

Excerpt from

The Bereavement of Agnès Desmoulins

by Mariam Karim

I began the new oil painting after Emir died. The only friend that Madame Desmoulins ever had. A ship, a liner, sunk in the Red Sea, the Al-Salaam. Eight hundred dead, maybe more. And old Emir, returning from Haj, among them. He had planned to go to Cairo, where he had had a business once, and where his eldest son still worked. But the forces of the Red Sea had planned other things. The deep hidden dragons of tragedy emerged, breathing fire, and water and sky and flame became one. Emir was gone forever.

Madame Desmoulins' salon looked like an unrestored medieval tableau, so thick was the gloom that filled it, so still and unmoving sat the mourners, so fixed and lightless their eyes appeared. Dodi, nebulous Dodi, his arm hung over the sofa, in a black t-shirt. Madame Desmoulins, a widow who could not mourn. Manès Trigot, a meaningless, transparent being in the tragedy comically clutching a math book. A baby's intransigent wail. A mother's hushing voice, soothing, a backdrop, unseen presences in the tableau. Isabelle, distraught, knowing not how to comfort her sister in an unacknowledged loss. Isabelle's arrogant offspring, upper-class *lycéens*, soft-faced, uncommunicative, untouched by their surroundings. The cold rain pattering on the fogged panes.

I went back to my apartment and unpacked my good canvas. I unrolled it and carefully fitted it onto my new easel. The time had come...and I began to paint. Of the unseen narrative nature of the visual. Through colour and light and shadow I would attempt to build it into a living instant, an instant prepared at any moment to move backwards or forwards in Time, and become another. The metamorphosal character of emotion once captured would, alone, infinitely appeal to the perceiving eye, suddenly, once, and then forever, responding in seamless perfection to the transformatory quality of experience.

The painting christened itself ‘*The Bereavement of Agnès Desmoulins.*’ It reminded me, for some reason, of Manet’s *Olympe*, in its contrasts of light and shade. In the background appeared a dark Arab man in a white djellabiah, holding a baby. Next to him, a tall black African, perhaps Nubian, wearing a leopard skin draped around his shoulders, a grey turban, and carrying a tall spear. Unrealistic figures, speaking of the travelling soul of Agnès Desmoulins, of Humankind.

In the unseen there was the sea. Tall, white buildings with large windows, letting the sea into Agnès Desmoulins’ soul, as she stood, young, on a balcony, facing the blue. The sea that brought him to her, the sea that took Emir away.

A bleak wind whipped around the curling streets of Montmartre, and when I went to the post office, a few days later, I stopped by the Tunisian’s store to buy some cheese and bread. I saw Mme Desmoulins emerge from the heavy studded doorway of the church Saint Jean at the *Abbeses*. She said she had started going there after Emir’s death. I noticed she called Dodi Jean-Francois sometimes, too. Perhaps her being, spread thin too long across countries was trying to withdraw, like an amoeba, into the confines of a single city, assume a shape, an identity not required heretofore. I knew that, yet I knew too, that the sea would not let her go; it would enter forever, even on the windy, drizzly, grey days of Montmartre, blue and green, through white, sunny windows, reclaiming her interest, her regard, across which it had voyaged so long, towards Monsieur Desmoulins, and his other family, with sorrow; towards Emir and his love, with longing.

It’s important to be recognized as someone...its important for people to be able to identify one...for accordingly do they give you a status...accordingly they need to put you in a slot—that way interaction becomes easier, and one feels less threatened by the unknown.

Yet it seemed the unknown would always be a part of Agnès Desmoulins, a part she must hide, put away...and continue...

As most mornings, the next day, I dressed, ate a small breakfast of coffee and croissant or baguette—or a bowlful of muesli with milk... I went over to the painting...perused it for a few moments, added a stroke here and there....depending upon my mood and inspiration....then locked my door and went down. As usual, I met Dodi in the street, walking his bicycle, wearing a warm muffler and cap, his face screwed up against the wind. Seeing me, he stopped, and gave me a blank but concentrated look.

“I know you have seen them. They have come, they are there, I have seen them, and I know you have seen them too.”

“Who?,” I asked, slightly frightened. Was he talking about Marina and her baby?

“The ones who have crossed the *Méditerranée*, the troubled ones. The ones who speak different tongues. You saw they were there when *Tante* Isabelle came.”

Now I was terrified. Feigning coolness, I murmured, “*Oui, oui,*,” and quickly walked away, nodding amicably to Dodi. I do not know how long he stood there, looking after me.

As the sunshine slipped in and out of the oddly darkened days, a momentary visitor, the cafés grew brighter and fuller, more enticing, creating worlds within, full of luminosity and laughter; and the Seine greyed, like an old woman, her surface become wrinkled in the wind, and flecked with white. What kind of summer was this? said the people in the streets.

And all through the noise and the cold, the world inside, the Other World, crept upon the pavements, almost an intruder, and claimed bits of reality for itself, for its images, putting them away in its large overcoat, each with a surreptitious glance, to see if it were being watched...but no, no one could see, so lost were they, each in his own capsule of joy or sorrow, love or longing, hope or despair.

The broken teacup fell in my lot one rainy afternoon. After we had travelled many days and nights on the waves that followed Emir's sudden departure from Agnès Desmoulins' life. She took my hand over the spotty table cloth, for her an expansive gesture: "Mehjabeen,"(she pronounced it *Meyjumbee*), "You are a kind girl," she said ."I should have been born in a sunny land, or at least in the South."

"There are lands," she continued, "dark and lonely, Mehjabeen, where the soul lives. They are not bright and rich and merry as is Paris. There are no operas, no cinemas, no cafés. There are deserts and vast lands, and people with quiet faces. So Emir told me. Where they speak not of how they live and what they experience within, there the soul lives, in silence."

I thought of the untended yellow stretches of Rahimganj, of the quiet-eyed children playing in the dust, of their white smiles, and a pang assailed me. Goose pimples stood out on my flesh.

"You are kind, and warm, like the people of sunny lands..."

I was about to contradict her, to say that in my country too people could be callous, crude and brutal, ...but something stopped me, not patriotic fervour, but the wish to not shatter the careful image of other lands she had constructed, and wanted to live by. Because she felt more akin to strangers than to her own countrymen.

In the late afternoon I was still restless, Bernardo and Anita were nowhere to be seen, and I had still not been introduced to the Shadow, who I was longing to see. Fabrice had called, but for some reason I did not want to call him back. He spent a lot of money on me...and that, somewhere, made me uncomfortable.

It was light yet, despite the clouds, so I walked down the hill, sometimes taking the stairs, two by two.... to the bus stop right at the bottom on the main road, and went to Boulevard Saint-Michel for a stroll.

Graeth was very fond of Greek sandwiches and I was glad to meet him at the Place Saint-Michel where he sat propped against his *moto*, eating a sandwich, and making a sketchy picture of the café facing the Seine.

“*Hola!*” said his Spanish companion to me. He was a curly-haired young man with a merry smile. I never saw him before or after. Graeth had a twinkle in his eye as he looked at me.

“Love is bartered and sold, as is Art and Talent,” he said, but without bitterness this time. The wind was whipping his golden hair around his craggy face and he looked more like the Pied Piper than ever. Leading the children down to the River Weser....

I bought myself some *frites*, and we went and stood on the bridge across the square, the Pont Saint-Michel, looking down at the Seine. The wind played with the leaves, and with the scarves of the *bouquinistes* even carrying their caps away at times. The Spaniard with the unruly hair left and Graeth moved closer to me until our arms touched. I munched my fries, and waited for him to speak. His eyes had held that communicative twinkle ever since we had met.

“You have freckles,” he said in an amused tone.

“Unfortunately,” I said dryly

“And your hair’s not an even colour either.”

“I’m a bit like my grandmother. Her mother was English. I’ve got the worst of both sides.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that,” he said, very nicely, “You have that dark Indian empathy in your eyes, the beauty painters cannot catch...”

“If you say so,” I replied lightly.

Suddenly Graeth turned and grabbed my arm, the twinkle still in his eye. His grip was firm and strangely comforting. Then, his arm went about my waist and his lips were on mine. One large hand cupped my breast and I felt my breath leave my body. All through the kiss I thought of Joffroy de Peyrac, the lame Duc of Languedoc kissing Angélique for the first time. She had not known a kiss could be so sweet. It was over as promptly as it had begun, and I felt it had happened to someone else. Not to Javed’s daughter Mehjabeen. I’d been kissed by the River Weser by the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Maybe I’d been inviting it. I continued eating my *frites*, not moving away, not wanting to appear gauche. Perhaps Meyjumbee had been kissed.

Some things happen, and they don’t. Some things don’t happen, and they do. Reality is elusive, optional.

The designs on the raiment of the figures became more intricate as I worked on them. Cutwork on the fringes. The shadows spoke more deeply, purple and green and grey. The

faces were plainer by comparison, still almost expressionless, as if waiting...to develop into someone ...

I became afraid of my own work. I dragged the canvas into the sitting room, farther away from my bedroom. It frightened me at night. Who were the unknown mourners at the bereavement of Agnès Desmoulins? And Dodi had seen them too. Something was compelling me to create a world I had no connection with. To which I did not belong. To connect to people I did not know. Some things happen and do not. Some things don't happen, and do. Art was teaching me the path to optional realities with which we live every day, making choices, yet never analyzing the process. And from moment to moment we pick from the pack of realities, a card, sometimes of our liking, from an open pack, sometimes a blind card, and call it Destiny.