



The Secret

An excerpt

Philippe Sollers



Illustration by Andrea Popyordanova

Mother

Oh god, everything happens at once . . . Even though I knew Mother was on the last leg of her life's journey, never would I have thought that the end would go so quickly. Mother? No! Already? Eighty-four years old, but still . . . Always lively, precise, her eyes, her wit, her pure, pale, luminous forehead, her gaiety . . . My young old little mother, or rather, for years now, my definitive, chaste, imperious little girl . . . Be ready to suffer, that's the idiotic law, the price to pay for having put in an appearance. You were

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Le Secret (1993) is a spy story that makes room for other things: the moving narrative of the death of the protagonist's mother; caustic and exuberant observations about society's ills; topical references to current events; and ironic commentary about artificial insemination and other new ways to manufacture human bodies. The narrator is secret agent Jean Clément; his wife is Judith; their ten-year-old son, Jeff. As in all of Sollers's novels, the narrator-protagonist speaks for Sollers, and his wife and child represent Sollers's wife (Julia Kristeva) and child.

This excerpt, "Mother," narrates the death of Clément's mother from cancer in a clinic in the south of France, followed by a surprise package that arrives after her death like an encoded message from the

lent a body? You have to return it.

Jeff: “Grandmother’s not coming this year? She’s sick?” Yes, grandmother is very sick, she was operated on for four hours, she has recovered, but not for long. She says: “I’m going away little by little.” And also: “Live? What’s the use?” With a strange little forced laugh, she says: “What bothers me the most is how sad you are going to be. It bothers me, it bothers me.” Also: “One would like the impossible, but everything has an end.” And: “Who said this, again: ‘I am now as nothing, everything is now as nothing to me’?” (Me: “That’s not nice!”)

I call her twice a day at the clinic, I feel her voice declining each time, with pauses or surges of energy. Me: “Am I bothering you?” She: “Oh, never!” “I’m thinking about you a lot.” “Oh, I know!” This *Oh*, totally exceptional, is very willful, emphatic. In reality, it’s a thick book crammed with stories, scenes, details, landscapes, dreams, tears, laughter, wild conversations, coquetties, dresses, scarves, jewelry, outings, beaches, automobiles, lunches, dinners, gardens, faces. It’s an *Oh* that is almost impossible to hold up, but with her always alert mind she keeps it firmly in her throat. It’s this *Oh* that I know I am especially going to retain from her, as if she were already playing at telling me, from the other side: “Do you think you will be able to think this *Oh*? Entirely? Without mistakes? With all its nuances, its adventures, its reliefs, its colors? Up to the end? Not forgetting anything? Deciphering the silences?”

She also says: “Today it was hard.” Or else, when they have taken her into the garden for a few minutes: “In the sun I lived again.” And also: “I have only one wish: to sleep, sleep, sleep.” Two or three minutes, and then: “I give you a big hug.” Or: “I hug you with all my heart.” Once, I was very surprised when she used a word that she has never used for me (but perhaps there was someone in the room): “Goodbye, my child.” Briefly, she tells me about her treatment, about the analyses (which they keep half hidden from her but about which she has no illusions), the transfusions, the dressings, the massages. And finally, with determination: “Don’t worry,” or: “Enough moaning.”

beyond. In a life-affirming exchange of brief words between mother and son, the son carries the mother over the threshold to her transition in death. At the end of the novel, this moving scene materializes in three dimensions in the form of the Pietà, Michelangelo’s statue in Rome: the seemingly diaphanous figure of Christ momentarily laid across the Holy Mother’s knees, soon to be taken up in his resurrection. He is the one, light, diaphanous, incredibly weightless and unmeasured, who carries her in his transitory death.

Sollers has said publicly that the three phrases Mother breathes as she is dying, “Oh never!” “Oh I know!” “It’s enormous,” are exactly the words his mother spoke on her deathbed. The intimacy of the scene could not be more heartfelt.

Though it may seem that the emotional narrative of a mother’s death has little to do with a novel of espionage, *The Secret* asks the reader to forge a connection between these disparate genres. And a thoughtful reader will realize that the activities of a secret agent provide a paradoxical metaphor for this deeply personal story, as if to say: what can one know about death except what one can piece together, like an undercover story, from the bits of available information? Rich in codes, symbols, and allusions, *The Secret* has hidden depths for the attentive reader to plumb.

Read bios

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Philippe Sollers (b. 1936 near Bordeaux), founder of *Tel Quel* and *L’Infini*, powerful and influential editor, author of scores of novels, essays, and art criticism, “public intellectual” or media bad boy, has a lot to say about what society isn’t

I went to see her three times. I take her hand, we talk of banalities, in reality everything is taking place elsewhere in those “Oh, nevers!” and “Oh, I knows!” I fear the moment when the telephone will ring in empty space. It will come, it will come, and space on that occasion will not close, time will be taken away.

My last visit, the heat was already at its strongest, the good old South still resisting with all its strength. The clinic is five kilometers from the city. Her room was on the ground floor, just behind a fresh little wood of catalpas. The window was open, she was breathing with difficulty, she asked for a glass of water, “I can’t take it anymore,” and, almost inaudible, “it’s hard to die,” that’s all. However, there was that glance when I entered, head turned, flash of joy, surprise, could this be salvation after all? A darting glance, incredulous and ecstatic, yes, everything is possible, miracles exist, after all. But right away she understood, resting on the pillow, eyes closed, white nightgown with little blue flowers, very thin, drawn, sculpted, long silence. I kissed her on the forehead, I took her hand. My left hand, closer to the heart, her right hand. She pressed my fingers three times, quite intentionally.

That was really the last message. Saying: continue, don’t be afraid, you are the one who is right against all rights and reasons, we are the ones who are right, follow your path, little does it matter where it leads, continue, continue, do not doubt, do not look back, let people talk, continue, hold yourself upright, I apologize for having given you life on this side, sorry, but the harm is done, and maybe that is a happy error since we have come to know and love one another, no reconciliation, no, it’s impossible between a man and a woman, but, if you wish, agreement within radical disagreement. That’s it, you see. There is no going forward or backward, it’s like that. I am preceding you in this business, I am rather proud of it, look at my face, it will almost be yours at the end, what’s inside is between us, no one can understand anything. You don’t die outside, you know, but inside, in the depth of the soul. Don’t let yourself be intimidated, no one can kill you, let’s get

getting right. He is a versatile, controversial thinker who has said that the novel is the continuation of thought by other means, and he believes that the truth is best spoken in a work of fiction. But the seriousness of his social criticism does not prevent him from engaging readers via humor. As Philip Roth has said: “Anybody out for a good time should read Philippe Sollers. He’s the sort of intellectual clown we don’t breed in America—urbane, bestial, candid, effervescent, an irrepressible ejaculator of farcical wisdom, a master of good-natured malice, a kind of happy, lively, benign Céline.” Sollers’s latest novel is *Mouvement* (2016).

Armine Kotin Mortimer is the translator of two books by Philippe Sollers, *Mysterious Mozart* (2010) and *Casanova the Irresistible* (2016, both University of Illinois Press). Upon receiving her translation of the Mozart book, Sollers wrote: “Many thanks for your very fine *Mysterious Mozart*, which is far and away my favorite translation and introduction.” Excerpts from four other literary translations have appeared or are forthcoming in *3:AM Magazine*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Cossack Review*, and *AGNI*. She has also translated several other contemporary novels in French for which she is currently seeking publishers. In her long career as a professor of French literature, she published many scholarly books and articles, and for her distinguished work on behalf of French culture, the French government awarded her the *Palmes Académiques* honor in 2009. She lives in Urbana, Illinois.

going at last for always, for ever. I approve of you. I vote for you. Whatever happens, don't forget this moment of certainty, of the decision of certainty. I am going to die in you, and you will die *in you*. The outside is nothing, chaos, lies. All those stories about birth, death, pregnancy, womb, origin, end, fabrication of bodies are nothing. You see, it is hard to die, but death is nothing. Life is another life. Inside, vertical inside. That's how it is. *It's yes.*

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The doctor had told me: "Look, there are three principles. The first: be logical. The second: don't answer questions you are not asked. The third: hedge." As for me, I was there to look him squarely in the face and clearly ask him to avoid unnecessary suffering. Understood? Understood. His recommendations were kind, but, in our case, not up to par.

When I left, she was sleeping. The next morning, I reached her again by telephone, in a breath. I said: "I take you with me, I take you completely in my thoughts." And she, painfully, but very distinctly: "That's enormous." In the evening, another "I give you a hug," scarcely audible. And the next morning, the phone rang more than five times, to continue no end. The doctor called me a quarter of an hour later. Me: "No suffering?" He: "No apparent suffering." An abyss in "apparent."

That was yesterday. It will always be yesterday. Judith, Jeff, and I put on our best clothes and went to bury Mother. It was still hot, people die in the summer in our family, I checked it out by looking at the dates on the tombstone in the cemetery. Almost all in July or August. The last space was all that was left for her, the coffin went in at an angle, the men were obliged to push. The priest, at the church, was professional. He quickly passed over the notorious incredulity of his client by speaking of her "dignity," a word of muted reprobation that is applied to out-of-the-ordinary people they don't quite know what to do with. He seemed surprised when I asked him to read Matthew 10:26: "Fear them not therefore: for

there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops,” as well as the same passages in Luke 8:17, 12:2-7, and Mark 4:22, concerning the light that should not be hidden and the capacity to listen: “Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have.” And also: “For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.” I felt that this “whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken” remained incomprehensible for this honest young man, as for everyone else. But there’s no arguing, it’s in the text.

Jeff was pale and stiff in his navy-blue suit, it was his first death. He touched the coffin several times, cautiously, in the central aisle, in front of the large lighted candle. I spared him the moment when the body was put into the coffin, Judith stayed with him outside. I found myself alone with her, lying so icy and beautiful, incredibly positive and neat, cold as lead, north-south axis, fixed needle, her clean-swept forehead and my lips on it, “goodbye my love.” Then the formalities of the burial. Jeff wanted to know why the gravediggers gave us fistfuls of salt taken from a dirty light-blue plastic bag. He cried at the lowering. And then the three of us left by taxi, under the heavy sun, for the airport.

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I received the package this morning, by special courier. A Chinese box of black lacquer prepared for me by Mother at her attorney’s. On one side, about a hundred letters from me, forgotten letters from my youth, when I was in England, in Kent, staying with her friend Violet, whom she had hidden during the war. What clearly comes through, between the lines, is that I am asking her for money. On the other side, personal objects that she must have

slowly sorted through: a blue silk scarf, her reading glasses, an oval handbag mirror rimmed in tortoise shell, an ancient ring, Greek intaglio in a gold mounting, with a goddess's profile (a souvenir of her trip to Greece at the end of the fifties, only photo I have of her in Venice, where she took the boat, light-colored suit, gray morning on the docks), and, right at the bottom, ten thousand dollars in fifty-dollar bills. No note to accompany this, of course. That is really like her. The facts, the lines, the angles, nothing else. What a good writer, actually, in life as it is lived.

That she had to die, okay, that's the rule. But how to get used to not seeing her and especially not hearing her? "Oh, never!" "Oh, I know!" "IT'S ENORMOUS." It is the voices that are eternal, the moments of the voice. There is a flash of voices that passes through everything and persists beyond everything. For that voice, that destiny forever. Not what is said, but the voice alone, suddenly detached, endless, unrecordable, unsituatable. How can they not hear it? Listen! Remember! Listen! The world is an incessant and massive hallucination by the deaf. Listen better! Your hand! Nearer! Remember! Listen!

The last time I kissed her while she was still quite awake, she was in a wicker armchair in front of the open window. Since her room was on the ground floor (room 900, strangely), we could smell the strong scent of cut grass. From the corridor, we could hear the noise of a vacuum cleaner. She no longer even wanted to watch the stupid programs on television, a bad sign. Leaning toward her, I almost fell into the rose bushes climbing in from outside, her cheek, the red flowers, scarcely a meter. We laughed. After which, practically carrying her, I helped her lie on her bed again, and I lay down beside her. Calmly, she spoke to me about her death ("I've paid for the service," so as not to have to say "burial") and I said the needed "No, nos." I even made myself more convinced than ever, that was the accent she wanted to hear: her doubts or objections criticized point by point. In reality, only one thing counted: being side by side in the skiff of darkness and light, in the fresh old rowboat of all time, visible only to us.

One of my letters from England tells her about my visit to

Canterbury and the “radioactive” production about the assassination of Thomas Becket in 1170. Murder in the cathedral . . . Those good English people, they never got over having gradually consolidated their monarchy and their national religion, Henry VIII, his marriage and the consequences, based on a very obvious crime, the reliquary regularly pillaged there, impossible to hide. Illegitimacy in broad daylight. Thorn. All Shakespeare comes from this. In a corner one also finds the *gisant* effigy of the Black Prince, his fleur-de-lys crossed on his chest like a breastplate. Details to amuse her. She kept all that (with the request for a money order in the postscript and return to the sender). Adding a sum of money to be spent immediately, let’s be practical. The dollars? An allusion to the trip to take Jeff to New York to see Judith, so complicated. The ring? Confiding an indirect philosophy. The glasses, the mirror, the scarf? Yes, yes, it is I, it is really I.

All that’s left now is to dream about her? Not at all. Her movements are not in dreams but rather in a sort of sheet of air laid over the air, impalpable. I still put out my hand sometimes to call her on the telephone. Yes, but without really believing it, I see myself making the gesture as a verification. She is neither here nor there, and even less in the hereafter, but everywhere and nowhere, vertical presence from nowhere, according to her fluid lesson of transition. Three times, the very distinct hand pressure. Another pulse, another heart, another life. Yes, it’s yes. ♣

translated from the French by Armine Kotin Mortimer

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