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Opening Extract from...

Monsieur

Written by Emma Becker

Translation by Maxim Jakubowski

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I bumped into Monsieur's first-born on Line One, at Charles-de-Gaulle-Étoile. Classes had ended and hordes of noisy schoolkids were laying siege to the trains. I had to get up from my seat to allow a new batch to fit into my already full carriage and it was only when I felt a sharp elbow dig into my back that I looked up from my book for the customary exchange of indifferent apologies, neither of us bothering to disconnect from our iPods. As ever, I was only half convinced of the need to apologize. Why should I? Because I just happened to be there? Because I was in the way?

I can't pretend that his voice, which I could barely hear, triggered it. For some reason, I looked up at him, and knew instantly, without any shadow of doubt, that it was his son. There was no magic involved, but the likeness between them struck me with all the power of a spell. With immense effort, I dropped my eyes from his. They were wide, heavy-lidded, weighed down by the sensuality he had inherited from Monsieur and of which he was no doubt unaware. *It's him it's him it's him it's him it's him*. I realized I was staring at him and pretended to return to André Breton – I couldn't think of anything else to do.

I had never thought it would be so painful to be close to him. I didn't even notice the train reaching my station – I could have followed him anywhere.

Charles. The eldest. That morning, in the blue room of a hotel in the fifteenth *arrondissement*, I had surprised Monsieur by listing his boys: Charles, Samuel, Adam, Louis and Sacha, the spawn of a life I could barely imagine. I knew things about the eldest that even he

might no longer remember: the heated argument over dinner about some historical battle during which Charles, in a fit of rage, had slammed his fist on the table, almost earning himself a paternal slap; the afternoon when he had come in from school totally high, his thick black hair still smelling of grass. Monsieur loved him with a passion – beside which the tenderness he had once shown me was a drop in the ocean.

The train lurched and, again, Charles bumped against me. 'Sorry,' he said, with a pinched smile.

I recognized his father's dimples, the same white teeth. It was as if Monsieur was gazing at me, for the first time in six months, in a way that explained everything: his children, his wife, everything he had built his life on. I could have been kind, I could have been compassionate, but Charles was somehow unable to move away from me, offering a series of apologetic smiles (each evoking an image of Monsieur after our lovemaking). I wanted to scream, *Stop!* I don't want to look into those grey eyes, which don't belong to you. None of your features truly belongs to you – not even the long nose your mother gave you. I was biting the inside of my cheeks, pressing my lips together tightly, avoiding the unformed questions in his eyes.

Who am I? My name is Ellie (which means nothing to you but, God knows, there was a time when it meant everything to *him*, more than drink, food, sleep and everything in between). I'm about your age, a couple of years older – I haven't changed much since the days when I was carrying my maths books around in a

moth-eaten old rucksack, and I'm looking at you like this because you remind me so much of your father. In your dark eyes I recognize the same unconscious languor that once frightened me, the hunger for women that attracted me. Right now, I'm reminded of those eyes peering over his mask when I watched him operate at the clinic. Of course, Charles, I know it shouldn't affect me in this way: I'm almost forgetting you're just a rough sketch of him, but thirty years younger.

I was once his mistress and I loved your father with an all-consuming fire. I can imagine one random evening coming across you at a party, sharing a joint with you and watching your eyes cloud over, as his did, learning what makes you laugh and contemplating your so familiar lips. It would be so easy, so natural, to become your girlfriend and meet up with you every evening outside the lycée. I'm not too old for you, just old enough to help you discover the realities of life, but I feel twenty years older. I heard so much about you from your father that in my eyes you're almost a child, asexual. If I were now to kiss you, as I desperately want to, it would be with despair, because you are the son of the man I cannot forget, and your kisses would have the same effect on me as the methadone prescribed for a recovering heroin addict. I've encountered so many Almosts and Not Quite Rights since he and I parted . . .

Hi, Charles, I'm Ellie. You've never spoken to me and you'll probably never see me again, but I know the name of every member of your family because I have held your father, of whom you happen to be a disturbing copy, in my arms. So, although I don't really know you, I truly

know you . . . It's like a Truffaut movie: a strange woman among thousands walks into the same Métro carriage as her lover's son. She recognizes him; his features are familiar from all the photographs she has seen of him, of his family. With your father, it could have been anyone, but it just happened to be me. It was me he would meet up with on Tuesday mornings when you'd all left for school; it was me he was already thinking of when he kissed the top of your heads. Me, with my Bensimon jeans and my ponytail. This face. These hands sweating over a paperback in the stifling atmosphere of the Paris Underground but which, *barely six months ago*, Charles, were digging their nails into another pair of hands, the hands you felt on your back when you were learning to ride your first bicycle in the Luxembourg Gardens. You know none of this, and you're peering at me in the way you probably do at all girls – but I should be the person you despise most in the world because all I want is to hide in your pocket and spend the evening next to him at your dinner table. Just to see him. To witness some of the moments you barely notice, like your conversations, his kiss before you go to bed, the first words he says when he crosses the threshold every evening. Just five minutes at a table with all of you. Five minutes of your comfortable life, you arguing with your father, who is so annoyed that he has stopped eating, your pretty mother sighing at this male aggression, your four younger brothers fearful of taking sides, and me, stuffing myself with images to conjure up when I'm alone.

At Châtelet, Charles shot me a final glance from beneath his long black eyelashes, then disembarked amid

the flow of passengers. I watched his silhouette until he had disappeared among a hundred anonymous heads, walking, I knew, towards Line Four and, later, emerging onto the Île Saint-Louis. A door, a number, a key granting access to the large family apartment where his mother was listening to his brother Adam telling her all about his day in first year. Monsieur would get home at around nine, after the children had had their dinner. But they would cross his path in a thousand ways, brushing against him as they cleaned their teeth in the bathroom before the goodnight kiss. And Charles would fall asleep with no memory of me. The Métro carriage felt so empty now that he was gone.

Cry. Scream. Burst out laughing. Whistle. Get back to your book.

My chin quivered like that of a little girl whose hand had been smacked. I pulled my collar up, and all the way to Nation, serenaded by Offenbach's '*Belle Nuit*', I sobbed my heart out. It seemed the only thing to do.

APRIL

Lolita, by Nabokov. A book that led me on the path to damnation. I don't think you could find a more guilty title in my library. I had journeyed through de Sade, Serpieri and Manara, Mandiargues, Pauline Réage, but none had produced the itch that literally threw me into Monsieur's arms. I see it clearly now. I should have been kept well apart from the yellowing old copy that stood innocently on the shelf. It was there I learned all there is to know about a particular type of man, worldly but weary, whose gaze is invariably drawn to young girls, and how those men focus on bodies that are no longer children's but not quite women's. It's the book in which I learned about the inner voice that draws them to nymphets. I learned how to decipher the vice beneath their respectable appearance, their adoration of the tousled goddesses they name Lolita.

Lolita. Demanding beyond reason, possessive and jealous, drawn into an endless war (which she has already won) against all other females, looking down on them despite her diminutive stature, her slender limbs and her age: she is fifteen years old, the age at which Nabokov killed her. The men we are talking about, in their serious suits and oxford brogues, kneel at the altar

of these little darlings, for reasons that are wrong, and sordid to many: their innocence and the softness of their skin; their arses and breasts, which defy Newton's laws of gravity; their fingers, which lack shame, their small hands manipulating in childlike fashion – hands that have probably held nothing larger than a Magnum ice-cream (isn't there playful appetite in the way they hold this new delicacy?); their eyes, which are like harpoons because invariably, with men, they hold their gaze, in the street, despite the presence of parents, because they have no sense of shame. I now know all there is to know of men's attraction to them, but does anyone know what the nymphet is looking for? What draws her away from long-haired boys towards men as old as her father? Nabokov never let us into what Lolita was thinking when she sat on Humbert Humbert's lap on that pale summer morning. Or why, a few pages earlier, she was jumping across his knees, deliberately mistreating him, knickers flashing, twittering while her worshipper attempted to stem an almost adolescent effusion. It's this parallel reading of the book that I missed, the impossibility of discovering how the story would have unfolded had Lolita been allowed to speak. It was with this in mind that in the previous October I had climbed into the bed of a forty-year-old man. I shall ignore the almost accidental frolic I had when I was fifteen with a young company executive: there are men, and then there are men in their forties. Should you consider the distinction insignificant, I can assure you that not a single member of my tribe has ever confused the two. Nymphets and forty-year-old men attract each other.

That man – what was his name? – hadn't left me exhausted with delight in the morning but neither had he killed my attraction to his sort. I will go further: it was his abysmal lack of *savoir faire* and sensuality that propelled me on my quest. Maybe I was too demanding; maybe I was hoping too much to fulfil all the perfect scenarios I had imagined: myself, bent to the strength, will, hands and words of a professor, open to anything and prey to every manipulation my body would allow him. I had no wish to talk, and neither of us said a word until four o'clock when I got tired of having him inside me. It was a world away from the excesses that had previously crowded my mind. It was while I was jerking him off that I realized the list of those who could worship me as I wanted was endless. I smiled when he came, thinking of the men in my future.

The following day, scampering towards the Métro, still bone tired from lack of sleep, I realized I knew no more than I had the day before. That older men can sometimes find it difficult to get hard was no surprise. The experience had not been psychologically exciting as I had expected; he had said none of the words I had hoped for, and my body showed no evidence of added maturity, even though I was twenty. When the phone rang and his number lit up, I didn't answer and, after a few weeks' silence, I received this message: 'I'm tired of pursuing you, Ellie. Stop playing at being Lolita. You're too old for that sort of game, and I have no intention of becoming Humbert Humbert, even if I wanted to, which I don't.'

I didn't know Monsieur. I had heard his name a

thousand times over meals with my uncle Philippe – they were not only colleagues but close friends. For me, his name evoked the hospital. I didn't *know* Monsieur. If I'm honest, it's all my mother's fault. In February this year I was slouching up the stairs from my room in the basement, holding my Bible under my arms (*La Mécanique des femmes* by Louis Calaferte), wondering what to do with myself during the students' strike. It's impossible now to determine what Mum had in mind when she mentioned the surgeon's name. According to her, he was the only person apart from me who appeared to want such a filthy piece of literature – in fact, he was *obsessed* with it. At first, I couldn't have cared less: Philippe's work colleague belonged to another world, whether or not we were obsessed by the same book, and I couldn't see myself arriving at the clinic to discuss erotica with a man of forty-five.

Forty-five.

Forty-five.

An insidious form of boredom allowed the idea to take root in me that I should meet this man. I would repeat his name aloud, surprised that I found it increasingly attractive in a dangerous sort of way. I searched for it on Facebook and gazed at the only hit, trying half-heartedly to come up with a reason to make him a 'friend'. I had to enter his world like a spy, with literature, a charming Trojan horse, concealing my true purpose. The need to discover everything about him was like a mosquito bite I had to scratch. I had put two or three cunning questions to Philippe and learned that when I was still small I had

passed the famous C.S. in the clinic's corridors when Philippe and he had been visiting patients. I plumbed the depths of my memory and recalled my uncle's birthday, two years ago: I had spent an entire evening among a crowd of elders without noticing the man who read the same books as I did, and just happened to have a twenty-five-year start on me. Twenty-five years: such an enormous gap. Twenty-five years spent caressing the bodies of women, subverting procreative sex, while I was still an innocent sucking milk from my mother's breasts. Must I also mention the strong ties connecting Monsieur and my family, thin but strong, like a nylon cord, with the same cutting edge? The heads of twenty-year-old girls are full of improbable romantic scripts: there's the one about the student and the surgeon, where she knows nothing and he knows everything and, standing between them, the dear old uncle, unaware of the drama unfolding around him. (Were he to find out, the erotic tale would swiftly turn into a drama by Racine!)

In March, I moved closer. I no longer needed a face for Monsieur. That he was a surgeon, that he harboured the same tastes as I did, that he was married and had a family made him stand out from the crowd easily enough; those attributes confirmed him as an inhabitant of an almost parallel world, that of Adults (it would be an aberration to define people of my age as such). I didn't need to find him physically attractive (just as long as he wasn't disgusting . . .). As I write, I can hear his theatrical indignation: 'So you would have been content with any old fat guy!' To which I can only answer, yes, probably.

But let me reassure him: as the story unfolds, we will see that his trap was perfect.

One day I became tired of circling him without his being aware of it. It was April. The shimmering month of April. Pollen was floating down from the chestnut trees and I was bored. The strike struggled on, I wasn't seeing anyone and, as spring came around, I spent my days sprawled on the terrace, sunbathing. I was desperate to meet up with people, men, and experience fever, ecstasy, passion, anything but this deadly lethargy. I had gone over and over the situation in my head and lay in wait, crouched in the shadows, for the moment to reveal myself to Monsieur.