Judith Dancoff

TERMINUS

The girl ran through the undergrowth, leaves as large as fists slapping her in the face, the earth under her feet wet and slippery—she fell, got up, fell again—but none of it mattered, breath so hard in her throat she was rasping. There was something in her mind, a point of absolute convergence, and she would go to it no matter what. She wasn't even fourteen and barely knew where she was running, except away. The Wolves had left her for the afternoon, so fat and lazy. They had names, but she would not speak their names. She thought of them with huge layers of fat under their wolf skin. Greasy, it would spat in the firepan. She pictured it with pleasure. They'd left her with a board of ironing, then cooking after and feeding the animals, like so many times, but this time was different. The window was open, and looking out, she'd seen a bird jumping on a branch, then flying away. Why not me, she thought, just like that. They wouldn't be home for hours. The farm was wide and long and miles to any road, but it didn't matter, she knew that in moments she would only be a speck on the horizon.

Her heart started to beat, blood rushing to her ears, pounding like an Indian drum, so loud she was sure someone must hear. She took nothing, wanted nothing from the Wolves. Left without even a pair of shoes. It was spring so not very cold, but now it was just turning evening, and she wished she had more. She looked up at the new Ohio moon, cold and icy and thought again of the point in her mind where she was running—away, that was its name. She would reach it with complete precision. "I am speed," she thought. "I am a bullet." The train depot was near; leaves still slapping her but she only felt them like wind. She could hear the sound of the train arriving and knew she would come to it if she kept running, then somehow get on and travel home. After that she didn't think.

She emerged from the undergrowth suddenly, a barefoot, thirteen-year-old girl in a tattered dress, torn down one side to

reveal fresh whippins', 'straighten-outs' the She-Wolf called them. The pain was always with her, but distant, unimportant. Annie paused just long enough to admire the sleek engine of the train, preening in the early evening light, then flew toward a rear compartment, far from the conductor checking tickets at the front. Besides, she knew that when she turned sideways, she was so small and thin as to almost disappear. She got on, found a seat, and as the train started, closed her eyes in something like a prayer, though she no longer believed in God. A young man settled next to her; she sensed him rather than saw, felt the rustle on the seat, his slight odor, then the gentle vibration of the huge animal starting beneath their feet. She kept her eyes closed and breathed.

She breathes now as she thinks of that day, the sheer luck of it, for the young man to have chosen her rather than some other seat in the half full compartment. Later when the conductor came, he bought her a ticket with barely a question. When he got off at the next station, he turned her over to an older woman who turned her over to someone else, until she reached Greenville.

Of course she is safe now, and the sun on her arm feels so good. She does not want to open her eyes, but the man in front of her clears his throat impatiently. Besides, it is Paris, it is a beautiful day, and she is here.

"You have been most lucky in your career, Mademoiselle, yes?" The pudgy-faced Frenchman nods and she smiles a half-smile in return. He speaks in heavily accented English. She crosses her feet beneath the table and feels her regular self come back to her. French is a language Annie has never liked, but it does not matter. Behind him are the glorious Tuileries Gardens where she will go when this is over. He sips his coffee between gloved fingers, his pinky finger raised in the air. His too round face sweats uneasily in a patch of sunlight and he swabs it with a monogrammed handkerchief. Black whiskers sprout from his cheeks, making him look exactly like his hound that is curled beneath the table.

She nods but says nothing. Yes, the train was luck. She has told no one of that day, not even her husband Frank.

He touches her hand, and she allows it for an instant, then pulls it away. She would not be here at nine in the morning except that Cody asked her to, always the energetic showman,

with only his business on his mind. He had winked, shook his long blond hair, and grinned in his way that meant this was required: a possible investor for the show; nothing else mattered. So she is here. There is little required of her, anyway, except to let the man appreciate her presence.

A waiter brings pastries, leaves.

"Have you always shot a gun?" the man continues. The word *gun* is too slippery in his mouth, too personal. She likes this part less.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it." His eyes glint and it seems that he is almost salivating.

She holds her neck stiffly and speaks to the tree behind him. "There is little to tell. We were poor; I hunted for food. That is how I learned."

"Of course…"

All this is true, though of course there is more. The man shakes his head knowledgeably as though her answer has fit his wise assumption. He begins to talk of her skill, saying nothing she has not heard before. Annie only half-listens, but allows her body to relax. Now is the dull part and after it ends, she has the morning to herself. She watches a sparrow on a branch behind his ear, pecking its feathers and beyond the branch, what she can see of the gardens where she will go when he leaves. She calls none of it luck, of course, but destiny—that she got away, that she met her husband at the shooting contest in Greenville and then Cody, and has made it here to this extraordinary city with both of them, and is who she is. She was the bullet, racing towards what was always her destiny.

The man is talking about destiny now, in fact. *Destin* he calls it, explaining to her the numerous meanings of the word--one's aim, goal, conclusion, terminus, already written the moment the child is born. She was pre-ordained to be what she has become,

Wantanya Cicilia, Little Sureshot Sitting Bull named her, didn't he?

"What was the Indian like?" Here the man squints, the better to see the apparition.

"A great man. Very proud." She says a few more things that they like to hear. For a moment, she sees the old Lakota warrior next to her, the hard foreign skin of his hand and dark eyes. His

cheek bones were angled like steel but his voice to her was always gentle. After the Battle of Little Big Horn where he defeated Custer, he was America's number one enemy, but Cody got him out of prison to perform for Queen Victoria's fiftieth gala. He stayed with the show only a season, though. To meet the foreign heads of Europe and show them the greatness of the Indian, this was good, he said, but the white man's way of life made him sick. He longed for home. Now he was on the reservation and God knows what would happen.

"Did you have, how do you say it, fear of him?"

"No." Why should she fear such a person. She did not question what anyone needed to do for their freedom.

The investor puts his plump hand over hers and squeezes it. "I am married, Monsieur."

"Will I see you perform tonight?"

"Of course."

He talks on about his wineries in the south, his business holdings, what he will do for the show. Finally it ends. When it is over and he has left, she opens her parasol, takes a breath, and lets her hand air out in the breeze. She can do as she likes now: visit the gardens, stroll back to Cody's encampment at the edge of the city, visit a museum, whatever is her pleasure. She would like to see the Tuileries, to walk in such luxury, her toes crunching nicely on the pebbles beneath her feet. Less than two decades ago the castle was burnt to the ground by angry rioters, and now the garden is once again itself, women with flounced sleeves and bustles parading down broad avenues of trees, fountains sparkling, young children and dogs playing in the sunlight.

The day Sitting Bull gave her the name, he had looked her in the eye and nodded slowly, holding onto her hand. Cody said the Indians saw some people as empowered, and Sitting Bull saw her that way.

Maybe she was empowered. As a child when she'd first slipped onto the train, nearly wild from four years of captivity, the young man who sat beside her treated her with sympathy and concern. What if he had chosen another seat? The compartment had many empty seats. None of her life might have happened. He gave her a jacket to put over her shoulders and shared his food. When the conductor came, the young man paid her ticket in advance for the day's journey back to Greensville.

"I am going home to my mother," she'd said. Little else needed to be spoken that wasn't already spoken on her body. Though she looked ten, she had seen enough to be twenty, and he asked for no further explanation.

Her mother was not in Greensville, though. No one told her that she had moved to a neighboring village. She walked the last ten miles in the night and when the door opened, Susan Mosey, now widowed for a third time, not yet thirty and already old, jutted out her chin for a hello, kissed the top of Annie's head, and went back to her chores. The fifth of too many children, Annie had been sent to a poor farm when she was nine, then taken by the Wolves. No schooling, she barely knew how to write her name. Maybe her mother knew of the Wolves, maybe she didn't. She did not blame the woman, but finally home again, she felt a visitor nonetheless. She was given a pallet to sleep on in the corner of the room and that was it. Two weeks later her mother sent her back to the farm.

On the morning she left, the woman was hanging sheets on the line to dry, the material flapping hard in her face, when Annie came up to her and hugged her. So small, she barely came to her mother's chest. "I missed you," she said into her body. Susan Mosey looked down at Annie, her eyes distant and lined in red as though she rarely slept. "I missed you too." She extricated Annie's arms, and went back to hanging the sheets.

That was it. The poor farm was as she remembered it, bleached fields with a farmhouse and barn for a dormitory, but she was not given to another family, only set to scrub floors and at night sleep in the barn with thirty cots and the rafters open to a flock of wild pigeons. She saw it all in a dream, because the metal in her back had begun to grow by then, a stiffness next to her regular spine that made her breathe more deeply and see only the future line there for her to follow. Her one possession, a cap and ball rifle from her dead father, became her family. She grabbed it from behind her mother's bureau when no one was looking, took it to the poor farm, and from that day forward, would not let it out of her sight. At night she slept with it, cold against her body but she liked the cold, her world, the world of metal, that she would now inhabit. She worked church Sundays for a month for ammunition, then took it into the woods to hunt game. How good it felt to be there, open to the earth and sky, a halo of blue

above. Her father had shown her how to use it once before he died, how exactly to hold the rifle, and she felt that now in the holding, his breath and whiskers next to her ear. Take a breath right before you shoot, he had whispered. She breathed, the air cracked.

So many small animals fell, like they were giving themselves to her. With each death she bent over the small furry creature and wrapped it carefully in paper. When she had enough, she walked into town and sold them at Katzfield's General Store. Food was scarce, Katzfield said. People would eat them. Bring more. Within two years, she had paid off her mother's farm.

Now the woman offered the main bed, but Annie no longer wanted it. The metal, fully grown in her now, had transformed her. She went on the road, to shooting contests and exhibitions, and made her keep that way. Usually she won, but she did not do it to win. It was the thing in her back that called, the line, the absolute arrow of the bullet traveling from the very center of her being to its target.

People thought good aim was in the gun or the hand or the eye. They talked about it incessantly at the contests. Well of course those things were true--the gun had to be just right, the eye and hand like sisters--but really a good shot began between the shoulder blades, right behind the heart; it had nothing to do with what came out of the barrel, so whether the shot was true or not was never in question, the terminus of the bullet pre-ordained. She felt that each time she pulled the trigger—the weight of the gun, the retort, the point inside her body where the shot began and the satisfaction when it met its target.

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It is night as Annie walks through the Wild West encampment in Parc Neuilly at the western edge of the city. Every night she makes this walk slowly to her tent, as though she must first make sure that each human and animal are in their place for the night before she too can take her rest. She has not thought so much of the past in years, and it has made her more awake than usual, but the inspection calms her, to feel the safety around her.

She begins by scanning the rows of teepees that house the ninety-seven Indians, most of whom perform daily, though there are also children, women, and old people among them, unwilling to let their loved ones go alone on Buffalo Bill Cody's great adventure half-way around the world. Why should they, proud emissaries of their culture, in this foreign city with good food to eat and money, instead of on those dreadful places called reservations where the government would have them live?

The row of tents for the cowboy contingent is separate—forty tents in all—including a tent for her and her husband Frank. At the base of the teepees are the corrals. Altogether, they have brought with them one hundred and eighty horses, eight buffalo, five Texas steer, two deer, six donkeys, and three elk. That both animal and man traveled across the Atlantic on a boat still amazes her, most of the humans sick and disoriented, cowering below with the howling creatures, while she could not get enough of wandering the deck in the grey storm, the ocean slick and fierce, battering the masts.

Last year they traveled the same route for Queen Victoria's fiftieth gala; this year they have come for the grand opening of the Eiffel Tower that reaches a thousand feet into the sky, the tallest man-made structure on earth. The Europeans come in droves to see them, shrieking at their performances, as the Indians gallop around the 15,000 seat arena that the French built specially for the show. Famous battles are replicated, except now the Indian invariably loses and the white man wins, to civilize the world. The glint in the Indians' eyes sends shrills into the women's bosoms, true palpitations at the sight of such savagery.

Having walked the length of the teepees, Annie starts toward the arena, aware of the tiredness in her body and growing drowsiness and at the same time she is content. A few campfires are scattered about, but most people are asleep, like the animals near them, mewing in their sleep.

She stands outside the now empty arena, only the sound of an occasional animal rising into the crisp night air. Today at their show, the roars from the audience were deafening. She was the pretty little girl as she always was, doing her tricks with her tiny waist and petticoats, a gun in each hand. The machine shot out hundreds of transparent glass balls into the air, one after another—pink, blue, yellow, gold. She saw them like bubbles in

the sky and shot them all. As if that wasn't enough, she got on a horse and did the same, as she galloped around the huge arena. The audience roared. Someone said that Princess Isabella of Spain was there, along with the Prince of Wales, the American author Henry James, and half the writers, artists, generals, and politicians of the country. At the end of the act, she offered to shoot the ash from a man's cigar. Usually her husband Frank volunteered for this part, but today, before he could speak, some big-wig had stood up in a top hat and tails, and the trumpet player sounded revelry, so it was too late. Cody's face turned ashen: what if she missed? She could read real concern in the big man's eyes, worry over lawsuits and the rest, but she knew she wouldn't. His fear surprised her. She rarely saw it in Cody, already the walking myth, and barely forty. He'd fought in the Indian Wars—ex-bushwacker, plainsman, rider for the pony express, carnival hawker. Anything for his precious show. He was a big, fine-looking man, that's what people said-- wavy blond hair, long legs, like some tree. When he walked next to her, she could feel the ground vibrate, and now he was afraid.

He brushed up next to her. "Not in my show," he spat through gritted teeth.

She winked at him, smiled, then twirled to the audience, and told the man to take his position one hundred paces away. Too late; it was part of the show.

The audience hushed, and it made Annie want to laugh, sensing everyone's fear that she knew she had none of. The man sucked on his cigar, the arena froze. A few clouds, unaware of the proceedings, drifted overhead. She took in a breath, the gun exploded and the cigar fell to the ground. The man laughed and bowed deeply as his wife rushed to him from the stands. Annie spun on her heels in a little curtsy and gave her child smile—but inside her heart was hammered steel as it always was, and the audience roared again.

Close to midnight now, the Paris night is dark. Time for sleep, her whole body calls for it. She is ready to start back toward the avenue of tents and her own near the far end—Frank will already be in their cot, asleep or pretending to be—when she hears a mewing at her feet, and looks down to see a small kid, outside the arena fence, wobbling near her ankle. It must be newly born, somehow separated from its mother, lost, its fur still

damp. What could have happened? Crossing the ocean does not frighten Annie, nor shooting a cigar from a man's mouth, but this baby animal, alone and vulnerable, puts a panic inside her that is hard to contain. For a crazy moment, she thinks of taking it back to their tent, but Frank would not like it, and besides, it would have no milk. She whips her head around but cannot find the mother goat. With no choice, she picks up the little body, so hot and wet, and takes it back to the corral, where she can only set it in the central pen. If its mother does not find it by morning, it will be dead. She should stay with it all night, sit with it in the cold mud and let it suckle her fingers. She is yelling at Cody in her mind that they must have someone to care for the animals at night, when the mother goat appears, an apparition out of darkness, and in a moment is licking its head.

Ten minutes later Annie is inside her own tent. Quietly so as not to wake him, she strips to her leggings and climbs into bed, and Frank's arms open as she'd hoped they would. He is a large man, all warmth and solidity, twelve years her senior. Only with Frank does something open in Annie's chest, and if she cries on his arm, he only kisses the top of her head. They met at a shooting contest—he the out-of-town sharpshooter who offered to outgun any man in the town, but all the local bets were on Annie, and when he saw her gift, he politely bowed and then turned around and courted her until she agreed to marry him and let him be her manager. Not one without the other, he'd winked. Just his smile, sometimes, is enough, his eyes twinkling at her, giving her an 'Atta Girl! and kissing her quickly on the cheek when she comes off stage.

Tonight she lays her head on his chest, warm and strong, rising and falling in the moonlight that shines in from the top of the tent, and sighs her sigh, because she knows how lucky she is, that above all her destiny has led to him. Because she cries sometimes when she feels this way and he knows it, he strokes her shoulder to tell her he is there, and slowly she falls asleep with his scent in her mind. He smells of laundry soap and man and the unique smell that is him. In the morning they make love quickly before they get dressed and Annie prepares for the day, putting the steel back inside her. When she cracks the tent open, there is only light.

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Today is her day off, though, and Annie will not perform. One day out of seven, Cody has promised. He is fair. Still, she goes about her morning ritual as she always does because she believes in discipline. Without discipline, she knows, the human race probably would not exist; certainly she would not. She will practice for an hour or two later, but first she and Frank will leave for a day of visiting Paris.

Frank has left early to breakfast and smoke his cigar, so she takes her dress and hangs it on a pole in the center of the tent. It is not really wrinkled, she never wrinkles her clothes, but the same care must be taken each day to prepare herself. There is no iron or board here, there never is at their performance sites, but there are other good methods. An hour before when Frank was still asleep, Annie had slipped out of bed in the cold to restart the fire and put a large kettle of water on to boil, so now an hour later she can set the pot, steaming and hot, in the center of their large tent and need only place the dress above it. As the steam rises, she holds the sharp blade of a knife behind the material, then slowly presses against the blade with her fingernails to straighten each pleat. She laughs at the number of times she has cut herself at this ritual, but it is unimportant today; today she feels nothing except the pleasure of the geometry and the fabric yielding to her fingers. She is done in half the time it usually takes, and after she dresses, she plaits her hair with the same care, then stands before the mirror for a final inspection. She likes what she sees, the person she has created, with all her ribbons and bows. She will turn thirty in a month, but Cody's advertising has yet to go beyond nineteen. She parts the tent and walks outside. Frank looks up at her and grins, with his soft moustache and twinkle in his eye only for her. She can still taste him, their secret, so that if the steel is not enough—it never is not enough, but still—he is there for her. He sits around a morning campfire with Cody and a few others. She recognizes the artist Gauguin, whom she has met before. So many of the artists haunt their encampment, painting the Indians, even Cody. She is not here this morning, but a few days before the seventy-year-old painter and sculptress Rosa Bonheur, who won a gold medal at the Paris Salon when she

was just twenty-four, spent hours sketching Cody and the animals and is composing a great painting of him riding his horse.

Bonheur is an old woman now, stocky in her black dress and boots, but so warm. When she met Annie, she squeezed her hand and told her in her bad English how much she admired all of them. She said that the Wild West Show had reawakened her and reminded her she was still an artist.

She wishes the old painter were here this morning, she would like to ask her what her life as a young painter in this world of men was like, but there is only Gauguin and a few others she does not recognize. Whenever she sees the artist, he is surrounded by people and animals—today several dogs, who wag and bark at his thick leather boots for scraps, and in his hands is one of Cody's guns that he is inspecting, turning it over and over, stroking it, in a way that makes her uncomfortable. At the same time, he is holding forth about something in his poor English; she does not listen. She knows many women like Gauguin, but in her opinion, his face has the look of a broad 'S', too handsome with a lock of hair over his brow and a thick moustache; he is no one to be trusted. Frank turns to her holding out a very large hand, and she takes it, letting herself enter his warmth. The artist is of no consequence. She and Frank will be true tourists today, visiting all the attractions of the Exposition she has yet to see: a Hall of Machines with Mr. Edison's electrical phonograph; the Fine Arts Pavilion; even a tiny train that will ferry them across the modern city to an avenue of ethnic villages where one can stroll through all of France's colonies without ever boarding a ship. The Javanese dancers in particular have attracted much interest, drawing standing-room-only crowds..

"Are you ready my dear," Frank asks, crooking his elbow for her to take.

"Thank you, Monsieur." She curtsies, then loops her arm through his, and together they walk into the morning.

Today Annie is a feather drifting on a breeze, and at the same time she is glad for Frank's body next to her, to feel his heartbeat, as she breathes in the blue sky and clouds and the knowledge that nothing is expected of her beyond this. She looks up and watches a giant flock of birds fly overhead.

To get from Parc Neilly to the Eiffel Tower, they must take a carriage, first through the undeveloped areas west of Paris and

then past messy avenues of poverty, the kind that lie on the outskirts of all cities. Dirty children run through roads of mud; tired women carry baskets of laundry. With Frank next to her, though, she does not allow them into her mind; what does such poverty have to do with her? At last the carriage crosses Pont d'Lena and begins its approach to the Tower.

How extraordinary the sight is, the iron edifice rising into the sky. She has seen it from a distance, but never so close. It sends a shiver down Annie's back, the top of its metal glinting in the early sun. Metal into clouds, she thinks; mankind is surely capable of anything. Below the tower is a crowd of thousands, waiting to ascend a very long staircase to the first elevator.

She and Frank are ready to wait with them, but the morning is too warm, and besides, there is no need. Because Annie is who she is, the mayor of Paris has extended an invitation for a night visit, for any evening they choose. They will go in a week, after the American Gala. Now they walk in the opposite through the Place de Mars, a landscape of gardens and fountains, decorated throughout with Mr. Edison's incandescent bulbs. At night, people say, he has made the city glow. At the end of the garden, they take their seats in the small train that will carry them to the ethnic villages and soon Annie can smell the ethnic quarter even before it comes into view.

It is not really a quarter, of course, but an exhibition of small huts and villages set within the modern city, and guarded over by an impressive colonial mansion, with guards at the ready, their bayonets drawn. The steel of the bayonets glints in the sun, and at the same time, swirling around the metal, are all the fragrances and songs of faraway places she has only dreamt of.

To enter the quarter, one must walk through the arch of the impressive colonial mansion, built especially for the Exposition and guarded over by the bayonets. Beyond the arch, golden minarets come into view, Cambodian temples, Egyptian domes, exhibits from Cairo to the Americas and beyond, and off to one side, an African hut of half-naked women, enclosed in a cage-like fence. The breasts of the women swing openly, infants suckling. In front of the cage, a cluster of dainty French schoolgirls holds out sweet lozenges and bon-bons to their naked counterparts on the other side. A small boy takes one, his eyes round, and the girls squeal and run away. Further on, veiled matrons rush

across the road to a small mosque while young boys lead donkeys to market, crying out in strange foreign tongues.

To colonize is to own; Annie knows this. It is what stronger countries do to weaker ones, what the white man has done to the Indian, and besides is the way of the world. She has no opinion about this and at the same time all limitations of freedom cause in her a feeling of great discomfort. The day before, the King of Senegal went to Cody to ask if he could buy her as one of his wives.

She would never have found out, but after she shot the man's cigar, Cody told her.

"Should have sold you to the King of Senegal," he winked. His eyes were twinkling.

He was sitting on a bale of hay in one of the small corrals off the arena waiting to go on. She had just finished. Outside the arena was alive with the buffalo stampede—five animals in all—to be followed by the wagon-train-Indian-ambush, saved, in short order, by none other than Buffalo Bill himself.

She grinned to show that she didn't take him seriously and took off her guns. She set them on a table and began washing gun powder from her hands.

"Oh, he offered, all right. There was some little man with him and his entourage who spoke English. One million US dollars to buy you as a wife." Cody's eyes glowed. "I told 'em you were far too much trouble, that you'd probably shoot him or something, but he said they had ways of dealing with such women. 'In that case,' I answered, 'I'll take two million.'"

Annie had laughed, but strapped her guns back on and did not wait for him to go on as she usually did.

Now she and Frank take their seats at the Javanese theater just as the performance is starting. The dancers are the stars of the ethnic villages, people say. The musicians cannot get enough, nor the artists and writers. There is a hushed anticipation, and then the curtain separates to reveal a line of seated musicians. The bells are the first to begin, soft crystalline sounds that rise in pitch and tempo followed by a patter of drums, then louder and louder, and in moments Annie is transported to an ocean of sound. "It is called *Gamelon music*," Frank whispers in her ear. He clutches her hand and kisses it. "Look." Near the stage is a European man closely inspecting the instruments and taking notes. "That's the

composer, Claude Debussy. They say he comes everyday. That he cannot stay away."

The music ocean reminds Annie of the glass balls they shoot into the air for her—lavender, gold, cyan—fragile shapes in a zillion pieces, and behind them the animal drums, whispering at first, then increasingly loud. She closes her eyes to see the colors and drums move in the black space behind her eyes. When she opens them, a troupe of young girls is dancing on the stage. Each is a shimmer of gold, her hands turned in intricate curlicues, her head tilted beneath a jeweled crown. In her entire life, Annie has never seen anything so beautiful.

When the performance ends, she and Frank along with others who are recognized are invited into the dancers' small dressing-room-tent behind the stage. Everything here is aglow: the candles scattered about, the sheen of a red velvet curtain, above all the girls themselves in their gold cummerbunds and pantaloons, skin of the finest copper. If only Bonheur were here; Annie would feel comfortable talking to her, but she is shy with people she does not know. She seats herself in front of a long mirror and for the moment simply watches the small party through the glass. Frank talks with Debussy and other artists. Gauguin is near the front of the tent with the troupe's overseer, a short Dutchman in a crooked white wig and embroidered leggings. He is smoking a cigarette from a long, pearl holder. His lips are crimson, face powdered nearly blue. He twists one embroidered leg round the other like a girl though he must be close to sixty, and feeds a small canary in a golden cage, then lifts a glass of champagne.

"Madames e Monsieurs, welcome to our boudoir!"

He repeats himself in French, uncorks another bottle and refills glasses. Gauguin raises his glass, gesturing broadly. The tent is almost too small for him, his head brushing the top. His voice booms out in French and it is clear he is making some effusive compliment. The Dutchman tilts his head down and blushes, then snaps something at an older child, who moves to Gauguin, her eyes on the floor, and touches his hand.

Gauguin laughs, kisses her on the neck, and takes her with him to a stool in the corner. It sickens Annie; she has seen enough. She looks toward Frank. It is time to go. The youngest of the girls, perhaps not more than ten, comes up next to her. The

girl dips her fingers into a pearl make-up box that sits before the mirror and pulls out lip rouge.

"Is this your make-up?" Annie asks. Of course the girl does not speak English, but she would like to talk to her, be close to her dewy skin and the obsidian of her hair. In spite of herself, Annie glances into the mirror again and sees the painter now nuzzling the older girl's neck. The girl says something, and he throws his head back in a laugh. When he opens his mouth, it is red and huge, the mouth of an animal.

"No Madame," the child whispers.

"Oh, you speak English?"

"A little." Her voice is so soft, Annie can barely hear. Now the painter is pouring the older girl a glass of champagne and encouraging her to drink. She brings the glass to her mouth, giggling at the fizz of bubbles.

"Are you Annie Oakley?" the child asks. She begins to paint her lips with a tiny finger.

"Yes."

"Will you teach me the gun?"

That makes her feel better, that a child should learn protection. "If you like. What would you like to know?"

"How to shoot the bubbles."

She means the glass balls they shoot into the air. The girl takes a brush and begins to powder her cheeks. Her eyelids are like some kind of flower petal, Annie thinks, the green stuff of life still on them. She can sense the weight and substance of the girl, the veins on the girl's tiny neck pumping softly, a lemon scent rising off her skin. Was she ever that small? When Annie was that age, she was with the Wolves. One winter night the She-Wolf locked her outside. It was so cold and snowed so hard that in the morning, Annie's feet were nearly frozen. After they let her back in, she was sick for a month.

The girl sits on her lap and puts an arm around her shoulder. It is done before Annie can stop her. A small monkey jumps on the girl's lap and she gives it something to eat. Her bare feet, covered in rings and anklets, swing against Annie's skirts. Annie closes her eyes in such pleasure, to feel the girl so close, the small bundle of her body next to her own. She would like to stroke her, run her hand over her body, but the most she can manage is to shadow her body with her hand.

The feeling of the dressing room stays with Annie for hours. It is black night now, not even a moon shining above, and still she cannot sleep. Frank lies beside her, his large chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, the distant sounds of the animals like a gentle curtain, but none of it does any good.

She thinks of the small goat from the other night and wonders if it lived; a part of her would like to rush to find out, and she must forcibly stop herself. She can smell morning. It has been years since she has not slept. Something to do with the dressing room, though she hardly knows. In her mind are only images: first of the child moving so quickly onto her lap—so precious, how she would have liked to hold onto her forever—and then through the mirror, the counter-image of the dog-man licking at the older girl's neck.

After they returned, she tried to talk to Frank about it, but she could barely find the words.

"I don't think the children are well cared for," she tried.

"They seem in good health." He undressed to his leggings and climbed into bed, smiling at her with his soft eyes and patting at the spot that was Annie's spot. It was the place next to him where she laid her head each night and drifted into sleep, but tonight she knew there would be no drifting.

Through a slit in their tent, she had looked at the careful rows of other tents and teepees that she was so glad of—neat, symmetrical, like the line of a bullet. She did not think she wanted to revisit Paris for days. She pictured the head of the child on her lap, the rows of symmetrical ebony braids, and the shiny white scalp between.

"Annie?"

She said nothing.

"We can take in a child, you know, if you would like. When we get back." This was not the first time they had talked about this. To Annie, though, a child meant responsibility and care; they did not live that kind of life. Luckily she had never gotten pregnant, they both believed because of the night she was frozen. To Frank a child was unimportant. She was everything to him he said. He only wanted what she wanted.

"That's not it, Frank." She sat on the bed next to him, tears at the rim of her eyes. "Why was Gauguin there? Is it true he has them pose?"

"I have heard that."

"Is there nothing that can be done to stop him?"

"I don't think so."

Frank stroked her face wiping away her tears, but did not speak further. And now it is morning. She walks outside the tent to the few campfires just starting, the images of the two girls still haunting her and for the first time is homesick for Ohio, though it will be weeks before they can go home.

It is like the hammer and barrel of Annie's shotgun has come undone; that is how she thinks of it. She can almost hear the metal clicks, the many parts of the shotgun falling to the floor, and there is no one who can put it back together.

Of course she misses two targets at her performance that day because she has not slept, but then it happens several days in a row. She cuts the cigar act from the routine entirely and will not attempt it again while she is in Paris. Red Shirt, the young Lakota medicine man, comes to her after a particularly bad performance. He has seen the problem as others have. Maybe Cody has sent him. He seats her across from him on a bale of hay, holds both her hands and begins to chant. How can this help, she thinks, but she keeps her eyes closed and feels his hand touch her forehead. His body is so cool and smooth; she can feel his coolness and smoothness enter her, his chant moving through her body. He lays her down on the bale, covers her with a blanket, and rubs something on her forehead that makes her sleep.

After that, the week is less dreadful; her performances are not perfect, but they are passable; she sleeps again through the night. When the week is over, she is one week closer to going back to Ohio, and in addition she and Frank will go tonight to the American Gala at the Grand Colonial Palace. The Mayor of Paris will be there, to crown Edison and pay homage to the American contingent, and when it is over, she and Frank will be allowed their night visit to the Eiffel Tower.

She spends the day visiting friends and at target practice, misses nothing. As evening approaches, she dresses in her best buckskin skirts, plaiting her hair carefully and knotting Frank's tie

as he loves her to do. That night as she enters the palace on his arm, gliding into a sea of perfume and tuxedos, an orchestra plays the latest tunes, and in spite of herself, she sighs. If fifty meters away half-naked Africans shiver in the night air, it is unknown here. A row of Edison's electrical chandeliers hangs above them like stars, and everywhere are celebrities: the actress Sarah Bernhardt, the writer Oscar Wilde, the Prince of Wales. She and Frank twirl through three waltzes, then stop for champagne as the actress approaches them. Annie knows it is Bernhardt by her trademark profile and the way her auburn hair falls on her translucent skin. She wears a diaphanous dress of musk chiffon, a long string of pearls twisted through her fingers.

My God her skin is soft, like some kind of angel, Annie thinks, and a sweet scent rises off her body. She stays just long enough to compliment Annie on her show, eyes twinkling, then floats off to another group, her perfume wafting behind her. She and Frank are about to dance again when the waltz ends and the orchestra begins a special introduction. Thomas Edison—it must be him, Annie realizes, though she has not met him before—moves to the front of the ballroom. He is a neat, middle-aged man with a barrel chest and a gold watch dangling from his vest, a petite, grey-haired wife on his arm. He looks like any businessman, and yet he is not any businessman; he has already remade the world. Next to Edison is the mayor of the city, a shorter businessman in a fancier suit, but otherwise little different. The mayor gives a short, heavily accented speech about Edison's greatness and about the greatness of America for its inventiveness and genius, then christens Edison the King of Light, and the room breaks into a wave of applause.

It is cool outside and quiet. The stars are in their places and the animals of the earth content.

Before they make their night visit to the Eiffel Tower, she and Frank will stop at the Javanese compound since Frank has promised to mail some of the Dutchman's letters via the American post. Annie suggests they also visit the dancers' tent and Frank readily agrees. When she was at the poor house a troop of matrons would march through monthly to check on their clothing and food. The director would have them wash in icy water and stand for inspection. The image of that crosses her mind, but she

quickly dismisses it. Soon enough, she and Frank are inside the Javanese compound, and Annie is sitting beside the bed of the youngest child.

It is dark in the tent, the dancers fast asleep, why did she think it would be otherwise? Frank is busy, though, so she will have to wait for him here, watching as the chest of the smallest dancer moves in and out in steady breaths. There is nothing to see here, surely; she can still feel the contentment of the world outside the tent, as though it is a breath of air from God.

The girl turns in her sleep, and Annie strokes her arm, then smoothes the covers under her chin. She never thinks of the children she did not have, but next to the girl, she feels the lack—what it might have been like and what it would have given her.

The girl quiets. Is she happy in her life? Unhappy? Her pearlized cheeks tell her nothing, nor the thick black eyelashes that close her eyelids. Youth is too beautiful, Annie realizes; it hides the reality of what exists beneath.

Fifteen minutes later Annie is outside the compound, still waiting for Frank. She breathes in the brisk scent of jasmine surrounding the camp and behind that the dampness in the air that foretells a late night shower. It is as though the very molecules in the air are asleep tonight. She looks up at the stars again and thinks how foolish she was to worry. All childhoods are not her childhood. Still, she decides that when they are back home, she will start a charity for orphan girls, to support their education. The idea makes her smile, the small imaginings of what she might call it and all the good she will do, so it takes her a moment to register the new sound in the air, something like the scuffling made by a small animal.

She is sure it is that until the higher pitch comes in, the unmistakable thrumbeat of fear that draws Annie towards a smaller side-tent a distance away from the Javanese tent, the sound growing louder with each foot she draws closer.

Somewhere within five feet of the small tent opening, Annie recognizes it as the voice of a human child, and now her own heart joins in, pounding in her ears. She pulls back the flap of the tent and is met by the gaze of a dark-skinned Javanese girl, perhaps eleven or twelve. Not one of the dancers—her features are too native-like and black for that, her face so alive with terror that it looks as though the whites of the girl's eyes are about to roll

out. Nothing makes sense, all jumbled and strange. She is half-dressed in some kind of strange costume of a Dutch farm woman, but nearly fallen off her tiny body, and when she sees Annie in front of her, the child clutches her hand in such a terrible vice, that Annie is caught immobile—unable to see beyond the girl's gaze.

The eyes are the eyes of a child, Annie thinks, but around them swim a red-rimmed sea of woe that she knows all too well.

"No, no!" the Dutchman barks at the child. He startles Annie, coming up behind her from out of the night, his chest against her back for God's sake, and shouting in some foreign tongue at the tiny girl as she digs her vice deeper and deeper into Annie's hand.

The man must have walked Frank to the exit of the Javanese compound, and then, seeing her encounter with the child, rushed over to solve it. But he is solving nothing, so close to Annie now that his entire body melds into her back. She has never been this close to a man other than Frank and it makes her want to vomit, his crumbling ribcage and hot, knotted heart moving against her spine. His breath comes out next to Annie's ear, warm and terrible smelling. The girl has Annie's hands from the front so it is difficult, but Annie twists her neck back to confront the man, his ridiculous powdered-face swollen in rage, the wig halfway down his blue check.

"What are you doing?" she screams. "Let her go!"

"I apologize Miss Oakley. I will break her hand if need be." Now he reaches more tightly around Annie, a full lover's embrace, to find the girl's hand and work at pulling back individual fingers. It is sickening, his body so close. Even without the girl, it would be sickening. It is hard for Annie to breathe.

"No! Stop!!"

With her free hand, she pushes at his chest, to get him away from both of them. Somehow, though, a small finger is bent back too far, and the girl shrieks in pain.

"There is another way, surely. What is the problem?" Frank is at their sides, trying to enter the struggling triumvirate, but there is no room.

The Dutchman shouts something new to the girl, loud bursts of spatted air, over and over against Annie's ear, his spit on her cheek, and slowly it takes effect. In front of her, Annie can watch

as the child's eyes seem to break, the lids drifting down, the vice loosened. Her whole body shifts, in fact, the fire draining out of it. She was a girl and now she is a shadow, backing into the tent.

Annie wants to chase in after her, but the man holds her back.

"She came to him herself," he says, "and asked for work. Otherwise she and her brother would be on the streets. She is well-paid; do not worry."

The man lets her go. "It is nothing so terrible," he says, entering the tent after the child.

Now that the girl is inside, no one seems to care what Annie sees. The tent is empty except for a small chaise lounge in its center lit with candles, and in front of it, the back of an artist's easel. Annie can see neither the painting nor the man, though she does not need to. It is clear merely by his shoes, wide and implacable, and the smell of his tobacco.

The Dutchman walks the girl to the chaise. He whispers into the child's ear and leads her into position, then pulls the dress from her shoulders to reveal the tiny pin-points of her half-formed breasts.

It is then that the 'S' face looks out from behind his canvas and grins at Annie, winking only once.

Why does she not have her pistol at such times, so that she can carry out the justice that is necessary, then grab the girl's hand and rush with her somewhere away? Annie fixes her gaze on the child's feet since she has not the heart to look elsewhere. She would bathe the feet in scented water and carnations, and afterwards when the girl was tired, put her in a feather bed.

"Come, Annie," Frank whispers behind her. *No. She will not listen.* "Come."

He takes her hand, the hand caught in the vice that she can still feel, but the pain is pleasure because it is the shadow of the girl trying to free herself that Annie would like to keep alive forever. To colonize is to own, to hollow out fully until there is only the flag of the other existing inside you.

"Come."

She hears nothing until she is standing on top of the Eiffel Tower with him, the farthest away that any human being can travel on earth. Yes, there are certain mountains, but no one has yet scaled them. That would be a good idea, to take all the children in need to such a mountain so they will not be harmed.

She has no memory of ascending the Tower, but it is colder here, and closer to the stars. They are alone, this night visit the mayor's gift, with a bottle of champagne and Mr. Edison's gramophone to play, but none of that matters now. Paris is aglow below her, the world modern and made new, but she looks at nothing and instead simply holds onto the iron of the rail, cold metal that she wishes she could put back inside her spine, but she is unable to. She has the sensation that her body is collapsing.

"Sh, sh, sh…"

Now it is Frank holding her from behind—his body welcome; his body part of her body—but he is only softness and flesh, as she is. When he was a child, both of his parents were killed in the Indian Wars. Sometimes at night, he talks in his sleep and cries.

"Look what Mr. Edison has arranged for you," he says.

At the edge of the platform is a table covered by a huge gramophone. Next to it is a bottle of champagne and two long-stemmed glasses.

"Pour the champagne, Annie."

But she will not. She bends down and kisses the iron of the rail that is solid and real. She likes its taste, its smell, like the taste and smell of her gun or the taste of blood. How small she still is, like a girl running across the prairie. If Frank were not holding her, she would stand on the rail and fly away.