

**almost
life**

ALSO BY KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

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kiran
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for TdF

But that unique sum of things, the experience that I lived, with all its order and its randomness . . . all the things I've talked about, others I have left unspoken — there is no place where it will all live again.

Simone de Beauvoir

Part One

1978–1979

Love at first sight is always spoken in the past tense.

The scene is perfectly adapted to this temporal phenomenon: distinct, abrupt, framed, it is already a memory (the nature of a photograph is not to represent but to memorialize) . . . this scene has all the magnificence of an accident: I cannot get over having had this good fortune: to meet what matches my desire.

from *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes

Chapter One

They met on the steps of the Sacré-Cœur beneath a sky of the most fierce and unerring blue, so without variation or hesitation it was as though a painter had brushed cerulean across the horizon, no shade or blight anywhere, yet undeniably a cover up. Or perhaps it was only so blue by contrast to the dome and cupolas of the Sacré-Cœur, which too seemed arranged, virgin white paper cut out and laid across the perfect wash of the sky.

Laure was reading and smoking on the left staircase, her long legs thrust out before her, her prematurely greying hair flipped over and hanging across her narrow face. Erica approached, sweating from the ascent through Montmartre's cobbles in her polyester skirt printed with great bunching florals, rippling and sticking to her thighs. She swears it was the right staircase, remembers turning to her left to look up at the dome pinned against the sky. Smoke in her eyes, an instinctive irritation that did not serve her well in Paris. Each will remember it differently, but on this fact they agree: it was Erica who smiled first, and said—

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‘Bonjour.’

Laure did not smile easily at the best of times. She was hungover, and the walk in the July swelter to this reading spot a punishment she was still recovering from, a pilgrimage to atone for the previous night’s sins. She hadn’t expected to meet an angel at the basilica’s steps, only to read and watch people and grouse inwardly at the tourists swarming her city. But when she looked up, this girl was singularly beautiful. Long auburn hair, tanned skin, a hint of Laforêt in the wide set of her eyes, her askance doe demeanour. These judgements Laure made rapidly and without self-awareness. She was adamant she didn’t set much store by appearance. Everything about hers was calculated to suggest this, from her man’s shirt to her grey trousers, a little short at the ankles. Her hair was lank and stank of beer and smoke, but she was aware of the girl’s – the tourist’s – nervous expression as she tried again, her accent stronger, more careful, and knew she was experiencing what Michel called Laure’s *ravissement*, the strong and slightly terrifying aura Laure exerted as though she were a wolf pinning a prey animal.

‘Bonjour.’

‘Hi.’

‘Je m’appelle Erica.’

Laure raised her eyebrows. ‘Laure. English?’

‘Yes,’ said the girl, with a slump of disappointment and relief. And then, a flare of defiance: ‘Française?’

Laure did smile then. ‘Parisienne.’

She did not find tourists charming, and certainly not English ones, but she thought this girl darling. How old was she? Seventeen? Her skin glowed that undeniable golden that came from youth and health, true health from walks outdoors and sleeping well and eating vegetables and not drinking. Laure

did none of these things, except walk when she wanted to punish herself. Her particular, slouching thinness came from these frequent atonements and from her father, who ate butter as though it was a sin to leave a scraping in the dish and was rangy as a whippet. Her build bought her a certain kind of cachet – that rapture Michel alluded to – but Laure knew she smoked too much, drank too much, ate too little with colour, or indeed anything that was not bread and butter. Her skin broke out around her bleeds, her jaw rough and bumpy, and her face looked grey in early light.

She propped her glasses onto her chin, an affectation also learned from her father, and looked more squarely at the girl.

‘Je suis ravie de vous rencontrer.’

‘No,’ said Laure. ‘You would say, enchanté. Or, ravie.’

‘Ravie,’ repeated Erica, her mouth parting to show a kitten-pink tongue, white teeth. Laure ran her own furred tongue over her own furred teeth, took another drag on her roll-up and blew the smoke out in a pointed stream. Erica scrunched up her nose, and Laure knew she was a thought away from coughing and wafting her hand.

‘Your accent is too tight. You need to let your words fall.’

‘Your English is good.’

Laure shrugged. *Of course.*

‘I am sorry to bother you.’ Her voice was posh, clipped. Perhaps the formal address suited her better after all. She was sweet.

‘It’s only I saw you reading, and it’s not the sort of thing I would normally do, but it’s hot and it’s Paris, isn’t it?’ She gave a silly laugh, and it occurred to Laure that here was a clever girl told it was better to be beautiful than clever.

The girl pulled her bag around to her front, a severe leather satchel in light brown, the sort of thing a schoolboy would carry. Laure watched her struggle with the buckles. There were no creases on the straps – the thing was brand new. A gift? It did not fit with her floaty skirt, the bardot top – was that cheesecloth? – and in fact none of it fitted. It was a costume, a thing put on to walk around Paris and do things she would never normally do. Her nails were unpainted.

She'd managed to wrestle a book from her bag, a poor reveal too long in the making, but she lifted aloft a copy of *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, the exact same edition Laure held loosely in her own mauled fingertips, from the Collection *Tel Quel*. Laure's was marked with wine-glass rings across the white background, the image of tense and searching fingertips, the spine cracked and binding perilous, made thicker by her dog-eared pages. Erica's was pristine, as though never opened, though a metro ticket marked a third of the way in.

'And honestly, I thought I was mad. Pretentious, you know, to buy this let alone try to read it in public. I was talked into it by the bookseller. But then I saw you reading here, and smoking, and it made me laugh . . .' Erica trailed off, realizing she had been insulting, but not realizing Laure loved to be insulted. 'Only I thought if a proper Parisienne were doing it, I could too.'

'Which bookshop?' asked Laure, knowing it would be Shakespeare and Co.

'Le Divan.'

Laure did not betray a flicker of surprise. 'My friend works there.'

'Oh! Perhaps she was the one. Dark hair?'

'No. Blonde.'

‘Ah.’ Erica dithered. ‘And I hope you don’t mind—’ she rummaged in her satchel, and pulled out a camera, a boxy Canon AE-1 with a black lens cap. ‘But I took a photograph from back there, because you do look *very* French. The picture I had in my head, anyway.’

Laure did not blink.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ she repeated. ‘I can destroy the film if you do.’

Laure let her gaze trickle down Erica’s face to the camera in her hand and back again, knowing she would blush, and she did, deliciously, from her slick collarbones to her round cheeks. She shrugged to show she didn’t care, as though she was used to people taking her photograph and telling her they had done so. ‘First time in France?’

‘And Paris! Well, yes of course in Paris. Paris and France. First time anywhere actually, other than England. I’ve been to London, to the British Museum and the National Gallery, but I knew I couldn’t think myself an art lover until I had been to Paris. I’ve been to the Louvre and the Petit Palais. There’s the Pompidou of course, but I go there tomorrow. Today the weather is so good, I thought, why not walk to the Sacré-Cœur, see the church and sit on the grass and see the city from up here. I’m staying on the Rive Gauche, and it was further than I thought, and hotter too.’

She fanned herself for emphasis, and the camera strap flapped against her cheek. She blushed even more furiously. Laure wondered what she would look like naked.

Laure smiled perfunctorily, and pushed her glasses back up onto her nose. She meant that to be a dismissal, and was glad when the girl tripped up past her, up the left-hand steps of the Sacré-Cœur, and a little disappointed too, when she lost

her scent – girlishly sweet, the sort you would get in a pharmacy – and turned to watch her disappear into the crowd making for the church.

•

Erica collected her skirts in her hand as she moved up the steps against the flow of people, her cheeks hot. She was burned on her shoulders and nose, could feel the skin there stretched and sore. She didn't understand what had happened to her. It was as though she'd left her body and watched another, bolder self walk towards that woman and attempt to talk to her. It was how she'd felt at school, arriving at a conversation already underway, laughing a beat too late and too loudly. She glanced behind her as she entered the cool of the basilica, but she – Laure, a perfect French name – was out of sight. The way she'd looked at her, with such disdain. Erica had felt like a child again.

But she was not a child, she reminded herself, as she took a paper shawl from the stack and covered her tender shoulders. She was eighteen, an adult, travelling abroad with her own money in her pocket. Aside from that woman on the steps, her attempts at French had been greeted with tolerance and sometimes praise, though her dreams of blending in with the students around the Sorbonne were dashed the moment she arrived at Gare du Nord. She had painfully misjudged the style – there were no bardot tops and bright skirts as *Girl About Town* promised. French women wore leather jackets even in the sun, and turtlenecks, tailored trousers and skirts. Their breasts were small and free under thin knits and shirts, nipples pointed and pert.

Erica shifted her bra strap, feeling sweat soaking the lace. Her own breasts were large and heavy, her nipples indistinct.

Her disgust at her own body had been bred into her at school, where the girls would take turns placing pencils under their breasts, praising each other if they fell and retching when they did not. Naked she was too much: too saggy, too expansive, too solid. She did not mind herself in clothes so much, but she felt very self-conscious in her holiday outfit, and wished she'd brought her pleated skirts and work shirts, the tea dresses she'd inherited from her mother and let out at the chest and hips.

But she'd spent all her weekend earnings on these clothes precisely because they were the sort of things she'd never wear. When she'd got the idea into her head a couple of years ago to spend the summer after leaving school in Europe, Paris arrived at her like a flurry of wings, a beating flight of fancy. She'd sold it to her parents on the libraries and galleries, but she envisaged drinking red wine and kissing French men, walking the cobbled streets and lounging in the grounds of the Palace of Versailles, sitting on benches near the Seine, reading Sartre.

Paris was beautiful but faded, the Seine stinking for streets around and the benches beds for drunks and tramps. A single glass of red wine made her stomach bloat and her head spin, and it was too hot for wine anyway. The Palace of Versailles had been bombed by Breton nationalists the month before and would not open this summer. Her sandals chafed and slipped on the cobbles. The pension she booked was dingy, the sheets damp and the walls sweating. The women-only bathroom was shared with Spanish students who laughed when she said hello, and the plughole was always clogged with hairs, and she was sure someone else was using her toothbrush. At least she was not on her period and would not be for her whole stay, thanks to a miracle in a sugar shell taken from the

blister pack of pills borrowed from Lucy and swallowed diligently each morning.

But she told herself *you are here*. The magic of being somewhere no one knew her was intoxicating. She had found a café on the corner of her street where she could look in four directions and watch the women with their dogs and the men with their bicycles, the students talking intensely or reading and smoking, all of them smoking. She'd been every afternoon, so now the owner started her order without asking, a café au lait like Hemingway and a palmier, and was content to leave her be and let her read and eavesdrop until closing. She loved the hand gestures, the shapes the smoke made in the air as it got dark. She loved the names of the streets: Rue Saint-Sulpice, Rue de Rivoli, Rue Crémieux. She loved the bakeries and the bars, the way the streets wrapped and sprawled and reached for each other, the river.

And as she stepped into the Sacré-Cœur, she loved that too. She had regretted choosing such a hot day to climb the steps, but the immersion into the shaded cool was all the better for it. It smelled of old stone and lit candles and was smaller inside than she'd expected. The benches were flooded with light from the cupola, and she sat on the warm wood and tipped her head back, eyeing the celestial figures of the North Dome, the gold-backed Jesus in Majesty and his attendant angels, more carved into the grey stone, wings stretched wide. She'd spent hours poring over the highly saturated photographs in the library's copy of *Paris on Film*, but they'd blurred the colours into a garish glare. The small squares of the mosaics seemed to glow with light, the interaction of stone and tile creating an oscillation, a ripple that lent breath to the saints' faces, a quiver to the angels' feathers. She sighed,

the hairs on her arms standing up. She felt something akin to what those long-ago devout must have felt: transcendence laced with the necessary twinge of fear.

A man sat beside her, a little too close, and Erica stood though she'd have liked to sit longer. She moved away to join the slowly circling crowds and, glancing behind her, saw the man move to where she'd sat. She imagined the warmth she'd left behind meeting his legs. As she read the inscriptions she felt his eyes on her. She dropped a centime in the collection box and lit a votive candle for her grandmother, peered inside the fonts and queued to climb the dome. She'd have preferred to see the crypt, but there was something about the idea of descending while being watched that felt threatening. After five minutes in the queue she changed her mind. She knew it was due to the man's scrutiny, for he had joined the queue too, and now stepped from it to follow her.

It was nothing new, being followed. In King's Lynn it happened sometimes, usually when she was in school uniform, but in Paris it had become a daily occurrence, men of all ages, boys too, openly whistling and making kissy sounds, sitting at her table, or linking arms with her if she let her guard down. She didn't mind too much, and when it made her heart race and her anxiety spike, she remembered her mother's advice to smile smally and shake her head.

This man was insistent though, she could feel it from the moment he'd sat beside her. He was only a few years older, with full lips and thick curly hair, and though he was handsome when he smiled at her, she felt exhausted, already, at what was to come.

'Salut,' he said. She smiled at her feet, and tried to move away. He caught her elbow. 'Tu es belle.'

‘Merci,’ she whispered, and pulled from his grip. The paper shawl ripped and came apart as though doused in water. She crossed her arms over her chest, holding her shoulders, but he was drinking her in, eyes dripping over her.

‘Parlons.’ It is not a question.

‘Non, merci.’

‘Anglaise? English? Hey, cherry, you want to talk to me?’

She walked quickly away from him, could pick out his foot-fall on the stone behind her. It was all she could do not to run. Not knowing what else to do, she hurried down the right stairs, hoping the woman would still be there. She was, her book held languidly in her hand, a roll-up between her lips, her eyes concealed behind her sunglasses. Erica threw herself down beside her. The woman lowered her glasses to her chin once more, shifted her cigarette to the side of her mouth.

‘Back again?’

‘Please. I’m sorry.’ Erica looked around. There was her admirer, coming to a halt on the step beside them. He smiled at the woman, Laure.

‘Elle est rapide, ta copine.’

Laure said nothing, staring him out. He made to sit down beside Erica but without warning, without changing her expression, Laure barked once, twice. The man laughed uncertainly, but she growled and he hovered in a half crouch. Scenting victory, Laure increased her snarling. People were looking, shaking their heads, but Erica joined in, both of them hissing and growling, and the man said,

‘Putain.’

And Laure said, ‘Casse-toi.’

And he left.

•

Erica gripped Laure's knee. 'That was brilliant.'

Laure could see the girl was shaken. Her pallor, her overly bright eyes. She felt the warmth from Erica's hand on her knee, the liquid pooling in her belly. She heard Michel's voice in her mind. *Invétéré*. She had work to do, an essay to write, this book and others to read. But she was bored, so she put her book down, and turned the full force of her gaze on Erica.

'Okay?' She placed her hand on top of Erica's. The touch brought Erica's laugh to an abrupt halt, the girl's expression suddenly sober.

'Yes, I'm all right. Thank you. I really am sorry to have troubled you again.'

She started to get up and Laure steered her closer instead, so their thighs were touching, Laure's thighbone overshooting Erica's by inches. She liked shorter women. Michel said if she were a man she would be a brute. As it was, she was only a pervert.

'It's fine. I was thinking it was a shame not to see you again. What are you doing now?'

Erica was flustered, blushing again. Laure hoped she didn't play poker.

'I thought I'd read for a while.' She pulled the Barthes from her satchel. 'Perhaps I could sit with you?' Laure stuffed her own copy into her pocket and stood up, offering her hand.

'It's too hot. Let's get a drink.'

After a startled pause, Erica let her pull her to her feet, and Laure abruptly dropped her hand. They walked down the steps, past the green stretches of grass, and from Erica's glances at the people stretched out Laure could tell she would rather lie down and rest there. But she followed her down the steps and onto the cobbles, which made Laure feel tenderly towards

her. Laure's body was stiff and she pulled her hair across her neck to hide the love bite Hilde had given her the night before. She smiled down at Erica, who was focused on her feet, which were plump and poorly clad in cheap thin sandals.

'Would you like coffee? Wine?'

'Maybe a beer?' ventured Erica, and Laure took her to a small bar on Rue Jean-Baptiste Pigalle she had been to with one of the history students last year. She'd been drunk, and it was darker and dingier in the midday sun than she'd remembered. She ordered them two beers and they sat at a sticky table on cushionless metal chairs outside. Laure took the beer like it was medicine, and Erica sipped.

'Barthes then?' Laure tapped the book in her breast pocket. 'What do you think?'

'I'm reading slowly, and I have to look up some of the words,' said Erica, 'but I think it is so romantic. So beautiful.'

Laure laughed into the final swallow of her beer. 'Romantic? I don't know what dictionary you are using, but I don't think it is romantic.'

'Maybe I am misunderstanding.'

Laure didn't care to educate her. 'What did you think of the Sacré-Cœur?'

'Beautiful,' and then, 'It was peaceful. It felt smaller inside, like it wrapped around me. And the light is everywhere, with the gold. It bounces it, doesn't it? The angels, they seem to quiver. It was lovely.'

They were weak words. Laure was disappointed, mostly in herself. What had she expected from this tourist? They should have stayed at the steps, read until they were sun drunk and gone back to hers. She could no longer see the path forward, how to navigate this girl into bed before she stopped desiring

her. She could leave, but that had the feeling of abandoning a puppy. She smiled perfunctorily.

‘Another beer?’

‘I’ll get it.’ The girl leapt up and went back inside. Laure got out her tobacco and papers. She heard Erica speaking her godawful French, heard the barman flirting bluntly and badly, Erica’s nervous laughter.

What must it be like, to have men everywhere want to fuck you? Laure was convinced it wasn’t as fun as those girls made out. Maybe some of them relished it, revelled in seducing men, knew how to turn them on and enjoyed it. Her own allure was made solely for her own sex and she had never questioned it, even as a girl with boys trying to see up her skirt or futilely grabbing her flat chest. None of them did it because they desired her, but out of a sort of calculated curiosity, much as they would squash ants in a line to see what the others would do.

The girls though – that was different. It was as if Laure spoke a language only they understood. She could make them laugh and blush and later, come as they never had before. But that was when she discovered sex could exist for her. For a long time she thought she did not like it, as a concept and certainly not an act. She toyed with becoming a nun, the silence and the clean mountain air and the robes, and the women of course. It all appealed. The first girl Laure kissed told her she was Mama, and Laure Papa, and for a while Laure wondered if this was in fact it, if she was a boy and that was why the sight of the girls in their swimming costumes made her throb, why when she listened to Françoise Hardy she thought of her classmate Sarah Lebroy’s freckled collarbones and not, as her friends did, Jean-Pierre from the year above’s veined forearms.

It was a relief, then, to come to university and to Paris and discover women fucked women without either party pretending they were men. Laure had not needed to try to find the others – they swarmed to her; something in her essence, her body language, her scent. She settled into her new, expanded life with none of the guilt and unease others experienced – this choice came at a cost, of course. But one she told herself she was happy to pay.

Erica finally emerged with the beers, and two shot glasses balanced between her fingers, at the sight of which Laure lit her cigarette.

‘Gin,’ said Erica, apologetically. ‘He insisted.’

Ah. Free drinks though. That was a benefit that did not come her way often.

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Laure raised the glass to her and downed the warm gin. Erica followed suit, eyes watering.

‘That’s disgusting,’ she gasped, and Laure laughed and agreed. Buoyed by her amusement, Erica asked, ‘What do you do?’

‘Smoke. Speak to strangers.’

Erica grinned. This was good. Laure was warming up. Maybe she should brave the bartender again, get them another gin.

‘I mean for work.’

‘I’m studying.’

‘You’re a student?’

Another shrug. *Of course.*

Erica had misjudged her age. She’d thought Laure much older, late twenties at least. She had lines around her mouth, a worldliness in her gaze. ‘Of what? Oh! Let me guess. English.’

‘Non.’

‘French. Literature, I mean.’

Laure shook her head, squinting against her own smoke.
 'Philosophy.'

Laure tipped her hand side to side in a *sort of* gesture. Scenting victory, Erica chewed her thumbnail. It tasted of the clear polish her mother had bought her to stop her chewing her nails.

'Anthropology? Some sort of social science?'

'Art Theory,' said Laure, and though she delivered it as a throwaway, Erica read the pride in her voice. It was a chink in her cool that Erica could chisel away at.

'I didn't know you could do a degree in that.'

'It's a thesis. I'm studying for my doctorate.'

'I'm going to university in September. English.'

'Here?'

'No!' Erica was thrilled at the idea. 'England. Norfolk.'

'Norfolk University?'

'University of East Anglia.'

'I don't know it.'

Erica absorbed this blow. 'Where are you studying?'

'Sorbonne.'

Of course. It explained the ease, the obvious intelligence, the belonging. Erica fancied she could pick out the Sorbonne students on sight. They emerged only in the evening, their days spent in libraries or their halls, and swarmed the parks and bars, carrying books, smoking, drinking carafes of wine. Erica's French was not strong enough to understand all she overheard, but it was an eavesdropped mention of Sartre that sent her to the bookshop where she was instead talked into buying *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* from the bookseller who was not Laure's friend, a book only published the year before and already mesmerizing to her. Romantic, she'd said

to Laure, and still she felt it. She'd like to know why Laure disagreed, but she didn't want to feel stupid. The gin and the heat were thickening her blood, making her limbs heavy and loose. She liked the feeling, liked sitting on this wonky chair on the hot pavement next to this intimidating and handsome woman. It made her feel more settled by association, almost as though she belonged.

'Alors.' Laure clapped her hands together, making her jump. 'I must go. It was a pleasure to pass the time with you.'

She said it drily, and with a rush of shame Erica realized she had not passed some unspoken test, that after her initial dismissal on the steps she had failed to improve matters. Her mind flicked through every stupid thing she'd said, every graceless action, every immature laugh. Laure was stubbing out her cigarette with deft fingers, licking the end and stowing it in her pocket.

'Yes,' said Erica. And without knowing what she was saying, with the impulse that comes with desperation, she said. 'May I have one?'

It caught Laure visibly, a yank on a cord.

'A smoke.' Erica gestured at the pocket the half-smoked cigarette had disappeared into.

'Sure.' Laure took out a small blue tin and a cardboard box. She placed both on the table before Erica, who understood with mute horror she was expected to roll her own. After a moment's hesitation, Erica opened the tobacco tin, peering inside uncertainly.

Laure seemed amused, but she did not embarrass her further. 'Allow me.' It was an act of unimaginable kindness, Erica thought, that she licked her thumb, pulled a paper from the box and stacked tobacco into it, spiralled up a strip of cardboard

into a filter, licked the paper and rolled it tightly. It was a perfect cylinder, a work of art really, and she took it as such, reverently.

‘Light?’

Erica had not thought this far ahead. She did not want to actually smoke the thing. She’d only wanted to keep Laure with her a little longer, to linger awhile in her orbit.

‘Non, merci.’

‘Rien.’

There was nothing left to keep her. Erica smiled, looking as though being left was of no consequence. But she felt more alone as Laure walked away than she had been before they met.

Laure turned, and the light was brilliant on her face, short, downy hairs on her cheeks, her eyes a deep-water grey. She saw Erica was staring at her, and gave a goofy smile, performative and true. She called,

‘There’s a reading, tomorrow at Le Divan.’

‘OK,’ called Erica, too loudly, so relieved not to be saying goodbye for ever.

‘Eight o’clock.’ Laure raised her hand in a salute, and was gone.

Le Divan was in the sixth, at the corner of the Rue de l’Abbaye and the Rue Bonaparte, barely twenty minutes from Erica’s pension, but there was too much to do to spend a leisurely day getting ready. She rushed her time at the newly opened Centre Pompidou, though it was to be the centrepiece of her Parisian experience and the ticket was expensive, merely glancing at the Jasper Johns and the Gerhard Richters, and returned instead to the treacherous cobbles of Montmartre to

seek out the second-hand clothing shop she had spotted the day before. She could not, would not, turn up to the reading in paisley. The shop smelled bad, body odour and smoke, and most of the racks held clothes more suited to the bin or Laure's build than Erica, but she found a mustard dress, only slightly stained, of thin knit that clung nicely to her hips and breasts, highlighting her waist with a silver coin belt. Though cheap, it cost double her day's budget, but she figured there might be food at the reading, and if there was not she could do with skipping some meals.

She did not have time to wash it, so when she got back to her horrid little room she sprayed the dress with Charlie Blue and heaved open the flaking window to let it air in the sluggish breeze. Then she went to the damp bathroom and locked the door, selecting the sharpest of the razors lined up on the windowsill and shaved her underarms and legs, contorting herself to reach even the midpoint of her calves, then took cream that smelled of roses and rubbed it into her stinging skin. She didn't bother to wash away the stubble in the sink – let the laughing girls see how it felt. The bathroom was home to the pension's sole mirror, and she checked her face, thought perhaps she felt a spot coming beneath her lip, but with her mother's voice in her head resisted picking at it. With some lipstick, it wouldn't show.

Outside, one of the Spanish girls was waiting, wearing only her underwear.

'Bonsoir.'

The Spanish girl clucked her tongue in reply, shouldering past her and shutting the door hard. Erica returned to the room and checked the clock. Five thirty. The day was passing very slowly. Why was she so anxious, as though waiting to

sit an entrance exam? Perhaps because this was a scene from one of her fantasies, an invitation to a book reading in Paris. An invitation extended by a quintessentially French woman, someone so utterly unlike her.

She sniffed experimentally at the dress, could still smell the smoke layered under artificial jasmine, the slight voluptuousness of fat from the vents of the café below. She took it down and shook it out.

‘A great find,’ the shopkeeper had insisted. ‘Very style.’

The stain was more noticeable in the strip light of the bedroom and she turned it off. She could still make it out – it looked like coffee, billowing across the right hip, but the reading did not start until eight. There would be bodies pressed together. She shivered in delight. Maybe she would meet a man there, handsome and intense with hair like James Taylor, one of Laure’s friends from the Sorbonne. She could go to UEA with a boyfriend, Marc or Luc from Paris. She imagined them writing to each other, calling one another from the hall’s telephones, twirling the cord around her finger and laughing at his jokes.

Her stomach rumbled. She was so hungry. In the basement there was a communal kitchen with a small fridge and a toaster full of mouldy crumbs. She had not paid extra for the use of it but there was no lock on the door – perhaps she could go down and see what there was. But there were bumps on her inner thighs where they chafed, and her hand had looked so fat beneath Laure’s elegant fingers, her leg double the other woman’s width. Better to be hungry.

She took out the Barthes and her Collins English–French dictionary, and opened it to her marked page: *désréalité*. She preferred reading in public where self-consciousness forced

her to abandon the dictionary and simply read. She didn't understand everything, or even most individual words, but in the flow of letting her eyes move as they did when reading English she gained more meaning, and when she did understand a word she found the context it offered lapping like a ripple both forwards and backwards across the surrounding sentences. But alone, she was more diligent, feeling a duty to stop every time she didn't know something, looking it up in her pocket-sized dictionary, sometimes making a note in the back so she could string several unknown words together and form a transliteration of sorts. When she got home she'd buy the translation, and see how much she got correct.

Feeling restless, she set aside the book. The hands of the clock had barely moved. She turned to the blank pages at the back of the dictionary. They were meant for notes but Erica used them for writing. Erica had always written, and started taking it more seriously a couple of years ago after her English teacher praised her re-writing of Rudyard Kipling's 'If'. She'd kept a painstaking diary ever since – *the unexamined life* and all that – but had left it behind at home as it was too cumbersome. This trip she'd settled for using these limited pages, precious space that made her more mindful of what was important to put down.

It was filling up with little vignettes, about the woman who gave her dog coffee from her saucer at the café, or the man who followed her for half an hour before she finally lost him by turning into a library and darting amid the stacks. She had an idea of turning them into short stories eventually, though the form was not one she especially enjoyed. All her favourite writers were masters of it, so she should be too. Today, there was only one person she wanted to write about. In her mind's

eye, she moved towards the Sacré-Cœur, and noticed the woman on the steps for the first time. *Through the camera lens, she looked like an angel, or a wraith—*

When she next looked at the clock the room was dim. She hadn't turned on the light again and didn't realize her eyes were straining. The clock said seven thirty. Erica threw the books aside and reclasped her bra, hooked her knickers out of her bum and then kicked them off, putting on a clean pair instead. She pulled on the dress, which felt tighter than it had in the shop though that was impossible, she hadn't eaten after all, and pulled the coin belt a notch snugger as punishment. Using the shiny metal of her lipstick as a mirror, she traced her lips in a blush pink, lined her eyes and applied blush to her cheeks and exposed clavicles, and brushed out her hair. It fell to her waist in gentle waves, the one part of her she liked without qualification.

She had no bag but her satchel, so she put her book and lipstick inside, counted out enough money for a drink and rolled up her emergency fifty-franc note and slipped it inside her bra. For good luck, she tucked the cigarette Laure had rolled for her in there too.

She had looked up the route to the bookshop in her city map, so she put that in her bag and locked her door and walked down the stairs and out of the pension as she was taught, confident but unshowy, looking like she knew exactly where she was going.

•

Laure was nervous and she didn't know why. She'd met Pauline that afternoon, her husband away and her daughter with the nanny, and they'd fucked slowly, Pauline licking Laure's ankles and kissing the backs of her knees as she worked her with her

fingers, Laure sinking into the thick mattress and clean white sheets and trying to come. She couldn't, and so they switched and she made Pauline sweat all over her lovely fresh sheets. Someone would change them before her husband came home.

They'd recently stopped talking after, and Pauline would not let her smoke in the apartment, so Laure was left with the hum of her elusive orgasm and the chatter of her brain while Pauline dozed in her arms. She knew, as she dressed, their affair was coming to an end. It was never exclusive, even outside Pauline's marriage she slept with other women and men, but still they saw each other every week and Laure knew her body now. She knew her likes and her dislikes, her mild kink for wrists and ankles, connective joints where she could tongue tendon and bone and flesh. Laure had a theory this was because during her daughter's birth the baby got stuck and her wrist fractured when they pulled her out, but Pauline did not like this theory.

'I am not your dissertation,' she said. 'There doesn't have to be a construct behind everything.'

But Pauline was wrong, and this was another reason their passion was fading. She was too unimaginative, too uncurious about the world. She didn't even ask about Laure's love bite. Her walls were lined with books but they were unread, large glossy photo books and hardbacks of classics. It was window-dressing, just as Pauline's sensuality was. She was not an imaginative lover either, and did not pursue Laure or her own pleasure with any genuine intent. She had sex the same way Laure ate: as a necessity. Maintenance.

Their affair had begun last winter, when Laure had been invited to the Président's dinner as one of their prized students. Pauline's husband sat on the board and had been there too,

but mainly stayed outside smoking, as had Laure. He had introduced Laure to Pauline, mentioned possible patronage. This never materialized but Laure briefly fell into their circle, coming to a couple of dinners. Pauline kissed her in their hallway after their third encounter, tasting of Périgord pudding and vermouth. She was Laure's first married lover but was herself a practised cheat. It had been exciting, arousing even, but the novelty was gone and, Laure had to admit to herself, so was her desire.

She kissed Pauline perfunctorily in the hallway where it had begun, and hoped it would be the last time. As she lit up on the pavement outside the gorgeous Belle-Époque building, Laure wondered again how exactly people fell in love. Desire felt easy, and so did its leaving, but however did someone become as entangled in another person's soul as they did in each other's bodies? Everything she read made her convinced it was exactly what Pauline protested against: a construct, an inorganic forcing of matters, a word that could be filled and emptied endlessly of meaning but was too often bound to one set of values. She loved her friends, and sometimes fucked them too, but she could not imagine binding to them for ever. It was not a condition of her sexuality, for Hilde had loved her ex-girlfriend and claimed now to love Laure, and Marie and Agnès slept with no one else and had lived quite happily in the same small garret in Montparnasse since first term. They even called themselves unmarried marrieds, and wore bracelets threaded with each other's hair. But they were Classicists, traditionalists by nature.

She had half an hour to reach Le Divan, ample time but not enough to shower at the YMCA or to return to her squat to change. She could have showered at Pauline's, could finish

her cigarette and knock and wash in Pauline's marble bathroom with her clean towels and perfumed soap. But she did not want to go back. Onwards, now.

She had a new old book in her pocket, bought from a bouquiniste yesterday, a hardcover of Maupassant's *Pierre et Jean* she did not need, but that leapt out at her because of the colour of the binding, sky blue as the backdrop to the Sacré-Cœur. They'd had a *Madame Bovary* in the same handsome livery, but she'd felt that too on the nose. She would find a bench near the bookshop and read a while to ensure she was not there early. Not that she'd care how that would look, but she was used to being late and did not want to get a reputation.

•

Erica was early, and no one was there yet. The booksellers were still setting up, pulling out benches and unfolding chairs. She resisted the urge to help, and instead sat in the café next door, sucking in her stomach to stop the coin belt vanishing between her tummy rolls, and drank a black coffee because it was the cheapest thing on the menu. The caffeine made her jittery almost instantly, but she finished it anyway, even the black sludge at the bottom of the cup, and tried to read. But it was Thursday night, traditionally a student night, and even out of term time here they came, the students in their uniforms of black jackets and slacks, blazers and pencil skirts. Erica was soon too busy watching to even pretend to read, and Le Divan quickly filled and spilled onto the pavement, the spare chair at her table commandeered by a couple, the girl sitting on the boy's lap and kissing him like a cat lapping from a bowl of milk. Erica did her best not to stare, and at eight thirty decided to try and get inside the bookshop for the reading.

She moved through the crowd that wrapped around the corner plot. The glass windows were smeared with condensation from within and blocked by bodies leaning against them without, and so she could not see inside to tell if the reading had actually started. Of course, she was not there for the reading, but it was a pretence she was willing to commit to in order to stave off any potential disappointment at neither Laure nor her future French boyfriend being there.

The benches and chairs were full, but everyone was talking very loudly with no sign of reverent hush or a readiness for paying attention. People had glasses of wine from somewhere, and Erica saw the till point was cleared of books and leaflets and laid out with glasses and bottles of wine. She fought her way to it.

‘Vin blanc, s’il vous plaît.’

‘Non.’

Erica flushed, wondering if she was about to be asked for her age, but the bookseller gestured at the bottles and said, ‘No fridge. Only red.’

Knowing it was a bad idea, she paid for a glass and carried it carefully to the edge of the room, where there was a gap to stand against the bookshelves and look out over the milieu, frequently checking the door. She set down her satchel and fanned herself with her free hand. There was not even room to turn and examine the books. The air was thick and getting thicker, and she slid a hand behind her to pluck the fabric of her dress away from her back. There was no sign of an order to proceedings, and she wished someone in charge would begin, give the evening structure. If Laure wasn’t coming, Erica would need distraction.

She finished her wine and bought another, finding her spot

taken when she tried to return. Forced to strike out into the crush, she drank her wine down to a manageable level and battled her way back outside. As she stepped through the doorway she half tripped over a bag, tumbling into clean air. Someone caught her elbow causing her to sling her wine in a crescent moon over the pavement before her. She felt wine splatter over her chest.

‘Shit!’

The hand on her elbow held firm and set her back on her feet as hoots of laughter rose from the crowd behind her. Cheeks flaming, she looked up and saw a man grinning apologetically down at her.

‘Pardon. It was you or the wine.’

‘Merci,’ she said, though she wasn’t feeling especially grateful. Behind him, she caught sight of a familiar tall frame. Laure, in a camel trench coat. She raised her eyebrows – a greeting? An admonishment? She must have brushed right past her. Erica wished the pavement would open and swallow her, or a van come and flatten her into the Paris cobbles. She watched a woman, short and slim, lean into Laure and say something, smirking. Laure shrugged the woman off and looked at Erica, jerking her head slightly in invitation. Erica went gratefully, like a beaten dog, dabbing helplessly at the red wine on her chest.

‘Here.’ Laure pulled a balled handkerchief from her pocket and offered it to her. Erica felt like she might cry, but she smiled with all her teeth and wiped away the wine. Laure waved away the soiled handkerchief and introduced her friends.

‘Françoise, Barbara, Michel, Christophe, Léa, Hilde, Claude, Agnès, et Marie.’

Erica wagged her fingers and immediately wanted to die. ‘You work here,’ she told Marie, and the angular, crop-haired

blonde nodded. She had large green eyes and looked like Jeanne d'Arc by way of a poet. Her fingers were tightly laced into Agnès', a round-faced Black woman, and if Erica had any doubt about what they were to each other, Marie kissed Agnès' neck before disappearing inside for more drinks.

'Where are you from?' asked Michel, a bearded man of extraordinary beauty.

'England.'

'England!' Michel clapped his hands in delight. 'London?'

'King's Lynn. It's a town, in Norfolk.' Erica wished she had something to do with her hands. She tapped the empty glass with her nails. 'Are you studying here?'

'We are all students.'

'Classics,' nodded Agnès.

'History.'

'Anthropology.'

'Girls,' said Claude with a wink.

'We all study those,' said Françoise.

'Almost all,' said Léa and Michel in unison, before bursting into laughter.

Hilde and Laure were the only two who had not spoken. Hilde was pretty, with a snub nose, a ringer for Lulu, but she looked miserable, her blue eyes rimmed with red. Laure hadn't looked at Erica since inviting her over, and Erica thought she felt a tension between the women, as though they'd just been fighting. Marie emerged from the shop with two bottles of wine and a clutch of glasses, and the others cheered. She passed out the glasses and poured, Erica gratefully accepting a refill.

'Careful,' said Claude jokingly, as Erica took a hasty sip.

Marie rolled her eyes as Agnès nuzzled back into her hair. 'Ignore him, he's a child.'

'I'm older than you!'

'Your brain is ageing slower than your body.'

'They are brother and sister,' said Michel conspiratorially.

'Your English is so good,' said Erica, feeling slightly dazzled.

'All of you. Do you learn at school?'

'Of course. But we read, we listen to music.'

'I love Kate Bush,' said Léa, fluffing up her fine blonde hair.

'Me too,' said Erica, though she didn't own a single record.

'Diana Ross!' shouted Michel, and broke into 'Love Hangover', swinging his hips and pursing his lips. When he was done their circle applauded, though a shout of 'Tapette!' caused Michel to glare over his shoulder.

'Do you like Kate Bush?' Erica asked Laure, trying to gain a foothold in the conversation.

Hilde laughed nastily. 'Quelle andouille.'

'Quoi?' asked Erica.

Hilde rattled off a string of words Erica didn't understand, but Marie tutted and Agnès nudged her gently. Laure seemed unaffected by any of it, her hands busy rolling. It was beginning to look more like a crutch than an art form, and Erica felt irritated by her lack of engagement. But as though she'd read her mind, Laure licked along the paper, sealed the roll-up, and said,

'Joni Mitchell. I'm devout.'

'Ah oui,' spat Hilde. 'Le grand amour.'

'Casse-toi,' said Laure, without temper.

Hilde yanked away from Agnès and pushed inside. Erica watched her go and saw that in the shop people were still, the noise level dropped. The reading must have started, but no one outside seemed interested in going in. In the lull,

Erica heard a loud male voice speaking in rhythmic, impassioned French, the clicking of fingers as applause.

‘Are you studying?’ said Léa.

‘Yes. No. Soon. In September I start university.’

‘What’s your research?’

‘No, sorry. Undergrad. English.’

‘Ah, you’re a schoolgirl,’ said Françoise, but without the spite Hilde displayed.

‘I’m eighteen,’ said Erica, feeling the hateful blush bloom across her chest again. ‘Nineteen in March.’

‘We don’t mind how old you are,’ said Christophe kindly. ‘Michel is ancient. A thousand years old.’

‘Vingt-neuf,’ said Michel. ‘Experienced.’

Christophe purred. Erica thrilled at their company. She had never met homosexuals in the flesh before. She took another swig of red wine.

‘My mother saw Joni Mitchell at the Royal Festival Hall.’

‘Vraiment?’ Laure blew out a blue stream of smoke, and Erica realized it was dark, the sky bruised navy and the light from the bookshop painting everything in gold and shadow.

‘Yes. She said it was the best night of her life.’

‘Cool,’ said Laure, and Léa and Françoise echoed her. Erica felt she’d been blessed.

‘There are some good bands on at UEA. My uni. I’m hoping she might come. Joni, not my mum.’ Erica crossed her fingers and held them up. Françoise laughed, and Erica felt her blessing evaporate under Laure’s frown at the superstitious gesture.

‘Allez,’ said Barbara. ‘J’ai mal aux pieds.’

‘Oui.’ Laure threw her smoke down and shoved her hands in her pockets.

‘Hilde?’ said Agnès uncertainly.

‘Quitte-la.’

Barbara linked her arm through Laure’s and Léa took Erica’s.

‘Lover’s tiff,’ she said. ‘Hilde is jealous. Has Laure told you about her socialite?’

‘No,’ said Erica.

‘She didn’t tell Hilde either. The socialite is some rich man’s bored wife, a practised slut.’ Léa didn’t sound judgemental, more admiring.

Erica nodded sagely, deliciously scandalized. It made perfect sense Laure would have multiple lovers, multiple women lovers. She was handsome, like a beautiful boy. Like Björn Andrésen. Briefly, Erica imagined holding her hand, as Agnès held Marie’s, and then giggled at her absurdity.

‘What’s funny?’ asked Léa, smiling too. Her eyes were hazy, unfocused, and Erica realized she was on something.

‘Rien.’

‘Tu parles français?’

‘Un peu.’

Léa was a far kinder conversant than Laure, and pretty in an unthreatening way. They walked on arm in arm as Léa explained to her, in simple, slow French, that for months Laure had been sleeping with an older woman, a mother no less, in her twelfth arrondissement pre-war apartment, that her husband was a prominent sponsor of the university and they strongly suspected knew about his wife’s affairs and got off on them. That sex with his wife was fine, but if he learned Laure was a paid-up member of the Communist Party he would probably have her killed. Erica did not know if she was meant to take this literally.

‘Et Hilde?’

‘Ah.’

Hilde, she learned, had been involved with a girlfriend for many years, and now was on a rebound with Laure, but had convinced herself she was in love with her and was growing increasingly jealous of Laure’s other lovers and frustrated with her lack of commitment.

‘But it is because Hilde is still in love with Carolina. The ex. So many threads, and Laure is the knot. But you must not let that put you off.’

Realizing Léa’s meaning, Erica shook her head. ‘No, no, we are just friends.’

That was not entirely the right word. Acquaintances? Laure had invited her here and not even bothered to speak a full sentence to her.

‘You’re straight? Claude will be pleased.’

Erica looked over her shoulder. Claude grinned and gave a sardonic wave. He was cute, she decided. Not James Taylor or Björn Andrésen, but cute. He’d do. *Straight*. What else would she be?

‘Where are we going?’ she said, thinking to ask for the first time.

‘Barbara’s. Her parents live in the fourteenth, but they’re never there.’

Erica pulled up short. ‘My bag!’ She’d forgotten it at the bookshop.

‘What?’

‘I left it behind.’

‘It’ll be gone,’ said Léa. ‘None of us bothers with a bag.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Laure had stopped too, and turned to look at them, frowning.

‘I left my bag behind.’ Erica felt panicky. Her room key

was in there, and she could not afford the fee Madame Allard had mentioned if she lost it. And her dictionary with its notes, her book, her map. 'I have to at least see if it's still there.'

'It won't be,' shrugged Laure. 'But I'll come with you.'

She let go of Barbara's arm, who exchanged a weighty glance with Michel. Erica followed her, feeling the group's eyes on her back.

'Behave, little sister!' called Michel, in English so Erica knew she was meant to understand.

'Is Michel your brother?'

'Non.'

Erica looked back. The group were joined each to each – a hand around a shoulder or a waist, Michel linking little fingers with Barbara. A stab of longing in Erica's chest, to have such ease with another person, let alone several. Maybe that was waiting for her at university. Someone, many people, who would help her slough off her unremarkable girlhood and change her life. Maybe others who wanted to write – or at least people she could say that to openly without them laughing.

'Thank you for coming with me,' she said, and Laure nodded. She looked tired, purple shadows under her eyes, her cheekbones stark. She raised her cigarette to her lips, and in its flare Erica noticed a bleeding hangnail.

'How was the Pompidou.'

'Incredible,' said Erica, remembering her visit as though in fast forward, zipping through the galleries, up the escalators, turning her back on the views of Paris and leaving early to buy this dress. 'I thought I would find the building ugly, but it is an eruption, isn't it?'

'Eruption.' Laure's mouth turned down at the sides. 'I think it is vile. But I see that.'

‘Have you been?’

‘Not yet. It only just opened. Will you go to L’Orangerie?’

‘It wasn’t on my list. Should I?’

Laure halted abruptly. ‘Definitely. *Les Nymphéas* are so excruciatingly beautiful. They swallow you down.’

She was more animated than Erica had ever seen her. ‘Perhaps we could go together?’

Laure looked down at her, and without Erica realizing what was about to happen, Laure kissed her, full on the mouth. It was sudden, and quick, and Laure drew back with her eyes open, checking Erica’s reaction. A hundred thoughts raced through Erica’s mind and then stopped, replaced by a sort of high-pitched white noise. She had the taste of tobacco on her lips, a humming warmth. The spot beneath her lower lip throbbed as blood rushed to her face. *Straight*. What else. Without thinking, she reached to kiss Laure again, and the woman laughed and turned her head, snaking her arm around Erica’s shoulders. ‘Not here.’

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Laure could read Erica like a book. Her bewilderment, her arousal. She could also tell she had never kissed a woman before, did not know the rules of engagement. The first kiss had been daring, a second would have been stupid. The streets were busy, and their first graze of lips easily missed, but it would not do to risk being seen by the wrong sort of person. But it was conclusive, and for the first time since seeing Erica, Laure knew the matter was settled, and she could relax into the rest of the evening.

Erica began to talk non-stop, about the Pompidou, about Paris, about her pension, and though the arm around her was meant to reassure her, Laure could tell she was more nervous

than ever. They reached Le Divan, which was as busy as when they'd left it half an hour before. Erica disappeared inside to search for her hideous satchel and Laure drifted into conversation with a politics and philosophy student she knew from undergraduate days and hadn't realized was still in Paris. As they exchanged updates, she saw Hilde inside, staring out at her with a manic intensity. God but she was sexy when she was angry, which she always seemed to be – if not at Laure than at her parents, or her ex, or the state of the world. Laure ignored her, and as she knew she would, a moment later Hilde was beside her.

'You piece of shit,' she said. 'Why are you like this? You know I would die for you.'

'You're a fool, Hilde,' said Laure, as the politics and philosophy acquaintance slipped tactfully away. 'Don't make a scene.'

'Don't make a scene,' she spat. 'What about your little fat tart? Spilling her wine, spilling out of her dress.'

'She's not my tart. She's nothing to do with me.' Up until ten minutes ago, it had been the truth.

'You invited her here.'

'I mentioned it to her. She likes reading.'

'Everyone likes reading. You are such a slut, Laure. You should have been born a man.'

'But then you would not want to fuck me.'

'Go to hell.'

'Gladly,' she said and went to intercept Erica. Hilde shouted after her, as together they walked away once more from the bookshop. 'Bitch!'

Erica at least knew better than to look back. Laure asked, 'Your bag is gone?'

'Yes,' she said, and there was a definite wobble in her voice.

‘Did you lose much?’

‘My books, my key.’

‘There are more books, spare keys.’

‘I can’t afford it.’

That surprised Laure. The girl was clearly well off, spending her summer here instead of working.

‘Your money?’

‘I have some in my room. Enough, but not to replace what’s gone.’

‘It’ll come around,’ said Laure, slinging her arm back around Erica. ‘Shall we go to Barbara’s?’

‘Yes,’ said Erica eagerly, and then, seeming to realize she was being offered another option, ‘If you want to?’

‘For a bit,’ said Laure.

There was music filling the stairwell when they arrived at Barbara’s parents’ place.

‘The Bee Gees!’ exclaimed Erica. ‘I love them!’

‘Michel does too,’ said Laure repressively. Now they were in the relative privacy of the apartment block, she allowed her hand to drift lower, to the small of Erica’s back. It was curved like an Arp, no hard edges anywhere. Erica jolted but then leaned into Laure’s touch and Laure turned her smoothly, pressing her against the wall. Laure’s leg went between Erica’s and they kissed, Erica ready this time, her mouth opening, her hot tongue finding Laure’s.

‘There you are.’ Léa was on the landing above, grinning down at them. ‘Come on, I need you to settle an argument, Laure.’

She held out her hand to Erica, who giggled breathlessly and climbed up to meet her. Laure followed into the dark and smoky apartment, shrugging off her coat and closing the

door behind. She did not know how the neighbours tolerated the noise, but they had never once, according to Barbara, complained.

The apartment was not large, and could have fitted inside Pauline's drawing room. It was split into several small rooms, more wall than space, but their group was crammed into the kitchen, Michel and Françoise dancing in the only floorspace, and the others arranged on the counter and chairs, candles lit and placed on top of the fridge. Léa had pulled Erica onto a chair with her, and Barbara poured two more glasses of wine.

'What's the debate?' asked Laure over the noise, leaning against the table and accepting her glass.

'*India Song*,' said Agnès. She was smoking, though she didn't usually. Everyone was, Laure realized, even Erica accepting puffs of Léa's joint, which Laure hoped she realized was cannabis. Something in the air, infecting them all tonight. Laure liked to think it was her. Michel said she was not the bellwether for their group, but the weather itself.

'Trash,' said Barbara dismissively, and then, mindful of Erica, repeated herself in English. 'Trash. It's self-absorbed, shallow, narcissistic, colonialist trash.'

'The characters are self-absorbed and colonialist,' said Léa. 'The film shows them to be and so is not.' Léa turned to Laure, who was focused on the deep valley of Erica's cleavage. 'What do you think?'

'I think you are both correct.'

Barbara threw up her hands in exasperation. 'We should never have asked the post-structuralist.'

'*Student* of post-structuralism.' Laure refilled her glass. 'Now you mention it, didn't Duras say herself in an inter-

view the meaning to the images came after? So if the director herself had no hold on a fixed point, why should you, or you, Léa.'

'Fine, so we are both correct. But what do you think?' said Léa. 'You loved it when we went together.'

'I didn't love it. It revolted me, and it amazed me.'

'That's a contradiction.'

'It's a truth. Both things fit, and they cannot sit together. You have to break it all apart.'

'I'm too high for this,' said Claude, swinging his legs against the cabinets.

'Me too,' said Léa, resting her head on Erica's shoulder. She was a good foil for Erica, wispy and blonde next to Erica's luxuriant darkness. Erica was sitting quite still and smiling, taking brief puffs of the spliff she was clearly not inhaling. Laure wondered about giving her a brief précis of the discussion, for in their temper they'd all switched back to French, but she seemed content, the dear. Let her not trouble herself.

The record ended and Barbara left to change it while Michel and Françoise continued shimmying to the silence until Christophe pulled Michel in to him with his legs and wrapped them around his waist. Michel freed himself and leaned over to Laure and asked,

'Did you see Hilde?'

'Mm.'

'You should let her go, you know.'

'I am not holding her.'

'Make her hate you, at least.'

'I'm doing my best.'

Michel snorted. 'You forget I know you, sorcière. And this one?'

He meant Erica.

‘She’s only here for the summer.’

‘Mm.’

•

Erica was listening very hard. She wished she could mark her place in the conversation, as she did in her books, and reference her dictionary. She thought sadly of her lost Collins, a gift from her father on her sixteenth birthday, when she first started saving for Paris. It was the first and only gift he’d given her that made her think he understood her. She had years of notes, novel ideas, lines for poems she never got around to writing, and observations from her trip, all gone. But this night was tumbling her along, and with the same feeling one might get white-water rafting, she was terrified and exhilarated.

She could sense Laure beside her, her cool energy, the burning coal at the centre of it. A cord, binding them. Erica had thought about kissing girls before, practised on Lydia’s hand before dances and given each other love bites. Once she had rolled back and forth with Rosie on Rosie’s parents’ bed, fully clothed. It was make-believe, play-pretend.

But this was different. Desire had steam-rolled her the moment Laure kissed her briefly in the street. She wanted the woman in ways she didn’t wholly understand the mechanics of, knowing only the in and out of the two boys she had slept with at school. What did this mean? *Straight*, Léa had said. Was she fully aware until this evening, in a room full of not-straight people, that there was another possibility? Her parents had never mentioned it. They’d never mentioned sex at all. She didn’t see anyone else naked until the changing rooms before swimming at school, and then she’d only focused

on how other girls' ribcages showed, how their hips were narrow and their breasts high and neat.

She felt like the whole room could sense her arousal, as though she was giving off a scent. She drank more wine to quiet the sensation, but it only made her feel heavier and more languid. She tried to concentrate on the conversation, but it had drifted on. They all spoke so *fast*. She was sure English people did not speak so fast.

She took another toke, careful not to inhale, and when the music started again it was something French she didn't know, but she got to her feet with Léa anyway, swaying her hips and remembering to suck in her stomach. Laure did not dance but Erica felt they danced together anyway, every motion a call and response. Claude moved close on a slow, shmaltzy tune and she enjoyed using him, imagining his hands as Laure's. Though she hadn't inhaled, she felt high, the room thick with smoke and the candles burning low. Claude was singing along to the song, his breath tickling her ear. He had a nice voice, and she told him so.

'Merci, belle. You like Claude François?' She thought he was talking about himself in the third person. His hard-on was pressing into her thigh. She wondered how to excuse herself as he went on, 'He died you know. This year, electrocuted in his bath.'

'No, he was fixing a lightbulb,' said Laure. She was suddenly at Erica's back, as tall as Claude, and she gently and firmly extracted Erica from his grip. 'Allez.'

Erica nodded, her whole body seeming to vibrate with want. The others were pairing off, she saw. Michel and Christophe were kissing passionately, as were Barbara and Françoise. Marie and Agnès were gone, though Erica hadn't

noticed them leave, and as Laure led Erica from the smoky kitchen she saw Claude shrug and close in on Léa, who had been dancing alone.

‘Is she—’ started Erica, but Laure cut her off.

‘They’ve done it before.’

‘But should we—’

Laure stopped her words with a kiss. Erica moaned and let herself go limp, like a kitten bitten on the neck by its mother. She could not believe she was kissing a woman, but if she let herself forget and thought just of the kiss, it was so good she allowed the implications not to trouble her, as natural as letting her hand tangle in Laure’s hair, pull her tighter into her body. Now was not the time for thoughts. She felt Laure’s hand slip between her legs and press her just so, and wondered if she really was going to let this happen here – yes, the answer was yes, – but then Laure stopped kissing her and said, ‘Come on.’

It was very dark outside, purplish traffic fumes obscuring the stars. Erica felt breathless, sobered by the night air, and knew if Laure kissed her again she would not, could not, want to stop. But was it so bad? Here, under the glowing, lovely Paris pollution, she did not think it could be. Laure walked fast on her long legs, and Erica had to scurry to keep up. As they left the residential neighbourhood and crossed the fifth, the black sprawl of the Jardin du Luxembourg spread away like a vast sea to their left. It was ringed with a high gate but there were shadows everywhere, the surrounding buildings imperious and mute. Erica pulled on Laure’s hand, a question – *here?* She did not know if she could wait much longer for whatever was about to happen. But Laure shook her head and hurried her on, through busier streets and quieter ones, past cat-calling

men and tramps asleep on benches, the closed-up boxes of the bouquinistes, across the Pont de la Tournelle and the shining Seine, the rarefied silence of Île Saint-Louis and Pont de Marie, into the heart of Le Marais.

At last, after what must have been an hour, Laure pulled a set of keys from her coat and unlocked a gate, slipping through into an unlit cobbled courtyard littered with broken furniture, and stopping before a barricaded door. Laure unlocked two padlocks and slid across a bolt, gesturing Erica inside. She only hesitated a moment, knowing if Laure were a man she would have run screaming. Instead she went inside and stood in the dark while Laure closed and locked the door behind her, and led her up a flight of what sounded like metal steps, through a final locked door, and then clicked open her lighter.

‘Welcome,’ said Laure, dropping her hand. Erica stood as though in a night forest, listening for rustling, for clues. Laure lit candles that poured small pools of light onto a table littered with bottles and ashtrays and books. It smelled bad in here, stale, but then Laure was offering her a beer and putting on a record. ‘Crimson and Clover’ seeped from the player, scratchy and seductive. As Erica’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw Laure covering a battered leather sofa with a sheepskin. Her shirtsleeves were pushed up and her forearms glowed in the candlelight, pale and luminous as a Vermeer, and Erica thought how this song would always be this moment for her, Laure lit just so, and a squat in Paris, and unbearable desire. Erica set down her undrunk beer on a cluttered sideboard and went to her.

Laure straightened as she approached and regarded Erica with the same cool challenge she’d first looked at her with. Her collarbones were sharp enough to cut. Erica placed her tongue

into the hollow of one and licked it, tasting salt. Laure did not move. She was letting Erica take the lead. Erica understood it was another test, and this time, she was determined not to fail.

•

Laure woke from a sleep better than any she'd had in months. Years maybe, since she was a girl in her childhood bedroom with the iron bedstead and broken-sprung mattress. Light was leaking in through the unlined curtain, and it was cold, as it always was first thing in her apartment no matter the weather.

Apartment was an optimistic word – Laure had been squatting here since its previous inhabitant, Anita, a Maoist she'd had a brief fling and then a long friendship with, moved back to Uruguay. It was an ex-joinery, and the air still smelled of sawdust. The sofa was Anita's as was all the furniture, the smoke-stained curtains, the mugs. Laure's only additions were the books and an unframed print of the album cover of *Blue*, tacked up over the boarded-up fireplace. Laure had taken the board down briefly when she first took over the apartment, and quickly understood why Anita had kept it blocked. If it was not pigeon shit dropping down it, it was pigeons themselves, sometimes dead but worse and more often, half dead. She hated having to break their poor little necks. Vegetarian was a dirty word in her father's house, even here in Paris among her student friends, but even if she could afford it Laure doubted she would eat meat.

Laure shivered. She was completely naked, the sheepskin meagre shelter and the sofa's flaking leather sticking to her side. She peeled herself upright and looked around. Erica was gone. Laure felt a swooping sensation: relief and disappointment. The same mix she had felt on the steps of the Sacré-Cœur. Erica had been an eager lover, not experienced

but inspired, and perhaps because her expectations had been low Laure had come under her tongue harder than she ever had with Pauline, or even Hilde. Erica's own orgasm was something Laure had to coax out of her with patient repetition. She was, as so many first-timers were, guarded about her own pleasure, at first not wanting Laure to go down on her. But when she did come she was more beautiful than ever, that blush all over her body just as Laure had imagined, her thighs soft and dimpled, her belly loose and velvet.

They had stayed up and talked after, the post-coital radiance softening Laure as it sometimes did, laying her bare in a way that always surprised her most of all. She'd talked about Michel and Marie, her first friends in the city, how Michel had bought all her food for the first few months until her funding came in. Laure had promised to take Erica sightseeing, to Père-Lachaise and the catacombs, to see the Monets at L'Orangerie.

She pulled on a jumper and her underwear, found mismatched woollen socks and began the arduous task of making coffee. She'd skip-dived a coffee grinder and bought a cafetière from Bastille market, mended the hairline crack at its lip with electrical tape. She was just boiling water in a pan when Erica emerged at the far end of the room, through the door that led to the grim Turkish toilet Laure never braved, looking traumatized. Laure let her gaze slide over the glug jug propped upside down to dry on the windowsill, deciding not to mention she used that when caught short.

What Laure said was, 'Yes, it's bad. At least you wore your shoes.' But what she thought was, *I am so happy to see you.*

•

When she eventually found it, Erica thought she would vomit at the sight of the toilet. It was a hole in the ground, splattered

with all manner of things. But the thought of throwing up and coming face to face with that hell hole made her determined not to, so she clamped her mouth shut and pissed holding her nose, and got out as fast as she could.

The magic of the previous night and early hours of the morning were fading in the face of the squalor Laure lived in. The building seemed mostly deserted, an old factory of some kind, winches hanging from the ceiling and a pleasant herbal smell once she was out from under the fetid cloche of Laure's room. But some of the doors she tried led onto other dwellings, unlocked and full of sleeping figures. She only glimpsed inside before hastily closing them, noting that they were similarly shabby, but none were so sordid as Laure's. It had taken Erica a full minute to cross the cluttered floorboards, covered in bottles and piles of dirty laundry, ashtrays and glasses that appeared to be stolen from a variety of local bars, the heels of bread and mouldy butter scrapings on plates, coasters, and sometimes pamphlets. It looked no better on her return, and Laure showed no sign of embarrassment as she picked her way back to the sofa across the scattered islands of floorboard, pulling the sheepskin over herself as in her haste for the bathroom she had not replaced her bra.

'You don't use that?' she asked, at last.

'Of course not. I go to the café across the street.'

'And when it is closed?'

Laure shrugged. 'I hold it.'

'That's not good for you, you know,' said Erica. 'Gives you infections.'

Laure offered her coffee. It was burnt and strong but Erica drank a whole cup, knowing that even if she'd been offered milk it would be taking her life in her hands to accept.

‘Where do you wash these?’ she asked, unable to stop herself.

‘Down the hall. There’s plumbing, a sink, a shower. Only for us women.’

‘There are other women living here?’ Erica had seen only men.

‘Three of us. But the men are fine too. They don’t use the toilet either.’

‘Someone does.’

‘It is a bit different from your pension?’

‘Yes,’ said Erica, realizing what she’d taken for the poverty of her accommodation was only basic. She knew she was being rude but the lack of sleep and the shock of the room in daylight had forced it from her.

‘We are not all in Paris only for our summers.’ Laure did not sound offended. In fact, she seemed a little amused.

‘Of course. It’s expensive, to live here?’

‘Expensive to live,’ said Laure. ‘But I am barely here. I am at the library, or class, or the community café Michel runs, or at Marie and Agnès’. It’s somewhere to sleep.’

‘And sleep with people?’

Laure laughed shortly. ‘I must admit I am usually at theirs.’

‘I’m honoured.’

‘Tant pis.’ Laure raised her cup. ‘You did lose your key.’

Erica groaned and fell back on the sofa. ‘I’d almost forgotten. I have to pay for a new key.’

‘Do you have enough?’

Erica fumbled on the floor for her bra. Her emergency fifty francs were nowhere to be seen. ‘I had a note somewhere. It must have fallen out when we . . .’

She felt her easiness vanish, her brief feeling of superiority

fade. She felt the furious blush again, the traitorous blood rushing to her face.

‘Fucked?’ offered Laure.

‘Do you have to use that word?’

‘Made love?’ smirked Laure, and Erica hated her a little bit, as much for her teasing as for how good she looked, even in this foul room with dark circles like gouges under her eyes, her hair lank with grease. She began rolling another cigarette, and Erica saw her nails were bitten, and tinged yellow with tobacco.

‘Slept together.’

‘Ah, you like a euphemism.’

‘Where do you learn your English?’ Erica shook her head. ‘Honestly? All of you speak it so well.’

‘Joni Mitchell.’ Laure jabbed her thumb at the tacked-up poster. ‘Books. Films. It’s the language of the oppressor but the oppressor has good music.’

‘Oppressor?’ Erica snorted, feeling oddly defensive. ‘We fought with you in the War.’

‘You are not an imperialist, are you?’

‘Let me guess – you are a pacifist.’

‘Aren’t we all? But no I believe war is sometimes a necessity. But it should be fought between soldiers, not civilians. Did you know two million civilians died from war-related causes in your colony of India alone?’

Erica blinked. She had not known this. ‘What about your colonies?’

‘Six hundred thousand,’ said Laure. ‘And double that in French Indochina.’

‘So why are we the oppressors?’

‘Come on. You and les Ricains run culture, or think you

do. You export all your books and films and import none of ours. You think yourself superior because we all speak your language, but it is because it's been forced into our mouths and you think yourself above learning ours.'

'I tried to speak French to you,' Erica said, her cheeks hot.

'It was so bad,' said Laure, lighting up. 'It hurt my ears.'

Now Erica hated her simply because she was rude. More than that, she was being cruel. Erica knew girls like her, knew they thrived off reaction, but she could not help it. She stood up and snatched her bra from the floor, kicking aside detritus, trying to find her fifty-franc note. She wanted to get out of here, take a hot shower and forget she'd ever met this horrid, grimy woman.

'Mais non,' said Laure. 'I'm teasing.'

Erica ignored her. The red wine sick feeling that had risen in the toilet was growing again, and she refused to throw up in front of Laure. But she needed her fifty francs. In the room at the pension she had her allowance for food, for museums and occasional metros, but the new key would wipe her out.

'What are you looking for?'

'My fifty francs,' said Erica.

Laure leant forward, clenching her cigarette between her teeth, and joined in sifting through the mess on her floor. Erica moved aside a bottle of red wine that spilt its dregs over her foot.

'Ugh! How do you live like this!'

'Very well thank you,' said Laure, unconcerned. 'Voilà.'

She held up the crumpled note and Erica snatched it off her. 'Merci.'

Bundling her bra under her arm, because she did not want to undress in front of Laure, she stomped over the heaps to the door.

‘Attends,’ said Laure. She pushed herself off the sofa and scooped her keys off the table, and walked deliberately slowly to Erica. She was completely naked, and flashes of the early morning reared at Erica: Laure’s long, deft fingers between her legs, inside her, the perfect pressure and rhythm, her long, boyish body pressing into her, all hip bones and ribs. Her beautiful pink nipple, like a nut in her mouth.

Laure smirked as though she knew exactly what Erica was thinking. She bent down and scooped a shirt off a heap, pulling it over her head. It was unbuttoned to her breastbone and Erica could see the points of her nipples through the fabric. Her clitoris throbbed and she hated Laure all the more. The woman stood over her, her hips slung forward like a man. How did she smell so good, when she also smelt of cigarettes and stale wine and sex? There was a scent to her, like sap or honey. Erica had found it on her hair, along her collarbones, inside her. ‘I have to come down with you, unlock the padlocks.’

Erica gave a tight nod, trying to ignore how her stomach swooped at the contact between their bodies, Erica’s hand on the door handle and Laure’s over it, their hips touching. She knew she was going to have to kiss her, though her mouth tasted vile. She had to touch her, to feel her against her. She tried to resist it, and with a defiant jut of her chin she said, ‘The French invaded Britain, you know. You colonized us.’

Laure laughed, and dropped her keys.

•

Their lovemaking was faster this time, no savouring each other. Laure pulled Erica’s hair, Erica bit her nipple. They knew what worked for each other, and both wanted to get to the point, the release. Erica was louder this time, freer, and it was pleas-

unable to learn her abilities were not beginner's luck. She was a good lover, instinctive, as Laure herself was. They were both sweating when Erica came, quivering and dropping against Laure, her warm breasts pressed against her, her gorgeous weight pinning her down. Oh but she was a *woman*, with her soft belly and full ass, her hip bones hidden like buried treasure, striking like gold bars against Laure's own. Laure reached to turn Erica's mouth up to hers, but Erica burrowed her face in deeper to her shoulder, taking her weight on her elbows.

'Don't. I stink.'

'I don't care.'

'I do.' Erica pushed up, clutching her discarded dress to herself and turning away to fasten her bra.

'I have seen you naked,' said Laure, amused, propping herself up on her elbows. 'Up close.'

'Don't,' said Erica, and from her voice alone Laure knew she was blushing. 'I'm gross.'

'Excuse me?'

Erica said nothing, pulling the dress over her head and turning to look down at her. 'I do know I'm fat.'

'And?'

'You're meant to say I'm not fat!'

'I don't care. I like it.'

'How can you like it?'

'Your breasts, your ass. I like them. I like your body.'

Erica was studying her face. She seemed genuinely shocked.

'I saw that girl you slept with.'

'Hilde?'

'She's beautiful. Slim.'

'She is,' Laure shrugged. 'You are beautiful too.'

Erica snorted and pulled on her knickers. Laure followed

her lead and got dressed too, pulling on slacks and a shirt. 'You must know you are. I've seen all the men look at you.'

'Men look at anything.'

'And women?'

'I hadn't thought about it before.'

Laure retrieved her half-smoked cigarette, her lighter, keys, some loose change. 'You should.' She unlocked the door. 'Shall we get a drink?'

'It's the morning.'

'Bof.' Laure locked the door behind them and led the way through the warren of the squat, unlocking and locking, and finally barricading the outside door. When she turned to the cluttered courtyard, Erica was chewing her thumbnail.

'I'm not . . . you know.'

'Quoi?'

Erica gestured at her.

Laure fought an instinctive desire to close her arms over her body. She stood straighter instead. 'A lesbian?'

Erica blushed. Laure brushed past her, leading the way to the gate onto the street. Her chest hurt suddenly. Too much wine, that was all. Too many cigarettes. She rubbed her breastbone. Erica was hanging back. She looked stricken.

'It's OK,' Laure said over her shoulder. 'You aren't the first tourist I've fucked. Sorry, *slept with*.'

Erica winced. Good. She unlocked the gate and bowed Erica through.