

# Summer Fling

A Short Story by Kim Kelln

Emma, restaurateur and chef, is taking some away time from her lifeless marriage when she meets Frank, a most enchanting and handsome food critic. They have a lot in common and hit it off immediately, but she's uncomfortable that she's uncertain if it's just a summer fling, or if she wants it to be something more, especially since she hasn't made up her mind about her marriage.

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

Emma struggles to keep up with her long-legged husband as they slalom their way through the crowded terminal. It was only her feelings of wifely obligation that propelled her along. He was the one that was late, her flight didn't leave for another three hours. She loses sight of him when she is stuck behind a cluster of grannies on a moving sidewalk.

Roger is off to some oil and gas conference on the other side of the world. In the past, he would have asked her to come along, often insisting that she drop everything and join him. He stopped asking a long time ago. She stopped going a long time ago. Instead, she booked a trip to the South of France, justifying it as a business trip for her restaurant. Maybe there was a hint of childish spite involved too.

She mentioned her trip to him but it didn't seem to register. As they leave for the airport he is surprised that she has her suitcase with her.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"South of France," she says.

"Oh!"

They drive to the airport in silence.

She's breathless when she catches up with him outside of Security. He checks his watch, looking impatient.

"OK. I have to go. I'll be back in a week or so. I'll text my return flight when I'm on the tarmac," he says.

Emma waits for the perfunctory goodbye-peck on the cheek, but he's off and queuing. He doesn't look back. She sighs.

#

Emma spends the afternoon sightseeing, enjoying the ambiance and pace of an old-world city. When she returns to her hotel, the concierge recommends a small, most excellent bistro close by.

While showering away the heat, she thinks about Roger and their marriage. She supposes, like any marriage of almost twenty years, there would be good years, and some bad. Although he can be thoughtless, seemingly all the time now, he is never cruel. Shaking the thought out of mind, she dresses in a short skirt over bare legs, her best feature, she's been told, and a cami. She appraises herself.

"Not bad for forty-seven," she says.

A brief minute later, she shrugs, sighs, and changes into slacks, a summer blouse and flats.

The bistro is in a historical building, but is very bougie and modern inside. She is shown to a small, table-for-one close to the open windows, beside another lone occupant. Except for this *singles section*, the restaurant is all couples, some young, some old, some same-sex, and some indeterminate. Several men and some of the women give her admiring glances.

Her *dining partner* is a man of moderate age, greying at the temples, clean shaven, and draped in a Tom Ford linen-blend suit. He has a small journal beside him and makes notes after sampling various morsels. Sometimes, after tipping back his glass, he looks skyward, deep in thought, then writes some more.

Emma leans over.

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

“Excuse me,” she says, “do you speak English?”

“Oui,” he says, dabbing his napkin to his lips, “yes, I do. How may I help you?”

“Oh good. Nothing really, and I apologize for intruding. I just wanted to know who you’re writing for, and how you enjoyed your meal? I’ve had several food critics through my restaurant back home, but none as thorough as you seem to be.”

He laughs, “no apologies necessary, and thank you for the compliment — at least I think it is a compliment.”

“Definitely a compliment.”

“I write for the LA Times, but I’m on sabbatical, so to speak, to work on my book about the cuisine of the South of France. What is your restaurant?”

“La Fusion Française, and we serve its namesake. I’m also the chef”

He grimaces.

“You object?” she says.

“Fusion can take many turns, some of them dark. I’d have to eat there to say one way or the other. How would you rate your restaurant?”

“Five star, of course,” she says, grinning.

He laughs again. He has a nice laugh, she thinks.

She extends her hand and says, “I’m Emma Lemark.”

“Franklin Delmarco, my nom de plume, but, please, call me Frank. Pedestrian, I know, but my friends all do,” he says, as he takes her hand. He lifts it gently and touches it delicately with his lips. Emma blushes.

“Oh my. Umm. I’ll let you get back to your ‘work’,” she says, embarrassed both that she was blushing, and for putting air quotes around *work*.

They dine in silence, he engrossed in his critique and she in the couples, thinking briefly of Roger, but stealing frequent glances at Frank.

When their plates are cleared, Frank says, “Emma. Your glass is empty and I still have half a bottle. Please sit with me. Please. We can finish the bottle and I’d value your opinions about your meal, as a restaurateur and chef.”

She joins him and they talk food, wine, travel, France, and the state of cuisine in the US. They finish another bottle of wine and complete the night with Cognac and dessert.

“May I walk with you to your hotel, Emma?”

“Certainly. It’s not out of your way, is it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well then, let us proceed.”

#

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

Frank is happily surprised when he sees Emma at the Marché des Quais the next morning. He waves to her across the crowded marketplace.

Together they wander the stalls. Frank says he has a plan, but to Emma it feels like they're meandering. She smiles, thinking about Roger, and wondering why men have plans that aren't really plans at all when it comes to shopping.

The vendors are starting to pack up by the time Frank feels he's seen everything worth seeing. They reach Emma's hotel as dusk settles in.

"Today was a lot of fun," she says. "I'm so glad I ran into you."

"Me too, and the day is hardly over. I have a delightful place in mind for dinner. Would it be presumptuous to ask if you'd join me?"

"Not presumptuous at all, Frank. I'd love to join you, but I need to freshen up first."

When Frank returns, she takes his offered arm.

"I'm happy you came," he says, "it's a pleasure to have such charming company for dinner, someone with the same impeccable tastes."

"I don't know about that," she laughs.

Emma pulls herself closer when Frank comments on her endearing laugh. Dinner is just as he advertised, delightful — the food, the wine, the conversation. The two bottles of wine are empty and they're indulging in the last of the dessert and espressos.

"I know it's forward of me," he says, "but can I ask about your marriage?"

"Certainly. We've grown distant over the years, inattentive, often absent. It doesn't seem like there's much spark left, but perhaps that's expected after a long time together," she says. "Basically, together, but apart."

"Yes, together, but apart. I know what you mean. Jeannine and I are the same. It seems she has her life and I have mine. That's why I decided to come here and work on the book — kind of a dream of mine."

"On the South of France?"

"Why not!" He says, "the wine's terrific, the ambiance is chill, and," he raises his demitasse, "by very happy circumstance, you are here."

At the hotel, Frank holds her very close and looks into her eyes.

"May I," he whispers.

She closes her eyes as he slowly leans in. His kiss is brief.

"Sorry," he says, flustered.

Emma smiles, relishing his taste, unconsciously licking her lips. She puts her hand behind his neck, pulling him to her, touching her warm lips to his. As they part, Emma steps back.

Grinning, she says, "Mister, if you're going to steal a kiss from a lady, you oughta make it a good one. But, I think that's enough for tonight."

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

“Perhaps,” he says, “tomorrow, then? For breakfast, I mean, and a day of sightseeing?”

#

After breakfast they embark on their walking tour of the three cathedrals, following the *scenic route*, arm-in-arm, at a leisurely pace.

Mid-day, they find a quaint, sidewalk tapas bar and spend a glorious hour or more savouring appetizers before finishing the tour. Frank has arranged for dinner at another restaurant that evening, one that comes highly recommended.

She decides she’ll wear her short skirt and cami tonight — it seems right since this feels like a real date. Frank wears his Tom Ford suit. They agree they are a very handsome couple.

The *highly recommended*, fine dining experience they were promised didn’t pan out and, except for the company, the evening would have been a disappointment.

At the hotel, Frank says, “I have plans to drive to Montauban tomorrow to see the fortifications, and to do a bit of touring around the countryside. Will you come with me? I promise you a fun time.”

“Sure. But only because you promised me a fun time.”

“Great. I won’t disappoint you.”

They stand together in awkward silence, each wondering what to do. Their faces are close. They close their eyes. Emma tilts her head as his soft lips gently press against hers. He caresses her silky cheeks and runs his hand through her hair. They pull apart reluctantly. She touches a finger to his lips.

“That was much better, Frank,” she whispers.

She watches him as he walks away. He looks back and stops. They smile and give each other a tiny wave.

#

Once out of the city, Frank detours to country roads, leaving the frenzied traffic of the Autoroute behind. Emma rolls down her window and flutters her hand in the wind. She watches Frank, listening to him chatter on about the cheese and produce in this part of the country, not really paying attention, just enjoying hearing him talk. They pass through villages with impossible names, stretches of verdant pasture sprinkled with doe-eyed cows, and orchards laden with fruit.

They stop at a meadow where Frank lays out a blanket under an old oak tree, while she unpacks the picnic basket, stocked from the markets along the way. They lay back under the warm sun, talking about their dreams, about his book and her restaurant, lulled by the soft wind carrying the scent of grass and flowers.

They spend hours touring the old fortress, then wander the streets and market places, unabashedly holding hands like teenagers. As dusk nears they find an intimate bistro. When they’re seated, Frank pulls out his notebook, but puts it back in his pocket.

“Not tonight?” she asks.

“Not tonight,” he says. “Just you and me — the critic can take a rest.”

Frank moves his chair so he’s next to her.

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

It's late when they've exhausted the menu and their wine. The evening has cooled.

"I don't feel comfortable driving after all that wine," he says. "We should stay overnight. What do you think?"

Emma kisses him and smiles seductively.

"Sure," she says.

The waiter gives them directions to a hotel for "les amoureux". It's out of the way, but he insists, "très romantique". It is both — out of the way and *très romantique*. Their room is on the second floor, overlooking the square. As the door closes, they embrace, hot with passion, impatient, kissing, touching, tearing at each others clothes.

#

Emma is lazily drawing figure eights in Frank's chest hairs. The sunbeams dance across the bed as the dawn advances to morning. He has his arms behind his head.

"Are we bad?" she asks.

"Define bad," he says, "we're both lonely people, thrown happily together. We find each other attractive, pleasant and with much in common, even if some of that is a lifeless marriage. No, we're not 'bad'."

"Is this just fling, a summer affair?" she says.

"Does it have to be anything?"

"Maybe. Maybe I want it to be something, but I'm not sure. Maybe just what it is in the moment is good enough."

She lays her head on his chest, listening to his quickening heartbeat. He runs his fingers through her hair. She smiles and lets her hand slide down under the covers.

#

On their return to Bordeaux, Emma moves in with Frank. For the next four days they wander without agenda, holding hands, kissing on street corners, embracing being lovers with gusto. Emma pushes her question about 'what this is' to the back of her mind, taking pleasure in the moments they are together.

#

They are naked, shiny with perspiration, their boudoir twinkling in the moonlight. She lies on top of him, trapping his arms above his head, unhurriedly pressing soft kisses across his face.

"I leave tomorrow," she says.

"I know."

"We've been living on borrowed time, and the clocks running down."

"It doesn't have to be. I'm falling in love with you — we can just carry on!" he says.

Emma tenses and slides off, then nestles beside him, drawing the sheets over them. Her breathing slows. Frank watches her face and pulls her closer.

## Summer Fling by Kim Kelln

“Or maybe not,” he says.

“I don’t know. I have feelings for you, I just don’t know if it’s love. Maybe it is. I was in love once, a long time ago, but I still know what it feels like. I married Roger because of love and, maybe, maybe that love is still there, somewhere down deep. It’s only the spark that’s gone. Maybe I’m OK with this just being a thing, although it feels like it’s more than that, like it should be more than that. I don’t know.”

Frank softly caresses her hair.

“We still have tonight and tomorrow,” he says. “Maybe I can change your mind — I think we have plenty of spark between us.”

Emma giggles as Frank rolls her onto her back. He kisses her face, her breasts, her delicate belly. He throws off the cover and they make love.

#

They stand together, hand-in-hand, browsing the trinkets and postcards in the airport souvenir store, looking at this and that, but not into shopping, least of all for souvenirs. Frank checks his watch.

“Time to go,” he says.

He walks with her to Security. They embrace, kiss, a goodbye kiss, one filled with love and sorrow, then part reluctantly as she joins the queue. His cheeks are wet with tears. She looks back, her eyes glistening.

She turns away. Frank watches as she takes out her phone and puts it to her ear. Maybe it’s Roger, he thinks, with some bitterness. It’s a long call and she steps aside to let people pass. She’s angry and agitated. When she puts the phone down she wipes away tears, lifts her head, then turns around and walks back. She throws her arms around Frank’s neck, hugging him, kissing away his tears.

“I don’t want this to just be a summer fling,” she says, “I don’t want to be on borrowed time anymore.”

“Me either,” he says.

He wraps his arm around her as they walk out of the airport, together.