AT YOUR SERVICE

For Marta Mosquera, who, in Paris, told me of madame Francinet

For some time now it's been a problem lighting the fire. The matches are not as good as they used to be, now you have to hold them head down and hope that the flame has some force to it; the kindling arrives damp, and no matter how often I tell Frederic to bring me dry logs, they always smell wet and do not take well. Since my hands started shaking, everything is more of a problem. Before, I could make a bed in two seconds, and the sheets would 1ook and feel as though they'd just been ironed. Now I have to make my way around and around the bed, and madame Beau­ champ gets irritable and says that if they're paying me by the hour it's not to waste time smoothing out one wrinkle here and ano ther there. And all that fuss because my hands shake, and because the sheets today are not like they used to be, not so solid and heavy. Doctor Lebrun says there's nothing wrong, only I have to be very careful, not to catch cold and to go to bed early. "And that glass of wine every now and then, eh, madame Francinet? It would be better if we eliminated that, and the pernod before lunch also?" Doctor Lebrun is a young doctor and his ideas are very good for young people. In my day, nobody would have said that wine was bad for one. But after that, l don't drink, not what you'd call drinking, like that Germaine on the third floor, or that animal Feli'.':, the carpenter. I don't know why that reminds me now, that poor monsieur nBbe, the night he made me drink a glass of whiskey. Monsieur Bebel Monsieur Bebel In the kitchen at madame Rosay's apartment the night of the party. I used to go out a lot then, still even while I was working house to house. Mr. Renfeld's place was one, at the sisters' who taught piano and violin, a lot of places, all of them very nice houses.

Now I can hardly make it three times a week at madame Beauchamp's, and it looks like that's not going to last long. My hands shake so badly, and madame Beauchamp gets irritable with me. These days, madame Rosay would

never give me a recommendation, nor would madame Rosay come herself looking for me, now monsieur Bebe

would not talk with me in the kitchen. No, especially not monsieur Bebe.

When madame Rosay came to my house it was already afternoon, and she didn't stay more than a few minutes. To be frank, my house consists of a single room, but I have a kitchen in the back and what I have left over of the furniture from when George died and I had to sell every­ thing, it seems to me I have the right to call it my house. In any case, there're three chairs, and madame Rosay re­ moved her gloves, sat down and said that the room was small but pleasant. I wasn't very impressed with madame Rosay, though I would have preferred to have been better

dressed. She took me by surprise, and I had on the green skirt that the sisters had given me. Madame Rosay '.vas not looking at anything, I mean that she looked and im­ mediately looked away, as though to disengage herself

from what she'd just seen. Her nose wrinkled a little; probably the onion smell bo thered her (I love onions ) or the smell of cat-piss. Poor Minouche. But I was pleased that madame Rosay should have come, and told her so.

"Ah yes, madame Francinet. I also am very happy to have found you, I'm so busy . . ." She screwed up her nose as if housework smelled bad. "I would like to ask you to . . . that is to say that madame Beauchamp thought that perhaps you might have Sunday night free."

"Well, naturally," I said. "What can you do on Sunday

after atte;?ding mass? I go to Gustave's for a while, and then . . .

"Of course," madame Rosay said. "If you're free Sunday, I'd like you to help me around the house. We're giving a party."

"A party? Congratulations, madame Rosay." But that seemed to offend her somehow and she got up suddenly. "You would help in the kitchen, there's a good deal to do there. If you can come at seven, my butler will give you

the necessary instructions." "Naturally, madame Rosay."

"This is my address," and she gave me a cream-colored calling card. "Will five hundred francs be all right?"

"Five hundred francs."

"We'll say six hundred. You'll be free at midnight and there'll be time to catch the last metro. Madame Beau­ champ told me that you are to be h·us ted."

"Oh, madame Rosayl"

When she was gone I near had to laugh, thinking that

I'd almost offered her a cup of tea (I would have had to

look for a cup that wasn't chipped ). Sometimes I don't pay attention to who it is I'm talking to. Only when I go to a

lady's house I hold my tongue and talk like a maid. It must be because I'm nobody's maid in my own house, or be­ cause it feels as though I were still living in our little three­ room backyard house, when George and I were working in the factory and never lacked for anything. Perhaps by dint of scolding at poor Minouche, who makes pee-pee under the stove, it seems to me I am also a lady like madame Rosay.

Just as I was going to go into the house, I almost lost the heel off one shoe. Right away I said, "Good luck come, hum, hum, wanton whoreson devil be gone." And I pushed the bell.

A gentleman with grey side-whiskers like in the theater came out and told me to come in. It was a very, very large apartment that smelled like floorwax. The gentleman with the side-whiskers was the butler and smelled of benzoin. "At last," he said and hurried to make me follow him down a hallway that led to the servant's quarters. "The next time you'll call at the door on the left."

"Madame Rosay didn't tell me anything."

"The lady doesn't have to think about those things. Alice, this is madame Francinet. You'll give her one of your aprons."

Alice brought me to her room on the other side of the kitchen (and what a kitchen) and gave me an apron that was too big for me. It looked like madame Rosay had given her the job of explaining everything to me, but at the beginning the business about the dogs seemed to be a mistake and I stood looking at Alice, Alice had a wart right under her nose. In crossing the kitchen everything in sight was so lavish and shiny that just the idea of being there that night shining up the crystal and preparing the trays of hors d'oeuvres that they eat in such homes, seemed to me it was better than going to the theater or to the country. Probably that was why, at the beginning, I didn't understand the business about the dogs, and I stood there looking at Alice.

"Mmm, yeah," Alice said, she was from Brittany and you couldn't miss it. "The missus said so."

"But why me? That gentleman with the whiskers, couldn't he take care of the dogs?"

"Mr. Rodolos is the head butler," Alice said, with holy veneration.

"Well, if not him, then anyone. I don't understand why me."'

Alice suddenly grew insolent. "And why not, madame?"

"Francinet, at your service."

". . . madame Francinet? It's not strenuous work. Fido is the worst, Miss Lucienne has spoiled him ter­ ribly "

She went on explaining to me, all friendly again, like jello.

"Cube sugar every minute and holding it in her lap. Monsieur Bebe ruins him too, whenever he comes, he pets and fondles him a lot, you know . . . But Medor is very good, and Fifine won't budge out of her corner."

"In that case," I said, so my astonishment wouldn't show, "there are a lot of dogs."

"Mmm, sure, a lot of them."

"In an apartment!" I said, I was indignant and couldn't hide it. "I don't know what you think about it, mad- arne . . ."

"Mademoiselle."

"Pardon me. But in my day, mademoiselle, the dogs lived in the dog kennels, and well might I say so, because my late husband and I had a house next to a gentleman's villa where . . ." But Alice did not let me finish the e:>.'Pla­ nation. Not that she would say anything, but you could see that she was impatient and that's something I notice very quick in people. I stopped, and she began to tell me how madame Rosay adored dogs, and that her husband put up with all her tastes. And, too, there was their daughter, who had inherited the same leanings.

"The young lady is crazy about Fido, and sure as any­

thing, she'll buy a female of the same breed so they can have puppies. Now there're no more than six: Medor, Fifine, Fido, Tiny, Chow, and Hannibal. Fido is the worst,

Miss Lucienne has spoiled him terr-ibly. Don't you hear

him? Absolutely sme that's him barking in the reception

·

hall."

"And where will I have to stay to take care of them?" I asked with an unprejudiced air, so that Alice shouldn't think that I felt offended.

"Mr. Rodolos will take you to the dog's room."

"Unhuh, so the dogs have their own room?" I was as natural as possible. It was not Alice's fault, really, but the truth of the matter is I would have liked to have boxed her ears a couple of times, then and there.

"Of course they have their own room," Alice said. "Mad­ ame wants the dogs to sleep each one on his own mattress, and they've fixed up a room for just them. We've already brought up a chair so you can sit and take care of them." I fixed the apron as best I could and we went back to the kitchen. Just at that moment another door swung open and in came madame Rosay. She had on a blue dressing gown b·immed in white fur and her face full of creams. She looked like a piece of pastry, if you'll pardon me for saying so. But she was very friendly and you could see that my arrival was a relief to her.

"Ah, madame Francinet. Alice will already have ex­ plained to you what your duties are. Perhaps later you'll be able to help out with some other light duty, drying glasses or something similar, but the main thing is to keep my darlings quiet. They are luscious dears, but they don't know how to behave together, and especially not all by themselves, and I cannot tolerate the idea that Fido might bite poor little Chow, or that Medor . . ." she lowered her voice and came a little closer. "Besides, you must watch Tiny very closely, she's a Pomeranian with lovely eyes. It seems to me that . . . well, the moment is coming when

. . . and I wouldn't want Medor or Fido . . . do you understand? Tomorrow I'll take her out to our estate, but until then I want her watched very closely. And I wouldn't know where else to keep her except with the others in their room. The poor darling, so delicate! I couldn't stand having her away from me all night. They won't give you any trouble, you'll see. On the conb·ary, you're going to have a good time, you'll see how intelligent they are. I shall come up now and then to see how everything's go­ ing."

I realized that was more of a warning than a friendly offer, but madame Rosay continued smiling under the flower-scented cream.

"My daughter Lucienne will come up also, nah1rally. She can't be without her Fido. She even sleeps with him, can you imagine . . ." But this last part she was saying to someone she'd just thought of, for at the same time she hli·ned around to leave and I didn't see her again. Alice, leaning against the table, was looking at me with an idi­ otic expression. It's not that I despise people, but she was looking at me with that idiot expression.

"What time is the party?" I asked, realizing that with­ out thinking I was continuing to speak in madame Rosay's tone of voice, her way of putting questions a little to one side of a person, as though she were asking them of a coatrack or a do01way.

"It's going to begin now," Alice said, and Mr. Rodolos, who was coming in at that moment brushing a speck of dust from his black sttit, agreed to this with an air of im­ portance.

"Yes, no time to waste," he said, with a hand-sign to Alice to get busy with several lovely silver h·ays. "Monsieur Frejus and monsieur Bebe are already here, and they want cocktails."

"They always come so early, those two," said Alice. "And they drink, too . . . I explained everythin g to mad­ ame Francinet, and madame Rosay told her what had to be done."

"Ah, perfect. It would be best, then, that I take her up

to the room where she'll be staying. Then I'll go bring the dogs up; the mas ter and monsieur Bebe are playing with them in the salon."

"Miss Lucienne had Fido with her in her room," Alice said.

"Yes, she'll bring him to madame Francinet herself. Al

right now, if you would like to come with me . . ."

So then I found myself sitting in an old, high-backed chair, right in the exact center of an enormous room, the floor filled with mattresses, and where they had a little doghouse with a straw roof, just like an African hut, and according to Mr. Rodolos' explanation, it was a caprice of Miss Lucienne's for her Fido. The six mattresses were thrown down every which way, and there were bowls with food and water. The only light in the room was a bulb hanging just over my head that gave off a very weak light.

I mentioned it to Mr. Rodolos, and that I was afraid of falling asleep with nobody there but the dogs.

"Oh no, you won't fall asleep, madame Francinet," he replied. "The dogs are very afectionate but they're spoiled, and you'll have to pay some attention to them the whole while. 'Wait here a moment."

When he shut the door and left me alone, sitting in the middle of this funny room, with the smell of dogs (well, it was a clean smell) and all the mattresses on the floor, I

felt a little s trange myself because it was almost like dreaming, especially with the yellow light over my head and the silence. Of course, the time would pass quickly, and it wouldn't be too disagreeable, but every minute I felt as though something were wrong. Not exactly that they'd called on me for this without telling me in advance, but something strange about having to do this work, or maybe I really thought that it just wasn't right. The floor gleamed with a real luster, and the dogs, you could tell that they did their business somewhere else, because there was no smell except of their own which isn't telTible once you've been there a little while. But the worst thing was sitting there alone and waiting, and I was almost happy when Miss Lucienne came in carrying Fido in her arms, an aw­ ful Pekingese (I can't stand Pekingeses ), and Mr. Rodolos arrived yelling at and calling to the other five dogs until they were all in the room. Miss Lucienne was lovely, all in white, and had platinum hair that fell to her shoulders. She kissed and fondled Fido for a long spell, paying no attention to the others, who were drinking water or play­ ing, and then she brought him over to me and looked at me for the first time.

"You're the one who's going to take care of them?" Her voice was a little shrill, but you can't deny that she was very pretty.

"I am madame Francinet, at your service," I said greet­ ing her.

"Fido is very delicate. Take him. Yes, in your arms. H e's

not going to dirty you. I bathe him myself every morning. As I told you, very delicate. Don't let him mix with them. Give him water once in a while."

The dog stayed quiet in my lap, but at the same time, I was a bit disgusted. A great Dane with black spots came over and began to smell him, as dogs do, and Miss Lu­ cienne let out a screech and gave him a kick with the point of her shoe. Mr. Rodolos never moved from the doorway, he looked used to the whole tiling.

"You see, you see," Miss Lucienne screeched. "That's what I don't want to happen, and you must not permit it. Mama has explained that already, isn't that right? You will not move from here until the party's over. And if Fido feels badly or begins to cry, knock on the door and that will let me know."

She went out without looking at me again, after taking the Pekingese up in her arms again and kissing him until the dog began to whine. Mr. Rodolos stayed around for a moment.

"The dogs are not ill-behaved, madame Francinet," he said. "In any case, if there is any problem, knock on the door and I'll come. Take it easy," he added, as though it had occurred to him at the last moment, and he closed the door very carefully. I wondered if he'd locked it from the outside, but I resisted the temp tation to get up and go see; I think I would have felt much worse if I found out he had.

As a matter of fact, it wasn't difficult taking care of the dogs. They didn't fight, and it was far from sure that what madame Rosay had said about Tiny was true, at least it didn't seem to have started yet. Naturally, as soon as the door was shut, I let the nasty little Pekingese loose and let him jump around peacefully with the others. He was the worst, asking for a quarrel the whole time, but they didn't do anything to him, they even seemed to be inviting him to play. They drank a little once in a while, or ate the rich meat in the bowls. God help me for saying it, but it almost made me hungry to see what good meat there was in the bowls.

At times, from far away, you could hear somebody laughing and I don't know whether it was because I was informed that they were going to have music (Alice had said so in the kitchen ), but I seemed to hear a piano, al­ though perhaps it was in another apartment. Time dragged and it seemed very long, especially on account of the single light hanging from the ceiling, so yellow it was. Four of the dogs fell asleep right away, and Fido and Fi£ne ( I'm not sure it was Fifine but it seemed to me it must have been she ) played on for a while biting each other's ears, and ended up lapping a lot of water and lying down one against the other on a mattress. Sometimes I

thought I heard steps outside, and ran to take up Fido in

my arms, so that if Miss Lucienne should walk in . . .

But no one came and much time passed, until I began to fall asleep in the chair, and almost would have liked to put out the light and really fall asleep on one of the empty mattresses.

I shan't say I wasn't happy when Alice came to get me. Alice's face had a very high color and one could see that she was still excited by the party and all they'd said in the kitchen among all the other maids and Mr. Rodolos.

"You're a marvel, madame Francinet," she said. "The missus is sure to be delighted and'll call you every time there's a party. The last one who came couldn't man age to keep them quiet, until Miss Lucienne had to stop dancing and come tend to them. Look at how they're sleeping!"

"The guests've gone already?" I asked, a little embarrassed at her praise.

"The guests, yes, but there are others're more at home, more like family here, and they always stay on a little while. Everybody's drunk a lot, you can be sure. Even the master, who never drinks at home, came into the kitchen very cheerful and joked with Ginette and me over how well the meal had been served, and gave us a hundred francs each. They'll give you a tip too, I think. They're s till dancing, Miss Lucienne with her boyfriend, and monsieur Bebe and his friends are playing masquerade."

"Then will I have to stay?"

"No, the missus said that when the deputy and the others had left, the dogs should be let out. They love to play with them in the salon. I'll cany Fido and all you have to do is come with me to the kitchen."

I followed her, exb·emely tired and groggy with sleep, but very curious to see something of the party, if it were only the glasses and plates in the kitchen. And I saw them, for there were mountains of them piled everywhere, and bottles of champagne and whiskey, some still had a whisker to drink in them. In the kitchen they had tubes with a blue light and I was almost blinded by so many white cabinets, so many shelves, the plates and casseroles shining off them. Ginette was a tiny redhead who was also very excited and greeted Alice with little laughs and mak­ ing faces. She seemed shameless enough, as so many of them are these days.

"Still going on?" Alice asked her, looking toward the door.

"Oh, yes," Ginette said, wiggling her hips. "Is that the

lady who was taking care of the dogs?"

I was sleepy and thirsty, but they didn't offer me any­ thing, not even a place to sit down. They were too en­ thused by the party, by everything they'd seen while they were serving table or taking coats in the enh·yway. A bell rang and Alice, who still had the Pekingese in her arms, went out on the run. Mr. Rodolos came in and past with­ out seeing me, and was surrounded immediately by the five dogs leaping about and playing. I saw that he had a handful of lumps of sugar and that he was parceling them out so that the dogs would follow him to the salon. I leaned up against the large cenb·al table h')'ing not to look much at Ginette, and hardly had Alice returned when she continued gabbling about monsieur Bebe and the dis­ guises, about monsieur Frejus, of the pianist who seemed to be tubercular, and how Miss Lucierme had had a dis­ pute with her father. Alice seized one of the half-empty bottles and brought it to her lips with such vulgarity that it left me very upset, so much I didn't know where to look; but even worse was that then she passed it to the little redhead, who finished it off. The two of them laughed as if they also had had a lot to drink during the party. That was perhaps the reason that they didn't think of me, that I was hungry and above all else, thirsty. Surely, if they'd been in their right minds, they would have no ticed. People are not bad, and they are discourteous often because they really don't know what they're doing; the same thing happens on the bus, or in stores, or in offices.

The bell rang again, and the two girls hurried out. You could hear great peals of laughter, and once in a while the piano. I didn't understand why they were making me wait; all they had to do was pay me and let me go. I sat down in a chair and put my elbows on the table. My eyes were dropping with sleep and I guess I didn't notice that someone had just entered the kitchen. First I heard a noise of glasses clinking together and a very soft whistle. I thought that it was Ginette and turned around to ask her what they were going to do with me.

"Oh, excuse me, sir!" I said getting up. "I didn't know it was you here."

"Not here, I'm not here," said the gentleman, who was very young. "Loulou, come see!"

He was staggering slightly, holding on to one of the shelves. He'd filled one glass with a whitish drink, and was looking at its transparency as if mish·usting it. Lou­lou, who'd been called, did not show up, so the young man came over toward me and said I should sit down. He was blond, very pale, and had on a white suit. When I noticed that he was dressed in white in the middle of winter, I

wondered if I was dreaming. This is not a way of speak­ ing, when I see something strange I always ask myself if I am dreaming, in capital letters. It's not impossible, be­ cause sometimes I dream some sh·ange things. But thegentleman was there, smiling away with an air of fatigue, almost of boredom. I felt bad to see how pale he was.

"You must be the one who takes care of the dogs," he said, and set right away to drinking.

"I am madame Francinet, at your service," I said. He was so pleasant and didn't make me feel afraid at all. Rather, he made me want to be useful to him in some way, to have some sort of courtesy in dealing with biro.

Now again he was looking at the half-open door.

"Louloul Are you coming? There's vodka out here. Why, have you been crying, madame Francinet?"

"Oh, no, sir. I must have been yawning a little just be­ fore you came out. fm a little tired and the light in the room up . . . in the other room, was not very good. When one yawns . . ,"

". . . the eyes water," he said. He had perfect teeth, and the whitest hands I've ever seen on a man. He stood up all at once, he went to meet the young man who was staggering in.

" "This lady," he explained to him, "is the one who has liberated us all evening from those nasty animals. Loulou, say good evening."

I stood up and gave another greeting. But the gentle­ man called Loulou did not even look at me. He'd found a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator and was hying to uncork it. The young man in white went over to help him, and the two of them fell to laughing and sb"uggling with the bottle. When you laugh you lose your strength, so nei­ ther of them could manage the uncorking. Then they wanted to do it together and threw themselves into line on either side and ended up leaning against one another, get­ ting happier all the time, but without being able to open the bottle. Monsieur Loulou was saying, "Bebe, Bebe, please, let's go home now . . ." and monsieur Bebe was laughing harder all the time and pushed him away play­ fully until at last he uncorked it and let a great jet of foam spurt all over monsieur Loulou's face, who let out a string of swear-words and rubbed his eyes, running back and forth from one side of the room to the other.

"The poor dear, he's too drunk," monsieur Bebe said, putting ills hands on his back and trying to push him out of the kitchen. "Go keep poor Nina company, she's ve1y unhappy . . ." and he laughed, but without meaning it. Then he came back in, and I found him nicer than ever.

He had a nervous tic that made him raise one eyebrow. He repeated it tlu·ee or four times, looking at me.

"Poor madame Francinet," he said, touching my head very softly. "They've left her all alone, and for sure they haven't given her anything to drink."

"They'll come soon to tell me that I can go home, sir," I answered. It didn't annoy me that he'd have taken the lib­ erty of touching me on the head.

"That you can go, that you can go . . . Vlhy does any­ one have to give you permission to do anything?" mon­ sieur Bebe asked, sitting down opposite me. He'd picked up his glass again, but set it down on the table and went to get a clean one and filled it with a tea-colored drink.

"Madame Francinet, we are going to drink together," he said, handing me the glass. "You like whiskey, of course." "Heavens, sir," I said, frightened. "Outside of wine, and

a little pernod at Gustave's place on Saturdays, I don't know anything about drinking."

"You've never tasted whiskey, really?" he asked in as­ tonishment. "One swallow, not more, b·y, you'll see how good it is. Come, madame Francinet, cheer up. The first swallow is the one that counts . . ." And he began to re­ cite a poem, what, I don't remember, where it says some­ thing about seafarers from some strange place. I took a swallow of the whiskey and found it so aromatic that I

took another, and then another. Monsieur Bebe was sip­ ping his vodka and watching me fascinated.

"It's a pleasure to be with you, madame Francinet," be said. "Luckily you are not young, with you one can be a friend . . . One has only to look at you to see bow good-hearted you are, like an atmt from the provinces, one whom one can cater to, but without risk, without risk

. . . Look, for example, Nina has an aunt in Poitou who sends him chickens, baskets of vegetables, even honey

. . . isn't that wonderful?"

"It certainly is, sir" I said, letting him pour me another little glass since it gave him so much pleasure. "It's always nice to have someone to look after you, especially when you're so young. When you get old there's nothing else to do but to think of oneself, because the res t Here I

t�ke car� of myself, for example. When my George died . . .

"Have another small one, madame Francinet. Nina's aunt lives way down there, and she does nothing, she has nothing else to do besides send chickens . . . There's no risk in telling family stories . . ."

I was so dizzy already I didn't even care what might happen if Mr. Rodolos came in and surprised me sitting in the kitchen talking with one of the guests. It was a tre­ mendous pleasure for me to look at monsieur Bebe, to hear his laugh, it was so sharp, probably because of the drinking. And it pleased him that I was watching him, although he seemed a little uncomfortable at first but then he only smiled and drank, looking back at me all the time. I know that he was terribly drunk because Alice had told me that they'd drunk an awful lot, and besides, the way monsieur Bebe's eyes shone so. If he hadn't been drunk, what would he have been doing in the kitchen with an old woman like me? But the others were drunk too, and yet monsieur Bebe was the only one who was keeping me company, the only one who'd given me a drink and patted me on the head, though maybe he shouldn't have done that. But because of that I felt very pleased with monsieur Bebe, and looked at him more and more, and he liked it,

people looking at him, because once or twice he turned his profile and he had a very handsome nose, like a statue's. He was, all of him, like a statue, especially with his white suit. Even what he was drinking was white, and he was so pale that I was a little afraid for him. You could see he lived a shut-in life, like so many yow1g men these days. I would have liked to tell hin1 so, but who was I to give ad­ vice to a gentleman like hinl, and furthermore I had no time to then because there was a knock on the door and monsieur Loulou came in dragging ilie great Dane along

behind him with a sort of curtain that'd been twisted to make a kind of rope. He'd drunk a good deal more than monsieur Bebe and nearly fell when the great Dane ran

around him and tangled ilie curtain around his legs. There were voices in the hallway and a gentleman with grey hair appeared, he must have been monsieur Rosay, and right after him madame Rosay all flushed and excited and a thin young man with such black hair, blacker than I'd ever seen before. All of them were trying to help mon­ sieur Loulou, who was getting more and more tangled up with the great Dane and the curtain, all the while laughing and joking at the top of his lungs. No one paid any atten­ tion to me, until madame Rosay saw me finally and be­ came serious. I couldn't hear what she said to the grey­ haired gentleman, who ilien looked at my glass (it was empty, but there was the bottle next to it), and monsieur Rosay looked at monsieur Bebe and made an indignant face while monsieur Bebe winked at hin1 and threw him­

self back in his chair laughing to beat the band. I was very

mixed up, it seemed to me that I ought to stand up, that would be better, and greet everyone wiili a curtsy, and then go to one side and wait. Madame Rosay bad left the kitchen and an instant later Alice and Mr. Rodolos came in, they came over and indicated that I should follow them. I curtsied to everyone there, but I don't think any­ one saw me because they were all trying to quiet monsieur Loulou down, he'd suddenly burst into tears and was say­ ing incomprehensible things waving his hands at mon­ sieur Bebe. The last thing I remember was monsieur Bebe's laugh, thrO\ving his chair back and laughing.148 Julio Cortazar

Alice waited until I'd taken the apron off, and Mr. Rodo­ los handed me six hundred francs. In the sh·eet it was snowing, and the subway had stopped running some time back. I had to walk for over an hour to get back home, but the whiskey kept me warm, and remembering so many nice things, and how much fun I'd had in the kitchen at the end of the party.

Time flies, as Gustave says. You think it's Monday and it's Thursday already. Autumn ends and suddenly you're in the middle of next summer. Every time Robert shows up to ask me if the chimney doesn't have to be cleaned ( he's a very good man, Robert, and charges me half of what he charges the other tenants), I turn around twice and see that winter's here already. So, I don't rightly re­ member how much time had passed until I saw monsieur Rosay again. He came at nightfall, almost at the same time as madame Rosay had the first time. He also began by saying that he'd come because madame Beauchamp had recommended me, and sat down in the chair rather confusedly. No one sits comfortably in my house, not even me when there are visitors who are not good friends. I be­ gin to rub my hands together as if they were dirty, and begin to realize only afterwards that other people are go­ ing to think they really are dirty, and I don't know where to put them. It wasn't so bad, monsieur Rosay was as up­ set as I was, although he hid it better. He used his cane to

tap slowly on the floor, frightening Minouche a great deal,

and as if to avoid my eyes, looked around constantly. I didn't know what saint to call on, because it was the first time that a gentleman had been so upset in front of me, and I didn't know what to do in a case like that except to offer him a cup of tea.

"No, no thanks," he said impatiently. "I've come at the request of my wife . . . You remember me, surely."

"Oh, go on, monsieur Rosay. That night of the party when there were so many distinguished guests . . ."

"That's right. The party. Exactly . . . I mean, this has

nothing to do with the party, but that was a time you were very helpful to us, madame "

"Francinet, at your service."

"Madame Francinet, of comse. My wife thought . . • Look, it's something somewhat delicate. But I wish, above all else, to reassure you, what I am going to propose to you is not . . . how do they say illegal."

"Illegal, monsieur Rosay?"

"Oh, you know, these days . . . But I repeat: it has to do with something very delicate, but basically perfectly correct. My wife has been informed of all the details and has given her consent. I say this to you to reassure you." "If madame Rosay is in favor, for me it's like commu­ nion bread," I said, so he would feel more at home, al­ though I didn't know a great deal about madame Rosay

and furthermore she struck me as unsympathetic.

"In short, the situation is, madame Francinet,

that's it, madame Francinet. One of our friends per­

haps it would be better to say one of our acquaintances, has just passed away under very particular circum­ stances."

"Oh, monsieur Rosayl I'm so sorry.

"Thank you," said monsieur Rosay, and made a very strange face, almost as though he were going to yell in rage or break into tears. The face of a really crazy person, it made me afraid. Luckily, the door was ajar and Pres­ nay's shop is next door.

"This gentleman . . . well, a vety well known fashion designer . . . lived alone, that is, esb·anged from his family, do you understand? He had no one besides his friends, well, his clients, you understand, that doesn't count in these cases. Well then, for a series of reasons which would take too long to explain, his friends have been thinking about the details of the burial, and "

How beautifully he spoke! He picked every word, beat­ ing the floor slowly with his cane, and without looking at me. It was like listening to the news on the radio, only that monsieur Rosay spoke more slowly, aside from which you could see he wasn't reading a script. The effect was much better. I felt so much admiration that I lost my suspicion and brought my chair a little close. I felt a sort of warmtil in my stomach feeling that such an important gentleman had come to ask a service of me whatever it might be. And I was frightened to death and rubbed my hands without knowing what to do.

"It seemed to us," monsieur Rosay went on, "that a cere­ mony to which only his friends would be invited, a few

. . . anyway, it would not have tile magnitude requisite in the case of this gentleman . . . nor would it translate the consternation"-that's what he said-"which his loss has produced . . . Do you understand? It seemed to us that if you would function with your presence at the wake, and natmally at the bmial . . . let's say in the capacity of a relative very close to the deceased . . . do you see what I mean to say? A very close relative . . . let's say an aunt . . . I would even venture to suggest . . ."

"Yes, monsieur Rosay?" I said at tile height of wonder. "Well, it all depends upon you, and certainly you are

* . But if you would receive an adequate recompense

. . after all it's not a matter of your taking the tr·ouble for nothing . . . In that case, isn't it so, madame Fran­ cinet? . . . if the remuneration would be suitable to you . . . you understand . . . let's say the mother of the deceased . . . Let me explain carefully . . . The mother who has just arrived from Normandy, having been apprised of her son's death, has come to accompany him to the cemetery . . . No, no, before saying any­ thing . . . My wife thought that perhaps you would agree to help us out of friendship . . . and for my p art, my friends and I have agreed to offer you ten thousand­ would that be all right, madame Francinet?-ten thou­ sand francs for your assistance . . . Three thousand at this moment and the rest when we leave the cemetery, after the . . ."

I opened my mouth, only because it had fallen open on me all by itself, but monsieur Rosay didn't let me say anything. He was very flushed and was speaking rapidly, as if he wished to finish it as soon as possible.

"If you accept, madame Francinet . . . as all of us hope you will, it's understood that we rely on your assist­ ance, and we are not asking of you anything irregular, to put it that way, in that case my wife and her maid will be here within half an hour, with appropriate cloth­ ing . . . and the car, naturally, to take you to the house of course it will be necessary that you how

shall I say . . . that you become used to the idea of what's involved . . . the deceased's mother My

wife will give you the necessary information and you, naturally, will have to give the impression, once in the house . . . You understand . . . Grief, ah, desperation

. . . This has to do chiefly with the clients," he added.

"In front of us it will be enough to keep silent."

I don't know how it happened but a bundle of bank notes, very new ones, appeared in his hand, and may I drop dead this very moment if I know how, suddenly I felt them in my hand, and monsieur Rosay got up and left murmuring and forgetting to close the door like everyone who leaves my house.

May God pardon me this and so many other things, I

know. It wasn't right, but monsieur Rosay had assured me that it was not illegal, and that in that fashion it would lend a very substantial assistance (I believe that those were his very words ) . It wasn't right that I pretend to pass for the mother of the gentleman who had died, and who was a fashion designer, because there are things that just ought not to be done, not to h'ick anyone. But he had to think of the clients, and if the mother wasn't at the burial, or a least an aunt or a sister, the ceremony would not have the significance or give the feeling of grief generated by the loss. Monsieur Rosay had just finished saying these exact words, and he knew better than I. It wasn' t right for me to do this, but God knows I hardly earn three thousand francs a month, breaking my back at madame Beau­ champ's house and other places, and now I was going to152 Julio Cortazar

get ten thousand for nothing more than crying a little, to lament the death of this gentleman who was going to be my son until they buried him.

The house was located near Saint-Cloud, and they drove me there in a car the like of which I've never seen except from the outside. Madame Rosay and the maid had dressed me, and I knew that the deceased was named monsieur Linard, his given name Octave, and that he was the only son of his aged mo ther who lived in Normandy and had just arrived on the five o'clock h·ain. The aged mother was me, but I was so excited and mixed up that I heard very little of all they told me and what madame Rosay advised me. I remember that in the car she en­ treated me many times (she enh·eated me, I won't gainsay it, she had changed a lot since the night of the party) to not be too exaggerated in my grief, and told me it would be better to give the impression of being terribly fatigued and on the edge of an attack.

"Unfortunately I shall not be able to be next to you," she said as we were already arriving. "But act as I have indi­ cated to you, and aside from that my husband will take care of everything that's necessary. But please, please, madame Francinet, above all when you see newspaper­ men, and ladies, especially the reporters . . ."

"Won't you be there, madame Rosay?" I asked, really amazed.

"No. You can't understand, it would be something to ex­ plain. My husband will be there, he has some interests in monsieur Linard's business . . . Naturally, he will be there out of respect . . . a business matter and a hu­ mane one . . . But I shall not go in, it wouldn't be appro­ priate for me to . . . Don't worry about that."

I saw monsieur Rosay and various other gentlemen in the doorway. They were coming over and madame Rosay gave me a last piece of advice, then threw herself back in the seat so they shouldn't see her. I let monsieur Rosay open the car door, then I got out into the s h·eet, crying at the top of my lungs while monsieur Rosay was hugging me and leading me inside, followed by some of the other gentlemen. I couldn't see much of the house because I was wearing a shawl which almost covered my eyes, and be­ sides I was crying so hard that I couldn't manage to see anything, but you could tee! it was llL'mrious by the odor and also by the thickness of the carpets. Monsiem Rosay was murmuring consolations, and his voice sounded as

though he were crying too. In a very, very large salon where the chandeliers had fringes, there were several gen­ tlemen who were looking at me with a lot of compassion and sympathy, and I'm sure they would have come to con­ sole me if monsieur Rosay had not hurried me forward, holding me across the shoulders. I managed to see a

young man on a sofa who had his eyes closed and a glass in one hand. Hearing me come in, he didn't even move, even though I was crying very hard just then. They opened another door and two gentlemen came out carry­ ing their handkerchiefs. Monsieur Rosay gave me a little shove, and I went into a room, tottering, and let myself be led over to where the dead man was, and I saw the dead man who was my son, I saw the profile of monsieur Bebe, more blond and white than ever now that he was dead.

I think I grabbed hold of the edge of the bed, because monsieur Rosay and several other gentlemen leaped over and carne around me and held me up, while I was looking at the handsome face of the dead monsieur Bebe, his long black eyelashes and his nose like wax, and I couldn't be­ lieve that he was monsieur Linard, the gentleman who was a fashion designer and had just died, I couldn't con­ vince myself that this corpse there in front of me was monsieur Bebe. Without knowing, I swear, I had begun to cry for real, grabbing hold of the edge of the big deluxe bed of carved oak, remembering how monsieur Bebe had patted my head the night of the party, and had poured me a glass of whiskey, talking to me and paying attention to me while the others were having fun. When monsieur Rosay murmured something like, "Speak to him, say son, son . . ." I had no trouble lying at all, and I think that crying for him made me feel a lot better, as if it were a reward for being so afraid as I'd been up to that moment. Nothing seemed strange to me now, and when I raised my eyes and at one side of the bed I saw monsieur Loulou with his eyes all red and his mouth h·embling, I started to cry at the top of my lungs looking him right in the face, and he was crying as well in spite of his surprise, he was crying because I was crying, and was filled with surprise

at realizing that I was crying like him, really crying, be­ cause we both loved monsieur Bebe, and we almost chal­ lenged one another from opposite sides of the bed, almost as if, without rhyme or reason, monsieur Bebe might

laugh and make jokes like when he was alive, sitting at the kitchen table and laughing at all of us.

They led me back to a sofa in the big salon with chan­ deliers, and a lady there who'd pulled a bottle of smelling salts out of her purse, and a servant pushed a small table

on wheels over next to me that had a h·ay with hot cofFee and a glass of water on it. Monsieur Rosay was much more at ease now that he saw I was capable of doing what they'd asked me. I saw that when he went ofF to speak with some other gentlemen, and there was a long period

when no one came into or left the salon. On the sofa oppo­ site me, the young man I'd seen when I came in was still sitting there and crying with his face in his hands. Every now and then he'd taken out his handkerchief and blow his nose. Monsieur Loulou appeared in the doorway and looked at him a minute before coming over and sitting down beside him. I felt so sony for both of them, you could see they'd been very good friends of monsieur Bebe, and they were so young, and felt it so greatly. Monsieur Rosay also watched them from one corner of the room, where he was standing talking in a low voice to two ladies who were already standing up to leave. And so the mo­ ments passed until monsieur Loulou jumped up with a

shriek, and drew away from the other young man who

was looking at him furiously, and I heard monsieur Lou-

lou say something like, "Nothing at all was ever of any importance to you, Nina," and I remembered that there was someone called Nina who had an aunt in Poitou who sent him chickens and vegetables. Monsieur Loulou shrugged his shoulders and went on to say that Nina was a liar, and at last he went off making faces and gestures of annoyance. Then monsieur Nina stood up also, and both of them were almost running to the room where monsieur Bebe was laid out, and I heard them arguing, but right away monsieur Rosay went in to make them be quiet, and

I couldn't hear anything else until monsieur Loulou came back to sit on the sofa, with a soaked handkerchief in his hand. Just behind the sofa there was a window which opened on an inside court, I think that of all the things there were in that room, I remember the window best ( and also the chandeliers, they were so elegant) , because toward the end of the night I saw the sky changing color little by little and growing more and more grey and fmally pink, just before the sun came up. And all that time I was sitting thinking of monsieur Bebe, and suddenly I wasn't able to restrain myself and I cried, although only mon­ sieur Rosay and monsieur Loulou were there, because monsieur Nina had left or was in another part of the house. And so the night passed, and at times I couldn't help thinking about monsieur BeM so young, and I began crying again, though also it was a little bit because I was tired; then monsieur Rosay came over to sit beside me with a very s trange look on his face, and said that it was

not necessary for me to continue to pretend, and that I

should ready myself for when the time came for the burial and the people and the newspaper reporters would anive. But it's difcult at times to know when one is crying for b·ue or not, and I begged monsieur Rosay to let me sit wake on monsieur Bebe. He seemed very surprised that I didn't want to go to sleep a bit, and different times he suggested that he should take me to a bedroom, but finally he was convinced and left me alone. I took advantage of a few minutes when he'd gone out, probably to the bath­ room, and I went into the other room when monsieur Bebe was.

I had thought I would be alone with him there, but there was monsieur Nina looking at him, stationed at the foot of the bed. As we did not know one another (I mean to say that he knew that I was the lady who was passing as monsieur Bebe's mother, but we had not seen one another before this), we looked at one another suspiciously,

though he didn't say anything when I approached and stood beside monsieur Bebe. We stood there for a while, and I saw that the tears were running down his cheeks and that they'd made like a furrow near his nose.

"You were there also the night of the party," I said, hop­ ing to distract him. "Monsieur ·Bebe . . . monsieur Lin­ ard said that you were vety unhappy and asked monsieur Loulou to go out and keep you company."

Monsieur Nina looked at me without understanding. He shook his head, and I smiled at him so as to cheer him up.

"The night of the party at monsieur Rosay's house," I

said. "Monsieur Linard came out to the kitchen and gave me some whiskey."

"Whiskey?"

"Yes. He was the only one all night who offered me something to drink . . . And monsieur Loulou was open­ ing a bottle of champagne, and then monsieur Limu·d let fly a jet of foam in his face and . . ."

"Oh, be quiet, be quiet," murmured monsieur Nina. "Don't mention that . . . Bebe was crazy, really crazy . . ."' "And you were sad because of that?" I asked, so as to say something, but now he didn't hear me, he was look­ ing at monsieur Bebe as if to ask him something, his mouth moved repeating over and over again the same thing until

I couldn't watch him any longer. Monsieur Nina wasn't such a nice boy as monsieur Bebe or monsieur Loulou, and to me he seemed very small, although people in black are always smaller, as Gus tave says. I would have wanted to console monsieur Nina, he was so despondent, but at that moment monsiem Rosay came in and motioned for me to go back to the salon.

"It's getting to be morning now, madame Francinet," he said. His face was getting green, the poor fellow. "You ought to rest for a bit. You're not going to be able to stand the fatigue, and pretty soon people are going to start arriv­ ing. The bmial is going to be at nine-thirty."

In fact I was dropping from weariness, and it would be better if I slept for an hom. It's incredible how one hour of sleep refreshes me. So I let monsieur Rosay take my arm and lead me out, and when we were crossing the salon with the chandeliers, the window was already a pale pink, and I felt cold in spite of the fire in the fireplace. Monsieur Rosay let go of me at that moment all at once, and stood looking at the doorway that led to the enh·ance hall. A man with a scarf knotted around his neck had come in, and for a second I was frightened thinking that maybe we had been discovered ( although there was nothing illegal) and that the man with the scalf was a brother of some­ thing like that of monsieur BeM's. But that was impossible, he had such a coarse air about him, as if PietTe or Gustave might have been brothers of someone as refined as monsiem Bebe. Behind the man with the scarf I suddenly saw monsieur Loulou looking as though he were scared, but at the same time it seemed to me he looked satisfied that something was about to happen. Then mon­ sieur Rosay motioned me to stay where I was and took two or tln·ee steps toward the man with the scarf, without much wanting to, I thought.

"You're coming? . . ." he started by saying, in the same tone of voice he used to talk with me, which at bot­ tom was not at all friendly.

"Where is Bebe?" asked the man with a voice that showed he had been drinking or shouting. Monsieur Rosay made a vague geshlre, wanting to keep him from entering, but the man came forward and swept him aside with just a look. I was very surprised at such rudeness at such a sad moment, but monsieur Loulou, who'd been standing in the doorway (I think it was he who'd let the man in) , broke into peals of laughter, and then monsieur Rosay went over and began slapping him as you would a boy, just like you would slap a boy. I didn't hear very well what they were saying, but monsieur Loulou seemed happy in spite of having bis ears boxed, and said some­ thing like, "Now he'll see . . . now he'll see, that whore . . ." although I don't like to repeat his words, and he said it several times until suddenly he burst into tears and put his hands to his face, while monsieur Rosay was pushing and pulling him toward the sofa where he stayed, sobbing and crying, and everybody bad forgotten about me, as usual.

Monsieur Rosay semed very nervous and couldn't make up his mind to go into the dead man's room, but a moment later you could hear monsieur Nina's voice argu­ ing about something, and monsieur Rosay made up his mind and ran to the doorway just as monsieur Nina came sailing out protesting, and I would have sworn that the man with the scarf had given him a good shove to throw him out. Monsieur Rosay backed off, looking at monsieur Nina, and both of them began to speak in low voices but even so it came out shrill, and monsieur Nina wept in de­ spair and made such a face that I felt very sorry for him. Finally, he calmed down a little and monsieur Rosay led him over to the sofa where monsieur Loulou was, who be­ gan to laugh again ( that's how it was, they could as soon laugh as cry), but monsieur Nina made a disdainful face and went over to sit on the other sofa near the fireplace. I stayed in one corner of the room, waiting for the ladies and reporters to arrive, as madame Rosay had instructed me, and finally the sun was shining directly into the panes of the window and a servant in livery showed in two very elegant gentlemen and a lady, who looked first at mon­ sieur Nina thinking that perl1aps he was family, then they looked at me, and I had my face in my hands but I could see very well from between my fingers. These gentlemen and others who came in later passed through to see mon­ seur Bebe, and later they gathered together in the salon, and some of them came over to where I was, accompanied by monsieur Rosay, and gave me condolences and pressed my hand very feelingly. The ladies also were very friendly, one of them especially, very young and pretty, who sat down beside me for a moment and said that monsieur Linard had been a great artist and that his death was an irreparable misfortune. I said yes to everyone and I was really crying, although I should have been pretending all the time, but it affected me to think of monsieur Bebe in­ side there, so handsome and so young, and of what a great artist he had been. The young lady kept patting my hands and telling me that no one would ever forget monsieur Linard, and that she was sure that monsieur Rosay would take care of the fashion house just as monsieur Linard had always wanted, that his style would never be lost, and many other things I don't remember but always filled with praise for monsieur Bebe. And then monsieur Rosay carne looking for me, and after looking at everyone around me so that they would understand what was about to happen, he told me in a low voice that it was time to say goodbye to my son, because they were going to seal the casket soon. I had a terrible fright come over me, thinking that now I had to do the hardest scene, but he held me up and helped me to sit up, and we went into the room; there was only the man with the scarf at the foot of the bed, looking at monsieur Bebe,and monsieur Rosay gestured toward him pleadingly as though to have him understand that he ought to leave me alone with my son, but the man answered with a wry face and shrugged his shoulders and didn't budge. Monsieur Rosay didn't know what to do, and went back to looking at the man as though imploring him to leave, for other gentlemen who must have been the re­ porters were just entering the room behind us, and really the man was very disrespectful there with that scarf and his way of looking at monsieur Rosay as if it were to insult him. I couldn't bold back any longer, I was afraid of them all, I was sure that something terrible was going to hap­ pen, and even though monsieur Rosay was paying no at­ tention to me and was still making gestures at the man to convince him to leave, I went over to monsieur Bebe and began to cry and wail, and then monsieur Rosay held me back because really I would have wanted to kiss monsieur Bebe on the forehead, for me he was still the best of them all, but he didn't let me go and begged me to calm myself, and finally made me go back to the salon, consoling me while he was squeezing my arm until it hurt, but as for that, no one could feel it but me and it meant nothing to me. Then I was on the sofa and the waiter brought some water and two ladies were fanning me with their hand­ kerchiefs, but there was a large crowd in the other room, and new people came in and gathered around me so I couldn't see what was happening. Among those who had just arrived was the priest, and I was very happy that he had come to accompany monsieur Bebe. It would soon be time to leave for the cemetery, and it was good that the priest was going to come with us, with the mother and the friends of monsieur Bebe. Certainly they, too, would be happy that be was coming along, especially monsieur Rosay who was so upset, all the fault of the man in the scarf, and that be was so careful that everything be cor­ rect and as it ought to be, so that people should know how good the dead man had been and bow much everyone loved monsieur Bebe.