

## Snow in Paris

(Translation of Sitor Situmorang's<sup>1</sup> "Salju di Paris")

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He threw the blanket back as though he had slept for a very long time. The dark room was filled with a white light. Outside, the city was covered with snow. Was the snow still falling? He sat up and his feet searched for his slippers on the floor. The floor was as cold as ice. In the shop below he could hear Madame Bonnet, the widow who owned the hotel, calling out.

"Monique!"

She was calling for the maid.

He turned to the window. Snow fell on the damp glass, like flickering scratches on an old film. It was very cold and very quiet.

Standing, he made his way to the washbasin against the wall. Without thinking, he turned on the hot tap. The water burned his hand and he angrily drew it back, then turned on the cold tap. The sound of the water splashing into the basin, hot and cold together, revived him and warmed his blood a little. It was a very cold Winter. He went and took his dressing gown from the hook behind the door.

A fragrant powder rose from the folds of the coat, like a forgotten mist. A pain tore at his heart.

He dragged himself back to the basin. It was empty. He had forgotten to put in the plug. There were a few long strands of hair at the bottom of the basin.

He went back to sleep.

When he looked at his watch again, it was eleven o'clock. Monique had knocked at his door some time ago. He could hear the sound of the vacuum cleaner in room 15, next to his.

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<sup>1</sup> Sitor Situmorang (b. 1923) is a major Indonesian poet and short story writer. "Snow in Paris" (Salju di Paris) was first published in 1954 and was included in Sitor's anthology *Pertempuran dan Salju di Paris*. This translation is part of a new project to translate Sitor's short stories into English.

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Hoping that Monique would come in, he sat down again. Monique knew everything and said nothing. Madame Bonnet knew too, but Madame Bonnet was different. She was a widow and understood everything on the basis of her own experiences. Monique had not had these experiences. She understood things intuitively. Her eyes were soft, she smiled and she did the work expected of her every day.

In the mornings she looked after Madame Bonnet's three children (two boys and a girl) and dressed them to go to the nearby parish school. She opened the door for Andre, the bar attendant, a retired chauffeur. She dusted the furniture. Then she woke the boarders. The sound of her shoes at certain times in the morning was one of those important, unnoticed things, which, like the water flowing through the pipes, you only heard when it stopped.

Monique wouldn't come back today.

Surprisingly, this cheered him. He began to whistle. The noise of the vacuum cleaner in the next room stopped and then started again, more loudly than before. He forgot Monique and went downstairs.

*"Bonjour monsieur Andre, bonjour Madame!"*

Did they reply or not? Andre placed a cup of coffee, "ground coffee" as he always stressed, in front of him. He had learnt that the Indonesian did not like coffee essence.

Various customers came in. Almost all of them were drivers from the large garage under the building next to the hotel.

They calmly entered one after the other, bringing the wind with them. The half-opened door sprang shut again each time. Rubbing their cold hands together, they stamped their boots on the threshold to get rid of the mud and dirty snow.

*"Bonjour!"*

Then they climbed onto the round bar stools.

Andre served them coffee and wine. Some drank wine, while eating the bread they had brought with them. Already big men, their size was magnified by their thick shabby jackets.

He saw them in relation to Andre and the bar, the way Andre made coffee and poured the drinks, casually but faithfully. Every day.

But were the other days the same as today? The various wine bottles stood in rows behind Andre's handsome face and full head of hair.

Cinzano, Dubonnet and others in various colours.

The men said very little. They were part of the silent early morning ritual that began again each day. It was as quiet as a country restaurant.

*"Will you have lunch here today, monsieur, or shall I wrap you a roll?"*

He shook his head, almost like a spoiled child, and, standing up, walked to the door. The door swung noisily back and closed behind him. Outside, the air was as cold as ice and immediately enfolded him.

Should he turn right or left, or go to the centre of the city? The snow was still falling. He could feel it stabbing against his ears and hair.

He had met her a few days ago. It was later in the day than this but snowing in exactly the same way. Perhaps five days ago. Yes, five days ago. Today is Tuesday. On Thursday.

He had been on his way to police headquarters, at the Prefecture, to renew his alien's residence permit. It was something he had to do at certain times. Now he only needed to report once a year. He had lived in Paris for fifteen years.

It was easier as an artist to be granted permission to live in France. *Peintre*, painter, he wrote and indeed he was a painter, although he had not painted anything for the past five years.

He wanted to write poetry too. It seemed to him that Paris and all it contained invited one to be a poet. Meaning: to write, to express one's feelings in a real poem.

That had never happened. Well, once. Five days ago, the night he met the girl, while they were sitting on the terrace of a restaurant beside the River Seine, facing the Notre Dame, with its towers soaring into the sky, white in the falling snow and the spotlights from the field in front of it.

"A prayer thrust high into the sky," he had said. She wrote the words into a red notebook she took from her handbag.

He regretted the words. He was embarrassed but didn't say anything.

Had they really met? Lived four nights together?

After leaving the Prefecture, having renewed his visa, he was startled at the gateway to the Marche aux Fleurs, the flower market, to see a nervous figure, a woman, approach him through the snow, and stop in front of him. They briefly looked at each other.

He could not explain why, but the look in the woman's eyes caught him by surprise and he turned unconsciously to buy a newspaper, the *Paris Presse*, from a street vendor. For many years he had lived in a dream, separate from the bustle of the enormous city. Now the snow and his memories locked him into a tiny space, inhabited only by the figure of this woman. Everything outside that space was a figment of his imagination. He looked at the lead coin in his hand. Only that was real.

Had she spoken to him?

"Monsieur, do you speak English?"

He was briefly startled. It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to him.

"Yes."

The girl, she was still young, explained her situation. She had wanted to apply for a visa to go to Switzerland. Having come from London, she had decided to extend her journey. But she had no photographs and the officials

needed a photograph. The requirement applied to Asians. Europeans didn't need a visa. What race was she? Mixed?

"*Suives moi!*" he said reassuringly with a wave of his hand. Without realising, he was speaking French. But the girl understood and was now walking beside him. There was an island in the middle of the Seine, near the Notre Dame and other important buildings. He knew a photographer there. Ready "in ten minutes."

They followed the road beside the Notre Dame cathedral, turned left into a small road and then crossed a narrow and dark yard to a building. This was where the photographer worked, as indicated by the sign "*Here for your passport-photos*" and the pointing figure of a hand.

Inside, the girl removed her overcoat. She was slender and attractive. Her cardigan was wine red.

He stood in the corner of the studio, like a guide used to serving tourists, watching her as she took out a comb, mirror and her make-up.

A few minutes later the girl was ready to have her photograph taken. Now he could observe her from the side. Her face, her hair, breasts, hands, feet.

The impression was inconclusive. She was pretty but was she married? How old was she? She had both a child's simplicity and a woman's maturity and firmness.

The camera snapped twice and they only needed to wait. Their eyes met and he looked away.

"I would like to make a phone call. Can you help me, please? I can't use the Paris directory. It is not like the London book."

"What number?"

"I don't know. The Empire Hotel."

There were six Empire Hotels listed in the directory.

He asked the girl which road the hotel was on. She didn't know.

"What is it near? What important building, I mean?"

"Near the Saint Lazaire station."

Finally they found it. Or at least found one worth trying.

"Who would you like to speak to, Miss?" he asked, covering the mouthpiece with his hand.

"Mr Stone, room 115."

He was startled but hid his surprise. And even more startled to hear the clerk say that Mr Stone had paid for the room and checked out.

When he explained the situation to the young woman, she showed no response. They paid for the photographs and left without saying anything else.

He felt as though they had known each other for a long time. Unconsciously, perhaps because of the cold, they walked close together.

When they reached the police station, he read the girl's name: Margareth Rodrigo.

“My name is Machmud.”

The girl looked at him for a moment.

“Are you Indonesian?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Philippino.”

“I saw your passport.”

Outside again, they wandered aimlessly through the falling snow.

“Do you still want to go to Switzerland?”

“No.”

He understood.

“Come and have a drink.”

That was it. Five days ago. That night, he took her back to his hotel. They met Madame Bonnet on the stairs. He didn’t introduce the girl. Madame Bonnet smiled and seemed to bless them. Had she not, the staff might have made things difficult.

“*Mignon,*” Madame said to no one in particular. Pretty. She continued down the stairs.

Margareth was indeed beautiful. She gave herself like a cat seeking warmth on a cold night.

Bonnet’s “family” accepted the new situation. As he himself did, without asking any questions. But he wanted others to ask him how and why. Monique addressed Margareth as “Madame.”

It was all very friendly. Margareth accepted the term as if it were her right.

During those few days, Margareth followed him everywhere he went in town, as he met his friends, borrowed money, went to the embassy on the half day a week he worked there, making stenciled copies of information brochures to be sent to other embassies, where they would probably never be read but simply thrown away, as well as tearing up brochures from other embassies as soon as they were received.

Nobody asked him.

He wanted people to ask him questions, just as he himself wanted to ask questions.

He wanted Aimee, the Jewish girl, to ask how and why he had disappeared the past few days. Aimee was nice but she was as hard as iron. She wore long sleeves to cover the numbers tattooed in Buchenwald under her fine skin. He wanted them to ask him about love, faithfulness, betrayal and friendship. But no one did. He had long ago stopped asking himself about such matters.

He wanted to ask Margareth. But Margareth seemed to have no need to ask anything and was silent. She told him nothing about herself. He was living inside a story and he wanted to escape. But Margareth said nothing. Both of them said nothing.

Yesterday he was determined he would ask her about herself or tell her about himself when he returned home.

Because the day was cold and Margareth was tired, he went to “work” alone.

On his way downstairs, he had met Monique.

“Is Madame awake?”

“Leave her. Wake her at eleven. But please take her some coffee now... Er, and tell her that I'll be back at six.”

But just before six that night, when he entered a restaurant near the metro for a customary drink, he met Wong. He was annoyed.

He didn't like meeting Wong. Especially now. Wong was an Indonesian Chinese but he could already see himself in this older man.

Wong had spent twenty years in Paris. He had taken his wife, a French woman, back to Indonesia after he had graduated from the Sorbonne, perhaps he hadn't graduated at all. She had left him, after living two years in Jakarta. And now Wong, like a character in a novel, was still searching for her among the six million inhabitants of Paris.

Twenty years. No one knew whether the story was true or not, whether he had ever found her and, most surprising of all, what Wong did for a job and where he got his money.

Wong's life mirrored his own, although he couldn't explain why. He had never married, never had a wife the way Wong had. But they shared something in common. He couldn't deny that. Although he had never tried to understand the feeling. He just knew that he didn't like meeting Wong. Not just because Wong was bald, not because Wong wore glasses and had wrinkles around his mouth. And not because of the sad, patient, and mischievous look in his eyes. He often felt sorry for Wong, especially when Wong asked him to pay for his coffee.

But Wong was standing there. With his back to the entrance, in front of the cashier. He was buying a sweepstakes' ticket.

He tried to leave at once but Wong turned and saw him across the cigarette smoke and the noise of the voices. He was caught in Wong's gaze and sullenly entered the café.

For a long time, he was forced to listen to Wong telling him what he would do with the millions of francs he could win from betting on the horses and such like.

At ten he finally returned to the hotel. There was no one downstairs. Andre had apparently gone out the back. He climbed the stairs quickly. His heart was beating rapidly. He knew. It was not simply an intuition.

The room was tidy, the air warm and moist. It was empty of all signs of humanity, except for the traces of boredom. Cleaned, slept in, cleaned, slept in.

The room never spoke, never asked questions and never answered any. Monique looked away.

He went downstairs. Andre had returned and seemed extremely busy arranging the bottles on a shelf. Madame was nowhere to be seen. Everything stopped and revolved around his loneliness as he stared at the marble tables.

That was last night. He walked through the snow. Passed buses.

The snow lay thickly on the roads and the rooftops. He walked, then turned around and stared at his footprints. Two doves flew anxiously about, looking for food on the snow covered ground.

The snow fell, gradually filling his footprints, covering the mud, turning everything white again. As white as the lonely path in front of him.