



## ~ Here and Back Again ~

*I've finished another one. A bison. Done in lampblack.  
Come on!*

*. . . This cavern roof's so low. Mind your head!*

*We have to swim here. Hold your breath. It's pitch  
black, I know. You have to fight the current . . .*

*On your stomach now. We have to crawl. Head down  
– don't get stuck, or we'll be here for ever, both of us.*

*Oh dear. The torch is wet. Well, anyway, you get the  
idea ...*

‘The door! There's people come. To tell me the secret  
of the universe.’

She hopes the old guy doesn't die while she's away.  
But, on the other hand . . . She comes back up.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘They have the secret. No spoo! The  
other guesses were all wrong. Not strings. The universe  
is made of things that look like snails. Or love knots.’

‘What's a love knot?’ asks the old dying guy.

‘Leli the cat, she’s looking bad too,’ says the lady.

‘Oh fuck this fidgeting!’ shouts the old guy. ‘This is the moment for some becoming immortal. Some go to hell. Others qualify for paradise. Mostly – it’s transforming into places and objects, passing reluctant into other people’s heads, and all the blur and shimmer that entails. Find the right mode! It’s my moment! Music! A play of light! Birth and death – they say those are unimportant – screwing, pay packets: those are supposed to be revealing moments. Crap! This is my most important day . . .’ He leaps up off the bed, his catafalque, and runs off down the street. ‘You lie!’ he shouts at two types in black, holding the secret. ‘In the universe, the needle’s stuck – “no change”. It isn’t made of anything at all. It’s an exploded void. Nought banging into nought.’

The lady tells me, ‘Your father’s demented. He ran off down the street, like those three-legged wheels. Into the wood, under the escarpment. No one said anything. They all saw.’

‘He’s just excited,’ I say. ‘Probably those pills. There’s always couples in the wood. They’ll know where he is. He isn’t voyaging. He’s tripping.’

All the same, I stand outside the house a while, looking up and down. There’s a youth, with a guitar, electric. I say, ‘That’s a beautiful red, your instrument. Like cherries.’ In white letters on its horn it says, ‘To the sea.’

‘Why that?’ I ask.

‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I don’t speak English. We did that at school.’

There’s an abundance of civilisations here. Layer on layer. Priests, poverty, malaria. They’ve got rid of the malaria. The first paintings on the walls – that was tough. Now – I guess it’s not.

‘When I write, there is nothing other than what I

write.’ That’s the philosophy, but we don’t do much writing here. ‘You could leave,’ I say to the guitarist. ‘Lodge in a civilisation, somewhere else.’

‘It’s the women leave,’ he says. ‘We tend to hang around, we men. We get the house.’

‘Marx said the highest consciousness was species being. The awareness of us in everything. Communism, the only hope. Look what a cock-up! Last act – lured into a tragedy on the mountains of Afghanistan,’ I say.

The lad’s embarrassed. So am I.

‘Go fuck yourself off!’ he says, trotting away. That’s what I meant.

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Her house is clean but skinny.

Dana tugs off her sweater: in sequins, it says, ‘No lingering’ across the chest.

‘You know,’ says Dana, ‘you can suckle on me. The rest – there’s border control and shoot on sight.’

‘It seems I’m just dependent, Dana,’ I say. ‘That “something more” there has to be, grows ever larger.’

‘That’s for someone else, or mister nobody,’ she says. ‘This is what you get. It’s the best there is. There is no greater happiness. If you can’t emote to match – the problem’s your capacity. No use pouring wine in bottles that are full.’

‘I guess it’s the culture,’ I say, not satisfied. ‘The family . . . Baseless claims . . .’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘This is the full life. Get used to it.’

‘Then there’s the work, the recognition . . .’ I say.

‘Everyone has to do it,’ she says. ‘When they hire you, you have to sign a paper that says you resign. That way, when they fire you, the law is happy.’

Dana stows herself away. Time to leave. ‘Your trouble is,’ she says, ‘you have good ideas, but right

after someone else has had them. Try to keep up – even to inch ahead. And find out what to do with them.’

The street is hot, like a varnish.

Mirko is leaving. He speaks French, so that means Belgium. I suggested Senegal, but no . . . The illusion of work . . . promotion, even. A fat girl with good legs who makes quiches. He says,

‘If you play with French cards, you know straight off – every prince is a knave. Every king is waiting to be done down by an ace. Everyone here will cheer for tyranny, because they admire the puffed-up guys, and think they can outwit them. Screw out more money, pout a bigger chest. Then, it all slumps. Melancholy, not intelligence, in play.’

I hear this all the time.

‘That war,’ he says, ‘was just across the water. A stroll away. The ferry goes through the flat sea like a sleeping man doing breast-stroke. Throb and pause . . . We surely have the hate they had. True – we’re held back. No weapons. Sentimental songs. The system’s always clogged. Never a massacre to clear the pipe.’

‘Everyone’s mixed up. On the stairs, to go up or down,’ I say. ‘You couldn’t manage a civil war.’

‘Think of your life as story,’ Mirko says. ‘Where does it lead? Maybe a mafia? End as boss, or fall-guy. Repentant: or in jail for life: spat on for sure.’

‘No, Mirko,’ I say. ‘That’s what you want. Real life. Yours told by someone else. Verified in the paper. I don’t want real life. I could go to the marshes of Poland with that girl from the bar. They have buffalo there, and green birds. Shacks, lots of shacks. Or to Iran, with her boyfriend, and dodge the prying and the deserts. It’s all churches and mosques, everywhere. And with guys who hate the place and are sick with nostalgia and parents they never really knew . . . Fuck real life!’ I say. ‘Everyone is in it, they want more till they vomit . . .’

‘This dreaming of scaffolds,’ Mirko says, ‘it’s fantasy, because you’ll never have the sparky life you want. What you’ll have is being dragged along a flinty road, behind the donkey cart.’

That, I know. ‘You’re dry,’ he says. ‘With the wind, you’ll snap.’

‘We’re similar,’ I say. ‘You, Dana, the rest. That’s what binds a society.’

‘Break it,’ Mirko says. ‘It’s clear, something broke. It fell apart. Get a group together. Into the forest. Sort it out.’

‘No men,’ I say. ‘They’re picayune. They bully.’

‘Women are even more acculturated,’ Mirko says. ‘They can’t stand you. Men would tolerate you, push you aside.’

‘The primitives,’ I say. ‘They faced all that. Still, between times, they napped, buried their dead, watched the sky and separated out the species. Died at twenty. Clubbed some comrades.’

‘The forests,’ Mirko says, ‘are full of settlements. Already – migrants. Nomads who don’t move. Your troupe would not survive.’

Mirko goes to Belgium, lives like he wants. Happy for ever. Dana says,

‘There’s a French woman come. She does books – she’s in a cottage she says France bought for things like that.’

And here she is. A long nose, sharp, a hidden pearl in its tip, like all the thinkers have. ‘I’m looking into Maeterlinck,’ Sandrine says.

I don’t believe her. Maybe she has broken down, inside. She shows me a picture of a road – Paris, London – there’s food from Thailand. ‘Inuit snax’ it says too. There’s busy people, never hungry, never tempted, not by anything.

‘This is what our cities, rich places, once looked like,’ she says. ‘You imagine they still do, I bet. Really, it’s your crime scene interests me. Every place must have one, else we’d all trek back and long to live in holes. It’s evil that I’m after. They pinned it on the great ones – the leaders, builders, great destroyers. Then – it was passed around. We all had some. “The evil that men do . . .” That was the quote. Women too, I guess. Many think that way.’

‘Sandrine,’ I say, ‘this is a place you spend a hundred years – they pass undimmed, just your enamel wears away, you rust, you tarnish, fray and crumble. Time will get you – not the place. Here, there’s been no massacre. People leave, before the urge comes to be evil.’

‘Of course,’ says Sandrine. ‘The Maeterlinck is just a cover.’

‘You mean,’ I say, ‘states go round the world buying up cottages and gifting them to nationals who look for massacres, so that they can dump upon the past? Aversion therapy?’

‘Oh dear,’ says the French lady, fingering her long, bony nose. ‘I hope you’re not an extremist,’ and she laughs. ‘Some lost souls, I know, have a chuckle about terror. It’s quite infantile . . .’ She turns on me. ‘Guys like you – a foreigner, yet you’ll live here all your life. You could be anything – a revolutionary, terrorist, a punk. Off to fight jihad? Or – worse – you wouldn’t fight for me, for us. Me – I’m a sort that’s more advanced. A national culture – but quite continental. Paid in a continental coin. You – you’re all covered up. Scurrying among the leaves.’

‘We have to hide him,’ Dana laughs at me, pinches my face, as if affectionately. ‘It’s not that he’s ashamed of anything. I think he just enjoys it, hiding.’

‘Being hidden,’ says Sandrine, analytically. ‘There’s a difference. Vital. Which does he enjoy the most, I

wonder. Hiding? Being hidden? Some think it's the same thing – it's an unhappy couple.'

'Yes,' says Dana. 'I know all about those.'

We stand, entwined. Three statues, glancing outside the ring we make.

Dana expires! We hear the bang and then a whistle – but Dana's gone already – a fish split open by a shell, revealed and speechless to the bones. Struck dead. A lightning strike.

'Friendly fire!' says someone. 'They have to practise shooting off these things . . .'

It isn't true – no accident. Somewhere there is bad intent. That's why Sandrine is here. 'Stop snivelling!' she says to me. 'Dana's death – just one of many – uncountable profusion. Remember – you're a brave soldier, we're at war.'

It hadn't seemed at all like that, though if you're informed and interested, it does, I guess . . .

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'*Mann vergisst,*' the opera says. 'We forget'.

I say to Sandrine, 'Do you know, really close up, I mean – Cécile La France? The name alone . . . I saw her in a movie. She needs love . . .'

'I'm often asked,' says Sandrine. 'I am here for that as well. You want an introduction? She'll not come here, of course, but . . .'

I'm sure we'll never meet. In any case, it's true, that my opinions are extreme. That could be why I'm watched . . .

'Yes,' says Sandrine. 'You are extreme. It stimulates the others, who become extreme themselves. It isn't what you want; power, winning – it's how your arrogance expresses thoughts . . . Too speculative,

excluding nothing. They change from day to day. I'm sure they're grounded . . . Maybe it's a question just of taste.'

'Dana said my taste was quite insipid,' I tell Sandrine. 'Like wild asparagus. The scent comes through secreted in your urine, some time after.'

'You keep staring at my eyes,' she says, irritated. 'They're absolutely a pair. Maybe Dana's weren't. You depressives . . . think nothing creates futility except your memories – usually anomalous . . .'

Not eyes: the nose, unique in this particular shape.

'That's quite wrong,' I say. 'There's no futility. On you go! You can't take stuff with you – but you can leave great piles behind.'

'What stuff did you have in mind?' she asks.

Nothing. 'Well, of course,' I say. 'I could try with wood. Objects. Sculptures. Things in a frame. No call to breathe life in – the wood has it all already.'

'Yes,' she says. 'That sounds real naff. Say it, don't do. It's beyond you and beneath you. And – you can't sell.'

'Then, Sandrine,' I say, 'what can *you* do? Your blue birds fly away. They can't be caught. Can you protect us from our loss? From all the loss? Unknown people with an unknown plan – sweeping us away. Maybe they'll find a guy to make apologies. Another generation hears, amazed. Live people – that's what we know, all we know, that's kin to us . . . not the ruins, the old symphonies, the tomes. But our lookalikes, brothers and sisters, comrades, here they are beside us – then, they spin and drift – and disappear. People – they fade away – like captains tumbling from a spaceship. No air, no gravity – a "help" won't carry. It just fills your baggy suit. There is no help, no hand. Another project, that's the most to hope. Sandrine, it must be why you're here.'

'I have my orders, that's for sure,' she says. 'And my



aesthetic. Names unstuck from myths, and whirling round. I might enquire into Dana, that death . . .’

‘Leave it, Sandrine,’ I say. ‘Put an end to it. You’d have to enter into what a person feels and fears . . . the moment of extinction. Looking down, into the void. The story she becomes; the story all around, before and after, then . . . She ends. As Dana – it’s all over. Real and ephemeral. All those stories – never end. They go on for always. You can’t look for real ephemeral stuff in tales, in stories. There’s only frustration if you try. The family, the state, the justice. Police, the falsity of memories, gossip – it’s a thicket, Sandrine. Those are the epics, improvised and drying brown. You don’t need go into all that.’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘I’m quite at home in stories. I’m here to nudge the plot.’

‘You were sent,’ I say. ‘So, someone knows more “why” than you.’

‘Oh no,’ says Sandrine. ‘These opinions. The extreme ones. Ever since those puffed-up guys wanted more land, more power, ports and peasants – all that – it’s been opinions. Superior races. Higher gods. Better politics. More friends. Socialism, independence. Well – those may be extreme – they’re not exactly new. I’m here to see what opinions may be called extreme – but anticipating. For the next time. Something far out. Really extreme. Maybe not punk or *pointillisme*. Ideas that mobilise, that terrorise. Otherwise – it’s all cold soup.’

‘I seem to have it wrong,’ I say. ‘Behind opinions, I thought, there’s . . .’

‘You do,’ she says. ‘Of course, there’s accidents. But each accident’s unique. The rest is: getting those who want to get you. Get them first. Expunge. Time’s invented just for that, anticipating. No doubt you’ll leave the rough stuff all to me.’

I can't believe she came here just for me, and my mistakes.

'Cécile says she'd love to meet you,' Sandrine says. 'In a while.'

'That was just a whim,' I say. 'It's all of no account.'

'Well,' she says. 'I hope none of you guys is taking arms, enlisting somewhere. I'll find you, that's for sure. Stick to the whittling.'

'Round here, we all went to school together,' I say. 'Everyone thinks the same. I went too, but didn't listen. No one has special thoughts, or invites their comrades to view their numinous works.'

'You see,' says Sandrine, 'someone like you – could be a Luther. There'd be you – and your extreme idea. And if there was, in the end – in the beginning too – no idea at all? Just you . . . Away would fly . . . the lot. The church, the state, the land, the buildings. The opera was bad enough – the painted ladies, prancing, guys with antlers on their head. It disperses, butters up your mind . . .'

'I hadn't thought of anything like that,' I say. 'I know you have to snoop. Carry right on. But – I have no extreme idea. I haven't come to it, Sandrine. Maybe I can't. Maybe you're right – it isn't there. Or if it is – then everything would disappear. Change shape.'

'That's exactly it,' she says. 'I'm here to see if you arrive at it. I told you – it's not now. It's next year, or tomorrow.'

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There's a Sandrine everywhere, in every hamlet. They have a grant. Maybe they all write books on the exotic too. They pry. Perhaps my friend, Romolo, would take her on? He screwed a Swiss girl, here on a vacation. When he went to find her in her home, they turned the

hose on him, and then the dog. It must have been his name.

‘Maeterlinck,’ I say to him. ‘*Bluebeard and Ariadne*. Brilliant stuff. Her nose – it has the pearl of genius, tucked in the tip. She’d love to catch you, thrashing in her net . . . She collects extremes. Invent a ride, and sit her on it, a cause, try to recruit her into it . . .’

‘Useless, my friend,’ says Romolo. ‘You can’t unstick her and stick her on to me. Any cause I might one day be sympathetic to is indefensible. This side or that – anything involving other people – it’s a joke. If it isn’t blood, it’s futility that’s dripping on your head.’

‘Suppose,’ I say, ‘there’s something so grotesque . . .’

‘They’ll send a letter. You join up. A cell incorporated unto cells. They bury you for free. Sometimes you get a medal. There’s nothing you can do, except for heroism,’ he says. ‘All for the cause. Sacrifice.’

‘What you don’t foresee is exactly what she’s looking for. The offensive: the new that transforms everything,’ I say. ‘Sometimes you feel you have it right, your extreme, your inoffensive thought, I know. But when it’s not so fugitive? What then? Suppose you light upon an idea – that really shakes it all – the tree, the landscape, and the sky? What then? Swing along with Sandrine – the new extreme is ours,’ I chant.

‘No!’ he says. ‘No to you! And her. This time there won’t be dogs that tear my pants. She rides with packs of kings and queens, all after me, no doubt. Me – I’m innocent, every time!’

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‘I fear Romolo won’t have sex with you, Sandrine,’ I say. ‘Though you don’t have a dog. He’s not ready for new tricks.’

That's beyond her. 'I want to know what web I'm in,' she says. 'You have sex with a family, not an individual. And – I thought Mirko was your brother.'

'No, no,' I say. 'He lived with us a while – but who your mother is – it makes no difference to your age.'

'That's true,' she says. 'I hear your mother died quite sudden, in an accident.'

'She fell downstairs,' I say. 'An open razor in her hand. Nearly decapitated. Two accidents and one effect: – there's no intent established.'

'I'm sure that's true as well,' she says. 'Though – you'll have felt the impacts.'

'I told you, Sandrine,' I say. 'Here, it's all the same, indifferent. Whoever you live with, they tell you everything the same. Only the bad guys leave a trace.'

'It's them that interests me,' Sandrine says. 'But I don't trust you, and your telling. The people here – when fascism collapsed, they went to being communists. And then . . . tell me what happened then.'

'I wasn't born here, Sandrine,' I say. 'You should have asked my friend, Mirko. He was the storyteller. He went to Belgium, but he wasn't happy. The Flemish did for him. He wasn't understood.'

'This is good stuff,' Sandrine says. 'You, a foreigner too, and certainly not French. Disinheriting everyone, your country . . . you might be Italian, somewhere deep and dark. The language – it's easy. Stick vowels on the end of everything. Family ties all razored out. And – pimping for your mate, that Romolo! No one could invent you, not even you!'

'I'm surely not your only client hereabouts,' I say. 'You'll have a soft and tender streak . . .'

'Of course!' she says. 'Who'd not be fascinated by a Mélisande?'

'We're back to that?' I ask. 'Romance? The people here – they hunted down all living things – the furry

ones, that is. Resistance ended there. They ran from power – the paladins, the churches, the fields where the mosquitoes lived. When all the furry things were dead, they put their guns into the rafters. Curled up themselves, like ammonites.’

‘If you want relationships,’ she says. ‘You must try hard. Much harder. The future doesn’t arrive if you just wait and wind the clock.’

‘I know, Sandrine,’ I say. ‘You’re not American. You have doubts. I realise – here everything requires an effort, some *rhodomontade*, exegesis. History demands it. But – you’re part of the reactionary wave. Nothing to push against. You’re just a mass of surf. You swallow everything. Kings, Nazis – they’re all embedded here. Reaction for its own sake. There’s nothing else. No one dissents. There’s space, but there’s no room . . . All disappears into your tide . . .’

‘Us – we’re stones. We sleep, deep. There – forests of trees. Here – a coppice of shambly cottages. Don’t wake us. You’re quite other. You speak in French, but your country is the globe. Your lookalikes, your brothers – those guys you say you’re trying to exterminate – the guys with black flags, breaking up the past, posturing, selling it. It’s you, see: in the mirror. A small distortion. They smirk, you scowl. They massacre, you bomb. You do it from the office. They – the same. They are your jesters, your caricatures. Your caricaturists. Their religion – is the perfection of yours. They do what you keep inside. Yours a double act – the big serious guy with baggy pants is you – clowning against the clown. Pour the water down the other’s trousers. Who will end up, prince of the ring? There’s no *auguste*. It’s a sham, my dear. The thing is – choose the winning side.’

Vanity. It sounds like vanity, my voice. Then there’s

her nose. The nose – where does she put it when she sleeps?

‘Not sham,’ she says. ‘It’s real. Just not how you thought. You especially – you don’t need to pick a side. You’re here, and what you are.’

‘You’re right, Sandrine,’ I say. ‘I give up. Everything is as it seems. The novelty – it’s just the circling round. It’s countries, states – all that old stuff. You should give up too, looking for what’s coming next. We know what we need for our contentment. The unanswerable questions dangle on their strings above our heads. You needn’t look. The next big thing – is scurrying somewhere in the forest. A creature, laden with a head so big it has to waste time doing sport – no gadgets, no telephones – but smart! High on self-protection.’

I pull Sandrine – into the forest. ‘Hey,’ she shouts. ‘Wait! These few trees – there’s nothing here . . .’

‘Oh yes,’ I say. ‘Life! The species that comes after us – they must be very small. Billions of them – mostly eating air and drinking dew. Maeterlinck had prevision – they’re his fairies, his princesses. They’ll take over, if we don’t poison them – one of our bright mistakes . . .’

There’s guys shooting up, and making little fires, or stretched out on some foam. A wave of giggling, pleasures that fleet away, and people you’d not recognise in suits.

‘This is my free day,’ she says, and pulls me close against her. Her face goes out of focus – the features melt away, time on the rocks, our destiny seeking the medallions of sun that flickers through the leaves . . .

‘More light, Sandrine,’ I shout, pulling myself away. ‘I must have brightness, see what’s happening . . .’

Well, the forest’s here: she hesitates.

‘It’s life!’ I say. ‘They say to cheer it, celebrate. Life is a relay. If you drop the baton – there’s someone there

to pick it up and run, maybe with hundreds of legs  
more, nearer to the ground.’

She laughs, goes further in, expecting me to follow. I  
let her go. So much for my date with Cécile. Wasn’t it a  
Bardot movie she was in . . . ?

Sandrine’s inside – how she’ll feel at home,  
chivvying the mushrooms, interrogating the red ants.

It’s worth a song. ‘Burning bride’ comes to mind –  
‘You’ll be lucky when she runs out of desire,’ I sing.  
There’s crowds around my house. It burns: someone  
burns it. Hard to tell.

‘Go away!’ I shout. ‘It’s stone. There is no flame.’

The floors and ceilings have flared up, and lie as  
charcoal in the cellar. Mine was a torch song. I possess  
a white stone cube, unique and warm.

My friend Remo stands beside: he says, ‘Maybe  
something fell on it. An act of thunderbolts, a  
quiverful.’

It’s true. The storms roll in and over, shells fall all  
about, the plastic powder finds the wires and blows up  
everything. ‘The mice!’ I say. ‘They live in reeds below  
the tiles.’

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‘Oh,’ Remo says, ‘they hear the whistle, don’t wait for  
the bang. Like the green birds in the trees . . . Don’t  
worry about them. There’s worse has happened, and if  
you looked at what’s to come . . .’

‘Your brother Romolo,’ I say. ‘He’s such dry grass.  
Yet when I wanted – he wouldn’t go on fire. Sandrine –  
she’s tinder. Or – no, she’s a spark, she’s already  
reaching upward, wavering into dance . . . The red hair,  
the pale eyes, the lashes carrotty . . .’

‘It’s the nose,’ says Remo. ‘That’s what puts you off.’

Not knowing if it's sharp or like an instrument the doctor shoves, it goes right in . . .'

'I want to do her a good turn,' I say, 'because it's the best turn for me.'

'I know all that,' says Remo. 'You think she'll have to draw up constitutions for the ants. You're wrong – they already have one. It's the best. Then, there's us. The next thing coming – we'll call terror, the big guys dressed like crows who come to get us. They already came. They come quite regular, they always have.'

'No one loves them for it,' I say.

'Oh,' he says, 'you old reactionary! You have to take a side. Your crows bring truth and justice. Whoever sends them.'

It's true. It doesn't lift the heart.

'You have a heavy touch,' he tells me.

'That's not so,' I say. 'Everyone has parents, known or not. They die, all of them, in ways you haven't thought about. But it's random. You don't will it. People move away – some stand next to you: many die. It's random. They do other things as well, more vigorous. My house suffered a random hit. It happens to a mass of things. Only the intervals, the time spaces, make a tragedy, when there's a symmetry, or it all happens pouf! like that. All occurring in one day – it's common, though. I could show you on a map, or in a book . . .'

'That's so,' says Remo. 'Time is a lousy marker for the normative as well. It's not just when you're considering what is reasonable: time's not up to any scratch.'

'You know, Remo,' I say, 'a place like this – into my mind comes Smolensk. It's bigger, of course, but the market – desolation. Everybody drunk or hungry. Too big for what it has to hold, like mammoth jeans you find



in charity bins . . .’

‘That’s bigger,’ Remo says. ‘And it’s in Russia too.’

‘It used to be in the USSR,’ I tell him. ‘And in the war. It’s the desolation I’m talking about. It had the same whiff as here. But – I’ve travelled, all over. I’ve more to look back on and regret than most. And held executive posts, though briefly. I had a conscience, jumped ship . . .’

‘We need a star to follow,’ Remo says, thoughtfully. ‘Ships sail by them.’

‘I had this fantasy,’ I say. ‘Cécile La France. Saw her late one night. In a movie, I think. She impressed me with her poise. People seem to need heroines. If you forgive me, not to hurt your sensibilities – she had more poise than Jesus.’

‘I’m not sensitive at all,’ says Remo. ‘Go right ahead.’

‘We were talking about randomness, things that hit you in the middle of the night,’ I say.

‘You should have stuck with Sandrine,’ Remo says. ‘No poise, but class. You had neither, palming her off on Romolo.’

‘She’s in the forest, researching, like everyone does now,’ I say. ‘Other species, tottering but more hopeful still . . .’

We see her, Sandrine, in the trees, flickering, a menacing firestick.

‘You should do some travelling again,’ says Remo. ‘Your luck’s burnt out here. We’re all thinking about it too – hoping we won’t meet anyone we used to know. and have to sub them.’

‘There’s always characters like me from the past,’ I say. ‘Bearing a fear and disappointing hope from history – nothing specific, though. and no remedy for any of it.’

I hope Remo will take me up, give a criticism, maybe, that starts us talking. About me. He says,

‘You say you want things to change,’ says Remo.

‘But you flinch from the dark things that change brings.  
It’s just your style – pushing things away.’



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