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The Imperfectionists

Written by Tom Rachman

Published by Quercus

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**The
Imperfectionists**
Tom Rachman

Quercus

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For Clare and Jack

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‘BUSH SLUMPS TO
NEW LOW IN POLLS’

PARIS CORRESPONDENT — LLOYD BURKO

Lloyd shoves off the bedcovers and hurries to the front door in white underwear and black socks. He steadies himself on the knob and shuts his eyes. Chill air rushes under the door; he curls his toes. But the hallway is silent. Only high-heeled clicks from the floor above. A shutter squeaking on the other side of the courtyard. His own breath, whistling in his nostrils, whistling out.

Faintly, a woman's voice drifts in. He clenches his eyelids tighter, as if to drive up the volume, but makes out only murmurs, a breakfast exchange between the woman and the man in the apartment across the hall. Until, abruptly, their door opens: her voice grows louder, the hallway floorboards creak – she is approaching. Lloyd hustles back, unlatches the window above the courtyard, and takes up a position there, gazing out over his corner of Paris.

She taps on his front door.

'Come in,' he says. 'No need to knock.' And his wife enters their apartment for the first time since the night before.

He does not turn from the window to face Eileen, only presses his bald knees harder into the iron guardrail. She smooths down the back of his gray hair. He flinches, surprised to be touched.

‘Only me,’ she says.

He smiles, eyes crinkling, lips parting, inhaling as if to speak. But he has no reply. She lets go.

He turns finally to find her seated before the drawer where they keep old photographs. A kitchen towel hangs from her shoulder and she wipes off her fingers, damp from peeled potatoes, dishwashing liquid, diced onions, scented from mothballed blankets, soil from the window boxes – Eileen is a woman who touches everything, tastes all, digs in. She slips on her reading glasses.

‘What are you hunting for in there?’ he asks.

‘Just a picture of me in Vermont when I was little. To show Didier.’ She rises, taking a photo album with her, and stands by the front door. ‘You have plans for dinner, right?’

‘Mm.’ He nods at the album. ‘Bit by bit,’ he says.

‘What’s that mean?’

‘You’re shifting across the hall.’

‘No.’

‘You’re allowed to.’

He hasn’t resisted her friendship with Didier, the man across the hall. She is not finished with that part of her life, with sex, as Lloyd is. She is eighteen years younger, a gap that incited him once but that, now he is seventy, separates them like a lake. He blows her a kiss and returns to the window.

The floorboards in the hallway creak. Didier’s front door opens and shuts – Eileen doesn’t knock over there, just goes in.

Lloyd glances at the phone. It has been weeks since he

sold an article and he needs money. He dials the paper in Rome.

An intern transfers him to the news editor, Craig Menzies, a balding worrier who decides much of what appears in each edition. No matter the time of day, Menzies is at his desk. The man has nothing in his life but news.

‘Good time for a pitch?’ Lloyd asks.

‘I’m a tad busy, actually. Could you zing me an email?’

‘Can’t. Problem with my computer.’ The problem is that he doesn’t own one; Lloyd still uses a word processor, vintage 1993. ‘I can print something and fax it over.’

‘Tell me by phone. But please, if possible, could you get your computer working?’

‘Yes: get computer fixed. Duly noted.’ He scratches his finger across the notepad, as if to tease out a better idea than the one scrawled there. ‘You folks interested in a feature on the ortolan? It’s this French delicacy, a bird – a sort of finch, I think – that’s illegal to sell here. They stick it in a cage, poke out its eyes so it can’t tell day from night, then feed it round the clock. When it’s full up, they drown it in Cognac and cook it. Mitterrand ate one for his last meal.’

‘Uh-huh,’ Menzies responds circumspectly. ‘But sorry, where’s the news?’

‘No news. Just a feature.’

‘You have anything else?’

Lloyd scratches at his pad again. ‘How about a business piece on wine: sales of rosé outstripping white for the first time in France.’

‘Is that true?’

‘I think so. I still have to double-check.’

‘Do you have anything more timely?’

‘You don’t want the ortolan?’

‘I don’t think we have space for it. It’s a tight day – four pages in news.’

All the other publications Lloyd freelanced for have dumped him. Now he suspects that the paper – his final string, his last employer – is looking to send him away, too.

‘You know our money problems, Lloyd. We’re only buying freelance stuff that’s jaw-dropping these days. Which isn’t saying yours isn’t good. I just mean Kathleen only wants enterprise now. Terrorism, nuclear Iran, resurgent Russia – that kind of thing. Anything else we basically take from the wires. It’s a money thing, not about you.’

Lloyd hangs up and returns to the window, gazing out at Sixth Arrondissement apartment buildings, white walls dirtied where rain drizzled and drainpipes leaked, the paint peeling, shutters closed tight, courtyards below where residents’ bicycles huddle, handlebars and pedals and spokes jammed into each other, zinc roofs overhead, capped chimney pipes streaking white smoke across white sky.

He walks over to the closed front door and stands still, listening. She might come back from Didier’s unbidden. This *is* their home, for Christ’s sake.

When the dinner hour arrives, he bangs about as clamorously as possible, crashing the door into the coatrack, simulating a coughing fit on his way out, all to ensure that Eileen across the hall hears him leaving for his supposed dinner plans, although no such plans exist. He simply will

not sit down for another charity meal with her and Didier.

He wanders down Boulevard du Montparnasse to kill time, buys a box of *calissons* to give to his daughter Charlotte, and returns home, as stealthy now as he was noisy before. When he enters the apartment, he raises the front door on its hinges to dull the squeak, clicks it gently shut. He doesn't turn on the main light – Eileen might see it under the door – and fumbles in the kitchen, leaving the fridge ajar for illumination. He opens a can of chickpeas and digs straight in with a fork, catching sight of his right hand, which is mottled with age spots. He switches the fork to his left hand, the decrepit right thrust deep in his trouser pocket, hugging a thin leather wallet.

Been broke plenty of times. Always spent better than he saved. On tailored shirts from Jermyn Street. Cases of Château Gloria 1971. Shares in a racehorse that almost landed in the money. Impromptu vacations to Brazil with impromptu women. Taxis everywhere. He takes another fork of chickpeas. Salt. Needs salt. He drops a pinch into the can.

At dawn, he lies under layers of blankets and bedcovers – he doesn't use the heating anymore unless Eileen is here. He'll visit Charlotte today, but doesn't relish it. He turns on his other side, as if to flip from her to his son, Jérôme. Sweet kid. Lloyd flips again. So awake, so weary. Lazy – he's become lazy. How did that happen?

He forces off the covers and, shivering in his underwear and socks, makes for his desk. He pores over old phone numbers – hundreds of scraps of paper, stapled, taped, glued

in place. Too early to call anyone. He grins at names of former colleagues: the editor who cursed him out for missing the first Paris riots in '68 because he had been drunk in the bathtub with a lady friend. Or the bureau chief who flew him to Lisbon to cover the coup in '74, even though he couldn't speak a word of Portuguese. Or the reporter who got the giggles with Lloyd at a Giscard d'Estaing presser until they were flung out and upbraided by the press secretary. How many of these ancient numbers still work?

The living-room curtains brighten gradually from behind. He parts them. The sun is not visible, nor clouds – only buildings. At least Eileen doesn't realize his money situation. If she found out, she'd try to help. And then what would he have left?

He opens the window, breathes in, presses his knees into the guardrail. The grandeur of Paris – its tallness and broadness and hardness and softness, its perfect symmetry, human will imposed on stone, on razored lawns, on the disobedient rosebushes – that Paris resides elsewhere. His own is smaller, containing himself, this window, the floorboards that creak across the hall.

By 9 A.M., he is trooping north through the Luxembourg Gardens. By the Palais de Justice, he rests. Flagging already? Lazy bastard. He forces himself onward, over the Seine, up Rue Montorgueil, past the Grands Boulevards.

Charlotte's shop is on Rue Rochechouart – not too high up the hill, thankfully. The store isn't open yet, so he wanders toward a café, then changes his mind at the door

– no money to waste on luxuries. He gazes in the window of his daughter’s shop, which is full of handmade hats, designed by Charlotte and produced by a team of young women in high-waisted linen aprons and mobcaps, like eighteenth-century maids.

She arrives later than the posted opening time. ‘*Oui?*’ she says upon seeing her father – she only talks to him in French.

‘I was admiring your window,’ he says. ‘It’s beautifully arranged.’

She unlocks the shop and enters. ‘Why are you wearing a tie? Do you have somewhere to go?’

‘Here – I was coming here to see you.’ He hands her the box of candies. ‘Some *calissons*.’

‘I don’t eat those.’

‘I thought you loved them.’

‘Not me. Brigitte does.’ This is her mother, the second of Lloyd’s ex-wives.

‘Could you give them to her?’

‘She won’t want anything from you.’

‘You’re so angry with me, Charlie.’

She marches to the other side of the shop, tidying as if it were combat. A customer enters and Charlotte puts on a smile. Lloyd removes himself to a corner. The customer leaves and Charlotte resumes her pugilistic dusting.

‘Did I do something wrong?’ he asks.

‘My God – you are so egocentric.’

He peers into the back of the shop.

‘They’re not here yet,’ she snaps.

‘Who aren’t?’

‘The girls.’

‘Your workers? Why are you telling me that?’

‘You got here too early. Bad timing.’ Charlotte claims that Lloyd has pursued every woman she ever introduced him to, starting with her best friend at lycée, Nathalie, who came along for a vacation to Antibes once and lost her bikini top in the waves. Charlotte caught Lloyd watching. Thankfully, she never learned that matters eventually went much further between her father and Nathalie.

But all that is over. Finished, finally. So senseless in retrospect – such effort wasted. Libido: it has been the tyrant of his times, hurling him from comfortable America all those years ago to sinful Europe for adventure and conquest, marrying him four times, tripping him up a hundred more, distracting and degrading and nearly ruining him. Yet now it is mercifully done with, desire having dwindled these past years, as mysterious in departure as it was on arrival. For the first time since age twelve, Lloyd witnesses the world without motive. And he is quite lost.

‘You really don’t like the candies?’ he says.

‘I didn’t ask for them.’

‘No, you didn’t.’ He smiles sadly. ‘Is there something I could do for you, though?’

‘What for?’

‘To help.’

‘I don’t want your help.’

‘All right,’ he says. ‘All right, then.’ He nods, sighs, and turns for the door.

She comes out after him. He reaches to touch her arm, but she pulls away. She hands back the box of *calissons*. 'I'm not going to use these.'

Back home, he runs through his contact numbers and ends up calling an old reporter buddy, Ken Lazzarino, now working at a magazine in Manhattan. They exchange news and get nostalgic for a few minutes, but an undercurrent runs through the conversation: both men know that Lloyd needs a favor, but he can't bring himself to ask. Finally, he forces it out. 'What if I wanted to pitch something?'

'You never wrote for us, Lloyd.'

'I know, I'm just wondering if.'

'I do online strategy now – I don't have a say in content anymore.'

'Is there someone you could get me in touch with?'

After listening to several variations of no, Lloyd puts down the phone.

He eats another can of chickpeas and tries Menzies again at the paper. 'What about me doing the European business roundup today?'

'Hardy Benjamin handles that now.'

'I know it's a pain for you guys that I don't have this email stuff working. I can fax it, though. It won't make a difference.'

'It does, actually. But look, I'll call if we need something out of Paris. Or give me a ring if you have something newsy.'

Lloyd opens a French current-affairs magazine in hopes of stealing a story idea. He flips the pages impatiently – he

doesn't recognize half the names. Who the hell is that guy in the photo? He used to know everything going on in this country. At press conferences, he was front-row, arm raised, rushing up afterward to pitch questions from the sidelines. At embassy cocktail parties, he sidled up to the ambassadors with a grin, notebook emerging from his hip pocket. Nowadays, if he attends press conferences at all, he's back-row, doodling, dozing. Embossed invitations pile up on his coffee table. Scoops, big and little, pass him by. He still has smarts enough to produce the obvious pieces – those he can do drunk, eyelids closed, in his underwear at the word processor.

He tosses the current-affairs magazine onto a chair. What's the point in trying? He calls his son's mobile. 'Am I waking you?' he asks in French, the language they use together.

Jérôme covers the phone and coughs.

'I was hoping to buy you lunch later,' Lloyd says. 'Shouldn't you be down at the ministry at this hour?'

But Jérôme has the day off, so they agree to meet at a bistro around Place de Clichy, which is near where the young man lives, though the precise location of Jérôme's home is as much a mystery to Lloyd as are the details of the young man's job at the French foreign ministry. The boy is secretive.

Lloyd arrives at the bistro early to check the prices on the menu. He opens his wallet to count the cash, then takes a table.

When Jérôme walks in, Lloyd stands and smiles. 'I'd

almost forgotten how fond I am of you.'

Jérôme sits quickly, as if caught out in musical chairs. 'You're strange.'

'Yes. It's true.'

Jérôme flaps out the napkin and runs a hand through his floppy locks, leaving tangled tents of hair. His mother, Françoise, a tobacco-fingered stage actress, had the same hair-mussing habit and it made her even more attractive until years later, when she had no work, and it made her disheveled. Jérôme, at twenty-eight, is tattered already, dressed as if by a vintage shop, in a velvet blazer whose sleeves stop halfway up his forearms and an over-tight pin-striped shirt, cigarette rolling papers visible through a rip in the breast pocket.

'Let me buy you a shirt,' Lloyd says impulsively. 'You need a proper shirt. We'll go down to Hilditch & Key, down on Rivoli. We'll take a taxi. Come on.' He speaks rashly – he couldn't afford a new shirt. But Jérôme declines.

Lloyd reaches across the table and grips his boy's thumb. 'It's been ages – we live in the same city, for God's sake.'

Jérôme takes his thumb back and studies the menu. He settles on the salad with goat cheese and walnuts.

'Have something proper,' Lloyd protests. 'Have a steak!' He grins, though his gaze runs down the menu to the price of steak. He clenches his toes.

'Salad is fine,' Jérôme says.

Lloyd orders the salad himself since it's the cheapest item. He offers his son a bottle of wine and is relieved that this, too, is declined. Lloyd wolfs down his food and all the

bread in the basket. Too many chickpeas, too little meat. Jérôme, meanwhile, pecks at his goat cheese and ignores the lettuce.

Teasingly, Lloyd tells him in English, ‘Eat your greens, boy!’ Jérôme’s face creases with incomprehension, and Lloyd must translate into French. Jérôme could speak English at one stage, but Lloyd moved out when the boy was six, and he had limited chances to practice after that. How peculiar, then, for Lloyd to see in this French kid’s face the features of his own long-gone Ohio father. Ignore the hair and otherwise the resemblance is striking – the flat nose and the foggy brown eyes. Even Jérôme’s habit of using three words where twenty would do. Except, of course, that Jérôme’s words are in the wrong language. An unsettling thought crosses Lloyd’s mind: one day, his son will die. It’s a plain fact, but it had never occurred to him before.

‘Come on,’ Lloyd says. ‘Let’s get that pretty waitress over here.’ He raises his arm for her attention. ‘She’s cute, no? Let me get you her number,’ he says. ‘You want it?’

Jérôme pulls his father’s arm down. ‘It’s fine,’ he says, hurriedly rolling a cigarette.

It has been months since their last meeting, and the reason is soon clear: they are fond of each other, but there is little to say. What does Lloyd know of Jérôme? Most of his knowledge derives from the boy’s first few years – that he was timid, always reading Lucky Luke comic books, wanted to be a cartoonist. Lloyd told him to be a journalist. Best job in the world, he said.

‘So,’ Lloyd asks, ‘you still drawing?’

‘Drawing?’

‘Your cartoons.’

‘Haven’t done that for years.’

‘Sketch me now. On a napkin.’

Jérôme, looking down, shakes his head.

This lunch will end soon. Lloyd must ask the question for which he arranged the encounter. He snatches the bill, rebuffing his son’s outstretched hand. ‘Absolutely not. This is mine.’

Outside the café, he could still ask Jérôme the question. The last moment arrives. Instead, he says, ‘Where are you living now?’

‘I’m moving to a new place. I’ll give you the details then.’

‘Care to walk for a bit?’

‘I’m headed the other way.’

They shake hands.

‘Thank you,’ Lloyd says, ‘for meeting me.’

All the way home, he curses himself. Around Les Halles, he stops on the sidewalk to count the money in his wallet. A teenager on a motor scooter drives down the sidewalk toward him, beeping maniacally.

‘Where am I supposed to go?’ Lloyd shouts. ‘Where do you want me to go?’

The boy slows, swearing, his machine scraping Lloyd’s leg.

‘Fucking prick,’ Lloyd says. He never asked Jérôme the question.

At the apartment, Eileen says, ‘I wish you’d bring him by.’

I'd love to cook him a meal. Wouldn't it be lovely if he just dropped in sometimes?'

'He has his own things going on.'

'At the ministry?'

'I imagine. I don't know. I ask him questions and I get these vague—' Lloyd opens his hand searchingly, looks into his palm, unable to find the word. 'I don't know what. You ask him.'

'Okay, but you have to get him over here first. Does he have a girlfriend?'

'I don't know.'

'No need to snap at me.'

'I'm not. But how am I supposed to know, Eileen?'

'Must be interesting working at the ministry.'

'He might be making photocopies, for all I know.'

'No, I'm sure not.'

'But I have to say, I find it pretty odd.'

'Find what odd?'

He hesitates. 'Just that he – knowing what I do for a living, what helped bring him up, what paid for his childhood – he knows that I'm a reporter, yet he's never once given me any sort of tidbit, any scrap from the ministry. It's no big tragedy. Just, you'd think he would have.'

'Maybe he doesn't have anything to give you.'

'I'm aware of how those places work. He has stuff I could use.'

'He's probably not allowed to talk to reporters.'

'Nobody is. But they do. It's called leaking.'

‘I know what it’s called.’

‘I don’t mean it that way. Sorry.’ He touches her arm. ‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘I’m okay now.’

The next morning, he wakes up furious. Something in his sleep enraged him, but he can’t recall what. When Eileen comes over for breakfast, he tells her to go back and eat at Didier’s. She leaves, and he wishes she had not, that she’d slept there last night. He opens his wallet. He knows how much is there but checks anyway. If he doesn’t earn something soon, he can’t stay in this apartment. If he moves out, Eileen won’t come with him.

Without her, where does he go? He needs money; he needs a story.

‘I’m waking you for the second day running. What time do you normally get up?’ he asks Jérôme over the phone. ‘Listen, I need to meet again.’

Jérôme arrives at the café and shakes his father’s hand. As rehearsed, Lloyd says, ‘I’m sorry to bother you again. But there’s something important I need to check for work.’

‘With me?’

‘A small thing. I’m doing a piece relating to French foreign policy. It’s urgent. Deadline’s today. This afternoon.’

Jérôme leans back in his chair. ‘I don’t know anything useful.’

‘You haven’t even heard my question yet.’

‘I really don’t know anything.’

‘What do you do there?’ Lloyd says, then reels in his temper. ‘I mean, you haven’t even heard what I’m asking. You must have been there three years now. You won’t let me

visit, you won't tell me about it. So are you a janitor and you're afraid to admit it?' He laughs. 'They do give you a desk, right?'

'Yes.'

'All right, a guessing game. You keep giving me one-word answers. I'll get there eventually. Is your desk close to where the minister sits? Or far?'

Jérôme shifts uncomfortably. 'I don't know. A medium distance.'

'Medium is close.'

'Not that close.'

'For God's sake, this is like pulling teeth. Listen, I need a story. Just let me pick your brains for a minute.'

'I thought you had a specific question.'

'But do you have any ideas? I did buy you lunch yesterday.' He adds, 'I'm kidding.'

'I can't.'

'I'm not going to cite you. And I'm not asking you to go in there and steal documents or anything.'

'What sort of thing do you want?'

'Not sure. Something terrorism-related maybe. Or to do with Iraq. Or Israel.'

'I don't know,' Jérôme says softly to his knees.

Lloyd's other children would have dismissed him by now. Only Jérôme is loyal. All three daughters are like Lloyd – always striving, always driving at something. Jérôme, though, doesn't push back. He alone is loyal. He proves it by saying, 'If anything, it'd be this thing about a Gaza force.'

'What Gaza force?' Lloyd perks up.

‘I don’t know all the details.’

‘But wait, hang on. The ministry is talking about a force in Gaza?’

‘I think I heard that.’

‘You think?’

‘I think so.’

Lloyd gleams. ‘We might have something here. We might, we might.’ He pulls out a notebook and jots this down. He teases out the nugget, tugs, tweaks, yanks at it. A shiver passes through Lloyd: this is what he’s good at. But Jérôme is clamming up. Too late – he’s been opened. Out it comes. Come on.

‘You can’t use any of that.’

‘You’re not going to get in trouble.’

‘It’s my information,’ Jérôme says.

‘It’s not yours. It’s just information. Doesn’t belong to anybody. It exists independent of you. I can’t *not* know it now. You want me to grovel? I asked for a bit of help. I don’t see what’s so difficult. I’m sorry,’ Lloyd concludes, ‘but you gave it to me.’

He rushes home – he might still make deadline. He phones Menzies. Ha-goddamn-ha, Lloyd thinks, as he is transferred. ‘Well, my friend,’ he says, ‘I’ve got you a story.’

Menzies hears him out. ‘But wait – France proposing a U.N. peacekeeping force in Gaza? Israel would never go for that. It’s a nonstarter.’

‘Do you know that for a fact? Anyhow, I’m reporting that the French are floating the idea. What happens next is another matter.’

‘We’d need this firmed up.’

‘I can do that.’

‘You’ve got four hours till cutoff. Look, report the hell out of it and check back in ninety minutes.’

Lloyd puts down the phone. He glances at his contact numbers. He doesn’t even have up-to-date background on Gaza. He dials Jérôme’s cellphone, but it rings and rings. He finds a number for the foreign ministry. Maybe he can get details without revealing Jérôme as his source. Of course he can. He has done this sort of thing a million times. He phones the ministry press office, thankful for the first time that crazy Françoise changed their son’s last name to hers – no one will tie the name Lloyd Burko to Jérôme.

Lloyd poses a few introductory questions to the duty officer. But she’s more intent on extracting information than on giving it, so he cuts the conversation short. The moment he hangs up, his phone rings: it’s Menzies.

‘You’re phoning *me* now,’ Lloyd says with a hint of triumph.

‘I mentioned your story at the afternoon meeting and Kathleen is excited about it,’ he says, referring to the editor-in-chief. ‘As you know, you don’t want to get Kathleen excited.’

‘So you’re taking it?’

‘We’ll need to see it first. Personally, I’d like to run it.’

‘How many words you looking for?’

‘As long as you need. Provided it holds up. As I say, we’ll have to see the copy first. You think this could be frontable?’

If the story runs on the front page, it has to jump to the

inside pages, too, which means it must be longer. And longer means more money. 'Page one,' Lloyd says. 'Definitely page one.'

'You're hammering this, right?'

'Just got off the phone with the foreign ministry.'

'And?'

'More of the same.'

'But you're getting this confirmed – that's amazing. I haven't seen this anywhere.'

After they hang up, Lloyd paces around his apartment, stares out the window, scratching the pane, searching his memory for any useful source. No time. All he can do is work with what he has – finesse a single-source story, plump it up with background material, and pray that it slips through. He sits at his word processor and types out a story that, when he yanks the paper from the machine, is easily the flimsiest he has ever tried to flog. He places the sheet to one side. No quotes, nothing.

He feeds in a fresh sheet and starts anew, writing the piece as it ought to have been: full quotations, dates, troop numbers, disputes within the cabinet, transatlantic hostilities. He knows his craft – all is couched in terms of possibilities, proposals, balloons floated. All the fabricated sources are 'on condition of anonymity,' or 'officials close to,' or 'experts familiar with.' No one is cited by name. Fourteen hundred words. He calculates how much that will earn him. Enough to pay the rent – a reprieve. Enough to buy Jérôme a decent shirt. To take Eileen out for drinks.

He reads the article, using a red pen to slice away what

might be contested. This shortens the text, so he concocts a couple of repetitive quotes from ‘an administration official in Washington.’ He retypes it, makes amendments, and faxes it from a phone center down the street. He bounds back up to his apartment, pausing on the landing, out of breath, trying to smile. ‘Lazy bastard!’ he tells himself. He bangs on Didier’s door. ‘Eileen? You there?’ He enters his place and locates a dusty quart of Tanqueray, pours himself a shot and swirls the liquor in his mouth, letting it burn inside his cheeks. He has never falsified a story before. ‘Feels all right,’ he says. ‘Shoulda done this years ago! Saved myself a whole lot of work!’ He pours another splash of gin, waits for the inevitable call.

The phone rings.

‘We need to tighten the sourcing,’ Menzies says.

‘Tighten how?’

‘That’s Kathleen’s say-so. Incidentally, this faxing stuff is a nightmare on deadline. We had to retype everything here. You really need to get your email working.’

This is a good sign: Menzies is counting on pieces in the future.

‘You’re right. I’ll get the computer fixed right away.’

‘And sourcing. We have to be clearer. Like in the third graf, the quote reads weird. We can’t identify the person as “familiar with the report” when we haven’t mentioned any report.’

‘Did I leave that in? I meant to cut that.’

They make tweaks, work their way down the story, hang up in accord. Lloyd takes another sip of gin. The phone

rings again. Menzies is still not happy. ‘This isn’t sourced directly to any person or institution. Could we just say the “French foreign ministry”?’

‘I don’t see why “an official” isn’t good enough.’

‘On the meat of the story, you have a single unnamed source. It’s too vague for page one.’

‘How is it vague? You run this sort of stuff all the time.’

‘I thought you said the foreign ministry confirmed it.’

‘They did.’

‘Can’t we say that?’

‘I’m not gonna burn my source.’

‘We’re near deadline here.’

‘I don’t even want you writing “French” anything. Just say “an official.” ’

‘If you can’t agree to more exact wording, we won’t be able to run it. I’m sorry – I’ve got Kathleen right here telling me so. And that’d mean tearing up page one. Which means hell on earth this close to deadline, as you know. We need to decide now. Can you budge on this?’ He waits. ‘Lloyd?’

‘A source at the foreign ministry. Say that.’

‘And it’s solid?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good enough for me.’

But not for Kathleen, it turns out. She calls a contact in Paris who scoffs at the piece. Menzies phones back. ‘Kathleen’s source is some top ministry flack. Is yours better than that?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much better?’

‘They just are. I can’t get into who.’

‘I’m battling Kathleen on this. I don’t doubt your source. But for my state of mind, give me a clue. Not for publication.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Then that’s it. I’m sorry.’

Lloyd pauses. ‘Someone in the Mideast directorate, okay? My source is good: policy side, not press side.’

Menzies conveys this to Kathleen, who puts Lloyd on speakerphone. ‘And this guy is bankable?’ she asks.

‘Very.’

‘So you’ve used him before?’

‘No.’

‘But we can trust him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Off the record, who is it?’

He hesitates. ‘I don’t see why you need to know.’ But he does see, of course. ‘It’s my son.’

Their chuckles are audible over the speakerphone. ‘Are you serious?’

‘He works at the ministry.’

‘I’m not too enthused about quoting your family members,’ Kathleen says. ‘Though at this hour it’s either that or we run wire copy on Bush’s plunging approval ratings, which frankly is no longer page-one material at this stage.’

Menzies suggests, ‘We could plug in the Five-Years-After-9/11 setup, which is pretty much done.’

‘No, the anniversary is Monday, so I want to save that for the weekend.’ She pauses. ‘Okay, let’s go with Lloyd.’

He’s drunk by the time Eileen returns home. She left Didier with his friends at a jazz club and knocks at the front door. Why doesn’t she just walk in? But he won’t bring that up now. He hurries for another tumbler and pours her a gin before she can decline.

‘Make sure you buy the paper tomorrow,’ he says. ‘Page one.’

She rubs his knee. ‘Congrats, babe. When was your last of those?’

‘The Roosevelt administration, probably.’

‘Franklin or Teddy Roosevelt?’

‘Definitely Teddy.’ He pulls her closer, a little roughly, and kisses her – not one of their normal soft pecks but an ardent embrace.

She shifts back. ‘Enough.’

‘Right – what if your husband turned up?’

‘Don’t make me feel lousy.’

‘I’m only kidding. Don’t feel bad – I don’t.’ He pinches her cheek. ‘I love you.’

Without a word, she returns across the hall. He flops onto his bed, mumbling drunkenly – ‘Goddamn page fucking one!’

Eileen wakes him gently the next morning and places the paper on the bed. ‘It’s freezing in here,’ she says. ‘I put the coffee on.’

He sits up in bed.

‘I didn’t see your story, babe,’ she says. ‘Not running today?’

He scans the page-one headlines: 'Blair to Step Down in 12 Months'; 'Pentagon Forbids Cruelty in Terror Interrogations'; 'Gay Marriages Roil America'; 'Australia Mourns "Crocodile Hunter" '; and finally, 'Bush Slumps to New Low in Polls.'

His Gaza story didn't make the front. He flips through the inside pages. It's nowhere. Cursing, he dials Rome. It's early, but Menzies is already at his desk. 'What happened to my piece?' Lloyd demands.

'I'm sorry. We couldn't use it. That French flack friend of Kathleen's called back and denied it all. Said we'd be screwed if we went with it. They'd issue an official protest.'

'A flack friend of Kathleen's pisses on my piece and you guys buy that? Anyhow, why is Kathleen re-reporting my work? I told you, my son works at the ministry.'

'Well, that's kind of weird, too. Kathleen mentioned your son's name to her friend.'

'She identified him as the source? Are you out of your mind?'

'No, no – hang on. She never said he was your source.'

'It's not going to be hard to figure out. Jesus Christ!'

'Let me finish, Lloyd. Let me finish here. No one called Jérôme Burko works there.'

'You morons. He goes by his mother's maiden name.'

'Oh.'

Lloyd must warn his son, give him time to come up with an excuse. He calls Jérôme's cellphone, but he isn't picking

up. Maybe he's at work early for a change. Jesus, what a disaster. Lloyd rings the ministry switchboard.

The operator says, 'I'm looking at a list of all the people in this building. That name is not on it.'

Lloyd hurries down to Boulevard du Montparnasse, raises his arm for a taxi, then drops it. He hesitates at the curb, squeezing his wallet, which is thinner than ever. Then again, if he's going to go bankrupt this is how he should do it. He waves down a cab.

At the ministry building, the security guards won't let him inside. He repeats his son's name, insists that it's a family emergency. This gets him nowhere. He shows his press accreditation, but it expired on December 31, 2005. He waits outside, phoning Jérôme's mobile. Functionaries stroll out for cigarette breaks. He searches among them for his son, asking if anyone here works in the North African and Middle Eastern directorate.

'I remember that guy,' a woman says. 'He was an intern here.'

'I know, but what section is he in now?'

'He's not in any section. We never hired him. I think he wrote the exams, but he couldn't pass the languages part.' She narrows her eyes and smiles. 'I always thought he was lying about having an American father.'

'How do you mean?'

'Just that his English was so hopeless.'

She dredges up an old address for Jérôme and gives it to Lloyd. He takes the Métro to the Château Rouge stop and

finds the building, a decaying chunk of plaster whose main gate is broken. He scans the list of residents at each inner courtyard, hunting for Jérôme's last name. He can't find it. Then he spots an unexpected last name, his own. The buzzer reads, 'Jérôme Burko.'

Lloyd presses it, but there is no response. Residents come and go. He sits at the edge of the courtyard and gazes up at the shuttered windows.

After an hour, Jérôme appears through the main gate but does not immediately see his father. He opens his mailbox and, flipping through junk, weaves down the passage.

Lloyd says his son's name, and Jérôme starts. 'What are you doing?'

'Sorry,' Lloyd says, standing sorely. 'Sorry to appear like this.' He has never spoken to his son in this manner, with deference. 'I just turned up – is that okay?'

'About your article?'

'No, no. Nothing to do with that.'

'What, then?'

'Can we go upstairs? I'm cold. I've been out here a while.' He laughs. 'I'm old, you know! I might not look it, but—'

'You're not old.'

'I am old. I am.' He reaches out his hand, smiles. Jérôme moves no closer. 'I've been thinking about my family lately.'

'Which family?'

'Can I come inside, Jérôme? If you don't mind. My hands are ice-cold.' He rubs them together, blows on them. 'I had an idea. I hope you don't take offense at this. I was

thinking maybe – only if you wanted – maybe I could help you with your English. If we practice regularly, you’ll pick it up, I guarantee.’

Jérôme flushes. ‘What do you mean? My English is fine. I learned it from you.’

‘You didn’t have that many opportunities to hear it.’

‘I don’t need lessons. Anyway, when would I do them? The ministry would never give me time off.’

To make a point, Lloyd switches to English, speaking intentionally fast: ‘I’m tempted to tell you what I know, son. I don’t want to make you feel lousy, though. But what are you doing in this dump? My God, it’s incredible how much you look like my father. So strange to see him again. And I know you don’t work. Four kids I’ve produced, and you’re the only one who wants to talk to me anymore.’

Jérôme hasn’t understood a word. Trembling with humiliation, he responds in French: ‘How am I supposed to know what you’re saying? You’re speaking so fast. This is ridiculous.’

Lloyd reverts to French himself. ‘I wanted to tell you something. Ask you something. You know, I’m thinking of retiring,’ he says. ‘I must have done, what, an article a day since I was twenty-two. And now I can’t rustle up a single new idea. Not a one. I don’t know what in hell’s going on anymore. Even the paper won’t publish me. It was my last – my last string. Did you know that? No one prints my stuff anymore. I think I’m leaving my apartment, Jérôme. I can’t pay for it. I shouldn’t be there. But I don’t know. Nothing’s settled yet. I’m asking, I guess – I’m trying to figure it out.’

Quite what's the thing to do. What would you say? What's your opinion on the matter?' He struggles to ask this. 'What would you advise that I should do? Son?'

Jérôme opens the door to the building. 'Come in,' he says. 'You're staying with me.'