

Call Me

by Daniel Harris

Doctor Otto Fermé entered Bistro Estelle, greeted Estelle with the obligatory three kisses, and took an outdoor table. He had eaten lunch at this Paris bistro ever since saving Estelle's sight. As a staff surgeon at the historic Quinze-Vingts National Ophthalmology Hospital, this twelfth arrondissement bistro was a convenient nearby restaurant with exceptional cuisine.

"Doctor Fermé, have you seen the menu?"

"Yes, I'll take the coquilles Saint Jacques and my usual.

"Yes, sir."

The doctor's usual was 50 ml of pastis on ice with water on the side. His surgeries for the day now over, he allowed himself the stress reliever of an alcoholic drink.

It was a partly cloudy day with scattered showers, typical of Paris in the Spring. The temperature was high enough that a suit jacket was comfortable. Because of the threat of rain, only a few customers were dining outdoors. The inside was filled with staff and patients from the hospital as well as neighborhood residents and tourists

"Doctor, do you wish your meal with your pastis or after?"

"After of course, as you well know, Michel."

"Yes, but duty says I must ask.

"I have dined here twice a week for the last twenty years and every time you ask the same question."

"It is my job. Perhaps someday you will want the meal without a pastis."

"Yes, but not likely. I only consult in the afternoon, no surgeries. Pastis is a stress reliever."

"I too take a pastis after my day is done."

Doctor Fermé was dressed in a suit with a bow tie. Unlike some of his colleagues, he did not wear his scrubs in public. He was a voracious reader presently reading Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, a lipogrammatic book written without the letter "e." Fermé found it interesting that a supremely gifted writer who had worked as an

archivist at a hospital would write a book with a missing letter. As an amateur violinist, Fermé found such tricks of literature silly compared to the musicians who limited themselves to a few notes when composing or improvising. While Fermé found Perec's writing virtuosic, as a medical man, it seemed cold, even disembodied, and possessed a certain emotional detachment.

"Are you ready for your meal?" asked Michel.

"Yes, but do not serve it with bread. I must watch my waistline.

"As you wish, doctor."

The scallops were fresh and delicious. The young wild asparagus vegetable was superb, and the Sancerre wine accompanying the meal was perfect. When he was halfway through his meal, a young woman approached his table. She asked him if she could join him. It was a strange request since there were many empty tables.

"Of course, mademoiselle."

The woman was attractive with classic features. She appeared to be in her late twenties and was dressed in expensive couture. Her makeup and coiffure looked professionally done. Was she a model or actress on a meal break? There was nothing sexually provocative about her appearance. Still, there was a whiff of sexuality about her, and her pheromones connected with the doctor's receptors.

"Do you have a pen I may borrow?"

"It is a fountain pen. Do you know how they work?"

"Of course."

The woman took a small note card from her purse and wrote on it. She then stood, handed the card to the doctor, and said, "Call me." She left the table and walked toward the Reuilly-Diderot metro station. The doctor watched the woman cross the street, admiring her perfect posture, and studied balletic gait. She placed each foot directly in front of the other in a single line, causing her hips to move in that unique runway model's roll.

The doctor examined the card. On it was written "Hannah, 1.43.34.33.41." He studied the card, immediately he noticed the palindromic name and telephone number. An Uroboros symbol —

sex and magic. Ah, I've read too much Perec, he thought and put the card in his wallet.

Fermé sat thinking about the woman and her strange request. Was this woman a high-class prostitute? He was almost seventy. Why would a twenty-something woman be interested in him, an agéd ophthalmologist on the cusp of retirement, if not death?

"Dessert?" asked the waiter.

"No, thank you. Friday is dessert day. That's when I enjoy Estelle's famous chocolate mousse. *Le notte s'il vous plait.*"

"Monsieur, you know we never charge you for your meals."

"Yes, but I always pay for them."

"Oui. And Estelle always donates the money to charities for the blind."

"That's interesting. Estelle is a most wonderful and generous woman."

"As she says, sight is priceless."

The doctor walked back to the hospital, confused by the interaction with the mysterious young woman.

Three days later, the doctor and his wife attended an evening of Indian music at the Indian Embassy in Paris. After the break, they sat near the exit since he had early surgeries and would leave before the music was finished. Shortly before the second half began, an attractive young woman in expensive couture sat next to him. She wore an exotic and alluring perfume. After a few minutes, she took a pen and a small card from her purse. On the card she wrote: "Eve, 1.43.34.33.41." As she stood to leave, she bent down, handed him the card, and whispered in his ear, "Call me."

That night the doctor barely slept. Why did two beautiful, expensively attired palindromically named women give him the same telephone number? Was it a sexual entrapment scheme? A #MeToo scam?

He had never had a mistress in forty years of marriage. He had always been circumspect around female nurses and staff. Behind his back, the younger doctors called him "grandpa" for his perfect

manners and benevolence. He was well-liked by his patients and colleagues. At the hospital, he was considered "The Kind Doctor."

Doctor Fermé, never called the number. He destroyed the cards. In this age of Big Brother, who knew what video camera had recorded the interactions with the young women.

Three months later, sitting in the summer sun at Bistro Estelle enjoying a post-meal espresso, a twenty-something woman dressed in expensive couture approached him, and sat at his table.

"Are you here to leave a name and telephone number?" asked the doctor.

"How would you know?" asked the woman.

"I have an answer for you."

"Yes?"

The doctor took a prescription pad from his pocket and wrote: "Otto, 1.43.34.33.41." He rose from his chair, handed the script to the surprised woman, and said, "Call me."

