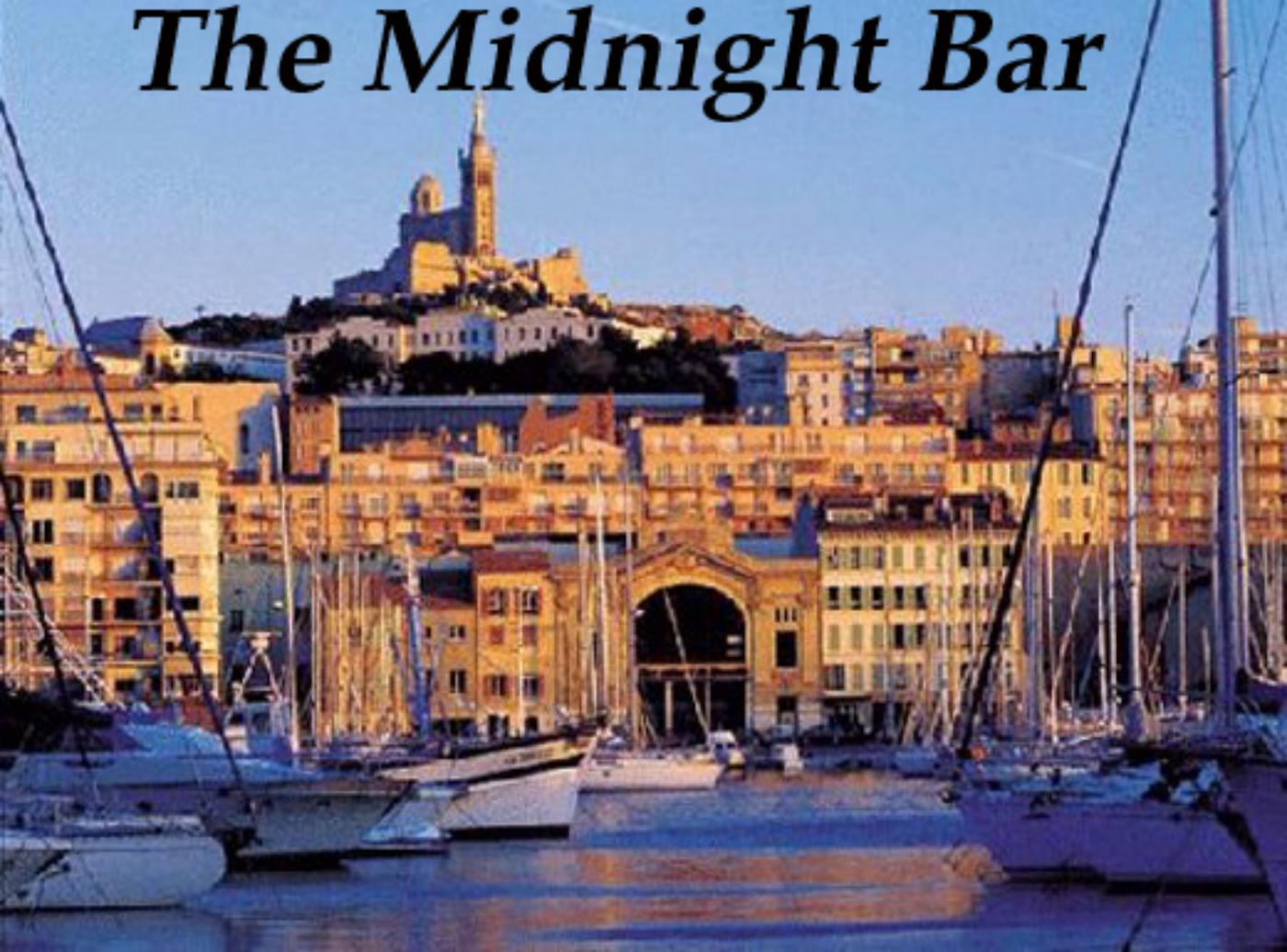


The Midnight Bar



The Midnight Bar

a French war tragedy

from Pierre Boileau's and Thomas Narcejac's "*D'entre les morts*"

by Christian Lanciai (1998)

translated 2019

Dramatis personae:

Bartender

René (first customer)

other customers

Robert (6th customer)

Madeleine, his wife

a doctor

Lucille

Max

Two policemen

Other bar guests of various categories

The action is in Paris and Marseilles, 1940-46.

Copyright © Christian Lanciai 1998-2019

The scene is a cheap bar. It is closing time.
One guest is left in the bar with his head bent down and his hat on.

Bartender You are the last one, Monsieur.
Customer I know.
Bartender If you leave we could start cleaning.
Customer I haven't finished drinking yet.
Bartender You never do. You might need to dry out sometimes.
Customer Not I. Do you know what I did four years during the war?
Bartender (assizing him) You were either at a hospital or kept away doing nothing.
Customer Wrong. I was drinking.
Bartender All the war?
Customer All the war.
Bartender I believe you. And you don't seem to have learned to get dry. What will it be?
Customer A double Scotch.
Bartender At this late hour?
Customer At this early hour, you mean.
Bartender It's the same. For you time does not seem to exist.
Customer It never did.
Bartender What made you forget all about time and the world and just spend the war drinking? Let me guess. – Unhappy love.
Customer How could you guess?
Bartender I am a bartender. I know all humanity better than any confessor.
Customer That's why I'm still here. You inspire me with confidence. I could sit here drinking all night with you for company.
Bartender Only if you could pay.
Customer Do I look poor?
Bartender Not directly. But if you'll excuse me I will lock up anyway. When you have finished I can let you out. (*goes to lock the door*)
Customer I will never be finished.
Bartender With liquor or with woman?
Customer Neither with liquor or with women.
Bartender Are you of that kind?
Customer What kind?
Bartender Who never can have only one.
Customer I had several, but she was one and the same.
Bartender Now it's getting interesting.
Customer Or rather, she was several although one and the same.
Bartender Better and better. Was she possessed?
Customer No, but I am still possessed by her.
Bartender You mean them?

Customer No, she was only one. But I could never understand who she was, since she alternated between identities.

Bartender Not an uncommon phenomenon in women.

Customer No, this one was different. She wasn't common at all. She was the most unusual woman in the world.

Bartender She must have been, since you didn't get married to her.

Customer I could never have her, but still she was mine. But always when I thought I had got her she disappeared.

Bartender Into thin air?

Customer Don't make fun of me. This is serious.

Bartender Yes, it looks like it. Nothing is more serious than when you start taking yourself seriously.

Customer My dear friend, you don't know what you are talking about.

Bartender Do you?

Customer I wish I knew.

Bartender My dear Sir, obviously you have problems. If you wish I could help you with it. But then you must tell me the whole story.

Customer It started in 1940. There was a war, and I was a lawyer. I had wished to be a policeman, I had worked as a policeman, but a certain psychic liability had forced me to resign. The same defect exempted me from war service. So I stayed at home in Paris in civil service, and there were others who did the same, like an old school fellow of mine, who managed an important wharf in Le Havre. At that time we were still certain that the Germans only were up to some suicidal madness that we would soon lash out of them.

Bartender We all thought so, since the Maginot line was infallible.

Customer We thought we could quickly beat the Germans all the way back to Berlin with some help of the English, but that was in 1940 long before Dunkirk...

(The scene shifts. The bar remains the same but is filled with light, life and movement and many people of 1940, while the bartender discreetly vanishes.)

Customer 2 What do you think of those bloody Gerries?

3 Their enterprise confirms the prejudice of generations: they are all mad.

4 The case is clear! The entire war is just a German suicide party!

2 But are we so much better with our old Dreyfus generals? Don't forget that we were the ones who framed Dreyfus!

5 But that was just one single person and a military at that! The Germans are so mad so they believe themselves to be able to eliminate all Jews in all Europe!

3 And therefore they apply the German logic to first start with all other peoples, beginning with the most impossible: Poles and French!

(The animated discussions carry on.)

6 What do you think of the war?

1 *(the same since the first scene)* Just nonsense.

6 Can we win?

1 We never won against the Germans, but the English never lost a war. So even if we lose against the Germans the English will win the war for us. I don't care how it will turn out.

6 You are as unpatriotic as myself.

1 You look worried, Robert.

6 I am. I have a problem turning all world wars into nothing.

1 Then it must be your wife.

6 How did you guess?

1 Love is the only serious thing in life for us Frenchmen.

6 Indeed. But my wife is something different.

1 So is every Frenchman's wife.

6 You don't understand. She is something more. She is more than only love.

1 Why are you so worried?

6 (*grows serious*) She is gradually disappearing, and I am losing her.

1 Just like that? Into thin air?

6 No, not physically.

1 Don't tell me you like everyone else are losing her to a lover. It happens to all of us. Even Victor Hugo was deceived by his wife.

6 (*serious*) You are joking, René, but this is serious. She is not unfaithful.

1 Then it's really serious.

6 How long have we known each other, René?

1 Only since we started school together.

6 That's more than three quarters of our life. That's why I dare to ask a favour of you, trusting you with my deepest confidence with such a long common background.

1 You are welcome.

6 I would ask you to follow her.

1 (*surprised*) My dear Robert, so you suspect your wife of infidelity after all!

6 Not at all.

1 But that's absurd! I am not even a policeman any more! And you know why I had to resign. My psychic handicap disqualifies me even from the simplest jobs!

6 But I have known you for more than thirty years, and I could trust you. I couldn't trust anyone else with such a favour.

1 But my dear Robert, come on! You ask me to follow your wife because you know she is not unfaithful, and you are serious about it! What comedy is this?

6 I want to avoid a tragedy.

1 By following your wife with the help of a dismissed policeman who in critical situations gets paralyzed? Come on, Robert!

6 You have never seen my wife. At least give her a chance.

1 A chance of what? Do you want me to be her lover for you?

6 You might be able to save her life.

1 Pardon me, Robert, but your dead seriousness makes me laugh my sides off. Then explain at least what is the matter with her!

6 She is possessed by a dead person.

1 So why then consult me? Take her to a doctor! Or to a psychologist or psychiatrist! Why not an exorcist?

6 You still can't take it seriously. But I don't wish to apply such definite methods until I am more certain about it.

1 What do you want to know?

6 What she is doing in daytime. She is gone all day, and I can't watch her then since I have to work. When she comes home she tells me she has been to Auteuil or Bois de Boulogne, but the car shows she has been away for hundreds of miles. She walks like in a fog and doesn't seem to know herself what she is doing, as if she was monitored by another.

1 Is she sleepwalking?

6 No, but she lives like in a trance.

1 Wake her up then.

6 She is awake but still absent.

1 I could of course discreetly follow her at some distance, since I have nothing sensible to do anyway during the days.

6 Tonight we are going together to the opera. I have a ticket for you from a place where you can watch us without her seeing you. It's very important that she must never notice that you are following her. *(gives him a ticket)*

1 Apparently you thought of everything. Of course I will keep thoroughly invisible.

6 You don't have to make up your mind now. You can decide whether you wish to proceed with the investigation or not after having seen her.

4 *(breaking in)* What's the matter, boys? You look so seriously worried! I hope you don't let the war bother you. It's not serious, you know.

1 We have much more serious things to discuss than any present world war.

4 We are making bets about it. What do you think? Will the Germans be beaten within half a year or more?

6 Three months.

1 Four.

4 Within half a year then? Boys! The odds are favourably increasing for us!

3 You don't win any war by waging bets.

2 *(to 6)* Who bothers about wars when he has a beautiful wife to care for?

6 Exactly. Forget all wars. Make love instead.

3 If only it were that simple.

1 See you at the opera tonight, Robert.

6 It's music to your liking – Puccini's "Madame Butterfly".

1 Isn't that somewhat hard to digest as it involves harakiri?

6 Reality transcends all fiction, René. *(finishes his glass and is dragged out by the others. René turns back to the bar and the bartender, who returns. Also the light goes out, and the bar is back to dark and empty.)*

René That's how it began. I saw her that evening.

Bartender What was she like? (*Music is heard from Madame Butterfly: Her air in the second act.*)

René Imagine Danielle Darrieux and Jeanette MacDonald, both at their most beautiful. Imagine the soft charm of Danielle Darrieux in combination with Jeanette MacDonald's beauty, and you have her. I saw her in the foyer in the intermission in a black gown with a long bluish green shawl. (*She is seen vaguely in the opposite part of the stage, only faintly appearing, simply passing by and vanishing.*)

She was naturally blonde with a slight touch of golden and red. But the most important thing about her was that she was a real lady. You could see that at once. No country did ever bring forth such fine families of nobility as France, and it was as if everything best and finest about our country was collected and concentrated in her.

Bartender You fell in love with her at once.

René It wasn't that simple. But I looked forward to the task of discreetly tailing and following her at a safe distance without being noticed.

Bartender And I bet you took that undertaking seriously

René I did exactly as I was asked and nothing more. I followed her. (*empties his glass*) And it was strange wanderings indeed she brought me out on.

Bartender You need a refill. (*fills up his glass*)

René You are the perfect bartender.

Bartender No, I am just like the doctor who happens to know the right medicine.

René I thank you for it. (*drinks*)

Bartender Well, what happened? When did she discover that you tailed her?

René One thing at a time. (*Robert has returned and taken a seat by a table. René leaves the bar and joins Robert.*)

Robert Well, René, any results? Have you anything to tell? What is my wife up to?

René It's indeed most strange and worrying things.

Robert I thought so. But what?

René I can't make her out.

Robert Who could ever with any woman?

René Still there is some logic in everything she does. But it's not of this world.

Robert Get to the point.

René First she went to the Passy cemetery. There she stayed very long like dreaming herself away by a certain grave. Do you have any family grave there?

Robert What grave was it?

René She remained there for fifteen minutes before tearing herself away like from some spell. I could examine the grave afterwards.

Robert Well?

René (*brings out a note*) Pauline Lagerlac, 1840-1865.

Robert (*turns his eyes down and sighs*)

René Do you know who it was?

Robert It was Madeleine's great grandmother. Well, go on.

René A relative? Well, that seems fair.

Robert I will tell you more later. Go on with your report.

René Then she went to the Louvre. There she sat for an eternity contemplating a female portrait.

Robert Was it of anyone special?

René "Portrait of Pauline" by Edgar Degas.

Robert Of course. The famous Pauline portrait by Degas.

René But the strange thing was, that your wife had her hair made exactly in the same way as the Pauline of the portrait, as if she identified herself with this lady. But why did she die so young?

Robert She jumped into the Seine and drowned herself.

René How terrible! Why?

Robert It's a long story. But go on with your report.

René She wandered along the quays and across the river to Île St. Louis, so that she could watch the Notre Dame from behind. Then she went back along the left quay. But she seemed constantly absent, as if, as you expressed it yourself, she wandered in a sort of fog.

Robert The question is where these wanderings in the fog will lead her. Where will they end? That's what worries me.

René But tell me now about this Pauline, this great grandmother, whom she seems to identify herself with.

Robert A tragic story. Pauline Lagerlac was a foundling. She grew up at the care of the nuns in a monastery in Victor Hugo's time, but she escaped from there at the age of seventeen. She began to appear at lighter entertainment institutions, where she caught the eye of an eccentric millionaire. This was during the second empire, when there were so many bizarre barons that got rich in one night, owned all Paris in the next and then suddenly disappeared. But Pauline became a celebrity especially in the salons and acquired a reputation almost on par with the empress Eugénie. Then Pauline had a little daughter. But the baron had tired of her by then and married another but wanted the child. So he arranged for the mother to be bereft of the child, leaving her without any support. When she ran out of money she had to walk the street and eventually became deranged. She made herself notorious by harassing anyone on the street, accusing them of having stolen her baby. She was locked up in an asylum, but she escaped from there to drown herself in the Seine. She jumped from the bridge to Île St. Louis behind the Notre Dame. It was in February, and the water was cold...

René But why does your wife identify with her?

Robert That's the worst thing about it. She knows nothing about her great grandmother's history and fate. I researched it myself from other sources.

René That would imply...

Robert That her great grandmother, the beautiful unblessed Pauline, tries to take charge of my wife to make her repeat her suicide and her wild eternal protest against the cruelty of the world.

René But could any such thing be possible?

Robert That's the question we are facing, René. But we are warned and have to eye the danger. Madeleine is now of the same age as Pauline when she drowned herself. If she tries to jump any bridge, René, you must be there to save her.

(This part of the stage gets dark. René rises and returns to the bar.)

Bartender (visible again) And did she jump?

René Yes, she actually jumped. And it came like a complete surprise. It was in the early spring of 1940 when the water was at its coldest, I think there were even ice-floes on the waves, and I had to promptly throw off my coat and jump after her.

Bartender But then you had to reveal yourself to her.

René I had no choice. It was a matter of life and death.

Bartender What did people say?

René Fortunately there were not many who saw us. Most people choose other quays for their walks, and it was a cold icy day, so almost no one was out. It was also in the morning. I could fish her out rather undisturbed and discreetly carry her into my car and drive her home.

Bartender To your apartment?

René Yes. That was closest.

Bartender You wanted her for yourself?

René She was quite unconscious. Her husband was gone away, and I had no access to her home. I could give her the best help at home with me.

Bartender And what did she say when she woke up? Wait! Let me guess. "Where am I?"

René No, it wasn't that simple. She said nothing. She just looked at me in terror. That was natural. There she was waking up ice-cold and damp in an alien bed with an alien man.

Bartender An interesting situation. Could you go into details?

René It was like this.

(The scene shifts showing René's bachelor apartment, a nice flat of one room with a kitchen with a warm fire in the open fireplace.

René sits down quietly and discreetly by the fire, waiting for Madeleine in the bed to wake up.)

Madeleine (wakes up with a shudder) Who am I?

René (gets alert and rises) Shouldn't you rather wonder where you are?

Madeleine You are right. But who are you?

René You are lucky. I am a policeman.

Madeleine What has happened? Why am I so cold and my hair so wet?

René You fell into the Seine.

Madeleine And you fished me out?

René You were lucky. I happened to be close by. It's not many people walking there on a cold and early Sunday morning.

Madeleine But you happened to be there?

René Yes.

Madeleine What's your name?

René René.

Madeleine I am Madeleine Gévigne.

René I know. I have notified your husband. He is in Le Havre. I found your identification with your home address in your driver's licence. There they gave me the number to your husband.

Madeleine And you dried me up and put me in your bed. You are very considerate.

René That's my profession, to care for people.

Madeleine But how did I fall into the Seine?

René You have no memory of the incident?

Madeleine No.

René What is the last thing you remember?

Madeleine That I was walking around in Paris.

René And then what happened?

Madeleine I became confused and got lost in the usual darkness.

René What usual darkness?

Madeleine I sometimes have blackouts.

René Yes, your husband said something about it. Has it happened before that you fell into the Seine?

Madeleine No, never. I have never even fallen in the street.

René So it was a greater blackout this time.

Madeleine Apparently.

René But you are cold. You had better take this on. (*throws a morning-gown over to her*) Come and sit by the fire. What about some coffee?

Madeleine I would love to.

René I made it fresh for you.

Madeleine (*dons the morning-gown in bed, does not leave the bed until after that.*) Will my husband come and fetch me?

René He will call any moment. He has called every half hour since I first called him.

Madeleine How long have I been here?

René Two hours.

Madeleine And you have been sitting by me all the time. What did my husband say?

René He was naturally very upset and shocked.

Madeleine Have you sacrificed your working hours on keeping watch over me?

René Don't worry. I am dismissed.

Madeleine Are you out of work?

René Not directly.

Madeleine So you are indirectly out of work.

René Perhaps you could call it that.

Madeleine Perhaps you would pleased enough to explain your situation.

René I am really a lawyer these days. I used to be a policeman, but I had to resign because of an incapacitating work trauma.

Madeleine What happened?

René We pursued a criminal across the roofs. I lost my balance and fell. If I hadn't caught hold of the spout I would have fallen down some number of storeys. My colleague tried to help me. His name was Leriche. He stretched down a hand and thought he could pull me up. Then a tile broke loose under his foot, and he was the one to fall down when it should have been me. He died instantly, and it was my fault.

Madeleine No, it was the criminal's.

René And he got away of course.

Madeleine And you were left hanging in the spout.

René I soon got help. They didn't have to bring a canvas-sheet. But the worst of all was the vertigo. I had never suspected earlier that I could suffer from vertigo. I was paralysed for a month afterwards.

Madeleine By the vertigo or the sense of guilt?

René Both. It was a terrible combination, and they still make out my life's two worst and probably only enemies.

Madeleine How long since?

René A little more than half a year. And then came the war on top of that.

Madeleine And now you are a lawyer?

René Actually I don't have to work. I had a good pension from the police. They are careful about providing for crippled policemen. That raises the status of the corps.

Madeleine So you don't have many clients?

René Very few. The law job is more like a hobby and perhaps something of a therapy. I don't have to feel out of work or redundant.

Madeleine Am I now a client?

René No, but you could make one.

Madeleine You actually saved my life. According to a Chinese saying you are now responsible for the rest of my life.

René If you don't have anything against it, that's what I'll be then.

Madeleine I don't think my husband will come and fetch me. He is in Le Havre, you know.

René How was the coffee?

Madeleine It was the best coffee I have had in my life.

(The telephone rings.)

René It must be your husband. Would you like to talk with him?

Madeleine I can't stay here. Tell him I went home on my own.

René I could drive you. *(answers the phone)* Hallo? Yes, she is awake now. We have had some coffee and a chat. No, she has no pains from the incident. But she has no memory of what really happened. Do you understand? It seems really to have been like another force than her own that brought her to the abyss. *(pause)*

(to Madeleine) Your husband is now in Rouen and on his way to Paris.

Madeleine Tell him that I am completely restored and can make it at home on my own.

René (in the telephone, pauses) Yes, we'll talk more about it tomorrow. All's well that ends well. *(hangs on)*

Madeleine What did he say?

René He was relieved. He actually happens to be an old school mate of mine.

Madeleine What luck! Then you know each other.

René Yes, we really do. May I drive you home, or would you prefer staying here for the night? Your clothes are not dry yet.

Madeleine Thank you, but I shouldn't stay here. My husband will be coming home. Perhaps I could borrow some clothes from you in the meantime. You are welcome to drive me home.

René Then I'll go and fetch the car.

Madeleine Please do. And thanks for the coffee.

René I am to thank you.

Madeleine For what?

René For getting to know you.

Madeleine You don't know me, Monsieur. And don't try it either. You are a happy bachelor. Don't ever try to get to know a woman.

René Not even you?

Madeleine Me least of all.

René You are even more mysterious than you seem to be to your husband. I'll soon be back. You will find the wardrobe to the right. Take whatever you feel like. *(leaves)*
(Madeleine sits brooding by the fire for a moment and finishes her coffee before she rises and leaves for the wardrobe, and everything gets dark.)

bartender (René back at the bar when there is light on it.) That was a major catch indeed! So she just came falling straight into you life and naked?

René No vulgarity, please.

Bartender I beg your pardon for being direct.

René You are right. She did fall naked straight into my life. And she was beautiful as well. She was absolutely irresistible. Anyone would have fallen in love with her instantly and forever. She was like that. There is only one such woman in a million.

Bartender (amused) And what did her husband say?

René That's the curious thing. He had no objections or comments. He had engaged me specially to keep watch on her, and he was perfectly satisfied with the way I did it. He was never more pleased than when he learned that I had saved her from drowning and put her naked in my bed.

Bartender What did he say?

René "Thank God that you were there when it happened!" He was certain that she would have drowned otherwise.

Bartender So for his part it was quite in order that you associated with her on a daily basis?

René Yes, actually. He could never guess my feelings for her, his concern for her excluded all possible suspicions, or so I thought at least. So it became completely

legitimate for me to be with her every day, become more and more intimate with her and search her out.

Bartender How far did it go?

René (flings out his hands, as if to prove that he is unarmed) No love. I swear, that we only kept on a friendly basis. But we became very good and close friends. He seemed to trust me completely, and I did not want to abuse my friend Robert's confidence. I never wanted to risk our friendship nor the fine beauty in my relationship with Madeleine. It seemed that I could help her, and I wanted nothing more. That I loved her was my secret.

Bartender I suspect that you loved her too much at once.

René Correct. It was my mistake, but I couldn't help it. Who can help being in love? It's the most common of all mistakes, and no one ever regretted it.

Bartender So you tried to help Madeleine with her problems. How did it go?

René We searched our way in her impending darkness. We tried to reach her subconscious. We tried to get into some touch with the deceased Pauline Lagerlac. We went carefully one step at a time into the dark and dangerous area of the subconscious, and it seemed to work out well, for I was at the same time extremely cautious and delicate with her. I never wanted to put her at any risk...

Madeleine Thanks for being so careful about me, René.

René It's my duty as a man and human being.

Madeleine If only all men could reason in the same manner!

René Then people like you would never have to jump into the water.

Madeleine You are right.

René But we have to settle your problems, Madeleine. We have to eliminate the evil suicidal phantom within you.

Madeleine Do you believe in reincarnation, René?

René Why?

Madeleine Do you really think it's possible that my great grandmother, who committed suicide, tries to do it again by me?

René The thought is absurd, Madeleine. On the other hand I have to think it's quite possible that your great grandmother still is bitter about life and could try to continue taking revenge by manipulating her later kin to follow her terrible destiny.

Madeleine So you think she is another person than me?

René Definitely.

Madeleine So there is another power and influence than my own we have to fight. But how do you fight a dead person, René? How do you reach her?

René Only by unveiling her and seeing her through and telling her directly to disappear I think we could get rid of her for good. The strength and power of the dead is that they can see us and feel us without our seeing and feeling them. If we then still see them anyway, recognize them and identify them, their game is lost.

Madeleine You make it sound so simple.

René It is simple.

Madeleine But my life feels more than just led astray by someone dead. It feels as if I impossibly could master my own fate. That's what's leading me into perdition, René, not someone dead.

René Then I must fight your fate.

Madeleine Is it possible?

René Of course.

Madeleine (*turning away*) You are so naïve. You don't know anything.

René What is it that I don't know? Instruct me!

Madeleine I can't.

René Then you must let me help you. Perhaps I am the only one who could help you, *Madeleine*.

Madeleine So take me to a psychiatrist. He could surely drive away my evil spirits. Let him lobotomize me to make certain while he is at it. Or why not let a priest drive out my grandmother's evil spirit by downright professional exorcism! Wouldn't that be the simplest way?

René You mustn't talk like that, *Madeleine*.

Madeleine Then I would become what my husband wants: an obedient servant easy to manipulate.

René You have your right to your own life, *Madeleine*, without grandmothers and freaks and evil spirits.

Madeleine But I am married to my husband.

René I know. He is the one who employed me to help you.

Madeleine So it wasn't just by chance that you fished me out of the Seine?

René No, it wasn't just by chance, *Madeleine*. I followed you. I was your guardian angel.

Madeleine So my husband employed you to watch over me?

René Yes, *Madeleine*, in case something would happen. And it happened.

Madeleine So you are just my guardian?

René No, *Madeleine*, your lover. (*kisses her passionately all of a sudden*) I love you, *Madeleine*.

Madeleine René, this should never have happened.

René I know, but it has happened.

Madeleine No, the other thing. My husband should never have engaged you.

René In that case I could never have saved your life.

Madeleine My life isn't worth saving, René.

René How can you say such a thing like that, you, who are the most beautiful and sublime of women?

Madeleine No! You know nothing about me!

René That's why I want to know more.

Madeleine Enough! Forget me! (*runs away quickly*)

René *Madeleine!* Wait! (*runs out into the darkness after her.*)

Pause and silence.

The bartender pours him another drink.

Bartender And what happened next?

René The worst moment in my life. We had this conversation in a church outside Paris. We were just there for an ordinary rustic excursion. It had been on her own suggestion. But when she ran away from me in that church she ran straight up the church tower. I tried to follow, but the vertigo hit me. I can't endure heights. That's why I had to resign as a policeman. She disappeared into the top of the tower, and I just could not follow. In the next moment I heard her and saw her... (*Madeleine's long, terrible scream.*) I saw her body falling down through an aperture in the tower. But the scream was so terribly alive, as if she never could stop falling. I saw her body massacred against the stoning below the tower. It was all torn and wrung almost to irreognizability, and her neck was more than obviously broken. She had died instantly.

Bartender (after a moment's silence) And what did you do next?

René What could I do? I was to blame for everything! I had upset and shocked her. Instead of curing her evil I had made it worse and brought it to a crisis and dead end! I was destroyed. I suppressed it all immediately. After having seen her body wrung awry and massacred against the stones I remember nothing more, until I woke up at a clinic, wakened up by others. As the weakling I was I must have fainted by the overwhelming shock. I thought of jumping out after her and wished to follow her in death, make her company in her abyss, but I couldn't even manage that. I just swooned and went off as the absolutely despicable weakling and coward I was...

(*René wakes up in a bed in a hospital. Robert is sitting by his side.*)

Robert It's over now, René.

René Yes, and it's my fault.

Robert No, you couldn't help it. You tried to save her.

René I scared her to death!

Robert No, René, you mustn't think like that. Nothing could have saved her, not even you.

René There will be an inquest, won't it?

Robert I have already been questioned several times. The police suspects me of I don't know what.

René Let me testify. I take the whole responsibility.

Robert The matter is basically clear. She was suicidal. I employed you to protect her. You succeeded in saving her life once. The second time you were obstructed by your medically established vertigo factor. That's the simple case.

René Poor Robert. What will you do?

Robert Leave Paris. The Germans have broken through the Maginot line. They will occupy Paris any moment.

René Take me with you.

Robert You must first get well. You are still suffering from the shock. I will leave tomorrow.

René Take care.

A doctor You had better leave the patient now.

Robert (rising) Au revoir, René.

René (clutching his hand) In another and better world, when we have beaten the Germans.

Robert Goodbye, René. *(leaves)*

René (to the doctor) It was my fault that his wife killed herself. Can you cure that ailment, doctor?

Doctor I am afraid it's not within my capabilities.

René Then nothing can cure me, doctor, as long as I live.

Doctor Yes, you yourself, but no one else.

René Do you really think so, doctor?

Doctor Yes, but it could take some time. *(prepares an injection)*

René Give me a generous injection, doctor, so that I may sleep long and forget.

Doctor That much I can do, but it's only a temporary remedy, Monsieur. *(gives him the injection. René goes to sleep.)*

Poor devil. He is worse off than any war casualty. *(leaves)*

Bartender So that's how you went to the dogs.

René I escaped from the hospital. I escaped from the war and from the Germans. I escaped from Paris. I escaped from everything, and I was lucky, for I got away. Robert didn't make it. He was bombed by the Germans on his way from Paris. His car was hit and exploded with him.

Bartender So you never saw him again.

René No, and it felt wrong. I felt guilty. He had gone to blazes while I had got away, when it should have been the opposite. Now I was guilty both of his and Madeleine's death. I reached Marseilles in a regular breakdown condition and was disgusted by everything including the Vichy government.

Bartender (refilling his glass) Have another drink.

René That was the only thing I could do in Marseilles: drinking. But it would get worse. I went on escaping, to Morocco, Casablanca, and to Dakar. There I got stuck in a joint. For four years.

I did not suffer the war. I drank myself through it. I filtered all the miseries of the world through my glass. And in the glass I always found her and watched her, always waiting for me at the bottom. But I never reached the bottom. *(empties his glass)*

Bartender No one ever does. *(refills)*

René Yes, I actually did in the end. But it was four years later, after the war, when I came back to Marseilles. The Germans had been defeated and left France. I thought of Robert and wanted to celebrate the liberation with him if anybody. Only then I learned about his sudden tragic end. Then I started drinking again – recklessly. Again I saw only her in the glass but could never find her in the bottom, although she was always there. She just couldn't disappear and leave me alone. She was an unfinished business and unresolved mystery. Her case was still a matter left hanging in the air on top of the pending basket, urging and demanding a settlement. She kept

hanging about haunting me, just as her great grandmother had been persecuting her with her tragedy. I was stuck in the black hole of her forever.

(During this the scene is slowly changing into a vulgar bar in the port of Marseilles with sailors and prostitutes. One of the latter is especially vulgar in a cheap fur coat that catches the eye. She is sitting with the only guest in the joint of some better status. René catches sight of her and can't tear his eyes away from her.)

That's when I caught sight of the other one. It was a dreadfully cheap and vulgar harlot, a real luxury prostitute, the extreme contrary to Madeleine, and still there was something about her that distinctly reminded me of Madeleine.

Lucille (smoking with a mouthpiece in a garish hat and purple leather gloves, to her wealthy cavalier) That man is staring at me.

Max Let him stare. You are used to it.

Lucille I am not used to people who can't pay for themselves to stare at me as if they owned me.

Max He is just a harmless bum of the gutter.

Lucille He could have seen me before. He could be a policeman.

Max Is he a threat to you if he is?

Lucille All men can be threats, but the most threatening are always those who neither say or do anything but just sit waiting, chewing around their destructive thoughts, which are written all over their blank faces. A staring expressionless face always gives me the creeps. And that bloke gives me an uncanny feeling that he knows more about me than myself.

Max (calling across the bar) Hallo there, you the bum at the bar, come here!

René (stricken) Are you talking to me?

Max Yes, exactly! Come here!

René (hesitating but coming) What do you want?

Max I want to buy you a drink. Take a seat.

René (taking the seat slowly, looking more at Lucille than at Max)

Max Have you seen this lady before?

René Why?

Max You are staring at her as if you knew her. You are annoying her. And you go on staring. You are insulting her.

René I mean no harm. It's just that she reminds me of someone.

Max Who, if I may ask?

René A fine lady I knew before the war.

Max There you are, Lucille. He is innocent. He is just a war victim like everybody else. But the war is over now. So let us celebrate and build a new better world without war.

Lucille But with atom bombs and communists. The war goes on in Korea.

René You have the same voice.

Lucille The same voice as whom?

René Her name was Madeleine.

Lucille Was?

René She is dead.

Max I am sorry. Did she die in the war?

René No. She committed suicide. I tried to save her but failed awkwardly as with everything else.

Max So you were never in the war?

René No. I was among the cowards who only got away while all the brave ones died.

Max And for that you feel guilty of the whole war. I know your kind. You are more to be pitied than all the war casualties.

René That's what my doctor told me as well.

Max But I haven't introduced you. This is Lucille. She is here just to comfort people like you. She could comfort anyone. It's her profession.

René She could never comfort me.

Max Shall we bet?

René (to Lucille) Are you sure your name is not Pauline?

Max I am sure she must have changed names many times. They usually do.

Lucille Max, I am not sitting here to be insulted.

Max Shut up. You have been paid to accept anything.

René No lady should accept insults.

Lucille There you are, Max.

Max (gets up) Is that how it is? Accept this bum then, this deserter from the war, this drunkard from the gutter, who never did anything for France! You just take care of him and wear him down and abuse him, you slut! I could find other harlots who will give service for their payments!

Lucille I would rather have a poor man who is honest than a rich shitbag like you.

Max And for such a bitch I used my credit! (leaves them in a fury, upsetting the table on the way.)

René (raises the table)

Lucille You have seen better days.

René I didn't intend to offend your friend.

Lucille That blasted humbug has made his fortune on the black market and business with both Vichy and the Germans. Or else he wouldn't be that rich.

René Still you accepted his money.

Lucille Unfortunately I had to survive.

René I agree that it's sometimes involuntary.

Lucille We seem to be in the same boat.

René Sorry that I can't tear my eyes from you.

Lucille Do I remind of her so much?

René Yes.

Lucille Although she was such a fine lady?

René Yes.

Lucille You see what I am.

René You could be improved.

Lucille I doubt it.
René You could be remade.
Lucille No human being can be remade.
René Let me try.
Lucille Why?
René Just for the experiment. I think I could find her in you.
Lucille You want to dig up a dead woman in me?
René The dead could hide among the living.
Lucille That's enough! You are getting more and more morbid.
René No, there is something that urges me on.
Lucille What?
René Love.
Lucille Could you love me?
René Let me try.
Lucille That's what I am for.
René But first you have to be remade.
Lucille What do you give me if I agree?
René My life.
Lucille Is that all? It couldn't be worth much.
René Although it's wasted I think it could be more worth than all the assets of Max.
Lucille I could take you on trial.
René That's all I ask. I have nothing to live for but the memory of the one you remind me of. Let me live for you like for that memory.
Lucille You don't know what you are in for.
René So let me find out.
Lucille I assume you are not entirely without resources.
René Your guess is correct.
Lucille So I am entirely at your service, Monsieur. Where would you like to start?
René With your appearance. Let's leave this place to begin with. We have a new life to start. Come!
(They break up, and he leads her out of the joint.)
Bartender How could such a cheap slut remind you in the least of your so beautiful and noble lady?
René That was the strange thing. I couldn't explain the likeness even to myself, but there was something more palpable than only the looks.
Bartender And how could you even get the idea of trying to convert a cheap harlot from the harbour of Marseilles into what Madeleine had been?
René It was the very impossibility of the enterprise that tempted me. The challenge was irresistible, and deep inside I knew that I would succeed.
Bartender Did you succeed?
René That was the strangest thing of all. Gradually, piece by piece, detail by detail we methodically carried through the renovation of this woman from a harbour

slut of the gutter into the very likeness of Madeleine. It was like restoring an old palace, which had decayed into a stable for cows.

Bartender Didn't she object?

René She didn't like it. She thought I was the victim of my own self-deception. She wanted me to love her and not her clothes, her face or Madeleine. She wished to be appreciated and maybe loved for her own sake and not for Madeleine's.

Bartender Of course. No one likes to be remade into a copy of her man's earlier mistress. That's an outrageous and extreme insult. It is surprising that she agreed to it at all.

René But the most remarkable thing was, that while I gradually gave her better clothes and brought her up from what she had been, her soul also changed. Simultaneously with that her outward more and more changed into the image of Madeleine, her soul also became more and more like Madeleine's.

Bartender That's what I thought would be the most impossible part of the operation.

René But it came true before my very eyes. It was almost like a spooky revelation. Finally a terrible suspicion came to me... (*Lucille enters completely changed into Madeleine's style but still with Lucille's hair and make-up.*)

Lucille, I must ask you a question. Are you and Madeleine by any chance one and the same person?

Lucille That Madeleine has gone to your head. You may think whatever you want of me. If you want to believe that I was your Madeleine, so go ahead. But didn't she jump out from a church tower and kill herself?

René That's what I saw with my own eyes. But I am also seeing you with my own eyes, and you have her eyes, her voice, even her way of moving around, even her soul...

Lucille Come on, René. You know nothing about my soul. No man will ever know or understand anything about a woman's soul. That's why he tries to deny to himself that it exists.

René There is so very little that makes you different from Madeleine.

Lucille No wonder, the way you so forcedly tried to make me a copy of her. One could almost suspect that your main driving force is your urge to copulate with a dead woman.

René Please don't be vulgar, Lucille. It doesn't suit you.

Lucille You mean that Madeleine was not like that.

René No, she was not like that.

Lucille But I can never become Madeleine, René, because I am Lucille, the harlot from Marseilles, a whore who slept with a hundred men and only made her living on selling her body! Try to see me for what I am!

René Still there is in some odd way Madeleine within you, and I want to evoke her and bring her out entirely. There are only a few more details missing...

Lucille You will never be satisfied! Let me be myself, and try to accept me as I am!

René Not as long as you can still make improvements. You must colour your hair, Lucille.

Lucille Never!

René And leave all make-up except some small discreet lipstick with just a hint of Mascara...

Lucille You want to turn me into a corpse, into a sterile statue like in Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion!

René This is my last request, Lucille.

Lucille And what happens then?

René I am curious about that myself. But perhaps I will be happy then.

Lucille For your own sake you had better be.

René It's my last request, Lucille.

Lucille (sighing hard) Well, what bloody colour of her hair did that blasted suicidal girl have then?

René No vulgarity, Lucille, please.

Lucille You reason exactly like a woman.

René No, Lucille, like a true and honest lover.

Lucille (sighs again) Well then, I'll take the risk, just to see what truth and honesty there is in that nutty lover.

Bartender So she coloured her hair and became as much of Madeleine as she could be. And then? Did she turn into Madeleine?

René She became more than just Madeleine.

Bartender What do you mean?

René She got the right colour of her hair. She got the right kind of discreet make-up. She got more and more of Madeleine's clothing style and behaviour. But when she returned from the hair-dresser she was still a total disaster.

(Lucille enters as Madeleine but with Lucille's hair style.)

But Lucille, what did you do to your hair?

Lucille (irritated) Is the colour wrong?

René No, it's the right colour, but you haven't changed the style of your hair! You know how I wanted it!

Lucille May I not keep anything of myself, not the slightest shred of my own personality?

René Only this last detail, Lucille, I pray!

Lucille You are hopeless!

René No, just faithful to my love ideal.

Lucille Your ideal will be your ruin. *(disappears into the toilet)*

René (to the bartender) I waited and waited. I turned around now and then *(does so)* to see her coming out, but she never came out. It was as if she intentionally kept me on the rack, as if she kept me waiting on purpose, and for a moment I felt that she would never come out any more. Then I grew desperate and started moving towards the toilet myself to fetch her... *(does so. Then she comes out. Suddenly she is Madeleine. Suddenly it's all just Madeleine while Lucille is completely deleted. Earlier Lucille has always*

been dominating no matter how much like Madeleine she has become, but now suddenly it's all just Madeleine.)

René (almost falls out of breath) Madeleine!

Madeleine Yes, René, here I am. (They fall naturally into each other's arms. The bar disappears.)

René It's really you!

Madeleine Yes, René, I am your Madeleine.

René Madeleine, Madeleine, I got you back!

Madeleine I never died, René.

René (looks at her) What do you mean?

Madeleine Just what I am saying.

René What is this new act of yours?

Madeleine I am not acting any longer.

René I don't understand you.

Madeleine Come, René. Let's make love at last. (pulls him towards the bed. It's a shabby, simple hotel room of 1946.)

René I'd love to, but tell me first what you mean. What is this new mystery you have turned into?

Madeleine (with René on the bed) I have a strange confession to make. And you must forgive me.

René Forgive you? For what?

Madeleine For having betrayed you.

René Betrayed me? With whom?

Madeleine With Robert Gévigne.

René Robert? But Robert is dead. How could you know his family name?

Madeleine Because I knew him.

René You knew Robert? Then you must also have known his wife.

Madeleine René, I can't deceive you any longer. I never knew Madeleine. And you also never knew Madeleine. You only knew me.

René (almost rising) What is this?

Madeleine Forgive me, René!

René You are Madeleine! I knew it from the start!

Madeleine No, René. I am Lucille. You always knew only Lucille. You only knew the adventuress Lucille who acted the role of Madeleine!

René (totally confused) But why?

Madeleine Don't you understand?

René I don't understand anything.

Madeleine (sighs) Robert murdered his wife. To be able to do it and have an alibi he engaged me to play his wife and you to watch me. It was all a staged performance. He knew that you suffered from acute vertigo. He knew that you would never get up into that church tower. He waited up there with his wife whose neck he had already broken. He threw her out when I came up. Everything was planned in advance into the smallest detail.

René But she screamed!

Madeleine No, René, it was I who screamed. And Robert quieted me at once. I screamed of terror of that deceit and murder I had made myself an accomplice of. And most of all I screamed of terror over the cruelty in our using you and your fate.

René Madeleine, what is this mad nightmare of a tall story you are telling?

Madeleine The truth, René. Not until now you know the truth about the woman you have loved so long.

René Madeleine, you break my heart. Can you imagine how much I have suffered for you? Can you imagine those abysses of remorse that I suffered for your sake? For four years I sat just drinking and only wallowing in searching for you in the bottom of the glass, which I never reached! I cried over you for four years, Madeleine! I cried myself to death for your sake! And then you never existed.

Madeleine Yes, René, I exist. We can still start together. It's now our life is starting. I love you, René. You have made me a real woman and a better person.

René (breaking down) It's too late, Madeleine.

Madeleine No, René, it's never too late.

René Don't you understand? A dead woman is lying between us! Robert murdered his wife, and you were part of the murder! I am a policeman and lawyer!

Madeleine Robert is dead, and his wife is dead. But I am alive, René, and our love is alive!

René No, everything is buried alive with Robert's wife!

Madeleine René, you can't let me down now. We are made for each other. After all we've gone through we now deserve a life together.

René Do you really think so, Madeleine?

Madeleine Forbear the murder. Forget the crime. Forget the war. Let the dead bury the dead. Let us take care of life. Don't miss this unique and golden opportunity, René! This time it will never come back. I came back from the dead once, but such luck you will never have again.

René I am too old and too tired. I drank my life away grieving for the ideal that I thought was you and which turned out to be just a cheap adventuress who agreed to love for money.

Madeleine I am not the same, René! I have become better! You see yourself how thanks to your love I managed to turn myself into the ideal you once loved...

René But I lost it! It was just a dreadful criminal plot, an infernal intrigue for monetary reasons, for a direction of a murder! For the sake of a scoundrel to be able to do away with his wife without other consequences than her money!

Madeleine He didn't get away. Fate caught up with him. He was gutted on the way with all his money. He gained nothing from his murder but lost everything. But destiny has given us a new chance, René. Don't blow it.

René How could I believe in anything any more after this war? Let's not deceive ourselves, Madeleine. I am a drunk failure of a handicapped former pettifogger, and you are just a discarded strumpet, who never did any honest work in all your life. You are already getting mouldy and baggy. I can't do any more. I

can't bear to think of it any more. Everything was just a most infernal plot of life's practical joke and a tragic senseless and outrageous self deceit...

Madeleine For love nothing is impossible, René.

René You killed love yourself. You made it impossible from the beginning by the murder of Robert's wife. That's what we never can get away from. We have that story behind us, it will always keep pursuing us with its facts. Our punishment will only be the worse for your getting away with your part in a murder. I am sorry, Madeleine, but I see everything clearly now. Live in peace from justice, but don't count on me. My heart is too broken to ever be able to love again. *(leaves the bed)*

Madeleine René, you must not leave me now! In that case you give me no choice!

René (walks to the door) Goodbye, Lucille. *(speaks the name as if it denoted the lowest form of prostitution.)*

Madeleine (when René walks out) René! You were the only one I ever loved! *(takes out a gun and shoots herself in her head.)*

René (hurries back into the room) Madeleine! No! *(shocked, embraces her, gets all bloody, etc.)* Come back! Oh no! You can't do this to me! I loved you, Madeleine! Come back! Forgive me! Forgive me! *(embraces her, crying bitterly and for long)*

(collects himself) This must not be true. What shall I do? There is only one thing to do. *(takes Madeleine's gun, contemplates it well)*

It is still loaded. There are five bullets left. Shall I follow you, Madeleine? *(puts it to his head)* Do you want me to? Is that what you want? No. I can't make it. I am too yellow. I was no good, neither for a policeman, a soldier or a Frenchman. I have failed in everything, and I have taken the life of Madeleine. *(grabs the telephone with the gun in his hand and dials a number.)*

Police? Good evening. I am reporting a murder. A woman lies murdered in room 13 in Hôtel du Nord. I am the murderer. I will wait for you at the bar down by the corner. Thank you. Goodbye. *(hangs up)*

Now there is nothing left for me in life but to get drunk. *(leaves)*
(The scene vanishes and turns back to the bar. The bartender is now alone and cleaning up after the last guest, when two policemen enter.)

1st policeman Haven't you closed yet?

Bartender I am closing.

2 We are looking for a fellow who was supposed to be here.

Bartender So? What's his name?

2 We don't know the name. You haven't seen any maniac here tonight?

Bartender This place is empty, Monsieur.

1 We can see that indeed. We were called by a maniac who reported a murder and himself as the murderer. We didn't take it seriously first, but then we actually found a corpse in a room at the hotel next to here. He said he would wait for us here.

Bartender I am afraid I can't help you, Monsieur. There have been customers coming and going all day, but none of them acted as a murderer or maniac. They were basically all miserable wrecks and victims from the war.

2 We understand. Who was your last customer?

Bartender I never ask names, Monsieur.

1 Come, Jules. Let's go. There is nobody here. And it could have been suicide. Dead whores are found every night.

2 But we must follow this up! There was no false alarm, and the man was no maniac!

Bartender Gentlemen, I can assure you, that in my bar tonight there has been no murderer and no maniac. I know my customers.

1 Come, Jules. There is nobody here.

2 Yes, we'll have to go on then. But if any murderer comes by, let us know!

Bartender Of course. Good night, gentlemen. (*The policemen leave.*)

(*out to nowhere*) Live in peace, dear customer, and welcome back with all your sorrows. (*closes the bar.*)

*Gothenburg-Athens,
January-March 1998,
translated March 2019.*