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**Opening Extract from...**

# 13, rue Thérèse

Written by Elena Mauli Shapiro

Published by Headline Review

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# 13, rue Thérèse

*a novel*



*Elena Mauli Shapiro*

headline
review

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# Foreword



When I was a little girl growing up in Paris in the early 1980s, an old woman who lived a few floors up from my apartment died alone. Her name was Louise Brunet. She had no remaining relatives to come fetch her belongings, so the landlord had to clear them all out. He let the other tenants in the building scavenge through her stuff and take home silverware, jewellery, whatever they wanted. My mother salvaged a small box filled with mementos: old love letters from WWI, mesh church gloves, dried flowers, a rosary – many objects worth nothing but memories. This box is the sepulchre of Louise Brunet's heart. The story behind the objects is lost; the objects are now the story. As I have carried this strange box through life and across the world, I have always intended to make a book out of it. This book now exists; you hold it in your hands. The Louise Brunet depicted within it is a fiction; the real Louise Brunet is irretrievable. Still, she gave me the stars. I merely drew the constellations.

NB: This is lyrical authorspeak for "The events and characters depicted herein are fictitious. Any similarity to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental."

# On the Record



*Paris, shortly before Christmas*

*Josianne's* gift is a simple square box, its sides about as long as her forearm. It is about as deep as her hand is wide. The white plastic lid has a quaint red crosshatch pattern on it, like the sort you might see on a tablecloth in a small family-owned restaurant. The box is nothing extraordinary, though its contents have been known to induce fevers. At least, that is one of the effects it had on Josianne when it first came to her—perhaps she decided to pass on her gift as much from a need to get it away from herself as to share it with another. At least, the box let her think she decided.

The first was a Russian physicist, whose face she had liked best when flipping through the files of foreign professors. His photograph called to her. She decided to hide the box in his office for him to find when he arrived and explored his new working space. The box had an odd effect on him, too—or maybe the effect was partially due to her easy laugh, her smooth, deeply red hair, her hazel eyes that changed color so strangely with the light, that had something a touch hazardous in them like a faint electric crackle. The next year, there was a Swiss historian. (The gift always chose to return to her.) Then there was a year when none of the scholars appealed to her, and she left the gift fallow.

At first Josianne thought this year would be the same; she'd taken no special notice of him. He was a foreign professor like all the others in her stack: a piece of paper she would have to enter into a database, assign an office space to, order a library card for. When he wrote to ask her questions about his sojourn in France, he was crisply polite—surprisingly formal for an American. When she entered his curriculum vitae into the system, she typed the words without really seeing them—a scholar in nineteenth-century French literature from a California university. It was only when her automatic fingers copied in one of his side projects—translating the poems of Paul Valéry—that something registered with her. She stopped and looked back up at the top of the page to check the name she had entered, truly reading it for the first time: Trevor Stratton.

A translator, caught in the space between two tongues. Such people tend to come a little bit unglued from the task of trying to convey meaning from one code to the other. The transfer is never safe, the meaning changes in the channel—becomes tinted, adulterated, absurd, stronger. Translating Valéry especially is a peculiar choice: his meaning is quite unstable even in the original French. That Trevor Stratton must be a little strange. Well, at least Josianne hoped so.

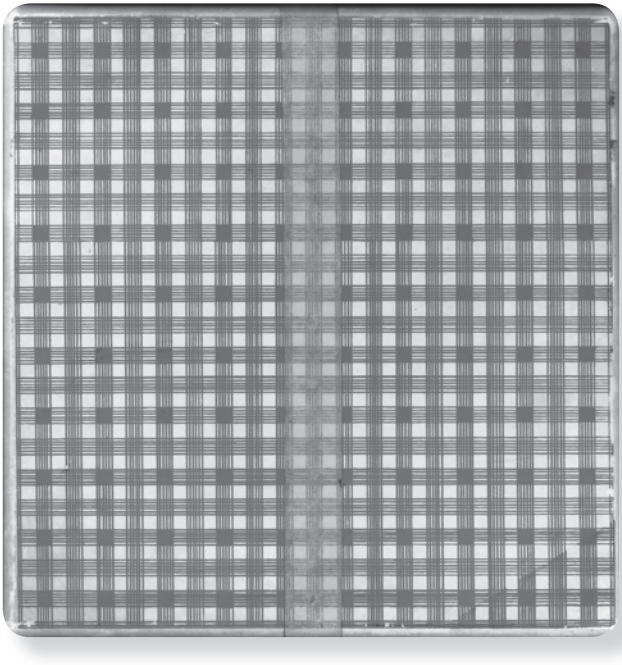
Now that she has received the photograph he sent her for his library card—the red one that will grant him access to special collections and original manuscripts—her mind is made up. She likes his face. His eyes are slightly widened in the picture, as if he is startled to find himself captured there. She is convinced that she sees the necessary gleam of yearning in those eyes; she thinks she can help this yearning. She is already fond of the graceful sweeps of gray arcing over each of his ears, contrasting sharply with his otherwise

starkly black hair, and his mouth caught in something like the beginning of a smile—whether sheepish or mischievous she isn't quite sure. It must be he is ripe for her gift.

She will give him the office with the tall, useless empty file cabinet in the corner. He will probably not think to open all the drawers and look in them his first day on the premises. But he will, eventually, discover a box tucked all the way into the darkness at the back of the bottom drawer, innocent-looking yet unexpected. How could one see such a thing and then not take a little peek inside?

She wonders what effect it will have on him.

This is the lid on the box:



Would you like to open it?

Paris

January 12th

Dear Sir,

Quite by accident, I have found the most fascinating record. I will be sending you scraps of my findings as I extract them—thus you must forgive me if the documentation does not yet make much sense to you. I will send all to you in the order in which I find it, and once I have all the data there is for me to excavate, I will attempt to collate everything into something more cogent. The letters are not in any order. Neither are the photographs. Neither are the coins, the gloves, the cards, nor anything else. It is all quite pell-mell, quite a puzzle.

It has snowed here in Paris, a good fall that layers everything in a lovely sheen of glimmering white. The poor French are utterly routed by this development: it seldom snows here. Traffic is gridlocked; people are stuck places. It is rather funny. I am told that when it snows, generally it is in tiny flakes that melt as soon as they hit the ground. This snow has stuck, and no one knows what to do.

So I am scanning the pieces of the record as I come upon them, and sending copies of the scans to you, should some ill luck befall my notes. Included with this missive are my first findings:

1. a letter asking for a girl's hand in marriage, dated 22 November 1915 (accompanied by my clumsy translation).
2. two photographs of the same man, taken approximately fifty years apart. (These are the largest photographs—

they rested on top of all the artifacts. They are approximately six by nine inches, and quite beautifully preserved. The first is dated 26 January 1943. The second is undated, and likely taken in the last decade of the nineteenth century, from the looks and clothes of the fellow in the picture.)

3. a postcard from a father to his daughter from the front lines, dated 12 October 1918.
4. a rosary.
5. a tiny diary with a drawing of roses on the cover, which calls itself "Little Memento Calendar for 1928." (The thing fits in the palm of the hand. I have scanned the cover and a few of the pages.)
6. two calling cards: one for M. & Mme Henri Brunet, and one for Madame Henri Brunet alone. (I have not yet found a photograph of the woman herself. Perhaps I will, but I'm not sure—perhaps she is not much for pictures of herself? Her Christian name is Louise.)

That is all I have to show you for now, but there will be more. I cannot tell you when for sure. I am constantly being sidetracked by other projects. Also, by absurd administrative rigmaroles: the French appear to have a fondness for that! Especially the pretty red-haired secretary, who loves to stamp things, and have me fill them out in triplicate, and make me take them places to be stamped again, and bring them back. On some days this tickles me. On other days, it makes me want to press the palms of both my hands against my ears to keep my brains from spilling out of them.

I am well these days, Sir. As a matter of fact, surprisingly well, considering that all my colleagues appear to be dropping like flies of various flu-like ailments.

I have told no one yet of this record I have found. Surely, someone would then try to steal it from me. Certainly, the French would insist on sending it to Preservation, and I would have to get a thousand things filled out and stamped before I could look at it again. What a nuisance. For now, I exercise my absolute right to be a secretive and quiet researcher—it is delicious and sweet, like hard fruit candy in the mouth.

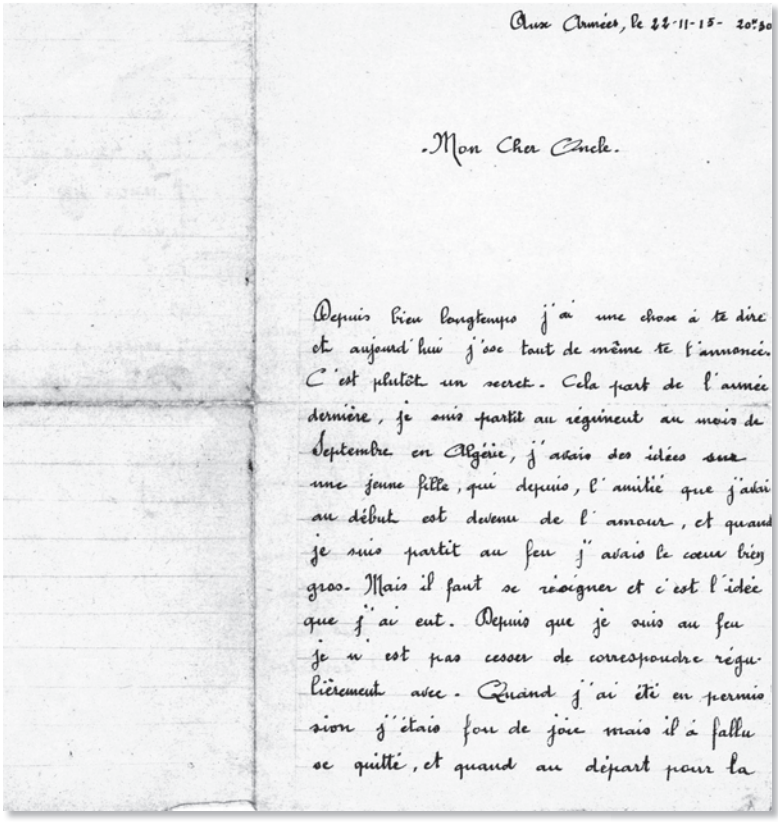
Well, I will leave you to your work, Sir, before I get too fanciful with my language again. My greetings to you and yours.

Sincerely,



Trevor Stratton

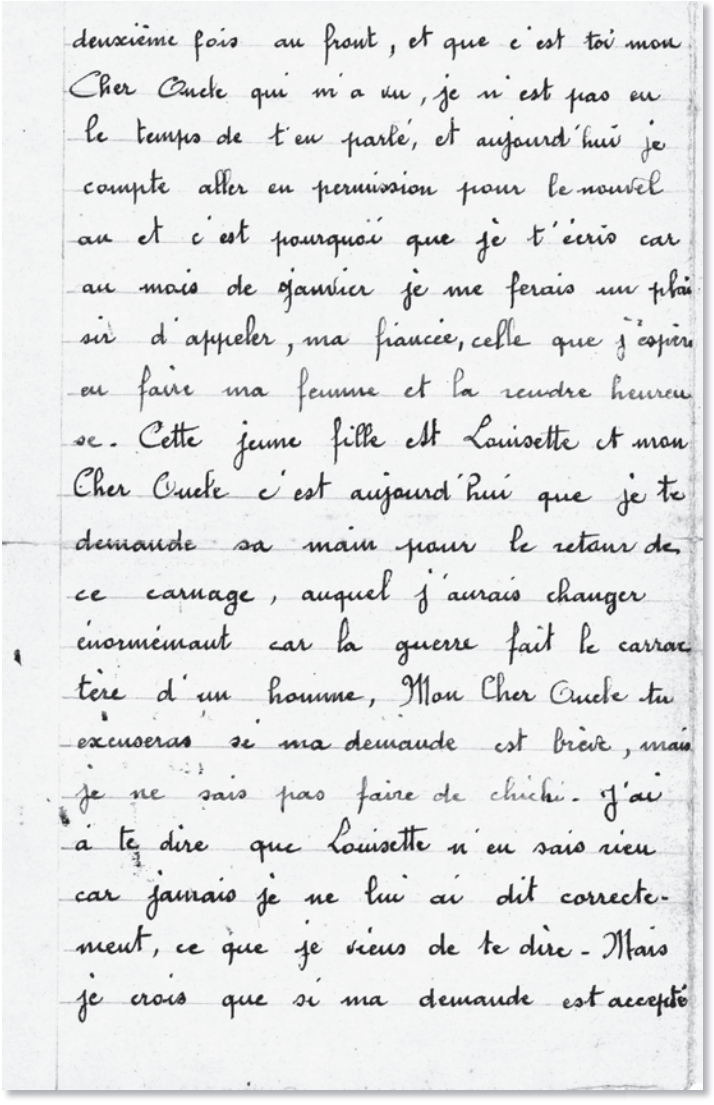
[NB: The envelope is missing from this particular letter, which is a bother—I am not even sure of the name of the addressee. It is one sheet of paper folded in half, to make a small folio. It is so delicate, splitting along its center fold. You can see that the writer was hardly more than a schoolboy; his endearing clumsiness of feeling and his orthographic errors are a testament to this, as is the fact that he has traced lines on the paper in pencil so that he could write neatly, straight across the page, and then attempted to erase them after the ink from his nib dried on the paper.]



Aux Armées, le 22-11-15- 20h30

Mon Cher Oncle.

Depuis bien longtemps j'ai une chose à te dire et aujourd'hui j'ose tout de même te l'annoncer. C'est plutôt un secret. Cela part de l'année dernière, je suis partit au régiment au mois de Septembre en Algérie, j'avais des idées sur une jeune fille, qui depuis, l'amitié que j'avais au début est devenu de l'amour, et quand je suis partit au feu j'avais le coeur très gros. Mais il faut se résigner et c'est l'idée que j'ai eut. Depuis que je suis au feu je n'est pas cesser de correspondre régulièrement avec. Quand j'ai été en permission j'étais fou de joie mais il a fallu se quitté, et quand au départ pour la



deuxième fois au front, et que c'est toi mon
Cher Oncle qui m'a vu, je n'est pas eu
le temps de t'en parlé, et aujourd'hui je
compte aller en permission pour le nouvel
an et c'est pourquoi que je t'écris car
au mois de janvier je me ferais un plai
sir d'appeler, ma fiancée, celle que j'espère
en faire ma femme et la rendre heureu
se. Cette jeune fille est Louisette et mon
Cher Oncle c'est aujourd'hui que je te
demande sa main pour le retour de
ce carnage, auquel j'aurais changer
énormément car la guerre fait le carac
tère d'un homme, Mon Cher Oncle tu
excuseras si ma demande est brève, mais
je ne sais pas faire de chichi. J'ai
à te dire que Louisette n'en sais rien
car jamais je ne lui ai dit correcte-
ment, ce que je viens de te dire. Mais
je crois que si ma demande est accepté

elle n'en seras qu'heureuse. J'ai travaillé sur le front pour cela, car j'espérais racheter ma faute en étant au régiment et je crois avoir réalisé cette idée.
J'espère Mon Cher Oncle que tu en feras part à Louisette. J'ai appris par Louisette quelle avait quitté Malakoff et quelle était chez ma Tante Eugénie J'espère quelle seras heureuse chez ma Tante car elle est bien bonne. Je suis toujours en repos et la santé se maintient Je ne vais plus grand chose à te dire apart qu'en lisant ta réponse seras pour moi un nouveu grand courage.

Je termine en t'embrassant.

Ton neveu qui t'aime et pense à toi

Camille

At the armies, the 22-11-15—20:30

My Dear Uncle,[1]

For a long time now, I have had something to tell you and today I finally dare announce it. It is a bit of a secret. This started last year, when I left for the regiment in Algeria in the month of September. Then, I had designs upon a young girl, and in our correspondence since then, the friendship that we shared in the beginning became love, so that when I left for the front I had a heavy heart. But one must be resigned to such things, so I carried on. Since I have been at the front I have not stopped corresponding regularly with her. When I was on leave, seeing her made me crazy with joy but we had to part once again. I saw you, my Dear Uncle, when leaving for the second time for the front, but I did not have the time to speak to you of this development. Today I count on being granted leave for new year's, and this is why I write you, because in the month of January I would take great pleasure to call my fiancée the one that I hope to make happy as my wife. This young girl is Louisette, and, my Dear Uncle, today I ask for her hand upon my return from this carnage, where I will have changed enormously since war makes the character of a man. My Dear Uncle, you will forgive me if my request is brief, but I do not know how to make a fuss. I have to tell you that Louisette knows nothing of this as I have never properly told

1. His punctuation is atrocious (commas everywhere like anxious hiccupping gasps), as is his sentence structure and his spelling. I simply could not render it accurately in my translation. I have tried to help along his poor wording without utterly destroying the flavor of his voice.

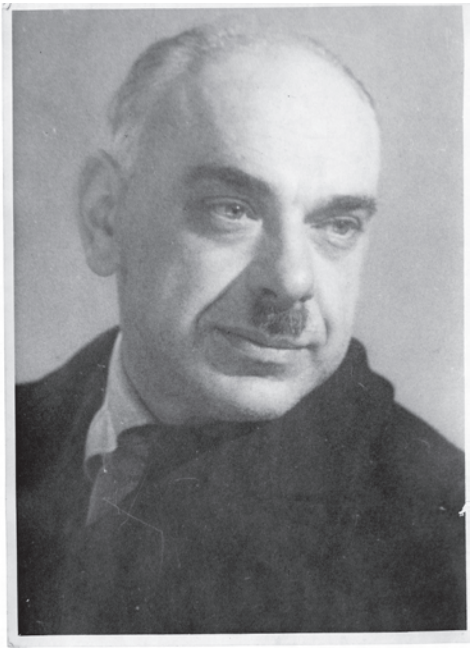
her what I have just told you. But I believe that if my request is accepted, she would only be happy. I have labored at the front with this happiness in mind. I hoped to redeem my faults by being at the regiment and I believe I have done so. I hope, My Dear Uncle, that you will accept this request and share it with Louisette. I have learned from her that she has left Malakoff for a spell and that she is now at my aunt Eugénie's. I hope she will be happy at my Aunt's as she is so good. I am still at rest and my health maintains itself. I do not have much left to tell you other than that reading your reply will grant me a great new burst of courage.

I finish by embracing you.[2]

Your nephew who loves you and thinks of you, Camille

2. The French salutation *je t'embrasse* confuses me each time I hear it. The verb *embrasser* means all of the following: (1) to hug someone; (2) to kiss someone, chastely, as in on the cheek; (3) to kiss someone passionately—what we call a French kiss, of course. I don't know what to make of it: the connotation must always be picked up from context. It makes for a lot of interesting ambiguities. I choose to translate this word with the English *embrace*.

*A photograph dated*
*26 Janvier 1943*



This man here, he is close to the grave. You do not know how you know this; perhaps it is the melancholy weariness in his eyes. Somehow you know he never sees a free France again. He dies of a massive heart attack just a year after this picture is taken. You see

him stricken, breaking a sudden sweat, clutching his left arm with his right hand. Moments before, his face had been so placid as he read his newspaper. Look at the face from moments before and try to read the cause of his body's failure—

If you were a romantic, you would say: he died of a broken heart. He was, after all, a widower. His wife died when his daughter was born—in 1896. It must have been a very, very slow broken heart. Maybe it took so long because it kept getting half-mended by the young women he hired to tend to his children.

Or he died of a broken heart because his country was in bondage—though he survived the invasion by nearly four years. Really, morally, he was quite flexible. The situation was not ideal. He didn't necessarily enjoy it, but he never fought it. He was too old. It was no longer any of his business.

He was seventy-three years old. It was just his time. His last name was Victor. His first name is yet to be found in the documentation.

After the troops march into Paris in June of 1940, he spends an entire month completely drunk. His daughter is concerned. Her husband says: "Leave him alone. This is how he mourns our country."

This condition is unusual for him. He always had an even temperament. He was always a moderate person. Despite his constant state of inebriation, he isn't loud or sloppily emotional. He doesn't say anything that might get him shot. He hardly says anything at all.

The men who used to work with him say his pathetic drunk-

enness is caused by his recent retirement—he simply doesn't know what to do with himself.

He never explains to anyone the reason for his sudden excess. In July he comes back to himself. He lives a quiet life. He doesn't belligerently look into the German soldier's eyes when he gets asked for his papers on the street, a mere three steps away from the front door of his apartment building. He doesn't belligerently refuse to meet the German soldier's eyes when the soldier looks into his face, scrutinizing him for signs of subversive tendencies. He respects the curfew.

He buys meat on the black market. On the black market, he also buys a delicate pair of sheer stockings with a black seam up the back: a gift for his daughter. She thanks him but doesn't wear them. She says she will save them for a special occasion.

He knows his vision up close is failing. His work becomes more difficult. Soon he'll have to retire. This frightens him. He would like to be able to work all the time—it would make it easier for him to ignore the rising rumblings of the forthcoming war.

His daughter has been trying for years to have a son. She has not been successful in begetting any child, not even a daughter. She cries to him: "I am too old now, I never will. Why didn't I? Am I not a real woman?"

He holds her febrile body against him. He feels her hot face against his neck, moist with tears. "My dear," he says, "be glad you don't have a son. Look at the shape this world is in. Be glad you don't have a son."

Still, he would have wished a son for his daughter, just to make her happy—even though he knows that the grief of losing a child is much keener than the grief of never having him.

He loves his work, its tiny precise nature. He can get lost in it for hours. He has been doing this work for so many years that his hearing has lost sensitivity to the sound of the drills and sanders. It hardly even registers anymore. When he was young, the noise echoed in his head for hours after he got home. He could hear it as he went to sleep—even when he made love to his wife, so long ago.

The Great War is receding; it is a new decade, and his daughter seems to be taking well to married life. It doesn't escape his notice that the fellow she married looks strikingly like him. The resemblance makes him smile. It isn't uncommon for good girls to marry their fathers.

She babbles joyfully about having a son. She cannot wait to cut up her wedding dress to make baptismal robes for the plump pink baby boy she will push forth from herself, in blood and pain and happiness.

He looks at his daughter's sweet oval face, at the young hope in her dark eyes, and is reminded of his wife. Louise is the only thing he has left.

He gets a great price on fifty-seven eight-millimeter pearls from one of his suppliers. Their color is beautiful: a uniform cream that

can flatter any complexion. They are also almost perfectly round. Their smooth weight in his hands is a joy to him.

He has one of the women in the shop string them on white silk thread: though his hands are skilled in so many ways, he has never been good with knots. He is a man for metal and stone, for welding and cutting and polishing—a man for intricate patterns in chains of gold and glinting facets on diamonds.

He makes the clasp himself, from white gold. He encrusts it with tiny round diamonds. It is truly a labor of love. He will give his daughter the necklace on her wedding day. She is marrying a fellow that he approves of, who works under him at the shop. The fellow's name is Henri Brunet. He should train him to take over, after he is gone.

His eldest child, his only son, dies swiftly of the Spanish influenza in December 1918, after surviving the Great War. His life is a disaster. If it weren't for his daughter, he would take the rifle he went to war with, wedge it tightly under his chin, and blow the back of his head off.

He serves in the Great War. He is too old for this. This is ridiculous. He is too old for shells and shrapnel and falling men with bloody gore splattering from their shattered skulls—these men who fall and stay there, rotting and dissolving into the noxious earth.

There is an explosion behind him. He ducks from the shower of poisonous mud, covers his head with his arms. Something flies into the back of his neck and gets wedged there. It burns in his flesh. He

thinks: it must be a piece of shrapnel. He goes to the doctor. The doctor swabs the site with alcohol, roots around in his muscle with a big pair of flat-ended tweezers. He pulls the thing out and shows it to him.

The thing isn't shrapnel. It's another man's tooth, a man who got blown to bits in the explosion.

"It looks like a canine," the doctor remarks.

He laughs and laughs until tears pour from his eyes. Then he vomits. He will never forget the smell of the alcohol and the needling pain in the meat of his neck as the doctor worked in the back of him.

His son is in the war too. This is ridiculous. The boy is just a child; the hair on his face is still downy.

His daughter is in love with a boy he does not approve of—her own cousin, who is in the war too and writes her torrid letters from the front lines. There are so many things that are ridiculous—he doesn't care what world he has to live in, as long as he never has to go to war again.

He is in the Paris metro with his son and his daughter, each one holding one of his hands. His love for them often hurts him.

The train pulls into the station with a great squeal. It has five cars: four green ones, and a red one in the middle. His daughter looks up at him and asks: "Papa, why is the first-class car in the middle?"

He has never wondered this before. Children ask the strangest questions. He spontaneously answers: "Well, if the train stalls and gets hit by another train from the back, or if it hits a stalled train from the front, the middle car is the safest. It's to keep society's more valuable members from getting damaged, you see."

This just occurs to him as he says it, and it immediately strikes him as true.

"Papa, that's terrible!" His son looks at him with large outraged eyes, his sense of justice deeply shaken.

He shrugs. "Dear boy, this is the world. This is just the way the world works."

He turns out the first young woman he has hired to tend his children. Though she feels so good, he is afraid he will get her pregnant. Then he would have to marry her. This offends his sense of propriety.

It's a cloudless day in the spring of 1896 when his wife gives birth to his second child, a daughter, and dies of complications from the delivery. He names the child Louise. He looks at her tiny flailing limbs and feels utterly lost. He thinks this must be the worst day of his entire life. He is still young.

He sets an oval sapphire into a gold ring. The stone's pure blue color mesmerizes him. The filigree work he has wrought around it is beautiful. His supervisor has spent a great deal of time showing him how to do it. He thinks maybe he is being groomed to take over after his supervisor is gone.

The stone glints darkly at him. He has never been so happy. He will give this ring to his wife to celebrate the birth of their son. It's the first piece of jewelry he's made that he gets to take home in-

stead of selling. He is proud of his labor. He is glad that his wife will wear his work on her body.

He is frightened the day he gets married. He's pretty sure he loves the girl, but he isn't sure about *till death do us part*. That's a long way away. How is a man to know how much he will love a woman decades from now, after she has grown old and withered, and perhaps mean and bitter?

Today she looks lovely in her white lace. Her oval face has a high flush, and her dark eyes will not meet his. She is a virgin. This makes him nervous. Being with a virgin makes him fumble and flutter also, as if this were his first time. At first, the business of clothing removal is very serious—they don't smile. Then, he somehow manages to get tangled up in his own suspenders. He makes himself laugh with his contortions. His mirth means she is allowed to laugh also, and she does.

"Here, I will help you with these," she says, and she does.

They are naked and free and at the cusp of the rest of their lives: it's like he's starting over, as if he were being born.

This man there, he is barely more than a boy. He has not even left his father's household. This is his first serious picture, taken alone without his family. His father laughs and says: "The next picture you'll have taken, you'll already have your wife and your children. Enjoy your bachelor life!"

He is excited. He looks forward to the future. Look at his forthright gaze. He has just gotten an apprenticeship making jewelry.

His father is disappointed that the boy will not pursue his studies in law but understands that the boy is good with his hands and wants to do something with them. The boy has always been gifted with tiny work.

His protruding ears are endearing. He is too young to even know that a portrait from a profile or three-quarters perspective would be immensely more flattering. The ears would not stick out so. Eventually, he will figure this out.

If you were a romantic, and you hadn't just been pulled back here through what is to come, you would say: He has his whole life ahead of him—how lucky he is.



A Photograph Undated
(likely taken in the last decade of the nineteenth century)