

Philippe Djian

Maudit manège

Éditions J'ai lu

Antoine, there is a rumor that this book is for you.
I confirm that it is true.

*“Do not permit the events of your daily lives to bind you,
but never withdraw yourselves from them. Only by acting
thus can you earn the title of 'A Liberated One'.”*

HUANG-PO

1

One evening, about five years after the death of Betty, I thought my last hour had arrived. And God knows I wasn't expecting that at all.

I was in the kitchen with Henri peeling a few things, lending him an ear. The superiority of poetry over all the rest; I'd heard two hundred times before. The most terrible thing was that he was right, but I always refused to admit it. I could write novels and packets of short stories, but I was unable to align a single poem of any worth, it was a field where I was a little ill at ease. I have an unbounded admiration for those who can overwhelm you in a few sentences, cut your breath; the problem being that they are all half crazy. One of the questions I ask myself was whether poetry made them mad or if it was the opposite that happened. Ultimately what I saw was that while a writer could still prepare an evening meal, a poet was just good enough to slide his legs under the table to eat.

He was planted in front of the window with his drink in hand and conscientiously pissing on the novel as genre, but I had other things at hand, it

was getting late and I still had a hundred small things to prepare. I glanced at his white hair and that evening, I let him derail, and didn't ask him to come and help me instead of breaking my balls. I thought I should make an effort the night of his birthday. Henry had just turned sixty-two years old and I invited some people to come help us blow out the candles. I hoped that I would be able to hold on to one or two to solve the problem of the dishes.

The fridge was packed. When I opened it I noticed a trickle of dressing on the cake box, and for a split second, the hair went up on the back of my neck. The paper seemed already somewhat soft in places. I pulled it out quickly, and pulled off the lid, swinging the fridge door shut with my heel. Fortunately, the cake wasn't damaged. Fortunately, because I remembered precisely how much it had cost me. I always knew the price of things when I was going through difficult times. And the anniversary of Henry coincided with the passage of my bank account in the red.

It was a cake, superbly decorated, modern in esprit yet sumptuously baroque. I spent a good moment in the bakery explaining what I wanted, you would think they had never seen a locomotive. Finally, I had to sketch a picture. I specified that the wheels were to be in nougat and that I wanted a sumptuous amount of chantilly for the plumes of smoke. Henri, trains, that's what he loved. I couldn't do anything less. Not the day of his birthday. I was really happy that the cake was intact, and decided to show it to him.

His back was to me. From what I could hear, the novel was a form of obesity cultivated by people like me. I put a hand on his shoulder:

– Hey, stop a minute, I want to show you something!...

I had the locomotive in one hand and there was such a multitude of reflections in the chantilly, I wanted to see the expression on his face when he saw it. His shoulders drooped but you could feel the flame that burned inside. It was curious, how many times I had that sensation looking at Henri, maybe a hundred times, and the first few times, I felt as if I had just been dropped on my ass. I hoped that a guy that wrote novels at least emitted a few sparks, but I wasn't so sure. They're lucky, those that burn from inside, they emit a beautiful light, they're easier to recognize. Henri turned gently towards me. I had the impression it lasted centuries. And then all at once, there was no air, an unbearable pain seized me, and in the same second I found myself in a boat that had just been rammed. I fell to my knees.

Henri asked me what kind of gag I was in the process of pulling, when I was simply in the process of dying. I knew right away. The unbearable pain that was crushing my chest was nothing though, or at least little compared with the fear that devoured me. I saw the cake slip from my hands and fall flat in front of me. Of course, I could notice a few signs that I wasn't necessarily young anymore, but forty isn't the end of the world, and to tell the truth, you can never be sure that you've already experienced the best years.

I was lucky in that moment to be able to leave my body. Apparently not all writers can do that, but I wasn't surprised, there are always some capable of exceeding the strict minimum in any field, they're just there to give you shit. I saw Henri's face darken. I saw how I moved forward and how I got caught myself from falling, leaning

on one arm. I saw a trickle of sweat glitter on my nose. Somehow, I was already dead. My soul was in the process of breaking into a thousand pieces.

Finally, my strength forsook me and I fell flat on the ground. I lay right across the train and crushed it completely. It was his birthday cake. Some things should never happen, it seemed to me. I've always had a very clear recollection of this scene. Its sadness is a perfume without name.

I moved after Betty's death maybe, five or six times, and then the desire left me. Each place looked the same. The houses, the streets, the towns, the people, yes, even the people started to appear the same. In the end, that simplified the problem. I just decided not to move anymore. That town or another, 300 kilometers to the west, in a seemingly calm street, a house like any other... why not, what difference did it make?... It was like this hospital room. Exactly the same from one side of the country to the other. I took advantage of it to sleep for a week straight.

When I had really woken, I found Henri at the foot of my bed, in a T shirt and buried in a magazine. The room was full of sunlight, the window was partially open.

– Henri, I'm sorry about the cake.

He looked up directly. His hair was cut, he was shaved, his shirt was clean, he seemed to be in good shape. We looked at each other for a moment smiling, then he raised his hand in the air and I grabbed it laughing.

– You idiot! he murmured.

– My God! I don't believe it myself!

We went on for a little bit before moving on to more serious subjects. I took my hand from his shoulder.

– Tell me, did you bring the mail?

He threw a packet of letters on my knees and sighed.

– Just trash, bills, adverts....

I verified this at the tips of my fingers while he brushed his hair back. There really wasn't anything to save, I filled the trash with it in a single movement.

– He must think you have nerves of steel.

The rub was, I didn't even know where to get hold of him. For an editor, he really traveled a lot. Maybe he had posted my money to the other end of the world, and only thinking of this made me nervous. Maybe he had lost at cards and he was abandoned on some corner, ravaged, almost nude, without glasses, without identification, without anything, without a checkbook? I didn't know what to think. We were in debt up to our necks.

– On the other side of things, I've always pulled through, I said.

Henri got up, grinning. He was rather big, around ninety kilos, and the bed creaked.

– Ah! shit! do you think you can smoke here? he asked.

– Yeah, sure, what is it?

– Hey, the smoke, it doesn't bother you?

– Henri, it's not my lungs, it's my heart. But it's passed now, so we are going to pretend like nothing happened, we're not going to talk about it anymore, agreed?

He took out a packet of cigarettes and offered it. I wasn't really craving one, but I took it anyway. It was the first cigarette after coming back from the dead. A filtered.

Henri sent the first puff of smoke towards the ceiling.

– In my opinion, the grocer will hold for another

week. After that, I don't know.

– He's wrong to get panic. The money will be there one day or another.

– Each time I put my foot in the place, he pulls out the bill. Today again, he waived it under my nose and said, "Let's be clear, I don't want this piece of paper to end up on the ground." and he added, "Tell me, do I make myself clear old man?..."

– My God! sometimes it seems like he has us by the balls!

– Yeah!... I left with two cans of sardines and a loaf of bread.

– Shit, but otherwise everything is good?

– I think from here, you don't really have a good sense of things.

We fell silent for a second, then I put my cigarette out in the ashtray crushing it in every direction.

– Listen! Haven't I always fixed these things, do you really have to get upset by these things?...

– Sure, but you're not in my place. At the moment I jump whenever I hear someone knock at the door, and I have to sweet-talk all of the merchants in the neighborhood to get a last reprieve. Last time, I came here to tell you that they were going to cut the telephone, but you were sleeping. I'll take advantage of the fact that you're awake now to let you know, they cut it.

– What do you mean, they've cut the telephone?!...

– I don't know, but they're not bothered. The latest is, that we still have water, gas, and electricity. Note that I'm not worried about them though; I'm convinced we'll be thrown out before.

– Shit, what do they want!... I guarantee we'll soon have some money. I'm not worried about it. And relax, we'll do what we decided.

I loved the way he looked at me when I said that. He made some faces with puckered lips, then shook his head slowly.

– Nothing has changed? It's still for the day after tomorrow? he asked.

– After they've given me a final exam.

– You want me to come get you?

– Hmm, I don't know.... I thought I would jog home. I don't know if that's a good idea for someone your age.

I left the hospital at the strike of 10 in the morning. The sun already beating in your face, a young sun, still nervous and clumsy, that burns you right away, a kind of baked dog strangling on its leash, something in the genre of an hysterical spring. Walking, I stretched quietly, I filled my lungs, I moved my head, like a guy who just got knocked good and with a little inquietude seeks to verify that nothing seems to be broken inside. But I didn't feel anything out of the ordinary, and I almost laughed. I didn't put that in the classification of major breakdowns, more like a problem with the carburetion, something to cause some sputtering, but then you can take off in the blink of an eye. Really, I was more astonished by what had happened. When you see a bolt of lightening rip open blue skies, you always ask yourself if it was your imagination. And then it was enough to envision all the shit that can happen in someone's life to feel myself spared.

I crossed a good part of the town without rushing, without feeling the least bit of fatigue, contemplating my money problems like the blessed. I wasn't trying to pretend that the situation wasn't particularly alarming, but I was more or less used to it. I got my check every six months, and for three or four months, everything

went fine. I noticed always after that I had come up short. There was certainly something about money that evaded me, some force that I was unable to master. Of course, Henri was a big handicap, but the problem wasn't there. When I lived alone, the situation was exactly the same. I would rather have had a check for half the amount every three months. It would have simplified my life.

Rather than pass in front of the grocer's, I continued on the sidewalk in front of me. It was beautiful out. It wasn't a question of escaping my problems, so much as avoiding them, to conduct myself in a reasonable manner; particularly for someone whose heart had just missed a few beats. Beyond that, I didn't crouch down behind a row of cars, I didn't quicken my pace, I continued as if nothing was amiss.

– HEY! OVER THERE!... WAIT A MOMENT!

I stopped. I wasn't really surprised. Those guys develop a sixth sense, I imagine. I watched him run across the street with his notebook in hand and his pencil behind his ear, and sincerely, I was full of pity for him, I could imagine the lousy number he had pulled. I immediately reassured him.

– Ah! You caught me at the right time, I said. I was just thinking to stop by and see you. Do you have my bill?...

That's the best method, you have to cut the grass right under their feet, as close to the ground as possible. I let him catch his breath, and right at the moment he opened his mouth, I finished him off:

– What would you rather, cash or a check?....

– Oh!... well, as you prefer!...

– Do you have my bill, there, do you have it with you?

– Euh!... yes, of course!

– Good! don't lose it! I just got my check. I'll pass by to settle up in the afternoon.

His eyebrows furrowed lightly. I only needed to remember that I was still alive to send him the most disarming of smiles that anyone had ever encountered.

– Hmm!... that took awhile! I added. You must have been practically trembling, I can tell you something like that can make anyone nervous. If I put myself in your place. In the end, happily everything is taken care of, I was sorry about that.

He retreated a step. I sensibly got out of the way so that the sun shone directly on his face. I had the same effect on some of my readers, I had even caught rumors of some cases of hysteria in the cities. They guy hesitated slightly.

– I'll be there in the afternoon, I closed.

A few strides and I had turned the corner. There wasn't one, there was ten like that and the majority concentrated around the house. Crossing this zone was like an obstacle course for combatants. Didn't that just kill you, that this country preferred their writers dead over living. I continued hanging close to the walls. You had to see it, the greatest writer of his generation, hurrying, back curved like the last piece of shit. It was clear my abilites were not yet general accepted. Betty, that would have made her crazy to see that.

The mailbox was hot, burning. I opened it. It squeaked in the silence of the street. I clenched my teeth, that it was so empty, that I was so completely deceived. I wanted to rip it off and send it through a windshield, but I already had enough problems. I didn't even have the heart to jump over the garden gate. I pushed it open gently and entered.

The house was also empty. I wondered what had happened. I went to look for a beer and when I got back to the main room, I noticed that someone had cleaned house. I hadn't noticed at first, and still it was right before my eyes, and it really surprised me.

I was just looking under the carpet when he came in. He had a box full of food in his arms. A drop of sweat was hanging from the end of his nose.

– Damn, you're already here, he said smiling.

I actually saw a ham and a bunch of bottles of alcohol, not the worst brands. Hell if I understood anything.

– But Henri....

It must have weighed a lot. He was grimacing.

– Jesus! this time it's too much!...

I accompanied him into the kitchen.

– Well, this time I'll take off my hat to you! I'm wondering how you swung this all...

He put the box on the table whistling. The drop fell and I watched it drop inside. He arched his back.

– Well, it arrived by courier this morning! he explained. I waived it a little under their noses.

A minty sea breeze ran through the room, a quietly grabbed a chair and sat down.

These stories with the checks transformed life into a roller coaster ride. I would never admit such a thing, but it wasn't completely impossible that in the deepest place in my heart, where no infamous light had ever penetrated, there where I almost never go, in the most unfathomable depths in complete darkness, that I enjoyed the situation. Isn't it like the sensation of being trapped at the base of a wall and seeing it collapse at the last second, isn't it like pulling out once again a

luminous sword and cutting their chic. There was good to be had. One day you had to turn your pockets inside out for a miserable beer, and the next day all the cans in the city were at your feet. That doesn't mean the world wasn't badly made. Henri's position was that he was already too old to be bothered by it all. Only he couldn't do anything. There was twenty-two years difference between us, and of course you had to notice a difference someway or another.

I was more than anything happy to be able to pick up the car. It had been more than a month at the garage, and still another one who challenged me to an arm wrestling match at least once a week and who was practically choking on the telephone. The last time, I showed up with a newspaper in hand and I said look at that, look at the publicity they running about me, did I lie to you? But of course I fell on guy who had never bought a single book in his life, a guy who was suspicious of literature, one who would have cleaned a spot of grease with the last page of *Ulysses*. I had to leave him one of my last bills to prove to him that a writer was the type of person you could trust. I left there with a light reprieve, staggering on the sidewalk as if I had been hit with a monkey wrench.

Contrary to a legend that was circulating, I didn't have a particular thing for cars. It was the solitude that I loved, though not just any kind. To drive along with doors locked. And if there was anything I hated in the world, it was that a car cost me money. I hated mechanics, I didn't want to hear about it, but sometimes you had to go and those bills were sheer torture. In the end, regardless, I had to get the transmission checked. It was pulling out of a parking slot that everything happened. I cursed all the way while Henri

laughed and waved to the other drivers. It was nighttime, and we were returning from the other side of town. And I swear on my grave, if we didn't have to make the entire trip jammed in reverse, if that didn't leave me bathed in cold sweat. I had to take two aspirin before going to bed.

Of course the Mercedes reminded me of a few things, but I didn't have anything against that. It wasn't like these stupid photos under glass, or as if I had saved a lock of her hair like an idiot, it was normal that she had a place in my life, and I'm obviously not talking about the Mercedes, and the desire to forget her never entered my mind. She was never really far away from me, and we still had some good times together. I even took Henri to show him the piece of property that I had bought her, I took advantage of the visit to repair a shutter that some asshole had ripped off, I remember it being a nice day, we returned in great shape, we had fun all the way back. Betty and I, we got on well, we were like two twins that had been separated and mysteriously maintained contact, and that suited me perfectly. The only thing that bothered me, though I had already let it awhile, was that I didn't know what to do with her ashes. I could never reach a decision about it. I kept them at the bottom of a suitcase, the last suitcase in the most inaccessible closet. It was a sort of weight I had to carry, but to be honest, I didn't think too much about it. I thought that would probably be better the day I decided to open that thing, the day I would lick my finger, the day I would stick it inside. But there was no rush. I had the impression I had plenty of time.

I filled it up before going back, taking a gentile detour around town with my new transmission. Now, everything was set. We could concentrate on Gloria. It was still possible to take advantage of

daylight, and yet the city was lit, the streetlights glowed in a purple sky and the general ambiance radiated a strange charm. I parked to do some shopping, and then I sat down at a terrace while a guy prepared my pizzas.

The moment appeared to me an inexplicable sweetness, to the point that I half closed my eyes with out thinking of anything. Getting the car out of the garage had been the last thorn that I had removed from my foot. I listened to that guy humming in his truck while my pizzas cooked.

When I arrived Henri came out on the sidewalk to assure himself that it was actually true. He made a complete tour of he Mercedes rubbing his hands together and really, he smiled at it.

– Huummmm!... there you are, sweetie!... There at LAST!

– My God, sometimes I don't really know if you are completely normal...

I unloaded the pizzas without waiting. I pointed out that there were still a few things on the back seat and I entered the house straight to the kitchen. I was as hungry as a wolf.

Henri cheered up at once. When we had finished eating, he cleared the table without even thinking about it, I didn't even have to move my little finger. I smoked a cigarette while he smiled in front of the window, I smoked quietly.

The night was mild. Henri had pulled out a couple of glasses and I had transported mine to the armrest of the sofa. It was like the house was bathed in foam, you couldn't hear a thing outside. Only yesterday we were in the skins of two creatures hunted, moaning as the trap was closing, but the scenery had changed in one fell swoop, and regardless, all you could see now were two magnificent wolfs with full stomachs,

light hearted, lying on their backs in a clearing, a rum and coke in hand. It was practically a year since Henri had moved into the pad, and everything seemed to go marvelously well. But I hadn't often had the occasion to see him in this state, his eyes brilliant, completely worked up.

I know why he was charged up. I knew perfectly well what the situation was. Still, I lay on the sofa smiling, without saying a thing. I let him buzz around with his glass squeezed to his chest and I took advantage of the moment to empty mine. After a moment, he stood in front of me. He seemed like someone who had just drank coffee extract, his hair was practically straight

– But my God!... Why don't you say anything, he growled.

I crossed my hands behind my head, I wanted to give him a hard time, I wanted to drag him out into the light.

– Why don't I say anything? Well, what's going on with you, do you want me to tell you a story?... You can't appreciate this moment of calm?... It would be absolutely perfect if you would just take care of my glass....

He turned around grinning, then came back with the bottles. We looked at each other.

– Go easy with the cola, I said. It's full of sugar.

He leaned forward towards me with kind of a wry smile. His face was more lined than normally. I said to myself, that's what awaits you, the only truth. I handed him my glass. He had to spill the half of it.

– Listen, he whispered, I'm trying to ask you something.

– Yeah ?

– Hum... why don't we go tomorrow?

I played it a little like a guy who had just fallen out of the clouds, I raised myself onto one elbow.

– Look, Henri, I'm not really in great shape....
What are you talking about?...

He nodded with a sigh:

– Of course, I can't hope that you could put
yourself in my place...

I didn't get up. I drank my drink quietly.

– I feel like you are in a strange mood, I said. I
hope you are going to spoil the evening....