

Didier Pedra is the name of a male prostitute who lives at sixteen Rue des Toits Rouges, in Paris.

It's a relatively quiet street amid the greater bustle of the Latin Quarter, his flat on the top floor of a long tenement, two blocks from the river. I'd never expected to find myself standing on the stoop of a prostitute's building in the rain, on what should have been an unremarkable Thursday evening in March.

Then again, I'd never expected to be five weeks from my thirtieth birthday with my hymen still intact.

As I stood on Didier Pedra's front step—precisely six minutes early for my appointment and unwilling to go in, lest I appear too eager—I knew only a few things about him. I knew he was in his early to mid-thirties, that he'd always lived in Paris and that he had a reputation for being supremely good in bed.

As if I had any basis for comparison.

I knew also, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was gorgeous. I use that word without gushing, without girliness. I say *gorgeous* as though I'm speaking of the most luscious and decadent cake you ever laid eyes on, one you can taste from ten feet away. So beautiful that not only do your salivary glands tingle, your eyes water. So beautiful that cutting a slice and consuming it would feel wrong, because you are beneath such a specimen.

As an aside, you might wonder what sort of woman would visit a male prostitute. I can only speak about the one I know, which is of course myself.

I'm not what I might have pictured.

I'm younger than I'd have guessed, not quite thirty as I said, and I suspect I'm better-looking but less well-off. I'm not beautiful, but I'm an inch or two taller than average, perhaps a bit underweight, though in this city of chain smokers my measurements seem standard. I have curly hair, neither short nor long, neither blonde nor

brown, neither sloppy nor tidy. I pin the sides back with a barrette behind each ear. For some reason I dressed this evening more for a job interview than a first date, likely because Didier intimidated me tremendously. My flats collected rain on the walk from the Metro and the cuffs of my slacks were wet and shapeless by the time I reached number sixteen, Rue des Toits Rouges. The Street of Red Roofs.

I was scared and thrilled, shaky from excitement and nerves and anticipation.

There was no doubting Didier's aforementioned gorgeousness. I work at a museum in Paris—no, not the Louvre but still very nice—and two of my best friends work in the gallery next door. Paulette is from near Provence and Ania is Polish, and they are both insatiable perverts. I say that affectionately. When customers wander out of earshot, Paulette and Ania are never more than a breath from discussing some man or other or the exploits of a mutual friend.

Ania first told me about Didier Pedra when the gallery displayed a half-dozen daguerreotypes. You may have seen some—photographic images burned onto shiny silver plates, like dark mirrors. It's a delicate, temperamental, antiquated medium. The artist behind the exhibit was a local woman and her model was Didier.

He is without a doubt the most stunning man I've ever seen, both burned onto metal plates and in person, burned forever onto my retinas. He's so beautiful I actually felt an ache in my chest when I viewed those images.

Noting my fixation, Ania had declared herself the model's greatest fan and disappeared into the storeroom, emerging with a large binder filled with prints. Didier has sat for many photographers and other artists since he was in his late teens. Ania had plopped the portfolio down on a table and proceeded to flip through the images. I'd immediately wondered how I might possibly steal the binder and sleep with it beneath my pillow, though of course I never would. But if given the chance, I might borrow it on a long-term basis without permission.

Definitely without permission, because there's some defect in my personality that prevents me from admitting my attraction to handsome men. I've always been that way.

I was an extremely homely kid, growing up in northern New Hampshire. I wasn't quite the ugly duckling who blossomed into a beautiful swan... I merely developed into an okay-looking duck. But back then I was inarguably gawky, and because I knew it

would be laughable for me to profess my love for the cutest, most popular boys at my school, I chose to act as though I couldn't care less about them. That I was above such nonsense.

In truth they intimidated me, because they had the power to disappoint and humiliate me, and confirm everything I feared about my own awkwardness.

I carried this facsimile of haughty superiority with me through college and beyond, and though I shrug off accusations that I might have a crush on this man or that and pass my attitude off as contempt, secretly of course I'm simply terrified to hear it made official that they're out of my league.

Beautiful men terrify me because, deep down, they're the only kind I want.

I could probably do well, dating guys as passable-looking as myself. I even suspect they're nicer people, yet I have what feels like an affliction—an affinity for beauty. A fetish, perhaps, to further belabor that overused term. It's what led me to museum work, to art appreciation, to entire weeks of my life lost window-shopping for mouthwatering furniture and trinkets that could bankrupt me with a single swipe of my bank card. I have expensive taste, my father always said. Though surely he'd meant my refusal to settle for less than the fancy brand of macaroni and cheese, with its seductive silver packet of gooey Velveeta. Not home furnishings or Parisian prostitutes.

But that's enough about me for now.

When it finally struck six fifty-nine, I gave myself permission to enter Didier's building. I shook my umbrella off on the stoop and studied the tenant list. I pressed the brass button beside *5C Pedra, D.* and waited, my breath held.

I should mention that Didier and I had only corresponded in postcards, because a) I hadn't had his number at first; and b) once he gave it to me, I was too chickenshit to use it. The voice I'd speculated and fantasized about didn't greet me, though the door buzzed as it unlocked and I let myself in.

It was probably once a dazzling building, now thoroughly worn around the edges. In addition to attractive men, I fear elevators, especially the ancient kind here in number sixteen, with the accordion-style door, so I found the slightly less claustrophobic stairwell and dripped my way up four flights.

Flat 5C is at the very end of a long, dim, narrow corridor with a ceiling at least a

foot shorter than the lower levels'. As I took my final breath, knuckles poised to knock, the door swung in.

Didier was taller than I'd anticipated. He was more of everything than I'd anticipated. Which is saying a lot, because I'd purposefully conflated him in my mind, so grand he could only fail to measure up and hence give me permission to do as I always do and declare myself above the bothersome magnetism of lust.

But Didier did not disappoint. My mouth went dry and I must have looked stoned, standing there with the blank expression I rely on when desperately trying to appear unaffected.

"Good evening," he said. "You're Carolyn?"

I managed to say, "I am." My name is, in fact, Caroly, a misspelling on my grandmother's prospective baby name list that my mother found exceedingly fetching. No sympathy for her daughter, doomed to be addressed as Carol or Carolyn for the rest of her days. And because of how "Caroline" is pronounced in France—*Caroleen*—nobody here ever gets my name right when I introduce myself. But that's fair, considering how badly I mangle their entire language every time I open my mouth.

"I'm Didier." He shook my hand and I marveled at the gesture, how he could manage to make it feel so casual yet confident. "Come in." His English is strong, though his accent heavy. Ania had told me he could speak several languages, and that his father was from Spain.

He closed the door behind me as I stepped into his garret.

It was the single most sensual space I'd ever been in. There was nothing extravagant about it, yet sex seemed to drip from every square inch. His furniture was all dark wood, a mix of mahogany and walnut. More estate sale than antique broker, but it worked. It matched the stained beams of the sloped ceiling and set off the walls, painted the deep red of a dying rose, two weeks past Valentine's Day. The lighting was perfectly inadequate, allowing the eye to take in only a handful of immediate details at one time. Very soothing, like blinders. The living room was long and narrow, and through the few windows not shrouded by gauzy curtains you could see an enviable skyline view to the east. It smelled nice, as well, something I couldn't place, the oddest mix of clean and musty.

I'm babbling about Didier's décor because I was afraid to look at him at first, and those were the minutiae I lost myself in. But eventually I turned to face him.

"You have a lovely flat."

"Thank you. Would you like a drink?"

"Sure." I'd never needed a drink so badly in my life.

"Have a seat." He waved toward the settee and armchair in the corner before heading for another room. "And you prefer English?"

"If you don't mind. Thank you." I set my umbrella and purse by the door and crossed the room to sit on the chair. Pigeons paced on the ledge outside the window, their little bird motors idling, purring and cooing their contentment. I envied their ease.

Didier's voice carried from the far room. "I see you did not escape the storm."

"No, sadly."

He reappeared with two glasses of red wine, handing me one as he took a seat on the couch.

I have avoided describing Didier, I know. That's because I worry I'll never be able to paint him properly, to do him justice. But here goes.

I'll start with his voice. It's deep and gentle, warm and relaxed. I'm terrible at guessing heights, but he's tall, over six feet. His image in those photos and sketches from the gallery binder are elegant, which he is in real life as well.

I can't find the right word for his build. Though he's quite trim, he has a large frame—wide shoulders, broad hands—making him seem heavy and strong. In person, his muscular body was of course hidden, and it was maddening to know what he looked like nearly naked and to then have to suffer his sweater and slacks. He had on socks but no shoes, which for some reason I found reassuring.

We sipped our wine and I have no idea what we talked about. The rain, how this spring was stacking up to previous years, perhaps. I took in only what I was looking at.

I know you must want to know about his face, one worthy of so many artists' awe and my clumsy prose. It's a stern face, as you'd expect of a male model. A strong jaw, though not square. Cheekbones that bend light, of course. Expressive eyebrows, black in the dim room. His hair is a shade lighter than his brows, and not as unruly as mine—a wavy sort of curly, long enough to clutch but not to wrap around one's fingers. His eyes

are deep brown with heavy lids that give him a slightly sinister, slightly sleepy expression. His nose is strong, not quite *big*, with the faintest hook to it. Like so many Parisian men, he has an air of caustic wisdom about him. Unlike many Parisian men, he does not have an aroma of cigarettes to accent the attitude.

Didier is the type of man who, even if you can't stand seafood, makes you crave oysters. There is something raw and primal yet utterly refined about him that leaves you hungry for such a thing. He pairs with liver and black caviar and hundred-dollar champagne, this extraordinary delicacy of a man. A rare animal, worthy of hunting to extinction lest anyone else lay claim to the beauty of him.

"So tell me what exactly brings you here," he said.

Ah, a question I had no answer for. "I saw pictures of you at a gallery, and heard that you... You know."

He nodded.

"You've modeled a lot," I said.

"I did. Not so often anymore." The only imperfect thing about him was his teeth—white but a bit crooked, which I didn't mind at all. Mine are just the same.

"Have you lived here long?" I asked, aiming my gaze all around his flat.

"Ages. Nearly ten years." He had a way of leaning forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and locking his eyes on mine even as he sipped his wine. Though it sounds unnerving, it makes you feel you're the most fascinating woman on earth.

Normally I shy from a stare as intense as his, strong as a floodlight, but all I felt then was blank.

"And you?" he asked. "How long have you been in Paris?"

"Two years, next month."

"School?"

I shook my head. "Work. At a museum. Assistant curator."

He made an impressed face. "And so what brings you to me?"

My delusions of charisma faded. "Um... Do you have a confidentiality thing with your clients?"

A smile that melted my muscles. "We never met," he said simply.

"Right. Well. This is embarrassing..."

He let me trail off, no prompting, merely sipping his drink while I gathered my thoughts.

“I’m not very experienced with men.”

Didier nodded, as though he were fluent in evasive English. “You’re looking to change that?”

“Maybe. To be honest, I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

He leaned back against the couch cushions and crossed his legs. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but it is a flat rate.” I pictured the check in my purse, ready to be dropped in his mailbox upon my departure. “You get me for the evening, and what we do is entirely your choice. Nothing is off-limits with me.” He gestured with his free hand, presenting his body as a package.

“Right.”

“But that goes the other way as well. It’s your time, and if all you want to do is talk and drink, then that’s what we do.”

I wondered how often that *was* what women wanted from him—a date with no pressure, no fear of rejection. That’s what I wanted, after all. I’ve even heard that plenty of men who patronize female prostitutes want simply that, companionship.

“That would be good, to start.”

He nodded, stern face striking and sage. “Do you mind my asking, how inexperienced are you? Or what would you like to learn from me?”

“I’ve kissed men, but that’s really all.”

Let me pause here and explain how it felt to admit that. I’m sure plenty of girls lie about how many guys they’ve messed around with when they’re younger, not wanting to seem too easy. Well, there’s another stigma that comes later, as you edge closer to true adulthood, especially if you run with a liberal, artsy crowd. I always pray my friends assume I’m a real freak behind closed doors, just stingy with the details. I think you can get away with being a virgin until you’re, say, twenty-three or so, and still pass it off as choosiness or cautiousness or plain old willfulness. But twenty-nine? By then people start to wonder what’s *wrong* with you. Including yourself.

Didier was the first person I’d actually admitted the extent of my inexperience to, ever. I even lead my gynecologist on. When she asks, “Are you sexually active?” I

always reply, “Not at the moment.” If the truth has always been embarrassingly apparent, she’s been kind enough not to tell me so.

And it was in *that* moment in Didier’s living room that I realized, maybe not tonight, but some day not too far off, I could leave this place with that weight lifted from me. I could walk down his street and be like everyone else. I could have a *lover*. This is Paris, after all. Having a lover is like having a pancreas. I was suddenly very ready to quit being a medical anomaly.

All Didier said to my pronouncement was, “That is very interesting.” He paused and squinted as though he were taking a drag off a psychic cigarette. I worried he was about to tell me he had a policy against deflowering his clients, but instead he went on. “It’s very flattering that you’ve come to me.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Yes. I would be very honored to corrupt you in whatever ways you like.”

I laughed at that, relaxing further. The wine suddenly tasted extraordinary, and it dawned then that I was turned-on. I’d worried that wouldn’t happen and I’d officially get stamped DEFECTIVE and sent back to the factory.

I cleared my throat. “I have no idea what ways I’m looking to be corrupted. I’m usually pretty nervous around men.”

“That’s very normal, for the first date.”

Ooh, *date*. I liked that. I’d happily pretend I’d scored a date with this perfect man.

“There’s no rush, by the way,” he said. “I rarely get to bed before five a.m., so if you want to just sit here and drink and talk all night, you’re not wasting my time or keeping me up in the least.”

“Okay, great.” And necessary. I’m a slow thaw.

“Here.” Didier stood and crossed the room to switch on a radio. I love listening to French talk radio. Even after two years, I struggle to follow the pace of the language but I adore the sound of it. He kept the volume low, and I felt he’d read my mind, meeting some need I hadn’t even realized I had. He filled the silence without making it feel like a pointed seduction or an awkward distraction, and my brain quieted.

The etiquette is odd, when you visit a prostitute. On the one hand, Didier was mine to do with what I wanted. That was my privilege. But even if I wanted to treat him like a

piece of meat, I suspected I wasn't capable of it. He might be a slice of cake, reserved specially for me, but it felt very strange to actually consider enjoying him. Which of us was I worried about demeaning?

He fetched the wine bottle from the kitchen and set it on the table before us, taking his seat. "So tell me. You're an attractive woman. You seem successful and clever."

"Thanks."

"May I ask what it is about men that's made you cautious? Do you not like being touched, or you simply haven't met the right one? Is it a religious decision?"

"No, definitely not religious. And I don't think I mind being touched, really... It's hard to explain." I folded my legs beneath my butt and addressed his hands. "I guess I don't want to settle for a man who isn't really, truly attractive to me. But I'm afraid to try to date those guys, because I'm afraid I'll find out I'm not enough for them. It's always been easier and less scary to just not take the chance."

"You won't be rejected here."

I nodded. "That's the appeal. Well, and you." I met his stare. "I'm sure you've heard a million times that you're handsome. You, um... I think you may be the most attractive man I've ever seen."

His smile was warm and humble, and it gathered the skin beneath his eyes into adorable little rolls. "That's very kind. I hope it pleases you that I'm yours to enjoy."

"It does. It scares me, too."

"Of course."

I drained my glass and Didier refilled it. His mix of matter-of-factness and perfect calm was disarming. I'd feared he'd be cocky or sleazy or aggressively flirtatious. I mean, countless women pay to sleep with him. How could that not give a man a gigantic ego? I'd also feared he'd be a sweet-talking, God's-gift Don Juan and I'd feel as though I were being coerced. But I didn't. If this was a seduction, it was very covert and exactly my speed.

We chatted some more about the city and when the sky grew dark, Didier lit at least a dozen candles, a mound of them all melted together on an old metal card table behind the couch. Beeswax—that was the pleasant, musty smell I'd noted.

Didier by candlelight was obscenely stunning. At long last, my mind was

wandering. I studied the tendons in his neck in the warm glow and recalled the images of his bare chest that I'd seen. He must've been used to such scrutiny, as he merely sipped his drink and watched me watching him.

I feel so predictable saying it, but add wine and candles and a Parisian skyline at dusk and this prude is suddenly a hussy.

"I don't suppose you could, um..." My voice dropped to a mumble. "Take your sweater off?"

Didier nodded and stood, stripping away his top and undershirt in one motion.

As he sat, I gave myself permission to be curious, not bashful. I decided to treat him as what he was to me—living art. His bare skin looked warm in the flickering light, and I understood with true clarity what artists mean by "muse". He's magic. A man who poses merely by sitting, a hundred thousand angles waiting to be discovered. I wished I were more artistic so I could capture him, every last shadow and contour.

"You're beautiful," I finally said.

"Thank you."

"It's okay if I only want to look at you tonight?"

"I'm yours for whatever you wish to do. Or not do."

When you're as inexperienced as I was, there's a ton to learn from a man before you even touch or kiss him. I considered what I wanted. To see him naked, but not too soon. To watch him bathe. To watch him masturbate, above just about everything else. That's always turned me on, and I'm sure it's because I nearly never fantasize about actually being with a man. Even in my own imagination, I fear rejection. My mental porn is almost exclusively comprised of one-man shows, with an occasional faceless woman stepping in as choreography demands.

"Could you take your pants off?" I asked him.

"Of course."

Before I knew it, he'd stripped to his underwear. And it was the sexiest underwear I'd ever seen on a man. Nothing fancy, just briefs, but they were made of silk or some other fine, explicit, clingy fabric. His thighs looked strong, his shorts full. He was an Armani campaign, lounging on his old couch in this moody, elegant apartment, candles flickering.

*Note to self: find out if clients are allowed to take photographs.*

“Is it weird,” I asked, “having people stare at you?”

“No, not really. I modeled for so long, I’m used to it now.”

“And you don’t model anymore?”

He shook his head. “Very rarely. My priorities have shifted.”

“Oh. Well, I guess it’s just weird for me, then, doing the staring.”

“You’re here with permission to do far more than stare,” he reminded me with a smile. “Believe me, I’m not bothered.”

“Would you feel weird if I asked to watch you, later? You know, like watch you...”

I couldn’t find the right verb, all of them sounding too clinical or too juvenile.

“Touch myself?”

Oh, that’ll do.

I nodded.

“No, that would not bother me at all.”

I sipped my wine and considered something. Male prostitutes can’t fake it the way female ones can. What if the time came for Didier to take me and he wasn’t *up* for it, as it were?

“Something is worrying you,” he said.

I smiled dopily, owning my nerves. “Sort of. I was just thinking about how... About what happens when you’re not attracted to your clients.”

“Whether or not I can perform?”

I nodded again.

“Well, I have a few unwritten policies. The first is that no one in this flat does anything they aren’t comfortable with. If I don’t think a woman is absolutely, perfectly ready for me to do what she’s asked, I won’t do it.”

“And what about if *you* aren’t into it?”

Another smile, but this time he lowered his gaze to the glass in his hands. “If I’ve managed to make a woman really, truly ready to have me, I’m into it. It’s very seductive to me, a woman who can make demands of my body.”

“Oh. That’s a good answer.”

He met my eyes again. “The truth always is.”