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Chapter 3

(pp 13-19)

The dark green car almost flew as it emerged from the little wood and raced out towards Paris. It was early afternoon on an overcast day at the beginning of January. Persistent drizzle, dull light and in the distance scattered crows and magpies flitting through the air over meadows and fields along the main road. No snow and no sun. But the two pairs of headlight cones were virtually egg-yolk yellow as they burned their way through the undergrowth and in an instant dispelled the twilight between the trees. The dreary grey of the birch trees seemed to burst at the same speed as the unfamiliar car approached and raced into the wintry stillness of the day.

It was a day which faced the activities of everything and everyone as gently and as indifferently as every day before and every one after – just an ordinary Monday, if it had not been the first Monday of the year. The green car was coming through the wood on 4th January 1960. The road surface was wet with rain. The sky was mirrored on the asphalt. And in the puddles floated reflections of clouds which for days had been blowing across from the British Isles and depositing their rain on the countryside between Seine, Marne and Yonne, clouds from Somerset and Cornwall sailing swift and low.

What was thundering closer had to be a ton-weight projectile on four wheels, a rocket flying through the day, inside which people were sitting who evidently wanted to gain time. The man who thought that, stood wrapped in his waterproof cape with a wet face and misted glasses on a narrow, dirty green strip between the ditch and two of the ancient plain trees which lined the route nationale. Jumping from the saddle, Paul Cassel, a farmer from the village of Villeblevin, had brought his bicycle to a halt. It didn't often happen that such a noise broke through the midday stillness, sound as if from a diving aircraft. Paul Cassel had fought in the Ardennes. He had been a POW in Saxony. The noise he heard coming from the birch wood went through every limb like the howl of the German Stukas. He slid from the saddle and sank onto the frame.

And when the bicycle had come to a standstill, he turned round, seized by the old panic and at the same time curious to see what kind of infernal machine was bursting through Chévreaux' forest at his back.

Cassel saw four yellow lights racing towards him, four lights, two on the left, two on the right. He didn't know any cars with headlights like that. He was a well-informed man who read a lot. He had developed a milking machine. He had been visiting his brother in the next village, Villeneuve-la-Guyard, and had talked about electric fences all morning.

Route Nationale 6 was thirty feet wide at Villeblevin. There were more than thirty yards of open ground, overgrown in the warmer seasons of the year by grass, nettles and coltsfoot, between each pair of the more than 250 plain trees on both sides of the road. Last summer's balls of mistletoe hung in the still bare branches of the roadside trees which were more than a century old. Paul Cassel knew there were plans to cut down every second tree, to give its neighbour room to breathe and grow. Plans to which not only the Chévreaux family had objected, whose ancestors had planted the border of plain trees at a time when the route nationale between Sens and Fontainebleau had still been a military road, unsurfaced, spread with sand and gravel, the dips and pot holes filled up with shards of glass or pottery.

Without knowing the history of the road, Gilberte Darbon switched on her indicator lights and stopped her Renault just before the junction with RN 6. Since Christmas the nursery school teacher from Lyons had been visiting a friend, who lived in Misy-sur-Yonne, a couple of minutes north of Villeblevin. Rarely on foot, preferably by car, especially as it never seemed to stop raining, she explored the area, churches, markets. That Monday Mademoiselle Darbon had been in an enterprising mood, she had turned the car radio up loud and sung along with the songs whose words she knew.

She had already spotted the figure in the red cape cycling along the main road under the trees a little while earlier and, careful driver that she was had not let the cyclist out of her sight since. That he, she assumed it was a he, stopped his bike a couple of

hundred yards east of her and before she reached the junction, did not surprise her, rather she was relieved, and so, because he no longer represented a traffic risk for her, she forgot Paul Cassel again.

Gilberte Darbon and old Monsieur Cassel were not the first witnesses that 4th of January to the speed at which the dark green coupe was driving through the birch wood at Villeblevin. There was also a lorry coming through the little wood, and sitting in it were two men, two brothers: France IV FM was playing a chanson by Yves Montand, *Les enfants qui s'aiment*. Like the teacher, who had turned up the song so loud, that she heard nothing of a noise bursting through the little wood, the forestry workers Roger and Pierre Patache were also listening to Montand in their drivers' cabin as they manoeuvred their heavy truck through the trees. Roger was at the wheel. In the passenger seat, his younger brother, Pierre, called Pipin, was glancing through a newspaper. The windscreen wiper squeaked. From time to time Roger Patache grimaced, because the song coming out of his transistor radio made him think of Yves Montand in *The Wages of Fear*, and even if he himself had only loaded tree trunks he could easily imagine himself as the nitro-glycerine driver in the film. He did not tell his brother, who did not have much of an imagination, about his day-dream, which for a few seconds turned him into a cinema star.

It was their first transport day. Pipin didn't know why the heirs of the Chévreaux family had decided to cut down the little birch wood, which he had run through as a child, that is, he did really, because Roger had explained to him that the felling had become necessary because of the reparcelling of agricultural land. He wondered why the fields and the wood, which he knew so well, had to be reparcelled at all. For the time being Pipin didn't have an answer. And also he didn't want to get on Roger's nerves, especially as they were both earning good money with the wood, and there wasn't much work in winter. Pipin concentrated on the newspaper, he looked at pictures which caught his attention.

It was Roger who first saw the car racing towards them, lights appeared in the rear view mirror and rapidly grew bigger. He assumed the car would slow down and stay behind them, at least till they came out of the wood and reached the main road. But he was wrong and said at the moment the car went into the other lane and disappeared in the blind spot: “Will you take a look at that: Graveyard here I come.”

A fraction of a second later the green coupe appeared to the side of the front of the old Simca truck and swerved back in lane, so that even Pipin saw it.

“Hello, hello!” he laughed, “what speed’s he doing?”

Roger estimated the speed of the car shooting away from him and making for the end of the wood at more than eighty miles an hour, but kept the guess to himself. His mind was busy with a different question. But Roger didn’t know the make of the car either, he decided it was either a new Mercedes model or an American car.

The old railway line to Paris ran parallel to the main road at a little distance from it. The midday train from Sens was going by, pulled by its steam locomotive, Roger saw the trail of smoke as it grew paler over the Yonne bridge and then disappeared.

“Did you see the thing?” exclaimed Pipin. “Do you know what it was?”

Roger told him: a Chevrolet.

Pipin snorted. Chevrolet... no way! That had been a Facel Vega, and he smacked himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand, before sinking into deep thought. Roger saw the Yank car reach the edge of the wood, saw it penetrate the long straight corridor of the main road.

At the same moment as a feeling of wretchedness arose in him at the snail-like speed of his truck which wasn't carrying a load of nitro-glycerine at all, a couple of hundred yards away the old fear of the Stukas was rising up in Paul Cassel, so powerfully, that despite the rain he brought his bicycle to a halt and dug his boots into the mud.

Cassel did not see a Renault turning east onto RN 6. “Les enfants qui s'aiment ne sont là pour personne,” sang Yves Montand on the radio and with him Gilberte Darbon as she saw the little birch wood lying in front of her at the main road. It spread out there dipped in a gentle mauve or, rather, emanating a gentle mauve. Out of it emerged a car, a car with four equally strong dazzling headlights approached her so fast, that she was startled, even before she saw the man on the bicycle again. The green car with the white roof raced past him at such speed that the rush of air almost lifted him off his feet, he staggered, his cape billowed out, and Cassel cursed, he lifted a fist threateningly. “Fuck you!”, he yelled through the noise, which he suddenly found himself in the middle of, because to his astonishment the rumbling and squealing he heard came not only from the car racing past him, and from the midday train, which whistled before it steamed across the Yonne bridge, it came simultaneously still from the wood. There Roger Patache shifted down to a lower gear. The truck gearbox howled, submitted, the Simca speeded up, the Patache brothers also reached the main road.

Now everyone was assembled between Chévreaux' old plain trees, four victims, four witnesses and two handfuls of magpies and crows. The birds paid no attention to the chance encounter. They flitted through the drizzle with the indifferent tenderness of those children, who were not there for anyone because they loved one another.

Chapter 4

(pp. 19 -30)

I asked myself, whether it was we who were really the children in the song – Véronique, Delphine, Maurice and me. There was much in the description that I recognised, the Chévreaux' little wood, the highway, I even remembered the Patache brothers' truck: It was blue, but the paint was cracking from the metal in many places and beneath it an almost white pale blue came to light. An old Simca, so dented, Maurice once said, that it looked as if it had been dropped from an aircraft.

I asked myself, whether he had been in Villeblevin again to talk to Roger, Pipin or old Cassel about the accident. Since the death of my father, when my mother also moved to Versailles, I hadn't been there again. I did the arithmetic and came to the conclusion that Paul Cassel was probably no longer alive. He must already have been over 60 then, as old as I was now.

And we had also been quite different from the children in the kitschy chanson by Prévert. It's true, we weren't there for anybody, not for old Cassel and not for Pipin Patache, who was only four or five years older than we were and as terribly lonely as the little squirrels he caught in the woods and left to themselves in tiny cages behind the house. We weren't even there for each other. Had we loved one another? Maurice seemed to believe so. I had believed it too.

Our stretch. The tracks.

What we really loved were trains. The man who had invented trains had put them in the world for the two of us, we thought, and they meant the world to us.

Yet no train in the world ever stopped in Villeblevin, not in all the years Maurice and I lived in the place, till it drove us apart and we drove off, each in his own car, loaded up, with a full tank and without saying goodbye to each other, he and Delphine and soon after that also me and Véronique.

She sat beside me. We were in our early twenties and had two small children, Jeanne and Pénélope, they sat behind us. I clearly remembered the moment when I drove the Renault, which we had taken over from Véronique's mother, across the Yonne bridge and half way over the water the morning train from Sens came towards us. It was the last time I saw it. It still had the old green carriages with the gold lettering. A diesel locomotive was pulling them, just as the steam locomotives had done before. And there too I thought of Maurice: Where would he be? It was six months ago, perhaps a little longer, that he and Delphine had moved away from Villeblevin. And Véronique must have read in my eyes, what I was thinking, because hardly had the rattling passed and we were on the other bank, than she asked me, whether I was thinking about him. Who did she mean, I asked. And she smiled for a long time. Maurice, she said after a while, she was talking about Maurice.

If a train, like the midday train, came from the south across the Yonne, it went for three quarters of a mile parallel to the main road, before line and route nationale parted. To the north Route Nationale 6 curved away from Villeblevin, but the tracks went right through the village, separated two playing fields, went on past the church, the cemetery, the open air swimming pool, the school, past the back of Maurice's great uncle's house and further past farm houses, gardens, fields until the village came to an end and the Forest of Fontainebleau began. In the forest's outskirts, surrounded by old oaks, lay the park and the dilapidated manor house of the Chévreaux. That was the stretch which Maurice mentioned in his letter – which he conjured up. Because that stretch was sacred to us, indeed more than that. It was our escape route, our exit from Villeblevin. On it we practised how to disappear.

Since the letter the memories were chasing through my head. What's past is past – I didn't know when I was supposed to have said that to Maurice, but I nevertheless wished it were so: gone, gone.

In the week after I left hospital my daughters took it in turns to look after me: Pen came in the morning, in the afternoons Jeanne came after the office. If Jeanne had to stay longer, my son-in-law visited me and we played chess. André won every game, although I couldn't fail to notice that he almost always suggested a Sicilian, at which I was better than he was. I was exhausted, but then again not so exhausted that I would have granted him the triumph of the deliberate loser. Me sitting in bed, he in the wicker chair beside it, we silently and doggedly pushed the figures across the board. We weren't good players. We both tended to dramatic, unconsidered sacrifice of officers, André even to suicide of his queen, which he probably thought brilliant, but I, however thought idiotic, but didn't tell him. We both wanted to win and hardly had the opening been completed, than he tried to confuse me by quoting moves from his favourite matches, "Fischer against Spassky, Reykjavik 1972!", or sentences from Vladimir Nabokov's novels: "If you do that, then I'll do this, and out goes knight." He didn't seem to know about the letter, which is why I didn't even mention it. And Jeanne and Pen already appeared to have forgotten Maurice's detailed communication, which is why I didn't say anything to them either about what was going on inside me. It didn't stop raining. It rained almost the whole week. I listened to André's exposition of the "Solus Rex" and other terribly tedious examples from the wide field of chess problems, at the same time virtually never leaving my bed and yet my thoughts were running through the hottest summer days I could remember.

I recalled every detail. When I was at last left to myself, I threw the pillow from my bed, mowing down the figures already set up for the next inglorious game and lay flat on my back. I shut my eyes. I folded my hands over my heart. So I let it all wash over me. And it wasn't a minute before, the images, the sounds and everything else appeared and they were there again: bridge, railway line, embankment. The open air swimming pool and the school yard. Madame Labeige, Professor Ravoux, the Patache brothers. The day of the accident. Albert Camus! The Nobel Prize winner dead in

Villeblevin. And not dead, not a Nobel Prize winner, but alive: me, me in Villeblevin. And Villeblevin in me. I had the whole place in my head.

And then the train rolled on, and at the same time the rain beat on the window: The train, the regional express of my memories crossed the bridge over the Yonne and shot forward along the exactly two and a quarter mile stretch to the edge of the wood. In between was Villeblevin, which didn't have a station. There were two tracks, and the second track, intended as a siding, was in reality unused, no train had ever travelled on it. The wooden sleepers were rotting, the rails had rusted, a thick, lumpy red fur was sticking to them, mouse cities with passageways and tunnels, storerooms and cemeteries lay beneath the ballast, and the ballast wasn't grey, but shimmered and shone, green, blue and in summer even purple with moss and lichen.

The abandoned embankment was the best thing there was in Villeblevin. In the summer holidays the whole place was like it. Everything was deserted, dreary and empty. Officials and farmers had remained behind, but everyone else had gone to the seaside. There seemed to be only two children in Villeblevin, Maurice and me, that was it. In term time too we were the ones who were most royally bored. In the summer we bored ourselves silly. There were weeks in which day after day we were the only ones at the open-air swimming pool. Towels, books, sweets and my transistor radio, we left it all lying on the grass in the evening, in the morning it was all there just as if we had merely taken a dip in the empty blue pool to cool off.

What was good about the summer holidays? Only that the school house, too, was empty. The windows of the janitor's apartment on the ground floor were open during the day to let in some cool wind that was all. Long after ten in the evening, when my mother came in and I pretended to be sleeping and she switched off the light, there was something shining in the janitor's room as bright as a space ship just before landing. If I stood up again and crept back to the window then I saw the living rooms of the village flickering. But the absolute brightness, however, that hovered before my eyes and made me stare and stare until I began to dream and I slipped back into bed virtually already in a dream, was the janitor's chandelier, so big and radiantly bright,

that it should really have been hanging in the school hall. It certainly did so before, said Maurice – and things he imagined were as good as true to him. He was a boy who stood body and soul amidst marvels. I was more cautious, perhaps because my imagination frightened me more than anything else. According to Maurice, Monsieur Labeige kept his young wife like a kind of janitor's slave and, making up some excuses about safety, they had brought the chandelier from the school building into their living room, just as they once transported the discarded glass case for stuffed animals from the biology room and heaved it through their garden, before disappearing through their front door with it. Whether it was really true that from now on they used the glass case, in which not long before foxes' skulls, stuffed birds and fish skeletons had been displayed, as a kitchen cupboard, was something we never found out. But we thought anything possible when it came to Labeige and that not only because for years Maurice and I were in a kind of intergalactic state of war with him.

Did I know, asked André, on one of those afternoons when Jeanne was held up in the publishing house, who was chess world champion in 1957, the year he was born. I had never heard of Botvinnik, nor of Smyslov, two Russians who, as André explained at length, had fought one another on the chess board for more than a decade and had both been world champions in 1957, before at last with Tal and Petrosian the era of...

In 1957, when we began to build the great disappearance machine, Maurice and I were 13. We were in second year and lived in the same street as the grammar school. My father was a bargeman. He was about as interested in chess as he was in the Soviet planned economy. He was never there, and if he was there it was just about impossible to get on with him. When they met, my mother and Maurice's mother did nothing but talk about our fathers. We, they said, would turn out like our dear fathers. Even though I didn't have any intention of becoming a bargeman and Maurice didn't aspire to be shot down by a German in Normandy at the age of 30. He and his mother had three rooms on the first floor of an old house, which in Villeblevin was always called Maison Ravoux, a small quiet apartment with lots of plasterwork on the ceilings which looked out onto an overgrown garden and the railway embankment.

There was no one living above them, that's where the attics were and a big room to hang up the washing, which I remembered very well. Maurice and I wished we could move into it, in order to have the twilight emptiness of this entirely wood-panelled room all to ourselves. Maison Ravoux was called that after his great-uncle Benjamin, who lived alone on the ground floor, and whom his mother took care of, because he was diabetic. If she was asked what her job was, Maurice's mother said, housekeeper, sometimes she also said, cleaning woman. Was Professor Ravoux interested in chess, in the chess war between Smyslov and Botvinnik, in 1957, when André was born? I did not know.

If I managed a surprise move once in a while, André immediately exclaimed "Ssobáka!" which, as he explained to me, meant "little dog" in Russian and was intended quite affectionately. Boris Spassky had said it to Bobby Fischer in 1972 during a match. While André talked, while he quoted sentences from the *Luzhin Defence* or *Lolita* – "finis, my friends, finis, my enemies" – and torpedoed my castling, I recalled unforgettable summer afternoons. That was the trickiest time of day. One could never know where the enemy was. In the morning Labeige cleaned the corridors and class rooms, at midday he closed the windows and drew the curtains. Then, it was said, he slept for two hours. But in the afternoon one was never safe from him. If it was not too hot to work outside, then Madame Labeige stood in the school garden, legs apart, her beautiful bum up in the air, pulling weeds from a sandy soil. Because where the school garden was, there had once been a football pitch, before it was moved next to the railway embankment. Madame Labeige and her backside preoccupied our imaginations as did no other female creature in Villeblevin: She was not only beautiful and much younger than her husband. She was wild, she was smart, lively, strong, honest and mysterious. Enchanting and wonderful. Usually she wore her hair pinned up, and her husband, speculated Maurice, forced her to put on the same pigeon-grey track-suit as he himself wore, so that from the distance it was hardly possible to tell the two of them apart. At any rate it was only Labeige who tinkered with something on the roof of the bike shelter. If he spotted us committing the most serious of all offences, if we, in order to shorten the way to the railway embankment, ran across the schoolyard, it was always Labeige who shouted at us. His

wife, on the other hand, if she was suddenly standing in front of us, said, “Raymond and Maurice. Going somewhere? For another ten seconds I’ll pretend you’re a mirage, then unfortunately I have to call Monsieur Labeige...” – as if she were obeying an instruction, which it was not in her power, but only in the power of the janitor, who happened to be her husband, to change. She had freckles and green eyes. She was sweating heavily and smelled very sweetly of sweat and something else that I didn’t know, but which drove Maurice as wild as it did me. Sometimes we asked ourselves, how she would react, if one person, or two, came to rescue her.

Ochre-yellow, the building occupied almost the whole left side of the street. Apart from the grammar school it also accommodated the town hall. The tricolour hung from a mast above the entrance, a door which, like the entry with the wooden gate a couple of yards further on, was almost always shut, except when the mayor wanted to drive in or out. Roger Patache, who sometimes chauffeured the mayor around, was at the wheel of the Citroën DS. Roger had been a friend of Maurice’s father, and since his death he visited Maurice’s mother from time to time or drove to the cinema in Fontainebleau with her. At the back the Citroën had tinted windows, so that one never got to see more of the mayor than perhaps his hand, a bit of his shirt sleeve.

From time to time, when the janitor mowed the strip of grass in front of the school or was planting fresh flowers in the flower beds, Roger parked the DS in the entry in front of the locked gate, left the car door open and smoked a cigarette with the bright-red and shaven-headed hate-figure Labeige who leant against the fence. If we peeked through the curtains at the window of Maurice’s room, we only had eyes for the car. We sensed we would become witnesses to a secret occurrence, as soon as something stirred in the back of the black DS. Because one had to ask oneself why the mayor didn’t get out of the car as well, why he never spoke to the janitor himself, but instead preferred to send out Roger Patache who, apart from Maurice’s mother Cora, wasn’t friendly to anyone. Cora he called her, although her name was Corinne.

But nothing ever moved in the DS. Sometimes, when he flicked the cigarette onto the street and turned away from Labeige, Roger looked up at us, before he went back to the car. And we, we ducked down, dived below the window sill in a single movement and became as invisible as the mayor, who was called Léaud and who sat in the gangster limousine the whole time and waited.

“Can you,” asked André, when it was my move and a glance at the board revealed that yet again I didn’t have a chance, “do you think you can list the world champions since 1957 in the right order?”

“No.”

“I can. Wait...” – he rubbed his hands and stared at the ceiling – “Botvinnik, Smyslov, Botvinnik, Tal, Botvinnik, Petrosian, Spassky, Fischer, Karpov, Kasparov and...”

“Botvinnik?”

He laughed. And said, offended: “Kramnik”.

We waited till we heard the DS driving into the yard and the gate bang shut. Then we leapt to our feet ran to the kitchen window at the back and pulled it open. Everything was quiet in the house and in the overgrown back garden. The afternoon lay before us, empty and long and boiling hot. Beneath us, the garden door of Maurice’s great uncle stood open. But we didn’t hear anything from there either, no snoring and no turning in the bed which lay exactly under Maurice’s bed one floor below, not the slightest sound. Professor Ravoux was there, only one didn’t hear him, he was always there, because he hadn’t left the house for a long time, and even if he had wanted to, he was far too fat. When it was so quiet, he was sitting in his special easy chair by the window, the one that didn’t collapse under his weight. He read there or wrote about the Duc de Montmorency, whom he greatly admired, or simply watched what was happening in the street.

But since Roger Patache and Mayor Léaud were no longer there, nothing was happening in the street. Where something was happening, was at the back, beyond the overgrown garden, in the big walnut trees, and that's what we were waiting for.

It was heralded by what we called the negative wind.

“Stop watch?” asked Maurice and ran his hand through his mop of hair, which was reddish blond and stood up wildly from his head now in one direction, now in another. And I nodded and like him stared at the railway embankment.

Even before we heard the whistle from the Yonne bridge, the walnut trees began to move. From our green grandstand, the ivy-framed window on the first floor of Maison Ravoux, we saw it: The foliage didn't rustle, there was not a breeze in the air. What made the leaves tremble was the negative wind – they quivered and only then did they show their iridescent undersurface. In summer the trees along the embankment turned silver, when the 1.50 p.m. express train from Paris thundered through Villeblevin.

Then came the whistle from the bridge. It was the shrill, long drawn-out whistle of the big steam locomotive which was still in use. We loved it and between the two of us called it “the beautiful, the wonderful”, and that's exactly what it was, because those were the feelings we had for it, beautiful and wonderful.

“Quiet now!” was the next thing Maurice said, although he didn't need to say it. I knew what mattered. We hoped that no sound would disturb us. We just listened into the garden, along the tracks and ever further as far as the river. The clattering came from there. The beautiful, the wonderful was coming across the bridge, and we knew, when the clattering grew a little quieter, just a hint, then the locomotive had reached this side of the bridge and passed the points, where the siding diverged, and then raced on alongside the unused track, while the carriages with the people, which were going to Paris, to the Gare de l'Est, were still swaying above the Yonne.

“Now!” cried Maurice and a fraction of a second later: “Have you got it?” and his wide open eyes in his freckled face stared at me.

And I shouted back: “Yes, I’ve got it!”, and then to prove it I held up the stop watch, so that we could both see the seconds racing.

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