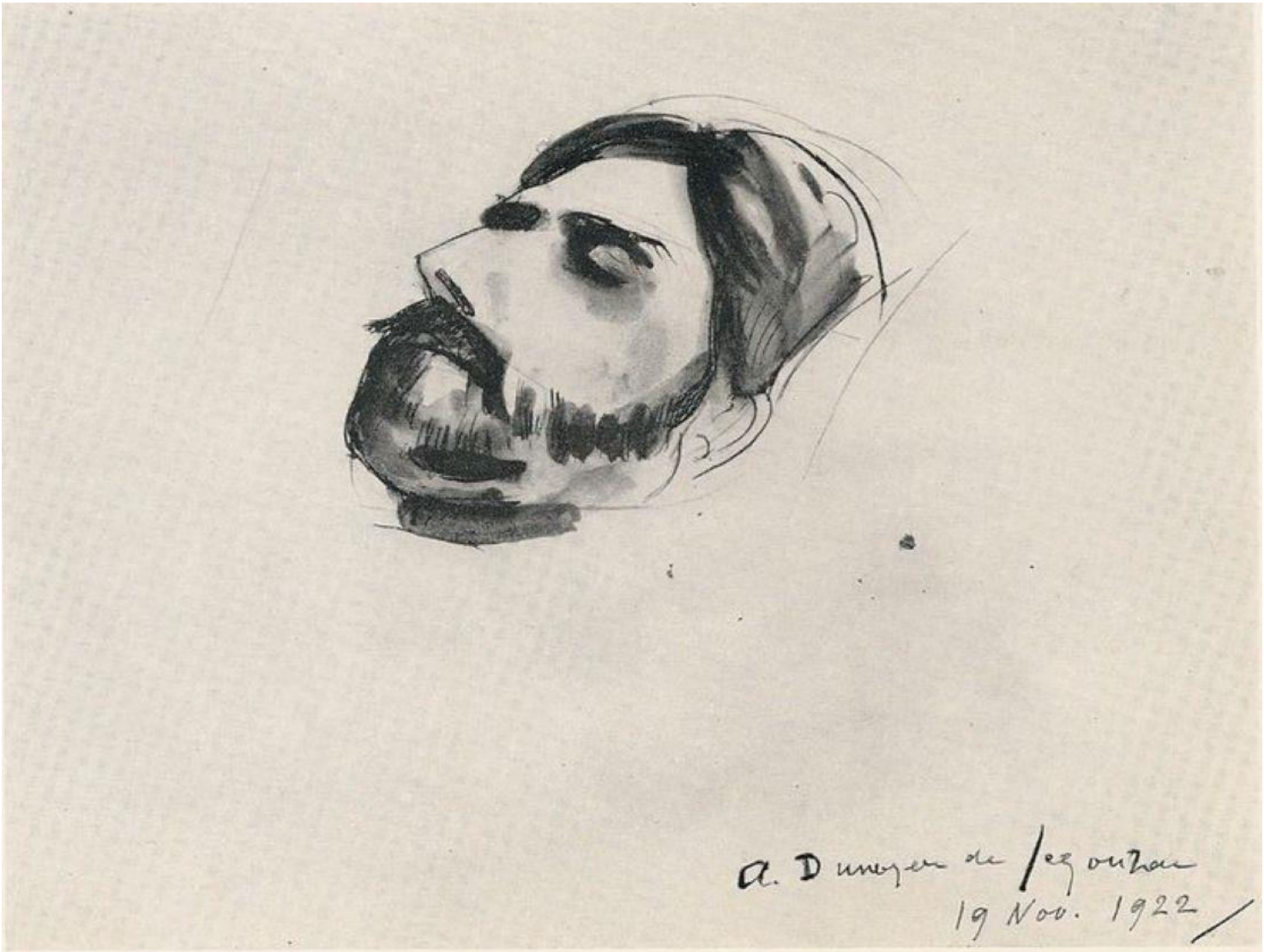

Proust sur son lit de mort, dessin de Dunoyer de Segonzac, 1922 (nº 522).

Mme de Breyves's Melancholy Summer Vacation

Ariadne, my sister, pierced by what love
Did you die on the shores where you were abandoned?*

1

Françoise de Breyves hesitated for a long time, that evening, before deciding whether to go to the reception at the home of Princess Elisabeth of A***, to the opera or to the Livrays' play.
At the friends' house where she had just dined, everyone had left table over an hour ago. She had to make up her mind.
Her friend Geneviève, who was meant to be returning with her, was plumping for the reception at the home of Mme d'A***, whereas, without altogether knowing why, Mme de Breyves would have preferred one of the other two options, or even a third: going home to bed. Her carriage was announced. She still hadn't reached a decision.

"Really," said Geneviève, "it's not very nice of you – I think Rezké is going to sing and I enjoy that. Anyone would think it would have serious consequences for you if you went to Elisabeth's. For one thing, you know, you haven't been to a single one of her big receptions this year, and since you're so close to her, that's not very nice of you."

Ever since the death of her husband, which had left her – four years ago – a widow at the age of twenty, Françoise hardly ever did anything without Geneviève, and liked to please her. She put up no further resistance to her request and, after bidding farewell to her hosts and the other guests, who were all sorry to have had so little chance to enjoy the company of one of the most sought-after women in Paris, she said to the footman:
"Take me to the home of the Princess of A***."

2

The evening at the Princess's was extremely boring. At one moment Mme de Breyves asked Geneviève:
"So who's that young man who took you over to the buffet?"

"That's Monsieur de Laléande, whom I don't know at all, actually. Do you want me to introduce him? He asked me to, but I didn't give a definite reply, as he's quite insignificant and boring – and since he thinks you're very pretty, he'd never let go of you."

"Oh, in that case, no!" said Françoise. "He's rather plain, actually, and rather commonplace, though he does have quite nice eyes."
"You're right," said Geneviève. "And anyway, you'll be meeting him quite often, it might be awkward for you if you knew him."
And she added, jokingly, "Though if you would like to get to know him on a more intimate footing, you're wasting a very fine opportunity."
"Yes, a very fine opportunity," said Françoise – and her mind was already on something else.

"After all," said Geneviève, no doubt overcome by remorse at having been such an unfaithful go-between, and having deprived that young man of a little pleasure for no reason at all, "this is one of the last receptions of the season, it wouldn't be really serious and it might perhaps be nicer of you."
"Oh all right then, if he comes back over this way."
He did not come over. He was at the other end of the salon, opposite them.
"We have to go," Geneviève said shortly.
"Just another few minutes," said Françoise.

And on a whim, above all out of a certain desire to flirt with that young man, who must indeed find her very pretty, she started to fix a lingering gaze on him, then looked away, only to gaze at him again. As she stared at him, she did her best to adopt a caressing manner, she didn't know why – for no particular reason, for the pleasure of it, the pleasure of charity, and to some extent the pleasure of pride, and the pleasure of doing something useless, the pleasure of those who write a name on a tree for some passer-by whom they will never see, or those who cast a

bottle into the waves. Time was passing, it was already late; M. de Laléande headed towards the door, which remained open after he had gone out, and Mme de Breyves could see him at the far end of the entrance hall, handing his number to the cloakroom attendant.

“It’s time to go, you’re quite right,” she said to Geneviève.
They rose to their feet. But as chance would have it, a friend of Geneviève needed to have a word with her, leaving Françoise alone by the cloakroom. The only other person there just then was M. de Laléande, who couldn’t find his walking stick. Françoise allowed her gaze to linger on him one last time. He walked by her, lightly brushed Françoise’s elbow with his own, and, his eyes shining, said as he bumped into her, seemingly still looking for his stick, “Come to my place: 5, Rue Royale.”

This was so unexpected, and M. de Laléande was already so assiduously looking for his walking stick, that subsequently she was never entirely sure if it hadn’t been a hallucination. Above all, she felt very afraid, and as the Prince of A*** was passing by just then, she called him over, and said she wanted to make arrangements for an excursion with him the following day, speaking with great volubility. During this conversation, M. de Laléande had gone. After a while, Geneviève came up and the two women left. Mme de Breyves said nothing of what had happened and remained shocked and flattered, though at bottom quite indifferent. After two days, when by chance she thought back on the incident, she started to doubt the reality of M. de Laléande’s words. When she tried to recall them, she was unable to do so fully; she thought that she had heard them as if in a dream, and told herself that the movement he had made with his elbow had just been an accidental moment of clumsiness. Then she quite stopped thinking spontaneously of M. de Laléande, and when by chance she heard someone saying his name, she fleetingly remembered his face but had altogether forgotten the almost hallucinatory encounter by the cloakroom.

She saw him again at the last evening reception to be given that year (it was towards the end of June), though she did not dare ask for him to be introduced to her; and yet, despite finding him almost ugly, and

aware of his lack of intelligence, she would really have liked to get to know him. She went up to Geneviève and said to her:
“You may as well introduce me to Monsieur de Laléande. I don’t like to be impolite. But don’t tell him it was I who asked. That would put the onus on me.”

“I’ll do it a bit later if we see him; he isn’t here just now.”
“Well, look for him.”
“He may have gone.”
“No,” said Françoise very quickly, “he can’t have gone, it’s too early. Oh, midnight already! Come on, Geneviève my dear, it’s not all that difficult, you know. The other evening it was you who wanted to. Please do it, I’m really keen.”

Geneviève looked at her in some astonishment and went looking for M. de Laléande; he had already left.
“You see, I was right,” said Geneviève, returning to Françoise.
“I’m dying of boredom here,” said Françoise. “I’ve got a headache; please, let’s leave right now.”

3

Françoise didn’t miss the opera once, and, filled with vague feelings of hope, accepted every invitation to dinner. A fortnight went by, she had not seen M. de Laléande again and often woke up in the middle of the night thinking by what means she might see him. Although she continued to tell herself repeatedly that he was boring and not handsome, she was more preoccupied by him than by all the wittiest and most charming men. Once the season had finished, there would be no further opportunity of seeing him again; she was resolved to create one and kept mulling over the possibilities.

One evening, she said to Geneviève:
“Didn’t you tell me that you knew a certain Monsieur de Laléande?”
“Jacques de Laléande? Yes and no – he’s been introduced to me, but he has never left his calling card, and I’m not at all well acquainted with him.”

“The fact is, I’ll tell you, well, I have some small or maybe even great interest in seeing him and getting to know him, for reasons that don’t personally concern me and that I can’t disclose to you for a month.” (Between now and then she would have agreed with him on some lie, so that she wouldn’t be caught out; and this thought of a secret known only to the two of them gave her a warm feeling inside.) “Please, try to find some way of doing this for me – the season is over and nothing will be happening, and I won’t be able to have him introduced to me.”

The close practices of friendship, so purifying when they are sincere, protected Geneviève as well as Françoise from the stupid curiosity that is such a vile and intense pleasure for most people in society. And so, with all her heart, without having entertained for a single moment the intention or the desire, or even the idea, of questioning her friend, Geneviève tried to think of a way, and only got cross when she couldn’t find one.

“It’s such a pity that Madame d’A*** has left. There’s Monsieur de Grumello, of course, but actually that won’t get us very far – what would we say to him? Ah, I’ve got an idea! Monsieur de Laléande plays the cello – rather badly, but never mind that. Monsieur de Grumello admires him, and then he’s so stupid and will be all too happy to please you. The only problem is, you’ve always given him the cold shoulder and you don’t like just dropping people after you’ve used them, but you’d then be obliged to invite him next year.”
But already Françoise, flushed with joy, was exclaiming:
“But I don’t mind that in the least, I’ll invite all the foreign parvenus in Paris if need be! Oh, hurry up and do it, Geneviève my dear, how kind you are!”

And Geneviève wrote:
Monsieur, you know how I seek every opportunity to give pleasure to my friend, Mme de Breyves, whom you have doubtless already met. She has several times expressed to me, as we were talking about the cello, how much she regretted never having heard M. de Laléande, who is such a good friend of yours. Would you ask him to play for her and

for me? Now that we all have so much time, it will not be too much of an inconvenience for you, and it would be so very kind. With my very best wishes,
Alériouvre Buivres

“Take this note straight away to Monsieur de Grumello’s,” said Françoise to a servant. “Don’t wait for a reply, but make sure you personally see it is handed in.”
The next day, Geneviève sent Mme de Breyves the following reply from M. de Grumello:
Madame,
I would have been more delighted than you can imagine to satisfy your desire and the wishes of Mme de Breyves, whom I know slightly and for whom I have the warmest and most respectful feelings of friendship. And so I am very sorry indeed to have to tell you that, as ill luck would have it, M. de Laléande left just two days ago for Biarritz where – alas! – he will be spending several months.

Please accept, Madame, etc.
Grumello

Françoise, white-faced, rushed over to lock her door, and no sooner had she done so than choking sobs were pouring from her lips, and a flood of tears from her eyes. Up until then she had been busy imagining scenarios in which she would meet him and get to know him, sure of being able to turn them into a reality as soon as she wanted: she had lived off this desire and this hope, perhaps without properly realizing it. But through a thousand imperceptible roots striking down into all her least conscious moments of happiness or melancholy, filling them with a new sap from an unknown source, this desire had implanted itself in her. Now it was being ripped out of her and cast aside as something impossible. She felt all torn apart: the suffering she felt, as this whole “herself” was so abruptly uprooted, was appalling, and now that her hopes had suddenly been exposed as baseless and she was plunged into a profound grief, she saw the reality of her love.

Françoise withdrew more and more each day from all of life's joys. Even the most intense of them – the ones that she enjoyed in her close relations with her mother or Geneviève, in her hours of music, reading or walking – she experienced distractedly, now that her heart was in the grip of a jealous sorrow that never left her for a single moment. She suffered agonies, both because of the impossibility of going to Biarritz, and also – even if such a thing had been possible – because of her absolute determination not to go there and thus compromise, by her unreasonable behaviour, all the prestige she might have in the eyes of M. de Laléande – and her pain was immeasurable. Poor young woman, a victim tortured without knowing why, she was terrified at the thought that this pain would perhaps linger on like this for months before any remedy came, never letting her sleep calmly or dream freely. She was filled with anxiety too, because she didn't know whether he might pass through Paris – any day now, perhaps – without her knowing. And the fear of letting a happiness that was so close escape her a second time emboldened her; she sent a servant to enquire about M. de Laléande from his concierge. He knew nothing.

Then, realizing that a sail of hope would never again appear on the sea of grief that spread out to infinity, beyond the horizon of which it seemed there was nothing more, since the world there came to an end, she sensed that she was going to do something crazy, she didn't know what, write to him perhaps – and, acting as her own doctor, so as to calm herself down a bit, she allowed herself to try and let him know that she had been wanting to see him, and she wrote this note to M. de Grumello:

Monsieur,

Mme de Buivres forwarded your kind words to me. I cannot say how grateful and touched I was! But one thing worries me. M. de Laléande did not, I hope, find me indiscreet? If you do not happen to know, ask him and tell me the whole truth, as soon as you have found out. I am filled with curiosity to know, and you will be doing me a real favour.

Thank you again, Monsieur.

With my best wishes,

Voragynes Breyves

One hour later, a servant brought her this letter:
You have no cause for concern, Madame. M. de Laléande was quite unaware that you wished to hear him play. I had asked him which days he might be able to come and perform at my place, without saying for whom he would be playing. He replied to me from Biarritz that he would not be returning before January. And please do not bother to thank me. You do me the greatest favour by asking me to do a small one for you, etc.

Grumello
There was nothing else to be done. She did nothing else, fell into an increasing depression, and was filled with remorse at feeling so sad and thereby causing her mother sadness. She went to spend a few days in the country, then left for Trouville. There she heard talk of the social ambitions of M. de Laléande, and when a prince, striving to please her, asked, “Is there any favour I could do for you?” she almost cheered up on imagining how surprised he would be if she gave him a straight answer to his question; and she distilled, so as to savour it the more, all the intoxicating bitterness that she felt in the contrast between all the great and difficult things people had always done to please her, and this one small thing, so easy and yet so impossible, that would have restored her calm, her health, her happiness and the happiness of her family.

She found a certain enjoyment only in the company of her servants, who had an immense admiration for her and who served her without daring to speak to her, sensing how sad she was. Their respectful and sorrowful silence spoke to her of M. de Laléande. She listened to it with deep pleasure and made them serve her breakfast very slowly, to defer the time when her friends would come round and she would need to put on an act. She wanted to preserve the bittersweet taste of all the sadness that hung around her because of him, and savour it lingeringly in her mouth.

Even more, she would have liked other people to be dominated by him too, and found relief in the thought that what occupied such a large place in her heart filled up a considerable space around her as well; she

would have liked to possess strong and healthy wild animals who would languish on seeing her pain. At times, in despair, she wanted to write to him, or get someone else to do so – to dishonour herself, saying "nothing really mattered any more". But it was better for her, in the very interests of her love, to maintain her social situation, which one day might give her more authority over him – if that day ever came. And should a brief closer acquaintance with him break the spell that he had cast over her (she would not and could not believe it, or even for a single moment imagine it; but her mind, more perspicacious, could perceive that cruel and fateful possibility despite the blindness of her heart), she would thereafter remain without a single comfort in the world.

And if some other love chanced to come along, she would no longer have the resources that she could at least still count on now – her great influence, which would, on her return to Paris, make it so easy for her to get to know M. de Laléande. Trying to distance herself from her own feelings and examine them objectively, she kept telling herself, "I know he's nothing special; I've always thought as much. That's my settled opinion of him, and it hasn't wavered. The emotional turmoil set in later, but it has left that first opinion quite unaffected. He's nothing much, but it's for that nothing much that I live. I live for Jacques de Laléande!" But immediately, having uttered his name, by an association of ideas that this time was quite involuntary and irrational, she saw him again, and felt so much euphoria and so much suffering that she sensed that even if he was nothing much, that did not matter – he still made her experience sufferings and joys next to which all the rest were as nothing.

And even though she reflected that, if she got to know him better, it would all evaporate, she endowed this mirage with all of her pain and all of her longing. A passage from the Mastersingers that she had heard at the reception of the Princess of A*** had the capacity to evoke M. de Laléande for her with the greatest precision ("Dem Vogel der heut sang dem war der Schnabel hold gewachsen"*). She had involuntarily turned it into the real leitmotiv of M. de Laléande and, hearing it one day in a concert in Trouville, she burst into tears.

From time to time, not too often in case she started to weary of it, she would shut herself away in her room, where she had had the piano brought in, and started to play it, closing her eyes the better to see him: this was her only joy, an intoxication which left an aftertaste of disenchantment, the opium which she could not do without. Stopping sometimes to listen to the flow of her pain, in the same way that one bends over to hear the sweet incessant plaint of a spring, and thinking of the agonizing alternative between her future shame and the subsequent despair of her family on the one hand, and (if she did not yield to her desires) her eternal sadness on the other, she cursed herself for having created such an ingenious balance between the ingredients of pleasure and pain in her love that she had been unable either to reject it at once as a deadly poison, or to cure herself of it.

She cursed her eyes first and foremost, and perhaps even more than them her hateful spirit of coquetry and curiosity which had made those eyes open as wide as flowers to tempt that young man, and had then exposed her to the gaze of M. de Laléande, as swift and sure as arrows and more invincible in their sweetness than if they had been injections of morphine. She cursed her imagination too; it had so tenderly nourished her love that Françoise sometimes wondered whether her imagination alone had given birth to it – that love which had now overpowered its mother and was torturing her to death.

She cursed her ingenuity as well, which had so skilfully, for good and ill, contrived so many scenarios in which she would be able to see him again, that their frustrating impossibility had perhaps bound her even more tightly to their hero. She cursed her kindness and the delicacy of her heart which, if she were to give herself to him, would infect with remorse and shame the joy of that guilty love; she cursed her impetuous will, rearing up so high and bold to leap over every obstacle every time her desires led it towards an impossible goal, but so weak, so flabby and so broken, not only when she was forced to disobey those desires, but when some other emotion directed her.

Finally she cursed her powers of thought, in their divinest aspects – thought, the greatest gift ever granted her; thought, which people have called by every name without ever finding the right one: the poet's intuition, the believer's ecstasy, the profound sense for nature and music; thought, which had placed high peaks and endless horizons before her love, bathing them in the supernatural glow of its allure and in exchange imbuing her love with some of itself; thought, which had taken an interest in this love, shown solidarity with it and saturated it with its own highest and most intimate inner life, dedicating to it, in the way the treasure in a church is dedicated to the Madonna, all the most precious jewels of her mind and heart – that heart which she could hear lamenting in the evenings, or hovering over the sea whose melancholy was now the sister of the sadness she experienced at not being able to see him.

And she cursed that inexpressible sense of the mystery of things, when our minds sink into a radiant beauty, like the sun setting in the sea, for having turned her love into something deeper and more immaterial, more extensive and so to speak infinite, without having made it any less torturing – "for" (as Baudelaire put it in his evocation of late autumn afternoons) "there are sensations that, however vague, are still intense, and there is nothing more keenly penetrating than infinity."*

5

αὐτόθ᾽ ἐπ᾽ ἀϊόνος κατετάκετο φυκιοέσσας
ἐξ ἀοῦς, ἔχθιστον ἔχων ὑποκάρδιον ἕλκος,
Κύπριδος ἐκ μεγάλας τό οἱ ἥπατι πᾶξε βέλεμνον.

and as soon as the sun rose, he was consumed, there on the seaweed of the shore, keeping in the depths of his heart, like an arrow in his liver, the smarting wound of great Kypris.
Theocritus, 'The Cyclops'*

It is in Trouville that I have just met Mme de Breyves again. I must say I've seen her looking happier than she is now. Nothing can cure her. If she loved M. de Laléande for his good looks or his wit, we could find

some wittier or more handsome young man to take her mind off him. If it were his kindness or his love for her that had bound her to him, another man might try to love her with even greater fidelity. But M. de Laléande is neither handsome nor intelligent. He has had no opportunity to prove to her whether he is affectionate or hard-hearted, forgetful or faithful.

So it must be he whom she loves, and not certain merits or charms that might be found to an equally high degree in others; it must be he whom she loves, for all his imperfections, all his lack of distinction; she is thus destined to love him in spite of everything. He – did she know what this was? All she had to go on was the fact that he filled her, from afar, with such shudders of desolation or bliss that all the rest of her life, everything else in the world, no longer counted for her.

The most handsome face, the most original intelligence, would never possess that particular and mysterious essence, so unique that no human being will ever have an exact double, even given an infinity of worlds and an eternity of time. Without Geneviève de Buivres, who quite innocently took her to the reception at the home of Mme d'A***, none of this would have happened. But the circumstances joined up to form a chain and imprisoned her, making her the victim of a malady that is incurable because it has no rational explanation.

To be sure, M. de Laléande, who is doubtless at this very moment strolling along the beach at Biarritz, leading his mediocre little life filled with footling little dreams, would be quite astonished if he knew of that other life, so miraculously intense that it subordinates everything to itself and annihilates everything apart from itself – the life he leads in the soul of Mme de Breyves, and which is as continuous as his personal life, translating itself just as effectively into acts, and distinguishing itself from his own real life only by a heightened awareness, one less intermittent and more varied.

How amazed he would be if he only knew that he, not usually much sought after in his material incarnation, will suddenly appear in her mind's eye wherever she goes, in the company of more talented

people, in the most exclusive salons, and amid the most richly satisfying landscapes; and if he only knew that this woman, widely loved as she is, then allows her tenderness, her thoughts and her attention to focus on the memory of this intruder and on him alone. Everything fades in comparison with him, as if he alone had the reality of a person and as if the other people present were as insubstantial as memories and shadows.

Whether Mme de Breyves is out walking with a poet or lunching at the home of an archduchess, whether she leaves Trouville for the mountains or for the countryside, whether she is alone reading or conversing with the best-loved of her friends, whether she goes out horse riding or drifts off to sleep, the name and the image of M. de Laléande hover over her, delightfully, cruelly, unavoidably, in the same way that the sky hovers over our heads.

Things have gone so far that she, who used to hate Biarritz, now finds that everything to do with that town affects her with a painful and unsettling charm. She is anxious to know who is going there – people who will perhaps see him, who will perhaps live with him without appreciating their privilege. For those people she is without rancour, and without daring to ask them to carry out any errands for her, she keeps asking them questions, and is sometimes astonished that they can hear her talking so much about things indirectly connected with her secret, and still not guess it. A large photograph of Biarritz is one of the few decorations in her room. She has given one of the people out for a stroll visible on this photograph, whose face is quite indistinct, the features of M. de Laléande.

If only she knew the horrid music he likes and plays, those despised romances would doubtless usurp, first on her piano and before long in her heart, the place of the symphonies of Beethoven or the dramas of Wagner, because of the sentimental dumbing-down of her taste, and the charm that the man who is the source of all charm and all pain would project onto them. Sometimes the image of the man she has seen only two or three times, for just a few minutes, the man who holds such a small place in the external events of her life and who has

assumed one in her mind and her heart that is so all-absorbing as to fill them entirely – sometimes this image grows faint before the tired eyes of her memory.

She can no longer see him, can no longer recall his features or his silhouette, and has almost forgotten his eyes. And yet this image is all she has of him. She panics at the thought that she might lose this image, and that her desire – which admittedly tortures her, but which is now part and parcel of her, since she has entirely taken refuge in it, having fled from everything else, and to which she clings as one clings to one's own self-preservation, to life itself whether good or bad – might evaporate and that the only thing left would be a feeling of dreamlike malaise and suffering, of which she would no longer know the objective cause, would not even see him in her thoughts and would no longer be able to cherish him there. But all at once the image of M. de Laléande has returned, after that momentary disturbance in her inner vision. Her grief can resume its course – and this is almost an occasion for joy.

How will Mme de Breyves be able to tolerate going back to Paris, where he will not be returning until January? What will she do in the meantime? What will she do, what will he do afterwards?

Twenty times over I have been ready to leave for Biarritz and bring back M. de Laléande. The consequences might well be dreadful; but there is no point asking her, she will not permit it. But I am so saddened to see her delicate forehead being beaten from within and almost broken by the merciless blows of that inexplicable love. It gives her whole life an anguished rhythm. Often she imagines that he is about to arrive in Trouville, and will come up to her and tell her he loves her.

She can see him: his eyes are shining. He talks to her with that expressionless, dreamlike voice that forbids us to believe while at the same time forcing us to listen. It is him. He is saying to her those words that make us delirious, even though we never hear them except in a dream, when we see shining in them, so heart-meltingly, the divine and trustful smile of destinies that are conjoined. Whereupon, the feeling

that the two worlds, that of reality and that of her desire, run in parallel, and that it is just as impossible for them to meet as it is impossible for a shadow to coincide with the body that has cast it, awakens her.

Then, remembering that minute near the cloakroom when his elbow brushed against hers, when he offered her that body which she could now be holding tight to hers if she had only wanted to, if she had only known, and which is now for ever distant, she feels cries of despair and rebellion resounding through her entire body like those one hears on sinking ships.

If, when out walking on the beach or in the woods, she allows herself gently to yield to the pleasure of contemplation or reverie, no, not even that – to a sweet smell, or a song brought to her indistinctly by the breeze, making her forget for a moment her pain, then she suddenly feels, striking deep into her heart, an agonizing wound, and above the waves or the leaves, in the uncertain distance of the sylvan or marine horizon, she perceives the evanescent image of her invisible and ever-present victor who, his eyes shining through the clouds as on the day he offered himself to her, takes flight, bearing the quiver from which he has just sent yet one more arrow winging its way towards her.

– July 1893

The end