

Farewell to Montparnasse by Ralf Rothmann

Translated by Alexandra Roesch

Time was up and she was not sure whether to be glad or worried. Almost a year of fraught labour, an episode of hearing loss and two additional kilos for half a sentence on paper ... at least she had worded it herself and it might not be inconsequential for the future that the word Paris featured alongside the usual terms such as 'top down approach' and 'allocation'. That was her biography - she would be asked about it. But her life?

She had been given the afternoon off and still wanted to buy a few presents. Yet while she walked past the shop windows on the rue de Rennes, she paid more attention to her reflection than to the displays. A young woman with self-assured poise, whose line of work would probably have been apparent if she dressed accordingly. But she favoured jeans and twinsets, preferably black; that was perfectly sufficient for working behind the computer screen, even in Paris. The shoes were all that mattered. And the right nail varnish.

She lived in the rue Delambre, in a back courtyard flat with a pitifully trickling shower and light switches that made crackling noises and because she suddenly dreaded the dark rooms and the suitcases waiting to be packed, she decided to go for a cup of coffee at the "Dome", even if she didn't particularly like the place. But a cold wind had been blowing since the morning and the Dome had a glazed terrace.

Leaning in the doorway, as always, was the inevitable Pierre – Pierre Camembert, as she secretly called him - in whose eyes she had never found approval during all those months, at least not in jeans and twinset, regardless of the size of her tip. The fact that she lived in the neighbouring building did not carry with him either. Only her foxy red hair saved her occasionally and on days like this, full moon days, the glimmer of lust behind his haughty indifference shimmered through. He nodded briefly and stepped aside – just enough for their clothes not to touch. "Bonjour Mademoiselle. No school today?" Then he held aside the heavy door curtain for her, a length of dark-green felt, and she blew out through her nose and ordered a Grande Crème. The terrace was almost empty in the early afternoon; there was only an elderly man in a dark-blue suit at a table in the furthest corner, drinking a small glass of wine and looking out onto the boulevard. A book with a few feathers tucked in between the pages protruded from his jacket pocket, and on the empty wicker chair next to him lay a hat, or rather it stood there, like a bowl. A fawn-brown hat, filled to the brim with mushrooms.

She sat down a little way away and crossed her legs. Time was up, and what now? She thought of Berlin, of the maisonette flat in the green belt that Bertram had chosen for her, of the absurd number of rooms, of the enlarged company headquarters and the new office that she would move into after the wedding, and suddenly she had a faint sense of trepidation. But when the waiter brought her the Café au lait, she raised her chin. Time for a reckoning.

She knew what effect her smile had; she used it almost daily, dare she admit it. It could replace signatures and now it softened Pierre's expression a little. Needless to say, hope now sprouted in the little Camembert, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and said: "Thank you, Monsieur. Most kind. I actually wanted a large coffee, but no matter ... by the way, do you know that you have the most exceptional legs?"

There it was, astonishment blossoming in his predator's eyes and he put his head to one side, furrowed his brows; his mouth was actually quite pretty. She pressed her fingertips together. "Yes, really. An almost perfect O."

Of course, you could not expect someone like him to lose his composure; but a momentary constriction of the throat came as no surprise. He opened the pot with the sugar packets, tore the receipt and took the banknote from the table. "Oui, Madame", he said hoarsely, counting out the change for her, and it almost sounded a little distressed. "But what can you do. It comes from riding pigs."

Then he left her alone and breathing deeply, she sank back into her chair and looked out towards the crossroads, to the stream of people passing by in front of the "Rotonde". Some were taking pictures of the monument to the poet, covered in verdigris, what was his name again? ... in any case it was by Rodin, in any case it was in Paris, my God, Paris ... This faded beauty. Yesterday's lustre. She had not met anyone in the course of this year, apart from a few lawyers or businessmen. Not once had her French colleagues invited her out, the young German woman, who had at first probably seemed somewhat helpless, no doubt; she had barely spoken to anyone outside office hours, at least not to anyone who might have been interesting. And the men who had come and stood next to her at the bar in the "Select" were so blatantly obvious in their intentions that she could barely believe it. Manger et coucher, life could be so simple, hilarious.

She waved to Pierre, ordered herself a Martell to go with her coffee and used the opportunity to take a closer look at the hat belonging to the only other person sitting on the terrace. There was no doubt, they were mushrooms, wild mushrooms like those her father had often collected, usually at the Schlachtensee. She recognised the grey knight, the shaggy parasol and the birch roughstalk and suddenly she smelled the earthy aroma and asked herself how one came about a hatful of wild mushrooms here in the middle of city, where you could feel the Metro beneath your feet and where the buses to and from where the Boulevard du Montparnasse met the Boulevard Raspail, made the scrawny trees on the streets tremble.

She tapped the spoon against her front teeth and turned a little in her chair so as to take a good look at the man. He wore ankle boots, suitable for hiking, and he seemed just a little taller than her. He wore spectacles and had a small moustache, a sculptured, noble nose and an unusually high, slightly intimidating forehead. A man who, judging by his craggy face had experienced pain in his life, a thinker who probably also read a lot, but who still had nothing of the intellectual about him, on the contrary. He had the look of someone out and about in all weather; a limp pine needle hung in his longish hair, of which there was quite a lot at the back and which, despite his age, showed only a light scattering of grey. His chin was always slightly raised, his hands rested comfortably on the armrests of the chair. Large, strong and yet sensitive, fingernails with clearly defined half moons; these were the hands of someone empathetic, possibly even a lover. How did she know that? All mushroom pickers have delicate hands.

The thick curtain's leather seam dragged across the floor. In passing, Pierre put the cognac down in front of her, approached the man's table and after a brief bow asked if he would like anything else. The man shook his head, pushed the empty wineglass and the small plate with the coins towards the waiter and stood up, buttoning his jacket.

Something rattled in the pockets, it sounded like pebbles and he carefully reached under the hat, picking it up from the chair.

How substantial he looked next to this Camembert, who probably thought he was God's gift to women, how unpretentious and yet how self-assured, and his voice reflected this. He said something about the weather, and just as his gazing out at the street earlier on had not been so much monitoring, but simply looking, without any pretension, so this voice needed no emphasis, was surprisingly soft and seemingly defensive and yet still stronger than the waiter's uptight, chesty notes. This was because it was aware of the quietness in the room, she thought instinctively, and for the first time in this whole year she felt that here was a truly interesting man – particularly because he still seemed to be unaware of her and her glances. Even when she cleared her throat.

He strode through the room, looking at the mushrooms with evident collector's pride. One of the feathers sticking out from his book was from a jay, and she took a sip of her cognac and sat up a little straighter. An obviously expensive pin stripe suit – the tailor's label still hung from the sleeve - a faded t-shirt and old hiking boots: somehow the man seemed familiar. But perhaps she was mistaken, maybe it was wishful thinking rather than reality, especially as she had heard a trace of an accent in his French, maybe Austrian or German.

Despite the heavy shoes, he walked lightly and he had already passed her table and was reaching for the green felt, when she gathered up all her courage – my God, it was her last day - took a breath and said: "Excuse me. I know you!"

He stopped in surprise, looked around. There were fingerprints on the lenses of his frameless glasses, and at the sight of his eyes, which reflected kindness and light despite being dark, for a moment she didn't know where to look for shame and took refuge in her smile. Which, however, quickly subsided again. "From a dream ...", she added mutedly and could barely believe it; it hurt her throat to swallow.

What an earth had got into her? Had she lost her mind? Was she really that desperate? She had to think of the many lonely women at Aperitif time, sad figures, who were no longer asked about their biographies by anyone; you could see that the only tenderness they received each day was the touch of the powder brush. Which reply, if any, would she give to a guy who came on to her like that? Thankfully she had spoken German, so that at least she need not fear the waiter's ridicule, his ice-blue gaze. I know you from a dream. Sweet Jesus!

Yet the man, who had been looking at her attentively, didn't seem annoyed. He rearranged the mushrooms in his hat, plucked a blade of grass from the gills. "Yes!" he finally said and smiled earnestly. "I remember ..."

Then he briefly closed his eyes, a gentle acknowledgement, pushed aside the curtain with the back of his hand and went out. The window, vibrating from the buses that were just setting off, was dusty, his image blurred and had he waved from the side of the street? She could not see through her tears.