The Disappeared

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Extract

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Year Zero was the dawn of an age in which, in extremis*,*
there would be
no families, no sentiment, no expression of love or grief,
no medicines, no hospitals,
no schools, no books, no learning,
no holidays, no music:
only work and death.

NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Montreal



1

Mau was a small man with a scar across his left cheek. I chose him at the Russian market from a crowd of drivers with soliciting eyes. They drove bicycles and tuk tuks, rickshaws and motos. A few had cars. They pushed in against me, trying to gain my eye, to separate me from the crowd.

The light in Mau's eyes was a pinprick through black paper. He assessed and calculated. I chose him because when he stepped forward, the others fell back. I told him it might take many nights. I told him I needed to go to all the nightclubs of Phnom Penh. The light of his eyes twisted into mine. When I told him what I was doing, the pinprick opened and closed over a fleeting compassion. Then he named his price, which was high, and said, I can help you, borng srei.

Bones work their way to the surface. Thirty years have passed since that day in the market in Phnom Penh. I still hear your voice. I first met you in old Montreal at L'air du temps, where I went to hear Buddy Guy sing "I Can't Quit the Blues." I was sixteen, and it was Halloween night. Charlotte and her friends did not wear costumes, but I used the occasion to disguise my age by putting on a shiny red eye mask decorated at the temples

with yellow and purple feathers. My long kinked hair was loose and I wore a ribbed black sweater, my widest jeans, leather boots. As soon as we were past the doorman, I pulled off my mask and I saw you looking at me. We took a round table close to the stage in the smoke-filled room. All through the first set I rolled cigarettes and passed them to the girls at my table and listened to Buddy Guy pleading the blues, eyebrows way up, eyes wide open, singing "Stone Crazy" and "No Lie," then squeezing his eyes shut he sang about homely-girl-love and begging-for-it-love, and I kept glancing over to see if you were looking at me.

I did not avoid your mud dark eyes. Between sets you stood, lifted your chair above your head and walked through the crowd toward me. You were slim and wiry and you wore a white T-shirt and faded jeans and your black hair was tied back at the nape of your neck. Your leather jacket was scuffed and your runners worn. You shifted sideways to let a tray go by and you said to the girls at my table, Can I join you? I brought my own seat.

The girls looked at each other and someone said yes and you put your chair in beside me, its back against the table. Charlotte said, You play in No Exit, I've seen you at the pub. What's your name?

Serey.

They poured you a beer from the pitcher and you talked in your soft voice to all of us. Asked, What are you studying? When you turned to me I had to say, I'm still in high school.

Charlotte said, I'm her Latin tutor. Her name is Anne Greves. You asked, Is Latin difficult? A girl across the table liked you and she said, I study Latin. You said you tutored math at the university. Said you'd seen them around, but not me.

Charlotte said, Her father teaches there and she doesn't want to be seen.

You smiled again and your front tooth had a half-moon chip and you said, Cool, in a strange accent of Quebec and English and something else I could not place.

The house lights went down. You leaned close and whispered, I want to touch your hair.

I did not say no or yes, but I felt the warm pressure of your palm against my skull. Then you put your elbows on the back of your chair.

You spoke with the mix of interest and inattention I was familiar with in men. Your excited eyes flickered to the stage, to the table you came from, to me. You wanted to know who was watching you. You wanted to see Buddy Guy and the horns and guitars up front. You wanted to watch me.

Years later you said, I remember watching you roll cigarettes with one hand. Fidgeting when the girls at your table talked. You seemed so free. I remember the light in your hair.

It was a time when young people from everywhere were driving Volkswagen buses through the mountains of Afghanistan and chanting in ashrams in India. But boys like you were not hippies or peaceniks or backpackers; colonized boys like you had always been sent abroad to study. You had been away for six years and you had learned to be at home in three languages, to navigate the manners and peculiarities of the West. Your education was mathematics and rock music. You knew functions and relations and your musician friends sang against war and had love-ins for peace. It was a time when young people believed the world

could be borderless, like music. All this was naive, looking back. You were five years older, and you spoke a language I had never heard. And there was that animal feeling, the smell of your leather jacket, the quiver in my stomach, Buddy Guy's voice and your breath on my ear.

Years later you said, Do you remember in those days, the shock of an Asian guy with a white girl, or a black with white, or a French with English, all of us pretending nothing was forbidden? I never had the courage to ask a white girl until you, that night at L'air du temps.

Buddy Guy walked out for the last set in a green jacket that he took off while he played, hammering and pulling and bending strings with his left hand as he shook the right arm free, his right-hand fingers plucking and picking so he could shake off the left sleeve. His jacket fell to the floor and he grinned out at us when we clapped at his clowning. His mother had died that year and he said he was going to get a polka dot guitar in her honor but he did not have it yet. He played sounds he had heard other places and other times, horns and fiddles, concocting a New Orleans gumbo, a little of this, a little of that, paying homage to Muddy and B.B. and Junior. And then he got down to his own work. He sang about Lord-have-mercy-blues in "One Room Country Shack" and impatient love in "Just Playing My Axe," and with that great big charming smile he sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and about asking for a nickel from an angel and about strange feelings and broken hearts and, with a shake of his head, about women he could not please but we all knew he could please anyone, and I wished the lights would never come up. You put your muscled arm around my

shoulder and pulled me close and you asked in a soft, soft voice, Can I take you home? A few people were dancing on the sides and you took my hand and pulled me up to dance too and you could sway at the hips but you had this way of moving your hands that was not rock and roll and not the blues but a small graceful bend backward in your wrist at the end of a beat.

Charlotte and the girls at my table were putting on their coats, pulling bags over their shoulders, flipping their long hair from inside warm collars like shirts flapping on a clothesline, and I said to them, See you.

We walked north on cobbled streets through the chill autumn air. You said, Would you like to come and see my band?

Maybe, I said. Where do you come from?

Cambodia.

Halloween revelers passed us, laughing and calling to each other in joual, hurrying through the darkness wrapped in black capes and devil masks and angel wings. Cambodia? I pulled my eye mask down.

You touched the feathers and said, Anne Greves, I like it here. Things are unimaginably free here.

I knew from that first walk home.

Outside my father's apartment on l'avenue du Parc I turned to face you and drew you under the iron staircase. You put your lips on my lips and I remember your eyes through the holes in my mask and the touch of your hand against my skull. You pulled me to you and I felt the first touch your fingers on my skin. Through the gratings on the stairs I sensed the movement of a neighbor boy with his Halloween basket, staring at us from the shadows, chewing on a candy-kiss. I caught his eye and said,

Jean Michel, pourquoi tu n'es pas au lit? Then I looked at you and said, *O malheureux mortels! O terre déplorable!* You laughed and released me, said, I want the whole world to see, and reached your hand up as if you were going to steal the boy's candy. Then we joined the child on the steps and you took a piece of string from your pocket and showed him a trick. There we were, an exile, a small boy and a girl-almost-woman, together in the darkness. I still hear your voice singing Buddy Guy's "I Found a True Love," and I remember how we sat that night and watched the clouds roll in across the moon.

2

Papa was a tall, husky man with thick hair and a shy smile that camouflaged his driven nature. He took me to a protestant church when I was a small child. I do not think he was a believer but I think he would have liked to be. He used to slide into the pew, close his eyes, drop his head and hold the bridge of his nose between the thumb and middle finger of his right hand. Watching him in this attitude of prayer I saw a man, unmasked and vulnerable, trying to be with his god. On the wall of the children's room in the basement was a picture torn from a magazine of a tall Christ with gentle eyes, standing in front of two sheep and a donkey, his arms around two children. This Christ's shoulders were a little stooped; he had a shy smile like Papa's.

I once complained to Papa about having no mother. He said, There are things we cannot change. One learns this: Get up, keep trying, you will find your way.

I listened and still longed for tenderness. I wanted him to say, I will help you. But he did not. He said, Think of yourself as a solitaire, a unique gem in the crown of the king, the philosopher's stone.

Why can't I be the gem in my own crown? I said.

He laughed then, his big Danish laugh. I amused him when I behaved most like him, determined, stubborn, and I was never afraid to be free, a thing I put down to my mother's early death. She had been a student in one of my father's classes. He was fifteen years her senior and I was the product of their late afternoon passion. There is something in the hard dying of the light on a frigid afternoon in Montreal that drives strangers to each other. My mother quit school to raise me, but when I was two, a truck crushed her car on an icy autoroute. Papa hired a French-Canadian housekeeper called Berthe Gagnon to take care of me. Berthe laughed easily, looked at me with fond eyes and filled my mother's absence. I am told that after a short time I did not miss my mother. But my father did. He was not interested in domestic life. Berthe went to my teacher meetings and took me to choir practice and watched my sports games.

Papa had no time for play. He had grown up poor and hardworking and ambitious, the only son of a Danish immigrant fisherman who died at sea on the Grand Banks when Papa was a boy.

My father liked to say, The war gave a poor boy like me a chance to be educated.

He was a tool and die maker and he had to beg to join the navy because they needed his skills at home. By the time he managed to get himself enlisted, the war was over. But he was lucky. He traded in his uniform with its handsome gold buttons and raised anchors for a veteran's education. He studied engineering and specialized in medical prosthetics.

It did not seem strange to me that he was rarely home. None of the fathers I knew spent much time at home in those years of rebuilding after the war. Papa liked his routines, mornings in

the lab, afternoons teaching, evenings reading. He and my mother were together for only two years. I imagine them in that newly married state, each still trying to please the other. I imagine her charming him with her youth and her *joie*. After she died, Papa read to me at night when he got home in time and he took me fishing every summer for a week. He taught me the names of all the bones in the human body and I learned to recite them. He taught me to memorize Latin declensions, *amo, amas, amat*, and the Lord's Prayer in Latin, *pater noster, qui es in caelis*. He said Latin is the sign of a cultivated mind. I learned the prayers but not to pray. I learned to say I love you in a language my father called dead.

When he read to me he sometimes looked at the black and white picture of my mother on my bedside table. The focus is soft on the young woman holding a baby, me, and our eyes are locked together. Papa's voice would drift away and I learned to wait quietly until his attention flickered from the photograph back to the page. I think I began to read this way, studying the words in an open book, waiting for absence to be filled.

I have no clear memory of my mother. There is a photo of Papa and her standing behind a snowman on the mountain. His arms are wrapped around her waist and her eyes are laughing and her full lips are open in a wide, wild smile. It is cold but she does not wear a hat. Her hair is loose and long and windblown. I have her hair, kinked, gold streaked. I *do* remember lying on my back in the living room and the smell of warm cotton under her iron in the kitchen. And I do remember a black hole in the chill earth. I remember a lily in my hand, its white petals unnaturally waxen, someone called it Eve's tears. I was supposed to

drop it on the coffin. I remember looking down and I was afraid of the depth and the hard lines of the cut earth.

This thing is sure: Time is no healer.

I remember fragments, bits of moving light on a winter wall.

Berthe took me to hear Etta James at a blues club on St. Laurent, on a night my father was away. She said, They can't see me bringing you in but once we're inside I know le gars, he'll let you stay. Alors, mon p'tit chou, you will come in with my groceries.

I pulled her grocery trolley with two wheels, its plaid sack attached to the frame. A block from the club, she helped me climb in, tucked a dish towel over my head and bumped me up two steps through the door.

Etta had a blond afro and a heart-shaped face and those huge painted black eyebrows and when she sang I was sure her eyes were looking deep into mine. She sang about blind girls and her lips were sad, and shrewd too. I knew that she cried like I did from a hidden place, ow, ow, ow, ow, as I listened to her talk-singing betrayals and epic quests for love, and I sank into the warmth of Berthe's lap, her arms around me, the woody scent of pine-tar soap on her skin. That night I understood why sound was first in the world, before even light or water.

Berthe was sent very young to work as a maid in an English-speaking house in Westmount. She looked at their art and listened to their music while she cleaned. She told me, That was worth more than the little money I got there, learning English and listening to Ray Charles and Robert Johnson.

At the end of my days at Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's school, Berthe and I used to lie on the floor together looking at the pictures on the covers of her long-playing records, listening to the scratch of Mississippi Delta blues and that ocean-deep Etta-voice pray-singing "Tell Mama" and "Sunday Kind of Love."

My father let Berthe go when I was thirteen because he said I did not need her anymore. She anticipated this and by the time she left she had taught me to cook for myself, to do my own laundry and homework. After school the thin winter sunlight disappeared into early darkness in our lonely apartment. I used to sit wrapped in a big eiderdown, reading under a single lamp with a chipped shade, the room's eclipse of the moon. I tried to get Papa's attention by letting my wild hair go wilder, wearing the tightest jeans, being the cleverest girl in my class. I bought some wire-rimmed granny glasses that neither helped nor hindered my vision. I told him I was going to friends' houses and sneaked into blues clubs until one night the owner of a little hole in the wall club in the north end stopped me when I was trying to slip in to hear Willie Dixon sing "I Ain't Superstitious." The doorman brought me to the manager's office and he called my father to come pick me up. Papa parked the car, walked past drug dealers and prostitutes and blues fans to the office, where I was studying musicians' signed photographs in cheap wooden frames on the manager's wall. On the drive home I told him it was unfair that I could not go inside, I had been taking the metro for years, listening to the blues for years. He nodded in a neutral way without taking his eyes from the road and said, It won't be long now.

I wanted him to say, I will take you. I will listen to music with you.

He hired Charlotte, one of his students, to tutor me in Latin, and as chance and my father had it, she liked the blues too and she started taking me along. I was an escaped green and yellow budgie protected by a flock of wild sparrows. Charlotte and her friends closed around me, standing in line for clubs, hiding this dangerously bright-feathered creature thrust upon them. And for a long time I felt that this was not an unsatisfactory way to grow up.