



**THE  
MYSTERY  
OF  
HENRI  
PICK**

**DAVID  
FOENKINOS**

**WALTER  
PRESENTS**

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different man. The Frédéric that Agathe had gone out with was a sort of unfinished version, a rough draft. She was more beautiful now, as if she had not been able to fully bloom in his presence. Their break-up had not been dramatic; they had come to a mutual agreement: a cold, legalistic expression that ultimately evokes the mutual agreement that there was no love between them. They got on fairly well, but they never saw each other again after their split. They had stopped calling, stopped texting. There was nothing left to say. They had loved each other and then they had stopped loving each other.

Eventually the question of what they were up to now arose. “What are you doing these days?” Agathe asked. Frédéric felt like saying “Nothing.” But in the end he decided to mention the fact that he was writing his second novel. Her face lit up. “Oh really? You published a book?” She seemed happy that his dream had finally come true, but unwittingly her words pierced him to the core. If this woman whom he had loved, whom he had been with for nearly three years, the smell of whose armpits he remembered perfectly, didn’t know that he had published *The Bathtub*, then his failure was unbearable. He pretended that he was happy to have seen her again, and left without asking her a single question. He hasn’t changed, she thought: it’s all about him. She had no idea that she had hurt him.

It was a new order of narcissistic wound; she was part of what we might call *the inner circle*. In some way, it was against the rules for Agathe not to know that he had published a novel. Frédéric himself was so stunned by the importance he gave to this information that he decided it was better to end the conversation. Then, suddenly, he got it into his head to go after her. Thankfully she moved very slowly; that hadn’t changed. Agathe had always walked the way some people read books: without ever skipping a word. When he caught up with her, he watched her for a few seconds before pronouncing her name with his mouth close to her ear. She turned, wide-eyed: “Oh, it’s you! You scared me.”

“Yes, sorry. I was just thinking that our conversation was too brief. You didn’t tell me anything about yourself. Would you like to go for a coffee?”

### 3

Madeleine was still struggling to accept the idea that her husband had never told her about his passion for literature. Her past had taken on another tone now, like a scene or a landscape viewed from the other side. It bothered her, and she wondered whether she should lie. She could easily say that yes, she knew Henri had written a book. Who could contradict her? But no, she couldn’t do that. She had to respect his desire for silence. But why had he hidden everything? Those few pages had created a gulf between them. She knew perfectly well that he couldn’t have written a book like that in a few weeks. It must represent months, even years, of work. Every day, he had lived with that story inside his mind. And in the evenings, when they lay in bed together, he must still have been thinking about his novel. But whenever he talked to her, the only things he mentioned were problems with customers or suppliers.

Another question haunted her: would Henri have wanted his novel to be published? After all, he'd left it in that library instead of just getting rid of it. Presumably he had hoped that somebody would read it. But how could she be sure? What could she possibly know about his wishes? Everything was so confused. After a while, she decided that it would be a way of bringing him back to life. In the end, that was all that mattered. People would talk about him; he would be alive again. That is the privilege of artists: to outfox death by leaving behind their creations. And what if this were just the start? What if he had performed other acts in his life that would be discovered later? Perhaps he was one of those men who exist only in their absence.

Since his death, she had never wanted to go up to the attic. Henri had kept cardboard boxes there, full of things accumulated over the years. She wasn't sure what she would find there. Joséphine had been in a rush the last time she looked through them; they needed to search more thoroughly. Maybe she would find another novel? But it was difficult to get up there. It involved climbing a stepladder, which she couldn't manage. That must have suited him, she thought; he could have put whatever he wanted up there, knowing that she could never find it. She had to call her daughter. It would give her a chance to finally bring up the subject of her father's novel; Madeleine had found it impossible to talk to her daughter about this before. True, they didn't speak often, but she should really have mentioned it earlier. The truth was that the revelation about the novel had plunged Madeleine into a new relationship with her husband, a relationship into which she had found it hard to integrate the presence of their daughter. But she couldn't keep her out of it much longer. The book would be published soon. Joséphine would be bound to react like she had; she would be shocked, stupefied. Madeleine feared that moment for another, related reason: her daughter exhausted her.

#### 4

Joséphine was in her early fifties, and since her divorce she had completely let herself go. She couldn't string two sentences together without breathing hard. A few years before, almost simultaneously, her two daughters and her husband had all left the family home: the two girls to live their lives, and the man to live without her. After giving everything, she felt, to build a fulfilling life for each of them, she had been left alone. The after-effects of this emotional shock fluctuated between melancholy and aggression. There was something distressing about seeing this woman, well known for her energy and her plain speaking, sink into depression. It might just have been a phase, a testing moment, but the pain grew roots; it grafted a new skin, sad and bitter, onto her body. Thankfully, she liked her job. She ran a lingerie shop, and spent her days there in a cocoon that protected her from the brutality beyond.

Her daughters had gone to Berlin together to open a restaurant, and Joséphine had visited them a few times. Walking around that city, simultaneously modern and scarred by its past, she came to understand that it was possible to move beyond devastation not by forgetting it but by accepting it. It was possible to build happiness on a foundation

filled with suffering. But this was easier said than done, and human beings had less time to rebuild themselves than cities did. Joséphine often spoke with her daughters on the phone, but it wasn't the same; she wanted to see them. Her ex-husband called her occasionally too, to ask how she was, but it felt like a chore, like a sort of post-break-up aftersales service. When she talked to him, he always played down the happiness of his new life, but she could tell he was deeply content. Of course, he didn't like to think of the damage he had left behind him, but there comes an age when time is ticking and it becomes impossible to renounce pleasure.

Eventually, the spaces between their phone calls grew longer and longer, and it was now several months since Joséphine had heard from Marc. She couldn't even bear to pronounce his name. She didn't want it in her mouth: this was her tiny victory over her own body. But he was on her mind all the time. He was also in Rennes, the city where they had lived together, and where he lived now with his new lover. The one who leaves should at least have the decency to move away, she thought. Joséphine considered her city as an accomplice in this emotional tragedy. Geography always takes the victors' side. Joséphine lived in fear of bumping into her ex-husband, of accidentally witnessing his happiness, so she never left her neighbourhood now, *the capital of her pain*.

This was not the only loss she had suffered: her father had died too. It was difficult to claim they had been close, because he had been stingy with his affections. But he had always been a protective presence in her life. As a child, she'd spent hours in the restaurant, watching him make pizzas. He'd even named one of them after her: a chocolate pizza, the Pizza Joséphine. She was fascinated by this father of hers, braving the heat of that immense oven. And Henri liked to feel his daughter's admiring gaze. It's so easy to be a hero in the eyes of a child. Joséphine often thought about that lost time; never again would she be able to enter a pizzeria. She liked the idea that her daughters were carrying the torch of their grandfather's vocation, making Breton crêpes for the Germans. This was how a family threaded its way through history. But what remained of that thread now? The shock of her divorce had aggravated her grief over her father. Perhaps, if she could just rest her head against his shoulder, everything would be all right again, as it had been before. His body as a shield against the world. His body, which sometimes appeared to her in dreams, so vivid, so real; but he never spoke during his nocturnal visits. He passed through her dreams as he had passed through her life, in reassuring silence.

Joséphine had liked one thing in particular about her father: he never wasted his time criticizing people. Presumably he still had those thoughts, but he didn't squander his energy uselessly. Some people thought him introverted, but his daughter had always considered him a sort of wise man, out of sync with the world. And now he wasn't there any more. He was rotting in the Crozon cemetery. She was rotting too. She was alive, but her reason for living had been buried. Marc didn't want her any more. Madeleine, although saddened by her daughter's divorce, could not understand why Joséphine didn't just move on. Born to a poor family, and having lived through the war, Madeleine considered crying over love to be a privilege of the modern world.

Joséphine should *start a new life* instead of whining and snivelling. Joséphine, for her part, was exasperated by this idea. What had she ever done wrong? Why should she have to start a new life when she'd been perfectly happy with the old one?

Recently, she had begun going to church; she found some comfort in religion. To be honest, though, it wasn't faith that drew her, but the place itself. It was a timeless space, safe from the brutality of life's perils. She believed less in God than in His house. Her daughters worried about this transformation, considering it out of character for a woman who had always been so pragmatic. From Berlin, they encouraged her to go out, have a social life, but she had no desire for anything like that. Why did your loved ones always want you to get over things? What if she didn't want her wounds to heal?

All the same, to appease her friends, she had gone out on a few dates. Each time, it had been a miserable experience. There had been one man who, after driving her home, had put his hand between her thighs, clumsily searching for her clitoris before he had even kissed her. Surprised by this abrupt (to say the least) attack, she had roughly pushed him away. Not discouraged in the least, he had whispered a few rude, even quite disgusting phrases into her ear, thinking they would excite her. Joséphine had got out of the car, laughing hysterically. Obviously it had not been what she was looking for, but it was a relief all the same: she hadn't laughed like that in years. The man probably felt embarrassed now at having rushed things; she imagined he regretted offering to handcuff her on their first date, but he'd read somewhere that women adored that sort of thing.

## 5

On the way, Joséphine thought about her mother's words: "You have to come and see me, it's urgent." She had not wanted to say anything more than that on the phone, although she had made clear that nothing terrible had happened. It was an unusual situation; completely unprecedented, in fact. Madeleine never asked her daughter for anything. In reality, they barely spoke to each other. They were so different that silence was the best way of avoiding arguments. While Madeleine was bored with her daughter's complaints, Joséphine was simply desperate for a hint of tenderness, a motherly hug. But she knew she shouldn't necessarily see her mother's apparent coldness as a form of rejection. It was a generational thing. Her parents' generation didn't love each other less, they just showed it less.

When Joséphine returned to Crozon, she slept in her childhood bedroom. Each time, the memories came back to her; she saw herself again as a mischievous little girl, as a grumpy teenager, as a provocative young woman. All the Joséphines were there, as in a retrospective exhibition. Nothing changed here. Even her mother seemed to her to be the same eternally ageless woman. It was still the case today.

Joséphine kissed her mother and immediately asked her what was so urgent. But Madeleine preferred to take her time; she made some tea and calmly sat down before saying: "I've discovered something about your father."

“What? Don’t tell me he had another child.”

“No, of course not!”

“Oh. What, then?”

“He wrote a novel.”

“Papa? A novel? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But it’s true. I read it.”

“He never wrote anything. He never even signed birthday cards—it was always your handwriting. Postcards, letters... nothing. And you expect me to believe that he wrote a novel?”

“I’m telling you, it’s the truth.”

“Oh yeah, I know how this works. You think I’m completely depressed, so you tell me some rubbish to make me react. I read an article about it—‘mythotherapy’ or something, right?”

“...”

“I don’t get why it bothers you so much that I see the world as a dark place. It’s my life, I’ll live it how I want. You’re always so cheerful. People love you, with your larger-than-life personality! Well, I’m sorry, but I’m not like you. I’m weak, anxious, gloomy.”

In reply to this, Madeleine stood up to fetch the manuscript, which she handed to her daughter. “Calm down, will you? This is the book.”

“But... what is it? Recipes?”

“No. I told you, it’s a novel. A love story.”

“A love story?”

“And it’s going to be published.”

“What?”

“Yes. I’ll tell you all the details later.”

“...”

“I wanted you to come so you could go up to the attic. I know you’ve already been up there, but not for long. Maybe if you have a better look, you’ll find some other things.”

Joséphine did not respond. She was hypnotized by the manuscript’s first page, with her father’s name at the top: Henri Pick. And then the title:

*The Last Hours of a Love Affair*

6

For a long moment, Joséphine was speechless, hovering between incredulity and stupefaction. Madeleine realized that the exploration of the attic would have to wait. Particularly since her daughter had already started reading the novel. Joséphine rarely read books at all. She preferred women’s magazines or celebrity gossip. The last book she’d read was *Thank You for This Moment* by Valérie Trierweiler, the former partner of the French president François Hollande; the book was a memoir about their