

la Révolution de Ventôse

BAYARD GODSAVE

Time loves only those it has given birth to itself...

—Vasily Grossman

I have read about the neutron bombs. In the books there are diagrams of radiation waves, tipped with arrowheads, passing through the walls of houses, seeking out the families inside. When they were detonated, green flashbulbs going off up in the night sky, most were killed by the radiation instantly. Some held on for a few days, but these were not many. Paris itself remained standing, like it had never been touched—this, after all, is the purpose of a neutron bomb—empty like a museum at night. Empty and unlivable, draped in fallout.

The war went on for years without Paris, and when it was over the survivors, the defeated, from Africa and Britain and Spain and Germany, were captured and brought here, though the rad-counts were still very high, and the factories went up and the survivors went to work. These were our grandparents, the first slave-laborers, the first settlers of radioactive Paris, the City of the Faint Glow.

Today I am fifteen years old. Middle aged. I will go to see Maman while Lucien is at work.

“Masha,” she says to me, “you are as big as a house. Come and sit.”

When Papa was alive he used to say that Maman was spring loaded, and in her old age she still has the energy of the woman I

remember from when I was a little girl, even if she is stooped a bit and her once elegant legs are like twigs in her stockings. “Maman, your hair,” I say. It has only been a few weeks since I saw her, a month maybe, but I can see that it has grown thin, like a fluttery veil.

Maman shrugs and looks away over the city. “It is only hair,” she says. Maman’s apartment is big and mostly empty. In the winter whatever furniture she has will often go in the fireplace. There is a chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the main room, and all of the windows look out over the river.

“So,” she says. “What shall we do for your special day?”

“I want to go to the musée,” I tell her.

The Louvre Museum of Paris was once famous around the world. When Maman was my age and carrying me in her belly, the government decided to remove the art inside, to take it to where there is no fallout, so the people who live on the outside could look at it. A line of helicopters stretched away to the horizon and soldiers in their grey uniforms, with breathe-masks to protect them from our sicknesses, marched to the steps of the museum. The people fought them for seven days. Many, many people died. They fought with whatever weapons they could find, with swords from the display cases in the museum, or with the rifles that are found from time to time hidden in the basements and catacombs, from before, from when Paris was free. They threw fire and blew themselves up. From the rooftops men devised catapults to bring down the helicopters. And on the eighth day the government determined that the artwork was too contaminated to come into contact with the people outside anyway, and agreed to leave it in the safekeeping of the workers.

When I walk amongst the paintings, my throat feels closing-shut in sadness. Not bad sadness, but good sadness. The sadness of seeing your children born or the sadness of sunrise. My favorites are the pictures of women like me from the oldentimes, women who worked for the masters pouring milk from large pitchers into bowls. Maman is drawn more and more to the pictures of the impossibly old, wizened and pocked and so sad at how unavoidable it is. Maman's parents were nearly her age when she was born. She was born here, and they were gone before she was six.

Maman and I stand in front of the painting of the famous mother who washed her boy with oil after the mob tied him to the cross. The boy is famous too. But in this picture she is pregnant with him and communing with the angels. Maman puts her hand on my belly and the baby kicks. "Strong legs," she says, "like you had."

"He is strong," I say, "I think you will be a grandmother this time, Maman."

"I think so too."

After the musée, Maman and I wait for Lucien at the trains. We are still in the Windy Month, so night time comes early. Lucien only ever gets to see the sun in the Hot Month and the Month of Fruits. Until not long ago I worked at the factories too, but now I stay home, and when my boy is born I will stay home with him until he is old enough. Then he will go with me to the factory, where he will be taken to work with the other children and he will not see me again until it is time to go home at night. The children always cry on the first day. I cried every day for all ten days of the week when they took

me away from Maman. But we all must work, and in this way none of us is special.

We can hear the trains scream from far off, hovering on magnetic cushions as they sail towards us—not like the Metro trains that sit so heavily on their tracks—and though they are painted black like the night—Lucien says this is so that enemy aeroplanes cannot so easily bomb them and upset the economy—we can see their blinking lights from far away and in no time they are on top of us and the doors open with a pneumatic hiss and the workers crowd onto the platforms with the smell and heat of the factories still on them.

When Lucien sees us, his expression does not change, but he embraces me for a moment and then kisses Maman on both of her cheeks.

I put my arms around Lucien's neck and then walk alongside him. I tell him about the musée. "Lucien does not care for the paintings," I say to Maman. "Not like we do, but he loves the sculptures. The big one of Napoleon is his favorite. Isn't that right Lucien?"

"Oui," Lucien says. He puts a cigarette in his lips and nods his head. "Oui," he says again.

Maman is insistent that we go somewhere to eat, so we stop at the café on Avenue President Kennedy on our way home. It is full of people just off work, workers with their wives or husbands or lovers. The owner, who knows Lucien, clears a table for us and pushes some of the other patrons aside to make room for me and my big belly.

Dinner is onion soup and bread and cold beef with bottles of beer. Maman and Lucien have the liter bottles, I have the small one. After we've eaten Maman and Lucien order more beer. Lucien is quiet but

Maman talks a lot when she drinks. “Everyone likes to complain,” she says. She is saying this, in part, for the benefit of the table next to us, who are, as we say, Philosophers, that is they like to search for the reasons for things and the reasons they discover are always sad. “But as long as I can have a full stomach, and beer, the world is not so bad, eh?”

Lucien crosses his arms over his chest and looks through his cigarette smoke at the Philosophers. “There have been rolling water shut-offs in the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse. Invalides is next. If they don’t do something, the riots will be worse than last summer.”

“Lucien is such a worrier,” I say. Lucien shakes his head and smokes. He does not look at the Philosophers now. Lucien is older than me, he is twenty-two, so he knows more about things than I do—also, he is a man. Sometimes he thinks I am a silly girl, but he loves me too because I am small and generous and will give him as many babies as he wants.

“Last summer it was the blacks.” Maman is slurring her speech now. She doesn’t realize that she can no longer drink like she did when she was younger, before she started losing so much weight, before the sickness materialized. “Always it is the blacks.”

Lucien stubs out his cigarette and signals for the owner to bring us our bill.

I am making tea for Svetlana the anthropologist, though I know she would never take her breathe-mask off to drink it. She will tell me not to go to the trouble, that I shouldn’t let the tea go to waste when we have so little, but I will tell her this is nonsense. We have plenty of tea—even though we do not, this is just what you do when you

have guests, you make them tea. And when she is leaving she will try to give me a gift of a box of tea, which I will refuse, and which I will find later left somewhere after she is gone.

“Are you excited about the baby?” she says. When we talk, we take turns speaking into a microphone. “It won’t be long now, will it?”

“Yes,” I say. When I think of him, I cannot help but smile. “I am very excited.”

“And Lucien?”

“Lucien is excited too.”

“In what ways does he let you know that he is excited?”

Svetlana the anthropologist always has questions for me like this. From what I say about me and Lucien she will try to make ideas about everyone in Paris. I tried once to tell her that this would not work. Lucien and I are regular people, but there are a lot of different ways for people to be regular. She told me not to think of that, to answer the questions as honestly as I could. I like Svetlana the anthropologist, and I want to help her. “Lucien is excited,” I say. “But I have let him down before and I think he wants to wait until the baby is here and alive and healthy before showing me his excitement.”

Svetlana the anthropologist smiles. Her mask is one with a clear plastic front so I can see her face, not like the masks the soldiers wear, the rubber masks that make them look like insects.

“And I know that it will be healthy because I feel different this time. Before, with the others, I felt so sad. I don’t feel sad this time. He will be a strong boy.”

“I hope so,” she says. She is smiling still. Her teeth are straight, but a little gray. “And Lucien recently received a promotion at work, right?”

“Yes,” I say. “He is a squad leader.”

“That’s a management position.”

I nod. I know what she is thinking.

“Has he noticed any changes? Do his old co-workers, his friends, do they treat him any different now?”

“Everybody likes Lucien,” I tell her. Lucien was so angry when he was promoted, even though it meant more money and vouchers for us. Sometimes, in the bad periods, like we had last summer, the managers begin to die mysteriously. Every morning for a week they will pull them out of the Seine. Or one night the trains might empty out and there are five or six of them left in the vacant cars, stabbed to death. And it is always the squad leaders first. I told him that we’d just had a bad period, so we are not due for one for a long time. And people look up to him. They will not want to hurt him. “He is a good squad leader,” I say.

After she has shut off the tape, Svetlana the anthropologist shows me a picture of her family. She has a little girl with curly red hair like hers. Her husband is bald like he has the sickness, but he is healthy and has a strong square jaw. I laugh when I look at him. “His head is shaped like a pin,” I say.

She laughs too, because she knows that I am joking. “He is a professor at my university,” she says. “I was his student and we fell in love.” Then her smile disappears. “What I write about you, Masha, I want you to know I don’t believe a word of it.”

I am confused by this, but I can tell she wants me to understand, so I nod.

“There are people who think that all of this is terrible. My

husband and I wish that things could be better for you and Lucien and everyone else. That there was no Parisian Work Colony. But those people, all of us are too afraid to say anything. I wish that I could write the truth about you but I can't. I can only write what they want to hear. That all of you are happy and healthy, productive members of society. I'm sorry."

I want to make her smile again. "Why should it matter to me what you write about us? I will never read it, will I?"

Svetlana the anthropologist does smile at this, but it is a smile I don't believe. She stands. "Be safe, Masha," she says. She always says this, *Be safe, Masha*, but this time it sounds different the way she says it.

In the four years of my marriage to Lucien, I have never lied to him except once, and that was less of a lie and more that I did not tell him about something. A year and a half ago I took a lover. Robie. Robie is a black. Robie is Lucien's age and he already has the sickness so bad that he has been moved to the *hôtel des Invalides*, which is strange because Robie is strong. He has given his wife three little children. I should not go to see him, but all morning I have wanted to look at his face one more time and so I am going.

Since Svetlana the anthropologist's visit, I have been thinking about what it is to live in this place. Always she is looking at us with pity and sadness. I rarely feel sad. But I forget too. I forget that Lucien has gone almost without food—the meal Maman bought us at the café is all he's had for three days now—and continues to work in the factories, all so that I can eat, so that my baby will be strong.

Once, Svetlana the anthropologist showed me pictures of the city where she and her husband live. The buildings were all the color of sidewalks or a rainy sky, and instead of windows they had mirrors. She has a car—there are very few left here, and fewer that run, most have been taken apart and turned into other things, like kettles or pans—and a picture frame where the pictures inside change and move. But everyone looked so afraid in those pictures. I pointed to one of the buildings, which towered above the rest and shone white with a glow that seemed to come from the inside. The windows reflected everything outward. “This building makes me sad,” I said.

She looked at the picture. “That’s the Cultural Center. My husband and I saw La Boheme there recently.”

“I don’t like it,” I said.

Look at this city. There are so many pretty things here. The fountains, even though they are shut off at this time of year, I can still hear the water splashing off the cement bowls until it almost sounds like voices. There are so many shapes and colors. My favorite house is on the way to Robie’s hospital, yellow with white trim, with a big triangle roof, and inside the triangle are cherubs and fauns dancing and playing pipes. There is so much in this city that is made only to look at. Pictures and sculptures and arches and cathedrals. I understand why Svetlana the anthropologist feels sad about us. We don’t live long, compared to the people outside at least. But, I want to tell her, we live well.

Robie’s bed is on the fifth floor, and as I wind up the long, wide, marble stairway, I have to step over many who have the sickness who

are laid out there, waiting for their own beds. The beds are pushed together close, and everything is quiet but for the low moaning and coughs of the sick. The smog has settled low over us this afternoon, and outside the windows the city is draped in mist, like a phantom city or a dream. When I see him I stop. Even from this far away I can see how skinny he is. He has grown a thin, patchy beard that is grey in places. I remember the first time that we were together, holding his smooth cheeks in my hands as I took his mouth to mine. The tight curls of his chest hair, soft and yet coarse all at once.

I duck behind a pillar and look at him from afar. He is asleep and surrounded by his family. His wife, who is his age, looks tired, and her body is beginning to droop in places. She is a black too, and has long coils of hair down to her waist. She holds one of her children, the youngest, Tommie, who was born only six months ago. The other two, little girls named Sofie and Joyce, I don't know which is which, sit on the bed with their father. One sits at the edge with her toes touching the grey tile floor, she clutches one of his hands and looks hard at Robie's closed eyes—as I wish I could, were I able to get near him—like she is trying to will them open. The other is stretched out on the bed with him and reads to him from a book. A picture book. I wonder if she can read—yes, some of us can read, some of us understand symbols, but there are many of us who don't—or if she is merely describing to him the pictures.

There are rules when it comes to taking a lover. A lover is a temporary thing, a thing that exists in the present tense only. One must think of one's lover the way a child sees the world: as something that disappears when he shuts his eyes. When Robie and I are

together, it is okay for my heart to feel whatever it is natural for it to feel, but when he is gone I must not think of him. He is not mine. I love Lucien. Love, though, sometimes grows too comfortable and we sometimes need something different. Everyone knows this. But lovers are only to serve a purpose, and they should not make us crazy like when we are in love with someone. I should not feel about Robie the way I feel about Lucien. But here I am, at the *hôtel des Invalides*, breaking all the rules.

Maman has had many lovers. But she does not love them and they do not love her, and they will not miss her when she is gone, not the way I will miss her, or the way she misses Papa. Some, I am sure, will never know that she is gone—and some must be gone themselves, though to her they are still alive, as much as an absent lover can be said to be alive, that is, they exist in her mind frozen, awaiting one more encounter, or the going dark of her consciousness, at which point all of the images in her mind will be lost forever.

I wonder not for the first time if my baby will come out looking like Robie, if my baby will be black—it is strong like Robie, when Lucien's babies have all been weak—and instead of pushing that thought away, for the fear it brings me, I hold onto it. A part of him that will go on after he is gone, after I leave this place of sickness, and never see him again. "Your father and I used to lie awake together, and I would listen as he described for me the books he read," I would tell him. Our child. Our strong boy.

As I am watching him and thinking these things, Robie's wife turns and our gazes meet. She has bags under her eyes and I think she is ugly, and I wonder what Robie ever saw in her. She calls the nurse

over and whispers to her and glances at me as she speaks, and then the nurse is coming towards me.

As she approaches I am thinking of Robie and Lucien meeting on a shaded street. They shake hands and smile at one another.

“You foolish girl,” the nurse says. Her lips are painted bright red, and she looks old like the paintings in the museum. “You shouldn’t be here,” she says, and takes me by the arm and leads me away from Robie and his wife and his children.

I tell the nurse that I am tired, and that I have a long walk home. She looks at my belly, maybe she is noticing it for the first time. She sits me down on the marble steps and then goes away for a moment. It is so stupid. Coming here like this. Why do I love so much?

The nurse returns with a glass of water and hands it to me. “You cannot come here bothering our patients like this.”

“I am sorry,” I say. “Thank you for the water.”

She nods and looks away. “Do you have a husband?”

“Yes.”

“Go home to him. Put this other one behind you.”

“Thank you,” I say again.

“You can stay until you get your strength back, but I don’t want you to bother any more of our patients.”

When I leave the hospital, the sunset is orange and pink and green through the smog. From all directions I can hear the sound of voices echoing through the streets and alleys. Far away the voices sound like chanting, but up close they are chaotic and angry. In the distance I can see our neighborhood. Helicopters hover over it and

fire red tracer bullets at the silhouetted rooftops, the windows of the buildings beginning glow and throb with the fires inside. The sound of voices is joined now by the sound of explosions. The pops of gunfire. Soon the street is filled with smoke and people running. This should not be happening. It is only a few months since the last bad period. My thoughts go to Maman. My thoughts go to Lucien at the factories, who will think I am safe at home, but will worry anyway and will maybe be too busy worrying about me to worry about himself. The street is filling with more and more people, their anger directed at nothing, but also it is directed at everything. The helicopters are hovering over Invalides now. Over the loudspeakers they tell us to disperse or they will open fire. I am knocked on the back of my head with something, an elbow or a rock, and I fall to the pavement. My head feels split in two and I am so tired I can feel myself falling into unconsciousness. I curl myself around my belly. I only need to stay awake. I only need to stay in a ball. The people run blind in the smoke and kick my legs and back and arms and head, they trip over me and curse at me and run. They throw bricks and bottles of fire. I only need to protect my boy. My strong boy. I only need to bring him into this world, this world that is cruel to us in countless ways, this world that is the only one given to us, I only need to see him and to show him the things that are beautiful and to tell him that those are the things that he will live for. The smoke is growing thick in my throat and nose. Above us the helicopters sway and hover, and on their loudspeakers a man is counting backwards from ten. □