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The Melancholy Summer of Madame de Breyves, Marcel Proust

The Melancholy Summer of Madame de Breyves

Ariadne, my sister, you, wounded by
love,
You died on the shores where you had
been abandoned.

—RACINE: PHAEDRA, ACT I, SCENE 3

That evening, Françoise de Breyves wavered for a long time between Princess Élisabeth d'A.'s party, the Opera, and the Livrays' play.

At the home where she had just dined with friends, they had left the table over an hour ago. She had to make up her mind.

Her friend Geneviève, who was to drive back with her, was in favor of the princess's soirée, whereas, without quite knowing why, Madame de Breyves would have preferred either of the two other choices, or even a third: to go home to bed. Her carriage was announced. She was still undecided.

"Honestly," said Geneviève, "this isn't nice of you. I understand that Rezké will be singing, and I'd like to hear him. You act as if you'd suffer serious consequences by going to Élisabeth's soirée. First of all, I have to tell you that you haven't been to a single one of her grand soirées this year, and considering you're friends, that's not very nice of you."

Since her husband had died four years ago, leaving her a widow at twenty, Françoise had done almost nothing without Geneviève and she liked pleasing her. She did not resist her entreaties much longer, and, after bidding good night to the host and hostess and to the other guests, who were all devastated at having enjoyed so little of one of the most sought-after women in Paris, Françoise told her lackey:

"To Princess d'A."

The princess's soirée was very boring. At one point Madame de Breyves asked Geneviève:

"Who is that young man who escorted you to the buffet?"

"That's Monsieur de Laléande, whom, incidentally, I don't know at all. Would you like me to introduce him to you? He asked me to, but I was evasive, because he's very unimportant and boring, and since he finds you very pretty, you won't be able to get rid of him."

"Then let's not!" said Françoise. "Anyway, he's a bit homely and vulgar, despite his rather beautiful eyes."

"You're right," said Geneviève. "And besides, you'll be running into him often, so knowing him might be awkward for you."

Then she humorously added:

"Of course, if you want a more intimate relationship with him, you're passing up a wonderful opportunity."

"Yes, a wonderful opportunity," said Françoise, her mind already elsewhere.

"Still," said Geneviève, no doubt filled with remorse for being such a disloyal go-between and pointlessly depriving this young man of a pleasure, "it's one of the last soirées of the season, an introduction wouldn't carry much weight, and it might be a nice thing to do."

"Fine then, if he comes back this way."

He did not come back. He was across from them, at the opposite end of the drawing room.

"We have to leave," Geneviève soon said.

"One more minute," said Françoise.

And as a caprice, especially out of a desire to flirt with this young man, who was bound to find her very lovely, she gave him a lingering look, then averted her eyes, then gazed at him again. She tried to make her eyes seem tender; she did not know why, for no reason, for pleasure, the pleasure of charity, of a little vanity, and also gratuity, the pleasure of carving your name into a tree trunk for a passerby whom you will never see, the pleasure of throwing a bottle into the ocean. Time flowed by, it was getting late; Monsieur de Laléande headed toward

the door, which remained open after he passed through, so that Madame de Breyves could spot him holding out his ticket at the far end of the cloakroom.

"It's time we left, you're right," she told Geneviève.

They rose. But as luck would have it, a friend needed to say something to Geneviève, who therefore left Françoise alone in the cloakroom. The only other person there was Monsieur de Laléande, who could not find his cane. Françoise, amused, gave him a final look. He came very near her, his elbow slightly grazing hers, and, when closest to her, with radiant eyes, and still appearing to be searching, he said: "Come to my home, 5 Rue Royale."

She had hardly foreseen this, and Monsieur de Laléande was now so absorbed in hunting for his cane that afterwards Françoise never knew for certain whether it had not been a hallucination. Above all, she was very frightened, and since Prince d'A. chanced to come along at that moment, she called him over: she wished to make an appointment with him for an outing tomorrow and she talked volubly. During that conversation Monsieur de Laléande left. Geneviève reappeared an instant later, and the two women departed. Madame de Breyves told her friend nothing; she was still shocked and flattered, yet basically very indifferent.

Two days after that, when she happened to recall the incident, she began to doubt that Monsieur de Laléande had really spoken those words. She tried but was unable to remember fully; she believed she had heard them as if in a dream and she told herself that the elbow movement had been an accidental blunder. Then she no longer thought spontaneously about Monsieur de Laléande, and when she happened to hear his name mentioned, she swiftly imagined his face and forgot all about the quasi-hallucination in the cloakroom.

She saw him again at the last soirée of the season (toward the end of June), but did not dare ask to meet him; and yet, though finding him almost ugly and knowing he was not intelligent, she would have liked to make his acquaintance. She went over to Geneviève and said:

"Why don't you present Monsieur de Laléande after all. I don't like being impolite. But don't say I suggested it. That will keep it casual."

"Later, if we see him. He's not here at the moment."

"Well, then look for him."

"He may have left."

"Oh no," Françoise blurted out, "he can't have left, it's too early. Oh my! Already midnight. Come on, dear Geneviève, it's not all that difficult. The other evening it was you who wanted it. Please, it's important to me."

Geneviève looked at her, a bit astonished, and went searching for Monsieur de Laléande; he was gone.

"You see I was right," said Geneviève, returning to Françoise.

"I'm bored out of my mind," said Françoise. "I've got a headache. Please, let's leave immediately."

Françoise no longer missed a single performance at the Opera; with vague hopes she accepted all the dinners to which she was invited. Two weeks wore by; she had not run into Monsieur de Laléande again and at night she often awoke, trying to hit on ways of finding him. Though repeating to herself that he was boring and not handsome, she was more preoccupied with him than with all the wittiest and most charming men. With the season ended, there would be no opportunity to see him again; she was determined to create an opportunity and she cast about for a possibility.

One evening she said to Geneviève:

"Didn't you tell me you knew a man named Laléande?"

"Jacques de Laléande? Yes and no. He was introduced to me, but he's never left me a card, and we're not in any communication with each other."

"Let me tell you, I'm a bit interested, very interested, for reasons that don't concern me and that I probably won't be able to tell you for

another month” (by then she and he would have worked out a lie to avoid exposure, and the thought of sharing a secret with him alone gave her a sweet thrill). “I’m interested in making his acquaintance and meeting with him. Please try to find a way, since the season is over, and I won’t be able to have him introduced to me.”

The practices of close friendship, so purifying when they are sincere, sheltered Geneviève as well as Françoise from the stupid curiosity in which most people in high society take shameful enjoyment. Thus, devoting herself with all her heart and without, for even a moment, intending or desiring to question her friend, much less thinking of doing so, Geneviève searched and was angry only because she came up with nothing.

“It’s unfortunate that Madame d’A. has left town. There’s still Monsieur de Grumello, of course, but actually that won’t get us anywhere—what can we say to him? Wait! I’ve got an idea! Monsieur de Laléande plays the cello quite badly, but that doesn’t matter. Monsieur de Grumello admires him, and besides, he’s so dim-witted and he’ll be so happy to do you a favor. The thing is, you’ve always avoided him, and you don’t like dropping people after making use of their services, but you won’t want to be obligated to invite him next season.”

However, Françoise, flushed with joy, exclaimed:

“Why, it’s all the same to me, I’ll invite all the adventurers in Paris if I must. Oh! Do it quickly, my dear Geneviève—how sweet you are!”

And Geneviève wrote:

Monsieur,

You know how I seek all opportunities to bring pleasure to my friend Madame de Breyves, whom you have, no doubt, already encountered. When we have talked about the cello, she has on several occasions expressed her regret at never having heard Monsieur de Laléande, who is such a good friend of yours. Would you care to have him play for her and for me? Now that the season is over, it will not be too great an imposition on you and it will be extremely generous on your part.

With all my best wishes,

Alériouvre Buivres

“Deliver this letter immediately to Monsieur de Grumello,” Françoise told a servant. “Don’t wait for an answer, but make sure you hand it to him personally.”

The next day Geneviève sent Madame de Breyves Monsieur de Grumello’s reply:

Madame,

I would have been more delighted than you can suppose to carry out your wishes and those of Madame de Breyves, whom I know slightly and for whom I feel the keenest and most respectful devotion. I am therefore dreadfully sorry to inform you that, by an unfortunate fluke, Monsieur de Laléande departed just two days ago for Biarritz, where he plans, alas, to spend several months.

Very truly yours, etc.

Grumello

Françoise, deathly white, dashed to her room to lock herself in. She barely made it. Sobs were already shattering on her lips, tears were streaming. Fully engrossed, until now, in picturing romantic ways of seeing him and getting to know him and certain she would carry them out as soon as she wished, she had been living on that yearning and that hope, without, perhaps, realizing it.

But this desire had implanted itself into her by sending out a thousand imperceptible roots, which had plunged into all her most unconscious minutes of happiness or melancholy, filling them with a new sap without her knowing where it came from. And now this desire had been ripped out and tossed away as impossible. She felt lacerated, suffering horribly in her entire self, which had been suddenly uprooted; and from the depths of her sorrow through the abruptly exposed lies of her hope, she saw the reality of her love.

Day by day Françoise withdrew further and further from all her pleasures, and a heart haunted by a jealous grief that never left her for a moment was the only thing she could offer her most intense delights, the very ones she savored in her bonds with her mother and Geneviève

or in her musical hours, her hours of reading, and her outings. Infinite was the pain caused by the impossibility of her going to Biarritz and, even had it been possible, by her absolute determination not to let a rash step compromise all the prestige she might have in the eyes of Monsieur de Laléande.

A poor little victim of torture without knowing why, she was frightened at the thought that this illness could drag on for months until a remedy was found for a condition that would not let her sleep peacefully or dream freely. She was also worried about not knowing whether he might pass through Paris, soon perhaps, without her finding out. And emboldened by the fear of again letting happiness slip by so closely, she sent a domestic to question Monsieur de Laléande's concierge. The concierge knew nothing.

And realizing that no sail of hope would henceforth emerge on the horizon of this sea of grief, which stretched ad infinitum and beyond which there seemed to be nothing but the end of the earth, Françoise sensed she was going to do insane things, but she did not know what, perhaps write to him; and so she became her own physician: to calm down a bit she took the liberty of trying to have him learn that she had wanted to see him; she therefore wrote Monsieur de Grumello:

Monsieur,

Madame de Buivres has told me about your generous idea. How grateful and deeply moved I am! But something worries me. Does Monsieur de Laléande consider me indiscreet? If you do not know, please ask him and get back to me once you know the full truth. I am very curious, and you will be doing me a great favor. Thank you again, Monsieur.

With my very best wishes,

Voragynes Breyves

One hour later a servant brought her this letter:

Madame,

Do not worry, Monsieur de Laléande has not learned that you wished to hear him play. I asked him on which days he could come and perform in my home but I did not tell him for whom. He replied from Biarritz

that he would not come back before the month of January. And please do not thank me. My greatest pleasure would be to give you a little pleasure. . . .

Grumello

There was nothing more to do. She did nothing more, she grew sadder and sadder, and she felt remorse at being sad, at saddening her mother. She spent a few days in the country, then went to Trouville. There she heard some people talking about Monsieur de Laléande's social ambitions, and when a prince, vying for her favor, asked her, "What can I do to please you?", she almost chuckled when imagining how astonished he would be at her sincere response; and she gathered, in order to savor it, all the intoxicating bitterness there was in the irony of that contrast between all the great and difficult things that people had always done to please her and this so easy and so impossible little thing that would have restored her peace of mind, her health, her happiness, and the happiness of her loved ones.

She had a bit of solace only when among her domestics, who admired her immensely and, feeling her misery, served her without venturing to speak. Their respectful and mournful silence spoke to her about Monsieur de Laléande.

She reveled in their silence and had them serve lunch very slowly in order to delay the moment when her friends would come, when she would have to stifle her emotions. She wanted to retain the bittersweet taste of all the sadness surrounding her because of him. She would have wanted to see more people dominated by him, to ease her pain by feeling that what occupied so much of her heart was taking up a little space around her; she would have liked to have energetic beasts wasting away with her affliction. For moments at a time she desperately yearned to write to him, have someone else write to him, bring shame upon herself, "nothing mattered to her."

But precisely for the sake of her love, it was better to preserve her social standing, which could someday give her greater authority over him, if that day ever came. And if a brief intimate relationship with him

broke the spell he had cast over her (she did not want to, she could not, believe it, even imagine it for an instant; but her more astute mind perceived that cruel fate through the blindness of her heart), she would remain without any support in the world. And if some other love came her way, she would lack the resources that she at least now possessed, the power that, at their return to Paris, would make it so easy for her to have an intimate relationship with Monsieur de Laléande.

Trying to step back from her own feelings and examine them like an object under investigation, she told herself: "I know he's mediocre and I've always thought so. That's my opinion of him; it hasn't varied. My heart may be confused now, but it can't change my mind. It's only a trifle, and this trifle is what I live for. I live for Jacques de Laléande!"

But then, having spoken his name, she could see him, this time through an involuntary and unanalyzed association, and her bliss and her sorrow were so great that she felt that his being a trifle was unimportant since he made her feel tortures and delights compared with which all others were nothing. And while she figured that all this would fade once she got to know him, she gave this mirage the full realities of her pain and her joy.

A phrase she had heard from Die Meistersinger, at Princess d'A.'s soirée, had the power to evoke Monsieur de Laléande with utmost precision: "Dem Vogel, der heut sang, dem war der Schnabel hold gewachsen" (The bird that sang today, its beak was sweet). She had unwittingly made that phrase his actual leitmotif and, hearing it one day at a concert in Trouville, she had burst into tears. From time to time, not so often as to make it pall, she would lock herself in her bedroom, to which the piano had been moved, and she would play that phrase, closing her eyes the better to see him; it was her only intoxicating joy, ending in disillusion; it was the opium she could not do without.

Sometimes pausing and listening to the flow of her distress the way one leans over to hear the sweet and incessant lament of a wellspring, she would muse about her atrocious dilemma: one alternative being her

future shame, which would lead to the despair of her loved ones; the other alternative (if she did not give in) being her eternal sorrow; and she would curse herself for having so expertly dosed her love with the pleasure and the pain that she had not managed to reject immediately as an unbearable poison or to recover from subsequently. First she cursed her eyes, or perhaps before them her detestable curiosity and coquettishness, which had made her eyes blossom like flowers in order to tempt this young man, and had then exposed her to his glances, some of which were like arrows and more invincibly sweet than injections of morphine would have been.

She also cursed her imagination; it had nurtured her love so tenderly that Françoise sometimes wondered if her imagination alone had given birth to this love, which now tyrannized and tortured its birth-giver.

She also cursed her ingenuity, which, for better and for worse, had so skillfully devised so many intrigues for meeting him that their frustrating impossibility may have attached her all the more strongly to the hero of those novels; she cursed her goodness and the delicacy of her heart, which, if she surrendered, would corrupt the joy of her guilty love with remorse and shame. She cursed her will, which could rear so impetuously and leap over hurdles so dauntlessly when her desires strove toward impossible goals—her will, so weak, so pliant, so broken not only when she was forced to disobey her desires, but also when she was driven by some other emotion.

Lastly she cursed her mind in its godliest forms, the supreme gift that she had received and to which people, without finding its true name, have given all sorts of names—poet's intuition, believer's ecstasy, profound feelings of nature and music—which had placed infinite summits and horizons before her love, had let them bask in the supernatural light of her love's enchantment, and had, in exchange, lent her love a bit of its own enchantment, and which had won over to this love all its most sublime and most private inner life, bonding and blending with it, consecrating to it—as a church's collection of relics and ornaments is dedicated to the Madonna—all the most precious jewels of her heart and her mind, her heart, whose sighs she heard in

the evening or on the sea, and whose melancholy was now the sister of the pain inflicted on her by his total absence: she cursed that inexpressible sense of the mystery of things, which absorbs our minds in a radiance of beauty, the way the ocean engulfs the setting sun—for deepening her love, dematerializing it, broadening it, making it infinite without reducing its torture, “for” (as Baudelaire said when speaking about late afternoons in autumn) “there are sensations whose vagueness does not exclude intensity, and there is no sharper point than that of infinity.”

And so, beginning with the rising sun, he was consumed, on the seaweed of the shore, keeping at the bottom of his heart, like an arrow in the liver, the burning wound of the great Kypris.

—THEOCRITES: THE CYCLOPS

It was in Trouville that I just recently encountered Madame de Breyves, whom I have known to be happier. Nothing can cure her. If she loved Monsieur de Laléande for his good looks or his intelligence, one could seek to find a more intelligent or better-looking young man to divert her attention. If it were his benevolence or his love for her that attached her to him, someone else could try to love her more faithfully. But Monsieur de Laléande is neither good-looking nor intelligent. He has had no chance to show her whether he is tender or brutal, neglectful or faithful.

It is truly he whom she loves and not merits or charms that could be found to the same high degree in others; it is truly he whom she loves despite his imperfections, despite his mediocrity; she is thus doomed to love him despite everything. He—does she know what that is? Only that he induces such great thrills of despair and rapture in her that all else in her life, all other things, do not count.

The most beautiful face, the most original intelligence would not have that particular and mysterious essence, so unique that no human being will ever repeat it in the infinity of worlds and the eternity of time.

Had it not been for Geneviève de Buivres, who innocently got her to attend the princess's soirée, none of this would have happened. But the chain of circumstances linked up, imprisoning her, the victim of an illness that has no remedy because it has no reason.

Granted, Monsieur de Laléande, who at this very moment must be leading a mediocre life and dreaming paltry dreams on the beach of Biarritz, would be quite amazed to learn about his other life, the one in Madame de Breyves's soul, an existence so miraculously intense as to subjugate and annihilate everything else: an existence just as continuous as his own life, expressed just as effectively in actions, distinguished purely by a keener, richer, less intermittent awareness.

How amazed Monsieur de Laléande would be to learn that he, rarely sought after for his physical appearance, is instantly evoked wherever Madame de Breyves happens to be, among the most gifted people, in the most exclusive salons, in the most self-contained sceneries; and how amazed he would be to learn that this very popular woman has no thought, no affection, no attention for anything but the memory of this intruder, who eclipses everything else as if he alone had the reality of a person, and all other present persons were as empty as memories and shadows.

Whether Madame de Breyves strolls with a poet or lunches at the home of an archduchess, whether she leaves Trouville for the mountains or the countryside, reads by herself or chats with her most cherished friend, rides horseback or sleeps, Monsieur de Laléande's name, his image lie upon her, delightful, truculent, unyielding, like the sky overhead.

She, who always despised Biarritz, has now gone so far as to find a distressing and bewildering charm in everything regarding this city. She is nervous about who is there, who will perhaps see him but not know it, who will perhaps live with him but not enjoy it.

She feels no resentment for the latter, and without daring to give them messages, she keeps endlessly interrogating them, astonished at times

that people hear her talking so much around her secret yet never surmise it. A large photograph of Biarritz is one of the few decorations in her bedroom.

She lends Monsieur de Laléande's features to one of the strollers whom one sees in that picture, albeit hazily. If she knew the bad music he likes and plays, those scorned ballads would probably replace Beethoven's symphonies and Wagner's operas on her piano and soon thereafter in her heart, both because of the sentimental cheapening of her taste and because of the spell cast on them by the man from whom all spells and sorrows come to her.

Now and then the image of the man she has seen only two or three times, and for moments at that, the man who has such a tiny space in the exterior events of her life and such an absorbing space in her mind and her heart, virtually monopolizing them altogether—his image blurs before the weary eyes of her memory.

She no longer sees him, no longer recalls his features, his silhouette, barely remembers his eyes. Still, that image is all she has of him. She goes mad at the thought that she might lose that image, that her desire (which, granted, tortures her, but which is entirely herself now, in which she has taken refuge, fleeing everything she values, the way you value your own preservation, your life, good or bad)—that her desire could vanish, leaving nothing but a feeling of malaise, a suffering in dreams, of which she would no longer know the cause, would no longer see it even in her mind or cherish it there. But then Monsieur de Laléande's image reappears after that momentary blurring of inner vision. Her grief can resume and it is almost a joy.

How will Madame de Breyves endure going back to Paris, to which he will not return before January? What will she do until then? What will she do, what will he do after that?

I wanted to leave for Biarritz twenty times over and bring back Monsieur de Laléande. The consequences might be terrible, but I do not have to examine them; she will not stand for it.

Nonetheless I am devastated to see those small temples throbbing from within, beating strongly enough to be shattered by the interminable blows of this inexplicable love. This love gives her life the rhythm of anxiety. Often she imagines him coming to Trouville, approaching her, telling her he loves her. She sees him, her eyes glow. He speaks to her in that toneless voice of dreams, a voice that prohibits us from believing yet forces us to listen.

It is he. He speaks to her in those words that make us delirious even though we never hear them except in dreams when we see the very shiny and poignant, the divine and trusting smile of two destinies uniting.

Thus she is awakened by the feeling that the two worlds of reality and her desire are parallel, that it is as impossible for them to join together as it is for a body and the shadow it casts. Then, remembering that minute in the cloakroom when his elbow grazed her elbow, when he offered her his body, which she could now press against her own if she had wished, if she had known, and which may remain forever remote from her, she is skewered by cries of despair and revolt like those heard on sinking ships.

If, while strolling on the beach or in the woods, she allows a pleasure of contemplation or reverie, or at least a fragrance, a singing wafted and muffled by the wind—if she allows those things to take hold of her gently and let her forget her sorrow for an instant, then she suddenly feels a great blow to her heart, a painful wound; and, above the waves or the leaves, in the hazy skyline of woods or sea, she perceives the nebulous face of her invisible and ever-present conqueror, who, his eyes shining through the clouds as on the day when he offered himself to her, flees with his quiver after shooting one more arrow at her.

The end