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I, Charlotte, Comme Il Faut

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NORGE ESPINOSA

I, Charlotte, comme il faut
(a dramatic poem)

*People interested her almost not at all, no matter what sex or age they were.
Most of the time, when she spoke, she seemed to wake up startled from a day-
dream, which in some other period might have led her to become a mystic, but
in her case was political.*

—On Charlotte Corday, from an anonymous biography

Your Honor here on my face
Are the marks still fresh of my first murder
Which unfortunately will also be my last
Since I know history well and I respect it
I am happy to have saved France
From such a terrible monster
And I'm proud of the thrust of my knife
Which may seem to you like an inimical act
Reason enough for the verdict to come swiftly
And the sentence and later my rest
Next to Brutus in the Elysian Fields of my imagination
I will answer right away so please be patient
You should know that in April of the present year
I sent my father a long letter saying
I was going to England in exile fleeing poverty
And the corruption at the heart of this country
And yet I begged for his blessing
Besides asking him to watch over my footsteps
A prudent request at a time like this
Words that can only aspire to draw him away
From guilt and the mocking of drunkards
Who follow the one killed without remorse
Because I was truly sick of the "Terror" and had decided
That if all the men of this land were so worthless
It was necessary to exterminate the guilty ones
Above all the one who had cut off two thousand heads

And that is how I came to Paris on July eleventh
Checking in right away at the Providence Hotel
A place which had been recommended to me
And where I was well treated
Because the crisis had not yet stripped my countrymen
Of the last of their goodness and in the ruins we were equal
Complying in a more or less coherent fashion
With the sacred objectives of the revolution
My plan to kill him in public
At the Federation Parade at army headquarters
Which was to be held for him and his comrades
There I would pull out a knife and bring him to justice
Prepared for the fanatical crowd to tear me to pieces
Killing me at once without even knowing my name
But the monster no longer appeared in public
No longer went out because his illness
Had forced him into seclusion his cracked skin
Itched more and more and he had to stay at home
Sitting in the bathtub soaping his ass
Twenty-four hours straight writing and rewriting
The names of those who were to be executed
Erased from our history by the stroke of a pen
The privilege of a tyrant about to die
Shit I cried out but I didn't give up
Somehow I needed to enter his house
Which was guarded by a fat cook
A boy a policeman and a foul-smelling maid
Three times I tried your Honor
Three times I tried to cross that threshold
And three times I heard those bitches
Covered with scarlet insignia curse
Screaming more than me saying things
I will not repeat out of respect for your Honor
I wrote two letters to Marat explaining to him
That I wanted to bring him the names of the conspirators
In a horrible plot to kill him the leper
Squashing him like a toad or a black basilisk
In his own filthy tub of mangy water

Letters I had taken up to him
While he cried Simone don't beat me
She looked at me with fear
She who long ago had sacrificed her virginity
Not exactly for the good of the revolution
And then I was facing him your Honor
Finally I had before me that naked chest
Into which I would plunge the knife I was concealing
In my girdle here in my womb let me stop here
For a moment to remember it does me good
As if a sweet wind were blowing over me
What mortals have called happiness
What the revolution calls duty fulfilled
Let me describe for you with a wealth of details
How I killed him I'm giving you the exclusive story
Gentlemen of the jury don't deny this last wish
Of a young murderess who at this very moment
Inspires mysterious feelings of pity in you
I took four hours to pick out the knife
Before you on the floor by the bathtub
Four whole hours going from booth to booth
At the market at the Palais Royal searching
Without noticing the cloth the perfume the dresses
Which a young woman of my beauty should have noticed
Two francs it cost just two francs
Which is the precise cost of immortality itself
I'm much younger than any of us imagines
I liked its white handle its menacing air
Pure death inscribed on it by an innocent craftsman
And as if in a dream I handed it to the vendor
Who praised it saying it was wonderful for fruit
Not for a human chest the ignoramus didn't know
How soon that delicate blade would be plunged
Into the darkest heart in all of France
The heart of France itself
To cut out the vile worm gnawing at him
It was painful your Honor to see that man stripped
Of his august robe barely covered with a dirty sheet

That Simone had refused to wash
The bath water was red I remember
Because I was disappointed
I dreamed of seeing blood
Staining everything the water the walls
My face nothing like that took place
That man made me feel sorry and I cried as I had
In Caen when I saw one of my few friends die
Simone found me there when she tried to interrupt us
She fled at the sight of my tears begging pardon
Leaving me alone with him once and for all
While he feverishly copied each name
Muttering over and over executed executed
As if he thought of himself as God
A proud sinner a killer the great monster
Without even asking about the causes or motives
Of the vile plot to eliminate him
I am not a believer your Honor
But I swear I heard a bell tolling
Although it was getting dark and surely
They could only ring death knells in those horrible days
I am not a believer respectful gentlemen of the jury
But I understood those bells were warning me
The time had come and I raised my hand
This way the way I'm raising it now
Once again raising the knife to plunge it
Without pity without shame without any qualms
Into the filthy body of the one I hated
Sinking it into his throat the end of the revolution
Your Honor you must forgive me
But in truth I cannot find the exact words
To describe for you in a vivid way
The expression on his face the horrid mask
He wore in the final moment of his life
He who suffered
The man I killed the only one the wretch
Because at that moment his face was also
The face of everyone he had had executed

And in a succession as rapid as it was horrible
I saw France before me the whole of France guillotined
I would have stabbed him again in my fury
Had he not howled with a voice that was not his
But the voice of hell itself
A moi ma chere ami
Which made me freeze the water
Stained with his corruption spilled on my robe
Leaving me wet and slimy
From an empty body that was no longer Marat
Falling slowly carefully in a beautiful
Gesture the most daring artists would copy
This way lean a little more to the right a little more
Slowly Jean Paul lean your head
Don't tighten your arm hold the pen like this
Your face should be ecstatic with the light on it
So that David our most dynamic painter
Can give the scene an exalted air
Let him do what he has learned to do in this time
Of your death another passage of sparkling glory
Another splendid page of the revolution
From which they will never be able to erase me
Look at my knife all of you take a good look at me
And celebrate this humble fine-featured maiden
Whom they will call the new Judith greater than Brutus
The brave schoolteacher horrible at the moment of her death
Before my face is buried under the waves
Of marble we call history
See my flashing eyes the flush of my cheeks
The subtle gesture with which I say good-bye
To the frightful corpse shrouded in water
That is Marat dead that is Robespierre dead
Dead like Napoleon and Louis XIV and the Dauphin
Like Marie Antoinette and Casanova and the gendarmes
Who took Joan of Arc the cross
So she could kiss it as the flames swept over her
Dead like Hector like Julius Caesar like Charlemagne
Like Galileo like Leonardo

Like Dreyfus dead like Rodin and Rilke
Like Bertolt Brecht before the ruined ghettos
Dead like Shakespeare and Dante in the mystical rose
That elevates us that is perfection itself
Dead as all the victims of all the wars in history
Dead like honor like dead leaders
Cities like Athens Jerusalem
London Vienna Berlin St. Petersburg Warsaw
Like the statues dead
Dead like their heroes whom I see now
In the dirty water of your silence oh Marat
You who wrote will the people's friend
Always have to play the role of Cassandra for you
As if you guessed as if you knew
No one would ever pay attention to your cry
No one would ever notice your gesture
Dead beautiful Marat my most sublime masterpiece
And now my time
Your Honor there is nothing more to say
Just that when I heard his last cry suddenly
Abruptly they appeared oh so quickly
The monster's servants when he had not yet died
Ardently calling out his famous slogans
Filthy signs of their enormous indignation
Pushing me to the ground tearing my robe
Which I put up with like a good Norman woman
Like a martyr I should say it doesn't matter
Details the rabble will know by now
And later will be confused with heroism
Among so many other things that speak of our pride
Our dignity in survival
Judge me for yourselves I who wait only for death
May it be as I imagine a happy journey
To a better place more beautiful and worthy
Than here where life is not worth its name
Now leave me in peace let Simone leave now
Later you will return to insult me to avenge yourselves
Before they come to take me to the abbey

Let me listen with joy to my sentence
Don't beat me Simone I promise not to abandon you
Before you punish me leaving my back marked
By your fingernails your teeth woman turned into a fury
Whose bandages will you put on now
Who will you be faithful to
Augur of my death you will say good-bye to me
Spitting on me as if to crown me
Good-bye your Honor gentlemen of the jury
May no one doubt or hesitate
I Charlotte killed the way I needed to
The right way

Translated from the Spanish by Daniel Balderston and Christopher Merrill