



A MEMOIR OF CHILDHOOD

La Petite

Michèle Halberstadt

Translated by Linda Coverdale

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a memoir

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Translated from the French
by Linda Coverdale



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To Charlotte, my daughter

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A little girl in tears
In a city in the rain ...

—CLAUDE NOUGARO

I'm twelve years old, and this evening, I'll be dead.

This morning I emptied the bottles of sleeping pills and all the other medicines Mama stores on the top shelf of the cabinet in the bathroom to keep them out of reach. It took me five big glasses of water to swallow everything. Next, I ate some bread and butter, drank more orange juice, and set out for school.

I said nothing to anyone. I am neither depressed nor overexcited. I feel serene, the way one is when doing what one really wants to do. And what I want to do is disappear.

It's five minutes past nine. I'm in study hall. My classes don't start until ten, but I decided to leave the house as early as possible. I don't know when it will happen. Probably before midday. Will I fall off my chair, or simply go to sleep? I don't feel tired. By tomorrow everyone will have forgotten that I spent my last study hall on the bench in the fourth row on the left, two tables from the window.

I see latecomers crossing the school grounds at a run, even though it's absolutely forbidden to walk on the grass. I never dared. Too late now.

The students around me are diligently doing their homework. I, too, am concentrating on the paper in front of me. But I'm not working. I am writing.

I ought to have thrown out all my notebooks. If someone discovers them, will I ever be in trouble! No, that's silly of me. I won't be here anymore. Nothing more will happen to me. As the nurse says at the end of a blood draw, when she loosens the tourniquet: it will soon be over.

I got caught in the middle of science class. I'd dozed off, facedown in the crook of my arm. Even though I'd carefully stacked some books in front of me, that old bag Gauthier finally noticed that I'd fallen asleep.

Amazingly, her voice was calm, almost gentle, when she told the girl next to me to escort me to the infirmary.

Poor Caroline, blushing with embarrassment, was scandalized.

"You're crazy! She could have stuck you with detention for the whole afternoon!"

After glancing at me, she lightens up a little.

"Actually, the way you look, no one would think of yelling at you. Your face is so white!"

My being sent to the infirmary is really annoying. It's only ten past eleven. I certainly don't want anyone calling home; Maman would come get me and nag me with questions. Which isn't at all what I'd planned. What I want is for people to let me sleep—and die in peace.

Luckily, on Wednesdays there's only one nurse on duty, and after Caroline knocks and opens the frosted-glass door, we see Mlle. Jamin from the back, crouching as she wipes a coarse floor cloth over the other tiles, where a sixth-grader has just thrown up her breakfast.

Still with her back to us, Mlle. Jamin asks me about my symptoms. I invent a sleepless night for myself, a migraine, I'm simply feeling dizzy, that's all. No, I don't think my parents are home this morning. Yes, when I get home, if I don't feel better, I will call the doctor.

Believing me, because she has no reason not to, she gives me a scratchy rectangular pillow, an itchy brown blanket, a few drops of soothing mint extract on a sugar cube in a little spoon, and decides that it's more urgent to reach the parents of the little six-grade girl than to take care of me.

Thank you, mademoiselle: forget me, that's all I ask.

Back to sleep I go.

The door of the infirmary swings open on my mother's square glasses and beige silk dress, and I can tell from her strained look that Maman is still furious with me. After our argument yesterday, she's not about to cut me any slack. That shrillness in her voice gives her away, and the stiff way she moves. She's here, but distant; efficient, but noticeably curt with me.

She takes my arm brusquely. No doubt she thinks she's on top of the situation. Ordinarily, I detest these black days when she won't look me in the eye, when my questions meet only silence, when my pitiful peace offerings leave her cold. Today, though, I couldn't call her less. Oh, if she only knew! But, that's precisely it: she mustn't.

I let her drag me to the car. I don't even switch on the radio right away as I usually do, but she appears not to notice. Too busy working her way through the traffic jam.

My legs are numb and my mind is woozy. Between the sleeping pills and my determination not to nod off, I feel like the classic alcoholic in the movies who swears he's fine right after he's downed one drink too many.

I have to carry this off. And hang on for another few hours. My worst fear is that they'll pump my stomach and the next day say, "She lost her head for a moment but that's over now, let's not discuss it anymore," when that's all everyone will think about from then on.

I did not send out a cry for help, I raised no alarm, sent up no flares. I don't want people to save me and then ask themselves why I did it. It's been too late for that for a long time now.

Fortunately, Maman doesn't seem worried. She's still too angry with me. She must think that feeling faint is the least you can do after getting on your mother's nerves so much. Maybe she even sees it as the sign of a guilty conscience. Well, let her.

I open the car window, but the May breeze is too mild to give me the bracing shock I'd hoped for. It's only a short ride home from school, but I'm already drowsy. Getting out of the car, I can hardly feel my legs. My book bag is way too heavy. Feeling Maman's eyes on me, I try to walk to the front door of our building as normally as possible.

Even before putting down her purse, the first thing she does when we get home is call the doctor who's been taking care of us for so long that Maman will risk disturbing him at lunchtime. I hear her telephoning him out in the hall. Please let her get a busy signal, let the phone be off the hook so he can eat undisturbed! No, too bad, she's talking. Not for long. She hangs up, then joins me in my room, nervous and irritated. She'd just missed him, and had spoken with his wife. He's out on an emergency call. He won't get here for another three hours. Maman draws the window curtains and I stretch out, grateful for the dim light. For once, heaven is on my side.

It's three in the afternoon. I couldn't swallow a thing at lunch. I told my mother I felt sick to my stomach. I'm in bed, in my pajamas. I mustn't fall asleep. I try to read, to concentra

on the words as hard as I can. The cleaning lady brings me a glass of water. When Mama and I were yelling yesterday, Monique had looked quite uncomfortable. She places a hesitant hand on my forehead, which isn't hot at all—in fact, I feel colder and colder. She asks me how I'm doing and suddenly I'm deeply moved by her concern. I take that warm hand and lay it against my cheek, saying softly, "Don't worry, I've arranged everything, it won't happen again."

Two minutes later, my mother bursts into my room and shakes me roughly.

"What did you tell Monique? What have you done this time?"

It's her "this time" that shuts my mouth tight.

I no longer try to look her in the eyes. I close mine and wait for her to leave.

Today feels as if it will never end. To wake up, I splash a little water on my face. I long dreadfully to sleep. I turn on the radio, loud. In a fake, jolly voice, an announcer translating the lyrics to a Beatles song. We don't love them for their *words*, you jerk!

I must have drifted off because I'm startled by the touch of Dr. Assan's cold hands on my temples. I open my eyes to his salt-and-pepper eyebrows, his impassive gaze. He applies his stethoscope, listens to my heart, takes my pulse and says, holding my wrists, "You can talk to me, you know. I'm a doctor."

I glance at his watch. Twenty past four. I swallowed everything at eight o'clock, so that's what I should do it.

Then, doing my best, tripping over words I can barely pronounce now, I tell him about the medicine cabinet, the empty boxes thrown away as I walked to school, the big glasses of water.

He looks at his watch too, stands up abruptly, packs his things. He has the inscrutable face of someone who must swiftly make a difficult decision. Before leaving the room, he looks at me sadly, and I measure the weight I have just placed on his shoulders.

I'd like to tell him I'm so sorry to saddle him with this, when he's had nothing to do with it. But my energy's all gone. My tongue is even more sluggish than my brain. My jaws feel encased in plaster; my mouth won't open anymore. By the time I've sized up my situation, the doctor has left.

So I give up. I slide into a night without dreams. My body is now just a lump of cotton wool. I feel myself falling into a void that sucks me in without a sound.

There, I've done it. Everything will return to its proper place.

Them here. Me over there.

I hear the alarm clock on the night table.

I tell myself that it's ticking too loudly, louder than my heart that has almost stopped beating.

The second hand of the alarm clock.

That's the last thing I remember.

Part One

Opaque black stockings, with a seam that ran from the heel all the way up the back of the leg, noticed them right away when my mother came into my room. I was quite feverish, with a bad case of the flu. I'd been flat on my back in bed for five days. I watched her legs fascinated. My mother always dressed discreetly, with midcalf-length skirts and gray tights. Those stockings gave her an unfamiliar and sophisticated allure.

Instead of coming to sit on the edge of my bed, she paced back and forth, and the room swayed to the rhythm of her dark skirt.

Only then did I notice, in the buttonhole of her navy blue blouse, a tiny bit of black crepe she was fiddling with nervously.

"Do you know what this means?" she asked.

She was using the voice from her bad days: a touch dry, short of breath, the voice for when she's trying to get a grip on herself, on her nerves, her fatigue.

That morning, it was her grief she was trying to keep under control.

I felt my heart shrink in my chest and my throat tighten in anguish.

She was intensely agitated.

I pulled the covers up to my chin before answering, as briefly as possible: "Does it mean someone has just died?"

She became still, finally, but would not meet my eyes.

"Yes, someone in the family."

I sensed that she was waiting for me to guess, to understand, but my mind was muddled by fear.

We had some old aunts in Israel ... it was probably one of them ... No, that wouldn't put her in this state ... Ah, I had it: it must be the old lady who took care of her when she was twenty, and whom she loved like a grandm—

"It's your grandfather."

She paused, took a deep breath and, released from the burden of her news, blurted everything out.

"He came home from a trip on Monday, you know that. But he didn't feel well and he died that night. We buried him yesterday afternoon, you were asleep, you didn't ask me where he was. It's very young to die, sixty-three; you know how I adored him, so think of him, he loved you very much. The doctor's coming soon; you'd best take your temperature. You see better this morning, so should I bring you breakfast or do you want to get up?"

I took the rectal thermometer, slipped it under the sheet, and turned toward the wall.

"I'll leave you now; there are so many things to sort out and problems to deal with, you can imagine. I'll pop in later."

The door closed quietly.

Even lying down, I could feel my legs trembling. The noise from the street was muffled now, like the notes of a piano when the strings are covered with a velvet rug to avoid disturbing the neighbors. My heart, pounding so wildly a minute ago, had stopped short and

seemed to beat only in fits and starts.

I sat up suddenly. Perhaps that position would help my brain cope with the unspeakable. But nothing did.

My mind was reeling, stymied by a single thought, like a worn needle stuck in a record groove ...

Four whole days ago.

Ninety-six hours of oblivion, during which I read, ate, and slept as usual when the best part of my life had vanished forever.

I don't know what hurt more: the grief, or not even knowing he'd died. Delayed-action mourning is more crushing. It has lost all cadence, all rhythm, and is experienced outside the cycle of days and nights, of people who cry and people who console.

Everything had been said, wailed, wept without me.

My sorrow was outside of time, and thus infinite.

The black stockings had dealt a death blow to my childhood.

The following Monday, back in school, I found the news had preceded me. I was welcomed with suspect kindness and consideration. I had few friends; I'd gotten used to that. As the smallest as well as the youngest girl, I understood why no one wanted to be seen with the class "baby." Ever since I was eight, I'd been a year ahead of my age group in school, but that meant my life felt as if it were a year behind those of my classmates and their jokes, secret preoccupations. Their sudden solicitude, a mixture of pity and condescension, was exasperating.

"So, are you feeling better? Poor thing, you must be sad! Were you very fond of your grandpa?"

Fists clenched in the pockets of my gray school smock, I made an effort not to be disagreeable, clenching my teeth to keep from saying something sarcastic.

All the girls saw my silence as proof of my sorrow.

"Look, you see, she's really sad!" they murmured, with sidelong glances at me between bites of their afternoon snacks.

I had no use for their brand-new interest in me. It had come too late. Between them and me, between their indifference and my shyness, their united front and my fear of never winning them over, a gulf had opened like a wound that hurts only when touched.

What separated us this time was a question of vocabulary, for which there was no answer.

What words could reveal that the problem was not the death of a grandfather, but a world shaken on its axis, a sky scraped raw, a pure note turned strident, abandonment beyond a measure?

How to explain that it hurt so much?

And whose business was it anyway?

He gave me terrible nicknames, which made me angry, and my anger made him laugh. His laughter was big, strong, enveloping, like his hands when they helped me untie the knots of the packages that were always waiting for me when I visited him.

In his bedroom was a low chest with five drawers, and the bottom one was reserved for me. I could arrive unexpectedly, yet find a surprise hidden there every time. A gift, a handkerchief, a lollipop, it could be anything.

That was a promise he'd made me and he never once broke it. That permanently restocked drawer represented the infallible proof of his love for me. He did not treat me like a granddaughter, like a little girl. He considered me a person with whom to share and exchange things to read, points of view, essential discoveries.

For example, when I was six, and the two of us were having lunch in his kitchen, he placed before me a white plate bearing a regal *chèvre cendré*. He knew that I hated cheese in general and this kind in particular, because to me goat cheese tasted like soap. He was immensely fond of *chèvre cendré*, however, so it was impossible that his granddaughter should not share this predilection. He uncorked a bottle of Bordeaux, placed a bit of *chèvre* on a small piece of warm toast lightly spread with salted butter, and explained to me precisely how the flavor of the cheese would be accentuated by the wine's acidity. His blue-footed wineglass clinked mine to celebrate my first tasting as a connoisseur, in the certainty that from then on, just as we shared a straight nose, drooping eyelids, and the inveterate habit of constantly humming, his favorite cheese would also be mine.

He was facetious, imperious. He understood everything and I could tell him frightening secrets he would never have thought to make fun of. He was not judgmental, never reproving, and aside from lapses in good manners, about which he was intransigent, he was quick to forgive. Mockery was his usual tack, repartee his besetting sin, generosity his Achilles' heel. His humor made the world cozier, his tenderness cushioned my days. Nothing could ever happen to me as long as he was there, and I had never envisaged a life without him as its center.

He called me his "sunshine," but it was mine he took away with him.

I was what is called a good child. I continued to be one.

No one noticed that I was turning inward, withdrawing inside myself.

I was calm. I became silent.

I had been lonely. Now I was alone.

In the weeks that followed the news of his death, no one mentioned my grandfather. At least not in front of me.

Often, when I was in the kitchen to set the table or else reading off by myself, I would hear my mother and sister, behind the closed double doors of the living room, recalling old memories and sometimes breaking down, stifling their sobs. And I would have given anything to laugh and cry with them. But I would have swallowed my tongue rather than say that.

It would never have occurred to me to cross the hall, open the double doors, and tell them the stories that were feeding my grief.

“You don’t sit down at a table where you haven’t been invited,” my grandfather would have said with a nod of approval.

In my presence, my family bore up under their loss. My sister distracted my father with her algebra problems, while my mother alternated between cooking and housework with robotic efficiency to keep her sorrow at bay. Everyone had the same mission: to spare “the little one” the painful burdens of the grown-ups.

They meant well, which is the excuse offered whenever a good intention goes awry.

The effect, on me, was radical.

Since I wasn’t worthy of weeping with them, they’d get nothing from me. Neither laughter nor tears. Not one secret shared. I would barely be there.

I became transparent. Present, but elsewhere. Polite but reserved. Pleasantly indifferent. I would reveal no more of myself.

I kept my distance, the way a prisoner digs a hole at the far end of the cell, scratching away a few millimeters every day: too little to be noticed but enough to keep spirits up.

I didn’t want to arouse any suspicions.

So I became nice.

Too nice.

In repeated doses, niceness can be suspect, close to simplemindedness. Since nothing ever disturbed my docility, I wound up giving the impression of being rather vacant.

Since the three members of my family were essentially somewhere else, in a bubble separate from mine, I thought of them as “the people across the way,” and little by little they allowed themselves to be fooled by what I let them see. By continually retreating within myself, I had bleached out all my colors. Wanting to be invisible, I was henceforth insipid.

The misapprehension was under way.

A few months later, Uncle Émile came to visit us. He was my grandfather's elder brother. They resembled each other physically, but the one was like a distorting mirror of the other, his negative copy, Cain to his Abel, his shadow face, his dark angel. Émile's burliness was vaguely threatening, and his geniality a façade to mask his cunning. Even his brand of humor veered into malice. Everything supple, ample, and generous in the younger man became brittle and stiff in his brother. And his booming laughter could be chilling.

But until that March morning when, freezing in our Sunday best, we waited in pounding rain for the Brussels–Paris train to enter the station, I had never realized how much I disliked him. For one simple reason: he'd had no place in my life, nor I in his. I suppose that during my childhood we'd sniffed around each other, backed off, and without acrimony left it at that, perfectly synchronized in our mutual indifference.

Unconsciously, I had registered everything, stashing it away in some drowsy compartment of my brain that came suddenly to life and disgorged its flood of bad impressions the moment those gleaming black patent-leather oxfords stepped down off the train, bearing an imposing form tightly cinched into a fawn-colored cashmere coat.

A porter materialized immediately to take charge of the leather-strapped beige canvas luggage to which Émile pointed with his kid-gloved fingertips before wrapping his arm around the damp shoulders of my mother's peacoat in a theatrical embrace.

"My poor dear, I'm here now, ready to devote all my time to you."

But he never noticed the distress in mother's little face, busy as he was inspecting all the passing women under forty, automatically taking inventory of their charms and flaws with the sharp eye of a professional who, even in his leisure moments, could not stop sizing up the situation: pretty legs ... flirtatious ... unhappy marriage ... nose job. More of a medical inspector than a sensualist, my uncle stared at those women with cold precision, and never blushed for them. Clutching his arm, my mother saw nothing, shaken by that face so like her father's, happy to be the main object of his visit, even if it had taken tragic circumstances for him to finally grant her his exclusive attention.

In French novels there are exotic and distant uncles from America possessing fortunes obscurely acquired and regularly exaggerated. In our family, the uncle came from Belgium and, thanks to him, we endowed that flat country with every marvel. Émile was the only one of us who had succeeded. He had built his fortune out of the stuff of legends: jewels.

He shone out over our family like an overlarge diamond, tacky and mysterious.

Of his past, I knew only that the war had surprised him far from his native Austria and that Belgium was where he'd managed to hide. Was he forced to change his name during the war or had that come later? Had he done it out of gratitude toward the country that had sheltered him, or to facilitate his integration there? In any case, he no longer shared anything more with my grandfather than a capital letter, having traded in the rest of the family name for a surname that sounded more Flemish than Walloon and not Viennese at all.

Anvers was where he had made his fortune and his reputation.

Various anecdotes all exalted this exemplary success, unique in the annals of our family. For Central European Jews who had not had time to emigrate far from the swastikas, it was already a miracle to have escaped death.

Émile was the only one who hadn't settled for mere survival.

People claimed he was immensely wealthy. Lowering their voices, they would say that when the biggest diamond merchants in the world got together for an informal precious stones market, they examined the jewels one dealer at a time following a hierarchy reflecting their status in the profession. My uncle was the ninth to select his stones, and to be ninth, to opine the adults with the knowing air of novices hoping to pass for experts, was incredible. Tongues wagged furiously over the famous women who were his clients and the liaisons he supposedly enjoyed with some of them. He had married for love a woman he kept in fearful submission, alternating between showering her with princely gifts and pitching fits of jealousy, when he wasn't having Homeric tantrums over the sums she spent on haute couture.

The ninth-biggest diamond merchant in the world was surely among the top three skinflints of the century. His stinginess was as legendary as his financial acumen.

He could have taken one of the finest suites at the Ritz by the year in Paris, a city he loved to visit. He preferred to stay in a place on the corner of our street and take his meals with us.

"It's because he has a sense of family," explained my mother, who spent the week before his arrival scrubbing our tiny apartment from stem to stern. There is spring cleaning, and there's getting ready for winter, but in our home, there was also the "Belgian clean sweep" when a visit from Émile prompted us to bring out our best clothes and china so as not to suffocate under the weight of our inferiority. And I hated him from the bottom of my heart for humiliating my mother that way.

This time, my uncle came neither for business nor to renew his wardrobe but solely for his niece, as he was now her closest relative.

He stayed four days and had long conferences with my parents from which my mother emerged with reddened eyes, her shoulders bowed with the weight of her gratitude.

He took her along when he went shopping, forced her to accompany him to the theater. And on the last day grandly announced that he was taking us all to lunch.

His favorite brasserie wasn't much to look at, but it served, he insisted authoritatively, the best leg of lamb in Europe. No need to consult the menu: lamb all around. My sister was allowed to wet her lips with bloodred nectar served in tulip glasses; when I was tactless enough to ask for some sparkling mineral water, he ordered a carafe of plain water for *petite*. My request was the only time I spoke during the meal, my mother's angry look having clearly informed me that I was decidedly lacking in manners.

Bent over my plate, avoiding their eyes, I stewed in my bitterness. My grandfather, now *he* wouldn't have said a thing. Besides, he hated restaurants, found them noisy. He claimed that one couldn't put all the senses into play at the same time and that to savor a dish required silence, even contemplation.

My uncle paid such considerations no mind. He was a talker at the table, trumpeting his observations with a loud familiarity, summoning the waiters, using the informal *tu* with the maître d', slipping into the kitchen after the cheese course to tip all the apprentices. But he

left my mother to pay for the taxi home.

He came up to our apartment to have a digestive liqueur and we all settled into the living room to kill some time before accompanying him back to the station for the evening train. Perched on a footstool with a book on my lap, I pretended to read but did not miss one bit of those adult conversations, which for once were taking place in my presence.

My uncle talked about a childhood memory, an argument with his brother about a brand new bike he'd damaged on purpose out of jealousy, since the bike was a reward for the younger boy's excellent grades, which were better than his brother's. I could sense the antagonism lurking in that story, the furious competition that all the older brother's fortunes had not managed to erase. And I listened in vain to that nasal voice for the right note of true family affection.

Deep in my hostile thoughts, I felt myself flush when I heard him say abruptly, "Now leave me alone with *la petite*."

Keeping my head down, I didn't dare look up from *The Black Stallion*. He took the book gently from my hands and sat down in front of me.

"You're terribly sad, aren't you?"

His voice was soft, no longer wheezy at all. He placed his hands on mine.

I gritted my teeth and prayed to the gods not to let me cry in front of him.

"I know how much you adored my brother, and he often talked about you. So I also came here to tell you this: you can count on me. I will never replace him for you, but I will do my best to be worthy of him. I will visit more often, we'll do things together. You'll tell me which books you like and we'll go pick out others you don't know. In the meantime, we'll write to each other."

He took me in his arms. I smelled the woody scent of his eau de cologne, and the autumnal perfume made me want to be won over. Yes, I asked nothing better than to believe in him, to love him. I put my arms around his neck and hugged him as hard as I could, touched by his unexpected kindness, like a caress from heaven. After all, the same blood in his veins had run in my grandfather's. He couldn't possibly hurt me.

The next day, carried away, emboldened, I decided to send him a card to thank him for talking with me. I often wrote to my grandfather. He used to tell me that he loved hearing from me, and he had carefully saved the note in which, instead of signing "Your granddaughter who adores you," I had written "Your adored granddaughter." He had phoned me as soon as he'd received it: "That's true, I do adore you, so you can write that!"

I took great care with my handwriting when I wrote to Émile to avoid even a single mistake, so that he would be proud of me, his brother's favorite, and would want to write me back.

I hoped for a letter, a phone call.

I waited. Expectantly. Particularly around special occasions, holidays, vacations, trips.

Six months later, he never even thought to wish me a happy ninth birthday.

It was around that time that I began to write. I filled whole notebooks with the blue ink of the South Seas. All this writing wasn't the sign of a precocious talent, but an overflow of unspoken words that were stifling me.

Since I was no longer speaking to anyone, I had invented a confidante with whom I conversed on familiar terms, a sweet creature I baptized Laure. I loved that name for its aura of infinite gentleness. Laure. *Laure* ... I whispered it like a soothing prayer.

Laure was who I would have liked to be. A slender elf, gentle and mischievous, a model for a desperately ordinary little girl.

Ever since my first year of school, I had faced this fact: I would never be pretty. I had none of those classic features described in novels. Neither the delicate nose, nor the prominent cheekbones, the high forehead, the rosebud mouth, the almond eyes, the silken tresses. My mostly straight nose had a bump that ruined its profile. My high-enough forehead only accentuated a wandering eye made more obvious by round glasses. My ears stuck out, my chin was too pointy, my teeth were uneven. I looked like what I was: a run-of-the-mill child.

Inside me, though, there was Laure. And Laure had a special grace, the grace that makes people look at you instead of just seeing you, and listen to you instead of merely hearing you. She had strength, enough to carry the weight of my dreams. And they were vast.

I wanted everything. To write. Sing. Invent. Compose. I had no desire for power, only a thirst to be someone—as well as the terror of not succeeding in that, plus the certainty that I would not survive such a failure. I was exalted by what I felt ready to accomplish but ashamed for even daring to imagine that one day, the world might come knocking at my door and sweep me up in its whirl.

A life that's worthwhile ... How does one deserve that?

All my notebooks to Laure were full of those incantations. For lack of a destiny, I had become a heroine of invincible beauty with legitimate ambitions. She gave me the armor in which I felt encouraged to go off to every battle. With her, I was fearless.

In the evening, the family apartment was divided in two, each side retrenched in its territory. My parents and sister gathered around the living room television. Behind my closed door, the radio was my spyglass pointed at the future, that inaccessible world of adulthood made palpable, concrete.

The radio was my lifeline, the instrument of my escape, my tutor, and I was its attentive pupil. A radio brings within reach of the imagination a world in black and white where you are free to invent colors, contours, reliefs, like a kaleidoscope turned endlessly before your eyes by an invisible hand. Since the radio speaks to no one in particular, it persuades you that it addresses you alone. It couldn't care less that you're too young, too ugly, and nothing special. It confides in you. It trusts you. It tells you everything it knows, right away.

I realized this one evening in November when I flung open the living room door and announced that President Kennedy had just been assassinated. My parents froze; my sister

raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“You’re sure you’ve got that right?”

I returned to my lair without deigning to reply, intoxicated at having been, for the first time, the one in the know, an adult among my peers. Since information was power, Lau would now have a profession: journalism.

She says her first memory is when I was brought home: she was three, and I was five days old. She had a pretty room with cream wallpaper and stuffed animals massed at the foot of her crib. It was nap time.

Because of a mix-up, my cradle had not yet been delivered. My mother set me down in the crib.

My sister says she remembers her rage.

A week later, she began nursery school, leaving behind this newborn who was taking over her bed, her mother, the whole place.

She says she remembers her misery.

She reigned over my childhood like a queen bee. She was the sun I admired from the shadows. She had presence, talent, and was always first in the class. Admired by everyone, she saw herself in the mirror of their love. I studied her secretly, the way one observes an unknown species, with curiosity but not jealousy, because you cannot want to be like something you don't understand. To me she was the most unfathomable of mysteries. I could not figure out how her brain worked, or her soul. I found her beautiful. She had about her strength that was too precise, too violent for our cramped apartment, our little lives, as if the stork had somehow delivered her to the wrong address. The deference shown to my sister by grown-ups only enhanced this vision of her as a treasure made ours through some miracle.

She was precocious, as if she'd been born having already attained the age of reason. Beneath her gleaming helmet of black hair, her brain gloried in her overwhelming intellect. When she spoke, adults made much of her opinions. By the time I'd put a few thoughts in order, I'd already lost the chance to get a word in edgewise.

I grew used to keeping quiet and listening to her. Used to contemplating the radiance of her striking loveliness. A strong profile, aquiline nose, firm chin, and a crisp bob hairstyle reinforced her self-confidence. She knew. She ruled the world. She was the Alice of a land where she was the unique and priceless wonder. My sister the prodigy.

She was the idol of my childhood. More than my mother or father, she was the one I would have liked to dazzle and astonish. Or simply surprise. I was like a puppy wanting to be petted but unable to decide whether to sit up and beg or pee all over the place.

I pestered her with questions. I followed her everywhere. The most clinging of little sisters. Her humblest subject.

Occasionally, I rebelled. But she was too powerful. She always found just the right word, the one that cuts home, wounds, knocks the wind out of you, leaving you disarmed and vanquished. She didn't need me. I needed her too much.

*Once upon a time there was a queen
Adored by a dwarf girl, pining unseen,
For how could a humble creature so small
Captivate the loveliest queen of them all?*

Yet to a knight who appeared one day,

The queen gave her royal heart away.

“Sir knight, on whom our queen doth dote,

Would you kindly tell her, so she may note,

That the dwarf girl, of most modest station,

Adores her with blindest admiration?

Tell her, I beg you, for I cannot

Make myself heard from my lowly spot.”

The queen and the dwarf girl. That’s how I saw us. How to win the love of the queen when you’re only the dwarf? I wore out my nerves over this. I worried so much I forgot to grow.

The queen knew how to be cruel. She often withheld the keys to words whose meaning she did not wish to explain to me. When I was eleven and we were off on a skiing vacation, I managed to snag a stool at the end of a table where she was having lunch with some kids her own age, after our mother had pleaded my case with her along the well-known lines of “She’s your sister, after all!”

The older kids were talking about astrology. My neighbor, a freckle-faced boy, was kind enough to ask me what my sign was. And when I murmured, blushing to be suddenly the center of attention, “I’m a Virgin,” the queen’s laughter drowned out everyone else’s, as I sank into disaster without a word from her. Humiliated by their hilarity, unable to understand what was so funny, I kept repeating, louder and louder, until I was screaming at that ski resort restaurant gone abruptly silent, “I’m a Virgin!”

The queen let me make a fool of myself without lifting a finger to rescue me. That evening she lost the unconditional devotion of her most faithful subject.

Since she was gifted at everything and I at not much, she became my tutor (for a slight increase in her allowance). She was not a good teacher. My inability to quickly grasp what she was hurriedly explaining to me exasperated her, and her impatience paralyzed my brain. My for my shame at not understanding was so overwhelming that it swept all thoughts from my head: I was petrified. Each lesson left me even more foolish, more dwarfed, before the queen, who would sail from the room with her chin in the air, abandoning me to my fate the way a wild animal discards its prey after ripping apart the carcass. Once again she had won, in addition to some extra pocket money, the assurance that she had no rival for her crown.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, am I still the best of all?”

“Yes,” admitted the girl left holding the mirror for her, crumpled in defeat.

From the sixth grade on, I found myself in the same lycée as my sister. I was not a good student. I did the bare minimum, just enough to avoid repeating a year, not enough to win the slightest honor. And honors, that's precisely what my sister collected, enough that her name had become a guarantee of quality that I was rapidly ruining. So the disappointed teachers who'd found me in their classes took their revenge on my report card.

"Not as good as her sister," was the blunt assessment of a French teacher who'd never actually had her in his class.

"Makes us miss her elder sibling," sniffed the math teacher.

"She'll have problems!" prophesied the history-geography teacher.

I had no talent for anything, except music.

"But those grades aren't enough to bring her average up," was the concluding comment from the principal.

On report card days, I was careful to miss the bus, dodging the half-inquisitive, half-triumphant "Well?" from the helmet of black hair, and I walked home, choosing the longer route, waiting for lights to turn green, even helping the blind people from a nearby institution negotiate the crosswalks.

On those days, I begged my grandfather's pardon, for just the thought of him made me blush with shame. I promised heaven I'd do better. The next day, though, after the first hour of class, all my good resolutions went out the window, and my concentration with them. I was bored, I daydreamed, I lost track of the lesson and never managed to pick it up again. As soon as I entered a classroom, my mind wandered off to play hooky.

Thanks to all my flights of fancy and scribbled notebooks to Laure, I was skilled at writing fairly effortless essays on those prescribed topics that are the lot of lycée students from the sixth grade on. But this rare scholastic pleasure vanished on the day when, to evoke the "autumn landscape" in an essay, I wrote, "The oaks that, bending in the winds, lean their heads together to whisper secrets in one another's ears."

Rather satisfied with my twenty lines, I waited impatiently for the results of my effort, hoping for a grade high enough to raise my class standing. Alas, the distribution of the papers in descending order of merit passed without my name being called. I was about to raise my hand, hoping I'd simply been forgotten, when the teacher forestalled me with a swift jerk of her chin.

"You will come see me after class."

The rest of which dragged on in slow motion, punctuated by the heartbeats I heard pounding in my temples.

I waited until all my classmates had gone before approaching the teacher's desk. She avoided my eyes while carefully stowing her papers away in her fake green crocodile briefcase.

The croc snapped shut with a dry click as she asked me brusquely, "So, you're fond of Victor Hugo?"

She finally looked up and leaned in close to my pale face.

“I hate cheaters. Victor Hugo described the ‘whispering trees’ much better than you did. So do me a favor and leave his idea to him.”

She stood up with a stamp of her platform shoes.

“I will not report you. I gave you a zero. Next time do your own thinking, instead of trying to impress your teachers.”

With that, she slipped on her beige raincoat with a plaid lining and left me alone, crushed.

I’d never read a single line of Victor Hugo.

But bad students are not given the benefit of the doubt.

I was too much of a dunce in her eyes to have come up on my own with an idea so banal that a great poet had already immortalized it, unbeknownst to me.

In my eyes, a gift for literature—and music as well—was the most noble talent anyone could possess. I believed I had a feeling for *le mot juste*, just as I had a good ear. That morning, I understood that I’d greatly overestimated myself.

I was unworthy, inferior, without distinction. True, I played Chopin from memory and blackened entire notebooks with Laure’s adventures, but what I thought were my good ideas were only the pallid recycling of the works of great authors.

Until that moment, I’d thought I was a poor pupil because I didn’t pay enough attention. For the first time, I had to accept the general opinion: it wasn’t my ability to concentrate that was limited but my comprehension itself.

Luckily, Grandfather was no longer there to witness the end of my ambitions, the collapse of my self-respect, the nightmarish end of my literary dreams.

Grandfather had been mistaken.

To appease my fury, I spent the whole of the following recreation period composing a “Ode to the Teaching Establishment,” which I intended to slide anonymously under the door of the teachers’ lounge, but the fear of being expelled sent this short text to swell the pile of handwritten pages known only to Laure.

You hate me,

Toads, vipers,

But you will not silence me.

I know that you envy me

The life flowing in my veins.

For I, I intend to live,

And that pains you no end.

It was all mere bravado. Live, me? Dying of boredom in school, then making myself as small as could be, keeping my thoughts to myself at home—that wasn’t living. More like wasting away.

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