

The 11th Arrondissement

by Judith Ossello

I could make a dull rattle as I hit the ruffled tin roof just eight feet below the ledge of the screenless window. Thick red lines drawn across the metal like Robert Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series-you would have to look hard for meaning in such simplicity. My watch might scratch along the surface as I fell, and the local authorities would find my body when the alarm began to beep around eight in the morning. The watch wouldn't be damaged. Maybe someone would steal it before they found me.

We were talking about the anonymity of Paris, how it seemed as if you were more alone here than in an abandoned nuclear test site in the middle of the Nevada desert. I was looking for madness while flicking paintchips out the window. An emphatic "what" said by either of us would have forced a kiss. I met him in the street on the way to the liquor store.

"Hey, are you going to the party?"

"What? We're just getting some beer maybe." She waited to get a closer look at them. "Where is the party?"

Ruth was the one they wanted to know. I had a theory you should dress like the people you want to meet. She had shoulder length dread locks woven together with wig-hair and string to extend them several inches, but they looked natural. She wore a low cut black top with matching black spandex pants. I admired the way you could see the black lace of her bra when you looked down at her.

"Don't buy anything." Quith lifted his shirt to reveal two bottles of Johnny Walker Red Label tucked into the waist of his oversized pants. His hip bones acted like clothes pins to hold up the weight of the bottles that he repositioned into the front pockets. "We will buy coke and you will come with us." I must have been concentrating on his words because I didn't notice the group of friends who were behind him.

"What the hell is taking forever-are we going to get us to drink? Who are you?" Karli said before yelling at us to come with these

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guys because they are a lot of fun. She wore a black shirt with a big silver star on the front accentuated by a belt of tan flesh over her black jeans. Black hair rebounded off her shoulders into curves that reminded me of large hooks.

"Stop being so stupid," Breton said. He smiled as he saved her from losing balance. He looked up and muttered: "We have been partying on free alcohol all day."

We traced every part of the sidewalk with backward and side steps until we arrived at the neighborhood store: one aisle with a divider in the middle to separate the wall of beer from the rotting fruit, which seemed doubled by its reflection. Ruth and I started with the cheap reds then switched to beer selections after one of the guys insisted on explaining the merits of each brand.

"You are not going to get that are you? Please have some respect for your system-your body will not forgive you for buying so unwise." Breton stood brooding over us while we tried to make a decision.

Pablo stole a bag of white rice and some rotten vegetables while Quith talked to the cashier. Ashamed and broke, Ruth and I bought the six of Kronenbourg that Breton reluctantly suggested given our financial limitations.

Later, I realized it was the same beer the reggae band was drinking on the steps in the Place de Bastille. The names of streets are so important to one's experience of the city. I could hear the name of a particular "rue," and it would immediately evoke a very specific mood. There were also squares or neighborhoods that held the same personality, but I thought of them as a group of friends who happen to be streets. They get along, yet they retain their identity. I watched people wait for their evening dates while trying to convince myself Paris would offer me something other than loneliness.

"I am Pablo, are you an American?"

"Yes, but I don't consider myself to be your American."

"Perhaps you are Canadian? I am sorry."

"No, I'm an American," I said without understanding why he should be confused. Karli was sucking on someone's ear so I didn't

pay much attention to him for a few seconds. As line of saliva fell across his shoulder, she lost interest. "What are the names of the others, did you remember my name? It is important that you remember my name and nothing else from this night."

"And you remember mine?"

"Pablo, isn't it?"

"Yes, I see." His smile gave me a much needed advantage over Ruth.

We walked through a spray painted, tortured door framed by a larger door. Inside, an open expanse of concrete was lit at the back corner where the stairs to the flats were located. As Pablo and Breton climbed the stairs, their long legs seemed to bend indefinitely at the knee and hip despite the restriction of their jeans. I concluded that Parisian sexuality must be partially indebted to the cricket or grasshopper. The entrance to their flat was a wood door scarred by scriptures common to places frequented by people who have not yet made their mark on the world.

"Fucking sit down," Karli said abstractly. She was partially swallowed by a couch which sprung from the floor like a rotting mushroom. Two other girls appeared from nowhere. Both were slender and trendy, which is not necessarily a bad thing in Paris.

One of the girls was an artist who worked with latex. I imagined her work would be similar to Eva Hess, the only other latex artist I knew of. When I mentioned this to her, she got excited, and we discussed contemporary art throughout the night. She said the true center of art was not in the galleries, but in the apartments of artists.

I had no immediate plans for the next three weeks except an eventual visit to Sweden. She checked with one of the guys to make sure that we could stay in his summer home in Marseilles where the art scene is currently thriving. Visions of violent rape in some beach house prevented me from immediately accepting the invitation-why were they so eager to help us? The very rich don't tend to structure their boredom with morals, and I could feel the recklessness breeding within me after twenty minutes of their company.

Pablo and Quith took turns translating until I was drunk enough to overcome my fear of offending them with my pathetic French accent. We began to write the names of our favorite artists on the back of an empty case of beer as the guys translated the names of artists into similar French nouns and verbs. Sometimes I would speak nonsense to see how it passed as French.

The other girl, Zoe, was a model for Vogue, and Ruth was determined to memorize every curve in her body hoping her brain would process the coordinates and make the proper alterations to her own body. Zoe seemed to forget she could move. Suddenly, she would be seized with rapid movement and walk across the room with intense conviction until reaching another wall where she would resume her previous trance. It got to be quite frightening as the night went on because she would suddenly appear and disappear within seconds.

Ruth pulled me to a corner of the room to explain that she was very self-conscious about her inverted nipples, a result of losing eighty pounds in a short amount of time. It was one of the reasons she was able to stay faithful to her boyfriend.

"When you think about seriously being with someone, is it a question of whether or not you could make them happy, or whether they can amuse you before you begin to predict their movements and realize it is time to move on . . . its like a futile task we all approach with religious intentions-elusive Gods are more important than real saviors."

Ruth looked confused. I was uncomfortable with whatever I had just said so I added, "What I really mean is do you ever get bored with your boyfriend without knowing why?"

"Well, we get on very well, and I've not been with too many people, especially with the being overweight as I was-so self-conscious. Miss him now, I do. Which sport do you follow? You and Zoe are so lucky." She sounded very distant so I asked for a smoke off her joint, but it turned out to be a hand rolled cigarette.

"Do you guys have anything to smoke?" she asked while quietly telling me that she had decided to go with the flow of things tonight, just let things happen.

"Is there any weed?" one of the guys asked, "because if we have weed then let's smoke. If there is none, that is okay too. Let's not worry if there is none because that would be too much . . . to worry of."

A stack of tapes fell to the ground, and the music changed. People began to dance in lieu of conversation. Ruth refilled her glass with a mix of whiskey and Coke for color while I had another beer. I was afraid of losing control suddenly rather than slowly.

Plates of the rice were handed out. Picking at the rice, everyone re-evolved into insects delicately perched on the edges of their chairs. I wanted someone to sing an opera. Ruth said she could've done it a few years ago, but her private voice teacher had instructed her to sing in the wrong octave and that permanently damaged her vocal cords. She works with her dad tuning pianos and sings only in the metro stations where her voice carries without much strain.

The party regained its momentum shortly after people ate. Three couples formed tango machines. I felt like we were ignoring a war waged in the streets below. Ruth switched partners twice, and Zoe shifted her weight from one leg to another.

"Come sit down." Ruth was laying next to the arranged body of Karli, who was passed out while kissing Karli's boyfriend, Breton.

Pablo yelled some announcement about a bomb being dropped over Paris, and all residents of New Zealand were required to leave the area. Karli barely moved her eyelids.

"Sit down," Ruth said before continuing her conversation with Breton, "look, I can feel her breasts and she thinks that it's you. Look, she's smiling." I saw the situation like a scene from a movie. She seemed to be performing a breast exam rather than something perverse. I felt a hand pull the shirt out of my jeans and inch up my back. The hand was warm from being around Ruth's breasts.

I felt so far inside my body; it did not seem to matter what happened next. I stood up and tucked in my shirt before realizing

the separation this movement created. I don't remember making a decision-it was simply a reaction similar to touching something uncontrollable. Time became extremely important.

Pablo handed me an old liter bottle of coke. I drank it in three long gulps.

"Is that strong?" His eyes were so big. He approached my lips like a praying mantis and barely brushed their surface until I leaned forward.

"I love women, women's breasts, foreign women," he said this with deliberation as he brought his hands up along my ribs as if he were going to carry me somewhere.

"Do you want to know what I love, or do you already know?" I shouted in the sudden silence before the next song began to play. A dark orange descended upon the room and pulled me to the floor. He never answered. Instead, I watched the sway of filaments hanging from the bottom mattress thinking it would be cool if I could catch a French dust bunny.

"Hey, it's two-thirty. We're locked out unless we run, there-do you want to stay here? They said okay, plenty space." Ruth looked different without clothes so it took me a minute to answer.

"If you think its best, then sure. Is this the party?"

"Actually, we are getting ready to leave as soon as I get dressed. I think Pablo said he would carry you to the car-he's not bad looking although I just kissed Breton. This is his flat. Anyway, get up and lets go to the party." Magic hands carried her out of the room, and Zoe appeared.

"I am not going to the party-good for you both to have your fun," she said looking sad but devoid of pity.

She walked around the bed and helped me to my feet before leaving. I snapped the wire of Ruth's bra with my foot as I walked into the other room. The full-length mirror on the door of the closet seemed like a better room to visit, but they had already seen me in the doorway.

Karli was passed out with Quith straddled on top of her. Breton was feeding Ruth rice with the tip of his tongue. Pablo stood like a

giant question mark as he flipped through a magazine I had pretended to read in the silence following the introductions.

I knew the texture of Pablo's clothes more than the taste of his thoughts. Something should be romantic about his hair, but it was just black. His jeans were faded at the knees, but it wasn't sexy. His eyes were black, maybe cold or just empty. I watched him put down the magazine and walk towards me. He rolled into movement until he gained enough momentum to complete the combined motion of arms, legs, head, and shoulders.

We got into someone's car and began driving. The streets were hedged by a never-ending line of cars. Like the gardens of Versailles or the Tuileries, a precise madness was constrained.

At a stoplight, we stopped to talk to one of their friends. He wore a light blue polyester shirt with clouds printed all over it. I decided to call him Magritte, and he chose not to reply. While he talked to Breton through the passenger window, I watched his friends walk away. Their thick motorcycle jackets held their shoulders in a constant state of aggression as they limped down the sidewalk. Finally, Magritte decided to get in the car. The tips of his nails were painted red and hid the dirt lodged behind them. He scratched the fabric interior of the car without a cat's disregard for destruction. I tried a few scratches too.

"Now here is the invitation-keep quiet Breton, you bastard, I'll give you yours in a second-stop being a bastard," Pablo said as he moved under a streetlight to check the address, "He's such a bastard." His arm grew around me like a vine while he handed the other invitation to Breton.

"Who will go in first?" asked Breton.

"What are you talking about-we decided that I would, remember?"

"You do all the talking, okay?" Breton said while trying to look through me.

"Listen, to make this work, we have to be dates okay? So, I might have to kiss you in front of the guard to convince him."

"Fine. I am doing the talking." I leaned against him to prevent my skirt flipping up in the night breeze.

We walked toward the silent wall of doors-so many options before us. I wanted to chose the wrong door since I have a strange apprehension about arriving at prescribed destinations-I am afraid the mystery will not compare to the altered moments of an experience rotted by expectation. It is a preference based on simplicity: the maze of categorized significance denies you the satisfaction comparable to the anonymity of strangers looking through you. This moment was not firmly attached to time until we walked through the door.

Wax skirted candles covered the bronze of gothic candelabras outlining a path to the stairs. I crossed a finger through the cool part of one of the flames. Breton put one of the candles out with his tongue. The sensation of fire is reassuring when you are feeling lost. It is dependable and definite.

The basement was arranged in brick caves like catacombs. Until you walked through a series of three or four small caves, you would find the largest room where the music was. I lost count of the rooms a few times by watching people fade into the depths of cold shadows along the curve of the wall. Ruth rescued me from one of the shadows.

"You will not believe such luck, but I found 20 francs in the loo! We can get a breakfast tomorrow, a real breakfast where that horrible woman won't toss out cups of hot chocolate so half spills out and gets upset when we ask for refills in ten minutes time."

"Where should we go? I really don't, do you? Want to stay the night. Do you want to leave soon?"

"I heard Paris is most beautiful in early morning-we should walk round until the hostel opens, about half past eight this morning, isn't it?"

"Maybe."

"Yeah." Ruth paused for a moment to lick her lips. "Do you know that bloke who just passed looked just like my mate at home? My ex-boyfriend, actually. He was going to get a lobster tattoo. I was going to get a bird. He's just like a lobster, really. Always, always picking things up--inspecting them. He should've gotten it."

"Didn't he?"

"Well, we never went, and he never thought to go himself."

"Should we find the others?" I asked.

"Yes, the others-that's so odd a way to put it."

"You seem more comfortable with it than I am-I'm so jealous."

She answered without punctuation. "Well you see I was just going to roll with the night to relax and let things happen."

"A good idea, maybe, but, I don't think. I mean. At least Breton seems nice-we danced."

"Yes, I saw. I think they are wanting to leave as well. Do you think they might have AIDS? I didn't think, but do you?" Time isn't important as long as you know when to leave because familiarity, comfortable familiarity, requires a delicate balance between time and distance. My sensibility for short-term acceptance lacks Ruth's tolerance. I was beginning to feel vulnerable to judgement and responsibility. My memories would be ruined if we went back to their flat.

Quith insisted on taking a driving tour of Paris. Breton called him a bastard several times, and Ruth performed a mini-strip tease for the rearview mirror. We went back to their flat.

