Under a Glass Bell

AND OTHER STORIES

Anaïs Nin

Introduction by Elizabeth Podnieks

Swallow Press

Ohio University Press

Athens, Ohio

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Houseboat

The current of the crowd wanted to sweep me along with it. The green lights on the street corners ordered me to cross the street, the policeman smiled to invite me to walk between the silver-headed nails. Even the autumn leaves obeyed the current. But I broke away from it like a fallen piece. I swerved out and stood at the top of the stairs leading down to the Quays. Below me flowed the river. Not like the current I had just broken from, made of dissonant pieces colliding rustily, driven by hunger and desire.

Down the stairs I ran towards the water front, the noises of the city receding as I descended, the leaves retreating to the corner of the steps under the wind of my skirt. At the bottom of the stairs lay the wrecked mariners of the street current, the tramps who had fallen out of the crowd life, who refused to obey. Like me, at some point of the trajectory, they had all fallen out, and here they lay shipwrecked at the foot of the trees, sleeping, drinking. They had abandoned time, possessions, labor, slavery. They walked and slept in counter-rhythm to the world. They renounced houses and clothes. They sat alone, but not unique, for they all seemed to have been born brothers. Time and exposure made their clothes alike, wine and air gave them the same eroded skin. The crust of dirt, the swollen noses, the stale tears in the eyes, all gave them the same appearance. Having refused to follow the procession of the streets, they sought the river which

lulled them. Wine and water. Every day, in front of the river, they reenacted the ritual of abandon. Against the knots of rebellion, wine and the river, against the cutting iron of loneliness, wine and water washing away everything in a rhythm of blurred silences.

They threw the newspapers into the river and this was their prayer: to be carried, lifted, borne down, without feeling the hard bone of pain in man, lodged in his skeleton, but only the pulse of flowing blood. No shocks, no violence, no awakening.

While the tramps slept, the fishermen in a trance pretended to be capturing fish, and stood there hypnotized for hours. The river communicated with them through the bamboo rods of their fishing tackle, transmitting its vibrations. Hunger and time were forgotten. The perpetual waltz of lights and shadows emptied one of all memories and terrors. Fishermen, tramps, filled by the brilliance of the river as by an anesthetic which permitted only the pulse to beat, emptied of memories as in dancing.

The houseboat was tied at the foot of the stairs. Broad and heavy on its keel, stained with patches of lights and shadows, bathing in reflections, it heaved now and then to the pressure of a deeper breathing of the river. The water washed its flanks lingeringly, the moss gathered around the base of it, just below the water line, and swayed like Naiad hair, then folded back again in silky adherence to the wood. The shutters opened and closed in obedience to the gusts of wind and the heavy poles which kept the barge from touching the shore cracked with the strain like bones. A shiver passed along the houseboat asleep on the river, like a shiver of fever in a dream. The lights and shadows stopped waltzing. The nose of the houseboat plunged deeper and shook its chains. A moment of anguish: everything was slipping into anger again, as on earth. But no, the water dream persisted. Nothing was displaced. The nightmare might appear here, but the river knew the mystery of continuity. A fit of anger and only the surface erupted, leaving the deep flowing body of the dream intact.

The noises of the city receded completely as I stepped on the gangplank. As I took out the key I felt nervous. If the key fell into the river, the key to the little door to my life in the infinite? Or if

the houseboat broke its moorings and floated away? It had done this once already, breaking the chain at the prow, and the tramps had helped to swing it back in place.

As soon as I was inside of the houseboat, I no longer knew the name of the river or the city. Once inside the walls of old wood, under the heavy beams, I might be inside a Norwegian sailing ship traversing fjords, in a Dutch boyer sailing to Bali, a jute boat on the Brahmaputra. At night the lights on the shore were those of Constantinople or the Neva. The giant bells ringing the hours were those of the Sunken Cathedral. Every time I inserted the key in the lock, I felt this snapping of cords, this lifting of anchor, this fever of departure. Once inside the houseboat, all the voyages began. Even at night with its shutters closed, no smoke coming out of its chimney, asleep and secret, it had an air of mysteriously sailing somewhere.

At night I closed the windows which overlooked the Quays. As I leaned over I could see dark shadows walking by, men with their collars turned up and their caps pushed over their eyes, women with wide long skirts, market women who made love with the tramps behind the trees. The street lamps high above threw no light on the trees and bushes along the big wall. It was only when the window rustled that the shadows which seemed to be one shadow split into two swiftly and then, in the silence, melted into one again.

At this moment a barge full of coal passed by, sent waves rolling behind it, upheaving all the other barges. The pictures on the walls swayed. The fishing net hung on the ceiling like a giant spider web swung, gently rocking a sea shell and a starfish caught in its meshes.

On the table lay a revolver. No harm could come to me on the water but someone had laid a revolver there believing I might need it. I looked at it as if it reminded me of a crime I had committed, with an irrepressible smile such as rises sometimes to people's lips in the face of great catastrophes which are beyond their grasp, the smile which comes at times on certain women's faces while they are saying they regret the harm they have done. It is the smile of nature quietly and proudly asserting its natural right to kill, the smile which the animal in the jungle never shows but by which man reveals when the animal re-enters his being and reasserts its presence. This smile came to

me as I took up the revolver and pointed it out of the window, into the river. But I was so averse to killing that even shooting into the water I felt uneasy, as if I might kill the Unknown Woman of the Seine again—the woman who had drowned herself here years ago and who was so beautiful that at the Morgue they had taken a plaster cast of her face. The shot came faster than I had expected. The river swallowed it. No one noticed it, not from the bridge, not from the Quays. How easily a crime could be committed here.

Outside an old man was playing the violin feverishly, but no sound came out of it. He was deaf. No music poured from his instrument, no music, but tiny plaintive cries escaped from his trembling gestures.

At the top of the stairs two policemen were chatting with the prostitutes.

The windows overlooking the Quays now shut, the barge looked uninhabited. But the windows looking on the river were open. The dying summer breath entered into my bedroom, the room of shadows, the bower of the night. Heavy beams overhead, low ceilings, a heavy wooden sideboard along the walls. An Indian lamp threw charcoal patterns over walls and ceiling—a Persian design of cactus flowers, lace fans, palm leaves, a lamaist vajry-mandala flower, minarets, trellises.

(When I lie down to dream, it is not merely a dust flower born like a rose out of the desert sands and destroyed by a gust of wind. When I lie down to dream it is to plant the seed for the miracle and the fulfillment.)

The headboard opened like a fan over my head, a peacock feather opening in dark wood and copper threads, the wings of a great golden bird kept afloat on the river. The barge could sink, but not this wide heavy bed traveling throughout the nights spread over the deepest precipices of desire. Falling on it I felt the waves of emotion which sustained me, the constant waves of emotion under my feet. Burrowing myself into the bed only to spread fanwise and float into a moss-carpeted tunnel of caresses.

The incense was spiraling. The candles were burning with delicate oscillations of anguish. Watching them was like listening to a beloved heartbeat and fearing the golden hammer strokes might

stop. The candles never conquered the darkness but maintained a disquieting duel with the night.

I heard a sound on the river, but when I leaned out of the window the river had become silent again. Now I heard the sound of oars. Softly, softly coming from the shore. A boat knocked against the barge. There was a sound of chains being tied.

I await the phantom lover—the one who haunts all women, the one I dream of, who stands behind every man, with a finger and head shaking—"Not him, he is not the one." Forbidding me each time to love.

The houseboat must have traveled during the night, the climate and the scenery were changed. Dawn was accelerated by a woman's shrieks. Shrieks interrupted by the sound of choking. I ran on deck. I arrived just as the woman who was drowning grasped the anchor's chain. Her shrieks grew worse as she felt nearer salvation, her appetite for life growing more violent. With the help of one of the drunken tramps, we pulled the chain up, with the woman clinging to it. She was hiccuping, spitting, choking. The drunken tramp was shouting orders to imaginary sailors, telling them what to do for the drowned. Leaning over the woman he almost toppled over her, which reawakened her aggressiveness and helped her to rise and walk into the barge where we changed her clothes.

The barge was traversing a dissonant climate. The mud had come to the surface of the river, and a shoal of corks surrounded the barge. We pushed them away with brooms and poles; the corks seemed to catch the current and float away, only to encircle the barge magnetically.

The tramps were washing themselves at the fountain. Bare to the waist, they soaked their faces and shoulders, and then they washed their shirts, and combed themselves, dipping their combs in the river. These men at the fountain, they knew what was going to happen. When they saw me on deck, they gave me the news of the day, of the approach of war, of the hope of revolution. I listened to their description of tomorrow's world. An aurora borealis and all men out of prison.

The oldest tramp of all, who did not know about tomorrow, he was in the prison of his drunkenness. No escape. When he was filled like a barrel, then his legs gave way and he could only fall down. When he was lifted by alcoholic wings and ready for flight, the wings collapsed into nausea. This gangplank of drunkenness led nowhere.

The same day at this post of anguish, three men quarreled on the Quays. One carried a ragpicker's bag over his shoulder. The second was brilliantly elegant. The third was a beggar with a wooden leg. They argued excitedly. The elegant one was counting out money. He dropped a ten-franc piece. The beggar placed his wooden leg on it and would not budge. No one could frighten him, and no one dared to push off the wooden leg. He kept it there all the time they argued. Only when the two others went off did he lean over to pick it up.

The street cleaner was sweeping the dead leaves into the river. The rain fell into the cracked letter box and when I opened my letters it looked as if my friends had been weeping when writing me.

A child sat on the edge of the river, his thin legs dangling. He sat there for two or three hours and then began to cry. The street cleaner asked him what was the matter. His mother had told him) to wait there until she returned. She had left him a piece of dry bread. He was wearing his little black school apron. The street cleaner took his comb, dipped it in the river and combed the child's hair and washed his face. I offered to take him on the barge. The street cleaner said: "She'll never come back. That's how they do it. He's another for the Orphanage."

When the child heard the word orphanage he ran away so fast the street cleaner did not have time to drop his broom. He shrugged his shoulders: "They'll catch him sooner or later. I was one of them."

Voyage of despair.

The river was having a nightmare. Its vast whaleback was restless. It had been cheated of its daily suicide. More women fed the river than men—more wanted to die in winter than in summer.

Parasitic corks obeyed every undulation but did not separate from the barge, glued like waves of mercury. When it rained the water seeped through the top room and fell on my bed, on my books, on the black rug.

I awakened in the middle of the night with wet hair. I thought I must be at the bottom of the Seine; that the barge, the bed, had quietly sunk during the night.

It was not very different to look through water at all things. It was like weeping cool saltless tears without pain. I was not cut off altogether, but in so deep a region that every element was marrying in sparkling silence, so deep that I heard the music of the spinet inside the snail who carries his antennae like an organ and travels on the back of a harp fish.

In this silence and white communion took place the convolutions of plants turning into flesh, into planets. The towers were pierced by swordfishes, the moon of citron rotated on a sky of lava, the branches had thirsty eyes hanging like berries. Tiny birds sat on weeds asking for no food and singing no song but the soft chant of metamorphosis, and each time they opened their beaks the webbed stained-glass windows decomposed into snakes and ribbons of sulphur.

The light filtered through the slabs of mildewed tombs and no eyelashes could close against it, no tears could blur it, no eyelids could curtain it off, no sleep could dissolve it, no forgetfulness could deliver one from this place where there was neither night nor day. Fish, plant, woman, equally aware, with eyes forever open, confounded and confused in communion, in an ecstasy without repose.

I ceased breathing in the present, inhaling the air around me into the leather urns of the lungs. I breathed out into the infinite, exhaling the mist of a three-quarter-tone breath, a light pyramid of heart beats.

This breathing lighter than breathing, without pressure from the wind, like the windless delicacy of the air in Chinese paintings, supporting one winged black bird, one breathless cloud, bowing one branch, preceded the white hysteria of the poet and the red-foamed hysteria of woman.

When this inhaling of particles, of dust grains, of rust microbes, of all the ashes of past deaths ceased, I inhaled the air from the unborn and felt my body like a silk scarf resting outside the blue rim of the nerves.

The body recovered the calm of minerals, its plant juices, the eyes became gems again, made to glitter alone and not for the shedding of tears.

Sleep.

No need to watch the flame of my life in the palm of my hand, this flame as pale as the holy ghost speaking in many languages to which none have the secret.

The dream will watch over it. No need to remain with eyes wide open. Now the eyes are gems, the hair a fan of lace. Sleep is upon me.

The pulp of roots, the milk of cactus, the quicksilver drippings of the silver beeches is in my veins.

I sleep with my feet on moss carpets, my branches in the cotton of the clouds.

The sleep of a hundred years has transfixed all into the silver face of ecstasy.

During the night the houseboat traveled out of the landscape of despair. Sunlight struck the wooden beams, and the reflected light of the water danced on the wooden beams. Opening my eyes I saw the light playing around me and I felt as if I were looking through a pierced sky into some region far nearer to the sun. Where had the houseboat sailed to during the night?

The island of joy must be near. I leaned out of the window. The moss costume of the houseboat was greener, washed by cleaner waters. The corks were gone, and the smell of rancid wine. The little waves passed with great precipitation. The waves were so clear I could see the roots of the indolent algae plants that had grown near the edge of the river.

This day I landed at the island of joy.

I could now put around my neck the sea-shell necklace and walk through the city with the arrogance of my secret.

When I returned to the houseboat with my arms loaded with new candles, wine, ink, writing paper, nails for the broken shutters, the policeman stopped me at the top of the stairs: "Is there a holiday on the Quay?"

"A holiday? No."

As I ran down the stairs I understood. There was a holiday on the Quay! The policeman had seen it on my face. A celebration of

lights and motion. Confetti of sun spots, serpentines of water currents, music from the deaf violinist. It was the island of joy I had touched in the morning. The river and I united in a long, winding, never-ending dream, with its deep undercurrents, its deeper undertows of dark activity, the river and I rejoicing at teeming obscure mysteries of river-bottom lives.

The big clock of the Sunken Cathedral rang twelve times for the feast. Barges passed slowly in the sun, like festive chariots throwing bouquets of lightning from their highly polished knobs. The laundry in blue, white and rose, hung out to dry and waving like flags, children playing with cats and dogs, women holding the rudder with serenity and gravity. Everything washed clean with water and light passing at a dream pace.

But when I reached the bottom of the stairs the festivity came to an abrupt end. Three men were cutting the algae plants with long scythes. I shouted but they worked on unconcerned, pushing them all away so that the current would sweep them off. The men laughed at my anger. One man said: "These are not your plants. Cleaning Department order. Go and complain to them." And with quicker gestures they cut all the algae and fed the limp green carpet to the current.

So passed the barge out of the island of joy.

One morning what I found in the letter box was an order from the river police to move on. The King of England was expected for a visit and he would not like the sight of the houseboats, the laundry exposed on the decks, the chimneys and water tanks in rusty colors, the gangplanks with teeth missing, and other human flowers born of poverty and laziness. We were all ordered to sail on, quite a way up the Seine, no one knew quite where because it was all in technical language.

One of my neighbors, a one-eyed cyclist, came to discuss the dispossessions and to invoke laws which had not been made to give houseboats the right to lie in the heart of Paris gathering moss. The fat painter who lived across the river, open-shirted and always perspiring, came to discuss the matter and to suggest we not move at all as a

form of protest. What could happen? At the worst, since there were no laws against our staying, the police would have to fetch a tugboat and move us all in a line, like a row of prisoners. That was the worst that could happen to us. But the one-eyed cyclist was overcome by this threat because he said his houseboat was not strong enough to bear the strain of being pulled between other heavier, larger barges. He had heard of a small houseboat being wrenched apart in such a voyage. He did not think mine would stand the strain either.

The next day the one-eyed man was towed along by a friend who ran one of the tourist steamers; he left at dawn like a thief, with his fear of collective moving. Then the fat painter moved, pulled heavily and slowly because his barge was the heaviest. He owned a piano and huge canvases, heavier than coal. His leaving left a vast hole in the alignment of barges, like a tooth missing. The fishermen crowded in this open space to fish and rejoiced. They had been wishing us away, and I believe it was their prayers which were heard rather than ours, for soon the letters from the police became more insistent.

I was the last one left, still believing I would be allowed to stay. Every morning I went to see the chief of police. I always believed an exception would be made for me, that laws and regulations broke down for me. I don't know why except that I had seen it happen very often. The chief of police was extremely hospitable; he permitted me to sit in his office for hours and gave me pamphlets to pass the time. I became versed in the history of the Seine. I knew the number of sunken barges, collided Sunday tourist steamboats, of people saved from suicide by the river police. But the law remained adamant, and the advice of the chief of police, on the sly, was for me to take my houseboat to a repair yard near Paris where I could have a few repairs made while waiting for permission to return. The yard being near Paris, I made arrangements for a tugboat to come for me in the middle of the day.

The tugboat's approach to the barge was very much like a courtship, made with great care and many cork protectors. The tugboat knew the fragility of these discarded barges converted into houseboats. The wife of the tugboat captain was cooking lunch while the maneuvers were carried out. The sailors were untying the ropes, one

was stoking the fire. When the tugboat and the barge were tied together like twins, the captain lifted the gangplank, opened his bottle of red wine, drank a very full gulp and gave orders for departure.

Now we were gliding along. I was running all over the houseboat, celebrating the strangest sensation I had ever known, this traveling along a river with all my possessions around me, my books, my diaries, my furniture, my pictures, my clothes in the closet. I leaned out of each little window to watch the landscape. I lay on the bed. It was a dream. It was a dream, this being a marine snail traveling with one's house all around one's neck.

A marine snail gliding through the familiar city. Only in a dream could I move so gently along with the small human heartbeat in rhythm with the tug tug heartbeat of the tugboat, and Paris unfolding, uncurling, in beautiful undulations.

The tugboat pulled its smokestacks down to pass under the first bridge. The captain's wife was serving lunch on deck. Then I discovered with anxiety that the barge was taking in water. It had already seeped through the floor. I began to work the pumps, but could not keep abreast of the leaks. Then I filled pails, pots and pans, and still I could not control the water, so I called out to the captain. He laughed. He said: "We'll have to slow down a bit." And he did.

The dream rolled on again. We passed under a second bridge with the tugboat bowing down like a salute, passed all the houses I had lived in. From so many of these windows I had looked with envy and sadness at the flowing river and passing barges. Today I was free, and traveling with my bed and my books. I was dreaming and flowing along with the river, pouring water out with pails, but this was a dream and I was free.

Now it was raining. I smelled the captain's lunch and I picked up a banana. The captain shouted: "Go on deck and say where it is you want to stop."

I sat on deck under an umbrella, eating the banana, and watching the course of the voyage. We were out of Paris, in that part of the Seine where the Parisians swim and canoe. We were traveling past the Bois de Boulogne, through the exclusive region where only the small yachts were allowed to anchor. We passed another bridge, and

reached a factory section. Discarded barges were lying on the edge of the water. The boat yard was an old barge surrounded with rotting skeletons of barges, piles of wood, rusty anchors, and pierced water tanks. One barge was turned upside down, and the windows hung half wrenched on the side.

We were towed alongside and told to tie up against the guardian barge, that the old man and woman would watch mine until the boss came to see what repairing had to be done.

My Noah's Ark had arrived safely, but I felt as if I were bringing an old horse to the slaughterhouse.

The old man and woman who were the keepers of this cemetery had turned their cabin into a complete concierge's lodge to remind themselves of their ancient bourgeois splendor: an oil lamp, a tile stove, elaborate sideboards, lace on the back of the chairs, fringes and tassels on the curtains, a Swiss clock, many photographs, bric-a-brac, all the tokens of their former life on earth.

Every now and then the police came to see if the roof was done. The truth was that the more pieces of tin and wood the boss nailed to the roof, the more the rain came in. It fell on my dresses and trickled into my shoes and books. The policeman was invited to witness this because he suspected the length of my stay.

Meanwhile the King of England had returned home, but no law was made to permit our return. The one-eyed man made a daring entry back and was expelled the very next day. The fat painter returned to his spot before the Gare d'Orsay—his brother was a deputy.

So passed the barge into exile.

The Mouse

The Mouse and I lived on a houseboat anchored near Notre Dame where the Seine curved endlessly like veins around the island heart of Paris.

The Mouse was a small woman with thin legs, big breasts, and frightened eyes. She moved furtively, taking care of the houseboat, sometimes silently, sometimes singing a little fragment of a song. Seven little notes from some folk song of Brittany, always followed by the clashes of pots and pans. She was always beginning the song and never ending it, as if it were stolen from the severity of the world and something frightened her, some fear of punishment or danger. Her room was the smallest cabin on the houseboat. The bed filled it, leaving only a corner for a little night table, and a hook for her everyday clothes, for her mouse-colored bedroom slippers, her mouse-colored sweater and skirt. Her Sunday clothes she kept under the bed in a box, wrapped with tissue paper. Her one new hat and a small piece of mouse fur were also kept in tissue paper. On the night table there was a photograph of her future husband, in a soldier's uniform.

Her greatest fear was of going to the fountain after dark. The houseboat was tied near the bridge and the fountain was under the bridge. It was there the hoboes washed themselves and slept at night. Or they sat in circles talking and smoking. During the day the Mouse fetched water in a pail, and the hoboes helped her to carry it

in exchange for a piece of cheese, left-over wine, or a piece of soap. She laughed and talked with them. But as soon as night came she feared them.

The Mouse emerged from her little cabin all dressed in her mouse costume, a mouse-colored sweater, skirt and apron. She wore soft gray bedroom slippers. She was always scurrying along as if she were threatened. If she was caught eating, she lowered her eyes and sought to cover the plate. If she was seen coming out of her cabin she immediately concealed what she was carrying as if she were thieving. No gentleness could cross the border of the Mouse's fear, which was ingrained in the very skin of her thin legs. Her shoulders sloped as if too heavily burdened, every sound was an alarm to her ear.

I wanted to dispel her fear. I talked to her about her home, her family, the places where she had worked before. The Mouse answered me evasively, as if she were being questioned by a detective. Before every act of friendliness she was suspicious, uneasy. When she broke a dish she lamented: "Madame will take it out of my salary." When I assured her that I did not believe in doing this because it was an accident and an accident could happen equally to me, she was silent.

Then the Mouse received a letter which made her cry. I questioned her. She said: "My mother wants a loan of my savings. As I am saving to get married. I will lose the interest on the money." I offered to lend her the sum. The Mouse accepted but looked perplexed.

When she thought herself alone on the houseboat, the Mouse was happy. She sang her little beginning of a song she never finished. Sometimes instead of mending stockings she sewed for herself, for her marriage.

The first storm was caused by eggs. The Mouse was always given the same food as I ate, and not treated like a French servant. The Mouse was happy to have everything to eat, until one day when I ran short of money and I said to her: "Today just get some eggs and we'll make an omelet." The Mouse stood there, with a great fright in her eyes. She said nothing but she did not move. She was very pale, and then she began to cry. I put my hand on her shoulder and asked her what was the matter.

"Oh, Madame," said the Mouse, "I knew it could not last. We've had meat every day, and I was so happy, I thought at last I had found a good place. And now you are acting just like the others. Eggs. I can't eat eggs."

"But if you don't like eggs you can get something else. I don't mind. I only mentioned eggs because I was short of money today."

"It isn't that I don't like them. I always liked them, at home, on the farm. We ate a lot of eggs. But when I first came to Paris the lady I worked for was so stingy—you can't imagine what she was like. She kept all the closets under lock and key, she weighed the provisions, she counted the pieces of sugar I ate. She always scolded me for eating too much. She made me buy meat for her every day, but for me it was always eggs, eggs for lunch, dinner, every day, until I got deathly sick. And today when you said . . . I thought it was beginning all over again."

"You ought to know by now that I don't want you to be unhappy here."

"I'm not unhappy, Madame. I'm very happy here, only I didn't believe it. I thought all the time there must be a catch in it, or that you were only engaging me for a month and were intending to throw me out just before the summer vacation so that you would not have to pay my vacation, and I would be left stranded in Paris in the summer when there are no jobs to be had, or I thought you would send me off before Christmas so as not to have to give me a New Year's present, because all this happened to me before. I was in a house once where I could never go out; in the evenings I had to watch over the child, and on Sundays when they all went out I had to watch the house." She stopped. That was all she said for many weeks. She never referred to the eggs again. She seemed a little less afraid, but she scurried and hustled just as much, and ate as if she were ashamed to be caught eating. And again I could not cross the frontier of the Mouse's fear. Not even when I gave her half of my lottery ticket, not even when I gave her a frame for the photograph of her future husband, not even when I gave her writing paper the very day I caught her stealing mine.

Then one day I left the barge for a week, and the Mouse was left alone to guard it. When I returned I found it harder to catch the

Mouse's eyes, or to make her laugh. A woman who had been walking along the Quays with her lover lost her hat. It fell into the river. She knocked at our door and asked the Mouse if she could come onto the barge and try to catch it with a pole. It was floating around the other side. Everybody tried to reach it through the windows. The Mouse almost fell out carried down by the weight of the broom and the pull of the current. Everybody laughed, and the Mouse too. Then she got frightened hearing herself laugh, and she hurried away to her work.

A month passed. One day the Mouse was grinding coffee in the kitchen when I heard her groan. I found the Mouse very white, doubling up with pains in her stomach. I helped her to her cabin. The Mouse said it was indigestion. But the pains grew worse. She groaned for an hour, and finally asked me if I would get a doctor she knew about who lived very near. It was the doctor's wife who received me. The doctor had taken care of the Mouse before, but not since she lived on a houseboat. That made it impossible for the doctor to go and see her because he was a *grand blessé de guerre* and on account of his wooden leg he could not be expected to walk across an unsteady gangplank into a dancing houseboat. That was impossible, the wife repeated. But I pleaded with her. I explained that the gangplank was steady, that it had a railing on one side, that the houseboat never moved unless another barge was passing by, that it was anchored near the stairway and easy to get into. The river was very calm that day, and no accident was to be feared. The doctor's wife was half convinced and gave me a half promise that the doctor would come in an hour.

We watched for him out of the window, and we saw him arrive limping at the gangplank and hesitating in front of it. I walked over it to show him how steady it was, and he limped across it slowly repeating: "I am a *grand blessé de guerre*. I can't be taking care of people who live on houseboats." But he did not fall into the river. He entered the little cabin.

The Mouse was forced to make certain explanations. She was afraid she was pregnant. She had tried using something her sister had told her about, pure ammonia it was and now the pains were terrible.

The doctor shook his head. The Mouse had to uncover herself. Strange to see the little Mouse with her thin legs raised.

I asked her why she had not told me.

"I was afraid Madame would throw me out."

"On the contrary, I would have helped you."

The Mouse groaned. The doctor said: "You risked a terrible infection. If it does not come out now you'll have to go to the hospital."

"Oh, no, I can't do that, my sister will find out about it, and she'll be furious with me, and she will tell my mother."

"Maybe it'll come out all by itself but that is all I can do: I can't be mixed up in things like this. In my profession I must be careful, for my own sake. Bring me water and a towel."

He washed his hands carefully, talking all the time about the fact that he could not come back, and that all he hoped was that she would not have an infection. The Mouse was hunched in the corner of her bed looking anxiously at the doctor who was washing his hands of all responsibility. The *grand blessé de guerre* did not look at the Mouse as if she were a human being. Everything about him said clearly: you are only a servant, just a little servant, and like all of them you get into trouble, and it's your own fault. Now he said aloud: "All you servants make trouble for us doctors."

After washing his hands he limped down the gangplank with a definite good-by, and I returned to the cabin and sat on the Mouse's bed.

"You should have confided in me, I would have helped you. Lie quiet now, I'll take care of you."

"Don't send me to the hospital, my mother will find out. It only happened because you went away, and during those nights alone I was terribly afraid. I was so afraid of the men under the bridge that I let my young man stay here, and that's how it happened, because I was afraid."

That's how it happened to the Mouse, just in panic, she scurried into the trap, and was caught. That was the love the Mouse knew, this moment of fear, in the dark.

"To tell you the truth, Madame, it isn't worth it. I don't see anything to it at all. To have all this trouble afterwards, to get caught like this, and what for? It isn't anything extraordinary."

"Lie quiet, I'll come back later and see if you have a fever."

A few hours later the Mouse called me: "It happened, Madame, it happened!"

But the Mouse had a fever and it was mounting. There was an infection, and no doctor would come to the houseboat. As soon as they heard what it was about they refused to come. Especially for a servant. That happened too often. They must learn, they said, not to get into trouble.

I promised the Mouse to talk to her sister and invent some reason for her going away if she would let me take her to the hospital. She agreed and I offered to pack her valise. At the mention of valise the Mouse grew very pale. She lay inert and looked more frightened than ever. But I took her valise from under the bed and laid it beside her.

"Tell me where your clothes are. You will need soap, a toothbrush, a towel . . . "

"Madame . . ." The Mouse hesitated. She opened the small night table beside her. She handed out to me all the objects I had thought lost during the last month, my own soap, toothbrush, towel, one of my handkerchiefs, one of my powder puffs. So many things that I smiled. Out of the shelf came one of my chemises. I pretended not to notice. The Mouse's cheeks were red with fever. She packed her little valise carefully. She packed writing paper for her young man, and her knitting. She asked me to look for a book she wanted included. It was a Child's Reader. The Mouse had worn down the first ten pages, the stories of the lamb, the cow, the horse. She must have been reading the same pages for many years, they were so threadbare and gray like her bedroom slippers. I told the Mouse I would get her a new pair of slippers. The Mouse reached for her pocketbook which was hidden under the mattress.

"My God, has nobody ever given you anything?"

"No, Madame."

"If I were poor and sick in bed, wouldn't you give me a pair of slippers if I needed them?"

This idea frightened the Mouse more than any other. It was impossible for her to imagine this reversal.

"It isn't the same thing," said the Mouse.

She was carried out of the houseboat. She looked very small. She insisted on wearing a hat, her Sunday hat taken out of its tomb of tissue paper, and the very small fur neckpiece the color of her mouse eyes.

At the hospital they refused to take her in.

Who was the doctor taking care of her? None. Was she married? No. Who performed the abortion? Herself. This they doubted. They advised us to try another hospital. The Mouse was losing blood. The fever was consuming her. I took her to another hospital where they sat her on a bench. The Mouse kept a firm grasp on her little valise. They plied her with questions. Where did she come from? Where was the first place she worked in? The Mouse answered meekly. And after that? She could not remember the address. This held up the questionnaire for ten minutes. And before that? The Mouse answered again. She kept one hand over her stomach.

"This woman is losing blood," I protested, "are all these questions necessary?"

Well, if she didn't remember the third address, did she remember where she worked after that? And how long? The time was always two years. *Why?* asked the man at the desk. As if her not having stayed in the house longer were surprising, suspicious. As if she were the culprit.

"You performed the abortion perhaps?" asked the man turning to me.

The woman bleeding there on the bench meant nothing to them. The little round moist eyes, the tiny worn piece of fur around her neck, the panic in her. The brand-new Sunday hat and the torn valise with a string for a handle. The oily pocketbook, and the soldier's letters pressed between the leaves of a Child's Reader. Even this pregnancy, accomplished in the dark, out of fear. A gesture of panic, that of a mouse falling into a trap.

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"Under a Glass Bell", originally published in 1944, was the first book by AnaÃ¯s Nin to gain attention from the literary establishment. It was published by Nin's own printing press, which she named "Gemor Press" (a word play on the name of her employee and lover Gonzalo MorÃ©). Edmund Wilson favorably reviewed "Under a Glass Bell" in The New Yorker magazine. The book is a collection of short stories, with topics ranging from diary keeping ("The Labyrinth"), to life in Paris ("Houseboat"), to a late-term abortion ("The Birth"). Many