

# THE DISCOVERY OF THE SMILE

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## PROLOGUE

The bells of Saint-Germain are calling the faithful, but these two men are definitely not going to Sunday Mass. It is not so much their clothes that suggest this - the way they are dressed would not be inappropriate. The shorter one, a southern-looking man in his mid-twenties with carefully parted hair, wears a reasonably presentable black velvet suit. The taller one wears brown corduroy, paired with a baker boy hat and a cape with a fur collar. He is at least two heads taller than his companion. With his blond mane, he is as light as the other is dark.

No, it's not the clothes. It's the gestures and the looks. The two of them are planning something unchristian. As they walk up the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the blond Siegfried talks and gesticulates. His much smaller companion, however, is silent. He smokes, nods, and hurries to keep up with his towering companion.

They turn into Rue du Bac and head towards the Seine. At the Orsay, they push their way through the teeming crowds outside the station, dodging horse-drawn carriages and automobiles.

It has been sunny and dry over the last few days; the traffic kicks up vast amounts of dust that settles on the velvet suit and cape. When they reach the Pont de Solférino, they brush the street off each other's shoulders. They light more cigarettes. Then the men cross the Seine. The Louvre rises

up in front of them. The blond man points to the wing of the building on the river side and explains something to his companion, who acknowledges the explanation without much reaction.

Once they arrive on the other side of the river, they turn right. The blond man stops in front of a bouquinist stall. An etching seems to have piqued his interest. But before he can take a closer look, his dark companion tugs his arm. The blond man follows, albeit under mock protest.

The main entrance to the museum is reached via the Place du Carrousel, the immense courtyard of the former royal palace. It is quite busy on Sundays. Locals join the foreign Baedeker tourists looking for a cheap pastime. Entrance is free.

The two men seem to know all this and so they head for the Porte des Lions, the side entrance on the Quai des Tuileries. It is almost deserted this late morning. They throw away their half-smoked cigarettes and walk between two bronze lion statues. As they pass by, the man in the velvet suit casts a thoughtful glance at the two big cats. He knows that originally there was only one. It carried out its duties in the Tuileries until Napoleon III ordered it to be moved to the Louvre. For reasons of symmetry, the Emperor had a second lion made, an exact copy of the first one, but in reverse. The copyist took things to the extreme: the signature at the foot of the replica is 'eyraB' - the back-to-front name of the sculptor who made

the first lion. The signature is the only way of telling the original and the copy apart.

Since he visits the Louvre regularly, the shorter man knows that the two attentive Louvre lions do their work much more conscientiously than the museum guards. This is one of the reasons why he embarked on this adventure in the first place.

They head up a small staircase to the first floor and enter the Grande Galerie. One of the guards sits at the entrance, recognisable by his uniform of orange trousers and dark frock coat. The guard, a tubby man in his mid-fifties, is slumped in his chair, his sausage-like fingers interlinked in front of his paunch; he is sleeping. His bicorn hat is resting on his lap. Religious scenes hang to the left and right of the guard, a Carracci and an Albani. A host of angels watches over the guard's sleep. The blond man frowns, raises his folded hands to his temples.

The men cross the gallery briskly. Paintings from the Spanish and Italian school hang here: Velázquez and Zurbarán, Raffael and Il Correggio. As they pass these masterpieces, a change seems to have come over the two men. The blond man no longer gesticulates, and he seems to have lost his tongue somewhat. His companion, on the other hand, now holds himself more upright, even making a remark now and then.

The men don't give the impression that they are interested in the paintings. Their goal seems to be somewhere beyond the gallery. That is

the way to the Salon Carré, among other places, which is the location of many of the paintings that are particularly worth seeing. The shorter man indicates questioningly to the passage.

‘This way, Baron?’

The person being spoken to shakes his head and looks around. They are definitely not alone. All around them, visitors are roaming - middle-class families with children and maids in tow, American tourists with art catalogues, Russian aristocrats with walking sticks and sabres. The only thing that cannot be seen anywhere is a museum guard, not even a sleeping one.

‘And now for the clou,’ says the blonde man.

He points to a door that the short man had not noticed before. It is half-hidden behind a curtain and bears a sign saying: ‘No entry’. The blond man opens it and goes in. His companion follows him, if a little hesitantly.

‘Staff staircase,’ the blond man says.

They descend to the ground floor via stone steps, where they encounter a heavy oak door that is only ajar. The man in the velvet suit stops on the landing with a disbelieving expression on his face as his companion calmly peers through the crack in the door. Beyond the threshold lies a small inner courtyard. It must be visible from the windows on the upper floor.

‘Through there? I don’t like the idea,’ says the short man in heavily accented French.

‘No. I just wanted to see if the guards are playing cards in the courtyard again. No, we’re not going through there.’

‘Where then?’

‘Down, down to the dark river banks!’ the blond man calls out and hurries down a further flight of stairs. The short man shakes his head with a sigh and follows him.

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A little later, a taxi struggles up the Butte. It seems to be heading for Sacré-Coeur, the still unfinished church that is causing so much discussion. But the car turns off. The short man can be seen through the window, sitting in the back, wearing his velvet suit. The streets of Montmartre are deserted. The local residents spent the previous night, a Saturday, drinking in the ‘*Lapin Agile*’ or the ‘*Moulin de la Galette*’. They are probably still sleeping it off.

When the taxi stops in the Rue Ravignan and the man in the velvet suit gets out, he can be sure that no-one will take any notice of him. He heaves a sack over his shoulder.

The taxi leaves. Without watching it go, the short man walks over to a building. It looks as if it should be torn down sooner rather than later: a row of sheds put together without a plan, whose windows have long since boarded up and whose doors barely close. The man enters one of these hovels and walks down a narrow, dark corridor. After a while he comes to a door with a sign on it. It says: 'Poets' meeting place'. He unlocks the door and goes in.

The dwelling clearly belongs to an artist. There are pots of paint and brushes everywhere, as well as canvases. The floor is full of crumpled paper, scraps of wood and other rubbish. The man goes over to a rickety-looking table and sits down. The chair creaks.

'What's going on?' a sleepy female voice asks.

The man turns towards a part of the room that's been separated from the rest by panels of fabric. A messy bed with all sorts of covers and pillows can be discerned through the semi-transparent material. 'Nothing, Fernande. Go back to sleep.'

The only reply is a soft sigh. He digs a packet of cigarettes out of his trouser pocket. It is a new brand he's only recently discovered, made in Poland, but with a nice French name: Gauloises.

He walks over to the large easel in the middle of the room with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He looks at the canvas in silence. It is

two metres forty-four by two metres thirty-four. The painting is therefore slightly larger than its model, El Greco's 'Fifth Seal'.

A jolt runs through the short man. He takes off his jacket, reaches for a palette, blobs colour on it. When he is done, he opens the sack he brought with him. He places the contents on a chair. For a while, he looks at his latest conquest with a feverish gaze. Then he starts to paint.

## 1

Vincenzo sips the red wine. He does not really like French table wine, he would prefer Frascati or Nebbiolo. But what is he supposed to do? He can't afford anything better.

He leans back and looks around. Vincenzo has managed to get an outside seat at the '*Tortoni*', one of the first cafés on the Grands Boulevards. On this summer evening, all the tables are occupied. An endless procession of walkers pushes its way past: gents in tails and top hats, elegantly dressed ladies and, in between, a bunch of much less refined folk - labourers, housemaids and waggoners.

They wouldn't even be able to afford a glass of vin ordinaire in the '*Tortoni*', but at least they can stroll along the Boulevard des Italiens, feeling like citizens of the capital of the world.



Vincenzo can't really afford the '*Tortoni*' either. But on a summer evening like this, there is no other place you want to be. So he has thrown on his only suit, fastened a halfway fresh banded collar to his shirt and hurried over from the Italian quarter to the 10<sup>th</sup> arrondissement.

At first, Vincenzo had walked up and down for an hour. He had set his sights on cheaper establishments in the side streets. But you can't follow the spectacle of the boulevards from there - the tables there are like 'listening only' seats at the opera, not that Vincenzo had ever been to the opera, but something like that.

When he passed the '*Tortoni*', a table had just become free. He recalled the café's famous ice cream. It was said to be delicious, *como un vero gelato italiano*. Vincenzo pictured himself sitting there, enjoying a huge sundae with whipped cream. The ladies at the next tables would chuckle at the handsome fellow's huge appetite. They would cast him mischievous looks. It was a pleasant notion. So he sat down.

Vincenzo's dream had been shattered when he saw the prices. Instead of ice cream, he ordered the cheapest wine on the menu. For the past hour, he has been extending it with the free water, because he can't afford a second carafe.

Surreptitiously, he looks around, making sure that none of the waiters is nearby. Vincenzo pulls out a flask and takes two quick sips. The cheap booze burns his throat. He doubles over and coughs.

‘I beg your pardon, Monsieur?’

Startled, Vincenzo looks up and hides the flask under the table. Two gentlemen are standing in front of his table. One wears a dark three-piece suit, a pink shirt, a bowler hat and a monocle. The other is dressed in beige-coloured English tweed, much too warm for this weather. Enthroned on his pear-shaped skull is a too-small straw hat, which he now doffs.

‘A very good evening to you, Monsieur. I wanted to enquire whether these two seats might be free.’

Vincenzo looks at the man with the straw hat. He is carrying a stack of journals under his right arm - clearly an *homme des lettres*. His dandyish companion also looks like an artist. It would be easy to tell the men that he is waiting for a friend or that he is just about to settle his bill, but instead Vincenzo gets to his feet and performs a gesture that he copied from the ushers over at the Pathé Palace.

‘But of course, gentlemen. It would be an honour.’

‘Ah, that is so very kind of you. Max, come, this lifesaver has room for us.’

The men sit down and order Pouilly-Fumé, a whole bottle. The straw hat stuffs himself a pipe and begins to smoke and talk. While the aristocratic-seeming companion listens, leaning on a bamboo cane, the other talks about an exhibition. He makes disparaging remarks about an artist and an art critic. Vincenzo has never heard of either of them.

The straw hat pulls a book out of his pocket, then another and then another. He seems a bit like a magician to Vincenzo, only instead of rabbits he conjures up papers from all the folds of his garments. He opens one of them and reads a poem out to the dandy. Then he hands it over to his friend, only to take it away again shortly afterwards and abruptly change the subject. Initially he talks about a Roman emperor called Pertinax, then about Buffalo Bill, of whom the man in the tweed suit seems to think very highly. Vincenzo can barely follow. Then the stranger talks about his visit to the Louvre and lists various painters: Lorenzetti, Uccello, Sassetta, da Vinci. At least Vincenzo knows one of them. He is not surprised to hear the straw hat speak of only Italian painters. Italians are the best artists in the world.

The two of them have taken over his table, in every sense of the word. The straw hat has spread his travel library all over the table. Among them, a journal titled 'L'Assiette au Beurre' and one with a woodcut print on the cover: 'The Rotting Magician'. While waving another book around, the literature lover enquires: 'Have you read it yet?'

'Yes,' says the monocle man. 'It holds a certain fascination, but at the same time it makes no sense.'

The straw hat wags his fingers.

'Ah, ah! But it's not about making sense, it's about speed. The story as a frenzy, and the frenzy is the story. Do you know how they do it?'

‘Well, like everyone does, I presume.’

‘No, Max, no. They have to produce one a month.’

As he says this, he keeps tapping on a slim volume in his right hand. Vincenzo tries to decipher the title, but the speaker’s hand is in the way.

‘One a month? Impossible.’

‘Souvestre told me about it, listen. They discuss the plot, the structure of the chapters, him and Allain. Then they go into separate rooms with phonographs in them. They dictate, breathlessly, without pause, then give the full rolls to their typist, who transcribes everything and tidies it up.’

‘And then they edit?’

‘No, no, it goes straight to the printer. No corrections, literary expressive dance, pure improvisation. It’s wonderful. I devour it all!’

Vincenzo takes the last sip of his watery red wine and pulls out his tobacco. He can already see the waiter hurrying through the rows with his lowered gaze. Like a bird of prey, he watches from above for empty glasses and carafes. In a moment he will dive down upon Vincenzo and demand another order.

He is about to start rolling, when the man with the monocle holds out an open cigarette case to him. Vincenzo takes one and thanks him.

‘Ah, ah,’ the man with the straw hat exclaims, ‘what do I see there?’

He points to Vincenzo's hand. There are traces of white paint on his fingers holding the cigarette.

'You work with paint, correct? Is Monsieur a painter by any chance?'

After work, Vincenzo had been in such a hurry to leave his stuffy attic room that he had not bothered to have a proper wash. Remnants of paint and plaster are still stuck to his hands. He had spent twelve hours plastering the walls of a new branch of Félix Potin - a mindless job that doesn't even begin to match his talent and abilities.

'That is correct, Monsieur. I work as, yes, as a painter.'

The presumed poet scrutinises him, noticing Vincenzo's accent. He switches effortlessly into Italian.

'What sort of painting?'

Vincenzo feels caught out. It doesn't matter whether you are whitewashing shop interiors or decorating the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel - in French there is one word for it. In Italian, on the other hand, he is a common painter, an *imbianchino* and not a *pittore*.

'I do all sorts of commissioned work,' Vincenzo replies. 'Art painting, restoration. I have,' he takes a drag of his cigarette, 'even worked in the Louvre.'

He actually has, but not with a palette and easel. Years ago, his employer framed some pictures there and put them behind glass. Because Vincenzo knows a little bit of woodwork, he was involved.

To forestall any further questions, he says: 'Your Italian is excellent, Signore.'

The man makes a dismissive gesture.

'I am Polish, but I was born in Rome. May I ask where in Italy you are from?'

'From Dumenza.'

'Ah, ah. I love the area around the Lago Maggiore.'

Vincenzo smiles silently. The gentlemen are acting very friendly, but he senses the condescension in their looks. They have seen through him. Although he is sitting here, in this café, which is frequented by *le Tout-Paris*, shoulder to shoulder with real artists, they know that he is just a small-time labourer, not a man of the world like them. Vincenzo's hand creeps towards the flask. He desperately needs a sip.

The speaker has stopped and turned towards the boulevard, where he seems to have caught sight of a familiar face. He calls out. It sounds Russian. He gets up from his chair, grabs the book with the woodcut print and holds it up high so that his acquaintance can see it from the pavement.

Vincenzo, meanwhile, smokes the cigarette he has been given. It is good tobacco, nothing like the stuff he normally consumes. His gaze falls

on the thin book that he couldn't see clearly earlier. The cover and the paper look cheap, the price is printed on it - thirty-five centimes. Nevertheless, he is captivated by the colourful cover. It depicts Paris at night. The view goes west, up the Seine. In the foreground, Vincenzo recognises the Louvre and the Pont Royal. Further back, the Eiffel Tower stretches towards the sky. And above the city, on top of the city, a giant figure seems to rise from beyond the horizon. Its shoe alone is as big as the Panthéon. It is a man wearing a black tailcoat, with a black top hat on his head. A carnival mask hides the top part of his face. He holds a bloodstained dagger in his right hand. He seems to be staring at Vincenzo. The title is written in bold yellow letters above his top hat: 'Fantômas'.

The figure frightens him, but fascinates him at the same time. To stand above things like that just once, like the phantom of Paris! To have the power that this stranger undoubtedly wields! Vincenzo feels something stirring in his loins. Embarrassed, he crosses his legs.

'The effect is quite impressive, isn't it?'

Vincenzo looks up. The man in the tweed suit seems to have divested himself of his magic book; at least he is no longer holding it in his hand.

'Yes,' Vincenzo replies. That's all he can say. His throat suddenly feels dry.

‘Fantômas - like something from a nightmare. It’s not great literature, it really isn’t, but it has a dark energy that captivates you. Have you read the Zigomar novels? No? What about Arsène Lupin?’

‘I have heard of both of them, but haven’t had the time to read them yet,’ Vincenzo says.

He gets up. He suddenly feels uncomfortable, as if he’s being interrogated. While he rises, his gaze returns once more to the cover. His café acquaintance reaches for the book and holds it out to him.

‘Thank you, Monsieur, but ... I can’t accept it.’

‘Oh, come now, take it, take it. I can see that you are interested. No wonder, we are all talking about it. It’s a stroke of genius! And I have already read it. It’s a cheap pleasure, this ‘Fantômas’, but not a bad one. But if you don’t sleep well after reading it, please don’t blame me.’

With a smile that won’t tolerate dissent, the man pushes the book into Vincenzo’s hand. He thanks the man and hurries off. When he is already a short way up the boulevard, he realises he has forgotten to pay. He quickens his step. He turns off at the Porte Saint-Denis, just in case an angry waiter is following him. He turns around several times. He can’t spot a *Tortoni* waiter, but he increasingly feels that someone is following him.

Now he is almost running. After covering a certain distance, he squeezes into a doorway. Breathing heavily, Vincenzo feels around for his flask. As he takes the last sips, he keeps an eye out for pursuers.



The coast seems to be clear. Hastily he crosses the street, almost getting hit by a hackney cab. Ignoring the coachman's torrent of abuse, Vincenzo continues on his way. He approaches the Gare de l'Est. The area is shabby, no comparison to the Grands Boulevards. Workers sit outside the corner bars, many of them already very drunk.

Vincenzo stops on one of the corners. He is still worried about possible pursuers. He urgently needs something for his nerves, but the flask is empty. At least he has some tobacco. Vincenzo rolls himself a cigarette.

'Hey, darling, do you have one for me?'

A girl emerges from the shadows of a doorway. She is wearing a summer dress and twirling an open parasol between her fingers.

'I'm not interested. Go away.'

'No problem. But what about a cigarette?'

Vincenzo rolls another one and hands it to the girl. She was probably quite pretty once, but the street has taken its toll. He can't really guess her age.

'What's your name?' she asks.

'François,' he says.

'I am Yvette. Are you Italian?'

'Why?'

'My mother is from Calabria.'

'And your father?'

‘Joker.’

Yvette takes a deep drag, blows out smoke. She pulls out a small silver bottle from somewhere in the ruffles of her dress and takes a sip. Vincenzo feels his throat tingle.

‘What do you do, Francesco?’

‘I am a painter, an artist.’

She smiles mockingly and twirls her parasol again.

‘And you live in Montmartre, right?’

Yvette, or whatever her real name might be, is clearly expecting an original reply. Instead, Vincenzo gives her a hard slap round the face. The cigarette flies out of her mouth, and she staggers.

‘You bastard!’ she shouts.

Vincenzo is on her. He grabs the silver bottle, then he shoves the prostitute in the chest. He doesn’t hit hard, he’s not a monster. But the force is still enough to lift the delicate woman off her feet and make her crumple down on her backside. Yvette howls with anger.

‘You dirty macaroni-eater!’

But Vincenzo is already around the next corner. Shortly afterwards, he is standing on the bank of the Canal Saint-Martin. He leans against the railing and sniffs at the bottle. Its contents smell sweet. Vincenzo takes a sip, but immediately spits it out again. Cheap apricot liqueur, women’s tittle, not for a real man with a thirst. He pours the rest of it into the canal

and runs his fingers across the bottle. It seems to be made of real silver. Tomorrow he will ask the pawnbroker in the Italian quarter what he might get for it.

Somewhat mellowed by his lucky find, Vincenzo sets off home. When he arrives at the Rue de l'Hôpital Saint-Louis, it is already dark in the house. His landlady and her husband are in the habit of going to bed early. Vincenzo creeps quietly up the stairs. He enters his room, which measures just a few square metres.

Vincenzo locks the door and clamps the chair under the handle, just in case. He sits down on the bed and stares at the wall for a while. Then he remembers the book that the man in the café gave him.

Vincenzo is not a big reader. The only books on his sideboard are the Bible and an Italian-French dictionary. But the cover depicting the masked man has made him curious. And in any case, he is wide awake. He'll spend half the night trying to get to sleep again. He does have a bit of medicine left, but it seems too early for that. He begins to read.

'Fantômas'

'What did you say?'

'I said: Fantômas.'

'And what does that mean?'

'Nothing ... everything!'

'But who is that?'

'No-one ... and yet, yes, it is someone.'

‘And what does this someone do?’

‘He spreads fear and terror.’

Vincenzo continues to read. The man in the straw hat didn't overpromise. The story is very exciting. This Fantômas does not seem to be a man of flesh and blood; he is actually a phantom. He is cold and calculating, murdering without remorse. He is a master thief. Fantômas' uncanny, almost supernatural abilities give him incredible power. He is unstoppable. He is always one step ahead of the police. Vincenzo particularly likes that aspect about him.

After a while, he puts the novel aside and stares at the ceiling. He had hoped that the book would make him sleepy, but he is even more agitated than before. If only he could be as daring as Fantômas. He pictures it. It is a nice notion.

In the distance he hears the bells of Saint-Laurent strike two. Vincenzo rubs his eyes. He needs to get at least a few hours' sleep.

He quickly undresses. He pulls a box out from under the bed, takes out a brown apothecary bottle labelled 'Laudanum'. He pours a little of it into a glass and adds water and a spoonful of sugar. As soon as he has taken the medicine, his senses fade. Vincenzo sinks down onto the bed and closes his eyes.

After an hour or two of dreamless sleep, he is awakened by a noise. He opens his eyes. A breeze blows in his face. The window is open. Had he opened it? He can't remember.

A figure is standing at the end of his bed.

Vincenzo recoils and crawls to the top end of his bed. He can barely make out the figure in the moonlight. It is a man in evening dress. He is tall, and the chapeau claque on his head makes him look even taller.

'Good evening, Vincenzo,' a deep male voice says. 'You have been chosen to do great things.'

The man takes a step forward. Moonlight falls on his face. Vincenzo can see that the upper half of it is covered by a mask. Then he blacks out.

## 2

You would think there were better things to do on a summer evening than huddle together in a stuffy basement in Montmartre. But most people probably felt the same as Yelena: when Victor is speaking, you forget about cafés and festivities. You forget life as it is. Instead, you become intoxicated with life as it could be.

‘Justice? Justice is nothing but terror for the benefit of the owning classes. Stealing from a rich man has always been considered a greater crime than killing a poor man.’

Yelena is standing at the back, next to a table displaying various pamphlets of the syndicalist federation CGT: ‘The Crime of Obedience’ or ‘The Immorality of Marriage’. Most of the audience are men; Yelena is petite and they block her view of the speaker. Only occasionally does she catch a glimpse of his face from between the backs of the heads in front of her. It is a beautiful face, well-proportioned, with high cheek bones, dark brown eyes and a thick, almost black mane of hair. Victor can’t be much older than twenty-five. He’s probably even younger.

‘Stealing from the rich man is not a crime, it is a virtue! If society denies you the right to live, you must take it. The police arrest us in the name of the law. We strike back in the name of freedom.’

There are approving comments from the audience. As a loyal reader of ‘l’anarchie’, for which Victor writes under the pseudonym Le Rétif, Yelena knows his reasoning inside out. But it is something else to hear him declaim his ideas on the propaganda of action and the expropriation of individuals.

Victor Kibalchich’s eyes shoot bolts of lightning; his voice is like thunder. The fact that there has been a thunderous sultriness over the Butte

all evening seems only fitting. The ideas of anarchism will descend upon the world like a storm.

‘Remember the heroes of Tottenham,’ Victor says.

Many listeners nod excitedly. The story is not new, but it still stands as a shining example to many comrades - or as a cautionary tale, depending on what side you are on. Two men in North London stole the payroll of an engineering factory. The police gave chase. The anarchists tried to shoot their way out, firing at anyone who stood in their way. Three people died, including a ten-year-old boy. The latter, in particular, upset a great many comrades. Shooting a policeman, all right, but some accidental bystanders? Children, even?

In the end, the two shot themselves - but only after they handed over the expropriated wages to a comrade. This self-sacrifice seems heroic to many. Others, however, think Tottenham to be madness, evidence that illegalism has no future.

‘I see sentimental objection in some of your faces: “But these twenty-two poor people that your comrades shot at were innocent! Don’t you feel any remorse?”

No! Because those who persecuted them could only be honest citizens who believed in the state and authority. Oppressed, perhaps, but oppressed people who perpetuate their oppression through their criminal

activity: enemies! For us the enemy is whoever prevents us from living. We are the ones being attacked, and we fight back!’

Victor bows his head and steps back to signal that he is finished. Applause erupts.

The crowd begin to disperse. They pour out into the Rue de la Barre to escape the stifling heat of the cellar. Yelena also goes up to the ground floor where the printing presses and paper rolls are. She goes outside. Two dozen men and women are standing around on the pavement. Someone pours water. Yelena would prefer a white wine, but that is only available at ‘l’anarchie’ when Raymond ‘La Science’ Callemin is not present. The Belgian comrade watches over everything like the chairman of a Protestant temperance society, to ensure it is strictly non-alcoholic.

So she takes a water and looks around. She can see Rirette, Victor’s girlfriend standing some distance away. He is never far from her, and Yelena’s prime objective is to ask Le Rétif some questions. She has just worked her way through Kropotkin’s ‘To the Young People’, and some things are unclear to her.

As she passes Raymond Callemin, she hears him say: ‘No, no, Jules. It’s not just the alcohol. Science says that salt is poison ... oh, comrade Yelena, good evening.’

Yelena had hoped to sneak past La Science, but it seems that is not going to happen.



‘Good evening, comrades,’ she says and smiles at the two men. She just manages not to curtsy. Free women do not curtsy, just as free men don’t bow. But man is a creature of habit. For years in Nertchinsk she was beaten when she didn’t curtsy to the guards. It’s not easy to cast off a habit that has been beaten into you with a birch rod.

‘May I introduce you,’ says Raymond who loves playing the master of ceremonies. ‘Yelena Zhernakova, a new author. Our comrade wrote a remarkable text in the latest issue titled ‘Why I am an Anarchist’.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ says Raymond’s conversation partner. He is older than her, probably in his mid-thirties, and doesn’t look like an anarchist. Yelena always looks at people’s clothes first, because she works as a seamstress. She quickly sees that the man standing opposite her is dressed in the finest cloth. She recognises it by the evenness of the colour transitions of his summer flannel suit. Yelena surmises that it’s a Fox Brothers fabric. Only someone who is rich - or who expropriates the rich - can afford something like this. Which of the two applies to the man with the moustache?

‘Comrade Jules Bonnot,’ Raymond says. There is a patronising smile on his pale, boyish face. Raymond pats Bonnot on the shoulder as if he had personally discovered him.

Yelena and Bonnot’s eyes meet. A shiver runs down her spine. She knows that kind of look. She rarely encounters it in Paris, but in Siberia she

has seen lots of men with this gaze. Men whose eyes say that they no longer feel fear. That they have seen, experienced or done everything that might scare you.

‘Likewise,’ Yelena says.

Bonnot nods at her kindly.

‘And why,’ he says, ‘are you an anarchist?’ His voice sounds like rusty iron.

She wants to reply that those who have no means of subsistence have no duty to acknowledge or respect other people’s property, considering that the principles of the social covenant have been violated to their detriment - and that this idea can already be found in the works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte.

Instead she says: ‘I have no choice.’

‘You should read her article, Jules, it’s very good,’ said Raymond.

‘I will. What is your pseudonym, comrade?’

‘Voltairine.’

In contrast to Raymond’s voice, Bonnot’s is refreshingly free of pretension. Yelena is fascinated by him but in a different way from, say, Victor Kibalchich. The latter is a pioneer. However, Yelena is not sure whether he would also take action if it came down to it. In the case of Jules Bonnot, she has no doubts. The propaganda of the deed is not only theory for this man, she senses that.

‘And yours?’ she asks.

‘Mine ...? I don’t have one.’

Raymond gives a baying laugh.

‘That’s not quite true. Some call him ‘Le Bourgeois’.’

Bonnot grimaces.

‘I need to take my leave,’ he says, ‘comrade Octave Garnier and I have a bit of a drive.’

‘To Romainville?’ Raymond asks.

Yelena knows that a group of comrades have rented a house east of the city where they live according to the principles of freedom and individualism. Bonnot nods silently, looking at Yelena.

‘You should visit us in Romainville sometime, if ...?’

‘Yes?’

‘If you are interested in the deed.’

‘Perhaps I will. Have a good trip, comrade.’

Bonnot walks over to a car parked at the side of the road some distance away and begins to get it ready. Jelena watches him in disbelief.

‘He owns his own car?’

‘He has a different one each time,’ Raymond whispers.

She looks at him quizzically.

‘An impressive man, this Jules. Trained mechanic. Former army sniper.’

Just then the bells of a nearby church chime. Yelena flinches.

‘Is it six already?’

Raymond shrugs his shoulders.

‘Probably. The speakers spoke for a long time, especially Victor.

He can really make you lose tra...’

‘I must go.’

Yelena presses her water glass into Raymond’s hand. He wants to say something - La Science always wants to say something - but she has already gone. She will be late, and Monsieur Poiret will be livid. He is not the worst boss she has ever had, quite the opposite, but the fashion designer is prone to temper tantrums. In this case, his anger would probably even be justified. He impressed upon her to be at the studio no later than seven. She is to help with a fitting for a loyal customer.

Yelena wants to run, but the path is too steep for that. So she takes the steps, as fast as she can. She leaves Sacré-Coeur behind her, which many of her fellow comrades would like to blow up because it is a revanchist building that is supposed to punish Montmartre for its revolutionary spirit during the Paris Commune. Yelena thinks of Proudhon, his criticism of Rousseau on religion as an instrument of domination. She gets caught on a loose paving stone and stumbles. She only just manages not to fall.

Put the revolution out of your mind, girl. At least until you arrive at Paul Poiret's studio in one piece and have taken the measurements of this manufacturer's daughter or banker's widow.

Yelena arrives at Boulevard de Clichy. It is still early in the evening, and yet it is already very busy. There are people everywhere, on their way to the 'Moulin Rouge' or the 'Grand-Guignol'. The café terraces are packed; Mediterranean musicians are playing a tarantella at the Place Pigalle.

Yelena looks at the clock above the entrance to the métro station. It's quarter past six. She had wanted to walk to the studio, because métro tickets are expensive. She could eat for two days on the twenty-five centimes. But now she has no choice. Yelena rummages for coins in her black satchel.

'S'cuse me, Mademoiselle. Can I ask you sumfink?'

When she looks up, she sees the face of a young man. His attempt to grow a beard has failed spectacularly. He gives her a big smile. Two of his incisors are missing.

Yelena is breathing heavily after rushing to get here; black spots are dancing before her eyes. And so it takes a while for her to realise whom she is dealing with here - or rather, what. The jaunty cap sitting on the back of his head, the striped shirt, the red sash the youth has tied around his hips - there can be no doubt. Now Yelena spots his companions, three of them.

They are leaning against a plane tree some distance away, pretending to be otherwise occupied.

Les Apaches. That is all she needs this evening. These gangs are terrorising half of Paris now. Most of their members come from the slums. They have no work and get by with racketeering. Apachism is socially explainable, but from Yelena's point of view it's a waste of revolutionary potential. If only all these young men would take up the class struggle instead.

But she doesn't have time to talk to the youth about Marx and Engels.

'Don't come near me,' she barks at him.

The Apache spreads his arms placatingly. His hands are empty; he probably has the knife in his sleeve. If she's lucky, it's just a knife.

'I just wanted to ask if ...?'

'I'm in a hurry, kid, get out the way.'

Yelena still has her hand in her bag. She is feeling around for something. The Apache is not smiling any more. He feels snubbed. The fact that his friends are watching him being rebuffed doesn't make things any better.

'Now listen, you little whore. That is no way to talk to the *Loups de la Butte*.'

Yelena's hand clasps the little Deringer. She pulls the pistol out of her bag and holds it right in front of the Apache's face. The look on his face is priceless. He takes one, two steps back. That's enough for Yelena. She is already at the entrance to the métro, is hurrying down the steps. She hears angry shouts behind her. She slips the small pistol back in her bag while she runs.

By the time the Apaches appear on the stairs, she is already on the platform. The train is waiting. She gets in and runs through the carriage. Thankfully it is not very full. She weaves her way through workmen, women in smart clothes and tourists with travel guides. The blood is pumping in her ears. When she looks out of the window, she sees the Apaches at the foot of the stairs, together with two angry conductors. One of the Wolves of the Butte raises his arm. A blade flashes. Then the train starts moving. Yelena sinks down on the seat. She is drenched in sweat.

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When she enters Poiret's studio, it is already half past seven. The tables with the sewing machines at the back of the building are deserted. There is no sign of the maître either. Yelena goes to the washroom first. She has been sweating like a pig; the dust of the street is stuck in her hair and on

her face. She cannot face Poiret or his wealthy clients in this state, no matter how late she is. He is going to shout at her either way.

Yelena washes the dirt off her face and rearranges her hair. When she looks halfway presentable, she walks over to the velvet curtain. On the other side is the actual shop where Poiret receives his customers and carries out fittings. Yelena stands by the curtain and listens. She can hear gentle humming; it sounds like Verdi. Yelena takes a deep breath and pushes the curtain aside.

Poiret is leaning against a high desk sketching something. He is a small, round man, a ball on legs. He has taken off the jacket of his lime-green suit made of Dugdale Brothers linen and tucked his tie into his sky-blue shirt so that it won't get in the way of his sketching. There are dark patches on Poiret's back and armpits. At least I am not the only one sweating, she thinks.

She steps closer. Poiret doesn't notice her, he seems completely immersed in his work. She can see now that her boss is sketching a woman. She is wearing bloomers and a top that widens at the bottom - a lampshade on legs. On her head, the woman wears a turban, topped with a peacock feather.

Yelena clears her throat. Poiret whirls around, clutches his chest.

'My God, girl! Don't creep up on me like that.'

'I am terribly sorry, Monsieur Poiret.'



‘What is it, hm? Can’t one even work in peace at this late hour?’

‘I am sorry to disturb you, but ...’

He is not listening. Instead, he holds the sketch out towards her.

‘What do you think of this? Go ahead.’

When the owning classes celebrate the exploitation of the proletariat by dressing up in the costumes of Ottoman slave drivers, it has a refreshing honesty.

That’s what Yelena thinks. But instead, she says: ‘It looks wonderful.’

‘And wonderfully comfortable, hm? Oh, if only I could wear something like that. This heat is killing me.’

Poiret waddles over to a cabinet containing various liqueurs. He takes out a bottle of Chartreuse Jaune and an ice bucket, and also a small Baccarat glass. While he pours himself a drink, he says: ‘So what is it that you want?’

‘I was supposed to come for a fitting, Monsieur.’

‘Oh really?’

Sipping the liqueur, Poiret goes over to a drawer and pulls out an account book. He leafs through it.

‘Ah, Isadora Duncan. You’re a bit early, aren’t you?’

Yelena is glad she left her bag in the back of the studio, otherwise she might have pulled out her Deringer and shot the little snob in his fat stomach.

‘I, you said ...’

Poirot’s forehead wrinkles menacingly.

‘What did I say?’

Yelena is sure that he ordered her to come at seven. But if she tells him that, Poirot might also remember how much he hates unpunctuality - other people’s unpunctuality, mind you.

‘I just wanted to get everything ready. But Monsieur has not told me in which drawer Madame Duncan’s pieces are.’

‘Drawer ten. And yes, do that, do that. I don’t know when exactly she is coming. These Californians have no sense of time at all. But she’ll turn up at some point, don’t you worry. She needs the pieces for a performance.’

‘Is she an actress?’

The fashion designer gives her a surprised look. Then he begins to laugh uproariously. A hundred kilos quiver with amusement.

‘You don’t know who Isadora Duncan is?’

And you don’t know who Kropotkin is, you little bourgeois.

‘I am afraid I don’t, Monsieur.’

‘She is a dancer! Well, not just any dancer. The embodiment of the ancient dream of dance performance, kissed by Terpsichore. I think Polignac said that about her.’

Yelena doesn’t know who Polignac is either.

‘You will see. The pieces are as good as ready, just a few last changes.’

Poiret reaches for his jacket and puts it on. He inspects the fit in front of the mirror and adjusts his pocket handkerchief. Meanwhile, he casts Yelena a stern look.

‘Go and fetch the pieces and wait in the shop. It doesn’t matter how long it takes, do you hear? Unfortunately, I have to leave. My wife has taken it into her head to go to the Hippodrome de Longchamp tonight. Some stallion,’ he chuckles, ‘must have turned her head.’

Poiret reaches for his walking stick and hat and heads to the door.

‘And I don’t want to hear any complaints, you hear? Do everything the way she wants. She can be a little eccentric at times.’

‘You can rely on me, Monsieur.’

Poiret drinks the last sip of liqueur. He hands the empty glass, which still has an ice cube floating in it, to Yelena. Then he steps out into the street and flags down a taxi.

As soon as Poiret is out of sight, Yelena sinks down on an ottoman. She fishes the ice cube out of the glass and presses it to the back of her

neck. While the cool water runs down her back, she stares out of the panorama window onto the Champs-Élysées.

### 3

They sit in the '*Closerie des Lilas*', outside, of course. Her Lohengrin still hasn't shown up. The man is simply unbelievable. Isadora Duncan feels anger rising inside her. She would like to jump up and dance out her anger, jump around like mad, in the middle of the Boulevard de Montparnasse, despite the heat, despite the people. Or perhaps because of the people. If she were to contort herself half-naked on the pavement, it would cause quite the scandal. Everyone would be furious, not least her unpunctual paramour.

'You look displeased, darling,' Madeline says. Isadora's companion is from New York, an old acquaintance from way back who is currently on a tour of Europe. She is a painter and wants to be inspired by Paris. Isadora was delighted to see Madeline again, although she's a little, well, she just lacks the deeper artistic understanding. Her watercolours are terribly ordinary. If Madeline were to buy postcard views from some

Parisian street artist instead, she would save herself a lot of work. Of course, Isadora would never tell her that. But it's the truth, nonetheless.

'I had hoped,' Isadora said, 'to introduce you to Paris.'

For a moment, Madeline looks perplexed - she is not the brightest spark. Only after a while does she realise that Isadora is not referring to the city of cities, but her lover, Paris Singer.

'He is very handsome, isn't he?'

'You can say that again, Maddy. You never know what people think when they give their children names like Desdemona or Achill, but in the case of Paris - well, he is one of the most handsome men I've ever seen. And imagine: he is ten years older than me, but some think he is younger.'

'I can hardly imagine that, Isa, you still look like you're in your mid-twenties.'

'Thank you, you little fibber. But it's true, of course, my art keeps me young and toned,'

'So where is he?'

'He wanted to drag me to the *'Paillard'* tonight.'

'What's that?'

'A restaurant.'

Not just any restaurant, but one of the best the city has to offer. They serve Russian cuisine, which, as Lohengrin likes to say, is the best in the world.

There are many advantages to having Paris Singer as a friend. Alongside his good looks and considerable sexual stamina, Paris has an enormous fortune. His maxim in life is to spend it lavishly. But eating *La Choucroute Impériale Russe* or *Coulibiac* in this August heat was not to her taste. She has a performance tomorrow, so she will spend almost the entire evening in a large, dark building - why does he not understand that an artist needs light and air before such a performance?

They had argued about it a little. But eventually they had agreed to meet at the '*Closerie*' instead. But now it is after nine, and Paris still hasn't turned up. The man is used to the entire world waiting for him. The entire world, but not her.

'I am sure he'll be here shortly,' Madeline says and pats Isadora's hand. Then she takes another sip of her greenish drink. Maddy has ignored Isadora's advice and ordered absinthe. Now, after the second glass, she is already looking rather the worse for wear. It will probably be a short evening.

For a moment they sit in silence. Madeline's gaze roams across the tables and scrutinises the slightly unconventional figures. Many artists come to the '*Closerie*'. Some look worn out; others are dressed up like peacocks. The fact that there are so many painters and poets in Montparnasse is a new development. When Isadora had lived in Paris before, several years ago, Montmartre was the home of hopeful young

artists. In the meantime it's become quite overrun. You can read about how picturesque the Butte is in every Fodor or Baedeker.

'Oh, look at that one over there!' Madeline calls out a little too loudly, and to make matters worse, she points at the man. 'These, how do you say? Montparnos? They really are something special.'

The gentleman who has taken Madeline's fancy is wearing a sky-blue knickerbocker suit and a matching cap. The *pièce de resistance*, however, is his walking stick, painted in the same sky blue.

'He's an Englishman. I know him. Do you want to meet him?'

'Is he a painter?'

Isadora considers whether Madeline can take the truth. Then she says: 'He is a famous climber. He was the first to scale K2.'

Madeline gives a silly giggle.

'And what else does he climb?'

'Oh, my dear, you really should switch to orange juice now. Wait a moment, I will fetch him.'

Isadora gets up and walks over to the flamboyant character sitting on the other side of the terrace. There is a glass of whiskey in front of him. He is reading a book.

'Good evening, Aleister.'

The person she is addressing furrows his brow. As soon as he sees Isadora, however, his expression brightens. He jumps up immediately, takes off his cap and bows.

‘My dearest Isadora, what a pleasure! How lovely to see you.’

‘Likewise.’

Aleister is in his mid-thirties, but his bald head and his deep-set eyes make him look older. His appearance shows that he enjoys life to the full.

He motions her to sit down with him. She shakes her head.

‘I am here with a friend who is visiting Paris. She is an American like me. Would you like to join us for a moment?’

‘It would be an honour.’

Aleister picks up his drink and his book. They walk over to Madeline, who looks at the man in sky-blue with wide eyes. Isadora is still not sure whether it is a good idea to let the two of them loose on each other. Aleister will probably be bored by Maddy’s ordinariness. Madeline, in turn, will probably be shocked. The mystic sometimes sets out to offend people.

Admittedly, this is one of the reasons why Isadora feels a kinship with Aleister. The man wants to push the boundaries, break down walls, just like she does. During his extensive travels through India and the Himalayas, the Briton has gained deep insights into the cosmic mysteries.



Aleister does not talk about it much, but Isadora can sense that he possesses a deep wisdom that goes far beyond the comprehensible.

‘May I present: Madeline Simmonds, Aleister Crowley.’

Aleister introduces himself quite politely to her friend. He asks her about her impression of London, which Madeline visited first after arriving in Southampton. She seems quite enchanted by the sky-blue eccentric. Isadora can’t blame her. With his bald head and bulldog-like face, he is not necessarily a handsome man. But there is something magnetic about his gaze. And then there is the voice that doesn’t match his stature at all: a bright, buttery baritone. Aleister also has a Midlands accent, making him sound insanely English. And Americans are known to have a weakness for that.

While the two of them chat, Isadora sips her white wine that is already warm. She looks at the spine of the book that Aleister is still carrying in the crook of his arm. It is titled: ‘The Heresiarch & Co’. She points to it.

‘That? A very remarkable book. I bought it yesterday at Galignani’s and have already devoured it.’

‘Is it a mystical work?’

‘Yes and no. Not a book of magic in the strict sense, but a description of fantastic, mystical journeys. Short stories reminiscent of Poe or perhaps Dunsany.’

‘Who is the author?’

‘Someone by the name of Apollinaire. To be honest, I’d never heard of him. It was rather,’ ... Aleister smiles ambiguously, ‘... the title that appealed to me.’

‘Guillaume Apollinaire? Oh, I know him. You see him often with the painters. He is an art critic, I understand.’

‘An interesting man, that much is certain. His Ormesan, in particular, is brilliant, a wily adventurer with psychic abilities. Tell me, might you perhaps introduce me to this gentleman in due course?’

‘Introduce - yes. Procure - no.’

Aleister gives a dirty laugh. Madeline looks as if she has lost the thread. It’s probably better that way.

‘I would be very grateful. But something else, tell me: how are you getting along with the cards?’

After her performance the other day at the ‘*Gaité Lyrique*’, Aleister had showered her with praise. Isadora is used to that, but the mystic not only praised her Apollonian grace and expressiveness. He said she possessed a magical consciousness. That was evident in her movement. By manifesting her occult energies on stage, Isadora influenced the entire audience, performing a sacred rite.

Isadora had thought about it a lot. And it was true: her connection to the audience is something special, she can feel the vibes. But because of his many years of arcane training, Aleister can actually see them.

At their last meeting, the magician not only gave her a large piece of hashish, but also a set of tarot cards. Not one of those old Italian ones, but a brand new one. When she first saw the motifs conceived by the painter Colman Smith and the mystic Arthur Waite, she was utterly enchanted.

‘I work with them almost every day.’

‘Good. Who is your significator?’

‘What is a significator?’ asks Madeline, who in the meantime has finished her second glass of absinthe. Her eyes are glazed.

‘You know tarot?’

‘You mean fortune-telling cards?’

Aleister shakes his head. His expression betrays indulgence, as if he were talking to an uneducated peasant who doesn’t know any better.

‘The cards reveal the mysteries.’

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a worn crimson box. From it he takes out the Rider-Waite-Smith tarot cards. He shows Madeline some of the Major Arcana - The Hanged Man, The Tower and The Devil.

‘The significator symbolises the questioner. The cards placed around him his destiny.’

‘And who are you, Isadora?’

‘The Queen of Wands,’ she says quietly.

It was the obvious choice. They both have red hair. The Queen is full of fire, full of love, she is life, movement.

Aleister nods knowingly. ‘A good choice,’ he says quietly. ‘But who,’ he raises his eyebrows theatrically, ‘might our good Madeline be?’

‘You want to read my cards?’

‘If you like? The Dance of Fate is open to everyone.’

When Aleister says ‘dance’, Isadora suddenly remembers. How could she forget that her costume for the performance is still at Paul Poiret’s studio? It might need some alterations, otherwise she won’t be able to wear it tomorrow. Isadora is very particular when it comes to her costumes. She prefers to dance naked, of course, but if that is not possible, she at least wants to feel as if she is naked. The fabric must flow around her like water. The only designer who understands that is Paul. That is why she commissioned him to design something based on the chiton, the undergarment from Ancient Greece.

‘Isadora? Is everything all right?’ Aleister asks.

‘I have to go to the dressmaker.’

‘Now?’ says Madeline.

‘I completely forgot. It’s because of all the fuss with Lohengrin.’

‘Lohengrin?’

‘I mean Paris. I sometimes call him that. Dear Aleister, I am so terribly sorry, but I need to leave immediately.’

Of course, Madeline wants to accompany her. Isadora asks her friend to remain seated - after all, the evening is still young. But Madeline is tired. They agree that Isadora will visit the ladies’ room and ask the maître to arrange a taxi. In the meantime, Aleister can quickly tell her friend’s fortune and then leave too; according to him, he has planned an invocation to Hermes at midnight and still has some preparations to make.

‘It was a pleasure, as always, Isadora.’

‘Likewise, Aleister. Tell me, have you heard about the séance at Madame Filine’s? Will you be there?’

‘Only if you are.’

‘Then we will see each other there. Adieu. Madeline, I’ll be right back.’

Isadora enters the taproom of the ‘*Closerie*’ and passes the brightly lit cocktail bar. She waves to a waiter and asks for the bill for her and Aleister’s tables. There is no reason to skimp. Paris Singer carelessly handed her several notes that morning for her expenses for the week. The amount would be enough to pay the bill for the entire ‘*Closerie*’. She asks the waiter to organise a taxi. On an evening like this, that is no easy task, which is why she gives him a generous tip.

In the ladies' room, she washes her face, neck and armpits. It has been unbearably hot in Paris for the last two weeks; the weather is reminiscent of southern California. It was thirty-four degrees today at noon. The heat makes many people listless and lethargic. Her friend is the best example of this. Maddy's Irish blood is too thick for these temperatures. Isadora, on the other hand, is stirred by the heat, constantly feeling that tingling running down her stomach and back, towards her loins.

She makes sure she is alone in the ladies. Then she slips her hand under her thin dress, takes her nipple between her thumb and forefinger. It is almost unbearable. Where is Paris Singer when you need him? If he were there, she would instruct him to give her relief right here and now.

The door opens. Isadora quickly pulls back her hand. A woman enters. She is wearing a summer dress that leaves her shoulders free and reveals a surprising amount of her olive skin. She is pretty. Her nose is a little too big, but Isadora finds that quite striking. The girl could play Carmen. Isadora watches her until she disappears into one of the booths.

As she walks back to the table, she pictures the beautiful Spanish girl, her hands clawed into a white sheet, letting out cries of pleasure. She has to force herself to banish the delicious image from her mind, otherwise Madeline will wonder what is wrong with her.

When Isadora reaches the table, she sees that something is wrong. Madeline is sitting bolt upright in her seat. Aleister is gone. The looks of the other guests tell Isadora that something has happened.

‘Maddy, are you not feeling well? Were the cards unfavourable?’

‘No, no. He said my trip would ... would lead to new revelations, to new shores.’

Isadora sits down.

‘But that sounds wonderful, darling.’

Madeline has her hands under the table. It looks as if she is clenching them tightly in her lap. Isadora suspects something. It would be typical of Aleister.

‘He ... he ...’

‘Put his hand where it didn’t belong?’

‘No, not that.’

‘What then?’

‘He said goodbye very politely and bowed. Then he took my hand and said: ‘Madame, may I give you a snake kiss?’ I had no idea ...’

‘The snake kiss?’

Madeline is about to burst into tears.

‘He bent over as if he wanted to kiss my hand. And then he, then he ...’

Madeline raises her right arm. Her hand is wrapped in a white napkin with bloodstains on it.

‘... he bit me.’

## 4

The advantage of the Carrefour Vavin is that you don't have to commit. Three cafés are grouped around the square. First, there is '*La Coupole*', a *bar américain*, the kind you could find in Chicago and New York. Twenty metres further on, on the same side of the street, is '*Le Dôme*'. Pablo likes it there. The dark wood and the plush fabrics make the place very cosy. But it is expensive and today it was too crowded for him.

So when Guillaume and the other members of the gang appeared, they moved on to '*La Rotonde*'. It's on the other side of the street. The two cafés always have each other in their sights. If they were humans, they would probably hate each other. '*Dôme*' looks down on '*Rotonde*' because it is less glamorous; '*Rotonde*' considers '*Dôme*' as an upstart because '*Rotonde*' has been around much longer.



As it has turned out, swapping cafés was a mistake. There is not much going on at ‘*Rotonde*’, but the guests that are there are all the more exhausting. Pablo actually wanted to do some sketching - he likes working in cafés - but the constant questions completely throw him off his game. And although he has so far refused to answer any of them, the two German art lovers who have joined them at the table just won’t let up.

Pablo leans against the wall, framed by Fernande and Guillaume. The latter is explaining to the Germans why the Louvre should be burned to the ground.

‘... a huge burnt offering, all the Raffaels, Rembrandts and Rigauds - a hecatomb for the gods of the future, gentlemen!’

The plumper of the two, wearing a bowler hat and a sporting a goatee, looks incredulous.

‘You cannot be serious?’

Pablo takes a drag on his cigarette. Guillaume waves his pipe around. There is a glass of Guinness and several empty plates in front of the poet. His friend has been eating since they got here. When he wasn’t talking.

‘Ah, ah, I have nothing against the artworks there, not per se. But presenting them to society in this way ultimately only serves to cement the status quo, to tell people: that is art. And nothing else!’

Guillaume is grinning from ear to ear. His cheeks are full of colour. At moments like this he reminds Pablo of a Pierrot who has smoked too much opium.

‘Monsieur Picasso,’ says the second man, who is blond with pockmarked skin, ‘so you share Monsieur Apollinaire’s opinion?’

Pablo feels Fernande reach for his hand under the table. She knows how tiring he finds these discussions, this constant questioning of what this or that painting means, what its place is in art. When you hear a bird sing, do you try to understand its twittering?

Before he can come up with a sufficiently sibyllic reply, Max Jacobs rescues him. He comes in the door at that very moment and waves to them with his walking stick. They greet each other; another chair is fetched. Max sits down. He looks like a ghost, not for the first time. Pablo is worried about him. All that ether doesn’t agree with him.

‘Now let us return to your invective against the, ah, against the museums, Monsieur Apollinaire,’ one of the men starts. ‘I understand the thing about the future, that the new art ...’ he nods at Pablo, ‘... needs space. But according to your logic, it would not only be the Louvre, but also the Uffizi and ...’

‘The Louvre?’ Max interjects. ‘That’s where I have just come from.’

Guillaume turns to Max. He has just lit a fresh pipe, garlands of smoke swirl around his baroque pate. Pablo reaches for the charcoal pencil. He starts to draw a line across the page in front of him.

‘It’s been closed for hours,’ he hears Guillaume reply. The line on the page takes a turn that Pablo had not foreseen. Instead of correcting it, he lets it continue.

‘I mean I came past there. On the way from the opera,’ Max says.

‘You were at the opera? What was showing? That horrible new performance of ‘Nabucco’?’

‘Will you listen to me first, Apo? I just took a walk. And when I came past the Louvre, I spotted a crowd of people.’

‘A demonstration?’ the pockmarked German asked.

‘No, no, I don’t think so. The people were standing on the Rivoli. The police were holding them back. I wanted to go to the Carrousel to see if I could get a better view from up there, but it was all cordoned off.’

The line turns out to be a shoulder. Pablo starts again, and continues sketching. A massive torso emerges.

‘Wait a moment, Max. The police cordoned off the Louvre?’ Guillaume says.

‘Yes, that’s what it looked like. Strange, isn’t it?’

‘Perhaps,’ says the porky German with a smile, ‘someone set fire to it.’

Guillaume snorts. Drops of Guinness spray across the table.

‘Ha, ha, very good, very funny! That would be desirable, no question, but hardly likely. I think I will go and check it out. I need to have a walk around the block anyway, otherwise I won’t be able to shit again. What about you, my friends?’

Pablo shakes his head. He continues to sketch. From the corner of his eye, he sees Fernande get up.

‘I am just going to freshen up, darling.’

Pablo nods barely perceptibly. Guillaume has also got up and reaches for his straw hat.

‘I’ll report back!’ he calls out to the group. He says something to the two annoying Germans in German, which Pablo doesn’t understand. It seems to be funny though because the two of them laugh boisterously. And they say that the Germans don’t have a sense of humour.

‘You are a funny bunch,’ the plump one says to Max.

‘A gang of artists that has all of Paris shaking in their boots,’ Max replies.

The German looks confused.

‘Do you mean that ironically, or ...’

Max removes his monocle and leans forward. In a conspiratorial tone he murmurs: ‘Have you ever heard of La Fontaine, Molière and Racine?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘That,’ Max points to the group, ‘is us.’

‘Aha.’

Meanwhile Pablo is working on the head. The sketch is turning out quite well.

‘I have one more question, Monsieur Picasso. I saw your ‘Girl with the Mandolin’ at Kahnweiler’s.’

At the mention of his gallerist, Pablo winces. His line goes wrong. He looks up. The two Germans look at him expectantly. He suddenly realises that all his guardian angels have disappeared. Guillaume has gone. Fernande has gone. Max is still there, but he really isn’t any good as a bodyguard.

‘Your painting reminded me a little of a Marcel Duchamp nude. Do you know him?’

‘Mhm.’

‘Duchamp’s deconstruction of the female form and that of the Girl with the Mandolin seem very similar to me. Do you think that Cubism ...’

Pablo reaches into the bag next to him. He takes out a Browning Automatic and places it silently next to his cup of coffee. The German’s eyes widen.

‘A pistol? Is that a symbol? The tremendous force of your images, Monsieur - are you trying to say it is like a projectile ...’

Pablo places his hand on the pistol, grasps its handle. It lies cool in his hand.

‘One more word and I will shoot,’ he says.

The man stares at Pablo; he would like to reply. Pablo stares back. He might not be a giant, but the power of his gaze has mowed down many a man. The German can’t maintain eye contact any longer. Hastily, he and his partner get up. They mutter a farewell greeting and hurry out.

Pablo slips the weapon back into his bag. Max says nothing; he just looks amused. Fernande returns from the ladies’ room and sits down next to him.

‘Where are the Germans?’

‘They had to leave.’

She looks at his failed attempt.

‘Is that meant to be Guillaume?’

Instead of replying, Pablo crumples up the piece of paper and throws it carelessly at the floor. Fernande’s expression darkens. She turns away from him.

Is she upset because she thinks he is? Or because he doesn’t want to explain his failed attempt? Or because it’s her time of the month? Who knows? Pablo fixes a fresh piece of paper and waves the waiter over. Fernande and Max order coffee. Pablo orders a fruit salad.

For a while it's just the way he likes it. Outside on the pavement, the musicians play 'Notre président', and not that badly either. Max and Fernande are gossiping viciously about the stupid Germans, about Guillaume Apollinaire's pernicky girlfriend, about how bad the food was last night at '*Chartier*'. It's fun to listen to their chatter, but not have to contribute.

Pablo stuffs his pipe and sketches a new Guillaume. He has drawn his best friend many times before, as a pope with a tiara, as a bank employee and as god knows what else. Today he is drawing Guillaume as a detective. He dashes a magnifying glass into his large hand. It is directed at an oil painting. Instead of a straw hat, he gives his friend a deerstalker. Pablo is just about to get down to the details, when someone flings open the café door. The bells above the entrance ring as frantically as church bells during a firestorm. Pablo looks up. Guillaume is standing in the doorway. He looks agitated. He comes over to the table and throws himself into one of the wicker chairs.

'Someone has broken into the Louvre. Ah, ah, it's unbelievable!' he exclaims.

The entire '*Rotonde*' has turned towards Guillaume as he speaks. The poet dabs his forehead with a handkerchief. Agitatedly he waves the waiter over and orders a large beer and some fruit-flavoured ice cream.

Only then does Guillaume purse his lips, as he always does when he wants to explain something.

Pablo knows his friend's artistic pauses only too well, but even he is getting impatient now.

'What happened?' Pablo asks.

'A huge commotion. They say something has been stolen from the Louvre. No-one seems to have any details. The police have cordoned everything off. I ran into Dubois - he works for *'Le Figaro'*. He had just replaced a colleague who had been there since the early afternoon.'

'Outside the Louvre?' Max asked.

'Yes. It seems the museum was already closed this morning. Dubois said he had seen L epine in person, so it must be something serious.'

Louis L epine is the prefect of Paris, one of the most powerful men in the city - some say he is their secret ruler. Murmurs begin at the surrounding tables. Reinert, a bassoonist who works in the opera, leans over.

'But which painting was stolen, Guillaume?'

'Ah, ah! That is the question. To be honest, I don't even know if it was a painting that was stolen or something else.'

'You mean statues or statuettes?'

Meanwhile, Pablo has started drawing again, but his line fails once more. He stares at Guillaume whose gaze says: 'Don't worry.'



The waiter brings the beer. Guillaume takes several big gulps and continues to look at Pablo as he in turn lets the sheet of paper with the failed museum detective disappear under the table. Max, meanwhile, turns to the bassoonist, who is still waiting for an answer.

‘It won’t have been the ‘Nike of Samothrace’. Hard to fit that one under your coat.’

Some of the guests laugh. Guillaume gives Pablo a last look, then turns to his audience with a wide smile.

‘On the other hand, gentlemen, think of the leaden statue of Isis that was stolen from the Louvre a few years ago. Including the plinth, if I remember rightly.’

‘How did they get it out?’ someone asks.

‘Through the chimney,’ Guillaume replies. ‘Even Father Christmas could learn a thing or two from thieves like that!’

The people jeer. Guillaume is gradually getting going. He reminds the guests of the journalist who spent the night in an Egyptian sarcophagus as a test of courage. And he tells them about the unknown man who climbed into the Galerie d’Apollon through a window three years ago and rearranged several paintings but didn’t take any of them. Guillaume garnishes the whole thing with little jibes at the guards, who, as everyone knows, are recruited from the ranks of injured soldiers. Most of them are

so old and worn out that they wouldn't be able to catch a thief even if he walked right past them.

Everyone is having a wonderful time except Pablo. He wants to go home. He asks Fernande if she wants to leave. She shakes her head.

'You can go on ahead,' she says in a resigned tone that suggests she knows the answer.

And it's true, he has a clear stance on the matter. Women, especially pretty ones like Fernande, shouldn't walk around Paris without an escort, let alone sit on their own in cafés. As soon as he had departed, a whole swarm of pushy admirers would gather around Fernande. Pablo finds the thought almost unbearable. He stuffs another pipe.

Meanwhile the discussion has shifted from the topic of how easy it is to steal something in the Louvre to the question of the evening: what could have been stolen? Lépine would not come to the Louvre in person for a second-rate marble torso or a random Poussin apostle. The big names are discussed - Caravaggio, Raphael, Titian and Ingres. Guillaume, the impresario of the evening, makes a game of it. He asks the audience for names of works of art, then promptly delivers his assessment.

'The Marriage of Cana!' someone shouts.

'Certainly worth stealing, but good grief, it's nearly ten metres high. The thieves would have to come with an ox-cart - or two!'

'The Raft of the Medusa'!

‘Ah, ah! Gericault’s masterpiece, also a whopper. Perhaps the thieves have paddled down the Seine on it and are already close to Rouen.’

‘Gabrielle d’Estrées!’ someone shouts.

Lewd laughter. ‘Gabrielle d’Estrées and one of her sisters’ is a portrait of two bare-breasted women. The hand of one is touching the nipple of the other.

‘Handy, easy to steal. It would look good hung over the marital bed,’ Guillaume says.

Of course, Pablo knows all the paintings that are being discussed. His father José is an art teacher. He took Pablo to museums countless times and leafed through art catalogues with him. Pablo has also been a regular visitor to the Louvre for years now. That he had the Vermeer in question in mind when the ‘Lace Maker’ was mentioned is clear. But did those around him?

Pablo suddenly realises what a special place *‘La Rotonde’* is. In most other cafés, Guillaume’s little games wouldn’t work because nobody would know the paintings. Here, on the other hand, everyone knows which works are meant, or at least pretends to.

Someone has just suggested a nameless mummy from the Egyptology collection, but this is flatly refused by the audience. Then someone suggests the ‘Rebellious Slave’, a statue by Michelangelo.

‘It’s more than two metres high. Not even...’ Guillaume forms two circles with his thumb and forefinger and holds them in front of his eyes to suggest a mask, ‘not even Fantômas could get it out!’

‘I really want to go home now,’ Pablo says to Fernande.

She sighs but complies. Pablo puts a few coins down on the table and gets up. He helps Fernande into her jacket.

‘Pilgrims at Emmaus’.

‘Small, yes, but a very gloomy old thing, don’t you think?’

Pablo nods to Max and pats Guillaume on the shoulder.

‘See you tomorrow?’ he asks.

‘Yes, in the evening, in the *‘Closerie’*. Marie is coming too,’ replies Guillaume.

Pablo leads Fernande to the door. They are already outside when he hears someone shout out ‘Leonardo da Vinci!’ The door closes.

‘Which Leonardo? I would have liked to know,’ Fernande says.

‘Guillaume will be happy to explain it to you tomorrow.’

‘What’s the matter with you today, Pablo?’

‘Nothing.’

They cross the square and walk towards the Métro station.

‘Are there lots of them in the Louvre? Da Vincis, I mean?’

‘La Belle Ferronnière’. ‘John the Baptist’. A Madonna,’ Pablo says.

‘And the Mona Lisa.’

‘Hm. Yes, that too.’

‘I wouldn’t steal that one.’

‘Why not?’

‘I found it disappointing,’ Fernande says. ‘Unremarkable somehow.’

Pablo believes the Gioconda to be one of Leonardo’s best paintings. But he has heard this criticism several times before. Perhaps it’s because of the centuries-old varnish. It makes the painting look darker than Leonardo originally painted it. Maybe the fact that the Gioconda is presented in rather an unflattering light is also a reason. Veronese’s immense ‘Feast in the House of Simon the Pharisee’ hangs above it, and to the left and right, a Raphael and a Titian take up space. The Gioconda, a rather small and quiet painting, is wedged between large and loud paintings. No wonder that she can’t shine.

‘What do you think it was, Pablo?’

‘Can we talk about something else?’

‘My god, you really are insufferable today.’

During the journey home, they don’t speak a single word to each other.

## 5

As the car turns into the Rue de Rivoli, Juhel unwraps the chocolate bar he bought at Potin's and eats it. Each bar comes with a small card from the Potin series 'Celebrities of our time'. There are people who make a point of collecting the entire set of Félix Potin pictures together. Juhel also collects them, although not very diligently. He separates the tin foil from the brown paper and pulls out the photograph from in between. A baby is staring at him. No, it is not staring at him, it is looking into the distance with an almost elegiac gaze.

'Alexis, Tsarevich of Russia' it says underneath the image.

Juhel slips the future tsar into his breast pocket. They are almost there. Instead of stopping at the Place du Carrousel, the driver leaves the street and stops directly at the main entrance to the Louvre. Two police officers approach their Lion Peugeot. One of them tells them to stop. Juhel winds down the window and waves the patrolman over.

'Good day. Chief Inspector Juhel Lenoir of the Sûreté Générale. We're expected.'

'Just head straight on through.'

'Thank you. Where will I find my colleagues?'

The policeman tilts his head.

'All over the building by now, I'd say. But the crime scene ...'

The officer points to the spot where the southern wing of the Louvre meets the main building. If his memory does not deceive him, then the Salon Carré is where it happened.

The policeman's statement that his colleagues are already all over the building vexes Juhel. He is not surprised. It was clear that the prefecture would arrive before the Sûreté Générale. It was equally clear that the Paris police would initially 'forget' to inform their colleagues from the Sûreté.

Juhel gets out and walks towards a side entrance. Another policeman holds the door open for him.

He walks down a long corridor lined by pillared arches until he reaches a large stairwell. Marble steps lead up to the first floor. Juhel hasn't been to the Louvre for a long time, but he does remember this staircase. It is hardly possible not to remember it. The staircase is a spectacular vault with huge skylights. The prow of a stone ship rises up at the top of the staircase. A headless statue with outstretched wings stands on it like a figurehead - the 'Nike of Samothrace'.

Juhel climbs the stairs.

A man in an earth-coloured three-piece suit leans against the pedestal of the headless goddess of victory. He is smoking a cigarette and looking down at Juhel. It is his former colleague Alain Contois, inspector with the prefecture's criminal investigation department.

'Well look at that. The Sûreté Générale is here so soon.'

‘I’ve come to help.’

‘How nice.’

In Juhel’s eyes, anyone who starts a conversation in this way forfeits the right to be taken seriously, or even to be acknowledged. Without giving Contois another glance, he turns to the right. Juhel can hear the officer softly hissing the word ‘traitor’. He passes two dark marble columns and finds himself in a magnificent gallery leading to the Salon Carré. At least that is what Juhel hopes. As already mentioned, he hasn’t been to the Louvre for a long time - he is not particularly interested in art.

A man waddles towards him. He is wearing the uniform of a museum guard. His bicorn hat is very crooked and the man looks extremely dishevelled. Juhel cannot blame him. When the man comes closer, he perceives a strong smell. The guard smells of sweat and *vin de table*.

Even without this olfactory clue, Juhel would have noticed that the man is a drunk. You can tell by his nose, by his rheumy eyes.

‘Monsieur le Gardien,’ Juhel says and nods to the man.

‘Monsieur.’

‘The Salon Carré?’

‘Straight ahead.’

The Salon Carré is not exactly huge by Louvre standards; nevertheless, it makes quite an impression. The most spectacular thing is the ceiling, richly decorated with gold and figures. Light falls through a



large glass roof onto the damask-red walls. The latter are full of paintings. They hang close together, closer than the Brest prints with which Juhel's wife Aimée is gradually plastering their apartment.

The place is busy. You could almost think that the Louvre wasn't closed. There are probably around twenty people in the room. They are mostly from the prefecture. He definitely knows the greying gentleman with a goatee and a sweeping moustache. It is Alphonse Bertillon, the head of forensics. As always, a swarm of assistants scurries around him, clunky cameras, powder puffs and folding rulers in their hands. Some journalist once described Bertillon as France's answer to Sherlock Holmes - poor France, Juhel thinks.

There is an empty spot on the right where the hustle and bustle is greatest. He steps closer. Between two Renaissance paintings full of angels and babies are four hooks. The painting must have hung from them. The detective in Juhel registers that the wall hooks look hardly any different from those at his home.

The empty space measures about eighty by fifty centimetres. Juhel tries to remember what exactly was depicted in the painting - a woman, that much is clear. He must have looked at this Mona Lisa when he came here. Everyone visits the Salon Carré because that is where the treasures are known to hang. However, Juhel can't remember the painting.

Clearly this Lisa didn't make much of an impression on him.

On the other side of the room he spots another familiar face. It is Octave Hamard, the head of the Paris Crime Department. He is in conversation with a well-dressed gentleman. Juhel joins them.

‘Good day, Messieurs.’

Hamard crosses his arms in front of his chest. He looks like a porter from Les Halles who has been put into a suit.

‘Hello, Juhel.’

Turning to the civilian, Hamard says: ‘This is Chief Inspector Juhel Lenoir.’

The man sports grey stubble and has an aquiline nose. He is Juhel’s age - mid-forties. They shake hands.

‘Georges Bénédite, Head of the Egyptology Department. I am representing Director Homolle.’

Théophile Homolle is the Director of the National Museums and therefore, above all, of the Louvre.

‘He isn’t here?’

‘The director is on holiday.’

‘I see. I am representing the Head of the Sûreté Générale.’

Bénédite looks puzzled.

‘I thought, Monsieur Hamard ...’

Juhel can’t blame the man for his confusion. Everything that happens in Paris is the responsibility of the prefect and his men. The

prefecture has its own patrolmen and its own criminal police, the Sûreté de Paris. The Sûreté Générale is responsible for the rest of the country. The two police forces reside in separate headquarters and have little else to do with one another. Cynics claim that there are Apache gangs that work better together.

‘... Monsieur Hamard represents the prefecture, and I am here,’ Juhel nods to his colleague, ‘to support him in his work.’

Hamard smiles weakly. Experience shows that this does not bode well.

‘Very well,’ says Bénédite, ‘shall we go over to the office? Director Hamard and I wanted to meet there with several other people and go over the current state of affairs.’

Juhel nods his agreement. It seems he arrived just in time. Otherwise he would have had to request the minutes of this meeting and the corresponding investigation file from the prefecture headquarters at Quai des Orfèvres 36. Given the explosive nature of the case, the notoriously uncooperative colleagues would probably have provided them, but with several days’ delay.

On their way to the directorate, Juhel notices how deserted the rest of the Louvre seems. They do not come across a single guard. After around ten minutes, they enter a large room crammed with dark furniture and dusty folios. It appears to be the office of the absent Homolle. Shortly afterwards,

more people arrive. Bénédite introduces them to each other. From the museum, the chief curator of the painting collection, Monsieur Leprieur, as well as the chief museum guard. From the police, in addition to Hamard and Juhel, Alphonse Bertillon and a man by the name of Ferrat. The latter seems to be Hamard's personal assistant. The group is complemented by an officer from the Ministry of Fine Arts.

Juhel takes out an emerald-coloured notebook, a gift from his wife. On a clean page he writes: '22<sup>nd</sup> August 1911.'

[END OF SAMPLE]