

Chestnuts in Blossom: A French Pandemic Diary 2020

St Germain-en-Laye, France

Tuesday, March 17

L. arrives today. We fix up the guest room off the kitchen with everything he might need: kettle, coffee, designated cups and plates and cutlery, snacks. He'll crawl through the window from the street when he arrives (so he doesn't touch the gate A. and I use). There is a small ladder inside the bathroom off his room and a taller ladder outside the window so he'll be able to access the garden without coming through the house. We seal the hallway to his room, ceiling to floor, using duct tape and thick plastic trash bags. I'm not sure how long he'll be quarantined in there (A. just popped her head in to say two weeks). Maybe we'll set up the garden shed so he can work or eat in there if he wants (I'll talk to A. about that today).

Thursday, March 19

Police horses clip-clop past the house several times a day. The sound of their passing makes me happy. Like a child, I run to the window and watch them go past. With the silence has come bird song and the gentle tinkling of A.'s chimes ringing from a rusty hook on the garden wall. The chestnut tree outside my window has thick buds on it. I know chestnuts flower but this one is so huge I cannot imagine it bursting into bloom. I hope it does.

Sunday, March 22

The chestnut tree's leaves unfurl slowly, every day it gets a bit greener, it will not blossom, I think. Seven days tomorrow since we've left the house. The weather has turned cold and all week police have been stopping pedestrians and motorists, asking to see permission slips we are meant to carry with us. We are allowed to go for food, medicine, to the bank, and for a walk near our house. Yesterday, in balmy spring sunshine they were megaphone shouting "*retrez chez vous!*" Go home! It was disconcerting.

Tuesday, March 24

We take turns making dinner and putting a paper plate of hot food on the ladder outside L.'s window. Online food deliveries are difficult to get now, it's a week or longer before they arrive and when they do there is no telling how much of the original order it will be. Still we have stored plenty of food in the basement as backup.

Wednesday, March 25

The forest is forbidden but A. and I sneak into it for walks anyway and, as far as you can see, small white flowers in dark greenery carpet the floor beneath leafless trees, and brown dirt paths wind through them as if in a fairytale. The road in front of the house is empty, still, silent but for the occasional click and whirl of a lone biker going past (I should get a bike) or the clip-clop of police horses headed to or from the forest. Last night I could see them from my window grazing in the dusk on the grass near the Protestant church.

Thursday, March 26

Yesterday A. and I sat in the sun in the garden talking over coffee. Her plant seeds arrived. Vegetable seeds and a little bag of soil. She was surprised that the red pepper seeds she'd been waiting for in the mail look the same as the ones she threw out last night before chopping the pepper for dahl. "I thought they'd be different." She said. We are excited to try growing vegetables: peas, cucumber, peppers, and lettuce. This will be A.'s project, not mine.

Friday, March 27

The weather is beautiful. Across the street, windows that were once shut are flung open during part of the day. I now see there is an old woman who lives behind lace curtains on the second floor, and an old man who lives below her. In the attic is a younger couple, and yesterday next door to us I saw a middle-aged woman lounging in her garden reading all afternoon. A neighborhood where there had been none.

People who have never run before jog down the middle of the empty street to keep a safe distance from pedestrians—they look not yet defeated. Others walk their dogs. Both are good excuses to get out of the house without being questioned by police.

L. doesn't leave his room. A. calls to him through the plastic. Sometimes he answers, sometimes he doesn't. We put out food. It unnerves us, we want him to get out in the air when the sun is shining. Much of our days are spent worrying about our sons.

Saturday, March 28

Evening cocktails in the garden. L. climbed out his bedroom window and sat in a chair we'd put under the blossoming chestnut tree while we huddled by the house talking with him over the phone.

Tuesday, March 31

Lapis skies today but last night strong winds blew open windows, dislodged shutters banging from their locks.

Friday, April 3

Seventeen days of official confinement. A. had suggested we stay in a week before the government announced lockdown, and I stopped going into Paris a week before that. Thirty-one days. There is no reason to get up in the morning anymore. There is so little to differentiate one day from the other that we easily lose track of time, of which day of the week it is, what month. I slept until almost noon today. Last night A. says I was shouting in my sleep, nightmares. I woke up in a sweat.

We have enough food. All three of us (one at a time) went to the shop this week to stock up. But last night a magpie stole bags of grated cheese and bags of corn chips from groceries left in our "decontamination room" (the tiny greenhouse). Scattered debris all over the garden. A. was mad. She hates magpies.

Saturday, April 4

From my bedroom I can hear the train going to and from Paris. I wonder who, if anyone, still rides it. Still, the sound is comforting, a gentle *chug, chug, chug, clank*, several times a day. At night, in bed, I listen to the last train pull in and stop.

Friday, April 10

There are crazy stories in the news and rumors. Stories about guns in the US, stolen medical supplies, and the deliberate suppression of virus medication here. All of it seems possible but it's hard to know—even harder to believe—what's true.

Monday, April 13

Macron, looking obscenely tan, announced that lockdown will continue until May 17th. It is not unexpected, just disheartening. Still, days are clear skies, soft winds, and little rain.

Tuesday, April 14

In the garden the lilacs and wisteria are purple blooming. The chestnut tree is decorated with white cones of flowers, I can't wait for them to drop like confetti. On Sunday we had Easter brunch on white linen dressed tables in the garden. L. and his girlfriend (who climbed in the window) at one table, us at another.

Friday, April 17

I thought the man across the street had died. It's been weeks since I've seen people stopping on the street to talk to him through his window. This morning I saw movement in his apartment while I was making coffee. I worried it was someone come to pack up his things. I watched

surreptitiously from the kitchen. When he appeared in his window to look out, I cried! I don't know why I cried; I have never met him. I was just so happy to see he was okay.

Sunday, April 19

Talked to my parents, they are doing surprisingly well. They have organized drive by birthday parties and the ringing of Jaffrey's church bells every night at 6:00pm. Dad says the bell at the Methodist church is hand rung so they have volunteered to ring it on a rotating schedule. I would like to see that!

A.'s vegetable seeds are sprouting well, especially the peas and they are so pretty. She is waiting for a delivery of soil before planting them outdoors but the French government has just declared that Amazon is now only allowed to deliver essential supplies: food, hygiene products, medicine, so who knows when—or if—the soil will ever arrive.

Monday, April 20

Got pleasantly drunk on rum cocktails yesterday and danced around the kitchen listening to reggae.

Sunday, April 26

There is only this: the sound of M's chimes in the garden, bird song, horses clip-clopping, the occasional car, and emergency sirens.

Friday, May 1

Patience is wearing thin. In the house, small things A. does bother me. Hell, I bother me. There is no way to escape but to drink martinis, which I do not do often but want to do all the time.

Monday, May 11

Lockdown has eased! Sixty-two days we have been in the house, going nowhere but for walks to the forest and the occasional run to the grocery store. There is a rat in the basement that has been eating our food. It chewed through a cement wall to get at it. I don't know what we will do to get it out of there, but we have moved the food and left only cans and bottles. Still, just the idea of it, a rat, bothers me.

Two of the three fish in the pond have gone missing. We do not know where. Tall purple Canterbury Bells are blooming alongside the wall in the back garden. The landlords' rose bushes are drooping with the weight of their blossoms, we'll have to tie them back.

Another day of sunshine but we had the most magnificent thunderstorm two nights ago. It began with thick rain splashing down in the early evening. By nightfall lightening lit the sky with a loud crack that made me jump. I tensed for the next crack when the sky flashed but it never came, just the slow roll of thunder in the distance. It was the most thrilling event in weeks: the rain lashing down on the roof top, the wind pushing it in through open windows, pulling at locked shutters, trying to set them free, the light flashing blue and white bright in the dark, and the thunder drumming. Today though it is all sunshine and garden chimes as though the storm had never been, as if nothing has happened except for the missing fish and the rat that has moved in.