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The year is 1871. Revolution has just established a democratic government in France, following the defeat of emperor Napoleon in the war with Germany. But the new Republic satisfies no one. The provisional government is comprised of politicians who served under the Emperor; they have done nothing to address the revolutionaries' demands for social change, and they don't intend to. Right-wing reactionaries are conspiring to reinstate the Emperor or, failing that, some other monarch. Only rebel Paris stands between France and counterrevolution.

The partisans of order have their work cut out for them. First, they have to get the French people to accept the unpopular terms of surrender dictated by Germany. To force the armistice on its citizens, the new Republic bans the radical Clubs and shuts down the newspapers, threatening Paris with the combined armies of two nations. Only then, after warrants have been issued to arrest the insurgents who overthrew the emperor, do elections take place.

With the radicals in prison or in hiding, the conservatives win the elections. The chief victor is the banker Adolphe Thiers, Proudhon's old nemesis, who helped to sell out the revolution of 1848—if not for him, the emperor might not have been able to seize power in the first place. Propelled into office by voters from the provincial countryside, Thiers' first act is to negotiate peace with Germany at a cost of five billion francs.

This strikes Thiers as a cheap price to pay to take the reins of the state—especially since the French people will be paying it, not him personally. And should they refuse? He would still rather fight France than Germany.

One of the terms of Thiers' surrender is that German troops are permitted a victory march through the capital. After starving through months of siege, this is the last thing the Parisians want. Rumors spread that the Germans are coming to loot the city. The Vigilance Committees that sprung up after the revolution continue meeting, despite the ban.

On the night of February 26, tens of thousands of rebellious members of the National Guard gather downtown on the Champs-Elysées in defiance of government orders. Alongside them are stone-faced revolutionaries like Louise Michel, a forty-year-old schoolteacher from the suburb of Montmartre. Together, they break open the prison in which the latest round of political prisoners are held and set them free. Then they wait in the frigid darkness for the Germans to come, preparing to die for Paris.

When dawn still shows no sign of the invaders, the rebels seize the cannons that remain in Paris from the war. These cannons were paid for by donations collected from the poor during the siege; the rebels believe they rightfully belong to those who are prepared to use them to defend the city, not to the politicians who have betrayed it or the Germans who are

A hush falls. The soldiers ready their weapons. They look pale. Someone cries, "Don't shoot!" but the crowd does not fall back.

"Aim!"

A line of matching rifles goes up. A woman is trembling; another grips her arm, sneering at the young men in their army uniforms. Behind them, Michel and her friends raise their rifles as well. They see that some of the soldiers are shaking too.

"Fire!" There is an instant's pause.

An officer throws down his weapon and steps out of the ranks. "Fuck this!"

"Turn your rifles around!" someone else shouts. This is the moment Michel will always remember.

The next day, the red flag flies over the Town Hall—the flag of the people, the flag they should have raised in 1848. The Vigilance Committees occupy the neighborhood administrative buildings. Lecomte has been shot. Thiers and his henchmen have fled to the nearby town of Versailles with the remains of the military. The financiers have retreated to their country estates. Victor Hugo has run away to Belgium. From the East, the German troops are waiting to see whether the French government can subdue this new revolution, fearful it might spread across Europe.

Paris is in the hands of commoners known only to each other. Mysteriously, the city has never been so peaceful.

coming to disarm and humiliate it. They drag the heavy guns from the wealthy district back through the hovels and trash-heaps of their own neighborhoods to park them on the hilltop of Montmartre.

On March 1, 1871, the German troops finally enter Paris. They stick to downtown, avoiding the restless slums. The shops are all closed; the statues along the parade route wear black hoods and black flags fly from the buildings. Ragged hordes watch from a distance through narrowed eyes; their cold stares make the well-fed Germans shiver. The occupiers withdraw to camp outside the city to the east.

Days later, Thiers' government announces that landlords can immediately claim rent payments that were suspended during the siege. All debts are due with interest within four months, and the moratorium on the sale of pawned goods is canceled. The salaries of the National Guard are also canceled, except for those who can demonstrate special need. It will take all this and more to pay the terms of the peace Thiers has signed.

On the morning of March 18, Montmartre wakes to find the walls plastered with a proclamation. In patronizing tones, Adolphe Thiers explains that—for the sake of public order, democracy, the Republic, the economy, and their own skins—the honest people of Paris must turn over the cannons, along with the criminals by whom they have been led astray:

> To carry out this act of justice and reason, the government counts on your assistance. It believes that the good citizens will separate from the bad, and will support, instead of resisting, public opinion… Having received this notice, you will now approve

our recourse to force, because there must be peace, without a day's delay.

On the previous evening, Louise Michel had climbed to the crest of Montmartre to bear a message to the rebel Guardsmen watching the cannons. It was late, so she stayed overnight at their headquarters. All night, suspicious characters kept turning up with stories that didn't make sense, pretending to be drunk, trying to get a look at the hilltop.

She awakens to gunfire. It is still dark. By the time she is on her feet, French troops loyal to Thiers are already in control of the building. They arrest the men and ransack the house, but take little notice of her—she is a woman, after all. After the troops have secured the area, they bring in a captured Guardsman who has been shot. Michel tears strips from her dress to staunch his bleeding.

Montmartre's liberal mayor arrives. Michel can only shake her head at his dismay: he is concerned about the injured Guardsman, but above all he hopes the troops will take the cannons away swiftly before his constituents get unruly. Not knowing that Michel has already dressed the Guardsman's wound, he asks for clean bandages. Michel offers to go out for them.

"You're certain you'll return?" He gives her a sidelong glance.

"I give my word," answers Michel, deadpan.

As soon as she passes out of view, she is sprinting down the hill through the dim streets, past small knots of early risers reading Thiers' proclamation posted on the walls. She is yelling out "Treason!" at the top of her lungs when she turns onto the street where the headquarters of the local Vigilance Committee are. Her friends are already there; they grab their guns and

rush back up the hill with her. In the distance, the drums of the National Guard can be heard, beating out the call to arms.

Now the streets are thronged: bearded Guardsmen, young men in shirtsleeves fumbling with their rifles, women in twos and threes. They thicken into a human sea, rushing upwards. Ahead of them, Michel sees the hill, crowned in the first soft light of day. At the top, an army waits in full battle array. She and her friends are going to die. The effect of this revelation is almost exhilarating.

Suddenly, Michel's mother is beside her in the crowd. "Louise, I haven't seen you in days! Where have you been? You're not going to get mixed up in all this, are you?"

When she reaches the crest of the hill, the crowd has already breached the infantry cordon. The soldiers are surrounded. Women are heckling Thiers' troops:

"Where are you taking those cannons? Berlin?"

"No—they're taking them back to Emperor Napoleon!"

"You can fire on us, but not on the Prussians, eh?"

A shame-faced officer pleads with a matron who has planted herself between a cannon and the horses pulling it. "Come, my good woman, get out of the way."

"Go on, you coward," she yells back, "Shoot me in front of my children!"

"Cut the cables!" someone shouts from the back of the crowd. A knife passes from hand to hand until it reaches the woman blocking the cannon. She cuts the straps attaching it to the horses. The crowd cheers.

General Lecomte himself rides up, high and haughty. He assumes command in a voice that resounds above the tumult: "Soldiers! *Prepare arms!*"