

THE BIN AND THE BOMB

Excerpt, from *Porcelain Travels* by Matthew Félix

... After a week of searching, I appeared to have found a place to live. To be sure, I needed to see it in person. I set up an appointment and, the next day, I went to check out the apartment.

Stéphane met me at the metro station and whisked me off to his place, just a couple of minutes away. In order to see it, it was necessary to climb seven flights of stairs. The building was an old, grandiose Haussmann in an upscale neighborhood. I commented that it seemed odd there wasn't an elevator.

"There is," Stéphane responded, before bounding out of sight, "we just don't get to use it."

The apartment was a *chambre de bonne*, or service room, which was essentially where "the help" lived way back when. More than welcome in the homes of their employers when cooking or cleaning, at all other times apparently the servants were to remain out of sight. That explained why, even though the building did in fact have an elevator, it didn't go to the top floor—where the service rooms were located. The servants didn't even have off-hour access to the main entrance. Instead, they were expected to use a separate, discreet door a few feet away, the same one through which the trash was dragged in and out.

So much for *fraternité, égalité, and liberté*.

Stéphane vaulted up each flight as he had countless times before, not only his years of experience but the long legs on his tall, lanky frame affording him a considerable advantage over me. Not that I wished him any ill will, but I was almost relieved when I found him panting at the top of the stairs. My relief was short-lived. I was soon seeing not one but several Stépbanes, each moving about like crystals in a kaleidoscope.

I sat down and put my head between my knees. For a moment I was back in the only session of Bikram yoga I had ever dared attend, reliving the alarming instant I realized that—although I was watching him, and he was still talking—I no longer heard anything the instructor in the classroom-cum-sauna was saying. "This must be what it feels like before you pass out," it occurred to me. Every drop of blood in my body had drained below my waist. If I didn't sit down that very instant, it would be lights out.

"It's harder if you stop part way up," Stéphane offered. I barely nodded, like a coma patient who can only communicate by moving his big toe.

Stéphane and his girlfriend, a Chilean woman named María, were getting ready to spend a few months traveling around South America, which was why they were subletting their apartment. When we opened the door, María was there to greet us. There was, after all, no other place for her to be.

I have no idea how it was possible for two adults to cohabit in such confined quarters. Prisoners sharing a cell have more room to move around. Astronauts in space stations have more privacy. Even conjoined twins live more separate lives than Stéphane and María at home together.

"Well, here it is," Stéphane proclaimed, in a timid statement of the obvious. He seemed nervous.

"Here it is!" I echoed, not sure what else to say. I also forced a smile, hoping to disguise my shock and dismay.

"Well, ah," Stéphane began, looking around as though trying to figure out where to start, "there's the futon, which folds out into a bed. And the wood plank hanging from the chain can be put up against the wall, when you're not using it as a table."

He proceeded to give me a demonstration. I, however, was distracted. Looking beyond the retractable table, through a large window I beheld an unobstructed, top-to-bottom view of the Eiffel Tower. It was breathtaking. Other than from open spaces like the Trocadéro or the Champs de Mars, I wouldn't have thought such a view was even possible.

"That's the TV," Stéphane continued, making yet another statement of the obvious. A large screen hung on an adjustable arm sticking out of the wall. Couldn't miss it.

"And there's the Internet connection," he concluded.

I looked down at the floor, where a blinking black box sat atop a tangled nest of wires.

“The sink’s in there,” María interjected, motioning to a minuscule alcove off the main room. It was about as big as one of those old ironing-board closets.

“Yeah, and the hotplate and microwave,” added Stéphane. Apparently, the alcove served as the kitchen. “It’s really, really important you turn off the gas whenever you’re done using the hotplate.”

“Butane tanks aren’t allowed in apartments anymore,” María explained, “because there have been some explosions. But we don’t have any other way to cook.”

It made perfect sense. If they couldn’t cook, they couldn’t eat, and they would die. Without cooking, death was certain; death by butane-tank explosion, on the other hand, was merely a possibility. Like any prudent, rational thinkers, they had chosen the less risky option.

I took a closer look. On the shelf under the microwave, there was a small butane tank. Ironically, other than the fact it was blue, it looked just like one of those stereotypical bowling-ball bombs in old cartoons. A hose ran behind some shelves, connecting the tank to a two-burner camping stove, which Stéphane had referred to as the hotplate. That was where I would be doing my cooking; assuming, of course, that I, myself, wasn’t burnt to a crisp in yet another unfortunate, newsworthy mishap.

“That’s why you also have to make sure you always open the window when you’re cooking,” cautioned Stéphane, while showing me how to raise the small, four-paned window over the camping stove.

“And please don’t remove the piece of paper. The windowpane is broken on the other side, and the paper keeps it in place,” he added.

I looked at the paper. It featured a huge set of lips that had benefited from a reparation, volumizing, and anti-aging regimen developed by a Parisian laboratory. I made a mental note never to remove the paper from the window. Wouldn’t want to hurt those pretty lips—especially not after all the work that had gone into them.

Returning my attention to whether I was up for the dangers of living with a potential bomb, not to mention the every bit as sinister threat of a gas leak lulling me into a permanent slumber, María deftly changed the subject.

“The bathroom!” she said.

“Oh yeah!” responded Stéphane with a smile, as though he couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it sooner. “Come on.”

We stepped back out into the hallway. As we did, Stéphane insisted it was paramount I always carry the key with me whenever I left the room, since the door locked automatically. I made another mental note, adding it to the ones about the gas and the lips.

We walked to the end of the hall, where Stéphane opened a narrow door that, from the outside, appeared to be a closet. And in a sense, it was. I found myself presented with the very embodiment of a “water closet.” Besides a tall window, there was room for nothing in the little chamber other than a toilet and the brush used to clean it.

There were actually two water closets—one at each end of the hall. They were shared with the neighbors, creatures of the night who were few in number and rarely seen.

“As you can tell, it’s clean. The neighbors are very respectful,” María pointed out, in case I hadn’t noticed. I had. But my mind had already moved onto something else.

As elsewhere in my travels, “water closet” was not to be confused with the more comprehensive term “bathroom.” There was neither a sink nor a tub or shower in the little room. Where did Stéphane and María bathe, I wondered. The answer would prove to be an ingenious—albeit unorthodox—setup back in the kitchen alcove.

Hanging from the ceiling were two shower curtains I had overlooked initially, no doubt while wondering if the benefits of renting the apartment outweighed the risk of dying in it. Stéphane explained the role the curtains played in maintaining his and María’s personal hygiene.

“It’s easier if you just shower at the pool,” he began, “but, when you want to shower here, first you have to put this on the floor.” He motioned to an empty rubber bin that had been resting against the wall. It was the size of a laundry basket.

“Then,” continued María, “you unhook the shower curtains, and let them come to rest in the

bin.”

Like a flight attendant describing life-saving techniques, she demonstrated the procedure.

“After that, you take this hose and hook it up to the sink. Then you turn on the water, get it to the right temperature, and take your shower,” explained Stéphane. “You just have to make sure not to take too long. Otherwise the bin will overflow, and you’ll have a big mess on your hands!”

I thought of the time at home when I’d failed to turn the faucet all the way off, after going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. The sink had a slow drain, and the water overflowed, flooding the bathroom floor—and seeping through my downstairs neighbor’s ceiling. Earplugs had ensured I slept through it all, until my panicked landlord came pounding on my door early the next morning. A big mess, indeed.

Returning to the situation at hand, I considered the facts.

By Parisian standards, the apartment was cheap. Most other apartments I’d found were much more expensive. Still—forgetting for a moment the whole bomb thing—was I really up to showering in a laundry basket? Although I’m normally more adaptable than just about anyone I know, that sort of felt like taking it to a new extreme. On the other hand, I wouldn’t have to live with roommates. The apartment had a high-speed Internet connection and a TV. It also had that spectacular view of the Eiffel Tower.

Then, of course, there was the one factor I had been conveniently overlooking: I was out of time. No other feasible options had presented themselves, and I didn’t feel comfortable extending my stay at Sophie’s.

I talked the chronically codependent couple down 100 euros a month.

We had a deal.