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Three by
Echenoz
Big Blondes, Piano, and Running

Three of the Prix Goncourt-
winner's greatest novels,
collected together for
the first time

Jean Echenoz
with an introduction by Liesl Schillinger

Jean Echenoz won France's prestigious Prix Goncourt for *I'm Gone* (The New Press). He is the author of seven other novels available in English and the winner of numerous literary prizes, among them the Prix Médicis and the European Literature Jeopardy Prize. He lives in Paris.

Mark Polizzotti has translated over forty books from the French, including works by Gustave Flaubert, Marguerite Duras, André Breton, Raymond Roussel, Patrick Modiano, and Jean Echenoz and has written six of his own. He directs the publications program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where he lives.

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1914

Lightning

Ravel

I'm Gone

S.: A Novel (in collaboration with Florence Delay, Patrick Deville, Sonja Greenlee, Harry Mathews,
Mark Polizzotti, and Olivier Roth)

Plan of Occupancy

Chopin's Move

Double Jeopardy

Cherokee

Three by Echenoz

Big Blondes, Piano, and Running

Jean Echenoz

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BEYOND THEIR CONTROL

Liesl Schillinger

What do a murderous hard-boiled blonde, a hard-drinking, neurotic concert pianist, and a record-breaking Czech runner have in common? Seen through the potent, essentializing lens of the French novelist Jean Echenoz, the answer is: most everything. People often talk of writers having a “voice”—the chopped, deadpan earnestness of the sci-fi noir auteur Philip K. Dick; the wryly mellifluous fugue precision of Nabokov; the garrulous, judgmental sentimentality of Dickens. But the distinctive sea that runs through the fictions of Echenoz is not so much a voice as a preoccupation or even an obsession: the idea that the individual has next to no control over his or her own motivations, duties, choices, and that identity is a tragicomic construction projected largely by others.

The complaint of one of Echenoz’s protagonists, the alcoholic Parisian pianist Max Delmarc (the antihero of his 2003 novel *Piano*) could be the refrain of all his characters: “No one understands my project. Not even me.” Max, though he lacks any clear notion of what he’s trying to achieve, stubbornly lurches ahead, taking unconsidered actions whose consequences will shape his life, death, and afterlife, “with no discernible method” or objective. In this, Echenoz seems to suggest, Max resembles most of us. As Max pushes through a revolving door on one of his many unthought-through moves—an escape attempt from a sterile limbo called “the Center”—he asks himself, rhetorically, what the point is of his breakout: “To go where?” he wonders, and answers his own question “No idea.” No matter; he continues his undirected journey all the same, until his minders (with Echenoz there is always a minder) catch up with him. Soon, Max will be brought back to the Center, and be given a new face (via plastic surgery) and a new name (via the Peruvian underworld): Paul Salvador. As Paul Salvador, Max will return to Paris, but not to the “real” Paris: instead he will inhabit a kind of replica or “twin” Paris, “smothered under a black, synthetic rain expelled by clouds of pollution brownish and swollen like udders”—where he will come across everyone he knew in his former incarnation. Most of them will not recognize him. But when one of them does, Max’s chief minder from the Center, a man called Béliard, will show up on the spot, in a rage. “You let yourself be recognized,” he shrieks. Even-temperedly, Max/Paul responds, “You can’t blame me for that.” In the world of Echenoz, this is the sole rational response to the absurdity of the human predicament.

The three books in this Echenoz gatherum—two short novels, *Big Blondes* (1995) and *Piano* (2003), and the fictionalized biography *Running* (2008), about Emil Zátopek, the Cold War-era track superstar from Czechoslovakia—all partake of Echenoz’s dark, fantastical sensibility and indulge his penchant for geographical dislocation. In *Big Blondes*, a different Paul Salvador—that is, a Paul Salvador who was never Max Delmarc—sets off the book’s noirish chain of events. This Paul Salvador is a Parisian television producer who wants to create a series of documentaries about the lives of women he classifies as “big blondes,” to explore his vague conviction that “tall blondes possess an acute awareness of their singularity . . . of being special, of constituting the product of a mutation, a genetic phenomenon, even a natural catastrophe,” though he brings no rigorous methodology to his approach. “What is it we call blondness?” he muses. In his bland offices, Paul mulls the categories he wishes to collect in his survey—“warm tall blondes” versus “cool tall blondes,” Hitchcock blondes, Soviet blondes, “the emblematic Monroe-Dietrich-Bardot triangle,” n

to mention the “solar,” “incandescent” and “artificial” blondes. “Every blonde, one day or another . . . faces the suspicion that she’s a fake,” he explains to his bored, curvaceous brunette assistant Donatienne. “Every one of them is exposed to this doubt; each one runs the risk they’ll be suspected of being artificial.” Donatienne yawns, “Whatever you say,” and keeps filing. What is it all for? Salvador cannot explain: “When you get down to it maybe they don’t even need to be blonde. I don’t really know yet,” he admits. What he does know is that he definitely wants to track down one big blonde in particular, a flash-in-the-pan French singer known as Gloria Stella, who vanished (intentionally) after serving several years in prison for the suspicious death of her “lover-cum-agent,” who had tumbled down an elevator shaft. Salvador hires a band of detectives to find the ex-con blonde, but Gloria Stella resists discovery. So profoundly does she desire to remain anonymous that she has moved to the sticks, dyed her hair mouse brown, and adopted a disguise: she affects a hunch, wears shapeless tracksuits, and paints her face with “violent makeup” that makes her look like a demented clown. The first gumshoe, a man named Kastner, accosts her by accident while seeking directions, and when Gloria (for it is she) soon pushes him off a cliff—an action approved by her minder, a parrot-sized homunculus named Béliard (who has the same name as Max Delmarc’s minder in the later novel *Piano*), who shows up when he feels like it to abet or thwart the murderous muse. “At best, Béliard is an illusion,” Echenoz writes, “an hallucination forged by the young woman’s deranged mind. At worst, he is a kind of guardian angel.” Fleeing the prying eyes of Salvador’s hapless goons, Gloria (called Gloire now), will fly to Australia, India, and other distant lands, accompanied by Béliard, until the plot draws her back to Paris, where she will submit, for no good reason, to the spotlight Paul Salvador yearns to turn on her. “He wanted her consent, she has granted it,” Salvador reflects, “Gloire at last walks into his office, “a tanned tall blonde” whom he barely recognizes. But who she is (or was) scarcely matters: “Feminine, masculine, neuter; if the sun’s gender varies from one language to another, its character also changes depending on the skies.” The two of them, hunter and hunted, will end up high in the sky, on a ski lift in the Pyrenees. Will they fall in love? Or will Paul Salvador, like so many of Gloire’s previous pursuers, fall into the void? There may not be much difference—the other Paul Salvador will later observe in *Piano*: love “is not only evanescent, but soluble. Soluble in time, money, alcohol, daily life, and a host of other things besides.”

It is one thing to bring philosophical abstraction and poststructuralist happenstance to characters who never drew breath; but in his novel *Running*, Echenoz carries his fictional principles and focus into the real world. Widening his aperture, he takes in the improbable rise and equally improbable fall of the gangly Moravian factory worker Emil Zátopek—a sport of nature who won three gold medals in long-distance running at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952 (the 5,000 meters; the 10,000 meters; and the marathon) and broke scores of speed records in his prime. Born in 1922 in Czechoslovakia, Zátopek came of age as the troops of Hitler’s Wehrmacht overran his country (which they called the Sudetenland and wanted to seize for the Third Reich). When Nazi youth organizations compelled “raggedy Czechs” to compete in running races against highly trained German athletes, Zátopek, who loathed all sports (in Echenoz’s account), had no choice but to run and surprised himself and everyone else by winning handily. His form was “impossible,” Echenoz writes: “Emil advances laboriously, in a jerky, tortured manner, all in fits and starts. He doesn’t hide the violence of his efforts, which shows in his wincing, grimacing, tetanized face, constantly contorted by a rictus quite painful to see.” His arms windmill and twitch, his tongue sticks out, he moves “as if he had a scorpion in each shoe, catapulting him on.” Yet he wins at meet after meet, breaking Czech records at Brno, at Zlín, and in Prague. After the Germans lose the war, he keeps on winning, in Oslo, then in Berlin; only now, his country has become a satellite of the Soviet Union. The once-reluctant runner becomes a world-

famous Olympic sensation, applauded in the public square, adored—and imprisoned in this role. The Czech Republic's new Soviet minders want Zátopek to serve as a poster boy for the triumph of socialism and swiftly curtail his traveling privileges for fear he might defect (though he has a wife at home, a well-connected javelin thrower). Deftly, indelibly, Echenoz shows the humble hero's helplessness progress to prisoner of the state—gawky Zátopek might as well be one of the author's pure inventions, like a big blonde hunted by a mad television producer or a weak-willed pianist tethered to a purgatory whose rules he can neither obey nor violate. He becomes, in essence, an individual with next to no control over his own motivations, duties, or choices, whose identity has been stolen by his minders. He becomes, like so many of Echenoz's characters, a tragicomic construction created largely by others.

In this omnibus of three definitive novels by Jean Echenoz, each of them deceptively light and quick to read yet cumulatively resonant when read side by side, readers will feel the patterns of the author's thought replay and interplay, reinforcing the vitality and power of each portrait. With *Blondes*, *Piano*, and *Running*, Echenoz deftly captures the transformation of personality, as it flutters between the two forces that struggle to constrain it—imagination and history, in all their obdurate caprice.

Big Blondes

Jean Echenoz

Translated by Mark Polizzotti

You are Paul Salvador and you're looking for someone. Winter is coming to an end. But you don't want to do the looking by yourself, you don't have much time, and so you contact Jouve.

You could, as usual, arrange to see him on a bench, in a bar, or in the office—yours or his. For a change of pace, you suggest he meet you at the municipal swimming pool at Porte des Lilas. Jouve is glad to oblige.

On the day in question, you are there at the appointed hour, at the appointed place. But the Paul Salvador you are does not usually show up early for his meetings.

Arriving particularly early that day, Salvador first walked around the large black and white building containing five thousand hectoliters of water. Then, following the slight incline of Boulevard de Mortier, he passed in front of the gray constructions that bordered the southern face of the pool building and contained five hundred employees of the French counterintelligence services. Salvador took a stroll around that, too, until, not far in the distance, the bells of Notre-Dame des Otages rang the hour.

He and Jouve met in the pool cafeteria, above the grandstands that hung over the lanes, beneath the wide, transparent sun roof. The only people in that area wearing business suits (light gray for Salvador, navy blue for Jouve), they watched the bathers flail about at their feet, observing the women more closely than the men, each establishing a private mental typology of their swimwear: the one-piece kind, bikinis or thongs, models with pleats, smocks, ribbons, even flounces. They hadn't yet begun speaking. They waited for their Perrier and lemons.

At the time, Salvador was working for a company that produced TV shows, in charge of entertainment programs and news magazines—entertainment programs and news magazines that Jouve watched every evening with his wife. Salvador, a tall, thin individual of about forty, didn't have a wife. His long pale fingers played with each other constantly, whereas Jouve's hands, more carpenter- or butcher-like, ignored each other, carefully avoided contact, each one ensconced most of the time in one of Jouve's pockets.

Heavy-set, ten years older than Salvador and four inches shorter, Jouve prudently sipped the contents of his glass: the carbonated water and lemon blended with the chlorinated air of the natatorium to gently cleanse his nostrils. "So," he finally said, "who is it this time?" He shook his head when Salvador uttered a woman's name. "Mm, no, I don't think so," he said. "I don't believe I've heard of her."

"Take a look anyway," said Salvador, handing him a ream of press clippings and photos depicting the same young woman, always on the point of departure, with captions mentioning the name Gloria Stella.

Two kinds of photos. On the four-color ones, cut from the glossy pages of weekly magazines, one could see her leaving the stage, or bursting from a Jaguar or a jacuzzi. On the other, slightly more recent ones, in poorly screened black-and-white garnered from the Society pages of the daily press, you could see her exiting a police station, leaving a lawyer's office, or walking down the steps of a courthouse. If the first batch of photos, perfectly lit, abounded in dazzling smiles and triumphant looks, the second was filled with averted eyes behind dark glasses and closed lips, flattened out by the flashbulbs and hastily centered. "Hang on," said Jouve, "wait a moment."

While waiting, Salvador excused himself. On the door to the toilet stalls, amid various

propositions, an exasperated felt pen had inscribed THOSE WHO CAN'T DO, TEACH SWIMMING. "I've got it," said Jouve when Salvador retook his seat in the cafeteria. "Now I recognize her. I remember the story. Whatever happened to that girl?"

"No idea," said Salvador. "Vanished four years ago. I'd like you to handle this for me. It shouldn't be too complicated, should it?"

"Shouldn't be," said Jouve. "We'll have to see."

Soon afterward they headed out on foot toward the city's outer boulevards. "Right," Jouve said. "I'll start a file. It would be good if you could write down everything you know about her."

"Of course," said Salvador, pulling another paper from his pocket. "I drew this up for you. I've put down everything I could find on this sheet."

"Nice-looking girl, in any case," Jouve pronounced as he leafed through the photos. "Can I keep them?"

"By all means," said Salvador.

With Jouve, Salvador walked once more past the counterintelligence headquarters, of which only the upper floors were visible behind a protective wall bristling with barbed wire and fixed cameras aimed at the sidewalk. At wide intervals, enameled signs bolted to the wall discouraged people from photographing or filming the area, which enjoyed military classification and bore witness to successive styles of administrative architecture from 1860 to 1960. A tall, skinny metal tower supported a number of antennae directed toward the four corners of the earth, and the only means of ingress was a heavy gateway mounted on rails, through which French vehicles containing vague individuals entered and exited nervously. Two uniformed sentries guarded this gateway, with similar deterrent expressions and somber appearances, their eyes masked by mirrored shades.

"To tell the truth," Salvador said, "this might not be too easy. We looked around a bit ourselves but came up with nothing. It's as if she hasn't been in touch with anyone in, as I said, almost forty years."

"We'll see," said Jouve. "I'll get somebody on it for you right away. But who?" He wondered. "There's Boccara, who wouldn't be bad; I'll see if he's free. Or else Kastner, maybe. Yeah, better Kastner. Nice guy, and he could handle it just fine. First off, is that the right identity?"

"Excuse me?" said Salvador. "What identity?"

"That, her name," said Jouve, putting his finger on Gloria Stella. "Sounds kind of like a fishing boat, don't you think?"

"Oh, right," said Salvador. "Oh, no, no of course not. But you'll see, I put all that down on the sheet."

Late in the afternoon, Jean-Claude Kastner reached the small industrial zone that gave some preliminary idea of Saint-Brieuc. He parked his car in the lot of a pet food factory, then searched the glove compartment for an opaque plastic pouch, fastened with Velcro, which he set on his knee without opening right away. First he pressed his eyes, with just the tips of his fingers, but hard, to remember them of the 250 miles of highway.

The pouch contained the documents Salvador had given Jouve the day before yesterday, along with a Michelin map number 58, detailing Brittany between Lamballe and Brest. In a fold of the peninsula was slipped a handwritten list of port towns swarming up and down the coast, as well as others farther inland, from here to Saint-Pol-de-Léon. According to the first cross-checks that Jouve had done, it was there that the woman might be living—a tall, beautiful, intimidating blonde woman photographed from various angles and various climates. Tracing his route for the next few days, Jean-Claude Kastner joined together in red pencil, directly on the road map, the townlets that he would have to visit. One of the latter had been connected by a broken line, as in certain magazine games, the route formed no discernible shape, and Kastner found this vaguely disappointing.

Having folded these materials back into their sheath, he started up and returned to the highway, continuing on to Saint-Brieuc. With his car parked in the center of town near the covered market, Kastner dined on a deluxe couscous at one of the Maghrebi restaurants that compete with each other near the old station; then he found a room in an unrated hotel opposite the new one. Gloomily lit by a single overhead bulb, the room was a windowless cube with no television or refrigerator, and no toiletries in the bathroom, since there was no bathroom: in a corner they had simply grafted an elementary shower under a tarnished, foldable plastic device, fragile and leaking. Kastner fell asleep fairly quickly.

He woke up just as quickly two hours later, tossed several times in his bed without managing to fall back asleep, turned on the overhead light, then tried to get back into a sci-fi novel whose why eluded him even more than its wherefores. The room was too hot, then too cold, and Kastner alternately shivered and perspired, unable to keep his mind on what he was reading. Taking up his road map again, he reworked the itinerary established in the parking lot: it didn't change very much, but this time the resulting drawing vaguely suggested a sea horse lying on its side. In desperation, he ended up swallowing a sleeping pill, dozing off after twenty minutes.

Incoherent dreams passed through him, concluded by a familiar nightmare. The classic vertiginous dream: Kastner clings with all his might to the top of a vertical mass of disjointed girders and rusted crossbars hanging over an abyss. It's a precarious scaffolding with peeling paint, which a strong wind is threatening to knock down. Kastner doesn't dare look at the void below him; he feels his energy flagging and his strength deserting him, knowing full well that he is about to let go. The situation is already very distressing, and normally the dream ends there; it's there that his terror generally wakes him. But not this time. This time Kastner loses his grip and falls, falls into the endless void. He wakes up, drenched, just before hitting the ground.

Ordered for seven o'clock, his breakfast consisted of watery, mass-produced coffee, orangeade, and pastry. Kastner didn't have the stomach to finish it. The sleeping pill had left his mouth dry, and his strength just like in his dream, along with most of his appetite. He was achy, feverish; his fingers trembled a bit. He proceeded to do a few half-hearted deep kneebends, after which his sweat gave off

chemical odor that persisted after a careful shower, persevering even through the eau de toilette. The he put on the same clothes as the day before: brown polyester suit over a wine-colored polyester polo shirt. In this way, Kastner was dressed like some salesman or door-to-door canvassers—profession that he had more or less held in the past, as well as several others that enjoyed a similar level of prestige in the social scale of employment.

All day long, at the wheel of his car, the Michelin road map folded out on the right front seat. Kastner followed the prescribed route. Stopping in each little town, he showed his photos to bartenders, service station managers, tripe butchers, or bakers not yet done in by the large supermarkets. He convinced himself he was being discreet. Kastner said that the woman in the photo was his sister, or sometimes his sister-in-law. Once he got up the nerve to pretend she was his wife, but it bothered him, upset him, and he didn't risk it again. In any case, the small shopkeepers shook their heads and pouted negatively, and so Kastner also canvassed the large supermarkets. But in vain all that day, and all the next.

On the third day it rained, and Kastner got lost. In fact, it rained without really raining; minuscule droplets dotted the windshield—not heavy enough to make it worth using the wipers, not light enough to do without them. The blade smeared the glass instead of washing it. No doubt because of that, while trying to get to a village named Launay-Mal-Nommé, he missed a junction on Route D78 somewhere between Kerpallud and Kervodin, only to find himself smack in the middle of a cluster of anonymous gray houses. He parked on a platform in front of a massive church, with a monument to the dead to the left and a small seaside graveyard to the right, which was scarcely more lively: nothing to inspire any joy in the man sitting in his car. He tried to decipher his road map, which by now was more like a rebus. Then he vaguely sought out his name on the monument to the dead, but as usual it was a total loss: only patronyms of local vintage were listed there, which did not include the Kastners.

His glance drifted toward the church, behind which an elderly man no sooner emerged than disappeared; then two minutes later a woman skirted the church door. Kastner, despite all the wrong-way streets in his life, had never liked asking directions of anyone, but this time the ambient dampness, loneliness, and silence led him to lower his window and, as the woman was passing nearby, apologize for bothering her:

“Excuse me,” he said, “but I think I’ve lost my way. I’m looking for an intersection. You wouldn’t know anything about an intersection around here, would you?”

The woman was young, slightly stooped: little flat shoes, dull mid-length hair that for lack of a better word one would call chestnut brown, large eyeglasses on a small aquiline nose—the whole thing covered in violent makeup and wrapped in a sweatsuit whose halves didn’t match. Closed, perhaps fearful expression, nothing attractive, didn’t seem mean. She stopped without immediately coming closer, her body leaning to one side under the weight of a bag of groceries. “An intersection,” Kastner repeated, “a crossroads.”

She appeared at first glance to have no particular ideas on the subject, then not to have very many ideas at all. Doesn’t seem all that bright, judged Kastner, slowly repeating himself in a more articulated voice, pressing his finger onto the map that he presented upside down through the lower window. “Launay-Mal-Nommé,” he specified. “That’s where I’m going.”

“Launay,” the woman finally said without looking at the map, “I know it. It’s on my way. Wait a minute and I’ll tell you.”

A pause, then, in a monotonous tone, a succession of first rights and first rights, of lefts before right, of thirds after the traffic circle, you couldn’t miss it; Kastner had quickly stopped following. “Listen,” he said to her, “if you’re heading that way, I can give you a lift if you like. You can tell me

where to go. Get in—if you like.” Another pause, then she gave only a small nod; as she walked around the back of the car, she said something about a bus which Kastner didn’t understand. She got in, setting the bag down by her feet. It was in her way for the entire ride, but Kastner didn’t dare suggest putting it on the backseat.

The ride offered a uniform vista of scattered gray houses, few of which seemed inhabited, a fair number of which were for sale—but who would want them, Kastner wondered, who would want the ones whose narrow windows didn’t look out to the sea? Not me. Not really a place for me. I prefer the sun, and anyway, when you get down to it, I don’t have any money. On the bloodless facades one could sometimes see traces of water from a flowerpot or hanging laundry, a sign of life that dripped from the wash and irrigated the flowers. Other facades were barely still breathing, bearing the skins of advertisements painted fifty years before, the ghosts of hernia trusses and phosphatides.

Immobile on her seat, lips almost still, his passenger indicated the route step by step for Kastner—who, ostensibly watching the road, used his peripheral vision to take in the harsh makeup: apple-green eyelids, two violet lines under the eyebrows, two circles of terra-cotta blush on the cheeks, and extraterrestrial garnet-red lipstick. All of it against a rather pale background. His peripheral vision even made out the time on the kind of little wristwatch you can win at a local fair—something other to seven—and spotted a few red traces that flaked on the half moons of chewed fingernails. Upstream from one of them, Kastner thought he identified a wedding band—but no, the object, having turned, was decorated with a cheap little green stone flanked by three brilliants.

They headed on toward Launay-Mal-Nommé; the young woman was now completely silent. To fill that silence a little, Kastner decided to divulge the reasons for his presence. Employed by a small private company, they had dispatched him into the sector with the mission of finding someone. For reasons that weren’t clear to him, he specified—probably some miserable matter of debt repayment—as was too often the case. Careful not to touch his passenger, he stretched out his arm toward the glove compartment and pulled out by feel two or three photos of the someone in question. You wouldn’t have seen her, by any chance? She was barely listening or didn’t understand it all, said no the way she might have said yes; she didn’t seem too happy or too stable. Kastner felt a certain sympathy rising in him, not far removed from a vague solidarity.

Around a bend, the young woman pointed her finger (there, I’m getting off there) at a small isolated house near the road: Kastner braked while downshifting. The house was gray and squat, like so many others in the area, with a small garden on the side. Won over to the wild state, timorous flowers encircled a yellowed palm that, half-dead from cold despite the microclimate, looked like a large janitor’s broom that had been planted in the ground and started growing. “It’s not too much farther,” the young woman said. “Straight ahead about another half mile.”

“Thank you,” said Kastner. “Thank you very much.”

“Thank *you*,” said the young woman. “Can I offer you something to drink?”

“I don’t want to impose,” said Kastner.

“Oh, come on,” she said with a new little smile. Then, as she bent down to get her bag, her left hand seemingly accidentally brushed Kastner’s right thigh. Who shuddered imperceptibly. Who then said sure, OK, and parked his car on the verge. “Don’t leave your car out here,” said the young woman. “I’ll open up for you.”

“Sure, OK,” repeated Kastner, whose auto then crossed through the gate and rounded the house toward a small courtyard that mirrored the garden. Kastner switched off the engine, got out of the car, and slammed the door without taking his keys from the ignition.

The sea was not very far away. Through a side window, in the absence of a clear horizon line, one

could almost see it blending with the sky in the waning daylight. Kastner was now sitting in a ~~not~~ ~~overly comfortable wicker armchair,~~ a glass in his hand, piles of brochures at his feet. The furnishings in the living room were rudimentary, mismatched as in the kinds of houses one rents on vacation; a light socket hung bulbless from a wire in the middle of the ceiling. After a first glass, Kastner had accepted another, then a third, before the young woman had suggested, given the hour and since he was there, that he stay for dinner. It would be a change from the usual steak and fries swallowed alone and at top speed; he hadn't put up much resistance. They didn't speak much more after that. Kastner heard the young woman moving glass and metal objects in the kitchen. The idea—incongruous, immediately dismissed—crossed his mind that he could spend his whole life this way.

While waiting, he took stock of the brochures: always the same magazines in last month's issues, a television guide, the almanac of tides for the current year. Leafing through the latter, he looked for today's date, scarcely familiar with these phenomena. Nonetheless, he seemed to understand the tide corresponding to today's date, at eleven twenty-four p.m., there would be a record level of high tide. The young woman passed through the living room from time to time, restoring the levels in the glasses until dinner was pronounced ready.

She had prepared only white foods: peeled shrimp, noodles, and plain yogurt, seasoned with sauces in tubes whose colors were no less vivid than her makeup. White wine. As Kastner asked a few questions about her life, she claimed to have worked the previous year in a canning factory, to have lost her job, to be currently unemployed, like a fair number of people in the area (unfortunately that seems to be the case all over, Kastner commiserated gravely), but that she helped out twice a week at a fish market in Ploubazlanec (I worked in fish too, Kastner informed her, without specifying further).

After dinner—rather drunk, to tell the truth—Kastner reeled out a few tortuous phrases from which one could deduce that he found the young woman quite pleasing and that he was, indeed, rather attracted to her. As she smiled while refilling his glass, he judged that the situation was advancing nicely. As she did not pull her hand away from his, he figured it was in the bag. Kissing her voraciously a bit later as he leaned against the door, he was forced to admit that he was having a hard time standing up. Then, with a snicker, his fingers blindly sought an opening in the uncooperative textile; he was starting to get excited when he broke out in a cold sweat. The woman laughed and shook her head; she gently caressed Kastner's cheek before her hand slid down to his neck, against his chest, and when she passed over his belt the man trembled from head to foot and turned pale. The woman, although she was still pressed tightly against him, Kastner continued to shake. "What's wrong?" she asked in a low voice. Kastner found it hard to explain. "Come," she said, "let's get some air. It will clear your head."

"OK," said Kastner, "sure."

He hadn't paid much attention to the time passing during dinner. He was surprised that night had already fallen, so black, opaque, and dull, solid as concrete, devoid of stars as if its consistency were blocking out the celestial vault. Far off in the corner a moon just barely hung, reduced to its thinnest shaving. Scarcely out the door, Kastner put his arm around the young woman again and took the liberty, encouraged by the fresh air and the darkness, to explore matters a bit further. She did not seem to mind this development, and so Kastner was pleased. "Wait a minute," she said. "Come—we'll be more comfortable over there."

To get over there, away from the road, they took a dirt path between two artichoke patches. The young woman went ahead while Kastner followed by guesswork, stumbling to the rhythm of the potholes, disoriented by darkness, horniness, and white wine. Unable to see even his feet, the man discovered at the last second that the sea was right there, thirty yards below. You couldn't see it from

the top of the cliff he had just reached, but Kastner divined its proximity by its habitual low grow punctuated with convulsions. ~~Crashing here and there on the rocks, a larger wave exploded like a bass drum, dissipating afterward in shudders of studded cymbal.~~ The woman seemed to be disappearing toward the silhouette of a small blockhouse, the size of a sentry box for two—perfect, stammered Kastner’s consciousness.

But an instant later she had vanished behind the pillbox. Kastner reached it, walked around without finding her. He tried calling out to her, realizing only then that he didn’t know her name, and timidly emitted a few exclamations of the *hey, hello* variety—followed by a prolonged *euhh* for his own benefit, bending toward the sea but leaning with one hand against the sentry box wall.

Then, as he tumbled into the void under the impact of a violent shove, his groan was transformed into a strangled cry, a horrified whimper that stretched out while, in fast motion, the sensations of his last dream rushed toward him. During his fall he barely had time to hope he would wake up again before hitting the ground, but not this time. This time his body would shatter for real against the rock. Of the man named Kastner only his clothes would remain intact, transformed into a sack of broken bones. Two hours later the tide would rise to take care of them; then its record level would carry them far away from the coast, and six weeks afterward the sea would bring them back, beyond recognition.

That Jean-Claude Kastner should manage, first, to lose his way in a civilized and well-marked region already suggests that he was not the world’s sharpest investigator. That he should have to ask directions of a passerby says a lot about his ingenuousness. But that he should not recognize her as the very person he was seeking disqualifies him once and for all. Even if that person had changed a lot.

The fact was, she had completely transformed herself. Judging by the documents they had given him, Kastner had pictured some tall, elegant blonde with interminable legs and high heels, the delicately pitched gait of a tightrope walker, and a clear gaze sloping gently down toward him. That was how he had visualized her. That was no longer the case. She no longer fit a single point of the description. On the other hand, it’s true that, since the day she had disappeared, things had had plenty of time to evolve.

And the next day, you are someone looking for Paul Salvador. Your vehicle carries you toward the eastern part of Paris, near Porte Dorée, not far from the Bois de Vincennes. You park in front of the modern building that houses Stochastic Films: six floors of offices and studios, sixty million francs yearly revenues, rising from the corner of Avenue du Général-Dodds and Boulevard Poniatowski. You walk in without attracting attention. Airtight as a bunker, the lobby is decorated with green plants and lit by indirect spots; in its center rises a tall, polychromatic abstract sculpture, a totem planted slantwise in a gravel doormat. To the right, a row of exceptional receptionists, all nails, lashes, and breasts; to the left, nothing special. Just ahead, the elevators. Forget the receptionists, head straight for the elevators.

You cross the lobby; no one asks you anything. Secure in their three-day beards, the young men in boots and leather jackets barely even jostle you. Your eyes would also like to linger on all the unstructured girls who come and go here, but you ignore them as well and proceed straight ahead. You enter the elevator, press number 3.

The elevator door opens onto a hallway that you follow to the first open office: that's it. Enter. Stand quietly in a corner. Wait. Whatever happens, no one will notice you. In any case, Salvador's office is empty for the moment. It's a large room whose double-thick panes calmly overlook the avenue traffic. Armchairs and conference table, as well as large oval mirror and sofa. On one wall, two paintings by who knows who; against another, volume lowered, six stacked televisions broadcast the day's programs. The walls are dark green, the carpet warm sand. Not a folder lying around, not a sheaf of paper; all the data is digitized. Only on the table do a few files rest, ongoing projects that Stochastic will deliver, made-to-order and ready-to-wear, to public and private TV stations.

And here comes Salvador, seeming not very busy. He walks around his office, stares at but doesn't really see the specters wriggling onscreen, nor the avenue through the window, nor his reflection in the oval mirror. Distractedly he leafs through the files while awaiting his assistant. Here she is now. Let's go.

37-24-36: no matter what the season, Donatienne stands out by wearing clothes that are supernaturally short and miraculously low-cut, sometimes so short and so low-cut at the same time that between these adjectives almost no actual fabric remains. Endowed with the energy of a breeder reactor, Donatienne throws an envelope quilted with plastic bubbles onto the table before dropping into a chair and expressing herself in a rapid voice, sharp but fragile like a fishbone made of chalk. Sometimes happens that talking, for Donatienne, consists in reeling off a single, unending sentence without catching her breath, without period of comma or pause—a performance that, as far as Salvador can tell, only Roland Kirk has matched on the saxophone, and perhaps also Johnny Griffin to a lesser extent—all the while beating, in triple time, the arm of the chair with her right palm. It always happens that once in a while she speaks more soberly.

Salvador rips open the envelope that she dropped on the table. It contains two 45s recorded five or six years earlier, when vinyl was still the coin of the realm. Both carry the name Gloria Stella in boldface, followed by the title of the A-side (“Too Too Too” for one, “We’re Not Taking Off” for the other) superimposed over a color photo of the singer. Donatienne, meanwhile, describes all the trouble she's had procuring these two records, now out of print. She seems to be stressing—Salvador is barely listening—the gap between the breadth of her research and the value of its object. To underscore her

point, she makes a disdainful gesture with her left hand while shrugging one shoulder, causing a strap of her brief garment to slip down the other shoulder. As she frequently shrugs her shoulders, a strap of her dress slips one time out of two, and the next time it's the other strap; Salvador averts his eyes two times out of two. But just then the telephone rings, allowing him to busy himself elsewhere. "I'm listening," he utters.

At the other end of the line, Jouve sounds concerned. The evening before, his employee Kastner neglected to call in with a progress report, as he was instructed to do daily, no matter what, and fruitful or not. "I'm a little worried," he says. "That's the first time. It isn't like him. Anyway, I'll see if he calls tonight."

"All right," says Salvador. "Keep me posted." Then, after hanging up, "To work," he says. Donatienne opens the Gloria Stella file.

Usually, Salvador's programs appeal to collective memory. Where are they now? That's the formula: a good, reliable formula that has proven itself time and time again. You go in search of a name whose posterity has faded, whose echo has died out. Retired talk-show host, single-role actor, overachieving crook, radio game-show champion, vanished top-of-the-bill amnestied by memory. You exhume a one-time instant celebrity who had soon dissolved into neglect, someone people remember so little that they don't even remember having forgotten him, but who is there nonetheless: stored like the others at the back of a closet, in memory's oldest boxes. Those boxes are still there, way in back even though a few have been damaged by a leak in memory's ceiling. The labels pasted on them are now a bit hard to read. Salvador's programs consist in repainting the ceiling, refreshing the memory, opening those boxes.

But this might take a more intimate and personal turn. So it was, for example, with *From the Bottom of My Heart*, a ratings hit with the pre-retirement crowd in the provinces, or with *The Prettiest Girl on the Beach* ("You once saw the prettiest girl on the beach and you remember her. You remember her all too well, though you didn't dare talk to her. Do you remember her name? Write to us. We'll find you that prettiest girl on your beach."). It was another matter entirely with Gloria Stella whose case fell into a broader category. Indeed, first as a popular singer, then as the heroine of human interest stories, she had gotten herself pretty well noticed five or six years ago, for a few months.

Career brief: Born Gloire Abgrall, precocious teenage fashion model. Entered the world of variety shows under the pseudonym dreamed up by Gilbert Flon, her lover-cum-agent.

Bottom line: those two 45s, a shot at the Olympia, a few tours as special guest star, number three on the hit parade for "Excessive"; photographs, autographs, fan club, movies on the horizon. It all looked very promising until Gilbert Flon took a suspicious dive down a fourth-floor elevator shaft.

Since then: suspicion, investigation, prosecution witnesses, indictment, trial, verdict (five years, extenuating circumstances), prison, release for good conduct, disappearance.

So that, having covered the ground in the teenage weeklies, then in the women's monthlies, having cleared herself a little place in the Arts and Entertainment sections of the dailies, it was more and more in black-and-white that they then transferred her from the celebrity news to the Legal column before she sank into the deep column of Forgotten.

Where, indeed, was she now? Not a peep in four years. She must be thirty by now. The perceptible path of Gloire Abgrall stopped dead the day of her release from prison, the date on which any relatives and allies she had left stopped receiving the slightest sign of life from her. She disappeared into the woodwork like a good thousand other persons a year who are never seen again. Still, Salvador and Donatienne are hopeful. While waiting for Jouve's men to find her, they put the finishing touches on their project: specifying the order of documents from the video library, archives, news of the day

interviews with those closest, specialists' viewpoints—courts, mental health, and show business.

Naturally, Salvador is not the first to look for Gloire Abgrall. Numerous paparazzi have tried, with no other result than, for one who was a little more brazen than the rest, the outline of his body deep embossed in the roof of a Peugeot parked in front of Rouen cathedral (Seine-Maritime region), at the bottom of a two-hundred-foot drop.

After their work has ended and Donatienne has left, Salvador makes the rounds of his office one last time. Noticing, next to its envelope, the recorded opus of Gloria Stella, he slips a 45 from its pouch and drops "Too Too Too" onto the turntable. Standing near the window he watches, on the boulevard, a leather-clad woman extricating herself from a diesel automobile. The song plays and he listens to the words, popping the envelope's little plastic bubbles between his fingers, one by one, the way he had treated, on family vacations thirty years before, the little bubbles of algae growing on the submerged rocks off the Giens peninsula (Var region).

On the morning of that same day, the woman who had sealed Jean-Claude Kastner's fate awoke a little before nine o'clock. She had opened her eyes on the grayish ceiling, then, recognizing it, got up and slipped on a shapeless green fleece-lined bathrobe. But immediately afterward, in the bathroom mirror, she had trouble recognizing her face.

Hurling a man into the void being the sort of thing that can make you forget to remove your makeup, it was a contracted mask that appeared to her in the glass, petrified by sweat and suffocating under the greasepaint. She restored her image with scant consideration, using cold water and household soap, as delicately as one sandblasts a facade. Her hair was not a pretty sight, but she, who hardly cared, brushed it back violently. She gave the mirror an evil grimace that bared her teeth, which she then brushed no less brutally—until her gums bled, the handle of the toothbrush snapped in two, and the young woman swore out loud while spitting a pinkish froth onto the sink's yellowed enamel. She rinsed her mouth endlessly before putting on new makeup that was only slightly more discreet than the day before, tying her hair with a brown rubber band. Back in her room, she haphazardly chose a sky-blue blouse with feather prints and a bright red skirt, throwing a large navy-blue smock over the whole thing.

Standing in the kitchen, Gloire Abgrall then emptied a large bowl of coffee in one gulp. On the sides of the bowl, pochoir silhouettes of fruits and vegetables chased after each other beneath the cracks. She glanced out the window to check the weather: silent light-gray front. The windows hadn't been cleaned in some time, and it was hard to make out what was happening outside, but even in the kitchen it wasn't that easy to see either, as if the air itself hadn't been cleaned. Setting the bowl on the table, she then gathered some food scraps onto a page of newspaper—crusts, tops, peelings—before going out.

Behind the house, the back of the small courtyard ended in a shed in which a one-eyed, former white Renault R5 stood parked, and a few rimless tires, two caneless chairs, and an enucleated lantern grew mold. A first-generation washing machine and an antique boiler framed a hutch in which a rabbit, fleshy and trembling, pondered the short term with an opaque eye. The young woman crossed the courtyard with her food, a grating little wind brushing at her temples. Then, as she was about to lean toward the animal: "Personally," said Béliard, "I don't disapprove."

Gloire Abgrall turned her head and Béliard was there, sitting on her shoulder. Well, what do you know, he was back. Casually posed on her shoulder, legs dangling and eyes looking elsewhere, Béliard leaned with one hand on her collarbone, and with the other rubbed his chin.

"Ah," she breathed, "there you are." Béliard nodded contentedly. "And anyway, so what?" she said. "Disapprove of what?"

Béliard crossed his tiny legs and doubled over with a sharp laugh: "The guy last night," he said. "Others might disapprove. Not me. You were within your rights, Gloire, you've had enough to deal with. They've given you enough to deal with. I'm just calling it as I see it."

"I don't give a shit how you see it," Gloire declared.

"It's my duty to tell you," Béliard observed in a pinched voice. "It's part of my job. Afterward you can do as you like." Then he fell silent, sulkily folding his arms and staring straight ahead.

"All right, fine," said the young woman, "don't pout."

"I am *not* pouting," Béliard said coldly. "If you only knew how little I cared."

“Come on now,” she said. “Come on now, Béliard.”

~~Béliard is a skinny little brunette, about a foot tall and with a slightly receding hairline, part on the side, drooping eyelids and upper lip, muddy complexion. He is wearing a brown cotton suit, dark purple tie, and shiny little brown shoes, spit-polished. Rather disgraceful spineless face, though with a determined expression. Arms folded, his fingers stick out of sleeves that are a bit too long for him, and drum on his elbows.~~

At best, Béliard is an illusion. At best he is an hallucination forged by the young woman's deranged mind. At worst, he is a kind of guardian angel, or at least can claim some kinship with the congregation. Let us envision the worst.

If he really is one, created too ugly and too small to be officially recognized by a fraternity overpreoccupied with its movie-star physique, they must immediately have dumped him on Social Services. That is, unless they simply abandoned him on the side of a highway during a parade or an angels' convention abroad, cuffed with his standard-issue halo to a road sign. Whatever the case, from a very young age he had to get along by himself, taking advantage (despite everything) of whatever gifts and qualities his birth conferred. Ignored by his own kind, renounced by his hierarchy, perhaps even slapped with a prohibition, he is compelled to ply his trade as a freelancer, outside normal channels and as discreetly as possible.

Moreover, he isn't always there, or at least not always physically present: the frequency and duration of his visits with the young woman vary. Sometimes he stays away for two months, sometimes he shows up every evening like a regular at the local bar, sometimes for two hours in the middle of the night as if with some girl. Always he seems rather self-centered, not too observant of principles, often in a surly mood. Occasionally he keeps office hours, a cruising little nine-to-five, but he might also spend three weeks grounded on his little corner of shoulder, immobile, nervous, taciturn, looking hunted, as if hidden away or wanted by the authorities. In short, he's pretty irregular. The only general rule is that he shows up when Gloire is alone, which has not been an uncommon occurrence in the past four years. Lately he hasn't been too constant, coming by only two or three times a week. Not that he does anything in particular when he's there, but at least he's there.

At the moment, he was clearing his throat, patting his lips with a balled-up handkerchief. He seemed to be lost in thought. “Did it feel the same?” he said in a distracted voice, without looking at the young woman.

“What do you mean?” she said in the same tone. “Did what feel the same?”

“The guy last night,” specified Béliard. “When you pushed him. What did it feel like? Compared to the other times, I mean.”

“Fucking little asshole!” hissed Gloire. “Goddam little asshole piece of shit! We agreed we would never bring that up.”

“Just doing my job,” Béliard reminded her.

As Gloire leaned toward the hutch, Béliard, to keep his balance, slid toward the back of his shoulder, almost to the shoulder blade. When she stood up again without warning, he nearly went tumbling head over heels, but regained his equilibrium just in time: “Ah,” he grated, “*that* was smart.” Then, having settled in again, “So, what's the plan for today?”

“You'll see,” said Gloire.

“I'd like to be a little more involved in the decision-making,” Béliard declared energetically. “I'd like to have my say in all this. I mean, after all, that's what I'm here for, isn't it?” She, having turned around, now walked resolutely toward the house. “Hey, what are you up to?” he worried. “Where are you going like that?”

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