

Philippe PARROT

Venus has two faces,
and so many more...

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CHAPTER 1

MEMORIES AND HATRED

Sprawled in a chair that threatened to collapse at any moment, Boris Zakowski was enjoying a break, delighted to unwind after a hard day. He drew on his pipe, inhaled the smoke and savoured the moment. As a parenthesis in the course of his thoughts, he loved to hold his breath for a moment and feel the delicious sense of torpor that it brought him. It was so pleasant to feel almost godlike, to contemplate things from on high...

He propped his feet on the edge of the desk and noticed that his shoes were caked with mud. So what ? An obsession with cleanliness was a prejudice that a man of his calibre treated with contempt. Was it not grotesque to dwell on such ridiculous concerns when life held so many more serious considerations ? Boris would never give in to such frivolity, despite so many years on this continent. It had been a very long time ago since dirt was anything but a slight nuisance.

Besides, it amused him to accentuate and exacerbate the bohemian side of his character, if only to ridicule his visitor's smallness and undermine their petty convictions. The thinly veiled criticism they addressed to him left him cold as stone and convinced that handling his clients required a decisive and brutal frankness to shake the certainty out of them. And everyone accepted his escapades without batting an eyelid, so awed were they by his extraordinary stature.

Boris was indeed an impressive giant and no one could help but tremble before this specimen of primal man, captured by his tormented expression and flaming mane. And if he occasionally flattered himself to be a seducer, he equally prided himself on being a lucky bastard. Zakowski had cheated death so often in his native country that he loved to court it, and precisely because it no longer pursued him here, he felt a guilty pleasure in defying it. That's why, convinced that lady luck smiled upon him and that he was in control of his own fate, he had opted for a career as a detective ! And that's why, with such an opinion of his role in life and of his own person, he said he could not conceive of dying, but of finishing with it all !

He obviously shocked his entourage to profess such nonsense but he persisted. The « Boris-style-suicide », seen as the culmination of a life where thought outweighed emotion, was a legitimate act that attested to the greatness of the man. Such a gesture commanded respect when it was the result of a free and well-considered choice, even if individuals who claimed this reason remained the exception. As for the others, Boris condemned their conduct, if it were a cry of protest : living elsewhere and differently or an emergency exit : flee failure and cowardice, sensing in their misguidance a perversion of freedom. In short, suicide was a noble road to take to exit the world only for the wise who had achieved, during their period of their existence, the goals that they had set. It was the right of those who have nothing left to prove — when what could be ; has been — to leave. A theory that Boris expressed in the punchline to a joke : « When your suitcase is packed and ready, hop on ! The train is leaving. »

By the coolness of his fingers Zakowski felt that his pipe had gone out and understood the mechanism at the origin of his ramblings. He had begun brooding when the bowl of his pipe no longer warmed his hands. His thoughts depended on the temperature of his fingertips. It was ridiculous ! Especially since he did not want to make a move now that the sun was filtering through the window and inviting him to pull himself together to receive his client. An aristocrat who had called yesterday and made an appointment without specifying the purpose of her visit. He had bombarded Zuletta with questions to gauge her impressions and she answered the questions one by one ; he concluded only that her brittle voice betrayed a fragile sensitivity. It was not easy to be able to imagine what this stranger was like from such a tenuous report. He filled another pipe although time was scarce and decided to make his client wait, contrary to the most elementary rules of courtesy. He reflected on the chance that he might be making a mistake. The information he was supplied with was subject to doubt, because it had all been filtered by the distracted ear of Zuletta.

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Zuletta ! Boris Zakowski was flooded with memories as soon as her image came into his mind. The remembrance of their meeting arose from the depths of his memory and he could not help murmuring her name. This black woman was his work, a creature in whom the attributes of femininity had crystallized to transform yesterday's savage into a woman. Ten years already ! How time flew... His protégée lived by his side, in the apartment above the office, so grateful for his efforts to save her that she could no longer conceive of living without him...

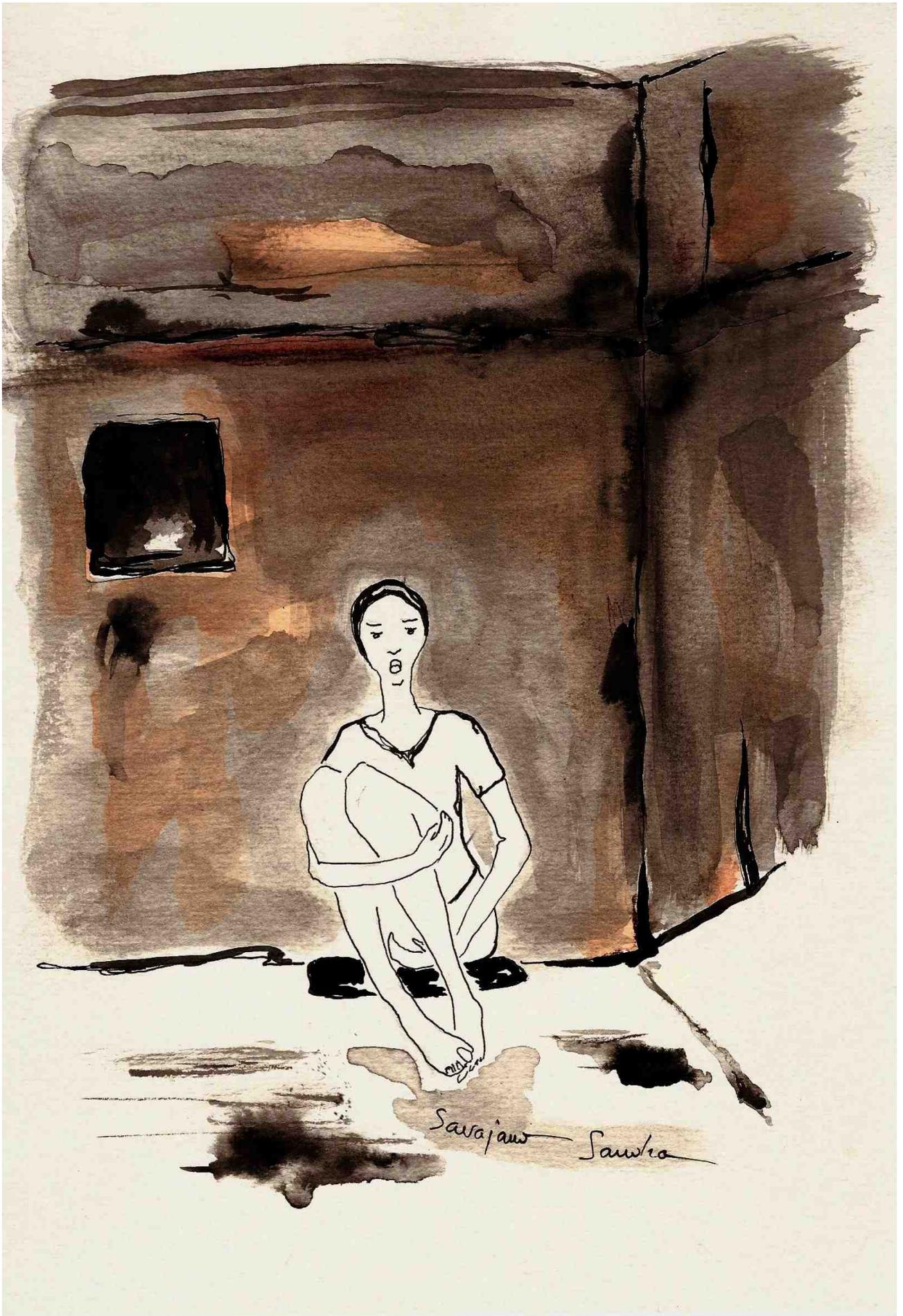
Boris was staying at the time in a city plagued by slums, with instructions to follow the wanderings of a husband who took advantage of conferences to cheat on his wife. He had learned, during the investigation, to sniff out the places he needed to go ahead of time. Zakowski had thus heard talk of a madam, a purveyor of girls, and he had obtained her contact details in order to pay her a visit.

He was baffled by the attitude of the guide who required a down payment at each street corner and alley ! Flabbergasted by how the brat tried to kindle his desires with « Soon my sisters, gringo... for you, they'll do everything ! ». How many miles had they travelled ? It was not easy to estimate as this Gavroche of the Tropics contrived to deceive him. Boris was certain that he was passing by the same alleys several times, stepping over the same stream, and finally, surprising the same old hag delousing a child. Yet he had let the guide lead on, aware of what was at stake. The kid had to stop tourists at all costs from finding their own way back to Eden if he wanted to keep drawing a regular income from this job. He stopped after a long and winding journey, his index finger pointing toward a small wall. It was there ! They moved to a concession where a whitewashed building stood, when the kid stiffened. A matron with a face like a bulldog lolled in a rocking chair, wrapped in a shawl that hid her hair, surrounded by a swarm of young children. Boris was struck by the vision of young girls and let himself be led, without realizing that he was approaching the group. It was at that second he noticed her, sitting apart from her sisters.

Zuletta was hiding behind the seat of the stepmother, sitting on the dirt, bent legs clasped against her chest, sheltered from lust.

Boris visibly paled.

He had to quickly turn back if he did not want to fall into the past. He forgot the determination of the guide, who was holding out his arm in the expectation of a banknote. Boris was immobilized by a weakling. The minutes were being swallowed up in negotiations when he felt her charms working on him again. This child who was trying to



escape the world attracted him and he couldn't tear his eyes away from her face. Her attitude revealed a sadness and the blurry contours of an old story became sharp. If he wanted to resurrect it, it sufficed to wait for his memory to find the old paths again, using this girl's face as a compass even if the girl mistook his emotion for lust and began to cry, frightened by the fixity of his gaze. It was not, however, the fever of desire but the joy of love that surged in Boris' heart. Specifically, he was reliving a childhood memory, thanks to the shock of this meeting...

As a young adolescent, he was on vacation at the seaside and a couple had settled with their daughter a few meters from the place rented by his family. She refused to swim despite her parents' encouragement and spent her days hiding between their lounge chairs. Boris was concerned about her and furtively kept an eye on her. Three weeks passed in this way, hidden from her sight, deploring her sadness, and marvelling at this stranger's constancy in sitting for hours under the parasol. Until this afternoon when her father had forced her to swim, exasperated by her behaviour. Which she did, reluctantly. She walked by Boris and had given him a brief glance through the tears running down her cheeks.

Boris had let her walk away without daring to console her, too shy to offer a word of comfort. Yet it would be said ! Courage had certainly betrayed him, but he would overcome his fear when she returned and talk to her so long that she would consent to becoming his friend.

Hogwash ! People running on the beach, bathers fluttering amid the waves, rescuers rushing to their boat, screaming, panicking, a body being carried, arms dangling, eyes glassy... Boris watched the drama being played out without being able to change the course of things. He cursed death for choosing its victims at random and swore with all of the might of his fifteen years that he would have revenge...

His teen years resurged thirty years later, in the guise of a girl as sad as the one from his childhood ! Boris was no longer a boy watching fate steal his wishes without flinching. The time had come to make good on his commitment and save this child by giving her a taste of life.

It was time to act. The boy took his silence for an agreement and engaged in negotiations, while the girls, convinced that they were being bargained for, were being deliberately provocative. One ingénue batted her eyes, a tease unbuttoned her blouse, another stroked herself. All of them, experienced whores the lot of them, were having fun plying their charms on the client. All except one, still hidden in the corner, who nothing and nobody seemed to move. Boris did not flinch, his gaze fixed on Zuletta, indifferent to the spectacle of this troupe metamorphosed into a pack of bitches in heat. He needed to do nothing more to convince the employer that she held a pigeon in her hands : a man willing to pay a fortune to possess a girl ! She could raise the stakes and gamble on the price of a tigress who refused to go with Whites and who put out her claws when they approached.

She grabbed Zuletta's hair as she lie prostrate behind her chair, pulled her out of hiding despite her screams and threw her to Boris' feet. Zuletta hesitated, her hair dishevelled, her skirt hiked up. Should she take refuge in the bosom of the madam and be struck for it, or crawl toward the man and find herself in his house ? She could not decide and lie on the ground, shaken by sobs. The moment dragged on for an eternity, without anyone doing anything to intervene, until the madam dismissed the boy with a gesture and entered into conversation in the stranger's foreign tongue.

— Hey, gringo, you want this slut ? I'm not mistaken, eh, my other girls do not interest you ? It shows in the way you ogle her, it's useless to deny it ! Alas, for your wallet, this bitch is worth gold ! She's been rotting in her outback there a fortnight. Her parents

gave her to me and nothing has happened since ! Neither whipping nor fasting, nor threats. Impossible to overcome ! She struggles as soon as someone takes her and I'm obliged to reimburse them. What a shame ! Oh, the hell with it, you, I'll make you work for it yet ! Anger overwhelmed her and she punctuated her insults with punches, delighted to double her victim's tears. Boris kept his composure, apparently insensible to the violence being perpetrated right before his eyes.

— Look, madam, you 're selling, I'm buying ! Right ? So let's avoid any misunderstanding ! I do not want you to mistreat the girl that I want. One more scratch and I won't take her, is that clear ?

— Well, well, well gringo, you seem to be a connoisseur. Your kind is rare around here. Excuse me.

— Everything depends on the price ! How much do you want ?

— It will cost a hundred dollars to hook up with this piece of meat ! In cash and in advance ! And I warn you, I won't return the money if it doesn't work out ! You never know with a virgin, if it's worth it or not. Take it or leave it !

— Not so fast, madam. I see that we are not speaking the same language. I was not asking you « how much ? » to sleep with her but « how much ? » to take her with me !

— Take her with you ? Are you crazy or what, gringo ? What would her parents say if they wanted to see her again ? It's impossible !

— Stop trying to swindle me, madam ! Her father sold her to have one kid the less and one coin the more ! Don't take me for an idiot ! Her parents care about their daughter as much as I care for your mother ! They would never set foot here again, except to sell you a second daughter ! So come on, how much ?

The madam was thinking it over. The man knew the scene better than she ever imagined but there was one thing she was not wrong about. He wanted the girl, and would be willing to pay the price. She should stick to her guns and not budge.

— 2 000 dollars cash, gringo !

— Hey there, don't exaggerate ! It's fair that they didn't pay you to be rid of one more mouth to feed. Tell me, do you want to win on all fronts ? I will pay half, no more !

— I'm sorry. It's 2 000 dollars or nothing !

— You're dreaming.

— No I'm not ! And I'm not going to be pushed around by a white man !

— Pushed around ? You'll be pushed around tonight all right, if you continue like this !

— ... ?

— Bralosky, do you know him or do you want me to refresh your memory ?

— He's the Chief of Police. So what ?

— So what ? It is just that someone comes from the same country as he does, and someone's done him a big favour. Do you get it now ? One word from me and you'll get yours within the hour. In jail for pimping ! And now... how much ?

— Damn it, this can't be happening ! I've never seen such a devious guy. My word, who are you ?

— Her guardian angel.

— Whose ?

— Hers !

— This fleabag ! Are you a freak or what ?

— Who knows ? How much ?

— Well, not so fast, gringo ! Give me time to think. I won't decide on a whim. Wait ! I'll make you a good price ! 1 500 dollars. Agreed ?

— 1 000 or prison !

— You want to ruin me, dammit ! I thought you were willing to fork out to debauch this girl ! But good God, what do you see in this slut ? This is unbelievable ! I would never have done business with you if I knew you were going to play such a dirty trick !

— So...

— All right, gringo ! You win. 1 000 dollars and you can rid me of that sloth who costs me more than she brings in.

— You see, madam, everything works out.

— You have the money ?

— You'll have it tomorrow. I'll leave the girl with you as a deposit. But take care, don't hit her ! Otherwise, it's prison and no money...

— Don't worry, gringo, I'll pamper your princess !

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Zuletta had just come in.

— Excuse me for disturbing you Boris ! The lady who called for an appointment has just arrived. She's waiting with her son. Can I let them in ?

— Huh ... what ? Shit, I forgot about them ! No, Zuletta, let them wait. You know my habits.

— Yes. But I never shall succeed in getting used to them !

— But it must be done, and you know it. Make them move to the adjacent room while waiting. I will be ready in five minutes.

Work demanded his attention again and Boris suddenly found the tobacco bitter. The arrival of the Countess awakened his curiosity and the appeal of loafing around lost its charm. He wanted to see and to know. He walked to the wall that separated his office room, took down a painting, grabbed his headphones and began to observe through the two-way mirror.

A woman and a boy were waiting in a room furnished with a table and a sofa. That there was no chair or armchair was not a sign of greed or lack of taste. Purely technical considerations had dictated this choice. Boris ensured a strategic position by requiring visitors to sit in front of his observation post. He saw their every move. An object related to the personality of the client was always placed on the table. Today, Boris had opted for a deck of tarot cards, certain of this woman's interest in all things mysterious.

She got up to pace the room, a sign of a growing irritability she no longer seemed able to suppress. She stopped in front of the mirror, inspecting her makeup, her hairstyle, and she took her frustration out on her son who did not budge, sitting in his corner. He followed his mother's wanderings, bowed his head at her slightest scowl, then raised up again and watched her, torn between the desire to try to elicit a sign of tenderness and the fear of provoking her anger.

— Mark ! Stop gaping at me, would you !

— Mama...

— Mama what ? Come on, say it, say that you're ashamed of your mother ! Huh ? How many times do I have to tell you to pay more attention to me ? See if my hair is out of place, if my makeup needs a touch up... What do I know ? To take notice of all these little things that your father took notice of... But no ! Little Mister does just as he pleases, like always ! And to think that I dreamed all my life of having a child who would love me and...

— I do love you, Mama, you know that ! Even at home I told you that you looked very elegant in that suit. Remember, you started screaming that it was shameful to see a son take an interest in his mother's clothes ! And if I am silent like now, you reproach me for not complimenting you ! I don't know what to do anymore ! What do you want, Mama ? Tell me...

— What I want ? That you stop talking to me in that tone ! That you're considerate, that's what I want, you stupid idiot ! And I have to keep harping at you every day !

— Mama...

— Shut up or I'm going to be even more annoyed !

Mark got up to run into his mother's arms, as if he wanted to be forgiven.

— Oh no ! Whatever else, don't muss me up. Stay put. You know I hate to be touched !

Mark rushed to the door in tears when Zuletta entered, intrigued by the outbursts she had heard. He could not avoid it ; his race ended abruptly with his running right into her chest. She asked no questions, hugged him and led him into the hall, convinced that she had to leave the Countess alone in front of the mirror.

— What I want ! Hmm... As if he didn't know ! It's simple. I want him to obey me like the others do.

She let all the resentment she felt explode and stood firmly planted there, trembling all over, when she suddenly regained her composure. She pulled a bottle from her purse, lifted it to her mouth, took a few swigs and finished with her makeup, not even waiting to feel the effect of the alcohol. Boris looked at her hands, so capable of perfected techniques to ensure that her seductive power remained intact. Thus, the pencil strokes around the eyes where no nuance was out of place ; it was a work of art that required all of her attention. The tightness in her jaw disappeared in a few seconds and her body stopped shaking.

Boris was astonished at the speed of the transformation. He saw this woman previously so disfigured by anger metamorphosed into a diva now that her features had a bit of colour and her eyes had sparkle. Seeing herself in a more flattering fashion, thanks to the effect of cosmetics, cheered up his client. A touch more red on her lips, and she was ready. She put away her equipment, snapped shut the clasp of her bag and looked at the time. It was late and she was about to leave when she felt one of her stockings sagging. She went up to the table, set her things down, and pulled her skirt up over her hips and slid it up over her buttocks. She pulled it up to her panties, found the garter belt that held the silk in place and unhooked the fasteners. The stocking slipped down to her feet and she pulled it up the length of her leg again, pinching the seams between her fingers and wiggling her leg and hip, further emphasizing the nakedness of her flesh. She was readjusting her suit, the operation finished, when she bumped up against the table. The tarot cards scattered, one of them fell on the parquet and she walked over it without even noticing.

Boris paled. He had seen the card and knew the truth it revealed about the nervous applicant. He hung the painting back in place on the wall while his client went out without understanding that her destiny was still laying there, laughing at her behind her back.

Zuletta and Mark were talking in the hallway.

— Mademoiselle, please forgive my son for forcing me to scream. He is incorrigible and I always lose my temper. Believe me, I'm sorry ! That said, tell Mr Zakowski I'm leaving if he does not receive me this very second. I've waited three quarters of an hour...

— Please excuse Mr Zakowski, he is very busy. I'll remind him of your arrival.

Zuletta entered Boris' office, leaving the Countess and her son facing each other.

— Listen to me Mark ! Never start up again with this kind of prank ! Do you want to make me look like an unfit mother ? That's what you want, isn't it ?

— No Mama, I swear, I never wanted that !

— You'll wish you behaved yourself differently ! Moreover, I wonder what that...

— Madame de Clery, if you would come in, please !

— Ah, Mr Zakowski, you 're finally here ! I began to despair. You know, your behaviour is completely unacceptable !

— Well, Madame, you're perfectly free to call upon someone else... you may even use my phone.

— Mr Zakowski ! I wouldn't consider such a thing.

— In that case...

Zuletta went out and closed the door on the trio.

— I'm listening, Madame de Clery.

— Mr Zakowski, you've wasted a lot of my time so I'll get straight to the point. I want you to find out about the whereabouts and actions of someone I have had no news about for months. I want to know where she lives, what she does, where she goes. In short, I want to know everything about her life ! Am I clear ?

— Absolutely, Madame de Clery. You're aware that I require a lot of money to take on this type of case. You know my conditions in this regard, I suppose ?

— I do know them, in fact. I even made a deposit to cover the costs of taking on the case.

— Perfect ! So back to your problem. You want me to trail a relative, you say ? Well, that's my line of work ! I still need to clarify one thing before starting my research. Because one detail bothers me. Isn't it normal, in life, that friendships fade over time ? Why then, does a woman like you give so much importance to such a minor event ? Why would she spend so much money ? I must confess that I do not understand you. Also, I want to hear from your own lips why you're so attached. And I'll warn you ! I won't take on the case if you don't answer.

Martha stiffened, outraged by his manners. She leaned forward to go but she changed her mind the second she locked eyes with Boris.

— She... She betrayed my trust. And I won't stand for that, do you hear me ! You see, Mr Zakowski, people have come in and out of my life since the death of my husband. I associate myself from time to time with a man or a woman who I can appreciate. But that person should stay in their place if they don't want to lose me.

— If I understand right, Madame de Clery, the man or woman who becomes your friend must never deviate from this rule, is that it ? Can one, therefore, talk about a friendship if it is a liaison based on this principle ? Do you dare to tell me that such attachment is viable ? Perhaps someone fled from you because your affection became too... heavy !

— Mr Zakowski, stop this childish talk, if you please ! Whatever your conception is of human relations, I am not interested in knowing which of us is right or wrong. I can still have feelings, even if I am no longer able to love ! I feel I proved that to this person whose name I do not even want to pronounce. She did not take this into account and left me.

— And I suppose you do not like separations that are imposed on you. The decision should be yours, as usual !

— Mr Zakowski !

— Come on ! Why would she have gone if not for this reason ?

— Do you really want to know ?

— Madame de Clery ! I'll soon know one way or another.

— She tried to lead Mark astray.

— No less ? The charge is serious, Madame de Clery. Are you sure that you want to go forward with it ?

— Ask my son. You 'll see !

— Is it true, Mark ?

— Do I have to answer, Mama ?

— Yes, dear, answer !

— It's true, sir, Mark confided, with downcast eyes and red with shame.

— A point escapes me in this case. Why call me rather than the police ?

— In the name of friendship, Mr Zakowski. Precisely this friendship I just mentioned and which you seem to doubt ! That is what drives me to act in this way. You see, I still think well of this person, even though she doesn't deserve it any longer. I want to

find her and help her get treatment, not put her in jail. She is not a criminal; she is sick. That's why I'm here. To prevent her from causing harm again, and to cure her ! Moreover, let me know if you feel ready to start and I will take action...

— What do you mean by « I will take action » ?

— How do I know ? You take me by surprise.

— Okay ! We'll see. One more thing. You led me to believe at the beginning of our interview that the price of your friendship is total submission to your whims. Is that correct ?

— You mock me, Mr Zakowski !

— Perhaps, but it's the truth ! And allow me to insist, even if it means offending you. Wouldn't « curing her » be a pretext for finding and punishing her for the separation she imposed without your consent ? Was this not a crime of « treason » ?

— Mr Zakowski ! How dare you suggest such things in front of my son ! I will not allow you !

— Do not allow me what, ma'am ? To state the obvious ? You need to do the same and to do it quickly ! That's how I work. So I come back to my question. Answer !

— You're an oaf !

— The compliment honours me.

— You're out of line ! I repeat. It is not my intention to punish her but to save her. You know, I'm not a monster, Mr Zakowski. There you are, that's my answer. Are you satisfied ?

— For the moment, yes, Madame de Clery ! Accordingly, I shall carefully look after her interests, have no fear. We are indeed agreed upon one point. That she must be saved ! But, thought Boris, from whom ? You or herself ?

— You've finally returned to reason !

— I do not want to hurt you, but please know that I never lose my reason ! My respects, Madame. Goodbye Mark...

Boris relit his pipe after his visitors' departure and asked Zuletta to hand him the file. He studied it until midnight and gathered enough information to weave together a net that would soon trap everyone involved.

He was holding in his hands the file of a very strange case indeed.

CHAPTER 2

HANNAH'S DARLING

Niels curled up under the sheets, the blanket pulled over his head so he could feel his breath warm his face. He was dozing after a sleepless night and trying to coax himself into finding the courage to leave his bed. He had to get up if he didn't want to see his mother walk into the room. Fortunately, Hannah soon came to the rescue and he recovered instantly all his willpower by magic when her image came into his mind. He stretched and leapt out of bed.

— Niels, darling, wake up ! Your hot chocolate is ready ! You hear me ?

He dreaded this voice that set the pace of each of his school mornings and announced, at the end of the night and the beginning of the day, the agony of dreams and the time for homework. His mother would not, however, have to reiterate her call on this first day of July, just a few hours before the arrival of the circus. This day was different from all the sunrises that had discouraged him throughout the year. Today finished the year of anxieties and constraints ! Commands and fears vanished into the mists of dawn by the sheer virtue of the word « holidays » and he was going to be able to give his joy free rein.

Niels would celebrate the event in his own way. As soon as he had swallowed his bread, he wouldn't go to Pieter's house to lock himself up with him in the back room of his house amid their stockpiled toys. No, this was not a Thursday like all the others. They would ride their bicycles and join Hannah, who opened the doors of the dream to anyone who had the courage or the innocence to want to enter through them. It wasn't necessary to build castles in the air ! It was enough to await her arrival. Especially since she was going against habit and giving in to their whims this year !

Two children were going to have the honour, for the first time in the history of the village, to accompany the circus and walk through the streets with the magician. Just imagine ! To roam the city at her side when the residents of Houloze celebrated the return of the street performers who had fed their imagination for ages and to parade with the queen of the show who brought up the rear of the convoy, standing on the balcony fitted out on the rear of her trailer ! Yes, Hannah's resolve had faltered. She finally agreed to show the affection she felt for the boys. The villagers would know by this favour that they were her darlings, especially Niels, for whom she felt a special affection.

Hannah ! With almost boyish charm and those of a clown and magician, nobody knew whether to pity her, laugh or shudder. Only the kids could see through it, during the days of summer when they were next to her. They immediately recognised something in her manners and sensed that Hannah was a being apart, a sort of link between the hearts of men and the spirit of another world. She was isolated in the dream and life was neither here nor there. Foreign to adults, she did not share their tastes or their joys. Only her miracles mattered, and the kids dreamed of seducing her in order to tap into the genius that hid inside her.

She knew how to make them laugh and how to spoil them with the old coat she wore throughout the year that made her look like a beggar. But her admirers did not complain. Quite the contrary, they appreciated the coat's innumerable pockets where they were allowed, with complete impunity, to plunge in their and pull out a host of surprises. It was

a funny Harlequin suit and everywhere there were patches of coloured fabric sewn onto on the cloth, on the front, back, sleeves...

Niels joined Pieter after dressing and was scolded for being late despite the importance of the appointment.

— Ah , there you are ! It's about time. What were you doing ? I bet you were still daydreaming in your bed ! And I thought you'd grow wings when Hannah arrived ! It is not surprising that you're her pet and she makes goo-goo eyes at you. You're just like her, always in the clouds.

— Aren't you jealous ?

— Are you crazy or what ? If you want to know, there are plenty of girls in high school ! And I find Hannah rather silly by comparison.

— But you said yesterday...

— I said she's our girl. Right ?

— Uh, yeah, that's it...

— Oh ! Don't play stupid ! Admit that you're smitten with her !

— You lie !

— You make me laugh ! As if I was going to get hurt ! Listen, I 'll tell you two things. One ! If she agreed that I could come, it is only because I am the friend of her Little Darling. Nothing more or less. In fact, she never liked me. Two ! I have a girlfriend. Believe me, she's got more curves than Hannah !

— More «curves » ?

— You're unbelievable. You're as thick as a brick ! When are you going to let go of your mother's skirts ? When you go to high school, you're going to chase the girls, that's for sure !

— You think so ?

— Cut off my hand if it isn't so. You will want to get a girl. Find one who's damn good looking ! Do you get it now ? And you 'll always want to smooch !

— Well then, Hannah is damn good looking ! I look forward to kissing her every year to celebrate her return.

— Stop being so stupid ! You've already kissed her on the mouth ?

— ?...

— That's what I said ! She's no looker !

— But...

— Stop, Niels ! You would always feel like snogging her if Hannah were sexy. Have you ever wanted to ?

— Me ? But she...

— That's what I said ! She's no model !

— That's not true, I love her ! Does anyone else make us travel in dreams ? Do they do that, the others ?

— No. You're right about that ! She's the only one doing that... Hey, have you seen the time ! We have to hurry if you want to join your sweetheart.

The Grand Place celebrated the arrival of the « Balbar Circus ». Niels and Pieter leaned on one of the columns of the esplanade, astride their bikes, dazzled by the spectacle that presented itself to their eyes. They were certainly experiencing the same emotions. If they admitted in their heart that the village was paying tribute to the circus with these preparations, it was this square, decorated with lanterns and flags, especially showed their commitment to Hannah. It was their own property, in a way, because they lived in one of houses located above the arcades that added to the square's fame. This was reason enough to them for the square to seem like an outside extension to the family setting, an extension into a world where their imaginations could run free. The decorations that appeared over the last few days seemed to them to be the fruit of their will, the realization of their fondest wish : to celebrate Hannah ! For her only, this deployment of banners, this profusion of

garlands, this sea of paper flowers. They admired the blaze of colours, touched to see how this flowering matched their emotions. To the pleasure of seeing this offering to their friend was added the pleasure of participating in the festivities. They would be applauded by the crowd lined along the pavement and no one could tell, amid the jubilation, if the honours were addressed to Hannah or to the kids. Even they themselves, drunken with all the shouting, could not tell the difference. The imminence of the hour filled them with delight. Time accelerated, marching towards the second where their dreams would come true. Even space was changed. It crystallised in this place that had become the centre of the world by the sheer force of their desires. They had forgotten this until they reached the end of their race and the object of their passion : Hannah ! If they admired the location, it was because she was already on their territory, because they already sensed her silhouette slip between the ropes of the tent. The charm was working once more, as it always did on those who came out to stroll under the arcades.

— You coming or what ?, exclaimed Pieter, pushing the pedals. This is no time to stand around gapping if you want to see your beautiful...

Niels pretended not to hear, and sprang in turn. The village slumbered while the grocer picked up the board that protected the storefront every night. She put her burden down as soon as she saw them, lifted the hem of her dress and ran after them in pursuit. But she couldn't catch up with them and exorcised her helplessness and anger by shouting.

— Rascals, scoundrels ! I'll tell your parents ! You good-for-nothings ! You'll pay for it !

— What is she talking about, Pieter ?

— The blow I dealt her last week ! I stole a box of caramels from her while she was in the back of the shop.

Now that they were on their way, Niels and Pieter were pedalling as quickly as they could to reach « Bald Mountain » all the faster. It was up there, on the mountain peak in the middle of the countryside, that they would find Hannah in the ruins of the castle where the acrobats would stop to give the animals water.

The boys let themselves be carried away by the sight, captivated by the scope of the plain. A sort of intoxication crept over them over the miles, as if energy that increased their strength tenfold was escaping out of the ground. They found in the experience of shared effort a kind of communion they did not feel in their games or in their discussions. Their legs kept on and on at the race and they felt like perfectly synchronized cogs of a gear, with no centre and no limitations. The same spirit animated them both, and they pedalled until they were exhausted on the road that disappeared on the horizon, where the battlements of the tower loomed above the ramparts.

The « Square Tower » was conquered an hour later. As reward for completing this step, they laid down at the summit, where the walkway had sunk after the collapse of the base. The void below the hill did not impress them. They took in the view of the entire landscape and would never relinquish their watch post, no matter the risks. They saw the borders of the province, where neither the one nor the other had ventured. And this more than fascinated them ! It was on this side that the circus caravans should appear. Niels and Pieter scanned the horizon, eager to see the convoy stretching across the distance.

— Hey, do you see something ? They should be there soon.

— ...

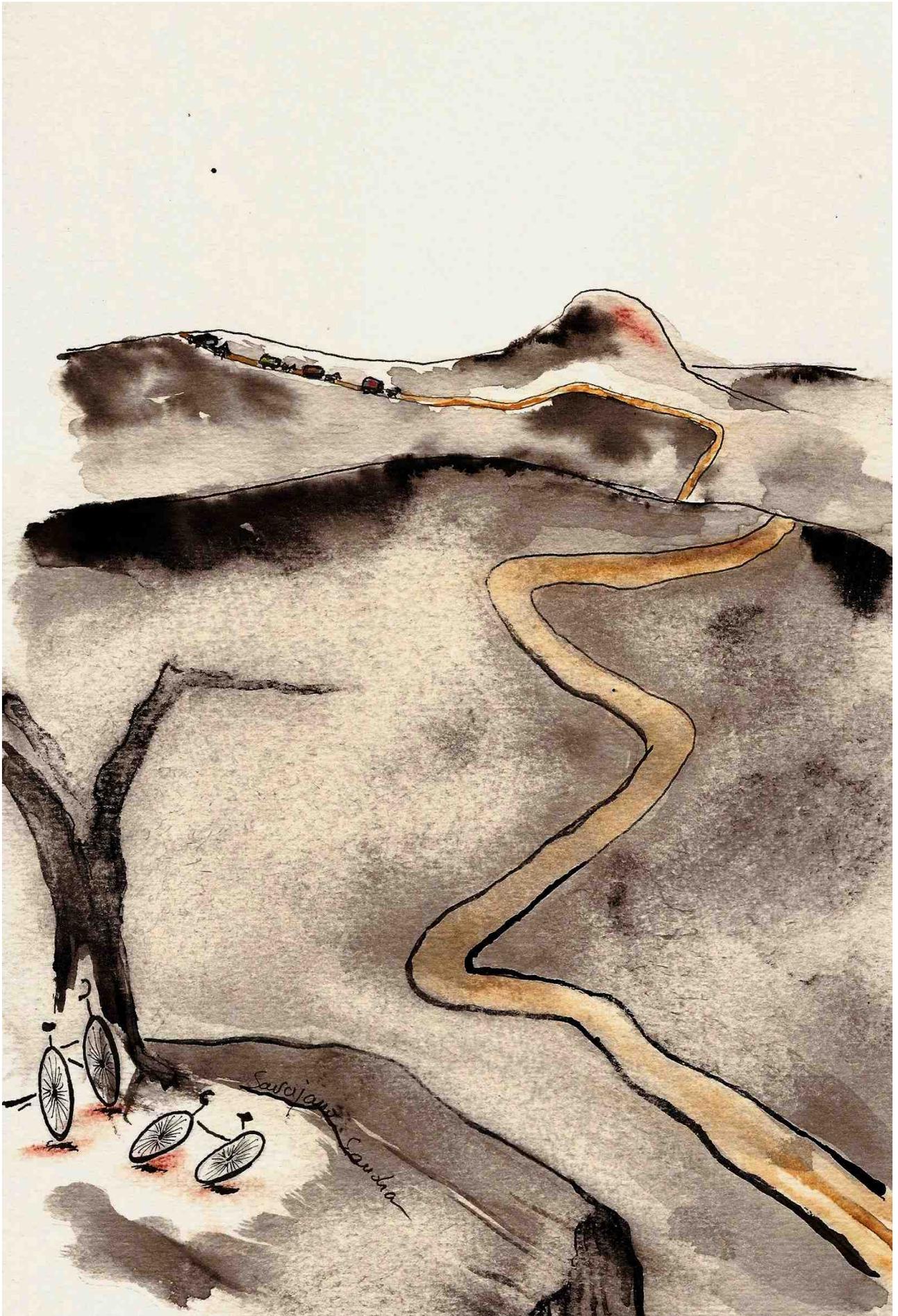
— Why, Niels, you haven't cracked up have you ? You're not going to sleep now !

— Uh... No ! I was thinking. Tell me, Pieter, do you think I'm going to blush one day ?

— You what ? You blush ? What are you going on about now ?

— Well... It's what we were talking about earlier. When you blush in front of a girl, that means you're in love, right ?

— Yeah ... if you say so.



- Tell me, do you think I will blush one day when I see Hannah ?
- Given your type, it's possible ! But she will not fall in love with you, don't kid yourself ! Think about it, she's blown out at least thirty candles ! It's a man she's looking for !
- But I am her favourite !
- Of course you're her favourite. But wake up ! She doesn't have a kid and you 're sort of like her child. She babies you and plays the mother hen. But don't be tempted to make anything more of it. You will never be Hannah 's husband !
- So she doesn't love me ?
- No. Don't even think about it ! You'll always be a little kid in her eyes.
- Then she'll want me when I grow up !
- Maybe. But she will have aged and it will be you who won't want her anymore !
- That's not true ! I will always love Hannah !
- You're so damn naïve ! Believe me, you will change and someday you won't love her anymore.
- Well then, what's the point of love if it's not for life ?
- To have a good time. That's all !
- And is that what Hannah thinks too ?
- From what I know of her, certainly not !

Niels began to daydream to pass the time and he stopped watching, sure that Pieter would avert him of the arrival of the circus. He closed his eyes and thought of his girlfriend. It was a misjudgement of his strength to think he could resist slumber. He fell asleep just a few moments later, a smile on his lips, exhausted by their escapade and his sleepless night.

* * * * *

— Giddyup, Mousette, just a little more, we're almost there ! Don't you recognize the place anymore ? Go on my sweet, another little push and I promise, by the faith of Balbar, you'll be the first to drink from the spring ! Go on, giddyup...

— Hie !

— You can smell the stable now ! Huh, you want a drink and rest, right ? Oh, it's useless to put on that big show for me, shuddering nostrils and chomping at the bit ! I know you well. Giddyup now... And stop shaking like that ! You know, the inhabitants of the castle deserted the place a long time ago ! Here, there's no one to welcome us with honours. Come on, a little more and we'll be there.

As usual at the end of each stage of the journey, Balbar left his perch of the raised seat of the leading trailer and sprung on Mousette's rump. The mare understood that they were going to stop. The arrival of her master reinvigorated her or at least masked the fatigue ; she nodded her head as a sign of welcome and accelerated her pace. Balbar encouraged her with words, thighs pressed against her flanks as he stroked her neck with one hand and with the other ruffled her mane. And so they reached the foot of the ramparts when emotion assailed him. These ruins that had seen so many centuries fascinated him and made him sit up straighter.

— Hey, the castle, is there a living soul there ? Hey, good folk, rejoice ! The circus is here ! The square... the square... There are the clowns and the jugglers... the acrobats and the tightrope walkers. But most of all, there is the most famous magician of all ! Hannah will move you ! Hannah will transport you ! Ahoy castle, wake up ! Life is at your door ! Balbar has returned ! Laugh, dance, sing, love, but also dream, thanks to Hannah ! Hear me ! The time has come for you to relive the thousand thrills, thousand fears, thousand ecstasies of childhood ! Hasten, we're here.

Balbar let himself be carried away by this hymn to life trumpeted out to the surrounding countryside. Alas, no response came back to him. Of little matter. Balbar was not a man to be offended by silence. The diversity of existence never failed to astonish him and he accepted it with pleasure, even when things seemed to go contrary to his hopes.

* * * * *

Joy spread throughout Pieter when he heard the sound of horseshoes on the road. He stared at the curve in the road where Balbar and Mousette would emerge, and what filled him with pleasure at this time, even more than the arrival of the acrobats, was his satisfaction with himself. Niels would not be at the rendezvous. Pieter could not really accept, in fact, Hannah's affection for his friend, although he made a big show otherwise. It was, to his adolescent spirit, a preference that hurt his male pride. Since the circumstances provided him with an opportunity for revenge, he decided not to wake Niels when he heard the echo of the tirade. He wanted to profit at all costs from a victory so easy and a happiness so great.

He set off without remorse to join the caravan even before it appeared...

* * * * *

What pride in being able to act like a man with the gypsy travellers' blessings ! The carriages up front was rattling on its way again after the animals were given a break for water. Pieter took up the reins of Hannah's horse, which was bringing up the rear, and was busy sending regards to passing caravans. He recalled the reunion during which the drivers returned his salutation, knowing that they had witnessed a true metamorphosis. He had become a guy who could now boast of having astonished his friends by changing so much. Among the men, this astonishment was mixed with a feeling of complicity, and, among the women, a reserve in proportion to their discomfort.

The male had replaced Adonis ! His shoulders were broader, his beard had grown and he was so proud of his new allure when he turned toward Hannah. She avoided his gaze and he rejoiced to discover the influence he exercised. She was wearing, as usual, her famous coat and while he encouraged the horse to follow the penultimate carriage, he dug his fingers into a pocket that was at the height of her breasts and began to caress them, under the pretext of looking for a bauble. Hannah jumped and pulled away when she became aware of his intentions.

— Hey there, no you don't ! What's gotten into you suddenly ?

— Oh la la ! You're overreacting a bit, aren't you ? I did nothing wrong. I just wanted to take some candy.

— And in bad faith ! You do not take me for an idiot, by chance ? You think maybe I have not seen through your little game, eh ? I forbid you from now on to delve into my pockets. Understood ?

— The other kids are allowed !

— Exactly. I just realized that you're not a kid anymore. Your childish games are over. You know, believe it or not, that I have known men of your sort, with their dirty paws. I do not want any part of it.

— Okay, okay, I get it !

Pieter had blundered. He must quickly restart the conversation if he wanted to avoid turning the journey into an ordeal.

— In fact, you expected to find me in company of Niels, didn't you ?

— Hey, I didn't think of it ! What's he doing ?

— Oh, he still has his head in the clouds. Proof... he should be with us at this time. We went together to join you, but who knows what may have crossed his mind ! He was

waiting for this day for an entire year, he didn't stop talking about it and the moment when he could actually see you again, he's gone ! We were in the « Square Tower » when you arrived. I came down and he, well... I don't know what he did. He was probably daydreaming... He only cares about his dreams. Even now, he has forgotten you.

— Are you crazy or what ? You should have told me about this earlier ! We should have gone to look for him in the dungeon before we left. He will miss us if he fell asleep. And what if we go to see him ?

— Dear Hannah ! Always ready to fuss over your little darling and to believe anything. Do you really think that Niels could fall asleep, with you at the castle ? Okay, he's a dreamer. But most of all, he's a lover. He's making a fool of you in my opinion and it's working.

— Stop, please ! I am concerned about where he could be, that's all.

— Don't stress ! I am sure that we will find him waiting for us near the bikes. And proud of having tricked you...

— Perhaps. Do you know what I am suddenly asking myself ?

— No.

— It would not be you by chance with all your chatter, who convinced him to slip away as a joke, would it ? With the intention of finding yourself alone with me... You know, I'm beginning to see what you're capable of ! You're not the seed of man for nothing. All means are fair when it comes to eliminating a rival, isn't that right ?

— I don't know. But I didn't say anything to Niels, I swear ! Let's go, he'll tell you himself ! The bikes are out there, behind the thicket.

No one was waiting for them. Pieter stopped the trailer at the hedge, loaded up the bicycles, and then they set off to join the convoy.

— Don't worry ! He must have returned to the village on a tractor. He could not do otherwise ; I'm the one who has the keys to the lock. Hannah shrugged her shoulders and they didn't speak another word.

* * * * *

The village was in celebration. The children of the village lined the sides of the road and rushed into the street to hurry behind the carriage and form the procession as soon as Hannah's trailer reached them. Each one nudged their neighbour to get nearer to the balcony and grab hold of the handrail. It was a ruthless war to remain attached to the step long enough to plunge a hand into a pocket. Everyone knew that they risked nothing because Hannah was busy calming down her most bellicose enthusiasts. A rain of confetti fell on her shoulders... A cacophony of laughter and calls buzzed in her ears... Hundreds and hundreds of streamers were wound around her neck, her arms, her legs...

The ritual repeated year after year, with her flock of faithful servants continually renewed, a new generation rising up to fill the vacancies left by those grown old, this flux of devils seemed to defy time even though Hannah had to use make-up to hide her wrinkles and to maintain the illusion. That's why she left the bench and retired into the trailer before entering the city where the acrobats were staying, letting her horse go free to follow the train. She was an artist, and no one should witness or bother her when she wanted to prepare herself. Only solitude and peace. However, today a man and a difficulty had disturbed her. She had been interrupted in her routine and would have felt incapable of getting ready, had she not heard Balbar's saxophone from a few kilometres outside the village, announcing the end of this preparatory phase.

It was the « three blows » that announced the show.

Something in her heart unlocked the second she recognised the instrument. She fell under its spell and immediately forgot about the busybody and the disappointment. These notes scattered to the four winds, it was « The Anthem of the Acrobats » composed by

Balbar in honour of the circus to which she had pledged her whole life. Her sullen face of a minute ago was lit up and she again felt the joy of life and desire to meet the demands of the travellers, of her art, of the greatness of her character.

— I have to get ready. We will soon be there. Balbar has just given the signal. You, you hold the reins and you stay there ! Don't come into the trailer at any cost !

Pieter didn't understand the reasons for her about-face. He, who judged men according to the attributes or defects he recognised in them, suddenly asked himself if Hannah wasn't just like him, ready to deceive her friends if circumstances required it. Her face had been transformed in a second, and only a liar could be capable of such a quick change in their physiognomy. Hannah fell in his esteem and he saw her for the first time different from the image of her that he cherished. Pieter did not know about true passion. He did not know about the kind of emotion that Hannah felt listening to the saxophone that carried her off, far away from calculations and pettiness.

Near the village, Pieter rapped on the door she had locked herself up behind.

— Hannah, hurry ! We're here. I can already see the children...

— It's okay, I'm ready ! You can turn around. Let's go quickly, let's set ourselves up in the back to welcome the children. You know, you are really lucky. I will never ever change my habits. Are you happy, at least, to be at my side ?

— Of course ! Niels and I dreamed about this so often.

— I know. But it's mostly Niels who dreamt of it. For you, it's just one more medal in your collection. Something else for your trophy case. Am I mistaken, or not ?

Pieter lowered his eyes, stung to the quick.

— Oh don't worry, I'm not angry at you ! You're like the others. I will however tell you one thing.

— Hannah ! Hannah !, cried hundreds of voices.

The convoy was at the village gates and the swiftest children were already gathering into a crowd behind their idol's trailer.

— Well, the kids are there. I'll tell you later. I don't have time now. We have to make our entrance. If ever you see Niels, make a sign to him to climb up, promise !

— Promise.

* * * * *

The festivities had begun. Hannah abandoned herself to the laughter and exclamations of her followers. As for Pieter, he remained withdrawn, too absorbed by his own concerns to take interest in the party. And to think that he had waited for this moment for months and could not enjoy it when it finally arrived ! Fortunately Hannah took his hand as soon as she noticed how quiet he'd gone, unable to imagine the thoughts that were disturbing him.

— Come on, Pieter, do me the favour ! Smile. Yes, like that ! Come on, try again ! Look at me ! Do I seem sad ? Come here next to me and see how your friends are laughing.

— Hey, kids, isn't it a big day today ?

— Y... E... S... ! Long live the circus, long live Hannah !, they exclaimed, escorting her in a delirium.

Pieter drew near, finally won over by the magic of the procession and the enthusiasm of the children. It was the party ! A time to shout, to feel joy, to go mad, to forget. To the devil with regrets ! Nothing mattered anymore ! The past didn't exist anymore, friends didn't exist. Only these moments now could delight him. He pressed up against Hannah and they crossed the village in the direction of the Grand Place, married for the day, huddled up one against the other, hand in hand.

* * * * *

The festivities were finished. Trailers had found their parking spaces, the kids had disappeared with their gifts and men had begun setting up tent. Hannah withdrew after the tumult of the reunion because the silence that followed the children's departure always left her feeling distraught. It was indeed a test for it to pass without the transition from happiness to loneliness. She was dreaming on her bed without noticing Pieter's presence, when the hurricane lamp he had to light surprised her out of her torpor. Night fell and Hannah had not yet moved or said a word. A shiver ran through her, she looked left and right and then sat up straight when she realized where she was.

— Pieter, are you still here ? You should have gone back. Your parents will be worried about you at this late hour.

— I was going to go, Hannah. I just wanted to make sure that you were all right. You seemed so sad after the children left. Are you okay ?

— Of course I am, what a question ! But what about Niels, did you hear anything from him ?

— Uh, no...

— And yet you stayed here, watching the flies buzz around ! My word, you're thick as a brick ! You should have roused me ! You should have gone to see his parents and found out if he'd returned ! What a sloucher you are, it's unbelievable ! You're not right in the head. Get out ! I'm going to warn Balbar.

— Goodnight.

— You know I think that you're actually proud of your plan, aren't you ?

— My plan. What plan ?

— To get rid of Niels so you could be with me !

— But I didn't do anything !

— That would surprise me. Whatever happens, your little gamble is going to cost you dearly !

— And what is that supposed to mean ?

— One thing ! You are going to pay for putting selfishness over friendship.

— Oh la la... Now you're acting like my parents and trying to teach me morals.

— And ? You think maybe I'm not being fair ! I'm going to ask you a question, since we're speaking frankly. You think you're a man, right ?

— ...

— At least in one sense. You have hair on your chin and the appearance of a man ! But it's not enough in life to have muscles. You need character too. To know how to be tough and sometimes how to lose. Like today ?

— I lost something ? Me ? I'd like to know what !

— My friendship, if you did anything against Niels ! You see, it was all for nothing. Go, get out now ! We've talked enough.

Pieter was just about to leave, when he wanted to confess everything to Hannah and ask for her forgiveness. He couldn't bear to lose her. Alas, he saw the anger in the look that she gave him and knew that his plea would be rejected. The crime had been committed and the sentence pronounced ; he had to accept that justice was served. He left in silence, bitter in the realisation that by deceiving and losing Hannah, it was his own childhood that he had just betrayed and left behind.

* * * * *

Someone knocked a few times on the trailer, late in the evening. Hannah opened the door. Niels came rushing into her arms, his face defeated, worn down by the miles that he had travelled on foot.

They had finally found each other again.

CHAPTER 3

THE MOUSETRAP

Nino had been working since dawn, his face drenched in the light of the lamp. He finished reading one book and had scribbled down many notes that would need to be organized later.

— Hey, Dubreuil's waking up !

He recognised the footsteps of the septuagenarian in the hallway, orchestrated by a fart, then by the squeaking of a door, and finally by the din of flushing. It was time ! The renters knew that it was at six thirty that this aquatic deluge struck on the landing with the regularity of a metronome. He would have to be quick if he didn't want to be late. Nino tidied up his cluttered desk, where papers hung willy-nilly off the edge. The table perfectly reflected its owner's state of mind : a studious, but turbulent spirit. He then turned towards his books. It was a ritual. The conviction that the texts opposed the precariousness of things with the durability of their words, this sentiment was enough to help him regain his courage. Such determination to fight against time was, everyday in Nino's heart, a reason for satisfaction. At the dawn of day, he forgot all his worries when he thought about all the knowledge he had acquired thanks to these books, and the joys that they had brought him.

As for his last glance, it was for her. He had never been able to tear this photo up, even if he had destroyed all the others. He who scoffed at ghosts from the past, who found grotesque the idea of gazing lovingly at a face when one didn't even know, for lack of news, whether the person was alive or dead. This souvenir of his youth had escaped destruction. Nino had decided to conserve it, to avoid seeing all his memories disappear too quickly. He was happy to be able to depend on her to help him reconnect to the stages of his life, when the milestones of the past began to coalesce into a shapeless mass of memories. Nino did not feel his history was determined by the events that had happened since his birth. No ! His birth year was this portrait and he took the detour she required of him, for the length of a glance, each time that he wanted to evoke the past. The before and after of his life was illuminated from the starting point of those eyes, and then replaced without difficulty in the axis of this unusual chronology.

These moments, ridiculous or not, were necessary in order to guarantee his equilibrium. His philosophical quest has so often demonstrated to him the impossibility of determining principles that he ended up by agreeing to be pragmatic out of necessity : the only thing that mattered was his room. Despite years of reading, his spirit could not discern the ideas of order and reason that he felt he needed to make sense of his daily life.

And still less of dreams, filled with fantasy !

He finished up, dressed, donned his overcoat and glued his ear to the door. He did not want to meet a neighbour and have to talk to him. No one. He opened the door, verified that the hall was empty with a quick glance, and left. The floor creaked underneath his feet. The shoes and heels tested its robustness ; the floor aged in a general indifference, just like the renters. But the corridor was so badly lit that the decrepitude of the place was unnoticeable. Nino groped along, unbalanced by his clubfoot. He reached the height of the stairs, gripping the rail and descended in the direction of the hall when he found himself

face to face with a customer who had recently arrived. He was about to give way so she could pass and go upstairs when she darted and stood full in front of him. He was going to lose his balance when she seized his hands in extremis. She caught him in time. The embrace unleashed a flood of sensations in Nino, who had renounced all relationships for many years. The touch of the hand stirred his heart. Both of them became aware of the ridiculousness of being held that way and stared at each other awkwardly, when the stranger burst into laughter.

— Well, well, Mr Nino, do you think this is really the time and place to court your neighbour ? It is not a mid-life crisis that torments you, Lanzani ?

— You're mistaken, Mr Rossopoulos, I...

— Oh, no need to apologise ! Between us, I've also played this tune ! However, I would have chosen another occasion to make your acquaintance. Miss, don't you find your fiancé a little...

— Mr Rossopoulos, where are you going with this ?

His gaze resting on her legs, she suddenly realized that she was being eyed up. She let go of Nino's hand and regained the landing without so much as a goodbye.

— Ah, women ! What susceptibility ! Don't you find, Mr Nino ? You can't even joke around without them taking offense and taking off in huff. That takes the cake, huh ?

— You might be right, Mr Rossopoulos ! You know, joking around with them was never my forte. I never know what will make them laugh or not. Anyway, I'm never going to understand them !

Nino crossed the hall where Rossopoulos was gloating and left without further comment, to the chagrin of his interlocutor, who was disappointed in not being able to have a longer discussion. The hotelier sat back down in his chair to monitor the going-ons, inspected his dressing room, lit a cigar and opened up the newspaper. Everything was in order and the day started auspiciously.

* * * * *

For years, Nino had played the observer when he was out on the street with all its passer-by's. No matter what he notices, judges or instigates, his fellow man always looks at him critically. With the swing of his pelvis, he looked like a duck, and he felt his handicap like a punishment. He lowered his head, but even this strategy was useless. A sort of sixth sense substituted for his sight and he felt everyone's attention honed in on his clubfoot. Faced with commentaries and jests from the strollers, Nino felt their gaze permanently upon him, condemned and excluded.

He had been late this morning and had tried to run to catch his bus. It was the first time, and it was a relief to have the same preoccupations as the strangers encountered on the pavement. He was not aware of it but he adopted their comportment, pressed by time, and became in his turn a boor ready to push aside people in his way to gain a few seconds. Certainly, the obsession that haunted him was ordinary and down to earth. Fear of his boss obsessed him and he could no longer recognize any voyeurs among the city dwellers, but only saw individuals moulded into the standard of a perfect employee. Neither « I » nor « us » had any place in the middle of this crowd. Only the sentiment of « we » predominated, and Nino clung to this « we » with delight. It was so agreeable to be an element within the multitude, a cog in the machine. « we » functioned without emotion and rushed in double-quick time, with a bellyful of spite and a mouthful of complaints. « we » transformed people into programmed zombies with a perfection that hid beings without attachments, obsessed by their obligations.

« We » do not live, « we » go to work.

Lanzani objected to the vagaries of public transport. His bus had not respected the schedule due to traffic jams and he arrived at the doors of his administration thirty minutes late. The attendance sheet had already left the secretariat for the boss's office. A confrontation was inevitable.

* * * * *

Nino felt ready to admit to any wrong when summoned before Blum. That's to say he was now in such a state of embarrassment, it was as if he had committed a fault. Standing in front of the door of the office, he did not dare to knock and tried to gather his courage when the sound of footsteps made him lose his will. He forgot the instructions, turned the handle and entered the room.

— But... Lanzani, who do you think you are ? What are you doing walking in without invitation ? Didn't we always tell you that you have to knock before entering ? Go out immediately and begin again !

Nino crushed the brim of his hat, incapable of hiding his shame and his regret.

— And then stop fidgeting with your hat, Lanzani, you conduct yourself like a child and it annoys me ! Go on, get out ! Let's finish this.

Nino found himself outside Blum's door for the second time and was fixated on the title : « Head of Department » engraved on a plaque hung at eye level. There was no way out but through. He breathed deeply before giving a knock.

Silence.

He was waiting for a response but no voice invited him to enter. He knocked again. Still silence. The wait imposed for vexatious purposes succeeded, and he promised to not stoop to another attempt. He needed to find a way out of this buffoonery, at the risk of the seeing the test continue. He summoned up his courage and rapped again.

— Enter !

Nino was stuck in the middle of the room and did not dare ask permission to sit. He shifted from one foot to the other, because of the tingling up and down his leg.

— You have the St. Vitus dance or what, Lanzani ? So sit down. That will calm you down !

— There's no need, Sir. I won't disturb you. I only wanted to sign the attendance sheet.

— In addition you are late ! You know, Lanzani, this is not like you ! I hope that you remember that you have clear obligations. You are an example for your colleagues and must remain so. I can count on you, can't I ?

— Of course, Mr Blum.

— Everything is fine then if we are in agreement. Therefore I won't convince you of the merits of my decision. You acknowledge having arrived a half an hour late and having improper conduct towards me ?

— Uh... Yes.

— You will also agree that these facts are reprehensible !

— Effectively, Mr Blum.

— Exemplary by your attendance, it will be to your credit to be sanctioned. You might well expect that compliance with the regulation is a necessity. It is by paying this price that employees will be discouraged from acting as they wish. You can see that I am therefore obliged to send the attendance list to Personnel Services without your signature and inform their manager. As a result, expect a reprimand, Lanzani !

Nino remained speechless, gobsmacked by the conclusions of this civil servant's logic, by the obvious pleasure this bureaucrat took in his certainty of being right. Blum's reputation was not overblown. He had led the conversation with brio and consolidated his power without formally injuring the susceptibility of his interlocutor. His mind had

delighted, under the guise of having the virtue of setting an example, in chastising someone whose seriousness was proverbial. Especially someone like Nino, who was by nature reluctant to fight and with the years even less willing to do so. This exercise was part of the pleasure !

— And if it's any consolation, Lanzani, know that I still consider you to be essential ! Go on, you can take leave now, you're already late enough.

* * * * *

A great excitement prevailed in the building. Nino headed to the premises where he worked without paying attention, still reeling from the interview. He crossed the ground floor where odours of ether and formaldehyde mingled to impregnate the air and engulfed the elevator servicing the basement. As it went deeper underground, the fumes faded, annihilated by the residues of the pet store. He couldn't get accustomed to this stench that made him nauseous, but nevertheless endured the test every morning.

Nino had just barely left the elevator when he found himself face to face with Rebeck, a co-worker. It sometimes proved hard to disentangle the sympathies of those he had never sought to befriend. The friendship with Rebeck fell into this category. He put up with the man's attentions unwillingly in the same manner he suffered the constraints of existence : with resignation.

Rebeck cleaned the floors with great quantities of water, his broom and his mop. No one dared to oppose its overflows and he demanded all rights on the pretext of having participated in his youth in wars of pacification. Comporting himself on conquered land in a service where he played the role of veteran, no door posed an obstacle to his advancement. He entered everywhere, in the offices, changing rooms, toilets, and never without a self-assurance that disarmed the most hardened. His presence seemed so legitimate that the victims lost capacity and ceded the field. Rebeck was also fond of yelling, which immediately reinstated the pecking order if the interlocutor tried to protest.

— Hello Lanzani ! You're finally here... hey there, pay a little attention where you put your gammy leg, if you don't mind ! And get a move on ! I hate it when someone follows in my footsteps and bugs me when I'm sweeping !

Nino acquiesced with a smile, half defiant and half indulgent, although Rebeck couldn't discern between one or the other. The vulgarity of his co-worker's character was shocking, but he had compassion for a man of such a primal nature and preferred to attribute these words to a bore rather than to an outright bastard. He did not wish to dwell on them and refrained from comment, leaving Rebeck to interpret his silence.

The smell of dead mice mingled with the smell of the litter, like every Monday after a weekend when no one had come to take care of the beasts. Nino recognised the scent at the outset. One acquired a discerning nose by manipulating the creatures for months and learning to notice the smell of rotting flesh among exhalations of urine and droppings. Nino identified the smell even before shutting himself into the place and could already affirm, without risk of error, that he would find several corpses. It was almost as if he could calculate their numbers, estimate the amount of faeces in cages and the quantity of centilitres the beasts had relieved themselves of. Nino stiffened when he retreated into what he called his « mousetrap », a place where he also felt trapped by life.

He was at work. Cages stacked four levels high were arranged along the walls to allow the operator to find mature mice at a glance. His function as a laboratory officer was simple : he should at all costs produce the ascites fluid. And if no one expressly told him that the lives of his protégées were of little importance, he had quickly understood. Their task was to be sacrificed upon the altar of science.

He had spotted it immediately. A creature with the bloodied coat fleeing the bites of its fellow mice cavorting in the box. The males sensed death's proximity and persecuted their prey and drew squeaks from each assault. She moved with difficulty because of a belly that she dragged like a cannonball and which left bloodstains in its wake. Nino seized her. With an abdomen that had tripled in volume, tumours under the skin and nicks on the back, the animal would die from one hour to the next. But samples had to be taken before shortening its suffering.

He pinched the skin along the spine and turned the mouse over. This position exposed the belly and made it easier to penetrate the needle. The animal was abandoned to its fate, its limbs splayed from the way it was being held. Where a clot testified to a puncture made the night before, he refrained from draining, certain of no longer finding ascites fluid. He searched between the hairs with the needle tip, looking for a pocket, and pushed intermittently on the flesh, just to observe the reaction. The liquid was there if the wall was bulging. It was missing if it curved under pressure. Nino found the vein after several pat-downs, exerted pressure and breached the skin. The ascites fluid pearled up as soon as he had penetrated the viscera.

He explored the bowels with his instrument plugged into the abdomen and could not help but damage sooner or later an organ and cause bleeding. He was not astonished if no animal withstood more than a week of this treatment. Moreover, today was an unlucky day since blood mingled with the liquid. Nino just cut some tissues. It was time to finish the job.

He withdrew the needle, deposed the beast on the bench and closed the tube. He brandished a ruler over the head, laid down the sharp side of his instrument and used force to crush the neck. While he maintained the position, he saw members moving in all directions and the creature suffocate. He finally saw her body shaken by spasms and shit and pus escaping from her anus. She was still moving. Nino exerted more pressure on the neck to nail the mouse to the bench, grabbed the tip of the tail and violently pulled once, twice, three times. A few crackles at the height of the cervical and the execution was sloppy. It was now a waste product : snout pointed toward the ceiling, the head separated from the body by a depression, eyes bulging.

— « Next ! »

Nino worked like this all day.

* * * * *

He was returning to the boarding house, his work done, when he jumped at the sound of his name.

— Mr Nino !

He couldn't put a face to the voice that called out to him although he was certain he had already heard it. He stopped and started to turn around, supporting himself on one leg. It was the stranger he had met in the stairwell, returning home with a net bag filled with provisions.

— Mr Nino ! You don't mind if I call you that, do you ?

— Uhh... Yes, of course !, he mumbled, blushing at finding himself arriving at the hotel in her company.

— I am very happy to meet you. I also wanted to come knock on your door to apologize. I acted so silly this morning. You'll forgive me, won't you ?

— For having bumped into me ?

— No. For running off without saying goodbye !

— Don't worry, I was not upset. I understood that you wanted to escape from Rossopoulos.

— I really didn't expect to come across him then.

— No matter. I quickly forgot the incident.
— So let us not talk anymore about it ! Especially since I will soon leave the hotel.
— You're leaving already ! I thought that you had only just arrived.
— Yes, but the holidays have reached their end ! I wanted just to visit the capital and get my mind off things.

Apart from this, they marched side by side without daring to speak. Nino was carrying the bag that he hastily took from the hands of his neighbour. They arrived at the hotel, crossed the hall under the gaze of Rossopoulos and Nino accompanied her up to her door.

— Now where did I put my keys again ? It's always the same thing. I throw them in the bottom of the shopping bag and I need to unpack everything to find them.

— You're not really going to sort through your affairs in the hallway ?

— What else should I do ? I need to find them. Go on, Mr Nino, dump it all out on the floor !

Nino was reluctant but fear of gossip prevailed over his shyness. He coughed to appear composed and grew bolder, aware of the ridiculousness of the situation.

— Look, Mademoiselle, you cannot put all your provisions on the floor. What would we look like if one happens to surprise upon us ? Come into my room. You will be more at ease to look for them.

— Do you think so ? I'm not disturbing you ? Really ?

— I was the one who suggested it... Go on, come in !

She followed him and they closed themselves inside this room, where no woman had ever entered.

— I'm sorry it's so cramped. As for the disorder, please don't hold it against me, I rarely have the opportunity to receive guests. Here you are ! Put your commissions on the bedside rug ! Like that, you will find your keys !

Nino watched her fussing at his feet ; she was on her knees, taking out each of the packages one by one.

— What an idiot ! Look ! I am transforming your room in a souk.

It was true. There were so many products littering the ground that Nino could no longer take a step without possibly crushing something. He remained in his corner, arms swinging, and began to curse his initiative.

— That's it, here they are !

She suddenly raised her head and waved a bunch of keys, her face lit up with a smile.

— Do you want me to help you to put your things in order ?

— No, don't worry about it ! It will just take two minutes. Take a seat on the bed. You don't look well.

The rug was clear in a few seconds. She got up and sat down beside him without even checking if an article had slipped under the mattress.

— I'm relieved ! I was afraid I might have lost them in the market.

Nino did not dare to speak. His neighbour also remained silent, both embarrassed now to find themselves in the room without further purpose. She stood up, shook his hand and left, unable to bear the discomfort any longer. She abandoned him to his solitude, even before he had time to realize it, tipsy from the fragrance of her perfume.

The door opened again a moment later and she slipped in through the doorframe and approached Nino, who had not moved since she'd left.

— Mr Nino, forgive my flippancy, won't you ?

He forgave her with a smile, charmed by so much ingenuity.

— And rest assured ! You will soon have new friends !

The prophecy seemed extravagant to him. He remained puzzled when she rushed towards him and kissed him on the cheek, to his great astonishment.

Then she disappeared as quickly as she had reappeared.

CHAPTER 4

THE GLOVE

Gauthier had once again clashed with her mother, furious that she has agreed to accommodate a stranger in Martha's room. In his eyes, you had to be wary of such an arrogant individual who might be hiding evil behind the show of superiority. But how had she responded to his insinuations ? She had laughed. Yes, she had laughed ! Then, as usual, she started to play mother hen and started to reel off arguments to her beloved « Gau-gau ». Firstly, having money come back in again was going to help them, since the gentleman had paid upfront for his entire stay, secondly, the presence of a guest would cheer up their boarding house, thirdly, her womanly intuition told her he could be trusted. That's what she said ! The man would therefore be staying.

Pressed against the window of the workshop that overhung the marquee of the « Balbar Circus », Gauthier was thinking that he would never forget his embarrassment at their first meeting. It was a weekend in July. If it often happened that mother and son ignored each other during the week, each living cloistered in their own apartments, indifference was banished the seventh day. Every Sunday after mass and a detour in the pastry shop, the mother pulled the cord in the dining room to dramatically sound the bell installed in the son's premises. It was the signal. He could go down without fear of the disturbing her, to sit at her side, discuss with a glass in hand or gaze through the window at pedestrians walking under the arcades of the « Grand Place ». It was a moment of happiness where the mother lent an ear to her son's concerns and in which Gauthier took interest in his mother's chatter. It was a sacred space, plucked out of time, where by sharing their confidences, they gathered again the courage to believe in their dreams. He was listening to her complaints that Sunday when he had been shocked by the attitude of a man who was observing them through the windows. Gauthier was going to open the window to ask him to skedaddle when the man put on a smile, tipped his hat in greeting and came knocking on the door.

— Mr Brandier, I presume.

— Himself ! With whom do I have the honour ?

— Boris Zakowski, a friend of your mother.

— Enchanted. What is it you wish ?

— To talk with her.

— I'm sorry, she is very busy. What is it about ?

— Oh, nothing really important ! A case to settle. And, you see, it's confidential ! I need to handle it directly.

— But look here, sir, I am her son.

— All the more reason, dear friend ! There is no worse counsellor than a loved one. Their lack of objectivity is blatantly obvious.

What nerve ! Gauthier was preparing to dismiss the intruder when his mother's voice came through the dining room door.

— « Gau-gau », my dear ! Ask the gentleman to wait a second ! Give me time to take off my apron and I'll be right there.

— Charming nickname, sir ! My congratulations ! You are loved in this house. Between us, you should count yourself lucky. As for the décor in the hallway, it suits me perfectly. I can tell I will be happy here.

— Absurd supposition, Sir, we do not rent.

— You do not rent to just anyone I'm sure, but to me...

Gauthier was going to retreat when the hostess appeared and the two of them immediately locked themselves up in the living room as if they had known each other for a long time. One hour later, the stranger had installed himself in Martha's room, to the amazement of the son. Under what conditions and why ? He knew nothing.

* * * * *

It had been fifteen days since he had been forced to agree that the man could stay at Houloze. His fears allayed, he had to admit that this madman had one good quality : discretion. Zakowski always claimed to have other obligations and declined each invitation despite his mother's insistence to dine together every night. At the most he strove to visit with them a little between his outings, in the hope of being forgiven for his refusals. Life in the Brandiers' house had therefore resumed its natural rhythm over time. Even Gauthier was not disturbed by their houseguest. If they crossed on the stairs, they shook hands and then parted. At the worst, he heard the man pacing when he worked nights in his studio. As for potential friends coming by and disturbing their tranquillity, he received none. The man managed to be forgotten, to be so discreet it was as if he could pass through walls. Until the day where Gauthier had the opportunity to talk to him...

He returned this afternoon to his workshop when he found himself face to face with Zakowski who was sitting on the steps, contemplating the statue exposed on the landing. Such strong tension emanated from his hunched-up body that nothing seemed capable of disturbing him. Lost in his thoughts, Boris was fixed upon the face of the statue as if he wished to extract all its secrets. Gauthier bypassed his guest so as not to interrupt his meditations, when out of the blue a question made him jump.

— Tell me, Gauthier, do you know what this face hides ? This woman escapes me and I am getting furious. Would you have had the chance to know it well ?

— Excuse me ?

— I said. Have you known her well ?

— But-, it's my sister ! She agreed to pose before her departure.

— Offering her body does not deliver her soul ! However, it is her soul that I wish to lay bare. Did you ever see her ?

— What a question ! We cannot erase a single stroke of our childhood.

— Then, tell me ! What was she like ?

— Are you interested in my sister ?

— All women interest me. You see, it's my vocation to save them.

— You're very presumptuous.

— Rather realistic. They are so vulnerable in their appearances.

— You are mistaken with regard to Martha. Nobody has to save her.

— It is always believed until the day when... But tell me, how many years has it been since you've seen her ?

— Why ?

— Just like that...

— Since the death of her husband. Ten years !

— She has necessarily changed in this case.

— Her ? Never.

— So... what is your sister like ?

— Full and straight ! One look and you are conquered !

— A femme fatale, in short !
 — Make no mistake. She only thinks of the happiness of others.
 — The problem is that something prevents you from wanting to reveal too much, don't you think ?
 — You are cynical, sir ! Why do you doubt Martha ? As far as I know, you didn't know her ?
 — Certainly not ! However, in your place, I'd open my eyes before it's too late.
 — What do you mean ?
 — Oh, nothing much ! You see, dear friend, I don't spend my days surrounded by marble in order to overestimate people's saintliness. I, Mr Brandier, I get stuck in with them every day and I see them at work. And you can take my word for it, they are not as angelic as you seem to think !
 — Why do you continue to attend to them if they are such miserable types ? Do as I do, live as a hermit ! Or maybe you enjoy you rolling in the mud ?
 — Let's not exaggerate, Mr Brandier ! However, you may be right. I like swimming in the murky waters because they are rich learning grounds. But rest assured, it is always for a good cause ! As to your reservations... contrary to your beliefs, helping someone, I mean contributing to the fulfilment of their destiny, does not necessarily mean to act according to idealistic principles in every situation. What is good is not necessarily right as the remedy for their ills. On the contrary ! Choosing to lose oneself is sometimes the only way back to the self. In short, I am more of a hybrid genre : sometimes saint, and sometimes devil, depending on the circumstances.
 — My word, you are a monster !
 — Unfortunately no, I'm not that pretentious. Between you and me, why would I become indignant if some people's happiness comes through their own downfall ? They call on me and I run quickly to assist them. All the better ! If their desire involves the participation of other willing individuals, then I am still in on it ! Come on, don't get angry ! You are not a child anymore. And, don't worry, I still have a conscience, because I sometimes say no. There you have it ! When a woman bent on running toward her own ruination wants to drag an unwilling person down with her, I get involved ! Not to put a stop to her madness but more modestly, to divert it and channel it elsewhere...
 — Stop ! You horrify me. How could my mother agree to have you under her roof ?
 — You should ask her. Oh ! We're standing here chatting and the clock is ticking. I'm sorry but I have to go...
 — Your « obligations », I guess.
 — Exactly ! See you soon, Gauthier, and give my regards to your mother. I am afraid I will not have time to visit her over the next few days.

Zakowski was in fact in a hurry. For three weeks he had worked to monitor his prey and to put the trap in place, he now saw the moment arrive where he would have to create the event and influence the course of things. He had also decided to spend the day at the café on the « Grand Place ». He was convinced that the first act of his staged production was going to unfold there, just steps away from the tent.

* * * * *

Hannah had finished distributing the programs along the streets of Houloze and had allowed herself a moment of rest before the evening show. She let herself be shuffled along by onlookers who walked under the arcades of the « Grand Place » when a store window attracted her gaze. Photographs were exposed in the midst of newspaper clippings that announced the arrival of the circus. Hannah approached the storefront, curious to know if her show had caught the attention of the paparazzi guilty of violating Balbar's prohibition. She was absorbed in the photos when she suddenly trembled. A man sitting on

the terrace of the shop was observing her. Despite the pleasure he had in watching her, Hannah guessed from the glances he threw intermittently along the passage that he was waiting for someone else. The minutes elapsed without her taking the decision to move, when the man rose up to stand. He had just spotted a silhouette and did not intend to let it go. It was obviously a relief, because a smile appeared on his lips. His movements intrigued Hannah, who used the window as a mirror to try to discover what was generating this excitement among the crowd. But no face seemed worthy of attention ; no pedestrian seemed of special interest. People were moving too quickly to give her the time to notice. There was only one individual who attracted her, with his lame approach. The chap could barely make his way forward and risked falling at every moment. He railed against the curious onlookers who jostled him and Hannah guessed that he was lost, unable to oppose the stream that had pushed him along to the store window she was spying from.

The incident occurred at this moment, so quickly that no witness had time to intervene. The individual on the terrace sprang into motion and darted headlong into the man who was limping. Hannah let out a scream as the victim, unbalanced by the shock, came sailing at her feet. As for the aggressor, he disappeared with impunity, covering the cries of Sibylline oracles.

— Hey, hermit, your time has come ! Do you hear ! Your time has come ! To be reborn back to life...

In vain. Lanzani understood nothing of the message, he only felt the hand touching his face.

It was Hannah.

— Are you okay, Mister ? Can you get up ? Wait, I'll help you. Take my arm !

— No, it will be okay, Madam ! I'll be able to get up myself. Thank you, but you can go now, it will be okay.

— Have you lost your head or what ? Have you seen what state you're in ? You have a bloody nose and a gash in your forehead and you already want to leave ? Nonsense ! I'm going to take you to my caravan and take care of you. It will give you time to regain your senses.

Like a child who pretended to reluctantly resist the attentions of his mother, he leaned on the shoulder of his benefactress. They joined the circus, leaning on each other, and gradually pedestrians around them scattered, already peddling the news.

— Did you see ? It's Hannah !

— Who ?

— Hannah ! The magician who performs with the « Balbar Circus » ! All the kids adore her ! And now she's taking care of down-and-outs. What a woman !

Boris Zakowski, back in his room, observed the surroundings of the square to ensure the success of his plan. He was infused with pride when he saw them enter the caravan. All those weeks of work had not been in vain. Events were lining up in the best interests of the various protagonists.

* * * * *

Nino was stretched out on the bed and awaiting Hannah's return from the infirmary. The surroundings he found himself in startled him and he could not help but open his eyes wide despite his condition. Certainly, he had just violated the sanctuary of an eternal child. Throughout the room were dolls of different sizes with different faces and clothes ; plush animals escaped from an imaginary zoo ; puppets entangled in their strings occupying the space as monarchs did their territory : as masters ! But now, it was his presence that stood out among these characters all piled up on each other. This décor gave him the feeling that he wasn't so much a woman's guest but an intruder who was barely tolerated by this community of sages. Here, even the owner of the premises must feel



foreign in her own home. A sort of guest supported by the brotherhood, provided that she did not protrude on their domain or disrupt any of their habits. Which is what she must have abided by, judging by the little space she allowed herself to occupy !

Another thing was surprising. There was an object hidden under a veil that sticking out beyond the panels of a folding screen and exuding a halo of light. Nino had not been able to escape its attraction from the moment he had noticed it. His curiosity was stronger than his injuries ; he could not resist the urge to go lift the fabric.

It was a cheval glass, a full-length mirror that could be tilted in its wooden frame.

When he touched the cloth, his movement seemed to cause ripples on the mirror. The mirror did not have the normal rigidity of a material, but had, by who knows what enchantment, the fluidity of a liquid. These hallucinations that resulted from his fall worried Nino, who returned to the bed and snuggled under the blankets. A few minutes later, Hannah was back with a first aid kit.

— Are you feeling better ?

— Yes, the bleeding has stopped. There is only my vision that becomes cloudy at times...

— In that case, I advise you to lie still. You're pale. You know, it's normal to be woozy after such shock. You should rest for an hour or two. Afterwards, we'll see. In the meantime, I will see if I don't have some medicine that could perk you up.

— No, it will pass ! Don't trouble yourself ! I'll be fine in a minute. I really don't want to trouble you any more.

— You are really insupportable ! You are barely up on your legs. Believe me ! You might fall on the road if you leave now. What would I look like then ? You wouldn't let it be said that Hannah is heartless !

—You're... you're Hannah ? The magician ?

— Herself.

— But then ? It is you I came to see.

— Me ?

— Yes. You !

— Why did you want to see me ?

— Well, about the announcement ! Well, I also planned to watch your show. I have one of your programs. Imagine that I found it by chance in my room. A few days ago a friend had misplaced it during her visit. You see, one speaks of you, even in the capital...

— Do you like magic ?

— I scarcely believe in it. In my opinion, a magician is firstly a conjurer. And God knows these manufacturers of illusions know how to fool you. As a kid, I was amazed by their performances and at the same time curious to discover their tricks. That is why I decided to try my luck when I read that you are looking for help. There is nothing more to lose at my age.

— To listen to you you'd think that you've never had the soul of child.

— Excuse me ?

— Kid, you were the argumentative kind... A funny sort, who claims to be able to marvel at things without losing reason. It is impossible. We cannot not both abandon ourselves totally and maintain composure. You must choose. It would be too easy to just want to believe without having real faith. Don't you think ?

— That's true...

— Our meeting will not have been useless in this case. You see, I have to warn you. You have to leave your logic behind in the dressing room if you want to participate in my show. In fact, there is absolutely nothing to understand. I have neither tricks nor gadgets. You simply have to have faith. I don't sell dreams or deceive. I take you to the land of dreams ! I do not maintain the illusion in the existence of another world. I take you to this

world ! Do you get it ? And especially don't come if you have not kept some sense of innocence. The essentials would escape you.

— What should I do then ?

— Anticipate that down here reality is but an appearance ! Real life is elsewhere, in another universe. And I give the key to anyone who feels the obvious evidence in his heart.

— Sorry, I believe that the cause is lost then because mine has run dry.

— Stop your nonsense ! No one is hard-hearted enough to not be able to give of themselves. The circumstances did not lend themselves to it, that's all ! I might mention that given your appearance, you hardly had the chance to favour them with opportunities, am I right ?

— ...

— Well, you've seen the time ! We're talking away and here I am late. I am sorry but I'm expected under the big tent. I'm going to have to leave you.

— You are a funny character, all the same.

— Why ?

— Because you are talking about the heart as if you had already loved. Yet everyone in town says that no boy could ever seduce you.

— People see existence only through the small end of the telescope. Love is not always reduced to a relationship between a man and a woman. It is sometimes a much stronger feeling, a kind of momentum that carries you. How can I tell you, it's so many emotions all at once. The wonder of things... the joy of accepting them as they are... the desire to give oneself to them ! And what else could be added to all of this ? It is all of this, love !

— My word, it is a profession of faith. You should stand up in the pulpit every Sunday.

— Definitely, you are just like the others. You don't want to take me seriously.

— Don't get angry. I was teasing you but didn't want to hurt you. Please forgive me ! The villagers don't really know you at all.

— Only the children understand me. They have not been spoiled by life ! We feel and share the same things. As for you, I'm sure that you will have no reason to despair.

— Why ?

— Because a kind of goodness emanates from you that awaits its time to speak, even if you forbid yourself from it. Let's stop joking around, I'm going away this time. I must rehearse and prepare for the evening's presentation. In the meantime, relax ! We shall resume this conversation when I return. I am sure to convince you.

— Of what ?

— Of the greatness of dreams, my friend ! See you later ! You are going to stay aren't you ?

— Uh... Yes. I won't bother you ?

— No, don't worry ! I never do things by obligation. Ah ! I almost forgot. Rummage through my office, you'll find a book to keep busy you during my absence.

Now that his fears had vanished in the course of the conversation, Nino no longer felt like a foreigner amidst his companions in the caravan. On the contrary. He observed them and believed he could glimpse a certain benevolence in their eyes. Obviously, the words of their mistress had reassured them about the intruder. He was now one of them.

The drawers of the secretary desk served as a storage area where Hannah crammed trinkets and papers. With the exception of one, which was empty. Or almost... Out of sight, a chest rested on a cushion. Nino was approaching the handle to grab it when he felt a warm feeling as if an incandescent source was wasting away inside. Had his fall caused an alteration of his senses ? He wanted to know. A silver key commanded the lock. Lanzani activated the mechanism and raised the lid.

A glove. The right.

So many precautions for such a commonplace piece of clothing ! Hannah was crazy to cherish such a thing. Small — even the hand of a young girl could not slip into it — it seemed crafted of a material that combined both the flexibility of silk and the strength of leather. He could not remember ever having touched anything like it, no matter how far he went back in his memory. And, unless his eyes were tricking him once again, it was the glove that was radiating a kind of brilliancy. He shivered. His reason faltered before the phenomenon, it swept away all of his certainties. Lanzani suddenly felt a dimension of existence impose itself on his consciousness. A world he had no grip on offered itself up to his curiosity. In all innocence he had half-opened the door to the supernatural. However, he would have to take the initiative and seize the glove if he wanted to cross the threshold. Which, after a moment's hesitation, he did.

As he slid his fingertips inside the glove, the cuff came to life, travelling by undulations that stretched the fabric. Lanzani did not budge and watched with disbelief as the phenomenon unfolded before his eyes. The glove was continuing its progress without haste, propelled by an unseen energy. It widened and finally reached his wrist after several creep movements when the life in it disappeared just as it had come : suddenly ! Nino tried to recover his faculties but panic invaded him as soon as he realized what had happened. He paled and felt his legs give way. He should rid himself at all costs of this thing that had become again only an inanimate accessory. Unfortunately, this second skin was stuck to his own and he had the impression of tearing his flesh when he tugged it off and threw it to the ground. He groaned and closed his eyes, convinced that he would find his hand in shreds. The nightmare dissipated the second he opened his eyes again. The skin was certainly irritated but was not damaged.

Leaving the premises. Going ! Immediately, despite the blood, the hallucinations, the headache... Going ! The life buried inside the material started up again, and with little spurts it began to show itself. The material stirred on the ground and shrank visibly when the gesticulations ceased, then returned to its original size. Would he put an end to these torments ? No ! Suddenly, the inconceivable happened. Fingers moved frantically to replace the palm of the glove down on the ground, and after several attempts, made by pivoting the little finger around, it managed to plug itself into a crack on the floor. The hand stood on its ends, dragging itself in the direction of the desk and stopped when it reached the height of the drawer, where the small chest was stored. The man and the thing then faced each other. Seconds elapsed in silence, disturbed only by Nino breathing at the edge of madness. The glove stiffened again and pointed its forefinger in the direction of the box. Still these trances, still these hallucinations ! Nino understood the order. He had to store it in its box, or risk being victim of its spell. He obeyed and approached the hand. The glove coiled up there, Lanzani straightened, deposited it into the receptacle, lowered the lid and closed the drawer.

His visual disturbances had ceased despite the bewilderment that clouded his judgment. Any traces of the nightmare had faded when a sense of tingling titillated him. He looked at his arm. The spots that had appeared on his skin with age had all disappeared. Through magic, Nino had just found his hand as it was in other times, in his youth.

* * * * *

Nino was staggering along the road that was supposed to bring him back to his hotel room. His wound to the forehead was bleeding, his nose also. He soliloquized inarticulately, with a pallid face and a dazed air. His mind staggered, ready to fall over in the darkness, his leg protested at every step, his skull, beset by a headache, imploded. He could not order his thoughts and they dissolved into nothingness before even being formulated. To convince himself that he was not insane, he mumbled to himself constantly.

— I wasn't dreaming ! No, I'm not crazy... I fell ; I was bleeding. But the glove moved... I saw it... A doctor, quick ! I saw it, it moved... the glove, moved... the glove... moved. He walked through the maze of streets without knowing where to go. He had forgotten everything and an obsession haunted him. Get away as quickly as possible from this cursed circus, where he swore to himself that he would never return. He roamed the streets of the village for hours, his forces diminishing. He needed rest... there ! A bench ! So far away. Still a meter away. Still... his legs abandoned him. Nino began to faint when his fall was stopped by an iron fist.

— Hey my good sir, you're lucky that I was passing by ! One second more and you'd be in a heap on the ground ! Hey, is something wrong ? Listen, this will just take two minutes ! You will see later if life is worth it. Fate was persecuting Balbar today. After Hannah's delay at the rehearsal — she said she had taken in a casualty, as if she had the time to play nurse ! — and now he had inherited this cumbersome burden. But he could not get rid of this man, stretch him down on the bench and just leave. And he could not entrust him to anyone else. This was not how he would fulfil his duties toward others. No, it was the only solution : to go to the circus and get some help for this guy who kept deliriously sputtering the same refrain : glove-moved... glove-moved ! He had clearly lost all reason. It would surely be necessary to combine all of Balbar's science and all of Hannah's dedication to cure him. He hid the posters that he was meant to be hanging up around the district under the bench and grabbed the dying man. He weighed so little on his shoulders that they were quickly back in the tent.

Pure chance itself joined forces with Boris's designs to hinder the existence of a loner. Against his will, Lanzani found himself for the second time within the confines of the circus.

* * * * *

Hannah fell silent at the end of the story. And like every evening during Nino's convalescence, to help him recover the memory, she retraced the highlights of the day where he would have sunk into madness without Balbar's intervention. It was indeed a sign of the slow pace of his recovery : he still couldn't remember the events of that afternoon. The only certitude was that he once again owed his salvation to Hannah, who had managed to reconstruct the facts from a few clues.

In particular, his very youthful right hand...

— And after that ! Tell me about that ! What happened ? What did you do ?

— You are worse than a child. Will you never tire of this story ?

— No, because it is about you !

Hannah blushed, embarrassed to evoke the days and nights she had spent lavishing him with care. She had shown him her dedication and compassion without a moment's thought for praise and vanity. As she did not like boasting about an attitude dictated by her heart, she strove to divert the course of the conversation.

— I am sorry but I don't have any more time to talk. I have to get myself ready in a hurry. The show will start in a few minutes. Above all, do not forget your promise. Today you are going to take part in one of the acts.

— Don't worry ; I will not go back on my word. I have so much confidence in you.

He was quiet after this admission, happy to let the silence speak for him. Hannah put on her party dress hidden behind the screen, and although she was determined to avoid embarrassing interviews, she was nevertheless delighted to see a man interested in the woman that she was. As for Nino, he took pleasure in what she tirelessly retold him of these days, touched by his friend's selfless capacity to give. During this sensitive time of convalescence, neither Nino, who sensed her generosity beneath her shyness, nor Hannah, who had guessed at his affections despite his reserve, wished to dispense with their light-

hearted gallantries. On the contrary ! The game of questions and evasions had quickly been maintained by the interested parties themselves, happy to give vent to their feelings without disrupting their modesty. Under the guise of pleasantries that were repeated every night without compromising themselves, Hannah and Nino were feeling the first stirrings of love, without having to declare it or take initiatives. It was pleasant for both of the agreed parties to take things one step at a time, not to seek every day a ploy for seduction. It was enough for them to peacefully wait until the early evening when they found themselves together again and could go through the same routine.

— Tell me ! Tell me about it !

— No, no and no, I already told you ! Once is enough ! You know all about your adventure as well as I do now.

Hannah looked at him a moment, pretending to be angry like a mother scolding her child, and then broke out laughing. She was in truth delighted to give in without having to be begged too much, and to retell again «their » story.

One last time...

CHAPTER 5

A NEW WORLD

The show was in full swing and Balbar had seized the microphone while the staff was busy on the ring removing the lions' cage. To extend the thrill aroused at the sight of wild beasts, the master of ceremonies held the audience spellbound with his remarks. His voice reached Nino's ears and pulled him out of his reveries. It crossed the room and made good on his promise, amplified by the speakers and barely muffled by the big tent. This evening he had to mingle with the crowd sitting on the bleachers and offer to come up when Hannah requested a volunteer.

— Ladies and gentlemen, listen, the time to travel has arrived ! It is late, the night protects us and the stars, messengers from a distant universe, shine in the sky. However, ladies and gentlemen, a woman has explored these worlds to the edge of reality. And she invites you to cross the threshold. So I proclaim : dare to do it, despite your fears and reservations ! Hannah opens the doors to the supernatural. Supernatural ? Let us leave these trifles to the kids ! And why ? Do you have a heart of stone ? Of course not. So, those who dare to live reconnect with the delights of their childhood dreams ! Then live, those who dare to leave the certainties of reason ! They alone will come out standing taller for it : « Yes, I have lived well... ». Come on, my friends, have the audacity of fools and become wise ! Let yourself be carried away by Hannah into the other world !

These words had torn Nino from his tranquillity. The opportunity to become a man was ripe for the grabbing. Could dreams teach him knowledge that could not be discovered in books ? Nino paled. Intellectual quest might be a hoax if Balbar proclaimed the truth. He closed his eyes to chase this possibility from his mind. Alas, Balbar continued with his oration and the scene remained engraved on his retina.

Under the tent, the night ! So black that no spectator could distinguish his neighbour, their gaze captivated by Balbar. The skilled presenter is immersed in the projector light, dazzling in his gala dress, bright eyes, proud to feel that men and women are hanging on his every word.

The miracle was taking place tonight in the bleachers in the soft silence that followed the invitation. Everyone held their breath at the idea of reconnecting with childhood, mesmerized by Balbar's words and actions. Nino himself felt under the influence of the acrobat and heard a voice summon him to keep his promise. When he realized that he could not resist him, he got up, left the trailer and reached the neon sign, « Balbar Circus », which threw a cloak of light on passers-by slipping through the flaps of the entranceway. He tried to pick up the pace despite his lopsided approach, eager to reach the curtains that hid the ring. Nino was imprisoned by the magic of the circus even before he reached it. Smells strangely took shape to ferment in isolation in the greenhouse heat. It was a cocktail of stench and sweat, smells of wild cats and horses and especially the fumes of urine and excrement that the ash could no longer absorb.

He had not yet slipped between the curtains when he divined Hannah's presence. Although he had not yet perceived her voice, he knew with certainty, from the incense burning around the mirror to define an invisible border, that she stood in the middle of the

stage with the mirror and the glove. He pushed aside the fabric of the curtains, a shiver running through him at the thought of discovering another world and taking the plunge.

She was there, a few dozen meters in front of him, staring at his wide-opened eyes as he entered. The one she had been waiting for had finally dared to take this adventure. She could begin.

— Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to tell you a story. Years ago there was born a simpleton. When the mother realized her daughter's disability, she convinced her husband to lock her up and both began to drink to forget their misfortune. Every evening, they joined the prisoner in the attic, a bottle in hand, and mocked her in the candlelight. But they didn't come during a stormy night. Happy to escape the taunts, the little girl gave into daydreaming when her attention was attracted by the sound of heavy drops that fell from the roof. A puddle had formed on the floor in the course of hours and the water was solidified in the alchemy of the rays of moonlight filtering through the attic. So much so that in the morning it had turned into a mirror. The girl grabbed a glove that was lying there and touched it. Waves of energy were born at every touch and danced around its edges. Even more amazing, her fingers sank into this material, which was both hard and permeable at the same time. She crossed through the mirror, despite her fears, and what she saw there gave her the will to live. It was... just imagine... a kind of universe... how to explain it ? Meetings such as... Wait !

The silence that had imposed itself without the knowledge of viewers now reigned throughout the bleachers. All were captivated by her story and wanted to know what she had discovered. And voila ! Hannah stopped and plunged them into expectation, just as she was about to satisfy their curiosity.

— You !

— ...

— You, sir ! At the back. There, on the folding seat ! Tonight, you will be the elected representative !

— Me ?

— Yes, you are going to discover what everyone here is burning to know. You're going to see what is behind the mirror.

— But... Maybe I could relinquish my place to someone else ?

— No.

Hannah moved forward under the spotlight, straight up to the man hidden in the dimness. The public had guessed his anxiety by his intonation. How the devil could he be afraid ? Everyone would give his or her eyeteeth to be in his place. The spectators followed the circle in which the magician was walking, curious to see who could have possibly hesitated.

* * * * *

A beam of light fell on Nino's shoulders. He blinked, his hand above his eyebrows like a visor. The light blinded him and he was getting ready to leave when he felt a hand grab his. He was pulled into the centre of the stage, just steps from the mirror, as docile as a blind man shouldered by his guide. The projector was turned off, the tent disappeared in the darkness, the surface of the mirror became fluorescent. A halo of light now enveloped Hannah and Nino. It was a strange, almost spectral, atmosphere. The animosity towards Lanzani had disappeared and everyone was watching the scene with emotion. It was a shared thrill, a communion.

— Are you ready ?

— Not really ! But I had promised you, is not it...

— Have courage ! The Land of Dreams awaits. You see, it always reflects the image of the heart. It is just as pure and innocent.

- Hannah. And what if mine is not...
- In that case...
- In that case, what ?

Hannah shuddered. She realized suddenly that she had just committed a blunder, no, worse than that, a mistake. She had caused Nino to fear by suggesting that the supernatural reflected his desires. The dream could be a nightmare if his thoughts were not as noble as she had guessed them to be. Could she have deceived herself about this man ? Alas, it was too late. Facing the audience, neither one nor the other could retreat. She took advantage of the unrest, took the glove out of the case and slid it onto Nino's fingers.

A collective « oh, oh, oh... » of fright rang out through the circus when the phenomenon occurred. The crowd was captivated. The cuff came to life once more, then widened to swallow the whole hand. It was a custom-made fit that married perfectly to the flesh and clung to each pore. Nino seemed distant. The flow emitted by the material reinvigorated him as soon as it was slipped on his hand. His eyes regained their sharpness and his spirit its lucidity. He was freed from all the fears that had beset him a few seconds earlier. Even the concerns raised by Hannah faded, swept away by an excitement that drove him to boldness ! He felt the courage of a conquistador. Whatever was about to happen, he was ready for it...

- What do I do now ?
- — Wait until I move away a few steps and have disappeared into the darkness. Then bring the glove close to the mirror, that's all.
- — And then ?
- — Things will take care of themselves, you'll see.
- — Fine... See you soon, Hannah ! I, how can I say it, I...
- — Do not say anything ! Not now. Later. When we're ready.
- — Are you afraid of what might happen to me or what I could tell you ?
- — Who knows ?

Nino was in the middle of the ring, drowned in the aura of the mirror. He seemed to gradually metamorphose into an evanescent being, the silhouette of a ghost, like a sleepwalker with the complexion of death. Spectators watched with concern as this avatar turned a man into an immaterial creature. As for Nino, he raised his arm in the direction of the mirror, indifferent to their anguish. No sound, no whisper, no crackle. The entire circus held its breath.

The glass wall trembled when it came into contact with the glove. Nino touched the mirror and the stirring of the material became noticeable as he repeatedly insisted. Nino was in turn troubled by tremors. The moment his reason toppled, he pushed the glove through the material. The mirror offered no resistance and the man penetrated it. He saw his arm and shoulder disappear, swallowed up by the vacuum. So he stood at the wooden frame, passed a foot across and in this uncomfortable position, straddling two worlds, made a sign to Hannah before diving into the unknown. The waves that resulted ran aground on the edges of the frame and the surface of the mirror soon found again its rigidity. The laws of physics were restored. The mirror had become an object without a soul, a cold material, smooth and compact. In all but one detail, however. Anyone would have wished to look into it would have noticed with bewilderment that the silverfish surface reflected no images.

* * * * *

It was dark. No ray, no light to guide the eye. Nino waited, pressed with his back against the mirror for the time it took to adjust to the darkness. His nose detected a scent that presaged a presence. The thickness of the night oppressed him when he heard one voice lost at the end of a corridor. The chime of a music box accompanied it.

- — Hello !

Nino kept silent, on the defensive. He preferred not to be tricked, even though he believed the voice to belong to someone friendly. Insulted by his silence, the voice continued its monologue, with a hint of bitterness in her voice.

— Why are not you nice to me ? I've done nothing ! The others normally say hello. Why not you ?

The remarks were disarming and Nino suddenly felt uncomfortable. The voice was obviously pained and he had hurt the person's feelings. He hastened to respond to ask for forgiveness.

— Excuse me, but... I do not know you !

— Is this a reason to be rude ?

— Certainly not ! But who are you ? I can't even see you !

Again, silence.

— Hello !

Nino hesitated and then stammered.

— Hello !

— Ah, you see that you are not bad ! I knew it anyway. I had been warned...

— Someone warned you ? Who ?

— You are very curious ! Well my heart, if you want to know !

— Heart ? But who are you ?

— The guardian!

— The guardian ? Here... in the dark... hidden in a corner... with a music box as your only company... You're not afraid ?

— Of whom ? There is nobody here. And I'm not hiding. I'm even very close to you. At the other end of the corridor. Hold on !

Nino heard the crackle of a match. There, at the end of a corridor flanked by doors, he saw appear in the candlelight the silhouette of a girl sitting at a desk, just in front of a hall with closed doors. She faced him and stared out toward him. The dimness of the light shielded Nino and he was elated to be able to look at her without being seen. Although this observation position reassured him since he was free to think as he pleased, he was surprised that the hostess didn't adapt the lighting that prevented her from distinguishing new arrivals. It would be so simple to install a light above the mirror ! As for the airs of a saintly hypocrite she gave him, it was ridiculous. Nino was laughing and smiling, sure of his impunity.

— You laugh ! You're making fun of me ! Would you take me for a fool ?

Nino stiffened, struck by the relevance of the remark. She could see in the dark.

— Uh, yeah... Well, no ! That's not what I meant. Forgive me, I do not wanted to offend you. You seem so nice.

— Blah blah blah! I am willing to forget that you are being ironic on my account, but on one condition...

— ...

— Swear to me to become my friend !

— Your friend ! But...

— But what ?

— I do not know you. After all, maybe you're just a birdbrain who changes her mind all the time.

— That's not true ! It is you people over there who are fickle !

— Really ?

— You see that I'm right ! You laugh. You do not want to promise then ?

— No, I'm not laughing. You amuse me, that's all !

— So, would you like to ?

— Make that promise ? No ! You see, how to say it, it is too early to make an oath.
We just met.

— Then me too, I'll take my time.

— So why then ?

— Because you are a visitor. And, believe me, I have known enough of them to be wary. They promise me every time that they'll come back when they open one or the other door. But I never see them again once they've returned to their world. They are liars. They are all bad. Say, sir, will you come back, you ?

— Why not...

— Really ?

— Yes. Here, I'll even make you happy on this point. I promise you.

— Hooray !

She took the porcelain merry-go-round and raised the mechanism that activated the music box. Two faceless grooms began to turn astride their horses, carried forward by the accents of the lullaby. She put the toy on the desk, stood up, walked up to her guest, the candle above her head, and stopped in the middle of the passage. Nino had still not moved.

— You see these signs above doorframes ?

— Yes.

— Well, take the time to read them one by one. They will guide you in choosing your dream. Me, I cannot advise you. My task is simple : I open doors with my keys. And I accompany if necessary...

Nino looked down at ten charming, evocative names. He stared at one heading after another in the hope of discerning which odyssey it invited the reader to embark on.

— Have you chosen ?

— Yes.

— Which door do you want to go through ?

Nino pointed his forefinger at a sign that was engraved with these words : « An afternoon in the country ». She made no comment, took her trousseau out of her pocket, found the key, slipped it into the lock and turned the handle.

— You can go, sir, the Land of Dreams awaits you.

Nino advanced toward the threshold, his heart beating quickly.

— Do not worry about what might happen ! I shall remain permanently in the corridor. You just have to call me and I will open the door immediately.

— But I don't know your name...

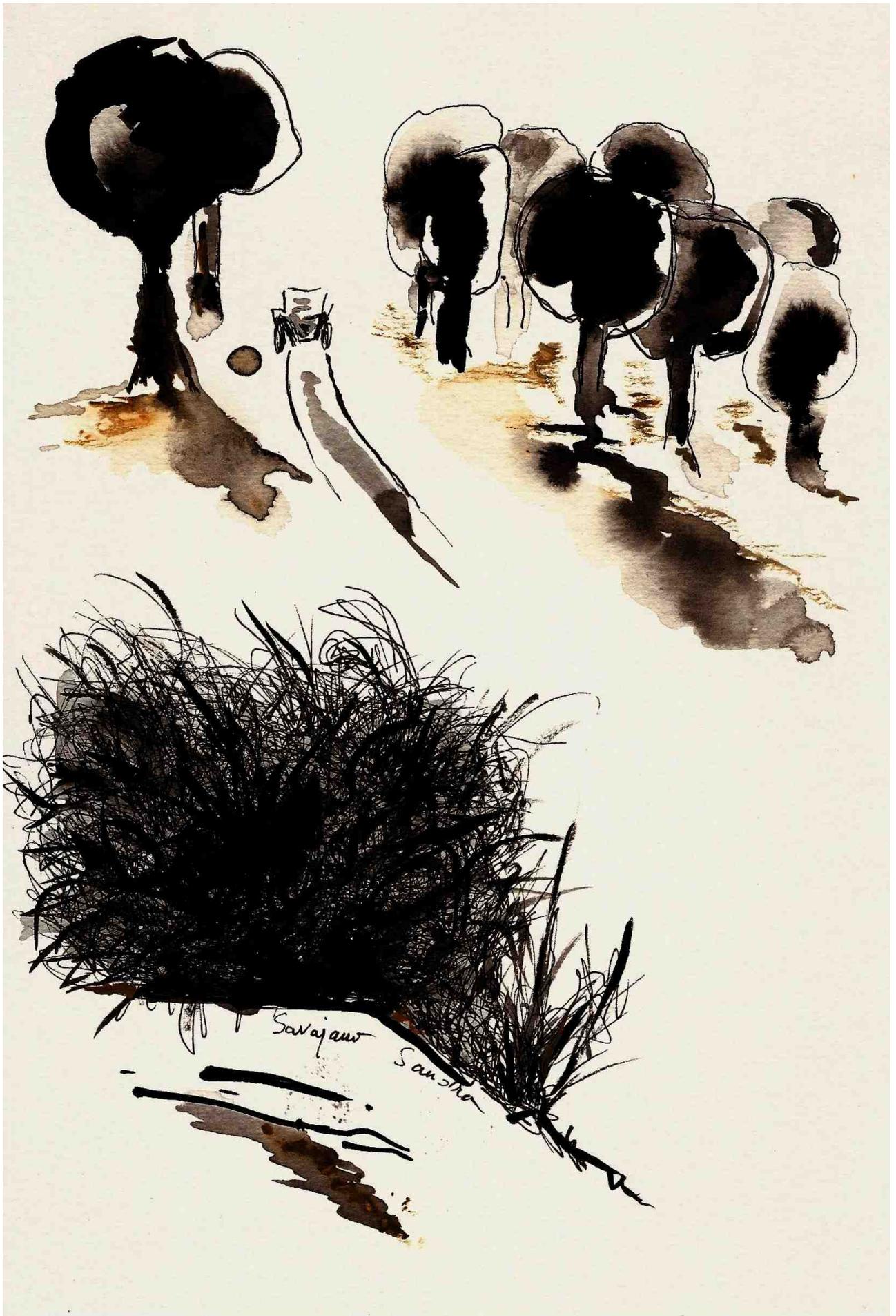
— Nelly ! And yours is Nino, isn't it ?

— So you can guess everything ?

She smiled in response and gave nothing away. The second Nino set foot on the other side ; she wished him a « good adventure » with the wave of her hand.

« AN AFTERNOON IN THE COUNTRYSIDE »

Hidden in the bushes, Nino guessed he heard the cries of children as they approached. But the thicket where he was hiding was so dense, the brambles so tangled, that they would never guess that someone was taking refuge there. They would pass by without noticing him. The inviolability of his hiding place reassured Nino and gave him a moment, the time to regain his strength. He crouched, breathing heavily after the race, and took advantage of the rays of sunlight that filtered through the bush. He tried to catch his breath, his eyes half-closed, unable to forget that it was he who was the object of the manhunt ! Fear oppressed him and he startled at every crackle of a branch, terrified at the idea of being discovered. From time to time he spread the leaves to watch for them



and guessed from the sharpness of the shouts that his pursuers would soon survey this part of the forest. But all hope was not lost. The thicket overlooked a road and, if he felt on the verge of being discovered, he would not hesitate to cross it and to sink into the woods located on the other side. The possibility of an escape dissipated his fears when he heard the sound of a car coming in his direction. He stopped monitoring the grove and turned toward the highway. Was his retreat going to be cut off? Despite the distance he recognised the coupé of the Count who lived not far away. This madman of speed, always in a hurry to get to town, was traveling at low speed. Nino cursed the setback when he saw the vehicle stop a few meters away. And, one surprise after another, it was not the husband who stepped out onto the ground, but the wife! Nino forgot his fate... He had often heard from friends or in the café of this bride who came from a village family and was a main topic of conversation in town because of her antics and of her beauty. The aristocrat had installed her in his house before marrying her shortly afterward. Ten years later, people never tired of mocking this marriage. As for Nino, even if he followed the couple through the distorting prism of rumours, he had never had the opportunity to be introduced to the countess who split her life between the castle and their small residence in the capital. Her forays into the village were rare and people who could claim to attend on her were few. The hawking of all the « did you hear that » rumours had not usurped her fame, she was beautiful but of a beauty that betrayed no emotion. It was a remarkable face with fine features and bright eyes, a sleek silhouette, always tastefully dressed! However, one could guess from her haughty bearing that she was a being full of pride.

She also appeared to be hunted because, barely out of the car, she looked all around her, as if she wanted to make sure she was alone. To see how clumsily and hastily she rummaged through her bag made Nino realise how anxious she was. What did it mean, this abrupt stop in the countryside? He understood when she pulled a knife from her bag, squatted and planted the tip in a tyre. It gave out a whistle and when it was flat, the Countess withdrew the blade, stood up and scanned the horizon. The road was deserted. No witnesses had seen her. She pulled a flask from her pocket and put it to her mouth. She regained her composure when the bottle was empty, dusted off her dress, put away the weapon, verified that she had no spare tyre and immediately set off on the way back, looking satisfied despite having miles to go before reaching the town. Nino felt his heart being carried away as she approached his lair and he distinguished her features. This woman was truly enchanting. He could not take his eyes off of her when suddenly a shout made them both jump.

— Come! Here he is! I found him!

A boy parted the bushes and faced him, about to encircle him. Nino stood up and rushed into the brambles to cross the road. Alas, his clubfoot stumbled against a stone and he tumbled down the slope in front of Madame de Clery, immediately surrounded by a swarm of children. The countess understood in the look Nino gave her that he had witnessed the puncture. She stared at length at him, but no child guessed why she was happy to witness the arrest of the fugitive. She pretended not to pay attention, circled the group and went on her way while the kids lashed out at the man on the run.

* * * * *

Nelly laughed, amused by the squeals of a young mouse lost in the fabric of her blouse when she was startled, surprised by the violence of the blows against the door. He was finally back. She took the candle and went to open the door in the middle, while the mice fled her petticoats and scattered in the hallway. Nino was there, his face haggard, leaning against the frame and unable to take a step...

— Mr Nino, what happened to you?

Nino was shaking from head to toe and did not recognize Nelly, too busy mumbling fragments of sentences under his breath.

— Witch ! Go away, I do not want to see you anymore ! I do not know you anymore ! Go away ! « An afternoon in the countryside ! », You must be joking ! A nightmare, yes ! But I said nothing... I saw nothing... I did nothing... Martha, I do not know ! Never saw ! Back, witch ! Stop chasing me... I'll be quiet, you hear ! Leave me alone ! And you standing there watching me, who are you ?

— Mr Nino, it's me, Nelly !

He recovered his senses at the mention of his name, crossed the threshold where he lingered and slammed the door, frightened at the idea that the Countess could join him in the corridor. Saved ! The dream had vanished and the memory of the meeting became blurred. He felt curiously safe here at the border between worlds, between dream and reality. Even if he wanted to return to his other life, like all the visitors before him.

— What happened, Mr Nino ? Tell me ! You know, you're the first to return in this state. All the others are usually happy.

— Did they open this door ?

— Of course not ! Each visitor sees new signs...

— That is fortunate, Nelly ! This story was a nightmare.

— What is a nightmare, Mr Nino ?

— What ! You've never done it ?

— No.

— Look, Nelly ! Men sometimes dream of funny things.

— So, tell me ! I'm big enough to hear everything.

— No, not tonight ! I'm too tired. I want to go home. I want to find my friends and tell them everything. Finally relieve myself of the burden of the past.

— And me ! Am I not your friend ?

— I would be too afraid that you wouldn't be if I ever confided it to you.

— While your other friends would stick by you ? Even after your confession ?

— I think so, Nelly ! Please understand. They are like me. Our dreams and weaknesses are the same.

Nelly said nothing. He blew out the candle without giving her time to protect it with her hand. If she ran to the office looking for a match, searched and found it and struck it, Nino would have already crossed the corridor and gone back through the mirror ! Her haste would not change the course of things. Nelly let him get away in the dark and Nino heard her choking back tears as he was sinking into the material for the second time.

— Mr Nino ! You're coming back, aren't you ? And we will be friends forever ! Right, Mr Nino ?

What good was it to answer and what could he respond ? Nino himself did not know what to think after this adventure. His reason wavered and only his determination to get back to his world preventing him from sinking into despair. He disappeared, leaving Nelly to her solitude without knowing whether he would see her again, happy to be reunited with Hannah and Balbar, the only ones who would never humiliate him.

CHAPTER 6

BORIS GIVES LESSONS

Memories never resurfaced with equal force as in these days when, forced to face the crowd, Zuletta could not escape the lust of men. She had been too often offered to satisfy their appetites not to know that her beauty disorientated them and not to detect every pair of eyes gazing at her, even if they were hidden behind a newspaper or behind a pair of glasses. From her first step into the street, she felt the atmosphere grow heavy with desire, even when she was dressed from head to toe. The terrors of her childhood knotted in her throat and she found her reflexes of the past, convinced that a pimp would emerge from nowhere and force her to respond to the advances. Anxiety gripped her and suffocated her, until the thought of Boris came to her rescue.

He would be soon presenting himself on this autumn day, as his train was coming in fifteen minutes. She paced the concourse at the station, bowed her head so as not to attract the attention of travellers and sometimes cast a glance at the « Grand Cerf » clock. She had quickly noticed that a gypsy had been following her for several minutes. A street hawker with bouquets of roses arranged on a stand, whom she'd seen offering flowers to lovers and who had stopped harassing his customers to follow her as soon as he had spotted her.

A little runt barely out of his teens, the young man was astounded to meet a woman of colour. Zuletta was reassured when she deciphered the meaning in his eyes and realized he was not burning with passion but with admiration. The boy's intentions were flattering to her self-esteem, now that she no longer feared him.

— Ladies and Gentlemen, attention please ! Train No. 144 is pulling into the station. Please stay away from the sides of the platform. Thank you !

The voice springing from the loudspeakers startled Zuletta. She was going to miss the arrival. She pivoted around to join the convoy that arrived in a squeal of brakes when she came face to face with the gypsy. The opportunity presented itself for him to explain himself, and he was willing to risk facing the young woman's anger if she would just let him talk. Unfortunately, she passed him without even deigning to see him, without even granting him a smile. Zuletta strode by her eyes on all the travellers getting off the train. Her eagerness to reach the express train clearly indicated that she was waiting for someone.

Zuletta immediately spotted Boris, who stood a head taller than the flow of travellers. He was finally back after three months of absence. An estrangement so long, made necessary by the vagaries of the investigation, would not happen again. She swore to it. Whatever happened from now on, she would follow him if he had to depart again. But today was a day to celebrate and she could not resist the pleasure of drawing his attention. She gesticulated and shouted so loudly that Boris finally saw her, surprised to see such exuberance in his protégée.

— Hey Zuletta, what's happening ? Don't you see ? Everyone is looking at you.

— Well, Boris, you were going to pass me by without noticing me.

— I thought the appointment was this afternoon, excuse me ! And didn't we agree to meet at the apartment ? You know my horror of public displays of affection.

— I know, but I looked so forward to seeing you after all these weeks of waiting. I could not refrain from wanting to surprise you. You're not angry, are you ?

— Of course not ! It is not, however, your usual habit.

— Neither is your following the wanderings of a circus for three months !

— You're right. Let's go. And what about having some lunch now ? I'm hungry and have many things to tell you.

Zuletta did not dare to act any more extravagantly, despite her desire to be embraced by Boris, which he had perceived and preferred not to satisfy for fear of setting a precedent. Any token of affection died at the edge of her lips, stopped by the coldness of a man no emotion seemed to move. She had to contain at once this burst of tenderness exacerbated by their separation and she stopped from moving toward Boris, stopped herself from daring to kiss him. Her eyes were dull and her mouth twitched. He had broken her momentum and she remained motionless, waiting for an initiative from him. As far as public displays of affection, they did not even shake hands !

— We never had lunch at « Grand Cerf », did we ?

— No.

— Well, let's go to celebrate my return ! You'll see. This is one of the smartest restaurants in the capital, even if it is inside the station. The food is succulent, the service impeccable and the ambience elegant.

— No less !

— Why are you smiling like that ?

— Because I can barely imagine you frequenting that kind of place. Your character and rash manners must clash in a place like that.

— Am I really such a boor ?

— No. But you're frightening ! And people like their peace ; they prefer to avoid those who seem likely to inconvenience them.

— They would not have their peace if they forbid me access to the dining room. In that case, I would...

— Make a scene, wouldn't you ? You make trouble everywhere you are, Boris, and you know it !

— Do you speak with full knowledge of the facts ?

— No, but I owe you so much and...

Zuletta did not finish the sentence. In the second she entered the restaurant through the revolving door that had snatched Boris in a whirlwind, she felt a hand grab her arm and stop her running. She jumped, gasped and pulled herself together before staring at her aggressor. A bouquet of roses slipped between her fingers as she heard whispering, « This is for you, Madame, with all my heart ! » and a figure darted away and melted into the crowd. Zuletta turned around to say thank you. It was too crowded with commuters and with difficulty she distinguished a pleading face amid the hustle and bustle that quickly blossomed when she gave him a smile.

— Well, well, are you making conquests ? Congratulations. Moreover, it is time to damn men if you want my opinion. It's true ! No one can conceive of it that you want to stay with an old wolf.

Once she had crossed the threshold of the brewery, Zuletta stood still, holding the flowers to contemplate this innocent's testimony of affection, standing there in the middle of the passage. Her attitude had not escaped the perspicacity of the other customers and it had taken a remark from Boris to bring her back to the realities of the moment. Yet, far from sticking to the reserved attitude she usually displayed in opposition to his taunts, she laughed. With a laugh so contagious that bystanders lifted their heads and laughed too. Boris and Zuletta made a grand entrance in the restaurant, followed by indulgent eyes forgiving both the innocent offender for his misconduct and her choice of companion.

— Just between us, I don't recognize you anymore.

— Your absence has matured me, that's all ! By the way, I want to ask you a question.

— I'm listening.

— Are you serious when you claim to be an « old wolf » ?

— Of course !

— Old wolves are solitary and flee from company. Don't you know that ?

— My faith, no. Where are you going with that ?

— To you, Boris ! If you were a misanthrope, you would have asked me to leave your apartment a long time ago, don't you think ?

— Is that so ?

— Well, I'm sure you do not really believe in the advice you gave me about men. I would not have seen a hint of bitterness in your irony if you really wanted to see me go. In some ways, it is the resentment of an old wolf ! Hurt to see another offer me what he himself thought to offer but refuses to for some obscure reason. That's why you made me laugh back there a few minutes ago.

— My word, but your comments are biting today ! Fortunately I am not absent more often. You put my nerves to the test. And what must the old wolf conclude ?

— First, I can read well how his heart fights against his efforts to conceal his feelings, and second, that I no longer aspire, anymore, to be his protégé.

— Yikes ! This is revolution !

— Do not be ridiculous, Boris, and see for yourself how it is ! You left for three months. That's a long time and I missed you. That's it.

This investigation would definitely upset his life. Events he had experienced there stirred new convictions and Zuletta was rebelling. Was there an impending change in his life ? He would think about it later. He decided for the moment to close the chapter to escape questions.

— Listen, we can discuss these things later ! We had better get back to business. We must take stock of things before my three o'clock appointment with Madame de Clery. What's the state of play on your side ?

Boris was skilfully turning the topic back to work, satisfied to stand on the firm ground of an investigation, where he knew how to stand up to Zuletta.

— I followed your instructions and made several visits to her son. As she has done since the death of her husband, Madame de Clery always finds a pretext to prevent Mark from spending his holidays at the castle. He stayed this summer at the boarding school and eventually came to enjoy our meetings, even though he was afraid at first that I had been sent by his mother. I befriend him and swore to never speak of our meetings.

— Perfect ! Were you able to elicit his confidences ?

— Yes.

— What a lack of conviction ! Okay, I can guess your thoughts : « Boris, must the investigation take precedence over everything ? Can't you think of Mark's confusion ? ». Do not worry ! I will make sure to get him out of trouble. I have to attend to the most urgent matter first, you know ?

— As it must be.

— Did he clarify anything about the truthfulness of his mother's statements ?

— Yes.

— I thought so. But we shall talk again of it tonight because I'm pressed for time. This is the part where I come in ! Do you remember that after my interview with Madame de Clery, I discovered that she and Nino were natives of Houloze ?

— Yes.

— I went to the site and while there I learned a detail about Nino's life. As a kid, he was fascinated by the circus and dreamed of becoming an acrobat. To the point of running away to follow the big top in its travels...

— I actually remember this anecdote, which seemed to me to be unrelated to the investigation.

— It would have been perhaps, save for the conjunction of two events. The announcement of the circus' arrival in Houloze and the arrival of a letter in which you pitied him his fate. Something clicked in my head ! This chap was ruining his life.

— The Good Samaritan took the upper hand !

— Stop making fun ! You know I loathe do-gooders. Charity and good works do not interest me. I simply answer « present ! » if you ask me and if you pay me. Life too often prevents men from becoming what they want to be !

— It is not Life that thwarts their plans but men themselves with their little schemes and shenanigans. Look at Nino ! Wasn't his existence shattered by his family's opposition to his becoming an artist, and then by a woman who wanted to prevent the disclosure of a secret ?

— Stop quibbling if you please ! Free will is a myth that gives everyone the courage to get up every morning and continue what he was doing yesterday and do again tomorrow. People would shoot themselves out of their misery without the illusion that they can at any time chart a new map of their fate. It is life though that is hiding and calling the shots behind this hoax. Much better, it is she, the queen, who determines tactics and sacrifices pieces in this game of chess. And for good reason ! These tokens believe so much that they are free that when they say « I » they do not even realize that they are playthings of a strategy that transcends them. They are too weak. Slaves to their desires and ambitions, they do not know how to argue without disregarding their sensitivity. Blinded by passion, they imagine that their interests are best served when they first meet a superior logic : the final purposes of life ! For my part, I will never submit myself to the demands of nature and the whims of the heart. The use of reason is enough for me to find my way.

— Men can therefore free themselves since you claim to have achieved it !

— Look around you, Zuletta ! People are too childish to reason.

— Will you never stop wanting to be a superman !

— Why should I change ?

— Because you should not spend your life wanting to prove something. You should also consider living it.

— For more than fifty years I've been working at it.

— No ! Going through life implies knowing how to love, Boris. Yet you meet your fellow men to either fight them or mould them. You are incapable of just allowing yourself to live. You are too hard, and if there's a flaw in you it is that.

— A flaw ? You're the first to tell me that.

— I know. You only hear what you want to hear. Look, you pretend to be free from instinct and from emotions, and at the same time you want to help people to thrive. Is this not contradictory ? Why do you agree to support those whose reason abdicates if desire and sense prevail in our society ?

— Only for realism, Zuletta. Experience shows me the immaturity of my fellow citizens every day. Why knock myself out under these conditions just to shape them in my own image ? You know me, it is not my style to fight for lost causes. I take them as they are, without wanting to change them, even if it is true that I find them pathetic. Take Nino, who we were just talking about ! His whole life was shaken about due to changing circumstances. Is it reasonable to expect to transform the poor fellow into a man ? Obviously not. Better to help him realize his ambition of becoming an acrobat ! Because he is an artistic soul who never resolved to make the decisions imposed by nature. That is why I decided to intervene.

— In short, he will still be weak but happy. This is the philosophy that guides your actions !

— Pretty much, yes.

— And that's why you asked me to go into his room and leave behind the program announcing the arrival of « Balbar Circus » in Houloze. You were convinced he would seek to get there.

— Yes. Especially since there was something on the back of the paper that could induce him to drop everything : a job offer ! Imagine Hannah recruiting an assistant. Do you realize ! The opportunity was offered to Nino to realize his dream. I was willing to bet, considering his job, that he would make a return trip. All that was left was to induce this woman's choice ! It was time to learn more about her and I organized an encounter to do so. Ironically, my plan has succeeded beyond all expectations. Now they are crazy about each other !

— Are you sure ?

— I never forgot a detail, you can be sure of that. Hannah has a collection of cuddly toys and it gave me an idea. I asked a kid to knock on her door and offer her one. She doesn't know it, but it is bugged. Since then I have a ringside seat to listen to her conversations. Moreover, it was by this means that I discovered what secret connected Nino to Martha.

— What is it ?

— Wait ! I'll first finish with them. I told you they were inseparable. So far, nothing unusual. But the plot thickens. Nino became infatuated with another woman !

— Another woman ?

— Exactly.

— Impossible ! Nino is too shy. He was unable to talk to me at the boarding house without blushing.

— There's a lesson in that for you ! You see what awaits me if I take life as it comes.

— Stop being ironic about feelings.

— Recognise it for what it is anyway ! Two women for one man, it seems like a vaudeville.

— You are mistaken, I'm sure. Nino is not a womanizer and I cannot imagine him launching into a multitude of adventures. Life frightens him too much. He is a dreamer.

— Exactly, Zuletta ! You just got to the heart of the problem. This other woman is the woman of his dreams. But she's in a dream !

— A dream ?

— Yes. You remember the poster where it was written : « Hannah, the greatest magician of all time. »

— Yes.

— Well, this woman deserves the epithet. Those who wish can transverse through a magic mirror every evening, and, believe me, Nino does not resist the pleasure of disappearing anymore.

Zuletta stared at Boris, astonished to hear him peddling such nonsense.

— Come on, Boris, it's conjuring, that's all !

— I know nothing about it to tell the truth, but one thing is certain : the mirror is as thin as a sheet of paper and the spectators really do disappear ! For the rest, it is enough to see their faces on the way back. It's a pity that I cannot try the experience, at the risk of being recognised. But back to business ! Nino's first journey was a fiasco. He emerged convinced that he had experienced a descent into hell. It took all of Hannah's persuasion to encourage him to take the path of dreams again, but he hasn't missed a show ever since...

— Did he go crazy ?

— Worse ! He fell in love. Every night behind the glass, he meets a teenager who is the exact counterpart of Hannah. You see, Zuletta, Venus has two faces and Nino discovers the ambiguity of love later in life. From now on, he is torn between two women : one that shares with him the vicissitudes of life and chains him to it ; the other one that delivers him from it though the charm of her evanescence. Men rarely escape this duality because these

figures occupy complementary places in their hearts. Now, I do not know by what miracle, but Nino has the opportunity to resolve the contradiction. Dreams are as real as reality, and in dreams, Nelly is just as alive as Hannah. There is a border of glass that separates them.

— Is it possible ?

— Alas, yes, I should say, even if this kind of story appeals to me. I almost start to distrust myself. Maybe I should stick to the obvious ! I'm getting older and my insight is not what it used to be. My plan presented deficiencies. I never imagined Nino's fit of madness and him escaping after their meeting. You understand. My scenario would have collapsed if chance had not rescued me in the person of Balbar. But I had thought it all out and planned everything. At least so I thought...

— Well, Boris, you worry me ! This is the first time I see you tormented by doubt. You should drop the investigation. It is only bringing us trouble.

— Don't worry ! My work is done. I am almost finished writing the report that I will send to Madame de Clery. I have found Nino and I will announce his arrival in the capital. The Circus has just taken up its winter quarters and it will be lodged in a big top from October to March. By the way, what time is it ?

— Two-thirty.

— I'll be late. I have to run. I have an appointment with my client at 3 o'clock. Forgive me, but you will have to have your dessert without me. Here, take the chequebook to pay. See you tonight. And then he made a gesture that he had never before allowed, he took her hand affectionately and handed her his wallet. Boris dared a caress and departed from his principles. He stood up, pushed aside the neighbours' table and left Zuletta alone to finish her meal. If everyone else criticized his lack of manners, for her part, she thought that it was only the fallout from the investigation. Boris had changed more in these three months than he had done in twenty years. It was un hoped for and she ought to rejoice. She lifted a smile and all the audience abandoned her to fate, surprised by her indulgence, and they decided not to pay any more attention to such unpredictable people.

* * * * *

As he watched passers-by strolling on sidewalks through the windows of the taxi, Boris did not pay attention to the complaints of the driver who fulminated against the traffic jams. He thought of the phone call the day before. Madame de Clery had roused him from his sleep to ask that they move their appointment forward a week, citing hazy reasons for the request. She had pleaded in a voice clouded by alcohol, and Boris had agreed to visit her the day after, eager to bring these drunken discussions to an end. On the way to her house, he blamed himself for having given in, for attempting to satisfy the whims of a diva.

— Sir, we have arrived.

The car had stopped at his client's home. On this avenue with rows of modern buildings, a mansion had withstood the greed of developers, stuck between these constructions. At least until the death of Mr Clery who had vowed never to succumb to speculators' offers. But new owner, new deal ! According to rumours, Madame de Clery was looking to sell.

Boris had pushed the gate open and followed the lime trees into the property when he saw, at the foot of the stairs, the car of Gilles, the lover of the lady of the house. Surprised she had a third party here after her insistence to see him, Zakowski suddenly had the certainty of having been manipulated and the presentiment of a clash.

— But will you stop harassing me ! No lowlife like you is going to give the orders in my house...

— Martha, I beg of you, do not be angry ! I did not want to offend you, but you must see that I have a reason to be upset ! You call me a half an hour ago to ask me to come over,

and just as I arrive, you announce that your shifty detective has just called to tell you that he's here. You could not put him off, this muckraker ? It's unbelievable to just drop in uninvited to people's homes ! As it is we do not see each other often enough. Do we really need him here like a third wheel ?

— Stop being vulgar, if you don't mind ! Your coarse language exasperates me. As for the other who has the nerve to impose himself uninvited, I will still receive him. If only to let a man know what his disruption costs me.

— What do you mean by that ?

— Oh, you understand perfectly ! You're a fop in comparison, only good for frequenting the nightclubs I took you from and to which you can now return. It's over between us !

— My word, are you delirious ? Are you still drunk or what ? What's going on, Martha ? Stop, let's see... Ouch !

By the exclamations that reached Boris's ears as he came up to the balcony, it was obvious that his premonition had come true.

— You want me to hit you again, huh ? Go on, get the hell out of here ! I don't want to see you again. You're a weakling and I need a man...

— Someone like « Zakowski » perhaps. Ouch ! But you're completely crazy ! Are you going to put the bottle down ?

— One more word and I'll knock you out.

— Okay, I'll shut up ! But calm down, Martha !

— I hate you, you hear me ! No one before you has ever dared to insult me.

— What ? Dared to say that you drink ? But everyone knows. Ouch !

— Bastard... Filth !...

Gilles took a deadly blow for the third time. Boris decided to intervene and rang the doorbell, eager to put an end to the bullfight and avoid being witness to a crime of passion.

— You get the hell away too ! Besides, what are you doing here ? I didn't whistle to you as far as I know. Will you stop annoying me one day ? You are without a doubt just like the others. Shabby ! Get out of here ! Both of you !

She appeared on the balcony above the entrance and clung to the railing, her face distorted by anger.

— Madame de Clery, I remind you of a detail. It is you, this night, who asked me to come by at three o'clock to bring you the...

— Go away, jerk, do you hear me ? I don't want to see you anymore, not you and not anyone ! Besides, the gigolo will join you. I'm sick of losers.

— Madame de Clery, I see you do not know me. I'm not the type to allow myself to be manipulated for very long. I swear to you that today we will have our meeting, in one way or another.

— Just try ! I ordered Claire not to open.

— You asked for it.

Even before she brandished the whiskey bottle clutched in her hand, Boris had climbed over the railing, grabbed her wrist and pushed Martha inside the living room. Surprised by the violence of the assault, the Countess lost her balance and collapsed on the rug. She whimpered, humiliated and groggy. All traces of rebellion had disappeared and the balance of power was reversed. Neither Gilles nor the maid who emerged behind the crack of the door dared to intervene, taken aback by the Zakowski's audacity, they felt in a state of extreme tension. Silence reigned, disturbed only by Martha's breathing.

— Good ! Claire, show Gilles to the door.

— But...

— There are no buts. You heard as well as I did that Madame de Clery no longer wants to see you. Or, perhaps, you want me to escort you out myself ?

— What will Martha think ?

— Come on, Gilles, do not be so stupid ! You know perfectly well what she thinks of you. So stop being silly and leave the premises. This will save you from having to repeat the farewell scene. It was epic !

Gilles did not insist and went out, keeping his eyes on his mistress, as if fearing to receive a final blow. The car started a moment later at top speed, with the engine revving in the driveway.

— Perfect ! Well, Claire, do not just stand there. Do not worry ; I am not going to murder anyone. Go ! You can leave.

The maid was run off and disappeared, taking care to close the door.

— Madame de Clery, I will not seek to know why you'd want to pit Gilles against me. I know you well enough to imagine a sordid calculation. I shall get to the point for lack of time to dedicate to you. As you've certainly learned by reading my reports, your friend Nino...

— That man is no longer my friend ! retorted Martha, who came and sat down in an armchair.

— Well, you have found your haughtiness. Where was I ? Ah yes ! I said that your friend has left his work and his books to follow a circus and realise his dream of becoming an acrobat.

— Realise his dream ! You make me laugh ! He has always been incapable. Who led him to this madness ?

— I do not know, Madame de Clery. My role is to report the facts, not to determine the causes. I know one thing for sure. The « Balbar Circus » will, from October to March, take up its winter quarters in the capital. Nino will reside in the amusement park during this period.

— Will he not be tempted to go elsewhere ?

— I do not think so. You know the saying, « Quite new, quite beautiful ! ». He will not tire so quickly of this adventure.

— He is hardly in the habit of persevering.

— Maybe he has changed ? In any case, this is what you wanted to know, Lady Clery ! My work is done as of today and the investigation is closed. You can find more information in the file that I will send to you soon. Ah ! Another detail. The circus takes a break once a week, on Monday evening to be exact. Who knows why, but Nino takes the opportunity to slip under the tent and spend hours fixing a mirror.

— He is completely crazy !

— Each to his own folly, Madame ! Especially as it does not harm anybody.

— Am I meant to take that personally, Mr Zakowski ?

— Not at all, ma'am.

— Good ! So that's that, I suppose ?

— Yes. My task accomplished, I have no reason to impose myself any further. My respects, ma'am.

Martha had risen, white with anger. She felt that Zakowski had conducted the interview as if he were the sole master of it and she would be deprived of a rematch. She regained composure, walked to the fireplace where a few logs were burning and grabbed a box sitting on the shelf.

— Mr Zakowski, you surprise me ! You are taking your leave without demanding your fees. I have decided to increase it considering your services. Look, here they are !

The Countess turned in his direction and threw several bundles in his face that scattered all over the room. Boris took the insult without blinking.

— Ah yes, I forgot !

He began to pick up the money, not fearing to put one knee to the ground to recover it. Martha rejoiced to see that Zakowski would degrade himself so much. All in all, pride

would be swallowed sooner or later and there was always a way to possess a man, no matter how proud he was.

Boris had recovered the money when he approached her.

— Madame de Clery ! Did we not say earlier a profound truth ? In every man, there is a bit of madness that slumbers. Well, I think you awoke mine.

Boris was squatting before the fire, his arm above the flames licking his skin. He freed one by one the banknotes that were consumed between the smouldering embers and he fixed his gaze on Lady of Clery impassively. Martha rushed to stop him when he opened his hand and released the last notes that fell into the blaze.

It was over.

He got up, walked over to the door and threw a quick glance at his client. The countess stared at the fireplace, muttering curses like a witch chanting incantations at the fire.

CHAPTER 7

THE WEDDING RING

The troupe of the « Balbar Circus » feasted noisily in the back room of the cafe where a dozen plates had been set to celebrate their return. For over an hour, the atmosphere had been lively, as they swallowed the caterer's food and lightened the boss' cellar. Even Ritchi, the barkeeper, could not help but laugh with the customers seated at the bar when he heard the jokes coming from all sides. Nobody thought to take offence at the hullabaloo. On the contrary ! The circus was set up in a neighbourhood where there were no distractions and it was the chance of a lifetime to see the group claiming their rights to celebrate and the jovial acrobats offset the arrival of winter. It was possible every night to go to the show and it was enough to go to Ritchi during the day in the artists' company to forget his troubles. This was their general headquarters and there was constantly one of their representatives on the premises.

They celebrated at this hour reuniting with the capital, gathered around a table presided by a ruddy complexioned party animal : Balbar ! He sat as if enthroned at the end of the table, a turban on his head, impressive in his embroidered finery. Glances made feverish by alcohol converged on him to implore him to get conversations started again, to cut through the debates and to keep up the merriment. He had just stood up, drink in hand, to impose silence on the assembly when he turned his gaze on the guests as if he were about to deliver a message.

All were frozen, their tightly strained faces turned in his direction. Eva, the contortionist who could devour anything anytime and still remain so skinny that she managed to twist up her limbs and be locked in a glass box... Fred, the knife thrower who gave the public shivers when he planted his daggers around his wife's body, which was attached to a wheel, so haunted were they by the fear that, given his myopia, the weapons might deviate from their path... Carmen the rider who jumped her horse through rings of fire, so graceful in her sequin-studded leotard that she was admired as much for her beauty as for her performance and devoted to magic in the hopes of seducing Balbar... and all the others for whom he cherished a special affection : Carlos, the trainer who plunged his head into the mouths of wildcats, praying to Mother Mary that they were well satiated before he did so... Aldo, the weightlifter, all muscles and hair, fearful of surpassing his limits and seeing the weights fall down on his head... Jill, the tightrope walker who slept on her wire, always in the clouds... Gregory, the clown, whose facial lines and features no one had ever really seen, so covered were they with face paint... and finally, Hannah.

— My dear friends, we are gathered once more to celebrate our return. If Carmen will blame me, as in love, for palavering too much and for not doing enough, at least in matters that concern her...

— Balbar, you are obnoxious !

— I was just saying. If one would again criticize my palaver, but I ask you, how can I avoid it, me the most illustrious of Negroes, when I always saw the Elders indulge in this pleasure with delight ? Sorry, I digress again, I said...

— You were saying ? resumed the guests in chorus.



— Yes, that's it ! I tried to tell... By the way, what did I say ? For sure, it is Carmen's fault again for putting me under her spell ! So, my friends, let us implore Bacchus ! Perhaps, with the taste of wine and the start of intoxication, whatever I was going to say will come back to me. None the less, long live the circus !

— Long live the circus !

Everyone raised their glasses and drank in the same spirit. All drank in one gulp, intoxicated by the ringing of the glasses except for two killjoys. Balbar recovered his senses enough to see them in their corner.

— My friends, by Balbar's faith, now here is a drink that, in just one sip, is enough to unseal my eyes. What I wanted to tell you, do not worry, will be brief. Once again here we are back at Ritchi's and we're not deceiving ourselves if it seems that nothing has changed. Have you ever observed the course of a river ? Steadfast in his bed, though its waters are never the same. Well, mates, so it goes for other beings ! Nothing changes, it is believed, when everything is different. You see, existence is like a flowing river, always the same and always changing. Hold on ! If life in the tent apparently follows its course, it is nevertheless clear that the « Balbar Circus » has been turned upside down. Why ? Because Hannah, though married to the circus, is in love ! And this news is so extraordinary that I invite you to celebrate tonight, not our reunification with the capital, but her mad passion. So drink to her happiness ! Cheers Hannah, long live love and give thanks to life.

— « Thanks to life for life ! » Exclaimed the assembly.

Hannah and Nino, surprised by the improvisation, had looked down when they felt their cheeks redden. It was not easy to expose their feelings of joy, having hidden them so long from the acrobats, and they were embarrassed, even if there was no mockery in the ovations.

— One moment, my friends ! I have not finished, you see ! You should know from experience that I rarely turn over the floor to someone else after having seized it for myself. Isn't that true, Carmen ?

— For sure ! Even the most talkative of the gossips would be unable to shut up our « Socrates » ! That is to say...

— Go on ! Do not try to flatter me in the hopes of any compensation.

— Oh, it's been a long time ago since I expected anything from a Don Juan who intoxicates me with words in lieu of caresses.

— Beautiful Carmen, you're mislead by resentment, but Balbar forgives you. God knows if he understands that your bitterness is the exception that proves the rule.

— Ah, the rascal !

All the guests burst out laughing. Indeed, their jousting full of expertly distilled gall had become over the years a kind of vaudeville show. Words were tossed out in the manner of old lovers, each skirmish was a page in the anthology of the war of the sexes, each played their role with suitable complacency for the ritual, aware of enjoying a sense of friendship with the opponent and at the same time doing something useful by embellishing circus life with gossip.

— Go on, Carmen, stop teasing Balbar ! Anyway, you will not have the last word !, remarked a voice in the hubbub.

— Dear friends, let the sinner seek once again to corrupt me. I shall not hold forth but will get straight to the point. You, my friends, asked to spread my joie de vivre throughout the country, listen to me ! As from this day, I'm telling you, you're not twelve anymore...

— Goodness, I do not see how we could be, we were always nine ! Carmen cut in.

Laughter rang out again, shaking the solemnity of the speaker. He contracted the features of his face to prevent breaking into his legendary smile and bursting out with laughter with them too. He managed to contain himself and carry on with his speech.

— I was telling you my friends that as of today I welcome in our family a member whose righteousness we have come to appreciate over the past months. I speak of Nino ! So we shall drink to his health in a few moments. However, before paying tribute to the seducer who has succeeded where all others failed, I want to dedicate their union, I, Balbar, the king of entertainers.

His companions were silent, confused by the initiative, although it was in the purest tradition of his escapades.

— Yes, and I've decided ! I'll marry our friends according to the rites of my tribe and unite them by bonds more solemn than the peroration of a mayor or a priest. Come to me, you two !

Hypnotized by the look Balbar had thrown them as he uttered these words, Hannah and Nino rose to go where he bid them. They skirted the table, side by side, ill at ease feeling all eyes upon them. The silence hung over their shoulders and they felt lost amidst so many witnesses. Hannah grabbed Nino's hand and held it tightly. They finally dared to show their love in front of the acrobats before being united in marriage. Balbar waited for them to come stand in front of him, happy to offer them what should never have left his finger. At least until the day he would have celebrated for himself what he celebrated today for both of them. But he appreciated too much the charms of celibacy to metamorphose into a husband. Too many passions were burning in his chest that prevented him from being satisfied with one love. Over time, he had acquired the wisdom to understand it and the happiness of taking pleasure in it. It was time to get rid of it.

They had now reached him.

— My friends, very long ago, when I decided to leave Africa without having married, my father gave me the gift of this wedding ring passed down in my family for generations. Enjoy it !

It was a gold ring composed of two rings which, interlaced according to a secret process, formed a jewel. It never occurred to anyone's mind how to undo such a complex assembly. Yet Balbar freed two wedding rings in a sleight of hand. An « Oh ! » of admiration went through the room.

— Companions, this present is a reflection of love, true of course ! That love, nestled in our hearts, which persists despite the vicissitudes of life ! What was one, must now be two ! Such is life. Two rings nested one inside the other and it's the same ring ! Hannah and Nino attached one to another and it's the same love ! So I decided, me the renegade unable to continue the tradition, to make our friends custodians of the rite. I'm going to unite them here in front of you all, and reveal to them the trick, sure to put an end to the confusion of my ancestors. Hannah and Nino, are you ready to take the oath ?

He stared at them, noticing some hesitation when he handed them the sheet of paper that he had prepared.

— Nino, are you ready ?

— Uh, yeah... Well, yes, of course.

— Hannah ?

— I'm ready.

Balbar cast a glance at Nino as if he wanted to verify the depth of his attachment. Then he bestowed each of them, one after the other, with a hug and invited them to read a text.

— I, Nino, I pledge to remove our rings every night and reassemble them to symbolise the strength and solidarity of our love.

— Your turn, Hannah !

— I, Hannah, I pledge to take the rings apart again every morning as a symbol that our love is still secure when divided and shared between us.

— Witnesses thereof, I declare you united for life !

These words uttered, he advanced a step and full of compunction, slipped the wedding rings on their fingers. He then hugged them in silence, time to entrust to their ears the secret of the gem.

* * * * *

— Here we are ! It's here.

— Here where you have lived so long ! My faith, my trailer is not any bigger, but I prefer it. It looks like the cell of a monk here. Can I sit down ? Hannah asked, pointing to the bed.

— Of course ! You're home now... since we are married.

— It's true ! You know, Nino, I find it hard to get used to, too. Everything happened so quickly in the last few weeks. It hasn't all sunk in yet. You'll forgive me, won't you ? And you, are you happy at least ?

Nino was as tired as his partner and he, too, did not know what to think after a hectic day. If, in a few days, he would not mind that Balbar had formalised their situation, now he almost held it against him that he had forced them into nuptials. Indeed, Nino felt more responsible for Hannah than he had this morning on waking. For a man in love with freedom, the feeling weighed upon him.

— Put down your suitcase and sit beside me. You're so pale. You're not okay, are you, Nino ?

— A little depleted, that's all !, he replied as an excuse.

It is true that they had spent a tiring afternoon. The ceremony just over, the acrobats were eager to congratulate the wedding pair with endless hugs that Nino had to submit to gracefully. They were not content to kiss their cheeks ; they had taken them aside, one after the other, to solicit their impressions and give them advice. Finally, the marriage had ended with a tour of wine and the transformation of the room into a dance floor. Balbar had taken out his saxophone, Ritchi had been requisitioned with his guitar and Carmen roped in to carry a tune. And he was forced to open the ball with Hannah and dance to the cheers despite his clubfoot. The newly wedded couple had parted in this way until she noticed Nino's dejection. Hannah took his hand in the crowd swelled by the influx of customers attracted by the music and they were eclipsed by a service door. As they had decided in the morning, they bought a suitcase and had then returned to the Rossopoulos boarding house. Nino wanted to give in his notice and collect his belongings.

They had barely sat on the quilt when their resolutions vanished, happy to finally rest. Nino stared at the carpet and remembered the highlights of the day. As for Hannah, she was conducting an inventory of the room to reconstitute the life of her husband. She noticed right away the books and notebooks. So many years in isolation, for what ? To discover some hidden truths between the lines. Maybe ? Yet they should have still have to be put into practice ! This imprisonment had certainly inoculated him with a healthy dose of wisdom, but it had also vaccinated against the human world to the extent that this hard-won wealth remained untapped. She loved him for that very weakness : his inability to live life with the body rather than the mind had transformed him over the years into a recluse.

She understood at once, sharing Nino's life, how lucky she was to experience her wanderings to the Land of Dreams while remaining among men, especially among children. Her heart opened with this revelation. Full of compassion for the man who revealed to her his truth, she had fallen in love. While pity and gratitude certainly fed her feelings, but Hannah found comfort knowing that one of the paths there would surely lead to love. She was happy on returning to fulfil Nino by introducing the pleasures of life as well as the joys of dreams.

She thought of her happiness when a rush of tenderness came over her. She glimpsed what had been his journey through the wilderness when she suddenly felt ready

to give of herself if proof of her love would help Nino to turn the page. She moved closer, put her arm around his neck and pulled him to her to put her head against his shoulder. The sweetness of contact delighted her. She slipped her other hand under Nino's shirt, driven by what she thought was a motherly gesture. Hannah touched a man for the first time in her life. Not just a handshake or a kiss on the cheek. She could now really touch « her » man, since Balbar, by marrying them in front of the acrobats, finally allowed her to give free rein to her desires. It was indeed a great pleasure to untangle the hairs on his chest with her fingers, to feel the skin of his stomach. Her senses soon awoke in this playful game of caresses and she offered herself without shame when her last modesty yielded.

As for Nino, he did not immediately perceived the turn that their head-to-head took and only did so when he found himself amazed at the hand that slid under his clothes. He closed his eyes, too weary to oppose her touch. When he realized by Hannah's respiration and daring gestures where these preambles must necessarily lead, it was too late. He let himself be undressed when he realised, in the middle of the embrace, that he had never desired Hannah. She was obviously not his type of woman because she had never aroused in him the slightest confusion in four months of cohabitation. He had loved her for other qualities and her sudden appetite startled him, convinced until now that Hannah had felt the same. Yet it was she who had scattered his clothes across the room, leading this game where one hand was busy giving caresses and the other strove to render him naked and where finally she guided her husband's fingers between her thighs and enjoyed... Nino, for his part, had not experienced the same excitement. If he had satisfied the requirements of Hannah, a malaise had invaded him however as soon as they wanted to make love, here in the room where he had always sworn no woman would ever sleep. It was almost a sacrilege in his mind to dare desecrate a place so long devoted to the worship of thought. And besides that, he was afraid...

She, in the photo, had no doubt observed the scene from the corner of her eye, outraged by the exhibition. His former mistress, imprisoned on paper, strove to haunt him. Her face bewitched him and she weighed on his actions and his thoughts.

— You know, Nino, it's not a tragedy if you do not desire me. In fact, it is my fault. I never should have made the first move. Still, you're funny all the same, you ! When one takes the first initiative and you are unable to fulfil your duties ! Me, who thought you different from the others !

— You are mistaken, that's not the reason. It's...

— Is it possible, Nino ? Martha still has such a big effect on you.

— Yes.

They had no secrets from each other after so many nights of indulging confidences. Over the weeks, Nino had spoken of his relationship with the Countess and Hannah the emptiness of her love life. Aware of the fascination her rival exercised, Hannah was certain that she understood the root of the problem.

— So you can never break the chains ?

— One day perhaps, I do not know...

— Well, this is hardly flattering to me !

Hannah, with wounded pride, had lowered her eyes to hide her bitterness. She understood through this remark she would never be loved as long as this woman would interfere in their lives. She had to get rid of what gave so much reality to that fantastical being, if she wanted to free Nino and save their marriage !

— Honey !

Hannah had straightened her head and gently grasped his hand. Nino was surprised by the epithet that she presented to him, but also touched by the word that he felt to be synonymous with forgiveness for his clumsiness.

— Do you love me ?

— Hannah, you know well that I find it hard to conjugate this verb.

- I know, but wouldn't you want me to do everything possible to finally dare you ?
- You sound like a working girl ! Frankly, you surprise me. Would it be this marriage that explains your change ?
- Maybe. By the way, can you promise me one thing ?
- Sure, what ?
- Forgive me.
- For what ? If anyone here that should be forgiven, it's me !
- Promise !
- Okay, I...

Before he had finished his sentence, she hugged him in her arms and kissed him. Nino gasped when she pulled away, jumped out of bed and walked to the desk. She deprived him of the initiative but he consoled himself by looking and thinking, proud of gazing at her body and of being the usufructuary. Nino went into raptures in the sight of her figure, the plump lines of her limbs, plump buttocks and generous breasts. He would never have thought that she would be so desirable under her clothes and felt confused in front of this femininity that even Pierrot Lunaire could not improve upon.

Finally, she seemed attractive to him. Finally, he wanted to make love with her.

- Come, Hannah ! Come to me...

Standing against the desk, she was not listening, hands behind her back, eyes elsewhere. Nino could hardly distinguish what she was doing and assumed she was ruffling through her coat. He waited without posing any questions when she brought her arms up to her chest. She held a matchbox between her fingers. He heard a scratching, saw some fragments of sulphur scatter, and then a flame flicker.

- But what are you playing at ?
- You will keep your promise, won't you ?

To think that she wished to be reassured and find in the reiteration of his commitment the courage to run away ! Hannah risked everything there. Either she would be freed from the yoke of her rival and bind him to her, or she would lose him the moment she dared. She stared at her husband and waved the match over a corner of the photo...

A voice dictated to Nino to throw himself on her to stop her as he saw the flames licking the photo's edges. The fire was blistering the emulsion and distorted Martha's face, gradually reducing it with the heat to a twisted black shape. Now as this picture was consumed before his eyes, it was his judge being tortured. As each square centimetre burned, Nino felt the ties to life and the certainties that had forged his identity dissipate and disappear with the smoke. Hannah was killing him more deftly than a murderer could ! It was absolutely necessary to prevent the destruction of his past and he had wanted so much to rush forward and strangle her but his legs refused to move.

Nino discovered the truth. Far from being iconoclastic, as the first impression had led him to believe, the flames proved redemptive. He discovered thanks to them Martha's unvarnished personality, as black as the ashes! Far from wanting to avenge her, a peaceful feeling won over him because this revelation had been necessary. Nino became aware, with the destruction of this memory, that he was releasing himself from a story and getting rid of an inquisitor who judged his existence and condemned his behaviour. That's why he had not thrown himself on Hannah. She had just saved him.

— Your time has come, Nino ! Seize it ! Whispered a voice emerging from his memory.

Nino recognised the exclamation. It had been pronounced by the man who had thrown him at Hannah's feet. His destiny was coming true. He who had been defeated a second earlier, straightened up, jumped out of bed and hugged her. He knew what he wanted for the first time in his life.

He wanted this woman and no other.

— I... I love you.

Hannah looked at her husband with emotion, ready to give in to him again when she wanted to complete the metamorphosis. She took the remains of the photo she had placed on a saucer, pressed them between her fingers and reduced to them to dust.

— Come on Hannah, let's go back to bed ! I'm all yours from now on.

— I know, darling. But do me a favour, will you ? I would prefer, all things considered, that we make love in the caravan, in the midst of our friends.

Nino nodded and they hastened to dress, fill the suitcase and leave. As for Rossopoulos who they met in the hall, he was shocked to see Nino in the arms of a new conquest.

— For God's sake ! Lanzani has gone nuts. He would have turned my hotel into a brothel. To hell with him ! It's better like this.

The concierge with his vexation, the lovers with their happiness, nobody exchanged farewells when they parted at the door. Hannah and Nino devoured each other with their eyes and entwined arms.

CHAPTER 8

THE BALL

Hannah and Nino made love surrounded by the cuddly toys, the dolls, the marionettes who opened their eyes wide to convince themselves that they were not seeing things. This pair dared to disturb the peace and order in a sanctuary where innocence had always imposed its law ! It was a betrayal of these subjects whose hearts beat for their queen, even if they kept their distance from strangers. She respected the solemnity of the place for so long that they could not imagine Hannah putting an end to the harmony. Yet this was what she had done. But to prevent this cohabitation from leading to a scandal, they had agreed to share the trailer with a stranger whose manners agreed with their principles.

It was said that they would never again trust men.

They had guessed at a glance that an unusual event had occurred when they had seen them entering. First, Hannah and Nino had come in holding hands. Then they not only forgot to say goodnight to their friends but they took off their clothes in front of them. An attitude Hannah herself had never permitted ; she always changed behind a screen. They had seen their clothes fly in the corners, in the middle of inappropriate words and caresses. What a lack of manners ! Finally, the community had seen, with their own eyes, the couple slip between the sheets where they were hidden. To do what ? Mystery ! All had noticed the down bedcover slide off the foot of the bed, the victim of turmoil... All had well noted a frenzy seize the couple... All had heard loud and clear the sounds that rose to a crescendo... But they could not determine the sense of this kind of misbehaviour.

Silence fell abruptly in the caravan after the ultimate groans of pleasure or of pain, they couldn't say. The whole community understood that Hannah and Nino had reached a level of serenity that they themselves would never know. It was not without sadness they saw peace prevail again in their kingdom. Their queen had experienced emotions that they could never share, even if she succeeded in expressing them. If no one can love without sharing, the assembly of sages foresaw that they had reached the limits of their love. Those who had believed it possible to love her more every day suddenly guessed that they were victims of an illusion. Never would they demonstrate to Hannah an affection as deep as that displayed by Nino. Worse, they would never want to ! They retired to their embittered world, their glass eyes revealing nothing of their feelings, showing nothing but the reflections of the bodies, caught in the light of the lamp, which shimmered with the sleepers' every movement.

Dawn was approaching when Nino woke up with the feeling of having failed to honour his commitments. What obligation could induce him to leave the warmth of the sheets and, more importantly, to separate him from Hannah ? Nelly ! He had forgotten, because of the events of the day, to visit her as he had done for months. He gradually freed himself from the arms of his companion in the light of the moonlight that filtered through the window. He sat on the edge of the bed and was about to rise when he changed his mind. He felt the presence of a ring on his finger. Balbar's gift reminded of his duties.

— Heavens ! he muttered between his teeth, I would have broken my word.

He took off his wedding ring, approached Hannah and, despite his fear that she would open her eyes while he searched for the hand hidden in the covers, he managed to find it and slide off her ring. He then followed Balbar's instructions and reconstructed the jewel in its original beauty, the two rings entwined together.

* * * * *

Once again, it was dark in the corridor when he found himself on the other side of the mirror. Withstanding this situation was an ordeal for a man who never closed the shutters of the room he slept in. Especially as his knowledge of the premises were of no help. The concepts of space and time were relative in this world because they mattered nothing to Nelly, who enjoyed constantly changing the configuration of the corridor. Even the usual lamp placed at the foot of the mirror, following his pleas, was not in its place. She was sulking in her own way and avenging the inconsistency of her friend. He walked in begging her to show herself, his hands held in front of him for fear of tripping over an obstacle.

— Nelly ! I beg you, turn on the lights ! It's really not very clever on your part. I wonder when you will stop behaving like a...

— When you swear to me that you won't behave anymore like a...

— It's not my fault if I'm late. Wait a minute, I'll explain.

— Explain what ? You forgot me ! Do you want to know what I think of you : you are mean, that's what !

Nino guessed from the foolishness of the comments that, making full use of her gifts of adversity, Nelly had reconnected with her adolescent self. During their first meeting, it was forgivable. But today he was no longer the kind of man to spend his time with a shop girl without growing tired of it, and it was precisely because she had managed to transform into a woman that she had managed to seduce him. So why replay « Alice » ? Was she spoiling everything because of a trifle ?

If Nino was forced into these reunions, he soon caught on to the game. Nelly had quickly identified his personality and was able to grow in wisdom to reel him in more tightly. It was this ability that had conquered him and confronted him with passion in the prime of his life. He had been lucky to fall in love with two women without either of them interfering in the world of the other one and to experience love in its duality, without the adventure degenerating into conflicts. He had exhausted all facets of love, without feeling that this exploration might lead to a farce. In the daytime, he had Hannah next to him, breathing into him the courage to face the monotony of life and, at night, he came to Nelly, who adorned this courage, in itself unattractive, with an aura.

— Now I catch you daydreaming ! Not only are you late, but you're not even paying attention to me !

— Are you becoming jealous ?

— Oh no ! You, I do not envy you. I wouldn't live for anything on your side of the mirror. I only wish that you would be more considerate, that's all ! You can even love others out there, I do not care ! I would pity them for what they are. Moreover, they can metamorphose like me ?

He was about to reply « Unfortunately not ! » when he reconsidered. Would he blame Hannah for being just a woman ? Certainly not. He hastened to answer evasively.

— I do not think so...

— So I'm the only one who is irresistible ?

— And so pretentious ! Yes, you're the one.

— Naughty !

Nino stopped. He knew his friend well enough to know that these repartees that she sometimes indulged in were manifestations of the Nelly he'd known from previous months.

If this girlish attitude was exasperating, it was only for the memory that he let her keep ranting on. He knew from experience that his silence would eventually bring her to reason.

— What woman are you today ?

Despite a deliberately neutral intonation, he was eager to discover the new face of Nelly because he would willingly admit it, it was his happiness. Hannah certainly helped him keep his equilibrium, but only Nelly, through her disguises, gave his life its salt. He was recalling her transformations during the summer when he discerned the light of a candle that oscillated right and left, suspended at the end of a baton. It was weak and did not light the ground.

— Hey, you ! You are commandeered to accompany a *tourtouilleur* for a mission.

— A *tourtou*... what ? Nelly where are you ? I do not see you.

— I don't know any Nelly ! I am a guy. That should not be confused. You want a cigarette ?

Nino did not have time to open his mouth and refuse. The crackle of a match lit up the face of a man who hid his eyes under the brim of a hat, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

— Come on, let's go.

— But... Nelly will be looking for me, I...

— There is no « but » or « I ». Follow me !

Nino did not dare to oppose the order. He opened the door designated by the guide and crossed the threshold, without even thinking of deciphering the inscription above.

« AN IMPROPER ANNOUNCEMENT »

Wedged between walls behind which one could make out the factories, the street they were walking down was dismal. An icy wind was rushing past, accompanied by drizzle. What an idea to have followed a lamplighter on his tour, one who gave himself the title of « Tourtouilleur ! » Nino was leaning against a urinal to protect himself from gusts and was ready to wait for the rain to stop when someone cried out from the pavement on the other side :

— Hey, you... I'm not paid to do nothing ! I have to turn on all the streetlights in the area. Go, go !

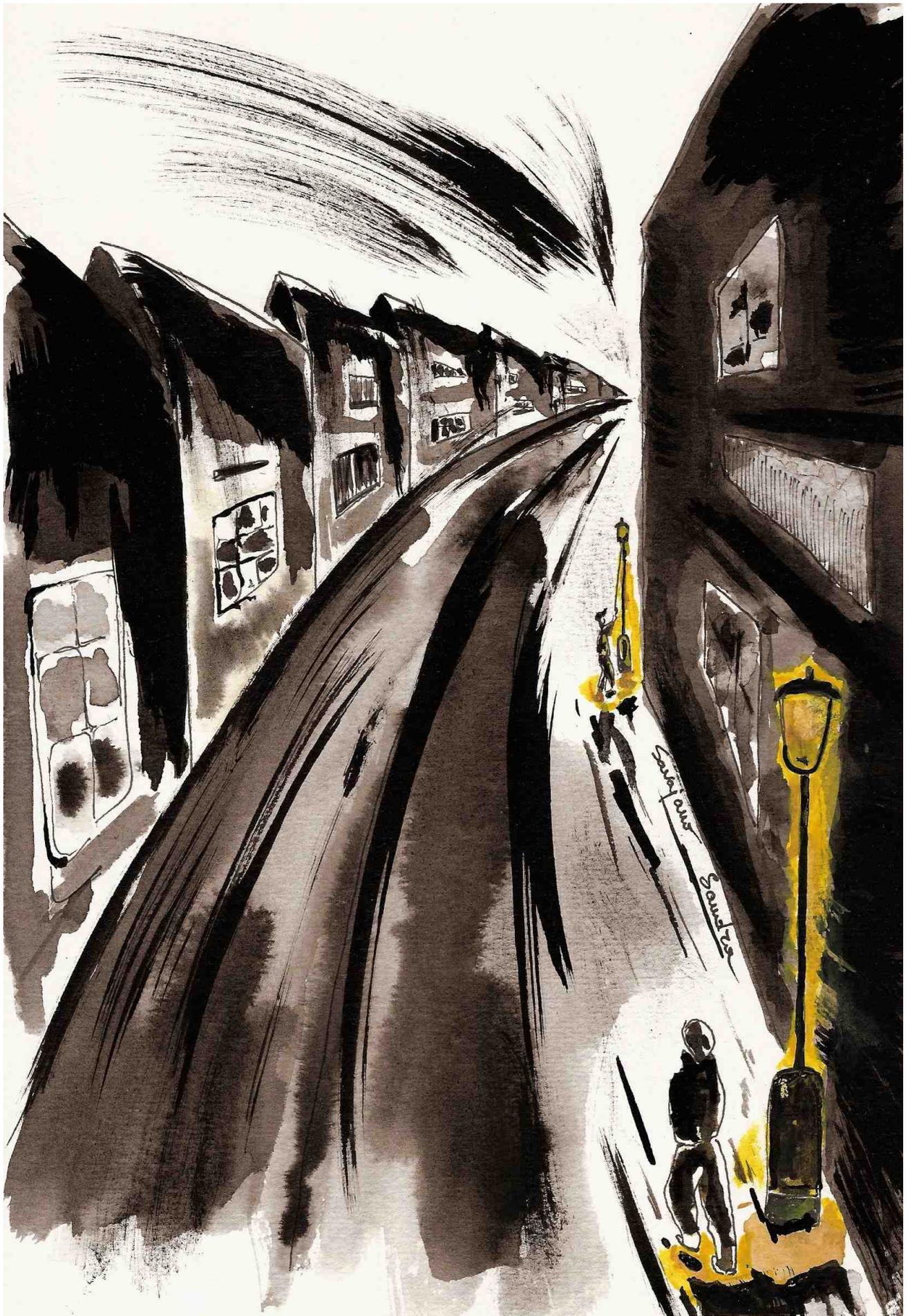
Nino turned pale at the thought of staying in this cut-throat place. He could barely make out the surroundings in the nightfall and the place was deserted, without passer-by's, or shops, or homes. Only factories, perhaps barracks or prisons. They were in a no man's land where the outcasts of society had been tossed. He would be killed without a bodyguard. He crossed the road and joined the officer who stopped at a foot of a gallows where he turned the handle of the gas supply, trying to open the lantern to carry the flame of the candle to the burner. But the pole swung and he couldn't reach the latch.

— You think you could help me instead of standing there with your arms crossed, huh ?

— What should I do ?

— You're tall. Do it for me !

Nino did as told, intimidated by the young man's tone. Far from removing his hands when Nino took the pole, his companion kept clinging to the wood and they united their efforts, glad for the body warmth they shared, working side by side. They held tightly to the pole despite the weather and succeeded after several attempts. The light of the lamp shone down on the cobblestones and splashed them with milky clarity. Nino had recognised Nelly under the getup before even being able to stare at her. Indeed, her jacket had yawned open while they were working next to each other, just enough for him to



glimpse the « N » for Nelly embroidered on the lining. She chided him once again not to spoil the adventure by casting doubt too long. As soon as he had spotted her, Nino was ready to go along with things until the outcome of this story orchestrated by his friend. Nino was, however, disturbed. Until now, Nelly had always appeared as a woman. But today she had taken the appearance of a man ! How would he be able, under these conditions, to give free reign to his feelings without the situation becoming scandalous ? She looked like an urchin with her hiking shoes, cap and shirt and Nino had to admit that this ruffian had charm. These beardless cheeks and the delicate skin, yes, these details betrayed a feminine face !

— Hey, what are you looking at me like that for ? Not because I'm having some effect on you by any chance ?

— No, it's just that you remind me of a friend.

— Much good may it do you ! But come on now, we have a job to do !

The *tourtouilleur* resumed his walk to another lamppost without dwelling on Nino's embarrassment. The sound of his shoes on the paved sidewalks resounded through the avenue, amplified by the height of the walls that sent them echoing back.

— Say, couldn't you make a little less noise in those heels ? Someone will hear us.

- — Who could possibly hear us ? No one comes by here at this hour.

- — Well then, what good is that lantern down there ?

- — In the middle of nowhere !

- — Yes.

- — It's the « Lighthouse of Life » ! Only those who search for it can see it ! And so, what is it you're looking for, you ?

- — Who knows? Without a doubt, the same thing as the others...

— I'll lead you in that case and you will have your answer. The vocation of our brotherhood is to illuminate visitors, both their steps and their minds...

Believing that this mission called for a break in the routine, the guide accelerated, ignoring Nino who was immediately left behind. He held before him a string of lights and Nino followed him, reassured by the glow of the streetlights that pierced the darkness at regular intervals. They arrived very quickly at the end of the other extremity, just below the lantern that lit up a poster on the wall.

— Here we are at the crossroads. I'll leave you. Glad to have made your acquaintance.

— But you aren't going to leave me. You do not really think that I will stay here in front of this panel !

— You are like all the others facing this test ! Come on, at least make the effort of taking a look, that won't cost you anything !

« EXCEPTIONALLY TONIGHT ! A BALL AT THE WORKSHOP. FREE ADMISSION FOR THE ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE IF HE PRESENTS HIMSELF TO THE TICKET OFFICE. GO ! LET YOURSELF BE SWEEPED ABOUT BY THE VORTEX OF APPEARANCES, THE CHARM OF ILLUSIONS, THE WEALTH OF MIRAGES ... DARE ! »

Nino was going to ask the *tourtouilleur* for clarification, but he had already disappeared, snatched up by the night. The flame lit at the end of his pole testified again to his passage. What would become of him, alone in this neighbourhood? He wanted to catch up with him and to ask to be returned when a gust extinguished all the gaslights. Nino was plunged into darkness. His hour had come if the elements themselves were joining forces. He resigned himself to his fate when his eyes caught the announcement that glowed in the dark. The letters were phosphorescent. It was a sign. He had to go to

the ball if he wanted to get out of this place alive. He unstuck a corner of the poster, amazed at the ease with which the paper came loose, when an exclamation came to his ears. Nino jumped up and whirled around, sure to be attacked by a prowler. His back to the wall, he tried to scan the surrounding area, his chest tight with anguish. He did not realize he had pulled down part of the poster in his panic. He waited several minutes and then went back to work. But even with the extremity of the poster just barely torn, the same interjection came back to him.

— Ah ! Here's our man...

Nino understood. The joke came from all sides behind the sheet of paper, which acted, as in the theatre, as a curtain and surprised two actors through the barely lifted veil. Which part did they play ? He stood on tiptoe and peered through the crack. Two dwarfs in tuxedos were talking on the other side. As soon as they saw him, they bowed and took off their top-hats, faces lit up with a smile.

— Good evening, dear friend ! We were expecting you. Please, I beg you ! Do not be concerned, we are not ogres. That was my brother who scared you. He loves to joke around, forgive him !

— But... the wall ?

— Ah, you people with your logic ! Why do you think that a poster must be necessarily stuck on a wall ? Ours can hang up by themselves. Besides, you don't have to glue it since it doesn't really exist. You do not know it yourself but it has always been engraved on your heart and your mind and projects what you refuse to acknowledge about yourself on the entrance. And besides, we have many other things to think about for us to worry about that. Isn't that so, dear brother ?

— Of course !

— Enough of jokes ! We aren't going to stand here and discuss for hours in the draughty air. We would catch cold. Come and join us. You are our guest.

Nino tore the poster down, went through the wall and slid in alongside the twins. He had no other choice. The gentlemen clapped their hands and spotlights immediately lit up every corner of the shed. There, amid machinery, hoists and other equipment of torture, were disarticulated human body parts : legs, arms, hands, heads, trunks piled up willy-nilly. Nino shuddered. He had unwillingly thrown himself into a torture chamber.

— Come on ! We'll give you a tour.

Nino gasped, seized by the vision. His heart was racing and this time it was disproportionate with the fears he had faced before. He was defenceless against these monsters, these killers would turn a gentleman into mincemeat. Suddenly he felt nausea before his imminent demise, leaned forward and gave up his wedding meal, unable to control the contractions of his stomach. His strength abandoned him when he saw the dwarfs whispering. They were sealing his fate. There was no escape ; he was cornered like a rat.

- — Dear Sir, we are afraid of not being able to get you to participate this evening. You need to rest a little first. You are dying. And, believe me, we know what we are talking about here ! Don't we, dear brother ?

- — Certainly, we know everything about it.

— Sit down, just enough time for us to fetch our first aid kit ! We will administer one of our remedies to you and you'll perk up quickly. You'll see !

Nino feigned agreement by nodding his head, deciding to take advantage of their absence to escape. Die poisoned, never ! Unfortunately he found that the breach had been plugged back up when he turned toward the wall. His retreat cut off, he could not oppose the will of the jailers and drank the elixir without resistance.

* * * * *

Nino was surprised he was still alive when he opened his eyes. His executioners had preferred a stay of execution. But why had they pardoned him ? He tried to answer this question when the set caught his attention. Nino was under surveillance, lying on a mattress installed in an annex to the workshop. Dozens of men and women surrounded him, motionless and silent. Frozen in various postures, they appeared to have been placed like statues caught in action. The closest was a jester in a contortionist's pose, standing on one leg, the other foot propped behind his head ! It was a miracle that he could stand in this position. With his chequered leotard in red, blue and yellow, his poulaines and his green gloves, his cap trimmed with bells, he was irresistible and Nino could not help but smile. He also seemed to want to bless him and shelter him from unhappiness with his bauble in hand. Two steps away, head bent over a crystal ball that she stroked with her fingers, a fortune teller scrutinized, in the opacity of the glass, the designs of providence. She was decked out with a piercing gaze and a tapered face and resembled trace for trace a raptor. The scarf on her head kept her hair off her face and accentuated her features, even if her garish clothes lent a note of cheer to the picture. Nino did not linger over the little schemes of the gypsy. He pursued his investigations and one by one made the acquaintance of the other models. The surprised troubadour has to declaim an ode to his beauty, the guitar slung over the shoulder... The dancer in tutu, so graceful in her costume that with the slightest shiver of her ruffle, Nino imagined her leaping through the air and spinning with grace. And many others besides, with a ruddy complexion... close by, a privateer with his wooden leg, eye patch and sword, ready to board ship... Farther on, the white beard and the blue eyes, a hermit in sandals... Over there, a devil of a tease, a courtesan in a crinoline dress, condemned by a judge as she makes her pleas, the avenging arm... Finally, a figure hidden in a corner trying to shy away from his curiosity. Draped in a hooded cloak and hood, she gave away nothing of her person and was leaning on a scythe, her hands pale... Nino looked away and became interested in the painter on her right. He faced his easel, arched back, his palette between thumb and forefinger, and gauging the perspective, held his brush out at arm length. Nino, fascinated by the attitude of the artist in full creation, followed the direction of his gaze. What he found enchanted him. A woman lying on a sofa was posing, her face hidden under a veil. She revealed her charms, and if she offered her breasts unselfconsciously to the genius of painter, her hands at the height of her hips rested on her stomach and half concealed the fleece of her sex.

— Look, it's going better for you now, isn't it ! You're getting to know our children. She's beautiful, isn't she ?

— Who ?

— Our jewel ! Her... on the divan.

Nino sat up, still not recovered from his sleep. As for his hosts, they settled on poufs as if they were in the context of a cocktail party, talking with their guest.

— You know, we're sorry, but we owe you some explanation.

The two accomplices were embarrassed and Nino was glad. The reversal of the situation suited him and he refrained from making a comment to hold on to the advantage. He only looked at his interlocutors with insistence, delighted to increase their confusion.

— Uh... yes, how can we put it ? We apologize for having been the cause of your discomfort. We realized too late what a fright you had ! Put yourself in our place though ! We have few visitors despite the posters to the right and left and we love pranks. So when someone comes, we enjoy spoofing around a bit. But we are not monsters like...

— Wait ! cut in the other. I will explain to the gentleman who we are. You're not actually going to monopolize the conversation. So, dear sir, my brother was going to tell you a secret. We are two genius handymen who spend our time making humanoids. You have some of our specimens around you.

Accordingly, the body parts you noticed upon arrival are not the remains of your predecessors. These are pieces designed by us and intended to be assembled at one time or another in order to enrich our collection. Now you know everything !

— But... Nino couldn't help remarking with a smile, your characters are poor replicas. They are not alive !

— Think again, sir ! They will be alive soon and thanks to you...

— Thanks to me, you're crazy !

— You are the elected, the chosen one, aren't you ? It is your role to give life to the illusion ! You see, each of us is specialized in part of the body : me the upper body, my brother the lower. We work on our own, without worrying about the activities of the other. However we cannot turn the key when our prototype is on his feet, the two halves assembled...

— The key ! What key ?

— This one ! Answered a twin, tightening an awl. Insert it into the hole provided for this purpose, just under the nape of the neck, and you will appreciate our work. They will come to life and the ball will take place...

Nino looked them in the eyes to see if it was a gag or not. In truth, he perceived no cunning in their eyes, just an expression of concern.

— But the woman lying on the couch, your masterpiece you say, is your height. You could animate her, Nino replied mischievously, by putting your finger on the right spot.

— No ! We cannot. This realisation is perfect. A mechanical movement is not enough to awaken her. Only a kiss can perform the miracle. And not just any ! The kiss of the elected from among the elected ! She is programmed to wake up when she feels a certain pressure on her lips ! None of your predecessors managed so far, and the dances have always been failures. It's your turn now.

Nino stood up, the key in the palm of his hand. He finally believed their words. He plunged the blade into the head of the clown who cried for joy and fell backwards. He proceeded in this way with all the others, leaving in his wake a hubbub and increasing agitation. The humanoids celebrated their newfound life with the joy of embraces. A carnival atmosphere prevailed in the hangar when he went to the model. The music intoxicated, drinks flowed, lights blinding, couples danced. Nothing seemed to stop the ball. Yet silence immobilized them, aware of the gravity of the moment. They prayed for their elected because their happiness depended on a kiss...

Gradually, as he approached the couch where the stranger was lying, Nino, charmed by the sight of her body, was trying to fix his eyes on her face. He did not want to see her legs or her chest or her stomach. His only mission was to reach the square of gauze and without lifting it, deposit a kiss ! He did not, however, resist the pleasure of admiring her repeatedly. His heart was understandably beating quickly when he knelt beside her. Mouth just inches from lips that he could not clearly distinguish, hands just a few inches from the skin he could not stroke, Nino was enthralled. He knew what he wanted for the second time in his life.

He wanted this woman and none other.

But he sensed that it was her, again and always her, who had orchestrated this love at first sight. Nino guessed that she delivered her identity to the insight of her heart, by shielding her eyes to the lust of men. Far from being destined to make her unrecognizable, the veil testified, to the opposite, of one of her tricks, the most puzzling and the most daring. Hiding her face that had always given clues and revealing her body, which had always concealed its secrets, moreover in public view — what nerve !

Nino was the happiest of men when he touched the veil with his lips. She was not a woman with a face we would grow tired of, as beautiful as it may be, but with a multitude of faces which changed according to the day. He already knew, even before

discovering them, that her features would never be fixed in a line, but changeable in the likeness of dreams. Under the gauze slumbered a human being of a thousand facets that a man's whole life would not suffice to explore.

He kissed her...

The seconds ticked by one by one and the kiss lingered on. Nino was enthralled and the guests shared his happiness, sensing in the never-ending embrace that the miracle was going to take place. All the spectators screamed with delight when a tremor ran through the model's body and she shuddered. Nino recognised her by the intonation of her « Where am I ? ». It was Nelly ! He was about to raise the lace when he felt his friend's hand grab his wrist.

— No, Nino, don't do it. No one should see me. It doesn't bother me if they admire my body similar to so many others, if only you know what distinguishes me from them, my face !

— Nelly, why such immodesty ?

— Because we are in a world where nudity does not shock. And I wanted to know...

— Know what ?

— If you loved me ! Don't you understand ?

— No.

— I have always let you discover, by one detail, which character I was playing, haven't I ?

— Indeed.

— This time I wanted to test you because I'd never presented myself to you naked. I had never hidden my face, which has a particular trait, by which you could recognize me. Would you doubt yourself, disturbed by desire ? Only love could guess who was hiding in the avatar of the character, darling ! Yes, only love could accomplish this feat and you have done it !

They exchanged these words without being heard by the assembly. The hypothesis that this man and this woman knew each other came to no one's mind. Most dancers thought only of enjoying the dance, delighted to have regained their autonomy. For others, they interpreted the conclave as proof that a new love was beginning. The painter had watched the scene with the eye of the artist and guessed the truth, standing next to his easel. If the couple loved each other, they were nevertheless lovers. The awkwardness of the man contrasted too much with the grace of the woman. She and he were clearly from different worlds, despite appearances. The painter guessed that such dissimilar beings could not endure in the long term, these strong sentiments, except under the condition that one of them renounced his or her true state of being. Yes, he was convinced of the necessity of this choice by observing them, and he was worried. Neither had yet perceived that their love was doomed to failure if the present conditions of their idyllic romance continued.

Nino glanced around the room to make sure that nobody would be forgotten, while Nelly was snatched up by the emotional crowd who wanted to be close to the one whose revival ensured the success of the party. However, there was an outcast, down there, at the bottom of the hangar, the humanoid whose face we could not distinguish, still leaning on his scythe. Nino hesitated. A voice urged him not to revive someone who seemed so sinister. It was nevertheless his mission to carry out, and he walked towards him.

— Sir, come back ! You do not need to give a turn of the key to that troublemaker. He will be set in motion soon enough !, shouted one of the dwarves in the back.

— But you told me...

— Yes, Sir, we told you to give a soul to our creations ! But you see, this one is not the fruit of our imagination. He is an intruder. He imposed himself against our will and we must admit that he brings trouble wherever he goes among us.

— *Why don't you try to chase him off? This is your home, isn't it?*

— *Of course we wasted no time trying to expel him! But nothing could be done! He came back with such obstinacy that we finally gave up. Now we ignore him until he shows himself.*

— *Don't worry! It is not me who is going to disturb him. I wouldn't want to spoil the evening for anything in the world!*

Nino retraced his steps and mingled with the dancers, leaving the highly sought dwarf to his admirers. Everyone wanted to thank him for bringing them to life and he could not venture into the jungle of legs without being immediately lifted up and laced by arms. These signs of gratitude touched him, and if he feigned anger by shaking his limbs as if to make space, he finally smiled and cried, proud to be the father of these creatures. For his part, Nino looked for Nelly amidst the hustle and bustle. He wanted to find her and never leave her, afraid to see her take advantage of the jostling in order to disappear. He crept between revellers, believing that he had seen her, when he felt a hand at his back pulling on his jacket.

— *Do you dance, Nino?*

It was her. He turned to kiss her when he found himself face to face with the whore.

— *Disappointed, sweetie?*

Round eyes and gaping mouth, he had not yet articulated a word when his partner plastered herself against his chest and started dancing with him.

— *You know, darling, you're lucky to be loved like this!*

— *By you?*

— *Joker! I ignore feelings, you should have suspected that. I am like a bee; I flit around gathering nectar from left to right! My philosophy is simple, you know. What lasts and repeats bores me! Look at me! Should I content myself with one man?*

— *My word, providing pleasure is a form of love and existence is too often stingy.*

— *In any case, you, you'll enjoy it! Listen, the other one asked me to give myself to you!*

— *What!*

— *Put yourself in her shoes. She loves you and wants you. But, how can she keep you? She found out how. She will prove to you that she is more desirable than any other woman. If I cannot give you more joy than she gives you, she knows you will never leave her.*

— *I do not need proof! I love her and I do not care about the others.*

— *Blah blah blah... we know how you men are. You swear to love us for life and you break your oath the first time a stranger smiles at you! She's right. There is no other way to hold onto a man.*

Nino had felt for some moments a stream of air freezing his back as she spoke. He closed his eyes and gave himself up to the dance to escape her words as if shaking them off. Better to forget everything and think no more. Even if he guessed that as an expert in seduction she was playing with her femininity! He was guided, carried away by the music that enchanted them, intoxicated by the swirling waltz that swept them up. A smile appeared on his lips as he felt, in the stiffening of his companion, that the spell was broken. He quivered and opened his eyes. The face of his companion was so pale that he stopped for fear of seeing her faint. She who had looked at him a moment earlier with effrontery, now gazed at her shoes without daring to speak to him. Nino was going to grab her chin and force a smile when a cry seized him. He turned.

The man with the scythe was facing him, hidden under his cloak that enveloped him from head to foot. He waved his sword in the air and dazzled them with its reflections. The dancers moved no more, mesmerized by the brilliance of metal. He

brandished his weapon higher and higher. Drama was imminent when he disappeared, punctuating his retreat with sneers. The ringing of little bells had to force him to flee.

It was the Fool!

— Come on, lovers, a smile ! I tell you, life is all up to you ! Regarding the scarecrow, let him shout in outrage. All the better ! Laugh like you did when you were children if he's still dangling from your skirts ! Then you'll see ! Your cheerfulness prevents the intrigues of that vagabond. Offer up a song of life in opposition to his funeral orations ! Oppose the purity of your heart to the darkness of his soul and the incredible happens ! Destroyed by mockery, the reaper will be mortified.

The animated jester, intoxicated by his own words, little by little sketched out the movements of a hilarious dance. Jubilation took over his limbs and a shiver went through his body. He swung his head and triggered a chorus of bells, his face illuminated by his two rolling eyes. The bells hanging from the top of his cap jingled and shook at each jolt. It was a concert of discordant sounds but they disturbed no one. On the contrary, the tintinnabulation delighted the audience because it meant the coming of bliss. Even the bells attached to his poulaines, his bracelets, his belt participated in the celebration. The jester, a smile on his lips, sometimes lifted one leg, then another, sometimes one arm, then another, to cause hilarity. Nino and the whore giggled, conquered by the jolly fellow's absurdity.

— Ah even so ! You're finally how I like you : HAPPY ! And me who speaks when you have nothing to do with my sales pitches. To hell with the elocutions of a clown, you think ! And I understand you. Go ! Enjoy the evening. Me, I will take the good word elsewhere. Oh, one more word ! Dear elected, have you sometimes wondered where real life was found : at your house or at ours ? There, from where you come, a thousand obstacles slip between you and the things you desire. How to find happiness in these conditions if you have to constantly struggle to achieve a goal ? Your existence is but a caricature of the real, believe me ! You can never satisfy your passions for lack of resources and of time. Your spirit is fooling you if it tells you otherwise. So, listen to me ! You flourish where there is no mediation between the dream and its realisation, no obstacle between the object and its possession. This world exists, it is just beyond here ! You are in the antechamber of The Land of Dreams ! So, take advantage of it with the Missus... or with another. A word to the wise !

He cried suddenly from the wings :

— Attention, the Fool is coming !

He bowed in reverence to Nino and rushed out doing alternating cartwheels and somersaults, which delighted the public. The dancers stopped and gave their mascot an ovation during this exhibition, then scattered the moment he departed. The jubilation was indescribable amidst the din of bells, applause and exclamations. Nino and his companion, happy to resume the course of their adventure, watched him disappear behind the couples entwined on the dance floor. The music called everyone back to their duties. It was time to celebrate, to dance, to love. The whore pressed up against Nino who blushed to see, under the pressure of the embrace, two breasts spill out of her neckline.

— They are superb, aren't they ?

— Splendid !

— So, you like me !

— Of course.

— So much the better ! Then where I'm going to take you, I'm going to drive you wild.

Although he had not been waiting for these words to guess her manoeuvres, Nino kissed her lips in acquiescence. She led him under cover of the waltz towards a glass door, steps away from a garden lit by moonlight. His body gave way in the arms of his mistress, drunk on sensations. Nino paid no more attention to the scenery that spun

around him, his nostrils intoxicated by her perfume, his view troubled by her chest. They were about to disappear when two revellers separated the lovers. Before they even realized what happened, the courtesan found herself in the arms of the model and Nino was with the painter.

— Excuse me, sir, but it was my duty to speak to you now. I would not be able to bother you if you had crossed that door with Chloe.

— But... What do you want ?

He slammed himself against Nino in response.

— What's wrong with you !

— Do not mistake my intentions, Nino, I want to talk to you.

— You know my name ?

— Doesn't my model know it ?

— Do not confuse things, we're friends. On that subject, might she have requested you to act in this manner ? Is she jealous ?

— Let's see here Nino, you should know that she does not know that feeling. She wants your happiness and serves your love, if I am to believe her words.

— Get to the point, sir !

— If you insist ! Do not you find it regrettable that the one who has awakened my model cannot live with her forever, as in the fairy tales ?

— The comparison is rather silly. As to the question, I didn't really think about it.

— I thought so. Your manners betray your carelessness. An artist is not mistaken. However, we are here to reveal to men what lies behind people and things. It was my duty to inform you of what I saw. And would you bother to listen to me without this scheme ? No ! You're too busy. My model happily lends herself to the ménage with pleasure. She was delighted to play a trick on you.

— But then are you going to stop lecturing me !

— I'm almost done, do not worry. You are the chosen one, aren't you ? You are not one of us in that case. Therefore, do you think that a visitor can keep one foot « here » and one foot « there » ? It would be too easy to take advantage of the privileges granted in each of the worlds. A day comes when he must choose. Painful decision, I agree, if the joys are complementary to each other. But that's life ! You have to know how to renounce all the joys in order to enjoy the greatest of them.

— Are you nearly done now, Sir ? You exasperate me !

— Know to make a decision before it is too late. You will eventually get tired. Do you understand now ? Here they are, my model and your favourite, just in front of us ! What an odd couple, don't you think ? One hides her face and shows her body, the other just the opposite. Amusing, isn't it ?

— It takes a painter to note such a detail !

— Don't be fussy, both are yours ! Farewell, Sir !

He took off in the same fashion that he had glued himself to Nino, delighted to embrace his model and give way to Chloe, who resumed her chatter as if the incident had not disturbed her.

— Honey ! You know what she told me while you were taken aside ?

— How would I know ?

— That I will have to work hard to satisfy you because a woman has already given herself to you. Tonight ! A woman, moreover, who lives over there, beyond the border. Who loves you as much as I do... I laughed ! I'm so sure of myself ! You will not know the pleasures shared in my company with anyone else ! I am the sweetest, most docile, the most inventive, have you any doubts ?

— She was not angry with you, to have recounted my life to you ?

— *Why would she be ? Everything is simple when you love. She wants you to have pleasure and that which contributes to that delights her. No matter whether it's me or another. She is certain, indeed, to be the most loving ! We'll see.*

Chloe threw Nino a smouldering gaze and kissed him with such enthusiasm that he staggered under the pressure of the kiss. Neither one nor the other paid heed to the stifled giggles that followed them when they went to hide in a corner of the garden.

The Grim Reaper leaned on his scythe and followed them, determined to watch over his progenies. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the couple leave in due time, full of contempt for the fools who forgot so quickly that he had numbered their days. In their happiness and carefreeness, what their lovers' eyes took for a moonbeam coming down and wrapping itself around them was in fact the shadow of the voyeur. Death bided his time and chuckled under his cape, sure that sooner or later he would yield the expected dividends.

CHAPTER 9

STRONGER THAN LOVE

Hannah spent her days recovering from the hectic pace of summer now that the circus people were exempt from work related to installing the tent. With a perfectly honed show that freed her from the fear of failure and winter that encouraged her to stay cloistered, the right conditions united to provide the opportunity for her to pamper her husband. But the truth escaped her in passing the baton to love ; she previously had neither the time nor the inclination to explore this passion. Her attachment depended as much on feelings as on circumstances.

Hannah's transformation dated from that golden night when, in the arms of Nino, she had experienced the pleasures permitted by marriage. This sacrament had often nourished her dreams and she had always vowed that she would give herself to only one man : her husband ! Balbar and the consecration of their union, it was these elements that empowered her to violate prohibitions that had been too long respected. He had reached his goal and made her a woman out of her by officiating the ceremony and giving voice to her feelings in front of the acrobats. By her own will, Nino had become the centre of her life and she devoted herself to him without hesitation or calculation. It was so exciting to discover a new dimension of femininity ! Even if it were clear that she felt more joy to offer than Nino felt to receive.

Hannah encouraged him to transverse the mirror, pushed into that choice by her temperament. The husband she pampered in her dreams prevailed over the husband she cradled in her arms and she felt more nourished by an image than by the reality of a physical presence. Maybe also, in her capacity as an artist ready to conceive of a variety of beings, she couldn't imagine any other type of love : an experience where tolerance was a rule and liberty a right. She who still needed to broaden her horizons by meeting other people and who would not tolerate being deprived of the opportunity to do so, found it normal that Nino was having other adventures. Aware of Nelly's advantages as well as her own, Hannah guessed that their personalities complemented each other's and that she would keep her husband provided as long as she never changed. Indeed, in contrast to the young girl who they often evoked to metamorphosis, Hannah's strength lay in her ability to remain the same and to create around Nino a peaceful haven that made life pleasant, and to give of herself without externalizing her feelings too much. Even if he would embellish his existence down here, Nino would prefer Hannah's serenity to Nelly's exuberance ! The one and the other were thus both satisfied with their lives. The first because he had passed the age where he needed to try out crazy fads ; the second because she knew she no longer had the charm of youth. They loved each other without upsetting their temperaments and showed their affection by discrete attentions. Touched by her thoughtfulness, Nino lived the life he had always dreamt of. Without the company of noisy neighbors, without the penalty of a professional obligation, he was suddenly released from the constraints that had weighed on his existence. She had succeeded in just a few days to rearrange the space by piling up the dolls, stuffed animals and puppets and making use of the screen after regulating the mirror under the big tent. She had, in the end, set up a corner office where Nino could read in peace, protected by the screen of silk. Days had elapsed since then,

respecting the same ritual : husband, seated at his table and plunged into his books, wife, lying on the bed and sharing in his world. They remained silent for hours, lulled by the hum of the stove while the snow covered streets and houses. Nino who had renounced all speculation since his travels to the Land-of-Dreams, reread the classics of literature with a rediscovered and childlike capacity for wonder. He cavorted from adventure to adventure and identified with the characters resurrected in his eyes while Hannah flourished at the side of a husband who knew how to honour the woman and the dreamer without making her feel ugly or ridiculous. If, by day, husband and wife passed hours in contemplation inside their kingdom, by evening, the metamorphosis became their topics of discussion and the bond that strengthened their attachment. By evoking visions perceived in his ecstasies or feats performed by his heroes, Hannah and Nino were able to commune by sharing their experiences. This complicity was a delight for beings who had been so long solitary. After searching for years to decipher the meaning of texts, Nino discovered through their exchanges a truth he had long sought. One is reborn if they abandon reason and abandoned themselves to their heart. He was initiated in this way, through the illuminations of his wife, to a path toward knowledge that was more authentic than through the means of thought.

As for Hannah, she felt that the woman she had become was calmer thanks to her husband's reading. She listened to his comments and became aware of the role of the writer, the power of words and saw her convictions reinforced. Her way was not the one of folly or witchcraft but that of the emotions. If men tried to communicate their visions through the use of paper and a pen, it was because they had felt something uncommon, extraordinary. There could be no doubt. The existence of a different world, as evidenced by the Land of Dreams, had been proven and its discover had been necessary. Nino comforted her in her determination by identifying disciples in literature who had already preached the good word. She was not a clown sentenced to distract the kids but a guide who was still poorly understood. This was her fate, no matter what it cost her ! Wandering along the roads, approaching the doors of Wonders and helping children to discover them. Hannah had reached maturity thanks to love and she was now ready to accept herself for what she was : a woman and a herald.

* * * * *

When Nino read, the words transformed into a screen where sets and characters were projected. And if it required a lot of noise to make her leave the dark room of her imagination, conversely, nothing and no one could remove Hannah from her world when she abandoned herself to her dreams. Nino had to wait until her trance ended and her eyes opened again if he wanted to talk to her.

Someone had, on that day, pounded so long on the door that the racket ended up silencing the soundtrack Nino was mixing through his reading. Just as a series of technical disturbances eventually break the spell of a film, the loud raps had broken the magic of the novel. He suddenly raised his head and left his chair to open it. The man at the top of the stairs was unkempt and looked like a scarecrow with his straw hat, his dust-covered coat and his worn-out galoshes. Given the visitor's face, blacked with dirt, Nino would never have guessed that the man came from China if he had not seen two bright and slanted eyes.

— Excuse me, sir ! Could you tell me if this is the magician's caravan ?

— Yes, this is it ! Why ?

— I would like to meet with Hannah.

— I fear that you will be forced to return. She cannot see you now.

— Yes, of course, I see !, he cut in, throwing a glance at the bed where Hannah was resting. She's fast away with the fairies ! I'll come back later, don't worry. I wouldn't want to disturb her dreams for anything. I too know the price of ecstasy. I'll come back tonight if

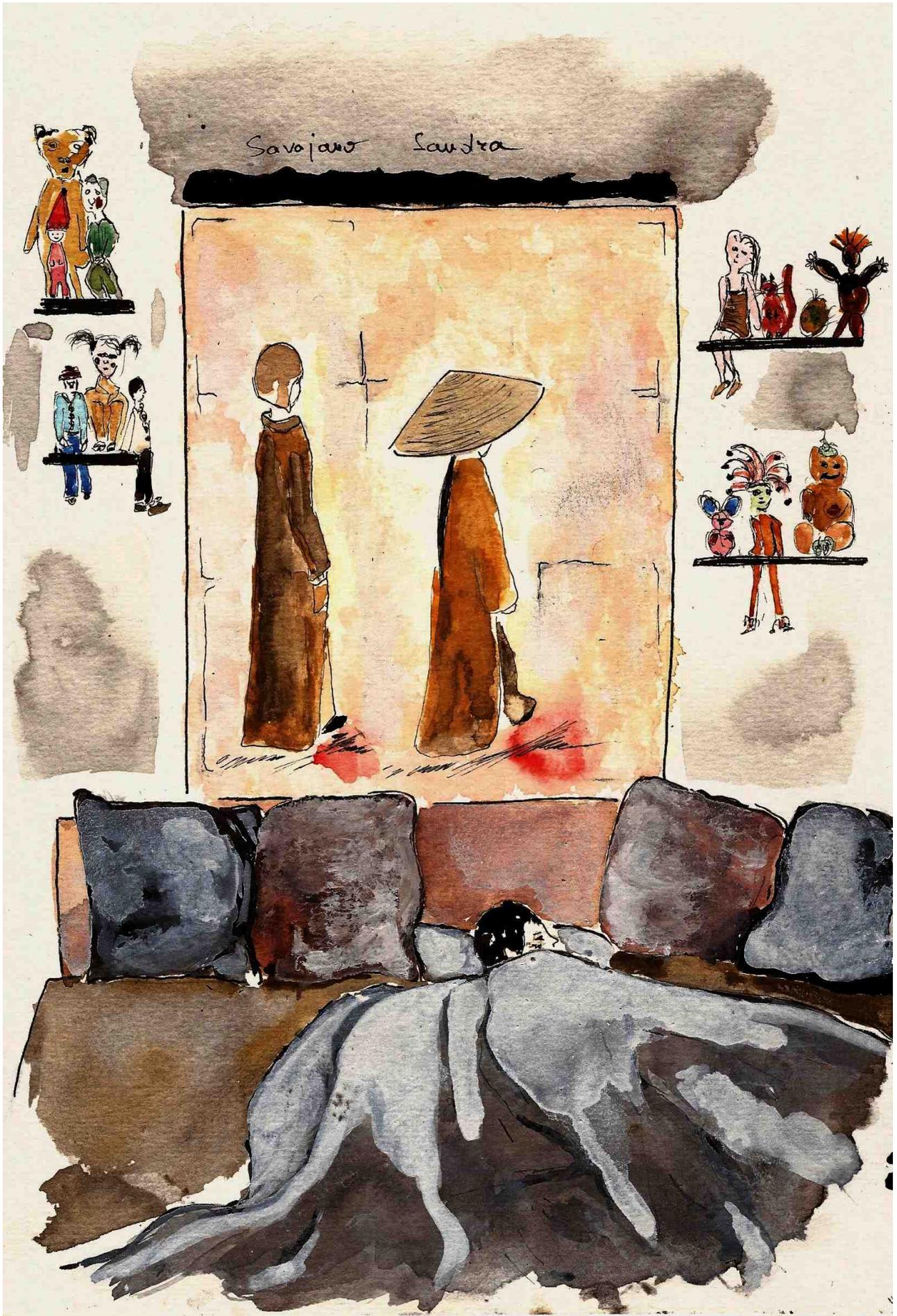
that won't inconvenience you, just before the show. Goodbye, sir ! Excuse me for disturbing you.

He uttered these words in a tone of confidence as if afraid to wake Hannah, then retreated backwards, down the steps, without ceasing to wave his hat. Nino was unable to resume his reading when he found himself back in his office. His mind was obsessed with the vagabond. What did he want to say to Hannah ? Nino felt a sense of discomfort, seeing a stranger intrude on their private life and spoil it.

The stranger returned a few hours later and, as if she had immediately recognised one of her own, Hannah did not take offense when he asked her to follow him and thus disrupt their habits. The two of them seemed united by an instant connection that was so strong that Hannah had to remind herself that night of her duties. Not only did Nino notice her disinterest in the show, but more importantly, she forgot the ceremony of the rings. What had this man told her that upset her so much ? He wanted to know but had obtained no answer. If not a confession on the tip of her tongue... She was now bound by a secret and could not reveal anything before various problems were resolved. Consequently she begged Nino not to press questions in the weeks to come, to let her come and go at will, without trying to find out where she was ; in short, to be patient for as long as necessary. Out of arguments and annoyed by his insistence, she concluded that he could make this sacrifice if he really loved her.

* * * * *

Passionate lovers enjoy a privilege when a change in heart leads them to turn to a new love. Blinded by the force of emotions, they rarely perceive the stages by which they detach themselves from the previous one. They are too eaten up inside to be interested in anything else, victims of a temperament that draws its energy from the exasperation of feelings and not in the recognition of the qualities of the other. Its *raison d'être* is not that the desired one be worthy of interest, but only a source of excitement. Therefore, they become detached from the one they adored with ease when the time and opportunity arise. This was, in some way, Hannah's attitude. Nino noted with bitterness the changes in the coming days. His wife's behaviour had altered, even if she respected the rituals established by six months of communal life and if she forced herself to remain considerate towards him. She who previously addressed all subjects without embarrassment, now became irritated if he questioned her. Nino now recognised that she distrusted his intentions and sought to squash his desire to share her thoughts. And last but not least, she who had never given anything less than 100% of herself to him was now behaving like a sleepwalker waiting for some signal to snap her out of her torpor. And she did not resist, no matter which time of the day it came ! Lying on the bed, lost in a dream, it was enough to hear a knock at the trailer several times for her to leave their world. Nino realized to what extent his wife was escaping him and was unable to forget that it was impossible to rouse her from her dreams just a week earlier. He guessed that he was no longer her « only sun » as she had so often whispered in his ear, even though she admitted nothing and had done nothing to alter their habits. And to think that he had so long awaited the spring, happy for the time when he would sit down at his desk and see the harbingers of fairer days through the window ! Just because of a visit and, wham, his hopes were dashed. Nino came to believe that a curse was hanging over his shoulders. During March — weeks in which Hannah was absent for whole days out following the stranger — he watched helplessly as their cocoon unravelled. Defending his happiness became, at the dawn of his old age, too hard a fight. He lowered his arms in surrender, although this attitude did nothing to prevent him from discerning what degree of detachment Hannah had reached. He guessed he had hit rock bottom when he realized that in addition to this mock tenderness, displayed somehow to preserve appearances, was now an indifference to his readings. If she still complied with



the rite of the rings, once the obligation was met, she no longer slid across the sheets to snuggle her head against his shoulder and listen to him talk about literature. No ! She turned her back to him and slept fitfully. Nino renounced all when this conduct became systematic. Their love was really falling apart if Hannah no longer felt the need to try to receive the only thing he could give her : the pleasure of books ! What good was it to continue to read under these conditions ! In late April, Nino stopped sitting in his office and devouring books. Left to himself, he never got out of bed, except at show time to go through the mirror.

* * * * *

Hannah had just left the trailer, railing for the first time against his disinterest, and Nino had slipped his head under the pillow in the hope of falling asleep, when Balbar entered.

— Come on, get up ! There's no need to shut yourself up in here when it's so beautiful outside. By the faith of Balbar, one thing is sure. It will not be said that someone is in the doldrums under my tent. Go on, get up or I'll throw you into the den of lions !

To support of his words, he grabbed the covers and pulled them back, stunned to reveal a thin Nino who shivered and tried to cover himself back up. But his hand met another hand that grabbed him. He groaned and sat up.

— What's gotten into you Balbar, you hurt me !

— Well good then, Nino ! Seeing the state of you, I can only see one solution : to shake you out of it ! Come on, get dressed ! You're done with hibernating, from today on, believe me ! Hannah and you, the two of you nestled together all winter like lovebirds ! But it's over now.

— That's funny coming from the guy who married us !

— Don't pretend that you don't understand, silly bugger ! I am not inviting you to go out wenching ! To live is to enjoy much more than that ! But you still have to be bothered enough to move your backside. Existence offers itself to those who take it, you know ! Do you understand now why I'm here ? To give you back the taste for enjoying yourself, starting with a good bottle ! Come on, get moving, we're going to Ritchi's.

He picked up Nino's clothes that were scattered about the room, threw them on the bed and made an ultimatum, his finger pointing at the clothes.

— I'll give you five minutes, not more, to get dressed ! And hurry up, I'm waiting downstairs.

Nino complied. He had lost all his muscle tone and wobbled on his legs because of eating only the tiniest amounts and staying inside. It occurred to him that he would never reach the cafe when he found himself again alongside Balbar. He was afraid of not being able to walk long distances despite the support of his cane and afraid of forcing his mentor to run after him again. However, Nino had sworn to avoid this humiliation. His body balked at every moment and he walked with difficulty, angry at his clubfoot that unbalanced him. Short of breath, trying to regain strength without seeming to beg for a break, he took advantage of the slightest breeze to stop under the pretext to lifting his coat collar back up again. Alas, if these stops allowed him to regain the necessary energy to progress a few meters, they exasperated Balbar who took pleasure in retaliation to accelerate between each stop. A vicious circle, one having to stop more often, and the other walking faster and faster, Nino was exhausted upon arriving at the pub. He had, however, not fainted and had not resorted to needing the care of his friend.

— Two absinthes, Ritchi ! And do not be stingy on the quantity. We need to talk and Nino needs his spirits lifted, said Balbar to anyone who would listen.

Customers standing at the counter had turned towards the entrance, staring at the bizarre individual who behaved so in conquered territory. Ritchi rejoiced and gave them a glance, proud of the importance conferred on him by his function.

— Come on, don't you know who this is ? This is Balbar, the director of « Balbar Circus ». The circus is set up just a stone's throw away from here.

They greeted him and toasted his health, full of admiration for this character whom they had not yet had the opportunity to meet. Balbar, touched by the ovation, could not resist the urge to speak.

— Gentlemen, please ! Balbar, you know, is a man impervious to praise. So do not shower him with reverence, not even your joy in meeting the greatest entertainer of all time. Alas, gentlemen, three times alas, we who would like to make enthusiastic tributes a hundredfold are ignoring the most basic of courtesies ! Yes, gentlemen, an obligation must be paid. He will save a soul ! Applause, gentlemen, if you please !

Before a public perplexed by the tirade, but which nevertheless gave the master an ovation as they had been requested, Balbar, accompanied by a Nino blushing with shame, crossed the room without stopping and shut himself up in the back room, very satisfied with his improvisation.

Nino sat facing Balbar and lowered his head, his eyes fixed on the glass of alcohol that he warmed between his hands. He blamed the effects of walking despite his efforts to hide his fatigue and Balbar softened, conscious of having driven him too hard. He who never acknowledged his mistakes, felt the need, for once, to apologize.

— You aren't angry with me, are you ?

— For what ?

— For my behaviour just now, of course ! I realize myself that I was a bit too much back there, when I think about it. You will excuse me, won't you ?

He patted his companion's shoulder to give more weight to his words. Nino was surprised. It was amazing to him to have spent months with this charmer who would do anything in the world to avoid a mea culpa and to hear him today admit that he had committed a fault. Balbar asking forgiveness ! He wanted to see. He looked up and was convinced of the sincerity in his eyes.

— Of course I forgive you Balbar ! And anyway, after all, the race that you imposed on me reinvigorated me. As you said yourself in the trailer, I was beginning to need a breath of fresh air. I had a double ration thanks to you. But is it reasonable that a man who claims to save my soul cares about my carcass ? Are you looking for sainthood, Balbar ?

— Sainthood, me ? Are you kidding or what ? I love life too much to take an interest in man's eternal life. That would be a waste of time. There's only one life that I know of ! So we might as well enjoy it ! Me, you know, I like circus people, period. And, above all, I hate to see them unhappy.

— So that's why we're here ! I sadden you.

— Absolutely. And we are here to solve the problem.

— Which one ?

— Don't act dumb. The whole circus knows. Hannah is in heat.

A burst of laughter shook him and he toppled backward in his chair.

— What !

— Don't worry, Nino, it's a joke ! Although when you think about it, the kid would do anything and go anywhere, only to be satisfied. I'm sure she would abandon her mother and father if necessary.

— Be clearer Balbar ! She has a lover ?

— Worse !

— I thought she only loved the circus, and me, maybe.

— She loves you in her own way, no doubt, my old friend ! Believe me, I know enough to assure you that you are and will be the man of her life. Moreover, it is not for

nothing that I married you two. As to why she is infatuated with you, it's a mystery ! I can't understand the whole thing myself. But that's not important. Your problem, Nino, is that you haven't yet understood Hannah's true nature. She loves something else, much more than she loves the « Balbar Circus » and she would leave the circus without the least hesitation if this « something else » required it.

— But she always told me that the circus and the children were her life.

— It's true ! She's convinced of it herself as long as she has her feet on the ground. But watch out ! When something invites her to look up at the clouds, Hannah is immediately transfigured ! Nothing else matters. Well, did she at least tell you about her latest escapades ?

— No.

— Well, just imagine, about three years ago, she disappeared one morning without leaving an address. Yes, it was just like I'm telling you, she just took off. Without warning anyone. And she did not care that I was deprived, overnight, of the show's main attraction. Parenthetically, I almost bit the dust because of her. My profits fell by half during her absence. So do not tell me she cannot live without the circus !

— Where did she go ?

— Clever the one who could say ! Today no one knows a thing about it anymore. For my part, I would swear on my mother's life that she left our borders. I found amongst her affairs a letter from a guy who invited her to come to see him under the pretext of offering her a treasure. I'm willing to bet she went to join him. One thing is certain anyway : she returned six months later with a chestnut mare. So much fuss for a nag, you'd say ! I thought the same thing too. Until the evening performance where the spectators and I discovered a new Pegasus ! Whoever mounted the horse could ride through space and go wherever they wanted.

— Did you try it ?

— I did not. You see, I've never been fascinated by miracles and wonders. I am an Epicurean, not a dreamer. The charms of existence down here largely suffice for me. In my opinion, it is pointless to look elsewhere. Especially when we know that one life is not sufficient to exhaust all pleasures. And, you know me, God knows I'm trying.

— And Hannah, who is she then ?

— A fairy.

— A fairy ? You're joking. She's like you and me, made of flesh and bones.

— Maybe, but she's a fairy ! And it is precisely because she doesn't want to make you confront the fact that Hannah escapes you. If blood flows through her veins, believe me, thoughts are not running through her head but entire worlds.

— What do you mean ?

— It is her vocation to be elsewhere. Her *raison d'être* is not for this life down here and, know this for once and for all, neither you or I, nothing or no one could ever satisfy her aspirations. It may be hard to believe but Hannah is attached to things and to beings from afar. Still, you are privileged ! She must really love you to offer you her body and her heart. But to hope to possess her soul is impossible. She has already given it as a gift.

— To whom ?

— To the master of the Land of Dreams, of course !

— In that case, why doesn't she fulfil her wish if she dreams only of living there ? She knows how to get there, doesn't she ?

— That's the mystery of Hannah, unless she has been condemned to live among us.

— I don't understand.

— The saints must remain on earth as long as God pleases, even if they want to leave this world. It is He who decides. They must lead by example, to be shepherds leading the flock. This may be true for Hannah. She is on a mission and cannot rejoin her world before we have all been converted...

— Her life will not be enough for it. That's absurd !

— It is without a doubt no absurdity in the Land of Dreams, don't you think !

Nino stared at his friend with dismay. He suddenly saw a glimpse of his wife's personality as if the hypothesis Balbar was, in the light of facts known to himself alone, not a wild imagining, but the truth. These clues collected over months that he had been unable to interpret had been given meaning by the boldness of Balbar's intuitions. Yes, he was right. Hannah was from somewhere else ! The consequences of the discovery shook him and he could not help but stammer :

— But then, what is to become of me in that case ?

— There you have it ! Well, I'll tell you what will become of you ! It is in fact for this very reason that I led you here.

* * * * *

Two weeks earlier, when Balbar had circumvented him by his words and convinced him to resume work if he did not want to sink into depression, he got too drunk on too many words and too much alcohol to make an objection. When Balbar had extolled the virtues of work in building character, he had not even smiled when he heard these words in the mouth of the dilettante. The discovery of what Hannah really was overwhelmed him and he came to believe that a job in the circus would save him. So when they raised their glasses and drank together, he had promised to be at work the next day. But at that moment, he had not thought to ask what kind of work awaited him...

Nino was resting between a bale of straw and Yago's flanks, here where he had just set aside his pitchfork. For two weeks he had been taking responsibility for the maintenance of the animals and he liked to burrow down beside Hannah's horse to break the monotony of the mornings.

— You know, Yago, Balbar might have said that Hannah loves the Land of Dreams more, but I'm sure she loves us anyway. If she didn't, she would have gotten rid of us a long time ago, me the killjoy, and you the old nag ! Moreover, guess who you made me think of ? Of my mice ! Between you and me, it was not our habit to keep them. We got rid of them in less time than it takes to say it, and it was always me who was in charge of that task. Life is funny, don't you think ? I have just barely left the litter of rodents, and now here I am busy taking care of yours !

— Hie...

— Oh, don't worry about it, I certainly did not want to imply that you deserve the same fate ! No, I readily admit, the residents of a menagerie are more endearing than my mascots in the laboratory. However, Yago, the smell... it's the same and I'll never get used to it...

— Hie...

— You still protest. And Hannah ? you say. She loves me and that privilege is worth the price of shovelling manure. So it is ! But what do I do when she is possessed like she is today ? And what will I do when she will probably be the same tomorrow ? Wait idly with my arms behind my back ? Well, look here ! A month ago, there was not a day passed that she didn't come to caress you. And do you see her now ? No. Yet you do not complain. But you, you are a sage. I guess a your feelings by the sweetness of your eyes. You understand her, you excuse her and you wait for her. But you have to recognise one thing ! You have been at Hannah's side for years and you do not doubt her commitment. For me, it's different. Follow my example ! You reply. Trust in her love and be patient ! She will return to you tomorrow. Do you think so ?

— Hie...

Nino, disappointed by the neighing, remained pensive. It did no good to rehash everything. He patted the rump of his confidant and went back to work, deciding to leave it up to the heart and up to time to know how to proceed with care.

CHAPTER 10

DEATH OF THE MAN

In the Hall of Lost Steps at the Palace of Justice, the bailiff had opened the door solemnly and urged the jurors to enter before turning to them, with a severe face and stiff movements. He was stuffed into a uniform whose sides parted with every movement and he was about to withdraw after having verified that all were present when the necklace hanging on his neck clinked. It was like an infringement of regulations in the silence that surrounded his salute. He stiffened, embarrassed by tinkling sound and hastily closed the door for fear of committing a new blunder. Denis was the only one to notice through the opening that he was biting his lip.

— Ladies and gentlemen, if you please !

The President invited everyone to sit at the deliberation table, where a file had been placed. Denis, distracted by the incident, was slow to take his place.

— Mr Reletti, if you please !

He saw by the glances that the jurors threw his way that they were shocked by his inattention, especially now, when they were making a life or death decision in regards to the accused.

— Excuse me.

The room was empty, except for the shelves arranged on one side of the room, the round table around which they sat and the eight chairs put at their disposal. High ceiling with wood panelling, parquet and wooden beams, he felt uncomfortable here. The coldness of the place was impressive and Denis imagined sitting in the house of an aristocrat, not in the Administration Building.

— Well, are we ready ?, asked the President. If no one minds, I will first review the statement of the accused before addressing the arguments presented to the audience by both the prosecution and the defence. This is the element that will serve as a basis for our discussion. What do you think about that ?

All approved and the President seized a folder where elements of the investigation had been recorded. Then he began to read in a measured voice.

— Report No. 1038 — Commissioner District 5 — Monday, May 6 — 19 H 15. I, Philip Smith, a police officer, declare that I have received the attached document from the hands of Madame de Clery and then delivered it to the authorities. « I, Martha de Clery, acknowledge having murdered Mr Nino Lanzani, last night at 10:30 p.m. I took advantage of the installation of the « Balbar Circus » to put an end to his actions and served society by ridding it of a nutcase who would have benefited from the leniency of the court and escaped death. I confess that my crime was premeditated and happened in the following circumstances. Late in the evening, I slipped under the tent and waited for Lanzani who arrived around 10:00 p.m. My judgment was confirmed when I saw him set up a mirror in the middle of the ring and begin staring into it. Who could revel in the sight of his own image, if not a pervert ! I took advantage of the darkness, approached him and stabbed him in the back before he even noticed me. He screamed, faced me and jumped on me despite his wound. I struck him with several stabs of the knife, he grew weak on his knees and stumbled on the mirror, which broke. A shard of glass slashed his neck in the fall, he lost

consciousness and I finished it by cutting his throat. Hiccups, a rattle, it was over. I had done my duty. Proud to have avenged the De Clerys, I deny any regret in performing an act that I would commit again if honour demanded it. I demand to be sentenced severely, aware that this conception of justice, if it were tolerated by society, would lead to anarchy. Having neither remorse nor extenuating circumstances, I demand the death penalty !». That, Ladies and Gentlemen, is the confession. Do you have any comments?

— What a woman, still ! Denis uttered with admiration.

— Mr Reletti ! We are not here to judge the personality of the accused but to sanction her actions. Therefore, I ask you to support your arguments with facts, not impressions.

Denis regretted having contributed to the election of this noteworthy personage as President. Rivalry had developed between the two jurors during the trial, because of the trouble caused by Madame de Clery. In fact, after refusing to be assisted by a lawyer, she genuinely wanted to take part in the trial and not to leave the responsibility of deciding for her up to the professionals. No ! She had monopolized the attention of the judges by her statements and had become the star of the trial. But far from using her charisma to save her head as any accused would have done, she was bent on focusing on her guilt, justified in her sight by the premeditation and modalities of the crime. Her willingness to blame herself was so difficult to understand for the two jurors that they could not do otherwise but to be fascinated by this woman who had decided to die. But while Denis did not hesitate to express his opinion without any consideration of the murder, the President, to the contrary, tried hard to hide his. A bourgeois tormented by his feelings, he tried to hide under the impartiality of his function and Denis had quickly found himself on a merry-go-round of fighting with him on this point numerous times.

— Mr President is right, Mr Reletti, how can you admire a woman who is not afraid to kill a man and to abandon her child ? You have forgotten it perhaps, but by asking for her own execution, Madame de Clery herself sealed her son's fate. Think about it ! This boy will soon be orphaned by the will of his mother. It's insane ! You'd have to be a monster to be so cold-blooded about ruining so many lives.

— And what do you suggest, Madam, as a punishment for the accused ? To declare her innocent and release her to raise her child ?

— Do not talk nonsense ! I certainly don't want to make light of her crime. I only prefer that she be sent to a psychiatrist and not to the scaffold, even if the experts have concluded that she was entirely responsible for her actions at the time ! Her detention would at least allow Mark to see his mother again.

— If you please, do not digress ! I remind you that the time has not yet come to answer to the Court's questions and to pronounce on the guilt of Madame de Clery or on her sentence. Thanks be to God, we're not there yet ! Let's start with the facts in the light of the evidence. Allow me to recall them myself if nobody has an issue with that. Are there any objections ?

No juror spoke up.

— Okay !, said the President, I will begin with the autopsy report. It seems, according to the document submitted by the medical examiner, that his findings corroborate the confession in our possession. The time of death of Mr Lanzani corresponds to that indicated in the report. As for the cause of death, it is official. Of the ten stab wounds counted on the body, only the cut to the throat was fatal. The victim bled to death in seconds, his carotid artery severed.

— May I ask a question ?, inquired a juror.

— Of course !

— Madame de Clery indicated in the letter given to the police that Lanzani broke the mirror during the scuffle and got stabbed under the chin with a piece of glass. Does the

report prepared by the expert permit it to be determined with certainty what actually caused the death : the shard of glass or the knife ?

— Excellent question, Mr Larbelle ! Unfortunately, the autopsy findings are hardly conclusive on this point. I would even say that they leave the door open to all speculation. Accordingly, we must stick to the testimony of Madame de Clery and conclude that the dagger was the cause of death.

— Some doubts therefore exist ?

— In my opinion, no. Despite her emotional state, one could grant that Madame de Clery has always acted with reflection. She nourished too much hatred towards Lanzani to forego the pleasure of giving him the coup de grace.

— May I make a comment ?

— Absolutely, that's what you're here for.

— If the defendant knows what she was doing, we also know that she began to drink and had to undergo several detoxification cures after the death of her husband. However, her relatives and friends have made statements that suggest that she still enjoys whiskey. The night of the crime, couldn't she have drunk too much to get her courage up, and ended up making herself incapable of really understanding the consequences of her actions ?

— What do you mean ?

— The shard of glass in the throat may be the cause of death. Someone found a fragment at the base of the neck, did they not ?

— That's a bit much, Mr Petersen !, shouted the mother suddenly with indignation. You don't really want to acquit this murderer do you ? I will end up believing that Mr Reletti is not alone in having been bewitched by this woman. Finally, gentlemen, tell me what is so extraordinary about Madame de Clery that she disturbs you to this extreme !

— Madam, measure your words, if you please !

— Come on, Mr President, are we going to forget that a man has died just because she is beautiful and determined ?

— Of course not.

— Well that's some reassurance at least !

— So, let's resume the debate where we left off. However, I will open a parenthesis to respond to our colleague's question. Too much time had elapsed between the murder and the confession for it to be judicious to perform a blood test. Madame de Clery seemed of sane mind to the police, so we must assume that she enjoyed all her faculties at the time of the crime. Do not forget, no decision is based on assumptions, as seductive as they are ! We must consider the confession to acquit or to condemn. However, the statements of Madame de Clery are irrefutable. As for evidence, I'm coming back to that. Laboratory testing proved that the bloodstains found on her suit belonged to the same blood type as the victim's. As for the handful of hair found between the fingers of the deceased, the tests confirm that they are those of Madame de Clery. The only grey areas here, dare I say, are the amputation of the right hand and the button ! On the first point, the accused denies any involvement in this barbaric act ; on the second, she says that she remembers that Mr Lanzani snatched it off during their fight. Unfortunately, neither the hand nor the button were found despite the police's search of the ring.

— What do you think we should conclude from this, Mr President ?

— In my opinion, nothing that could call into question the prosecutions' conclusions. There are too many elements that prove her guilt. You know, there are often details in this kind of drama that remain unexplained. A maniac may have discovered the body and perpetrated the mutilation. Regarding the button, she probably lost it in other circumstances and doesn't remember it anymore.

— In that case, are you not lending support to my arguments, Mr President, ventured Mr Petersen. If you admit that she could be mistaken on one point, why not allow

that she might be mistaken on another ? And ask yourself if the cut to the throat was indeed the cause of death ?

President stiffened in his seat, annoyed by an insinuation that threatened to betray him if he still had to defend the accused.

— Mr Petersen, you surprise me ! Denis intervened. As Mr President often reproached me for, but it is true I am not hiding it, you have standing before you an admirer of Madame de Clery. However, I would like to be clear. It is not because her Machiavellianism and determination subjugate me that I would excuse the inexcusable. You should do the same, Mr Petersen. It's not because you have also fallen under the spell of Madame de Clery that you have to shirk off her crime. I am sorry but she is guilty and it is not going to be two details that prove otherwise.

The tone was so brittle that Mr Petersen lowered his eyes and shrivelled up in his seat in the hope of being forgotten.

— Hmm... coughed the President, I think Mr Reletti has summed up the situation perfectly. It is unnecessary to dwell on it any further. If you wish, we will discuss the motives after the manner of the crime. They seem obvious given the personality of Lanzani Nino and I'll stop there to present the elements of the investigation. He and Madame de Clery were born in Houloze. They met after the death of the Count when Lanzani presented himself to the castle to offer his services. He took advantage of Madame de Clery's confusion and managed to convince her to employ him as a tutor to her son. The Countess let herself be persuaded, affected by his personage. We can be astonished by this in a woman as insightful as she is. But so it was. We all have our weaknesses and she does too. Lanzani moved to the castle and managed to win the trust of the Countess, and maybe even her heart, thanks to his discretion and dedication. We can assume that she gave in several times to his advances. But this detail does not help clarify this case and I will not insist upon it. Several years passed without anything darkening their relationship until the day her son confided something to his mother. His tutor has been fondling him. Nino Lanzani, accused by Mark of touching him, disappeared even before she decided to terminate him, without a doubt torn by her feelings. Should we cry for vengeance and demand his death ? Surely not ! Nonetheless, Lady Clery's blindness sheds light on the consequences of Lanzani's behaviour. The mother affirmed this. Mark became temperamental after the trauma. Even psychiatrists appointed by the Court could do nothing about it. No exchange is now possible.

— Could they at least get him to confirm his mother's assertions ?

— No. I repeat it. He did not say a word during the interviews as if evoking the past filled him with terror. He seemed to fear retaliation — I ask you why ! — and he constantly lowered his head, trembling. That is why the Court chose not to bring him to the court. The confrontation would have been detrimental to him.

— Madame de Clery therefore hates Lanzani because the De Clery heir has psychological problems ?

— Exactly, concluded the President.

— If Lanzani were this depraved individual as portrayed by Madame de Clery, what should we make of the statements given by the acrobats who are convinced otherwise ?

— Nothing. The pack mentality reigns and masters these people !, retorted the President. You know, we do not know where they come from ! The « Balbar Circus » is not a circus, it is a court of miracles ! There are blacks, gypsies and fools. Remember yourselves Hannah's words ! No, Lady and Gentlemen, I say it without hesitation. None of us should rely on their testimony. It is not a coincidence that Lanzani found refuge among these lawless outcasts. He could not find a better ally. They stick tight together faced with justice, ready even to commit perjury. And it has been committed during the trial, I'm sure of it.

— Moreover, Mr Rossopoulos's overwhelming testimony before the Court supports the statements of Madame de Clery !, added the woman. Lanzani was too polite to be honest. The proof ! This Zuleta of whom he spoke. Lanzani found a way to seduce her and take her to his room when she had just arrived. A mark worthy rendezvous !

— In short, I will allow myself this remark because we are deliberating behind closed doors. Lanzani got what he deserves ! concluded the President. Alas, madam and gentlemen, we are not judging the victim but the murderer. The law is the law, all considerations aside. So we need to punish the murder under the law and not the motive, however legitimate it may be ! I remind you that this was a premeditated crime, do not forget it ! We cannot tolerate seeing everyone settle their own accounts, for fear of falling into anarchy.

— So, are we finally going to vote ? Denis asked impatiently.

— Yes !

Each took his pencil and replied to questions posed by the judges, aware of the gravity of his actions. Eight sheets dropped into an urn would soon seal Madame de Clery's fate.

* * * * *

Martha had been on the verge of a nervous breakdown for a month now as she waited for an official to serve her with the date of her execution. She had more and more difficulty to control herself, exasperated by a stay that made her fear the conviction might be annulled and disoriented by the alcohol withdrawal the circumstances required. Twice, moreover, she had been seized by tremors and had to be transported to the infirmary to receive care.

Today when someone had visited her to tell her the news that tomorrow at dawn she would be led to the scaffold, a kind of serenity had replaced uncertainty. She had finally won and reached the objectives she had set. To finish with this existence where alcohol and gigolos were no longer enough for her, and to discredit, on this occasion, the only man who had left her !

Lying on the straw mattress, staring at the light bulb on the ceiling, Martha took pleasure in recalling this afternoon's interview, especially the response of the assessor when she had smiled and let out a sigh of relief at the announcement of her death. He and the others had not understood, but she was not offended to see her character misunderstood. This ignorance allowed her to manipulate men at will. Therefore, she could not complain. Yet, she thought bitterly, she was tired of this fun and enjoyed less and less her victories over male vanity. For example, her adventure with Nino ! Faced with this adversary, the triumph had been too easy. All things considered, she regretted not having taken her revenge on the man who had humiliated her. Breaking Zakowski's will would have fulfilled her ! Alas, it was too late. Yet she had masterfully fooled this male with her insight. Present at all court hearings, he had at no time blinked at her lies. Although she panicked when she spotted him in the audience, she quickly assured herself that he would not intervene in the debates. He left her to present the elements of her guilt and to cast dishonour on Nino without flinching, for lack of evidence to disprove her story. He knew nothing and that was a satisfaction. If it hadn't been possible to bribe him, at least she had succeeded in deceiving his sagacity. She tasted victory when she heard a rattling of keys. She jumped, left the bunk and went to glue her ear to the door. Her heart was racing and she thought for a moment that she might faint. Was it time already ? She knew that they would come for her at dawn. The evening meal had ended a few hours earlier, it had to be about midnight. Who allowed themselves to disturb these grounds at this hour ?

A strange atmosphere prevailed in the corridor where prisoners awaiting execution were incarcerated. Unlike other quarters of the centre, where noise bore witness to the permanence of life, a silence imposed itself in this wing of the building, away from the comings and goings of jailers. The fruit of a singular alchemy, one sensed the necessity to speak in a lowered voice as soon as one stepped foot into this antechamber of death. The moment they passed the grid which isolated this area from the rest of the prison, they showed respect to the precariousness of the lives that could be counted in days by making the least possible noise. Yet despite the guards' precautions when they turned their key in a lock, the slightest knock of metal resounded in the ears of the condemned as an echo of their demise. Today only her cell, among those on either side of the corridor, was occupied. Martha knew immediately that someone was coming to see her. She shrank back, then rushed into a corner where she crouched. She was trembling, curled up on herself, her forehead to her knees. The door opened and closed. A man entered without uttering a word. Martha guessed in the silence that this unknown was waiting to distinguish her face before engaging in conversation. She stared at the visitor, at the end of her nerves.

— You !

— The one and only. You see, I certainly did not want us to part ways angry. That's why I decided to invite myself to drink to your triumph.

Backing up his words, he took a bottle and a glass from his pocket.

Martha stared at him, her facial features suddenly distorted by hatred, stunned by the presence of Zakowski, in this place and at this time. She regretted at that second not having a dagger to push into his bowels and enjoy his agony.

— Madame de Clery, pull yourself together ! You know that you and I are cut of the same cloth. Cold-blooded beasts who sacrifice their feelings on the altar of reason ! So, it's useless to bother ourselves with emotions !

Having her merits recognised, even if it was done by the enemy, was a balm to her heart. The satisfaction of self-esteem enchanted her a few hours before her hanging and she rejoiced doing battle with him. Whether he was sent by fate as he sometimes claimed, because he came to make honourable amends, she wanted to take advantage of the opportunity and not just be content with his capitulation at her feet. She wanted more than surrender. She required a death. Unfortunately, she had only a few hours to wreak vengeance and she needed all her strength to win this fight. She had to quickly recover, regain control of her nerves and regain her clear-sightedness. She had to deal with the opponent during these few minutes necessary for the surge.

— Could I have a whiskey before celebrating what you call my triumph ? You can tell me afterwards how you managed to get here ! It's incredible ! Especially the day before my...

He handed her the glass : she drank it in one gulp.

— Of your execution, I know. But you see, this meeting is not as unlikely as it seems. In any case, it is not a coincidence. I wanted it at this time and in this place and I got it ! As to how, well, it's thanks to you, I dare say ! I have followed your principles and used your technique : greed ! But with a difference though. I succeeded with the prison guards where you have failed me. The feat has cost me a fortune, I agree, but I have no regrets. It is not every day that two minds meet to recognise the merits of the most eminent.

— So it's true ? You're willing to admit my superiority. But tell me, what were you thinking when speaking of triumph ?

— Don't play the fool. I mean that which you hold most dear : to dominate men ! It's true, you can be proud of yourself. You have always worn out the credulity of males to serve your purposes. Including whatever you wish to achieve without having the courage to accomplish...

— Sorry, but I do not understand your riddles.

— It is nonetheless clear.

Martha drew herself up to standing, her face disfigured by anger. Faced with Boris who distilled his thoughts drop by drop, she felt herself put into too inferior a position to long endure his game. Alas, she could not counter-attack if she didn't know where he wanted to go with this. She was furious.

— Who are you to torture me so ?, she screamed. Look at me ! I'm tired of you, you hear me ! Drop the bullshit and go away, do you hear me, go away ! I never want to see you again, not you, not anyone.

She fell sobbing at Zakowski's feet.

— Who am I ? A little providence, Madame de Clery. You persist in despising me, for lack of wanting to understand. But I want your good. Here, I'll even give you proof ! There will be no retrial, and tomorrow you will die at dawn. Isn't it great news when you know that I understood everything ? Even your stroke of genius, this masquerade of a trial ! That is the victory that I had to celebrate with you, to enjoy right till the end the pleasure of deceiving your fellow man and killing two birds with one stone. Dishonouring Nino and dying !

Boris took her by the arm and forced her to get up as he spoke these words. In his eyes, hearing the truth required being face-to-face. Then he put an object in the palm of her hand, even before she had time to utter a sound.

— Take it ! It belongs to you.

Martha spread her fingers and turned pale.

— My button !

— Indeed ! The same one that you ripped off your suit the evening of the crime immediately after stabbing Nino, who had just died. The same one that you slipped between his fingers with a handful of your hair in the hope of planting a red herring. In short, the button sought by the police.

— You were there too ?

— Of course ! Every Monday since I told you about his habits. Like you, moreover.

— But why ?

Martha looked at him without reacting. To understand what vanity it was to want to resist this man annihilated her. Her bitterness dissipated and she abdicated, broken by a will that she finally conceded was superior to her own.

— What for ? To allow everyone to reach their very limits ! You see, Madame de Clery, the protagonists of this affair have not belonged here since the time they met me. Their fate is in my hands, and believe me, it is a responsibility. However, I can consider myself lucky even if the task was thankless. Nino and you have led your lives to their ends.

— Don't talk anymore about him to me !

— I shall speak of it nonetheless, Madame de Clery ! I have too much pride to let you think I'm a fool ! The court swallowed your nonsense ! Me, never ! I know the truth you disguise. Nino was not the monster that you have portrayed. He did not try to seduce you, let alone derail Mark. His only mistake, if I may say so, was to happen upon you on a road where you burst a tyre and he played with the kids at summer camp ! It's so easy, is not it, to blame a breakdown for the death of a husband by heart attack... to accuse fate of not allowing you to procure the medication that would have saved him... in short, to mask a premeditated murder...

— You...

— Yes, I know that too, Madame de Clery ! It was too heavy a secret for Nino to carry. He eased his conscience by talking with Hannah, the woman who came to give evidence at court. But just between us, the walls have ears in her caravan.

— The fool has said nothing.

— The fool, as you say, is not here to denounce our pettiness and overwhelm us. Not everyone has the privilege to look like you, Madame de Clery ! Of little import what troubles you had with the law, provided that Nino was happy.

— You make me laugh ! It was not because he committed suicide ! He broke the mirror — or the mirror broke, I do not know — and a piece of glass cut his throat. I saw it with my own eyes and so did you !

— Of course ! But however you are overlooking something. He did not act out of desperation. I'll even surprise you. Nino was in love ! And it is precisely because he was in love that he chose to die...

— You are ridiculous ! The Hannah that I know is still alive.

— Whether or not she's alive, it is a fact. But Nelly ?

— What ! You want to persuade me of this nonsense I heard in court ? You're stark raving mad !

— Listen to me, Madame de Clery ! I'm not here to convince you that Nino discovered the Land of Dreams ! Your beliefs do not concern me. No, I came to clear up some misunderstandings concerning your success. Which, incidentally, you had only because I wanted it for you.

— You only think of humiliating me and defeating me !

— Humiliate you ? If that is the price you have to pay to understand that no one deceives me, yes ! As to defeating you, believe me, I've never had the intention. Otherwise, I would have showed the button to the authorities and proven your innocence.

Martha shuddered at these words.

— Do not worry, I will not do it. Isn't my task to lead you to yourself ? You want to die, don't you ? Your dignity was abused enough with the alcohol and the gigolos. You wanted to end it for months but you did not have the courage. Nino provided you with the means. Your wish is granted, and you will die today, partly thanks to him and largely thanks to me. Here are the details that explain my presence tonight. I wanted you to know who orchestrated your demise, why Nino committed suicide, and why I let him.

— You're not going to restore the honour of this loser you seem to hold in such high esteem ?

— The fulfilment of his destiny seemed more important to me than his respectability. Moreover, you should be grateful to me because I will preserve your reputation so that yours can be realised. When it is you who used your charms to convince Nino to come to the castle, you who seduced him so that he would not speak, you who pursued him out of resentment.

Martha felt hatred consume her, facing the magnitude of her defeat. She let her body betray her despair, unable to utter a word and exorcise her anger in words. Tremors shook her, her fists clenched, her face contorted when she threw herself on Zakowski to seize him by the throat. He kept his composure and struck an uppercut to her stomach. Made breathless by the violence of the hook, she opened her mouth without uttering a sound. Her hands let go of him and she sank down on the ground, nailed there by the pain. As for Boris, he readjusted his shirt and tie before calling the jailer. He was about to leave the cell without addressing Martha when he changed his mind.

— In fact, I was just about leave and but have forgotten something. I suppose you have not forgotten your son ? Well, do not worry, I have learned from the court that his grandmother and uncle will have custody ! They are delighted and so is he. Between us, he is already friends with his two neighbours, Niels and Pieter. Come on, I'll leave you the bottle and glass. Enjoy it !

In the morning, Martha went to the scaffold half drunk.

CHAPTER 11

THE HEREAFTER IN THE LAND OF DREAMS

— Where... where... am I ? Nino mumbled, after the ordeal he had just endured.

— But ! In the Land of Dreams... at my side !, a voice in the darkness surprised him.

Nino's head ached. His skull felt as if it were stuck in the jaws of a vice and the intense pain prevented him from opening his eyes to distinguish who was speaking to him and from being able to reflect and understand what he was doing here. He remained prostrate and groaned in the hope of being consoled.

— Do you suffer ? Here, snuggle up against my shoulder. You'll see, it will be much better.

Nino tried to gather strength and move his body, when he felt two arms encircle him and pull him gently. With every limb paralyzed, he appreciated an initiative that exempted him from making an effort and gave himself up without resistance when he felt his temple that throbbed to the beat of a heart resting on a pillow. Nino realized that his head was nestled in the neckline of a blouse. He placed his hand on the chest, went up the long neck towards the face, then brushed it with his fingers as if searching in the dark to identify the person who had rescued him. Far from being frightened by this, this unknown benefactor accompanied her caresses with shoulder and head movements to help him find her mouth, her nose, her eyes. She put her lips to his when she realized he did not yet recognize her. Nino guessed who she was by the taste of her kiss.

— Nelly, it's you !

— Who did you expect ? Come on, don't talk anymore, you'll only tire yourself out unnecessarily.

— No, I want to know ! Tell me what happened to me, I don't remember anything !

— You made the « choice » Nino !

— What choice ?

— You have renounced the world and joined the Land of Dreams. And accepted the price that it costs : death ! However, you have not lost your life by sacrificing your body. Instead, you have found it again and you will soon taste timeless joys...

— But who is speaking for me if I am dead ? Tell me, Nelly, am I still me ?

— Better yet, Nino, you are finally « you », the one you dreamt of being ! Down there, remember, down there was only pretence. You who are looking for the absolute, you were only a reflection of yourself in a world of beings that passed, passed again and then passed away : a man racked with doubt ! You despaired even of Hannah's love ! Be reassured now. On this side of the mirror, everything that existed before still exists, on the condition of having crossed the threshold.

— But who am I if my body remained there ?

— An avatar of yourself before metamorphosis.

Nino shuddered. He understood after this explanation why Nelly had been able to move him a moment earlier. Despite the feeling of having a dislocated body, he did not have it anymore ! What did he look like ? He patted himself gently. Through touch, he realized that he was reduced to a figure whose contours were outlined by a phosphorescent

border. He had become a form without matter. With one detail in exception : his right hand that wore the ring was intact and defied time.

— Have no fear, Nino, that appearance is transient. You cannot pass from one universe to one without enduring some inconvenience. I must, however, tell you a secret. Love creates miracles in the Land of Dreams. Soon, you will remember your true identity and our happiness will be complete.

— Nelly, what a joy to hear these words, nestled up against you ! Listen, it's my turn to tell you a secret ! I love you.

— It is an open secret. I've known forever.

Affected by Nino's naivety, she burst out laughing, with that mischievous laugh he adored. Her presence comforted him and his anxieties were diminishing. However, even if he had begun to recover his senses, there were missing links in the chain of events and his reason was too defective to find them on his own. He grew bolder, even at the risk of annoying her.

— Tell me, Nelly, one more question, the last ! How does the transition take place ? I don't remember.

— You are incorrigible, Nino ! When will you stop always wanting to understand instead of living ? This is exactly what you failed to do in your world. Okay, so here goes ! Since these trifles will soon be of no more importance, I'll tell you... you remember that I had asked Chloe to seduce you at the ball in your honour. She had, in fact, another mission. She must profit from your sleep, after making love to you, to whisper into your ear how to keep me if you decided to.

— What did she tell me ?

— Word for word, this sentence : « Nino, the time has come to decide. Do not forget this if you would like to rejoin Nelly ! She will be behind the mirror every Monday waiting for your visit. You cannot see her but she sees you. Come close, kiss the mirror and wait ! In recognition of your love, she will bring her lips to your mouth and seal your fate with that kiss. The mirror between you will break and you will join her forever. Let it be as it should be ! »

— Did I hesitate a long time ?

— For weeks. But you can imagine, it's never easy to leave those we love, even to find your way. Especially Hannah, whom you loved so much !

— So I betrayed her ?

— To the contrary, Nino, you followed her lead ! You understood that her mission took precedence over love, as great as it was ! Now, part of her mission is fulfilled thanks to you. You are her first convert, do you understand, her F I R S T ! Could she have hoped for anything better ? Her husband decided to renounce all appearances ! Isn't that wonderful ! Besides, look !

Nelly snapped her fingers. Veils invaded the space, arms came from nowhere, carrying candelabras where one candle burned on every branch. Slowly, they turned toward the couple, toward where they perceived the voices were coming from.

— We are married for life, Nino ! she whispered, handing him his ring.

Nino recognised on her finger the wedding ring that Hannah had worn. The rite was perpetuated because he had kept his. In the face of this testimony to love, he gave himself up to happiness without remorse, convinced that he had his wife's blessing. He hugged Nelly, tears in his eyes.

— Listen Nino, it's time to leave.

— To leave ?

— Yes, look ! In this corridor that you know so well, my office and all the doors you so often knocked on have disappeared. Today only the portal remains. Do you see it ? It is at the end of the corridor. To reach it you must tear away, one by one, all the pieces of gauze being offered in your honour.



— Are we not good as we are, here, holding on to each other ?

— This place is the Land of Dreams, Nino, don't forget it ! Dreams are never more than a representation of the afterlife, and as such, they only last a moment : the time spent sleeping. This no man's land of which I was the guardian is the border to the realm. On one side, earthly life, fleeting and changeable ; on the other, heavenly life, timeless and stable. We cannot stay here any longer. We have to cross the line. Do you want to ?

Nino sensed from the worry in her voice that she feared reluctance on his part. He certainly had reason to hesitate. The first passage had been so bloody. But if this part were even more painful, the fact that he would confront it in Nelly's company restored his courage. He stood up on his legs without showing how much effort it cost him.

— You're right, Nelly, let's go !

He took her by the waist and they advanced towards the portal. Unusual honour guards, the arms carrying the candles, moved into the space to illuminate each step of the way. As Nelly had asked him to do, when a veil barred their way, Nino snatched it away with his hand. The fabric was detaching from an invisible glass ceiling, floated in the air a few seconds and then wrapped him in a shroud. As he neared the portal, the gauze overlapped his body and Nino little by little again regained his human figure. By some compassionate mystery, the fabric became flesh when it came into contact with humans. At the end of his metamorphosis, Nino understood the meaning of the message uttered by his attacker : « It's up to you to be reborn to life ». The meaning of the hitherto obscure prophecy was revealed in the light of this reincarnation taking place right before his eyes. In his quest for a better life, Nino had to shed his self to gain faith that would have been impossible to have without sacrifice. Far from growing in reason as the mind told him, he had to defy reason and listen to his heart. Yes, it was crazy to leave Hannah but it was nevertheless the decision that had to be taken to reach the end of his path. Nino trembled several steps from the goal. He turned to Nelly as if afraid of losing the happiness now within his grasp.

— Nino, your face !

Nino, who had recovered the boldness of his youth at the hour of his decision, now reclaimed his charm at the hour of their jump. Nelly surrendered herself to his arms. This gesture was a sign. The doors opened and they were admitted passage. They were still huddled against one another, dazzled by the clarity rising up from the horizon, when a ray of light enveloped them. Swept up in a whirl, they saw the world grow distant before vanishing into the azure blue, happy to never again set foot on the ground.

The noise of a mechanism was suddenly heard in the hallway that had previously been deserted. The music box engaged, the carousel began and both faceless riders who had circled around during the time of their meeting had taken human form.

Nelly's and Nino's features were painted on the porcelain heads. For all eternity...

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French version : ISBN 978-2-919760-00-8
Legal Deposit : November 2010

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