

W  
OR

*The Memory  
of  
Childhood*



Georges Perec

TRANSLATED BY DAVID BELLOS



or  
THE MEMORY OF CHILDHOOD  
Georges Perec  
Translated by David Bellos



DAVID R. GODINE • PUBLISHER  
BOSTON

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## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Les Choses. Une Histoire des années soixante* (Prix Renaudot 1965)

*Quel petit vélo a guidon chrome a-t-il de la cour?*

*Un Homme qui dort*

*La Disparition*

*La Boutique obscure. 124 rêves*

*Especies d'espaces*

*Alphabets*

*Je me souviens*

*La Vie mode d'emploi* (Prix Médicis 1978) Translated as LIFE A USER'S MANUAL

*Un Cabinet d'amateur*

*La Cloture et autres poèmes*

*Theatre I*

*Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien Penser/Classer*

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The twenty-third letter of the alphabet is written in French, as in English, as a double V; and in French the letter "W" is also called "*double-ve*". The title of Perec's double tale of the Olympic ideal and of the discovery of a lost childhood thus has nothing to do with the sound of the letter U; it's not 'dAbal. ju: (or dn.b'l.yu) that is meant to echo through these pages, but 'dAbal. vi: (or dD.b'l.ve).

D.B.

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In this book there are two texts which simply alternate; you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up with each other, as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was only their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping.

One of these texts is entirely imaginary: it's an adventure story, an arbitrary but careful reconstruction of a childhood fantasy about a land in thrall to the Olympic ideal. The other text is an autobiography: fragmentary tale of a wartime childhood, a tale lacking in exploits and memories, made up of scattered oddments, gaps, lapses, doubts, guesses and meagre anecdotes. Next to it, the adventure story is rather grandiose, or maybe dubious. For it begins to tell one tale, and then, all of a sudden, launches into another. In this break, in this split suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation can be found the point of departure for the whole of this book: the points of suspension on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.

G.P.

# ONE

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*For years I put off telling the tale of my voyage to W. Today, impelled by a commanding necessity and convinced that the events to which I was witness must be revealed and brought to light, I resolve to defer it no longer. I do not conceal from myself the scruples - for some reason I was about to say: the pretexts — which seemed to argue against publication. For years I wished to keep the secret of what I had seen; it was not for me to divulge anything whatsoever about the mission which had been entrusted to me, first because the mission had, perhaps, not been accomplished -but who could have brought it off? — and then because he who entrusted it to me, he too has disappeared.*

*I wavered for years. Gradually, I forgot the uncertain adventures of the voyage. But those ghost towns, those bloody contests (I believed I could still hear the shouting), those unfurled, wind-whipped banners came back to live in my dreams. Incomprehension, horror and fascination commingled in the bottomless pit of those memories.*

*For years I sought out traces of my history, looking up maps and directories and piles of archives. I found nothing, and it sometimes seemed as though I had dreamt, that there had been only an unforgettable nightmare.*

*. . . years ago, in Venice, in a cheap restaurant in the Giudecca, I saw a man come in whom I thought I recognized. As I rushed towards him, I was already fumbling my apologies. There could be no survivor. What my eyes had seen had really happened: the lianas had unseated the foundations, the forest had consumed the houses; sand overran the stadiums, cormorants swooped down in their thousands, and then silence, sudden icy silence. Whatever may happen now, whatever I may now do, I was the sole depository, the only living memory, the only vestige of that world. That, more than any other consideration, was what made me decide to write.*

*The attentive reader will have grasped no doubt from what has been said so far that in what I am about to relate I was a witness and not an actor. I am not the hero of my tale. Nor am I exactly its bard. Though the events I saw convulsed my previously insignificant existence, though their full weight still bears upon my conduct, upon my way of seeing, in recounting them I wish to adopt the cold, impassive tone of the ethnologist: I visited this sunken world and this is what I saw there. I am not possessed with the boiling fury of Ahab, but with Ishmael's white reverie, with the patience of Bartleby. Once again, as for so many before me, these latter shall be my guiding spirits.*

*However, so as not to infringe an almost universal rule and one which in any case I have no wish to dispute, I shall now indicate as concisely as I can certain features of my existence and, more particularly, the circumstances which prompted my voyage.*

*I was born on 25 June 19.. around four o'clock, at R., a hamlet of three houses, not far from A. My father owned a small farm. He died from complications arising from an injury when I was nearly six years old. He left almost nothing but debts, and my whole inheritance came to a few possessions, some*

linen, three or four pieces of crockery. One of my father's two neighbours volunteered to adopt me; I grew up amongst his people, half a son, half a farmhand.

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*At the age of sixteen I left R. and went to the town; I plied various trades for a time, but as I found none I liked, I ended up enlisting. Accustomed as I was to obedience, and possessing an unusually sturdy constitution, I could have made a good soldier, but I soon realized that I would never really adapt to military life. After a year spent in France at the Training Centre at T., I was sent on active service; I stayed more than fifteen months. At V., whilst on leave, I deserted. With the assistance of an organization of conscientious objectors, I succeeded in reaching Germany where for many years I worked without work. In the end I settled at H., right next to the border with Luxemburg. I found a job as a mechanic in the largest garage in the town. I lodged in a small family hotel and spent most of my evenings in a bar watching television or, occasionally, playing backgammon with one or another of my workmates.*



# TWO

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I have no childhood memories. Up to my twelfth year or thereabouts, my story comes to barely a couple of lines: I lost my father at four, my mother at six; I spent the war in various boarding houses at Villard-de-Lans. In 1945, my father's sister and her husband adopted me.

For years, I took comfort in such an absence of history: its objective crispness, its apparent obviousness, its innocence protected me; but what did they protect me from, if not precisely from my history, the story of my living, my real story, my own story, which presumably was neither crisp nor objective, nor apparently obvious, nor obviously innocent?

"I have no childhood memories": I made this assertion with confidence, with almost a kind of defiance. It was nobody's business to press me on this question. It was not a set topic on my syllabus. I was excused: a different history, History with a capital H, had answered the question in my stead: the war, the camps.

When I was thirteen I made up a story which I told and drew in pictures. Later I forgot it. Seven years ago, one evening, in Venice, I suddenly remembered that this story was called W and that it was, in a way, if not the story of my childhood, then at least a story of my childhood.

Apart from the title thus wrested back, I had practically no memory of W. All I knew of it came to a couple of lines: it was about the life of a community concerned exclusively with sport, on a tiny island off Tierra del Fuego.

Once again the snares of writing were set. Once again I was like a child playing hide-and-seek, who doesn't know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden, or to be found.

Later I came across some of the drawings I had done around the age of thirteen. With their help I reinvented W and wrote it, publishing it as I wrote, in serial form, in *La Quinzaine litteraire* between September 1969 and August 1970.

Today, four years later, I propose to bring to term - by which I mean just as much "to mark the end of" as "to give a name too" - this gradual unravelling. W is no more like my Olympic fantasy than the Olympic fantasy was like my childhood. But in the crisscross web they weave as in my reading of them I know there is to be found the inscription and the description of the path I have taken, the passage of my history and the story of my passage.

# THREE

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*I had been at H. for three years when, on the morning of 26 July 19.., my landlady handed me a letter. It had been posted the previous day from K., a fairly large town about 50 kilometres from H. I opened the letter; it was written in French. The paper, of very high quality, had a letterhead bearing the name*

## **OTTO APFELSTAHL, MD**

*above a complicated coat of arms, excellently engraved, but which my ignorance of heraldry did not allow me to identify, or even, quite simply, to decipher. In fact I succeeded in recognizing clearly only two of the five symbols which composed it: a crenellated tower, in the middle, going the full height of the crest and, at the bottom on the right, an open book, with blank pages; the other three, despite the efforts I made to understand them, remained obscure to me. Yet it was not a matter of abstract symbols; they were not chevrons, for example, or stripes or lozenges, but figures that were somehow double, with precise but ambiguous designs which seemed to be open to several different interpretations, without it being possible to decide on a satisfactory choice: one of them could just about have been a sinuous serpent with bay leaves for scales, another might have been a hand that was simultaneously a root; the third was equally a nest and a brazier, or a crown of thorns, or a burning bush, or even an impaled heart.*

*There was no address and no telephone number. The letter said only this:*

*Sir,*

*We should be most grateful if you would kindly agree to meet us to discuss a matter which concerns you.*

*We shall be at the Berghof Hotel, 18 Niirnbergstrasse, this Friday 27 July and shall await you in the bar from 6 p.m.*

*Thanking you in advance, and with our apologies for not being able to give you a fuller explanation at the present time, we remain, Yours faithfully . . .*

*There followed a more or less illegible signature which only the name given in the letterhead allowed me to identify as "O. Apfelstahl"*

*It is easy to understand that this letter scared me at first. My first thought was to run away: I had been recognized; it had to be blackmail. Later I contrived to master my fear: that the letter was written in French did not mean that it was intended for me, for the man I had been, for the deserter; my current identity established me as a French-speaking Swiss, so my command of the language was not likely to surprise anyone. The people who had given me assistance did not know my former name, and thus it would require an improbable, inexplicable set of coincidences for anyone who had met me in my previous life to find me and recognize me now. H. is only a small town, off the main roads, unknown to tourists, and I spent the best part of my days down in the inspection pit or on my back underneath an engine. And even if, by some unbelievable chance, someone had come across my track, what could he ask from me? I had no money, I had no way of getting any. The war in which I had*

fought had been over for five years; it was more than likely that I had even been amnestied.

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I tried to imagine, with as much calm as I could muster, all the possible ramifications of the letter. Was it the outcome of a lengthy, painstaking investigation, of an enquiry which had gradually drawn its net around me? Was it written to a man whose name I might have or who had my name? Was it from a solicitor who believed he had found in me the heir to a huge fortune?

I read the letter again and again, and tried each time to find another clue, but all I found were grounds for still greater perplexity. Was the letter's "we" merely a formality, the customary style of almost all business correspondence, where the signatory speaks for and on behalf of his employers, or was I dealing with two, or more, correspondents? And what was the meaning of the "MD" which followed the name of Otto Apfelstahl in the letterhead? In theory, according to the reference book I borrowed briefly from the garage secretary, it could only be the American abbreviation for "Medical Doctor", but though the symbol was widely used in the United States, there was no reason for it to appear in the letterhead of a German, even if he were a doctor; otherwise I should have to suppose that this Otto Apfelstahl, though he wrote to me from K., was not German but an American. That would not in itself have been particularly surprising—there are many German emigres in America, and many American doctors are of German or Austrian descent; but what could an American doctor want of me and why had he come to K. ? Was it even imaginable that a doctor of any nationality would use a letterhead which indicated his profession, but instead of supplying the information one would have a right to expect — his own or his surgery's address and telephone number, his consulting times, his hospital posts, etc. —furnished only a fusty and impenetrable crest?

All day I pondered on what I ought to do. Should I keep the appointment? Or should I run away right then and start all over again, somewhere else, in Australia or in Argentina, living another illegal existence, with another fragile alibi, with another fabricated past and another identity? As time passed my anxiety gave way to impatience and curiosity; feverishly I imagined that this meeting would change my life.

I spent some of the evening at the Municipal Library, leafing through dictionaries, encyclopaedias, and directories, in the hope of gleaning information about Otto Apfelstahl or possible clues to other acceptations of the initials "MD" or to the meaning of the crest. But I found nothing.

The next morning, a lingering presentiment made me stuff into my travelling bag some linen and what I might have called, were they not quite so paltry, my most treasured possessions: my wireless, a silver fob watch which might well have been my great-grandfather's, a little mother-of-pearl figurine bought in V., a rare and peculiar seashell which my "godmother" correspondent had sent me when I was on active service. Did I mean to run away? I don't think so; rather, to be ready for any eventuality. I gave my landlady notice that I would be away for perhaps a few days and settled up with her. I went to see my employer. I told him that my mother had died and I had to go and arrange the funeral at D., in Bavaria. He allowed me a week off and, as it was nearly the end of the month, gave me my pay a few days early.

I went to the station and put my bag in an automatic locker. Then I sat in the second-class waiting room, almost in the middle of a group of Portuguese workers leaving for Hamburg, and I waited for six o'clock in the evening.

# FOUR

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I don't know where the break is in the threads that tie me to my childhood. Like everyone else, or almost everyone, I had a father and a mother, a potty, a cot, a rattle, and, later on, a bicycle which apparently I never mounted without screaming with terror at the mere thought that someone might try to raise or even remove the two small side-wheels which kept me stable. Like everyone else, I have forgotten everything about the earliest years of my existence.

My childhood belongs to those things which I know I don't know much about. It is behind me; yet it is the ground on which I grew, and it once belonged to me, however obstinately I assert that it no longer does. For years I tried to sidetrack or to cover up these obvious facts, and I wrapped myself in the harmless status of the orphan, the unparented, the nobody's boy. However, childhood is neither longing nor terror, neither a paradise lost nor the Golden Fleece, but maybe it is a horizon, a point of departure, a set of co-ordinates from which the axes of my life may draw their meaning. Even if I have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable: the things that were, the things that stopped, the things that were closed off — things that surely were and today are no longer, but things that also were so that I may still be.



My two earliest memories are not entirely implausible, even though, obviously, the many variations and imaginary details I have added in the telling of them - in speech or in writing - have altered them greatly, if not completely distorted them.

The earlier memory is apparently set in the back room of my grandmother's shop. I am three. I am sitting in the middle of the room with Yiddish newspapers scattered around me. The family circle surrounds me wholly, but the sensation of encirclement does not cause me any fear or feeling of being smothered; on the contrary, it is warm, protective, loving: all the family - the entirety, the totality of the family - is there, gathered like an impregnable battlement around the child who has just been born (but didn't I say a moment ago that I was three?).

Everyone is in raptures over the fact that I have pointed to a Hebrew character and called it by its name: the sign was supposedly shaped like a square with a gap in its lower left-hand corner, something like P and its name was apparently gammeth, or gammel.<sup>1</sup> The subject, the softness, the lighting of the whole scene are, for me, reminiscent of a painting, maybe a Rembrandt or maybe an invented one, which might have been called "Jesus amid the Doctors".<sup>1</sup>

The second memory is briefer; it is more like a dream. It strikes me as even more obviously elaborated than the first; several versions of it exist, and overlaid upon one another, they make the memory itself more illusory. The simplest statement of it would be this: my father comes home from his work; he gives me a key. In one version, the key is made of gold. In another version it is not a golden key, but a gold coin; in yet another version, I am on the potty when my father comes home

from his work; and, finally, in yet another version, I swallow the coin, everyone fusses, and the next day it turns up in my stool.

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1. Excess detail such as this is all that is needed to ruin the memory or in any case to burden it with a letter it did not possess. There is in fact a letter called "Gimmel" which I like to think could be the initial of my first name; it looks absolutely nothing like the sign I have drawn which could just about masquerade as a "mem" or "M". My aunt Esther told me recently that in 1939 — I was three then — my aunt Fanny, my mother's younger sister, used to take me from Belleville to see her. At that time Esther was living in Rue des Eaux, very near Avenue de Versailles. We used to go to play on the bank of the Seine, next to the great piles of sand; one of my games consisted of making out, with Fanny, the letters not in Yiddish but in French newspapers.

2. In this memory or pseudo-memory, Jesus is a newborn infant surrounded by kindly old men. All the painting entitled "Jesus amid the Doctors" depict him as an adult. The picture I am referring to here, if it exists, is much more likely to be a "Presentation in the Temple".

# FIVE

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*It was precisely six o'clock when I went through the revolving door into the Berghof Hotel. The lobby was more or less deserted; casually leaning against a column, with their arms crossed, three bellboys dressed in red, gilt-buttoned waistcoats were chatting in low voices. The porter, recognizable by his huge bottle-green greatcoat and his plumed coachman's hat, was crossing the lobby diagonally, carrying two hefty suitcases and leading the way for a female guest who held a small dog in her arms.*

*The bar was at the end of the lobby, barely separated from it by a lattice-work partition decorated with tall green plants. To my great surprise, there were no customers in the bar; no cigar smoke hung in the air to make the atmosphere almost opaque and somewhat stifling; instead of the muffled confusion I had expected, the noise of a score of conversations over insipid background music, there were only cleared tables neatly set out with place mats and gleaming brass ashtrays. The air conditioning made the place almost chilly. Sitting behind a counter of dark wood and steel, a barman in a slightly crumpled jacket was reading the Frankfurter Zeitung.*

*I went to sit at the back of the room. The barman raised his eyes momentarily from his newspaper and threw me a questioning glance; I ordered a beer. He brought it to me, dragging his feet; I noticed he was a very old man; his really very wrinkled hand shook a little.*

*"Not many people about," I said, half just to say something and half because it really did perplex me. He nodded then suddenly asked me: "Do you want some pretzels?"*

*"Excuse me?" I said, not grasping.*

*"Pretzels. Pretzels to eat with your beer."*

*"No thank you. I never eat pretzels. Give me a newspaper instead."*

*He turned about, but evidently I had expressed myself badly, or he had not paid attention because, instead of going over to the newspaper racks hanging on the wall, he went back to his counter, put down his tray, and went out through a little door which must have given access to the pantry.*

*I looked at my watch. Only five past six. I got up and went to fetch a newspaper. It was the weekly financial supplement to a Luxemburg daily, the Luxemburger Wort, more than two months out of date. I glanced through it for a good ten minutes as I drank my beer, quite alone in the bar.*

*You could not say that Otto Apfelstahl was late; neither could you say that he was on time. All you could say, all you could surmise, all I could surmise, was that with any appointment you had to allow a quarter of an hour for waiting around. I should not have needed to reassure myself, I had no reason to be anxious, but nonetheless Otto Apfelstahl's absence made me uneasy. It was after six o'clock and I was in the bar waiting for him, whereas he should have been in the bar himself waiting for me.*

*Towards twenty past six - I had abandoned the paper and finished my beer long since - I decided to leave. Perhaps there was a message for me from Otto Apfelstahl at the reception desk, perhaps he was expecting me in one of the reading rooms, or in the lobby, or in his room; perhaps he was calling it off and proposing to defer the discussion until later? Suddenly there was a kind of hubbub in the lobby: five or six people burst noisily into the bar and sat down at a table. Almost simultaneously two bartenders emerged from behind the counter. They were young and I could not help noticing that the two put together would just about have made up the age of the man who had served me.*

~~It was just as I was calling one of the waiters so I could pay for my drink - though he seemed too busy taking the orders of the new customers to pay any attention to me - that Otto Apfelstahl~~ appeared: a man who stops almost as soon as he has entered a public place, looks all around with particular care, with an air of attentive inquisitiveness, and strides forward as soon as his eye meets yours, such a man can only be your opposite number.

He was a man of around forty, quite short, very thin, with a narrow, sharp-featured face and greying, crew-cut hair. He wore a dark-grey twill suit. In so far as you can tell a man's profession by his appearance, he struck me as being not a doctor but rather a businessman, a senior bank manager or a lawyer.

He stopped a few inches from me.

"You are Gaspard Winckler?" he asked me, but actually the sentence was barely a question, it was more a statement of fact.

"Er . . . Yes . . .," I replied idiotically, and made to stand up, but he stopped me with a wave of his hand.

"No, do stay seated: we shall be much more comfortable talking if we sit."

He sat down. He considered my empty glass for a second.

"You like beer, I see."

"Sometimes," I said, not really knowing what to answer.

"I prefer tea."

He turned slightly towards the counter, half raising a finger. The waiter descended straightaway.

"A pot of tea for me. Would you like another beer?" he asked of me.

I acquiesced.

"And a beer for the gentleman."

I was increasingly uneasy. Should I ask him if he was called

Otto Apfelstahl? Should I ask him point blank what he wanted of me? I got out my packet of cigarettes and offered him one, but he refused.

"I smoke only cigars, and only after my evening meal."

"Are you a doctor?"

Contrary to my naive expectation, he seemed not at all surprised by my question. He gave but the merest smile.

"In what way does the fact that I smoke a cigar only after my evening meal lead you to think that I might be a doctor?"

"Because that is one of the questions I have had in my mind since I received your letter."

"Do you have many others in mind?"

"Yes, some."

"And what are they?"

"Well, for instance, what do you want of me?"

"That is indeed an obvious question. Do you wish me to answer it straightaway?"

"I should be most grateful."

"May I first ask you another question?"

"Go ahead."

"Did you ever wonder what became of the person who gave you your name?"

"I beg your pardon?" I said, not grasping.

# SIX

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I was born on Saturday, 7 March 1936, towards nine in the evening, in a maternity clinic located at 11 Rue de l'Atlas, in the XIXth *arrondissement* of Paris. My father, I believe, was the one who went to register me at the *mairie*. He gave me only one forename — Georges — and declared me to be French.<sup>1</sup> Both he and my mother were Polish. My father was not quite twenty-seven and my mother was not yet twenty-three. They had been married for a year and a half. Apart from the fact that they lived a few yards from each other, I don't know quite what circumstances led to their meeting. I was their first child. They had a second, in 1938 or 1939, a little girl whom they named Irene, but she lived for only a few days.<sup>2</sup>

For years I thought that Hitler had marched into Poland on 7 March 1936. I was wrong, about the date or about the country, but that's of no real importance. Hitler was already in power and the camps were working very smoothly. It wasn't Warsaw Hitler was taking, but it could have been, or it could have been the Danzig Corridor, or Austria, or the Saar, or Czechoslovakia. What is certain is that a story had already begun, a history which for me and for all my people was soon to become a matter of life and for the most part a matter of death.<sup>3</sup>

1. In fact the declaration made in accordance with clause 3 of the Law of 10 August 1927 was entered by my father a few months later, on 17 August 1936 to be precise, in the presence of the justice of the peace of the xxth *arrondissement*. I possess an authenticated copy of this declaration, typed in violet on a letter-card dated 23 September 1942 and posted the following day by my mother to her sister-in-law Esther, which constitutes the last proof I have of my mother's existence.

2. According to my aunt Esther, as far as I know the only person who can now remember the existence of her only niece (her brother Leon had three boys), Irene was born in 1937 and died a few weeks later from a malformation of the stomach.

3. To clear my conscience I looked in newspapers of the period (mainly the issues of *Le Temps* for 7 and 8 March 1936) to find out exactly what was happening on that day:

Berlin Spectacular! Locarno Pact denounced by Third Reich! German troops enter the Rhineland DMZ.

In an American daily, Stalin denounces Germany as a warmonger.

Caretakers strike in New York.

Italian-Abyssinian campaign. Possible start of negotiations for an end to hostilities.

Crisis in Japan.

Electoral reform in France.

Germany negotiates with Lithuania.

Trial in Bulgaria following disaffection in the army.

Carlos Prestes arrested in Brazil; allegedly denounced by an



American communist who subsequently took his own life.

Communist troops advance in northern China.

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Italians bomb military hospitals in Abyssinia.

Kosher slaughtering banned in Poland.

Nazis convicted and sentenced for plotting outrages in Austria.

Attempt on life of Yugoslav premier: parliamentarian Arnaoutovic fires at but misses Premier

Stojadinovic. Incidents at the Paris Law Faculty. M. Jeze's lecture interrupted by stink bombs.

Counter-demonstration by the Federal Union of Students and Neutralist Students.

Renault produces the Nerva sports model.

Full-length production of *Tristan and Isolde* at the Paris Opera.

Florent Schmitt elected to the French Institute. Commemoration of the centenary of the death of

Ampere. In the semi-final of the French Football Cup, Charleville meets Red Star and the winners of

Sochaux vs Fives meet the winners of the Racing vs Lille. Plan for a Broadcasting House.

Gibbs recommends Gibbs shaving cream for oily skin: and for dry skins, Gibbs soap-free

rapidshave.

*Scarface* showing at the Ursulines.

*Chapayev* on at the Pantheon cinema.

*Samson* on at the Paramount.

*La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* at the Athenee theatre, and at the Madeleine, *Anne-Marie*, by

Raymond Bernard, from an idea by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, with Annabella and Pierre-Richard

Wilm.

Advertised to open on Friday 13 March: *Modern Times*, by Charlie Chaplin.

# SEVEN

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*"You do not understand?" Otto Apfelstahl asked after a moment's pause, as he looked at me over his teacup.*

*"Let us say your question is ambiguous, to say the least."*

*"Ambiguous?"*

*"There is more than one person who, as you put it, gave me my name."*

*"Since you think it necessary, I shall make my question more precise. I am not alluding to your father, nor to any member of your family or your community after whom you might have been named, as is, I believe, still a fairly widespread custom. Nor am I thinking of any of the people who, five years ago, helped you to acquire your current identity. I mean, quite straightforwardly, the person whose name you have."*

*"The person whose name I have!"*

*"You did not know him?"*

*"Indeed I did not. And what is he doing?"*

*"We would very much like to know. That is in fact the sole purpose of this meeting."*

*"I do not see any way in which I could be of use to you. I always thought that the papers I had been given were forged."*

*"At the time, Gaspard Winckler was a child of eight. He was deaf and dumb. His mother, Caecilia, was a world-famous Austrian singer who had escaped to Switzerland during the war. Gaspard was a sickly, puny boy, condemned by his disability to virtually total isolation. He spent most of his time crouching in a corner of his bedroom, ignoring the sumptuous toys and presents that his mother or family acquaintances gave him day in day out, and almost always refusing to eat. His mother, in despair, decided to try to overcome her son's helplessness by taking him around the world; she thought that new horizons, changes of climate and tempo would have a beneficial effect on her son and might even set in train a process leading to the recovery of hearing and speech, since all the doctors they had consulted were quite clear on this point: there was no internal injury, no inherited disorder, no anatomical or physiological deformity to account for the boy being deaf and dumb; this could only be ascribed to some infantile trauma whose precise configuration unfortunately remained obscure despite examinations by numerous psychiatrists. All this, you may well say, does not have much to do with your own adventure and still does not tell you how you came to have the same identity as this poor child. To understand that, you should appreciate first that out of both caution and preference for neat work, the support organization which took care of you did not use forged papers, but only genuine passports, identity cards and stamps, all supplied by officials in sympathy with its cause. It so happens that the Genevan official who was going to deal with your case died three days before you got to Switzerland, before he had anything ready, but after all the stop-overs and stages of your subsequent journey had been set up. The organization was at a loss. That is when Caecilia Winckler came into the picture; she belonged to the organization, and was in fact one of its main officials in Switzerland. And that is why, since it was an emergency, you were given the scarcely amended passport which Caecilia had had issued a few weeks earlier for her own son."*

*"And what about him?"*

*"International agreements allow for a child who is still a minor to be included in the passport of one"*

parent."

"But what would have happened later?"

"Nothing, I imagine. They would have done whatever was necessary for Gaspard to obtain another passport; I do not think they ever dreamt of asking to have yours back one day."

"So why do you think that I might have met them?"

"Did I ever say anything of the sort? You have to let me finish. A few weeks after you had been through Geneva, when we were certain you were out of danger, Caecilia and Gaspard left for Trieste where they embarked on an eighty-five-foot yacht, the Sylvander, a superb vessel which could take them through the worst typhoons. There were six of them on board: Caecilia, Gaspard, Hugh Barton (a friend of Caecilia's and who was in a sense the commanding officer), two Maltese sailors who also served as ship's steivard and cook, and a young tutor, Angus Pilgrim, a specialist in the education of the deaf and dumb. Contrary to Caecilia's hopes, the voyage does not seem to have improved Gaspard's condition: most of the time he stayed in his cabin and only very rarely agreed to come up on deck to look at the sea. From the letters which Caecilia, Hugh Barton, Angus Pilgrim and even Zeppo and Felipe, the two sailors, wrote during that time, and which I came to consult for reasons you will shortly understand, there emerges over the months a great sense of poignancy: the voyage, intended to be a cure, progressively loses its raison d'etre; it becomes increasingly obvious that it has been a useless undertaking, but neither is there any point in bringing it to an end; the boat wanders before the wind, from one shore to another, from port to port, stopping a month here, three months there, searching ever more vainly for the place, the creek, the vista, the beach, the pier where the miracle could happen; and the strangest part is that the longer the voyage goes on, the more convinced everyone aboard seems to become that such a place exists, that there is, somewhere on the ocean, an isle or atoll, a rock or headland where suddenly it could all happen - the veil sundered, the light turned on; that all that is needed is a rather special sunrise, or sunset, or any sublime or even trivial event, a flight of birds, a school of whales, rain, a doldrum, the torpor of a torrid day. And each of them clings to this illusion, until one day, off Tierra del Fuego, they are hit by one of those sudden cyclones which are everyday occurrences in those parts, and the boat sinks."

# EIGHT

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I possess one photograph of my father and five of my mother (on the back of the photograph of my father, one evening when I was drunk, probably in 1955 or 1956, I tried to chalk: "There is something rotten in the state of Denmark." But I didn't even manage to scrawl to the end of the fourth word). I have no memory of my father other than the one about the key or coin he might have given me one evening on his return from work. The only surviving memory of my mother is of the day she took me to the Gare de Lyon, which is where I left for Villard-de-Lans in a Red Cross convoy: though I have broken bones, I wear my arm in a sling. My mother buys me a comic entitled *Charlie and the Parachute*: on the illustrated cover, the parachute's rigging lines are nothing other than Charlie's trousers' braces.



The idea of writing the story of my past arose almost at the same time as the idea of writing. The following two passages date from more than fifteen years ago. I have copied them out without making any changes; I have used notes for the corrections and comments which I now feel obliged to add.

**The father in the photograph poses like a father. He is tall. He is bareheaded, holding his kepi in his hand. His greatcoat comes down very low.<sup>1</sup> It is gathered at the waist by one of those thick leather belts that remind you of the window straps in third-class railway carriages. Between the polished military boots -it is Sunday - and the hem of the greatcoat you can just make out that there are interminable puttees.**

**The father is smiling. He is a private. He is on leave in Paris; it is the end of winter, in the Bois de Vincennes.<sup>2</sup>**

**My father was a soldier for a very short time. Nonetheless, when I think of him, I always think of a soldier. He was a hairdresser, vaguely, and a caster and moulder, but I can never manage, so to speak, to see him as a working man.<sup>3</sup> One day I saw a picture of him in mufti and it quite astonished me; I had only ever known him as a soldier. For years I kept his photograph by my bed, in a leather frame which was one of the first presents I received after the war.<sup>4</sup>**

**I have much more information about my father than about my mother because I was adopted by my father's sister. I know where he was born, I could just about describe him, and I know how he was brought up; I know some of the traits of his character.**

**My father's sister was rich.<sup>5</sup> She was the first to come to France and brought over her parents and her two brothers. One of the latter went to seek his fortune in Israel.<sup>6</sup> That one was not my father. The other made a not too serious effort to establish himself in the diamond trade, to which his brother-in-law had introduced him, but after a few months of stone-setting he decided to give up the prospect of making his way in the world and became a skilled worker.<sup>7</sup>**

**What I like very much in my father is his jauntiness. I see a man whistling a tune. He had a nice name: Andre. But I was bitterly disappointed when I found out that in reality - that is, on official papers - his name was leek Judko, which didn't mean very much.<sup>8</sup>**

My aunt, who loved him dearly, who brought him up almost single-handed, and who solemnly vowed to take care of me (which she certainly did), told me once that he was a poet; that he played truant; that he didn't like to wear a tie; that he was more at ease with his pals than with diamond traders (which still doesn't tell me why he didn't pick his pals from the diamond trade).<sup>9</sup>

My father was also a doughty fighter. The day war broke out, he went to the recruiting office and enlisted. He was put in the Twelfth Foreign Regiment.

The memories I have of my father are not many.

At a particular time in my life, in fact at the time I referred to previously, the love I felt for my father became bound up with a passionate craze for tin soldiers. One day my aunt confronted me with a choice for Christmas between roller skates and a set of infantrymen. I chose the infantrymen; she didn't even bother to talk me out of it, went into the shop, and bought the skates, for which I took a long time to forgive her. Later, when I began going to grammar school, she used to give me two francs every morning (I think it was two francs) for the bus. But I pocketed the money and walked to school, which made me late, but enabled me three times a week to buy a toy soldier (made of clay, alas!) in a little shop on my way. Indeed, one day I saw in the window a crouching soldier carrying a field telephone. I remembered my father had been in the communications corps,<sup>10</sup> and this toy soldier, which I bought the very next day, became the regular centrepiece of all the tactical and strategic manoeuvres which I performed with my little army.

I thought up various glorious deaths for my father. The finest had him being cut down by a burst of machine-gun fire as he was bringing to General Soandso the dispatch containing news of victory.

I was rather silly. My father had died a slow and stupid death. It was on the day after the armistice.<sup>11</sup> He had got in the way of a stray shell. The hospital was overflowing. It has now reverted to being a deserted church in a lifeless little town. The cemetery is well maintained. In one corner of it there are a few rotting wooden stakes with names and numbers.

I once went to what you could call my father's grave. It was on a first of November. There was mud everywhere.<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes it seems to me that my father was not a fool. Then I tell myself that this kind of definition, positive or negative, doesn't get you very far. Nonetheless, I am comforted a little by knowing he possessed sensitivity and intelligence.

I don't know what my father would have done had he lived. The oddest thing is that his death, and my mother's, too often seems to me to be obvious. It's become part of the way things are.

Cyrla Schulevitz,<sup>13</sup> my mother, who, I learnt on the few occasions I heard her spoken of, was more usually called Cecile,<sup>14</sup> was born in Warsaw on 20 August 1913. Her father Aaron was a craftsman; her mother, Laja, nee Klajnerer,<sup>15</sup> kept house. Cyrla was the third daughter of seven children.<sup>16</sup> Her birth exhausted her mother, and she had only one more daughter, born a year after my mother, and named Soura.<sup>17</sup>

These more or less statistical details, which are of fairly limited interest to me, are all that I have concerning the childhood and youth of my mother. Or rather, to be more precise, all that I can rely on. The rest, although it sometimes seems that someone told it to me, and that it comes from a trustworthy source, is probably ascribable to the quite extraordinary imaginary relationship which I regularly maintained with my maternal branch at a particular time in my

brief existence.<sup>18</sup>

With that reservation, I shall therefore say that I suppose my mother's childhood to have been squalid and straightforward. Born in 1913, she could not avoid growing up in the war. And she was Jewish, and poor. She must have been clothed in the hand-me-downs of six siblings; she must have been left pretty much to herself, so the others could get on with laying the table, peeling the vegetables, washing up. When I think of her, I imagine a twisting ghetto street in a pale, sickly light, maybe snow, and dingy, poverty-stricken shops with endless, stationary queues. And my mother is in the midst of all that, knee-high to a grasshopper, a wee chit of a thing, wrapped four times round in a knitted shawl, hauling a great black shopping bag twice her own weight.<sup>19</sup>

Even so, I have spared her from thrashings, though I suspect that in the environment and the circumstances I have just sketched they must have been two a penny. On the contrary, I see great tenderness and great patience, a lot of love. My grandfather Aaron, whom I never knew, often takes on the mantle of a wise man. In the evening, after carefully tidying away his tools,<sup>20</sup> he dons steel-rimmed spectacles and chants the Bible out loud. The children are virtuous and placed around the table in order of height, and Laja takes the plates they hold out in turn, and pours into each a ladleful of soup.<sup>21</sup>

I don't see my mother growing older. The years pass by all the same; I don't know how she grew up; I know neither what she learnt nor what she thought. It seems to me as if for years things stayed what they always had been for her: poverty, fear, ignorance. Did she learn to read? I've no idea.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes I wish I knew, but there is too much now to distance me from these memories. The arbitrary, schematic image that I have of her suits me; her image fits and defines her for me almost perfectly.

There was just one event in my mother's life: one day she learnt she was to leave for Paris. I imagine her ecstatic. Somewhere she got hold of an atlas, a map, a picture; she saw the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. Perhaps she thought of heaps of things, probably not of fine dresses and balls, but maybe of the mild climate, the quiet, contentment. People must have told her there would be no more massacres and no more ghettos, and money for everyone.

So they left. I don't know when or how or why. Was it a pogrom that drove them out, or did someone bring them over?<sup>23</sup> I know that they got to Paris: her parents, herself, her younger sister Soura, maybe the others as well. They settled in the XXth *arrondissement*, in a street whose name I have forgotten.

Laja, the mother, died. I believe my mother learnt to be a hairdresser. Then she met my father. They married. She was twenty-one years and ten days old. It happened on 30 August 1934, at the registry office of the xxth. They moved into Rue Vilin; they managed a small hairdressing business.

I was born in the month of March 1936. Perhaps there were three years of relative happiness, no doubt darkened by baby's illnesses (whooping cough, measles, chickenpox),<sup>24</sup> various kinds of financial problems, a future that boded ill.

War came. My father enlisted and died. My mother became a war widow. She went into mourning. I was put out to a nanny. Her business was closed. She signed on as a worker in a factory making alarm clocks.<sup>25</sup> I seem to remember she injured herself one day and her hand was pierced through. She wore the star.

**One day she took me to the station. It was in 1942. It was the Gare de Lyon. She bought me a magazine which must have been an issue of *Charlie*. As the train moved out, I caught sight of her, I seem to remember, waving a white handkerchief from the platform. I was going to Villard de-Lans, with the Red Cross.**

**I've been told that later on she tried to cross the Loire. The runner she called on, who was to smuggle her across, and whose address had been passed on by her sister-in-law who was already in the free zone, turned out to be away. She didn't make a fuss and returned to Paris. She was advised to move house, to hide. She didn't bother. She thought her war widow's status would keep her out of trouble.<sup>26</sup> She was picked up in a raid, together with her sister, my aunt. She was interned at Drancy on 23 January 1943, then deported on 11 February following, destination Auschwitz. She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding.**

1. No, in fact, my father's greatcoat does not come very low: it goes down to the knee; and the tails, moreover, are gathered halfway up the thighs. It is therefore wrong to say you can "just make out" the existence of puttees: they are fully visible, as is the greater part of the trousers.

2. Sunday, leave, Bois de Vincennes: there's no basis for any of this. The third of the photographs I have of my mother — one of the ones where I am with her - was taken in the Bois de Vincennes. But nowadays I should rather say that this one was taken at the place where my father was actually stationed; to judge by its format (15.5 x 11.5 cm), it is not an amateur's snapshot: my father, in his virtually brand-new uniform, must have posed for one of those itinerant photographers who do the rounds of recruiting boards, barracks, weddings and schools at the end of the year.

3. My father came to France in 1926, a few months before his parents David and Rose (Rozja). Previously he had been apprenticed to a Warsaw hatter. His elder sister Esther (who subsequently adopted me) had been in Paris for five years already; he went to live with her for a time in Rue Lamartine, and apparently he learned French with great ease. Esther's husband David worked for a trader in real pearls, and it's not impossible that he suggested my father should work in the jewellery business. What is certain in any case is that Rose, a woman of great energy, opened a small grocery shop, and that my father worked for her: it was he who went to Les Halles in the small hours to fetch the produce. It's probably true that he was also, and maybe simultaneously, a worker: several documents have him down as a "metal turner", but I don't know whether he was in a factory or in a small business of his own. He may have worked in a baker's in Rue Cadet as well, in a shop whose back room gave onto the courtyard of the building where David worked. Other documents have him as a "caster", a "moulder" and even as a "self-employed hairdresser"; but it is not very likely that he learned to cut hair; my mother managed the little hairdresser's shop she had leased on her own — or perhaps together with her sister Fanny.

4. It's because of this present, I think, that I've always thought frames were precious objects. Even nowadays I stop to look at them in the windows of camera shops, and I am surprised every time I come across frames for five or ten francs in Prisunic chain stores.

5. It would be fairer to say she was working towards wealth.

6. ~~At the time this was Palestine, of course.~~

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7. I was still strongly affected, even though already in a negative manner, by the criteria of social and economic success which made up the main part of the ideology of my adoptive family.

8. Icek is obviously Isaac and Judko is probably a diminutive of Yehudi. People might well have called my father Andre, just as, scarcely less arbitrarily, people called his elder brother (the one who went to seek his fortune in Palestine) Leon despite his first name being officially Eliezer. But actually everyone called my father Isie (or Izy). I am the only person to have thought, for very many years, that he was called Andre. One day I had a talk with my aunt about this. She thinks it was perhaps a nickname he had from his workmates or cafe acquaintances. For my part, I tend to think that between 1940 and 1945, when it was the most basic precaution to be called Bienfait or Beauchamp instead of Bienenfeld, Chevron instead of Chavranski, Normand instead of Nordmann, I could have been told that my father's name was Andre, my mother's Cecile, and that we came from Brittany.

My family name is Peretz. It is in the Bible. In Hebrew it means "hole", in Russian it means "pepper", in Hungarian (in Budapest, to be more precise) it is the word used for what in French we call "pretzel" ("pretzel" or "bretzel" is in fact merely a diminutive form [Beretzele] of Beretz, and Beretz like Baruch or Barek, is formed from the same root as Peretz - in Arabic, if not in Hebrew, B and P are one and the same letter). The Peretzes like to think they are descended from Spanish Jews exiled by the Inquisition (the Perez are thought to be Marranos, or converted Jews who stayed in Spain), whose migrations can be traced to Provence (Peiresec), then to the Papal States, and finally to central Europe principally Poland and secondarily Romania and Bulgaria. One of the central figures of the family is the Polish Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz, to whom every self-respecting Peretz is related even if it occasionally requires a feat of genealogical juggling. As for me, I am supposed to be Isaac Leib Peretz's great-great-nephew. Apparently he was my grandfather's uncle.

My grandfather was called David Peretz and lived in Lubartow. He had three children: the eldest was called Esther Chaja Percec; the second, Eliezer Peretz; and the last-born, Icek Judko Percec. In the period between the first and third births, that is to say, between 1896 and 1909, Lubartow was, in succession, Russian, then Polish, then Russian again. An official hearing in Russian and writing in Polish, it has been explained to me, will hear Peretz and write Percec. But it is not impossible that the opposite is also true: according to my aunt, the Russians are supposed to be the ones who wrote "tz", and it was the Poles who wrote "c". This explanation signals but by no means exhausts the complex fantasies, connected to the concealment of my Jewish background through my patronym, which I elaborated around the name I bear, a name which is distinguished, moreover, by a minute discrepancy between the way it is spelled and the way it is pronounced in French: it should be written Percec or Perrec (and that's how it always is written spontaneously, either with an acute accent or with a double "r"); but it is Percec, despite the fact that it is not pronounced Peurec.

9. It's obviously not my father I'm tackling here; more like a settling of old scores with my aunt.

10. I do not know the source of this memory, which nothing has ever confirmed.

11. Or rather, quite precisely on the very day, 16 June 1940, at dawn. My father was taken prisoner after being wounded in the abdomen by machine-gun fire or a shell splinter. A German officer pinned



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