

Karen Pawson

Summer Haunts

Ridiculous to be haunted by the woman three years after the fact. This C woman, this Claire Delors whose name you loathe to mention for fear that Philippe will think that you are obsessed with her, which you are. This femme fatale of a woman who positively outstripped you and still does in ability, imagination and daring.

Ridiculous, but not surprising. Not when everywhere you turn, something conspires to bring her back into your life, elevate her to the status of an unresolved issue: a haughty, tumble-haired redhead walking ahead of you on a downtown street; her infinitely less appealing, definitely "unFrench," but equally imposing Sarah Ferguson double beaming out at you from countless magazine racks. Or because every time you walk into a library or bookstore, you're drawn to a row of books, to books boasting the name, DURAS, and, one in particular, the title, *Destroy, She Said*. Even now, three years later, it takes the wind out of you that title, as if someone kicked you—

Or because a friend visiting from Toronto unwittingly mentions that he came across this C woman's name recently in the *French Review* or bumped into her the month before at a conference in Montreal. Or because you have an uncanny way of predicting her presence in places where Philippe cannot take you but where the campus circuit takes him.

Fortuitous encounters, Philippe would say. Maybe, you say to yourself, but you know better, "fortuitous" being one of her words.

"Anne, chérie, you'll have to get used to the fact that as long as I'm in this profession, I'll be running into her."

This said to you from a well-meaning Philippe following his return from La Martinique last April. An international conference on the French language and the arts, together with the week long promise of balmy weather, had tempted him there along with hundreds of other sun-seeking academics prepared to indulge in yet another round of mental masturbation.

Nothing Philippe said fell on deaf ears. Of course you were going to have to get used to it and of course he would be running into her. The fact that you'd left Toronto to follow Philippe clear across the country, to V—of all places—even this was no guarantee. Any self-respecting academic worth a pinch of salt was going to travel, do the circuit, "publish or perish," see or be seen.

And so. So, sweet Anne, yes, you were going to have to get used to it.

Remarkably, for the week leading up to Philippe's departure last April, right up to the moment he was packing his bags and you, you lay propped up on the bed watching him, you'd delighted in the opportunity with him, in the extravagance of having him travel thousands of miles on public money to deliver a paper ten minutes long.

The good life.

Never thinking to ask whether C might be there. All of this operating at a lower level of consciousness, somewhere in your mind the knowledge, but never formulated in words. And you never thought to ask to see the timetable, the calendar of events on the conference that he had mentioned having received in the campus mail . . . Only you had seen it: a white leaflet sticking out of his bookbag. Not once did you confirm with a glance at the workshop headings and the list of speakers' names. Not once.

You supposed he was grateful, Philippe, relieved. So you let him go, if "let" is the word for it. At the airport saw him off with a smile, you and your Julien, the two and a half year old happy product of your love almost lost. Muttered something as naïve and insipid as: "I am the mother of his children," as you waved good-bye, this while running a hand through Julien's sunny curls and the other over your newly swollen tummy: five month's token proof of your new-found trust, testimony to your decision to let sleeping dogs lie.

What would he think, Philippe, if he knew of your fascination for Duras, for HER books? You take them everywhere, soaking her up as you might a lover: on your morning walks with Julien; on your precious weekly visits to the university library where you tuck yourself away in a cubicle to pour over her; while lining up at the bank or at store service counters. Or on those rainy, dismal, stress-filled days of the past winter when you supply taught just to keep your foot in the door for lack of better job prospects in this government town.

The noon hour bell no sooner rung, you were down those corridors that look the same from one high school to another and out the door, out the door and rushing to your car and driving out to the ocean. Driving with the windows down, your hair flying, confident that this was the sort of thing she liked to do, (you'd read it somewhere in one of her letters to him written from Le Havre that awful Christmas three years ago).

Even into bed with you, you bring the lean, white hardcovers with the unmistakable blue star on the back, (these books synonymous with *la vie adultère*). You wait until Philippe has his back turned or has fallen asleep. Then you read until your eyes drop, often past midnight and often with shame, reliving what they must have lived, realizing that this might be the best you can hope for: second-hand experience.

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A kind of terrorizing.

That cool October evening way back when complicity became a catch word, caught between drifting glances, raised eyebrows and half-empty glasses of wine.

Her strutting in that night in a square-cut black dress so that your already confined Toronto apartment was to take on suffocating proportions: laughing at you out of the sides of her eyes, her arrogant Frenchness, her brazen confidence summed up in the fiery mane falling irreverently about her shoulders and in the insolent button nose. Philippe, agitated, almost wild in his desire, finding a place by the stove out of view, safe from your scrutiny, you who, overnight it seemed, had become the dull wife, a mere sigh of a woman, a thorn in his side.

Later you had watched her disappear into the bathroom and if no one else had seen, you had: seen the malicious intent, someone bent on

gaining the means to destroy. Minutes later, her coming out again, head bent in a smile. You, waiting, feeling yourself go red in the face, then going in yourself and having your worst fears confirmed: the medicine cabinet ajar, your vitamins and toiletries displaced, your neatly typed prescriptions found and flaunted: HALCION .25. MOGODON. Take one or two tablets before bedtime.

Never had anyone dared to come so close, venture into the marriage of your lives.

* * *

Now, three years later, where is she? Comfortably set up in a cushy tenure position at a university back East, teaching feminism in French literature at that.

Going around calling herself a feminist like others call themselves Christian.

"Et toi, Anne, es-tu féministe?"

Having asked you this to the tune of Madonna in the background, this at a party she'd thrown for fellow graduate students the spring before it all began.

Even then, her putting the question to you had been a foreshadowing, a warning to you that she was to be the standard by which you would measure yourself from that moment onward. How your dignity, your very marriage depended upon how you answered. (Philippe had interrupted his conversation with a friend on the sofa nearby to catch your reply).

"Why categorize?" you shrugged. (How you hated this mania some people had of wanting to put others in boxes, of wanting always to classify, classify). "Femme, féministe. I'm a woman, that's all."

Proud of your answer on the instant, you had hoped to dismiss her interrogation as rolling off you as water rolls off a duck's back; sickly conscious, meanwhile, of wanting to impress her, you had allowed the opposite to happen: you had confirmed your insignificance.

Time and time again you have imagined how she must make her classroom entrances. Surely she calculates to arrive after her students so that they have the benefit of viewing her all at once.

First: her relaxed, but quick-quick step along the corridor outside.

Then: the heavy brown classroom door being pushed open with a self-appreciative sweep of the arm.

In she walks, flashes a smile, surveys the class.

Even in beige, in a clinging mohair dress, she is unconventional. Her students say: here is somebody, somebody with credentials, somebody who won't be fooled. Someone not to be jostled, but played with? Maybe. Oh yes, she loves a good game. Someone who calls the shots.

This while wearing the brightest and surest of smiles, a smile that reduces and challenges, a smile that, together with the turned up nose and freckles and hazel eyes that crease and dart, inspire everyone to ask:

"Who is she, where has she been and how has she escaped unscathed?"

She walks over to her desk, sets down the menu for the day: DURAS. *L'ensorcelease*, as more than one critic has called her. You know. You have read them all.

"Il faut être folle de désir pour un homme pour jouir de la sorte de la lecture de Duras."

Destroy, she said.

Too obscure for the innocent, this Duras, this bible of the feminist faithful. Deliberately, frighteningly stark. Pared down to the bare elements. No hiding behind. And no identifying with unless married and over thirty or brutally observant and lacking in compassion.

"Je ne peux pas la sentir," Philippe had protested in the beginning to excuse the book's presence in the apartment; then, soon, he was flaunting it, leaving it everywhere as proof of his conversion.

No confessions needed. Philippe's dark, impenetrable scowl beneath his blond brows had given it away: her mark on him, this Claire woman, heroine incarnate of the Durassian universe.

How he would read her, doubly concentrating on the passages she had underlined and her scribbled comments in the margins. Late into the night, to Satie's Gymnopoedies, luxuriating in the yellow light of the lamp that isolated him from your all too wifely presence in the next room. A yellow light that cast shadows under tired eyes that would be blue with anger towards you in the morning.

Upon Philippe's return from La Martinique:

He had had, he said, every intention of telling you that SHE had been there.

Curiosity kills the cat.

An entire afternoon spent working up to that moment:

The ARRIVALS door sliding open, Philippe, tall, robust and tanned, ever gallant with his windswept blond hair hanging in slivers above his eyes, emerging with a broad, gleaming smile. Julien, momentarily holding back, then bursting forward to grab his father's leg.

You too hold back until Philippe draws you to him with teasing eyes. You melt into him. It would be so much simpler to let yourself go, forget what Philippe is or isn't, a man happily and deservedly removed from you, and just play the part of the happy and devoted wife, the woman destroyed only to be revived and brought back that much stronger, living proof that one can survive such commonplace agonies, maybe even gain from them.

"A week in the sun looks good on you," you say, huddling close on pointed toes.

Philippe returns your good-humored scrutiny with a gentle squeeze before rushing off to gather his suitcase from the conveyor belt.

Having shed his travelling clothes, Philippe works in the garden. He stoops and bends in his gumboots, the sweat on his bronzed back breaking into beads.

You watch, *telle la voyeuse*.

An afternoon of waiting, of heightened awareness, of sexually charged glances and shy smiles. An afternoon that produces nothing in verbal admissions, only your conviction that Philippe shared himself.

No sooner is he in the shower than you are going through his things. Stealing up to his bookbag, flipping through his cahiers, past manila envelopes, anything that might tell you, confirm her presence there.

Remarkably, the single sheet of blue-grey hotel paper, signed and dated at La Martinique, sits neatly exposed between two file folders: an offering. You grab it, one ear perked to the click of the shower stopper in the bathroom, then to the sound of the shower curtain being pulled

back. You creep back into the bedroom, close the door and hastily unfold words so splendid, so cruel in their longing that you almost swoon.

Words that take their place in the repertoire of words that has become your collector's item, your secret stock against him.

(What you remember most about her, her knowing red smile: "I know you go looking through his things.").

You make love to him that night like a cat, better yet like a leopard as you are sure she must have, one that slinks and stalks, slithers and rolls, flexes and arches and gnarls, while Philippe, Philippe throws back his head and groans, his mouth dropping open in pleasure.

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Which brings you up to date, to July and to your approaching due date. To this western city's sprawling blue skies and still dry heat, clear as glass.

You spend more and more afternoons on your front balcony, looking South towards the ocean, imagining the lull of the waves and their quiet breaking on the pebbled shore beneath the cliff. Philippe leaves you every afternoon to teach a class at the university. Extra money, he says, for the baby, little stranger beneath your heart. Julien's naps, meanwhile, have grown conspicuously shorter: from two to three, your blond beauty, your "shared responsibility" sleeps in his blue room behind even bluer blinds. In front of his window you have set up a folding chair so that you can hear him if he stirs.

From time to time you run your hand over the tight ball that your middle has become and smile a smile that falls empty on the air, fades into quivering corners.

You wish.

You wish you had a secret life.

More secret and naughty than the life inside you, holding you, placating you, leaving you vulnerable and prim: exposed.

You acknowledge that even in the best of times pregnancy creates feelings of inadequacy and panic, of wild desires. You recall a photographer-friend in Montreal who had gone out looking for full-time employment when she was six months pregnant, (at the time she still was

not showing), only to renege on her decision three days after accepting a job as a salesclerk in a jewellery shop!

You do not want to be like her: frantic.

Sitting placidly in your folding chair you remember Philippe's warning to you that evening back in late April: "C'est en lui donnant de l'importance que tu la rends dangereuse." A warning that had come on the heels of one more illustration of your morbid curiosity:

"Was SHE there?"

How your curiosity hadn't stopped there. How you'd gone so far as to ask him how she was wearing her hair and how she dressed. And if she had changed at all? And was he—still attracted to her? (This while lying on the living room couch in the dim with your head on his lap; meantime, he had run his hands, so nicely, through your hair, grabbing it in clumps, then tugging on it, separating into strips).

Having not wanted to answer that last question, he had met it with a stern and resentful silence, a mental digging of the heels so that the question had hung on the air, refusing to go away. You had asked it again, a voice inside your head this time insisting that **THESE WERE NOT QUESTIONS ONE ASKED**.

(By wanting to know every last, sordid detail, i.e., What was she like? What did the two of you talk about? What was it like to make love with her? What positions did you try?

EST-CE QU'ELLE TE BRANLAIT?

it's your way of taking that much away from him.

It's your way of robbing him of that part of him that does not belong to you.

So when he is reluctant to answer, hesitates or says, "You don't want to know these things. Why do you want to go on hurting yourself?", it is not out of any real regard for you.

It is his way of keeping the French bitch all to himself.

It is his secret. His vicious, greedy little secret.)

But surely, you fumbled, he could understand your curiosity. After all, he and this C woman, had had something together once, something that had almost destroyed your marriage, driven a wedge between the two of you like no other and you proceeded to quote the marriage counsellor whom you had gone to see all those weeks leading up to Julien's birth, how he had told you that losing your husband to a love affair was like

losing him to death. You had to go through a period of grieving, of mourning. It was taking you that long.

But you haven't lost me, Philippe had said, pushing back his impatience. I came back to you, didn't I? After which he had gotten back on the subject at hand to deny having found her changed, other than having found her mellowed maybe, a little more serious and thoughtful. Less hard.

(It comes back to you: his having told you once how she had sat up in bed and smoked after that first if only time they had made love and said, "Well, Philippe Legrand, I can't believe I have you in my bed!")

What you were able to learn about her that evening back in April was that she looked more or less the same, dressing like someone "qui soigne son image et qui est consciente de son effet." And that for the time she was in La Martinique she had kept pretty much to herself. True, Philippe had gone to hear her segment of the conference and, yes, they had gone for a coffee afterwards. Other than that she had spent her time avoiding people, (which was uncharacteristic of her), and driving around the island in a rented car. (When you think of La Martinique you imagine a dark hotel room with sliding doors and a balcony looking onto a tropical garden stretching out to a luminous ocean). Preoccupied by the death of a colleague who had committed suicide a couple of weeks before, an ex-grad student from the same department where she and Philippe had studied together, she had, you were told, been the last person to see this young man alive.

News to which you would have given no further thought were it not for the look on Philippe's face at breakfast two mornings ago. You had gone to bed the night before considering a passage from *La vie matérielle*, the latest book by Duras that you were reading. In it, she laid bare how fathers in no way shared the same devotion as mothers, how only mothers knew what it was like to have their children climb all over them, hit them, bite them, strangle them, sleep on them to the point of being devoured, extirpated. Elated, almost reassured, you wanted to hail Duras, applaud her recognition; now, you thought, you were about to be twice devoured, twice, thrice rendered mad. Toutes les mères sont folles.

And lying in bed that night, you had asked yourself: might she have happened upon this passage, this Delors woman, she who read and preached Duras until she was blue in the face? And if she had, might she

have been moved to sympathy by it, or better yet, felt as if she too had been k-i-c-k-e-d-i-n-the-g-u-t?

For all you knew, she might have had abortions and today find herself sterile.

WE ALL MAKE OUR CHOICES.

These were the words that were ringing in your head as you woke two mornings ago and throwing off the bedcovers, opening the blinds, you had resolved to be strong about it, to wear the words like a banner the day long.

Seeing the fresh melon in the fridge, you'd decided it would go well with your Saturday morning usual of strong coffee and pancakes. Why don't we have it on the balcony? you suggested to Philippe. While he went about getting breakfast ready, cheerfully, you thought, you brought up the cosy lace-iron table from the basement and set it up on the front balcony with its three chairs.

You have an image of yourself as you greeted Philippe upon his emerging with the pancakes just seconds before, Julien had demanded your attention, but you managed an abrupt about-face. The arm you had used to pick up Julien's fallen spoon is posed, at wrist's length, on the table. Your head is lifted, catching the sun that filters through the holes of your wide-brimmed straw hat. Your smile: wide, pressing, urgent. An invitation to Philippe to share in your certitude, in the happiness.

Then Philippe had sat down and the pressure had been on to extend the moment.

Perhaps too assertively, you'd leaned back.

Smiling weakly at you, Philippe waited, then, with lowered eyes that betrayed his boredom, took a sip of his coffee.

And there you had had it; again, it came rushing at you: the shame of being all intent and no action. Cerebral rather than sensual. Unlike Philippe who is sensuality right down to his thighs which are naked even when clothed, which, winter or summer, an inner restlessness, a smouldering draws his hands to tame or acknowledge—you're not sure which—with taunting strokes.

And unlike her

Then—you hardly know how you got on the subject—but soon you were talking about that André fellow, the one who had committed suicide back in April? the one, apparently, that she had been the last to see alive.

With deliberate blandness, Philippe recounted what she had told him back in La Martinique: about this André fellow not finishing his thesis and how this weighed on him, depressed him. About his lacking any get up and go the last weeks, his steering clear of colleagues and meetings. About C going over to see him one day and finding him sitting gazing out his window as she let herself in.

What, you asked, was she doing showing herself into his apartment?

About Philippe's face as the question passed from your lips. About how you closed your eyes and, with a vengeance, turned your face to the sun, hoping it would soothe, help you forget Philippe's nervous forehead and faraway eyes, the slightly gaping mouth. Or maybe, just maybe, help you decipher it, tear it apart and break it down, live and wear it as if it were your own: the look of starving, the look of secrets betrayed.

To have that power.

To have

that

power.

It is at night when you feel it the worst: the smouldering, like a madness. Your skin flushed, rising to the hot wave that slides up your neck, around your head and down the front to smother you. You throw off the bedcovers and listen to the blind click and tap against the sill with every waft of air, feeling your husband yards away even though he sleeps beside you.

You never wanted this love, you tell yourself and him at these times, the declaration slipping from your lips in whispered screams.

You never wanted this love, this dependency which leaves you stranded, branded, a woman insane.

This terrible love which sees nothing redeeming in the fact that he came back to you. On the contrary. This terrible love which grabs you by the throat, stifles the cry: "Don't do me any favors!" and in the next breath: "I wanted to be the great love of your life!"

Instead you are the pet dog that one caresses in front of the fire and thanks for being there at the end of the day, even though the absent strokes of your master's hand confirm that he is elsewhere.

A love that is a kind of dying.