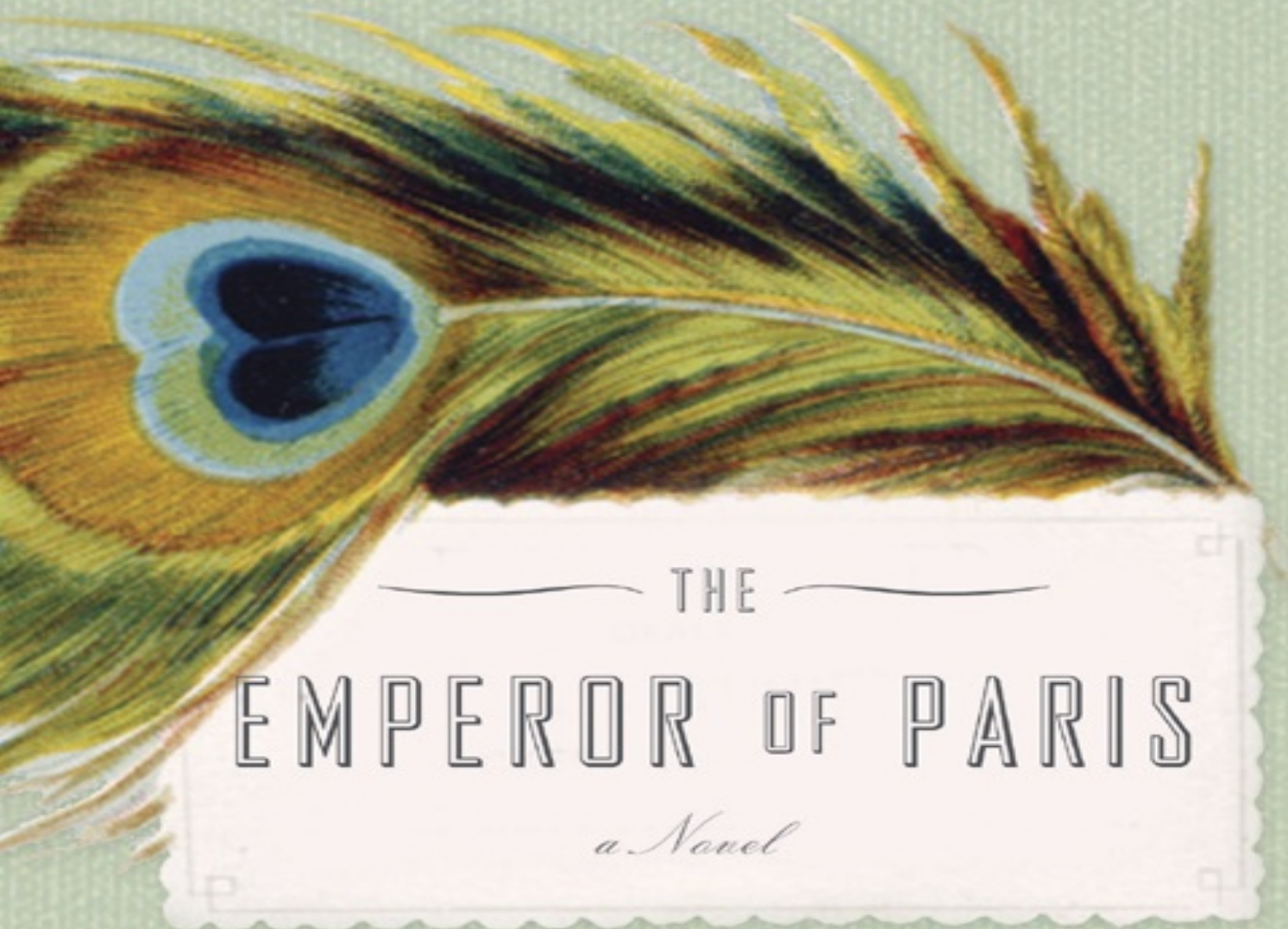


CS RICHARDSON

Author of THE END OF THE ALPHABET



THE
EMPEROR OF PARIS

a Novel





THE
EMPEROR
OF PARIS

CS
RICHARDSON



Dundee, Canada

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The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes. The lover of life makes the whole world into his family, just as the lover of the fair sex creates his from all the lovely women he has found, from those that could not be found, and those who are impossible to find, just as the picture-lover lives in an enchanted world of dreams painted on canvas.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE,

The Painter of Modern Life, 1863

For the gossips of the bakery it becomes irresistible: the wisps of smoke up their noses, the voices under their windows, the footfalls of curiosity on the move. They are the first to arrive, these busybodies, shading their meddlesome eyes and comparing their hare-brained theories.

Mark this day, someone says. We are witnessing the devil's work. Only Satan would burn a library.

It is providence, comes a retort. God's design unveiled to us mortals.

Either way, says a third, it is a cruel deity. A cruel one indeed, dooming a good man to such a horrible fate.

The bakery's more level-headed regulars appear. Some to stand rooted to the cobbles in disbelief, others to pace back and forth, frantic now to do anything that might help the bread man. An old fellow elbows through the mob and pulls at the bakery's blue doors. The locks hold firm, his thick spectacles knocked askew with the effort. Three or four boys scatter in search of buckets; a fifth runs off to call the fire brigade. An elderly woman shouts the address after him.

Heads are scratched and hands are wrung. In the summer heat handkerchiefs are pulled from pockets and sleeves; foreheads wiped, eyes dabbed, mouths covered. A bout of coughing, then someone asks if anyone has seen the baker.

Out wandering, I should think. Sunday after all.

A fortunate day then, and all the better that our man isn't here. Imagine watching your life going up in flames. Luckier still he isn't cinders himself.

And where will all this luck be, I ask you, when he arrives home to nothing? After all he's been collecting, all those armloads of books? It will break the man's heart.

A cruel one indeed.

The crowd becomes a small fidgeting sea in front of the bakery, each face turned to a sky the colour of pearls. They watch in silence, holding their children close, praying the brigade not delayed in traffic. Above them the baker's apartment disappears.

Smouldering flakes begin to blossom in the heavy air, sliding over slumped shoulders resting for a moment on shoe tops, dying tiny shrivelled deaths in the street. There are glimpses here and there: a sentence, a phrase, a doomed word drifts by. Among the single white bits are shards of red leathers and frayed blue cloths, the curled and blackened edges of marbled papers, melted strands of silk ribbon, everything spinning slowly to the ground.

On a July morning in the eighth district of Paris, it begins to snow.

In his time the baker's father had been a celebrated man, though he held no official title. A sign had never hung on the bakery's doors: BEHOLD EMILE NOTRE-DAME, THINNEST BAKER IN ALL PARIS! No one had the thought occurred to him to take advantage by placing a notice in the shop window AND YET HOW STOUT HIS BREADS!

This matter of thinness was the source of endless debate among the gossips queuing for their daily loaves. Some claimed that Monsieur might as well be invisible. With those legs of dear Emile is more than worthy of the honour. Others were certain that among the countless bakers in the city there must be scrawnier candidates. Someone would then suggest that it was not Monsieur's stature that had made him worthy. Our man is the very model of service they would say, to his craft and to us. He rises at ungodly hours, makes us good breads in bad weathers, and hands them over with a smile and a story. I could not care less if the fellows were made of twigs.

In the end all agreed it was a marvel—considering the temptations of butters and yeasts and eggs—that any baker anywhere in France might be as slender.

There was never a discussion regarding the size of the baker's wife. A woman of Italian descent and feverish religion, Madame Immacolata Notre-Dame was in her other aspects generously round. Only her head was small: a gracious sphere covered with black hair drawn to the nape of her neck, her high-collared blouses making her head appear all the smaller. No one addressed her as Immacolata. To all she was simply, piously, Madame; and her Emile was their Monsieur.

The bakery occupied the ground floor of a narrow flatiron building known throughout the neighbourhood as the cake-slice. As far back as anyone could remember the letters above its windows, in their carved wooden flourishes, had spelled out:

BOULA GERIE NOTRE-DAME

the N having long since vanished.

All who visited the bakery agreed the signage was as charming as the squeezed triangle of the building that housed the bakery and the thin and thick of its husband-and-wife proprietors. Yet there were demands that Monsieur make repairs. The more excitable gossips insisted that tourists might loiter, having made a wrong turn somewhere and found themselves unable to decipher *boula* and *gerie*. You will have these poor souls, monsieur, fumbling for a guess that the broken word means *cathedral*. Which will only make them anxious as they wonder if they are in the right district at all. Then there will be the emptying of luggage in search of phrase books and maps. And then, monsieur, you will have the unthinkable: underclothes and stockings and goodness knows what else thrown all over the street.

To calm these worries, Monsieur would concoct a story concerning the N's disappearance. He might begin by suggesting that Napoleon himself had taken it. The little general would spring to life in the figure of Monsieur: climbing a wobbling ladder, straining to reach the

prized letter, prying stubborn nailheads with his fingers. With each telling the location of the missing consonant changed. It once turned up in Les Invalides, glued with wallpaper paste to the lid of the great man's tomb. Monsieur leaped from the last invisible rung and took a deep bow.

You are welcome to retrieve it, my friends.

The bakery's location in a building named for a pastry confection was an irony lost on no one. For centuries there had been an order to the world, a natural division of gastronomic labours. Bakers worked their dough, pastry men fussed with their marzipan. Each kept to his own, begrudging enough if he found himself walking past the other's shop. To feed your family, you were off to the boulangerie. Weakness for a macaron meant a trip to the patisserie and be quick about it. It was a sensible order: everyone knew to visit a fruit seller when looking for a squash was foolishness; dogs and cats in the same litter meant the end of civilization.

Yet these were modern times, the gossips were quick to remind. We must change as the world does, monsieur.

All too easily for Monsieur's liking. Bread was the stuff of life, for him the stuff of generations: the Notre-Dames had been bakers as far back as there had been Notre-Dames. We have fed kings and washwomen, he would boast. Our breads have soothed teething babies and started revolutions. I ask you: would you sop up your grandmother's cassoulet with a handful of apricot jam? I should hope not.

No. Monsieur would not betray a guild older than the Pyramids by fooling with custards and icings. Others might offer their éclairs alongside their country rolls—heaven forbid in the same display case—but such fraternity was not for him. You can stuff me with mousse, he would grumble, before I start ladling meringue into a pie and serve up a month's worth of indigestion for my trouble.

Each customer remained just as loyal to this creed, though on occasion, should Monsieur take a break from the ovens and join his wife upstairs, a quiet comment about raspberry tart might slip out of a gossip's mouth.

The walls of the bakery were decorated with allegories: a woman with blushing cheeks held a bouquet of wheat sheaves to her bosom; a laughing baker snorted plumes of aroma from a glowing oven; winged infants hoisted trays of pains au chocolat, delivering breakfast to the gods. A glass case stretched the length of the shop, displayed ranks of braided loaves, croissants nestled like lovers, curve within curve, boules scored with the initials N-D, baguettes in two lengths. Next to the case sat the till, an iron beast requiring a well-swung fist to open the drawer. Wicker baskets were everywhere, in chronic danger of being knocked over, and overflowing with varieties of sourdough and rye, wheat rolls with sweet hidden raisins, and Monsieur's gently herbed brioche.

Above the door to the cellar and its ovens hung a calendar advertising a peerless and heavenly beer. The calendar featured a portrait of the Virgin Herself, in shades of pink and purple, her eyeballs spinning in ecstasy, beams of orange light bursting from her head. A golden bottle, sweating in the holy warmth, hovered in the clouds above her.

With the day's last customer served and gone, Monsieur and Madame would climb the stairs to their apartment in the top of the cake-slice. Morning after dark morning, down to fire the ovens, polish the marble, upright the baskets. Evening after evening, up to home and bed.

The Notre-Dame household was solid underfoot but slightly out of level, a boat nestled at low tide. The lounge and kitchen were one room, furnished with a pair of arm-worn chairs. The dining table had come from a café near the cake-slice, a wedding gift from the proprietor. The bathroom floor sloped its own way into a bedroom where Monsieur would cheerfully move the bed should Madame wish to open the armoire drawer. The attic, reached by a circular staircase that rose inexplicably from the centre of the main room, was a space of rough-hewn beams and mouse-hole corners. If Monsieur leaned out the attic window at a particular angle and shooed away the ever-present gathering of pigeons, he might enjoy a view of the chimney pipes of the district.

Honoré, saint of bakers, stared from prayer cards tacked throughout the apartment. An Italian bible, swollen with strips of paper marking Madame's preferred verses, was the extent of the Notre-Dame library.

Someone new to the Boulangerie Notre-Dame, standing at the distant end of the morning queue, could enjoy a few distractions till their turn came. Having finally stepped inside, they might admire the bakery's painted tiles. Or watch the stock of baguettes dwindle ahead of them and worry whether there would be any left when they reached the counter. Or turn their attention to Monsieur and Madame bustling behind the display case. An unlikely pair, the newcomer might wonder, tapping the shoulder next in line and asking how this curious thin baker and his hefty missus had met. Heads would turn, throats would clear, and the hive of the bakery would come to a halt.

A gossip would say it was strawberry. Another would reply that no, it was raspberry.

As you wish, but I am sure it happened near the river.

In the park, you mean.

Monsieur might slide his arm around Madame's waist. As I recall we were on the boulevard, he would say.

Well then, Monsieur, it was most certainly a Saturday evening.

Sunday afternoon, Madame would reply, offering a hint of a smile as she spoke, and leaning her head against her husband's shoulder. The debaters would pay no attention as they circled the newcomer.

You must visualize our baker here, strolling along on his day of rest, his head—
in the clouds as usual, conjuring another story when—

he passes a pastry shop and—

averts his eyes as any proper baker would and—

fails to notice the young beauty emerging from the shop.

Madame would look at her husband. I was eating a tart, wasn't I?

Monsieur would kiss his wife's cheek. A treat, he would say. After mass.

There would be the inevitable collision: Monsieur ending up in the gutter, Madame with most of the tart smeared across her face. He leaped to his feet, ready for a yelling match, and turned to meet his foe. There she stood adjusting her shawl, cleaning custard from her dress, blushing and cursing a streak in Italian. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

He smoothed his hair and rummaged through his pockets for a handkerchief. Once he had found it, he paused as she nodded her permission. He wiped a dribble of raspberry ganache from the corner of her mouth. She never stopped staring into his shining grey eyes.

So there it is, someone would conclude. I knew it was raspberry.

The important thing, Monsieur would add, was that it was red.

On that dessert Emile and Immacolata built their life together, though none who knew them were bold enough to remark that such happiness had begun, of all places, outside a pastry shop.

There were the Sunday afternoons in a small café near the Boulangerie Notre-Dame: the same outside table no matter the season, her mother chaperoning a few tables away. Emile would arrive with a copy of the day's illustrated newspaper tucked under his arm, present the front page with a flourish and weave a tale concerning its illustration. Immacolata would roll her eyes or gasp at the proper moments, not caring that her handsome baker never began his stories by reading the headline.

A front page once featured the unveiling of an enormous marble statue in a far-off museum. Emile spoke of the marble in his own bakery, explaining in a deep voice and with many a dramatic pause that its slabs and tiles had travelled across a sea—teeming with sharks and mermaids, he said—all the way from the quarries of Sicily.

But there is no marble in Sicily, Immacolata said. They have a volcano. There they mould their statues out of molten lava.

But I am sure my marble came from Italy. Certain of it—by boat—across the sea—teeming

—
Then your marble began its journey in Tuscany. Like me.

And the sharks—the mermaids?

Immacolata glanced at her mother a few tables away, then placed her hand on Emile's.

Still swimming as far as I know. I was only little, but I remember watching them through the railing as we sailed away.

The spring of 1901 saw Emile and Immacolata married in an alcove chapel of the Church of Saint-Augustin. There followed a small celebration in the bakery. Emile baked the choux buns for the pièce montée himself, admitting to no one that a week earlier—under cover of a late night stroll—he had consorted with a pastry man in the ninth to produce the cream filling for the buns.

A few customers had arranged for a duo of cello and violin. Naturally the gossips were first in the queue for a dance with the bride.

On Sunday mornings Madame would drape a shawl over her head, touch the palm of her hand to the nearest Honoré and set off to church. In leaner years she might have been seen shuffling to mass on her knees, and once, as joyful as a martyr, she likewise made the pilgrimage to Chartres by scuffing up and down the aisle on the train from Montparnasse.

station. Through each mass she prayed to Gabriel, hands clenched, knuckles white, begging for the gift of children.

When his wife had left for services, Monsieur would dress in his one black suit, step out of his clogs and into his Sunday shoes, comb his unruly hair, button his only collar and descend to the bakery. After polishing the counter with his sleeve, Monsieur would step outside to inhale a morning free of flour dust, and place his bony bottom on the curb. Only then did he lean his back against the bakery's blue doors and scrutinize the pictures in his illustrated newspaper.

On an afternoon in December of 1907, with a north wind stabbing at the bakery window, Madame received an answer to her prayers. As though a lover's breath had wafted across the nape of her neck. Standing behind the counter, she held a hand against her cheek, then crossed herself. She caught her fingers in the closing drawer of the till.

Next? she said, perhaps too loudly.

Through the following summer Madame seemed to double in size. The morning of the eighth of August found her in hard labour in the cellar of the bakery, splayed on the same table where, were it any other Saturday, Monsieur should have been scoring his second lot of baguettes. In spite of the early hour, the day promised to be the hottest of the summer.

Ovens at full heat, rising loaves overflowing their pans, Madame's ankles balanced on Monsieur's shoulders, customers filling the shop upstairs and fretting about whether anyone had gone to fetch a doctor, the gossips among them suggesting hot water and cold towels and opening or closing as many windows as possible, all combined to make circumstances in the bakery more uncomfortable than anyone could have imagined.

By midday a quiet cry was heard coming from the cellar. Everyone in the shop took turns grinning and slapping each other on the back, then left in search of champagne and the good crystal. Monsieur placed his newborn son in a bowl of proofing dough. He mopped his wife's brow and smoothed her hair and chuckled at his own joke.

Quite a loaf you've baked, my love.

Everything in Madame's head came loose and spun into blackness. Half naked, bloated and torn for anyone to see, she panicked at the sudden emptiness inside her. At feeling nothing for the trembling thing beside her in the bowl, its pink fists wavering above the rim. She waited for the joy, the relief, the excitement, the peace.

Monsieur whispered that the boy would need a name.

Madame looked away, her thoughts tumbling in a thousand directions. She had worn her knees raw in devotion. She had been so correct, so careful, full to bursting with faith in Gabriel's kindness. She could not remember a day when she had not dreamed of motherhood. She had wanted this child since she herself had been a child. Now the shivers of fear would not stop. Was this Gabriel's reward for her selfishness? To give a gift only to turn His back and deny the want of it? Madame stared at her husband, tears pooling in her unblinking eyes, flowing down her face and welling on the marble under her.

I am trying so hard, she said.

Monsieur forced a smile. Rest now, my love. I will think of something.

The boy spent his first night swaddled in the drawer of his parents' armoire. He slept, as day-olds do, peaceful and unaware.

The following morning Monsieur's newspaper depicted the moment after a train had collided with an elephant. The surprised animal hurtled through the air as the engineer poked his head from the engine's cab, the man's cheeks puffed and pink as he blew on his whistle. The headline told of A STRANGE RAILWAY ACCIDENT IN SIAM!!

Another Sunday and Monsieur might have managed a fantastical story, one he could not wait to tell his wife when she returned from mass. Animals, birds, mythical creatures: these were his specialties. The elephant might transform into a mad runaway from an African travelling zoo. Or become a gift to the mayor of Paris, delayed on the outskirts of the city from the Maharaj of Calcutta. He would invite Madame to join him on the bakery step, then transform into a fidgety public official rattling his watch to see if it still worked, or a grand and puffy Indian prince, bowing with apologies and trying to keep his turban on his head.

But a new father's mind is full of other dreams and other worries. Monsieur barely noticed the newspaper's date: 8.8.08.

Monsieur ran through the bakery and up the stairs to the top of the cake-slice. He could hear the fits and gasps of his wailing son. He found his wife in the bedroom trying to nurse the infant, her face turned to the ceiling.

Octavio, he said, stretching the *ayvio* into *ahhvio* and waving the newspaper above his head. You see, my love? Eighth day, eighth month, eighth district.

Madame's eyes were swollen; her hair hung in drenched tangles.

Your son, she said.

Ours.

His wife did not reply as Monsieur left to warm a bottle of milk. Outside, the skies above the cake-slice sagged in the summer heat, threatening a downpour.

The baker makes for home, west now, his face toward the sun. He carries a bundle tied with twine, three books bound in green linen. The load knocks his shins with each stride; the rough string handle cuts into his hand. He nears the end of a well-travelled route, but on this day it holds no comfort.

It had begun like no Sunday before it. He had set out from the bakery, a head full of possibilities. A week had passed, he thought. Surely she would have found his gift. She could be there even now, at this early hour, in the gardens waiting and wondering who had left such a lovely thing behind. Would she know it was intended for her?

He had pictured her as he hurried along. She was sitting in her chair by the boat pond, loosening her scarf in the warmth of the July morning, smiling as she read. She was starting to write something. Making a note of a favourite, he was certain, the one tale in a thousand that had always been *his* favourite.

Through the morning he had tried to keep his usual pace and schedule. He had visited his favourite bookstall on the quay. Yet he had barely spoken to the proprietor, had rushed through his selections and settled on the green ones without giving them much thought. He had crossed the Pont des Arts almost at a run. He had forced himself not to look as he made his way through the Tuileries toward the boat pond.

But he had seen her empty chair. Was he behind his time, had he missed her? Or had someone else seen it, thought it forgotten, thrown it away? He had waited. The woman never appeared. Finally a groundsman began dragging the chairs strewn around the pond back to their proper places. The old fellow then picked up her chair, brushed off the dust and carried it to the trees nearby. No one had used it for some time.

The baker passes a café, tripping over the outstretched legs of a gentleman seated on the terrace. The man pays no attention as he juggles his newspaper, grabbing at the edges, trying to fold the paper inside out, frustrated that his arms are not long enough. He closes the paper to fold it lengthwise, one hand sliding from the top corner, the other gripping the bottom. He manages only to tangle his wrists in the middle and crease the paper the wrong way. The baker regains his footing and shuffles on.

Through a small park now. Huddled near the carousel, children surround a circus strongman, bouncing up and down as though on their own beds, their fingers stretching for invisible ceilings. The strongman holds a book in one hand. With pretended effort he hoists his chair with the other, his eyes never leaving his reading. In the chair sits a squealing girl. She waves to her friends below, their arms wrapped around the strongman's meaty legs. On the carousel, white horses pause in mid-gallop, waiting for their distracted riders.

The baker passes a pair of old women sitting on a bench. Each reads an identical copy of a cheap paperback. One grimaces as though stabbed through the heart and slaps her book

closed. At the same moment, the other stifles a gasp with her hand, her eyes growing wide.

A December wind armed with ice and knives gathered its skirts in a northern sea. It stepped ashore near Calais, dithered before finding the Paris road, moaned its way south through thick and ancient forests, entered the town of Beauvais along the high street, paused in front of the cathedral, circled the market square, then lifted its frozen hems and slipped uninvited under the door of the town's only clothing shop.

To waft around the fat thighs of Pascal Normande, kneeling behind the door and encased like so much mince in a waistcoat embroidered with peacocks, an immaculate suit, high collar, silk tie and pearl stick pin. He ran his fingers around the frame, measuring the drafts. In such a position, his face would glow an alarming shade of pink. His plump lips tightened to a sneer.

Screw these goddamn farmers, he said.

He grunted as he got to his feet, brushed the knees of his trousers, tugged at his waistcoat, fingered his collar and peered through a frost-skimmed window to the empty square beyond.

Screw them all to hell and back.

Pascal had seen no more business this day than yesterday, or the day before, or the month past, or in the year since opening Atelier Normande. Yet in a glance he surveyed the shop, reassuring himself that all was ready. Poised, he might have said were the weather not so frigid.

Dismembered mannequins leaned against the icy walls. Shelves sagged under the weight of fabrics: bolts of browns and greens, a selection of Irish wools, rare satins, saffron cottons from the dye pots of Morocco. In the window a chorus of heads wore a collection of CHAPEAUX MERVEILLEUX!, so proclaimed the advertising card, each aeronautic brim layered in country dust.

A row of ladies' footwear, their toes placed neatly in line, stood along the counter. Behind which: Madame Céleste Normande. Forced by the temperature in the shop to abandon her code of daywear, she was wrapped in a rough blanket that would eventually produce a rash. She looked to her husband, a wisp of vapour escaping her clenched teeth.

Paris, she said.

Pascal Normande had been born in the city's twentieth district, the bastard son of a piecework dressmaker. She had doted on her boy, only to stitch herself to death in the backroom of a musty ladies' shop. The first suit he owned was the one he had worn to grieve her. He had made it himself, those dark days and nights at her elbow leaving the impression; his buttonhole work as fine a tribute as any eulogy. He promised her grave that he would be the Normande to improve the family's lot.

Céleste Renault was the daughter of a porter who had made the rounds working the fine hotels of the boulevards. As a girl she would put on her cleanest smock, tug the hem down to cover a hole in the knee of her stockings, and meet her father after his shift. She sat in the lobbies, practising grown-up postures under the potted palms, admiring the guests as the

came and went. The heaps of travelling cases would bring on a fit of giggles whenever the jammed the revolving doors. On their way home, she would ask her father where the luggage had come from. The brass-riveted trunks, the leather wardrobes as tall as she was, the hatboxes decorated as though they were birthday cakes.

How much could all that hold, Papa?

A world entire, her father would say. The likes of which you and I will never see.

They grew up in the twentieth, Céleste at the top of the Belleville hill, Pascal at the bottom. Yet their paths never crossed until the World's Fair of 1900.

Tracing through the exhibit halls and pavilions, the fair's great attraction was the Moving Promenade: the guidebooks described it as A MARVEL OF AN AGE TILL NOW UNFULFILLED! The contraption consisted of wooden platforms sliding along at different speeds. At a slow and easy pace, the inner course was advertised as being for those of weak or infirm constitutions, women, young children and the clergy. The outer course moved twice as fast.

Pascal, grown into a young gentleman, stood on the outside gripping the handrail and trying to look relaxed as he moved along. Near the Russian Pavilion he passed an enormous black hat on the slower course, its brim shading the face of Céleste. Though the hat was from one or two seasons past, it was the burst of orange pheasant feathers across the crown that caught Pascal's practised eye. He knew them instantly as a bit of magic, an inexpensive trick that on the right head could distract the viewer from noticing less fashionable details of an ensemble. And he knew they had worked on him: he began shuffling backwards to stand alongside this vision. He lifted his bowler and complimented her on her dress. Céleste scanned the neatly parted hair, the athletic shoulders, the slim hips, the gleaming shoes. She offered her hand. Pascal took it and, without a moment's hesitation, Céleste stepped from the slower platform to his. Together they moved off toward the Palace of Electricity, the feathers' long tapered ends swaying with the speed.

Céleste believed, once, that her husband would do as he vowed on the day the smallest of emerald rings had finally emerged from his pocket: he, the enthusiastic Pascal, would buy for her a life that would see a jewel on every finger. She, his dearest, dearest heart, would live under cloudless skies. They, the newly engaged Normandes, would stride into the twentieth century with elegance and style. They may be obliged to begin that journey outside Paris, with rents being what they were, but sooner or later the city would beg them to return.

By the evening of her first day in Beauvais, *once* had become a word for fables.

Madame Céleste tightened the blanket around her shoulders and threw Pascal his scarf and gloves. A smile as cold as her fingers creased her face.

Paris, was all she said.

Within the week the Normandes were gone, the shop's shutters left banging in the winter wind. The loss of a good tailor, like the arrival of the medieval armies that had once trod their fields to muck, the citizens of Beauvais shouldered with characteristic stoicism and dry humour. They would recall the December of 1907 as having the strangest sort of weather.

Atelier Normande reopened on the first day of the new year, unveiling its windows in a Paris back street near, though not quite near enough, the prominent fashion houses. A summer collection was presented—most notices called it quaint—petits fours were served, Pascal scurried about.

One newspaper did remark on Madame Céleste's dress. She skimmed the article, her eyes pouncing again and again:

The hostess's ensemble—a fearless stroke against convention—cascades of silk and velvet—magnificent, magnificent—dangerously exciting—supple territories at the shoulder and décolletage—the women of Paris—London—New York—will think twice about their dreary wardrobes—brava! they will shout as they rip their tired seams—rework their waists and hems—brava, Madame Céleste!

She turned to her husband. As well they should, she said.

The August skies had cleared. Pascal Normande slid a key from his vest and locked the shop, leaving the cutters, seamstresses and pressers to work through the night. A new season approached and preparation was all.

Pascal believed a client of Atelier Normande expected timeliness or they just as promptly took their business elsewhere. He conveniently forgot that his clients were not those of the great houses. They were a more practical sort, interested as much in the thickness of the billfolds as in the newness of their wardrobes. Just as conveniently he forgot how his mother had spent her nights.

He pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve and wiped his face. He cursed the wet heels sliding up from the river, along the boulevard, around the corner and through his front door. Convinced the day had been the hottest of the summer, he set off for home.

One might have missed the soggy handkerchief, the stained hatband, the flushed cheeks; such was the rehearsed swing of Pascal's walking stick. Here was a gentleman, one could assume overdressed for the weather but still at ease with himself and his world, wanting for nothing. For Pascal Normande was in the business of illusion.

It was an expensive business. The last francs in his Beauvais pockets had been spent moving back to the city. Every franc since went to outrageous taxes and mysterious fees. Every franc that did not pay his workers, or barely covered the rent on his apartments, or dripped from his wife's earlobes, every centime leveraged or mortgaged or begged, threatened his end.

And yet. Word had it a shipment of Chinese silks sat idle and cheap on a wharf in Le Havre. Simply wire the money and an autumn line, the talk of the boulevards, would appear as though from thin air. There were rumours of a baroness planning a series of fancy dress parties for the following spring. Fold a franc into the aprons of the kitchen staff and a winter's worth of orders would materialize like aces from one's sleeve.

Pascal stepped off the pavement to allow a governess and her young charges to pass. He touched the brim of his hat. A few paces on, he stopped and looked back, his pink face brightening.

A children's collection, he thought.

With a few mothers in the client book, no shop on earth would be more magical than Atelier Normande.

At that moment Madame Céleste was at home selecting a hat for the evening's opera, *Carmen*, box eleven. Adjusting the angle of the brim and running a hand through a nest of ribbons, she rehearsed her exit from the taxi, the discreet hoist of her hems to avoid the puddles left by the afternoon's rain, her walk up the grand staircase, the curve of her necklace, her pause, her pose, her wave to an acquaintance, the turn of her feet as she stood waiting for the chair to be slid under her chaise longue, the glare in her eye and the arch of her brow at the usher's flustered request: would madame be so kind as to remove her hat?

As she passed each mirror in the Normande apartments, she paused and considered her reflection. The tickets would have cost Pascal a fortune.

Her smile, she concluded, was perfection.

A one-room apartment hides in the shadows of a small courtyard. Inside a young woman paces the uneven floorboards, dressed only in her underwear: a cotton chemise, dull and shapeless with overwashing. She circles the room, stumbling over books, sidestepping memorized knotholes. She fusses over the time, rechecks the address she had written on a strip of paper. Her stomach in knots, she worries the weather will be as oppressive as yesterday's. She fills a cup from the kitchen tap. The gulped water makes her belly complain all the louder. She frets over what to wear, frets then over her fretting. From a rope strung above her bed she takes down a hanger. Her only proper dress: summer cotton, a ghost of its former rose-petal pink, the waistline long out of fashion. The sleeves, she thinks, heaven help me what if I sweat. For a cooler fit she considers shortening them or removing them altogether. She knows she could do the alterations blindfolded, the number of times she has watched others manage it.

She slips on a pair of canvas shoes. Flat-soled, broken in, comfortable for the walk. She adds her best scarf, the one with the suggestion of peacock feathers. Once a vivid swath of violets and greens, its colours faded now with time and wear. She checks in the mirror by the door, smoothing the scarf to each side of her face and throwing the ends over a shoulder. On motion, as mindless as breathing: the look, the adjustment, the toss.

The young woman picks up the parcel she will deliver, running her fingertips over the careful re-wrapping, smoothing lingering wrinkles in the paper. Satisfied no one could suspect it had been opened she takes a breath and settles her stomach. Then a flash of memory: the man in the Tuileries.

She had recognized him from the museum. He was carrying a bundle of books, which had explained the stories he told about the paintings. Her story man, she had named him.

Had she seen one of his books work its way loose from the bundle as he passed? Would he have forgotten such a beautiful thing? Impossible, she thinks. The books he was carrying that day were frayed and worn, at best second- or third-hand editions. Nothing so cared for as this one, certainly none so carefully wrapped. And if it had fallen, how would it have found its way to her chair by the pond? No, she decides. This one belongs to someone else. A child, she is sure, judging by the scrawled and misspelled handwriting at the back. For a moment she imagines how anxious the young owner might be, how he might be missing his favourite stories, how upset she would be if she had misplaced one of her own books. She decides to hurry to make her delivery. It is the least I can do, she thinks, for a fellow reader. With luck she can finish the errand and return to the boat pond in time for lunch.

The young woman locks the door to her apartment. A voice calls from the darkness of the courtyard, as though her mother has waited for this moment to rise from her grave.

Are you the daughter of gypsies, child? If you insist on walking out so plainly, then remember to cover yourself. Tighten your scarf, my dear; we do not want someone staring at you for the wrong reason, do we?

On a crowded Geneva tram, the evening commuters looked up in annoyance, their elbows bumped, their newspapers jostled, to see someone rushing for the rear doors. They returned to their reading without a second thought. The young man stumbled into the street.

He gathered himself, slapped at the satchel slung across his chest and dug his hands into his coat pockets. Relieved he hadn't left anything behind, he turned his shoulder to a gust of wind as the tram moved off into the dusk.

He found a bench in a nearby park. A woman with a small child hurried past, both bundled against the cold. He watched them as he lowered his head into his upturned collar. The park rounded a corner and disappeared.

He pulled off his gloves and blew on his fingers. He removed a sketching book from his satchel and laid it across his lap, gently, as though the air itself might dissolve the paper. He rummaged through his pockets for his penknife, pulled a pencil from his jacket, made one more survey of the park. He began whittling at the pencil.

Testing the point with his thumb, the young man closed his eyes and pictured his left hand hovering over a fresh page.

A hesitant line, the beginning curve of a reclining form.

Two more strokes, echoing arcs: one for the shoulders, one for the pelvic joint, drawn in opposing angles to the bodyline.

The legs. One line turning out from the hip, the other raised and bent to form a peak. Arms: the right cocked to bear the weight of the upper body, the left outstretched, resting on the knee to come. Then quick strokes, suggestions of slender fingers extending from relaxed hands.

And now the head. A simple oval: relaxed, leaning easily to one side. As though absorbed in conversation.

The young man buried his drawing hand in his armpit. He squinted at the oval, tilted his head in unison, felt the stiffness in his own neck.

He ached for anatomy. For an easel and a place amid a circle of fellow students. For a master to stand at his shoulder as he painted: offering encouragement, a gentle suggestion regarding technique, or perhaps even telling his classmates to gather round and watch a future member of the Academy at work.

The young man thought of his mother, her face pinched and worried, were she to learn of his ambitions. And his father, entering someone else's balances in a ledger, dreaming a noble life for his son.

The face. A midline vertically through the oval, for the eyes a horizontal. Two more: the line of the mouth; the tip of a nose eventually to be straight and handsome. Swipes of eraser to sharpen the jawline and hollow the cheeks. And the eyes. Deep-set, shadowed under the

brow. Heavy strokes marked the crease of eyelids; fine lines became lashes. Each pupil darkened with layer on layer of lead, a tiny spot left to reflect the light.

He ached for creation. For life to somehow rise from the drawings in his sketching book. For his own energy, his own impressions to swirl and spin on a canvas. For a dream city he had tacked above his bed: postcard parks warmed with a painter's light.

The young man signed the corner of the page.

Jacob Kalb, December 1907.

A Saturday, the following August. The Paris Direct from Geneva pulled into the station twenty minutes behind schedule. The sky could hold no more: a summer rain broke in waves across the station's glass roof. The third-class carriages remained out in the weather.

Jacob Kalb, a stuffed carpetbag under his feet and his knees under his chin, hurried a last sketch of the old woman across the aisle. Since crossing into France he had managed a passable likeness of the woman's pocked cheeks, the creases around her puffy mouth. In small vignettes he had made studies of her hands and their bouquets of arthritic fingers. On the page her hair looked like lengths of wire exploding from under her hat.

The conductor assured everyone that the rain would stop at any moment; it was only a short walk into the station. Jacob checked his pockets. The money pulled from a tin under his bed, together with the address of a traveller's hotel found in an old guidebook, was still where he had put it that morning. He tucked the sketching book under his coat. The conductor touched the brim of his cap.

Welcome to Paris, monsieur. Mind the step.

Horse-drawn buses loitered outside the station; one or two automobiles chugged past. Jacob looked in the direction of what he sensed might be west, searching for a landmark, something recognizable from his bedroom wall. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun; already the cobblestones steamed. He pulled the guide from his pocket, tried to untangle the maze of streets.

The quintessential Parisien, the guide advised, *is known to favour walking as a mode of transport.* Jacob tightened his bootlaces, shouldered his carpetbag and stepped over a recent deposit of manure.

His mother would have found the envelope by now, propped against her most cherished possession, a photograph of a stiff and uncomfortable toddler. Jacob remembered her telling and retelling the neighbours how much the photograph had cost.

She would be reading the letter, with her usual stoic frown, stifling tears with a quiet cough, rummaging for a handkerchief. Jacob could hear her voice as though she had followed him out of the station. But why here, Jacob? Of all the insanity. This city is no place for a boy. And who will feed you? Where will you sleep? Could you not draw your pictures back home? Your father and I could send you to Paris when you are a year or two older, if that is what you truly want.

Jacob adjusted the load across his shoulder and wished he could rewrite the letter, ac

something about already being older, that he would write once he was settled, that he already missed her spice cookies, that he was a man now, that she and Papa had taught him well.

He knew his father, having returned from the bank, would be for the moment silent; sitting in his dim corner, deaf to his wife's worry, wondering how to explain to his best customer that the letter drafted for his signature—You'll remember my son, sir. His apprenticeship with your firm—would no longer be needed.

The boy will be fine, my dear.

Jacob wished his father were tugging at his mother's arm as they followed him, gently pulling her back toward the station, leaving him to make his own way through the crowd along the boulevard.

He resisted the temptation to retrieve the guidebook. *And not a plodding vagrant is our native of the City of Light, but one that takes the greatest pleasure in wandering for the sake of it, with neither the assistance of map nor compass nor indeed destination of any kind.*

After handing the manager's wife a month's advance for an attic room and relieving himself into a trough that was the toilet two floors below, Jacob stepped over the bed and draped his damp clothes from a beam. Falling against the thin mattress, he opened his sketching book to a blank page.

8.8.08. Arrived. The Academy on Monday.

He sketched the remains of the room's wallpaper, the flaking relics of what had once been a pleasant floral pattern. Someone's notion of a touch of home for the footsore.

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