



a novella

ROYALTY
THY NAME IS
WOMAN

CARSTEN SPROTTE

ROYALTY, THY NAME IS WOMAN

What she revealed on my road to Reims

A novella

by Carsten Sprotte

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Dedicated to those women who believe in their saving power.

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Foreword

Royalty, Thy Name is Woman counters Hamlet's famous line about feminine frailty. Its heroine is a woman who expressed her singular saving power as the world approaches its greatest danger. An excerpt from my own life, it begins with my champagne-showered appointment to a position in the world's premier luxury empire. There, my *road to Reims*--like another's road to Damascus--takes an unexpected turn, veering into the unknown.

I had already emigrated from Burger King/Dairy Queen country to the domains of Veuve Clicquot and Krug. This in itself makes for a great tale, but where, beyond luxury, can such a journey lead? That is what *Royalty, Thy Name is Woman* reveals.

I thought--as the author--that I would know where it would all end. But as I carefully placed my final words, a virus called corona erupted on the scene, and all that I had written about a certain *coronation* would take on a new light.

Notre Dame

Like champagne and crystal, Reims and royalty have always been paired. Capital of the Champagne region long before chardonnay was made to sparkle, the kings of France were crowned at Notre Dame de Reims, the great 5th-century gothic cathedral destroyed by flames in 1210, disfigured in 1418, and bombed in 1914. She--the cathedral-- always rose again.

My story concerns a crown, but not one for kings, and not one for a cathedral coronation. Its language is doused with champagne--and a noble one at that--but the ceremony's centerpiece is the singular woman I encounter on my road to Reims. There where I am smitten is also written: *from Epernay your epiphany will come*. It is not what you, the reader, are expecting. That much I know. The luminous bubbles of Veuve Clicquot are but a pretext. Their light is a delight, but cannot compare to her royalty.

If you take this road to Reims with me, you will learn of luxury, but only so that your own nobility may be revealed. How far have you already travelled down this road? My journey started off in Texas, and I can assure you it was a long haul from there. If you come with me, you must start by facing the howling headwinds of a *bigger is better* mentality while disregarding the hooting populist crowds. Out of shotgun range, you must fly like a goose to the place that's calling you. But how does one even conceive of refinement *à la française* when raised in a culture of BBQ and basketball? Like a migratory goose, I was born with an internal guidance system to seek out that place of beauty, that *fleur de lys* of all flowers called *La France*.

A Texan would insist that the meat in the middle of a burger counts more than the buns. So that's where I'm taking you: straight to the beef, where my life's beginning comes to an end. Here, some fifteen years after my arrival in that paradise called *La Douce France*, I find myself in a private garden in Verzy near Epernay, savoring *La Grande Dame de Veuve Clicquot* and conversing with the sublime made flesh. Here in the middle, I have reached what feels like a pinnacle in my life. It all seems too good to be true. Knowing that the only constant in life is change itself implies that when everything is perfect, something must go wrong.

How wrong can things go? Could my worst fears lurk behind the perfection of that present moment? If so, a corollary should also apply: when all has gone wrong, something must go right. But that kind of wisdom you only forge when your cup is almost empty. At the time when my story begins, my *coupe* is overflowing, and effervescent too. After more than a decade of bathing in French beauty, *she*--the singular one--now appears to me. The time has come for me to testify.

Pomp and Preliminaries

Three months prior to her appearance, I was hired as the Head of Learning for Moët Hennessy, the wine & spirits division of the world's leading luxury conglomerate. That I, with my humble Texan origins, devoid of any form of luxury, should have been appointed to such a position in this most prestigious French firm was the ultimate reward for my hard-earned cultural integration.

My first task is to design an in-house executive education programme, starting with induction (or on-boarding as some call it). Before I am deemed legitimate in this function, I have to gain intimate knowledge of the company's luxury wines and spirits, the most famous of which are Dom Perignon, Krug, Veuve Clicquot, Ruinart, Moët et Chandon, Hennessy Cognac, and Château d'Yquem.

How is such knowledge to be acquired? I will have to tour every single one of these prestigious *maisons*, meeting with their presidents as well as their alchemists--the masters of each unique wine & spirit. I anticipate extensive tastings, and many sumptuous lunches for conversation. These are business as usual in a world of refinement beyond anything ever seen in the land of tee-shirt billionaires.

My initiation protocol has been devised by my boss, Etienne, the Head of Human Resources. One of the crowning moments will be a lunch meeting with Christine de Santenay¹, officially the Corporate Advisor on Luxury Branding. She has been suggested as one of the key speakers for the executive education programme I am supposed to develop. The stakes are high for me, and without her guidance and support my programme will lack legitimacy. Etienne will join me on the occasion. As I try to figure out who is responsible for what in this elaborate organisation, I am told that Madame de Santenay could be best regarded as a queen within a constitutional monarchy. In other words, her role is symbolic yet vital.

As I investigate who she is, a fascinating portrait emerges. For some, she is an icon, for others an iconoclast. There are those who call her a poetesse, and others a prophetess. As an acclaimed author, anything of importance written about one of the company's luxury brands must meet her discerning criteria; the language that describes luxury must be as exquisite as its object. It seems that nobody can finely-chisel language the way she does. Should the greatest luxury empire in the history of the world ever crumble, I can imagine she would be remembered even longer than its architect. She seems to embody the perfection to which luxury brands can only aspire.

During my preparation for the meeting, I have come across an excerpt from a speech she gave, its context now forgotten.

*Enter royally into the new day!
Open yourself to the joy of simply being born.
The time has come to straighten slouched shoulders*

¹ I have changed her name for reasons I will explain towards the end.

*and rise before life's greatest struggle.
Your palms perspire, but now they must take up the task.
Rise up to the challenge of a new day unfolding!
The time is gone when timidly you ask.
Rediscover the royalty within yourself!
Hail each morning with thunderous applause.
Leave behind your past pain that bites like a morning frost.
Dissolve those ancient wounds that damper this dawn.
Enter royally into the new day!*

This was not the insight into the luxury industry I had hoped for. I know the world of literature and I know the world of marketing. Never do these worlds truly intersect, because communication in marketing always serves the grand purpose of selling something, no matter how subtle and seductive the message may be. As I am soon to discover, Madame de Santenay speaks with the authority of the Torah. No amount of money is sufficient to buy whatever it is she is talking about. If the heavens and the earth were for sale, she would be the best qualified estate agent.

Human societies have always been hierarchies to some extent, with the most noble rarely at the top. But there is also a subtle sovereignty, unnoticed by most, whereby the most sublime of all beings on earth shine, but do not reign, above all the rest. Christine de Santenay is one of those beings. *Who am I, to be meeting her?* I try not to trouble myself with the question.

The estates of Moët Hennessy in the Champagne region alone are a treasure of national heritage, many of which I will visit in due time. For our lunch, Madame de Santenay has chosen her favorite among the many prestigious properties owned by Veuve-Clicquot Ponsardin: *Le Manoir de Verzy*, set upon the heights of the *Montagne de Reims*. Home to the domain's vine-keepers a hundred years ago, it now hosts prestigious (or very fortunate) guests for the tasting of its finest vintages. As far as I am concerned, the only event of any significance is to take place there one September afternoon in her presence.

Dressed for disaster

Was it Proust or Woody Allen who once stated that 80% of success is just showing up? Showing up on time boosts your chances further. What is less well understood is what it really means to show up. When you are somewhere with someone, how much of the real you is really there? Is 80% enough? Are you certain that your essential self has not been usurped by an imposter, whose role you have tacitly agreed to play and that you play so well that you have forgotten it's only a role?

My road to Reims begins with a Lanvin silk necktie and a greasy bike. I leave my home in Paris at 6:30 in the morning, having organized a meeting with some of the HR staff at Moët & Chandon in Epernay at 9:00. Everything seems under control. I ride Vélib (public bikes) in order to avert any risk of traffic jams or public transportation incidents. I live on rue de Clichy, only 15 min from the Gare de L'Est, with a direct line to Epernay. Trains are almost always on time. What can go wrong?

Halfway to the train station, I jump a curb to get around a *camion poubelle*² (if you are in a hurry, you can always count one of these to block the road). Then happens what has never happened in the course of over a hundred previous trips: the bike chain derails. My train is now leaving in 15 min. I can either find a docking station and run 10 minutes to the train station, or I can fix the bike in five minutes and ride the remaining five minutes to the station. I decide to fix the bike, which turns out to be a delicate operation. Public bikes are dirty, and I am wearing my light-gray, perfectly fitted De Fursac wool suite, with a white shirt and an indigo silk tie. It's my finest attire, the same that I wore for my initial job interview. My wife says I look like a fashion model. I was feeling glib prior to the present crisis.

I flip the bike upside down on the sidewalk and sense the annoyance of an incessant stream of pedestrians. Then I begin the surgical maneuver of lifting the black greasy chain back onto the pins. The chain is jammed. I have no choice but to grab it firmly with my entire hand while rotating the filthy pedal with my other hand. My tie is now dangling dangerously close to the greasy moving parts. Four of the five minutes are now lost in this metallic mess. I am starting to sweat in the cool morning air. The heat of my neck exudes whiffs of *Chamade*, my vintage Guerlain fragrance, *pour homme*. Nobody cares.

A dreaded *Mr. Bean feeling* is coming over me, entirely inappropriate for who I am meant to be in this moment. I curse myself for being the only person in this luxury corporation who rides a public bike to work in a fine wool suit. But that's just who I am. I'm half Danish, damn it! Something about me will never fully jive with the luxury establishment.

I get the chain back on the rail, flip the bike back onto its wheels, loop the band of my attaché around my shoulder, and pedal furiously to the station. I miss my train by 2 minutes. Next one in 30 min. I whip off an apologetic text message to my 9:00 rendez-vous. In my silent

² I am so fed up with having to choose between garbage trucks and bin lorries that I avoid the matter altogether.

cursing, I offer up a few hints of private gratitude that this is happening to me in France. Here, at least, my late arrival will not mark the end of my career.

There will be other ways to end a career.

Le Manoir de Verzy

Whatever transpired in the two hours of office meetings that followed my late arrival is entirely lost to me and to the collective memory of mankind. I was able to scrub my hands clean of the bike grease, and that is truly all that mattered.

It is now 11:30 and Etienne shows up with a chauffeur in a black Peugeot 508 to shuttle us from Epernay to Verzy, a half-hour drive. As we exit the last generously-flowered round-about in Epernay, Etienne thinks aloud to himself:

“I hope this will be a propitious meeting for you, Carsten”.

”Is there any reason to worry?”

“Madame de Santenay is a controversial figure in our organization. She has a great number of devoted followers, but also some detractors, although I think the latter are bothered not by who she is, but only by her role in the company. With respect to her person, she is almost universally admired.”

“Well, I suppose that as a published author and sought-after speaker, she may say things that others would prefer left unsaid.”

“Yes, sometimes she can be provocative. Some say she is an aristocrat born in the wrong century. They are suspicious of the way everything about her is so perfect. They squirm when confronted with her supernova-like passion for life. Everything becomes extraordinary when she speaks of it. Every straight line is crafted into an arabesque and rectangles all become rococo!”

“If LVMH were in the business of producing personas, it sounds like she would be its most prestigious product.”

“True” Etienne chuckles, “she’s our mascot of majesty. You know, her role in our company is an exception to every rule. For her, it’s almost more of a pastime. She mostly gives conferences. Certainly all she does is done with *grandezza*, but she has no job description and no clearly defined position in the power structure. Even so, she is perhaps the only one with power--be it informal-- over the CEO. I think he listens to her very carefully. There is no one else I know, or have ever known, who is employed just for being who they are.”

There is no sarcasm in Etienne’s remark. He seems quite innocently baffled by his own observation, and I too contemplate for a moment what it might be like not to have to earn one’s living, nor to be defined by what one does for a living. How is it that plants and other animals are simply content with being alive, when humans have created for themselves a world in which existence is never enough? Within that world, those who auto-proclaim themselves as the most advanced, are certain to have conquered their freedom for self-determination by *doing something*. Etienne interjects:

“Everyone should have a clear job description if we want to run a well-oiled, profit-maximizing machine, isn’t that right, Carsten?”

His emphasis on the dreadful adjectives makes the question sound rhetorical. Inspecting any remaining grease in my fingernails, I reply:

“I don’t know about the well-oiled machine bit, but the Wine & Spirits Division is churning large profits last I heard, in spite of a missing job description and a controversial author in residence.”

“Indeed, this year is better than the previous one, and never as good as the next. We must certainly have the most predictable, ever-increasing share value in the history of capitalism”, he added, before returning to the subject of Madame de Santenay.

“Those who prefer top models as mascots suggest she should step down before she turns 70.”

“That sure sounds petty! Isn’t the CEO the same age without anyone suggesting he step down?”

“Actually, I think she has a few years on him. She was born amongst falling bombs. Well, you can search out a photo of her thirty years ago and you will at least understand how some may still be hung up on the image of her former self, prior to the transformation.”

“The transformation?” I inquire. “You make it sound like a known historical event, or some massive cosmetic surgery.”

“Well there is a distinct Christine *before* and *after*. Before, she was glamorous, sophisticated, cultivated, ravishing, seductive... the iconic French woman.”

“Before what?” I insist.

“From what I gather from her writings and my conversations with her, it was no particular event, and yet it was something like her *road to Damascus*”.

“Perhaps like my own road to Reims?” I suggest.

“We’ll see about that” he chuckles. “Regardless, what emerged from her own transformation is difficult to describe. It is as if she shed her entire facade of glamour and became someone immensely more admirable. Exquisite, really. Well, as you can tell, I’m quite the admirer. And I think I know her better than most in this company. It’s fair enough to suggest that she agreed to this lunch because of my persuasion. Beyond your expected collaboration with her on the induction programme, Carsten, I want you to know that you will rarely, if ever, have another chance in life to meet a person of such indisputable nobility. Keep that in mind as you sip the world’s finest champagnes with her.”

“Thank you, Etienne. I appreciate the heads-up even if it has made me a bit apprehensive.”

With that, I turn my gaze to the window and notice we are deep in a forest, enchanted with strangely shaped trees right out of a Dr. Zeus book. The tree trunks whirl like arabesques, scattering patches of light beneath their branches.

“I’ve never seen anything like these trees. What are they?”

“Ah, they are called *les faux de Verzy*, a thousand dwarf beech trees that grow nowhere else in the world. Only on this road to Reims. Nobody knows why.”

I am dumbfounded to have known nothing of such a wonder. But as I will discover, all of these things, and far more, are known to her. I have yet to approach the abyss of my ignorance in a forest that is never lost...though many are lost in it.

Noon. On time! We round the fountain and stop in front of the manoir's classical double staircase. I briefly admire the interplay between the twenty white wooden shutters and the masonry adorned with vines in the flame of early autumn. Etienne, who has already been here and done that, remarks with nonchalance:

“C'est beau, n'est-ce pas?”

Etienne resembles Yves Saint-Laurent in a javelin thrower's body. He's an inch taller than me and his shoulders are three inches wider. I'm glad he's my boss, and not my rival. I wonder if his life is as perfect as he looks. This, I will never have a chance to learn.

From inside the manoir, I zoom in on the large classic French doors that beckon us toward the garden. It is the late September of summer's final act. Warmth and coolness together play while sunshine and shadows each have their say. The butler opens the double doors and we plunge into the scene of a painting. Could it be Fragonard? In the distance, on the other side of a low stone wall, a sea of undulating chardonnay vineyards fills the canvas between the flanks of wooded hills, partitioned by a narrow road winding its way to a village. Leading from the manoir to the stone wall is a path through ailes of trimmed boxwood à la française. A rose garden surrounds the boxwood hedges and offsets the remains of the 6th-century Saint Basle abbey. Closer to us as we view the landscape from atop the staircase, a majestic, five-score-old Atlas cedar with its bluish needles rises like a centerpiece over the sun-speckled lawn of lush green. Near to it, a round table has been elaborately prepared with a white tablecloth.

I feel euphoric yet petrified by the perfection of the scene before us. I don't want to budge, but Etienne beckons me forward. We step down to take our place at the table and wait for Madame de Santenay to arrive. There is time to glance through the menu, entirely concocted to highlight the virtuosic Veuve Clicquot vintage champagnes. It's a simple lunch menu.

*Tarte Fine de Langoustines à la Burrata
Veuve Clicquot Brut Carte Jaune*

*Suprême de chapon de Bresse cuit au Foin
Jus de cerises
Veuve Clicquot La Grande Dame Vintage 1999*

*Coulis de fruits cosmiques
Sorbet au champagne
Veuve Clicquot Demi-Sec carrafé*

Etienne takes advantage of our wait to wield his wit:

“Have you ever had such a chance to meet two grandes dames at the same time?”

I am puzzled by his riddle, but he points to the menu where I read *La Grande Dame Vintage 1999*.

“Indeed,” I humor him, “this will be my first time! Do you think Christine’s choice of this place for lunch has anything to do with that?”

“It certainly does. Even though Veuve-Clicquot offers top-notch champagnes, it is not recognized as our finest. We consider Dom Perignon and Krug to be superior. But Madame de Santenay has a special liking for Veuve-Clicquot because of that extraordinary widow--we call her *la Grande Dame*-- who made it such a success two hundred years ago.”

“I see the Veuve-Clicquot champagne as something of a goddess in a pantheon of gods. The branding clearly suggests that if any champagne could be described as feminine, this is the one.”

“Yes, I’ll have the house offer you a book on the subject. Her success seems so easy and obvious today, but she started off during the Napoleonic wars, and suffered setback after setback. But she brilliantly anticipated the opening up of the Russian market and took considerable risks in getting the champagne imported there. Her champagne then became so much in demand that she couldn’t even fill the orders. Extraordinary story, really!”

A breeze stirs the branches of the great cedar. I am swept up like a spirit to mingle with the happy ghosts of Proust, Renoir, and Ravel. I wish they could be here at this moment, to lend their art to my inspiration. I would like to remain in this elevated state for a long while.

Soon I will be tasting *La Grande Dame*, but the essence of that anticipated delight is not in the bubbles, nor in the chardonnay; it is in my own effervescence. I notice that the double-doors of the Manoir have now opened, and I return from my wandering, expectant.

The Encounter

It is easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle than for an exceptionally beautiful woman to enter into the kingdom of heaven.³ She is born into a trap of sorts, ever subject to the envy of women and the desire of men. She is hardly able to conceive of her own existence without this permanent shower of admiration. She is watered by it every day and never knows drought. She settles for half-truths and the art of pleasing. She becomes like a docile coat hanger on which men hang their dreams. Tragically, even if she develops the most admirable of human qualities, others are too blinded by her exterior beauty to take note. Whatever luscious garden she may cultivate within herself remains out of sight to others. She merits compassion more than envy, awaiting old age, like a dear friend, to come and set her free.

One woman--maybe more--might emerge in each generation to pass through the eye of the needle, carrying within her some extraordinary gift that outshines her external beauty. As she cultivates her gift, not her appearances, the combination of the two can only magnetize and mesmerize those around her. Her glory is revealed to the world in the late age of her life, after all the great works of her body have been accomplished and she has cracked open her shell of vanity.

While ordinary women are obsessively patching themselves up to remain desirable and stay young against all odds, she is completing her work of ageless art. Every wrinkle bears a message and the wear on her skin tells a story. There is a hint of immortality in her incandescence; she has given birth to herself as a goddess. All women will be elevated by her example, and through her men will draw closer to the divine. Many are those who preach the thunderous return of the Son of God, but the world secretly awaits Her subtle workings.

That is what I would later understand. In the present moment, Christine de Santenay is descending the stairs from the terrace towards our table. Etienne and I are now standing as she approaches with measured, liquid grace. She seems to inhabit her body with joy and gratitude, as if to say *quelle merveille que je suis !* There is nothing of the conceit of a woman who knows that others find her attractive, nor even a hint of narcissism.

Were it not for the way you move, even your most minute gestures, how could I reveal the luminous secret of your soul? Your chords are strung tight and everything in you moves upright. Your body is the instrument through which the music of creation flows.

The slight sway of her slender but fully-mature form is accentuated by a fitted black dress, over which is draped a Hermes silk shawl of orange, amber and purple hues. Her three-quarter-length sleeves bloom into semi-transparent and finely-laced ruffles. *Hermes, messenger of grace, borne upon wings of lace.*

I have always been mesmerized by the bottomless pit of beauty a woman can carry within her. There is no crown of jewels I would prefer to hold and no greater coronation than to lose myself in the love she awakens. Ah, to serve such beauty like Christian Dior, but that is a gift I

³ Variations on Matthew 19:23 "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

lack. As for the mess of hormones and emotions that characterized my early years, I have sought to avert an otherwise certain doom by learning to decipher and disable them.

Christine's appearance awakens not only aesthetic agitation but also an entirely new sensation, more powerful and persistent, that I cannot name. It is like a string quartet that vibrates within me when previously I had only heard a single string at a time. I find myself contemplating the face of a mother, a lover, and a sovereign all at once. Tenderness, passion, elegance, and authority together emanate from her presence. *Who is this woman?*

She first greets Etienne with a kiss on each cheek. I observe the perfection of this protocol, of no use to me since the kiss is reserved for those familiarly acquainted. She then turns to me, seeming enthralled as if I were the most marvelous event in her life that day. Etienne introduces me as the new head of executive learning. She humors him by listening, but all the while looks at me intently as if I were already familiar to her. She offers her hand. I want to kiss it. I want to bow my head to her. *This is a business lunch, not some gala event*, I remind myself. I take her hand, but not for a "shake". She envelopes it with her other hand, comes nearer to me with disarming delight, and rhymes aloud:

*"Comme je suis enchantée de vous rencontrer aujourd'hui à Verzy, ce petit bout de paradis!"*⁴ How I am delighted to meet you here in this little paradise we call Verzy!"

Her declaration is so lively that I imagine her addressing an audience of mesmerized children at a puppet show. It is the child in her, still vibrantly alive with wonder, that speaks this way. It is my adult ego, troubled by gusts of attraction and self-engrossed in the fear of not being good enough, that replies this way:

"Je suis tout aussi ravi, de plus est de savoir que vous détenez les clés du paradis ! I too am delighted, especially to know that the keys to paradise are in your hands!"

She turns to me and to Etienne, bouncing back my oddball remark with backspin like some ballerina tennis champion:

"The gates of paradise have always been wide open, *chers Messieurs*, but you will never notice because you are looking for keys. You have walked by a thousand times without seeing anything. You have trampled upon jewels without looking, ignored the sap oozing from every present moment."

With this, as with so many things she would say, I wonder at first if she is not spontaneously quoting some famous author I should know. I later learn that she is simply speaking in her most natural manner. It is from this superbly eloquent speech that her writing flows. In the meantime, she has both me and Etienne scrambling for words. Laurent (the chef) appears just in time, impeccably dressed in his chef attire. Chef Laurent and Mme de Santenay

⁴ The entirety of all my conversations with Christine were in French, and I have occasionally left a sentence in French to remind the reader of this important fact. It is important because the language we speak molds how we express ourselves. Translation is always an approximation. The more sophisticated and subtle the expression, the more this is true.

have obviously known each other for a long time. They hold each other's arms, kiss cheeks, and express heartfelt jubilation at seeing each other again.

Laurent has the honor of seating her, then tells us the story of today's menu while the manoir staff serve the first bottle of Veuve Clicquot. Champagne service has its own protocol. A victory champagne calls for a swift and decisive saber slice that releases a frothy explosion to the cheers of an exalted crowd. An intimate Champagne requires measured release of the cork so that it pops like a chime. Then, with both bottle and glass held at their bases, the two are tilted together while the agitated elixir is subdued into a gentle flow.

I watch as Christine is served. The iconic Veuve Clicquot bottle label bears the same intense orange as the accents of her silk shawl. I can't help but think that everything has been orchestrated. Once all is in place, Etienne raises his glass like a conductor's baton to offer a toast.

"A notre américain à Paris à nous, qu'il rayonne avec toutes les chances de son côté. To our very own American in Paris. May he shine and merit the best of luck."

It is a strange-sounding French toast, but I thank Etienne for his wishes, and reaffirm how much I am looking forward to my job. We touch glasses together and exchange a brief eye-to-eye acknowledgement...or so it might appear if you find yourself looking on. Every exchange of regards with Christine, no matter how brief, is a brush-stroke on the canvas of your living memory, a writing on your wall.

Her eyes are not exotic gems, but mysterious cavities that draw me in. Enveloped by a soft shade of lilac mascara and finely-traced eye-liner, they are like embers that reach out from their depths to embrace me warmly like a Brahmsian melody. They are also like bottomless pits, portals to eternity covered by the mask of her face.

The tasting of a fine champagne is yet another ritual. We hold the half-filled glasses like jewels before our eyes and marvel at the quality of light captured in the scintillating Chardonnay; we bring them close to our nose like the bud of a rose. At last, our lips with liquid join, and the magic enters into our being. The champagne releases its palette in the chamber of our mouths, tickling the tongue. Each of us, tasting the same champagne, savor our unique, ineffable experience the way lovers do, whereas those not attuned to the subtleties might hardly experience anything at all, other than "yummm...tastes good! 100€ a bottle, really?"

Despite this individual subjectivity, a fine champagne can evoke a truly shared experience. The finer the champagne, the finer the expression required. I refrain from simply speaking out my pure glee. Etienne, who has already tasted who knows how many fine champagnes, seems to be debating whether or not to say what has already been said, for Christine will detect any inauthentic word or deed. So we leave it to her.

"Vous savez, she begins, "our champagnes are consistently perfect; it is our wonder that must be expressed anew, as before every new dawn. Once we become apt at contemplation, that state of rapture before any expression of beauty that our senses can perceive--even a glass of water becomes like wine through a miracle of our own making."

I wonder if I should venture an allusion to Jesus' miracle of turning water to wine, but finally decide to refrain. Etienne volunteers an alternative observation:

“Well, isn't this *tarte fine de langoustines* delicious?”

“Oh yes, it is an entirely novel delight!” Christine agrees enthusiastically. “Knowing our Chef Laurent, it's his creation of the day and no other day will ever produce anything quite the same. Tell me, both of you, do you prefer the certainty of perfection or the uncertainty of freshness?”

I can't help but calculate what consequences my answer might have on my career. That alone means I'm on the wrong track. There is a benevolent trick here: she knows that I know her preferred answer. She does not want that as an answer. She wants to know who I am, not the role to which I was assigned in last season's theatre performance. She wants to know how I have survived the desperation of being separated from oneness at birth, and with what vital substance I am filling the gaps between childhood, old-age, and death. She wants to know what I have captured from the immensity that whispers around me. She wants to know if the experience of love has transformed me. I realize that I am not prepared. I feel poor and naked even though I sense her benevolence. Etienne is not about to get into the thick of it, and jokes:

“I prefer fresh perfection, and perfect freshness.”

I follow suit: “When confronted with both, as I am in this moment, how can I possibly choose?”

I sigh with relief to see her smile. There must have been something fitting about my reply.

Before Christine has a chance to express herself, Etienne changes the subject, eager to get down to business. I don't know what other blunders he has made in his executive career, but cutting short this conversation has to be added to the list. I am eager to know what I could have learned from her about freshness and perfection.

Etienne thanks Christine for her invitation, and explains that I have been hired to create a unified training effort for all of the entities within the Moët-Hennessy matrix organisation that includes the previously independent brands and the regional sales & distribution companies. This is a means both to forge a corporate culture and to optimize costs.

I add with a hint of humor that he could find nobody better to hire than an American to build a European union. Etienne retorts:

“Well, there is nothing the French hate more than being deprived of their recipes for doing things the way they like to do them. All the same, they admire American efficiency. I think you have a chance of getting all these barons to work together to the extent that you can understand and represent both worlds.”

Christine is amused: “Well now, you'll have an immoderate amount of tasting to do before this project gets off the ground, won't you? It's a good thing our lunch includes at least these three!”

“Three down, 30 to go!” exclaims Etienne, hastily finishing off his *langoustines*. Three seconds later, his iPhone vibrates in his pocket and we watch him discreetly remove it to verify

the caller. He doesn't lose a second to beg our pardon, rise from the table, and take the call, moving briskly toward the manoir.

I feel a moment of precarious isolation. My mind races to find something appropriate to fill in the gap. Christine is ahead of me, of course. She smiles and reminds me:

"Somewhere in this grand organisation, a critical decision is being made at this very moment, and Etienne most likely holds the key."

I nod and reply:

"Elsewhere in this grand organisation, a remarkable bottle of Veuve-Clicquot rosé has been opened, and the glasses are in our hands."

Her eyes twinkle and she bubbles with laughter while raising the glass to her lips.

Etienne returns to the table looking flustered and anxious.

"I'm so sorry, he says, Jean-Yves needs me in a meeting this afternoon. We have this quarterly earnings report deadline, you know. It wasn't planned that way. The collapse of Lehman Brothers is not helping things. I'm really so sorry about our lunch. We were off to such a pleasant start!"

We were off to such a pleasant start. How the full implications of that statement would come back to haunt me! For such a French lunch to be interrupted meant something terribly important was brewing. We rise from the table to see him off. Christine, with unperturbed grace, expresses her regrets at his premature departure.

"You must come back another time, cher Etienne".

I shake his hand and wish him well, adding that the next glass will be to his health and success. We silently observe the great male figure disappear into the manoir.

Inception

“Well, here we are now just the two of us, the young man with *la grande dame*. What a scene for the locals!” Christine laughs.

Etienne now gone, I borrow his wit:

“Two *grande dames*, in fact! So that makes three!”

I watch Christine revel in the witty remark while I try to calm my own nervousness. I fear I am up to the occasion, not worth her while. I try my best to put a lid on it in order to get the conversation back on track:

“They say that one of my first tasks is to develop an induction programme for executives. And from what I understand, all eyes are on you as a keynote speaker for this three-day programme. I hope to learn what you would like to get across to our newly hired executives. It will help me to set the framework.”

I am coming across a bit stiff and serious which amuses Christine tremendously.

“Are you prepared to deal with the consequences of my induction...or shall we call it an inception speech? Has no one warned you?”

Only she knows how silly and speechless this leaves me.

“You will go through all that effort to bring the crowd inside, and the first thing I will do is take them out again. Instead of inducting them into the conventional, atrophied reality of progress and profit, my desire is to lead them out into a vast open space where their minds can conceive of things that do not yet exist. In life as in *luxe*, whatever does not begin in blinding light has no future. The mercenaries, money-changers, brokers, squabblers, conformists, and dull-spirited in our midst will jump off a cliff rather than hear me out. They are like farm geese compared to wild geese, with no inkling of how they have allowed themselves to be hemmed in and hand-cuffed by our profit-driven technocracy. We have become so horribly enslaved, forfeiting our power to others! Only artists, dancers, fiddlers, high-wire acrobats, and torch-bearers will remain to hear me out. Those who know nothing of adoration have no place among us.”

“Hopefully you’ve been in contact with our recruitment department” I joke.

What else can I do but joke? I’ve been left to fend for myself in an unimagined wild. This word *adoration*, so unexpected in the context, has me baffled. It occurs to me that Christine may have been deliberately placed in her position like some high priestess. I recall that in the heart of Versailles, the palace of the profane, the sun king built a sanctuary for the sacred. Maybe the LVMH Group’s chairman has divined that a dash of sacred spices will up his recipe for success? Or maybe his splendor as an empire-builder has to be paired with some other qualities he does not possess, leaving her to sit like a secret in the center, while around her he dances his mighty deeds. Beyond perplexity and controversy, all who cross Christine’s path are elevated and ennobled.

“The recruiters will do their job as they have been told. My job is precisely to do what I have not been told. It is a rare privilege, an honor I must uphold. I am here to pass on a millennial

flame; to rage, rage, at the dying of its light; to praise, praise, and celebrate what is beyond sight.”

She might as well break out in song, I think, feeling strangely out of place. Every sentence she speaks, beginning with her stunning overture, has a mesmerizing musical quality. There are vocal accents, dynamics, ritardando, crescendo, *expressivo*. None of them sound like theatrical devices or affectations; they are spontaneous emanations from her being. The nuances that ripple across her face remind me of the way light refracted by water dances across the bottom of a shallow pool. Only when you are confronted for the first time with such radical, transparent integrity do you realize to what extent most of us pretend. I realize it about myself and am appropriately appalled. .

“Now that you’ve set the stage,” I hazard, “I will be intrigued to hear what you plan to say.”

“Well, I don’t intend to deliver content and won’t have a single slide to show. Zero logistics. ”

I recall Etienne’s observation that she was the only one he ever knew who was paid just for being herself. She continues:

“I feel that what lacks the most in the careers of our executives--if not in our lives--is intensity. I don’t mean thrill or anything that requires external stimulation. I certainly don’t mean working harder. What I do mean is a fervor of being that wells up spontaneously from inside us. What I do mean is tapping into a native nobility that is so much greater than our routine existence.”

“Several days ago as I was reading up in preparation for our meeting, I came across your rousing text *Enter royally into the new day!* I didn’t anticipate that it would have anything to do with our inception programme.”

“Ah, that text--*corona aurora*--was intended for you, this morning” she smiled, “but it does have everything to do with what I would like to get across to our executives. Not only must they discover the royalty within themselves, but also the superb of all we undertake in this company. What I see as significant in our luxury products is the intensity of aspiration that produced them. This is the caldron from which emerged all of our supreme wines and spirits, the source of such wealth and fame. They are not born of a business plan but of a burning quest for refinement and perfection. I believe this quest has more to do with what we as humans are becoming than what we in this company are selling.”

“Do you think this quality is something that can be taught? Or is it simply intrinsic?”

“The fervor is already burning within each of us to a greater or lesser extent. We can activate it in others through the attention we give them. We must learn to see the flame that burns in others, yes even those with whom we work. We must recognise a successful firm as a unique web of human bonds rather than a techno-economic machine.”

“I wonder what our executives will do with such a message. What will they actually change? I must admit that I have never encountered an organisation where such attention to

others exists as you describe it. Usually attention is simply given to people's failure to meet objectives."

"What you believe to be impossible will indeed remain impossible. If what you desire burns in you, and your vision is clear, you will in some way and at some time manifest that vision. Your outer world and inner world mutually reflect each other; they are engaged in an ongoing transaction as if one were a seller and the other, a buyer. You are the market-maker, and you can be the one through whom the miracle occurs."

I silently squirm in discomfort at this affirmation, the implications of which truly terrify me. *What if the world outside of me really is the exact reflection of what is inside of me?* She has led me to the brink of unreasonable belief where I have always feared to leap. I cannot yet face up to this, and reply:

"Thank you Christine, I really do find that inspiring. I was also thinking we should somehow weave in our three cardinal company values: creativity, excellence, and entrepreneurship. I'm sure you would also have a motivating and original way to engage everyone on these."

She is again amused, and I know I'm in trouble.

"You know, Jean-Baptiste and Chantale speak so competently about those things. I would like to leave it to them, and instead address a less holy trinity." She pauses to consider.

"How about *la débauche*? How about *l'ivresse*? How about *eros*? How do those sound, at least as a *mise en bouche*?" she asks with a hint of mischief.

There are many French words that have slightly different meanings than their English equivalents (like the word excited), but here, I cannot escape the fact that *la débauche* really does mean debauchery. I had not encountered that word since the days of my bible studies as a teenager raised in an American ultra-conservative cult. I cling to its French equivalent, hoping it contains some glimmer of virtue. But instead I suddenly remember all the things I had been told about legendary French immorality.

L'ivresse means drunkenness, but is more frequently used figuratively to evoke a state of lighthearted ecstasy, such as very few tend to experience on Monday mornings.

Eros is the explosive state, also called desire, that is the all-powerful magnet that draws man and woman together. I don't have any idea why this would be on her agenda and it makes me squirm. This surprising semantic trio could make for a fascinating discussion, but not one I am prepared to have with Christine de Santenay. I'm holding on to the ropes to steady myself and hoping redemption is near. To her somewhat rhetorical question about how this agenda sounds to me, I reply:

"I'll have to trust you on this one. I can only say that I do like that there are only three. Beyond three, begins infinity. May the three set us free!"

She winks at my wit, which gratifies me more than the champagne.

"The world of luxury into which you are being welcomed is an extravagant, much envied, version of the great illusion. Out of the many movies you could have gone for, this is the one you

chose to watch. Somehow you have managed to arrange a tête-à-tête with me. Where many have failed, you have succeeded. So perhaps it is my role to offer you a private induction of sorts?"

Her remark conjures up the image of a spermatozoid elect, the one in a million chosen by the sacred egg. I feel a pang of embarrassment as it suddenly occurs to me that I must be nobody to her. It is not something she is making me feel, but my own perception. She has absolutely nothing to gain from this lunch meeting with me. At best I must be something of a curiosity for her.

"I must say, Christine, that I am honored you are taking this time for me. It's just that I don't know where you are taking me."

"Where I am taking you? Conversations should be *filles du vent* (daughters of the wind). We do not need to know where they will take us. We only must be willing to let ourselves go. Maybe my phone will ring, and a great urgency will spare you?" she teases.

Her phone is silent. I'm not even certain she has come armed with one. She has built her home on a high place, well above the insect-like frenzy of modern man below. I am still so absorbed in my self-interest that I really cannot conceive how she could find the conversation with me enriching. If she does, it is not because I have anything extraordinary to say, but because she is able to read into the depth of people's eyes and fish out what they hardly know about themselves. To have someone recognize your value beyond any economic contribution is a transformative moment that all too few experience. Part of me wonders if this is what is happening to me now, and if I have the confidence to believe it.

But now the chapon is being served...cuit au foin (cooked under hay). There is an amusing French expression that never felt so poignant as in this moment: *Je me demande à quelle sauce je vais être mangé* (I wonder what kind of sauce I'm going to be eaten with). It is too late for me. The lioness has me paralyzed under her paws.

"Tell me then about the unholy trinity. I'm mystified."

Before she answers, an idea flashes through my mind. *Think not that I have come to demystify. I have not come to demystify, but to lead you deeper into the mystery, in all of its ripe fullness.* Maybe if Jesus had been a woman, that is what she would have said? Why am I thinking of Jesus, for Christ's sake?

"Luxury is a multi-faceted world, one facet of which is sumptuous excess. You have been hired to work for the world's premier luxury company. Has nobody yet told you what luxury is all about?"

"Well, I've always thought of it as an appreciation of the finer things in life, or a special value we attribute to objects and experiences that bring us aesthetic pleasure."

"Well, that sounds like *tarte à la crème* (creampie)! You surely realize that luxury has, in previous ages, been severely frowned upon, if not forbidden? Luxury leads to sumptuousness and debauchery. To be clear, it is sumptuous excess--although why not call it a superabundance?-- of sensual pleasure. That is a bad thing for the church, and a bad thing for the state. Is it a bad thing for you?"

“I suppose we could have managed with only one champagne at lunch.” I suggest, as the waiter opens the next bottle, *La Grande Dame Vintage Reserve 1999*. He half-fills her empty glass, followed by mine.

“We could have managed with no champagne at all,” she retorts “but woe to those who manage life like a mechanic changing a tire.”

The protocol of a new champagne opens a parenthesis in our discussion. Both of us become bee-like, hovering over our glass, then plunging into the nectar. Observing her out of the corner of my eye is a source of delight that distracts me from my own tasting. But what am I going to be able to say about this vintage champagne that will prove my recognition of its superior qualities? Will I be able to demonstrate that I am worthy of it? Fortunately Chef Laurent appears to make sure all is well. He jokes about Etienne’s disappearance:

“Il est parti chercher le chapon? “ (Did he run off to chase the game bird or what?) Well, I don’t expect he’ll be back any time soon, because to find a bird like this one he’ll have to venture far into the fields of la Bresse. Let me assure you, I’ve been there and seen those chapons running free beneath the cherry trees.”

La Bresse is to fowl what Champagne is to sparkling chardonnay: a stamp of origin that attests to its inimitable qualities. You can’t just raise the same fowl in Champagne, nor produce the same wine in La Bresse. In France, the mother of all culinary abundance, there is a specific origin, almost like a specialized organ, for the production of almost every delicacy.

“How shall we describe this vintage, Laurent?” Christine defers.

“Ah, well let’s start with its pale yet luminous golden robe. With a discerning nose you may detect hints of lime tree, cacao, and tobacco floating above its complex floral bouquet. The attack on the palate is remarkably fresh; its perfect acidity makes for a lovely, long finale.”

The same disarming enthusiasm that I felt when she greeted me flared up once again as she exclaims :

“Quelle merveille, mon cher Laurent!”

Despite my concentration, the hints of lime tree, cacao, and tobacco still escape me. Laurent returns to the kitchen and Christine returns to *la débauche*, surprising me with a question.

”What would you say we are really selling in this company?”

“Well, last I checked, it was something like 40 billion euros per year worth of wine & spirits, perfumes & cosmetics, fashion & leather goods, watches & jewelry.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that this spectacular economic success, surely one of the greatest stars of modern capitalism with an almost hyperbolic increase in share value, is founded entirely on the sale of goods that are non-productive and superfluous? It is an economy of production that feeds off non-production. Let us savor this paradox for a moment as we taste this sumptuous chapon that Chef Laurent has cooked over the hay of Elysian fields.”

As I consider the particular qualities of the hay, I’m also thinking that I really do need to offer something to this conversation, otherwise she will not have a moment to enjoy her meal.

“I wonder what exactly people are buying? Or trying to buy? I imagine much has to do with social status and self-image: being able to demonstrate your self-worth using exterior signs of wealth.”

“That quite possibly accounts for 95% of sales. Is that also why you are here, Carsten?”

It is treacherous to tout one’s own superior motives, so I apply myself to answer truthfully.

“I have never been asked point blank like that. I really feel, deep inside, that I am here because of a love for beauty and a desire to share it. I don’t entirely know how to explain that. It started with the violin when I was 11, then with the French language when I was 19. When I came to France, I felt like a young tree transplanted to the proper soil. Parts of me began to flourish that were previously stunted. I visited most of the wine regions in France and plunged into the ruby alchemy of their vintages. I expanded my palette ten-fold.”

“So you are a violinist?”

“Yes, that is what I am,” I confirm with startling confidence, well-aware that playing the violin has absolutely nothing to do with *what I do for a living*. I sense that it may be the only thing about me, apart from my mastery of French as an American, that might interest her in earnest. Or perhaps the one thing that might make her consider me apt to receive what she intends to pass on. She pauses for a long moment, searching me with an irresistible tenderness that I will only understand much later, then begins:

“All of creation aspires to the caress of the master’s bow to make its music heard. The rapture of being alive can be felt so poignantly in music! But also in seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching. If we shine white light into a prism, a rainbow of colors appear. In this same way, we touch physical matter with the light of our minds and from it springs the ineffable wonder of our world.”

la Débauche

“Let me now tell you now about *la débauche, mon cher violoniste.*”

I prepare myself for the long-haul of listening.

“The natural world is an exuberant and exorbitant show, a delirium of luxuriance bathing in a superabundance of energy. Consider the springtime with its boundless release of pollen and seeds. So very little will germinate. What waste, we might say! The unnatural world that we have brought into being, terrified as we are by the scarecrow of scarcity, is a sinister economy reduced to bank accounts, interest rates, share prices, life insurance, shriveled-up hearts, and other manifestations of cash-gorged poverty.”

There are times when Christine resembles a roaring lioness, and other times when she pulls back like a little bunny under a cabbage leaf dripping with dew. This is not one of her bunny moments. Indignant, she lurches forward.

“Our consumerist society has enacted a mass destruction of living diversity, decimating the number species day by day. Was such diversity in excess? Each day a thousand trees of knowledge are cut down. Cultures and traditions are eradicated as we pave our asphalt highway of progress. Each day we take one further step towards an optimized dystopia. On which side waves the bright flag of justice and freedom, do you think? Where does the sacred still shine its light?”

“I’ve never been one for flag waving,” I humbly interject.

“*La débauche* is my provocative introduction to luxury as the art of excess. There is always an excess, what George Bataille referred to as *La Part Maudite*. All attempts to contain or control it are vain and grotesque. It must bubble freely, adding to the number of stars in the cosmos.

“‘Exuberance is beauty’, wrote William Blake, I believe”.

“Yes, and in his same proverbs: *the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom*. Of course, *la débauche* is a sometimes deadly game the young ones play to experiment with their limits. This is but a shadow that reveals the light of the limitless, a secret wisdom beneath an appearance of folly. You see, Carsten (somehow she knows how to pronounce my name), there is a plane on which excess is superabundance. Does the sun shine in excess? Should there be a limit on love?”

I am engrossed in the melody of her voice and the dancing of her hands close to her heart, all leading up to this dazzling conclusion. I pause as we taste the champagne once again. I search for something to say.

“Here we are floating in a superabundance of Champagne, and I begin to understand how *la débauche* and *le luxe* go hand in hand, but I’m still not sure how this will serve our induction programme. Why do you think it is important for our executives to know this?”

“We must not take on leadership positions in the world’s premier luxury company with a tarnished idea of luxury, such as believing it to be the cause of poverty or of moral decay. Both of these ideas are deeply ingrained in our collective subconscious. That is why I purposely chose

the word *débauche*, to stir things up. We should also remember that our luxury products have a far more positive impact than the heaps of manufactured garbage that desecrate the earth as well as the spirit of those who produce them.”

“Yes, but...I’m also haunted by the dark side of the luxury business: this shocking co-existence of abject poverty and the unbridled consumption of superfluous products.”

“The unbridled consumption of superfluous products is an apt description of our entire mercantile society, not the luxury business in particular. Nor is the persistence of poverty a consequence of the expansion of luxury. *De grâce*, let us leave behind this illusion that there is not enough to go around! No, the dark side lies elsewhere, under this enormous cloak thrown over our mass consciousness. We have hoodwinked ourselves into believing that we are destitute beings, constantly in need of something outside us that money can buy. That is where the shadow lies.”

I leap on the opportunity to demonstrate my understanding of what she has said:

“It is what we Americans once inscribed in our Declaration of Independence as the pursuit of happiness. It turned into a colossal trivial pursuit for which we soon need to declare *game over*.”

She tactfully ignores my reference to America as if I were talking about my own dirty laundry.

“Ours is a society that constantly distracts us from our essential being. It is as if we were living outside of ourselves. Life itself is so generously abundant! How can we miss it? The wealth inside is begging to be reflected on the outside so that we can reconnect with it. Luxury can be experienced as a material expression of our highest aspirations.”

“So we could say that within this economic order where we have defined ourselves as consumers, luxury necessarily manifests as a product? I do prefer a land flowing with Champagne to Coca-cola. The holy spirit bubbles out of one but not the other!”

“Well, there is a sacredness in all that exists because all has proceeded from our sacred free will. We must be able to look squarely at the untold misery in this world with compassion, yet at the same time remain in a state of wonder and jubilation.”

“Sometimes that seems like an insurmountable challenge,” I admit.

“It is an entirely paradoxical yet necessary balance to maintain. I may rage against consumerism, but it too, as all things, will inexorably be subject to alchemy. It is a horrendous reality that we have collectively created--the projection of a dream shared by power-wielding men--but we can choose to extract ourselves from their hideous dream. It will come to an end, soon enough, because we cannot maintain our totalitarian techno-economic system in violation of the basic principles of life. Our current financial crisis is surely only a tremor compared to what will come. Until then, women will continue their invisible handiwork that knits the world together.”

She pauses for a sip of champagne and appears to gather her thoughts.

“Now, there is an intriguing verse in the Talmud regarding this prophetic transformation of all that is enmity to us:

*And in the time to come,
The Holy One will make a banquet for the Righteous,
From the flesh of the Leviathan,
And its skin will give cover.”*

“That sounds worse than a Jew eating pork!” I joke, so as to divert attention from my struggle to grasp the meaning.

“Yes, it is a striking metaphor, isn’t it? So you see, what began as *la débauche* has now become abundance, feasting, and celebration. All of these are facets of luxury.”

L'Ivresse

I have a tentative and slippery grasp of what she is telling me, but I feel myself sinking into waters too deep. I am subjugated by her authority, yet profoundly uneasy about what it all means for my job. Yes, my job, my dream job. I must succeed! Is Christine an agent of my success or my failure? Is she subversive? I am as thoroughly lost as I am bewitched. What she is telling me seems entirely outside of the ballpark of my employer's expectations. My employer? Who am I working for, anyway? Who will decide whether my induction program is a success? I glance down at the *chapon* on my plate, pondering the Leviathan, and carve out a final bite.

Christine is contemplating the effervescence of her champagne. It feels like that right moment for a transition. I pretend to lead the interview:

"*Ivresse* is one of those words I've never been able to adequately translate into English. Both drunkenness and intoxication are correct, but we just don't use those words with the same metaphorical liberties as you do in French. I would say it's closer to lighthearted ecstasy."

She smiles at my satisfaction for being able to point out such subtleties.

"*Ivresse* is a state of sublime sensuality for which our bodies are the natural instruments once we become fully present in them. Of the many mysteries I have encountered on earth, I know none greater than this miracle of the body. So frail yet resilient. So subject to the laws of entropy and decay. And yet, nothing else exists that is so well-equipped to sense eternity and detect the presence of the gods as they come and go among us. We can relish in sensual delights--just look at us now!-- but once we allow life to transform us, the greatest of all delights are no longer outside of us. As we become aware of the subtle alchemy within us, a single drop of our own elixir will suffice to produce *l'ivresse!*"

I can't say I understand what she is trying to convey, caught up as I am in the spectacle. Listening to Christine speak is a front-row seat at the opera and the ballet combined. Her hands move in a spontaneously choreographed dance. Her facial expressions are a kaleidoscope of vivacity and nuance. And her voice fills an imaginary hall around us. I am becoming more aware and bothered by the dullness in my own expression, but I must keep up the conversation.

"What I do understand is that any addiction to luxury goods can never lead us to a state of *ivresse*, only to drunken stupor, temporary highs, and obsessive urges."

"Nothing external to ourselves can produce *ivresse*. Luxury just happens to be one of the more compelling illusions. Another beguiling imposter hiding in the bushes of luxury is prestige, that sense of superiority because you can afford what others cannot."

"So luxury goods are at best tokens along our path to *ivresse*?" I suggest.

"They are small marvels that lead us to the ultimate Wonder...*le fil de la Merveille*."

"Do you think there would be a better way to advertise so as not to encourage addictions or false aspirations?"

"It goes beyond advertising, but I would say we should communicate authentic elevated emotions for which our products are nothing more than superfluous accessories."

“Is it not disappointing to conclude that we don’t need champagne after all in order to know the state of *ivresse*?”

“Champagne should be its expression, not its cause. That is true for joy itself. If we wait for a cause of joy in our lives to come along, we will miss out on what is here before us. ”

“Can we say that if our executives share this understanding of *ivresse*, they will naturally be happier in their lives and in their job?”

“The company is concerned with their excellence, not their happiness; I’m not so much concerned about them being happy as being intensely alive. The notion of happiness has been served up with too many insipid sauces. As they become more intensely alive, everything around them will begin to bloom in a new light.”

“Maybe we could imagine a company defined not only by its luxury products, but also by the passion of its people? That sounds like the right kind of message,” I conclude, feeling relatively content with myself.

Dessert is being served, and with it the final bottle of champagne, *demi-sec*. The dish placed before me is cause for *ivresse* even before I can touch my tongue to it. Presented on a large, dark, round plate, it is artfully composed of *coulis de fruits*, berries, blossoms, and a single donut-shaped lacy wafer that rings around a small orb of *sorbet de champagne*. A powdered spice has been sprinkled like stardust over one-third of the plate. It is an edible masterpiece that mirrors the harmony of the spheres.

Chef Laurent makes his final appearance to introduce his desert, and Christine exclaims:

“Isn’t this the most exquisite presentation on a plate you have ever seen?”

“Well, I wanted to prepare something *out of this world* for you, and so I have called it *a coulis cosmique!*” Chef Laurent laughs.

“It commands contemplation like a zen garden!” I hasten to confirm.

“I’m honored you like it, and I trust you will find our final champagne a perfect match.”

“Please have a glass with us!” Christine beckons Laurent.

“Just a sip,” Laurent winks.

We all touch our glasses together and taste the nectar.

“It feels so silky on the tongue!” I volunteer without a second thought.

Laurent knows I am here to learn about the wines, and explains how the right proportion of meunier grapes, blended with the chardonnay and pinot noir, produces a fruity aroma that is unusually intense for a champagne.

“Do enjoy your dessert now, I must get back to the kitchen.” Laurent scurries off.

Eros

Before our spoons touch the sorbet, Christine delves into her final subject.

“Do you think our dessert has anything to do with eros?” She seems pleased to pretend innocence.

The champagne is producing a giddiness in me and it feels ill-advised to delve into matters of eros. I can’t fathom where she could be going with it.

“I can’t say I do...unless the powder is like a pollen path and it’s all about bees,” I shrug my shoulders.

“I might suggest there is palpable tension in the sinuous yin-yang pairing of two *coulis de fruit*; one light purple, the other deep yellow. The two are so important to each other, but a boundary is clearly defined between them. The waters must stop where land begins. Eros is like that frothy shoreline where the masculine and feminine continuously crash up against each other and intermingle. Each exists as such in relation to the other.”

She reads the dish as if it really did contain some hieroglyphic message. I skirt around my own inability to add anything intelligent to her description.

“More than any other topic, I must admit that eros is the least likely I had imagined for an induction program, but I expect you will be taking it in an unexpected direction. For sure, it’s not going to be some Valentine’s day pitch!”

“Valentine’s Day is a perfect example of kitsch. It is everything that eros is not, so bravo for the introduction! Eros is both vital and sacred. Contrary to both eros and *luxé*, kitsch is a banal and inauthentic substitution for the grandeur of our existence. That is why kitsch and consumerism mutually reinforce each other.”

“Right, because you can’t manufacture anything vital and sacred, but kitsch can be mass-produced,” I chip in.

“The Eros of which I speak is on the same plane as its soul-mate, Thanatos. It is a matter of life and death, so to speak, where we experience *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.”

“Place me as a seal upon thy heart, for love is strong like death, and the passion of love more powerful than the grave,” I proudly quote.

“Ahh” she sighs with delight “it’s not every day I hear someone refer to the Song of Solomon! But more to my point, both eros and death itself are stages in the necessary annihilation of our ego.”

“That’s not going to sell very well, is it?”

“Of course not! Consumers must be spared at all cost this understanding of eros, because the entire consumerist system is firmly grounded in the illusion that we are lacking something that can be purchased. Of course, nothing we can buy will ever replace the marrow of existence. Consumption and entertainment have become the most formidable diversions from our true selves. Many luxury brands have, from my perspective, become uber-kitsch. They suck the vital substance from eros in hope of selling more jewels and perfume.”

“I suppose you’re referring to sales slogans such as *how far would you go for love*, or *what would you do for love?*”

“Precisely. Who can honestly equate the choice of a perfume with the quality of commitment in love? Who honestly believes one’s ability to afford the finest jewel elevates one’s love? Against tenacious resistance, I advise luxury marketers not to count on the naivité of those consumers whose wealth is inversely proportional to their human depth.”

“How much longer do you think women will continue to link the quality of love to the price of the diamond?” I discreetly glance at her wedding band, but not discreetly enough because her eyes follow there with a smile.

“When we enter into love, we believe that love has been given to us by the person we love, and that this person is the holder of that love. We so easily fall into the love trap, expecting love from another. We thus become mendicants, and in doing so disgrace ourselves. Love is not in someone else’s hands. Neither is it on your finger, neither on mine. It is between one being and another. It is what the impalpable space between us has brought forth. The essential is what breathes *in between*.”

“I didn’t mean to sidetrack you.” I say this only because the between feels too unstable, leading me to add “I just want to be sure to understand why you choose to speak of eros at the induction program.”

“Of course, it is so entirely unexpected to encounter such a word in a professional context. The effect is almost amusing! What I wish to convey is vital and cannot be relegated to the realm of the intellect. Eros is not of the intellect. It is a visceral, sometimes even terrifying, breakthrough into the ultimate experience of Love.”

“Forgive me if I’m not clear what distinction you make between eros and love.”

“The entire kingdom of love is surely not contained within eros, but eros plays a role like none other. By drawing us magnetically one to another, it leads us through the dissolution of our ego--much like death-- toward something greater than us. The potency of passion is our chance to break through the walls of indifference behind which humanity has bunkered itself; it is our chance to experience fervor.”

“Yes, and we already mentioned how luxury creations require a work of passion,” I am content to remind her.

“And here is another link between love and luxury: the only proper measure for love is to love without measure, and the ultimate measure of luxury is to go beyond all measure. Both, you see, bring us to the threshold of the absolute. Both call us to the end of man’s desiring. Luxury, of course, is only an illusion, whereas Love is alpha and omega.”

“So as long as we are conscious of this, we can use luxury to enrich our lives?” I suggest.

“Yes, but not because luxury is superior to other forms of human experience. It happens to be the one you and I are enjoying together, here and now.”

“Well, many people certainly believe it to be a superior form of experience, otherwise our products wouldn’t sell for such high prices!” I chip in.

“We have our French expression *vivre d’amour et d’eau fraîche* (living on love and fresh water)? There are those who think it’s possible, others not. If you are truly in love, what can you possibly buy that will make you feel more complete? There is absolutely nothing missing. All consumption becomes superfluous.”

“That would seem like a dangerous proposition for our company, placing it at the pinnacle of the superfluous.”

“Do you think we must aggravate people’s sense of lack in order to sell our luxury products?” Christine suddenly exposes me, and I have to seek inspiration in my glass of champagne before I reply. I had become comfortable with her taking all the space, and I was just enjoying the ride. Now she has called me out. A coherent idea finally takes form in my mind.

“I’ve never considered it, really. But I suppose that if we can come to see all consumer products as superfluous, the only ones we will want are the very finest. Those, at least, can procure some additional satisfaction remotely complementary to what nature already provides us. Luxury will thus remain the art of the superbly superfluous, and whatever pleasure it brings will be joyful excess.”

She is smiling at me, and as I bask in her warmth she raises her champagne glass to offer a toast.

“To the superbly superfluous!” she laughs, “with a salute to Oscar Wilde who once said that his tastes were simple...limited only to the best.”

I am feeling elated as if I had just graduated with the highest honors. She observes my satisfaction and lets it soak in before changing tone.

“Let me relate a zen tale I like very much. A beggar shows up at a monastery. A monk informs the zen master of the beggar’s presence and asks what should be given to him. *Nothing*, the master replies, *for he already has all he needs.*”

For a brief and unsettling moment, I ponder myself the beggar and she the master. She has become very poised and calm as we observe each other. More accurately, she is silently reading me, and I am squirming inside myself trying to make sense of it all. I hesitate to express any reserve, but finally decide on this:

“Don’t you think, Christine, that most will see what you say about eros as a private affair, and fail to grasp its place in a professional context?”

“You can hide from it, you can dilute it, you can degrade it, but nothing will change the fact that love is the big story in our lives. We attempt to subdivide ourselves so that our private life does not affect the rest. Love, we think, threatens the integrity of this fictional kingdom over which we attempt to maintain total control. I recall an interview with one of our top executives during which he was asked a question concerning his wife that seemed to make him uncomfortable. Skirting around any reference to love, and without any visible emotion, he conceded that she was *an important factor in his life balance.*”

“I suppose that does sound a bit like a factor of production!” I chime in.

“Let us not become dulled by such disembodied language! Has eight hundred years of lyricism in the West led to nothing better than this?”

A response to this rhetorical question wells up in me but I hesitate to share it with her. I am thinking that eight hundred years of lyricism in the West has led precisely to her, a living pinnacle of Western civilization *au féminin*. But because there are times when we cannot speak our minds honestly, I tone down my praise:

“I prefer to think that eight hundred years of lyricism in the West has led to your eloquence rather than that man’s dullness.”

She does seem touched, pausing for a moment before replying sincerely:

“Thank you for such a clever and unexpected compliment.”

Now this is the glory of the most glorious woman, that she is hardly even aware of herself. The glory is flowing through her and she is but a conduit. As I would later learn, Christine saw herself as a caretaker of truths passed down, preserving them as she would her own children. Born in Vienna to a Hungarian Jewish father and a Catholic mother, raised in France and married into a pan-european high aristocracy, her exquisite intellect was fashioned in the crucible of paradoxical thought. She is fluent in the Talmud, the Veda, the Tao, the Bible, classical mythology, French, German, and Russian literature. Knowledge in itself is of no value, but she has transmuted all of it into her own living wisdom. Athena was the goddess of wisdom, but all renowned philosophers have been men. No longer so, for in these domains, Christine is a prodigée among masculine cohorts, a formidable rival to all who excel in logos. Yet, it is in matters of the heart that she is unrivaled. The grace of her expressive form is like nothing I have ever encountered. The French language would be worth learning if only to touch the diamond-studded velvet of her speech. My admiration is boundless, but I do not yet understand that all of this is but the lesser part of her, a golden wrapping of sorts. I have yet to approach her essence.

“While we’re on the topic of eight hundred years of lyricism in the West, perhaps you are wondering what happened at the end of the 12th century?”

“The troubadours!” I answer, contentedly.

“Right, and I suspect you didn’t learn about them in the course of your MBA, did you?”

“No, and I can think of nothing farther removed!”

Christine contemplates for a moment what remains of cosmic eros on her plate.

“Carsten, do not imagine that everything I am telling you will be featured in your induction programme, and in particular what I am about to share. Perhaps you have heard of Abélard and Héloïse ?”

“Not much, but I believe they rest in the Père Lachaise cemetery near where I live.”

“In some way, they are still more alive than some who still receive their pension. Their experience with eros became something of an archetype that would mark the annals of history. It was a great tragedy, of course. Now, Abélard was a great scholar in his time, and was asked by Héloïse’s father, the canon of Notre-Dame, to become her personal tutor. She was an

exceptionally gifted young woman. No doubt she learned much from him, but they also became secret lovers. When this was found out, Abélard was castrated for his offense, and Héloïse sent to a nunnery for life. In spite of their physical separation, they corresponded for years. Héloïse wrote to him *“even if I could be Queen to the Emperor and have all the power and riches in the world, I’d rather be your whore.”*

These words touch upon something deep in me. I have to bunker down against an onslaught of tears. For an instant I feel that Héloïse is sitting before me, that she and Christine are one and the same. Maybe she senses this is too much for me and returns to a more intellectual discourse:

“The Fathers of the Church tried to suppress eros as an evil during the European 12th-century, but Héloïse proclaimed the sanctity of her relationship with Abélard until her last breath as a nun. What she understood as a woman mystic is that the union of man and woman can be of the same nature as that of the soul with its Source.”

She pauses to read my mind while espresso is being served in delicate, white porcelain cups. The bottle of demi-sec is carried off half-full. There are limits we must respect.

“I know you are wondering what all this has to do with your induction program,” she offers.

“I am coming to understand that your intended induction address is about life, rather than business. And also that you are planting seeds in people’s minds. Hence, inception.”

She smiles at me softly as if she knows of things to come.

“I have not made things easy for you, Carsten. Eros has taken us into the realm of the sacred, and I do believe that our quest for the finest, the most subtle, and the most exquisite in all we create, reveals the divine in us. I know of nothing that can give greater meaning to the work we do in this company, and no greater purpose for this company’s very existence.”

L'Heure Bleu

The hour has come. I feel a breeze rising up and sense that all will soon drift away from me like a dream.

“It has been such a privilege to have this conversation with you, Christine. I wish all new hires could experience induction...or should I say inception... the way I have. How will you ever fit this into a 30-min speech?”

“Don’t imagine that my speech will follow the transcript of our conversation. You never know what life can serve you just as you’re on your way and think you have it all prepared!”

“I guess I now know that you prefer freshness to perfection.”

She sparkles like a child, as if the punch-line had been set aside just for this moment:

"Life in all of its messy exuberance sooner or later clears away everything that tries to hold claim to permanence. It wipes away beliefs, principles, systems, and categories of thought. All that we cling to, all that we try to maintain intact, all that we screw to the wall, will ultimately crumble and dissolve. In the long run, life is only interested in impromptu, constant renewal, and freshness. Yes, freshness *is* perfection. *De la source jaillissent les eaux les plus exquis.*”

Years later I will still hear her voice and mouth forming that final, resonant word: *exquise...exquise...exquise* It is like the ending chord of the orchestra. The sound is gone, but the conductor’s baton remains suspended in the air so as to absorb a long moment of silence into the music itself. Sometimes I imagine the silence never ends.

“I, too, have taken great pleasure in our conversation, Carsten,” she tells me as she folds her napkin on the table.

I take the cue and round the table to pull out her chair. There are still rare instances in our age of gender equality when that gesture of deference still holds sway. But where there are no longer any goddesses there can be no goddess rituals. When a man offers to pull out a chair for a woman, he also offers himself the spectacle of her rising: the subtle sequence of inimitable movements by which she passes spontaneously from one posture to another. It is a minute marvel, a delicious yet harmless indiscretion. I would so gladly have repeated it a thousand times for her.

She thanks me for the gesture, and we begin our walk together up the steps to the manoir. The sensation of moving by her side seizes my full attention. I am acutely aware of the way she carries herself. *Her chords are strung tight and all in her moves upright.* It is a grace that is both natural and deliberate. The male brain instinctively and subconsciously registers an attractive female as a sexual object; this is a fact of nature that women naturally resent. It is within man to sublimate this impulse, first by inhibiting his behaviour and ultimately by changing his thoughts. Christine induces a response more potent than anything physical. By her side, I feel swept up in elevated emotions that dilute desire into homeopathic doses. *Will not other women who elevate themselves also transform the men around them?* The integrity of her being is thus expressed even in her posture and her gait, with a power to entrain those around her.

We reach the top of the stairs after our walk in silence. She will remain in a private lounge for another afternoon meeting. I will have a driver take me to Reims to catch my train back to Paris. Standing before me now, she signals it is time to exchange a kiss on both cheeks. It is a short-lived intimacy, but just long enough to capture a hint of her perfume, altered by her own inalterable essence. Later, I would find myself sampling every single perfume at Guerlain on the Champs-Élysées, in search of the holy grail. It was impossible for me to re-constitute that scent, so I finally decided it must have been *L'Heure Bleu* because of what Guerlain wrote about this perfume he created in 1912:

Le soleil s'est couché, la nuit pourtant n'est pas tombée. C'est l'heure suspendue... L'heure où l'homme se retrouve enfin en harmonie avec le monde et la lumière.

The sun has set but night has yet to fall. Time is suspended, and for a moment we are at last in harmony with the world and its light.

Even if it were not her actual perfume, I believe she would have validated the choice. It so perfectly matched her celebration of the sacred silence of life's in-between moments: the blank between words, the suspension after an exhalation, the rest within a musical phrase. What she would not have accepted is my obsession over her perfume or any other aspect of her physical presence. It was probably the closest I have ever come to idolatry. Maybe it was idolatry, and that is why the end of it all must feel severe like punishment for a sin.

Our kiss complete, she looks into my eyes, smiling radiantly, and before turning away speaks these final words:

“Carsten, *souviens-toi de ta noblesse, et quoi qu'il advienne, garde bien le fil de la Merveille; il te délivrera du labyrinthe*. Remember your royalty, and whatever may come, hold onto the cord of Wonder; it will deliver you from any labyrinth.”

I suppose she could have said these very same things to others, but they felt entirely for me in the present moment. Christine had a gift of penetrating with her heart; she really did sense what lay behind a person's mask.

I want to reply: *you are royalty incarnate, and will always be my cord to Wonder*. Instead, I say:

“Thank you Christine, I will remember that”.

After eight hundred years of lyricism in the West, that is all I could muster.

The Road to Reims

On the road to Reims before returning to Paris, I feel that the chemistry of my body has been altered. I have been made to ring like a crystal glass. A new space of resonance has opened within me, filled with her voice. Behind closed eyes, I see only her corona.

Having overheard my conversation with Etienne on the way over, my driver, Christophe, makes a point to innocently inquire:

“So, you met Madame de Santenay for the first time today?”

“Yes, I did. Do you often drive her?”

“Many times. She loves Verzy. *C’est vraiment une très grande dame !* She is such a magnificent lady!”

“She certainly is,” I restrain my reply.

Now we are again crossing a forest of dwarf beech trees. The sunlight flickers on the grass and the world feels enchanted. I catch a glimpse of an imaginary Abélard and Héloïse walking together in a clearing. Was the forest not the same eight hundred years ago, even though many trees have come and gone? Was there an invisible lineage between Héloïse and Christine?

This question, however esoteric, would stick to me. A year would go by before I discovered Christine’s novel about Héloïse entitled “A Passion”, curiously written in the first person. It contains the substance of what she had briefly conveyed in our conversation about the sacredness of eros. I have since translated a passage from her book, referring to one of Héloïse’s final letters to her far-away, life-long lover.

“Abélard, after all these years, nothing of you has been lost. Your seed lives on. Night after night, and during an entire lifetime, the bright stars of your milky way have given off their light within me. Our entanglement has begotten a cosmos as vast as the one that surrounds us.

Obstinate and blind to all the rest, I have made my way across passion’s great expanse. Now I understand how close it is to holiness. Passion, too, strips us of all that is extraneous. All that is beautiful, awe-inspiring, and luminous in this world suddenly implodes into a single point. Its concentration of energy is explosive, and the fire that it sets off will burn to the ground the entire edifice of the ego. Not a single stone of that edifice will remain standing, and the soul that it contained will thus be liberated. It matters not to God which path we take on our way back to him. It matters not how we feed the flames that consume us. All that matters is the ardor of our longing.”

The great cathedral looms ahead as we drive into Reims. My mind feels like a vast, vaulted space, and I remind myself with great difficulty that I have a job to do. The men who built this cathedral must have believed in their sacred work. They understood their role in something greater than themselves. Eight-hundred years later, here I am designing executive education programmes deprived of any notion of the sacred. But on this day, Christine appeared in my life to re-enchant it.

Christophe wants to tell me a story about one time he drove Christine to the train station.

“There was road construction and we had to take a detour. We were driving through a bad part of town...”la cité” as we call it. Lots of social housing. Groups of young men you don’t want to mess with. We stop at a traffic light and can hear this loud rap music coming from a small group of teenagers who have staked their claim to an abandoned plot of land. Madame tells me to pull over and wait 10 minutes for her. She gets out and walks straight over to this gang. I have no idea what she is doing and get really nervous. I watch these kids as she gets right in the middle of them. Imagine the scene. She’s dressed like a duchesse, even wearing a hat that day. They are exchanging glances and funny smiles like they don’t know what to make of it all. A moment later, they are all standing up and having a conversation with her. One of them turns the sound down. They talk for a few minutes, then she turns and walks back to the car.”

“Did you ask her what she said to them?”

“I was too dumbstruck. I told her I was worried about her and was ready to call the police.”

“And what did she say?”

“She just said that nobody had ever acknowledged those kids. She said they needed to be acknowledged. Can you believe that?”

I rewinded several hours back to when I met her, and how in that instant I had felt like the most important event in her life that day. She acknowledged who I was beneath my mask. Yes, I believe I understand what happened when she suddenly broke into the circle of those young men on the fringe of society. I imagine that she asked them to tell her about their music, because it was something she had never heard before and wanted to understand. Her spontaneous sincerity, her irresistible smile, and her panache caught them all off guard. That was the only reason she could pull off such a stunt. There is something else I also imagine. Those kids were plotting a crime, to be carried out that very night. But that crime was never to happen after all, because the gang leader crossed Christine’s eyes that day on her road into Reims. Where others saw a toad, she saw a prince, and he would never again be the same for it.

Disgrace

A couple of weeks later, still reeling after my road to Reims, another trip awaits me on my grand tour of luxury wines & spirits. I am to meet with the Head of Human Resources for EMEA brand distribution (Europe, the Middle-East, and Africa), located in London. I'll hereafter refer to him as Khan, hailing from what I'll hereafter refer to as GinghamKhanistan. The purpose of my meeting is to fully understand and integrate any existing executive education initiatives carried out in his region. At least that is what I have been given to understand.

Khan is in a hurry when I arrive in his London office. Of that short meeting, nothing remains except an exceptionally disagreeable feeling that I have wasted his time. Khan knows something I didn't but is in no hurry to tell me. I conclude my short trip with a visit to the LVMH House in Mayfair--its shrine for top executive education--before returning to Paris.

Back in my office on Avenue de la Grande Armée in the shadow of the Arc de Triomphe, I spend a day reviewing notes and preparing my recommendations. It is an ordinary day at my nest of luxury, but I don't feel ordinary. Christine has made me feel as if I have one foot in this world, and one foot in some other. I am so caught up in the afterglow of her grandezza that all the luxury trimmings around me seem nothing more than a stage set. My top-floor office looks out onto an interior courtyard designed as a parisian reinterpretation of a zen garden. There are Japanese maples, dark-wood walkways with a few benches, and spaces for smooth white stones. I look out and observe members of our staff with coffee and cigarettes in hand.

I admire my dark-wood desk covered by a layer of impeccable glass. I observe the fine grey wool of my jacket sleeve resting upon the glass, and the white of my dress shirt against the dark wood. I notice the dark green box of Dom Perignon and an empty bottle of Hennessy X.O. on the bookshelves that match the desk. On the wall is one of the many iconic marketing photos that allure consumers into the world of Moët-Hennessy. This one features a woman shot from her backside, where she holds the bottle sheathed in its bright yellow/orange protective sleeve close against the small of her back. She is wearing a black dress with no back, revealing its soft and sinuous form against the hard, upright neck of the bottle. She holds the bottle with black evening gloves, extending to her elbows. There is a hint of her profile, with her head slightly turned to the side, her black hair pulled back into a chignon, and a blur of a man dressed in a suit and tie, approaching her.

As I prepare my morning espresso from that *nec plus ultra* of all office espresso machines, Julie the blond walks by, arriving later than usual, but just as usual in appearance. Julie works in corporate communications, and each day of her is like a new cover of ELLE magazine augmented by a perfume sample. Dread took hold of me the first time I saw her. I didn't know how I was going to deal with that daily overdose of glamour and sex-appeal.

But today is different. I catch a whiff of her perfume *J'Adore*, and wink to myself as I glimpse at her cosmetic perfection. I have been elevated. I can see beneath the mask, and will never look upon a woman in the same way ever again. Today, I learned she has been offered a new position at Dior. Everything is working out fine.

Later that day, I had lunch with a group of office colleagues at a chic thai restaurant. Bénédicte is there. She is one of my closest colleagues, the new Head of Compensation and Benefits. At Christmas time, she will deal out the champagne allowances. Every employee who has been good that year will receive a couple of complementary bottles. As we finish off our desert, a single scoop of green tea basil sorbet, she tells me about the sumptuous Christmas party being planned for all headquarters employees. Potel & Chabot will cater the event, and Krug (in limited quantities) will be the featured champagne.

It is an ordinary day in the office, but Etienne, my boss, is mysteriously absent. I don't see him until the following day, when he tells me to get a coffee and come directly to his office. I expect this has to do with my upcoming trip to meet the distribution companies of the Asia/Pacific region.

"Carsten, I think you should be the first to know this. I have been asked to leave my position as the Head of Human Resources, effective this month. I will in fact leave LVMH entirely."

I look blankly into the black of my coffee. This news is not part of the repertoire of my anticipated realities. My pause says more than my mechanical reply.

"This is really shocking news, Etienne. I thought we were off to such a good start and I was really looking forward to working with you. Have you been replaced?"

"Kahn will be taking over my job starting in two weeks."

That makes two blows to the head. Left. Right. For four very long seconds, I stare once again at my espresso in a stupor.

"Perhaps you are aware, Etienne, that I just met with Kahn two days ago...as if nothing were going on."

"I'm very sorry about that, Carsten. I probably should have warned you. This has all been rather sudden."

"Can you imagine the situation, Etienne? Here I was presenting plans and asking for feedback, as if he were a future colleague, when he knew damn well he would be my new boss in a week and in a position to dash all those plans!!"

"Again, I'm sorry Carsten. Our plans were indeed off to a good start."

I can't say I feel betrayed. Etienne no doubt has his own worries monopolizing his attention. But it all seems to me now like the perfect set-up, for which nobody will claim responsibility. It is laughable, really. I can imagine the whole thing featured on stage, and watch the audience gawk. *Yep, that's me, the sucker.* I shall say it with humor and gain a bit of sympathy at least.

I would see Etienne only three more times. Once you have lived in a world of luxury, it feels unbearable to be downgraded. The French coined a word for those the king had banished: *la disgrâce*, or the removal of the sovereign's grace. I would meet Etienne for lunch several months later. He has been spending time sailing in Brittany and doesn't have any clear destination. Beneath his impeccable mask, I wonder about the degree of his disorientation. He

seems to be fading away. Many years later, nobody will be able to tell me what has become of him. Happier are those who lived under a simple roof near running water than those who must face disgrace.

Jambon de parme

Khan is a captain from Gingham Khanistan and a top business school. He takes orders and executes them. He gives orders and expects execution. Military efficiency, dressed up in a charcoal, pin-striped Givenchy wool suite and a Rolex to keep excellent time. His secretary is always in a scurry. Among other tasks, she helps him select the most appropriate pair of diamond earrings for his wife's birthday.

Appearing affable, Kahn asks that we have a quick lunch in his office. He wants to review the corporate induction programme I am putting together. Would I mind *fetching* the sandwiches? He throws in an occasional British word, but his accent is skewed toward American business-talk and colored by his language of origin.

"No pork", he reminds me.

I am too taken aback by the "quick lunch" command to ponder the "no pork" imperative. What is not lost on me is the irony of a modest American who values conversation and creativity suddenly reporting to a non-European ambitious autocrat climbing the echelons of the French luxury empire.

As we sit munching the quick lunch around his meeting table, it suddenly occurs to me that "no pork" was not only intended as his personal menu preference. He asks me what kind of sandwich I'm eating...even though he already observes.

"Jambon de parme, roquette, tomates séchés".

He does not reply, but there is an irrepressible queasy expression that flickers across his face. From that moment on, I am beginning to feel as uneasy as he is queasy. There is doom brooding from within the guts.

"I've decided to suspend your China trip, by the way. We have some budgetary constraints to deal with. I suppose you noticed that one of the world's most prestigious banks just went bankrupt? Well now, let's have a look at this induction program".

I start off with what was for me the grand highlight of the show, a speech by Christine de Santenay. Before I can even get to the meat of the matter, Kahn interrupts:

"Are you sure Madame de Santenay is the right way to start off this programme? It really needs to be about inculcating our corporate culture. Madame de Santenay will make a fabulous honorary dinner guest, of course. She's better than the finest crystal, I've heard."

I sense that Kahn is not a great fan of people who are more about *being* than *doing*. His question is rhetorical, but I still bother to answer. I have created an incommensurable measure of trouble in my life by trying to answer questions that are intended as affirmations.

"For sure we will have plenty about corporate culture during the two days, but I really thought, as did Etienne, that her speech would be such a grandiose introduction to the world of luxury. You know, it's a bit like inspiring masons before they roll up their sleeves to build a cathedral. Men are born not to hew stone by the sweat of their brow but to erect cathedrals out of boundless imagination and awe."

Kahn is now looking at me as if he thinks I've peed in my pants, unaware.

"No" he makes clear that his question was not a question, "it will be more effective to start off with our group values. I think this should come from Jean-Baptiste (the Wine & Spirits Division CEO). Since he surely cannot be present at each programme, how about getting him on video?"

This is a conversation with no future.

Faith in the Feminine

I cannot even conceive of informing Christine of Kahn's order. I know it would be a trifle for her, but for me the entire course of the world seems to weigh upon it. The future will unfold along an entirely different path depending on whether or not she speaks. Meanwhile, she has been caring for the course of the world in her own manner.

Her corporate function is hardly more than an extracurricular occupation. Of far greater importance are her writing, her teaching, and her speaking at many conferences around Europe, without neglecting smaller gatherings at schools, hospitals, and prisons. Her voice cries out against injustice and the empire of image, but also sings her enthusiasm for great literature. Wherever she goes, she radiates her confidence in the new generation and reassures those in anguish.

That first week in the wake of Verzy, I ordered all of her books online. When the box showed up at my door, it didn't occur to me that my wife would find this special order completely out of character. There was nothing in our repertoire of existing experiences that could shed any light on it. Without taking time to read a single chapter, she dropped a comment like one of many seeds that would sooner or later yield their fruit.

"Your order of 12 books written by the same Christine has arrived. Well, she is a beautiful woman, isn't she?"

That was hard to escape, since Christine's publisher decided that most of the book covers would feature her face in black and white. I have often heard it said that every woman wants her man to think of her as the most interesting and attractive woman he has or will ever meet. My fascination for Christine is, in this respect, a form of betrayal. Innocent or guilty, it appears that I have crossed the line.

But it did not stop me from reading her. Not only do I read, but I want to hear her voice again. There is something about it that cannot be put into words. With a bit of research and luck, I learn that she is invited as a guest speaker at an interfaith council to be held in Paris in a week's time. The last thing my appetite calls for is religious soup, but I would have gone even had she been speaking about the night life of the praying mantis.

Now I am sitting in an auditorium at UNESCO looking at the strange and colorful spectacle of rabbis, bishops, reverends, imams, and sikhs all arranged in a semi-circle on stage, like musicians in an orchestra. They will all need to speak separately for their voice to be heard. As of yet, there is no single symphony to arise from their divisive doctrines. In this arena of oddly-dressed men, the vast majority representing monotheistic patriarchal religions, Christine shines like a golden centerpiece. Everything lacking in the entire holy lot is concentrated into her presence. They dance round in a ring and suppose, but the Secret sits in the middle and knows.⁵

⁵ Tribute to Robert Frost

If I had been asked to search out the divine among these high dignitaries, it is with her that I would start and with her that I would linger for a long while. I wonder what her place is among these ambassadors of the world's religious institutions. Why has she been invited? What religion does she represent? How can she speak for a luxury empire and a religion at the same time? I await her words impatiently and am relieved that she is first to follow the event's general introduction.

She approaches the podium as if it were an altar, her vision set on some limitless horizon, her steps synchronized with a music that only she hears. Whatever she will speak is already contained in the grace and dignity of her stance and her movement. There is in fact nothing she needs to say. This is what it looks like to have perfect alignment between the organs, the heart, and the head. This is the image of a woman who stands at the junction between the above and the below, the luminous union of heaven and earth. I cannot but wonder what all of those bearded and clean-shaven men are feeling. I wonder what it must be like for a celibate priest to witness this exquisite feminine presence about to seduce the audience into eternal life without a single doctrine. I wonder why the word *goddess* has been so misconstrued.

Instead of standing behind the podium, she places herself fully in front of the audience. There is not a leaf of space to separate who she is from what she will speak. All those who listen are in her arms already. On this occasion, she does not appear as a Dior fashion model, but in attire that seems to better represent women of all the world: a dazzling red and golden sari. She thanks the enthusiastic crowd and forms a *namaste mudra* with her hands, standing silently for several pregnant moments while her aura ripples across the audience.

She claims her voice amongst this auspicious male council on behalf of women of all cultures and religions: amazoniens, inuits, flamenco dancers, carmelites, mothers who walk their children to school and others who retrieve their dead bodies from battle, women in the spotlight and women in the shadows, women in love and women in hate.

"I do not represent any particular religion or spiritual tradition as other speakers will. Instead, I incarnate the most ancient of all of these. I represent the memory carried within women, the knowing that dwells in their wombs, the fervor of their daily routines. It is these women who hold the world together. Ecumenical councils of the past sought to determine whether or not women have a soul. I say they do not. Women do not have a soul; they *are* the soul of this world. They are *our* soul."

I glance at the circle of male representatives and wonder what they make of this heretical nonsense. Holding her stance, she refers to the etymology of the word religion in French--*relier*, to bond together what appears separate-- that women are the very fabric of all religions because it is in their nature to create and nurture human bonds, from birth to death. Here she cites the Indian mystic and saint, Mâ Ananda Moyî, a woman flooded by joy, whom she met on several occasions:

"I take care of the suffering of all who come to me, because I have lost all sense of separation. In me, each of you has an equal measure of the height and depth of eternity."

Women, she continues, contain within them the impetus to foster human bonds on a greater level. Religions that now seek peace in this world can do so more easily with less emphasis on doctrine (a masculine expression of religion) and more on intuition and the heart (a feminine expression). Even though her mother was Christian, she is not focused on the blood and body of Christ, but the blood and body of life itself. Even though her father was Jewish, she is not focused on the holy land, but instead exalts the holy parcel that we must cultivate within ourselves. She has let herself be touched by all the world's spiritual traditions and wants only to bear witness to the glory that seeps out from all that lives. The primary theme of her 15-minute speech is the role of the feminine principle in restoring peaceful and fruitful dialogue between religions and peoples.

Her earrings are large and ornate, hanging midway to her shoulders. Near the end of her speech, one of them suddenly falls off, sliding down her sari and landing at her feet. Adding surprise to the unexpected, she does not stoop to pick it up. Rather, she very deliberately removes the other and lets it drop to her shoulder, then down the length of her dress beside her other foot. She observes its fall, seeming to contemplate what has just occurred. The audience is tickled by this improvisation, and I too am inexplicably touched. Only in private moments had I seen a woman remove her earrings. She then raises her head to address the audience with her usual radiant reassurance :

“Life is constantly teaching us to let things go. Crises, separations, illnesses...all are invitations to leave things behind us. Death will take from us all we have tried to possess. Over all else, it has no power. It is through this progressive shedding of things that a space of great freedom opens up, exactly where we would never have expected it.”

While the entire audience, and notably the assembly of masculine dignitaries, is caught off guard, under the spell she has cast with earrings resting at her feet, she slyly slips in a declaration with the potential to devastate the entire circus of institutional religion:

“Now that I have shed this of myself, I am ready to address the essential. Remember your vow, the vow you made when you took up a life on this earth? You vowed to take care of whatever you so choose...a few trees whose soil you water or animals who eat from your hand, a few dear human beings, a school, a hospital, a ministry, a nation. It matters not, for each is a kingdom unto himself or herself. It is your choice, but all under one condition. Yes, do you remember? Does it now come back to you? The one condition is that whatever you do must vibrate in love. Those who take care of the parcel of the world that has been entrusted to them are silently saving the whole of it.”

The patriarchy breathing down her neck nods enthusiastically at this statement, even though it would seem to invalidate each of their prerogatives when taken to its logical conclusion. *It is not your religion that matters, not at all. Turn your eyes away from doctrine; let yourselves be touched by the feminine and you will come near to the vibration of love.*

But they hear something else. They understand the vibration of love to be the end state of their own religion. Yet, Christine's message is equally valid for those within and without religion. It is a perfectly fitting ecumenical rally cry, finely chiseled for the occasion and delivered irresistibly.

I find myself pondering the idea of a new religion of such humility that it need not even be named, nor even its Godhead. I wonder why monotheistic religions begin with God the Father instead of a mother, where all human life begins. I find myself in a state of spontaneous adoration for the goddess. *There is a subtle power that a woman can exert on a man, greater than the might of an emperor. Greater than God the Father.*

My attention returns to Christine's speech.

"I want each of you, ambassadors of humanity's diverse faiths, to know that each of these faiths has been a source of light to me, like so many facets of a jewel. Let us accept, however, that all institutional religions have, at some point or another, been misled, resulting in immense human suffering. From this honest recognition, each of you now has within you the power--that particular feminine power of forgiveness-- to return to that suffering and wipe it away. You can be the ones through whom this miracle occurs."

Now, at the end of her speech, she radiates like a ruby in the eyes of all. She could end it here and enjoy a rousing round of applause, but within her is contained not only the nobility to which one bows, but more importantly the vision of royalty in others to which she herself bows.

Turning to Rabbi V... seated to her right, the eldest among the interfaith council, she asks his permission to relate one of the latter chapters in his life. He smiles tenderly at her as if she were his daughter.

Christine explains that she was present for a conference in Vienna where Rabbi V... had been invited as a guest speaker. At the end of his speech, during which not an earring dropped, a woman in the audience questioned why he had left his home town of Vienna only to return sixty years later. This, she relates, is what he replied:

"Now as an old man, I have often asked myself what can I still do for this world before I leave it behind. One day, the answer came to me, as clear as the first rays of morning sunlight: *Leave no trace behind you of your suffering in this world.*

Sixty years ago, you see, as a boy in Vienna, I was harrassed, beaten, and stoned by a band of Nazis, and left for dead on a bridge. This morning, I returned for the first time to that spot on the bridge where the shadow of that beaten, bleeding boy still lingers. I took him up into my arms and led him away. I told him that all has been healed. He and I are no longer separate, and we will both leave this world with no trace of our suffering. That is why it has taken me sixty years to return to Vienna, and that is why I am now free to leave."

Rabbi V.. wipes the tears from his eyes as she ends the story, and the audience along with him. A final C-major chord of resolution has sounded. His life has just acquired a quality of mythical grandeur in the voice of the world's most enchanting storyteller.

The Last Glass

Three weeks after the *jambon de parme* incident, Kahn says he wants to see me in his office first thing in the morning. I don't pick up a coffee on the way. He has me sit across from his desk, on which sits a single envelope.

"As you know, Carsten, things have changed since Etienne hired you. I don't think we get along effectively. Work is not moving forward as I expect. I have decided this will be your final week, and have prepared a termination letter for you along with a check for two-month's salary. I'm sure you will be very successful with whatever you do in life."

He rises to shake my hand and bids me out of his office.

Those final words of monumental encouragement somehow fail to make my heart leap for joy, as would also the strangely similar formulation I would hear several years down the road: *you are going to be such an incredible lover....for another woman.*

Home that evening preparing dinner in a jovial disposition that I am only able to muster under dire circumstances, I ask my wife what she would consider the worst news I could announce. Without much thought, she brushes off my silly question:

"Hmm, maybe that you've lost your job?"

"Really?" I reply. "I thought you were getting fed up with drinking Ruinart blanc des blancs at breakfast."

She is right that it is bad news...stomach-punching bad news. I just hadn't considered it to be *the worst*. Once delivered and the deed done, I find myself stunned. The worst financial crisis since the Great Depression is at its peak. We have just purchased our Paris apartment thanks to crushing mortgage payments that had been calculated on my luxury-adjusted salary that has just vanished. My wife is a school principal with a menial salary guaranteed for life, so one might understand her perception of impending doom. In truth, though, she will face the situation courageously, down to the last bottle of Ruinart that we set aside for some future celebration. Years later, in financial shambles, the relationship does become unsustainably tethered, but by then not a single bottle of Ruinart will remain.

Losing my job had been one of the greatest fears in my life (along with getting divorced). Now I can check it off the list of things I dread...with bravura. And it was not just any job. It was the ultimate plum of a job that I lost, and without any clear cause. Were I now to lose the proclaimed love of my life, I would really be on a roll! In the years to follow, before becoming the intrepid author of this book, I check off these and other fears from my bucket list. And with that, there is so very much that I no longer fear. I have even stopped fearing the collapse of modern civilisation. It seems at times so imminent that I feel I have already gotten over it.

There is one fear, however, for which I am perpetually unprepared. It belongs to that family of fears for which no preparation is possible. It cannot be imagined in advance, and when it happens you feel that nothing you have ever learned about life is of any help. I remember this feeling from when my baby niece was diagnosed with a brain tumor from which she never recovered normal brain functions, and again when a baby nephew suddenly died in the middle of

Thanksgiving dinner, and again when the same happened to a friend, and again when another friend's son died suddenly at the age of 20. As they occurred and after, these tragedies have been left dangling like loose strings that can never be woven into a meaningful tapestry.

Now, in the tenth month after my termination, I learn from Bénédicte, an ex-colleague, that Christine de Santenay is hospitalized in serious condition. In panic, I ask Bénédicte to get as much information as she can. It will not be an easy task for her. The information is in part private. I want to know where and for how long she will be hospitalized, and if possible what her condition is.

Bénédicte does come back to me a couple of days later with all I wanted to know. Christine is in Reims, and has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and given six months to live. But that was six months ago!

Under normal circumstances I would have debated what to do. I would have worried about how appropriate it would be for me to visit her in the clinic. Who am I to request a visit? I am nobody for her. Would her family understand? Would she want me to see her in such a state? Would my presence be desirable? What would I be able to tell her? Why am I determined to go there? What will my wife think? Should she come along with me? Should I call first and make sure I'm welcome? Should I call to make sure she is still alive?

Yes, I should. I call the clinic and request a visit tomorrow. The nurse asks for my name and puts me on hold. Maybe that hold only lasts for two minutes, but my mind has explored so many split-second scenarios, that a new day seems to dawn when she returns to announce:

“Madame de Santenay will receive you between 11 and noon tomorrow.”

I feel jubilation as if I have been granted an incredible job interview. But then the strangeness sinks in. I only met Christine in person once, and the next time will be the last. I will be visiting her deathbed.

The Seventh Month

I take the first train out the next morning. This time I do not miss it, despite my hazardous ride to the station on a morning black and wet. There are few passengers on this train, leaving me to reflect on why I have taken it. The train called *Why* is a long ride, suspended in time. The countryside streams by like so many passing memories while I try to focus on where I'm headed.

As we journey through life, we will at times pass near the precipice. We reach what seems to be the edge of our existence. We can call this extreme Love, just as we can call it Death. Both imply an annihilation of the ego. Yes, I learned that from Christine. As for Death, we are destined to pass by that cliff many times, pretending it does not exist, or with muffled fears steering a course clear of it. Then one day, perhaps because of Love, we decide to get down on all fours and crawl out to the edge. We stick our nose out into the void and get a whiff of the unknown.

On my way to Reims through the farmlands of la Marne, I am still far from that cliff that I have so far managed to avoid. My father has prostate cancer, but I have been skirting around the matter. My mother, too, harbors a fatal disease though nobody yet knows it. Death is still but a philosophical concern for me. I have happily emancipated myself from all indoctrination--*God only knows the depth of that indoctrination*--and I feel relatively content with the idea of remaining dead after death, like a leaf that falls from a tree. I have recently read Ray Kurtzweil and am intrigued by the perspectives of merging with artificial intelligence to prolong my identity indefinitely. Yes, wouldn't it be grand to upload my entire life experience and have my creativity served by boundless knowledge and computational capacity? Wouldn't it be *not so grand* to have this same capability in the brains of certain others I do not bother to name?

Then again, wouldn't it be positively terrifying to have unlimited intelligence completely detached from all meaning? Wouldn't death become an even more terrifying perspective once you have managed to achieve an artificial extra hundred years? But this is all some science-fiction scenario for the so-called Singularity expected to occur around 2049. Whatever is expected will certainly not happen exactly as foreseen.

Christine is dying now, and that is my sole preoccupation. I feel devastation, as I would at the idea of the destruction of Paris or an entire sequoia forest. My heart cannot bear it and my mind cannot contain it. Why is this rare and precious gift to the world leaving it prematurely?

On the way to the clinic, I stop by a local florist. *This is my definitive bouquet*, I think to myself. *The bouquet to end all bouquets*. I consider the inadequacy of all those on display, destined for some buyer in a rush. How will I possibly find a bouquet worthy of her? Maybe a massive bouquet of multi-colored roses? No, that would be too obvious. I plunge my nose in them and mumble how they lack fragrance, anyway. So what is that faint sweetness I smell in the shop? I ask the florist, who so far has been of no help with my quest. She points to a tree branch covered in pink-white little flowers, standing alone in a large vase.

"Those are the first almond blossoms of spring", she tells me.

Well, that settles it, I thought. However crazy it will look, I'm going to bring her the Spring.

"I'll take the almond branch and the vase, please."

The branch reminds me of a verse by Paul Verlaine, one of the first I ever learned by heart in French to woo my first fiancée.

*Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches
Et puis voici mon coeur qui ne bat que pour vous.
Ne le déchirez pas avec vos deux mains blanches
Et qu'à vos yeux si beaux l'humble présent soit doux.*

By the time I arrive at the clinic, I don't know if I am on time or not. I announce myself at the reception desk and scrutinize the nurse as she verifies something on her computer screen. She asks for my name, then asks me to kindly wait a moment. I watch her disappear down a hallway, then return a minute later with a gracious smile.

"Madame de Santenay is expecting you now. Room 23 is at the end of the hallway to the left."

There is a sameness in all that is clinical, and the clinic is a facet of our standardized and sanitized world. Linoleum floors, no matter how bright and sanitary, remind you of infirmity. A nurse in white pushes a random patient in a wheelchair. She is kind and attentive, but the patient's freedom has been abducted. There are walls painted here in tints you would never choose for your home. In a place where interior design should be of utmost importance, it has been relegated to a cost-controlling techno-bureaucracy. They are the masters of healthcare, controlling all interaction between individuals and their own body. This is not where Christine belongs. How can you put an eagle in a cage?

As I reach the threshold of her room, where the light of day is streaming out into the hallway, there is a moment, and only one, when I will step into that light. It is a single step, like the one that separates the precipice from the abyss and solid ground from water; like the step from a dark enclosed place into the wide open light. Like stepping out into the spotlights on stage. I am about to become visible to her, and her to me. I'm going to find her lying in that hospital bed, diminished from her splendor. She is going to wear the face of terminal cancer. I don't know what that looks like. It will likely shock me. I'm afraid I may not be up to it. Not up to being able to say what I would like to say. Not up to accepting what has become of her. Not able to say good-bye at the end, knowing that it will be the last time I will ever see her again, alive. I have come this far, to take the step. I suck in a full breath, close my eyes and feel my body move into the light.

In moments of crisis or shock, our usual reactions are sometimes suspended. It is as if we are temporarily outside of ourselves, or as if something else has taken over inside. I open my eyes and leave my sight behind. She has turned her head, half reclined in the bed, to watch me

appear. The room is filled with her radiant presence that cannot be seen, a bush that burns but is not consumed. I am vaguely aware that the scene in front of me is unbearable. Christine's body where the Three Graces had previously made their home is now laid waste, emaciated-- its vital substance entirely sucked out. There is nothing grotesque about it, not even unsightly. Why does it seem so terrible, almost unspeakably so?

What is unbearable is the sudden stripping away of my ideal. The obliteration of my icon. My legs cannot carry me through this loss. I may sink to the floor at any moment, but she is calling me to her side and lifting the weight of my body with a magic bagatelle. Christine is no longer entirely contained in her body. No doubt that was always the case, but now it is as undeniable as the light of the moon upon the lake. All of her vitality has retreated to her eyes, its final outpost. Yet, there is warmth in the hand she reaches out to me as I take my seat next to her bed.

"Now, haven't I done well to live an extra week, just to have your visit?" she beams tenderly at me and the branch in my hand.

"You have brought me *the blossoms of the almond tree*" she observes with emphasis as tears well up. I remain unaware of their cause and move to set the vase with its branch on a stand.

"I only just learned about your condition, and came straight away. Surely, you didn't think I would let you off the hook for that induction program, did you?"

She smiles at this, and I am so relieved to break out of my grief, even for a moment that is brief.

"Yes, you've chased me all the way into my rabbit hole, haven't you?" She pauses, looking out the window. "Dr. Krems, a very young and well-studied cancerologist, diagnosed me over six months ago and stated clearly that I only had six months to live at most. So what do you imagine this seventh month is for?"

With all my vitality, I'm not able to muster a word. I feel like a vacuum-sealed jar. She is aware of my incapacity and, as usual, leads the show.

"Do not be bothered by a question you can't bring yourself to ask, Carsten. If I am to live, I will live in grace. If not, I know that here or elsewhere, on this or the other side of life, every day is from now on my day of birth."

I am not able to make much sense of those words. I can only surmise that she is experiencing terminal cancer in a state of mind very different from my own. My glance is drawn to her right elbow, for some reason bandaged. Strange, I think, considering that her entire body has been hollowed out from the inside, that I would notice this minor external wound. It is precisely this relative triviality that enables me to speak, where the gravity of her condition makes words seem impossible.

"What happened to your elbow?" I really do ask this question.

She grins like a little girl proud of her first batch of cookies and points to the heap of manuscripts on her bedside table. Her elbow had been rubbed raw by the friction of manuscript writing, day after day.

“What’s the point of dancing with death if you don’t bother to tell about it? Since Dr. Krems only gave me six months, I didn’t have a minute to lose! It was time enough for my personal eggshell to break, leaving space for an expanded life. I do feel that I have survived my own life by opening it up to others. Any life, when we consider it separate and solid, ends up lost like some pair of gloves or a broken umbrella in the flea market of all things outside of us.”

Her voice has hardly changed, I think, as I imagine her telling me this over a glass of Veuve Clicquot in Verzy. Full-bodied, heart-warming, with titillating floral notes and a hint of minerality, it is a wine beyond compare. Now I am again struck by her unrequited seductiveness. How can a dying woman exercise such power? She is not seducing you to fall in love with her body or her mind. She is seducing you to fall in love with life, and even with death itself. Once a captivating dancer, now she has become a flamenco-dancing skeleton that none can resist.

“I want to be among the first to read this book, of course.”

“Consider it an induction, in place of the one you had planned. I have given all I have, quite literally, to hold the hand of every reader who accepts to venture with me over to the other side. I have crossed briefly into the neverlands and returned to tell you there is nothing to fear. It is my final gift, ready on time to send to my publisher. My death was scheduled for last week, but now it has become as uncertain as the end of the world as we know it...always looming around the corner! It matters not anymore, because I now have the certainty that whether I live or whether I die, I live.”

As I sit in silence, unable to utter a word, she passes effortlessly, like the music of Mozart, from gravity to lightness of being.

“Have you not brought along that fiddle of yours to play me a farewell tune?”

“What a thankless brute I am! It never even occurred to me.”

“There is violin music in my veins as well, you know. Hearing Yehudi Menuhin as a child was an astonishment from which I never recovered. Later, I contemplated the violin as a fitting analogy for the human body. How important it is that we keep our strings taught and tuned so that the Master can make divine music through us!”

“But that’s not all.” she paused. “Here is a story you’ll be the last to hear. My grandmother was fished out of the cold waters of Lake Garda early one morning, nearly dead. She had spent the night reading, for the first time, the hundred love letters from Aldo, her true love. Why was she reading them for the first time? Because they had been intercepted by her father and stowed away. Only when she was at last wedded to a man of proper pedigree and social status were the letters revealed to her. Her father had denied Aldo the right to marry her. Aldo then left for America, broke and broken-hearted, promising that he would return with enough money to marry her. He was murdered somewhere in New York and never returned. The life of her true love was snuffed out. He happened to be a promising professional violinist. In the three years before he

left, he taught my grandmother to play as well. All that remains is a portrait of her with her violin. As a little girl, I was fascinated by that portrait. She never picked up a bow again. What I only later came to understand is that contrary to appearances, she really did leave her life behind in that freezing lake. The woman who coughed up all that water from her lungs only returned to the world of the living as a shadow of herself. Someone needed to go back and rescue the invisible part of her that remained.”

“Like Rabbi V. in Vienna, to leave no trace of our suffering in this world” I remind myself, aloud. Christine was not aware that I had attended that conference where she related that story.

“I will do this for her, Christine. I will return to that lake. If I should play a tune, just name it.”

The pledge escapes me before I even give it a thought.

“No solo violin can play the Andante from Gustav Mahler's 6th Symphony” she swiftly counters, before turning to look at me the way every woman I have ever known looks when caught off guard by an unexpected expression of kindness. I have unintentionally struck a chord in her heart, and the sweetness and softness of that sound is to die for. It melts away all inhibition.

“You seem to know secret passages to a woman’s heart. Take care with that. I was too astonished when you arrived here in my room to tell you why I was so moved. When I was a little girl, I was operated on for appendicitis at the hospital. When all was done, my father--the prince of all fathers-- walked in with what at the time I thought was the most beautiful gift I had ever seen, although many a little girl might have been disappointed. It was of a tender green and a translucide white. Yes, guess what that was. . . .an almond tree branch in blossom. Never have I seen such almond blossoms since, or shall I rather say that blossoms have never looked at me in that way since. . . .until the moment you walked into the room and awakened this memory in me.”

“Christine, you are exquisite in a way that a thousand almond trees in full bloom cannot compare. Your existence will forever be a form of grace to me.”

I feel tears welling up as I sit by her side, one last time, subjugated. There are tears in her eyes as well, but I will later understand they were not of the same quality. Mine are tainted by sorrow and fear of loss. Defiance as well, against what should not be. Why must such a sublime being retract herself from this world when she is needed the most? Her tears appear from a place of ineffable joy, beyond my reach. She holds my hand and searches me from the depth and stillness of her ever-burning eyes. There is a presence in her greater than anything that can be contained in a body. While her body was yet magnificent, there was the illusion that she really was contained in it. Now that it is shriveled and frail, besieged by this thing called cancer, there is no longer any doubt that she exists far beyond the realm of that body. Her physical presence has acquired a transparent quality as it nears its dissolution. I imagine it fading into pure light, and feel that I am closer than I have ever been to the source of all love. Oh yes, my mother loved me, but I was too little to grasp its significance; I only basked in its warmth. A mother’s love is

so easily taken for granted. Then there was the love of a sister, but she grew up and hardened into the mold of man and a masculine God. Then, there were women who loved me while they were smitten by Eros and nothing could have exhilarated me more at the time; but it always seemed to tarnish. There were women who persevered in their love, and this is a great gift, but I now see not the greatest.

For the love that Christine radiates is both personal and universal. It feels intense and palpable, as if I have been her child, and also as if I have been her lover or her close friend. Only in years to come will I reach the understanding that through my singular presence she feels her love for all that exists. She basks in the bliss of that final eros that marks the end of the illusion of separation.

A Coronation

I sit still and speechless beside her for the time she allows. I wonder how such glory can shine from this state of agony. I imagine myself sinking to my knees, my lips touching her feet. What else can the body be used for in the presence of such royalty? On the road to Reims, like the one to Damascus, there is blinding light. I find it within me to declare with a proud smile:

“Christine, there is something I would like to make of this almond tree branch.”

I break off the longest twig and bend it into a loop, then tie together the two ends with a rubber band I spot by her manuscripts. She watches me, bemused, as I take the blossoming branch in my two hands and move closer to place it on her head, watching intently.

“Here in Reims where the coronation of great French kings once took place, I now bestow an everlasting crown on its first and final queen.”

There is something in a woman, even one who has attained the stature of a queen, that melts when she is taken off guard by affection. The spontaneous expressions that escape from her in that instant--the subtle quiver of the lips, the dipping eyebrows, the imploring eyes, the slight tilt of the head--are all a rare gift. I revel in this moment, almost in awe of what my gesture has triggered. I have touched on something deep, and I watch what begins to well up within her, before she is finally able to speak.

“I am an infamously loquacious woman, but your gesture has left me momentarily speechless. You would not have known that when I was a child I had the habit of going to school with an imaginary crown on my head. It was so vivid in my mind that I sometimes feared a teacher would notice and tell me to remove it. This childhood intuition regarding my own royalty was stamped out during a long period of adulthood. There is nothing royal about playing the role of a beauty queen or an intellectual aristocrat living in a château. But a time would come when the intuition of my childhood would return to me. It did not come in some lollipop moment, but after a terrifying night of darkness. It was a long and lonely night when I became acutely aware that the worst in every human was also in me, but also a night when I understood that even within evil exists the spark of the divine. It was the night when the splendid edifice of my superficial self collapsed, and from the rubble would rise up this royalty that you have seen in me. Only when we have dared to see hell within us may we also discover heaven in that same place. We must confront our shadows and walk on through the night in order to see the dawn.”

“What you say about evil is hard to grasp. How did such an idea come to you?”

“Oh, I could not invent such things. It is one of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, but neither was he the first to understand. It is such a profound and subtle intuition, finer than that champagne we once shared, but once you awaken to it, the entire struggle against evil takes a whole new turn.

Her remark brings to mind the *war on cancer*, just like the war on everything else we abhor that supposedly attacks us from without. But I choose to make no mention. It feels out of place. I sense, moreover, how far I am from grasping the majesty of her insight.

“Thank you for graciously accepting my make-shift crown. I don’t suppose it’s the kind of crown you had imagined as a little girl. Where are all the jewels on this earth when we need them?”

“The little girl in me is delighted, and I have all the jewels I need for where I am headed.”

I contemplate Christine in her withered body with a crown of almond blossoms on her head. Is that a corona I see faintly glowing around it? I imagine this as the subject of a painting in the Louvre. Something of my own life suddenly wells up.

“Seeing you with this crown, I am reminded that soon after I met the woman who is now my wife, I devised this affectionate name for her: *ma belle duchesse*. To me, there was something noble about her. But she would always protest, reminding me that she was *only* an ordinary French woman. We still don’t agree, although certainly other matters have created more bitter disputes.” I smile as I pull out a photo of her from my jacket.

Christine pierces through the mask as she does with every human encounter.

“Oh yes, with eyebrows arched that high there is a cathedral for her soul, but I suspect she is too stubborn in her will and brittle in her ankles to believe you.”

“I don’t know how you see that, but it is true” I marvel.

“But you are right to see such royalty in her. Many are those who believe that love blinds us. I assert the contrary: that it grants us luminous clarity to see in our beloved those qualities that others cannot. In the glorious morning light of eros, you beheld your beloved the way God intended her to be.”

I put the photo back in my jacket pocket, pondering this paradox of blindness and clairvoyance. Christine returns to her own train of thought:

“Now that you have me thinking back to when I was a little girl, I recall that I also had the odd habit of practicing the curtsy, that exclusively feminine gesture of bowing before a dignitary. I must have spent hours doing this in front of a mirror.” She pauses in her speech, but I can feel that her message is welling up from within the silence.

“Since you have come to crown me, and even though I cannot rise, I would like to take my final bow. Yes, I do believe that all of you who believed in me were lending to me on credit, so to speak. You believed in what was not yet confirmed. Here, at the end, I have become what you loved in me.”

I had never considered there could be such art to dying. A hero’s death, triumphant or even defeated, has an invigorating and gratifying appeal. But wasting away in a hospital bed? I had always banished from my mind such a pitiful perspective. It was for me the worst of all deaths.

I see now that Christine has by no means been wasting away. Her internal alchemy has accelerated, and she works day after day to bear witness to it, transmuting it into her final night--*Verklärte Nacht*. Only through her example am I able to comprehend these words of Rumi:

*As it draws you to itself
What pleasure your suffering becomes.
Its fires are like water.
Do not tense your face
To be present in the soul at its work.*

Christine does not share her agony with me, for I am as yet incapable of finding my way to its pleasure. As so much else in her life, it is on a plane beyond anything I have experienced. Its intensity is only equaled by her passion for the highest existence.

A nurse appears at the door to announce that the hour has passed, and that Christine's husband and sons will soon arrive. I do wonder what husband and sons they must be. I know that her husband is a duke, which makes her a duchess prior to me crowning her as queen. Like any mother, she must have become cross with those boys when they carelessly broke a vase in someone else's home. Like any wife, she must have duked it out with her duke of a husband on account of some truth he perhaps withheld from her. Nothing can be hidden from a woman of profound intuition, and I imagine this may have provoked some epic struggles in their relationship. I would like to meet these men in her life, but such is not my prerogative. I bring her hand to my lips and look into those eyes that see a new beginning in every ending.

"Christine, before I leave, I want you to know that you have opened the door of my small life to a greater existence. I will never lose the thread that leads me to Wonder...*le fil de la Merveille.*"

That is all she needs to know. Her mission in my life--one of many thousand--has now been accomplished. I rise to leave the room. Just before my exit, I call to mind what she had just told me about taking a bow. For the first time in my entire life, outside of bowing on stage, I give it a try. I do not think about it a single instant. I have no technique. There is no form I attempt to imitate. The image of Alexa, my special niece, flashes to mind. She is not able to communicate, except for a few rare signs, the most memorable of which is her hands clasped against her heart to say "I love you". That is what Alexa taught me, from the unattainable depths of her autism. I clasp my hands to my heart, then lower my head slowly and bring my hands together in a *namaste mudra*. Engraved in my memory, Christine is there, radiant and approving. She is a magnificent jewel refracting brilliant light. The room is full of her. The world is full of her. My heart is full of her. I walk through the doors of the clinic and re-enter the world I once knew. The air is cold, the sunlight weak. All is the same, but I have changed. Her corona has *contaminated* me.

She is risen

What is more moving than the beauty within us? It remains an impenetrable mystery of nature, just as unreal as it is real, like a reflection upon water. It belongs to none and is limited to none. Is any particular woman beautiful? Or, like the delicate almond blossom, is she not simply a conduit of an irrepressible eruption of beauty within her?

In the days that follow my return from Reims, I feel lost in my familiar world. My final vision of Christine--the beatific--is constantly present with me. Perhaps not constantly, because in one disturbing vision, it was I (and others like me) who had killed her by wanting to hold onto her. Was she not an object of idolatry? Does she not have to disappear in order to maintain the integrity of her message? Would she not have to deliver herself and all of us? Simply replacing a man god with a woman god will not solve the human predicament. As she herself once said, any representation of God is precisely what God is not. Such thoughts cloud my mind and give me a sense of urgency. I must gather my final words as an offering before she passes. I sense that in spite of my doubts, even my occasional spikes of indignation against what shouldn't be, the only appropriate expression at this final, fleeting moment, is gratitude.

Dear Christine,

The music of your voice will remain with me wherever you go. You dedicated its virtuosity to a message of such intense vibration that it penetrated the hearts of all those who heard it. The whole of me feels like an instrument still resounding from that voice. My mother brought me into this world, but you--like a mother on a higher plane-- have opened the passage towards a greater existence and awakened me to adoration. You have aroused me from my sleeping stupor, and led me to the window that looks out upon the vastness of the world and the immensity of my soul; yes, even as far as the wonder of death itself, that other side of the mountain. Free from all fear, I will surely meet you there someday.

You know these words of Christ on his cross: "Father, why have you forsaken me?" It feels like a pinch of humanity that helps us to relate, but how could God ever feel forsaken by God? Does not the whole of human experience boil down to this feeling of separation, omnipresent in the life of man, and rendered so acute by the crucifixion?

I came to witness you, Christine, not crucified but calcified. Reduced to the essence of your aching bones. No gospel writer, only your withering arm and indomitable spirit, will relate your truth now that your voice has faded. Never have you felt forsaken, but always closer to the source of life. You have brought me here to the end of man's desiring, a rest from the relentless quest. Now I know that all that I sought outside of myself is contained within me.

*Do not go raging into that good night,
Sing, sing, at the birth of the morning light.*

Your voice is ever with me, and I will sing its praise until the end of time.

Carsten

I post the letter on March 21, a day of palid sunlight when once-autumn leaves, worn by the winter, lie scattered like barren bones beneath skeletal trees. The first day of spring has been postponed, as nature itself echoes this moment of grief. Christine's voice is in my head and brings nothing but comfort and confidence. But my own voice often interferes. It revolts against her agony and premature death. *This is not the way things should be.* I believe she has power over her destiny and I do not understand why, and in whatever subconscious way, she has chosen this path. I experience moments of anger against her Judaism. *When will these--God's chosen people--stop re-enacting their sacrificial past?* I am equally angry at her Christianity. *Wasn't a crucified Christ enough?* Must she follow that path because her name (and mine as well) signifies a *follower of Christ*? I am angry at the whole of these monotheistic religions for their glorification of trials and tribulation. Angry indeed at my own judeo-christian roots that cannot be removed even through a lifetime of digging.

I don't want to believe pain to be a required stop-over on the soul's journey. The whole of me is in revolt against human suffering, and after having blamed everyone else including the traditional God, I blame the collective belief system that supports it. Only much later does it occur to me that I was revolting against someone else's experience in their place. There is no doubt that Christine experienced physical pain beyond anything I have ever known, but her subjective experience of this pain--in other words, her suffering--was not as I imagine. Otherwise, she too would be in revolt. Instead, she felt bathed in love as never before; she was grateful for the agony that led to her ultimate state of consciousness. Who am I to revolt against what she validated for herself? Who am I to object to her profound joy at the threshold of death?

Later, I would also begin to understand another paradox. She moved entirely beyond the realm of all religion without negating her roots; she celebrated the whole of life, including death. Although the continuation of life after life was a visceral certainty for her, she was entirely focused on the intensity and depth of life in each passing moment. I believe that death itself was something she wanted to fully experience. Mark Twain echoed what most of us feel when he wrote that he was not afraid of death, but preferred not to be there when it happened. Christine, on the contrary, wanted to be there, immersed in the immensity and intensity of dying. This absolute confidence in life was beyond my grasp. I have since come to wonder if there is not a frequency of vibration beyond which the body can no longer contain the presence that lives inside it. If so, Christine surely attained such a frequency--unnatural to contain--that I have never

personally encountered in another human being. Where most believe the greatest strength is holding on, she demonstrated a greater grace of letting go.

“Death” as she said in another place “will only take from us what we have tried to possess and has no hold on the rest.”

My sleep is troubled during the first nights of April. One morning a dream lingers in my mind. I was in the same garden in Verzy where Christine and I once had lunch together. I was alone at the table, but two places were set, and Christine was served just like me and we were having a conversation.

“Why have you died?”

“My mission is accomplished.”

“Why did you decide to die this way, over seven months?”

“I wanted to experience this ultimate trial, to face death fully alive.”

“Why would you want that? What’s the use?”

“I wanted to cross the darkest night, fully aware. I wanted to know what would happen. I wanted to bear witness. I tell you in truth, it leads to the ultimate liberation, one that can even be felt in the body.”

“What was the meaning of your cancer?”

“I believe there is no other disease that so perfectly represents the horrendous imbalance we have created in our modern world, where individuals and private interests grow and replicate, disconnected from the social body and the earth. In the same way, cancerous cells replicate out of control, incoherent with the body that supports them. It is this societal disease caused by an entrenched illusion of separation that I have so vehemently decried during my life. I have died from the disease that mirrors what has gone wrong in our world. I wish that to be known and understood.”

And so I wonder: will she save us?

On the morning of April 5th, Christine has already left this world, but I only learn of it several days later, too late for the funeral. I will never know if she read my letter in time. In her final moments of consciousness, I would like to think she could sense my words before they were even written.

Corona Suprema

No longer in one place, she is everywhere. No longer spoken from her mouth, her words are inscribed in the hearts of all those who knew her. Others will yet discover this legacy. Her last work, written during the final months of her terminal cancer, will be recognized by most as her most influential, and will be the most widely read in French and in German. Few woman before her (another was Etty Hillesum who perished in the holocaust) had given the world such a forceful and moving validation of premature death.

Royalty, Thy Name is Woman is a title that revisits Hamlet's famous line: "Frailty, thy name is woman". A tacit belief in women's moral and intellectual inferiority has lingered in the West over thousands of years. There is a popular question, meant to define us, that I was asked countless times when applying to schools or positions during my earlier years. *Who do you most admire and why?* The implicit question was rather *which great man who did great things do you most admire?* It had not once occurred to me that I could choose a woman, no more than it had occurred to me as a Christian boy that God could be anything other than a Father, no more than it had occurred to Nietzsche that the *Urbemensch* could be other than a man. Who has ever heard of a breastfeeding superhero? WonderWoman? She is but a second-rate man. The true wonder of the woman lies in the feminine, that entirely other set of qualities that deserves veneration just as much as masculine performance merits admiration. This is one of the most important reasons I have chosen to write about Christine: to resurrect into honor the feminine principle in our world that she so perfectly embodied.

The scope of her influence is felt over time. Even though over a decade has passed, my urge has grown more insistent to share her message with the world. Her works have only been published in French and German. Since I am not a professional translator I cannot remedy this unfortunate lack. In truth, it would require more than a professional translator. Such was the exquisiteness of her language.

That is why I have felt compelled to write *about* her in English using a *novel approach*. More importantly, and more in line with her own will, I wish to share what she allowed to *pass through* her. Yes, that was how she said it. Fully aware of the pitfalls of idolatry, she didn't want her person to become a monument of achievements; she wanted to disappear leaving only traces of the divine presence in this world.

Any person who has known or read the works of the woman I refer to as Christine will have no doubt as to her true identity. Such is the magnitude of her magnificence. Why not reveal her identity outright? I want the story to be read as such, without the reader verifying the life of the heroine before even reaching the end of the story. I want to avoid idolatry, whether that be my addiction to an effigy or someone else's rejection of it. Finally, I don't want to get tripped up in biographical discrepancies that could compromise my canon. Just as Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* has been staged in many different ways, I have taken liberties in narration. I believe I have remained faithful to her essence and essential message, having spent far more time listening to her voice than this book can convey.

Christine inspired a quality of adoration in others that is moving to witness, very different from a rock-star or rap-star adoration. Now, there are videos of her and Facebook pages that have since been posted on the internet. Spontaneously, and with no organized campaign, there are thousands who follow, and more each day. Many leave comments to testify how they have been touched by her. To select one of the most succinct out of the multitude: *no words can capture the amazement I feel as a witness to such grace.*

I used to think of devotion as a form of subservience and self-sacrifice to a deity, a person, or a cause. After Christine, I recognize it as a spontaneous and boundless love for someone, or perhaps what they represent, beyond personal attachments, and beyond death.

I used to think of the feminine in terms of those attributes that characterize women, of little significance to men beyond sexual attraction. After Christine, I named the feminine as that absolutely vital set qualities through which the *humanity* of mankind is awakened. I imagine it is close to Goethe's idea of *das Ewig-Weibliche* (the eternal feminine) and surely also the Taoist concept of Yin that underpins and pervades all that exists. The divide between man and woman (and all of the variations of this divide) is but one expression of this polarity, albeit the most poignant for us as we experience it in our flesh. It is here also, in what has become a feminist power struggle, that the significance of the feminine has been downplayed. Yet, there is a subtle power that a woman can exert over a man, even within "a man's world", greater than the might of an emperor. Greater than God the Father. Through the woman, man has known the love of his mother, then the love of his beloved. It is the flicker of such love that he will always see in the eyes of another when he is in love. It is this flicker that may melt his heart and move him in unspeakable ways. Awakened to the feminine, he may at last be reborn into a world where he need not err alone, suffering through the survival of his separate self.

Until her last breath, and even in her agony, Christine bore witness to a love that transforms men and women and humanity as a whole. When she was awarded the prestigious French Language prize for literary excellence, she found it within herself to deliver a speech from her hospital bed by telephone. After her death, I obtained a voice recording of this speech that I have diligently translated.⁶ As I listen to her voice again in French, I am filled with joy from a place of devastation.

⁶ In all that I have translated, I have not sought to make her speech conform to the trends of modern American English. I believe that form also informs. Although I cannot capture the beauty of her spoken French--the most beautiful I have ever heard-- that at least is my aim.

Dear Members of the Jury, Dear Readers and Friends,

I would like to offer you a bedside story, though I am the only one in bed. No longer able to stand before a large audience, I will draw near to each one of you and speak softly to your ear. This prize you have bestowed for my life of writing is a precious crown for me. I was born into this world in the torment of persecution, bombardments and exile. I found a homeland not in a place but in a language: the French language so dear to us all. To this day, and even through my darkest nights, hour upon hour, the words that flow from my mouth have knit a net of light, saving me from the pit of death. A hundred verses and pages of prose, learned by heart, have made me the writer that I am. Often, in the act of writing I do nothing more than let myself drift upon a luminous landslide of what I hardly dare to think or speak. My service to the French language has ennobled my life, and your prize honors me more than you can possibly imagine.

Now I would like to briefly share with you my final work, my last adventure. I have always shared the substance of my life experience. All of my previous work has been nothing other than my earnest effort to share my own life as a grand experiment. There may remain secrets, but there is no such thing as a private life. Every act, every gesture, carries a responsibility; it is a modern illusion to think that we can retreat to some kingdom of the self.

I carry this conviction with me into my hospital bed, even in these intimate moments when the embers of my fire are extinguished one after the other. The last two months have been a terrifying, heart-ripping plunge, and also a great crossing. The mystery of suffering has loomed all around me. I'm not yet able to collect myself to speak of that in detail, but I must touch upon it because it has scoured me into a state of exquisite transparency. It has calcified me down to the last cell in my body. Thanks to this agony, I penetrated the unfathomable. One night in particular, I drifted into uncharted territory, and what I found there is beyond belief. When all has been destroyed and absolutely nothing remains, there is not emptiness and dread as you would expect. Not at all. I swear this to you: when there is nothing left, only Love remains. There is nothing but Love. All the dams burst. You are flooded and entirely submersed. Love is not a feeling, it is the vital substance of all creation, the elementary particle that no scientific method can detect.

I have returned to you from this state to bear witness. I am here before you, amphibious, like a swimmer who emerges from the ocean with water still trickling down her body. It is impossible to remain entirely in the ocean of unity, where all separation has been abolished, and return to the land of human brotherhood. I do believe that my personal mission, so long as I am able, is to return among you, brothers and sisters. I had always thought that love was a bond between us all. Now I know in truth that it goes much deeper: we do not need to be bonded because we are all already within each other. This is the ultimate, unfathomable mystery.

I want to bring you this good news. Not news I have heard, but news I have lived. On the other side of what appears as the worst, there is nothing other than Love that awaits you. There is nothing to fear. Maybe you think you have heard this before; maybe you think it is a fairytale;

maybe it sounds fluffy and doesn't feel real. Let me now tell you how it has become real. Almost overnight, the depth of love that I feel as well as that I receive seems to have expanded exponentially. All the people I have accompanied and who have accompanied me over the past twenty years, have suddenly swelled up in an overwhelming tsunami of love. Though I was struck down as if by lightning, they have risen up around me with open arms. They are present at my bedside, in letters, in calls, in gestures--all have risen with courage and beauty. All have dared to love, excessively. My dear friends, let these words beckon you to become fully alive, to remain in joy, and to love beyond bounds.

Now my voice is fading, and with it my life. Perhaps you will still meet me lingering among you at the cocktail. Leaving you behind is not easy for me. My hand is on my heart now as I bow to each of you.

A Chopin Postlude

Nothing public has or will be said on the matter, but I feel certain that Christine's death deeply touched LVMH Chairman, Bernard Arnault. It had only been a year since he had lost his only sibling and dearest sister to cancer. Spectacular success and sadness make for a difficult paradox to harbor in his heart. He will contain it to a space that only music can penetrate. There are days when a crack appears in the magnificent edifice of his resolute composure. At home on rue Barbet-de-Jouy, a stone's throw from the Rodin museum, he rests his hands on his Steinway grand for the Chopin Prelude in D minor. From his fingers flow the delicate expression of his soul. There can be no great man without great tears.

Any brother who has lost a sister can know something of the wound that remains from grief. The feeling that Christine's disappearance leaves on him is less visceral. In his universe, surrounded by the finest of everything, her presence was a form of intellectual and spiritual excellence. Truly, she was a human masterpiece. The wisdom that she came to embody and radiate in the latter stage of her life must have both unsettled and intrigued him. Nobody knows of its ultimate effects; seeds of the soul can take a very long time to sprout.

Unlike Monsieur Arnault, LVMH did not suffer from Christine's passing. On the contrary, the Group has since accrued hundreds of billions of euros in sales. Its share price continued to rise (as Etienne predicted), increasing more than 60% in 2019 alone. After its landmark acquisition of Tiffany, Bernard Arnault became the wealthiest man in the world⁷. He lives to be number one, but not in the field of sainthood or enlightenment. Instead, he has consistently succeeded in his 50-year game of family-style empire-building, with an obsession for creativity and craftsmanship. He pays the highest salaries and even paid full price for the brands he acquired, confident they can generate even more value. Against the advice of brokers and bean-counters, he was always right. They all told him it made no sense to disperse the business across products with nothing in common. He replied that the boldest creativity and the highest excellence were capabilities that could be leveraged across diverse products. He thus became, at least more than any other single man, the father of the modern luxury industry. He was never focused on quarterly profits, but always on what could yet be built or accomplished in the future. He always knew that financial success is a consequence of long-term, relentless excellence.

Intensely competitive, insanely ambitious, uncannily visionary, and superbly intelligent, he is a fantastic incarnation of the masculine principle without big muscles. Like a Napoleon of modern times, he is the new emperor of French civilisation, this time expanding by non-violent means. He has built the greatest commercial empire in the history of the world without sending thousands of mother's sons to death in battle.

He is the power by which things become manifest in the material world. In collaboration with Frank Guery, he created the Vuitton Fondation, a structural masterpiece that perpetuates

⁷ It is my prediction, not an actual fact, that he will beat out Bezos who made his billions on the broken backs of warehouse workers, giving nothing back to the society and the earth from which he cleverly extracted his wealth.

Paris' heritage of architecture with panache. At the time of its construction, I lived just across the woods, and watched it rising up from the ground like some great vessel destined for sail on an ocean of dreams.

What could such an immensely successful man owe to the feminine? Monsieur Arnault relates that when he was a little boy, his grandmother was terribly grieved by the loss of his grandfather. Bernard the boy told his parents he wanted to leave home to live with his grandmother and comfort her. Well, it was across the street, but still a big bet for a little boy. And who knows what gift that extraordinary grandmother bestowed on that boy's spirit. She is forgotten, but he is now world-famous. That is the way things always go with grandmothers.

His other debt to the feminine is more obvious, for luxury is a particular expression of the feminine. Perhaps more than any other company, his can be considered *of women, for women, and by women*.

In our world where only what can be measured matters, he is perhaps the greatest *big boss* around, and I am grateful to have passed through his company. There is nobody else I enjoy seeing make millions more than him. I watch him with the same glee that he watches his favorite tennis champion, Roger Federer. As he rolls in the world records, I think to myself "what fun!" It is a game, after all.

When the game is over, I return to Christine, the whisper of a higher existence and the vibration of love rippling across the ocean of humanity. Monsieur Arnault is a visionary, but Christine's vision extends beyond his horizon. He makes his ambitious dreams come true, but her dreams have connected her to an invisible, more enduring reality. He is number one, but she is beyond compare.

Seated once again at his Steinway piano after a day of historic negotiations, another Chopin Prelude flowing from his hands, perhaps he has again been touched by her. It is more difficult, so it is written, for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. With her blessing and thanks to her wisdom, I trust he will find his way.

Postscriptum

Paris, March 20, 2020.

I write these final words under mandatory confinement, while the coronavirus epidemic has yet to reach its peak. As things currently stand, there may be as many who die from the virus this year as from other causes on a single day. Compared to the compounded capital of all human suffering, it is but a trifle, yet it has triggered worldwide panic on an unprecedented scale. In spite of humanity's spectacular techno-economic *progress*, we as a species seem more terrified of death than ever before.

It is a strange and unexpected coincidence to have written a novella about a corona (crown) at such a time as this. The massive majority of humanity will live on, but something significant will die. That something is perhaps our *way of life*. Certain world leaders have said we are at war against a virus. Here is an organism that infects our bodies in order to *senselessly* reproduce itself, while we too as a species have infected the macro-organism on which we depend, in our mad pursuit of economic growth at all costs. On many levels, we as a species have chosen to senselessly reproduce, as if we were a virus. We must dominate ourselves, not our external reality.

Through so many of her writings and conferences, Christine beckoned people to recognize how our way of life is fatal to the soul. Hers was one great induction program into life. Had she lived to witness mankind's current predicament, she would have been reassuring, with words such as these that she wrote some thirty years before:

“Our society has found nothing better than crises to elevate itself. Without them, the entire system conspires to preserve the status quo. Consumerism has barred off all access to the depth of our being with barbed wire. I do believe that crises enable us to avoid the worst.”

Let us then accept this crisis as a teacher. Let us move forward, in spite of fear, through the passage that leads to deliverance. *Where danger becomes great, so also does the power to save.*⁸ As sovereign beings, we can overcome our fears, and this will be our coronation.

⁸ Friedrich Hölderlin: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst Das Rettende auch.”

Gratitude

It is my pleasure to make this work available as a gift to you and hope you will receive it as such. Should I factor in the cost of all that I have received from others, it would become priceless. There is no escaping that all is a gift.

If I have in any way inspired, encouraged, or provoked your thoughts, know that any gift you chose to send back to me will also be received as such, and with my heartfelt thanks. I see this as a cycle of gratitude that benefits us all. You may [click on this link](#) if you wish to contribute, or refer to <http://carstensprotte.com> for more information.