

Dear L --,

Hi. I'm in Paris. The last time I was in Paris was probably the last time I wrote a letter. I'll apologise right off for my handwriting; I want to say it's screwed from years of typing but the truth is I'm just impatient and ink hurts. And yes, I have a passport now, I can go anywhere, which is a thing I haven't been able to say for more than ten years, (did I tell you this story? It ends with the lesson – never destroy your marriage certificate, no matter how much you hate the bastard...). The first thing the Immigration guy said to me was, hey – now you can flee if you want to – like running away was something I'd won. Did I want to? Is this what I'm doing? It was you who told me once, all that stands between the moment of disaster and the collapse of humanity is seven days. Or perhaps it was less optimistic – five. I try to imagine you striding out against the apocalypse with a gun and can only suppose you must be right. I think what I'm saying is: aren't we all, always, ready to flee – at some level?

I'm writing this from a Salon de Thé on the rue de Rivoli.¹ The signature drink is hot chocolate, strong as coffee, the milk served in white china jugs and rosettes of Chantilly cream on gilt-edged saucers. None of it looks particularly generous at first, but I promise you, five minutes in and you're seeing stars. The queue to get in the place was long; I was an hour just in line on the street, not even inside, face pressed to the window looking at the macaroons like they were terracotta kings in the Forbidden Palace. Not everybody would consider patisserie to be worth the ordeal – but there's a signature drink! And the all-important question: milk or chocolate in first? The waitress was definitely telling me something about the correct order but I wasn't going to ask her to speak, thinking the system would be self-evident. Here's a sign the establishment you're in is way out of your usual league; your drink has a system and an understanding of it cannot be assumed. It goes where? And – when? (A measure of one's loneliness: that there is no-one to turn and ask. Or this, learned at a talk at the Polar Institute right before I left; there are whole islands in 'existence', literally imagined by explorers, willed into being by the enormity of the emptinesses they were trying to chart...)

There is an American girl at the table opposite. Long-haired and kind of hip. She's with a Frenchman, he's older, of course. Sometimes she looks over from her *Chocolat Africain* and catches my eye and I think of the last time I was with someone this way, doing that thing where the conversation is mostly about figuring out which parts of yourself you're going to conceal. And don't think badly of me that I imagine them in bed later – I mean after – and if, sans l'urgence, they will lie in separate silences, if he will be cold, if this will confuse her – if everyone feels this. Fifty Euros says he'll be fucking someone else this time next year. And yet. Maybe I should have done this; loved less, and more often.

I am trying to tell you --. I'm writing everything down as if I will forget it.

When I came here last, the beautiful girl I was travelling with was stopped on the steps of the Montmartre funicular by a stranger who wanted to take her photograph. Her surprised face, turning from the light of a winter-pallid sun: that is the picture of her I carry in my mind, as if I were the camera, the composition my own. I was 19 when I came here last, when I

last wrote letters. It seems an impossibility, that I was ever that age. And then there will be the time when I will think it an impossibility that I was ever 37. Is this the best I can say, that the past seems like a time when I was almost alive? Just this morning I saw something when I crossed the street at Solferino, a bird in the road, hit by a car and thrashing into the tarmac, its neck and legs broken in opposite directions like someone had stamped on a clockwork toy. Not death throes, life throes, shaking loose the last of its life. I wonder if this is what I am doing in Paris. I wonder if I am shaking loose the last of a life.

They're warriors, not kings – aren't they? You called me at 3am. It was a mistake, I know that – for you it would have been, what, evening maybe? I'm not good with the time difference. I don't know whether you're even in New York; it is that time of year when there is no way to find you if you do not want to be found. It would have been a pressure in your pocket, an accidental combination of buttons pressed, or missed, at just the right moments – not a decision, not desire. And if most of me believes in Baudrillard's hypotheses of Chance, there is equally a part that made you an island, willed into being by something I need that I can't explain. It is just possible that maybe, on the other side of the world, you were writing, looking out of a window, and some word or song made you stop, put down your pen, (oh who of us really does this?) and this something made me worthy of your call. I know it isn't true, but because I didn't answer --.

What you asked me to tell you was the story of the human heart. But L--, my heart is tired. It disappoints me that all I can manage is this, and I don't even know if I should send it.

X.^{3,4}

¹To be precise, *Cafe Angelina* on the rue de Rivoli, in Paris's 4th arrondissement.

²As seems to have become traditional for us, we somewhat intrusively asked whether this piece was fiction or non-fiction; and, as is also traditional, we received an elegantly ambiguous response: 'This piece is a mix of non-fiction and fiction. Maybe I should leave it up to the imagination as to which bits are most made-up, but it's certainly true that I would go to extraordinary lengths for good patisserie. (And I also wouldn't recommend pretending to be Nicole Kidman when your decree absolute arrives...)'

³Lucy Durneen grew up in the Fens, but has lived and worked in Berlin, Brussels and York, before moving to Cornwall. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Plymouth University and lectures in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. Her stories and poems have been published in *The Manchester Review*, *Short Fiction* and *Poetry Ireland Review*. She is currently completing her first short story collection. Lucy divides her time between St Ives, Cambridgeshire, and Liskeard, Cornwall.

⁴Yes, we do wish her Cornwall home was in St Ives, so that we could have ended the issue by saying that she divided her time between St Ives and St Ives. But you can't have everything. Is it not enough that we brought you a letter from St Ives, Cornwall, *and* a letter from St Ives, Cambridgeshire?