

A HALF FLOWER

FIRST CHAPTER ONLY

NAUPAKA

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Cover image by Mirà Kanehl

First edition, 2024

ISBN: 978-3-947722-11-2 (eBook), 978-3-947722-13-6 (soft cover paperback)

A TEAR DANGLES

Lyon, 1816

Balzac Voclain's descent into peril began with a roll of Camembert. True, it's not uncommon for a boy his age to get into trouble now and then. But Balzac didn't get into ordinary trouble. He saw things he wasn't supposed to. And all because he once saved a rabbit.

"Balzac," Victor called, pushing aside other pupils as he descended the stairs of the building. "Salaud, wait."

Balzac sauntered along the fence that separated the road from the school, absorbed in a novel where a rogue pirate had just discovered his lover had betrayed him and absconded. With the treasure.

Victor panted next to Balzac's ear. He jabbed a finger on the page, leaving a smudge of dust on it. This tore Balzac from the pirate's cave to the roadside, feeling as if he had left something of himself behind in his imaginary world.

Victor eyed him and tightened his unwieldy schoolbag. "Another one of your ridiculous books, eh?"

Balzac wiped the paper. "These ridiculous books' was the

only place he ever found freedom. Where he could soar in imagination and leave behind that secret pain which followed him everywhere. "Oui."

Victor's uniform was filthy. The crusty socks covered Victor's stick legs up to the knee, and his blue shorts stood out stiff, too large. His tie had unknotted and hung crooked over his shirt, which had once been white but was so no longer.

Balzac adjusted his glasses. "Another fistfight?"

Victor shrugged.

One handed, Balzac pulled up his brown leather backpack, which extended beyond the width of his back on both sides. Now, where had he been ...? Right. He had left the crook at the empty cave.

"Here, let me put your stupid book away." Victor nudged him in the ribs and held out a small, shiny object. "We can pass by the market and get a fresh roll, I lifted a coin from Soeur Marie Joséphine."

Balzac pouted at his friend, then handed him the volume. "Buckle the strap this time."

Last week, precious books had spilled on the road while he chased his companion. Balzac paid with eight hours of detention, spread over three gruesome days in the moldy library where he mended volumes as la directrice's sour breath brushed his cramped hands. His was scrutinizable work.

"Bien sûr," Victor said, though Balzac heard limited commitment in his voice.

The weight of his knapsack shifted on his shoulders, and he listened for the click of the clasp.

A nun whisked past them on the narrow pedestrian path as Balzac checked the clasp with his fingers, and her black gown grazed their legs.

They greeted her with “Ma soeur,” and bowed in their customary accord.

It was Soeur Marie Joséphine.

She stopped, squinting at Victor with a frown. She was pale as a ghost, which made her large pores even more prominent. Something was wrong, though—she had an internal look.

Victor shifted and scratched the nape of his neck, and a bead of sweat tickled Balzac’s back.

“Allez, run home mes fils—and avoid the market, Victor.” With a biting glare of discipline, she flapped a sanctioning finger. Then she hastened to the school grounds.

Victor had a smug smile. “She didn’t realize it was moi. Something to do with the elections, maybe?”

Balzac imitated la directrice’s squeaky voice. “How many times have I told you not to talk about political things, Victor? Five whips on the back, three rulers on the knuckles.” He smacked the delinquent in his backpack.

“Oof.” Victor bent in imaginary pain. “Ma soeur, have pity.”

Their giggles echoed off the cool walls of the houses and cobblestones.

Balzac jerked a heavy strand of hair out of his face. “A roll with Camembert?”

Victor turned to him with a mischievous glint in his eye. “We have enough for two.”

A sea of humanity flooded the street towards the city square. Two women flanked another whose light-brown tresses spilled down her neck, each holding her by a hand. Her fluffy curls clung to the side of her visage and tear-clad cheeks as she stumbled with rasped breaths. She squeezed her trembling eyelids shut.

“Balzac.” Victor grabbed his arm and stopped. “I think

there will be an execution.” His eyes sparkled with horror and an overwhelming pull towards the spectacle.

Balzac perceived it, too—a macabre, powerful emotion that shouldn’t exist, but which he couldn’t resist. He followed Victor to the market, his backpack bouncing against his ribs while its contents jumbled and thumped behind him. They slowed as they approached, picking their way more carefully through the mud, excrement and foul waste that littered the road, and those people and horses reckless of negligible citizens. A stinky slip could destroy more books. Boys, too.

“Who do you think they’ll execute?” Balzac said as they waded through the crowd, munching. Their backpacks made moving forward impossible, so they moved sideways and held hands, to make sure they did not to lose each other.

Victor shrugged. “Revolutionaries. I suppose since the Ultras won the election, they are cleaning up again.” His tone was more serious now, and he glowered.

Balzac knew why. An officer had murdered Victor’s father, a blacksmith who fought for the rights of farmers. Widowed and with a wicked boy to take care of, his poor maman struggled, and though Victor helped—or tried to—he was much better at planning elaborate jokes on their neighbors than being useful.

When he reached the wooden barricade, Balzac squirmed, squished against it by a frenzied crowd that stank of nervous sweat.

On the stage used for plays, circuses, governmental announcements and executions, Lyon’s guillotine stood tall and lean. Its clean, modern lines testified to its rationality and efficiency. A painless death, Balzac had heard his father, a butcher, describe the decapitation device to a friend. He stared at it, not believing it was possible to die pain free, because the Fourvière beggar, who had lost his left arm in the war, complained of pain in his phantom limb. A shiver

electrified Balzac's spine despite the pressing heat. The crowd quieted, save for the murmurs that washed over it in the occasional wave.

Balzac stood on tiptoes to glimpse what was happening. Too short to see past the platform, he climbed onto the barricade, and Victor followed.

Prison officials lined up four prisoners clad in dirty, torn rags behind the stage, there guarded by Gendarmerie who discussed something with the Mayor. The Military Police, in all splendor, wore white leggings under long coats adorned with gold buttons, rapiers at their sides and tricorn hats. The uniforms gave them the respect they expected—people kept their distance.

To his right, a woman wailed. Balzac thought he recognized the tone, but couldn't distinguish whence it came, and soon the cry drowned in the crowd's excitement.

The Bourreau stepped forward and opened a paper, then cleared his throat to command quiet. "The Royal Government of France has found four offenders guilty of treason." The man's voice strained when the crowd mumbled.

Balzac's stomach plunged as he listened and realized what he was about to witness. Cold sweat trickled down his neck.

Victor stared glassy-eyed at the orator. His hand leaned on the platform and twitched.

"Should we—do you really ... want to watch this?" he whispered into Victor's ear.

Victor gaped. "Mais, they haven't even started." He turned back to the spectacle.

"The first is Jean-Baptiste de Chaillou, convicted for plotting to kill the most High and most Puissant second Prime Minister of France Armand-Emmanuel Sophie Septimanie de Vignerot du Plessis, fifth Duke of Richelieu and Fronsac."

A wild debate broke out in the crowd, and Balzac's stomach knotted.

"The next three,"—the Bourreau shouted at the full power of his voice—"Sylvain de La Rochefoucauld, Phillipe-Frédéric de Condorcet and Guillaume-Chrétien Bochart de Saron, are convicted for helping the first."

Balzac froze, and a lump formed in his tight throat. He knew the last name.

"Victor," he said. "Let's go."

Victor's jaw dropped. "Non."

Balzac stretched to see the prisoners better, but the accused stood behind the platform and the death machine blocked his view.

The Bourreau shuffled the first prisoner to the guillotine. As he fidgeted on his deathly bench, he screamed. "Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort."

The iron swooshed and made a wet crack. His head thumped onto the wooden floor and rolled, which left a trail of blood on the sun-heated wood and a screaming silence.

The Bourreau grabbed the severed head and placed it at the edge of the platform, facing the crowd. Balzac glared at Jean-Baptiste's white visage. Red streams emanated under him and dripped through the cracks onto the dry earth, which whipped up dust. Terror collected in the corners of his eyes and drooled into his stony crevices. His mouth twitched, as if he wanted to say something, and someone interrupted him. Then his eyelids slid over the olive green, and his lips drew into a downward slope and gave him a mien of pain proper to his situation. Pain. Non, his father had lied. The coppery scent of the fresh puddle beneath him hung heavy in the hot air.

Balzac thought he saw a white haze emanate from the head that reached for the body, now heaved off the bench and laid on a cloth to be bound. He rubbed his face, and the

vapor collected between the separated parts. He had seen such a thing once before, a long time ago. He pounded his fists against his thighs to make it go away, instead heat flushed his body.

Balzac almost fell backwards when a second visage appeared. His vacant look mocked the gaping crowd. His crow's feet told stories of laughter, as did the creases near his lips, which loosened and somewhat curled upwards, as if he was at peace with the world. His memory dripped onto the floor.

A sobbing woman said, "Sylvain."

At the cry of his name, his pupils turned, which caused gasps from those who saw—including Balzac and Victor—and increased the volume of the woman's agony. The blood was so pungent now the sweet aroma of iron made its way onto the tongue.

Another thump beyond the heads had Balzac flinch. This man's mane was longer, so when the Public Executioner picked it up, his features grazed the floor. Gory stains dripped on the beige leggings, and he cursed as he put the head beside the others.

All bodies had the haze.

A raggedy-dressed man got ready for execution. Balzac recognized him. A tattoo on his shoulder, an inky lily and a rose hugging his collar bone, peeked through a tear in his shirt. Guillaume's countenance was sweaty, and his wet curls gripped onto it for dear life. His blue gaze stood out against his dark, dirty skin and black hair. They met Balzac's, and he raised his brows.

Balzac's stomach turned.

Guillame smiled, defeated but dignified. As he limped towards his end, the azure of his irises drowned in sadness. "Adieu," he mouthed. Then he lay on the bench.

Balzac tried to swallow the lump in his throat, but it wiggled and remained defiant in its position.

Chunk.

The head rolled into the bright puddles.

Goosebumps frigid as the majestic knife shot along Balzac's back and over his limbs.

Placed next to the others, Guillaume's visage lined with secret dread, as if the voltaic resonances of life gripped onto his muscles, and his optics filled with liquid death. A tear climbed down his dirty, stubbled face and mingled with blood as it glided, got caught at his jaw where it dangled off the edge, and trembled in pink with every step of the man on the platform.

"Guillaume," a familiar voice screamed next to Balzac.

He puked the Camembert roll into the dark puddle below the stage, wiped his mouth with his bare, shaky arm and spun around to his aunt, who looked back and forth between him and her dead husband, agape.

She staggered, her trembling hand reached for her brow, then she cursed under her breath.

Balzac wasn't supposed to be here.

Her face glistened, and her forehead formed deep wrinkles. She slapped Balzac and shouted incomprehensible words which ended in a simper. She stared past him, wiped her face, and pushed away a sweaty strand of her hair. Then she pressed him to her hot chest, and they melted into sobs. She left him seated on the barricade without another word.

He ground his teeth, glaring at the marketplace.

Someone poked Balzac in the shoulder. He turned to Sylvain's head, which floated beside Victor and stared with glassy eyes. A Gendarme held it by its hair.

Balzac fell off his seat and pulled Victor with him. They scrambled up and dusted off their clothes.

"Salaud," Victor said under his breath.

The Gendarme roared with laughter as the Bourreau shouted insults at the defamation of his esteemed career.

Victor grimaced at the Gendarme, shouted insults and raised his fists, and Balzac cursed him with the worst words he could think of as a prison official dragged them away. Released in the square's middle, Victor stared back at the guillotine blanched. "Bloody Ultras," he said, and put his arm around Balzac.

"Bloody Ultras."

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