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The Truth About the Harry Quebert Affair

Written by Jöel Dicker

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor

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THE TRUTH ABOUT
THE HARRY QUEBERT
AFFAIR

JOËL DICKER

*Translated from the French by
Sam Taylor*



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The Day of the Disappearance

(Saturday, August 30, 1975)

“Somerset Police. What’s your emergency?”

“Hello? My name is Deborah Cooper. I live on Side Creek Lane. I think I’ve just seen a man running after a girl in the woods.”

“Could you tell me exactly what happened, ma’am?”

“I don’t know! I was standing by the window. I looked over toward the woods, and I saw this girl running through the trees. There was a man behind her. I think she was trying to get away from him.”

“Where are they now?”

“I can’t see them anymore. They’re in the forest.”

“I’m sending a patrol over right now, ma’am.”

The news story that would shock the town of Somerset, New Hampshire, began with this phone call. On that day, Nola Kellergan, a fifteen-year-old local girl, disappeared. No trace of her could be found.

PROLOGUE

October 2008
(thirty-three years after the disappearance)



My book was the talk of the town. I could no longer walk the streets of Manhattan in peace. I could no longer go jogging without passersby recognizing me and calling out, “Look, it’s Goldman! It’s that writer!” Some even started running after me so they could ask me the questions that were gnawing at them: “Is it true what you say in your book? Did Harry Quebert really do that?” In the café in the West Village where I was a regular, certain customers felt free to sit at my table and talk to me. “I’m reading your book right now, Mr Goldman. I can’t put it down! The first one was good, of course, but this one . . . Did they really pay you two million bucks to write it? How old are you? I bet you’re not even thirty. Twenty-eight! And you’re already a multi-millionaire!” Even the doorman at my building, whose progress through my book I was able to note each time I came or went, cornered me for a long talk by the elevator once he had got to the end. “So that’s what happened to Nola Kellergan? That poor girl! But how could it happen? How could such a thing be possible, Mr Goldman?”

All of New York, the entire country, in fact, was going crazy for my book. Only two weeks had passed since its publication, and it already promised to be the best-selling book of the year. Everyone wanted to know what had happened in Somerset in 1975. They were talking about it everywhere: on T.V., on the radio, in every newspaper, all over the Internet. In my late twenties, I had, with this book—only the second of my career—become the most famous writer in the country.

The case that had shocked the nation, and from which the core of my story was taken, had blown up several months earlier, at the beginning

of summer, when the remains of a girl who had been missing for thirty-three years were discovered. So began the events described in this book, without which the rest of America would never even have heard of the little town of Somerset, New Hampshire.

PART ONE

Writers' Disease
(eight months before the book's publication)



In the Caverns of Memory

“The first chapter, Marcus, is essential. If the readers don’t like it, they won’t read the rest of your book. How do you plan to begin yours?”

“I don’t know, Harry. Do you think I’ll ever be able to do it?”

“Do what?”

“Write a book.”

“I’m certain you will.”



In early 2008, about a year and a half after my first novel had made me the new darling of American letters, I was seized by a terrible case of writer’s block—a common affliction, I am told, for writers who have enjoyed sudden, meteoric success. My terror of the blank page did not hit me suddenly; it crept over me bit by bit, as if my brain were slowly freezing up. I had deliberately ignored the symptoms when they first appeared. I told myself that inspiration would return tomorrow, or the day after, or perhaps the day after that. But the days and weeks and months went by, and inspiration never returned.

My descent into Hell was divided into three stages. The first,

necessary for all breakneck falls, was a blistering rise. My first novel sold one million copies, propelling me, in my twenties, into the upper echelons of the literary world. It was the fall of 2006, and within a few weeks I was a celebrity. I was everywhere: on T.V. screens, in newspapers, on the covers of magazines. My face smiled out from huge advertisements on the subway. Even the harshest critics on the East Coast agreed: Marcus Goldman was destined to become a great writer.

After only one book, the doors of a new life were opening to me. I left my parents' place in New Jersey and moved into a plush apartment in the Village. I swapped my old Ford for a brand new Range Rover with tinted windows. I started going out to expensive restaurants. I had taken on a literary agent who also managed my schedule and came to watch baseball with me on a giant screen in my new apartment. I rented an office close to Central Park, where a secretary named Denise, who was a little in love with me, opened my mail, made me coffee, and filed my important documents.

For the first six months after the publication of the book, I contented myself with enjoying the sweetness of my new existence. In the mornings I went by the office to leaf through any new articles about me, to surf the Internet, and to read the dozens of fan letters I received every day. Then, feeling pleased with myself and satisfied that I'd done enough work for the day, I would wander the streets of Manhattan, causing a stir when I passed by. I spent the rest of my days enjoying the new rights I'd been granted by celebrity: the right to buy anything I liked; the right to a V.I.P. box in Madison Square Garden to watch the Rangers; the right to share red carpets with pop stars whose albums I had bought when I was younger; the right to make every man in New York jealous by dating Lydia Gloor, the star of the country's top-rated T.V. show. Sure that my success would never end, I took no notice when my agent and my publisher fired off their first warnings about getting back to work and writing my second novel.

It was during the next six months when I realized the tide was

turning. The flood of fan mail slowed to a trickle, and fewer people stopped me on the street. Soon, those who did recognize me started asking, “Mr Goldman, what’s your next book about? And when’s it coming out?” I understood that it was time to get started, and I did. I wrote down ideas on loose sheets of paper and made outlines on my laptop. But it was no good. So I thought of other ideas and made other outlines. Again, without success. Finally, I bought a new laptop, in the hope that it would come pre-loaded with good ideas. All in vain. Next, I tried changing my work habits: I made Denise stay in my office until late at night so she could take dictation of what I imagined were great sentences, wonderful one-liners, and the beginnings of remarkable novels. But when I looked at them the next day, the one-liners seemed dull, the sentences badly constructed, and the beginnings all dead ends. I was entering the second stage of my disease.

By the fall of 2007, a year after the publication of my first book, I had still not set down a single word of the next one. I began to understand that glory was a Gorgon who could turn you to stone if you failed to continue performing. My share of the public’s attention had been taken over by the latest rising politicians, the stars of the hottest new reality T.V. show and a rock band that had just broken through. It was a ludicrously short time frame as far as I was concerned since my book had appeared, but on a global scale it was an eternity. During that same year, in the United States, more than four million babies had been born, almost two and a half million people had died, more than thirty thousand had been shot to death, half a million had started taking drugs, fifty thousand had become millionaires, and some forty thousand had died in automobile accidents. And I had written just one book.

Schmid & Hanson, the powerful New York publishers who had paid me a tidy sum to publish my first novel and who had great hopes for my future work, were pestering my agent, Douglas Claren—and he, in turn, was hounding me. He told me that time was running out, that it was imperative I produce a new manuscript. I tried to reassure him in order

to reassure myself, telling him that my second novel was progressing well and that there was nothing to be worried about. But despite all the hours I spent in my office, the pages on my desk remained blank; inspiration had abandoned me without warning. At night, in bed, unable to sleep, I would torture myself by thinking that soon the great Marcus Goldman would no longer exist. That thought frightened me so much that I decided to go on vacation to clear my head. I treated myself to a month in a five-star hotel in Miami, supposedly to recharge my batteries, firmly convinced that relaxing beneath palm trees would enable me to rediscover my creative genius. But Florida was, of course, nothing but an attempt to escape. Two thousand years before me, the philosopher Seneca had experienced the same troublesome predicament: No matter where you go, your problems go with you. It was as if, having just arrived in Miami, a kind Cuban baggage handler had run after me as I left the airport and said:

“Are you Mr Goldman?”

“Yes.”

“This belongs to you.”

And he handed me an envelope containing a sheaf of papers.

“Are these my blank pages?”

“Yes, Mr Goldman. Surely you weren’t going to leave New York without them?”

And so I spent that month in Florida alone with my demons in a luxury suite, wretched and disheartened. On my laptop, which I never shut down, the document I had named *new novel.doc* remained blank. It was after buying a margarita for the hotel pianist that I realized I had caught a disease sadly common in artistic circles. Sitting next to me at the bar, the pianist explained that he had written only one song in his entire life, but that it had been a massive hit. He had been so successful that he had never been able to write anything else, and now, penniless and miserable, he scraped out a living by playing other people’s tunes for the hotel’s guests. “I was touring all the time back then, performing

in the biggest venues in the country,” he told me while gripping my lapel. “Ten thousand people screaming my name . . . chicks fainting or throwing their panties at me. It was something else, man.” And, having licked the salt from around his glass like a small dog, he added, “I swear to you it’s the truth.” That was the saddest thing: I knew he wasn’t lying.

The third stage of my nightmare began when I returned to New York. On the plane home, I read an article about a young author who’d just published a novel to huge acclaim. Life was taunting me: Not only had I been forgotten, but now I was going to be replaced. A panicky Douglas met me at the airport: Schmid & Hanson had run out of patience and they wanted proof that the novel was progressing and that I would soon submit the manuscript.

“We’re up shit creek,” he told me in the car, as we drove back to Manhattan. “Please tell me your stay in Florida revived you, and that your book is almost finished! There’s this new guy everyone’s talking about . . . His book’s going to be a bestseller this Christmas. And you, Marcus? What have you got to give us for Christmas?”

“I’m going to buckle down,” I promised him, as fear gripped me. “I’ll get there! We’ll do a big promotional campaign! People loved the first book—they’ll love the next one too!”

“Marc, you don’t understand. We could have done that a few months ago. That was our strategy: ride the wave of your success. The public wanted Marcus Goldman, but as Marcus Goldman was busy chilling out in Florida, the readers bought a book by someone else instead. Books are interchangeable: People want a story that excites them, relaxes them, entertains them. And if you don’t give them that, someone else will—and you’ll be history.”

Newly chastened, I went to work as never before: I began writing at six in the morning and didn’t stop until nine or ten at night, carried away by the frenzy of despair. I strung words and sentences together, came up with dozens of story ideas. But, much to my frustration, I didn’t produce

anything worthwhile. Denise spent her days worrying about me. She had nothing else to do—no dictation to take, no letters to file. She paced up and down the hallway, and when she couldn't take it anymore, she pounded on my door.

"I'm begging you, Marcus," she said. "Please, *please* open the door! Come out of your office for a while, go for a walk in the park. You haven't eaten anything all day!"

I yelled in reply: "Not hungry! Not hungry! No book, no dinner!"

She was practically sobbing. "Don't say things like that, Marcus! I'm going to the deli at the corner to buy a roast beef sandwich, your favorite. I'll be quick!"

I heard her pick up her bag and run to the door, then clatter down the stairs as if her rushing might change anything. I had finally grasped the seriousness of my situation: Writing a book from scratch had seemed easy, but now that I was at the height of my fame, now that it was time to live up to my talent, to repeat the weary climb toward success that is the writing of a good novel, I no longer felt capable of it. I had been floored by the writers' disease, and there was no-one to help me to my feet. Everyone I talked to about it told me it was nothing to worry about, that it was probably very common, and that if I didn't write my book today, I would do it tomorrow. For two days, I tried writing in my old bedroom, at my parents' place in Montclair, the room where I had found the inspiration for my first novel. But that ended in pitiful failure. My mother was not altogether blameless for this, because she spent both of those days sitting next to me, squinting at the screen of my laptop and repeating, "It's very good, Markie."

Finally, I said, "Mom, I haven't written a single line."

"But I can tell it's going to be very good."

"Mom, if you'd just leave me alone . . ."

"Why do you need to be alone? Are you hungry? Do you want pancakes? Waffles? Some eggs, maybe?"

"I'm not hungry."

“So why do you want me to leave you alone? Are you saying it disturbs you to be with the woman who gave birth to you?”

“No, it doesn’t disturb me, but . . .”

“But what?”

“Nothing, Mom.”

“You need a girlfriend, Markie. Do you think I don’t know you’ve split up with that T.V. actress? What’s her name again?”

“Lydia Gloor. But we weren’t really together in the first place. I mean, it was just a fling.”

“‘Just a fling’! That’s how young people are nowadays. Nothing is ever more than ‘just a fling,’ and they end up bald and childless at fifty!”

“What does that have to do with being bald, Mom?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with being bald. But do you think it’s right that I should find from a magazine that you’re with this girl? What kind of son does that to his mother? And guess what? Just before you went to Florida, I go to Scheingetz’s—the hairdresser’s, not the butcher’s—and everyone in the salon is looking at me strangely. I ask what’s going on, and Mrs Berg, with her head under a dryer, shows me a magazine she’s reading: There’s a picture of you and that Lydia Gloor, standing in the street together, and the headline of the article says that you’ve separated. Everyone in the hairdresser’s knew you’d split up, and I didn’t even know you’d been dating this girl! Obviously, I didn’t want to look like an idiot, so I said she was a charming girl and that she’d often had dinner with us at the house.”

“I didn’t tell you about her because it wasn’t serious. She wasn’t The One, you know?”

“But they’re never The One! You never meet any of the right people, Markie! That’s the problem. Do you really think T.V. actresses know how to keep a home? You know, I met Mrs Levey yesterday at the grocery store, and her daughter is single too. She’d be perfect for you. And she has very nice teeth. Should I ask her to come over now?”

“No, I’m trying to work.”

And just then the bell rang.

“I think that’s them,” my mother said.

“What do you mean, ‘that’s them?’”

“Mrs Levey and her daughter. I asked them to come over for tea at four o’clock. It’s four exactly. Punctuality is important in a woman. Don’t you love her already?”

“You invited them over for tea? Get rid of them, Mom! I’m not here to have a tea party—I have a book to write!”

“Oh, Markie, you really need a girlfriend. A girlfriend you’ll get engaged to and then marry. You think too much about books and not enough about getting married.”

Nobody understood what was at stake. Soon after the start of the new year, in January 2008, Roy Barnaski, the head of Schmid & Hanson, summoned me to his office on the fifty-first floor of a skyscraper on Lexington Avenue to give me a serious talking-to. “So, Goldman, when will I have this new manuscript?” he barked. “We have a contract for two more books. You need to get to work, and be quick about it! This is a business! Did you see that guy whose book came out before Christmas? He’s replaced you in the eyes of the public! His agent says his next novel is almost finished already. And yours? You’re costing us money! So pull yourself together. You need to pull a rabbit out of your hat. Write me a great book, and you can still save your career. I’m giving you six months. You have until the end of June.”

Six months to write a book, when I had been blocked for more than a year. Worse still, Barnaski had not informed me, when he gave me this deadline, of the consequences of failing to meet it. It was Douglas who did that, two weeks later. “Barnaski is going apeshit. Do you know what’ll happen if you don’t deliver in June? He’ll sue the shit out of you. They’ll take all your money, and you’ll have to wave goodbye to this beautiful life of yours. This cool apartment, those fine Italian shoes, your Range Rover . . . they’ll take it all.”

Lesson number two: Not only is glory ephemeral, but it also comes

at a price. The evening after Douglas delivered his warning, I picked up my phone and dialed the number of the only person I thought might be able to help me out of this quicksand: Harry Quebert, formerly my college professor, and above all one of the bestselling and most highly respected authors in the country. I had been close friends with him for more than a decade, since I'd been his student at Burrows College in Massachusetts.

It had been more than a year since I had spoken to him. I reached him at his house in Somerset, New Hampshire. When he heard my voice, he said mockingly:

"Oh, Marcus! Is it really you? Incredible. I haven't heard a word from you since you became a star. I tried calling you a month ago and was told by your secretary that you weren't coming to the phone for anyone."

"I'm in trouble, Harry," I answered bluntly. "I don't think I'm a writer anymore."

He immediately dropped the sarcasm. "What're you talking about?"

"I don't know what to write anymore. I'm finished. Totally blocked. It's been like this for months, maybe a year."

He laughed warmly, reassuringly. "It's just a mental hang-up, Marcus! Writer's block is as senseless as sexual impotence: It's just your genius panicking, the same way your libido makes you go soft when you're about to play hide-the-salami with one of your young admirers and all you can think about is how you're going to give her an orgasm that can be measured on the Richter scale. Don't worry about genius—just keep churning out the words. Genius comes naturally."

"You think?"

"I'm sure of it. But you might have to give up a few of your celebrity parties. Writing is a serious business. I thought I'd taught you that."

"But I am working hard! That's all I'm doing! And yet I'm not getting anywhere."

"Well, maybe you're in the wrong place, then. New York is a wonderful city, but there's too much noise. Why don't you come here,

to my place, the way you did when you were my student?”

Leaving to find the inspiration for a new book in a seaside village, in the company of my old mentor—it was exactly what I needed. So it was that, one week later, in mid-February 2008, I went to visit Harry in Somerset, New Hampshire. This was a few months before the dramatic events I am about to narrate.

Before it provided the setting for a scandal that shook the nation in the summer of 2008, no-one had ever heard of Somerset. It is a small town by the ocean, about fifteen minutes from the Massachusetts border. On its main street you can find a movie theater—always showing films a month or two after the rest of the country—a few shops, a post office, a police station, and a handful of restaurants, including Clark’s, the town’s historic diner. Around this center, there were peaceful neighborhoods of painted wooden houses with porches and slate roofs, bordered by perfectly manicured lawns. It was like something from a mythical America, where no-one ever locks his door; one of those places frequently found in New England, so calm that you feel sheltered from all the world’s storms.

I knew Somerset well, having visited Harry there as a student. Harry lived in a beautiful stone and solid-pine house—located outside town, on Shore Road in the direction of Maine—that overlooked a stretch of water identified on maps as Goose Cove. It was a writer’s house, with an ocean view and a deck with a steep staircase that took you straight down to the beach. All around was a tranquil wilderness: the coastal forest, the shoreline of shells and boulders, the damp thickets of ferns and moss, a few walking trails that ran alongside the beach. If you didn’t know civilization was only a few miles away, you might easily believe yourself to be at the end of the earth. It was also easy to imagine yourself an old writer here, producing masterpieces out on the deck, inspired by the tides and the light on the ocean.

I left New York on February 10, in the depths of my writer’s block.

The country was already quaking from the first vibrations of the presidential election: Five days earlier, Super Tuesday (held in February, rather than the usual March, a hint that this was going to be an extraordinary year) had all but awarded the Republican nomination to Senator John McCain, while on the Democratic side the battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was still raging. I drove to Somerset without stopping. It had been a snowy winter, and the landscape that rushed past me was blanketed with white. I loved New England, I loved its tranquility, I loved its vast forests, I loved its ponds with water lilies where you could swim in summer and skate in winter, I liked that you didn't have to pay sales tax or income tax in New Hampshire. My memory is that when I arrived at Harry's house that day, on a cold and misty afternoon, I immediately experienced a feeling of inner peace. Harry was waiting for me on the porch, bundled up in a huge winter coat. I got out of the car and he came over to meet me, placing his hands on my shoulders and offering me a generous, reassuring smile.

"What's going on, Marcus?"

"I don't know, Harry."

"Come on, let's go in. You've always been oversensitive."

Even before I unpacked, the two of us sat down in his living room to chat for a while. He made coffee. A fire crackled in the hearth. It was warm inside. Through the large bay window, I saw the ocean roiled up by icy winds and sleet falling onto the rocks.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful it is here," I murmured.

He nodded.

"You'll see that I'm going to take good care of you. You're going to write a novel that will knock 'em all out. There's nothing to worry about—all great writers go through this."

He seemed as serene and confident as ever. I had never seen him show any self-doubt; his mere presence radiated natural authority. He was in his mid-sixties and he looked great, with his always impeccable silvered mane of hair, his wide shoulders, and a body still taut and

powerful from long years spent boxing. In fact, it was through this sport, which I too practiced regularly, that we had first become friends at Burrows College.

The ties that bound me to Harry, which I will come back to later on in this story, were deep and strong. He had entered my life in 1998, when I arrived at Burrows. He was fifty-seven. He had spent the last thirteen years sprinkling his stardust on the English department of this modest rural school. Before this, I had known Harry Quebert the Great Author by name, like everyone else did. At Burrows, I met Just Harry, the man who would become one of my closest friends, in spite of the difference in our ages, and who would teach me to be a writer. His own apotheosis had come in the middle of the 1970s, when his second book, *The Origin of Evil*, had sold a million or more copies and won two of the country's most prestigious literary awards: The National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award. Since then, he had published books on a regular basis and had a popular monthly column in the *Boston Globe*. I hoped that in the next few weeks he would be able to turn me into a writer again and teach me how to cross the chasm of the blank page. "Writers get blocked sometimes. It comes with the territory," he explained. "But if you get down to work, it will unblock itself—you'll see." He put me in his ground-floor office, where he himself had written most of his books, including *The Origin of Evil*. I spent long hours in there, trying to write, but most of the time all I did was stare out at the ocean and the snow. When he brought me coffee or something to eat, he would see the despair on my face and attempt to cheer me up. Eventually, one morning, he said, "Don't look like that, Marcus. Anyone would think you were dying."

"I'm not far off."

"Come on. It's fine to worry about what the world is coming to, but you shouldn't fret like this over a book."

"But you . . . have you ever had this problem?"

He laughed loudly.

“Writer’s block? Are you kidding? More than you can even imagine!”

“My publisher says if I don’t write a new book now, I’m finished.”

“You know what a publisher is? He’s a failed writer whose father was rich enough that he’s able to appropriate other people’s talents. You’ll see, Marcus—everything will be O.K. You’ve got a great career ahead of you. Your first book was remarkable, and the second will be even better. Don’t worry—I’m going to help you find your inspiration again.”

I cannot say that my time in Somerset gave me back my inspiration, but it was undeniably good for me. For Harry too, whom, I knew, often felt lonely: He was a man with no family and with few distractions. Those were happy days. In fact, they were our last happy days together. We spent them taking long walks by the sea, listening to opera, hiking cross-country ski trails, attending local cultural events, stopping in at supermarkets in search of little cocktail sausages, the profits from which were donated to military veterans (Harry was crazy about those sausages; he thought they alone justified the war in Iraq). We also often went to Clark’s, where we would eat lunch and laze around all afternoon drinking coffee and talking about life, just as we used to when I was his student. Everyone in Somerset knew and respected Harry, and soon everyone knew me too.

The two people I felt closest to were Jenny Dawn, who ran Clark’s, and Ernie Pinkas, the unpaid municipal librarian, a good friend of Harry’s who sometimes came to Goose Cove in the evenings for a glass of Scotch. I went to the library myself every morning to read the *New York Times*. On the first day, I noticed that Ernie Pinkas had put a copy of my book on prominent display. He showed it to me proudly and said, “You see, Marcus, your book has pride of place here. It’s the library’s most borrowed book. When’s the next one coming out?”

Harry had been sitting in the same place at Clark’s for thirty-three years: Table 17, which boasted a metal plaque put there by Jenny with the inscription:

IT WAS AT THIS TABLE, IN THE SUMMER OF 1975,
THAT HARRY QUEBERT WROTE HIS FAMOUS NOVEL,
“THE ORIGIN OF EVIL”

I had seen this plaque so many times, but I had never really paid it much attention. It was only during this stay that I began taking a keen interest in it, spending a long time contemplating it. Soon I was obsessed by those lines. Sitting at this ugly little wooden table, sticky with grease and maple syrup, in this small-town diner in New Hampshire, Harry had written his great masterpiece, the book that had made him a literary legend. Where had he found such inspiration? I wanted to sit at this table too, to write and be struck by genius. And in fact I did sit there, with pens and sheets of paper, for two afternoons straight, but it was no good. Finally, I asked Jenny: “So he just sat at this table and wrote?”

She nodded. “All day long, Marcus. The whole blessed day. He never stopped. It was the summer of 1975—I remember it well.”

I felt a kind of fury boiling within me. I too wanted to write a masterpiece; I too wanted to write a book to which all other books would be compared. These feelings came to the fore after I had been in Somerset for almost a month, and Harry discovered that I had still not written a single word. It was early March, in Harry’s office at Goose Cove, where I was waiting for divine inspiration. Harry walked in, an apron tied around his waist, bringing me some doughnuts he’d just made.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“I’m writing something amazing,” I replied, passing him a sheaf of papers like the Cuban baggage handler gave me three months earlier.

He put down his plate and looked at them excitedly, before realizing they were blank.

“You haven’t written anything? You’ve been here more than three weeks and you haven’t written anything at all?”

I lost my temper. “Nothing! Nothing! Nothing of any worth! Only scenarios for second-rate novels.”

“But, dear God, Marcus, what do you want to write?”

I replied without thinking: “A masterpiece! I want to write a masterpiece!”

“A masterpiece?”

“Yes. I want to write a great novel, with great ideas! I want to write something unforgettable.”

Harry looked at me for a moment and then burst out laughing. “Your hubris always did get on my nerves. I’ve been telling you that for years. You’re going to become a very great writer—I know it. I’ve been sure of it since I first met you. But do you want to know what your problem is? You’re in too much of a hurry! How old are you, exactly?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Twenty-eight years old! And you already expect to be a cross between Saul Bellow and Arthur Miller? Glory will come to you—don’t be in such a hurry. I’m closing on seventy, and I’m terrified. Time flies by, you know, and each year that passes is another year I can’t get back. What do you think’s going to happen, Marcus? That you’ll just produce another book, like a hen laying an egg? A career has to be built slowly. And as for writing a great novel, you don’t need great ideas. Just be yourself and you’ll get there, I have absolutely no doubt about that. I’ve been teaching literature for twenty-plus years—twenty-plus *long* years—and you’re the most brilliant student I ever had.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s the simple truth. But don’t come to me like a crybaby because you haven’t received the Nobel Prize yet! For God’s sake, you’re twenty-eight years old! Jesus . . . stick your great novels up your ass! The Nobel Prize in Stupidity, that’s what you deserve.”

“But how did you do it, Harry? *The Origin of Evil*. That’s a masterpiece! And it was only your second book. How did you do it? How *do* you write a masterpiece?”

He smiled sadly. “You don’t write a masterpiece. It writes itself. And, you know, for lots of people, that is the only book I’ve ever written . . . I mean, none of the novels that came afterward had the same success. Whenever anyone mentions my name, the first thing they think about—almost the only thing they think about—is *The Origin of Evil*. And that’s sad, because I think if I’d been told at your age that I’d already reached the summit of my career, I’d have drowned myself in the ocean. Don’t be in so much of a hurry.”

“Do you regret that book?”

“Maybe . . . a little bit . . . I don’t know . . . I don’t like to dwell on regrets. They tell you that you have not come to terms with what you’ve done.”

“But what should I do, then?”

“Do what you’ve always done best: write. And if I can give you some advice, don’t be like me. You and I are very similar in many ways, so I’m begging you: Don’t repeat the mistakes I made.”

“Like what?”

“In the summer I came here, in 1975, I too wanted desperately to write a great novel. I was obsessed by the desire to become a great writer.”

“And you succeeded.”

“You don’t understand. Sure, I’m now a so-called ‘great writer,’ but I’m living on my own in this enormous house. My life is empty, Marcus. Don’t be like me. Don’t let yourself be eaten up by ambition. Otherwise, you’ll be left with a lonely heart and a bunch of sad words. Why don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“I haven’t found anyone I really like.”

“I think the problem is you fuck like you write: It’s ecstasy or it’s nothing. Find someone good, and give her a chance. Do the same with your book: Give yourself a chance too. Give your life a chance! You know what my main occupation is? Feeding the seagulls. I collect stale bread—in that tin in the kitchen with SOUVENIR OF ROCKLAND,

MAINE written on it—and I throw it to the seagulls. You shouldn't spend all your time writing.”

Despite the wisdom Harry was lavishing upon me, I remained obsessed by this idea: How had he, at my age, found the key to unlocking the genius that had enabled him to write *The Origin of Evil*? This question circled my brain ever faster, and because Harry had let me have the run of his office, I decided I had the right to rummage around a bit. I had no idea what I was about to discover. It all began when I opened a drawer in search of a pen and found a notebook and some pages of working notes. I was very excited—it was an opportunity I hadn't dared hope for, a chance to understand how Harry worked, to find out if his papers were covered in cross-outs or if his genius flowed naturally from him. Insatiable, I began searching his library for other papers, hoping to find the manuscript of *The Origin of Evil*. I had to wait for Harry to leave the house, but as it happens, Thursday was the day he taught at Burrows, leaving early in the morning and generally not returning until evening. And on the afternoon of Thursday, March 6, 2008, I discovered something that I decided to forget immediately: In 1975 Harry had had an affair with a fifteen-year-old girl.

I uncovered his secret while rummaging furiously and shamelessly through the shelves of his office. Concealed behind the books, I found a large varnished wooden box with a hinged lid. This, I sensed, could be the Holy Grail: the manuscript of *The Origin of Evil*. I grabbed the box and opened it, but to my dismay there was no manuscript inside, just a series of photographs and newspaper articles. The photographs showed a young Harry—thirty-something, magnificent, elegant, proud—and by his side, a teenage girl. There were four or five pictures, and she was in all of them. In one of them, Harry was lying shirtless—tanned and muscular—on a beach, next to the smiling young girl, who wore sunglasses tucked into her long blond hair to hold them in place; he was holding her tightly to him and kissing her on the cheek. On the back of the photograph was an annotation: *Nola and me, Martha's*

Vineyard, late July. At that moment I was too caught up in my discovery to hear Harry return from campus much earlier than expected. I heard neither the crunch of his Corvette's tires on Goose Cove's gravel driveway, nor the sound of his voice as he entered the house. I didn't hear anything, because inside the box, underneath the photographs, I found a letter, undated. In a child's hand, on pretty writing paper, were these words:

Don't worry, Harry. Don't you worry about me. I'll find a way to meet you. Wait for me in Room 8. I like that number, it's my favorite. Wait for me there at 7 p.m. And then we'll go away forever.

*I love you so much.
Hugs and kisses,
Nola*

So who was this Nola? My heart pounding, I began skimming the newspaper clippings: articles that described the mysterious disappearance of a certain Nola Kellergan one August evening in 1975. And the Nola in the newspaper photographs was the same as the Nola in Harry's photographs. It was at that precise moment that Harry entered the office, carrying a tray with cups of coffee and a plate of cookies. Having pushed open the door with his foot, he dropped the tray, because he had found me crouched on the carpet with the contents of his secret box scattered before me.

"But . . . what are you doing?" he shouted. "Are you . . . spying on me, Marcus? I invite you to my home and you betray my trust by going through my private things? And you call yourself a friend!"

I muttered some pitiful excuses: "I just happened upon it, Harry. I found the box by chance. I shouldn't have opened it. I'm sorry."

"Damn right you shouldn't have opened it! How dare you! What the hell did you think you were doing?"

He snatched the photographs from my hands, quickly gathered up all the newspaper clippings, and shoved everything back haphazardly into the box. He then carried the box to his bedroom and closed the door. I had never seen him like this, and I couldn't tell whether the emotion that gripped him was panic or rage. Through the door, I repeated my excuses and thought up new ones, telling him that I hadn't meant to hurt him, that I'd found the box by chance, but nothing made any difference. It was two hours before he came out of his room again: He went downstairs to the living room and downed several whiskeys. When he seemed to have calmed down a bit, I finally dared approach him.

"Harry . . . who is that girl?" I asked gently.

He lowered his eyes. "Nola."

"Who is she?"

"Don't ask me who she is. Please."

"Harry, who is she?" I repeated.

He shook his head. "I loved her, Marcus. I loved her so much."

"But how come you never mentioned her to me?"

"It's complicated . . ."

"Nothing is complicated between friends."

He shrugged. "I guess I may as well tell you, now that you've seen those photographs. In 1975, when I arrived in Somerset, I fell in love with this fifteen-year-old girl. Her name was Nola and she was the love of my life."

There was a brief silence.

I finally asked: "What happened to her?"

"It's a sordid business. She disappeared. One night in late August, someone who lived nearby saw her, bleeding, and she was never seen again. I'm sure you saw the newspaper articles. She's never been found. No-one knows what happened to her."

"That's terrible."

He nodded. There was a long silence.

“Nola changed my life, you know. And I would have given up becoming the great Harry Quebert, the famous writer; I would have given up all the glory and the money and the fame if it meant I could have kept her. Nothing I’ve been able to do since she disappeared has given as much meaning to my life as the summer we spent together.”

I had never seen Harry look so shaken before. After staring hard at me for a moment, he added: “Marcus, no-one knows about this. You are now the only one who does. And you must keep the secret.”

“Of course.”

“Give me your word!”

“I promise, Harry.”

“If anyone in Somerset were to find out that I’d had an affair with Nola Kellergan, it could ruin me.”

“You can trust me, Harry.”

That was all I knew about Nola Kellergan. We did not speak about her again, nor about the box, and I decided to bury this episode forever in the caverns of my memory. It never crossed my mind that a few months later Nola’s ghost would return to haunt us both.

I went back to New York at the end of March, after six weeks in Somerset. I was three months from Barnaski’s deadline and knew I had no chance of saving my career. I had burned my wings, and now I was in free fall. I was the sorriest and least productive famous writer in New York. The weeks passed, and I spent most of my time fervently preparing for my defeat. I found a new job for Denise, contacted a legal firm that might prove useful when the time came for Schmid & Hanson to take me to court, and I made a list of objects to which I was most attached and needed to hide at my parents’ place before the sheriffs started banging on my door. At the beginning of June—that fateful month, the month they would build my scaffold—I started marking off the days until my artistic death: There were thirty days left, then I would be summoned to Barnaski’s office and executed. The countdown had begun.