

Trance

“The depth and strength of a human character are defined by its moral reserves. People reveal themselves completely only when they are thrown out of the customary conditions of their life, for only then do they have to fall back on their reserves.”

—Leon Trotsky

You are flummoxed by your discovery, and know immediately that you must venture out and find Van Rjien. He of all people would be able to shed light on this. You wander out the door, and sprint towards a small body of water a distance away from the hut. There were footprints here, but something was wrong. There were too many different pairs of footprints. You barely finish the thought before you feel rough and clammy hands constricting your throat. You lash out, kicking in every direction, but to no avail. Everything was slowly turning dark...

... You are drowsy, dizzy, disorientated; everything goes into a spin. Fuzzy coloured shapes swirl in front of your eyes. After an eternity, the mist clears, and you find yourself in a large room. Before you is a large mahogany bookcase, containing volumes of books: some yellowed with age, others clearly barely months old. You scan through the titles and authors: Enid Blyton, The Magic Faraway Tree; Beatrix Potter, The Tale of Peter Rabbit; Elinor Brent-Dyer, The School at the Chalet; J & W Grimm, Kinder und Hausmärchen; René Goscinny, Le Petit Nicolas. Quite a collection! You begin to wonder what could possibly be the purpose of such an eclectic collection (what? No Dostoevsky? Or Hemingway?) – but before you come up with an answer, the cloud is back, and your mind – and your vision – is swamped by fog once again.

Fog. Fog. Cloud. Mist. So much fog everywhere. Confused, you wonder if you might be in London. But the city that surrounds you is not London. For a start, there don't seem to be any tall buildings around, even though you are pretty sure that you are in a bustling city. You wave away a street merchant offering to sell you a nutella crêpe and just barely dodge another man walking out of a store called FNAC. You walk around the city, trying to figure out where you are – you pass some ancient-looking cathedrals and an opera house with statues of eight of the nine muses (clearly because they fit better geometrically). In the distance, you see a gleaming white cathedral atop a hill with a golden angel on its pinnacle next to an Eiffel Tower-like structure. You stop in puzzlement, wondering whether you are hallucinating, only to barely escape being run over by a tram (its never a good idea to stop in the middle of the road).

A feeling of panic swells up inside you as you are seized by a sudden desire to get out of this place, wherever it might be. You hail a random taxi and scream,

“Out! I need to leave! I need to get out of this place!”

in a mad frenzy. Amazingly, the driver hardly bats an eyelid and gestures for you to get in. Even more amazingly, he seems to understand English.

“Yes, sirr... I vill drive yoo to zee aerporr zen,”

he reassures you.

As the taxi pulls up at the airport, you feel yourself relaxing once again. You happily disembark, secure in the knowledge that you are soon about to a) find out where on earth you are, and b) get a flight home. But just as the letters on the terminal building come into view, something large and papery hits you on the back of the head, and you fall to the ground.

—Sally Zhao