
Opening Extract from...

The Lover

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For Bruno Nuytten

ONE DAY, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said: 'I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.'

I often think of the image only I can see now, and of which I've never spoken. It's always there, in the same silence, amazing. It's the only image of myself I like, the only one in which I recognize myself, in which I delight.

Very early in my life it was too late. It was already too late when I was eighteen. Between eighteen and twenty-five my face took off in a new direction. I grew old at eighteen. I don't know if it's the same for everyone. I've never asked. But I believe I've heard of the way time can suddenly accelerate on people when they're going through even the most youthful and highly esteemed stages of life. My ageing was very sudden. I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship

between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final, leaving great creases in the forehead. But instead of being dismayed I watched this process with the same sort of interest I might have taken in the reading of a book. And I knew I was right, that one day it would slow down and take its normal course. The people who knew me at seventeen, when I went to France, were surprised when they saw me again two years later, at nineteen. And I've kept it ever since, the new face I had then. It has been my face. It's got older still, of course, but less, comparatively, than it would otherwise have done. It's scored with deep, dry wrinkles, the skin is cracked. But my face hasn't collapsed, as some with fine features have done. It's kept the same contours, but its substance has been laid waste. I have a face laid waste.

So, I'm fifteen and a half.

It's on a ferry crossing the Mekong river.

The image lasts all the way across.

I'm fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that part of the world, we have just the one season, hot, monotonous, we're in the long hot girdle of the earth, with no spring, no renewal.

I'm at a state boarding school in Saigon. I eat and sleep there, but I go to classes at the French high

school. My mother's a teacher and wants her girl to have a secondary education. 'You have to go to high school.' What was enough for her is not enough for her daughter. High school and then a good degree in mathematics. That was what had been dinned into me ever since I started school. It never crossed my mind I might escape the mathematics degree, I was glad to give her that hope. Every day I saw her planning her own and her children's future. There came a time when she couldn't plan anything very grand for her sons any more, so she planned other futures, makeshift ones, but they too served their purpose, they blocked in the time that lay ahead. I remember my younger brother's courses in book-keeping. From the Universal Correspondence School – every year, every level. You have to catch up, my mother used to say. It would last for three days, never four. Never. We'd drop the Universal School whenever my mother was posted to another place. And begin again in the next. My mother kept it up for ten years. It wasn't any good. My younger brother became an accountant's clerk in Saigon. There was no technical school in the colonies; we owed my elder brother's departure for France to that. He stayed in France for several years to study at the technical school. But he didn't keep it up. My mother must have known. But she had no choice, he had to be got away from the other two children.

For several years he was no longer part of the family. It was while he was away that my mother bought the land, the concession. A terrible business, but for us, the children who were left, not so terrible as the presence of the killer would have been, the child-killer of the night, of the night of the hunter.

I've often been told it was because of spending all one's childhood in too strong a sun. But I've never believed it. I've also been told it was because being poor made us brood. But no, that wasn't it. Children like little old men because of chronic hunger, yes. But us, no, we weren't hungry. We were white children, we were ashamed, we sold our furniture but we weren't hungry, we had a houseboy and we ate. Sometimes, admittedly, we ate garbage, storks, baby crocodiles, but the garbage was cooked and served by a houseboy, and sometimes we refused it, too, we indulged in the luxury of declining to eat. No, something occurred when I was eighteen to make this face happen. It must have been at night. I was afraid of myself, afraid of God. In the daylight I was less afraid, and death seemed less important. But it haunted me all the time. I wanted to kill – my older brother, I wanted to kill him, to get the better of him for once, just once, and see him die. I wanted to do it to remove from my mother's sight the object of her love, that son of hers, to punish her for loving

him so much, so badly, and above all – as I told myself, too – to save my younger brother, my younger brother, my child, save him from the living life of that elder brother superimposed on his own, from that black veil over the light, from the law which was decreed and represented by the elder brother, a human being, and yet which was an animal law, filling every moment of every day of the younger brother's life with fear, a fear that one day reached his heart and killed him.

I've written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted around all these things without really tackling them.

The story of my life doesn't exist. Does not exist. There's never any centre to it. No path, no line. There are great spaces where you pretend there used to be someone, but it's not true, there was no one. The story of one small part of my youth I've already written, more or less – I mean, enough to give a glimpse of it. Of this part, I mean, the part about the crossing of the river. What I'm doing now is both different and the same. Before, I spoke of clear periods, those on which the light fell. Now I'm talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth, of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried. I started to write in surroundings that drove me to

reticence. Writing, for those people, was still something moral. Nowadays it often seems writing is nothing at all. Sometimes I realize that if writing isn't, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it's nothing. That if it's not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement. But usually I have no opinion, I can see that all options are open now, that there seem to be no more barriers, that writing seems at a loss for somewhere to hide, to be written, to be read. That its basic unseemliness is no longer accepted. But at that point I stop thinking about it.

Now I see that when I was very young, eighteen, fifteen, I already had a face that foretold the one I acquired through drink in middle age. Drink accomplished what God did not. It also served to kill me; to kill. I acquired that drinker's face before I drank. Drink only confirmed it. The space for it existed in me. I knew it the same as other people, but, strangely, in advance. Just as the space existed in me for desire. At the age of fifteen I had the face of pleasure, and yet I had no knowledge of pleasure. There was no mistaking that face. Even my mother must have seen it. My brothers did. That was how everything started for me – with that flagrant, exhausted face, those rings round the eyes, in advance of time and experience.

I'm fifteen and a half. Crossing the river. Going back to Saigon I feel I'm going on a journey, especially when I take the bus, and this morning I've taken the bus from Sadec, where my mother's the head-mistress of the girls' school. It's the end of some school vacation, I forget which. I've spent it in the little house provided with my mother's job. And today I'm going back to Saigon, to the boarding school. The native bus left from the market place in Sadec. As usual my mother came to see me off, and put me in the care of the driver. She always puts me in the care of the Saigon bus drivers, in case there's an accident, or a fire, or a rape, or an attack by pirates, or a fatal mishap on the ferry. As usual the driver had me sit near him in the front, in the section reserved for white passengers.

I think it was during this journey that the image became detached, removed from all the rest. It might have existed, a photograph might have been taken, just like any other, somewhere else, in other circumstances. But it wasn't. The subject was too slight. Who would have thought of such a thing? The photograph could only have been taken if someone could have known in advance how important it was to be in my life, that event, that crossing of the river. But, while it was happening, no one even knew of its existence. Except God. And that's why – it couldn't have

been otherwise – the image doesn't exist. It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was detached or removed from all the rest. And it's to this, this failure to have been created, that the image owes its virtue: the virtue of representing, of being the creator of, an absolute.

So it's during the crossing of a branch of the Mekong, on the ferry that plies between Vinh Long and Sadec in the great plain of mud and rice in southern Cochin-China. The Plain of the Birds.

I get off the bus. I go over to the rails. I look at the river. My mother sometimes tells me that never in my whole life shall I ever again see rivers as beautiful and big and wild as these, the Mekong and its tributaries going down to the sea, the great regions of water soon to disappear into the caves of ocean. In the surrounding flatness stretching as far as the eye can see, the rivers flow as fast as if the earth sloped downwards.

I always get off the bus when we reach the ferry, even at night, because I'm always afraid, afraid the cables might break and we might be swept out to sea. In the terrible current I watch my last moments. The current's so strong it could carry everything away – rocks, a cathedral, a city. There's a storm blowing inside the water. A wind raging.

I'm wearing a dress of real silk, but it's threadbare, almost transparent. It used to belong to my mother. One day she decided the colour was too bright for her and she gave it to me. It's a sleeveless dress with a very low neck. It's the sepia colour real silk takes on with wear. It's a dress I remember. I think it suits me. I'm wearing a leather belt with it, perhaps a belt belonging to one of my brothers. I can't remember the shoes I used to wear in those days, only certain dresses. Most of the time I wore canvas sandals, no stockings. I'm speaking of the time before the high school in Saigon. Since then, of course, I've always worn shoes. This particular day I must be wearing the famous pair of gold lamé high heels. I can't see any others I could have been wearing, so I'm wearing them. Bargains, final reductions bought for me by my mother. I'm wearing these gold lamé shoes to school. Going to school in evening shoes decorated with little *diamanté* flowers. I insist on wearing them. I don't like myself in any others, and to this day I still like myself in them. These high heels are the first in my life, they're beautiful, they've eclipsed all the shoes that went before, the flat ones, for playing and running about, made of white canvas.

It's not the shoes, though, that make the girl look so strangely, so weirdly dressed. No, it's the fact that she's wearing a man's flat-brimmed hat, a

brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon.

The crucial ambiguity of the image lies in the hat.

How I came by it I've forgotten. I can't think who could have given it to me. It must have been my mother who bought it for me, because I asked her. The one thing certain is that it was another markdown, another final reduction. But why was it bought? No woman, no girl wore a man's fedora in that colony then. No native woman either. What must have happened is, I try it on just for fun, look at myself in the shopkeeper's glass, and see that there, beneath the man's hat, the thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood, has turned into something else. Has ceased to be a harsh, inescapable imposition of nature. Has become, on the contrary, a provoking choice of nature, a choice of the mind. Suddenly it's deliberate. Suddenly I see myself as another, as another would be seen, outside myself, available to all, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire. I take the hat, and am never parted from it. Having got it, this hat that all by itself makes me whole, I wear it all the time. With the shoes it must have been much the same, but after the hat. They contradict the hat, as the hat contradicts the puny body, so they're right for me. I wear them all the time too, go everywhere in these shoes, this hat, out of doors, in all weathers, on every occasion. And to town.

I found a photograph of my son when he was twenty. He's in California with his friends, Erika and Elizabeth Lennard. He's thin, so thin you'd think he was a white Ugandan too. His smile strikes me as arrogant, derisive. He's trying to assume the warped image of a young drifter. That's how he likes to see himself, poor, with that poor boy's look, that attitude of someone young and gaunt. It's this photograph that comes closest to the one never taken of the girl on the ferry.

The one who bought the flat-brimmed pink hat with the broad black ribbon was her, the woman in another photograph, my mother. I recognize her better in that than in more recent photos. It's the courtyard of a house by the Small Lake in Hanoi. We're together, she and us, her children. I'm four years old. My mother's in the middle of the picture. I recognize the awkward way she holds herself, the way she doesn't smile, the way she waits for the photo to be over and done with. By her drawn face, by a certain untidiness in her dress, by her drowsy expression, I can tell it's hot, that she's tired, that she's bored. But it's by the way we're dressed, us children, all anyhow, that I recognize a mood my mother sometimes used to fall into, and of which already, at the age we were in the photo, we knew the warning signs – the way she'd suddenly be unable to wash us, dress us, or sometimes even feed us.

Every day my mother experienced this deep despondency about living. Sometimes it lasted, sometimes it would vanish with the dark. I had the luck to have a mother desperate with a despair so unalloyed that sometimes even life's happiness, at its most poignant, couldn't quite make her forget it. What I'll never know is what kind of practical considerations made her leave us like that, every day. This time, perhaps, it's the foolish thing she's just done, the house she's just bought – the one in the photograph – which we absolutely didn't need, and at a time when my father was already very ill, not far from death, only a few months. Or has she just learned she's got the same illness he is going to die of? The dates are right. What I don't know, and she can't have known either, is what kind of considerations they were that haunted her and made that dejection rise up before her. Was it the death, already at hand, of my father? Or the dying of the light? Doubts about her marriage? About her husband? About her children? Or about all these appurtenances in general?

It happened every day. Of that I'm sure. It must have come on quite suddenly. At a given moment every day the despair would make its appearance. And then would follow in inability to go on, or sleep, or sometimes nothing, or sometimes, instead, the buying of houses, the removals, or sometimes

the moodiness, just the moodiness, the dejection. Or sometimes she'd be like a queen, give anything she was asked for, take anything she was offered, that house by the Small Lake, for absolutely no reason, my father already dying, or the flat-brimmed hat, because the girl had set her heart on it, or the same thing with the gold lamé shoes. Or else nothing, or just sleep, die.

I've never seen any of those films where American Indian women wear the same kind of flat-brimmed hat, with their hair in braids hanging down in front. That day I have braids too, not put up as usual, but not the same as theirs either. I too have a couple of long braids hanging down in front like those women in the films I've never seen, but mine are the braids of a child. Ever since I've had the hat, I've stopped putting my hair up so that I can wear it. For some time I've scraped my hair back to try to make it flat, so that people can't see it. Every night I comb and braid it before I go to bed, as my mother taught me. My hair's heavy, soft, burdensome, a coppery mass that comes down to my waist. People often say it's my prettiest feature, and I take that to mean I'm not pretty. I had this remarkable hair cut off when I was twenty-three, in Paris, five years after I left my mother. I said: 'Cut it off'. And he did. All at once, a clean sweep, I felt the cold scissors on the skin of my neck. It fell on the floor.