AN EXTRACT FROM CHAPTER 1 OF

A Permanent Passion
by Philippe Sollers
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY ARMINE KOTIN MORTIMER

That month, November or December, I had actually decided to end it all. I had Betty’s revolver there on my right, I would look at it from time to time. I won’t forget that black stain in the drawer, the window open onto the wet courtyard, the narrow, badly furnished room, the obese, senile landlord coming in to shout in my ears, every other day, that I had again forgotten the light when I went out. I still had enough money for eight or ten days, but I might as well blow it all in one night, no? And then,bang, goodnight dead-end outlook, screw the imbeciles. In this type of situation, obsessions burst directly into your head, they explode in silence, they are aimed at an undifferentiated physical mass reduced to its shifty base. Yeah, trouble.

It would have been fun to leave my cadaver like a surprise headache for the landlord. He would have the police on his back, so much the better, I could even set up a little stage. I really did try to give him a hard time, what a Fascist pig, typical French (Gibert, Paul Gibert, his name comes to me just now, Gibby to his pals of the Unified Social Front, I suppose). What an asshole. And a widower as well. Mme Gibert must have been dead at the end, a bitch like him with her petty accounting, her cocking blunder. Anyway, why not start by taking down this pig with the big eyebrows, the red face, the sweating, the grunting, already hysterical about the events, ready to shoot at whatever moves? No, that’s too kind, let’s not mix substances, death is enough. That she wanted very much. Paulo, for a change of gestures, words? Or else she is provinces? Or else Brazil, she talked about it, Rio, Sao Paulo. For whatever reason, she was boasting, she didn’t know how to use it, I think. One of her friends was all that I still had from her, but that wasn’t it either. I stay for an hour with my eyes open on a void barely tinted a deep blue. The movement continued underneath, it had changed direction, it seemed to head north, now, a phony north, not at all terrestrial or celestial. I was still verifying that I was awake, that I wasn’t dreaming, that I could reason or calculate. I felt, though, that I was going to give in. I went under.

The next morning I took Betty’s revolver, went and threw it into the Seine. It was raining, and this cold, hostile rain thrilled me. Everything was changed, shapes, sounds, colors, odors. Things rose up with nothing beyond, brutal, bare, contoursless. I was one of those things, they were neither in front of me nor around me, they were simply there, freed from having any sort of orientation and any sort of meaning. The right to the absence of meaning ought to be a man’s first right, the second being, precisely, the right not to be one. There I was, motionless, on the Pont-Neuf, face exposed to the freezing rain, in the terrible wind that sometimes seems to rush in among the gargoyles of Notre-Dame to blow its stupid desolation onto the city. The fact is I was hot, I was burning up with a fever, I was sweating under the rain, and the only clear idea I had at that moment was that my life, my story, had no importance, no value, no meaning, and it was wonderful just like that. No good, no bad, not even an animal function. My principal sensation was of being traversed by a transparent column, a scroll of certainty, take this or don’t take it, your choice. It’s not just drowning people who see their lives pass before their eyes in a few seconds, there are also those burning in the rain, the ones thunderstruck by the unfinished, the maniacs of overflowing infinity.

Plunged, into the brown water. No suicide, and in a way no death. It’s totally unforeseen, this rim surmounted by time, this foot on the other shore, on the other side of the line. It was still raining, and there I stood, watching the eddies under the arches. I had the impression I could sketch their melting movements, their overlaying, their passions. I wasn’t moving. This has happened to me. So there I was, in my room one evening, mostly petrified, when the event took place. I say “event” for convenience. The fact is everything happened as if space declared a difference of levels. I hadn’t taken anything, no alcohol, not even a little joint, not a single line. I was tired, that’s all. Slowly, the bed started to sink underneath the bed, the walls slid along their surfaces. The place was folding in and opening up at the same time, embarkation, fluid burial. I avoided moving, to verify that the movement continued outside of me, that it wasn’t due to sleep or to a hallucination. Perspectives opened up on the left, on the right. The earth was not quaking, because this lasted, insisted, transformed the dimensions of the room. No pain, no fear, almost no surprise, a great tranquility. Silence glowed in its orb, I could see it. Silence like that is spherical, one could almost say it mimics a presence that can do very well without living beings. I briefly thought, okay, I’m dead, and that’s all it is, what a big fuss. But no, that wasn’t it either. I lay for an hour with my eyes open on a void barely tinted a deep blue. The movement continued underneath, it had changed direction, it seemed to head north, now, a phony north, not at all terrestrial or celestial. I was still verifying that I was awake, that I wasn’t dreaming, that I could reason or calculate. I felt, though, that I was going to give in. I went under.

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I remember that the rain stopped, that a cold stream of sunlight came and revived the water on my face. I say “my face,” but I felt no such possessive unity, just nostrils, temples, ears, cheeks. Those are mine, those things? A stream. A forehead, eyes, a throat, lungs, a city, stone, bridge, river. Hands, legs, worn out shoes, respiration, a heart that beats, blood. All right, I have to accept this montage, or not. It will last what it can or wants to. Nobody asked to be born? Oh yes they did.

A guy came, took me gently by the arm, he was saying there was another one for me, get me away from the edge of the bridge, I had to hear the usual moral patter, you can’t do that, you’re never as alone as you think, you must have someone waiting for you, you’ll see, tomorrow you’ll feel better. And all the rest. He was pulling at me, we ended up on the other side of the street, now he was even proposing to buy me a drink, middle management type, timid, concerned. He seemed to be happy talking, he was playing a part from an old TV show, he found a thousand reasons for living all the same. It was mushy, of course, both ridiculous and respectable, like everything that comes out of them, in the end, when the big thing comes. Poor Gibby, poor Betty, poor unknown passer-by, poor me, same old story, let’s let all that flow away with time.

“Don’t worry,” I heard myself say. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

The guy let me go, with regret, I didn’t look the part, I should have taken an interest in him, I had kept him from drowning, answer his call for help, but okay, it was more than I could handle. I went home to sleep, deep sleep, that’s the objective.

I often think about this episode. For me it’s like a fragment from a book that I could read again. I could recite it by heart, slow it down, speed it up, add variants. I have done a thousand things since, I keep coming back to this. The drawer, the revolver, the rose, the bed, the bridge, the rain, the swirling water. The hour when the walls slid, the sensation of the bark plunging into the silent, spherical emptiness, the overcoming of the obstacles, a story of death. If things are going badly, I can immediately recall this series, in detail, it opens up, it takes me in, it talks to me, a broad memory returns with it, as if, starting from it, I could have every last instant of my life at my disposal. It’s a keyboard, a code. Everyone’s own rate, language, code, a different call. I look at my hands, my bare feet, the sun is here, on the waxed floor, it’s the start of the summer, what luck. The boat stands ready in the port. I like this Buddhist saying: “Worrying about your fate after death is as absurd as asking yourself what becomes of your fist when you open your hand.”

But back to Paris in the somber period. Why, after the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. The events had happened in the Pont-Neuf adventure, did I go to that very private party? For the free drinks? No doubt. 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The library, especially, is strange. Old bound books, rare editions, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth centuries, volumes of alchemy and Chinese engravings. A person of erudition has lived here, or is still living here. Doras and shouldn’t look at a reader of anything at all, but it is true that we haven’t said a hundred words to each other.

Almost no furniture. Everything gives the impression of having been improvised during a forced move, in expectation of another place. There is the library with the rest of the books, a long white table down a hall, a little table in this well-tended museum of books, near a French window looking out onto the grass. By instinct or chance, I pick up an old edition of the States of the Sun and the Moon by Cynaro de Bergerac. His portrait opens the book, long intense face with the famous quatrains. The Earth was troubling me, I took my flight to the Heavens, There I saw the Sun and the Moon, And now I see the Gods. In all modesty, then. No surprise that his enemies, after having made his life miserable, ended up making a roof beam fall on his head. I start to read: “The moon was full, the sky was clear, and nine o’clock had struck…”. Nine strokes in the night, silence. Don’t ask me why, but this adventure seems to be present in this very moment, in the air. I get to a well-known cryptologist, where Cynaro, returning home, finds a book open to a certain page on his table, a book he didn’t put there, which therefore revealed itself to him of its own accord. “The miracle or the accident,” he writes, “Providence, Fortune, or perhaps what one could call vision, fiction, chimera, or madness if one wants….” I too have always thought that books were magical instruments indicating the attitude to have, the route to follow, for the right person at the right time. They pretend to be inert, but they act in secret. The paper encloses as yet unknown atoms, the ink secretes invisible particles. Suddenly, I’m sleepy. There is a black leather couch near the table where I am. I stretch out. I sleep.

Someone is caressing my hair, my cheeks. I open my eyes, she’s there. It is dark. I pull her down onto me, we kiss hard, soon we’re on the carpet holding tight, I hear the dog growling, he’s jealous, she gets up, closes and locks the door, lights a red lamp in the corner, and this time we’re not screwing—we’re making love. The difference is huge, it’s musical, they’re not written the same way. Instead of parallel monologues that pass along a pair of timelines, a single line, instead of dialogue, we pretend to be forbidden, what is truly forbidden. Instead of more or less always simulated violence, a crime. Crime is gentle, supple, insidious, curious, it is never satisfied with anything, it wants to go further, know more. Question? Answer. Agreed! Yes, we could murder it. A little more, a little less, we have all the time in the world, no hurry, the fire insists under the ashes of the words, the first ones are the best, the first “darling,” the first “I love you” or “I adore you,” inevitably you say them one time or another for real, a matter of measuring what hollow they refer to, what submersion of odors, skin, tongue, saliva, breaths. Do you smell me, says a precise point to another precise point. I am here, says someone who is not the spatial someone. This someone comes from far away, you don’t know where, through thousands of failures or brief illuminations. Love is an art of music, like alchemy. It is against the crime of love that all crimes are committed. Easy to verify, and yet no one says it.

What an astonishing woman! It’s as if she’s coming in from the garden, whereas she has just spent the day in the city—where, doing what, little does it matter. I on top of her, a life of a fairy. Do we share an interesting exploration, fitting together perfectly, the Chinese call it “doing Mandarin ducks,” the act of being inseparable yet distinct. There is a paradise of mouths, you don’t find that every day, you can go months or years without finding what you need, for one man this woman, for the other woman, this man or this woman, a chance surprise. You play emotional roulette, and sometimes the dice fall, the ball stops, you’re in.

We stay like that on the floor, naked. We are twelve years old. I’ll follow her, hence her rest go away. Is she going to come now? Yes, before me, that’s good. I ask her for her? Her eyes say yes: good.

Night has fallen. She goes upstairs to her bathroom, I go to mine, that’s how it will be, more or less, from now on, we come back down, she lights a wood fire in the living room, I offer her a glass of champagne, we drink and silently raise our glasses to the god of encounters. Or, to be exact, it is he who is toasting himself. Am I exaggerating? Not at all, only the propaganda of unhappiness could make you think it.

“Are you hungry?” says Dora.

“A little.”

“The caretaker’s wife is making something.”

She puts on some music, Bach on the piano, we go into the dining room, another fire in the fireplace, roast chicken, a Margaux of good vintage. And then, we talk. She is a lawyer, her husband is a physician, she died three years ago, they had bought this house for their weekends, she is not sure about keeping it, it’s a heavy responsibility, she has her studio in Paris. The library? “Oh yes, he was quite a collector. There are some interesting books, I think.” Yesterday’s party! She almost didn’t go, old friends, slightly crazy. I wonder if she has sex like that, from time to time, when the occasion offers, for hygienic reasons. The answer is probably yes, so what? It happened to be me. The faster, the more or less better. Nothing more to say.

“And you?”

Are we saying tu or are we saying vou? Both, that will be more correct. I tell her that I’ve decide not to do anything, except maybe write, not sure. Write? She looks surprised, I guess I don’t look like the type. And first of all, write what? Novels? “I think so.” “Nothing.” “Because things happen to you?” “So it seems.” She laughs. What am I living on? A bit here and there, my parents still send me money from their home in the provinces, not knowing that I have just been going to the Sorbonne for a long time. I avoid political questions, of course. “I take it day by day,” I say.

“Night by night”

“That’s it.” She doesn’t look shocked, trust physical trust, is here. Let’s get back to her. She likes music, dogs, the south. She was born in the north, however, in Amsterdam (it’s odd, tons of good things are going to come to me from there later on).

“We’ll go to Amsterdam one day. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Not at the moment. And you? Your lover, or lover?”

“No problem.” She didn’t say she didn’t have any, but “no problem.” Prudent. So already I am a problem. Which she will easily solve, that much is clear.

I look at her. Beauty, truthfully, is a deep, lively goodness, tense as it should be, marked by pain. Beauty: intellectual goodness. Ugliness: hatred, ignorance. Beauty is the intelligence of evil, ugliness the stupidity of a fake, lying good. Tonight she has put on a little black dress, she is naked under it, negating the winter that surrounds us in this remote spot, yet just a short distance from an entire history of luminance and celebration. She has slipped into each dress, each dress, each season, and knows what she’s doing, it’s time now for the cushions by the fire. Her voice is calm, a little low, her eyes are smiling (yes, blue). Let’s continue with the information. Big love story with the husband! Probably. On this, the statements remain distant, almost indifferent. Children?
A fifteen-year-old daughter from a best-forgotten first marriage. So no children with the cardiologist collector. Understood, let’s leave it at that. I make a quick calculation: she is between thirty-eight and forty years old, she looks thirty, she doesn’t seem at all bothered by the fact that I’m twenty-three. I am advanced for my age, she is young: a glance, agreement, action. We are into what society fears the most: the overthrow of powers. She puts on more music, still Bach on the piano, interpreted by one of her friends, a genius, she says: “I’d like you to meet her one day.” And then: “Excuse me, I have to make some phone calls.” She’s saying both tu and vous: it’s a dance. She shuts herself in one of the offices, stays there about an hour. Twice she sticks her head out: “It’s long, but necessary.” She laughs. She’s into her money affairs, and money must be pouring in. Today I realize that, with few exceptions (which put her security at risk), we’ve never really talked about her work, her friends, her enemies, the business she was always handling, international law, travel to Switzerland, trips to Strasbourg, Brussels, The Hague, London, Frankfurt, New York. Nor have we talked about my books—her life on one side, mine on the other. And from the start, a fundamental fidelity, till death do us part, hard to know why.

No simple “why” in this kind of encounter, it all plays out in a powdery rain of details. In speaking, especially: listening, respiration, reserve, silence. We hear each other, true expression of understanding. Something wants to come into being, becomes clear, doesn’t get used up, doesn’t stop. The dead mix in, one is sometimes tempted to say, at least some of their luminous moments. Relationships that are boring or tragic are mistakes of the Devil. He wants everything to be done out of interest, meaness, or calculation. The Devil suffers, he retches, if he senses that this is not the case. It’s a pleasure to watch him resist, huddle, search, spy, slander, agitate, seethe, try again and again to prove the contrary. Divide, reign, separate. No evidence makes an impression, nothing convinces him. The Devil has learned his catechism: each thing and each individual has a price, you should be able to buy or sell anything. Did I say “the Devil”? With a capital D? That’s idiotic? Too bad. The Devil exists, I have met him in person a hundred times. God, less certain, a tendency, perhaps, withdrawn, fleeting. The Devil is a policeman, and God is undercover. How funny.

So money circulated between us, leaving no traces. She gave me some, I gave her some. She never asked me, for instance, what was meant by what I called from time to time, with a laugh, “the war effort.” That was the least of her worries. She read no manifestos, no journals, no tracts. Sometimes, after a demonstration, she would simply say, “That was you!” without waiting for the answer, because she knew there wouldn’t be any. She sensed that I was involved in shady things, which she probably considered puerile, but never a word about it, no more than about the financial (hence necessarily dubious) strategies of the large conglomerates she worked with. The fact is we are protected each other instinctively, and even a wiretap of our phone conversations would have revealed nothing other than the classic lovers’ play, pet names, nicknames, recollections, excitements, fits of laughter. Since most of the time she spoke English because of her work, the return to French was a private pleasure for her, a kind of vacation. She also spoke German (“You don’t understand a bit of it, it’s quite beautiful”). I had a project with the French language: bring it back, give it a different relief, a new dimension of sound. Take it as a block, let it out of its enclave, change it from all sides, in its freedom. See it from the outside, for that reason, like a voyage to the sun or moon. And farther if possible, into antimatter, black holes, space, galaxies. A gentle madness, desire for rhythms and fibers. The gift, in this sense—well, it was Dora.

Born near Bordeaux in 1936, PHILIPPE SOLLERS made his brilliant entry into the Parisian intellectual scene in 1958-1960 with back-to-back publications and the founding of the journal Tel Quel, destined to become the arbiter of French thought and theory for the next two decades. A leading exponent of the avant-garde, Sollers wrote novels reputed as “difficult” and “experimental” during the sixties and seventies, then began writing novels in which has been called a “readable” style with the publication in 1983 of the best-selling Familles. He continues to publish novels as well as essays, essay-books, and extended interviews on many topics, in art, literature, music, photography, biography, and social history. A Sollers publication is always an event, and he remains one of the most widely known authors in France. He lives in Paris with his wife, Julia Kristeva.

Sollers is an innovator, a versatile, controversial thinker and vastly productive writer who uses the genre of the popular novel to convey his philosophy. A person of vast erudition, he has chosen to express himself via a verbal art unique to him. He has said that the novel is the continuation of thought by other means, modifying a familiar quotation from the war theorist Clausewitz, and he believes that the truth is best spoken in a work of fiction. The talky messages, the ideas, the intellectual exchange with the knowing reader, the omnipresent literary allusions are paramount; plot and character are typically in service to the ideas. From his self-defined stance as a marginalized thinker on humanity’s behalf, he is a gadfly who pricks the conscience of his country, and these urgent criticisms of society and its ills find expression in a re-invented French literary language.

APPRECIATION 2.0: “If you work for a living, why do you kill yourself working?”

Amanda Davidson
Rob Stephenson
John Reed
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