

Call Me

Doctor Otto Fermé entered Bistro Estelle, greeted Estelle with the obligatory three kisses, and took an outdoor table. He had enjoyed lunch at this Paris bistro twice a week 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 destination with exceptional cuisine.

"Doctor Fermé, have you seen the menu?" asked the waiter.

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

"Yes, sir."

It was a partly cloudy day with scattered showers, typical of springtime Paris. The temperature was suit-jacket comfortable. Because of the threat of rain, only a few customers ate outdoors. Staff and patients from the hospital, neighborhood residents, and tourists filled the dining room.

Doctor Fermé wore a suit and bow tie. Unlike some of his colleagues, he did not wear his scrubs in public. A voracious bibliophile his current read was Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, a lipogrammatic book written without the letter "e." Fermé found it interesting that a gifted writer who had worked as an archivist at a research hospital would write a book with a missing letter. As an amateur violinist, Fermé found such tricks of literature silly compared to musicians who limited themselves to a few pitches when composing or improvising. Fermé, a compassionate medical man, enjoyed Perec's virtuosic writing, but found the prose cold, disembodied, and lacking empathy.

The scallops were delicious, the wild asparagus superb, and the house wine an excellent complement. When he was halfway through his meal, a youthful woman approached his table. She asked if she could join him. It was a strange request since there were many empty tables. "*Bien sûr, mademoiselle.*" Doctor Fermé stood and pulled back a chair from the table. She sat and crossed her legs.

She was an attractive woman with classic features. She appeared to be in her late twenties and wore expensive couture. Her makeup and coiffure looked professionally prepared. Was she a model or actress on a meal break? There was nothing sexually provocative about her appearance. Still, the doctor sensed a sensual familiarity about her bearing.

"Do you have a pen I may borrow?"

"It is a fountain pen. Have you ever used one?"

"But, 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 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 read the card: “Anna, 1.43.34.33.41.” He studied the card and immediately noticed the palindromic name and telephone number. “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 my dessert day. That’s when I enjoy Bistro Estelle’s famous chocolate mousse. *Le notte s’il vous plait.*”

“Doctor, 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.”

“Estelle is a generous *patronne.* An inspiration.”

“As she says, ‘Sight is priceless.’”

Three days later, the doctor and his wife attended an evening concert of Carnatic music at the Indian Embassy in Paris. Shortly before the second half began, an attractive twenty-something woman wearing expensive couture approached the doctor and his wife sitting at the end of the back row. She wore a familiar scent.

“Doctor Fermé?”

“*Oui.*”

She handed Doctor Fermé a card. He read the card: “Eve, 1.43.34.33.41.” She bent down and whispered in his ear, “Call me.”

That night the doctor barely slept. Why were two beautiful, expensively attired women with palindromic names and the same telephone number giving him these cards? Was it a sexual entrapment scheme? A #MeToo scam?

In forty years of marriage, he had never had a mistress and was always respectful of female nurses and staff. Behind his back, the younger doctors called him “grandpa” for his patrician old-style French manners.

Doctor Fermé never called the number. He destroyed the two cards. Three months later, sitting in the summer sun at Bistro Estelle, enjoying a post-meal espresso, a woman in her mid-twenties 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.”