



*The Last
Rendezvous*

A NOVEL

Anne Plantagenet

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH
BY WILLARD WOOD



OTHER PRESS • NEW YORK



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Selected Poems by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore

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SPENT THE AFTERNOON with Henri. Again the same vertigo, as though walking an exposed ridge and not knowing which side to fall on, a wild commotion in my chest. On the rue de Saints-Pères I teeter along the sidewalk. Whatever choice I make will be the wrong one anyway, and the options terrify me. Shall I jump feetfirst into the abyss? Shall I launch myself into the wide tomorrow with all the little caskets stacked up in me? Not surprising that I should feel such a tumult inside, a continuous uproar that addles my sleep and churns my stomach. I can bear it no longer. Even breathing hurts. The air, or is it just our love, is heavy beyond belief for the month of March in Paris.

Henri burrows into himself to get away from me, while I can find no avenue of flight. No am I certain of wanting to escape. How helpless I feel, how humiliated, to love a man who has renounced everything, who forbids himself the slightest emotion, and who takes refuge in his pain! Less than a year has passed, and already the mystery that bound us together has come undone. Henri barricades himself against me. His ardor has given way to fear. Or else he has grown weary. Worse yet, perhaps he was never sincere. Did I trample on what was once sacred to me for the sake of a lie? (A lie I am responsible for, one I consented to, and whose accomplice I am.) This is the question, finally, my haunting fear. Can I doubt our moments together, question the magnificence of a gesture or of a moment of abandon, the permanence of a vow? I can. If Henri absconds at this stage, he will nullify our whole love. I am prisoner to a man who no longer gives me anything, who has made my desire into a tomb. Night has come. Time for it to be over. I've lost faith in us. At each new laceration, my resistance grows less, and dejection gains on me. Yet still I hold on, though to what I'm not sure, and without knowing how, to this time stolen from death, to this man through whom I've known a love unlike any other—devastating, irreversible. It has cost me my home, my husband. How can I go back now?

In Henri's arms, my pleasure becomes painful. A way of condemning my bliss, no doubt, and expiating it. Also of regretting its briefness. Naked and disconcerted moments ago, hidden behind my hair, hunched over my body's shame, I concentrated on the silence behind me of the man to whom I'd wholly given myself, feeling his absence. The minutes that had gone before, the stripping, the saliva, the grasping, the fusing, the grace, that dazzling time when we cannot be other than ourselves already belonged to us no longer. The horror of the real assailed us once again.

"I've reached the end," I breathed.

In the bachelor's rooms where I join Henri at the cost of a thousand evasions and deceptions that chafe at my skin, there is always a moment when I feel the urge to run away to escape, by noble means or base, from this scabby love. By what mystery am I here playing with the abyss and defeat, exposed to the blows of a man whose entrance into my life destroyed my quiet peace? I don't understand. What bent of mine, previously unknown, draws me back despite myself between the sheets of this lover with a missing eye, this man spent before his time, whose sad flabby body, reddened with excess, can offer me only a disappointing embrace? What remorseful impulse? It is certainly not the flesh, unstable

alien, that sacrifices me implacably to Henri, but rather the search for a rapture and ravishment that only he has ever awakened in me. Or an irresistible desire to fall. But I don't let myself, I multiply my efforts to pull myself from the void, search feverishly for a branch to cling to, haul myself up onto the stable ground above, where fire crackles and children laugh. I know I must quickly disentangle myself from the lianas Henri has deftly wrapped around my neck, from his hands that mark me, hands like a vise, a harness, from his bronze his divine fingers. I must. A question of life and death. But can I do it? And do I want to be delivered? For this feeling that bruises me will never again be mine to experience! Frantically possessed, I am as afraid of the pain as of its cessation, its memory. One doesn't reach such heights of pleasure twice. To break off, what a horrid sound that has.

After crying for three days, terrified by the awful silence of life without him, I fly once again to my assignation with Henri, all the fractures in my being exposed by this great and tragic love—starving, thirsting, intensely alive.

For a year it has been this way.

IN THIS EARLY spring of 1821, the weather is heavy, lowering. Brought up in the town of Douai and inured to the severe climate of Flanders, I react uneasily to this unaccustomed warmth. The strange heat weighing down on Paris oppresses me. The temperatures we have experienced these last days in our little rooms under the eaves of the Hôtel du Paon have become unbearable to me, as I announced yesterday to my husband and my mother-in-law. And I wasn't lying. Or not entirely. My spells of nausea have grown stronger and more frequent. I break out in cold sweats. I would rather be on the rue Childebert, I told them, the studio of my uncle Constant, where, thanks to the windows on three sides, it is cooler and I am better able to write. Not far from the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the Childebert is a big five-story structure inhabited by artists of every shade. Tucked in a corner behind the canvases and hardly bothered by the turpentine fumes, I am able to turn all my attention to my poems. Or so I pretend. But the truth is that for months I have been stopping at my uncle Constant's studio only briefly on my way to the rue des Saints-Pères.

"My son, your husband, is very obliging. To think that he wears himself out on the stage of the Odéon day after day, poor boy, so that we may live, while you traipse about the streets without the slightest concern for his reputation!" says Anne-Justine.

Her voice holds exasperation as well as hatred.

"When a person has a past such as yours," she goes on, "and has managed by a miracle—by trickery—to marry the foremost actor of the day, one might expect some attempt at discretion. But you are mistaken if you think that I am like Prosper! I hear what people are saying ..."

I sigh. There are rumors, I am well aware of it, prompted as much by my poetry as by my former career as an actress. My mother-in-law takes them in greedily. She has never accepted that her only son should marry a woman seven years older than himself. And one who, at least while I was still performing, received greater acclaim on the stage. I am untroubled by her words. In the early days of our marriage, Anne-Justine's attacks hit home and wounded me and Valmore both. Now they barely graze me. Shallow scratches that are quickly erased.

by Henri's claw marks.

"You know perfectly well that I am going to see my uncle."

"That's what you say. And even if it were true. A painter. In an atelier, a nest of rogues, a more intent on debauchery than art. My husband would never have allowed me to circulate in such company!"

Well, he'd have had his reasons. Was she not married at the time he seduced her? But I must at all costs avoid the argument that Anne-Justine is trying to kindle in an effort to keep me at home and stave off her loneliness. I swallow my sarcasms. My meekness nonetheless has all the marks of impertinence, which Anne-Justine senses perfectly well. Only her fear of ridicule keeps her from dragging out the scene. Her jealousy of me has its sources in her single-minded love for Prosper, the passions she has stifled, and the ambitions she has vested in him, while her own life has been nothing but frustration. I am no fool. And I would very much have liked her to love me. I expected it. I even called her "Mother" in the early days. The loss is all hers. I go out leaving her offended, to stew in her ill feelings.

I am bound elsewhere, and it is elsewhere that my feelings are engaged. I can see nothing advance blindly, dazzled and relieved, refusing to believe that it could end, that the situation might not last indefinitely. Valmore spends his days in rehearsals, and our little Hippolyte, born in January of last year, is growing up in good health at the home of a wet nurse on the outskirts of Dreux, near the house of my sister Eugénie. Thanks to Henri, I published a book of poems a few months ago and a collection of Antillean stories, whose critical success momentarily gave me the illusion of at last breaking free from the theater that I so detest. What would I not do if it meant never having to perform monkey tricks on the stage again and living properly from my writing! That satisfaction, alas, has not been granted me. I must quiet my ambitions, for I have just learned (though my mother-in-law does not yet know it) that Prosper's contract with the Odéon will not be renewed next year. Valmore dislikes the capital in any case; he claims it is a center of malice, of ruthless ambition, and of worldliness. Tired of the duplicity and scheming, which he has resolutely steered away from, he has engaged us both at the Grand Théâtre in Lyon. Once the present season is over, we will again have to pack up our belongings. The wandering life I had hoped to be done with will resume. My endless vagabond existence.

THE PROSPECT OF leaving, of being torn from Henri and forced to return to the stage, afflicts me doubly. The fatal date, which I find myself alternately calling for and cursing, depending on whether I am queen or slave, whether Henri rebels or surrenders, is barely a month away. I sometimes feel he is rejoicing, finding my departure an easy solution to the problem of our love. His baseness repels me. I would like to slash his face with my nails. But then a tender word drops unexpectedly from him and fills me with pride. The joy, the importance I feel, in being loved by him makes me forget for a few hours the attendant debasement.

That is why, in this month of March 1821, ignoring the reprimands directed at me by Anne-Justine, the sacraments binding me to Prosper, the vows I spoke over the grave where my mother molds alone in the Caribbean, shutting my eyes on my stolen youth, my violated happiness, passing over the remains of my three dead children, I fly to the rue des Saint-

Pères, my stomach in knots, my throat constricted. I fly, yes, laughably free, like a novice to whom a last public outing is granted before the cloister, savoring the particularity of every second that carries me toward Henri, its fragility as well, while everything around me is subsumed by a great and triumphal purity.

HENRI'S NAME IS in fact Hyacinthe Thabaud de Latouche, but he has always hated it. A one-eyed man named after a flower is just too grotesque, he says. Early on he started to sign his articles with a pseudonym—a different one each time—and to initial his letters with an H which everyone took to stand for Henri. He never objected, and he only told me the secret in the wake of many other disclosures, reluctantly and as if by mistake, at the same time asking me to continue calling him by a name that is not his. My lover is immoderately given to imposture. He goes masked.

Since separating from his wife, Latouche has lived in a small two-room apartment on the rue des Saints-Pères, near the banks of the Seine. I like to look out onto the river through the panes of his tall windows. In its waters I see other tragedies go by, onto which I sometimes manage to graft my words. Henri's apartment is a sort of bachelor's lair in an artfully studied state of neglect. "A Carthusian monk's cell," he claims. When I entered his apartment for the first time, after a moment of confusion, I quickly perceived behind the apparent disorder of the drawing room, filled as it was with books, rather ugly knickknacks, and exotic fabrics and hangings that bow to the current fashion for the Oriental style, an exacting logic. In this arrangement, which is at once pleasing and undeferential, Henri de Latouche is in his element. Or at least so he would have one believe, even as he suggests the opposite.

"I don't like these rooms," he told me that day. "I never invite anyone here."

"Then you do me a great honor."

"A great wrong, more like."

It didn't matter, really, as it was I and I alone who had decided to come to his rooms, and who had chosen to give myself to him.

Always turned out with exacting elegance, a sign of the importance he gave to appearance and of his confident, slightly contemptuous attitude toward the outside world, Henri had buckled before me, revealing his weaknesses. Behind his costume, a horrible drama was in progress. This great cynic in fact had a very low opinion of his own worth. His apartment, like a ship in a heavy swell, with its objects placed here and there in a moment of pique, or laziness, seemed vainly and obsessively to defy the storm and was the very image of his shipwreck.

"I've never managed to settle into this place. Can you understand that, Marceline? I put up with its noxious ambience. It was months before I could actually fall asleep here."

"Are you quite sure, Henri, that your discomfort comes from the place?"

His lips twitched slightly.

"What I mean," I went on, "is that perhaps your own company—"

"Silence, witch."

"As you like," I said, smiling. "For my part, I've moved so often that I make a poi-

whenever I arrive in a new place of taking it in hand and bending it to my will. Within a few hours, I feel as though I've always lived there."

"I'm sure I believe you. But as for me, dear Marceline, I am a recluse and a misanthrope. I have tried the company of men, don't think I haven't. But now I am done with lies. Let others join in the masquerade ..."

Such an exile, I told myself, such dire pronouncements! Why should this man, more loving of heart than he allowed, inflict this absurd penance on himself? With the greatest renunciation, Henri was secretly watching his life go down to defeat. But I would know how to bring him around!

I was convinced of it. Filled with wonderment at our having met, thankful at every hour of the day for the bond that held us together, and recognizing in Henri the man I might have been, the man I was, moved by our true selves as they collided continually in the general motion of the world, I was persuaded of victory. My certainty, my fervor, were absolute and unshakable. We were so strong, each of us, and so strong together, that nothing could harm us.

Nothing, that is, except Henri.

A YEAR LATER, as evening descends, I am rushing from the apartment on the rue des Saints-Pères, fleeing the dark shadows of the Seine, the scene of the pillage, spitting my tears, swallowing my anger, my hurt, my inability to save Henri from himself. I make a solemn vow always to love Valmore, his peace, his sunlit, fertile plains. From now on (but how many times in the last months have I promised myself the same thing) I will refuse my dark side its right to live and wreak havoc—by Christ I'll wring its atavistic neck. A few years ago, when I was at a low point and becoming, like my mother, a lost woman, did I not dream tearfully of the same haven of married life, of the crowded table at Sunday dinners, of jams, nursery rhymes, and sprigs of thyme? More than anything, I wanted to get away from the theater, to feel myself protected, under a man's cover! I imagined myself in the arms of the handsomest husband someone I might never dare hope for, whose magnificent and vigorous body would unfailingly awaken a thrill in mine. Then, surrounded by my little ones, I would fade quietly away one night in wise old age. This husband has by miracle been granted me. As for fading away, am I not doing so already? Each day that passes without noise, without writing, are they not each of them burying me a little deeper?

But yesterday, yesterday! Blessed Tuesday on the stern of the île Saint-Louis, Henri offered me eternity.

"Do you not see how frightened I am by my love for you?" his voice trembled in my ear.

And he interposed his hand between us, but too late, to keep me from hearing.

Veiled dampness of the quais along the Seine. And the house across the river, Henri had told me, was the home of Abelard and Héloïse. At that unhesitating moment, I would have severed all moorings to sail with him, to float down the river of our love to its mouth and meet the sea. "*Ma chérie*," he'd said. I left him in the mystic shadows of Notre-Dame, our love like an unbreakable shell, and Paris sanctified where my love pierced through into broad daylight.

There would probably never have been a better moment to separate forever.

• • •

TODAY I AM all fury and distress, discovering that Henri has reversed himself, that in the early hours of the morning after a night of insomnia, overcome by his fears, he sought to lose himself in the arms of a girl.

“You who manage to love me,” he told me just now, “don’t. Take what’s there for the taking, Marceline, and hope for nothing more. I’m not one of those side-whiskered young dandies, high-waisted and well favored, who warble their love like martlets and chirp about the future. The concept of children, of living as man and wife, belongs to a world I no longer inhabit. Don’t insist, you’ll destroy the last of your strength. Take the crumbs that are there to be gleaned. There’s nothing more to expect, I warn you.”

“Then I’ll have passed through your life without changing a thing ... when I was ready to turn my own topsy-turvy for you. I’d have offered myself to you in a church, in my marriage bed, even, with my son asleep in the next room. I’d have gone to those lengths of depravity. I believed the feeling that held us in its grip would sweep everything before it.”

“I did warn you.”

“Yes, and you wrote me too. The exact opposite.” “I don’t want to take this any farther. It wouldn’t make you happy.”

Implacable reasoning, from which he won’t be swayed. Latouche has taken everything away from me, even the pleasure of waiting. Yesterday, I experienced a moment of grace which the events of today have left blasted. I collapse, shaken by the oscillations of the passion that Henri is constantly betraying. And yet I can read the desire in his eyes, the fright, the feelings that even under torture he would make every effort to deny. Or I think I can read them. Perhaps I am my own worst enemy. I couldn’t stand to be proven wrong. To discover that Latouche is making a fool of me, that our love is purely a literary game for him is an amusing fantasy. This man is my downfall. For a sou I come running on my knees, putting at risk the entire edifice of my life. I must break it off, I must absolutely break it off.

In tears, I walk along the banks of the hostile Seine in the direction of the rue du Paon, Saint-Germain. A feeling of nausea gradually overcomes me. Will writing keep me from losing my mind? In a month, yes, only a month, I will be leaving! Then everything will be over, the blows and the tears. In my memory, Henri will no longer wound me. Soon, comfortably aboard the marital ship beyond sight of land, I’ll once more let my body wed the motion of the water, the indomitable current. But where is it leading me? Into what troughs, onto what shoals?

I am wracked with vomiting. What have I walked into? I am lost. My love, spat out as yellowish bile, runs off over the sidewalk, splashing my bootees and the Flemish lace of my dress.

TONIGHT, WHILE VALMORE is appearing onstage and my mother-in-law is busy with her sewing, I shut myself in my room, wrung out. My thoughts are mournful, my heart empty and bruised.

Exhausted, I think of death. A fallen woman is what I've become, and my only thought is to be with that man, who is probably thinking only of how to get rid of me. No. That's not possible. How can I impute such thoughts to Henri, doubt his sincerity, his very real suffering? I am ashamed of myself. Grief floods through me, sucks me down into the well where my demons wade, the beings I have loved and who are dead. My absent ones. Are they not calling me to them? I seem to see their veiled smiles. But then there is Hippolyte, my sturdy little boy, so handsome and alive, for whom all the others died. Despite all the blows it has dealt me, still, at the age of almost thirty-five, I love life. Angrily. Thanks to Latouche I've reached one of its key moments. Beneath the seeming quiet of my existence since marrying Valmore, there lingered a troubled woman, thirsting for eternity, who was constantly paying for faults she hadn't committed and who hadn't yet had the courage to strangle once and for all the ghost of her past.

Filled with my desire for peace, my thirst for war, I must force my body not to run through Paris to be with Henri. The city weaves its fabric, interlacing our separate hearts.

For several days now, I have known that I am pregnant.

MY CHILDHOOD IS A SMELL, the smell of the *loées* my mother used to make after Sunday lunch which permeated the whole house from cellar to attic. A kind of armor. A veil that would never tear. Or so I thought. But like the cocoa that replaced coffee around 1790 when coffee grew too dear, everything in the Dutch genre painting of my early years has disappeared. Nothing is left of the family scene, frozen and false, portraying a beautiful blond-haired woman with her four children gathered around her. At her side sits her silent husband. In the background is her aged mother, her head nodding with the uncontrollable shake of those who live only through memory.

My grandmother spent most of her life, perhaps the best part of it, or the least false, waiting for her husband. Calling himself a watchmaker, he would visit towns collecting watches to repair and then abscond with them. He was a thorough crook. Usually he would slink off for a few months. Then he would return without warning before disappearing once again. My grandmother cursed him, but she always found herself pregnant after his unexpected reappearances. Then she would return to her waiting, as to a loathed but necessary piece of work. One day my grandfather left for good. He lived out the rest of his life, probably drunk, as a prompter in a Brussels theater. Lost, my grandmother came to sit by our stove in the dining-room rocking chair, its movement slowly becoming her own. She spent the greater part of the day knitting mutely into her blue apron, lost to the world around her. White strands of hair poked out from her fluted white bonnet. Her tiny feet grazed the sand on the red tile floor. She was no longer waiting.

After a stroke that paralyzed half of her body, she had to take to her bed, her handsome face resolutely turned to the side. Her eyes, focused on an invisible point, were intensely frightening, accusatory. Was she conscious? We preferred to think that she was not. From time to time she would come back to us, her pupils full of ooze and mud. Snippets of her youth broke over her thin-drawn lips, which smelled of age, of rot. Then she would retreat into her chasm. Her agony went on and on. I found her absurd, useless. For the first time in my short life, I wished for the death of a person I loved. Anything to stop this everlasting end, this inexorable decomposition.

“Like life beforehand, death is taking its time with her,” my mother said.

She gave her a peck on the cheek three times a day and changed her without a murmur.

For my part, I could see that an era was coming to an end with my grandmother and that her death would bury it forever. A moribund part of me—my childhood—was drifting away, trying doggedly to hold on with unimaginable strength and desperate energy, fearful of what would come after.

“UP YOU GET, girl! Come see!” called my father to wake me up. “Gayant is going by with his whole family!”

The festival of Gayant, the biggest celebration of the year, commemorates the breaking of

the siege of Douai in 1479 and the entrance of the French into the city. It lasts a week at the start of July.

“Here are the crossbowmen from Tournai!” said Cécile, my eldest sister.

“And the archers from Arras!” said Eugénie, the next oldest.

The whole town tagged along through the streets behind the procession of enormous wickerwork figures. My mother made us dress in our best clothes.

“No gingerbread men if you don’t,” she said, “and no beer or liqueurs.”

We were happy. Fragmented images from this period come back to haunt me often. I see my mother at her spinning wheel, surrounded by pewter and tapestries, engravings and leather-work. Muslin, lace, and guipure. At night I would listen to my sisters read, do the sums, I watched them sew and wind balls of wool. How impatiently I kept a lookout in the evening for their return from school, for the thick skirts of Cécile and Eugénie, their hair floating on the breeze above the sturdy cape of the Ursuline order! And Félix, my brother, so proud to recite his seminary Latin ...

Then we would join together to sing from the old romances:

*Our Lady, visit us in our sorrow,
With all your angels at hand,
And may the war depart tomorrow
For a distant land.*

I would fall asleep on the primer that Cécile was using to teach me my letters. I drifted off smiling, surrounded by my toys, my porcelain shepherdesses, my sheep carved from wood and smelling of resin, my wax angels with their wings of cardboard and gauze.

WE LIVED IN the Notre-Dame neighborhood, at the foot of the abandoned ramparts I loved so much. With the other children, I would run off and play among the harebells along the old sentry path. A mass of rubble, really, but the pillar of my enchanted world. We lived beside the church and the cemetery, which was so neglected that it ran to ruin. Behind us were the narrow, dingy streets where the populace sheltered. Better off, we lived among a group of houses where our neighbors were a baker, a man who rented coaches, a lace weaver, and the proprietor of the inn on the corner. Ours was the fifth house. One of those gabled, red-brick Dutch structures. On the ground floor, a long hallway led through to the yard in the back.

I was not yet old enough for school. Waiting for my brother and sisters, I played in the main room under an enormous umbrella with my doll, near my grandmother’s feet, beside the great tiled stove.

“A hotroom,” the old woman would say, “requires constant attention.”

My mother and a group of neighbors—sometimes as many as twenty—spun linen in the room, whose floor was strewn with sand, while my grandmother, at least before her first stroke, tended the stove and prepared meals.

The bedrooms were on the floor above. As was common at the time, we had a lodger or

the second floor, while a pauper family lived in the cellar. Before the Revolution, a small clay Virgin gazed out of the niche above the main door. But after falling into disgrace in 1789, she was removed to my mother's room with all the crosses and rosaries. The niche was left vacant, like an empty eye socket, disfiguring our house.

THEN CAME THE Terror.

Convents were torched, churches pillaged, priests assassinated. Gayant and the rest were gone. The reign of fear took hold. Fear and mistrust.

“Go out and fetch some water, girl,” said my grandmother.

“Me?”

“Aren't you my sturdy little girl? You're not afraid of going out into the courtyard, now are you?”

The same scene would be repeated every day. We shared the well and a rain barrel well used for doing laundry with our neighbors. There was a saint there. Or rather, the mutilated statue of a saint that my atheist father had picked up after the sack of the church next door. In a corner of the courtyard, near the stairs. This hideously wounded, violated figure terrified me. I preferred playing knucklebones on the abandoned graves of the old cemetery, which I had turned into my private garden. But at home, in order to get water, you had to pass in front of the profaned idol. I had no choice. Each time, I made the sign of the cross, even though I wore the tricolor ribbons of the Revolution and a Phrygian cap. My grandmother sensed my fear and chided me gently for it.

“That child needs to shake herself,” she would say to my mother. “She is as timid as a mouse.”

“Marceline, give your grandmother a hand,” my mother would say, never lifting her head from her work.

Under their mocking glance, I would set off valiantly. It was not cruelty on their part. Inured adults, they had forgotten the wounds of their childhood. Each of these women was struggling to hold her position and keep her own nightmares quiet, even at the cost of showing fierceness toward me. There was war on all sides.

Around this time my grandmother started to decline. In some ways it was for the best.

IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD, the priest of Notre-Dame celebrated the Catholic rites clandestinely. When he went to administer the last sacraments to a dying person, he used so much makeup for his disguise that he was frightful to look at.

“The dying mistake him for Death and expire at the sight of him!” my father said.

My mother would frown.

“Religion is nothing to joke about. Show a little respect! And bear in mind that this priest performed our marriage. And baptized all our children.”

My mother, Catherine Lucas, and my father, Antoine-Félix Desbordes, were married in 1776. It was an arranged marriage, almost certainly. There was never any love between

them, I'm afraid, or so little, and so fragile, that it dropped to the ground like a fruit that rots too soon. My mother was from a humble family, and her marriage brought her up in the world. She was just a girl, younger than her husband by seven years, very pretty, forthright, serious. Her handiwork was prized for its quality throughout the region. She kept an impeccable house, working maniacally at it. Our pewter always gleamed and nothing was lying around, because my mother hated disorder. Her obsession with putting things away was a subject for ridicule among us. No one guessed at the great emptiness inside her that was masked by this apparent taste for organization, cleanliness, and regularity. My mother's probity contrasted strongly with my father's character, which was scattershot and always ready for a gamble. Despite their difference in age, he was in reality the first of her children. And for us, he was more a big brother than a father.

On her wedding day, my mother could neither read nor write, which was not at all unusual. My father didn't care, and if my mother decided to learn her letters, alone in the evenings by candlelight, it was not at her husband's urging. She took to it, and started devouring novels with a gravity that she transmitted to each of her four children. Reading was serious business. Before dinner, when my father was late getting home, my mother would sit us down and read aloud to us several chapters from a book. Though we were hungry, we would listen to her devoutly. Thus it was, on an empty stomach, that I discovered books. It was also thus that my mother, lured by the other world she glimpsed cutting open the pages of her books, succumbed in the end to madness.

MY FATHER'S DREAMS were also beyond the reach of his ambitions. He tried his hand at several trades: ceiling molder, master painter, gilder of cabinetry. But his naïveté and incompetence proved incurable, and his businesses failed every time. He papered over his successive disasters with stories that my mother and we children pretended to believe. Then the Revolution swept away all the carriages and all the coats of arms with them. There was nothing left to paint or to gild. Next my father bought a bailiff's practice and partnered with a grocery business that was in fact a den of swindlers. After that he claimed to be the confidential secretary and proxy for an important high cleric in Douai, as well as his provost, lawyer, and counselor. My family's decline proceeded inexorably.

In the end, some business about an unpaid debt brought the curtain down on his adventures. He started to drink and lie inveterately. He grew evasive. I still adored him, unaware of the approaching catastrophe. I liked the stories he told, the broad gestures he made with his arms, his eyes that sparkled with energy. My mother, by contrast, seemed to me an austere and untouchable goddess. The spark of madness, of fantasy, was my father's realm. But in this I was gravely mistaken. I never thought my mother could have another life. My separation from him was to be brutal.

CÉCILE WAS BORN a year after my parents married. Then there was another girl, a little Sophie who died at almost twenty-four months. I very likely owe my life to her death, to my mother's silent crisis, to the fathomless pit opened in her heart by that death. The tragedy was ordinary enough. Out of a litter, not all can survive. The wet nurse, a cold spell,

passing epidemic—there are always reasons at hand, like so many nails to drive into the little coffins. A shovelful of dirt, then you move on. Another birth follows. People forget that a mother's pain is the same whether in a manor house or a hovel, that it pierces walls of brick as well as wattle.

We were not yet destitute, however. Life is more resilient in bourgeois homes, and my mother kept us to a high standard of cleanliness. Never did I hear her speak of this little girl. It was Cécile who told me about her one day. Surprised, I realized I had never thought about my mother's life. Everything in it just seemed to happen. I had denied her the potential for inner torments, zones of shadow. Or a capacity for devotion to anything besides her children. She, too, could cry, then. Know sorrows that were unrelated to us. It was almost a betrayal.

BUT A WOMAN'S womb is inexhaustible. Eugénie was born in 1780 and Félix in 1782. Childbirth came on a regular cadence, the cycle reassuring if fragile, subject to inclemencies. In the familial home on the rue Notre-Dame in Douai, the family was growing. The fifth and last Desbordes child, Marceline, came into the world on June 20, 1786. My mother had not given birth in four years. My father chose the name Marceline as a tribute to the wife of a local magistrate whom he wanted to flatter and who accordingly became my godmother. I never knew her.

At the time I was born, my father had been a *mulquinier* for a year, which is to say a linen salesman, a common and honorable trade in our parts. The respite was a short one. All too soon, his debts to the innkeeper began to mount, his rent went unpaid, some swindles in which he had been drawn were uncovered, and he was declared bankrupt. We were left with nothing. At night, our boarder would noisily swallow his soup, while our bowls sat empty in the barren larder.

One terrible day, men came to place seals on three rooms in our house. My mother shrieked, we cried, my father gesticulated in vain. We had only three rooms left to live in. One of them was for my grandmother, who was dying interminably. It was like being in a house of death. My father sold the handsome furniture that had passed down through several generations of Desbordes and that my mother had maintained with fierce devotion for years. I could see her raging inside, barely mastering her hatred, her contempt for him. Our inner upheavals found an echo in the tumult of the world around us. There was a scaffold, unused, on the place d'Armes in Douai, and there might as well have been one in the middle of our house.

FOR THE SAKE of appearances and to hide his true sympathies, my father began to associate with the new political regime.

"It's a good idea to attend the revolutionary meetings," he said.

"But you are against them!" My mother was shocked.

"Yes but someone could turn us in!"

"And what about the girl? Aren't you ashamed to take her to that den of unbelievers?"

"She declaims prettily, she recites speeches against tyranny. It makes for a change."

My mother, who went to confession on the sly and continued secretly bringing provisions

to the priest of Notre-Dame, was furious. For my part, I was already starting to detest the playacting.

Thanks to his machinations, my father managed for a time to wrangle from the revolutionary authorities a succession of largely fictitious positions. But in 1795, the curtain came down once and for all. He was by then a night watchman and moved us from our beautiful house on the rue Notre-Dame to look after a wineshop near the town hall where we had rooms on the floor above.

For my grandmother, it was the last straw. She passed away. My father, meanwhile, was still searching for excuses. Accepting no responsibility for our misfortunes, he invented harebrained stories, spun outrageous nonsense.

“You may not know it,” he told us one day, “but in the fifteenth century, the ‘De Bordes’ were rich bourgeois, famous for the opulence of their weddings. People talked about them throughout the region. They were respected, envied, looked on with jealousy. And sometimes they were hated! Their women were beautiful and their children plump. But they had ties to the secret Calvinist community. Certain noblemen took a dislike to them and publicly accused them of heresy. At that point, one of the Desbordes fled to Antwerp. His son announced himself a Protestant and established trade posts abroad, becoming captain of the Dutch East Indian fleet. He received a title of nobility and grew tremendously rich!”

Rich! Rich! The word hovered, sparkling, over our heads.

“They all disappeared gradually,” my father went on. “The only ones left today are two great-uncles, grandsons of the navy captain.”

“That’s impossible,” Félix objected. “They would be more than a hundred years old!”

My father shrugged. The facts were irrelevant. We were simply meant to believe him.

“As they have no direct descendants and have heard of our little setbacks, the crisis in the textile industry, and our financial embarrassment, they offered to leave us their fortune. Quite a considerable fortune!”

“And?”

We hung on his every word.

“There was a condition attached to it,” said my father, drawing on his pipe and growing heated at his own eloquence. “They wanted us to convert. Can you imagine? Us, Protestants. I turned them down. That’s why we’re in the fix we’re in now. Otherwise, we’d be the richest family in Flanders!”

In a corner of the room, my mother glared at him, quiet as a stone. I did my best to ignore her. I actually liked my father’s stories. Even as a small child, I understood the docile warmth of a falsehood, and how a beautiful lie could be more companionable than a nasty truth. We were living a perpetual imposture. I still didn’t want to admit it. And yet I’d seen my parents attack each other with the ferocity of raptors. Even after the Terror was over and the Directoire had been declared, when the saints were resettled on their pedestals and religions had been restored. But I closed my eyes, holding fast to my years of innocence, to the Lenten flowers that I picked between gravestones and pressed between pages of a sketchbook. Like dried slices of time.

BELLS AT THE town hall replaced the carillon in the belfry of Notre-Dame. My mother's endurance had apparently come to an end. Seven years after me, she gave birth to a tiny creature that died after three weeks. My father did not even attend the funeral. After twenty years of marriage and six live births, here was my mother living shamefacedly on a noisy, gloomy street over a wineshop, keeping a boarder, terrified that the bailiffs would appear at any moment. I, a child of ten, was her only companion. Divorce, a recent institution, had found favor among a number of her friends, most of whom had left Douai. My mother was alone, neglected by her husband, who drank as much wine as he sold and probably supported mistresses, perhaps even natural children. In twenty years, the unfeeling gears of daily life had ground down her girlhood dreams. The exemplary wife had seen her spinning wheel develop a multitude of cracks. A pauper now, her trunk no longer had room for the paintings of the Dutch interior from the days of the *loées*, when she reigned as queen. Its paint flaking, it had been worn away by disillusion, by sacrifice, and by resignation.

Between stagnation and indignity, as between the rope and the dagger, my mother resolved to make a choice, and she took a lover.

IT WAS THUS that, one morning in November 1796, my mother left Douai, her husband, and three of her children forever, dragging me along, a terrified girl ripped from her native soil, when one last time I shed uncomprehending tears.

OUR DEPARTURE FOR LYON is almost upon us. Already I hear the coach rattling, the horse neighing. I must-at all costs arrange with Valmore for a delay. Separations have always had for me the bitter taste of soil, of a soil left behind forever with its burden of graves to be tended, their surface gradually sagging, a vast garden from the past overrun with ruin and rubble, and opprobrium, the trees uprooted where I climbed, as a child, toward unattainable crests. Leaving is always leaving my father again, being exiled a little farther from my childhood. Every year I find it harder to get used to.

“I’m not ready,” I tell Prosper by way of excuse. “I need to see my uncle about Hippolyte and talk to my editor about my next book of poems. I still have much to do. I could join you later, your mother and you. Pauline has offered to take me in for a few days.”

“Pauline? All right. If you like.”

Valmore is so happy to leave Paris it is indecent. Or so it is to me at any rate. His good humor affects me like a bright sun at a funeral. He blithely agrees to set off first, alone with Anne-Justine. A lesser evil. I knew all along he would. Prosper generally bows willingly enough to my suggestions, my wishes. He will think I am at Pauline’s for these three days during which I will betray his trust for the last time. My husband doesn’t especially like Pauline. She is far too extravagant a woman for him. But he respects our friendship, which began several months ago at my uncle Constant’s studio, where the explosive Mme Pauline Duchambge arrived in her voluminous silks, with her trinkets and perfume, enchanted by the poems I had just published and which she wished to set to music. Ten years my elder, Pauline is sinfully beautiful. At our first meeting, I could only stammer from emotion. With the sensuality of a Creole Madonna, she is dark in a way that attracts me. She is everything that I am not. But we share the pain of having lost children. In every other respect—divorced, aristocratic, an excellent musician and singer—Pauline Duchambge is the free woman that I will never be. She writes romances that have created as much stir in the capital as her supposed Antillean origins and her stormy relations with the musician Auber.

Given my awkward ways and provincial garb, I couldn’t understand her interest in me. My friend of the beautiful Mme Tallien, countess of Caraman-Chimay! I blushed with pride. I still blush when I think of her. She knows a great deal about me. She is the only person to whom I have described my adventure with Henri.

But I won’t go to Pauline’s.

VALMORE REALLY DOES not like her very much. He generally mistrusts women of the world. And he thinks I open my heart too freely. Pauline Duchambge’s feelings are perhaps not as noble as you imagine, he tells me. He warns me that any confidences I make to her will soon be flying all over Paris in altered form. Prosper is obviously right. But his good sense and advice intended to protect me from being duped, run counter to my thirst for passion. I need to fuse with another being, man, woman, or child. At the risk of burning my wings and despite several disappointments, I choose flight each time. It doesn’t escape me that my husband tries

always to be standing with outstretched arms near where I am likely to fall. A net. He is the best of men, thoughtful, solid as a rock. I owe him so much. Could I live without him? wonder. Marked as with a red-hot iron by Henri's body, I am still filled with inexplicable tenderness for Prosper and drawn to his striking presence, his Olympian fineness, his athletic figure. Valmore onstage in belted costumes. A marvel. I tell myself this over and over as I accompany Anne-Justine and my husband to the mail coach.

From the window of the carriage they have climbed into, he sweetly extends his hand to me. Adorable Prosper. He is just a child. Perhaps I want to mother him too much. My loves have always been childish loves. Until Henri. Will we regain, Prosper and I, the peace and serenity, the gentle waters of our earlier years? Right now, standing in his loving gaze, I have the furious wave that has caught me and is carrying me away from him! This isn't me anymore. Is it me? I so want to bask on that peaceful plain, but part of me, stubborn and inexplicable, sets a different course, takes up arms, cries havoc. I have struggled so hard to become a respectable woman, a wife, the mother of a happy family. How could it come to this? Have the simple ambitions of a provincial girl been overtaken with fever in the capital? When, where did I go astray?

We have agreed that I will rejoin them in three days. Three paltry little days of eternity which to embrace the ardent body of my other life, to smother the impossible bed of coals that has so selfishly and irresponsibly set alight. Three seedy days to shrug off my fantasies and put on once more the tight overcoat of reality, made to my measure and buttoned to the neck. I still have three days of dust and music before shutting myself away in the cloister of silence.

I BURST IMPATIENTLY into Constant's studio to discuss with him the subject of Hippolyte's nannies. My beautiful little boy has inherited his father's features. He is just starting, with little burbles of satisfaction, to take his first steps. I have made up my mind that he is not going to stay with a nurse somewhere far off. I lost a baby that way. But before I bring him to be with me, before I manage to prepare our life somewhat in Lyon, for convenience I have decided to leave him for a short time with my uncle. This is a painful decision for me, because I take so poorly to being separated from my boy.

"Now you won't forget to give him his sedative solution, will you, Uncle? Oh, and especially his borage tea. These were the particular recommendations of Dr. Alibert himself.

"Yes, yes," says Constant. "But I can't help thinking, my precious *tiote*, that all these doctors ... but I'll do just as you say."

From time to time, my uncle drops a word of patois into his speech, the sound of our local village bells. Of my church of Notre-Dame. The old painter doesn't see it, but each time I am deeply moved by his unintended gift. My uncle is so distracted, though, that for a moment I am afraid to place the life of my only son in his paint-stained hands, in the chaos of his laid-out studio. The two of us have traveled an arduous road together. Long estranged, we have recently been reconciled. To put Hippolyte in his care is to prove my undying love for him. No woman is more a mother than I am. I live and breathe for my child, having lost two babies and a little boy of five, my light-haired angel buried one morning in Brussels, whom I have often come to

mourn for in secret at the Childeberte studio.

Yet as this April 1821 draws to a close, each minute brings me toward another bereavement. I find myself hurrying to settle the last details. My uncle, whose life has bound him to his easel without ever granting him a child, is delighted to be temporarily in charge of Hippolyte. Rushed and effusive, I take leave of my curly-headed baby. The moment I am out of the studio door my scruples are gone. All I can think of now is seeing Latouche. Though I could scarcely have imagined it, I am to be for another three days more a woman than a mother.

Resolute, willful, with quick steps and a light body, I walk toward my lover, cherishing every pebble, every centimeter of the way that leads me to him. It is the hour when everything is still possible. I believe in us. Why would we sack the kingdom that was given to us? My accomplice, my pride and joy—I never knew the meaning of love until I met him. I am confident. There along the Seine, between the rue Childebert and the rue des Saints-Pères, words are being engraved in my heavy womb. The sun is reflected in the river, seeming to open it from end to end, and the vast gash of water unashamedly reveals its true carmine color. I am no longer that extinguished woman, dull, already faded, whose stolen childhood has barred her from being beautiful. I am no longer that huddled shadow of maternal deference, that hated wrong helplessly repeated in memory of a dead woman, that soul that goes to earth, contracts into itself because afraid of loving and being left, because afraid of enduring further pain, preferring to shrivel into its own fears. I am a loosed head of hair, a goddess of mythology, touched by grace and transfigured by the sureness of the feeling that buoys me. Nothing can stop me, not blame, not questions, not shame at betraying the unsullied faith of my husband, whom I would leave at a word, a whisper, without a backward glance. I know myself to be free.

RUE DES SAINTS-PÈRES. Climbing the final set of stairs to Henri's apartment, I have lost all my certainty. I sense what little connection our story has to reality, how much it owes to its nonactuality and how much it feeds to the point of nausea on its own truth. Our passion navigates the rim of the absolute, which it can abandon only at the cost of losing its raison d'être. Latouche's love is fated to remain a vow, a sacred vocation. Only Prosper's, which sometimes fails, is real. In point of fact, I have no choice to make between them.

Henri is waiting for me with extended claws. I know he is going to hurt me. All is lost even now. He is livid with pain, and only admits to it angrily. After sparring with himself, he has most likely rejected once and for all the temptation to grant our love a different outcome. So as not to be dissuaded, he is prepared to parry my every thrust. He will be hateful, most certainly, keep himself hidden, and strip our leave-taking of any regret. He looks like an opera singer ready to belt out a song of freedom. He greets me with the satiated air of a man who has spent the night in a strange bed and congratulates himself on it with impudence. I cannot help but notice.

"How elegant you are," I tell him. "That color green suits you remarkably well."

"Last night, if you can believe it, I wound up in Sophie Gay's salon," Henri answers, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "Deschamps dragged me there as usual, despite my

protests. But it turned out to be rather an entertaining evening. I enjoyed myself thoroughly

“I’m sure of it.”

Hurt, I cast about for something to say. Paris society is closed to me, and I do not yet have access to literary circles. I am just an actress who writes poems, romances. Within me, like a stubborn vine, mortification is growing. I find Latouche’s false lightheartedness unbearable.

“On the way up, did you happen to meet a young man with a high forehead, thin, but rather well built?”

“I think so, yes. I didn’t really notice.”

“That is young Hugo, I’ve mentioned him to you before. Vigny introduced us. He lives nearby, rue du Dragon. He is so poor, so scrimping, that I gave him a leftover dish of boiled potatoes with salt lard, you know, that specialty of my native Berry. The poor boy strikes me as rather sympathetic, I confess. He too admires Chénier, and doesn’t turn up his nose at the thin little wine from La Châtre that I keep on hand ...”

“Henri ...”

“Can I offer you a cup of tea? You seem overwrought ...”

For all of a season, Latouche loved me. That is enough to establish, during the life that remains to me, a cult in his name. Nothing must be touched. I’ll write for him, my poetry will be his, it will be him. Our love will stay as it was during the long spring that has just passed and that now belongs to me. In the flesh, Henri dispossesses me of everything, even my emotions. Far away, absent, lost, he will no longer affect me, he will be obliged to give me back my memories, pristine and unalterable. They will be beyond his power to soil, to negate. After today, we will have all eternity.

But now for our last hours together! I would like to read suffering in his face. Could I be alone in hurting? Such a waste, this rout of the emotions. He hasn’t much love for me apparently. Did he ever love me? I’ll never know. Everything has already been said. The time has come for mourning. Latouche already stinks of carrion. I must forget the suppleness of his skin, all that has made an imprint on my body, what I have felt in my flesh. How could I still stand for Prosper to touch me? I have hollowed out an abyss in the marital bed. But it will be erased. With time, everything is erased, even aversion. I will never have slept all night with Henri, his face in my hair and his hands on my waist. Yet that is true possession. Not the clattering gallop of breathless bodies. How I hurt! Who is crushing me so cruelly? How do I exit this nightmare?

Henri tries to ignore it, but he is too astute not to notice that I am foundering by the minute. Ordinarily, I am more voluble, talking with him for hours at a time about political and literary feuds, the theater, the country and property, childhood, crops, the sowing of seeds in wheat fields, and all sorts of idle chatter. But since entering his apartment, I have not moved from the orange-colored bergère where I normally sit, beside the piano in the window recess. The truth is that my nausea has returned and my legs will no longer carry me. The Seine below ferries floods of dramas and deceptions past me tauntingly.

“There was a splendid crowd at the Arsenal the other night,” says Latouche.

His captivating voice has come down a note.

“Observe the hypocrisy of these people, Marceline. If I hadn’t written that article on *Adèle* which Nodier commissioned for *Le Constitutionnel*, the man would spend part of every day blackening my name. Instead of which, I have become an indispensable part of his literary clique. You probably think I have given a portion of myself away in the process, no? That I have betrayed myself? But then you are pure. And I beg you to stay that way and not let yourself become sullied ...”

Pure. What did it mean? Provincial? Plebeian? I am overcome with bitterness. I am jealous of the impure women that Henri holds in his arms at night, with their smell of fox and darkness. Why does he not keep some of my sweat on his skin? He wants to protect me from himself, not to hurt me, he often says. These warnings exasperate me. I want to be hurt.

“Henri ...”

“What is it, darling?” he asks, anxious, exasperated. “You’re pale. Do you feel unwell?”

“No—or rather, I’ve never felt so dejected in all my life ...”

At that moment, I have forgotten my whole past, my tears, my dead ones. I am the most sincere of women. Before the man I love helplessly, I find myself facing the void. Never has life seemed so desperately absurd to me. Two people with such a wealth of words between them! I feel deceived, humiliated by the very man who made me beautiful beyond comparison in a world that revolved around me, a world from which his absence was inconceivable, a world where I awoke each day to the wondering realization of his existence. Today, useless, I no longer belong to that world.

“No—please, Marceline, don’t cry. I don’t like it—I can’t bear to see you suffer.”

His face has shattered. The affectations, the grimaces are gone, he has become again the man I love. It is once more the face of my one-eyed lover, in which anguish and avowal are joined. I will pack it away in my heart’s jolted travel trunks, along with the little furrows in the corners of his pond-colored eyes, and his smile that he holds down the way a prude tucks up on her dress so as not to show her ankles. Latouche’s eyes are two marshes, one salt, the other dry.

“What upsets me, Henri, is the falseness. Your indifference, if only a pretense, is torturing me. If real, it is killing me. In either case, I no longer recognize you. Henri—please—we have so little time left ...”

Irrationally, I go on waiting. By pressuring him behind his defenses, I am hoping for a last burst of passion. Perhaps he won’t allow me to leave. Perhaps he won’t consent to lose me. How I should like him to seize me, rain blows on me, detain me!

“You’re reading me wrong,” he says finally. “Do I not have the right to act a part plainly, to say one thing and then its opposite, to play the buffoon when everything is cracking, fissuring, and collapsing around me? Dear angel, who sees through all my crude masks so well, I’ve lost my taste for defeat. You are well aware of my distress, of the power you have had over me. I deny no part of what has happened between us. There are hours, sculpted in the bronze of time, that nothing can dismantle, hours in which I wait for you, in which you come to me, Paris is full of them, is it not? But another force drives me, Marceline, which refuses happiness and forbids me to love you. Will you forgive me one day? Can you see us as staid lovers? Come, think what it took us to find each other, how easily we could have

brushed past each other again and again, in the boxes of the theaters where you acted and where I happened by, without ever connecting. Only poetry could bring us face to face. You have affected me far more forcibly than I could confess, and you know it. I believe I have freed you from a certain number of shackles. You, who are enlarged by emotion, possess words far more than do I, whom emotion chokes. We have loved each other, we do love each other, and you are leaving. I will not prevent you from going. I have nothing to offer you. It is stupid, I realize, pitiful. I'll probably never entirely recover. The idea that your womb might some day carry a child is such a beautiful one ..."

"Henri—"

Shall I tell him? My God, shall I reveal everything, now, here, before another moment passes?

"No. Save your tears for tomorrow. I am saying nothing you don't already know, and you are far too sharp not to have seen, even before I did, that I could not be, and will not be, the architect of your future. I am too given to sulfur, and the kisses with which I vow to love you always reek of debauchery. Would you really want, Marceline, for me to ask you to choose between Prosper and me, between bound days and loose sheets? No, that isn't what you want. You made your mind up at the start. What holds you back is the fear of growing old. After him, you think in a panic, there is nothing and no one. But I who love even your developing wrinkles and your tired breasts, I have no elixir of youth in my cupboards. All the better, all the better, dear shadow, dear tightrope walker, whose future beauty I divine. The lip I see tremble! If you knew, Marceline, just how much this loss is mine above all. I am not sacrificing you, I am sacrificing myself ... I still have your portrait, the fine pencil sketch your uncle drew, your proud and conquering beauty barely hidden by a modest profile. I have your portrait, yes, a precious gift from you, and it will perhaps hold me in the world of the living for yet a time. You will be reborn, make loss and absence your familiars, soften the trench henceforth gouged into the soil of our hearts. You'll write, my queen. It is an order I charge you with, a prayer I address to you, and the only sacrament that binds us, independent of man, in the eyes of art alone. Come, my love, lean against me for now. Listen to the storm roar outside and swell the Seine with the sobs that I am stifling. Because I too am crying quietly."

It is raining over Paris, Marceline, it is raining.

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