

Deadly Details

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Nearly three hours after landing at Charles de Gaulle, I found myself hauling 60 pounds of luggage up three steep flights of dark, squeaky, wooden stairs. Upon my arrival, my comfortably settled American roommate introduced herself as Michelle and informed me that there would be a grand fête, a big party, for my mysterious host mother's birthday that evening in the courtyard of our apartment building. I was jetlagged and travel weary after 26 hours of takeoffs, landings, layovers, and security lines; I had no idea how to process this new information.

The afternoon sun poured in through the tall windows in our small room at an odd angle and cast long shadows on the dusty and splintered wooden floors. Everything was strangely still except for Michelle's background chatter and a single hammer striking metal outside. I looked down from our third floor window into the courtyard and saw a lone man struggling with a huge piece of white canvas. The atmosphere — the lackadaisical autumn sun, dust, and the preparation for a celebration among strangers speaking a language I could barely follow — disoriented me. I turned my attention to Michelle, trying to keep up with her babble in French. Her mouth moved so quickly and details only slowly permeated my hazy mind. The party would be themed and each person was to wear a Meurtrière Detail.

I didn't know what that was.

"A 'Killer Detail,'" she said in English. "An accessory that just kills your fabulous outfit."

So 20 minutes later and 30 hours after leaving LAX found me shopping with a stranger for a "Killer Detail" for a French woman's soirée in the Marais — a liberal, artistic quarter of Paris known for bargain shopping and a lively nightlife enjoyed mostly by burly, bald-headed gay men. Michelle led me down the noisy boulevard and turned onto a street far too narrow to contain the traffic that rushed by. Her bouncy step was quick and deliberate; I had little time to take in my surroundings if I wanted to keep up.

We finally came to a boulevard with cheap-looking shops filled with colorful plastic trinkets and faux-leather goods. Piles of shoeboxes lined the windows of each shop, inside and out, enticing passers by with their flamboyant fashion statements and low prices. We stepped into the first shop on the block. It was clean with white walls but busy with merchandise; it seemed to be a kind of gag-gift shop. I scanned the room for something that could serve as my “Killer Detail.” On the back wall I spotted some bandanas that were shaped like caps. The two-euro price tag drew me to them so I picked a purple one and stuck it on my head. It clashed perfectly with my outfit—I had my detail. I was relieved to have found something and my jitters started to melt away as I reveled in the fact that I was in Paris about to make my debut into French society. It would be glorious.

Dusk fell on our artsy, right-bank apartment after we made our way back home. I decided to take a nap; I rested my travel-weary body on a narrow bed with a foam mattress and forty-five minutes later, I arose to a dark room. Pale light filtered in through the opaque glass windows of the double doors that opened to the rest of the flat. I heard Michelle and Madame talking and laughing. Their French sounded distant to me, almost surreal.

I shyly emerged from my room to explore my new surroundings. Strings of white lights were all that illuminated the inside of the apartment. They hung around a large mirror that sat in the hallway on a frayed Persian rug. Light was reflected in the mirror and gently lit the next room where Madame and Michelle bustled. The entire apartment shone with a magical feeling and everything seemed hazy and unrealistic—like a dream.

Madame Benichou was a big personality packed into a tiny body. From what I could gather, she was newly divorced and ready to have fun. She pranced around those bare wooden floors, her full black skirt sweeping the ground. She asked which earrings she should wear and the language barrier seemed to disappear with her excitement. Michelle asked Madame what her Meurtrière Detail was. Madame picked up a brown leather holster carrying an alarmingly realistic pistol and buckled it around her petite figure to top off that swooshing black skirt.

A handgun was not exactly what I had in mind as a “Killer Detail” but of course it made sense. A growing concern that my bandana would fail me invaded my mind. I asked Michelle what her detail was and she pulled a kitchen knife out of her boot. I tried not to show my utter shock.

A group of us descended through the dim, creaky staircase, Madame with her pistol, Michelle with her knife, and I with my purple bandana planted innocently on my head. We went through the basement to the courtyard. The canopy was up, adorned with colorful, glowing lights strung up every which way. The festive setting offered no sign of that lonely man who had, only three hours before, labored to put it up under a radiant sun. Now, the quiet courtyard throbbed with American disco music. The party came to life with a full bar and an oversized storage closet converted into

a makeshift buffet. Homemade dishes decked the tables as guests slowly began to arrive.

My purple bandana faded into the background among crazy French men and women dressed in outfits that one would expect to see in a cartoon. Apparently, I was not the only guest who missed the memo on the danger aspect of the “Killer Detail” because there was a man in a white suite with a bright orange shirt carrying a rubber chicken. An exotic-looking woman wearing lingerie complete with knee-high pleather go-go boots stood next to me at the bar as I was handed a glass of champagne. I soaked it all in. The guests were like colorful characters in a picture book with gaudy and elaborate costumes. The glimmer of lights and the vibrancy of the music was all a dream. This was my introduction to Paris.

My dizzying exhaustion melted into inebriation as I took advantage of the endless champagne. I lurked in the shadows of the softly illuminated courtyard awe-struck by my first evening in the City of Light. Eventually, I made my way back to my small room while the party still throbbed below. I could no longer keep my eyes open and the experience had become all too elusive. I drifted off to sleep that first night having already lived my dreams.