

FATALE

JEAN-PATRICK MANCHETTE

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I

THE HUNTERS were six in number, men mostly fifty or older, but also two younger ones with sarcastic expressions. They all wore check shirts, sheepskin jackets, waterproof khaki trench coats, more or less high boots, and caps. One of the two younger guys was all skin and bone, and one of the fifty-year-olds, a bespectacled pharmacist with white hair in a crew cut, was fairly thin. The other hunters were potbellied and rubicund, especially one named Roucart. They carried two- or three-round sporting guns because birds were the game. They had three dogs, two pointers and a Gordon setter. Off to the northeast there must have been other hunters because they heard a gunshot, followed by another, from a kilometer or perhaps a kilometer and a half away.

They reached the end of a stretch of damp moorland. For ten meters or so they passed through silver-birch saplings barely taller than a man, then they found themselves amidst large rustling trees, mainly birch and poplar, and thickets. The group loosened. There was standing water here and there. From the northeast came four or five more distant reports, a muted crackle of fire. A little later they broke up deliberately. They had been hunting for a good three hours and still had not killed anything. Everyone was frustrated and crotchety.

A moment came when Roucart went down into a damp, narrow coomb strewn with masses of rotting leaves. He found the descent rather hard because his paunch pulled him forward and he was obliged to dig in his heels and throw his head back. His head was shaped like a pear, stem upwards, and his bald pate was red beneath

his green-and-brown camouflage-style cap. The skin of his face was red too, his eyes bright blue and his eyebrows white. His nose was short and stubby, with wide nostrils and white hairs inside them. He pulled up at the bottom of the coomb to catch his breath. He propped his gun against a tree trunk, then leaned back against it himself. Mechanically, he felt in his jacket pocket for a cigarette, then recalled that he had given up smoking three weeks earlier and let his hand fall to his side. He was disappointed. Suddenly a gunshot rang out no more than a hundred meters away and a badly trained dog barked briefly. Roucart had no dog. Without removing his considerable backside from the tree trunk, he leaned forward and with his mouth half open cocked an ear in the direction of the sound. All he heard at first was the murmur of the leaves, then someone coming down behind him into the coomb. He turned his head with some difficulty to see a young woman standing motionless at the foot of the incline, just four steps from him, a thin figure in a long light-brown oilskin, waders, a round rain hat over her long brown hair. Slung over her shoulder was a 16-gauge shotgun.

“Good heavens! If it isn’t Mélanie Horst!” exclaimed Roucart, hastily detaching his rump from the tree trunk and sucking in his stomach. “Well, this *is* a nice surprise! But how come? I thought you had left us for good, dear child.”

She smiled vaguely. She might have been thirty, or thirty-five. She had dark brown eyes and delicate features. The vague smile barely exposed her teeth, which were small and even. Roucart approached the young woman, continuing to address her as “dear child” and talking in an avuncular tone as his big blue eyes roved up and down her slim form. He declared himself greatly astonished to see her here—first because she never went shooting and secondly because she had said her goodbyes to everyone the previous afternoon and taken a taxi to the station.

“As surprises go, this beats all. And such a pleasant one too,” he exclaimed, and she unslung her 16-gauge shotgun, turned it on him, and before he had finished smiling emptied both barrels into his gut.

Moments later he was lying on his back against the upward slope

and its rotting leaves. His torso was full of holes and his khaki jacket had ridden up beneath his chin from the impact and his check shirt was half out of his pants. Roucart's bare head was bent forward and twisted to one side, his cheek was in the mud, his eyes and mouth were open, and his cap lay upturned on the ground. With saliva glistening in his mouth, the man narrowed one eye slightly and died. From far away there came the sound of three gunshots. The young woman walked away.

IT WAS night when she went into the station, and she had reversed her oilskin, which was light brown on one side and white on the side now visible. A red scarf was tied around her brown hair and the frame of her large glasses was black-and-white check. The young woman's mouth was at present made up with scarlet lipstick. The station was hardly crowded. An Arab family with three children waited on a bench, peeling oranges. Lamplighters were going to and fro with oilcans suspended from their belts. The young woman made her way to the self-service luggage lockers. Opening a locker at one end of the row, she took out a slim attaché case and a large leather bag. Then, going to the other end, she opened another locker and removed a green plastic briefcase with a zipper running around three sides. She slid the fastener open about twenty centimeters and looked quickly inside the case, which was twisted and bulging from the volume of its contents. Raising her head, she zipped it up again. With her three pieces of baggage, she went and sat down in a corner of the station hall and smoked two Celtiques.

After ten or twelve minutes a royal-blue luxury train pulled into the station. By this time the young woman was already on her way to the underground passage. She emerged onto the platform just as the train came to a halt. She walked for fifty meters or so alongside the train, checking the car numbers. She came to her sleeping car. A porter greeted her on the platform and took her ticket, along with the leather bag and the slim attaché case. She kept the overstuffed briefcase under her left arm and grasped its edge with her right hand as she climbed into the carriage and made her way to her single

sleeping compartment. The porter set the bags down. He told the young woman that they would arrive at Bléville* at eight o'clock the next morning and asked whether she would like a wake-up call. At seven, she replied. Smiling, she asked the man whether it would be at all possible to bend the rules and deliver a meal to her compartment, a meal whose desired components she detailed. The porter began by saying no, but then fell prey to the charm of her smile and the fifty-franc bill she held out to him, folded in half and nipped between two fingers. All the while she barely took her eyes off the briefcase, which she had put down on the made-up bunk.

When the porter returned a good while later, only her reading light was on and the young woman was almost naked. A towel worn turban-fashion was tied low on her forehead, while her body was covered by another, rather large towel pulled tight below her armpits, leaving her shoulders and arms bare and falling to her heels like an African woman's *pagne*. The porter placed the food on the little table, uncorked one of the two bottles of champagne, and placed their silver-plated ice buckets on the floor, saying it would be best if she called for him when the second bottle needed opening. Then, after she had paid him with bills extracted from a black box-calf bill-fold, he swiftly withdrew.

The train had been back in motion now for about fifteen minutes, often approaching a speed of one hundred and eighty kilometers per hour. Once the porter left, the young woman turned all the lights in the compartment back on. She removed the towel from her head and her hair appeared, still very wet and streaked yellow and black. The little towel was badly soiled with black dye. Bending over the washbasin, the young woman rinsed the remaining black dye from her hair. From her large traveling bag she took a small hair dryer. Earlier she had set on the floor an American battery-powered hair-setting device designed to heat twenty rollers, and turned it on. She plugged the dryer into a socket by the washbasin and dried her

*Bléville is, literally, Wheatville, but *blé* in a slang sense means money. The town's name is thus something like Doughville.—*Trans.*

hair. Thanks to a reversible chemical change, the red core of the rollers had turned black, indicating that they had reached the desired temperature and were ready for use. The young woman, blonde now, threw off the large towel, which was hindering her movements. She rolled her hair into the twenty curlers. She pulled the edge of the lowered blind aside slightly. She got a vague impression of night rushing by and of dark masses that were copses or buildings. Here and there lights could be seen in the distance. Occasionally an illuminated railroad crossing shot past, close by the train. She let the blind fall back and went to sit at the little table. She reached out and picked up the briefcase. She put it on her lap and unzipped it completely. Carefully she counted the five-hundred-franc and hundred-franc notes that it contained. From time to time she dropped one, and the tips of her breasts would brush against the money on her knees as she leant down to retrieve the fallen bill. In all, the briefcase surrendered some twenty-five or thirty thousand francs; the young woman put the notes back, reziped the case, and placed it on the floor next to the compartment wall.

Next she lifted the cover of the hot plate, revealing a choucroute. The young woman proceeded to stuff herself with pickled cabbage, sausage, and salt pork. She chewed with great chomps, fast and noisily. Juices dripped from the edge of her mouth. Sometimes a strand of sauerkraut would slip from her fork or from her mouth and fall to the floor or attach itself to her lower lip or her chin. The young woman's teeth were visible as she chewed because her lips were drawn back. She drank champagne. She finished the first bottle in short order. As she was opening the second, she pricked the fleshy part of a thumb with the wire fastening, and a tiny pearl of scarlet blood appeared. She guffawed, for she was already drunk, and sucked on her thumb and swallowed the blood.

She went on eating and drinking and progressively lost control of herself. She leaned over, still chewing, and opened the briefcase and pulled out fistfuls of banknotes and rubbed them against her sweat-streaked belly and against her breasts and her armpits and between her legs and behind her knees. Tears rolled down her cheeks even as

she shook with silent laughter and kept masticating. She bent over to sniff the lukewarm choucroute, and she rubbed banknotes against her lips and teeth and raised her glass and dipped the tip of her nose in the champagne. And here in this luxury compartment of this luxury train her nostrils were assailed at once by the luxurious scent of the champagne and the foul odor of the filthy banknotes and the foul odor of the choucroute, which smelt like piss and sperm.

Nevertheless, when the young woman arrived in Bléville at eight o'clock that morning, she had retrieved all of her customary self-assurance.

WHEN SHE got off the train at Bléville, the young woman was blonde and her hair was as frizzy as a lamb's. She was wearing high boots in fawn leather with very high heels, a brown tweed skirt, a beige silk blouse, and a fawn suede car coat. On her right hand she wore two old rings with stones of no great market value and tarnished silver settings, on her left an engagement ring of white gold, and on her left wrist a small square Cartier watch with a leather strap. She hailed a porter and handed him her large traveling bag and her slim attaché case. She no longer held the green briefcase, but was now carrying a shoulder bag made of interwoven broad strips of beige and dark-brown leather. As she crossed the main hall of the station she glanced towards the bank of luggage lockers, which was impressively large.

In front of the station, the young woman handed the porter two francs and got into a taxi, a Peugeot 403. She told the driver to take her to the Résidence des Goélands—the Seagull Apartments. On the way she shivered and rolled up the window against the cold, damp sea breeze.

For her stay in Bléville, the young woman had chosen to call herself Aimée Joubert, and that is what I shall call her from now on. At the Seagull Apartments, Aimée Joubert's reservation had been duly noted. The girl at the reception desk, barely more than a kid at the awkward age, with acne and thoughtful, mean eyes, checked a register and then produced Aimée's keys and told her the floor and room number.

"You get two keys, okay?" she said as she handed them to Aimée.

“This is to the front door. It’s locked after ten at night. We ask our guests to make as little noise as possible after ten. In the off-season, I mean. We have mostly elderly people here, and they like quiet.”

“That’s fine,” replied Aimée. “I like quiet myself.”

The girl did not show her to her room. Aimée carried her bags to the rear of the hall, took the elevator, and located her studio apartment on the fourth floor: a rather attractive room about twenty square meters in size, along with a wide balcony and a recessed kitchenette. An accordion-style sliding partition separated the cooking from the living area. There was also a narrow bathroom with a long tub and moss-green tiles. The furniture consisted of a double bed with a predominantly bright-red plaid spread, a bedside shelf with a telephone, a teak armoire, two easy chairs with blue velvet upholstery, a teak chest of six large drawers with brass handles, and a teak chair. The walls were white, the carpeting slate gray. In the center of each of three of the walls hung framed prints of eighteenth-century British ships of the line. A small Ducretet-Thomson television stood on the floor in front of the big picture window that took up the whole fourth side of the room. On the wide balcony were two more armchairs—garden chairs—and a round garden table, all in white-painted metal. The balcony overlooked the Promenade—a vast esplanade covered with yellowing grass and traversed by a pinkish roadway—and the choppy gray-green sea. All in all, fairly satisfactory lodgings.

Aimée unpacked and put away her clothes and other personal belongings, including a key-copying apparatus, a device for strengthening her hand muscles, and her chest expanders. Everything fit easily into the armoire. The young woman drew herself a bath. While the water was running she turned the television on, but nothing was being broadcast. She turned the set off and picked up a guidebook entitled *Bléville and Its Region* and a frilly clear-plastic shower cap. She pulled the cap over her hair and settled herself in the tub with the book. She opened the volume at random and began to read: *a whale, which in that millenarian period was believed to presage the end of the world. . . .* (Aimée’s lips moved slightly as she read.

She skipped a few lines; in any case the text had been familiar to her for some time.) *But it was the advent of oceangoing vessels that supplied the real basis of the town's wealth. The sons of Bléville proceeded to distinguish themselves in wars with first the English and later the Portuguese, and they ventured as far away as Canada and the East Indies. Under Louis XIV, trade and the guerre de course were the mother's milk of Bléville's prosperity. Following the decline of the port in the nineteenth century, the town was to wait until the 1960s for a new boom time to come. In those years the chemical and food-processing industries moved into the valley and the working-class suburbs underwent rapid expansion. Today Bléville can boast . . .* (Aimée broke off her reading at this point. On the facing page was a depiction of the same jetty and lighthouse that could be seen from her studio's balcony if one looked to the right.)

The young woman got out of the bath and used the handbasin to wash her tights, panties and bra with bar soap, then hung them up to dry on the chrome towel rack. She dressed in the same clothes she had worn on her arrival, except that she pulled a brown crew-neck sweater over her silk blouse. She left the apartment, put the keys in her bag, and went downstairs.

The streets of Bléville bore such names as Surcouf, Jean Bart, Duguay-Trouin, or alternatively such names as Turgot, Adolphe Thiers, Lyautey, and Charles de Gaulle.* Aimée walked up and down these streets for a while, occasionally consulting her guidebook, making sure that she was perfectly familiar with the town's topography. The young woman was almost exclusively interested, however, in the old town, dwelling place of the local bourgeoisie on the left bank of the river and well away from the port with its cafés overflowing with mussels and fries, with whores and seamen. To the rear of the affluent neighborhood quasi-expressways had made their

*Surcouf, Jean Bart, and Duguay-Trouin were celebrated French corsairs and admirals. Turgot was an eighteenth-century French statesman and economist; Thiers was known as the Butcher of the Paris Commune; General Lyautey fought in the French colonies and later became a Fascist.—*Trans.*