

Today, again, I will not stop by the post office to mail what I have written to you during the past few days. The faded woman behind the old counter might well wonder what has happened to me, the woman with spiky silver hair who writes so much, so often, and to the same person, to an A. d' Anville in Paris. 'Used to drop in every day but hasn't been around for a while now,' she might say. 'Must've been a tourist on holidays. She's probably gone back to her A. d' Anville by now.'

You see, this woman who has lines on her face and creases in her tired frock began to recognise me after half a dozen visits or so. And from behind the dismal beige counter she would engage me, *avec bonhomie*, in a ritual banter.

In the palm of her open hand she would feel the weight of the envelope I had placed flat on the cool surface in front of her and she would smack her lips appreciatively, 'Eh, she's a heavy one that one!' She did tend to think that my letters to you were, on average, fairly weighty.

And I would smile and try a light-hearted response like, 'Ah, *les mots!* Words, they weigh much more than the paper on which we write them, don't you think? Or, less cryptically, I might have answered, 'C'est pas grave. The more they weigh, the more of your beautiful stamps will have to go on the envelope.'

It was true. I did enjoy the long row of colourful stamps she would pat on the white envelope. And it was quite seriously that I had told her that words are often a lot heavier than the paper they are written on. But again, what about my other belief that feelings and emotions are not meant to be expressed, they need to be lived out?

Anyway, over the passing weeks she had internalised my preference for a varied selection of stamps as opposed to only the one or two that could have met the fare. French stamps are such thumbnail masterpieces! They are rich snippets of history, beautifully drawn snatches of melody, reminders of a bygone era of artists, of explorers, of makers of cathedrals. There is, of course, a new generation of stamps here like everywhere else, bright and simplistic, feel-good stamps, but I stay away from those. Too greeting-cardish.

And the placid, mouse-haired woman who sat on a stool behind her sad little counter used to select the patches of colour; amulets that would ensure the safe passage of each of my letters into the other world. Into the world that I cannot reach, the world that is beyond mountains and lakes, the world that has the Parc Monceau as its geographical centre. Once done, she would add, in the tone of the baker who is pleased with the feel and the appearance of his golden loaf, 'Eh, *voilà. C'est bien joli tout ça.*' Very pretty indeed.

I feel like indulging in a little fantasy, Adrienne, so let us pretend that over the past couple of months this woman who has weighed each of your letters and affixed the white and blue *Prioritaire* sticker on the bottom left-hand corner of each envelope has become curious. Let us pretend, just for the sake of passing time, that she has become curious as to the type of person this A. d' Anville, who lives in Paris, might be. And that, in quieter moments, while she looks at the sunny world on the other side of the grimy revolving door that brings an eclectic dribble of humanity to her, the dispenser of pretty amulets, she has, as in some life-imitates-fiction scenario constructed her own A. d' Anville.

By my jeans and loose tee shirt, by the large straw bag that usually hangs on my shoulder, she would have figured that I, who often came in the middle of the afternoon when the traffic through that post office was minimal, was not a working woman. The envelopes I gave her to process were often quite thick but visibly not likely to contain 'business' matters. You see, she would have noticed the format of these envelopes that always seemed too small, too tight, like plump plums ready to burst out of their over-stretched skin. To her, they might have looked like envelopes worried their glued seams might come unstuck along the way. In time, undoubtedly, she would have taken note, too, of the untidy, often haphazard way the address was written. Rue Gabrielle. What a beautiful name for a street! You would have noticed too, you who have such tidy, efficient handwriting. Developed for speed and clarity.

After weeks of weighing and gluing and stamping around your name she would have correctly decided that these envelopes had to contain letters to a lover.

Too old to be a newlywed, she would have thought of me, and no one writes that feverishly to a husband. So, she would have cast you, A. d' Anville, as a man. Yes, as a man and most likely one in his fifties, a respectable age for her who sits behind the drab post office counter. Or maybe not. Too predictable. She might have preferred to cast you as an outrageously sexy, young lover. After all, the French are quick to say, 'C'est dans les vieux pots qu'on fait d' la bonne

*cuisine*, ' something about the best cooking being done in old pots. Personally, I find this double entendre a little crass but it is, after all, a well-worn colloquial expression. And undoubtedly there has to be some truth to it both literally and figuratively. Let us just assume that she would feel more comfortable with a lover a few years older than herself. And towards which options does that fantasy take her?

Would she imagine you as a dark and mysterious lover who spoke with the warm accent of exotica while he looked at her with melting deep-dark amber eyes? Or would her fantasies lead her to a bronzed erstwhile sun-god who still turns heads as he steers his wind-surfer through the last crested waves that lead him, thickly-torsoed-sea-warrior, to the golden shore of soft sand, to the feet of mesmerised erstwhile sirens?

I guess the casting of you, Ms d' Anville would depend on the character the post-office woman would feel most able to lift her out of the mediocrity of the dull, tethered life, which, for the sake of my little fantasy, I need to impose on her. So, maybe she would prefer being rescued from her grumpy, sloppy husband and snotty, screaming children by a gentle professor, certainly not a mad one. No, we are clear on that. That would be far too complicated, erratic and demanding. Too intimidating. No, no, she would be longing for someone more like a gentle, romantic poet, one with soft unruly hair that meets the fuzzy curls of his soft beard, a shade darker than his tousled hair. A bit of a bumbling, absent-minded, gentle soul with faded pale-blue eyes behind steel-rim glasses. Yes, she would like such a man. A man such as this fantasy would allow her to nurture him curled up against her breasts. But he would rub her weary feet and swollen legs when she would rush back to him after another tedious, neon-lit day, behind her painted concrete counter. Except that, as she flips through her books of paintings, tiny enough for Alice to hang in The Rabbit's den, she thinks that if she had a gentle lover who loved her enough to massage her weary legs and smooth away nascent varicose veins, her days on the grungy side of the revolving door would be less grungy, less beige.

Yes indeed, a gentle, sensitive man who would walk around with his hair tousled like that of a newly awakened child would be good for the weary woman who sits in front of a faded wall and dusty fly-blown posters inside this worn-out post-office. But tell me, Adrienne, which of these cut-out characters, if any, would you pick as your *homonyme*, as your namesake?

I am not going to stop by the post-office but, on my way home I am going to pick up the photos taken in Paris, in Provins. I finally could bring myself to have them developed. Only one will be of you alone. It was taken by Sophie as you were leaning against the age-stained door that led us into the little dark, damp chapel. She had returned the camera to me saying, 'This one of Addy is for you.' She always calls you Addy. So does everyone else it seems. I do not imagine ever wanting to shorten your name, Adrienne. It is so ... you.

I remember having simply thanked her with a puzzled smile while I should have said, 'That's nice, but why?' I regret not having thought of anything to say at the time. I did not keep our conversation going.

But again, at the time, there might have been nothing that needed adding. Instead, I casually strode to the chapel's door to scrutinise the intricate designs carved deeply in the thick age-tempered oak panels and chose the segment best suited for macro photography.

Did she sense, then, that something a lot messier than mutual appreciation had already dropped its larvae in the palm of our hands? Should I have told her that if this picture was truly intended for me, she should have brought your face into tighter focus. And wait to see in your eyes that mute, stricken tenderness with which you would look at me, later that evening at Le Prince Noir restaurant.

I refrained from getting that roll developed until the day I asked you to pull the plug on us and on any thought you might still have been harbouring of getting us some quality time in Paris, behind Sophie's back. That particular roll has been on my mind every day since I removed it from the camera. I guess the purpose behind delaying such a simple pleasure is the same as that of the little girl who decides to keep her bonbon, her candy for ... later. She knows she will delight the most in its sweetness when the craving for it is beyond tantalising. So, I postponed the discovery of your face on glazed paper until the time the image of you, locked inside my mind, became imprecise, until the desire to see you, to look at you, reached its apex. Until I felt I would never get an opportunity to 'see' you any other way. I am now unable to bring back the precise colour of your eyes though a deep and rich shade of polished chestnut comes to mind. As words,

though, not so much as a colour. More a feeling than a colour. I do, however, still see the corners of your mouth, as they turn up, as you smile, allowing tiny dimples to form on either side of your lips. But you see, Adrienne, I can no longer bring up the whole of your face, in sharp focus.

There is one long shot of you that visits me regularly but there never was a negative of it; you are on the other side of the street as I have just caught sight of you, caught sight of your green woollen coat, through the thin iron bars that fence off the Parc Monceau. One foot, shod in a tan leather court shoe, taps the edge of the sidewalk. Your impatience, your need to cross that avenue, to reach the park, where you hope I am already waiting for you, shimmers all around you like a transparent aura.

'*Verde, que te quiero, Verde.*' I do not remember anymore why Federico Garcia Lorca wrote his lines on 'Green' but yes, like him I can say, 'Green, how I love you.' I love *you* when you are *that* green, the very particular shade of green of *her* winter coat. '*Te quiero, Verde*' as I wait to see *her* reappear on the crowded sidewalk. *That* green, your green will signal her return to me.

Briefcase in one hand, your wonderful green coat buttoned high against the chill winter wind, you are held back by the unrelenting flow of cars which rush by, unaware that they are depriving us of some of the most important minutes of our lives. Finally, you see me, seated on the scaly-green park bench, looking at you. While the pounding of my heart muffles the sounds of traffic, I see your smile, honest and shy. Then, I watch you pass through the massive wrought iron gates that lead into the park.

And you are here, close now. Very close. The hem of your coat brushes against the other green of the park bench. Tight close up now, as I look up. The faint bluish shadow under your eyes is the silent confirmation that you too, have failed to find any form of respite since our last moment together.

As I look up at you, you bend down to leave a kiss near the corner of my eye. I knew then that, if only one ounce of bad luck was ever attached to my name, I would end up loving you.

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Tonight, you will call, as planned. Again and probably as awkwardly as last time we spoke, you will begin your conversation by asking me how I am. And again you will ask me why I have not resumed my writing. Your last letter told me, before you did, that my tone during our last phone conversation had upset you. When you asked how I was, I know I should not have asked whether you wanted the truthful answer or a placating one. I should not have let sarcasm taint my words when you asked why I had not written.

Tonight, I must not answer the way I did this morning. Your call had caught me in one of the now frequent bouts of frustration that strip away the veneer of protective rationality I want to hold on to. Tonight I could flatly answer your concern about my well-being with something like, 'I have started a new manuscript. That takes up all my spare time. Very therapeutic. Great crystaliser of thoughts. What more can I ask, seeing that I am, after all, only an antipodean on holidays?' But again, maybe I should simply give you the other truth. I could simply say that I have never stopped writing, I have merely stopped mailing.

So, you cannot, after all, keep your promise to move on and away from us. You claim that you cannot refrain from looking for a breach, for a way to find time away from Sophie. For a way to see me. And yet, you cannot imagine a way to free yourself for a few days, either, while remaining in Paris or by flying down here.

The truth is, Adrienne, that it is an excruciating effort for me to come to terms with the realisation that, again, I am at your mercy to either plan or postpone or cancel the plans we were so excited to make over the phone only a few days ago. You announced then, bubbling over with excitement, that you had just heard from Sophie that she was planning to accompany what's-his-name, her boss, to an international conference in The Hague. You begged me to agree to put aside my natural repulsion for stolen moments, to forget loyalty and guilt and everything else I had been building into a scaffolding behind which to isolate, or is it insulate, myself from you.

And you wanted me to fly up to Paris for the five days of her absence. Then came your other call. Your were totally panic-stricken. Breathless, you said that she must have sensed you would take advantage of her absence. That she had cancelled her trip to The Hague certain that her

boss would be able to fend for himself. That she had not given you any more explanations in regards to her last minute decision. And that is making you very nervous.

I feel nauseous. The aborted plan hurts more, now, because we should never have schemed such a plan, any plan that played on the hope of actually being able to spend some time together. Will we ever again be able to sit facing each other, to talk, to listen, to watch, and caress each other with words, with silences, with the soft promise of love in our eyes? I dare say not. And I think we need to find a way of getting on with our separate lives. That is why I am no longer mailing what I write. Which is why I have already asked you, though not in so many words, to gently lay us to rest on an imaginary stretch of sand, to sprinkle us with stardust and let us evaporate into a moonless onyx night.

For now, though, I can say that I know the panic the diver feels, when oxygen no longer reaches her lungs and the pale puddle of light above her head is only very faint. I need to see you again, if only once, to understand with you, my face against your throat, your arms around me, being comforted by the hot tears of helplessness which would escape from my eyelids, as water seeps from behind a broken dyke, and drowns my cheeks.

Instead I am left with the gnawing need to demystify this love that is yet to be made physical. I am left, too, with a rosary to recite, to hold on to the precept of moral value, to remind myself that we would never be able to build anything lasting on the rubble of her pain. You are all she has left. I do remind myself of that. I remember the trust thing too; the betrayal antidote, the 'vital organ' bit, and how you are the only one she's finally trusted enough to love.

You have helped her heal. I do not wish her ill, it is simply that tonight, I am suffocating under the weight of her loyal friendship and the irregular correspondence she kept going all these years, even as I floundered, only guilty then, of a waning interest.

Just like with my relatives, here in Nice, Sophie and I have not shared an awful lot together, though our correspondence spans close to fifteen years. Just like them, she has always been on a different side of the world from me. The same side as theirs, the same side as yours.

If I had known then what I know now, I would have terminated my tenuous connection to Sophie a few years ago. You see, Adrienne, if I had, you and I would never have met. There would never have been that first handshake at Chez Lipp. There would never have been a tear-in-the-backdrop moment at Le Chicago. There would never have been that burst of unexpected desire ripping through us, unprepared for it as we both were. And there would never have been any of our actual ghost entanglement. At the time Sophie would have been a little hurt by my decision to cut her loose but again, knowing what we know now, she would have been a lot better off. But of course we all know that the problem with hindsight is that it always comes after the event.

You know the story of how Sophie and I came together in the first place. Not just in another place but more importantly, truly in another life. She was thirty-eight at the time. I was twenty-six. I came upon her inside a narrow boutique in a bazaar in Tangiers. Its low ceiling seemed held up by piles, pillars, and columns of stacked rugs of varying heights and thickness. Visibly, she was one tourist who was not about to let her choice of rug and its price be dictated either by the overweight, sweat-stained Moroccan vendor or by the endless rounds of mint tea he poured for both of them in little glasses. Our paths met then, in Tangiers, where I was doing some free-lance interpreting work for the management of a large international resort that had just opened over there. But Sophie did not need me as an interpreter.

Later that afternoon, once we were seated in the coolness of a white-washed courtyard sipping wonderfully thick coffees served in glazed terracotta demitasses, she had unrolled her rug for me to admire. It really was quite beautiful. It was not a very large rug and it did not have a busy pattern. Its beauty lay in the richness, in the depth of its colours. In the red of its inner rectangle, in the depth of its dark-emerald rosace and outer band, in the delicacy of the myriad of tiny green and white flowers woven in by skilled hands, and of course, in the thick density of its pile. She explained how she had loved that rug as soon as the vendor had unrolled it. She said, too, that she loved driving a good bargain. That she had been determined to make the sweat-stained vendor sweat through every pore of his many rolls, not only some of his natural fat reserve but every drop of mint tea he had plied her with, and every *dinar* or *dirham* that she thought in excess of the rug's honest value. I liked her humour. I liked her strong temperament. We made love. We spent the rest of her holiday together.

You, of all people, can guess how ours was destined to remain an embryonic relationship. You know that because you know her. You know her fear of bonding emotionally with women, particularly the women she would have most liked to trust. You are the only one to have made a breakthrough at that level. I understand that.

But the fact remains that, now, you and I have met, and we have fallen in love, though I know some would be quick to suggest we should ditch the 'love' word and replace it by 'lust'. Yes, they might be right. It is quite possible that we have only managed to fall in lust. To lay this point to rest is one reason why I, almost desperately, need to connect with you, if only just once.

In the meantime, whether it is love or lust, desire or greed, envy even for what belongs to another, the pain is the same. I am back to the 'beyond any shadow of doubt' principle. I do know that if one has ever said, 'Thou shall not covet,' I am coveting. I am coveting in a major way. Or, as little Emmanuelle might say, I'm like *soooo* coveting.

But let us go back to Sophie. As I stand today, I am a galaxy away from my twenty-six years of *d'antan* and I realise that, somewhere along the way, I have depleted my reservoir of free-spiritedness.

Having been a rolling stone for so long, and not necessarily by choice I am, now more interested in gathering moss. And, as far as she is concerned, I am not just an indifferent other who happens to be attracted to you. You have touched on that last point in one of your letters. You are right, this is where *le bat blesse*. This is where, for Sophie, the shoe pinches.

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On the way to the beach: tulips. A palette of vibrant colours was spilling out of the florist's front window and onto the narrow sidewalk, their bright corollas made translucent by the striped afternoon light that filtered down from the rooftops. The first bouquet, the only one, I had time to offer you was one of tulips. Tulips to brighten the walls of your office, otherwise bland and grey on that wintry afternoon in Paris. Here, in the south of France, they herald the nearing of spring and like notes on a music sheet, they are everywhere. They meet me wherever I go.

Their fragile shapes are heaped on rough wooden carts, in stalls, in vases, in buckets, at the open-air flower market in the old quarter of Nice. Their *feux d'artifice*, their fireworks, have no rivals here, this time of the year. Next to them, the roses appear stiff, tight and unyielding. Mauve tulips in tiny makeshift vases at the terrace of a bistro make me smile. Further up the street, sun-yellow tulips in thick, squat, terracotta jugs. Their limp frailty is reminiscent of the swooning, delicate courtesans of bygone days, the ones who swooned in literary salons, or at the feet of their sweetly-scented, secret lovers.

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Paris, 18 Mars

Alex,

Spring is in the air, here, too, not a day too soon. The bay window behind my desk is wide open, though of course the air is still a little chilly. You see, from here, I can hear what you heard when you were by my side on our bench below: the cascade, the twittering of birds, children playing and of course the *froufrou*, the flutter of wings as the pigeons come to roost on the ledges of all the windows facing the park. The unfortunate thing about the pigeons, though, is that they leave behind many unromantic traces, and so, millions of Parisians consider them as pests. That's fine, we do know this is not yet a perfect world. But, hey, plastic pigeons just wouldn't cut it.

This morning, I got a phone call from a notary I didn't know. She was explaining some kind of legal bind she wanted me to advise on, when my heart seemed to seize. Even my speech was affected by the time I uttered or should I say stuttered the answer to her question. It was her voice. She must have found me totally odd, to say the least. But the thing is that her voice was your voice coming through the earpiece. I mean she talked just like you. Her intonation was yours. As soon as I could politely hang up, I did, cutting short my muddle. Then I buzzed Helene in the ante-room, to tell her I wasn't in, not for anyone. And then, you see, the dam that I've been trying to consciously erect around me to exclude you, it just broke. I put my head on the desk and I cried and I cried.

This is why, in spite of the chill, I needed to bring fragments of our park inside my office.

Don't worry, *ma chérie*, tears, as you know, can provide therapeutic release.

Alex, please, stop by the nearest mail-box, drop something in it, anything on which you will have scribbled my address. I have you on the phone, when I can, when you're home. But it's not the same as deciphering your handwriting, not the same as reading the flow of your words, not the same as letting your thoughts wash over me as I lie on the sofa, warm in the soft glow of the halogen light, or in bed, the shutters shut tight against the intrusion of the night beyond. I miss your envelopes with reams and reams of ... you. I had so gotten used to them. I miss them. I miss you so terribly.

I kiss you, gently, tenderly, right now, and each time your face breaks into my thoughts, each time your smile reaches all the way here to soothe me.

Adrienne

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A flashback: I see myself in the Air France jetliner, seated near the porthole window. Grey, grey nothingness, not even the line of a horizon on which to tie a fantasy. The plane had left Paris only a few minutes ago, but already I was writing to you. These first private words scribbled on an airline paper napkin, the first since our one dinner alone, thirty-five hours ago, had come to me in the shape of a quick poem.

Already then, I had felt the need, an urgency to confirm through clumsy words the respect I felt for what you and Sophie had built together, like two birds making a nest, twig by twig. A nest based on shared moments, tested trust, daily love, patience and understanding; the very thing I was searching for. That need had been a catalyst in regards to my departure from Australia, a week earlier. I was longing to experience that commitment at least once. However, only minutes into my flight away from you I was aware, already then, of the danger I posed to your arrangement. And my melodramatic thoughts, spurred on by the frustration of having run out of time with you, went something like:

Ten years of sharing life  
A monolith set deeply into earthy foundations  
Two lives entwined  
No longer one reed and one elm  
Not even willows  
You became one oak

A centenary oak  
An oak that can only be felled  
By the powered teeth of a saw

Already the birds scatter  
From its tallest branches  
In a frenzied flight  
Away from their panic  
The squirrels usually brash and cheeky  
Now bounce against the roots and the rocks  
Maddened by the shrill scream of the saw

The forest curls up on itself  
In pain in shock blinded and deafened  
Its heart cries  
Its fibres tear  
Your soul bleeds  
The saw jams under the weight of its bite  
The wound is already deadly  
An acrid smell fills the still air  
The giant trunk creaks  
Its many circles of wisdom lie exposed

It cracks  
It snaps nest-bearing branches  
It collapses heavy and dead  
In its final resting place  
The undergrowth is crushed in the embrace  
But the slain oak no longer trembles  
Silence tears at our ears

Soppy and over the top for sure, but these unsolicited thoughts still offered a reasonable analogy with the power of emotional destruction you and I could unleash.

You see, Adrienne, already then, while still so raw from our miserably unsatisfying *nuit blanche*, from our sleepless duel against reciprocal desire, I needed to reiterate this: we are more than leaves blown away from purpose and reason by a mindless, vagabond wind. What pitiful self-indulgence it would be to say something like, 'The summer breeze tumbled me this way and that. But it's not my fault if I follow its pull. I'm only a little leaf, after all.'

Adrienne, I strongly believe that we do control our destiny. Together or separately, we must take action, one way or another. The oak has to be left standing.

Already, the jetliner was tipping its nose towards the Baie des Anges, jewel of the Riviera. It was the signal for me to fold away the metaphor of the stricken forest, but more difficult, to tuck you away while I tried to compose myself for the momentous family reunion about to take place. My father and relatives would be down there, somewhere, assembled behind a wall of glass, peering at the sky, ready to welcome me after a very long absence. All I had to greet them with was the shadow of your smile in my eyes and a torn, sick heart.

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"*Tu sais*, Alex, each in our own way ... we've been longing for another visit from you, but we've been apprehensive about it at the same time." My aunt, Marie-France, was speaking to me, in the kitchen where she had ushered me for a little quiet talk. "We often asked ourselves whether you ever thought of us when you stayed away so long. Not Emmanuelle of course, she wasn't even born when you left. I had never expected another child so late, but life has its own ways ..." Then she added perkily, "Hey, I hadn't even met her father then. I mean, really, that's how long it's

been. Over ten years!" Marie-France was busily foraging inside the pantry for the makings of coffee. The *tartelettes*, *éclairs* and *mille-feuilles* were already to bring out to the other eight members of my family, engaged in an animated conversation, in my grandparents' living room. From where I stood in the kitchen, I could hear my father's strong intonations. Marie-France pointed to a little oblong sponge cake, oozing sticky sweetness, topped by a maraschino cherry.

I looked at her, and then I remembered, exclaiming, for her satisfaction, "My favourite! The one and only *Baba au rhum*."

Pleased with my reaction, she nodded, and returned to her initial thought, "Then, we tried to imagine you as you might have become. Women do change a lot at your age. And then we worried. We thought ... well, it's difficult in a way, that type of reunion." I followed her movements around the kitchen, watching her as she sighed, wiping her hands on a flowery tea towel. "You see, we worried that, by now, after so few visits, so *espacées* too, so far in between, you might see us as strangers, no longer like the family who looked after you when your mother went away." The percolator had stopped its bubbling. She reached for it and frowned, "Your father and I, we even came to the conclusion that too much time has gone by, that the gap has become too wide to fill properly." She looked up from the dainty demitasses she was filling to the brim. "Your life has been so different from ours, ever since your mother took you away. I mean, really! Straight to Africa you went. A new American stepfather and all. Who would have ever thought ...." Marie-France absent-mindedly caressed the smooth percolator handle. "And all the countries you've lived in," she added, "... and the unique experiences that's brought you ... and all."

I nodded and I smiled inwardly at the 'and all' as she carefully arranged the demitasses on a silver tray. She was right about the enormity of it all. Right, too, about the different turn my life had taken away from theirs the moment Mayanne had come to take me back with her.

I remember my grandfather's thunder, my grandmother's tears the day they heard, by *télégramme* I think, that Mayanne, remarried and now secure in a stable union had decided she was ready to resume her responsibilities as a mother. She had already landed in Nice and would be collecting me two days hence.

You want to know what I remember of my own reaction. I am not sure. Not much at all actually. Only tears. Tears and anger. Not fear though. I mean, I knew who Mayanne was, well vaguely. She was the nice woman who had visited us a few times. The beautiful nice woman who had a very small dog with her, a Toy poodle I found out later, as white as a new-born lamb. Later, much later, I found out, too, that my mother was twenty-six years of age. When she visited, I remember she would bring me fairy tale books.

Tears and anger though, mine and my grandparents', when the moment came for me to go with her. Or more specifically, at the moment I understood that I was to go away ... for a long time ... without them. I kicked and I screamed. Then there is a blank. I do not remember how we got to Mayanne's suite at the Negresco Hotel on the Promenade. I do remember the burly black and white toy bulldog that barked when I pulled on its chain. She had bought it at the hotel boutique on the way up to our room. She had bought, too, a little tan monkey that, endlessly, flipped around and around and around a parallel bar. He wore a pointy little red hat but I cannot remember what trigger made him go around and around like that.

Anyway, back to my aunt, Marie-France. She is happy and rotund now. Warm and welcoming too. So in her kitchen I smiled and I nodded that I did understand her fears about the disparity of our lives and the void left in the wake of the thousands of yearly joys and sadnesses not shared. I kept on nodding, I kept on smiling wondering whether, one day, I might trust Marie-France enough to tell her a little about the 'and all' she was probably not yet suspecting. Or was she? Had she ever wondered why I had never married, not that it was too late to do so ... but the optimal moment, if ever there is one, had certainly passed.

In the meantime I bit my tongue, so strong was the urge to say, 'You know, Marie-France, all that I am, at this very moment, is a woman in love with another woman. Her name is Adrienne. I only met her a few days ago, in Paris, but the one thing I want most of all, even as I speak to you, is to make love with her.' Instead, I helped her reach for the dessert plates.

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Memories in black and white glued to the pages of a well-thumbed family photo album. Marie-France is thirteen, her hair is braided into two, long, smooth and shiny plaits. In her hand, is the hand of a toddler, bundled inside a thick woollen jacket, her little head protected by white beanie.

"Do you remember? I taught you how to walk in the park." Marie-France looked up from the heavy album resting on her lap. "How to get down a flight of stairs, too. That was trickier. You were afraid to use both feet, you know, alternating. You'd only go down with your right foot forward, at each step, never the left one. You don't do that any more, do you?" Good-naturedly reminiscent, she was happy to rekindle the fading memories of my early childhood, from where we sat, on a comfortable bed, amongst a profusion of pastel paisley cushions thrown over a quilted bedspread, embossed with soft lace. The half-open door to Marie-France's bedroom swung on its hinges.

"*Alors?* Already plotting things together, I see!" My father had just discovered our temporary hideaway. The half-smile, tugging at the corners of his moustache, seemed to be checking whether his intrusion in our 'girls' talk' might be excused. He stood by the door, tall and tanned, visibly waiting for an invitation to join in. His hesitancy suggested to me that he was careful not to impose, wanting to sit close to his stranger-daughter, not yet knowing how to go about it. So, I reached for his hand and made him sit on the bed, next to me. He smelled of dry, spicy cologne and strong cigars.

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I am thinking of the Mediterranean sea, so wide, and forever lapping exotic lands, beautiful, here, now, as it is alight under the lower rays of the afternoon sun. Yet, it stubbornly resists the moon's efforts to bring her tides, the cleansing tides she needs so desperately, to avoid choking on its own stagnant filth. Like her, Adrienne, we will reach the stage where all beautiful desire and emotions, all *déchirures*, the tearing and the pain, all uniquely intense vibrations will sink into murky depths, pile up on the muddy, rotting bottom of the sea. There, where all that is too fragile to survive dies.

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Why did I have to ask you that question, late last night? Your unexpected phone call was a most welcome surprise. You simply had to hear my voice. But I spoiled it by asking the one question for which I already had intuited the answer. Was it to feel, more than hear, the hardness of your tone? To experience the pain created by your words? Maybe it was to force you inside a trench, where I hoped you would hurt yourself. Or was it simply to have myself jolted, on command, out of the incoherent reverie in which I had been wallowing since our last phone conversation? You did not fail me. Your words came as the answer to a secret masochistic need of mine.

I know, now, that a pain is not a pain, is not a pain. That pain, last night, was not at all like the pain of desire against which I close my eyes, tightly, to tame it, or to nurse it longer inside my belly, to have it obliterate everything that is not of its essence, if only for a few seconds.

Last night, as my ears were already hot from the prolonged contact with the ear-piece, my eyes followed the contours of your voice, helplessly drowning behind closed lids, in wells of silent tears. But you did not know that.

You did not dwell on the topic. In fact you only said one sentence about it. And that sentence was embedded in innocuous rambling babble. And yet that sentence, because it had been borne out of your thought, had planted itself there where I could not *not* hear it. Incongruously potent. It is not that you said something I did not expect, or had not thought of. It is more the matter-of-fact manner in which you said it that echoed through the earpiece and found my heart as a willing target.

It was just a tiny little thing that had to do with a special, time-off merriment you were planning to celebrate Sophie's retirement this time next year. You had not paused for effect. You would not have intended any effect, I know. You simply moved on to your next thought and so, you missed hearing the pain raking through my ribs. Already, you were back to planning how and when, one day, hopefully soon, we would finally be able to snatch a couple of days together. And then, though you were seated comfortably by your window to better listen to the night, you finally heard my silence.

You decoded it, belatedly but accurately. You tasted my tears. You guessed the pain. Then, momentarily, you insulated me from it. Through the plastic earpiece pressed against my ear, I allowed you to wrap me up inside a cocoon of long distance tenderness.

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At the edge of the water-line, a gleeful, blonde little girl is trying to skim pebbles on the white foam of the ebbing tide, unaware of the murk that filters from below. Her body, toasted by the day's play in the sun, seems even smaller in the faded denim overalls, obviously passed down from an older sibling. Feet in the air, she cartwheels. Sand sprays all around, and she topples over into the foam that hems the lazy, indolent, greasy ripples.

Suspended seconds of hesitancy as the little girl's psyche hovers between tears and laughter. Still seated on her behind, lapping wavelets tickle her pixie-like feet. She laughs. Her chubby little hands brush the wet sand off her knees. I watch her get up and make her way back to dryness. And suddenly then she reaches deep into the sand and tosses it by the handful. A shower of shiny, golden grains thrown against the setting sun shape a halo, a golden aura around the little girl. Then, they too, one gleeful handful at a time, blend into the compact darkness of sand moistened by the tentative tongues of tepid seawater.

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Paris, 25 Mars

Alex,

Almost three months ago, you walked into my life. I can't quite say unannounced though, because Sophie, so excited at the news of your visit, almost bored us silly with the retelling of the old and, by now, familiar stories about her friend Alex, even weeks before you were due to arrive.

Anyway, during these past months, I've circled heaven and hell and touched hell again, yesterday, when I felt your pain. For the second time, I thought, for a split second, that I would never again hear the sound of your voice. That fear tore my heart away. Please understand that in the literal sense, so real was the sensation of loss. And then, your voice again, wet and broken.

Alex, I'm unable to pull away from you just as it's impossible for me to even wish it. I know. I've tried both. You're either inside or around my thoughts every hour of the day, as soon as I look up from my work. I'm forever busy talking to you, writing to you, in my mind. And in real time too. If we're still apart, it's only because of the distance between the Eiffel Tower and Nice's Baie des Anges and the lack of a fated opportunity to negotiate that distance. And that is solely because I can't bring myself to deceive Sophie ... further.

Adrienne

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Part II

(DÉCHIRURE)

## Where From Here?

Adrienne, have we reached the point of no return, or have we simply reached the point of no healthy return? What do you expect from me, now? I am not empowered by a decisive hand of cards I can either gamble or play with. I have only one card, and that one card, alone, does not yield a game, it does not constitute a hand even if, according to you, my card is nothing less than the Queen of Hearts.

All I know is that I need the curves of your body, rounded and softened, along mine. My heart runs to you only to meet a void, or is it a hollow, a cavity in which emptiness becomes oppressive. As much as my lips crave to shape three little words intended to confirm what you already know. I will not allow them to liberate their prisoners. I will keep them my captives. I must not, and certainly not for the sake of cheap sentimentality, say, breathe or do anything that could possibly render me more vulnerable than I already am.

Will we go on keeping our correspondence a secret? The role of the wolf in sheep's clothing that I have taken on is, now, too burdensome to carry. Ah yes, Adrienne, I sense your shudder, as you might think: what if she comes out to Sophie? I can almost hear you beg, 'Please, please, Alex, *surtout pas*. Don't even think about it!'

I imagine her tears, if I did come 'clean', her disgust in the face of the double treason. The double irony: though it is a male who tore at her soul, it is women she sees as wearing masks to better hide their deceitful nature. Women, she would say, make you love them. A woman can crawl inside another's heart, make it hers, to better split it open from the inside. The betrayal of a little girl by her mother refracted through each one of us. The sin of the mother, a sleeper inside each one of us. Waiting to wake. Oh, yes, I can clearly see the jagged turmoil in her grey eyes. A double confirmation that, all along, she had been right not to trust. Except that she had, in the end, hadn't she?

This dawning would be so much more insidious than all others imagined since the little girl had been betrayed by the mother. More damned than any other, bar that one, could ever have been. Because you owe her trust. You owe it to her because she gave it to you in the first place. Yet I suspect that, like the reed, Sophie's life experiences have shaped her into a very resilient woman. Her inner strength is, mostly, what had made her so attractive back in Tangiers. Such strength and determination in such a frail-looking woman. I know that had fascinated me at the time.

What I mean is that once the devastation of the tempest becomes post-trauma followed by an eerie silence, her instinct for survival, and yours to make amends, as a means to expunge your sin of lust, will push you towards a reconciliation. The foundations on which you rebuild will be made stronger by a genuine attempt to understand intimately the other's more secret self.

You see, Adrienne, at the moment, I cannot conceive of anything worse, in terms of intimate relations, than the silence in which both of you have walled yourselves. You, under the pretext of sparing her, she, because of her fear of getting sucked into the crack you have laid open at her feet.

How complicated it is to attempt writing down these mind wanderings, in a vacuum, with only my pen and paper as witnesses. It is much like attempting the mental, painstaking peeling of a tiny, pink prawn, in space, where it cannot be pinned to a plate. Knife and fork are replaced by the power to concentrate on each of its circular scales, their individual points of detachment and the careful nip of the blade that exposes the soft, pale underside.

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Paris, 4 April

Alex,

Just a quick word tonight, my love. I'm tired and need refuge by your side. The evening's been particularly trying. Papa's health is worsening. In fact, he's reached that stage where his doctors, knowing that they can't help him, want him to go back home, back to Lyons, to make room for another patient. One that is not yet condemned to die.

At the two extremes of life, people have the same needs; warmth and the soothing presence of loved ones. I haven't told you much about my father or his illness, because the moments we spend together, on the phone or in writing, are too precious to be warped by a topic as sobering as encroaching death. Just like I don't want to waste these precious minutes talking about work-related strains either.

But tonight, I need to talk. I'm frightened by the speed of my father's decline and mother's unwillingness to admit *ce qui est maintenant inévitable*. The doctors are categorical. She's normally strong and reasonable, but that's because he's always been by her side. They came from the same little hamlet in Bourgogne.

They played together as children. He used to carry her books on the ten-kilometre walk to and from school. Can you imagine? I'm very lucky to have had them as parents; salt of the earth they are. Simple but with honest values. Warmth in the hearth and in the heart is what I grew up with. That's why Sophie is so fond of them. Her own father died in a work-related railroad accident when she was only little, and her mother, well, you know. I'm afraid of not being strong enough to offer my own elderly mother the emotional *soutien*, the help she will need, any moment now. After he's gone.

On another note, *chérie*, next weekend, finally, we're off to Honfleur, with Isa and Eli. We haven't seen them since the dinner party, though we've had one or two brief conversations on the phone. As I mentioned once before, I'm sure they noticed something, on the last night we were all together, your last night here. If Eli had, indeed, caught our silent exchange that night at Le Chicago, then she's known all along.

Anyway, they seemed to have decided to drop out of sight, until now. I assume their intention was to give us privacy while Sophie and I got on with the famous 'hocus-pocus-abracadabra-Alex-disappears-now' circus trick. And so, here we are, facing a 'fun' weekend as a happy foursome. Be that as it may, a foursome is bound to be easier to handle than a twosome, as Sophie and I are not handling the tête-à-tête routine well at all.

I'm going off on a totally new tangent now but all these repressed, pent-up sexual emotions are making me think about my own sexuality, something I really haven't thought about a great deal, not since my first crush on a school girl friend and certainly not much at all as an adult. But a while back you said something about choices. About it being important for you to know that you actually chose your sexuality. Some women would rather think they didn't have a choice, you know.

When my mother heard on TV, or maybe she just happened to read it in a woman's magazine, that some scientist in the States had isolated the 'Gay' gene, she almost cried. With relief. Can you imagine? I didn't have the heart to tell her that, though that man may well have found something in his Petri dish, his detractors had been quick to point out that there were many other factors involved in being Gay. Conditioning and free choice are still viable ways to travel the same path. The thing is, she was so happy because, to her, it proved that I hadn't deliberately chosen to be a sinner. I might still be held back in Purgatory but I wouldn't go straight to the fires of hell!

On the other hand, you were saying that you were so glad you had had a first and long lesbian relationship before your rape. You said you would have hated knowing that your sexual life-choice might have been forced upon you. That you had become a lesbian simply because you couldn't deal with a man's sex as a result of your rape. That your rape had made you a 'sexual cripple'. You are proud to have made your choice freely. How does your mother feel about the 'Gay' gene though?

With Sophie, again, it's different. She's convinced that it's her brother's incestuous torment that's made it impossible for her to even think of sex with a man. One reason she doesn't even

like going to the beach much is because of these skimpy bathing suits that men tend to wear over here. You know, by design, they leave very little to the imagination.

When she was about eighteen, she came across a flasher, I mean a guy who was masturbating behind a tree, in a park, not far from where children played and lovers kissed. Anyway, the way she tells the story, it's really very funny. You know what a great raconteur she is. So, she comes upon this man. From the movements of his arm, and the way he's partially hidden behind the thick trunk of a large *platane*, she knows exactly what he's doing. So she drops her bag, she runs towards him, bowls him over and would probably have beaten him to a pulp if passers-by hadn't dragged her off him.

In those days, each public park had a guard of sorts, not a groundsman and not a policeman. Anyway someone had gone to get this guard who, as it turned out, knew about this masturbator but hadn't been able to actually catch him in the act.

The guy was then hauled up to his feet, bleeding nose and all, penis dangling, unable to zip up his fly because ... oh, I can't remember why not any more. As I said, you should really hear her tell that story. She's fine about it all now. I mean, she's refused to undergo therapy but she knows where she stands. She's seen a few psychologists because I thought it might do her some good, somewhere, but basically she says she doesn't need to put that much time and effort into it. She knows she's not good around half-naked men and masturbators, that she wouldn't make a good public pool attendant, but basically she's very comfortable being a lesbian. But the point I'm making is that the choice has been made for her by adverse circumstances.

How did I even start on that topic? And there I was telling you that this letter was going to be a brief one. I guess I need to spend more time 'with you' than even I thought I did, if you know what I mean. I'm really all over the place.

I'd better finish telling you about that weekend away and how I worry at the thought that, one of them, most likely Eli, might isolate me if only for a few minutes. First, she'll interrogate me without mercy, then she'll confidently state what she understands of my situation. I won't admit to anything but that won't make any difference to her. She'll end up giving me a smarting but totally wasted lecture. But, really, Alex, the reason I'm so uneasy about it all, is because I know I'll have to deny you, out loud, for the first time.

It's raining in Paris tonight. The sharp gusts of cold wind have returned. Over dinner, Sophie and I threw a few poisoned darts at each other. And you are on the other side of my world! Was it you who said France was a little country? Not so little to cross when you're at ground level.

I'm happy to know you're off to the mountains, in a couple of days, with your aunt and her daughters. You were right to accept their invitation. The clean air you'll breathe at that altitude above the cloud cover will do you good. Think, too, of the beautiful women you might meet on the slopes; caramel tan, fluorescent ski-suits, sun-kissed hair, seated as you'll be, at a mid-slope café, sipping *pastis*. So, no skiing for you this time around?

It does hurt, you know, imagining you there, free, and desirable. It hurts, too, to love you without ever risking to touch you. It hurts too, that I'm such a coward. But again, I tell myself that real courage is to actually stand by Sophie, be it out of loyalty, be it because of the remains of the love that only a few months ago had us snug and safe. And I know that, sooner or later, you'll disappear, in love again, with some exciting woman, most likely younger than me, who'll give you all I'm dreaming to give you. Or you'll disappear somewhere else. Even back to the antipodes where you come from. This, France, me: we're just so many stops along the way to wherever.

I found your letter, as I came home from yet another tiring day. A treat! Your words, free, sensual ... I can't describe the *tendresse*, the tenderness they make me feel.

So, congratulations. You've found the type of part-time work you think you might enjoy. Real Estate work, what a good idea. You'll be out a lot checking out beautiful houses tucked away in the hinterlands and apartments from which you could dive straight into the sea and these will bring you into contact with a lot of people you wouldn't get to meet otherwise. I want to be your secretary, simply to be by your side, to protect you from in-house politics, to keep away all the frustrations that could spoil your day. You'll be vulnerable in this environment, confronted by the brash and aggressive pace of the world of Real Estate, particularly in the south of France, where big money is often at stake. But before you're due to start, you'll have two weeks off with Marie-France, Joceline and Emmanuelle, off to the snow.

Months go by, *chérie*, but tonight in the metro, back from the hospital, I saw your face in the grimy glass pane. Your eyes were shining in the night. I miss you so much I could scream. I kiss you with all the tenderness I have in me.

Adrienne

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10.35 p.m. I was expecting it, I was waiting for it, eyes glued to the clock, counting the clicks made by the second hand and yet, I jumped, startled, as the first ring electrified the taut network of nerves that lay just under my skin. Reacting to the urgent vibrations of that second impatient ring, I felt my heart thud against my ribs. You see, Adrienne, my heart, too, has integrated the fact that, lately, these night-time rings introduce conversations that seldom follow the intended script. Maybe because of the pent-up energy, the repressed frustration badly concealed, they ignite in me thoughts otherwise tamed and controlled by the pen. On the third shrill trill, it was anxiety and fear that moved me towards the phone. I picked up the receiver, slowly bringing it to my ear.

"Allo?" Not quite a silence and not quite a bad line static. "Adrienne ... I can hardly hear you." I guessed your voice more than I heard it. An odd silence floated shapeless along the telephone cable. "Adrienne, talk to me! What's wrong!" Hand gripped on the receiver, I willed it to yield the sensual, warm tones of your normal voice. Static on the line, its presence seemed to make your silence more audible, or simply more transparent. And I understood even before your hoarse whisper reached my inner ear, "Alex, I'm scared!" And these simple words told me that, once again, our latest scheme to meet in Paris was not going to eventuate, as stillborn as the previous ones.

"What are you afraid of? Adrienne?" My heart had already constricted itself to protect its vital core, in anticipation of a major blow.

"Alex, this time, it's not about Sophie. She's good, really. She's left me ... she's left me some breathing space." Another silence. I could feel an impatience rise where my fear had just lain.

"Then, what is it about? Adrienne, talk to me! What's happened?"

"I'm afraid ... I'm afraid of not ... of not being able to ... to cope." You steadied your voice, imparting it with some semblance of resolve. "I'm afraid of the ... the emptiness. I already ... imagine it."

What emptiness?

"I'm afraid, it'll be worse when you get back on that plane again. When you go back to Nice. When once again, you will leave me alone ... all alone to manage my life ... to manage ... everything all alone." A silence. A muffled snuffle. "Don't you know I'll ... I'll ... flinch every time ... when I look up and see her? Every time I catch her looking at me ... I'll be feeling ... so ... bad ... so guilty ... when you're gone again." Your panic was flowing and spilling over the telephone line. Not only could I hear it, it was close enough to feel but I did not try to stop you. "It's the thought of more lies, Alex. You ... you don't have to lie to her. Not in her face ... not when looking into her eyes, you don't. You just lie by ... by..." By my silence. "I can't stand the thought of all the ... other lies ... worse ones I know I'll have to tell. Reasons for this and that I'll have to invent ... Each one will be more ... difficult to mask. And my father ... Oh, Alex, I hate all of that! I can't stand any of it. Not anymore!"

As I listened, eyelids tightly shut to better anticipate the contours of your other, as of yet, unformulated thoughts, I sensed there was still the hope of reassuring you. Of reassuring you about Sophie, about yourself, if not about your father.

I hated never finding the right words to tell you on that topic. On the topic of your father's imminent death. Only dry banalities come to me each time I try to comfort you. The thing is that I am not practised at illness-related conversations. I do not know hospitals. I do not know their smells. I do not know the smell of approaching death. I do not know how death looks on the face of a loved one. I have never lost anyone. No one I know has ever been seriously ill. I thought I could talk you out of the spiral of fear that seemed to have lifted you off the ground. I felt confident. I relaxed the grip I had on the receiver.

And then, your voice now firm, "Alex, don't come!"

I was no longer braced against the implication of these words. It was my turn to flounder in a vortex of unfocused thoughts. "What do you mean ... 'don't come'?" I inhaled deeply. "Of course I'm coming. I'll soon be with you, in Paris, as planned." Then I added, blindly refusing to acknowledge what I had understood, "Will you be at the airport to meet me, or shall I take a cab? To Monceau ... or to where exactly?" Was it the echo of my words that bounced back into my ear, or was it simply the echo of your silence? Maybe it was the holographic shape of your weakness that muffled your voice and appeared behind my closed eyelids.

"*Non, Alex, ne viens pas!* I don't want you to come ...Not any more. *Ne viens plus.*" You were no longer pleading. You were no longer hesitant. The cold, clipped tone of Ms d' Anville, the lawyer, finished me off.

I felt empty, chloroformed. I felt sick. I felt nauseated by the depth of a cowardice I had only vaguely sensed, pending more evidence. Now you wanted to know how I was feeling. You wanted to help me deal with this. No, Adrienne, I will not allow you to be both the giver of the blow and the healer.

"Adrienne," I said, teeth clenched against the slow rage I could already feel congesting my throbbing temples, "what I am thinking at the moment is no longer any of your concern."

Your sigh rose towards me, but I refused to grab it. I refused to give it meaning. I refused to latch on to it. The compliance with which I had lived and breathed our sterile passion had been entirely based on the premise that one day we would meet again. In a simplistic way I had assumed, at the time, back in January, that a reunion, albeit a brief one, would be imminent. I had assumed that, face to face, together, we would know how to best make things work out. I had assumed that we would be able to reach an agreement and honour it bilaterally. And so everything that I had thus far *avalé*, swallowed, endured, made do with in the name of patience and understanding, surfaced as bile and bitter resentment. Odd double silence on the line. But again, I took it upon myself to not unleash that resentment. Self-control. Remoteness must always prevail. I have already explained that strange reflex of mine. And it is at times like that that it activates itself. Useful, isn't it? Everything else that is on the outside, that is me, my churning guts and my fear of abandonment, we remain *écorchées vives*. Raw, bruised and battered. But the point is that this pain must not show.

"I understand your ... apprehension but ... Adrienne, you have to understand that ... by telling me not to come, you are tolling the knell ... *le glas, tu comprends* ... the death of our ... relationship." I caught myself with my free hand gesticulating the quotation marks around the word relationship, a silent bitter admission that a relationship was, of course, the one thing you and I have never had. "*Ce soir, tu vois ... c'est nôtre histoire* ... our story that is dying here, no matter how I choose to interpret your justifications."

"Alex, *je t'en prie* ... Please, try to understand!"

Oh please! Spare me!

You had more to add. "What would we do ... What would I do if instead of stopping the fire, your four days in Paris ... with me ... made it worse, you know what I mean? What if it ... fanned the flames?"

My throat tightened further as I listened to your words. You stopped there but I sensed you needed to say more. You could have. I was too busy holding in deep breaths. Too busy making myself exhale slowly, quietly. Too busy smothering the sarcasm that would be impossible to stem once past my tight lips.

Your voice had resumed with a newly found penetrating eloquence. Your brain must have stopped seizing. My ear, having gained an insight of its own, disconnected itself from the receiver. And I let the projected images of the total osmosis we had so carefully, so crazily planned only a few days ago, shrivel up further. The picture of a withered rose, lifeless on a nasty yellow plastic tablecloth, its dried heart exposed, stiff petals curling inwards superimposed itself on the vague voice that still filtered through the receiver. And yet, until tonight, until ten thirty-five p.m., our words, our thoughts, our desires had followed the same trail, hand in hand. Or close enough.

Ten forty-two said the clock. Why was it still ticking? I brought the receiver back to my ear. "Alex ... Alex ... *tu es là?* "

"Of course I'm here? Where else would I be?"

"Alex, *écoute!* Listen to me!"

Haven't I listened enough already? Have a heart.

"Everything I read in your letters, about your feelings for me, they're all ... echoes of my feelings for you. Don't you see?" Your intonations seemed tainted with pain as you added, "The images, the cravings, the mad emotions you craft so cleverly with your words ... " My ear had resumed its position, tightly pressed against the plastic earphone. "I feel them ... for you. Alex? *Dis? Tu comprends?*"

Oh yes. I understand. But we're past that kind of understanding, Adrienne. Understanding has become superfluous. As helpful as a toothpick for kindling wood.

"Yes, Adrienne, yes ... that may well be so, but tonight, for the first time since Le Chicago and Le Prince Noir restaurant we are no longer synchronised," I said, aware of the level of impatience creeping into my voice, aware that this conversation had already peaked a while ago.

A long sigh trailed behind your words as you whispered, "If only it were as simple as that!"

With something akin to dismay, I realised you were regrouping your thoughts, that you were about to open another window in your argument. You see, Adrienne, by then we had reached the last instalment, the last sequence of our scenario. The time had come for the heavy curtain to drop down on us and suffocate us. There would be no curtain call.

Our script had been terrible and though we had battled on valiantly our performance had been even worse. Our characters were weak. Our acting had been tepid. We had lacked determination. A quick closure would have been the only progression out of the corner in which you had painted us. And yet you mistook the cue. You thought you needed to say more.

"*Mais enfin*, why don't you understand, Alex?" It was your turn to sound exasperated. "Don't dismiss me so quickly. There's ... there's more to it than ... Well, I haven't explained it well. What I mean is ... " Your voice had become that of a frightened little girl who is afraid of letting go. Tears welled as I listened unable to hang up. "What if you ... disappear after the few days spent with me? Do you understand? No ... you don't." You sighed again. I heard the tightness in your voice. "What if ... Alex ... what if I found an ... indifference in your eyes ... afterwards?" A pause. "I make myself sick over *cette peur* ... this fear, the same fear I've had all along. Alex ... how can I say it so you understand? I'm afraid that the ... reality of me will ... disappoint you." Silence. Thoughts whirled around my head. You had sounded as if you had just offloaded something heavy or had finally mustered the courage to lance a metaphoric boil. "No ... more to the point is what will I do ...when ... when I notice a smile of relief as you wave one last goodbye?" you asked again.

I pressed the tears from my eyes and brushed a hand under my nose. I did not want you to hear these tears. I made myself breathe again.

"Adrienne ... Adrienne, listen! What you are afraid of could just as easily have happened to me ... don't you see? You too, you might have ended up with your own expectations unmet. You too might have been disappointed. And relieved that it was finally all over. That is how it was supposed to have happened, isn't it?"

Somehow, unintentionally, my verb tense reflected that all was already in the past, no longer an option to either choose or dismiss. In a muddled way I was being cruel to you who had cast the die. I was not allowing you any space in which to manoeuvre. The present and the future had just been bounced into a past time warp.

At the time of this conversation I would have liked to ask you if you ever had truly wished for anything else but a closure. I do not think so. Ah, but not a closure based on my disappointment ... of ... of you ... of your performance? Not one simply based on my walking away. Is that the rub? Would you have preferred a strong closure based on a heroic strength of character? Had you fancied that a negation of a full-blown out love or unquenchable lust would make you forever a martyr to the virgin of Fidelity? Could that be so that you could beat your chest and clamour, 'I've been strong for you, Sophie! For you. For us, my love!' Am I being unfair?

And still you over-explained. "Sophie won't make it if I get any closer to you, emotionally closer. She's giving me more room to move, yes. We've only seen each other once this week ... for dinner. She doesn't call to say goodnight as she always does ... did ... when we're not spending the night together. She says I need the rest but I know she's giving me more space. But you see ... I know her. If she feels she has to move even further away ... she'll ... rush things to ... to pre-empt. Her judgement won't be good and she'll – "

"Adrienne, please! Don't labour the point anymore, please!" I shouted into the receiver, by now feeling the weight of your endless justifications as accumulating dead weight on my shoulders.

And the urge to throw a barb at you surfaced. A nasty urge, a nasty barb about the particular way in which, for the last three months, you had looked after Sophie's best interest. The barb hit the target. I could tell I had aimed it well. You did not even try to shake it off. You let it dangle from the point of impact, letting your wound bleed silently.

For the first time, since you had taken up the habit of nocturnal phone calls, eyes wide open I followed your voice. I used to like keeping them closed, to draw you close into a cocoon in which vanished both exterior reality and the sharp white beam of light that hung high above the phone in my father's living-room.

"Why are you so intent on listing the many reasons, real or imagined, for which you have aborted our plans?" And I did not resist the urge to add, "Adrienne, the time has really come to dismantle our invisible but messy entanglement. I mean, what with Eli breathing down your neck and all, it's all getting too risky for you, isn't it?" And then, slyly, I asked, half bee, half scorpion, "Why are you persisting with this conversation? All that needed to be said has been said."

*"Parce que je t'aime.* Because ... because I love you."

I drew in a breath. In slow motion I moved the receiver away from my ear and gently, ever so quietly, my hand brought it down to rest in its cradle.

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The sail of a solitary windsurfer like a butterfly wing torn off by a cruel child, immobile in the distance, is carelessly planted into the grey skin of the angry sea. The wind pulverises the sand over the esplanade. Sharp grains, hard and stinging. The passers-by brace themselves against the gigantic, erratic breath that pushes against their back. And they pass by clutching the collar of their tops and shirts against their throat.

Spindly, anaemic palm trees seem maddened as they shake and wave their once dusty fronds to a sky in tones of pewter and silver that remains impervious to their agitation. Storefront signs strain to break loose and boats tethered to the jetty are eager to snap their mooring. The wind trills and shrieks. The only fixed point of the landscape is the watercolour sun that sits smugly poised low on the watery line of the horizon.

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