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THE COLOURS OF AIR

‘Grandfathers! Forward! Bring them on! They let you choose a nationality, even a document. But – of course, you’ll be investigated.’

‘JEAN-LUC,’ says Mélusine, ‘He read the poster. He won’t admit – go a bit back, we mostly come from somewhere else. He can’t make sense of it.’

‘Political bombs,’ says Angelina, her friend. ‘They make monuments. Most just rip out the fittings. The air bombs – those lay flat. That’s business. Or no business – quite another thing.’

‘The *Battle of Algiers* – how I remember that!’ says Mélusine. ‘Now, it’s only criminals...’

‘We’re moving,’ says her friend. ‘Somewhere with animals.’

‘Oh,’ says Mélusine. ‘I wish ... But not with Jean-Luc. India, perhaps, the monkeys ... lewd brutes.’

‘It’s so confusing,’ says the friend. ‘Once there were Americans – they were everywhere. Now – there’s sultans, tsars, and all these caliphates. Is it history or geography, dear Mélusine?’

‘Go where there’s trees,’ says Mélusine.

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‘Do something!’ says Mélusine. ‘Something new, Jean-Luc, in real life, so you’re not a suspect.’

Jean-Luc tells his friend:

‘I volunteered – there’s a mistake. They can cancel memories, not add them. They clean your brain – a brainwash, seems like a dementia. What new memories would you like put in, if they discover how? *Germinal*, they’ll be: like – planting irises, taking off the falcon’s hood...

‘There’s my head, lying open on a salver ... the mouth, slack, afraid, arrogant. The eyes look painted

on.

‘Someone crouched over racing binoculars is staring at my brain. Her sweater says “Wild Girl”.’

‘The guy with the chisel says – “Old movies! Dozens, useless. If only we could install new wonders... We might put in the Qur’an, useful, in the event you’re asked. Or a Ramayana. The colours keep you pepped.”

“I’m into *War and Peace*,” the woman says. “I take slow trains, I need peace sounding in my ears. They couldn’t see at night back then, so they fought their wars in light of day.”

“Here come the movies!” shouts the doctor guy. “*Chistka!* Out with them, a purge, wash out the mud!”

“The cinema! Distant hooves: candlestick cactuses, long guns, no reloads, the bangs get added later, hate is easy, but love – the camera has to look separately into each set of eyes, so love’s diluted, you must infer ... wow! – she lifts her silks, clean panties you can bet, he has no problem with his buttons, here come the fogs, day into night, Gabin’s stone face, the clang of trams, the occupation, guys heaping into trucks and trains, politics, the baby dropped, easy to forget a little one, the letter is mislaid, subtitle you can’t read, everyone so beautiful you can’t tell who from witch – the old are crones or sages, villains wear tall boots, and there’s the spooky song, don’t pay the orchestra, you hear it but don’t see – music stretches all along, those horns sound like trombones, the darkskins are in

rehab, a chance to chant and dance, the fraudsters sneer, mistreat their secretaries and oh no, he's fondling her, the spy is shot, the boss is dropped, a satisfying splat, will the princess jump out the cake, her contract says ... freedom, puppets, other worlds..."

"The doctor says, "We got rid of all that, we left a space that you could fill with learning Tagalog, last words first lines," he spins along... "Any goddam thing you like, you must be desperate ... you're empty now..."

'It's your Ismaili forebears,' says Mélusine. 'Riding white horses, firing flintlocks. Distant hooves, Jean-Luc! Cleaning your head – that's a good show. But – old movies! Black. White. Sometimes sepia. I do grey, instead. You're without evidence, Jean-Luc. You could be an extremist, no one now would have a clue.'

He can't respond. She says, 'I've been with you longer than with all the rest, Jean-Luc. It's time for you to pack the scenery... Saddle up. And go!'

The tug of rival caliphates – he can't experience it. It's vanished, for him, gone for ever. Those visionaries – scattered everywhere ... old Marx, called the last Fatimid – all gone now, old battles, refought, reactionary... There's still some architecture, Jean-Luc thinks, the brain is structured like it was back then, the eyes lined up, dimensions still the same. Those horses – horses of Andalou... It's obvious they're Spanish – it isn't possible they came from over there, the other shore – 'no, no, the Arab steed is quite a

different beast. It has round eyes, a squarer jaw...’ It’s history. ‘Mélusine’, he thinks. ‘She’s normal, changeable, demanding ... best be up and go, even before she makes you...’

He says: ‘The guys we should have voted for – they talk of love, fraternity – their closets bulge with armaments.’

‘Quite so,’ she says. ‘I told you – get your ancestry cleared out.’

‘Mélusine,’ he says, ‘now, I’m emptied out: of all those hours, hours in the dark, of other peoples’ hours. There’s not much left of me.’

‘Well,’ says Mélusine, ‘if you’ll suffer from not having me, there’s nothing I can do.’

‘Now, we’re all luxuries,’ says Jean-Luc. ‘We people. Ornaments. When we were humans, long ago, and one of us had died – the goat would not be milked. The gun not loaded, the poachers not awaited. What are we for now, Mélusine? Trying our hands at anything, nothing, retiring on to chairs...’

‘Billiard balls,’ says Mélusine. ‘They kiss. They do not penetrate. They are a set – if one goes missing, you must take one from another table. Or think “that pink’s a green” – for ever. It’s order, Jean-Luc.’

‘I’m so empty,’ Jean-Luc says. ‘I am the highest point, the human azimuth – reached after a short and troubled history. There’s nowhere else to go. No more world. We ate it. I’m the last.’

‘I’m sure everything you say is true,’ says

Mélusine. 'But not for me.'



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