

COIN-OPERATED
BOYS



by

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That August, Elodie Selkirk became the latest lady in Paris to order a coin-operated boy. Despite her hooked nose and missing pinkie finger, Elodie was suffering from a rash of suitors; unfortunately for them, she was in no need of a gentleman. Elodie glanced down the hall to make sure that the maid was still safely in her room, as instructed – it was best to keep the boy a secret until she could check him over. She straightened the silk bow at her throat and opened the door.

Her apartment was close to the busiest shopping street in Paris, and all of the city's ephemera were passing by, their feet at eye-level. A parade of life, from the glittering right down to the groaning: whispering petticoats dirtied at the hem, leather shoes shinier than pennies, wheels ticking on cobblestones, snatches of scandal... Usually, Elodie could not stand the racket, but it all slipped out of focus the moment she saw the boy. From the calm angles of his cheeks to the ruled lines of his cravat, the boy was a mathematical sum. He added up perfectly.

'Mademoiselle Selkirk? I am pleased to meet you.' His voice was as clean as dew, but Elodie would not forget her manners.

'Do come in, sir. There is tea in the parlour.' She swept her arm to clarify, fingers carefully curled to hide the missing pinkie. The boy bowed as he passed her. His pinstriped boater seemed to tilt; Elodie looked away from the imperfection as she closed the door, and by the time she walked to the parlour he was sitting at a perfect right angle to the chaise longue.

She seated herself opposite him and poured the tea. She had not made the tea, of course; the maid had been instructed to set the scene, and then disappear to the kitchen. The boy was Elodie's personal business: she did not want the staff to see him.

'What is your name, sir?'

The boy stirred sugar into his tea, then pushed the cup away.

'Is it...?' Elodie considered. 'Luc-Pierre?'

The boy smiled, revealing teeth as white as salt. 'My name is Luc-Pierre,' he said.

'And you may call me Elodie. As long as no-one can hear, that is.'

The boy – Luc-Pierre, she thought with a smile – nodded an assent. Elodie sipped at her tea. She would dismiss the maid early and turn down Luc-Pierre's bed herself. Only Elodie could get the sheets neat enough, and now that Luc-Pierre was here everything must be perfect.

Elodie's need for a boy had been sparked by one suitor in particular, Claude di Haviland, who would not take a blush as a refusal. He'd left his calling card ten times a day, finally driven by Elodie's silence to wail her name along the alleyways in the starlit hours. Wrapped in clumsily-buttoned knitwear and clutching a rose to overpower the stench from the Seine, Elodie had crept up the stairs from her basement apartment and tried to shush him. She was not at all prepared for such a situation and her hushing was ineffectual at best. Soon his wails encouraged a chorus from the neighbourhood cats: they lined up along the wall behind him, tails flicking like conductors' batons. When Elodie's neighbours had begun ignoring her in the

marketplace, tutting about their interrupted dreams and awakened babies, Elodie knew something had to be done.

The day after the coin-operated boy arrived, Claude came calling once more. Elodie dismissed the maid and swung the door wide herself. In his surprise Claude forgot to remove his hat, and sat on the couch in all his outdoor clothes. It was so rude that Elodie had to avert her eyes while pouring the tea, but she still remembered to provide a silver pot of sugar.

‘My dear Claude,’ whispered Elodie. ‘Have you met Luc-Pierre?’

At that moment, just as he had been instructed, Luc-Pierre swept into the room and took a seat next to Elodie. Their knees were almost touching, and Elodie’s heart beat so hard she feared it would rattle the whalebone of her corset.

‘Charmed,’ choked out Claude. As the co-owner of A Boy for All Seasons, with his sister Nora, he well knew the function of coin-operated boys. The boy’s presence was as clear a spurning as any lady could provide. Claude managed two sips of his tea before making his excuses, and the neighbourhood cats lost a choir member.

The next week, Elodie went walking along the Seine with Luc-Pierre. She had stuffed his buttonhole with three fat yellow roses, which she knew was a little excessive; he did not have the ability to smell, but she still did not want the reek of the polluted river to upset him. She placed a handful of the yellow roses along her hat-brim so that they matched. It was the perfect time for a walk: the streets were freshly swept and the morning sun had not yet begun to burn their eyes. Elodie felt her skin prickle with perspiration and slowed her pace. They were young lovers out for a stroll, and there was no reason in the world to rush.

‘Would you care for an ice, sir?’ Elodie nudged her fingers on Luc-Pierre’s arm as she spoke: the affection was daring for such a public place, but she could not resist. In return, Luc-Pierre graced her with a smile.

‘I confess I do not know, mademoiselle. Would you care for one?’

For the first time in her life, Elodie made a sound that could be described as a giggle. ‘Oh, do let us be wicked. One ice each! Look, the cart is just over there.’

She steered him past a cluster of petal-coloured parasols, which presumably had ladies underneath.

‘Good sir,’ husked a voice. Elodie and Luc-Pierre turned to see a woman in patched and lurid silks, one arm outstretched towards them. ‘Might you wish to accompany one of your fellows on a jaunt?’ The woman spoke with a mocking undertone, and was looking at Luc-Pierre as if Elodie were invisible. A horde of tabby cats purred circles around the woman’s feet.

‘No thank you, mademoiselle,’ said Luc-Pierre neatly.

‘More coins if you’re with me. Three is the fashion now, sir.’

And then, dear Reader, the wretch dared to wink at the promenading couple! Elodie clenched her teeth tight together, almost choking on her revulsion. She let go of Luc-Pierre’s arm and stepped close to the woman. She spoke in a voice between a whisper and a murmur, safe in the knowledge that her voice was drowned out by the

clatter of hooves and shouts of the street-sellers and the torrent of unspoken rage and lust and frustration roaring between everybody's ears.

'Madame, I would not expect you to observe the difference between your own putrid clockwork and the perfect mathematics of this gentleman. Now take this –' Elodie pressed a trio of coins into the woman's palm – 'and ensure that you never bother us again.'

In a moment, Elodie's back was to the woman and her gloved hand was once more resting on Luc-Pierre's capable arm. She selected red ices, as they matched her beau's suit-jacket admirably well.

That very day, Claude had deigned to rise before midday to help out in A Boy for All Seasons. Resting between deliveries, he spotted Elodie and her beau strolling in perfect sync with their heads tilted together. He recognised his own stock, but that did not stop the jealousy from burning up his throat.

Claude's foot somehow ended up at the edge of the kerb just as Luc-Pierre passed; coin-operated boys become unstable when not at right angles, as Claude well knew, and he only just managed to catch poor Elodie as Luc-Pierre toppled into the gutter.

'Oh, my love!' she cried, breaking free from Claude's grasp and lifting her skirts and bending over to help up Luc-Pierre all at once. Claude could not fail to miss her choice of words, and it was this that made him skulk back to bed and refuse to help in the shop for the rest of the week. Elodie took Luc-Pierre home and fixed him up as well as she was able, feeling sick with guilt.

And that is how Elodie got her coin-operated boy, and how Claude's jealousy was fired, and how this whole sorry tale began to unfold.

'He kept an assortment of thimble-sized people in a snuff-box in his top pocket, but that is not why he was unsuitable.' Cara O'Donohue pinched her fork delicately between thumb and forefinger, and then rather ruined the effort by using it to lift an obscene mouthful of cake. Cara is not her real name, of course, but we must protect her reputation in case she reads this.

'How simply dreadful,' Elodie murmured, averting her eyes while trying to look sympathetic.

'You have no idea, ma chérie!' Cara rearranged the row of lilac frills below her décolleté. 'His moustaches were never waxed. Never! Well, perhaps once.'

'Goodness,' said Elodie, though of course she had stopped listening by now. These fortune-telling sessions were usually simple enough – new thrills are on the horizon, charming strangers admire you from afar, beware gentleman with tarnished watch-chains – but Cara did not seem to really want her fortune told. She wanted a captive audience, and she was willing to pay for it.

'Tongue for luncheon! And on a Friday. Quite unthinkable, I'm sure you

agree,' chirped Cara.

Oh, when would she hush? This was Elodie's final afternoon with Luc-Pierre, and Cara's incessant chatter was spoiling it. Their weeks together were the most wonderful of Elodie's life and she could not bear to think that it was almost over. Alas! To find such a perfect man, then to find that love is impossible!

She risked a glance out of the café's front window. Luc-Pierre sat just where she had left him, an untouched cup on the table. His pinstriped boater was tilted to the left, and she ached to adjust it for him. Then again, it was best for him not to appear *too* dapper; already he was getting many an admiring glance from the other ladies, and if one of them were to proposition him then he would jaunt off with them. Poor boy, he did not know any better. It was deep in the cogs of his being. He needed Elodie, she was sure.

'Don't you agree, ma chérie?' asked Cara, reaching for another mini-pâtisserie. From her tone, Elodie surmised that this was not the first time the question had been asked.

'Oh, indeed,' she breezed. 'I quite agree. Now, let us return to the fates. I feel that they... that they... oh, goodness me!'

Elodie swooned back in her chair, as if overcome by the chatter of spirits. As Cara fussed towards her, she risked another glance through the window. Luc-Pierre had not moved at all. For a moment she worried that his clockwork had run down – but she had fed him with two dozen coins last night, and Nora had reassured her that each coin was good for two hours of even the most vigorous movements. Those two dozen coins were worth it for the pleasures of Luc-Pierre's company, no doubt about that – but they led to Elodie sitting here, being bored to tears by Cara O'Donohue. She coughed and blinked back to life, trying not to sneeze at the stench of violets wafting from the handkerchief Cara was dabbing at her cheeks.

'My dear,' whispered Elodie, 'the fates have spoken. They are very pleased with you, and they have good news. They wish me to tell you that there is a pleasant surprise on the horizon. *Very* pleasant indeed.' Elodie leaned forwards conspiratorially; Cara leaned forwards too, so that their powdered foreheads almost touched across the table. 'The surprise involves a certain gentleman.'

Cara squealed. 'Monsieur di Haviland?'

Elodie felt a twinge in her chest at Claude's name, but recovered quickly. 'The spirits cannot name individuals, you understand. They mention a straight back, shiny hair, a chivalrous air –'

'But that must be Monsieur di Haviland! He is so very knightly and he walks with his back pointing straight to heaven.'

Elodie smiled, fancying that she heard her cheeks creak at the effort. 'How astute you are. It must be that very gentleman.'

Cara primped at her dark ringlets so they framed her cheeks, glancing over her shoulder into the crowd as if the fates were going to deliver Claude di Haviland at any moment. Well, thought Elodie, perhaps they would. He was probably the only man left in Paris whom Cara had not yet terrified away. Claude was unexpected and

boisterous and his garments always lay at all sorts of raucous angles. He would not do at all. And yet, there was something about the twitch of his smile and the way he could catch her just before she tripped...

Through the café's window, Elodie caught a glimpse of Luc-Pierre's perfectly-pointed chin. No, Claude di Haviland would not do at all. But now that he had stopped calling on Elodie, perhaps Cara's fortune would indeed come true. And ducks might fly to the moon.

'This has been wonderful, dear Elodie,' said Cara, already bustling to her feet. 'But I simply must dash. You provided fresh insights into my life and future, as always, and I thank you for that. I can't think what I would do without you. You really are a wonderful friend.' She tucked a fabric pouch of coins under Elodie's napkin, fussed once more at her curls, and disappeared into the crowd.

Elodie took a moment to collect her thoughts - did Cara really consider them friends? Did she pay all her friends for their company? What was the slowest possible route she could take to A Boy for All Seasons? - then walked out of the café. It was time to return Luc-Pierre.

From the outside, the true nature of A Boy for All Seasons was not clear. Nestled between a milliner and an academic bookshop, both aimed at those with outsize heads, the building appeared to be a rather dingy men's clothing shop. The only unusual aspect was that the shop's name was in a pale pink font with silvered edges: a colour combination designed to discourage gentlemen from entering. Occasionally a lady may enter looking for a snuffbox or pair of gloves for her husband, but most customers knew exactly what they wanted. And they always got it.

When Elodie and Luc-Pierre pushed open the door of A Boy for All Seasons, Nora was neatening the display of cravats. Her waistcoat was neatly fastened, the buttons shined and the hems starched. Her dark hair was tucked up under her velvet porkpie hat and her trousers were loose enough to maintain the illusion. She was the very picture of a competent shopkeeper, and she played the role well. The customers did not wish to feel that they were purchasing flesh in a seedy back parlour, after all; the boys were officially meant as companions, and their purpose was simply to discourage overly-enthusiastic beaux. At least, that is what Nora stated whenever the lawman came calling.

'Elodie! And Luc-Pierre. What a fine twosome you make.'

'You are wicked. Do not tease me so.'

'I do not tease. You are fine indeed, and I very much hope that you will find your own Luc-Pierre. One without a little stand in a little shop, that is.' Nora busied herself with straightening Luc-Pierre's hat and neatening his collar, and Elodie could not keep the pained look from her face.

Elodie looked down at her boots. 'I know I should not ask, dear Nora, but I must. Luc-Pierre, has he... I mean, is he... booked?'

'No, I shall let him rest. There is a waiting list for him, of course, but he can stay here for a day while I get him fixed up.' Nora sighed and tipped back the rim of

her porkpie hat. 'And I must stay in any case to mind the shop. I shall send Claude with the deliveries. But oh, damn that rapsallion! He is worth less than the mud on my boots. Still in bed no doubt, sleeping off the effects of the midweek revelries.' She took Luc-Pierre's hand and led him into the back room, calling back to Elodie: 'One moment, my dear, and we'll have your coins back!'

'Oh, you really don't have to - I have enough, you know, to...' Elodie peered into the back room, tugging at the fingers of her gloves. 'Nora, do you need my help? Just to make sure that Luc-Pierre is comfortable. He is so used to my presence, you know...' She trotted after them.

Claude de Haviland was not still in bed; quite the opposite. He had lurked beneath his bedcovers until he heard his sister slamming the front door to go downstairs to the shop, then swept off the blankets and leapt to his feet. Well, perhaps he dozed for a brief hour or two before he rose. But when he did rise, it was with the excitement of a devil.

His motivation? Love! Love was the only emotion that could stir his limbs and whip up his heart. Love, oh love! And Claude knew how love felt.

Even crouched over with a drinking glass pressed to the floorboards, Claude still made sure to keep a brooding look on his face. He knew it was effective - Cara O'Donohue's desperate giggles told him as much - and he wanted to be ready in case Mme. Selkirk had a reason to come to his room. He'd have a bit of a job explaining why he was on his knees listening at the boards, but she'd soon forgive him when she noticed the tenderness in his chocolate-brown eyes. Ladies always forgave Claude di Haviland. Except, alas, for Mme. Selkirk: the one lady he wanted, and the only one who would not have him.

The problem was that the drinking glass was not a gramophone trumpet, and the most he could hear from downstairs was the shuffle of shoes and the occasional high-pitched laugh. He knew that Mme. Selkirk was downstairs - even in his head he could not call her Elodie, not even his one true love - because he had seen her approach the house from his window. And her hand clasped in that of the filthy automaton.

Well, Claude had something that the clutch of clockwork never would: a plan. If he could not make Mme. Selkirk love him as he was, then he would become something that she *could* love. Tossing the glass aside, he reached for a pinstripe boater, a pair of compasses, and a scalpel.

Autumn was looming, bright with the rain of dead leaves and raucous with the last gasps of summer lovers. Every hat-brim bloomed with slightly-wilted roses; every shoe was adorned with buckles gleaming brighter than the sun. And over it all, the reek of the Seine - but let's not mind that, for you may buy a sweet-smelling posy at any street corner.

For Elodie, September smelled sour with loss. Since losing Luc-Pierre, she could not eat. She could not sleep. She snapped at her maid for forgetting to polish the sugar-spoon, for opening the door too vigorously, for scuffing her feet as she walked. Lying wide-eyed in the insomniac moonlight, she realised that she even missed the wails of Claude di Haviland and his feline choir.

After several weeks of mooning around the city, both hoping and fearing to spot Luc-Pierre on the arm of another lady, Elodie decided that enough was enough. Nora was her best friend and would surely understand. She would march into A Boy for All Seasons with her fists full of coins, if that was what it would take.

When the maid announced Mme. di Haviland before breakfast was even on the table, Elodie was so surprised that she had nodded without thinking. She tried to smooth the frown from between her brows so as not to insult her friend.

‘My dear, what a pleasant...’ Elodie began, her words failing at the look on Nora’s face. ‘But what is wrong?’

Nora’s jaw was clenched so hard that her lips had turned white. She did not remove her velvet porkpie hat or sit on the chaise-longue. ‘You must come now. There is no time to wait. Claude, he...I thought he was working on the repairs to the boy, you know, so I left him to it. For weeks and weeks, Elodie! I just let him do it. I could not know! And now, he...’ Standing in the dimly-lit doorway, Nora seemed luminescent with panic. ‘You will see for yourself. But you must come. *Please*, Elodie.’

Without waiting, Nora stepped back into the hallway and opened the door herself. It was all Elodie could do to pull on her hat and coat before Nora bustled off down the street.

Elodie had not managed to keep pace, so by the time she arrived at A Boy for All Seasons the door was wide open and Nora was nowhere to be seen.

‘Mme. di Haviland?’ Elodie called as she stepped into the shop. Her gaze swept from left to right: past the polished glass of the counter, the closed door of the back room, the shoes and cravats and handkerchiefs in a dozen shades of blue. In the corner of the darkened shop Luc-Pierre slouched, picking at the skin around his thumbnail. He was hatless and the edge of his shirt was untucked.

In her surprise, Elodie cried out before she knew what she was saying. ‘Luc-Pierre! You look so...’ Imperfect. Awkward. Repulsive. ‘...different.’

It was not until he approached her that she realised what was wrong. There was a depth to his gaze and a roll to his walk that was out of character, and yet utterly familiar. With a jolt that pressed all the air from her lungs, Elodie realised why she recognised his manner. He was a *man* – just like the dozens, hundreds, thousands of other men peacocking messily around the streets of Paris. She wilted to her knees on the floor.

‘Elodie,’ called Nora from the back room.

Elodie stumbled to her feet and walked through the door to the back room. There, perched neatly on the edge of a chair, was Claude. His cravat was ruler-straight and his eyes shone flat as a pond in summer.

‘Good morning, Mme. Selkirk,’ said Claude neatly. ‘How do you do?’
‘I...’ Elodie could feel the heavy presence of Luc-Pierre at her back. She stepped forward to sit beside Claude, but Nora grabbed her hands.

‘Do you see?’ she shrieked. ‘Do you see what you have made?’
‘But how did he...how can this be?’

Nora let out a wail and gestured to the workbench. It held the nicks of a decade’s tool marks, and when Elodie looked closer she saw that each groove held dark red stains.

‘The mechanism is a simple one,’ said Nora ‘I’ve never known someone to perform the process on their own flesh, but it...I mean, it must be possible. The evidence sits before us.’

‘I have been waiting, Mme. Selkirk,’ said Claude, standing up and taking Elodie’s hand in his own. ‘I was waiting for you to come and collect me.’

Not knowing what to do, Elodie let her hand be taken. Through her glove, Claude’s skin was as cool as morning dew, and she could not help but let out a sigh.

‘My own brother,’ croaked out Nora. ‘My own flesh and blood. And now he is...’

‘Not flesh at all,’ said Elodie. The words felt heavy with realisation. ‘He is something else.’

‘Now he is nothing at all.’ Nora’s eyes met Luc-Pierre’s as he stood in the doorway.

Luc-Pierre creaked out several coughs before he could speak. His voice sounded fleshy and wet, as if he had half-chewed liver caught in his throat.

‘What shall I do, Mme. di Haviland? Where have I to go?’

But Nora could not reply. Luc-Pierre held her gaze for ten beats of his heart, then turned and walked out on to the street.

Elodie neither saw nor heard any of this: all she knew was the calm, clean angles of Claude’s face.

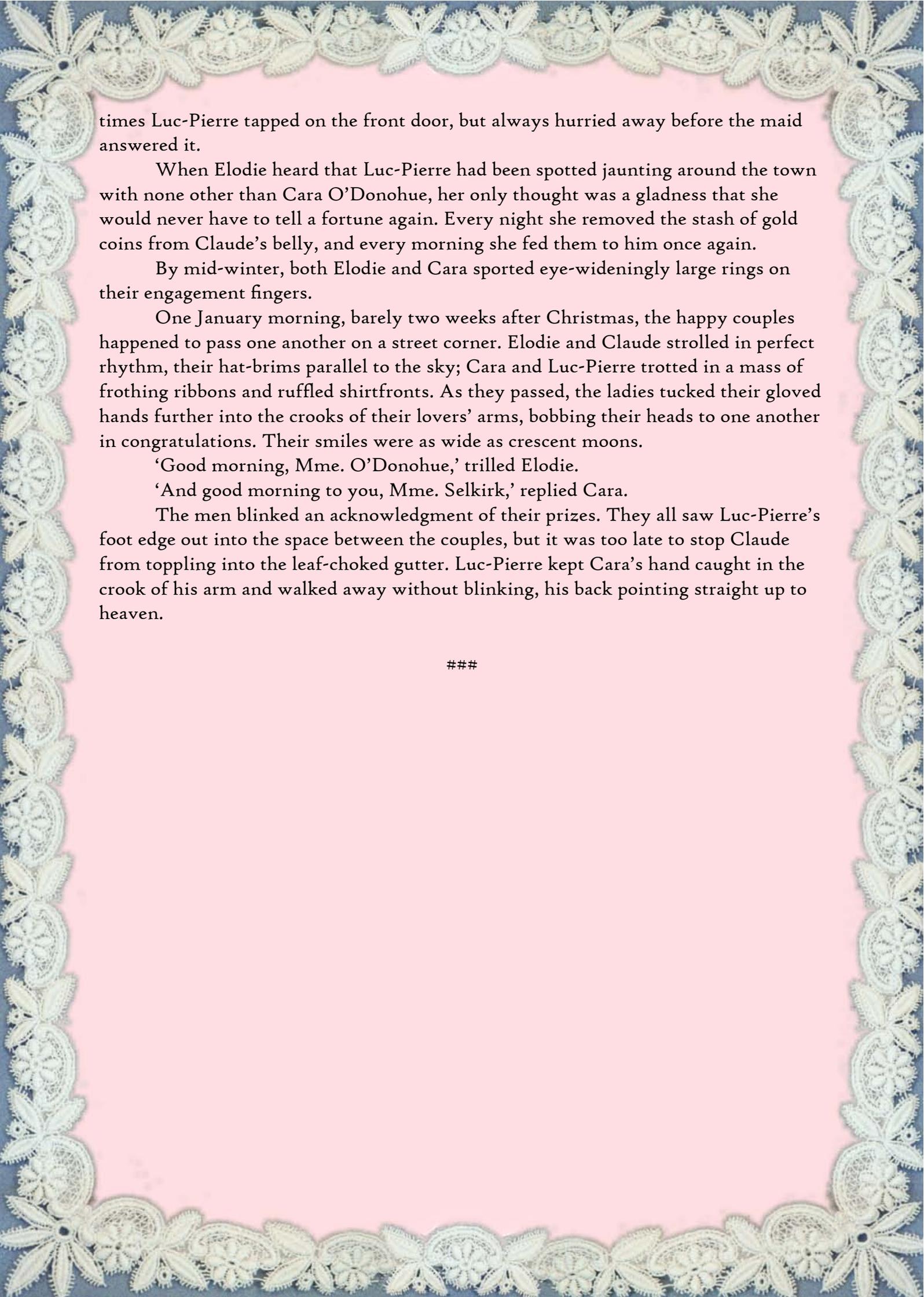
‘Is this what you wanted?’ she whispered to him, under her breath so that Nora would not hear.

‘I want nothing at all,’ said Claude.

Over the following months, the happy couple were never out of one another’s sights. Nora closed the shop for a week or so and the city’s gossips revelled in the slump of her shoulders and the reddened skin around her eyes, but when she re-opened the shop they soon forgot. Business was as breathless as ever, and Nora had to take on two ladies to help with the shop floor while she worked on repairing the boys in the back room.

She did not call on her friend, but Elodie – too busy staring into Claude’s shiny eyes and selecting new items for his trousseau – barely noticed. She also did not notice Luc-Pierre lurking in the alley outside her apartment in the moonlit hours.

The neighbourhood cats circled around his ankles hopefully, willing him to break into song so that they could join in, but they were left unsatisfied. A few



times Luc-Pierre tapped on the front door, but always hurried away before the maid answered it.

When Elodie heard that Luc-Pierre had been spotted jaunting around the town with none other than Cara O'Donohue, her only thought was a gladness that she would never have to tell a fortune again. Every night she removed the stash of gold coins from Claude's belly, and every morning she fed them to him once again.

By mid-winter, both Elodie and Cara sported eye-wideningly large rings on their engagement fingers.

One January morning, barely two weeks after Christmas, the happy couples happened to pass one another on a street corner. Elodie and Claude strolled in perfect rhythm, their hat-brims parallel to the sky; Cara and Luc-Pierre trotted in a mass of frothing ribbons and ruffled shirtfronts. As they passed, the ladies tucked their gloved hands further into the crooks of their lovers' arms, bobbing their heads to one another in congratulations. Their smiles were as wide as crescent moons.

'Good morning, Mme. O'Donohue,' trilled Elodie.

'And good morning to you, Mme. Selkirk,' replied Cara.

The men blinked an acknowledgment of their prizes. They all saw Luc-Pierre's foot edge out into the space between the couples, but it was too late to stop Claude from toppling into the leaf-choked gutter. Luc-Pierre kept Cara's hand caught in the crook of his arm and walked away without blinking, his back pointing straight up to heaven.

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