

MEÏ LEPAGE

DRYING YOUR TEARS

7 February 2007

Fireflies soar

High in the sky

So that men

Won't clip their wings

Emma *Noémie*

1

The heavy traffic oozes, like sludge, along the lanes and between the cinder blocks. I left Créteil and the suburbs of Paris this morning, and am having a bad dream in which I keep changing places with no transition at all. I helplessly watch on as the town I grew up in exudes globules of pollution and urban mayhem. Sweaty pedestrians grumble and curse their way through the line of cars as they head for the concrete buildings. Everything is filthy, even beyond the city limits.

The A/C isn't working and I'm numb with the heat. I reluctantly roll down my car window to avoid passing out. Still at the wheel, I dab at my runny mascara and fix my messy bun before getting to the police station in Annemasse, the French Prealps town closest to Geneva. Appearances do matter, especially for a first impression.

I manage to get out of the traffic jam and onto a parallel route, when suddenly I spot a woman on her patio: red-faced, she is wilting in her deckchair despite welcome splashes from the garden sprinkler.

Parked in front of her house, the woman's drab SUV does not totally hide her from view. I slow down to get a better look – eager to judge her, driven by an unhealthy urge to peek. But let's be honest: what would this stranger think of my condescending attitude, especially since it comes

from a lady cop? We're all someone's fool; yet I can't help thinking, some are more foolish than others – and, more often than not, more foolish than me.

The newly built precinct soon looms into view. My childhood memories are of a gigantic city, and I wonder why the places you grow up in always seem to shrink with time. Even the mountains seem too close, and weigh down on me. Dark smoke billows out of the factory stacks at the mountain's base, and a greyish haze hovers over the heat-ridden valley.

I have to swerve to avoid chaotic roadworks. The light turns red, forcing me to stop across two lanes, which elicits loud honking from behind. My knuckles go white on the gearstick as I resist the urge to switch into reverse and crash into the halfwit who stopped barely an inch from my bumper. Slick with sweat and overly agitated, the guy is fidgeting in his seat so much that I no longer feel like entering the fray: he might step out of his car, and then I'd have to endure his stench and the pointless string of abuse. I settle for simply glaring at him in the rear-view mirror.

To my left, I spot a lovely house that stands out amongst its dreary neighbours, like a glitch in the matrix. Several colourful bikes are scattered across the well-tended garden; there's one next to the woodshed, with stabilisers and butterflies screwed to its handlebars. A barbecue is sizzling nearby, and as the wind changes direction, the greasy smoke seeps through my open window before I can roll it up.

I feel my pulse accelerating as a mental dam suddenly bursts: memories come flooding through me, of a party with music in the distance, of a wall of flames and inhaled soot, of an inferno that shattered windows and the life of an insignificant girl. There's no happiness without forgetfulness. And one can forget many things, but not that. That sinks in, deeply, it nullifies whatever came before it and poisons whatever comes next.

Damned red light. I can't jump it, since I'm caught in the traffic, so I let my gaze linger on the blocks of council flats and their tiny windows. Their outlines blur in the heat. Ten seconds tick by. I can't resist the urge to turn my head and watch the horribly perfect scene outside the house.

The dinner table is set, as in a cartoon, with a host of colours that I loathe. I recognise the fruit-shaped ice cubes in their drinks – those plastic ones you put in the freezer, that give whatever you drink a rubbery aftertaste, but that you come to appreciate because they're the taste of holidays. Then I hear the laughs, carefree, unbearable.

I used to laugh like that once, with my younger sister Noémie. That was before our mum's flabby white belly began to swell with alcohol. Before she repeatedly forgot to take us to school. Before the cold baths. Before the awful smell of rotten food in the kitchen. Before she died. And before the fire. All in all, it didn't last long.

The light goes green, but all hell has broken loose inside my head. I itch to destroy the little paradise they have built. I envision myself turning the wheel, shifting gears and pushing my foot down. Ruining their picture-perfect garden would be an easy task. I imagine ramming the barbecue so that it smashes onto the table, scattering their bikes onto the lawn so that their pitiful bells echo with their screams.

But I just take a deep breath and slowly move on without turning back.

If it weren't for Adèle, I would never have agreed to step back into this nightmare.

23 March 2017 was the last day of my former life.

I remember my boots crunching on small bits of unmelted grey snow. They were a lovely pair, made of pleather, and went up to my knees. I had matching gloves. I was still wearing my work blouse, concealed under my ample burgundy faux-fur coat.

The reason I remember it so vividly is because I can no longer dress like that today. Because it reminds me of you and makes me want to throw up.

It had been night for a while. You couldn't even make out the form of the mountains, behind the roofs of Annemasse. I was still in high school and had a part-time job in a hotel. I worked there on evenings and weekends. On top of my wages, I had been given permission to sleep there, in my own room. That way, I no longer had to live with my father: it was my dream job, basically. That night, like many others, I had planned on meeting Eddy after my shift. I couldn't wait to see him.

I left the hotel and crossed the road. That's when I heard your engine roar. Since the street was nothing more than a long straight line, I should have guessed I was the reason you were slowing down, but I didn't use to think like that back then. I was still very naive. Once you had

drawn up alongside me, you slammed on the brakes. Then you got out in a flash and pinned me down against your van.

The phone in my hand went crashing to the ground. You were choking me with your elbow. I tried to scream, but you were crushing my throat. Then you dragged me across the car and threw me on the back seat. When I tried to resist, you kicked me in the jaw. A taste of metal filled my mouth. I wanted to spit, but you put tape over my lips. After that, you tied my wrists to my ankles and blindfolded me. Do you know that even today, I cannot stand the dark?

You slammed the door shut. I tried to calm down, because the more I gasped for breath, the closer I came to choking. Although I did my best to pay attention to every turn you took, I soon lost all sense of direction. The ringing in my ears left me unable to focus. I eventually had to swallow the blood oozing from my split lip.

We stopped. We hadn't even been driving for more than ten minutes. You hauled me out and threw me onto the mud. You severed the ties that bound my ankles and pushed me in front of you. I didn't want to sob, to give you that pleasure, but I couldn't help myself. It was a gentle slope and we walked but a few steps. I slipped against concrete and you opened a door – a very old one, from the sound of it. I heard a nail roll on the floor and I tripped over a heap of scrap metal. Had you ungagged me, I would have begged you to let me go, and sworn not to breathe a word to anybody. I think I would even have been able to go back about my life as if nothing had happened.

You held me up against your chest and opened a trapdoor, releasing a rush of stale air. You pushed me down the stairs and, once inside, you pinned me against the wall. I couldn't think straight. I was drifting somewhere between the cobwebs I could feel against my ice-cold skin and the damp ceiling.

I felt your hands on my shirt collar. The soft rub of your clothes against mine was the only clue you were there. Your breath quickened. I wanted everything to stop, I prayed for you to just

fuck off. I think I begged so hard that my wish came true. You stood back, but I knew you were still in the basement. You must have been looking at me, at the sorry sight shivering in the dark. Then you went back up and locked the trapdoor behind you. The only thing that lingered was your scent. Those hints of spice and cedar I knew so well.

2

Carène Sauveterre, whom I'm supposed to meet, is late. I have to wait for her in the overcrowded reception area – I guess the complaint department is understaffed on weekends. The young officer at the desk asks a possibly senile old man to repeat his wild story for the third time. Those waiting in line have trouble hiding their impatience as I settle for a corner seat. I let my gaze wander on the walls, which features mainly posters for helplines and awareness campaigns; I hope they might still save lives. The accrued weariness of the day catches up with me and I soon doze off in a metal chair screwed to the wall.

Celebrating my departure – albeit temporary – seemed like a good idea last night. We usually only celebrate successful investigations at the CID: a successful bust or the arrest of a notorious criminal. But since we haven't had one of those for quite a long time, everybody was delighted to have drinks on me. We waited until the Créteil precinct had emptied before raising hell. As daybreak, I was still busy cleaning up. Even though I didn't really have fun – which I had expected – it was exactly what I needed: I'd avoided trying to sleep.

The young officer at the desk eventually sees me. He smiles, gives me a thumbs-up and then quickly makes a call. Five minutes later, the staff door bursts open with a bang.

“Emma! It’s been so long!”

Given the circumstances, Carène’s tone is way too cheerful. Her grating voice gives me an uneasy shiver. She wraps her arms around me as if we were buddies. I find this kind of personality both admirable and repulsive. I pat her awkwardly on the back and force a smile onto my lips.

“Carène, how are you? Look at you; you haven’t aged a day!”

And I actually mean it. She hasn’t changed one bit since we attended police school together.

Carène is one of those people who never seem to age. In lieu of a bun, her long blond hair is now tied in a loose braid that swishes across an oversized T-shirt she tucks into her jeans. I’m sure most people would think she is barely out of her teens.

“Neither have you. But let’s not celebrate too early, our thirties are looming large. Anyway, we’ll have time for drinks later. Come with me”, she adds. “I’ll give you the grand tour; though I’m afraid you’ll find the premises quite small compared to Créteil.”

I tug self-consciously on my crumpled white shirt, all the worse for wear after my long trip, and follow Carène into the hall.

Ultimately, all police precincts look the same, except perhaps for the coffee machines. We pass the interrogation room on the ground floor. I say hello to the three day-squad officers who are eating as they finish paperwork – their desks are cluttered with a jumble of official reports, complaint forms and half-eaten sandwiches. The place positively reeks. They all arch an eyebrow when they see me. I guess they know who I am, but I introduce myself all the same.

“Emma Fauvel, PC, on detachment from the SDPJ 94¹. I’ve been called to help on the abduction of Adèle Jezequel.”

¹ Police district of the Val-de-Marne, a suburban *département* outside of Paris

After exchanging a few banalities, we part with the usual “Hold on tight!”, a classic phrase among fellow officers that means both “See you later” and “Take care”. Holding on tight is indeed a requirement for the job, given what you face: violence, poverty, tragedy, squalor, madness, and all the misery at large in the outside world. And then there’s the darkness that comes from inside the workplace: your colleagues’ vices, their faults, their clashing morals and misplaced pride, their pent-up frustrations and ill-founded criticisms – all of which, on a bad day, can make everything implode.

Carène settles for a hollow laugh and a half-hearted wave before resuming the “grand tour”. We end up in a corridor lined with detainment cells. Seeing her admire her reflection in a glass door, I can’t help asking:

“And what about your office?”

She blushes and clears her throat.

“Ah, yes, of course. It’s on the second floor.”

“Is the superintendent in today?”

“We no longer have one, not since the last one retired over five years ago. Commander Jezequel is now at the helm.”

I have trouble hiding my surprise.

“Wow, that’s a hell of a responsibility.”

“Especially given the circumstances.”

“Tell me about it.”

We reach the first floor and walk past offices, a locker room and a break room.

“Well, what about a coffee before we get down to the briefing?” Carène suggests.

“With pleasure.”

She treats me to an Americano, no sugar, and gets herself a can of pop. We then head up another flight of stairs. Carène was wrong: the place is as much a maze as the Créteil precinct.

The investigation teams' acronyms are taped onto their respective office doors. The brand-new corridors are nearly deserted, but I guess they are bustling on weekdays. Annemasse is the French suburb of Geneva. Here the affluent live side-by-side with the criminals – in numbers that skew heavily towards the latter population. It's the perfect powder keg, fuelled by deep-rooted drug-trafficking networks. The Swiss border has its strong points, including both legal and illegal businesses, which provide the local police with an unhealthy dose of work.

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