

SUICIDE WITHOUT DYING

My first rat of the day is the size of a small dog, hit by a car overnight and lying dead in the gutter. Its eyes are open and startled. Its body has hardened against the pavement. I think the weather must have confused it—something is wrong this year, to have such heavy fog so late in May. I scare Jean-Pierre in the truck by holding the face of the rat against his window with my bare hands.

“Bastard!” he yells at me, calling it a Yankee Rat, or calling me a Yankee Rat. I don’t understand his French through the glass. “Get in the truck, we’re late!” he shouts.

This is how it is with Jean-Pierre.

Later he will laugh, or I will laugh.

I place my broom in its holster and climb into our small, bright green truck. Jean-Pierre is driving us ahead to the Place St. Michel. We’ll skip a section of the route.

“*Ou es tu, Yankee?*”

“*Boul’Mich.*”

“*Menteur!*”

She is calling me a liar.

This is Amira’s voice, crackling over the radio. She is our dispatcher, tracking where we are in the city and which cleaning crews are running late. To tell you the truth, we could do without her, although we probably couldn’t. She is right. I am a liar.

She is Algerian, and some days when I close my eyes I hear love in her voice.

“*André des Arts.*” I point.

Jean-Pierre doesn’t look. I’ve been pointing to the same landmarks from my life for three years. The Hôtel St. André des Arts is six stories tall and two car lengths wide. I lived there, in hiding, my first month in Paris, using up the last of my cash while Amira’s friends arranged a city job for me and a false identity. In room 25, I became Luc Distang.

“It looks like ‘luck,’” I told her.

“It isn’t,” she told me.

It was ‘Luke.’

I sweep streets now for the city where it’s too narrow for any truck but ours. We work in cleaning crews of two and I wear thick green pants and waterproof shoes and a lime-green vest that’s visible a block away even in the fog. Across my back it reads, “*Propeté de Paris.*”

Paris owns me. I’ve grown used to the broom by now, but of course it’s a ridiculous tool for a grown man to use. There are long neon-green bristles at the end, like a witch’s broom in a child’s cartoon, comical until you find a rat and then you appreciate the design.

My job in the early morning is to use a large, square-ended turnkey which I carry in my pocket to open the water valves along the curbs as we work our way from block to block. I use my broom to sweep the trash from the street into the gutter, and then along the slow, shallow

current of water there until it reaches the drain. I pick up what I can with a metal dustpan and place it in the back of the truck. The rest goes into the sewer. I turn off the water. We move on to the next block.

My job is to make small rivers in Paris, and hope, as they do, for a better life.

Because of the fog, we can't see the traffic problem developing ahead of us on the Île de la Cité. The city wears a false innocence this morning, empty of human suffering and conflict and disappointment. There is only my neon broom and the earnest movement of trash ahead of me in the gutter, our small green truck revving into gear, the sour smell of standing water and oil beneath my shoes. I close my eyes for a moment and inhale deeply. This is the Paris I own.

Nearby, in front of expensive cafés, wicker chairs are stacked four high on the sidewalk as a reminder—the rest of Paris I do not own. I am a renter, and Paris can evict me at any time. It throws me pennies for sweeping its litter along.

In the distance are the spiked shoulders of St. Séverin Cathedral, wrapped in a gray cloak of ambiguity, hiding the church's faith in God even from its strongest believers.

I've finished sweeping the Place St. Michel and Jean-Pierre picks me up again to drive us onto the Île de la Cité. "How is the moon looking this morning?" he asks me.

"The moon. Very well," I tell him. The moon is a narrow crescent of faded paint, oversprayed onto the pavement of the Place St. Michel, unintentionally Islamic in appearance, left behind by a street artist years ago. The moon is in constant peril, only a step away from a sidewalk used by thousands of rough soles each day. We carry strong solvents in our truck to clean street graffiti and paint stains like this one, but instead we protect the artist's mark.

Someday I will tell you the story of the moon and the artist, but today Jean-Pierre has taken us over the bridge onto the Île de la Cité and we can see the trouble ahead.

Jean-Pierre is ten years older than I am, in his late thirties, but he acts like a pensioner, overweight and sedentary and ready to retire. He exhibits all the mannerisms of the French—what I've seen of them, anyway—crying out suddenly in delight over nothing, or wincing at a bad idea as if I've squirted lemon juice into his eyes. His hands fly out at me when he speaks; his cheeks inflate like a blowfish; his head nods like a boxer avoiding a punch. He is busy with everything in life but work. His feet are ruined from a decade of cleaning the city.

I sweep for both of us and he drives the truck. My driver's license is a forgery and I use it as little as possible. My passport is a forgery. My record of birth in France is a forgery. We are ranked the lowest team in productivity among the city cleaning crews because I'm doing the work of two, but this is how we protect each other. What he doesn't understand—what I haven't told him—is I'm wanted by U.S. authorities for what I would call the mercy killing of my addled mother in her Connecticut home; an assisted suicide by suffocation. To me, she was already dead. To the police, she wasn't. To them, I am wanted on charges of premeditated murder.

Heavy traffic surrounds us on the Île de la Cité, a parking lot of delivery trucks and vans and morning taxis. With our city truck lights flashing, Jean-Pierre tries to move some of it aside but there is nowhere for it to go. We are now the rats in the street. Amira is talking to other crews on the radio about the situation and Jean-Pierre vows to stay with the truck. I will take my broom and walk ahead to where I might still be able to work. He will pick up my piles of trash as he reaches them.

In this way I come to witness the woman from America standing on the parapet of Notre Dame Cathedral, preparing herself to fall silently through the fog, like a bundle of clean laundry, to meet her God.

“You may have faith in God,” Jean-Pierre told me once, “without believing in God.” I remember this phrase because I wrote it down in my pocket notebook at the time. I was trying to learn French and I wrote down whatever people told me, for decoding later. I later gave up on this. I don’t have the brain for learning French. I’ll never be mentally quick enough. I still write in English in my pocket notebooks to keep from losing my mind. I thirst for English like a prisoner in a foreign jail, dying to hear the voice of a cellmate, a captor, anyone—the barking of dogs through an open window—directed at him.

“You can have *hope* in God,” Jean-Pierre says.

“You can have hope. Yes,” I reply.

My French is only good enough sometimes to repeat what I’ve heard and add a “yes” or a “no” at the end.

The police are working the scene near Notre Dame Cathedral. I carry my broom upright in one hand like a toy horse’s head on a stick, its neon face ripe with the smell of the gutter. Most of the drivers stuck in traffic don’t understand what’s happening ahead of them, but the streets have been cordoned off in all directions and the police are negotiating with a woman barely visible in the clouds. I have a sudden vision of Our Mother the Virgin Mary. *Notre Dame*. I hope for this woman’s sake there is a God. I rub at my neck, at the long, smooth scar there, a burn from a rope, and I feel more alone than ever standing in the middle of a crowd filling the streets in all directions.

Because of my city uniform and my broom, I’m able to work my way through the people to the front. The police are using bullhorns to hold back pedestrians and to speak with some compassion to the woman above. She’s holding onto a gargoyle—a random demon, but *her* demon—out on a ledge 20 or 30 meters in the sky. She’s ready to leap, I can feel it in my chest.

“This nonsense has been going on for half an hour!” a man shouts at me in French from the open window of a taxicab, checking his wristwatch to be sure of the time.

Angry drivers are standing outside their cars, some of them yelling at her, “Jump and get it over with!” “If you’re going to do it, do it!” In the quiet morning air, with the sound of voices

carrying so well in the fog, I'm sure she can hear them, even at her height on the ledge. They've been waiting in traffic a long time, they are delivering produce to markets, wine and beer to restaurants, these are not fat bankers and politicians who can afford to be late to work, these are men paid to make their deliveries before the start of business, taxi drivers with passengers who need to catch their trains, their flights, who need to reach their morning meetings. This has gone on too long and it should be resolved.

Officers in riot gear unfold from a police van and run to the front lines. So often there is riot gear in France. The organizers of strikes and demonstrations are known to complain if the police do *not* send a riot squad—indicating the authorities are taking their cause too lightly. Even so, a suicide is not a strike, and I'm surprised to see the riot squad. They push roughly through the crowd and I'm not sure what the woman could be thinking at this point but someone screams and points at her, and I see the bag of clean laundry tumbling from the sky.

Then, just as abruptly, it strikes a set of scaffolding halfway to the ground and tumbles in a new direction, into the treetops, rustling loose the tender green leaves of May and snapping small branches, which chase her gently to the earth.

The police run to the woman and I'm drawn along by the crowd of pedestrians as they follow at an uneasy pace, wanting a closer look but not wanting to see. We can tell the woman is still alive, screaming in pain and trying to stand, out of instinct, although a moment before she wanted death. The police reach her and try to keep her still. The medics arrive quickly. They were on standby near the scene, although I hadn't noticed them waiting. The woman fights against them, swinging one unbroken arm, but she can't move her legs. She yells at them like a cat near death still defending her notion of territory and pride.

I don't know what to think. I never do. I look at the people around me, to identify an emotion in their faces, horrified but fascinated. They begin to close in on me and I feel the same rush of heat and panic I feel when the small elevator in my building stops unexpectedly between floors, trapping me inside for a moment, until it can free itself and move on.

The people in the crowd smell strongly now of nicotine and perspiration. The stench of the dead rat on my hands, on the bright green bristles near my head. The pool of water and litter at my feet, calling me back to work. I use the broom, held at my waist in one hand, to clear a wide path for myself. I'm nudging at people gently, I believe, but they scramble to avoid me. All the while, my other hand is at my throat.

The woman survives. A gift from the Virgin Mary herself. They take her to the nearest hospital to continue her suffering. A spokesman informs us she is American, living in Washington, D.C. She is 56 years old and she is distraught over her husband's televised announcement to the nation that he is leaving her. This was meant to be their anniversary trip to Paris. She is the wife of a U.S. Senator. Thus, the riot gear. Thus, what marriage has done to another woman. As my mother lay dying of schizophrenia caused by her children and her husband.

“We’re two hours behind,” Jean-Pierre complains to me. “Couldn’t she have used a gun, like other Americans?”

Radio talk shows in Paris are stirring already with debate over the behavior of the drivers who stood outside their cars yelling at the woman to jump. “This wild mob was deplorable,” the host begins. “Something you would see in America, not in Paris. Don’t you agree with me?”

“Sacrilege! On her part. Leaping from our holy Notre Dame!” a caller argues.

“An insult to our nation!” another says.

“This behavior of the drivers was understandable! People! I was there!”

Who calls into these talk shows, after all, but the drivers themselves, listening in their cars and trucks as they drive: “We are all working at this hour, to make the city great! Who is a woman like that woman to come to Paris and behave so badly?”

Jean-Pierre listens and enjoys the debate. He calls out to me as I work. “You and I, we are at work before any of these drivers! We are the greatest workers of all!” he shouts. I sweep like a madman, trying to return to our schedule and erase my memories of the morning and everything I know about America. My broom is a poor eraser. I am cleaning Paris with a toothbrush, and all the while the fog of the past interferes.

Jean-Pierre reminds me there are two winters in every year. The first, in January, when the year begins, and the second in December, when a new winter starts.

Sweeping the streets, I have time to contemplate such tricks of logic. Sometimes there is real wisdom to what Jean-Pierre is saying, and sometimes it is nonsense. I am a stone in a stream when I work, he tells me, or I am the water flowing around the stone, or I am the source of the water, turning my square key as I go. I don’t understand his words. I write them down in my notebook. These are not the usual phrases of the streets and shops and the zinc bars after work.

Later-morning traffic is moving quickly past me now as I sweep, making a sound like the years of my life rushing ahead to catch the others. The exhaust they leave behind smells sweet for a moment, like food, before turning to poison in my lungs. I feel caught between two winters and I worry this is all I will ever have.

“You need to relax,” Jean-Pierre tells me. “You are wound up as tightly as any American I have ever known.”

“Who have you ever known from America?” I ask him.

“You are the first,” he answers.

“Tell me again about the water in the river,” I ask him. “I want to write it down correctly.”

“The water is a metaphor,” he tells me. “You and I, we need to breathe underwater to stay alive here. Not like a fish breathes. Like the riverbed breathes.”

“Get in! You’re the last two out!” Amira yells at us over the dispatch radio in our truck.
“Where are you?”

“Canal St. Martin,” Jean-Pierre tells her.

“You are hopeless, both of you! Come in now, tomorrow is a holiday, I must get home.”

“It isn’t a holiday for your people, what is the hurry?” Jean-Pierre asks her.

“It’s everyone’s holiday.”

“Don’t worry, Amira, we’ll be there very soon,” I tell her.

“Liar!” she says. Then, with desperation: “My husband will beat me if I’m late!”

“She’s joking,” Jean-Pierre tells me.

“I don’t think she’s joking,” I tell him.

“Leave the keys for us, Amira, we’ll lock up,” Jean-Pierre tells her.

“I’ll be fired if you forget,” she says.

“You will never be fired,” he tells her. “The President of France himself could not fire you.”

We are all speaking French, of course, although Amira’s French has an Algerian influence, and mine is like a schoolboy’s. Her eyes are black and guarded and sometimes dangerous—the eyes that were introduced to me by the night clerk at the Hôtel St. André des Arts, after I woke him one night to ask how I could get a new identity for cash. No phone. No Internet. No electronic trail.

I imagine Amira’s eyes as I listen to her words crackling over our radio. I can smell the harisa on her breath—the Guajillo chilies, the garlic—something like coriander, or caraway, also. She is of the lowest caste in Paris. Jean-Pierre spars with her on the radio partly because he has nothing better to do and partly because he is free to say whatever he wants to her.

He drops me off beside the canal. Our friendship goes no farther than this. I will walk home from here to my poor apartment building on the fringes of the 19th arrondissement, and he will drive our small green truck back to Amira at central base and then take the train home to the suburbs where he lives, far from the expense and the *haute couture* of central Paris.

I carry a small bag of clothing with me. Sometimes I stop at a zinc bar on my way home to try to meet people and I change out of my uniform there. Before I knew to do this, the owner would walk me outside and ask me not to return.

I pass an old couple sitting on a bench by the canal. They don’t look up to greet me. They are arguing. They’ve been married too long.

“Why do Americans always kill themselves when they don’t get what they want?” I hear the woman say.

“*Bonjour, ma sentinelle.*” I bow to touch the head of Madame Huguette’s pet hen as I enter the Bar Fleuri, a zinc bar in the 19th. The hen is a good luck charm. She is not a fancy bird, but she will hurry to greet you with a round of friendly clucking if she recognizes you as a regular.

The Bar Fleuri is on the rue du Plateau. Its doors are open all day long, serving coffee, breakfast, lunch and aperitifs, dinner, whiskey, carafes of inexpensive wine into the night. People sit on mismatched wooden chairs at solid tables with Formica tops. An old, beat-up gas pump, painted green, stands inside the front door with a nozzle and a hose, looking ready for use.

The customers are mostly men these days—North Africans and Arabs and ex-Americans like myself. There are days one would call it a seedy place, depending on which men come in and how long they stay. In the morning, they stand and argue over the news in a lively way as they drink strong espressos and head to work, or head out to look for work. In the afternoon, they sit and drink half-liters of house wine and argue about the lack of work until they are bleary-eyed and ready to go home to their families.

“Why is this place called the Bar Fleuri?” I once asked a man there.

He looked up. He had no answer.

The waitress pointed at the wall behind us to tell me the bar was named for the roses painted on the tiles there.

I hope someone will talk to me today. I hope I will hear English.

In the small bathroom, where a person can barely turn around, I wash my hands and face clean of work and change my clothes. I am thin enough now that a small bathroom doesn't bother me. My face in the mirror is strangely distorted. I've lost the rounded look of an American.

Modern times have come to the Bar Fleuri. There is a television set mounted on one of the walls. The patrons are watching images replayed again and again of the woman leaping from Notre Dame. A local news crew had time to set up and capture it all in dramatic fashion, a woman falling out of the fog and caught by scaffolding and then the treetops and then the saving arms of the soft earth. The debate continues in the Bar Fleuri over the behavior of the drivers and the miracle of the woman's survival on the eve of Ascension Thursday.

“An insult! Tomorrow! A holy day!”

“She was a tourist, what would she know of our holy days?”

“She was a Catholic. She knew.”

“A person doesn't plan her suicide with reference to the church calendar.”

“It was a miracle. At our own Notre Dame.”

“It's a matter for her family now.”

I have seen and heard enough of the woman leaping from Notre Dame. This is what the media do. For a day, they prod us all into caring about a complete stranger. Then the day passes and we cease to care. How else can one survive? It would be overwhelming.

There are laws in America governing how many turns a noose can have before it is considered illegal. The noose is so dangerous a knot, it's a crime even to tie one as a joke for a friend. Something I wrote down once in my pocket notebook. Something a policeman told me, waiting for me to answer his questions about the rope burn he noticed on my neck. My first

attempt to escape my life. A week later, I slipped out of America on a container ship.

“If you replace all the parts of a bicycle, over time, is it the same bicycle?” A question from Jean-Pierre. It helps him pass the time as I work and he drives. “It would seem odd to argue that such a bicycle is the same as the original,” he tells me, “and it would seem just as odd to argue it is a totally new bicycle. There are no clear solutions.”

I assume you are who you say you are.

I assume you are who you were yesterday.

“I’m not sleeping well these nights,” I tell Jean-Pierre. “Your questions bother me.”

Jean-Pierre once read in a book that inmates in London prisons lost their minds because they were kept too long in solitary confinement. Practices had to be changed. A person given no connection to another human being will cease to be human. It’s suicide to do this to yourself.

We all need at least one other person.

“You do not need me, however,” Jean-Pierre clarifies. “You need someone else.”

I have been told, when men return from war after killing so many other men, their wives wait and wait and wait for things to return to normal, but they never return to normal. That place is gone from the map. It has been dismantled.

“And what if all the time your neighbor is taking the old parts out of your garbage can,” Jean-Pierre asks me, “and using them to build a bicycle of his own?”

Listening to the news at the Bar Fleuri, we are told the woman who leaped from Notre Dame will never walk again.

This can be desired, I tell myself—reducing life to a single option. There are studies showing, one year after the event, paraplegics are as happy with their lives as lottery winners. I think of the woman and I hope she is one of them.

Her husband has already been asked by reporters if he will divorce her anyway, despite her paralysis.

“Who is to say what is right or wrong between two people?” he answers, and for once the men at the Bar Fleuri are uncertain.

“He is a wise man,” I tell them in English. “A U.S. Senator.” They finish their wine, as if I have said nothing to anyone. I think about Amira then. And Jean-Pierre. Tomorrow is a holiday, but after that we go back to work.

END