



# Paris Nocturne

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# Paris Nocturne

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**Patrick Modiano**

*Translated from the French by Phoebe Weston-Evans*

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS • NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

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Page design by W. H. Chong.  
Cover design by Mary Valencia.  
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015942212  
ISBN 978-0-300-21588-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



LATE AT NIGHT, a long time ago, when I was about to turn twenty-one, I was crossing Place des Pyramides on my way to Place de la Concorde when a car appeared suddenly from out of the darkness. At first I thought it had just grazed me, then I felt a sharp pain from my ankle to my knee. I fell onto the pavement. But I managed to get up again. The car swerved and collided with one of the arcades surrounding the square in a shower of broken glass. The door opened and a woman stumbled out. A man who happened to be at the entrance of the hotel under the arcade ushered us into the lobby. We waited, the woman and I, on a red leather sofa while the man made a phone call from reception. She was cut along the hollow of her cheek, on her cheekbone and on her forehead, and the cuts were bleeding. A huge man with short brown hair came into the lobby and walked towards us.

Outside, they surrounded the car, which stood with its doors hanging open, and one of them took notes as if for a report. As we got into the police van, I realised that I was missing my left shoe. The woman and I were sitting side by side on the wooden bench. The huge brown-haired man sat on the bench opposite us. He was smoking and glanced at us coldly from time to time. Through the barred windows I could see that we were driving along Quai des Tuileries. I hadn't been given time to collect my shoe, and I thought about how it would stay there, all night, in the middle of the pavement. I could no longer tell whether I'd lost a shoe or an animal, the dog from my childhood that had been run over when I lived on the outskirts of Paris, Rue Docteur-Kurzienne. Everything was getting muddled in my mind. Perhaps I hit my head when I fell. I turned to the woman. I was surprised she was wearing a fur coat.

I remembered that it was winter. And the man opposite was wearing a coat, too, and I was wearing one of those old sheepskin jackets you find at flea markets. Her fur coat was certainly not one you would find at a flea market. A mink? A sable? She was smartly dressed and well groomed, which contrasted with the cuts on her face. On my jacket, just above the pockets, I noticed spots of blood. I had a large graze on my left palm; the spots of blood on the fabric must have come from there. She held herself erect but with her head tilted to one side, as if staring at something on the floor. My shoeless foot, perhaps. She had shoulder-length hair and in the light of the lobby she seemed blonde.

The police van stopped at a red light on the quay, level with Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois. The man continued to watch us in silence, one at a time, with his cold stare. I couldn't help but feel guilty of something.

We were still stopped at the lights. The café on the corner of the quay and Place Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, where I had often met my father, was still open. It was time to escape. Perhaps all we had to do was ask the guy on the bench to let us go. But I felt incapable of uttering a single word. He coughed, a chesty smoker's cough, and I was startled at the sound. Since the accident, a profound silence had settled around me, as if I had lost my hearing. We continued along the quay. As the police van headed over the bridge, I felt her hand squeeze my wrist. She smiled, as if she wanted to reassure me, but I wasn't frightened at all. It even seemed to me that we had been in each other's company before, at another time, and that she still had the same smile. Where had I seen her? She reminded me of someone I had known a long time ago. The man opposite us had fallen asleep and his head had dropped onto his chest. She squeezed my wrist hard, and I was convinced that soon after, once we were out of the van, they would handcuff us to each other.

After the bridge, the van went through an entrance-way and stopped in the courtyard of the Hôtel-Dieu casualty department. We sat in the waiting room, still accompanied by the man. I was beginning to wonder exactly what his job was. A policeman in charge of keeping an eye on us? But why? I wanted to ask him, but I already knew he wouldn't be able to hear me. I had LOST MY VOICE. The three words came into my mind in the stark light of the waiting room. The woman and I were sitting on a bench opposite the reception desk. The man went to talk to one of the women there. I was sitting very

close to her; I could feel her shoulder against mine. He sat back down in the same place on the edge of the bench, along from us. A red-haired man, barefoot, dressed in a leather jacket and pyjama trousers paced up and down the waiting room, shouting across at the women at reception. He complained that they weren't paying him any attention. He kept walking in front of us, trying to catch my eye. But I kept my eyes averted because I was afraid he would talk to me. One of the women from reception went over to him and gently guided him towards the exit. He came back into the waiting room, but the time he launched into a tirade of complaints, like a howling dog.

From time to time, a man or a woman escorted by officers would cross the room quickly and disappear into the corridor opposite us. I wondered where the corridor led to, and if, when our turn came, we would be steered down there, too. Two women crossed the waiting room, surrounded by several police officers. I could tell that they had just come out of a police van, perhaps the same as the one that dropped us off. They were wearing fur coats, just as elegant as the one worn by the woman sitting next to me, and, like her, they were smartly turned out. No cuts on their faces. But each handcuffed at the wrists.

The huge brown-haired man motioned for us to get up and took us to the end of the room. Walking with one shoe was uncomfortable and I wondered if it wouldn't be better to take it off. I felt quite a sharp pain in the ankle of the foot without a shoe.

A nurse led us into a small room with two camp beds. We lay down. A young man came in. He wore a white coat and had a jawline beard. He checked his papers and asked the woman her name. She replied: Jacqueline Beausergent. He asked me for my name, too. He examined my shoeless foot, then my leg, lifting my trousers up to the knee. The nurse helped her out of her coat and cleaned the cuts on her face with cotton wool. Then they switched on a night-light, and left us. The door was wide open and, in the light of the corridor, our man paced up and down. He appeared in the doorway with the regularity of a metronome. She was lying there next to me, her fur coat pulled over her like a blanket. There wouldn't have been room for a bedside table between the two beds. She reached her hand out and squeezed my wrist. I thought of the handcuffs that the two women were wearing earlier and again said to myself that they would end up putting them on us, too.

Out in the corridor, he stopped pacing. He was talking quietly with the nurse. She came into the room, followed by the young man with the jawline beard. They turned on the light and stood at the head of my bed. I turned to the woman and she shrugged under the fur coat, as if to tell me there was nothing we could do, we were trapped, the time to escape had passed. The huge brown-haired man stood motionless in the doorway, his legs slightly apart, his arms folded. He didn't take his eyes off us. He must have been preparing to stop us in case we tried to escape. She smiled at me again, with that same wry smile she had in the police van earlier. I don't know why, but this smile made me uneasy. The fellow with the jawline beard and white coat leaned over me and, with the nurse's help, put a kind of big black muzzle over my mouth and nose. I smelled the ether before losing consciousness.

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From time to time, I tried to open my eyes, but I kept falling into a half-sleep. Then I had a dim memory of the accident and wanted to turn over and see if she was still there in the other bed. But I didn't have the strength to make the slightest movement—the stillness put me at ease. I remembered the big black muzzle, too. It must have been the ether that put me in this state. I lay still and let myself drift along in the river's current. Her face came to me with total precision, like a large identikit photograph: the even arches of her eyebrows, clear eyes, blonde hair, the cuts on her forehead,



cheekbones and the hollow of her cheek. In my half-sleep the huge brown-haired man held up the photo, asking me if I 'knew this person'. I was astonished to hear him speak. He kept repeating the question with the metallic voice of a talking clock. I studied the face until I thought, yes, I know this person. Or perhaps I had met someone who looked very similar. I could no longer feel the pain in my left foot. That evening I was wearing my old moccasins with crepe rubber soles and stiff leather, which I had cut with scissors because they were too tight and hurt my ankles. I thought about that shoe I had lost, the forgotten shoe left in the middle of the pavement. The shock of the accident brought back the memory of the dog that had been run over long ago, and I could see the sloping avenue in front of the house. The dog used to escape and go to the vacant lot at the end of the avenue. I was afraid that he might get lost, so I kept an eye out for him from my bedroom window. It was often evening when he came walking slowly back up the avenue. Why had this woman become associated with a house where I had spent part of my childhood?

Again, I heard him ask me the same question, 'Do you know this person?' His voice became softer and softer until it was a whisper, as if he was speaking right up against my ear. I stayed still and let myself be carried along by the river, perhaps the same river where we used to walk with the dog. Faces gradually appeared in front of me, and I compared them with the identikit photograph. Of course, that was it: she had a room on the first floor of the house, the last room at the end of the corridor. The same smile, the same blonde hair but worn longer. She had a scar across her left cheekbone, and I suddenly understood why I had thought I recognised her in the police van. The cuts on her face must have reminded me of the scar, only I hadn't realised it then.

Once I had the strength to turn over to the side where she lay on the other bed, I would reach out and touch her shoulder to wake her. She would still be wrapped up in her fur coat. I would ask her all the questions I needed to ask. I would finally find out exactly who she was.

I couldn't see much of the room: only the white ceiling and the window opposite me. Or rather, a bay window, on the right of which a branch swung to and fro. And the blue sky behind the windowpane, a blue so pure that I thought it must be a beautiful winter's day. I had the impression I was in a hotel in the mountains. Once I was able to get up and walk over to the window, I would see that it looked out onto a field of snow, perhaps the start of a ski run. I was no longer carried by the river's current, but was gliding over the snow, a gentle, endless slope, and the air I breathed had the coolness of ether.

The room seemed larger than the one last night in the Hôtel-Dieu, and I hadn't noticed a bay window, or any other window in that kind of storage room where we had been taken after the waiting room. I turned my head. No camp bed, no one else but me. They must have given her a room next to mine, and I would soon see how she was. The huge brown-haired man who I feared would handcuff us to each other was surely not a policeman as I had thought, and we owed him no explanation. He could ask me all the questions he liked, interrogate me for hours; I no longer felt guilty of anything. I was gliding over the snow and the cold air made me slightly euphoric. The accident the night before did not happen by chance. It marked a breach in continuity. The shock was good for me, and it occurred in time for me to make a new start in life.

The door was to my right, beyond the small, white, wooden bedside table where they had left my wallet and passport. And on the metal chair against the wall, I recognised my clothes. At the foot of the chair, my one shoe. I could hear voices on the other side of the door, the voices of a man and a woman conversing calmly. I really had no desire to get up. I wanted to prolong this respite as long as possible. I wondered if I was still in the Hôtel-Dieu, but it didn't feel like it, because of the silence, barely interrupted by the two reassuring voices on the other side of the door. The branch waved to and fro in the window frame. Sooner or later they would come and explain everything to me. I felt

absolutely no apprehension, even though I had always been on edge. Perhaps I owed this sudden peacefulness to the ether they made me inhale the night before, or another drug that had eased the pain. In any case, the heaviness I had always felt bearing down on me had lifted. For the first time in my life, I was light and carefree, and that was my real nature. The blue sky at the window evoked one word for me: ENGADIN. I had always needed fresh air, and last night a mysterious doctor, after having examined me, understood that I had to leave for ENGADIN immediately.

I could hear their conversation on the other side of the door, and the presence of these two unseen and unknown people reassured me. Perhaps they were there to watch over me. Again the car appeared suddenly from the shadows, grazed me and collided with the arcade, the door opened and she stumbled out. While we were sitting on the sofa in the hotel lobby and until she squeezed my wrist in the police van, I thought she was drunk. In a police station, they'd say, an ordinary accident like one that was caused by someone 'driving under the influence'. But now I was sure it was something else entirely. It was as if there was someone watching over me without my knowing or as if chance had put something in my path to protect me. And that night, time was running out. I had to be protected from some kind of danger, or be warned about it. A scene came back to me, probably because of the word ENGADIN. A few years earlier, I had seen a fellow hurtling down a steep ski slope and deliberately throw himself against the wall of a chalet and break his leg so he wouldn't have to go to war, the war we called 'Algerian'. In short, he was trying to save his life that day. As for me, apparently I didn't even have a broken leg. Thanks to her, I came out of it relatively unscathed. I needed the shock. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on what my life had been up to that point. I had to admit that I was 'heading for disaster'—to use the words I'd heard others say about me.

Once again my gaze landed on the shoe at the foot of the chair: the big moccasin I had split at the ankle. They must have been surprised when they removed it, before putting me in bed. They were kind enough to put it with the rest of my clothes and lend me the pyjamas I was wearing, blue with white stripes. Where did all this solicitude come from? She must have given them instructions. I couldn't take my eyes off the shoe. Later on, when my life had taken a new course, I would always have to keep it in view, displayed on a mantelpiece or in a glass box, as a souvenir from the past. And to those who wanted to know more about it, I would reply that it was the only thing my parents had left me; yes, as far back as I could remember, I had always walked with one shoe. With this thought, I closed my eyes and sleep came to me in a burst of silent hysterical laughter.

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A nurse woke me with a tray, which she told me was breakfast. I asked her where exactly I was and she seemed surprised that I didn't know. At the Mirabeau Clinic. When I asked the address of the clinic, she didn't answer. She studied me with an incredulous smile. She thought I was making fun of her. Then she consulted a form she had taken out of the pocket of her white coat and told me that I had to 'leave the premises'. I repeated, which clinic? The floor pitched as it did in my dream. I had dreamed that I was a prisoner on a cargo ship in the middle of the sea. All I wanted was to reach solid ground. The Mirabeau Clinic, Rue Narcisse-Diaz. I didn't venture to ask her which neighbourhood the street was in. Was it near the Hôtel-Dieu? She seemed to be in a hurry and closed the door behind her without giving me any further information. They had bandaged my ankle, knee, wrist and hand. I couldn't bend my left leg, but I managed to dress myself. I put on my one shoe, thinking that it might be difficult to walk in the street but that there was sure to be a bus stop or metro station nearby and I would soon be back at my place. I decided to lie down again on the bed. I still felt at ease. Would this feeling last long? I was afraid it would disappear as soon as I left the clinic. Looking at the blue sky framed

by the window, I convinced myself that they had brought me to the mountains. I had avoided going over to the window, for fear of disappointment. I wanted to remain under the illusion for as long as possible that the Mirabeau Clinic was in a winter sports village in Engadin. The door opened and the nurse appeared. She carried a plastic bag, placed it on the bedside table and left without a word, in a swift movement. In the bag was the shoe I had left behind. They had taken the trouble to go all the way over there and retrieve it from the pavement. Or perhaps she had asked them to get it. I was surprised by such attention on my behalf. Now nothing was stopping me 'leaving the premises', as the nurse had instructed. I felt like walking in the open air.

I was limping a little and held the banister as I went down the long staircase. In the entrance hall, I was about to leave through the glass doors, one side of which stood open, when I noticed the huge brown-haired man. He was sitting on a bench. He waved to me and got up. He was wearing the same coat as the other night. He took me over to the reception desk. They asked for my name. He stood next to me, as if to better monitor my movements, but I was planning on giving him the slip. As quickly as possible. There in the entrance hall rather than out in the street. The woman at reception gave me a sealed envelope with my name written on it.

Then she gave me a discharge form to sign and handed me another envelope, this time with the clinic's letterhead on it. I asked her if I had to pay anything, but she told me that the bill had been taken care of. By whom? In any case, I wouldn't have had enough money. As I was about to cross the hall towards the exit, the huge brown-haired man asked me to sit with him on the bench. He gave me a vague smile and I decided that the fellow probably meant me no harm. He presented me with two sheets of onionskin paper on which some text had been typed. The *report*—I still remember the word he had used—yes, the *report* of the accident. I had to sign my name again, on the bottom of the page. He took a pen out of his coat pocket and even removed the lid for me. He said I could read the text before I signed, but I was in too much of a hurry to get out into the open air. I signed the first sheet. I didn't have to bother with the second; it was a copy for me to keep. I folded it, stuffed it into the pocket of my sheepskin jacket, and got up.

He followed hard on my heels. Perhaps he wanted to put me back in a police van, and there she'd be again, sitting in the same place as the other night? Outside, in the little street that ran down to the quay, there was just one parked car. A man was sitting in the driver's seat. I tried to find the words to take my leave. If I walked off suddenly, he might find my behaviour suspicious and there was a good chance I'd have him on my back again. So I asked him who the woman from the other night was. He shrugged his shoulders and told me that I was bound to see in the *report*, but that it would be better for me and for everyone else if I forgot about the accident. As far as he was concerned the 'case was closed' and he sincerely hoped I thought so, too. He stopped alongside the car and asked, in a cold tone, if I was all right to walk, and if I'd like to be 'dropped off' somewhere. No, I was fine, really. So without saying goodbye, he got in next to the driver, slammed the door rather savagely and the car moved off towards the quay.

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The weather was mild, a sunny winter's day. I no longer had any notion of time. It must have been early afternoon. My left leg was hurting a bit. Dead leaves on the pavement. I dreamed that I would come out onto a forest path. I was no longer thinking about the word Engadin, but an even sweeter one, more remote—Sologne. I opened the envelope. Inside was a wad of banknotes. No message or explanation. Why all this money? Perhaps she'd noticed the sorry state of my sheepskin jacket and of my one shoe. Before the split moccasins, I had a pair of big lace-up shoes with crepe rubber soles that

I wore even in summer. And it would have been at least the third winter I had worn the old sheepskin jacket. I took the form I had signed out of my pocket. A report or rather a summary of the accident. There was no letterhead from any police branch, nor did it look like a standard administrative form. 'Night-time...a sea-green Fiat automobile...licence plate...coming from the direction of Carrousel Garden and heading into Place des Pyramides...Both taken to the lobby of the Hôtel Régina...Hôtel-Dieu casualty department... Dressings applied to the leg and arm...' There was no mention of the Mirabeau Clinic and I wondered when and how they had transported me there. My surname and my first name were in the summary, as well as my date of birth and my old address. They must have found all this information from my old passport. Her name and surname were also there: Jacqueline Beausergent, and her address: Square de l'Alboni, but they had forgotten to add the street number.

I had never held such a large sum of money in my hands. I would have preferred a note from her, but she was probably not in a state to write after the accident. I assumed that the huge brown-haired guy had taken care of everything. Her husband, perhaps. I tried to remember at what point he had appeared. She was alone in the car. Later on he had walked towards us in the hotel lobby, while we were waiting, sitting next to each other on the sofa. They probably wanted to compensate me for my injuries and felt guilty at the idea of how much worse the accident could have been. I would have liked to reassure them. No, they shouldn't worry on my account. The envelope with the clinic's letterhead contained a prescription signed by a Doctor Besson instructing me to change my dressings regularly. I counted the banknotes again. No more financial worries for a long time. I recalled those last meetings with my father, when I was about seventeen years old, when I never dared to ask him for any money. Life had already drawn us apart and we met up in cafés early in the morning, while it was still dark. The lapels of his suits became increasingly threadbare and each time the cafés were further from the city centre. I tried to remember if I had met up with him in the neighbourhood where I was walking.

I took the report I had signed out of my pocket. So she lived on Square de l'Alboni. I knew the area as I often got off at the metro station close by. It didn't matter that the number was missing. I'd work it out with her name, Jacqueline Beausergent. Square de l'Alboni was a little further south, next to the Seine. I was in her neighbourhood. That was why they had moved me to the Mirabeau Clinic. She probably knew. Yes, it must have been her idea to have me taken there. Perhaps someone she knew had come to collect us at the Hôtel-Dieu. In an ambulance? I said to myself that at the next phone box I would look her up in the phone directory by street name or I would call directory enquiries. But there was no rush. I had all the time in the world to find her exact address and pay her a visit. It was perfectly justifiable on my part and she surely wouldn't take offence. I had never called at the house of someone I didn't know, but in this case, there were certain details that needed to be clarified, not to mention the wad of banknotes in an envelope, no accompanying message, like a handout thrown to a beggar. You knock someone down in a car at night, and arrange for money to be delivered to him in case he's been crippled. For a start, I didn't want the money. I had never depended on anyone and I was convinced, at that time, that I didn't need anyone. My parents had been of no help at all and the occasional meetings in cafés with my father always ended the same way: we would get up and shake hands. And not once did I have the courage to beg him for money. Especially towards the end, around Porte d'Orléans, when he had lost all the energy and charm that he had on the Champs-Élysées. One morning, I noticed buttons were missing from his navy-blue overcoat.

I was tempted to follow the quay as far as Square de l'Alboni. At each apartment block, I would ask the concierge which floor Jacqueline Beausergent lived on. There couldn't be that many numbers. I recalled her wry smile and how she had squeezed my wrist, as if there were some kind of complicity between us. It would be best to telephone first. Not to rush things. I remembered the strange impression I had in the police van all the way to the Hôtel-Dieu, that I had already seen her face somewhere else. Before finding out her phone number, perhaps I would make an effort to remember.

Things were still simple at that time; I didn't have most of my life behind me. Going back a few years would be enough. Who knows? I had already crossed paths with a certain Jacqueline Beausergent, or the same person going by a different name. I had read that only a small number of encounters are the product of chance. The same circumstances, the same faces keep coming back, like the pieces of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, with the play of mirrors giving the illusion that the combinations are infinitely variable. But in fact the combinations are rather limited. Yes, I must have read that somewhere, or perhaps Dr Bouvière explained it to us one evening in a café. But it was difficult for me to concentrate on these questions for any length of time; I never felt I had a head for philosophy. All of a sudden, I didn't want to cross Pont de Grenelle and find myself south of the river and return, by metro or by bus, to my room on Rue de la Voie-Verte. I thought I'd walk around the neighbourhood a bit more. Besides, I had to get used to walking with the dressing on my leg. I felt good there, in Jacqueline Beausergent's neighbourhood. It even felt as if the air was lighter to breathe.

BEFORE THE ACCIDENT, I'd been living for almost a year in Hôtel de la Rue de la Voie-Verte, near Porte d'Orléans. For a long time, I wanted to forget this period of my life, or else remember only the seemingly insignificant details. There was, for example, a man I often passed at around six o'clock in the evening. He was probably returning home from work. All I remember about him is that he carried a black suitcase and walked slowly. One evening, in the large café opposite the Cité Universitaire, I struck up a conversation with a young man sitting next to me who I thought must have been a student. But he worked in a travel agency. He was Madagascan and later I came across his name and a telephone number on a card, among a pile of old papers I was throwing out. His name was Katz-Kreutzer. I know nothing about him. There were other details... They were always to do with people I'd come across, barely glimpsed, and who would remain as mysteries in my mind. Places too... A little restaurant I would occasionally go to with my father, near the top of Avenue Foch, on the left. I searched in vain for it sometime later when I happened to be passing through the neighbourhood. Or had I dreamed it? Along with country houses belonging to people whose names I could no longer recall, near villages I would not be able to point out on a map, a certain Évelyne I had known one night on a train. I even started compiling a list, with approximate dates, of all these lost faces and places, of all those abandoned projects, like the time I decided to enrol at the faculty of medicine, but I didn't see it through. My attempts to catalogue all those plans which never saw the light of day and which remained forever on hold, a way of searching for a breach, for vanishing points. Because I'm reaching the age at which, little by little, life begins to close in on itself.

I'm trying to recall the colours and the mood of the period when I lived near Porte d'Orléans. Shades of grey and black, a mood that seems stifling in retrospect, perpetual autumns and winters. Was it just a coincidence that I ended up in the area where I had met my father for the last time? Seven o'clock sharp in the morning at La Rotonde café, at the bottom of one of those tall blocks of brick buildings that mark the edge of Paris. Beyond lay Montrouge and a section of the ring road that had just been completed. We didn't have much to say and I knew then that we wouldn't see each other again. We got up and, without shaking hands, left La Rotonde. I was taken aback as I watched him wander off in his navy-blue overcoat towards the ring road. I still wonder which distant suburb he was heading for. Yes, this coincidence is striking now: to have lived for a period in the neighbourhood where our last meetings took place. But at the time, I didn't give it a second thought. I had other things on my mind.

DR BOUVIÈRE IS another one of those fugitive faces from this period. I wonder if he's still alive. Perhaps under another name, in some provincial town, he has found new disciples. Last night, the memory of this man brought on a nervous laugh which I struggled to contain. Had he really existed? Was he not a mirage provoked by lack of sleep, a habit of skipping meals and taking bad drugs? Not all. There were too many details, too many connections that proved well and truly that a Dr Bouvière during that time, conducted his meetings from cafés in the fourteenth arrondissement.

Our paths had crossed a few months before the accident. And I must admit that at the Hôtel-Dieu, as they put the black muzzle over my face to administer ether and send me to sleep, I had thought of Bouvière because of his doctor title. I don't know what the title meant, whether it was one of his university ranks or if he was recognised as having completed medical studies. I think Bouvière played on this ambiguity to suggest that his 'learning' covered vast spheres, medicine included.

The first time I saw him, it was not in Montparnasse at one of his meetings, but on the other side of Paris, on the Right Bank, right on the corner of Rue Pigalle and Rue de Douai, in a café called Le Sar Souci. I have to point out what I was doing there, even if I have to come back to it again in more detail one day. Following the example of a French writer known as the 'nocturnal spectator', I frequented certain neighbourhoods in Paris. In the streets at night, I had the impression I was living another life, more captivating one, or quite simply, that I was dreaming another life.

It was around eight o'clock in the evening, in winter, and there were not many people in the café. My attention was drawn to a couple sitting at one of the tables: he had short silver hair, was around forty, with a bony face and pale eyes. He'd kept his overcoat on. She was a blonde woman of about the same age. Her complexion was translucent, but her features were severe. She spoke to him in a deep, almost masculine voice, and the words I heard sounded like they were being read out, so clear was her articulation. But there was something about her that fitted perfectly with the Pigalle district at that time. Indeed, at first I thought they were the proprietors of one of the nightclubs in the area. Or probably just her, I thought. The man would have stayed behind the scenes. He listened to her as she spoke. He took out a cigarette holder and I was struck by his affectation, a slight movement of the chin, as he put it in his mouth. After a while, the woman stood up and in her smooth voice, articulating each syllable, she said to him, 'Next time, you won't forget my refills, will you,' and this phrase intrigued me. She said it in a dry, almost contemptuous tone and he nodded his head docilely. Then, with an air of confidence, she strode out of the café, without turning back, leaving him looking annoyed.

I watched her leave. She wore a fur-lined raincoat. She walked down Rue Victor-Massé on the left hand side of the street and I wondered if she would go into the Tabarin. But she didn't. She disappeared. Perhaps into the hotel, further down the street? After all, she was just as likely to be the proprietor of a hotel as of a cabaret or a perfumery. He remained sitting at the table, his head lowered, pensive, the cigarette holder dangling from the corner of his mouth, as if he'd just taken a punch. Under the neon light, his face was veiled in a film of sweat and a kind of grey grease that I've noticed on the faces of men made to suffer by women. Then he got up, too. He was tall, his back slightly stooped. Through the glass, I saw him walk down Rue Pigalle, moving like a sleepwalker.

That was my first encounter with Dr Bouvière. The second was about a fortnight later, in another café, near Denfert-Rochereau. Paris is a big city, but I think you can meet the same person several times and often in places where it would seem most unlikely: in the metro, on the boulevards... Once twice, three times, you could almost say that fate—or chance—had a hand in it, and was willing a certain meeting or steering your life in a new direction, but you seldom heed its call. You let the face go, and it remains forever unknown, and you feel relief, but also remorse.

I went into the café to buy cigarettes and there was a queue at the counter. The clock on the far wa

was showing seven o'clock in the evening. At a table beneath it, in the middle of the red moleskin banquette, I recognised Bouvière. There were a few people with him, but they were sitting on chairs. Bouvière was sitting on the banquette by himself, as if the more comfortable spot was his by right. The grey grease and sweat had disappeared from his face, and the cigarette holder was no longer dangling from the corner of his mouth. He was barely the same man. This time he was talking; he even seemed to be delivering a lecture while the others listened in rapture. One of them was scribbling in a large school exercise book. Girls as well as boys. I don't know why I was so curious, perhaps that evening it was the need to answer the question I was asking myself: how could a man transform so dramatically depending on whether he's in Pigalle or Denfert-Rochereau? I had always been very sensitive to the mysteries of Paris.

I sat on the banquette at the table next to theirs, so I could be close to Bouvière. I noticed that they were all drinking coffee, so I ordered one, too. None of them paid me any attention. Bouvière didn't even pause when I knocked the table. I had stumbled over the foot of the table and fallen next to him on the banquette. I listened attentively, but didn't fully understand what he was saying. Certain words didn't have the same meaning when he used them as they do in normal life. I was amazed at how gripped his audience was. They lapped up his words and the fellow with the exercise book didn't pause for a moment from his shorthand scribbling. Bouvière made them laugh from time to time with obscure references that he must have often uttered, like code words. If I have the strength, I will try to remember some of the most characteristic phrases from his lectures. I wasn't receptive to the words he used. They had no resonance, no glimmer of meaning for me. In my memory they are like thin, bleak notes played on an old harpsichord. And besides, without Bouvière's voice to animate them, all that is left are the empty words, whose meaning I can't quite capture. I think Bouvière took them, more or less, from psychoanalysis and far eastern philosophy, but I am reluctant to venture into territory I know little about.

Eventually he turned to me and acknowledged my presence. At first, he didn't see me, and then he asked his audience a question, something like, 'Do you see what I mean?' while staring straight at me. At that moment, I felt like I was melting into the group, and I wondered if, for Bouvière, there was a difference between me and the others. I was certain that in this café, around the same table, his audiences would come and go and, even if there were a handful of loyal followers—an inner circle—different groups would no doubt gather here every evening of the week. He confuses all the faces, all the groups, I said to myself. One more, one less. And every so often he seemed to be talking to himself, like an actor reciting a monologue before a faceless audience. As he felt the attention on him reach its peak, he would draw on his cigarette holder so hard his cheeks became sunken and, without exhaling, he would pause a few seconds to make sure we were all hanging on his every word.

That first night, I arrived towards the end of the meeting. After a quarter of an hour, he stopped speaking, placed a slim, black briefcase on his knees, an elegant model—like the ones in the large leatherwear stores in the Saint-Honoré neighbourhood. He took out a diary bound in red leather. He leafed through it. He said to the person sitting closest to him, a young man with a hawkish face, 'Next Friday at Zeyer at eight o'clock.' And the man jotted it down in a notebook. He appeared to be his secretary and I assumed he was responsible for sending out announcements for meetings. Bouvière stood up, and turned to me again. He smiled warmly, as if to encourage me to keep attending their meetings. As a kind of observer? The others stood up together. I followed suit.

Outside, in Place Denfert-Rochereau, he stood in the middle of the group, exchanging a few words with one and then another, like those slightly bohemian philosophy professors who develop the habit of going for a drink with their more interesting students after class and late into the night. And I was part of the group. They walked with him to his car. A young blonde woman, whose thin, severe face I



had noticed earlier, walked beside him. He seemed to be on more intimate terms with her than with the others. ~~She wore a waterproof jacket the same colour as that of the woman in Pigalle, but hers wasn't lined with fur. And it was cold that evening.~~

At some point he took her arm, which didn't seem to surprise anyone. At the car they exchanged a few more words. I stood a short distance from the rest of the group. The way he put his cigarette holder in his mouth didn't have the same affectation that had struck me in Pigalle. On the contrary, the cigarette holder now had something military about it. He was surrounded by his officers and was issuing his latest orders. The blonde girl was standing so close to him their shoulders were touching. Her face became more and more severe, as if she wanted to keep the others at a distance and demonstrate her pride of place.

He got into the car with the girl, who slammed the door shut. He leaned out of the window and waved goodbye to the group, but at that moment he stared directly at me, so that I imagined the gesture was intended just for me. I was on the edge of the pavement and I leaned towards him. The girl looked at me with a sulky expression. He was getting ready to start the engine. I was gripped by vertigo. The phrase had so intrigued me the other night in Pigalle that I wanted to knock on the window and say to Bouvière, 'You haven't forgotten the refills?' I was saddened by the thought that this phrase would remain a mystery, one among so many other words and faces captured in a moment and which continue to shine in your memory with the glimmer of a distant star, before being erased forever, on the day of your death, without ever revealing their secrets.

I stayed there on the pavement, in the middle of the group. I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to say to them. I ended up smiling at the fellow with the hawkish face. Perhaps he knew more than the others. I asked him, a little abruptly, the name of the girl who had just left in the car with Bouvière. He replied, nonplussed, in a soft, deep voice, that her name was Geneviève. Geneviève Dalame.

I'M TRYING TO remember what I could have been doing so late, on the night of the accident, around Place des Pyramides. I should explain that, during that period, every time I crossed over from the Left Bank I was happy, as if all I needed was to cross the Seine to be lifted out of my stupor. Suddenly there would be electricity in the air. Something was finally going to happen to me.

I probably attach too much importance to topography. I had often wondered why, in the space of a few years, the places where I would meet my father gradually moved from the area around the Champs-Élysées towards Porte d'Orléans. I even remember unfolding a map of Paris in my hotel room on Rue de la Voie-Verte. With a red ballpoint pen, I marked crosses that I used as reference points. It had all started in an area with L'ÉTOILE at the centre of gravity, with exit routes running away to the east in the direction of Bois de Boulogne. Then Avenue des Champs-Élysées. We had slipped imperceptibly past the Madeleine and the Grands Boulevards towards the Opéra neighbourhood. Then further south, near the Palais-Royal for a few months—long enough for me to think that he had finally found somewhere to settle—where I would meet my father at the Ruc Univers. We were getting closer to a border that I tried to mark off on my map. From the Ruc we moved to the Corona café, on the corner of Place Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois and Quai du Louvre. Yes, I think that's where the border lay.

He always arranged to meet at around nine o'clock at night. The café was about to close. We were the only customers left in the back room. The traffic along the quays had died down by then and we could hear the Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois clock strike the quarter hours. It was there that I first noticed his threadbare suit and the missing buttons from his navy-blue overcoat. But his shoes were immaculately polished. I wouldn't go as far as to say that he looked like an out-of-work musician, more like an adventurer after a stint in prison. Business was getting worse and worse. The spark and agility of youth had gone. From Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois we finished up around Porte d'Orléans. And then, one last time, I watched his silhouette disappear into a foggy November morning—a reddish-brown fog—around Montrouge and Châtillon. He was heading towards these two neighbourhoods, each of which has a fort where they used to shoot people at dawn.

I often found myself, sometime later, making the same journey in reverse. At around nine o'clock at night, I would leave the Right Bank, cross the Seine at Pont des Arts, and find myself at the Corona café. But this time, I was alone at one of the tables in the back room and I no longer needed to find something to say to the shifty-looking guy in the navy-blue overcoat. I began to feel a sense of relief. On the other side of the river I left behind a marshy zone where I was starting to flounder. I had set foot on solid ground. The lights were brighter here. I could hear the neon buzz. Soon I would be walking in the open air, through the arcades, up to Place de la Concorde. The night would be clear and still. The future opened out before me. I was alone at Place de la Concorde and could hear the Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois clock strike the quarter hours. I couldn't help thinking about Bouvière's disciples and the few meetings I had attended those past weeks. They were always held in cafés around Denfert-Rochereau. Apart from one evening, further south, Rue d'Alésia, at the Terminus, where I had sometimes met up with my father. That night, I had imagined him and Bouvière meeting. Two very different worlds. Bouvière, a bit pompous, with a whole string of diplomas and protected by his status of doctor and guru. My father, more reckless and whose only education was the street. Both of them crooks, each in his own way.

At the last meeting, Bouvière brought roneos and I learned from the young man with the hawkish face that he gave the same lectures at some university or school of advanced studies whose name I can no longer recall. They all attended the lectures, but I really couldn't bear to sit in a row on those school benches with the others. Boarding school and the barracks were enough for me. On the night that the hawk distributed notes while Bouvière was getting settled on the moleskin banquette, I

gestured to him discreetly that I didn't need one. The hawk gave me a disapproving look. I didn't want to upset him, so I took one. Later on I tried to read it in my room but I couldn't follow it beyond the first page. It was as if I could still hear Bouvière's voice. It was neither feminine nor masculine; there was something smooth about it, something cold and smooth, which had no effect on me, but it must have gradually sneaked up on the others, inducing a kind of paralysis that left them under his spell.

Yesterday afternoon his features came back to me with photographic precision: cheekbones, small pale eyes set deep in their sockets. A skull. Fleishy lips, oddly contoured. And that voice, so cold and smooth... I remember at that time, there were other skulls like his, a few gurus and sages, and sects in which people my age searched for a political doctrine, a strict dogma, or some great helmsman to whom they could devote themselves body and soul. I don't know why I managed to escape these dangers. I was just as vulnerable as the rest. Nothing really distinguished me from all the other disorientated listeners who congregated around Bouvière. I, too, needed some certainties. How on earth had I avoided his trap? Thank goodness for my laziness and indifference. And perhaps I also owe it to my matter-of-fact nature, my connection to concrete details. That man wore a pink tie. And this woman's perfume smelled like tuberose. Avenue Carnot is on an incline. Have you noticed that on certain streets in the late afternoon, the sun is in your eyes? They took me for a fool.

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They would have been really disappointed if I had admitted to one of the reasons I attended their meetings. Among them I had noticed someone who seemed more intriguing than the others, a certain Hélène Navachine. A brunette with blue eyes. She was the only one who didn't take notes. The blond girl who was always in Bouvière's shadow regarded her with suspicion, as if she might be a rival, and yet Bouvière never paid her any attention. This Hélène Navachine didn't seem to know any other members of the group and didn't speak to anyone. At the end of the meetings I watched her leave alone, cross the square and disappear into the entrance of the metro. One evening, she had a music theory exercise book on her lap. After the meeting, I asked her if she was a musician, and we walked together, side by side. She earned her living by giving piano lessons, but she hoped to get into the Conservatorium.

That evening I took the metro with her. She told me she lived near Gare de Lyon. So that I could accompany her all the way, I invented a meeting in the neighbourhood. Years later, when I was on the same above-ground metro line, between Denfert-Rochereau and Place d'Italie, I wished for a moment that time would dissolve so that I might find myself sitting, once again, on the seat beside Hélène Navachine. A strong feeling of emptiness then swept over me. For reassurance, I told myself it was because the metro was running above the boulevard and rows of buildings. Once the line went underground again, I would no longer feel that sensation of vertigo and loss anymore. Everything would fall back into place, into the reassuring day-after-day monotony.

That evening, we were almost the only people in the carriage. It was well after rush hour. I asked her why she went to Bouvière's meetings. Without knowing who he was, she had read an article of his on Hindu music that she found enlightening, but the man himself had disappointed her a little and his 'teachings' were not up to the standard of the article. She would give it to me to read if I wanted.

What had led me to the groups around Denfert-Rochereau? Just curiosity. I was intrigued by Dr Bouvière. I wanted to know more about him. What was that Dr Bouvière's life like? She smiled. She had asked herself the same question. First appearances would have it that he had never been married, that he took a liking to particular students of his. But did he really like them? They were always the same type: pale, blonde, severe looking, like young Christian girls bordering on mysticism. It had

bothered her at first. She felt as if some girls in the meetings looked down on her, as if she wasn't quite in tune with them. ~~We're bound to get on, I said to her. I'd never felt in tune with anything~~ either. I thought she must have been like me, a bit lost in Paris, no family ties, trying to find some axis by which to direct our lives and sometimes coming across Dr Bouvière types.

There was one episode with Bouvière that had taken us both by surprise. At one of the meetings the week before, his face was bruised and swollen, as if he had been beaten up: he had a black eye and bruises on his nose and around his neck. He made no mention of what had happened and, to allay suspicion, he was even more brilliant than usual. He engaged with his listeners and kept asking if we understood everything he was saying. The secretary with the hawkish face and the blonde girl with transparent skin watched him with concerned expressions throughout the lecture. At the end, the blonde girl held a compress to his face and, with a smile, he let himself be nursed. No one dared ask him anything about it. 'Don't you think it's a bit odd?' asked Hélène Navachine, in the calm, jaded tone of those for whom, since childhood, nothing comes as a shock. I almost told her about the woman I had seen in Pigalle with Bouvière, but I couldn't really imagine her having given him such a beating. Nor any other woman for that matter. No, it must have been something more brutal and disturbing. There was a shady side to Dr Bouvière's life, perhaps a secret he was ashamed of. I shrugged my shoulders and said to Hélène Navachine that it was just another one of the mysteries of Paris.

She lived in one of the big apartment blocks opposite Gare de Lyon. I said I had an hour to wait until my meeting. She said she would gladly have invited me in so I wouldn't have to wait outside, but her mother wouldn't have allowed her to bring someone unannounced to their small apartment at 5 Rue Émile-Gilbert.

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I saw Hélène Navachine at the next meeting. The bruising had almost disappeared from Dr Bouvière's face and he wore just a small bandaid on his right cheek. We would never find out who had beaten him up. He would never let it slip. Even the young blonde woman who got in the car with him each week would be none the wiser, I was sure of it. Men die with their secrets.

That evening I asked Hélène Navachine why she was so interested in Hindu music. She said she listened to it because it relieved her of a pressure weighing down on her and it transported her to a place where, finally, she could breathe air that was weightless and clear. And really, it was a silent music. She needed air that was lighter and she needed silence. I understood what she meant. I went with her to her piano lessons. They were mostly in the seventh arrondissement. While I waited for her I went for a walk or, on snowy or rainy afternoons, I took shelter in the café nearest the apartment building she had gone into. The lessons were an hour long. There were three or four of them a day. So during these breaks, I would walk by myself along the abandoned buildings of the *École militaire*. I was afraid I would lose my memory and get lost without daring to ask the way. There were not many passers-by and what directions exactly would I ask for?

One afternoon, standing at the end of Avenue de Ségur, on the edge of the fifteenth arrondissement I was seized by panic. I felt like I was melting into the sort of fog that signals snow. I wanted someone to take me by the arm and say soothing words to me: 'No, no, it's nothing, old boy... You must be tired... Let's go and get you a cognac... You'll be all right...' I tried to cling to small concrete details. She had said that she tried to keep things simple for her piano lessons. She made all her students learn the same piece. It was called *Bolero*, by Hummel. She played it for me one night on a piano we found in the basement of a brasserie. It wouldn't be long before I could ask her to whistle Hummel's *Bolero*. A German who must have made a voyage to Spain. I'd be better off waiting for her in front of the

building where she was giving a lesson. What a strange neighbourhood... a metaphysical neighbourhood, as Dr Bouvière might have said, in his voice that was so chilling and so smooth. How feeble of me to let myself get into such a state. All it took was a bit of fog with a hint of snow at the Ségur-Suffren crossroad for me to lose heart. Really, I was being pathetic. It could be the memory of snow falling that afternoon when Hélène Navachine came out of the building, but each time I think back to this period of my life, I can smell snow—or rather, a coolness that chills the lungs and ends up getting confused in my mind with the smell of ether.

One afternoon, after her piano lesson, she slipped and fell on a patch of black ice and cut her hand. It was bleeding. We found a pharmacy a little further down the road. I asked for some cotton wool and, instead of 90 per cent alcohol, I asked for a vial of ether. I don't think it was a deliberate mistake. We were sitting on a bench. She took the lid off the vial and, as she soaked the cotton wool to apply to her cut, I was hit by the smell of the ether, so strong and so familiar from my childhood. I put the blue vial in my pocket but the smell still hung around us. It permeated the hotel rooms around Gare de Lyon where we used to end up. We would go there before she went home, or when she'd come and meet me there at around nine o'clock at night.

They didn't ask for your papers at those hotels. There were too many people coming and going because the station was nearby. The clients wouldn't stay long in their rooms; there would always be a train coming soon to take them away. Shadows.

We were handed forms on which to write our names and addresses, but they never checked if they matched a passport or ID card. I filled them in for both of us. I wrote different names and addresses each time. I made a note of them in a diary so I could change the names the next time. I wanted to cover our tracks as well as our real birthdates, since both of us were still minors. Last year, in an old wallet, I found the page on which I had listed our false identities.

Georges Accad 28 Rue de la Rochefoucauld, Paris 9e

Yvette Dintillac 75 Rue Laugier

André Gabison Calle Jorge Juan 17, Madrid

Jean-Maurice Jedlinski Casa Montalvo, Biarritz

and Marie-José Vasse

Jacques Piche Berlin, Steglitz, Orleanstrasse 2

Patrick de Terouane 21 Rue Berlioz, Nice

Suzy Kraay Vijzelstraat 98, Amsterdam

I was told that each hotel passed these forms on to the vice squad, where they would be arranged in alphabetical order. Apparently they have all since been destroyed, but I don't believe it. They remain intact in their filing cabinets. One night, just to kill time, a retired police officer started leafing through these old files and he came across André Gabison's or Marie-José Vasse's form. He wondered why, after more than thirty years, these people remained missing, unknown at their addresses. He would never know the truth of it. A long time ago, a girl used to give piano lessons. In the hotel room around Gare de Lyon where we used to meet, I noticed that they still had the blackout curtains from the civil defence, even though it was many years after the war. We could hear the comings and going in the corridor, doors slamming, phones ringing. Behind the partition walls, conversations went on late into the night; it sounded like travelling businessmen endlessly discussing their jobs. Heavy footsteps in the corridor, people carrying suitcases. And, despite the commotion, we both managed to reach the realm of silence she talked about, in which the air was lighter to breathe. After a while it felt as if we were the only people in the hotel, that everyone else had left. They had all gone to the station opposite

to catch a train. The silence was so deep it made me think of the little train station in a country village near a border, lost in the snow.

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I REMEMBER AT the Mirabeau Clinic, after the accident, I woke with a start and I didn't know where I was. I tried to find the switch for the bedside lamp. Then, in the stark light, I recognised the white walls, the bay window. I tried to fall asleep again but I was disturbed and restless. All night, people were talking on the other side of the partition. A name kept coming up, in different intonation JACQUELINE BEAUSERGENT. In the morning I realised I had been dreaming. Only the name JACQUELINE BEAUSERGENT was real, since I had heard it from her own mouth at the Hôtel-Dieu, when the fellow in the white coat had asked us who we were.

The other evening, at the south terminal of Orly airport, I was waiting for some friends who were coming back from Morocco. The plane was delayed. It was past ten o'clock. The large hall leading to the arrival gates was almost deserted. I had the odd feeling that I had arrived at a kind of no man's land in space and time. Suddenly I heard one of those disembodied airport voices repeat three times: 'WOULD JACQUELINE BEAUSERGENT PLEASE PROCEED TO DEPARTURE GATE 624.' I ran the length of the hall. I didn't know what had become of her in the past thirty years, but time no longer mattered. I was under the illusion that there could still be a departure gate for me. The last few passengers were making their way to gate 624, where a man in a dark uniform was standing guard. He asked sharply: 'Do you have your ticket?'

'I'm looking for someone...There was an announcement just a moment ago...Jacqueline Beausergent...'

The last passengers had disappeared. He shrugged his shoulders. 'She must have boarded long ago sir.'

'Are you sure? Jacqueline Beausergent...' I repeated.

He was blocking the way. 'You can see very well there's no one left, sir.'

EVERYTHING ABOUT THE period before the accident is confused in my memory. Days merged into one another in a haze. I was waiting for the voltage to increase to see more clearly. When I think back to it now, only H el ene Navachine's silhouette emerges from the fog. I remember she had a beauty spot on her left shoulder. She told me she was going to London for a few days because she'd been offered a job there and she was going to find out if it was really what she wanted.

I went with her the evening she caught the train at Gare du Nord. She sent me a postcard telling me that she would soon be coming back to Paris. But she never came back. Three years ago, I received a telephone call. A woman's voice said, 'Hello, I'm calling from the H otel Palym... There is someone here who would like to speak to you, sir...' The H otel Palym was almost opposite her place, in the little street from which you could see the Gare de Lyon clock. We'd taken a room there once under the names Yvette Dintillac and Patrick de Tourane. 'Are you still on the line, sir?' The woman said. 'I'm putting you through...' I was sure it would be her. Once again, we would be meeting between piano lessons and the students would play Hummel's *Bolero* until the end of time. As Dr Bouvi ere liked to say, life is an eternal return. There was static on the line and it sounded like the murmur of wind through leaves. I waited, gripping the handset to avoid making the slightest movement that might break the thread stretching back through the years. 'Putting you through, sir...' I thought I heard the sound of furniture being knocked over or someone falling down the stairs.

'Hello...Hello...Can you hear me?' A man's voice. I was disappointed. Still the interference on the line. 'I was a friend of your father's...Can you hear me?' I kept saying yes, but he was the one who couldn't hear me. 'Guy Roussotte... My name is Guy Roussotte...Perhaps your father mentioned me...Your father and I worked together at the Bureau Otto... Can you hear me?' He seemed to be asking the question for form's sake without really caring if I could hear him or not. 'Guy Roussotte... Your father and I had an office together...' It was as if he was calling from one of those bars on the Champs- elys ees fifty years ago when the clamour of conversation revolved around black-market dealings, women and horses. His voice was becoming increasingly muffled and only fragments of sentences reached me: 'Your father... Bureau Otto...meet...a few days at the H otel Palym... where I could reach him...Just tell him: Guy Roussotte... the Bureau Otto...from Guy Roussotte...a phone call... Can you hear me?...'

How did he get my phone number? I wasn't in the phone book. I imagined this ghost calling from a room at the H otel Palym, perhaps the same room that Yvette Dintillac and Patrick de Tourane stayed in one night long ago. What a strange coincidence...The voice was now too faint, and the sentences too disjointed. I wondered if it was my father he wanted to see, believing him still of this world, or if it was me. Soon after, I could no longer hear his voice. Again, the sound of a piece of furniture being knocked over or someone falling down the stairs. Then the dial tone, as if the phone had been hung up. It was already eight o'clock at night and I didn't have the energy to call the H otel Palym back. I was really disappointed. I had hoped to hear H el ene Navachine's voice. What could have become of her, after all this time? The last time I saw her in a dream, it was interrupted before she had time to give me her address and phone number.

\*

The same winter that I heard the faraway voice of Guy Roussotte, I had an unfortunate experience. Strive as you might for over thirty years to make your life clearer and more harmonious than it was earlier on, there's always the risk that an incident will suddenly drag you backwards. It was in December. For about a week, whenever I went out or returned home, I noticed a woman standing motionless a few metres from the door of my apartment building or on the pavement opposite. She



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