

The Whisper of the White Lilies

A collection of Short Stories

Titus Kujur

The Whisper of the White Lilies

© 2025 Titus Kujur

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or critical articles.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Titus Kujur

Published independently by the author

Dedication

For my niece, Madeline—
eight years old and never out of words,
chattering, giggling, running from one corner to
another,
scribbling masterpieces on walls,
and twirling to every song,
even the ones she doesn't quite understand.
May you always keep the world spinning
with your laughter and mischief.

Table of Contents

Preface	vi
Chapter 1 A Cigar, a Coffee, and a Chance	1
Chapter 2 Of Mopeds and the Mystery of Old Men	11
Chapter 3 Steam, Rain, and Radio Songs.....	17
Chapter 4 Puffs, Puddles, and Perfect Brews.....	26
Chapter 5 The Child Within Me.....	31
Chapter 6 Strength Wears No Crown	42
Chapter 7 The Peacock in the Rain	52
Chapter 8 Philosophy of Lust.....	60
Chapter 9 The Boy Who Wasn't Mine	65
Chapter 10 Sorataka.....	73
Chapter 11 When the Rain Forgot to Stop.....	83
Chapter 12 Of Dust, Anklets, and the Divine	90
Chapter 13 The Curtain Never Falls.....	104
Chapter 14 The Telephone Booth	120
Chapter 15 Sunday well spent.....	136
Chapter 16 A free mind is a dangerous thing.....	149
Chapter 17 When the Mango Falls Sideways	162
Chapter 18 Ink and Shadows.....	177
Chapter 19 River of Ash.....	190
Chapter 20 The Magnolia Note.....	205
Chapter 21 The Last Move.....	221
Chapter 22 Maati.....	237

Chapter 23 Crossed Lines.....	251
Chapter 24 The Love Beyond the Years.....	261
Chapter 25 A Place Set for None.....	272
Chapter 26 The beggar of Harsfa Street	283
Chapter 27 Blind Date	292
Chapter 28 A Fevered Rain.....	301
Chapter 29 The Potato Factory	311
Chapter 30 What Might Have Been.....	321
Chapter 31 Learning Without Walls	333
Chapter 32 The Last passengers.....	342
Chapter 33 The Elusive Art of Bargaining	350
Chapter 34 And he asked for nothing.....	359
Chapter 35 The Honest Pickpocket.....	373
Chapter 36 The Third Hour.....	387
Chapter 37 Tea for One.....	399
Chapter 38 The Patient in Room 306.....	408
Chapter 39 The Roommate Agreement.....	422
Chapter 40 Exit Interview	434
Chapter 41 The Girl on Platform 4	449
Chapter 42 The Whisper of the White Lilies.....	466
Chapter 43 The Wedding Photographer.....	483

Preface

When I began writing *The Whisper of the White Lilies*, I never imagined it as a single woven tapestry. The stories did not arrive in order, nor did they seek to be bound by one thread. They came in fragments, in sudden bursts of memory, in quiet moments when the world seemed still. Instead of a grand design, what I found were small openings—like lilies stirring at first light—gentle, deliberate, yet impossible to turn away from.

Each story became a vessel for a voice: some fragile as breath, some carrying the weight of grief, others rising bright with hope and resilience. They are fragments of lives that may never touch in reality, yet in these pages they brush against one another, bound by the same human pulse—the longing to be remembered, to be understood, and to leave behind even the faintest trace of who they once were.

The title is drawn from my long-standing admiration for lilies, flowers that hold both purity and farewell within their petals. To me, they embody the paradox of life itself—where beauty cannot be separated from sorrow, and silence often proves more eloquent than speech. White lilies, in particular, carry an air of reverence, as though they belong both to the living and the departed. In the same way, these stories drift between shadow and light, between loss and renewal, between what fades and what endures.

It is my hope that as you wander through these pages, you will not only read but also pause—to feel, to reflect, to listen. Perhaps in the cadence of a line, or even in the unspoken hush between words, you may hear an echo that belongs not solely to me but to you. A whisper you had almost forgotten, yet one that has been waiting patiently to be heard.

With quiet and enduring gratitude,
Titus Kujur

DO NOT COPY

Chapter 1

A Cigar, a Coffee, and a Chance

It was the 8th of September, 1964. Rain had been belting down since the morning, a relentless torrent that turned the cobbled streets of Montparnasse into glistening ribbons of grey. Outside our little café, *Le Coeur Silencieux*, the Parisian evening lay cloaked in a curtain of steady drizzle, the streetlamps casting pools of yellow light upon the wet pavement, flickering like tired sentinels.

The road was all but deserted. A few Citroën DSs and Renault Dauphines slipped quietly past, their tyres hissing through puddles. The glass panes of the neighbouring barber shop were misted over, and the dim light within revealed a solitary figure reading a newspaper. Across the street, a modest parfumerie had already drawn its shutters. The neon signs of a nearby cinema flickered weakly, advertising an American noir film, half the letters drowned in condensation.

Inside the café, the warmth was a comfort. My staff, young lads mostly, had taken to playing cards at a back table, occasionally chuckling or arguing over whose turn it was to deal. The scent of cocoa, ground coffee, and wet wool lingered in the air. I had just tuned in to the old radio perched on the shelf behind

the counter. After the familiar crackle of static, a voice emerged—serious, well-enunciated.

"Mesdames et Messieurs, les pluies continueront pendant cinq jours."

Five more days of rain. I sighed and wiped the counter again, out of habit more than necessity. It was 6 p.m., and I was contemplating whether to close early and send the boys home. No one was coming through that door in weather like this, surely.

Then, just as the slow jazz notes of Charles Aznavour's *Hier Encore* began to croon from the radio, the bell above the door jingled softly.

A gentleman stepped in.

He was in his late thirties, tall—must've been six foot if he was an inch. Short, neatly trimmed dark hair, a cigar clamped between his lips, the kind that smouldered with lazy arrogance. He wore a crisp tuxedo, despite the rain, its shoulders beaded with droplets. On his feet gleamed a pair of Church's Oxford brogues, the leather so polished you could see your reflection in them. Around his wrist—a Rolex Submariner, glinting faintly in the light.

His skin bore the bronze touch of many suns, yet was lined from years in harsher climates—a man who had seen the world, and perhaps even bled for it. Handsome, no doubt, though not in the pristine way of matinee idols. No, his charm was of a more rugged

persuasion—the sort built in deserts, in trenches, in lonely outposts.

He removed his cigar, exhaled a slow cloud, and approached the counter.

"A table for two, if you please," he said in a clipped, British accent, his voice low and unhurried.

Jean, one of the waiters, escorted him to the corner table by the rain-dappled window. The gentleman settled into the chair with a grace that suggested he was used to fine establishments—and yet bore none of the pretension.

"What can I get for you, monsieur?" Jean asked.

He tapped some ash into the tray. "Just a hot coffee for the time being. I'm expecting someone. My ex-wife, actually. Should be here any moment now."

Jean raised an eyebrow but said nothing. The man continued.

"Came all the way from Bristol to meet her, you know. We never really had time for each other—our lives simply... ran in different lanes. So we divorced. No court drama, no lawyers biting at our heels. Mutual, civilised. Like old friends parting at a station."

He looked out the window then, watching the rain streak the glass.

"Now that I've retired from the army, I might look for a civilian post. Something less... explosive. And if she's willing, I'd like to settle down again. With her."

Jean nodded slowly and headed off to the kitchen. A few moments later, he returned with a steaming cup of coffee on a small tray and set it before the gentleman, who took a long, appreciative sip, his eyes still fixed on the street.

From my post at the counter, I watched him. Quietly. Like Poirot in one of those Agatha Christie tales. There was something about him—perhaps the calm with which he carried his hopes, or the soft flicker of vulnerability beneath the hardened surface.

The hours drifted. The song on the radio gave way to others—Françoise Hardy, then a bit of Jacques Brel. The rain refused to relent. It was nearly 9 p.m., and still no sign of the ex-wife.

The man didn't fidget. He didn't pace or glance at his watch. He simply sat there, occasionally ordering another cup. I believe by then he'd had three, maybe four. His cigar had long since dwindled to ash.

Outside, the street remained hushed. A couple with a red umbrella hurried past, their laughter muffled. A lone police officer, his coat soaked and shiny, paused under the café's awning to light a cigarette before moving on. The city was dreaming in greys and golds.

I began to wonder whether she'd show at all. Maybe she had changed her mind. Or perhaps she had been delayed by the rain, or caught up with life. But he—he seemed content to wait, each sip of coffee a quiet act of endurance.

At half past nine, he stood up, placed a generous tip on the table, and collected his coat from the back of the chair.

I approached, curious.

"She's not coming?" I asked, more softly than I intended.

He looked at me and smiled faintly. "Doesn't seem like it. But that's alright. The coffee was excellent. And Paris... well, Paris is still beautiful, even in the rain."

With that, he crushed the cigar stub in the ashtray, gave me a courteous nod, and stood to leave. His coat was already over one arm, and his eyes drifted momentarily towards the drizzle outside, as though resigned to the wet walk ahead. But just as his hand reached for the brass handle of the café door, something caught his eye – and mine, simultaneously.

A silhouette had appeared outside the door, framed by the rain-dappled glass pane. The figure was backlit by the golden hue of the streetlamp, a woman in a long raincoat, her head lowered slightly as she adjusted the strap of her handbag. The gentleman froze, his expression softening into something almost unreadable. He stepped back, away from the door, and sat down again.

"At last, the wait is over," he murmured, almost to himself, as if I wasn't even there.

I turned to get a better look at her. She was peeling the raincoat from her shoulders and, with quiet grace, hung it on the brass hook outside the entrance. The door creaked open with that familiar Parisian charm, and in she walked — a vision of sheer elegance.

She couldn't have been more than twenty, perhaps in her late teens. Her scarlet dress clung gently to her knees, tailored to perfection, the fabric rippling like liquid fire with every step. Her red heels echoed softly across the tiled floor. Blonde hair, curled softly at the ends, framed a face so exquisitely crafted it seemed almost unreal. Stud earrings winked under the pendant lighting, and a silver chain lay lightly across her collarbone. On her right wrist shimmered an ivory bracelet, simple but distinctive.

She walked straight past the gentleman without a word and took the chair by the window, crossing her legs with such poise it was impossible not to notice. I glanced at the gentleman, expecting some sign of joy or recognition. But to my surprise, he looked... unsettled. His brows were drawn, lips thinned slightly. It was evident that she wasn't his wife — not by any conventional stretch. But he didn't move. He stayed seated, back straight, fingers interlaced tightly on the table.

By then, the rest of my staff had left for the evening. It was just the three of us, the hush of the rain tapping on the windows, and the warm hum of the little wall-mounted heater in the corner. I walked over to the young woman, notebook in hand.

"Bonsoir, mademoiselle. What may I get for you?"

She smiled politely, eyes scanning the menu for a moment. "A hot café au lait, please. And a slice of lemon tart."

"Of course."

I brought her the order shortly after, setting the delicate china cup and plate before her. She murmured a thank you and turned her gaze out the window, seemingly ignoring the gentleman a few tables over. But a few minutes later, she turned and looked his way.

"Do you mind if I join you?" she asked in French, her voice smooth as velvet, laced with a faint southern accent.

He looked up, surprised, as if she'd plucked the question from the air. He paused, then gestured toward the seat opposite him. "Not at all."

She moved gracefully to his table and took the seat, placing her coffee and tart gently down.

The air was thick with unspoken things. At first, their conversation was stilted. He gave short replies, she sipped her coffee with detachment. There were long pauses between sentences, and the rain outside seemed to accentuate the silence. But something began to shift. I noticed the moment it happened. He said something, quite possibly a joke, and she laughed. Not a forced chuckle, but a genuine laugh that crinkled the corners of her eyes.

And then it all changed.

The tension that had sat coiled between them began to dissolve. Their words became more fluid, their gestures animated. She leaned forward slightly, resting her chin on one hand. He spoke with more ease, gesturing occasionally with his hands, now relaxed. Laughter began to bubble up between them, soft and sincere. The dullness of the earlier evening faded away, replaced by something warmer, lighter, almost intoxicating.

I busied myself at the counter but couldn't help overhearing snippets of their chat. They spoke of books, of travels, of films. She mentioned her childhood in Nice, the way she used to dance in the hallways of her grandmother's house. He spoke of sailing, of the smell of the sea, of once trying to write a novel that never saw the light of day.

There was something magnetic unfolding between them. The kind of subtle connection that needs no grand gestures. Just a shared gaze, a hand brushing against another as they reached for the same sugar bowl.

But there was something else as well — something I couldn't quite shake. I stared at the woman again, trying to place her. That face. That poise. That luminous smile. I knew I'd seen her somewhere. It nagged at me through the clatter of cups and the low hum of the café's old fridge.

And then, it hit me.

Of course. She was Emilie Laurent — the rising star of French cinema. She had starred in that indie film, "Le Silence de l'Étoile," which had received such acclaim at Cannes. Her performance had been all anyone talked about for weeks. It made sense now, her beauty, her charm, the grace she carried without even trying.

They stayed until ten, the rain still whispering its lullaby outside. Time had slowed in the little café; hours melted like butter on warm bread.

At last, they stood. Together. She adjusted her dress, and he slipped his coat back on, pausing only to reach into his wallet. He paid the bill, added a tip that made my eyes widen, and thanked me with a nod that felt sincere.

I watched them from the counter as they stepped outside. Neither bothered with a coat or umbrella. The rain embraced them both, dampening their hair, streaking their clothes. But they didn't seem to mind. They were laughing — freely, openly, the way only new lovers or those who've found something precious can.

Hand in hand, they walked off down the street, splashing through puddles, smiling like children with a secret.

And I, alone in that little Paris café, wiped the last table, turned the chairs up, and switched off the lights. The rain still tapped gently on the windows, soft as a whispered promise. Outside, the city shimmered

beneath its veil of drizzle, and though the streets were quiet, something in the air pulsed with quiet wonder.

I stood for a moment by the door, hand on the latch, watching the glistened cobblestones and the faint outline of two figures disappearing into the mist, arm in arm. No umbrellas. No need. Just laughter and love, untouched by the weather.

It struck me then—perhaps life isn't about grand gestures or perfect timing. It's about moments. Small, unexpected ones that creep in through the cracks of ordinary days. A look. A chance meeting. A red dress in the rain.

Love, I thought, has no script. It arrives unannounced, sometimes long delayed, sometimes barely recognised—yet when it finally comes, it softens even the hardest edges.

As I stepped out and locked the door behind me, I smiled to myself.

Paris had reminded me once more: the rain may fall, the night may stretch long—but love, quiet and stubborn, will always find its way home.

Chapter 2

Of Mopeds and the Mystery of Old Men

Now then, pull up a chair, warm your hands round a mug of tea, and let me take you back. To a particular morning, a peculiar one at that — the 12th of December, sometime in the late 1980s, in the charmingly confusing city of Graz, tucked away like a well-folded handkerchief in the heart of Austria. A place where the rooftops are a symphony of red tiles, the air always smells faintly of roasted chestnuts and distant snow, and time, much like the locals, moves at its own unhurried pace.

It was a Sunday morning, one of those indecisive sorts — the sky couldn't quite make up its mind between drizzling or simply brooding, hanging grey and bloated like a poet's sigh. The cobbled streets were still damp from last night's frosty flirtation, glistening under the flicker of antique lamps that hadn't yet been switched off. Graz always had this old-world charm, like it had made a gentleman's agreement with modernity to stay only partially updated.

Now, I was on my loyal motorbike, if you could still call it that. It wheezed more than it whirred, rattled more than it roared. I'd named her Mathilde — partly out of affection, partly because shouting, "Come on,

Mathilde!” made the breakdowns feel less mechanical and more dramatic. Dressed in my long olive-green overcoat (a relic from my student days) and with a scarf my mum had knitted in hues of mustard and regret, I was heading to the Sunday market with noble intentions. Bread, milk, and maybe — just maybe — a packet of buttery Leibniz biscuits if my willpower crumbled before the biscuits did.

The streets were mostly deserted, save for the odd elderly couple shuffling along arm-in-arm, or the occasional dog walker, more walked than walking. The windows above the shops still blinked with frost, curtains drawn halfway as if to say, "Yes, we're awake, but not quite functioning yet." I pootled along the Hauptplatz, the city's main square, its baroque facades still proud and stoic despite the weather. The tram lines sang faintly under the tyres, a subtle metallic hum. Graz Cathedral loomed at a distance, bells silent, but its presence unmistakable.

And then I saw him.

An old man, silver hair ruffling with the wind's mischief, his long coat a patchwork of wear and mystery. Shoes that looked like they'd walked from another century, and a gait so unhurried it made time itself hesitate. He was walking along the pavement near Herrengasse, right past the confectioner's where the smell of apple strudel could commit theft of attention.

He must've been late sixties, maybe seventies — then again, he had that kind of face that made age guess at

him rather than the other way round. Could've been 35 with the soul of a war widow, for all I knew. But I digress.

Out of a blend of decency and nosiness — a combination I wear as a badge of honour — I pulled over beside him, engine puttering like a sleepy bee.

"Fancy a lift, sir?" I asked, voice bright and genuine, like an apprentice scout.

The old gent didn't so much as flinch. He raised one hand, delicate as if dismissing a cloud, and waved me away like I was the wrong answer to a riddle.

"Go on, lad," he murmured, not even sparing me a glance. "Your wheels smell like onions."

Now, I won't lie, I felt a sting. Not the onion comment — that was probably accurate — but the dismissal. Here I was, trying to play the Samaritan, and he treated me like I was offering a seat in a leaking gondola.

Still, I shrugged, mustered a wounded smile, and carried on. The city opened up ahead with a mixture of pastels and memory. There's something about winter in Graz that feels like being inside a snow globe that someone forgot to shake. I passed the narrow alleyways near Schlossberg Hill, where ivy crawled like stubborn secrets and wooden signs swung with stories in languages long lost.

Finally, I reached the Sunday market, tucked near Jakominiplatz, a mishmash of stalls where one could

buy everything from goat cheese to socks that claimed to improve blood circulation. I parked Mathilde with her usual theatrical cough, wiped my foggy glasses, and entered the fray.

Inside, the market was a riot of smells and murmurs. Spiced meats, old records, pine wreaths, and earnest bargains. The stalls glowed with fairy lights and festive desperation. I bought my bread — a dense sourdough with a crust that could file your nails — and milk in a glass bottle that made me feel like a character in a black-and-white film.

I was resisting the siren song of the biscuit stall when — behold — there he was again.

The old gent.

Only this time, he wasn't walking. No, he was perched like a well-fed raven on the back of a gleaming red moped, sliding through the street like it was silk. In front of him, steering with effortless style, was a woman who could've walked off the cover of an Alpine fashion magazine. Late twenties, chestnut curls bouncing, a leather jacket worn like rebellion, and the kind of smile that made the air warm despite the December chill.

They zipped past me, her laugh rising above the engine like a songbird in a thunderstorm, and there he was — grinning, relaxed, one hand on the seat, the other in his coat pocket like a secret weapon.

I stared. Dumbfounded. Stunned into biscuitless silence.

“What in the name of Earl Grey’s teapot...” I muttered aloud, half to myself, half to the universe.

As if on cue, he turned. Caught my gaze. Smirked. And then — like a scene from a film no one would believe — he called out, “She’s my granddaughter, moron!”

Well. There went the last remnants of my ego, scattered like breadcrumbs for pigeons.

But then something odd happened. I laughed. A proper, hearty, shoulder-shaking laugh that made the stall vendor ask if I’d had mulled wine for breakfast. The kind of laugh that reminds you life’s a bit mad, and that’s the best part.

As they disappeared into the winding street, the old gent looked back once more, raised his brows as if in salute, and mouthed: Thank you.

And just like that, the mystery unravelled.

He hadn’t been rude. He’d just known what — or who — he was waiting for. Not some wheezing stranger with questionable onion-scented transport. But someone he loved. Someone who mattered. He hadn’t needed convenience. He’d had connection. Patience. Confidence in what was coming.

Walking home with my groceries, the wind colder now, I thought a great deal about that.

We're always in such a rush, aren't we? Always trying to help or be helped. To leap at chances or shove others toward ours. We forget — truly forget — that everyone has their own pace. Their own time. Their own red moped coming.

Rejection isn't always about us. Sometimes, people aren't being dismissive. They're being discerning. Not every offer must be accepted. Not every act of kindness lands — and that's alright.

There's a peculiar grace in knowing what to wait for. And an even rarer strength in waiting.

That old man — cheeky, sharp, onion-averse — reminded me that dignity doesn't always look like politeness. Sometimes it looks like patience. Like faith. Like a grin from the back of a shiny moped.

So, to you reading this, in some café or bus stop or while avoiding your inbox — remember:

If your offer of help is turned down, don't lose heart. Perhaps they've already got someone better in mind. Or perhaps they're just waiting for their granddaughter.

And if you're the one waiting — for love, clarity, purpose, peace — don't settle for what simply arrives first. Wait for the ride that matters. One that makes the whole journey — however bumpy, however belated — truly worth it. And, if you can help it, try not to smell like onions.

Cheers.

Chapter 3

Steam, Rain, and Radio Songs

It was one of those languid monsoon evenings in *Haedong*, a quiet village nestled between mist-cloaked hills and shimmering rice paddies in the southeastern part of South Korea. Time always moved slowly here, like the water weaving gently through the dykes. That evening, I found myself seated on the old wooden verandah of our house, a chipped porcelain teacup nestled between my palms, the warmth seeping into my calloused fingers. The tea—steeped just right—carried a comforting bitterness, its aroma mingling with petrichor rising from the damp earth.

Outside, the rain fell in a soft, unhurried drizzle, not enough to soak the land thoroughly but enough to blur the outlines of the distant trees and make the rooftops glisten like wet charcoal. The sky remained overcast, a uniform grey sheet, thick and heavy, with no sign of the sun breaking through. I was in no mood to step out again. The day's work had left me drained—hours spent bent over the fields, coaxing the soil to yield its gifts, planting sesame and checking the irrigation channels. My boots now rested by the door, muddied and tired, like myself.

From within the house came the gentle clatter of pots and pans—my wife was busy in the kitchen preparing something warm. The scent of toasted rice flour and sesame drifted through the wooden lattice windows, whetting my appetite. Occasionally, I could hear the sharp pop of oil meeting moisture—she was making *botteok*, our children's favourite: sweet, syrup-filled pancakes with brown sugar, cinnamon, and crushed peanuts. Alongside those, she was frying *jeon*, thin mung bean pancakes flecked with finely chopped scallions and garlic, crisped to golden perfection. A small dish of kimchi would undoubtedly accompany the lot.

The cows were settled in their shed by then, their sides steaming slightly in the cool damp air. The shepherd boy **Jinho** was brushing their hides with long, deliberate strokes, humming an old folk song passed down through generations. A few chickens scratched about under the awning, sheltering from the drizzle.

School had been dismissed early due to the weather. Our son and daughter, their school satchels tossed aside without ceremony, were now outside, cavorting in the courtyard puddles. Each had an umbrella too large for their small frames, and both were trying to coax paper boats down the muddy rivulets that had formed along the cobbled paths. Their laughter—bright and uninhibited—rose above the soft patter of rain, bringing a tender warmth to the stillness of the evening.

Haedong was a place untouched by hurry. Here, traditions flowed like the streams: slow, steady, and quietly enduring. The villagers greeted each other with measured bows; the days began with roosters and ended with radios. Most families kept gardens lined with beans and peppers, and the air always smelled faintly of woodsmoke, earth, and something sweet in the distance—perhaps ripening fruit, or just memory.

Soon enough, my wife stepped onto the verandah with a tray in hand, her apron slightly stained, her smile as familiar as the landscape. She placed the food beside me with a nod, wiped her brow, and sat down for a moment. We ate in silence, content in the shared quiet.

Afterwards, I reached for the old valve radio perched on the windowsill. It crackled for a few seconds, a sound like dry leaves brushing against stone, before settling into the evening broadcast. A mournful Korean ballad flowed through the air, played on gayageum and haegeum—string instruments that always seemed to weep rather than sing. The music, slow and melancholic, suited the mood perfectly. Outside, the drizzle had not let up; it tapped softly against the tiled roof and trickled from the eaves like silver threads. The paper boats continued their tiny journeys down the rivulets, navigating past pebbles and patches of moss as though they were great islands or reefs in the children's imagined oceans.

Just then, I heard footsteps approaching along the pebbled path by the side of the house. Turning my