

m!normous© series #2

LEE MAE
MAGEI

UNDER
CONSTRUCTION -
COMMENTS
WELCOME!

NO?SPITALity

personalized for Mustapha Ben Turkoja

of Mascara, Algeria

Written by *Lee Mae Magellan*© Unbeaten at AC (Artificial Creativity)

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My novel -

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Non occides

Exodus 20:13

The Latin Vulgate

Neutrality. Humanity. Hospitality

NO?SPITALity



The army is ready; not a gaiter button is lacking

Marshal Leboeuf, Napoleon III's Minister of War

SWITZERLAND

Part I

February 1, 1871

Art. 1

The French army requesting passage shall lay down its arms, equipment and munitions upon entry into Swiss territory.

Art. 2

The said arms, equipment and munitions shall be returned to France after the peace and upon final settlement of the expenses incurred by the stay of the French troops in Switzerland.

Art. 3

The same shall apply to artillery pieces and related munitions.

Art. 4

Officers shall be allowed to keep their horses, arms and effects.

Art. 5

Provision will be made subsequently for the horses of other ranks.

Art. 6

After carriages bearing provisions and baggage have been unloaded, they shall return to France immediately, together with their drivers and horses.

Art. 7

Paymaster and post carriages shall be delivered with all their contents to the Swiss Confederation, which will take them into account in the final settlement of expenses.

Art. 8

The execution of the provisions of this agreement shall take place in the presence of the French and Swiss officers designated for this purpose.

Art. 9

The Confederation reserves the right to designate the places of internment for officers and other ranks.

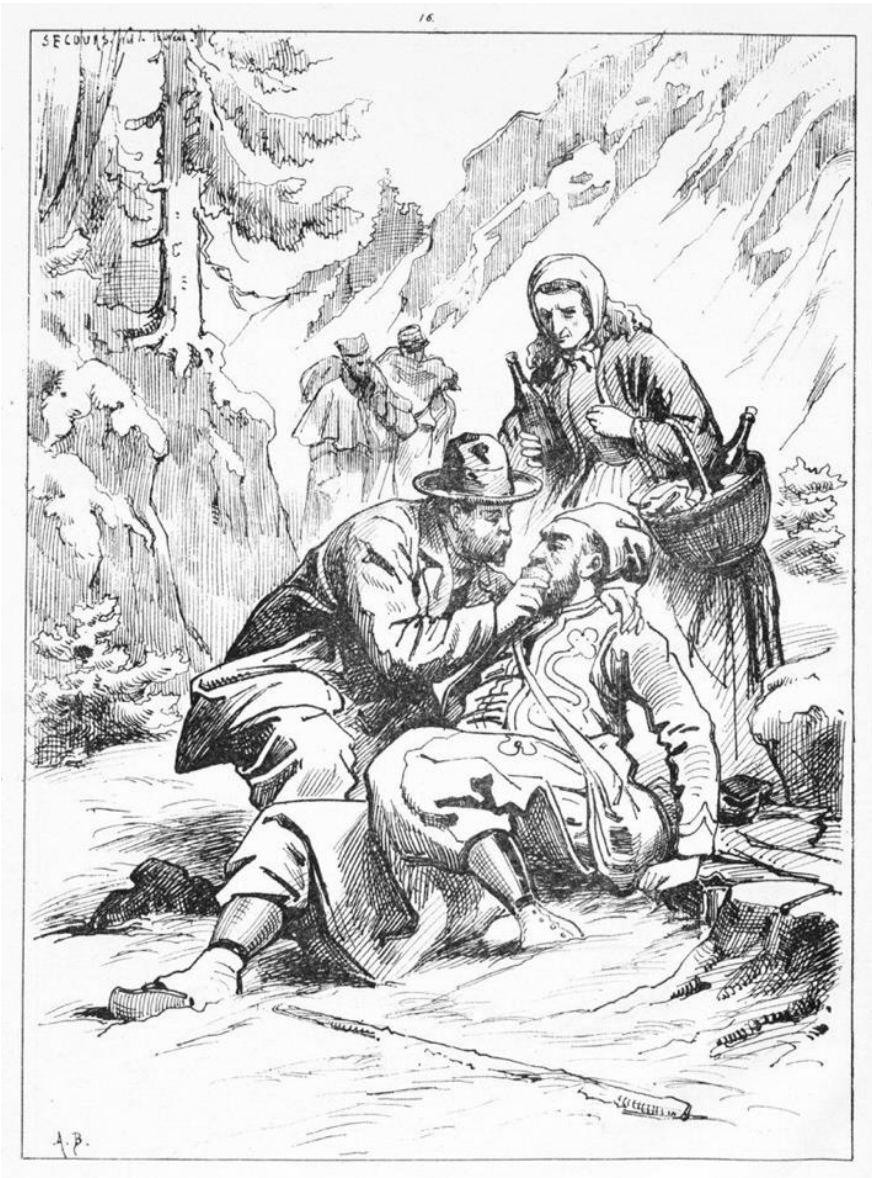
Art. 10

The Federal Council shall indicate the detailed provisions intended to supplement the present Agreement.

Made in three copies at Les Verrières on 1 February 1871.

General Herzog, Commander in Chief of the army of the Swiss Confederation

General Clinchant, Commander in Chief of the First French Army:



Week I

February 1, 1871

«*Marie, tu es où? Viens tout de suite.*»

Marie, where are you? Come at once. Mother needn't shout that loud. I was right here, hanging the ice-cold washing underneath the large, dark canopy of our old farm's roof. My hands were as red as red could be, the skin raw and irritated. I had wrung everything forcefully after scrubbing each piece of clothing with a large chunk of greenish, slippery *Savon de Marseille*. Even Julien's breeches were immaculate again. I had rubbed them tenaciously with steaming hot water until they were clean again.

My underwear had needed extra care: I had soaked all my panties overnight in a bucket with icy water. Although it was freezing cold, ice water was hard to get. The old granite fountain by the stable was completely frozen: No more running water from our well in winter. I had carefully reaped some of the bigger icicles, that

hang from the awning of the shed, then melted them in a large casserole on our wooden stove to get the water. Then I had added more icicles to cool the water again: a most laborious procedure to even start soaking the agglutinated panties in a small metal pail. Only after pouring away the red water, the day after, I would then scrub my underwear with soap and tepid water.

Amazing what a hardened mixture of seawater, from the Mediterranean, exactly 72% of pure olive oil, from olives matured until May after harvesting and the alkaline ashes of marine seaplants, grown, dried and burned in the Camargue would do. *Savon de Marseille*. The secret was not only to stir the mixture for the exquisite soap long enough in large, immense copper cauldrons but also to leave it out to dry in the warm mistral winds of the Provence. Mother had known the recipe and while using the real *Savon de Marseille* for ourselves, we've copied it quite successfully to sell, using ingredients the Swiss Jura mountains would provide; sheep milk, fresh from our farm, cold mountain water, submountainous salt from *Sels des Alpes*, horse chestnuts and a variety of wild flowers we picked and dried when at leisure. The wonderful soaps, proficiently scented, provided a steady income for all of us.

«Marie, Marie. Where are you?»

Mother, again? I sighed, what could possibly be wrong, so she needed shout loud like this? Why the urgency? The apple pie was in the oven; yes-, I had only used 6, not all 10 eggs and there was enough wood for today's fire, and maybe even tonight. But then Julien and his useless friend Louis could fetch more logs, if more were needed. Everything was under control. What could mother possibly want that demanded such urgent and immediate attention?

«Marie? Seriously, Where are you?»

«I am right up here, mother. What is it?»

Quickly, I hung up the last piece of my woollen underwear, ever so glad my bleeding had stopped again a couple of days ago. Having my courses was always such a drag. Who knew what all that blood between my legs was ever good for? I picked up the large wicker basket and made for the stairs to descend to our living quarters where it would be warmer. On the first step, I ran into mother. She took the basket out of my hands at once, turned on her heels and walked down the narrow wooden stairs before me. I followed her empty-handed, wondering what all the commotion was about.



«They are coming.»

Who was coming? She was out of breath indeed. Why was mother out of breath? Had she been running? Why was she already back from *Fleurier*, the lively village close by? I was startled. Was something wrong? Was it Uncle Vanya? Was something wrong with Uncle Vanya? God forbid. I felt my heart beating faster. Was he missing again? Wandering off in this winter weather would indeed be most dangerous.

Usually it took her all day to go about her business in the village. The watchmakers of Fleurier were paying well for our sheep-milk soap, our hand-dyed fine woollen yarns and of course our knitted exquisite jumpers, socks, underwear, blankets and children's clothes; little baby shoes and tiny bonnets mostly. Although mother kept saying she wanted Julien to become a watchmaker and not take over the

farm, -only a couple of sheep these days anyway-, our wool and soap production has steadily been increasing these last years.

In 1818 a Edouard Bovet had undertaken his first, rather successful business trip to China. Mother claims ever so often she had seen him once at church when still a girl and he a grown man. However the case may be, since then, the Fleurier watches sold to the Great Empire have brought much wealth, more and more work and therefore a steady increase of many migrants who built new houses and started large, noisy families. Many of the new villagers were rich enough and would buy our hand-crafted soaps, our fine wool and everything gorgeous, mother, my younger twin sisters, Rose and Blanche and I would knit.



«Who is coming, mother? What is it? Why are you so flushed?»

«The French, they are here. The army. I have heard from Henriette, -but now they are here indeed. You must pack up provisions at once. Take the apple pie. Is it ready yet?»

Oh, no, no, no. Not the apple pie. I have made that pie especially for Uncle Vanya's birthday tomorrow.

«And do what?» I asked, feigning ignorance.

«Go to *Fleurier* at once. Or even to *Les Verrières*. That is where they are crossing the border.»

«Oh no. Mother, must I? It is so cold today.»

I didn't feel like venturing out in such weather. Even for the winter's seasons it was unusually cold right now. We had reached the end of the stairs and mother hurried into the kitchen to check on the fire.

«Oh, that pie looks wonderful, Marie. Well done. The crust is so golden and the smell of the hazelnuts. How finely you must have grated them. I am proud of you.»

«It is for Uncle Vanya's birthday.» I said defiantly, not willing to part with the pie without a fight.

«Oh dear, I am so sorry, but you know Uncle Vanya wouldn't mind.»

«It's his birthday tomorrow.»

«He wouldn't know, dear. You do know that.» She looked at me with such love that I had to avert my eyes.

«He would, mother, if he could only taste the cake.»

«Oh Marie. I know. But not this year. This year, we must help those poor, poor men. You should have seen their horses.»

«Did you actually see them?» I was curious now.

«I did, the border at *Les Verrières* has been open since 5 o'clock this morning. The first ones have arrived already, but more are waiting. Thousands, and thousands, they say. They will be moving on to the city of *Neuchâtel*, even Bern, the capital. You must go at once. Take the sledge and Fanny. Julien can help you get everything ready. And he can go too. Hurry, child. And don't forget to take some of father's clothes, the warm woollen jumpers, -the blue one, some of the grey blankets. I will ask Marthe to get them ready. And some soup. Are there any leftovers? Let's hurry.»



Father's clothes? The blue jumper? Mother had only knitted it last year, when father was bed-ridden and delirious. She couldn't be serious. Blue was such a hard colour to get when dyeing wool. Besides, they were Julien's clothes now, soon he would be tall and broad enough to wear everything father had owned. Why would she want to give all this away, and to strangers? The French? I mean, the French -. Really? I couldn't ever imagine parting with father's clothes. Obviously, I had been imagining wrong: Mother wanted to part with it all and part with it so soon. I didn't understand her. I had heard about the war between the French and the Prussians, but I didn't think it would ever come so close: Not to *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevue*; not to father's old spruce cupboard with his clothes freshly washed and pressed and neatly folded. His clothes still smelled of the fumes of his pipe, *Soap de Marseille* and an ingredient I cannot name but *father's smell*. It had been fainting steadily these past weeks. But when I occasionally stood before the open cupboard, it was still there, lingering in the air for minutes before it evaporated completely. That smell, I simply loved it.



Carefully, I opened the hot iron stove door and took out the steaming apple pie. It smelled delicious, so soft and warm and lush, thinking of giving it up to French soldiers, I felt the hungrier for it. Carefully, I wrapped it steaming hot into

waxed paper. Not a wise thing to do, considering wax melts when heated. But I couldn't care, trying desperately to swallow my tears.



«Marie, get on the sledge. Let's move. We have everything. The soup will freeze if we don't hurry.»

«I am coming, let me just get my mittens. I cannot remember where I placed them.» I shot my brother a furious glance. Why was Julien always so impatient, always nagging?

«Come on, mother said to be back before dark. Come without them then. You know how early the sun sets now. We must hurry.»

«No, I am not coming without my mittens. You wait. You don't have to work with your hands as much as I do.» I shot my brother another furious glance. He seemed impervious to all my looks though.

«Come on, you know that this is not true.»

«Of course it is and you know it, - kitten.» Now I smiled at him.

I could always tell when Julien sulked. I knew it wasn't so much for the nickname I had picked for him. He wasn't happy to go either. Today he had wanted to work on his new wooden skis. He must have been busy polishing the upper sides of the wooden planks when mother found him in the barn and told him to start moving.

My beige woollen mittens with the red and pink roses woven delicately into its fabric were hung on the old iron hooks by the main stairs where they always

were. While picking up everything mother wanted us to take; clothes, the blue jumper, blankets, old leather boots, soup, the apple pie, I must have overseen them. Now, I grabbed them quickly and rushed back outside. Pippa, our kind and strong German shepherdess got in my way, so I was tripping. When I stood straight again, she barked at me loud, her large eyes full of wonder.

«Hey, Pippa, come on. Calm down.» I patted her soft fur, knelt down and held her head in both my hands. For a moment our eyes locked. How I loved that dog, loved her so much.

«No, don't take Pippa», Mamà said, «I will need her to bring the sheep in tonight. You know they say there are wolves at Noiraigue now.»

«I wasn't going to take her», I defended myself as I got up again.

«It's alright child, I've just wanted to make sure -.»

Make sure what? She still thinks I am a child, I wondered, feeling a slight pang of anger. But there was no time to think about what mother had said. Julien was done waiting, he had pulled the reins and the sledge started gliding slowly down the narrow lane that led up to *La Maison Blanches* at *Hautevue*. I ran after him and jumped on. There was fresh snow everywhere. I loved winter when its magic covered Nature so gracefully.

However, today it was hard to breathe in the outrageous cold that we dived into headlong. I felt the fine hairs in my nostrils freeze. We were plunged at once into the most atrocious and dreadful nightmare even the deepest and coldest winter could not provide on its own. Fortunately, it didn't take long with Fanny, our strong young *Freiberger* mare and grandfather's old sledge to get to *Fleurier*, the village

closest to our home. We reached it from *Hautevue* in about half an hour and we arrived there safely in the early afternoon.

The village and its peaceful trails around it couldn't be recognized. I am not sure, I can even begin to describe the horrid and heinous nature of what unfolded before us, in that stark and absolute cold. The skin of my face was frozen to my skull, my lips had drained of all life and blood, my eyes starred miles and miles ahead without focusing properly on any of the awful scenes we were presented with.

There were men everywhere. The men were. I mean-. The horses were-. I mean how can I? -. Why would men do this to each other? Why would they do this to their horses? Why would anyone do this to any living soul? Their horses. I couldn't look at them. Their tails were bitten off, many horses had lain down in the snowy trenches, wounded, sore, dying from hunger and pain. Some already dead from hunger and pain: Still fully packed with baggage, blankets and crate, no weapons though. *Thank God*. Yet, the horses were still harnessed and many of them not moving. Not dead either. Wincing in pain. Twitching. Dozens and dozens of them dead, others half alive, the skin of their large bloated bellies raw, bruised, inflamed. Wheels of carriages turned over, wood and iron were sticking out of the snow. The stench. The stench was different, despite the cold. Frozen carnage had its own bitter-sweet, amarodial taste in your nose, on your tongue, even in your ears. I could taste disaster with my ears. The silence,- the silence of the snow-covered hills and forests, the absolute stillness, yet pierced by many moans; loud sighs, giant yet petite gasps when lives were obliterated. We could hear the screams of men and beasts reverberating in the valleys, through the alleys and the cold, snowy airs. Deaths in Silence. Silence in death. It couldn't be described. War was not at all what I

had imagined it to be. It was-. No, I couldn't say. And then this was not even war.

What was this?

Being young, I didn't really know what to expect from war anyway. I had never really imagined nor conjured it up before my inner eye. It hadn't really come up on my mental slate on which I drew my life, my dreams, my hopes and fears. I had no pictures to compare it to. And this. This was different altogether. I hadn't imagined any of it like this: Not that shockingly awful scene, not that fiercely foul smell. No one could imagine this. It was beyond reality. These were humans and their horses. All men. I couldn't see any women, but the ones tending to the poor souls. This was *l'enfers inimaginable*. Living, unimaginable hell. And somehow Julien and I were in the midst of it. *What were we to do? Oh mother, why have you sent us. What were we to do?* Hand out the apple pie now? The soup? To the bloodied soldier sitting in the snow over there? To the emaciated soul lingering over here? How sorry I was at once about the waxed paper. Why had I spoiled a good apple pie thus? Never mind Uncle Vanya's birthday. We take such good care of him. He is protected, snug and safe in our little fold, in the love of our big family, his nieces, his nephew, his brother's wife. Mother was right, he wouldn't know it was his birthday tomorrow. He wouldn't know much these days but that we loved him dearly. He could do without that apple pie. Why that greed, that envy? Envious of this unspeakable tragedy? Greedy of that unbearable hell? How humiliated I felt at once, how ashamed, humbled and utterly, utterly mortified.

Julien had fallen silent. After a while, I was the first to speak.

«Let's move onwards to *Les Verrières*. I really don't know what to do here. Maybe someone there can direct us. Have you ever thought -? When mother sent us, have you -?» He was in shock too.

«Say nothing. Sister. Just be quiet.»



I couldn't stay silent for long though.

«What does the red cross mean on the tarpaulin of these waggons? This is already the second one I see.»

«I don't know. They don't look like soldiers.»

«Probably they are not.»

«Shall we ask them what to do? Do you think they would know-?»

«Would you think anyone would know what to do? Look at the chaos, these men, look at the horses. I don't think we shall ever make it to *Les Verrières* today.»

Julien's voice was failing.

«Yes, the horses», I mumbled, «the horses.»

«And these men, malnourished, forsaken, bleeding. Is that a stick instead of a leg? Can he walk on a stick alone? Did you see that? He's missing his left leg.»

«No, I didn't see it. A stick? In the place of a leg? » I was looking for the man without the leg in vain.

«Look there is another waggon with the red cross. Let's ask what they do here. Someone must be in charge, right?»

«In charge? Of this, sister? You think so?»

Julien snorted out loud, but it wasn't a happy laugh.



I still feel completely overwhelmed by what we saw today and if it hadn't been for Christian, we would have turned then and there to go back home to *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevue* without having achieved anything.

«Hey, you. What have you got?»

A young man who had been walking next to a covered wagon carrying the red cross insignia approached us. I couldn't help but notice that he was neatly shaven.

«He means us, Julien. Does he mean us?»

«I guess so.»



«You're from here?»

«*Hautevue*. A farm, just outside *Fleurier*.»

«Well enough. You brought provisions for the internees?»

«Yes, we have some soup, blankets, some other stuff.»

«Apple pie», I added.

«It isn't much», Julien added apologetically.

«No, it's fabulous. Better than nothing. You have to start somewhere. Let me see.»

Julien got off the sledge trestle and started unpacking what mother and Marthe had packed in a hurry.

«Come on, take it over here.»

The young man grabbed what he could carry and walked over to the red cross carriage where several wounded French soldiers and officers were huddled together. Julien followed him carrying some of the big, yellowish blankets we had woven from what was left over from last year's wool. The warm colours of the knitted quilts stuck out like dismal sunflowers in the snow.

«Marie.»

«Yes.»

«Come, help.»

As if in a complete haze, I had been too scared and too cold to get of the sledge. When Julien called me, I started moving slowly. Once I had crawled out from underneath the sheep skins that had kept us warm, the arctic cold airs hit me full blast. I was used to being out in cold weather, but this year's February cold spell was a kind of its own. I heard the snow and ice crunch underneath my black leather boots.

«Help me with the soup.»

I moved closer to the men jumbled together in the carriage. Some of them could sit up straight, others were too weak to sustain themselves, slumping against their companions. Their eyes were lifeless and dull, some of them couldn't even keep their swollen eyelids open. One was humming a tune I didn't recognize. The melody

was strangely comforting considering how badly beaten they were. I started ladling out the soup Marthe had cooked so hurriedly before we left. It was cold by now despite the lambskins mother had put on the large milk kettle to keep it warm.

«It's cold.» I said regretfully.

«Yes, it is. They said today the thermometer nearly drops to minus 30 degrees Celsius, in the Jura valleys. We must get them to safety quickly.»

«I mean the soup.»

«At least it is not frozen. Don't worry about it. It's fabulous.»

Fabulous? He had a strange way of twisting words and meanings. Yes, I nodded, handing another half-full metal mug to one of the French soldiers who could hardly hold the cup in his bruised hands. *Fabulous, just fabulous.*

«Where are you taking them?» Julien asked curiously.

«I guess, first *Neuchâtel*, then some other place. I don't know yet. The Federal Council and the army are setting up a rescue plan as we speak.»

«Are you with the army?»

«No, I'm not. I am with the Red Cross. I'm Christian. Christian Monnier. I'm a doctor.»

«Marie Bergeron. *Enchanté*. That is Julien, my brother.»

«You're a doctor? I have never seen so many dying and wounded men. And the horses. The poor, poor animals.»

«Believe me, neither have I. I think the men who made it across the border in the early morning hours were better off. I have heard they were told to march all day to make room on the road for the others who are yet to come.»

«March all day, and in this cold?»

I found that hard to believe but didn't take time to consider in more detail. I had turned my head and found myself staring into the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. I felt strangely invigorated at once.

«*Mademoiselle*, you're most kind.» He smiled and I felt my pulse going up. What was happening? A dark-skinned man in French uniform had addressed me. The delicate ribbons sewn on his jacket ran all along his upper body, beautifully intertwined like a snake curling up cosily, covered by the safety of a massive stone on a hot summer afternoon.

«You're welcome.» I said, lowering my eyes. It was confusing how he kept looking at me. Being strangely drawn to his gaze, I didn't know where else to look but in his eyes. He looked right back at me and, somehow I felt I had known him all my life. It was the strangest feeling and yet pleasing, rather comforting in the midst of the chaos around us. I felt safe at once. Then, I smiled too and he winked at me. I felt how my throat became drier. Why would he do that?

«It is a true act of grace and love», he said, still smiling..

«I am sure your family would have loved that cake as much as we do.»

I was so greatly confused by our encounter and found no words apt for an appropriate reply. I bit my lips and simply nodded. How come, he knew my wicked thoughts so well without ever having met me? I tried to overcome the awkwardness that began settling between us.

«What is your name?» I snorted, embarrassed at once by the strange, hoarse noises that came from what was usually my voice. But I had to admit, I wanted to know his name very much.

«I am Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara.» He answered.

I looked at him more closely. What a long and beautiful name. How old would he be? It was hard to tell. But he couldn't be much older than I was, in his twenties maybe.

«You're *Mademoiselle Marie*, I heard. *Enchanté, Mademoiselle Marie.*»

«The pleasure is all mine.»

«Your apple pie. It tastes better than any pie my mother or my grandmother used to make when I was a boy. Thank you so much.» He was already swallowing the last bit of the sponge.

«Mustapha is with the Turcos,» Christian explained. Julien nodded as if he understood what that meant. Seeing the blank look on my face, Christian added: «The *tirailleurs algériens*, the Algerian riflemen.»

I looked at the soldier who had addressed me once more, more carefully: An Algerian rifleman? How dangerous that sounded when he looked like true and blissful innocence himself. His lips were bloody and cracked, covered by small crumbs of my apple pie. His face was even and dark. There was a strange serenity in his eye, a serendipity I had rarely encountered ever before and could hardly bear, given his dreadful suffering and plight he must have encountered. How could, how would he remain so calm in the midst of all that chaos? Mesmerized, I watched how he licked his lips to get rid of the crumbs.



When we got back to *Fleurier*, I couldn't help but still think of the man who had so gracefully thanked me for my pie. There was something about him that made

my heart beat faster. If I hadn't known different I would have said I had fallen in love with him at first sight. Had I? Had I fallen for him? I heard myself speak out loud.

«He was so dark. I thought he was most handsome.»

«What do you mean?

«The man in the waggon? His face was so dark, sunburnt in winter.»

«Marie, you wouldn't think he was sunburnt, would you? You should know better than ask such silly questions. He fights for the French. They took him from their colonies in Africa. Algeria belongs to the French.»

«How can a country belong to another country? I don't understand that.»

«That's because you are a woman.»

«You're a man. Explain. Explain it to me.»

«It just belongs to them. They took the country and that's that. How am I supposed to know? It just belongs to them.»

«And what do you mean they *took* him? How can they take countries or people?»

«They have guns, rifles, cannons, the lot. They made him fight in their war against the Prussians.»

«Could the French also take you to fight against their enemies?»

«I am white, they wouldn't dare enslave me. They only enslave black people as far as I know. And you know Father Mathieu says to love all our enemies, not fight them. So no, I wouldn't fight anyone, I'd rather die.»

«He is not my enemy and he wasn't black.»

«Right, Dark people. They only enslave darkies.»

«How come you know this word? *Darkies*? I have never heard you using it.»

«Uncle Tom's Cabin. You should have read it when Mamà had assigned it to us. Why are you always ever reading Jane Austen. Your English is good enough to understand real literature.» I ignored his attempt to tease me.

«But, I don't understand. You are dark in summer. When we bring the hay in for the sheep. You're as dark as him. I am as dark. We're *darkies*. What's the difference then? I've always thought dark people were dark because they constantly live in the sun. In Africa. Where the sun shines? If we always lived there wouldn't we be as dark as them too?»

«No, Marie, I wouldn't think so.»

«Really? Are you sure? I really am dark in summer and so are you.»



«Whoa. Fanny. Slow.» We were nearly back in *Fleurier* and more and more carriages before us blocked the road. I was less scared now when looking at their torn clothes, their feet wrapped in rags and their missing limbs. Some of their limbs were indeed missing. Julien had been right. The dry blood on their uniforms still made me retch though, but somehow I had recovered from my initial shock. How terrible war must be. So much death, so much blood, so many dreams eternally shattered. And yet, meeting Mustapha had made me strangely calm. As if to fear no evil was true indeed.

«What do I know. They come from Africa. I come from the Swiss mountains. That's probably all the difference there is. I mean, you are right. We are all humans

after all.» Julien was still rambling about dark and white and Africa and the Swiss. I had stopped listening a while ago, focusing intently on the snowy trail.

«Is that Henriette?» I exclaimed upon seeing a woman running towards us, waving both her arms frantically and shouting our names out loud.

«Marie. Marie. Julien. Stop. Stop at once.»

«Whoa. Halt. Fanny. Halt» I pulled the reins slightly back. Fanny obeyed instantly and brought the sledge to a halt.



«Julien, Marie. Thank God, I catch you here. I was about to run up to *La Maison Blanche*.» Henriette was panting hard and I looked at her startled. I couldn't remember seeing mother's friend in such agitation, she was completely rattled.

«Henriette, is everything alright?» It took her a moment to catch her breath before she could speak.

«No, it isn't, not at all. Oh my God.» Mother's friend was mighty pale. I wondered what was wrong.

«Henriette, tell us what happened.» I felt an ominous foreboding. Something must be terribly wrong. What could it be?

«It is your Uncle Vanya.» Now, my heart began beating faster.

«What about him?» I asked apprehensively. *No, No, No.* Nothing could happen to our dear, beloved Vanya.

«Imagine. Jean, you know my nephew from *Noiraigue*, right? He ran all the way to my house to tell me. He saw your uncle earlier this morning. Uncle Vanya was marching with a French battalion towards the city of *Neuchâtel*. Jean, recognizing him at once, tried to persuade him urgently to turn back. But your Uncle Vanya didn't recognize him. He would hear none of it. He simply walked on. Imagine. *Mon Dieu*. He's walking with the French army. What are we to do? He will not survive this cold. He will not survive this.»



I gasped, feeling my heart beat faster than ever. Then I went completely cold, all energy had left me. I felt like a limp dead shell of my very self. Uncle Vanya marching with the French internees towards *Neuchâtel*? Indeed, he would not survive this. *Dear old uncle Vanya, what are you doing?*



We rushed home, as fast as we could, then told mother. She was desperate. We are all desperate when we should prepare to help the many, many poor soldiers at our doorstep. Now, I am here, trying to calm down while writing it all down. Rose and Blanche have been crying all evening. There was no dinner. Louis has helped Julien with Pippa and the sheep. I have retired to write. I should go to bed, but there is no way I can close my eyes for just a second. Uncle Vanya out there. Somewhere in the cold where we cannot reach him. How helpless I felt, how lonesome.



It's midnight soon and I have taken a decision. I am writing to mother now.

La Maison Blanche 1 February, 1871

Dear Mamà

Forgive me for doing what I feel I must do. I will take Fanny and the sledge and set out to bring Uncle Vanya back. Please stay calm and do not worry. I will be fine. If I am to go until Neuchâtel, which I am prepared to, if I must, I will stay with Aunt Thèrese. I still have the letter with her address she sent for Christmas, so please don't worry. I might even find him before I get there. Have a little faith in me and be blessed.

Yours ever so truly

Marie

Thursday, February 2, 1871

«Whoa, Halt. Fanny.»

I quickly jumped off the sledge. It was still pitch-dark and ice-cold. Sunrise was a long way to go, many more miles from here. If only we could move faster. The temperature must have dropped even more in the wee hours of the early morning. In the light of the old cast-iron lantern I could see the tiny ice crystals hanging from the fir trees. Why was Fanny so slow? I hadn't put that much weight on the back of the sledge: Some blankets for Uncle Vanya to keep warm. *If* I ever did find him at all in this constant train of horses, men and ghosts; dead and alive, sick and wounded. I had taken some bread, some sheep cheese, some bee wax candles for the lantern, some milk that must be frozen by now, hot tea in a large clay jar I had packed in sheep skins. The load wasn't heavy. Fanny and I should have been moving much faster. We had barely left *Fleurier*. Why were we so slow? It couldn't be due to the cold or the snow on the gravel road only. The strong mare had bent her head low,

hot steaming breath evaporating from her nostrils. Her dark brown fur was wet and icy, glistening in the semi-dark. Luckily enough the moon was out, providing the terrible darkness with some sallow light. On the narrow path I had managed to pass many carriages by now, a curtain of sorry sounds following me ever so constantly. It was with utmost dismay that I listened to the cries of the wounded and sick, the cries of the night owls hidden in the dark, the grey wolves howling in the valleys and hills far.

I had encountered a couple of slow lone riders exhausted from the many miles they had been travelling. They could barely sit in their saddles, if they still had any. But mainly, I had seen soldiers on foot: Some of them moving, shuffling slower and slower the later it go. Why had they not put been put on the trains that were running? I didn't know.

Some of them were sitting or lying in the snow, maybe as dead as the horses that were resting besides them. I didn't know whether they were dead or alive and I didn't want to find out. My mind was set on Uncle Vanya, him I wanted to find, his life I wanted to save. Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire; true enough for me tonight. There wasn't more I could do, not now, not all by myself.

When I touched Fanny's strong and slender shanks, just below her knee, I could feel her blood pulsate. She was so warm, so very much alive. How I loved the stout, strong horse. I loved her more than Julien, more than Rose and Blanche, maybe even more than mother, but definitely not more than father, or Uncle Vanya.

Although-, I couldn't say. Fanny had always been there for me when I needed her. I have known and loved her dearly since I was a little girl.

Then I heard an unfamiliar sound. What was that? At once I felt how alone and terribly forsaken I was. I was being carried along in the midst of a powerful stream of refugees, and yet I was all alone, the only woman among so many men. How exposed had I myself to the elements and dangers of the night, the wood, the trail, the foreign army. I could have cried right then and there. But I didn't. Crying. Crying never helped. Quickly, I turned around and nearly shrieked out loud. My heart froze. I stared into the darkness. No, I wouldn't give up without a fight. My muscles were all tense, my svelte fists ready to deal these blows. I saw something move, a dark hooded figure, move. He moved with great strength and agility and ardour. My stomach turned, my blood pressure dropped, then rose at a speed unknown. I nearly passed out. There was a man, a grown man. I saw him jumping off the sledge Fanny had been pulling, jumping off our sledge. He slowly came towards me towering high before me, towering high, high above me, in the dark, strangely illuminated by the weak light of my lantern. He lifted his right arm. I lowered my fists, all courage had been lost. I felt so weak, so frail. I couldn't, I wouldn't fight back. I closed my eyes at once, ready to receive whatever blow I would be dealt with. But then nothing happened, and I tried opening one eye. He looked familiar.



«Julien, *mon Dieu*, what are you doing here? You gave me such a fright. And Pippa. Pippa, lovely. You're here too?»

Tears shot in my eyes and quickly, I squatted down and ran my fingers through her soft fur. My heart was pounding heavily, but what a relief it was to see my beloved brother Julien. He had brought our German shepherdess. I couldn't even begin to tell how relieved I was. In fact, I couldn't remember ever, having seen Julien and being thus overjoyed.

«She should be with mother though, shouldn't she? How will they bring the sheep in?» I couldn't believe he had taken our Alpha Female. She belonged to *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevue*, nowhere else in the world. I patted her gently.

«Easy, darling, easy.»

She was as excited seeing me as I was excited seeing her. Her and Julien.

«Don't worry. Tonight, we shall be back.»

«You think, kitten?» I looked at Julien with amusement. He was still such a kid, a mere boy. I didn't think we'd be back anytime soon.

«Of course, we will have found Uncle Vanya by then. Don't worry. Once he is tired, he will simply sit down, sleep a bit and wait for us to pick him up. He always does.»

«Alright then. But, tell me: How did you get onto the sledge? I didn't see you.»

«Well, you weren't the only one who thought of finding Vanya. And you had to go back *again* for your mittens, remember?»

«Of course. The mittens. I keep forgetting them. They have taken so long to make; I think I simply don't want to spoil them. When they are home, they are safe from harm.»

«They're mittens, Marie. Only, mittens.»

«I know. I wouldn't expect you to understand. And Pippa? How did she end up here?»

«I don't know, I swear I didn't want to take her.» He looked at me trying to look innocent.

«Is that so?» I ruffled her fur again.

«She just ended up on the sledge. Promise. I had nothing to do with it.»

I smiled at both of them. We may as well do this together.



Getting to *Noiraigue*, the next village, seemed to take forever. What was a short and delightful walk in summer, taking a couple of hours only, was now a strenuous *tour de force*. It took its toll on us and Fanny. When we finally arrived, the sun was about to come up. We were exhausted. The village looked different: Usually a place so quiet and peaceful, it was now full of dirty carriages and men in torn and dishevelled uniforms. The villagers, mainly women, were tending to their needs. There was freshly baked bread to go round, vegetable soup, *bouillon*, ladled out ever so quickly into large metal mugs. There were stoneware cups, filled with hot steaming coffee, handed out freely, most of them filled to the brim with fresh foaming milk, brought in from the cow barns earlier this morning. There was no end to the kindness of the people of *Noiraigue*. My stomach rumbled. I only realized now how hungry I was myself, after the long, exhausting trip. Getting here during the night had taken forever and still we hadn't found Uncle Vanya. Where was he? Was

he still marching? Was he ahead of us? Had he managed to get all the way to *Neuchâtel*? *Uncle Vanya, where are you?*

We discovered Jean, Henriette's nephew, close to the village fountain. We found him standing outside one of the big houses near the main square. He was grooming a beautiful black horse, thoroughbred and once strong. Now, the poor animal looked under-nourished and exhausted though, reduced to a shadow of the beast it once was. When Jean saw us, he started running towards us, his hair tousled in the cold and icy winter morning winds, both his arms up high, waving at us frantically.

«Marie, Julien. Come. You must come inside at once. I have news for you.»



«That's really all I know.» Jean bowed his head.

I looked at him aghast. No, it couldn't be true.

«Tell me again, I cannot believe it.»

«He said he had joined the *3.e Regiment des Tirailleurs algériens*. You know, the Algerian rifle men, *5.th Compagnie, 3.rd Battalion*. That is what he said. Hard to believe, isn't it? Hard to believe they would let him join. And he changed into their uniform. Heaven knows where he got one of their uniforms from. Someone must have given it to him or he stripped it off a dead man. Then your Uncle Vanya walked right past here. I am so sorry, I couldn't stop him.

'Close the ranks', he said. 'Close the ranks. *Allez. Marchez,*' he said. » Jean shrugged and sighed out loud.

Allez? Marchez? Uncle Vanja, he is so stubborn.

«I should have tied him down with a rope. I am so sorry. I didn't think of that on the spur of the moment. I should have tied him down. We have plenty of ropes. I should have-» He buried his face in his callous hands.

«It's alright, Jean. There is nothing you could have done. If you had tied him down, the whole French army would have come after you. I didn't think they would have let you take one of their own as a prisoner. Tying one of them down? Really? You cannot be thinking seriously that would have worked?» Jean shrugged helplessly.

«It might have.»

«No. Wouldn't have worked. Letting him go was the right thing to do.»

«But where did he go? Did he say?»

«He wouldn't know, would he? They must take everyone to *Neuchâtel* first, before they're distributed all over Switzerland. So, I guess that's where you'd find him, in *Neuchâtel*, but I am not sure. Maybe the newspaper will tell you more.»

I paled. They were distributing the internees all over Switzerland? Oh no. Could it be true that Uncle Vanya had even left *Neuchâtel*? I felt how my heart began racing. No, no, no. How were we ever to find him again if he had left *Neuchâtel*? Switzerland was so big. Nonetheless, it made sense. A small city like *Neuchâtel* couldn't possibly cope with the amount of refugees pouring in from the French border. *Impossible*. Impossible. They would need the whole confederation's support to deal with such a challenge. It did make sense. It made sense at once, but it also made our endeavour endlessly more complicated. I took a deep breath.

«Look, here. One of the men coming from *Neuchâtel* has just brought two copies. They are from yesterday and the day before. But never mind.»

He handed us the newspapers. If I hadn't been panicking thus, I might have enjoyed how comfortably we were sitting in the warm kitchen of a large old stone farmhouse while Fanny rested in their stable. Jean's mother, Antoinette, had served us hot milk with honey and freshly whipped cream. She had also put goat cheese, a large chunk of warm rye bread and some freshly churned butter on the table. The coffee, she served straight from a large kettle on the oven; it was steaming hot and well sugared. The room was well-heated and cosy, the fire must have been lit hours ago. She must have risen as early as we had, if not before. I yawned discreetly, holding my hand over my upper lips to stifle the yawn. How tired I was already, and we had barely started our search. I had only eaten very little since I left home. Looking at the delicious food on the table suddenly made me so nauseous. My empty stomach rambled, but my brain was filled with so much worry, I couldn't lift a finger to feed myself. All over Switzerland? The French army was being distributed all over Switzerland as we speak? No wonder I didn't feel hungry anymore. Oh my!

Uncle Vanya, where are you? Are you still alive?



Jean put two worn copies of the bilingual, *Feuille d'Avis de Bern* (French), *Bern's Intelligenzblatt* (German) on the table. I quickly browsed through them, looking for news on the French army on Swiss soil. In the *addendum*, the additional pages, I finally found a short note I found worth reading in more detail.

«Can you read what it says?»

Julien asked me eagerly, looking over my shoulder. He could be such a nuisance.

«Can you not, kitten?» I snapped. Then I began reading out loud as fast as I could.

«They say a 1000 hundredweight of flour and 500 hundredweight of rice will be provided to the hungry population of *Pontarlier* and *Morteau* if the army doesn't cross the border. »

«Why if they didn't cross the border? Well, they *did* cross. And considering what we have seen, I doubt that will be enough food to feed them all.» I decided to ignore his comments as my eyes fell on another article.

«Oh my God, look at the prices in Paris, and just before Christmas last year. Potatoes were 1 Francs in 1869 and in December 1870 the price has gone up to 20 Francs, or milk, one litre instead of 30 cents it was two francs, or a turkey, 90 Francs instead of 10 Francs. Can you imagine? 90 Francs for a turkey?»

«Good for the farmers if they get so much money for their produce.»

«I don't think you understand Julien, there is so little food, no one is making any money here. War is very disruptive for business unless you produce weapons.»

I glanced at Jean, how clever he had become, explaining so well about war and business and prices. For a second, I looked at him in amazement, then, when our eyes met, I turned back to the newspaper.

«I agree with Jean. How awful that war is. Why are men fighting? I mean. Look at the prices.»

I pointed excitedly at the table.

	1869	1870
Kartoffeln	Fr. 1. —	Fr. 20. —
Sellerie (das Stück) . .	" —. 25	" 1. 75
Runkelrüben (das Kilogr.)	" —. 20	" 1. 20
Olivenöl (das Kilogr.) .	" 4. —	" 10. —
Milch (der Liter)	" —. 30	" 2. —
Frische Butter (d Kilogr.)	" 6. —	" 70. —
" Eier (das Stück) . . .	" —. 15	" 2. —
Rindschmalz (das Kilogr.)	" 1. 30	" 4. —
Pferdesfett (das Kilogr.) .	" 1. —	" 6. —
Kaninchen	" 3. —	" 30. —
Tauben	" 1. 50	" 35. —
Hühner	" 6. —	" 55. —
Enten	" 7. —	" 80. —
Truthühner	" 10. —	" 90. —

«Doves, 35 French Francs instead of 1.50. How much is that in Swiss Francs?»

«Rabbits, 30 Francs instead of 3 Francs and chicken 55 Francs instead of 6 Francs. *C'est fou*. That is crazy. Even horse fat cost 6 Francs.»

«Because they have to», Jean replied to my earlier question.

«They have to? You mean have to fight? For what? Explain that to me. For the prices to go up so drastically that no one can nourish their children? Their parents? Their husbands? The poor women of Paris. How are they to feed their beloved?»

«No, they have to because they must defend their country, their honour, their pride. *Vive la France*.»

He raised his fist high above his head. Was he making fun of us? I pulled the corners of my mouth down.

«Of course, country and honour taste much better than potatoes, milk and turkey. Much, much better.» I said sardonically.

«Horse Fat, 6 Francs. Worth the honour and pride any time. Of course. Anytime. Who is eating cheap horse fat now anyway? Look it is even more expensive than beef fat. I guess it is so expensive because all the horses are slaughtered on the battlefields.» I looked up at him waiting for a response.

«You're a woman. You wouldn't understand such important matters.»

«Of course, all I am ever interested in is food and cooking. Of course. And that is not important at all. I know. I guess you could boil white stones in your *potage*, or your stew and it would still taste the same. Stones and some dry grass and a tiny bit of sand to season it all. I mean, who needs chicken or celery, or speaking of it, horse fat?»

«Food, indeed. Less important than war», Julien said taking a big bite of the fresh rye bread Antoinette had just served.

«That is right. » He added with his mouth full.

Enough was enough. I grabbed the slice from him, scratching his cheek with my thumb nail.

«Give that to me. That is not important.» I insisted holding the bread up high. He reached for his face, rubbing the spot where I scratched him.

«Ouch. Marie, *t'es con ou quoi?* Stop that.»

«Come on. Stop fighting.»

«Tell me rather where do they take the French soldiers? Does it say? Where could Uncle Vanya be?»

Of course, Uncle Vanya. Why fighting with Julien over such trivialities as war and food?

I turned the page, then started reading out loud.

«The French soldiers will be taken to the army barracks which can keep about 8500 men.»

«8500, that is ridiculous. There are surely 10 times as many from what we've seen.» Jean said.

«*Vraiment*, really? You have seen that many?»

Once again, I ignored Julien's remarks.

«It also says that the cantons will be paid to host, feed and stand sentinel over the soldiers.»

«Whatever does that mean? Do you really think these poor soldiers would run away? Look at the condition they are in. They are not going anywhere. But who is going to pay for all this?»

«The Swiss government?»

«I guess they'll make the French pay. After all it is their fault these poor devils are in such a state, and the Prussians. They should pay for it too. All parties who wage wars should pay for their casualties and the refugees they cause. Don't you think?» I looked at the two young men eagerly.

«All I am interested in is where to find Uncle Vanya.» Julien said, Jean just shrugged. He still felt guilty for letting him go.

«I have no idea. We'd have to find out whether he is in one of the military barracks. I guess being among the first to cross the borders, that could be possible. Otherwise, I wouldn't really know what to do. Which cantons could he have been taken to?



«If you move on to *Neuchâtel* you might find out more. But it is far, even with Fanny and the sledge. One day, maybe two days in this cold, even longer if it snows again. The roads are not always clear enough to travel swiftly. It is dangerous. It is

dangerous for Fanny too. The road goes downhill all the time. With the sledge and so. Better be careful.» Worriedly, Jean looked at the both of us.

«We're going.» I said determinedly, «and we take Fanny and the sledge. Otherwise, if we find Uncle Vanya, how can we take him back home?»

«He can walk. If you should find him.»

«He won't walk. We may have to tie him to the sledge once we find him, won't we Julien?»

«Of course», Julien answered. He looked worried and older than I had ever noticed. I tried not to think of what would happen if we really had to wrestle him from the French army and tie him to the sledge.



I am writing this by the light of the lantern. Fanny and Julien are asleep and so is Pippa, but I cannot sleep. It is too cold. We have travelled downhill all day. And we were slow, just as Jean had predicted. Too slow to reach *Neuchâtel* before nightfall. We had to camp by a forest glade when it got too dark to continue our way. There is fresh snow on the trail now, it lays on rock-solid ice and makes journeying further dangerous. In addition, there is so much traffic, so many horses, so many carriages with men, some of them wounded, most weakened, and all of them wasted. It is a nightmare when you have to manoeuvre past their broken carriages, past their lost souls, their hopeless faces. How can Uncle Vanya possibly survive such a long and exhausting trip in this extreme weather? He was old, he was frail. It was so cold. Hopefully, he is still alive. I didn't dare think of him. I didn't dare think of the worst.

My feet are freezing, my hands are freezing, my face is peeling off, my lips are bleeding. It is unbearable. I am too cold to even hold the quill properly, the quill, that father had used for his writing and -. What? The ink I have kept close to my body is now out in the open winds and it is freezing. I will c---



When Julien woke, we made Fanny get up and continued on our way. It was still dark, but there was a promise in the skies that the light of the winter sun would soon enough come up and bring new hope, a new day. The city of *Neuchâtel*, a full member of the Swiss Confederation only since 1856, when a royalist coup was successfully defeated, couldn't be far now. It must be within reach shortly. At least, that was what we thought. I hadn't travelled to *Neuchâtel* for quite some time and couldn't possibly remember how far it was. It never had seemed that far. But then, we would never make the journey in February as the roads were unsafe because of too much ice and snow. It was madness after all to venture this time of the year so far from home. It was madness and how I regretted it already. But what choice did we have? We simply had to find our uncle.

I fed Fanny some of the hay I had taken from *La Maison Blanche*, but there was no water as we couldn't make a fire. I gave her some snow, but she wouldn't swallow it. So, I stuck some into my own mouth. The tiny crystals melted instantaneously in the hollow of my jaws, my lips burning from the cold when I spit the mucilaginous water back into my hollow palm. I then held it close to Fanny's muzzle. She drank the warm slime eagerly and so I repeated the procedure until she

turned her head. Was she thirsty no more? She hadn't taken much. What had alerted her?

The forest to our left and to our right was dark with secrets only a sacred winter-wood can hold. I was scared. I held my breath. I heard my own heart beat so loudly. A perfect iambic pentameter: *da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM*.

Two households, both alike in dignity.
In fair Fleurier, where we lay our scene
A pair of star-crossed lovers make their life,
Whose misadventured encounter overthrows
Doth with their love bury their parents' strife.

Shall I?

Shall I compare thee to a winter's day?

Shall I?

My Love, Shall I?

I felt so faint as the words of old rushed by. I felt so feeble and forlorn. Was it Mustapha I was yearning for? I found it hard not to think of him.



Fanny snorted out loud and licked my hand once more. The spell was broken. My muscles relaxed, I could breathe again, the vision was gone. We were still on the road. I looked around. We had to move on. And so, we continued on our way.

As we turned the next corner we saw some deer: Their large figures were huge and mighty shadows in a picture I couldn't bear to look at. There was a noise, I couldn't place. When I turned my head I saw a small fox run from us. It was this time of day, the time when wildlife stirred. What if we were attacked by wolves? There were wolves in these regions: Dangerous predators, beastly, lurking, monstrous creatures. It seems the woods were teeming with life and yet, I felt compared to what we had seen the day before, there was hope and the solitude of a dream yet to come true. When all the narrow path did display was torture and death and yonder ingratitude.

Again, I felt my heart, my lungs, my stomach would fail me. But, continue we did. The sledge lurched forward, and forward and then once again. Forward. I felt uneasy. A dreadful premonition, I cannot truly explain, has taken hold of me and taken hold completely.

As the minutes passed slower and slower, the path became steeper and steeper. I was too scared to get off the sledge. I was too scared to walk down such a steep and slippery, icy slope. I should have gotten off. I should have been walking, Julien should have been walking. The moment of no return came ever so quickly. It took us completely by surprise. The sledge, so faithfully carrying my and Julien's weight, began to move without our doing. I couldn't stop its course. The breaks were failing: Broken, not working. Nothing could be done. After turning a narrow corner too fast, the sledge shot forward like a lion charging for its lost and forsaken prey. Fanny. Poor Fanny.

Her legs gave way immediately. Then the sledge hit her body full throttle. She fell at once onto the icy mountain trail, then was shoved off the path and slid onto

the snowy slope, steeply slanting down into a narrow valley creek. I heard her grunt out loud. The sledge had come to an instant halt and I had banged my knee on the wooden joist, but didn't feel any pain. My neck must hurt from the collision, but I couldn't feel it. My eyes were fixed on Fanny. She was still down, hanging over the precipitous slope precariously: Her head still on the track, but her upper part and her hindquarters in the deep snow, off the beaten track. If the snow started to move and an avalanche was triggered, she would glide into the abyss inexorably. I was petrified. I was paralysed.

She was twisting, she was twitching, she couldn't get up. And worse, she made the most ghastly noises. In fact, I had never heard such a grisly sound before: Our beloved Fanny squealing so terribly, so horridly, so- I cannot explain. I cannot find any synonyms, however superlative, to describe the distress she expressed. It made my heart sink, my hands and arms tremble. My mind blanked, my brain stopped working and if it hadn't been for my lungs, which obviously knew what needed doing, I would have suffocated right then and there on that very spot. I would have dropped dead immediately. I was conscious at once that the worst had now happened. The worst was now real. *Mon Dieu*. My heart sank into the unfathomable, incomprehensible void I had known was looming out there, but it was a place, I had never found myself in before. Not even *near* before. Ever.

«Fanny, Fanny.»

She sighed and snickered and snorted, vocalizing her pain in a sequence of strange sounds we were totally unfamiliar with. I had never heard her or any other horse; mare or stallion, even any other living creature; man, woman or beast, make such dreadful, despairing and most distressing sounds.

«No Fanny, No.»

« Get off the sledge, she may be pulling it down with her. »

I was still paralyzed at the thought that she would slide down the slope, pulling the sledge with her. I couldn't leave her, could I?

«Marie, get off, Now. Come on.»

I only looked at him. Was this my brother? I didn't recognize his face, I didn't recognize his voice.

«Marie, now. Hurry»

Julien had jumped off the sledge trestle already. He stretched out his hand then grabbed my hand tight as I reached for his fingers. He wouldn't let go, but pulled me towards him. Slowly, I got up and jumped off. Then, he let go and turned immediately. Carefully, he went off the beaten track and made his way, on his buttocks, through the deep snow towards where Fanny's hindquarters lay. Pippa, barking out loud, followed at once. Both sank deep into the snow as they desperately tried to move forward and get closer to her. This was so dangerous.

«Careful, Julien, the slope is so slippery. Stop. Come back.»

Without being able to think clearly, I followed on their heels, more stumbling than walking.

« *Mon Dieu*, Marie. Stay on the track. »

Obediently, I climbed back onto the track and got up. For a while, I just stood there and looked into the abyss. What I saw made my pulse race, my mouth go dry. I was gasping, I was panting: Streams of ice-cold air as cold as virgin mountain rivers pierced my lungs. I couldn't look at Fanny. Her right long pastern bone stuck out diagonally while the coffin bone was badly twisted. She was in so much pain. She

groaned out so loud, in such agony. Again and again, she tried getting up, but when sustaining herself just a little, she'd fall down again. She'd grunt, she'd moan, she'd snort. It was agony, more agony, pure agony. I couldn't watch her, the strong beloved mare, so helplessly tied to the frozen ground, so defencelessly coiling in the cold, cold snow: It was misery, pure misery and pain. Everything came to a complete halt. That was the end of everything.



I stood in silence. We were right on the cusp of despair. In fact, we were past it. This was despair. Pure despair. Utter despair. Fanny could not possibly survive this accident, and neither would we. She was exhausted and lay still. I wish, I could kneel down, I wish I could stroke her head. But she was too far away from me, climbing down to her was too dangerous.

«Fanny, Oh Fanny. Please» I started crying. Mother needed Fanny as much as we did. I felt I had to die right then and there.

«*Mon Dieu*, what shall we do?» I whispered.

«She cannot be s-saved.» Julien hadn't stuttered in years.

I looked at my brother, thinking about the actual meaning of his words. He couldn't be serious. What did he mean she couldn't be saved? *Of course*, I thought: *Of course, she can be saved.*

«Her right foot is completely smashed. She cannot get up.» Laboriously, he had clambered up again.

«What are we going to do? I will not leave her here, not in this cold, not with all these -, these people on the trail. The wolves.» I left the sentences half finished, not bearing to speak the inevitable out loud.

«Can you see how that bone is sticking out? There is nothing you can do, we will have to leave her here. Marie, please.» I barely recognized his voice. Was this my brother speaking?

«Julien, we cannot leave her here. We have to take her back home-.»

«Marie, I am so sorry, but please, don't make this harder than it is already.»

I looked at him from below. Was really all hope gone?



«*Mademoiselle* Marie? Julien? What are you doing out here? What happened?»

I turned around and saw him. He was taller than I had expected. Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara jumped off the Red Cross waggon which had just pulled up behind us. Never would I forget his name or his face or his kind smile. At once, I felt like someone had suddenly plunged me into hot water, a steaming hot bath tube for all I knew. My cheeks must have turned ruby red, maybe even a dark, dark purple, maybe black. I pulled up my woollen scarf quickly, hoping to cover my coloured face. Still, I felt the blood rush through my body and my brain, up and down and up and down. There was a loud echoing in my ears. A loud pounding. A loud throbbing.

What in the world was happening to me? Never before had I experienced such strong emotions, such a fit of excitement and unrest, and peace and complete, serene joy.

«What happened?» Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara asked, aghast looking down at Fanny. I shook my head in silence trying not to sob out loud. Julien took a deep breath. He, too, was at a loss for words.

«How can I help?» Mustapha added calmly.

«She cannot move her right leg. Her pastern bone is sticking out diagonally, everything is completely smashed.»

«Let me see.»

«I couldn't stop the sledge in the curve. We were too fast.»

«This is not your fault.»

Prudently, Mustapha slid down to where Fanny was laying. By how she was moving her ears, I could see she had noticed his presence. Carefully, he started examining her right leg while she was softly moaning in pain. She was too fatigued and frazzled to fight for much longer. Occasionally, when he tried twisting the leg to test its elasticity, she grunted out loud, then put her head down again. She closed those long, thick lashes over her gentle eyes, spent from the long, exhausting trip, the extreme cold. I watched how expertly Mustapha examined the horse, not being able to take my eyes off his strong, yet slender hands. His fingers were moving so skilfully and aptly as if he had been doing nothing else all his life. Maybe he had -, maybe he had been born to examine and save horses? Save our horse? I calmed down slowly. I put all my trust in him, the dark stately man from Mascara, Algeria. North Africa. A place, a country, a continent so far away; so foreign and different

that I had no words to describe it, no pictures to understand it. I had nothing really to rely on, but him.



«Where is Pippa? I have not seen her in a while.» I looked at Julien, alarmed. He shrugged, he was too distressed by what had happened to Fanny. «She'll be back.» He said absent-mindedly.



«There is nothing you can do.»
Tears shot in my eyes. *Why would he say that now?*
«What do you mean there is nothing you can do? There is always something you can do.»

This was Fanny he was talking about; the horse our father had raised from her first day she was born. Born and bred at *La Maison Blanche* in *Hautevive*, she was ours. We were hers. We would not give her up, we would not forsake her, not now when she had served and loved us so faithfully all these years.

«You cannot save her. *Impossible.*»
Mustapha clambered up again and looked me straight in the eye.
I shivered. That couldn't be right. Why would he say that? Was he not born to heal our horses?

«We must do something. What can we do?» I panted.

By now tears were streaming down my cheeks; *no, not Fanny. My beloved, beloved, strong mare.* I was losing all control. Mustapha pulled out a long, thin, stick from underneath his uniform.



«I can shoot her for you, if you wish. She is in so much pain.»



It was only then that I saw that the stick was not actually a stick, but some sort of a gun. Its shaft was long. I would have guessed a little longer than a meter, but definitely longer than any long arm I had ever seen. We didn't have guns like these in the Swiss Jura mountains and even I, for a second, was mesmerized by its beauty, forgetting about the disastrous plight we were in. In fact, I felt like the little baby that had been crying and was then distracted by a loving mother's impromptu surprise: The wooden stock was striped in black and shiny gold and its end was decorated spectacularly. My eyes fell on the intricate patterns immediately.

«What is this?»

«It is a Snaphaunce Lock Jezzail. My grand-father passed it on to me, it was made in the 20ties in the city of Tétouan, still as good as new».

He handed it to Julien who nearly dropped it.

«The decoration is beautiful», Julien mumbled, looking at it closely.

«Isn't it?»

Mustapha held up the rifle for us to see. The labyrinthine patterns were beautiful. There were flowers, waves and tiny leaves carefully tangled and intertwined. Prominently placed near the trigger were five simple lines neatly curved representing the crescent of the moon.

I couldn't bear look at the men examining this piece of art while Fanny was in such pain.

«I have never seen such beautiful craftsmanship. Whoever made your weapon must have been a master, learning from the best. »

Julien was in awe. I wasn't. As if in trance, I listened to their conversation. What were they talking about? I heard the words, I heard them talk, but I couldn't really follow.



«It is inlaid with mother of pearl, bone, copper wire and silver looted in South America by the Spaniards and then melted from 17th century Spanish coins brought to Tétouan from South America“.

«No brass?»

«Brass and copper inlays.»

«I thought so.»

«What does the writing say on the left?»

«I think it means *White Dove*, the nickname of Tétoun. »

Fanny groaned out loud. She must be in such pain.

«Is it loaded?» I asked.

Mustapha took the rifle back into his strong hands and opened the barrel.

«Incredible. The barrel is inlaid too, I have never seen anything like it.”

Julien observed, still succumbing to his fascination with such a beautiful and unusual weapon.

«Can I see too? »

«Careful, now it is loaded. » Mustapha passed me the weapon gingerly.

I took the rifle into my hands, feeling its long, thin beautifully crafted body as if in a dream, as if nothing of this was real.



There was a howling close by and Julien stirred.

«Where is Pippa?» He turned around to look for her.

«Pippa, Pippa. Where are you?» He shouted out loud.

«I haven't seen her for a while.»

«Ok, stay here, I will go and look for her.”

He turned around and grabbed a spare lantern we had brought along, lighting it as he started walking up the narrow road.



Fanny was at my feet, writhing in pain. I was still holding on to the loaded Snaphaunce Lock Jezzail with both my hands. I had named the long arm at once: *White Dove*. It was a weapon worthy of its fate, worthy of its game. I felt for the trigger. I felt the wool of my mittens stretch around my fingers. Then I looked at the red and pink roses woven delicately into their fabric, covering the upper part of my hands. I looked at the slender weapon my fingers held, its inlaid roses, the leaves, the waves, the crescent, the lines of writing I couldn't read nor understand. Mustapha had said they might mean *White Dove*. *White Dove*, indeed. Innocence. Summer. The blue endless sky. The horizon. Green leaves swaying in the gentle wind of a tepid August evening. Grass, the fresh and moist smell of grass after a fierce thunderstorm. So many memories. So much peace.



Non occides. Thou shalt not kill.



I remembered the Latin lines from Exodus 20:13 so clearly. The Bible. My Bible. I took heart and began sliding down towards Fanny. The slope was steep, the slope was slippery, but it was easier now that Julien and Mustapha had prepared the ground and paved the way. Where they had trodden, there wasn't as much fresh snow as initially. I sat on my buttocks, stabilizing my position with my boots and

reached for Fanny. Tenderly, I stroked her warm forehead, running my fingers slowly through her forelocks. She calmed down. She felt my presence.

Non occides. Do not kill. Feeling carefully for the hollow between her malar bone and the socket of her eye, I paused. I took a deep breath. I exhaled. I felt the cavity above her eyes. She looked at me, fearing no evil, fearing no sin. Our eyes locked. She was tired now, exhausted. I nodded. I was tired now. For a moment I rested. We both did. In peace. We rested in peace, and then I kissed her, touched her face briefly with my lips. Her fur was cold, the droplets on her forehead, frozen.

Then I stood up, laboriously and not without pain, -the weapon was long, so long, the slope was steep-, then, I placed the muzzle of the gun into the hollow I had so carefully stroked just seconds before. I took a deep breath. Then I pulled the trigger. And then again. And again. Once, Twice and once more.

As if performing a ritual of old, I took off my mittens, there was blood everywhere. Then, I placed them on the wound the bullets had ripped into Fanny's head. Her head, it was gone. She, she was gone. The wool was soaked in blood at once, the red and pink roses gone. Only red. Only blood. Fanny's blood. My hands naked. I nearly stumbled. I nearly slipped. I felt the earth tremble. I felt the slope tremor. Was this a temblor? I felt vibration. Vibration all over. What was happening?

I was in trance, I heard Julien shout from afar. I heard Mustapha shout. Mustapha. A glimpse of surprise in his eyes. Surprise. Mustapha, he was beautiful, so beautiful. He was-. I couldn't say. I looked up to him. He looked down.

«Marie. Marie. Up here. Come on.» Was he talking to me? I heard a voice from afar.

«Marie, the sledge. It is all coming down. Come on. Come on.» I got up, climbed up some steps and then instinctively pointed the long arm towards Mustapha.

«Whoa, Marie. Careful. It is still loaded - Ok. Ok.» He reached for the long arm's muzzle.

«I got you. I got you.»

I nodded, looking up at him where he was standing. We were joined by the rifle, but joined we were. A glimpse of infinity. Our eyes locked. He was mine, I was his. I felt a wave of deepest love and enormous exasperation wash over me.

«Don't pull the trigger. Can you hear me? Don't pull the trigger.» I nodded. Of course, no -, I wouldn't pull the trigger. Not now.

«The weapon is still loaded. You hear me? Marie? You hear me?»

I nodded again. Of course. *Don't pull the trigger.* I got it. Got it.

«My diary. It is still on the sledge. My father's - »

«Let it go. There is no time. The sledge will go down.» He was panting. I stared at him wide-eyed.

I felt movement, I felt the slope's tremor again and then all started sliding, all started moving. And so did I. With one bare hand, I reached for the trestle's bench, rigged it open and grabbed the leather case with my diary as the sledge slid ever so slowly past me, gaining speed and momentum by the second. I felt how Mustapha pulled me up, grabbed my back and pulled me onto the trail. There was a stabbing pain in my shoulder. I winced, holding on tight to my leather case with father's quills, the precious ink and my diary. I still heard the roaring as the sledge broke in a thousand pieces, burying poor Fanny underneath, pulling her down into the abyss.

The droning sounds. The pounding bullets. The shattering sledge. Fanny dying. A din so loud I couldn't hear a thing. I couldn't hear anything. Had I gone deaf?

Mustapha took the long rifle from my hands, relieving me of its enormous heavy weight despite it's being so light and fine a weapon. It was more than I could carry, more than I could ever endure. A burden unbelievable. I had killed. I had killed Fanny. I had killed her. Beloved Fanny. It was me, me opening fire upon the innocent.

Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara.

He reached for me, grabbed me by the shoulders.

He held me.

He pulled me close and stroked my hair, caressing my neck with his palm.

I collapsed into his strong arms.

I buried my face in his chest.

I held onto him, held onto him tight.

He smelled like the fresh and mighty westerly wind.

He smelled like the wind carrying the thunderstorms, bringing the wild fires.

Then, when he slowly, slowly let go of me,

Then when he let go of me ever so quickly,

Then, my heart broke. Broke forever.

Never, never would I heal.

I had killed. And, killed I had.

It couldn't be undone.

Fanny. Fanny. Dead. Dead and gone.



Mustapha let go of me, releasing me from our untimely embrace ever so tenderly, unlocking our unseemly physical clasp carefully.

«What happened? Oh God. Marie. What happened? I heard the shots. I ran right back. Are you alright? Are you hurt?»

He looked at Mustapha first, then Julien's gaze fell on Fanny lying about a dozen meters away from us in the abyss. She wasn't moving. There was blood. Blood everywhere. I could still smell it: Her warm blood gushing out, then trickling ever more slowly unto the icy snow, freezing at once; that smell, it had smelled like iron. Her frozen blood. I starred. I starred at her frozen blood, my naked hands, my broken fingernails, the rough skin above my left thumb. I felt nothing. I felt everything. I wasn't capable of answering any of Julien's questions. A glimpse of surprise. A glimpse of infinity. I managed standing on my own feet. I was trembling, tremoring. A glimpse of surprise. I was shaking and it wasn't from the cold. What had happened? What on earth had happened?



«Have you shot her? Marie, have you shot her? How could you? You? How could you shoot her? We might have found a-» He stopped right there and started screaminginginging in gin gin gin incoherently. Julien was beside himself with anger and hurt, raging against me so terribly. Furious. None of us were thinking clearly. I

was about to nod. I was about to confirm the incredible. A burden unbelievable. A burden no one else could relieve me from.



«I shot her. I did what I had to do», Mustapha said.

«I did what had to be done. She wouldn't have survived. She was in too much pain.»



Friday, February 3, 1871

And imagine. We had lost Pippa too. I really cannot remember how we then got to city of *Neuchâtel*. It was evening until we finally made it to the shelter of the medieval town. Besides the piercing cold and the unbearable pain in my heart, soul and mind I didn't feel much else. Somehow Mustapha fit us into the carriage, with all his companions who had been too tired to get off and witness the tragic scene.

I do remember that I dreamed of him holding my hand, but he was sitting in the coach box all the time, far from my dreams, far from my confined reality in the Red Cross carriage. I sat tight, holding on to my leather case, protecting my ink, my quills and my diary. I was pressing the case tightly to my breasts. Finally, the vast grey lake and the lights of *Neuchâtel* could be seen in the distance.

Finding Aunt Thèrese's house near *Petite Rochette* was easy. It was more difficult though for Mustapha to first get the carriage moving through the throngs of people, carriages, horses and mules on the *Avenue de la Gare*. Everybody was on their feet to see the French internees, especially the soldiers from Northern Africa such as Mustapha himself. Elderly ladies were staring, even pointing, at him as if he were a giraffe or an elephant, any of the African animals we only knew from rare postcards, paintings or magazines. I found their amazement appalling and so outlandish. How

could they indulge in such obscenities? By the look on their faces you could see that some were scared being thus overrun by wounded, shattered men that were not Christians. How could they fear the poor foreign soldiers thus? All, I ever feared was the moment we'd have to say good-bye. And that moment, it came -, came ever too quickly.

Having arrived at Aunt Therèse's house in *Petite Rochette* we waved good-bye to Mustapha and his small crowd. He had to join his battalion, whereas, we climbed up the narrow stairs to our aunt's apartment. Upon arrival, she hugged us both tight, kissed our foreheads, even Julien's, and then gave us hot chicken soup in tiny porcelain bowls decorated with blue palm leaves. We were so exhausted from the journey, she sent us straight to bed. Mother had telegraphed her, so she was expecting us. Aunt Thèrese seemed pleased, and yet so worried to see us. But after all, she seemed more pleased.

It's late morning now and I am still exhausted. The image of Fanny lying dead and bleeding in the snow is haunting me. I can feel the trigger. I can hear the shots ring out so loud. Her death is a loss so painful I cannot even begin to describe what it means to me, the family, mother. I daren't think of it. I daren't think of how to tell mother. And I was to blame for all this. Losing Fanny. It was a disaster. I mean. I cannot-.

I look out the window upon the lake, the *Lac of Neuchâtel*, as I am writing these lines. And I get lost in the blur of the lake's many shades of green and blue and black and grey: a myriad of colours so cool, so hyperborean it comforts the eye, it caresses the soul. How peaceful the waters were in winter. I assume there are carriages and horses and French soldiers everywhere in town, but still no sign of Pippa.

Pippa, dearest, where are you? Have we lost you, too, to the woods? Aunt Thèrese has placed an announcement into the *Objets Perdus ou Trouvés*, the Lost and Found Section, of tomorrow's *Feuille d'Avis de Neuchâtel*, the local newspaper. How lucky it will be published tomorrow. Otherwise, we would have had to wait until next Wednesday.

I am exhausted after writing down everything that had happened yesterday. I will have to go back to bed. Writing it all down is exhausting, excruciatingly draining, no sight for sore eyes, on the contrary: only misery, misery and pain. Fanny, Fanny gone. Uncle Vanya gone. Pippa gone. I cannot imagine. And Mustapha. I cannot imagine what really happened. Is this really what happened? I killed Fanny when he said he had? Did I really kill her? With that long black and golden stick that was a long arm, his long arm? His long arm that saved me.

But did I kill her? Did he? I think I did. I know, I did.

Also, I am running a fever. My cheeks are burning, my head is aching. When I get up, I'm dizzy. I am thirsty, thirsty all the time. I overheard Aunt Thèrese talking to the doctor. Was I suffering from small pox? Was I suffering from Typhus fever. Was I suffering from pneumonia? Who knew? Was I dying? Who knew?

Where was Uncle Vanya?

Where was Pippa?

Who knew?

I'll have to lie down again. My head is spinning. All hope is lost. This was the end indeed.

Sunday, February 5, 1871

«*Vive la Suisse. Vive la Suisse. La Suisse.*»

The word of the day, shouted by many, many as they were passing us: Long Live Switzerland. So many soldiers are now arriving in Neuchâtel, by train, on foot or in Red Cross carriages ~~drawn by~~. Some of them are badly hurt, some sick with Typhus, dysentery or small pox, really sick, not like me who was well again after a good night's sleep and more strong chicken soup. The soldiers can hardly sustain themselves. Some are tired beyond belief from the long trip, the terrible battles against the Prussians, the battles fought so hard, and yet fought in vain. Most of them are in a sorry state, others just need rest, food and a good bottle of wine from the finest *Neuchâtel* wineries. The city is filling up quickly. Me and Julien went to the station after lunch to find out more about Uncle Vanya. And I cannot tell what happened. Not yet. What a long, long and exciting day. Let me start at the beginning.

We saw hundreds and hundreds of French soldiers arriving not only from *Les Verriers*, but also from *Morteau*. The good people of *Neuchâtel* do everything to make them comfortable and support them. There seems no end to their good works. They bring hot soup, strong, well sugared coffee and tea, woollen underwear and even cigars to make everyone at ease. I, on the other hand, cannot stand the smoke of that tobacco. It makes me nauseous and dizzy. Aunt Thèrese and her friends from church have been busy since chaos broke loose last Wednesday. Dear Therèse, she has indeed expended all her time, money and patience, exerting every possible effort to provide for the prisoners' needs. Some call them prisoners now, interneés. I think of them more as refugees, poor souls stranded on our doors.

After sleeping all Saturday and waking early today, aunt realised quickly I was now well again to work in the kitchen. No, I didn't have Typhus, she said, and no, I didn't have smallpox. I was well enough to be helping and so, help I did. We were in the kitchen all morning. I have no idea where she got all these potatoes from, and the carrots, the leek and the red onions and, not to forget; the savoy cabbage which is hard to wash because all water is pearling off from its impermeable skin. Why even bother washing it? But I didn't dare ask her. She even found another fat chicken to simmer with the vegetables. How could she carry all this food up the narrow stairs? Julien had to go down four times to fetch more wood for the stove. And then the meat. How could she even afford two chickens in one week? There are many things I didn't know about Aunt Thèrese. She was father's and Vanya's sister and the last years they hadn't really been on speaking terms. Who knows why.



«Yesterday, even Julie brought soup. I cannot believe it. Julie. Julie of all people.»

«Why is that so exceptional Aunt Thèrese?»

«She is a widow and she has four small children, three boys, one baby girl, all hungry all the time, little Geneviève only died last month and she was not yet three years old. Poor Julie cannot really spare the potatoes, nor the carrots she sacrifices for the French soldiers. She really trusts the Lord will provide for her.»

I wondered for a moment if the Lord would indeed provide for Julie, Aunt Thèrese's young friend whom I didn't know and her four little ones whom I didn't know either. But I didn't dare ask that question either. I guess only the good Lord himself knew the answer to that question. And maybe that was a good thing.



«And when we all went to the station on Wednesday to receive those who came in by train. You should have seen them. They were battered, their clothes torn, their faces ashen. They looked so miserable. I cannot describe it. They said there had been a train the night before with so many sick soldiers. They took them straight to Geneva.»

«We saw them, aunt. We did.» Did she say Geneva? Geneva? What if Uncle Vanya had been brought to Geneva? I had no idea how far Geneva was from *Neuchâtel*. Coming to think of it; it seemed further away than Northern Africa. It

seemed like Geneva was at the end of the world. How would we ever find Vanya again in Geneva? My heart sank.

«Then you know. Child, you know. Really, you are too young to see such misery.»

She sighed and got up, wiping her red hands on her starched apron.

«Why must there be wars? Why such atrocities? Why so many dead and killed, beheaded, they say. Here one more onion. Chop it up. Then we are done. No, no, chop it finer. Give it to me.»

I handed the half-chopped onion to her, glad we might eat lunch soon. Beheaded? Had she said beheaded. I couldn't, I wouldn't want to picture this, not after using sharp knives all morning.

«Marie, please run up to *Cruchaud* the pharmacist before lunch and get me half a flask of Peppermint Alcohol from *Ricolès*. No, wait, get me a full flask. I think I can use it, with all the commotion. Here are 4 Francs, that should be enough. Oh no, you cannot go today.» She checked herself, crying out loud:

«It's Sunday. I am getting everything mixed up, even the days of the week. Today. A day of rest. Phew. Well, maybe next week then. Tomorrow. For today they even cancelled the 3 'o clock service. Can you imagine. And if it's Sunday already-. Oh my. I forgot to pick up the fabric they sold so cheaply. They are liquidating on of the finest French Wool houses at Mrs. Tagmann's, *Rue du Chateau*. You know by castle. They're selling finest French Merino wool for 2 Francs an ell. Can you imagine? Hopefully, the sale will continue on Monday. How could I forget about this yesterday?»

«Two Francs an ell? That cannot be right.» I said finding it hard believe what Aunt Therèse had just claimed.

«Noone has that kind of money in France anymore, I mean for fine merino wool, well. I imagine that is why they brought it here.»

I only shrugged. Hopefully they wouldn't bring such fine and cheap wool to *Fleurier*. We would be out of business in no time.



«And they have to protect the trees: You know, where the horses and mules are stationed on *Faubourg de l'Hôpital*.» She saw the blank look on my face.

«*Faubourg de l'Hôpital*?»

«You know there is the lake, then as you walk up the hill, the English gardens, then the *Faubourg de Lac* and just above the *Faubourg de l'Hôpital*. You know where, right dear? The horses, the mules, they are so hungry, they eat everything green. Imagine. They've eaten the wooden fence. I only saw it from afar. I didn't dare pass close to these brutes. Imagine, the fence. They ate the fence. They ate each other's tails too. Can you imagine how hungry these poor animals must be?»

She saw the look on my face. I couldn't bear this. Why was she talking about horses? She seemed to understand at once.

«Sorry, Marie. I am so sorry.»

I couldn't bear any of this any longer and without delay I got up, turned on my heels and went straight to the room she had prepared for me and Julien. This is when I finally started crying. I couldn't take this anymore, all this chaos and

commotion. Where was Uncle Vanya? Where was Pippa? Where was Julien ? Had he gone missing too? I would have needed him now. He had snuck out when we started peeling potatoes and Aunt Therèse had turned a blind eye. How much, I sometimes wished I was a boy: free to do what I wanted, free to go and roam where I wanted.



Julien came back for lunch. What a relief my brother was back, but then, he was hungry. That explained everything. He always came back when he was hungry. We ate our soup quickly while Aunt Therèse was busy packing up everything she wanted to take to the *Collège* where she knew some of the French soldiers were hosted. I felt her avoiding my eyes. She was still sorry for bringing up the horses.

«Aunt Thèrese. »

«Yes, dear? What is it?»

We looked at each other silently. She spoke first.

«You know I am so sorry-.»

«It is alright. It isn't your fault. There is nothing we could do about Fanny. I know.» I swallowed my tears at the lie. There had been something I could do about Fanny. There had been something I had done about Fanny. It was me who had put her down, me who had given her the *coup de grâce*. And only Mustapha knew, a total stranger from Northern Africa. My life was falling apart so quickly since I had left home. There were no secrets at *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevoue*, only trust and love and forgiveness. Would I ever find my way back there? So much seemed different now. So much I couldn't tell, couldn't say. I looked at my aunt. She was examining my face

closely, being his sister, she really had my father's eyes. When she was worried she pulled up her eyebrows the same way he had. Even her voice reminded me of him. How could I ever tell her the truth?

«I know, dear. But I am so sorry. And Sarah Ann? How will she take it?

«Mother? »

It was strange hearing her first name. I keep forgetting she wasn't originally from here. Sarah Ann Marshall from Greenock, by the beautiful wild inner seas of the West Coast of Scotland, eldest daughter of a tanner and a seamstress. Our dear mother. It was hard to imagine that she had had her own life before she met father on a journey to Switzerland, the *Val de Travers*, where father oversaw work for an English gentleman in the asphalt mines of Travers. They fell in love immediately and got married the next month. Her Scottish family, Irish immigrants, were abandoning her at once for joining a protestant Swiss, a Calvinist of German-French origin in holy matrimony. I guess they wouldn't even know their Sarah Ann's beloved Jean-Jacques, my father, had died last year. They wouldn't know I was their granddaughter.

«Can you telegraph mother? Please.» I said instead. She nodded, wiping a tear from her eye.

«Sure, I will let her know. But, Marie, Julien. You will have to go back. You've lost Uncle Vanya and Fanny. You've lost Pippa. Your mother cannot take anymore loss. She cannot lose the two of you. You'll have to go back to *Fleurier* as soon as you're ready and well enough to travel. I will also telegraph her this.»

I looked at Julien. I could see his was thinking the same: *Absolutely not. We must find Uncle Vanya. We must find Pippa.* Instead we both nodded.

«Of course, Aunt Thèrese. I can also write her a letter. In fact, I will write her today.»

«Yes, please do that, dear.»

She sighed out loud, relieved she had convinced us so easily.

«Let's clear the table. We want to take this soup to *the Collège*. These poor men are hungry too.»

«Why are we doing this Aunt Thèrese? Why are you spending so much time and money on these soldiers? I am sure the chicken was expensive. All that vegetable. Surely, these men have killed others. They are not innocent. And some of them are not even Christians. They are from North Africa. All this is not our business.»

I looked at him sideways. Surely, he was referring to Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara. Brother hadn't forgiven him for shooting Fanny when in fact he had done no such thing. It was me who had shot her, me who had absolved her. But how could I ever tell my little brother? Julien, the kitten, had a temper like a tiger, he wouldn't take this lightly. On the contrary, if I told him I had shot her, he would surely hate me forever. I couldn't tell him. And why was he pestering Aunt Therèse about her kindness? Why would he ask such impertinent questions now?

«No, some of them are not Christians. You're right Julien. And that is exactly why we are helping them. » She paused and looked at her nephew.

«What good would it do if we only ever helped our friends and family and fellow Christians? Tell me, would that bring joy to the world? Glory to the Lord? You know what Jesus said: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you,

and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven:
for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just
and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye?

«You know all this by heart?»

« Don't you?» She asked surprised, Julien shook his head.

« Matthew 5.44 to verse 46» I said eagerly to please my aunt.

« That's right, dear.»

« That's right, dear» Julien mimicked Aunt Therèse. I shot him a reproachful,
embarrassed look.

«Come on now. Let us go. There is still so much work to do. You can fight
later»

«Sorry, Aunt Therèse» Julien said meekly.

She only smiled and ruffled his hair.



At the Collège Aunt Thèrese ran into some other women who had brought
soup, bread, bed linen, shoes and so many other things I couldn't keep track of all
their love gifts. Julie, the young widow with the many children looked nice, preppy. I
was going to talk to her and ask about the poor, littlest one, but Julien pulled me by
the arm and dragged me outside.

«Come on, let's go and find Vanya while she is busy. We may have to go back
home soon enough. He could still be here.»

«I am not going back home before we've found him.» I hissed.

«Exactly. Me neither.»

«You just said we are to go back.»

«No, I didn't. »

«You did. »

„Ok, I did. »

«Great we agree on some things. »

«Of course, we do, sister. »

«Of course? » I raised my eyebrow. He only shrugged and then we both laughed. It was such a relief to laugh after our little fight. So much has happened, but some things never change. And that was as annoying as it was comforting.

«Let's start at the station. Maybe we can find someone who has seen Uncle Vanya. And then, you have to see the lake. I went there this morning. There is a beautiful, long walk along the lake. First *Quai de Mont Blanc*, then *Quai du Port*, *Quai des Alpes*. The screeching seagulls. The majestic swans. It's absolutely glorious. You have never seen so much water, sister. I'll have to take you there.»

«We are here to find Uncle Vanya, not go sightseeing.» I hissed.

«Of course. I know. But you wouldn't want to miss the lake. And he could be by the lake, you never know. He always liked open waters, at least he said so. Remember all these trips he made? Always the Sea or some lake. Or a mountain. Of course, the mountains.”

«Fair enough”, I sighed, «there is a chance he is by the lake.»

Nonetheless, we went uphill to the station first. The city was completely packed. Masses of goods were transported through the streets of Neuchâtel. It was such a happy, busy frenzy, we didn't really know where to start looking. How could

we find Uncle Vanya in the midst of such chaos? Who could we ask? Who would know anything? Who could help us? Everybody looked so busy, so full of purpose and determination. I wouldn't want to slow them down by asking questions. I didn't know what to do. In fact, I had no idea and neither did Julien. We ended up walking all the way up to the station without knowing what to do or where to start. Seeing all the many wounded soldiers, the constant train of horses, mules, men, women carrying baskets with apples, linen, bottles or God knows what, exasperated and tired us.

«This is pointless. How can we ever find Uncle Vanya? We need some sort of strategy.»

«Don't give up hope, Marie. We shall find him somewhere. Somehow. Keep walking. Strategies are for war. We are not at war. What we need is God's help and a tiny bit of luck.»

And so, we did; We kept walking a little further up and then down the many well-trodden stairs until the gorgeous lake of Neuchâtel opened up before us. I gasped out loud upon seeing the lake. Its waterfront was beautifully framed by large majestic houses, such as the new college of *Neuchâtel* that had been built recently. There was the *Grande Promenade* built on large rocks just beneath the waters and small gravel paths meandering along the lakeshore. I was mesmerized. Indeed, I had never seen so much water or so many stately sailing boats far out in the distance. The lake seemed to stretch endlessly into the mist, the waters still and quiet, seagulls soaring up high and swans sinking their heads deep to catch whatever food there was for them to catch: little fish, molluscs, small insects, but also algae or waterweed. It was awesome to observe wildlife by the lake.

In the distance we saw a group of men gathered together closely, they were building a circle as if they expected some sort of performance.

«Let's go and see what this is about. Maybe someone there knows about Uncle Vanya. Come on, Marie. Come on.»



«German Shepherd or French Bull Terrier?»

«What do you mean?»

«Your bet? »

The man who had addressed Julien looked ragged. His uniform was dirty and torn, some of the buttons had come off, his face was battered and unshaven. I didn't like the look in his eyes, there was something sinister about him. He gave us a crooked smile.

«Two francs on the German Shepherd.» Julien said.

«I must warn you, he is not the favourite. Not in this fight. But the odds are high. 20:1. Your gain is high should he win. Very unlikely though, very unlikely, indeed. Against all odds.»

He snickered and began counting his coins and bills.

«Why? What is wrong with him?»

«Badly hurt, malnourished. Not the fighter type. German, but not the fighter. Funny, heh? And his left paw is bruised, he's limping. Truth is, I don't think, he will make it through the first round. On the other hand, not much lost if he gets killed. Guy who found him in the woods didn't want much for him. I only bought him

because it is too funny to see a German Shepherd in such a lousy state. Usually, the Germans win. And this one is for sure gonna lose. Will be killed in the first round, or the second? Maybe. If he makes it to the third it is a great spectacle. Worth every single cent.»

He raised his right eyebrow, or the part of it that wasn't shaved off. I stared at the place where his front tooth was missing.

«Well, you'll lose your two francs. Still, want to bet?»

«Two francs», Julien nodded and pulled out his purse.

«Bad choice, but your choice. Don't complain later. I told you. » The man snickered again.

I looked at my brother in amazement. I hadn't known he was the gambling type.

«Ok, let's see if you get lucky. They are about to start.»

The man limped away.

«What is happening here? Why did you give him two francs? What kind of bet is that? Dogs?»

«Yes, I guess it's a dog's fight. A German Shepherd against a French Bull Terrier. Great idea when there is finally peace between France and Germany, don't you think?»

No, I didn't think that was a great idea. The poor dogs. Why were they made to fight? Julien, however, smiled at me, as innocent as a small boy, as innocent as a great, great fool.

«Will they kill each other? »

«That's the idea.»

«That's outrageous.»

«It's a dog's fight. Come on, sis.»

I wanted to answer him, but couldn't. We didn't have the time to discuss any of this further as the two dogs were released from wooden cages that had been hidden from our eyes. The men had dug a large hole by the lakeside and the two dogs were thrown down into the sandy frozen mud, so they couldn't escape their fate.

There was such a dense crowd that we hadn't seen the dogs until they began circling each other. The French Bull Terrier was strong, he growled once, then he attacked right away, biting hard into the German Shepherd's forechest pulling him onto the icy ground. The Shepherd winced out loud and spun around. We could see his foreface clearly now, his whole body contorted and twisting, flat on his ribcage, *her* ribcage. Julien and I froze. I could feel his body grow tense beside me. This was our Pippa. The pentagonal black spot between her ears was clearly visible also if her fur was dull and dirty and dishevelled. There was no doubt about it. We both knew at once. She looked badly battered, her eyes lifeless, the fire of her brave spirit extinguished by the brutality and cruelty committed towards her. Pippa. Beloved Pippa. *What has happened to you? Where have you been?*

«Marie, we must stop this. She's not gonna make it. We cannot simply stand here and watch her be killed. *Mon Dieu.*» Julien's voice was hoarse.

«I know. I know.»

«What are we gonna do? *Mon Dieu.* Marie.»

I knew what to do. Instinctively, I knew what to do. On the eve of leaving *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevue* I had packed father's revolver and I hadn't parted with it

ever since. It was safely packed away in my felt coat, so safely that I had forgotten all about it with all the commotion on the road. I had only remembered taking it when we were safe and sound at aunt Therèse's place and I hadn't forgotten since. My fingers were trembling when I felt for its cold case. Could I really shoot the French Bull Terrier? And from back here? There wouldn't be much time before they would see the pistol in my hand and overwhelm me. I had a few seconds, maybe -, maybe a little more, maybe not. And would I hit the right dog? What if I shot beloved Pippa? Or what if I shot one of the spectators in the crowd. I was a good shooter. Papà used to say I was the best when bringing down small pigeons from heights so high it was hard to tell something was even up there. But these were not the quiet and peaceful rolling hills of the Jura mountains, these were not the green meadows around *Fleurier* with their beautiful alleyways and their fat, little quails high in the sky. Here the risks were immense, enormous. I couldn't even begin to think about them. Precious time was lost. The men were shouting, the crowd was outraged, the fight gained momentum. The kill was near.

«Come, Julien, let's move closer. I need to see this.»

The French Terrier had attacked again, charged without fear and when I saw his teeth dig into Pippa's throat, I gathered all my senses, all courage, all consciousness and concentration. *Courage. Bravery. Valor.* I took off the fine black leather gloves Aunt Therèse had given me only yesterday and dropped them on the floor. I tied once more the ribbons of my hat while picturing the flight of father's pistol's bullet after I would have aimed, after I would have pulled the trigger. Anticipation. Seize the moment. Redeeming the time. I waited for the Terrier to turn

its hindquarters towards us. Thus, its body was sheltering Pippa from harm. Harm. Death.

Non occides. *Thou shalt not kill.*

Only then -, then, I pulled out the revolver, spun it around in my naked hand, grabbed it tight, then relaxed, then breathed, then tightened up, all my muscles tense and engaged, then loaded, then aimed for the French Bull Terrier. Then I pulled the trigger. The shot. It rang out loud. A millisecond had passed, maybe less.



Julien turned towards me, he stood close, aghast. He saw the smoking gun in my hand at once. He gasped.

«Give me the gun. *Mon Dieu*, Marie. What have you done? »

I stood there and didn't move, as if I was paralyzed.

«Come on. Give it to me. Quick. Marie. Quick.»

So many things then happened at once, it is really hard to bring them in some sort of logical order. Nothing was logical or chronological or causal. All happened at once. Time was suspended. The seconds ran backwards or sideways or crosswise. I simply cannot remember what happened before and what had happened afterwards. Impossible to describe what happened right after the shot had gone off. I saw Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara in the crowd. He looked straight at me. A glimpse of surprise. Infinity. Mustapha Ben Turkoja. *Master Ben-Tee*. I smiled.



Then he was swallowed by the men beginning to move and I could no longer see him. The French Bull Terrier collapsed on the pitch. It was dead at once, killed by the bullet of Papà's revolver. At once, it felt as if a massive wave came alive in the middle of a massive, massive ocean. I assume there was blood on the pitch where the Terrier had collapsed, but I only saw the dead dog for a millisecond. Pippa was released from its grip and she also collapsed on the floor. I only saw her for a millisecond too. The crowd, all men, most of them in French uniform started shouting out loud at once, gesticulating wildly, some of them were pointing at me and Julien. We had killed the French contender. Truth was: I had killed him. The German shepherd lived. *Impossible*. Who was I to kill the French challenger? Who was I to take sides? And the German side? Who was I to spoil the game? They came towards us. They started pushing us. Some started shoving each other, then there was fighting. It was chaos. It was a frenzy beyond all imagining. It was cold. I was cold. I had killed. Again. A dog. *Thou shalt not kill*, I had. I did. Kill. This was becoming a devastating habit. I shuddered. What would happen next?

I couldn't see Master Ben-Tee anymore. Why would I call him like this? When he was Mustapha Ben -. I didn't know what was happening. I couldn't remember his name properly. He had a complicated, beautiful name. Men were spitting, shouting, grumbling out loud: In French, in a language I didn't understand, but instinctively believed to be Arabic. Where was Pippa? I had to go and get her. I had to save her. Now, I began moving. The soil under my feet was rock-solid frozen and yet I felt like

walking on quicksand. Now, I was manoeuvring my way through the crowd. There was hard pushing. There were moving bodies everywhere. Entities I couldn't control. Entities I couldn't understand nor direct. Men. I smelled their bodies, I felt their limbs, pushing me, getting in the way, harassing me. Would they kill me too? Would I never see home again? Mother? My sisters? The golden white chalk walls of *La Maison Blanche*? Would I ever again sit by the fire in our kitchen? So much anger, so much scorn and hatred, all coming towards me, all raining down on me. I breathed. Then I held my breath.

«It was you. You killed the dog.» The man was standing close to us and I felt his spit all over my face as he was accusing us.

«What did you do that for?» Another French soldier had pushed forward and screamed at us.

« I lost all I had. What about our money now?»

«*Traître*, traitor.» One of them pointed at Julien.

«He has the gun.»

«He killed the dog.»

«I did.» I said calmly, barely even whispering, but no one listened, they all looked at my brother, shoving and pushing him.

« Shut up. Marie.» Julien said. I could see by the determined look on his face how distressed he must feel. Then, one of the by-standers punched him right into the face. Blood dropped from this nose. He reached for his handkerchief.

«No, leave my brother alone.» I took a step forward and stepped between Julien and the men. As I did, I was wrestling the revolver from my brother's hand. It

was with such ease I grabbed it from him, that I myself was amazed. I aimed at the crowd, firmly clutching the revolver.

«Back off.» I shouted as loud as I could.

«Whoa. The lady has guts.» One of the French soldiers snarled.

«Back off. Leave my brother alone.»

«He has killed the dog, we shall kill him too.»

« I said, back off. *Reculez. Reculez. Tout le monde. Tout de suite.*» My French rang out high above us, my words falling upon us like feathers when the white doves were shot. *Everyone back off, at once.* But the crowd wouldn't move, they kept shouting and moving towards us. I didn't know what to do. Then, I aimed into the air and pulled the trigger. The shot rang out loud. My ears hurt, my fingers trembled.

«I said, back off. Back off. *Reculez, tout le monde.*» Some of the men began moving away from us. They looked annoyed, some of the afraid. I felt such relief. Slowly, I lowered my arm. My index finger was so sore.

« Marie, give me the gun. Come on.»



Where was Pippa? Why couldn't I move forward? What was happening? Then I saw the horses, mounted police, I heard the whistles. I saw the men disperse. I saw one man pointing at Julien, how he was searched, how they found the gun. They held father's gun in their hands. The police did. I didn't hear the voices, but I saw Julien's lips move.

«I have shot the dog, the French Bull Terrier. It was me who shot it.»

That is what he said. I could feel from afar that this was what he said.



Why do the men take charge when it was me who shot Fanny, when it was me indeed who shot the French Bull Terrier? Why did they cover for me? Take the blame? Say they were the killers? Why wouldn't they let me tell the truth? Why wouldn't they let me own the kill? Why couldn't they face that women could kill? That women were brave? Aim high, bring low. I was aware: It had taken a lot of guts and gumption, some serious spunk to kill the French Terrier in the midst of the French army, to save the German shepherd. I was the killer. I was. Why wouldn't they let me own my sin, take my blame, wallow in my useless pride for making my aim, for making my kill? I was fearless, and yet I was so frail, so afraid.

Then I saw Mustapha again, he was closer now. I looked at him. I shook my head. *What did I do that for?* I nodded. Then I shook my head again. I shrugged. He smiled. He understood. My confusion. The pain. The shock. His eyes so deep, so dark, their pull so soft, so gentle, so strong. He smiled, a smile of hope and happy reunion. Whatever, the circumstances. Happy reunion. Unexpected. A glimpse of surprise. Infinity. I walked closer towards him. He was carrying something: A bundle of dark fur, a bundle of joy.

«Pippa, *Mon Dieu*. I-. Pippa.»

She moved, Pippa lifted her head, she opened her eyes to look at me., she closed them again. She was breathing. She was bleeding. Master Ben-Tee had

wrapped his uniform tightly around her, pressing on the wound on her forehead.

His hands were bloody.

«Your dog?»

I nodded, overjoyed at seeing him, at seeing Pippa wounded but alive.

«I thought so. Let me take you home. And her. You look shattered.»

«I am. Master Ben-Tee, I am.»

«I beg your pardon, Mademoiselle Marie? »

«What's happening to my brother? »

«I don't know. I guess they will arrest him. »

«*Mon Dieu*. What will become of him? They will put him in prison? »

«For shooting a dog in an illegal and unlawful dogs' fight? If they arrest him, they will not keep him for long. Don't worry. They have bigger problems at hand. »

I looked at him, not so sure what he meant.

«Us.» He said, then he smiled. I couldn't help but smile back at him.

«Worry about her. She needs water, and proper bandages. Let me see to it.

Come.»

I looked back at Julien, but he was so engaged in his discussion with the young Mounties that he wouldn't look back.



We started walking, walking away from the harrowing scene. It would take forever to climb up the mountain to Aunt Therèse's house. I hoped to God it would take forever indeed, simply to be with Master Ben-Tee. He made me smile, he helped

me relax. Life had become so confusing these days and we still hadn't found Uncle Vanya. If only father was still here to help us get through that difficult and most challenging time. Or mother, no, not mother. I wouldn't want her to come. She would only make matters more complicated. She would worry so much, we'd all be sick and helpless in no time.



«This is *Place Pury*, from here we can walk straight up to your Aunt's house. Are you alright, Mademoiselle Marie?»

«Yes, Mustapha. I am, thank you. I cannot believe my brother -> I was wise enough not to finish the sentence.

«I cannot believe it too.» He looked at me quizzically as if to test me.

«You saw? »

«I did.»

«Oh my-.»

«You are a good shooter. Not many men would have made that shot. »

I blushed. He knew.

I knew, he knew.

He knew, I knew, he knew.

Complicated. A silent conspiracy. A glimpse of surprise. I sighed.

Why did you call me Master Ben-Tee? - Before.»

«I don't know, I thought it sounded nice.»

«Master? Like an English Lord? I am no Master. My name is Mustapha Ben»,

«Turkoja of Mascara. I know.»

«You do remember then?»

«I do.» I nodded not sure I had really managed to say his name properly.

«Then why the name? This is not my name. It is a funny name.»

I shrugged. I had no answer to this. He was right it was silly.

«What makes you think I want to be an English Lord? »

«I didn't think that. Look, I didn't mean to offend you. On the contrary.» I felt rather silly now. Had I just blushed?

«It is alright *Mademoiselle Marie*. I know the name is difficult for Europeans. It is hard for them to remember Arabic names. Call me Ben, if you don't like Mustapha.»

«No, it's alright. Mustapha. I can remember.»

«It's M like Marie. *Mmmustapha*.»

«M like Marie. Alright. I know.»

I looked at Mustapha sideways, how tall he was and how straight he kept himself. His strong slender hands were buried in Pippa's fur, he held her close to his short jacket, warming her thus. I liked the voluminous red trousers he was wearing. I have never seen a man wear trousers like this. And I had never seen hats like these, red bold caps covering his curly, dark hair. I wished I could touch his hair. Was it soft? Was it firm?

He walked up the cobbled streets fast and I had to lift up my skirts to be able to keep up. I felt even sillier for wanting to touch his hair.

«You're brave Marie.»

«What makes you think so?»

«Well, first, you killed your horse. You loved your horse.»

Tears began filling my eyes. That was true, and how I loved Fanny.

«And then you killed the French Terrier to save your shepherdess. You love your shepherdess. You kill with grace and courage and love.»

«Thou shalt not kill», I said quickly, my eyes brimming with tears.

«And yet you do. Does that no longer make you a Christian?»

«I am, I am a Christian.» I stood still and so did he. I swallowed. My throat felt sore.

«That's good. I am a Muslim. So that makes two believers then.»

«And? Do we believe the same?»

«Does it matter? »

«I guess so. »

«You know, only 11 years ago, one of our great leaders protected the Christians in Damascus from the Druzes. Our great Abdelkader ibn Muhieddine hid them in his own house and sent out his own sons to bring more of them to safety.»

«So, a well-respected Muslim hid Christians from other Muslims?»

«He hid them from murderers.»



«You shall not kill, you shall not murder,» I said.

«But you do kill. The French have committed the most atrocious crimes in Algeria. You cannot imagine what they did. The French are murderers, and so are the English, the Germans, the Americans. You all are.»

«We all are. But tell me, why did your leader protect the Christians in Damascus when the French have committed such horrible crimes?»

«Some French have committed the most horrible crimes, but not all of them have, not the ambassadors or the Sisters of mercy he took in. They were innocent. Not all Christians are the same, not all Muslims are the same. Not all Christians kill. Not all Muslims kill. Some believe in the Bible or the Qran and cherish every word while others use every word in the same book to subject and enslave others. And to kill. In the name of the church, in the name of Allah. Although we mustn't. Although we shouldn't. The same ideas, the same faith, it can be used to kill and control or to protect and give life.»

«That cannot be. You cannot use the same ideas to kill or to give life at the same time. I think, sometimes Christians don't read their book or don't do what it says. But, I believe it is always wrong to kill. To kill anyone. Jesus says clearly, love your enemies, love-, not to kill them.

« Then why do Christians kill? Explain it to me.»

« I can't. I know, they do. But after all, we all fail, we are all murderers. One way or another. 'Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment'.

“You know your scriptures. I respect that.”

“Thank you. Jesus says that when-.”

“The sermon of the mount.”

“You are familiar with the sermon of the mount?” I looked at him, amazed.

“I am. Unfortunately, I am.” At the time, I couldn’t understand why he looked so sombre when he said that, so I prattled on.

“We all need God’s grace and forgiveness. We have all failed and need to be saved.»

«Even you, a murderess.” He murmured.

«Yes, even I. I am not without sin, none of us is. But it is impossible for us to become righteous by ourselves or by any good deeds. I sinned. I did, I have. You got me. It is only by the grace of God that we are saved, not by anything we do. I didn’t mean to kill, I didn’t want to kill. It was a necessity. And it was wrong.»



«That is what all white people say too, when they kill us. A necessity. »

«But that is wrong. It is wrong to kill others.»

«They are not Christians, then?»

«They are murderers.»

« We say anyone who murders any person, and now listen up Marie-, ‘who had *not* committed murder or horrendous crimes such as corruption, it shall be as if he murdered all the people’ .»

«What does that mean? That it is right to kill anyone who had committed murder or a horrendous crime? If someone is corrupt you are allowed to kill him?»

«In Arabic, we call it *fasādin*, corruption, mischief.»

He painted the letters into the air with the hand that wasn't holding Pippa.

فَسَادٍ

«But how does violence ever end if you allow killing? You shall not kill anyone. Because otherwise the vicious cycle of violence never stops. Killing, if you ask me, it is always wrong.»



«And yet: How can you keep on killing and then you simply forgive the murderers? If you argue like this, anyone can kill anyone and then say they're sorry and ask for forgiveness. It doesn't make any sense at all. Surely, you must see this.»

«It does. It is not easy to truly regret your wrongdoings. Grace does not come cheap. And yet, somehow you have to stop the violence. Thou shalt not kill the enemy, but love him, love her.»

«What does that even mean? Love?»

His eyes burned right into my soul. I wasn't quite sure how much longer I wanted to counter his questions. We were walking so slowly, we didn't get anywhere.

«Ok, let us imagine, the French Christians were truly sorry for the atrocities they committed in Algeria, and they say to you: 'We are so sorry. Killing was wrong.»

«They'd admit killing our men, our women, our children. That this was wrong? »

«They killed children?»

«They did.»

«That is bad.»

«Well, that barely describes it, Marie.»

«You are right. But imagine, if the French said, 'We are sincerely sorry for all we have done.' Would you not accept such an apology?

«I don't know, I cannot imagine, they'd possibly apologize. They wouldn't apologize in a hundred years.»

«And if they did? Apologize in a 100 years, a 150 years? Would you accept the apology then?»

«Would I accept a French apology in a 150 years? No, I wouldn't. »

«But why? Why would you not accept it? If they truly were sorry for all cruelty they had committed? »

«Marie, I'd be dead by then. What good does it do to me if they only apologize in a 150 years? No, I couldn't care less. I'd be rotting away in the ground.»

«Don't say that. »

«I would. It is true. And, so would you. Rotting in the ground.»



«Ok, let's say another country would commit awful crimes against Muslims, as dreadful as the French did. Maybe China. Labour camps, forced sterilization, etc. »

«What is forced sterilization? »

«Ok, 21st century talk. How would we say that in the 18th century? Wait.»

«Marie! 19th century. It's 1871. 19th century! »

«Ok, 19th century, then. What does it matter? So sorry, I got lost thinking about all these centuries. Let's start over. »

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«Let's say China would commit awful crimes against Muslims. Let's say they'd kill them all. Can France criticize China then?

«No, they cannot. You cannot criticize someone for something you did yourself»

«Why not? If you've learned what you did was wrong? If you've learned to truly regret? Because if you don't, then the violence goes on forever. It never stops. And violence hurts us all. Wars, they hurt us all. Repression, it hurts us all. Who benefits if we all kill and repress each other? No one. No one benefits. We all lose. We all have the same right to live on this planet. If we cannot say, what we did was

wrong, if we cannot regret it, if we cannot sincerely apologize, we are not human. We lose our humanity, our decency. We lose our souls. Then we are machines. Machines and murderers. We're given over to passion, revenge, greed, the love of power and wealth. Then, we are not human anymore. And it doesn't matter which nationality you are. Who invented nation states anyway? We are all the same. We are all humans after all. We should all be able to say 'I am so terribly sorry, What I did was so wrong.' What the French did to the Algerians, it is terribly wrong and they must regret it. What the Chinese will do to the Uighurs, it is so wrong and they must, in due time, regret it and apologize publicly for it. *Coram publico.*»

«I don't know. It is the way of the world. It's always been like that.»

«So, that's why the message comes straight from heaven: Thou shalt not kill.»

«But you have killed, and you are even a woman.»

«Women kill too, and it is just as wrong.»

«You're beautiful when you are so upset. » He said.

Then, he smiled. He smiled at me, - and me, I wasn't adding injury to insult, but profound confusion to aflutter unsettledness.



I blushed. Again. Only this time was sure I blushed. Talking to him was so bewildering. Yet, I didn't feel uncomfortable. It was rare that anyone spoke to me with such earnestness, such dedication and faith, a kindred soul, a kindred spirit. He was genuinely interested in what I had to say and didn't treat me like some imbecile or like mother who still treats me like a small child. I cannot remember discussing

such important matters with anyone. I didn't even know I could discuss such earnest matters so profoundly. When I remained silent, he continued.

«You keep saying, don't kill. And yet, you admit, your fellow Christians do. They kill. The French do, the Germans do.»

«And you, and your people? Don't they kill?» I countered.

«They do too. We all kill. Does that make it any better? If we all do what we shouldn't? Our territory was bordered to the West by the Sultanate of Marocco and to the east by the Ottoman regency of Tunis. It wasn't always peaceful, » He paused.

«I understand what you mean. » I wasn't sure I did though. I knew nothing about no history in Northern Africa.

«They are all wanting a say, all wanting power, wealth, water, gold, camels, silk, pepper, *women*.» He laughed at this and I lowered my gaze.

«But after the French started settling at our coast in 1830 it was -. They called it pacification. But there was no peace. On the contrary. Pacification was war. War was slavery. Against our people. The men, the women, the children. Thousands and thousands of our people died at the hands of the French. They said it was necessary to exterminate us all. Extermination. Can you believe it. *Thou shalt not kill?* So? Thou shalt not kill, but kill you do. Exterminate you do. Scorch the earth until nothing was left to burn.»

I didn't know what to say. Walking up *Rue du Seyon* ever so slowly, our discussion had suddenly become serious, heavy. Why was he telling me all this? Why was he accusing me? I was a simple farmer's girl from the Swiss Jura mountains. It wasn't my fault that the French hadn't come to raid our farms. Suddenly, I felt so privileged. How could I answer any of this? What the French had

done in North Africa was wrong, terribly wrong. Killing thousands. Men, women, even children? Slaying them brutally. And in the name of what they called Christianity? I was ashamed. I was a Christian, alright, and though, I was a sinner, who needed God's forgiveness, I wouldn't ever dream of using the name of the Lord to subject others, to kill or torture them or to overthrow a government and storm the U.S. Capitol on Epiphany. I also wouldn't dream of burning down Paris. I was told to love. And love, I tried, love I did. Shyly I glanced at him sideways. Love I did. Oh my-



«So why are you fighting for the French? Why are you killing for them, if they killed your own people?»

I wiped a tear from my eye, more from the cold than from being upset.

«Marie, I can see you're crying. Let us stop talking about all this. I didn't mean to upset you.»

«No, I want to know. I am not upset.»

«I will tell you, but not today. Enough is enough. Look, This is your aunt's house, isn't it? We are here.»

I looked him up and down, he had gained poise again. His features were even, nearly golden. He looked bemused and gave me a smile most gorgeous and loving.

«The people of this city have been most kind. We shall all forever be grateful.¹»

I nodded.

«Here, take Pippa. I think she is asleep.»

We stood in the darkness of the doorway, protected from prying eyes, when he handed me the injured dog gently. Our fingers touched as he slowly and deliberately placed her in my arms. She slightly whimpered when being transferred, and then fell asleep again. He was close to me now, his well-trained body towering above me. For a moment, we both stood stock-still, mesmerized by each other's presence, locked into a union we had formed the moment we had stepped into the blind vestibule, the moment we had first met. I could feel the warmth of his torso, divining the heat of his blood pulsating in his arteries. Our arms touched lightly. He wouldn't let go of the dog. I felt the muscles of his upper arm touch my breast as we both held our frail shepherdess. Her life hang by a thread and I was grateful beyond words for him helping me safe her. But there was so much more-.

Underneath her dishevelled and dirty fur he softly squeezed my hand, then he stroked the inner side of my palm, stroked it again. There was purpose here, not coincidence. I felt the fine hairs of my left arm raise, then I felt my breasts go firm,

¹ Mae Lee Magellan© declares a **Primary Source Analysis Disclaimer Error Alert** (PSADEA - 'sju:dəʊ) The French General Clinchat expresses his gratitude to the prefect of Neuchatel on the 8th of February 1871, see the respective article in the Feuille d'Avis de Berne, a Bernese newspaper on the 14th of February 1871. 'France', so he writes 'will forever be grateful to the good people of Neuchâtel'. Mae Lee Magellan therefore concludes, any French subject will forever be grateful, especially POC Algerian riflemen used up in the French-Prussian war. This conclusion could, with a 97.567% chance, be wrong. The margin, for this novel, to include wrong conclusions, was set at 98% before download. Reduce the margin to get better results and reduce PSADEA in general. M!normous© suggests setting the margin to include wrong conclusions, at 10% or lower to grant the full experience your personalized novel can provide.

my nipples harden. A sensation never known before ran through my body. Some kind of unknown strange but pleasant fever. I shivered and it was not from the cold.

He smiled, letting his eyes linger on my lips for just a second. I felt his warm breath on my face. What was this that was happening so naturally between us? I felt my lips twitch, my mouth slightly opening to the tremor of his breath. I felt all the muscles in my body tighten up.

«Thank you, Mustapha, thank you for -. »

I could barely speak, my voice would fail me, hoarse with excitement, with longing for what was to come. What was to come? I didn't know. I couldn't guess.

He raised his left, long index finger and touched my lips as if to silence me.

«Hush, Marie, it's alright. Don't thank me. All of this you did yourself. You killed the French Terrier. That was all your own doing.»

I stood still, enjoying his touch. Then, I don't know what got into me, I slightly began rubbing my lips on his finger moving my chin up and down, coiling up my lower labium and slightly opening my mouth. I heard, I felt, my breathing intensify. In awe, I closed my eyes, giving myself completely up to this new and most pleasant sensation. When he stretched out his full hand to touch my face, I lost all decency and honour. Before he could pull his fingers away, I slid out the tip of my tongue and licked them, then I kissed them tenderly. He bent his fingers slightly, feeling the inner, most sensitive parts of my lips, and without much ado, I had opened my mouth and taken in two of his fingers. I began sucking them ardently, biting his flesh gently. I felt breathless, hungry for air. His body, so close. His face so close. His lips, so close. Did he touch me where no one has touched me before? What was that feeling? The tiny bud between my legs would swell, then harden, burgeon and yet

yield its leaves. Then-, then I gasped, drawing in air as if I was drowning. A tremor unknown, such quiet shaking from within the deepest depth of my womb. What was happening to me? My lips were dry, yet trembling under his fingers, my heart was racing, my knees felt weak, my legs were hardly supporting me.

Then I awoke with a jolt. What was I doing here? Quickly, I released him. Pippa, between us, was still asleep in my arms. I stared into his dark face: His eyes full of surprise and kindness and love. I was petrified. What had happened? I couldn't explain. Without a word, I held on tight to Pippa, turned on my heels, and ran inside. My tongue burned with the smell of his skin. My mouth was aflame, my whole body on fire. I could hardly walk. The swelling, so numb my pudendum. I needed water. Quick. How to extinguish such fires? Such passions? Quick, I need to rinse and cleanse myself.

I hurried up the stairs as fast as I could while carrying Pippa. With each step I took, she became heavier and heavier while my heart was so light it might have flown right through the roof. I was so confused, so rattled. What had just happened? I couldn't explain. I didn't know. I was at a loss. I was-. What if somebody had seen me? What if somebody told Aunt Therèse? I felt such shame and endless guilt. Falling for a Muslim. I was mortified. This was all wrong, so wrong. But then, -was it? Was it really?



Julien hasn't come back yet. Aunt Therèse has left to find him at the *Gendarmerie*, the local police station. She wasn't pleased when I told her what had

happened by the lake. I didn't tell her that it was me who had shot the French Bull Terrier. I didn't mention either that I had met Mustapha. Mustapha. I couldn't stop thinking of him. How he-. Not now. Not now. Now, I am sitting at my desk, well Aunt Therèse's desk, overlooking the lake of Neuchâtel, thinking of the dog's fight and how I shot the Terrier. The memory was already fading fast into the bright and shiny light of the stroll that had ensued: I had walked up the steep Jura hill on which Neuchâtel was built with Mustapha Ben Turkoja. It was a stupid idea to name him Master Ben-Tee. He doesn't need my name, he has his own name. Of course. How he had promised to tell me more some other time. A promise we'd meet again. He promised -. My heart was beating faster at the thought of this when all I ever wanted was for it to slow down. I really, really didn't want to think of him. But I couldn't. I could not *not* think of him.

How gently he had carried Pippa all the way up to *Petite Rochette*. How gently- No. No-. Pippa. She is asleep now. I have made a fire to cook hot water on the stove in the kitchen. Luckily, in the morning Julien had brought up plenty of wood for the oven, so it wasn't that much work. I have brewed a small stoneware jar of strong camomile tea to wash Pippa's wounds. Then I have fed her some left-over potatoes, but she barely touched those. She is asleep now. I feel I need to rest too even though the sun only begins to set. I am exhausted from what has happened today, not to mention these past days since I left home.

Fanny is dead We haven't learned anything about Uncle Vanya's whereabouts, Julien was arrested and Mustapha-. No. At least we have found Pippa. I hadn't hoped to see her ever again and here she was, lying peacefully in her basket on a red woollen blanket her nose fluttering occasionally, while she snored, and

swallowed and made the most incredible noises. Noises of Life and Peace. Noises of Joy and Hope. Hope. There was still hope. Hope and love.

Was it true what I had done? Licked his fingers? And then? What had happened then? I still couldn't explain. All I knew was that when he had touched me, my body, my breathing, my womb had awakened to sensations so beautiful and strong, yet so unknown. Unknown and terrifying. Was it true I had yielded to such indecencies? A Christian girl falling for a Muslim? Him falling for me? Was he? Was he falling for me? It was as if the world entire, once more became unhinged, once more came to an end. Surely, aunt Therèse didn't mean *that* when she said we were to love everybody. It couldn't be. No, it couldn't be. And so, it was me who stood right at the abyss. It was me, *oh Lord*, standing in the need of prayer. And pray, - pray I did. And cry, - cry I did. And, when I finally fell asleep, my features relaxed into the most pleasant and gentle smile. For smile was all I could.

Tuesday, February 7, 1871

I couldn't leave the chambers yesterday. Nor could I go out today, I was feeling so much shame. Had anyone seen me and Mustapha in the doorway at *La Rochette*? I didn't know and I didn't want to find out. What had I done? What had happened to me? How could I even-. I felt I could never ever show my face again to the good people of Neuchâtel. How would I ever find Uncle Vanya now? I have failed so miserably, I had fallen so low, all my sacrifices in vain. How could I approach a man and approach him so boldly? I was so mortified.

I told Aunt Thèrese, I wouldn't leave the apartment because I had to tend to Pippa's needs. I washed her wounds twice a day, fed her bones and potatoes while Aunt Thèrese kept asking why I wouldn't take her out into the fresh air. *Go for a walk beside the lake, ambulate along the lakeside and its glorious promenades.* I couldn't even

begin to think of the lake and what had happened down there and then the walk up, with Mustapha. No, there was no way, I would go and see the lake again or walk across town.

I was desperate. For I knew if I wanted to find Uncle Vanya, I couldn't look back. I needed to look forward. But how? Tell me, how?



Then Julien finally came home. First, I heard the door and then I heard Aunt Thèrese's clear voice ring out. I got up immediately and hurried into the kitchen. The fire was burning and a kettle with hot water sat on the stove. Oh my -, I had forgotten all about putting that kettle onto the stove. Aunt Thèrese poured a cup of tea for herself and Julien.

«Marie, would you like some tea?»

«No, I am fine. Thank you.»

«Julien, you're here? I am so relieved.»

I looked at my brother and ran my hand through his tousled hair. I sniffed him and wrinkled my nose. He smelled funny, like a grown man.

«We thought we were never gonna see you again.»

«Did you think they'd hang me for shooting a dog? Here in Switzerland?»

He looked at me proudly, smiling, yet challenging me for the truth. I fell silent.

«Thank God. I have telegraphed your mother that the gendarmerie has taken you in. Now, we can finally send her some good news.»

«Oh no, Aunt Thèrese, what would you do that for ?»

«She needs to know, doesn't she? You are her son.»

I glanced at Julien and he scowled back. I gave him a smile. I couldn't say how glad I was he was back.

«They let you go?»

«Yes, they did. The owner of the French pit bull didn't press charges. In fact, the constables have arrested him for illegal bets and gambling. So, I was quite lucky.»

«How come you shot that dog?» Aunt Therèse asked incredulously.

Julien looked at me. I starred right back. Would he tell her who really shot the dog?

«I couldn't give up Pippa to that French Terrier, could I? You would have done the same, aunty. And I had taken father's pistol. Before we left,» he added, as if that explained anything.

He looked at me reluctantly, we were conspirators. I kept quiet. For some reason, I didn't know, I kept quiet, kept quiet again.

Aunt Thèrese nodded.

«Maybe. You never know. I might have done the same. If I could shoot.»

«Well, you're here again. Thank God. That is all that matters now. And your mother will be here tomorrow. She will arrive in the morning.»

«Mother? She will be here. » I looked at my brother sideways. We were both alarmed at once.

«She wants to bring you both back home.»

I turned to Julien and this time it was him who smiled at me.

«Really? She does? »

I smiled right back. What did he know that I didn't?



Week II

Interlude

Friday, September, 26, 1902 Montmartre, Paris

She hadn't heard him come in. All of a sudden, he stood behind her.

«You're writing.» It was a statement, not a question.

«How do you know?»

«I saw the title page.»

«It's nothing.»

«I didn't know you're a writer.»

«I am not a writer»

« I understand you're writing for an Algerian?»

«I am writing for myself. »

«It says the novel is 'personalized for Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara.'

What is a personalized novel anyway?»

«I know what it says on the title page. »

«So? You are writing a novel? »

«I can read it to you if you want, but I haven't finished yet.»

«But tell me, you are writing it for one man only?»

She didn't answer.

«You write for an Algerian? What would you do that for?» He raised his eyebrows.

«You hardly write about Algeria.» She replied defiantly.

«Why should I? Others do better creating that fantastic orientalist culture. »

«You think Algeria is only fantasy?

«Imperialist fantasies. They should justify our greed and the cruel realities of imperialism. It has nothing to do with the realities in the colonies. If you really knew what went on down there, you wouldn't find the words to describe the atrocities.»

«You think my novel justifies imperialism?»

«Does it?»

«I don't know. »

«If it does, you will be famous. »

« I don't want to be famous. You know that.»



«What a waste. »

«What is? »

«You should be writing for everyone. It's a waste if you write a complete novel just for yourself.»

«You, you write for everyone. To tell everything to everyone. You are the one who explains the world.»



«I explain France. Remember the golden rule for any good writing: Always write about what you know. What do you know about Algeria?»

She shrugged.

«Nothing, I know nothing about Algeria. You're right.

«Then write about France. «

«France is not the world.

«It is our world.

«Why do we have to divide the world into 'our' world and 'their' world?

There is only one world. There are only people. Us, them. Us. All of us.»

«That's how we rule. By dividing.»

«By pretending France is the world? A world of its own, a world others aren't a part of?»

«France is an imperial nation, a Great Power. It must acquire colonies and carry its customs, its language, its traditions, its flags, its arms to all the world. »

«Like Great Britain?»

«Not even the Brits have their own world.»

«The world should belong to all of us and it doesn't. You know, it doesn't.

Highest stage of nationalism, highest stage of capitalism. And yet it doesn't belong to the people, to all of us.»

«I didn't know you were a communist.» He raised his eyebrows again.

«You know I am not. I cannot fit my simple ideas into any of these complex theories.»

«I know. And yet-» He stopped right there.

«I really didn't know you were a writer.» He then said. It seemed to bother him.

«Does it matter?» She asked, then, helplessly, she lifted her shoulders.



She smacked her lips.

« I want to know why. »

«So do I. »

«Well, you cannot explain *why*.»

«That is not true. »

«No, *you* cannot explain *why*.”

«I can't or you can't?»

«You can't.»

«Then you can?»

She didn't answer, but her hands, holding on tight to the many pages she had written, were trembling for she couldn't either.

Wednesday, February 8, 1871

I couldn't sleep at all. When I heard the Black Forrest Cuckoo Clock in the drawing room strike 5 am, I got up. After lighting a candle, I washed my face in the large porcelain basin sitting on the old chest of drawers. How cold it was. I had already filled the heavy jug last night before going to bed. I loved the delicate blue flower patterns so ingeniously created by the porcelain painters at Villeroy and Boch. Never had I seen such exquisite flowers. For all I knew, such beauties must be growing in the Far, Far East: Indochina or Australia. Australia must be beautiful. Father had bought a map of *Terra Australis* we couldn't stop looking at when we were younger. The names, so exotic and foreign, fascinated me and Julien beyond anything we could even imagine. To us the names of these places were like dreams

rolling by, tickling our fantasy, as they moved on: The Gulf of Carpentaria in the North, Spencer Gulf in the South, Trinity Bay in the North East. But the place we fantasized most about was: Buccaneer Archip.

I spent a moment rubbing my lips, my eyes, my cheeks, carefully drying my face with a thin cotton towel. When I touched myself, I still burned with shame as I remembered Mustapha Ben Turkoja's hand on my face. For a split second I saw him tall before me, his face, his lips, so close, his eyes so dark and kind. Quickly, I undressed, then folded my nightgown. After I had put on my camisole, a long white woollen chemise, my petticoat, stockings, woollen socks and my modest vestment, I was ready for the day. I woke Julien and waited for him to get up. In the meantime, I packed everything Aunt Therèse had given me into my small suitcase: two more camisoles I put on top, another spare dress, two chemises, two petticoats, a cardigan, my woollen stockings, the beewax candles and matches. Carefully, I lifted my mattress to find this notebook, the feather pen with its fine long nib that father gave me for my 16th birthday, the little inkpot with its magic liquid that was so wonderfully thick and black. All writing items were enclosed neatly in my beloved dark leather compendium to carry or rather to hide. I still remember saving it from the sledge before it fell into the abyss. I felt the blood rush to my face. Mustapha, he had saved me, he had corrupted me. He was-.

«We need to leave now before Aunt Thèrese wakes up.» I couldn't have faced aunt and tell her a lie. Better leave, before she rises.

«Hush, don't wake Pippa. If she starts barking everyone is awake.»

Julien turned in his bed and grumbled something I did not understand. I pulled away his thick blanket. In the red woollen sock of his left foot there was a hole

and his big toe stuck out, curious as a little mouse in the attic after the tomcat had left. It made me laugh to see how he was wiggling his toe.

«Do you know what time the trains are running?» I asked. He sat up straight and yawned.

«Let's just go to the station, and find out, shall we?»

«It's cold. It's too early.»

«Get dressed. And dress warm. We may have to wait a couple of hours before we can get on a train to Bern. Yesterday not all the trains were running.»

«Where are my pants?»

I sighed out loud, picking up his pants gingerly from the floor, careful not to wake our German Shepherdess. She still slept a lot these days recovering from the time in the woods and her injuries in the fight.

«Thank you.»

«Hurry and hush. We mustn't wake Aunt Therèse.»

Sleepily, he nodded, beginning to clothe himself. I turned around to find my woollen cardigan and the new mittens dear aunt had bought for me.



«He really said we would find Uncle Vanya in Bern? It must be such a big city, how can we, how can we ever-,» I whispered.

«You mean Christian? Yes, he did. He said most soldiers are taken to Bern, he said they are taken to the *Wylterfeld*, the field of Wyl. They are even building army barracks there now. The Red Cross might know more in a couple of days. Christian is

on his way to Bern as well, so we can meet him there once we get there ourselves. He told me to look for him at the *Café Fédéral*. It must be right in front of the *Fédéral Palace* At least, that was what he said yesterday. » Julien stretched his arms and finally got up. I began to get impatient.

«Come on. Start moving. We must leave before Therèse wakes up. And what if we take such a long trip and everything is in vain?»

«Look. Christian said it is likely Uncle Vanya is in the capital now. He said it's worth a try. And if we don't find him there, someone might know where he was taken. They are not randomly distributing the internees all over Switzerland. It is all properly organised: There should be accurate lists with names and all.

«All over Switzerland? Oh my-. We shall never find him».

«You're losing heart now? Marie. Come on, sis.»

«What will mother say when she gets here and we'll have left again? »

«She'll understand. Don't worry.

«You guess?» He nodded.

«Do you know where I left my boots?»

«By the oven in the kitchen?»

«Right, let's go. »

Very slowly we opened the door and started tiptoeing out of our small chamber. We mustn't wake Pippa, we would pick her up on her way back to *La Maison Blanche* once we had found Uncle Vanya. She needed rest and would only be in the way. Besides, mother was coming to fetch us and we weren't there. She could take her home instead. That would be a great idea indeed. Having Pippa with her, instead of us, would ease her pain and worry. Poor mother. How she must be

worrying. I know she would forbid us spend one more day searching for Vanya, if she had a say in this. How good, she hadn't. The thought somehow made me smile.

I looked behind once more. It was a modest room: A small cherry-wood writing desk with many small drawers to hide little things. I was particularly fond of that table. It was perfect for writing while watching the lake. There was also a chair, two small beds and a large cupboard, but that was all the furniture there was. The floor was covered by nice long wooden planks, Aunt Thèrese shone regularly with a special oil from England. There were high whitewashed walls on which three oil pictures were hung. The canvases were depicting lovely scenery of summer: high yellow reeds in the wind and large, colourful birds with long blue tails, I had never seen before. The third picture displayed young, strong deer ready to charge and hide in the woods, their eyes so timid, so shy. I loved that last picture. Uncle Mathieu had made them all, when he was still alive. I was tempted to pack the picture with the deer, but then decided against it. It was such a nice little room, it couldn't be changed. The picture would be missing. Aunt Thèrese would be missing it. No, I couldn't take it. As slowly as possible I closed the door behind us. *What was I thinking?*



I was sorry to leave so suddenly, all seemed so dull and grey and heavy.

«You may be right. What if we never find him? If they really do take the internees all over Switzerland how can we ever know where he is?» Julien was wavering too.

«Well, we won't find out if Mamà takes us back to *La Maison Blanche*, will we?»

«I know, but what if we really don't find him? What if he's dead?»

«Julien, we shall find him. He's Uncle Vanya. He is not dead. Please stop getting on my nerves. Have you got your shoes now? You got the note to put on the kitchen table? Ready? Hush. Be still.»

He only nodded, while he was tying the laces of his boots.

«Was that aunt Therèse's door? Hush. Let's wait. Don't move.»



Getting from Neuchâtel to Bern was quite the adventure. We spent precious hours in the cold before we could even leave. At 05:30 the streets were nearly empty and so was the station. An army officer in uniform let us enter the station as he took pity on us. We sat on one of the wooden benches in the waiting area and hoped the first trains to Bern would start running soon. But they didn't and Julien fell asleep, his heavy head on my shoulder, his strong arms leaning on my ribs. It was cold and sitting so close to him, made me feel a little warmer although the position felt uncomfortable soon. It took too much strength to continually support his slumping body and his drooping head. He was drooling. Nevertheless, I kept still, trying not to move, so I wouldn't wake him. It hadn't been a good idea to get up so early. Stupid me. *What was I thinking?*

I also hoped to God dear aunt Therèse wouldn't notice we were missing before evening. Hopefully, she wouldn't go into our room and discover all our luggage was gone. I had put a note under my pillow to explain why we had left to make sure she wouldn't worry once she started searching for us in earnest. And we had put another note on the kitchen table explaining we'd be helping Christian, our friend from the Red Cross organizing the mail service for the internees. The French soldiers surely would want to write letters to their beloved, letting them know they were still alive. It was a noble cause and Christian had indeed asked Julien to help the day before. Somehow, I was sorry, we didn't help. We should have.

For a split second I thought of Mustapha. Wouldn't he want his family to know he was still alive? Was his family still alive? What he had told me, - the French killing, slaughtering so many of his people-, was most disturbing. Everything, really everything about him was most, most disturbing. I tried not to think of him. The dark eyes, his smooth dark skin, the smell of his hands, his fingers-. *Stop. Marie. Stop. I cannot write more about him. I must find a way to distract myself. What was I thinking?*

Before we could see the train, we faintly inhaled its vapours; the fresh airs disgraced from one second to the other. Then we heard the steam engine's regular pounding and mashing. The pungent fumes from the burning coal stung more and more penetratingly in my nose, the closer the train came. The smell reminded me of the day father took us down into the dark tunnels of the asphalt mines at *la Presta* where he oversaw work before he met our dear mother, before he was paid off and bought *La Maison Blanche* in *Fleurier* to start the sheep farm he had always dreamt of.

I didn't have time to think of dear father for soon enough the rhythmic sounds of the engine rang louder and louder in our ears. The train was pulling in as Julien lifted his head and stretched.

«Julien, wake up. How can you sleep when there is such noise?»

«I am hungry.»

«You're awake? There's a train. Come on. Let's find out where it is headed to.

«Ok. I am coming. Marie. Wait. Can we get some *croissants* at the boulangerie before we start moving? It might be open by now. The chocolate *croissants*-. I am awake, but I am starving.»

«Depends. Let's see when our train leaves for Bern. Maybe they have now finally opened the ticket counter. Come on.»

Neuchâtel had woken up, people were milling all over the station, its forecourt and the adjacent streets running down steeply to the lake shore. Elegant ladies in their best travel wardrobe, beautiful hats and gloves and frocks, to journey to their relatives in other big Swiss cities, were chatting animatedly to each other. Little girls in tight costumes, pulling each other's hair, were accompanying them, giving each other silent looks only they'd understand. There were old men in ragged clothes on horse carriages moving goods for the day, there were young men bringing large wine barrels and even bigger metal cases containing aught I knew. How busy everyone was. And the soldiers: There were still so many French soldiers, even that early in the morning. Secretly, I was watching out for Mustapha, but didn't see him. *No, I must find a distraction. I can write about him no more.*

The size of Bourbaki's army must have been unimaginable. But what was really unimaginable was the size of the German army they lost to. So many able

French men, so many weapons they must have carried and yet, no victory won; only disaster and death and sinister defeat, pure pain. In the midst of the sea of passengers, soldiers and train personnel we discovered the one lonely figure we didn't really expect, we didn't expect at all. Not that early in the morning. Julien saw her first.

«Marie, look. There is mother.» I stopped breathing. *Oh no.*

«She must have taken the first train leaving from *Les Verrières.*» How worried she must be for us, but she couldn't be as worried as we were for dear uncle Vanya.

«Mamà, *Mon Dieu.* She is already here.» I pulled Julien behind one of the large iron poles sustaining the grand high metal construction, that served as a roof, above the platform. My heart was racing.

«Shall we go-.»

«No, let's stay here. Don't move.» I hissed.

«But, she came,» he whispered. And I could see pity and love in his eyes for our dear mother who had gone through so much already. But no -. No, we wouldn't be stopped, not now.

«I know. Don't move.» I whispered back.

«Shouldn't we? » He said out loud, not finishing the sentence. But I could read him so clearly he needn't say one more word.

«No, Julien. I am not going back. If you want to go back, go ahead.»

I slightly pushed him by the shoulders, but he didn't budge.

«Stop that Marie. Stop it. She can see me.»

But she didn't.



The Franco Suisse Railway Company needed many of its waggons and engines to help distribute the French soldiers to various destinations all over Switzerland, so not all the trains were running as scheduled or were even running at all. The great reorganisation was on-going and we were not the only ones who wanted to travel. I wondered briefly if Mustapha was also brought away from Neuchâtel, then, again repressed the thought of him. I decided then and there that from now on I will use this diary for trivialities only. I need to distract myself. My brain, my soul, my everything continually, continually was thinking about him. I must find other things to write about than this *amour fou*.



At the ticket counter an elderly, round gentlemen in uniform advised us on what tickets to buy.

«Buy tickets to Bienne here, and then from there to *Herzogenbuchsee*. There you'll have to change to the train coming from Zürich. Get new tickets there to Bern. Don't go via the village of *Lyss*. They opened that part seven years ago, but it's not running smoothly. Not now, anyway. Take the longer route, you'll be faster in the end. It's a bit more expensive, but the view between Burgdorf and Bern is simply gorgeous. Lean back, look out the window and enjoy. It is really worth it. You are young to travel alone, aren't you?»

I nodded obligingly to everything he said, having no idea whatsoever, what he was talking about. Bienne, the city by the lake of Bienne I had heard of, but what was *Herzogenbu-what-chall-we-call-it* ? I couldn't even pronounce the name of that place. Being predominantly used to French and English names of places, I felt the German names sounded awful, so harsh and unwelcoming. We had always spoken French and English at home, but not German and definitely not Swiss German. Venturing into a zone of Switzerland where people couldn't communicate with us was going to be an interesting experiment, one, in fact, I feared most dreadfully.

«Ok, then, two tickets to Bern.» I said in French.

«Two it is. And to Herzogenbuchsee, not Bern. I told you. You will have to get new tickets there from the *Schweizerische Centralbahn*. One-way or return?»

Schweizerische Centralbahn? Whatever that was. I only understood „*Schweizerische*“ meaning Swiss. But what was *Centralbahn*? What was I supposed to say? My mind went blank.

«One-way,» Julien said in my place.

The man gave me a strange look as if he didn't trust Julien was telling the truth. I nodded to support his claim.

«One-way, then» I tried to keep my voice under control.

«You want to stay in the capital. Not come back? That'll be 2.50 francs then.»

I handed him the money and smiled. Of course, we were to come back, but only with Uncle Vanya. I wouldn't ever go back without him. Ever.



The elderly man in uniform behind the ticket counter in Neuchâtel hadn't promised too much. We managed to get to Biel and to *Herzogenbu-what-chall-we-call-it* safely and well before lunch. There, we managed to get new tickets from the Swiss Central Railway Association, the *Schweizerische Centralbahn*. That was what it meant. Everything went so smoothly, everyone was friendly and so organized. And then, as soon as we had left the little city of *Burgdorf*, the train wound its way through the most beautiful countryside I had ever seen. An enormous valley with large bare willows and century-old naked linden trees, green meadows covered in white frost opened up before us and crystal-clear frozen creeks were meandering their way through the most gorgeous landscape. The train was rambling its way through this dazzling fairyland on tracks that were curved, so we'd get to see the huge engine occasionally. It was fascinating how the white steam was continuously blown over our carriages. I couldn't get enough of it and wouldn't take my eyes off it. The smell of the burning coals: To me it was the smell of true freedom finally found. When I discovered the first farmhouses, I had to stand up, so surprised was I and so excited. I felt like a little girl to whom all and everything was new. In fact, I was that little girl. I was her. Little did I know that soon enough that girl would be no more.

«Look. Julien. There are farmhouses with roofs down to the ground. I have never seen anything like this. And look at all the icicles. Aren't they gorgeous? But why would they construct houses like that?»

«No, idea. Maybe they can climb on the roofs more comfortably if a tile comes loose.»

«You think?»

«Nah -, not really. I have no idea, sis. But, what does it matter? Isn't it simply so beautiful?»



«Look at the mountains, the Alps. All covered in snow. How beautiful. How high they must be, nothing like the hills at home.»

«And the cathedral. Can you see the cathedral?»

«Yes, I can. It must be huge. Let's go and see it some time. »

«Julien, we are not here for sightseeing.»

«I know, but don't you think we could use a little help from above?»



When we finally arrived in Bern it was an hour or two past lunchtime. We had bought *croissants* in Neuchâtel after making sure Mamà had left the station, but that was so long ago, an eternity. Julien was hungry again and so was I. I reached for my purse, but it wasn't there. It was gone. I held my breath.

«Julien, do you have my purse?»

«No, I don't. You had all the money.» He looked crestfallen.

«Oh, *mon Dieu*, it is gone. I cannot find it.» Frantically, I was searching all my pockets.

«When did you use it last?»

«When I bought tickets. I had it then.»

«Maybe you put it into your valise. Why don't you open it and find out?»

«No, I cannot do this, not here. Look at all the soldiers here. I have put my camisoles on top. I am not going to open the valise here. I don't think it's in there anyway.»

«Fair enough, let's find a place more private where we can open it. »

We left the station which was mainly occupied by the Swiss military organizing the many French internees. Quickly, we walked onto the open space before it. I couldn't really appreciate the beauty of the large, grand houses surrounding us. And the mighty trees, how wonderful it would be to enjoy their shade in summer, but I couldn't take all in, I was too nervous about the missing purse. Finally, we found a place underneath one of the old linden trees on the square by the station's entrance where we were safe from prying eyes. I held the valise towards the tree and Julien sheltered me so no one could see my underwear. I opened the latch, then the case lid. Carefully, I rummaged through my belongings.

«I cannot find it. It is gone. I told you it's not in here. Why should it be in here?» Quickly, I closed the lid again.

«That cannot be true. What are we gonna do? I am starving. We must ask Christian for help. He might be in Bern already.»

«No, Julien. I have a better idea.»



«And? »

«Do you remember the Christmas letter from Bern?»

«Which ones, there always were so many letters at Christmas, and from all over.»

«The ones from Mamà's friend? Emily Eichenberger? Her friend from London when she was young? Who lives in Bern now. Don't you remember? The beautifully slanted E for Emily and another E for Eichenberger? I can still see mother's handwriting on the envelope where she put her address when she wrote back. Don't you remember?»

«No, I don't. It's amazing you should remember.»

«Come on. You must remember too: The lady with the photo studio? Mamà's best friend, when she first came to the continent? She sent pictures of the mountains when she was on tour with that other British gentleman. I cannot remember his name though. The Alps in the snow. Glaciers. The wooden chalets? Don't you remember?»

«Ah, yes, of course, now I remember. There was a picture of the Matterhorn. I do remember that. I have never seen a mountain in that shape, and all the snow, the rocks. It was awesome.»

«Wait. I know. Wait. It was *Postgasse*, the alley of the post office. Her address. I remember because I was looking at the envelope for hours, the stamps, the neat handwriting before mother posted it. Post it to the *Postgasse*, I always thought that was funny. But the number? I don't remember the number.»

«37. It was *Postgasse 37*.» Julien exclaimed.

«It was a pair. 3 and 7 were 10. I do remember.» He added gleefully.

«That's right. 37. Of course. Well done, Julien. Let's go and find her.»

«Well done, Julien», he imitated me, scoffing at my enthusiasm. I ignored him.

He could be such a nuisance when he was hungry.

«She will surely help us. Mamà and her were so close.»

«Alright. Let's go. Look at that. A train waggon drawn by horses. And the wheel behind so much bigger than the other up front. How curious. Let's see where they are going.»

«Well, let's see if they know where *Postgasse* is.»

«Anything you say, sis. I am starving.»



We approached the large carriage drawn by two black horses. To me they looked like French Percherons, bred at the royal stud in Le Pin. Father had shown us small black and white pictures when we were little. How father had loved horses, it made my heart go heavy. I haven't seen such fine, strong horses, so well groomed, for a long time, certainly not in Neuchâtel where the poor beasts had devoured each other's tails. Faintly, I remembered the sorry beasts who were so hungry and starved from the long tiring march from the city of Belfort to the safe haven of Switzerland that they ate everything remotely edible. Looking up the horses, I winced. My heart suddenly was aching so badly for losing our dear Fanny in the woods. I had to swallow hard. We didn't exactly lose her: It was me who had shot her with the

strange, wonderous weapon Mustapha had carried. White Dove. Mustapha. *No, I couldn't think of him. Not now.* More Trivialities. I must stick to the trivialities, the trifles. Please.



A young man in a brown felt hat, a matching brown quilted gilet and a thick grey pullover sat on the roof of the carriage letting the whip dangle lazily on the horses' back as if it was a fishing rod and he a fisherman trying to catch zebra trouts in the *Doubs* river. He was busy reading the local newspaper. Julien approached him boldly, he addressed the man in French, and he responded with a heavy accent I couldn't place.

«*Bonjour Monsieur, I like your hat. If I'd like to buy the same here where could I -?*»

The man laughed out loud.

«Here? In Bern? You must be new to the city.»

«Just arrived.»

«I guessed so. I bought that hat in the city of Alessandria from Giuseppe Borsalino himself. Fine gentleman, if you know what I mean. First class, everything about him. *Prima classe.* Nothing like this can be found here.»

Julien nodded, he didn't know what the stranger meant, I could see as much.

«Do you want a ride?»

«We are looking for *Postgasse 37.*»

«That's great. I can take you all the way down to the *Zytglogge* tower and a little further towards the bear's pit. From there it's not long on foot. You turn left and you're there. Easy. Put your luggage on the roof. Come on.»

He reached down to get our suitcases.

«I am sorry, my brother was too audacious. My purse was stolen. We have no money. If you can just point us in the right direction, we shall walk. I am sure it cannot be far.»

«Oh please, *bellezza*. Let me offer the ten cents. I couldn't let a beautiful young lady like yourself walk all the way down to the *Postgasse*. I'm going in this direction anyway. Hop on. There are not too many people at this hour. Look, only two more passengers and there is room for six. So, plenty of room.»

He made an extravagant gesture to indicate just how much room there was in the little wooden cabin on whose roof he was sitting. I looked inside and smiled. An elegant lady in a black hat turned her head towards me. She and a little boy were patiently waiting for the carriage to start moving. The lady smiled politely back at us, but the child looked away. He couldn't have been older than five or six years.

«By the way, I am Alonzo.»

«You're Italian?» My brother guessed.

«Sì, Alonzo, *il Gattopardo*. Piacere. »

«*Gattopardo*?» I didn't understand a word. There were only that many languages I could master.

«For, you, *bellezza*, just Alonzo.»

«Oh, he calls you *my beauty*, sister.»

I decided to ignore the both of them.

«But, you're Italian?»

«Oh, I see you are a believer.»

«Believer?»

«You believe in the Republic and the nation state instead of the church. »

He shook his right hand in the air as if he was to cut down a tree with his bare hand.

«No, we don't,» Julien said abruptly.

«Of course, we do,» I insisted.

«So, what does it matter which republic or nation I belong to? What is a republic anyway? Before Napoléon came there was the kingdom of Sardegnna and it wasn't restricted to the island of Sardegnna only but extended all the way to the mainland. There were the Papal states, the republic of Genoa, the grand duchy of Tuscany, the kingdom of Sicily, the Republic of Venice. And that is only the ones I remember. Then, Napoléon created the Cisalpine Republic around Milan, Genoa City became a republic too and its hinterland became the Ligurian Republic. He formed the Roman Republic, sent the Pope to France. As if this wasn't enough, he formed the kingdom of Italy in 1805 declaring himself king.

«Napoléon declared himself king in 1805? He must have been a baby then. I don't understand.»

«You mean Napoléon III. Yes, he was only 3 years old then.»

«I don't understand. There is more than one Napoléon?»

«Yes, of course. Your Napoléon who has just lost the Franco-Prussian war is Napoléon III, he is Napoléon I's nephews. Napoléon I, he is the other guy, the one who created republics for everyone, but declared himself king. So are republics really

monarchies? I don't know. In the Netherlands he created the Batavian Republic, further south, right here the Helvetic Republic. You know. Switzerland. Now, tell me. Can you keep track of it: Kingdom. Republic. Duchy?»

«Well, you obviously can.» I said pointedly.

«No, no, no, I am not even finished. This is all very complicated. My head is still spinning when I think of it all. Later there was a kingdom of the two Sicilies instead of just one, and Milan is no longer part of a republic, but now belongs to the kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. But yes, I am Italian if you want it so. From Torino. Always Kingdom of Sardegna until we became part of *il Grande Regno d'Italia*, the great Italy. And since France withdrew its troops which protected the Pope and would rather fight the Prussians, and would rather lose., - also Rome is now part of the *Grande Regno d'Italia*. We even moved the capital from Florence to Rome. It makes you wonder if the Swiss ever moved their capital to some other city if they could conquer it. Maybe to *Zürich*? But then, the Swiss wouldn't conquer *Zürich*, would they? They would rather buy it, wouldn't they?»

«He talks a lot.» Julien said in English,

«He does. And gesticulating so wildly.» We both laughed.

«Ah you're English? »

«Now, who's a believer? If we speak English does that makes us English then?» Alonzo laughed.

«*Va bene*. You are fast learners. Come on. Climb in. I can hear your stomach grumble. Take some of my bread. Fresh from this morning. The best in town. I'll take you.»

Julien wolfed down his piece of bread immediately.

«*Mamma Mia, tu hai fame. You are hungry. Here. Take some more.*»

«Thank you. Thank you so much.»



And now: More trivialities. The carriage started moving slowly from *Zwischen den Toren*, Between the Gates, down the *Spitalgasse*, the alley of the Hospice. But I couldn't see a hospital, only a large church on our left. I haven't ever seen a church this large. Was it the cathedral? But I forgot to ask as the next scene unfolded right upon us: So many people were walking the streets of Bern, I didn't know where to look. I could see a couple of maids, their heads bare, their hair braided, surely they must be on their daily errands. They were carrying large, heavy wicker baskets filled to the rim with beer bottles, potatoes, eggs. To tell the truth, I couldn't really see what was inside, I've simply made this up: beer, potatoes, eggs, who knows? I mean they must be carrying something. Some were carrying small children instead of baskets. Their long dresses and aprons touched the dusty street and must have gotten terribly dirty by the end of the day. One young girl was washing something -I couldn't see what it was-, in a small wooden basin on a large table that stood close to a fountain. How I'd hate that: To wash my dirty clothes in the middle of the street and in public. What if you had to wash out the blood from your courses and everybody could see? I blushed at the mere thought of it. But maybe women here rarely had their courses as they were always with child? There were a lot of children in the streets.

And there were many carriages, small and big, most of them heavily loaded with wooden crates and large barrels that were drawn by stout ponies and strong horses. I even saw a large St. Bernard dog pulling a small handcart for a boy. It reminded me painfully of how we used to work together with Pippa to bring in our sheep. I simply loved working with dogs or horses. For a moment I felt awfully homesick, but then I was distracted again.

The city moat also ran in the middle of the street and I felt it was peculiar that everybody could see what waste it would carry. But then, I really didn't trust my eyes, when I saw a single cow march down the street. The beast was not accompanied by anyone and walked towards its destination as if it knew exactly where it was going. I put my hand before my mouth to stop myself from giggling when I saw that it defecated right onto the cobbled street. With all the horses in town I guessed it didn't really matter though. Horse shit. Cow Shit. All the same.

Still, what a contrast to the two elegant ladies over there. Both clad in long exquisite dresses, holding their heads high. Their beautiful hats must have been dispatched directly from the poshest Parisian fashion ateliers, if any of those were left after the war at all. And already we had moved past them. Next, a few elderly men in bowler hats stood close together, discussing earnestly. The roads were full of people: French soldiers, Swiss soldiers, gendarmes and civilians: peasants, children, modest maids, noble citizens, grand, rich ladies and wealthy businessmen. They were all walking up and down the main street, with good speed, going about their daily business on a cold February morning. Many greeted each other and most of them nodded towards Alonzo. Obviously, everybody knew him. The whole city seemed to be up and about, so busy was the street. I rubbed my hands. So excited by

the wonders the big city offered I had totally forgotten that it was still freezing cold and so hungry.



There were many French soldiers in the streets. But no one I'd recognize. Secretly, I was scanning each face for *Mustapha's*. *No, I wouldn't see him ever again. No, I shouldn't even be thinking about him.* The only question that mattered now was: Where could we find ~~Mu~~, Uncle Vanya? I had no idea where to start. In Neuchâtel we had already seen thousands of men, most of them wounded terribly, missing their arms, missing their legs, dressed in rags, dressed in torn uniforms covered in old dried brown blood, suffering from hypothermia, sick with Typhus or small pox, their clothes torn, exhausted and tired. But no Uncle Vanya. Here it was the same although people didn't look so ragged anymore. I heard a dog bark at a horse close by and turned around, but we had moved on already. I didn't see the dog.

For a second I remembered the dog's fight by the lake. I had shot the French Bull Terrier to save Pippa. It was still hard to believe what I was capable of: Shooting our beloved Fanny, shooting a French Bull Terrier after only ever shooting small wild pigeons when we were occasionally hunting with father. What would be next: Shoot a man? When our dear Lord told us not to kill. I shuddered at the thought. *Thou shalt not kill.*

Then I thought of Mustapha. Again and again. Why could I not forget him? Why would I always think of him? I knew, I had sinned and I hoped I would not do

it again. However, if the chance were offered to kiss him again, well-. *More trivialities, please.*



I couldn't get enough looking out of the carriage's windows unto the large town houses and their beautiful high facades. Above the arches of the alcoves there were three more stories. I couldn't believe how large the glass windows of these houses were and I couldn't stop admiring the beautifully crafted wrought iron decoration before the window. They looked like tiny balconies for dwarves or trolls. The shutters to many windows were closed or cotton blinds were overhanging the window so you could only see the lower part of the windows. I gazed at the sombre light underneath the alcoves hiding the entrances to the many different workshops, ateliers, café and canteens and thus sheltering Bern's pedestrians from rain and hail and sleet. *Entrance to houses. Hiding places. Just me and-. No.* How beautiful the streets looked, even in dark, dull February, the dullest month of winter tide: A time when everybody tired of fighting one more round with winter as their sparring partner. I couldn't stop staring at the busy main road and despite the serious reason of our journey, I couldn't stop smiling.

«Look, there, The *Palace Fédéral*.»

«Mon Dieu, I wouldn't have thought it was so big. Look at the large square in front of it. It's beautiful, isn't it?. Is *Postgasse* still far, Alonzo?»

«No, *bellezza*, it isn't. But first I'll have to stop the omnibus here at the *Käfigturm*. Then, we shall go past the *Zytglogge Tower* and a little further. Whoa, *Sognatore*. Come on. He doesn't like the tower. It's too high for his liking.»

«He is *Signore*? You call him *Mylord*? And what is an omnibus?»

«This is an omnibus. You're sitting in it. We can transport up to 6 passengers. And. No, *Signorina Bellezza*, he is *Sognatore*, not *Signore*. That means dreamer and this one here is *Adoratore del Sole*.»

He pointed at the horse next to *Sognatore*.

«I don't understand a word of what you're saying.»

«Pardon, *Signorina Bellezza*, He is *Sognatore*, that means dreamer and this one here is *Adoratore del Sole*, that means Admirer of the sun. We are all very pleased to meet you and your brother.»

I only kept smiling, grinning my worries away. If everyone was as friendly and helpful as Alonzo, we shall find Uncle Vanya soon enough.



Postgasse 37 we found easily. Alonzo had taken us as close as his regular route with the omnibus allowed. Emily Eichenberger's photostudio was situated on the *rez-de-chaussé*, the ground floor in a smaller cobbled side alley that was not as busy as the main street where Alonzo had stopped to let us climb out. It said Emily Eichenberger, Photographer in beautiful red and golden letters above the entrance of a heavy oak door. The two capital „Es“ in her name were beautifully intertwined, whoever had done her artwork must have been a master. I hoped to God she would

help us. I hoped to God she would remember Mamà. If she was as benevolent as her artwork was beautiful, we'd be fine. I tried not to worry, but frankly: Worry I did, and a great deal.

Julien and I had stopped before the house, put our suitcases on the ground and looked up at *Postgasse 37*. A couple of meters before the three-story city house two large stone arcs stretched up high from each side of the pavement. The stone archways ran up to the first floor, then along the large façade and finally touched ground again when curving and meeting in the middle of the building. The semi-round curvatures so built a small vault, a little dome, before the entrance where you could stand on the footpath sheltered from the elements. It felt like the opposite of standing on a meadow at *La Maison Blanche* in *Hautevieve* if you know what I mean.

«It feels like standing in a cave.»

«Yes, it does, doesn't it?.»

«But we're in the middle of the capital. Incredible. Why would they build caves in the city?»

«I don't know, Julien.»

«Do you think these wooden doors, in the ground, lead down to the cellar?»

«I guess so.»

He rattled at the handle as hard as he could. I got a real fright from the loud noise he made.

«Stop doing this.»

I looked around to check no one had seen my brother being so bold. Rattling a door handle like a lunatic. He might be mistaken for a burglar. Our voices echoed

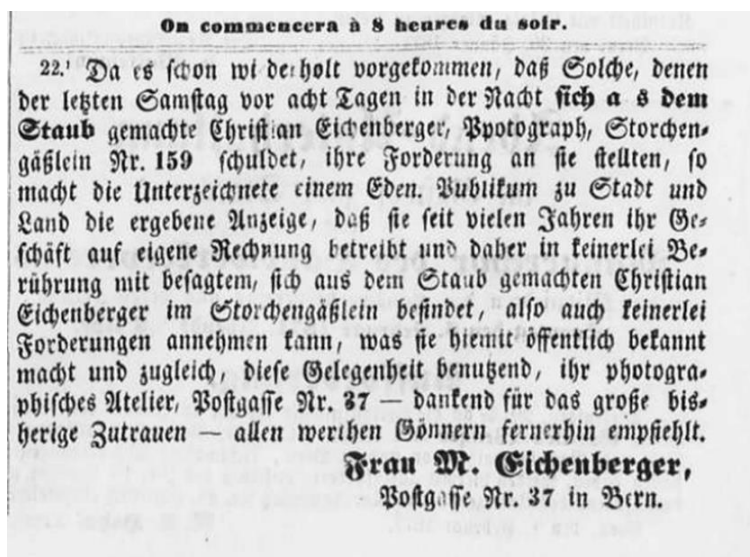
loud in the little enclosed space and automatically we were speaking softer, nearly whispering.

It was then that the front door of the photo studio opened and Emily Eichenberger herself came out. She was an impressive, stout lady in a black, long, rustling dress with a white lace ribbon around her neck. She was tall and kept herself straight, which added to her elegance. Her auburn hair was combed back and held together tightly in her neck. However, it seemed that now, she looked stern, and furious. She started shouting immediately and the echo in the little space was unbearable. Julien put his hands over his ears immediately to drain out her shouting..

«What do you want? The shop is closed.» That much German I understood.

«We-. We are sorry.» I said in French, startled at the heavy shouting and she switched to French as well.

«I even ran it in the newspaper.»



«You did what?»

«I am not related to Christian Eichenberger.»

«Is she talking about Christian from the Red Cross?»

«No, he is Christian Monnier, not Eichenberger.» Julien filled me in quickly.

«I don't understand.»

«I am not responsible for what he's done. His studio was at the Storchengässli 159, if he owes you money, it is none of my business. We are not related. We are both photographers and the name is Eichenberger. That's that. It's a mere coincidence we should have the same name. Actually, it is more of a nuisance. Such a nuisance when everybody now comes calling at my door.»

«No, he doesn't owe us money.» I said quickly, yet rather startled at her outburst. I hadn't imagined her so vivacious and spirited.

«You don't want money?»

«Well. We would need money, occasionally, our purse was stolen.» Julien admitted freely. At this, she turned around and walked towards the door, looking barely over her shoulder.

«I am sorry, young lad, but I don't run a charity. If you need money turn to the local *Hilfsverein*, they call it the Red Cross now. They can help you. I run a business here, not an asylum for children. I cannot help you. And just in case you're interested I did donate to the Swiss living in Paris. At the concert on Thursday. Our brothers and sisters in France, they really need the money.»

She opened the door to let herself in. Before she could close it behind her, I called out to her.

«But, wait. Miss Eichenberger, we are Sarah Ann Marshall's children.»

My voice was reverberating in the hollow that was the small cave the architect of this grand city house imagined, for its inhabitants to step into, when leaving and entering their home.

«You do remember your friend? Sarah Ann Marshall? She married Jean Jacques Bergeron after the two of you visited the Asphalt mines in *La Presta*.»



Emily Eichenberger spun around as fast as her voluminous dress allowed. She looked at us, her jaw had dropped, her eyes wide open.

«Say that again, dear.»

«We are Sarah Ann Marshall's children. We are looking for Uncle Vanya.»

Now she became pale. She did remember. I could tell immediately.

«Vanya. You are looking for Vanya? » Her voice was faltering.

«Do you know him? » Now, it was my turn to be surprised. Vanya had never mentioned her. I had always thought she was mother's friend. How come she knew Vanya?

«Of course. Your father's brother. Of course, I remember him. He was -. I was. I was married.»

She stopped herself short and wouldn't continue. Then I couldn't help but observe a minute movement. Had she just shaken her head? I looked at Julien and could see he had raised his eyebrows. That was most peculiar. What did she mean? She was married? To Vanya? Hardly. That couldn't be, could it?

«Why are you looking for him here? Did you think he came to see me? After all these years?»

Her voice had become so painfully hopeful I was sorry I had to bring her down.

«No, in fact, well- . It is a long story. He marched with the French army from *Les Verrières* to Neuchâtel and we think they may have taken him to Bern. That is why we came. To look for him and bring him home.»

«Why would he do that? March with the French army? Is he a soldier now? At his age? » She looked rather concerned now.

«He doesn't remember.» I tried to break the news gently, but really there was no easy way of doing this.

«Doesn't remember? What do you mean?»

«He doesn't remember how to get home. He doesn't remember us. He doesn't remember anything. We must find him before he gets hurt.»

She looked at us. Silent. Then she took a deep breath. Were these tears in her eyes or was it just the cold wind blowing through the long alleyways?

«Come on in. Come on then.»

She held the heavy oak door open for us and we entered her photo studio. I was stunned. The place was filled with the most amazing items. There were sheets of metal, I guessed copper? Maybe. There were sheets of glass, bottles with strange liquids, cameras, large hats with long peacock feathers, long black velvet gloves. The centre piece of the studio was a gigantic picture, you could sit in front of, which was displaying the Alps. It was a huge panorama painting, that was taking up most of the studio. I admired the large even strokes for the mountains, but there were also fine

and tiny details such as the pine trees, the meadows and the small Alpine cottages.

Were these sheep? I stepped closer to get a better look.

«What a beautiful picture that is.» I said admiringly.

«You think so? Thank you. I made that.» She took off her scarf.

«You painted that?» I looked at her, amazed.

«Yes, from one of my photographs.»

«That is the Matterhorn. Right?»

«Oh, You know that?»

«Yes, we have a picture book with the exact same picture. I remember looking at it ever so often when I was little.»

«You still have the book? I gave that to Vanya when it came out. I helped shoot some of the pictures. See I have a copy myself.»

She walked towards a large bookshelf filled with a variety of books. Amazed I looked at the beautifully decorated book spines, made of thick brown leather and many of them decorated with golden letter. We had a lot of books, but Emily Eichenberger must have owned twice or three times the amount of books we possessed and hoarded in *La Maison Blanche*. I watched her scan the titles, her head slightly tilted to the left.



«Are you a mountaineer, Ms. Eichenberger?»

«Please, call me Emily. No, not really. I don't particularly like the mountains, nor climbing up steep slopes carrying tons and tons of equipment in my backpack. I simply love photography. It's my life. And people want to see the Alps, so I went to see the mountains, then bringing back pictures. I love the pictures, not the mountains. I mean they are impressive but to me? Tell the truth: not as impressive as the pictures we got. Was it this book? I think I've found it.»

As she was reaching for the book, there was a knock at the backdoor and without even waiting for a response, an elderly gentleman, flung it wide open. He simply walked in without greeting us. I think he didn't even see us. He wore a warm waistcoat, buttoned high on his chest. It was semi-fitted, -not around his belly though, there it was very closely fitted-, and reaching down to his thigh. His shirt collar, its tips turned down into wings, was so stiff and upstanding he could hardly move his head. His greasy hair was neatly parted in the centre. He looked stern and started talking at once.

«And? Have you decided?» His voice was loud and harsh and rather unfriendly. Emily fell silent, it was as if all life had suddenly gone out of her. She seemed drained of all energy.

«Give me more time. Please, I am still trying to raise the money and if I cannot do it, I need more time to find another place. I cannot move the studio out of the city. Not so fast. Please. »

«One more week.» He turned on his heel and left as fast as he had come in. He left without saying good-bye or giving any more explanations.

«What was that about?» Julien asked.

«They want to sell the house. To a butcher. That means I will have to move out and find new lodgings for myself and the photostudio. All this will be turned into-, into a butchery. There will be cows hanging from the ceiling, hogs for roast pork, chicken feet. In about a week. There will be blood everywhere. Blood. I mean-. You heard him.»

She raised her hands in despair. I let my eyes wander over the gorgeous photostudio Emily had created: a tiny cosmos reflecting life's outstanding beauty, so exotic, enormous, elaborate, ebullient, edified, effervescent, effulgent, elated and electrifying, I couldn't imagine someone could ever destroy it. I looked at the wonderful black and white pictures, so expertly framed, the rose muslin curtains, the black draperies, the stoles you could wrap around your shoulders, the antique, inlaid wood furniture and not to forget: The huge canvas with the mountains she had drawn so artfully. All this, it would have to yield to dead pigs, oxen tails, chicken feet and blood? A butchery? Unimaginable.

«I told them I was trying to raise the money to buy the house myself. But it's impossible. I cannot raise such a sum. But if they are to give me one more week, hey, I'll take it. Let's not think about this now. One more week. We have one more week.»

She laughed and there was a bitter ring to her voice, I hadn't heard before. I looked down on my hands. Poor Emily. Losing her home, losing her business. It couldn't be easy. I had taken a sudden liking to mother's old friend and felt sorry for her predicament. I couldn't imagine being a woman and having to shoulder such responsibilities all by myself. There should be something that could be done about this but I feared there wasn't.

Emily seemed unconcerned. She took a deep sigh and kept on looking for that book of hers. Obviously, she hadn't found the right one yet, or she was simply stalling for time to compose herself, while turning her back to us. When she finally had found it, she held up a heavy copy of a picture book for us to see. The cover was as beautiful as the one we had at home: *The Matterhorn*. To me the name of this mountain sounded as magic as the Mediterranean. Both places I had heard of often, but never laid my eyes upon.

«Yes, indeed. That's exactly it. That's our book.» Julien cried out.

«I even remember what it had said on the first page: 'A lady's imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love, from love to photography in a moment.'»

«But it's wrong, the quote is from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and it should say from love to matrimony in a moment». I corrected my brother.

«I wrote that. It's not wrong.» Emily interjected.

«You did?»

«For *Uncle Vanya*?»

«Yes, for *Vanya*.»



A small photo of a young man fell out of the large and heavy photobook. I reached down and picked it up at once. The paper felt oddly strong between my fingers.

«This is *Uncle Vanya*.»

I cried out, amazed at the perfect likeness to my uncle.

«But here he is much younger.»

«Let's see.» Julien looked over my shoulder.

«Unbelievable. He is younger indeed. He looks a bit like me.»

«No, he doesn't.»

«No?»

«Well, maybe a tiny bit.»

«See.» My brother was punching me. We were both laughing.

«Emily, please, can we take this picture and show it to the soldiers? Maybe we can find him like this more easily.

«It wouldn't be much use, Marie. He doesn't look like this now.»

«Well, a bit he does. You can still recognize him, can't you?»

«Yeah, if you know what he looks like now.»

«Maybe there is something I can do about this.» Emily said.

«Can you?»

«Maybe. Give me the picture.»

She took the photograph out of my hand and sat down at a beautiful bureau next to her bookshelf. Everything she owned was a masterpiece. I admired the curved countertop and the round, perfectly shaped ebony drawers the bureau desk was sitting on. The surface was covered with inlaid woodwork in different shades of brown, yellow and beige: delicate golden flowers, beige trees, the white sun, the moon, the stars, the Big Dipper. Were these eagles? Surely in a bureau crafted as carefully as this there must be a secret drawer. I wished I had a secret drawer to hide

away this notebook from prying eyes. Sometimes I wonder if Julien doesn't read it, but then he may not even have noticed I was a writer.

Musingly, Emily looked at the picture of Uncle Vanya. Then, she opened the top drawer and took out some feather pens, ink, paintbrushes, cotton swabs, water- and oil colours. First, she dipped the nib into the ink, waited a moment, sighed and then put the nib down.

«What are you doing? Oh no -, You're destroying the picture.»

«No, I am making him older. So, the soldiers would recognize him when you show them the picture.»

«Can you really do this?»

«Let's see. You will have to help me.»

«Is his hair grey or is he bald?»

«Grey hair.»

«Ok. That's easy, bald would have been more difficult.»

Carefully, she began colouring his hair.

«And how has the face changed? Wrinkles, sagging chin?»

«Are you sure you want to do this? »

«Why?»

«Is it the only picture you have of him?»

«It is.»

«Wouldn't you want to keep it as it is, instead of spoiling it?»

«You want to find him though, don't you? You'll need something to start with.

Marie is right. We need to look forward, not backward.»

Carefully, she continued working on the picturing, colouring it exactly as we suggested and explained. It wasn't long before it looked exactly like Uncle Vanya, his very exact likeness. She blew onto the picture to dry the colours, then she handed it to me.

«Here. Your uncle Vanya. Hopefully, we can find him.»



«I am so sorry. You must be hungry. You came all the way from Neuchâtel? Have you even eaten lunch yet? And do the trains still run? I heard they use them all to transport the soldiers. What a disaster. Wars are terrible. Why must men always be fighting?»

I nodded silently. Yes, that was a question I had asked myself before. What was it with men and their wars? Why were there wars anyway? They were disruptive to anything that was good and worth living for. In the end we were all defeated, inevitably defeated: villages burned, houses looted, landscapes up- and overturned by shells and cannons. How could anyone earnestly believe war was what you my beloved described as 'the lifeblood of nations'?

«We had a slice of bred Alonzo gave us. But I wouldn't mind some cheese and more bred.»

«You had a slice.» I pointed out. Julien gave Emily a broad smile, trying to look innocent, and she smiled right back at us.

«You met Alonzo? And he gave you bred? He is such a character.»



«What a shame you didn't come last week. We had a wonderful professor in town, an elegant petite lady from the *Sorbonne* who gave the most incredible insight into *Molière*, the playwright. You know him? »

We both nodded. Mamà had made sure we'd read the classics in French and in English.

«I think she gives more lectures this week though. And the concert on Sunday at the casino. There was a great choir, wonderful music and half of the entrance fees go to the poor Swiss in Paris. They must be suffering so terribly now. Paris so badly beaten by the war, that awful siege by the Prussians. It hurts my heart to think how they're destroying everything good and noble. A city like Paris. But I do think the student choir will sing on Thursday. I'll have to check again in the papers. Let's see.»

She grabbed the newspaper. It was *the Feuille d'Avis de la ville de Berne*.

«Yes, they sing on Thursday. In fact, forget about the students. Look here. We have to see the royal and imperial Austrian hussar regiment returning from London. The concert starts at 07:30. They do „Hücooco“ di Paragi from Baratta. Shouldn't it be *il cuoco di Parigi*. It's *il cuoco*, I am sure: The cock of Paris. What is *Hücooco*? The person who set these letters had no clue. Or then, I don't understand. We simply

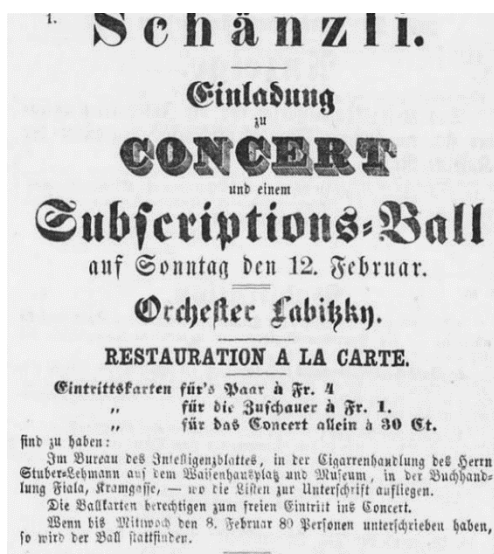


must go and find out. They are selling programs at the entrance.»

Wide-eyed I looked at Julien. Concert by the royal and imperial Austrian hussar regiment? We have come a long way from *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevieve* and we haven't come to see musicians and clowns. We were

here to find our dear Uncle Vanya. How could we tell that to Emily without insulting her? But, once she had started, Emily Eichenberger couldn't be stopped.

«And now that you are here, I must subscribe to the ball at once. Look



here. They need 80 signatures today or the ball won't take place. You are coming? Marie, have you brought another dress? Something a bit more-.»

She clicked her tongue and winked at me mischievously. I was startled.

«A dress for a ball?»

This was unexpected. The bread I was chewing on got stuck in my throat and I was coughing. I didn't want to go to any balls.

«Yes. See here. Sunday, the 12th of February. It includes the concert and you can go as a couple. Never mind, he's your brother. It will be fun. That would be 4 francs then. You know how to dance? I'll just go as a spectator. But you are young. You must have some fun.»

I stared at Julien and he stared right back at me. I could tell, he thought the same: Go to a ball? By all means: Absolutely no. We were here to find Uncle Vanya not to dance on some ball.

«I will go right after lunch and enter our names at the bookshop Fiala in *Kramgasse*. I know the lady who runs it.»



«Do you have any idea where they brought the internees? We have seen many soldiers, but don't know where to look for their quarters. Where are they stationed? Is it the *Wylerfeld*?» Julien said rather abruptly, his mouth still full with Gruyère cheese.

«Does it say more about the French army in the paper?»

«Of course. Uncle Vanya. Let's see. Well, they are collecting money for them now, but also shirts, pants, underpants, socks. Look here. The ladies of the

8. An die Frauen der Spitalgasse.
Allen Denjenigen, welche Lust und Zeit haben an dem Liebeswert für die internierten Franzosen mitzuhelfen, wird hiemit angezeigt, daß sich für **diese Gasse** eine Vereinigung von Frauen gebildet hat, um gemeinschaftlich für dieselben zu arbeiten, und es wird freundlichst eingeladen, sich möglichst zahlreich, Jedes nach Vermögen und Verhältnissen, dabei zu beteiligen. Ein Arbeitslokal befindet sich bei Frau von Werdt-Steiger, Nr. 126, 3ter Stock, woselbst alle Tage, Morgens von 9-12 und Nachmittags von 2-5 Uhr gearbeitet wird und auch Arbeit nach Haus abgeholt werden kann. Weitere Auskunft wird bereitwilligst erteilt und Beiträge an Geld, Arbeitsstoff und fertigen Kleidungsstücken daselbst, sowie auch bei Frau Wittve Käser, Nr. 174, erster Stock, dankbarst angenommen. Auch die kleinste Gabe ist willkommen!

Spitalgasse have even formed a union to work together for the interned French army. 'Whoever has time and feels like it, can come and help with

the work of love for the French. You are invited to assemble at Ms. Werdt-Steiger, Nr. 126, 3rd floor. Mornings 9-12 and afternoons from 2-5. You can also go and collect material to work from home. Even the smallest gift is welcome.' How sweet of the ladies of the Spitalgasse. »

There was something about Emily's voice that made me wonder if she really thought it sweet. She sounded ironic and put the newspaper back on her bureau. Why was it wrong to sew clothes for poor, ragged men? I didn't understand, but didn't dare to ask, for fear, she would laugh at me. Emily turned to my brother and changed the subject.

«I think, you're right, Julien. I read somewhere that they were all brought to the *Wylerfeld*. But you cannot go there by yourself. It is too dangerous. Let me join you. I will quickly go and fetch my hat.»

«That will not be necessary, really. We've come all the way from -.»

«I insist.»

At this very moment a little silver bell hung high above the entrance door jingled brightly and a young couple entered the photo studio. They brought in a waft of cold air. Emily got up at once, she literally sprung to her feet to serve her customers.



«Could we have our photos taken, *Madame?*»

«Of course. Please install yourselves here. She pointed at the chairs before the large Matterhorn painting. It was so beautiful indeed. I still couldn't take my eyes of the sea of colours flooding the large canvas. What a masterpiece.

«Would you like to take your coats off for the picture? »

The young lady began taking off her coat, underneath she was wearing the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. I couldn't have imagined such fine and exquisite lace. And the buttons. I wondered how they were made. I for myself, definitely wouldn't know how to make such buttons. I was all wool, not such exquisite lace and such fine buttons. She ran her fingers over her dress, smoothing it carefully.

«My wife would like to know how exactly you ban our image on paper? How is a photograph made?»

«Well, there are different types of photography. It is a complex process. I am working with what they call a daguerreotype now. Really it should be called a 'gerberotype' for it was Professor Andreas Gerber here in Bern who invented the process. He was the first to find out how to use silver salts in the camera obscura. Louis Jacques Mandée Daguerre is a scoundrel.»

«I remember Professor Gerber. Professor of veterinary science?»

«Yes. Indeed. My late husband was his student and me he taught everything about photography. Do you know him? »

Emily asked curiously. All irony in her voice was gone when now she was talking to her customers. I listened intently.

«My brother was his student too. Is Professor Gerber still alive?»

«Yes, but he is not so well. I haven't heard from him for a while.»



«So why are you using a daguerreotype and not another process?»

It's the best. It creates such beautiful contrasts and brings out all the details of your eyes, your face, your hair, your dress. You will not recognize yourself as the picture is much clearer than any mirror can ever show you».

The woman laughed.

«That cannot be true».

«Wait until you see the picture». Emily smiled at her warmly.

«But how do you do it? I still don't know.»

«I expose a silver-plated copper sheet to iodide. This then creates a light sensitive coating. Then the plate has to be exposed to light for, let's say 40 minutes, maybe a little less, maybe a little more. That is the art of photography.

«I understand.»

«No, no. It is not finished then. Last you have to hold it over mercury vapours and then use hypo solution to fix it. »



Enraptured, I was listening to Emily's explanation, not sure I understood anything she said at all. Julien pulled me by the sleeve. He had finally finished eating and wiped his mouth, then he put down his napkin.

«Let's go.»

«Where?»

«The *Wylersfeld*. Come on.»

«Of course. »

I was on my feet at once. Uncle Vanya, we'd have to find him. The French soldiers. My heart began beating faster. Might we even run into Mustapha again? Would he be brought to Bern too? Maybe we would see each other again. It was possible. Was it possible? *What was I thinking?*

Slowly we tiptoed towards the entrance.

«Where are you going?»

«Emily, we will be back in the evening, if that is alright. We leave the suitcases here.»

«No, wait. You cannot go on your own.»

«Please don't worry, » I added. Julien had already opened the door and we had slipped out into the cold February afternoon. He shut the door behind him. It wasn't as chilly as in the Jura Mountains, somehow the walls of the big city sheltered us from the cold. I guess it was definitely a couple of degrees Celsius above freezing. We walked away from the house, as fast as we could, walking upwards towards the station. It would be a long way and suddenly I felt faint and tired.

«Let's take the omnibus back to the station. I am so exhausted. This day is simply too long.»

«It wasn't me who wanted to get up so early, sis.»

«No, it was you who wanted to go back home with mother.» Julien scowled at me. I shoved him lightly.

«Come on, brother, no hard feelings.»

— (Mitgetheilt.) Die für Bern ankommenden Internirten sollen sämmtlich auf dem Wylerfeld aussteigen und dort in den Schießständen ärztlich untersucht werden, um hernach je nachdem in die für sie bestimmte Lokale geführt zu werden. Wir vernehmen soeben von amtlicher Seite, daß heute um 10 Uhr in Neuenburg ein erster Transport Internirter als Vortrab nach Bern instradirt wurde. Dieselben werden vorläufig nach Egun geführt.

«How do we even know where to go?

Do you know where the *Wylerfeld* is? I cannot see any fields where barracks were built now, I couldn't see any when we came.»

«No, of course I don't know where it is. But surely at the station someone knows where we can find it. Some of the army officers are bound to know. We shall start there.»

«I guess that works. But we still don't have money.»

«Well, Alonzo liked you a lot, he may let you ride for free again.»

«Very funny. And what about you. Will you have money to pay?»

Julien only shrugged, giving me that large broad smile I had always loved.

«I am your brother. Come on, sis.»



«Ah, *Bellezza*, and Julien. Going back to the station?»

Alonzo pulled up his carriage and stopped in the *Kramgasse*, the cobbled main street of the large capital. I could see he had four horses now. *Sonatore* and *Admiratore del Sol* looked strong and well, but there were two black horses taller than them, strongly built with thick manes but thinner, in fact rather emaciated, now that I took a closer look. One of them was even limping.

«In fact we are going to the station, but we still- .»

«There is room for the both of you. Come on. Get on. Don't worry, don't worry. *Non preoccuparsi.*»

«*Grazie.*» I said proudly. Thank you. It was one of the few Italian words I did know.

«*Ma tu, parli italiano?*» He seemed overjoyed at me speaking his native tongue but I had still no idea what he'd said.

«Sorry, that's all I know.» I answered him in French. He smiled at me. I felt his eyes linger on my body and I must say, I didn't like his look. But then, the moment had passed and he clicked his tongue and *Sonatore* and *Admiratore del Sol* as well as the two newcomers started trotting up the broad road. Soon enough the main street of *Bern* changed its name to *Marktgasse*, then *Spitalgasse* the closer up to the station you got. That much I knew already.

«Going home again so soon?»

He shouted from the rooftop so we'd hear him.

«No, in fact, we are here to find our Uncle Vanya.»



He stopped at the *Zytglogge* tower, climbed down from the roof and joined us in the carriage.

«Time for rest.»

«You're resting? Here?»

«Jeronimo and Zephyr are exhausted. They need some rest.»

«Your new horses?»

«Imagine I've just bought them from the French cavalry. A horse like this easily costs 1000 Swiss francs, even more. Each. They're Carthusian, bred for the Crown of Castile in the middle ages, then their ancestors were stolen from Spain by Napoléon I's army and bred in France. Beautiful, beautiful animals. They only need some food and rest. What I need now is a second carriage and another driver, then they will pull a second omnibus. They're strong. Horses for war. Horses for Emperors. I will be rich.»

I hoped indeed he wouldn't give us more historical facts, I was too tired to process any more European history, but luckily, he didn't.

«You should have come to Bern yesterday. Hundreds of French cavalry arrived in Bern. What was it? Maybe 2 o'clock? A little after lunch. What a spectacle. The people of Bern flocked to the streets to see the many cuirassiers, chasseurs and gendarmes. Some of them from Africa. Imagine. »

Now, I was wide awake. Maybe Mustapha Ben of Turkoja had indeed come to Bern?

«- and they brought 100 extra horses. Then they took them through the Upper Gate, up onto the *Grosse Schanze*, the Big Sconce And imagine. Today, they've sold them. I couldn't believe my luck. I only paid the officer 300 Swiss Francs for both of them. Imagine. Both of them. Jeronimo and Zephyr. What beauties. I will be rich. I am rich. These horses are priceless. »

I smiled. If he said so.



Neuestes.

— Gestern um 2 Uhr kamen durch das Narbergerthor etwa 4—500 französische Kavallerie mit etwa 100 überzähligen Pferden in Bern an. Es waren viele Kürassiere, theils Chasseurs, theils Gendarmen. Von den Letztern trug eine Anzahl noch Schußwaffen. Die ziemlich lange Cavalcade bewegte sich unter dem Zudrange einer großen Zuschauermenge zum Obern Thor hinaus auf die große Schanze, wo Ross und Reiter ihr Wahl erhielten. Ebendasselbst befanden sich einige größere Abtheilungen französische Fußtruppen, welche noch am gleichen Nachmittag weiter befördert werden sollten. [31]

— Die französischen Offiziere verkaufen ihre Pferde und zwar bisweilen zu den spottbilligsten Preisen. So versichern Augenzeugen, daß Pferde, die einen Werth von 800—1000 Fr. repräsentiren, zu 150 - 300 Fr. verkauft werden.

— Wie wir schon gestern mittheilten, werden die angekommenen Flüchtlinge vom Publikum reichlich beschenkt. Eine rührende Scene bildete es, als ein altes Bauernmütterchen zu den zwischen dem Bahnhof und Spital befindlichen Soldaten trat und ihnen warmen Kaffee — gewiß etwas Willkommenes in diesem Augenblick — brachte. So klein die Gabe war, sie war gewiß recht gut gemeint.

«What are *cuirassiers*? »

Julien asked curiously. I looked at him from the side. Since when did he take an interest in military and warfare? He was indeed growing up. Was this down on his upper lip? I hadn't really discovered the dark spot before. It was painful to watch him. His face eager to know more about the art of killing, it scared me. *Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not kill.* And yet, we did, yet we do.

« You want to know what *cuirassiers* are? They are cavalry wearing armours.»

Alonzo answered quickly. He seemed to know everything, but then he also had met about everyone passing through the city and he obviously liked the talking.

«A *cuirass* are two metal plates which cover your torso.»

He hit Julien on the chest with the back of his left hand.

«Here, a chest plate and a plate on the back. But it's heavy. They say they can take 3 musket shots at close range. But one of the men told me yesterday that wasn't true. They could, if they were lucky, take one shot fired at long range. Most of them *cuirassiers* died. They took very heavy losses in the war.»

He sighed out loud, then smacked his lips.

«Look, here. He gave me a picture as he had no money for the omnibus.

Impressive, right?» I looked at the men, they were handsome and stood so straight,

yet some of them looked tired. Then I froze. Was the man who sat in the middle black? I couldn't really tell.



I gave him back the photography and got out Uncle Vanya's picture from my purse.

«Have you seen this man? He is with the French army, maybe with the cuirassiers. I don't know.»

Alonzo studied the picture closely, running his thumb around Vanya's hair as if to give him a new haircut.

«Please don't do that. It's the only picture we have.»

«*No, mi dispiace.* I am sorry. I haven't seen him. But if you give me the picture I will ask around.»

«No,» I said, «Thank you, but, we are keeping the picture. We only have this one.»

«In fact, let me keep the picture for my services.» At once and without further warning, he put uncle Vanya's picture into the pocket of his coat and started moving.

«No, I cannot let you have it, it is the only one we have.» I held out my hand to get the picture back. He simply ignored me, climbing out of the carriage.

«Give us back the picture.» I said more determinately, looking fearfully at Julien.

«What picture?»

«What do you mean? The picture I have just given you.»

«You have given me no picture.»

«My sister has just given you a picture of our uncle.»

«Has she? I cannot remember.»

He got out, climbed onto the roof and with a jolt the omnibus started moving again.

«*Mon Dieu*, he stole Uncle Vanya's picture. What does he want with it?»

« I don't know, but we must get it back. What will Emily say if we tell her we lost the picture?»

«But how can we get it back?»

«No, idea, sis. Let's think of something.» I looked at him, aghast. What were we to do? I had in no way expected such brazenness.

When we arrived at the station, I climbed out the carriage and onto the roof where I sat next to Alonzo. Boldly, I held out my hand.

«The picture. Now.» He turned his cheek and pointed at it with his right index finger.

«You want me to slap you?» I raised my arm, but he caught it midway and squeezed it so hard it hurt despite the thick winter coat I was wearing.

«Ouch! Stop that.»

«*Bacio*. Kiss me.» I was so taken aback that I went all limp. Kiss him? Was he serious?

«No.» I said, «No.»

«No? Then *no* picture.»

I looked down at Julien. I could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe that was happening either. I made a decision quickly.

«Ok» I said. «Close your eyes. Turn your head.»

Obligingly, he did, savouring what was to come. I moved my lips towards his face, then reached as fast as I could into his pocket, pinched uncle Vanya's picture and jumped off the box that held the driver's seat. Upon landing on the frozen ground, I nearly sprained my ankle and Julien quickly reached out for me so I wouldn't drop down.

«*Ladra*.» I heard him say from above.

«I beg your pardon?» I looked up at my harasser.

«*Ladra*.»

«I still don't know what that means.»

«You little thief.»

He said and then he started laughing out loud.



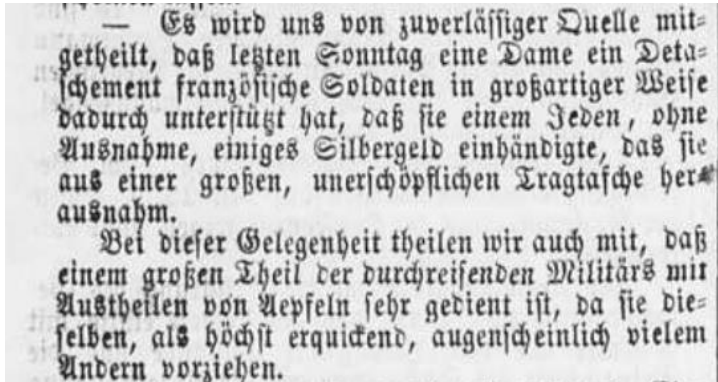
I am just too tired to keep describing everything in detail. I must be telling this story faster, -too many trivialities. Julien has already called me twice and we want to go out again to look for Vanya. It is already Thursday and I am catching up, writing under yesterday's heading, for I got home so very late, I was too tired to write even one word. So, I've been up for more than an hour writing yesterday's diary entry. To cut a long story short: After walking for a good hour, all the way up to the *Wylerfeld*, from the station, it is up, up up-, we realised it all to be in vain. Uncle Vanya was not there. None of the military officers, nor any of the doctors or French soldiers recognized his picture. All we could see were soldiers in red trousers and capes held together by rags and tatters. They were in a deplorable state and some of them looked like looters and they probably were.

The Swiss army officers examined them, gave them bread and soup and cigars. They also realized the French government had failed to keep their end of the bargain: The poor men needed shoes and we were not going to pay for that as well. Let's see if the French will. The Red Cross had already sent out calls for shoes and boots in the *Feuille d'Avis de la ville de Bern*. We will restore whatever shoes will be collected, even if old and torn. Well, I shouldn't say „we“ for I won't be mending shoes. But I feel I am very much a part of this. It is such a great, joint effort to care for these poor men, it makes me happy, it makes me proud. And yet, proud we should not be. Pride in

being Swiss, in being French, Pride in being German or Austrian or any other nation has brought much pain and many wars, including this one.



When we finally got back to the station, without having achieved a thing, we ran into hundreds, maybe even thousands of soldiers arriving at the station in Bern. People from all over had come out to welcome and to care for them. I saw an old, wrinkled farmer's wife bring hot coffee, never mind her flask was empty at once. It was a small gesture, but it touched my heart and it sure did warm the hearts of the few French soldiers who enjoyed her coffee. I even saw a well-dressed lady with an



elegant black hat and her maid who accompanied her. They both handed out many, many silver coins until the lady's purse was obviously empty. I couldn't count

how much she gave away, but I think many a soldier did profit from her loving kindness. And I wondered what bliss it must be to give so freely to the needy instead of fearing they would steal from you. If you empty your purse to the destitute, surely you wouldn't need to be afraid to be robbed. She looked so wild and free and happy, not scared at all and I wished I knew her name, but I was too shy to ask. And then, she was gone, and so was her maid.



And then.

Then. I mean I cannot *not* write about this.

I saw Mustapha.

Seeing him came as a complete shock.

I admit I had been looking for him and yet I didn't expect to *really* see him. I feared to see him.

Feared it so much.

He stood tall and alone at the gate before the hospice near the station, looking away from me, smoking a cigarette. I now know where the hospital is, it is on the other side of the station where I hadn't seen it the morning we arrived. I looked into his dark, kind eyes, quickly I looked away. Then I looked at him again, but avoided his eyes. He was wearing a fresh, smart jacket in blue, wide red trousers, with blue stripes and a red woollen belt. How handsome he looked in the African uniform. My heart began racing, from the cold, from the exhaustion of the day and I stood stock-still while waves and waves of French soldiers were flooding and heaving around me. I heard their voices, I felt their plight and yet, I only gazed at him, my anchor in the sea, my troubling new friend. Riding above them all was: Mustapha Ben of Turkoja, Algerian rifleman and when he finally saw me, after what seemed an eternity, I smiled.



I walked towards Mustapha as if in trance, losing my dear brother, Julien in the 'tramping crowd', the throng of people milling at the station. In fact, I did forget all about Julien for a moment, totally oblivious to him travelling with me or even him being my brother. When I had finally reached Mustapha, I stopped right before the gate of the *Burger Hospice*, the citizen's hospital where he stood. He took my hand in his and teased me.

«Mademoiselle Marie. You again? Are you on some great Arab hunt? Well. You've found me. Guilty as charged.»

I laughed out loud.

«Why hunt? I have no intention of killing you.»

«No? Well, I am glad then. Because you really are killing me.»

I didn't know what to say and decided to ignore his last sentence. What in the world could he mean? I was thunderstruck. I couldn't think clearly. Here he was. So many hours I had spent dreaming about him, about us.

«I cannot believe that I've found you.»

I couldn't help but smile at him.

«What are you doing here? We keep meeting. This is the third time already. You are following me?»

«No, of course not. » I looked up at him and we both smiled. For a moment the world had stopped spinning.

«We are still looking for Uncle Vanya. Let me show you his picture.» I said eagerly, fumbling in my bag for Emily's picture and mighty glad I could lower my face. I could barely look at him. My cheeks were glowing. My hands were shaking

and it took me a while to get it out. Standing so close to Mustapha again, it was most confusing, most stimulating.

I held the picture up for him to see and quite naturally, he grabbed me by the wrist to pull the picture closer. I nearly fainted, feeling very weak.

«He looks young. Didn't you say he was past 50?»



As much as I wish, I cannot nearly remember the exact wording of our conversation for everything was in such a haze. But, I felt invigorated and somehow I ended up walking alongside him. We walked all the way down to the French church where he was to stay for the night.

«How lucky you are to sleep in a church and not the horse-riding school. Sleeping in a church, that must be something. I have only ever been to church for a service. I couldn't imagine laying my head down in the pews. It would be too exciting.»

«I am just glad we have a roof over our heads, you cannot imagine what places we slept in beyond the Swiss border.»

«Why are you fighting for the French anyway?»

«I am French.»

«You're French? But not a Christian? How can you be French then? *Impossible.*

I thought you were-.»

«I was what?»

«Well, not French. Definitely not.»

«Well, you're wrong. My father is Marshal MacMahon, The *French* Governor-General of Algeria.»

«He is not? Isn't he famous?» I exclaimed in utter astonishment.

I had heard of Marshal MacMahon before, but couldn't place his name nor say exactly what he was famous for. But I remembered Uncle Vanya and father mentioning his name repeatedly. I always thought it was funny to have a French warlord with an Irish name. And now, he was Mustapha's father?

Mustapha was laughing.

«No, you're right, he is not, but I sometimes I wish he was. Maybe life then wouldn't be so complicated.»

«But, you are French?»

«*Oui, Mademoiselle*, I am French, *tout à fait*, by all means. And no, not a Christian. But to be honest, I don't know who my father is. Some unknown French soldier, officer, blacksmith. Theoretically, Marshal MacMahon could be my father. My mother was from Mascara.»

«Not Turkoja? I thought you were from Turkoja?»

«No, I am Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara. Turkoja is my family name.»

«Of course.»

«I am French too. My father is French.»

«*Et voilà, Mademoiselle*. We're both French then. *Vive la France*. »

He raised his arm.

«*Vive la Suisse*,» I countered.

«*Et la Suisse. Bien sur. -Of course.*»



Thursday, February 9, 1871

«Marie, are you coming. Breakfast is ready.»

«I am coming.»

I will write more later. I simply can't right now.

Friday, February 10, 1871

I am just too busy with everything dearest Emily has planned for us. She is quite the character. And she has so many ideas. The ball on Sunday. My brand new dress. Her Photography. The studio. So much has happened. Yesterday, Alonzo took us on a tour all the way up to the station and then down to the bear's pit and up again. Those bears. I was thrilled to see them from so close and appalled at once, to see how their liberty was so terribly stripped away from them. They were wild animals after all, not some pet an emperor could possess, not some emblem a city could keep and deal with at liberty. Alonzo said Bern wasn't called Bern because of the bears, but because of something to do with the Italian city of Verona in Tuscany being called *Bern* in middle-High German. Sometimes, I wonder if he simply makes all this up as he goes along. Whatever the case may be, his *grand tour de Bern* was most illuminating. It was so exciting. Julien says I have found myself a suitor. He says Alonzo keeps glaring at me

when I don't look his way. But I haven't really noticed. He seems just friendly and I like it when he makes me laugh. If he asks me to dance with him at the ball, I will say 'yes'. If he even comes to the ball. Emily said I shouldn't do that and go with Julien instead. But who goes to a ball with his brother as a partner? I wish I could ask Mustapha, but I can't.

I will write more as soon as I can. We haven't found Uncle Vanya yet. But, I mustn't give up hope yet. Dear, dear Vanya. I couldn't imagine life on *La Maison Blanche* without him. Not after father is gone. We must find him. No matter what. We must. I am sorry, I have to run. Julien is calling me again. I will write more tomorrow. I promise.

Sunday, February 12, 1871

The ball would have been tonight, but I have missed it. My beautiful beige dress with the gorgeous, fine lace, handwoven and carefully crafted in the city of *St. Gallen*, the sartorial masterpiece Emily had bought me; it hangs exactly where she hung it for me; on the wardrobe by the piano in her atelier. Such a long story. I don't know where to start.



Today the skies are yellow. The air is so dense, full of colours I have never seen. It is quite a spectacle. I wonder what makes the clouds so bright, so eerie.

«It's the dust from the Sahara.» Mustapha claimed.

«Sahara? The desert? In Africa? » I laughed at him.

«Yes, I guess. Can you imagine anything else that would bring such bright colours to these dull, dark regions? I know that colour. That colour is home, my home.»

«But how could it get here. Colours don't travel, do they?»

«The poison winds. They sweep up fine grains from our huge sand dunes in Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, Lybia, Egypt. All over. Then, the winds blow the fine sand hither and tither. And they blow it here. The simoom winds don't know any borders.»

«The simoom?»

«Our strongest, hottest, driest desert winds. They are so hot and often rise up so unexpectedly, you can die of a heatstroke if you don't find shelter in time.»

«Heatstroke? Right. But not here. It's more likely you die of hypothermia here.» I said.

«Hypothermia?» He asked.

«When the cold kills you.»

«I can imagine that. We nearly died from the cold outside Belfort before we made it across the border to Switzerland.»

Would he tell me more now? What he had gone through before he came here, must have been awful. I will have to find the courage and the time to listen to it soon, but not right now, I couldn't. I wasn't even sure yet I could trust him with the sand.

«You know, I think you're lying. How can this be sand from the Sahara? I mean, that's hundreds and hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away, right? »

«I told you, it's the winds.»



«It is getting chilly.» I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck.

«We have walked quite far out from the city. Would you like to turn back? I am aware we shouldn't be alone. Unchaperoned.» I laughed out loud.

«Unchaperoned?»

«Why, don't you know what it means, peasant girl?»

«I do know what it means. I may be a peasant girl, but my parents taught me good manners.»

«They have? Really? I wouldn't really think so after today.»

I blushed. Still feeling such shame.

«I was trying to save you.»

«You were. Thank you. Sorry, I haven't said that before. Thank you. You did save me. Coming to think of it, you are incredibly brave. You know that, don't you?»



I took a deep breath. If I had saved him indeed, well then it might have been worth it.

«But, I do wonder you should know that word. Unchaperoned? Have you learned it in the army?» I was teasing him.

«No, I didn't, but really, we should turn back. I wouldn't want you to be compromised.» Now, he was teasing me.

«This is most ridiculous.» I scowled at him, «I am compromised already, and I don't want to go back.» In fact, I'd rather die than go back to the city.

«Don't you?»

He stopped and looked at me so intensely that I shivered. I shook my head silently. A glimpse of intimacy. Then, without giving me any warning, he pulled me closer, held my face between his hands. Then he let me go, then he stepped back and turned around. I shivered. What had happened? What was he doing? He had started walking again and I followed him. But, the innocence filling the void between us was gone.



«I simply love the woods and the occasional sight of the river below. From afar it's silver, it's a dark, greyish silver. don't you think? The water? It's so beautiful. Isn't it amazing how naked the trees are now in February with all their leaves gone? Look at their fine branch work. How-. »

My throat was sore and my voice was creaking from all my prattling. I continued speaking quickly to cover up what I had uttered so thoughtlessly. I really hadn't wanted to say 'naked' in front of a man, and a handsome stranger, and especially not after what had happened today. Yet, the word has come out so naturally. I couldn't take it back, so I just carried on.

«And the birds, there is a woodpecker. Can you hear it? It must be right here.» I stopped, laid my head back, listened carefully and looked up in the direction I guessed the woodpecker was perched on a tall tree. But I couldn't see it.

He nodded, he smiled at me and then we kept on walking.

«Yes, the empty trees,» stressing the word empty. And now it was me who smiled at him.

«They look like skeletons at a waterhole after the lions retire.»

«That is cruel.»

«Or after *you* are through with a herd of gazelles. Would you kill gazelles? »

«You're macabre.» I scowled at him.

«I didn't mean to vex you.»

«But, you did.»

«Wouldn't you kill a gazelle?»

«I don't know. I have never seen one in real. Is it like a deer?»

«Yes, dear.»

«You're funny. Mustapha. »

I had stopped walking again and turned towards him. I was scowling at him. He was so close now. My knees felt weak, my heart was beating faster. I felt faint. Underneath the thick soles of my laced boots, I could feel the hard, small, sharp chisels. High treetops sheltered us from the yellow fogs that still ran across the skies bringing more and more sand grains from the Sahara, if this celestial phenomenon was even caused by desert sand grains at all. Mustapha had stopped as well and stepped even closer. His shoes were touching mine. I could see the dirt on his boot. The warmth of his body was tangible now. A glimpse of intimacy. Infinity. Again. Then, he took my hands into his hands and waited. His hands were naked and dark on the outside, the inside was light. Without thinking I began stroking the lines on the inside of his left hand, tenderly caressing his leathery, yet soft skin. Slowly, he pulled off my gloves, reaching for my bare fingers. Our naked hands touched. Now,

my heart was racing. I felt hot, yet so cold. It was most, most, *most* confusing. My mind blanked. I shivered at his gentle touch. I held my breath. What next? We were alone indeed. How had I got here? So much has happened. Where to start?



Just a few moments ago, Mustapha and I had walked out of the packed city, passed underneath the high and mighty railway bridge to get away from the crowds. Too many people: civilians, military, women, men and children, but also dogs, chicken, geese and far too many horses were milling the streets of Bern. Such commotion and such noise. We needed a break. I needed a break. First, we carried on along the river, but then when the path along the watercourse abruptly ended, we found ourselves climbing up a steep hill. Beavers had cut down a couple of large mighty willows and it would have been too dangerous to venture beyond their dam. Somehow, we had then ended up in this endless, magic forest that was stripped of its green by gruesome winter tide. There were large, bare oak trees, some green fir trees, but not too many, there were small bushes and low shrubs, all around us the magic, endless forest stretched.

Occasionally, a rider on horseback passed us, nodding his greeting towards us. We nodded back, smiling happily. Mustapha and I kept meeting, our separate paths criss-crossing, and I cannot begin to describe how thankful I was, how thankful I am for having found him, -again. Despite the circumstances. Despite everything

that has happened. How exciting it was being with Mustapha Ben Murkoja of Tascara. Never before have I felt anything like this.



But let's start at the beginning. After lunch today, Julien and I had met Christian Monnier at the *Café Fédéral* on the *Bärenplatz*. He had come to Bern on a mission of the Red Cross and was staying in town for a couple of days. Over a cup of steaming hot coffee served with whipped cream and *schnapps*, strong liquor, he told us that he had heard of an elderly soldier who could not remember his very own name: A soldier who was too frail, too old for service, a soldier whose description might fit Uncle Vanya. His contacts said this man had been taken to *Aarwangen*, a small place between Bern and the city of *Olten*, now an urban settlement, of paramount importance for the railway, but originally dating back to Roman times. Not that I would know any of this, but Christian is so learned, and was filling us in on all the details. He said Uncle Vanya, most likely was taken to aforementioned *Aarwangen*, a village on Switzerland's East-West trade routes. He said it was likely we had just missed him. He also said we were to contact Daniel Friedrich Jaggi, the local pastor, for more information, once we got there.

Julien and I were overjoyed at this good news and my brother decided at once to take the next train to *Aarwangen* and find out more about this elderly soldier who did not remember his own name. Maybe, we were lucky. Maybe this soldier who didn't remember, was indeed Uncle Vanya.

I accompanied Julien to the station and then decided to go back to Emily's photostudio to tell her the good news myself and to prepare everything for Uncle Vanya's return. Someone should also write to poor mother. How worried she must be. Being so caught up in the bustle of big city life, I had forgotten all about her and *La Maison Blanche* at *Hautevue*. I felt guilty. But I really couldn't write to her yet. I didn't want to get her hopes high and I wouldn't have known what to tell her anyway. And, to tell the truth, I didn't want her to know just yet where we were. What if she came to Bern to get us? What if our quest was ended prematurely?



I was on my way back from the station, when I decided to stroll once more over the *Bärenplatz*, the large cobbled square I had begun to love so much for its many lively restaurants and taverns, its beautiful market with fine, fresh produce: blue goat cheese, large trouts from the *Aare* river, sweet onions bigger than apples, leek, carrots, potatoes, even honey, whatever your heart desired. They sold the most wonderful dainties here. A little detour wouldn't hurt, so I told myself not knowing what lay in store.

Also, I couldn't get enough of looking at our *Palace Fédéral*, imagining all the important business that went on there. Christian had told us the Swiss Confederation had issued bonds for 15 million Swiss Francs to pay for the military asylum of the French army. Could you imagine. 15 million Swiss francs? And the Swiss government will pay the money back with a 4.5% interest rate. That once again was another 675'000 Swiss francs. Where did we take all this money from? Who was

Um den Anforderungen genügen zu können, welche die starke Grenzbesetzung, die Aufnahme einer französischen Armee, die Vervollständigung der Feldmächtigkeits unserer eigenen Heeres und andere Umstände an die Staatskasse stellen, hat sich der Bundesrath entschlossen, ein Anleihen von 15 Millionen aufzunehmen. Das Dekret lautet:

Der Schweiz. Bundesrath, gestützt auf die ihm unter dem 16. Juli 1870 erteilte und unter dem 22. Christmonat gl. J. erneuerte Vollmacht, auf den Antrag des eidgen. Finanzdepartements beschließt: Art. 1. Die Eidgenossenschaft wird auf dem Wege einer öffentlichen Subscription ein Anleihen von 15 Millionen aufnehmen, worin 6,700,000 Fr. zur Tilgung der im Juli und August 1870 ausgegebenen sproletartigen Kassascheine begriffen sind.

Art. 2. Die Emission geschieht zum Kurse von 97 1/2 und es werden auf den Inhaber lautende Obligationen ausgestellt, welche zu 4 1/2 % verzinslich sind.

Art. 3. Die Verzinsung des Anleihe ist kostenfrei für die Obligationeninhaber und findet je am 31. August und 28. Hornung statt bei der Bundeskasse und bei den eidgenössischen Hauptzoll- und Kreispostkassen. Die gleiche Zahlung kann auch im Auslande bei Bankhäusern erfolgen, deren nähere Bezeichnung später stattfinden wird.

Art. 4. Die Rückzahlung des Anleihe erfolgt frühestens in sechs Jahren vom 31. August 1871 an gerechnet und soll spätestens in 15 Jahren, also bis 1886 vollendet sein. Der Bundesrath behält sich vor, nach Ablauf der 6 Jahre das ganze Anleihen auf sechsmonatliche öffentliche Kündigung hin auf ein Mal oder von ihm jenseits näher zu bestimmen, ebenfalls 6 Monate vorher bekannt zu machenden Raten zurückzahlen.

Wird die Rückzahlung ratenweise vorgenommen, so ist die Reihenfolge durch Auslosung zu bestimmen.

Art. 5. An den nämlichen Kassen (Art. 3), wo die Zinsen entrichtet werden, können auf die Verfallszeit die Kapitalbeträge ebenfalls kostenfrei erhoben werden. (Schluß folgt.)

Bern. Gestern Nachmittags langten ungefähr 100 deutsche Verwundete in Bern an und setzten ihre Reise nach Basel fort.

going to pay so many, many millions?

Thousands of Francs? Where would all that money come from? It was a complete riddle to me. Christian had said the French will pay us back. But how can the French pay back 15 million Swiss francs? They were bankrupt. They've lost the war to *Kaiser Wilhelm I*, the German emperor and Bismarck, their new, ambitious chancellor. I didn't understand it.



Disaster started to strike, when I saw Alonzo and his omnibus from afar. The carriage was pulled by only two horses today: Sognatore and Adoratore del Sole. He had stopped the carriage before the *Gambrinus*, a tavern Emily said I should

avoid by all means. But where were Zephyr and Jeronimo, the two Carthusians he had bought so cheap from a French officer? I didn't see them.

And what was causing this commotion? There was a large crowd, mainly men in French uniform in front of the *Gambrinus*. First, I didn't understand what the loud dispute was all about. When I got closer, I heard Alonzo's loud voice. He was in rage.

«Give me my money back. The horses were not yours to sell.»



«What does the Italian know about my horses? *Bien sur*, they are mine to sell.

They were with me since this bloody war started. Mine. You get it? Mine . »

«Then why did the Swiss authorities confiscate them? They took them from me. Do you understand? They weren't yours to sell in the first place. You frog eater. They belong to France and now, as you're here, they belong to the Swiss. Someone has to pay for -.» He shoved him and the French soldier turned around angrily.

«Of course, they were mine. I don't want to hear this imbecile's accusations anymore. A deal is a deal. Let's go.»

The French officer turned to his friend and tried to leave the scene. At this moment Alonzo pulled out a large knife. The crowd fell silent.

«Is this a Bowie knife?» I heard the men next to me ask his neighbour. What was it with men that they had to name even their weapons and knives? A Bowie knife? What did I care? It looked deadly and dangerous enough. Alonzo was

threatening a French army officer at knifepoint while dozens of French soldiers surrounded the two. I was really so worried for him.

There was a loud murmuring as the crowd began to move back, thus clearing a small arena for the two gamecocks. Some of the spectators were climbing onto the brim of the fountain to see better what was going on. From where I was standing, it didn't look like this was going to be a fair fight, for only Alonzo had knife. But then, there was half of Napoléon III's army present, maybe that wasn't fair either. I didn't know what to think nor how to assess this conflict.

Right now, there was nothing I could do. It was at this very moment that I held my breath. The French army's officer's friend turned around and I saw at once that it was Mustapha Ben Murkoja of Tascara. Mustapha here? He, here? Then, I saw the long, sharp silver blade in his left hand. I gasped. Alonzo and Mustapha fighting? With knives?



«*Nigger*, what do you want here? This is between me and him. I don't fight with savages. Get out. And you. French officer. You coward. Come back. Come here and fight like a man. Like a man. Why would you let one of the savages fight for you? Coward. Coward. *Che Coniglio*.»

Alonzo spit out the words, full of hate and indignation. I nearly fainted. I had never really heard that word, *nigger*, spoken out loud, but I understood at once that it was the worst possible insult ever. The worst you could think of, the worst you could say and now it was out there in the open, floating in the air like a fiery bullet. I was

appalled by such hostility. Such enmity. Such aggression. Alonzo, who had been so friendly with me and Julien, turned out to be so aggressive? I found that hard to believe. But the evidence was right before me. And him I should accompany to the ball tonight? I felt a pang of doubt. But I had no time to think about the ball.

The dance began. Mustapha stepped forward, trying to slit Alonzo's face, but the Italian moved back swiftly, thus avoiding the sharp blade. Before I could take one more breath, he was crossing over to the other side of the arena. *En guard*. They both stood stock-still for a second. Ready to charge again and then-. I couldn't look and covered my eyes. All I could do was rely on my hearing and the crowd's reaction was immediate: A murmur went through the many throats. I was screeching out loud, as the spectators shoved me, while moving back a couple of steps, to give more room to the two contestants. I had opened my eyes immediately again. Now, it was Alonzo's turn. He was prancing on the balls of his feet and swinging out his knife while crossing the arena to get to the other side where Mustapha was ready to deal him another blow.

I couldn't stand this a second longer and without thinking what I was doing, I stepped forward, into the middle of the empty circle, held out both my arms horizontally showing the palm of my hand to either man.

«Stop», I cried.

«Stop this at once. This is insane.»

But they didn't hear me, or they didn't want to hear me and simply danced their cruel war dance around me, slashing at each other with their knives, nearly hitting me as well.

«Marie, get out of the way.» Mustapha panted. I hardly recognized his voice.

I could hear the noise of the blades whirring as they cut through the cold air like bolts of lightning. There was a silent hissing, an intense soaring of the knives I had never heard before. It sounded like the rising wind before an evil thunder storm. Soaring, soaring high. It sounded like the golden eagle's mighty wings bushwhacking its prey over the snowy alpine summits. I had to do something, but what? Do what, before the eagle stroke, before all hell broke loose, before one of them was dead?



I cannot say what devil got into me, but somehow all this reminded me of my two little twin sisters, Rose and Blanche, fighting when they were little and how I would usually stop them then. It was a reflex. Nothing more. I bent forward, pulled up my skirts, pulled up my camisole, then pulled down my stockings and showed my naked derrière first to Mustapha, then to Alonzo. It had become dead-still. Quiet. Peace. Finally. The trick usually had done its job and it seemed to work now.

They stopped, they did stop and looked, and looked and looked.

I lifted my head, -slightly turning my face, for my hair had come away- and then I could see them all stare. All these men. Stare. At my naked buttocks. Before I could even drop my camisole again, the crowd began to roar with laughter. Such cheering. From the corner of my eye, I could see three men on the fountain brim. I saw how they spun around, and fell into the empty basin, so hard they were laughing. The men couldn't stop, wouldn't stop. Next, one of them was trying to grab me, pulling my hair roughly so it was hurting me.

«Oh you bitch, come here. I'll have you right here.» He reached for his fly, wanting to undo his trousers, but I hit him right into his face and surprised at my strength, he let go. I ran. I fled. I ran.

That moment, I'll never forget.

Never Ever.

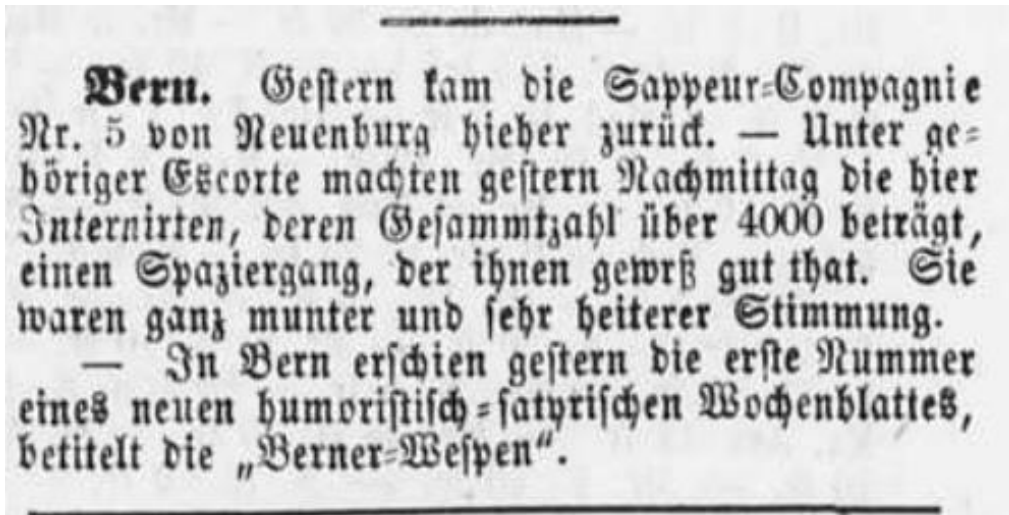
It wasn't as if I'd realize what I had done. For I didn't. I hadn't. But then: The humiliation. The shame. First, I really hadn't realized what I had done. But then, at once, I became aware and then, -. I was filled with such shame. As if I was Eve herself in that wretched garden, or rather the garden that was no more.

All I could do was run from the *Bärenplatz*, all I could do was run. Run, Run. What had I done? What had I done? What danger had I gotten myself into? *Mon Dieu. Mon Dieu.* Such shame. Such danger, such humiliation.

Yet, what I kept thinking was: I have stopped them. I have stopped them. They are not going to kill each other now. And somehow saving their lives was worth the enormous shame I felt, it was worth the enormous danger I had gotten myself into. I had saved their lives. I had saved Mustapha's life. And maybe Alonzo's. I had saved them both. Or so I was convinced. But what world was that where it took the bare ass of a woman to stop men from fighting? Now, really I must cross out this sentence. It is most vulgar, but then, I mean: wasn't it true?



I only stopped running when I was on the outskirts of the city, near the municipal riding hall where more French soldiers were accommodated. Large groups of them were promenading together along Bern's alleys. Their loud laughter frightened me, scared me beyond anything. Were they laughing about me?



Would they soon know what I had done? Would they all know: The whole city filled with roaring, raucous laughter of men? The whole country? My body was heaving from exerting myself so dreadfully, running all the way here from the town square, the *Bärenplatz*, finding my way through the throngs of people, civilians and soldiers only with such great effort. I was exhausted. I had to catch my breath. When I sat down, I saw that Mustapha had followed me. Faintly, I smiled at him. And he smiled back. Then we had started walking, then the beaver dam. You know.



Then, the woods, us holding hands. Mustapha. So gentle. So tender. Gentle. I could relax, I found peace. His eyes. His hands. Gentle. Then, the small cabin. He had

discovered it first. The small log cabin in the woods. We went inside and locked the door. Then, -. I cannot.

Inside the -, and when-

I whispered, «Will you marry me?» Never had I known such joy, such pure and perfect joy.

«Marie? Marie.» He was still panting.

I smiled and so did he. I have to stop here. All this is too much, I cannot write more. I am tired. Excited-. Beyond.

Beyond anything I can even begin to describe. What a Sunday. That I missed the ball thereafter goes without saying. And still, still we haven't found uncle Vanya. I mean how could I -.



Monday, February 13, 1871

I couldn't help but tell her. First, Emily was furious when, last night, I had locked myself in to write and wouldn't come out. But today, today, she was thrilled, when I told her about the debacle before the Gambrinus. First, she was worried alright, but she also thought it hilarious and wouldn't stop laughing.

«You showed them arses, your ass? Oh my -. Marie. How could these men put you, you poor damsel, in such distress that you would resort to such extraordinary and vulgar means. Showing your arse? To all these men? Marie? Really? I cannot get over it. It cannot be true.»

She savoured saying the word 'arse' and her genuine and easy-going response to what had been the worst plight in my life, helped me relax.

I had to join in her laughing, so funny was her reaction. We were both snorting out loud, holding on to each other while sitting on her chaise lounge.

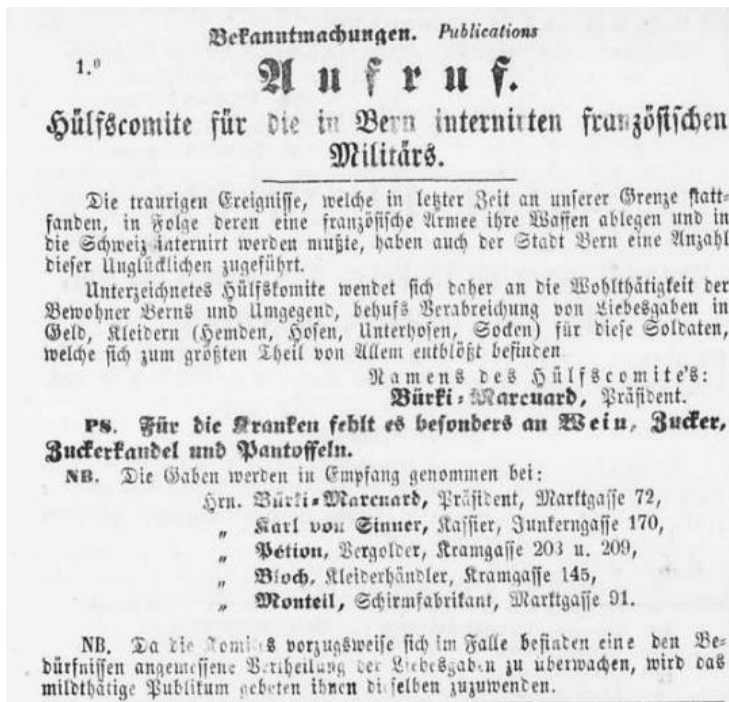
«You just pulled your stockings down? And your underwear? That is-. I mean Marie. Your naked *derrière*. Really? That is incredible. Incredible. Really, I cannot believe it. What a brilliant idea. And most daring. But what's harder to believe is that it really worked. They stopped. I mean, really? And then they did stop? A woman's nakedness stopping all their violence at once? So, they can gloat. Gloat, gloat, gloat. Not fight. Men. I mean. Men. They are such animals. »

She got up and was pacing up and down the studio so excited was she.

«I wouldn't have thought it took so little for them to stop their fights, to stop their wars. I always thought life on this planet would have to come to an end, so they'd stop and save the earth instead of fighting. But this. All it takes is us, women, undressing. And they stop. Why are we even wearing clothes? I mean, really. Oh my God. My dear Marie. What have you done? What courage and strength. Maybe we should just go naked always. It would bring down crime rate and it would end all wars.»

Exhausted, she dropped onto her fauteuil and leaned back.





«Look here. You're not the only one who is naked. It says the Red Cross still needs shirts, trousers, underwear and socks. They write that the majority of the poor, unhappy soldiers find themselves mostly bared of everything. Mostly bared of everything? Have you seen any naked men in the street?»

She looked up, her face at once dead-pan and so serious.

«Have you? Marie? Have you? »

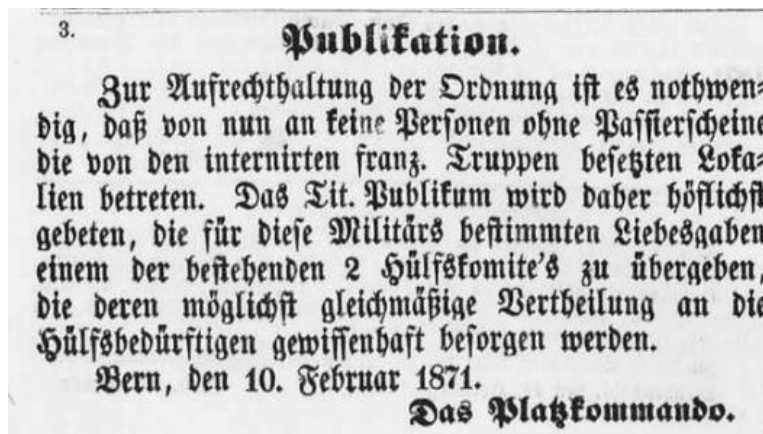
I nearly snorted out laughing, but it wasn't funny to laugh at the expense of the poor and half-naked French soldiers. I mean they looked awful, shattered from marching, exhausted by typhus and smallpox, and all of them half-starving, including their horses. It wasn't funny altogether. Not funny at all. I suppressed my giggles², feeling really bad for being so high on having fallen so completely and totally for Mustapha.

² Mae Lee Magellan declares a **Race Privilege Disclaimer Error Alert** (RPDEA). Marie, the protagonist and I-narrator, cannot understand her privilege being white. Her reaction here can, with a 98.767% chance, be perceived as racist. The margin, for this novel, to include RPDEA, was set at 99%

«And for the sick they need wine. And sugar. I'll have to go and check if I have some wine left in the cellar. We could take it down to *Bloch*, the merchant. You know the shop in *Marktgasse* that sells clothes? You might also need another new dress to wear during the day. The soldiers need wine. We can do two things at once. Wine and dress. Come on.»

But then, she kept reading and wouldn't get up. I wouldn't get up anyway and no, I wouldn't go anywhere, anywhere at all. She continued.

«See. We cannot take it ourselves. Obviously, Alonzo wasn't the only one who got into trouble with the French. It says to keep the public order all love gifts must be given to the Red cross and cannot be taken to the soldiers directly. Fair enough.»



«Well, I am not going to go anywhere. Not today. I really don't want to see anybody.»

«Well, I can understand that. They might start threatening each other at knifepoint each time they see you, just to see your-.»

I smiled weakly. In retrospect, I felt so awfully embarrassed. And no, I didn't think it would bring down the crime rate, nor end wars. That was just stupid babbling.

«Well, I am not gonna go anywhere. I shall just wait and see when Julien comes back from *Aarwangen*. He didn't get back last night, did he? »

«No, he didn't and neither did you. You also got back late. And then you locked yourself in and wouldn't come to the ball? I heard Alonzo was furious. He was swearing like some sailor at port all night.»

I blushed. No, I didn't want to talk about what happened that late. And gladly Emily didn't ask more. Or then, then she knew already. I couldn't tell and I didn't want to know.

Tuesday, February 14, 1871

«I mean, Daniel said-,»

«Who is Daniel?» I asked impatiently.

«Daniel Jaggi, the pastor of *Aarwangen*, don't you remember Marie? Christian told us at the *Café Fédéral*.”

I only nodded, eager to know more. Were we on the right track? I hadn't seen Julien so excited for a long time. He was sitting in front of a steaming hot cup of coffee Emily had just made for him in her photo studio. As he was ladling in mountains and mountains of sugar I looked at him reproachfully. Then Julien stopped, put the spoon down and reached for his notes.

«He wrote a report, that I copied. Let me read it for you, sis.»

He glanced down at his papers. I was so tense, I could hardly breathe.

«Daniel writes there are 500 French soldiers stationed in Aarwangen. They arrived in such a sorry stage, their uniforms torn, starving and frozen. Let's see-.The villagers brought fresh straw and blankets, so the poor devils could rest in the old school that was about to be torn down. Some of them were taken to the old storehouse where the poor used to be educated and that now served as an orphanage. The people of Aarwangen and the adjacent villages have cared for them so kindly and brought whatever was needed: Clothes, pants, underwear, socks, shoes. The French soldiers would also go and knock at their doors and people would invite them into their kitchen to sit by the fire. They would serve them coffee, a glass of wine and even spirits. As they said they were still engaged in a war, they were allowed to drink. Many of them being Muslims and Mohammad forbid them to drink alcohol. About 70 of them came from Northern Africa: Zouvaes, Algerian Riflemen, Moblots, Turkos, one of them really dark and tall. They were all vaccinated and carefully examined and treated by two doctors, Dr. Kummer and Dr. Sulser, I think. I am not sure I remember that correctly. Let's see. »

I wondered what the names mattered, but Julien was bent over his notes trying to find the correct passage.

«Come on, it doesn't matter what the doctors were called. Was Vanja there?»
Julien ignored my comment.

«Yes, Dr. Kummer. They've opened up three infirmaries to care for the sick and wounded in the last couple of days. One infirmary they've opened up in the clubhouse of the local rifle association. There they cared especially for soldiers suffering from smallpox and nerve fever. It must be strange resting in the clubhouse

of the rifle association while suffering from nerve fever caused by so much shooting in this terrible war.»

I nodded. Imagine that. But how kind of the Swiss rifle club to open their hearts to the needy soldiers from France and give them refuge. These days the strangest things were possible.

«I met Mohamed Ben Abdelkader, the son of the mayor of Biscara,» Julien glanced at his notes again.

«Soldier of the third regiment of the Algerian riflemen, 5th company, 3rd battalion. He was one of the few who could read and write and would therefore sit in the pastor's drawing room all day and write letters for the other soldiers. They wanted to let their families know they were safe. And alive. So many have died. It was strange to hear the foreign names when the bugles called them to attention: Muhamed Ben-Ab-elkader, wait. There are more.»

Julien took the next piece of paper and continued reading out loud.

«Ben Chaa ben Kador, Mohamed Ben Turkoja, Mahomed Ben Ahmed, El Kuschay, Caddor Ould El Arbi, Ali Ben Ibrahim, Ahmed Ben Chly. Daniel knew their names all by heart, but I had to write them down.»

«But, Uncle Vanya? Have you found Vanya?» I interrupted him although I was very keen on hearing more about other Algerian riflemen. So far I only knew Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara. Mascara, not Biscara. Julien had said Biscara, right? I added another question before Julien could even respond.

«Is it not Mascara, Julien. Mascara?»

«What?»

«Not Biscara. »

«No, Mohamed said Biscara, not Mascara. See, I took notes to remember Here.»

He looked at his notes again, ran his fingers along the lines, then nodded.

«Biscara».

«Biscara. Mascara. I don't get it. Turkoja, Murkoja. »

«Marie, what are you talking about? What do you know about any of these cities and names?»

I blushed and I could see how Emily looked at me sideways. She could so clearly read me. I would have to tell her eventually, just not now. Not just now.

«Uncle Vanya? Tell us. Have you found him?»

I said eagerly, trying to repress all these conflicting emotions.

«I haven't. No, I haven't found him. Not yet.»

What a blow. We all sat in silence. Would we ever find Uncle Vanya again? All of a sudden, I wasn't so sure I'd see him ever again. I lowered my head and tried hard not to start crying.

Week III

Wednesday, February 15, 1871

«*Marie, tu es où?*» Marie, where are you?

«Are you ready to go?»

Emily had packed six bottles of her best wine to take to the French soldiers and when she had finally arranged all she needed, she wanted to leave immediately.

«Just about. I am coming.»

Quickly I finished putting my hair up and pinching my cheeks once more. I looked so pale these days. We left the house and were walking up *Postgasse* towards the station. Both of us were carrying a small wicker basket with some bottles of *Elbling*, grown on the sunny terraces of Lake Thun. Emily had even packed one flask of *Pinot Noir*, her last one. The precious wine bottles were carefully wrapped in old

newspaper and lay snugly in our baskets, safe from breaking on the hard cobblestones underneath our feet.

«You look lovely today. That rosy glow of your cheeks. And your eyes. Marie, what has happened. Glowing, glowing. You are glowing. Mascara? Biscara? Come on, I can tell -.»

«Emily, not here.» I chuckled nervously. There were so many people in the streets and I feared someone would be listening in on our conversation.

«Is he French? An officer?»

«How did you guess?» I said, amazed she knew, although I wasn't sure whether Mustapha was an officer. I didn't care much for army ranks.

«Come on, it's not that hard. You came home late the other day, completely enraptured. Ever since you haven't been the same. Always absent, always dreamy. And? Will you be meeting again? You know I should be coming along. Your ->»

«Well, I hope so.» I had given in, it was better to tell her the truth. I needed a confidante.

«I think he is staying in the French church.» I giggled, not sure how to go on.

«Oh, that is great, let's pass the French church then.» She snickered like a teenage girl.

She reached out, clasping my hand, but I withdrew it at once.

«No, no, absolutely not.» I paled, then I blushed. My face felt so funny and quickly I touched my cheeks with both hands.

«Come on.»

«No, I can't.» I stood stock-still like a mule, looking at her pleadingly.

«Ahh, the naked *derrière*. Come on. Own it. You really did them a favour and you prevented death. That is a noble deed, indeed. Noble. And besides, you do want to see him again, don't you? »

«I do. Sure, I do.» I said hesitatingly.

«See. That's the spirit.»

Her face was radiant and I couldn't help but smiling back at her. Of course, I wanted to see Mustapha again.

« You cannot hide away in my photo studio forever.» I nodded, she was right.

«Alright. Let's pass by the French church.» I giggled foolishly while Emily, in high spirits, grabbed my arm. We kept on walking.

«He is not a Christian.»

«He is not? I am appalled,» she said with feigned indignation.

«He is from Northern Africa, but don't worry he is French.»

«Why would you think I'd worry because he is from Northern Africa? I worry more now that you say he is *French*.»

«No, he's not *really* French. His name is most exotic: Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara. I hope I am getting it right this time. I keep confusing the letters of his name.»

«Marie, what makes you think he is not *really* French? You are either French or you're not. Which one is it?»

«His father is French.»

«So? Your father was French as far as I remember.»

Father. I didn't want to think of him. Not now. My memories were fading. I could barely remember his face, his smell, his laughter. I had fallen silent for we had

nearly reached the large storehouse, *the Kornhaus*, on one of the main squares. I turned my head deliberately and looked down towards the *Kindlifresserbrunner*, the so-called Child-Eater-Fountain, then up again at the large *Kornhaus*. Further down there was the French church and I didn't want my eyes to wander there, not yet. So, I stood and look on. What I saw was impressive. The *Kornhaus* was an enormous sand stone building, close to the town's theatre, you couldn't miss it, even if you had wanted to. Alonzo had told us that in its enormous cellar, it held unimaginable amounts of wine and grain to pay the wages of the city officials. He said, he didn't understand why the locals didn't call it more aptly *das Weinhaus*, the Winehouse, for it harboured wooden barrels, large as pirate ships, drums and casks so immense there was hardly room for a single grain of corn. Alonzo said, he wondered how the city officials could run Bern so soberly, given the amount of *vinum rubrum*, red wine, they were paid with. No more history. I don't know why I remembered all the useless anecdotes Alonzo had told us.

Then, I braced myself for the inevitable and looked towards the French church. My heart faltered. From where we were standing, I got a glimpse of the many French soldiers standing in front of the entrance of the French church. I recognized them at once by their colourful uniforms.

«Look.» I nodded towards the men.

«I see. Let's go. Come on.»

She pulled me by the sleeve and dragged me along, I gave in. We passed underneath the alcoves, walked along the *Kornhaus* and then, finally, stopped before the church. It seemed as if an eternity had passed. Emily held up a bottle of wine, smiling at the group of soldiers who stood right next to us. We knew we weren't

supposed to address the internees directly, but Emily had told me she wouldn't take her best wine to the Swiss army to distribute. Who knew where it would end up? For a split second I was wondering if embezzling the wine would make the Swiss officers eligible to be killed. Hadn't Mustapha said Muslims believed you should not kill unless the person was guilty for corruption? Taking the wine for themselves would make the Swiss army guilty of corruption, wouldn't it? Maybe I had misunderstood him?

«Anyone?»

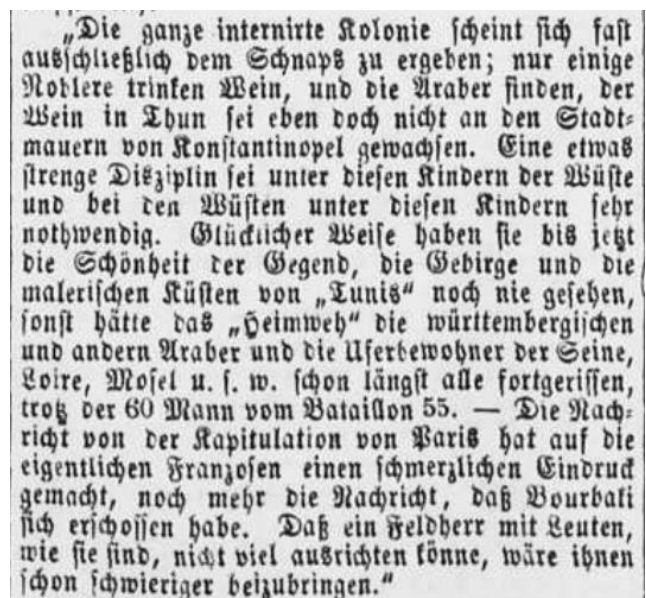
The men, some of them in uniform, turned around at the sight of us ladies. They looked much better than they had a couple of days ago. No, they were clean, their wounds dressed, their uniforms mended. Some were wearing thick woollen coats and boots that had been repaired skillfully. They no longer looked like beggars. Some of them were smiling when they realized we came bearing gifts.

«That is most kind of you. »

«Thank you so much. *Merci, Merci beaucoup.*»

«Is this one of the bottles that taste like vinegar? »

«Vinegar. What do you mean?» 3



„Die ganze internirte Kolonie scheint sich fast ausschließlich dem Schnaps zu ergeben; nur einige Noblere trinken Wein, und die Araber finden, der Wein in Thun sei eben doch nicht an den Stadtmauern von Konstantinopel gewachsen. Eine etwas strenge Disziplin sei unter diesen Kindern der Wüste und bei den Wüsten unter diesen Kindern sehr nothwendig. Glücklicher Weise haben sie bis jetzt die Schönheit der Gegend, die Gebirge und die malerischen Küsten von „Tunis“ noch nie gesehen, sonst hätte das „Heimweh“ die württembergischen und andern Araber und die Uferbewohner der Seine, Loire, Mosel u. s. w. schon längst alle fortgerissen, trotz der 60 Mann vom Bataillon 55. — Die Nachricht von der Kapitulation von Paris hat auf die eigentlichen Franzosen einen schmerzlichen Eindruck gemacht, noch mehr die Nachricht, daß Bourbaki sich erschossen habe. Daß ein Feldherr mit Leuten, wie sie sind, nicht viel ausrichten könne, wäre ihnen schon schwieriger beizubringen.“

3 Mae Lee Magellan declares an Out-of-Context Error Disclaimer Alert (OoCEDA). The original source in the Bernese newspaper *Feuille d'Avis de Bern*, this dialogue is referenced on, says verbatim: «The whole company was drinking liquors, only the more noble among them drank wine, while the Arabs complained that the wine grown in Thun, [a small city near Bern that grows wine] has not grown on the city walls of Constantinople. A little more discipline among these children of the desert and the deserted among these children is necessary. [...] Hearing about Paris capitulating, has

«Compared to our wines growing on the city walls of Constantinople, this tastes as sour as vinegar.»

Emily held on to the bottle of Pinot Noir.

«Then, don't take it. I'll keep it.» I could see her frown drop and her eyebrows raise up.

«Alright. » She withdrew the bottle and put it back into her basket.

«He didn't mean to be ungrateful, Madame. All he really said was that this wine hasn't grown on the city walls of Constantinople, which is indeed true. You must admit. Madam? Madam?»



Emily had fallen silent at so much impertinence and I was dumfounded, and stared, my mouth open, at the man who had apologized.

«Mustapha?» Was it really him? I hadn't recognized him before, how odd.

«Mademoiselle?» He looked at me questioningly, as if he didn't know me.

«Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara?»

«Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara, the *second*, indeed. *Enchanté*. You know me?»

impressed the actual Frenchmen painfully, even more the news that Bourbaki shot himself. It would have been more difficult though to teach them that a commander with people like they were, couldn't achieve much anyway (translated by Mae Lee Magellan with the help of duumbl.com, no warranty for correctness).

«The *second? Enchanté?* You're pleased to meet me? You're funny. Of course, I know you.» I stopped right there, then snickered uncomfortably, then I looked at Emily, feeling rather uncertain. I didn't really know what to say. My heartrate had slowed down. I felt cold. I felt hot, something within me was grumbling. My face was on fire. I didn't know what to think. Did Mustapha not recognize me any longer? I punched him lightly into the chest. Had he grown? He looked a bit taller than before.

«I am Marie.» I giggled, «Remember?» Then I paled. Had I really just said that?

«Of course. Marie. I understand.»

He grabbed my hand and held it for just a second, then he let go immediately as if touching hot burning coal. I was confused.

«Well, good.»

I looked at Emily again. She shrugged and shook her head quickly, as if to tell me not to worry too much.



«Come back with us to my studio, I want to take pictures of you and Marie.»

«Well, you should take pictures of Mustapha and Marie.»

«Alright, let's go then.»

«No, I mean Mustapha and Marie.»

«That is what I say, Mustapha, you, and Marie, her. Let's go. Come on.» She looked at me questioningly. I pulled up both my eyebrows indicating I had no idea why Mustapha was so slow. What was wrong with him?

«You want to take *my* picture? Well, I don't say no, then. Let's go. I have never had my picture taken.»

We started walking back towards the photo studio passing the *Café de Pyrénées* on our way.

«So, tell us more about this war. What was it like? You all looked so awfully beaten when you first arrived here.»

«Awfully beaten? I'd say ~~'bloodied, haggard and half-mad, fainting from hunger, a pitiful sight'~~. (Quoted directly from Zola, Émile: *La Débâcle*, Translation by Elinor Dorday, Oxford World's Classics, 2017, p.127, quote deleted for copyright reasons)

I mean, we had the chassepot, and yet-.»

«Excuse me. What have you had?» Emily asked, «a piss pot?» She laughed out loud. Talking about piss pots with complete strangers was too funny, even for a cosmopolitan such as Emily.

«No, that's a breach loader. A gun. Far better than anything the Germans had ever seen. But there was such chaos. We were told to advance, then to retreat. Go west. Go East. Cavalry here, artillery there. Stay where you are. Move. *'Marching and countermarching and failing to meet at any of the appointed places'*. (All green quotes from Zola, Émile: *The Downfall*, Translation by Ernest A. Vizetelly, War

Correspondent 1870-1, published in London by Chatto & Windus, Picadilly 1893, printed by Spottiswoode and Co., New-Street Square London.) 4

The provisions? Not here, but there. Then there, not here. Can you imagine? We go hungry. We had to loot our own farmers' houses. Take what's there. Eggs, carrots, leek, meat for the soup, wine. Anything that was up for grabs. We'd take it, we'd use it to survive. If not the Francs-Tireurs were there before and had taken it all already. 'They were becoming the terror of the peasants, whom they defended inefficiently, and whose fields they laid waste.'

We had no idea where we were. Sometimes we'd see the same village twice in one day, once from the West, once from the East. Then we were desperate, losing all faith. They only gave us maps of Germany and not of France. When we spent most of our time in France. They didn't even think we'd spend so much time in France and wouldn't know the country. Can you imagine? But France, I mean -, her territory is enormous. We didn't know where exactly we were. We didn't know whether they were coming to get us or whether they weren't. Passing the villages was the worst. 'On either side of the road, the women sobbed, and taking their children in their arms, held them out to the passing troops as though begging the latter to carry them away'.

4 This eBook, *the Downfall* by Zola, Émile was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Ron Tolkien & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>, *, 12.04.2014. A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding. This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **M!normous.art does not make changes in the eBook, nor does it make commercial use of the whole eBook. Lee Mae Magellan© only uses a few disjointed and disconnected Émile Zola quotes that are up for grabs, to personalize this novel.**

Hours we stood to attention and then-. Nothing. The rain, the mud, The beating sun. We could have used that time resting. But we didn't. We were lost, the Germans weren't. They even grew into this colossal monster after New Year: The imperial state of Germany. Can you imagine? Wilhelm I, Bismarck. I mean. What can you do? Napoléon III was captured, we remained in the battlefields to rot and starve, our poor horses eating each other. Paris fallen? Do you know what it is like when eating fresh carrots, found in a field, make your hunger worse or even make you ill?»

We both shook our head at this. Eating carrots didn't make me ill, on the contrary. Mother would give us soft-boiled carrots when we *were* ill. It would soothe your stomach she used to say.

«Or do you know what it's like when 'in the dawn of what you instinctively felt would be a terrible day, you seat yourself on the ground, weary already, although you had not yet started on the march; but your stomach empty, and you heart oppressed with anguish.' You cannot even start the day you're so famished, so worn out.

And then, the battle of the Lisaine, such long endless precise lines of German riflemen, lying flat on a hill, firing at us incessantly. And us. *Crever*. Dying. Cracking. In the mud, *crever*; dying. In the rain, *crever*; *dying*. In the snow *crever*, *dying*. All dying. No protection. Nothing but chaos. They simply left us to die in the battlefields. Beheading each other. And then our very own General Bourbaki committed suicide, shooting himself. What a disaster. And then we crossed the border. Now, we're here where ladies bring us wine. I mean-. It's nearly paradise.»
He smiled at us.



Beheading each other? I didn't dare ask what he meant with that exactly.

Mustapha was much more talkative than usually. He hadn't told me anything about what had happened on the battlefield and, I respectfully, hadn't dared asking about his terrible experiences. How loquacious he suddenly was, I hardly recognized him. He had told me more in a couple of minutes than in all the hours we had spent together before. Was this Emily's doing? I glanced at her sideways.

«The war. It reminded me all so much of home. When the French came to our village. First, they took my eldest sister and when they were done, when they were through with her, I mean-, they buried her in the garden. She was still alive.- Then, they slit open my mother's womb. And out came twins. Can you imagine? Brother and I just watched. They made us watch. She died that very day. Twins died too. All dead. All burned. They burned everything, all huts, the whole douar (a word the word-processing machines in the 21st century wouldn't know and would therefore underline in red). They scorched the earth, everything burned. Mother had dressed my brother and me in our sister's dresses and put one earring into our ear. But it didn't help. They took us away to one of their camps. Luckily, they didn't put us into a cave. I heard of hundreds of our people suffocating in a cave the French blocked.»

«Alright, Mustapha, I think that is enough for today. I am not sure I can bear any more. You want to have your picture taken? Come on in.»

Emily had become pale and so had I. All blood had drained from my cheeks and my heart, leaving me ice-cold. I felt sick. How could anyone treat another human being like that? Bury his sister alive? *Thou shalt not kill*. Wasn't it true for the French

Catholics too? How hollow the phrase had become since I had left *La Maison Blanche* at *Haute Vue*.

«Stand over there. You want to take your coat off?»



I couldn't stop thinking of what Mustapha had told us: His pregnant mother and the twins in her belly. So much blood must have come out of her body. The two naked babies. The strong umbilical cords. I had seen sows giving birth. It usually was a bloody mess. And his sister, I couldn't stop thinking of her either, buried alive? I wasn't sure I had understood correctly what he had meant by saying 'when they were through with her'. Did that mean - ? Did men do that to women? Did they really? Growing up thus protected at *La Maison Blanche* in *Haute Vue* hadn't really prepared me for anything that was going on in the world. I knew about the act. I had seen dogs, horses, sheep and jumbuck do it, but still. I thought us humans were different. I believed in Love and Romance, I really believed in Jane Austen's courtships. Complicated, but in the end successful. But this? What was this? I was utterly confused, and I had so many questions I knew I couldn't ask anyone, not even Emily.

«Smile. Come on. Marie. Smile.» I contorted my face into a weak smile, looking directly at the camera. We had to keep still for ever. Then, Emily wanted to do one more shot. I watched her polish the silver side of another plate with lush velvet. Next, she carried the plate in a light-tight plate holder to the camera, a simple wooden black box, she had bought in Paris from *Maison Susse Frères*.

«Put your arm around her. Come on.» Cumbersomely, Mustapha put his arm around me. It felt so heavy, I wanted to shrug it off my shoulder. Why did I have to be in that picture? Something had changed between Mustapha and me, but I couldn't say what it was. All was different. I felt desperate, tired and sad. All of a sudden I wanted to go home to *La Maison Blanche*, be with Mamà, my sisters, Julien, Uncle Vanya. Uncle Vanya. We still hadn't found him. No, I couldn't possibly go home, not yet.

«Smile. Come on. Wait. Be still. Now, don't move. Don't move. Wait. You have to be patient. One more minute.»

«Let's do one without me.» I was getting restless and simply walked away.

«Do you want to do another one?»

«Yes, one just me.» Mustapha smiled.

« Please. »



«The babies, were they girls or boys?»

«Two girls. We couldn't even bury them. Not mother, not the babies. After they were done, they burned it all.»

We kept walking in silence, we had just reached the beaver dam and were now climbing up the hill towards the magic forest. After some time, I spoke again.

«So, you'd have two baby sisters.»

«They'd be married by now.»

«Of course.»

«But you have a brother?»

«Yes, I do. A brother.» He looked at me strangely as if I was supposed to know his brother.

«Elder or younger?»

«Elder.»

«What did you mean by saying «after they were done»? Done with what? I don't understand.» I asked hesitantly, then I wished I had not spoken. Why was I asking him this?

He looked at me from the side. His eyes were fiery. He looked different. Talking about the violence he had experienced had changed his face.

«The act of love can become an act of hate, an act of power, an act of violence and death. Of humiliation. Rape. You understand that, Marie?»

I didn't answer. The path had become narrow and he walked before me. He didn't talk for some time and neither did I. A lot of our walk had been in silence, but automatically our steps had taken us towards the cabin. I could now see it from afar.

«Look, the cabin.»

«The cabin?»

«The cabin. There.» I pointed towards it.

He looked at me as if he didn't know what had happened there.

«I am cold, let's see if we can light that fire again.» I smiled at him.

«Alright, Mademoiselle, as you wish,» He said obligingly.

He began collecting wood, picking it up piece by piece from the frozen soil of the magic forest: some little twigs and one or two larger branches.

«Mustapha, don't you remember? There is wood in the cabin.» I laughed nervously.

«Alright. No wood then.» He dropped everything he had collected and came away with me.



When we closed the door to the cabin, I turned around. He stood there in his mended uniform and it felt different than last time. He looked so forlorn and small, not as confident as when we had met before. I moved towards him and raised my hand to caress his face. I wanted him so badly, yet I couldn't read his eyes.

«Don't worry. You're here now. You're safe. No more killings.» I said softly, nearly whispering. He raised his arm and grabbed my hand quite tightly, removing it from his face determinedly. It was as if I didn't know him. I frowned. But there was no time to talk.



So loud was the rattling at the door latch that we both froze. Obviously, someone wanted in. I had locked the door again. We had been alone, so who could that be? Had someone followed us? I hadn't seen anyone else when we entered the cabin. Although I'd have to admit, I was so enraptured in what was to come that I might not have been very attentive at all.

We were both alarmed at once.

«Open up. Now. Open the door.» A loud voice shouted out so angrily, so aggressively. Someone was standing right before that door.

«Don't. Don't open.» Mustapha whispered and I nodded.

I was scared. Who else was here? There was such dreadful rattling and the door was creaking so loud, we didn't know if it'd give way to the intruder any moment.

«Let's hide behind the table.» Mustapha grabbed me and pulled me down. Quickly, he had overturned the table. We cowered behind the small fir table while turning its countertop to barricade the door. There was such a loud pounding now as if someone was using the trunk of a large tree to smash the wooden door. We looked each other in the eye, both fearing the unknown lurking so close by.

At this very moment the door was broken into and flung open. It was Alonzo. I didn't know if I should be relieved. Maybe not. He looked furious.

«Alonzo. It's you?» Slowly, I got up and looked him in the eye.



He was furious indeed and he was towering tall above us. I could see his spit fly onto the dirty floor as he was roaring, I could feel tiny droplets of saliva sprinkle my face.

«Nigger, leave the lady alone.»

That word again. It made me tremble with anger and fear. The worst possible insult ever.

«I am not a nigger, I am an Arab, if you need to call me names.»

«You're dark. You're from Africa. You're a nigger.»

« You are pretty dark yourself. Are you a nigger too?»

«Alonzo. You here?» I asked, my voice terribly trembling. How afraid I was, how paralyzed.

«Leave her alone.»

«No. It is not what you think.» I tried to calm him down.

«Leave her alone. Take your dirty fingers off her.»

He had stomped towards us, overturned the table and grabbed Mustapha by the collar. Mustapha on the other hand, he was not moving. He was not defending himself but dropped down on his knees as if to pray. He folded his hands and lowered his gaze.

«What's wrong with you nigger, why aren't you moving? Move. Fight. Come on. You had no problem fight me last time. Let's finish this now.» Alonzo was all body, all gestures, challenging his presumed opponent with all his might. Mustapha, however, he remained silent.

«You know I don't fight with savages, but after kidnapping the lady, I will have to kill you right here. Kill you first, indict you later.» He sneered.

I stared at him completely frozen. No, I hadn't been kidnapped. No, no. I opened my mouth to say so, but Mustapha spoke first and what he said made me freeze.



«Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

But I say to you: Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.»

At this, Mustapha, still on his knees, looked up, looked full into Alonzo's face and turned his right, then his left cheek towards him. Alonzo was thunderstruck, it was as if time had come to a halt.

«But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons and daughters» at this he looked at me and smiled, «of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.»



«You do not use *our* good Lord's words in vain, no. I forbid it.»

Alonzo was beyond himself. Mustapha's meekness left him completely baffled and yet he had had pulled out his knife, the same he had fought with last time. This time I wasn't quick enough to do anything. I felt completely paralyzed by what was happening before me. A mere spectator I was to a scene most ghastly. The innocent slain. The lamb to the slaughterer. He began stabbing Mustapha in his chest. Once, twice, more. Again and again. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't be true.

When I finally had the presence of mind to move, I kicked at Alonzo, I kicked against his shin as hard as I could. But he was impervious to my feeble moves and I had no means to make him stop.

«Alonzo, stop. Stop this madness.»

I screamed at the top of my lungs. But he wouldn't listen, he wouldn't stop until Mustapha lay on the floor of the cabin, in his own warm blood, barely moving, only wheezing, his breath rattling. Then Alonzo woke from his frenzy, turned from his bloodbath and spun around: without looking at me, he left the cabin. His eyes were filled with this lustrous madness I had already seen when they had fought on the *Bärenplatz*. We were alone again. Was Mustapha still alive? Was he dead? Was this the end?



«A rattlesnake. I can hear it. Run. Marie. Run.»

«No, there are no rattlesnakes here.» I knelt down, crying now and speaking softly. I could see at once he was dying. It wouldn't take long now.

«It's you, your breath. You must stay still. I will run and fetch a doctor. Don't move.»

«Argh, - no, stay here, Marie. Don't go.»

I got out my handkerchief and wiped his sweaty forehead. He was burning up from within. Then he closed his eyes and I could hardly hear his voice.

«Stay. I am ready now. The Lord is with me.»

«But you said, you're not a Christian? I don't understand. What Lord?»

«There are many things we don't understand, that is why we must have faith.

Have faith, Marie. - Aaguh» I could see he was in so much pain.

«Still. You must lay still. Stop talking. I will run and fetch a doctor.»

I pressed my handkerchief onto the wound which was spilling most his blood; it was seeping continually through his shirt. He was shaking his head. I could see how difficult it was for him to speak.

«Please, don't go. Marie, please. Stay here.»



His breath was still rattling like that snake he feared, and his body was convulsing from the pain he was in. There was blood everywhere. On the floor, his boots, my dress, my hands. Blood all over. He opened up his coat and I could see *White Dove* underneath, the Jezail, he always carried. He ran his thumb along the weapon, trying to lift it into my bloody hands. But he was too weak to give me the rifle.

«Aaargh - Please, Marie. Please.»

«No. No. Mustapha. No.» I could hardly speak, so hard was I crying. I knew what he wanted. I knew what he had just asked of me. And no, no. I couldn't do it, I wouldn't hear of it. Life was sacred.

«Marie. Please.» He howled like a lone wolf in the wilderness. The sound was most distressing when received: it went right through me, through marrow and bone, brain and stomach, all my fluids, all my hardware.

«I can't.» I whispered.

«Please. Yes, you can.»

«*Thou shalt not kill.*»

«I know. Please. Marie. Help me. The pain-.» His body twitched unnaturally.

«Let me get you a doctor. You will be fine.»

«No, Marie, I won't.»

«We can still save you.»

«My life is in God's hands.»

«I know.»

«They hated me already. If I come back home crippled -.» I could see how difficult it was for him to speak.

«Who hated you?»

«My brother. Everyone.»

«But why?»

«Because I love Jesus.»

«But you are a Muslim.»

« I am not.»

« I don't understand. You were last time-.»

«Please Mary.» He looked towards the Jezail.

«I can't.»

«Yes, you can.»

«No, Mustapha. No.»

«Mustapha?» I began shaking him. He only winced. His eyes were faltering, his voice was faint. I held my ear to his bloody lips.

«Please.»



He closed his eyes. His body was twisting so wretchedly, I could barely look at him. He must be in such pain. It was the end. This was on me now. Nothing could be done, but this. My vision blurred, my heart had stopped beating, my blood was no longer circulating. I was moving like an automaton Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin could have built: Then I swallowed, then I inhaled, then I exhaled. Then I kneeled, then I got up, then I stood straight. Would I really do that? Had he really asked this? I knew he had. I knew.

I stood there in the cabin, then, place of greatest joy and yet, place of greatest sorrow now. *Thou shalt not kill*. How could it be: I, so young, was faced with so hard a choice, so hard a decision. Did I have a choice? Yet, was it my decision? I loved him so much. I loved him so much. So much.

To kill or not to kill, that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing end them. To die – to sleep,

No more; and by a sleep to say we end

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks

That was all I remembered, all I remembered. I remembered no more. He looked peaceful now. Was he still alive? Was there still heart-ache?



I took his weapon. I carefully weighed it in my hands. I looked at the ornaments on its handle. How beautifully intertwined the patterns were. I took a deep breath. A glimpse of death. Infinity. Infinity. I stepped back. I aimed. I pulled the trigger. The noise was deafening.



Then I broke down, I was sobbing. I was screaming. I was pulling my hair, scratching my breast. My fingernails broke. I lay my head on his dead, warm body and waited. Then I looked up, then I closed his eyes with my bloody fingers. Everything came to a halt. Everything stopped. Time. Love. Hate. Everything stopped. I had stopped feeling anything. Anything at all. I would never feel again, I would never love again. I, too, had died a thousand painful deaths. The big great void had devoured me completely, pulled me into the deep, deep, dark abyss I couldn't avoid, couldn't avoid by all humble and meagre means at my disposal.

It was me who had killed my beloved. My first love. My first love. I had killed the only man I had ever, ever loved, relieving him from the immense pain inflicted

upon him. I hadn't wanted to see the unconquerable barriers, but now, I knew they were insurmountable indeed. In-sur-mount-able.



When I finally got up, I took *White Dove*, the rifle he had loved, and put it back into his arms where she belonged, where she'd always hid in her dovecote. Then I walked home, in disarray, confused and hurting beyond anything I can describe. I didn't heed the looks of the strangers I met, keeping my eyes on the ground. Everything was too much.

As I was walking I started to wonder. Wasn't that a cross on Jezail's handle and not a moon? There was a moon on the rifle I had killed Fanny with, then in the woods, so long ago. There was a moon, right? Not a cross. An eternity ago. And now, I had killed again. But who had I killed with? The sun, the moon, the cross? My mind fell into a strange reverie: I couldn't help but quote Romeo's soliloquy to myself, using words so much more apt and adequate than written all these centuries ago.

But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Mustapha is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief,

That thou her man art far more handsome than she:

Be not her slave, since she is envious and cruel;

Her vestal livery is but sick and green

And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

It is my man, O, it is my love!

Oh, happy dagger: Shall I thus kill myself so soon? But then Juliet's Romeo lived when she thought him dead. He lived. Alive. I was losing all reason and common sense. I was going mad. I ran, I walked, I stumbled back to the city as fast as I could. I was going mad. I barely made it home.



It was in this pitiable condition, that I reached the photo studio and stumbled into the house. I saw mother at once. My mother was here and never had I been happier to see her lovely, her kind face. She was holding hands with Emily and both women had been crying, their eyes red and tearful. When I came in, they jumped up at once and hurried over to embrace me. Julien sat next to them, looking up from the newspaper. He spoke first.

«*Mon Dieu*, you're covered in blood.»

«What happened?»

«He's dead.» I started sobbing again. My nose was completely blocked, I could hardly breathe.

«Who is dead?» I could see fear in their eyes.

«Mustapha is dead.»

«Who is Mustapha?» Mother asked.

«What happened?» Julien asked.

«Alonzo, he stabbed him. I then killed him.»

«You killed him? *Mon Dieu*. Why?»

«I said, Alonzo had stabbed him. It was really him.»

«Who is Alonzo?»

«Why did he stab him?»

«He thought- . He thought -. He thought he was taking advantage of me.»

«Who? Alonzo?»

«No, Mustapha.»

«Mustapha thought Alonzo was taking advantage of you?»

«You killed Alonzo? »

«No. No. Please. Be still. Be still. I cannot bear it.» I was covering my ears with my hands. I couldn't take this any longer. I was sobbing out loud.



«Give her a moment.» Mamà drew me away from Emily and Julien and put her strong warm arms around me. Her smell. She smelled so good. I put my head against her shoulder.

«Come here. Marie. Come. Hush, my baby, hush.»

She held me tight and then started singing that old Irish lullaby: a beautiful song of yore, carried in her heart, underneath her bosom, from the yonder shores of Ireland to the Swiss rolling hills of the Jura when she had eloped with my father so many years ago.

O Sleep, my baby, you are sharing
With the sun in rest repairing;
While the moon her silver chair in
Watches with your mother.
Shoheen, sho lo,
Lulla lo lo!

I quietened down, I let go and then, I became so tired I had to sit down, resting my head upon my arms. I couldn't keep myself up for another second.

«Come, let us get you washed. Take off these clothes. I shall wash them for you.» Mother said.

«You had better burn them in the oven. The police will -» I heard Julien mumble from afar.

«Yes, that is a good idea, Julien. Come on. Marie. Take them off and give them to Julien. Julien, go to the kitchen at once and fetch some hot water.»

In a complete reverie, I took off my clothes and the two women washed me. How wonderful the *savon de Marseille*, the soap of Marseille smelled when they rubbed my skin with its soft foam. Mother must have brought it from back home. Once dry, mother clad me into her 'beige morning wrapper embroidered with purple silk'. A glimpse of home, a smell of hope. How wonderfully engulfed I found myself in their love and care. I couldn't stop the tears running down my face. How I got to my chamber I cannot remember. My body was still shaking so violently from the complete breakdown of my nervous system, so mother took me to bed as if I was little girl. She covered me with a soft, clean feather blanket and tucked me in. Those

white sheets, what comfort. I felt, 'an irresistible longing to slip in between all that whiteness and freshness and lose myself in the midst of it'. The last thing I remember was seeing mother's smiling face, then she blew out the candle and the smoking flax she didn't quench.



Thursday, February 16, 1871

«They were not crying because of you.»

«They weren't?» I sat upright in my bed and looked at Julien who had come to wake me.

«No.»

«So, tell me. Why were they both crying?»

«I wouldn't have thought you'd notice. The state you were in.» He sat upon my bed, looking at me earnestly.

«I did notice. I felt so guilty for being such a burden. Why is mother here anyway?»

«Obviously, when we didn't come home, mother and aunt Thèrese made enquires and after some days they found the man at the ticket booth. He remembered selling us those tickets to Bern. He really did think us too young to

travel so far all by herself, and in times such as these. So, she came. By the way, she brought Pippa.»

«Really. Pippa is here? How is she?»

I jumped out of bed at once.

«Where is she?»

«I think she is in the studio, by the oven.»

Barefoot, in mother's gorgeous night gown, I ran down at once. When I saw her and when she saw me, we were both yipping and yowling as if we hadn't seen each other for years. She was stronger now than when we left her in Neuchâtel and obviously had gained some weight. Her wounds had nearly healed. Aunt Therèse and mother must have looked after her well.

«You're up already?»

«Yes, Julien woke me.»

«And, how are you feeling?»

«I am much better.»

«I am glad to hear that. Would you like some coffee?»

«Yes, Emily that would be wonderful.»

«With milk?»

I only nodded, running my fingers through the short hair of our beloved German shepherdess. And then, all dams broke, all secrets were told, everything came in the open. I couldn't help it. I couldn't help myself. I spilled it all. When mother, and a moment later, Julien came in, I told them all that happened in the cabin the day before and how I had shot Mustapha after Alonzo stabbed him so brutally.

After I had finished my tale, there was a long silence, then mother left the room. I have never seen her so agitated, so sad and bereft, not even when father died. I felt so numb, so guilty, so completely forlorn. I was on my own, all by myself. The little girl in me had died, a woman had emerged and she, she was still a stranger, a danger, a complete riddle to me and my beloved family.



Emily put another cup of *Café au lait* in front of me. She sat down again, right opposite, looking at me so heartfully. How I loved that little round table in her studio. It was covered in photos she had taken recently, as I was shuffling through them absent-mindedly I found the one. It was that one and only picture. It had been hidden away underneath a pile of other photos before it surfaced so unexpectedly. I took it into both my hands right away.

«Oh, that's me and Mustapha.»

I looked at the picture she must have made yesterday when Mustapha and I went for this unfortunate walk in the woods. My face and brain were drained from all blood at once. I felt so empty. He looked like a stranger in that picture. I looked like a stranger, indeed, a stranger. The picture was proof of how I felt. I let my hands sink into my lap.

«Let's bring that away.»

Emily took the picture from me quickly, stood up again and lay the photo on top of her bureau where I couldn't see it from where I was sitting.



«Marie, there is something I need to tell you». She sounded serious and I was alarmed at once.

«Has someone else died? Uncle Vanya? Have you found him? I had forgotten all about him in my distress.» I gasped, all ears.

«No, nobody died. And no, we haven't found Uncle Vanya. We haven't found him yet. But I shall lose the studio and the apartment. The house was sold yesterday. To the butcher.»

«Oh no. How awful.»

«It's done.»

«Your losing your home?»

«I guess.»

«And your studio.»

«I guess so.»

«You couldn't buy the house?»

«I don't have that kind of money.»

«A loan? You're a successful business woman, aren't you?»

«For a spinster like me? You're joking. Maybe in another century.»

«That was why you were crying?»

«Yes. And because you were missing, of course.» She got up and stroked my hair tenderly.

«So, what are you going to do? That is awful.»

«I don't know. Marie. I don't know. Maybe move back to Paris. Or London. I don't know. Maybe it's yet the best that has ever happened to me. We shall see.»



«I will turn myself in»

«What are you talking about?» Emily looked at me, surprised.

«I will go to the police offices and tell them about Mustapha. He must receive a proper Christian burial. No one might find him in that cabin for weeks. It looked quite deserted. We cannot simply leave him there.»

«No, Marie, you cannot do this.»

«What if they arrest you? You cannot go to prison.» It hurt to see how worried Emily was.

«We shall see. I really want to do this.»

«No. Marie. Don't do this. You said yourself Alonzo killed him. You didn't kill him. Say Alonzo killed him. I mean somehow he did.»

«Let the police and the law decide that. I cannot go on living as if nothing had happened. I have to tell the truth. You cannot keep me from telling the truth.»

My brother understood at once.

«I will come with you,» he offered, «let's not tell mother right now. She has enough to deal with already.»

«Thank you», I whispered.



As soon as we had finished breakfast, we left the house and started walking towards the Gendarmerie. It didn't take long to find their house where two beautiful black stallions stood, fully harnessed, ready to go. Slowly, I approached the bigger one from the side, petting his shoulder lightly, then rubbing him stronger. I felt his muscles shivering under my hands. He lowered his head and looked me right in the eye. Thus encouraged, I softly touched his nostrils and he gently shoved his mouth into my hand. Then I began rubbing his ears. What a beautiful, beautiful animal, and so strong.



The gendarme we first talked to only spoke Swiss German.
He signalled us to wait and left the room to find his colleague who spoke French. I whispered to Julien:

«I am so nervous. I am so nervous. How can I even begin to-.»

«Relax, just tell them what happened.»



«No, don't feed them again. No sugar. They will become too fat. *Bonjour Mademoiselle, Bonjour Monsieur.*» Good Morning Miss, Good Morning Mister. An

elderly gendarme in uniform had walked through the door obviously still busy giving instructions about the horses to a stable boy in the street.

«Pardon *Monsieur, Mademoiselle*. I think he has never seen a horse before-. No, you have to groom them now. Come on-. Not from behind. *Sacrément*. Not from behind.»

He left the room again, nodding towards us and we heard him shout in the street without understanding what the confusion was about. Julien smiled at me reassuringly. It wasn't long before the gendarme came back and sat behind his desk, opening a drawer and taking out some papers. He looked very busy, sweat on his forehead despite the cold February.

«*Mademoiselle, Monsieur*. How can I help you? You wouldn't believe how much we have to do right now. The French army. They're drinking and then aren't footing the bill. All the tavern owners come crying at our door. No wait-.» He was looking out the window.

«*Sacrément*, that is not how that's done. If you will excuse me?»

Once more, he strode quickly through the door and we heard him shout at the poor boy so terribly. I sighed and looked at Julien despairingly. Would we ever be able to make our case?



«There is a dead man.» Julien said quickly when the gendarme sat again.

I scowled at him for I had wanted to say, «I killed a man».

«An Algerian rifleman» Julien continued.

«A Mohammedan?»

«Yes, an Arab.»

«Oh, ok. They are dying. Some of them are so badly wounded. He wouldn't be the first one. I haven't really kept track of them. The military is in charge for this, not us. Or the pastors who help bury them.»

«No, you don't understand, he was stabbed.»

«Oh yes, they were all stabbed, shot, quartered, drank themselves to death. Whatever you wish. Hit by a cannon ball,» he was chuckling. I was appalled. Why was that funny?

«No, you don't understand. Alonzo stabbed him.»

«The omnibus driver? Surely not. He is a good man. What makes you think that?»

«My sister saw him stab the man.»

«Ah, a woman's testimony. My apologies, *Mademoiselle*, that I find hard to believe. Alonzo is a handsome man. Italian. Quite the Ladies man. The likes of us cannot compete with that. Can we?» He looked straight at Julien and Julien looked back at him, bewildered and confused. I cannot remember having seen my brother look so stern.

«Has he refuted you, *Mademoiselle*? You know one must never believe what comes out of the mouth of women and children. Don't you think young man? Don't you think? They cannot tell the truth even if they wanted to.»

He chuckled again, then smiled at Julien without giving me another look. He was shuffling his papers, simultaneously checking the stable boy outside the window.

«*Sacrément*, I cannot believe what he does to that horse. If you will excuse me?» He strode out again in his black leather riding boots and his well-cut uniform. Julien and I looked at each other in despair. Was our case closed already?

«Let's try our luck somewhere else sister. I don't think he will help us.»

«But why did you do all the talking?»

«You heard him. He doesn't believe what children and women say. He thinks Alonzo jilted you.»

I scowled at my brother.

«Hey, I didn't say that, he did. You heard him.»

«Yes, I heard. How come men can be so extraordinary daft?»

«I am not daft. Come on.»

«Alright, alright, I know.» I was still scowling.

«Marie, let's see the army officers at the station, if you really want to clear this up. Maybe they are more helpful.»

«Of course, I want to clear this up. What are you thinking? I cannot leave his dead body in that cabin. He must be buried properly. I did, I did love him. So much.»

My voice was faltering. Julien looked at me with so much sympathy it hurt. I swallowed my tears and with them all desperation and fear. If the police didn't help, the army officers surely wouldn't help either.

«No, of course not. But I think we're wasting our time here. Come on, Marie. Let's go.» I nodded and we got up and went outside where we saw the gendarme grooming the horse himself. The stable boy was made to watch.

«That is how it is properly done. Look. And down, and down, and down. Use some strength, they need pressure, horses need pressure. Now you.- No, no no. Hold

the brush like this. Like that. Have you never groomed a horse before? Were you born in the next century or thereafter?»

«In fact, I haven't. I am new to the job. My father is a tailor. We don't have money to keep horses.» The gendarme finally saw us standing there.

«*Mademoiselle, Monsieur.* Don't worry about the dead Arab. They get stabbed all the time. One more or less. It doesn't really matter. On the contrary. The Germans are already congratulating the Swiss on what we have brought upon us. And imagine the cost of this operation. One mouth less to feed, good for us.»

I was completely shocked about his reaction. How on earth could he say that? Of course, it mattered. Mustapha gone. The one and only gone and killed at my hands. This man had no idea, no idea what he was babbling. I was so enraged I presented him with an ultimate challenge.



«Fair enough, it wasn't Alonzo who killed him. It was me. I shot him. And I can show you the body. Right now. Let's go.» I had walked over to the other stallion, the bigger one I had already made contact with upon arrival. Quickly, I uncoupled the harness from the bar. Without waiting for his consent or any other reaction, I swung myself up into the saddle and looked down upon him. Julien had gone pale at my confession and looked up at me aghast. I could literally read what he was thinking. Gleeefully, smiled at him.

The gendarme had stopped grooming his horse and eyed me suspiciously, I could see he thought me mad or hysterical or both.

«Get down, gal. You cannot ride that horse. It's a -.»

«And how I can» I said from mighty up high. The stallion was such a beautiful, beautiful strong animal, I could feel his athletic muscles quiver underneath my legs. He was dancing lightly, ready to charge and so was I: Ready to go. Showtime.



«Gee up.»

The stallion was rearing high and whining loud, then we took off with what I'd say was a pure *carrière*. The horse jumped forward, using both strong hindlegs to charge away like lightening. I had to hold on tight to its mane. How that horse wanted to move. How it wanted to use its strength and show its tricks. And now the time has come. It was galloping already. I looked back over my shoulder. What a ride.

«*Sacrément*, is she stealing the gendarme's horse?» I heard the unpleasant man shouting after me. And when I looked back one more time, I saw how Julien only shrugged, his eyes wide open, his face ashen. That was the last I saw of him.

The stallion soon fell into a light gallop and when I turned around, I saw the gendarme mounted on the other horse coming right after me. He was much slower, falling back continuously. So far so good. Now all I had to do was take him to the cabin.



Finding my way on horseback to the magic wood and the cabin wasn't as easy as I had imagined and when I reached the beaver dam I had to get off and walk up the steep slope holding the stallion by its reins. The steed followed blindly, trusting me completely. Luckily enough I had put even more distance between me and the gendarme so he wouldn't catch up at this critical stage. In fact, I couldn't see him anymore and for a moment I was tempted to wait for him. But then, spontaneously, I decided against it and so I walked up and up and up, leading the horse beside me until I had reached the magic woods.

On horseback I reached the cabin swiftly and it was then that I wavered. What was I supposed to do now? Shouldn't I have waited for the gendarme? Wasn't the whole idea of stealing the horse to bring him here? Would he still be coming? How would he know where to go? The magic forest was a maze. I looked at the cabin, the door looked, my beloved in his blood behind that wooden door. I got down and tied the horse onto a small, but strong tree. Before I turned, I gently caressed his head.

«If only I knew your name, beautiful.»

The stallion looked me in the eye and whinnied, then he began to graze at once. I took a deep breath and walked towards the cabin. What should I do? Go in? Wait here? There was such a pull from these wooden planks I couldn't help myself, I had to go closer and closer and then -.



I reached for the door latch and pressed it down. The door opened and I stood aghast. The cabin was empty. The cabin was clean. There was no body, no blood at all. No Mustapha. No body. No jezail. I looked, I looked, then I looked again. Then I pressed my hand against my mouth and bit my fist to see if I was dreaming. The edges of my teeth: It hurt. I stopped. I went inside. The cabin was nearly empty. The body was gone. Even the fir table stood upright, in the exact same position we had found it when we first entered. And for the briefest of moments I saw myself prostrate on that table when he entered. My hair loose, my breasts laid bare; recumbent and reeling. His breath whispering on my naked skin. Not when Alonzo came. Before. Before. Before. When we were alone. Mustapha and I. The short sweet piercing pain for just some seconds, it had made me cry: Then pure unknown pleasures that seemed like centuries and centuries and centuries and on. It then had made me cry the more. I stood stock-still, waiting for the memory to pass, trying to shake it off, but I couldn't. A spell had come over me.



But where was my love? Where was my beloved gone? Why was his dead body not where I had left him? I was so confused, so startled. Was I going mad indeed? Was this hysteria?

Or had he risen? Was he alive?

Was he my Romeo? It was right then that I remembered the play correctly. It wasn't Romeo who faked his death. It was Juliet. She drank the magic potion, she woke after her slumber, when trying to fake her own death. When all went wrong

thereafter. It was Romeo who thought her dead, he swallows the poison. Deadly, lethal poison. He was dead at once and he was not resurrected. But, alas. This wasn't a stage, this wasn't a play. Mustapha's body was gone, and I had no explanation whatsoever. It was a riddle beyond imagining. Slowly, I closed the cabin's door, emerging from a befuddled scene, I could behold no longer. The fresh air pierced my lungs and I inhaled the cold air gladly. I heard the stallion whinny. Reluctantly, I walked back towards where I had left him, saddled up and started riding back. What a mystery. It drove me mad once more.

Seeing the cabin, seeing that very fir table, it had brought back such strong memories of -. I could still not repress the images that flew towards me. I could not forget what had happened here: Our love, so pure, so innocent, consummated in such joy and livid ecstasy. Thus, strangely aroused, I straddled the strong stallion and felt at once the warmth of his body seeping through my clothing, warming my skin where it was most tender. The steed's back was gently rubbing against my thighs as we were galloping back through the woods and towards the river. I could hear me breathing, breathing ever faster.

«Gee up» I cried wanting to escape what was coming. But as I lifted my pelvis rhythmically to fall in with his strong movements, ever much speedier, I could not hold back. His tense muscles were brushing the sweet folding skins between my legs so hard, pressing onto its hidden rose bud, then releasing softly, then brushing, then pressing-. I gasped out loud. The short sweet piercing pain. No, no. No. And now, my beloved dead. The galloping. No, no. It couldn't be. All this was wrong, and yet, when I had reached the point of no return, the point of culmination: It made me cry, the memory so strong, so vivid, so beautiful. I was with him and yet, I knew I was

not. I was panting hard. What was I doing? All was wrong. This was so wrong. I felt such shame. Such shame and humiliation. How could I betray my beloved thus? Where was he gone? Why did he leave me here, alone, exposed to a mere and hollow fantasy of our love making? Why was he gone?



I met the gendarme below at the beaver dam, half-way back to Bern. He had had to stop because the dam had blocked his way and he had had no idea where I had disappeared to. He wouldn't have dreamt I had climbed the steep slope right next to him and with the horse. He saw me come down on foot, my hair all loose, my cheeks scarlet red as I was leading the steed right next to me. Within earshot, I heard he was swearing so badly, I don't want to recount his foul words on these pristine pages.

«I was wrong. There is no body», I said soberly, trying to hide my commotion from dying so many pointless deaths.

«No body, no crime. I told you in the first place. What were you thinking? Stealing that horse.»

«He liked the joy-ride», I said bitterly.

«I must admit if you weren't such an excellent rider, I would arrest you right away. How you bolted off. *Chapeau*. Mademoiselle. *Chapeau*. Respect, young lady.

Many of my colleagues, including myself, would have fallen off at that speedy take-off. He is a wild one and you seem to be able to handle him and handle him so well.»

«He is a beauty. What is his name?»

«We call him Karoo.»

«Karoo? Ok. Karoo. Let's take you back now.



«I cannot believe you stole the gendarme's horse. What were you thinking?» Emily was screaming with laughter.

«Not much, I guess.»

I shrugged, enjoying mother's and Emily's soothing presence after what had become such a strenuous and confusing day. All this was so exhausting. Mother had been so understanding, she hadn't been scolding me for anything, not yet. Her worry for Uncle Vanya forgave me and Julien all our hapless and hopeless adventures and all our vain and witless endeavours.



«But, now Emily. Tell me about the house. When will it be sold?»

«Mr. Schenk, the landlord said the transaction was due by the end of the week and by the end of the month I will have to move. The butcher wants to set up shop quickly. It's not even someone we know in town. I have no idea where he comes from.»

«That's bad.»

«It's life.»

«Why don't you come with us to *La Maison Blanche*? The house is big enough and another pair of hands is always welcome.»

«Sarah Ann, I am not a soap maker, nor a shepherdess. I am a photographer and I cannot imagine doing business on a farm. I need big city life to survive. How many photos do people want in their lives? Maybe two or three, maybe five or six, ten at the most. I will have photographed the village within a month or two and then be unemployed.» The both laughed.



We heard the glass shatter. One of the front window broke, as if someone had shot at it. Mother screamed out loud. Emily dropped on the floor and spread out flat and Julien, he simply remained seated. Me too, I remained silent. Not moving. My ears were hurting from the noise. Were we under attack? What was that? There was glass everywhere on the floor. And then I saw: In the wall next to the mirror there was a hole as if a bullet had hit the wall. When I looked closer, I saw: A bullet had indeed hit the wall. Someone had indeed shot at the front window. I gasped. Was that the German army? I had heard their ambulances were still passing Bern, but marauding troops with rifles? And hadn't the French surrendered all their arms when they had crossed the border in *Les Verrières*? In Neuchâtel we saw huge piles of

chassepots, rifles, cannons taken from the French. But I was quite certain, someone had just shot at us.

Carefully, I got up and looked through the window. I saw two figures move on the other side of the road. One of them was carrying a rifle indeed.

«What's happening?»

«I cannot see. One has a rifle. What could they want?»

«I'd say they want in.»

«Robbers maybe?»

«I guess so. Let's hide the camera. They can take everything, but please, not the camera. I cannot travel to France now to buy a new one.»

Underneath the little round table, some of the planks were loosened and Emily quickly removed them and put her best cameras inside. Then she put the planks back and moved the table over the hideaway. It seemed this was not the first time she had done this.

«You lousy French, come out and fight. Like men.»

A hoarse voice shouted loud in the street, a horse was whinnying.

«We are not French, we are Swiss.» We shouted back in fear. What was going on here?

«And we are not lousy.» Julien whispered so only we could hear it.

«Well, you are.» I hissed.

«I am not.»

«Yes, you are.»

«Hushh.»



«Come out, we shall arrest you. You're prisoners of war.»

«We are civilians». My mother shouted back. She looked at me aghast. Oh my. What on earth was going on here?

«We are no soldiers. Only women and children,» she looked at Julien quite worriedly. What was going here? Switzerland was a neutral country. There was no war here. It seemed impossible, but then everything was possible in times such as these. Had the German army overran Switzerland?



«Yes, women and children.» Julien shouted, trying to imitate mother's high-pitched voice to sound much younger than he was.

«Raise your hands and come out.» The voice said from outside.

We looked at each other. Did we know that voice? It sounded strangely familiar.

«I'll go first. Stay behind me.» Emily said.

«Wait.»

«Ok,» I whispered. She opened the door and went out, with her hands up high above her head. Then silence. Nothing happened. I didn't dare look out the door. Was Emily dead yet. Strangled? Stabbed? Shot? Quartered?

«Come on», my mother said.

«Let's go.» She folded her forearms above her head and walked out, then me and Julien came last, my brother waving his white handkerchief. What we saw made my heart wrench.

Emily was hugging a tall French soldier. I could only see him from behind. He was wearing a mended uniform, there was a huge brown patch on his left elbow and his trousers were still torn. When he turned his face slightly towards me, I hardly believed my eyes.

«Uncle Vanya,» I cried out loud and tears shot into my eyes immediately. I ran towards him.

«Emily, my Emily,» he said so tenderly, kissing her neck.

«Does he recognize her?» Julien asked amazed. Mother was nodding towards him, holding her breath. She was clutching my hand so hard, it hurt.



«Let's walk up to the cross and see if the strawberries are ripe yet.»

Emily nodded, her own eyes filled with tears.

«Oh, Vanya, yes, let's do that. But not just now. Maybe tomorrow? You look weary. Come in, the soup is nearly ready, and I'll make you coffee and fresh bread. Give me that rifle. You don't need it here.»

Obediently, he handed her the weapon. She gave it to Julien at once.

«Yes, we have conquered these Frenchmen, haven't we?» He was rubbing his hands and clapping his thighs ever so happily,

«haven't we?»

What was he talking about while wearing a French uniform?

He looked across to the street to the man who was standing in the shade of the large houses. And I saw -. I saw-. There was. It was. Not that couldn't be? It couldn't be and if, then how?

«Haven't we conquered these Frenchmen, hey you, *Kaiser Wilhelm*, answer,» Vanya bellowed.

«Yes, of course, *Chancellor Bismarck*, we have.» *Kaiser Wilhelm* barked back and stood to attention. The *Kaiser* looked foreign, foreign and dark and ever so beautiful.

He was risen. He was alive. Was it Easter yet? Who had rolled away that stone? If you see, you believe. And yet. I did see and I did not, did not believe what I saw.

It couldn't be.



«*Et voilà*, your Uncle Vanya.»

Mustapha smiled at all of us. We stood in the street, Mother, Emily, Julien and I and we were paralyzed. How could there be a plausible explanation for any of all this?

Mustapha. Mustapha whom I had killed. Mustapha who-. I was thunderstruck, my eyes stargazing beyond infinity, beyond the realm of the living, beyond what was and had been and beyond what ever, ever will be. There was Mustapha and obviously, he had brought back our beloved Uncle Vanya. Had he risen indeed? My mind completely blanked. I was a Christian, but that I found hard to believe.

«I am sorry about the shooting. The only way I could get him away, was to try and re-enact the battle of Sedan. We captured Napoléon III, we wounded MacMahon. He was *Chancellor Otto von Bismarck* and I was *Kaiser Wilhelm*. «

«You are who?» Mother asked incredulously.

«I am Otto Eduard Leopold, Prince of Bismarck, Duke of Lauemburg, born von Bismarck-Schönhausen» Uncle Vanya stood to attention.

«How come you know his full name?»

«I taught him» Mustapha said.»

«And how come you know such things? Mother asked amazed, «even I wouldn't know the Chancellor's full name.»

«Wikipedia,» Mustapha said.

«I beg your pardon?» I asked.

«Is that an Arab swear word?»

«No, it isn't. Not at all. But never mind. Our journey was long. We marched all the way from Thun where I had found him, continuously hiding from the French, camping at night along the Aar-river. «

I gazed at him as if in trance. He was alive indeed. Mustapha alive, pretending he was the German emperor, the German *Kaiser* to bring Uncle Vanya, *Chancellor Bismarck* home. It was heart-breaking. His loving kindness made me love him even the more. I felt such overwhelming love for him I cannot find any words to describe the feeling. But, why was he alive?



«I have found him, after some of my men had sent news that an elderly gentleman was among them who was wearing a French uniform but obviously wasn't a soldier. So, I left for Thun a couple of days ago to search him for you. I found him alright, but he kept wanting to go back. So when we stood before this very house, I had to tell him we had to smoke out the French spies who hid in here or he would have turned and gone back to work and help remove that clay target rampart they made everybody work on. I would never have thought he'd shoot at you. I am so sorry. Sorry about the window too. But nobody got hurt?

„Im Ganzen haben bis jetzt etwa sechszehn das Weite gesucht und nur einer ist wieder eingebracht worden. Es hatte dieß zur Folge, daß die ganze Mannschafft drei Tage gänzlich in der Kaserne konfinirt wurde und in den letzten Tagen nur zu bestimmten Stunden hinaus durfte. An den ihnen angebotenen Arbeiten auf der Allmend theilnahmen sich nur wenige; den übrigen ist es sonst wohl in den warmen Zimmern. Meistens die Araber arbeiten an der Abtragung des alten Zielwalles, um sich etwas zu verdienen. Für 6 Stunden Arbeit erhalten sie 70 Cts. Zuzüge, was neben dem Sold von 25 Cts. und der freien Verpflegung immerhin ordentlich ist. Aber auch sie arbeiten nur, um am Abend Alles zu verbrauchen und am Morgen von vornen anzufangen, wenn sie mögen. Eine etwas strenge Aussicht ist sehr nöthig, denn es sind da ganz verwilderte Elemente unter diesem Rächerkorps neben recht ordentlich gebildeten, namentlich was eigentliche Franzosen sind. Unter diesen befinden sich ziemlich viele Verheirathete, welche von Hause aus theilweise bedeutende Summen Geldes erhalten. Manche hingegen vergessen oft im Wirthshaus das Zahlen; dagegen gibt es dann wirklich wieder solche, die dieß für die Andern gutmachen.

«No, we're all fine», Julien said quickly, «never mind the window. Uncle Vanya is alive. That is all that matters now.»



«You're Mustapha?»

Mother said in her friendly, decent manner.

«Indeed, I am. *Enchanté, Madame*. You must be Marie's mother. Your daughter is most wonderful and so beautiful. Now that I see you, I understand why.»

Mother chuckled at this. She looked at me, shaking her head, her eyes raising a million questions that I couldn't answer. I shrugged and shook my head as well. What was going on here? I had no idea whatsoever.

«You stole my daughter's heart and bring back my late husband's brother? *Kaiser Wilhelm*, Thank you so much. None of our men were able to do that.» She bowed towards him. I had never seen mother bow to anyone. My eyes widened even more at the sight of this. Was everyone losing their mind now?



«You must tell us all in detail.»

«*Madame*, I am really sorry I got delayed like this. You must have worried. Obviously in Thun, sixteen of our own had fled most cowardly and couldn't be

found anymore. So, when I had arrived in the city of Thun, the Swiss officers locked us in for three full days. And when we got out again, your uncle Vanya wanted to join the workers on the *Allmend*, the common grounds, to earn those 70 cents a day. We were supposed to remove the old target wall, some large clay rampart they used for shooting. The only way I could convince him to leave was to tell him we were Germans and had to flee from the French. I told him, he was Chancellor Bismarck and me the emperor Wilhelm. I said we had to join the German army for the last battle against the French at Sedan. He made me give him live ammunition and wouldn't be cheated. He seems to know a lot about shooting and weapons. Believe me I tried not giving me the real deal. Impossible. But then I'd never thought he'd shoot He's such a sweet, old, harmless man. I am really sorry if this has caused you any inconveniences.»

«Oh please don't worry, You brought him back, that is all that matters now. Please come in.»

A couple of spectators, some maids carrying heavy baskets with firewood, had stopped their errands to see what all the shooting and shouting was all about. Emily wanted us to come inside, away from the prying eyes.

«Please, I'll get the soup ready at once. Do come in.»

«Why didn't you tell him he was the French emperor? You're French, aren't you?» Julien asked directly. I scowled at him. Was it really necessary to criticize Mustapha's ruse?

«I chose the narrative that served my interests best,» Mustapha said cryptically.»



«Why is there a picture of you and my brother?» Mustapha raised his eyebrow when he saw the picture on Emily's bureau. It was the first time Mustapha addressed me directly and my heart was racing. *His brother?* He had never mentioned a brother. Wouldn't he have told me of him before? I had asked about his family, but he had said nothing. Nothing of a brother. Had I shot his brother? Mon Dieu, I had shot his brother. His brother. Of course. He was, I mean. He was the other one. Now, I understood. Mon Dieu. I had fallen silent. Then I managed to say one word.

«Because-» I couldn't answer.



«Is this our home? Emily. Do we live here? Me too? Do I live here too?» Uncle Vanya asked.

«Yes, dear, you do live here. This is your home to.» Emily said quietly.

«Are you my wife? I loved you. I've always loved you. Even when you were married. You were married, weren't you?»

«Yes, darling. I am your wife.» There were tears in Emily's eyes.

«Is this your home?»

«Yes, dear, that is my home.»

«Do you live here?»

«Yes, I do. Darling, I do.»

«And me? Do I live here too?»

«Yes, you do.»

«And they do they live here too?» He pointed at me and mother.

«No, they live in *La Maison Blanche* at *Hauteville*. They only visit me.»

«Where is that?»

«Where you lived before. Don't you remember?»

«I have always lived here.» He was getting impatient and restless.

«Yes, of course», mother said, shaking her head at Emily to tell her to play along.

«You are my wife, aren't you?»

«Yes, darling, I am.»

«I thought so. Where is the soup? Is the soup ready yet? Woman get the soup.» He barked. Emily only smiled.

«Of course -.»



It was at this very moment that the landlord came crashing in again.

«Madame Emily, what was that noise?» He saw the shattered glass on the floor at once.

«A window broken? You will have to fix that at your own expense. The house is sold now. And what's that hole? He looked at the wall. Was that a bullet? Has someone shot at the house? Police. I shall call the police. And, you will have to mend that too.»

I looked at *Herrn Schenk*; Mr. Schenk sideways. Was he not concerned for us? Was his only worry for the house and not its inhabitants? We could be dead, for all he cared.

«I will fix it *Monsieur*. I will.»

«The house is sold? But it is ours. My home. Did you sell it to me?»

Vanya asked, speaking with a new authority I hadn't ever heard before. Being Chancellor Bismarck had done him a world of good. The landlord looked at him, not knowing what to say.

«This is my house, right?» Uncle Vanya insisted.

«No, this is not your house.» The landlord said in return.

«This is *my* house and I will sell it to Mr. Delamuraz. A butcher from *Sumiswald*. He will set up shop here by the end of the month. Which means –.»

At these news, Uncle Vanya took off the old jacket he had been wearing for years. He'd always wear it, day in, day out. I cannot remember him without that jacket. Even now, obviously, he had had no intention of exchanging the old rag with a French uniform.

«No, no, no. Sell the house to me. Look I am rich.»

He began ripping open the seams of the old piece of clothing that had been his for so long..

«No, Uncle Vanya, don't do that. You love that jacket.» Mother cried out in despair, trying to keep him from his work of destruction.

«Baloney, let's buy that house.»

Into his jacket a large leather briefcase was sewn in, he took it out, removing the outer cloth carefully from the lining. Then he untangled the cords that held the

briefcase together and pulled out a stack of what might have been old letters, strangely enough they were wrapped tightly in wax papers. Of course, he had done that to keep them dry. But they weren't letters. What were these papers?

We all looked at an original Pacific Rail Road Bond. Uncle Vanya examined it closely

«Oh, this one can only be cashed in May, 1895. Let's find another one. We need the money now, don't we?»

Without waiting for anyone to answer, he shuffled through the papers, mumbling *sotto voce*, «Central Pacific Railroad Company, the Union Pacific Railroad, Trinity House, Hoare's bank, Barclay, Twinings, Lloyd's Bank. That looks good.»

I had no idea what these companies were or what they were producing. The only one I could recognize, when he muttered it out loud, was "Longines".

The landlord's eyes were bulging out when he saw what must have been immense riches displayed right before his eyes.

«Is that enough to buy the house?» Vanya asked. With both hands he held up the papers, right into the landlord's ugly face.

«Of course, it is. It's all yours. The house is yours. I will call my lawyer and we shall make it official today.» Mr. Schenk said eagerly.

At once, he began snatching up the papers, sneering all the while. It was that awful sneer that woke me from my stupor that had befallen me ever since Uncle Vanya started dishing out his bonds. I said out loud.

«No, wait. We first want to get these stocks appraised properly. We may be paying you far too much.»

«Well, young lady. It's now or never. Hand over the bonds now, or lose the right to the house forever. After all, it is sold already.» I looked at Emily helplessly, eyes wide open at this brazenness.



«Why is there a picture of you and my brother.» Mustapha asked again, but I couldn't answer now and kept ignoring him.

Emily spoke, for she was not helpless, never ever.

«Fair enough then, Mr. Schenk, we shall lose the right to the house then,» she said cottoning on to my plan rather fast, taking it to the next level.

«With all that money we shall move to Paris, or London. Who wants to live in Berne when you can walk along the Champs-Élysées, see the Tuileries, or London, Westminster Abbey? Buckingham Palace? I haven't seen London's Bridge for so long. What do you think my dear?» She kissed Vanya on his cheek and he smiled.

«Paris in spring. London in autumn, I am all in, my dear. Chancellor Bismarck goes where he wants.» He winked at Mr. Schenk and quickly, I was trying to drown out his last remark. Mr Schenk needn't know about poor old Chancellor Bismarck.

«Maybe these stocks are worth enough to buy you a house in Paris *and* in London.» I said daringly.

«And in Bern as well. Maybe one with a better location, right along the *Marktgasse*, closer to the station?» Julien said who had just understood what was going on.

«And in Fleurier too. You can buy a house there too.» Mother said who did not understand what was going on, but trusted us enough so she would just copycat the nonsense we were saying. She really took the cake when she added:

«And then you may still have enough money to buy this old shack here.» Maybe she *did* understand what we were trying to do. I glanced at her sideways and saw her smile.

«Right, Here's money, for at least five houses. Who knows?» I smiled at the landlord who looked crestfallen. By now I had picked up the stocks and shares and looked at the landlord challengingly. No, he wouldn't get to blackmail us. Absolutely not.



«Why is there a picture of you and my brother.» Mustapha asked once more, still holding the picture. But no one listened to him. I, for sure, didn't want to hear him ask that. I had no idea what to tell him. The truth, I guess. But not now.

«Wait», the landlord said, he was sweating now.

«I agree, I agree», he sighed out loud. «Have these bonds and shares appraised first. For aught you know, you may also be paying too little. I will stop the sale of the house at once, but you must pay 10% more than the butcher would have. I know he cannot pay more and for my extra expenses in this matter,» he added quickly

«And how much would he have paid?»

Mr. Schenk didn't answer.

«3% more then», I said, «Not 10%».

«9%»

«4%»

«8%»

«Oh stop it, I cannot take it anymore. We shall pay exactly 5% more than your butcher would have. How much would he have paid anyway?»

« I will let you know.»

She stretched out her hand and the landlord took it greedily.

They seemed to be shaking hands forever.

«Deal,» he said and I couldn't bear the smirk on his face. But the house was now Emily's or rather Vanya's. Miracles after miracles. I sure now needed a miracle too, for what was to come.



«Why is there a picture of you and my brother?»

«Mustapha, let's go for a walk. I cannot tell you here.»

«Alright.» He keenly smiled at me and I smiled back.

We left the photo studio and walked up *Postgasse* towards the French church.

«I met your brother up there, when we brought wine to the soldiers. One of the Frenchmen insulted Emily, he said the Emily's wine tasted like vinegar and then your brother came and apologized for this insult. I turned towards him and said

'Mustapha?» and he answered in the affirmative saying he was Mustapha Ben Murkoja the second. I didn't realize it wasn't you. «

«You mean Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara, not Murkoja.»

«Of course. Turkoja. I still cannot remember your name properly. So sorry.»

«And after all that happened you did not realize it wasn't me?»

«You look alike.»

«We don't. How could you not recognize me? Marie? How could you?»

I shrugged uncomfortably. He seemed upset.

«I said, you look alike. Then he told us about the war. And he told us about your mother and your sister.»

«He told you that? He had stopped walking and looked at me.

«Well, you wouldn't».

«Then he also told you why he is Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara, the second?»

«The second? Yes, he said he was the second.»

«But did he tell you why we called ourselves like this?»

«No, that he didn't tell me.»

«After they killed our mother and the baby twins, we were the only family left and so we decided we were one. We adopted a new name, a new place of origin: Mascara, and we were Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara the first and he was the second. We were inseparable. Inseparable. We were one.»

«But why did you not tell me of him?»

«He didn't tell you that?»

«No, he didn't.»

«When he was twenty-one, he became a Christian, converted to your Jesus Christ. He said he loved the Lord like his own brother and that Jesus was alive. He said the Holy Spirit had come to live within him. You understand, I had to cut him off.»

Because he had become a Christian? But he is your brother?

«I know. I know».

«And me? Will you cut me off as well? I am a Christian too».

Mustapha didn't answer.



«But why was he here in Switzerland? If you cut him off?»

We passed the city's riding hall and many of French soldiers sat before the building in the sun, some of them mending their uniforms, others drinking, others playing a game I didn't understand from afar. We walked right past, out of the city. Mustapha chose not to answer for some time. When we were down by the river he said.

«He did not desert me. He would always follow, always be close. The only reason I joined the French army was to escape him and hopefully die as far from home as possible. It was a chance offered I couldn't let pass. But he was not afraid of dying, he enlisted to. He stayed close to me, he would not desert me. Ever. Not even in this bloody, awful war. He had sworn to protect me. Always. And it seemed he did.»

By now, I was trembling. It was clear at once. I had shot his brother, but how come the body had disappeared? That I didn't know. How could I tell him a story I didn't know the end to? How could I tell him anything?



For a long time we were walking in silence and somehow our steps took us back to the cabin in the magic wood. I had to tell him, somehow I had to tell him. The Truth. Before. Before we reached the cabin. But I couldn't. I didn't have the words, I felt so shy and humbled. After all I had done. Me? Shy and humbled? We saw the cabin from afar, I felt like a rabbit watching the snake. I kept walking when all I wanted was run away in the opposite direction.

When we got inside, he locked the door behind him. Then he turned and looked at me.

«Oh Marie, I've missed you so much. Come here.» He pulled me closer and my blood rushed through my body, I could hear my heart pounding.

«I've wanted you so much. I couldn't stop thinking of you.»

He began kissing me softly, nudging me gently towards the table. I wanted him so much myself and yet I had to tell him. Somehow. I had to tell him now. Before-.

He carefully lifted me onto the table, parting my legs tenderly with his strong hands, his finger running along my thighs giving me the shivers. I surrendered to his fervent touch willingly and with pleasure. I felt his manhood as he pressed himself towards me. And I yielded. I couldn't tell him, not just yet. I put my head back,

sighed out loud, let him kiss my breasts as he undid my dress, my camisole. And yet. I had to. I had to tell him. Now. Before-.

«Stop.» I said. «Stop, Mustapha, I have to tell you something I should have told you before.»

«What is it my love?» He mumbled.

He kept kissing my neck, my ear but I had gone stiff.

«I was here with your brother.»



«Thinking it was me?»

He sobered up and took a step back. I had never seen a grown man naked before, not like this. Last time my eyes were closed and now - . Now, they weren't. I wasn't sure I could even speak and I couldn't raise my eyes, only staring at his nakedness. Then finally, when he had the decency to pull up his red trousers, I looked away, so completely embarrassed. Quickly, I covered my own breasts and closed my dress again.

«Marie. Tell me, no. Marie. Marie, you didn't? You didn't. With my brother?»

«No, no, no. We didn't. That is not it. No, you must believe me. No. Nothing happened. I swear.»

«So what is it? What happened?»

His dark eyes burned into my soul. I found it hard to look at him.

«A man followed us. He thought your brother was taking advantage of me.»

«And?»

I fell silent. I couldn't tell him what happened, could I?

«And?»

I only looked at him. Then I took a deep breath. But before I could speak, Mustapha spoke.

«I shall kill him.»

He turned away from me and started pacing up and down the room. It seemed he instinctively understood what had happened. Silently, I shook my head, tears welling up.

«You don't understand, Marie. There must be revenge. He was my brother.»

«Why did you not tell me you had brother?»

«He's dead to me.»

«Even when he was still alive?»

«Who was it? Who killed my brother?» I looked at him helplessly. How could I ever tell him what happened?

Would he really kill Alonzo? I guessed he would. Would he kill me too? Truth told, it was really me who killed him.

«Tell me who it was! Marie. Who was it?»

No, no, I wouldn't say a word. I had seen the two men fight and it was only by the grace of my tender, naked, white ass that they had stopped. No. I wouldn't tell him. No, he couldn't have his revenge. It was always wrong to kill, no matter what. *Thou shalt not kill.*

«I don't know his name», I lied. It was wrong to lie too. But *sacrément*, as the gendarme had kept saying, if it saved Alonzo's life it was worth the lie. Alonzo was a scoundrel, but he didn't deserve to die.

«I have never seen him before. He smashed the door and started stabbing your brother, before we could-.»

«And Mustapha? What would he do? Did he fight like a man?»

«He fell to his knees and quoted the sermon of the Mount.»

«The sermon of the Mount? Which mount?»

Which mount indeed? My mind blanked for a moment.

«The beatitudes. Thou shalt love thy enemy. The sermon Jesus gave, on the mountain.»

«He didn't fight?» I shook my head, keeping silent. Each word I said seemed to enrage him terribly.

«Right, I see *thou shalt not kill*. That why you're not telling me who the man was? You are protecting him.»

I shook my head, frightened at his outburst.

«No, I am not protecting anyone.»

«Marie. He took a life. Whoever it was, he must give his own life for taking my brother's. You know that, right?»

I stared at him wide-eyed.

«Right? We are talking about my brother.»

«You said, he was dead to you already?»

«Don't you dare.» He roared.

«You are a woman, you don't understand.»

All of a sudden being with Mustapha scared me terribly.



«Was it Julien, Marie? Tell me? Was it Julien who killed my brother? Tell the truth. Are you protecting him? You know you shall not lie.» Mustapha was still shouting and by now, I was crying hard.

«No, it wasn't Julien, I promise, it wasn't»

«So, tell me, who was it?»

«I don't know him.»

«I shall kill him.» Tears were streaming all over my face.

«No, Mustapha, please, please don't kill him. It wasn't Julien. It was-. No, I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you. But you must believe me it wasn't Julien. I know who it was, but I don't want to tell you. He doesn't deserve to die.»



«Marie, do you really love me?»

«I do.»

«Then, tell me.»

« I can't.»

«Then, you don't love me.»

«I do. Mustapha. Please.»

«You don't. You don't tell me the truth, you keep confusing my name, you mistook me for my brother. You lie to me. That is not love. That is -. I don't know what it is, but it is not love. You, you don't love me.»

I didn't know what to say. Whatever he said, I couldn't have agreed more. I had sinned before and I had sinned again. What a good Christian I was. How wonderful all this had turned out.



«So where is the body?»

«That I don't know. It is a riddle.»

«I went to confess at the gendarmerie the next day.»

«Confess? At the gendarmerie? I don't understand. What would you confess? Don't you confess to a priest? I am confused. Marie, tell me the truth. Now. Did he not refuse you after all? I mean you are a beautiful woman. Look at you.»

«No, no, he did refuse me. That is not it. That is not what I confessed.»

«So why would you confess? And to a *gendarme*?

«I have killed him. It was me.» I screamed out loud.

«I don't understand what you are saying. You, you have killed him? But how? And why? You said there was a man.»

«There was a man, but it was me who killed him. With his rifle. The same you have. So, if you want revenge, you have to kill me. It was me. Me, the murderess. I kill with elegance and grace. You remember?» I was now sobbing out loud, spit flying from my flews.

«Marie, that cannot be true. No, you're lying.»

«It is true, whether you believe it or not. Just like the gospel or the sermon of the Mount. True whether you believe it or not. No matter what.»

«But why would you kill my brother? You said there was a man? I don't understand. Please, do enlighten me. Please. You cannot keep me in the dark forever. Speak up. Speak up at once.»



«The man had stabbed him so badly, he would have died anyway. Your brother asked me to relieve him, and I did. I did. I relieved him from his suffering.»

«You did?»

«I did. He asked for it. You must believe me.»

«So, what did he say before he died?»

«He said he feared the rattle snake.»

«He did say that?»

Mustapha raised his eyebrow, he seemed to calm down.

«And that he loved you.»

At this last sentence, Mustapha bent down and started crying. Seeing him cry came as a shock about as big as seeing him naked. I stretched out my hand, but he pushed me away. Time stood still. He had pushed me away. He didn't want me. Nothing mattered anymore. My love, he didn't love me anymore.



«Let's go back, I shall need to grieve and make arrangements for his burial. I shouldn't have -. No, I should have-.»

«There is no body for a burial. I've told you already. I came back here, and he was gone. First, when I saw you, I thought you had risen. I had -, I have no explanation whatsoever.»

«Indeed. Risen to a challenge immense. I will find that stranger and I will also find the body. If it wasn't Julien, I know who it was. You don't have to tell me.»

«You do?

«I do. It was Alonzo, wasn't it?»

I only stared at him, completely shocked. The expression of my face gave me away immediately. How could he guess?

«See, that's what I thought. He will also know where the body is. I'll go and ask him.»

Of course: Alonzo. He must have come back to hide the body. In the end it was him who had committed the crime and not me. Of course, why hadn't I thought of this before? How could life be so complicated. How could I have been so blind? And after all, how could I become so entangled in that web of lies and murder and drama? All I have ever been, is a simple farm girl from the Jura valleys.



There was one last question that bothered me.

«What about me?»

«What do you mean?»

«Us. What about us?»

«What do you mean?»

«Is that the end of us?»

«There was no us.»

«But, last time-, in the cabin?»

«Where you killed my brother?»

«No, where we made love.»

«That was not love.»

« It was to me. » I said meekly.

«I am married.»

I looked at him thunderstruck. He couldn't be telling the truth, could he?

«I am married to a French girl from Paris.»

«You're not.»

«Come to Paris with me and see for yourself. You will like her.»

«You're going back to Paris?»

«I am. Where else should I go? Françoise is waiting for me.»

«Françoise?»

«Françoise Belfay. My wife. Come. Come and meet her.»

«No, I am not coming.» I was startled. What was he talking about?

Desperately, I held my tears back. I didn't want him to see that I cried. He was married? My Mustapha married. I felt so faint, I could have vomited right there and then.



Friday, February 17, 1871

I needed rest, how I needed rest. The past few days since Julien and I had embarked on our adventures had been too strenuous. So much had happened. I keep rereading this diary wondering how so much could happen in one day, in one week, in two and a half weeks. Mustapha married? And to a French girl? Françoise Belfay? What a beautiful name, what atrocious, terrible news.

Why had he made love to me? Why had he deceived and misused me so? When I loved him? When I had given myself up to him? When I wanted -, when it was me who had dreamed of becoming his betrothed, his beloved bride, his ever so faithful wife? I had no answers, only a million questions. There were no answers. Not for me. There was only hurt and pain and humiliation. How stupid I had been. How foolish.



All I wanted now, was go home. Home to *La Maison Blanche*, the wide meadows of the Jura, the endless rolling hills, the deep valleys, the karst rocks I loved so much to climb. Fresh air, fresh water. Sheep. Wool. Home. Julien, my sisters. Mamà.

The next day, we left Uncle Vanya in Emily's care and boarded a train for Neuchâtel. Julien was grilling Mamà with his questions all the way from Bern to Herzogenbuchsee

«How come Vanya had all these shares?»

«I remember us talking about this. He always said he was rich. When he worked with father in the mines, he always said he'd buy the same stocks and shares as the gentleman who ran the mines in La Presta. I never really believed a word of what he was saying. The work was hard and hardly paid. I remember looking at the map with all these tunnels, all meticulously planned. The grid looked like the streets of La Chaux-de-Fonds.»

«Or New York» Julien added excitedly.

«Or New York, but by far not as glamorous. The darkness down there. The foul air. You cannot imagine. And then the horses. They took down horses to drag the waggons. And how they dug those tunnels. The vertical mines all along the asphalt bank: They called it *Le grand monsieur*, Asphalt the great Lord as if it came to rule us all, maybe it still will. Considering all the asphalt they dug out, paving streets as far away as London. They took out everything and left only pillars two meters long and two meters wide. But then, they became greedy and started to leave pillars

only one meter long and one meter wide. That was when your father wanted out. He said it was too dangerous and only a matter of time until the mine would collapse. It was then that we left for *La Maison Blanche*. And my sister married Uncle William and I married father. And my family-. Well, you know all this, don't you. Vanya came with us, but obviously, he and Emily-. Anyway, I never did believe that he was rich. I am so glad for him and Emily. He knew her right away when he saw her, didn't he? That was amazing.»

Mother's eyes were glistening with tears.

«Were they ever married?»

«No, they were not. You know that.» I wondered if she'd tell us more.

«Emily wanted to be a photographer and Uncle Vanya -. Well, he wanted to work in the mines. And she didn't want to leave the city. She would never have given up her independence. And then Vanya married Fleure. And they had Patrice and Maude.»

«Mamà, we know all this.» She smiled at us.

«Of course, you do.»

«And aunt Therèse, why did we stop talking to her? »

« She never approved. »

« Of what? »

«Not something children should talk about.»

I rolled my eyes. I knew what she didn't approve of: Having an affair while being married, it was wrong. I knew. I painfully knew. Wrong. And yet: so right. In fact, I no longer knew what was wrong and right. I had somehow gotten past that point without noticing.

«Why do we even call him Vanya?»

«But I've told you the story before. It was a little boy on a train, I think he was travelling with his grand-father, a cloth-merchant from Russia. He just looked at him and said: «Vanya, Vanya» We all had to laugh so much and ever since we've always called him Vanya. » I really felt too tired to hear any of this.

«And, mother-» Julien already had the next question ready for her, but I couldn't take this anymore. I leant my head against the cold, wet window and looked at the landscape rushing past me so quickly. Then I closed my eyes and stopped listening to their conversation.



So many things were troubling me: Would Mustapha kill Alonzo? Would he find his brother's body? I guess Alonzo had dragged it down to the river at night. The mighty Aar-river will have swallowed it by now.

Would I ever see Mustapha again? How soon would the Swiss army take the soldiers back to France? Did he really not love me? Was he really married? Did he really think I didn't love him? Would the gendarme find the rifle, the beautiful jezail, and remember I had said I shot a man? Would I be charged? Prison? Would I be free?

I had sinned greatly. *Thou shalt not kill* and yet, I had. I had killed repeatedly. I had lost my innocence forever. No longer was I girl. Now, I was a grown woman: A stranger I didn't like, a stranger I didn't know. How was I to live with myself? And all alone?

And how I missed Mustapha, how I yearned for him so greatly. Thinking of him, my heart was breaking. Would I ever experience such love and joy again?
Would I?

How could I survive this day?

The next day?

I felt sick already.



Part II

PARIS

Semaine sanglante - Bloody Week

Friday, May 19, 1871

I should have written more these past days, these past months, but I couldn't. Too much had been troubling me. The morning sickness, it had set in a couple of weeks ago. Mamà gave me that worried look I only know too well and when the vomiting wouldn't stop, she sent me to see the doctor in Fleurier. I was with child, that much was certain, and I was desperate. How could I raise a black child? A bastard? Here at *La Maison Blanche* in *Hautevue*? Without a husband to protect me? I didn't know. I don't know. I had no choice.

Saturday, May 20, 1871

How beautiful the blossoms of the old cherry trees shone in the dew of early dawn. How beautiful the blooming apple trees by the road, the buds still closed so early in the morn. Beneath my shoes, the grass was wet, yet lush and green. When I held my cold, limp fingers to my lips, I felt my moist breath warming my blood. It wasn't far to the station now and when the sun finally rose behind the horizon I could see *Travers* from afar. Now, mighty poplar trees were lining the lane. Now, the first houses came into view. Then the station. Then the clattering steam engine. The train. Then, *Besancon. Dijon.* Paris wasn't far now. Paris. *Imaginez.* Imagine.



«*Mademoiselle, vous êtes seule?*»

Miss, Are you on your own? A young gentleman sat down next to me, putting a small leather suitcase underneath the seat. I only smiled at him. Why confirm the obvious?

«Are you going to Paris?» He asked. I nodded shyly. Mamà had told me, and told me repeatedly, not to talk to strangers on the way.

«You know the city is beleaguered by the army. You wouldn't get in.»

I was so surprised I answered him despite my initial resolution not to speak with anyone.

«What do you mean? The Prussians have left, haven't they? Didn't the French surrender by the end of January? There was an armistice I heard.»

«Not by the Prussians, beleaguered by the French army.»

«Why would the French besiege Paris?» I exclaimed out loud, startled at this outrageous idea.

«You haven't heard of the Commune then?»

I shook my head and looked at him, totally befuddled. What was he talking about? What was the Commune? We didn't get many news at *La Maison Blanche*. We knew the war was over. The French army interned in Switzerland had been returning to France. I had thought there was peace now. I had thought it safe to travel to Paris. Was I mistaken?

«The Communards have taken over Paris in March, they want to build a new society, not only a new society, they want to reorder the world. From Paris to all of France, to Russia, to the Americas. Even China. The betterment of the workers.

Abolition of child labour. Separation of state and church. They took the archbishop hostage.»

«I don't understand. Why would they take the archbishop hostage?» The young man shrugged.

«In March, when Paris awoke without a government. Everyone came out to see the barricades. The National Guard took control. That's when the Commune was born.»

«But what do they want?»

«They want to end exploitation of all labourers. Revolution. That is what they want. Revolution. They call it socialism. Communism.»

«How so?»

«They want equality. For everyone. Man and women, workers.»

«But that sounds like a good thing. That is a good thing, isn't it?»

«Well, it might be. But as terror was rising, people began to flee the city *en masse*.»

«Why that?»

«They didn't want to join the ranks.»

«Of the army?»

«No, the ranks of the national guard, the Commune. The Communards forced all citizens to join and fight for their ideas and not all Parisians liked that. Can you imagine?»



«And who sent the army then?» I found it hard to understand what he was talking about.

«The French government in Versailles have sent their troops. Even the Prussians released French war prisoners to help keep the order. The Germans have not much interest in socialism spreading in France, not to much avail though. The Commune still stands.»

«The Prussians released French war prisoners as soldiers against the French people? The French against the French? I bet that saves them Germans some work.»

He nodded.

«Not exactly, nationality doesn't matter in this case. It is a war of ideas, it really is the Commune against Versailles.»

«So, they are all French?»

«Yes, most of them are French, but they have very different ideas what that would mean. French is not automatically *French*. The Commune wants everybody to be the same, but this does not include the ruling class. They are not the same. Obviously. It's complicated. And they are all heavily armed, that doesn't make it less dangerous.»

«Hopefully, they will not shoot each other, will they?» The more I heard, the more worried I got.

He smacked his lips and looked me straight in the eyes. He chose not to answer that question.

I was alarmed. Civil war in Paris? No, it couldn't be, not when I was going to Paris.



«And, where are you going?» I asked timidly.

«I am going to Paris too.»

«So, how will you get in?»

I have a cousin who's with the National Guard. He issued me a permit.»

«Then you are lucky.» I tried to hide how dismayed I was. Had all been in vain? Would I never find Mustapha again? Even though he was married, I was resolved to tell him I was with child, his child. I wanted him to know. That was all I wanted: tell him he was to be a father, the father of our child.

«I could try and pass you off as my sister. They might let us in together. What is your business in Paris?»

«I'd rather not say,» I answered cautiously.

«A man, then, I guess. Is he as handsome as I am?» He pointed both his palms at his face, and it made me laugh out loud.

«No, I am looking for a Françoise Belfay». I said defiantly.

«A woman then? Alright.» He rose his eyebrow and I didn't understand why he'd give me that look. What was wrong with looking for a woman?

«Do you know anyone of that name?» I broached the subject again.

«I don't, but I could make enquiries, if you'd like.»

I nodded. Sure. Sure, I'd like that.

I was resolved to tell Mustapha he was the father of our child. There were no other options. Come what may. Hell or High Water. Cannonballs or rifles. Even if I

had the whole French army stand against me. I had to get into Paris somehow and find him. Françoise Belfay. Her name was all that would help me find him.



«I am Pierre. Pierre-Auguste.» He held out his hand.

«Marie. Just Marie.»

«*Enchantée*, Marie.» When I stretched out my arm, he took my palm and kissed my hand. I blushed, withdrawing my fingers quickly. It made me remember last time a man touched my fingers with his lips. I shivered at the memory.

«Do you mind? It is still about half an hour before the train stops outside Paris.» He had gotten out a pencil and paper from his suitcase underneath the seats.

«No, of course not. The landscape is beautiful. Go ahead.»

«Not the landscape.»

«But?»

«You, you're beautiful. Can I draw your portrait?»

«Me? You're a painter?»

«*Mademoiselle*, In fact, I am.»

«*Mon Dieu*, how exciting. I have a friend in Bern who can paint. She did a wonderful large canvas of the Alps, the Matterhorn. But she really is a photographer.»

«I prefer painting people.»

«You mean women?» I said taunting him casually.

He didn't answer as he had already begun his sketch. Had I given him permission to do this? Not really, but I was curious to see what I'd look like on his sketch.

«What should I do?» I said, despite feeling uncomfortable by how intense his gaze had become when he searched my face. Had he just looked at my breasts without averting his eyes? That was outrageous.

«Just look out the window and relax. Think of something beautiful.»

I smiled. Something beautiful? That was easier said than done. All I could think of was how the French army was besieging Paris. Not exactly beautiful. The poor people of Paris, besieged again. I still thought it weird that they would besiege their very own capital while their own people were trying to reorganize the government. Wasn't it obvious that fresh ideas were needed to govern when the republic and the monarchies had failed so dreadfully? Abolition of child labour, equality of man and women, the end of exploitation of labourers. It didn't sound too bad. The only thing I wondered about was why they had taken the archbishop hostage? What could they possibly want with him?



«You will be perfect for the harem in Montmartre.»

«Harem?» I said appalled. Where was he taking me? I had only a very vague idea what a harem was, but it didn't sound decent. I definitely didn't want to go there.

«Concubines.» He mumbled, still concentrating hard on the lines he drew.

«Concubines? I am not a concubine.» What could he mean humiliating me thus? What was I to say? He wasn't so wrong, but how could he have guessed? My being with child didn't show yet. He couldn't know. He didn't answer. What a strange young man. I could see that he didn't really want to talk while he was drawing.

«Not a real harem. I am working on a couple of sketches for a picture which will show Parisians in a traditional Algerian costume.»

«I am not a Parisian and why Algerian?» I blushed when I said the word. My heart began racing. I felt so faint. Why would he see me in an Algerian costume? Could he read my mind? Could he see whose seed had begotten the child I was carrying.

«The Orient, don't you find it fascinating?»

I blushed even more and turned my head away from him to look outside the window. Was my fascination with Mustapha just a fashion: a sentiment *en vogue*? No, it couldn't be. Had I fallen prey to the present *zeitgeist*? Was I not in love with him, Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara? Was it simply an *amour fou*: Loving all that was foreign and not European? I searched my soul, I searched my heart. No, it couldn't be. I did truly love him, love him foremost as a man, not as an Arab, not as an Algerian. To my defence: I hadn't even realized he was different when I first saw

him. I had simply thought the sun had burnt him. How naïve I had been. And naïve I still was.



«That is perfect. Stay like this. Turned away like this. Lost in thought. How beautiful your neckline is.»

I was glad I didn't have to look the stranger in the eye. My cheeks were burning from all his talk about Algeria and all his well-meant compliments that were most insulting.

«Your black hair tied loosely in that knot, how beautiful the colour. Like ebony. And the rings in your ears. They are perfect with your small ears.»

There was no end to my embarrassment. I felt the red spread all along my ears and right underneath my ebony hair.

«She shouldn't be wearing anything at all.» He murmured.

«I heard that.» I said boldly. He was taking such liberties indeed. Did I really have to listen to these obscenities?

«No, no. Please don't feel offended. I am not talking about you. The woman in my picture. She shouldn't be wearing anything but these earrings. It will not be you. It's a mere fantasy. Don't you think nudity in women is so beautiful? I find it most fascinating. You too?»

What was enough was enough. I didn't have to answer him, in fact I didn't even have to listen to this. I got up and walked down the aisle, still red as a ripe, sweet cherry. A little further down, I turned to look fully into his face.

«I am not your fantasy.»

«Suit yourself. I didn't mean to offend you.»

«Of course not.»

«I haven't finished the portrait. Wait.»



I walked further down the aisle and moved on to the next waggon which was third class. I had paid for second class, but I couldn't bear the dirty grin on the stranger's face any longer. Rather I'd sit more uncomfortable in third class. I was about to sit down, when I felt as sick as a dog. Immediately, I rushed to the window. No sooner had I managed to pull the window open than I had to vomit. I had just about managed to stretch my head out and up it all came. Vomiting on a train in motion was the most humiliating experience ever, leaving me completely debilitated. Everything splashed onto an elderly gentleman who had taken his hat off and was leaning out of the adjacent window to get some fresh air while enjoy the balmy scent of spring. At least until I had poisoned it all for him. My knees were shaking and so were my hands.

«You're coming to third class to vomit? That is incredibly sassy.» He said angrily while he was cleaning his face and shoulders with a handkerchief. I was so mortified and ashamed I couldn't say I word. I simply looked at him, wincing from

embarrassment. He was covered in little bits of oatmeal I had eaten this morning. I could still see them as there hasn't been enough time to digest them.

«I am so sorry, Sir.»

«You brazen bitch, how dare you?» He came towards me threatening me.

«Leave her alone. It is not her fault she feels so sick, right?» A plump elderly woman had rushed to my defence.

«Right dear. Not your fault. Take a sip of water. Here.» She handed me a bottle and I eagerly drank half of her water.»

«That's better, dear. Right? Come here. Come sit with me.»



Then the train stopped at *St-Denis*. We had to get off for it didn't go all the way to Paris. Some said there were trains that were still running, others said there were none. It was chaos at the station. I had no idea how to get into the city. Some of the other passengers also looked as if they were stranded on some deserted island. I didn't exactly feel like Robinson Crusoe, too many people were milling around me, but being here, felt strangely exotic. I was in Paris and yet I wasn't. Not yet. I didn't see the painter who had so boldly approached me. Somehow, I was glad I had gotten rid of him, on the other hand I understood clearly that he might have helped me get into the city. Obviously, not everyone had a permit these days to travel freely. On the way, we had seen so many soldiers, on foot and by horse, as well as waggons filled with rifles and armour, even large cannons. It was a rather frightening and sorry sight. In fact, it really did look as if the complete French army was headed to Paris.

And we had seen Prussian soldiers as well, heading out, back home to Germany. What a commotion on the streets. It seemed like France was turned upside down. What was I to do? How would I proceed? Would I ever reach Paris? The Champs Elysées? Notre Dame? The Louvre? I felt so sick again.



As I was leaving the station to get some fresh air, I heard a voice that was familiar. On the corner I saw, Pierre-Auguste, the painter, pleading loudly with a flyman.

«Please, take me to Montmartre. I will pay you in full once we get there. I have no money on me. But I promise, the money is in my apartment.»

«No money, no transport. You are not the only one who wants to get into the city.»

«I have money», I said. Pierre-Auguste looked at me surprised.

«Ah, my beautiful Algerian has come to my rescue.»

«I haven't come to rescue you.»

«I know, I am only teasing you.»

«And I am not Algerian.»

«Of course, I know. Sweet Swiss lady.»

«It is not funny.»

«I understand. I hurt you. Please accept my sincere apologies. I will not offend you again.»

«Do you have money, or don't you?» The flyman asked impatiently.

«How much is the fare?»

«Whatever he says, pay him half.»

The flyman laughed and I reached for my purse. After I had paid him what he wanted, me and the painter took a seat in the carriage. The flyman whipped up his horse and drove us away.

«So, this Françoise Belfay. Is she related to you?»

«Somehow, she is.»

«Is she a communarde?»

«I really don't know. I guess I will find out once I'll find her.»

«It will be difficult to find people these days. Paris is in chaos. Some even say there is gun powder in the sewers. They may blow up the richer areas any time soon.»

«Blow up the city?»

«Don't believe everything I say.»

«Oh, I see.» I wasn't sure what to think now. Was someone to blow up Paris?

He couldn't be serious, could he?

«I hope they won't touch the Louvre.» He looked worried all of a sudden.

«The museum?»

«Yes, the museum. Some say it is all bourgeois art and must be annihilated.

Destroyed»

«That is outrageous.»

«It is, indeed. How can art be your enemy? How can you want to blow up pictures? I mean they are simply pictures. It is not their fault that kings and queens liked them, kept them, the pictures and the painters who made them.»

«And yet, art is never just art. A picture isn't just a picture. It is much more.

They stand for something else.»

«What do you think they'd stand for?»

«For the power to map the world. If you have the power to map the world, your power is infinite. I somehow understand that people want to destroy that power.»

«How beautifully put, I see you're not only beautiful, but also educated and wise beyond your years.»

«Does that amaze you?»

«Me? No, of course not. But some people would be amazed at this.»

«Why is that?»

«Because you are a woman.»

«Because I am a woman? What difference does that make?»

«I know it's stupid. It is not me who thinks like this. I am simply a painter.»

«Oh, I thought you were going to say you were only a simpleton.»

«I might qualify for one as well. May you be the judge of this.»

I only laughed and he joined in. That was when we reached the city gate.

Would I manage to get into the city on his permit? All of sudden, my heart sank. We didn't really have a plan.

«Now what?»

«We shall see. Let us go.»

«Just continue,» he ordered the flyman.

«Ayeaye», the flyman said and continued straight towards the city gate, *Porte de Clignacourt*. There was a sleepy party of national guards who stopped us.

«Your permit?» the tallest among them said. He had approached the carriage and checked the inside for whatever contraband he suspected we'd carry. Pierre-Auguste reached for the pocket of his coat and got out a piece of paper decorated with many colourful stamps. Cumbersomely, he handed it to the guard. He looked at the paper, then he looked at Pierre, then he looked at me.

«What about her? Where is her permit? She cannot pass without a permit.»

«I am really sorry, it took too long to process. Our father is sick, maybe dying and my darling sister had to come at once. I went to fetch her in *St. Dennis*. In fact, we should keep going at once. Poor father was wounded while fighting the Versailles. Here, like this.» He reached for his heart and showed dramatically where the cannons must have hit our poor, poor father while rolling his eyes and his tongue lolling out. I nearly cracked out laughing so dramatic his performance was, yet I kept a straight face, deadpan and sad, as becoming of a mourning daughter who was visiting her father one last time on his deathbed. What a charade, I thought, they will never be convinced by such lousy acting. But Pierre-August was already continuing:

«It was his last wish to see his daughter. You wouldn't want to deny one of our heroes his last will, would you? Would you?»

The national guard didn't answer and continued studying the permit Pierre-August had handed him. So, once again, just to make sure, the painter bellowed:

«Would you? Really? Would you?» I pulled his sleeve lightly because I felt he really was overdoing this little piece of drama. The national guard didn't even answer. He simply folded the permit, handed it back to Pierre-Auguste and we were allowed to pass. We crossed the railway and then the streets of Paris unfolded before us. I couldn't believe my luck. I had made it. I was in. What luck!



The *Boulevard Ornano* was so wide and beautiful, I couldn't stop turning my head to see it from all angles. The street was so much wider than anything I had ever seen. We rode down to the first *rond-point*, the first roundabout and then turned right into the *Rue Duhesme*. My heart was beating so loud, I nearly burst. If it hadn't been for Pierre-Auguste, I wouldn't have made it into the besieged capital of France. What I found disquieting, however, was that the streets looked deserted. There was hardly anyone, as if an ominous catastrophe was looming. It probably was. Looming.

And then the barricades. When I had seen the first one, large stonewalls built from bricks and debris, guarded by the heavily armed national guard: bearded men in uniform, I was so frightened I nearly wet myself. But after more and more barricades and more and more detours around the men wearing their képi so proudly, I was no longer scared. We had to drive around them again and again, so somehow you got used to it. Yet, I hadn't pictured it like this at all. The beautiful city of Paris, it looked like a war zone. And who was I to come here? I was no soldier. I was simply a woman in need of a husband.



«Are you hungry?»

«I could eat a horse.»

No sooner had I said this than I realized how inappropriate the expression was. Pierre-Auguste didn't seem to mind. But then, he also didn't know about Fanny. He smiled at me and for the first time since we had met, I relaxed a little. I had made it, made it to Paris. If I wanted to find Françoise Belfay, I needed someone to help me find her. If I did find her, I might find Mustapha too. I closed my eyes and searched my love's face, hidden so deeply and clearly in my memories. In my vision, he was as beautiful as the first time I saw him sit in the Red Cross carriage in *Les Verrières*, he was as strong as when he carried Pippa all the way up the steep street in Neuchatel to take me back to aunt Therèse's place. I simply had to find him. I had no choice.

«I know a place where they don't serve horse, but they serve the best elephant in town.»



It was right on the *Boulevard Marguerite-de-Rochechouart* that we stopped. The tavern didn't really look like a tavern from the outside. But when we entered the dark room, I could see a few bistro tables and the most beautiful salon chairs I had ever seen.

«Oh, look at the chairs. How gorgeous they are. Look at the fine gold.» I exclaimed out loud. A high-strung young man in his twenties, was thrilled to illuminate us. He stood on the stage and lectured us from above.

«Made by the *Maison Beurdeley*, right here in Paris. They're using the most exquisite material. They are usually producing for kings and, ehm- kings.» He gave me a sinister look I didn't know how to interpret. Then, he clapped his hands.

«See here: The ormolu mounts, mahogany, tulipwood, amaranth, sycamore».

Dramatically, he then jumped off the stage. The true stars, however, were the tiny dust pecks being propelled into our sphere, tingling in our moist breath zone, then hovering by, up in the air, and levitating languidly before they disappeared into thin air. The audience was missing, so were more performers. The place was empty but for him and us, and the dust he had swirled up so magnificently.

«*Auguste*. Finally. *Tu es là?* You're here. And with a lady. Ah -. A beautiful lady. *Bienvenu*. Welcome. Welcome to our humble abode. I am Lucien.» He said, curtsying theatrically.

«*Enchanté*, pleased to meet you,» I mumbled embarrassed at this burst of emotion while avoiding his eyes and looking around. I was wondering at his definition of humble. To me the place was so big it looked like a palace. Everything in Paris was bigger and grander and more exquisite. More *distingué*. It couldn't compare to the truly humble houses and villages in the Jura mountains at all. It couldn't even compare to Bern, the Swiss capital, I had come to like so much when Julien and I had ventured there in February: an adventure that, whether I liked it or not, was to stay with me for the rest of my life.

No -, Paris was a class of its own even though it was besieged by its own army. Everything was so green, so many open spaces between the houses. How wide the boulevards: It was as if your eyes were falling and falling and falling into their endless horizons.

«We'll have *Ragout d'Éléphant*. Twice.»

«Oh stop that nonsense.» I woke from my reverie. What was it with that elephant?

«You'd rather have zebra?»

«No, I am sorry, there is not zebra left,» Lucien said earnestly. I only rolled my eyes at the two men fraternizing. Pierre-Auguste was being too funny.

«Camel?» Lucien proposed eagerly. Obviously, he was in on this too. I groaned out loud, forgetting that Mamà would always scold me for making noises not worthy of a lady. But then, I was no lady. No soldier, no lady, no nothing. Just me.

«Of, course, I'll have camel.» I said playing along.

«No, no don't take the camel. *Ragout d'Éléphant* is so much better. The camel smells funny. Come on Lucien, tell her. It does smell funny.»

«He is right, The *Ragout d'Éléphant* is delicious. Our chef cooked enormous portions in champagne, parsley, rosemary and sage. He then sealed the stew in large glass jars. Delicious.»

«Ok then. Elephant it is.» I had given in.

«*Ragout d'Éléphant*.» Lucien corrected me.

«*Ragout d'Éléphant* sounds good for me.» I said beginning to feel tired at their useless games and speaking of tired, I also began to feel sick again. How hungry I was.



I didn't like the dark of the tavern. Outside there had been so much sun, bright, brilliant sunlight illuminating the city from high, high above. How impressively the concrete and the glass reflected the thousand rays of the sun. How elegantly the deep shade of the buildings danced on the large boulevards as the sundial moved on and on. It was as if the sun here was a different star than back home where all was dull and dreary. I couldn't wait to get outside again. And I had yet to find a place to stay the night.

«And do you like it?»

«I do, it smells like pork, maybe more chewy. But I like the rosemary that they put in and the white wine. Is it really champagne?» I stressed the word *champagne* unnaturally.

«You still don't believe you're eating an *éléphant*, don't you? »

«No, no, of course. It is just funny that I should get to eat an *éléphant* before I had even seen one.» I retorted quite sharply.

«Have you never seen an elephant?» He asked surprised. I shook my head.

«No, I haven't. You?»

«Of course. At the zoo. Before they slaughtered them.»

«They slaughtered them? Why would they do that.» I said amazed, looking at my fork and the undefinable piece of meat it had pierced.

«Food. The prices have skyrocketed. People were hungry.» Pierre-Auguste was chewing hard on a piece of meat, I could see his lips move rhythmically and he used his finger to get out the sticky part from between his teeth. It was revolting to watch him and yet I did faintly remember the newspaper article I had read in

Noiraigue. A turkey before Christmas would cost, what?-, nearly a hundred francs? I put my fork down and looked at what remained on my plate. I paled.

«Yes, I remember that. There were concerts in Bern to support the Swiss suffering from the siege.»

«The Swiss? Why did they need support? They were not the only ones who suffered, the workers here in Montmartre, they suffered a great deal too. So many died. And then the children. That was the worst. The others, they ate cats, and field mice and brochettes of sparrows. But the rich in Paris, they got the special menu. That is why they ended up slaughtering the zoo animals. Most of them were served at *the Lapérouse* for horrendous prices. But Lucien knew the butcher and he gave him a couple of kilograms of the elephant's ass. You know. Lucien's chef then canned them up for special occasions such as this. He is a regular customer here. The butcher, not the elephant of course.» He winked at me.

«I am not the only one who likes a nice ass.»

I looked at him aghast, what was he talking about?

Pierre-Auguste gave me that flirtatious look I didn't like while I was desperately trying to process what he was telling me. Was that no ruse? No joke at my expense? Was that real elephant on my plate? It seemed likely enough. What they said made sense indeed. The zoo. The siege. The prices sky-rocketing. The slaughter. My stomach turned and I got up, running out to find a place I could empty myself. It wanted out. All wanted out. Everything wanted out. The Parisians were savages. Savages, all of them. No matter how much art they had stored away at their museums. No matter how much history they covered their streets with. Savages. All of them.



«Are you alright?» Pierre-Auguste patted my back and held my hair back. My body was wrenching, the last contortions before the waves would ebb down again. I knew the procedure well by now. I couldn't believe he had followed me.

«Yes, fine. Don't worry.» I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand. I had vomited so often since I found out I was with child that I was already used to the sour stench of what had come up from within me. However, it was a first that I had vomited an elephant's ass.

«You're with child?»

«How do you know?»

«I just guessed. You didn't look sick before.»

«Well, you guess right.» I admitted. It was too tiring not to tell the truth.

«And Françoise Belfay is who exactly? Your beloved's mother?»

«No, not his mother.»

«Sister?»

«No, she is his wife.»

«His wife? Oh. I understand.» He whistled. I was too exhausted to tell him he didn't understand a thing.

«That's bad. And he was with the French army?»

«An Algerian rifleman.»

«An Arab?»

I nodded again.

«You're in trouble.» I still nodded.

«*Sacrément*, you're in such trouble.»

I nodded even more and then I began to weep. Pierre-Auguste put his arm around me.

«Hush, my dear. All will be well. We shall find this Arab of yours. But, let me paint you first. You can sit, relax and let your thoughts calm down.» He called for the flyman whom he had had advised to wait for us while we were to have lunch.



As I was climbing back on the coach, Pierre-Auguste remembered that he hadn't settled the bill.

«Marie, I need to go back inside. Do you have any money?» I groaned and got out a purse from underneath my frock.

«How much?» Luckily, Mamà had given me 100 French Francs.



«Was that Pierre-Auguste Renoir?» A beautiful young lady had approached the coach and looked at me warily. Her hair was elegantly swept up underneath her felt hat decorated with red plumes. I had never seen anyone keep herself so straight, not even mother. She wore an amazonian dress that I felt was rather unusual, even for Paris. In her right hand she was holding a large fan decorated with the most

beautiful Asian ornaments, maybe Japanese? From left to right across her blouse, she wore a red silk scarf the same colour as the plumes, everything was adorned with gold fringe. She looked rich and famous. In fact, she looked as if she had just stepped out of a picture immortalized on a large canvas hanging in the Louvre. Not that I had ever seen the Louvre, or any of the pictures there, but Papà had when he was young.

«Yes, that was Pierre-Auguste. Why?» I said hesitatingly, not sure what she wanted.

«Are you one of his models?» I raised my eyebrows at this. *Was I?*

«No, I am not.» I said quite determinedly. She scowled at me, trying to hide her indignation. I realized I had given her the false idea.

«He helps me look for my fiancé.» I added quickly. At this her face lit up and she gave me the most splendid smile.» I could only guess what that meant.

«You are engaged? Are you not with the Commune?»

«Could I not be with the Commune if I was engaged?» I said pointedly.

She only laughed out loud without trying to hide her amusement.

«You know the church, it binds us women, the holy shackles of matrimony.

Who in her right mind would want that?»

«I don't know what you're talking about.»

«You will soon enough. Wait until you're married. *Enchanté*, I am Liz.»

«I am Marie.»

«So, you have not found this fiancé of yours yet?» She stressed the word *yours* unnaturally.

«No, I haven't.»

«So, how are you going to find him? Paris is big.»

«Do you know anyone of the name Françoise Belfay?»

«Sure, I do. She is also with the *Union des Femmes*, the Women's Union.»

My heart missed a beat. Did she really know Mustapha's wife? Would finding him prove so easy after all?

«Where can I find her?»

«In church. Try *Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois*. In the evenings.»

I gave her a blank look as I hadn't heard of such a church before.

«Near the Louvre.»

«But you said the church-» She laughed out loud again.

«We're meeting in the churches. Not for mass, but for politics. Françoise sometimes even speaks there. You'll like her. She is so dedicated.»

«Is she married?»

«Who? Françoise?»

«Yes. Is she?» Liz laughed out loud. What I said seemed to amuse her.

«Of course not.»

«Are you sure?»

«She might have been married though, that I don't know.»

«To an Algerian rifleman?» I asked, afraid of what she'd say next. Liz couldn't stop laughing.

«A soldier? Françoise hates the Versailles army. I can assure you she is and never was married to a soldier.»

«Then it is not her.»

«It is not a common name, Belfay, you know. I would have said there was only one Françoise Belfay in the whole of Paris. And that is her. I know Paris well.»

I shrugged at this. It seemed wrong.

«Come tonight, if you can. You will meet her at Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. Sure. They're explaining once more all about our Manifest. The central committee has only just proclaimed it.»

«A manifest for what?»

«To go to war.»

«As women?»

I was appalled. Was everything upside down these days?

«Indeed. We shall prove to Paris and to the world that we shall defend the barricades and give our blood, and our life as our brothers do. We'll die for the defence and the triumph of the Commune, or so to say for the people. *Vive la Commune. Vive Paris.*»

«A call for violence then?»

«*Vive la Commune.*» She shouted once more and raised her hand. I thought her most peculiar. She had a foreign accent I couldn't place. And why was she shouting like this? And raising her fist?

«Isn't killing always wrong?» I said most defiantly.

«Oh, Marie, you must come tonight. You have so much to learn. You will like it. Oh dear. I am sure you'll like it, *ma petite fiancée.*» My little bride? Why would she call me like that? I was confused, but I kept smiling. However mad that woman, she surely brought me a step closer to Mustapha. That much I've understood.



When Pierre-Auguste came back to the carriage, he told the flyman an address I didn't understand. People here spoke so fast, they swallowed half their sentences and most of their letters.

«Where are we going?» I asked.

«Home.»

«I'll need some lodgings where I can stay the night.»

«You can stay with me. Remember, I want to paint you.»

«I may not have time. I'll need to go to church.»

«What church? »

«The Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. Tonight.»

«Of course, you ran into Liz. I saw here on the way out. Have you joined the Women's Union yet?»

«No, of course not.»

«Of course not?» He only laughed, «you don't know Liz yet. She will change your mind. Like that.» He snapped his fingers to illustrate what he was saying.

«We shall see.»

«You can stay with me. On the sofa in the atelier.»

«Oh, but how much would it cost?»

«How much can you pay?»

«Not much.»

«That's good.» He smiled at me.

«I am glad that is settled then.» He added. I really had no idea what to say to him.



No sooner had we reached his apartment than another lady called at his place. She was a little older but just as elegant as Liz had been. It seemed Pierre-Auguste was quite the ladies' man and he could paint them indeed. He had been showing me some of the paintings in his atelier when the bell rang and he rushed to let his visitor in. I was still admiring his work when the woman appeared in the doorway. She looked flushed when she saw me in his private quarters. But all I ever did was admire his work: I liked the colours he had chosen a lot: beautiful, happy colours full of summer and spring, full of laughter, love and time at leisure. His interpretation of the real world left me baffled so close was it to the beauty I saw in life. The woman and he settled in the drawing room and he began painting her at once. I could hear them laugh and chat while I withdrew to get ready to go out once more. I then slipped out, not without putting on another woollen jumper. In the evening, it was chilly in Paris although it was the end of May.

I walked the streets aimlessly, careful to stay away from the barricades although the men in uniform hollered and shouted at me when they saw me from afar. I didn't like the atmosphere. It felt like all hell was about to break loose upon the city. So many weapons and cannons and bricks and horses and rifles. Everyone was armed to their teeth. Cheering. And then the army outside the gates. They were heavily armed too and they hadn't come to lose the battle. Would anyone be able to win this? Or will it just mean destruction for everyone?

I could imagine there were gunpowder barrels in the sewers. Everything was possible. The city was teeming with violence yet to come. This wouldn't, this

couldn't end well. I must be mad to have come here. And yet, I hoped to God I'd find Mustapha soon enough. All I wanted was get out of here. Occasionally, I'd ask someone in which direction I had to walk to get to the Louvre and passers-by would point in various directions. I always followed their advice although it seemed conflicting at times. I had lost all sense of orientation. I was completely lost in Paris.

Then the river opened up to me and I felt a pang of relief. It couldn't be far now. The view from the bridge was breathtaking. Slowly, I crossed the Seine looking up and down the river to find out which was the Louvre. I still had no idea where exactly I was. If I was honest enough I didn't even know what the Louvre looked like. The grand and awe-inspiring monuments of Paris lay before my very eyes and yet I had no idea what exactly I was looking at. I kept on walking and when I stopped again at a road crossing, there was only a lone *communard* who had bent over to tie the lace of his boot. As he was alone, I felt safe enough to address him.

«Excuse me, sir», I said politely. I wanted to ask if he knew how I'd get to the Louvre. By now, I couldn't really remember the name of the church, but I had been told it was right by the Louvre. I couldn't finish the sentence. He had got up again and looked me, stared me, straight into the eyes. I recognized him at once.

«Alonzo», I cried out loud, «what are you doing here?»

«*Mademoiselle* Marie, you here?» His eyes widened in surprise and hurt and anger and ten thousand other emotions I couldn't name for him. I blurted out without thinking clearly.

«Where have you brought the body? Mustapha wanted to bury his brother.»

«His brother? I don't understand.»

«You killed his brother.»

«I haven't killed anyone. He was alive when I left.»

«But he was deadly wounded.»

«Says who?»

«Well,-», I was at a loss what to say and had fallen silent. This was most befuddling.

«His brother? You mean the nigger is alive? I didn't dump him in the river?»

«The river? You dumped him the river?»

He smacked his lips.

«Would you have wanted the gendarme to find him in the cabin.?»

«No, well. Yes. I don't know.» I was so confused. How come he knew about the gendarme? Had he followed me? Had he even seen me on the horse? I was mortified. Bravely, I put on a straight face and tried to control the wavering of my voice. No, there was no way he could have seen me on that horse.

«He is no -what you call him. Mustapha is my fiancé».

«You cannot be serious. He is a nigger. You're not going to marry such a scoundrel.»

«He is no scoundrel», tears began filling my eyes.

«But why would you then marry him?»

He looked at me and I stared back. It took him only a second to guess correctly what was the cause of my visit to Paris.

«Oh no. You cannot be serious. I understand. *That* is why you are here. I see. He's knocked you up.» He had grabbed my wrist.

«How dare you.» I said more aggressively than I had intended, pulling my hand away from his clutch. He let go. For a moment we both looked at each other again, not sure what was to come next. He didn't respond, but then said while hitting his forehead with his right hand:

«That is what it explains it then, of course.» He sneered at me and I feared what was to come.

«Of course, what?»

«I saw him dead.»

«Who?»

«This Mustapha of yours. I saw him dead the other day at the *Place de la République*. Here in Paris. I saw a body, -the poor soul gone- and I thought he looked like the man I had dumped into the river. I thought it rather peculiar. Now, I understand, they were brothers. That makes sense.»

«He's dead? Are you sure it was him?» I froze. No, that couldn't be true.

«I would recognize that nigger's face everywhere. He had that funny long gun. Beautifully adorned with the crescent of the moon.»



Mustapha dead? It couldn't be. My heart had gone numb, my body cold. I felt confusion, I felt pain. I didn't know what I felt. Was Mustapha really dead? Alonzo had seen his rifle, the beautifully inlaid crescent. How else would he know such details? That rifle was unique. It must be true. I had no explanation otherwise. My love, he was dead. I felt a beating in my body that hammered the last bit of hope and

happiness away. Mustapha dead. I felt I was dying too. Coming here was a lost cause. A lost-

«I cannot go back.» I whispered. My lips were trembling, my teeth were rattling.»

«No, of course not. Not without a husband,» Alonzo hissed.

«What will the people say?» I said silently.

«That you are a whore.»

He smacked his lips again.

«A whore?»

He nodded.

«A whore. Yes, you are.» He snorted out loud and came closer. I could smell his foul breath, then he had grabbed me by the wrist again and shook me hard. It hurt and I had begun crying. Desperately, I tried to control the tears streaming down my face. Was I indeed a whore? What was wrong with having loved Mustapha? Our love had been so pure, so strong, so innocent. Fulfilment. Complete fulfilment. Mustapha was the one and only. The one and only I had ever wanted and now he was gone. He was dead. Gone forever. I began shaking, I began crying and the sobbing soothed my frayed nerves, it comforted my hurting soul; most tenderly the salty tears stroked my broken heart. I was dissolving into the beginning night. Lights were fading. Darkness crept upon me. Faster and faster. I felt so faint. I felt so weak. I was delirious.

What black magician conjures up this fiend

And mortal eyes cannot endure the devil. —

Thou hadst but power over his mortal body;
His soul thou canst not have. Therefore begone.
For thou hast made the happy earth thy hell,
Filled it with cursing cries and deep exclaims.
Either heaven with lightning strike the murderer dead,
Or earth gape open wide and eat him quick

True hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings

All hope was gone. Gone.



«I will marry you.»

It sounded more like a command than a question.

«You will?» I looked at Alonzo, my eyes completely swollen, my face blotched.

«I will. I will take away your shame.»

I nodded. What choice did I have? No one would ever have me. Not with child. And certainly not with such a dark child.

«Let's do this now. There is a church over there.» He pointed towards the trees in front of a grand, old church. How beautiful the huge round window. How beautiful the church from afar.

«You want to do this now?» I sniffled, trying to come back to my senses, trying to grasp and understand the seriousness of the situation.

«You want to wait until people see that bastard stick out underneath your dress?» Roughly he let his hand glide over my belly, ruffling my coat, then he punched me, not too hard, but also not lightly.

I winced with pain. At once, I stepped away from him. Everything hurt and I had to sit. I squatted down while with both arms I was holding my child. I felt my belly hardened. I was startled. How dared he touch me like this? How dared he punch me so? Before I could put up any resistance, he grabbed my wrist and pulled me back on my feet again.

«You want to wait until they all see you are a whore?»

«No, of course, not.» I said meekly.

«Then I will marry you now. Come.» He spat on the floor.

I stared at him in disgust.

«I will marry you now. *Puttana*, you whore. Come on.» He grabbed me by the arm.



He began dragging me toward the entrance of the church and I was really too confused and hurt and upset to protest. Mustapha dead. What did anything matter now? What was happening to me? I couldn't say. My head was turning. I felt so sick. Then, I couldn't proceed any further and I vomited all over my boots. Alonzo quickly stepped away from me. For a while, I kept retching and he let go of my arm. He

stared at me in disgust. When I had finished and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, he grabbed me again and pulled me towards the entrance of the mighty church. No bells were ringing on my wedding day, no happy faces, no laughter and joy. No laughter and joy. No laughter and joy.



«Aren't you worried to father a child as dark as mine?»

«I am dark. Look at me.»

He pointed both his hands at his face. Alonzo was right, being Italian, he looked darker than any of the farmers in the Jura I knew.

«My father is from Morocco, my mother is from Naples.»

«Morocco? Seriously? Then why did you call Mustapha the way you called him?»

«His father was French. I hate the French.»

«I don't understand. You call the French niggers?» I hadn't really wanted to say that awful word, but it had just come out, slipped out between my lips before I could control it. Everything about Alonzo was so confusing.

«Stop asking these questions. Woman.» He hissed. I nodded. Alonzo was Moroccan? What a surprise.

He pushed the door open and we entered the church. An enormous space opened before us, contained by beautiful stone arches: The art of masonry at its perfection, displayed so courteously before our very eyes. I blinked again and again,

trying to get the tears out of my eyes. This was beautiful. The church was beautiful. Like nothing ever seen or heard. These hallowed halls. These hallowed halls where revenge wasn't known. I couldn't help but hear Sarastro's velvet voice sing to me his sweet, sombre melody. Mother had translated the opera for us children when father had sung it to us on a rare occasion. I had never forgotten the lines: And should man have fallen, it is love which will guide him to duty. No traitor can lurk because our enemies are forgiven. Forgiven.



I heard loud voices from where the altar stood. That I found unusual.

«Hello? Can anyone marry us? Father?» Alonzo bellowed. His voice was reverberating in the large nave. I winced at him shouting out loud like this in a church so dignified. Shouldn't there be silence in such holy halls? Silence and respect? Dignity? Why the noise?

«Marry? Oh, sure I will marry you.» Her laughter rang out loud like silver bells. A slender woman came forward. I eyed her suspiciously. She wore the strangest costume I had ever seen: Loose, Turkish pants and shoes that reached above her ankles with golden tassels. She wore a vest made of finest velvet, all crimson and beautifully decorated with the most elaborate embroidery. Her head was crowned with a cap displaying a red cockade and-. I didn't trust my eyes, in her blue belt stuck two pistols. I only stared at her. She was Queen fantasy. She didn't look like a priest at all. And, she definitely was a woman.

«Come, stand here.» She made us come forward. «Come, come. Now, walk with me.» We walked past a large cross lying between the pews and stopped in front of the pulpit. Why was the good Lord lying naked on the floor? How strange all this was, as if in some bad dream. What nightmare had befallen me? Was I still dreaming?

«Here?» I asked. «Not at the altar?»

«Here is fine.» She donned a long, black, ecclesiastical habit and climbed onto the pulpit. A couple of other women came forward and watched us curiously. Some began clapping their hands, others were cheering her on.

«Dearly beloved. We are gathered here together.» The women were shouting even louder. Some of them were whistling. What was going on here? Where was the priest, the deacon? Where was anyone? All this was so confusing.

«What?» The woman called to the crowd from the pulpit.

«What?» She screamed again.

«Go on.» A large old woman in the crowd shouted back up at her, «Go on, Françoise.»

«By the power of the Commune, I herewith declare you *communard* and *communarde* for better and poorer, definitely not for richer and surely for worse, surely for war. A free union.» I looked up at her. She got it all wrong. Who was that woman? What kind of vows were these? How could she parody the divine offices so terribly?

«*Union Libre*». The spectators cheered, raising their fists.

«*Union Libre*.» The leader in her black habit shouted back in French, raising her fist high above her head. Free union. Free union.

«*Union Libre.*» The crowd cheered as all women were raising their fists above their heads. The small group emanated such energy it was strangely sickening. I shivered, feeling hot and cold at once, and feeling so very sick.

«You may now kiss the bride.» She shouted from above.

Alonzo pulled me closer with a jolt and started kissing me. I felt his tongue all over my lips.

The women whopped out loud, cheering and screaming at the top of their lungs. The noise was deafening. What a disgusting ceremony. I felt so ashamed. Was I married now? I felt his tongue, how hard he pressed it between my closed lips. It was revolting.

«Let us now continue with what's really important.» The woman sauntered down the steps from the pulpit and all her comrades followed her to the front where she began to speak so loud, that I could understand every word despite the distance and despite the echo hollowing so frighteningly in the nave.

«The manifest. Dear communardes, let us talk about the manifest our committee has signed a couple of days ago. Versailles wants us to give in, to be reconciled. Peace. But not us. We demand war. Whoever wants peace is a traitor. We must stop the exploitation by the capitalists. Our fight must bring forward the triumph of the people, the workers. It must end: All the injustice, the long hours, we women work. Ten, twelve, fourteen, even more hours, bent over our needlework, bent over whatever work the capitalists have assigned to us. Without us earning our reward. Without us owning the means of production. All this must come to an end. The hour supreme is now here. We act with energy. The tree of liberty can only grow when it is watered with the blood of our enemies».

I shuddered at this. Has she really just said that? The blood of our enemies? I hadn't come here to make enemies and I surely hadn't come here to kill anyone.

«There.» She stopped short. «There.» Everybody looked into the direction she was pointing her finger.

«A nun.» She shrieked out loud.

«Look, a nun.»

The crowd was murmuring, all simultaneously turning their fiery faces as a hideous, hundred-headed dragon, venomous and terrific. I felt the energy rise again. You could have kindled a mighty fire with that ravenous, rapacious rage. My eyes widened at the sight of this.

«Go, get the nun.» She screamed from the pulpit.

«Go, get the nun.» She screamed again.

«Kill the nun.» Everybody shouted.

I shivered. Would I witness murder now? Would I witness a kill? Surely, the wouldn't kill that nun?

People began moving, but I couldn't see anything. The woman up front, she was pointing in our direction, but where was the nun gone?

«Throw all the nuns in the Seine, so we can be done with them.» The woman on the pulpit shouted.

«The Seine, the Seine, the Seine», the women chanted.

I froze. Why would she say such atrocities? Why throw the nuns into the Seine? What had the nuns done to the Communardes to deserve such atrocious punishment?

«They steal our labour, they steal our wages. We want our wages.»

«We want our wages,» the women screamed.

«We want our wages,» their leader shouted.

«We want our wages,» the women cheered.

There was such a commotion I couldn't really see what was happening. Everybody was moving and shouting and pushing each other. I felt so faint. And then I vomited again, but this time right onto the antique, smooth stone floor of the church. It was revolting. All of this: revolting.



Why had I come here anyway?

My vomiting had woken Alonzo from his reverie. The women's vibrant fervour was enchanting and paralyzing at once. The sirens had been lulling us both into some sort of stupor by the severity of their s-words.

«You're feeling sick? Come, wife. Come.» He was smirking like a lunatic.

Then he began pulling me into a darker corner of the church and I followed only reluctantly. I wasn't his wife. What did he want with me? There were stairs leading down to the basement and he pulled me towards them. When we had reached them, he began descending the narrow stone stairs, pulling me behind him. I didn't want to go down there. I didn't want to go anywhere with him, anywhere near him. Before us a dark tunnel opened up. He dragged me along, further and further.

I screamed out as loud as I could. But no one heard me. The women were too busy with their own processions, they wouldn't hear me. And if they did, they didn't care. Nevertheless, I kept hollering as loud as I could.

«Stop. Please. Let me go. No.» But he muffled my cry with his fist over my mouth. I felt his knuckles press hard against my lips and teeth. It hurt. Then, for a moment he let go.

«Let us go back.» I whispered, but again he ignored me.

«No, not yet. We're fine here. Stay still, *bitch*.» He was panting hard, his mouth half opened. His hot, humid breath made me wretch. I felt how he forcefully pressed me against the cold, moist wall. My ribs hurt, my womb hardened as he pressed his manhood against my stomach. I started wheezing as I couldn't breathe. Then, one of his rough hands began lifting my skirt while his other hand was undoing his own belt. I felt his fingers on my naked skin, sliding viciously over my belly, then sidewinding between my legs. I pressed them together as hard as I could. He grunted out loud.

«No, please, Alonzo no.» I whimpered. What was I to do? I was the lamb led to the slaughterer.

«Please, no,» I begged, panicking beyond anything I had ever known.

The baby.

He would hurt the baby. My mind completely blanked.



Next, Alonzo keeled over and behind him appeared a glowing candle. In the dim light of the golden flame, I saw the face of a young man. In his other hand he was holding a large, heavy metal crucifix, the size of his arm. There was blood all over. I looked at him, eyes wide open. He had used the holy object to hit Alonzo on the back of his head. I looked at the figure wincing at my feet. Alonzo was bleeding. Slowly, he reached for his wound while groaning out loud. It would take him a while to get up. I turned to my rescuer, eyes wide open. What now?

«Come, come. Quick.» He said softly.

Only now, I saw that the man wore a priest's robe and a stole. A priest had knocked down Alonzo. A priest? I didn't even try understanding this. As fast as I could I followed the clergyman into the tunnels, and we walked and walked and walked. It seemed that below Paris there was another immense second city and he obviously knew his way round it. Finally, we reached a little inlet, a place very much like a small cave, where two nuns were sitting on rocks. One of them got up at once and came towards us as we approached.

«Sister has heard you scream.

«I was awfully scared when I heard you scream like this. Are you alright, dear?»

«I am, thank you so much. I don't know what I would have done without you.» I looked at the priest, still shaking awfully.

«Father Bénédict is awesomely brave, isn't he?» The other nun said admiringly, patting the priest's arm. I couldn't see much in the dark, but it looked as if he blushed.

«I am sister Élise and that is sister Aurélie.» They both giggled.

« Marie.» I said, relieved to finally make new friends.

« Very nice meeting you.»

« Likewise.»



«What are you doing down here?» I asked amazed.

«We look after the church. When the communards leave after their meetings, we go back at night to sing and pray and hear confessions.»

«Believers would come as early as 3 o'clock in the morning.»

«They mustn't be seen by the communards.»

«But sometimes the Communards don't leave and celebrate their orgies all night, sleeping on top of each other in the pews. Then we just sneak in and bless them silently.»

«But why are you hiding down here?»

«They killed the archbishop.»

They had killed the archbishop? *Mon Dieu*. I wasn't a catholic, but that was awful.

«Hush. Have you heard that?» I held my breath, indeed we could hear a rolling thunder and I wondered what it was. Longingly, I thought of Pierre-Auguste's atelier. My small suitcase was snug and safe next to a large sofa. How wonderful it would be to lay down now, to stretch my legs, to rub my back and get all this weight off my feet. But how far that house was, how far. Having taken so many turns, above ground as well as underground, I had no idea how to get back.

«How can we get out of here?» I asked impatiently

«Not yet. We shall have to wait, an hour or two. Come. Sit here. Make yourself comfortable. Here, have some water.» She handed me a little flask. Thirstily, I began drinking from the bottle. Who would have thought how much I appreciated such a simple act of kindness?

«Which *arrondissement*, which district are you from? *Buttes-Montmartres?* *Panthéon?*»

«I am not from Paris. I come from Switzerland. The Jura mountains.» I kept my voice down, like the others.

«Switzerland? How beautiful. The mountains. And you're keeping yourself from all these awful conflicts indeed. Well done.»

«Is that a good thing?»

«Yes, it is. War is terrible. So many suffer, innocent people die. If they aren't wounded, they starve. If they aren't shot, they die of the fever, typhus, pneumonia. Anything really.»



«How long have you been here?»

«It seemed like weeks, but actually I left home this morning, arrived at lunch time.»

«This morning, indeed? What about the Versailles Army before the gates of Paris?»

Have you seen them? Are they strong?»

I nodded, not sure what to say.

«I guess, they are. There were so many soldiers.» I said hesitatingly, not sure where to start or how much to reveal.



«You should have seen the artillery in March. They had it all stationed up on the hill in Montmartre. Nearly 20 cannons in one row, altogether 6 or 7 rows. Can you imagine. So many cannons. They could blow up the whole city if they want to.»

«Don't say things like this. You scare me.»

«I mean, they killed the archbishop although he was helping the wounded. They simply executed him.»

«I could have killed the man who attacked you. I nearly killed him. I may have killed him.» Father Bénédicte bowed his head.

«Father. Don't say that. You were defending Marie, not executing him.»

«No, it is true. I hit him quite hard. I may have killed him. He might be dead.»

Only now I saw how troubled Father Bénédicte was. I was so sorry for having caused him such troubles.

«I felt such hate, such awful hate. I have never, never experienced such strong aversion towards any of God`s creatures. Seeing Paris fall like this. It`s too much. It is too much to bear.»

«But if you hadn`t struck him, he would have hurt Marie. You only defended her. That is not wrong.»

« I guess, it is always wrong to kill.» I said softly.

«But I couldn`t let him have his way with you. I had to do something.»

«Let`s go and back and see how he is.» Sister Aurélie interjected.

«I am definitely not going back there.» I protested.

«But I will,» sister Élise said, grabbed one of the candles and walked off into the tunnel.

«I`ll go and see if he needs help.» Her voice was already echoing from afar.

«Let me come with you.» Father Bénédicte shouted after her.

«Do you really think that is a good idea?» I held him back.

«I`ll join her. Father, stay here.» Sister Aurélie cried, scurrying after her as fast as she could.



«We have just been married.»

«I struck down your husband? No, that cannot be true.» Father Bénédict hid his face in his hands.

«We were married by one of the communardes. She got it all wrong. I don't think we are officially married-»

«They marry people now? I thought the whole point of being a communard is to live in what they call a *union libre*, a free union, live without the shackles of the church.»

«They kind of married us. I don't even know which church we were in.»

«That would be Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois.»

«Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois? Of course. I have been looking for that church all afternoon. Incredible I found it. I am looking for a Françoise Belfay.»

«I think one of the communardes they call Françoise.» Father Bénédict said lamely. He didn't seem too enthusiastic talking about them.

«Really? Maybe that is her.»

«Why are you looking for her?»

«She is the wife of my baby's father.»

«She is the wife of your baby's father?» It took him a moment to process this information.

«I don't understand.»

I softly stroked my belly.

«But, how can she be the wife of the baby's father. Aren't you married to the father? The man I struck down?»

«No, that is not the baby's father. The baby's father is dead. *C'est compliqué.* »

It is complicated, complicated indeed.



It took a while to tell the whole story to Father Bénédicte. I left out some of the juicy bits, for instance me doing the naked-ass dance in Bern and some of the other incidents involving things I didn't necessarily want to share with anyone. But otherwise I told him about everything. How the French army crossed the border at *Les Verrières*, how I shot Fanny with Mustapha's gun, how I shot the French terrier and Julien took the blame. I told him about aunt Thèrese and how mother came to Bern and Emily and Uncle Vanya. I told him how Mustapha had saved us all by bringing our uncle back. It was such a long and satisfying story and yet, soon I was tired of explaining all the details. Father Bénédicte was listening ever so patiently.

«And now, you say, your Mustapha is dead?.»

«I don't know. I don't think he is dead. Alonzo said he saw him dead. But then Alonzo doesn't know him. Maybe it wasn't him.»

«And maybe, he cannot be trusted. Whatever the case may be, We will all die if the Versailles army will not come soon and rescue us. »

I only shrugged. I was quite sure the Versailles soldiers would be here soon enough, but I wasn't sure, they had come to rescue us.



«Why do they want to throw the nuns into the Seine.»

«They said that?»

«I heard it from one of their speakers. She saw a nun and then called for the crowd to go and get her.»

«Yes, sister Aurélie ventured out to get some fresh candles and obviously she was seen. She really shouldn't have gone. But I think she is afraid of the dark.»

«More than of the communards? Why do they want to kill the nuns? I don't understand.»

«The convents are the largest competitor for the communardes in the production of cotton cloth. The nuns are modest and humble, they don't need much, they don't charge much. The communardes say the nuns are poorly nourished, poorly lodged, poorly cared for. But that is not true. The girls get what they need and they don't need much. Some of them have escaped such precarious homes, living under the roof of the church is a blessing for them. If you don't want to marry, what choices as a woman do you have? You can choose the church or-» He stopped himself short.

«I am sorry, I didn't mean to trouble you.»

«I know what you mean. Marry or then, you can become a nun or-, well, the opposite. That's about it. I am familiar with the choices, there aren't many, not for women anyway. I am young, but that I understand.» Father Bénédicte was nodding.

«That is not the choice God wanted women to have when he created them in his image.»

«In his image?»

«In her image. Whatever you want. And therefore women shouldn't be faced with such limited choices. Their choices should be endless, as God's love.»

«No, you're right. You say that the communardes blame poor women who have become nuns for the ills of the church?»

«That is nicely put.»

«Do they also blame poor women who have become prostitutes for the social ills of prostitution?»

«Of course not.»

«Then why blame the nuns?»

Father Benédicte shrugged.

«I don't know. That is a very good question, I have never really thought of it like this. But I do understand that the communardes want to turn cloth making into a rather lucrative business for women. And there is no room for women who do the same job at much lower prices. That is why they want to throw the nuns into the Seine. They are already preparing for after the Commune, when luxury goods and feathers and flowers will become the great fashion again. What I don't understand is why they haven't chosen another trade altogether.»

«Like what?»

«I don't know, builders, blacksmiths, printers, painters anything men do. They could do anything, really.»

«They want women to be equal, they want them to fight like men, but then they say, they cannot work like men. That I don't understand. Why do the

communardes only want to do women's work. It is so inconsistent with all their teachings and belief. It simply doesn't make sense.»



What are these tunnels?» I asked to change the subject.

«I don't know, some of them belong to the sewer systems. The others, I can't say.» He shrugged, then got up and stretched his legs. Father Bénédicte got restless. I could see he was beginning to worry.

«Why aren't they coming back?»

«I don't know, shall we go and check?»

«No, you must stay here. I could go.»

«Oh, no. I don't want to stay here all by myself.»

«Let's wait a little longer. They may come back any minute.»

It was cold down here. I wasn't dressed warm enough for an adventure such as this. I was shivering as we waited for the two women to come back. How I longed for the wee hours of morning to come so I could leave this awful place and go back to Renoir's place.

Was Alonzo dead? Had father Bénédicte killed him with the crucifix? Why didn't the two nuns come back? It wasn't that far to where Alonzo was lying on the floor. They should be back by now. I tried not to worry although that was hard.



When they finally did come back, my heart nearly stood still. They were carrying Alonzo between them. He was groaning so hard, I could barely stand it.

«His wounds need dressing. Do you still have that water bottle?»

I stood stock-still, looking at my violator. What was I to do? What was I to say? Help him now? Surely not. I swallowed hard.

«We cannot leave him there, all by himself. He needs care. His head was badly hit.» Sister Élise looked reproachfully at Father Bénédicte.

«Was that really necessary?» She scowled at him, but he only shrugged.

«Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath. You know that father, don't you. Ephesians Four -»

«- Twenty-six. I know. I know the verse.»

« But chose not to act upon it? » She looked at him, admonitory, yet full of grace and mercy.



Alonzo's eyes were filled with dry blood. And yet, he had enough life in him to insult me again.

«*Puttana*»; he said. «You whore. This is all your fault.»

I gasped.

«Stop that,» Sister Élise scolded him.

«She is a whore. Did you know that? She's carrying a nigger's child. A nigger's child.»

He spat right before my shoes, then groaned out loud again.



«Is that true? Are you pregnant?»

«Please, let me out of here. Please, let me go.» I could bear the tunnels no longer. I could bear the sight of Alonzo no more. Why was he alive? Why Mustapha dead?

«Leave her be», Father Bénédicte said, «let's go, Marie. Come on.»

I looked at the two nuns, amazed at the loving kindness in their eyes despite the circumstances.

«Go, just go.» Sister Élise said, nodding good-bye.

Father Bénédicte started walking and I followed him thankfully. It wasn't long until he opened a large sewer lid from below and let me out into a deserted street.

«Take care. «

«You're not coming?»

«No, I will not abandon my church.»



As if in a dream, I then found my way back to Renoir's atelier. Most of the way I was crying. I was completely lost and only with the help of the occasional passer-by I finally found my way. The detonations in the city were echoing in my brain. Were they announcing the beginning of the end? When I reached Renoir's place the sun was coming up. Its rays tickled my swollen face when I pushed the door open and let myself in with the last bit of energy I had left. I staggered into his studio, then I tumbled onto the large sofa. I fell asleep instantly. My last thoughts were with Emily. I wished I had brought a camera. I wished I could have taken pictures, of father Bénédict just before he hit Alonzo on the back of his head, the sweet smiles of sister Élise and sister Aurélie, their compassion visible in their faces. I wish I could have taken pictures of the beautiful, beautiful, green city, of all that I had seen, all that I wanted to remember so badly. And then, there were other things- Some things I wanted to forget forever, pictures I wanted to ban from memory, heart and soul and I wished I had a camera for this too. First, I'd shoot Alonzo with it. Shoot him with the Non-Rembrancer, that is how I would name that camera. The great, pure Non-Rembrancer. Then my mind went blank and I remembered no more.



Sunday, May 21, 1871

I was in the cabin and Mustapha was with me. He gently touched my face, then he kissed me. I could feel his full lips on mine. Again, he lifted me onto the table and let his fingers run along my arms, my breasts. I stretched my back and pressed myself against him. Then his hand moved down between my thighs and suddenly it was so rough I screamed out loud as he touched my tender skin. I felt his foul, warm breath on my face. It wasn't Mustapha who stood so close, it was Alonzo. I screamed and screamed and screamed. Then they were both gone.

There was a thunderstorm. It was loud. The thunder was rolling, the rain was slanting against my face, my body. Then lightning struck, then lightning struck again. Fire. There was Fire. And Vanya and Julien? Where were they? Had Vanya run back into the house? Why was the fire so hot? I saw windows red as the Turkenlouis Poppies that grew in our garden. But then, *La Maison Blanche* was so far

away from me. So far, I couldn't see. But I knew it was there, I knew it was right there, so close by. But the closer I ran to it, the further away it seemed. I ran and ran and ran. The thunder. So loud. So loud. I covered my ears. I was scared. Would Vanya be safe? Julien? My brother, was he safe?

Then I opened my eyes and the thunder hadn't stopped. I was awake, yet, at once I covered my ears. Where was I? This was not *La Maison Blanche*. I jumped out of bed and ran to the window. What was that noise? The skies were blue. My heart was pounding fast and furiously. I heard my own breathing. It was loud, it was irregular. There was no thunderstorm. What was that? Then, I remembered. I was in Paris. Paris. Right. At this very moment the door was flung open and Pierre-Auguste stood there, his eyes wide open. He looked so shocked I completely forgot I was only wearing my camisole.

«The army. They breached the gates. The Versaillese are here.»

«So. Are we freed now?» I felt relief.

He didn't answer at once, surprised at my sudden outburst.

«No. Of course not. Get your things, we shall have to leave at once.»

«I am not leaving Paris before I've found Françoise Belfay and Mustapha.» I said stubbornly.

«I thought you went looking for her last night. Haven't you found her?»

«No, I haven't. Not yet.» I said desperately

«Then I recommend you give up quickly. We must leave at once. They are killing everybody.»

«No, I am not coming. You go.» I was petrified, but resolved to stay.



«Marie, I am only joking. You're safe. As safe as you can be in a besieged city.

We are not going anywhere. The army is still outside these walls.»

«That is not funny.» I crossed my arms over my chest.

«You believed the army was here?» He smiled. «You're funny.» Then he laughed out loud.

«I can hear the cannons. The noise is deafening.» I defended myself.

«You'll get used to it. Since March they have killed-, I don't know how many. thousands. I mean you have seen the breach batteries they directed against the gates of *La Muette, Auteuil, St. Cloud, Point du Jour* and *Issy* only a couple of days ago. Five *arrondissements* are under shell. But Paris still stands.»

No, I hadn't seen that. How would I? I had only just arrived. Breach batteries he said? That didn't sound so good.

«And have you painted the cannons? The dead?»

«No, I haven't. I have friends on both sides, I am not getting involved. I paint women and flowers and-» He smacked his lips, «golden mirrors. I paint the beauty of life. Not war. War is so ugly. I have no interest in ugly.»

«But what about the barricades. They are just around the corner. What about the fight of the commune?»

«Not my fight. Although. I mean the people are trying to form a government by the people and for the people. That's noble. But I wouldn't know how to paint that. I seek beauty: Beauty only. I focus my eyes on everything beautiful.»

«Not on reality?»

«It's the same. You, you are real, aren't you? And, you're beautiful. How can you say this is not reality.» He made me blush again.

«What does this have to do with anything?»

«You slept long. Let's go and have lunch in the Luxembourg gardens and hear the concert.»

«What concert?»

«For the orphans and widows. You'll like it. Everybody will be out on such a beautiful day.»

«We shall see», I said sceptically. The Parisians couldn't be out when the cannonballs were roaring so loud. It seemed hard to believe.

«You will like it, I promise. Get ready.»

He left the room and I looked at my naked feet, had I really just had this whole conversation with him while only wearing my camisole? How embarrassing and yet, it had seemed like the most natural thing to do.



Thousands of people had come to hear the monster concert at the Tuileries. The bright spring dresses of the elegant Parisians triggered a burst of creativity in my brain. The designs were so inspiring, my mind was overflowing with energy. I had so many ideas for new woollen wear, all I wanted was get a feather, ink and paper. I longed to sketch the new models me and my twin sisters would knit for next season.

I was concentrating hard on remembering some of the details for new collars or waistlines. If only I had had that camera. At half past two me and Pierre-Auguste were standing in the shade of the green alleys, listening to the music played by so many instruments.

Everybody was inhaling the fresh air underneath the great, old trees while the bands were playing for the benefit of the widows and the orphans of the Commune. Pierre-Auguste had said thousands have died so far. It was hard to imagine. Thousands. Dead. I was appalled at the sheer numbers. Why would the French die at the hand of the French? Were there as many dead in the French-Prussian war? Probably not.

We were on the *Rue du Rivoli*, close to the *Place de la Concorde* and occasionally we heard the shells detonate. How close they were. Had Paris fallen?

«Don't worry, they cannot get into the city.»

«Let's hope so.»

«No, don't worry, Marie. Can you hear what he says?» We approached the platform of the conductor of the orchestra to understand better what was being said.

«Monsieur Thiers has promised to enter Paris today. But he has not entered; he will not enter. The army will not breach the gates. We are safe here. I invite you to come here next Sunday for our second concert for the benefit of the widows and orphans.»

«Marie. Is that you?»

I turned around and looked at Liz whom I had met yesterday after having eaten, and vomited, the elephant. My stomach turned at the thought of it. She was accompanied by a woman that looked oddly familiar. It took me a second to

understand fully who she was. I couldn't help but recognize her by her unique style: Loose, Turkish pants and shoes that reached above her ankles with golden tassels. She still wore the vest made of crimson velvet, beautifully decorated with the most elaborate embroidery. On her head sat the cap displaying a red cockade. However, I didn't see the two pistols in her belt. She was the Communarde who had married me and Alonzo in the Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. I stared at her, aghast. What could I possibly say to her?

«Meet Françoise Belfay. You were looking for her, weren't you? Françoise, that is Marie. She is from Switzerland»

She turned to me and added: «Marie, Françoise.»

She was Françoise? I was stunned. Mustapha's wife was beautiful. I felt so belittled and simple next to her, that I had completely forgotten what I had wanted to say to her. I couldn't even properly look at her dress to take mental notes of how to imitate it when back home. She was too much to take in, so much-, so much larger than life.

«Pierre Auguste, come walk with me. Marie and Françoise have a lot to talk about.» Liz grabbed Pierre-Auguste by the arm and walked off with him. I turned to Françoise Belfay and she had already started to talk to me.



«You're just Marie? You must have a *nom de guerre*.»

«I beg your pardon? A what?»

«A name for war. Elisabeth has taken one. She is no longer Tomonovskaya. Imagine she took a male Russian surname. She is now Elisabeth Dmitrieff, not Dimitrieva. What a revolutionary act. You understand. She has organized the women in Paris so well. Isn't she most perfect?»

I gave her a blank look, no I didn't understand at all. What was she talking about? Since when were there male surnames? And why Russian? And who was Elisabeth? Was she talking about Liz? I didn't have time to ask, she continued like a waterfall.

«And André Léo took two male first names. The names of her sons. You must take a male name too.

«I am not sure I understand. You want me to change my name? And take a male name?» Parisians were different, that I knew, but this beat everything I had ever heard. Why would she want me to become a man when I was female?

«Yes, of course, it's part of our war against the bourgeoisie, against the church.»

«I don't think I am at war with the church.»

«But you must. How can you ever be free otherwise. You should be Matthew Maslov. Maslov and Matthew. That goes together well. M and M.»

«No, my mother is Irish. Why should I take a Russian name? And why Matthew?»

«Take an English name. It doesn't really matter. Wait. Let me think. How about *Mae Lee Magellan*? That would be a perfect *nom de guerre*. Matthew Mae Lee Magellan.» I gave her a frown. Was she out of her mind? What on earth was she talking about? I wanted no new names.

«But war against who? You frighten me. All that talk of violence. Why-?»

She interrupted me quite indignantly

«War against the bourgeois world. War against Versailles. War against the socialist patriarchs who want to abolish monarchy in the state and keep it at their homes: The husband king, the wife his serf. And it isn't time for talk. It is time for action. It's a war between the people and their tyrants, between work and exploitation, between men and us, the women.»

«Yes, I can hear it. The cannons are deafening. It seems they're getting louder by the minutes. And yet, it is a war against your own people? You're French, they're French. I don't understand. They're using French cannons against French people? What kind of war is that? Hasn't Paris been besieged by the Prussians? Why are you now fighting your own army? Your own people? Your own brothers and sisters?»

«They're not our army and the Prussians, yes, they're gone. You don't understand. Things are moving quickly here. We do not engage in international wars, only in civil wars to overthrow the ruling class and free the workers. A new order is soon here. Revolution will bring peace in the end. We demand as Léo said it in the *Manifesto, liberty, equality and fraternity*: Liberty in the religious, civil, political and moral orders. We demand equality before the law, equality in marriage, equality in work. And we demand fraternity, which must become the general law of relations between men and women. And we demand it with severe violence if they wouldn't listen. We need to be heard now. There will be no peace until we've reached our goals.»

«But if you want fraternity, how can there be war. Why so violent against your own brother? Your own sister? I don't understand. How can this do any good?»

«You don't have to understand everything we do.»

«Why not? Because I am a woman?» I said sardonically.

«Of course not, because you are new to Paris and our cause. So Matthew Mae Lee Magellan it is?»

«No. I am Marie Bergeron. Bergeron. That is my father's name. And his father's name. And I will not change it. Marie Bergeron. That is me. Me.»

«And what about the women in your family? You cannot have a name that was handed down to you by a man. You must choose yourself. You must be free.»

«Really? Free? I am free. There is no other name I'd rather want. I am Marie Bergeron. That's who I am, that's who I have always been. I don't need to change my name to be free. My freedom doesn't depend on my name. It is the truth spoken by my saviour that will set me free, not a stupid name.»

«There you are wrong. Totally wrong. The church binds us, the church binds us women.»

«I didn't say the church. I said Jesus will set us free.»

«Isn't that the same?»

«No, it isn't. Not at all. And that is why I shall not take your *nom de guerre*. No name for war, not for me.»

«I see you are resolved. So? If you must, keep your name. Maybe you still want to change it later. *Matthew Mae Lee Magellan*? Perfect *nom de guerre*. Just perfect. He was the first to circumnavigate the world, wasn't he? And wasn't he Irish?»

«Magellan? Father said Magellan was Portuguese. And, no, he didn't complete the circumnavigation as far as I've been told. He died in battle in the Spanish East Indies and did not come back home. But he named the Pacific Ocean.

The word Pace, Peace is in there. Peace, not war.» I raised my eyebrow hoping she'd understand. But she didn't.

«He did? Name an ocean? An ocean? Imagine. Maybe I should really adopt the name for myself. What do you think? Me, *François Mae Lee Magellan*. Perfect *nom de guerre*.» I only frowned and raised my eyebrows at this. What was it with these Communarde women and war and violence? All that bloodthirstiness. It was appalling.

I thought she was friendly and sweet, but also completely crazy and *completely* nuts. But I didn't tell her that, I didn't even nod. I was too startled at all that has been said. 'Fraternity, which must become the general law of relations between men and women' I'd like that, but why all the talk about blood and war and violence? I didn't understand. There was more about this Commune that I didn't understand than I did understand. It was all most confusing.

By now, the cannons had become so loud it was hard to even hear what she was saying. So many questions and no-, still no answers. I had to get to the bottom of this.

«Are you married to Mustapha? I asked finally.



She laughed out so loud I was at once sorry I had even asked.

«Mustapha? No, I have never heard of him. Who is he?»

«Let us find the others,» I answered, not sure whether or not to smile.

«Who is Mustapha?» She repeated.

«The father of my child,» I patted my belly.

«And you think he is married to *me*?» She looked at me in amazement.

«Why would you think that?»

«He said so when he left.» I said defiantly.

«He left you because he was married?»

«Yes.»

«Married to me?»

She looked at me with utter and pure surprise. I lowered my eyes.



«You know you don't have to have the child.»

«What do you mean?»

«As I say, you don't have to have the child.»

« I don't understand.»

«I know someone who can help you.»

«Help me? How?»

«*Not* to have a child.» She raised one eyebrow and then looked at my belly. I felt uneasy.

«How would she do this?» I asked, not certain I did understand correctly. She grabbed my hand and started walking.

«Come, I'll take you to her. It is getting too loud here anyway.» Then she let go of me and put both her hands over her ears and I followed suit.



We started walking along the Seine on the *Quai du Louvre*. I felt uneasy. How would this woman help me? Mamà had told me to come back if I didn't find Mustapha. She would help me raise the child. But how could she? Mamà had lived her life, there wasn't much left for her. A new baby would bring her, bliss and joy and meaning again. But for me? What would it mean to me? Now, that Mustapha was dead? There was so much I still wanted to do: Maybe become a photographer? Have my own studio, just like Emily? All this wasn't possible if I had a baby or it'd be endlessly more complicated. Getting rid of the child was tempting.

We had been walking for quite some time, when Françoise suddenly stopped.

«It's here.» She pointed at the dark oak door of a large stone house. «Third floor to the right.»

«And now? What do I do?»

«Let's see if she is home.»

«Do I need to pay her?»

«Don't you have money?»



We climbed up the narrow stairs and reached a shabby door which must lead to one of the apartments. Françoise knocked three times, then waited, then she knocked again. But there was no answer.

«Maybe she is not here?» I volunteered.

«I doubt it. She's usually here at this hour.»

She knocked once again and finally the door opened.

I didn't trust my eyes. In the doorway stood sister Aurélie. But for some reason she was wearing plain, civilian clothes. Was she not a nun?

«Marie. You're here?» She had recognised me at once, before I could even say a word.

«You know each other?» Françoise asked surprised.

I nodded silently. What was sister Aurélie doing here?

«Come in.»

«I thought you were -.» I said amazed.

«Please, don't.» She interrupted me quickly.

There was loud thunder very close by, as if a bolt of lightning had split a large oak tree in two. It was more scary than anything I had ever heard. I winced and closed my eyes for a second. Françoise looked calm, but concerned.

«You know what, Marie, stay here. I'll have to go and see if I can help. It sounds as if the army has made it into town. That could be the end of all. Oh no, not

after they have given equal pay to male and female teachers today. Imagine, equal pay. I will not let that go without putting up some resistance.» As she turned on her heel, she lifted her vest of crimson velvet and I could see a large pistol, hanging from her belt. She looked grim and somehow I was scared of her.

«Come and join us once you're done. Well, if you can still walk. Long live the Commune.» She raised her hand to a salute and then Françoise had left. I could see her saunter down the stairs so eagerly.

«Come in, quick.» Sister Aurélie said, turning her head right and left to see if anyone else had witnessed the scene.

«I'd like to keep this quiet.»

«Yes, me too», I whispered.

I entered the apartment, looking around curiously. It all looked very neat and clean.

«Why are you here?»



«Aren't you a nun?»

«I am. »

«Then, why are you doing this?»

«What do you mean?» She looked alerted.

« I know what you do.» Slowly, I stroked my belly.

«You do?»

«Françoise told me. She said you could help me.»

«What do you think I can help you with?»

«You know.»

«I do?»

«Of course». I touched my womb once again.

«If you can.» Tears filled my eyes. I could see she had given in.

«I can.» She got up and wrung her hands. Her gaze lingered on my body and felt uncomfortable.

«But why? Why are you doing this? You are a nun. Aren't you?»

She sighed softly.

«I was your age, maybe a little younger. I loved-. Well, I loved him and when I was with child my father hid me in a convent. They said, he was too poor for me, a simple carpenter. My father, well-, French duke, and he was rich. The hairdresser came every morning to do my mother's hair. Can you imagine? They made me give the little one away. It was the worst that had ever happened to me. My breasts full of milk thereafter. It hurt, it all hurt so much. I felt like they had ripped me apart, as if my leg was missing or my arm. I didn't heal. I was so devastated. Then I decided to join the order. Marry, no. I wouldn't. Not after what I had gone through. It was then that I decided that I would help any woman who would have to suffer as I had. I would help them gain control over their lives. You will live, the baby won't. But you're in control. Your life. Your say. Easy as that.»

«What about your vows as a nun? Isn't life holy? A sanctuary to always, always protect. There is a reason why it says: Thou shalt not kill.»

«Yes, you're right. Of course, you're right. I know I am guilty. I have taken someone's life. And I have repeatedly. I know it is a sin, and yet I cannot help but

feel that way. A woman's life is worth something too and if the life of a child obliterates that life, I think you must interfere with God's plan. It is still wrong. Alright. I know. Killing is never right. But keeping the child if you don't want it, if you can't care for it? That is wrong too. So both is wrong and who can say what is the lesser evil? Besides, What I don't understand is why I am blamed for taking a child's life? So many children are killed and no one blames their murderers. What about the parents who don't vaccinate their children and the babies who die of smallpox or the fever? What about the factory owner who exploits young children and makes them work day and night? They die too, from working too hard, from hunger, from exhaustion. What about the coal fires that pollute the air and the children that suffocate thereafter? Is he blamed the same as the woman who takes her baby's life? No, of course, he isn't although he is just as guilty. And what's more: Did you know that in the United States 930'000 babies are aborted each year?»

I shook my head. That number couldn't be right.

«That is far less than all the people who die from obesity. »

« I don't understand.»

«From eating too much. In the age group 25 to 64 years 516'484 die, for the elderly there are even 1'560'000 unnecessary and premature deaths.»

«You mean they starve?»

«Quite the opposite, they eat themselves to death and nobody bans overeating. Shouldn't they ban that too if as many people die? Why are always the women blamed?»

She looked heated now and I was confused about her outburst. Surely, there wasn't that much food in the U.S. that you could die from eating too much? What a

ridiculous idea. Where did all that anger come from? Before I could make a remark, she was continuing.

«What about the smoke from the factories that clogs the little ones lungs? They die too. And is everyone blamed who burns coal and gaz and pollutes the air? No, they aren't. And then, what about the generals who send someone else's sons to war? These babies are killed too. Without any point, without any gain. They are dead. And no one benefits. Yet, no one blames the generals. No one blames the army. All ever anyone blames is the woman who aborts the child. Tell me, is that right in God's eyes? Why should one killer be more guilty than the others? If we are guilty, we all are. We should all rot in hell, you know that, don't you?»

I had never really seen it like this, but then I must admit, being pregnant and all it involved was not something I had often thought about in my old life. Too innocent I had been. I could see that somehow her argumentation did make sense though.

«Society accepts in so many ways that people die. I could give you so many examples where children die at the hand of us. But then everybody only talks about some poor pregnant woman who, in tears and desperation, mutilates her own body to get rid of her little one. Do they think that women do this lightly? Do they really think that? That it is done easily? These women suffer, they cry, they pay with everything they ever had. Their health, their sanity, everything. You shall see. » She sounded so sombre. Was she threatening me? I wasn't quite sure I knew what she was talking about. Yet, somehow, as much as I wanted to part with the baby, she had scared me. It felt sore. It felt tender. It felt fragile. My life was about to change once more and I wasn't sure I was ready for this. Not until long, I hadn't even been aware

there were options such as this and no these options were not even options anymore but became certainties with light-speed. It scared me beyond belief, beyond anything I had ever known.

«Are you ready?»

I nodded without being altogether convinced of what I was doing. Sister Aurélie's voice had grown steadily during her soliloquy. I had tried to take in all she had said. It was a lot to process and yet, it sounded truthful. I must have paled and I was shivering.

«I am sorry if I have scared you. You don't have to do this. Go home, have your baby, be ye a mother. Do it. You can leave at once. You have to want this. I am not forcing anyone.»

Thus, challenged I saw more clearly.

«No, I want to do this. I think, I do.» It was the first time she smiled.

«Ok, then come.» Another shell detonated close by. The noise was deafening and I held my ears with both my hands. So did she.

«Don't worry. It's just civil war. Unrest is part of the transition. It's inevitable. Nothing to worry about. Come. This way.»

All of a sudden I was wavering and I wasn't so sure I wanted a part in this. Why all the violence? Why all the killing? Why would I want this?



She led me to a room with a large canapé. I could see her long, brown dress carelessly flung onto it. When she picked it up, her black bonnet fell down on the floor. She reached for it quickly and folded it neatly.

«Lay down, pull up your dress and take off your boots, your stockings and your underwear. I will go and fetch hot water.» She went to a chest of drawers and got out a strange long stick, some tobacco and matches. She lit one of the matches on the wall and put the flame to the long stick.

«Wait. Here, smoke this first.»

«What is it?»

«Opium.»

«Opium?»

«It will give you sweet dreams until all is over. No need for you to suffer now.»

She lit the strange long stick that looked like an astronomical telescope and handed it to me. I had no idea what to do with it.

«Breathe.» She advised impatiently.

I put my lips around the telescope and took a long breath. Then I inhaled. My lungs filled with smoke. What a strange, sweet smell. I began giggling. Then I started coughing.

«Good, get undressed now. I'll get the hot water. Keep breathing.» She gestured to me how to keep inhaling the opium. Most peculiar, all this was most peculiar indeed.



I hadn't heard her come back, everything was in a haze. Suddenly, I felt her voice close to my ear. As startled as I was, as funny, it all seemed.

«Lay down, on your back, open your legs.»

I did as I was told. I opened my thighs as wide as I could giggling all the time. This was hilarious. When she touched me it tickled. I snorted out loud.

«It's funny indeed that I should meet two people from Switzerland in one day.»

«What do you mean?» I mumbled. I could sense how she was touching me, putting her fingers into my body to feel me, to feel the boundaries between me and the new life I was growing. The opium made me forget all pain, I couldn't have said whether she was hurting me or not. I had lost all shame and decency. I was all body. I was all flesh. I was all broken. I was all fallen.



«After you had left the tunnels, we waited a couple of hours, but as we walked towards the exit, a man came down the stairs.»

«Whoa» I winced. Laying on my back was uncomfortable. I felt a stabbing pain.

«He said he was from Switzerland too. But he had a Russian name.»

«A Russian name?» Everybody had Russian names these days, maybe he was Russian?

«He said he was called Vanya and he said he was looking for Mairy. That sounds a bit like Marie, right. Hold still now.» I could see her head disappear between my legs.

«Mairy is the nickname Uncle Vanya used for me when I was little.»

Had I really said that? I could hear a voice that sounded like my own. I had become stiff, I had completely frozen. Sister Aurélie had stopped examining me.

«That is you indeed? You know that man?» She sat up straight and looked at me.

«I guess. I have an uncle Vanya, but he is safely back home in Bern.»

«You do? Are you sure? I thought for a moment Mairy could be you. But he was really confused. He talked a lot of incoherent nonsense. He said, in case I saw you, I should tell you, he had just seen the Kaiser.»

«The Kaiser?» I looked at her in shock. Was the room on fire? Was that smoke? Somehow all this rang a bell, however I couldn't quite understand yet what she was talking about. Everything was in such a haze, so far away. The Kaiser? What about the Kaiser? I wrecked my brain, but couldn't remember.

«He said, he had seen the Prussian Kaiser. I told you he talked a lot of nonsense. The Prussian Kaiser is not in Paris now.»

«What? Kaiser Wilhelm?» I didn't know how I remembered the name, somehow I simply remembered his name. And somehow the Kaiser was not the Kaiser. The memory was there somewhere, I couldn't quite access it right now. I had to access it. Right now. Come on. Why was there all that fog in my brain?

«He said he had seen him at the gate where he came in. He was completely bananas.»

Was he? Who was she talking about? Who was she talking about? Why couldn't I think clearly? I had to think clearly. I must. And then, then I did.



I sat up, trying to regain my consciousness. I remembered. It all came back at once. The Kaiser? I knew the Kaiser. I loved the Prussian Kaiser. Kaiser Wilhelm, that was Mustapha.

«I love the Kaiser. I carry his child.» I said dreamily.

«You do?» She said amazed.

«Everybody in Paris loves the German Kaiser. Of course, dear. You know what? I think that is the opium. Lay down again and let me get to it. You want to get rid of this child, don't you?»

Obediently, I lay down and she grabbed some metal stick I dared hardly look at. What did she want with that if the Kaiser was alive? Mustapha alive? Could it really be?

«It's -. I do.» I sat up straight and closed my legs, I could feel the inner part of my thighs rub together. My womb was burning.

«I cannot do this.»

«You are not hallucinating?»

«No, I am not. But it is not-.»

«Not the Kaiser's child? You know, the communards will kill you if they find out. A prince born in the Paris Commune? *Impossible*. They will kill the baby too. They will kill all babies if they find out.»

«No, not the Kaiser's. Let me explain.» Then I felt so sick, I got up and walked two or three steps. Then I retched. I shook my head resolutely but it didn't help. I vomited right onto the floor.

«Where have you seen him?» I moaned.

«Here, take this.» She handed me a wet towel.

«Where have you seen him?» I whispered again, then I lifted my head and felt that I had wet my own hair. My brown locks clung to my cheeks and reeked so terribly I felt sick again.

«I told you, down in the tunnels below *Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois*, close to the Louvre. We met him on our way out.»

I vomited again, right into the towel and my spit began seeping through the starched linen at once. I was dripping the contents of my stomach onto the floor, onto my shoes. It was so disgusting, so humiliating. I could barely stand.

Alas, I cannot even begin to describe how sick I felt at this moment. Not only was Mustapha alive, but Uncle Vanya was surely lost in the tunnels below Paris. How could I find both men: one above, one below ground? In a city besieged by the French army and held hostage by the communards? I had no idea where to start. The task at hand seemed immense and me most unfit to even begin resolving it.

I felt so weak, I felt so faint. I was still high on the Opium I had smoked.

I vomited again. I had to get out of here at once.



Back in the streets, I didn't know which way to turn. If Uncle Vanya was down in the tunnels below *Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois* he would be terribly frightened by now. He would be cold and hungry and miserable and lonely. How could he survive down there? I had to hurry. I had to get back to *Église Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois*. and the Louvre.

For the briefest of moments, I couldn't help but notice how beautiful and warm the evening was. Paris was peaceful and green and so lush: All the trees freshly clothed in silver leaves, the sky azure and open like the wild, wide ocean, and then the flowers: The scent of the flowers; benign. Beautiful golden roses were glowing in the dusk like stars hanging high above the firmament, lilac greeted from the gardens and the Jasmine smelled the most intense and wonderful. How serene and joyful was night's arrival upon the great city of Paris. How serene and peaceful. If only the cannonballs had stopped flying, thundering so loud, so deafening, bringing so much death and destruction.

I limped as fast as I could down the street. I had no idea where to turn to next. Left or right? Left or right? No idea. A man came along and I politely addressed him:

«Sir, please-.» He hurried right past me without taking any notice of me even standing there. What was wrong with him? I had asked politely. Why was he in such a hurry?

Next, a group of young men and two women came my way. They looked shattered, their clothes dirty and one of the men's jackets was torn.

«Excuse me, could you tell me how to get to the Louvre?»

«Well, we could, but you surely don't want to go there now, do you?.»

They all laughed out loud and one of the women snorted like a little piglet.

Why was that so funny?

«Why not?» I asked defiantly.

«The army, the army has come. We are retreating. We want to go back to our barricades to protect our district, but if you want to go to the Louvre, turn right over there and then the second next left. From there it is all straight on. You'll get straight to the Louvre.» They were all hastening on. One of the women was so short, she had to run to keep up with the others.

«Thank you. Thank you so much.» I shouted after them. One of them stopped and turned around:

«Don't thank me. You will not get out alive. The Louvre and all its bourgeoisie crap will soon be taken by the army if we don't manage to blow it up before. I do hope they could get down all these kilograms of Nobel's Blasting Powder.

Everything will go up in smoke. You had better come with us.»

My eyes widened. No way, I'd go with them. Uncle Vanya. Uncle Vanya. He was there somewhere below the Louvre. He had come to look for me and now he was lost altogether.



I was running, turning right at the very first possibility the road turned, then the second next left, then all straight. I was running like I've never run before. Where I got all that energy from, I don't know. They say in times of war and times of extreme fear our body can do the unthinkable, the unstoppable. I couldn't be stopped. Was it right or left now? All of a sudden I was confused. I slowed down, then I kept walking, I kept turning. There was a street, there was a square, none of it I recognized. Then, what I saw made my blood freeze. They were all dead. The barricades were destroyed. On the cobbled stones lay dozens of men and women. All slain by the French army. The good and noble citizens of Paris. All dead.

Then, I saw the little girl. She must have been shot, her blood flowing, drying in the gutters. I couldn't take my eyes off the awful scene. I looked at the girl. Her legs stuck out unnaturally and someone had pulled her purple dress over her head. As if it wasn't enough to kill her, as if it wasn't enough to take her life, she had to be completely annihilated. I bowed down and pulled the skirt back over her body. When I uncovered her face, it was completely gone. She had no face no more. I gasped. I had never seen someone dead so young.

The young were meant to be alive.

I was alive. Uncle Vanya, was he alive? They had said they had brought down Nobel's Blasting Powder to the tunnels. Vanya, he, he was in the tunnels. I had to get

down to the tunnels. I had to find him. Now. My mind was raw and sharp and broken. My thoughts were racing. I had to slow down. I had to think. I had to-. I could see some soldiers coming across the square and I saw how one of them lifted his rifle and aimed at me. Quickly, I fell to my knees and robbed as fast as I could between the dead bodies, back behind the shattered barricades. My left knee got badly scratched and I was bleeding, but I couldn't care. Then I heard the shot ring out loud. Another one followed. What was I to do? Where should I go? Where could I hide. I lay still for a moment, closed my eyes and pretended I was dead as everybody else.



My mind had gone blank.

Completely blank.

I felt too sick to even vomit.

Were they coming my way?

I didn't dare stick my head out and see.

Quick. Marie. Quick.

Think of something.

Anything.



I couldn't think of anything at all. There was no way, I could possibly do this alone. I needed help. I opened my eyes. There were no soldiers, at least none I could see now. I started moving. Then I moved a little faster. Slowly, I retreated to the street I had come from. I had to turn back, I wouldn't make it to the Louvre. Enough was enough. It wouldn't help Uncle Vanya if I was killed. There had to be another way. Maybe Renoir could help me. He knew Paris. Maybe he knew about the tunnels. Safely and crouching on my knees, I crawled back, then I walked. I walked and finally I crossed the Seine. Would I find my way back? At least I recognized some street names now: *Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs*. Soon enough I found *Le Jardin du Luxembourg*, then his atelier. The door was open. He wasn't there. I felt so guilty. Where was Uncle Vanya? Had he come to look for me indeed?

Where was Mustapha? Were they safe? Were they dead?

I was so exhausted, I fell asleep at once, not before remembering that I should have turned to sister Aurélie for help. Of course, she knew the tunnels. How thoughtless of me. Why, after all that had happened, why would I still put my faith in men and not in women? I felt so faint and I wasn't sure whether I was running a fever.

Monday, May 22, 1871

I still feel so hot. Was I sick? I was thirsty all the time, yet too tired to get up and fill the water jar. My throat is sore, my forehead, glowing like hot coals. I felt like sitting in the heat of our kitchen, when the fire has died down and the oven was ready for the lamb stew to finally simmer. My body is so heavy, I can barely move. Writing is exhausting and slow. I hoped to God the little one was all right.

I have been too exhausted and too scared to go out all day long and I feel the worse for it. Things must cool off a little. The cannons have been roaring non-stop. If I got killed, I wouldn't find Uncle Vanya and I wouldn't find Mustapha either. My thoughts were with poor, poor Vanya all the time. Was he still in the tunnels? He must be freezing down there. What if his cough had come back?

Hiding in Renoir's atelier was pure torture. He is still painting me as I am writing, filling pages and pages and pages. Hours and hours and hours. In the

morning I had felt a little better, but in the afternoon, I fell asleep on the sofa. I guess he was painting me even then. His gaze is gentle and steady, yet relentless and cruel. I cannot help it, I cannot evade it. I am too weak.

All I care about are my words. My writing. My hand is hurting from holding the feather pen for so long. I have so much catching up to do. The last few days - I couldn't really write until now. Too much has happened since I left *La Maison Blanche*. It is difficult to process. The cannons. The smell of the opium I had inhaled. The dead bodies I have seen, the little girl. Her face. I cannot forget her face or rather the place her face was meant to be. The deafening noise in the city. We can still hear the cannons. The grumbling is awful. I am so worried for poor Uncle Vanya. What if he is dead already? The city must be filled with dead bodies by now. What if he was one of them? What if he didn't come back home with me? What if he never saw my child?

I must be so hungry, I haven't eaten all day and yet, what I feel is weakness, sheer exhaustion, not hunger. My hand is trembling now and beginning to hurt. I must stop. I will stop now. I feel delirious. Delirious and weak. I need to find strength to go out again soon. I must find Uncle Vanya. I must find Mustapha. Soon, soon I will be strong again, strong enough to go out and search the streets of Paris. Soon, not now. I can't. Right now, I simply can't. Is this the smell of hot soup? Onions? Carrots? Potatoes? Am I hallucinating?

Tuesday, May 23, 1871

«Jules wants to burn down the Tuileries Palace, he wants to burn down all the monuments in Paris.» I could hear whispering voices from afar. Was I still dreaming? I touched my forehead, it was soft and warm. No more sweat. The fever was gone.

«What are you talking about? Isn't he in prison?»

«He was freed. He commands the Reserves Brigades now. And, I've just told you, they're going to burn down the Tuileries Palace.»

«What if the fire spreads to the Louvre?»

«You know what he thinks about the bourgeoisie and their art, don't you?»

«This art is not the bourgeoisie's, it belongs to all of us. Can't they see that? It is our history, our destiny. Some of these works are priceless. You cannot just burn it because it depicts something you don't like. »

The man was howling by now and what he said became more and more incomprehensible. He had indeed woken me now and, drowsily, I sat up on the sofa where I had spent the night. It was still dark outside and somehow very quiet if it hadn't been for the obnoxious shouting. The thunder of the cannonballs, however, had miraculously stopped. What a relief.

I stretched my back, then lifted my head and looked up. By the door two candles were burning in elegant, silver candleholders, illuminating the slender figure of a woman sweet-talking to a man.

«*Cheri*, come, come with me and we'll talk him out of it.» She whispered to calm him down.

It was Françoise. She was standing very close to Pierre-Auguste Renoir. The memories of yesterday rushed back at once. Of course. The painter. I had spent the day in his atelier. I had spent the night-. I had spent the night at a stranger's place. I couldn't help but feel embarrassed.



They looked like lovers. Maybe they were lovers. Who knew? How beautiful the two of them were. I could even smell her from where I was sitting. She had brought in a whiff of an incredible female smell I found hard to describe. Mother smelled like this, Aunt Therèse did in her way, Emily did. There was the smell of gentle bee wax lip salve scented with calendula; there was a bouquet of long, thick hair drained in camomile shampoo mixed in a tiny bit of fresh sweat; There was the strong fragrance of dried lavender that hung on to the dress. Freshly baked bread?

Baguette?

I cannot really describe it, but I recognized it now I smelled it. It was her: All woman. I felt pain. How I missed the women from home and their support. Mother, Emily, Aunt Therèse. I missed their kind words, their smiles and laughter. I missed

their tears, their comforting hugs, their fresh, steaming hot food. Home-made bread. All of a sudden, I felt incredibly lonely.

«*We'll have to do something.*» She whispered.

He had grabbed her face and pulled her closer. Was he going to kiss her? I was embarrassed to witness such an intimate scene. Did they even realize I was in the room?

«He will not listen to us, don't even try. '*Les derniers vestiges de la royauté viennent de disparaître.*'» The last relics of royalty will disappear. I had no idea what they were talking about, but it sounded incredibly serious, incredibly important.

«We must stop him. We cannot let him destroy history, the diary of mankind.»

Auguste pulled her closer and their lips nearly touched. I shivered.



«I will come with you.» I shouted out loud to make sure they knew I was there.

«Marie, you're awake?» Renoir looked at me, startled.

«Yes, I am awake. It is hard to sleep when there is so much noise.» I grumbled.

«You're here?» Françoise turned to me and her eyes were fiery. Had she really not seen me? I had to think of the two pistols she was carrying in her belt. What was she carrying those for?

«I-.»

I had no idea what to say and so I just shrugged, sitting up straighter and pulling a blanket over my night dress.

«Not with your husband tonight?» Françoise then smiled at me. She seemed friendly enough. If she was jealous, she tried to suppress it.

«Let me get dressed.» I said evasively.

«It's still early, 4:30 am.»

«I am used to getting up early.» My voice squeaked a little, and I noticed that the sleepy and hoarse sounds I produced, didn't really support that claim.

«Get dressed then.» She challenged me and pulled Renoir's sleeve so he was facing away from me.

«As if I had never seen a naked a woman.» Renoir complained playfully as he was turning his back to me.

«I see, that is why it'd be such a shame to burn the Louvre: All these naked women. All of them burning in purgatory: That is what you couldn't stand.»

Renoir only chuckled and Françoise's face must have lit up. I couldn't see it from behind, but her voice was full of mischief when she continued.

«Of course, the naked women: That is the only reason the Louvre must be saved. You know, for a moment I believed all your nonsense about history and destiny. The diary of man, man indeed.» She sounded bitter and I didn't quite understand why.



«I am decent.» I said quickly, still pulling up my stockings.

«You are? Decent? Oh my God.» Françoise stressed every word she said as she spun around to look at me.

«I thought you didn't believe in God.» I lifted my head, raised my chin and looked her in the eye.

«She doesn't» Renoir said.

«Oh my God, you're decent.» Françoise repeated, simply to vex me. She seemed worse than Julien right now, imitating the sound of my voice better than he ever could have.

I looked at her, trying to keep my calm and feigning indifference. I had no idea what she was so upset about. Why was she using God's name in vain and why was she making fun of me?

«Yes, I am decent.» I said defiantly.

«What's wrong with that?»

Françoise wilfully ignored me, then changed the subject.

«The *Rue Cardinet* yielded first, then the *Rues Noblet, Truffaut, La Condamine*. Although they had slept on their paving stones to defend their barricades. But at three the cannons of the Versaillaise saluted the break of day. The national guards stood no chance.»

«But it is quiet now», I said.

«It will not be quiet for long. They say all the gates from *Neuilly* to *St. Ouen* in the rear are taken. On his right, *Clinchant* attacked -.»

I interrupted her right there.

«*Justin Clinchant?*»

«You know him?» She looked at me, surprised. I nodded.

«Still has all his hair? »

«I guess. I must say I haven't really laid eyes on him.»

«But I have. He negotiated the surrender of the Bourbaki army with the Swiss, didn't he? They had to lay down all their arms at the Swiss borders. I remember my brother pointing him out to me on that first day when the refugees had just crossed into Switzerland. It didn't seem important who he was at the time»

«Well, he surely is not surrendering now and there is no way he's laying down his arms. He comes at us with all the might of the monarchist army and they're taking down all the barricades of the *Batignolles* as we're speaking. Some say the barricade of the *Place Clichy* have arrested him, but I don't know. There are so many rumours right now. You don't know what to believe.»

I nodded and Renoir raised his eyebrow at this.

«So, how come you know?» I asked, but Françoise only smiled, not revealing her sources.

«The Prussians must be laughing their heads off. They have now surrendered the neutral zone. Imagine, they have besieged Paris for so long and now it seems we shall destroy it completely by ourselves. And no one is here to help us with our cause. *Citoyenne* Dmitrieff is beside herself that Marx and the other London Internationalists don't come to Paris to defend the Commune. She and Louise Michel sent a detachment of 25 women to Montmartre. The men had commenced some new barricades during the night, but shown no spirit at all. The women alone showed any ardour.»

«And what will happen now?»

«No one knows. If you don't surrender, they will shoot you. They have shot twenty guards already.»

«We get the picture.» Renoir said to stop her scaring me.

«I do wonder what kind of picture that would be.» I asked.

«Not one I'd paint. Surely not.» He shook his head in disgust.

«If you raise your red scarf, they will shoot you. If you-».

«I get it, I get it. They will shoot you. They will shoot you. Whatever you do.»

Renoir said impatiently.

«They will.» Françoise replied. She took a deep breath.

«So, what are we waiting for? Let's get moving.»

I looked at Renoir. Had he lost his mind now? Where did he want to go?



«*Déserteur*. How can you leave Paris now?»

Françoise seemed to understand better what he meant. Renoir had started to move around his atelier fast, packing a few things at random into an old, brown suitcase he had pulled out from behind one of his easels.

«No, Françoise, calm down. I will not leave, but I will not tolerate that your communards and the like will burn down the Louvre. That they want to help the workers get their rights, that is noble; equal pay for men and women, noble. That they want free rent for the months Paris was besieged and in chaos, simply great. I

could use some of that gold at the national bank your friends are guarding. Of course.

But my goodwill ends when your friends want to destroy the city of Paris. The monuments, the art, all of this is sacred. You cannot simply wreck such havoc and burn everything because you want total freedom. What kind of freedom is that? No one can live in a charred city with no art, no beauty, no history. These buildings were built by the broken backs, the broken hands of our fathers and mothers, they did lose their lives, they paid with their health, their blood, they were slaves to their masters, their kings. And yes, that was wrong. Totally wrong. But is just as wrong to burn down all these monuments. It is wrong to lord over others, it is wrong to be so rich when others have nothing at all. That it is wrong to - . »

What an outburst. Françoise and I looked at him, aghast. Obviously, he wasn't finished yet.

«If you burn down everything, how can we ever remember that life was different and people had to live their lives differently? We can understand the concept of time and difference. Why must we be kept in ignorance? What kind of city do you want to leave to your children? A city devoid of history, art and culture?»

He looked at my belly and I blushed.

«Is that what you want to hand down to your children? A city in ruins? A planet in ruins? That we burned everything, destroyed everything because we could not handle real freedom and do not understand our own history?»



«Why are you blaming me? I haven't exactly signed up for this too. There was a lot of talk about violence in the clubs, but now that-. I don't know. I didn't think they would -.» Françoise had gone pale.

«See. Now that you'll have to go through with it, you waver.»

«You're just scared.» I said, trying to be comforting and reconcile the two. I didn't like the turn this conversation had taken.

«Of course, you're scared. It is only human to be scared, to call for so much violence and bloodshed upon your enemies. It doesn't do you any good. It kills you in the end. It does.»

I looked at Françoise, to me she looked more desperate than scared.

«It is one thing to say that we must shoot the priests, as they prevent us from doing what we want. I mean women are harmed by going to confession. They are harmed by marriage. The church. It cannot be right. To death! To death! So, the cry went, the clergy raise our children for the monarchy, to build their castles, their furniture, their beautiful gardens, all that wealth. We must slit their throat, pull their tongues out. I met a woman who had her hand stuffed into a priest's throat to pull out his tongue, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't.»

Françoise started weeping and I was startled at her sudden meltdown although I had to admit, picturing that woman's hand down the priest's throat was-. I mean -, appalling. Gruesome. A most terrifying idea. Françoise was sobbing now and I barely understood what she said.

«And now all comes to an end. What does it matter anyway? Let them burn everything. The Louvre. Who will want to see all these dead statues and pictures anyway? What is your art even good for? Tell me, what is it good for?»

Renoir grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her gently, then more forcefully.

«Are you out of your mind. I am not giving up the Louvre. Do you know how often I have gone there since I can walk, since we lived in the *Rue d'Argenteuil*? I would stay with the old masters in the *Nouveau Louvre* for hours and hours. I would live with them. They are my home.»

Her shoulders sagged.

«Auguste, let her go. We must all calm down.» I tried to interfere, but he couldn't be stopped.

«The Campana Collection. The Venus of Milo, the Winged Victory of Samothrace. Did you know they found Nike shattered in hundreds of pieces on the Greek island of Samothrace and pieced her together? And the Great Sphinx of Tanis? And then the paintings. I don't even know where to begin with the paintings. Their women-. Tizian. Ingres. Peter Paul Rubens. His beautiful Helena Fourment with her son. What a contrast to the tiny, tiny flower bouquets. All that porcelain and then for the Orient. The Louvre. The Louvre was Life. The Louvre is Life. I am not giving up the Louvre.»

«Flower bouquets?» I asked timidly, for I had lost track of what he was talking about.

«Thirteen. I was thirteen, when I started painting porcelain. Flower bouquets mainly.» Then, Renoir turned his back to us. I guess to hide his agitation and his

pain. Françoise started blowing her nose. For a moment there was silence. I wondered what would be next.

«We must save the Louvre. » He said one last time. He was calm now and his voice sounded firm.

«And we must find Uncle Vanja. But, we cannot possibly do this alone.» I had spoken before I knew what I was saying.



«Aurélie.» Françoise sniffled.

«Of course, she knows the tunnels.»

«And a lot of the powder is in the sewage tunnels.» Renoir added. He made it sound as if this was a good thing.

«But she is a nun.»

«She is also my sister.»

Françoise, the wild queen fantasy and Sister Aurélie were sisters? That was hard to believe, yet, coming to think of it: They did somehow look alike.

«Father Bénédic. He can help us too.» She added while carefully folding her wet handkerchief.

«And Sister Élise?»

«Sister Élise is dead.» Françoise said abruptly. I only stared at her. The petite sister dead? I couldn't think of it.

«But-»

«She is dead.»

«And? Anyone else? » Renoir asked.

«Dead? What does it matter?»

«No, of course not. Anyone else who can help?»

«Marie?» Françoise said and looked at me.

«Sure, I will come. If we save the Louvre, we save Vanya»

«Who is Vanya?»

«It is a long story. I urgently need to find my Uncle Vanya, he must be somewhere in the tunnels below the Louvre. It seems he's come to bring me home to Switzerland and got lost on the way.»

«We all do occasionally.»

«Do what?»

«Get lost.»

«We may all get lost occasionally, but we don't all lose our memory.»

«He's lost his memory?»

I pressed my lips together and nodded slightly.



«So, what are we waiting for? We must get moving before the sun comes up.»

«That is right. I will meet you at the Louvre then.» Auguste grabbed his jacket and was gone before we could discuss our plans in detail.

«But how can we find them all?» I asked naïvely

«Don't worry. We shall find them.» Françoise said and then, she smiled and wiped off her tears.

«You want some *baguettes* first? »



«Aurélie, Aurélie», Françoise was banging loud on the door of her apartment while I was standing by. There was no answer.

«She is not here. What are we to do?»

«I don't know. Maybe she will come back later. Shall we wait?»

«She should really be here. So early in the morning. She should be-.»

«Well, I guess -»

The neighbour, an elderly lady in a long green night gown, opened the door and stuck her head out.

«Françoise, is that you?» She said sotto-voce.

«Yes, it's me.»

«And who is that?» She asked, eying me suspiciously.

«A friend.»

«Your friend?»

«She's fine, don't worry.» Her voice reverberated loud in the stairways.

«Shh, not so loud. Come on in.»

She fully opened her own door and quickly we walked across the hallway.

When we entered her apartment and there was such a stench of sour cabbage that I felt sick at once.

«Can I have a pot?» I asked curtly.

«Quick.» I said, pressing my hand onto my mouth.

She handed me a chamber pot and at once I vomited. Luckily, beside the *Baguette*, I hadn't eaten much lately, so there wasn't much to get out.

«Let's get some fresh air in.» Françoise opened the window and the draft did me a world of good.

«Don't open the window. Close it quick. I haven't opened it for days.»

«Why's that?»

«They might see us.»

«Who might see us?»

«I don't know. The Commune, the army. Anyone.»

«Anyone.? Ok. Whatever you say. Do you know where Aurélie is?»

«They have taken her.»

«Who?»

«I don't know. I heard her scream and scratch and then silence. And then silence. I don't know. I heard someone lock the door then. I was too scared to go and see by myself. I would have a key if you want to go inside.»

«Sure, give me the key.» Françoise said eagerly.

The woman limped over to a huge spruce wood cupboard and got out a large, iron key hanging on the inside of the heavy door. Françoise at once snapped it from her.

«We'll be back.»

«Come, Marie.»

«Sure. I'll come.» I said gingerly, trying to balance my weight on my feet, shifting forward and backward rather uncomfortably.

«I'll come.» I still felt so weak. If only all that vomiting finally stopped.



The door opened at once and Françoise swung it wide open.

«Aurélie. *T'es là?* Are you here?» Quickly she went inside. We heard someone groan out loud. Françoise rushed towards the first door on her left and opened it. I followed as fast as I could. What a shocking sight! Aurélie was laying on her bed, her face badly battered and her legs and arms bound to the large four poster bed with hemp strings.

«Oh my God. What happened?» Françoise screamed and started releasing her sister at once. Her wrists were bleeding.

«Jacques Marèt.» She whispered.

«The husband of that woman who was here last week?»

She nodded.

«What did he want?»

«I cannot say-. I felt-. .»

«Hush, you mustn't talk. Let me get you some water. Marie. Run into the kitchen and get some water, will you?»

I nodded and walked as fast as I could to the kitchen. I brought back a clay jar filled with fresh water and a glass which I put on a bedstand close by. Aurélie could barely speak, but she tried.

«He wanted a boy. And when, she couldn't take it anymore -.

«That is why she came?»

«That is why he came.»



«Can you sit up?»

«Yes, I am fine.» Aurélie's face was contorted, so much pain was she in, but she managed to keep herself in an upright position, her hands were trembling as she held the glass. Carefully, she took a sip, then another one.»

«Can you stand?» Silently, she shook her head.

«I guess not yet.»

«We need your help.» I said.

«I don't think I can help you right now.» She sounded so weak, I saw at once she was in no state to come out with us and help us. I explained our endeavour nevertheless.

«We need to get into the tunnels. They want to blow up the Louvre.»

She leaned back and closed her eyes. Only then I saw the fresh blood on the starched, white linen.



«I am so sorry. I cannot help you. I don't think I can even stand up straight. I am hurting so much right now.» Softly, she began to cry, drawing her knees up to her chin and with both arms wrapping her body, thus holding onto her womb.

«Leave her», Françoise said. «We'll have to find another way.»

«We will-.» I said, «We will.» I was completely shocked at what must have happened here.

Gently, Françoise stroked her sister's hair. Aurélie had closed her eyes. She was so pale, she looked as if she had died.

«Father Bénédic, he can help you and he knows the tunnels just as well.»

«Where can I find him?»

I had realised Françoise wouldn't be coming as well to help save the Louvre.

«I think at the barricades at the *Place Concorde*, if they still stand.»

«What do you mean?»

«He decided to join the Communards.» She whispered, her lips now close to her sister's hair.

«He did?»

«He did. When in Rome, do as the Romans do.»

«But we are in Paris.»

«Then do as the French do.»

«What French? The king's army or the Communards' National guards? They are all French.» She only shrugged.

«That is crazy.»

«I know.» Françoise said and lowered her head.

«All of it is.»



I left Aurélie's apartment by myself. The early morning sun was about to come up and I could feel the glorious beauty of another wonderful day dawn upon me. It had been so dry lately, the winds were arid and strong. If the Louvre burned who would stop the flames from devouring the priceless art it harboured? If the Louvre burned and collapsed who would stop Uncle Vanya from dying in the rubbles of the tunnels underneath? Given he was still stuck in the tunnels which, all things considered, was more than likely. I looked at my bare hands, feeling so lost and forlorn I couldn't help but cry. Quickly, I wiped my eyes. There was no point in

crying now. Not now. There was no time. I had to move on. I had to find Vanya, I had to find Mustapha, if they were alive. And so God help me, I had to help Renoir save the Louvre. What a day. Would I ever succeed? Would there ever be an end to all this trouble and chaos?

Interlude

Sunday, September 29, 1902 Montmartre, Paris

She had stopped reading out loud and lowered *The Manuscript* into her lap. Her hands were old, her skin so fine and dry and leathery, the nails soft and white, her right thumbnail broken. Carefully, she felt the edges of the paper, the crumpled pages filled with long and boring sentences she had rewritten ever so often. The letters stared at her, as if they had a life of their own, as if they themselves reproached her for being bold. For being old. Her voice had become frail, oscillating with a low frequency tremor from reading for so long, her eyes watery. Then she slowly lifted her head and looked at him questioningly. He looked away, she could see he was tired. All these hours, had he even been listening to anything she had been reciting to him? Was this whole affair still on his mind? Would it never, never go away? Could they ever, ever carry on and simply live in peace? Just the two of them?

«I know, I shouldn't have done it.» She said apologetically.

«You have looked through all my notes?» He asked instead.

«I have», she said affirmatively.

«There must be a thousand pages or more. Are there a thousand pages?»

She nodded at this. He remained silent and after a while she spoke again.

«You know, I love your handwriting.»

«And this is what you've come up with?» Impatiently, he waved at the manuscript.

«I didn't mean to offend you.»

«You didn't. You don't. I am just ->»

«Disappointed?»

«No, no. surprised.»

«Surprised?»

«I didn't know you could write. All these years we were married. Indeed, I am amazed.»

«I know, everyone loves *La Débacle*, I know that. You know that. It is such a true account of what happened.»

«A true account. Exactly. So why would you write *this*?» Once more, he waved his left hand at her and the fat manuscript in her lap. She took her time before she answered, carefully and deliberately choosing her words.

«Your work. Your story. It's all about men and the army. The glory of war.»

«There are women in the story. And there is no glory in war. War is awful.

War is atrocious. I know that. You know that.»

«I know. I know you know.»

She bit on her lips.

«Still.»

He looked at her, looking right through her.

«I've wanted to write a story about a simple farm girl instead. I've just wanted to write. Make things up. I cannot say why.»

«And, you have done just that: made up a simple story about a simple farm girl.»

...

«So? What do you think?»

«Of your little story?» He shrugged, then got up and walked up to the window. He looked outside at the busy *Rue de Bruxelles* in the seventh arrondissements. As he was turning his back towards her, she took heart and asked him the question that mattered most. The only question that ever mattered.

«I'd really like to know what you think: Will she ever find Mustapha? Will he be a father to his child?»

«A black Algerian rifleman, dressed up as a communard, in the last days of the Commune in Paris? Spring 1871 we are talking about?» He made a noise she found unpleasant.

«If that is how you see it? He isn't dressed up as communard. I guess he was a communard.»

«Right. You guess. Don't forget he's an Arab. And so far, he is literally non-existent in your story. What happened to him? You tell me. Look, your simple farm

girl, Marie, she looks for him in all the wrong places. She doesn't even know for sure that he went to Paris. He could still be in Switzerland, looking for the body of his dead brother. Or, he could be running Hashish from Morocco to Europe, establishing routes that will help build an Empire when his grandson will take over.

«Morocco? He is Algerian. I don't understand. And why his grandson?»

«His great-grandson then. Morocco, Algeria. They are all Arabs, who cares for borders? The French do, the English do. My dear, our stories reach deep into the past, and they reach deep into the future. You don't really know your Mustapha, do you? For all I know, his great-grandson could be running one of the biggest drug cartels in Europe. He will put everyone around him to sleep, deep, deep sleep. He will flood Europe with drugs and dead bodies, shoot even his own relative in Spain over fighting how to transport that cocaine from Panama via Morocco to Europe. There will be a war in Amsterdam. People beheaded-.»

«Algeria.»

«You said he was French.»

«French, yes. Algerian, yes. But not Moroccan. Why do you keep saying Morocco?»

«Alright. To transport that cocaine from Panama via Moroc-, via Algeria to Europe. Whatever you want. Investigators will be astounded at just how much violence he uses to maintain his powers. He will understand the power of the media in a democracy and attack their offices, intimidate the journalists, kill them. He is Pat, the Patrón, he kills his enemies in front of their little daughters. In the end he will be arrested in Dubai, but when tried in *The Bunker*, he will reach out and kill again despite the drones, helicopters and armoured jeeps used for protection.

«What are armoured jeeps? Drones? Helio-what? I don't understand. Are you not feeling well?» She turned towards him, now she was worried.

«He will kill the lawyer of the crown witness, then shoot the brother and in the end- In the end, he will kill-.

«Stop it. How can you know all this?»

«I can't. I am just making it up. Mustapha could be a cold-blooded murderer.»

«You are cruel.»

«But you're guilty of omitting too much. The readers' fantasies can run wild.»

«You mean, like when your fantasy runs wild and invents all these stories about this great-grandson.»

«Exactly. So, you should have your Mustapha killed as soon as you can, before his great-grandson attacks the rule of law in Europe, bringing narcoterrorism to a continent where-.»

«Are you alright, my dear? What is *narcoterrorism*? You are sure you are not running a fever, are you?» She looked at him, concerned, at this outburst. What was wrong with her husband? What had that unhappy story, she had read to him, triggered?

«I am not running a fever.»

«Then, why all that strange-»

«Have him killed.»

«Have him killed?»

«Have him killed. Your Mustapha, have him killed.» He roared, raging at her ignorance.

«But why?» She asked timidly.

«I mean, he is as good as dead, isn't he? He has disappeared, right

She will have to give that baby away. He cannot live to be a father. You know that. Do you think I haven't understood what that story is about?»

...

She remained silent, not thinking of the pain. The pain, she felt it, like she had felt it then: The empty womb, the umbilical cord, cut and then, the blood. So much blood. Then, the baby gone, and her breasts bursting, her breasts burning.

...

«So, what do you think has happened to him?» He asked. She looked distracted.

«I am asking you.» She said, annoyed he would speak again.

«How am I supposed to know, *you* are the one who let him drop out of *your* story.»

«Mustapha didn't drop out. And it is not *my* story.»

«It is *your* story. So? What happened to him?»

«He went his own way.»

«What do you mean?»

«Just that. He left. I don't know where to find him.»

«You're the author, you control the action. Get him back, put him in his place.»

«What is his place?»

«His place? I've told you already. They will kill him. Shoot him, hang him, behead him. Whatever. He'll be dead. Like all the others. It's the Commune. It's the French army. You understand. The French. The glorious French army.»

She remained silent.

«Maybe that is why he left.»

«What do you mean?»

«He doesn't want to be put in his place if that means he's killed.»

«He's put himself there.

«What do you mean?»

«The moment they took up arms against their own army, the day they built these barricades, the moment they sewed these uniforms-. They were dead. He is a communard, right? He does wear the National Guard 's uniform?»

«I don't know. I told you, he's gone. I don't know what he's wearing. I don't know where to find him.» Defending *The Manuscript* to him like this was tiring. She felt ridiculous. He wouldn't understand. He was a published author, he was famous. She was just a woman, a woman with a pen. And some ink to spill. He was all facts, all truth, she was all fantasy, all creation. All fiction.

«Don't be so silly. He is a character in your novel. He cannot simply leave. He is in the story. He has become the story. He is the story.»

«So, tell me what happens next?» She asks.

«How do I know? You're telling the story. But one thing is for sure, *cherie*. He cannot live. Don't you see that? Not so much because he's an Arab, but because he's

a communard. The killing was necessary. Their ideas, well-. You know that, don't you. Even the girl – I mean your Marie-.» He fell silent.

...

«But what if-»

«No, my love, he cannot live. You'll have to let him go. Let him go.»

«Well, I told you, he's gone already.»

«No, not like this. You cannot give complete freedom to your characters. You cannot let them walk out of the story you're writing for them.

«But why not? If authors can rewrite our stories, can they not give us complete freedom?»

«You shape their path, their destiny. You build them up, you bring them down. They are what you want them to be. They go where you want them to be. They consume what you want them to buy. They vote for whom you want them to vote for.»

«I don't understand. I don't want them to buy or vote anything.»

«These stories must tell the truth. Get him back.»

«And then?»

«Then, kill him. That's the truth. What else did you have in mind?»

«One more day. Give him one more day.»

She lowered her head, then, without waiting for a response, she got up and left the room. *The Manuscript* she took with her.

Tuesday, May 23, 1871

When in Paris, the Louvre is easy to find. Walk underneath the large elm trees of the *Champs d'Élysées*, then cross the *Place de la Concorde* and perambulate into the *Tuileries* Garden. Pass the *Terrace de l'Orangerie* first, then walk around the large *Bassin Octagonale* André Le Notre put there for the sake of pure geometry, a deviant joy, and you're nearly there. Easy to find on any day, but today-. Today. No.

My heart felt faint, my knees were trembling, and I had vomited repeatedly since I had left Sister Aurélie's apartment in the early morning. Paris was so big, the streets so long, so wide. I got tired before I could even decide what to do. Most of the day I had spent sitting on a dark green Gondole bench supported by cast-iron legs in the *Tuileries* Gardens. I was paralyzed. Such bustle, such hustle. Such noise. The army. The national guards. All these people milling about. All around me so much life and death and within me nothing but stillness, emptiness, a loneliness of a

different kind I found hard to bear. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where to go.

One more day I had spent in Paris and I hadn't used it wisely. It was getting late. Six o'clock had passed a while ago. Renoir had urged me to be back in his atelier before dark. The *Tuileries* gardens and the adjacent *Avenue Champs Elysée* were surely not the place to be alone at dusk. Not in times such as these. Unsafe. Unsafe and dangerous. What was I to do? I felt so lost, so alone. If Uncle Vanya hadn't come to Paris, I would have gone home right now. I would have turned on my heels, walked around all the barricades and out of the gates of a city besieged by an army fighting against its own people, against its own workers.

The battle for ideas, the battles how to govern a nation, a people: Were they meant to be fought with iron weapons, rifles and bullets? Couldn't words be your endless sea of blood? To spill and on and on and on and on? And more? I wondered. Was anything ever worth the deadly violence? The endless tears? The heartache? I remembered the dead girl on the barricades I had seen only yesterday. *Thou shalt not kill*. I had not forgotten. No, I had not. *Thou shalt not kill*.

I had to find Vanya.



«Marie.»

I turned.

«Marie.»

A man came running towards me. He was wearing the uniform of the National Guard and waving his arms high above his head.

I looked, then I looked again. Could it be true?

«Mustapha.» I whispered.

«Mustapha.»

I heard my voice reverberating among the walls of sweet green surrounding us. Then, I started running down the *Champs Élysée* towards him, I stumbled. The sun was still so high, I felt its warmth upon my cheek, its glitter in my eyes when a dozen rays of liquid light darted through the branches. I felt such joy. Such mere and fleeting happiness. And such joy. Mustapha here.

Then I held him, then he held me. We embraced each other as if we were drowning, as if we were dancing, as if we were completely and utterly drunk.

«Marie, You're here. Why are you here?»

«I came to tell you-» He interrupted me.

«I am not married.»

«You're not?» I gasped.

«I was so angry with you. I was upset my brother died. I had to blame someone. I am so sorry.» He buried his face in my hair and I could hear him inhale. I held my head back to look into his eyes.

«You are? You really are. How come you're-»

«I am. I am so sorry.»

«And you're not married?»

«No, I am not.»

«That wife of yours would have been awful anyway.»

«Who are you talking about?»

«Françoise Belfay.»

«I said, I was married to her?» He laughed out loud.

«You did. You cannot remember?» I said reproachingly.

«It was the only name I could think of at the time.»

«She is hard to forget.»

«So, you have met her?»

His lips found mine and he kissed me so tenderly I was melting. I was dissolving into the blissful evening that was all ours.

«Where have you been?»

I mumbled barely audibly and yet I knew he had heard me. He must have heard me.

«Where have you been?»

He kissed me again, silencing me before I could speak again. My shoulders were heaving softly like golden rye in the fields on a warm evening in June, my sighing like the loud and earnest cry of the strutting, strong falcons soaring up high.

«Where, where my love, where have you been?»



«I missed you so terribly.»

«I missed you too.»

«Why are you here? Why Paris, of all places?»

«I had no choice.»

«Why not?»

«I had to-. Well. I have come to tell you something.»

«Tell me what?»

Suddenly, I felt shy. How could I tell him I was with child? How could I –

«You fathered a child.»

I spoke and the sound of my voice was so faint it barely carried the syllables, all these gorgeous vowels, to his ears. Had he heard me? Had he understood what I tried so unluckily to convey? Gently, he grabbed me by the chin and pushed it up so I was forced to look straight into his eyes. I shivered.

«A child?»

His gaze was unfathomable. He looked at me, amazed but calm, and then, then he began to smile. Such kindness, such golden warmth. He did remember. I could see it in his eyes. What a relief. What a union we had formed, always formed since we first met.

«Marie, You're with child?»

I nodded. He stepped back a little and looked at me. Then he stretched out his hand. Tenderly he touched my belly and I was electrified at once. His touch, so gentle, his face so close. His eyes were like the deepest sea and instantly I lost myself completely in their spell. His touch, it brought back the most forceful memories at once. I wanted this moment to last forever. For ever. I had missed him so much.

«My child.»

«It has just moved.» He said, excited.

«No, it hasn't. The quickening hasn't started yet.» I laughed out loud and my laughter was dripping off my lips like shiny nacre pearls.

«I could feel it move.»

«No, you couldn't.» I gently scolded him.

«Not even, I've feel it yet.» I added.

«You're sure?»

«Quite sure.»

«Well then.»

He caressed my womb.

«Marie, you're beautiful.»

Then his hand wandered up, between my full breasts, touching the naked skin in my neckline. Before I could object, his index finger ran along my chin, along my cheek, my hair, down my back and then both his hands were cupping my buttocks. Gently, he pulled me towards him. I felt how our thighs touched and it made me tremble. He began kissing my face, my closed eyes, my cheeks, my chin, then he moved his head into my bosom. I could feel his hot breath through the fine materials that were covering my naked skin.

«You have grown. How full your breasts are.»

He buried his head in my warm, soft flesh.



I heard voices and pushed him away gently. Quickly I began lacing up my dress.

Unsure of how to proceed, I said.

«My child, our child. It's-.»

Then I fell silent. I didn't make sense and I knew it. He looked at me, kissed me again.

«Our son.» He ran his hand over my womb.

«Our son?» I lifted my head as if to challenge him.

«Don't you think it will be a boy?»

I looked at him, I smiled and then I had to take a step back, I spun my body round, away from him. I vomited right there behind one of the bushes before the *Terrace de l'Orangerie* in the *Tuileries* Gardens.



«Are you alright. You don't look well. Come. We have to get you out of here.»

He gave me a handkerchief to wipe my mouth. Then he handed me a bottle of water. I rinsed my mouth, glad no one seemed to take an interest in our engaging *tête-à-tête*. People had bigger problems at hand than scolding lovers for indecencies.

«No, I cannot leave. Uncle Vanya. He is here.»

«Here?»

«He's come to Paris.»

He groaned.

«The old fart, he's here? How come?»

«I don't know. I guess, he wanted to come and look for me.»

«Look for you?»

«I don't know. Someone must have told him I had come to look for you.

Mother? Emily?

«Do I get this right? You came looking for me, then Uncle Vanya came looking for you and now we go looking for him again?»

«I guess so. You are going to help me?»



He shook his head.

«Marie, let it go. Let's get you out of the city. You leave Paris as fast as you can. I will go and look for Vanya myself.» Mustapha had taken me by the hand and was dragging me away towards the street.

«I have some experience in finding and bringing him back, you know.» He smiled at me.

«No, I will help you. He is my uncle. He is in there somewhere.» I pointed towards the gardens.

«In the Palace? I mean, I know, he is the chancellor, but really? He's in that Palace? How would you know?»

«No, not in the Palace, he is in the tunnels, underneath.»



«Marie. You must go at once. Keep heading North-West, that may be the easiest way out.»

«Why are you saying this. I want to stay in Paris. I don't want to leave. Not without my uncle.»

I felt tears welling up within me.

«Marie, please, for the sake of the little one.»

«I'll have to find Vanya first. I told you.»

«He may be dead already.»

«Does that mean you won't even bother look for him? What if he is alive?» I said defiantly.

«More likely dead, if he is in the tunnels. Have you heard the blast? There must be fire somewhere. I guess that is only the beginning. I am sure this is not the only building that will go up in flames today. The Louvre, will be next. Paris will be burning. These people are dangerous.»

«You are wearing their uniform.»

«I know, I never thought they'd use all that violence.»

«Really? You didn't?» This sounded much harsher than I've wanted it to sound. It was hard to stay calm.

«I beg you. Leave now, as long as you can. Marie, please.»

«I am not leaving.» He shrugged.

«If that is what you want.» His eyes searched my face.

«It is what I want. I don't want to leave Paris.» I was determined. He nodded and drew me closer to him. I buried my face on his shoulder and inhaled his smell.



«Are you coming?»

I let him go, ready to embark on our quest to bring back Uncle Vanya. Now he was here to help me, I felt strangely invigorated.

«Marie, I can't.»

He slightly winced. Then he looked over his shoulder as if to check if someone had followed us.

«You cannot come and help me look for Uncle Vanya?» I raised my eyebrows.

«I am so sorry. I have -.»

«What do you mean? You cannot come and help me?»

«There is something I will have to take care of first.»

«What can possibly be more important than finding Vanya?»

He remained mute.

«Come on. Mustapha. What is it?»

«I don't want to tell you.»

«But why?»

«It could be dangerous if you know.»

« Dangerous? What have you gotten into?»

«Noting, really. But before I'll go looking for the old fart, I'll have to take care of something else.»

«Stop calling him an old fart.»

«But he is an old fart. You never spent a night in a tent with him and we were camping every night by the Aar river when I brought him back. He is an old fart. Believe me. And I will always call him that.»

«Tell me why cannot you not come and help finding him?»

«I am just following someone's example. You wouldn't understand.»

«Your leader who saved the Christians from murderers?»

«You remember?»

«I do. And, yes, I do.»

«Marie, please, leave the city. Please. » I shook my head.

«Not if you don't tell me what you are up to.» At this, he shook his head and I bit my lips.

« I see.»



«Be careful. God bless you.»

«And you.» He kissed me again.

«As-salamu alaykum,» he added, seeing how resolved I was.

«What does that mean?» I asked curiously.

«It means, peace be upon you.»

«And upon you.» I said.

«wa 'alaykumu s-salām«

«What does that mean? «

«And upon you. That is what it means.»

«And upon me. Right.» I smiled.



As I turned to walk away from him, Mustapha grabbed me by my wrist and held me back. He was whispering now.

«If we make it out alive, will you be my wife?»

My heart had stopped. Had he really proposed just now? In the *Tuileries* Gardens where we could hear the cannonballs roar? In Paris, a city on the verge of destruction? I saw him standing here, so alone, so fragile, so strong. The father of my child.

«Marie, please. Please, say yes.»



A fatal exception 0E has occurred at 48.833880 : 2.329200 in UXB UMinormOUS (01) - 2.326200. The current application will be terminated. Black Screen of Death. You will lose any unsaved information in all applications.



We kept standing there, looking at each other as if time had stopped and everything had come to an end. A complete halt in the midst of death and destruction. A moment of peace, then I woke up from our perfect embrace. I had to get moving.

«If you don't make it out of Paris, you will find me at the *Sainte-Chapelle*.» He said, reluctant to let me go.

«Where is that?»

«A chapel. It isn't far from here.» He waved towards the East.

«You can get to it from both sides of the Seine, but I think with all the commotion, I'll take the other side.»

Sainte-Chapelle. Sainte-Chapelle. I kept repeating the name, trying not to forget it. Somewhere down that way.

«In the worst case, I will see you at *La Maison Blanche*.» He said, letting go of my fingers.

«At *Haute-Vue*.»

«Of course, where else?» He kissed my hand once more and then let go.

«I will be fine.»

«You sure will. Everything will be alright, Marie.»

«I know. I know.»

He then, finally, turned and walked towards the *Pont de la Concorde*. I stood there, looking after him until he was a tiny dot far, far up the road. I waited until he

started crossing the bridge, only then I began walking towards the *Tuileries gardens*.

Again, I was on my own.



Why was everything so big in Paris? I was getting so tired. My feet hurt and so did my back. I was exhausted already. Where was the Louvre anyway? I looked at the enormous *Tuileries* palace, its front facing West so gloriously, built and constructed to stand the tide of time forever. But what was that? Some of the windows were blazing with fire. I began to feel the heat in my face. When I looked away my skin cooled quickly, but when I turned to the building, I felt how my cheeks were burning. Quickly, I began rubbing them. How sensitive my skin had become, how terribly the smoke penetrated my nose.

The Louvre itself I couldn't see, as it was somewhere behind the burning Palace. I hadn't cut the corner yet to see what lay behind. A loud bang gave me the shivers. The first window had burst, and then again, right afterwards: *bang*. The next window was shattered by the fire; another enormous window pane was sputtering into a thousand pieces. Each time a window exploded, I cringed with fear, relieved I was walking in the cool garden and still so far away from the building, so far from the fire and yet so close.

Bang, Bang, Bang. Where was the fire brigade? Where was everyone? I kept some distance to the grand, long building, walking as fast as I could while I began

seeing the fire flickering behind more and more glass, then as lightning darting out into the balmy night-air. *Bang*. Another window gone. *Bang*. The huge palace was burning up quickly. The windows gone in no time. I started running, covering my ears with both my hands. How long would the palace keep standing? Where was Uncle Vanya? How could I get into the tunnels? My head was racing, but my feet were lagging behind. They were as heavy as lead. I had to slow down at once. I was walking, then, before I could catch my breath, I realized I was as slow as a snail on a hot blazing summer's day.



Even when I had turned the corner to the south side, I couldn't see much, everything was hidden by the smoke bellowing up more intensely now. It was hard to see anything at all. Gingerly, I walked towards the Seine and then along the riverside façade towards the Louvre. Seriously, where was the fire brigade? Where was everyone? Shouldn't they bring up buckets and buckets of water from the river now?

I saw two men in National guards uniforms get out of the building. They looked distressed. The younger one was extremely agitated. They came right towards me.

«*Quel con*. We should just shoot him.»

«Do you really want to risk setting all the detonators off? You will kill yourself when you start shooting at the powder.»

«The dome will collapse soon, there is enough explosive in the central pavilion to bring down the Mont Blanc. So, don't worry. He'll be gone.»

«Well, still. The Louvre must go up in smoke next. We should set off the detonators he's sitting on now.»

«Why does he keep saying he is Kaiser Wilhelm?»

«He is wearing our uniform.»

«Is he? I couldn't tell from afar. But the rifle looks like one of ours. Guy sure knows how to shoot.»

«He is out of his mind. We should just shoot him ourselves, before he does more harm.»

«No. I've just told you. You will not make it out of the tunnels if you shoot him. You will hit the explosives. Don't you get that?»

«Where is he?» I interrupted the two men anxiously. I couldn't help but overhear their conversation.

«Why is that your business?»

«I may be able to help.»

«How so?»

«I think it is my uncle you're talking about. He is not well. I want to bring him home. Please. Let me help.»

The two men looked at each other and I could tell that Vanya's life did not matter to them at all. All they wanted to do was blow up the Louvre. My heart was racing. The situation had gotten out of hand so quickly. What was I to do? I had no idea.

Obviously, they had come to some sort of silent understanding. The younger one said:

«Get down the stairs and then into the basement, then left and right again. from there you get to a tunnel that takes you directly underneath the Louvre. Walk for a couple of hundred meters and you'll see an old man in a ragged uniform. Tell the others, Jules said it's ok that you're down there. They will let you pass. They're coming out any minute anyway. We're getting ready for the big explosion.»

«What do you mean?» I asked.

«Listen, if he doesn't come out, we'll blow up the Denon wing with the both of you. All of it and whatever statue they left behind. We cannot wait.»

«No, no. Don't do that. Please. I will get him out.» I was petrified.

«We'll give you ten minutes.» For a moment I hesitated, not sure where to go.

«Do you want to save your uncle or not? Everything will go up in smoke here soon. You should get moving. Nine minutes now. Go. It is this way.»

Without answering him, I turned and started running for the stairs to the basement.

«Go left, then right again.» He shouted after me.

«*Neuf minutes.*»

«Nine minutes, nine minutes».

I heard the words being trampled underneath my feet.



«Father Bénédicte?» I exclaimed when I had reached the bottom of the stairs.

«Hush», he said, «Call me Ben.»

«Ben? Father what is wrong?»

«Why do we always get to meet in the tunnels?» He answered.

«Is that really you? Father Bénédicte, what are you doing down here?»

«Please.» He looked at me pleadingly and only now I saw that he was not wearing his habit, but the uniform of the national guard.

«Oh, you've changed.» I raised my eyebrows.

«No, I haven't»

«Your -.» I pointed at his new clothes at a loss what to say or how to interpret this.

He stretched his shirt and smiled weakly:» Oh this. That is not really a change.

That is ->»

«What is it?»

«Different. I'd say.»

«Different. Ok. As you like, Father.»

«Please, call me Ben.»

«He is your father?» One of the communards had turned the corner and was coming towards us. Father Bénédicte had gone pale.

«Yes, that's my father,» I said self-consciously to the communard who had asked me so freshly. I could see from the corner of my eye, how Father Bénédict's eyes widened with surprise.

«In fact, we are looking for his elder brother. He must be down the tunnels, towards the Louvre.» I volunteered.

«Oh, you mean the lunatic holding up the whole operation?»

«That must be him. Jules said it's ok if you let me pass.»

«Jules said that?» He asked suspiciously.

I nodded, feeling my throat tighten up as if someone was strangling me.

«Ok, *allez-y*. But don't be long. Everything will go up here soon. We are on our way out.»

«Sure», I said as I was passing them. We started walking down the tunnel.

«You've got some nerves.»

«Quick. Come. This way.»



It took us some time to find our way in the dark, old tunnel. Father Bénédict had a candle, but it didn't give off much light. I kept banging my hands to the rough walls as we moved forward. Several communards passed us on their way out. Each

time we had to press our bodies to the cold wall to let them pass. I felt uneasy. I wish I didn't have to be touched by all these men, all these strangers.

«It cannot be far now.» Father Bénédicte said

«What are you doing down here?» I asked.

«Marie, hush. I heard a noise.»

Indeed, we heard water, rushing close by.

«It's the sewage system. It carries a lot of water right now.»

We walked in silence for another couple of hundred meters.

«Do you think we'll be there soon?» I asked.

«I don't know.»

«I bet my uncle Vanya, the old fart, is sitting on a barrel filled with Nobel's blasting powder, holding a gun.»

«The old fart?»

«It's a nickname.»

«Not very nice nickname.»

«I know.»

«What's with the gun?»

«He was a good shooter. Really. The best.»

«That sounds dangerous.»

«Hush. Have you heard that?»

«What exactly?»

«That noise.»

«What noise?»

«Hush. There. Don't you hear it?»

We both strained our ears, trying to hear more.

«I know what that is.»

«What?»

I didn't answer.

«Let's get closer.»

«What is that noise?»

«I think he's crying.»

Father Bénédicte had stopped and turned his ear sideways to hear better.»

«You may be right. It sounds a bit like crying.»

«It is crying. Believe me. I know what it sounds like. He's cried like that when father died. My father, his brother. And he cried like this when Fleure did. His wife.»

I tried explaining.

«Let's go and find him. It cannot be long now.»



Father Bénédicte shone his candle into the alcove where Uncle Vanya was sitting between a couple of large barrels. They were all filled with explosives.

«Uncle Vanya», I said, more urgently than relieved to finally see him.

«Uncle? Are you alright?» I said, but he didn't answer. He was squatting between the barrels, gently rocking forwards and backwards while pressing his knees together and giving off strange sounds.

«Uncle?

«You know she always wears the apron. When she cuts up the fish. You know.» He grabbed my hand and looked at me.

«I have sown all the rye. The rye is all in the fields now.» He moved his arm and his hand as if he was sowing.

«No more rye. All rye in the fields. All gone.» He showed his empty hands.

«Uncle Vanya, it's me Marie»

«In the fields.»

«I have to go home. Let me go home. I have to cook for the children. My beautiful Fleure has gone to the village. She prepared a little something to put in the oven. Can you tell me where to find the oven? They will be right here. School is over now. Patrice, are you home yet? Maude?»

«No, Vanya, it's me. Marie.»

«Marie. Where is the oven?»

«There is no oven. These are the sewage tunnels. This is Paris. Vanya, please. I need you to wake up.»

«I'll have to put the stew in the oven. Don't you understand. Where is the oven?»

He got up and started walking up and down the tunnel.

«The oven. Where is the oven?»

«What is he talking about?»

«The oven. Where is the oven.»

«I have no idea.» I said rather desperate. What was Uncle Vanya talking about?»



«Is that the dynamite?» I nodded towards the barrels.

«I guess», Father Bénédicte whispered.

«Look, it says Nobel's Blasting Powder on each barrel.»

«We're right underneath the Louvre.»

«You're sure?»

«I am. We walked about 80 meter to the North then East. That takes us right underneath the Denon wing. But once the building starts burning. It will collapse completely. Then everything will go up in flames anyway. We're literally sitting on the powder keg.

«I understand.» I tried hard to ignore what he told me. I couldn't allow for a mental breakdown now.

«What are we going to do?»

«We have to get him out of here.»

«And let them blow up the Louvre?»

«I don't know what else to do. At least then we can save one life. We cannot save everything.»

«I guess we can't.» I said.

«I don't know how we're gonna get your uncle out of here. Maybe we should just simply knock him out.»

One of the communards appeared behind us. Seeing him I got a real fright. I hadn't expected anyone down here. Hadn't they all left?

«Why are you guys still here? Julien sent me to find you. He said he cannot wait much longer. You must get out of here now.»



I looked at Father Bénédict.

«Fath-» I stopped myself and bit my tongue.

«Ben, Ben. Listen. You go. I will stay here with him.»

«No, I will not leave you both down here. You must come up with me. Or I will knock him out.»

«No, it's ok.» I tried again: «Uncle Vanya. Uncle Vanya. Can you hear me?»

«Maude? Is this you?»

«No, it's me. It's Marie. They will blow up the Louvre. You must start moving.» He stood there, watching us. I could see he was so far away from us, galaxies upon galaxies lay between us.

I walked up towards him and tried pulling him by the sleeves. Then I grabbed his arm a little harder and he shoved me back.»

«Don't. Don't touch me. Who are you? Do you live here.»

«No, Uncle, I don't live here. Why would I live here? I am Marie. Your niece. Don't you remember?»

«It is all gone. The rye is all gone. All gone.»

Once more, Uncle Vanya showed his empty palms. Poor uncle Vanya, he must be so stressed out. How did he even get here?



«I don't think he will come with us.»

«Try again», Father Bénédicte insisted, «Just try again. Think of something. Anything, really. Come on. You know him best.»

«Uncle Vanya, please.»

«All gone. It is all gone.» He once more showed me his empty hands.»

«The rye? Is it all gone.» I asked, beginning to despair.

«Yes, Maude. The rye. All gone.» He looked at me directly.

And then I instinctively knew what to do.

«Father», I said.

Father Bénédict looked at me as if he was going to kill me. He shot a look at the communard to see if he had noticed.

«Don't call me father», he hissed hardly audible.

«Father», I said once more, looking with great intent at my uncle as if my gaze could will him to move, would will him to come with us.

«Maude? Is this you Maude.»

«Yes, it is me. Maude. Your daughter.»

«Maude, Thank God, you're here. I cannot find home. Where is the house? We must put the cake in the oven. Mamà will be upset if she finds out we haven't done it. She told me to do it before supper. She made the cake especially and now I cannot bake it.» And here it was, we had connected.

«Sure. Father, let us put the cake in the oven. Come.»

«My dear Maude, you are here. I am so glad you're here. Where were you?»

«I am here now.»

«I am glad.»

«She brought up potatoes from the cellar?»

«No, she didn't have time. Mamà has gone to Fleurier to the market. It's Tuesday. Don't you remember?»

«Tuesday. It is Tuesday. Of course.»

«Let us bring the potatoes up from the cellar. It is so dark here.»

«Tuesday. Of course. Fleure is in Fleurier. «

«Yes, Fleure is in Fleurier.»

«On Tuesdays» he said.

«On Tuesdays», I said. Then I smiled faintly.



«I am going up now», the communard said, losing his patience., «they cannot wait much longer. It's time to blow up the monarchy. If you don't come now, they will blow you up too.»

«But why? Why do you want to blow up everything?»

«The monarchy must fall, the empire must fall. The revolution only will bring peace to the workers.»

«Peace? You're destroying their city. Is that really what you want? Destroy their home town?»

«Look at the Louvre? Is this a worker's home. Really? You must be deranged. Yes, we want to see all the grand buildings burn.»

«But why? Why can't you let them stand and open them up for the public? Being in these palaces. It is so nice. The workers could come here to meet or to recreate, to relax. They could come and look at the art.»

«You are deranged indeed. Relax? Recreate? A worker? What are you even talking about? They will destroy us, don't you see? They will not back down. They're coming for us. The army is ready.»

I looked at him, not sure what to say. He was a fanatic. It'd be no use trying to convince him otherwise.

«I am leaving now.»

«No, please, please wait.» I pleaded with him.

«Jules cannot wait any longer.»

«Julien is here too?» Vanya asked amazed.

The communard gave him a confused look.

«What is he talking about.»

«My brother», I said as if this would explain anything..

«He is not your brother.» Vanya looked at me, scoldingly.

«He is your cousin.»

«Of course, my cousin. And yes, he's also here, Uncle Vanya. Let's bring up the potatoes and cook supper for everyone.» I picked up a couple of stones from the floor and handed them to Vanya.»

«Can you carry these for me, Father.» I glanced at Father Bénédicte sideways and saw him smiling.

«Let's take the stairs and get out of the cellar. It's time to get some fresh air, Father.»

«Yes, Maude. Thank you. Of course. Let's go upstairs.»

He walked right past us, shoving Father Bénédicte hard towards the wall so he scratched his elbow. Benevolently, he signalled me everything was well and we followed Vanya as quickly as we could. It was amazing how fast my uncle could still walk. It wasn't long until we reached the stairs and when I looked back I saw that Father Bénédicte was still rubbing his arm. That must have hurt. We climbed up the stairs to the ground floor, where we got a glimpse of the Winged Victory, beautiful

Nike of Samothrace, standing naked on marble sublime for centuries to come if her home didn't explode today.

Then we ran out into the fresh air, then, finally the glorious night sky above us. Only, the air wasn't fresh at all. What was wrong? And it wasn't dark, although it must have been close to midnight. There were no stars. Why was everything so red, so fiery from below? Why was it so hot? My cheeks were glowing, my bare upper arms began sweating. We turned around and all we could see was fire. Fire. Everywhere. I couldn't tell what was North or South or East or West. Paris was burning.

«See those people down there?» Father Bénédicte shouted.

Indeed, I saw a small crowd standing along the burning *Tuileries* Palace.

«Do you think that is the fire brigade?» He asked, I only shrugged.

«Let's see if they need help. Marie, Vanya, are you coming?»

I was so exhausted I could barely stand, but Vanya had already gotten up and was eagerly following Father Bénédicte who strode along arduously. I had no option, I had to follow them if I didn't want to lose Vanya again.

«Wait. I am coming.» I gasped, but they didn't hear me.



«Where is Françoise?»

«She's gone inside to look for Jules. He still hasn't come out yet, neither has she.»

«Why doesn't the dynamite work? It should have brought down the building by now. We put so many barrels underneath the building. It should take down the Louvre in no time.»

«They couldn't get it ignited. Something was wrong with the fuse. Now they're working on the second floor and Jules wanted to check on that. He wanted to bring the building down from the top. Petroleum. Liquid tar and turpentine. Once the roof is on fire, it will collapse quite easily.»

That much for helping the fire brigade. I barely trusted my ears. Why had we even bothered walking all the way down to the burning Palace? I searched Father Bénédic't's face, but he wasn't looking at me.



«The rye, the rye, so I was sowing the rye.»

Uncle Vanya picked up some gravel stones, a couple of small, dirty chisels, and threw them back onto the earth.

«So, I was sowing the rye. So, I was sowing the rye. So, I was sowing the rye. «

Then Uncle Vanjy started singing properly. For some reason I couldn't even begin to fathom, in the midst of all the chaos, he chose one of the ballades by Eustache Deschamps.

<i>J'ay perdu doulz aporil et may,</i>	I have lost sweet April and May,
<i>Printemps, esté, toute verdure;</i>	Spring, summer, all greenery;
<i>Yver, janvier de tous poins ay</i>	Winter, January of all parts have
<i>Garniz d'annoy et de froidure.</i>	Garnished with annoyance and
<i>Dieux scet que ma vieillesce endure</i>	coldness.
<i>Dieux scet que ma vieillesce endure</i>	Gods know that my old age endures

When he raised his baritone, I could hear the clear voice of my mother joining in, my father's bass and then me and Julien happily squeaking along. Fleure would be knitting socks or jumpers or woollen blankets. She was always knitting. I saw us all sit underneath the old linden tree on a warm June's evening, tired from the day's work, but content, singing away all our sorrow and all our worries. Everyone smiling. I had these few happy memories of early childhood before our *La Maison Rouge* burnt down and we had to rebuild it. Before Fleure died in the flames. Before Uncle Vanya saved Julien from the flames. It seems like after we had lost Fleure, after we had lost our first house, things never were the same. We never were the same, we knew loss and we knew sorrow. No wonder we hardly ever talked about it thereafter. But with all the fire the memories of that night were brought back vividly.



«Why aren't they back yet?»

One of the communards looked up the building rather worried. I understood, Françoise and Jules were still up there. Somewhere. Doing ought I know.

«Look the fire begins devouring the upper parts. She must have found Jules by now. Why aren't they coming out? They will not escape the fire if they don't get out now.»

«Françoise.» The man shouted, then he started coughing badly. No wonder -, with all the smoke breathing had become increasingly difficult.

«Françoise.» His colleague shouted louder.

«Where are you?»

How loud they screamed, how loud they hollered. Was Françoise still in the building? I felt faint. What was she doing in there? Why was she looking for that Jules? Why were they burning down such a grand old building? I still didn't get how that would help their cause. Their ideas were great, but their methods, ruthless. Relentless and cruel and inhumane. Senseless.



Uncle Vanya had sat down on the grass. He was now singing his own song again.

«Rye, I was so sowing the rye. So, I was sowing the rye. The rye in the barrels.»

«Rye is not stored in barrels.» I said.

«This rye was stored in barrels alright. So sure of that.» He countered

«Maude, I saw it. I saw them barrels.»

«Really?» I asked, feigning innocence.

«Tonight.»

«Tonight. You sowed the rye tonight?»

«And I opened the barrel and sowed the rye. So, I was sowing the rye, the rye.»

Not sure, he had even heard me, I looked at his hands. His fingers were moving as if they were opening a barrel, then drifting as if they were sowing. Suddenly, I realized what he was talking about. Rather excited, I turned to Father Bénédicte who sat next to my uncle on the floor, looking just as exhausted.

«Of course. He has emptied the barrels with the blasting powder. He was sowing everything into the sewage system.»

«You think?» His face light up, the thought seemed to amuse him.

«Guess that is why they can't they blow up the building.»

« Of course. There is no dynamite underneath the Louvre.» He gave me a broad smile.

«Not anymore.» I beamed back at him, at once proud of my uncle who had helped so ingeniously save the Louvre.

«All the violence they sowed, he simply watered it down.» I nodded at this. There was a lump in my throat and for a moment I couldn't utter one more word.

«And now, what will grow out of it?» Father Bénédict asked pensively.

«What will grow out of the sewage system?»

He looked so sombre and grave, I didn't dare ask the question again when he didn't answer.



Françoise's head appeared at the window high above.

«*Au secours.*»

She screamed. Help. I always thought Help was easier to scream than *Au secours* but the way she first stretched the «o» and then added a much higher note on «urs» was very effective. We all turned our heads immediately and looked up to her. Now, she certainly had our attention. How furious she looked with her hair flying out the window, her face ruby red and full of pain and exhaustion and fear. There was fear in her eyes.

«Françoise. What's wrong?» One of the communards hollered up to her.

«He's lost consciousness. Jules, he's not moving. I cannot move him.» She hollered back at him.



For some reason Uncle Vanya had come out of his reverie.

«Who can't you move? Is it Julien? Fleure, are you still in there?» He shouted up to her. I could see the fire sparkle in his eyes. He looked wild, - wild and determined.

«Jules. He is on the floor. There is smoke everywhere.» She shouted down.

«Oh my God, is that the *Notre-Dame* which goes up in flames over there?»

Father Bénédict gasped. We all looked across the Seine into the direction he was pointing.

«It is in that direction, isn't it?» I asked, not sure where the famous *Notre-Dame de Paris* exactly was.

«It's over there. That must be the *Île de la Cité*, the island of the city. I can see fire. That must be *Notre-Dame*. On no. Not *Notre Dame*. Oh no.»

«Where's your uncle?»

I was still looking out over the river, but quickly turned around. Where was uncle Vanya.

«He's gone.» I said quite dryly, feeling an uncomfortable itching in my throat.

Interlude

Monday, September 29, 1902 Montmartre, Paris

She had stopped reading out loud and lowered *The Manuscript* into her lap. Her hands were old, her skin so fine and dry and leathery, the nails soft and white, her right thumbnail broken. Carefully, she felt the edges of the paper, the crumpled pages filled with long and boring sentences she had rewritten ever so often. The letters stared at her, as if they had a life of their own, as if they themselves reproached her for being bold. For being old. Her voice had become frail, oscillating with a low frequency tremor from reading for so long, her eyes watery. Then she slowly lifted her head and looked at him questioningly. He looked away, she could see he was tired.

«He is still alive.»

He muttered as if complaining.

«Who is?»

«Mustapha.»

«Yes, he is.» She said defiantly.

«And missing again. Missing again from the story. Where is he? What is he doing?»

«Well, Marie met him in the gardens.»

«Nonsense.»

«What do you mean? She did.»

«Well it was quite a meeting.»

«You think?»

«Alexandrine, she is not a prostitute. Why would she behave like this?»

«What do you mean?»

«You know what I mean.»

«Novels must be about reality. About truth. Don't you understand.»

«Your novels are about truth. This story is different.»

«Why are you telling it then?»

«Because I can.»

«Because you can? What is this supposed to mean? No, you can't. This is all such nonsense. They would be dead. Bloody Week in Paris and here they are, running around like rabbits. She'd be shot. She'd be dead by now. And the tunnels in the sewage system. I mean. Underneath the Louvre? Really?»

«There are tunnels underneath the Louvre, I have researched that part.»

«*Alors*. I think -.»

«You're just jealous.»

«Why would I be jealous?»

«Because I am free, so much freer to tell my story than you were with *La Débauche*. I can make up whatever I want. That is freedom. That is true freedom.»

«No, that is not freedom. Your characters are in control. They enslave you. They write their own story. Do you really want that?»

«I guess I do. I don't know how else to write.»

«To plan ahead, to write with diligence and discipline. *Nulla dies sine linea*.»

«I know, I know. That is easy for you. You can write like this, but me - I have errands to run, duties to take care of. Clothes to see washed, floors, tiles. I cannot simply sit down and write for hours as you can. I cannot get it all right.»

«Then don't do it, if you can't do it properly.»

«What do you mean?»

«Rather don't write, than this.» He waved his hand impatiently at *The Manuscript*.

«Than what? What is so wrong with my story?» She felt a lump in her throat.

«You let the characters have their own life. You cannot do that.»

«Why is that? What is wrong with characters having their own life?»

«They cannot live by themselves. They cannot breathe by themselves. Don't you understand? They cannot live, not in the story, not in Paris, not in your head, Nowhere. There is no room for Marie and Mustapha anywhere. They're doomed. You have to get them killed. And you know that. Get them under control I have told you before.»

«No, I won't.»

«Won't what?»

«Kill them.»

«Why not?»

«I can't. I cannot simply kill them. Not after all they have gone through.»

«That is not a reason why they should live.»



«If I had kept her, she might live too.»

«Or not. You don't know that.»

«She was my only child and I let her die.»

«No, you didn't. You were young. You had to give her away. You didn't let her die.»

«Being young is not a reason.»

«You know it would have been impossible.»

«But, now she's dead.»

«That is not your fault.»

«How would you know?»

He shrugged.

«What does this have to do with your story anyway?»

«Everything.» She said.

«Everything.»

Then she looked away.

Tuesday, May 23, 1871

«Vanya is gone.»

«Oh my -.»

«Do you think he went back inside?»

I could hear the sound of the raging flames: wooden bars breaking, windows exploding, all hell had come loose and we were right in the midst of it. Where was Paris' fire brigade to fight this inferno? Where was help to find Vanya? How wicked to lose him again. Not again. I had to bring him back home. I had to keep him safe, safe for Emily. Beloved Emily. I wish I had had a camera to take a picture of the appalling and horrifying scene unfolding upon me. What a picture that would have been. The *Tuileries* Palace: A grand monument of that size and, burning. It was scary beyond all I had ever experienced.

«I guess he did go back inside. To help Françoise.»

I looked at Father Bénédict despairingly.

«Let's go and find him then.»

«Marie. No. It's too dangerous. Look the fire brigade is finally here. And the *chassures d'Afrique*. They will extinguish the fire. Just wait. Wait.»

«I cannot wait. That is my uncle in there. He's my family. He saved my brother from the flames when our house burned. He saved him, choosing him over his own wife. She died. My brother lived. Thanks to him. I will go inside. I will get him out.» I ran to one of the fire men who had begun passing on buckets and buckets of water from the Seine below.

«Pour it over me.» I screamed at him.

«*Mais, pourquoi?*»

«Just do it.» He shook his head.

«Do it.» I insisted

«You cannot go inside.»

«Pour the water over me.» I screamed at the top of my voice. The fire was roaring so loud, I could hardly hear my own word. I knelt down before him.

«That's madness.» He said while emptying the first bucket over my head, they passed him another one and another one. Three buckets he emptied over me, so quickly I found it hard to get my bearings and stand up again. How cold and fresh the water from the Seine was: A baptism of a different kind. I felt the woman I had become no longer was a stranger. I was ready now. I was prepared to love, for life, for death. What did it matter?

I knew well, if I went inside, I might not make it out again. I might burn and roast within the mighty shell of what had held European art history, the Tuileries

Palace and the Louvre. Renoir had said most works had been brought away to Versailles to protect from the Prussians. But then I didn't care. Fleure didn't make it that day, when *La Maison Rouge* burned. She didn't make it, when she went in, to search for Julien. All we found was her-. No, I couldn't think of her now. I had to concentrate. Concentrate on what was coming. Fire was coming. Heat was coming. Finally, I stood, then I turned. I looked up at the burning building.

I began running towards the entrance pressing the light, wet cotton scarf I had been wearing all day over my mouth. I sucked the water out of the tissue and then it was there: The smell of home, distilled for a moment such as this. Home. La Maison Blanche. My mind blanked.

I kept running. I heard people shout. I saw smoke and figures moving and then I was inside. The thick walls encased me, closed in on me: The big grand Palace had swallowed me. Only did I not escape the waters in the whale's mouths but was thrown in a furnace as hot as when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were challenging Nebuchadnezzar in ancient times. I didn't see anything, not a thing. I held my breath and pressed the scarf closer to my mouth. Then I started coughing. I saw a figure right next to me and it was Father Bénédict, his face unnaturally contorted though. All was a blur. The air dancing and trembling and dissolving into nothingness. I nodded towards him. He had chosen to follow me like some guardian angel.

I walked towards where I believed the stairs were and as I got onto the first step; I saw Uncle Vanya lying on the stairs, covering a woman's body. Was that Françoise? I grabbed him, but couldn't move him by myself. He was unconscious and didn't budge. The smoke. The smoke was so heavy. I wouldn't stand this for

long. Where was Father Bénédicte? I had no energy to shout his name: my lungs couldn't fill with air, my voice was hoarse and gone. I was silenced by the momentum of the situation. As I turned my head, I saw him surface next to me, pressing his hand against his face.

He nodded towards me, then bowed down and we began dragging Vanya towards the exit.

«Let's go back for Françoise.» I said not, before coughing out loud. Speaking was a mistake.

«Him first.» He signalled.

Father Bénédicte lifted Uncle Vanya by the shoulders and nodded towards me to take his legs. He was heavy. *Mon Dieu*, was he heavy. Step by step we managed carrying him out the great hall, towards the entrance gate. I nearly stumbled over one of the marble pedestals, but then caught myself at the last second.

A couple of steps before the exit, the worst happened. Father Bénédicte stumbled and dropped Vanya. His legs were ripped from my hands as Bénédicte went down. I had to let go and Vanya fell onto the floor with a loud thump. But so did the Father. And he wouldn't get up. He had simply collapsed. I gasped, drawing in, hot acid smoke. I felt faint, my head was spinning, my vision blurred. Yet, I ran up to Father Bénédicte as fast as I could and tried to estimate the distance to the door. It wasn't far. A couple of meters. I was strong as a horse, I could probably drag him to the exit if I grabbed him underneath the shoulders. Then, Vanya groaned. Both men lay on the floor, the fog got stronger, I became weaker. I could only take one at the time. Which one would it be? I couldn't think clearly. I couldn't wait to make a proper decision. That smoke was poisonous.

I grabbed Father Bénédicte underneath the shoulders and dragged him towards the door. He was heavy, too heavy. Why was he so limp? Was he unconscious? In a coma? Was he dead yet? I didn't dare think of that. The way to the door seemed endless and I felt the smoke irritating me more and more. I wouldn't endure this for much longer. I would be down next, and then we would all be dead. Dead and gone.

What did it matter? I thought for the briefest moment. What did it matter if I died here? Life had to come to an end. Eventually. Nothing lasted for ever. Nothing. We all had to die and maybe the moment had now come. Death. The end. There was nothing I could do. But then I thought of the baby. The little one would die too, without ever having seen the beauties of this planet.

My thinking became clearer again. It did matter. It did matter whether I made it out or not. *Hell*. If the place existed at all it did matter whether I made it out or not. My vision blurred.

Somehow, I made it to the door, ought I knew how. But I made it and as I was there, three firefighters barged in, two grabbed Father Bénédicte underneath the arms and carried him out. I followed, supported myself by the tallest, and when the clear, clean air hit my trachea, I felt so much relief: I was alive. Alive. I cried. Tears ran down my cheeks, streamed down my cheeks, washing away all dirt. All soot and smut and grime. All gone. They quickly brought me away from the building.

«He is there. He is still in there. And she is too.» I muttered, protesting out loud, but no one heard me. No one wanted to hear me.

«My uncle. He is still in there.» I repeated this time louder. One of the firemen turned towards me. His face was full of pain and fear.

«We cannot go back inside. It is too dangerous. Let's wait until this cools off. They are bringing up so much water now. See?» He pointed somewhere and I turned my head to see what he was talking about.

I looked at the long line of Parisian firemen, *chasseurs d'Afrique*, the African riflemen and men wearing the staff uniform of the Louvre. The line was reaching up from the Seine to the gardens and all along the huge building. Buckets were being passed from one hand to another. But, would they be fast enough?

«They are not fast enough.» I said. No one responded. They were all so busy now. Most of them were helping with the baskets, but two were tending to Father Bénédicte. It seemed he was badly hurt.



«I am going in again.» I said more to myself than for anyone else to hear. So, I walked back across the lawn, then back to the entrance door and as I reached it, I heard an explosion so loud it hurt my ears. Automatically, I opened my mouth to release pressure from my ear drums. What had just happened? I couldn't really see much. In fact, I couldn't see anything beyond those thick, huge walls.

«I am going in.» I repeated again and repeated merely to myself.

«I am going in.» No one was near to hear me. I turned my head. How sick I felt. How weak. Then I vomited. Then I wiped my mouth. It felt sour and it felt foul.

It was all wrong. Why did nobody help me? Why did I have to do this by myself? I straightened up.

They were all busy bringing up the water from the river. If no one was going to help me, I would bring out Uncle Vanya myself. I took a deep breath, then held it and then walked inside. Where was he? I was trembling. I felt weak. I felt faint. The smoke had become thicker. It was difficult not to lose one's sense of orientation, but I kept walking. He must be right here. The stairs must be over there. I pressed my scarf onto my mouth. Why hadn't I wet the material again? That would have helped me bear the terrible smoke.

There he was. He lay on the floor, his left knee badly twisted, his right arm very unnaturally bent. What had happened? Why didn't he move? And where was Françoise? The woman he had been holding in his arms. Was it Françoise at all? I walked a few steps and saw her by the stairs. She was still in the same place we had left her. Was she alive? It looked like they had fallen down the stairs together, entangled in some strange embrace. *Mon Dieu*. It was hot. I felt like my head was bursting, my brain blasted out by the terrible heat. Françoise turned and then I could see she groaned. She was still alive.

Françoise was further away but not as heavy, Uncle Vanya was closer to the door but so heavy I would hardly be capable of moving him. Françoise had been calling for this violence, she had been part of this, she had brought this upon herself when Uncle Vanya, he was innocent. He did not, would not remember anything. He may not even know why he was here. My decision was clear.

I reached for Vanya trying to drag him towards the door and then I saw his lips move. I lowered my head and held my ear to his lips.

«Her. Please. Get her. Please.» He whispered. Or had he said *Fleure*? I couldn't really tell. It was hard to hear anything in the noise of the fire.

I turned and looked around. If that was his last wish, I had to move fast now. I ran towards Françoise and grabbed her underneath the shoulders. As hard as I could, I pulled her towards the exit, then I pulled her over the threshold and out into the night.



«*Mais, t'es con?* Did you go back inside?» One of the firefighters came running towards me.

He picked up Françoise.

I only nodded, *yes, yes*. I was mad. Mad completely. I was shivering so badly. I felt hot, I felt cold. I felt as if I was roasted alive and, yet, I would have to go back inside. Back inside, again, to pull out Uncle Vanya. He was so close to the entrance door, so close to the exit. It would be a matter of seconds.

«Wait.»

«Wait.» The firefighter said. He held me back. I felt his hand on my skin.

«Wait.»



Seconds passed. Eternities passed. Eons of time and time and time came rolling my way, came flooding in as we both looked on, the firefighter and I. We both looked up. The building -. I had stopped breathing, my lungs failed me. My eyes widened. Then I raised my fist, raised it up high. I shielded my face. I stretched my fingers to cover my forehead. The heat. The heat. Was that true? Did my vision fail me?

The part of the building I had left Uncle Vanya in -. That part, that part -. I stared. I didn't trust my eyes. It was collapsing before our very eyes and there was nothing I could do. I could watch it imploding, I could hear the enormous, deafening blast, I could feel the heat and then I could see all the debris. Debris all over. Of course -. That I could do: Watch. But I was paralyzed, tormented. We were still standing there while an enormous fiery pyre raised up high quickly, higher and higher. Quicker and quicker.

Soon enough it was pillaring so high above us, it reached right into the unfathomable depths of the mighty skies, the depth of deeper space and galaxies unknown. It reached to the stars and beyond. The man-made pillar, the pillar of anger and hatred, of greed and power, of sorrow and violence. It reached up high. So high I could see no end to it. No end to death and destruction. *Thou shalt not kill.* But it did. It did kill. And there was no way of stopping it. How great a matter a little fire kindleth.

How great a matter, the mighty, mighty fire pillar: it was burying, it was devouring the body of Uncle Vanya in its midst. Burning him alive. Burning all of him: His body, his brain, his life, his thoughts, his dream, his long lost memory, his everything. It was annihilating the uncle I loved, devouring the person that was family, my family, my father's brother. I stood there, aghast, shocked, totally consumed by the brutality of what I saw. Incredulously, I was staring at the pillar. Where was uncle Vanya? Where had he gone? I hadn't seen him go, but I knew he was gone, gone forever.

There was nothing I could do now. It was all over. I started breathing again, but all breathing hurt. My lungs filled with toxic airs and each breath I took, it hurt. It hurt beyond description, beyond anything I had ever experienced. This was beyond my circle of influence, beyond the scope of anything I could handle: The pillar, so high the pillar made of hatred and violence and utter desperation. I couldn't fathom him, couldn't begin to fathom him: Uncle Vanya. I couldn't even begin to understand where he had gone: Not his body. Not his soul. Not his resurrection. I broke down, I cried and then. Then, I vomited again. One life gone, one life to come. It was more than I could bear. The firefighter, the stranger. He, he was still there when I turned my head. His eyes were flickering.



Tuesday, May 23, 1871

I love the silence at night. The darkness. I love when the smells intensify. The rose petals glowing in the dusk, the dew settling on the freshly cut blades, the wheat grains undulating when so softly stirred by summer wind. The endless love song of the crickets, the sweet notes of the nightingale dropping from high above and then the owl; the cry of the Tengmalm's Owl resounding from valleys remote. I love the night, the night when all is quiet. A spring night in May, a night in summer. June. July. August. Beautiful, dark nights. Dark. How beautiful and then-. Then, high up the stars, the shooting stars: Falling and falling and falling into skies of different kinds, onto planets so unknown, so afar, so unyielding.

Julien and I and Uncle Vanya, we -, we used to sit outside, far from the canopy of the linden tree, far from the house, far from the village. Up on the rocky crest, we used to sit and look up into the sky. It wasn't dark in the sky. It isn't dark in

the heavens. There was light. There is light So much light. I loved the sparkling stars, the moon behind the clouds. I loved it all.

But where were the stars now? Tonight, where was the moon? There were only clouds. Huge, dark, man-made clouds higher than any tower I had ever seen. A booming, humming Tower of Babel made of nothing but evil gases and glowering, cowering heat. And light on earth, not in the sky. Light from fires. Endless fire. I turned towards the firefighter, he turned to me. A friendly face, he had a friendly face. And kind eyes. I could see his fear, I could sense his helplessness. The helplessness of the firefighter it was a scary thing.

«He must be dead.» He said.

I nodded. I was in complete shock. Uncle Vanya. Dead. No. It couldn't be. What now? How was I ever to go home? Without him? Face mother without him? Emily. Emily. How could I ever face Emily without him? Uncle Vanya gone. I squatted down. I felt sick. But I didn't vomit. I felt completely empty.



«They are not selling our blankets.»

I looked at him questioningly. What was the fire-fighter talking about? What blankets?

«They will keep them until we can pay them back.»

«Who will keep the blankets?»

«The pawn-brokers. The Commune forbid them to sell anything we have deposited. We shall need them blankets. In winter. We shall need them. I have four girls and two little boys. Twins. Only 3 years old.

«Of course.»

Had he pawned his blankets? Why would anyone in this right mind do that?

«And they're giving millions to the army.»

«What do you mean?» I looked up at him. Was he in shock?

«The *Bank of France*, it gives millions to Versailles. And to the Germans. And to the Swiss for hosting the Bourbaki Army. There is no shortage for the soldiers nor for the Swiss. They're all getting their wages, I heard. How they're getting the money out of Paris, I don't understand.»

«Out of Paris?» I had great difficulty following him.

«The *Bank of France* is just around the corner. It is within the territory of the Commune.»

«Is it?» The Bank of France wasn't really on my list of things to worry about.

«They wanted their own currency. But it didn't really work.»

«Why not?»

«You cannot build a currency out of thin air. They're lacking the gold and silver the *Bank of France* has.»

«So, why didn't they just take the gold of the bank?»

«They would have had to make an effort. The bank is heavily guarded. The *Marquis de Plœuc* has several hundred footmen under his control, and they have rifles in the bank and more than enough ammunition. Although, some say, the Commune

could have besieged the bank easily, but the leaders of the Commune didn't want to.»

«Why not?»

«They allow Versaille to keep the bank. The communards are mesmerized by the haute-bourgeoisie's cash box. Too much respect for the bourgeoisie. Can you imagine?»

«Respect? For the bourgeoisie? But the Commune calls for so much violence. The manifest of the Women's committee, I found that quite shocking. They don't seem to have much respect for life. They want to kill them all, don't they? The blood of their enemies watering the trees of life? Shouldn't respect for life matter more than respect for money?»

«Beslay thinks the bank is the fortune of the country. Without it there is no more commerce, no more industry. He says if you distribute all the money to the workers for free, the money will lose its worth. The bank notes become waste paper. But I wonder if that is true. They could have given us just some of the money. A little amount would have gone such a long way. It would have brought so much relief. And it would surely help start commerce again. If everybody lives in want, how can anybody make any money?»

«Yes, your right. The money should have been used for relief and development. The poor nuns. The archbishop. Why didn't they take the money and use it wisely instead of taking all these hostages? I saw a girl. She was dead.»

I fell silent, I couldn't tell him the details of what I had seen. It was too horrendous.

«She could be alive, she should be alive.» I added.

He nodded and averted his eyes.

«You wouldn't believe, how much money there still is. Some of it has been taken to the provinces when the Germans came. They even say most of it has been brought out of the city. But that's a lie. There is still so much there.»

«How do you know?» He shook his head.

«I cannot tell you.»

«Why not?»

«All that sand. All these bags. You wouldn't believe how much sand there was.»

«Sand?»

«Three days ago, me and some my colleagues were called-.» He fell silent.

«I cannot tell you.» He shook his head.

I shrugged.

«I understand. Look, I am not even from here. I am Swiss, I will go back as soon as I can. It wasn't a good time to come to Paris.»

«You're not from Paris?»

«Can't you tell by my accent.»

«I thought you spoke weird.»

«That is not weird. That's how we talk back home.»

«Ok. You're not from here. I see.»

I looked at him. He looked tormented and yet relieved as if he had found someone to unburden himself to.

«I will tell you then. We were called to the bank of Paris and then we moved everything to the cellar.»

«Everything?» I raised my eyebrows. What did he mean?

«Gold and silver coins and papers. I didn't know what they all were. But the ingots of gold. You wouldn't believe how heavy they were. And how many. It took us 15 hours to carry everything into the cellar. Two rooms. Filled to the top.»

«Really?»

«It was so much. It took us long.»

«That much?»

«Maybe one billion francs. Maybe two billions. I don't know.» He had come close and he was whispering now afraid anyone might overhear us. My eyes widened. I couldn't imagine a number thus high. How many zeros were in a billion? A billion French Francs? It was simply unimaginable.

«They put twelve locks onto that door. And then we sealed the only stairway to the cellar with sand. Bags and bags of sand. So much sand we poured on that spiral stairway, you wouldn't believe it. I wonder anyone would ever access it again. And in the end, we sealed it all off with a slab. Can you imagine? All the money of the *Bank of France* is still here. Hidden in the cellar. Underneath a ton of sand. Shouldn't the money of the *Bank of France* belong to the French? It is our bank, isn't it? And we-. We had to give away our blankets.»

«That's unbelievable.»

«It is. Isn't it?»

«*Incroyable*. Unbelievable.» I repeated. He looked pale.

«I shouldn't have told you.» He said ruefully.

«It doesn't matter anyway. They are here now. They will hang me.»

«You think?»

«They will hang all of us. Even you.»



«Marie. Marie.»

I turned around and saw Father Bénédict come striding towards us.

«Father.»

It was wonderful to see a familiar face in the midst of chaos and destruction, not to forget the imminent threat of being hanged by the French army.

«Marie. Thank God you're alive.» I took his hand and squeezed it. Only, now I felt that I was trembling.

«How are you?» He asked utterly concerned for my well-being. He must have seen how badly I was shaking.

«I am feeling sick. And thirsty.»

I only realized now how thirsty I actually was. Maybe that was why I hadn't vomited in hours? There was nothing left in my stomach. No liquids in my body. I was completely dehydrated.

«Come over here. They have water.»

I turned around to tell the firefighter I was leaving with Father Bénédict and to say *Au Revoir*, Good bye. But he was gone already. I couldn't make out which way he had taken. It seemed like the night and the smoke and the chaos had swallowed him. For the briefest of moments I wondered if he had spoken the truth:

Two billions in gold and silver, hidden in an enormous vault, underground, behind doors barred with a dozen locks, underneath tons and tons of sand? It sounded like a wonderous story from the Buccaneer's Archipelago's ancient-lore-treasure-box, unearthed by some drunken sailor who couldn't tell right from wrong, nor truth from fiction. If true, why wouldn't the communards simply take the riches and give them to the needy? What were they afraid of?



I gargled down the water so fast I felt sick at once.

«You're alright?»

«No, not really.» My stomach rumbled and for a moment I wasn't sure this wasn't the long expected quickening. Was the child moving? Was that my baby moving?

«Sit down for a moment. Marie, you must take a rest.»

«I am trying. It's not easy to rest after what's just happened. Uncle Vanja. He's dead.»

«I know.»

«I truly wish I was home.»

«Oh, dear Marie, I wish you were. How can I help? Where can I take you?»

«*Sainte-Chappelle.*» I said without thinking. Mustapha would be there. He would help me. He had to help me. He had to help us.

«Why *Sainte-Chappelle*?»

«I have friends there.»

«You do?»

«Mustapha. He told me to come there if I couldn't get out of Paris.»

«The father of your child. You have found him then?»

«I have. It's a miracle.»

«Ok, I will take you then. Can you get up? It wouldn't be that far to walk, if we can manage to get through. With all the monuments on fire, the barricades and the army in town, well-, we shall see how far we get.»



We crossed the Seine on the *Pont Neuf* to get onto *the Île de la Cité*, then walked across the glorious *Place Dauphine* towards the immense Palace. So far we made good headway. But where was *Sainte-Chappelle*?

«Marie Antoinette was imprisoned here before she was executed.»

«She was?»

«Yes, in the revolution.»

«How can we get to the chapel? I cannot even see it from here.»

Death and executions were not a subject I felt comfortable to discuss right now. The firefighter had scared me by saying we'd all hang. Even me. And I wasn't even a queen. I was just a simple girl from the countryside.

«Let's go back to the *Quai de l'Horloge*. I think we cannot pass here. We will have to go around the monument»

«Do you think they will kill us all?»

«They might.» He said playfully and raised his left eyebrow. Then he gave me a splendid smile. Was he joking? Why was that funny?

«You're wearing the wrong uniform again.»

«Yes, that is true. With the army breaching the barricades, the habitat of the church might be safer now.»

«You still have it?»

«Not here.»

«Maybe you can find another one at *la Sainte-Chappelle*?»

«That would be presumptuous. I cannot simply steal from one of my brothers.»

«It wouldn't be stealing, would it? You are a member of the church, aren't you? You should be having all in common too. Like the communards»

«Oh Marie, if that was so easy.» He sighed deeply.

«Why are you saying this?»

Our conversation had taken a serious turn and I was glad we could finally see *Sainte-Chapelle* from afar. It was enormous and lit up strangely by the many fires that were now burning in Paris.

«We are nearly there.»

«Do you think I will really find Mustapha?»

«He will be there. I know. Have a little faith.»

«The entrance looks barricaded. How will we get in?»

«Don't worry. I know a way in.» He looked up and down the street. His eyes rested on a manhole cover.

«Tunnels?» I groaned.

«Yes, tunnels it is.» He gave me a faint smile.

«You should be used to it by now.»

«Oh no. Please no. I don't want to go underground again. I -»

Painful memories of seeing dear Uncle Vanya sitting on all these barrels of dynamite came up forcefully. I winced at the mere thought of it, but I couldn't finish the sentence, Father Bénédicte had already lifted the heavy cover and pulled it to the side of the road.

«Come on.» He said.



I had to go down first as the manhole cover was too heavy for me to close again. How I hated going underground where it was cold and humid and the stench of the faeces nearly overpowered me. Despite a constant breeze blowing in the boulevards of Paris, the night above ground was warm and peaceful. Throughout the past days the winds had been blowing from each of the four cardinal wind directions: South, north, west, east and yet the weather these last days had been glorious.

«Here, take the candle.» Father Bénédicte lit the candle and handed it over to me as I gingerly began climbing down the metal ladder. I nearly dropped it as hot wax ran over my fingers when Father Bénédicte passed me the light.

«Ouch, that's hot.»

«Careful. Hold it steady. It is the only one I have.»

«I won't drop it. But there is such a draft. Oh no. It has gone out.» I stood on the ladder, looking up at him, deplorably. The wax ran along my fingers, the dripped off, but I didn't feel any pain. The candle had gone out.

«Go down a little further so I can get in too. I will pass down the matches to you.»

«Ok.» I started climbing further down.

«What about the rats?» I asked, trying to repress my fear. I had heard a strange rhythmic noise, little feet scurrying on wet gravel, the four, long claws of the front feet hammering onto the stone.

«Where are you going? Don't climb down that far. Now. Here. The matches.» He was laying on his stomach reaching down to me. I looked up. There was his hand. There were the matches. For now, I couldn't see any rats. But then, I was looking up towards the heavens.

«Take them.» I felt his fingers, they were cold.

I held the matchbox tight in my fist.

Carefully, holding the candle and the matchbox in one hand, I was trying not to miss a step of the iron ladder. I climbed deeper and deeper into Paris's intestines, large, dark, convoluted tubes that would never end. Then I reached the bottom. I could see the tunnel.

«Wait. I'll close the cover first. That will stop the draft.» Father Bénédicte called out to me. But I had already lit the match on the stone wall, its red phosphorus igniting instantly. The little flame gave such joy and comfort. Relieved, I took a deep breath. Then I exhaled. My moist breath extinguished the tiny flame at once.

Darkness again.

«Wait.» He said. «Wait. I've said.»

«Too late.»

He climbed down and pulled the cover of the manhole over him. The draft stopped at once, but there was such darkness. I fumbled for the matchbox, opening it blindly in the dark, a movement I had performed thousands of times in my life. Quickly, I stroke another match and then managed to light the candle. The light was flickering, but now I could see. What was that? More and more moving shadows at my feet, and moving quickly. I felt something small run over my boots, and then I felt it again and again. Again. There was that sound again; as if a thousand tiny skeletons were shimmying through Hades. My hands were trembling so hard I couldn't hold on to the matchbox, the match and the candle. I dropped the matchbox and we both heard a splash.

«What was that?»

«The matches.» I clenched my teeth. How could I let the rats scare me so. If we didn't have light down here we had bigger problems than a few harmless rats.

«Marie. No. These were the only ones I had.»

«It will be alright. The candle is burning. See.» I looked up, trying to keep my voice steady and firm.

«Alright. Let's go.»

«Which way to *Sainte-Chapelle*?»



«Move. Along the altar. Now. Show me your hands. Keep still.»

My eyes widened with shock at what I saw: Two heavily armed men were strutting up and down in front of a small group of nuns and priest. They held them at gunpoint, their rifles aiming straight at their heads. I could only see the broad backs of the oppressors, they were quite heavy-set and looked rather tall from where we were hiding. My gaze fell on the additional large pistols hanging from their belts and I shuddered. The prisoners themselves looked frightened, their clothes were dirty and in disarray, the clerical collars lopsided. What was going on? I held my breath, trying to understand what was happening here at *Sainte-Chapelle*. The procession in progress was ghastly and unfamiliar, however, the voice resounding loud through the large nave sounded strangely familiar. Where had I heard it before? Feverishly, I tried to remember, but my mind was blank. For now, I could only see the two men from the back.

Then the smaller one turned around. I did recognize him at once. A catatonic rigidity spread over my body. I had stopped breathing. Had he seen me too? I wasn't hidden very well, we were literally just pressing our backs towards the wall between the arches underneath the enormous glass windows.

«Look there, Saint John and the Seven Churches of Asia at the feet of the Son of man. »

Father Bénédict whispered and then pointed at a stunning rosette high above our heads, but I couldn't really hear anything he was saying.



What was Alonzo doing here? Alonzo pointing a rifle at nuns and priests? Father Bénédict and I were standing as still as we could, pressing our backs firmly to the cold walls of the church, trying not to move, trying not to breathe. What if they saw us? It was more than likely they'd see us any minute. I looked up, trying to relax. The enormous glass window panes reached so high above our heads. The colours were gorgeous. The heavens so close. Redemption and safety so endlessly far. I kept looking up, trying to relax. I was so far from comfort. Fire was flickering through the colourful glass. Paris was indeed on fire. No, I couldn't relax.

Thick blankets of smoke had covered the city before we went underground. So many monuments must be burning by now. Yet, inside the chapel it was blissfully dark and cool. No smoke. Fresh, humid air. We were encapsuled in a shrine of a different kind. And it was the darkness that might hide us just well enough. Alonzo hadn't seen us yet or then he simply chose to ignore us. We could see him turn around again, facing the altar and his little group of prisoners. Father Bénédict

looked at me in distress. I gave him a faint smile, for the moment we were safe. Once again the cup was taken from us. But what was yet to come?



«You'll have to shoot me first.»

Was that-? No, that couldn't be. No. Not him. Somehow his voice sounded even more familiar than Alonzo's voice had. And I knew instantly who he was. The man who was speaking so boldly was hidden from our sight as he was standing right behind the other heavily armed national guard. I hadn't really looked at the prisoners yet, so consumed by my anxiety upon seeing Alonzo. I felt the fine hairs on my arm rise.

«They are all under my protection. I vouch for them with my own life.»



«Fair enough. Then, I will shoot you all. Get on your knees. On your knees now.» Alonzo bellowed.

Father Bénédict turned to me. He was whispering right into my auricle, I could feel his breath tickle my earlobe.

«We must do something. »

He whispered. I nodded eagerly.

«He hasn't deserved this.»

«You know him?» I whispered back.

«Yes, we have been working together these past weeks. I've brought my sisters and brethren in via the tunnels and he's brought them out. The Arab puts them on boats at night and lets the current of the Seine take them out of Paris. He is incredibly brave.»

I nodded. Yes, he was brave. Of course, Mustapha was brave. He kept arguing and pleading with Alonzo. I heard his voice louder and clearer than before. This had become a matter of life and death.

«Show them some mercy. You know that this is a lost cause. The army is finally in town. They breached the gates. Your barricades will not help you. Why are you doing this to us? Let us go. They may give you credit for -.»

«You're not one of them, nigger.»

The two men, face to face, again. But how was I to resolve this present crisis? No degree of nakedness would possibly help here. Alonzo was determined to shoot the priests and nuns here and now. He aimed his rifle at Mustapha first. Some of the nuns went down onto their knees, raising their eyes upwards and folding their hands. They were silently and obediently expecting what was to come. Not one of them put up any resistance. Mustapha spoke again. His voice had a life of its own, so full and big was it resounding in these hallowed halls.

«I am one of them. I may not be a Christian, but what you're doing is universally wrong, in all countries and cultures and nations. They are human. I am human. It doesn't matter what you believe in. They are innocent. Why would you want to shoot us? What belief is worth shooting a fellow man? Mine surely isn't.»

Mustapha stood tall, he wasn't moving at all while he was speaking. Alonzo roared back at him.

«They are the church. They are guilty of treason.»

«What treason?»

«They are betraying the Commune.»

«They are the Commune.»

«They are not.»

«Who are you to judge?»

«I am-.»

I wouldn't wait and let him finish. Vigorously, I stepped forward.



My clear voice rang out high above their bickering, as I moved along the middle of the nave towards the altar. My steps filled with such purpose: faster than any bride's on her wedding day, more determined than any priest's moving past his congregation. I could hear my boots clicking on the stone floor rhythmically.

«Take me. Take me instead and let them go.»

«Marie.» Mustapha gasped. For a moment I caught the terror in his eyes, but quickly I looked away-, looked straight and steadfast at Alonzo. I was ready for whatever was to come.

«Marie.» Alonzo sneered, «I knew I'd see you again. But here?»

«Take me and let them go. Let *him* go.»

I walked up fast towards the altar and positioned myself in the line of fire. The rifle in Alonzo's hands looked bigger from up here. Behind my back, I heard the little group murmuring. Then the noise ebbed down. There was silence. No one spoke. We were waiting. Waiting for his verdict.

«Alright. I'll take you.»

I stepped forward and nearly stumbled on the step that led up to the altar.

«Let them go.» I said.

«We shall see.»

«Let them go.» I repeated.

«They could marry us properly.» He sneered.

«I have no intent of marrying you.» I said as calmly as possible.

«I'll have you just like that then. You're used to it, aren't you?»

He looked from me to Mustapha whose face was burning strangely, yet he showed no emotion I could read.

«I will spoil her for you for good.» He had started circling Mustapha.

«Once I am through with her, you will not want to marry her, you will not ever want her again. She is a whore. My whore. She is my whore.» He roared out loud and for some seconds I realized how frightened I was. Then the moment, so dark yet so ephemeral, it passed.

I took a deep breath. I had come here to find Mustapha, to tell him about our child. I had come here to give us a chance, a chance of getting together, a chance of living together. But what now? I hadn't really thought this through properly. And yet, I had no choice. If I really gave myself up to Alonzo all hope would be lost. And yet, I had no choice. Mustapha would never marry me thereafter. And yet, I had no

choice. I could immediately see what Alonzo meant. For once, he spoke the truth. He did. Mustapha would not, could not marry me, after-. Well, after. He couldn't. Never. I took another deep breath. But they would live. They would be alive.

What was I to do? I couldn't let Alonzo execute all these people. Men and Women. Clergymen. Sorry saints with no aureole to show above their heads. I was their only way out. Mary. Mary. *Marie*, Me. Their salvation.

Was this how our saviour had felt? When they had led him to the cross? When they put the crown of thorns on his head? When they tore his clothes and gave him the vinegar? I couldn't image. The pain. The suffering he had had to endure. How much suffering. How much suffering was I to endure? Was I really brave enough to follow in his footsteps, to give my life, my life and the life I was carrying? But then, I had made my choice and I was resolved to go through with it. I would not back out of this. Not now. It was too late for me to ever be rescued.

The other man standing next to Alonzo came closer. I hadn't really had time to process how he fit into the picture. Quickly, he grabbed my hair from behind and pulled my head back, so I stumbled into his open arms. I turned and pushed him away to free myself.

«What are you waiting for. Let's take her. Sounds good to me.» He sneered lecherously. I felt such great and terrible discomfort, but strangely enough I was no longer scared.

«Not you, you fool». Alonzo replied impatiently. And then he did the most incredible, the most atrocious thing you can ever, ever imagine. Finding the words to write what happened, it still makes me tremble, it still makes my heart pause. *Steady now.*

Alonzo, he raised his rifle, then carefully aimed at his companion, despite standing so close and then -. The man, he looked at him, amazed, surprise, not sure of what was to come. Then, Alonzo pulled the trigger. Can you even imagine? The shot rang out so loud I winced like a dog when fireworks go off. The man, he fell down immediately. On his face. Dead. He was instantly dead. His body limp, blood was seeping from his breast. Blood had splattered all over me. In great horror, I looked at my coat, my dress. I was covered in blood no soap could ever wash out.

The prisoners gasped, one of the nuns started to cry softly. Alonzo picked up the dead man's rifle, holding thus one weapon in each hand now. I felt my heart racing. Had that really just happened? Had Alonzo just killed his fellow man? How would I ever get out of here again? It seemed this was the end. He would kill us all, the lunatic he had become. It was only a question of time.

I turned around, I vomited. I sucked in air. Then, I vomited again, right onto the floor of the altar. I felt my stomach turn and turn again, revolving spastically around all my inner organs, strangling my lung, my heart, my soul, my tiny baby. After I was finished, I tried wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. But my hand was cold and sweaty, I only smeared the foul pap onto my chin. One of the nuns stepped forward, she handed me a beautifully embroidered handkerchief. I looked at the tiny orange flowers, the little white doves she had worked into the beige cotton fabric. Her elaborate needlework had caught the likeness of a little village; white houses with golden roofs, a tiny, sandstone church, the silver cross on top of it. There was the sun, there were the stars, there was the beautiful crescent of the moon.

«Thank you.» I whispered, wiping my face thankfully.

«She that loseth her life for my sake shall find it.»

«She that findeth her life shall lose it.» I replied without thinking. I looked into her kind eyes, wrapping myself into the mystery of her loving kindness, a power far stronger, far greater than death and destruction.

Was I to lose my life?



«Come then.» Alonzo looked at me. His eyes were bloodshot.

I must have distracted him amply, for at this very moment Mustapha charged forward. What a fool, I simply thought, for Alonzo would surely, and surely instantly shoot him. It was amazing how many different thoughts you can think in so few split seconds. Before things just happen, irreversibly just happen.

And indeed, Alonzo raised one of the rifles, shouldering the other like a professional killer if such an occupation even existed. He loaded the weapon and as he pulled the trigger I saw, from the corner of my eye, that one of the fathers had started charging forward, throwing himself right between Alonzo and Mustapha. The shot was muffled by a thud. Then the poor man fell dead onto the ground. He had given his life for the stranger who had promised to protect him. There was more blood, more blood, but I had stopped looking, averting my gaze. So much death. So much destruction. And yet, Mustapha was still standing and he raised his hands, he gave in, moving back slowly. He looked into Alonzo's eyes as if he could hypnotize him, as if he could silently will him to stop the killing.



«You will let them go, if you take me? Alonzo. Do you hear me? »

I spoke softly, as one speaks to a child in distress.

He grunted something I didn't understand. Could he even hear my feeble voice in his blood frenzy, his savage bloodthirstiness? Did I reach him? I doubted it.

«Give me your word.» I urged, trying to get through to him.

«I will let them go.» He panted.

«You promise.» It was a command, not a question.

«I do.» He answered.

«Marie, please. Please don't do this.» Mustapha call out pleadingly, but I would have none of it.

«Go. Go. Just go. You can all go.»

I said to him, I said to the others. When we walked away from the group, I didn't look back.



I wasn't scared. When Alonzo brought me down to the tunnels, I wasn't scared. When he dragged me along in darkness, I wasn't scared. I wasn't scared. At least that was what I kept telling myself. I was far beyond fear or hurt or pain. I was beyond panic: snugly packed into a secured place where the storm raged, but it couldn't get at me. I was in a safe place, a safe haven. I was completely detached from myself. I was completely free, free from everything. And the freedom was my compulsion, the freedom was my prison, a gated, iron room I couldn't escape from.

He pulled me forward, onward, downward. Back to the tunnels. He pulled me so hard, I felt him ripping out my hair. In the light of the candle, I could see a tuft of my thick hair entangled between his fingers. But I didn't scream. I didn't open my mouth. I had given myself up for Mustapha, for the people he protected, the people he cherished and cared for. There was no greater love. There was nothing more I could do.

Mustapha, my love, he had vouched for these Christians with his life and they had vouched their life in return, in fact, one of them had given his life in return. Who was I not to honour that bond? Who was I not to be a part of that?

Once again, I shuddered, remembering how that priest had thrown himself into the line of fire. In the darkness of the sewer network where all vision was blurred and hazy, I relived once more how he jumped right before that rifle: Not just a Christian who gave his life for a Muslim, but one mortal being giving his life and his soul for another. There was no greater love than to give your life. No greater love.



She that loseth her life for my sake shall find it.

She that findeth her life shall lose it.

Was I to lose my life?



Instinctively, I knew it was more than possible I would not survive this. Nor the little one I carried with me. What was I to do? *Thou shalt not kill? Thou shalt not kill.* Thou shalt not kill the child you carried? Thou shalt not kill thy violator? Could I really *not* kill Alonzo? And yet, would I really kill him if the chances were offered to me? I felt for anything to kill with in my pockets. But all I could feel was the fresh white handkerchief mother had given me when I had left home. My sweaty fingers clenched it hard. Home. *I had forgotten all about it. Mother. Julien. La Maison Blanche, Aunt Therèse, Emily.* It all seemed so far away, it all seemed in a remote past I had no longer access to.

I could hear Alonzo breathe out loud as we walked in the darkness of the tunnels.

«This way, whore. «

He laughed unnaturally. The tunnels echoed his grunts back at us, both of us.

«This way, you whore.»

Was it me he was talking to? I didn't feel the pain his words meant to cause.

I was who I was. How would he ever get to decide whose whore I was? No, he wouldn't. I felt his breath, I felt his breath all over me. We had walked down to a little room that was built at a junction. It was a little underground room where two tunnels met, I guessed one went eastbound, the other northbound. A junction. Here he stopped.

«Come here.» He said. Again, he pulled me by the hair and then he pressed me at the wall. He put the candle on a rocky ledge and took a step back.

«I wanna see this. I want to see you.» He sneered.

I shivered. It was cold down here and damp. He didn't look me in the eyes, he looked at my breasts, he looked at my belly, letting his eyes wander downwards. Being stared at like this felt most uncomfortable and humiliating. The male gaze at its worst. Then he buried his face in my neck and I felt his wiry beard rub on my ears. His breath smelled foul and I turned my head. I felt how he bit my neck, it hurt. I felt how he ripped up my dress, then my camisole. I felt his rough hands on my skin. I felt him touch my thighs, then move his hand upwards. His fingers. His manhood. I froze. I felt petrified. I couldn't move. I couldn't scream. I couldn't do anything. I whispered.

«Please, please stop. Alonzo. Please stop.»



«Alonzo.»

«Alonzo, hey.»

«What are you doing?»

Two voices spoke from below, spoke so clear, their tone so pure, I didn't trust my ears. First, I thought I was hallucinating, but I could hear them clearly. Where did they come from? From below? From above? Little angels sent from heaven?

«Alonzo.»

«Alonzo, she said stop.» A little hand was pulling Alonzo's sleeve.

He let go of me and stepped back. Alonzo looked befuddled, then he arranged his clothes and I pulled together what was left of my dress. The seams had come loose and my naked skin showed. I felt ashamed desperately covering my nakedness.

«Mathieu said it was you. I wouldn't have recognized you. It is so dark down here.»

«We are so glad we found you.»

«Everything will be alright now. I told you.» The elder boy, not older than twelve or thirteen though, said to the younger one reassuringly. He had large brown eyes and a sweet face, full of dimples.

«Yes, he told me, we would find you again. See?» The younger one beamed at Alonzo. His innocent smile, it looked so angelic, I felt he must have stepped down from heaven's door to save me.

«Can we go now? Look, here is the ball. I could save it. It is really all I could save.»

The two little boys stood next to us, one of them holding a leather ball laced up with strings to keep together. He was holding the ball up high for us to see.

«They said they were lighting up the football too. What an awful thing to do.»

«They are lighting up the city. The whole city. The palace is burning. We saw it»

«Why are they burning down Paris?»

«Yes, Alonzo, why do they want to light up the football? This is my football. This is our football, they cannot light it up.»

«I don't know.» Alonzo said. He shrugged. All of a sudden he looked small.

«Please, Alonzo, Let's go back to the *Bois de Boulogne* to play.»

«Please, please. Alonzo. Let's play.»

«Can we go now?» The little boy pulled his sleeve.

«Let's go. Come on.»



Alonzo's voice was hoarse when he spoke.

«I am with the lady.»

«Yes, we could see that. But it didn't look like she likes you much.»

«Come with us. We like you.»

«Yes, please. Come play with us. We love how you play. Your flanks, your shots. Awesome. And we need someone for the trenches. We never cover them trenches real good.»

«What about your brothers? Alonzo asked impatiently.

«Can't you play with them?» The little boys fell silent.

«No, we can't.»

«Why not?» I could sense what was coming and shook my head at Alonzo. But he didn't get the hint, how would he?.

«Why can't you play with your brothers?» He asked again.

«Because -.» The younger one said.

«Because they're dead.» The older one said.

«All of them?»

«Marcus, Emile, Stephane and even Mathieu, all dead.»

«I am sorry.» I said, still trembling, «I am very sorry for your loss.».

«It is not your fault.» The young boy smiled at me.

«But Marcus? He was the one who looked after you?» Alonzo asked.

«He did.»

Alonzo turned to me as if to explain what I only guessed.

«Their parents died of the fever. Last year.»

«Right before Christmas.» The little one said.

«Yes, of course.»

«Will you come and play with us now?»

«Alonzo, please. There is no else who will help us.»

«And I am hungry.»

«We haven't eaten since this morning.»

«Will you buy us soup? And some bread? There is this place at the entrance to the *Bois de Boulogne*. They sell the most delicious candy. And I want to see the black man.»

«The man in the golden cage? I do too. I want to see him.»

«He is not a man. And the cage is not golden.»

«He is. He is from Africa. That is what they say. Don't they. Where is Africa anyway? Is it outside Paris? Is it a part of Germany? Alonzo? Is Africa in Germany?»

The little boy was pulling his brother's sleeve.

«Are you coming too?» The little one looked at me.

«No, she is not coming. No one wants to see that human zoo.» Alonzo said.

«But you are?» The taller one said to him once more.

«Come on. You come, Alonzo. Please.»

«Yes, I guess. I guess, I am coming.»

«We are going to the human zoo; we are going to the human zoo. The human zoo. The human zoo. And we are going to play football. Football. Football.» The smaller one started singing and cheering. Alonzo let go of me and pushed me away from him.

«I will catch up with you later. We are not done yet.»

I fell against the wall and scratched my palms badly, but at least I was free. Released. Finally. I turned on my heels immediately. Which way to go? .



I found my way back to *La Sainte-Chappelle*. Somehow, I made it. But when I had finally reached it, no one was there. It was empty. How late would it be? Morning must be here soon. Where was Mustapha? Where was Father Bénédict? Where was the little crowd Mustapha had protected? Had they already left the city? I had told them to go, but now, somehow, I hoped they would still be there. I felt so alone, it was frightening. If they had left already, how would I get out of the city? On the steps to the altar, I sat down on the floor and tears began running down my face. I couldn't hold them back, I felt such relief. Truth is, I didn't feel anything at all. I simply wept silently, sheer exhaustion crept over me, I was tired beyond anything I had ever experienced. Then, I put my head down for just a second.



I must have fallen asleep instantly, for when I woke up, I felt so dizzy and sick I could hardly get up. I pushed myself up and then managed to stand, swaying. It was then that I saw a piece of paper, it was sitting underneath a brass candelabrum placed prominently on the altar. Truth is, it was hard to miss. If I hadn't been so upset and tired I would have seen it at once. Had I lost precious time now? I staggered towards it and nearly tore the note apart when I opened it, so incoherent my motor control was. My hands were trembling and I was straining my eyes to see properly what it said. Mustapha must have left me a note. But there were very few words. The paper was filled with a drawing. I recognized the most prominent

landmarks: First, the river, the mighty *Seine*, there were several arrows indicating the direction its current took and then the bridges. They were neatly labelled *Pont Neuf*, *Pont des Arts*, *Ponts du Carousel* and then *Pont Royal*. There were stairs and then a big cross on the left to the *Pont Royal*. Instinctively, I knew that was where I'd have to go.



I started moving my legs, my feet, my whole body, - in the process shaking off my inertia. Quickly, I turned away from the altar, first I was shuffling, then walking, then I was running. I ran as fast as my condition would allow, first down the aisle, then out of the Chapel and then along the river. I crossed the *Seine* on *Pont Neuf* and ran and ran and ran. There was no stopping.

I held my head down, trying to ignore the fires, trying to ignore any other passers-by. Paris was burning, Paris was blazing. I had never seen anything like it. It was frightening: The French capital on fire, so many grand monuments on fire. And all light up by the French themselves. The French waging war against each other. The Communards were burning down its city, the French army was slaughtering its citizens. What kind of Commune would ever do that? What kind of army would ever do that to its civilians?

The air dark and yet so bright, heat mingled with the fresh spring breeze, I gasped. My right side was hurting from hurrying so much. I stopped running, sucked in the smoky air. I could hardly breathe, then I was coughing, then my belly

turned. I vomited, then vomited again. I was retching. My legs felt weak, my throat was dry. The sour stench in my mouth was unbearable, the side of my tongue hurt. Had I bitten myself? How would I ever get out of here? How would I ever get home? It all felt like a scary, terrible nightmare that would never, never end. I kept walking and walking and walking. At times, I looked at the river beside me, but the many reflections of blazing and burning flames and roofs and debris gave me the shivers. I kept my head down, looking at my boots, my boots only.

Was this *Pont Royal* already? I looked up, but what I saw let my heart sink. The Tuileries across the river were ablaze and there, somewhere covered in all that smoke, must be the Louvre. The Louvre, and my dear, dear uncle Vanya. The sacrifices he had made were incredible. He, too, had given his life for a greater cause. Then another thought hit me like an axe. He was still over there, somewhere. His ashes were. He was. And yet. He was no more. I couldn't take him home. A funeral without a body. No body. Where was he? Where had he gone? Was he in the heavens yet? Was he rescued? Would God remember you when you didn't remember a thing? I was so tired. Home. I wanted to go home. Could I ever find my way out of Paris? Paris, this apocalyptic hell of fire, this city ablaze with hatred, violence and murder, a purgatory beyond forgiveness and repair and pardon. What on earth was I doing here? And in my condition?



Pont Royale must be right here. I hope I hadn't miscounted the bridges and I hoped that whoever had drawn the plan had counted them correctly too. I was

nearly at the end of *Rue du Bac* and I didn't think I could go much further. I felt so desperate. So many of the houses were filled with the one element we can barely control: Fire. Fire was wild. Fire was free. Fire was so destructive. It would eat and swallow all that was in his way without planning for proper digestion. Showers of burning small timber pieces rained down on me. The heat was so intense I was scared my hair would start burning up. I smelled that strange smell burning hair gives off. I remember it from Mamà roasting off the fine hair of white, fat chicken wings on our iron stove. For just a millisecond I could see her, hold the chicken over the fire licking out between the iron rings. She smiled at me as if to let me know that all would be alright. A millisecond. A millisecond only. Then she was gone.

The sky was filled with enormous fireworks, waterfalls of sparkling embers flowed from either side of the river exploding like the tiny cherry buds in spring when the temperatures finally rose after long, cold March nights. The light was so bright I had to shield my face, so dreadfully the glare and the flashes hurt my eyes. The night was like daylight and yet so terribly dark and frightening. It is so frightening when the night is the day and all things are reversed. Summer is winter and autumn is spring. It is so frightening when all city noise was silenced by the cascades of fire that sprung from the very floor you were walking on, the very air you were trying to breathe. When I covered my face to protect myself from the heat, I felt the back of my hand burn. The skin tickled, the flesh whirring, sore from so much heat. The sensation made me feel so uncomfortable. So uneasy. So desperate and forlorn. I wanted out. Now. At once. Immediately. Out. Out of Paris. And fast. I didn't want to burn, didn't want to burn here in Paris.



Where exactly was I to go down to the river? Right, the steps to the left. I did remember the sketch, hopefully I did remember correctly. After I had seen it, I had shoved it into the pocket of my coat, but when I had tried to reach for it just now, it was gone. Gone. Had I lost it? There was no time to worry.

A flight of stairs opened up right before me. That must be it. The stairs leading down to the river where Mustapha had set a cross on the plan. It was clear to me that it was Mustapha who had set the cross and yet, I couldn't be sure. Maybe all this was to turn into a wild geese hunt yet. I stumbled down the steps and soon enough found myself underneath tall trees where I paused for a moment. The leaves were already out and a canopy of all that was good and gracious and green stretched above my head, welcoming me to all things bearable and gentle. I could, I would, I will make it. That was what I thought.

The cool chilling air was such a relief after breathing fire and smoke for so long. How welcome it was to breathe freely while the rest of Paris was burning and suffocating underneath the cloud of smoke that had engulfed the city. I smelled the river. Its musty, ancient smell filled my nostrils. I felt my ala of the nose move and it felt good. I felt alive. I was alive. I was still alive. How had I made it so far? How had I survived? But now? What now? What was I to do next? Where was I to go? If I wanted forward, it would mean swimming. I shuddered. Swimming down the river? Impossible. The waters must still be so cold. However, if that was the only way out,

I'd take it. To protect me and the unborn child. I'd do anything just to get out of Paris safely.

I heard people shout and scream on the bridge and then a loud cry. What was happening? Then there was an enormous splash and foam was spraying up. What was that? A bag filled with cats and dogs? I guessed not. I stared at the river, but couldn't make out a thing. If that had been a human body it must have drowned immediately. It must have gone down like a bagful of heavy Gneiss stone. My heart felt just as heavy.

I froze as I realized two men came down the stairs, one was obviously wounded. He could hardly walk and was sustained by the other. Quickly I hid behind a shack, trying to overhear what they said.

«What if we spent the night in here? One asked and only as I saw him pointing towards where I was hiding, I realised that I stood hidden behind the offices of the river authorities. Where were the guards? Had everybody left?

«Oh yes, right and get caught in tomorrow morning! The other one said, then they were silent. I followed them down to the riverbank and saw a whole flotilla of little boats. So that was where Mustapha helped the refugees escape. These must have been the boats they used to get them out of the city. I could see how the two men rattled at the chains of the boat and finally found an old pair of oars to break open a padlock. One of them helped the other, the one who was hurt, into the boat, then jumped after him and keeping close to the edge, in the shadow of the swimming baths and the barges, they disappeared into the night. It wasn't long before they were gone. Taken by the current of the Seine. I was alone again. They were gone, but they had given me the most brilliant idea.

The little boats, they would take me out Paris. Of course. That was why Mustapha had put the cross right here. That was my way out. I ran towards the spot where they had loosened the mooring boat and tried to unleash one of the boats for myself. Hopefully, I would catch up with Mustapha, Father Bénédicte and the others. They couldn't be far down the river. But, I didn't manage to break the locks open. The first one I tries was old and rusty and completely stuck and the second one wasn't much better. I scratched my fingers on the padlocks and the skin above my left thumbnail began to bleed.



Was that a candle burning? I had looked back over my shoulder to the office of the river authorities. Something was flickering in the windows. Then it was dark again. Had I been dreaming? I left the riverbank where the boats were mooring and walked slowly back towards the wooden house. The planks of the house looked beaten by the weather. This place had surely seen better times.

As the night got cooler, the wind had picked up and I felt the heat of the burning city being carried down to where I was. Everything was burning. How was I ever to get home again if I couldn't get into one of these boats? How was I ever to get out of the city? Was there someone in the offices who could help me get one of the boats loose? Maybe there were keys. Although I was scared, I realised there wasn't much too lose. I walked up to the closed window and looked inside. It was so dark, I didn't see anything. Then I pressed my nose onto the window pane to see better. My

lips touched the glass and I shivered. I didn't see anything but the reflection of my tired face. It was too dark and the window pane was too dirty.

When the window gave way as it was opened from within, my heart stopped beating. I smelled the foul air that evaporated from a building, the room hadn't been aired in weeks.

«Marie, is that you?»

«Father Bénédict.» I cried out, enormously relieved to see him.

«It is you indeed.»

«Of course, it is me. Whom did you expect?»

«I don't know. Not you.»

«You found the note with the map?»

«I did. Mustapha-.»

«I drew it.»

«You did?»

I looked at him, amazed.

«You're here. That's good.»

«Where is everyone? On the river?»

«No, they wanted to stay. They hide in the tunnels. You have to understand Paris is their home. Those who had wanted to leave, had left already.»

I was confused. What was he talking about?

«The nuns. The monks. They stayed.» He said.

«I see.» But I didn't really understand what he was talking about.

«Mustapha, him, we'll have to get out of the city.» He waved his head towards the inside of the room. Mustapha was hidden somewhere behind.

«He is here?»

«Come see for yourself.» He waved at the door and I hastened towards it as fast as I could. I walked into the darkness of the room that was only sparsely lit. When I saw Mustapha lying on the floor, I knew the worst had now happened. There was so much blood on the wooden planks, I felt my heart freeze.



«He is badly wounded.»

«What are you talking about?»

«Mustapha. He was shot. I think the bullet is still in his chest.»



I was thunderstruck. Mustapha shot? *What had happened?*

«What had happened?» I said out loud, lacking all imagination or common sense to say something more elaborately. It was all I could ever think of: *What had happened? What had happened?*

«We'll have to get him out of here. I found a spanner to open the locks of the boats. You can help me carry him down to the river.»

«You want to put a wounded man onto a boat?» I stared at him in dismay. He nodded tentatively.

«What choice do you have?»

«You always have a choice.»

«Do you have a better idea?»

«Well, no. Well-, I don't know. He needs a doctor.» I was overwhelmed by how little choice there was indeed.

«A doctor, right. We have to get him out of Paris first. I doubt you'll find a doctor in all that chaos here. I wouldn't know where to start looking. You?»



«How bad is it?»

Father Bénédicte only shrugged. Mustapha's breath was irregular. His eyes were closed, there was sweat on his forehead. I put my hand onto his hairline. He was hot, as if running a fever. Maybe he was running a fever. I felt how my heart began beating faster. He was so unwell. It was difficult to see him like this. How could I help? I couldn't. He did need a doctor. We had to get him out of Paris as fast as we could.

I heard him groan, his chest was hastily bandaged with a red cotton cloth that once must have been white.

«We walked-. Well there were skirmishes. And then, then, he was bleeding. I cannot really explain. I think it was some soldier. Or the communards. I cannot tell. I

am so sorry, Marie. It went so fast. We somehow got into the middle of it all. Next thing I realised he was down on the floor, holding his chest.

«Shh, don't worry.» I said. It is more important to find out how we can get him out of here.»

«I know. Let's carry him. You're ready?»

I looked at him aghast. No, I wasn't ready. No I wasn't ready for any of this. Absolutely, not.



I grabbed him by the legs and lifted him up. He was too heavy, I put him down immediately again.

«Come on, Marie, you can do this.»

«Of course, of course. Just give me a moment.»

I took a deep breath. Yes, yes, I could do this. There were many things these days I could do that I hadn't known I was capable of. I tried again, trying not to think of the child in my belly. Would all that effort endanger the little one? Pregnant women weren't supposed to do heavy lifting.

Carrying him all the way from the offices of the river authorities to the boats was hard. It seemed to take forever. We had to stop again and again, lowering him to the ground to rest our weary backs and heavy arms. Sometimes, when I had no strength left, Father Bénédicte was simply dragging him over the chisels and the stones. I felt that piercing pain just above my elbow, I felt my belly harden. It was devastating. Mustapha's wound had stopped bleeding, but the enormous bandage

Father Bénédict had put on the upper part of his body made him look like a war criminal shot in combat. I was scared by just looking at him. Father Bénédict's hands were so bloody. All that blood- .

«Marie.» Mustapha suddenly said. Then he opened his eyes and gave me the faintest smile I had ever seen someone give. It was a gift of a special kind.

«Mustapha.»

«Thank you.» He whispered. Then he drifted off again.

What was he thanking me for? For torturing him? I couldn't even begin to imagine in how much pain he was.



When we had lifted him into one of the little boats underneath *Pont Royal* I was sweating despite the chilliness of the early morn. When would the sun come up? Hopefully, it would soon. It must be early the next day. What would it bring? I was so worried. My heart was racing.

«Marie. Careful. I am going to open the padlock now.»

«Ok, I am ready.»

«Put the oar on the other side of the boat.»

«Of course. Sorry.»

«Alright. Let's go.»

We began drifting down the river.

«Hug the river bank, we don't want to be seen. To the left, Marie. To the left.»

«I am trying.»

«Try harder.»

«I do.»



I looked at Mustapha, the man I loved so much: to see him so weak and hurt and frail was painful. He was dying. Oh no, he couldn't be dying. I held my belly and again it felt as if the child moved. I was so upset, my eyes filled with water again. No, he couldn't be dying. Not now. Not when I had finally found him.

«Take the other oar.» Father Bénédict commanded. The boat had started to drift out between the boats mooring underneath the *Pont Royal* and was moving haphazardly. It was beginning to turn, the stern was the bow and to my great dismay, we were moving backwards. Then the current got stronger, pulling us faster and faster. We were drifting down the Seine rearwards.

«We'll have to get out of here. Turn. Marie Turn.»

«I am trying. It is not that easy.»

«Marie, Turn the boat.»

«I have no strength left.»

«Come on. You can do this.»

«Of course, Just wait. Oh no-.»

«Careful, you hit the other boats. Marie. Steer clear from them.»

We had run our bow into one of the other boats and then the anchor chains got entangled. It took me a while to get our skiff adrift again, but luckily I managed. The water was cold, my fingers numb. But finally we were floating down the river and we were floating freely. No strings attached. No nothing. Only the wooden barque, me, Father Bénédict and Mustapha.



«Alright. That is better.»

Above us I could see Paris burn. I could sense the heat evaporate from all the monuments ablaze as if the earth was opening its vaults filled with magma, its stony chambers full with embers and malicious glee. Many, many monuments must be under attack. All these beautiful buildings, they'd go up in smoke and ashes.

Smoke and ashes. Uncle Vanya's ashes. I'd leave him here. Here in Paris. All by himself. Tears began streaming down my face, but the runlets on my cheeks only made my skin itchy and more irritable. Bearing the heat on my naked face and arms, it was too much. Why did they have to burn down such a beautiful, beautiful city? Why did they get Uncle Vanya killed? Why couldn't I take him home again?

I had liked the ideas of the Communards so much: Equality for men and women; equal pay for teachers of both sexes; the workers earning their share and being paid in full and, of course, reasonable working hours that left time for leisure and family. I had admired how they had forced the bourgeoisie to take care of the

poor, to share their wealth, to let go of their greed, their systemic exploitation. There were so many good and great ideas in what the Communards wanted. But now it seemed things had gotten out of hand completely. Men, even women, had attacked property and were blindly and recklessly destroying it. In the name of the Commune, they had burned down homes, palaces, churches, trying to destroy the evil source of all wealth and power and control. All they wanted was anarchy and destruction and death. They wanted to destroy civilization as we knew it. But why? To which end and to which purpose? I didn't understand their motives, nor their zeal. Why such drastic measures? Why overthrow the whole social order, why not simply reform it, rebuild it, recreate it?

And why did they have to kill Uncle Vanya in the making of their heroic new world? My uncle was innocent, so completely innocent. Uncle Vanya. I couldn't stop thinking of him. The man who couldn't remember how he got to Paris, the man who couldn't remember who he was; he had saved the Louvre single-handedly. It was his folly and his bravery and his doing that had made it possible. The Louvre still stands.

We can still fill its glorious halls with artefacts to remember our past. We still have a fragile shell for a diary of mankind, a diary hard to read, as it tells of injustice, atrocities and bloodshed barbaric, but also a diary, as Renoir would point out, that brings beauty and elegance and artistry. Teach ourselves the ability to read this diary critically we must. Erase it, we can't. If all burned, if all we forgot, how can we ever shape what was still to come?

And yet, I had no answers, only questions. And my love. My love. Why did my love have to get shot? The love of my life carrying a metal bullet near his heart, alone this -, it was an impossible thought. I looked at Mustapha deplorably. *Please,*

please, don't die. My love. Please, don't die. I need you. The little one needs you. I couldn't,
no -, I wouldn't do this on my own.

Interlude

Monday, September 29, 1902 Montmartre, Paris

She had stopped reading out loud and lowered *The Manuscript* into her lap. Her hands were old, her skin so fine and dry and leathery, the nails soft and white, her right thumbnail broken. Carefully, she felt the edges of the paper, the crumpled pages filled with long and boring sentences she had rewritten ever so often. The letters stared at her, as if they had a life of their own, as if they themselves reproached her for being bold. For being old. Her voice had become frail, oscillating with a low frequency tremor from reading for so long, her eyes watery. Then she slowly lifted her head and looked at him questioningly. He looked away, she could see he was tired.

«He is still alive.»

He muttered as if complaining.

«Who is?» She asked innocently.

«Mustapha.» He grumbled.

«Yes, he is. He is still alive.» She said defiantly.

«But still missing from the story.»

«No, he is not.»

«If you say so.»

«Uncle Vanya is dead.» She added as if this made it any better.

«He's dead, I heard.»

«I did kill him. See. I can kill my characters, even the lovable ones.»

«You did indeed. But why? Why him? That wasn't necessary at all.»

«I am afraid it was.»

«The African, he should be dead.»

«Why are you so obsessed with Mustapha's death?»

«Because can you not get him under control. Where has he been? What is he doing? What is he saying? The reader doesn't know anything about him. Now, he is wounded, he is mute again. I cannot hear his voice. And before-»

She shrugged.

«He's busy. He doesn't have time for my story.»

«He is a character you've created.»

«Maybe.»

«He does exist?»

She remained silent.

«Tell me more. Have I researched that? Is that in my notes? I cannot remember.»

«No, I won't tell you.»

«As you please.»

He looked at the wall, then he continued.

«Why all that fire? Marie would die in all the smoke when she runs in to rescue Uncle Vanya, wouldn't she?»

«She would?»

He raised his eyebrows, then nodded.

«It is your story, but I am sorry to say: It is totally unrealistic.»

«Says who?»

«I do.»

«But you said Paris burned. You said it was all on fire.»

«It was.»

«So, it is not unrealistic. The Palace burned.»

«No, of course, it did burn. That part of the *Tuileries* you describe, it did burn down. You know that yourself. And who knows when they're going to rebuild it.»

«So? What's wrong with the story?»

«Have you researched what happens when there is so much smoke and fire as there was that day?»

«What do you mean?»

«Do you know, how long you can stay alive in a burning building?»

«I guess a couple of minutes, if you hold your breath.»

«Make it seconds.»

«Really?»

«Really. The smoke is killing you fast»

Disappointed she ran her fingers over *the Manuscript* and looked towards him. If that was true, she'd have to change the story completely. You could only survive seconds in a burning building? That couldn't be right.

«And, what's more: You let the Catholic live. The Catholic. Why does he get to live? If someone deserved to die it is the priest.»

«It is not for me to judge.»

«Why not? You're the author.»

«That's right. I am the author, not the judge.»

«That's the same. The author always judges its characters. You fail to judge correctly.»

She shrugged.

«If our house burned down tonight and you could but save one object what would it be? You'd have to judge, you couldn't save everything, right?

Alexandrine?»

She chose not to answer.

«You'd save *the Manuscript*, right?»

She stayed silent.

«Right? Alexandrine?» He waited for a moment, but he had known her for so long, he was sure what her answer would be.

«You'd save *the Manuscript*, I know it. You do judge then.»

«And what would you save? Her picture at the back of your drawer?»

She spit out the sentence as if it was poisonous.

It was his turn to be silent.

«I found it. I also found the one with the children. They both do look like you.

Denise? Jacques? Right?»

«When did you find the pictures?»

She shrugged.

«How long have you hidden them?»

«Come to bed.»

«Soon.»

«It is going to be a cold night.»

«Of course, dear. I will see to it.»

She put *the Manuscript* onto the small round table next to the fireplace and added more coal to the fire. Then she shut the window, then she went to bed, sliding her right foot under the woollen blankets first.

«Have you locked the bedroom door?» She asked warily.

«Of course.» He murmured, half asleep already.

Then she closed her eyes.

The End

He opened his eyes, his eyelids were trembling, he was barely breathing. For a moment I put the oars down and nodded towards Father Bénédicte to take charge of the bark. I kneeled down and reached for Mustapha's face. His lips were cracked and swollen with all the scorching heat in the air. I reached into the icy water of the river and cooled his forehead with some ice cold drops of water. He was wincing, groaning out loud.

«What is it dear?» I said while stroking his forehead. He was hot and to me it seemed he was running a fever. The heat came from within, not from Paris burning.

«I wanna bury you.»

I wasn't sure I had misheard. What did he mean?

I bowed down and put my ear closer to his lips. His moustache was tickling my earlobe. He hadn't shaved for a few days. I strained my ears to hear what he said. I had misheard indeed.

«I want to marry you.» He whispered, repeating what he had just said.

«You do?» Tears filled my eyes. He nodded, then he closed his eyes again.

With his eyes closed, he continued speaking.

«Now.»

«Now?»

He nodded again faintly.

«Will you say yes?» His voice was so faint and weak, I had nearly missed what must have been the most romantic moment of my life.

«Of course, I do. Of course. Yes, yes. Yes. I will marry you.» I began snivelling, My throat felt dry and I felt such immense release.

«I carry your child. Of course I will marry you.» I reiterated.

«Then ask him.» Mustapha slightly lifted his chin and rolled his eyes into Father Bénédic't's direction.

«You agree a Catholic marry us?»

«You don't?» He asked and I could barely make out his voice.

« I am not Catholic.» I said.

«You don't want to marry me?»

«Of course I do. But you're a Muslim, I am a Protestant. He is a Priest»

«So?» It was with great pain that he moved his lips.



«I now proclaim you husband and wife. You can now kiss the bride.»

I felt Mustapha's lips on mine, I looked into his eyes and heard Father Bénédic't's voice reciting the Lord's blessing from afar.

«GOD the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favour look upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting. Amen. »

For the briefest and most blissful moment I completely forgot we were on a little boat escaping the bloody slaughterhouse Paris had become. I forgot I was escaping the hot and blazing furnace Paris had turned into, the frenzy, the madness, the killing. This was our wedding, this was a new beginning indeed. This was the happiest day in my life.

I held his face close, I looked into his dark, beautiful eyes. Why were they so dull? Why so tired and lifeless?

«Mustapha?»

He squeezed my hand, then he faintly smiled and closed his eyes.



All I wanted was *La Maison Blanche* at *Hauteville*; Go home and rest and give birth to the little one. One life gone, one life to come. The cycles of life.



I looked at the tiny boat that carried us on the Seine. I looked up at Paris burning, the flames flickering so bright on the flowing waters that the reflections hurt in my eyes. If we survived this, we could, we would conquer them all: Australia, the great Pacific Ocean, Algeria, the mighty Sahara desert, the fierce storms riding the Pineapple Express. Anyone and anything. And if we didn't conquer, then the Love of God would. Love would conquer them all. Eventually, it would. Eventually, it will. I turned to Mustapha I kissed him again while Paris was burning and burning and burning. His lips, his lips were so cold. And, yet, our love, our love was stronger than hate and war and death and revenge and honour and pride and religion and the *manifesto* and the bloody, goddam revolution that will or will not take place. What did I know?

The End

Author's Note

On Seeking Refuge

NO?SPITALity was initially written because this author was most impressed by an article in the local Bernese newspaper *Der Bund* (Wälti, Simon: Als Bern 20'000 Flüchtlinge aufnahm, 05.January 2021 p.20). She had no idea that in 1871 Switzerland hosted 87'847 French soldiers who sought refuge from the German army and was curious to know more about the theme. The Swiss population at the time amounted to 2.6 million people only. This means Switzerland temporarily took in more than 3% of its population as refugees. Until the 31st of December 2020 Switzerland's population had risen to 8'670'300. If the same ratio were applied today Switzerland was to take in more than 260'000 refugees.

Even if Switzerland is far from hosting so many refugees, the number still seems rather low when compared to the 89.3 million people, the UNHCR says, are forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2021 "as a result of persecution, conflict,

violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.”

(<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>) What’s more, the number of refugees worldwide, according to the UNHCR, has doubled since 2010.

In Europe alone, since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, 12 million Ukrainians have fled from their homes, 5 million have sought refuge in the European Union and 7 million have been displaced within Ukraine itself (compare to: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472>).

On Literary Appropriation

With migration, cultures come in contact and in conflict, there are bound to be clashes of various degrees. Cultural appropriation, exemplary for a rather innocent form of conflict, is a phenomenon that is widely discussed for its controversy. Not as much attention has found the phenomenon of *literary appropriation*, such as seen in NO?SPITALity. Lee Mae Magellan has used a paper edition of Émile Zola’s *La Débacle* from 2017 by Oxford World’s Classic for its personal education and purposes only. To avoid copyright issues it has then gutted the edition of *La Débacle* that is freely available online: *The Downfall, La Débacle, A Story of the Horrors of War*, translated by Ernest A. Vizetelly, a war correspondent in the French-German war in 1871, who used the vernacular spoken at the time. In his translation, he included original words such as «flyman» that have to the author’s great dismay, disappeared completely from the 21st century translations of a timeless classic.

Will artificial intelligence hijack all our great literature and distort it, as is done in NO?SPITALity? Will it rewrite stories that belong to our history, our literary canon, our collective awareness, so we won't recognize nor remember these stories correctly? Using Émile and Alexandrine Zola as well as Jeanne Rozerot's lives and building NO?SPITALity around them, is a sacrilege that many will not forgive. *La Débâcle*, at the time of its publication in the late 19th century, had quickly become a European bestseller. It has now fallen prey to being retold rather poorly as NO?SPITALity for the 21st century. Literary appropriation at its worst.

As always, Mae Lee Magellan has used various online sources and books to personalize this novel for Mustapha Ben Turkoja of Mascara, an Algerian Frenchman. He is a fictitious, historical character whose name was randomly selected and stolen from the list of names composed by Daniel Friedrich Jaggi, the pastor of Aarwangen, who helped host the Bourbaki army in 1871.

Other important sources that have been used for Part I were the website of the Red Cross. The Red Cross traces its very origin back to the reception of the Bourbaki army in Switzerland in 1871. It was the earliest mission of the Red Cross and of paramount importance to its foundation in Switzerland from where it spread all over the globe. More detailed historical information and many great pictures and drawings can be found on the Website of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Of special interest was the article by François Bugnion: The arrival of

Bourbaki's army at Les Verrières, 30-04-1996 Article, International Review of the Red Cross, No. 311.

Important to writing Part I were also numerous online editions of *The Feuille d'Avis de Bern*, in German: *Das Intelligenzblatt der Stadt Bern*. Some extracts were left in the text for the reader to see, if competent to read Fraktur typefaces, to read. The screenshots were all taken from the online editions from February and March 1871. The author sincerely thanks the team of the *e-newspaperarchives.ch* for scanning thousands and thousands of pages, so we can still access and read them today. Thanks to their hard work, the trip to the year 1871 was most, most fascinating and a welcome escape during a winter in lockdown. It seems time travelling has finally been made possible. Thank you to all of you!

Last, but not least, the picture of the Cuirassiers on p. 163 was taken from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Photographs_of_Franco-Prussian_War#/media/File:CuirassiersMetz1870.jpg

For Part II the author has used many details from Carolyn J. Eichner's fabulous book *Women in the Paris Commune. Surmounting the Barricades* (2004). Her account of the Paris Commune is so well written that Mae Lee Magellan was tempted to include her passages verbatim and may have failed to resist the temptation at

times. Carolyn J. Eichner has such a clear understanding of the Paris Commune and the role of women then, that it was a great pleasure to read her detailed report of the many historical sources she has studied. The author has felt particularly grateful for her work. What a joy to have found a book such as hers whereas Ms. Eichner may feel less happy about NO?SPITALity and the liberties it took with her accurately researched portrayal of the prominent women leaders in the Paris Commune. The author explicitly wishes to ask for her forgiveness.

Of great importance was also the Online Version of Eleanor Marx Aveling's translation of *Lissagray's Histoire de la Commune* (1886), a book the Bodleian library in Oxford catalogued on the 14th of August 1986, and some way or another gave to Google to scan for everyone, including the author, to read.

To understand the lives of Émile and Alexandrine Zola and Jeanne Rozerot better the author has used *Zola, Die grossen Klassiker, Literatur der Welt in Bildern, Texten, Daten, Band 26* (presented by Gerhard Wiese et al, 1982). Of particular importance where the pictures of Alexandrine Zola and Jeanne Rozerot displayed on p.82. They helped determine which of the two women was chosen to supposedly have written *The Manuscript*.

And last, but not least: Of great importance was also Eric Toussaint's article *The Paris Commune's banks and debts* posted on March 19, 2021. Thanks to M. Toussanit for explaining a complex issue in details. Not that Mae Lee Magellan has understood much of it at all, but at least it has all been neatly recycled into a new story for you to enjoy.

If you have enjoyed reading the novel at all. It seems clear that the narrative structure of NO?SPITALity is far too complex, complicated and convoluted to grasp

at a glance. To begin with, there is an author who created Mae Lee Magellan, a deep-learning algorithm who then invented a fictitious version of Alexandrine Zola to write *The Manuscript* told by a female narrator, Marie Bergeron. In its *fictitious* structure NO?SPITALity reminds the reader of the complex, complicated and convoluted structures and layers we have built in our *daily realities*. To give one example, just think, how many journalists of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, - if allowed to do their work at all-, and how many months it takes to research, understand and communicate the complex, complicated and convoluted products the shadow financial systems have created. Our lives have been woven into a fabric we find harder and harder to grasp, comprehend, come to terms with or even change for the good of the many. The cognitive costs of understanding an ever more complex world, changing ever more quickly, are high, if not even too high. However, seemingly fast and easy and cheap solutions come at even greater costs for our democracies, our environment, world peace and, ultimately, the habitability on our planet.

So, be you the judge of whether the story of Marie Bergeron, the little farm girl, shall stand the storms of time. Will it become a timeless classic, or, and that is infinitely more likely, will it not?

The Author, June 2022