English sample translation

by **Sam Taylor** for

*Célestine du bac*

by

Tatiana de Rosnay

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Foreign Rights : benita.edzard@robert-laffont.com

It had been hot all day. The sky was dark gray and oppressively low. Martin walked home along Rue du Bac, with Germinal on a leash. He thought about the previous evening’s meal at the Chinese restaurant, about the moment when his father had proudly announced that he was getting engaged.

Engaged at fifty! It had taken a massive effort of will for Martin not to burst out laughing.

Victor Dujeu had stared philosophically at his Bananas Foster.

‘I have to get on with my life. It’s been sixteen years since Kerstin died.’

Martin had always hated hearing his father say his mother’s name. Victor Dujeu pronounced it the Swedish way – ‘Shairshteen’ – and not ‘Kristeen’, like most French people did. ‘Shairshteen’ sounded too soft, too intimate, and Martin didn’t like seeing his father’s lips pursing as he said it, as if he were blowing a kiss.

Victor Dujeu sighed. ‘I don’t like being alone, you see.’

But he hardly ever had been, thought Martin. For the past 15 years there had been a steady procession of women through the apartment on Rue de Babylone. Martin had never paid much attention to these women, treating them all – one-night stands, week-long flings, or girlfriends for a year – with the same discreet but unchanging contempt.

‘So I imagine you’ll be marrying the latest one?’

Victor Dujeu was so happy to hear his son speak at last that he decided to ignore the sarcasm.

‘Yes, I’m going to marry Alexandra.’

‘Ah…’ said Martin in a flat voice. ‘You should eat your banana. The flames went out a while ago. It’s probably cold by now.’

Victor Dujeu stiffened slightly. Then, resigned to his son’s evident lack of interest in his wedding plans, he leaned down to eat his dessert in silence. The lukewarm banana was floating in a cold puddle of sweet fat.

A pretty woman in her early thirties with long legs and greenish-blue eyes, Alexandra Chamard fully reciprocated Martin’s feelings of contempt. When she moved to Rue de Babylone, her strong perfume permeating every room in the apartment, the young man had no choice but to accept it. His father’s previous mistresses had seemed more discreet. This one displayed herself in an unpleasantly ostentatious way, parading half-naked through the apartment, back arched and chest puffed out, listening to Wagner operas at ear-splitting volume, and bursting uninvited into his bedroom – a place where even his father didn’t dare venture.

One day, while he was writing, she came in without knocking, then looked at the photograph of Kerstin on his bedside table.

‘It’s amazing how much you look like your mother! Take off your glasses, let me see…’

Hoping she would leave as soon as possible, Martin didn’t move a muscle. So she removed his glasses herself.

‘Incredible! You’ve got the exact same face, except for your nose.’

He tried vainly to retrieve his glasses. Without them everything went dim and he could make out only the vaguest shapes.

Laughing mischievously, she hid the glasses under his pillow. ‘Good luck finding them!’

He waited until she had left his room then groped his way to his desk and pulled out one of the drawers. Inside were three identical pairs of glasses. He had learned at a very young age that someone with his eyesight problems could not rely on a single pair. Whistling, he sat down at his desk.

As Alexandra reached the end of the corridor, she heard the clatter of typewriter keys and froze. Then she shrugged and continued on her way.

A raindrop fell on Martin’s nose, another on his ear. The other pedestrians were starting to walk more quickly. Umbrellas were opening.

‘It’s raining, Germinal,’ Martin told his dog.

The beagle turned around and stared at him with sparkling black eyes.

‘What should we do? Run to the house and risk getting soaked or find some shelter and wait for it to pass?’

Shelter, Germinal seemed to reply.

‘I think so too,’ said Martin.

He headed toward a half-open carriage door. The rain was coming down hard now, pattering against the dusty asphalt and the gleaming roofs of cars. The porch was quite deep and offered ample protection, and Martin was fully prepared to wait out the storm until a truly foul smell stung his nostrils – a mix of wine, sweat, urine and stale tobacco.

Before he’d had time to work out the source of this stench, a woman’s gravelly voice assailed him: ‘Hey, get out of here, you big dweeb – and take your mutt with you! This is my home. Go on, beat it!’

Surprised, Martin peered through the darkness at the door and spotted what appeared to be a heap of rags.

The smell grew sharper and he made out two knobbly knees, dark with grime, a head of graying, tangled hair, and a long sad face marked by deep wrinkles, a sour-shaped mouth and blackened teeth.

‘Are you deaf or what? I told you to clear off! This is my place.’

‘Madame, please accept my apologies,’ Martin replied politely. ‘I didn’t realize this was your home.’

He pulled hard at Germinal’s leash but the dog was avidly sniffing this interesting new odor.

‘Take a hike, buddy!’

‘I am trying to do exactly that, madame.’

He yanked the dog away and jumped out into the rain, then turned back to contemplate the strange creature half-hidden by the door, sitting on a scrap of cardboard. Beside her was an old basket stuffed to the brim with belongings. Those that could be seen poking out the top included the green neck of a wine bottle, some crumpled newspapers, empty tin cans and patched clothing. The woman, who was very thin, was wrapped in a tattered raincoat and had a cigarette between her lips. She was writing furiously in a notebook, as if on a deadline, and was so concentrated on what she was doing that she was no longer aware of Martin or his dog. Fascinated, he watched her while rainwater dripped off the end of his nose.

Meanwhile, Germinal was straining at his leash, eager to get home to his dinner and his bed. Regretfully, Martin ended up following the dog along the deserted Rue du Bac.

He invariably found her in the same place – in the porch behind the carriage door of what looked, at first glance, like a derelict building – on the corner of Rue de Varenne. Sometimes she would pace the sidewalk, scowling, arms crossed, a cigarette butt dangling from her mouth. She would insult any passers-by who didn’t give her money or who refused to look at her. She would rage at them, brandishing her fists like a boxer warming up for a fight. He had also seen her lying stretched out on her cardboard mattress, eyes closed and palms upturned.

The man who ran the fruit and vegetable store across the road told Martin that the woman had been living there for quite a while. Occasionally the police would take her away and you wouldn’t see her for a few days, but she always came back. She wasn’t really a problem, the vegetable guy said, except when she lost her temper.

Martin had never noticed her before even though he walked along this section of Rue du Bac several times a day on his way to and from high school. Why hadn’t he seen her, when she was constantly there, come rain or shine? He mentioned her to his friend Oscar, who laughed and said: ‘Dujeu, you’re such a space cadet! I could beg outside your door dressed in a garbage bag for a month and you’d never notice.’

A short, chubby, curly-haired boy, Oscar loved women with a precocious and all-consuming passion. Even though he and Martin had no interests in common, they had been close friends ever since kindergarten. Oscar felt a secret respect for this pale, reserved young man.

‘One day, Martin Dujeu will be famous,’ he told his sister Delphine.

‘The albino beanpole?’ she snickered. ‘Yeah, in a circus maybe!’

‘He’s not albino, he’s blond.’

‘White!’

Oscar just shrugged. Delphine was still pretty young and immature.

‘You’ll see. He’s going to be a famous author someday.’

Martin had been writing a novel for the past two years, and Oscar was the only person who knew about it.

What was that woman writing? Growing ever more intrigued, Martin would often take a detour on Rue du Bac in order to get a better look at her. Sometimes she spied on him; he would see her dark eyes glistening behind the door but as soon as he came close she would pretend not to have noticed, even turning her back on him.

He got into the habit of calling out ‘Hello, madame’ when he saw her.

She never replied.

Then one afternoon, on his way home from school, she got to her feet as she saw him arriving, uncoiling like a snake before standing straight-backed on her thin, dirty legs. He realized she was almost as tall as he was. Martin rarely noticed people’s heights since, from his vantage point, they all appeared so small. She had to be at least six feet tall. And how old was she? Impossible to tell. He guessed she was somewhere between 60 and 75.

He had the impression she was waiting for him as she stood there, hands on hips, head proudly raised. Moving closer, he had time to observe her lined, leathery face. Her long, filthy hair hung yellowish-gray down her back.

He wondered if this woman had once been pretty. If she had, then all her beauty had certainly now fled. Her hooked, beaklike nose couldn’t have been particularly attractive even when she was young, but the gauntness of her face now only emphasized it. A witch’s nose, thought Martin. And yet she possessed an undeniable magnetism, concentrated in her steady gaze and those pitch-black pupils.

A few feet away from her, he called out his usual: ‘Hello, madame.’

She took a step toward him, chin lifted.

‘What do you want from me, kid? Instead of all your hello-madames, why don’t you give me some money? Eh? You’ve obviously never gone hungry in your life. Look at you – you’re well-fed, neat and clean… I bet you sleep in a nice, cozy bed every night, don’t you? Have you seen mine?’

She laughed like a hyena.

‘Very well,’ said Martin, taking a 100-franc bill from his pocket. ‘Here you go.’

Her eyes widened.

‘What, are you crazy?’

She grabbed the bill with a desperate lunge then held it in front of her eyes and rubbed it.

‘It’s not fake, is it? You’d better not be playing a trick on me, you little bastard. I’ve fallen for that one before.’

‘Madame, I’m hurt. Good evening to you.’

He walked away, sensing her astonished gaze on his back.

‘You shouldn’t have done that,’ said the vegetable guy.

‘Why?’

‘Because whatever cash she gets, she spends on booze. And the more she drinks, the more she loses her dignity. Look, there she goes now, in search of her fix!’

She trudged wearily across the road, carrying her basket, and Martin noticed she was barefoot. She entered the grocery store then re-emerged a minute later already drinking from the bottle. She sat on her cardboard bed and abandoned herself to the flood of wine with the same contentment and pleasure as a baby sucking down formula.

Helpless and saddened, Martin watched her sink into oblivion.

**2**

**‘Shairshteen’**

The following Tuesday, Martin surprised his father by actually saying something during their ritual dinner at the Mandarin de Jade.

‘Father, have you noticed the lady who’s always on Rue du Bac, opposite the fruit and vegetable store?’

Victor Dujeu, startled, wondered if his son was using ‘lady’ as a euphemism.

‘A whore, you mean?’

Martin blushed, exactly like Kerstin used to do: cheeks turning scarlet, ears mauve. Once again, faced with the legacy she had left in the form of her son’s face, Victor Dujeu felt the familiar pang of grief, barely diminished by the intervening years.

Martin understood the half-irritated, half-saddened look in his father’s eyes, but he shook it off and returned to his question.

‘No, I’m talking about a homeless woman.’

‘Oh, the old bat who insults everyone, the one who looks like a witch? She’s been there a long time. She’s part of the neighborhood now.’

‘Have you noticed she keeps writing in an old notebook?’

‘No. Why are you talking about her?’

Martin slumped forward, shoulders hunched, and returned to his usual lethargic state.

‘Never mind,’ he sighed drowsily.

Martin couldn’t help being mad at his father for remarrying, for trying to replace his mother with another woman. Despite everything, he was aware that his father had suffered badly when his young wife was killed and that there’d been a certain bitterness about him ever since.

Her death had made headlines at the time, and the newspapers had harped on the fact that the body of Kerstin Dujeu, wife of the brilliant lawyer Victor Dujeu, had never been discovered. Nothing remained of her but her purse and her suitcase, filled with Christmas presents for her family, which had been found at the crash site.

It was horrible, Victor thought, never to have been able to look at his dead wife (an unpleasant but necessary sight), never to have buried her body or said his final goodbye at her graveside. Since he had only ever seen Kerstin alive, he found it hard to believe that she was really dead, even after sixteen years. Kerstin would be thirty-eight now, not much older than Alexandra, his future wife.

Victor Dujeu didn’t really want to marry again. But Alexandra was a skilled manipulator who had persuaded him that he shouldn’t be alone anymore, that he had been alone too long. After listening to her, he had to admit that the apartment, with its long corridors and its dark wood paneling, often seemed empty to him. And the sluggishness (whether studied or natural) of his son, who spoke more often to his dog than to his own father, did nothing to brighten the place up.

Victor Dujeu was bored, and Alexandra Chamard, with her inexhaustible supply of subterfuges, understood how to alleviate the lawyer’s ennui. In the end, it hadn’t been hard, convincing him to finally say yes.

Martin had no memory of the accident that had killed his mother. He had grown up with the recollection of a cheerful blond woman and he’d realized from a young age that he was her spitting image. He’d learned not to take off his glasses in front of his father, because that always made him sad. Martin didn’t talk much or laugh much or enjoy himself much because he knew that his mother had been blessed with an extraordinary joie de vivre.

From a young age, too, he had been angry with his mother for abandoning him, because there was nobody to pick him up on Avenue de la Bourdonnais after school apart from the nanny or his father’s chauffeur. No mommy. ‘Mommy.’ He thought there was something magical about that word. He heard it from the mouths of little boys in his class as they ran toward the crowd of women that gathered every day at half past four, all those smiling mothers with their open arms and their cakes and cookies. How would his mother have looked amid that throng of scents, tenderness and laughter?

At nineteen, Kerstin Sandstrom had arrived in Paris to work as an au pair and learn French. She’d gone to the Alliance Française on Boulevard Raspail, and they had sent her to a Mme Henri Dujeu on Rue Lecourbe in the 15th arrondissement. This lady had three young children and a large, light-filled apartment with a welcoming atmosphere that the Swedish girl immediately loved. This was Kerstin’s first time outside her hometown of Ornskoldsvik, on the Gulf of Bothnia. Instantly won over by the young Swede’s kindness and dynamism, Mathilde Dujeu hired her on the spot. Kerstin started work that very evening. She slept in a small bedroom on the sixth floor, overlooking the rooftops of Paris. In the mornings she took French classes on Boulevard Raspail; in the afternoons she looked after the children.

Henri Dujeu was a pediatrician and he had a younger brother who was already making a reputation for himself as a brilliant lawyer. From time to time Victor would come for dinner at the apartment on Rue Lecourbe, always in the company of a young woman, though rarely the same one – a source of endless fascination to Kerstin’s employers.

‘So who will it be tonight, do you think? The Basque girl with the large breasts, the beautician from Sartrouville, the aristocrat from Boulevard Suchet, or the forty-something widow in search of her latest toy-boy?’

Victor’s conquests were many and varied. Six-year-old Quentin Dujeu decided he would do the same thing when he was older. ‘That way, I’ll never be bored,’ he told his mother.

On this particular evening, Victor was accompanied by a Stéphanie in too much make-up. Kerstin was still in the apartment because she was expecting a phone call from her mother. She rarely dined with the family, preferring to eat her evening meal at six o’clock, Scandinavian-style. By eight, she was usually in her bedroom doing her French homework.

From the living room, Victor could see into the entrance hall and he caught a glimpse of thick, luxuriant platinum hair, a pair of pretty shoulders under a pink short-sleeved shirt. Leaning forward, he discovered a slender waist widening into a nice pair of hips. Surprised, he walked over.

The girl was talking on the phone in an incomprehensible language. The sound of it was somewhat coarse but not without charm. When he saw her face, though, Victor was amazed. She looked like angel: opaline skin, a round pink mouth, and blue eyes with lashes so blond that it was hard to make out more than a sort of golden flutter. His gaze roamed down her long, muscular legs to the slightly thick ankles. An athlete’s legs, he thought, fascinated.

What was this extraordinary creature doing at his brother’s apartment?

Aware of being watched, Kerstin turned. She ended her conversation, hung up the phone and looked at Victor. He lost himself then in a captivating blue gaze that, despite its fixity and focus, seemed to be struggling to bring him into focus. Kerstin put on a pair of thick-lensed glasses that did not diminish her beauty.

‘Sorry,’ she said, smiling and holding out her hand, ‘I couldn’t see you. I’m very nearsighted. My name is Kerstin Sandstrom.’

‘Shairshteen’. A sound that caressed his ears.

She had quite a strong Swedish accent and she couldn’t pronounce her Js. When she said ‘*je*’, it sounded like ‘*yuh*’.

Before Victor could introduce himself, his brother came into the entrance hall.

‘Your girlfriend’s alone in the living room,’ he announced.

‘Coming,’ muttered Victor, although he didn’t stop staring at Kerstin.

‘This is Kerstin,’ said Henri.

‘Kerstin?’

‘The au pair. She looks after the children.’

Henri looked at her and gestured discreetly at the ceiling. Kerstin understood instantly what he meant.

‘I’m going up now. Good night, Monsieur Duyeu.’

She turned to Victor and hesitated.

‘Good night, monsieur…’

‘My name is “Duyeu” too,’ Victor replied with a smile. ‘And I’m charmed to make your acquaintance.’

‘Good night!’

She flew off and the door banged shut.

‘For God’s sake, Victor,’ hissed Henri. ‘She’s the au pair!’

‘Maybe she could au pair for me too?’

Henri rolled his eyes.

‘And what about the girl you brought with you tonight?’

Victor froze.

‘Oh, God! What was her name again?’

‘Have you noticed,’ Mathilde Dujeu asked her husband, ‘that Victor has been coming to dinner more often in the past month? And the strangest thing is that he comes on his own.’

‘There’s nothing strange about that,’ Henri grumbled. ‘He’s in love with Kerstin.’

Mathilde did not seem too surprised by this. ‘Ah, good choice. She’s a lovely girl.’

‘She’s twelve years younger than him, she’s not from here, and she speaks really bad French!’

‘All the same, she’s very charming.’

And Victor Dujeu was very charmed by her. At the age of 31, he was in love for the first time in his life. Each time he ate dinner at his brother’s apartment, he would go upstairs to the sixth floor when the meal was over and knock at Kerstin’s door.

The first time this happened, she looked unfazed.

‘Ah, it’s you. Come in.’

He found himself in a tiny, tidy attic room. She offered him a cup of coffee poured from a Thermos flask. They talked until late that night, about her homesickness for Sweden, her impressions of France and the people of Paris, and the classes she was taking at the Alliance Française. Victor discovered that she had a great sense of humor. She laughed a lot. Around two in the morning, she finally kicked him out.

‘You can come back,’ she said as she closed the door.

After that, their nocturnal meetings were all Victor lived for. He didn’t care that they took place right under Mathilde and Henri’s noses. And, despite having never felt shy around women before, he realized that he didn’t dare make a move, didn’t dare touch her. He just listened to her talk and laugh for hours, enchanted.

On his fifth visit, around midnight, she took off her glasses.

‘Are you ever going to kiss me, Victor Duyeu?’

He swallowed.

She smiled at him tenderly and moved closer.

‘I can see you’re not used to Swedish women.’

He shook his head, dumbstruck but captivated.

‘Where I come from, women often make the first move.’

He stared at her, speechless.

‘Just relax, go with the flow,’ she whispered.

She was sweet and tender, but also deft in a way that surprised him in such a young woman.

At dawn he silently slipped out of bed and got dressed. She slept spread out, face buried in her pillow. He watched her breathe, moved by her beauty, her narrow waist, her supple back, her long muscular legs. He tiptoed out of the room and went downstairs.

Outside, on Rue Lecourbe, he felt suddenly ill: his temples buzzed, his brain fogged over, and he was in such a daze that he had to stop walking. Then, as abruptly as it had come over him, his malaise ended. The fog lifted and he knew what he had to do. It seemed so right, so obvious. Inevitable.

He went back into the apartment building and pressed the button for the elevator, then stood fidgeting while he waited. The elevator only went up to the fifth floor, so he had to take the stairs to Kerstin’s room.

Lying in the warm sheets, Kerstin listened to the steady, obstinate pounding of the elevator’s mechanism on the other side of the wall, the noise growing louder as the cabin came nearer. Second floor, third, fourth, fifth… The sound of the door banging shut, then footsteps hurrying up the stairs.

She opened the door to him before he even knocked and stood there blonde and naked in the slanting light of morning.

‘Kerstin,’ he said breathlessly. ‘Kerstin, I love you!’

She put her arms around him, skillfully kicked the door shut, and hugged him tight.

‘In Swedish, Monsieur Duyeu, it’s *jag alskar dig*.’

‘Martin!’

Victor Dujeu’s voice, coming from the distant living room, had no trouble making itself heard in his son’s bedroom, at the other end of the long corridor.

Martin Dujeu pulled a face. His father sounded like he was in a bad mood.

‘Martin!’

He finally got out of bed, rubbed the sore spot that his glasses made on the bridge of his nose, and opened the door.

His father stood in the living room waiting for him. Alexandra was lying on the couch pretending to read *Le Monde*.

‘Sit down!’ Victor Dujeu barked at his son.

Martin obeyed.

‘I believe you were supposed to get the results of your baccalaureat today,’ his father said in a cold voice.

‘Yes, father.’

‘So are you going to tell me what they were, or would you prefer to keep this information to yourself? The fact that you didn’t call me at the office suggests that the latter scenario may be closer to the truth.’

‘I tried, but I couldn’t get ahold of you. They told me you were in court all day.’

‘I didn’t receive a message from you.’

‘I didn’t leave a message.’

‘You failed, didn’t you?’ hissed Victor Dujeu.

Martin turned away from the terrible anxiety that deformed his father’s face.

‘Yes, father.’

‘You failed the baccalaureat *again*, Martin?’

‘Yes, father.’

‘Stop repeating: “Yes, father”!’ Victor exploded. ‘Don’t you have anything else to say? You think it’s normal to fail your baccalaureat twice?’

‘I didn’t work hard enough.’

‘Oh, and now you realize that!’ his father yelled, face reddening.

Alexandra stood up, swayed over to the bar, poured a generous measure of whisky, and handed the glass to her fiancé.

Victor sat down, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and downed the whisky in a single gulp. Then he lit a cigarette and, in a calmer voice, said: ‘What grades did you get?’

‘Two out of twenty in history and geography. Two in physics, three in biology, five in math, fifteen in English, twenty in swimming.’

‘And philosophy?’

‘Eighteen.’

‘Eighteen in philosophy? What was the subject?’

‘“Is it possible to doubt everything?”’

Silence.

‘And you knew the answer?’

‘It seemed obvious.’

‘What did you write?’

Martin stared at his feet.

‘To my mind, this question has two meanings. The first is theoretical: is it possible to establish a fundamental sense of doubt in our knowledge? The second meaning is more practical: is it possible to live without certainty on a day-by-day basis?’

Another silence.

‘Whom did you quote?’

‘Montaigne, Spinoza, Descartes, Bachelard and Einstein.’

‘So was philosophy the only subject you revised for, or what?’

‘No, I didn’t revise for anything.’

With his poise and competence, Victor Dujeu had become one of the most astute and formidable lawyers in Paris. Only his son was capable of making him lose his composure like this.

‘Martin, for God’s sake, what do you *do* all day? Apart from walking your dog and seeing your friend Oscar, what do you actually do?’

Martin continued staring at the floor. He braced himself for the storm that he knew was coming. It lasted five minutes and culminated with the thunderous crack of a slap in the face before collapsing exhausted on the couch.

‘Get out of here!’ Victor yelped. ‘I don’t want to see you again tonight!’

Martin left the room and closed the door behind him. Back in his bedroom, he inserted a sheet of paper into his typewriter and, at the foot of the page, typed:

*289*.

**3**

**Clumsy Oaf**

The next day, Martin stopped outside the carriage door of the derelict building.

She was sitting there cross-legged, writing in her notebook.

‘Hello, madame.’

No reply.

‘I failed my baccalaureat for the second time.’

She looked up at him through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

‘You don’t look very bothered.’

‘My father is very bothered.’

‘Is he the jerk who smokes cigars and wears pink shirts?’

‘Yeah, that’s him,’ Martin smiled.

‘He thinks the sun shines out of his asshole, that one.’

She took a drag on her cigarette and stared at him again.

‘He looks rich.’

‘He is.’

‘So what does he do with all his money, your old man?’

‘No idea.’

She stubbed out her cigarette and stood up facing him, arms crossed. Then she moved closer.

‘I’m going to tell you something, kid.’

He smelled her foul breath and shuddered at the sight of those rotten teeth. But he was fascinated by her bright, alert gaze.

‘Those bourgeois bastards who are rolling in money, the ones who like to flash their cash in fancy department stores like Le Bon Marché… they never give me anything. Not a single centime! What do you think of that, Martin Dujeu?’

Astonished, he asked her how she knew his name.

‘I know everything, me! I’ve got all the time in the world to watch you as you walk past every day – you, your old man, your little show-off friend, your daddy’s high-class hooker. I mean, what do you think? It’s not like I have anything else to do.’

‘You write,’ said Martin. ‘You have *that* to do.’

She moved even closer to him, her palm out and her face twisted into a honeyed smile. Her hoarse voice took on a pleading tone. ‘Could you give me some more cash?’

‘You don’t have anything left from the hundred francs I gave you?’

She shrugged. ‘Paris is expensive.’

‘Instead of giving you money, I’d rather buy you what you need.’

‘Ah, I see. In other words, you don’t want me getting drunk. Jeez, you’re worse than a cop!’

‘Surely there’s something you need,’ Martin insisted. ‘Clothes, food, medicine?’

‘No!’ she yelled, and for a moment he was frightened of the crazy look on her battered old face. ‘Buy me something to drink. That’s all I have left – I drink or I die. It’s the only thing that keeps me going!’

She held her hand out again.

‘No,’ said Martin firmly. ‘Anything but that.’

‘Then fuck off!’ she spat. ‘Get out of here, you filthy rich kid. You don’t understand anything! Go on, beat it, I don’t want to see you again!’

For the first time in his life, Martin felt real rage stirring deep within him.

‘I… I’m so sick of people telling me that,’ he stammered. ‘You know what I think? I think *you’re* the one who doesn’t understand.’

With these words he walked up Rue du Bac and turned onto Rue de Babylone, heading toward Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

At the Jardin du Luxembourg, Martin wandered around the cramped part of the park where dogs were allowed. He was starting to sweat. He had to find some shelter for Germinal, who – thanks to his British origins – did not cope well with heat. The beagle slipped into the shade under a bench and fell asleep almost immediately.

Martin spotted Oscar and waved at him. They often met up in the park when they were walking their dogs. Oscar was with Zéphyr, his mother’s wire-haired dachshund. Germinal and Zéphyr tended to fight a lot, but today, wearied by the heat, they simply ignored each other.

‘Is your father still mad at you?’ Oscar asked while his eyes lingered on the slender thighs of a woman sitting on the bench opposite.

‘God, yeah.’

Oscar had scraped a pass in his baccalaureat by retaking his oral exam.

‘You didn’t tell him you were too busy writing your book?’

‘No, I’ve never mentioned it to him.’

‘He must think you’re just farting around all day.’

‘Yep.’

‘Why don’t you show him your novel?’

‘Because he can’t read!’ Martin exclaimed.

Oscar whistled. ‘That’s a bit harsh.’

‘It’s the truth.’

‘But your dad’s brilliant. Everyone says so.’

‘Brilliant in court, maybe.’ Martin shrugged. ‘But he’s useless at ordinary life.’

‘You’re just mad at him because he’s going to marry Alexandra.’

‘I don’t give a shit about Alexandra.’

‘She’s sexy as hell though.’

Martin said nothing.

‘Silence equals consent,’ Oscar snickered.

Martin’s face was impassive. Oscar changed the subject while ogling the magnificent breasts of a young mother taking her children for a walk.

‘Your dad’ll drop dead when he sees your book. He’ll be amazed – and so proud of you. You really should show it to him.’

Martin turned to him with a strange smile.

‘I’ll show it to him when it’s published.’

Oscar was so surprised that he tore his eyes away from the young woman’s curves.

‘You sound very sure of yourself. You’re not normally like that.’

‘It’s not vanity. I know it’ll be published one day.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t know how to explain. I can just sense it.’

Oscar didn’t know what to say to that, so he fell silent. Germinal and Zéphyr were snoring at their feet. The heat seemed to be rising and the park emptying.

‘Are you coming to Cabourg this summer?’ Oscar asked, to break the silence, which to him was as oppressive as the heat.

‘God willing,’ Martin sighed.

God being his father.

Oscar’s father owned a famous nightclub in the Saint-Sulpice neighborhood, which attracted a chic, upmarket clientele.

When he was a little boy, living on the top floor of this fashionable institution, Oscar would sneak downstairs in his pajamas, in the early hours of morning, to spy on the nocturnal fauna: all those dolled-up women with their bright red lips, glittering jewelry and throaty laughter.

He lost his virginity at the age of twelve to one of his father’s young female friends (later discovering that she’d also been his father’s mistress), but the true origins of Oscar’s premature obsession with women went back to the nights when he would hide under the stairs, watching those divine creatures as they went back and forth between the dancefloor and the women’s restrooms. Heart racing, he would catch a glimpse of exposed panties beneath the rustle of taffeta, a flash of thigh above a black garter, the hint of buttocks through a swish of lace, all these visions accompanied by intoxicating feminine scents that he wished he could sniff all night long.

At 14, Martin had been initiated into this nocturnal voyeurism by his best friend, but was oddly unmoved by the parade of flesh, paying more attention to the songs the DJ played.

Four years on and Martin had still not had sex. And no matter how hard Oscar tried to find him a charitable girl willing to teach him the pleasures of the two-backed beast, Martin showed no interest whatsoever.

Late one night, on his way back from the kitchen with a glass of water, Martin thought he heard a noise coming from his father’s bedroom. And yet as far as he knew he was home alone that night: his father was away on a business trip and was not due to return for another two days. As for Alexandra, she was supposed to be spending the week at a friend’s house.

The noise grew louder: a sort of breathless moan. Vaguely worried, he approached the room. Light leaked from under the door, which stood ajar. Martin peered through the crack.

And saw Alexandra lying naked on the unmade bed, a man crouched in front of her with his head between her spread legs. She was groaning, her head thrown back. The man was young, Martin noticed, with a muscular body and black hair. He watched emotionlessly as the young man got up, lay on top of Martin’s future mother-in-law, and penetrated her with a violent thrust of his hips. Alexandra’s legs wrapped themselves around the man’s waist. Martin could see the man in profile now: it was not someone he recognized. Alexandra sighed even more deeply and scratched her lover’s back. Martin observed those two writhing bodies, their skin gleaming with the kind of sweat only sex can produce; he listened to their gasps and moans. And he wondered if his father knew about the infidelity being committed in his own bed. At the same time, he couldn’t help admiring Alexandra’s naked body, with its full, firm curves. Convinced that he was not remotely turned on, he coldly watched their genitalia as they slotted together and slid apart with increasing speed. Alexandra was screaming now and he wondered if he’d have been able to hear her from his bedroom. Then the man collapsed against her with a groan and Martin chose that moment to slip away.

In bed he noticed to his surprise that his penis was rearing up, almost painfully hard, straining to escape the confines of his underwear. He had to relieve himself then (somewhat clumsily, since masturbating was not something he did very often – a fact he hadn’t even admitted to Oscar) while thinking about a faceless woman with a warm and welcoming body, someone he could embrace without fear.

Martin had become obsessed with Emile Zola’s novels at the age of 15, when he read *Nana* for the first time. He devoured the 20 volumes in the Rougon-Macquart series, but *L’Assommoir*, with its slangy tone, became his favorite. This slice-of-life story recounting the degeneration of a social class destroyed by work, with its descriptions of promiscuity, alcoholism and poverty, the bustling lives of lechers and the vile stench of their lodgings… all of this fascinated the young bourgeois teenager who had grown up amid the opulent mansions of Saint-Germain and had never seen his city’s dark underside.

One day he could no longer resist the temptation to hang out in the eastern neighborhoods of the capital and around Montmartre, so he could visit Rue de la Goutte-d’Or, where Gervaise had her laundry at the corner of Rue des Poissonniers, which was now Boulevard Barbès. It was there that Zola had gone to do his research, noting down every detail in order to describe with scientific rigor the trajectory of the pretty blonde girl from Plassans who was dragged into a terrible downward spiral.

Martin imagined a sturdy, bearded man in round glasses scribbling in a notebook, and a plump young woman in a white shirt, shoulders bared as she sweated over her heavy iron.

At the corner of Boulevard Barbès and Boulevard Rochechouart he found a café that bore no resemblance to the one belonging to Père Colombe, L’Assommoir. Martin looked for that famous distilling equipment – the red copper still that intoxicated the capital, the infernal machine that so impressed Gervaise – but all he saw was an ordinary bar.

He went off in search of the wash house where Virginie and Gervaise had fought bitterly amid clouds of steam and the stink of bleach. In vain. Yet he followed to the letter the path described on page 21: ‘On the boulevard, Gervaise turned left and followed Rue Neuve de la Goutte-d’Or. […] The wash house was located near the middle of the street, where it began to slope upward.’ The street was now called Rue des Islettes, and Martin saw nothing even vaguely resembling a wash house. The neighborhood had been renamed and rebuilt over time, and now contained perhaps not one iota of what Zola had described; Martin felt a fleeting nostalgia for that lost world, a hint of bitterness. He caught the Metro at Pigalle and headed back to Rue de Babylone.

It was at the Concorde station that he suddenly had the idea for his novel. He went to Le Bon Marché to buy paper, then started work as soon as he got home. On the first page he typed:

*For Kerstin, my mother, whose hair was the same blonde as Nana’s: ‘the color of fresh oats’.*

*For O. Duval, my constant companion.*