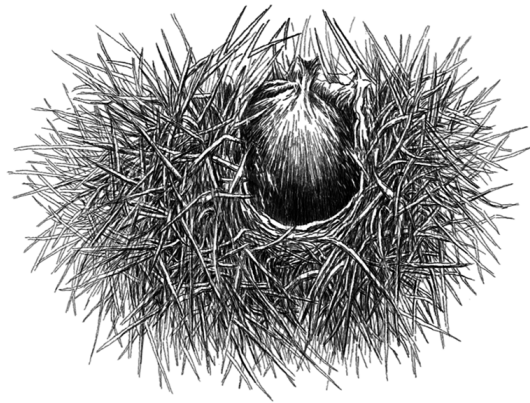
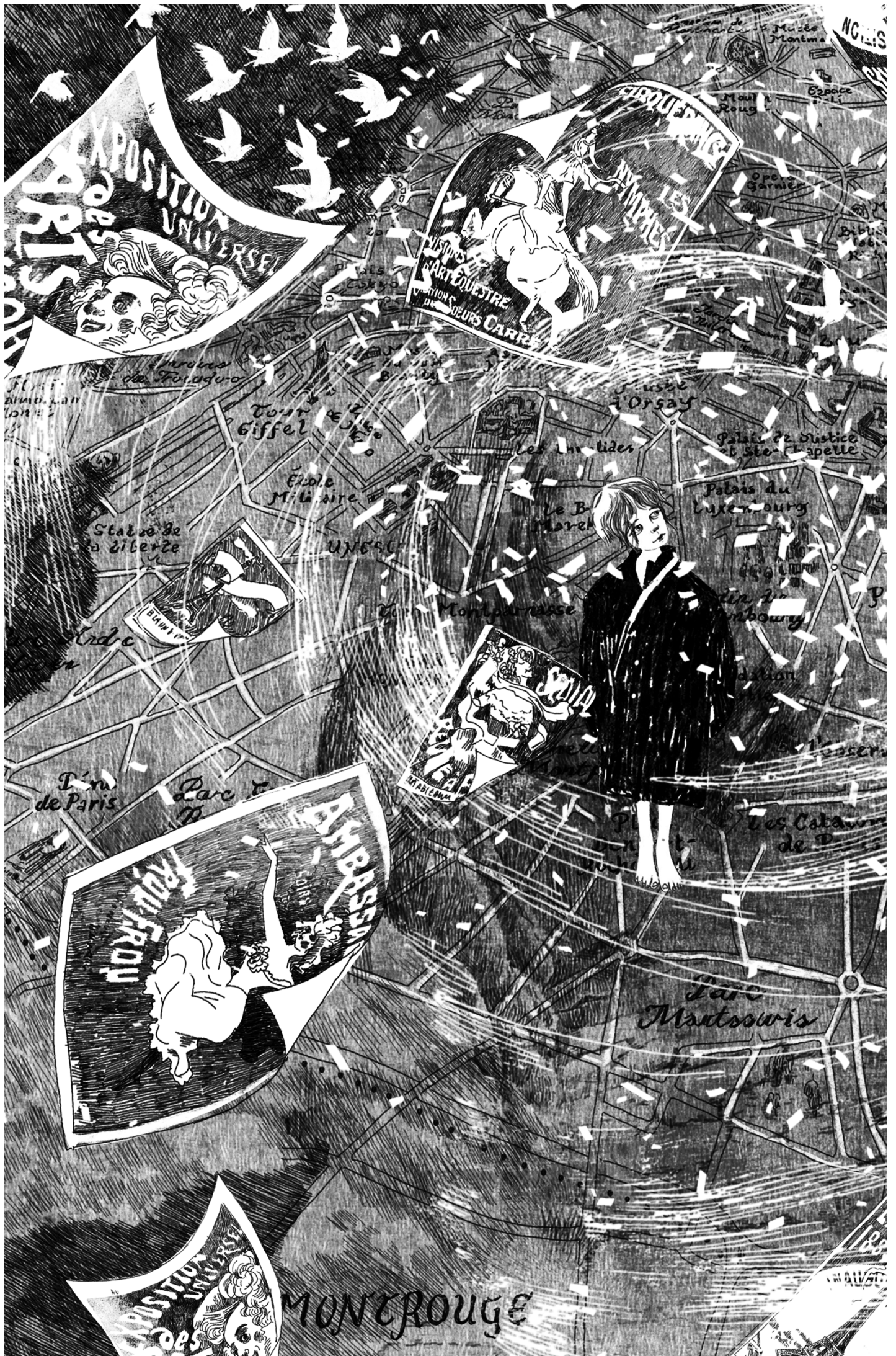


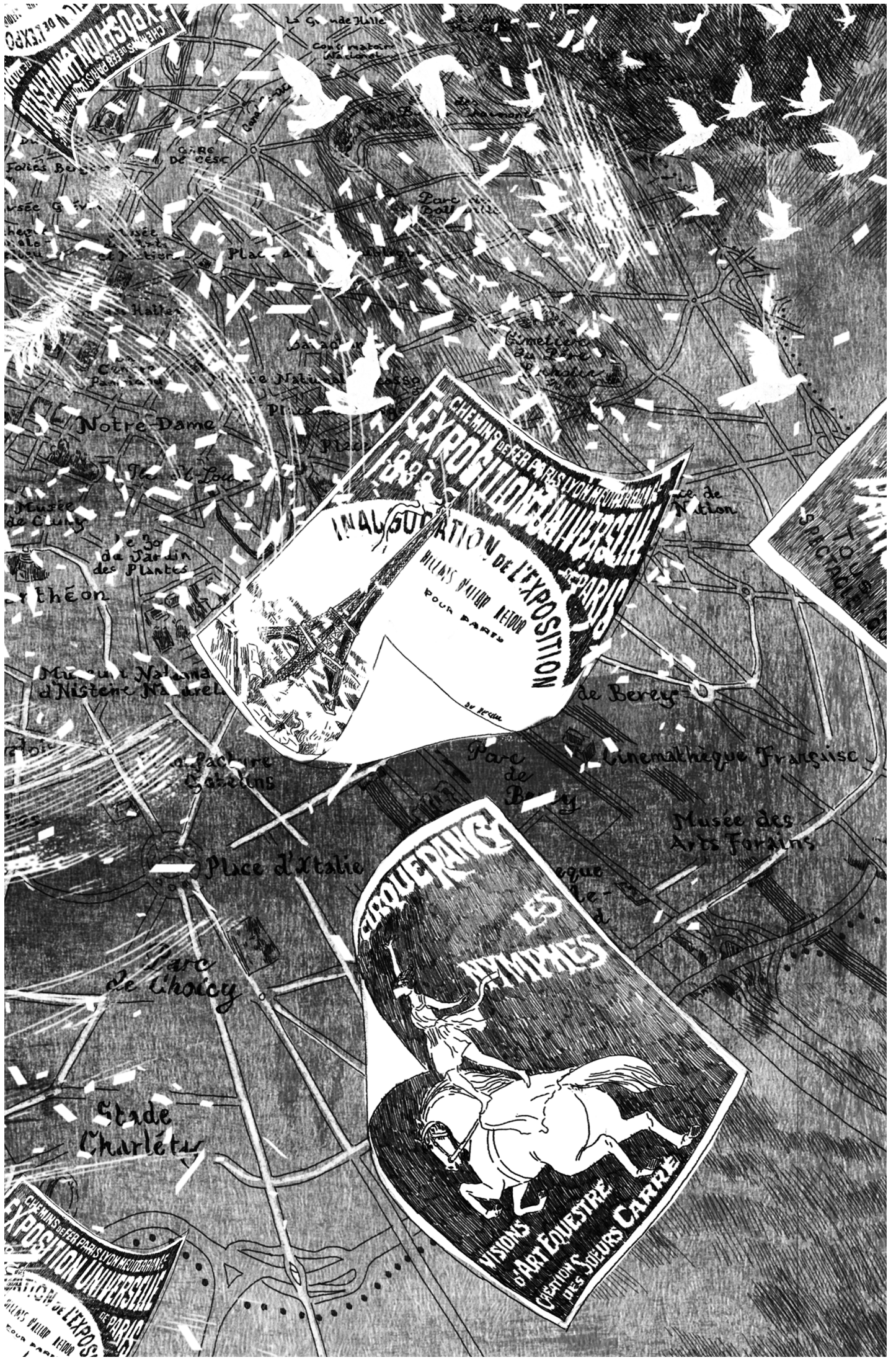
The Chestnut Roaster





*What matters is
Inside, I promise.
Tucked; a seed of life, a shining star,
And the gloss of a giant.
I promise, inside
Is what matters.*



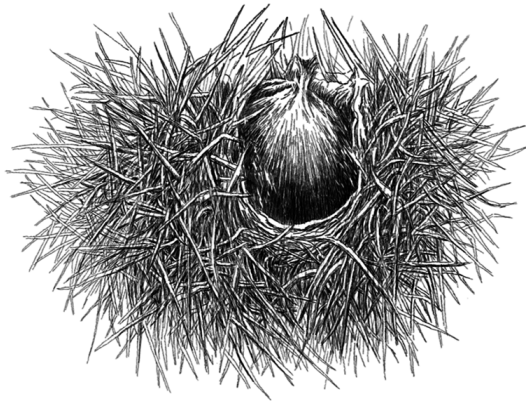


For Dad

Overground

On her corner, where the quiet Rue du Dragon meets
the bustling Boulevard Saint-Germain, petite Piaf Durand
– a girl who cannot forget, even if she wanted to –
stands at her chestnut roaster.

A stranger arrives.



One | Un

Piaf's Corner, Rue du Dragon, Paris

The smell of roasting chestnuts clouded around her, hug-like; the kind of smell that flared nostrils and clamped eyes shut, but Piaf did not blink. The stranger leaned closer, so close the dangling gold button on his coat tipped the pyramid of chestnuts between them. The top chestnut rolled onto the roasting cart's hot pan, and hissed. Piaf let it be.

"Of course you remember me, girl!" the stranger said, all smarmy and sweet as macarons. He leaned against Piaf's roasting cart until its old wheels screeched in disapproval. "We met when you were

younger – on your seventh birthday. I brought you a puppet.”

Piaf chewed her lip, fidgeted. What an odd thing to say. The man didn't look like a liar, all dressed up like that with his smile and serious coat. She stared down at the pyramid's fallen chestnut. Had there been a full moon last night? Every visitor to the roaster that morning had a madness about them. For once, they did not speak of the treasure stolen from Notre-Dame. The small Cabinet of Oils and its mysterious powers had been shrouded in so much curiosity that talk of its disappearance had dripped from tips of tongues in her roaster's queue for the guts of a long year. Not so today. Instead, regular customers and strangers alike were searching pockets for coins they were sure were there, losing things, finding things, non-stop gasping and talking nonsense. But *this* stranger was different. He was a liar.

“I do not remember you. I am sorry, Monsieur,” said Piaf. She'd dug deep for manners. “Will it be just the one cone of chestnuts, or two?”

“I'm a cousin,” the stranger insisted, “to your mother.” While a finger of black smoke rose like a crooked branch from the burning chestnut between

them, he mapped out an imaginary family tree in the air above her head. She studied the man's skin – grey with pores clogged with oily sweat. A dead fish sprung to mind. He shook the thin wrist of the girl he held at arm's length but did not release his grip. "So, I believe that makes you two cousins, too," he said. Piaf stared at the girl and took note: her eyelids were heavy, sore looking, and she breathed through her mouth. Now that the morning's fog had finally sunk down to the ground like a thick layer of vanilla cream, the low October sun was free to cast a crooked shadow across her face.

What happened to your nose? Piaf wanted to ask. There was this one time when the back of her twin brother's head gave her the best nosebleed in all of Paris... Piaf's memory niggled to tell the story, but she quickly pulled her hand up her coat sleeve and twisted her secret button until it felt tight between her fingers. The button, with its three tiny squirrels curled together in a circle, was carved from wood and sewn onto the inside of her cuff. It mightn't have been gold and heavy like the stranger's, but to Piaf it was worth more than his – for starters, it was a Pufont's Button Bijouterie original. But, best of all, it could

stop her non-stop, nagging memory dead – even when incessant fidgeting failed to do the job. It was just a silly distraction according to Luc, telling her she'd have to sell one hundred chestnuts to buy just one, but whatever her twin brother thought, twisting it kept her here – *in the now*.

Piaf let the button go. Before it had even unspun, the urge to fidget returned, every twitch of muscle fighting the lure of her memory. Fearing she'd get lost in the endless maze of tunnels inside her mind, she scratched at her cheeks and she tapped her toes and twitched as though an ant crawled across her skin.

The man hissed at her movements, and Piaf noticed the slight swatting of his hand. She annoyed him, she was a horsefly.

She focused on the girl. Her heavy-lidded eyes now latched on hard – proper eye contact; no flicking up and down or raising an eyebrow. Neither Piaf's fidgeting nor her small height seemed to bother the girl, not even a bit.

Piaf gasped when the man spoke again:

“SO, COME, dear child! Come along with us, this minute. A storm is predicted, and your mother insists you take shelter with us.” He smiled, but the twist

in his jaw and shift of his top hat told Piaf he was grinding his teeth.

Piaf looked up. The sky was blue, not a cloud in sight. “I said I do not remember you.” Piaf’s words were louder this time, and blunt – each syllable exaggerated by her fidgeting. Just as she had intended.

The man turned his head to one side, his stare stronger through one eye. “Your brother needs your mother’s care today. Poor boy.”

“Luc?” mouthed Piaf. The liar was speaking the truth: today, and every other day since his misfortune, Luc needed Maman’s care. And Maman always *needed* to care – too much so, truth be known. Piaf could even feel it now: given Piaf’s small size, Maman would wrap her protective strings around her daughter, tight as a spool of thread, until she could hardly breathe. But the stranger’s words, so close-to-home, cast proper doubt across Piaf’s thinking. *Did* she know him?

With its shiny shell yet to be slit, the fallen chestnut rattled in the pan as the steam within it built and built and built. And, as it rattled, so too did the tiny wooden boxes Piaf imagined were in her mind. Each one, a *memory box*. She stopped fidgeting and shuffling her bare feet on the box beneath her, there

to grant her some height. She didn't reach for her button this time and, like freeing a dog of its rope, set her mind free.

Quick as a wink, Piaf's thoughts raced down her memory's alleyways, its maze of thin tunnels, jumping from memory box to memory box until, somewhere deep in her brain, it found the box labelled 1883: five years earlier. She lifted its imaginary lid and allowed her mind to flick through the days inside. *Flick, flick, flick.*

She found it: All Fools' Day – the day of her seventh birthday.

The day the man said they had met.

"I remember," said Piaf, having twisted her button again. "Hailstones woke me, two presents, fried bread for breakfast, I won the race to the sheets and helped Maman fold them for a spoonful of jam from her good silver spoon." She paused when the staring man seemed to sink down a few inches, like a cat ready to pounce. "I made a mask – papier-mâché – and played football with my brother until his friends came. Hopped escargot on my own until cake for tea – seven candles for him, seven for me. Then bed. No puppets. I do not remember you." Without taking her

eyes off him, she too leaned over her roasting cart. She reached for her metal scoop and a cone made of old newspaper. *Business as usual.*

“You are mistaken, little girl,” said the man. His upper lip twitched. “Birthdays beyond your last are always a blur. What are you – eleven?”

By default, Piaf stood on her tiptoes and gritted her teeth. “I’m twelve.” He squinted then. His Adam’s apple rolled the length of his neck, like he’d found her words hard to swallow, or extraordinarily delicious – which, she could not tell. She urgently filled the paper cone with roasted chestnuts.

The burning chestnut hopped high in the pan. Piaf noticed, but left it so.

“Your memory deceives you,” the stranger hissed, his mask of sickly sweetness giving way to impatience. “Do as your mother would wish. Come.” He reached across the cart and clamped his oily fingers around the shoulder strap of her money bag and pinched her coat tight. A waft of something sickly sweet hit her nose. The strong smell of coffee from Les Deux Magots behind her, singed cloth and glue from Pufont’s Button Bijouterie before her, and the burning chestnut between them, each fought for

attention but were all beaten back – the smell from the stranger’s hand, sweet as one hundred cherry berlingots, drowned them out until she could taste it like soap in her mouth. Piaf turned her head and spat.

The girl with the crooked nose shuffled. Her eyes had opened wide. Piaf squinted. Was the girl’s head gently shaking side to side? It was almost not there – like a pulse, quivering the feathers of a brave bird. *Yes.* She was saying *no, don’t come.*

Piaf tried to squirm free, but the man tried to nudge her sideways, away from her cart. She attempted to catch the eyes of passers-by as the smell of roasting chestnuts hooked them, but they carried on, seemingly drawn like pilgrims from the rising Tour Eiffel towards the chimes of Notre-Dame cathedral.

The chestnut squealed.

Piaf waited until the man’s eye had clamped back onto hers before she spoke. “Starting on All Fools’ Day, twelve years ago, I remember everything. EVERYTHING. That was a wet Saturday and that was the day I was born. So no, we have not met before because I do not remember you. Enjoy your chestnuts, Monsieur.” Strangely, he looked satisfied and licked

his lips. Piaf pressed the cone of chestnuts into his palm and shielded her own eyes with her arm.

The chestnut, fed up waiting for someone to take heed of its warnings, exploded.

A searing pain stabbed Piaf. Her hands felt swollen as they clumsily grabbed at her right ear. Oh, how it ached, it burned. Her sight tunnelled, all sound overwhelmed by a shrill whistle. Still, she watched as the man smacked brazier-hot chestnut flesh from his long neck and raised both hands to his eyes. The girl fell forwards, her hand rising too.

That's when Piaf saw it: a thin chain, tied from his wrist to hers.

The stranger lowered the brim of his hat like he could hide in its shadow, and waited for a gap in the flow of passers-by to join them.

The girl spoke.

"You dropped this," she said, her voice rushed and muffled, and held out her clamped-shut fist. Piaf reached out and something heavy dropped into her palm. Her eyes were dragged down when the girl with the crooked nose raised one foot off the ground and spun like a ballerina, as far as her chain would allow.

Then, the man dragged her away.