



Sample – *This Is What I Cherish*

Translation by Isabelle Rossaert

Paris, September 1997

I dreamt of you last night. I saw you lying on the ground, a wounded animal. I wanted to touch you, grab your hand, put my hand on your heart to feel it beating. But, reflected in the black of your eyes, I saw a vulture already making its slow circles.

I bent over you and there was a smile on your lips. It was just a flash and then it was gone, and I knew I was in Paris, lying in my bed, and I had just woken up. But it felt like my chest was torn open, I felt thousands of ants eating my heart from the inside.

I tried to keep my eyes closed, tried to finish the dream. I tried to see you, tell you that you must not do this. I tried to feel your hand in mine again, but I could not. The dream faded. All that was left was the gnawing, the swarming in my chest. It had been as if you had wanted to say: I did this for you. And I do not want this. I have never wanted this.

It was a struggle to get up. I went out and had coffee on the terrace of a café on the Rue Mouffetard. I entered the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont, where I gazed at the candles before the shrine of Sainte Geneviève. I tried to find peace in the medieval garden of the Hôtel the Cluny. At the little park in front of the museum I rubbed Montaigne's shoe, that silly ladies' shoe of his that becomes shinier with every hand that touches it. I walked along the quay of the Seine, past the endless row of bookstalls to the Pont Neuf, and there I stood for a long, long time watching the swirling water, but nothing helped.

Today is a hot day. My feet ache from all the walking. At Dubois, next to the Panthéon, where I love looking at the pencils and the pastels, I bought this notebook. Later, I will have to get back to work but I still have a bit of time. At Patrice's café they are playing Cassandra Wilson. 'Love is blindness'.

The days are long, with the courses not having started yet. Everyone is gone, to their families in the countryside, to the sea. Enjoying the last of summer. I stay in Paris. I will not be going back. You must understand that my life is here. That is what I want to write to you about: how my life is here. I was never meant to be your wife.

Sunday, 7 September

The sun is already setting, the street basks in a hazy light. The heat lingers on days like these and the later it gets, the better Patrice's choice of jazz becomes.

The dream keeps on gnawing.

What are you doing in my dreams over here? This is my domain. Ever since I was a little girl I have dreamed of living here.

I was thirteen when my parents first took me to Paris. We booked a hotel with a view of the Eiffel Tower. We walked on the square outside Trocadéro Palace, with its man-sized golden statues. We visited the Louvre. I remember how disappointed I was when we finally stood in front of the Mona Lisa. You have to look really hard to catch a glimpse of it among the many visitors, and the painting was much smaller than I'd imagined. It just had no magic about it. I could not understand how this was the most famous painting on Earth. I had expected to be enchanted.

On Place Saint-Michel, at night, someone was selling fluorescent tubes that you could wear around your neck as a necklace of greenish light. Someone else sold plastic pigeons that you

could wind up and let fly away. The flapping sounds they made were exactly the same as those of the real pigeons scurrying around the fountain. My parents bought me the necklace.

Later we had dinner at a Greek restaurant where the waiter treated me like a princess. Mum and dad were drinking wine from a bottle that was shaped asymmetrically and had ribs in the handblown glass to fit the fingers of an adult. A bottle with a grip. I liked the bottle so much that the waiter gave me it as a present. He covered the neck of the bottle with tinfoil so my dress would not get stained with drops of wine.

Try to picture me, then. I was wearing a dress made of light blue Indian cotton with an embroidered flower on its short bodice. Mum had made it for me. I am so certain I wore this dress, because this is the memory that has stayed with me ever since that first trip to Paris. Try to picture me on the metro with the peculiar bottle on my lap, holding it with both hands. A man on the seat opposite mine looks at me. I see that he sees the whole story – me, my first time in Paris, my parents, the bottle on my lap, the glowing necklace. His knowing this is a secret between us. There is a twinkle in his eye that lifts me up. It is the first time a man looks at me this way. My primal memory of Paris is this feeling of being lifted up.

Saturday, 13 September

There is another image of Paris I cherish. Not a memory but a photograph. A photograph of mum and dad holding hands while climbing the steps leading up to the Sacré Coeur. I must have gone ahead of them, must have climbed the steps faster, considering that I took this picture. They look like a couple in love. Mum, still full of energy at that time, is one step ahead of dad. She has a big smile on her face. Behind her are the roofs of the inner city houses. The photo stands on the night table next to my father's bed. I used to look at it often when I was at his house. It is the last photograph of my parents before their lives changed. Before the diagnosis changed their lives.

A year before she died, mum and dad went to Paris for a long weekend, just the two of them. It was his birthday present to her. She did not wear a wig. Dad bought her a silk Hermès scarf, that she tied around her bald head like a pirate. She made up her eyes with black kohl, an act of defiance against the disease. My Amazon, dad called her.

Under the colourful silk, her head was covered with downy hair in those days. In summer, we sometimes went to the market in Cucuron, mum with a large wicker basket. I remember you there, with the old man. What an odd pair you were. I found you frightening, with all those dead animals you were selling. But you were doing good business, weren't you?

Of course I was jealous. Them going off to Paris, me staying with my aunt. My aunt's place would become my home, but I didn't know that back then.

We will all go together soon, my mother said, to soothe me. The three of us. And then we will go and see *The Lady and the Unicorn* again, you and me, she said, putting her arm around my waist and pulling me close. *The Lady and the Unicorn* was our secret.

This and other plans were what kept my mother alive long beyond the time the doctors had given her.

We were sitting on the beach. The sea rolled in, wave after wave, over the pebbles. It was already late in the afternoon. Mum had been sleeping most of the time. When she woke up she pushed herself up, leaned on her elbows and gazed at the sea. 'They have extended the exhibition at the Beaubourg, isn't that great? I'm sure we will be able to go in September.'

Why September? Why September again?

Sunday, 14 September

How can I tell you about Paris, not even knowing if you have ever seen a city? How can I explain a city like Paris to someone who has spent most of his life on a mountain? You have not even seen the sea, you have probably never left the Provence.

So imagine you are looking out from the old hermitage. Only you are not surrounded by green wooded slopes, there are no vineyards. There is no landscape of almond orchards and melon plantations stretching out before you, no cypress trees standing together like gossiping old aunts, roads bordered with plane trees or little villages dotting the hilltop. The horizon does not extend to the bluish silhouette of Mont Sainte-Victoire. Instead of all this, as far as you can see, there are rooftops. Buildings and rooftops. All you see is city. And I wonder what that kind of landscape would do to someone like you.

If you arrive in Paris by train, the first thing you do is descend to the metro. The first thing you see of Paris is what lies beneath it. The first thing you hear is the rattling, the creaking, the shrieking and then those snatches of music, a cello, a violin, somebody singing around the corner of one of the long underground tunnels. The first thing you see are these endless tunnels and the big billboards, everywhere those billboards and the metro trains that come and go, that swallow you up with their dozens of doors, that carry you off, packed into a crowd, and spit you out again at another underground location. And when you finally, for the first time, ascend into the light of day again, pushed upwards by a long escalator, there, the first sight of the city that assails you, that is the place where you are born into Paris.

I was born into Paris at Place Saint Michel. The water splashing from the dragon fountain. The rays of sunlight reflected by the windows of stately buildings. The terraces and bookshops and, when you turn around, once you have left the underground, the view of the Seine and the old palaces of Ile de la Cité.

Dad took me to Paris to celebrate my sixteenth birthday. He booked the same hotel where he had stayed with my mother two years before. It was small but comfortable, on a quiet little backstreet. We went to the same places that he had visited with mum. The Beaubourg, the Quay d'Orsay, the Musée de l'Orangerie. We always returned to Place Saint Michel by metro.

Monday, 15 September

He should not have done it. Not the same things he had done with mum two years earlier. It must have been so painful for him, but he wanted to show me what mum had wanted me to see so badly. There we stood, amidst the water lilies. Nearly alone in that big oval room. All around us the light, caught in brush strokes. Nothing but the capturing of the moment.

We stood there for more than an hour. In silence, except for the sound of our breathing, our soft footsteps as we mused and moved from colour to colour, from dot to line, to bow, to speck. Dad cleared his throat, then swallowed. It happened often in those days, at times when we were silent together. It was as if he hesitated between swallowing a memory or speaking it. 'Mum was standing here', he said, spreading his arms a little like mum had done. He looked at me and smiled weakly. 'Monet had an eye condition that made him see colours differently. Mum said...' His voice broke. In a constricted voice, suddenly high-pitched, he continued: 'How illness can yield such beauty.' Then, in the middle of that room, among the waterlilies, he burst into tears. I do not know how long we stood there, clinging to each other while my father sobbed like a little boy.

I just cannot stop thinking of dad. How he sobbed, how something inside him just burst. And I try to follow the feeling that these tears lead to. It was, I think, the fact that mum always remained so hopeful.

There is no beauty in illness, none. There is no beauty in hospital rooms, with their speckled walls, their metal beds and hoists. There is no beauty in the tepid smell of sick bodies and disinfectants that lingers there. In a body that swells, sags, becomes thin and limp. There is no beauty in eyes that sink ever deeper.

Mum refused to stay in the hospital, just like she had refused to wear a wig earlier. She refused to have a bed in the living room, although it would have been much more comfortable. Up till the very last day she wore dresses, loose, swishing dresses of colourful silk, and tied those silk shawls around her head and painted her lips a subtle pink that highlighted her complexion. There was always a vase with flowers on the table and she did not tolerate one single withered leaf. As long as she was there, the house was a haven of calm and beauty. When she could not take care of it anymore, dad asked the cleaning lady to come round more often. Mum gave her instructions. But she arranged the flowers herself; until the very last day she was the one who arranged the flowers. When she was able to, she would sit at the window that looked out on the castle. Mum and dad had moved to Ansouis for that castle. For years, mum was responsible for restoring the old fabrics – drapes, armchairs, tapestries... there was always something to mend. She and the old duchess were very fond of each other. Mum could have been the second daughter of the house. After the duchess died and her son moved into the castle, mum became good friends with his wife.

When mom did not sit at the window, she would leaf through one of the art books we had at home, one or two of which would always be lying on the coffee table. ‘Look’, she would say, pointing out a painting to me. ‘This one is exhibited in Madrid. We really must go there one day.’

Patrice brings me a cup of tea. ‘Are you okay?’, he asks. I sometimes wonder what my face looks like while I am writing like this. Sometimes I catch myself frowning or groaning or staring in the distance, up the street, as if I see something there that the other people on the terrace do not. I have become a familiar presence on this terrace. I think Patrice likes me. And he does not try to chat me up. Besides, it is more pleasant sitting here than in my room. I have not told you about where I live. Dad has rented a studio for me. It is in a fin-de-siècle building with a solemn facade and balconies on the second and fifth floors. Behind the front gate are a marble hall and a glass door opening onto a courtyard. It is peaceful there, stylish. There is a small splashing fountain. Ferns and hostas grow in the shade and in the sunny spots of this cobblestoned courtyard stand potted geraniums. You need a code to get in.

I live just under the roof. Officially it is not even called a floor. Grey paint peels off the walls, the floor is covered with simple terracotta tiles and in the corner there is an old sink covered with rust. There is also a toilet that always leaks.

My garret measures three by four metres. In earlier times the maids lived here. It is a small place but I have everything I need: a toilet, a shower, two hotplates, a fridge, a coffee maker. Right under the ceiling a small platform is mounted that has my mattress on it. You cannot sit up straight in my bed. Beneath it stand a small writing desk, a wardrobe and a bookcase. I don’t speak to my neighbours often. Next to me lives a man in his early thirties who teaches at the conservatoire. I can hear it when he has a woman staying the night.

I can see into the apartments on the other side of the courtyard. Many of them are beautifully furnished, just like mum would have done it. It was the small gestures. Things she seemed to do casually while moving through the house. Straightening a magazine on the coffee table, picking up slippers someone left behind, opening and closing the curtains at the right time,

turning on the floor lamp. Things we only realised she did when she wasn't there anymore. It only took a few days for chaos to spread through the house like mould. We tried to tidy up, but we never succeeded in making the house as bright as it had been before. I was too young to manage the household and dad was away from home a lot for his work. That is why I ended up living with my aunt in Vaugines. And it was a relief at the time, after that difficult, beautiful summer. Aunty had her shop to run and left me to my own devices.

Sunday, 21 September

A place that was all yours, did you have that? Was there such a place on the mountain, a spot you always returned to, as if to a nest? A rock maybe, from which you could look out over the valley, or a trunk you could lean against, your legs pulled up to your chest?

I had such a spot in Ansouis. On a hill near the village. I sat there between the roots of an oak tree, as if in an easy chair, and looked out over the valley and the neighbouring villages. No one could see me, no one knew where I was. I sat there high above the castle, in the coolness of the foliage. To get there, I followed a rocky path that ended in brushwood. I had to crawl under thorny bushes to reach it, it was my secret place. I did not actually go there that often. But in my mind I went there every day. My own private spot.

I hid little notes in the cracks of the tree bark. Resolutions or wishes at the beginning of a new year. And a year later I would look for these wads of paper, curious to see what I had written the year before. I measured my growth on this tree, the many ways in which I had changed. And whether my wishes had come true. I have a place like that in Paris. Even though I have only ever been there once, it is the place I go to in my mind to feel at home.

It was mum who took me there, that time the three of us visited Paris. A mother daughter day: dad was at the Musée d'arts et de métiers, mum took me out shopping in the Marais. Delighted, we peered into the window of a little shop selling expensive embroidery.

'I want to show you something', mum said. 'A very special place.'

It was a long walk, across the Ile Saint-Louis and the Seine again. We arrived at what looked like a medieval castle, right in the heart of the city. It was the Hotel de Cluny, the national museum of medieval art.

Mom strode through rooms filled with golden monstrances, headless statues from the façade of the Notre-Dame and stained glass windows from the Sainte Chapelle, rooms with medieval woodcarvings and luxurious tapestries, and I wondered why she walked through them so inattentively. And then we arrived in the room of *The Lady and the Unicorn*.

'Here we are', she said.

It was an oval-shaped room with indirect lighting and the smell that filled it was that of old wool. All around us hung tapestries, six in total, of different sizes. They all had the same main colour, the same type of red, a shade of red that made me think of my menstrual blood, that only a few years ago had terrified me and that I had painstakingly tried to keep hidden from everybody. Mom stood still in the middle of the room. She did not look at the tapestries, she looked at me, curious to see my reaction.

Small figures were scattered over all this red. Flowers, animals: a rabbit, a fox, a little monkey, a goat, a partridge. In the middle of each tapestry a similar scene was depicted: one or two women, slender, with long blonde hair and pensive eyes. They wore exquisite dresses with tight bodices trimmed with brocade and gemstones, and to their right stood a lion, to their left a unicorn, both animals holding a coat of arms or a flag.

Mum said nothing. She just stood there with her arms crossed, as if she were the maker of these tapestries: look at this, what do you think? She kept silent for a long time, she who was

always so eager to comment on everything. Even when I threw her a questioning look, she only smiled.

I walked up to one of the tapestries. Studied it closely. Little by little mum started to explain. She pointed out the intricate coiffures of the women, the beautiful detail of their dresses. She made me aware of the mysterious scenes. Here a lady rested her hand loosely on the horn of the unicorn. There a lady-in-waiting held a golden bowl from which another lady took gold-coloured pieces of candy. The lion stood on its hind legs and watched as she fed the candy to a parakeet, his eyes hungry, his mouth wide open.

On another tapestry a maidservant was holding a plate filled with carnations, out of which the lady braided a crown. A little monkey smelled a rose that he had plucked from the wicker basket standing next to her. On the next tapestry two ladies were playing a small organ. 'So what have we seen already?', mum asked suddenly in that tone of voice she had used when quizzing me on my homework when I was a child. She demonstratively rubbed her fingertips together, touched the tip of her tongue with her index finger, tapped her nose, her ear. All of a sudden I grasped her meaning. I walked to the next tapestry to see if I was right. There was only one lady in this one. She was kneeling, while the unicorn next to her rested his forelegs on her lap. With her right hand the lady held up a mirror to the unicorn, who looked at himself. I repeated mum's gestures and then touched my eye. We both laughed.

'But there are six of them?', I said. Mum nodded. She narrowed her eyes, studying me as if to guess my thoughts.

Do you believe in a sixth sense? All of a sudden I wonder about that. Has that ever happened to you, that you knew something even though you could not touch, taste, smell, hear or see it? Were there things you could only know with your heart on your mountain, too? Together mum and I walked to the sixth tapestry. It was the largest of them all and depicted the most elaborate scene. The women's robes were the same shade of red as the background of the tapestries, and this time the lady stood under a kind of canopy that was held up on both sides by the lion and the unicorn. The handmaid held up a small treasure chest in which the lady put a precious golden necklace similar to the one she wore on all the other tapestries. To her left, on a bench with a cushion, sat a small lapdog. Mum pointed at a strip of fabric at the top of the canopy bearing the words '*A mon seul désir*' in medieval letters. I watched as mum made the same gestures she had made earlier. Then she put her hand on her heart.

I cannot tell you what the scene on this tapestry means. I cannot put it into words, but I felt it, it is a place within my body, it is a feeling of light, radiating close to my heart.

'Did people really believe in unicorns back then?', I finally asked. Mum smiled. 'I think so', she said. 'They were beautiful, very fast, very wild animals. A unicorn, so people thought, could only be caught by a virgin. It would lay its head in a virgin's lap, and then become tame and vulnerable. Like this one', she pointed at the fifth tapestry.

'But they are not going to hurt it, are they?', I enquired anxiously. Mum shook her head. 'No, this unicorn will not be captured. It can jump up in a second and run back into the wild.'

We had been standing in that room for over an hour and one of the attendants came to tell us that the museum would be closing soon. When we were walking through the corridor on our way to the exit, still mesmerised by the beauty of the tapestries, mum suddenly put her hand on my arm. 'Look', she said and she pointed towards a room to our left. It was a dark room, but an elongated shape lit up in a display case in the corner, a sword or a lance. When I neared it, I saw it was a two-metre long rod of spiralled ivory. Mum smiled. 'A unicorn's horn', she said. My amazement amused her. She laughed, put her hand on my shoulder and said: 'One day, my little princess, you too will find a unicorn.'

I never entered the museum again. But in my mind I have, countless times. The room of *The Lady and the Unicorn* is my secret place in Paris.

Vaugines, sep. 14th 1997

Dear Valérie,

I am so curious about you in Paris. How have you been? The holidays must be about over for you too, no? You are being missed here.

Myself, I can finally breathe again. The heat is not so merciless now, the nights are already getting cooler. Most of the tourists have gone, what a relief!

I've asked Gaston to paint the shopfront, because it needed it. We had a television crew come up here, the other day. They came to film the church and the fountain, same old things. It must be ten years ago now that they shot that movie here. Montand, Auteuil, Emmanuelle Béart, where does the time go? Did you know Montand came to my shop to buy cheese? The small hard one. He came every week; very friendly he was. And so handsome, with that moustache of his, a man becoming better-looking with age.

There's been discord about the fountain all summer because of that television crew. The town council wanted to remove the moss that grows on it, can you believe it? The council thinks we should invest in sprucing up the village, in light of the growing tourism... And you didn't see any moss in the movie either, they argued. The arguments became heated, outside Rémy's bar. In the end a referendum was held: the moss stays, but there will be large pots with geraniums all over the village. So be it. As long as they don't go bonkers like they did in Cucuron it's fine with me.

By the way, there is something else I want to tell you. On the first Saturday of September, the men of Cucuron, the same ones that went hunting last year, drove a truck with two memorial stones in it up to the mountain ridge. One stone for Max, one for the wild boar. It felt like a sort of penance to me. Can you believe it? They really try to convince themselves and each other that one is not the other. For hours, they battered the hard soil with their pickaxes. Those fools of Cucuron. Clearly the mistral blows heavier there than anywhere else.

Love,

Your aunt

PS This letter has been lying around for a while. But now I am really going to post it. Your dad came up for a short visit. Let me know if you need anything, darling.



Fragment + Synopsis

Fragment

The wild boar was first spotted by two walkers hiking up the Luberon. Foreigners. No one believed them in Café Le Cercle. Not that there were no wild boar in the woods, but the animal simply could not be as big as the hikers claimed – one of them had stretched out his arm at waist height to indicate how tall it was. In a region like the Luberon, wild boar do not live to a very old age. Too damp and cold in winter, too hot and dry in summer. It was equally unlikely that the animal had not run away. ‘It was’, one of the men had said, ‘as if it wanted to say: this is my territory, no trespassing.’

Synopsis

When the men of Cucuron, a small village at the foot of the Luberon Mountains, become obsessed with an enormous wild boar running around on their land and go hunting for it, one of the young hunters is shot dead under mysterious circumstances.

But What Do I Love tells the story of what happens after this tragic incident. Through her diary we follow a young art history student at the Sorbonne. She fled the Luberon to forget the dramatic events, but they still haunt her in her nightmares. The young man’s death also forces her to confront other losses in her young life and triggers the grief over her mother, who died of cancer.

In the second part of the book her friend, a journalist, travels to the Luberon to find out what really happened on that fateful day of the hunt. From the bits of information and gossip he manages to gather from the reluctant villagers, he pieces together a story of what happened, a story he hopes will help his friend come to terms with the young man’s death.

This is What I Cherish is a story about confronting your fears and sorrow. About the importance and solace of beauty and nature’s indomitable power. It is also a tale about the necessity of telling stories so we can give meaning to the things that happen to us.