

Remedy

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Portobello
BOOKS



Feast of Saint Rosalia

As you presumably lived in a cave, dear Rosalia, and were possibly a twelfth-century nun - I'm afraid *The Concise Saints* allots you a meagre, wobbly blurb, pinned together by conjecture - it's unlikely you ever had your nerves quaked at six forty-five a.m. by mechanical jubilation, as mine were, here, this morning, whilst trying to get the most out of that last leg of beauty sleep. But Neighbour Jeromino was at it again, jack-hammering a stolen-variety cobblestone from the Rue Saint-Dominique. And so I pulled my pink *peignoir* out from under the cat (to cover the Eve-wear) and knocked on his door.

‘No noise before seven a.m. Neighbour Jeromino,’ I reminded him sweetly, and added ‘SVP’.

Neighbour Jeromino smokes Marrakech weed and had been at the vapours all night.

‘Excusez-moi, Madame, he said all a-trembling. He always a-trembles when stoned. I said nothing about the jackhammer, nor about him calling me Madame, which I am not.

Mumly always says that Catholics can’t get lonely because we have so many saints to chat with. No need to whine or pine alone, she says, when a community of divine ears are perked to hear you.

‘Even in matters of love, Mumly, matters of ... the love connection?’ I once asked her, on the eve of turning sixteen, all a-tremble like Neighbour Jeromino, and blushing, too, at the thought of confiding my boudoir bumbblings to the likes of you, Rosalia.

‘Especially those, Princess,’ she assured me. ‘The saints have no shame, a result of the hideous trials they suffered in public. And they’re all the better for it. I think they actually enjoy the juicy details, as long as you make them rhyme. And they’ll oblige you in acquiring a love interest if you put in your request on time.’

Mumly says we should always use the occasion of morning coffee to toast a saint, seeing as the martyrs were ever on the go. And so I raised my demitasse to you, Rosalia, before downing a shot of black coffee, straight from the stovetop espresso-maker that Johannes von Kryslar gave me. He is the Bavarian acrobat who stayed here for two days a fortnight ago, only to leave me (forever?) with a home phone number which was not his, but that of a family by the name of Smidtz. I have spoken to all the Smidtzes: the mother, the father and the two kids, Dieter and Monika - a very nice family, phone-friendly and eager to be of service.

Johannes, I should add, was the one who gave pedogasms - that is to say, orgasms of the feet.

I do appreciate the stovetop espresso-maker and use it every morning, including weekends, when, if I am a lucky girl, I have company.

I must admit, Rosalia, there are days when I wouldn't mind retreating to a Sicilian cave like yours, though only one equipped with lava lamps and a proper ladies' room. It would be such a nice place to read Balzac, I think. And maybe a bit of H. James. But the pull of duty, that competitor of gravity itself, got me to my desk at A La Mode Online at ten o'clock sharp. Twenty-two fashion photos awaited me, requiring my pen to pay tribute to the latest in calibrated couture: python trench coats, one-piece bloomer suits, strapless sheathes (Galliano); perforated dresses, narrow pin-tucked Bermudas, pumpkin pants (Givenchy); laminated chiffon skirts, tweed hosiery, dip-dyed duster-length peacoats (Chanel); and marmalade make-up (YSL).

I finished the work by noon exactly, just as the other girls were leaving for gym class, skipping lunch as they so often do. I politely declined the invitation to join them.

Instead, I headed for St Joseph's, down the street and to the left, where, as usual, I sat in the front pew next to Sister Dagobert and her guide dog, Yorik, for noon Mass. Sister Dagobert has been trying to get me to go on the Children's New Year Pilgrimage to Rome. She believes I am a child because I have an accent. I have tried to tell her otherwise but her belief will not be swayed.

'Remedy, she tells me. 'The Lord has invited all the children of the world to Rome to celebrate New Year with His Majesty the Pope. I'm sure there will be room for you on Père Ricard's double-decker bus.'

Sister Dagobert is blind and completely dependent on the goodness of both the Lord and Yorik. Poor Yorik! Here is a dog far past his prime with senses less than keen, but most dedicated all the same. Yorik sleeps through Mass, at times emitting unpleasant gases. Sister Dagobert always has a kerchief, which she holds to her nose when poor Yorik cuts his cheese. Yorik's gas would be less of a concern if Père Ricard burned some frankincense from time to time in that silver censor of his, but really he has no sense of ceremony. He does nip at the bottle a bit (which could explain his lack of initiative and slurred homilies and lamb-o' -gods), but Sister Dagobert has unerring faith in Père Ricard. Even in his hastily delivered, three-point weekday homilies, which she listens to as only a blind nun can - that is to say, rocking back and forth in the pew. Sister Dagobert prays aloud and without discretion after holy Eucharist. Often I wish I didn't hear these disclosures. Really, only Jesus should.

Seeing as it's your feast day, Saint Rosalia, I decided to celebrate just a tad, if only in a culinary way, to make up for all the unleavened bread you used to nibble on. And so I stopped by the caterer on the Rue Montorgueil for tartiflette, that creamy Savoy concoction of potatoes, crème fraîche, lardons, and reblochon cheese that's all the rage in Paris these days. But in no time at all, the girls, having foregone lunch for gym, arrived at my desk armed with those oversized French soup spoons. Tartiflette for one was consumed, quickly, by five, with much admiration of the French sort: Oh là là! But it is wonderful! It is delicious! Oh là là! By four o'clock I was starving and nearly went downstairs in search of a croissant concoction to make up for the potato concoction I'd missed, but Jean-Claudi arrived. I took a deep breath and stayed at my desk. Oh my heart! That man! Jean-Claudi

was freshly showered, and perfumed by Kenzo; his chocolate-brown locks, slightly damp from the mists, curled coyly over his brow. Surely this was his wet look! I had never seen it before, and alas, it only made me desire this most inaccessible boy-loving Adonis all the more.

Jean-Claudi is a fashion photographer for both ladies' and men's apparel. He is a catwalk voyeur, a flesh connoisseur. He is the wizard spinning the couture cocktails that magazine subscribers all around the world are lapping up off the pages. Oh, I have to believe that this great lover of men also has room in his heart for a lady or two ... Look how he comes into the office greeting each admirer, each adoring spoon, with that two-pronged kiss they call the *bise*. And he has a way of caressing your shoulder with his hand whilst doing so. Surely there is a fork in his road? I must believe there is. Boys-boys yes, to the east, but girls-girls as well, to the west. Jean-Claudi can have it all and I don't see that he would deprive himself an extra pleasure in favour of a singular affiliation.

Moreover, there is not an arrogant bone in his divine body! Today he lingered at my desk to tell me about a new hot spot called Le Swing Club run by a friend of his. It appears there is a giant swing in the middle of the club on which various astounding 'acts' are performed. Pray tell, Jean-Claudi, what may such acts be? He revealed nothing. When Jean-Claudi left me, I began to wonder if he spoke to me of Le Swing Club as a lead-up to taking me there in a man-to-woman date context. Later, though, I got word from Top Spoon asking me to call Le Swing Club's proprietor for an interview and possible write-up. Oh well. What can a girl expect? Jean-Claudi does get around and makes his desires clearly known to the right collocutor.

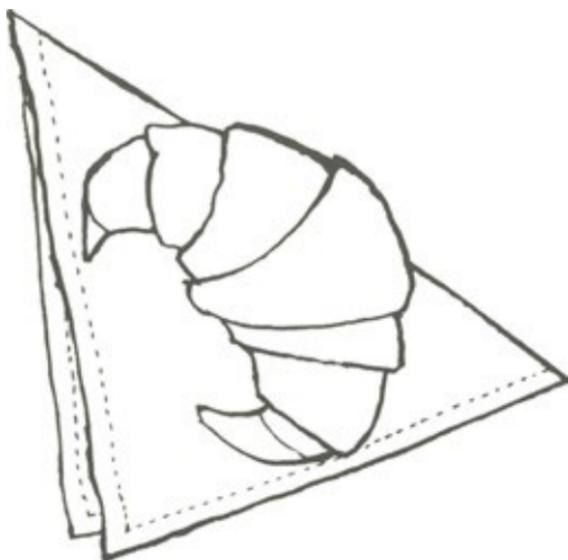
My earlier feast having been foiled, I picked up an entire roast

chicken on my way back home from the office (in your honour, Rosalia) as well as a brioche with sugar on the top (for Jubilee) and a bottle of Gigondas as a party favour for all the saints. I was looking forward to this repast indeed, but just as I was about to sit down to table, the doorbell rang, interrupting my imminent dining pleasure. Who's there, pray-tell?

It was Neighbour Jeromino, asking for a roll of toilet paper!

In response to this needy request, I gave him a roll of extra soft, scented with a yellow (not red!) rose motif and got back to dinner, happily washing down the chicken with the Gigondas, a beverage recommended for tête-à-tête dining, but which also suits celibatarians like myself. Poured a drop into a thimble for Jubilee, though he nibbled on the wishbone instead. Which is fine for a cat, but I do wonder about those people who abstain from the fruit of the vine at din-din for the sake of the Lord. Why Jesus himself was both a celibatarian and fine wine drinker, preferring, I believe, the Côtes du Jordain varieties.

Ah! but is there anything better than retiring to a fresh-sheeted bed in the evening with a book? I'm sure there is, but at least five nights out of the week, I prefer to think not. It's best to keep content if you can, whenever and with whomever you can (not so, Rosalia?) I read Balzac's *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* before dozing off into a deep sleep, hosting a dream in which Jean-Claudi appeared sporting a chartreuse redingote. Was it a good dream or a bad dream? To be honest, I'm not exactly sure.



*Feast of Saint Aigulf
(abbot of Lerins)*

Oh, my poor, dear man. The Concise Saints claims your brother monks, sick and tired of your holy lording over them, arranged for marauding Moors to do you in. This was truly unkind of them, and yet your remarkable death by heathen hands, coupled with your reforms meant to harness the mutinous monks at Lerins (I'm not sure where this is, must look up on a map), earned you sainthood indeed. Please accept my belated congratulations.

The ululating of the Moors was surely unpleasant to your ears,

especially as they swiped the dagger across your throat, but I can safely assume that you were never woken prematurely by M. Phet's downstairs lodger, as I was this morning, my ears nearly sticky with the sound of that syrupy torch singer from Taiwan. She's the girl you hear in all the Chinese eateries around town, the one with the sweet-and-sour voice, a millionaire herself with luxurious living quarters and guaranteed tranquillity.

And so I was obliged to put on my tracksuit and go downstairs.

M. Phet's lodger, a man of childish proportions wearing a zoot suit, looked most astonished by this interruption to his easy listening. I sensed he would have liked to shut the door and banish my face from his morning, but was too polite (or too sugar-drunk) to do so. Bless his heart, nor was the head I presented such a nice one, as there had been no time to tend to coiffure. No matter, the essential had to be said before some curtain of incomprehension was pulled down between us.

As M. Phet's lodger understands little French or English, I aired my complaint in the most amiable and international of languages - that of the hands - to which M. Phet's lodger then responded with the head. I gathered from his singular nod that an arrangement convenient to both of us had been made, and so took my leave.

Unfortunately I was unable to communicate efficiently the ten p.m. to seven a.m. rule, that French law protecting the common flatdweller from disruptive brouhaha. The torch singer's voice was taken down to a more intimate decibel, then raised again on high and left there.

I decided to leave early and have breakfast at the Café Beaubourg where Jean-Claudi can sometimes be found, never on a pouf but always in an armchair. I sat in an armchair myself in homage to that

fine young gentleman, who was probably at that very moment wrapped around some young buck of a swing performer in post-coital sleep. And I asked myself, would I climb onto The Swing for Jean-Claudi? For the love of Jean-Claudi.

Had to admit, shamefully, to my deepest self, that I would not. The Swing, I was led to believe, is a Men Only contraption. And just as I would never dream of going into the Gents to relieve myself (although it is true that women in France have the gumption to do so in cases of long lines for the ladies' room), I would never, ever climb up onto The Swing. So be it. I am no Joan of the Bow. I will commit no travesty for the love of JC. How all these thoughts do sadden me a bit!

I left the Café Beaubourg in a melancholy mood made worse by the napkin invitation brought to me by a waiter just as I had reached the dregs of my coffee. The napkin read:

'The solitude of one is lonely at that. But the solitude of two delights you know who ... Won't you come to my table, Mademoiselle?'

Oh dear, I thought to myself, not in the morning, not now! I really must get to the ladies' room. But I kept my cool and of the waiter I enquired, 'And who is the gentleman may I please ask?'

'Monsieur Lift: he told me, indicating discreetly with a tip of the head where the M. Lift in question was seated.

It was not difficult to identify the gentleman who sent the napkin communiqué, for he was looking straight at me, bowing his head and tipping his beret when he caught my eye. I had a good look: manifestly, M. Lift was in his sixties, apparently bald beneath the beret, and shaped much like our beloved and belt-begirded nursery egg, Humpty Dumpty. He was seated not on a precipitous wall, but on a high-riding pouf and, like M. Dumpty, his feet, too, did not reach the ground. I

cannot remember any distinct features of M. Lift's face, only his queer, come-hither expression rendered entirely ineffectual by a jowlish eagerness that seemed to consume his entire face. M. Lift was a desperate man and his position perilous; just one push and he was over. I took out my pen, brushed the croissant flakes off my napkin and wrote:

'Dear Monsieur, I thank you for your invitation. This solitude, however, must take herself off to work at this time. Alas! To each solitude its industry!'

I then gave this napkin note to the waiter, paid my bill and left the café, nodding but not looking in M. Lift's direction. It seemed to me that this was the way it was done. A woman declines, nods but does not look. Isn't it so? (But maybe you wouldn't know, dear Aigulf, such things being beneath your holy ken.)

This brief epistolary encounter set me up for morning pathos (a perplexing state you can perhaps relate to, Aigulf, being a pathological saint yourself). From ten o'clock to midday, I could not keep my mind from pursuing all the suffering solitudes in the world. I thought of the widows and the widowers (those freshly aggrieved), the divided divorcees, the bitter bachelors, the obsolete old maids, the freakish priests, bishops and their lonely lay-virgins (and of course all the abbots too!). All of them crept into my heart and therein found sympathetic soil until midday, at which point I washed them out of that mourning muscle with a torrent of tears in the ladies' room.

I do not cry like this often, but when lachrymation, much like the independent-minded virus, takes hold, it only stops when it has run its course. It cannot be medicated or tricked into dissolution. Several people knocked on the restroom door and several people waited. One

person politely enquired. But what response can a vessel of sorrow be expected to give? Are not the tears heard through the door warning enough that a solitude is at work and should not be disturbed? But maybe these visitors were like me, and would themselves have drunk from the Cup of Sorrows. Who knows?

As it was, when I regained self-possession and left the relief lounge, they were no longer there: they had found deliverance elsewhere - inevitably in the adjacent men's room (we are in France, and this is always a possibility).

By then I was late for Mass. I tiptoed up the aisle of St Joe's to where Sister Dagobert was seated, by herself because of the Yorik problem. She had reserved me a seat next to her.

'It's me,' I whispered into her ear, and as always received her reassuring, petite hand in reply. It's Sister Dagobert's practice to grope for a person's hand, not to offer a common handshake but, rather, The Squeeze. The Squeeze, always affectionate, is executed with surprising force and often sets the nerves of your fingers aflame. But only for a minute or two. I must say that, although small in stature and known to frequent the meek, Sister Dagobert is no pushover. In the afternoons she works at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital in the Tropical Disease ward, dressing and undressing wounds, her blind hands guided by the hands of the Lord, yet unaided by Yorik whom she is required to park outside. She also teaches the picture-book catechism to bedridden converts. Like the Singing Nuns, she never asks for reward.

After Mass, Sister Dagobert had me sign up for the New Year Children's Parade to Rome. Of course, as I couldn't exactly enrol myself, I signed a list posted in the church's foyer under the pseudonym, Miss Dorothy Wayward. Within the month, a deposit cheque

must be left to secure the reservation. I told Sister Dagobert that my (Dorothy's) parents would come by and leave the cheque with Père Ricard within the proper delay. She seemed happily reassured. In any case, she asked no questions.

Is it really possible that Sister Dagobert thinks I'm a child? So it seems. And yet she must believe me a precocious bloomer: a child with an independent current account and career; a child who chose to live abroad, a little one swimming thousands of miles from her birth continent to come ashore on the banks of the Seine at the foot of Notre-Dame. Sister Dagobert must think me a prodigy. And now she will have me trade in fins for feet and march on Rome. She will be the catalyst in my evolution from the piscine to the pedestrian, from Little Mermaid to Little Matchgirl.

I'm sure that many would say Sister Dagobert is only fooling herself, that by sublimating her blindness she has become a kind of phenomenological hazard. But to me this matters little. At times, an untruth is a better indicator of truth than some seemingly obvious fact. I may very well be a child after all. And this new continental life I lead could very well be taken as child's play. It all depends on how one looks at it. It's true that at times I feel I'm a smaller version of myself here. I've had to shrink to fit the proportions, you see. But could it be that I've shrunk too much? Sister Dagobert may be suggesting that I have. In which case I should, perhaps, pay attention and try not to put myself through the wash so often.

Sister Dagobert and I had a quick bite to eat at the cafe across the street. I ordered a croque-madame - a grilled ham and cheese number with an egg on top - and a spinach tart for Sister Dagobert, who does not eat ham.

Over lunch, she explained to me that she has had two conversion experiences in her forty-eight years of life. The first one occurred at the age of eighteen when she had a vision of herself on a date with Jesus. I believe they were going to a fireman's ball. At this point she quit her various Hebraic associations and joined league with the Jews for Jesus. The second conversion transpired during her twenty-fifth year, that year when unmarried Frenchwomen don hats on St Catherine's Day to attract potential husbands. But rather than parade her maidenhood with a hat, she cloaked herself in a habit, that most inexpensive and humble of wedding gowns, and was united by a mystic marriage to her former prom partner: Jesus himself. No comely vision visited her the second time around; she was swept away by the violent winds of whimsy. The conversion took her by force, leaving her in an ecstatic state for several days. She hardly knew what had come over her. When she finally did come around, she was no longer Mademoiselle Bibi Benguigui, but Sister Dagobert.

Sister Dagobert provided me with this particular history as she explained to me why she avoided ham. She could not help but maintain a certain prejudice against pork which she justified upholding by the fact that even her holy husband had never eaten it. She explained that she had once been sent for a year to a convent in Spain, that great land of a thousand and one hams, and had a terrible time of it. Some manner of ham on the plate at every meal. Since then, she has never quite had the same appetite, or so she says.

I happened to notice that she ate every last bite on her plate including the decorative condiments, the lemon shard and the parsley sprig. Fed Yorik pieces of my own ham and crust under the table whilst Sister Dagobert was preoccupied with an après-repas grace.

Back to the office, where I wrote the YSL article I was supposed to have written in the morning when pathos had struck. Pretended I was that rive gauche queen, Catherine Deneuve, and finished in no time.

Jean-Claudi arrived for a five-minute photo drop-off. I believe he was not insensitive to the Deneuvian transformation. Promised myself I would play Pretend more often, seeing just how useful this practice is for work and pleasure alike.

By the time I got home it was eight o'clock. Tired I was, but also somewhat distressed to find that Jubilee had exorcised all of his evil feline nibbles into my rug in the boudoir sometime in the late afternoon. I cleaned up the mess, then poured myself a glass of wine but skipped dinner.

At nine o'clock Mumly called from Florida. 'Princess, she enquired, 'when are you coming home?'

I knew of course that she did not mean for a visit, but for good. I did not have the heart to tell her the truth, so told an untruth: 'When the money runs out, Mumly, when the money runs out.'

In fact I've been here a year now and the money has already run out, which is why the job at A La Mode Online has become indispensable. The money in question had never been all that much in any case. Most of it was spent on shoes.

I dislike upsetting Mumly, who is ailing with dropsy and unable to play golf at the moment. The last thing I want to do is trigger her Valium instinct. Pills became part of her diet last year when that Gerard fellow broke both her heart and into her bank account. For his love she had sold all of her mutual funds, despite the dissuasions of Mr Epstein, her banker.

Girard was Haitian but pretended to be Parisian. Mumly loved his

accent. Whenever she told me about him, her voice changed, became much lower and I could tell she was talking in his voice.

‘Last night, he took me to zee Cha-Cha club and we danced all zee night.’

I don’t believe she even realized she was doing this. I would tell her to stop it and she would say, ‘Stop what, Princess?’

In a way, I think he inhabited her. She was like an empty glasshouse, all fragile and transparent. I suspect this was partly due to those menopausal supplements she takes: anyone could see through her. Synthetic oestrogen derived from pregnant mare’s urine aided Girard in his task. He saw clearly where everything was and had only to put his hands on it. Poor Mumly, she simply has not been the same since. I must say though, that when she was with Girard, she never once asked me when I was coming home.

Well, thank you, Saint Aigulf, for protecting my day from the treachery you once suffered. Lord knows what I would have done if marauding Moors had come after me with a blade today; a napkin communiqué certainly wouldn’t have done the trick.