

**Sympathy for the Incorruptible**

by Cambusmore

Summary

With his friendship with Camille under strain, Robespierre reflects on an episode from their school days that reminds him of how much they needed each other then and now. Featuring a cat, a lady and a rainstorm.

Notes

I know you wanted a light at the end of the tunnel, but it’s a bit difficult to make that happen with these boys, as much as I love them, so I hope you’ll accept a light in the middle of the tunnel? Have an excellent Yuletide and please enjoy!

“The thing is,” Robespierre said, “that everyone seems to regard Camille as a problem. But he isn’t a problem to me. He’s the best friend I’ve ever had.”

-1793-

Camille turns into the courtyard from rue Saint-Honoré as he does most days, where finally the stench of the street gives way to the industrious smell of sawdust. As usual, Duplay’s labourers are bent at their tasks, building ordinary furniture, nothing too flashy, all respectable pieces, solidly and unassumingly functional. You would not want to advertise your disenchantment with the Revolution with your dinner table. As usual, a slight lull in industry when they notice him: not quite a stop, more of a hitch, and maybe a catcall, soft and anonymous. He pretends not to hear of
course - what is he meant to do, blow kisses? Unusually, however, the staircase that leads to Robespierre’s room is gone. There is evidence that it had been there in the zigzag pattern of missing steps leading above in the paint and a large staircase-shaped hole in the wall. He stops and brushes the curls of shaved wood clinging to his ankles to cover his confusion. When he looks up again - because how long can you pretend to be tidying yourself really - he catches sight of Maurice Duplay waiting for him across the courtyard. His arms, big like sides of beef swinging in a butcher’s window, are crossed. Incongruously, there is a staircase behind him, although Camille is quite sure that it is not normally there. He could be wrong. He does not always pay attention as he should.

“I suppose you’ve seen these?” Duplay says to Camille when he’s within earshot, although he isn’t holding anything, simply gesturing vaguely towards some paper on a chair.

Camille gives his best fixed smile as a diversion and attempts to sidle past him and up the new stairs. It feels like wincing so it must look like it as well.

“The letters,” prompts Duplay. Camille has no idea what he’s talking about, keeps smiling broadly in hopes of avoiding any more of this. “Don’t you get them? You figure prominently in most of these so I would be surprised if you didn’t receive your fair share.”

“Of?”

“Threats.”

“Oh, threats. Yes, those. We are quite snowed under with them. My wife files them in case we ever fancy pulling them out at a party and marvelling at human ingenuity.”

“So you’ve seen them then.”

How could he have seen them if they are on a chair, over there? “I have not seen those, but-”

“Let me just show you.” How eager he appears to tell Camille all the ways people have thought up of killing him.

“Oh, it’s alright.” Camille bats a hand, not wanting to appear as concerned as he sometimes is that so many people like to write down just how much they hate him. “I’m sure the gist quite approaches what I’m used to seeing from my own correspondents.”

“But,” and here Duplay takes a step forward, stoops and adopts a worrying conspiratorial whisper, or as near to it as is possible in the busy courtyard, “such detail.”

“Yes, if only citizens applied their inventiveness to the benefit of the nation!”

“No, I mean,” he looks around like the fool in play, “such...depravity.”

“Ah, yes. I see what you mean. They do seem to think about all of the various combinations and acts possible. I believe the setting must be irresistible: you have so many daughters and just the one son. And all of the Jacobins visiting. You and your wife. And the workmen, of course, the workmen. It becomes easy for people to cast their gossip with all of these characters. Why they need to bring me into it, I can’t imagine. I suppose my reputation makes it convenient. In the ones I have read, I am, more often than not, the initiator of the most...involved situations. For men who wish so fervently for our deaths, they do seem to devote a lot of time to imagining us at it.”

Duplay no longer seems like he has much to say with his mouth open like that. “I’ll just go up to him.” And Camille starts up the pristine stairs.

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The very small and yet very big change of the staircase’s position confounds him utterly once on the first floor. He feels he may have to go back to where he would have normally come up and perhaps count the doors to find the right one, but a familiar figure in a dire shade of brown gives it away.

She lurks just outside his door like Brount would if she had not banished him to the landing to sleep noisily and obtrusively. Still, Camille can’t say that she is any less in the way than the dog. “Eléo-Cornélia,” what he calls her in particularly unfeeling moods, very much on purpose. If he had not already run a gauntlet of Duplays and interested workmen, and suffered the discombobulation of the disappearing, reappearing staircase, he might have been kinder.

“Citizen Desmoulins.” The only one who will not call him Camille. And it should not annoy him.

“I will just go in and speak to him then.”

Like her father, she steps a mere few inches into his path, but it is enough to stop him. He would not touch her for anything. “You saw the new staircase.”

“Yes. I came up it, as you know. Nice. Quite wooden.”

“It is entirely necessary to keep him safe. The other was too close to the street. One could walk in and be upon him unobserved in moments.” Camille refrains from expressing nostalgia for that simpler time. He does not refrain from much, but this he does, for Max.

“Dangerous days, Cornélia. Perhaps we are not doing our utmost to make everyone happy. What do you suggest?”

She blinks once, very slowly. If she meant to offer some suggestion, she gives it up and looks away unhappily. “I only want him to be safe.”

“So do I.”

When did it get so hot in this hallway? And quiet. Nothing is coming from the courtyard now, only the droning buzz of a trapped fly and Brount’s snoring between him and Eléonore. They watch each other as if to say, he’s mine so why don’t you fuck right off.

“Camille?” That gentle intercession feels quite like victory when they both hear it through the door and he beams at her and goes in, although he will feel sick with himself for it later.

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More than a week has passed since they saw each other last and each new meeting now ends with a vague tension; they smile at each other shyly as if they have quarrelled and thought better of it. The sound of footsteps fades away as the hum of the city grows louder from the open window.

“I am interrupting what little time you have to yourself.”

“No,” says Max among a cataclysm of paper, documents neatly bundled and piled, but of such a quantity. Then more definitively, “No.” He pushes back from his desk, straightens in his chair. Camille notices that the scent of sawdust has yielded to the sharp tang of oranges. “How is Lucile? And my godson?” They stopped asking after each other months ago.

“Both well enough, although Horace begins to rival Hébert for fanatical outrage. They would both like to see you, but Lucile does not like to come here uninvited. You have so many keepers now.”

“They mean well.”
“Oh, I know. Even the building tried to thwart me.” Camille says as he moves to sit on the narrow bed. He feels better if he does not have to look at it and remember that he told everyone that Robespierre keeps the marriage proposals he receives under the mattress.

Max clears his throat. “Someone got in the kitchen last week and shouted for me, not...not entirely kindly and so M. Duplay decided to make it more difficult to get to the bedrooms. It is really very considerate.” He sounds as if he is trying to convince himself. “Did you want anything?”

“I had a letter from Hérault I wanted to show you. He is not enamoured of the new calendar. I should probably burn it before the Committee sees it or, worse still, Fabre. Do you want me to come back later?”

“Not at all.” Robespierre raises both hands slowly and places his palms on either side of his face, slumping forward onto his elbows in a gesture of weariness. He must be exceedingly tired if he can no longer conceal it and Camille succumbs to a flutter of panic.

“I can come back later.”

“No, it’s alright.”

“If you’re tired.”

“No.”

Camille looks down at the bedding that he has been stroking in his agitation. “Where is this coverlet from?” He feels certain he has seen Maurice Duplay’s wife wearing it, or perhaps less wearing it than standing under it.

“Oh, I believe it was a dress of Mme Duplay’s.”

Camille stares for a moment. Surely, this is thrift beyond reason. In fact, it is a kind of ideology of thrift, it shouts, we must all sleep under women’s dresses - no, not like that. He does not now believe that purpose-made bed linens corrupt? “Max, are you trying to make a point?”

The quick flash of irritation that distorts Robespierre’s even features disappears, just as suddenly replaced by a look of such raw longing that Camille almost covers his eyes. But then he starts to laugh helplessly. “Oh, Camille.”

“What?”

“You have reminded me so much of school. When you asked me if I believed what I said about Lot. Do you remember?”

Camille remembers. “No, tell me.”

-1776-

Pantagruelle, who used to be called Pantagruel until she gave birth to kittens in one of the priests’ hats and a hasty amendment was made, has not turned up at the kitchen door during recreation for four days. Perhaps it has been only three; it poured a desolating rain on Monday and in case of inclement weather, recreation is squeezed into the dark inclement halls of Louis-le-Grand. Max missed the opportunity of a priest’s turned back to slip out and and see if she would greet him by the door with her usual squawks and enthusiastic collisions with his ankles.

It is now very late on Thursday night, or rather very early on Friday morning, and for the first time in many years, he feels the threat of tears in his sinking mood. Today, when he hovered outside
the kitchen door, one of the horrible women who worked there shouted at him to cease his lingering as it gave her a fright.

“Have you seen the cat?” he tripped over the last word like Camille would.

“The what?” As if she had never seen or heard of one.

“The cat that comes here. It is grey, with white socks. It likes cheese.”

“So do I, but I don’t see any young men hiding in corners to offer me none.”

“I’m not-” He gave up because she laughed too loudly at her own joke to hear him.

It does not prove helpful to hold on to his anger at her; it does not soothe nor reassure him, it does not make Pantagruelle trot up eagerly to the door, speeding up when she recognizes him- Max stops, squeezes his eyes shut on a swelling emotion. Names the kings of France in his head, then the Roman emperors, the provinces and their capitals. When he eventually falls asleep, Camille’s bed remains conspicuously empty across the dormitory. Hours later, he starts from some dream and feels as though he lands suddenly on his bed. Camille is there now, sound asleep, his breath pluming gently in the frigid air. This twilight, Max thinks, it picks out his pointed features like a caricature.

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Camille pretends to be other people for days on end. It has been Fréron now for three, but he’s only noticed that Camille has stopped calling him Rabbit. The poor boy thinks it is over, his perceived triumph over the nickname clear in how he redoubles his efforts to call Max Thing. And when he forgets to, he corrects himself. What a blow it will be when Camille, in a few hours or a few weeks, gives it up and addresses him as Rabbit again. He finds that he would like very dearly care to see his face the moment it happens.

“Lot gave his home and family for the preservation of his fellow man’s virtue, but Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed anyway. His sacrifice can therefore be construed as futile.” Fréron pauses dramatically for gasps that are not immediately forthcoming. He has misjudged the priggishness of his audience.

“You’re never saying that in Rhetoric,” says Suleau, unconvinced.

“I might.”

“He might,” agrees Camille.

They are sitting on the dormitory beds in the room Max and Camille share with a few others, in the gentle lull before dinner and nightfall. Well, Camille is not sitting. He is draped across the bed on his back with his head hanging off the mattress and the back of one hand to his forehead. He started upright like the others but fell into further physical despair as Fréron practiced for their next class. Max feels that time passes very slowly when one is trying not to laugh.

“When Lot chose to shelter the men he did not yet know were angels, he made a perfect choice, for he did not possess the knowledge we do of their identity or God’s test, nor of the true destructive potential of the citizens’ depravity. Knowing nothing, he chose to protect them guided only by his morality, yes,” Max holds up a hand at Fréron who has opened his mouth to interrupt, “God-given morality, but without thought for context or consequences nonetheless.”

Camille sits up, breaking character, his eyes gone wide as they do when he is denying an accusation for a transgression he has almost certainly committed. “Look, Max, do you believe this
stuff you’re saying?” It is as if Max has been insisting that shoes are the instruments of the devil, from the expression on Camille’s face.

All the laughter he has been suppressing bubbles up then, and he claps his hand to his mouth over a strangled sort of sound. Suleau and Fréron look abashed as he begins to hiccup and shake, nearly hysterical and wiping at sudden tears with his handkerchief. Camille says, “Rabbit, look how you’ve affected Robespierre with your rhetorical skill. Go add yourself to the Pantheon. Now.”

The look on Fréron’s face when he hears ‘Rabbit’, a perfect balance of confusion and affront, does make him feel somewhat better, although he saves the real satisfaction of it as a treat for later, perhaps when he has managed to stop crying. Suleau tactfully follows Fréron out of the room, bestowing a kind smile and a squeeze of Max’s shoulder.

When the door is closed, Camille asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Shame to break character on my account. I have never seen a face actually crumple like that.” Tears continue to stream unchecked down his face so that the handkerchief seems pointless. He tosses it down next to him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Where were you?”

“When?”

“Last night.”

“Are you crying because I went out last night?”

“Where do you go?”

“I wouldn’t burden you with that.” He smiles demurely, looking somewhere near the buckles on Max’s shoes.

“What if something happened?”

“Did it? Did something happen to you?”

“Not to me. To you.”

“Oh, something always happens to me.”

Max tries ignore the nebulous implications. “I mean, what if you got hurt? Got yourself killed?”

“What would it matter then? I’d be dead.”

“Camille.”

He brushes a few strands of hair from his right eye with delicate fingertips. “My father could mythologise my achievements. Dead boys don’t stutter or seduce magistrate’s daughters.”

“Camille!”

“Well, when I only hint at my various perversions, I don’t think you quite understand what I mean.”
He does not, no. “Tell me where you go.”

“Tell me what’s wrong.” A renewed flood of tears. Camille comes over to sit next to him, although far enough apart in case anyone were to walk in. “Max, please.”

He breathes shakily, tries to steady his voice. “I can’t find Pantagruelle.”

Thank God, Camille does not laugh.

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It turns out that everyone charged with keeping them within the confines of the school at night rather prefers to sleep. They creep past several porters and one prefect easily enough in stockinged feet, shoes in hand. In the courtyard, Camille calls a soft bonsoir to a man Max had not even seen standing in the shadows by the gate. He does not recognize him and cannot quite make out his expression, but smiles at him in complicity as they slip out into the street.

Even for the city, it is so very dark, much more than he expected. Paris does not seem capable of such darkness, but somehow here it is, yawning airlessly before him, only the black mounds of the buttes des Moulins and St-Roch discernible against the somber blue of the moonless sky. The stars hang there, cold and impassive.

He hurries behind Camille. “You won’t say, will you?”

“What?” He does not turn around.

“Why I’ve absconded.”

Camille laughs quietly, most likely at his choice of word. “No, I won’t.”

“Because they’ll say, Thing snuck out to find a cat, not a woman.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Do they already say that sort of thing?”

“Where shall we start looking?”

Max continues darting his gaze back and forth, up and down, as his eyes adjust to the gloom. His sight is already poor enough in the day. He hopes she will come if she hears his voice.

“I am looking. I know what they say about me.”

“Panta-gru-elle,” Camille calls.

“You know what they say about you? That you don’t know the difference between right and wrong.”

“Of course I know the difference. I simply choose not to dwell on it.”

“You frighten me when you say such things.”

“Would you have me weep for my reputation instead?”

He cannot think of a helpful reply and hurries to walk alongside Camille. Only his skin is visible in the dark, starkly pallid against his black hair and eyes melting into the night. Max looks away. “No, of course not. I am certain that everyone talks about everyone else.” And Camille is popular among the boys in a way. In the way that Caligula is popular among the boys.
“Are you looking in the gutter, too?” he asks.

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When the storm arrives, they are on rue des Amandiers and Max capitulates to utter hopelessness. It is dark and there are so many places she could be and, overwhelmed by grief, he drops to sit on a doorstep as two or three warning flashes of lightning and a rumble of thunder cede to the deluge. Camille stands facing him, rain pouring off his nose and hair and running down to disappear past the dip of his throat. He keeps looking up and down the street, hesitating about something.

“What?” asks Max, having to shout above the clattering of the storm.

“If our clothes are wet in the morning, they’ll know we have been out.”

There were no fires lit unless the holy water froze in the fonts. Camille once suggested that divine liquids could not enter a solid state without a minor miracle and had been slapped rather hard in the face for it.

“So they’ll know.”

He shakes his head and hair clings sodden to his neck and forehead. “I know a place we can go.” And he gives Max his hand to hoist him upright. For years he will remember how startlingly warm it turned out to be.

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She seems older than them, but beyond that, he has no idea. He has never had the knack of telling ages, and especially not for women, seeing so few of them. On opening the door of her attic rooms, she beamed at Camille and then glanced abstracted at Max for about a second.

“My friend,” said Camille, “my very morally upright and correct friend.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Well, come in then.”

Camille had refused for them a change of shirts (Max knew better than to wonder aloud why she would have these), but accepted some wine that warmed their throats and bellies. Sat as close as they could bear to the fire like this, watching the steam billow from their breeches and coats, feeling the skin of their cheeks tighten and throb pleasantly, a most peculiar sensation dawns on Max: that he and Camille now feel the exact same thing. Away from school and nicknames and stutters and the spectre of parents dead and alive, they are both reduced to their constituent needs for warmth and comfort, like babies or animals. And they are happy now in this small moment of satisfaction of those wants together. It is good to feel happy with Camille, knowing they both are without saying it, knowing they will be until they remember anything outside this brief respite from themselves, but not each other.

“What’s your friend’s name?” They both have to turn away from the fire to look at her and instantly half their bodies begin to cool. Together they could make one whole warm man and one whole cold one. The sudden cold feels so much worse for the contrast.

“He’s called Lot. He makes perfect choices.”

“Why doesn’t he speak for himself?”

“Because you asked me?”
“He’s got a kind face.” The more he watches her in the shifting firelight, the more her looks improve. Hair so dark it might as well be black, clear blue eyes, white skin with pink cheeks and a pinker mouth. Her eyebrows move smoothly as she speaks.

“That he is. In Rhetoric, when it takes me twice as long as everyone else to speak, he is the only one who never looks away from me in embarrassment. And he asks me questions he knows I can answer with words that I do not find difficult to say because he remembers which ones are.” Camille’s gaze shifts to him now and holds, rare for all his darting, furtive beauty and the tiny portions of undivided attention he metes out like rations. “And he never tells when I escape. Or last year, when he walked into our dormitory and caught Charles-Marie Étier stroking my hair. And when we come back from the holidays, he finds he needs to reassemble me because my father has tried to put my head at the end of my leg, and my heart,” he blinks, black eyes intent and gleaming, “my heart in the vegetable patch. But he finds all the pieces and tries to put them where they belong.” Camille’s voice gives on the last word and he turns back to the fire, popping and crackling to fill the stretching silence. The most astonishing thing of all, Max thinks, is that all this time, for all these years, Camille has been watching him just as steadfastly as he has him.

The woman, he never learns her name, has not been listening or understanding. “And those sea-green eyes of his,” she sighs.

“As if you’ve seen the sea,” mutters Camille.

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Later that night, back in the dormitory and dry enough, Max starts from a dream, not quite a nightmare, of Pantagruelle emerging from a cupboard in their Greek classroom, covered in cobwebs and dust and very, very hungry. The most distressing aspect is that he cannot tell if it is her. As he slowly grasps that he lies in his bed, in the dormitory at school, at night, just waking from sleep, he looks automatically across the room to the bed nearest the window. He can see only the soft puffs of Camille’s breath and the glitter of his black eyes like ink in the dark.

Max almost does not go to the kitchen door in the morning, but when he begs pardon of a passing kitchen maid with her basket of cabbages and her scowl, Pantagruelle comes loping up with a new chip on her ear. She struggles when he picks her up to hide his face in her fur.

-1793-

Camille smiles and asks, “You liked that I was unkind to you?”

“No, not unkind, never unkind. Kind when the situation required it and gently derisive when it did not. You are the only one I trust to tell me when I am being ridiculous.”

“Are you worried that the others think it, but won’t say?” The others, all of them, Fabre and Hérault and Marat when he was alive, but especially Danton, say it to each other all the time and laugh. Camille should not let them laugh so much.

“No, only that I think it of myself too much.”

“Oh.”

“Did you want to read me that letter from Hérault?”

Camille swallows loud enough for them both to hear and stands to go. “No, no - he just loathes the calendar and he goes on and on amusingly. Everyone hates it. I hate it. I can tell you that, can’t I?” Camille hides so many questions in that one.
“Certainly, you can. How could you doubt it?”

“Alright,” Camille wavers, lifts his hair off his neck. “I was thinking that I might start writing again.”

“An excellent idea. The Revolution needs your talent. And I’m not sure it lies in Assembly work, what with the having to wait patiently to speak without making faces.”

“I have become so good at making faces to spare everyone the embarrassment of my speaking that it feels a shame to use them only to amuse my son.”

Robespierre smiles, looks down at his hands and his neat nails. “You should learn to guard your feelings better.”

That fraught unease drifts back into the room like a ghost. “Are you telling me to?”

“No,” he looks up, frowning, “no, of course not. Camille, I would not dream of ordering you to do anything. Do you really think I would?” And as he finishes the question, Camille watches the dismay dawn on his face, grim and certain. “You are afraid of me. You.”

Somewhere outside, there blooms the distant roar of many people shouting about something. Camille wonders dimly if someone should go and find out what it is. “I don’t want to be.”

For a long time, much longer than is comfortable or bearable, Max gazes down at the limp fists he has made on his desk, breathing quickly. Camille squirms with the anguish at seeing him as tired and sad as any other man failing at his endeavours. “We are capable of worse deeds than we ever imagined, are we not?” Robespierre asks eventually.

“Listen, Max, I know something of being treated so much like a monster that one feels obliged to act the part. But what I have learned now is that it might be easier, easier for everyone, not to.”

He stands and walks over to Camille, to stand near him, not touching him because the proximity is enough. “We will both try not to be what they expect then. Not even what we expect of each other.”

That buzzing roar of the far-off mob, coming in waves, baffling.

“Yes, I promise to try.” He returns Max’s smile and fights to keep his expression clear of the sudden knowledge that that sound is the crowd at Place de la Révolution, insisting on yet more blood.

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