

Of Love and Revolution in a City

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Recriminations.
The cobblestones lie uprooted on their backs like beetles. The windows of the banks and the Renaissance hotel are still boarded up. Alongside the silver-tongued porter at the Renaissance stands a scrum of police, their jackets strained across their enormous backs. They are brothers bearing the same shoulders, flat faces and cropped hair; same posture. They stand close with hips and guns pointed towards each other. He stands away from them, uneasy. I imagine him chewing at his lip, like me, enlivened with suspicion and fear. My mouth is ulcerated, my tongue swollen from my own treacherous teeth. I pick at my lips and they split and bleed.

My eyes are dry like the plants I forgot to water. My eyes and the plants have lost their green and are turning brown. Together. It is autumn. I can see the park from here, a little park, with little people, walking their little dogs, the little trees are turning their leaves over, growing weary of life and faltering in the winds. In the knowledge that winter is coming.

I won't think on to winter without him, or that he is without blankets, handcuffed in the naked cell asleep on his feet. I don't think whether he is turning colour, weary. Or of how many broken bones it will take to break his silence. Or how many days before they come for me.

I'm lying. Of course I think, how many?

Revolution is just mathematics. We try to multiply, they subtract

us, divide us, fractions, fractures. Numbers possess me now. Just 4 days, 11 hours since I last saw him, x nights and y days until he is safe. Algebra, arithmetic. Scant substitute for simple counting. Him and me make two.

A knocking of knuckles at the door. My body spasms although my mind is crisp like the morning air, cold and bright up on the park and the police and the doorman. The knock is soft and shy, our neighbour from downstairs. Her eyes kissed with absinth that she drinks from a teacup since her son disappeared and she broke all her glasses. Her tongue swollen with the edge that is her nerves. We all wear our tongues wide and big this season; me, the neighbour, the doorman, the little people in the little park.

She taps again, a little rougher. I give in because I am weak and because she has a key anyway. I call out to her without lifting my eyes from the window, 'Let yourself in,' and the door eases open, unlocked before I had spoken.

Here she is with her coat on for all the trees are shedding theirs. She pulls a parcel like a weapon from under her arm, the substance I've been forgetting, the food I won't think to buy now. She loves me from her long-lived distance. Sometimes I consider hugging her, I appreciate this neighbour for all her dull stories, her moral lecturing, her recriminations.

'Don't let them take your hunger from you,' she prescribes, unwrapping bread and cheese to fry, two large eggs. She has invited herself to join the meal. 'I feel for you. I do.' We both think of her son – annoyance for me and reward for her. I nod. The doorman patrols up and down a few paces, like a caged puma. He walks, two paces left, two right, repeats, jailed like the rest of us, even the free ones.

'Will you cook for me?' I ask her. 'I want to see if he will return...'

'Of course he will,' she scoffs. 'This was a riot not a revolution.' says the woman who has witnessed enough to know the difference. 'And neither are worth the loss.'

I swear at her and she shrugs and shuffles into the kitchen. Her leg is arthritic. I have no regrets. Not this morning when I feel strictly alive. My eyes have dried and my fingers are peeling because

they haven't touched him for so long. The chaos that is my belly burns me up. But in my discomfort I feel potent.

When the phone yelps I know it's not him. It's not. It is Federica, I recognise her rural accent at once. She sounds tired. We are all tired, awake too long, stretching out the hours and the day, as if this sacrifice, this martyrdom, can salvage it all. We are worker bees, making hope instead of honey. She tells me of a prisoner solidarity march highlighting the abuses and demanding their release. This evening we will march on the jail, like bats carried forth on the vibrations of our loved ones. Or sheep, lambs bleating our misery as they pick more of us off.

I am foolish, the neighbour is right. No loss is worth it. The loss of me to them so as to register my pointless protest, it is not worth it. But I am going anyway, if only because prisoners might hear us. If only for feeling the love of friends around me. If only because a lone guard might be going home unheeded. If only because to sit here and listen to that clock is tearing me apart as violently as any truncheon.

So. I forfeit my vigil to return to the streets, re-dressing in black, more a widow spider than a wailing one, and I see myself, in the chipped mirror in the wardrobe. I see myself and I stop.

'It looks good on you.' the neighbour comments kindly, nodding to my head, she thinks I have dyed it. My hair, once black, has turned red, just as my mother teased me. *All the rage in this young girl's head will colour her good black locks.*

These winds must have changed. A rush, like whisky, brings life to cold toes. The neighbour passes me coffee, reminding me that food is ready. I dress and drink; no time to ponder miracles although I snatch looks at the mirror unabashed in front of the old lady.

'Where are you going now?' she clucks disapprovingly. 'Dressed for war not peace.'

'Both.' I retort testily, pulling a scarf over my new appearance, not wishing to be a beacon to a baton.

In the kitchen, I sit to eat, pushing bread in mouth and boots on feet.

'Stay here for if he calls?' I plead, knowing she will, she wants to

be of service, too fragile to risk the demonstrations herself. She is behind us, if not for us, for her boy they disappeared, breaking him and her together.

‘Tell him what words? His hard-hearted loved one is out making trouble again?’ she grumbles with pleasure.

She called me the loved one. A virgin acknowledgment despite her horror at our unwedded bliss. I smile and reach out and hug her. It is in revolutions that revolutions are born. I stretch out inside my armour, lowering my headscarf to conceal my raging hair. I say goodbye, carrying the last of my meal in my hand. Of all this; with burning cars and street battles and unrest and disappearances, it is a rushed breakfast which upsets her most.

Happenings

The cobblestones are being uprooted, dragged from graves like Lazarus. Evening is coming and we are growing less safe and less sane. We are near the Renaissance hotel, up at the good end of town. I live near here now, on the margins of the poor area, just on the wrong side of the invisible border.

The police have allowed us this far; we passed my street unbothered. But here the lines are growing thicker. The rumours of tanks are becoming more frequent. We have been gassed already, my skin prickles with its heat, and my clothes are damp. They started using antiquated water cannons earlier but we were at the side, unaffected.

His face was red, puffy from the gas. We watched the jet from the white cannon and he laughed. His skin is glowing, toxic, he arouses me in this state, when I tell him so he kisses me through our t-shirt sleeve masks and shouts that I am inappropriate.

We are here in this moment. Hungry and half asleep and serenely calm. When their lines dart forward to baton charge we move back but don’t run, keeping footing in the hysterical crowd. There is a woman dressed in yellow screaming and weeping.

With the crowd spread and police lines retreating I catch sight of friends. I pull him by the wrist through the throng before it tightens and we are trapped on the other side. This mass, the bodies closing ranks slowly, unsure, scenting the air with the collective anticipation.

Federica spots us first, spots him first. She was once his lover. She is tall with a cleft foot like the devil, but beautiful. My lover likes

her completely; everybody does, even me, although I am jealous. He and Federica were before us, long ago, before I was in his life.

This is not now. She greets us equally and then little Marko turns from his conversation, his mask keeps slipping downward. I think of children in their parent's clothes. Marko is rushed, his forehead tensed fretfully. Federica is completely covered, even her eyes concealed. I cannot see her but she still seems perturbed.

'They're bringing in guns, they're going to shoot.' His voice trembles.

'We've heard the rumour a few times today,' Federica, cynically and cold, 'not from anywhere reliable.' She is furious with her brother, I shrug it off, believing the guns and the tanks when I see them. She shouldn't have brought him; he is too young to be here.

Uproar amongst the crowd, a long legged man bounding with a stick; a police van with its front window smashed and the police pouring out, so many they must have been sitting on each other's laps. We recognise this unmasked man. We surge forward to close behind him, to take the swing of the batons on our limbs so he can escape. My lover digs his nails through my clothes so I look at him immediately, leans down to say he is going to get him somewhere safe, down these streets that we know well. And then he is gone and I am in the front line to welcome the pursuers, my arms linked with Federica and some stranger. I love them both, all faithful to each other in these moments of danger. We move forward together as if we were born together, joined like this, in congregation.

It is true about the tanks and the guns, but they don't bring them for hours and by then I know he is taken. We look for him everywhere, circling the groups, relishing the fresh water cannon that makes the crowd disperse so we can view better. But I know he has gone. A friend reports that two people were seen being arrested a street down from here, fitting his description and the one he was helping. We carry on the search half-heartedly, parting then meeting up, unwilling to be alone for long now. And then a voice:

'They're bringing in soldiers. Move back together, don't run, don't run...' Despite the words offered with such authority, some people near me start screaming, pushing outward, one heavy man falling over, some foreigner yelling in English, a hand comes in front of me and grasps their friends, plunging me backward and away

from mine. The people are scattering, as light as dandelion seeds, led away in different directions leaving these streets underfoot dangerous places to stand. I move back too, into bigger shadows, slip home on the rain falling upon the cobblestones like a baptism that never ends.