

Yolande Villemaire / ROSES AND LILACS

Translated by Louise Cantin Orr-Ewing

The day you went back to Montréal I was meeting a friend near la Bastille. He had asked me to pick him up at the bookstore where he works, so I took the opportunity to buy Philippe Sollers' *Passion fixe*, since it would not be available in Quebec for weeks. I wished I could have bought many other books, but I have learned to travel light. My friend took me out for lunch, to a nearby restaurant, then I stopped by a flower shop, I chose some pale roses that the florist supplemented with lilacs, as she had no more greenery. I was humming to myself in a hushed voice:

— *Mon amour, la rose et l'oeillet, mon amour et les lilas . . .*

While chatting with me, the young woman created the most beautiful bouquet I had ever seen. The bouquet was for Nane, who had invited me for dinner that night. My cousin Nane has been living in Paris for years and has become quintessentially French. Discreet in her little Agnès B suit, her conversation is always light, ethereal, surrounded by a sweet cherry blossom breeze.

We see each other occasionally, specially while I'm in Paris. We telephone each other, we send each other postcards, birthday wishes, letters, and since the late nineties, brief, laconic e-mail messages. But we prefer to meet; whether it is walking in the Jardins Albert Kahn, drinking margaritas at La Perla in the Marais, having lunch with one of her Parisian girlfriends, seeing a Robert Lepage play in Créteil with Québécois friends, lingering in a Tibetan restaurant near the Sorbonne, remembering our childhood, talking about grandma Yelle, about Matane.

Nane had invited me for seven thirty. I had left the studio at seven, thinking I could go to her house near the Gare de Lyon by way of

the Promenade Plantée. Since it was already dark and a little cool, I decided to hail a taxi near La Bastille. It was Saturday night and the taxi stand was alive with young Beurs¹ jostling and shouting. I waited fifteen minutes in the midst of a whirlwind of discordant sounds, holding my bouquet of roses and lilacs.

A woman taxi driver finally stopped for me, and admitted right away it was her first week on the job. I knew I would be late when she asked for directions to Avenue Daumesnil. All of a sudden I was in the position of guiding a taxi driver around the Gare de Lyon. It seemed beyond me, my sense of direction not being the greatest.

Since I arrived in Paris, I had worked continuously on the paper I was to present at the International Federation of French Teachers Convention, and I was wiped out. I just felt like being with Nane in her quiet little apartment as soon as possible. The taxi dropped me off in front of the station and I quickly found the quiet passage where she has lived since she settled in Paris. She works as a translator for UNESCO.

The minute I stood in front of the door of her building, I realized I didn't have the code. I just had my little purse, I had left my agenda in my handbag. I was already at least ten minutes late. I waited a while, hoping someone would come out of the building.

I walked to a restaurant nearby, the kind that specializes in couscous, it was still empty so the owner kindly let me use the phone. I didn't have Nane's number. I knew her address by heart; it is easy to remember an address in Paris, but I never bothered to memorize her phone number because I didn't call her often. I wanted to call information but it didn't work. I was dialing 411; the owner explained I had to dial 12 and added:

— Anyway, you can't call information from this phone; calls won't go through.

¹ Beurs: Young French people born in France of North African parents who emigrated to France in the sixties; young Beurs have French nationality, speak Arabic and French and practice Islam.

I asked for the phone book. I had to say “annuaire téléphonique” for him to understand what I meant — or was it the opposite? I can’t remember. I started to panic. I don’t know why but I did.

I came across someone with the same name as Nane; a dentist in the 15th arrondissement but I still couldn’t find Nane’s number.

Next I tried to reach Pierre at the studio, but I didn’t know the number either and the hotel-apartment where we were staying had just changed its name. I made a few calls to the office of the rental agency at Concorde and Nation, but all I got were recorded messages.

The restaurant owner was getting impatient. I paid for the calls, and went back to the front of Nane’s building. A woman passing by asked me if I knew where impasse Roland Barthes was. I seemed to recall it was near the station and I confided to her:

— My problem is I don’t have the code.

— You have to shout!

I went to a tiny street behind Nane’s and I yelled her name. I felt ridiculous.

I went back to the restaurant. I asked if there was a phone booth where I could reach information. I wanted to buy a phone card. At that precise moment, I remembered I had decided not to bring my card, thinking there was no use for it. It was a bit much to travel so light

Exasperated, the owner pointed out where the post office was. It was on the other side of the avenue Daumesnil. For a moment, I watched the traffic flow. Considering the state I was in, it was preferable to wait before crossing. The post office was probably closed anyway and even if there had been an automatic dispenser I didn’t have any change. I walked slowly up the next street: there were phone booths everywhere. I entered a bistro; I was told by an obnoxious waiter that I could only find a phone card in a tobacco shop. I asked him where I could find a tobacco shop.

— Gare de Lyon was his answer.

Disheartened, I told him it was far away. He snarled at me that it wasn’t his fault. On the square in front of the brasserie, there were at least three people with cell phones. I had counted at least four hundred and forty-three cell phones since I had arrived in Paris. I

kept counting them, as if their sheer number would bring a revelation. I nearly asked a stranger, wearing a cashmere coat, to lend me his, but I didn't dare.

My spring coat was not keeping me warm enough, I was cold. Here I was in Paris, on a Saturday night around eight thirty, in the middle of a sidewalk. I burst into tears, still clutching my bouquet of roses and lilacs.

My despair was totally irrational, and I knew it. I was a minute away from my cousin, who was waiting for me with champagne and a gourmet meal. I was a ten-minute taxi ride from the studio I was sharing with Pierre. Pierre would be home till nine o'clock since he was expecting friends for drinks.

Fine; I didn't have the code, the phone numbers, or a phone card; but I did have five hundred francs. Nane was expecting me. Pierre would fly to my rescue, anytime, anywhere. Indifferent to the few embarrassed passersby, I cried my heart out, being a small child again. I felt I was becoming a statue of salt, paralyzed, helpless. I was heartbreaking.

It felt as if my waters had burst and all the amniotic liquid had flowed out. All of a sudden, my world had sharp, cutting edges. The next minute, I was swimming in a bloody cloak of loud noises; the city had turned a deaf, red ear to my despair. I was trapped as if a current of neutrinos sent from the mists of time went through me; like a distant solar storm that had just reached me by accident.

I was a child, crying freely in the darkness near the Gare de Lyon. Blurred by tears, my face buried in the bouquet of roses and lilacs, I smelled the divine perfume of the flowers. I thought of my mother and her unconditional love. I remembered when as a child she tickled my cheeks with the bouquet of lilacs that she had just gathered for her mother, telling me "my life would be beautiful, beautiful."

In the middle of the sidewalk, I am praying, just like red-haired Lola in the German film *Run Lola Run*, the version where no one dies. My prayer is black, animal, animistic, amerindian; like an arrow thrown against my citadel of grief, like a fountain of gold spurting into the sky, like the new Eiffel tower that dances every hour for ten minutes, every night since the millennium.

I pray. I don't know to whom or to what. I pray to Notre-Dame du Cap, to Notre-Dame de Grâce, to the Virgin of Guadeloupe and to all the other black virgins of my catholic childhood. For a split second, I pray that life would cradle me in her arms so I can draw some needed strength from it.

I'm walking, sleepwalking towards the Gare de Lyon looking for a tobacco shop. I cross the Boulevard Diderot and I stand on a safety island in the middle of the road, at the exit of an underground parking. I am scared, exhausted. A good Samaritan waiting like me for the green light hears my cries and looks at me, astonished.

I mumble that I am looking for a tobacco shop, the phone number of my cousin, her code.

She volunteers to let me use her phone if only for a few minutes. I can't imagine asking information for Nane's number, standing amidst cars that rush from all directions.

I decline and thank her. She leaves. I turn around and walk in the other direction, towards the Gare de Lyon. I enter the station. It is quieter. It feels good.

I ask the person, who is putting away the chairs, where the tobacco shop is. He points to an escalator on the right. I can't find it. I go round and round, crying. Finally I locate it. I go up. On my right, another kiosk, a newspaper stand that could very well be a tobacco shop. The cashier informs me, almost with glee, that she has no more phone cards. She notices my tears, the other clients do too.

— But I still have some code cards . . .

— What's that?

— The same thing.

— How does it work?

— Just read.

Once in the phone booth I insert the card code and the display says "technical default". I try another phone, two, and ten more, always the same thing. I go back to the kiosk. Now I'm crying shamelessly, my mascara is running down my face, but it feels soothing to cry, and I continue crying.

A woman wearing a red smock with "Relay" written on the back, comes up to me and with a voice as soft as the wings of an angel, asks me:

— Can I help you?

Her empathy overjoys me and I start to sob instead of answering her. The manager waits. I hiccup:

— My cousin . . . number . . . the code . . . the code card.

Nothing works. She's been waiting since seven thirty.

— Write her name on this piece of paper. I'll look her up on the Minitel.

The magic word! Minitel. I never knew exactly what it was, but I know it's miraculous. I thank her. I wipe away my tears. I wait for her. She comes back with Nane's number. My hand touches hers.

— Thank you, you are very *nice*.

They don't say that in France; *nice* doesn't have the same meaning here, but I don't care.

I insert the code card, "technical default" again. I take off my glasses in order to read the tiny lettering. I dial 3055 and punch the star key, but always with the same result "technical default". I go back to the kiosk to ask how the damned code card works. The cashier explains:

— You can't insert the code card, you must dial 3055 then the star key and finally your code.

Yeah but which bloody code?

— The card's code obviously.

— But where is the card code? I don't understand.

— You have to scratch it off. Voilà. That's the code: 2345 5497 337. It's your code. You have to dial these numbers first and then dial the phone number.

On the radio Andrea Bocelli is singing:

— Con te partirò . . .

At this very moment, I realized I was crying and grieving for you.

Paris was not at all the same without your energy, omnipresent, pervasive, embracing. The physical joy that dances in every cell of my body when I move in the same time space membrane as you was gone, this tiny spring of water that echoes in my heart when you talk, talk, talk and when your voice, your voice, your voice caresses me, tames me, lures me into the depths of my wildest retrenchments, gone was the warmth that I absorb and that comforts me when you

touch me when I dance, elated, shrouded, mesmerized, electrified, when our bodies touch and I feel the weight of your closeness. All that remained was the memory of drowning in the exciting *rap* of your smell and in your eyes eyes eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, like charcoal light on the snow when Montréal becomes blurred in an ice storm that turns us into silent animals on the sidewalks of our first winter, do you remember my love when we were not yet together?

We were walking on Sherbrooke Street, returning from the Cegep, which had closed due to a power failure. A colleague had given us a ride from Lachine to Atwater Street, but there was no subway, no bus. The media would later call it “Black Friday”. We joined hundreds of pedestrians going east in the melting snow. All buildings were dark, and the traffic lights no longer worked. Headlights were the only source of light. It was at once beautiful and frightening. We were not yet aware that the James Bay power lines had given way under the weight of the ice and there could be a shortage of drinking water.

We sensed the danger.

You were standing by me, I was afraid of nothing. That day, in the midst of the blackout, you were my guardian angel. I was breathing in a bubble, pink and light as a perfume, a cocoon of light, walking with you in the shadows of Montréal, the muffled noise of steps, comforted by your presence, remembering my childhood when I went to the village with Raphael, inhaling the irresistible aroma of fresh bread welcoming us to the bakery. There was a smell of wet wool in the air while we were battling the wind and sleet, and the voice of Andrea Bocelli was echoing in my ears through the loud speakers, bringing me back to the Gare de Lyon where I stand alone, bewildered, lost.

— Con te partirò . . .

I miss you so, I miss you like never before.

As soon as I got back to the studio near the Seine that night, I learned your cell phone number by heart, so that I would never again be alone in this unforgiving world.

