



ANNE BEREST

Sagan

Paris 1954

The year a young girl became a literary legend.

Sagan, Paris 1954

Anne Berest

Translated from the French by Heather Lloyd



To my parents
To Martine Saada

Without Sagan, life would be deadly boring.
Bernard Frank

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1 January 1954

I see a man of sixty-five leaving the New Year's Eve party that has been organised in his honour, like someone walking out of their bedroom leaving the bed unmade. In any case, wherever he is going, the party's over. Once, he made the heart of Paris beat faster, but today there is no one left for him to dance with: those he can truly converse with are dead – or have not yet been born.

I imagine a car in Rue de Montpensier dropping him off in the half-light of a day that is still hovering between the old year and the new. A young couple are just passing the impressive entrance to his home, whispering to each other.

The man watches the two figures as they scuttle through the cold of that early morning. He notices the way they pull each other along by the arm, like two crabs heading in the direction of the Seine. The young boy is not bad-looking, with his Joan of Arc haircut – like a page boy who has been lifted straight out of an illuminated manuscript.

It seems to me that these two characters, shining through the dawn, pass Cocteau without recognising him. I can hear the two teenagers break into ripples of laughter as they run off towards the Palais-Royal.

If you look more closely and if you listen to their high-pitched peals of mirth, you realise that they are both girls. One is called Françoise and the other Florence. Whenever they race each other through the streets of Paris, neither one wins. In the end Françoise always holds out her hand to Florence and draws her along at her own swift pace.

*

Over the coming months I am going to be writing a book about Françoise Sagan and it is with that scene, featuring Cocteau and the daybreak, that I would like to begin it.

My book is to be a journal of the year 1954, telling the story of the few months leading up to the publication of *Bonjour Tristesse*.

A few months is not a very long time.

But I am going through one of the most painful periods of my life. Since the summer, I have been separated from the father of my daughter. I am weighed down by misery and I feel like a suitcase without a handle.

I am going to put an end to my grief through work. Night and day I am going to think about Sagan; day and night she will be my companion.

This will give me the best excuse for not seeing anyone: I have to read all the biographies, all the novels and all the interviews. Sagan gives me the courage to do this; she is the best possible source of comfort.

In my notebook with its brown paper cover I jot down phrases that I've gleaned here and there. I collect them, as I would the wise counsels of an older friend, a woman who has seen it all and who knows, therefore, that there is no advice to be given, that experience cannot be passed on and that the only thing we are able to bequeath to others is the testimony of our own existence, that is to say the mere fact of it, which is the proof that people can come through every sort of situation and that happiness can sometimes return.

I make myself at home with her, just as I make myself at home in the various flats that people

lend me these days. I borrow my friend Catherine's shoes. I spray myself with Esther's perfume, in her bathroom. I slip into the mindset of Françoise Sagan as if I were slipping on a pair of silk stockings – I inhabit her life in order to forget my own.

Here she is again with her friend Florence Malraux on the Pont des Arts, just as the new year makes its appearance in the sky above Paris between the Institut de France and the Eiffel Tower.

Ahead of them, the grimy façades of the Parisian buildings look like a huge accordion spilling out along the banks of the Seine. A sense of peace reigns, a thin film of frost covers the preceding years, like those white dust sheets that you throw over the furniture in country houses before you leave.

Thus each new year Paris draws away from the Occupation, transforming events into memories. And in the end, memories are always forgotten.

Florence and Françoise are children of wartime; in other words, strange creatures who began life at the end: they know the real God is Chance. And they know everything can go wrong. With that as your starting point, you've got to make the best of what you have.

They had been in the same class in the Cours Hattemer, a lycée in Rue de Londres, in the district round the Gare Saint-Lazare. It was a private school for children who were 'special cases'.

Owing to a long illness, Florence had had to give up normal state school for a while.

As for Françoise, she had been expelled from every conceivable type of establishment, first from a convent school (le Couvent des Oiseaux) for her 'failure to be deeply spiritual', then from the Louise-de-Bettignies School for having 'hanged a bust of Molière with a piece of string'¹ – though would Molière not have appreciated being hanged in the form of this dreary, scholastic representation?

It was during this period that, as a little girl on her way to morning mass, she would pass the revellers in their dinner jackets, clutching champagne bottles, issuing from the nightclubs on Rue de Ponthieu.² She was a child who believed adults had much more fun than children.

(I discover that a convent called 'the Convent of the Birds' really did exist. I used to believe that it was something made up by my mother who, when I was small, used to say about any little girl whom she thought rather silly, 'She comes from the Convent of the Little Birds.')

Françoise had been expelled from several religious establishments, but she did have to pass her *baccalauréat*. Fortunately, in 1885, a Mademoiselle Rose Hattemer had invented a method of learning that stimulated the intelligence rather than the memory. It was thanks to Rose that the two teenage girls met in the little playground of the experimental school.

Françoise was impressed by Florence, for Florence had been in the Resistance with her mother. And Florence was Jewish. (Yet France was not too keen on Jews after the war – they brought back bad memories.)

Florence was fascinated by Françoise because she asked questions that nobody asked. And because her mind worked in unexpected ways. And because she was never mawkish, as girls can be.

The two teenagers were going to become the very best of friends.

They shared a love of literature and they both subscribed to the same principle, namely, that you should treat great matters as if they were of little account and small matters as if they were great ones.

It was something that Françoise had come to understand as a result of the carefree life she had led and that Florence had come to understand as a result of her sombre life.

What they didn't know was that they were going to spend the next fifty years of their lives hand

in hand and that it was all going to go by in a flash.

Françoise had read Proust, and Florence, Dostoyevsky.³ Between them they had the century wrapped up and they swopped books as others swopped taffeta frocks.

But on that first of January 1954, as day breaks over the Pont des Arts, they still barely know each other.

‘We must make a vow,’ says Françoise.

‘Fine,’ replies Florence.

And the vow the two girls make is one and the same: they vow that Françoise will find a publisher.

Meanwhile, in Rue de Montpensier, Cocteau, who is ill, falls asleep, as he does every night thinking of the young man he has loved so much. He is thinking of Radiguet. He thinks of him every second of every hour. Radiguet goes on living in him. And goes on dying too.

For the second scene in this book, I would like to describe Françoise waking up in her childhood bedroom at her parents' home in the elegant Monceau Plain district, at 167 Boulevard Malesherbes.

There, in a vast apartment from the Haussmann era, Pierre and Marie Quoirez, originally from the provinces, have installed their three children. As members of the bourgeoisie, they 'both loved partying and had a liking for Bugattis. They drove round the roads at breakneck speed. My parents were youthful and up-to-the-minute.'⁴

Marie, the mother, is perfect. She is like a brown butterfly with blue wings and always impeccably turned out. She loves to laugh, loves going out, loves to make the most of everything the capital has to offer. Much later, Françoise will say of her that she did not live in the real world that she was always somewhere else as she rummaged among her hats. But, for the moment Françoise does not pay much attention to her mother. She has eyes only for her father, her ideal – Pierre. It was for him and by his side that she wrote her manuscript the previous summer, in just six weeks.

Françoise, of course, went to bed late the night before. She had been living it up with her brother Jacques. They had drunk whisky because, with whisky, you sink into a respectable melancholy that does not involve self-loathing – but, even so, this morning her eyelids seem full of grit.

Since daybreak, several people have gone into Françoise's room. The first had been Julia Lafont, the girl from the plains of Cajarc, the limestone plateaux in the Lot. She is the family's housekeeper and she comes in to gather up some blouses from Weill's ready-to-wear collection. Next comes Marie Quoirez to encourage her younger daughter to get up at a suitable hour for a young lady of her age. But, oh well ... she's got the rest of her life to get up early.

Pierre, who is an engineer and the technical director of a factory, merely opens the door to look at his big girl sleeping. He remembers stroking her head when she sat on his lap in the Jaguar as a tiny child, her little hands on the wheel.

A yellow pillow lies on the ground, like a block of fresh butter. It's the biggest pillow in the house and Françoise makes sure she has it so that she can read late into the night, comfortably propped up against the wall. The bedside table has a glass top, strewn with magazines and piles of books.

At the foot of the bed, on a fringed rug, an enormous record player is positioned at just the right distance so that Françoise only has to stretch out her arm, without getting out of bed, to turn her records over. On it I picture the Billie Holiday sleeve where you see that wonderful face, with a large flower behind the ear and pearls round her neck, just like Frida Kahlo.

The teenage girl, asleep on this morning of 4 January 1954, whose parents still call her by the pet name of 'Kiki', is far from imagining that in the not too distant future Lady Day will sing for her, in her presence, and will hug her and talk to her as a friend.



In order to put the finishing touches to this tableau – this imaginary representation of Françoise waking up – I have to decide what books will be lying on the bedside table.

Because this is the room of a girl who has set her sights on becoming a writer, I choose *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf.

I search for the book on my shelves in order to reread certain passages that I would like to quote here.

I study Woolf's words, wondering what Françoise Sagan would have made of them. It's like rediscovering a book you have just given as a present: putting yourself in your loved one's shoes, you wonder what their feelings will be when they read it.

Yes, it's clear that Françoise Sagan loved this book. I have to select two or three sentences from it, although I would like to include them all.

'Why did men drink wine and women water?'

'Of the two – the vote and the money – the money, I own, seemed infinitely the more important.'

'Intellectual freedom depends upon material things' or, again, 'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'⁵

The pages of *A Room of One's Own* bring a lump to my throat because I am reminded that when last I read the book I had dreams of becoming a writer and I wondered if one day I would have the necessary strength and courage.

Then my eyes light upon the very first page:

A Room of One's Own
Virginia Woolf

Reading these words, I feel the veins in my neck throb, just as they do when you find something by chance that you hadn't been looking for: a hidden love letter not intended for you; a 500-euro note just when you are short of money; or the offer of a trip when you want to get away from someone.

Clara had translated Virginia Woolf. That is, Clara Malraux, the mother of Sagan's best friend.

So I was fully justified, justified at least in placing that book on Françoise's bedside table. And why not even a copy with a dedication from the translator? 'To Françoise, who will one day be a writer.' For that is what her daughter had told her a few weeks previously, having just read her friend's manuscript at a single sitting: 'Françoise is a writer.'

Now that I have set the scene, with the books, the music and the blouses, I can wake Françoise up. I can get her to rub her eyes like a child, as she does in a photograph taken in Saint-Tropez in which she is wearing a checked nightdress. Then, in the corridors of her parents' apartment, she goes in search of her brother, who is her best friend as far as boys are concerned. Jacques Quoirez is twenty-seven. He has gone off to London to 'get experience' in a business there but he comes back to Paris for the end-of-year festivities. I am struck by the photographs of him that I have found in trawling through archives on the internet. He looks nothing like Françoise – you wouldn't think they came from the same family.

Jacques has read his little sister's manuscript.

Jacques has been impressed by what he has read.

Yet he is not a man to set aside his usual cynical attitude. With his stripy blazers, his threadbare Charvet shirts and his hide moccasins, he is the darling of the circles he moves in. He is blithe and devil-may-care and he possesses what is known as charm, which, in a man of leisure, is a terrible defect.

Not wishing either to flatter her or to fill her with false hope, Jacques has told her that the book she has written is a nice little composition,⁶ not at all bad for a first novel. He agrees to help his little sister parcel up the manuscripts, while at the same time giving her a warning: you have to be patient, and very patient at that, if you want to get yourself published. He has friends, some decidedly more gifted than she is and others with better contacts in the publishing world, who are still waiting for replies. Françoise, he muses, will soon discover that life isn't as cushy everywhere as it is in Boulevard Malesherbes. Little Kiki has been so spoilt and pampered by their parents Pierre and Marie, that one day she is going to have to be surprised by the real world. But the later the better, he thinks, for at the end of the day he loves his kid sister more than he loves any other woman.

All the same, Jacques has been impressed by 'Franquette'. No one really believed that she would write that mysterious book of hers so quickly. In places he has recognised literary influences: the 'warm, pink' shell like the ham in Rimbaud's 'At the Green Inn'; the words of Cécile, with their echoes of Musset's character Perdican; the quotations from Oscar Wilde and the influence of Choderlos de Laclos. But he has no wish to discourage her; there is nothing more tiresome than critics. We shall see – after all, this is a child who has always got what she wanted, from no matter who.

After much debate, they settle on three publishers, Gallimard, Plon and Julliard. They put the typed manuscripts in big yellow folders and Françoise asks her brother if he will write her address on them. She feels sure that confident masculine handwriting will put the publishers' readers in a positive frame of mind.

When he has written the addresses, Jacques has a thought.

Françoise really must put her date of birth on the manuscripts. His hope is that the idea of a little eighteen-year-old will touch the hearts of the readers and that when they return the manuscripts they will perhaps be less nasty in their accompanying letters.

‘What if we added the phone number too?’ suggests Françoise.

‘What for?’ asks Jacques.

‘In case they want to take me on immediately! In case they really, really like the book!’

‘No, Françoise, no. That would look silly. Publishers don’t phone you. They send a letter.’

But Françoise is insistent. She agrees to include her date of birth as long as they add the phone number. So, on all three copies, Jacques writes:

Françoise Quoirez,
167 Boulevard Malesherbes.
Carnot 59-61. Date of birth: 21 June 1935.

He suddenly feels very afraid for his little sister.

‘Whatever happens, if this one doesn’t get published, you will write another, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course. It won’t be the end of the world.’

‘Not even a little bit, OK?’

‘I don’t write in order to get published, you know. I write because, first and foremost, it’s something I enjoy doing.’

‘That’s just as well.’⁷

Smiling, and as a parting shot before closing the door behind her, Françoise calls out to her brother, ‘But I shall get published!’

At that very moment, on that fourth of January 1954, a boy of the same age – eighteen, to be precise – is recording two songs. It costs him four dollars, which he pays for out of his own pocket and he records them in a small studio specialising in the black soul music of Memphis.

The songs are ‘My Happiness’ and ‘That’s When Your Heartaches Begin’.

Both those kids, Françoise Sagan and Elvis Presley, are going to need shoulders broad enough to bear the weight of what they are going to become in a few months’ time: two idols pursued by frenzied crowds. But today they have quite simply *done* something, and it all stems from there. You never lose out by just *doing* something; there is a chance you might even win. You have to take on board the risk of winning, and the young do not realise just what the consequences of winning can be.

This is a book I have to write quickly, and it is taking shape and gradually coming into focus.

It is to be neither a biography, nor a journal, nor a novel. Let's just call it a story.

The idea is that it's the story of a girl, a very young girl, writing her first novel.

I will be cataloguing the various stages in the life of a budding author: her excitement, her fearfulness, her sense of anticipation.

My book will be about the progress of another book, from the moment the manuscript is sent off to the point at which it receives a literary prize. My plan is to focus on a few days in one year, the year in which the heroine's life will be turned upside down. With every passing day and week, the anonymous teenager will be on her way to becoming a recognised writer.

If this were a made-up story, I would have to work on the issue of plausibility in order to get the reader to accept that certain incredible things can actually happen. I mean things like a book becoming a huge success while simultaneously causing a monumental scandal; I mean things like a girl who had not yet come of age becoming a social phenomenon and the most famous Frenchwoman of her era.

But that story is true. So my task is to understand and then explain to others how implausible things can suddenly happen in life. I have to be able to show how a book can explode on the scene like a bomb, how it can burst forth like springtime, how it can have an impact like the catastrophe in a Greek tragedy.

'Françoise,' says Jacques, 'are you sure you won't be sad if your novel isn't published?'

'I don't know. We'll see. I like writing.'

'Why do you like writing?' asks Jacques. He can see that his sister does not envisage being met with rejection, still less with indifference.

'To write a novel is to construct a lie. I like telling lies. I have always lied,' she answers laughingly. 'Come on, wish me luck.'⁸

I visualise this girl in the Métro, sitting among other girls. They are all dressed just like their mothers, in long coats down to their ankles, Jacques Fath-style coats in dyed wool, or tweed coats. They wear little silk scarves and have their hair tied back, revealing the few pearls round their necks – there are no pierced ears. They are all dressed severely. It is an era when the transition from childhood to adulthood is a brutal one and there is nothing in between.

Like the others, Françoise is wearing a heavy coat and a red-and-white striped blouse buttoned all the way up. She could be anything from fifteen to thirty.

This is the last stage in her life when Françoise's face is not the face of celebrity. These are the last weeks in the whole of her existence when she is still a girl like other girls, a girl of eighteen. She doesn't know that there's not much of the old life left for her, nor that everything is about to be turned upside down because of what she is carrying, like a cancer, under her arm. Those sheets of paper covered in words, typed up by a friend 'because it's neater like that',⁹ are going to change her life for good. But we're not there yet. For the moment, I see her observing people in the reflection of the carriage windows. She feels sorry for a girl who has no ankles and whose calves go straight

up and down like broomsticks. It's unfair that some people are not beautiful, she thinks, as she is lulled by the sound of the train.

Whenever I came across people who weren't physically attractive, I experienced a sort of uneasiness, a sense of lack; the fact that they were resigned to being unattractive struck me as being an unseemly failing on their part. For, after all, what was our aim in life, if not to be pleasing to others?¹⁰

Françoise had got on at Wagram and had changed at Saint-Lazare, finally to emerge at the exit in Rue du Bac, where the wind blew up under her coat. Turning right into Rue de l'Université, she walks along to number 30, the premises of the publisher Julliard. Her hand is frozen when she pushes open the massive green door, tottering as she does so. She turns round. There is a young man behind her. They barely exchange glances but both guess that they are there for the same reason.

So they approach the desk together and naturally the receptionist addresses the young man.

'Are you here to submit a manuscript?'

'Yes,' he replies timidly.

'Don't bother phoning for a reply. You'll get a letter in a few weeks. If your manuscript is rejected, you can come back here and pick it up.'

'But I don't live near Paris,' he replies.

'In that case, come back with some stamped addressed envelopes. Thank you, and good day to you, Monsieur. Good day, Mademoiselle.'

The young man hurries out in search of a post office and some stamps. Françoise waits politely, she waits patiently and graciously, still facing the woman, who has buried her nose in her work again. 'So sorry, I thought you were with the boy!' exclaims the receptionist when at length she realises her mistake.

'It really doesn't matter,' replies Françoise. 'It really doesn't matter at all. Please don't apologise.'

Now we see Françoise (somewhat lighter, having been relieved of one manuscript) trotting off in the direction of the Librairie Gallimard, the high temple of publishing. This august establishment is only a short walk from Julliard, at number 5 Rue Sébastien-Bottin – the street is called after the man who gave his name to a directory of commerce and industry.

There is no one at reception. She hesitates. Her friend Florence works there but only started a few days ago. It would seem too casual just to wander off down the corridors looking for her.

So Françoise waits, politely, patiently and graciously. A young woman, hurrying past, asks her if she is there to drop off a manuscript. Françoise nods. The young woman reaches forward automatically to take the yellow folder and then declares in a single breath, 'Don't bother phoning for a reply you'll get a letter in a few weeks and if your manuscript is rejected you can come back here and pick it up.'

Françoise's next port of call is Éditions Plon, based in Rue Garancière, a quiet little street that doesn't get too much sun, a pleasant street, its name evoking that of a flower.

I can hear Françoise's footsteps. She is slightly out of breath, wondering, like someone wagering on several numbers in roulette, which number will come up. Which publishing firm will turn her destiny upside down? I see her frail little form, head down, lost in thought when her path crosses that of two men preoccupied by weighty matters.

The two men are of equal height.

~~The first man is all forehead: it is wide and pale and underneath it is a birdlike face. His beard~~ and large spectacles seem almost to have been stuck on, the features beneath them being so chiselled. He is assistant director at the Musée de l'Homme and, apart from his thesis, he has still only published a single work, with Presses Universitaires de France. Yet, at forty-six, he is no youngster. The second man, the one whose hands dart hither and thither in the air like insects, has his heart set on bringing out *Tristes Tropiques*. This fledgling publisher, much younger than Claude Lévi-Strauss, has black, unruly locks and a generous mouth. Strikingly handsome, he is the first man to have reached the geomagnetic North Pole. Jean Malaurie is launching a new series for Plon entitled *Terre Humaine*. He wants it to be the home for a new type of intellectual: author-explorers, men defined solely by the terrain they have covered. It is this editorial dream that the explorer of Greenland is explaining as he walks along Rue Garancière, with the Senate behind him, while young Françoise passes them coming from the opposite direction, her ankle boots click-clacking on the cobbles.

Françoise goes into an imposing mansion, the Hôtel de Sourdéac, which houses a printing works whose presses are always running at full tilt. But there is also on the premises a publishing firm, one that has made itself particularly receptive to literature and essays, called La Librairie Plon, les petits-fils de Plon & Nourrit.

On entering the courtyard, Françoise is overpowered by the smell of fresh ink, which then catches her by the throat as it mingles with the scent worn by the young woman at reception. Jolie Madame, the latest perfume from Pierre Balmain, is a mixture of violets and leather and has been popular as a gift this last Christmas. Jolie Madame goes through the same rigmarole as her predecessors: Are you submitting a manuscript? You can expect a letter. You'll hear nothing for several weeks, etc.

The die is cast. With her arms now free and swinging by her side, Françoise crosses Place Saint-Sulpice in the cold of that sixth of January. All she is thinking of is dinner that evening, when her big sister Suzanne will be celebrating her thirtieth birthday.

As happens every year, her mother will have bought a huge galette des rois, still warm. And as happens every year, everyone will make sure that Kiki finds the charm hidden in it and gets to wear the crown.

To Françoise, thirty seems a lifetime, too far off to contemplate. She doesn't know that, by the age of thirty, she will have been married and divorced twice, will be a mother, and a writer acclaimed throughout the world, her work adapted for the cinema by Otto Preminger, acted by Jean Seberg and sung by Juliette Gréco; she will be both loved and loathed and, in a terrible accident, she will have come close to death, a place beyond the reach of memory.

Between now and the age of thirty she has so much to experience.

Suddenly I visualise Françoise in the radiance of youth. I am more than thirty now and I feel out of place as – on the run from my own life – I immerse myself in the life of another. I am following in the tracks of a child; I see her cross the square by the side of the church of Saint-Sulpice. She crosses it diagonally, passing close to the fountain and its lions.

Fully preoccupied as she is by the thought of the birthday present she is planning to give her sister, Françoise does not know that she is being watched from behind the façade of the church by the painting by Delacroix.

It is of Jacob wrestling with the Angel.

His raised knee is a sign of his will. His muscular back tells of his resoluteness. And his arm and

shoulder bespeak his determination to fight. Every sinew in the magnificent body of the man called Jacob is straining towards victory and, at daybreak, he will gain God's favour because he, a natural man, has wrestled with the supernatural. But his thigh will be for ever marked by the injury he has sustained.

In every combat undertaken, in every task completed, in every victory gained, one must accept that something will be lost.

In every task completed.

In every combat undertaken.

One must accept that something will be lost.

What shall I lose through this book?

I was immersed in the writing of my third novel when, more than ten days ago now, Françoise Sagan's son suggested that I should write a book about his mother. Denis Westhoff is a man of around fifty. Listening to him talk is very pleasant: he speaks rapidly, in a soft, staccato tone without any hesitation, like the needle of a sewing machine regularly piercing felt.

'We will soon be marking the tenth anniversary of her death, ten years already, and I would like people to remember just what the publication of *Bonjour Tristesse* represented for society back in 1954. That was sixty years ago!'

This proposition is like a sign; it is obvious to me that this is something I *must* do. I drop the book I'm working on for her, for Françoise.

I phone Édouard because I am delighted to tell him the news. But we argue: he says that I feel flattered to set my name alongside Françoise Sagan's and that I should guard against vanity, etc.

I send him an email telling him how hurt I am:

Sometimes your friends attack you with cruel words that hurt. But because they aim true and see in you the things you keep most hidden, they say, 'It's because I care about you that I can see the part of you that you would like to hide. And, seeing that side of you, I still go on caring about you. Perhaps I care about you even more, knowing what I do. Because you and I are alike, united in guilt.'

When your friends act like this, they bind you to them more strongly than by any declaration of love.

But when your friends attack you and their aim isn't true, when they are aiming at other people (usually themselves) through you - that's to say, instead of looking at you, they are looking in the mirror - that's when your friends become terribly remote from you.

Édouard phones me back to say that there has been a misunderstanding and that I have misrepresented what he has said. He gently mocks the emphasis I put on our being friends something I have done regularly over the night on fifteen years that we have known each other. We make up by having lunch in the little Italian restaurant at the entrance to the library where I work.

Édouard knew Françoise Sagan. He tells me the things he remembers about her - he does an imitation of how she used to answer the phone in a Spanish accent in order to weed out unwanted callers informing them that 'Madame Sagan is not in.' I say to him, 'You loved her so much, so I don't understand why you shouldn't be pleased that I - your friend - am writing a book about her.'

'Of course I'm pleased,' he replies, 'but that's not the problem. What annoys me is that you're abandoning your novel.'

Édouard is a generous soul, just as Françoise was.

So, for the last ten days roughly, whenever someone asks me, 'What are you up to at the moment? Are you writing anything?' I answer, 'Yes, I'm writing a book about Françoise Sagan.'

Like a chemical reaction, people's initial response is always the same: it's as if a combination of certain words automatically produces a smile.

Utter the name 'Françoise Sagan' and you will see a smile come over people's faces, the same

smile you would see if you were to say, 'Will you have some champagne?'

~~I am wondering whether, in agreeing to write about her, I am not going to put myself in an impossible position by touching on what belongs to everyone. All of a sudden I am afraid of this book.~~

Yesterday when I put a whole series of questions to Denis Westhoff (What perfume did she wear? What year was it that she met Pasolini? Where was her brother Jacques living in January 1954? etc.) he said something very important.

'My mother was never afraid.'

'Even in 1954, when she was just a young girl, before her first book came out, do you not think she was afraid?'

'No, she wasn't afraid of anything or anyone.'

'But she must have wondered whether she would get good reviews.'

'It was one of the things she taught me. Not to be afraid.'

I make a note in my work-book: 'A scene to show that Françoise Sagan was never afraid of anything.'

I make a note in my head: Must teach my daughter that the only thing to be afraid of is fear itself.

Clearly, in my hands, there is a danger that Françoise Sagan might be lost to view. I am appropriating her for myself, just as a portrait painter imposes his own profile on the portrait of the sitter.

I am going to slide her into my bed with its rumpled sheets, there to wipe away the anguished sweat that, though I attribute it to her, is so like mine. *She* may not be afraid, but I am. So I let my black hair intertwine with her fairness and, like a photographer using light-sensitive paper, I develop the outlines of a silhouette that, while grave, is full of joy. I can't help myself. If it's a problem, all anyone had to do was not to ask me in the first place.

It is 11 January 1954.

It is so cold outside that Marie Quoirez, Françoise's mother, has agreed to lend her daughter her fur coat, made from the silvery pelts of squirrels which, even after death, do not lose their ash-grey colour, while the belly remains as pale as Snow White's thigh. The fur coat is so big on Françoise that Marie pictures her daughter as she was eighteen years previously, a gift from heaven, a newborn baby wrapped in a blanket.

Jacques is expecting her to join him for dry martinis at the Hôtel Lutetia. In the taxi taking her across town, Françoise is deep in thought as she looks out of the window at the succession of illuminated signs adorning Haussmann's buildings: 'Frigecco', 'Paris-Pêcheur', 'Chocolat Suchard', 'Janique', 'Gevapan' and, especially, 'Grand Marnier', advertised in that Gothic script that makes you want to be sipping a liqueur in front of a log fire.

The taxi carrying Françoise drives alongside the courtyard of the Palais-Royal, as yet devoid of Buren's columns, then past the Louvre without the addition of the Pyramid and the Jardins du Carrousel without Maillol's bronze statues. By day Paris is sooty black. At night she is navy blue.

Françoise enters the Lutetia through the revolving doors, which muffle the noise from outside and give you the feeling of moving into a world wrapped in cotton wool. Her feet go trotting over the chequered marble floor of the luxury hotel. She recalls that, at the Liberation, a girl Jacques was engaged to at the time, Denise Franier, whose surname before the war had been Frankenstein, had been driving them through Paris in a mustard-coloured Rovin D4. As they passed the hotel she had

told them it was there that whole families were awaiting the return of their fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children, and news from Poland and Germany.

Françoise has not forgotten those entire families that had disappeared. Even if she never referred to them, some things may be heard very clearly in the silence of their not being spoken about.

Comfortably ensconced in one of the deep red-velvet armchairs, sipping a cocktail, and paying no heed to the shrieks of laughter that pierce her heart like shards of glass, Françoise is not listening to her brother's friends, who are already drunk.

At that moment she is immersing herself in her memories.

The sharp, crystalline music of the tinkling ice cubes is taking her back to the war years.

She is seven.

Seven is old, so old that it is called 'the age of reason'.

She is living in the Isère, in Saint-Marcellin, at the foot of the mountains of the Vercors. The whole family has left Paris because of the war; on the day of their departure they had to turn round and come back because Marie, the mother, had forgotten to collect her hats from the famous milliner's, Paulette's.¹¹

Some weeks later, soldiers of the Wehrmacht come to search the house, which has the misfortune to be called 'The Gunnery'; they are looking for arms. They know that a van belonging to members of the Resistance has been spotted in the area. They get all the Quoirez family to line up and face the wall while they carry out the search. The story has a happy ending, as the Germans don't find anything.¹² But Françoise can remember the sound of her own breathing as, hands clasped on her head, she heard orders being given in a foreign tongue and the dogs barking. And she also remembers not being afraid.

I get the impression that for many French children of that generation, that is to say, those who were children during the war, their memories are not painful. Fear is not their abiding memory and the expression 'a long holiday' often crops up. Two things are mentioned: the women whose hair was shorn for having fraternised with the enemy and the revelation of images from the death camps. When you come to think of it, it is rather strange that an awareness of the war should be defined by those two things, both of which date from the period after the war, and yet they are cited in answer to the question 'What do you remember about the war?'

This is what Françoise remembers: she was eleven when she went to the cinema in Saint-Marcellin to see *In Old Chicago*, an American film starring Tyrone Power. It was 1946 and newsreels were shown before the film started. Suddenly there appeared on the screen those images of Buchenwald and Auschwitz in which you see snow ploughs clearing away heaps of corpses. It took Françoise some time, a few seconds at least, to realise what she was seeing.¹³

A friend of mine, Gérard Rambert, once told me that when he discovered some photographs under his parents' radiator cover, all he could see in them were hills. He could not understand why his parents would hide 'photographs of hills' in their radiators. It had taken him several days to realise what it was all about. Just as the faces in the paintings of Arcimboldo are made up of vegetables or fruit, so the hills in the photographs belonging to Gérard's parents were made up of bones and decomposed corpses.

In *Un Pedigree*, Patrick Modiano would write, 'At the age of thirteen I discovered the images of the death camps. Something changed for me that day.'

Those two sentences say it all.

'Something changed for me that day' is an experience that we have all had, every one of us

whatever our age or culture and whatever generation we belong to.

I remember the day when something changed for me.

I must have been six or seven.

My mother placed a big history book on the baize surface of her writing desk. We pored over its pages. I don't think I realised at first what I was seeing – I'm not talking about its meaning or import, I am merely saying that it was difficult to work out what the photographs were of.

My mother explained to me that we belonged to that family of bodies, that we were 'Jews'.

'Something changed for me that day.'

If I mention all these things, in a digression that is taking me further than I intended, it is because I see in Françoise Sagan's levity, in her irreverence and offhandedness, not an elegant front concealing despair, but a sign of her secret awareness of human suffering. She had no legitimate right to speak of suffering, for she belonged neither with the victims nor indeed with the executioners. Françoise Sagan was never to tire of exploring forms of distress that may be regarded as merely trivial but I sense that there was a deeply embedded seriousness in Françoise Quoirez that she respected too much to make it her own. And I know that the sight of a shaven-headed woman paraded through the streets of the village where she, Françoise, lived as a child was to haunt her for the rest of her days.¹⁴

'So, what's this about you waiting to hear back from publishers?'

Françoise, put on the spot by a friend who is flirting with her brother Jacques, comes out of her daydream.

'Yes, well, we'll see,' she replies, pushing back a lock of hair that has fallen forward.

'So,' insists someone else, 'have you heard back?'

Few things make Françoise feel more ill at ease. She doesn't want to talk about it. She is furious with her brother and his big mouth.

'No, not yet. I only dropped the manuscript off last week ... it can take several months.'

This is the cue for people to give their opinions, to come up with an anecdote about someone who had been read by Gide for Gallimard, or someone else who received a letter with a positive reply, or Proust who paid to have his work published, and so on and so on. Françoise has had enough. She doesn't want to have to listen to them any more; she feels dizzy.

It's at this point that her friend Véronique whispers to her, 'Come with me, I'll take you to the carnival. We'll have our fortunes told.'

The two girls grab their coats, then hail a beetle-black Citroën taxi on Boulevard Raspail.

'We're going to Pigalle,' says Véronique, in the serious voice she reserves for special occasions.

So here are the girls, speeding through the night towards their future. It's not the first time that Françoise has met a fortune-teller. The previous year, in Rue l'Abbé-Groult, a blonde woman with an enormous bosom had announced to her, 'You will write a book that will cross the oceans'¹⁵ and that had encouraged her to take from her drawer the few pages that had been lying there abandoned.

So it all stemmed from the woman who had predicted that Françoise would write books and that they would be very successful.

I can't see into the future, but I do have one extraordinary power, the power to transport Françoise back to that night in Pigalle.

Up there on the heights, from mid-December until mid-January, a carnival with dozens of strange booths sets up along Boulevard Rochechouart, stretching from Place Blanche to the Anvers Métro station. There you can find women who will tell your fortune with playing cards, as well as

shooting galleries, bearded ladies and fishing for prizes.

~~I quote here from the photographer Christer Strömholm, who photographed these carnivals in the late fifties:~~¹⁶

You could get to see wrestling matches ... Dwarves with beards would invite you to performances that lasted an hour.

The female snake charmer in her glass case would allow big, lazy snakes to coil languorously round her body. You had to pay to see her. We would watch in fascination for a good quarter of an hour.

Her working day was long and whenever she took a break she would leave her glass case but she never parted from her snakes. They stayed tightly coiled round her half-naked body. There was always a packed house for the 'leopard woman'. She would let us stroke her hairy patches.

I can imagine Françoise and Véronique wandering among the stalls and the roundabouts. I can see them laughing at the dodgems, sinking their teeth into round, sweet toffee-apples and getting candyfloss moustaches as they stood guffawing in front of the booth of the crocodile woman – half woman, half crocodile.

I like to picture them, complete with the leather handbags that mark them out as well-brought-up young ladies, entering the fortune-teller's booth.

There are some grey and orange stones on the fortune-teller's table; light from the candles throws into relief the wrinkles on her face – she could be one hundred years old – she wears jewellery, lots of jewellery. She asks Françoise to choose some cards and place them on the table then she stands up, takes a pendulum and, looking Françoise straight in the eye, says to her in a gravelly voice that conjures up some never-never land, 'I see someone who is coming to live with you, someone who will be arriving in the near future.

'It's someone you will get to know very well indeed, someone you will love and who will love you straight away, for you are very lovable. But, beware, the relationship between you will be one of extremes for she is haughty and capricious. She will love you as children love, unreasonably. She will love you as women love: if you neglect them, they do not easily forgive.

'This is someone you will know for the rest of your life, who will at times desert you and then you will suffer greatly. As she brushes past, you will always call her name. You must honour and cherish her, for you are one of those who know how to make her happy. You know how to make her laugh and to entertain her. She is on her way towards you. And when you open the door to her, you must look her straight in the face.'

'Who is this person?'

'It is Lady Luck.'¹⁷

My first paid job was as a reader for a publishing house. So I know all about manuscripts and what peculiar, repugnant, necessary, exciting things they are, inviting contempt and consideration in equal measure. I know the mystique surrounding those pages, those accumulating piles. I am familiar with the disillusionment and sadness that come from reading words that are just not right that are as indigestible as food which doesn't taste as it should. But sometimes, too, you feel your temples begin to throb and walls come tumbling down, when you read words that make a deep impression on you and help you to go on living.

Readers in publishing houses are a strange breed, somewhat wan, somewhat apart, somewhat feared; because the talent they have, their possessing 'a good eye' (in the same way as a person is said to 'have a nose' for things) is a gift: it's a type of expertise that cannot be either passed on or explained – it's as scary as witchcraft.

These are creatures wreathed in a slightly malodorous aura who loiter alone in the corridors with sheets of paper and folders under their arm, and such a one was François Le Grix, the reader at the publishing house of René Julliard in 1954.

He was nicknamed 'Grix' or 'the Grey Lady' and, on account of that ridiculous moniker, I imagine him to be a tall, slender, colourless individual, made fun of by the others for wearing 'a toupee which only he thought was undetectable'.¹⁸

François Le Grix is the first reader of *Bonjour Tristesse* on that thirteenth of January 1954.

Conscientious as ever, before he finishes his work for the day, in his fine hand – the handwriting of a schoolboy brought up under the Third Republic, who knows all his *sous-préfectures* by heart and can solve problems involving trains that pass one another – he writes this:

What Mademoiselle Quoirez has penned flows along nicely without faltering. Hence we are prevented from noticing the numerous barbarisms that it would be appropriate to eradicate from such a pleasing text. In the very first line, I light upon the following: 'To this strange feeling ... I hesitate to apply the fine name of sadness.' Not only does it lack euphony but the syntax also offends ... At one point the author writes of 'the hearing of that exaggerated laughter' instead of 'hearing that laughter'. I have underlined many of these infelicities, which the exercise of a little care would suffice to correct. The charm of the work, the rather particular spell it casts, produced by its mix of perversion and innocence, stems also from a complacent attitude to life being coupled with bitterness towards it, and from gentleness being coupled with cruelty. In places it is a poem as much as a novel, but without there being any break in tone or any false note sounded. Above all, it is a novel where life is depicted authentically and where the psychology, for all that it is daring, cannot be faulted, since its five characters, Raymond, Cécile, Anne, Elsa and Cyril, are boldly drawn and not to be forgotten in a hurry. The style of writing is in essence so classical that in quite a few instances the imperfect subjunctive would flow more naturally than the present subjunctive, which is rarely the case. But Mademoiselle Quoirez persists in not using it. Another example of a barbarism, and a rather curious one, concerns the book's actual title, inspired by its final lines, where the author tells us that, with the advent of evening, a strange face appears to her

which she greets with the words 'Bonjour tristesse'. In that it is evening, would it not be better to say 'Bonsoir tristesse' and, furthermore, would not the title gain thereby?¹⁹

As if clinging to a talisman, I have retained all the reports I wrote when I was a reader. They are in a big grey box file which I keep archived in the bedroom I had as a child in my parents' house. I would like to reread them all, one day. In amongst them is a report on a first novel that went on to be a great success. It had been written by a girl of my own age – twenty at the time – and I had been greatly struck when reading it. It was the first time I had read a manuscript that seemed to me to be undeniably both well written and likely to sell. So I had spoken up for it to the publisher, for whom I was working as an intern.

Some years later, at a dimly lit Parisian party, I ran across that same girl, who was now famous on account of her book. I was then working in a theatre on the Champs-Élysées. Needless to say, we were still both the same age as each other. But the success of her book had catapulted her into what seemed to me to be life as it was meant to be lived, whereas I was vegetating in the limbo of my own mere existence. I asked her for a light, and she obliged, but in an offhand way, without even bothering to look at me, so as not to lose the thread of the animated discourse with which she was regaling her male audience.

I said to myself, 'You're not looking at me and you don't know who I am. Yet I was one of the fairies present round your cradle.'

I often think of that incident.

In doing so, I wonder which of the people who cross my path, their faces unknown to me, have nonetheless played a part in my life without my being the slightest bit aware of it.

What I find striking in the story of Françoise Sagan is that the fairies who were present round that little girl's cradle, all those capricious fairy godmothers – *toutes les capricieuses mères du destin* – in whose hands her destiny lay and who played their part in the making of her fame, were all very elderly gentlemen.

First there was François Le Grix, then Pierre Javet and René Julliard, the publishing house trio. Next up were Mauriac, Blanchot, Paulhan, Bataille and then many others, a whole Senate's worth of wonderful old men who covered their faces in dainty veils to grant the wish of a girl-child newly born.

But we are not yet at that point. We are still just at the point where the reader's report from François Le Grix lands on the desk of Pierre Javet, editorial director at the publishing house of René Julliard, who, in turn, is shortly to be overcome with stupefaction (in the etymological sense of the word).

Before I recount what happened on the night of 16–17 January 1954, the night René Julliard read the manuscript of *Bonjour Tristesse* for the first time and wanted to publish it before he had even reached the last page, I must describe something that happened to me yesterday. It was such a strange thing that I wonder if I really did experience it, so strange that I could not say exactly what was going on.

I had decided to make an appointment with a clairvoyant, because, after I had written the episode with the fortune-teller, I reckoned that for me to meet a ‘real’ clairvoyant would be useful for the book and would make my description a bit less kitsch.

There are two sorts of writers. There are those who plumb their own depths to extract all the black gold they can find there and who, for that reason, are forced to live a life of asceticism. And there are those who need to experience things in order to write about them and who lose their way as they journey through life on the edge of a fantasy world, obliged to lead a kind of existence that sometimes proves fatal to them, as the wild ass’s skin does to the hero in Balzac’s story.

Be that as it may, I had made an appointment with the clairvoyant using the book as a pretext even though, probably, at an unconscious level, I wanted just as much to hear things about my personal life: my separation from the father of my daughter was looking as if it might be permanent and never in my life had I felt quite as lost as I did then. But instead of speaking to her about that, I put the following question: ‘I am writing a book at the moment. Can you see it?’ This is what I asked the clairvoyant when I met her in her studio near the Anvers Métro station, which in the fifties was the exact location – and I am not making this up – of the Pigalle carnival.

(What I am going to write next is the exact transcription of the notes I scribbled down in the course of our conversation. I am reproducing the words just as they were said to me, without any attempt to dress them up stylistically or to impose any kind of coherence on them after the event.)

I know that most readers will not for one moment accept the veracity of what I am going to report. Yet it is all true and I leave it to each individual to interpret as they wish, and as best they can, the remarkable occurrence that I was party to and that I restrict myself here to conveying as faithfully as possible.)

‘Yes, I can see that you are writing a book on someone’s life. It’s the life of a woman who lived as a man would. She was very masculine. But she was benevolent towards people. She was a woman who had experienced everything. She did whatever she wanted to do. But she did it alone. She experienced everything on her own.

‘She was a woman who felt misunderstood. She had stepped aside from time. For her there was no longer any such thing as a calendar, only a life lived in the present moment.

‘Françoise Sagan.

‘I am seeing Françoise Sagan – that’s correct, isn’t it?

‘From beyond the grave, she is wondering why society wished to destroy her. She is asking herself that question, she is asking you that question. Just like a tsunami, just as when the sea comes up and lays waste to everything, so society took everything back from her. Why?

‘It was not she who self-destructed. They *truly* wished to kill her.

‘She is trying to understand why she went from being an idol to a woman who was hated.

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