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Le Testament Francais

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Extract

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I

While still a child, I guessed that this very singular smile represented a strange little victory for each of the women – yes, a fleeting revenge for disappointed hopes, for the coarseness of men, for the rarity of beautiful and true things in this world. Had I known how to say it at the time, I should have called this manner of smiling 'femininity' . . . But my language was too concrete in those days. I contented myself with studying the women's faces in our photograph albums and spotting this gleam of beauty in some of them.

For these women knew that in order to be beautiful, what they must do several seconds before the flash blinded them, was to utter the following mysterious French syllables, whose meaning few understood: *'pe-tite-pomme'* . . . As if by magic, the mouth, instead of being stretched in assumed bliss, or tensed into an anxious grin, would form a gracious round. The whole face was thus transfigured. The eyebrows arched slightly, the oval of the cheeks was elongated. You said *'petite pomme'* and the shadow of a distant and dreamy sweetness veiled your gaze, refined your features and let the soft light of bygone days play over the snapshot.

This photographic spell had won the confidence of the most diverse women. For example, a relative from Moscow in the only colour photo in our albums. Married to a diplomat, she spoke through clenched teeth and sighed with

boredom before even hearing you out. But in the photo I could immediately identify the *'petite pomme'* effect.

I observed its aura on the face of a dull provincial woman, some anonymous aunt, whose name only came up when the conversation turned to the women left without husbands after the male slaughter of the last war. Even Glasha, the peasant of the family, in the rare photos that we still possessed of her, displayed the miraculous smile. Finally there was a whole swarm of young girl cousins puffing out their lips and trying to hold onto this fleeting French magic for a few interminable seconds while they posed. As they murmured their *'petite pomme'* they still believed that the life that lay ahead would be woven exclusively from such moments of grace . . .

Throughout this parade of expressions and faces there recurred here and there that of a woman with fine, regular features and large grey eyes. Young to begin with, in the earliest of the albums, her smile was suffused with the secret charm of the *'petite pomme'*. Then with age, in the more recent albums, closer to our time, this expression became muted and overlaid with a veil of melancholy and simplicity.

It was this woman, this Frenchwoman, lost in the snowy immensity of Russia, who had taught the others the words which bestowed beauty. My maternal grandmother . . . She was born in France at the beginning of the century, into the family of Norbert and Albertine Lemonnier. The mystery of the *'petite pomme'* was probably the first of the legends that enchanted our childhood. And these were also among the first words we heard in that language which my mother used, jokingly, to call 'your grandmother tongue'.

One day I came upon a photo I should not have seen . . . I was spending my holidays with my grandmother in the town at the edge of the Russian steppe where she had been

stranded after the war. A warm, slow summer dusk was drawing in and flooding the rooms with a mauve glow. This somewhat unearthly light fell upon the photos that I was examining before an open window. They were the oldest snapshots in our albums. The pictures spanned the historic watershed of the 1917 revolution; brought to life the era of the Tsars and, moreover, pierced the iron curtain, which was then almost impenetrable, transporting me at one moment onto the precinct of a Gothic cathedral, and the next onto the pathways of a garden whose faultlessly geometrical plants left me perplexed. I was plunging into our family's prehistory . . .

Then suddenly this photo!

I saw it when, out of pure curiosity, I opened a large envelope which had been slipped between the last page and the cover. It was that inevitable batch of snapshots which have been judged unworthy of appearing on the rough cardboard of the pages, landscapes which can no longer be identified, faces which evoke neither affection nor memories. One of those batches you always tell yourself you must sort through one day, to decide the fate of all these souls in torment . . .

It was in the midst of these unknown people and forgotten landscapes that I saw her. A young woman whose attire jarred strangely with the elegance of the people who appeared in the other photos. She was wearing a big, dirty grey, padded jacket and a man's *shapka* with the ear-flaps pulled down. She was posed with a baby clasped to her breast, muffled up in a wool blanket.

'How did she slip in,' I wondered in amazement, 'among all these men in tails and women in evening dress?' And all around her, in other snapshots there were these majestic avenues, these colonnades, these Mediterranean vistas. Her presence was anachronistic, out of place, inexplicable. She seemed like an intruder in this family past, with her style

of dress that was only adopted nowadays by the women who cleared snowdrifts from the roads in winter . . .

I had not heard my grandmother coming in. She placed her hand on my shoulder. I gave a start; then, showing her the photo, I asked her: 'Who is this woman?'

A brief flash of panic appeared in my grandmother's unfailingly calm eyes. In an almost nonchalant voice she replied with a question: 'Which woman?'

We both fell silent, pricking up our ears. A bizarre rustling filled the room. My grandmother turned and cried out, it seemed to me, joyfully: 'A death's head! Look, a death's head!'

I saw a large brown insect, a crepuscular hawkmoth, quivering as it tried to plunge into the illusory depths of the mirror. I rushed towards it, my hand outstretched, already feeling the tickling of its wings under my palm. It was then I noticed the moth's unusual shape. As I drew closer I could not suppress a cry: 'But there are two of them! They're Siamese twins.'

And indeed the two moths did seem to be attached to one another. And their bodies were alive with feverish trembling. To my surprise this double hawkmoth paid me no attention and did not try to escape. Before catching it I had time to observe the white marks on its back, the famous death's head.

We did not speak again about the woman in the padded jacket . . . I watched the flight of the hawkmoth once released – in the sky it divided into two moths and I understood, as a child of ten very well can, why they had been joined. Now my grandmother's confusion seemed to me to make sense.

The capture of the coupling hawkmoths brought to my mind two very old memories, the most mysterious of my childhood. The first, going back to when I was eight, was

summed up in the words of an old song that my grandmother sometimes murmured, rather than sang, sitting on her balcony, her head bowed over a garment on which she was darning the collar or reinforcing the buttons. It was the very last words of her song that thrilled me:

. . . We'd sleep together there
Till the world comes to an end.

This slumber of the two lovers, that lasted for so long, was beyond my childish comprehension. I already knew that people who died (like that old woman next door whose disappearance in winter had been so well explained to me) fell asleep for ever. Like the lovers in the song? Love and death had now formed a strange alloy in my young head. And the melancholy beauty of the melody could only increase this unease. Love, death, beauty . . . And the evening sky, the wind, the smell of the steppe which, thanks to the song, I perceived as if my life had just begun at that moment.

The second memory was so distant it could not be dated. There was not even a very precise 'me' in its nebulousness. Just the intense sensation of light, the aromatic scent of plants and silvery lines crossing the blue density of the air, which many years later I would identify as gossamer threads. Elusive and confused, this vision would nevertheless be dear to me, for I would succeed in persuading myself that it was a memory from before birth. Yes, an echo sent to me by my French ancestry. For in one of my grandmother's stories I was to rediscover all the elements of this memory: the autumn sun of a journey she made to Provence, the scent of the fields of lavender and even those gossamers floating in the perfumed air. I never dared speak to her of my childish prescience.

It was in the course of the following summer that one day my sister and I saw our grandmother weep . . . For the first time in our lives.

In our eyes she was a kind of just and benevolent deity, always true to form and perfectly serene. Her own life story, which had long since become a myth, placed her beyond the griefs of ordinary mortals. In fact we did not see any tears. Just an unhappy contraction of her lips, little tremors running across her cheeks, and a rapid batting of her eyelashes . . .

We were sitting on the carpet, which was littered with bits of crumpled paper, and were absorbed in a fascinating game: taking out little pebbles which were wrapped in white 'sweet papers' and comparing them – now a glitter of quartz, now a pebble which was smooth and pleasant to the touch. On each of the papers was written a name which we had, in our ignorance, taken for an enigmatic mineralogical label: 'Fécamp', 'La Rochelle', 'Bayonne' . . . In one of the wrappers we even discovered a rough and ferrous fragment which bore traces of rust. We thought we were reading the name of this strange metal: 'Verdun' . . . A number of pieces from this collection had been thus stripped bare. When our grandmother came in the game had just become more lively. We were quarrelling over the most beautiful stones and testing their hardness by striking them one against another, sometimes breaking them. Those we found ugly – like the 'Verdun', for example – were thrown out of the window into a bed of dahlias. Several wrappers had been torn . . .

Our grandmother froze above this battlefield scattered with white blisters. We looked up. It was then that her grey eyes seemed to be heavy with tears – just enough to make it unbearable for us if she broke down.

No, she was not an impassive goddess, our grandmother. She too, it seemed, could suffer unease, or sudden distress.

We had always thought she moved with such poise through the peaceful sequence of days, yet she, too, sometimes hovered on the brink of tears!

From that summer onwards my grandmother's life revealed new and unexpected facets to me. And above all, much more personal ones.

Previously her past had been summed up by a few talismans, a number of family relics, like the silk fan, which reminded me of a fine maple leaf; or the famous little 'Pont-Neuf bag'. Our legend maintained that it had been found on the bridge in question by Charlotte Lemonnier, aged four at the time. Running ahead of her mother, the little girl had stopped suddenly and exclaimed: 'A bag!' And more than half a century later, the muted echo of her ringing cry could still be heard in a town lost amid the endlessness of Russia, under the sun of the steppes. It was in this pigskin bag, with enamel plaques on the fastening, that my grandmother kept her collection of stones from days gone by.

This old handbag marked one of my grandmother's earliest memories, and for us, the genesis of the legendary world of her memory: Paris, the Pont-Neuf . . . An astonishing galaxy waiting to be born, which began to sketch its still hazy outlines before our fascinated gaze.

There was, besides, among these relics of the past (I remember the voluptuousness with which we caressed the smooth, gilded edges of those pink volumes, *Memoirs of a Poodle, Gribouille and his Sister* . . .), an even older testimony. A photo, taken in Siberia already: Albertine, Norbert and, in front of them – on one of those highly artificial pieces of furniture that photographers always use, a kind of very tall pedestal table – Charlotte, a child of two, wearing a lace-trimmed bonnet and a doll's dress. This photo on thick cardboard, with the name of the photographer and replicas of the medals he had been awarded, very much intrigued

us: 'What does she have in common, this ravishing woman with her pure, fine face, framed in silky curls, with that old man, whose beard is divided into two rigid plaits that look like the tusks of a walrus?'

We already knew that this old man, our great-grandfather, was twenty-six years older than Albertine. 'It's as if he'd married his own daughter!' my sister said to me indignantly. Their marriage seemed to us ambiguous and unhealthy. All our textbooks at school were full of stories that told of marriages between girls without dowries and rich old men, miserly and hungry for youth. To such an extent that any other kind of conjugal alliance seemed to us impossible in bourgeois society. We strove to discover some malign viciousness in Norbert's features, a grimace of ill-concealed satisfaction. But his face remained simple and frank, like those of the intrepid explorers in the illustrations to our Jules Verne books. After all, this old man with a long white beard was only forty-eight at the time . . .

As for Albertine, supposed victim of bourgeois morality, she was soon to be standing on the slippery brink of an open grave, into which the first spadefuls of earth were already flying. She would struggle so violently against the hands that restrained her and would utter such heart-rending cries that even the funeral party of Russians, in that cemetery in a distant Siberian town, would be stunned by them. Accustomed as they were to tragic outbursts at funerals in their native land, to torrential tears and pitiful lamentations, these people would be stricken in the face of the tortured beauty of this young Frenchwoman. She would thresh about above the grave, crying out in her resonant language: 'Throw me in as well! Throw me in!'

For a long time this terrible lament echoed in our childish ears.

'Perhaps it was because she . . . she loved him . . .' my

sister, who was older than me, said to me one day. And she blushed.

But more than that unusual union between Norbert and Albertine, it was Charlotte, in this photo from the turn of the century, who aroused my curiosity. Especially her little bare toes. By a simple irony of chance, or through some involuntary coquetry, she had curled them tightly against the soles of her feet. This trifling detail conferred a special significance on what was overall a very ordinary photo. Not knowing how to formulate my thought, I contented myself with repeating in a dreamy voice: 'This little girl who finds herself, heaven knows why, on this comical pedestal table, on that summer's day which has gone for ever, 22 July 1905, in the very depths of Siberia. Yes, this tiny French girl, who was that day celebrating her second birthday, this child, who is looking at the photographer and in an unconscious caprice curling up her incredibly small toes, thus allows me to enter into that day, to taste its climate, its time, its colour . . .'

And the mystery of this childish presence seemed to me so breathtaking that I would close my eyes.

This child was – our grandmother. Yes, it was her, this woman whom we saw that evening, crouching down and silently setting about gathering up the fragments of stone scattered over the carpet. Dumbfounded and sheepish, my sister and I stood with our backs to the wall, not daring to murmur a word of apology or to help our grandmother retrieve the scattered talismans. We guessed that in her lowered eyes tears were forming . . .

On the evening of our sacrilegious game we no longer saw an old-fashioned good fairy before us, a storyteller with her Bluebeard or her Sleeping Beauty, but a woman hurt and vulnerable, despite all her strength of spirit. For her it was that agonising moment when suddenly the adult betrays herself, allows her weakness to appear, feels like a naked

emperor under the penetrating gaze of the child. She is like a tightrope walker who has made a false move and who, caught off balance for several seconds, is sustained only by the gaze of the spectator, who is in turn embarrassed at having this unexpected power . . .

She closed the 'Pont-Neuf bag', took it into her room, then called us to the table. After a moment's silence she began to speak in French in a calm and steady voice, while pouring tea for us with her familiar gestures: 'Among the stones you threw away there was one I should really like to get back . . .'

And still in this neutral tone and still in French, even though at mealtimes (because of friends or neighbours who often dropped in unexpectedly) we generally spoke in Russian, she told us about the parade of the *Grande Armée* and the story of the little brown pebble known as 'Verdun'. We scarcely grasped the sense of her tale – it was her tone that held us in thrall. Our grandmother was addressing us like adults! All we saw was a handsome officer with a moustache emerging from the column of the victory parade, approaching a young woman squeezed tight in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd and offering her a little fragment of brown metal . . .

After supper, armed with an electric torch, I vainly combed through the bed of dahlias in front of our apartment block: the 'Verdun' was not there. I found it the following morning on the pavement, a little metallic pebble surrounded by several cigarette stubs, broken bottles and trails of sand. Under my gaze it seemed to stand out from these commonplace surroundings like a meteorite fallen from an unknown galaxy that has almost disappeared amidst the gravel on a path . . .

And so we guessed at our grandmother's hidden tears and sensed the existence in her heart of that distant French lover who had preceded our grandfather, Fyodor. Yes, a dashing

officer from the *Grande Armée*, the man who had slipped that rough shell splinter, the 'Verdun', into Charlotte's palm. This discovery disturbed us. We felt bound to our grandmother by a secret to which possibly no one else in the family was privy. Beyond the dates and anecdotes of family legend we could now hear life welling up, in all its sorrowful beauty.

That evening we joined our grandmother on the little balcony of her apartment. Covered in flowers, it seemed as if suspended above the hot haze of the steppes. A copper sun nudged the horizon, remained undecided for a moment, then plunged rapidly. The first stars trembled in the sky. Powerful, penetrating scents rose up to us with the evening breeze.

We were silent. While the daylight lasted, our grandmother darned a blouse spread out on her knees. Then, when the air was impregnated with ultramarine shadows, she raised her head, abandoning her task, her gaze lost in the hazy distance of the plain. Not daring to break her silence, we cast furtive glances at her from time to time: was she going to share a new and even more secret confidence with us; or would she fetch her lamp with the turquoise shade, as if nothing had happened, and read us a few pages of Daudet or Jules Verne, who often kept us company on our long summer evenings? Without admitting it to ourselves, we were lying in wait for her first word, her tone of voice. Our anticipation – the spectator's concentration on the tightrope walker – was a mixture of rather cruel curiosity and a vague unease. We felt as if we were seeking to trap this woman, who faced us alone.

However, she seemed not even to notice our tense presence. Her hands remained motionless in her lap; her gaze was lost in the transparency of the sky. The glimmer of a smile hovered on her lips . . .

Little by little we abandoned ourselves to this silence.

Leaning over the handrail, we stared wide-eyed, trying to see as much sky as possible. The balcony reeled slightly, giving way under our feet, and began to float. The horizon drew closer, as if we were hurtling towards it on the night breeze.

Above its line we discerned a pale gleam – like the sparkle of little waves on the surface of a river. Incredulous, we peered into the darkness that surged over our flying balcony. Yes, far away on the steppe there shone an expanse of water, rising, spreading the bitter cold of the great rains. This sheet seemed to be lightening steadily, with a dull, wintry glow.

Now we saw emerging from this fantastic tide the black masses of apartment blocks, the spires of cathedrals, the posts of street lamps – a city! Gigantic, harmonious, despite the waters which flooded its avenues, a ghostly city was emerging before our eyes . . .

Suddenly we realised that someone had been talking to us for quite a while. Our grandmother was talking to us!

'At that time I must have been almost your age. It was the winter of 1910. The Seine had turned into a real sea. The people of Paris travelled around by boat. The streets were like rivers, the squares like great lakes. And what astonished me most was the silence . . .'

On our balcony we heard the sleepy silence of flooded Paris. The lapping of a few waves when a boat went by, a muffled voice at the end of a drowned avenue.

The France of our grandmother, like a misty Atlantis, was emerging from the waves.