La Comédiathèque

# Writing One's Life

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# *Writing One's Life*

Writing one's life... First, let's clear up any misunderstandings. This book is not a guide on how to transform an ordinary life into a thrilling narrative. Nor is it a method for spicing up your existence so that you'll have exciting stories to share with your grandchildren one day. It is simply an autobiography—or more precisely, an auto-fiction—because recounting one's life inevitably involves revisiting it, if not outright reinventing it.

One day, I was having a coffee with a neighbour when I began sharing an episode from my life. He listened with wide eyes, and after a while, knowing I'm a writer, he interrupted me: "*Is what you're telling me true, or are you making it up as you go along?*" For a brief moment, I confess, even I was struck by doubt. Of course, all writers are liars—but sometimes, as Aragon put it, they lie truthfully. That's what prompted me to write this book. Yes, this narrative is written in the first person, to tell my truth. All my truth? Nothing but my truth? I wouldn't swear to it. After all, I am a writer. In this book, I recount how I got to where I am—not as an example to follow for anyone aspiring to become an author, but simply as my story.

Writing one's life is, above all, about claiming that part of freedom which alone gives us the feeling of truly being alive. I found my freedom through writing, which is also a form of deliverance. But one can write one's life in many ways—through actions as much as through words. Here is how I attempted to write mine, preferably choosing, like Robert Frost's traveler, the paths less traveled.

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*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –*
*I took the one less traveled by,*
*And that has made all the difference.*
*Robert Frost*

*Caminante, no hay camino,*
*se hace camino al andar.*
*Antonio Machado*

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## 1. Roots

I was born in Auvers-sur-Oise in the mid-fifties, and from a young age, I vowed to do everything to avoid spending my life there —let alone dying there. One can easily die of boredom in Auvers. It's no coincidence that Van Gogh, who had endured his share of struggles, ended his life there after completing his final work, *Roots*. That's just how it is. Apart from the dandelions, perhaps, it's hard to truly take root in this village —a place that so impressed the Impressionists, but where many lives have come to an end. My own cousin, about my age, hanged himself there before he turned forty. A childhood friend of mine shot himself in the head on the eve of his fifteenth birthday.

Auvers is what one might call a ribbon village, stretching over six kilometres and wedged between the meanders of the Oise River—prone to near flooding every winter— and a small cliff on the verge of collapse. In the middle run a main road and a railway line. The village is so elongated that it has not only a station but also a railway halt at each end, along with two schools. I spent the first twelve years of my life in a shack by the road, about two kilometres from the halt and Chaponval school, and four kilometres from the village centre—which, confusingly, isn't in the middle but at one end.

Auvers is a line on the map. Its circumference is nowhere, and its centre almost outside its bounds. Twice a day, back when there was no canteen, I walked to and from school. Eight kilometres daily. Between these two prisons, during my daily transfers, I began devising my first escape plans, though I had neither the means nor the courage to execute them. At fourteen, when I started secondary school in a neighbouring town, we moved to a house directly opposite the school I had just left forever. Another prison awaited me, far better guarded this time. And with it, another journey—longer than the last.

## 2. Stardust

Ensuring that my first home would not be my last—that was my first dream. Perhaps it's from there that my passion for space exploration and my deep aversion to all forms of religion were born. "Man, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," says Genesis. So, let us at least strive to bite another dust at the end, different from the one that saw our birth. Stardust, if possible. After a life in the mud, let Humanity's cradle not also become its tomb.

I was born in my parents' bed, in the very spot where I had been conceived. At the time, giving birth at home—without anaesthesia, of course, and with only the family doctor or perhaps a helpful neighbour—was not a nostalgic return to roots for bourgeois women searching for meaning in their empty lives. It was simply the harsh reality for many working-class women. Bourgeois women were already giving birth in hospitals. It is always disheartening to see some women, and some men, romanticize the servitudes of the past as acts of freedom—only this time undertaken voluntarily. To desire submission, whether to tradition, Nature, a god, or a man—is that truly freedom?

I was born breech. In other words, I entered the world showing my bottom. Needless to say, it was neither the easiest nor the least painful way for my mother to give birth —especially almost entirely alone at home, without the support of a husband who was either too busy earning a living or simply unwilling to witness such a butchery. Yes, the most unfortunate women gave birth in their own beds. And if necessary, they also performed abortions in their own toilets. The so-called "angel-makers" were not graduates of medical school, and the toilets—often located at the bottom of the garden—certainly didn't smell of roses. I might not have been the youngest. That's where he ended up, without ever seeing the light of day. I swore I would not end up in that hole.

## 3. Saint Martin

From my first year of secondary school until the end of sixth form, I studied in Pontoise at a modestly named Catholic school, Saint Martin de France. This institution, modelled after the famous English colleges, has for about a century educated the offspring of France's highest bourgeoisie, making it an undeniably elitist school—not necessarily for its academic standards, but certainly for the social standing of its students. You've all heard the expression, "I am not a Rothschild." Well, I had a Rothschild in my class. A real one. Not particularly unpleasant, actually. Not really a brilliant student either. Just rather discreet. People often believe the rich despise the less fortunate. That's not true. It's the nouveau riche who look down on us. Those who haven't had money long enough to forget where they come from, who know that with the slightest misstep, they might slip back, and who consequently seek to distinguish themselves from those who remain relatively impoverished. The truly rich do not despise the poor. They simply ignore them, not knowing how to interact with them—except, perhaps, to employ them in their father's factory.

On Saturdays at noon, when we were released for a short leave and I rushed to Pontoise station to catch my suburban train, my wealthy classmate's chauffeur, cap neatly in place, waited for him in a Rolls Royce at the school gate to drive him back to Paris. I went home to a three-room ground-floor flat where six of us were crammed together—the four children sharing a single room, heated in winter by a wood stove, with no hot water from the tap, no bathroom, and the toilet in the yard. He went home, I imagine, to a mansion in the 16th arrondissement or perhaps a manor in the countryside. We sat in the same classroom, but we did not belong to the same class. We did not live in the same world. Outside the confines of this school and its vast park, our paths would never have crossed.

The boarders came from Paris, or even from abroad. At most, they knew Pontoise only as the station where they caught the train back to the affluent districts of Paris for the weekend. If I was there, along with a handful of other privileged local kids, it was only because our parents, by tightening their belts, could afford at least the day-boarding fees of this prestigious school. But I would never have dared to invite these petty bourgeois classmates—who, though not part of the elite, lived in comfortable homes befitting their status as the sons of local notables—to my home. In class, I held my own with everyone, but beyond the school gates, I reverted to being a proletarian. My father had enrolled me and my brother in this school so we could receive a well-

supervised education, something he, being practically illiterate, could not provide himself. I should have been grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to receive the same education as the elite. Instead, I resented him for the shame I felt at not belonging to it. I was a stowaway on a luxury liner. Viewed as privileged by the students from the public high school I met at the station, I considered myself a pariah in the very chic establishment I was forced to attend.

Even today, at a social reception, I feel my rightful place is with the staff passing hors d'oeuvres from the kitchen, rather than among the distinguished guests indulging themselves in the salon. I will remain an impostor all my life. My name is Martinez. They called me Martin. Saint Martin is known for giving half of his cloak to a poor man. After seven years of initiation into Christian charity at Saint Martin de France, I still wonder what my wealthiest classmates did with their Burberry trench coats.

## 4. Épluches

I barely scraped through my A-levels after a turbulent secondary education. In primary school, excelling wasn't much of a challenge. While most of my classmates lived in more comfortable and sanitary homes than mine, they came from even more disadvantaged backgrounds. Most of them ended their education with the school certificate. From my entire class, only two of us went on to secondary school: me, the son of a Spanish immigrant, and the headteacher's son, of Vietnamese origin. He attended the public secondary school, and I went to a private one. Paradoxically, it was us—the children of immigrants—who took the social elevator, while the native French were content with the stairs, hoping they weren't descending to the basement. Often, the difficulty in rising above one's circumstances isn't due to the cultural handicap supposedly affecting children from modest backgrounds, but rather the lack of ambition their parents have for them. You will be a worker, my son, like your father." Or, "You will be a hairdresser, like your mother." A real job, right away, to start bringing money home. Anything else? That's not for us.

Those who didn't continue to secondary school went to learn a trade at Épluches, a vocational school nestled in the middle of the potato fields between Chaponval and Pontoise. When my grades were truly disastrous, my father would motivate me in his own way: *If you get expelled from Saint Martin, I'll send you to Épluches. Peeling potatoes*. It wasn't a Plan B—it was a threat of social death. My father, a Spanish lumberjack turned business owner, had higher expectations. I would rather die than become a worker like my classmates—French to their core, yet content with such a fate. For my father, that would have marked me, once and for all, as a failure.

I must say, during my school years, I never experienced any form of racism—unlike the "Ritals" (a derogatory term for Italians) at the time. In fact, I'm not even aware of any genuine insult aimed at Spaniards in France. Quite the opposite: to all my teachers, I was the example to follow. *Look, you bunch of dunces—his name is Martinez, and he's top of the class!* In truth, I was always the teacher's pet. And my Gaulish classmates didn't even hold it against me. When I entered secondary school, however, surrounded by the offspring of the local bourgeoisie and the heirs of the Parisian elite, I had to shift gears. At first, I felt a bit lost. But gradually, I climbed

back up—especially after dropping Latin in favour of economics. A shame, really, as I enjoyed Latin. But this change turned out to be the right choice. I excelled in French and economic sciences, and once again, I found myself leading the pack, far ahead of those high-society children whose parents had groomed them for Sciences Po (the prestigious Institute of Political Studies in Paris) and the ÉNA (the elite National School of Administration). Even ahead of the Rothschild heir who was my classmate—and who, curiously enough, didn't seem particularly adept at arithmetic or economics. But then again, what's the point of knowing how to count when you don't have to?

As the summit approached—the A-levels—I began to lose steam. My mind was elsewhere. Seven years of my life, locked up like a rare animal in a 35-hectare nature reserve that doubled as my gilded prison, had taken their toll. And, as with all prisons, this one, of course, wasn't mixed. In short, my performance began to slip, but I remained confident. Even an average student, after attending such an elite institution, couldn't possibly fail to earn the mention that would spare him the humiliation of a resit exam. My previous strong results in the French A-levels only reinforced this illusion. I placed all my bets on the high coefficient of economics, where I still had some strengths, and conveniently forgot about the other subjects.

I should have been more cautious. On the day of my very first A-level exam—drawing—I got up at dawn and caught the train at Pontoise station, aiming to reach an improbable suburban secondary school by eight o'clock to create the masterpiece that would earn me a few bonus points. Unlucky me, the train I boarded was an express to Paris. I ended up at Saint-Lazare station. By the time I found another train to backtrack, the exam had already been underway for an hour. They still let me into the room, but I had only an hour left to sketch the few fruits arranged on a table before us. It was then that I remembered I couldn't draw at all, having spent years treating art class as an extension of break time. After half an hour, I handed in my attempt. So much for the bonus. I told myself I didn't need those miserable few points to get the mention I was certain I deserved.

The A-levels arrived. The written results were announced, and disaster struck: a three in philosophy. A meagre thirteen in economic sciences. Not nearly enough to make up for my mediocrity in all the other subjects. In the end, I still scraped by with a "fairly good" mention after a catastrophic oral exam. At least this time, I managed to take the right train. And I wouldn't have to end up at Épluches. Swallowing my pride, I held my A-levels in hand—the key to university. After seven years in private education, I was finally heading to the public sector. Liberation…

## 5. THE LIFE OF LUXURY

With my modest "fairly good" A-level results, I couldn't hope to get into Sciences Po. Besides, my parents would never have been able to afford a room in Paris. After spending my entire adolescence in a Catholic school, I craved freedom. I longed to find my place, to mix with normal people—students from the same social class as mine, neither proletarian nor high bourgeoisie.

At Villetaneuse, the northern suburban university assigned to me based on my place of residence, there was no chance of running into my former classmates from Saint Martin. By then, the children of workers were likely already clocking in at the factory. I expected to find students from the local high school, hoping to form normal relationships with them—finally, relationships with the sons and, at last, the daughters of average French families. But was I still an average French person? Had I ever truly been one? Would I ever become one?

At fourteen, I left the slum where I was born and raised, along with my brother and two sisters. After an abandoned construction project in Montlignon—which, a few years later, would have allowed me to almost walk to Villetaneuse University or take a half-hour train and metro ride to the Sorbonne—we moved to a massive house, still in Auvers but two kilometres further away, even more isolated than the first. This bourgeois residence, surrounded by a two-hectare park, was built by my father with the help of an old retired mason—and us boys. When we weren't at school, we pushed wheelbarrows full of concrete because the old man could no longer move them himself.

In truth, for the first two or three years, we only lived in the basement of this house, as the upper floors were still under construction. I had left a hovel where I shared a double bed with my brother in the same room as my two sisters, only to find myself in the same bed, still with my brother, in a windowless basement room of an unfinished manor. At least now we had access to a shower and proper toilets.

As for running water, we no longer had to worry about running out. Built below the road and just a hundred meters from the Oise, the house was flooded even before construction was completed—one meter eighty of water on the ground floor. My brother and I fashioned a raft to explore our new home. When you're a child, you can find fun in anything, even the worst situations. But every winter after that, we lived in fear of another flood that might leave us without heating—and sometimes without electricity.

By the time I was sixteen, I finally had my own room—upstairs and more or less safe from the whims of the river. In fact, I had my pick of rooms, as my two sisters had hastily married to escape the family hell, and my brother was about to leave as well. I now lived alone with my parents in this "chateau," finally completed and equipped with all the modern amenities, yet eerily deserted. All I dreamed of was finding a way to leave too.

There is indeed a real chateau in Auvers, and I knew both the son of its owner—a classmate at Saint Martin—and the son of its caretaker, a "rital" who had already left school and dabbled in dealing. It was with him that I smoked my first joints during my rare moments of unsupervised freedom. This is the story of my life: I never knew where I truly belonged—at the chateau with the heirs, or in the servants' quarters with the staff. And neither group ever considered me one of their own.

## 6. My First Time

The summer after my A-levels, my father, without consulting me or giving me any advance notice, found me a job for July at the bank where he and his company held their accounts—Société Générale in Pontoise. He must have had some influence with the manager, as I didn't even have to sit through a mock interview, despite lacking both the necessary skills and the natural disposition for a bank clerk's role. More broadly, I was completely unfamiliar with the strange and fascinating world of office life.

I experienced this inevitable rite of passage—from childhood and pocket money to the adult world of salaried work—as a necessary and painful ordeal, almost akin to losing one's virginity. The first time, we suspect that, lacking prior experience, it won't be as enjoyable as we might have imagined. Still, we hope that, like for everyone else, it will get easier over time—we'll start to enjoy it, even find some satisfaction in it. At worst, if real pleasure remains elusive, we'll settle for the money handed to us in exchange for offering our labor to big capital—for its greatest profit and fullest enjoyment.

Temporarily, I left the familiar, reassuring world of school and stepped into the unknown realm of paid work. For this initiation, I was prudently assigned to the clearing department, likely to avoid any potentially catastrophic interactions with customers. Every day, customers deposit cheques from other banks at Société Générale, and elsewhere, people deposit Société Générale cheques at other banks. To avoid unnecessary fund movements, the clearing department's task is to tally all these cheques and cancel them out against each other, leaving only the net balance to be transferred. In practice, this meant the clearing staff manually adding up, bank by bank, the thousands of cheques deposited at the branch the previous day, using only a simple calculator to arrive at the exact figure that all parties would agree upon.

I've always struggled to add more than five lines without making a mistake, so you can imagine the odds of me arriving at the correct total after adding thousands of figures with decimals for over an hour. In a month, I don't think I ever got the correct number on the first try. Another employee—a real one—had to redo my additions to get the right total. He would finish the task in twenty minutes, casually chatting with his colleagues, while I spent almost the entire morning getting nowhere. I had nightmares about it, redoing those endless additions in my sleep, anxiously wondering where the fatal error was hiding—an error that rendered all my work useless and made me feel completely worthless.

My office manager didn't mince words in making it clear how pathetic an employee I was, rightly assuming that my presence in the office was due solely to my connections as the son of a major client of the branch. "*You will be an employee, my son.*" This initiation ordeal was particularly painful for me, and it left a lasting mark. For the rest of my life, I would harbour a deep aversion to office work—the very path my schooling and future studies seemed to have prepared me for.

I almost regretted not choosing to be a labourer. At least with manual work, like cutting wood, you can sometimes let your mind wander. When I wasn't working at Société Générale, my father would drag my brother and me out of bed at five in the morning—summer or winter—to work in the forest, thirty or fifty kilometres from home. We'd travel with other Spanish or Yugoslav loggers in the back of a covered van. At least we were in the fresh air. While burning branches or stacking logs, I could let my thoughts drift.

But I couldn't imagine spending my life as a woodsman, especially with my father as my boss. I was starting to seriously worry about my professional future. So, what were my options? A pen-pusher in an office or a labourer in a factory? Kafka or Zola?And what if I was simply good for nothing, as my father so frequently—and perhaps intentionally—reminded me all day long, hoping to motivate me?

## 7. The Anti-Ostriches Movement

When I arrived on the campus of Villetaneuse in October 1974, after seven years spent in the leafy grounds of Saint Martin School in Pontoise, I was abruptly transported from a privileged enclave reserved for a few heirs of high society to one designated for the numerous offspring of the suburban working class. At the time, the democratisation of higher education ensured that a handful of privileged students continued to secure the limited places available at the most prestigious institutions, like Sciences Po, while the rest of the crowd packed into lecture halls designed for 500 but holding over 1,000 students, and into seminar rooms meant for 30, crammed with 50. The former group would ultimately gain access to professional careers as senior executives, while the latter would be left with a consolation prize—a diploma of little value in the job market. At best, it might qualify them for office jobs they could have aimed for with just a high school diploma, or for preparing for obscure administrative exams in the hope of one day becoming minor civil servants.

Despair eventually breeds revolt, and Paris XIII fell under the sway of a handful of far-left students who declared that if one was destined to earn a worthless diploma, it might as well be done without any effort. My time at Villetaneuse thus became an endless series of strikes, with each year regularly concluding in exams that were mere formalities, followed by automatic promotion based on seniority. Fortunately, these long periods of inactivity were occasionally brightened by concerts in our lecture halls, transformed into performance spaces by a group of cheerful anarchists, the founders of the aptly named Anti-Ostriches Movement. During those four years, I learned almost nothing about economics, but I discovered Jacques Higelin, Bernard Lavilliers, Téléphone, and West African Cosmos—artists who gave some of their first concerts in the very halls where my political science or business law professors should have been. And since fate didn't seem inclined to make me an economist, I decided to become a rock musician instead.

## 8. THE BLUE HOUSE

To play the drums, the first thing you need is… a drum kit. Using the money from my first summer job, I bought a second-hand one. All that was left was to learn how to play it. On a friend's recommendation, I ended up taking private lessons in Enghien-les-Bains with the drummer from Dharma, one of the best experimental jazz bands of the time. It was a bit like learning to drive with a Formula 1 world champion as your instructor—despite having never touched a steering wheel—just to get your licence for an old 2CV and go on holiday.

The guy was lovely. Realising quickly that, starting drumming as a dilettante in my twenties, I would never become the next Billy Cobham—and that this wasn't my goal anyway—he kindly agreed to teach me the basics of rock accompaniment. With these few rhythmic fundamentals, I decided not to waste any more of his time or my money. I stopped the lessons and began practicing on my own. Two of my neighbours played guitar, and the bassist, Marc, was just sixteen—five years younger than me. He was the son of sculptor Georges Jeanclos, who would later become famous. This was my first band: *Les Rebelles*.

Our first public appearance was at the end-of-year party at the lycée, held in the Saint-Ouen l'Aumône community hall. We were only supposed to play one song before the prize-giving, but the band leader refused to leave the stage. Citing more or less imaginary encores, he stretched our set by three or four additional songs, much to the annoyance of the organisers. Between Beatles covers and the somewhat bland compositions of our singer, we managed to liven up a few dance nights with mixed success. Eventually, Marc and I decided to part ways with this variety singer and formed a new band with some Cameroonian friends I had met at university. This band would be called *Mami Wata*.

The guitarist was a true virtuoso, playing Hendrix like no one else. For a while, we triumphed in community halls and youth clubs across the region. But this guitar hero proved too unpredictable. We could never be sure if he would show up on the day, be in a state to play, or have a spare string for his guitar in case he broke one while playing with his teeth. Still with the bassist, we formed a new band built around a pianist who composed all our jazz-rock pieces. At my suggestion, the band was modestly named *Experience*—a tribute to my idol, Jimi Hendrix.

After several fairly successful concerts, our career ended in disappointment. We were scheduled to play at an open-air festival in Pontoise, just before the star of the show, Valérie Lagrange, who had generously provided all her band's equipment for the opening acts. But delays piled up, and Valérie Lagrange, likely not wanting to stay too late, decided to go on before us—packing up her gear afterward to return to Paris with her two trucks and twenty roadies. Ironically, she became our opening act. We had counted on her massive sound system to deliver an exceptional performance, but instead, we had to rely on our own inadequate amplifiers, ill-suited for an outdoor concert. By the time we went on, the audience was sparse, the star had left, and we didn't even have monitors. Unable to hear ourselves, we struggled to stay in rhythm. For a band already teetering on the edge, it was the final blow. Besides, I had to leave for the army...

So, a bitter end. Meanwhile, the regional band with whom we shared the limelight, *the Blessed Virgins*—more in tune with the times—had gone to record their first album in London. I would never become a rock star. But for me, this experience was undoubtedly the most intense of my life. During this period, we rehearsed in an incredible house in Auvers-sur-Oise, at the home of Rosine Luguet, whose daughter, Adélaïde, was a schoolmate of our bassist. Adélaïde's father, D'Dée, a legendary dancer at the Tabou in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, had remarried Ursula Vian-Kübler, the widow of Boris Vian. This later gave me the chance to see where Vian had lived, at Cité Véron in Pigalle.

Rosine herself was the daughter of André Luguet, a renowned theatre and film star of the early twentieth century. Her house was a bit like Maxime Le Forestier's *Blue House*—she had thrown away the key, and anyone could drop by at any hour of the day or night to eat, drink, or sleep. Most notably, it was a place where one could smoke anything that could be smoked at the time—often grown directly in the garden. Rosine had also been an actress, performing notably with the *Troupe des Branquignoles*. She graciously offered a room in her house for the *West African Cosmos* band to rehearse, and after they left for new adventures, we were ready to take their place.

Arriving at Rosine's place felt like stepping into another world. In those days, it was rare to encounter Africans in Auvers-sur-Oise. From the rehearsal room came unfamiliar sounds and rhythms, accompanied by chants in a language whose name we didn't even know. We would often find the band members gathered around an African dish, scooping from it with their enormous hands. For a few hours, a night, or a weekend, I became the hippie I had always dreamed of being, before returning to my life as a bourgeois student. Many of my friends at the time, less cautious than I was, did not survive this excess of freedom. For some, it led to hard drugs, turning their artificial paradises into very real hells.

I was fortunate to narrowly escape at least two raids by the drug squad. One took place at Rosine's house where, by some miracle, the cops didn't find so much as a cigarette butt in an ashtray—even though just weeks earlier, a large bundle of garden-grown weed had been drying in the rehearsal room. The other raid happened at a dealer friend's apartment, where I had smoked opium the night before. This time, the police found a substantial stash, and he ended up in prison. Had I suffered the same fate, my father would never have forgiven me, and the consequences for my life and future would have been far more devastating than just the legal repercussions.

Throughout my life, I seemed to play with fire without ever getting burned. I was fortunate never to be in the wrong place at the wrong time—and sometimes lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. It felt as though a guardian angel was watching over me, one I would meet later in life. In any case, this marked the end of my wonderful musical interlude. After a final failed audition at Hérouville, in Jacques Higelin's Bergerie, where a musician was urgently seeking a drummer for a concert the next day, I sold my drum kit. The army, which I had failed to avoid, was about to set me back on the right path in its own way...

# 9. The Three Days

I was twenty-three years old, and with my Economics Master's degree—largely obtained under false pretences—I had reached the end of my reprieve. Military service, like a delayed prison sentence, eventually had to be served, even if you'd been granted a deferment. I received my summons for what was then called the "three days," which, in reality, lasted just one. For me, it would take place at the Fort de Vincennes. By an extraordinary coincidence, my brand-new brother-in-law, who had just completed his dental studies, was also serving at the time. Assigned to the medical corps, his role was to examine young recruits summoned to Vincennes and determine their fitness to become good little soldiers. He reassured me. As a dentist, he couldn't directly declare me unfit, but all the other young doctors on the board, like him, were his friends. One way or another, I would be deemed unfit—that much was certain.

All my friends from that time had already been declared unfit. Typically, they showed up at *the three days* in tatters, after several sleepless nights on LSD, claiming to be insane, homosexual, and suicidal. The army has a holy horror of what it doesn't understand and an aversion to complications. Suppressing strong-willed individuals? That it knows how to do—it's the army's job, its mission. But dealing with lunatics, druggies, and gays? No. It doesn't know how to handle such outcasts and fears their "contamination" too much. For those who truly didn't want to serve and were determined to make it known, reform was inevitable. But I couldn't see myself playing this role of the asocial, even for one day. That act requires a complete loss of self-control and direct confrontation with the authorities—the state itself. I wasn't rebellious to that extent.

Throughout my life up to that point, I had dealt with authority—parents, teachers, bosses—by avoiding direct confrontation, which would inevitably lead to my downfall. I was more suited to cautiously navigating country roads with false papers than to speeding down a motorway without a license, drunk and reckless. That's why the almost-legal path to exemption proposed by my brother-in-law seemed perfect for me. But just days before my summons, came a cold shock: the exemption board had turned into a chaotic mess. The young doctors had been granting exemptions left and right, often in exchange for small or large "gifts"—and, in some cases, outright bribes. Investigations were underway, and the crackdown had already begun. An easy exemption was no longer an option for me.

To slip through the net, I had only one option left: to invent a convincing fake illness. My brother-in-law suggested epilepsy. Epileptic once, epileptic always. All it takes is proving you've had a seizure to be declared unfit for service. He was even willing to create a fake prescription attesting to this imaginary first seizure. But I hesitated. To be or not to be epileptic? In a way, being epileptic is like being an actor: you only need to play the part convincingly to be classified as such. But conversely, if you ever decide to give up that role, convincing others of your fitness and sanity can be nearly impossible. You risk being forever labelled as unreliable—a good-for-nothing.

My life was just beginning. I was considering becoming a professor, sitting for exams. Why not even a diplomat? To be reformed and labelled as epileptic… I would carry that mark of infamy for life. Worse still, what if, after declaring myself

epileptic, I actually became so? And then, perhaps, something deep within me resisted the idea of exemption. After all, I had always been a legalist, not a revolutionary. A grumbler rather than a true rebel. Cheating, yes. But questioning the rules of the game? Not so much. Facing challenges to emerge stronger always seemed preferable to evading them. I decided to face this one. Military service, it was said, would make you a man. And what if that were true?

## 10. THE BEAN FAIR

I was called up for military service on the 1st of August. In July, I had taken a short holiday to escape briefly before this year of incarceration, but I still didn't know where I would be stationed. On the way back, I called my mother. She opened the fateful letter that had just arrived. "Arpajon," she informed me. I had no idea where that was. The Côte d'Azur? Alsace? The suburbs of Paris? At university, a communist friend with well-placed connections had promised to intervene on my behalf, ensuring I wouldn't be assigned too far from home. This would allow me to return more frequently on leave—or even to come home every evening. At the time, there was no internet. No mobile phones. We had a map of France in the car, but finding Arpajon on it, when you didn't even know which region to search, was no small task.

I asked a petrol station attendant. All he knew about Arpajon was its famous Bean Fair. That didn't help much—beans were everywhere. According to him, it was south of Paris. He was right. I eventually located Arpajon, the place where I was doomed to spend, if not lose, a year of my life. In reality, I would only ever see Arpajon's train station and its barracks, hidden deep in the woods. I would never set foot in the town centre. Let alone the Bean Fair.

The August intake consisted of students who began their military service at the end of the school year, following their deferment. But not just any students. The most motivated were strongly encouraged to undergo military preparation before their enlistment, allowing them to be called up as officer cadets. The mere privates of the August intake, on the other hand, were those who weren't rebellious enough to be reformed but weren't compliant enough to volunteer as cadets. Most of us were around twenty-three years old, though some were much older. Several were married, and some even had children. Almost everyone came from the Paris region, assigned close to home thanks to well-placed connections, and most held qualifications equivalent to a bachelor's degree plus four, five, or even six years of study.

Not exactly the profile of the five other classes of conscripts—non-deferred, provincial, rural, and often peasants, barely of age, and at best holders of a school certificate. Not to mention a minority who were entirely illiterate. This stark contrast left the few non-commissioned officers in charge of us somewhat bewildered. Many of them were younger than us, had little to no formal education, and came from far less privileged backgrounds.

The eldest in our group was over thirty. Bald and significantly overweight, he looked fifty. From studies to marriage, and from marriage to child-rearing, he was undoubtedly the French record-holder for deferment. No one could fathom how he had managed to avoid conscription for so long. To top it off, he was a journalist for *L'Humanité*. As a matter of principle—and since communists are never anti-militarist—he hadn't done anything to get himself reformed, patiently waiting for the army to take the initiative and send him home, which it eventually did after a few months. Indeed, this leftist intellectual with a benign appearance, reasoning without being truly oppositional or anarchistic, was the worst kind of recruit for a sergeant and his superiors. A deserter who skips leave and doesn't return is hunted down by the gendarmes, brought back to the barracks, and put under arrest, which only extends his service time. Our comrade, however, didn't resist or argue. Instead, he politely asked for explanations about everything, feigning interest—explanations that his junior officers, naturally, struggled to provide. Sometimes, he even went so far as to offer suggestions or proposals. Nothing overtly insubordinate, but just enough to drive a non-commissioned officer, trained only to bark orders, into utter despair.

Every morning, we assembled in the courtyard for the raising of the flag. Afterward, during roll call, we stepped out of the ranks one by one to collect our mail. He was subscribed to *L'Humanité*, which the sergeant was therefore obliged to hand over to him personally each day in front of the entire squad at attention—though grinning. The flag-raising was, in a way, the army's equivalent of mass. And our comrade received his copy of *L'Humanité* as if it were the Holy Sacrament. The officers were vaguely aware that this daily ritual had an absurd, even mocking, quality, but they had no idea how to address it without risking embarrassment. The military, though rigid in enforcing its regulations, fears above all the Law of the Republic. Nothing in the rules seemed to prohibit a soldier from subscribing to *L'Humanité* as long as he wasn't proselytizing, and the law didn't appear to permit depriving him of such "enlightening" reading. Of course, there were discreet attempts at discouragement—subtle harassment, perhaps. But how do you intimidate someone who is a journalist for *L'Humanité*? By the next day, it would be in his newspaper...

I won't burden you with more stories from my military service, though there is much more I could tell. After a whole year of doing nothing and thinking about nothing, I returned to civilian life in great shape—with a rested body, a clear mind, and a renewed zest for life. The experience of imprisonment, when not overly prolonged, has the virtue of restoring the true meaning of freedom. Total idleness and sheer absurdity can reignite one's desire for action and reflection. In this sense, military service was both a return to the original void and a genuine rebirth for me.

## 11. My Universities

I returned to civilian life full of energy, determined to make up for lost time. At Villetaneuse University, I hadn't experienced the student life I had fantasized about when I left Saint Martin's School with my A-levels in hand. I had chosen Economics because I was interested in politics, but also for practical reasons, believing it offered the best path to a career that would suit me and ensure an acceptable, if not ideally fulfilling, future. However, while economics is a soft science—neither predictive nor experimental—its methodological framework leans heavily on the hard sciences of mathematics and statistics. Economics thus combines the nebulous aspects of the humanities with the most forbidding elements of the exact sciences. Economic and social sciences are philosophy and psychology turned into equations. It's a bit like trying to prove the existence of God with a computer program, measuring desire with a caliper, quantifying happiness with a thermometer, assessing an elected official's honesty with a weighing scale, or weighing pros and cons on a kitchen scale.

Although I had once dreamed of becoming an astrophysicist, I had to face the facts: I was more of a humanities person. Until my A-levels, economics had felt like history told by a journalist. But at university, I no longer had the mathematical foundation, especially after four chaotic years at a university in perpetual strike. Even though I had miraculously earned a consolation diploma, I was on the brink of dropping out. My first summer job at Société Générale had already given me a bitter taste of what awaited me if I continued pursuing a managerial path—and how little my knowledge of Keynesian or Marxist theories would help in a banking job. Better to die. If I was going to study something with no clear career path, I might as well choose a subject that genuinely interested me. And if I was going to be a student, it might as well be at the legendary Sorbonne.

What interested me most at the time was reconnecting with my Spanish roots. During my secondary education, my Spanish father had insisted I take German as my first language and English as my second. After all those years of study, I spoke both languages about as well as I spoke Latin. Now, I would make my own choice. Using equivalencies, I decided to enrol in the second year of a Spanish Literature degree at La Sorbonne. The only problem? I had never studied Spanish in school. No matter. I already spoke a bit of Spanish from practising it during our family holidays each summer on the Costa Dorada. A month of summer courses at the University of Salamanca should be enough to give me the basics.

Two months later, I arrived at Clignancourt. The real Sorbonne would have to wait a bit longer. The first two years of the Paris IV degree took place at Porte de Clignancourt. It was still better than Villetaneuse, though even further from Auvers-sur-Oise, where I was still stuck living due to a lack of funds for a room in Paris. But I was highly motivated. I had to be, as I knew I wasn't at the required level. At the first lecture in the amphitheatre, I arrived late. The entrance was by the professor's desk. As I stepped in, every eye in the amphitheatre turned towards me. I sat down as discreetly as I could, glancing around to better understand the discomfort I had felt on entering. The amphitheatre was filled with girls—only girls. I was getting closer to paradise.

My professors quickly noticed that I was an exceptional case. I was a boy, older than the others, and my Spanish skills were at a fourth-grade level at best. But they were all incredibly supportive, recognising my extraordinary motivation. Every day, I got up at five in the morning. A short run to maintain the fitness I had gained during military service, then I tackled the assigned novels—in Spanish, of course. I understood only half the words and looked up the rest in the dictionary. I continued my readings on the train—two hours of commuting to Clignancourt—using the time to familiarise myself with the Spanish classics. Everything fascinated me: classical and modern literature, Spanish and Latin American works, the Golden Age, and the Civil War. The same war that had driven my father to seek exile in France in 1939 with his parents. The war that, in many ways, had shaped my own destiny.

By the end of the year, I had caught up with my classmates. The following year, I earned my degree with honours. Any time I wasn't commuting or attending classes, I spent in the library. Occasionally, my professors would ask me for the references of the articles I cited—ones they hadn't come across themselves. But my voracious appetite for learning wasn't satisfied. Taking advantage of equivalences that allowed me to shorten courses and study at least two disciplines simultaneously, I accumulated the equivalent of fifteen years of higher education and earned seven university diplomas in different specialisations.

## 12. Become Who You Are

With my entry into the Spanish Literature degree, I finally gained access to the inner sanctum: the Sorbonne. In practice, most seminars were held at the Instituto Hispánico on Rue Gay-Lussac. No matter—it was the Latin Quarter. And the lectures took place in the historic setting of the Sorbonne itself, with its majestic halls adorned with woodwork and frescoes. The contrast with Villetaneuse was striking. There, the lecture halls were made of concrete and covered in graffiti. Professors at Paris XIII taught in fear of having a bucket of water or a sack of flour thrown at them, openly and without fear of sanction from leftist students. Here, some professors still lectured in togas, commanding silence with nothing more than a clearing of the throat. Others dictated their lectures, which young women from good families dutifully transcribed word for word. May '68 felt like a distant memory. But I must admit, I saw only advantages to this return to order.

In Spanish, there are fewer students than in English. They tend to come from slightly more working-class backgrounds and are generally more motivated. Many, like me, have Spanish origins, or they have a genuine passion for Spain and the language of Cervantes. A few steps from the Sorbonne, the small Instituto Hispánico is both modern and already somewhat outdated. The atmosphere there is more relaxed than at the Sorbonne—more intimate, even. We address the lecturers informally, have coffee with them at the local café, perform theatre together after classes, discuss the world after rehearsals, have drinks until the early hours—and more, if the mood strikes.

Having caught up with my classmates in Spanish Literature, I am also pursuing a third cycle in Economics at the *Centre d'Études Ibériques et Latino-Américaines Appliquées*, also housed at the Instituto Hispánico. It's a way to keep my options open as I consider a potential return to the business world. After all, I still don't know what I might do with a degree in Spanish, apart from attempting the CAPES, which doesn't particularly excite me. Throughout my life, I would often find myself teaching, without ever considering myself a teacher or aspiring to become one.

This return to economics helps me secure two internships in Spain, which, combined with my previously earned diplomas, enables me to join a third cycle in Marketing at Sciences Po. In other words, I make a grand exit from one of the most prestigious schools after having entered through the proverbial open window. At Sciences Po, I reconnect—if one can call it that—with my old classmates from Saint Martin's School. Not the same individuals, of course, but the same elite. They all have long, hyphenated names, or, failing that, names that double as luxury brands. In my cohort, there is even a Miss Peugeot. On weekends, they organise high-society rallies. I hadn't known such things existed—and I still don't fully understand what they are. Not being sectarian, they kindly invite me to join, but I decline, fearing yet again that I won't fit in and will embarrass myself by breaking codes I don't understand.

To celebrate the end of the year at Sciences Po, I reluctantly agree to attend a party at one of our wealthy classmate's homes. The windows overlook the gardens of Matignon, and I realise I'm in a minister's house when he pokes his head through the door to greet his daughter and check if everything is alright. History has caught up with me. Once again, I find myself mingling in an elite environment to which I do not belong—while still not fully belonging to any other.

The question remains: what should I do with my life? Starting with this professional life, which, at over twenty-five, I have yet to enter. At Sciences Po, as others might have a revelation at Lourdes, I have mine. One of our speakers is Georges Péninou, one of the few specialists in France at the time in semiology applied to marketing and advertising. Suddenly, I glimpse the possibility of combining my love for language and literature with my growing interest in marketing. Péninou was trained by Barthes. But Barthes is dead. All that remains is to find out where one can study semiology in Paris and who succeeded Barthes at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, where he taught until his life was tragically cut short by a van, right in front of the Sorbonne. My life has been a long scavenger hunt, a search for who I wanted to be. “Become who you are,” Nietzsche said. Easy to say. But first, one must know who one is—and that can only be understood in the end, provided one has searched long and hard. I am still searching...

## 13. ALGIRDAS JULIEN GREIMAS

While waiting to become who I want to be—at this stage, a semiologist, despite barely understanding the term—I secured an internship through Sciences Po at a market research company. I'll omit its name, but it was a French subsidiary of an American group specialising in quantitative studies, renowned for developing a sales prediction model. When an advertiser considers launching a new product, this company conducts surveys to gauge potential consumers' interest in the idea. The survey results are then fed into a mysterious program, along with other marketing data such as price levels, distribution channels, planned advertising investments, and numerous other variables. Finally, after processing all this information, the central computer, housed at the company's headquarters in the United States, delivers its oracle—like the Pythia of Delphi.

The secret behind this predictive model, which has made the fortune of this research firm, is as closely guarded as the recipe for Coca-Cola—even the French subsidiary remains in the dark. On the appointed day, accounting for the time difference, someone must call the mythical creator of this magic formula—a “doctor” based across the Atlantic—to obtain the fateful number that will determine the fate of the new product. In short, it's not far removed from Nostradamus or *Madame Soleil*. If this is what quantitative studies, supposedly scientific, entail, why not give semiology a try instead?

I continue my quest and discover that a semiology course is still offered at the Sorbonne, within the renowned *École Pratique des Hautes Études*—an institution where some of the greatest human sciences researchers have taught, and which, like the Collège de France, is known for offering free access to its lectures for auditors. I attend a session. It turns out to be primarily a phonetics course, taught by one of the leading linguists of the time, André Martinet, with occasional semiology basics provided by his wife, Jeanne, who assists him at each session. In the attic of the Sorbonne, the Martinet couple—already advanced in years—deliver a highly academic education to a small group of doctoral students. This is far removed from the dynamic and provocative style of Barthes. From the first class, I realise that if research in semiology is still thriving somewhere in Paris, it's certainly not happening here.

I ask one of these senior students for guidance, and he points me to a better lead: the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*. Despite its somewhat similar name, it is unrelated to the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. Apparently, a certain Algirdas Julien Greimas—whom I have never heard of—is spreading the good word there. I decide to check it out. Greimas's seminar takes place every Wednesday at 2 p.m. in the lecture hall of the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Port-Royal, and it, too, is open to free auditors.

As soon as I step into what resembles a chapel, filled with attendees and where the master is about to officiate, I have another revelation: I am about to witness a key moment in the history of research.

Greimas, who vaguely resembles Einstein with his large moustache, is as old as Martinet but carries a playful expression and mischievous eyes that immediately reveal he is younger in spirit than most of his disciples. These disciples fall into two categories. The first, often referred to as the twelve apostles, are brilliant intellectuals in their thirties—usually doctoral students but often already teaching. They form the inner circle around the prophet of the *Paris School of Semiotics*, which is not an official institution but rather a movement of thought and a research trend.

The comparison to religion stops at the somewhat dusty decor of this grand seminar and the passion animating its participants. Here, there is no guru. Of everyone in the room, Greimas is probably the least serious. He shares the stage with his followers, and anyone in the audience is free to speak up at any moment—though few dare, for fear of saying something foolish. The discussions soar to incredible intellectual heights, especially for someone like me, coming from a background in economics and literature, with no knowledge of linguistics and even less of semiotics. Simply put, they've even written a dictionary to better understand one another—the *Dictionnaire Raisonné de la Théorie du Langage*. They are now working on the second volume, and anyone is welcome to propose entries and definitions. It is a language entirely foreign to me.

The good news? It can be learned. Here, as Lacan might say, there is no "master" dispensing truths to eager students. In this amphitheatre, nothing is certain. Together, we search. Every day, we are ready to question the relevance of what we thought we had discovered the day before. Ultimately, we witness—and even contribute to—the emergence of knowledge in real-time. In my already lengthy student career, this is the first time I have experienced such a collective intellectual adventure. It is a revelation. I missed Barthes; I won't miss Greimas.

## 14. 10 rue Monsieur-le-Prince

With the first payments from my various internships, I can't yet afford to rent a studio in Paris in my own name. For that, I'd need a permanent contract with substantial pay slips. But at the very least, I've found a sublet near Montparnasse. A girl from university who's going to spend a year in Spain on Erasmus. It's not quite my own place, but when I first set foot in this small attic room, it feels like walking on the Moon. A small step for any student, a giant leap for me. No more accounts to render to my mother. No more orders from my father. From now on, I will only receive orders from my employers. As few as possible, but one must make some concessions. And besides, employers can always be changed… while waiting for the day I can finally do without them.

But more importantly, with this pied-à-terre in Paris, no more suburban trains! Nearly two hours to get from Chaponval to Paris early in the morning, and just as long to return late in the evening. This, of course, made any social outings after classes or a Parisian lifestyle in general impossible. It's a significant saving of time and energy, which will allow me to start studying semiotics seriously, while continuing to work at the research firm where I was already interning and where I have just been hired part-time. This will now be my credo: never again a full-time job in my life.

I joined Greimas's seminar in the middle of the year, too late to enrol in the third cycle at EHESS. And besides, I have almost no knowledge of linguistics and even less of semiotics. Is it really reasonable to undertake a thesis on this subject directly? I will use the remainder of the academic year to get up to speed, by attending the seminar and workshops as a free auditor. In addition to the grand Wednesday seminar, Greimas's most faithful disciples run weekly research workshops specialising in the various areas that semiotics claims to address. The very titles of these workshops are utterly incomprehensible to the uninitiated, starting with me. But, miracle, one of them is dedicated to advertising communication.

It is led by Jean-Marie Floch. Much younger than Péninou, who is nearing retirement, he was barely forty at the time, and I discover that he is the leading specialist in the field at the moment. More importantly, not only is he a prominent researcher who has already published several works on the semiotics of images, but he also works as a freelancer for research firms and advertising agencies. Precisely what I dream of doing one day. All that remains is for me to be accepted as a free auditor in his workshop, and for that, I go there at the appointed time for the next session.

Most of the workshops take place on the first floor of a small, dilapidated building at 10 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, not far from the Sorbonne. I will later learn that Auguste Comte lived there in the past. On the ground floor is a storage room, and on the first floor, a broom cupboard serving as Greimas's office, and another room just a little larger where the workshops are held. As we know, the Republic is not very generous with its researchers, and the university is even less so with this somewhat foreign troublemaker and his band of young, enthusiastic doctoral students who challenge the well-established boundaries between different disciplines, claiming to provide a common language for all the human sciences.

Jean-Marie Floch welcomes me politely. The Paris School of Semiotics is open to all, including a few enthusiasts who, perhaps due to its seemingly esoteric metalanguage, take Greimas for a guru and his followers for a sect. Even though there are fewer than ten of us, the most difficult part is finding a not-too-wobbly chair and a place to put it. After that, overjoyed, I attend for the first time the Advertising Semiotics Workshop led by this great specialist in the field. This first time will also be my last. The following week, Jean-Marie Floch informs us that he is suspending his teaching until the end of the academic year. Between his research work and his freelance semiotics activity, he is overwhelmed and must make choices. Moreover, his wife has just given birth to their second child.

It is a disappointment for everyone and a disaster for me. But I'm not one to be easily discouraged. I propose to the other participants that we continue the workshop in self-management. Self-management, which I quickly take control of. It didn't take me long to realise that most of my colleagues, who have been attending for several years and some of whom are working on a thesis with Greimas, have a rather mystical conception of semiotics and use its metalanguage in a rather surreal manner. Despite appearances, they know little more than I do. But I am acutely aware of my ignorance of this very rigorous discipline, I am determined to learn, and I have already started doing so by reading and rereading all of Greimas's books.

Compared to the others, I also have the advantage of knowing advertising well, of which they know nothing. In short, within a few weeks, these abandoned sheep regard me, more or less against my will, as their new shepherd. I hold authority and replace this illustrious professor whose class I have only attended once. Throughout my life, I have practised before knowing and taught to learn. The workshop's principle was for each participant to work on a practical exercise to be submitted at the end of the year. When the time came, we all submitted our work to Jean-Marie Floch, who agreed to return for the final session to close the workshop. For my part, with the limited semiotic knowledge I had acquired through my readings, I analysed a car advertisement. At the end of this final session, Floch asks to see me. Is he going to reprimand me for taking advantage of his absence to stage a coup in his advertising semiotics workshop? Will he gently let me know that the paper I submitted is not up to the standard of a third-cycle student? In short, has he realised that I am merely an impostor?

To my great surprise, without commenting on the work I had submitted, he offers me the chance to replace him with one of his clients for a semiotic analysis that he doesn't have time to do himself. I am, of course, very surprised, delighted, and completely anxious. The client in question is a computing group, and it concerns advertisements for electronic components. Not only have I never conducted semiotic studies for a real advertiser, but I also know absolutely nothing about this universe of products.

In addition to my job as a research assistant, I now find myself analysing in my attic room a large corpus of rather technical and rather austere advertisements for mysterious products that do not fall into the category of mass consumption, and of which I have no idea who they are really intended for. Floch comes to see me once to ensure that everything is going well. I present my work to him, expressing my distress. I will not see him again until the presentation day with the client, where he lets me present my analysis without making any comments.

It seems that my presentation was not so disastrous, as Jean-Marie then entrusts me with several other analyses, this time in the pharmaceutical sector with which, of course, I am equally unfamiliar. To top it all off, to lighten his schedule a bit, Floch offers me the chance to run his workshop the following term, alternating with him. I will be responsible for advertising semiotics, and he for visual semiotics, his area of expertise. Six months after discovering semiotics, on Jean-Marie Floch's recommendation to Greimas, who fully trusts him, I am given the responsibility of teaching it, as the head of this research unit under the aegis of EHESS and CNRS. My career as an impostor is launched. Nothing will stop me now.

However, to gain a semblance of legitimacy, I consider it prudent to register for a DEA (a postgraduate diploma), to officially learn the basics of the discipline that I will, in fact, be responsible for teaching to Greimas's doctoral students.

## 15. THE BOUGNAT

A few steps from 10 Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, where I am due to give my first class on advertising semiotics, there used to be a tiny bistro run by an Auvergnat. I don't know if it still exists. Some parts of Paris have changed little since the 1950s, and this Auvergnat's café, right in the Latin Quarter, already felt like a relic of another era. On Wednesdays, Greimas's schedule was as precise as clockwork. Around nine o'clock, he would have his coffee at this bistro, where he had his regular table and where he might hold a few meetings. He would then work in his tiny office, directly opposite the small room where the workshops are held. After that, he would return to have lunch with the Auvergnat, either in the company of people who had requested a meeting or with his closest disciples. The mobile phone did not yet exist. Those who wished to contact the master would therefore not hesitate to call the bistro, which acted as the receptionist for the head of the Paris School of Semiotics, and which, unbeknownst to him, must have received calls from many of the era's leading intellectuals. Greimas would then take the metro to Port-Royal to give his grand seminar, often accompanied by distinguished guests like Paul Ricœur or Umberto Eco, invited to share the platform with him to provide their contribution or even their critique. For Greimas is not afraid of controversy, which rather stimulates his mind. Even when expressing his doubts, he has an answer to everything, on any subject, and regardless of his interlocutor. He is one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, but he also wields humour, making his interventions more accessible, even on the most arid subjects. When he finishes answering a question, even if only a handful of insiders have truly grasped the meaning of what he said, the others at least remember understanding the joke he made at the beginning, and that reassures them a bit. The seminar continues informally at the local café where the master, to relax, seems to enjoy the company of pretty women more than that of old doctoral students.

While Greimas revels in debate, I am not yet of that disposition. I am, of course, petrified at the thought of facing, for the first time as a lecturer, students who a few months ago were my peers. Especially when Greimas himself is in the office next door, or when Joseph Courtès, who serves as his secretary and co-authored the famous *Dictionnaire Raisonné de la Théorie du Langage* with him, is in the very room where I am giving my class, hearing every word I utter while sorting his papers or typing away. That's why, on Wednesday mornings, before my class, I also go to the bistro and, along with my coffee, down a small calvados to help me relax.

Contrary to expectations, the attendance at my advertising semiotics workshop grows rapidly. Besides the usual students, all of Paris's freelancers eager to pick up some semiotics basics at a bargain flock to my classes. Given the extreme crampedness of the space, some even have to stand in the hallway. Floch reports that Greimas, with whom I have yet to have a proper conversation, is surprised and amused by this. But what is Martinez telling them to attract so many people to his workshop?

## 16. A Great Boss

The end of the academic year is approaching. Floch, until then a freelancer, is offered by Ipsos to establish a semiotics department there. He accepts and, a few months later, asks me to join him. It feels like another dream come true for me. At Ipsos, I will be able to work daily with the leading French specialist in visual and advertising semiotics, not as a student, but as a colleague. And, of course, in his company, I will learn more about applied semiotics in one month than anyone could in a year of study. Our offices are located on the management floor, right next to those of the two big bosses of this dual-headed institute, Didier Truchot and Jean-Marc Lech. Ipsos Semiotics, meaning Floch and I, is directly connected to the management. We are accountable only to our two bosses, who grant us immense freedom. The first advises top politicians, including those at the Élysée. The second advises leading business figures. The brilliant and elegant intellectual Jean-Marie Floch charms the scholar Jean-Marc Lech and even more so the businessman Didier Truchot, forming an inseparable directorial duo whose longevity, until the death of the former, remains a subject of admiration for all and a mystery to me. On Rue des Jeûneurs, where the institute is still based but will soon outgrow its premises, they even share the same office. Like all enduring partnerships, they have very different personalities.

Lech is more of a lone wolf, a networker but not really a businessman. He is not soft-hearted and constantly wields an irony that can be quite harsh, if not cynical. But he also has his complexities and darker sides. He is more of an ideologue than a humanist.

Beneath his apparently casual and somewhat gruff exterior, Truchot is a shy, emotional, and intuitive person. Although he does not hesitate to face confrontation, he likes and respects people, and that is what makes him a business leader admired by his employees. Starting from nothing, Didier Truchot has, over the years, built one of the world's top three market research and polling companies. During my "job interview," he simply tells me that if Jean-Marie Floch has chosen me to work with him, I must be the right person, and that is enough for him. When I resign a few years later, with no conflicts having arisen between us, this very busy man takes the time to have a brief chat with me. Is there any particular reason for your decision that we might discuss and that could make you reconsider? I tell him that it is a personal choice. In that case, I wish you good luck, and if you ever want to come back, Ipsos will always have something to offer you. Classy.

I did not return to work at Ipsos, and I only saw Didier Truchot again a few years later at Jean-Marie Floch's funeral, who, unfortunately, had to leave us prematurely. This great boss, who came with his driver, recognised me immediately and called me by my first name. And during this moving ceremony, which he attended to the end, he was in tears.

One can recognise petty bosses by their constant search for a scapegoat to bear the blame for their mistakes. Great bosses, on the other hand, take responsibility not only for their own mistakes but also for those of everyone under their charge, as if they were their own errors. It is in the storm that a great captain is recognised. For in the storm, a true captain does not merely hold the wheel with clenched teeth and pray to God for it to pass. The great captain is not made for calm waters; it is in the storm that he reveals himself, transcends himself, and truly exists. I have seen Didier Truchot face crisis situations as a great boss, which professional secrecy prevents me from detailing. But I can share an anecdote.

A major study had been commissioned to Ipsos for the repositioning of the *Le Progrès* newspaper in Lyon, along with a semiotic analysis. At the last minute, Jean-Marie Floch gives me the honour of presenting the results of this study in Lyon, alongside Didier Truchot and another research director responsible for the quantitative part. I am to meet them directly at the station to catch the TGV with them, but when I arrive, no one is on the platform. Without bothering to inform me, the research director has preferred to take the earlier train. I do not have the address for the meeting. In Lyon, I logically go to the newspaper's headquarters, where I am informed that the presentation is taking place at the personal home of the newspaper's editor, who has a broken leg and lives 50 kilometres away. The newspaper's driver takes me there. I was already quite stressed about presenting a study before a newspaper editor and my own boss, so you can imagine my level of serenity upon arrival. I enter and see Didier Truchot presenting the complex results of my semiotic study to the editor of *Le Progrès* and his entire editorial team, using only a paperboard on which he has scribbled a few mappings. He has read my report on the train but has no visual aids for the presentation, which I have in my briefcase. I am gently ribbed, sit quietly in a corner, and Didier Truchot finishes his presentation, which is nearing its end. I have travelled from Paris for nothing. I was unable to deliver the presentation of this very strategic and, incidentally, very costly study for the client. Even though I am not directly at fault, my boss could easily find reasons to reproach me. On the return train, in the TGV bar, as relaxed as usual, he makes no mention of my failure and holds no grudge against me. For me, it was a disaster; for him, it was just a minor mishap.

Another anecdote: One morning, arriving at the office, employees discover that a cleaner has thrown away all the company's accounting records. The previous evening, the accountant had carelessly left all the files stacked on the floor, and the well-meaning cleaner, mistaking them for old papers, had thrown everything out. The files are rescued just in time from the collective bin, right before the trash truck arrives. Neither the accountant nor the cleaner was fired for this, and everyone was still laughing about it years later. To err is human, and it is the role of a great boss to take responsibility for his employees' mistakes. Today, Didier Truchot is among the top one hundred wealthiest people in France. To succeed, as to simply survive, one must always face challenges and often even sorrow. But one can be a great intellectual or a great boss while maintaining a sense of humour and a minimum of humanity.

## 17. The Duettists

With Jean-Marie Floch at Ipsos, I conduct around a hundred semiological studies over a few years on a wide range of topics, from politics to food, from the press to the automobile industry, from luxury goods to arms manufacturing... These highly strategic studies are most often entrusted directly to us by Jean-Marc Lech and Didier Truchot, who are closely connected to all the circles of political and economic elite of the time. We do not need to engage in sales to offer our services. Our work is requested by top executives, and we usually present our analyses in their presence. Although our services are very expensive, they yield little profit because each study demands significant time investment, and, unlike quantitative research, there is no possibility of delegation or automation. Nevertheless, offering semiotic analyses greatly enhances Ipsos's reputation. Since Barthes, semiotics has enjoyed—and sometimes suffered from—a reputation as a complex, mysterious, even nebulous discipline. Yet, it continues to fascinate. Flooded with data on a daily basis, decision-makers increasingly recognise that quantitative studies cannot address every challenge, particularly the nuanced issues surrounding brand and corporate image.

The company itself, though typically run by marketing professionals from top business schools, maintains a certain respectful yet slightly mocking curiosity about the academic world. Just as a king needs his jester, the CEO understands that, from time to time, an independent, slightly impertinent perspective and an original, offbeat viewpoint can bring fresh insights—breaking the monotony of the reflections offered by his courtiers year after year.

Jean-Marie Floch, a researcher deeply familiar with advertising communication issues, has no trouble charming the most curious among these marketing professionals. He is brilliant, possesses a sharp sense of humour, and treats everyone —from the secretary to the CEO—with equal attentiveness and consideration. His ability to be both pedagogical and enigmatic, always appearing to know far more than his audience could grasp, only adds to his allure. For me, working alongside him is nothing short of a dream. Although he is my director and I am his research assistant, he treats me not as a subordinate but as a younger brother—still a bit rough around the edges and somewhat unruly. He never gives me orders. From the beginning, despite my having far less experience than him, we divide the work between us. He handles his studies, I handle mine, and along the way, we exchange thoughts on our preliminary results, challenges, and doubts. Using one of his favourite expressions, we act as each other's sparring partners, like boxers in training. He critiques or enhances my analyses, and I critique his, often making suggestions that he almost always incorporates. We discuss and, at times, argue passionately. But it's undeniable: we are complementary. He knows far more about semiotics than I do, while I have a slightly stronger grasp of marketing. His analyses can sometimes be too subtle, making them challenging for non-specialists to understand. I help bring simplicity to his work, striving to make his recommendations more actionable. In turn, he corrects my mistakes—occasionally even my spelling errors.

Jean-Marie Floch is far more to me than a mentor, and I am much more to him than just an assistant. We are rarely apart. Often, we use our lunch breaks to dash off together—Jean-Marie being a true mountain man—to visit art or photography exhibitions at the Grand Palais or Beaubourg. A specialist in visual semiotics and a discerning connoisseur in both fields, he is also an accomplished photographer and a skilled draughtsman.

On Wednesday mornings, we take turns leading our semiotics workshops, and in the afternoons, we attend Greimas's seminar. One of the non-negotiable conditions for joining Ipsos was that we retain one day a week for academic research. I quickly get to know Martine, Jean-Marie's wife, and their two children. Our conversations extend far beyond work—we share everything. Jean-Marie is about ten years older than I am and leads a well-ordered life. Every afternoon, his wife calls to remind him to bring home a baguette—a loving way of telling him she's looking forward to his return.

I, on the other hand, am single and lead a more unpredictable lifestyle. On weekends, alone this time, I take full advantage of being a Parisian. I visit museums and exhibitions, go to the cinema, and see plays. On the same day, I might visit two exhibitions, watch two films, and catch a play. I read voraciously—everything published in the field of human sciences, as well as essays on painting and photography, and biographies of painters. Naturally, I discuss all these topics with Jean-Marie. He recommends books, and sometimes even buys them for me. I envy his family happiness, while he takes vicarious delight in my various adventures and misadventures.

At Ipsos, we are rarely seen apart. Those who like us least—rightly viewing us as the management's emissaries and, by extension, as parasites—call us "the duettists." It's their way of reducing us to mere entertainers, if not clowns, who live off their hard work while they claim to earn the money. What they envy most, though, is our independence, our freedom, our intellectual aura, and our almost clandestine Wednesday escapes to academia.

We are migratory birds; they are barnyard animals. Floch is a man in a hurry, perhaps unconsciously aware that his time is limited. A terrible illness will soon take him, striking at the very place where he seemed strongest—his brilliant mind. At fifty, he still looked like a bird fallen from the nest. In the end, the fall came too suddenly.

He also taught me to live with urgency, as if each day might be the last.

## 18. The Status of Freedom

A report is still a report, and a boss is still a boss. The pressure to ensure that Ipsos Semiotics balances its books intensifies. We are pushed to evolve into a generalist qualitative research department, offering semiotic analyses among a broader range of services. To achieve this, we are encouraged to recruit another director who will expand this new line of more conventional but quicker and more profitable offerings.

The new recruit arrives. I sense the danger immediately. Two directors for one research assistant—it's a mess. The new director is primarily a salesman. Consequently, he sells many more studies than we do, mainly what are called consumer focus groups, which he himself moderates, taking only four hours each time. But after that, someone has to summarise everything and draw some actionable conclusions.

A few days after his arrival, he places a file on my desk and casually asks, "Could you write the report for me?" There are moments in life when the path you take hinges on your ability to say no to a request that seems designed to elicit a yes. I realise this is one of those pivotal moments, and without hesitation, I respond with Melville's Bartleby's famous line to his boss: "I would prefer not to." In other words, simply put, no. He feigns surprise and waits for an explanation. No? No. I offer none. I didn't join Ipsos to perform the same research assistant tasks I did before. I came here to do semiotics. Even Jean-Marie Floch, my mentor in the field, has never asked me to write one of his reports for him.

I share my stance with Jean-Marie, who supports me wholeheartedly. The new director reports my refusal to management, and I brace myself for dismissal. In the end, it is he who is forced to leave, lasting only a few weeks. Still, I've seen the writing on the wall—I know my days at Ipsos are numbered.

The new director is replaced by a qualitative research assistant who, at least, cannot claim any authority over me. But the financial pressure remains unchanged. The new assistant, a woman who has worked freelance until now, has no personal life and devotes herself entirely to her work—her sole means of existence and purpose. She stays late into the night, while Jean-Marie and I make it a point to leave by 6:30 p.m. One Sunday, she invites us to return to the office to finalize a presentation due on Monday, framing it as an emergency. This time, it is Jean-Marie who refuses. He understands, as I do, that if we give in, we risk losing our soul.

One morning, Jean-Marie arrives with an escape plan. Greimas has informed him of two semiotics teaching positions available in Quebec. With his wife's enthusiastic support, he decides to apply and suggests that I apply for the second position, which might be a good fit for me. Like two kids, we begin dreaming about this new life in America—he with his family, and I as an adventurer. During our lunch break, we even visit the Quebec Embassy to learn about the formalities and the country, of which we know almost nothing. Jean-Marie, a lover of mountains and wide-open spaces, is drawn to the vast wilderness. I, on the other hand, am captivated by everything I have yet to discover.

Unfortunately, we are soon brought back down to earth. In the end, our profiles do not align with the available positions. Goodbye, Canada. Meanwhile, our new research assistant, initially hired on the same four-day-a-week basis as us, pushes to transition to full-time. I quickly realise that the cherished freedom of our Wednesdays, which we had managed to preserve for returning to university each week, will soon become nothing more than a memory. My decision is clear: I will not fight another battle. This time, I am the one resigning. Better to face unemployment than to work full-time. But, against all odds, I will still discover America…

## 19. Chernobyl

In the meantime, I need a holiday. At over thirty, due to a lack of time and, more importantly, money, I've travelled very little. Spain with my parents. Spain again with friends. Spain still, for work. A few brief trips to London, like everyone else. For the first time in my life, I have paid leave to take. I decide to go alone by train for two weeks.

A few months earlier, I met a Romanian woman, also a student of Greimas. She's an architect with a charming accent. She resembles a matryoshka doll—more the concept than the Russian kind—because it feels like there are layers to her. In short, it's complicated. Our adventure doesn't last. She already has a boyfriend, doesn't want to leave him, and I'm not pushing too hard for her to do so. Still, we remain friends. She mentions her family in Romania and suggests I visit. Being easily swayed, I immediately buy a train ticket to Bucharest. Is she secretly hoping I'll one day ask her parents for her hand?

It's April 26, 1986. That evening, I am set to board a sleeper train to begin my journey to Bucharest. That morning, I hear the news on the radio: a nuclear explosion in Chernobyl. Chernobyl is 2,500 kilometres from Paris, and as everyone knows, the French authorities will insist that the nuclear cloud stops at the border. Bucharest, however, is only 900 kilometres from the explosion, and it's doubtful that Ceausescu's Romania has the means to fend off this deadly wind carried by its Soviet big brother.

My train ticket is non-refundable, so I decide to go anyway. I plan to stop in Austria and see how the situation develops. Arriving in Vienna early in the morning, the news grows increasingly unclear and alarming about this low-key, invisible, painless, yet potentially deadly nuclear explosion. On the route, which passes directly under the explosion's epicentre, Vienna is the last stop on the western side of the Berlin Wall—a wall that, it's worth remembering, is still standing at the time. Even in the West, the information about this catastrophe is questionable at best. In the East, it's likely even worse.

I decide to continue on to Budapest, just 250 kilometres from Vienna. Hungary isn't fully part of the Soviet Bloc yet, so there will still be time to turn back if things take a turn for the worse. In Budapest, I'll be only 1,100 kilometres from the nuclear plant that has just melted down. With that in mind, I board the train for Budapest.

I love train journeys. That moment when you step into the compartment and see the few strangers with whom you'll share many hours. A simple “hello” or a nod suffices to greet them as you take your seat. Then comes the slightly awkward silence, with the unspoken certainty that, after a while—when boredom inevitably sets in—you'll exchange a few polite words, and perhaps more, if the chemistry is right.

Among the passengers are a Chinese man and an Austrian woman. The man, a pianist, is quite talkative and skips over formalities. I'm not entirely sure why he's heading to Budapest, but it's clear he has no accommodation plans there. He announces this in somewhat broken English and doesn't hesitate to ask the Austrian woman, who has connections in the Hungarian capital, if she could host him. She politely declines, offering some excuse to avoid the request.

I haven't booked a hotel either—I prefer to improvise. I keep the conversation with the Austrian woman focused on neutral topics, such as our respective activities. She is a painter or, perhaps, an art student. I don't learn much more about her, as the journey from Vienna to Budapest is fairly short, and the Chinese man dominates most of the conversation.

As we step off the train, the Austrian woman breathes a sigh of relief while bidding farewell to the overly persistent Chinese man. We walk together toward the exit, and I ask if she can recommend a hotel—a subtle way of hinting that I have no idea where to go. Without hesitation, she offers to take me to a friend who often hosts her during her frequent visits to Budapest, a guy who works in advertising.

I see very little of Budapest. The Hungarians, anxious and poorly informed, stay indoors, surviving on canned food and clinging to their radios day and night. They listen to what they know is the official narrative—if not outright the voice of Moscow.

I have fascinating conversations with them. I work with top French advertisers, while advertising in Hungary is still in its infancy. I even start entertaining the idea of moving to Budapest to establish an agency in a country where everything is yet to be done. It's the Hungarian who brings me back to reality with a gentle reprimand. If he's in Budapest, like all his compatriots, it's because he has no choice—he can't leave to escape the Soviet nuclear cloud threatening to annihilate them. "We might all be dying without even knowing it," he says. "And you, with a French passport, not only came here willingly but are also thinking of getting even closer to Chernobyl by continuing on to Romania—one of the worst dictatorships in Eastern Europe, by the way."

I admit I feel a bit embarrassed. It's more the fear of appearing indecent than the fear of dying that ultimately convinces me to change my travel plans. I decide to leave Budapest. At the station, I scan the departures board for the next available train. Zagreb it is. Yugoslavia is still a communist country, but at least it takes me a little further from Chernobyl.

## 20. A Bomb

If I'm going to die, let it be by the sea. After a brief stop in Zagreb, the rather charmless Croatian capital of Tito's still-communist Yugoslavia, I continue by train to Rijeka, the closest coastal city accessible by rail. Rijeka isn't really a tourist or seaside destination. It's primarily a port and a shipyard. But that's fine. But that's fine. The beach is like love—pleasant with others, but painfully pathetic when you're alone.

Since I usually travel by night to save on hotels and escape the monotony of train rides, I arrive in Rijeka in the morning. The town centre is not unpleasant, with its small painted buildings and baroque-style facades. But as far as pastries go, that's where it ends. The cafes are rather austere and serve an undrinkable brew. The shops, when you find them, are stocked with improbable local brands or products from friendly communist countries, wrapped in packaging as strange as it is off-putting. For an advertising specialist like me, it's both a curiosity and a marvel.

It's Saturday, and I can't imagine spending the evening alone in my hotel room. But how do you find where the local youth hang out in a city devoid of capitalist signs, those symbols of abhorred capitalism? No nightclubs in sight. Not even a simple bar. Yet the girls I see walking by, dressed up and heavily made up, are clearly heading somewhere—but where? The only solution seems to be to find out. I spot two of them and discreetly follow. Not to hit on them in particular, but just to find out if there might be other places to go.

Three streets later, they go down a few steps to enter a basement venue. There's no sign indicating a night establishment here. Is it a nightclub, youth club, or private party? There's no way to know without going in. I must be the only tourist in town, I don't speak a word of Croatian, and my English isn't much better—but what else can I do? I didn't come all this way just to turn around and retreat to my hotel.

The girls enter. A young man stands at the entrance. I can't tell if he's selling tickets or screening out strangers like me. What's the risk? I'm used to this—I've been turned away from clubs in Paris plenty of times for showing up alone. I approach the guy and mumble something. He looks a bit surprised but lets me in without any trouble.

It's a tiny nightclub, with a small dance floor at the centre. I head to the bar, order a drink, and observe. Everyone here is between twenty and thirty, and it feels like they all know each other. Naturally, I don't know anyone, and no one knows me. It's not easy to start a conversation, even with the bartender. Still, the atmosphere is warm and welcoming. People seem intrigued by my presence—curious and amused rather than hostile.

I've lost track of the girls I followed, but I don't mind. I'm starting to question why I'm here when, in an almost surreal light, a creature suddenly appears, descending the stairs into the basement. From my angle, she appears tall and slender. She has long, slightly curly ash-blond hair. She wears almost no makeup, but two black lines accentuate her sharp, striking eyes, making them seem even more dangerous. She casts a searching glance over the crowd, her blue-green eyes slightly squinting, which only heightens their magnetism. I'll learn later it's because she's slightly short-sighted.

Finally, she spots some friends, joins them, and starts chatting cheerfully. I feel a bit more at ease, though still deeply intimidated. At least the girl with the minty eyes doesn't seem self-absorbed at all.

I'm still leaning against the bar, watching her, fascinated. She notices me, and I can sense her curiosity. I must be the only person here she doesn't know, and it's immediately obvious I'm not from around here. Once again, I feel out of place. Yet it's in moments like this that I feel most alive. All I have to do is cross the dance floor. But what would I even say? And in what language? I'm frozen, knowing that if I don't take those few steps, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. I've crossed half of Europe to get here. I've avoided a nuclear explosion, but I won't back down from approaching this bomb. I stand up, abandon the idea of a rehearsed line, and head toward her, unsure of what I'll say—or if she'll even listen. The two longest seconds of my life…

## 21. Freelancer

Returning to work after my romance in Croatia feels a bit gloomy. Alongside the simmering conflict with Ipsos management—who insist on moulding me into a full-time, profit-driven executive—I find myself once again at a crossroads. I now know enough about semiotics to hold my own at Greimas's seminar, but I can't see myself dedicating my entire life to becoming a prominent specialist in the field. The thought of defending a state thesis on an obscure topic in my fifties, only to land a lecturing position at a provincial university just a few years before retirement, feels uninspiring. Nor am I eager to channel all my energy into the École Sémiotique de Paris or serve as Greimas's personal secretary. His loyal lieutenant, Joseph Courtès, earned little more than a harsh rebuke from Greimas during his thesis defence at the Sorbonne, despite years of dedicated service. That's not the path I want to follow.

Applied semiotics is an exciting field, but beyond what is now dismissively termed standard theory, research in semiotics often feels as futile as chasing the Holy Grail. Real life lies elsewhere, and I feel I've reached the limits of what the humanities can offer me. To legitimise my presence at EHESS, I hastily completed a DEA thesis under Greimas. For this, I simply repurposed a study I'd conducted at Ipsos for a medical laboratory—on a suitably complex and dull topic to mimic academic research: the analysis of doctors' discourse on cerebral senescence. “That's a subject for me,” quips the mischievous Greimas, ever quick with his wit. It's all a formality. I don't even present my thesis to him; he likely approves it without reading, and I end up with my DEA in hand after a year of teaching doctoral students.

Now I need to choose a thesis topic. This time, a quick meeting with the master is unavoidable. I suggest a comparative analysis of the concept of value in economics and linguistics. He doesn't fully understand where I'm headed but pretends to be interested, asks a few perfunctory questions, and approves the topic. With that, my path is set for the next several years. Apparently, I made a good impression. A few weeks later, I learn he's appointed me editor-in-chief of the newly launched *Revue de sémiotique internationale*. It seems he assumed no one would refuse such an honour, so he didn't bother consulting me. Sensing a trap, I decline.

Shortly after, Greimas succumbs—not to cerebral senescence, but to throat cancer. To be fair, he's been smoking Gitane after Gitane for as long as I can remember. A few months later, he reappears with a scarf covering his scar, still smoking Gitanes, though now with filters. His intellect remains intact, but it's evident that this is the end of the road for him—and the beginning of a new one for me. The only question is which road to take.

Resigning from Ipsos is a given, but what comes next? And how can I make a living while keeping my independence? I don't want to be a manager or a researcher. Freelance work as a semiotician in advertising and marketing is an option, but for now, I want to pursue a different dream—one that the chaotic start of my university studies never allowed me to fulfil: spending a year abroad teaching.

It's late June, and I hastily enquire about exchange programmes. I find one near the Jardin du Luxembourg and decide to visit on a Wednesday afternoon, unannounced—full of hope but keeping my expectations low. The small office is about to close when a woman agrees to see me. I explain my request, and she gently reminds me that it's already June, the application deadlines for the next academic year have passed, and if my application were accepted, it would be for departure the following year at best. But I'm not looking that far ahead. Now that I've decided to resign from Ipsos, I know I won't last much longer there. I want to leave immediately. Sensing my urgency, she seems to have an idea. She tells me there's just been a cancellation for a lecturer position in Austin, Texas, and they're urgently seeking a replacement. I'd need to be there by mid-August, as the academic year in the United States starts very early.

Lecturer? What does that even mean? I was a mediocre second-language student in high school and can barely speak a word of English. My plan was to go to the United States to learn the language, not teach it. I try to reassure myself. The few lecturers I've encountered in secondary school or university didn't seem to have much of a teaching load. They were students who came to France to further their studies. In exchange for a scholarship, they occasionally appeared in classes like exhibits, speaking just enough to show us—used to our teacher's dreadful accent—what English actually sounded like when spoken by a native. They would chat informally about life in their home country, we'd ask a few silly questions, they'd answer with equal humour, and then they'd return to their studies. The woman in front of me can't provide many details about the position—or perhaps she's withholding information to avoid scaring me off. She doesn't even know if I'll be paid, or how much. But it doesn't matter. I've saved enough to get by for a few months, and I'll figure the rest out later. What's clear is that if she doesn't send someone to Austin, the American student involved in the exchange won't be able to come to France, and the organisation risks losing credibility.

The level of English required for the position must be validated by a Test of English as a Foreign Language. I decide to be upfront: I don't speak a word of English, and I'm certain I'll fail the test. “Don't worry,” she says. “Given the deadlines, the TOEFL results will arrive when you're already in Texas. They won't send you back for that.” Very reassuring indeed.

A few days later, my application is processed, and I take the test two weeks after that. As expected, when I receive the results in Austin, my level is far from adequate. But as she predicted, they don't send me back.

To cover my bases, I decide to keep the studio I finally managed to rent on rue Daguerre, secured with my pay slips as a dynamic young executive. A student friend agrees to sublet it for a year. This time, it's my turn: I'm the one leaving!

All that's left is to resign from my job and buy a plane ticket. I haven't flown much in my life—and never across the Atlantic. By the way, where exactly is Texas? I check a map. It's on the border with Mexico. I find little information about Austin. In the encyclopedia I consult (since the internet doesn't exist yet), there's only a mention of the university tower, where a sniper had barricaded himself a few years earlier, shooting at fellow students and causing several casualties. There's even a photo of the tower. The Austin campus looks pleasant enough… After all, I'm a freelancer too, and I'm ready to take a shot at anything that moves.

## 22. Paris, Texas

Austin feels like the end of the world. To get there, I have to change planes three times, each aircraft growing progressively smaller as I approach my destination. The journey starts ominously, with an hour stuck on the tarmac at Roissy after boarding. This marks the beginning of a long and arduous trip: a connection in London before crossing the Atlantic.

For me, this isn't just a phrase. At over thirty, I've only flown between Paris and a few European capitals, and even those trips were rare. Five centuries after Christopher Columbus, I'm discovering America. And, like Claude Nougaro a year later, I land in New York. From the airport, I feel the same shock he sang about.

In theory, I wasn't supposed to leave the airport—New York was just a stopover. But thanks to delays, the plane to Houston isn't there. The airline offers us a few hours' rest at a nearby hotel. With the time difference and the lunar atmosphere of this airport suburb, I lose track of time entirely. I have no idea what day it is or how to set my watch to avoid missing my next flight. Unsurprisingly, I don't get much sleep, and I see nothing of the Big Apple either.

The yellow taxis that shuttle me to the hotel and back to the airport, weaving through enormous highway interchanges, are a clear reminder that I'm in the United States. I'm on an entirely unfamiliar continent, alone, and I barely speak a word of English. At least Christopher Columbus had company.

When I finally arrive in Houston, it feels like stepping into a new world. New York's airport was crowded and grimy; Houston's is brand new, immaculately clean—so spotless you could eat off the marble floors—and nearly empty. I pass a few businessmen in Stetsons. Dallas and its cutthroat universe suddenly seem close. I'm about to step into an American TV series.

The final leg to Austin is on a tiny plane. It flies at a very low altitude, and with no clouds in August, the ground below is crystal clear. What strikes me most are the thousands of pools glittering in the sunlight—almost one for every house.

Austin's airport is even smaller than Houston's. I've finally arrived—but I have no idea where to go. It's Sunday, I think. Or maybe Monday. To be safe, I arrived well ahead of the start date at the University of Austin. The transition from the airport's air conditioning to the furnace outside is brutal. Saying it's hot in Austin in August is an understatement. I'll never know the exact temperature, despite the signs everywhere, because it's displayed in Fahrenheit. Without a calculator to convert it to Celsius, I can only guess. For context, Austin is roughly at the same latitude as Agadir. Not that it helps me much—I've never been to Agadir, let alone in August.

No one was waiting for me at the airport with a little sign saying “Jean-Pierre Martinez.” And no one will be waiting for me anywhere else for at least a week. I get into a taxi and ask to be taken to a reasonably priced hotel in the city centre—assuming “city centre” even means anything in an American city. The taxi drops me off in front of a motel on Congress Avenue, about three kilometres from the campus. It's here, for the first time in almost three days, that I finally set down my bag. While shaving, I take a moment to reflect on the mess I've willingly gotten myself into.

I had a job, accommodation, a family, and even a girlfriend—though she stayed behind in Croatia. Now, I'm alone in a grimy motel in Texas. It must be 15 degrees Celsius in the room and nearly 50 outside. I have absolutely no contacts here, except for the name of the Head of the French Department, who I suspect has more important things to do than worry about me. In a week, I'm supposed to start my duties as a lecturer, without knowing exactly what those duties entail—or even if I'll be paid for them.

The motel is in the middle of nowhere. I decide to scout the area on foot and head towards the university. The heat is oppressive. I pass the State Capitol, a smaller replica of the one in Washington. The campus begins a little further on. In reality, the University of Austin is a city within a city: over 300 acres, 50,000 students, museums, a bank, oil wells, and even a nuclear reactor. Yet, despite its scale, the city itself is calm and spacious, with few skyscrapers, and the campus feels like a large, green park.

The French and Italian Department occupies a standalone building, fairly large, with a neo-something style of architecture. This is a new country, and Texas, a state that feels even newer. Nothing here, apart from the skyscrapers, could be considered historic. It's mid-August, the campus is deserted, and I'm not even sure if the building is open—or if there's anyone inside. Since arriving in the United States three days ago, I've barely spoken to anyone, apart from a few words with customs officers, flight attendants, and taxi drivers. The thought of returning to that grimy motel without at least trying to speak to someone feels unbearable. What do I have to lose?

I push the door open. It's unlocked. At the end of a corridor, I find the Head's secretary, along with two young women—one blonde, one brunette. The brunette speaks French; the blonde does not. I introduce myself. They are charming, and I immediately feel a little less alone. Unfortunately, the Head isn't there, but they

promise to let him know I've arrived. I can see him tomorrow.

The brunette leaves, and the blonde seems concerned about where I'll be staying. I explain my situation. She appears to take pity on me—or perhaps my French charm is already working. She invites me to join her for a picnic that evening on the heights overlooking the Colorado River. My first picnic in Texas—and, as it turns out, my last. The sunset is magical. In Texas, the best views are often in the sky.

Jane, as she introduces herself, is incredibly kind and gentle. She shares stories about her life, as though we've been friends for years. It's a welcome bit of comfort after my long journey from Paris, where I left behind all my familiar landmarks. Paris, Texas. I feel like I'm in a movie—a feeling that will stay with me throughout my time in the United States.

## 23. Psycho

The next morning, I return to the university to meet the Head of the French Department. His name is Jean-Pierre, like mine. He must have French origins, and he speaks our language perfectly, with no accent. So we converse in French. At least he won't immediately notice my catastrophic level of English. He is very courteous and, despite the distance imposed by his position, he is considerate. I was expecting a job interview, but his first question is about where I'm staying. I tell him about the motel on Congress Avenue. He looks at me with a worried expression, as if I had just told him I was staying in the *Psycho* motel. Without hesitation, he picks up the phone and calls one of his French lecturers who has been teaching here for several years. After hanging up, he informs me that the lecturer is on his way. Spending another night in that motel is simply out of the question.

My compatriot drives me to collect my belongings, and I stay at his place for a few days while I search for accommodation—which, in Texas, doesn't seem to be a problem. I end up spending only one night in the motel and am now under the protection of the French community in Austin. Just two days later, they help me find a comfortable studio near the French Department. The apartment is partially furnished, and I drop my two bags there upon arrival. Those same two bags will leave with me two years later. I'm not one to settle in too much for such a short stay.

I now understand that being a lecturer simply means teaching French to beginners at the university. I will be solely responsible for two classes, each meeting twice a week. I'll be entirely on my own, standing in front of students who don't speak a word of French, while I know only slightly more English and have never taught a language before. The results of my TOEFL test, which will arrive a few weeks later, will only confirm my lack of qualifications. I have no legitimacy for this role. Once again, I feel like a fraud and am understandably anxious about my first encounter with students who may not be very motivated—or perhaps even unruly.

The fateful moment arrives. The university is well-funded, with high tuition fees, and there aren't many students eager to learn French. As a result, the classes are far from overcrowded, averaging around twenty students. At least discipline isn't an issue, which is a relief. The students range in age from seventeen to twenty-five. Some are

older, returning to their studies after taking time off to work and save for the exorbitant fees at this public university. Most come from privileged backgrounds, but even the less well-off must work while studying. Many of the girls work as waitresses in Austin's numerous bars and restaurants—fitting for a city known for its lively nightlife and party atmosphere. In short, these students have paid a steep price to be in my class. They're not here to chat or cause trouble—perhaps because they're simply well-behaved. Either way, their primary goal isn't really to learn French; it's to earn the credits they need for their degree.

In class, I give it my all, fully committed to compensating for my lack of experience. I prepare my lessons more thoroughly than other lecturers, who are more seasoned teachers, more at ease with English, and perhaps a bit less diligent. Within a few days, I've memorized all my students' first names. I never stay seated at my desk; instead, I move around the room and ask them simple, pre-prepared questions, to which they respond with simple answers. This approach seems to work, helping them grasp the syllabus concepts. The students seem happy, even though, when luck isn't on my side, I often fail to understand their questions. Despite this, they are remarkably kind and patient with me. During class, they treat me with the utmost respect as their professor. Once the lesson is over, however, some become friendly, inviting me to experience Austin's vibrant student life. At first, I decline, worried it might create an awkward situation. But since I'm only slightly older than some of them, I sense it may soon become difficult to maintain a professional distance.

If most of my students aren't particularly interested in French, they are certainly intrigued by this Frenchman in their midst. For my part, my students are the only Americans I have the chance to interact with regularly. The French Department feels like a little piece of France, where everyone speaks exclusively in Molière's language. The fifteen or so lecturers there won't start speaking English to one another, and the American faculty members use the opportunity to practice their French. Beyond the department, the lecturers—and by extension, the French community in Austin—form a close-knit family. On weekends, there's always a party somewhere, and we're all invited. If someone has a problem, they can rely on the others for help. But the flip side is that nothing happens without everyone knowing about it, and declining an invitation can quickly be perceived as unfriendly. How am I supposed to improve my English if I'm constantly surrounded by French speakers? If I want to leave having learned something about America and its people, I'll need to accept some of my students' invitations to spend time with them outside class. A slippery slope that could quickly prove risky...

## 24. Hanna Schygulla

Before giving in to the guilty temptation of forming extracurricular relationships with my students—even with female students—I decide to explore other social opportunities with my colleagues in the French Department. Among them is Charles, a slightly older guy around my age, who is completing a thesis in literature. Unlike most of the other French lecturers, who are only here for a year as a break from their studies, Charles seems more settled. Like me, he keeps some distance from the French community, which makes him an appealing companion for exploring American society.

He lives not far from the campus in what is locally known as a "coop," a shared house where everyone has their own room, but household chores are managed collectively on a scheduled basis. While this type of accommodation wouldn't suit my individualistic nature, I find the concept amusing. Most of the residents are international students, with only a few French among them. One of these residents is a German woman who bears a striking resemblance to Hanna Schygulla in her prime. As I wait for the chance to get closer to her—and I will manage to get very close eventually—I settle for socializing with Charles, who knows her well. Charles is the only French person on campus familiar with semiotics, making him the only one I can discuss topics beyond the best spots in town for Tex-Mex or country music. He has another huge advantage aside from his connection to the Hanna Schygulla lookalike: he owns a car, a classic American model from the 1960s.

Charles suggests we take a weekend trip to Houston, a city I've only seen from the airport, where he has some friends. It's the perfect opportunity for me to enjoy a ride in his beautiful car with someone I know well and who, at the very least, can hold a decent conversation. So, off we go to Houston. Halfway there, on a long, straight stretch of road—though that's hardly remarkable in a country that might have the world's fewest curves—we suddenly hear the wail of a police motorcycle siren behind us. Like a scene from a movie, the officer overtakes us and signals for us to pull over. We comply without hesitation.The officer dismounts his bike with deliberate slowness and approaches our car as if in slow motion. Charles has already rolled down the window by the time he reaches us. The officer is impeccably dressed, with polished boots and a neatly trimmed moustache. I half expect him to order us out of the car, frisk us, slap on handcuffs, and proceed to beat us with his baton. Instead, he politely asks Charles for his license and the vehicle's documents. Turning to Charles with almost excessive courtesy, he asks if there's any particular reason for the speeding. Since I'm neither pregnant nor having contractions, Charles has no excuse to offer. The officer hesitates for a moment. We are neither Black nor holding passports from countries that might place us among America's enemies—except, of course, in matters like unjustified invasions of Iraq. In the end, he settles for giving Charles a mild reprimand, returns his license, and wishes us a safe journey, advising us to drive carefully. Then, just as calmly as he arrived, he gets back on his bike and rides away. Honestly, just witnessing that scene was almost worth the fine we narrowly avoided. Still, I let out a sigh of relief—I've dodged the worst. Or so I thought.

Perhaps inspired by the moustachioed motorcyclist, who looked like he had stepped straight out of a San Francisco gay bar, Charles starts telling me a few details about our destination—or rather, the purpose of our little trip. “The friends we're visiting are all gay,” he says casually. “I hope that doesn't bother you.” I immediately reassure him of my absolute tolerance toward all sexual orientations, but now I'm the one feeling anxious. Suddenly, everything that should have been obvious begins to dawn on me. What I had previously seen in Charles as mere sophistication might also have hinted at something more effeminate. And if he has so many gay friends, it seems obvious now that he's one of them. Of course, it doesn't bother me that Charles is gay. The real question is whether it bothers him that I'm not. Have I unintentionally given him the impression that this trip to Houston might be some kind of romantic weekend? To clear the air, I decide it's best to clarify: while I am in no way homophobic, I'm also not gay. Charles responds immediately with a line that sounds suspiciously like something parents use to coax children into eating spinach or chard: “How can you know you don't like it if you've never tried it?” For a moment, I'm speechless, caught off guard by the sheer audacity of the argument. Then, I manage to counter. “It's true,” I admit. “There are many things I've never done. But if I were going to try something new, wouldn't it make sense to start with something I actually desire?” I pause for a moment, then add, “And when it comes to sexuality, oddly enough, now that I've finally had the chance to experience love with a woman, I think I'd be more inclined to try with several people rather than with a man.

While he remains silent, it's clear he hasn't entirely given up on convincing me, which does little to reassure me. Unfortunately, there's no turning back now. We arrive in Houston, nearly 300 kilometres from Austin. I'm in his car, and I have no other place to stay but the "Birdcage." This isn't the first time I've unknowingly found myself in such ambiguous situations. Since I have no particular affinity for macho types and would much rather discuss literature than cars, I tend to get along with refined, sensitive men—who, as it happens, sometimes turn out to be gay. Unfortunately, I don't always realize it until it's too late.

I sense that this weekend is going to feel particularly long, though it could certainly be worse. After all, my decision to befriend Charles wasn't entirely selfless—it was also a way to get closer to the Hanna Schygulla lookalike, his housemate at the coop. But now I can't help wondering: what will she think of me when she finds out I spent a romantic weekend in Houston with her gay friend? Sometimes I wonder if my life wouldn't be simpler if I just became gay myself. And what if Charles is right? After all, I actually do like chard. Chard, yes—but tripe? I'm not sure I'm ready for that just yet.

## 25. Fort Alamo

Since everyone assumes I'm Charles's boyfriend, the lively group of Latin American queens filling the house more or less leave me alone. That's something, at least. We've been put in the same room, but Charles seems to have finally resigned himself: I am irredeemably heterosexual. In fact, I'm the only one among the thirty-odd gays and drag queens gathered that evening to celebrate—I have no idea what—and for the first time in my life, I'm experiencing the difficulty of belonging to a sexual minority.

Nevertheless, I survive this very gay weekend in Houston unscathed. Back in Austin, at his coop, Charles will have the good taste to recount my misadventure to his German friend, who will laugh herself silly. It will only serve to strengthen our Franco-German connection. It seems that making women laugh is the way to go, and I happen to have quite a knack for it. Though, to be fair, I don't deserve much credit; my humour is often unintentional and sometimes at my own expense. My brief affair with the Hanna Schygulla lookalike, however, will come to an end soon. She has a boyfriend in Düsseldorf, and he's coming to visit her in Austin shortly.

Having wisely kept some distance from Charles and the gay community, I find myself once again on my own. A few of my students, however, insistently invite me to join them for after-class outings. At some point, it becomes impossible to refuse without seeming rude. It starts with drinks at the city's bars and soon extends to various other places. All of them smoke cannabis, sometimes even in the company of their parents. They offer me some, and out of politeness, I can't decline. Wanting to introduce them to a bit of French culture, I demonstrate how to roll a cone-shaped joint, as we do back home. They, by contrast, roll simple, straight cigarettes. To them, my method seems as exotic as a ham sandwich compared to a hamburger. For one of their birthdays, I'm asked to roll a giant French joint using ten leaves. Once again, I oblige, out of courtesy. Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—smartphones haven't been invented yet, so there's no photographic evidence to immortalize this massive joint that surely deserved a place in the record books.

I'm fully aware that I'm playing with fire. I could be thrown in jail or, at the very least, expelled from the university for corrupting these young adults—even though, in reality, they're the ones leading me astray. I make several trips to San Antonio with one of my Irish students. Before we head out in the evening, his father hands him the keys to his classic car—notable for its manual transmission—and his American Express card. We tour the bars and return home to vomit at ungodly hours. On Monday morning, I find myself back in class with these same students with whom I smoked or drank the night before. Yet, they remain extremely polite and never attempt to take advantage of the situation.

Still, it's beginning to feel risky. Besides, such wild parties haven't been my thing for over a decade. It seems wiser to ease off on my socializing with students. However, I'm now being actively courted by some of my female students. Several invite me on what's known here as a "date"—a kind of romantic appointment governed by mysterious rules for a Frenchman. Essentially, it feels more like a job interview than a romantic encounter. For once, though, I find myself in the unexpected position of being the potential employer.

Each semester, at least two students per class—all of whom are of legal age—invite me on one of these so-called dates. I can't always decline, but I never "hire," fearing, quite rightly, the awkwardness that might arise the next day in class. There's the matter of facing the "lucky" candidate, but even more so, the potential jealousy of the one whose "application" I didn't accept. Unfamiliar with local customs, I can't tell if these constant solicitations are due to some particular charm of mine—one that didn't seem to work much back in Paris—or simply to an attraction Americans have for French people in general.

One evening, I go out to dinner with friends at a Tex-Mex restaurant. The staff is made up mostly of students, particularly female students, working evenings to pay off their exorbitant tuition fees. When the bill arrives, there's a note scribbled on it in clumsy French: “For the man with glasses, a fan.” As I'm the only one at the table wearing glasses, I have to assume the message is meant for me. It's a young man who brings us the bill, but since it's signed by "a fan," I deduce it must be from the waitress who stayed behind the bar.

How can I resist such a declaration? At least this admirer won't be sitting in my class tomorrow. I've heroically resisted temptation for months, but no fortress is impregnable, and this Mexican restaurant will be my Fort Alamo. She gives me her name, romantically adding that her number is in the directory. That's where I'll go to find it. We'll have dinner together once, and when I escort her to her door, she'll reward me with a French kiss—probably to thank me for paying the bill. Our affair, however, won't go any further. This time, it's my application that wasn't accepted. Even now, I remain deeply perplexed about how to successfully start a romantic relationship with an American woman…

## 26. ALPINE

When, until the age of thirty, one has only ever left France to visit neighbouring countries, one wakes up each morning with well-established geographical references. To the north, the Northern Countries; to the south, the Southern Countries; to the east, the Eastern Countries; to the west, the ocean—and beyond the ocean, lands known only through television, cinema, books, or newspapers. Mythical places like Texas, with its famous oil fields, whose existence outside the TV show *Dallas* seems uncertain. Yes, when it comes to Texas, essence truly precedes existence.

Each morning in Austin, I need a few moments to adjust to these new geographical references. Above lies a vast expanse—Deep America—whose contours I barely know, and beyond it, an even larger country, Canada, about which I know nothing. To the right, Houston, the gateway for rockets bound for the Moon or Mars. To the left, far away, California, and beyond it, an unfamiliar ocean. Below, Mexico—closer in every sense—and curiously, it feels more familiar. In Mexico, they speak Spanish, the language of some of my ancestors. But more importantly, Mexico is deeply rooted in history, with a heritage etched into the architecture of its cities—something the United States can't quite match.

Austin, the capital of Texas, was founded in the mid-19th century. Its oldest surviving building, a simple shack from 1898, is marked by a plaque indicating its historical significance. In contrast, in France—and on the old continent in general—history is omnipresent. There isn't a village without its medieval church, a small town without its fortified castle, a city without its Renaissance mansions, or a large city without its Roman amphitheater. Even in the countryside, you'll find farms shaded by centuries-old oak trees. The European landscape is a palimpsest, where the layers of history remain vividly visible, making it nearly impossible to forget where one comes from.

In the United States—and even more so in newer states like Texas—none of that exists. In France, we marvel at La Défense, an island of modernity that stands as an exception. In the USA, modernity is the norm, and every downtown feels like La Défense. Austin is like Cergy-Pontoise, set within a state as large as France, where only "new towns" seem to exist. After a few months, this total absence of historical depth and the uniformity of modernity—even when it mimics past styles—becomes almost unbearable for a European. I found myself visiting one of the city's few museums, not to admire its collections, but simply to gaze upon any old painting, as long as it was more than a century old.

Mexico is the closest country to Texas with a genuine pre-colonial history, marked by monumental traces such as pyramids. The Spanish colonisers also left an enduring legacy, building churches, cathedrals, monasteries, convents, palaces, and fortresses that shape the landscape to this day.

At the university in the United States, Christmas holidays last a month. Unlike some of my fellow lecturers, who were already homesick and eager to return to France, I had no desire to go back. Instead, I decided to go to Mexico to reconnect with civilisation. I also had the address of a student in Mexico City, someone I had met at Greimas's seminar and who had also attended my Advertising Semiotics Workshop.

At its closest point, Mexico's northern border is less than 300 kilometres from Austin. However, Americans—especially students—who visit Mexico typically head south to Yucatán, drawn by the paradise beaches. They only see the country's airport in Cancún and the luxury hotels lining the coast at discounted prices. The only Mexicans they meet are the waiters serving their cocktails and the cleaning staff tidying up after their drinking binges. In a spirit of contradiction, I decide to enter Mexico from the north, traveling by land and without any hotel reservations, of course.

When I share my plan with my students, they try to dissuade me. Northern Mexico, they insist, is not a tourist destination—it's the most dangerous part of the country. Traveling through it by land is sheer madness. According to them, no one ever comes back alive from such a trip, though that may be because they don't know anyone foolish enough to attempt it. Undeterred, I persist. After consulting the map, I sketch out a theoretical route to the Mexican border. Beyond that point, I'll simply improvise.

The bus from Austin to Los Angeles makes a stop in a small town with a strangely familiar and bucolic name: Alpine. It conjures images of a Swiss mountain resort, inspiring confidence. It's less than 100 kilometres from the border at Ojinaga. I have no specific information about connections, but there must be one. I board the Los Angeles bus in the late afternoon, and around midnight, it stops in the middle of nowhere in front of a sign that reads Alpine.

I hesitate to get off. It's pitch dark, the bus stop is unlit, and I see no mountains resembling the Alps. Worse, I don't even see a single house. “Are you sure this is the place?” I ask. “It's right here,” the driver confirms. “And the bus to the border?” “Yes, there's one. But it doesn't leave until 5 p.m. Wouldn't you rather continue to Los Angeles?” I hesitate a moment longer. Then, as usual, I choose to leap into the night and the unknown. I step off the bus with my small bag. The bus pulls away, leaving me alone in the middle of nowhere, in the dead of night. No one in the world knows I'm here.

## 27. Rio Grande

I have no choice—I can't stay stuck at this dark, desolate bus stop until dawn. I start walking along the road, hoping to find the town's entrance. Eventually, I come across a few buildings. In reality, Alpine looks more like a service station surrounded by a handful of houses than a ski resort in the Alps. The shops are few, and, of course, everything is closed. It's just before 1 a.m., and the next bus to the Mexican border doesn't leave until 5 p.m. I can't spend the entire night wandering the deserted streets of this ghost town, let alone wait out the next day. I spot a sign pointing toward Ojinaga, the border town, and decide to try my luck hitchhiking.

Hitchhiking is never easy, but it's even harder when no cars are passing by. After about fifteen minutes, I finally see a rather beat-up car approaching slowly, its lights completely off. I hesitate to stick out my thumb, but I don't even need to. The car stops beside me, and without getting out, a surly-looking man asks for my papers. There are two or three other men in the car, dressed like cowboys. Even though they're in plain clothes, I assume they're police officers. In any case, I'm not in a position to refuse, so I hand over my passport. The man examines it closely—it's probably the first time he's seen a French passport. Besides me, what on earth would a tourist be doing in the dead of night in Alpine? He asks where I'm going. I explain that I'm trying to get to Mexico. Although his barely visible face remains impassive, I can sense his confusion. A Frenchman with a Spanish surname, hitchhiking in the middle of the night to leave the United States and enter Mexico. Clearly, I don't fit the profile of his usual suspects, and smuggling typically goes in the other direction.

He hands back my passport. Clearly unsure of what to say, he says nothing, and the car drives off. At least I won't be spending the rest of the night in a cell. But is my situation really any better? Another ten minutes pass before another car appears. Perhaps this time I'll have better luck. But no—the exact same scenario repeats. Once again, I recount my implausible story, and once again, my papers are returned. I quickly realize there's no point in staying on the side of this road at this hour, where the only cars passing by are unmarked police vehicles. I ask the cowboy if there's an

open bar in town, as I haven't seen any so far. He confirms there is and gives me directions. I decide to head there. If I'm going to spend the night here, I might as well do it somewhere warm—especially now that the cold is starting to bite.

The bar is barely lit from the outside. I step in and see about fifteen men inside, all resembling the ones I just encountered. They're wearing Stetsons and have revolvers on their belts. It feels like I've walked straight into a saloon. Who will draw first? Until now, I'd only seen cowboys at country parties in Austin; now I know where the real ones are. Still, I can't quite figure out who these people are. Civilian police officers? Volunteer militia? Or just local farmers? And what are they all doing here, in the dead of night, in this desolate place—drinking at the saloon when they're not patrolling the town? I hadn't realized that, nearly a hundred kilometres from the border, the hunt for Mexicans was already underway. But I can think of no other explanation.

Naturally, my arrival doesn't go unnoticed. All eyes turn to me, scrutinising me with suspicion. After a moment, the cowboys return to their low-voiced conversations. I order a coffee and wait for the tension to settle. By now, it's almost 5 a.m., and dawn is beginning to break. I decide to give hitchhiking another try—what else can I do? The bar is next to a petrol station, which seems like a good spot to catch a ride. In the United States, not having a car feels like the ultimate marker of homelessness, and sticking out my thumb feels as vulnerable as holding out my hand. But this time, luck is on my side. I've barely raised my arm when a car, having just refuelled, stops beside me. The driver gestures for me to get in. Normally, he says, he doesn't pick up hitchhikers, but seeing me earlier at the café reassured him.

I can't help wondering if I should be the one afraid—at least of having an accident. The driver is very old, his hands shaking. The glove compartment is overflowing with pill bottles, and the passenger seat is covered with them too. He pushes some aside to make room for me, then downs a few pills with his coffee, apparently to perk himself up. The good news is that he's heading to the border. He explains that he's a traveling salesman, and inevitably, this poor old man—who should have retired a decade ago—reminds me of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. I just hope he doesn't die at the wheel before dropping me off.

We eventually arrive safely, but since he's not crossing into Mexico, I have to hitchhike again. A Mexican pickup truck stops, already packed with several people in the front. The driver gestures for me to climb into the bed of the truck. That's how I cross the Rio Grande into Mexico—riding in the back of a pickup truck, without any customs officer stopping me or asking questions. Going the other way, I imagine, must not be so simple. Indeed, when I return to the United States, this clandestine entry into Mexico will cause me some problems…

## 28. CHIHUAHUA

I arrive in Ojinaga late in the morning and immediately catch a bus to Chihuahua, the capital of the state of the same name. Why Chihuahua, you might ask? Perhaps it's my recurring obsession with names. Just as Alpine conjured images of a Swiss mountain resort, Chihuahua doesn't make me think of a tiny dog for grandma, but rather the very essence of Mexicanness. If my goal was to avoid the luxury hotels and idyllic beaches of Cancún, then mission accomplished. Otherwise, Chihuahua offers little in the way of tourist attractions. Apart from its cathedral, it's a city as modern as Austin but far more run-down.

Above all, as soon as I step off the bus—in broad daylight, right in the city centre—I feel an unfamiliar sense of insecurity. It's a discomfort I hadn't even felt in the dead of night on the deserted streets of Alpine, patrolled only by an armed militia. I quickly realize this unease comes from being the centre of attention. Small, dark-haired, tanned, scruffy, and poorly dressed, speaking Spanish fluently and conversing fairly well, I had naively assumed that in Mexico, I would blend in more easily and attract less attention than in the United States. I was wrong. On the streets of Chihuahua, I feel like a white person lost in an African market, whose pale face instantly marks him as foreign—or like a blonde woman in a miniskirt walking through a market in Kabul.

Every Mexican man or woman who passes by turns to look at me, calling me a *gringo*. Where I had felt like an alien in the United States, simply arriving in Mexico has made me American. The term *gringo* doesn't carry any particular hostility; it's more a mix of curious amusement with a hint of covetousness. Still, I can't shake the unpleasant feeling of being a target—perhaps even prey. Wherever I go in town, people will know where I am, and I imagine them following me, waiting for the right moment to rob me—or worse. That's the scenario running through my mind, and it's far from a romantic comedy. If I check into a regular hotel alone, as I'd originally planned, I have the unsettling sense that this first night in Mexico could feel like the longest of my life—hoping it won't also be my last. After all, Northern Mexico's only notorious "tourist attraction" is kidnapping for ransom. And who would even pay a ransom for me? Realising this, I decide it's wise to reconsider my plan to live like the *swarthy Mexican* in Marcel Amont's song. After a night of wandering Alpine's streets, I desperately need to settle down, take a shower, and sleep in a safe place. I hail a taxi and ask the driver to take me to the best hotel in town. He complies, dropping me off in front of a reasonably decent-looking establishment—though it's probably not the best.

Even though I'm a *gringo*, I probably don't look like someone who stays in luxury hotels. This one is just a glass tower with a reception desk at the entrance—enough to give me hope that no one can enter my room uninvited. Finally, I can drop my bag, take my first shower in two days, and reflect on how I ended up here. Night has fallen, and from my twentieth-floor window, I look out at the pale lights of Chihuahua. How did I get here? I have no reason to be in this place. I know no one, and I hold no hope of making any connections. I feel as though I've reached the end of the world—and the end of solitude, a place where I might have hoped to find myself.

But solitude is like holding your breath; at some point, you have to come up for air, or you'll drown. At dawn tomorrow, as the cocaine dollars wash over Northern Mexico, I'll leave. No one is waiting for me—not even in a cemetery. Except perhaps death…

## 29. El Chepe

After hitchhiking and taking the bus—still unwilling to fly—I decide to leave Chihuahua by train to reach the nearest Pacific coast town, Los Mochis. True to form, I plan my route solely by consulting the map, without relying on any guidebooks, not even the *Guide du Routard*. By definition, a true traveler does not let a guide dictate their path; it is up to them alone to forge their way, on foot if need be, and, like Don Quixote, to invent marvels rather than settling for a reality that is merely picturesque.

This time, however, fortune favours me. Los Mochis, though no more touristically interesting than Chihuahua, turns out to be the departure point for a legendary train: *El Chepe*, named after the initials of Chihuahua and Pacific. Starting in Chihuahua, nearly 2,500 meters above sea level, the railway line descends like a 600-kilometre slide towards the Pacific, crossing numerous dizzying bridges and plunging through tunnels as dark as they are endless. In essence, *El Chepe* feels like a mix between the iconic Nescafé train that popularised *La Colegiada* and a ghost train.

On board, a handful of adventurous tourists seek thrills and aim to veer off the beaten path. Sitting next to me is a Canadian—clearly more of a seasoned traveler than I am—who, like me, is a foreigner and perhaps looking for a travel companion. We strike up a conversation. For half the year, he works odd jobs in Canada; the other half, he travels through Latin America. We agree to share a room in Los Mochis, both to split costs and to feel safer. This time, staying in a luxury hotel is out of the question. After my experience with Charles, I should have been more cautious about sharing a room with a stranger. Yet, with no young woman on the train willing to keep me company, I don't have much choice if I want to avoid spending another lonely evening.

Upon arriving in Los Mochis—predictably unremarkable—we book a room for two in a modest yet reasonably clean hotel. Our room is on the ground floor, next to the kitchens. It's not ideal, but it will ultimately prove to be a stroke of luck. This time, the danger doesn't come from the enthusiasm of my roommate. In the middle of the night, we are jolted awake by screams and the smell of smoke. Rushing into the courtyard, we see flames engulfing the upper floors. On the third floor, a woman is screaming from a window, torn between jumping into the void and burning alive.

The firefighters arrive quickly, but their efforts are alarmingly ineffective. Their hose is too short, and the water barely reaches the first-floor windows. Two firefighters brave the stairs and emerge minutes later carrying an inert body on a stretcher. I can't tell if it's the woman who had been screaming, whether she survived, or if there are other victims. As I stand there in the chaos, I begin to wonder if I should temper my appetite for adventure—if I want to make it back from this trip to Mexico alive.

I decide to head to Mexico City as quickly as possible, hoping that my former student from the Paris School of Semiotics will agree to host me. Upon arriving, I call her, and she immediately invites me to take a taxi to her home, where she offers to accommodate me. Through the taxi window, I glimpse entire neighbourhoods reduced to rubble, numerous ruined buildings, and massive cathedrals with bell towers leaning precariously, like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Mexico City had been struck by a devastating earthquake the previous year. It seems I truly am unlucky.

Beatriz—that's her name—lives with her aunt, a woman who holds a highly significant position at the Ministry of Education. While not quite a minister, she leads a team of about twenty experts in education sciences. Cultured and caring, her aunt also possesses a commanding personality and an undeniable sense of authority. Apparently, Beatriz has introduced me as one of Greimas's closest assistants and, therefore, a leading expert in semiotics. Enthralled by European culture, her aunt warmly asks me to give a talk to her entire team so they can benefit from the insights of a "master" who has arrived straight from Paris via Texas. As her guest, I feel I cannot refuse.

The next day, a chauffeur takes us to the Ministry. Beatriz and her aunt take the opportunity to show me Diego Rivera's murals, which adorn the interior of this monumental building—murals visible only to those fortunate enough to work there. I enter the conference room, where about twenty men and women sit before me, ready to receive my words as if they were the Holy Sacrament. I was already uneasy discussing semiotics with a handful of students in my workshop on Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, and now I must do it in Spanish, in a ministry, in Mexico City. They listen intently, ask a few quite thoughtful questions, applaud politely at the end, and then we leave. And to think—had I been roasted like a sardine in that hotel fire in Los Mochis just days earlier, these poor souls would have been deprived of my wisdom and left in blissful ignorance…

My trip will continue for another two weeks, after which I plan to fly back to Austin. It feels like the safer option. However, it's at customs, upon returning to the United States, that I'll experience the greatest scare of my journey. When I crossed the Mexican border from Texas by road, riding in the back of a pick-up truck, I was apparently in a free zone, with the actual border much farther away. No customs officer stamped my passport. Now, at the Texan border, a customs officer with a suspicious look points out that there's no official record of my departure from the United States—the same country I'm now claiming to re-enter. I'm not sure I understand everything, but essentially: if I never left, how can I return?

My name is Martinez. In Mexico, no one mistook me for a local, but I can see in the officer's gaze that he suspects me of being an illegal immigrant. I'm already imagining being turned away at the US border and sent back to France, my home country—all while I'm less than 300 kilometres from Austin. In the end, it all gets sorted out, and I return to the university, my colleagues, and my students with a sense of relief.

## 30. Third Semester

In Austin, the academic year ends in May—or rather, the second semester does, as the university never truly closes. A summer semester follows right after. How could anyone still doubt the greatness of America when they've managed to fit three semesters into a single year? During the summer, however, the university operates at a slower pace. This third semester is primarily for students who need to catch up on courses they either failed or couldn't complete during the regular academic year. Many of them, in fact, work to fund their studies and rely on the summer to make up for lost time.

For me, this month of May is meant to mark the end of my stay in Austin. I only have a one-year contract and visa. So far, everyone seems satisfied with my work. Each teacher is required to undergo an annual class inspection by the American professor responsible for overseeing the lecturers. In theory, it's nothing to worry about. We're notified in advance, and the inspecting professor—whom we all know—is renowned for his kindness. But still, until now, no external observer has ever attended one of my classes. What if they suddenly discovered my incompetence?

To avoid making my students uncomfortable—or giving the impression that I'm demanding exemplary behaviour—I haven't told them about the inspection. However, when they arrive in class and notice a man in a suit sitting at the very back, someone old enough to be their father and whom I pretend to ignore, it's obvious that something unusual is going on. They must also pick up on the fact that I'm a bit more nervous than usual. As they adore me and are incredibly well-mannered, they seem just as nervous as I am. They are even more attentive than usual, avoiding any chatter or jokes. In short, they behave impeccably, doing their best to act as model students.

In an effort to show her active participation in class, one of my students even dares to ask a question—in English, of course. Her intention isn't to put me on the spot but to enhance my reputation. The problem, as often happens, is that I don't understand the question. I ask her to repeat it, but, paralysed by the presence of the inspector, I still can't make sense of it. The girl is just as embarrassed as I am. She thought she was helping me, and now I'm stuck, like an actor forgetting their lines in the middle of a performance.

She tries to retract her question, but it's too late. The inspector kindly comes to my rescue, offering a translation so I can respond. Naturally, I am mortified. My students remain silent for the rest of the class. As soon as the inspector leaves, they rush over to ask who the man was. The girl apologizes profusely for inadvertently putting me in an awkward position. Later, the inspector, without mentioning the incident, praises me highly—particularly for the exceptional rapport I maintain with my students. If only he knew that I sometimes smoke joints with them after class...

At the end of each semester, students are required to evaluate their teachers anonymously, assigning them a grade and providing free-form comments. Once again, the feedback about me is overwhelmingly positive—so glowing, in fact, that it almost seems suspicious.

I am appreciated by both my superiors and my students. The Department Head, already assembling his team of lecturers for the next term, offers me a contract renewal. I realise I haven't yet fully explored my experience in the United States, so I accept the offer.

With nearly three months of vacation ahead, I decide to return to Europe. It's not that I miss France terribly, but I want to maintain a minimum of contact with my loved ones, avoid severing all ties with my previous life, and keep my options open just in case.

Besides, someone is waiting for me in Rijeka, Croatia. I met Nada two months before leaving for the United States, and she visited me in Paris for a few days just before I left for Austin. She was ready to follow me to the ends of the earth, but I couldn't take her along. That first crossing of the Atlantic was, for me, a leap into the unknown—if not a leap into the void. And you don't leap into the void holding someone's hand.

In Paris, her wide, amazed eyes reflected her astonishment at everything she saw. Clearly, this young woman, raised in Tito's Yugoslavia and having never left her country before meeting me, was unprepared to navigate the capitalist world without relying entirely on me. As for accompanying me to the United States—how could I possibly take care of a Fine Arts student from Rijeka when I didn't even know how I was going to manage on my own? She spoke no French, and her English was even worse than mine. In any case, without a work contract, she wouldn't have been able to secure anything more than a short-term tourist visa.

To be perfectly honest, I was heading to America to live a grand adventure—and grand adventures are rarely experienced as a couple. Still, although I hadn't vowed chastity and had, in fact, had several flings during this rather intense year, I stayed true to my word. Our story couldn't end before it had even begun. Simply put, I wanted to see her—the one who so perfectly embodied sweetness in a world of brutes. I decided to spend this third semester with her. Even if, as everyone knows, third semesters are like the Fourth Dimension: they exist only in the United States.

## 31. Yugoslavia

I return to Rijeka at the beginning of summer, after having explored America. Nada hasn't left her hometown, and she hasn't changed. I, however, am the one who has changed. Our differences, already apparent a year ago, now feel even more pronounced and increasingly difficult to reconcile.

I was already a man of the West, but now I return as a cowboy to this charming little town in still-communist Yugoslavia. To stay with her at her parents' home, I need not only her father's approval but also that of the Communist Party. This means I must report daily to the local police about where I am staying. I imagine they would much prefer I spend my foreign currency at a hotel, paying the inflated tourist rates—unless, of course, they suspect I'm a spy gathering NATO intelligence on the nearby shipyards.

Nada and I share a bed, but we do not share the same world. My mind is filled with memories from the past year—a year in which I've experienced so many new things. Without her. Still, I plan to show her the world, or at least a part of it, by discovering it together. She knows little beyond Croatia, and even that is limited. I already know this will be the only trip we ever take together. I want it to be unforgettable for both of us.

For the first time in my life, I have money, time, and total freedom. She is ready to follow me. The challenge now is convincing her parents, who are understandably anxious about their daughter leaving with a stranger. My first dinner with them is memorable. They are kind and hospitable, but her father, in particular, watches me with suspicion. Having worked his entire life in the shipyards and knowing only Tito's Yugoslavia, I am far from the ideal son-in-law in his eyes. And if he knew that I don't even plan to become his son-in-law…

Neither the father nor the mother speaks a word of English, making conversation difficult. Nada acts as a part-time interpreter, but her father is a man of few words regardless. He looks at me; I meet his gaze. I respect him, and I believe the feeling is mutual. Apparently, I'm not making too bad an impression. The next day, despite their caution, her parents allow their daughter to leave with a stranger for a long journey—one that will take us across Yugoslavia, through Southern Europe, and even to the borders of Sudan. As we set off, her mother wipes away a tear, wondering if she will ever see her daughter again. She is not entirely wrong to worry; we could very well never return, as we are embarking on a journey fraught with risks.

As usual, I have no timetable or itinerary, and I have no idea how far we will go. Each morning, we will wake up not knowing where we will sleep that night. Does she love me, trust me, or is she simply mad to follow me blindly on such an adventure? She, who has only ever known the small, orderly life of a young woman in a relatively prosperous communist country like Yugoslavia—lacking nothing, yet accustomed to forgoing the superfluous.

Most young people her age seem more or less content. They live in a protective bubble, without grand future prospects but also without fear of what lies ahead. I can't help but wonder: what will happen when it all comes crashing down? Nada doesn't understand my question. For her, things are simply as they are, as they've always been—and as they always will be. Two years later, the Berlin Wall will fall, and two years after that, Yugoslavia will cease to exist. But for now, we will traverse it one last time.

What is still called Yugoslavia is, within a smaller area than Italy, a patchwork of the most diverse European and Eastern cultures. Traveling across Yugoslavia means covering just a few kilometres and moving from West to East, from churches to mosques, from Ancient Greece to the Ottoman Empire, from seaside resorts catering to Germans to medieval countryside, and from Mercedes to horse-drawn carriages. It is also a journey through time and history—a land of incredible richness, diversity, and complexity. This makes it far more rewarding to explore by train or bus than to simply fly over it to visit the heavily touristic Dubrovnik.

From Italian Istria to Greek Macedonia, passing through Austro-Hungarian Serbia, we eventually reach Kosovo, which feels reminiscent of Turkey. The next day, we continue to the Albanian border, arriving in Ohrid, where we catch a glimpse of mysterious, still-Stalinist Albania across the lake. On this journey, Nada is discovering her own country alongside me—a country that, in two years, will belong to no one. For now, our plan is to stop in Prizren, where, of course, we haven't booked a room.

In the streets of the city, we encounter a hunchback who immediately offers to be our guide. With Nada by my side, I'm not exactly inconspicuous—especially in Kosovo. Apparently, girls from Rijeka are renowned for their beauty. Well, that's what a girl from Rijeka once told me; perhaps the judgment is a bit subjective. Regardless, my travel companion's ash-blonde hair and elegant figure certainly draw attention.

The hunchback invites us to spend the night at his place, mentioning that he has to leave early the next morning for a ping-pong tournament. According to him, he's a champion in the sport. Nada, ever enthusiastic and occasionally a bit naive, is eager to accept. I am more cautious but eventually agree. It turns out my caution was justified, as the evening is about to take a rather unexpected turn...

## 32. Freaks

In four years, Kosovo will be engulfed in flames. For now, however, a traveler passing through Prizren senses no particular tension. Far from the bustle of the West, this large town, just a few kilometres from Albania and with no major tourist attractions, seems forgotten by history—a history that will soon catch up with it. The streets are quiet, with few people and almost no cars. The horse-drawn carts moving through the town centre are not there to entertain tourists but to help locals get around and transport their goods.

On the way, our hunchbacked host mentions inter-community conflicts and denounces those who fuel them. We pay little attention. It's hard to imagine war during times of peace. He invites us to his home and throws together a small party in our honour. A few of his friends join us. Despite his disability, he seems to hold a certain influence over his circle. Perhaps it's because he has slightly more means than they do, a bit more life experience—or simply because he's the cleverest of the bunch.

A rather pretty young woman arrives, whom he introduces as his girlfriend. At first glance, this unlikely couple brings to mind Beauty and the Beast. But we soon learn that Beauty is deaf-mute. She is Albanian, very young, and appears to be entirely dependent on her protector. For me, communication with others is already difficult without Nada to translate. With her, it's impossible. Only our host seems to understand the few strange sounds she makes, accompanied by her gestures.

The evening continues. We eat, drink, and listen to music. As most of the guests have already left, our host, under the pretext of showing her something, takes Nada into the next room along with the Albanian girl. She returns shortly after, wearing an enigmatic smile. I ask her what happened, and she explains that our host has just suggested a "square game" with his girlfriend.

Although I was already on guard, I am understandably both surprised and reasonably concerned. It's past midnight, and we have no other option but to spend the night here. What kind of mess have I gotten myself into this time? I feel like I've wandered into a Fellini film—or perhaps Tod Browning's *Freaks*. I've dealt with delicate situations before, but now I'm traveling with a young woman for whom I feel responsible. Nada, however, doesn't seem to grasp that if our host were to become more insistent, things could escalate quickly. For the record, I have nothing against the concept of swapping partners in principle. But I can't imagine experiencing it for the first time with the Hunchback of Notre Dame and an underage, deaf-mute Esmeralda. We politely decline the offer. Still, the night promises to be a long one...

## 33. Oum Kalsoum

Having finally escaped that strange square encounter with a hunchback and a deaf-mute, we leave Kosovo and head towards Istanbul, then Athens. Traveling by train and bus, we seem to journey back in time. A few weeks ago, I left the New World to reconnect with Old Europe. Departing from Paris, I left behind modernity; in Yugoslavia, we traversed a country on the brink of collapse and a communist world already fading into history. In Istanbul, we stand at the heart of the Ottoman Empire; in Athens, at the cradle of European civilization. All that remains is to journey further back to the origins of civilization itself by tracing the course of the Nile. To preserve the magic, I would have preferred to reach Egypt by boat from Athens. But with no direct connection, I resign myself to taking a flight to Cairo.

From the moment we arrive at the airport, it's clear to all our senses that we've entered a different continent. An unfamiliar world—exciting yet potentially dangerous—unfolds before us. It's already late, and, as usual, we have no idea where we'll spend the night. I hail a taxi and ask the driver to take us to a hotel in the city. Naturally, he has a cousin who owns the most comfortable, well-located, and reasonably priced hotel in Cairo—a cousin with whom, it's safe to assume, he works on commission.

Arabic music plays softly on the radio. Intrigued, Nada asks if I know the singer. Since I only know one, and eager to impress her, I respond as if it were obvious, with a hint of playful mockery: “But it's Oum Kalsoum!” *Cairo, the spy nest*, won't be revealed until about twenty years later, but I'm already perfecting my OSS 117 style. Had she asked me the same question about an opera aria, I would have confidently answered, “Maria Callas.”

I had a 50/50 chance, and luck is on my side. It is indeed the Egyptian diva, and I've just made a friend. The driver is over the moon. “You know Oum Kalsoum?” To push my advantage a little further, I reply that, of course, everyone knows and admires her. Apparently, this isn't the case for all the Westerners he drives in his taxi. Suddenly, we're no longer mere tourists—we're friends of the Egyptian people. As a result, instead of taking us to his supposed cousin's hotel, he offers to bring us to his home for tea, to introduce us to his family, and to show us his record collection. I politely decline. We've barely been in Africa for fifteen minutes, and it might be wise to wait a little before venturing too far off the beaten path.

The hotel is decent. It overlooks a cemetery that resembles a shanty town—or perhaps it's the other way around. I will later learn that the poorest Egyptians have no choice but to live among the dead. We hear the call to prayer from the muezzin. Yes, we are definitely somewhere else.

The next day, we tour Cairo at a brisk pace. Tourism always feels like a bit of a waste of time. Less so than in Kosovo, we are not exactly inconspicuous—especially Nada. To the Egyptians, her blondeness and fairness represent the pinnacle of Western exoticism. Fortunately, her beauty does not attract lewd comments. Instead, both women and men turn to look at us, giggling. I imagine they see us as something like albinos. This time, we are the freaks. Unless, of course, they think we're movie stars—after all, people as pale as us are usually only seen in films.

At the bank, while exchanging money, we are offered tea. We're even invited to a wedding in Alexandria simply because we happen to pass by the restaurant at the right moment. However, sympathy for foreigners has its limits. In Alexandria, we are refused a room at a hotel that adheres strictly to Islamic principles—because we are not married.

After Alexandria, my plan is to sail down the Nile as far as possible. But while studying the map to decide our next stop, one name catches my eye: Ismailia. At fifteen, I devoured Pierre Benoît's novels. *Lunegarde* and its fake exoticism suddenly come to mind. A detour to Ismailia on the Suez Canal seems inevitable. Despite its romantic name, Ismailia proves to hold absolutely no interest, and it's even unclear whether Pierre Benoît ever set foot there. How many detours have I made in my life, only to realise that fiction always surpasses reality?

## 34. Obelisk

I can't imagine descending the Nile on one of those tourist cruise boats, complete with a restaurant and swimming pool, stopping only to visit ruins with a guide for two hours before returning on board to enjoy the all-you-can-eat buffet and hot tub. So, we choose to undertake this journey by train.

Arriving at the platform, I briefly regret my choice. In the first carriages we see, heads stick out of open windows in search of fresh air, while groups of travellers crowd the steps, unable to get inside the packed compartments. Although I have a taste for adventure and a desire to travel among the common people, I have no intention of enduring a journey of several hundred kilometres under such conditions.

Fortunately, at the ticket counter, the clerk, noticing we were foreigners, automatically sold us tickets for a kind of first class. As we make our way down the platform, we eventually reach carriages that are reasonably full, with numbered seats waiting for us. Nothing particularly luxurious, but comfortable enough. Our fellow travellers—middle-class Egyptian families—are charming, and we arrive without incident in Luxor.

Archaeological sites have never particularly fascinated me, but still. Unlike the Roman emperors, the pharaohs had the good taste not to invade all of Europe and impose their culture and architecture upon us. Arriving in Luxor truly feels like being somewhere else, rather than visiting a "mother city," as in Rome or Athens. I know Egypt only through *The Cigars of the Pharaoh* and the many souvenirs Napoleon brought back to decorate Paris. Seeing, at the entrance to the Luxor Temple, that solitary obelisk on the left—its twin standing proudly in the middle of Place de la Concorde—offers a vivid idea of what colonialism can be, and how it might be perceived by its victims.

We continue our journey to Aswan and decide to push on to Abu Simbel to visit the famous temple relocated by UNESCO to save it from being submerged by the waters of the dam built on the Nile by Nasser. Sudan lies just a few kilometres away, and we undertake a final excursion to the edges of Egypt. Though I have never been to Black Africa, I feel that it begins here.

To say we stand out among the local population would be an understatement. A Sudanese man we meet on a path invites us to tea at his home, and out of politeness, we cannot refuse. His house, made of mud with a thatched roof, is filled with men and women of all ages, as well as very young children. The women serve us tea and cakes, smiling warmly, though we cannot exchange a single word. It becomes clear that they wish to invite us to eat and perhaps even to stay with them. We are torn—between not wanting to offend their generosity, the embarrassment of depriving them of their modest means of subsistence by accepting, and the certainty that eating even a single bite of food exposed to the forty-degree heat and swarming with flies would make us ill.

I am completely at a loss before this hospitality I cannot comprehend. I feel ashamed—ashamed of my disgust, thinly disguised as scruples. Ashamed that such generous people can live in such poverty while we live in such opulence. It was out of decency that I avoided coming here by plane or cruise ship. Out of decency, too, that I strive to live in a very relative frugality—one that makes no difference to them but allows me to carry a slightly less guilty conscience. We have reached the depths of this journey into the origins of our civilization and history. The descendants of the pharaohs now live in servitude, while we are, indirectly, their lords. And yet, they are the ones who offer us the little that remains to them.

We begin our gradual ascent back to the surface. However, no journey to Egypt would be complete without experiencing the Nile. Since I refuse to board a cruise boat, only the feluccas remain. Typically, their owners offer tourists an hour or two of sailing. I negotiate with one of them to take us from Aswan to Kom Ombo, about fifty kilometres away. He hesitates—it's a journey that will take him all day, with the return lasting through the night. Eventually, we strike a deal.

The felucca journey on the Nile is enchanting. This majestic river flows through a desert, leaving behind only a narrow strip of fertile land. From morning to evening, we experience the full spectrum of colours the sun offers, as we glide close to the water. I understand now why the Egyptians chose to make it a god rather than a man nailed to two planks.

Night falls as the felucca drops us off on the shore, at the foot of the Kom Ombo temple, where not a soul is in sight at this late hour. For a few magical moments, we are transported to the Egypt of Ramses II, a Pierre Benoît novel, or a Tintin comic. From there, we walk for an hour to reach a road, then wait another hour before a van finally passes. The driver, thankfully, agrees to take us on board and bring us back to Luxor, where we can catch the train. It is the end of the journey—one that will remain forever etched in our memories.

## 35. Roissy

My second year as a French lecturer at the University of Austin will also be my last. Of course, staying would be tempting. Here, in the short term, everything feels easier, more exciting, more intense. Despite all the time I've spent in this Texas city—which, for all its charm, is far from as mythical as New York or San Francisco—I still feel as though I'm living in a film where I have the freedom to write the script each day.

My brief return to Paris between these two academic years in the United States reminded me that, once back in France, I will again become just another anonymous figure in the crowd, unnoticed and unremarkable. I can reclaim my studio, which I sublet, but for how long will I be able to afford the rent? I have no job, and even if I did, I have no desire to return to a role as a research officer at Ipsos or anywhere else—a move that would feel like a terrible return to square one.

Here, I have a pleasant job that leaves me plenty of time each week to go out, and even more during the holidays to travel. My contract can be renewed year after year, as long as I wish and as long as the Head of the French Department is agreeable. There is still so much for me to discover. I have the entire French community as friends, and for the first time, I've even started a romantic relationship that could last—with a young American woman.

But more than anything, I fear stagnation. Once again, I find myself at a crossroads and must choose a path. If I want to build a life in the United States, I would need to retake degrees at an American university and, preferably, get married to obtain the coveted Green Card. I've already spent years studying, and the thought of starting over in a language that is not my own—and that I still struggle to master after two years in a department where everyone speaks my native language—feels overwhelming.

Most of the French people I see around me are just passing through, staying for a year or two at most. Those who lack the courage to leave and find a way to stay seem completely uprooted. Settling in Spain or Germany is simply moving a little further from France—close enough to return in an hour by plane, five hours by train, or ten hours by car. Building a life in the United States, however, means renouncing one's identity to adopt another. But which one? I still understand nothing about this country.

In this university town—or rather, in this university that is a town—almost everyone is under twenty-five, and they always will be. They simply won't be the same people. Growing old here would quickly become pathetic. This dream life is, by definition,

disconnected from reality. Is it better to live a pleasant dream or to confront the harsh truths of life? I have no future in this country. Above all, I have no future.

I choose to return. I know it will be difficult and painful, but I am certain it is the right decision. In France, I enjoyed a certain recognition as a semiologist. Here, I am just the token little Frenchman. Just another lecturer. While I've had many adventures, they are fleeting. I need to fulfil my destiny, and my destiny is not to end up an eternal tourist in the United States, only to one day become a tourist in my own country. This stay in Texas has been a magical interlude. But now, it is time to invent my own destiny.

## 36. The Gaffiot

Back in Paris, I've settled into my studio on Rue Daguerre, but I no longer have a job and, therefore, no income. The few dollars I brought back from Texas will allow me to get by for a few months, living very modestly. However, having not worked in France for over two years, I'm no longer registered with Social Security. Since I resigned from my position at Ipsos before leaving for America, I'm also ineligible for unemployment benefits or the associated social coverage.

For the French administration, these two years in the United States simply don't count. Unless I find employment quickly, I'm on the verge of becoming marginalised. I now live with the constant anxiety of an unforeseen health problem leading to significant expenses that I wouldn't be able to cover.

Yet, I'm not actively seeking work at the moment. At thirty-three, despite all my experience, I've spent less than three years working as an office employee—and never for very long at the same company. I fully intend never to return to that life, and even though I don't yet know how, I will find a way to avoid it. That said, I do need to start earning a living again. I'm open to freelance assignments as an advertising semiologist, provided I can work from home and avoid reporting to an office every morning, chatting with colleagues by the coffee machine, obeying a boss, or serving clients. To me, the corporate world feels like a prison. In the United States, I experienced freedom, and I will never give it up.

The return to the grey anonymity of Paris is, of course, a bit depressing. I no longer know many people here. But waking up each morning with the knowledge that I can shape my day however I wish is a priceless luxury. I feel more eager than ever to learn and meet new people. And what better place for that, time and again, than the university?

Although, to my great regret, I didn't learn English as well as I had hoped during my time in the United States, I did make some progress. I now feel the need to structure my somewhat pragmatic knowledge of the language and to tackle Anglo-Saxon literature in its original form. I re-enrol at the Sorbonne to replicate, in English, the achievement I accomplished a few years earlier in Spanish.

This time, I enter directly into the third year, and as a sort of reparation for my humiliating failure on the TOEFL two years earlier, I will earn a degree with high honours in just nine months. My approach to studying, however, is very different from that of the other students, who are mostly girls. They seem to be there to obtain

a diploma by simply regurgitating what they've been taught, often verbatim, on exam day. I, on the other hand, only attend the classes that interest me, take no notes, and devour all the books in the library, where I spend countless hours.

To give myself time to recover, since I'm starting from a very low point, I've opted out of continuous assessment and placed all my bets on the final exam. What a pleasure it is to read the masterpieces of English and American literature in the language in which they were written! Since I only attend the most fascinating classes, I never get bored. For the other courses, I glance briefly at the syllabus but never ask my classmates for their notes—I simply read everything I can find on the subject.

Beyond these purely intellectual satisfactions, the Sorbonne is also the perfect place to meet girls. I'm about ten years older than most of them. Enough for it to be noticeable, but not so much as to risk being immediately dismissed as a pervert. I meet plenty of people and have a few new adventures, though none with lasting consequences.

With my English degree in hand, I still don't know what to do with my life or how to avoid long-term employment. I've taken on a few freelance assignments, but I have no desire to rejoin a company. What about teaching? After my idyllic experience at the University of Austin, it's hard to imagine myself standing in front of a class in a suburban high school. It will be the *agrégation* or nothing. So, I register for the preparation course for the *agrégation* in modern literature at the Sorbonne.

In the end, it will be nothing. I quickly realize that this prep course is nothing more than dreadful cramming. The classes are painfully uninspiring, and our supposed intellectual leaders sound hollow. The aspiring teachers already pledge allegiance to the system by submitting completely to it.

Rather than encouraging us to emulate geniuses in our own way, we are made to see their brilliance as incomprehensible and unparalleled. They are turned into deities to be worshipped, not models to draw inspiration from. This is why the system produces so many teachers and so few writers, so many slaves and so few emancipated thinkers. The method I used to earn my Spanish and English degrees simply doesn't apply here. To succeed, one must take notes verbatim and memorize them, even when they're nonsensical, in order to regurgitate them servilely on exam day. It paints a bleak, oppressive picture of the teaching profession. My whole life has been a quest for freedom—especially the freedom to think. I'd rather die than become a teacher, even an *agrégé*, tasked with teaching students how to accept servitude.

To complete my journey, I will nonetheless sit the written exams. My best mark will be in Latin—a seven out of twenty, I believe—which corresponds to the general average required for eligibility for the oral exam. To think I was forced to stop studying Latin in the fifth grade because I wasn't considered a good enough student, and now, I've taken the exam without even using the Gaffiot dictionary we were entitled to, which included translations of two or three sentences from the text we were supposed to work on.

So, I won't be a teacher. But what will I do with my life? An idea begins to take shape within me: to do what school and society have tried to forbid me from doing since childhood—to write my own life.

## 37. RENDEZVOUS

I'm in my mid-thirties. I'm not old yet, but I feel that one more year at university would be one too many. For over ten years, my romantic conquests have always been around twenty-five years old. I'm the one who's ageing. During a trip to Spain, I distinctly heard someone wonder whether the person accompanying me was my girlfriend or my daughter—a warning I can't ignore. I've stayed a teenager at heart, and what keeps me mingling with students rather than people my own age, who already have jobs and families—or are even divorced—is that youth represents a time of endless possibilities. Choosing a partner, choosing a career, choosing a place and a way of life... After thirty, most people have already made their choices, for better or worse. And in one way or another, choosing always means restricting your freedom.

However, I'm well aware that, at least in the realm of love, I am endlessly repeating patterns of failure that will only make me increasingly unhappy—and, soon enough, even pathetic. In an attempt to break free, I decide to undergo therapy. Psychoanalysis has always intrigued me. At twelve, I was already reading Freud. But there is a world of difference between reading books about psychoanalysis while lying on a couch and actually lying on the couch oneself to be studied. It's not by learning the rules that one knows how to drive, nor by learning the codes that one knows how to behave.

The experience is relatively brief, intense, and difficult. It ends the day I ask my analyst if I can truly tell her everything, and she responds, in carefully chosen terms, that I cannot. So, what's the point? Nevertheless, this experience has helped me progress. I am now fully aware that I persist in falling for young women who are clearly not right for me—whether because they live in another country or on the other side of the world, because they are too different from me and in no way complementary, because they are even more immature than I am (if that's possible), or simply because they don't love me—and this very rejection only heightens my desire.

However, I cannot resign myself to a relationship based solely on reason, knowing it would be equally short-lived. I want to hold onto the hope of a chance meeting that is as romantic as it is fortuitous—this time, grounded in reality rather than fantasy, and offering the possibility of a future.

The end of the year is approaching, and it will also be my last year at the Sorbonne. In the library, I run into a German student I barely know. I only know that she is married to an Egyptian. Completely unexpectedly, she invites me to a New Year's Eve party she is hosting in the modest two-room flat they share in Paris, near Bastille. She tells me there will be very few people: her sister, a few friends. It is clearly not a romantic proposal. She is married, and besides, she is not at all my type.

I hesitate for a moment. I won't know anyone. I might get bored. And by accepting, I deprive myself of any other potentially more interesting invitation for New Year's Eve. On the other hand, if I refuse, I risk spending the evening alone or falling into

the same usual traps I know too well in such circumstances. Moreover, her seemingly disinterested invitation intrigues and touches me.

I'm not sure whether she's inviting me because she values me or because she feels sorry for me. In any case, there is something very kind about her. Very genuine. Very simple. Like an obvious truth. I accept. Unknowingly, I have an appointment with my destiny.

When I ring her doorbell a few days later with a bottle in hand, it will not be her who answers. Nor her sister. Instead, it will be the woman I've been searching for endlessly without ever finding. The woman who will now be all women to me—even if I might glance back at a few others, contenting myself with simply watching them from now on. I won't have to grieve over my romantic quest after all.

She is under twenty-five, like all the others, but this time we will grow up together. And it is she who, by grounding me in reality, will enable me to achieve my dreams rather than merely dream them. And what if I had declined this invitation? What if she had? There are no coincidences, only appointments. That evening, I had an appointment with the woman of my life.

## 38. Writing One's Life

When I leave her a few hours later, a new year begins. Perhaps a new life. I give her my number and leave it to her to decide whether we will see each other again. I let her choose. She will call me, and we will meet again. Everything is simple with her, and everything feels obvious. But now it's up to me to decide—to choose one woman among all women. To accept being chosen by her. I know that if I commit to this path, there will be no turning back. I will forever set aside all other paths. I am fully aware that I am at a crossroads in my life, where I must choose the right path and avoid dead ends. My chance is here, and if I let it slip away, there may never be another.

I am fourteen years older than she is. I live in a rented studio, where my only piece of furniture is a wicker trunk. All my belongings fit into the two bags I took to the United States and brought back to France: one bag of clothes and one bag of books. I'm not really working. I'm not even a student anymore. I take drama classes. She, on the other hand, is finishing her studies at Sciences Po and will soon have a proper job with a permanent contract. I hardly fit the profile of an ideal husband. But she has faith in me, and that gives me wings.

I come across a small ad in *Télérama*, even though I never look at ads—especially not to find work. Harlequin Books is seeking translators from English to French for their romance novels. I pass the selection process, and my application is accepted. Over time, I will translate a dozen of these pulp novels. It's more an adaptation job than a translation. The text needs to be reduced by at least a third, and it must cater to French tastes. It's a valuable learning experience and, more importantly, the first time in my life that I am earning money from writing. I tell myself that it is possible.

A few months later, I reconnect with a girl I met during my English studies. Since then, she has attended the Fémis, a prestigious French film school, and has just been hired by a production company to oversee the writing of a youth series, *Extrême*

*Limite*. She suggests I try my hand at scriptwriting. Having never done it before, I immediately agree. At that time, there were no scriptwriting schools in France. For once, I feel just as legitimate as anyone else. The experience proves successful—I become a television scriptwriter. I go on to write for other youth series, all in the 26-minute format. Other production companies approach me, including those producing animation. I begin earning a decent living from writing.

It's a time for new beginnings. I am nearly forty, but I have never lived with anyone as a couple. Despite our age difference, we experience our firsts together: house, marriage, child. Everything I hadn't done until then, I accomplish in just two years.

I learn that a scriptwriting school has just been established in Paris: the Conservatoire Européen d'Écriture Audiovisuelle. It's too late to sit the entrance exam for the first year, but I join the second cohort. There, I hone the craft I am already practising—as usual—and make both professional and personal connections. My teachers include the creators of all the major French television series of the time: *Navarro, L'Instit, Julie Lescaut, Docteur Sylvestre*…

A fellow student and friend is hired to oversee the writing of a new series, *Avocats et Associés*, and invites me to join the pool of scriptwriters. I step into the big league: the 52-minute format for adults and prime time. For the first time, I earn more from writing than I ever did as an employee or freelancer.

The consulting firm that regularly employed me as an advertising semiologist has just been sold and no longer requires my services. This presents an opportunity for me to leave that profession entirely—a field I feel I've exhausted—and dedicate myself solely to writing. Once again, projects come one after another. But the world of television, much like *Dallas*, is ruthless. We are mercenaries in a Mexican army led by countless generals, many of whom are incompetent. It still feels too restrictive for me. I want complete freedom, and I know I won't spend my whole life working in television.

I begin writing plays. After unsuccessfully trying to get them published, I decide to create my own website and offer them as free downloads. These are the early days of the internet, and I dive into this space of freedom, approaching theatre companies directly and bypassing publishers. And it works. The first productions come in, encouraging me to continue.

The end of *Avocats et Associés* prompts me to leave television behind. I continue teaching scriptwriting for another year at the school that trained me, but I now devote myself entirely to theatre. I translate my plays into Spanish, and others translate them into Portuguese, English, German, and many other languages. Thanks to the internet, my texts circulate around the world.

I am now an internationally recognised playwright. I have no accounts to give to anyone. I live off my writing, and day by day, I write my life.

In the end, my father was right. I was good for nothing. Well, almost. From a very young age, I dreamed of being a writer. It took me over forty years to admit that I was suited to no other work than writing, a few more years to allow myself to make it

my profession, and another two or three to realise I could live from it.

Life is a journey. What will define us in the end is our path. The roads we took and, perhaps even more so, those we refused to take. Soon, the sea will erase the traces we leave behind in the sand, like lines on a manuscript. To those who come after us, let us leave only the desire to wander freely.

**Other plays by the same author translated in English**

**Monologues**
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

**Comedies for 2**
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The House of Our Dreams
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

**Comedies for 3**
A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Way of Chance

**Comedies for 4**
A Cuckoo's nest
A Hell of a Night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

**Comedies for 5 to 6**
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In flagrante delirium
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

**Comedies for 7 or more**
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe the savage beasts
Neighbours'Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Performance is not cancelled
The President's Draw
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

**Collection of sketches**
At the bar counter
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost Time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
Nicotine
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

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