

Red

They were calling it disaster communism. At the meetings they encouraged people to orientate themselves toward 'the common good', recognising disaster as an ongoing state of emergency, as the very fabric of the old way.

Aude struggled to make sense of the coming days, let alone months and years. It was getting harder to see the outline of things. Before long, she would need a cane, making her more visible in public. She was near excellent at pretending to recognise faces until they were close enough for her to discern. Soon, she wouldn't be able to walk alone, a thought that weighed heavy on her heart. They kept saying things would be safer, but Aude couldn't shake the memory of what was inscribed in the contract of the old world: the vulnerable were the first to go. What she had learnt in these months, as her grip on reality left her trailing in its wake, was how nature opened itself up to intruders. Blooming flowers were newness; she liked taking the risk, eating petals and hoping green stalk would sprout from her belly button. Rea kept telling her that in the aftermath of disaster, no matter how big or small, a collective conditional emerged. Losing your sight would not be a problem in a world built for it.

Any space that could be repurposed had been. The arches stood tall and wide; Aude recognised the church instantly. She'd been dragged there against her will as a child. Following her mother in Sunday best, she'd tried desperately to mess up something about her appearance, running her fingers through her hair in circles, removing the lace bows and clips when her mother wasn't looking, untying her shoelaces, letting her socks fall below the knee. She refused to be prim; from a tender age, she'd cultivated a desire to disgrace herself in front of the Lord.

Despite the rays of sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows, the outline of objects remained fuzzy. The cascade of colours running down his left side obscured the shopkeeper's face. He towered over her, Impatient.

'Can I help you?' She'd knocked over the mangoes.

'No, I'm fine.' She tried to smile, but all she saw him see

was big white teeth in a black face. Often Aude worried that she did not qualify for sympathy, even though this was what the revolt had promised. This worry made the business of living harder. Most of all, ordeals like this were humiliating. She smiled and retreated, grabbing a bottle of water to calm herself as she exited through another arch. She called Rea, who rushed to her aid with the speed of a mother.

In the beginning, as chaos had washed over the city, they'd erected fences to keep others at bay and turned only to each other for replenishing. Aude cherished Rea's care; her embrace was primal—it comforted you, made you hungry for more. Before she knew that intimacy could be organised in another way, Aude had frequently rushed home to find solace in Rea, to follow the marks running across her body with her tongue. Aude had trouble letting go of the old way. She had selfishly resolved to grab joy when and where she could. They kept talking about the end of ownership, but she stole Rea and locked her away. Aude and Rea enjoyed their communism of two. When Rea cried, Aude would cocoon her, letting her know that it was okay to let go, it was okay to allow a little invasion for mending. That's how the two moved together at first, crashing into one another, making each other more robust in the process.

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The conditions made living impossible. She was sure her mother had died of waiting. The tragedy kept time moving; it pushed the days along, dragging all those left behind with it. In the early days, everyone was in mourning. Strangers wandered the streets looking for lost loved ones, hoping to find them in the ruins of burning buildings, overturned police cars, abandoned warehouses. Aude realised there were big pains and little pains. The little pains were sometimes so overwhelming they made you forget about the approaching darkness.

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The ghouls were coming for them—they knew as much. Aude hated to remember. On the few occasions when she permitted herself to, she saw in her mind's eye how the events had unfolded. Slowly, families were disappeared

by the state's army; the pitchforks foreshadowing their deaths appeared outside their doors weeks before. She'd lost Kai that way. When the stakes had appeared on the concrete outside the East Tower Block and everyone fled for their lives, his mother had insisted on staying put. She feared God more than anybody else; that was her biggest mistake. She didn't understand that the state was God, for all intents and purposes. It regulated their lives using the Grim Reaper's utensils. The culling began with the tower blocks that lit the path at night. On the night Kai disappeared, Aude washed her hair. She couldn't get a comb through it; hands either side of the sink, she had broken down in frustration. She couldn't have known then that she'd never see him again, but she'd sensed it. She reached for the clippers. Her friends were dead, and with them had gone any care for her appearance. When she emerged from the bathroom, her mother screamed. That was the same day Aude told her that when she kissed boys, she was only pretending to like it.

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Rea spent days tracing the patterns on the curtains, only to come up short. She feared having more time on her hands to be idle. Each day, she performed chores in their shared home in silence, making sure Aude did the same, lest the figure behind the camera in the corner of the room turn them in. When they reclaimed control before the second insurrection, the state installed cameras in the homes of revolutionaries. They never admitted to this, but everyone knew it was true. This pushed organising underground; Rea knew that every minute spent in the flat was an elaborate performance. She had to make them believe things were returning to normal. Rea wondered if they turned off the cameras when couples had sex; sometimes she felt someone else's eyes on her as they undressed each other. Some days this did not bother her, but on others, the eyes made her want to shed her skin like a snake.

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This is how she told the story to those who had not witnessed it. There came a time when capital began to eat itself; they told everyone there was no longer enough to go around. All the systems and signs that

kept the world tightly knit together—Austen’s head on a banknote, Jefferson’s face on a coin—began to disintegrate. It started with people losing their jobs, then their homes. Philosophers had predicted that this thing called life (capital accumulation) would not last forever. There would be a transition phase before human flourishing began. That was this moment: those who could not let go, those who could not loosen their allegiance to the flag and the anthem joined the state and carried out the culls. In large groups, they marked their targets in blood, shattered the dreams of rebuilding communities from the root. Their actions were an ideological force; they maintained the state of emergency. Rea had felt like a conspiracy theorist watching things play out; it had happened exactly as they had predicted in the meetings. An appeal to order, then the people responded with disobedience of all kinds. In a meeting before the first street battle, one person had stood up and asked if they were ready to risk it all.

Communities organised into small confederations to try and fend off the attacks. These were sustained by care work, provided by women at first, and later by everyone who could. Those who were physically able stood watch in red, waiting for any sign of attack from government militia. They chased the state’s men out with chants and eyes on the unmarked cars that said, ‘We are ready for anything.’ They fed, clothed and bathed the wounded, using the doctors and nurses out of work to make the sick well enough to run again, well enough to defend their loved ones if it came to that. Those moments, when Rea bandaged a leg or helped stitch together a flesh wound, made her feel useful. She was unfamiliar with the flood of warmth that followed acts of service, when your energy went towards something other than manufacturing a product to be bought and sold. She started teaching basic first aid to anyone who would listen. The day she put on the red shirt, she knew that the old way was dead. There was no going back.

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They lock eyes at a meeting. Aude, who is embarrassingly sympathetic to the idea that we can transform the state into what we want it to be, secretly misses her old life. She has come to try and figure out how to adjust to living

in flux. What will happen to property? What will happen to borders? She misses the order of things, the intimate disappointments of limited political possibilities. Before this, the choices that filled her with this much anxiety were trivial. The chaos of this moment is saying: you can have what you have always dreamt of, Aude, a world free from violence. She is deciding how to respond. Aude is wearing black to signal her undecidedness; red has never suited her skin tone. She has not come expecting to meet the woman who will give her so much more than political consciousness. She has not come expecting to meet the woman who will shatter the romance of what was, dragging her kicking and screaming into what is.

Before, she had little to focus on but herself. The things that mattered to her were simple. In the old world she was allowed to be selfish; to preach the mantra of personal responsibility and to look away from the horrors that resulted. It was okay to dream of having; it was not smart to proceed as if lives were actually dependent on one another. In this moment, she thinks it is asking too much of her to relinquish the fantasy of the good life that she deserves. She misses music, spending her days smoking up and dancing around her room pretending to be sexy. God, is there sex in this future? She has not even considered this until now.

'It's important we know how to defend ourselves when we are under attack. They are sending firing squads to kill us and calling it order.'

Rea is striking. Her hair is scrapped back into a big bush; she has bits of grass in it from when she took a nap in the sun. Aude feels her belly drop and knows she is in trouble. She feels the heat radiating in her hands, then up her arms to her face.

'It's unclear what will come next. But we must protect ourselves. Think of violence not as moral or immoral, but simply as a question of who has the power to justify using it.'

Rea looks over and sees a new face. She knows instinctively that this girl will not pick up a knife; she can't even sit up straight. She decides to talk to her after the meeting, to introduce her to the other women and find

out where she's from. She is not wearing red. Rea smirks; that will change soon enough.

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The first time Aude dropped a plate, she thought it was just carelessness. She kept missing the drying rack. She had tried to ignore the shapes appearing at the back of her eyes; they disappeared if she blinked hard enough. She didn't want to worry Rea. She hated this in-between-moment—they called it 'survival pending revolution'. But pending meant being stuck in limbo. The sun still shone in the same way; the air was only slightly sweeter. Rea kept saying, revolution is not a one-time event, it is always already happening; the question is, are you ready for it? Are you ready to sacrifice everything when time ruptures and events begin to ricochet in unknown directions?

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The streets were... quieter. They stopped counting time in the old way; it was hard to get a sense of how far away they were from the bloody summer. Many people had been lost—they'd invented a new ritual to remember the dead. They tried to mix the old and new way as little as possible. There was something about old traditions—a coffin, mourners in black—that they had outgrown.

She'd fallen in love with Rea; they had proceeded as lovers do. Aude finally understood the talk of new modes of intimacy developing in the wake of disaster. Unlike before, she loved without possession or domination. There were no defined stages in their relationship; nothing happened too fast or too soon. They lived together because they were living with everyone. This new intimacy collapsed expectation. It allowed for a flexibility that responded to moments as they unfolded. Aude and Rea were allowed to change their minds and then change them again, knowing that they belonged not to themselves or to each other, but to the ground beneath their feet. There was new space to breathe. Aude knew that she could find comfort in others when Rea disappointed her. They complemented one another, rooted in an ecology that could not be threatened.

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One day, Rea was wonderstruck by the world she was building. Suddenly, colours were crisp and vibrant; she awoke without the familiar heaviness in her chest. It was as if she saw for the first time, and in the connections forged with others discovered that she could choose her relation to the world. She wondered if Aude felt the same; she wanted to bring her outside so she could witness. As they walked, glimpses of transformed holding centres and former prison sites convinced her that embers were a construction material. Rea began to believe, seriously, that destruction could not last forever. They decided to walk for as long as their bodies allowed, exploring the state's ruins. Every empty home was revived terrain; the private had been made public, and with it, every illusion of intramural living had disappeared. The clamps on their tongues fell away. No longer captive to hesitation or the anxiety that caused their mouths to dry up, Aude and Rea let go. They let go of the old world that had never really been a world at all. They gave in to the openness born around them; finally, they could share their pain with others without fear of reprisal or humiliation. They moved across the city like feathers bursting into open air, light on their feet, landing soft but deliberate.

They heard the sounds before they saw him. He'd played in the same spot even before the conflict began. He leaned against a tree beginning to bloom, unaware of the eyes on him, his strong breath blowing the notes out whistleclean. It was not a performance—the concept of remuneration had been abolished—he played just because, he played to usher in what was coming. The way he gripped the instrument made his lack of sight apparent to Aude—his grip was deft; unknown muscles in his forearm flexed as he hit his stride. Aude wondered if his blindness was obvious to Rea. She smiled as they watched him create sound from memory. It was not a song they recognised, which was fitting.

The notes floated through the air and surrounded them, wrapping them up, sliding across their skin as they danced. At this, the man turned in their direction and smiled; he played not for the dream of success but because this new world necessitated beauty of all kinds. The new world was not just labour, but labour for the sake of life-making. Was this what they meant, Aude thought,

when they had screamed, another world is possible, be brave? She knew the private satisfaction of this moment belonged to her, but also to Rea, also to the unnamed musician. That was the difference between how they had lived then and how they were living now; her interiority was not a closed entity to be protected from others at all costs. She threw her chest to the sky, head back, and relinquished the last piece of doubt. She felt her face for the first time, smiling anew and rubbing her black skin in amazement. Then she looked over and saw Rea, saw her and the infinite prospects, chances, the glory of potentiality that encircled her. Melodic phrases left her mouth before she could think of their meaning; she was being moved by what could be. Rea stared back in disbelief—she laughed and laughed.

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