

Toxoplasma

Ravages

No longer forest. Disaster.

Roots ripped from the earth, the ruins of trees drowned in the mud. This devastation of trunks weaves a labyrinth with no exit. The rhapsodies of birds, snuffed out.

A deep rumbling in the distance. Moss and leaves welcome the sky's tears as consolation.

A silhouette is dancing in the depths of the broken wood. Its hands trace amongst the desolation the figure of a madwoman, of a

Nikki opens her eyes. A warning is sounding deep in her stomach: either terror or the need to pee. The thinnest of sheets sticks to her body, covered in sweat. Outside: night everywhere.

Images from a dream in VHS slowly return. A mosaic saturated with the cooling of her inner world. Nikki remembers a disquiet in the vestiges of a devastated woodland fortress. An imperceptible movement.

A gesture, perhaps.

Nikki had already awoken earlier to a murmuring on the leaves of the box elder outside her window. But what just wrenched her from her dream into this dull light of four in the morning was not the sound of rain.

She props herself up on her elbows, alert for the slightest noise in the darkness. Her senses awoken to the accident. A long note breaks the silence. A sharp cry from a throat that she could swear was being strangled. A 'Mummy' that went on without any sign of breaking. Nikki thinks immediately of those feline wails that flood the alley in times of mating fever, the torrents of strident meowing in the gardens. But something in this call for help rings false. It is too human.

She gets up, leans against the window sill, and examines the alleyway: everything gleams, everything is blurred. The walls surrender secrets of shadows climbing the breeze blocks or crawling along the electrical wires. Reflections of an invisible moon. The shivering of leaves.

The cry falls silent.

'Hmm...', Nikki scratches her ear. A persistent murmuring itches her eardrum.

She pees, half-asleep, thinking as she sits on the toilet seat. Gentle gurgling. Her muddled thoughts recall the ravaged forest, that gesture that she is still struggling to glimpse: a farewell?

She drags herself back to her bedroom, pulls back the sheet and shifts her legs into a forgotten imprint in a corner of the mattress. She finds, once again, the path to sleep.

TROPHONIUS XSSS-GFFR 5AMGMT

<MeiMei> wot did u say

<klm> nikki song

<MeiMei> nicole

<klm> mb

<MeiMei> old school

<klm> chill

<Mei Mei> wot dus Nicole Song do?

<klm> cat detective

<Mei Mei> wut

<klm> she looks for lost cats in her area

<MeiMei> u and ur experiments

<killm> dont u hav anything better to do than give me shit?

<MeiMei> its loading

<killm> I can see u u no

<MeiMei> when will u agree to get a chick that isnt some nutcase artist?

<killm> she also works in a video store

<MeiMei> oy vey

<killm> r u absolutely certain that in ur heart in that heart that the Goddess gave u r u really certain without a shadow of a doubt that ur doing absolutely everything u can to try to shut ur mother fucking mouth?

'It's seven o'clock, Montreal! You're well fine this morning, seriously, you're suffocating me...'

Nikki yawns. She's sitting on her balcony. Her chocolate tea is getting cold. The alley is silent. It's too early. No one's awake, not the violinist in the neighbouring apartment, nor Mummy, the old lady who lives opposite her on the other side of the street. No birds. The cicadas burst into their first strident song, tendrils formed from the contortions of the wood around the power cables. A sacred moment: that point in the day when Nikki doesn't know what to do or how she'll do it.

'...hot, seriously, I'm starting to get scared that the troops gathered at the bridges will decide to attack us for having the right to go to the beach every now and then – you can't really blame them under those helmets and in their goddamn tanks.'

A bunch of kids have left some beers near the hopscotch courts painted on the asphalt. Probably vomited out of the concert venue on the corner, with its herd haunting the alley at impossible hours. No one complains about the nocturnal racket, not since the proclamation of the Commune. What time did they come and plonk their arses down? Before the cry that woke her at four o'clock? Nikki tries to recall the sound. Not tears, not miaowing, no. A child's cry. But all she can hear is that buzzing noise, still scratching in her ear.

'Radio GRA never lets anything go, we'd rather die than let those sons of bitches drink from... wait a sec, right, yeah, I've just heard that it was in Gaspé Park that our comrades discovered a dead racoon, chopped up and beheaded, on a swing. Everyone knows they're not the most popular animal, but come on guys, that's going a bit far...'

Nikki bites her cup. Gaspé? That's her area, two blocks up. Attacking a racoon, grrr. She wonders if last night's cry was not this racoon found dead in that local park she sometimes visits early in the evenings on her way back from the video store. Kim often says that people are capable of anything to get noticed, that that is how the 21st century will be defined; that everything is worth the same, between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Nikki thinks briefly of Kim, probably still asleep after a night spent at her bloody archaic screens. She thinks of her huge brown tits saturated with heat. She listens to herself breathing. A hunger her stomach echoes. She starts to relax back in her bed, ready to bring forth gushing pleasure, but she expels only a biological bleeding of anxiety.

'...I'm going to leave you in the company of Don't Fall by the Chameleons. We thought it seemed appropriate...'

The trees rustle in the alley like burnt paper. A fat ginger cat crosses the street. Nikki recognises him: Mr Pants, chatty and cuddly. Never lost. He comes to rub against her, and she flatters him a little.

'Hello, Mr Pants.'

'Miaow!'

Mummy is sweeping her balcony.

'Good morning, Nikki!'

'It's hot today.'

Mummy looks up at the sky.

'A storm's coming.'

Mummy is seventy-three years old, with varicose veins that she collects like old stamps. She dresses herself in curtains with Inuit motifs tied at the waist with a transparent pink belt. She hardly walks, a souvenir from past medical treatments, when the low-priority elderly lost the war of the media and budget headings, overtaken by the federation of methane-cannulated cows and authors of Hochelagan Circassian literature.

‘The cicadas, my dear.’

Nikki listens. Their strident sound appears muffled, less clear than usual.

‘Did you hear about this business with the racoon?’ Mummy asked. ‘I had to change the radio batteries to hear the next bit, but I think maybe I no longer want to know what goes on around here...’

‘It’ll get worse before it gets better,’

Mummy smiles, her teeth a sparkling accordion.

‘Coffee this afternoon?’

‘If I survive the day.’

‘Could you get me some toilet paper?’

‘Course.’

Mummy frowns.

‘Is everything okay, dear?’

‘Just a dream.’

Nikki thinks she hears Mummy mutter something, but the muzak of her dental accordion drowns it out.

The buses yawn at the stops along Beaubien Boulevard. All the cars are sleeping. The immense sky over the small façades is budding with fat cumuli. It is eight o’clock.

Nikki heads to her favourite Ecuadorian café. At the counter she chooses a Java mocha, not too strong, in a Corsican polystyrene cup. Behind the cash register a lady with wooden teeth speaks of this horrible murder in the park, poor little creature. You must be truly insane to attack such a small, pathetic animal. It must be the work of those bearded men in Africa demanding we put fewer naked women in video games. An employee busy cleaning the tables maintains that we need to get rid of all those fucking racoons that eat the cats and steal from the bins because if we have no more cats and nothing left in the bins, how will we survive, when it’s already hard to eat, to drink water that isn’t mud and to take advantage of the short fifteen minutes of electricity, no but come one, legit, how are we going to keep living? The sooner the Kyng arrives the better, that’s what I say.

Three seagulls fly across the blue, fighting over a can of sardines. Sitting on a bench, Nikki finishes her coffee. Seeking refuge in her walkman, she is still refusing to go to the park to see the racoon on a swing with her own eyes. She knows there’ll be way too many militiamen. It’s hardly en route, but maybe on the way back from the video store this evening she’ll take a detour to Jean Coutu to exchange some batteries for grapefruit (‘you can get anything at Jean Coutu, even a friend’) and maybe she’ll go take a look at the park. She shivers in her purple foam headphones. The idea of having to face the bogus clientele of the video store terrifies her more than seeing death. But she promised Hippolyte that she would stay on. She just wishes she could intensely experience this void inside her asking her to plug up every little hole of the everyday and build a nest of life there, even just a... fucking...

She wanders around the area searching for a lead that could give some meaning to her day. In her knapsack there’s a blue shirt with all the missing pet notices torn from poles in the area: poetic handwritten descriptions of cats, for the most part. A few doe-eyed pups. A red-backed tortoise. For the past few days, Nikki has been hunting down a grey puss that she thinks she saw run off one time, his fur already blackened by several days on the street. She prefers to investigate by day. At night, cats hide away. They are scared, scarpering away from the slightest light. The labyrinthine nature of the area makes it impossible to barrel after them. The Ulthar of Saint-Laurent, the Lovecraft fans of the local gambling ring say. This city is full of cats on the loose, with no collar. Since last winter she has been searching, without much success, for lost cats, stray cats, cats that fell off a balcony or just got confused, fluffy cats sprawled along the railway track, stuck in the mesh fence of a construction site, in the shadow of the fire escape or yawning between the wings of a twittering butterfly, calm cats, ornaments. Nikki pushes scrubs out of the way, moves aside broken pots, opens the doors of abandoned cars. Nothing. No sign of Bonnie’s silhouette, disappearing around the corner of Saint-Zotique and Saint-Dominique.

No sign of Bozo's muzzle, the black firebrand that escaped from the recesses of Bélanger. Nikki is having a hard time. She curses. The temperature won't stop rising. She wipes her forehead. Perhaps it's time to go to work.

'Hey, do you have any films with Doug McClure?'

The first customer of the day is wearing a dirty vest and a rough goatee.

'You want the Kevin Connor ones, I'm guessing.'

He looks at her hopefully. A bin fire is burning behind his dark-ringed eyes.

'Uh, it's the one where he has a gun, then at the end he pulls the chick - the cro-magnon?'

'Uh...'

OK, here's the deal: between 1974 and 1979, Kevin Connor directed three films for the British production company Amicus, all with McClure and all adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs (don't lump in *Warlords of Atlantis* with these though – it was filmed with the same team but not for the same producers). These films are a festival of beasts in stop-motion, fantasies concerned with re-establishing the full experience of a genre - at the risk of just turning it all into pudding. The film in question is *The Land that Time Forgot*. It's the story of a German submarine hijacked during the Second World War by the survivors of a torpedoed English ship, who end up discovering an underwater passage near the Arctic Circle to the mythical continent of Caprona, populated by dinosaurs. True, the ending is bollocks, but the woman in it is thoroughly modern, even if she does wear some fur.

'Actually, she isn't a cro...'

He stops her, gripping her arms tightly over the counter.

'Now *he* is a real man.'

'Doug McLure?'

'Yeah...'

She has a strong desire to stuff her tampon in his mouth.

'I like films with real blokes, you know?'

Nikki extricates her arms. She lands him with a rare edition of *Supersexgirl (Miss Magnificent, 1982)*, a disco porno with a sumptuous orgy of moustaches and aliens that get it on in tights.

'Here.'

'What's that?'

'A Marvel adaptation.'

He leaves with his eyes glued to the three small blurry images on the back of the case.

'Nikki!'

Hippolyte calls to her from the back of the store. He is washing up with fluoro gloves in the tiny closet they use as a kitchen.

'I don't like sass.'

'What?'

'You can't speak to customers like that.'

'What fucks do we give? We're all gonna die, and they don't pay.'

Hippolyte is an Athenian exile with the neck of a bull, all fat in a forest shaved down to the nape of his neck poking out of his t-shirt. This store is all he has left.

'You need to be nicer.'

'I am nice.'

'Try to smile.'

'I have flies in my teeth.'

'You have an attitude problem, Nikki.'

She looks at him, busy caring for a world that has disappeared, one plate at a time. She crosses her arms.

'How did we get here, Hippolyte?'

'We're dinosaurs.'

She knows he's right. Their daily life is degenerating: the fake sales written in highlighter badly hung on the pathetic cardboard signs in the shop window. The crumbling shelves. The yellowing covers. The good films that are never taken, the duds that are taken too often and never brought back; the tapes that haven't been rewound. The chewing gum stuck to the shelves. The guys who wank behind the curtain of the porno section, whose cream we find on the chewing gum stuck to the shelves. The tags

of the Betamax shop opposite. Just thinking about it makes Nikki mad. She wants to kill that super hyped-up video format everyone is fighting over; even Vestron made them an exclusive deal. To sum it up: the uncensored version of *Galaxy of Terror* didn't come out on VHS but as an ED Betamax Max limited-edition collector's box set thingamajig.

'Seriously though, where is the world headed? We know very well that VHS is the *nec plus ultra*! OK, OK, Beta is 250 lines of scanning, but look at the selection we offer! I don't understand, the world is losing its mind...'

Before the Commune, JVC was winning the marketing war, imposing its VHS format on every household. Everyone was jumping on the bandwagon: Magnavox, Mitsubishi, Quasar. But Sony had found a luxury niche in Canada, especially in Montreal: a 'quality' niche that had seduced the bottle-fed Boomers with its cinema-quality bullshit. In the Montreal of the Commune, luxury continued functioning at full speed because money was no longer worth much, so why not get something out of it?

'Nikki, there's room for everyone, you know. What is concerning is your stubbornness in refusing to offer blockbusters. I would like us to open up to the wider public.'

'You hired me to take care of the catalogue, didn't you? That's what I'm doing. I'm the curator of good taste in this city and frankly your Hollywood shit just doesn't cut it. We're not called Millennium Video for nothing.'

'Nikki, all I'm asking for is a smile.'

She smiles, then flips him the bird.

Nikki enters her tiny office through the door hidden at the back of the kitchen just after the one to the toilet. The only place where she stills feels herself. Her latest job is on her desk: a Funai video cam in separate parts. She sits down on her stool to fashion three rotary presses with a screwdriver. She exhales. She's getting worked up all on her own. She stabs the screwdriver into the wall of bills. She looks at her shelves filled with cassettes, cases and magazines. Her goddamn imaginary world. Her disembowelled plastic bodies piled on top of each other. Her magnetic RAM poorly repaired with thick scotch tape. Everything she left behind to come here suddenly rushes back to her. There is no way out. She puts her head in her hands.

She feels empty. She hasn't been rewound.

TROPHONIUS FFS-TTS 530PMGMT

<MeiMei> it's cos they dont dare flog the last Apollo optical discs for free, if u had a bit more margin on your budget we wouldnt have this problem

<killm> I told you: francis used an Artemis and he roasted his frontal lobe, im sticking with my console its safe

<MeiMei> we're not gonna go very far

<killm> I did a run on Magnasoft in three parsecs with Hermes, i taped up three walls then put the bits with the jackpot by finding the joker in the glovebox, dont tell me anyone on the Grid can beat that

<MeiMei> those daemons have fragments of enochians encoded in their routines we'll never find their weaknesses

<killm> what do u suggest? We cant open that with an Apollo anyway

<MeiMei> not without four hands

<killm> are you offering me a deal with Jove? I thought you couldnt stand him

<MeiMei> I cant, but I also know he'll be able to help us master the coordination, I'll pinch my nose so I dont smell the musk of his sweaty balls

<killm> switch switch bang bang

<MeiMei> an Ares turntable 44 + Artemis – ring a bell pancho?

<killm> ur on

Nikki bought some Peruvian grapefruits, a can of anchovies and some toilet paper with cute little animals cleaning themselves on it, all in a brown paper bag smelling of smoked wood. She made her detour, moving from the heat to the shade of the trees. Gone the houses with fire escapes, the children in kippas playing softball, the fashion of samurai robes. A flight of sparrows pass by singing Jacques

Brel. Everything seems to be holding back from exploding with joy. But Nikki is a ball of anxiety, eyes peeled. She models her gaze on Pacino's in *Serpico*, when he crosses a road. Troubled by the movements in the corners of her vision.

A comrade is on guard in front of Gaspé Park. Probably one of those young guys concerned with the security of the area, wearing patched uniforms with a red armband and a spot of black ink. An AK-47 is slung over his shoulder, a French beret on his head. He nods at her as she approaches.

'It's closed?'

'At least until tomorrow.'

She squints as she walks around the tiny playground.

'Are there any suspects?'

'I'm not very well informed.'

'Horrible, isn't it?'

He shrugs.

'It's just a racoon.'

'Racoons are cool.'

'Meh...'

He looks her up and down, probably wondering what she's wearing under her t-shirt to make her breasts so pointy.

'He was sitting on the swing over there.'

Nikki blocks the sun with one hand to make out the sinister structure.

'With its two legs in the holes. Some people are fucked, I swear...'

'Can I have a look?'

He hesitates. She recognises him: a kid from the Casgrain lot, living on the ground floor of a rabbit hutch. He sometimes smokes on the stairs in flip-flops and a dirty vest. She could bury this guy in her garden and no one would miss him.

'I was told not to let anyone enter.'

'Everyone's gone, right? And you can't possibly think I'm going to mess about with a crime scene... did you cover that in your komintern?'

She straightens herself in her t-shirt, her tits all excited. She's ashamed of selling herself like this, but she isn't afraid of anything. A ghost of desire flutters through the poor boy's eyes.

'OK... five minutes.'

She smacks a kiss on his cheek. Bargain.

The 'park' is a children's playground with a big tubular castle, some slides and four swings, two with yellow bucket seats for toddlers. One of them is bundled up in a bag. A red smudge is discernible through the crumpled blur of the plastic. Nikki examines the gravel beneath it. A fair number of people have already walked here – there are still drops. She runs her hand over the wood of a picnic table. Carved into the benches are the names of teens come to pledge their love. The play equipment is built on some soft multi-coloured stuff. Right at the back of the park is the cabin: a small building with a mini-gym observation room and, in lieu of a back garden, a large kids' paddling pool with a fountain in the middle. It's closed this evening.

Nikki retraces her steps. What was she expecting to find that the militia wouldn't have found already? Why was this animal killed here? Why this problem-free area? There are a few kids who come to play football on the field next door. She sees them smoking their joint sometimes, all sitting around their ball. They're bored shitless. They seem to have come from all over the entire world, winding up here to kick a ball. Why would they attack an animal? Why with such savagery? Racoons are hard to catch. They're tough. They give you rabies. And you don't see them that often. This crime is a deliberate act. A message, perhaps. Where there's a message, there's territory at stake. Nikki knows the way things work around here. Everything is divided up. Everything is being constantly called into question through signs that are clear for those who know how to read them.

The park is surrounded by a low iron fence. Impossible to carve anything into it. The cabin is made from fake wood, so difficult to tag. But the two alleys nearby have walls facing the park. Nikki exits the mesh enclosure through another low gate. She analyses the tags one by one. She's familiar with most of them: ugly shite drawn in a rush to show a name, group or team. All of them have been

dry for at least a week and nothing... Wait a sec. What's that? Nikki crouches down to look at a small drawing she wouldn't have noticed if the others hadn't been so familiar to her.

Fresh. Not done with a spray can. A marker. Unlikely that the comrades saw it. They probably didn't even bother to look at the tags or, if they did, they would have just focused on the biggest ones to establish who has control over the area. But drawing a new sign on a wall of regular signatures in plain sight – that means something.

Nikki sketches it in her notebook, suddenly feeling nauseous. Those crossed lines make her deeply uneasy, bringing to her mind several images: a devastated forest, a presence at the edge of her vision. Waking in the middle of the night. A cry. A little murdered racoon.

To get rid of her anxiety, she takes some time to look for Bonnie - she has admittedly become rather attached to her during her breaks. Bonnie the little round cat with a white spot on her black forehead. Bonnie with her big pathetic eyes. Bonnie somewhere in this network of streets. The idea of Bonnie lost is unbearable to her. She cannot accept it. A cat's place is in the softest part of a duvet, or on an unmade bed. In the warmth, even if it's 40 degrees outside. In the path of a ventilator's breeze. Near a bowl of fresh water and a cuddle. Not on the hot asphalt. Nikki searches for Bonnie. She has taken out her whistles, her professional bells and her treats, which sometimes attract birds. She finds only the shadow of herself twisted on top a speed hump. In the convex reflexion of an abandoned television screen. Perhaps Bonnie is caught between two rocks. Stuck in a hole where her cries for help will never be heard. Bonnie will let herself die. It's horrific. Nikki clenches her fists. The injustice carves a coffin between her shoulder blades.

An old man in a black suit is waiting in the alley at the foot of her building's fire escape.

'Can I help you?'

He doesn't respond. She has never seen him in the area before. Rather tall, in his sixties. Looks like Angus Scrimm, the undertaker from *Phantasm*. Long white hair hangs down from under an old-fashioned hat. Waxed shoes.

'Is everything okay?'

He finally looks at her. Wise eyes. He gives her a gentle smile. An unknown horizon stretches deep into his grey eyes.

'Can I do something for you?'

He lifts two sick fingers close to his face. His skin is tanned leather.

'Oh, you want to make a phone call?'

She climbs the stairs delicately, turning around to make sure the old man is following. He climbs with one hand on the railing. Nikki lives on the second floor. There is another traditional entrance on the other side of the building, but in summer she prefers to go around the back.

Flowers on her patio, a table for having breakfast, garlands left over from her birthday party the month before. An earthenware jar for crushing cigarette butts. She had left the sliding door slightly open. She puts her bag down near the telephone in the entryway. It still works – the home lines are the only thing close to full-functioning in the Commune.

'Go ahead.'

On his clock, Felix the cat moves his eyes in time to his clock-hand arms. The old man enters and picks up the handset, looking at it as if he had never seen one before. Nikki needs to change her tampon. She shuts herself into the tiny bathroom, leaving him to sort himself out. She waits. She thinks back to the drawing on the wall. Had she seen it in her dream, for it to recall those other images like that? No. It's something else.

The neighbour's radio filters through the thin wall of the shoddy building.

Venetian candles penetrated its heart / It trembles like talking to a stranger.

When she comes back out the old man has disappeared. The handset is lying next to the base, still connected to the call. Nikki frowns. He isn't outside. Still, he certainly hasn't run off, not at his age... She systematically searches the rest of the apartment. The bedroom. The cupboards. The front door is

still locked from the inside. The old man has quite simply disappeared. It doesn't look like he stole anything.

Remember the panic in its delectable face, when you touched it.

The hands on the clock keep turning. The whirring of the telephone. The moment stretches. Nikki hangs up. She doesn't understand what just happened. Could she have dreamt it? She doesn't believe in the supernatural. She knows that the real world is infinitely more bizarre than anything she could imagine. She also knows that our imagination is limited by the spectre of knowledge. What exists in the beyond could allow...

'...that was Talking to a Stranger, by Hunters and Collectors, we thought it would be appropriate...'

Okay, seriously Nikki, can you hear what you're thinking? If you were in a novel everyone would find this very improbable. Why don't you make yourself some coffee. Well fuck, there's none left.

Felix is pointing at seven o'clock when Kim arrives. Nikki is chewing on some cheddar watching a bad episode of *Riptide*.

'Hey fatty,' Kim says, taking off her combat boots.

'Is Ramadan finished?

Kim flicks a finger out from her dungarees. She collapses onto the sofa and fumbles with a lighter while watching the screen with an aggrieved expression: three naff detectives on a boat, fans of gadgets and half-digested plots – there's some Stephen J. Cannell in the lines.

Kim can't understand why their robot is only good for making cocktails.

'At least the *Chopping Mall* robots can kill people,' she says.

They had listened to *Chopping Mall* the week before. Three defective robots massacre customers in a shopping centre. They'd loved it.

'How's your violinist?'

'I haven't heard her today,' Nikki replies. 'She'll start soon.'

A musician had taken up residence two months ago in the neighbouring apartment. She practises two or three times a day: sometimes rather laborious scales, but often marvellous glissades of melancholy chords.

'Hey, look at this.'

Kim takes a pink telephone-like object out of her shoulder bag.

'It's my new Hermes. Not bad, huh? I did the welding myself. I don't have the money yet to put an Artemis together, but it's a start.'

Nikki takes it, weighs it in her hand, turns it over, and over again. Shakes her head. Pretends to be impressed.

'The French slipped us some Minitel cases for us to put our cards in, so now we have some kinda outdated user-friendly keyboards, but I'm super keen on the Del. The reaction time is pretty cool, it can process thirty lines at the same time. But the avx are just the best thing...'

Let's make something clear: Nikki knows nothing about computers. She and Kim are friends because they both share a passion for tinkering, but the culture Kim is part of, which she promotes through her fanzines, her illegal and personal BBS, and her events at the local squat, and at festivals and things, remains foreign to her. She doesn't even know how to approach its people. She tried once. A fiasco of stammering and discomfort, knocked-over glasses and indefensible positions in political discussions. Nikki has a big problem, and she knows it: she's suspicious of a great number of people. She tends to make amalgamations and she is scared of religions, especially Islam. The Commune is a response. A haven of peace that could at any moment tip into horror. She holds all the forces of alienation responsible for this heap of shit – even those of beauty.

They eat at nightfall at the table in the tiny lounge room, sitting next to each other and watching the television on mute. Kim drowns her hunger in a cascade of uninteresting news between two mouthfuls

of out-of-date salmon. She types pensively on her machine, ignoring Nikki's foot twisting around her own.

'Kim, fucking hell, come of your screens for just a second.'

'Just a sec, babe. We've got a run tomorrow on one of the Grid's fortresses, where all the oracles are stocked.'

'Oracles?'

'That's just what we call the prediction algorithms.'

Since the Web crash, Kim and her mates have haunted the Grid, a network reserved for the elite, the military, researchers. It's a series of virtual national roads full of private servers, databases, simple cabins in lines of code, which they explore, pillage or squat in.

'Sounds dodgy. If they sabotaged the Web, it's because they knew full well that you guys were going to destroy everything with it.'

'Stop killing my vibe, girl.'

Nikki gets up, takes some grapefruit out of the fridge and cuts them with a fork in the sink. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches Kim on the sofa: she is talking to her self, her fingers sketching discreet figures, as if she was knitting the invisible. Kim is dyslexic, it's what makes her unique - well according to her, anyway. It's what allows her to run on the Grid, she claims, because it means she sees things on the command line that no one else does. Vectors, worlds. This unique tunnel of perception allows her to visualise the world around her as a basket of numbers and ideas that tends towards the real and of which she claims to be the only incarnation vector.

'I'm not crazy, Nikki.'

Nikki sits down, her legs tucked under her like the osteo forbade her to do - she's had a weak hip since her ski accident.

'I think that all this, this world, is too solid. We must be able to make it more malleable. The walls, the tables, the beds. Imagine if everything was just information, you wouldn't need to bother to buy or make anything. You would just type a few instructions and, bam, look, instead of a lamp you have a peacock.'

Nikki eats her grapefruit praying for her stomach to digest it. She tries to imagine a peacock made of light, pixels and gestures, let loose in her living room, iridescent with lights from the depths of a dead world.

'Decapitated?'

Nikki nods.

'On a swing. Sitting in the basket like a kid, you know? With its two little paws sticking out.'

'Did you see a photo?' Kim asked.

'Nah, someone told me. It might just be a rumour, but I believe it. There was still blood everywhere on the gravel. Little drops of little racoon...'

'Ugh...'

They had moved onto the terrace. A gentle wind had risen to caress them. Kim has her feet up on the railing, sipping a local beer. Her cheeks reflect the television screen of the house opposite, pastels between the fabric of a curtain.

'Do you think it's terrorists training on racoons before they attack actual people?' Kim asks.

'I thought of that.'

'Are you going to investigate?'

'I've got fuck else to do.'

Kim looks at her, impressed.

'You think you're a detective, OK, but there aren't that many lady detectives.'

'Cybil Shepherd in *Moonlighting*.'

'She didn't have a choice.'

'But she learnt to like it.'

'Cagney and Lacey.'

'They're cops.'

'Angela Lansbury in *Murder, She Wrote*.'

'More of a writer than a detective.'

‘Margot Kidder in *Trenchcoat*.’

‘Huh...’

Nikki has a strange relationship with *Trenchcoat*. It’s a bad film, a Disney production that made a crime fiction novelist a reluctant detective – a kind of reverse *Condorman*, without the fantasy. It’s deplorably shit, but it has a certain light-heartedness about it. Maybe she invests too much of herself in these money machines, reading secret messages in the slightest hope of emancipation.

‘Why do you do it?’

‘I don’t know. I need to prove to myself that I can change things.’

‘Change what? I know you believe in God and all that crap, but I think the devil exists and that we can do something to rid the world of him.’

‘Pff...’

Kim is Moroccan. Her whole family is still over there. They sent her here to stay with her aunt when the religious situation in the country started to degenerate. Kim practices her faith as a kind of homage to her family, to feel close to them. In reality, Kim believes only in Unix.

‘But fucking hell, Kim, what kind of messed up person would do that to a racoon?’

‘People are more aggressive in summer. We sleep less, so we’re more irritable. It’s very hot, people are tired, lazy. It’s easier to scream and hit than to engage in dialogue. And, you know, racoons, fuck, they’re a real worry. I saw one drag a cat for ten metres, and last week Rachel saw two on her balcony, standing behind the glass, like kids waiting for sweets. They’re scared of nothing, they have rabies, fuck, it doesn’t surprise me that a couple of kids wanted to be useful like you and rid the area of a chihuahua-killer...’

‘You really give me the shits, Kim. Do you ever stop making everything about you?’

Nikki goes to the fridge in search of more food to integrate into the star system of her imperilled soul. Kim calls to her from outside, her arm on the sofa, as if she were reversing a car.

‘What’s your problem, girl?’

Kim loves discussing subjects that piss people off. She isn’t much of a fan of beating about the bush when talking about morons, no matter what kind, whether due to ancestry or convenience. But her bullshit detector is the best there is. Nikki comes back to explain how she feels with two more beers. Kim pretends not to hear. She strokes her cheek, kisses her. On the other side of the wall, the violinist begins a Tchaikovsky nocturne.

They go to bed watching *Godzilla 1984*, the cry of the metaphorical monster merging with the outside world and the storm growling in the distance, the echo of indigestion. Kim falls asleep on her stomach, a habit she has taken up from the moment they met, just after the proclamation of the Commune, at that party on the roof of the squat next door. They had immediately understood that something was passing between them: an intimate understanding of the deterioration of the world; their powerlessness despite their minuscule efforts to save it; their resignation in simply trying to save themselves and the people around them. ‘Anarchy is beautiful,’ Kim had said, swallowing handfuls of linseeds. They had ended up naked on the balcony, sitting in the old racing car seats torn from the cockpit, trying to glimpse the stars beyond the lights of Montreal, too bright, too present. Reassuring, though. Lonely souls, idealists, yet resigned. Nikki had passed her hand through her flaming hair and Kim, reassured, had put her head on her round stomach and fallen asleep.

Nikki woke up sweating. Same time: four o’clock. Had she heard something again to drag her from her coma? The sounds of the night are different now that the electricity comes in bursts. Everything is darker. Everything takes on an element of terror. Had she dreamt of a forest? She doesn’t remember, but the smell...

It’s still raining. The earth under the tree reaches her nostrils like the aroma of a horse dead in the middle of labour. She peers through the curtain of rain, looking for a clue. She thinks she can make out a silhouette in a raincoat (*Trenchcoat*) at the corner of the alley, but perhaps it’s just her sleepiness returning to her, blurring her vision with filaments of dream. She remembers the old man in her apartment and his strange disappearance. Too many things in her little disorganised head refuse to integrate themselves. She remembers what the priest used to tell her, when she would go to him asking for advice to cure her confusion: ‘Return to Him, He is order’. Today, still, her love of disorder is a voluntary suffering.

Kim curls up into a ball in a corner of the bed. Desire to bury her head between her hot legs.