

1.

HER MOVE BREAKS THE STILLNESS. She stretches her supple spine across the sumptuous, Tiepolo-blue Aubusson rug before the fire. The heat radiates inwards. It warms her to the bone. It radiates out again, twice as powerful, roasting her white back copper-pink. She stops moving. It is totally silent again. Nothing moves. The very flames are still and soundless. All movement has been arrested. We could stay here for years and no one would know. No food. No drink. Nothing but this woman to look at.

'May I read to you?' she asks. Her voice glows like the coals. It is gorgeous, but she has broken something, again. I thought only men could be that stupid.

'No.'

'It is by Voltaire; you know *Candide*. And his adventures?'

I do not bother to respond. Françoise reclines like a radiant statue. I am only interested in her sex. In her pain. She thinks she reads my mind.

'Come lounge by me. Come rest in love,' she says. 'You must build up your tolerance for simple pleasure. Your tolerance for love from the heart.'

My tolerance?

'There is more pleasure to be had in a thousand other ways,' I respond. 'You speak of my tolerance? I am tolerant of you! There is no love in the heart. There is only beating in a heart. And *beatings* can be given and received. That is all there is.'

Weak fool. She retracts at my statements. She is nauseating in her stillness and smallness. Why can't she grow? Meet me in my strength? She would be perfect were she not so insipid.

'It is possible to take pleasure in the simple things,' she says. Simpleton. Françoise leads a foolish life. 'Come,' she entreats. 'Some poetry? Do you like Jean de la Fontaine?'

' "Oh sensual Delight, without you, from childhood,
Life and death would seem the same;
Universal magnet for all living things,
How violently you attract!" '

Fontaine was nothing but a wet romantic. *Françoise* is the magnet. She is dragging me down into a pool of luxuriant warmth. Sucking me into a whirlpool of dreams. 'Come and let us drink,' she offers. 'We can get drunk together; we can relax.' She holds out a bottle of the Widow's champagne. I adore it. She is suffocating. I would give anything not to deal with her cloying embrace. I will drown in her saturated love. I do not want this.

I must shed blood.

-You could whip her.

-Yes. She gives so freely, surely she wouldn't mind if I whipped her without asking. I could simply have her bound and launch in, flay her perfect back, skin those sweet buttocks.

-She wouldn't mind, so what's the point?

-Exactly.

I leave the room and retire alone to my chamber, where I drink a dozen bottles of wine before dreaming of revenge and revolution.

The opening image is a figure falling from a wall. I do not know who it is. It drops elegantly, flipping over slowly, navigating its unhurried way through the space as though avoiding invisible obstacles. It hangs in the air, leisurely descending. It is the wall behind it that is in a hurry, rushing up towards the sky. The figure continues its languid pace until just before it hits the ground. Then it is swamped by a howling sea of slashing axes, swords and sabers, tearing arms and muscles as men are ripped asunder. The figure vanishes in a swarm of screams and steel. Blood and sweat bathe the faces of attacking, dying men that know no fear because they are driven by a mutinous fear from within. The swords are re-sharpened and launched again. No one is spared. No one is spared. Nor the brave, nor the beautiful, nor the weak. Bodies are cut into fragments and the devil take the last. I wander in a daze, a screaming sea of death swirling around me.

Thus my evening ends.

The next day begins with my menstruation.

It comes on like a storm, irregular, sudden. Sudden, yet with portent and presentiment. It has been absent for a year. I never know when it will come. Each period is different. One wrenches my gut and gives me diarrhoea to announce its arrival, the next silently seeps into the world whilst I rest. The smell is the same, but the volume of blood is different. The meaning is different. They are as different as children.

I stagger upwards from some shallow depths of rest as my belly howls at me. Cramps cut into me like swords. The vomit rips forth from my throat, over my tongue, my teeth, out over the edge of the bed and onto the rug.

My stomach is clear now. I feel better. I sit up and know my menorrhagia is coming. Not even any introductory spots this time. I am happy to bleed onto the bed. Here it is, red-black trickles between these pink lips. Drops disgrace the purity of the sheets, insult their immaculate order, stain their memory permanently. All cheer the virgins' wedding night sheets! And now it is coming, shoving out from my womb like a blood laden turd from heaven.

It is dramatic all over my finger.

This is royal blood. Ordained by God.

Slowly wipe my finger with a sheet. No. I can do better. I begin to draw. Touch the lumps and smear the war paint across my thighs, drag it onto the bed. Now my finger dips between my lips and slips out, saturated. The sheet becomes my canvas and an image emerges.

Is it an angel? No. Curling hair. A man? A god? No. The hair becomes longer. Curls and drapes over a neck. A mane. And now the eye. The all seeing eye of a horse. It is a good horse. Rearing now. Challenging. A cross between Pegasus and Marengo. Ready for battle. Ready to race. It grows rapidly across the bed. It is furious. It is fabulous. It is the painting of the face of my fear.

The door opens. The maid enters with a tray. Concern is instantly on her face. 'Oh! Your Highness! Oh, you are unwell?'

I have a sudden vision of myself, smeared with blood, my blood, and the sheets painted with a huge horse and have a sudden desire to laugh. It is too tragic. Too comic. Too perverse. Too operatic. Too completely inappropriate to paint with blood from your cunt. To play with blood from your cunt.

I laugh, and the laugh catches in my throat and becomes a screech. I accept that, and play with it. Suddenly I am screeching at the top of my lungs, perversely shrieking, laughing as though possessed. The maid drops the tray with a crash, glasses and plates smashing on the polished boards, and runs horror struck from the room.

I needed to shed blood.

A maid enters the room bearing a letter upon a small silver tray. It is addressed to Aunt. Françoise glances at it, frowns, and passes it to me.

I know this hand; it is from my servant and friend Bonie.

‘My dearest Aunt,

I trust my letter finds you well, and that your condition has improved. I have no doubt that your accommodation has.

All my interest in the maids has waned since recently I heard of your indisposition. We are all healthy here, except that some of us have been unwell. Some seem less brave with their duties, and some are too ill to come to work at times. It is as though something is preventing their earning an honest living, and anyway, something smells very bad around here. There is, recently, a foul stench invading our home, and the source of it appears to be putrid meat. Everyone is sniffing constantly, to be aware when it is near. It is difficult to smell it out, precisely. For the moment, I do not know how to remove the problem. My key concern is that it could reach you, as this rot can multiply like the plague. This may well radiate from Paris throughout the country.

Do not concern yourself with me, I am resistant to illness. Even the doctors would have a hard time landing Bonie! But, for the others, well, there is only so much I can do.

Would that I could clasp myself to a bosom, any bosom, then I would smile. If I were able to clasp myself to your bosom, then I would be happy again! All will surely be well here, even without such joy, for I am certain that I can manage to keep Her Highness's house intact, despite not knowing if she will ever be able to return.

Your loving nephew,
Bonie.'

So, someone is sniffing around. Judge B., no doubt. I can smell his filth in the system. He is sounding out where I am, who is involved. And Bonie thinks he can handle it. I am sure he can. My good Bonie. He is the only one I can rely on.

There is breath behind me. A finger bumps against my lips and insinuates itself into my mouth. It has been dipped in her sex. It is too magnificent. It is too delicious an offering. Gently I take her hand and look at it. The fingers are long and strong. Intelligent. They are unmarked. There are no creases, no blemishes. These are the first hands created. The nails are flawless. They happen upon a perfect shape. These are the nails that anchor themselves beneath my skin. When they bury themselves in my flesh they remind me of muscle. When she fucks me the nails inspire physical pain, but it is not the nails that hurt: the pain comes from somewhere deep inside. I cannot abide it. Enough reverie. The taste of her is still in my cheeks, and the edge of my tongue. It must be diminished. I wipe my mouth and ask, 'Fish for dinner again, then?'

I walk into her chamber unannounced. She is arranged on the bed, masturbating, sniffing what appears to be my undergarment, discarded earlier that evening. She smiles at me; today she is lusty, sure of herself. She touches her tongue to the cloth where discharge would gather. She is disgusting. I have to attack with something; 'There are maids employed for the task of cleaning cloth.' I turn my back on her and withdraw.

I want to return to Paris. They need me there. Dare I return?

I imagine arriving in Paris with a small army. I would appear in broad daylight, mounted on a stallion. He is black.

He is solemn. He knows that he is in charge. A small army follows me, willing to fight to the death. We ride directly to Rue Neuve-des-Mathurins. There we collect gold, and my remaining staff take up arms and follow us to the court. Along the way, we gather bystanders and revolutionaries, people of means and peasants alike. The gold is distributed among the army. We arrive at court. There are nine judges, sitting in different courts. They are hauled outside. Nine of them. They are propped against a wall. The gold is launched at them, flung with full arms and anger. The judges collapse under a storm of golden hail.

I am dreaming.

I need diversion.

What am I to do when there is nothing to do? I have ridden the horses. They knew me well from the beginning, and are still a joy, but other than that? I walk the grounds, but there are no people there. My skill, my pleasure, is to organise people. Here there are no stories, no intrigues to be explored. Françoise has a great tongue for lapping but not one for talking. When she talks, it is to say what other have said or written. There is nothing new in her conversation. All she wants is to spend time together. It is stifling.

Keen to keep boredom at bay, and distract me from the issues in Paris, Françoise arranges for a young woman to experience her first beating at the hands of her lover, in my presence.

We gather in a chamber. She curtsies to me. She is so nervous, so proud. He bows. He is confident.

Intercourse is never enough. What is wanted, what is needed, is the mystery, the unknowing. What will happen? We should never know. Never run away, never give up. That's what makes it so good. To open and subject oneself to another's intentions. To release the control, the fear, to subjugate and conquer oneself. To feel safe enough in the world to relax and allow another to teach, to guide, to threaten, even to injure and know you will come out not just whole, not just safe, but alive, more alive, yet more alive than you have ever been before because you have trusted yourself in the dance of life. What bravery, what courage, what valor, to step into the deepest fears you have and not run, not shirk, not shy away. This is what he asks of her. This is what she says. 'Yes.'

He takes her hand and holds it lightly, her elbow going limp as she believes and is relieved in her beliefs. Her knees and shoulders shifting, sagging, a smile growing on her face and warmth spreading through her, from those fingers along her arm, her spine.

He steps away. The next moment dark descends upon her as a blindfold is wrapped around her eyes. Her tension rises. A gag is placed firmly in her mouth and tied behind. This is a little uncomfortable. She struggles against it, briefly. She breathes deeply, and relaxes again into the experience.

'Raise your skirt,' he demands.

She does so.

'Touch yourself.'

Hesitating, but enjoying the game, she pushes her fingers gently under her chemise and begins to toy with her pubic hair. She feels his care and tenderness for her through her fingers, and it runs through her blood.

'More.'

She is unsure how to continue. She rubs for a moment, but it is unpleasant, and she hesitates.

'Insert your fingers.'

The mouth of her sex must be dry, for she wets her fingers and runs the saliva over her thirsty, hidden lips, now moist, now slimy, now allowing easy access. A world of tenderness opens up to her as her fingers enter and she feels her own sex, and she stays with the feeling, gently acknowledging the pleasure she can bring to herself. It is beautiful to watch her using first one finger, then two, three. She looks as though she is pressing forwards, scooping, inside and behind her clitoris where the soft flesh swells and releases more wetness. Her gown is slowly raised from behind.

There is a pause.

His tongue extends and touches the girl's ankle, licks full and slowly around her heel, around the edge of her foot solid on the floor, up the rear of the foot again from her heel. His teeth gently attach to her Achilles and bite firmly enough to register, not enough to mark or hurt. Leaving behind a finger tapping out irregular time on the tendon, the tongue leaves the ankle and slowly flicks its way up the back of the slender leg, sneaking round to the sides, pausing to explore the back

of her knee, while she struggles to remain upright, blinded, really masturbating now, fingers deep within, swooning at the range of feelings. Her flesh, her bones and muscles, melt. Warm vapours ascend and swirl around her.

Sets of tiny buttons are flicked open. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Breasts are unveiled for us to gaze upon. She is so close I could reach out and touch her. A warm mouth lowers itself onto her breast. I can see the tongue tumbling the nipples into the mouth and I want the burn of its caress that she is experiencing. Teeth close themselves around the nipple and she plummets into sensation. They chew, squeezing pleasure from the teat. She seems to be aware that something is wrong, but perhaps she cannot think clearly enough to register that if her lover is kissing her leg he cannot equally be now tenderly tracing circles around each nipple, now licking between her breasts, now sucking deeply on her teat. 'Hands together,' he demands, and she reluctantly, relieved, removes her fingers from her wet cleft and puts her wrists together. They are bound and pulled up above her head. A tongue crawls up her thigh and begins to work its way around her buttocks, touching, teasing, licking, finding. She is squirming. Perspiring. She loves it. She wants more.

She somehow knows now that there is more than one person attending her, but it matters not. The mouth at her rear pushes forward, pressing between the cheeks, and searching, begins to kiss and tongue-fuck her bottom, tongue extended fully like a finger, like a penis, a living thing invading her anus. She tries to squeal but cannot, then a crop whistles through the air. Crack! She freezes with pain and wants to scream, resisting, holding on to her hurt. The heat sears her skin and raises a welt, warm and red. She can feel it growing and singing across her thighs. She aches for it to stop, the pain is getting worse with each second. Out of nowhere a second lash - Crack! - and now the burn spreads through both thighs and turns inward. She feels herself opening up from behind, and dissolves into her complete experience of her own body, so enormous that it consumes all her thoughts, there is no thought, there is just feeling, a rich, deep, falling feeling, wet, searing, painful, divine, magnificent, sex.

Beside me, Françoise masturbates.

'You'll make a hole in it,' I snarl.

Guillaume enters, smiling, carrying another letter addressed to Aunty. He would like to be the household pet. His face, once innocent and charming, is now hungry. He doesn't know how to get inside me. He stands about foolishly, for longer than necessary, then leaves with the martyred air of one injured.

I open the letter.

Bonie has been beaten. He is hurt. The household is scattered. I must return to Paris.

I must not.

The Judge will be on the move. Where will he look?