

Dream Come True

by *Guillermo Samperio*

TRANSLATED FROM THE
SPANISH BY SHAWN GONZALEZ

Leticia thought that she was receiving a certified check for 85 pesos, but her bank, by mistake, made it for 48.7 million pesos. The next day, Leticia went to cash the check without having realized the error, until the bank gave her two boxes full of 500 peso bills, and she went straight home. Immediately, she packed a suitcase with clothing and two with the bills. While she loaded the suitcases into her car, she felt like a drug trafficker, or, well, that drug traffickers must feel this way when they traveled with so much cash, and she liked the idea. She arrived at the city in Yucatán that she liked so much. She stayed in a hotel for a week; she hired a lawyer who, for a generous sum, got her a new birth certificate. The same lawyer acquired a house to Leticia's taste in a stupendous neighborhood, and she bought a new, aerodynamic car with a sunroof, obtained furniture, curtains, and decorations; everything stupendous, agreeable. And she changed herself. She hired one of the best surgeons in the city, who gave her a pretty face and body like a TV actress; again, with the help of her lawyer, she got new documents for everything, like voter credentials, a passport, and everything else. In a luxurious restaurant, she met Christopher and they soon moved in together in her mansion, where she bought him a comfortable car. One Sunday, when they were walking near the main plaza, machine guns opened fire on them from two cars. For quite some time, Leticia and Christopher looked like rag dolls that could not fall to the ground due to bursts of gunfire that kept them upright and formed stars of clothing and blood on the couple until they both collapsed. When the vehicles departed and vanished, the people in the main plaza continued running in different directions, distancing themselves from the blasts. The next day, the local newspapers, in their four column headlines, stated that the drug trafficker Lino Téllez, alias El Christopher, had fallen to pieces beside a beautiful woman, his accomplice.

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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, obscenities burst directly into your head, they explode in silence, they are aimed at an undifferentiated physical mass reduced to its shitty 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 eleventh-hour shady deal 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 deaf at the end, a bitch like him with her petty accounting, her rotting blubber. 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 not egalitarian, in spite of what they say.

This room was the only hole in the wall I could find, a cheap ground floor on a dead end street. I would go to a café very early, return as late as possible to sleep. Paris is unlivable in winter, with its sinking sky, its blasts of swirling wind, its electrically hateful, compressed, obsessive psychology. Work? No, of course not, instead, the last flourish, as cutting as the shadows of thought. You won't be the first or the last to take the short cut, let them say what they want. Let's go, do it, no speeches. Tomorrow, I promise.

I can still hear Betty's voice before she left: "What a pain in the ass you are, in the end!" Exactly my opinion. In general, with me, she mostly minded her vocabulary, but that time it just came out all at once, in the bathroom. And yet we had just made love rather well, at least I thought so, or else it was precisely because of. Actually, the trigger was the red rose on the fireplace, in a glass, she thought someone must have given it to me, a floozy, whereas I had just bought it so I could see it when I woke up, the idea was to cheer things up a bit. Even Gibert had noticed it: "Now it's flowers too?" Bastard. Anyway, Betty got hot under the collar about it before my very eyes, convulsing like a child. Three months together. Okay, ciao. The revolver belonging to one of her friends was all that I still had from her, but she was boasting, she didn't know how to use it, I think.

Farewell, pale, nervous Betty, not a bad deal, when I think about it, but too tight like most twenty-year-old girls. Sometimes I wonder what the daily-grind machine has done to her. Did she end up in the United States, her dream? Is she walking on the streets of New York, Chicago, San Francisco? Did she succeed, later on, in inhabiting the bed and kitchen of an academic in the provinces? Or else Brazil, she talked about it, Rio, Sao Paulo, for a change of gestures, words? Or else she is dead. That she wanted very much.

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 mimes 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.

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, contourless. 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.

Plunk, 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 lines. 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 many times since, stopping like this, lying in wait, taking in a fundamental instant. So people have seen me here or there, from the outside? So what? A photo? But a photo is death, a reason why one should take as many as possible. They're all true, they're all false, and you can believe they're of me if that's what you want. Look, here's another one. Unexpected, that one.

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 nose, a forehead, eyes, a throat, lungs, noises, 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 some words. He wanted to 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 could have 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 must have one, I imagine, a distress 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 come to an end, it was the return to order, the most compromised among us had already left France, others were hiding in the provinces, only François and I were still here. François said we were covered, he had his sources, I didn’t insist on hearing about them, it was his job to know what the police were preparing, I never knew how to get very far into that domain of doubles. Could we amuse ourselves nevertheless? Oh yes, as always.

A manor house in Neuilly, murmurs in the lighted reception rooms. The guests looked like they were waiting for something or someone, the telephone was constantly ringing, there was whiskey, champagne. On his arrival, François quickly gave me an envelope, cash, bravo, just at the right time. A group of women in black, jewels and perfumes, asked me how I was as if they knew me. Mechanical smiles of the rich, but these women looked like they were expecting a definite advantage from the change of regime. As for François, he must have been negotiating immunities in secret.

One of the dark-haired women, quite beautiful, clearly wanted to have a go at it. No problem, there were bedrooms on the second floor. So we do it, without

talking, the usual grunts, that kind of sport was still possible, no epidemic, more or less successful random encounters of mucous membranes. In this case, it was pretty good.

“Shall we meet again?”

“You never know.”

“Your name?”

“Dora.”

“Married?”

“Of course.”

“Your husband is here?”

“Actually not.”

She was amusing, nothing like the nutty ones you usually meet in this type of situation. A controlling stratum collapses, another emerges, the women agitate a little, they want information, they take advantage of it to advance further. The marginalized person then has his chances, he is shrouded with mystery, with supposed virility, he is discreet on principle, one takes one’s revenge with him against the marital functionary or the profitable lover. Those men were scared, a Historical gale had knocked them down in the street or elsewhere, their careers are threatened, the markets hesitate, their partners take revenge. This woman had just shown herself fit for the task, she was pleased, arched back, knowledgeable fingers, desiring mouth, elegantly stifled cry. She hadn’t even undressed, dress pulled up, a pro, direct.

“Okay, let’s go back down.”

And me: “See you again?” A laugh.

Downstairs, François was having a big discussion with a future minister. He was playing high stakes, or maybe not, after all. The future minister had just been speaking to a well-known academic, a mover and shaker, powerful in journalism networks, a real controller masked by his pirouettes as a cruise-ship lecturer. He had seen me from a distance, for three seconds he knit his brows and scowled, he knew I wrote for a little extremist journal, scarcely read, but well read. So the quickly repressed hatred of the old crocodiles. That glint in the eye, that set of the jaw. That tooth, in front, retracted, the better to bite from behind. For the time being, he was talking charm to an over-the-hill actress, she was wrapping herself around him, around herself, he didn’t give a damn, either did she, but the virtual camera has its requirements. Near them, another half-baked big shot, ex-Stalinist, now a fierce denouncing democrat; a cultural director passionate about popular authenticity; an old-style theater director, made up, stiff, guilty conscience; a beginning philosopher of modest background, determined to be the moral thinker for the sweeping-up now under way; a photographer of night life with dirty hair; the president of a fashion magazine drowned in ads; an Icelandic writer famous for his huge, melancholy novels; a collagened movie star almost at the beginning of the end of her career; two managers of television channels and their mistresses, members of the same sect; a drug-using producer and his debutant lover; in short the whole vacuous, authenticated nomenclature.

I marveled at how François navigated in this maelstrom. He knew what he wanted, he could hedge, insist, compromise, obtain. Each and every man and woman had a weak point, lateral liaisons, payments to come, an open power wound. François played on those keys, he would make them play the right note. A musician of sorts, one of the best among us, in spite of the criticisms of those who thought they were purer, those naïve provocateurs. No one shall ever know who we are. Not even us, actually.

The party dragged on, I was drunk. I could hear snatches of analysis, opinions, self-satisfied chuckles, financial whisperings, psychological clichés, speculations about the old marionettes who might be able to return the State to order. Two or three names were repeated, always the same ones. The grandson of a highly placed civil servant at Vichy had a hold on a socialist dignitary.

A Christian Democrat senator was wooing a female publisher of pornography. A sentimental bishop and two progressive bankers were glued to a young pianist with a future. A black fashion model and a woman astrologer stuck close by a gynecologist with political ambitions. A communist spy was conversing with a fascist spy. A politician burned a hundred times was coming back to life right there in front of our eyes. François had left just after a conversation with the future minister. I was eating what I could, drinking. A girl came and sat beside me, a fake look of being lost, I’m bored, say something, take me away someplace. Pretty, blonde, drunk, violet eyes, very low neckline, stupid.

“What sign are you?” she says.

“Dragon.”

“There’s no such thing!”

“It’s Chinese.” Shit on that, I’d have to come up with sentences, soon I’d have to listen to her life story, her lover refuses to make her a baby, should she go behind his back and conceive in spite of him, or grab the first procreator she can find and present him with a fait accompli? You need to discuss this, maybe, but not with me. Ask your girlfriends. Another girl came over to kind of sniff me out, sensed the absence of social worth right away (those pants! that jacket!), nothing to be gotten from this, no perspective. The author of a quack sociological book destined to a wide readership came and pretended to ask me a question: why have all the revolutionaries been more or less anti-Semitic, starting with Marx himself? I must have answered that the question resolved itself, the Bible having an answer for everything, by definition. The grandson of the Vichy civil servant, on the other hand, wanted to know why “in my milieu” people appeared so reserved about the struggle of the Palestinian people and the happenings in the third world. Silence. “Are you for civil war?” he asked. Silence. Then he took himself off in the direction of a young naturalist novelist cloned from the nineteenth century, all adazzle at finding himself in High Society. The ex-Stalinist democratic big shot joined them, he looked at me from a distance with haughtiness and anxiety, an undecipherable and murderous phrase came out of his mouth, from the profile of his white-maned head, eyewitness to thousands of hours of meetings, conferences, more or less secret missions in Moscow, Berlin, Prague, Belgrade, Havana, Hanoi. The cultural director nodded his head in my direction: the pornographic editor had just murmured my name to him. I couldn’t make them out well now, space was tending to escape me again, I was once more risking negative territory, it had after all been a hard day. Inside, though, I was quite calm (inside: the envelope with the crisp bills). Dora had disappeared. The secretary of the future minister sat down beside me and, with a casual “incidentally,” as in, the bigger it is, the better, asked me if had known François for a long time. “François? What François?” I said, exaggerating my thick-tongued voice. He didn’t insist, tumbled onto the simpering actress at the beginning of the end of her career. I began to think seriously about the best way to find the exit, without stumbling too much.

Whereupon a huge man with a beard grabs hold of me and spits incoherent speeches into my face. Where’d he come from, this creep? Oh yes, I recognize him, a friend of Betty’s, a tough guy from the northern suburb, motorcycle, tattoos, earring, rock, heroin, coke. Disappointed he’s no longer indirectly living with me? So it seems. He’s mad at me. Betty should never have got into (that’s what he says) a guy like me, intellectual, asshole, I know you, I know all about you, I don’t know what’s keeping me from beating you up. “I’m in no hurry,” I say. Luckily, there is no one in the entryway to hear his bullshit. I tap him gently on the shoulder, it is really time to leave the ball. But here’s François coming back, drags me into an empty room.

“Everything okay?” he says.

“Fine.”

"I did what I could."
"Thanks."
"You staying in Paris?"
"I think so."
"Disperse, we keep in touch."
"The word?"
"Laozi."
"The code?"
"Pascal."
"Not bad."

He plunges into the crowd again, speaks quietly but vehemently to Betty's friend. The guy calms down. I try to find my way in the corridors and staircases, I run into the blonde from earlier, going into a bathroom where it would not be difficult for me to follow her, I go downstairs, I end up in the kitchens, I go out and find myself in an enclosed garden. It's cold, but I sit on a bench, I breathe in the plowed earth, the moon is shining in the wide-open sky. It is two in the morning. I get up, go back through the kitchens, find the door at last, the front stoop, the driveway down to the boulevard. Farewell, ship of fools, good luck.

Twenty meters away, a woman is getting into a car, a little black Austin. She starts out fast, stops short in front of me, lowers the window:

"Want a ride?" It's Dora. I get in. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere."

"I see."

I watch her hands, their precise motions, her self-assured legs. She drives well. We don't talk. We leave Paris, the Saint-Cloud gate, Versailles. Another twenty minutes, she turns again, narrow road, isolated house, we're here. She opens the gate, drives in, everything is dark, we go inside, it's warm, she offers me a last glass of whisky, we're still not talking, she goes up, calls me, here's a room for you and a bed. I collapse onto a red bedspread, fully dressed, we'll see later on.

The next morning, ten o'clock, nobody. In the kitchen, a note next to the coffeemaker: "I'll be back around 7 pm. If you want to leave, here is the number of the taxi company. Otherwise, see you later. The dog isn't mean, nor the caretaker. D."

I drink my coffee, I take a bath, I take a tour of the big white house and the garden, we're living in a novel, this is real life. I order a taxi (the place is actually near Versailles, I've just read the address on the notepaper). I go to Paris and get my things at Gibby's place, I pay him, "ciao, you old bugger," he gets all red, shouts at me all the way to the sidewalk, "hoodlum, fairy, commie, jew, leftist!" I stop at the post office to have my mail held, I get back at two in the afternoon, the wolfhound jumps on me, the little caretaker smilingly calms him down, "down, César, down!" he offers to carry my bag, no thanks, his dark, thin wife casts a suspicious eye at my appearance, I go into the house, I return to my room.

Okay, since I haven't been eating much these days, I go to the kitchen: ham, tomatoes, apples, there is even an excellent wine. And then a tour of the place.

A park-like garden, with a prairie gently sloping down toward a forest of oak trees. We are not far from the chateau de Versailles. Two abandoned basins, stone benches, poorly delineated planting beds, the caretaker mustn't be much of a gardener. In the house, a living room in a rotunda, a dining room, two offices, a big library. Upstairs, five bedrooms, one of them is locked, Dora's, no doubt. All the same, she was not afraid to have a stranger present in her house. It's true that we quickly and intimately made our acquaintances the night before, but what does that prove? Nothing. What's she like, anyway? Not very tall, dark hair, blue eyes, soft white skin, short hair. Desirable, for me in any case. What does she do for a living? Doctor, architect, lawyer? Something like that. I still don't know her last name, the notepaper just gives the address. Why does she live here rather than Paris? Alone? Partly? For the time being? Since when? Unless she *also* lives in Paris? And the husband? But maybe there is no husband?

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. Dora did not look like 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 house around it, in sum. I sit down at 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 Cyrano de Bergerac. His portrait opens the book, long intense face with the famous quatrain as a legend:

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, hovering in the air. I get to the passage where Cyrano, 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 for dialogue, a coded conversation. Instead of what pretends 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, but we could nuance 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's 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, she on top of me, a long time on our sides, 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. All lovers are twelve, hence the fury of adults. I'm starting to distinguish her laugh from all others. I've never heard anyone laugh like that, in a single flow, a cascade in her throat from behind her head, a laugh from the back, turned around, in profile, from below to above, a true laugh for joy, for no reason, a laugh for simply being present, and let all the rest go away. Is she going to come now? Yes, before me, that's good. I ask her for me? 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, she asks me to open a bottle 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, a well-known cardiologist, 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 *vous*? Both, that will be more correct. I tell her that I've decided 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?

"Things that happen to me."

"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 haven't 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 lovers?"

"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: intelligent goodness. Ugliness: hateful 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 with ease into her arms, her legs, she 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 skin, skeleton, scent, voice. People persevere in spite of the boredom, they want to believe in it, they don't dare admit to themselves that they are constantly bothered by this or that, they call it all passion, possession, they even think they were right to be wrong, that they should continue to force themselves, but they are wrong, it is just death prowling about there, heavy, puritanical,

fanatically impotent, frigid. True passion is gratuity and rest, the ease of stopping, of keeping silent, sleeping, disappearing. Hushed.

Do I keep accounts with her? No. It's here, in fact, that you have to look closely, that the most virulent suspicions are anticipated. The Devil wants everything to be done out of interest, meanness, 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 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, excitations, 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.

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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 what has been called a "readable" style with the publication in 1983 of the best-selling *Femmes*. 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 theoretician 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.

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ARMINE KOTIN MORTIMER translated Sollers's 2001 book, *Mystérieux Mozart* (*Mysterious Mozart*, Illinois 2010). Her translation of Sollers's *Casanova l'admirable* will be published in spring 2016 as *Casanova the Irresistible* (Illinois). She has completed several other translations of novels by Sollers and other contemporary French writers, for which she is currently seeking publishers. Her long career as a professor of French literature included many scholarly books and articles, as well as recognition by the French government with the *Palme Académiques* honor in 2009. She lives in Urbana, Illinois.

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