

L'Autre qu'on adorait (The Other Man We loved)

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Phil Miller tapped the microphone; everyone fell silent. The speeches had begun. When he announced her name, Nora walked up to the podium, her cheeks bright red from the applause. She received her prize, along with a check for \$700, which would be very useful if she went to France with you this summer. Professor Miller started to hold out his hand to shake hers but then changed his mind, walked over and kissed her on both cheeks - *as the French do*. He was shorter than her, and Nora had to stifle a laugh when she thought of the nickname you gave him: the gnome. Evelyn sat in the first row, and her warm smile made up for the absence of her parents, who couldn't leave the farm and couldn't understand what their scholarship daughter had been studying for the past four years. Research into literature? You couldn't really invent vaccines with words. Could you? They had never met you: they would have thought you came from Mars.

From the stage, Nora looked for you among the small group of professors and students. You weren't there. Given you were 6'2", she would have spotted you even if you were in the last row.

You'd promised to come, even though you hated your boss and the end of the year cocktail parties that bored you to death. Were you annoyed because she had barely protested last night when you told

her you preferred to be alone to correct the enormous stack of homework that was extremely late? Or, as Evelyn thought, were you still asleep because you'd ended up taking a sleeping pill around noon after having worked all night?

As soon as the speeches were over, the two women slipped away without having a drink with the professors; they congratulated the young woman and Evelyn, thinking she was Nora's mother. They headed for Nora's place where she'd left your key in the handbag she'd worn the day before, then went to your place in Evelyn's car.

They climbed up the two flights of stairs and knocked.

"Thomassss!" shouted Evelyn. "Thomah" shouted Nora (in the French way). They were nervous, of course, even though the fact that this had often happened made them worry less. Ten days before, Nora had been mad with worry: you hadn't replied to any of her messages for two days. She'd gone to your place and found you in bed, too drunk to even speak.

Nora unlocked the door; Evelyn made sure she went inside before her. Glancing over to the right, at the end of the hallway, towards the living room, she saw your long legs.

"He's here!"

Infinite relief in her voice. So you were sitting on the futon, reading or working; you didn't hear them calling because you surely had your headphones on with the music on full blast. People don't think of the simplest explanations. But sometimes, the worst is true: she had learned that the hard way.

Three steps and they were in the living room. Evelyn was the first to see your body laying over the futon, rigid, the bag over your head. The students' homework was strewn around your feet. She turned around to stop Nora from coming any closer.

Part One: Triangles

Chapter I

Nicolas...

On December 6, 1986, you were in the enormous march that crossed Paris like a ghost train; it had formed spontaneously that morning when the news spread like a cloud of dust. You were surrounded by a pack of young men and women hardly older than yourself but just as serious, with whom you chanted a slogan:

“State Mur-derers! State Mur-derers!”

For a week, you had been shouting slogans and booing Ministers. Today, it was no longer a game. The excitement of the final days gave way to a kind of anger and passion that were almost spiritual.

You're seventeen. Malik was twenty-two. He was a student, like you. He didn't even take part in protest marches, he wasn't committed: he was coming out of a jazz club when the army arrived on the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince on motorcycles and the demonstrators ran away down the Rue Racine. The army on motorcycles: two on each bike, the first one breaks through, the second lashes out with his truncheon without caring what damage he does. They're supposedly there to chase away the hooligans,

the ones who take advantage of social unrest and peaceful demonstrations to wreak havoc, but that's the official excuse: it's to massacre the Blacks and other minorities. Racist France. People found out this morning that Malik Oussekiné was suffering from kidney failure, and the police were now pretending that he didn't die from the beating he took from the enraged cops but because of his condition. There was even one Minister who felt entitled to make this statement: "If I had a son undergoing dialysis, I wouldn't let him do stupid things." The pathetic, patronizing tone of French indecency, a denial of responsibility, an absence of empathy.

"And if we don't win after all this..." Nicolas said.

You who were the elite of France were furious at the idea of entrance exams and an increase in registration fees for university that would separate the France of the rich from the France of the poor even more. When classes were over, you handed out pamphlets and the *Workers' Struggle*. You took the label of Trotskyist seriously and displayed it proudly. On November 23, you took to the streets with the strikers to fight the Devaquet plan, ready to confront the fascist students from the Rue d'Assas who arrived with iron bars. You were among the crowd that walked up the Boulevard Saint-Michel, followed by police sirens and the riot squad, and when the tear gas and shooting started to disperse the crowd, you ran, your hearts beating faster. Four days later, you numbered five hundred thousand, and on December 4, a million college students, high school students and workers marched from the Bastille to Les Invalides: from Caen to Toulouse, France rose up, and you were part of the new blast of air that revolutionized the country, like in May '68. You had never lived through anything as exhilarating.

“Pan-draud, Bas-tard!”

You know what illness is, you imagine yourself being hunted down, running with all your might, out of breath, convincing a government worker in a suit who is punching in the code to his building to let you into the lobby, chased there by the police, pushed into a corner, beaten up by truncheons, kicked in the head and stomach while you tried to protect your face with your hands, begging them to stop and so afraid that you piss yourself. Three against one.

Ecce Homo.

Your disgust increases at the thought that these policemen will be protected by their higher-ups. They’d lose some of their stripes, maybe, or get transferred, but would they go to prison?

“Thomas, got any hash?”

Nicolas has forgotten his, as usual. You roll yourselves a joint that you share with the people nearest to you.

A few days later, the newspapers announce the news on the front page: Devaquet has resigned and Chirac withdrawn his proposed law. You raise your fists in the air, hug each other, shout with joy. You’ve won.

In January, you’re eighteen years old. Politics is no longer the center of your life.

In February, you and Nicolas go skiing in Austria, staying in a small apartment that belongs to one of your mother's friends. You hurtle down the mountains, intoxicated by the fresh air, then go and get drunk in the evening, on wine you find in the cupboard that turns out to be pretty good. You feel closer to Nicolas than you ever have to anyone, perhaps even to Sebastien, your closest friend since middle school. You both have the same passion for neologisms and onomatopoeia. You never met anyone else with whom you could laugh for so long. Such a free and ironic mind in the face of a baby. Nicolas is so cute, with his dimples, freckles, curly hair and greenish grey eyes that are no more than slits when he bursts out laughing. He does have some annoying habits: every time you go to the café, he's forgotten his wallet, and you have to pay for him. He lets out farts that force you to immediately open your bedroom window while he's splitting his sides with laughter. Minor defects. He comes to your place after classes and meets your mother, who finds him charming; your sister, whom he finds charming. You notice that his whole body grows tense when the front door slams shut and he hears her voice, and that he slips into her bedroom as soon as he can to chat with her.

You also go to his place. His Jewish mother, a judge, is the epitome of elegance, and your mother, the daughter of a concierge who, thanks to her taste for reading and marriage to your father, has moved up from the ground floor of the building to the fifth floor; the two women have things in common: they are both a bit nutty, bourgeois non-conformists, off the wall, passionate, voracious readers. At Nicolas' house and yours, dinner with either mother includes endless intellectual discussions and irrepressible laughter.

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Chapter II

The Witch

One April afternoon, you call Nicolas to see if he wants to go to the movies. He's busy. He's meeting his sister at the Pompidou Center to see an exhibition on Tinguely. He has to hurry; he's late.

"Can I come too?"

"If you want, but get a move on."

Just before leaving, you hesitate, then quickly change your clothes. You swap your grubby jeans for some clean beige trousers, and your T-shirt for a white shirt that's more or less unwrinkled. It's really nice weather for April. You roll up your shirt sleeves, revealing your arms that are covered in a fine, chestnut down. It takes barely ten minutes to get there on the metro. You find Nicolas in front of the museum just before his sister gets there.

His sister is me.

"Thomas? You've changed so much!"

I nearly said "You've grown up!" You smile.

The last time we saw each other was a year and a half ago, during the summer vacation in Brittany. Even though Nicolas must have told you what a relief it was the day I left for the United States, and how bossy, hysterical and moralistic I was - in short, a pain in the ass - you know he admires me a lot. I'm six years older than him, and you. At twenty-six, I'm already teaching at college. I

graduated from the Ecole Normale with a higher degree in Classics. I'd just spent two years at Yale. That's my Resume. But there's something else, you can sense it. To start with, I'm doing my Ph.D. thesis on the Marquis de Sade. That means something, Sade. You've read him, you know what it's about. A woman who likes Sade. The idea turns you on. You picture me pulling my brother's pants down and spanking him. An extremely sexy idea that you don't share with Nicolas, because he can be a prude, Nicolas, and very moral, even if he doesn't realize it.

He apparently gets along with me better since I got back from the United States. I'm more tolerant. He no longer lives with our parents: he's less affected by my criticism. You learn through him that I went through a bad break up this winter: the American I fell madly in love with left me. You're curious. You like women who've been through bad affairs. You're no longer the one eager to discover sex, like Nicolas was that year. You know women and your desires. You've read Proust and Casanova.

In the museum, you play the guide. I don't know what to make of these colorful, funny sculptures. You make up a speech full of academic references and plays on words. Nicolas joins in and you both laugh a lot. But what's happening is happening between you and me. You notice the slightest signs. I walk beside you, our arms lightly touch. When you move behind me to point out details of an even more bizarre sculpture, you can feel a spark between our two bodies that are only inches apart. I nearly lean against you. Your arms brushes against mine: I tremble. With a complete lack of inhibition, a frankness in my way of speaking that you adore, I tell you that in the States, thanks to campus life and the parties the "French girl" always got invited to, I'd slept with a lot of men. You

give as good as you get. We map out our conquests from all over the world. Even though I'm six years older than you - a great difference at the time - you feel we are perfectly equal. We're on the same wave length.

I say goodbye when we leave the museum. Impossible to ask for my phone number in front of my brother.

A week later, Sybille organizes a big party in the country. You react when you see me, happily surprised. I've come with my brother. To see you again? Smoking a cigarette, you watch me dance to a slow song with Sebastien; you stand stiff as a board, wondering if you're going to get ousted. You go out to smoke a joint with your friends, and when you come back, I'm finally alone. You ask me to dance.

You don't waste any time. You tell me straight out that you don't like women your own age. You prefer the young ones, nymphets, or older women - like me, of course. You tell me about your affair with someone of thirty-eight - an old woman - who payed you to make love to her. You sense that you're not shocking me. I admit that contrary to what this gang of over-excited boys might think, I'm not interested in taking their virginity, and that sexually, I need to be dominated. My honesty sets you on fire.

"That's lucky. I'm the one who likes to dominate in bed."