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## A TRANSLATION OF MARION GUILLOT'S *C'EST MOI* WITH AFTERWORD

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A TRANSLATION OF MARION GUILLOT'S *C'EST MOI* WITH AFTERWORD

by

Edwin L Schooler III

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: Modern Languages and Literatures

Under the Supervision of Professor Jordan Stump

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# A TRANSLATION OF MARION GUILLOT'S *C'EST MOI* WITH AFTERWORD

Edwin L Schooler III, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2021

Advisor: Jordan Stump

This thesis is a literary translation of French author Marion Guillot's 2018 novel *C'est moi*. The work tells the story of a journey of self-discovery gone wrong. The unnamed narrator feels as if she and Tristan, her unemployed boyfriend, are slowly drifting apart as they put up with the daily domestic drudgery of their Parisian lives. They don't really get out anymore and they never see anyone except Tristan's only friend, Charlin, someone who the narrator doesn't particularly care for. One day, Tristan plans a surprise which he seems to think might save their relationship: hanging a gigantic nude photo of the narrator on the wall of their studio apartment. The narrator's relationship with this super-sized self-representation transforms the novel into a story about perception as she explores interesting questions about how we perceive ourselves, how we think others perceive us and the differences between photos and reflections. Eventually, the narrator's obsession with perception essentially causes her to descend into madness. After realizing that Charlin played a central role in the photograph debacle, she comes to the realization that she needs to get control of her life—this includes doing whatever it takes to get rid of what she sees as the source of all her problems: Charlin.

The translation is followed by a critical translator's afterword. This section includes descriptions of the original work's publisher, author and literary context. Moreover, it contains an overview of the various techniques used in translating the novel

as well as the different challenges the translation posed. The strategies used to overcome these difficulties in the translation are also featured in this part. The afterword also includes an analysis of several contemporary theories by prominent individuals in the world of translation (namely David Bellos, Karen Emmerich, Mark Polizzotti and Lawrence Venuti). These different theoretical approaches are used in order to help justify the decisions made throughout the process of translating the novel.

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Marion Guillot

# It Was Me

Translated from the French by Edwin L Schooler III



“Remind me to bring a bit of rope tomorrow.”  
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*





## I

Deep down, Charlin probably was a nice person.

We found out he'd died when Tristan's phone started vibrating on the kitchen table as we were having breakfast one morning. At that point, we hadn't had the courage to finish the dishes from the day before—neither of us wanted to plunge our hands into the murky sink water where the detergent-soaked sponge sat under some plates covered with the dissolving bits of leftovers from prior meals.

Tristan, sitting half-naked in front of his coffee, just stared at the message like he was trying to be sure he understood it. He muttered *shit* to himself over and over, lit a cigarette that was already smoked down to the filter and, instead of showing me the phone, just said: *Charlin died yesterday*.

They found him alone, next to his couch with a mostly-empty wine glass on the coffee table—which really wasn't surprising to anyone—but with his eyes bulging and, more importantly, a rope around his neck.

The following Thursday (we'd since finished the dishes and I'd managed to get the day off from work), we woke up earlier than usual to go to the funeral. After getting

out of the shower, Tristan made sure he was clean-shaven; he even changed his razorblade for the challenge of shaving his upper lip, that ever-tricky mustache zone. He put on his only black suit and I dressed appropriately also. Since neither of us had it in us to drive, we took the train, getting on just as the doors were closing.

I spotted two forward-facing seats that were free. Even though we sat next to each other for almost two hours, neither of us knew what to say. So we made do with watching the countryside fly by through our reflections in the window. If it hadn't been for all the people on the train, it would have been quiet enough for the whole trip to hear a fly buzzing about, the automated voice announcing the last stop, the bustle in the train car cut off by its gradual slowing and stopping, any hum of conversation, a cat's meow, the rustling of trash or clothes, and the occasional kid excitedly waving at the people waiting for him outside.

Right after we got off the train, Tristan put on his sunglasses; it was nice out, so at least we had that going for us.

The ceremony was at eleven in the morning. Charlin was to be cremated and there wasn't going to be a mass, incense, or a priest in mauve robes; this, too, wasn't surprising to anyone.

Before we left, we'd looked at a map on the white computer which struggled to load the information about the town. It showed us that the funeral home was a half-hour walk from the train station. So, already numb from situation and the trip, we went on our way, closely following the Internet's directions. During the walk, Tristan alternated between holding my hand and putting his hands in his pockets; his grip was flimsy and

tepid. Holding hands seemed to replace the need for any conversation while also allowing him to serve as a guide in the deserted morning streets which we were wandering not only for first time, but also under very strange circumstances, or at least abnormal circumstances. At almost every intersection, I had to glance at the map to make sure we were on track. At the fourth set of stoplights, we got distracted by a sign for something called “Central Kitchen,” which we could only guess was a procurement agency for local lunchrooms. We stopped in front of it for a moment, almost considering a detour to check it out, before ultimately just exchanging a look and a nervous laugh.

Twenty minutes later, across from the crematorium, we heard a red Fiat’s door slam shut and Charlin’s mother clear her throat as she locked the car. It wasn’t the right time to introduce myself, but she gave Tristan a kiss, saying between sobs that it was impossible, *impossible*, before she crossed the street to join the others at the entrance—there were maybe thirty people there, including two people keeping mostly to themselves who’d been on the train with us. Charlin’s mother was holding an easel and it was almost like her body was hanging from it, the wooden triangle barely able to contain the fairly recent photograph of her son (the image’s soft edges flowing over the borders). I noticed he was wearing his favorite T-shirt in the photo. It was the effigy of a rock band, and he’d worn it often when we’d see him.

We stayed outside for a moment, not talking to anybody. Then, a man in a striped suit came out to tell everyone we would be in Hall B: *through the double doors, please, take the first door on the right*. With the sun at our backs, we followed Charlin’s mother,

naturally forming a line because of how narrow the hallway was. Taking the first door on the right, we all went to the coffin and gathered around it, not daring to sit down in the imitation church pews. Given the general discomfort of the situation, it felt like one of those private art viewings; all that was missing was a free glass of champagne and a few paintings on the wall—that is, until the striped-suit man came in and went to the platform where he turned on his microphone and took his place behind the podium. In the meantime, Tristan and I had found a spot in the middle of the windowless room, behind the family, of course, but not all the way in the back either. We were near Charlin’s other friends, and maybe even some of his last sexual conquests. I was sizing up the girls out of the corner of my eye; one of them was almost certainly named Véronique, like all easy girls are.<sup>1</sup>

*This act, the man in the striped suit said directly to the deceased, will always remain a mystery to us, but we have gathered together today to pay our last respects to you by listening to a few of the songs that you held dear, songs that you will carry with you from this day forward—then, after some Coltrane, we listened to a Nougaro CD and Charlin’s mother burst into tears against the backdrop of “ah, tu verras, tu verras, tout recommencera...”<sup>2</sup>—We wish we could tell you just how much we’re going to miss you...*

The mother’s sobbing (of course she was going to miss Charlin; she was losing the only person she had left given the fact that she was already a widow and had no other children) became more intense and started spreading through her entire pew: it was like it

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<sup>1</sup> The choice of the name Véronique is most likely due to the French verb “niquer,” a vulgar term for sexual intercourse. As such, names like *Monique* et *Véronique* lend themselves to such wordplay.

<sup>2</sup> This comes from Claude Nougaro’s upbeat song *Tu verras*. It might be translated as: “Oh, you’ll see, you’ll see, everything will start again...”

was raining in the front row, but the water was dirty, like the rain in one of those weary storms that isn't comforting at all.

Then, as a gesture of peace, everyone was invited to the platform where Charlin was still staring at us from his little easel. We were told to choose one of the roses from the spray and place it on the coffin. Personally, I hate roses, especially when they're in a spray and specifically those dark red ones that are almost brown. So I was hesitant to take part. It seemed like a pretty sensitive matter to me too, like maybe even a bit too much to ask of me. While I was considering it, I stayed seated in the pew while everyone else headed for the center aisle. Like with every decision I make, I carefully weighed the pros and cons, procrastinating until it was too late for me to get up and go do what everyone else had already done. Admittedly, I avoided Charlin's gaze coming from the photo. It had become all the more piercing as the rows began to empty. Instead, I concentrated on Tristan's curly hair—he was obviously not worried about me or mad at me for feeling like I didn't need to fall into step behind him, probably telling himself that although I was important to him, perhaps even necessary in a time like this, I was still an outsider, and as such reserved the right of discretion and didn't need to act like everyone else—while he got into line, following the group to the platform, ready to pick out a ridiculous rose and throw it, if we're being honest here, onto a wooden box with a corpse in it.

I'm not sure how long the procession lasted, that is, how long it took for the spray to be reduced to just a couple of sad flowers, withered by the mourning, the humidity and the distress in the room. In any case, everyone had more or less found their way back to

their original seat, and since no one had prepared any words or felt able to pay tribute on the microphone, we listened to the striped-suit man solemnly read “Le Voilier” by William Blake<sup>3</sup> (as one does...). Then, after another song, this time rock—or in any case a song with drums, rough voices, and a couple of electric guitars (which seemed intended to try to warm up the crowd and enliven the room)—the master of ceremonies glanced at his watch, seeming like he was suddenly in a rush to get all this over with, as if he too had a TER<sup>4</sup> to catch (more likely, he had another corpse and mourning family waiting in Hall A). In one flash of movement, he turned off the CD player, the microphone and the stage lights. We quickly got the message and headed to the door. We followed the well-lit hallway back to the courtyard of the crematorium—I couldn’t help but see a certain symbolism in that sudden return to natural light, like a sign that the world was finding order again, like something inside of me was heating back up and coming to life again. As we left, the gravel crunched under everyone’s shoes, including the high heels of some of the girls, at least one of whom was definitely named Véronique.

With puffy eyes, Charlin’s mother asked if we were going to stay. She wanted us to wait for her so we could go to a family friend’s nearby apartment together: they were

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<sup>3</sup> In French, this poem (sometimes also called “Je suis debout au bord de la plage”) is almost always attributed to William Blake, as it is here. As is common for the time period, it’s generally believed to have been translated anonymously. That said, some believe it was translated by Victor Hugo while others believe Hugo is actually the original author. Interestingly, thanks to some convincing research done by the Transylvanian Dutch website for genealogy and family history, we know the original English version “What is Dying?” (sometimes also called “Gone from My Sight,” “The Parable of Immortality,” or “I Am Standing Upon the Seashore”) is almost certainly written by the Reverend Luther F. Beecher, a preacher and the cousin of Henry Ward Beecher. Despite this, the English version of the poem is often erroneously attributed to Henry Van Dyke. In my research, I’ve also found the English version as credited incorrectly to the following people: Henry Scott Holland, Bishop Charles Henry Brent, Colonel David Marcus, Dr. Harold Blake Walker, or Margaret M. Stevens.

<sup>4</sup> TER or “Transport Express Régional” (Regional Express Transport) is a rail service operated by the SNCF, the French national rail service. Here, the train itself is referred to as “a TER” by metonymy, as is common in France.

serving a light meal and there might have even been a cold buffet. I really wanted a coffee or a glass of white wine—why not a slice of ham with a little tabbouleh? But Tristan wanted to take the first train home. Who cares if we missed the buffet? We were already missing the most important thing: the ending to the story, which didn't really matter, because everyone already knew how it was going to end. There was only one true ending, simply put: Charlin disintegrating in a 1600-degree furnace.



## II

He was Tristan's best friend, or maybe just the only friend he still had from high school, a place Charlin left pretty quickly, convinced it would be more entertaining and profitable to become an electrician instead. Legally speaking, his name was Charles-Valentin, but he always went by Charlin: he must have found it less old-timey or more promising; after all, according to him, life was nothing more than a matter of calculations and combinations of "more" and "less." Maybe he just hated his name, even though he shared it with a famous musician who was known as much for his piano skills as for the fact he was crushed to death by his own bookshelf as he reached for a volume of the Talmud in March of 1888.

That said, Charlin didn't know any of the music by his namesake, Alkan. He'd never heard *The Song of the Madwoman on the Seashore*, nor had he ever touched a piano. It never occurred to him either to open a book, and especially not a holy one. He wasn't my type at all. Other than billiards, girls, and occasionally electrical circuits, we couldn't find much at all to talk about. But that didn't stop him from flirting with me and even straight up hitting on me, though according to him, he never would have actually gone through with it—he'd never do that "to his friends."

What we would do to his friends though, was show up uninvited, as evidenced by the fact he'd been doing it to us for months now, often before meals and, nine times out of ten, empty-handed. As far as I could tell, his sudden entrances, as frequent as they were unpredictable, usually came about because he grew weary of drinking alone. Otherwise, the frequency of these visits seemed to depend on his tendency to maintain multiple relationships, some more romantic than others, about all of which he would make up stories you could tell were lies from a mile away. Tristan didn't really see the problem; he said seeing Charlin kept him busy and even provided him with a kind of moral support in his battle against unemployment. As for me, without even discussing the choice of the word "battle," nor falling down the slippery slope of morality, I started to question pretty early on just how comforting all their empty beer bottles and middle-school jokes could be. I was beginning to reevaluate the possible benefits of their long conversations which sometimes lasted well into the night and, frankly, I was starting to have a problem with it all, especially when I was in bed and felt almost like I was the annoying one when I suggested they go finish the party and their drinks out in the hallway so I could get some sleep.

From my point of view—since lately Tristan's point of view wasn't making much sense to me—by getting close with Charlin, by accepting his presence in our home, by forcing him into my life using his puppy-dog eyes, Tristan was, little by little, distancing himself from me. I worked during the day, and when I came home in the evening Charlin was sometimes already there, often with his back pressed against the fridge from which

he had often already served himself a beer. It was definitely getting on my nerves. Even if we weren't the type to yell and break dishes and despite the fact that I was starting to feel the effects of my forties (most notably the fact that I was becoming less patient and that everywhere, and I mean *everywhere*, people had started calling me "Madame"<sup>5</sup>), Tristan and I were going through a somewhat delicate, you might even say difficult, phase of our relationship at that time. In reality, we were hanging on by a thread; we were living side-by-side rather than together, letting the days vapidly fly by. It was becoming our new normal and Tristan didn't seem to worry about the subtle numbness of the relationship, the slowing pace of things, or the distance between us (something Charlin was definitely not helping with). The issues were made all the more insidious by the fact that there was nothing really dramatic about the situation and what's more, it would have been so easy to fix it all with a little bit of willpower or three sips from a magic love potion.<sup>6</sup>

But we didn't have a magic love potion and Tristan seemed to be only half-heartedly looking for a job. And truth be told, he seemed to be looking with less and less enthusiasm as the weeks went on. After he'd been let go "like a dog" from his last job for mostly economic reasons, he quickly became discouraged by the rejection letters saying things like his application was carefully reviewed, he wasn't the right fit, he lacked experience (sometimes it was that he was too experienced), or they preferred someone less independent for the job. The best-case scenario was getting called in for an interview, but even those always seemed to end with him being told he might get callback only after

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<sup>5</sup> For some women in France, it can be a somewhat of traumatic experience to be called "Madame" (as opposed to "Mademoiselle") because it indicates that whoever she is speaking to perceives her as an older woman.

<sup>6</sup> An allusion, of course, to the chivalric romance *Tristan et Iseult*.

he'd waited for hours among other nervous candidates with whom he had nothing in common except his degree, his inability to make himself seem hireable, and his disdain for neckties. He was so discouraged that he didn't even consider the infrequent job listings in his field, never wanting to leave his bed covers to write cover letters.

It seemed like he was getting out less and less.

At any rate, when I'd leave for work, he'd usually be sitting in front of his coffee, if he wasn't still asleep. Then, when I'd come home, I'd sometimes find him alone, admittedly, already dressed, probably showered, usually in a pretty good mood, but either just sitting there, staring into space or focusing on a jigsaw puzzle, because on the days when Charlin was busy, Tristan had started doing puzzles to keep himself occupied (we do what we can to distract ourselves).

They were usually masterpiece paintings, the most recent of which was still incomplete on the floor. As always, he'd started with the edges: the day he got that puzzle, which he'd ordered online from a special site, he stuck his hands in the clear bag, searching the one thousand pieces for all the edges and the four corners. In less than an hour, he'd finished the border, which, as advertised on the box, was two 238 centimeters. That day, he also finished the multicolored cuboid and, behind it, the mannequin sitting on a bluish-gray crate with its deformed chest and disconnected head wedged between its stone legs.

In an effort to support Tristan, I'd help him during the day on the weekend. Everyone has their own way of doing puzzles, their own way of putting their nerves to the test: my favorite part of this puzzle was the color scheme: the bluish green of the sky,

the reddish slats on the floor, resembling a stage or a platform; as for Tristan, he was attached to the details, carefully recreating them, such as the dark castle windows in the background, or the inert smokestacks of the factory on the left-hand side. Sitting cross-legged though acting like he didn't care too much, he alternated between looking at the picture on the box—which he'd set up in front of his workstation right away—the loose pieces in the bag, and the pieces he'd already organized by shape and color. Before daring to place a piece, he'd wait, without moving, until he was sure he knew exactly where it fit. As for me, kneeling beside him, I tried pieces over and over again, without looking at the box, which I rejected on principle, letting myself be guided only by the shapes and the pure, inexhaustible pleasure of seeing two pieces of cardboard finding a way to fit together.

But puzzles, too, with their Ionic-style statue characters, were another thing he eventually gave up on. At the time, Charlin was over often and seemed to distract Tristan so much that we never finished the masterpiece painting with the hot-air-balloon-headed mannequin or the third, faceless figure. And now, in retrospect, without really knowing whether it would have been for better or for worse, I think funnily enough (I say “funnily” because at that point, a little effort on Tristan's part was all I was expecting) if Tristan hadn't given me the impression he wanted to change things, if he hadn't made the effort he did, that the three of us might have gone on like that forever: seeing each other as much as we were avoiding each other; sharing, against a backdrop of boredom, so many evenings and so much exhaustion, Tristan, his damn friend, and me.

## III

About two weeks before the funeral, Tristan came to pick me up from work. This was such a rare occurrence that when I saw him waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs around five o'clock, I was suddenly worried. After my day at work, all I wanted was to go home, take a bath, put on some pajama pants and get to bed relatively early—when Charlin left the night before, he said *see you later*, not *see you tomorrow*; and I was planning on taking advantage of that—but Tristan's joyful demeanor and triumphant smile, which I could see all the way from the second floor, told me things weren't looking good. As I was coming down the stairs, his overwhelmingly good mood seemed to suggest he had a surprise for me. I'll be the first to admit I was hoping it was just some flowers behind his back and I was praying it wasn't a ring in his pocket or him wanting to take me out to eat (any other night, why not?)... I didn't have it in me to deal with any of that; but I also wasn't observant enough to notice that in place of the flowers I'd imagined, there was a red scarf dangling from his hands.

Taking the stack of papers that I was holding from me, he pushed open the building's heavy door, revealing our double-parked car. Then, with a bow, he opened the door of the old, beat-up Peugeot—*your chariot has arrived*—he gestured for me to get

in—*after you, milady*—he was really enjoying acting all old-timey and, to tell you the truth, I was enjoying it a little bit too; it had been so long since we'd really laughed together. On the other hand, given that I hadn't had the chance to get any fresh air yet that day or even look away from my computer screen to glance out the window, I found it a lot less funny when, before starting the car, he put the scarf up to my face like a veil, holding it up against my hair and ears before tying it in a knot behind my neck. *Tristan, please, I'm tired. Where are we going?*

He told me we weren't going far, to just relax and go with it *for once*.

I was having trouble relaxing with a scarf over my eyes. It obstructed my view and the tight cotton knot behind my neck was hitting the headrest of the synthetic-leather seat each time the car slowed down, changed gears, or hit a bump. The only consolation was that we were driving in the direction of our neighborhood: despite the blindfold, I recognized the sharp bend at the end of the street I worked on, the series of stoplights on the never-ending boulevard, the quick thuds as the Peugeot passed over the three speedbumps, and the outline of our building's newly-restored exterior, which was hopefully—I was crossing my fingers—Tristan's last stop.

The scarf didn't totally block my view of the scenery, and I was actually able to see through it a little bit. It was a unique experience to suddenly see the world in red, and to only be able to distinguish passersby, bikes, and pedestrians by their shape; and store windows and café terrasses by their awnings. Despite the fact I couldn't really see clearly, I felt like I was able recognize the places I'd ventured for the last ten years by

bus, by car, and on foot, rediscovering them from the passenger seat—my window rolled down a bit and the radio playing a song that Tristan was humming along with, louder than the singer—under the scarf, which was not only super warm, but definitely made me look ridiculous.

I felt us reverse into a parking spot and the motor turn off. Tristan came around the back of the car to once again open my door and offer me his hand. I could barely see, but I took his hand and got out of the car. We approached the front steps and, hand in hand, we climbed up to the digicode where I heard the front door unlock automatically after the four beeps, followed by the sound of the elevator door opening.

Tristan seemed so happy with himself, and so happy I was playing along. That evening, I just didn't have the strength to resist, or at least I told myself it'd be over sooner if I didn't. I wasn't sure whether he was smiling because he found this all funny or because he was proud of himself; nevertheless, I was pretty sure I could hear his smile in the windowless steel container with carpeted walls that was lifting us to the sixth floor. Even though I couldn't see, I heard his keys jingling in his hand and I was guessing his excitement was growing as we ascended, culminating as the mechanized box came to a stop (which always made me feel sick, thinking I might get stuck between two floors) right in front of our welcome mat. We were the only ones who lived on the top floor of the building, which used to be workshops.

Telling me to close my eyes, which was a lot to ask—for the last half hour I'd had my vision obstructed by the bright red blindfold and my head was spinning a bit, not to



mention how sweaty it'd made me—Tristan turned the key and went in before me, helping me step over the welcome mat and enter our apartment, which, fortunately, seemed to be empty, or at least I didn't hear anything other than the normal creaking of the wood floors as we inched toward the living room. I was guessing he'd either repainted or redecorated, but in just a day and without a trace of preparation (at least I hadn't noticed anything when I'd left), it seemed unlikely; more reasonably, I figured he'd probably finished the puzzle and I even let myself hope he'd found a new bookcase where we could put all our books that didn't fit in the other one. In the meantime, those books were piling up on the floor, forcing anyone who wanted to grab a record or something from the cupboard to take a perilous journey. Or maybe it was just that he'd made us dinner; all this drama was just to distract me from what would end up being a good bottle of wine along with two glasses, a festive place setting and some fine dining, leading to a nice night for both of us, maybe even... *Tristan, will you tell me what you're doing? Are you really gonna make me wait for this long? –It's a surprise, you'll see! And not to brag, but it's a good one, too!* he said in a triumphant tone, so cheerful I almost didn't recognize him. *Don't move a muscle and on three, open your eyes; alright, ready? One... two...*

On *three*, he deftly removed the scarf. I needed a couple of seconds to readjust to the light and for the uniform redness to dissipate from my field of vision and be replaced by all our belongings, things and knick-knacks in the apartment. I didn't realize right away that in the middle of the west-facing living room, taking center stage between a miniature Peugeot 404 coupe encased in plexiglass and a model of the frigate *Hermione*, there was a brand-new picture frame hanging above the fireplace, covering the yellowed

wallpaper almost entirely. But more importantly, most importantly, in the giant picture frame there was an excessively large, super close-up photo: it was me.

## IV

The first thing that came to mind was that, due to the layout of our apartment, the neighbors across from us would be able to see that living-room exhibition of me through the kitchen window. Then, in the seconds that followed, I realized that unless we took it off the wall and carried it up to the attic—which seemed impossible, given the apparent weight of the thing—the moment we heard the doorbell (unless we covered it with a big sheet or something, which would probably draw even more attention to it) none other than Charlin was going to get a good look at it, an even better one than the neighbors and, on top of all of that, I just knew I'd have to put up with all sorts of snide and obscene remarks since, of course, I was naked in the photo.

It was from our most recent vacation—incidentally, it was the first time we'd left the country together—taken on a hot day I'd since forgotten. Equipped with the pocket-sized camera we'd bought during our stay and bored of looking at the typical house facades and touring the museums, Tristan got the idea to look for a nice place, far from the gazes of strangers, where we could try to use the self-timer to take some pictures of us together. As it turns out, it was mostly him taking pictures of me in one of the ubiquitous deserted inlets in the area. He took a bunch and really did get all sides of me. They primarily

featured me wearing nothing more than my swimsuit with cut-out sides, at times with the straps pulled down at his request. We had a good laugh because it was the first time that we'd ever done anything like that. Under the blazing August sun, intoxicated by the salty aromas of the ocean with sparse clouds barely touching the incoming tide, I found it really nice to just be topless for a moment—so nice that I didn't think about what we were really doing. After that, we went back to the hotel and several days after our vacation, we'd both gone back to our normal lives and never talked about it again.

As we stood in front of the supersized memory of that day, Tristan was pretending like he didn't understand, acting as if he didn't notice my unease, my scowl, and the fact I was clenching my jaw so I wouldn't yell at him or tell him he should stick his “excellent surprise” you know where. I wanted to tell him we had other priorities; we didn't have money to just pour down the drain. He was contemplating the photo so intensely that he let the red, crumpled scarf fall to the floor without even realizing it. He just kept saying it was a nice photo, I was beautiful, and this way he could have me with him when I wasn't home. Then, as if he were trying to justify his actions, he basically said that with the way things had been *lately*, this definitely couldn't make things any worse.

I didn't say anything, but of course, given what we were going through, what we already had on our plate, this wasn't going to make things any better either and I definitely didn't find it amusing. I would have preferred to see a signed contract for a job that started the next day or, failing that, to hear him acknowledge that Charlin coming over every other night was a lot and that something needed to change. Also, DIY projects may

not have been his forte, but he still seemed capable enough—and had more than enough free time, especially compared to me (yeah, I can be petty sometimes)—to put together one of those ready-to-assemble furniture kits, which would have been a much better surprise at the drop of the scarf. A bookshelf would have at least made sense and been a lot more useful than this giant photo of me, which, to cap it all off, seemed to shrink the size of our apartment right before your eyes—this was going to take some getting used to.

There was nothing inherently vulgar about the picture. I'd even say it turned out pretty well. The black and white seemed to work and, despite my bare chest, the imitation Stetson on my head, and the cigarette between my lips, I seemed almost natural. Without even mentioning its size (a 4x6 version slipped into my planner would have been more than enough...), or the fact that it highlighted the areas on my upper thighs which had been sprinkled with cellulite since my teenage years and were particularly visible in the summer, what really bothered me about the photo was not only the lack of swimsuit, but the fact I was looking straight at the camera in it, my gaze fixed on the lens. It was a gaze which could never be escaped, as it was now hanging on the living room wall, unavoidable everywhere, since the living room was also our bedroom and it was separated from the kitchen only by a glass dividing wall intended to hold back the smells from the kitchen. Ultimately, wherever you went, with the exception of the bathroom, the toilet, and a small part of the hallway, it was impossible to escape: it followed you.

Despite the heat of the moment, I didn't want to ruin the evening. So I kept my cool and somehow even managed to thank Tristan—*no, yeah, I'm happy, really happy!*

*It's just I wasn't expecting it, you know?*—but, in front of that close-up portrait, I felt for a moment the same fear that the invention of photography must have evoked some two centuries ago: the shock that the Académie des Sciences must have felt at the introduction of the much-lauded daguerreotype, which, along with trichloromethane, would make its mark on the nineteenth century and the world. Like all prodigious ideas, it divided the public. Because if photography were to become commonplace and the *camera obscura* and its tripod were to litter all the public squares of Paris and travel all over Europe as fast as scientists were able to polish the silver plates, Daguerre's magic masterpiece must surely have been a spreader of terror; not only for Ferdinand II, King of Naples, who banned photography, but for all families, for everyone, since the excitement of seeing yourself as a still image at a time when no one was accustomed to it was probably followed immediately by the horror of the reality of seeing yourself existing on a flat surface, frozen in time, able to look at yourself from the outside as if you were looking at someone else, all captured on flexible film by a demonic eye whose advances allowed you all too easily to copy yourself an infinite number of times.

More than one hundred-fifty years later, it was just as unsettling for me to be face to face with myself. As Tristan went to get us a drink, I thought about how it was much more awkward than seeing myself in the mirror in the bathroom, armed with a comb, a tube of lipstick or, in the evening, a makeup-remover-soaked piece of cotton. In the mirror, I maintained a clinical relationship with myself, mostly indifferent, happy most of the time with just making sure that I was there, and that it really was me I was seeing; at best I thought I looked pretty, with a nice face, seeming young for my age. If I was in a

good mood, I'd give myself a little smile, a wink, or a little wave before leaving the field of vision. You might say that in the mirror, my reflection and I got along. That strange, backwards apparition, maybe because it was true to proportion and color, knowing how to capture my exact movements, seemed more like me than this immense photograph that Tristan and I stood in front of as we shared a beer.

During dinner, thanks to the dividing wall in the kitchen providing some distance (or maybe even protection), I started getting used to it and accepting the idea we were going to live from now on with this thing hanging on the wall. After all, with a good sense of humor, it wouldn't be too hard, especially since it was a gift, and a really original gift at that, a truly imaginative effort to charm me; given the sentimental intent, I couldn't complain. Beyond the object itself, beyond all the stupidity of the thing, it really did show Tristan's love for me, his desire not to lose touch with me, and his effort to keep us from drifting apart.

That night, however, the photo and the general vibe in the room kept me awake. The sofa bed opened facing the window which overlooked the courtyard—that is, not facing the two narrower windows on either side of the fireplace through which, even when shut, the city's murmurs leaked—it was actually worse to have this version of myself behind my back. So, while Tristan sank into a deep sleep on his stomach, as if the new decor was cradling him like a baby, I imagined his deep breathing could cover up another breath I sensed in the room, just as slow but alert; after quickly abandoning the idea of counting sheep, I tried to chase away that wave of anguish and prevent it from taking up too much space by focusing on the ceiling and the glimmer of the streetlights

that was projected up there due to the fact we never closed the shutters. I thought about trying to read something, but I realized I would have had to worry about someone reading over my shoulder.

Even when Charlin didn't show up, we rarely had sex during the week. Sometimes this made me sad. I was disappointed because it seemed like, without really resisting, we were giving up so easily to the daily grind and force of habit. Yet, I admit it was a relief that night, one of the first times in months we had a night off, to slide under the sheets, talk about everything and nothing and just barely intertwine our legs in an act of intimacy, ignoring the rest of each other's bodies. Due to the gaze hovering over us, a gaze which was definitely mine without me fully acknowledging it, I would have been embarrassed to do anything more. It would have felt like watching myself in the act, having sex with myself or maybe even doing it with someone that I knew very well. In any case, due partly to the fact it was late, the photo, even if it hid the cracks in the battered wallpaper, ultimately bothered me more than if there had been a religious icon or a crucifix on the nightstand.

With the streetlights now turned off, there was nothing left to see on the ceiling except the molding, which seemed to move in the dark. So I decided to get out of bed. I took my pillow under my arm and a blanket out of the closet and, without looking back, without even glancing at Tristan who was still sleeping like a baby, I went in my underwear to shut myself away in the bathroom, where I used the tub to make some semblance of a bed.



## V

It was morning by the time my aching muscles woke me up. I put my pillow and blanket in the sink so I could take a shower; I watched the water burst through the shower head and run down the tiled wall in large drops. Afterward, I dragged myself to work, where I spent most of the day dozing off in my office.

When I left, I'd tried to avoid the living room. I took the bus, forgetting the stack of papers that were in the back of the car.

Feeling slightly queasy, I was doing my best to figure out what was going on at work by looking through emails on my computer. But no matter how hard I tried focus on the words or go back to the start of each sentence, I could only focus of the curvature of the parentheses or the dimensionlessness of the periods: it was too obvious I was nodding off in front of my inbox, so in a new window, I searched for portraits of famous people, telling myself maybe that would be less tiring for my eyes and it might even wake me up a little bit.

There were a lot to choose from; I clicked on random pages and scrolled through innumerable portraits, in black and white, in color (on some sites you could even zoom in), without worrying about the text near the photos or their time period, photographer or

style. It was nice to see all these people—Baudelaire, George Sand, Offenbach; and more recent: Princess Di, Che Guevara and the Dalai Lama—especially since lately, Tristan and I hadn't been going out much, and apart from Charlin we never really saw anyone anymore.

When my boss saw me through the half-open door, I'd just stumbled upon Einstein, and I was sticking out my tongue and rolling my eyes at the computer screen. My boss was a nice guy (and Einstein probably was too, in his own way), generally staying out of our way and not being a stickler for deadlines. Very logically for a boss, all he wanted was for our work to be well done. To this end, he made the work environment pleasant and didn't quibble over details, letting us more or less have free rein. He would act all serious at Monday morning team meetings, which we were all always late for, with our eyes still puffy from sleeping or weekend overindulgence. He'd straighten his tie and give us a somewhat stern talking to, but I'd say as far as bosses go, he was a nice person.

He was coming back from his lunch break with a cup of coffee in his hand. The funny faces I was making at my computer had entertained him from the hallway. Well, they at least made him crack a smile. That being said, it was quickly replaced by an almost worried look as he came into my office (at which point I naturally stopped playing my little game with Einstein and minimized the window), and looked at me closely:

*There's that look again! What did you do last night?*

I spared us both the details, figuring it was best to not tell him about the daguerreotype. Also, to deter any further comments or questions, I made sure not to tell

him I'd spent the night in my bathtub due to the fact that the only idea my boyfriend had been able to come up with to comfort me from our domestic drudgery was (instead of looking for a job or kicking his buddy to the curb) hanging a nude photo of me in our living room, which was also our bedroom.

I thanked him, assured him that all was well and that my project would be all wrapped up on time. I must not have been very convincing, because when he got to the door, he looked like he didn't care about the project and said *well*, drank a sip of his coffee, turned around, and without looking me in the eye, stammered: *I think it'd be best if you left a little early today.*

I was almost mad at him for making me address the issue. Through his kindness, he was forcing my hand and putting the truth right under my nose: I would have preferred for him to make me stay late, why not even spend the night in the office? I didn't want to go home early; actually, I just didn't want to go home at all.

But at five o'clock sharp, I was starting to become aware of the difference between objectively quantifiable time and time that is lived, flexible and malleable; that sponge-time that is shaped by events and moods and is capable of infinitely expanding and contracting. It was time for me to get up from my swivel chair. I had to stop looking at the clock, whose seconds I'd spent a good part of the afternoon watching tick by. Like every other Friday, a cleaning lady in dance slippers had shown up to methodically vacuum under my chair. She'd already plugged in the vacuum and her right foot was hovering over the on switch. I quickly grabbed my bag from under the desk and she gave

me her regards through the vroom-vroom by waving the collapsible tube, which she'd fitted with a brush.

## VI

The businesses in the neighborhood were all closing. It was going to be night soon; the front windows of the stores where I would sometimes try on too-expensive clothes just for fun were plunging into darkness. More and more lights began to glimmer: streetlights, headlights, local restaurants, bars, hotels and even the bluish blinking of my phone screen as Tristan tried to reach me. I wanted to just wander around as I avoided the fact I'd need to go home eventually. I yearned to feel in control of the situation, even if it felt like that moment at the setting of the sun when the sick accept their death in their hospital bed. Yeah, that really was how I felt that evening. I wanted to sink gently into the night and let myself get caught up in the partial darkness of the city.

Stopping in front of a window, I watched two sales assistants dressing up a mannequin. Looking as if they were thrilled to finally be done dealing with shoppers for the day, they were chatting as they carried out their task, without paying attention to me or their meticulous but automatic movements—buttoning the shirt, putting the plastic arms into the sleeves of a fitted jacket, inserting the legs into a pair of darted pants, they sometimes burst out laughing as they worked through the reflection of the blue dress with white polka dots that I was wearing that day; even though it wasn't particularly windy

that day, I noticed it was billowing in the slight breeze. It was fun to watch them through the window and to try to read their lips as I wondered how they could work with a mannequin of that size so delicately and easily while it was perched on its little platform. I was curious what could still be worth talking about after a day of working together. It was relaxing to watch them, and it reminded me of the time (just as vernal a day as the current one) when I was walking in the fifth arrondissement of Paris and saw a group of hearing-impaired people having a discussion in front of the specialized Institute<sup>7</sup> on the Rue Saint-Jacques; I continued to think about that until the women in the window noticed me, probably because of the movement of my dress. They both looked at me and stopped talking. They seemed as embarrassed by my presence as I suddenly was by theirs, as if I'd intruded into the middle of an intimate conversation, or at the least a conversation between friends which wasn't intended for the general public. They looked me up and down almost spitefully, so I smiled sheepishly at them and crossed the street, tightly gripping my purse.

There were a lot of people on the terraces outside, but I personally didn't have it in me to sit down. The nearby park was empty, its playground deserted. Usually as I walked along the wooden fence on my way home from work, I would avoid looking at the children who were throwing sand by the handful, gathering together in the sort of labyrinthine castle equipped with a slide, and fighting in front of their vigilant mothers until they came to blows over those sad creatures on springs, shaped like mammoths or

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<sup>7</sup> This almost certainly refers to l'Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris (the National Institute for the Deaf Children of Paris).

dogs. Generally speaking, I avoided children at all costs, and I was terrified by the idea of having one inside me, seeing it come out, its eyes half-closed, a being who after marking its place in the world by letting out its first cry would be destined for weeks of lethargy, unable to survive by itself, and as animalistic as it is unaware; its existence consisting only of eating at fixed times. Anyway, I wasn't sure if I liked kids. But that evening, the empty, silent park seemed pitiful. It was disturbing to see the lack of footprints in that unnatural micro-beach which would never see the ocean; a beach where you'd never be able to come lie on a towel.

In the laundromat, the sudsy wads tossed and turned in the drums. It was enjoyably hypnotic to watch the mismatched socks through the door and follow the movement of the machines. Their rumbling and constant speed fascinated me just as much as an aspirin disintegrating in a glass of water or those rotisserie chickens, spinning around, pierced by the spit. I would have happily waited for the spin cycle, when the machine starts to shake; I could have closed my eyes and imagined a Boeing taking off. But I didn't want to worry Tristan and I was starting to worry about him (in a way, it was a good sign that we could still worry about each other). I figured the best way to avoid all of that was, instead of giving him a call, to just run to catch the bus waiting at the end of the street, which would have me back at home in less than ten minutes.

## VII

The thing I dreaded the most that evening—even more than Charlin’s umpteenth visit or having to run after the bus in heels—was seeing that picture of me when I got home. Dealing with the photo was going to be as difficult for me as it would be for Tristan to discover a two-month-old beard (when he needed to shave, he always said it felt like he was “trapped in a pair of mittens”) or for him to feel the wind blowing on a bald spot he didn’t know he had. When I saw that image of myself (in which I wasn’t wearing mittens, or a swimsuit for that matter) with my smile, the cigarette hanging from my lips and my hair, already greasy from the heat, covered by the imitation Stetson I’d stumbled upon at a market the day we’d arrived in Porto, I knew I’d experience something similar to the feeling of doing something awkward and not fitting in, so close yet so far from knowing how to act to keep yourself from standing out or becoming a social spectacle, like in the past when you’d embarrass yourself by showing up to school with no shoes on, or finding yourself wearing an unremarkable black dress in the middle of a get-together you’d forgotten was a costume party.

I took a deep breath at the front door and went in, putting my bag down in the hallway. Sitting on the sofa bed (which was still acting as bed at that moment), Tristan



was alone, his eyes fixed on that spot above the fireplace, as if the black and white shapes of that representation of me had put a spell on him. Even though his chin was tilted upward, and he was gazing in the other direction, he was so absorbed (he didn't so much as say hello to me) that when I saw him, I immediately thought about the only chivalric romance I'd ever read—one in which Perceval thought about Blanchefleur as he leaned on his spear one winter morning, looking down at three drops of blood spread out in the snow which reminded him of her face<sup>8</sup>. Not unlike Perceval, Tristan too was motionless (though the only other knightly thing about him was his name). What more, it was springtime, I had no idea what Blanchefleur looked like, and I'd obviously never for a second imagined her naked with a hat in a Portuguese inlet. Nevertheless, it was at this very moment that I had a realization. It was this story coming back to me along with this scene that shook me to the core, even more than the actual portrait or seeing Tristan sitting in front of my face above the fireplace, silent, giddy and crazed as if he'd just finished pleasuring himself. I realized Tristan was happy with this lifestyle, with my episodic presence, less and less frequent now due to my work schedule—since these days if he actually saw me in the morning or the evening, the best we could do was maintain a sort of two-dimensional relationship, silent and ruminant, one that was probably comforting to him; a relationship which, in the living room, would have been nourished by my image, by its gentle invariability and peaceful permanence—so I realized we couldn't go on like this forever: sooner or later, I'd have to take charge of things.

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<sup>8</sup> See Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*.

## VIII

Everything became clear to me early, very early actually, the next day. I noticed there was a good movie on TV for once and when the doorbell rang, my silverware was placed neatly in the center of my empty plate and I had already started to imagine spending the day in my underwear on the couch. Across from me, Tristan was tackling his last bite of the salmon we'd just cooked and skinned. Holding his fork in one hand, he looked at me innocently, as if to imply he wasn't expecting anyone either. As he got up to answer the door, I went in search of dessert, hesitating between the fruit plate and the freezer. The next thing I knew—so much for a movie—there was Charlin on the wrong side of the door.

I immediately recognized the *clap* of their firm handshake, followed by Tristan's laughter, typically forced because it was Charlin telling the jokes. It was always a suddenly crude, stupid, and deceptive laugh which seemed to exist only to please the one telling the joke. *Where are you hiding, ya little tease? Get over here!*

His voice resonated in the entryway, becoming strangely clearer as it got to the kitchen: He wasn't wrong, I did wish I could hide, or for either me or the photo to just disappear.

Since there wasn't anywhere to hide though, I leaned against the countertop; I was peeling a clementine and the smell of citrus was spreading throughout the room. I admit I felt a sick pleasure when I put some of the stringy bits of clementine onto Charlin's multicolored tee-shirt as I touched his shoulder during the third kiss of *la bise*—he always insisted on doing three kisses<sup>9</sup>. He said *you seem upset* as he poured himself some wine. Winking at Tristan as he said it, he thought it was funny to add a *you know what* before telling me the version of me above the fireplace was in a lot better mood...

The way he casually added this last comment confirmed all the bad feelings I'd had; it was as if nothing had changed at all. I understood two things immediately: first, he and Tristan had hung out recently without me knowing, which I wasn't mad about. Second, and more importantly, this wasn't Charlin's first time seeing the photo (which, by the way, is something I definitely think I should have had a say in). As it turns out, he already knew all about it. I was annoyed with myself that I hadn't figured it out earlier and for thinking that the man I shared my life with was capable of being as original as he was modest and for not realizing that only Charlin would support such a stupid idea; also, if Tristan had needed help preparing the surprise, Charlin would have been the only person for the job.

As Charlin looked longingly at the fruit plate, he didn't even pretend to hide the truth. Instead, he shared all his memories from that infamous morning, that *damn*

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<sup>9</sup> *La bise* is the name of the French custom of using cheek kisses as a greeting for family, friends, and even sometimes strangers. The exact nature of *la base* (e.g., which cheek comes first and the number of kisses) differs by region and city. As such, it's not uncommon for *la bise* to create slightly awkward or annoying situations, hence the narrator's comment on the way Charlin insists on doing it.

*memorable morning*, when they wrapped the frame in yards of bubble wrap and brought it here in his electrician truck. They had to bring it up the stairs—*it didn't fit in the elevator*—then go back down to get the stepladder and the sixpack of beer (*we deserved a little reward, right Tristan?*). It must have taken a good two hours to hang it on the wall since *the damn thing was heavy, remember?*—then he raised his voice so that it would carry through the glass dividing wall to Tristan who seemed to be looking for something in the living room—*it almost fell and smashed your head!* Then, looking right at me, he said *you know what?* it had all been worth it because: *God damn, you had a great body back then!*

I had to pretend to enjoy his story, forcing a polite smile. I took the roll of paper towels and, following the dotted lines, ripped one off, wiping my hands clean instead of just washing them. As I did that though, I thought about how it would have been better to wash them: to wash my hands of all of this, of this idiot Charlin, of the photo. I just wanted to wait for it to all go away, that feeling of hearing him go on and on. It was like being stuck on a train track or deep in a long, dark tunnel where I felt alone with everything that was wrong those days. It might have seemed less lonely if Tristan had bothered to say something, or if he hadn't come back into the room that day with an envelope bearing Charlin's name, a square envelope that Charlin, teeming with greed, excitedly but clumsily opened after setting his glass on the edge of the table. It had money inside: a small wad of cash carefully folded in half. He straightened out the money and then counted it, bill by bill, before putting the wad into his pocket.

It was Saturday, but we didn't have sex that night; if I'd had the courage to spend another night in the bathtub (after all, I didn't have work the next day), Tristan and I wouldn't have even shared a bed that night. Since I didn't have enough to drink and wasn't able to bring myself to admit that I couldn't put up with seeing him spend his days doing nothing, wallowing on or in the sofa bed—on the sofa or in the bed, these days there wasn't much of a difference—I moved away from the plan—the very vague plan, really just an idea, but I had to acknowledge that for a moment, leaning against the kitchen counter, it had crossed my mind—to smash Tristan's head against the edge of the bathtub or the sink, it didn't really matter: the only thing that mattered at that moment, and in a way thankfully I didn't really imagine the rest (like the sound of his head hitting the ceramic, the fistfuls of hair on the ground and his face destroyed: all of that was of course unbearable and impossible to imagine), the only thing I cared about was the idea, even a vague one, that something could change, shift or disappear, that some noise could be made and some kind of action could be taken. And why not some blood? On the furniture and on the kitchen tile, long streaks of hot blood all the way into the living room, in line with the wood flooring, going all the way to the walls, ricocheting onto the photo, onto my body, the ocean and anywhere else you could imagine. It was almost beautiful to think about: a little red added to a monochrome image; it'd be like one of Kurosawa's black-and-white films in which the only color was the camellia petals he'd painstakingly hand painted one by one, making them more beautiful and peaceful than making love, particularly making love with the one who'd betrayed my intimacy and sold me out to Charlin, so to speak. Charlin, who for a little money—and never mind if we needed the money: we'd get through it, we always made it through—was always ready to

help out. Charlin, who, unaware of his new clementine fragrance, sipped on another glass of wine, smiling through the glass dividing wall, without taking his hand and his fat fingers of the wad of money stuffed in his pocket.

## IX

After getting his envelope and knocking back the rest of the bottle of wine, he didn't stay for too long.

Since imagining people dying always helped me appreciate my relative degree of attachment to them, it was comforting to feel tears swelling in my eyes and to see one fall in the mirror as I rated the idea of Tristan on his death bed as at least a 9/10 on my sadness scale. I pictured myself mourning at his funeral after he'd succumbed to a serious illness or suffered some fatal accident. I'd maybe even speak a few jumbled words at the podium or use an aspergillum to sprinkle some holy water in the sign of the cross in the empty space above his coffin. I must have been in love with Tristan, given the disarming sadness the idea of his death brought me. As I redid the experiment with a different protagonist, throwing away the wet cotton round covered in invisible germs, I realized that when it was Charlin's death, I had to completely pretend to be sad. I felt no distress, no regrets, not even an ounce of nostalgia. Instead, I felt a sort of relief, something distinctly reassuring, similar to contentment, like an ocean breeze filling my lungs. Strangely, the reason for this nice new feeling, the origin of this newfound freedom—which just kicking him out of the apartment would probably never have given me—was

definitely the image of his death and specifically my image of it, since I was going to personally see to it.

Let's just say as I stood in front of the mirror that evening, I realized Charlin had to be dealt with for good.



## X

The next day—since I never liked wasting the day in bed—I went down to the cafe where I ordered a glass of juice and then another one. As I sat there and just watched people walk by—it was good for me to people watch—I let morning slip away until I noticed Tristan had called me to see what the heck I was doing. I told him I was *on my way back*. To the outside observer, I wasn't really doing anything on the cafe terrace other than sunbathing and chewing on the end of my straw. Secretly in my head though, I'd serenely accepted my idea from the day before and, with that same serenity, I was ready to do whatever it took to make it happen.

For example, I thought about how at work, we had a pharmaceutical company as a client. Through researching poorly designed medicine brochures on my computer for the purpose of analyzing sales and advertising strategies, I'd started to familiarize myself a bit with medications—also, our boss had the team take a tour of a laboratory—so at the very least, I was learning the lingo and now had a couple of tricks up my sleeve for gathering information. What's more, since getting fired, Tristan took a pill as well, a half milligram of benzodiazepine, which according to the doctor was to help him *deal with it all*.

As I planned, I couldn't help but think of the story of Alkan's death. Without even taking into account the part about the Talmud, I figured it would be too difficult to find enough books and, even if I were able to pull it off, it'd be too hard to make it seem like a suicide. Similarly, I quickly abandoned the idea of getting a gun due to the fact that I didn't feel technically capable of making good use of it and it seemed to imply some level of squalid premeditation—and by the way, where would I get one? All of that would leave too much evidence. I preferred something more discreet and less explicit: generally speaking, I was pretty low-key.

The sometimes-undesirable effects of benzodiazepines seemed amenable and appropriate to me, perfectly suited for this project and the shape it was taking. The symptoms included: drowsiness, headaches, reduced awareness, impaired coordination, memory problems, changes in level of consciousness and, ideally, a certain psychomotor impairment, including loss of coordination... it was perfect. All that was left was to determine the adequate dose which, without being directly lethal (that would probably take dozens of pills, making the process of dosing him far too complicated), would make it easy enough for me to finish the job.

The most practical solution, I thought, for obtaining the raw materials would be to steal Tristan's prescription and *carte vitale*<sup>10</sup>; the smartest choice was to go to a pharmacy

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<sup>10</sup> Literally meaning "vital card," this is the health insurance card of the national health care system in France. The *carte vitale* is required at all medical appointments and for picking up prescriptions at the pharmacy.

I don't frequent in another neighborhood, one where I wouldn't run into anyone I knew—somewhere I wouldn't ever have to go back to either. For convenience's sake and to keep things believable, the next steps would happen at Charlin's place. In a phone call I'd make during work, I'd set up a meeting with him (which would take place during work hours, I'd be able to figure it out with my boss; he'd put up with it; since I didn't want to arouse suspicion at work or at home, I'd need to avoid any contact between the different parts of my life; I'd just need to find the *right* moment). And the reason for the call? Easy: I had to talk to him about Tristan; it was important, even intimate—and intimacy was something that made Charlin's mouth water. Also, with this type of subject, sex or relationships, we needed to talk in private, so definitely not at a cafe.

When the day came (I kept thinking about the plan as I flagged down the waiter—*what do I owe you?*), I wouldn't be seen in his building (*six forty, Madame*), arriving or leaving. I'd just have to wait for Charlin to walk away, or at least look away, after he'd poured the drinks—his phone would ring, I'd ask him to put on a record or he'd go to the kitchen, who knows?—just long enough for me to quickly dissolve the pre-prepared, finely-crushed and carefully-preserved benzodiazepine into his glass. Then, after pacing back and forth in the room, seemingly looking at his knick-knacks or taking an interest in his furniture—obviously I wouldn't touch anything—I'd strike up a conversation, bringing up the supposed relationship problems, even seeming to tell him secrets he wouldn't ever be able to divulge anyway because he'd feel himself starting to pass out, growing weak to the point where he'd need to sit down—*sorry, I don't feel so good. Is*

*it just me or is this cheap wine hittin' a little different?* he'd say—before falling asleep on the couch like a baby or a drunk in his bed.

As I put away my wallet, I had trouble imagining what it would actually be like. That said, I could imagine the setup, the foreseeable nature of our conversation—Charlin was a talkative type, slower to drink his own wine than to refill others'. Once he got comfortable, he was fairly resistant to movement—and the amount of time the pill generally took to start working (there are only generalizations, but I had a rough idea; I was making do with what I had), it'd all take no more than two hours. Given how long the effects would last, I wouldn't have any time to waste.

Then, after putting on some gloves, closing the curtains and inner shutters, I figured it would be doable to set up the rope—I basically already knew how to tie a noose—around both the ceiling cross beam, which would be my gallows, and Charlin's neck, who in his sleepy state wouldn't be able to do anything and wouldn't even realize when, using all my strength (this too should be doable, I wouldn't need to put him on a piece of furniture or a stool: although a slower process, hanging by partial suspension, in a sitting position, should work just fine; I'd found a couple of articles on the subject online, being sure to delete my internet search history not once but twice), I'd move his limp body, putting him on the couch, before finally, from behind—the advantage here is that I wouldn't have to see Charlin struggle very much at the moment when his veins began to close, his skin turning blue and his eyes bulging from his head—I'd make sure the rope was right on his neck: it would just be a question of physics, nimbleness,

patience, strength and skill. Yeah, on the face of it, from my sunbathed terrace, it all seemed doable. After all, the Prince de Condé was able to hang himself with just two handkerchiefs and his windowsill. I was definitely going to have to practice at the office, with some rope and an old rag doll.

When Tristan called me, I'd just realized the hardest part would be hiding the rope while we had our aperitif (I figured I'd need about three yards of it given Charlin's approximate height and weight). But to build up my strength, put the finishing touches on the project, prepare for the new life I was making for us, and maybe because it was Sunday or it was nice out, all this sun, or just because I still needed some air, a sort of quiet before the storm, I said *I'm on my way* clearly into the phone, before adding: *how about we go for a little road trip? Let's just drive 'til we get to the ocean.*

## XI

We must have been driving for an hour before gorse bushes and scattered patches of ferns replaced the lines of buildings, the city trees, and the dreary commercial areas. Driving on the smooth country road that had recently been resurfaced section by section, Tristan seemed impatient to pass every vehicle in front of us. Whenever he got close to one, he made sure no one was coming in the other lane, looked in the rear-view mirror, downshifted while putting on his turn signal and switched lanes over the dotted white line, all while probably speeding. Once we passed the sign for the entrance to the beach, we saw marshes and dunes. I opened my window a little bit, inhaling the spring air which seemed to become purer with each mile. Not long after, a strong salty smell filled the car, and we could see both the village bell tower, white as meringue, and beyond it, the ocean; it was high, opaque and motionless, with its enormous mass of billions of liters of salt water barely touched by scattered clouds as far as the eye could see.

I really only knew a little bit about the interaction between the moon and the ocean. Like, for example, I knew there was something about cotidal lines that had been studied since ancient times. That said, I felt like I had at least an idea of how the tide worked. I was always sort of afraid of the way it ebbed though: the slow withdrawal of

the waters leaving nothing but soggy sandbanks whose size depends on tide tables and beds of algae filled with mussels. It scared me to the extent that I found the idea of living on the coast courageous—a sort of affront to nature, or maybe a perverse exposure of the self, two times per day, to the terrifying possibility that the ocean won't come back.

But that Sunday, in an attempt to avoid the center of town, we took a winding road, surrounded by pines, that led us under the clear sky to an extravagant view stretching far and wide of scattered sailboats and, further out to sea, a cargo ship passing by an island, perhaps on its way to Rotterdam, equipped with its invisible crew and tons of grain or iron.

Before we'd left home, we didn't look at the tide schedule and we hadn't thought to bring towels or swimsuits (it was still a little early in the year for that anyway). We hadn't eaten lunch either; instead, we'd quickly packed some sandwiches—ham, gherkins and butter—wrapped in tin foil.

Tristan parked in the makeshift angled lot along the coast. Just after getting out of the car, he stretched out his arms and breathed in deeply, as if he were trying to clear his lungs. He took in as much of the ocean air as possible and said, *God it's beautiful here! We gotta get out here more often!*

Sandwiches in hand, we went to sit on a bench in a windy spot overlooking the water. We admired the ocean: it was ubiquitous and provocative, as much in front of us as to our sides—so much so that, feeling slightly woozy, I felt like I had to turn away to be sure there was still something solid elsewhere—with its ebbing and flowing bringing on waves of nausea. The cargo ship was moving imperceptibly as the ocean continued to

rise. It was like the tide was trying to get back to the mark it had left twelve hours ago on the shell-covered sandbanks situated between two granite masses formed by the ocean spray and salt.

We were eating without really talking about anything other than the beautiful weather and the nice time we were having, both comfortable with just commenting on the landscape as we munched on our sandwiches. We were doing something that neither of us had done in a long time—as if life could suddenly be summed up as having a picnic near some rocks on a bench covered in dry bird shit, watching the movement of the ocean—taking advantage of the fresh air, watching the sails swell in the wind and the many colorful particles of each wave that, as they crashed into the beach with a roar, should each have been audible individually. But, in reality, you heard them all at once and saw them as an indistinct whole, a chaotic blend; in short, a huge mess, denser and stronger than grief itself.

Behind us, people were walking on the footpath, the bottoms of their shoes whitened by the sand. I'd just taken my own shoes off—as well as finished my sandwich—letting my bare feet hang freely in the air as I sat on my hands. Suddenly, I felt Tristan's attention turn away from the ocean due to a chunky, short-legged clump of feathers that was heading straight for our crumbs.

The seagull was strutting like an idiot, the miserable inelegance God gave to gulls on full display. Its beak hadn't yet turned yellow and the speckles on its feathers were still changing color, causing it to resemble a pigeon more than a seabird, but also letting us know we were in the presence of a young member of the species whose ugliness,



inversely proportional to its age, would tone down as it grew older. I happened to know two things about these birds: First, the word “gull” came from “*gwelan*,” a verb in the Breton language meaning “to cry.” Second, in order to protect another kind of seabird, terns, adult seagulls were poisoned with strychnine and their eggs were sterilized by sprinkling them with oil and formalin.

The Laridae had quickly surrounded us; there were silver-colored ones, males and females with white heads and large beaks—fully yellow this time—their eyes encircled by orangish skin, flying over our heads or walking toward us, with the clear intention of eating our leftovers and defending their territory. For the first time since getting there, Tristan and I really looked at each other. Then, both on edge because of the commotion colony was making, we jumped up from the bench, fueled by the same motivation and maybe even an ounce of fear; we left so quickly that I didn’t even have time to put my shoes back on. Leaving gulls behind, I thought about how I really loved walking barefoot; that day, I found the direct contact with the earth exhilarating, the feeling, so much more real than through shoe soles, of really experiencing the land each time the bottom of my foot touched the grass, gravel, or sand of the path down to the beach.

I had my shoes in hand, sand already between my toes and I was wearing the only dress I trusted: the one I would put on in the mornings when I didn’t want to think about my outfit, knowing that its two front pockets were practical, it was comfortable, and that I looked good in it to boot (it was the blue one with white polka-dots I wore often that time of year). With all this in mind, I realized only a few yards separated me from feeling the water. Sitting nearby on a rock, Tristan was looking at me. I could feel

his eyes on my back warming me up along with the sun. I wanted to surprise him, spice up the day, and add a little defiance to it. Stepping into the water, I was disappointed by how timidly the seafoam brushed against my toes and ankles. I told myself if I was going to get wet, I might as well do it right; besides, this could all be part of my plan. I felt like something was starting, like the die had been cast. And so, I threw my hands toward the sky, my head disappearing for a second under the blue cotton of my dress and, without turning around, I threw it onto the beach somewhere, not giving a damn about being completely naked in front of the Sunday walkers—not giving a damn about anything. I didn't care about Tristan who I heard saying *stop*, telling me I was going to catch a cold or get sick and that there were strong currents in the area; I didn't give a shit about the currents. All I wanted at that moment was to forget myself, to remake myself, to prepare myself, to exonerate myself, to go into the ocean naked and to show off my body to the world—*Charlin, buddy, you have no idea what you're missing*—to feel the salt stinging my skin, my hips swaying and my breasts trembling in the cold April water, the lingering odor of my perfume mixing with the salt as I confidently broke through the barrage of waves created by the wind, the rocks, and the incline of the beach.

After three breaststrokes out to sea—during which Tristan was scared I'd swim away, go too far, cramp up or, frankly, drown—I felt the cold start to seep into my bones. He stood up—his pantlegs rolled up but his shoes still on—and took off his jacket, coming as close to the water as possible, waiting for my return with his hand on his forehead to block the sun. I felt a mischievous delight in letting him stew a bit; as long as I was moving my arms and legs nonstop, the temperature of the water was not only

bearable, but enjoyable. When I got out, my body was pink and covered with goosebumps and my teeth were chattering. Tristan rushed me his jacket, telling me I was crazy, everyone on the footpath could see me, it was *way too cold*, we didn't have a towel and I'd be warmer in the car—*come on, let's go home*. Using his jacket, he dried me off; well, mostly just my neck, shoulders and the bottom part of my hair. The jacket was between us, like a too-small and too-thin blanket, which I pointed out we obviously couldn't both fit underneath. But Tristan didn't seem to find that funny at all while I shivered, freezing. I would never swim again before July. But I really was happy; I felt like the world had gently opened up to me. That day, I was so lucky to be alive. It felt nice to be wrapped in Tristan's arms, sitting half-naked on a beach, far from home. Feeling a newfound determination, I was ready to do everything I'd planned.

## XII

That Friday, instead of going to work, I took the number 12 bus to the end of the line. My boss trusted me and didn't have a problem with me working from home, so any day would have worked, but I chose a Friday so I could have time to get everything ready and then relax beforehand. I chose that Friday specifically because Tristan actually had an appointment for the first time in forever: a job interview planned long before that he couldn't turn down. Taking into account the commute, it would keep him busy for a good three hours.

Before I left, I took advantage of his morning nap to rummage through his wallet, which was sitting out next to the recipe book in the corner of the kitchen. I grabbed his prescription from it and took the time to leave him a note on a post-it with a little smiley face wishing him good luck and telling him if he wanted, he could forgo the tie. Finally, I glanced into the living room where I saw my face and body before confidently slamming the door shut.

Earlier that week, I'd gone to the hardware store. I couldn't decide between two types of rope. One of them was white with polypropylene braiding, six millimeters thick; it was very easy to handle and recommended for camping, gardening, fishing and other

hobbies (I still wonder to this day why ropes are needed for some of those activities). The other rope was braided hemp; it was biodegradable, perfect for docking, mooring and rigging boats: it had a very high tensile strength: greater than 1000 lbs. Neither was a guaranteed choice, but esthetically speaking, I liked the white one better. I was also impressed by the fact that it was “rot-resistant” according to the label. That said, I ended up choosing the hemp one: it was ten millimeters in diameter and “nice to the touch”—I was actually thinking about Charlin a bit here, it was a human moment, as it were. In the end, esthetics weren’t the most important part.

I put the nine feet of rope into my grocery bag. It was one of those tough, almost opaque bags with the name of a supermarket written in capital letters on the side. I convinced myself it was low-key enough and the simplest, most obvious choice would be the least noticeable. What’s more, lots of people in the bus carried similar bags, though all of them were apparently heavier and fuller than mine. I stood for the duration of the bus ride; through the wide window, I watched old buildings, pedestrians, boulevards and housing projects pass by. Before not too long, the businesses were replaced by warehouses and soon the names of the stops became unfamiliar—“Lilas,” “Salengro,” “Poincaré”—the recorded voice pronouncing them seemed to have the same tone as the one you hear in the train station or on the metro, that voice that makes certain passengers instinctively react by standing up and grabbing the closest metal bar in anticipation of the sharp braking just before the doors open.

In the area, as is the case almost everywhere else the last few years, the inner city and the suburbs had been slowly merging, but with no continuity. As I imagined the fields, farms and sheep that not too long ago must have filled the former countryside, I thought about how soon, no matter where you went, there wouldn't really be any more city, country or coast and after all the beaches had been covered, the trees decimated and the meadows vanished, France would consist of only indistinguishable and enormous conglomerations with dreary architecture, overflowing with the fallacious idea of *low cost*<sup>11</sup> housing with PVC fences, roughcast monocouche renders and secured garages.

The little shopping center at the end of the line looked like any other: a small square of benches, seemingly random patches of turf, a bank, a bar—almost certainly one with PMU<sup>12</sup>—a post office next to a pseudo-boulangerie doing its best to sell squishy-crusted bread which probably just came out of the freezer the day before, and most, importantly, the pharmacy, with its green cross visible from far away, shining like the evening star.

To be honest, when I got off the bus my legs were wobbly and my arms were weak, despite how light the bag was. At this stage, I hadn't gone too far yet and I could still easily turn back. It really was a considerable thing to do, to kill someone, to kill Charlin, who, by the way, was waiting for me at his apartment as I stood outside the

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<sup>11</sup> In English in the original.

<sup>12</sup> PMU (*pari mutuel urbain*) is an off-track betting company that operates in bars and cafes throughout France, though primarily in small towns and villages. One generally associates the PMU sign with a certain type of bar. A typical Parisian would not likely think of a bar with PMU as a particularly inviting place.

pharmacy. He was probably in as good a mood as he was on the phone earlier. Most likely, he'd already opened a bottle of red wine.

And now, standing silently in front of the pharmacy's sliding doors, it felt almost like they were trying to give me courage, as if by opening, they were going to lift me onto a pair of stiletto heels and roll out the red carpet straight to the woman in the lab coat who I could already see behind the counter in her tortoise shell glasses, restocking drawers of medicine according to different doctors' hieroglyphic prescriptions. I thought back to Charlin's joyous tones on the other end of the line—for a moment, I even had to close my eyes and clench my fists to stop myself from backing out; it took a moment for me to get a hold of myself and bury that thought like a piece of lint in my pocket. Just before hanging up, I started to feel something strangely solemn for a moment, like a slight discomfort or just a touch of worry.

He didn't live very far from us, but I'd never really gone to his place. Well, I did go once, the day he moved in; all I remembered was boxes, the smell of sweat of the guys who were built like the armoires they were moving (raising clouds of dust as they did so and placing furniture wherever they wanted) and the wooden cross beam in the main room. Ever since then, Charlin had always come to our place and Tristan didn't question it; he probably just liked not having to leave the apartment.

At the pharmacy, nobody asked any questions—there must have been a lot of people behind me, because I could hear them sniffing. They stamped the prescription card, told me it would only be valid one more time, and gave me a little box—white with

green trim, nice looking and actually kind of appetizing, like a bag of candy—I put it and the *carte vitale* in my inner jacket pocket, since the grocery bag already had the rope in it.

Barely an hour later—the time it took me to ride the number 12 bus back the other way, find his name on the digicode, and climb the four flights of stairs, which thankfully kept me from overthinking everything—Charlin welcomed me at the door with his typical smile, motioning for me to come in. I couldn't figure out how to get to the living room, so, just like when you're lost in the forest and trying to find your way out, I walked straight ahead in hope of finding it, acting as natural as possible. I ended up trying so hard to act natural that I was acting kind of weird. Despite my efforts to make things seem normal, I was freaking out. Being inside his apartment was something entirely different; things felt much more complicated and cramped, almost as cramped as the hallway I was walking down with my purse on my shoulder; but only my purse because I'd accidentally left the other bag, the important one, the one which wasn't going to matter until later, in the entryway by the doormat. When he saw it, Charlin, a host almost worthy of his name, said calmly *whoa, check out all that rope! What are you, some kind of rock climber now?* Then he asked if he could take my jacket, wanting to put it on a hanger on the curtain rod that served as a coat rack. Of course, I refused politely; after all, I needed my jacket. So, I went with Charlin (and my jacket) down the hallway, which stank of the synthetic air freshener he used to try to mask the smell of smoke. I was in front, not really knowing where I was going. Behind me, Charlin seemed to push my body along with his heat, motion and proximity to me.



The apartment must not have been very big because we wound up in the main room almost immediately. It had two windows, a topstitched leather sofa (which I found tasteless because it was made of leather) and a pile of three pallets serving as a coffee table. On the table, there was a small bowl, an open bottle of wine and two glasses. In the cluttered room, there was an old radio set sitting near the electric heater, both next to the closed door of what must have been Charlin's bedroom, with the large stems of a ZZ plant blocking the light coming from the halogen lamp. I couldn't help but think that the poorly lit room actually felt pretty fitting for what I was about to do.

## XIII

As expected, he served me a glass of red wine, a 2014 Vacqueyras. He put it next to the small bowl, which I could see from the couch was filled with cookies and diced cheese. We started out—it always started out like this—by lighting up some cigarettes and talking about the weather, namely how nice out it was, even if it was a little cold for that time of year; for instance, we were actually still turning on the heater at night sometimes back at our place. It all seemed almost normal, sitting a reasonable distance from each other on the couch, almost as if the two of us hung out often together without Tristan, as if we could have been good friends. After all, we did have a few similarities, and for a few moments, everything just seemed so normal; it was almost like I'd come for Charlin's sake, like I was there to see him breathing and living, as if I'd come to enjoy a cigarette and some good wine together all while talking about everything and nothing with him.

Thankfully, the little box of medicine deep in my jacket pocket—I realized on the way over that I hadn't crushed the pills, so I was going to have to do it in the bathroom—bumped into my chest each time I grabbed a cube of gruyere or brought my glass to my lips. It was a constant reminder of the real reason for my visit, my endgame, my goal, or

in concrete terms: the nine feet of rope waiting for us in the entryway. Was the rope waiting for me or for Charlin? I couldn't worry about that of question of perspective because I knew it was almost time to get to the matter at hand.

As for Charlin, I sensed that he felt like we weren't going to be talking for long about the weather or second-hand furniture, especially seeing as the bottle was already half gone. It seemed like he was holding something back; though he still had the same smile on his face, it looked like it was on the verge of distorting, disappearing or shattering as he waited for me to talk about my relationship, or even to divulge the secrets I'd alluded to on the phone; he didn't say anything about it though, not giving me the faintest hint, not even using any of the purely practical fixed expressions which would have allowed the conversation to head in that direction, forcing me to use the little lies I'd prepared in advance. In fact, not only did he not say much to me, but he hardly even looked directly at me. What he did next didn't help either: he stood up, glass in hand, and paced around the room. As he turned toward me, it didn't seem like he was waiting for me to get to the heart of the matter, but rather like he was the one, interestingly, who had something to get off his chest. It was like had something on the tip of his tongue, or stuck in his throat, maybe a bad joke or a cyst that was about to burst. Whatever it was, the Vacqueyras passed right by it, doing nothing more than provoking little hiccups.

But I didn't want to hear it; I didn't give a shit about what he might have wanted to say, I didn't want to hear *anything else* because letting him speak or ask a question would have made him more alive. It would have made him that much more corporeal and

given him more control of the conversation and thus the situation. I'd had my fill of his jokes, his sense of humor, his tall tales about girls, business and money; no matter how much he "knew about business" or how many times he'd made the "deal of the century," he still always needed to borrow money. And by the way, I'm pretty sure he still owed Tristan some—it was a classic Charlin move to owe Tristan money and a classic Tristan move to lend him it—which in my head meant he owed me some too. Or maybe he owed me the entire amount, not just half. The way I saw it, since Tristan and I lived together and money was something we shared just like everything else, it really boiled down to the same thing: if he owed Tristan, he owed both of us. It couldn't have been a lot of money, the small amount I knew about at least, and it didn't have a lot of intrinsic value to me, but it just didn't make sense given our situation, seeing as Tristan and I were having trouble making ends meet. Basically, it's not even that I wanted Charlin to pay me back or even to recognize the nerve he had to let Tristan pay him to help hang a naked photo of me over my fireplace; no, forget all that, all I really wanted was for him to just shut up. And at that moment, I just wanted him to sit back down, so I could get this over with. I was ready to be done with his hiccupping around in circles in that miserable apartment which stank of cigarettes, leather and potpourri.

You might even say at that moment in Charlin's apartment, I was scared. I was scared to hear what he had to say. I didn't want to open that can of worms. My fear was that he would tell me important or serious things about Tristan, things I didn't want to know. I didn't want to learn Charlin had known him better than I did; after all I'd done for us, everything I'd put up with for months: his troubles, his days spent in his pajamas,

his uncertainties and his fling with unemployment. It didn't seem fair to me to learn new things about him from this guy who I felt was a bit of a lost cause already, somebody I saw as existing in the background of my and Tristan's story. It seemed just as unfair as it was seeing him standing up and walking around while I was stuck on the couch and in my head. I felt distressed, even without taking into account the wine, the smoke, and his pacing in the living room. The combination of Charlin turning round and round and the effects of the alcohol were going to my head; it was all giving me vertigo, a vague feeling that I was going to throw up and a desire to be somewhere else, anywhere else, maybe even someone else in another life... I knew I had to get things started. I asked to go to the bathroom and Charlin showed me to the hallway. Once inside with the door locked, I didn't throw up. Instead, I smashed a pile of pills on the floor the best I could. My anger, impatience and the lugged soles of my shoes made it pretty easy. I ground them with my foot and bent over (I was surprised by how flexible I still was) to gather the pill dust until I had a small pile on the bathroom tile. It was a mound of pure white powder, odorless and almost as fine as the sand on the nearby beaches. Before flushing the toilet, I put the powder into the box in my jacket pocket. Then, I unlocked the door and went back down the hallway, hoping that in the meantime Charlin had sat back down on his horrible couch, probably after going to the kitchen for another bottle of wine. In any case, I hoped that when I got back something would be different and my brief absence would have changed something.

As it turns out, it did. Back in the living room, Charlin was no longer pacing. In fact, he was nowhere to be seen. I wondered for a moment if he'd taken off. He definitely

couldn't have gone to the bathroom because I was just in there and he couldn't have gone anywhere else because I didn't see him in the hallway. I could have procrastinated it further, and I almost did, but the most important thing right then was to take advantage of the empty room. I needed to stick to the plan; it was now or never I told myself as I thought about the powdered benzodiazepine sitting in the little box. I focused all my attention on the coffee table and Charlin's glass. It was like the wine was saying to me *come on, show me what you've got; let's go, if you have what it takes!* I opened the little box, and without hesitating—with zero hesitation whatsoever—emptied it into the glass.

It was beautiful. I watched as the powder silently dissolved in a matter of seconds. Invisible and imperceptible, it didn't bubble or alter the color of the cheap wine. I couldn't help but start to start to think about the future, a future I was personally constructing. I knew most important step was done. I continued thinking about it, sitting peacefully on the couch until a door opened. Given the striped comforter cover on the bed and the pair of slippers sitting nearby, I knew it was without a doubt the door to Charlin's room. He came out with his phone in his hand—*found the piece of shit! After you called earlier, I had no idea where I put it.*

I guess I could have been stingier with the dose because after just a couple of minutes, the drink had its intended effect: Charlin let out several enormous yawns. He basically did end up saying the cheap wine was *hittin' a little different*. So, I talked a bit about the wine, which bought me some time and let me talk about myself as little as possible, ultimately avoiding telling any secrets or lies. I couldn't wait for him to pass out so I could take the gloves out of my purse and get to work; it was only a matter of time at

this point, let's say ten or twelve minutes at the most—but I tried not to look at my watch. There was nothing but time to kill, and I knew how to do it, but those ten or so minutes felt like a long time to go without over-thinking or losing my cool. To distract myself, I concentrated on the objects in the room: the table, the ZZ plant, and the wine glasses. But then I noticed the couch's topstitching which made me focus on the situation itself again, since it was the couch that Charlin was quickly slumping into. He was yawning more and more, and his eyes were starting to shut. He seemed distracted and slower to focus. At the same time, his words, mostly monosyllabic, were decreasing in frequency, his syntax was disordered, and his voice was doughy. Like actually doughy, as if there was a big piece of dough blocking his voice box, thickening his tongue, and sticking like mortar to his lips until finally he said, if I remember correctly, *mm exhausted, need to sleep a lil* and without even trying to get up to go to his bed, he laid down his weapons in the battle against his eyelids, which seemed to weigh a ton. He made do with closing his eyes there, after which the only other sign of life left in the room was his deep, regular breathing.

## XIV

I gave myself half an hour, not a minute more. I ended up wasting some time taking off my shoes and then some more taking the gloves out of my purse because I got my middle finger stuck on a loose thread. I closed the curtains and inner shutters and got the rope from the entryway. I laid it down flat and made two bights by doubling the rope back onto itself, being sure to keep enough of the working end free to make eight coils (they call these “tours morts”<sup>13</sup>). The coils worked their way back toward the standing end of the rope—I kept the three pieces of rope parallel, and it turned out really nice looking, like a little bowtie. Next, I had to pass the working end of the rope through the little bight which stuck out of the coils. I tightened it by pulling on the other bight (the art of knots has always been as mysterious to me as origami: you fold and unfold, without cutting, and in the end, you have a paper chicken). Still in my socks, I slipped Charlin’s head into the loop and, from the armrest of the couch, I threw my sort of lasso over the cross beam.

Charlin remained strangely quiet given the situation—after all, he had a rope around his neck and someone was starting to pull on it—but as I struggled (to make the

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<sup>13</sup> This translates literally as “dead turns,” but in English these are called “round turns.” The wordplay simply doesn’t exist in English.



task a bit easier, I tied the standing end of the rope to the bedroom door handle), I realized that it would be more complicated than it had been with the ragdoll. The maneuver would take more time and strength than I'd thought, an immeasurable amount of strength in fact. My hands were already starting to hurt ("nice to the touch" my ass! the hemp felt like it was burning my gloves) and I was quickly starting to get hot—not only were my hands on fire but my whole body was overheating. I was dripping with sweat, my back and neck were soaked, and it was running down my arms—I probably should have taken off my jacket—the sweat from my armpits was stiffening my cotton shirt as it dried. Charlin seemed to be getting hot as well; the pressure was causing him to turn redder and redder, his eyes bulging out of his head. He even started coughing and then wriggling, as if he were wearing a sweater that was too tight or a shirt that was buttoned all the way up. Then it became more like wheezing, which was both disgusting and a good sign. But I had to be sure he wouldn't open his eyes ever again, I knew I had to keep pulling, the best I could—stay strong, damn it!—I had to see the plan through to the end; I needed the strength of two people—I missed Tristan for a second at that moment—or a hundred or even a thousand. I looked one last time at the leather couch underneath the cross beam and closed my eyes, deciding it'd probably be easier to not look and just listen. It would make it easier to find the strength I'd used to carry all that weight, the enormous burden of the last few months and all those memories, recent and distant, like the pharmacist's tortoiseshell glasses whose reflection seemed to feature *The Disquieting Muses*, that puzzle Tristan and I never finished; Einstein's silly face smiling at me with his tongue out; the aisles at the hardware store; and the green and white box rocking in my pocket. But there were also other ones—other memories—like those of my last swim

(which also happened to be first of the year) and of our vacation with the colorful street market in Porto, that inlet muddled with mussels where Tristan wanted to take a photo of me and those afternoons when it was so hot that we spent the day lounging around naked in our room at the *Grande Hotel* before going into town for dinner.

As I pulled, I couldn't help but think about all of that. My socks slid on the wood floor, but I didn't lose my balance. I kept pulling and pulling without getting discouraged, putting my heart and soul into it to such an extent that I almost forgot about Charlin, that mountain of a man struggling on the other end. I was living with my eyes closed, but I was certain I was living. I truly did feel alive, exhausted but alive. Feeling in my gut that it'd be the last time I had to do it, I pulled the rope so triumphantly and forcefully that I thought it had given out: I didn't feel anything on my end; no more resistance, wheezing, movement, just nothing.

Once I'd recovered, despite not being fully lucid yet, I had the presence of mind to put my shoes back on and leave with both my bags—my purse and the bigger bag, now empty and so light as I threw it away in a neighborhood trash can. I didn't take off my gloves before leaving the building. Before going downstairs, though, I took the time to finish my wine and carefully wash my glass (as for Charlin's, I washed it too, but then I put it back on the table, put a little wine in it and rubbed it all over his dead hands and mouth) as well as the small bowl we'd snacked from. As a precaution, I took the used sponge with me and put a new one on the edge of the sink. I also emptied the ashtray of the cigarette butts with traces of my lipstick on them. I left the curtains and inner shutters

as they were and, under the light of the halogen lamp, assured myself that it was all over, everything was done: Charlin wasn't breathing anymore. He was entirely white—a strange white with shades of green, especially under his eyes where some mornings he used to have bags. He wasn't smiling anymore; it was soothing to me to finally see him without his smile; despite the fact it'd crossed my mind, and it would have been a beautiful act of complete revenge, I ultimately decided not to undress his body.

On the way home, I left Tristan a message in his empty voicemail box letting him know that even though I was behind at work, I was coming home early. I asked him how the interview went and also if I needed to pick us up some dinner.

## XV

Any forensic scientist would be able to spot the differences between the effects and techniques of hanging and strangulation or, to put it bluntly, the difference between suicide and murder—if only Charlin’s place had also had a balcony to go along with the cross beam—and my footprints all over the place (in the living room and the hallway, but also in the bathroom and entryway...). It was certain, given the lack of a will or a suicide note, that this would end up in the hands of the police. Cops, who stick their noses into everything, just like doctors, aren’t the type to let themselves be fooled; you can trick anyone except police officers and doctors. But anyway, all of that was obvious (*obviously* just by looking at the body, its positioning in the room, the strength and length of the rope, the cops would put together roughly what happened, even before a rigorous autopsy would tell the whole story). Even with all this in mind, I wasn’t scared right away—I speculated about the intricacies between the victim and the culprit, in theory and in practice, after all, they were maybe nothing more than two sides of the same coin, a bit like day and night, depending on your point of view, one starts as the other *falls*.

That evening though, I felt cheerful and light, so much so that I stopped at the florist to buy a bouquet of tulips (I was also getting uncomfortable with my arms just

dangling alongside my body). Under a stream of tepid water in the sink, I cut the stems diagonally and placed them in a vase. I added a bunch of water and the flower food packet that was stapled to the cellophane the flowers came in. I took advantage of being in the kitchen to discreetly put the prescription back in its place, next to the recipe book; as for the *carte vitale*, I'd figure that out later. Next, I washed my hands and, proudly, as if I were putting a trophy or some other sacred object on display, I went to the fireplace, being careful not to spill any water, and put my vase between the Peugeot coupe and the *Hermione*. As I looked at this miniature replica of "Freedom's Frigate," I admired its three masts, raised sails, perfectly aligned cannons and, at its stern, the little French flag which waved as I blew on it.

Tristan had come home a little before me. The interview went *ok*: like with any interview, it was hard to tell how it went right afterward. He must have taken off his jacket directly after the meeting or maybe even in the lobby of the building because when I saw him, he was just wearing his shirt, with his sleeves rolled up—which I found charming—revealing the fine but disheveled black hair on his forearms. Happy with the flowers, which cheered up the room, he joined me next to the bouquet and together we admired the bright yellow corollas which shined intensely and reflected off the windshield and Saratoga white body of the Peugeot 404. But it also seemed like they opened up at the top of their stems toward ceiling or the sky, as if they were insisting that you raise your eyes and look upward. And so, with the help of Tristan who had just put his arms around my waist, it was like I finally had the courage to look at myself for the first time; I was able gaze at that version of myself directly in front me and even

scrutinize it a bit: the curves of my body, the varying shapes of the rocks—I was able to smile and almost even wink at myself, because really, it was a pretty funny picture with my hat and cigarette. And even in black and white, it was like a bit of sunlight, a vacation feeling, something warm and bright which was nice and allowed me to stop worrying about growing old or having already grown old. It reminded me that there were still things to enjoy, opportunities to seize, and vacations to take. As an assortment of soy-sauce-soaked Asian mini-pastries were cooking in the oven, Tristan and I held each other close in front of the fireplace. It was like we both understood that although we had already shared a lot of love in our lives, there was still quite a bit left to share. Despite the weariness, Tristan, too, must have been moved by the moment because he whispered *it's beautiful* into my ear as he squeezed me a little tighter. Charmed by the way things were at that moment and ignoring all the eventualities of the situation, I paused for a moment and, without feeling the need to turn around and look him in the eyes, I responded: *yeah, like a Kurosawa film.*

## XVI

I decided to turn myself in to the police two days later.

After I introduced myself at the front desk, they took me to a room and closed the blinds. In essence, I told them it was me. Then I recounted the whole story (including the countless number of times Charlin—*Charles-Valentin, if you'd prefer*—burst into our apartment, all the empty beers, the situation with the photograph and the envelope that Tristan, *my husband, well not exactly but basically*, gave him in the living room; they made it clear that they wanted me to skip over these apparently less important contextual details). There were two guys there: one who was listening carefully and seemed to be an understanding guy and the other, emotionless in front of his screen in the back of the room, typing what I was saying, probably word for word.

I identified myself, gave the address, described the rope, the cross beam, the state of Charlin's body when I left, and the way I did the whole thing; as for premeditation—at that moment, I rummaged through my jacket pocket and placed the rest of the benzodiazepine on the table—and the fact that things had seemed a little more complicated than I expected, I was completely truthful. I actually asked the cops for a favor (I figured it was worth a shot), which made them laugh in the heat of the moment—*hey Franck are you hearin' this? Can you believe what she's askin' us?!—*but in the end

(specifically just after the guy who wasn't typing had stubbed out his cigarette into a notched ashtray), it was just a question of time. If I stuck to the agreement—*what do ya think Francky, we could make a deal here, huh?*—they would allow it. At the end of the interrogation, the two cops and I had come to an agreement. You might even say we made each other a kind of promise: under the condition that I immediately sign a written agreement swearing that I wouldn't leave the city or the region for that matter, and also that I would come check in with them three times per day (8:50 a.m. before going to work, 12:30 p.m. at the beginning of my lunch break and 5:30 p.m. right when I left work; on the weekend, same requirement, same sentence: I just had to make sure I stuck to the plan; and after all I'd already done, *I knew the ropes, right?*). Provided that I give them both (*and this part obviously stays between us*) some cash compensation—for a moment I was worried they would ask for a little payment in kind for their silence—and that I adhered to all their conditions, they'd keep my identity secret, never call me at home, agree to temporarily turn a blind eye and buy me just enough time to enjoy the event (even if none of us had phrased it that way). Under close monitoring, they'd give me the chance to be able to go—it was all I was asking for—to the funeral. I said *thank you* and got out my wallet to give them the money. Then I signed all the documents with a pencil I took from a jar I'd noticed when I came in because it had *you rock*<sup>14</sup> written on the front.

Every now and then, those cops, always the same two, would bring me a coffee at work (a plain, simple coffee without any foam served in a plastic cup). Since I saw them

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<sup>14</sup> In English in the original.



three times a day, as per the rules of our contract, they followed me in street clothes everyday up to and including the Thursday where we went from our place to the train station, then to the crematorium, the courtyard, into Hall B and then from the crematorium back to the train station. They were actually very discreet (you have to give them credit, cops are able to blend in with the crowd sometimes). After Tristan got us some second-class tickets on an automatic machine for the train ride home, I saw them both get on and sit down on the folding seats near the door and the bathroom. Tristan and I were within their sight, sitting side by side the right way round: in the direction of travel.

During the trip, I hummed the Nougaro song in my head —“ah tu verras, tu verras, tout recommencera... Je me réveilleraï, tu verras, tu verras, tout rayé de soleil, ah, le joli forçat!”<sup>15</sup>—and I thought to myself about how based on all my practice, I’d gotten pretty good at tying nooses. Speaking of nooses, it seemed to me things had come full circle. I felt not only had I taken my revenge, but I’d also made it around. Around what, I’m not sure. Maybe around myself. Without knowing exactly what was beginning, I felt reassured that I’d found myself and that I’d given it everything I could. All this being true, Tristan was still obviously sad. As we sat in the mostly empty TER, it was almost like the slow-moving train was trying to prolong his grief. He wasn’t sad enough to start crying, but sad, nonetheless. I was sure of it by the way he was biting his fingernails like he was searching for something and running his fingers through his hair like he was trying to chase away memories. I could see he was overwhelmed by the way he was

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<sup>15</sup> Another excerpt from Nougaro’s *Tu verras*. This one might be translated as: “Ah you’ll see, you’ll see, everything will start again... I’ll wake up, you’ll see, you’ll see, stripes of sunshine, ah the lovely convict”

looking at the empty blue sky and the stone houses scattered through the verdant countryside, all obstructed by my reflection in the window. I truly felt like I'd accomplished my goal, and that it was a good deed that I'd done. I was so happy with myself that, to top it all off, I decided that before going to bed that night, rocked by the imaginary salty fragrance of Porto's rocky inlets, I would order—it would be my reward for myself, a last homage—a brand new bookcase where we could put all our excess books.

I was thinking about all the books I never would have had the chance to read if I'd died that day (I even started a list in my head). Just then, Tristan started squirming in his seat to get to his phone that must have been vibrating in his pocket. The sounds of the motor on the rails covered the voice on the other end of the line that talked to him for two, maybe three minutes. Nevertheless, I heard Tristan stammer *uh, Monday morning? Ok, yeah, thank you so much* and, right after hanging up, he turned to me and for the first time since the start of the trip, he began to smile before saying *life can be so weird sometimes!* He got the job.

Life must have seemed that much weirder when right after we stopped, the two guys came to take me out of the train car. As they took out their handcuffs, they said in that classic police voice, but at the same time with a bit of kindness: *And now, Mademoiselle, you're going to have to come with us.*



### Translator's Afterword

Throughout the process of translating Marion Guillot's novel *C'est moi*, I was worried about writing the text you are reading right now. From the moment I set out to do the translation as my master's thesis, I knew I was going to have to produce some sort of scholarly component to go along with it. To be frank, I was intimidated by the prospect of writing such a thing. I mean, I've read my fair share of books about translation, and I believe I have a pretty good feel for what I'm doing, but the idea of writing something with a title as grandiose as "Translator's Preface" or "Translator's Afterword" was daunting. This was the case until the moment I sat down to start writing. As it turns out, there's more to talk about than I ever could have imagined. Fear not though, I'll spare you all but the most interesting of details.

For no reason other than academic precedence, I was initially planning for this to be a Translator's Preface. In my mind, it made the most sense to prepare the reader for what they were going to experience, making sure they had all the relevant information they needed about the novel, its author, the surrounding context, etc. As I'll talk about shortly, I especially wanted to be sure the reader understood the cultural significance of the *Minuit* novel in France. As I continued to write however, I realized the only information that I thought was particularly useful for the reader *before* starting the novel was a general overview about the publisher. And even that wasn't the most important thing in the world. What's more, I noticed many of the interesting things I wanted to talk about in this text contained pretty major spoilers. While this is indeed an academic project and that shouldn't necessarily worry me, it's a truth universally accepted that nobody likes spoilers. And so, having convinced myself that the information about the

publisher could wait until after the fact, and in an effort to avoid any unnecessary spoilers, I decided it would be better to do an afterword. So, with no further ado, I hope you enjoy this small look into my experience of translating *C'est moi*.

### **Some Important (But Not Preface-Worthy) Context about *Les Éditions de Minuit***

One of the reasons I think it's so important to take the time to talk about *Les Éditions de Minuit* in this afterword is because there really isn't an American (or English) equivalent. The publishing house, whose name could be translated as *Midnight Press*<sup>16</sup>, carries a certain cultural significance in the French-speaking world. When you pick up one of their books (with their iconic simple blue writing and white cover—if you've never seen one it's worth googling), you immediately have an idea of what you're getting yourself into. In order for me to talk about *C'est moi* in any serious manner, we first need to discuss what the *Minuit* novel means to French culture as a whole.

The origins of *Les Éditions de Minuit* are closely tied to the French Resistance during the Second World War. Since its inception as a vehicle for subverting Nazi media censorship, *Minuit* has continued to publish works by many of the greatest French-language authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These include Samuel Beckett, Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras, Jean Echenoz and Jean Rouaud, to name only a few. You might have noticed how casually I've used the expression "*Minuit* novel." This is because in my mind (just as in the minds of many others) being published by *Minuit* implies a certain quality about the novel. Pinning down exactly what it means, though, is not the easiest thing to do. That said, I'm certainly not the first person who has

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<sup>16</sup> This and all subsequent translations in this afterword are mine.

tried to figure this out. From journalists at the French version of *Slate* magazine to academics at Université de Provence, many have tried to answer the question of whether there's a *Minuit* style. Pierre Assouline summarizes these arguments effectively in his article for *La République des livres*. I'm particularly convinced by his observation that "just asking the question (almost) gives us the answer." In other words, the fact people continually talk about the potential existence of a *Minuit* style implies there probably is one. But, as he explains, the operative word here is "almost." It's not hard to argue there's something that ties all the authors published by *Minuit* together, but defining what that thing is? That's quite a bit more challenging.

Finding a concise definition for the *Minuit* style isn't the goal of this afterward. Instead, I simply want to be sure the reader is aware of its existence. That said, I'll provide two brief possibilities. First, there's Jérôme Lindon's infamous answer. If anyone is going to be able to give us an answer, it ought to be him. After all, he was in charge of *Minuit* from just after its inception in 1947 until his death in 2001. In a now frequently quoted moment, he described the novels he chose to publish at *Minuit* as "des romans impassibles" (Lindon). This created quite a stir due to the fact this could be understood to mean "emotionless novels." He would later go on to explain that he didn't mean *emotionless*, but rather *reserved* or *detached*. No matter what you understand "impassive novel" to mean, it serves as a good benchmark for what to expect when opening a *Minuit* novel.

The other possible explanation concerns the New Novel. It's pretty much impossible to discuss the *Minuit* style without mentioning the Nouveau Roman. This school of writing came directly from *Les Éditions de Minuit*. While not all *Minuit* novels

are New Novels, the two styles are so closely related that it gives a useful tool for discussing what the *Minuit* style might be. With this in mind, the *Minuit* style could be thought of as the authors “preserving the beautiful remnants of the principles of the New Novel: deconstruction, erasure, exhaustion and, of course, disappearance” (Assouline).<sup>17</sup> To reiterate, my goal here is not to try to argue what the *Minuit* style is, but rather to give the reader an idea of the cultural significance *Minuit* carries in the French-speaking world. When you see the blue-and-white cover of *C’est moi*, you know you’re in for a distinct, modern and *impassive* adventure, whatever that might mean to you.

### **Who is Marion Guillot and What is *C’est moi*?**

There’s very little information available about Marion Guillot. In fact, all that is easily available about her online is extremely brief biography on *Minuit*’s website as well as a series of interviews on YouTube by the Bordeaux-based bookstore Librairie Mollat. A relatively unknown author, her biography contains only two pieces of information: she was born in Paris in 1986 and she has written two books: *Changer d’air* in 2015 and *C’est moi* in 2018. This first novel follows Paul, a teacher, husband and father of two who abandons his job, wife and children when, not unlike the narrator of *C’est moi*, he decides he needs to make a drastic change in his life. I think Guillot’s writing is particularly commendable because it’s extremely personal. It seems fairly clear she’s not trying to sell millions of copies of some lifeless superhit, but instead to broach personal and intimate themes using her exceptional gifts as a storyteller.

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<sup>17</sup> He says “of course” because last word he uses to describe the style in French is “disparition.” This is a nod to perhaps the most famous Oulipo work of all time, a lipogram by Georges Perec called *La Disparition*. This book, which was translated into English by Gilbert Adair as *A Void*, famously does not contain the letter E.

In the interviews available online, there's good insight into how this novel might be situated in the greater literary context in which Guillot writes. As she explains, "it's a book that tries to play with registers" (Guillot in Mollat). As a matter of fact, it does a lot with registers that *Changer d'air* does not. The novel is filled with silly digressions by a narrator who employs an almost irreverent tone all the time. Guillot insists the novel is not intended to make fun of anyone. As she explains, it's possible "to say very important things... in a light-hearted way" (Guillot in Mollat). It seems clear to me that Guillot accomplishes this throughout *C'est moi*.

The novel is quite unique. As such, it resists almost any attempt to classify it into any single genre. When first considering the question, I was tempted to call it a murder mystery from the point of view of the murderer (I'm fascinated by imagining this story from the point of view of the two cops who follow her to the funeral and eventually arrest her). I hesitate to let this be my final classification of the novel because I think murder mysteries tend to do certain things this novel doesn't. Ultimately, I think it's best to call this novel a first-person journey of self-discovery and liberation. It's something similar to a coming-of-age novel gone wrong, but instead of an adolescent protagonist dealing with the challenges of growing up, it's a middle-aged protagonist working through something not unlike a midlife crisis. I think the most important thing to say about the novel, though, is that it's a story about perception. Perhaps the central element of the novel is the nude photograph that the narrator discovers hanging in her living room. As a literary device, the photograph allows the author to "explore the relationship that one has with oneself" (Guillot in Mollat). Throughout the work, the author uses the ideas of photographic representations and reflections to explore not only the idea of how we



perceive ourselves, but also what we think about the ways others perceive us. Ultimately, the novel succeeds in showing the descent into madness that is almost inevitable when one obsesses over these different types of perceptions. This madness, though, is almost always underpinned by the narrator's zany personality. Speaking of descents into madness, I'd like to take a moment to talk about dark nature of the novel.

It resonated deeply with me when I heard the author say, "people were really worried about me, like my family for example, they said, 'how could you write such a story?'" (Guillot in Mollat). When I decided this was the novel I wanted to translate, I worried about the exact same thing: what are my friends and family going to think when they finish reading it? Are they going to think I'm sick and twisted for choosing this book? But ultimately, I agree with Guillot when she explains that *C'est moi* is first and foremost an entertaining novel. The plot and central events are not necessarily funny, but that's not what defines the novel; instead, it's the way the story is told that makes it work. For an example, look no further than the fact the narrator is virtually incapable of stopping herself from giving her wry opinion on every little thing that happens. One of my central goals as a translator was to capture the humor Guillot creates through all the little things the narrator says and does. My hope was to reproduce the narrator's dry sense of humor, constant over-analysis of everything, and cold, calculating nature in a way that is light and accessible. I hope, just as the author does, to convey that "there's actually something very silly about what [the narrator] does and the way she does it" (Guillot in Mollat). One major measure success for this translation is its ability to capture the goofiness that persists throughout an otherwise gravely serious story.

In order to understand what makes the novel conceptually interesting, it helps to understand which elements were important to the author. For Guillot, the novel came to be by weaving two elements together: the funeral scene and the photograph. With these two ideas in mind, it was just a matter of filling out the details. To bridge the two ideas, Guillot uses compelling characters: the narrator, who remains unnamed, is the corporealization of the photograph. She's joined by her boyfriend, Tristan, and because *jamais deux sans trois*<sup>18</sup>, there's the photograph to round out the trio. But the photograph both is and isn't a copy of the narrator, so there's also the other obvious possibility for our third character: Charlin, who's there to "bring a little disorder into the story" (Guillot in Mollat). The interactions of these trios are a significant aspect of what make the novel compelling and worthwhile.

Once you've read the novel, it's not hard to imagine why I chose it: it's just a great book. But I'd like to share a little bit on the specifics of how I came to choose it as the first novel I've ever translated. Once I knew I wanted to translate a novel for my thesis, I really only had one rule: I wanted to pick a novel that had never been translated before. Some of the first books that came to mind were *La salle de bain* by Jean-Philippe Toussaint and *Préhistoire* by Éric Chévallard. My self-imposed rule for originality quickly dashed my hopes of doing either of these works, along with most of Toussaint's and many of Chévallard's other novels. But I realized pretty quickly why Toussaint and Chévallard topped my list of potential authors: there's just something about *Minuit*. With this in mind, I hopped onto the *Éditions de Minuit* website to check out their catalogue. I remember stumbling upon *C'est moi* and thinking huh, *what an interesting title; I wonder*

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<sup>18</sup> A wonderful French expression which might be translated as "all things come in threes" (used for things both good and bad things that come in threes).

*what it's about...* Fortunately for me, *Minuit* has a READ THE FIRST FEW PAGES button on their website. I don't know if it's appropriate to use the expression *love at first sight* between a book and a graduate student, but suffice it to say, I'd found the book I was going to translate. After finishing the novel in one sitting, I was ready to start translating it. I did my best to be prudent though, taking the time to read the author's other novel, *Changer d'air* (as well as reread *C'est moi*) to make sure I felt like I had a good grasp on Guillot's style, but I knew I'd found the right novel for me.

### **Titles & Epigraphs & Openings, Oh My! Three Early Challenges**

Before getting into a more general discussion about the process of translating the novel, I'd like to start by discussing three early challenges I faced with this translation. As the section header suggests, they are the first three things you encounter when reading a novel: the title, the epigraph and the first line of the novel. I decided to group these three elements together and talk about them first because not only are they the first thing you experience when you open the novel, but they are also three elements of any novel that I argue are of particular importance.

Choosing a good title for the translation is clearly very important. After all, despite what the old expression says, many people do judge a book by its cover. When trying to find the right English title for the translation, I carefully considered the author's point of view on the original title. In an interview, she explained that one of the qualities of the title she enjoys is that "it reflects quite well that the narrator is completely anonymous in the work" (Guillot in Mollat). Moreover, she says the meaning of this polysemic title varies all the way from something as simple as *hey, it's me !* to the

confession of a crime, or even something as consequential as the existence of the ability to know oneself. The title is dynamic as well, since “when you start the book, you don’t understand the title in the same way as when you finish it” (Guillot in Mollat). The title of the novel clearly plays a role in how it’s perceived and, given the importance this novel places on perception, I believe the English title needs to be as close as possible to the original French one. And so, we’re presented with what is possibly the novel’s most interesting translational conundrum: what should the English title be?

In the beginning, I believed there were two choices: *It’s Me* or *That’s Me*. That was the question. Due to fundamental differences between French and English syntax, *C’est moi* could easily be translated directly as either of these expressions. My gut reaction, as I think it would be for many, was to choose *It’s Me*. It’s hard to explain exactly why, but it just feels more like a title to me. It’s short and sweet, with almost a pithy quality to it. Despite these positives, *It’s Me* has certain shortcomings too. As I mentioned earlier, the polysemy of the title is extremely important. As such, I’d like for the English title to be polysemic in all the same ways as the French title, if such a thing is possible. For the author, the title has at least two meanings: it makes reference to a confession, and it reflects one’s ability to recognize oneself. Another, more explicit meaning behind the title has to do with the central element of the novel: the photo and the narrator’s realization that she is the subject of the photo. This is where I started to lean toward *That’s Me* as the working title.

My idea was that *It’s Me* lacked the necessary polysemy. It’s hard to find all the right meanings in *It’s Me*. The title *That’s Me* solves this problem, albeit only partially. For example, the phrase *that’s me* works almost flawlessly for the situation with the

photo. When the narrator sees the photo in the living room, she'd almost certainly think *oh my gosh, that's me!* On the other hand, it's more difficult (though not impossible) to imagine her saying *it's me* upon seeing it. Moreover, *It's Me* essentially doesn't work for expressing the idea of knowing oneself. *That's Me*, on the other hand, works almost perfectly thanks to the existence of the English expression *that's (just) me*. One can easily imagine someone justifying their behavior by saying to themselves, *well, you know, that's just me—that's just the way I am*, which seems almost impossible to recreate using *it's me*. But *That's Me* had problems as well. Similar to how *It's Me* just felt like a title, *That's Me* just didn't feel right. For me, it's a bit too clunky and seems to lack the pithiness of *It's Me*. What's more, both these titles have the same major flaw: they simply don't work as a statement of confession.

When I was excited about the prospects of the title *That's Me*, I'd briefly convinced myself it had a flavor of confession to it. After all, one can imagine a guilty individual being shown photographic evidence of their presence at the scene of the crime and responding in a defeated tone, *yeah, that's me*. However, this is admittedly a bit of a stretch and nothing particularly similar to this happens in the novel. As far as the admission of guilt in the novel is concerned, *It's Me* and *That's Me* just frankly don't cut it. It's useful here to take a moment to explain why *C'est moi* works as a confession in the original. In French, it's possible to say, *c'est moi qui l'ai fait* to admit you've done something. A literal, word-for-word translation of this might be, *it's me who did it*. A sense-for-sense translation, on the other hand, would be, *I did it*, perhaps with emphasis on the word *I*, but not necessarily, or even *I was the one who did it*. While this structure appears strange to English speakers, it's not only acceptable in French, but commonplace.

In fact, one might even argue it sounds more natural than *c'était moi*, which translates literally as *it was me*. It may not be possible to say which of the many meanings of the title is the most important, but if it were, the meaning having to do with confession would be a strong contender, especially when one considers the plot of the novel and the desire for the meaning of the title to change at the end. With this in mind, I ultimately settled on the title *It Was Me*.

Like any other, this choice has strengths and weaknesses. It obviously lacks the short and sweet qualities of *It's Me*, and it even feels a bit clunky in comparison to *That's Me*. What's more, changing to the past tense feels significant to me. I'm not alone in feeling this way either. When talking with the author about the change, she admitted "changing it to the past tense feels a bit earth-shaking for me" (Guillot in Messenger). But this is, of course, referring to the French expression *C'était moi*, which carries different meanings and cultural significance from the English *It Was Me*. In fact, when asked what she would have said if someone had proposed the French title *C'était moi*, Guillot said it "feels very pompous, like an epitaph" (Guillot in Messenger). This is of course her opinion and is only true of the title in French. Personally, I don't think *It Was Me* feels like an epitaph whatsoever. It's important to note here that the author does not need to approve the title I choose; that said, since she has been so gracious in giving me her time and invaluable in my helping me make this translation happen, I've been mindful to carefully consider her point of view in matters such as this. On a positive note, she ultimately gave me her blessing by saying, "go with the past tense if it allows for playing on fluidity and polysemy!" (Guillot in Messenger). And that's exactly it:

although not perfect, *It Was Me* is the only title that captures all the meanings I'd hoped to express. So, with fluidity and polysemy in mind, I've chosen *It Was Me* as the title.

It's not hard to see the adventure that translating this novel has led me on. If the title merits a two-plus-page discussion, you can only imagine how many similarly complicated conundrums arose during the 111 pages of the novel itself. It seems to me that there are enough topics worth talking about that if I talked about all of them, this afterward would be longer than the novel itself. Interestingly, I ran into another problem before even beginning the novel: the epigraph. Not unlike the title, one's understanding of this short quote changes significantly after finishing the novel. It reads:

« Fais-moi penser d'apporter une corde demain »

Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot*

In theory, an epigraph from another author poses all sorts of translation-related problems. A few of these include: Has a translation of the quoted work already been done? If so, do you use that translator's rendering of the text, or do you do your own translation of it? If you use another translator's version, how do you credit them without it appearing clunky? Is quoting the translation even the same thing as quoting the original? This stream of questions was what ran through my mind before I realized just how lucky I was: Samuel Beckett, a French-speaking Irishman (and *Minuit* author, by the way) famously produced his own translations, including one for *En attendant Godot*. And so, I was able to simply quote the same line in the canonical translation *Waiting for Godot* and avoid almost every one of these problems. There still remains the worthwhile question of whether *En attendant Godot* and *Waiting for Godot* are the same thing, but answering this question is outside of the scope of this afterward.

Lastly, I'd like to talk about the first line of the novel, which ended up causing me quite some trouble. In the original, the line is as follows: "Dans le fond, Charlin devait être quelqu'un de sympathique" (9). To put it bluntly, there's a lot of weird stuff going on in this sentence. But, as the first sentence of the novel, it does exactly what it ought to. It sets the tone, foreshadows what's to come and is memorable to boot. From Camus's "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte" to Austen's "It is a truth universally acknowledged...", the potential for greatness that comes with the first line of a novel is hard to ignore.<sup>19</sup> For me, a great first line serves as a microcosm for the novel. With all this in mind, really nailing the first line was of utmost importance.

If you ask Google to translate this sentence, it gives "Deep down, Charlin must have been a nice person." The crux of the problem with this type of translation lies with the verb "devoir." This is usually considered to be the equivalent of English's "must." That said, we often use "have to" or "got to" in colloquial American English. I think this is due in part to how formal the word *must* feels. Maybe it's just me, but I find it hard to imagine any normal person saying something like *I must eat dinner before we hang out.*

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<sup>19</sup> As a translator, there's also great potential to muck up this greatness. My personal favorite opening line of all time is from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis: "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." Interestingly, in his 2002 translation of the novel, Philippe Morgaut rendered this as: "Il était une fois un garçon qui s'appelait Eustache Clarence Scrubb<sup>1</sup>, et l'on est tenté de dire qu'il le méritait bien." As you can see by the <sup>1</sup>, he felt it necessary to include the following footnote: 1. En anglais *scrub* signifie « chétif ». (In English, *scrub* means « undersized ».) It's worth noting, I've loved this quote since childhood without knowing that *scrub* meant undersized. In the story, Eustace shows whether or not he deserves such a name in myriad ways. For me, his physical size/development is not what makes the line work. I'm not alone in thinking this either; my mom, to whom I owe my love of books as well as my knowledge of C.S. Lewis, never noticed the wordplay with *scrub* either. In fact, after asking a handful of native English speakers, no one has told me the meaning of *scrub* is particularly important to making the line work for them. In this way, Morgaut's insistence on this wordplay pigeonholes a French reader into focusing on Eustace's physical attributes, when the meaning of this all-important first line has the potential to be so much more than just that. Furthermore, the meaning of *scrub* is polysemic, and one could argue it's more important to focus on the meaning "to cancel" (a usage popularized during the time Lewis was writing) or "to clean" (a usage that works well with Eustace's character arc). All said, this is exactly the type of situation I'd like to avoid with my translation of the first line.



Meanwhile, *I have to/I gotta eat dinner before we hang out* feels totally natural. In general, the language in the novel is fairly casual. With that in mind, I really didn't want to use *must* here. So, by substitution of *must* with *have to*, you get "Deep down, Charlin had to be a nice person." But this doesn't work either, because of the multiple meanings of *have to* in English. For me, "he had to be a nice person" sounds like it could mean "it was required of him that he be a nice person" or, in other words, that someone is obligating him to be a nice person. Given my self-imposed requirement that the first line of the novel be as close to perfect as possible (which, by the way, I think it is in the original), this wasn't going to cut it.<sup>20</sup> This first sentence was, as it happens, a stark reminder to remember the importance of focusing on what the text means rather than what the words mean. When I ran into this problem, I couldn't help but think of David Bellos's quip that "translation *is* meaning" (87).

In his book *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*, Bellos offers some sage advice on dealing with problems such as the one I was had with *devoir*. As he explains, "the expression uttered (in speech or writing) is not the sole or even the primary object of translation when the force of an utterance is what matters, as it always does" (77). This reflects concisely what I think is going on in the first line. It has a certain *force* that, in a way, summarizes the entire novel. I find it more important to translate the force of the first line than the literal meaning of it. By getting the force right, I'll capture both the true meaning and the feeling of the line. With this in mind, I ultimately chose, "Deep down, Charlin probably was a nice person."<sup>21</sup> In the end,

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<sup>20</sup> I'll leave trying to substitute *got to* into this sentence as an exercise for the reader. Spoiler: it's not pretty.

<sup>21</sup> I've spent hours trying to figure out the exact difference between "he probably was a nice person," and "he was probably a nice person." In the end, I chose the former because it feels more like the first line of the original to me.

it's my hope that this first line does the same thing that the first line does in the original (something I hope is true of course for the entire translation, but especially of this line). If this line has the same force as the original, I'll feel I've succeeded.

### **The Translation Process**

There's one final thing worth discussing before getting into my process for translating the novel. I'd like to talk about style. By style, I mean how the text is rendered, not necessarily writing style. Specifically, I'm referring to punctuation usage and formatting in the text.

To put it frankly, there's no internal consistency for the usage of italics and quotation marks in the novel. That said, it's my contention that this adds to the charm of the novel, as well as blurring the lines between what's reality and what's just another one of the narrator's bizarre observations. In general, this lack of distinction is critical to what makes the novel work. For this reason, I've remained as faithful as possible to the author's style as it pertains to the use of italics and punctuation. The author's formatting is different from most French novels, but I don't think it generally causes any comprehension problems. The most notable difference between Guillot's style and that of a "standard" novel is her use of italics for dialogue. While different from what most readers are used to, it's not difficult to figure out what's going on while reading. I hesitated at first to venture too far from the "standard" American style, particularly that of how dialogue is rendered, but I was reassured after doing some research. From what I've found, authors such as Sally Rooney and Cormac McCarthy don't use anything to designate dialogue in their writing (no quotation marks, no italics, nothing—it's all

contextual) and even more similarly, authors such as Catherine Lacey and Kathryn Erskine use italics in their writing for dialogue, just as Guillot does. In other words, these American authors successfully made it through the copy-editing stage with this style of dialogue (quite possibly because it's thematically relevant to their works, as it is in *C'est moi*), so I am comfortable following my gut and doing so as well.

In the same vein, quotation marks are used somewhat haphazardly in the novel. They sometimes represent reported speech, while at other times they are used to represent text that appears in the novel's world (like on a sign, for example). Following the same logic as above, I did my best to copy Guillot's use of quotation marks wherever possible, making changes only when I thought the meaning of something was not clear in English. The last point of style worth mentioning is the paragraph breaks. As you may have noticed, some paragraphs were separated by nothing while others were separated by a blank line space. There's no way this wasn't done intentionally in the original, so I've chosen to keep all the same paragraph breaks in the translation.

It's now finally time to talk about some interesting challenges I faced throughout the process of translating the novel. The first general topic I'd like to broach is that of names. I'm an ardent believer that all character names are important, whether the author intended for them to be or not. After all, what's more central to a character than their name? As such, I made sure to pay close attention to the how to deal with different character's names and the culture significance they carry. The novel really only has three characters: the narrator, Tristan and Charlin. Given the fact the narrator remains unnamed, there's not much to discuss there. The names Charlin and Tristan, on the other hand, are both interesting. Let's start with Charlin, the sower of disorder in the novel. It's

important for Charlin's name to resonate with the reader. After all, it appears in the first line of the novel, meaning it plays a role in all the things the first line is supposed to do. So, what is the name Charlin anyway?

I'm not ashamed to admit I was completely baffled by it the first time I saw it. I couldn't figure out why this character had a name I'd never heard before. I searched far and wide on the internet but found nothing particularly convincing about the first name Charlin.<sup>22</sup> I knew from it wasn't really a first name in English, and the lack of available information online was beginning to convince me it wasn't common as a first name in French either. I began to wonder if the name would be too strange for an American reader. It seems conceivable as a name in French, but in English it just seems weird. I'd convinced myself so much of this line of reasoning, I had even started considering changing the name to something like Charlie, so that the American reader wouldn't be taken off guard right at the start. Ultimately, I decided to stick with Charlin for the simple fact that it's Charlin's name. For me, changing a character's name changes who character is. I felt like I was in the process of successfully portraying Charlin to the American reader, so I simply couldn't justify changing his name.

All of this was, of course, before I was made aware of a very obvious fact: Charlin's full name is Charles-Valentin. That's *Charles-Valentin*. It's just an abbreviation of his name, nothing more.<sup>23</sup> Suffice it to say, I felt like an idiot. I completely missed this

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<sup>22</sup> While there isn't much in the first name, there are tons of examples of it as a last name. There's even a Wikcionario (the Spanish version of Wiktionary, the wiki-based dictionary) entry for it that simply defines it as "Apellido," Spanish for "Surname." Incidentally, Charlin also happens to be the middle name of the great Renaissance poet Louise Labé.

<sup>23</sup> That really is all there is to it. After finally figuring this out, I asked the author where the name came from, just to be sure I wasn't missing anything else. She confirmed it's nothing more than a made-up nickname for Charles-Valentin. When I pointed out how it would have been strange indeed if she knew a real Charlin, given his fate in the novel, she quipped, "in a way, I do know a few Charlins, don't you? 😊" (Guillot in Messenger).

obvious explanation. The reason I'm sharing this story is because it's evidence of an important fact. No matter how deeply committed to a project you are, no matter how many hours you spend researching a question, and no matter how confident you are about your answer, it's possible to still be completely wrong. It was a humbling realization. This experience with Charlin's name has been my daily reminder as a translator of how easy it is to miss obvious but essential details. In the end, I'm glad to be an idiot.

My moment of confusion with Charlin was not the only time names posed a challenge in the translation. The most interesting name-related moment in the text is when the narrator says one of the girls at the funeral "was almost certainly named Véronique, like all easy girls are" (13). Not unlike my confusion with Charlin, I had no idea why the narrator was saying this. At the time, I hadn't yet been able to get in contact with the author, so I was left on my own for this one. I wanted to be sure I didn't miss anything obvious (like I did with Charlin), but more importantly, I wanted to get the joke. When I read the original, it really seemed like there was something going on that I was just missing. So, armed with my desire to be *in* on the joke, I crowdsourced my problem. With the help of the appropriately named website *survey-maker.com*, I sent out a short questionnaire to some of the French people I've made personal relationships with over the years. They were kind enough to not only respond, but also spread the survey among their friends and family so I could have a more representative sample. The survey was very simple: it asked the respondees what adjectives they associated with three names: Véronique, Tristan and Charles. I chose Véronique to try to get to the bottom of what was happening, and Tristan and Charles as a control (and because I was genuinely curious what kind of cultural associations French people had with these names). Ultimately, I

ended up with a more-or-less representative sample of 25 responses. As it turns out, this would be invaluable.

It's important to mention that the people responding to my survey had no idea what it was about. None of them knew these were the names of characters in a novel, most of them didn't even know I was translating a novel, and some of them didn't even know who I was. With that in mind, one can only imagine my surprise when an anonymous respondee from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of France gave the answer "easy girl" for their association with the name *Véronique*. Thankfully, they included the parenthetical note "because of the rhyme!" And that was it; that's the joke! As the footnote in the translation explains, *niquer* is a vulgar French verb for sexual intercourse. Because of this, names like *Monique*, *Dominique* and, of course, *Véronique* often find themselves at the butt-end of dirty jokes.<sup>24</sup> Despite the fact I was now in on the joke, I was no closer to translating it. How could one possibly translate this wordplay? Even if there was a woman's name in English that ended in a third-person singular conjugation of a vulgar term for sexual intercourse (which, to my knowledge, there isn't), I would still need to justify changing the name. In doing so, I'd be removing all the linguistic and cultural significance that comes with the name, not to mention stripping this character (however unimportant she might be) of such an important part of what makes her French. In an ideal world, I'd be able to find a name that is not only some kind of sex-related pun, but is also plausibly French while not seeming so foreign to an American reader that

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<sup>24</sup> The most notable example of this is probably from the comedian Coluche. His stand-up bit *Le Viol de Monique (Monique's Rape)* is entirely based around this wordplay. It should go without saying this is not a family friendly comedy routine. I'd like to thank my *coordinatrice* Catherine for independently confirming this as well. It just so happens that the same day I got this response from the survey, I brought it up to her and she was able to help me understand the wider cultural significance of this joke, including the existence of the aforementioned comedy routine.

they're taken off guard. In the end, this is almost certainly impossible. This is why I chose to keep the name but explain the joke in a footnote. You can't always have your cake and eat it too.

I'll finish the discussion of names with the final named character in the story: Tristan. The novel makes a couple of allusions to the chivalric romance *Tristan and Iseult*. Mostly, it's the narrator comparing (unfavorably, I might add) her relationship to that of these famous literary lovers. In the translation, I ultimately decided to include a footnote to ensure the reader is aware of this moment of intertextuality. I did this in large part because more than 1 in 5 of the French respondees in my survey mentioned something related to knights, the Middle Ages, or chivalric romance when asked what they associated with the name Tristan. While I didn't conduct a similar survey in English, my gut feeling told me that this association was not necessarily as strong with the average American reader. This was actually one of four possible moments of intertextuality I found in the novel. Thanks to the dialogue I was able to have with the Guillot, I found out only two of the four were explicitly intended to be allusions. Apart the *Tristan et Iseult* reference, the other explicit allusion is the one to Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished romance in verse *Perceval ou le Conte du Graal*, another work dealing very directly with knights and chivalry. Ultimately, I decided to use a footnote here as well because I wanted to assure the allusions a French reader would likely pick up on were just as obvious to the American reader, especially considering the fact this latter allusion is to an author who is not particularly well known in English. At the same time, my goal throughout the process of translating was to avoid adding anything to the translation that is not explicitly in the

original. To this end, I chose to include footnotes for the explicit allusions, while I let the other two moments be.<sup>25</sup>

I'd like now to talk a bit more about some of the theoretical approaches I considered while translating. As it turns out, the experience of translating and the experience of talking about translation are two very different things. Nevertheless, I found it useful to consider the work of certain translation theorists during my translation process. One useful methodology for discussing translation in academic circles is to use the framework setup by Lawrence Venuti in his well-known book *The Translator's Invisibility*. In this system, a translation is either "foreignizing" or "domesticating" (20). Basically, a translator must choose between making a translation feel native in their own language, or making it feel like something from another language. At the risk of oversimplifying a nuanced argument, a translation that is made to feel completely natural for its reader is a domesticating translation, while one that leaves some of the unnatural structures and unfamiliar linguistic occurrences in the text is foreignizing. The difference between these two types of translation is clearly much more complicated than this, but, as I'll explain in a moment, my approach doesn't need to worry too much about the distinction. Venuti is known for being vocal proponent of the foreignizing method of translation. For him, a translator must "do right abroad... [by doing] wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience" (16). He

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<sup>25</sup> The first moment I erroneously believed to be an allusion was when the narrator spends the night in the bathtub. I couldn't help but think of *La Salle de bain* by Jean-Phillippe Toussaint, another *Minuit* author. Guillot told me while she wasn't directly making reference to this novel, she likes to think it was in the back her mind because she loves Toussaint. The other potential allusion occurs when the narrator describes the wallpaper behind the picture frame as yellowed. Given the fact the narrator essentially descends into madness based on something hanging on the wall, I wondered if this might be an allusion to *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In the end, it wasn't, but it's nice to appreciate this moment of cross-cultural agreement about yellow (and yellowed) wallpaper being terrible.



continues this line of reasoning to its extreme, concluding in essence that domesticating translation is akin to imperialism. As with many arguments taken to the extreme, this one doesn't always hold up under close examination. Translation, when done well, shares cultural phenomena in a unique and special way that basically nothing else can. In fact, it's hard to imagine another artform that can do all that translation does.

It's my contention that in order for a translation to be successful, it needs to do at least some form of domesticating. In order to understand another culture, one needs to understand what they're being told about that culture. When we teach ancient history, we don't do it in Latin and Greek. To be fair, it's useful to let students experience what these languages looked like and how they functioned, but ultimately, we explain these ancient cultures in modern English. If you want someone to understand something as thoroughly as possible, you ought to explain it to them in the language (and register) they understand best. It's worth pointing out as well, making sure someone fully and completely understands another culture can only be done in their own dialect and is essentially the only reliable way to prevent the exact type of cultural violence Venuti writes about. As Bellos puts it, "translation is the *opposite* of empire" (205). To this end, if we hope to share culture via translation, some level of domestication will be necessary to do so effectively.

While it's extremely important to acknowledge the potential for cultural appropriation and violence during translation, I reject the premise that domestication is inherently problematic. In fact, I think a successful translation needs to walk the line between foreignizing and domesticating. I'm particularly convinced by Mark Polizzotti's

argument on the matter in his book *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*.

He argues:

My goal, then, is to offer readers the best likeness of the work that I can, retaining the quirks and personality of the original, but also making sure my version affords literary enjoyment *in English*—even if that involves a certain creative license.

This does not mean trampling heedlessly over the foreign author’s work, imposing my own preferences or shoehorning it into my culture’s values. At the same time, it also doesn’t mean bending and twisting the translation to fit the latest political fashions, or rigidly following a given theoretical approach. What it does mean is being sufficiently attuned to each nuance to divine where the author was going and knowing when to follow closely and when to deviate a bit in order to arrive at the same destination. (63)

For me, this is the only approach to translation that makes sense. In the debate of foreignization and domestication, one *must* take some from column A and some from column B. As long as the translator is conscious of cultural significance of the decisions they are making, any worry of appropriation or violence need not take priority over creating an enjoyable version of the work they hold so dear.

As I said, translating and talking about translation are quite different. So, to be sure my theoretical approach is sound, I’d like to put the theory into practice. A classic example of when foreignizing versus domesticating is relevant is with honorifics and titles. This novel is no exception. In fact, these titles play a central role in the storyline and themes of the work. I’m referring specifically to the French words *madame* and *mademoiselle*. There is an entire cultural phenomenon surrounding these two words.

They are roughly equivalent to *Mrs.* and *Miss* in English, with the main difference being they can be used to address someone directly. In other words, it sounds totally normal to say *Bonjour, Madame* in French. Meanwhile, in English, it's clear to any native speaker that *Hello, Mrs.* sounds funny.<sup>26</sup> Although the French government eliminated the title *mademoiselle* from official documents in 2012, it's still widely used in day-to-day life. As I ultimately chose to explain as a footnote in my translation, for a woman in France it can be somewhat of a traumatic experience to be called *madame* for the first time, seeing as this indicates that whoever is speaking perceives her as an older woman. This is exactly what happens in the novel. The narrator uses the fact that everyone is calling her *madame* recently as an example of how she's been feeling the effects of her forties. At the end of the book, there's the wonderful moment when the police officer calls the narrator *mademoiselle*, implying that her journey of self-discovery and transformation was, at least in some way, successful. This only works if the *madame/mademoiselle* dichotomy is well established.

Dealing with this character arc involving these very specific, culturally charged words in translation was a seriously interesting problem. For a while, I considered using the rough equivalents of *ma'am* and *miss*, but I ultimately decided they weren't exactly the same thing. This is actually one of those cases where I think changing *madame* and *mademoiselle* into anything in English would be a case of over-domesticating. There are

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<sup>26</sup> I remember from my days in middle school and high school when teachers would often chastise students for just calling them *Miss* or *Mr.* (e.g., *Miss, can I go to the bathroom?*). The teachers would usually respond with a passive aggressive comment such as *Miss what? Please use my full name.* It's only now that I'm realizing most of the students who would get in trouble for using only *Miss* to address the teacher were native Spanish speakers who were almost certainly calquing the honorific *Señora* from their native language in an attempt to be respectful to the teacher. I'm left to wonder if there's since been better training for teachers to make them aware that non-native speakers of English using the title *Miss* or *Mr.* is most likely not an indicator of disrespect, but the contrary.

several reasons for this. The primary reason is because I don't believe there's an exact equivalent. While the pair *ma'am* and *miss* is close, I think the exact meaning of the words differs by region and generation, particularly with *ma'am*.<sup>27</sup> What's more, no matter what pair of words one chooses, they won't carry all the same connotations as the originals. And even more importantly, they won't have exactly the same relationship to each other that *madame* and *mademoiselle* have. There's also something to be said about the audience I'm translating for. It's hard to imagine someone who has chosen to read a novel in translation from the French who will be completely unaware of the meanings of *madame* and *mademoiselle*. In fact, I'd wager even people completely unfamiliar with French language and culture have come across these terms. Given the fact they show up sometimes in English (not to mention the existence of cognates), I can't see any convincing argument for changing them that doesn't lean toward over-domesticating.

There are, on the other hand, several instances of what can only be referred to as domestication in my translation. In each case, I carefully weighed the pros and cons, following a process very similar to the process Polizzotti describes above. A notable example in which I chose to make a change is with the temperature of the furnace. In the striking line that ends the first chapter, the furnace in which Charlin is being cremated is described as "a 900-degree furnace" (17). Though not specified in the text, this is of course 900 degrees Celsius. Here, I'm left with an interesting problem. If I leave out the units, it could be ambiguous for my audience, the American reader. Personally, I want to

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<sup>27</sup> My first instinct with *ma'am* is that it's an older word and a southern word. In the end, I decided against it in part because I've been told two different times in my life that the title *ma'am* is not polite (once by a third party and once by the person I called *ma'am*). When I tell people these stories, they're usually surprised since for most people, *ma'am* is a perfectly respectful title. The fact this has happened to me twice in two different settings means there's at least some grain of uncertainty about the respectfulness of the word *ma'am*, something I don't believe exists with the word *madame* in French.

avoid this ambiguity. The way I see it, there are two choices: I can either clarify that we're using the Celsius system, or convert it to Fahrenheit, the system my reader is familiar with. In other words, it would look something like, "in a 900-degree-celsius furnace" or "in a 1600-degree furnace." For me, the line works in French because of its rhythm; that is, it's shocking due to the way it sounds. With this in mind, it's my contention that the former translation simply doesn't work. It doesn't preserve the force of the original line. This is why I went with the latter.<sup>28</sup> As far as the foreignization and domestication goes, one could argue that the temperature ought to be kept in Celsius. While I acknowledge this of viewpoint, I think the pros outweigh the cons on this one. As discussed above, the main reason for avoiding domestication is to avoid cultural appropriation or violence. In this case, it's clear that no one's culture is negatively affected by changing the units of temperature. I can't fathom a way in which my use of Fahrenheit in this specific instance is going to hurt anyone directly, or even indirectly.

What I can fathom, on the other hand, is the confusion the metric system might cause an American reader. Most Americans don't have any intrinsic understanding of the Celsius system. Is 25°C hot or cold? Unless you've spent significant time outside of the US, you'd probably have no way of knowing without Google or a calculator.<sup>29</sup> If I tell an American it's 65°F outside, they immediately know it's a perfect day. It's these types of natural associations that I think are so important here. For things like measurements, the

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<sup>28</sup> It's important to note that while 900°C is technically 1652°F, I used 1600°F because using anything other than a sonorous number would, as I've shown, defeat the purpose of the passage by failing to have the same force. What's more, crematorium furnaces don't actually burn at exactly 900°C, but the author used this temperature because it sounds better. In other words, I'm doing exactly what the author is doing by using 1600°.

<sup>29</sup> Even spending time outside the US might not be enough; I once met a guy who lived in France for 16 years and still had no frame of reference for temperatures in Celsius. He told me he just never figured it out.

risk for domestication causing violence is so low that it's easily outweighed by the importance of readability. I want the American reader to have the same gut reaction of understanding that the French reader would've had in the original. If not, is the translation really doing the same thing as the original?<sup>30</sup> Responsible domestication for the sake of readability should never be feared.

I want to take a moment to note I don't think all units should be converted. As one reads my translation, they will notice both the imperial measurement system and the metric system are present. This is because in order to translate responsibly, this type of question must be handled on a case-by-case basis. Some notable examples of when I thought it was appropriate to keep the metric system include the thickness of the rope and the dimensions of the puzzle. For the rope, it's simply a question of this being the standard for how ropes are measured everywhere in the world; even in the United States, this type of rope gauge is measured in millimeters (sort of like how we use liters for soft drinks despite the fact liters are a metric measurement). As for the puzzle, it's mentioned that the size is advertised on the box; since this is a French puzzle in France, the dimensions would be listed in centimeters, so it wouldn't make sense to change them. If there's a good reason for something to stay in the metric system, it's my opinion that it's the translator's responsibility not to change it.

For nearly every other example, I was able to justify a bit a domesticating in order to create a more polished final product. A notable example of this is when the narrator

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<sup>30</sup> While I could potentially be swayed by the argument that the 900-degree furnace should be kept in degrees Celsius because it's an extremely hot temperature which no one really has a frame of reference for anyway, I ultimately decided to put it into Fahrenheit because it works both ways. What I mean by this is that "a 1600-degree furnace" is hot enough to cremate a body in either system, since from what I can find online, a furnace needs to be at least 1400°F for cremation. So, in other words, "a 900-degree furnace" won't do the trick if the reader understands this to mean 900°F. However, the reader who assumes the furnace is 1600°C in my translation is still in the realm of possibility, although burning admittedly a bit hot.

describes their trip to the beach and how the air was purer “with each mile” (70). Obviously, I could have kept this as kilometers, but not unlike with temperatures, Americans simply don’t tend to have a frame of reference for metric lengths. Similarly, I chose to say the apartment the main characters live in is on the sixth floor, despite the fact in the original they live on “the fifth floor” (28). This is, of course, because what the French call the fifth floor is what we call the sixth floor. So, in order to make sure the reader has the right idea of what this top-floor-Parisian apartment is like, I want them to effortlessly understand how high up it is. With these types of changes, I think keeping the reader in the experience of the moment is far more important than any potential risk that domestication poses.

### **Dealing with “Mistakes”**

The last major point I’d like to address is what I’ve chosen to call “mistakes.” What I mean by this is the moments in the original that have something strange going on with them. To be clear, I don’t really believe “mistakes” is exactly the right word for these moments, hence the quotation marks. Nevertheless, these moments need to be addressed in some way or another.

I think it’s easiest to explain what I mean with an example. One of the more interesting “mistakes” in the text occurs during the description of tying the noose. The author makes a nice little pun during this part by explaining that the coils of the noose are called “tours morts” (“dead turns”). Unfortunately, in English we call these “round turns,” so the pun is impossible. This also explains why I used a the footnote in the translation. As far as I can tell though, this part of a knot is not actually called a “round

turn,” because this only refers to the rope passing around something other than itself. In reality, it’s actually called a “hitch” (“clé” in French) when the rope passes around itself. So, is this a mistake? Or did the author just want the opportunity to use the clever “dead turn” wordplay? I can’t say. But unfortunately, as the translator, I have to say. When something is incorrect in the original, a translator must make the choice to either correct it or leave it be. Both run risks. First off, there can definitely be problems with correcting such a “mistake.” After all, maybe it’s in the original for a reason (like the wordplay above, or it’s not hard to imagine a character saying something wrong to demonstrate their ignorance to the reader). Also, little mistakes like this can be part of the charm of the book. In this case, it would obviously be detrimental to remove them. On the other side of the coin, leaving one of these “mistakes” in the translation could seriously affect its readability. It might confuse the reader, or, worse, it could turn them away from the book. Also, at the risk of sounding vain, leaving in a mistake might cause the reader to think the translator doesn’t know it’s wrong or doesn’t understand what’s going on. Clearly, these little moments are difficult but important and ought to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

There’s no doubt that the most interesting instance of one of these “mistakes” in the text is the poem read at the funeral. In the original, it’s said that the poem “Le Voilier” by William Blake is read at Charlin’s funeral. If you research this poem online, there’s little argument among French people about its origin. They tend to agree it’s by William Blake and was translated anonymously (although there is a small camp who ardently insists it was actually written by Victor Hugo while others says Blake did indeed write it and it was Hugo who translated it). The real problem arises when you look for the



poem in English: basically nobody believes William Blake wrote it. As the footnote in the translation explains, the poem has been attributed to many people, but was most likely actually written by Luther F. Beecher. So what does one do in this type of situation? If I simply put “Le Voilier” by William Blake, an English reader with no knowledge of French may have significant trouble figuring out what the original poem is. One could argue that it’s not even important, since most readers aren’t going to stop and look up the poem. In context, it’s understood that it’s one of those sad funeral poems, which might be enough.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, there is no poem called “Le Voilier” by William Blake, despite what most French people seem to believe. I once again found myself with the question of addressing the “mistake” or leaving it be. In this instance, I ultimately decided to keep it in, but add a footnote summarizing the rabbit hole one goes down when trying to figure out what this poem is. There’s something really cool and unique happening between French and English here and as the translator, I wanted to share that with the reader.

All of this though, is, in a way, completely irrelevant. In the end, my most basic and fundamental goal with this project is to allow my friends and family (as well as any other non-French speakers) to have the same wonderful experience I got to have when reading the original. That said, I think it’s important to be clear. My goal was to recreate the experience of reading *C’est moi*, but not necessarily to try to recreate the novel itself. To understand this important distinction, it’s useful to consider Karen Emmerich’s book *Literary Translation and the Making of Originals*. In this convincing work, Emmerich puts forth the argument that “translations are not mere derivative works beholden to (yet

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<sup>31</sup> I actually considered briefly substituting it with one of the classic English funeral poems, such as “Do not go gentle into that good night” by Dylan Thomas. After due consideration, I decided that would be a clear instance of unnecessary domesticating.

always failing to adequately represent) a single, stable ‘original.’ They are, instead, textual iterations of a work in another language” (26). I’m particularly swayed by this idea. This also offers an interesting perspective on the “mistakes” in the original. If the translator is creating a new *edition* of the work, as Emmerich argues, they reserve the right to handle the problems of “mistakes” as they see fit. As it happens, these types of “mistakes” in originals are actually part of what causes those originals to be unstable.

When writing, I try to think about how the novel made me feel as I was reading it. My hope is to convey this feeling to the reader. As Bellos might put it, I want above all else to translate the force of the novel. But at the same time, as Emmerich argues, I’m making my own edition of this novel. After all, I’m not simply rewriting *C’est moi*. If I were, I wouldn’t have had to worry about the whole *It’s Me/That’s Me/It Was Me* dilemma. I’d tend to agree with Emmerich that “translation does not transfer content but rather puts forward an embodied interpretation of a literary work” (196). Ultimately, what I’m doing is interpreting *C’est moi* into something for my American audience to experience. In the end, *It Was Me* is a stand-alone work that I hope will be judged on its own merits.

All of this is not to say that I’m not deeply thankful to Marion Guillot. First of all, it was her incredible story-telling skills that captivated me and inspired me to want to bring her story to a wider audience. More importantly though, her guidance was invaluable. This project wouldn’t have been possible without her willingness to answer my questions, her enthusiasm and her endless support. I truly hope my edition of her

masterpiece can shine at least partially as bright as the original. I'd also like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Jordan Stump. I sincerely couldn't have asked for a more helpful (or more qualified, for that matter) person to guide on this journey. As I know he'd be happy to hear, I'll always say I've learned more about French grammar through studying translation than in any grammar class. I owe special thanks to Hailey Dorner as well. Her undying patience as she helped me edit this translation (especially in the grueling process of reading and comparing the translation and the original, line by line) helped me take this project from something I felt was good enough to something I'm truly proud of. Lastly, I'd like to thank my mom. I'm certain there's no way I could've overcome the challenge of translating an entire novel without the love of reading that she instilled in me through reading me *The Black Stallion* books every night when I was a kid. I love you, mom. There are definitely other people who deserve thanks as well; if I didn't mention you specifically, know that I truly am grateful. Finally, to my readers: thank you for your time, and I really do hope you enjoyed it.

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