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# Life Writing Prize

LAURANE MARCHIVE



LIFE WRITING PRIZE HIGHLY COMMENDED 2020

# **For the Flesh is Sour**

Laurane Marchive

This piece contains graphic sexual images.

## For the Flesh is Sour

*Laurane Marchive*

The video is small and pixelated. An animated blue alien with lips of gold, fucking a minotaur. A cartoon girl dressed as a student, surrounded by a group of beer-bellied men. A CGI woman, blindfolded and tied down with ropes, swallowing a green monster cock. A caption flashes on the screen: *Your stepbrother will make you beg for it!* and then *Play this game and try not to come!*

I rub my eyes and wonder if people are really into this. These days, most porn videos have the word ‘incest’ in the title. Like everyone worldwide is suddenly turned on by inter-filial gangbangs, by stepsisters and stepdaughters dressing up as cheerleaders and throwing orgies. Why am I seeing this ad? Does the internet think I am a horny teenager? Is it a virus? And if so, where did I get it?

More importantly, I wonder whether I am turned on. Should I not be turned on?

After twenty-nine seconds, the ad has run its course, and the screen freezes on the *Click to Play!* button. I do not *click to play*. I adjust the pillows behind my back, poke a knee out of the duvet to catch the grey Saturday sun. The glass on my bedroom window is frosted, the light comes in patchy. Outside, I can see only shadows. Short and stout from parked cars on the street. Tall and brown from the few winter trees.

I close the tab. Open another one. *Le Monde*, another video. The thumbnail depicts a still of the Gilets-Jaunes riots. Paris: a man with a yellow vest, waving a French flag opposite a wall of tear gas. In the distance, small fires and more human shapes, protestors or police. I have lived in London for so long it sometimes feels like I have orphaned myself

from Paris. Still, if I stare at the image long enough, I know I might disappear into it. The walls of my room and the outside light and the thing in my throat that feels like the spiky shell of a chestnut—*bogue*, in French, I never learnt the English name—might dissolve as my brain focuses on the man in the video. On the shape of the flag. On the exact number of silhouettes in the distance. I do feel like crying, but not in an obvious way. More like a background impression, something I know I could do, want to do. But prefer not to.

I open the Eurostar website. Journeys for the next day are expensive, I scroll through options to find the cheapest one. I could take the night-bus/ferry combo from London to Paris instead, but I don't want to exhaust myself. I don't want to fall asleep at the funeral.

When it hits my inbox, the Eurostar confirmation email makes a happy little 'ping' sound. I close the Eurostar tab. Revert to *Le Monde*. The video: protesters in yellow throwing smoke bombs in the streets. On the side of my screen, ads keep popping up, offering me *sex with women in your area* or inviting me to engage in cybersex with cyborgs, or nearby MILFs. The Yellow Vests ask for lower fuel taxes, a reintroduction of the solidarity tax on wealth, a minimum wage increase. Above the video, on the horizontal banner, an ad for a watch, its tagline light and breezy: *Don't Crack Under Pressure*. When I look up the watch, it costs £19,495. The video still playing, a protester says the government doesn't work for them. Says they are being erased. At the end of the clip, another video starts automatically: excited puppies decorating a Christmas tree.

The stairs leading up from the St-Michel station are grey and dirty, with chewing gum shapes imprinted onto them. I take exit number two and resurface at the St-Michel Fountain. Everything is as it always was: the statue wielding its sword, the gryphons spitting water, and tourists queuing to have their pictures taken in front of the fountain. On all four sides of the square, the yellow signs of Paris's most famous library brighten

the damp, silver weather.

I make my way to my grandfather's flat slowly, passing the café where I used to go at night alone to drink wine. I haven't been in a long time. Every time I come back to Paris, I promise to visit more often, but weeks turn into months, and at every phone call I forget words, and my mother says "*Dis donc, tu parles plus Français!*"

You're losing your French.

At the street corner, my grandmother's favourite cheese shop is still open, and further down the road, the terraces are full despite the spitting wind. The city feels quiet, suspended in no-time. There are no *Gilets-Jaunes* today, not a hint of a riot. Only tourists munching on *macarons* and wearing berets to blend in. I stop to watch a homeless man drink a beer opposite a bakery. Eventually, he throws the empty can at the window.

By the time I reach the flat, I am late. My mother opens the door.

"Finally! I was starting to get worried!"

"My train was delayed," I lie, "sorry."

We kiss, two kisses on the cheeks, and I walk down the corridor and into the living room. I take my shoes off, the carpet soft underneath my feet. The room is warm. Too warm, like a hen house. My mother wears a dark grey knitted jumper worn out in the sleeves. She looks tired. She empties a white plastic bag on the table.

"I bought pastries," she says. "I thought you might like that?"

"I would," I say. "*Merci*. Where is Grandpa?"

"He's in his room," she says. "He'll be back in a second."

In the kitchen, the radio is on. Fragments of interviews float into the living room. A politician announces that, in preparation for the *Gilets Jaunes* protest this upcoming Saturday, the city plans to display messages on information boards throughout Paris. The boards will let people know which areas to avoid in order to stay clear of the riots.

"I'll turn this off," my mother says. "It's too depressing."

The walls of the flat are covered with paintings and objects from everywhere in the world. Wooden frames and porcelain vases, Indonesian shadow puppets. When she comes back, my mother presents me with a *Mille-Feuille* on a white plate rimmed with gold and chipped at the edge. Most of the silver has worn off the dessert fork. The yellow metal shows through underneath.

“It sounds like they’re getting ready for war,” I say.

“I know, it’s crazy. They’re even talking about having armoured vehicles patrolling the streets.”

I notice she isn’t wearing any makeup. The lines around her eyes are deeper than I remember.

“This whole thing,” she adds, “it will blow over, for sure, but it seems like... half the country wants blood, and the other half is exhausted.”

I rake the teeth of my fork against the icing sugar. My mother talks about the *Gilets Jaunes*, the shops that have had their windows broken, and police brutality. I let her tell me all those things I know to avoid asking her about other things, like who else in the family will attend the funeral, or how she feels, or how my grandfather is holding up. I know I should ask, but it’s easier to focus on my plate than to bring that up, so I press my fork into the marbled layer of cake. Yellow cream oozes from the sides.

“People want change,” she concludes. “They’ve completely lost faith in politics, and I don’t blame them.”

She slides a hand through her hair, white at the front, darker at the back. She grabs a spoon and slices through her chocolate eclair. The *crème patissière* is sticky in my mouth. The cream is too sweet, cloying. I swallow, and the lump travels down my throat. My mother keeps her eyes down, absorbed in the task of taking small, even bites, sitting thin and upright like a vase full of water ready to tip. I think of saying something nice, something comforting or daughterly but I don’t want the water to spill. Above the table, there is a painting of birds. I push another lump of pastry past my tongue.

When I feel a hand on my shoulder, I look up. In his younger days, my grandfather was a formidable man. Black hair, raven nose, ambitious and uncompromising. I have seen the pictures. I've also heard the stories: how he would forbid his children to speak at the dinner table, how he put his career ahead of everything else, how he scorned anyone who wasn't himself. But I've never seen that side of him; by the time I was born, he'd already softened, and as I grew up, he focused all his ageing love towards his unique grandchild. Reading me bedtime stories. Taking me to the cinema on Sundays. Letting me get away with anything.

I stand up, and he wraps his arms around me. A decade earlier when I was in my twenties, we were about the same height. Now, his body bends forward like the pouring nose of a teapot. I stand taller than him. His jumper is loose and the ridges of his spine poke through the wool. His shirt is crumpled. I don't remember him ever hugging me before. I place a hand on his shoulder, and he holds onto me for balance. I try to think of the right thing to say but before I can open my mouth, he steadies himself and disappears into the kitchen.

My mother looks at me.

"It will be hard tomorrow, at the funeral," she says. "You'll have to be there for him."

That evening, in the room that used to be my grandparent's bedroom but is now a spare room—he moved into the small attic room long ago, when my grandmother first went to a nursing home—I lay my funeral outfit on the bed. A simple black dress with little white cuffs and a preppy white collar. Something elegant, yet simple; Grandma would have approved. I originally bought the dress for an ex-boyfriend who was into French maids: every so often when we were together, I would put on the dress, tie my hair in a bun, add an apron and slip into high heels. But the dress is versatile enough to double as funeral wear. So here we are.

I sit on the bed, open my suitcase. I take out my grandmother's necklace:

a heavy velvet ribbon decorated with silver coins she gave me years ago. Something she must have bought in the 1960s in Syria, or in Morocco, or in Lebanon. Born in rural France in the 1930s, my grandparents left the country after the war and spent their lives moving from one country to the next, my grandfather starting from the very bottom and working his way up the French diplomacy ladder. The stories pile up like vignettes. 1956: my grandmother, eight-months pregnant, driving alone across Morocco to get to safety amid the unrest that followed independence. 1968: Iran, my grandfather attending events alongside women wearing short, colourful dresses while the Shah was still in power. 1973: Damascus, my aunt reading *War and Peace* in the basement during the bombings of the Yom Kippur war. The stories are real-life memories, but told and polished so many times they've become legends, bedtime recollections with, at their core, my grandmother: a fantastical character in exquisite gowns and sparkling jewellery, whose friends owned pet jaguars or parrots or monkeys.

I slide one hand under the necklace. The silver is cold, I wrap it around my neck. The velvet, soft, and coins hitting my collar bone. In the holiday home where I spent most summers as a child, a picture of my grandmother wearing the necklace dominated the fireplace mantle. Beautiful, smiling a corner smile. Cunning. In control. Unreadable. I've often been told I look like her: similar features, similar eyes. I would wear the necklace at the funeral, but it is slightly too tight. I can never wear it for too long without feeling choked.

When I lie down to sleep, the sheets are hard and scratchy; they smell of old French country house. I slide under the swollen blanket and pull on the fabric to make it yield to my shape. On the ceiling, a damp stain is spreading, split by a long, threatening crack. The crack has been there for as long as I can remember.

I rub my legs together for warmth. Above the headboard, the same picture of my grandmother in the silver necklace. I wonder how long it has been there. I brought quite a few men back to that room over the



years, whenever my grandparents were out of the country. When I was seventeen, I wanted to surprise my then-boyfriend with a full lingerie set, suspenders and high heels, but I accidentally drank so much I fell asleep on this very bed as he was going down on me. Another time, I brought back a boy I was madly in love with, but when we got back, he was too drunk to have sex. And then, there was that one week spent in that room with an English boyfriend. We kept the blinds shut all day, and whenever the light seeping through the cracks grew too white and too dull, we would go to the bathroom, where the walls were pink and there were no windows, and the extraction fan was so loud the room floated like an isolated purse of warmth and flesh and saturated water.

I roll my underwear down my ankles and slide one hand underneath the sheet. Focusing on the single thought of the bathroom, kneeling in the tub, water choking heat and extraction fan. I start drawing circles with the soft of one finger, slowly then faster. It doesn't work. The skin is dry. I free my hand from the blanket and deposit a small lump of saliva on the tip of my finger. Inter-filial gang bangs and a faceless man in the empty locker room of a deserted swimming pool. Wearing an American schoolgirl outfit and getting spanked in the principal's office. Moaning, tied to a leash on the floor of a manor house, men pulling my hair till—

Eyes open again. On the ceiling, the damp mark is still there. It almost looks like a urine stain, its edges darker than the centre and the shape both regular and uneven, its extreme periphery a complex pattern of swirly lines. I roll my underwear back up, turn to the side. My phone shows 1:45am. I do feel guilty for not visiting my grandmother more often after she went to the home. As she grew more and more confused, I once went and watched her eat a blood sausage with her bare fingers. Dark red fibres stretched between nails and lips, and red clots stained the edges of her mouth, like in zombie movies when the undead rip apart mortal flesh and skin looks almost elastic. That day, I didn't recognise the woman sitting in front of me, couldn't reconcile her with the woman she had been. I never went back.

The walls of the Père Lachaise chapel are white and smooth. At the back of the room, the altar, and above it, a statue of Mary. Weeping. Holding Jesus's lifeless body. I stand at the first row of benches with my grandfather and mother. Behind them, four or five family members I never knew existed hold the home-printed psalms and prayers. The picture of my grandmother on the first page is pixelated, some of the pages haven't gone through the printer properly; on the left-hand side, the words are cut. The organ starts playing and the singer's voice rises around the stone arches. Four men dressed in grey carry the coffin down the aisle. Catholic funerals are so like weddings. Even the flowers are the same. White lilies.

When the priest comes forward, I try to focus, but I cannot square the fact that he represents God with his black cape and the pompom dangling from its pointy hood. The ceiling of the chapel is, in shape like that of the church of Saint-Germain, where my grandmother often took me for the midnight Christmas Mass. The arches there are dark blue with golden dots, to look like a starry sky.

"Do you believe in God?" I would ask her.

"I believe in God," she would say, "but not in the church."

The priest reads the psalms and prayers. I can hear the four pallbearers talk at the back of the chapel, chatting about nothing, about their day, the hush of their conversation carried by the stones. The priest speaks in a calm, quiet voice, his pompom now hidden.

"...And witnesses tell us in the Bible that before he resurrected Lazarus, Jesus wept. And the people saw this, and they said, 'He must love him very much,' for even though we are promised reunion in the eternal afterlife, death remains, always, a separation."

The priest describes my grandmother as a "discreet woman" who followed her husband throughout his career. A woman who liked "flowers, sewing and looking after other people."

I remember stories of her as an authoritative, red-dressed flamboyant blonde. Speeding for hours on desert or mountainous roads to cover

France–Syria as fast as possible. Smoking cigarettes at the wheel while her children complained in the back.

*Discreet* doesn't seem like the right word.

The priest calls for two members of the family to come and light the candles. I am aware of my mother crying. I am aware of my grandfather crying. I look at the dead Jesus statue and hear that I am called to the lectern. As I read the prayer assigned to me, I wonder whether my voice is loud enough or too loud, and whether I am giving a good performance. I wonder whether there are tears rolling down my cheeks or not, and which is preferable, and whether I look good or naughty in the little black dress. Whether my mascara is getting smudged and whether I look anything like those glamorous widows in American movies, who wear black veils and cry at the sides of coffins. Whether there are actresses on the market who specialise in funeral scenes, and whose features particularly suit the black and the weeping. Whether I look, at all, like my grandmother.

"Thank you," the priest says.

When my grandfather tries to stand up for the final blessing, he stumbles on his cane. I hold him up, and he rests a hand against the wood of the coffin. Around him the candles still burn; the white lilies glow, naked in their youth.

After the funeral, my mother takes my grandfather home, but I'm not ready to follow. I need air. I cannot breathe. I let them go, and I walk among the tombs of the Père Lachaise cemetery. It isn't raining, though I wish it was. I walk past Oscar Wilde. Past Edith Piaf. Past Sarah Bernhardt. My grandmother won't be buried here; these are elite graves; they are too expensive. Her ashes will be taken to my grandfather's flat where they will sit on the mantelpiece; keeping ashes at home is illegal in France, but he says he doesn't care.

Opposite the cemetery, a small cafe. Inside, everyone wears black. Everyone is mourning. I open my computer; the *Gilets Jaunes* are on

the front page of every news website. Shops boarding up their windows, politicians using the word *guerrilla*. Pictures of Yellow Vests screaming through teargas, armed police hitting the protesters with rods and rows of people kneeling on the ground with their hands held up high.

I close the tab. On the messy desktop, a folder called *Family*.

The clips are in random order. My mother has found old footage and converted it to MP4. The first file: my grandmother, in black and white, holding a baby in her arms. Then me or, more exactly, my mother at fifteen, looking so like me I have to pause and rewind the video. Tehran before the revolution, families in swimsuits playing ball games in the sea. Eerie footage of Sudanese children wearing white garments in 1960s Khartoum. All clips black and white or faded, things moving almost at normal speed but not quite, people speaking to the camera but no sound coming through their lips. Silhouettes moving on and off screen like ghosts, smiling at the lens through the grainy footage. The many children on film are young, some of them presumably still alive, with their own lives and their own griefs, and no idea they are still waving at a stranger's camera on the other side of the world.

The waitress brings me an *allongé* in a see-through cup. Next to me, a woman with white hair sits alone. She stirs the drink in front of her, a yellow brooch shining on her chest. She takes one sip and keeps the cup against her lips, warming them up. In her black outfit, she could be anyone. A retired teacher. A grieving mother. Or the triumphant widow of a mobster, cashing in, at last, on her rich husband's death.

The last video. It is short. My grandmother, white dress and curly yellow hair. Young. Very young. Chewing food with an open mouth. I have never seen her chew with an open mouth, she was a sophisticated woman. But in that video, she is still the farm girl with no manners who only just left France and doesn't yet know not to put her elbows on the table. She chews her food, and she opens her mouth, and she laughs. When the video ends, I press play again.

After my grandmother went to the nursing home, my grandfather was unable to cook for himself. He didn't know frozen chips had to be kept in the freezer, so he would store them in the fridge until they became soft and rotten. He survived mostly on creamy desserts and rice cakes, all the things that were bad for him and his wife had spent decades forbidding. Eventually, he learnt to cook omelettes. To buy food in tins or in jars, things that wouldn't go off.

When I get back to the flat my mother is already gone. My grandfather opens the door. I walk into the kitchen and he goes to the fridge.

"I have a steak for you, for dinner," he says. "You like steak, don't you?"

He hands me a packet of meat in its plastic wrapping. I place it on the kitchen counter. The steak looks dark, slightly grey. When I look at the date on it, I see it's expired.

"Grandpa, are you sure this is still good?"

"Of course it's good. It's very good meat."

He takes out a knife, slices through the plastic. I'm not sure whether the smell is off, or whether I'm imagining it. We put the meat in the pan and turn up the gas.

"Do you know how to cook a steak?" He asks.

"Me?" I laugh. "No... not really. I mean, I can do it, but not very well."

"Really? I thought you were a good cook..."

"I think you're mistaking me for somebody else," I say. And he laughs too, though not really. We both place our elbows on the counter, and our chins in our elbows. Watching the pan, side by side, waiting for a sizzle. Meat does keep well in plastic, I think, but I cannot stop watching the dark fibres grow darker in the heat.

When the steak is ready, he ushers me to the living room table.

"Eat," he says. "It's going to be cold."

"And you? You're not eating?"

He shrugs.

"I'm not hungry. I'll have a yoghurt later."

I slice through the steak. It is soft. I take a bite, and the flesh is sour. I chew the first piece slowly. I can feel his eyes on me, watching me swallow as he fills up his pipe, the tips of his fingers flaked with tobacco.

“Is it good?”

I nod yes, but when he looks away, I spit out the piece and hide it inside my napkin.

There is no way to tell whether the meat is good or not or whether I will be sick.

“Grandpa,” I cough, “how did you meet Grandma? You never told me.”

He looks at me.

“Really? It’s quite a nice story.”

I hide a second piece under the napkin.

“It was the fifteenth of August, 1948,” he starts. “I was twenty, your grandmother was fifteen. We grew up in the same village, but I’d been gone a few years to study in the city. One day as I was back home for the holiday, I went for a walk and, from a distance, I saw this beautiful girl. The most beautiful girl I’d ever seen, with blond hair and a white dress. A friend told me who she was. I was bewitched. For two weeks, she was all I could think of.”

I look at him and I nod and I smile, a piece of meat hovering by my lips.

“Then in September,” he continues, “I went to the Harvest Ball wearing my best Sunday suit. And she was there, with her sister. So I went to them, I asked her sister for a dance... I was cunning, you see, I wanted her to feel jealous.”

His eyes twinkle. I’ve never seen him wink, but I think perhaps he just did.

“When the next song came, it was a waltz, and I asked her to dance with me. I thought she would fob me off, you know, but instead, she smiled this big, beautiful smile.” He pauses, his pipe now full. “They say that love at first sight doesn’t exist, but I can tell you that it does,” he says. “We never left each other after that.”

I don’t have the heart to spit out the next piece, so I swallow the meat.

After dinner we sit down to watch TV. On France's main news channel, the *Yellow Vests* unrest is spreading and the government is failing to come up with answers. I sit on the floor with my back to the radiator. The metal dents dig into my spine and the water runs through the appliance, alternatively too hot and not hot enough.

This radiator has been here all my life. Always the same clicking sound, the same burning heat. Being a child, watching evening movies with my grandparents on that very same spot. And then early morning, waking up, sneaking into their bed. My grandmother would bring me a bowl of cereal, the spoon barely fitting into my mouth, I would spill milk all over the sheet. And then years later, going to university. Sleeping at the flat on Sunday nights before taking the train back to school early on Monday mornings. My grandmother insisting on getting up at dawn to make me breakfast. Still making me breakfast when I started taking Eurostars to London. Even when she started ageing. Even when she began to add salt to the coffee instead of sugar because her mind was beginning to go. I plunge one hand into my pocket, feel for the coins of the necklace. I want to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. To melt into a video. A fantasy. Sex on the floor of an empty warehouse, the smell of someone else inside me. Anything to shatter this ache. To crush it, dissolve it.

The TV presenter announces 263 people have been injured in the riots so far. "The Elysée," the presenter says, "is asking people to stay home, as extremists from the far right and far left are predicted to descend upon the capital in order to 'break and kill.'" I keep my eyes on the presenter's tie, on his shirt, white, on the creases on it. As the *Gilet Jaunes* explain why they are protesting and footage of smoke bombs fill the screen, my grandfather pushes another lump of tobacco down the bowl of his pipe. I see him from the corner of my eye and tense my back against the heat. To be more like her. More in charge. Enigmatic. My grandfather sits back on his chair. He blankly looks at the screen.

"Everything is falling apart."

## BIOGRAPHY

**LAURANE MARCHIVE** lives in London. Her work has appeared in *The London Magazine*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Review 31* and the *TLS*. Laurane is a previous winner of the French Escales des Lettres. She was recently longlisted for the BBC Short Story Prize, shortlisted for the Spread the Word Life Writing Prize 2019, and the London Short Story Prize 2020. She holds an MA in Creative Writing from Birkbeck. She also runs a circus.