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Opening Extract from...

ONE STAR AWAKE

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It began with my sweet tooth—although it wasn't my idea to walk all the way across town for an éclair. There were hundreds of places closer to home but I had been asked by my boyfriend to meet him at Bertrand Rose and that's what I was going to do. For as long as I could remember I had valued the opinions of others more than my own. The walk from my place beside Buttes Chaumont in the nineteenth to the pâtisserie in the eleventh would take an hour. After that there would be another half an hour on foot before I got to my job at the restaurant. A walk of ninety minutes on an April morning should not have been considered a hardship but Parisians, so I was told, were not so intrepid. But I was not a Parisian and my life, then, did not consist of very much.

It was a good job that I liked to walk, since I was unable for the hubbub of the métro and would not have dreamed of paying for a taxi even if I was able to find one at this hour of the morning. Rue Paul Bert, where I was headed, was not in my neighbourhood but since I couldn't claim to have a neighbourhood—not yet—I had no qualms about where I went and what I did when I got there.

The walk to Bertrand Rose took me along Avenue Parmentier. The streets had been rinsed by an oily rain and there were starchy gusts from the China Star dry-cleaners. The young man smoking from the window looked so forlorn. Only very early in the mornings did I feel that way too, although it was impossible to avoid—in Paris, you lived in an infinity of sadness. Moping princes writhed on Avenue Montaigne, dinner ladies flung four-course lunches at bawling children. If anyone was going there expecting cloaks to be thrown over puddles, if they were seeking old-fashioned rapture—well, I hope they found it.

I reached Paul Bert with half an hour to spare. Immediately I was amazed, upwind from the pâtisserie on the corner, by more sweet aromas. At that time in my life I was always hungry, simply because I never ate enough and because I moved around a lot. Away from work, I never bothered with anything other than sweets and the cheap stuff usually suited me just fine. Different foods appealed to me now and again—waffles from the truck at Jaurès métro—but never for long. A new bag of fizzy cola bottles was a big event in my life but, since this was Paris and I worked in a restaurant, I had to make an effort when it came to food. I struggled with most of it, the lingo especially.

I was amazed, too, by a note pinned to a doorway accusing someone of taking a shit in the stairwell and that the note featured a P.S. with a doctor's phone number heavily underlined. I was amazed—no, hypnotized—by the conquering hero in a tuxedo exiting a taxi alongside the barefoot girl who was pulling her skirt down to cover her knees as she followed him to the doorway with the note pinned on it.

I was amazed more than anything that Daniel had already joined the long queue making its way out of Bertrand Rose.

—You must really like éclairs, I said.

—Only one way to find out, he said. Chantilly? Chocolate? Hazelnut?

My answer included all my stored-up feelings for him at that point in time.

—Dunno.

Daniel was from somewhere near New York and was white yet he had dreadlocks that reached all the way down his back. The dreads resembled a rope you might use to tie up an old fishing boat in Connemara or wherever. You didn't need to have just arrived on the

planet to find this peculiar, but I tolerated it like so much else because I found him funny. I found him funny even when he called me his little autistic, which was definitely not my problem. He moonlighted as a sommelier in Gravy and because of the dreadlocks and his feline eyes—which gave many women, myself included, the shivers—he also modeled from time to time. They were the colour of the hashish he bought daily at Pyrénées métro. A close-up of them, speckled brown like a suntan, had once been magnified and suspended above Hôtel de Ville in an advert for contact lenses.

I was tall—and thinner than I am now—with the long feet and slender hips of a Masai. I was as white as the average dinner plate. My lips and my cheeks and bum were almost non-existent and my biceps were beefier than my breasts. I was to look at about as substantial as a ribbon but I was much, much tougher than I looked.

It was also said that I would have made a handsome man. And Daniel was intrigued by my accidentally punk-rock hairdo, washed the night before with Fairy liquid.

—What happens now? I asked, motioning towards the shop's door.

—We wait, he said. You know what this city needs? Chairs in the street. I spend on average ten hours a week waiting. Fucking standing.

—Not practical.

—Why does anything have to be practical? Look at that shit in the window. Next year we buy our Easter eggs at the Monoprix.

I didn't want to admonish myself in front of Daniel for not knowing this was Good Friday. I had vague notions of days of the week—it was either a work day or a day off. Of course there would be people waiting at the pâtisserie.

The shop opened and we all shuffled forwards. The black smocks and the granite countertops gave Bertrand Rose the feel of a pharmacy in a nightclub. I was baffled by it all, this small sweet citadel, and I did a run-through of all the incurably Parisian things I saw most mornings—the great human surge from Bastille métro, prammed babies trouncing each other, maliciously, with cuteness. Perhaps it was all Parisian, even the things—being coughed on, death-stares at traffic lights—you weren't supposed to think of as Parisian.

It was then that I saw the young man heading the queue. First of all, he seemed out of place in a room perfumed with such self-regard. He stood apart and looked like the kind of man to stand apart in happy rooms. The kind of man I saw impeccably alone at Enfants Rouges on Saturday mornings or alone in queues for Christmas trees.

He had just taken a croissant and was eating it so greedily that he did not notice the pastry flakes floating in slow motion onto the sun-bleached hair on his arm. I was watching his back—there was an illustration of eagle on his T-shirt—when I noticed the blaze of psoriasis at his hairline. He had dusty blonde hair and a coarse copper beard so deluxe as to seem artificial. The hair on his arms was as thick as reeds. His eyes were of the watery, wary variety and the skin on his cheeks above the beard was blemished—a person who'd been set on fire but the fire had been quickly put out.

I fixated on his conversation with the female assistant. The woman, who had facial hair to rival his, produced a dark chocolate orb he had specially ordered. They were discussing whether this kind of bitter chocolate would be suitable for children. My French was limited but I heard the woman—whom I named Bristles—wondering what kind of chocolate wasn't suitable for children. The orb was not an Easter egg by any means. Without tasting it I guessed it would have been too bitter for a child, and most adults for that matter. If he was buying this for a child he was bound for trouble.

The negotiation continued. His accented French was creamy and round. He was English, I guessed, from the way he pronounced vous as view.

—I recognise him, I said.

I knew him as you would your family's former postman or someone off the TV—but, remembering from where was as impossible as sending a boat over a mountain with your mind.

Eagleback, that's what I'd call him—even though I wasn't one for names. Everyone called me La Plongeuse, anyway.

The dishwasher.

—It suits you, Daniel used to say. Until we find you another one.

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