

# The Spotted Zebra Bazaar

By Raphaëlle Giordano

Translated from the French by Sally Axon

## Opening Scene

Every life begins with an opening act, and always with a curtain rising. Who knows whether these moments imprint a pattern that runs through the rest of our existence?

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.*

Shakespeare

That's why the manner of our entry is so important.

A man. A woman. Together, they wait in a consulting room that's been plunged into semi-darkness to preserve modesty. Understandably: this is obstetrics. They sit side by side, exchanging furtive glances and half-smiles glossed over with far more confidence than they're feeling.

The doctor in his white gown enters the room and, with a few kindly instructions, invites his young patient to take her place on the couch. She does so, quietly swallowing her need for empathy, which is directly proportional to her infinite yearning for reassurance. She lies flat on the white paper, which tears, inevitably. For no reason whatsoever, she's irritated by this sheet of paper that's supposed to protect the examination table but doesn't stay in place.

The doctor asks her to pull her top up over her chest, and looks at the enormous, exposed bump without so much as a twitch of his eyebrows. Bump? Balloon, more like. A hot air balloon. An exoplanet. She still can't get used to it. Her eyes widen at the sight of this thing that used to be her stomach, but has now grown alien to her body. A protuberance like this would be an object of wonder in a museum of curiosities.

She looks at the brownish line that now runs from her belly button to her pubis. Her child's first drawing, just for her. She would rather her son had found some other wall than her body to graffiti his love; she doesn't hold it against him, though. She just feels once again a tiny twinge of a familiar fear. Will she ever get her lovely flat stomach back, which until only very recently could still break hearts? She doesn't want to be slotted into a different category: from now on will she be a mother first, and a woman second? She closes her eyes to banish the thought. Not now. Not yet.

"OK?" her partner asks. "Yes, fine." And the doctor, in turn, leans across to apply the cold gel to her belly. She shivers. Anyone wearing a stethoscope around their neck might refer to it as piloerection, the pilomotor reflex. To you and me it's goosebumps.

The probe begins its exploration. Silence settles over the room; there are times when words have no place. The woman's eyes probe too, trying to decode the smallest scrap of information on the obstetrician's smooth, intent features. Suddenly, the man's face grows troubled. Isn't that the flicker of a frown line between his eyebrows? She holds her breath and sinks her nails into her husband's palm, her anxiety leaving four small, blood-red marks in his flesh. He doesn't flinch: he too is galvanized by the surreal images of the tiny being that's appearing on the screen.

The next few seconds seem to last forever. Then the verdict is pronounced. The first reprieve, several months ahead of time.

"Everything's fine." Such simple words that the doctor utters nonchalantly, a self-satisfied little smile playing on his lips. The happy parents' hearts explode with joy - but not too loudly, it wouldn't do to disturb the charged atmosphere of medical deference.

“Do you want to know the sex?” Yes, they do. It makes it easier to prepare for the child’s arrival. The color of the wallpaper, the first baby clothes, and so on.

The probe works across the abdomen again. The doctor searches, seeks, pulls a face. “Sorry, we can’t see anything. I won’t be able to tell you today.”

Eyes damp with disappointment, the mother takes one last look at the screen which still displays her baby’s mocking rear end.

## Scene 1

My name is Basil. I began my life mooning.

Is that why I've always felt as if I came from a different planet?

After forty-two years of existence, I think I have a better idea now of how I'm really put together: I'm definitely more hand-carved than flat-pack.

At the age of five, I liked to practice my reading by myself.

When I was six, after a frantic chase in the playground with my classmates, I stopped, out of breath, held two fingers to my jugular vein to check my pulse, and exclaimed:

“Oh! My heart's beating too fast!”

The girl I was foolish enough to be in love with – I suffered from a form of precocity in matters of the heart too – turned to me and hooted with mocking laughter:

“No, you idiot! That's not where the heart is, it's here!” she said, tapping the correct location on her chest.

The general hilarity struck like a dagger, and the incident earned me a reputation as a total moron, which stayed with me for the rest of the school year.

It has to be said that I was one of those gawky kids who don't exactly inspire compassion in their peers.

My brain dominated by its right side, my body by its awkwardness. So clumsy in my relationships with kids of my own age that I never knew what to say to them, how to speak to them, how to be accepted.

To stimulate my social life, my parents encouraged me to accept as many invitations as possible to birthday parties, and every opportunity to be with what the adults called ‘kids like me’. Did they stop and think for one moment that there could be nothing less like me than these kids like me? That I simply didn’t feel at ease with these children with whose games and thoughts I had nothing whatsoever in common?

Now and then, I would force myself to take part in a sword fight with the gang of ‘mates’. One day, one of them nearly took my eye out. I had no idea why that made the others laugh so much. Clutching one hand to my injured eye, I remember smiling to show a brave face, and pretending I was ‘having fun’. Laughing on the outside, crying inside. Other times I would take refuge in the kitchen and try to make conversation with the parents. I relished these interactions that put me on an equal footing with adult brains. They would look at me with surprise and curiosity. They played along with our chats for a short while before delivering my sentence, banishing me:

“Don’t you want to go and play, little guy?”

God, how that phrase drove me mad. Calling a child ‘little guy’ rams home just how little he is!

A nightmare.

Out of necessity, I learned to over-adapt by faking the reaction that seemed the most socially acceptable. Expressions on demand. Being hypersensitive, I had keen sensors that I kept permanently activated so I could come to understand my classmates’ moods and anticipate the risks involved in spending time with this cruel age group. It meant I was almost constantly on the alert. Exhausting.

I couldn't begin to tell you everything I tried to make me grow up faster. I must be the child who ate the most greens in the world. Who sat the straightest on his chair. While my brothers and sisters played their hearts out at the games little kids play, I would hide away in a corner to read the dictionary and learn all there is to know about the language of adults.

In parallel with this growth-acceleration program, I also tried to satisfy my insatiable curiosity about all things electronic and mechanical.

Sometimes I would take a trip to a neighboring garbage dump to pilfer a whole range of different devices and appliances and, back at home, I would take them apart to see how they were made. I could see the dismay in my brothers' and sisters' eyes. My mother would scold me. "You want to catch tetanus? I forbid you to go there again! What if you cut yourself? What if you fall? And what if you get bitten by a rat? Or you get crushed like an old car?"

Mothers have unbelievably prolific imaginations. But I loved mine more than anything despite her sometimes overprotective zeal. She alone glimpsed some kind of promise in my strange scribbles: always a dreamer, from an early age I covered my exercise books in sketches of far-fetched inventions, metaphysical reflections, poetry.

In the playground, when I was reading books by the great masters of science fiction such as Isaac Asimov's *Robots*, or *Dune* by Frank Herbert, I would sometimes overhear jeering comments from some of my classmates - the ones with no class - who amused themselves by finding exactly the right words to wound me. Spiteful and mean, they always made sure they spoke loud enough to be heard by their victim. "Leave him, he's weird."

I sensed their scorn. But also, to my astonishment, a kind of fear. How on earth could I be frightening to them, when I wouldn't even hurt a fly?

I looked up the definition of ‘weird’ in the dictionary: ‘inducing a sense of disbelief or alienation.’ So, as far as the others could see, I was not entirely ‘normal’. I mulled this over at length. What was ‘normality’ actually? It must mean something safe, unthreatening. *If only I really knew what it consists of*, I often thought to myself.

In my final year of elementary school, I’d even had the idea of setting up my own ‘normality watch’. I took it very seriously, jotting down possible stratagems in a notebook: *share some sweets with friends after school. Stop raising my hand so much, and especially don’t give too many correct answers in class. Try a little backchat with the teacher. Like football and jeans with holes. Have a girlfriend (‘have’ crossed out and replaced with ‘invent’). Spit my spinach out in the cafeteria, noisily, make a show of thinking it’s totally gross. Buy some fake blood for Halloween. Scratch my initials on my desk with scissors without getting caught, and so on.*

Despite my concerted efforts, I remained the kid it was uncool to hang out with.

Things didn’t improve when I started junior high. From an object of curiosity I progressed to being a scapegoat. And that’s when I realized I had to take action.

I had to find a way of being accepted. If only to put an end to the minor incidents of bullying that were frankly becoming a nuisance, and the punches I sometimes received from the little thugs at school, which left me with a collection of bruises on both my body and my self-esteem. And self-esteem takes longer to heal.

I was lucky that my Dad was into DIY. He had a thing for old motorbikes. He bought them, did them up, and sold them on. As a result, I had a whole assortment of tools at my fingertips, and they fascinated me. I loved spending most of my free time in this calm, inspiring place. Alone. At peace in my environment, and at one with my dreams. Where I



belonged, at last. That's where I made my first articulated creatures: mechanical spiders. I fitted them with an accelerometer, connected to a presence sensor. As soon as any hand trying to catch the spider reached a certain speed, the creature scuttled away. I refined my prototype by adding a red LED which lit up when the spider moved. The effect was awesome!

I called my specimens SpiderTricks. They were a tremendous success in the playground. The word spread, and with it an underground trade in orders from the big shots at the local high schools, keen to strike deals. They bought my SpiderTricks for peanuts then sold them on at three times the price. Unwittingly, I was drawn into trafficking. In the end, the Principal got wind of this black market and the less-than-angelic teens involved. There was quite a ruckus. The students were summoned; the parents too. A telling-off of epic proportions. And, finally, temporary exclusion.

It took all the composure I could muster not to explode with joy at the announcement of this exclusion, which, I was convinced, would strike a death blow to my unpopularity. And sure enough, I returned to school two weeks later in a blaze of glory, henceforth a 'respected' rebel.

Suffice to say that this misadventure left me, at the tender age of twelve, forever afflicted by the invention bug.

*Scene 2*

Arthur is down on one knee, engrossed in his work. His friend's words barely register.

“Come on,” says the friend. “Let's get out of here!”

“Chill, bro, it's OK. You keep a look-out while I finish off here...”

Medine has ants in his pants as he stands watch. Arthur can tell that his pal is cursing him inside. Perhaps he's right to worry. If they get caught, they're dead. They've already racked up so many screw-ups, they can't afford to add to the list. But Arthur has the habit of staying cool, calm and confident in every situation.

“Hurry up”, nags Medine, again, growing more and more anxious.

Still kneeling, Arthur shakes his spray can ready to add to his tag. He's been working on this project for two weeks. He found exactly the right sewer drain with a grating. He spent a long time preparing his stencil. Hidden away in his room, when his mother thought he was asleep, he would get up and work on his drawing, with painstaking care, until he reached the stage of cutting into the polypropylene sheet with an X-ACTO, the fine, super-sharp blade he used to cut shapes out of the stencil with great precision.

“Wait! I have to do the finishing touches.”

Arthur can see that his pal has had enough. He seems furious.

All the same, there's no going back now: he has to finish.

Too bad if his accomplice is getting cranky. Arthur swaps his matt-black spray can for a lightning blue. He takes off the fat cap – its nozzle is too wide – and selects a skinny cap,

much better for details. He feels truly happy as he brightens his graffiti with halo effects. The thrilling moment to reveal his work has come. He whips the stencil away.

“Well?” he asks, proudly.

Medine is awestruck. Before his very eyes, the sewer drain has been transformed into a skeleton, the grating as its ribcage, with Arthur’s message above: *From Sewer to Splendor* - he was proud to have come up with that one. He’s happy that he was able to express a little of his indignation through this piece, to push back against the system that’s oppressing him by trying to force him into a mold that doesn’t fit him! Labelled a dunce, branded with the red-hot iron of failure at school, he sometimes feels as if he’s only fit for the sewer. If only he could find his place in the world!

As he’s putting his things away, the loose front of his coat brushes against the still-wet graffiti.

“Sh..., it’s smudged!” he blurts out, infuriated.

Medine pulls him by the sleeve, seriously worried now. There’s a grown-up coming. Worse: an officer. Arthur grabs his things as the two friends take to their heels, their pursuer yelling behind them. Arthur glances at his friend, who seems to be finding it hard to keep up, briefly cursing the excess weight that’s slowing him down.

“I know where to go, follow me!”

If they don’t run faster they’ll be caught.

They reach the big hotel in town. Arthur drags Medine into the rear courtyard: the service entrance. There before them are trolleys full of white linen on its way to the laundry. He

launches himself into one, followed by Medine, and the pair of them bury themselves beneath the sheets.

The officer arrives soon afterwards, out of breath.

“Did you see two teenagers go this way?”

The chambermaid shrugs. The man sighs, and turns back.

“Well, we’re in deep sheet now!” laughs Arthur, pleased with his day’s achievements.

Suddenly, he feels the trolley move.

“Hey!”

The chambermaid cries out in fear when she sees two dishevelled oddballs rise from her trolley. She gives chase, going hell for leather. They wait until they’re around the next corner before doubling over with laughter.

They set off for the bakery; all this excitement makes you hungry. They emerge with a chocolate muffin and a Coke apiece, and stroll through the streets savoring the hit of sugar, made even sweeter by the lingering taste of their masterstroke.

Arthur’s phone rings.

“Wait; it’s my old lady. (Change of tone.) Hello? Mom? No worries, I’m on my way. No, I’m not hanging about, I’m with Medine, we’re just having something to eat. Yes, I’ll do my homework! I’ve got it sorted, I’ve told you! Can’t talk now, I’m in the street. I’m on my way...”

When he hangs up, Arthur's expression is hard to read. Medine laughs; Arthur glares at him. They part ways at the usual crossroads with a fist bump.

Arthur shoves his hands deep into his pockets and pulls up the hood of his sweatshirt. He hurries along the shopping street; he doesn't want to make his mother even more annoyed – the atmosphere at home is already strained enough. But he does notice a new store on the corner, on the site that's been hidden by renovation work for weeks. He wonders who's set themselves up here: an optician? A phone store? A hairdresser? He feels disappointed already. But it's nothing of the sort. As he comes closer, he finds himself mesmerized by the storefront before him. In big, handwritten letters, white on a black background, he reads:

*The Spotted Zebra Bazaar.*

## Scene 3

*Basil, your presentation leaves something to be desired...* I think, with my habitual perfectionism. I've been putting the finishing touches to the store for hours now. I must admit, I have the time. It's not easy to attract hordes of punters right from day one – nothing unusual there. For now, people are noticing the store. They pass by, stop at the window for a few seconds, ponder.

My return to Mount Venus six months ago brought me right back to my roots. Mount Venus... The name still makes me smile today. I see my mother dictating our address, explaining with disarming solemnity: "That's Venus as in the goddess." Yes, the wanderer has returned. A one-way ticket. I've come back here stripped of my past, like a murdered man who's still standing and walking. A man who had everything he could want, and managed to lose his very essence. And that's exactly what I'm here to find: an essence. To start all over again and, with the momentum of creativity, reinvent myself in a project that has meaning. Rise again from my ashes. The crazy, egotistical race for money and fame is over. All I aspire to now is some kind of peace and calm, and simple pleasures. I'm not opening a store; I'm indulging in a new way of life. Pared-down, more authentic. The objects I invent pique people's imagination, their creativity, and encourage their minds to open up to a bolder, braver way of thinking. They have no practical use... That's what amuses me. I've painted on the door, in beautiful handwritten letters, the words: *Provocative objects sold here*.

I'm aware that launching a business of this type in Mount Venus is a huge risk. God knows why I love this pretty town, with its fifty thousand inhabitants all proud to have kept one foot in a gloriously traditional past... But it's safe to say that this place is not exactly known as a platform for the avant-garde. And my bazaar could very well stick out like a sore thumb on the main shopping street full of traditional stores.

Of course, people will be mystified at first by my concept store. But I have faith. And I love the idea of helping to prove that the spirit of invention is not the sole preserve of big cities.

What does it matter if the locals are bewildered at first? The aim is to surprise them, encourage them to allow their curiosity to draw them through my door to explore my universe. Out front, I've recycled an old wrought-iron sign so I can put my spotted zebra logo there, visible from a distance. A round logo with a highly stylized image inside it of a zebra with stripes made up of spots. I'd searched for an image that would depict the idea of the out-of-the-ordinary. The zebra seemed to me to be one of the most strikingly visual animals with its incredible stripes. But stripes were still too obvious; whereas a spotted zebra, like a five-legged sheep, seemed more unusual. Similarly, I'd planned the entire décor of the store in a contemporary style, which to me means the impact of a joyful mix of genres. Hence the very designer look out front, and quirky-vintage inside, like an artist's loft-stroke-workshop. It was vital to be bold, to aim for contrast, I thought! Starting with the dark-wood façade, a modern look with the understated, elegant aesthetic I'm fond of: clean lines, the letters on the sign painted in elegant, white lower case with timeless downstrokes and upstrokes – the Elzevir font is to typography what the little black dress is to fashion. The large window showcases my signature creations in the foreground, with a glimpse of the interior of the store in the background: this has a number of separate spaces, like different settings to display each line of limited-edition objects so as to highlight their sense of poetry, mystery, or provocation. A section of brick wall here, a white wall there, then a black one; and up on the mezzanine, my office-workshop, reached via a spiral steel staircase. The whole front section of the store is bathed in light thanks to its skylight and its extraordinarily high ceilings.

Visitors can move between the stands as if they were at an exhibition, stopping as the mood takes them to look at any inventions that catch their eye. It's really nothing like an art gallery though. The Spotted Zebra Bazaar aims to be a feast for the soul as well as the eyes. People will be amazed, amused, and soothed; they'll nibble and dabble and mull.

Like a temple to curiosity where whispering is not required.

I've even rigged up a little tea room, warm and welcoming with its retro furniture and a painted metal sign: "Shop Sweet Shop" as another homely touch.

As evening draws in on this early-autumn day, I go to the window to look at my wrought-iron zebra logo swaying gently in the wind. I feel proud.

Suddenly, the entry bell chimes. A tall boy enters. How old might he be? Fifteen, sixteen?

"Good evening! Welcome!"

He gives me a look that stops my genial greeting in its tracks. I step aside to give him all the space and freedom he might need to forage at his leisure. Then I pretend to tidy up so I can watch him discreetly.

I see that his coat is smeared with black paint, and he has similar patches on his hands. With his red hood pulled up over his head, he's trying to look like a troublemaker, as if proclaiming some rebellion he's actually less sure of than he appears. Surreptitiously, I scrutinize his round face, its features regular except for a slight deviation in his nasal septum, his eyes bright, with just a hint of shiftiness, his dark brown hair cut in a neat style that contrasts sharply with his careless way of dressing. Fashion dictates certain stylistic effects to



boys of his generation, like compulsory routines in gymnastics. Usually it's a short back and sides, very short on the sides and longer on the top, always with a shaved part line.

I smile at the conformity of his hairstyle, which reminds me of my own paradoxes: how can we belong to a group while discovering what makes us unique?

The teenager heads for the first stand where the creatures from my childhood take pride of place. The new-generation SpiderTricks. He doesn't understand how they work, and that annoys him. I leave him to it. If I show him, the pleasure of discovery will be spoiled. He takes the trouble to read the little display card, which reveals the secrets of my insect with its mechanical legs. He understands the system, the presence sensor and the accelerator which triggers the insect's movement when a hand comes close to grab it. He allows himself a little smile, and tries it a second time, then a third.

I feel as if I've faced an uncompromising panel of judges, and passed the first test.

Skeptical once more, he moves on to explore the ready-to-think objects. Now he's looking at my 'tin cans to open minds'.

The first bears the message: 'Dreams don't grow in sardine cans'.

Inside are four little sardines in a row, made of painted wood. A pair of antonyms is written on each one, designed to make the reader reflect on the notion of the kind of life they want to lead. 'Generous or narrow-minded?'; 'Constructive or critical?'; 'Daring or faint-hearted?'; 'Proactive or passive?'

The boy scratches the back of his neck. I'd swear there's some serious contemplation going on inside that head.

Inside, I'm jumping for joy. He picks up another can and I see his lips form its title: 'Politicized can'. He opens it, and gives a start when a message springs out like a jack-in-the-box: 'Down with conservative ideas!' He turns towards me and sneers:

"These cans are useless!"

I'm amused by his reaction:

"In a practical sense, you're right. But then do you believe that an object that makes you think, or even just makes you smile, is worthless?"

His eyes narrow as if he's sizing me up. He's about to counter my argument, but thinks better of it and makes a show of turning his attention to the vintage Heinz Baked Beans can I restyled with Obama's 'Yes, we can!' slogan.

His face lights up when he gets the pun.

"That's a good one!"

I smile at him. Might as well try my luck: "Do you want me to explain the idea behind my store?"

"No. Thanks. I'm just looking."

He moves on quickly, past the Anagram Lamp with its inscription: *Good things come from DREAMING - daring, idea, image, mind, game, admire, gain....*, and stops at the hourglass clock.

"And this?"

‘That’s the Passing-of-time Clock. Look, there are twelve hourglasses set out in two rows. The sand in each one takes an hour to run through. So, at a glance, you get an idea of what time it is. But most of all it’s a beautiful object that helps you to be mindful of the value of the time that passes.’

“Not bad...”

He likes the clock.

“How much is it?”

“Ninety-nine dollars.”

“Whoa, no kidding...”

He puts it down.

Then a black frame hung on the wall catches his eye.

Inside it... there’s nothing. He frowns, and turns to me with a quizzical look.

“Huh? I don’t get that one. There’s nothing to see?”

“Precisely,” I smile. “What you see there is ‘nothing’. Think of it as conceptual art. The object invites you to reflect on the value of nothing. The frame is empty. Metaphorically, it’s a way of telling the viewer that it’s good to leave room for emptiness in your life, without trying to overfill it. Time to dream, time to be... Time for nothing! For example, sitting down just to feel you’re alive. Present in the present. Imagine a music score with no rests, no silences. It would be an unbearable racket! Yet how many people these days cram their lives full of activities, scurrying about, getting it all done at any cost? Everything happens too fast,

we chase after time, we want to ‘take time’ the same way we buy something on credit: without really giving ourselves the means to do so. We should listen to time like we listen to silence. It only takes form if we allow ourselves to watch it existing. Otherwise, it slips through your fingers.”

And I add, with a twinkle:

‘It may be nothing, but it changes everything!’

I see that he gets it, and I’m pleased. He’s about to speak, but his phone rings. He searches feverishly through his pockets, cursing under his breath. It’s clear that he’s expected somewhere. He won’t finish his tour of the store, which is a shame – he was about to come to my finest pieces. Another time, perhaps. I watch him leave, touched that the spirit of my bazaar should have resonated with a hulking teenager. As for the SpiderTrick he slipped into his pocket, I’ll pretend not to notice.

## Scene 4

This weekday morning is like every other for Giulia, her actions and rhythm dictated by the unexceptional. She gets ready to leave the house, and picks her keys up from the little wenge table in the hallway. Before she steps outside, she can't help glancing at her reflection in the mirror; she sees that two fine lines have appeared at the corners of her eyes. She wonders whether she's still attractive. She inspects her high cheekbones, her delicate skin, her soft, full lips, and her long eyelashes with their black coating of mascara, which set off the blue of her eyes beautifully. At the base of her neck, a mole, like a French *mouche*, a beauty spot made from black taffeta, betrays the passionate spirit behind her more reserved side. Yes, she still has her attributes.

"I'm off!" she shouts to her son.

She hears him mutter something from his room. She knows very well he isn't ready. *He's going to be late for school again*, she thinks, crossly.

As far back as she can recall, her son has never been one for playing by the rules, following instructions, respecting boundaries. She remembers all those years of patiently trying to help him fit into the school system; like pushing a square peg into a round hole, an impossible task. His inability to comply with the system was less obvious in the earliest classes. Back then, her boy could coast along like no one else, relying on his ability to get by with the least possible effort. Unfortunately, as he grew older, the con trick stopped working. One messy failure followed another, and it was time to face facts: Arthur was not cut out for school. Little by little, his academic journey turned into an uphill struggle. And their own relationship had become strained in the extreme; hostile, almost. Ready to explode at any moment. Giulia knew that Arthur's father leaving and their separation hadn't helped matters.

Had her ex-husband run away from the responsibilities inherent in raising a non-typical child who's growing like a weed?