

SAMPLE  
TEXT



# THE INHERITORS

HANNELORE CAYRE

From the bestselling author of *The Godmother*

HANNELORE CAYRE is a French writer, director and criminal lawyer. Her most recent work, *The Godmother*, won the European Crime Fiction Prize and the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière and has been shortlisted for a Crime Writers' Association Dagger award. *The Godmother* was also featured on *The New York Times*' '100 Notable Books of 2019' list and has been made into a major film starring Isabelle Huppert.

STEPHANIE SMEE left a career in law to work as a literary translator. Recent publications include the translations of Hannelore Cayre's *The Godmother*, and Françoise Frenkel's rediscovered World War II memoir *No Place to Lay One's Head*, which was awarded the JQ-Wingate Prize. Her translation of Joseph Ponthus' prize-winning work, *On the Line*, is forthcoming.

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*Saint-Germain-en-Laye*  
*18 January 1870*

Auguste had been sitting on the edge of his bed for more than an hour, eyes fixed on this costly novelty item available in the department stores, this thing called an *alarm clock*, which his aunt Clothilde had given him for his twentieth birthday.

*Because we all know there will never be enough roosters in Paris to rouse you from your sleep*, she had quipped in the note on the little card attached to the parcel.

It consisted of a clock which had been mounted inside a finely worked case portraying birds of paradise. Pondering the invention, the young man thought sadly how it would in many respects wreak havoc with the habits of all those night owls who, like him, struggled to rise in the morning. The thing was designed to set off a bell at a particular pre-determined moment. In addition to the hands indicating hours and minutes, a special hand, which one would set the previous evening, marked the time to rise. Auguste had set that hand at the number seven, one hour prior to the time indicated on his summons to attend the draw.

This much-anticipated date had been haunting him since the month of October, when he had presented himself at the town hall for the census of the class of 1869, the year of his twentieth birthday. Trying not to dwell on the matter during the festive season, he had remained in a permanent state of inebriation until January, then had surprised

himself by coming to see the draw as offering a conclusion to his agonising.

The countdown was finally over and today was the day!

This morning he would finally know if he drew a bad number, forcing him to abandon the Sorbonne – to give up his Parisian life, his pleasures, his indolent habits – for nine years of degrading military service, five of which would find him surrounded by brutish louts in damp barracks furnished with poor bedding.

The ring of that devilish invention made him jump, causing his innards to contract: *those not appearing for roll call at eight o'clock sharp shall be the first to be given their marching orders* were the words written at the foot of his call-up notice.

How he would have loved his mother and sister to accompany him to the draw. Unfortunately they had both been called as a matter of urgency to the bedside of an aunt who had taken ill. Nor was his father able to join him, confined to the house as he was with a poor back. That left his brother-in-law, Jules, a former officer turned businessman, and his brother, Ferdinand, an ambitious type who practised a cult-like devotion to money and whose favourite pastime was to back Auguste into a corner until he was ready to explode. Even if those two had offered to provide him with some comfort in the face of his ordeal, Auguste would have categorically refused.

The women of the family had not, however, abandoned him entirely, since they had arranged to have a mass said at Saint-Germain-de-Paris asking Providence to spare him

the fate of military service. Obviously, Auguste did not believe in God: even less so since reading *On the Origin of Species*, a luminous beacon of a book that succeeded in scientifically refuting the grotesque notion of life as divine creation, but privately he told himself that neither could the prayers bought by his mother do him any harm.

He dressed hastily and made his way through the silent house, taking care not to wake anybody. Once over the threshold, he pulled his collar up to his ears, ready to launch himself into the inky darkness of that winter morning. But scarcely had he passed through the metal gate of his family home when his imagination bolted. He already pictured himself, fear in his belly, marching into battle, just as that ill-bred old soldier his parents insisted on inviting to dine at their table used to describe in words fit to terrify the ladies – a man by the name of Pélissier, a veteran of the dreadful siege of Sebastopol. In the halo of light cast by the gas street-lamps he could practically make out the twisted frozen corpses of horses half-eaten by soldiers.

As he made his way up Rue de la République, the dawn filled with the silhouettes of people whose snowy footprints were converging on the town hall of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Children were playing battle games out the front of the building, entertaining the soldiers standing guard. Sitting astride imaginary mounts and armed with snowballs and sticks by way of swords, they launched themselves, shouting, at invisible enemies. Prussians, they said.

Those accompanying the young men were asked to remain outside while all those who had been called up were led by privates into the Hall of Honour. Sitting at the table waiting for them, with the municipal register containing the names of all the young men born in 1849 open in front of him, was the mayor, wearing his sash of red, white and blue, together with an impatient officer flanked by a handful of soldiers.

Auguste went to join a small group of bourgeois civilians standing around a large coal brazier, who had been joined, naturally enough, by the offspring of their servants. He greeted the Bertelot boy, who he knew had harboured designs on his cousin at some point, as well as his childhood friend Duchaussois, whom his father was constantly holding up as an example after he had pursued a position in the magistracy. He saw his high-school friends Berquet, Bruault and Fromoisin ... and there was Portefaux, too, the son of the mortgage registrar. Auguste hardly recognised him he had gained so much weight: he was hoping to be declared unfit for service on the grounds of obesity, he said. Auguste was equally surprised to see the fellow whom his mother had always called *little Perret*, the youngest son of their gardener, who it seemed had been born the same year as him. Then there were the sons of the town's shopkeepers. Some of them he knew from church, from having played with them when he was younger, or simply from having glimpsed them at the back of their parents' shops. A cheerful hubbub was very quickly heard emerging from this inner circle.

A little removed, keeping a respectful distance from the stove, stood a crowd of young workers clad in factory coats,

as well as a few peasants battling silently against the cold, dressed as if heading to Mass. They had all made the effort to put on clean clothes, for if their poverty was tolerated it was only because they had made the effort to dress properly and did not allow their impoverishment to cause offence to those with whom they were required to rub shoulders.

Auguste could not help but observe them surreptitiously.

‘There are so many of them,’ he thought, astonished. ‘How awkwardly they conduct themselves, and how stubborn their silence. Their manner sits at such odds with the ease and civility of the well-to-do. Why are they not the ones approaching the stove so they might warm their bones, with their meagre clothes and inadequate shoes, so poorly suited to the cold?’

‘These poor lads had a price, it seems. How much for that sturdy specimen hopping from one clog to another so as not to freeze? And would he agree to sell himself, that man, if he weren’t given his marching orders? Did *he* think that to have himself killed in the place of the son of a wealthier family is “a matter of outlook” as Monsieur Thiers recently asserted in the Chamber? Did he think it self-evident, a given, much like conceding his place around the fire?’

‘How complicated it all is!’ he thought, sighing.

Despite the Emperor’s desire to bring some ethics to the trade in men, the principle of freedom to contract had once again triumphed in the Chamber as a result of pressure exerted by the country’s paterfamilias.

The liberal deputies had voted by overwhelming majority in favour of bringing back military substitution as it had been practised prior to the accession of Napoléon III. Thus, it was no longer a question of the state being responsible for finding a replacement, in exchange for a fee, for those young men refusing to go, but rather a matter for the families themselves. There had of course been the minor socialist group led by Jules Simon protesting this *white slave trade*, this resurgence of *traffickers in human flesh* – but it was against a backdrop of general indifference. The conservatives, for their part, had brandished the spectre of war with Prussia. And contrary to all expectations, that country, while considerably smaller than France, had just crushed Austria at Sadowa in a single battle, thanks entirely to its compulsory service and its army of 1,200,000 men, but the conservatives too had been preaching in the wilderness.

At around ten o'clock, the officer present started to call the roll that had been stripped of exemptions, while a soldier turned the handle of the drum containing the 127 numbers slotted into their wooden casings.

Each time a name was called to be drawn, Auguste, who was not only in a state of panic but also bad at mathematics, would jump and lose track of his reasoning: 'There are 167 on the list, and twenty of them are exempted, so given that the municipality has to supply twenty-five men and assuming there'll be ten discharged for various reasons, a number would become truly bad from twice that, so from fifty, which means there's one chance in ...'

Duchaussois was the first of the little group around the



coal stove to be called. Were he to draw an unlucky number, he would seek to rely on a document he had thought to have prepared by a public prosecutor of the Imperial Court in Paris who was a family friend, which referenced his position as an acting judge on the Seine Tribunal, a position he had occupied for three years without remuneration. He drew a 10, asserted his claim, and was exempted.

Portefaux was the next name to be called . . .

After hesitating for some minutes as he mumbled who knows what sort of incantation, the young man was called to order and pushed unceremoniously towards the urn for the draw. When he extracted the number from its casing, he started to weep with relief: 120.

‘You’ll be able to start your diet, you great lazy oaf,’ mocked the soldier, as he returned to cranking the handle of the drum.

At last, around midday, it was Auguste’s turn.

When his name was called, his face crumpled. His body felt like it weighed a tonne as he dragged himself to the urn, plunged in his hand, then yanked it out as if from boiling water.

‘A 4,’ he murmured, defeated.

‘Selected!’ cried the officer, before reeling off the relevant articles of the Code in an emotionless voice. ‘Monsieur, in view of your number and unless you qualify for discharge, your position in the contingent is hereby confirmed. The recruitment board shall make its announcement on 18 July, whereupon you may proffer such replacement as you may have identified from any *département* in the Empire. The

mayor shall inform you of the conditions of said replacement's acceptance, as well as any documents you may be called upon to produce. We are relying on your zeal in performing your duty, and remind you of the unfortunate consequences which shall befall both you and your family in the event of your failure to comply.'

Auguste remained frozen before the soldier, his eyes vacant, hands moist, mind adrift. Then another name was called and he was forced to move, shoved aside by the next person to draw. He left the town hall without acknowledging a soul; in any event, nobody would have welcomed his greetings, for now he was jinxed. Overcome, he headed home, where his father was waiting impatiently to know what action to take.

Despite his outwardly calm and confident demeanour, Casimir had always worried for his youngest son.

Once the boy had passed his baccalaureate, he had done his best to initiate him into the delights of public construction – there was no memory of any de Rigny having ever done anything else, at least since Colbert – but so vacant were Auguste's eyes on the occasion of his last site visit that Casimir had sadly concluded the boy was not at all suited to such matters. This was in stark contrast to his other son. Ferdinand, having adopted and made his own the extraordinary legal construct that was the public limited company – namely an ability to conduct business without any liability for its failures – had managed the remarkable feat of quadrupling his assets by the age of twenty-seven, while

taking like a duck to the troubled waters of awarding public contracts.

‘What’s to become of this boy and his unhealthy sensitivity?’ Casimir would often wonder if he happened to be pondering his son Auguste. ‘He seems incapable of imagining doing anything with himself.’

He saw only one explanation for the significant difference between his two children: whereas the eldest, Ferdinand, had developed both in strength and energy, the youngest had succumbed in quick succession to every conceivable illness from the day he was born – and, like every child wrestled from death, he had been far too spoiled by his mother.

Physically he belonged to that species of tall, thin types with a broad forehead and dead-straight blond locks that he flicked off his face. His large dark eyes shone like horse chestnuts, lending him a fanatical air, as if ravaged from within, with a slightly effeminate touch. He considered himself a philosopher or poet, or both, coming out with particularly infuriating inanities such as: ‘I’d love to learn a manual trade so I might help my fellow man, brother to brother.’ He would go around predicting that he would die at thirty-three, like Christ, which women found highly entertaining. His parents, much less so.

After turning family mealtimes into a great headache by declaring suddenly one day that he was adopting a Pythagorean diet, a regime spurning all animal flesh, his latest infatuation was socialism, or more precisely the writings of

a philosopher – a certain Marx – who was living in exile in England, about whom he would harp on endlessly at every opportunity. This most recent fad had disrupted the household's peace and quiet once and for all, with the two brothers constantly bickering, each time further testing the limits of acceptability. It had reached the point where Casimir had had to beg his sister Clothilde, who lived in Paris, to take Auguste in so as to remove him from Saint-Germain until he had had a chance to mature.

Clothilde herself was not without her failings.

For starters, her lodgings were not at all appropriately located for a woman living on her own. Instead of settling in an area such as the 16th, 8th or 7th arrondissement of the capital, Clothilde had purchased an apartment for an exorbitant price in Haussmann's new developments in the heart of the Grands Boulevards, surrounded by cafés and theatres. To make matters worse, she meddled in politics. A committed Republican and devotee of a certain Léon Gambetta, a young arrogant lawyer with a visceral dislike of the Emperor, she would loiter in courtrooms and clubs so she could listen to his speeches. And to complete the picture, she was single – *I wish to remain a free woman and not be a poor turkey under the guardianship of some halfwit who has assumed control of her money* – so, lacking a husband with whom Casimir might reasonably have been able to discuss the possibility of reining her in, and at the age of fifty-six, it was obviously too late. Notwithstanding these few imperfections and the fact she set a deplorable example for the women of the family, she remained nonetheless socially

acceptable. Unfortunately, the same could no longer be said of Auguste, who in addition to having transformed his home into a battlefield had managed to set himself in out-and-out opposition to his social peers.

An optimist by nature, Casimir had gambled on his sister's modernity to guide his young son gently towards a more moderate stance. What's more, they would each be looking out for the other, which could hardly hurt.

When Auguste appeared in the dining room looking all undone, dinner had already been served and the three men of the family – his father, his brother-in-law Jules and his older brother Ferdinand – were waiting for him before beginning.

'Well then?' asked Casimir, anxiously.

'Judging by the look on his face, I'd say he's drawn a bad number!' said Ferdinand in a mocking voice.

'You'll be pleased. I drew a 4,' replied Auguste with a sigh, before collapsing onto his chair.

His father reassured him.

'You mustn't worry for a moment, I had made provision, as I did for your brother, and had set aside the 2000 francs required by the state to pay for your exemption. But given this damnable law, and the fact we now have to go about finding you a replacement ourselves, I'll have ample means to pay a dealer to bring us a good one. I've already approached Kahn & Levy at Place Saint-Opportune, who reportedly have no shortage of men.'

'Was it in that rag published by your friend Tripier that you found your Jewish dealers in human flesh listed?' asked Auguste's brother-in-law, Jules.

‘Between an advertisement for the *Naudia measuring stick* and *Learning German made simple!*’ said Ferdinand, not to be outdone.

‘The *Assurance* is not a rag but a newspaper for decent family men. The recruiting board will convene on 18 July, which leaves us, all of us – and let me insist on this point, *all of us* – six short months to find a replacement for our dear Auguste.’

Casimir himself still harboured very unpleasant memories from the period that had preceded the ballot of his own class. He had been left in a state of uncertainty right up to the eleventh hour, after a quarrel with his mother led her to punish him by steadfastly refusing to pay for a replacement for him in the event he drew a bad number. It still made him anxious to remember the day, twenty-three years earlier, when, in that same town hall, he had plunged a trembling hand into the urn. Fortunately, fate had smiled upon him and he had drawn a good number. He would not have to head off. And the events of 1848 only served to underline his relief. ‘I felt the wind of the cannonball in my hair,’ he was wont to recall. So there was no question of having his sons suffer that same dreadful experience, especially Auguste, who, given his feeble constitution, would struggle more than most with life in the barracks.

‘With the Prussians bearing down on us like a locomotive, I suspect prices will climb and your measly 2000 francs will do little to attract the dealers as you would hope. Believe you me, we shall have our work cut out,’ pointed

out brother-in-law Jules, who knew a thing or two about conscription, having squandered a third of his existence wallowing in the dreary routine of garrison life.

‘There’s no doubt that with the rumours of war, those hustlers are set to earn more buying and selling men than trading livestock,’ agreed Ferdinand, his mouth full.

Despite feeling everybody’s eyes focused upon him, Auguste stared at his plate as if into an abyss. His father placed a reassuring hand on his forearm and said, gently:

‘Do you think we’re not mindful of what’s troubling you? Military replacements are a good thing precisely because they help to restore the very social equity of which you’re so fond. It causes money to fall from the hands of those who have it into the empty hands of those who have none, to ensure, at the end of the day, that the army is supplied with a good soldier rather than a poor-quality one. Don’t listen to the foolish notions planted in your head by those socialists whose company you keep. By removing them from the foul air of their workplace, and by relieving them of their bad food, military service offers nothing but benefits to the proletariat, whereas it serves only to compromise the health of the sons of the bourgeoisie and ruin their careers. This inequality you’re constantly talking to us about is found precisely in the absurd notion of universal service.’

Ferdinand intervened.

‘There is a much easier way to explain all of this to my dear brother: any proletarian worker with a true job will never be used as a replacement. It’s only ever an issue for a labourer who has no work and who, by definition,

constitutes a menace. There's no need to delve any further into the whys or wherefores: it's a simple matter of rounding up the riff-raff and confining them to the garrisons in order to stave off chaos! Isn't that right ... Auguste ...'

And conscious of his son's despondency, Casimir finished on a gentle note, as if conversing with an invalid:

'Tell yourself it's *time* we're buying, not a man ...'

'Time to refine your grand leftist theories, which one day are sure to benefit society,' came Ferdinand's merciless mockery, prompting mad laughter from brother-in-law Jules, who, desperately struggling to contain himself, narrowly avoided spitting his soup onto the tablecloth.

'In the barracks, they'll begrudge Auguste his education and scorn him for his qualities!' said his father, losing his temper.

'His qualities? What qualities?' said his brother, pretending to call for a response from around the table.

And then suddenly, as if struck by lightning, Casimir started:

'But of course!' he cried. 'How did I not think of it sooner? Why not ask the young Perret lad to replace you? It may well be that he drew a favourable number. And to think we're preparing to send people off on a hunt to the other side of the country when the solution may well be here, right under our very noses! Adèle ... Adèle ...'

He beat the floor with his walking stick as he shouted for the maid:

'Adèle! Adèle, in the name of God!'

'Yes, Monsieur ...'

'Adèle, where's the gardener?'



Auguste, who until then had remained silent, suddenly struck the table with his fist, causing everyone present to jump.

‘That’s enough. It’s abominable! Perret’s boy will not be sent in my place! I will never agree to it! His poor family will not pay that bloody impost when we have the means to buy ourselves out of it for the cost of an annual subscription to a box at the Opera.’

‘Aaaaaaaah, here we go!’ groaned his brother.

And calling the other two as his witnesses, he said:

‘The moment has finally arrived when he gets to lecture us on the topic of human misery!’

Then, grabbing the ladle to fill Auguste’s plate to overflowing, Ferdinand said:

‘Here, have a little more of this excellent soup so you can take your time telling us about all these poor people, because after all there’s nothing better than a handsome table bedecked with flowers and silverware to bring out socialist sentiments. Come on, get on with it, we’re all ears! Tell us, for example, about your friends from the Café du Madrid ... Or – now what is he called again? That shameful Jew who seems to have scribbled some sort of treatise on the right to steal? – Marx, is that it? Go on, tell us a bit about your Monsieur Marx!’

Infuriated, Auguste left the table immediately, fists clenched, his mouth full of all the abominable insults he would so dearly have loved to spit in his brother’s face, but he contained himself out of respect for his father, who he felt had already put up with enough for one day.

He could still hear his brother shouting as he fled to his room.

‘—And you just sit there without saying a word. “I love the people,” he cries, the fool . . . Instead of letting him get away with everything and leaving him in the care of that lunatic Aunt Clothilde, you should be putting your foot down! Because when he gets it into his head to go and enlighten the hoi polloi about the principles of Goodness, Truth and Beauty, and he’s brought back to you in pieces from Paris on some oxcart, everybody here will be weeping – everybody except me! And anyway, I’ve had enough of eating this peasant’s food when Monsieur does us the honour of turning up!’

And with that, Ferdinand set the cutlery dancing across the cloth and left the table.

Jules observed his plate somewhat sceptically.

‘It’s true that without any bacon this soup is not very tasty!’

Hastily gathering together the few things he had brought with him, the young man hurried out of the house so as not to miss the train that would take him back to Paris. But arriving at the station and seeing the crowds gathered at the roundhouse, he realised many people had taken advantage of the sunny weather to head out to the snowy countryside. As a result, he was unlikely to find a seat in first class for his return journey, nor even one in second. That left third, even though he did not have enough layers to join the clerks and workers in the open carriage.

There, gathered in that railway station – built, not without irony, by Casimir de Rigny himself – was a micro-cosm of French society. A woman in clogs, burdened with a brood of grubby children, was rubbing shoulders with a *grande dame* flanked by her maid and doll-like offspring, all heading home from an outing. A respectable husband from Saint-Germain-en-Laye, off to the capital to breach the conjugal monotony, offered his seat to a young dancer from the Opéra Comique who was on her way back to her aged patron. A host of aspiring millionaires and young artists, loaded up with masterpieces, crossed paths at the station with their down-at-heel counterparts heading home and cursing Paris. There were thieves about too, one eye on that handbag somebody had forgotten to watch, the other on a wallet poking out.

All these social theatrics were a world away from Auguste's preoccupations; in his mind, he was already dead, absurdly alone, his body impaled on a Prussian bayonet in the middle of a field.

No sooner had the carriage doors opened than the compartments were stormed. The young man, having purchased his ticket at the last minute, ended up in the third-class carriage, precisely as he had anticipated. He began his journey jammed between two stocky workers stinking of sweat, who were greatly amused by their proximity to this young, sweet-scented chap. Upon arrival in Pecq, people took pity on him, seeing as he was blue with cold, and he was shoved into the second-class carriage. There he was able to warm himself up, drowning in

a gaggle of young women being scolded by their mothers. They were returning from an arranged rendezvous with attractive potential Saint-Germain-en-Laye suitors, but despite the photographs sent in advance, the train tickets, the money spent on outfits and ribbons, no understanding had been reached. 'No, truly, you simply make no effort at all!' railed their mothers. The young ladies were not listening, content to giggle as they pretended not to eye Auguste all the way back to Gare Saint-Lazare.

FROM THE MINUTE I BOARDED the TGV, I had the shits with everything.

I don't like having people in my space, so I never sit in my allocated seat. I can't stand my legs touching my neighbour's, not to mention having to do battle over the armrest. I prefer the flip seats near the doors, even if you rarely get any peace there because the space is often crammed with idiots letting rip or old people who, having just got on, are busy phoning to say they're on their way – *I can't hear you anymore, can you hear me? Hello?*

That day it was four girls who looked like they'd stepped straight out of a rap video, taking selfies from every possible angle. Curious, I checked out #TGVParis-Brest on Instagram to see how they'd glorified themselves, and to see what attributes they'd unveiled to the grand twenty-first-century fairground of seduction. But there, amid those images of curvy booty and pouting, swollen lips ready for every sort of stimulation imaginable, somebody – without my realising – had taken a photo of me looking on, and posted it.

There I was, in my black mini dress with pockets, my bomber jacket, my legs fitted out with their orthoses and my little heeled ankle boots, lost in a cloud of rainbow-coloured parrots. The total casting error. Emily the Strange invited to the hos' birthday party.

And to top it all off, I was pulling one of those faces ...

I've got to say, I wasn't feeling at the top of my game. I'd just been put on compulsory sick leave because I'd narrowly avoided being sliced in two, width-wise, by the doors of a metro train and, to make matters worse, I was on my way to the ultimate bore of a destination, namely my father's eighty-fifth birthday.

And the trip was a long way from over: once I'd made it to Brest, I would still have an hour by bus and an hour and a half by boat over wild seas to go. And since I knew that as soon as I arrived I'd just be in the way, you can imagine my enthusiasm.

I knew the script by heart: once I was there, my father would pretend to be happy to see me, then, after the customary banalities – *Did you eat anything on the train? Were there a lot of people on the boat? When are you leaving again?* – he'd have nothing more to say to me. I'd be all, *And you? How are things with you?* knowing all the while that I'd be opening the floodgate to a litany of grievances. Granny Soize calls it *the kaleidoscopic whinge*: sentences which, when taken in isolation and uttered in a neutral tone, sound purely informative – *You know, I was at the doctor ... When I eat in the morning, I get vertigo ... You remember Dédé, they're going to cut off his hands and feet because of his diabetes* – and yet when they're all gathered together produce a terrifying pattern of the fate about to befall him. He swivels it a bit, and wham! everything gets rearranged and off we go again. The most awful thing is, it never stops.

It was raining at Brest, just for a change. A biblical horizontal rain driven by the wind from the open sea that whips you in the face as soon as you step off the train. It was then that I noticed them for the first time, the three Parisians, there on the platform. It must be said they were the only thing you noticed, standing there in their pretty little shower-proof raincoats in an attempt to ward off the torrents of water. Two hirsute hipsters, one of whom was wearing glasses, as well as a fairly plain, tall girl with long, glossy hair.

I limped to the bus station as quickly as I could and climbed into the bus, which stank of wet dog. And then every oldie on board fell all over me. *What a long time it's been! You're as white as a baby's bottom, aren't you! And what about your daughter, where is she? Blah, blah, blah ...* Fortunately, in this part of the world, it's only one kiss you cop, not four, because I had to make my way down the whole aisle. The door shutting in the faces of the three dripping Parisians was met with general indifference, seeing as the bus was intended primarily for those from the island who were heading home.

Once we arrived at the port, everybody got off in a single movement and rushed to the ferry terminal to wait out of the rain until we were able to embark.

My old friend Tiphaine was there, sitting on a bench, busy yelling at her children to stop mucking about with the coffee dispenser. It was only when I saw how tall her youngest was that I realised it had been eons since I'd been back

to see my father. All I remembered was a little infant where now there was a little girl with curls piled on top of her head standing firmly on her own two feet and staring at me as I interposed myself between her and her mother.

I kissed my friend, embracing her generous, full body in a hug, and was struck with a flash of realisation that I had been missing my island.

Generally speaking, when you see old friends after a long separation, you tend to feel a little uncomfortable, as if prisoner of a bond that isn't always easy to reignite, but that's never the case with people from around here. I think it's because our families have been split in two for centuries, the men at sea either in the Navy or the Merchant Marine, and the women left behind ashore looking after the children. Living on the island then meant we developed a special gift for communicating with those who were absent.

So, after merely wondering where I had left off in the great ongoing drama that was the island ... Was it before they rebuilt the cemetery wall or after the Spar supermarket had closed down? ... she just said, 'Oh, right, yeah. It really is quite a while since you've been back!'

The weight of time that had passed since my previous visit required Tiphaine to address the basics: who had died, who was having an affair with whom, who had drowned, who had been evacuated by helicopter – so many tragedies for such a small place – she might have been accused of over-egging the number of dramatic incidents, but no. It really is like that around here; terrible stuff happens all the time!



We all made our way on board in the pouring rain, including the three tourists, who arrived by taxi in a state of chaos.

I headed straight for the bow of the boat and stretched out on a row of four seats, eyes closed, head resting on a sweater. Yes, I get seasick. I've tried everything: pharmaceuticals, hypnosis, simulator, even the thing where you take a nap under an apple tree; all of which is to say, I have fought it, but my body, not content with being a fractious, recalcitrant hack, has assigned me to shore duty.

The Parisians were sitting a few metres away from where I had lain down and, as I had nothing else to do on the crossing but listen to them, I allowed myself to be soothed by their conversation.

I worked out that they were a couple who had brought along their friend, the bespectacled hipster, in an attempt to take his mind off things. The tall, plain girl had concocted an itinerary, which she spelled out item by item, pointing out the places to visit on a map of the island. Somebody had died: it seemed to have been the girlfriend of glasses-man, because he was talking angrily about the father of his late sweetheart – a conservative member of parliament whom he called *the Super Prick* – and about his attitude at the funeral. It seems he had used the ceremony as he would a garden party, making his way from group to group, flanked by a waiter who was handing out glasses of champagne, trying to extricate himself and his son from the morass of their legal difficulties. Then there was talk of an earthquake in Nepal. They mentioned towns I'd never heard of. While the couple, who appeared to be involved in humanitarian work, were talking about

a sanitation disaster, the one who had lost his girlfriend bitterly quoted the law of deaths to kilometres: the further away the event, the more victims are required in order to stir the interest of a minimum number of people. Nobody had given a shit about the earthquake in Nepal with its hundreds of victims – his chick among them – crushed under tonnes of rocks.

For whatever reason, I fell asleep with two lines of Philippe Muray's 'Tomb for an Innocent Tourist' ringing in my head:

*There's nothing so beautiful as a blonde tourist  
Right before her head falls off in the jungle.*

My father had sent his mate Fañch in his Renault 14 to fetch me from the boat. Fañch threw my bag into the back and hardly had I plonked myself down in the passenger seat before he started giving me grief.

'You know, he's old, your father, he won't be having too many more birthdays, you have to come more often, otherwise one day you'll regret it . . . And when you do come, stay for longer and bring your daughter with you . . .'

It's crazy the way this community tries to slip leg irons on you every time you come home, I thought to myself.

'He told you he was missing me, is that it?' I gave it right back to him. He grumbled something in reply, his florid drunkard's conk buried deep in the fur of his spaniel, who was perched between him and the steering wheel. And then he was silent.

It must be said that everybody has an opinion on what we shall call *the topic of Blanche* on this pebble of an island, where everybody feels responsible for everyone else's kids, if only because in that environment, shut off from the rest of the world, they all grow up right under your nose, so nobody is indifferent to *the topic of Blanche*.

There's one in every generation in a closed-off community, the one who's a pain in the neck. The sort of ratbag who's always involved in the latest scandal. Whenever a holiday house is broken into or a car set alight . . . Whenever lobsters disappear from the traps or the jetty walls are tagged in high season with filthy comments attacking tourists . . . To put it bluntly, for the generation of those born in the '80s, that historical pain in the arse was me: Blanche de Rigny.

There was the time I ran away, of course, when after yet another fight with my father he wanted to stick me in a boarding school on the mainland before I'd finished middle school. Three days of searching. National rescue helicopters circling the coastline of the island. Every vessel out in the water, right down to the smallest dinghy, carrying out a meticulous search for my body at the foot of the cliffs when, at age thirteen, I had left to try to make a living on the streets of Paris. Already.

Better still, even before all of that, there was my birth.

It happened in the middle of a gale, like every other time there's a drama on this fucking island. My father was at sea off the coast of Africa when my mother started haemorrhaging, and seeing as it's impossible to fly a

helicopter in a 50-knot wind, the lifeguards had to ferry her to the mainland by boat. Obviously I had not been born yet, but I've been told the story so many times I can see myself standing between the legs of the sailors' wives, watching the orange and green lifeboat that would take her to hospital slip down its rails and into the water. Not one of the guys from the national lifeguards hesitated, so the story goes; their wives were weeping because there were walls of water and they feared they'd never see their husbands alive again. During the crossing my mother bled out in front of the powerless men. She was dead on arrival, but me, seriously preemie at only six months, I survived. One of the lifeguards registered my birth at the Brest town hall, and, keen not to make a faux pas, gave me my mother's first name: Blanche. They also say that when, some days later, my father returned for the funeral, the lifeguards all went to greet him as he came off the boat, looking as devastated as if it were their fault. They were the ones who carried the coffin in their orange uniform. The church was so full the priest had to leave the front door open. The latest installment in this drama on the high seas saw the island banding together around the widower, the father of the tiny little girl battling in an incubator all alone on the mainland.

Thinking back on it, perhaps that's the reason I get seasick.

After the funeral, Pater departed quick smart for one of his longest tours at sea, entrusting me to his aunt, Granny Soize, the woman who brought me up and who took care of my every need on a daily basis. He only took his retirement

from the Merchant Marine super-grudgingly when all that remained for an old guy like him was the fitting out of rust-buckets filled with Filipinos.

I was twelve years old by the time he started living with us full-time and it goes without saying he was entirely unwelcome, his unsavoury machismo misfiring completely after his lifelong absence.

Every place prompts its own particular set of destinies, so prior to my escape I must have subconsciously sensed that I had to get the hell away from that island and its constant dramas at all costs before I suffered my own calamity, *in personam* . . . And I wasn't wrong about that.

It's a pretty banal story when all's said and done, and as you'd expect, entirely typical of the island, for anybody in the know . . . We were taking advantage of the fact that the police hadn't yet arrived for the summer season by indulging in one of our favourite pastimes as idle youth, namely taking one of the cars parked at the wharf for a joy-ride. The keys were always left hanging in the ignition, and we were hammered and had no licence. Here we go, guys! We're outta here . . . I was with some guys and girls from the camping ground, not kids from the island, otherwise it would never have played out the way it did.

I was sitting in – or, rather, I was squashed into – the backseat, unfortunately too pissed to realise that the idiot who was driving was taking the coast road.

He simply didn't see that the earth stopped there. *Finis terrae*. Boom, over the cliff. The two guys in the front were crushed to death and the girl next to me burnt alive,

because she had been sensible enough to put on her belt and got stuck. Seeing as I've never been sensible about anything, I flew through the rear window when the car rolled and broke my spine.

*She had been dead now for four days and I had become rich.  
Unimaginably rich.*

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