Lovereading.co.uk

The Chalk Circle Man

Fred Vargas

Translated from the French by Siân Reynolds

Published by Harvill Secker

Extract

© Fred Vargas 2009, published by Harvill Secker, an imprint of Random House, a Random House Group company

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Fred Vargas

The Chalk Circle Man

TRANSLATED
FROM THE FRENCH
BY
Siân Reynolds



Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

Published by Harvill Secker 2009

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Copyright © Fred Vargas 1996
English translation copyright © Siân Reynolds 2009

Fred Vargas has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

First published with the title *L'Homme aux cercles bleus* in 1996
by Éditions Viviane Hamy, Paris

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
Harvill Secker,
Random House
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781843432722

This book is supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Burgess programme run by the Cultural Department of the French Embassy in London.
www.frenchbooknews.com



Ouvrage publié avec le soutien du Centre national du livre – ministère français chargé de la culture

This book is published with support from the French Ministry of Culture –
Centre National du Livre

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at
www.rbooks.co.uk/environment



Typeset in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

I

MATHILDE TOOK OUT HER DIARY AND WROTE: 'THE MAN SITTING next to me has got one hell of a nerve.'

She sipped her beer and glanced once more at the neighbour on her left, a strikingly tall man who had been drumming his fingers on the café table for the past ten minutes.

She made another note in the diary: 'He sat down too close to me, as if we knew each other, but I've never seen him before. No, I'm sure I've never seen him before. Not much else to say about him, except that he's wearing dark glasses. I'm sitting on the terrace outside the Café Saint-Jacques, and I've ordered a glass of draught lager. I'm drinking it now. I'm concentrating as hard as I can on the beer. Can't think of anything better to do.'

Mathilde's neighbour went on drumming his fingers.

'Something the matter?' she asked.

Mathilde had a deep and very husky voice. The man guessed that here was a woman who smoked as much as she could get away with.

'No, nothing. Why?' he replied.

'Just that it's getting on my nerves, that noise you're

making on the tabletop. Everything's setting my teeth on edge today.'

Mathilde finished her beer. Tasteless. Typical for a Sunday. Mathilde considered that she suffered more than most from the fairly widespread malaise she called seventh-day blues.

'You're about fifty, I'd guess?' offered the man, without moving away from her.

'Might be,' said Mathilde.

She felt annoyed. What business was that of his? Just then, she had noticed that the stream of water from the fountain opposite the café was blowing in the wind and sprinkling drops on the arm of the stone cherub beneath: one of those little moments of eternity. And now here was some character spoiling the only moment of eternity of this particular seventh day.

Besides, people usually thought she looked ten years younger. As she told him.

'Does it matter?' asked the man. 'I can't guess ages the way other people do. But I imagine you're rather beautiful, if I'm not mistaken.'

'Is there something wrong with my face?' asked Mathilde. 'You don't seem very sure about it.'

'It's not that. I certainly do imagine you're beautiful,' the man replied, 'but I won't swear to it.'

'Please yourself,' said Mathilde. 'At any rate, *you*'re very good-looking, and I'll swear to that, if it helps. Well, it always does help, doesn't it? And now I'm going to leave you. I'm too edgy today to sit around talking to people like you.'

'I'm not feeling so calm, either. I was going to see a flat to rent, but it was already taken. What about you?'

'I let somebody I wanted to catch up with get away.'

'A friend?'

'No, a woman I was following in the metro. I'd taken lots of notes, and then, suddenly, I lost her. See what I mean?'

'No, I don't see at all.'

'You're not trying, you mean.'

'Well, obviously I'm not trying.'

'You are. You're *very* trying.'

'Yes, I am trying. And on top of that, I'm blind.'

'Oh, Christ!' said Mathilde. 'I'm so sorry.'

The man turned towards her with a rather unkind smile.

'Why are you sorry?' he said. 'It's not your fault, is it?'

Mathilde told herself that she should just stop talking. But she also knew that she wouldn't be able to manage that.

'Whose fault is it, then?' she asked.

The Beautiful Blind Man, as Mathilde had already named him in her head, reverted to his position, three-quarters turned away.

'It was a lioness's fault. I was dissecting it, because I was working on the locomotive system of the larger cats. Why the heck should we care about their locomotive system? Sometimes I would tell myself this is really cutting-edge stuff, other times I thought, oh for God's sake, lions walk, they crouch, they pounce, and that's it. Then one day I made a false move with a scalpel . . .'

'And it squirted in your eyes.'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'There was this man once, he built the colonnade of the Louvre, and he was killed like that. A decomposed camel, laid out on a dissecting table. Still, that was a long time ago, and it was a camel. Quite a big difference, really.'

'Well, rotten flesh is still rotten flesh. The ghastly muck went in my eyes. Everything went black. Couldn't see a thing. Kaput.'

'All because of a wretched lioness. I came across a creature like that once. How long ago was this?'

'Eleven years now. She must be laughing her head off, the lioness, wherever she is. Well, I can laugh, sometimes, these days. Not at the time though. A month later I went back and trashed the lab – I threw bits of rotten tissue everywhere, I wanted it to go in everyone's eyes. I smashed up the work of the team studying feline locomotion. But of course it gave me no satisfaction at all. In fact, it was a big let-down.'

'What colour were your eyes?'

'Black, like swifts, the sickles of the sky.'

'And now what are they like?'

'Nobody dares tell me. Black, red and white, I should think. People seem to choke when they see them. I suppose it's a nasty sight. I just keep my glasses on all the time now.'

'I'd like to see them,' said Mathilde, 'if you really want to know what they look like. Nasty sights don't bother me.'

'People say that, then they regret it.'

'When I was diving one day, I got bitten on the leg by a shark.'

'OK, I suppose that's not a pretty sight either.'

'What do you miss the most from not being able to see?'

'Your questions are getting on my nerves. We're not going to spend all day talking about lions and sharks and suchlike beasts, are we?'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Well, if you must know, I miss girls. Not very original, is it?'

'The girls cleared off, did they, after the lioness?'

'Looks like that. You didn't say why you were following the woman.'

'No reason. I follow lots of people, actually. Can't help it, it's an addiction.'

'After the shark bite, did your lover clear off?'

'He left, and others came along.'

'You're an unusual woman.'

'Why do you say that?' asked Mathilde.

'Because of your voice.'

'What do you hear in people's voices?'

'Oh, come on, I'm not going to tell you that! What would I have left, for pity's sake? You've got to let a blind man have some advantages, madame,' said the man, with a smile.

He stood up to leave. He hadn't even finished his drink.

'Wait. What's your name?' Mathilde asked.

The man hesitated.

'Charles Reyer,' he said.

'Thank you. My name's Mathilde.'

The Beautiful Blind Man said that was a rather classy name, that there was a queen called Mathilde who had reigned in England in the twelfth century. Then he walked off, guiding himself with a finger along the wall. Mathilde couldn't care less about the twelfth century, and she finished the blind man's drink, with a frown.

For a long time afterwards, for weeks during her excursions along the pavements of Paris, Mathilde looked out for the blind man, out of the corner of her eye. But she didn't find him. She guessed his age as about thirty-five.