

Deliverance

By *Sonia Vlatkovic*

In a world strewn with bullets and bombshells, Paris was the eye of the hurricane. Labyrinthine streets, bustling crowds, a droning clamour; it was a sanctuary where I could escape the watchful gaze of the police, yet not the lingering shadow of my past.

I slipped through the crowd, shouldering each suspicious gaze cast my way. Each pair of eyes darting my way branded me an outsider, permeating my soul with the certainty that I was an alien. For six months, I had trodden this exact path, yet I still had ‘terrorist’ tattooed in crude letters across my forehead.

“This time,” I murmured, steeling myself. A sense of numb detachment settled over me like a film, sheltering my heart from the terrified whispers trailing me. “It’ll be different this time.”

If I remained on the streets for too long, Officer Étienne Javert would sniff me out again. Even now, the thought stirred deep-rooted instincts born from a world dominated by fear and darkness. Shivering, I cast a final glance over my shoulder before pushing into the *Chez Thénardier*.

A shabby café, centuries old and imbued with filth and beer, it filled me with hope despite my better judgement. “Excuse me?” I said, my voice resonating throughout the empty room.

“Monsieur—”

The barista, halfway down the staircase, stopped short at the sight of me. His face shuttered, tight with displeasure, an expression echoed in the faces of the Parisians outside – those rich, poor and somewhere in-between.

“Get out,” he said, his beady eyes narrowing into snakelike slits. “I told you to stay away.”

Something twisted within me at his words, stealing the breath from my lungs. “I have a new idea,” I said. “I can do the lowly jobs for you, like sweeping—”

“Dearest Raheem Valjean.” The barista’s wife slipped out from behind him, her lips peeled back into a snake’s grin. “How can you of all people help us?”

Frustration bloomed within me. Mustering my remaining dignity, I tried again: “Monsieur, Madame, please—”

“No.” The barista looked at me, the sparse hairs on his chin quivering in distaste. As his eyes lingered on my Iraqi skin and gaunt frame, I knew he sought signs of volatility, not vulnerability. “Your kind only knows violence.”

No, I knew desperation; I knew the cold embrace of despair. For nineteen forsaken years, my life was one immersed in a darkness not of my own making.

His wife squinted at me in mock scrutiny, her mouth crooked upwards in a derisive smile. As her eyes widened, I knew she had spied the outline of my ill-concealed pocketknife. “You *are* a terrorist!” she cried. Beneath the contempt coating her tone, I could hear the sharp edge of unease.

“It’s for self-defence—” I cut myself off, despising the thought of yielding my darkest memories. “Please,” I finally said, choking on the sounds of the French language; they were foreign on my tongue, reminding me of the life I had left behind.

“Out.” The barista pointed at the door. “Or else I’ll call for Officer Étienne.”

Anxiety unfurled within me. In Iraq, policemen were omens, harbingers of destruction and fear incarnate. Even now, I relived the terror of staring down the barrel of a gun, eyes watering as my nose flooded with the stench of metal and smoke. Yet, even as I shivered at the memory, a small, traitorous part of me acknowledged that they were only men. We all were.

The barista’s threat was a dagger against my throat, choking my airway until I finally retreated from the café. *Liberté, égalité and fraternité applies to all*, I thought bitterly, *but for some more than others*. A wail of despair clawed at my vocal cords, begging to be set free, but the desire evaporated as I spied the blue-and-black of Étienne’s police car veering down an adjacent street. A tiger stalking his prey – a tiger, in fact, who had often stalked me. A distinct awareness of the barista’s propensity to twist words and steal my freedom hastened my gait, but the shriek of a missile stopped me short.

No, not a missile; it was the screeching of tyres and crunching of metal.

My heart thrashed against my ribcage as people scattered, ants fleeing from danger. Every instinct roared at me to flee – *save yourself* – yet a quiet voice nagged at me. *Go*, it urged, a phantom tugging my sleeve. *Go* – not away, but towards the danger.

I did.

A car – no, a police car – lay in a crumpled heap, its blue-and-black emblem just discernible. Slender tongues of smoke and fire curled skywards, entwining into a terrible veil above the wreckage.

Go.

I edged towards the car, not knowing whether my hands shook from primal fear or from the protests roiling deep within. Étienne lay trapped inside, a fly tangled in the web of his seatbelt. As I approached, his eyes, fierce beneath his blood-stained brow, snapped upwards.

“You!” he snarled.

The pocketknife trembled as I drew it from my shirt.

A wild laugh tore from Étienne’s lips. “A knife!” He laughed again, a terrible sound, sagging against the binds of his seatbelt. “Exactly your style.”

A terrible buzz pierced my skull as fear finally engulfed me, swallowing his words. My vision dimmed as dark memories manifested from the world around me, entangling me within their claws: the smoke, suddenly tinged with the stench of death, billowed from the rubble of my home; the sound of the crowd were those of innocent civilians, their cries accompanied by bullets, choppers and bombs.

I would have succumbed if it were not for the tiny pinpricks of phone lights dotting my vision, each one piercing through the all-consuming haze.

I raised my head. My vision blurred with tears rather than terror as I leaned forward, ignoring Étienne’s grim smile as I cut through his tangled binds. “Be free,” I told him. Clean air flooded my lungs, and I inhaled, exhaled.

Yes; be free.

