

QUITE INNOCENTLY

(Excerpt from *En toute innocence*)

I rummaged through every box in our apartment. We had a new baby, we were moving to a new home. This was a new life, and I wanted to clean it of every useless scrap from the past. For weeks I discarded books, clothes, pictures, and all kinds of objects, which filled large black garbage bags piling up in the corridor. One day, on a shelf high up in the walk-in-closet, I came upon a decorated shoe box inside a larger box, in which I'd kept all the important letters that I'd received growing up: letters from best friends and later from boyfriends, love letters but also hate letters that I still remembered. As I put the letters back, I noticed something under the shoe box: a spiral-bound manuscript. It had been typed on an old typewriter. Beneath the title on the cover, "Quite Innocently," was my maiden name. Eighty pages long, it was neither thick nor thin. I had absolutely no memory of ever seeing this book, even less so of writing it. I opened it and started the first page.

I read it in one day, as I fed my baby and while she was asleep. The style itself was almost oral, full of run-on sentences, as if it had been written non-stop, in one breath. The description of the trial gave me the impression that the author was a twelve-year old, even though I must have been much older when I wrote it. As I read about baby Adam, I cried, and I ran to the crib where my little Clara was sound asleep. I touched her wrist to check that her skin was warm and her heart beating. When I read the part about Sebastian, I was amazed how bold and even reckless I'd been at twenty, and I thought of my grandmother, apologizing to her in my heart. And when I got to Walter... I started remembering, and I turned pale.

This was a book about me, a book I had written, but I had the feeling it was about a stranger. It was about a self I had erased. It is the nature of trauma, I suppose, to trigger this kind of erasure. I couldn't make the link between me, Marie, a thirty-eight year old

woman married to an American and feeding a baby on a sofa in an apartment in Manhattan, and the girl in this manuscript, another Marie, a French Marie, once upon a time in Europe. So eager to be normal, so desperate to lose her virginity. Naive or pervert? A murderer?

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It's true that at first I didn't realize that it was so serious. It hadn't lasted for more than two seconds and soon as I cried Ouch! it had stopped. Still, when I turned around and saw Didier all red, I realized that he had done something not normal, even a big no-no like when I used to prick baby David with a pin. David would start to shriek, my mom would run over What is it my love my love?, and I who had stepped aside three seconds before I'd rush over, I'd pretend to be very distraught, I'd cover him with kisses, I would be truly moved, I was so afraid my mom would discover what I'd done. Luckily David wasn't able to talk, besides which he didn't understand that I was hurting him, he only saw that I was comforting him, he was a dumb little cry-baby. That was certainly exciting, but not as much as stealing chocolate at the grocery store after school in sixth grade and crayons and also toys for David, all the while shaking at the thought of getting caught. The night when I came home and heard Mom calling me in a serious, sad voice, I knew someone had given me away, even before she said Marie how could you do this, how could you do this to me, your mother, a judge? I would rather her hit me, that would have been less painful than her hurt voice. I hadn't wanted to squeal on Didier, plus it was going to be embarrassing to explain what had happened, and if I hadn't argued with Anne that night, no one would have known anything. Anne was furious that I had arrived earlier than expected. She hadn't had enough time to phone her boyfriend in Marseille and she couldn't do it in front of me because she wasn't allowed to make long-distance calls and she was afraid I'd tell on her.

She even thought I had come back just to keep an eye on her. She hated me, I did everything I could to get her mad. She threatened to tell Mom that I had not stayed until the end of the session and that I maybe didn't even go there at all. To defend myself and prove her wrong, I started to tell her what happened, and I was quite proud of being able to shock her, my sister who'd always look at me scornfully the moment I opened my mouth. And if I had come back home, I said, it was because my butt hurt and I wanted to use the bathroom without being disturbed. I won. Ann was dumbfounded. She was sixteen and nothing like that had ever happened to her, only a few kisses, nothing more, and I have to add that Anne is much less feminine than I am, she's stick-thin no breasts and no butt at all, and even though I envy her, Dad says that men prefer curves, and Didier says that my own breasts will be firm and spectacular if I just tell my mom to get me a bra so I can start wearing it right away. Anne at sixteen, she was a real tomboy, she didn't have her period yet, plus she never got it, that's why four years later everyone was so surprised and she too when she got pregnant. She stopped yelling at me, she said Marie you're joking, you're making it up, you don't realize what you're saying, it annoyed me that she didn't believe me so I gave her details, I told her about the slaps which proved that Didier was feeling guilty, then she believed me and she was horrified, she is the one who called Mom at the court-house and that's how it all began.

For weeks and months I saw psychologists, doctors, judges, and lawyers, Didier got arrested, he broke down and confessed everything. Twenty times or thirty times I had to tell the same story and give all the details, at the end I hardly knew anymore if it had really happened, but on the other hand I didn't tell how I'd said yes when Didier offered to teach me to "French kiss" so that I would be well prepared when I started going out with a boy. I never told how, when he massaged my back to fix my twisted vertebra, his hands would slide underneath my arms on both sides and how I would spread out my arms just a teeny bit to give him space, and how I would look forward to those hands on Monday and

Wednesday all week long, how I would dream about them during the long, boring days of school, on my back on my thighs and most of all on my breasts even if sometimes they hurt when he massaged my vertebra and even if I cried out when he used the Bengay. I didn't say that Didier had told me about his life and that he would ask my advice, that he marveled at my lucidity, my intuition, my understanding of "conjugal relations" and that it amused me to see him so surprised, and that even though he was thirty-five years older than me I had the impression that he was the little twelve-year old boy and I was the masseuse who fixed the knots in his soul. He would tell me, Marie leave your books go have fun with the boys your own age, he would say, Marie don't forget to live, I thought that sounded cliché, you could clearly see that Didier wasn't used to intellectuals. He warned me about a great deal of suffering for the first time I would fall in love, I knew too many things and that wouldn't stop me from submitting to the common law, the law of love he said, and that made me laugh, I thought I was out of reach, I was twelve and a half years old, I didn't have my period yet, the hands of Didier were large and hot, they taught me more than his fortune-teller predictions.

For a long time I cried on Monday and Wednesday at the hour of my appointment with him. I thought of his hands, his smile and the expression he always wore when I arrived, What's cook'in good look'in, and his praise of my fresh skin which he said restored him to life after hours spent kneading rich old Parisian ladies who were all dying to seduce him, but the judges the psychologists and the lawyers told me that it was normal for me to be sad, that was why child-rapists were never tried, because the children were afraid to accuse the adults and felt guilty especially when they liked them. At first I didn't know it, but after all the sessions with the psychologists, the lawyers, the judges, and the doctors I understood that rape is the denial of a human being, to rape or to kill a child is the same thing, and even if Didier had asked permission, even if I had said Yes that would still have been rape because I was too young to decide for myself and because I was under his au-

thority. The expert psychiatrist wrote in his report that I was normal, saned and well balanced, I had no behavioral problems, I was developing well, but even so I had undergone such a serious trauma that one couldn't gauge the consequences, maybe I would go crazy and for my whole life be terrified of men.

Above all it was the trial I feared, but at the same time it was exciting. I didn't want to disappoint my mom or dad or the judge or the jurors, they shouldn't have been inconvenienced for nothing, and it wasn't easy two years later to look like a traumatized victim. Luckily I really like acting even if I am shy, plus Didier and I would often play make-believe, I invented stories and I gave him a role, I was the imperial countess and he the humble and love-stricken servant who had to do everything I ordered. For the day of the trial, instead of the tight ripped jeans and large collarless shirts I always wore at fourteen, my mom had picked out a scallop-necked white blouse with two embroidered cherries on the collar, a red vest and a Scotch quilt. In this outfit I looked like a nice little girl barely older than twelve. Didier had also gotten dressed up for the occasion, he hadn't put on the jeans and gray polo which he always wore under his white smock, but a dark green suit with a twill double breasted jacket which showed off his shoulders, a white shirt with wide green stripes and a very fashionable green tie with pink diamond shapes, he had disguised himself as distinguished gentleman incapable of raping a little girl. He had style, Didier, even surrounded by four police officers, he really was a good-looking man but he had a much older look about him than before, with his curly hair already graying under the temples, bags under his eyes and much more pronounced lines on his forehead.

I had been so well prepared for the shock of seeing Didier again that in the end it hardly affected me but what impressed me instead was the booming voice of the bailiff, All rise! he cried tripping over the words All rise as over a pebble, then everyone rose, the judge wearing a red rove entered, followed by two clerks, You may be seated, he said re-

gally like King Louis holding court under his oak tree, my heart started to beat very hard, I felt like I was in the shoes of a fragile little girl submitting to authority.

It was Didier I was playing with, it was against Didier ever since he'd retracted his confessions, confessions extracted by violence he said, he had accused me of making it up, plus no one had proof because sperm hadn't been recovered and the accusations of a twelve-year old kid couldn't convince reasonable adults. Everyone could see that the judge was convinced of Didier's guilt and that he was disgusted by child molesters, he would pose questions in a sarcastic tone, he would turn to us and smile when Didier answered, and when Didier said he hadn't heard the question the judge would get angry, would ask again in a cutting tone almost fed up looking like he was wondering, But who is this idiot, he should clean his ears with a q-tip. Didier spoke in a humble voice addressing himself to Your honor but when he started to accuse me, saying that you couldn't ever believe children and that I was a liar, the judge looked at me fondly, you could tell he wanted to hiss at such a bad actor. When the psychological expert came to testify that I had no impulse for pathological lies, when the medical expert came to describe the anal fissure compatible with the forced insertion of a penis in the anus and when he declared that a fissure like that was very rare in children, when the headmistress of my school came to say on behalf of all my teachers that I was an excellent student, honest and serious and so sweet and so pure and an adorable little girl, everyone knew Didier had already lost, the jurors' conviction had been resolved, he was a perverse monster who had sodomized an angel and who for his defense dared to slander his little victim.

But Didier fought back. I was a vicious little one he said, it wasn't surprising because I had access to my father's porn magazines and because I would see my parents naked in the house, I was a little thief whose parents didn't give her enough pocket-money or sweets and who would steal chocolate from the supermarket, he always had some on reserve to prevent me from stealing because he was scared I would get arrested, nougat

Lindt chocolate which was my favourite. And if he now was sitting on the bench of the criminal court, it was because of my mother he said, a tyrannical woman who despised men and who would repeat in front of us her daughters that our father was nothing but an idiot, moreover my father had a mistress, I was the one who had told him this, I knew of such things at age twelve and a half, Children are much less innocent than we think Your Honor, even if they had blond hair and blue eyes. The judge still kept up his sarcastic smile but I was getting more and more furious, I blushed to the tip of my ears, Didier had become my enemy, my most intimate enemy, as if it hadn't been bad enough to lie and to treat me like a liar, he also had to turn all my secrets against me, it was cowardice enough to make you vomit. Mom and Dad looked nervous, I their little Marie told lovely things behind their back and to none other than a chiropractor, a bastard, a child-rapist, otherwise how would Didier have known about the porn magazines, the afternoon snacks without chocolate, Mom's words, and Dad's mistress.

Then it was my turn. The judge demanded that the door be closed and the clerk lowered the microphone. It's too bad they didn't tape me, I wanted Mom and Dad to be proud, I was furious and it made me sublime. I told them everything in calm, natural tone of voice and with much feeling, how Didier had massaged me and lowered my panties like he often would to massage down to the base of the vertebral column, and I had felt something as if he'd stuck a thermometer in me, and then something else which hurt a lot. I cried, I turned around and saw his penis exposed and all red which he was already putting back in his pants, as quickly as possible I'd lowered my eyes. He had laughed a silly laugh and made me do another exercise on the bars, and when he had to go answer the telephone I got dressed, but he blocked the door, he said Marie I don't know what came over me I had a moment of foolishness please don't say anything to your mother or my life is over, if you want you can punish me, go ahead hit me as much as you like, he bent down and I

slapped him two or three times. Then I went back home, went to the bathroom, and before flushing the toilets I saw that I had made something brown and foamy.

I even managed to say the last sentence without giggling even though I'd been afraid of breaking into a nervous laugh when I'd practised it at home, and when I stopped speaking there was a silence in the room like in church on Sunday during communion. All the jurors were looking at me, they all looked like they were thinking my poor little girl and as if they wanted to comfort me, but it even got better a moment later when our lawyer passed around the photographs taken of me when I was twelve and a half years old, you could see me in between Mom and Dad and I looked so young so fragile so blond so innocent and so gentle that seeing these photos just after my story and with the doors shut, all that was making the jurors want to break the neck of the child-rapist the bastard the monster the piece of shit. He had the nerve to accuse his victim, to insinuate that she had stuck something up her own behind when the truth spoke so self-evidently from the mouth of the little girl he had sodomized. A shudder ran through the jurors, you could see the disgust written on their faces. Mom and Dad were proud and not nervous anymore, and Mom took me by the hand as if to reassure me and protect me against the villains of this world, that was a very successful gesture all the jurors noticed it, Didier couldn't possibly compete against us.

The prosecutor didn't look like much of anything with her little frame, her school-teacher's bun, her nose crooked like an owl's and her barely audible voice, each time the judge turned toward her, Have you any questions Madame Prosecutor, she would say No, Your Honor, she barely even played the role of an on-looker, she was really boring. But when she started to speak I understood that she had been saving her strength for her closing statement. It was a little piece of genius, no one could have topped it, she said everything possible to demolish Didier. It was a rape, perhaps not committed violently, but under constraint and by surprise, and the law treated these cases the same as violent rapes. It

was sodomy, ready to pervert a little girl whose sexuality had not yet been awakened. And who had committed this crime? A chiropractor, a doctor so to speak, to whom a mother had entrusted the body of her child. He had abused the child and the mother's confidence on which the whole of society depended: what would become of society if parents could no longer entrust their children to teachers and doctors? The act was horrible, and one could call it a second of folly, one second in the life of a forty-seven year-old man, a life otherwise honorable to this point. But this man had been educated, he had been trained, he was intelligent, this was a man who had learned, by his education, to control his impulses: his very education rendered his act inexcusable. The psychological expert had said that he was perfectly responsible for his actions, he hadn't committed the act under the effect of temporary insanity, but voluntarily. He had committed it with full consciousness, and he repeated the act here today even, by denying it, because one had to know that the denial returned to commit the rape a second time, the rape, yes, no longer of the body but of the mind of the little girl. Why did he deny it? At this, the hands of the prosecutor soared through the air, her finger pointed toward the witness stand, and the eyes of the jurors followed this finger in fascination, as if under hypnosis. I thought she was really good. She didn't need to speak loud, there was a deathly silence in the room, everyone strained their ears to capture every syllable, everyone wanted to know: why did he deny it, after having admitted three times spontaneously, once in his office, once again behind bars, the third time before the examining judge. That was something no one could understand and which bothered them. The public prosecutor had two explanations: the first was that perhaps Didier Damato was sincere, perhaps he was convinced that he hadn't done it, perhaps he had awakened one morning with the certainty that it had never happened, and Why, Ladies and Gentlemen? But because he was ashamed, because he couldn't bear the stain which didn't correspond to anything else in his life, because he didn't even have the courage to confront this act in his soul and conscience, precisely because it was so horri-

ble an act. The other reason was his terrifying life in prison. It was true that child-rapists were mistreated, insulted, beat up by the other inmates and that the guards didn't stop them, and maybe this seemed terrible but one had to understand what it meant, that child-rapists were the outcasts in a world of outcasts, there was a special name for them in the jargon of prisons, they were called shafters, even the criminals and the crooks rejected them, and Why, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury? but obviously because it was the most hideous crime of all, the most perverse, the most unspeakable, the most cowardly and the most shameful. Child-rapists were the waste of which society had to purge itself, especially when they were like the defendant, too cowardly to admit his crime before society in his soul and conscience, when, facing him, a courageous little girl for two years in a critical period of adolescence knew how to bear the whole weight of her accusation. This young girl, after such a crime, ought to have gone mad, psychotic, or schizophrenic, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, and yet I was normal, I wasn't suffering from traumatic consequences but Mr. Damato wouldn't have been able to know that when he had gotten his cheap thrill, it wasn't me he'd been thinking about. Then she turned to me and pulled out all the stops in a grand performance, she said Let me congratulate you Marie for your rare courage, you have seen psychiatrists and doctors but I am telling you Marie, you will be perfectly normal, we have all seen you in this room and we know that you are an extremely courageous young lady, calm and self-controlled. You heard a criminal say some horrible things about you and your parents, you must forget everything now Marie, outside the future awaits you, and when she had reached her conclusion, demanding Only fifteen years Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury because after all one must still take into account the life of this man which was honorable until now and the absence of any criminal record, these fifteen years seemed like nothing at all, one could have given her much more for the sheer pleasure of hearing her perform some more.