

Rue Amélie

Martin Lloyd



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Queen Anne's Fan

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Paris in the 1970s

It all started the day I got the parking ticket. It was the last Tuesday of the month and I did not want to get out of bed. It was the day we collected from the girls.

I hated that kind of driving; crawling along the gutters of Pigalle at walking pace and ignoring the hooting of the traffic behind us.

I shaved at the sink and the morning sun crept around the courtyard to the chromium cage which the concierge had hung outside her window. Soon her brainless bird would start twittering. One day I would wring its neck.

There was half a bottle of milk in the fridge. I stood in my pyjamas at the open window for all the tenants to see and I drank it. What the hell! I could show them that life in a bedsit could be luxury.

Over the high roof tops came the lumbrous rumbling of Paris. Our quarter was quiet but it was hemmed in by the frenetic traffic of Les Invalides at one side and the colourful jostling of the Eiffel Tower at the other. Between the two poles, the seventh arrondissement slumbered on in undiscovered isolation. It was a village of its own.

I drained the plastic bottle, scooped up some water to give it weight, and threw it from the window. It thundered like a cannon shot, straight into the open garbage bin which the concierge was wheeling into the yard below me.

'Connard!' she shrieked. 'I suppose you think that's funny!'

I did, actually.

Out in the rue Amélie, Marguerite was washing the windows of her restaurant, the policeman with the large moustache and no

chin was rocking on his heels outside the commissariat and two men in light raincoats were staring avidly into the dirty window of the printing shop opposite. I ignored them and walked down to the corner, not too fast and not too slow. I was still wearing my slippers. It was that kind of neighbourhood.

At the Café Clerc I ordered a big bowl of coffee and stole a croissant from the basket on the counter. Joanne was looking in the mirror and straightening her hair which was trying so bravely to be blond.

‘And one croissant,’ she added. ‘Put your money on the zinc.’

Joanne was a businesswoman first and always.

‘You’ve got a heart of ice,’ I complained.

‘You’ve got a purse of crumbs.’ She held the bowl away from me until I had laid enough metal on the bar top. She turned away and I stole another croissant. ‘Two croissants!’ she called.

Joanne would see your breath on a boiled egg.

In the corner, Makele the Senegalese street sweeper was dreaming into his *kir*, scrawny black wrists protruding from his blue cloth overalls like some ju-ju doll. On the bench Pino was falling asleep over his coffee. He had just driven to Nice with a load of newspapers. Outside, the two raincoats were staring into the dry cleaners.

‘Pino!’ I called. He jerked awake. ‘Have you seen those two pigeons before?’ He screwed up his sagging eyes and pursed his lips.

‘No. Friends of yours?’

‘They seem to want to be.’

‘They’re not cops, anyway.’

That was the least of my worries. I would not have taken a studio-flat next to a police station if I had been afraid of the police, but I had rather hoped that it would be the last place that someone would think of looking for me. Perhaps they had tried everywhere else. I somehow thought not. They didn’t look the tenacious types.

‘Are you in trouble again?’ Joanne moved the knight’s helmet sugar bowl and polished the bar underneath. ‘Why don’t you get yourself a job?’

‘I’ve got a job.’

‘Driving Vincent around? Some job! Chuck it in and get a proper job. That pimp’s no good. Get yourself a proper job.’

RUE AMELIE

I grabbed her wrist a little too strongly.
'And would you marry me then?'
She wrenched it free with an insulting ease. Then she looked
me straight in the eye.
'And if you gave up drinking, yes.'
That was the trouble with Joanne. You could never tell when
she was joking.
'You old dishrag, I wouldn't have you. Can I use the phone?'
She switched on the meter. 'Who's paying?'
'Me.'
'What with? Drawing pins?'
'My money.'
'You haven't got any.'
'That's why I need to phone. I'm calling Vincent.'
'Does he owe you?'
'A bit.'
'How much?'

I paused and tried to look miserable. Underneath her hard
crust I knew she had a heart of gold. I said 'Three weeks.' I
thought she could afford that.

She sighed like a mother doting on a favourite child and
opened the till. Her agile fingers prised up a bundle of ten franc
notes and counted them one by one. Ninety francs. She picked
out a telephone token from underneath and tossed it to me. 'Use
the phone in the corner,' she said as she replaced the bundle in
the till.

Vincent's phone rang and rang. At last an unshaven voice
answered. It was Gaspard, Vincent's bodyguard. One metre
ninety five and a face like an omelette. He usually sat in the front
of the car with me and made lewd comments about the girls when
he thought that Vincent could not hear. Vincent always heard and
would poke him sharply between the shoulder blades with his
stick. This would make Gaspard start and he would bang his head
on the roof and then swear about the saucepan that he had to sit
in. He really was very stupid. Vincent only kept him because he
looked like a bodyguard and like me, he did not pay him much,
if at all.

'Gaspard!'
'Who is it?'
'It's me, you fool.'

'The boss wants his car at ten o' clock.'

I said something rude about where the boss could put his car. I could imagine Gaspard clumsily clapping his fist over the ear-piece in horror.

'Have you been paid Gaspard?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh. When were you paid?'

'When we went to Casino Harz.'

I remembered that job. It was not a gambling casino of course – all gambling in France was state run. It was an old *manoir* on the road to Compiègne with walled gardens and a kilometre long drive, but it had a restaurant and a band and a dance floor and about three lightbulbs to the hectare so that qualified it as a chic nightclub. Vincent had made me wait outside with the car like a real chauffeur. He had been there for four hours. I had sat there watching the rich and corruptible arriving in furs and jewels.

Four hours in the car with Gaspard is a life sentence with hard labour. Vincent had gone in bouncing, he had been pleased about something. One of his 'big deals' I had to suppose. But he had come out scowling and in a foul mood. Something had not gone as he had desired.

I never learned anything about it of course and Gaspard would have needed pictures and speech balloons to have grasped what was going on. I thought no more of it at the time. I had weathered all his 'big deals.' They usually ended in tears. We did not know it but this one was to end in more than that. But he had paid us, so that was something.

'But that was last month!' I pointed out. You have to point things out to Gaspard. 'So you have had nothing for three weeks like me?'

'Err... I did another job.' I could hear his brain cogs grinding through gristle. I couldn't wait for the jackpot.

'Never mind, never mind.' Then I wondered what Gaspard did when he ran out of money. It was not too much of a problem for me, I could always think of something, but Gaspard? 'Don't you run out of money?'

'You mean, when he doesn't pay us?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah.'

'You mean you do run out of money?'

RUE AMELIE

‘Err... yeah.’
‘Well what do you do then?’
‘Me mum gives me some to tide me over. Oh the boss is here.’
He fumbled the receiver over to Vincent.
‘Has Gaspard told you when I want the car?’
‘Yeah, ten o’ clock.’ I put on my bravado voice. ‘But you won’t get it unless I get paid. You owe me three weeks, Vincent.’
‘It’s “Monsieur Descamps” whilst you’re on my staff.’ His voice was like vinegar off a hot spoon.
‘I don’t work for nothing, Vincent.’
‘You don’t seem to understand that I’ve got overheads. It costs a lot of money to run a car like that. Now you get over here for ten o’ clock or I’ll send Gaspard around to persuade you.’
Nice man Vincent. You always knew where you stood with him. No ambiguity. I hung up and swaggered back to the bar.
‘Well that certainly shook him up,’ I said.
Joanne gave me a look that would curdle velvet.
‘You great nun’s fart,’ was all she said.

The two raincoats followed me back up the street so I stopped at the door of the police station and read the notices pinned on the board. Echoing from inside came the staccato tacking of a one-fingered typewriter making mistakes. Someone swore.

‘Chief in a bad mood?’ I remarked to the policeman with no chin. He shrugged. He knew I didn’t care. With a backward jerk of my head I indicated the two men. ‘Yours?’

‘What?’
‘Are they yours?’
‘Are what mine?’
‘Those two men who’ve been following me.’
From the height of his doorstep he glanced lazily up and down the street. He did it nonchalantly so as not to arouse their suspicions. He did it well. His gaze fell back on me.
‘Why don’t you bugger off and annoy somebody else?’
I turned around. The street was empty.

The concierge collared me on my way back in. She was waving a piece of paper and the glint of victory enlivened her purple eyes and shivered in her double chins.

‘It will give me great pleasure to throw you out!’ she chortled.

I did not doubt her for one moment. She had the smug look of a fully-loaded cowboy when he knew that the baddie's gun was empty. 'And I will throw you out if you don't cough up what you owe to Madame Claire by midday tomorrow.'

'Ah, Madame Claire. And how is she? Still sprinkling ground glass on her pancakes?'

I rattled my finger nail along the cage like a machine gun, hoping the noise would give her bird a heart attack.

Madame Claire would throw me out. I washed my hands in the sink and wiped them dry on the net curtain. I would not be seeing it again, I guessed. I looked about the room. The peeling pink flowered wallpaper fading to beige; the lozenge-shaped wardrobe with the crooked door; the hissing geyser squatting over the earthenware sink; the woodwork painted brown. It was sordid. My strange elation at the prospect of abandoning it was only tempered by the realisation that I had nowhere to go. If only I had been kinder to Joanne. Too late to regret that now.

I saw the parking ticket flapping on the windscreen of the DS as I turned into the rue St. Dominique. I zipped it out with the flourish of a best selling novelist pulling his final sheet from the typewriter. *'Tow away requested 08.10'* it said. I screwed it up and dropped it to the pavement. I glanced up the street. No sign of the tow truck. One day my luck would run out.

As I put my key in the lock, two beige raincoats materialised in the chromium strip along the door and a pink hand closed over mine.

'I'll take that, Monsieur Descamps,' Shorty said. I weighed up whether it was worth telling them that they had got the wrong man. 'On behalf of Central Automobile Finance Syndicate I hereby formerly repossess this vehicle.' Lanky showed me the order. That bastard Vincent had defaulted on the hire purchase and had used my address to do it. 'Sign here,' he said. I signed '*V. Descamps*' with a flourish.

I decided not to put up a fight.

'Do you mind if I get my things out?'

Shorty looked at Lanky who nodded. They seemed relieved. I took Vincent's gloves from the dash, I had always liked them but I left them Gaspard's mints. There were only three left in the bag and one of those he had already partly sucked. As I straightened

up, an orange-roofed tow truck turned in from the avenue.

'Time for a beer?' I nodded towards Jean-Marie's bar. I had not been in it for some time. They looked undecided. 'Oh come on, you owe me something. I could have cut up rough.'

'Bit early for beer,' Shorty said and locked the door with what had been my key. 'Have you got the duplicate?'

He dropped the key into his pocket. He was quite pleasant really. Lanky sucked on his moustache. The orange roof was crawling slowly nearer in the line of rush hour traffic.

'It's at the office. I'll send it to you.' I stepped towards the bar. 'Come in and write down your address for me.'

Shorty looked at Lanky who had stopped sucking on his moustache and was now rubbing his chin. Any minute now he would start scratching his head.

'We could have a coffee. No harm in that,' he said.

'Just a beer for me Jean-Marie.'

Jean-Marie wiped his hands on his black waistcoat and addressed Shorty.

'Are you with him?' He jabbed a spoon in my direction.

Shorty looked at me. 'Temporarily.'

'Who's paying?'

At last, Lanky scratched his head. 'We are,' he said grandly.

'That's alright then.' Jean-Marie gave me a look normally reserved for traffic wardens. 'His credit rating is just below Mexico's.'

Lanky looked at Shorty. 'We know.'

'I could sue you for defamation of character,' I threatened Jean-Marie. 'I've got two witnesses.'

'No you haven't,' Lanky said.

'Cheers then.' I blew the froth at Jean-Marie. He clenched his fists as his short fuse began to smoulder. Lanky and Shorty stiffened. In the mirror I could see across the street where the men from the orange lorry were smartly lowering the front of the DS onto their tow trolley. They don't waste their time, those guys. Perhaps I could get a job with them as a driver.

'If it wasn't for the presence of civilised company here I would push that glass down your throat,' Jean-Marie growled.

'Don't mind us,' Shorty said generously.

Behind them the tow truck sneezed twice on its brakes

as it tried to edge out into the unyielding line of traffic. Would you let a tow truck out from the kerb? Jean-Marie saw it and looked at me. I blinked back at him like an idiot. He grinned smugly and smiled to himself.

‘What’s the joke then *bougnat?*’ I asked. I knew he hated me calling him that.

‘You are Jo-Jo.’ Then he laughed. ‘The great tough Jo-Jo.’ He introduced me to Lanky and Shorty. ‘I give you, messieurs, the biggest cretin in the rue St Dominique.’

Lanky and Shorty shuffled nervously.

‘Go on, amuse yourself,’ I encouraged him. ‘The laugh is always on you.’

‘But not this time, cretin.’ He theatrically looked out of the window. ‘Is that your car being towed away?’

Without looking up I shook my head. ‘No.’

His face dropped in perplexity as Lanky slowly turned.

‘*Merde!*’

He nudged Shorty and then rushed out into the street.

‘*Merde!*’

Shorty wiped the coffee from his coat and rushed out after him. They watched the tail end of the DS disappearing down the street, stern down, like a speed boat. Then they ran.

‘Seems like they don’t want to pay for the drinks.’

‘*Merde!*’

Jean-Marie vaulted over the counter and chased after them. I drained my glass, selected two croissants and a boiled egg from the basket and ambled back towards the Café Clerc, trying to ignore the shouting of the brawling men and the hooting of the traffic. Hurrying down the street came two policemen from the commissariat, the one with no chin trying to button his jacket as he ran. I stepped respectfully aside.

‘Why are you back?’ Joanne asked.

‘Makele!’ I shouted.

‘Jo-Jo!’ Big black face, grinning like a piano.

I tossed him a croissant. ‘Happy birthday.’

‘Messi, Jo-Jo, messi.’ He pushed it straight into his mouth with one finger.

‘Can’t you let a poor worker sleep?’ Pino grumbled and then dropped his head to his arms again.

‘Well?’ Joanne wanted an explanation.

‘You know, Jean-Marie’s croissants are much better than yours.’ I waggled the bitten end under her nose. Her nostrils flared. I recognised the warning too late.

‘Will you answer me?’ The room shifted ten centimetres to the left and my cheek stung from the slap. One of Joanne’s slaps would sober up an archbishop. Two would canonise him. I concentrated on shelling my egg. It always makes my eyes water. With most people it is onions. Me, boiled eggs.

‘I have just given away Vincent’s motor car to those two nice gentlemen in the raincoats.’

‘Of course. Knew I’d seen that type before. Finance company bailiffs,’ Pino mumbled from somewhere under his armpit.

‘Thanks for the warning.’

‘My pleasure.’

‘So you’re out of work and broke?’

Joanne had this way of gilding life.

‘I’ve still got my good looks.’

She silently swayed aside to uncover the mirror. I did not like what I saw. A brown-haired man of medium height with a face that would frighten nobody. Grey-green eyes sunken in sockets that were black shadowed from too little sleep and not enough food, a nose you could hang a hat on and a mouth which veered too easily to the sardonic. A wrinkled forehead above; a creased jaw below. And I was not yet forty.

‘Jo-Jo got no *boulot*?’ Makele lumbered up to the bar. His sunny black face was clouded with rain.

‘You’ve got it, me old broom-shunter. Jo-Jo’s got no *boulot*.’

‘Makele take you to big bossman. He give you *boulot*.’ His arm encircled my shoulders. To a Senegalese with no papers, having no job meant starvation. His concern should have touched me but I was too conceited.

Suddenly a ball of anguish shot through the sunlit doorway. ‘They’re after me!’ it announced and dived for the dark corner. I silently unhooked Pino’s workcoat from the wall and spread it over the crouching figure.

Pino raised his head momentarily and dropped it. Makele grinned. Joanne sighed heavily. It was going to be one of those days.

Martins the Portuguese. His full name was something like

Joachim Pele de Martins Silva but everyone called him Martins. In most respects he was the typical olive-skinned, black-haired peasant who had abandoned the fields of the Estrella for the bright lights. His stocky body had a wiriness about it which was not evident until you tried to move him out of the way. But by then it was too late.

Martins was mad. Not all the time, just occasionally. No-one could predict when it would be triggered off. Some said you could tell it in his eyes. They were black like coffee beans and never stopped for more than a second upon anything. Checking right and left, up and down, fearful. Three years playing hopscotch over land mines in Angola had made him a trifle irritable but the Portuguese army were not the caring type – they had just spat him out.

I looked around the bar. What a party! The matinal clientele of the Café Clerc consisted of a Senegalese road sweeper with a French vocabulary nudging double figures, a defrocked lawyer who delivered newspapers, a former driver and dogsbody for a small-time thug and a mad Portuguese limousine chauffeur. I then realised that the latter presented me with a glimmer of hope. When Martins came back to sanity he could put in a word for me with Voitures Verjat. I still had my *Grande Randonnée* licence somewhere, they would insist on seeing that. Getting a suit might be a problem. I could already see myself swishing along in one of their black Cadillacs with a rich widow cocooned in the back.

I took a step towards the quivering coat and my left ear was nearly torn from my head. Joanne had claws like a crab.

‘Oh no you don’t. He’s got enough troubles without you adding your donation.’ She was walking me ear-first to the door. I went with her. I hate to hit a woman. ‘I don’t want to see you in here until you have money and a job.’

This stung me a bit. Joanne could be purposefully unkind when she wanted.

‘Why should I be different from the rest of your drop-out friends?’ I hurled over my shoulder as I slunk down the pavement. A stale bread roll ricocheted off the back of my skull and made a noise like Fred Astaire in a sandpit as it exploded on the roof of a passing taxi.

I had one metro ticket left of an ancient *carnet* so I took the train to Barbès Rochechouart. I was going to ask Miro for a job. I had deduced that my term in Vincent's esteemed employ had come to maturity. Miro was a big-time thug. When he wanted a little job doing then he sometimes slipped it to Vincent. When this happened, Vincent would swagger about thinking he could roar like Al Capone. He couldn't; he just fizzed like Alka Seltzer.

Yes, I would ask Miro for a job. It was the right moment for me to move into the big time.

The train was fetid with hot, closely packed humans, rattling and banging against each other with studied unconcern. Before me swayed an elderly man in a rank smelling overcoat and a homburg. Red-rimmed eyes and dripping nose, and this was July. I turned away and looked at the tunnel wall wavering past. 'Dubo... Dubon... Dubonnet' said the faded posters. The train strained up the slope from under the Seine and crawled into Concorde. All along the platform masses of brightly coloured and eager tourists stood, guide books in hand, ready to launch themselves into the Parisian folklore. As the doors banged open everybody in the carriage groaned silently and took a step backwards. I already had my back against the partition. I breathed in.

'Hallo Jo-Jo. What are you doing here?'

Henri. A lean *piéd noir* with cadaverous eyes. A metro thief with a speciality.

'Hallo Henri. How's business?' I knew I was safe. My entire fortune amounted to the two twenty centime pieces in my pocket and the used metro ticket.

He shrugged. 'So, so. Soon be August.'

August. The holiday month.

'Going anywhere?'

'Might try Monte-Carlo this year. Did Nice last year but the cops are getting sharp since that conservative lot got in.'

'I had never realised how regional socio-politics impinged upon your trade.'

'You what?'

The train jolted off and he lurched against me. I smiled through my teeth and squeezed my hand at his throat, not quite playfully.

‘Unless you’re intending to leave me in credit, don’t even think of it.’

‘Honest Jo-Jo! On my mother’s life. I overbalanced.’ Then he looked at me queerly. ‘You skint?’

‘Down to the washers on my roller skates.’

He looked at me again and then his gaze drifted on.

‘Customers. Must go.’ He tapped me on the chest, about where my wallet would have been had I possessed one. ‘See you again.’ He began to worm his way down the carriage towards his victim – a foreign tourist with a summer skirt and a shoulder bag.

They had been excavating a new station at the Opera for as long as I cared to remember. Hacking down through the city subsoil, through the strata of centuries of primitive city sanitation. To counteract the stench the contractors were using a strawberry perfumed disinfectant. The result smelled like an enormous sweating brothel. The sickly stale odour permeated every tunnel, infused every stairway, percolated into every train. On windless days it could be smelled in the Opera building itself.

I tried breathing through my mouth and the smell stuck to my teeth like toffee. I could feel perspiration beginning to trickle down my spine. The workmen’s yellow lightbulbs bobbed up and down past the windows as the train rolled past their festooned loops.

Strasbourg St.Denis, this is where I change. I nodded down the carriage to Henri but he was working. The girl was glancing pleadingly to the left and right in a gasping disbelief with Henri’s carressing fingers between the buttons of her skirt and his other hand in her shoulder bag. What the hell! This was Paris. She could have stayed at home. At least she would enjoy some of it.

At Barbès Rochechouart I leaned against the pillar and watched the train rumbling off over the elevated section above me whilst I tried to think up a strategy to use with Miro. I gave it up and started watching the girls, jingling the two twenty centime coins in my pocket. A cheeky redhead in hot pants and thigh high boots shouted across to me.

‘You prefer the cheap job then?’

I eyed her coolly. She wasn’t one of Vincent’s girls, that I was sure of. And this was not his patch. I sauntered over, fixing her with my eye. She squirmed uneasily and looked around.

‘Emilie!’ she called to a hag with a fag. Emilie glanced around, took stock of the situation with her forty years of street experience and returned to her lamp post.

‘You’re a bit new aren’t you?’ I said to her. ‘I’m looking for Miro. You must be one of his girls.’

‘Don’t know what you mean. Are you a cop?’

‘And naive with it. Just tell me where I can find him sweetie.’

‘Don’t know who you mean.’

I shrugged. ‘I’ll ask Emilie then.’

‘Up that street. Big grey building on the left. Top floor.’ She pouted.

‘To show my unbounded gratitude, half of what I own is yours.’ I flipped her one of my coins. She watched it roll into the gutter as I walked away.

It was a concrete office block. It must have been put up in the thirties. The street door was a double panel of iron and glass art deco. The vestibule was a sharp edged box of grey marble with a five pipe brass banister rail coiling up the stairwell and amber fluted glass lampshades on the walls. ‘Top floor,’ she had said. On the wall by the lift was a name board. I perused it. *Mirovici Group – Floor Six* that would be the one. It had never occurred to me to wonder what Miro’s real name was. Mirovici. His father must have been a White Russian who had escaped during the 1917 Revolution.

I got out of the lift at the fifth floor for the good reason that it climbed no higher. From the landing window I could see across the rooftops of the city right down to the Seine and the Eiffel Tower; in the other direction, steep steps climbed in cobbled streets taking tourists up towards the Sacré Coeur.

My staircase to the sixth floor was of uniform grey stone. The notice on the door on the top landing said, *Mirovici Group. Ring the bell and wait.* I rang the bell and went in.

A gravelly voice grated, ‘It says, “ring the bell and wait.”’

The man slipped his feet from the table and, in one movement, rolled into an upright monolith of muscle to bar my progress through the ante-room.

‘That’s what I did.’

‘And wait.’ He prodded me in the chest with his fingers. It hurt but he was shorter than me so I did not hit him.

‘I waited.’ I gave him a witheringly superior look. ‘It doesn’t

say how long to wait.' He hit me in the stomach.

The other door opened and Miro walked in. He glanced at me, doubled over.

'Who's this?' he asked.

'Some smartarse who can't read.'

'Nice shoes,' I said from my banana pose. I had not forgotten that I was trying to get a job out of this man.

'Show me his mug, Luc.'

The gorilla's hand grabbed a bunch of my hair and yanked me upright.

Rather than swagger about like the crook that he was, Miro liked to project the image of a Russian count. He had the figure and face for it. He was slim and dressed in an expensively cut grey suit with silk shirt cuffs held by mother-of-pearl links which matched his tie pin. To underline how the passage of time had dealt elegantly with him he proudly wore his thinning silver grey hair brushed straight back. His eyebrows, still dark and bushy, adopted a position on his forehead somewhere between scorn and pity. He was clean shaven and his perfect teeth shone with thousands of francs of dentistry.

The gunsight of his aquiline nose swung the hard blue eyes unerringly onto the target.

'Oh it's the driver for that idiot Descamps,' he remarked. 'Or should I say "business associate Descamps?" Where is he?'

'He's not here.'

'No Luc,' he restrained his door thug, 'don't stroke him again. You've had your fun for today.' Luc made a face which indicated that he could absorb a lot more enjoyment yet without satiation. 'Bring him in. He's making a delivery.'

This was news to me but I didn't show it. Luc pushed me through the doorway behind Miro. The office was straight from a Hollywood film set. The room was large, it occupied the entire top floor front of the building. The walls were lined with art deco walnut and the ceiling was illuminated by concealed lights. I expected to see a wall panel swing silently open and Edward G Robinson step in holding an automatic in his hand. On a podium at one end stood a massive wooden desk the size of a small Cadillac. Miro walked over and sat on a swivel chair behind it. I remained standing. I had to. There were no other chairs.

'I knew Descamps would realise that the job was too big for his

tin pot outfit to handle.' Miro held out his palm. 'Well, hand them over,' he ordered.

'I haven't got them,' I stalled.

'Doesn't Descamps trust me?'

The innocent enquiry was outrageously impertinent. There was no doubt that Miro intended it to sound like a threat loaded with sinister malice. I wondered just what kind of business Vincent was getting himself into. If it involved trusting Miro, it was out of his league.

'Trust you?' I echoed. 'Not if he's got any sense.'

Miro stared at me for a second as if he had not heard. But I knew he had. His eyes went cruel. I didn't somehow think I was going to get a job today.

'Tell Descamps he's got a week to deliver it.'

'Tell him yourself. I don't work for him.'

I was definitely not going to get a job today.

'Since when?'

'Since this morning.'

'What are you wasting my time for? Throw him out.'

Luc shuffled forwards.

'I want a job,' I said.

Miro held up his hand. Luc stopped.

'You want a job?' I waited whilst he laughed. He showed me all his fillings. It looked like stocktaking day at Cartier's. 'A reject from that half-brained goat? Why should I give you a job? What can you do?'

'Drive.'

'So can my sixteen year old daughter.'

'Buses?'

'I don't take the bus.'

'Lorries? Artics? Bulldozers?'

He rearranged his silk tie. 'I don't own any bulldozers.'

'Tanks?'

'Throw him out.'

'Don't trouble yourself, Luc, I know the way.'

He troubled himself.

The redhead in the hot pants was still standing under the metro.

'O.K. chéri?' She grinned at me. 'Good business?'

'Buy yourself an ice cream.' I flipped the other twenty centime piece at her.

I crossed over the boulevard, thrust my hands into my pockets and threw myself into Pigalle. I would have to walk back to the rue Amélie. I had used my last metro ticket and had just thrown away my last coin. I could have done with a drink. I was still head down and pondering this lacuna when a woman's voice accosted me.

'Hello Jo-Jo. You're early this morning.' I looked up. It was Flore. One of Vincent's 'girls'. Henna'd hair, spangle top and miniskirt. 'Where's the old git? Too lazy to get out of the car?'

But I was not listening to her. I was looking at the envelope she was thrusting at me.

'Yeah, that's it.' My voice was vague. 'Lazy git.'

She switched her lilac plastic bag onto the other shoulder. 'You know Jo-Jo,' she jerked her head at the doorway behind her, 'as you're a bit early... I've always fancied you. One on the house?'

The nightmare vision of her wrinkled flesh unwrapping before my sensitive eyes jerked me to my senses. My fingers closed on the envelope and I pushed it into my pocket.

'Sorry Flore, can't stop. Another time perhaps.'

Like next century.

She shrugged. 'Another time then.'

As I walked on down the street, thoughts were pounding in my brain. Vincent could not get here for another hour at least. He had no car and no driver. I slipped into the patchy gloom of an awakening bar.

'Beer,' I said and pulled out the envelope, hiding it below the counter as I ripped it open and counted. Five hundred francs. I did not know how the levy was calculated or what the five hundred francs represented, I just knew that it was more than my month's rent. I tossed a hundred francs onto the counter.

'Haven't you got anything smaller?' The barman grimaced. I was probably his first customer. I shook my head. He scooped up the money. 'I'll go and see at the fruiterers. Don't go away,' he said, as if there were a danger of me walking off and forgetting my hundred francs.

'I'll tell you what – give me another beer before you go.'

It followed the first one down a treat. I sat up on the stool and tucked the four remaining notes into my sock. I watched a woman

at a window in the building opposite brushing the knots from her hair. She was sitting in front of an oval mirror, tugging at tangles and talking to the unseen reflection of somebody behind her in the room. With each tug her bosom wobbled in her peignoir like schoolkids jostling in the queue.

The barman returned carrying a bag of oranges. 'Bloody Marie-Claire,' he muttered. 'Just wait till she wants a glass of water.' He scowled and slapped the change down before me.

'Cheer up.' I put my empty glass on the counter. 'Vitamin C is good for you.'

Roseanne, the short Lyonnaise with the long black hair, gave me her envelope with no more protest than a slightly quizzical look. I patted her bottom and she told me not to handle the goods if I wasn't buying. I sauntered away, tingling with the feel of the money in my pocket. When I got to the rue Victor Massé I thought Liliane was going to give me trouble.

'What do you want?' she asked. Her lipstick had left red marks on her teeth. She looked like Dracula's mother.

'What do you think?'

'Where's Vincent?'

'In the car.'

'Why isn't he here?' Her look was challenging.

'Do you want me to go and get him? He would be pleased to give an account of himself to you if you asked him nicely.'

She pinched her lips together and then pulled a plastic envelope from her purse. 'Ignorant peasant!' she said.

'I'll give him your message.'

'I meant you.'

I smiled magnificently and walked away. By the time that I had reached Estienne d'Orves I had five envelopes in my pocket and considered that honour had been satisfied. Vincent had owed me wages, now we were quits. As I walked along I carefully tore open the envelopes and discarded them. Now there was no proof of any wrongdoing. Just money. A little over two thousand francs.

I found Makele at the Madeleine, sweeping a tidal wave of water down the gutter with his besom.

'Jo-Jo!' His black face lit up and he gave me a hug. He stunk like a damp raincoat. I would never get used to the smell of Africans.

‘Makele, pack up. We’re going for a drink.’

Like a circus clown his great face dropped into an expression of heartboken regret that could have been interpreted by a blind man standing three streets away. He shook his head.

‘Makele got no *fric*,’ he said.

I pulled the bundle of notes to the edge of my pocket so that he could see them. ‘Jo-Jo’s got *fric*.’

‘Jo-Jo got *fric*?’ His eyes widened to the whites. He was giving me the full works. Any minute now he would start juggling melons.

‘Come on. Where’s your broom cupboard?’

With the toe of his sandal he kicked up the metal flap in the pavement and bent down and twisted the tap. The gush of water drizzled to a trickle. We shuffled to the green cylindrical tower at the street corner. The posters pasted around it were announcing the Winter Circus. He took out his key, opened the secret door in the column and stepped inside. Then he turned to give me his grand finale. From the blackness of the tower his teeth and eyes shone white just like the Banania advert. He propped up his broom and shook his jacket onto a peg. Then he stepped out into the sunlight in a torquoise and green shirt. I prayed that the colour would mellow after a few beers.

‘I think we’ll start over there.’ I pointed at the nearest bar. ‘And then we can work our way down to the river and find a bench.’

Makele grinned easily. He did not want to know where the money had come from. Its mere existence was sufficient for him.

‘O.K. Jo-Jo. We drink.’