

Grisette

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

— “Mushrooms”, Sylvia Plath

Here is the handful
of shadow I have brought back to you:
this decay, this hope, this mouth—
full of dirt, this poetry.

— “Mushrooms”, Margaret Atwood

Prologue

Midnight.

Across the laddered rooftops, the bells of Notre Dame toll ten.

In a bare cell lit by a single candle, a young woman sits before a sheaf of empty pages. A cheap pen rests beside them. A bottle of ink.

As the bells fade away she takes a handkerchief from her lap and places it on the table. Inside are two small mushrooms, one bone white, one rust-pink, like linen stained with blood.

She picks up the pen and begins to write.

By morning, she will be dead.

Paris,

6th July 1853

~~The Life and Times of Marie-Louise Gosse~~
~~The Last Will & Testament of Marie-Louise Gosse~~
~~Confessions of Grisette~~

The Confession of Marie-Louise Gosse

My name is Malou Gosse and I am a murderess. My name is not Malou Gosse and I am not a murderess. My name is Malou and tomorrow I go to my death, accused of murder. All of those statements are true, and none.

Perhaps you have read about me in the newspapers, pored over the lurid details of the account and think you know it all.

You don't. The real story is far stranger than any that might appear in print. If a journalist had sought me out, perhaps I would have told it. But they didn't. And so, if I want anyone to know even half the truth, I'll have to write it here.

It is not ideal. My story is not one best suited to words. If I could, I'd tell it another way. I'd give up these letters and place the bitterness of wormwood on your tongue, the scent of teeming earth in your nostrils. I'd whisper it into your ear with wine-stained breath, run a finger shining with honey across your lips, bid you close your eyes and open your mouth and chew and swallow without question, never knowing the danger you were taking into your belly until it was too late.

What to place before you first? Reading is eating and the meat of the matter might not be to your taste, just yet. But I must be content with the time I have. These words must be written down by morning or spoil within my skull.

To begin, then. I was born in Paris, in the darkness beneath the city. I have never known the day of my birth, or any detail, save that it happened. Who knows what stock I came from? Perhaps my mother was a grand lady, or a ballet girl. A derelict from the Court of Miracles or baby farmer from Saint-Denis. Perhaps I wasn't born at all. Perhaps I grew on the streets from a patch of slime where a nightworker spat a gentleman's leavings.

It matters little. I was born unrecorded and will die misremembered. I doubt anyone will pay for my tombstone: tomorrow, when I dead and the newspapers have had their fill, they will roll my headless body into a pauper's grave. If I am to have an epitaph, I must carve my own:

Here lies
Marie-Louise Gosse
Born 1835
Died 1853

Tragic, perhaps you think, for one so young to go to the devil. My accusers would agree. They claim I was made bad, grew bad and can be nothing else. Cut me open and find rot inside. As if they would know what to look for. Most have never peered through a microscope and seen that nothing in this world is as it appears. Not flesh, not stone, not people. Certainly not words.

“La grisette meurtrière” I imagine them calling me. The murderous grisette, *mortiferum femina*, as if I am a new discovery, a deadly specimen among the other grisettes, venomous where they are innocent. As if we all grew from the loam of Paris the same way: born into petticoats at dusk every night with lavender water beneath our arms and rose water combed through our hair. Too loose to marry. Too dull to whore. A pair of gentle hands to coax the pen and the cock both. Grisettes.

I am different; that's what you think I am about to say. I am different to those other girls, all those soft-eyes does who coughed themselves so prettily to death. But I'm not. I am – you must remember this – just like them.

And if you're thinking clearly that should frighten you out of your wits. Because everything I did, everything I am accused of, they could do too.

grisette
/ɡrɪˈzɛt/

noun: grisette; plural noun: grisettes

1. a common edible woodland mushroom with a brown or grey cap, a slender stem, and white gills, formerly known as *amanita vaginata*.
2. (archaic) a young working-class Frenchwoman.

Amanita vaginata.

Commonly known as the **grisette** or the **grisette amanita**. Edible fungus of the family Amanitaceae. Not recommended for consumption due to the possibility of confusing it with related poisonous species, such as the death cap (*A. phalloides*); destroying angels, (*A. virosa*, *A. bisporigera*, *A. ocreata*) and the fool's mushroom (*A. verna*).

FAO: Members of the Board, The Belgravia Library

20th July 2003

To whom it may concern,

In this package you will find a copy of everything. My research, my notes, my journal and of course, the manuscript itself. Not the original. It's too fragile to handle much, and so deteriorated that in places it's almost impossible to make out. So, I've had to fill some of the gaps myself, using educated guesswork. That's why it's typed up this way and not as a digital file: we tried that, and failed. I'll come to why.

So, this account won't be in the form you expect or are accustomed to. Some of it will seem strange and there will be times when you doubt me but please – try to reserve your judgement and let me explain, as best I can.

Writing like this will damage my case, I know. I should be presenting my justifications to you in cool, impersonal language and established style with accurate citations and in well-ordered footnotes. But I can't. All of that seems meaningless now. *Her* fault. She showed me that everything I had thought of as solid is dissolving every moment. Even space. Even time. When you read this, you might understand. Unless I truly am as mad as everyone says.

You'll no doubt agree with that and say that I'm illogical, whimsical, prone to superstition. And I'll counter: have you ever spoken to any of your staff? I've heard talk of data gremlins and haunted catalogues; curses that have seen parts of your library burn or flood when disturbed or disrespected. Laugh all you like, but then go and stand in the Back Stacks in the depth of winter, the automatic lighting shivering on in response to someone who isn't there, look up from the book in your hands, word-blind, and know with every fibre of your being that someone is watching... then tell me I imagined it all.

Anyway, perhaps that's how this account should be read; at the farthest, most isolated desk at the very rear of the stacks, where the electricity is bad and the 1950s paint is peeling, beside the nailed-shut door that can't be found on any map and lets in gusts of wind that smell of wet stone and mildew and behind which – once – you're sure you heard the slide of footsteps... Maybe there, reading as I did, you will feel the truth of this story in some way. Hear *her* words the way they are meant to be heard. Taste them.

Maybe then, you'll believe.

But that part of the basement will soon be gone, lost under rubble and I am one of the twelve people banned for life from your library's premises. So I'll have to do my best to convince you with what I have: her words, and mine.

Here it is then, in its entirety, the manuscript I found that hot July morning and everything that came after. For what it's worth, I swear this isn't a trick, or a hoax: you won't be reading my name in some *Guardian* article a year from now. If you need corroboration, please ask Willa Paget. She was there on the day this started and knows that I never went looking for any of it.

One last thing; as you read, be careful. Her words have a way of working their way into your brain. I wasn't, and I fell too far, too fast.

As for what to do with this account: I leave it in your hands. Share it, burn it, bury it at the back of a storeroom, it doesn't matter. It's too late now. I've passed it on. It's already spreading.

Yours Sincerely,

Nicola Martin

“Men will acknowledge beauty in the tiniest moss, the most formless lichen, or even in coarse sea-wreck, and then peep into your basket of Fungi, varied in form, and of every brilliant hue and merely exclaim with disgust “What a load of toadstools!””

Plues, Margaret. *Rambles in Search of Flowerless Plants. Journal of horticulture & cottage gardener office*; 1864

“It may be permissible, since the group is but little known, in the first place to rehearse briefly the chief facts of their life-history.”

Lister, Gulielma. “Part 63. Mycetozoa.” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature*, vol. 31, 1911

The Confession of Marie-Louise Gosse

You have turned the page. You've not been put off, then, by what I've offered. That's good. It means you have a taste for darkness, for secrets like a rabbit's ruby guts; for bitterness and sweetness stirred together. For sorrow and its drowning. Then stay, you won't go hungry.

Have you ever eaten a Paris mushroom? I don't mean the ones they sell in the markets of London or Rome, or the dishes *aux champignons* boasted by every second-rate restaurant on the Boulevard du Crime. I mean true Paris mushrooms. If you have you will them by their scent of sun-warmed loam, their firm white flesh, their flavour of good earth and sweet hazelnuts and something unplaceable, like the taste of a lover's sweat.

But perhaps you do not know what makes a *true* Paris mushroom. It's quite simple. They must be grown within the city's limits, in the cavities that remain from where men dragged our capital's limestone bones into the light. In the darkness beneath your feet, in the shit of your own fine horses.

It makes me laugh to imagine your face, hearing that. Your disgust, as if we weren't all made from the same stuff. Albumen and ash, blood and jelly.

You are disgusted by me, too, now that I have shown my edges. But I grew in those tunnels, just like your precious mushrooms and no one ever praised my qualities, coveted me, called me valuable. No one except her. And she is gone.

My father always said my mother found me one night while out collecting horse's muck for the tunnels and carried me home, swaddled in a warm basket of dung. I will not say either of them took me in through kindness, though I believe their hearts had soft places. They must have done to feed me, in the years before I was able to feed myself. I wonder now what kind of people they might have been, in another world, where those soft places in their hearts were allowed to grow and spread rather than harden and crack as they did. I suppose I'll never know.

The woman I called my mother had been a flower-seller, peddling nosegays. She was sickly, fair and faded as an old print left too long in a shop window; a ghost on the skin of the world. My father had been a soldier in a war in Algeria. He had a sad sort of moustache, the ends split for lack of wax and hair darker than mine and two thick scars that circled his ankles. Often in the cold months he would rub at them. He'd been shot in the back and it had never healed right. He always said he wasn't *Français par le sang versé* – French by spilled blood – but French by broken bones.

I don't know when he left off being a soldier and started being a farmer. He only said that he'd be dead if not for old Henri, a comrade of his, who found him starving and brought him underground and showed him how to make gold from shit, as he always put it.

If I close my eyes I can see it, our mushroom farm: low, crooked tunnels carved from the limestone, and in the darkness bed after bed of pale fruits, like a thousand white eyes. I remember their flavour, the ones that were too large or browned or bruised to go to market: raw they tasted like winter rain on glass. Cooked they oozed out woodiness and musk, as if exhaling everything they had taken inside them with their final breaths. I was raised on them, weaned on them. Ate them every day of my life until my eighteenth year. Cut me open when I die and you will find webbed roots in place of veins. Does that mean I too will go on? Mushrooms cannot die, you see. By the time you eat them they are already corpses, already being born again.

So tomorrow, once I am dead, you had better burn my body. I'll turn any coffin to pulp within months. Even as ash, who's to say I won't come back and grow in the hollows of the Bois de Boulogne, my flesh transformed to soft tissue, white as bone?

But time runs and this is supposed to be a confession. Every drip of wax is another word lost.

Like I said, my father did not take me in for charity. Children made for good workers, in the tunnels. My small hands were nimble, I could navigate the beds with ease without crushing the crop. I ate less. I worked unpaid. Every night, I would harvest the crop and accompany my mother to market.

Not just any market, but the Marché des Innocents, the ancient gut of Paris. I am guessing you have never seen it, genteel reader that you are. You likely have never ventured into the tangle of streets between St Eustache and the Seine after midnight and found them transformed into a maze of wooden galleries and carts, upturned barrels and makeshift tables that appear at midnight and are gone by the light of morning. Perhaps by the time you read this, it too will be gone, another victim of our emperor's desire to rebuild Paris in his image.

Every morning, as the bells of Saint Eustache tolled two my mother and I would push the cart all the way from Chaillot hill onto the rue Tonnellerie – jostling to make an inch of progress through the wagons and mules and carts and carriages. In the rain, when fog clung to the skin like wet muslin, in the swelter of summer, it didn't matter: every day of the year, the market operated by no rules but its own. I knew it like my own body. Even now, blindfold me and I could find my way through by smell if I had to; past the vegetable market humming with the green stink of leeks and the earthy smack of potatoes, into the Marché des

Prouvaires with its blood-sticky cobbles and iron reek of raw flesh and bone. Around the wet, peppery mulch of the watercress girls and into the Place des Innocents with its ancient fountain. Father once told me that the market had been a cemetery, piled so high with bodies they wouldn't stay in the ground, and that people made candles and soap from the grave fat they scraped from the soil. He said that if you drank from the fountain you could still taste the lime they threw down to melt the skeletons. *That* was the soul of the place, he said: people in Saint Eustache found a way to make money even when the flesh was rotting from their bones.

On, past the fountain, past the bright spritz of the citrus sellers, onto the corner the rue Cossonnerie and there: the familiar smell of loam and fresh-turned earth, bosk and the faintest hint of fish. The place where we congregated by some agreement made long before I was born: the mushroom sellers of Paris.

Our pitch was the best, at the market end, sure to snare the first customers. Mother and I worked quietly; few of the other sellers greeted us. We Gosses weren't well-liked. Father said they were jealous that we did the best trade, sold the best product. Of course, there could have been other reasons.

We traded until sunrise, selling to other traders and grocers, apprentice chefs and finally peddlers. Sometimes, a buyer might remember my mother from her violet-selling days and give her an extra centime. Then, she'd buy us a secret as she put it: a cup of scalding, bitter coffee from the cart, or a single orange or a handful of burstingly sweet strawberries. We were always careful to swill out mouths with water from the fountain afterwards, to avoid Father's anger at being deprived liquor money.

Every morning, as the city awoke, we would return like night creatures to our creaking apartment in Chaillot, in an ancient, damp building pressed close against the hill, only a few steps from our secret entrance to tunnels. We would sleep, eat whatever could be bought from the money left after Father's latest drinking spree, work down in the farm, shovelling shit, hauling buckets of water. And sometimes, in the afternoons when the weather was fine and Father was not too sick from wine, he and I would go to the Bois.

Do you know the Bois? I have no idea who you are, the reader of this. Jailer or newspaperman, ragpicker or student. You could be taking in these words tomorrow – while my corpse is still fresh – or in a hundred years, when my bones are dust. Will the Bois remain, then? Will the trees torn down for barricades have grown back? Or perhaps it will be the next victim of Baron Haussmann's project – trees replaced by yawning avenues of pale stone.

I will try to show you the Bois as I knew it, when my father and I walked its paths, our boots hushing through leaf litter, heads bowed and eyes sharp, walking away from the road deep among the trees to the secret places where we knew mushrooms grew. In winter we went, when the earth was thick with snow and every snap of a twig echoed like a broken bone. Then we would gather wood ears with their texture like wet silk and marrow. In spring we found apricot-scented yellow chanterelles and blushing field caps. In summer when the loam was warm as blood-pudding we could gather mousserons tasting of anise and almond. In autumn, wrinkled morels with the mist in their gills and strange, black trumpets of the dead.

That was my life. Hawking in the market. Farming in the tunnels. Foraging in the Bois. Until I was seventeen and my mother died from a cough that shook the flesh from her bones. I wondered as I held her cold and waxy hand what kinds of mushrooms would sprout from her body, were we to place it in its own tunnel, among the spores and dung. Perhaps they would smell of sad violets. Taste of centimes and sorrow.

We did not leave her in the tunnels, of course. We buried her in the communal grave at Passy, out of sight of the grand, white sepulchres of the rich. Makes me laugh, that: to think that they tried to separate themselves from us even in death. Anyone who has seen a mushroom's tangled roots knows that everything beneath the ground is one, in the end.

With mother gone, father – always sour-tongued with wine – went more to drink. He still harvested and farmed, still nurtured the crops, still foraged in the Bois, but I was the one to go to market alone, while he sat in the butcher's bar and drank from midnight until they threw him out at noon. I did not complain. I knew nothing else. So, I grew, my fingernails always thick with muck and my skirts always damp and never dreamed that there would be a life beyond my tunnels.

Until I met Charles.

It was not love at first sight. I didn't even think him handsome. If anything I thought him odd, small-featured and rather mouse-ish, staring miserably from the midst of a group of roaring, staggering men – artists, by the dishevelled looks of them – who had found themselves in the market before dawn between the bottom of one bottle and the neck of another.

He did not call and whistle at the flower girls or eye the porter boys like the rest. He only stood and swayed and stared at me, and it was his eyes, dark as polished marbles, which drew me in: the way he seemed to see right through the skin of the world to what lay beneath.

In that moment, I felt him look past my third-hand grey gown and old, sodden bonnet to all the hatred and boredom and want that seethed inside my body.

And then he was walking towards me and for a reason I didn't understand my heart was beating madly in my chest, like the caged hens in the poultry yards.

‘Monsieur,’ I greeted, trying to remember how to speak.

‘I have a sudden wish to breakfast on mushrooms,’ he said. ‘Hare’s blood and mushrooms and apples in Flanders butter.’ He leaned and down and picked one of the champignons out of the cart, staring at it in the grey dawn light. ‘Is it true they grow in shit?’

No one had spoken to me like that before. At least, no one in the market: as if I had a mind inside the bonnet and a mouth to answer.

‘Oui monsieur,’ I said, and met his eyes. ‘Horse shit.’

I saw it right away, a flare of interest and heat: the unspoken question and acknowledgment of what would pass between us. He craned over his shoulder, never taking his eyes from mine. ‘Gustave, come here.’

Another man from the group – far more attractive with a rich fall of dark hair – staggered over to lean heavily on his friend’s slender shoulder. ‘What is it, Charles?’

‘Look. A grisette selling grisettes.’

I held his gaze. ‘My name is Malou.’

‘We’re going to Bar Rat,’ his friend half-belched in response. ‘Your bottle, B.’

My admirer still held the mushroom in his ink-stained fingers. He offered it back. ‘Will you join us, mademoiselle?’

And that was how it began.