



Pam Mariko

Taken Once

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by Pamela Mariko

*This story came second in the Sunshine Coast Literary Association
Memoir competition, 2015*

Foreign chatter rose to the balcony window; I opened my eyes. Light filtered through the gap between the hotel's heavy curtains.

I didn't know what my mum had been worried about; Paris was a modern city. "I've heard on the news some girls are missing. The police think they've been sold. Be careful!" she said at the airport.

"M-u-m! I'm nearly 25. Besides things like that don't happen in Europe." I hadn't given her time to reply; I hugged her goodbye as they called my flight.

Well, I was there now. I looked over at the other bed. Rumpled sheets. Empty. He'd be in the bathroom. I stared at the strange ceiling.

Good; we were going to collect my traveller's cheques from American Express this morning. "Ezra," I called, followed by a yawn and a stretch. "H-el-l-o! You're an early bird!" No answer from the bathroom. The bedroom came more into focus. His bedside table was empty. His overnight bag was gone from the corner. My throat dried and something jumped in my heart and stomach at the same time.

I swung my legs out of bed and dived into the bathroom. Empty. I flung open the bathroom cupboards above and below the

vanity, my heart beating. No aftershave. Nothing masculine. Only my stuff.

My money.

No. Oh no. Yesterday's discomfort in the AMEX office played through my mind. I pulled on my coat over my pyjamas and fumbled for the till receipt in my pocket. I could take this in to collect my money. Even as I thought it I knew I'd been taken. "Ezra, when you give currency for traveller's cheques, you have to come away with the book of cheques," I'd said.

"Sweet-ee, funds have to pass through my PANAM account overnight so that your pesetas can get the staff rate; or do you just want the normal rate and loose substantial unnecessary money to the banking institutions, huh?"

He shrugged as if he didn't care either way.

Well, that's why I was there, wasn't it? We'd talked about it in Majorca when he kindly offered to help Lizzy and I get US Green Cards and change our season's earnings at a higher rate. No strings. He was older than us. Didn't fancy him anyway.

I hugged my coat over my state of undress and hurried down the corridor to the lift. Once inside I hit 'foyer'. It took forever. The doors opened with a ding and I sped across the tiles to the counter. "Does anyone speak English?" Rude bastard behind the counter ignored my attempt en Francais. There were lots of people paying bills and exchanging French pleasantries.

"Does someone speak English?"

Another receptionist rolled his shoulders and turned his mouth down. What was he doing working at a major Paris Hotel reception

then? I moved to a third, asked the same question and elicited a similar response. I tried Spanish – my second language. Ignored. “Someone must speak English,” I appealed to him. Was I invisible?

I slammed my fist on the counter. “Someone here must speak FUCKING ENGLISH?”

The foyer ambience stilled for what seemed seconds.

A firm but gentle hand rested on my shoulder.

“I speak English, Madam. How might I help?”

I spun around.

“My name is John; I am chief security for the Intercontinental hotel.”

It was a real English accent.

“Thank God you’re English. The man I was with has stolen my money...”

“Half English. Come into the office.”

I followed. “I want the police.”

“Of course, please, sit,” he said as we entered the small office off the reception area.

“Tell me what happened before I phone them, so I can translate, yes?”

I nodded.

“My friend and I had a twin room here. He’s a pilot with

PANAM. He changed my money at AMEX yesterday but we didn't come away with US dollars...just this..." I showed him the till receipt and groaned.

"Why would you give him your money to change? The police will ask how well you know him. Glass of water?"

He poured two waters from a jug on the desk.

"We met in Spain. Just friends – a group of us. My friend Lizzy and I had jobs there. He and his Arab friend were the rich ones: always taking the rest of us to lunch. There was an Italian couple, four English girls, and some with boyfriends from time to time. Ezra knew Lizzy and I worked and saved hard, and that we wanted to go to the US."

"He is from US?"

"Middle East but lives in US. He said he'd help us get Green Cards, and that he'd change our season's pesetas at his PANAM staff rate - so we'd get a higher exchange rate. He said to hang on to our Spanish money when we got home to UK. He'd call us and invite us to Paris...he'd already taken us once before for lunch in Paris – free tickets, and flew us back to work in Palma by the evening."

He nodded very slowly. "So you knew he was, shall we say, honest?"

"Y-e-s! I mean, we weren't stranded, molested, or anything."

"Your friend, Lizzy?"

"She didn't want to come this time."

"And he telephoned and invited you to Paris from your home? Paid for you?"

“Last week. Asked if I still had the pesetas from my season in Spain. The exchange rate was good for him at the moment.”

“I’m sure.”

“He said if I got my outbound ticket on my credit card he would reimburse me when I arrived.”

“He has?”

It just got bloody worse. “No.”

“When did you arrive here?”

“Two days ago. He took me out to dinner, the Moulin Rouge, Can-Can shows and so on.” I stared into space. Took me? Well it was on my money, I realised now. “The next day he took me to the Eiffel Tower and AMEX. I argued that I should come away with either money or traveller’s cheques but he said...” Now I felt like a wide-eyed idiot saying it; I groaned and put my hands to my temples. “He said to get the special staff rate the currency had to pass through his Pilot’s account overnight.”

John brought his knuckles to his lips and coughed.

The questioning had been going on long enough. “Please call the police now.”

“They will ask: was this, how shall we say, your boyfriend for the moment? Your lover?”

The way he said ‘lur-vur’ made me pull a face. He had to be kidding. “No way! I never slept with him. Ever. We had twin beds. Why?”

“It is difficult for you. The police will not do much. This is Paris. There are many such small thefts...”

“It’s not small to me,” I squealed.

“But also, many air crews stay here at the Intercontinental — if indeed your friend is really a pilot.” He paused, “And, many prostitutes, also — stay here.”

I looked up at him very slowly and stared. “Are you...?”

“No, no! I am just saying, the attitude of the police, you know...”

It just got better and better every damn minute. “I want the police.”

He picked up the telephone and spoke in French. “They will be here quickly. They are near.”

I was still staring at him with amazement when two gendarmes arrived. One spoke with John as if I wasn’t there. Both had handle-bar moustaches, hooked noses and deep set lines either side of their noses, which added to their bored expressions.

“Well? Ask them to take a statement, please.”

John translated.

The more senior of the two police twitched his moustache and removed a clipboard from under his arm. He turned back a page and raised his eyebrows to me.

“Please explain. Security Manager ’ere translate,” he said in English.

As I told my story the other guy leaned against the wall and

took out a Gitanes cigarette from a blue packet. He blew smoke in my face. Arrogant prick.

“Can you catch him?” I snapped at the end of the translation process.

Both shrugged their shoulders, turned their mouths down and said: “Bur?”

“They will do their best,” John said and nodded thanks as they slouched out.

“Is that it?”

“Paris, as I said, has many bigger crimes. They will let you know in England, perhaps, if anything comes to light. What do you plan to do now? You have no money, you say?”

“He took everything. Please can you come with me to AMEX? Please. I don’t speak French, only Spanish and English. Please; it’s all my season’s earnings. It’s the money I was going to take my mum on holiday with to Hawaii.” I started to cry.

He came around to my side of the desk.

“I will come, a little later in the morning. But, I can tell you the receipt you showed me is just a till receipt from someone — anyone, at a counter. It is not personalised. But we will go. Now, you have no money... ”

“I would need to phone my mum to get help, or use my credit card to get a plane. I don’t even know if I have enough to get to the airport.”

“Look, it would be better to go in the morning after a sleep. I have a one- bedroom apartment near the centre of Paris. I don’t live

there. You can stay there if you like. It has no furniture but I can give you blankets to sleep on the floor.”

Something didn't feel right. “Why doesn't it have furniture?”

He shrugged like the police.

“I didn't get around to it. It is just a retreat.”

Perhaps he was married with a mistress. I needed a rest. I couldn't stay in the hotel. But...

“I can make a call and get you a cab there — on the hotel. A voucher.”

A flat in the middle of Paris? I wouldn't know where I was or how to get in or out. No-one would know I was there. No phone, and even if there was, who would understand me?

Despite my need to rest and re-group, something prickled the back of my neck in an eerie way. “Er, I'm not sure. No, I think I'd rather have a voucher to the airport, if you don't mind.”

He shrugged. “As you wish.”

“Thankyou, though.”

“Maybe it is best. C'est la vie.”

It was a relief to get a British Airways seat back to London, courtesy of my credit card.

I leaned between the seats and watched the nearest TV screen.

“This is the BBC News, Sunday, the 21st August 1977: More English, American, Swiss and Australian girls have been taken from

various apartments near central Paris. It is believed they have been drugged and sold to North Africa and other locations for the use of prostitution.

The widespread scam network seeks to lure young travellers to stay in apartments without charge. From there, they are taken...”

I stared at the screen, remembering John’s offer.

“Three people have been held for questioning...” the report continued.

Could John, the security manager, possibly be an agent for a slave prostitution racket? Surely not? His ‘C’est la vie’ comment ran through my mind.

Cameras flashed on the screen as three men were walked out of buildings onto Paris streets. Between two officials, John’s face stared back at me, a cynical twist to his smile, as if he could see me.

I felt my mouth drop. Oh my God. Goosebumps pebbled my arms and I shuddered. I might never have seen my family again. Tears came to my eyes and I shifted my gaze to the stormy night clouds lifting outside the small airline window. Good riddance to Paris.

Taken Once – almost twice.

... a short story by award winning author, Pam Mariko

Set in Paris, tells of a close encounter when a young person finds themselves “stuck” in Paris and at the whim of not so nice Parisians.

author of
**Red Moon:
Secrets of
a Sixties
Schoolgirl**



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