

That afternoon at the *Oh Poivrier* restaurant we had, once more, run out of time. And though we had our first and only dinner alone that night I had categorically refused to grunge up our special intimate moment, the only one we could ever get, with more of my murky account.

I had said, "Stay tuned for the next episode, I'll mail it to you."

I was joking of course but you said, "Yes, please do."

And my careless comment ended up being turned into a promise. And so I had embarked into a scriptwriting of sorts, a sad comedy of errors. And so, a few weeks after I had left you and Sophie at the turn of a long corridor at Orly airport, I had mailed you from the South of France, the first 'in role' instalment, a script of sorts that began with:

"An object over twelve inches long!" I still shudder at the thought of the long Bowie hunting knife I had glimpsed upon my arrival at Josh's apartment. Its blade had glistened coldly under the dull kitchen lamp. It was lying on the drain board in a little pool of water. Its grooved horn handle had the soft waxy sheen I have always enjoyed in natural wax and ivory carvings. Its curved tip seemed to point at a box of rifle ammunition nearby on the kitchen counter and at a very dusty bong that bared mussed palm prints. At the time, however, only three thoughts had come to my mind: the first was that he did hunt, just as he had said he did. The second was that by the well-used looks of the dusty bong, he probably hunted high. The third thought that had crossed my mind then was, actually, more of a question. Where's his rifle? It was not, however a question that had begged an immediate answer. It had been a thought that had simply flitted across my wary mind.

Josh had momentarily excused himself to 'hit the john', as he had said and I had been working up to telling him I needed to use the phone to call a cab. That would be signalling to him that I was through with him and through, too, with his idea of fun on the town. By then, I truly had had enough and Ann would be home soon. I no longer had any reason to delay my return home.

Mr Smith the assistant D.A. repeated his question, "Alexandra, tell us what the accused shouted at you after you screamed for help?"

I had heard him the first time and I was trying to bring myself to say his words in front of all these people, in this courtroom filled to the rafters with lawyers, law students, onlookers, my family and my friends.

"Alexandra, please." Mr Smith looked kindly at me over the metal rim of his glasses.

Through clenched teeth, I repeated what Josh had shouted, "You scream again ... I kill you!" I hesitated and Mr Smith nodded for me to go on. I inhaled slowly to calm my racing heartbeat, "You motha fuckin' slut. You ain't going nowhere, bitch!" Looking down at my trembling hands, I added softly, "That's what he said."

"And why did he feel the need to threaten you in such a vicious manner?"

"He had tripped me and I had fallen backwards on the floor. Against something very hard, a hard edge. I was winded and ... disoriented. I tried to sit up, to stand, but I couldn't."

"Okay. I understand. You were winded by your fall backwards. But why did he say these very harsh words to you, Alexandra?"

"I had screamed. I thought I had heard ... footsteps somewhere below. I had cried for help. I was hoping –" My voice broke.

"And what were you hoping for?"

"I ... I was hoping ... I thought. I thought someone might hear me ... and ... I was hoping they'd call the police."

"Now, Alexandra, why did you want strangers walking back to their own home around 2 a.m. to call the police? Why did you want them to call the police on your behalf, Alexandra?"

"I ... knew Josh was goin' –"

"Objection, Your Honour!" Mr Bartley interjected.

"Sustained."

Startled, I looked at my lawyer startled by the defence lawyer's objection.

"Alexandra, without naming anyone," enjoined my lawyer, "please, tell us why you wanted passers-by to call the police on your behalf."

"Without naming ... anyone?"

How can I not name anyone? He was not an abstract concept. He was right here, right in front of me. Boring right through me, smirking when he thought no one was watching. Why can't I refer to him by his name, Josh Bell, the man who raped me? "I ... I mean the thing is I was afraid of ... of ... "

"The man you knew was going to rape yo—"

"Objection. Your Honour!"

"Sustained!"

"Alexandra, can we refer to him as the accused?" I willed myself to be mesmerised by the hem of the navy blue skirt I was wearing and how it lay pressed slightly above my knees, demurely close together.

"Alexandra?"

"Yes, sir." I answered fighting the pull of Josh's presence, as he leaned comfortably back into his chair, slightly out of focus but very real all the same as he sat permanently to the left of my field of vision each time I leaned forward to speak into the microphone. "Well ... Jo – the accused ... Well, I knew ... I just knew he was going to ... to rape me." One hand clasped tight inside the other I fought to contain my emotions. "And I was afraid to ... to die, too."

Mr Smith let my words ripple across the silent courtroom before pretending an innocent question, "You mean that you thought the act of rape might kill you?"

"No. No, sir. I don't mean that. I was ... I was a virgin, sir." More to the point, sir, I wanted to add, no woman ever wants to be penetrated in a climate of fear. Not even if they have made love a zillion times before. But no, I didn't think his dick was going to kill me. " ... I was ... terribly frightened of being raped. But on top of that I thought he ... my ... aggressor might ... he might kill me ... instead of ... or ... afterwards."

"Instead of what?"

"Instead of raping me. Because he couldn't ... penetrate."

"This sounds somewhat confusing, Alexandra. You need to tell us, you need to tell the jury here why such horrible thoughts had crossed your mind and why your aggressor could not penetrate."

"Well, he ... he had finally managed to ... get on top of me. But he hadn't ... yet. I mean I knew he was not yet able ... to rape me. I had thrown him off. I sensed he was furious. Mad. I mean ... crazed."

"So, he was crazed because he had not yet been able to penetrate you and—"

"And I remembered the big hunting knife, a Bowie, I had seen in the kitchen near the sink. And the cartridges. I knew there would be a rifle ... somewhere in his apartment."

"And why were you worried about a rifle being in the apartment or by the hunting knife in the kitchen?"

"I felt he ... he might become enraged or so frustrated with me, with ... the fact that he couldn't, that he might ... get a weapon. The violence in him ... I just knew ... "

"Alexandra, I am going to ask you a very important question. Listen carefully. You had two fears going on simultaneously at the moment at which you screamed for someone to help you. One was that you were about to be raped. The other was the intuitive feeling that you might be stabbed or shot dead by a derang—"

"Your Honour! Objection! Cheap trickery to—"

"Sustained!" declared Judge Grimes. "Mr Smith, the Court is asking you to refrain from using any sort of derogatory epithet that might lead the jury to a premature character judgement of the defendant during this particular line of questioning."

"Yes, Your Honour. Alexandra, rape or death? Which did you fear the most at the time?"

Like LCD displays on the highway that urge motorists to negotiate the road carefully, little thoughts flashed behind my eyes: Take your time. Breathe in. Be clear. "I thought I would first be raped if he could and then killed ...afterwards. Or killed if he couldn't."

"That's a fair enough answer under the circumstances. Now Alexandra, you need to explain to the Court and to the ladies and gentlemen of the Jury how it is that your aggressor was able to position himself ... on top of you."

"I'm not sure. As soon as I fell backwards ... it felt ... I couldn't raise my head."

"And why not?"

"I think he must have grabbed ... my head was pulled back by my hair."

"Yes, you do have very long hair indeed, but please explain to all of us here why you have just said 'I think.' Surely, Alexandra, surely you would know whether or not the defendant had a hold of your hair or not."

I shook my head. "I know he did but the room was ... dark. Pitch-dark. I could not see anything. Not even my hands in front of my face. I couldn't see anything. I was totally disoriented."

"Well, now. Okay. The room was pitch-black. So, how did you know your aggressor was even anywhere near you?"

"My head was pulled back. I could feel his breath. I could ... smell him."

I had clawed the absolute darkness searching for his eyes. A fist had smashed against my face. Sparks of yellow pain had screamed behind my eyes.

"So, the man who has trapped you inside a pitch-black room, has thrown you on the ground, has punched you in the face, is yanking your head back and—"

"Objection, Your Honour!"

"Overruled."

I had pleaded with Josh not to hurt me, but the sudden understanding that I, Alexandra Delaforêt, had come face to face with raw, gratuitous violence had stunned me even more than the blows themselves. I had lifted my bottom off the floor to bring my legs back against my stomach, coiled to kick, desperately wanting to connect with his body, anywhere on his body but a mighty kick that would crush his genitals was foremost on my mind.

"Alexandra, did you, at any time attempt to strike ... your attacker? Did you try to weaken him somehow?"

"I did." A totally useless thought had crossed my mind at the time, how can he still be so strong? After the gallons of whiskey, after the marijuana smoked at the party. How can he still be standing?

"And did you manage?"

"No. Not really. Only glancing blows. I didn't manage to really hurt him." I hadn't managed to disable him.

His eyes. Go for the eyes.

I had not been able to gouge his eyes out. I had not even been able to crush his balls with my knee. "At the beginning he was careful to stay either behind me or to the side of me. To stranglehold me from behind."

"The strangleholds you've just mentioned, were they before the blows to your face? Or after?"

"Uh, after. When I had managed to get up. And he brought me down again. And somehow he dropped himself on top of me. I tried to kick but I couldn't turn enough to face him. To position my legs to ... to kick him properly."

"Why were you unable to face your aggressor?"

"By then he had a hand gripped around my throat and ... a knee on my stomach." I heard him grunt. Though the grip around my neck was still tight I felt his weight shift sideways.

His belt. He's undoing it.

He grunted again. As the pressure against my throat shifted once more, I strained under his fingers.

He's undoing his fly.

And I pleaded with him.

One button at a time. With his left hand.

And I thrashed and kicked the empty space directly in front of me, the only space I could kick. *He's going to rape me!* I had screamed silently, sensing that penetration was imminent.

The thought of my impending rape electrified me beyond fear. He moved off me. For a split second I did not feel him anywhere on me.

"And his full weight crushed me a second time. Sideways across my chest and stomach. Slamming the wind out of me. One knee prizing my thighs apart. He was ... cursing and shouting obscenities at me."

He's rearing to thrust and impale me.

"Now, Alexandra, I know this is harrowing for you but, please tell us what he did next."

"He had finally managed – " I can't do this. Too ... hard. Too ... I leaned back against the high back of the chair squeezing my eyes shut against the welling tears that had suddenly pooled under my eyelids, against the repulsive memory of his body slamming against mine.

"Alexandra, here, have a little water."

I knew my mother was seated somewhere near the front of the courtroom. I could almost hear her urge me through the moment. Come Alex, you can do it. Don't you break now.

No, I wouldn't break in front of him. She had flown in from Peru to be by my side during this ordeal. Ann is the one who, by phone, had broken the news of my 'accident' to her back in Lima.

'Darling, Ann, your roommate,' Mayanne had said, 'she's told me everything.' But Ann had not told my mother everything, certainly not the part of my life that had spanned close to four years. After all, as Ann had reminded me, 'It's not like we're still together ... now, is it?'

'No, Ann, it's not.'

'Well, you know how much I love you, don't you?'

'I know.' But not *that* way.

"Alexandra, would you like a little water?" Straining against the onslaught of jumbled recalls, I struggled to open my eyes. Mr Smith, one hand on the witness box was holding a glass of water in the other. "Take your time. I'll get you a box of Kleenex," he said in a fatherly way. Be a good girl and blow your nose, I thought wryly reaching for the white peak that poked out of the box he was holding almost under my nose. And I gulped and I gulped the water to dislodge the hard ball that was constricting my larynx. I choked on it and I coughed some more. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand. And I took in a deep breath, knowing I had to go all the way. Knowing that I wanted to go all the way. Just like Josh Bell had.

The courtroom was utterly silent except for the odd, restrained coughing sounds one often hears from audiences at the theatre. Though I didn't look at the rows of faces, I knew that many hundred pairs of eyes were trained on me, watching, searching for the expression that would convince them, if not the jury, of my innocence, 'beyond any shadow of doubt.'

"His elbow ... first, I think," I started slowly, not yet trusting my throat muscles, "then his ... forearm crushed my windpipe."

Breathe Alex. Take your time.

"He was bracing himself, his whole body weight against my ... windpipe, he ... to ... position himself to ... to..." I can't say it.

"We all know this is very, very difficult for you, Alexandra." Mr Smith had positioned himself between me and the courtroom spectators. "You are a very, very brave young woman." He talked gently and softly. "But you do want to tell the court ..." Yes, I do. Very much, "... everything that has happened to you in that pitch-dark room, to the very best of your recollection? Every movement you made, every movement he made. Everything he said to you."

"Yes, yes I need to say it."

"So, in the room where the accused had lured you to better– "

"Your Honour! I object forcefully!"

"Sustained. Mr Smith, please!" Judge Grimes banged his gavel. The buzzing of low chatter that had erupted in the courtroom stopped. Everyone was quiet once again.

I heaved a great sigh and began slowly, almost trance-like so as to better pace myself, "He positioned himself, hard against me, heavy like concrete. To rape me." There, I said it.

Not a sound came from the hundreds of people in the audience. I exhaled a cloud of pent-up tension through half opened lips. "But I ... dislodged him with another sideways roll ... from the hips. A vigorous one. And he loosened his hold on me." Whispers rippled again through the courtroom. "I had managed to scramble to my feet. He shouted at me, 'You cunt!'" Explosive verbal violence is so hard to talk about, so alien. "Frantically I bolted, wanting desperately to find a door."

The door. *Where* is the door?

"Pitch-darkness all around. Hands out in front of me I was frantically feeling, blindly feeling, feeling for a door knob." Feeling for an escape. Things fell off the wall as I felt my way, off something like a tabletop too. "I felt a knob-like shape. I grasped it. Turned it. I pushed on it with

all my strength thinking it was a ... I jerked it, it moved open but ... it was only a closet door." I needed to pause to let the panic I had just re-actualised ease its way back to its own pit of darkness.

I was aware of the new timbre my voice had acquired. I could hear it. It was stronger. I was stronger. I was going to get to the end of this ordeal, this second ordeal of a different kind.

I'm going to nail the bastard.

"A couple of steps behind me, he laughed. 'Told ya, stupid cunt!' he said. 'You ain't gonna go nowhere.' And he tackled me again mid-waist and he slammed me against the floor, my right arm twisted under my own body as I had tried to break my fall. I was pinned under him, again."

I can't move. Why can't I ... just ... throw him ... off?

I remember having felt as helpless as a rag doll wedged under a bolster. I remember wondering but very briefly why my eyesight had still not gotten accustomed to the darkness in the room. His forearm slammed against my windpipe again, like a bar of concrete. My eyes watered, my vision blurred.

I can't swallow!

Again he levered himself against my neck. I thrashed around as best I could. Anything but stand still.

Move, Alex! Sharp orders barked at myself came from within.

Don't stand still.

Move your legs! Hips! Just don't stand still!

Tire him out. Buy yourself some time!

I kicked up. My legs were once again brutally spread apart, his lower body, pillar-like, was bolting me down. I remember having screamed in pain as something tore inside my right shoulder.

I remember not being able to move. An image of me had flitted through my mind. Me, as a blue butterfly pinned to a corkboard by a long upholstery tack that speared its middle.

I need to swallow.

"He snarled an animal snarl. Small jerky movements. I knew he was fumbling with ... with his crotch ... penis. It's then that ... I became aware that I still had my slacks on." I took in a deep breath and released it slowly around each of my words. "Which is why ... he hadn't yet ... been able to ... rape me."

"Alexandra, do you mean to tell us that that man, so intent on raping you, hadn't realised that he first had to ... make it possible for himself?" The low hum of whispers buzzed around the room and settled as quickly as it had erupted.

"I guess, well ... all this happened pretty fast, really. It takes a long time to explain but ... Well, I think that with the amount of alcohol he had drunk and the marijuana he had smoked ... and the crazed violent way in which he ... carried on ... I think he had lost track of ... of that. Of my trousers."

"To the best of your recollection, how much time had, indeed, elapsed from the time your aggressor began till the moment you realised you were still protected by your clothing?"

"Oh, I ... I don't know. It ... felt like a long, a very long time spent crushed, being hit and strangled and afraid to die ... that way." I stopped suddenly unable to say clearly how long my ordeal had lasted. I took a sip of water from the glass Mr Smith had left for me on the wooden rail on the witness stand, by the microphone. And then logic suggested that my struggle, the violence, couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes.

How long does it take, in real time, for a strong man to pin a girl down, in a room in which she is totally disoriented, totally blind?

How long does it take him to grab her again once she's managed a temporary escape for herself?

How long could it possibly take him to come crashing down on her, his forearm at her throat as he braces himself into position as his knee grinds away the resistance of her thighs?

"Not very long. Only a few minutes." He had heaved once, and slammed hard against my sex, heavy on my stomach, his forearm still crushing my throat.

I need to breathe. Dislodge the bastard!

Block out the grunts! I need to buy me some time.

'Hey! Hey ... Josh,' I had rasped, painfully trying to work a tiny space for my saliva to move down. 'Ease ... up, man.'

Push down, push your throat muscle down. Down.

Can't breathe.

I needed to move my neck. Sideways. A fraction.

He grunted again, shifting between my legs. 'Shut it, bitch!' His face was right above mine. I felt him. I smelt his thick, rancid breath. His hips pushed hard against mine, his trunk-like legs keeping mine apart. Then, the pressure of his forearm eased against my throat. I filled my lungs. But only for a moment. I knew he was re-adjusting his position.

His final aim for the penetration.

The thrust of the Picador.

Talk to him.

Promise anything.

Beat the bastard!

'Hey ... ease ... up!' I had begged, trying to calm my voice into a semblance of sensuality. 'I'll help. Relax. Hey ... Come on ... Josh.' I tried to cajole, I tried to con. I had switched into a survival mode. 'You ... you don't have to do it alone. Let me move. Hey ... let me help you.' I pleaded out loud, silently pleading for air. And silently, too, pleading for my life.

'Shut the fuck up!'

"Alexandra, will you please tell the Court what happened next," asked Mr Smith, an encouraging smile on his lips. I knew that he knew that I knew that what he was asking of me was only what he knew I wanted to say, what I needed to do.

"He had become confused. He compensated by renewed vigour, more ... frenzy. He was even more ... feral." I reached for the glass of water that was still on the railing in front of me near the microphone. "Can't quite remember the sequence but ... I'm not sure ... how it happened but ... I was still pinned down by his weight. I could move my legs but ... didn't make any difference any more. I felt him tear at my waist, at my pants and..." I lowered my eyes and backed away from the microphone, once more aware of the tears that were welling in my eyes. "And he ... he..."

"Slow down, Alexandra. Take your time. The Court understands how all this is terribly difficult for you. Do you need a break? The Court can adjourn—"

"No!" I interrupted. "No ... I'm fine. Please."

No adjournment!

Won't be any easier later, not tomorrow. Not ever.

Let's get on with it. "I'd rather get on with it, now."

"Fine. So, let me recap. The accused has lured you inside an unusually dark room. He made you think that he was tired. That he wasn't feeling very well. He offered you to use the phone. He called out to you, from the bathroom you think to say that the phone that works was in the first room to the right of the hallway. Is this correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"Next thing you know he tackles you. You struggle. He kicks the door shut. He grabs you by the hair and yanks. You fall down. Caught unaware, shocked, and disoriented. Is this correct?"

"Yes, it is."

"Your aggressor restricts your movements, first by coming behind you in this pitch black room and by yanking you by the hair. Then, by constricting your throat, your larynx first, with a very strong hand grip once he's thrown you on the floor. Then by levering himself against his forearm thus pressing his full weight against your windpipe as he tries to manoeuvre himself into a ... penetrating position. And then by pinning you down, your own body-weight plus his pressing down on a shoulder that had been twisted under when he pinned you down a second time. And he tears off your trousers in one violent movement. Alexandra, to the best of your recollection, is that pretty much how the events unfolded at around one a.m. of the night in question?"

"Yes, it is."

"Is it accurate to say that by restricting your breathing the accused knew he was restricting the scope of your movements? Is this accurate?"

I nodded, "Yes, it is."

"Good. Now, Alexandra, tell the Court how the def ... how your- "
"Objection! Your Honour!" I closed my eyes, suddenly extremely weary.
"Sustained."
"My mistake Your Honour, I apologise."

"At this stage, I would like to present to the Court exhibit number four," I heard Mr Smith say as he walked away from the witness stand. He picked up a plastic bag from the Prosecutor's table and shook out an item of clothing. My heart jumped at the sight of the slacks I had been wearing. I had not seen them since the night the accused had ripped them off me. Not since the night I had had to leave them behind, unable to find them in the dark room, after Josh had ordered me to strip and sleep by his side.

"A pair of beige cotton-blend, girl's slacks. Size ten. Alexandra, do you recognise this item of clothing?" I nodded. "Alexandra, please speak up for the Court Reporter. Are these yours?"

"Yes, they are. They're the slacks I wore on the night of ... the Homecoming game."

"Your Honour, these slacks have been retrieved from the floor of the defendant's bedroom by Sgt. Samuel Dean."

Mr Smith came back to the witness box and held up the garment for all to see. I watched him as he turned to the jury spreading it in a way that revealed loose threads no longer connected to the set of five buttons that had closed the front of my slacks. It was then I saw for myself how he had done it, how he had in one powerful motion broken through my only rampart of protection. Cotton-thin protection.

As long as I have my pants on ... I had thought at the time, thinking the cloth would protect me. In one furious movement he had exposed all of me, from navel to small of the back.

A long tear reached clear to the back of the waistband and ran down both the inside leg seams. Mr Smith held up my slacks like a matador holds his sword, defiantly high in the air, readying for the kill. He wanted the jury to see the torn seams, to remove any 'shadow of doubt.' A low rumble rose from the rows of benches.

"Silence in the courtroom." The bang of a gavel on a wooden surface. Silence.

But you see, Adrienne, by the time I sent you that first written account of the court case from Nice, you and I had dined together and we had been very aware of the pull of sensual attraction that drew us together. We do know that our story is after all rather banal, particularly in Paris, the City of Lovers. But, oh, I still remember that shimmering heat that constricted my loins every time I allowed my eyes to settle on you, any part of you. And we had talked. Together, differently, again the way only lovers or total strangers thrown together for a moment in time can do.

And of course the evening gave way to the night. And when we came to our senses we shared the anguish of knowing that Sophie would have rung your apartment, before going to bed, as she always did when not spending the night with you; the anguish of knowing that your phone would have rung again and again, startling only the darkness of your empty bedroom; that anguish clung to our bellies like a wet shirt worn on the inside. For the first time in ten years, she would have gone to bed unable to connect with you at the end of a working day. Her mind, reeling off a number of possibilities, would have found us there, in Eli's little flat, pressed against the closed door, ready neither for flight nor fight but made to face both.

The tearing, knowing that we would never again be alone to lull each other's desire into a manageable, innocuous, little secret! The tearing, knowing dawn had found us here in our rumpled clothes, red-eyed from lack of sleep, from lack of peace! The tearing the deer feels when she stands still, flanks pulsating, knowing the hounds are closing in on her. After a final embrace of raw sexual frustration, you and I, for different reasons tacitly surrendered to the loyalty we owed Sophie. Out of timidity, out of reasons, unknown to our loins, we separated in the early morning.

Paris, 8 February

Alex,

Tonight, I am in total *dé lire*, delirium, I think you call it. Only a couple of weeks have gone by since you left. My arms feel useless and stiff from not being able to close around you. Here's the classic question: which is it easier to live with: regrets or remorse?

Tonight I'm flooded with regrets: regrets of not having done; regrets of not having caressed you, all of you, shy attempts restricted by clothing. And by self-imposed restrictions; regrets of not having kissed your face more slowly, more tenderly; regrets of not having dried your tears more lovingly; regrets of no longer seeing that little movement of your lips, the feigned protest for a kiss too passionately rough. I miss you terribly, living trapped in the old paradox of pain and pleasure.

Ce soir j'ai le blues, the real blues, blues that cling to the air around me. Delirium and blues. The more I try to settle myself back into my old routine, the clearer your memory becomes. Infernal! Hell!

On the radio, a woman's voice is begging, "*Explique-moi comment te dire adieu.*" But me, I'm not yet ready for you to show me how to say goodbye, though honestly, I wish I were. My contradictory wish is to have you, right next to me on the sofa, your shoulder against mine.

My imagination's always been pretty dull and my dreams anaemic and shapeless, but when I dream of you ... I wake up suddenly when, eventually, I sense a body pressed against mine, a body that, even through the half-awake dream, I know is Sophie's. Then, I'm afraid to go back to sleep. I'm afraid I might call out your name. *Ça aussi c'est infernal!* It's totally mad.

You need to know, Alex, that for the past two weeks, she's been like a battered bird. No, not battered ... bruised, yes, bruised because of the change she notices in me. She's not trying to make a scene. She's not even trying to get me to lie badly. In fact she's not even asking anything, though she did clearly spell out something the other day. I'll tell you about it later on. It frightened the hell out of me but ... I need to think about that, too, calmly.

Anyway, though she hasn't said it, she knows it's you I think of during dinner, while we listen to music, when I stop turning the pages of the book or file opened in front of me.

She's strong. She's attentive and she's patient, but I can tell by looking at her pale face and seeing the flat light in her eyes that she, too, is losing sleep over all this. I think she's begun to lose weight and you know how thin she is already. She's waiting for all this to pass, as one waits for the end of a *bourrasque*, you know, a windstorm, all tucked in, as best as possible.

There's something I need you to understand. Alex, it's because it's you I'm so attracted to that the dialogue she and I would normally have is impossible. I feel it in her silence, and honestly, right now, I'm not up to dealing directly with such a conflict. I need to be a lot more grounded before I can try that type of conversation with her.

Her intuition must tell her that, because of the irrational state I'm in, it wouldn't take much for me to drop everything right here, right now. I'd book myself on the first plane leaving for the South of France. Though, as I write these lines, I know that she's my baseline. And that, as such, she is, how should I say ... she's *incontournable*. What I mean is that I can't go around her and I can't step over her. No, don't call her a 'hurdle', Alex, please.

A few days ago, while we were having breakfast, I felt her eyes on my hand. I kept on drinking my coffee, fighting the pull of her stare as long as I could, before looking up. And then, with that husky voice of hers, she said rather slowly, 'Addy ... for ten years ... over ten years now, you and I have been making plans ... happy plans together. We've made plans for now ... and for the next ... twenty years.' She stopped but by the tone of her voice, I knew she had more to get off her chest. She was looking straight into my eyes but she was calm. Calm and determined and that's what scared me when she said something like, '*Tu sais très bien c' que j' vais t' dire.* You know that if you, too, were to betray me ... I'd just give up. You know I would. You know I'd rather die ... than go through that pain ... the lies ... the loss and the betrayal ... again.' She sighed and massaged the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other as she always does when she concentrates hard on her thoughts. 'You know that I mean it when I say that I would never consider starting over, with anyone ... not now, not anymore. I've invested too much ... in you, Addy, in us ... always gladly ... but I'll never start over ... with anyone else.' Her voice broke as he

added, 'Never.' I was so stricken by her monologue, by her tone, her words, and her face that all I think I did was arch my eyebrows, as if this ridiculous movement would somehow reduce the strength of her words. I'm glad she didn't seem to have noticed. And she added, 'I'm not saying that *en l'air*. I'm not saying any of this lightly. We both know I just don't have that strength. I don't have that ... that fire in me anymore.'

She was right, I knew she wasn't just saying that for effect. I knew she wouldn't have the fire needed to pick up the pieces and plod onwards on her own. And I knew too, that if it came to that, she wouldn't choose to go on living alone either.

Anyway, she got up quietly, stacked her cup on her plate along with her knife and scrunched up her paper napkin. She paused by the bin. The tip of her shoe on the pedal flipped the lid open, she tossed in the napkin, and the lid snapped shut. She set her breakfast things by the sink, and left me there, in a whirlwind of thoughts and fears, patting the chequered pattern on the tablecloth.

No, don't say it, Alex. I know her words can easily be construed as emotional blackmail. Maybe so. Let me just say I'm not ready to test her will to live. I'm not even ready to cause her such doubt, such pain. She's normally strong, I mean in good health, but emotionally she's terribly vulnerable.

You know her life will soon change in a major way. She's clearly looking forward to that early retirement of hers but it's a page that's difficult to turn for someone as driven as she is. And in the meantime, instead of making the most of that year that remains, she's exhausting herself playing mother to this useless boss of hers. She's clearly the one who should've been promoted Regional Director. Years ago!

Anyway, the other thing is that I still have another five good years before I can kick back and keep her company in *fare niente* land. Well, in partial *fare niente* land. I always thought I'd remain professionally active, if only as a consultant. The idea was to retire from the 24/7 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. grind. In any case, *c'est ce qu'on avait prévu*, that's what we had planned.

So, there's a lot happening in her head at the moment. Doubts and fears and all that. Anyway, in terms of her retirement, she's obviously planned it all around the notion that she and I would grow old together and organise ourselves and enjoy a lot of life, and live a lot, while we're still relatively young. That's how I wanted it too. With her, for her and for me. Alex, I do want to grow old with her. But what about the here and now?

Now, if you would let me sleep better, without invading more of my dreams, I'm sure I'd be able to think more clearly. It's only ten forty-five, but I'm way too tired and *énervée*, unnerved to attend to the briefs I brought home. I'm really not in the mood for any more infringements of international law. My mind is all over the place. Oh, if it were at all feasible, I'd say goodbye and farewell to you in this letter. But that, for the moment, is not the way out. Which is the way out?

I've been re-reading the scenario-like account of your story. I wish we had had more time together. More time to deal logically with the fireworks that have exploded inside us. But also much more time to let you unravel that whole nasty business of your trial with me by your side, as we were able to do for only for a couple of hours in that little restaurant, so unfortunately close to my office. Instead I've asked you to write everything down for me, hoping that once you entrust your nightmare to me it, like a feral hyena, will lose your scent and let you access a much needed closure. And though you write about a grotesque and abhorrent turn of events that defies understanding, along with the basic concept of justice, the scenario you've recreated for me makes, dare I say it, for riveting reading. I'm just so terribly sorry, *Chérie*, that it was you, there ... feeling it in your flesh, in your heart.

I hope what I'm going to say won't sound too weird but, actually, the fact that you're writing all this down for me makes the whole exchange even more powerful than if you had simply told me about it. What I mean is that besides conveying facts and emotions, your writing and my reading of it give us a way to communicate at another level. So intimately but not intimately about us. So please don't stop half way. I'll try to be clearer over the phone.

I'll call you, tomorrow lunchtime, from our park bench in Monceau.

The night wind is hitting against the shutters. The metallic sound they make as they rattle against the rusty brackets is tapping on my nerves.

Anyway, the one positive note for the day is that I'm sleeping alone tonight, free to tuck you inside my dreams. You see? I'm contradicting myself again.

Adrienne

I need to find something, not related to you, Adrienne, to occupy my mind. 'Fare niente', as you say, the Italian notion that true relaxation can only be achieved by not doing anything that is not pleasurable, is best enjoyed when the mind is free of any extraneous thoughts. And that freedom is out of reach at this point in time.

I worry about you. I worry about your health. I worry about your sleep, and lack of, and I worry about your general wellbeing or, more to the point again, the lack of. Sophie. Yes, she is vulnerable, particularly because there had been no sign there to prepare her for the possibility of an eventual 'betrayal' as she calls it. Mind you, that's what I would call it, too. And yes, when one is on the verge of retirement I imagine one can easily feel on the edge of old age. Though only a technical 'old' age, it still is the second landmark of aging for women. Aging, as opposed to getting older; menopause being the first, not that these two necessarily always come in that order.

In any case, a glimpsed possibility that she might find herself out of the nest and alone to face an older age is undoubtedly a heart-shrinking prospect. A double loss of love and emotional security. But realistically speaking, Adrienne, it is one prospect, you know and I know, Sophie is not truly faced with. To use another one of your terms, it is my 'baseline' conviction that you and I are too gutless to see our thing through to a happy end. Too gutless, or not ruthless enough?

The latter sounds better, but would you tell me a little more about her past, about that other betrayal, the first one? I can't quite remember what she told me about it at the time. It was so long ago. I remember that it had to do with her mother not having protected her from physical abuse. Was it from ... within the family? It was, wasn't it? But I can't remember who the perpetrator was and why circumstances were such that Sophie felt her mother had failed her.

From your bench in the parc Monceau you asked about my family. Ah yes, my roots. And I replied that it was too long a topic to chat about on the phone, that I needed to hear about more immediate things from you, from your world. But I can write about it now.

It is all very simple really and maybe a little sad but I know we don't live in a fairy tale world where unbridled joy necessarily overflows from everyone's heart simply because one has decided to jump on a plane and reconnect. Actually it would be a lie to say that I jumped on that plane to reconnect.

As romantic and exciting as it sounds, it is not quite right. I told you how I had grown bored with my life in Brisbane. I needed to jump on a plane, on any plane. I could have gone anywhere, really. For any length of time. You can do that when you are footloose and carefree. I will even go as far as saying that this kind of physical freedom is the only benefit I personally derive from being, to all intents and purposes, forever single.

So as it happened I thought of France. And as I thought of France I thought of that little country that I had never really gotten to know as an adult. And as I did, I thought of my father and his side of the family; all relatives I hardly knew anymore. And some childhood memories had flooded back. And in my mind, back then, these memories led to that romantic notion of travelling to the other side of the world to 'discover my roots'. Besides, that notion went a long way towards legitimising my decision to take leave from work for an indefinite period of time.

The thing is that there was really nothing to 'discover'. My roots you see, these roots, had never been lost, not in the real sense of the word. Never lost to discover as in a first time ever discovery. Through the twists and turns of life and destiny, my father, my aunt Marie-France, her daughters Joceline and Emmanuelle, and my grandparents, we all stand on opposite sides of a thirty-year gap of circumstances not shared, of celebrations and sorrows not shared. We have neither rejoiced nor commiserated together. We have not woven any length of cloth together. Not even a spool. We do not have any common memories.

Look, I don't wish to bore you with too much on that topic. Suffice it to say that everyone was truly happy to see me, that everyone is well, that everyone works and has a life of their own,

except perhaps my grandparents who are quite elderly by now, and my little cousin Emmanuelle who might be too young to have one.

She is only nine years old but a very together, 'modern' nine-year old, and now that I think about it, she does carry on as if she does, indeed, have a life of her own. Marie-France bought her a little diary of sorts in which the little one jots down all the after-school activities, and places where she needs to be driven over the weekends. She is a very busy little girl.

Grandfather seems now to prefer the company of endless successions of words to that of people as he fills in one Master crossword puzzle after another. He has become one eating, sleeping and crossword-filling machine. Before that though, I remember him mostly as the 'Colonel' from the '*Bonjour, mon Colonel*' the local shopkeepers used to throw his way in greetings. I remember him, too, as the grumpy one who begat my kind-hearted but equally grumpy father. Yes, I think my father could easily pass as a grumpy one himself though he does have a sense of humour that I do not think my grandfather ever had. But then again, when I was very little the Colonel used to take me fishing. We would sit under a very wide weeping willow, *un saule pleureur*, and we would dangle our lines in the dark green waters of the quiet river that bordered my grandparents' property. He would thread worms for me but I do not remember him having to unhook any of my fish. I do not remember having ever caught any. I do, however, remember feeling a little awed and privileged just being there by the river with him, my line dangling next to his, my little stool right close to his. In silence. I don't remember him catching much of anything either.

As I look back to those childhood days, I would say that my grumpy grandfather used to watch the slow flow of the gentle river in meditative silence. That is obviously what he needed to do. And he let me share that with him.

As much as I would love to spend afternoons talking with my grandmother, listening to her memories of her own life in the thirties and forties, of my father's childhood, and my own during the years I was in their care, it is not possible, not really. Only very few moments are still clear in her mind and, such as they are, they are disconnected. And my little grandma forgets that she has already covered those, the same ones, three or four times in the same number of days.

I feel sad every time I leave her because she is extremely frail. And though she is very huggable, her skin is so transparent and thin that I am afraid any hug I might give her would leave her bruised. Marie-France does not hug her, she pats her. When I look at grand-mere, I know I have waited too long before coming back.

Your father is dying, Adrienne, and my grandmother does not remember any of the happy moments of her life.

You asked about my initial contact with my father. Obviously I am still at his place but only because I have his house to myself during the week. He is always away on business until Friday evenings. He still works though he has finally retired from the army. An early retirement, an *anticipée*, as you call it, but not early enough in terms of, dare I say, his 'arrested personality development'.

Anyway, he had, very thoughtfully indeed, taken a week off work to spend time with me upon my arrival. How can I say it without sounding horribly self-centred? I have to admit having been glad, no, not glad, more like totally relieved to be alone on the morning of the eighth day. The thing is that, as I landed in Nice, I was so full of you, so heart-shocked, that I was almost literally gasping for air, unable to unplug you from my thoughts, not even for a moment.

And so the business of catching up with my father, and filling up gaps spanning back to my last whirlwind visit some ten years prior, quickly became an ordeal. It was soon reduced to a mind-over-matter thing, to a test of self-control; the test of the claustrophobic trapped in a lift momentarily stuck between floors.

The whole thing was made a lot worse by my being unable to talk about you to anyone. And that was further compounded by my being unable to go anywhere on my own. Father would not have understood why I would choose to do that. And so every minute of that week, and I mean that quite literally, every minute of my waking hours he organised to fit inside an army-style, precision-driven timetable.

Or were that precision and that regularity only those of an old bachelor? It is probably worse, mind you, when the old bachelor in question happens to be a retired Colonel and a Knight of the *Légion d' Honneur*, like his father before him.

Day in and day out. Whether we went for a walk, a drink, to the restaurant, to visit my grandparents or Marie-France, everything was timed to the minute. The point is that I felt totally claustrophobic, totally inadequate in terms of how I could see and hear myself relating to him and, at the same time, totally put upon. All I wanted, then, was to be alone, alone with you. Alone to process the sudden desire of you. Alone to surrender to all excluding erotic fantasies.

You might be pleased to read that the overwhelming need to be alone with my desire of you has not relented much. If anything, our on-going communication is exacerbating it, as I knew it would. But having lacked the initial willpower to leave your answer to my first note well enough alone, the steel teeth of a badly concealed trap are now truly gripped around my paw. I can no longer back away.

And so, I need to look for some sort of temporary, part-time work. Anything pleasant or interesting enough will do as long as it succeeds in pushing thoughts of you into a recess of sorts.

I need to achieve a balance of emotions. I need to enjoy what I came to do, here in Nice. I need to breathe, to open my lungs to this much-famed air of Provence, and appreciate the unique quality of the sunlight that has made the hinterlands so uniquely attractive to many a painter's eyes. I need to get into my car. I need to roam the region, light-hearted and open to the charm of the quaint little villages I might find hanging down the cliff face on my way to Monte Carlo or as I make my way up the mountains to catch the snow in Auron.

Through half-closed eyelids, I want to watch the Méditerranée as she glistens under a sky in shades of washed-out blue but I have to close my eyes against the shards of penetrating light. A muffled background voice enters the convoluted thought patterns I was secretly indulging: my father has broached yet another topic. I recognise his intonations as his voice stirs me out of my reverie. It is, in fact, a simple chat that does not require the effort of concentration. Thank goodness, for in front of me, but slightly to the left, I glimpse the silhouette of a couple kissing tenderly, one body snugly fitting the curvature of the other. An unexpected pain uncurls in my belly and makes me wince behind my sunglasses. I trap it under my eyelids. I will it to stay and grow, to engulf me, but already it recedes, as does the tide ebbing across the pebbles, only a few metres away. To this pain, I gave your name: Adrienne, in the same way as the name of the explorer who discovers a new landscape is given to the land itself.

'What you're saying implies that, for the French people, a lot of time and money are lost while they watch their new leaders reinvent the wheel every seven years.' I join my father in his discourse, hoping my comment actually fits the context.

Across the street, almost behind my father, a white seagull, soft wings neatly tucked alongside her chubby, little body, her red beak craned to the side, seems to be waiting to cross the road. She looks sideways at the bitumen before finally deciding to stay on her sidewalk. She moves away, carried by two slender, mauve, stick legs and twitching her grey-tipped tail feathers.

'Some unfortunate patterns seem inherent in the French voting system,' says my father, still ranting against the government of the moment, and against the *septennat*, the renewable, seven year mandate every new president is given, 'Pour jouer avec le pays, because, that's all they do really is play with our country,' he adds, categorically. In spite of a half-hearted attempt on my part to moderate his judgement, Father carries on with his acerbic remarks delivered in the type of categorical tone that precludes any contradiction. Not that I am thinking about contradicting him at all. I am not well-versed on the topic of French government policies and besides, my thoughts at the moment are as scattered as the little white clouds that play at overtaking the sun straight above the light-house on the far end of the knoll.

Across the street, a large black dog is restless inside the dim cabin of a van that has just pulled up. Almost frantically, he pushes his large rubbery snout into the window opening his owner has left for that purpose, whipping the backrest with an emphatic tail swing, but he does not bark. Ah, he has seen the German Shepherd that is coming, on his own, towards us. He stops by one of the many anaemic palm trees that line the Promenade, goes around twice, seems about to reverse the process but instead he raises a leg and sprays the exposed roots of the tree. Once done, tail high in the air, he passes by the car and disappears around the corner,

regally oblivious to the dog locked inside. The black dog now sits, behaved and relaxed, his profile staring ahead from the front seats. He is waiting for his master's return.

'If I understand you correctly,' I volunteer, feeling guilty about the lack of encouragement I am giving my father in this conversation, '... every seven years the newly elected government sets out, the best way it can, to undo what the departing leadership, in this instance the Socialists, have set up during their *septennat*. However, they are likely to be re-elected seven years later, because the Right will have had enough time to become unpopular once again.'

'Yes, that's the logic of the state of things. Unfortunately, the long-term effects... I really hope this *septennat* thing is going to be voted out ... after Chirac goes. The best we can hope for is a *quinquennat*. The US model of four years doesn't seem to appeal to anyone here.'

'So Chirac will go down in history, if nothing else, for being the last President to have ruled the country over the last two long mandates. That's political history in the making.'

My father smiles under his snowy moustache, 'More or less. It's quite a momentous decision really. There'll have to be yet another referendum and so on but ... we'll get there.'

And we sit in a companionable silence for longer than my thoughts need to depart to somewhere else, far beyond his tanned face. I find you, I pluck you out of your office, I plop you right here, next to me in the vacant rattan fauteuil to my left. United in our silence we sit. Hard-edged shards of desire cut through the diamantine glitter caught by the waves far beyond the Promenade.

My large ledger-like notebook and I are perched on a low wall, a few metres from the sand. One lone pigeon is picking at the paving blocks that meet the base of my perch. It seems propelled forward by the jerky, toy-like movements of its neck. The late afternoon sea breeze is cooling the air. It has been a beautiful day today, a day of warm sunshine, of unspoiled blue sky, of sparkling white seagulls. A day to sit on a terrace, facing the sea. It is a day to let the Mediterranean light permeate the darkest coils of fear to loosen them, to melt them. If I am so attentive to this pigeon's antics, it is in memory of another pigeon. To that other one you gave a piece of your chocolate waffle. It was late in the afternoon. Frozen on our little park bench, we had chosen silence as the best medium with which to express the bitter-sweet longing that raced within.

A second bird has just landed near the first, a soft flutter of grey silk. A shadow has just fallen across my page. The nib of my pen remains suspended, waiting above the crisp white page. The shadow lengthens. Slowly, my eyes slide up the length of a striped Indian shirt and over brown, wooden beads, to the soft glow of sunlight on a young face. Gentle, brown eyes seem separated by the central part of long, blond ponytail, curling lazily on a young man's shoulder. A soft smile meets my frown.

'Is it a diary you're writing? A book? I've been watching you for a while...' I would have liked to answer, 'No, young man, not a diary, not a book. Just a bad ... bad taste, second-rate script.' I was indeed writing the last instalment of the shoddy courtroom scenario I had promised to finish for you.

At your request, Adrienne, I will not leave the tale half-told. You are right in saying that, through the writing and the reading of that horrible series of events and spin-off thoughts, you and I relate together at a level that somehow offsets nicely the other way we 'talk' to each other. It is true that writing to you about the events back in Texas crystallises, though that is not the right word, the tenderness of your words as you write back in a way that could not happen if you were just giving me on-the-spot, face-to-face, comforting.

I am still not being clear. What about a visual image then? Let us say that your words are like the soothing, warm and delicate flow of clear water at low tide over dark, jagged, and craggy rocks. Okay, I won't overdo it so I will leave it at that for the moment, yes?

Anyway, back to the young man. I remember clearly having looked at him, probably like a groundhog would, coming out of its cave into the sunlight. I was the groundhog. Mentally, I had travelled so far away from this beachfront perch that I had not seen him approach.

'Me, I've always wanted to keep a diary... but I'm too lazy.' He spoke softly with the singsong tones of Provence. He hesitated, obviously waiting for an encouraging sign, but all he got was my tight silence and stubborn frown.

'That's why I was curious...' he added undeterred. Poor young man. His timing was all wrong. He was keeping my thoughts away from you, and my pen was eager to resume its dervish dance across the page.

'What I'm writing here is neither a diary, nor a manuscript. It's merely the draft of a thesis bearing on the sexuality of French pigeons,' I said with the closed voice of academia, eager not to hurt his feelings, but equally eager to return to my page. 'More precisely, I am writing about the regional variations of their sexual behaviour patterns.' Even I was surprised by the clipped tone of my retort.

The gentle young man's smile faded from his lips, but his eyes narrowed with curiosity. 'You mean to say they don't-' He leaned closer, a question shaping on his lips.

'I need to get back to my observations,' I said pointing at the pair of pigeons that had just landed to his left. 'A *plus tard*. See you later,' I added maintaining soft but firm eye contact. The tone must have left no room for appeal.

He glided away, feline-like in his tan hand-made moccasins, casting sideways glances at one of the birds that was now standing perfectly still except for the mechanical forwards and backwards movements of his iridescent green neck.

I returned to the crisp white page, once again free of bothersome shadows. I returned to my thoughts. I returned to you. And to me, back up in the witness box, being cross-examined by Mr Bartley for the defence.

"Mr Bartley," Judge Grimes' voice was stern and cold, "the Court is asking you one more time to give up, to not pursue, that line of questioning."

Mr Bartley, backed away from the witness stand. "I'm sorry, Your Honour." His back to the courtroom, he narrowed his eyes at me as if my mere presence on the stand indisposed him. As if I had breached the oath taken earlier to 'tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.'

"Young lady," he said looking coldly into my eyes, "from now on, I need to ask you to be more explicit in your answers." I watched him smooth his grey hair back with the palm of his hand. I never thought much of men who blow-dried their hair, even less when they were old, cold and snaky. "According to *you*, then," I heard the naked sarcasm in the voice, "how had the accused allegedly forced himself upon you?"

I started to speak but the words did not follow. Anchor-heavy they dragged behind me, hampering me in my efforts to be accurate and remain strong.

"Young lady! Would you please speak up! And into the microphone! The Court Recorder cannot hear you." My brain, my emotions were on overload but I knew, this moment above all others, was one of the decisive moments of this trial, of the trial I had initiated when I had decided to press charges four months earlier.

"The ... Josh ... Uh, I'm sorry," I said turning to the judge. "The accused had me pinned on the floor and he was supporting his full weight on his forearm as he... He was crushing my throat, constricting my breathing as he heaved. I could barely breathe. I couldn't scream. I couldn't move. And he ... he ... he tore inside. Again and again. Until he was done." Like a deep-sea diver struggling towards the surface I stopped and gulped for air. As an unnecessary afterthought I added unsuspectingly, "All I could move was my hips." There, I had twice admitted publicly that I had been raped. But I had not been wary enough of the heinous nature of Mr Bartley's specialty as he had chosen to exercise it when he took on the 'UT rape case' as a publicity stunt, when he had deliberately decided to help a guilty man walk free.

And so I watched as he closed in on me flapping the black sleeves of his robe, "Young lady, I am going to ask you to describe the movements that you could do while the man was 'inside' you. As you have just testified, you could move your hips. Is that correct?"

I nodded. "Speak into the microphone, please. And explain to the Court which movements you were free to make?"

"I could only move my hips ... my lower torso..."

"I need to ask you to be more precise in regards to the part of the anatomy you could move at that specific moment. Do you mean your back, your hips, your pelvis? Which were you able to move?"

I looked at him dumbly.

"Which movements did you make with your shoulders, your hips, or was it with your pelvis?" he repeated, separating his words as if talking to a dumb, recalcitrant child.

"I ... raised and lowered my hips. I ... tried to ... to buck. I was— "

"Woh! Have we heard this correctly, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury?" asked the defence lawyer, whirling around to face squarely the twelve men and women of the jury. "We've just heard this young woman testify under oath that all she thought to do while the young man was inside her was ... rotate her pelvis and ... buck? Ladies and Gentlemen, as much as I am sure this young *French* woman would like you to exonerate her of all responsibility for her actions, actions that have, clearly, precipitated the events that allegedly took place at the defendant's apartment, you have to decide whether..."
