

## JUST ANOTHER URBAN CASUALTY

*By Suraj Alva*

*“How I understand them, these poor people harassed by misfortune, having lost loved ones, who finally awoken from the dream of a belated reward, from the illusion that God will be just in the end, ...Suicide! The force by which the dispossessed take back control of their fates”—  
“L’endormeuse”, Guy de Maupassant.*

Cakes of dried vomit dotted the bedsheets and the floor. I could smell the piss that crisscrossed the puke like icing.

Pain seared the back of my eyes. My vision took turns, blurring for a few seconds and then taking a stab at clarity. I squeezed my eyes shut and didn’t open them for what I hoped was at least a minute.

I was on a bed too small for me. The lower right side of my stomach—where my kidney and liver were—seemed weighed down by a rock. I tried sitting up but failed the first two times. On the third attempt, I rested my back against a wall. A numbing paralysis crept up from the pit of my stomach to my chest. I gasped for air and felt it barely filling my lungs.

As soon as I got up from the bed, my feet on the floor supporting my body, my calves protested from lack of use, sending needles of excruciating pain up through my thighs to my pelvic region. I shifted the weight from my lower body to my upper by leaning against the wall. The pain subsided a little.

Light struggled in through the blinds of the room’s only window. *But what time was it? What day?* I walked or rather crawled to my work table and turned on my laptop.

A near-empty fifth of vodka and an empty bottle of sleeping pills spilled over from the trash can beneath the table. I looked at the laptop screen. It was four in the afternoon, March 11<sup>th</sup>.

I’d been out for two days, in a coma.

Ironically, I was not disappointed at my failure to die. Instead, a strange sense of relief—at still being alive and shame at what I had done permeated through me.

I needed a fucking cigarette.

I found my pack by the empty pill bottle and lit one. On the first drag, my stomach gave an exasperated groan filling my mouth with bile and my nose with its stench. The sense of nausea becoming stronger on the second hit—weakening my knees, I stubbed out the cig and tried to remain standing.

I pulled up the blinds and opened the window. It was a clear afternoon and a steady stream of fresh air assaulted me. From my fifth story view, I could make out people playing soccer in the field opposite my hotel. Beyond the field lay drab monochromatic boxes of buildings. It always surprised me how this part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement of Paris looked nothing like the rest of the city.

The area around Porte de Clignancourt metro station, where my hotel was, resembled more Algiers or Cairo than a major European capital. Hucksters littered the vicinity, selling anything from stale cheap cigarettes to counterfeit metro tickets. The shops and restaurants lining the streets sold wares and food no French patriot would call French.

But here, you could rent a room by the week for cheap. Amenities were accordingly poor and the room was only cleaned after checkout—ideal as I did not want a maid to find me too soon.

Relief and shame gave way to disgust as I turned from the window towards the room.

On some level, I must have known that this shit couldn't have killed me.

I needed to talk to someone. It had been three days—no five now, since I arrived and the only person I knew here was Anais.

When I met her in a café by my hotel, she held in her hands a collection of short stories by Maupassant.

This caught my attention and drew me to her. I was obsessed with Maupassant. He was the reason I was in Paris.

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I chose to study French instead of Spanish in high school because it was something new. Spanish was my first language and the lingua franca of my central L.A. barrio.

French wasn't so different from Spanish. I soon picked up reading comics like *TinTin* and children's novels—*Le Peint Prince* being my favorite.

Since nine, I read or tried to read anything I could get my hands on. It was an addiction that educated and entertained me at first. But it soon evolved into a distraction: an escape that I walked through anytime grim reality hit home.

I stumbled upon Maupassant a few weeks after my brother's murder, when I was on the run from reality. He was killed in a spat of senseless violence—the kind that was the norm where I lived. After his death, I read even more voraciously, distracting myself from the pain—that I knew would engulf my whole being if I let it.

One of his stories “L'endormeuse” captivated me. It begins with a man sitting by the Seine, who comes across a newspaper article revealing that more than 8,500 French commit suicide every year.

The man is horrified, not by the suicides themselves, but rather the manner in which they are committed. One method, popular with Parisians, includes drowning in the Seine—one of the most polluted rivers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

To breathe one's last in such a manner seems to him the height of ignobility.

Reading these pages brought to the forefront the suicidal ideations I'd been having since my brother's death. My brother was five years older than me. Since both my parents worked long retail hours, he raised me himself.

I missed him terribly. I couldn't look at photographs of him without feeling the bitter anguish of loss. I never visited his grave because if I did, his memory possessed me for days after. But neither grief nor sorrow were the prime catalysts of my suicidal thoughts. At least I didn't initially think so.

Neither was the fantasy that I could have done something to stop my brother from being murdered. I was in school when he was gunned down. All over a stupid argument—I later learned.

The reason I wanted to die was simple: I was a coward.

I was incapable of exacting revenge upon my brother's murderer. Whenever I saw him, out on the corner slanging or in an alleyway shooting dice, I went weak in the knees from hatred. And if his gaze met mine, his face bursting open in a wide toothed smirk—I, my brother's beloved, his baby; looked away, my face burning red hot with impotence.

People in my neighborhood didn't talk to cops. It was why he walked about free. He was valuable, too. The supply connect for the neighborhood dealers went only through him.

But it's not like I didn't try my hand at revenge.

After the funeral, I walked to the corner where the guys from my street hung out and dealt. All of them knew my brother, were his 'friends'. They offered me their condolences. Fucking hypocrites. If they were really sorry, they wouldn't have let the motherfucker live. I told them I wanted a *burner*. One of them, Pedro, who had known my brother since they were kids, walked up and after staring at me for a cool second, said "We ain't sellin no metal, *vato*, we only fuck with chrystal and tina aroun here." The others sniggered.

Liars! Pieces of shit! I'd do them too,

That same night, my dad walked into my room.

"*Papi*, let's go." he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"We're going for a drive" he replied. I looked at the time. It was about midnight.

"Now? Where can we go at this time? Everything's closed."

"No questions right now, okay? Just come with me."

"Where are we going?" I tried again as he started up the car.

No response.

We drove to a spot two streets over. It was where the addicts of our neighborhood hung out. He stopped the car, keeping the engine running. A gaunt woman came over. My dad pulled out a hundred-dollar bill.

"Get in" he told the woman. She looked at me, then at my dad and said

"Id da be 200 fur da boat uf ya."

"Okay, get in."

We soon pulled up beside an abandoned warehouse. My dad got out and told us to follow him. *What the fuck was going on? Why was this crack-hoe here with us? Why were we here?*

Inside the warehouse, we followed my dad to an empty dilapidated office in the back.

He told the woman to go across and lean against the wall. My dad then took out a .38 revolver and handed it to me. I didn't take it from him at first. I simply stared at it, dumbfounded.

I knew that in his youth, my dad had put in work out on the streets. But nobody knew what exactly he did—he never talked about it.

“You wanted a gun, no?” He asked. By this time, the woman started trembling and moaned, repeating “I ain't done nothin.” “I ain't done nothin, puhleez.”

I didn't speak. I tried to ignore the woman. But her pleas were getting more desperate, her voice striking an increasingly higher pitch.

“You think you can kill?” my dad asked. “Go on, take it, show me.”

“Bu-ut she has-sn't done anything” I stammered.

“Don't matter. She'd kill you for a dime bag. She's a useless, worthless person.”

He released the safety, pulled back the hammer and placed the gun in my right hand.

“Step up, son. Show me you have it in you. Cuz if you come out with it, you best be ready to go all the way. Cuz there ain't no second chances. And it won't be only your life on the line after.”

I pointed the pistol at the woman. She no longer stood but was splayed about on the floor, looking up at me. Her eyes were like those of a frightened animal, large with pupils dilated. She kept mouthing something, but I couldn't hear her. I couldn't hear anything. There was a ringing sound in my ears.

I closed my eyes, summoning up the face of my brother's killer. The rage and hatred started to flow, seeking their end in a sea of blood.

He did it and he had to pay. The animal had to die.

I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot reverberated around the room replacing the ringing in my ears. Then, silence. I opened my eyes. I saw a cracked white wall. But no blood. I had missed.

I looked down. The woman was still on the floor, silent now but still breathing.

The back of my throat began drying up in preparation for the ejection of my stomach's contents. I tried taking deep breaths to keep it down, but it didn't work. I threw up and continued doing so until I couldn't anymore.

“It takes a different kind of man to kill” my dad said as he pulled into our driveway.

“A sub-human form of a man, a half-man” he continued. “Listen to me, *papi*. He's gonna get what's coming to him. These sort of people, sooner or later, end up in prison or dead. There'll be justice. But it won't need you. I do not want to lose you too” he said before getting out of the car.

My dad was wrong. I could kill. If it took a half-man, a subhuman to kill, then suicide was my lot. For didn't they say it was the coward's way out? And what was a coward except for a half-developed human being?

I was never afraid of dying. I don't think that real cowards are. Life to us is too terrible and we want out.

But I didn't want to die here, in the hood. Drowning in this cesspool of crime and misery seemed to me, like to the man in Maupassant's story, a very ignoble way of breathing my last.

The man in Maupassant's story, horrified at the Parisians who elect to end their lives by jumping into the Seine, falls asleep on the bench he is sitting on and dreams.

In his dream, he stands before a house bearing a sign that reads 'House of Voluntary Death'.

He enters and is guided into a plush furnished room by a porter. He takes a seat on one of the many armchairs and is brought wine and cigars. Around him are people sitting or standing, reading or conversing. To his right, a man smoking a tobacco pipe is brought a yellow flower on a silver plate by a waiter. The man picks up the flower, brings it to his nose and inhales deeply. He nods to the waiter and follows him out the room.

When the waiter returns, our man asks what the flower business was all about.

He discovers that upstairs is a luxuriously decorated death chamber. People who no longer want to live, go in, sit down in a red velvet armchair called L'endormeuse or putter-to-sleep with a glass of wine and die painlessly breathing in the noxious gas pumped in the flavor of your choice.

If I was going to take my own life, it was going to be in a beautiful place and in a relatively painless manner. I did not want to be just another urban casualty.

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"So, you read Maupassant, French or English? Because, you know, a lot is lost in translation. English is, how do you say? Not complex" said Anais, pointing to the book which was now on the café bar.

"French, he's easy enough for a beginner like me" I responded.

"Oh, yes, children read him, mostly. I am simply taking a class on the short story. You know, he is the father of the short story."

"Where did you learn to speak English? No one here seems to be able to."

"In London two years, I was an au pair."

"You're English is really good"

"Yes, I know. You, where did you learn French?"

"In school."

"They teach French in America?"

"Yea, and Spanish."

We were in a café right across from the Porte de Clignancourt station—end of line number 4 and beginning of the immigrant zone. She finished her espresso and ordered a glass of wine.

The barkeep turned towards me. In my hesitant French, I ordered a glass of beer.

"Have you read his story 'L'endormeuse'?" I asked out of curiosity as well as to keep the conversation going.

“Hmm, perhaps, what is it about?”

“Suicide.”

“Hmm, I think so. Something about a chair, in the story, *non*?”

“Yes, kind of. The chair is the thing called l’endormeuse.”

“*La suicide*, is O.K. *non*? The story says that?”

“Yes, but not like...”

“I remember it now. It was, how do you say? *Bizarre*. You know he tried it himself?”

“Yes, I know. But he failed. Why do you think he did it?”

“What? Suicide?”

“Yes.”

“Who knows? Failure, loss of a loved one, boredom; curiosity, maybe?”

The barman brought out our drinks. I took a sip.

“To me, what makes sense only, is boredom and curiosity” she continued.

“For his suicide attempt?” I asked.

“Yes, for him, for everybody.”

“What’s wrong with ending your life because of failure or loss of a loved one? And why on earth does curiosity and boredom make more sense to you?”

I became aware that my voice was rising.

“You Americans, so touchy, sorry. I did not mean to upset you.”

“No, don’t worry, I’m not upset. I just want to know why you think that way.”

“Because to cure boredom with life is difficult, *non*? And curiosity—it is what drives us to do most things new.”

“But....”

“And failure is the story of the human race. It is only now that we are so *obsédé* with success—because it is all we see on TV and the movies.”

My beer was almost over and so was Anais’ wine. I wanted to continue talking to her. I made a mental calculation of how much money it would take to keep us here—but realized the absurdity of it. I didn’t need money after tonight. Tomorrow morning, I was going to overdose on the sleeping pills I had brought with me from the U.S. I would also try to polish off a bottle just to make sure everything went smoothly. If any of my brother’s life insurance money was left, it would go to my parents along with money from my policy. They could take it easy from now on.

I ordered more wine and beer.

“Thank you, you are sweet. A real gentleman, as the English say” she said.

“You were saying?” I said.

“I was saying what? O, yes. Failure, no wait, I already told you that. Loss of a loved one is also a *raison stupide*.”

“Why? I think it’s reasonable to not want to live because someone you loved is no longer alive.”

“If someone you love is gone, just love another! There are six billion people in this universe!”

“But you can’t, it’s impossible.....No, you can’t, there’s no way to love someone else as dearly as the one you lost. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You can! Love should not lead to death. It is *absurde*. Love is a survival instinct. It is

how our ancestors survived, hundreds of thousands years ago, against nature. Fear made us huddle together for our own safety. But fear is *fragile*. It goes away when there is no immediate danger. But danger always returns, *non?*”

She finished her glass of wine.

“So something else was needed, for our *préservation*. To keep us together in times good so when bad times came, we would not be *décimée*. It is simple. You love to live. You lose someone you love, you find someone else to love. You lose your wife? Love your children even more. You lose your children too? Find another wife and make some more children. If not, there are your siblings, cousins, nephews, nieces, friends.....”

“It sounds well and good in theory but it’s hard. No, impossible” I said.

“*Mais on peut essayer, non?* One has to try, correct?”

It was getting late; the servers and busboys began flipping chairs onto the tables.

“Your stay in Paris is how long?” She asked.

“I don’t know” I replied, my voice low, almost a whisper.

She stared at me with such intensity that I looked away, down at my feet. *But did she really or was I imagining this whole thing? Maybe I was just drunk.* I felt naked in front of her, as if I couldn’t clothe my emotions, thoughts, intentions. I didn’t need to tell her anything. She seemed to know what I was going to do.

She handed me a napkin with some numbers scribbled on it, picked up the Maupassant from the bar and put it in her bag.

“You are going to be here for a while, I suspect. There is too much for you to still do and see. You will try to leave, maybe, but something will keep you here. I know it.”

She kissed me affectionately on the cheek, most unlike the French manner of saying goodbye to friends, “After all, you are in Paris, the city of love.”

The End.

Suraj Alva is a freelance writer currently living in the Los Angeles area. My short story "Flies of the Oasis" was concurrently accepted for publication in c,c &d (Scars Publication) and The Fiction Pool—July, 2017.