A POOR INVESTMENT

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The red straw hat was an expensive disaster. Tess had worn it to the Hotel Carlton’s beach two days running, and not one suitable man even nodded her way. Just as she was about to shred the hat with manicure scissors, she had second thoughts. It did hide her thinning hair and mute her wrinkles.

The first day the only man to speak to her was a waiter. He spilled both her Evian and the citron presse ordered by a neighboring Frenchwoman. Tess said, “All thumbs, isn’t he?”

Conversation ensued. The Frenchwoman, an impeccably groomed widow named Herminie Pelletier, seemed terminally lonely but proud of the fluent English she learned as a child from her Scotch governess.

They agreed to meet in the hotel’s lobby at seven and dine together. Tess suggested The Stars and Stripes restaurant mentioned in a dollar-wise guide to the Riviera. “The hotel dining room is so stuffy. Besides, you’ve probably never tasted any American food but McDonald’s.”

Herminie nodded. “A taxi to Nice is so expensive. You will see more if we go by bus. It will be amusing.” She left for a manicure appointment. “At our age, one must maintain one’s appearance.” Tess had to budget nail polish.

The Frenchwoman was game enough to try chili con carne and even to say “Good,” but immediately ordered a liter of mineral water. She brightened over the brownies and offered to take Tess the following evening to a restaurant specializing in local cuisine. “It is modest, but the prices are reasonable.”

After Tess said yes, Herminie proposed a shopping expedition the following afternoon. “At our age, one must buy new clothes. Wearing the modes of one’s youth can make one appear old.”

Tess declined. The modes of her middle age cost more than she could afford.

While Herminie shopped, Tess returned to “Tender Is the Night.” She had hardly read a page when a small man who probably reached her shoulder bent down and,
without explanation or excuse, pushed back the cover of the book. “What a pity that such an attractive Englishwoman reads when she could be in the arms of a handsome man.”

Tess considered him a creepy gigolo who probably slept with men, women and everything in between, like the male and female prostitutes patrolling the Croisette. She forced a smile. “This attractive woman, who’s American by the way, not English, is waiting for her jealous husband who would not like her to be in the arms of another man, no matter how handsome.”

He shrugged and left. Tess put down her book and scanned this playground of the rich. The beach was carpeted with trim bimbos exposing their perfect breasts. Perhaps ten feet away a woman in her forties with a body most twenty-year-olds would have envied lay between two very young men. The woman sat up to stare at the sea, and they reached behind her head to kiss each other long and wetly. She turned around, saw what was happening and smiled.

That evening Tess and Herminie again took the bus to Nice, landing at a bistro called La Rive Droite. Tess enjoyed her first boeuf en daube and Herminie invited her along on her next afternoon project, a waxing. “This woman is remarkable. When she removes the wax, there is not a soupcon of pain. At our age, hair on the face has no charm.”

Tess told Herminie, “You’re brave. I just tweeze a stray brow now and then.”

She had already decided to resume trolling at the beach, but with a better lure—the diamond ear studs her parents had given her for high school graduation and the cherry-sized sapphire pendant Garry had won at craps. Finally, she tossed on a chrome yellow cover-up that hid belly, batwing arms and sagging breasts, yet revealed shapely legs, free of disfiguring veins. She might appear odd, even eccentric, to some, but eccentricity was often a sign of great wealth. When a woman, no matter what her age, looked rich, men popped up like toadstools after rain. She winked at herself in the mirror and trotted off.

Back on the beach, she ordered an Evian, picked up her novel and waited for action. Two chapters later, she heard a man say, “I’ve been watching you. Just what sort of book has you so engrossed?” The voice was deep and American.
Tess looked up. The man had a shock of white hair and a network of fine lines around his eyes, but a nicely bronzed body. A tastefully striped shirt almost disguised a modest paunch. She felt like crying bingo, but instead talked calmly about the novel.

He had read it, too. “I’m always looking for attractive properties.”

“Are you scouting something here on the Riviera?”

He laughed, and Tess saw a set of gleaming teeth that meant either top-notch genes or professional whitening. He seemed close to perfect, but not quite. Tess observed that one hazel eye had a disturbing habit of looking toward the other. “No, not real estate. I’m a movie producer. By the way, my name is Troy Enright.”

“I’m Tess Dailey. Might I have seen anything you’ve made?”

“I hope not. My work goes straight to video.” He paused a second. “Now I want to create a film to make my children proud of me. My grandkids, too.”

The word grandkids prompted Tess to whip out a fanfold of pictures of her son and his two girls. Troy responded with oohs and ahs, but no pictures of his own family. He glanced at his watch. “I have to run, but I’d really like to continue this conversation. Why don’t we have dinner tonight?” They agreed to meet in the lobby of the Carlton at eight. Tess was happy that she had swapped her rent-controlled Manhattan walk-up for the miniscule studio so near the hotel.

Tess dallied on the beach until five. If she had met Troy even a decade ago, when her entry into a room brought silence, sighs and general awe, she might have indulged in manicure, pedicure, shampoo, blow dry and facial, but nowadays she aimed only for looking neat, clean and rich. Troy had seen her wrinkles, sags and liver spots in the harsh glare of day. A bubble bath would suffice, followed by a minimum of make-up. She slipped into a black dress that made her seem voluptuous rather than plump and tied a gold-shot scarf around her neck to add glamour and hide loose flesh.

Troy was waiting in the lobby. His white guayabera shirt looked freshly washed and ironed, and the pleat on his matching trousers seemed sharp enough to slice meat. He wore white loafers without socks.

The minute Troy spotted Tess, he turned on a photogenic smile. “I thought you might be tired of all those fancy French sauces so I’m taking you to an American place.”
He led her by the elbow to his Jaguar convertible. “I’m nuts about classic cars and the wind through my hair.”

Tess fetched up a false smile. The wind would ruin her hairdo. She unwound the scarf from her neck and tied it around her hair. They sped along the Grande Corniche.

Troy drew up before The Stars and Stripes, the little café where she had taken Herminie two nights before. What a piker, she thought, and read the menu. “I’ll choose the crab cakes,” she said. “But it won’t be like the king crab I used to get in Alaska.”

“What were you doing in Alaska?”

“My late husband, had to travel for business. He was a wildcatter.” Garry was actually a gambler, but wildcatter sounded better.

She entertained Troy with anecdotes about the great times she had with Garry in Alaska, Mexico and Venezuela. Then she stopped abruptly. “Here I am, talking all about myself. I haven’t given you a chance to get a word in edgewise. What about you? Where were you born? Where have you lived? Are you widowed or divorced? You mentioned children and grandchildren. How many do you have? What are they like?”

Troy put his hands up. “Whoa! Do you think I’m going to answer all your questions now and never have a chance to see you again? No, I’m going to play a male Scheherazade and tell you tales over breakfast, lunch and dinner until you say enough’s enough and promise not to kill me.” He waited for an appreciative chuckle. “Isn’t this your first trip to the Riviera? What have you seen besides the beach? I’ll be your personal tour guide.”

The next morning Troy whisked Tess to what he called an amusing little bar for a café complet and regaled her with stories of shoots he had been on. After the drive to the Museum of Modern Art in Nice, they went to a charcuterie where Troy ordered the makings of a picnic lunch in rapid-fire French. When they returned to Cannes, he explained that he would go to a business meeting while she took a siesta and got ready for dinner. Four hours later, he took her to what he called an amusing little bistro, which turned out to be the Rive Droite, where she had dined with Herminie.

Over the next few days, Troy spouted facts, figures and anecdotes, but never much essential about himself. He made no attempts to take her to bed and left her to her own devices every afternoon.
On one of these afternoons, Tess ran into Herminie at the beach. The Frenchwoman said, “I saw you with that tall monsieur.”

“Troy? Yes, he’s been very attentive.”

Herminie looked suspicious. “Where is he now?”

“Trying to raise money for a pet project. He’s a movie producer.”

Herminie shook her finger at Tess. “Beware of that man. He is not younger than you, but men of his age usually have their little friends. Look about you. A man has only to choose the mamelles he likes the best. I want to warn you. There are many escrots, how you say, confidence men, on the Cote d’Azur who make their living by cheating women of their money.”

Tess patted Herminie on the shoulder. “I appreciate your concern, but Troy hasn’t asked me for a dime, er, a Euro and he’s always warning me not to wear my jewelry. He says I’m tempting thieves.” She laughed. “Anyway, I’m not looking for a lifetime companion, just someone who might pleasure me for a while.”

Herminie nodded, an understanding look on her face. “I have had many affairs of the heart. At our age, one must expect nothing and be grateful for crumbs.”

Tess tapped the book in her hand. “I promised Troy I’d give him my opinion on this novel, The Beating Heart. He says it was a best seller here in France. Now it’s come out in English. I have only four hours to read it through and dress for dinner.” She patted Herminie on the shoulder. “You and I can talk tomorrow.”

Later, Troy drew up before the hotel with another man in the back seat. Dressed totally in black, Pierre L’hermite smiled thinly and shook her hand limply. He seemed vaguely familiar to Tess, but she couldn’t place him. Troy introduced him as the author of the novel. Tess was impressed. “An author? How exciting.”

Troy smiled. “Where shall we dine? La Rive Droite?”

Pierre wrinkled his nose. “Banal. We will go to the Negresco. The Chanteclair.”

Troy looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “How like an author to suggest the highest-priced restaurant in Nice.”

As soon as they were seated, Pierre called for a bottle of champagne. After a protracted discussion of vintages with the sommelier, the two men turned to Tess. “And what did you think of The Beating Heart?” Troy asked.
“It’s charming. I don’t see how anyone can fail to respond to such a moving romance.”

Troy leaned across the table. “Don’t imagine for a second we haven’t found dozens of people just as enthusiastic as you and just as anxious to participate in the wonderful experience of translating a best seller into a hit film.”

“Are they going to be extras?”

“No, investors.”

Tess cocked her head. “I thought movies were bankrolled by big banks, insurance companies, even telecommunications companies.”

“Studio productions, yes, but this is going to be an independent.”

Pierre spoke up. “Studios will not back something experimental. The executives do not read books. They have assistants, all of them very young, very inexperienced with life, who read books for them.”

The word books jarred her memory. This tiny man, this supposed best-selling author, was the creepy little gigolo who had approached her on the beach.

“We would like you to invest in our venture,” Troy said.

“Invest?” Tess tittered a few seconds before straightening in her chair. She was struck by the irony of the situation. He really did think she was rich, and she had really believed he was a producer. Who conned whom? “I’m sorry I can’t go along with your proposal. I have a rule not to invest in show business.” She put down her glass.

Troy shook his head. “This is no fly-by-night venture we’re talking about. We’re going to issue stock, and the stock will be guaranteed by a leading French bank.”

Tess straightened in her chair. “I’m in no position to risk capital.”

Troy placed his hand on top of hers. “We could make you executive producer.”

“No.” Her voice was firm.

“We could write you a bit part, too.”

“No,” she almost shouted.

The smile dropped from Troy’s face, and he snapped his fingers at the waiter for the check. “I seem to have lost my appetite, I’m sure you have, too.” Once he settled the bill, the two men stalked out.
It was dark when Tess stepped outside the Negresco. She would have to take a taxi all the way back to Cannes. The fare would almost wipe out her tiny hoard, but she would still be able to cover airport buses here and at home.

These annual outings were a respite from scraping by on a cashier’s salary and hoping for visits from her son. This year she had sublet her tiny flat to that scrawny photographer, Brian Berkey. Next year she would swap her apartment for a place near another swanky hotel, but in Gstaad or Chamonix. No matter that she couldn’t ski, she would splurge on a flattering après-ski outfit, keep her arm in a sling and never go near the slopes. She could afford airfare nearly anywhere, but certainly not all her meals and entertainment. That’s what wealthy men were for.

She might even find one she liked, but never enough to make her stop missing Garry.