

LES ICONOCLASTES

By ELIZABETH HAN

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*All thoughts finish themselves eventually. I wish
it were true. Paint all the men you want but sooner or
later they go to ground and rot. The mind fights the*

*body and the body fights the land. It wants our bodies,
the landscape does, and everyone runs the risk of
being swallowed up. Can we love nature for what it
really is: predatory? We do not walk through a passive
landscape. The paint dries eventually. The bodies*

*decompose eventually. We collide with place, which
is another name for God, and limp away with a
permanent injury. Ask for a blessing? You can try,
but we will not remain unscathed. Flex your will
or abandon your will and let the world have its way*

*with you, or disappear and save everyone the bother
of a dark suit. Why live a life? Well, why are you
asking?*

*When you have nothing to say,
set something on fire.*

-- Excerpted from "Landscape with Fruit Rot and Millipede" by Richard Siken

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When the boy crashes the reading, I can tell by his too-slow, sashaying step that he is deliberately late. What's worse is when he takes an extra ten seconds to pretend to shir his brows at the mass gathering on folding chairs, the overflow crowd sitting on stacks of books, as though he knows that is how long it takes for Mathilde to fall in love. He pivots nearly all the way round on a derby shoe, showing off his entire outfit. The wool blazer, jumper, and slacks are so completely wrong for the summer weather in Paris that I nearly laugh into the poem she has asked me to read to the group.

"I can't read my own poem!" Mathilde said, blushing, as all young writers are apt to say, thinking there are rules. The other rules she flouts, like the rule that everyone comes to Paris to fall in love with a Frenchman, which she can, I guess, because she is French. No, when the boy, who introduces himself as Felix, assumes a position in the back of the room, my friend from Bretagne has already fallen for the one American attendee who thinks he's the sixth member of The Strokes. He's even got a damn copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* peeking out of the blazer pocket, pushed up probably by a wad of tissue, just enough that the title shows. At least he knows enough of the etiquette to wear all black.

The news broke that morning on the front page of *Le Monde*. Keats is dead. Harold, not John. The novelist, not poet, though the subject would have complained, skimming the full-colour obituary, that his work eluded such pedestrian concepts as genre. The neighbours found the thrice Man Booker Prize-winning author reclining, in death, on the divan, in his apartment in the 11e arrondissement, head tipped back and wearing a turban, like the Jacques-Louis David painting of the revolutionary, Marat, stabbed by Charlotte Corday. They said maybe Keats hadn't time to run a full bath. Cause of death—a stroke, though

they found a basket of cherries beside the body on the coffee table and his fingertips discoloured with juice.

Mathilde said, "They should test the juice. For it is more likely ink. Or better yet, poison. He was one of us, after all."

She, like the rest of the group, is taking the loss hard. "Thank God we're going to *Le Salon* today," she said, crossing herself, when we took some *jus pressé* and *crêpes* together at the *brasserie* close to Hui's apartment in Le Marais. "We need to be with our friends."

I agreed with her, though I have never felt at ease there as she. She always called our thing *Le Salon* rather than the weekly informal writing group in the back room of Shakespeare & Company. They are not my friends either, though we can say, when others ask, that we know of one another, are in one another's company. In the way the French call their pets *les animaux de compagnie*.

"*Oui? Mathilde Chartier? Je la connais,*" was how Paul, a Dutchman and another of the young writers, put it, one night when we went drinking afterwards. Paul, like Mathilde, is only nineteen. Steinbeck is his hero. Baby fat bloats his cheeks. On the other hand, in his last years, Sir Harold Evelyn Keats, CBE FRSA FRSL, on his book jackets, had started resembling a music stand at a car boot sale, thin, chipped, and crusted with unidentifiable splatter. When I look around the narrow room, every conceivable corner stuffed with mourners, and especially at Paul and Mathilde, I can't help thinking of my old writing teacher, Ms. O'Connell, who warned me of this moment.

"One day, your icons will start dying. The ones whose next book and next film and next record you wait on to come out. And the invisible ropes that anchored your vessel will be cut. You'll run out of things to read. You'll wish you'd paid attention to younger writers then."

We were in her living room watching *Silence* just after it came to DVD. She worried, just like after *The Departed*, that this would be Scorsese's last film, and she pledged to watch the next one on the first day in the cinema just in case. But once you make a promise like that, they pile up. Alice Walker. Woody Allen. Bruce Springsteen. John Updike's death nearly put her in a coma. Ms. O'Connell passed a few years ago and I gave a speech at the funeral that at least the cancer had spared her witnessing the expiration of Chief Justice Laura Reed later the same summer. Don't get me started on folks she actually knew. We should all be spared living long enough to see the deaths of our friends, though funerals are usually not so bad, since no one expects to have a wonderful time and it can end up being quite nice. The corpse certainly isn't stressing.

Mathilde, aside from her shock about Keats, who she claims influenced her first novel she wrote at age twelve, doesn't talk about death. She is young and turns out a new non-death-related story or poem a week. I am particularly proud to read this latest piece, a villanelle. It is excellently written. Side conversations are still going on among *Le Salon*, so I stretch the paper multiple times. I hack a cough before I begin. Mathilde says I am always performing, like that day we snuck into the Conservatoire National Supérieur on the Avenue Jean-Jaurés. Ostensibly, we went to see the auditions, but really, to scout the Perfect French Boy.

"Why are we here?" I asked on that day.

"This is for your benefit. You'll love it."

As children are life-size to other children, Mathilde saw nothing exotic about those budget Louis Garrels with their gold-tipped Sobranies, turtlenecks, and Gallic eyebags. But she knew I would. In between pieces, they fixed their perfectly undone hair and polished their reeds and I kept smoothing my skirt and going to the bathroom so I could walk past them again. The embarrassment of being a thirty-year-old

woman peacocking for boys younger than my brother really should have hit me, but it didn't. At least, not until we arrived back at Hui's place, where, on his bar, there is a photograph of him dragging a bow across a violin, me tense over the piano like my arms were held with invisible pins, my face in a permanent surprised expression.

Our parents' home is filled with such photos. Mother and Father, along with giving us both our start in science, made sure Hui and I began lessons at the same time so we could accompany each other all our lives. I was twelve and he was four when they brought us to the music school on the corner of Bloor and Queen's Park in Toronto. We didn't get to choose our instruments, but Hui was an immediate prodigy on violin. Any fool, on the other hand, can play a well-tuned piano. One day, when my parents visited me at the university, it occurred to me to ask my mother, "Why didn't you just start him younger instead of when I was older? To encourage him?"

"No, to encourage *you*," Mother replied.

"Dad?" I asked.

Father side-eyed her but didn't disagree.

Mother always called the shots in our family. After seeing her own premature death in a dream, she made a decision to have a second child at thirty-six, insisting I would need Hui when she and Father were dead. Today she's sixty-two and still healthy, which she attributes to God's unceasing grace. He must have fought off the principalities and powers of Satan behind the scenes. She pays God back for the respite by volunteering every weekend at church back in Richmond Hill and then kicking atheist ass at the all-Asian tennis club afterwards. Her dream has also paid other unforeseen dividends. After all, I'm here now, sleeping in Hui's living room and eating all his *pain au chocolat* while he's been called to Lille for an urgent consultation by his newest collaborators.

I'm not envious of Hui, but it is a bit odd having such a genius brother also in science. Ms. O'Connell always told me I'd regret majoring in biomedicine in college, but I didn't listen, and I'm glad she isn't around now to see how I'm left by it. A few months ago, my final struggle paper, the one needed before my committee would send me to defend, was finally accepted into a journal of impact factor three. I suspect Dr. Ko, my advisor, had needed to get his elbows out for that one. What a world we are living in, where institutions give out pity PhDs to divest minor-league candidates aging out of their research groups. They used to draw the limit at pity Masters, but now there are too many of us in higher ed all over the country, languishing on projects more dead than Sir Harold Keats. At the defense, when I finished answering the final question, Dr. Ko leapt up and embraced me, terribly moist, after seemingly sweating off half the water in his body. By contrast, the *Fac* in Lille, with whom my brother is studying a single nucleotide mutation within a proto-oncogene coded for on chromosome 5, had so required Hui's expertise he hadn't even had to pay for his own train ticket. Mathilde has not met Hui yet, but after seeing the photograph that day, has been pestering me for an introduction. Perhaps to file him mentally as the Perfect Chinese Boy.

Now, eyeing Felix, she nudges me very hard and her breath slightly speckles my ear. "*C'est ça. Regarde-le.*" Her dainty hands reach up to resettlement her hair, but she's forgotten she cut it to a perfect pixie for the summer. I can hear the question unsaid, on her lips. She looks so incredibly French. Felix is her Perfect American Boy. Of course he will notice her.

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My brother asked me to come to Paris but it's been eight weeks and it is still not apparent why. He's never here. After the defense, Dr. Ko didn't offer to have me stay on as a research associate and it's clear to everyone in the department that I'm not post-doc material. I usually TA a remedial physiology class in

the summer, but the numbers weren't high enough this year to offer it. No sharper signs from God are needed that I can work on my book now in the open.

On my website, my writing credits are modest but impactful, the opposite of my research career. Mathilde says I'm one of those writers whom you hate, for my first story got published in *Zoetrope All-Story* and my second in *Glimmer Train* because I didn't know any better about tiers. I started sending out my stories that I'd written in undergrad to the literary magazines from the back of the alphabet and the ones with the funniest-sounding names. But that was nearly eleven years ago. Aside from some flash, I've published little since. At some point, the agents I queried wanted to see a novel. So for years one to four of my PhD, I started several threads and worked diligently whenever I wasn't in the lab. Years five and seven, most of my experiments failed, a group at UCSF scooped our main project, and I began seeing a STEM version of a sports psychologist through the university. I lost hope I would ever satisfy the committee enough to progress to my defense. Worse still, my critique, not mincing words, said that my prose had turned limp and effete. Fortunately, *Liddy* happened and is probably the sole reason I still consider myself sort of an active writer, able to use the #amwriting tag on Twitter even if I can't tell my followers the exact work—thanks to Hui.

Three summers ago, Hui and I started working on a series of children's books about famous women in STEM throughout history. I germinated the idea, but it was Hui who came up with the time-travelling character of Liddy, named after Bathsheba Everdeen's loyal maid in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and Liddy's band of intrepid friends, The Alchemists.

"Who do you mean?" he asked me, when I lamented how little young girls knew about their forebears. "Marie Curie, Rosalind Franklin, and then who?"

I glowered.

"Ah. I see. That's the point."

Among a cornucopia of other talents, poor Hui had had to choose between the violin, drawing, and lacrosse, before settling on molecular biology—and, boy, was he good at the latter. He finished his baccalaureate at Imperial College London in two years and is now only six months away from a tenure-track position in Paris, practically unheard of at his age. Even with his lesser pursuits, he has a knack for quickly executing deliverables. Soon after our discussion of the concept of *Liddy*, he presented me with the first illustrations of the characters in the distinctive *ligne claire* style for which the books are now known, under his chosen pseudonym. He refused to use his real name and I wouldn't publish unless we had the same last name, so now we are Agnes and Roland Fang, joint authors of *Liddy and the Alchemists*.

"They should know that we're together," I explained.

"But won't they think we're married?" he asked.

"It's the Meg and Jack White conundrum. Folks'll go crazy with speculation."

"You want to make kids *crazy*?" he said, alarmed.

Hui also insisted on no author photos and no video interviews, so it wouldn't overshadow his science. While I had hardly any science of my own to overshadow, I just wanted to do something fun with my brother, so I acquiesced without argument. We've put out eight books in three years. Last year, we sold so well on Amazon that we released special Christmas editions with little felted versions of Liddy and the supporting cast. My favourite, and Hui's as well, is tiny felt Mary Anning in a bonnet and hoop skirt holding a tiny felt ammonite.

But that is *Liddy*. Kid stuff. *Liddy* is not my novel. I hate my novel, if it can even be called that. It dogs me.

This morning, when I found out about Keats, my first thought went to the Non-Existent Manuscript of Indeterminate Acuity, which I refer to as NEMIA, for short, like a person. Compared to the success of *Liddy*, NEMIA already felt like a joke. But today, it seems so much worse. Ever since I saw the obituary, I imagine myself, limp and pale, on my brother's sofa with stained fingertips and an unfinished Word document open beside me on the coffee table. The local *médecin* moves all furniture aside to examine me and issues the death certificate. They call Hui home. "She was so close," my brother says to the doctor, while knowing it wasn't true, and silently fretting about the smell. I think about what Hui would say in dialogue a lot and I think he senses this. Every now and then, he asks me if he is in NEMIA.

"I don't want to be a major character."

"I hope you get to find out," is my standard answer.

In June, I saw my brother off to Lille at the lift of his building, wedging his suitcase by his slight body, which was squeezed into a full three-piece suit. I pulled the lift's scissor gate shut. As the chamber began to descend below the level of my feet, he shouted, "Who knows. You could be done when I'm back. See you in two weeks!"

That was nearly two months ago. He called at the end of the first week and said it would be a longer sojourn than intended. "For sure, now, the book will be done. God smiles upon it."

I chuckled. "If your flat survives."

"*Non, s'il te plaît*. It's a base for exploring *la meilleure ville du monde*, not a cloister."

I decided he was right on both accounts. My brother had, ever since he was a child, maintained an iron interdict against mess and sloth. His drapes in the smart two-bedroom match his accent wall color and the lampshades, and, even more annoyingly, the vases and cups all face the same way. I suspected he called due to a clairvoyance that I had already left dishes in the bathroom sink and hung the toilet roll "under" instead of "over." I had abused his trust. I immediately fixed the toilet roll. And the next day, with new vigour, took to the streets of Paris, his adoptive city and mine for the summer, armed with my laptop, notes, and a copy of *Write Your Novel in Thirty Days*, beginning with different cafes and brasseries, experimenting with writing inside by the outlets, sometimes outside on a patio, before moving on to the *jardins*.

That was how I met Mathilde. Sat in one of the reclining chairs around the central fountain of Le Luxembourg, I was partway through deleting yet another sentence when a man with a tonsured head and an English accent asked me the way to the Rue de Rivoli. I pointed, but he didn't leave, started talking about an ex-wife and something about Rachmaninoff. The more he twittered, the more my stomach dropped. The creep wouldn't break eye contact. I wished I hadn't worn makeup or done my hair. Fortunately, a dry voice had cut in and said, "*Ah, je te recherche partout. Désolé, Monsieur,*" and the woman attached to it pulled me away by the arm, only giving me enough time to shut my laptop properly.

"*Louche,*" she said. "You cannot give them an in. Every tourist knows *Rivoli*. What *grand travail* are you working on?"

We've been going around together ever since.

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Mathilde's poem is a hit at *Le Salon*. I knew it would be, but she is appropriately self-effacing afterwards. Where we mingle outside beneath the large sign of Shakespeare and Company, she performs the correct number of *bises* for each person, a feat I've never been able to match. Paul, flapping his arms, gives her two kisses and a hug. Léon, the oldest regular, in his sixties, is from *La Midi*, which, for some reason, means the south of France. His three *bises* are always very wet.

"Lovely work," Léon tells her. Then to me, "And read very eloquently, Yan."

Mathilde told me she didn't want to seem too eager, but she cranes her neck hoping for Felix, lingering on the step, carefully rearranging his scarf, to offer his cheeks as well.

"Drinks? Yes? Yes. Onward, to me!" Léon says.

He, as the patriarch, leads the customary charge to the bank of the Seine, where, at nearly seven p.m., the seething swarms of tourists are out in full-force. We enter the closest off-license at the Rue de Petit Pont and grab beverages of our choice, mine a Kronenbourg Blanc.

I look for Mathilde by the *caisse*, but she and Felix stand in close conversation at the back of the queue. Felix pulls out his book and there it is—what she's been waiting for, the noticing and being noticed: *Il la remarque*. The inevitability of the scene slightly embarrasses me, as though some sort of lower-body blush slides warm and glutinous over my belly. For like the boys at the Conservatoire for Mathilde, I've seen a billion Felixes in Toronto, outside indie gigs at The Danforth and The Horseshoe Tavern, lighting cigarettes and rolling up the sleeves of their jackets to check the time, exposing their pretentious watches and knobby wrists. She runs her fingers over the crinkled paperback cover of *Catcher*, the famous one with the red carousel horse on the white background. Felix's blazer only has one pocket and his trousers are so tight it's unclear where he keeps his wallet or his phone. He pays for two Corona Lights with cash and holds hers for her.

Our group, about thirty people in mourning dress, squeeze past the crowds and find any empty spot we can along *le quai*. The shape we make looks like one giant black bird landed on the bank. Silver tabs click and hiss, corks pop, and spray flows over fingers, tongues darting out to slurp it up. Around us, boys loosen the top buttons of their shirts and girls in gingham dresses release and retwist their hair. We smell kebabs. The soft fricative rs and nasal vowels of the language that the country's set up an entire organization, *L'Académie Française*, to preserve. The doomsday voices say French will die out in a hundred years in favour of Mandarin and Spanish, but of course no one here tonight believes that.

"So what do you think? Will she pull?" Léon asks me. We sit facing each other with our legs swung over the edge of the bank, reflecting black stumps in the river's rippling surface. He's looking beyond my shoulder, to where I imagine gulls wheel across the short width of water to the flying buttresses of Notre Dame on the Île de la Cité and towards the cathedral's paired patrician towers.

I turn to see Mathilde and Felix bend their heads together, the darkness of their coiffes, hers just slightly lighter and reddish, his ten times wilder and more voluminous, almost melding into one. They sit a bit apart from everyone else. It reminds me of Hui's drawing of Pierre and Marie Curie, portrayed in the bloom of health, before the radium stole her power. Or gave it, depending on your perspective of the thing.

"You think she's pulling him or it's the other way around?" Léon asks. He loves Britishisms in his writing. They've come to pepper his speech as well.

"Does it matter?" I ask.

"Ha! We're writers. Of course it matters. Did Daisy pursue Gatsby? Anna chase Vronsky?"

“You didn’t read today,” I said. “And that’s a trick question. Sort of, you could say.”

“I didn’t read because it’s over. *Fini*.”

“What? What’s over?”

Léon touches his head and before I realize what he’s done, he holds a pale, glistening hair before my eyes. It’s not completely silver, but has started a slow, creeping death from the bottom.

“So?” I say. “And?”

“*Regarde-le*,” he says. “I think I’m too old for this. Should I give up? Paul wants to fuck young boys one day and, on another, teaches them to locate the sciatic nerve.”

Three weeks ago, Léon brought another snippet of his own long-suffering, soul-shredding novel, *Paul*, to read in *Le Salon*. Mathilde said it’s been two years of windows into the plus-100k-word work, and, in her opinion, it’s never really gone anywhere, nor will it no matter how many more drafts he brings.

She said, “It’s making him crazy. *Paul* is a dumpster fire. He should stop.”

“Stop writing?” I asked. “Maybe he needs to work *Paul* out of his system.”

“Blergh. You make it sound like diarrhea. Anything that sounds more like diarrhea than Tolstoy should be immolated.”

The titular Paul is an anatomy professor at a medical college in London during the Gilded Age, and whom the other Paul—that is, Our Paul—thinks is modeled after himself. Our Paul has lately dropped out of the Sorbonne, so the idea isn’t too far-fetched. Léon, an admirer of the spare prose of the Japanese stylists, like Natsume Sōseki and Yasunari Kawabata, writes about lost young men in old obdurate cities. Judging simply from what I heard, I still think there’s potential in the work, even if no one else thinks so.

“That’s another trick,” I tell Léon, now, as we drink. “Can’t he do both at the same time?”

Léon laughs. “Now that really would be a trick, fucking and dissecting at once. No, not Paul.”

“You don’t think that’s what sex is?”

“Ha! Yan, you’re too clever for your own good.”

“I’m serious.”

Léon takes a deep pull of his stout and, with the back of his hand, wipes away the bit of head clings to his upper lip. “So am I. I say, it’s the beer and the smell of that shop, only, that keep me coming back.”

“What, and not my gorgeous face?”

“Oh, you know me, the lecher.” He pokes a finger into my arm. His lip curves convincingly, for a moment, in a rakish grin. But then he turns away towards the gothic arches across the water and only his left ear is visible, slightly red where the sun roasts the skin over the pinna.

I follow his gaze to the cathedral. One of the biggest news stories of last year involved Notre Dame, when the attic beside the roof caught fire and burned for several hours before *les pompiers* arrived to save the

national monument. I was watching that morning on CityTV from my kitchen in Toronto, my green tea turning cold and undrinkable in the mug tensed against my fingers. Seeing the inferno on a screen was bad enough. But that day Léon was actually there, in Paris, outside our beloved Shakespeare and Company. He had just picked up a new magazine to read and then stood in horror as the thirteenth-century spire that had withstood the peak of the Capetians, the fall of the Bastille, and the Nazi German occupation, among other great epochs of the last millennium, collapse in a heap of ash and embers.

Worry for nothing; Notre Dame is forever, Hui said in his text to me from the lab, answering my fairly hysterical missive. *Toujours*. And Mother called to say, a few days later, after the social media furor had faded and President Macron green-flagged an investigation into the incident, that it was never in doubt that God would save it, His house.

Mother, unsurprisingly, always has choice things to say about the news. She has been like that since we were children. This morning, coming across the headline about Keats in *The Star*, she texted to the family group chat, “I always knew God would strike him down. He had it coming, the philanderer,” for Keats has never been anything to her but a bad example of what happens when you defy your parents and go into the creative arts. Her worst fear is that I will give up my career and marry someone like Harry Keats and that Hui will give up his career and become someone like Harry Keats. I don’t want to tell her that I would gladly give back all my papers, all of that science, even my *Glimmer Train* and *Zoetrope* stories, for one of Keats’ discarded drafts.

“I don’t think it’s actually in me, the book,” Léon says.

For a moment, the sun is in my eyes and I have to blink against it. I think he’s joking.

“But maybe I’m actually like those *jeunesse* who *want to*, but—”

“Wait a minute,” I say, lifting my hand to my forehead.

“—But ask if they really have to *read*, in order to *write*.”

Now he has my full attention. I pivot a bit to turn my back more into the sun, its heat creeping up the exposed back of my black dress. I didn’t bring anything too covered up to Paris and had had to settle on something a bit too tight and clubby for the somber occasion, not that the men at *Le Salon* or on the streets of the city minded. Now I tug at the elastic neckline. My jaw feels tight. We look at each other in silence. I wait for the punchline, but waiting for the punchline only works if it really arrives. It doesn’t.

I take a sip of my beer. It’s lukewarm in my mouth, and the swallow squirms down my throat like a fleshy slug.

“I haven’t really read anything in a while either. *Le Monde*, I guess. Twitter. Forums.” Finished with the stout, he starts in straight on a bottle of rosé. He takes a huge gulp, and I watch his Adam’s apple move, the light throwing shadows over its sagging slope. “Maybe I’ll be an incel before you know it.”

A flush, the feeling of engorging capillaries, creeps onto my neck and I can’t stop it.

“Paul is there, of course. I can see him, only—”

“Stop,” I say.

I don’t hear my own voice over the churning inside my ear canals, but it must be enough of a change from its usual timbre that Léon touches my arm. Some strands of toxoid approaching tears are rushing towards

my eyes, the lacrimal glands and the exit canals at the canthi, as Hui once told me as a child, poring over a book of anatomy with his eidetic memory. The tip of my nose, I think, is pink.

“Oh. Sorry. Are you okay?” Léon asks.

I pull my arm away. Now it’s my turn to face the Île, where, though the burnt scaffolding was long removed, a covering like an umbrella keeps water out of the holes in the vaults where the flames had chewed through. You could miss it if you weren’t looking for it. But I do, and the fact of its plasticky presence seems so backwards and ahistorical, as if the cathedral is only just being built and not in the process of restoration.

“What about grace?” I say without thinking. My finger raises to touch my lip, partially shocked, for this is Mother’s line and sometimes Hui’s.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Léon says, throwing out a palm between us.

“What?”

“You don’t get to talk about God again.”

Oh, I think. Is it really again? The flush modulates at my neck but rises and lowers and rises and lowers once more, like the meters on an equalizer, here into the reds, now back down to oranges, yellows, and greens.

I don’t remember the last time I talked about this with Léon or anyone at *Le Salon*, but Mother’s influence, religious or otherwise, runs deep. Growing up, at church, our Reverend in Richmond Hill would say that she could operate a one-woman worship and missions team if she put her mind to it. Her answer to everything is pray, repent, yield, wait, *be still and know that He is God*.

When I griped and moaned, all through the wilderness years of my PhD, Mother said everything would be okay, that the experiments would magically unfuck themselves, collaborators would actually start reading my emails for once, and confusion would sow among my “enemies,” the reviewers of the papers, as Our Lord had once defended the Israelites. I took courage from her words and managed to finish. But now I’m in Paris with my book, with Mother nowhere in sight, and no one talks like that here, except maybe people’s grandmothers or even great-grandmothers. And Hui, of course, who prays for his experiments and papers on a schedule.

Three hundred years ago, it would have been different. Three hundred years ago, France could never have imagined itself so. She, that great Catholic enclave, through all those centuries, those Wars of Religion, wherein decades and beads on rosaries were counted till fingers lost feeling. And yet, since La République, wherein secular is the watchword now, church attendance at an all-time low, hardly anyone I know here gets married before having children, and the *cing à septs* abound. In this modern Paris where the last president divorced his wife and remarried a model, I stand out too much with my faith and devotionals, even if it’s less flashy than Mother’s and Hui’s. I don’t feel like I belong in this time, which some people call “Post-Christian.” I don’t really get that term, but I know that that’s not me. I’m not post-anything—I’m right in the middle of it—and that’s why I can’t see the forest for the trees. My novel for the individual words.

“It’s grace. Sometimes the story is just better than your ability to write a story,” I mutter, and nearly choke on the sentence, for even this isn’t original. John Mayer had said something like this about “3x5” being better than his ability to write a song. Imagine quoting John-fucking-Mayer.

Léon makes a tiny caliper with his thumb and forefinger and extends it out towards the water. “Or mushrooms.”

I let out a deep breath. “I need some.”

“Mushrooms?”

I’m silent.

“Ah, you meant *grace*. Well, that’s too bad. I was nearly going to believe. I was going to ask *you*. This is about *your* book.”

“I’ve not written a thing,” I said. “I guess I talk about grace because I don’t have it.”

“I thought *Paul* was a hillock, but it’s a fucking mountain,” he says. “Am I using ‘fucking’ right?”

Léon reaches across the space between us, taking the slightest piece of hair from my forehead and tucking it away. I lean slightly into his touch. He smells like cedars. The tear has retreated enough from my eye that he leaves that alone.

“There, there,” he says. “That’s my lechery done for today. And your evangelism. Appreciate the lean, by the way. Does wonders for my ego.”

“You’re welcome,” I say, primly.

He smirks. “Now, Yan, listen. Your book, it may very well transpire still. I believe in you. You and Mathilde have...something. I’ve felt this, ever since you two started coming together. Mine, on the other hand...”

“No,” I say. “*Paul*, though. Tell me about it again. It might be okay. Or print it out and send it to me. I could help.”

Léon supinates his palms in front of him. “I can’t. It’s gone.”

“What?”

“I threw the manuscripts in the bin.”

For the second time in the conversation, my jaw and face feel like they’re on different geometric planes. “Fish them out,” I say.

“No, I mean I threw them in someone else’s bin. I don’t even remember which building. Trash day and I saw the *gardienne* wheel out a bin. And I just...did. Deleted them off my computer too. Recycle bin, emptied.”

“Someone *else’s* bin.” I can’t even fathom it. “You couldn’t even put it in your *own* bin?”

“I may get other ideas,” he says.

“What the... I don’t have any.”

I suppose that’s not true, but it feels like it. I don’t know where the ideas for my initial published stories came from, they were so long ago. Sometimes I think I need to do something really outlandish, like go to Burning Man, or renounce all my possessions and move to Tibet, to get more. I’ve dangled these

occasional fancies of wildness in front of Hui, hoping to get him to join me, but he disagrees. He also disagrees when I try to give him all of the credit, at least theoretically, for *Liddy and the Alchemists*.

“Weren’t you the one,” Hui said, last Christmas when we were back two weeks at our parents’ place, whispering so they couldn’t hear, “who saw the girls who could be inspired by it, who needed to know those things?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“I mean, I’m just a guy, a man, just a part of the patriarchy, right? How could I possibly get it?”

“Wow, Hui.” My goodness, but my brother was so painfully self-aware that it could bring me shame and unceasing pride at the same time. That day, I hid my face in a mug of eggnog before stuffing a gingerbread cookie shaped like a stocking in my mouth, just so I wouldn’t have to answer his completely unironic statement.

Now, seven months later, across from me, Léon looks at me earnestly and I take another sip of the beer. I’ve never told him about *Liddy*. No one knows. None at *Le Salon*. Not even Mother and Father. Hui and I discussed it briefly when the first two books started to gain traction on the internet, whether our parents should be in on the secret. He decided no, on the grounds, again, that they would ask more questions detracting from their already over-interest in his science. He doesn’t even like telling them about his publications, not even the ones in the highest tiers, like *Nature Medicine* and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, before they are in print for at least a week. I’ve honoured our agreement like a good sister. And Hui has always had a face like a black box.

I don’t even have anything to put in the garbage, I want to tell Léon. To discard, obliterate, incinerate is a luxury, and the thought is instantly enough to surface the tears once more, my cheeks hot.

I press my palms against them. What’s happening to me? I can tell that Léon realizes my distress too, but he’s helpless to do more than cough and shrug, all of his age, wrinkles, and liver spots not enough to deal with a crying woman. Once, back at *Le Salon*, when suggesting a line edit to one of Our Paul’s poems, Léon reminded us that Picasso, when painting the spiraling, blue-faced “Weeping Woman,” had said women were “machines of suffering,” but that none of us had ever figured out how to unplug the damned machines from the sockets.

Perhaps, as the who took this conversation to tears, it’s my responsibility to stop it from cataracting further as well.

Gathering all of my thoracic muscles, I inspire and stretch my shoulders, one nearly protruding from my dress by the circumduction.

“Do you,” I say, trying to steady my voice, “think Keats ever felt like this? Maybe between Bookers? Asked himself if he could do it again, staring at the computer, the stupid little cursor blinking on the blank page?”

Léon shakes his head. “Keats? Gosh. Maybe, not to this extent. I’m certainly no Harry Keats. But poor bugger. I mean, not poor. *Quelle richesse*. But to perish on the sofa, eating tiny *framboises* or *cérises* or whatever. And his last book, what dogshit.” He squints at me and cocks his head to the side. “Pardon my French. Why, little one? Do you think he was working on something?”

In my bag, there are napkins from the pile stacked by the register at the off-license, of which I always partake when we buy drinks, just in case. I blow my nose into several and crumple the soiled brown things in my palm, making a fist. “Aren’t we always?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes, that we are. Or at least, I was. And after the monstrosity of *Cartesian Coordinates*—”

“It wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Harry had to have thought atonement, restitution, recompense, reparations, indemnity, propitiation—”

“Seriously, I thought it was alright.”

“Please. He’d turned Einstein levels of old-age bad, or even worse, Hemingway-walking-into-a-propeller levels.”

I wonder if I look even more grave when Léon says this. I remember when I first read that incident about Hemingway, when, during a stopover in Wyoming on a flight to the Mayo Clinic, the writer tried to walk into the spinning blades of the craft. I remember thinking that was insane. But with my eyes, nose, and cheeks smarting now, walking into a propeller seems like a not-unreasonable response to the enfeeblement Hemingway thought he faced. At sixty years of age, the master was suffering from physical illness and mental anguish at the time. He had also started thinking he had lost it—the inimitable spark that had rocketed him to the pantheons of literature. He was inconsolable.

“You think a manuscript will turn up?” I ask.

“Yes. No. Well, yes. Actually, regardless, I don’t think I’d want it to.”

“Why? It would sell.”

“Of course it would sell. It’s Keats. But I don’t think I could take his reputation being sullied even more with *Cartesian*, part *deux*. It’s better like this.”

“Ah, Schrödinger’s Keats.”

“Exactly. Better that we don’t know and don’t get hurt. We’d best use the time to worry about our own writing and selling, if we ever manage to write anything again, that is, except—” Without any warning, Léon breaks off in mid-sentence, leans forward with his entire body seemingly, slits his eyes at something behind me, and jabs out a finger.

“Hm?”

“Like this. Look over there—now *this*, this we could sell.”

“What?”

“Maybe we’ve been looking at this all wrong. Maybe we’ve been writing about the wrong people this entire time.”

I turn to see what’s caught his attention.

Our enamoured colleagues, Mathilde and Felix, have, during the course of our conversation, inched closer together, closing down the width of the scintillating water and architecture beyond them. Their shoulders brush. Her cheekbones glow. Felix’s nutmeg hair seems even more wild and tousled than before and I don’t even want to know how much product is in it to get the curls to look that way.

Léon lowers his voice. “See how he takes her hand,” he says.

I sip and watch it unfold.

“She struggles. She pretends.”

Mathilde wrinkles her nose. Felix blows on her face, strands of her short fringe waving with his breath.

“She fails. She allows it. He smirks. He has her,” Léon says. “Tale as old as time. This, this is the story.”

“She made up her mind beforehand,” I say.

“*God*, to be so attractive and roundabout. It’s insupportable,” Léon says.

I’m about to gently reprove him for taking the Lord’s name—I’ve previously told him not to in my presence, if possible—but I don’t, because the second half of the sentence is exactly right. I keep watching. Now Mathilde and Felix are touching each other’s hair, which is as ridiculous looking as it sounds. It’s not that Felix is my type at all, but suddenly, as his Julian Casablancas-like face breaks into a smile, he looks every bit as gorgeous as Mathilde found him at the very first.

He’s drawing something in her palm with his finger and the tip of her tongue licks out, just slightly. I wonder if Mathilde feels her writing has manifested this boy into her life. Another triumph in *Le Salon*. Another triumph in love in the city that seems to never invent enough to say about the matter.

I tip the rest of the Kronenbourg into my throat. My envy sours the liquid a bit, the clarity enhanced by the bubbles. With the logic of acupressure, my heart searches out key points in my wrists. For I’ve evaluated the situation and these are the facts: I’m a thirty-year-old unmarried scientific and literary failure who peaked too early and is freeloading off my baby brother, Léon has killed 100k words and who knows how many years of *Paul* in someone else’s bin, and all the while, Mathilde is writing at least a chapter a day, looking like Audrey Hepburn reincarnate, and steeping in a cinematic romance right in front of us with Notre Dame de Paris in the background. It’s disgusting.

Léon seems to know what I am thinking. When I turn back from the couple, he’s putting away his phone in the little straw bag he always carries along with a cream panama hat and sunglasses, the hoary whiskers surrounding his mouth twitching like a rabbit’s nose.

“Come, Yan, don’t be like that. There’s a party,” he says.

There’s always a party after *Le Salon*. “Where?”

“Paul’s texting that he knows someone who knows someone in *le sixième* whose parents are out of town tonight.”

“Lucky them.”

“Lucky us, you mean.” Léon waggles his eyebrows. “Debauchery awaits.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“Now, that’s just silly. Come get soused and we’ll count who calls me *Grand-Père*. Whoever guesses closest wins.

“No,” I say, deliberately making my body heavy as he extends a hand and tries to pull me to my feet. Yet he persists and eventually I allow myself verticality. I brush some dust off my dress before crossing my arms. “Fine. Wins what?”

“A haiku. An original. About you.”

I pretend to think it over. “Hmm, I don’t know. About me? No, no haikus. You’re already too good at that Japanese stuff.”

“A limerick?”

“There you go. Now you’ve got yourself a deal... *Grand-Père*.”

“There once was a girl named Yan, whose novel didn’t go according to plan...” Léon sings.

I kick him, hard.

“Yup, I deserved that.”

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For a long time, even before Paris, I’ve been praying about NEMIA. Not in the way Hui does, formally, on his knees, his Bible, the King James Version with Jesus’ words marked in red, beside him, but speaking very slowly and quietly in empty rooms, so it almost looks like I’m talking to plants or artworks or the light fixtures. I sometimes journal the prayers. That kind of writing doesn’t make me tired, as it’s not for anyone else. It’s natural, and yet, at the same time, it feels strange to be praying for something material. Not like it matters to God. Mother reminds me that Our Lord understands the deepest desires of our hearts, that He understands my set includes fame and fortune, recognition by literary magazines, inclusion on bestseller lists, invitations to judge literary contests, and profiles in *The Paris Review*. He understands perfectly that my selfishness knows no bounds.

But if He saved Notre Dame, maybe He can save NEMIA.

One time, eight weeks ago, I went with Hui to his laboratory here in Paris, on a Sunday, when the building was closed to the public. He swiped his card on an electronic reader at the entrance. I followed my brother to the tenth floor, to the open plan office, one long space, where we left our bags and food at his working desk. Next door, inside one of the cell culture rooms, Hui handed me a lab coat and gloves and enrobed himself in a second set. Every two days, he had to come in to protect his cells from overgrowth. I watched him remove plates of red-pink cells from the fridge, place them just inside the glass safeguarding the silvery counter of the laminar flow hood, add enzyme to loosen the cells from the container, and spin them down to a pellet in the centrifuge.

“Didn’t you guys get an autounter?” I asked. He stood at the microscope. He had pulled out a hemocytometer and pipetted a small amount of the suspension onto the viewing window. The autounter used image processing algorithms to assess fifty random samples and took an average so you didn’t have to manually count with the glass device. You could go off for a coffee and come back to a nice little printout of the count.

“Other room,” Hui muttered as, in his gloved hand, he held a small tally counter that clicked when he depressed a button for each viable cell he saw on the grid.

“Old school,” I said. “Why?”

Click.

“I just want to see it more slowly, I guess,” he said. “Life.”

Click. Click. Pause. Click.

Then he looked up.

“You want to count the next one?” he asked.

“Uh...maybe you should do it too. To check my work. But sure.”

With Dr. Ko in the biomechanics lab, I had worked with human subjects, so I hadn't counted cells in years, not since *Intro to Techniques* in my life sciences undergrad degree at the University of Toronto.

I pulled the stool closer to the microscope. Under magnification, the viable cells were round, unstained with the Trypan Blue dye that Hui had added in an earlier step. The dead ones had taken up the dye in their cell membranes. There were more of these than I expected in the one square in question.

A tiny, dying world, I thought to myself.

And I suddenly remembered what Ms. O'Connell said again. With her legs in my lap, a few years before, as we re-watched *Midnight in Paris*, we went back and forth about whether the art could be divorced from the massive child-abusing, adoptive-daughter-marrying bell-end Woody Allen apparently was. We had agreed on the latter point, and yet neither of us could really say we wished to hasten the director's demise by artificial means either. We also wanted to see *Blue Jasmine*, which was upcoming with Cate Blanchett, one of our ultimate leading ladies. We were angry, but we couldn't kill anyone.

“Most of us don't acquire new icons as quickly when we're older,” she had said. “Then these giants, these icons of our youth start dying. And it feels like a world is dying.”

“A natural death for Woody, the child molester. I guess I'll allow it, if God does,” I had replied.

The hemocytometer was a flat glass rectangle with a coverslip. You pipetted the sample between these two layers and then, under the microscope, you counted the cells in the four large corner squares and the center square of the visible grid. There were three dead cells and eight live ones in the square of the upper left corner.

“Sorry,” Hui said from behind me. “Forgot to give you this.”

I felt the tally counter, cool and round, slip into my palm. “Thanks.”

Once I asked Hui for his top three, that is, the giants of his youth. He had answered James Watson minus the eugenics, Richard Feynman, and Bob Ross or Hergé, for he couldn't quite decide which of the latter had more greatly impacted his art.

“What about you?” he had returned.

“Amy Tan, J.K. Rowling, and Harper Lee,” I said. It was Hui so I'd known I could be honest. The last one I sort of cringe over saying to most people when they ask, since my favourite book, like the rest of me, is wholly unoriginal—*To Kill A Mockingbird*. Not to mention the fact that I kind-of-maybe-royally screwed up Harper Lee's death for myself.

Ms. O'Connell had been urging me to write to Lee for years. She never forgot the tiny note on a post-it she once received from Richard Yates, which she still keeps in her copy of *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*

like a pressed gardenia. She had also met Lee once, completely by chance, wandering around the author's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, while there for a wedding.

"Never meet your heroes? Bullshit. Go, before it's too late," my teacher had said.

I had thought it over, maybe even started drafting something, but then a year came and went. Then Ms. O'Connell had phoned me on a morning in 2016 with the news of Lee's passing, how my ribs had seemed to cave in on the poison dart of the words, and, with the flat surface of my phone squeezing all the blood from my ear, I wished, then, with all my heart, that I had tried harder. But I always thought there would be more time, that I needed to read *Mockingbird* just once more all the way to find the right words to tell Lee how much it meant to me. That I'd do a homemade card even, and slip it right into her hand, as though she didn't have enough fanmail to go through from nearly nine decades in the business.

What would it have been like? What would she have said? I had fantasized about it constantly, and after the death, even more. Meeting the literary hero of my youth, able to see how it would happen so clearly. I would wear a dress. She would wear a pink suit. We'd brush hands and some of her magic would enter me like an anointing. Later, when she read my card, she would be so touched she would write back personally.

To my dear Yan. Signed, Harper.

On her Wikipedia page, she's still pictured gripping President George W. Bush's arm at the ceremony where he awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom a decade ago. We make fun of Bush and all for all his debacles and stupidities, but he knew how to act the part of a President, didn't shrink from his duties like I do. Bush probably hadn't thought anything of heroes when bending over to pin the medal to her chest.

He might have loved her, but he knew he had to touch her, and did.

That day, in Hui's lab, I covered the pusher on the tally device with my thumb.

Click.

The dead cells were so blue. Flat and slack in their small clear world.

I ignored them.

Click. Pause. Click. Click. Click.

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The party is actually not in the 6e arrondissement, but the 10e, which makes sense because *six* sounds a lot like *dix*. Mathilde and Felix lag further and further behind. We're losing people to doublets and triplets that break off like pieces of a chocolate bar. The target apartment building is dim except for a balcony on the third floor, lit up in eerie purple, the brusque bassline audible from a few blocks away.

Mathilde pulls me aside. "I'm not going in," she says. "Felix and I."

"Ah."

"We're going to walk around a bit more."

"Sure, *walk around*."

“I can’t even talk to you,” she says, but it’s only feigned frustration, her eyes overflowing with an unearthly light and already pulled, as if drawn by a line, to Felix. He beckons down a side street.

“Be safe,” I call. “Use a…” The word fails me. “*Un préservatif.*” I love how the French make it sound like the purpose of a vagina is to pickle a penis.

Léon, with Paul, a few paces ahead of us, whoops as the music from the balcony changes from an Usher remix to Daft Punk. I’m about to reach them, when my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I check it.

“Yan, get in here!” They sign madly.

“My brother,” I yell back.

Léon shakes his head and motions me forward with his hand. I shake my head too. Reaching the oblong of light emanating from the lobby of the building he yells again, “Come up soon. The password is ‘aliquot.’”

“Kumquat?”

“ALIQOT. A-L-I-C. *Merde. Putain de merde. Euh,* just say you’re here with the writers.”

“Got it,” I mouth back and make to accept with the green button beneath Hui’s avatar, a molecular form of some neurotransmitter or other.

My brother once told me what it was exactly, but I don’t remember anymore, maybe dopamine, the chemical of pleasure and happiness. Now here’s a funny fact about dopamine: though a deficiency is associated with depression, too much is thought to be associated with psychotic features—that is, hallucinations and delusions. I’ve thought a lot about these latter concepts the past few years, that maybe science or NEMIA are my delusions. Thinking I can get out of the letter M’s, *middling* and *mediocre*. Thinking that I should be able to escape this writing black hole just because I am, as Léon put it earlier, and which is actually taken from a poem by Marge Piercy, a *jeunesse* who “wants to.”

*The real writer is one
who really writes. Talent
is an invention like phlogiston
after the fact of fire.
Work is its own cure. You have to
like it better than being loved.*

I adore that poem. Those last two lines have always killed me ever since I read them for the first time in Ms. O’Connell’s English class. Because that’s the truth—you have to put in the work—and though I do think I work, I’ve always wanted everything and all right now. I think a lot about *deserving*, which doesn’t exist, and is indeed a problematic concept, not only in art, but in religion and life. Maybe that’s my major problem, the problem that neither NEMIA nor two months and counting in Paris, one of the most creative cities in the world, can seemingly puzzle out.

“Keats,” is the first thing Hui says when the call connects. “I meant to ring earlier, when I heard this morning, but—”

“But science,” I finish for him. “I know.” The oncogene has been a bitch and the post-doctoral fellow at the collaborating lab in Lille is useless, doesn’t know how to design experiments, must also have been

handed a pity-PhD by a Dr. Ko look-a-like. Hui has to do everything: design, assay, analyze, write, submit, rinse and repeat, but he's always so damn chipper about it.

"Yeah. You okay?" he asks.

"I'm wearing black."

"The group?"

"Pretty upset."

"The manuscript?"

"Pretty upset."

"The French girl?"

"Pretty...smitten."

Hui doesn't even really have to ask for clarification, as though he deals with people falling in love every other day in this city. He's more interested in the result. "What's she fallen for now?" he asks.

"Julian Casablancas."

"They do have a tendency to show up here," he says. "Where are you? Is that Daft Punk?"

"Quelqu'un qui connait quelqu'un qui connait quelqu'un." Somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. "You?"

"The lab, just cleaning up. The custodian here isn't great."

"Don't you ever get tired?" I ask.

"Of what?"

Of course he responds like this. I don't even know why I've asked, except that talking with Léon earlier is making me question even more what I'm doing, trying to be a scientist, trying to be a writer, trying to be anything at all.

"I don't know," I say. "That endless pipetting, incubation times, agar plates, bands running in gel. Passaging cells in anticipation of their use. When they may never be used. Don't you think what is it all for?"

"The paper."

"But what does that even mean? So what about the paper? So you publish and what? Accumulate citations and do it again? But have we advanced much on your...molecule in a pocket of whatever in whatever cell in whatever tissue in whatever organ?"

Hui laughs. "NEMIA not going well, then. You should write with her."

"Who?"

“Your French girl. She seems a fount of ideas. Could be your second *Liddy*.”

“But I don’t want a second *Liddy*. I want my first novel.”

“Poetic, aren’t we today.”

I kick at a stray piece of trash on the pavement. I’m aware I sound petulant, but I don’t even care anymore. I’ve had one more Kronenbourg on the way to the party and it’s started to go to my head, the red flush of my Asian heritage pronounced on my upper chest and face.

“And to answer your question, we have, just a few hours ago, managed to get one clear band showing upregulation of a key signalling protein. Very sharp,” Hui says.

“Again, why do we do this though? Have you cured anyone? You’re more likely to murder that post-doc from frustration than save a life,” I huff.

“Drug development takes a long time, Yan.”

I know that. I just can’t stand his calm voice. The scientist’s voice. MacArthur Genius Grant and Nobel Prize-worthy.

“The earlier paper’s going alright too, nearly finished the revision. I think we’re going to target *PLoS Genetics* and work our way down. Trust God, Yan.”

“Trust God, trust God, trust God,” I repeat. “But, like, *one* novel. *The* novel. My *To Kill A Mockingbird*. You just need one. Why won’t God give me that?” I stop as my brain catches up with what he’s said. “Wait, *PLoS Genetics*? Why not *Cell*?” *Cell* is probably the *Ploughshares* of molecular biology.

“The P.I. here just wants it that way. I don’t mind.”

“You might cure cancer and you don’t mind?”

Some passing teenagers turn their heads to look at me, and I realize that I’ve been walking in a circle making random movements in some kind of hand jive, and my voice has been raised, probably for a while now.

A bench stands out midnight blue on the lawn of the apartment complex. Trying to pretend I don’t see the attention I’ve attracted, I place my bottom on the cold wood and pull my dress lower over my legs. Even the skin over the tops of my thighs seems slightly flushed. Every time I tell myself I won’t drink anymore, that I’m too old for this and that writing whilst drunk only worked for Hemingway and Bukowski, the agony of *Le Salon*, of hearing so much talent and work and industry, trips me up.

Covering the other ear that isn’t pressed to the phone with my palm, I hunch over and say again, this time in a whisper, “You might cure cancer. And you. Don’t. Mind?”

I hear Hui sigh. I can picture his little frown, too, wherever he is in Lille. I know what he’s thinking. He and I both know “cure for cancer” is just a marketing term, when there are too many cancers, too many interacting factors, nature and nurture and things we don’t even have names for.

He’s thinking I know better than to say something silly like that.

“Some things,” my brother said to me, last year, while sketching a figure of the fourth-century Greek astronomer, philosopher, and mathematician, Hypatia, in feathered pencil strokes, “are about one thing.

But they're really about another thing." And the funny part is, I don't even think he knew he was paraphrasing Tony Earley, who wrote, "A story is about a thing and another thing," an attempt by the novelist in one of my many, and frankly, mostly useless, "craft" books, to explain the art of effective endings.

At the time, Hui and I were arguing over how to depict Hypatia's tragic and, frankly, gruesome death without upsetting the delicate sensibilities of our juvenile audience. I could go on about it forever for how angry the story makes me, but here are the Coles Notes. Towards the end of her life, Hypatia had advised her friend Orestes, the Roman prefect of Alexandria, who was in the midst of a political feud with Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, over Cyril's persecution of the Jews. Accused of preventing Orestes from reconciling with Cyril, a mob of Christians finally murdered her with *ostraka*—a Greek word meaning oyster shells. They tore her body to pieces, dragged the limbs through town, and ended by setting what was left of her on fire. That's right, *on fire*.

Hui said Hypatia's assassination was painted as politically-motivated, but maybe people in the fourth century, and today, for that matter, just hated smart women.

We decided to shelve that profile for another day.

"Léon threw out his novel this week," I say.

"Who?" Hui says. "You're breaking up a bit."

"He threw it out. Léon."

"He threw out his back? The old guy?"

"His novel. In the garbage. He gave up."

"Do you want to give up?"

"No! I don't want to—" More stares from the sidewalk. I want to stick my tongue at them, and instead, scrub my face with the underside of my forearm. I'm so tired. "Sorry. I didn't mean to, you know."

For a moment, Hui is silent. I make signs at the stars, twinkling innocently back at me. I wish I could unscrew each, one by one, and roll them along the path in front of me, until they magically collide with a book idea. My thoughts sound ridiculous even to me.

"Yan," Hui says. "Two years ago, Keats came to the lab."

"I don't know what's wrong with me. *Why I can't*—" I straighten on the bench. I can't have heard him correctly, can I? "Wait, what did you say?"

"He did."

"Sir Harold Keats? Harry Keats. To your lab? Here? In Paris?"

"Yes."

"But he *despises* universities. He declined the honorary doctorate from Oxford, remember, because they wanted to present it in person. He did *not* come to your lab."

In fact, Hui read it first in Reuters News and texted me the article, knowing I would be interested. Keats not only declined, but wrote a scathing post on his blog about the uselessness of higher education. He liked to teach outside, lecturing to impromptu circles of his fans, on the grass, barefoot. He was usually high on something for these elliptical discussions, which he called *meridians*.

“He wanted to keep it a secret. Made us promise not to tell under any circumstances. However, I feel...it’s okay, now that he’s dead. I think you should know.”

“Okay, Hui, you’re scaring me. Know what? What was he doing?”

I leap up from the bench and started pacing around again. The moon, hidden previously by cloud, fights its way through and the grass glistens slightly. My heart seems to trampoline and smack against my chest wall repeatedly, like a puppy wanting out from a laundry room.

I can’t believe my brother has met Keats. And not only met him, but spoken to him, it sounds like, for more than a brief moment.

“Hui, tell me. Tell me right now,” I say.

“Slow down, I’m getting there.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be *kidding*. It was a book, wasn’t it.”

“Yes. He was working on an adventure novel, something really different for him, which had to do with genetics, and he wanted us to explain some basic concepts. I don’t know—I guess he Googled, found our lab, saw it wasn’t too far away, and came in to chat. Dr. Bissette asked me to talk to him. She told him I’m discreet.”

“Adventure,” I repeat. “Discreet.”

“Yeah, he mentioned Dan Brown, actually. Michael Crichton. Movie options.”

“You’re lying.”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

He is right. Hui has never lied to anyone. If he doesn’t want to answer, he doesn’t.

“The main character was some kind of scientist, you know, racing against time to save the fate of humanity inside a test tube or something.”

“Oh, man.” I press my fist against my mouth.

“What?”

“Léon was right. That it really can get worse than *Cartesian Coordinates*.”

“Honestly, I didn’t think it was that bad.”

I can’t help but smile. “When did you read it?”

“You do know that every PCR I run takes at least an hour for the machine and the gel, right? I picked up a copy. It was entertaining. I think he was trying to be Heller, but he should just be...Keats.”

“So you told him to be Keats and threw him out?”

“No. Of course not. I showed him the hood and the incubator and the fridge and he ran a gel. He wasn't half-bad for sixty. Steady hands. But this isn't what I wanted to tell you.”

“No?”

“Well, he insisted on buying me coffee afterwards in thanks, so we went around the block. And he told me how mightily he was struggling with OBATH.”

“OBATH,” I repeat. “What the heck is that.”

“Overcome Being A Talentless Hack.”

“You're kidding.”

“He wanted I AM MUCH BETTER THAN CRICHTON but that one 'than' messed up his hopes of calling it IAMBIC. It's like your NEMIA.”

“Seriously? I'm just like Harry Keats? Harry Keats? Harry Keats who wants to be better than Michael Crichton?”

“That's what I'm saying. He was a mess. Looked kind of crazy and was wearing a kimono, bike shorts, and clogs. He said he hadn't thought about a woman in months.”

“What about underage girls?” I prodded.

“Nope, not them, either.”

“You *asked*? Fuck me.” And then I'm laughing. I don't know why. It's so funny.

“So don't be so hard on yourself. NEMIA will be what it will be.”

“Is there...?” I can't get out the words. “A manuscript?”

“I don't know. I suppose. He sounded like he hadn't started. I gave him my email and he said he'd come back if he had questions.”

“Jeez.” I lean back on the bench and allow my flesh to squeeze between the wooden slats like dough through cookie cutters.

I imagine Keats' empty apartment in the *l'onzième*, all of the shelves, drawers, racks, anywhere with enough room to hide USB keys or sheaves of paper. In my mind, I walk through the rooms, lingering in each doorway. I lift up paperweights. I look for hollow books. I grow frustrated. I turn the place upside-down. I mess up his toilet roll. Unlike some of his other esteemed colleagues of the last century, the writer said, when questioned on his process in his 2006 *New Yorker* profile, he did write electronically and even performed all of his own backing up and version control.

“I know, right?” Hui says.

“And now he's dead. Wow, it'll be a fuss when they find the manuscript. If he died in the middle of writing it, there will definitely be a movie. He'll get his wish.”

“By the way he was talking, I think it would have pleased him, yes,” Hui says.

I hardly know what to think. My throat hurts from gasping and suppressing laughter and too much saliva mixed with the aftertaste of beer.

“Do you feel better?” Hui asks.

“No? I mean, yes, in a way? I don’t know. I don’t know if I’m glad you told me or horrified that even if I win three Bookers, I’ll hate myself in my old age.”

“Nonetheless, I don’t think OBATH was the real problem with Keats. I don’t think he had anyone, in the end. Didn’t you say he always wrote on his own? Kicked out his wife? Decided to only have girlfriends two or three months at a time? Or was that Salinger?”

“No, good memory. That was Harry, alright.”

“But that’s not you. You’ll always have me. Mother made sure of that. Even when you’re old.”

I look at my fingernails. They are pale and short and a little bit nibbled around the edges. Writer’s nails. From looking at my hands only, anxiety seems more my problem than age. I chew just at the corner of my pinky.

There’s a question I’ve always wanted to ask my brother, that has always stung, but didn’t think I ever would because Hui always has a sound reason for everything.

“But why did you have to move to Paris, then? Why did you leave me in Toronto? I needed you. I wanted you around. Eight years at that lab. *Eight*. The undergrads started asking me to play Mrs. Claus at the Christmas party. Do you have any idea what that’s like?”

“Hold up,” Hui says, “I asked you to come out here, didn’t I?”

“I thought that was for the book. And you’re in bloody *Lille*.”

“Then come to Lille, Yan. They love me here. I’ll can totally get them to pay for your ticket too. I would have asked, earlier, but you met the French girl and started going to that group, so I held off.”

That French Girl. I think Mathilde would die, hearing that.

“It seemed nice for you,” continued Hui. “I figured it would eventually get you writing. I guess I have always had faith in that, ever since you first told me you needed to do this. So I prayed for you and I am assured of this; I am absolutely assured that you will finish a book. Maybe not NEMIA. But something else, something that you haven’t jinxed with a name yet.”

I never thought I would be sick of Paris of all places. And especially not after only two months. But maybe I am. French people are always saying, of course, that Paris is not France, just like back home, we say Toronto isn’t Canada. Maybe Hui is right. It wouldn’t hurt to see.

“Hui,” I say. “I would love to come to Lille.”

“Done,” he says. “I’ll make it happen.”

“Can’t wait.”

He is quiet for a moment. "But you really haven't written anything since I've been gone? Nothing at all?"

"Not much. Just reading Mathilde's stuff. She's producing, that's what she is."

"She's with you right now?"

"Ha, no. Tonight, she's met this guy, this American kid, a first-timer. They've gone off together, now, instead of going to this party." And I summarize for my brother, in a few sentences, Felix's arrival at the bookshop, the reading, and the courtship by the river across from the cathedral, how much it's just like a dumb movie plot, one of those talking movies where you follow a few characters all night walking through a historic city and they have circular philosophical discussions.

"You think they're going to hook up?" Hui asks.

"Excuse me, did my brother just say 'hook up'?"

"Isn't that what you guys call it?"

"Yeah, but. Whatever. Anyway. That's funny, Léon asked me that too, like three hours ago. I don't know why you guys think I would know something like that. I'm not a crystal baller, Hui."

"Isn't that what writing is, though?" he says. "The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen'?"

"Wow."

"At least until you write it. I don't know, it sounds kind of cool."

"You always think the Bible sounds cool."

"Of course. Anyway, what does he look like, this Felix?"

"Worse than you could ever imagine."

"I'm not imagining anything."

Hui doesn't know any of The Strokes, so that won't do. "He's like...Harry Potter, without glasses and robes, and instead flying on a broom, he wails on his guitar," I say.

"He brought a guitar to the reading?"

"Well, no. But."

"So...nothing like Harry Potter."

"Shut up."

"This sounds pretty good. You should find out what happens and tell me when you come to Lille. Or better yet, hand me a synopsis I can read when you come to Lille," Hui says.

"You never gossip," I point out.

Hui laughs again. "I don't know. Maybe this country's changing me. I spend so much time in the lab, and from the window I see the couples walking around. I sometimes wonder."

"Then just get in a couple."

"Maybe. Maybe after this paper. Regardless, I'm trying to encourage you. Here's the thing. Don't you remember that first story in the magazine, when you were nineteen? I was eleven and I had never seen you that happy. I want to see you like that again. When you first called home and told me, I didn't hear you properly and I thought that *you* were the *Glimmer Train*, that it was your new pen name or something. I like watching you write. I told all my little eleven-year-old friends at school about it. You get so—I don't know—*sparkly*, and stuff. Like the Eiffel Tower at the light show."

The Eiffel Tower. Really? Every night, at dusk, the tower's light system switches on automatically, and, for the first five minutes of each hour until one in the morning, over 200 000 bulbs scintillate in an effect inspired by camera flashes. I like the idea of being sparkly.

Pretty damn good, Hui. Pretty damn good.

"I guess I should take that as a compliment," I say.

"Well, it is," he says.

I chuckle.

"There's something else," he says.

"What?" I say, with mock-weariness. I don't think I could take another revelation of this calibre. Was Keats also basket-weaving? Moonlighting at a tattoo parlour? Making viral Youtube videos?

"I was thinking. About *Liddy*. I know you let me decide about the names and the anonymity and never said a word because you wanted me to be comfortable. I know that. But I think we've been hiding long enough. You deserve some recognition."

Now, this really is a surprise. "You want to break anonymity?" I ask. "Really?"

"Yeah. I mean, you decide how to announce it and where. I'll just confirm. You jump, I jump, Rose."

I make a fake-frown even though I know he can't see me. "I want to be Jack. Have you really thought about this? What will Mother say?"

"Oh, she knows."

"What?"

"She picked up one of the books for some church family's kid's birthday last year and she just knew, from the words and the drawings, that it was us."

I exhale mightily. "No way. She never said a word."

"No. But she owns all of them. She just hides them in a drawer. She told me she understood why I wanted to focus. But she really, really wanted to say something to you. She always told you that you could do science. She thinks it's amazing that other girls could be helped by it. I think she thinks *Liddy* is partially her doing."

“Her doing?” I find myself coughing to stuff the laughter into my sleeve. Actually, it’s not a laugh, more like a hoot. My ribs palpitate and flutter. It feels so good to laugh. I imagine my mother with the books, reading them to some child at church, very solemnly talking about what a good husband Pierre was to Marie, but *don’t get any ideas because Marie would have discovered radium anyway, without a man.*

“Does she have the felted editions?” I ask. “Does she have Mary Anning?”

“Oh yeah. Barb’s her favourite, though.”

And somehow, that is even more funny. Mother wiggling felt Dr. Barbara McClintock at the child, the only woman in history who has ever won an unshared Nobel Prize in the category of medicine and physiology. I wonder how many little girls have wandered away from her lessons enlightened, how many scared of returning to Sunday School the next week in the unnerving event of continuation.

“Hui?” I say.

“Mm.”

“Thank you. You’ve no idea.”

I can hear him smiling across the line. “No sweat. I’ll get the tickets taken care of and I’ll see you soon,” he says.

“Fantastic.”

Then he adds, after a pause, “Who cares about NEMIA. Fuck NEMIA.”

And this is a big deal. Because he never swears. This is a little insane. This is a bit crazy. I’m crazy. I’m going to Lille.

“Yes, fuck NEMIA,” I say and sprawl out my limbs on the bench. The moon low, but easy and viable, even if just slightly Trypan blue.

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When I hang up, the music from the balcony switches again. It’s a song I actually know because they use it in car commercials back in Canada— *1901* by Phoenix, a band from Versailles. A popular day trip from Paris, Versailles and its palace has been on my list for a while, but now, of course, it will have to come after Lille.

A roar of approval can be heard from the partygoers as they recognize the driving beat and local talent. A light show which was not yet switched on when I started speaking with Hui now strobes from behind the sliding door leading inside, illuminating shadowy heads and shoulders edging towards the balcony’s railing. If I squint, I pick up the briefest sparks of lighters, orange reflecting back on faces. I can imagine more than see the palms cupped to protect the flames and the cursory flicks of heads backwards, allowing room for the smoke to suspend and swag around.

“Anthropological study?” A voice says from behind me. “Or just leaving?”

“Oh, it’s you.”

Mathilde has approached me on the pavement. She's wearing padded sandals beneath her linen trousers and blouse, and, with the music blaring, I didn't hear her footsteps.

I squint into the shadows behind her. Felix isn't with her.

"You're back. I thought you were with Felix," I say.

"I was." She inclines her head towards the party. "You didn't go up with the others?"

"My brother." I hold up my phone still in my hand.

"Ah, and what did the lovely Hui have to say this evening?" she asks, pushing her hands into her pockets.

"He..." I say. "He thinks I should come to Lille."

Mathilde smiles. "And will you?"

"Yes. I think it'll be good for my writing."

Mathilde steps a few paces closer and, in the moonlight, a clean crown of indigo wreaths her head. She places her lips just inches from my faces and whispers, "Glad to hear it. We must always do what's good for our writing."

"Why...don't you seem surprised?"

"Surprised? Why would I be? I said it—what is good for our writing is what's good for us. And you haven't been writing."

"I didn't know you really cared."

"How can you say such a thing? As your friend, it was a bit painful to watch and clear to me that a change would have to be made. I would have suggested a change of scenery myself if your clearly very intelligent brother had not."

"You're hilarious," I say.

She pirouettes. "It's true!"

We start walking towards the building together, taking our time. The lane is lined with small trees and, approaching the trunk of the nearest one, Mathilde wraps her arm around it and swings her thin body in a tiny dance as though it were a maypole. It's strange to see that, as though she should be dancing with a partner. I think of the boy in the blazer with *Catcher*.

"But back up—what about Felix? You two didn't...?" I make a motion of jabbing my pointer finger on one hand into the open palm of the other.

Mathilde grins and the dimples in her cheeks show up, two little depressions, as she returns to my side. "No, not at all. We walked around a bit and took another drink, but then he said his flight leaves tomorrow morning out of De Gaulle. He is going to Berlin. Then a tour of Italy. Then Prague."

So France is just a layover for Felix. Flyover territory to another adventure.

"Is he a good kisser?" I ask.

"I have no idea. *Aucune idée.*"

"What? Really?" I cover my mouth so she doesn't see whatever expression I'm wearing, as whether it's a smirk or otherwise, it's not flattering.

"We decided we should not sleep together, after all, nor would we exchange contact information. I stopped him when he was about to write his email on my hand."

I hold my breath. I shouldn't laugh, I shouldn't laugh, I shouldn't laugh.

"We discussed it, the pros and cons, and both decided it is much more romantic to leave it like this."

I give up. I collapse into giggles and slap my knee, then I slap my knee harder because I've become the kind of person who slaps her knee. I really am getting old.

"What?" Mathilde raises her brow.

"You crack me up. You do realize that I've been watching you too flirt, evade, and generally act out *Before Sunrise* all night?"

"He's kind of a Céline," Mathilde says, pensively. "Very beautiful but very flighty. Not that I'm a Jesse, but he's definitely a Céline."

"I feel cheated. I wanted to find out what happened from you tomorrow."

"But you did. I've just told you."

This is true.

"I see. You wanted that particular ending," she says. "I've ruined it for you."

"You've...subverted expectations."

"An ending," Mathilde says. "According to Aristotle, in *Poetics*, should be surprising yet inevitable. It's surprising for you, but inevitable for me."

"You knew the entire time?"

"I enjoyed myself."

"I see."

Mathilde nods again at the balcony. "Do you really want to go to this party?"

"No," I say honestly. "I want to write."

She looks at me for a moment.

"Then let's walk. And we'll write. Sometimes I think a story is just a very long walk with some people you don't know."

"We know each other already," I point out.

“But I don’t know your characters. Tell me.”

And it’s true. I haven’t told Mathilde much about NEMIA. All summer, we’ve focused on her characters, settings, plots, epiphanies, and endings. Her word counts and line numbers. Her blinky cursor, which never stays blinky for that long. Her frustrations and stagnations and endless elations. For a moment, I wonder if behind her inscrutable expression, she, like Mother, already knows about *Liddy*. Soon a lot more people will. I suspect nothing much will change—what Hui and I entered is still a pretty niche market, feminist books for little girls with bonus felt dolls—but I also know that, at least for my brother, discarding anonymity is sacrosanct, a sacrifice of love.

I imagine my brother being asked to sign someone’s book with his messy scientist’s handwriting. I’ve never done promotion before. We’ve been receiving a not insignificant stream of fanmail to a P.O. box we rented for this purpose and I had always had the hankering to write back, as myself, not as Agnes, not as Hui’s sister, even.

To my Dear Future Nobel Laureate. Signed, Yan.

“Do you think there are American boys in Lille?” I ask, though this probably a better question for Hui.

“Why not?” she says. “Are you ready for a little romance?”

I look away to hide my smile. “Not yet. But maybe.”

We turn around and head backwards towards the river. There are still tourists at this hour, nearly midnight, but it’s not surprising. They’ve come from far to see Paris and want to know what she looks like at each hour. The phases of the moon, the phases of the river, the moods of Notre Dame and *le quai*, the wide boulevards and public squares and Art Nouveau and elegant Hausmann buildings.

“*Even so is my strength now, for war, both to go out, and to come in,*” I say to this inky tableau. I spin around. The hem of my dress skims my thighs.

“Who’s that?” Mathilde asks, from a little ahead of me. She’s a brisk walker when she has purpose. “Keats?”

“No, not Keats,” I say.

It’s the Bible. Caleb, one of the great heroes of the Old Testament, is eighty years old and he cries out, in the Book of Joshua, that he feels as young as he did when the Israelites first saw the land that they would one day take. The land, after fleeing out of Egypt, which was promised to them by their Lord. The land for which they had been waiting for forty years, wandering in the desert in repentance for their initial fears that He would not fulfill that promise.

Now therefore give me this mountain is the next line.

My brother and I, we used to take turns saying Caleb’s speech, verse by verse, as children, and Hui would always take that one line, about the mountain, one of his only acts of selfishness. He allowed me nearly everything else.

Paul was Léon’s hillock, which became a mountain. So is NEMIA, for me. I don’t know about mountains anymore. I suppose you can try to climb a mountain. Fight a mountain. Blow a hole through it with dynamite. Go around. Plant a flag on it.

Sometimes, it is given to you. That's grace.

Maybe I'll soon find out if I have a little, after all. If it chooses me.

Mathilde doesn't prod me further. We keep walking, following the lamps which are all lit up. Shadows move behind curtains of the apartments on the Île. The cobblestones jostle our bones.

She slow-dances to the edge of the bank.

Suddenly she turns around and dangles one sandaled foot over the water. My arm reaches out for her automatically yet she evades it.

"What are you doing?"

"Do you dare me to jump in?" she says.

"Why?" I ask.

"It's an ending," she says. "A bit surprising, maybe?"

It's a good question. We write, each day, to know the answers. My fingers grasp at nothing.

"But is it inevitable?"

She smiles. "Find out." And she takes a single step backward.

END