

Agnés and Albertine

by Tabatha Stirling

The eastern sky lit up for hours this time. Smoke billowing out of whatever building had been bottle-bombed and the stench of charred meat reaching for the wind. Cajoling it to carry the warning to every survivor still making their way towards a pre-recorded radio message or following hopeful, dusty signs carved into tree trunks and telephone poles.

Hope was one of the biggest killers this side of the *La Grande Peste*, as Albertine insisted on calling it. She thought it lent a romantic quality to the destruction of mankind, made it easier reading so to speak.

Agnés thought it ridiculous but didn't have the heart to say. People took things much harder now there wasn't much warmth in the world. There wasn't much law and order either, so unless you wanted a knife in your guts or a rifle butt in your cunt, you kept quiet and as small as you could. Edging along the corners of the world, finding comfort in dark places, silent places.

Albertine had worked for Agnés at a high-end milliner just off Rue Saint-Roch in Paris. Albertine had the most delicate of fingers, capable of tiny, sensuous movements that could make silk sing and lace renounce it's own mother.

In the early days, she had felt quite possessive of this remarkable talent and later, when they became lovers, she became possessive of something else entirely.

'Do you think that's Marseille?' Agnés asked, pointing towards the spark-filled, Eastern sky. 'Because if it is, we should think about increasing our radius'.

Albertine regarded the sky seriously. Every choice she made, whether it was between a creamy *Vichyssoise* or a succulent *Langoustine* or which tender piece of Agnés to kiss first; each

decision was weighed and measured, handled and inhaled until she was absolutely sure.

'I think we should keep going straight. That last message was very clear about the date. If we don't reach the port by the 23rd we could miss the boat'.

Agnés shut her mouth quickly to bite off an angry noise that screamed below her surface. *That bloody boat.* Every since Albertine had first heard the message on her wind up radio she had begun to obsess about this unlikely boat and a way back home for her to Senegal. Every night and morning, Albertine would check the date in her notebook; its edges grubbed and marked.

'Cherie,' Agnés ventured, 'we have no idea if this boat is real, if the message is still relevant or even if it is safe? We have come so far, too far to screw it all up now for an unknown quantity. Please be reasonable'.

'Reasonable?'

Albertine's voice sharpened at its edges. 'You think it is unreasonable for me to try to find a way back to my home. To see if any of my family are still alive? This plague has left me with nothing. What is the point of living even, if it means we give up the search?'

Agnés frowned at her lover of two decades.

'You don't have nothing. You have me. And that's not what I meant at all. But we could be sacrificing ourselves to any kind of bad things. They could be Eaters for all we know. Please, Cherie, please, think more logically. You haven't been back to Africa since you were nine years old. You are now fifty-eight, how many people do you think are alive there still? I don't mean to be unkind but the reality is that no one is left'.

Albertine scowled, her skin the colour of Habana cigars creased a thousand ways. Eyes that had once entranced Agnés with their sparkle and significance now seemed smaller. Resentment shrank Albertine's beauty and magnified her flaws; continual hardship did the rest.

'She had been so beautiful', Agnés thought sadly, 'skin like midnight glass, breath that frosted the air with cassis and a cunt so warm and muscled it was a divine, marvelous thing.

Agnés remembered her first sight of Albertine, one January morning. The Frost moon had smiled icily and Paris was transformed into a playground of dusting sugar and splendor.

Versailles had never looked so beautiful.

Agnés had been working late on a Wedding hat for a politician's wife. A cheap woman whose face and name had become defined by the greasy wealth of her husband.

The hat, however was magnificent! Layers of the lightest dove grey, fine-weave straw and curls of smoky chiffon that competed for space like drunken acrobats. It was far too good for *Madame le Bourgeois*, but Agnés had learned something valuable years ago. To keep her mouth shut when the bad words came and only open it to let the complimentary ones out.

Madame was delighted but had left a dreadfully cheap tip to Agnés's disgust and she wished that she had left five, sharp pins in the lining. Humming softly, Agnés began to turn the lights down and clear her workbench of the Swarovski crystals that littered the surface, winking sadly in the fading light.

Agnés was locking the safe when she heard several thumps followed by a string of curses both in English and French. The English was tinged with those long American vowels that linger determinedly and the French blessed with the honeyed ones of Africa's West Coast. There was a brushing of skirts and a strong rap on the shop's front door. Agnés remembered feeling quite cross at the interruption and had muttered, 'Salope', under her breath as she pulled the door open and fell immediately in love.

But she wasn't in love anymore and the reality of this two-dimensional world, this black and tan world put all relationships under excruciating pressure. Emotions were as hard and useless as diamonds, a suffocating luxury in a society that survived on petrol, antibiotics and flesh.

Albertine had begun to repulse her. Things that had been so tender and enduring were now rancid and run to fat. The curvy lines of her *Rubenesque Noir* had blurred into *lardons* and those treacle and russet eyes that were sent from heaven had turned to *porc boue*.

A sick orange light had perpetuated the skyline for weeks and the sooty, screaming wind bit and toyed, bullying leaves into submission. The nerve-shredding howling and the sheer strength of the Mistral would leave songbirds dead under snapped trees.

Dozens of them lying broken and soft in the aftermath of a wind with a legend.

The Mistral was so famous in France for affecting the mind that certain *crimes passionelles* were pardoned. It played tricks on a person, blowing papers across the room, making hinges squeak and hallways moan.

The women trudged on acutely aware of each other and of their stench. But now, instead of walking closely together for comfort and warmth, they now began to walk apart, sometimes rounding corners without each other in sight. Heaving sighs of frustration and relief when a greyed head or a hunched pair of shoulders came into view.

They stopped at the foot of *Les Alpes*, magnificent mountains leading to Italy and Switzerland. High, granite faced marvels with air as pure as a first confirmation. They towered above Agnés and Albertine, their range and snowy tops breath-taking and Agnés felt a surge of hope and of determination. She must get to a village, somewhere high, where she could breathe and discover what was next.

Agnés's head was full of buzzing, like cholera or jubilant horse flies and she needed to clear it and convince Albertine to forget the fucking boat. Agnés felt pressure in her head and shook it fiercely.

'That', Agnés said, pointing towards the mountains, 'is where we must go if we want to survive. Villages are surprisingly hardy and the cold might have held off infection. Oh! Think of the fresh milk and bread. They might have bread! Don't you think,

Bertie?' Agnés was suddenly so excited that she missed the look of darkness that crossed her lover's face and stayed in her eyes.

Through clenched and painful lips, Albertine spoke precisely.

'No. We must get to the port. That is the plan. That is what we decided to do. You promised, you promised a hundred times. I won't let you take this away from me'.

Agnés spoke without turning her face from the green slopes and snowy tips further up.

'And *I* am not going to entertain this madness anymore. It is stupidity. It is selfish and it is going to get us killed'.

She heard a tiny movement behind her and spun quickly to find Albertine standing a few feet away holding a jagged, killing stone. A stone big enough to cave in a woman's skull, a stone that had seen blood before.

Agnés was frightened so she pretended ignorance to Albertine's killing stone and suggested they camp there, in the foot-hills and make decisions about their future in the morning.

Albertine nodded and a jittery peace presided over their supper of hard cheese and flatbread. There were even a couple of slices of a soft and wrinkled apple, still sweet enough to delight the mouth.

All talk of the future was avoided as they made each other tea from the herb bags they both carried, having become adept at foraging for plants and roots now that pharmacies were obsolete. You could often tell how dangerous a plant was by its name. Hammerfall, Bloodwell and Devil's Arse, for example. But not always. Enchanté, Serenity and Venus Mater were all deadly too.

Agnés had become obsessed with collecting dried willow bark after breaking into a deserted Library and finding out that it contained salicin. A mini wonder drug that could pull down fevers and relieve moderate pain. Albertine remembered that Agnés had danced in the aisles, waving the book in the air as she boasted 'at least *le sale grippe* won't finish us off'.

She had looked so pretty, her auburn hair still bright and without a trace of grey, blue eyes a little faded but brimming with enthusiasm. Even in her *Costume de Peste*, filthy men's trousers

held up by braces made for a rugby player and a frayed, paisley shirt that Albertine had stolen for her from a farmers washing line back in the Loire valley, Agnés seemed so vital.

Albertine had never loved Agnés. Oh! She had liked her very much. Especially her wit, the skin at the nape of her neck, even the two freckles on her arse that would bloom when licked. But mostly for the protection a middle-class French woman could afford to a well-used thirty-year-old African Immigrant with no papers. Agnés gave her a cover but also shelter, food, water and security. The *petite bourgeoisie* in Paris were vicious, using their language and cadence to stab and bruise the bemused Albertine. There was no sun in Paris for the newly arrived African girl, just dark and dangerous corners and the relief at the security that Agnés offered made the sex feel hardly a burden at all.

Albertine preferred to fuck men. She liked their strength, the rusty graze of forearm across her bare shoulders; she liked their girth and length. She enjoyed inhaling the salty Camembert smell of their *couilles* after a lunchtime shower. But men frightened Albertine. And they had hurt her many times. Broken bones and smiles, walking and wincing to the dyspeptic street doctor at *Porte de Clignancourt* for a shot of penicillin and another tube of pain medication.

When Albertine had arrived in France she was nine years old. A beautiful, well-developed child who entranced some men so entirely they ignored her young age and concentrated only on fulfilling their sick desires. She had been raped countless times by a certain type of man and, with each violation, a little bit of her compassion whittled away. Albertine used her hate well and had committed murder five times in her life, a fact she had never shared with Agnés.

As they went to sleep that night, at opposite ends of the fire, they eyed each other warily, becoming jumpy and anxious in the twilight. Alert to every snapping twig, owl hoot and the death shrieks of small creatures the women quickly became exhausted. Albertine was the

first to surrender to sleep, helped along by the strong herbal sedative that Agnés had dissolved in her tea.

Agnés rose before dawn, resting only a few hours to refresh herself. After all, the mountainous terrain would require extra effort and the air would thin quickly.

Albertine slept on as Agnés broke camp, her breathing even and calm, and as her face relaxed her youth seemed to spring back in like a well-risen *mochatine*, giving Agnés brief pause as she walked softly towards her lover, the killing stone in her hand.

Once it was done, once Albertine was somewhere better, Agnés covered her body with rocks and solemnity. It took a good few hours and broke well into her morning but it was important for Agnés to mark Albertine's death with something solid and lasting.

When the last stone was placed, Agnés collected both rucksacks and tied the two together with a couple of old belts and a corded piece of blue rope. Things that Albertine has stolen for them — she had always been a very skillful thief. Swinging the bags onto her back, Agnes never looked back at the makeshift grave, her mourning had been swift and fierce in the cold dawn.

The sky blazed azure, a hot, excitable blue and happiness pulsed through her veins. Agnés felt herself lifted as hope billowed around her heart.

When Agnés grasped her walking stick a slight tremor shook her left hand. Agnés flexed it twice to loosen any stiff tendons unaware that Albertine's herbal poison had started it's slow, remorseless journey around her body.

Agnés focused her eyes on the mountains and began to walk slowly upwards. She thought of the future, of fresh milk and of happier days with Albertine. Of her teeth, ice —white against a deep berry mouth and her strong, musical arms.

Agnés did not think of poison, of hurtful words or of Death although, she would meet *Le Morte* at dusk, in a small clearing just south of Clemenceé.

Where she lay, veins blackened by venom, watched by curious, gentle-eyed cows and ebullient house martins feeding off the flies that had gathered around her blood-warm corpse.

