

RAT

by Velina Minkoff

translated from the Bulgarian by Ekaterina Petrova, Vladimir Poleganov, and Rayna Rossenova

Jacques loved his home town. And why wouldn't he – Paris was the most beautiful city in the world. Everybody loved Paris, people came in throngs. Tourists prowled every nook and cranny. It had long ago become impossible to take a stroll around the Latin Quarter, by the Eiffel Tower, or down the small, picturesque streets of Le Marais. Not to mention Montmartre or the Champs-Élysées.

The tourists were in constant search of all things typically Parisian and the city served them copiously in the form of coquettish cafés, dainty restaurants, patisseries, bakeries. Boutiques, museums, cabarets, boat trips along the Seine. The quick-tempered waiters, with smiles skillfully painted across their faces, would bring watered-down coffee, defrosted meals, dry baguettes and croissants, ancient pastries. Souvenirs and clothes made in China, hour-long queues in front of museums and an impenetrable wall of flesh before the Mona Lisa. Perfectly choreographed, brightly lit mass shows in the cabarets with contemporary versions of *chansons*, the *Bateaux Mouches* gliding down the river with their audio guides in all languages, telling stories of the city's unique sights. The tourists gladly swallowed it all and never stopped pottering about Paris.

Jacques didn't pay any attention to them. He'd been surrounded by tourists from the moment he was born in the magnificent Haussmann building on the Place Saint-Michel. It was the Parisian girls he loved. They weren't beautiful, quite the contrary—most of them were surprisingly plain. But the moment he saw them — all hurried, intriguing, light make-up on their faces, large bag in hand, a scarf thrown around their necks and a cigarette between their fingers, he always lost his mind in rapture. It didn't matter that their hair was usually a bit grimy, windblown or frizzled by the rain and carelessly tied-up, or that they always dressed in the same street fashion: tight jeans, high-heeled boots, and raincoats. Each one of them moved through the city in her own private cloud of perfume, exuding sex.

When he was in high school and later, as a philosophy student at the Sorbonne, Jacques would sit in cafés, gawking at them as they passed by. He had time, he was supposed to be working on his PhD. He was constantly poring over something with his huge glasses, keeping them on so as to have a better view of the Parisian girls. He dreamed of getting to know them, of finding out where they were studying, what they did for a living, or what

movie they felt like seeing. But above all, he wanted to touch their fine breasts, to gently remove their panties with his mouth. Elodie was one of those girls. When she walked up to the counter to order a coffee, Jacques was mesmerized by her firm butt and perfect legs. He was staring so hard that she went over to his table for a chat and soon after, the two of them were lying in the large bed in his grandparents' bedroom.

Jacques was lucky to live in the large central apartment on the Place Saint-Michel. His parents were infatuated with the US and had moved there while still in college. They lived in the Napa Valley and claimed that California wine beat French wine hands down. They could not imagine going back to filthy, overpopulated Paris, where they had to ride the packed underground *Métro*. Jacques was honestly puzzled as to why they didn't like the *Métro*. The old tunnels smelled of the river. Sure, they were dirty, but people travelled on the trains, minding their own business – it was the most convenient way to get around town.

Jacques' mother had gone back to Paris to give birth to him, but had returned to California shortly after, leaving the infant in Grand-mère Cecil and Grand-père Robert's care without too much ado. It was they who had raised Jacques, right there in their large apartment—a true third-generation Parisian. His great-grandfather was of Norman origins, a native of Isigny. He had come to Paris and opened a small dairy shop, then bought the apartment at Saint-Michel, strategically located near Notre Dame, so that he could sleep until the last minute before going to church on Sunday morning.

Since Grand-mère Cecil's death, Grand-père Robert slept in the small servants' room between the bathroom and the kitchen. That was why the big old bedroom at the end of the thirty-foot-long corridor was at Jacques and Elodie's disposal. Elodie's clothes and trinkets had quickly turned into a heap on the floor and she lay naked, lithe and chiselled like a sculpture in the Louvre, smoking a cigarette and telling her story. Although she had graduated from the Paris School of Journalism, she was still subbing for regular staff in various newspapers and magazines whenever they needed her. They made her dig around and do research, but never published her articles. Still, she was convinced she would make it one day, as soon as she got her hands on the right story.

Elodie began spending most of her days and nights at Saint-Michel; she hardly ever went back to her rented studio in Belleville. She smoked a lot, everywhere, arranging thick, tall, scented candles all over the apartment, lighting them all the time to suck out the cigarette smoke. Grand-père Robert was constantly tailing after her and putting them out, afraid she'd set the house on fire. Elodie didn't cook – she would often bring home food and get Jacques

to eat in bed before or after sex. Grand-père Robert kept growling that they were giving rats an open invitation.

Jacques remembered how many times Grand-père Robert had told him about his childhood days, when he used to help his father in the dairy shop. They kept the butter barrel down in the cool cellar. One night, someone left the barrel lid askew and a huge rat slipped in. After gorging itself on butter, it apparently found it difficult to crawl back out of the slippery barrel, eventually sinking into the gooey grease. Only its tail was left sticking out. They carefully wiped the butter off its lifeless body and strained it through a cheesecloth to get the hairs out. Then, with a smile, they would sell the butter to the elegant bourgeois ladies with lace gloves up to their elbows who came into the store for a pound of “*le frais*.” The same ladies would come back time and again; they loved the butter so much. Well, *c’est comme ça*. That was Paris. Rats were all over the place.

Jacques would drink Elodie with his eyes – every time she got dressed to go out or undressed when she came home. He would inhale her perfumed naked body, oblivious to the way the tobacco had yellowed the skin of her face. Happily resigned, he watched her one afternoon as she playfully took Grand-mère Cecile’s formal dresses out of the closet and struck provocative poses in front of the mirror. Grand-père Robert had bought those dresses; he loved to spoil his wife, who adored fancy fabrics and elegant cuts. Chanel and Dior models from the 1940s and 50s, all of them iconic designs. For Elodie, the dresses were fun old rags with little more than sentimental value; she didn’t pay much attention to Jacques’ stories. Yet the dresses fit her graceful body so perfectly, even Grand-mère Cecile would have been jealous.

For Grand-père Robert, however, the final straw was when he got up to take a leak one night and found himself standing ankle-deep in a puddle on the bathroom floor. He always slept in a shirt and no underpants, so he quickly threw on a coat and, looking like a flasher, grabbed a bottle of wine and went up to the fifth floor to Pierre, the retired, alcoholic, widowed plumber. By dawn, the two old men had finished the bottle, so they went back down and Pierre used his tools to open up the bathroom floor drain.

Elodie had taken a shower before going to bed, probably thinking the water would just go down the drain as usual. She obviously hadn’t imagined the drain would get clogged after she’d continuously been pouring her scented candle wax into it to keep the wicks from drowning. Pierre pulled out a thick “candle” of hair and snot that had formed inside the pipe and the water flowed off, but Grand-père Robert couldn’t take it any longer. He marched into

his former bedroom and started bashing Elodie with the drainpipe candle, yelling at her to pack up her stuff, leave his house, and never show her face there again. Within the hour, the stunned Elodie had moved out, taking all of Grand-mère Cecile's dresses with her.

Jacques spared his grandfather this last detail and kept calling Elodie for days, until an automated voice message informed him that the number was no longer in service. Before long, a lengthy article appeared in the *Figaro* cultural section, outlining the historical value of Dior and Chanel dresses and the way their revolutionary cuts and fabrics had forever changed the life of the modern woman. The article was signed by Elodie Charpier. It contained photographs of all the stolen dresses on an almost perfect female body that Jacques knew only too well, even with the head cut out of the frame. That day, he had to make sure to carefully take the cultural section out before bringing the newspaper to Grand-père Robert.

Jacques married a Japanese woman. Mazuni. Grand-père Robert kept teasing him, saying he must have picked her up down by the Place Saint-Michel fountain, where crowds of Japanese tourists were incessantly blinding poor Archangel Michael with the flashes from their cameras. Mazuni was petite, her butt was rather wide and low, and her legs, while actually proportional to her body, seemed too short because of the mid-length pleated skirts she always wore. She walked softly, in small steps. Although she barely had any breasts, her masterfully sewed silk shirts were like magic to touch and smelled of green tea.

But what had captivated Jacques about her in the first place, as he sat at a sidewalk café table staring at the passing Parisian girls, was Mazuni's face. Her full lips smiled sweetly, her ebony eyes sparkled, her hair reflected the light like black glass. Her skin was white as milk. She looked like a schoolgirl. Sex was the last thing on Jacques' mind when she asked him how to get to "the Rouvle" and he started to explain that he'd lived in Paris all his life and there was no such museum.

Grand-père Robert's mean jokes subsided when Mazuni prepared miso soup with tofu or rolled some home-made sushi. He would make her conjugate French verbs. She had covered the old, tattered furniture in the apartment with soft, brightly-colored silk fabrics. If only Grand-mère Cecile could see her.