



NICOLAS FARGUES

I WAS BEHIND YOU

Translated from the French
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ERO DIETRO DI TE: do you know what that means in English? It means *I was behind you*. She was actually sitting at a table behind us for the entire meal and she spent the whole time watching me, although I didn't realise it. You know, it's funny, but I'm starting to think it wouldn't be stretching things too far to read something highly symbolic into that phrase. It could also mean: "All this time, all these years, I've been right behind you, not very far away, and you didn't see me. It was obvious you and I were meant to be together, but we missed each other every time. Now I want you to know that I'm here, the ball's in your court, you can't say no one told you and grumble that you missed out on the chance of a lifetime." What do you think?

It was the waiter who brought me a little card at the end of meal, with the bill. You know, the sort of card that has the restaurant's logo, address and phone number printed above its name. I don't know if you've noticed, but they always do this sort of thing really nicely in Italy—the cards are always properly printed on quality paper with an elegant illustration and attractive lettering, they always have a personal touch: the Italians pay far more attention to this sort of thing than the French. Written on the back of the card in ballpoint pen was '*Ero dietro di te—Alice*'; that's pronounced *Al-ee-chay* in Italian, then a mobile number which, in Italy,

starts with thirty-three or thirty four. The waiter smiled as he handed it to me and began telling me in Italian what had happened. I was nodding, although I could only actually understand one word in five; I couldn't bring myself to admit that I didn't understand Italian, it was thoroughly irritating, but I just kept nodding out of sheer pride. What a ridiculous way to react, huh? How stupid can you get?

As it was perfectly obvious that I didn't have a clue what he was saying, he naturally turned to my father and stepmother, who do speak Italian, and explained that a girl sitting at the table behind us had insisted on giving me her phone number. He was really tickled by it, he couldn't stop smiling! And it wasn't a mocking or a blasé smile. Quite the reverse—it was what I'd call a tremulous smile, a tremulous, emotional smile, tinged with amazement. Enthusiastic and amazed, that was it. He was so embarrassed about smiling, and so taken by the thought of this girl leaving her phone number for me in such a romantic, gutsy way that he was virtually blushing. Yes, I know, it's the sort of situation you only find in films or books and, putting myself in the waiter's shoes, I'm sure this sort of thing didn't happen every day in his restaurant. I didn't really take that on board, it's true, because it was happening to *me*, because the note was addressed to *me*. But, I suppose, looking at it objectively, that kind of thing must be quite exciting, mustn't it? So I asked the waiter, this time in English—incidentally, have you noticed that when you ask an Italian, "Do you speak English?", they tend to answer very humbly: "Just a little bit"? *Djustelitalbiè*, with that accent, making that sign with

their thumb and forefinger. They may say "Just a little bit" but they actually understand and speak English far, far better than the French, don't they? Have you noticed that?—What was I saying, oh yes, the waiter. I ask him in English, trying really hard not to have a French accent—because English sounds really dreadful spoken with a French accent, doesn't it?—I ask him if the girl comes here often, what she was like, if she was pretty or not, I ask him to describe her, just to give me an idea. I was just asking for a laugh, to show off a bit to my father, stepmother and kid brother, without really thinking about what I said. Just for fun and because it was making me feel better, taking my mind off things by chatting about silly stuff like that.

Because I was in such a state that evening, honest to God, you have no idea. Alexandrine had cheated on me over a month earlier, and I couldn't get over it, it was awful. I thought about it every time I looked at her, I tried to stop thinking about it, but it was no good, it had got blown out of all proportion, it had become pathological, it was slowly eating away at my mind, every day I felt drained, bloodless, I had a dead weight in the pit of my stomach night and day, you know, that dead weight you get just there, that won't go away, depression converted into objective physical pain. The kind of thing they treat with antidepressants like Prozac, stuff like that. Before I went through all this, I didn't understand Prozac. Before all this, you know, I'd made it a point of honour never to admit things weren't okay, I just went on stubbornly believing that I was happy—I even convinced myself that I didn't have any problems, you know, before all this

happened, I was Mr. *No Problem*—so I didn't understand the purpose, use or effect of all that chemistry. When people talked about depression and feeling down, it didn't seem real, I thought you had to be weak to need all those drugs, all those therapists, all that talking. I became contemptuous, scornful, totally intolerant about it all. I didn't realise you could be unhappy and not do anything about it, I didn't realise you could be really miserable, that you could feel ten years older just like that, that one day you could just stop wanting to put on a brave face. I thought that people who were unhappy just put up with being unhappy and that deep down they couldn't be all that unhappy, all that depressed, know what I mean?

Well, I never really seriously considered getting a prescription for Prozac because, deep down, I think I have a huge ego, which means I always keep my head above water and come out smelling of roses whatever happens. But I've now realised that there are psychological traumas which are too terrible, too hard to bear, and which can, in the long run, make you lose your grip. And I've realised that Western medicine has harnessed certain molecules to cope with these traumas and make life more bearable. And it would be a mistake to do without them if you really need them, if things are too difficult, if you aren't strong enough to do without, if they'll make you less miserable. And there's no shame in that. No, I've had it with looking down on people who cram their faces with drugs and don't hide when they're in pain—it's too easy. I realise now that they're doing their best. I realise now that the poor bastards must really be suffering, if they've come

to that. I now know you can be in pain and not be able to ignore it. I don't look down on anyone any more, anyway. This whole business has made me more human. I had to wait till I hit my thirties before I realised I was just like everyone else, that we were all in the same boat, and that I'd been a complete idiot to think I was better than anyone else. Besides, it was my therapist who told me at our first session, in June: "You're not better than all the others now, you're *one of them*", heavily stressing "*one of them*". Before all this, I'd thought I had nothing in common with other people. But I was more than happy to go looking for them when I needed to talk. Because, you know, I didn't talk before. I was Mr. *No Problem*, as I said. And, now, I can honestly say that that I pulled through because I spent hours talking to people, whether they were good listeners or not. Yes, I'll say it loud and clear: "Thanks, people, thanks! You saved my life and please forgive me for bad-mouthing you for so long, I swear I've learned my lesson and I won't do it again!" In the end, I was shameless; when asked "How are you?", I didn't have any qualms about answering, "Dreadful, things couldn't be worse, I really need to talk, have you got a minute?" And there was no holding me back—me, the man who was so afraid of damaging his perfect image by talking too much about himself and any problems he might have—there was no holding me back from talking to them for hours, like everyone else does, shamelessly doing people's heads in by talking non-stop the way other people have done my head in with all their talk when things were going badly for them, when I was pretending that everything was fine my end and that I was listening just as closely

to their problems as they do to mine, now that I have my own. And I never showed that they were sometimes doing my head in with their non-stop talk, probably for the same reasons that, of all the people I've discussed my problems with over the past few months, including you, there must have been one or two who felt I was doing their heads in big time, don't you think? I'm not doing your head in, am I? Are you sure? Anyway, I don't really care whether someone's listening to me or not. Now I talk. And something is always sorted out when you talk. Anyway, it finally dawned on me that people don't want you to spare them your problems and be okay—quite the reverse, in fact. People actually want you to show your true face and admit you're just like them, that you're in the same shitty boat as them. That's what sharing really is, that's what being human is. As long as you're fine, as long as you try to spare people your problems, you fascinate them but you're not one of them, you're better than them, your happiness keeps them at arm's length too much, it annoys them and makes them hostile. And they like you even more, they're even more attentive and sympathetic when you show your true face after they've spent ages thinking you were better than everyone else, after they've been waiting with perverse impatience for you to fall flat on your face, like everyone else.

Anyway, as I was saying, I didn't begin to suffer till I turned thirty. Or rather, to discover that I could suffer like everyone else and that my so-called strength of mind, my so-called elegant detachment, my totally theoretical, totally idealistic, totally literary aloofness towards everything couldn't protect me from a

straightforward, ordinary, resounding slap in the face. I didn't really grow up till the age of thirty. You know, I never had any real problems. I'm not a traumatised child, there's nothing objectively tragic lurking in my past. I wasn't abandoned, I wasn't raped or abused, my parents didn't beat the living daylights out of each other in front of me, my father hasn't killed anyone, he's never been to prison, he didn't drink, my mother didn't prostitute herself to feed me, I didn't witness horrible things, murders, genocides, deportation, stuff like that. My past was perfectly ordinary and middle-class: a little sister, a mum and dad who loved and respected each other, who loved us, and who then realised one day that things weren't working out and who decided on a clean break, and that was that. One child each and the best of luck, let's not forget we loved each other and that the children's happiness comes first. The petty trauma of divorce and a bonded family, the petty woes of a spoiled child, life goes on, nothing to make a big song and dance about.

Anyway, given that we're all totally self-obsessed, one day I'll probably laugh about this pathetic business I've just gone through with Alexandrine but, for now, it feels more like a revolution—the kind of revolution that's part of an adult's normal, mundane, lousy life. *That's life*, as they say. Quite an apt expression, isn't it? *That's life*. Anyway, this whole business will have a before and after, that's for sure. Hey, don't you think I've changed, just a little bit? I haven't changed completely, of course, but, I don't know, don't you think there's something a little sadder in the depths of my eyes, the kind of thing that's barely noticeable but shows

you're not the same any more, that you're a little more serious, a little more experienced now. You haven't noticed anything? You don't think I've changed? Yes, I know we're all damaged children in our own way. Each and every one of us. In theory, that should put all our petty little woes firmly in perspective. So much anonymous suffering is almost annoying. But, well, you know, having Alexandrine cheat on me was awful, a real nightmare. For a whole month after she got back from Bangkok, I couldn't sleep, I had to force myself to eat, force myself to get out of bed, take a shower, choose what clothes to wear, get ready in front of the mirror, keep a smile on my face so that everyone would go on thinking that everything was okay. Actually, no, I didn't force myself, that's not the right word. Actually, I was doing everything mechanically, without really understanding what was happening to me. I was in the middle of the shockwave, you know, when the building is still standing a few minutes after the earth tremor and then collapses. Or like the chicken which has just had its head cut off and keeps running round the yard for twenty or thirty seconds before it accepts that there's no point running any more, that it's going nowhere. I thought I was strong, you know, made of stainless steel, off-road, untouchable, too proud for pain. But suddenly, pride, aloofness, irony, were all gone. Just a resounding slap in the face from life. And like all those who are too proud and too sheltered by life when they receive their first hard knock, I overreacted. I turned into a robot, I did everything the same as usual but I'd switched off. I was completely devastated, I was obsessed by the thought of my wife being shagged in

her fucking hotel room, in Bangkok, by some man who was taller and more manly than me, who was bigger, less inhibited, a black man who spoke English and who made her come without a second thought. It was awful, honest to God, I tried to put on a brave face for everyone, I kept a manic smile on my face, pretending I was nobody's fool. But, underneath it all, I was going to pieces, I felt like no one in the world was losing their grip like me.

That was exactly my frame of mind when I was speaking to the waiter in that restaurant in Florence. I was feeling a kind of euphoric despair, you know? Though, on that particular evening, to be perfectly honest, just being in Italy was doing me the world of good. I'd arrived from Paris that morning, I was just there for the weekend, I wasn't expecting the trip to make me feel any better, it didn't even cross my mind that Italy might do anything for me, given the state I was in. And it's precisely because I didn't expect anything that it all happened, because it didn't even cross my mind that something might happen to bring me out of my black depression. My father, whom I hadn't seen for a year, had suggested that I make the most of my trip to Europe to spend a weekend in Florence, where he'd just moved with his family. He'd suggested this by email two or three months ago, well in advance, to make sure he didn't miss me, because he knows what it's like to make a flying visit to Europe: loads of things to do and people to see in record time, with no time to spare for family. He knew things weren't going brilliantly in my marriage and he'd written:

When you come to Paris with Alexandrine, in early September, why don't you come to stay with us in Florence for the weekend to take your mind off things? We'll have just moved; I've found quite a nice house in the hills with a view of the whole town.

When he'd suggested this in his email, I was in my office in Tanambo, on the other side of the world, my mind occupied with a thousand other worries and morally eaten up with guilt. You know, at that time, it must have been June, Alexandrine and I were already in the midst of a crisis. I was the one who, after years and years of reciprocal fidelity with two children, had suddenly screwed everything up, in mid-May, by losing my head over Gassy, a visiting singer who'd even got the witchdoctors in her village to cast a spell on me and, frankly, her magic charms could well have worked because, with hindsight, I really don't know what I saw in her, a singer for Chrissake, I ask you! A virtual stranger who really wasn't that attractive, anyway, whom I sneaked away to kiss and caress in her hotel, one morning when my wife and children were innocently at the zoo, completely unaware of what I was getting up to on the other side of town. The worst thing was not so much snogging another woman and fondling her breasts and fanny. You already know what happened, everyone knows. The worst thing was that, two days later, when I confessed to Alexandrine that I'd been with that woman, I also told her I was leaving her, only to take it back abruptly after twenty minutes and beg her to forgive me. I'm glossing over this part, I'm oversimplifying, I'll skip Alexandrine's mental and physical collapse the second I told her

the news, the terrible, palpable shock in her eyes and written all over her face, just as she was about to put a pound cake in the oven for the whole family. I'll skip the way I immediately wanted to die for putting her in that state, my sudden realisation that I'd thrown the world out of kilter, that I'd shattered her trust forever, I'd committed a real crime; I'll spare you my feeling that this was the end of the world, that I was walking into the fires of hell—there's no other image to describe it, the living nightmare, the words spoken in those decisive five seconds that you want to take back, those five fatal seconds that you hopelessly long to rewrite so that everything can go back to exactly how it was before, so that everything is just a bad dream. And talking about dreams, I'll spare you the one I had a couple of weeks earlier. Dreams are incredible. In this dream, Alex and I are yelling at each other, we're yelling at each other at the same time, face to face, eyes screwed shut in hysteria, we're in tears, yelling at each other although we're totally unable to communicate, we're deeply annoyed with each other for some reason that isn't clear in the dream, but it's something serious, very serious in fact, something in which I'm the guilty party, we're yelling at each other, making an incredible racket as if this is the end of the world, and yet we're hugging each other with all our might, like two orphans in an air-raid, terrified and waiting for death, because we both know that no other outcome is possible. I remember that dream perfectly, I'm not making any of it up, honestly, that dream was so frightening and the violence in it so tangible and realistic, that it made me sit bolt upright in our bed in

the middle of the night. It still gave me the shivers the next morning, I'm not kidding. I'll skip all that but, as far as the actual sequence of events goes, that's the version you've heard, isn't it? Tell me straight away if I'm missing something out, some additional detail, something you might have been told that you think is significant and that you might think I was deliberately keeping from you to make it easier to tell you my version. Go ahead, I really wouldn't want to influence you.

In any case, I won't go into the reasons for my little indiscretion with the singer. For a start, they're quite personal, it would take hours and, most importantly, I don't want to force you to take my side. I know you're very fond of Alex, I know you get on well with her and that she tells you her own version of things, it wouldn't be fair. All I can say, even if it doesn't get you anywhere, is that I had my reasons. Of course I did. I don't mind coming over as a bastard, I don't mind coming over as the person who ruined everything first, but it didn't just happen out of the blue, that's all I can say. I did it because I had my reasons and you're never totally to blame if you have your reasons, are you? Even though, at the time, seeing what a state Alexandrine was in because of me, I felt so guilty that I refused to consider that I might have had the slightest objective reason for doing what I'd done. Anyway, I felt like shit, I felt enormously guilty for lying to her, enormously guilty for threatening to leave her for some woman I'd had pathetic qualms about sleeping with before I'd left my wife properly, enormously guilty for going off at the deep end and taking just five seconds to ruin all

those years of marriage untroubled by the slightest acknowledged problem, with two kids into the bargain. After a sleepless night grovelling at her feet, begging her to forgive me and take me on again for life, after a sleepless night filled with her tears and despairing howls, after watching her throw her wedding ring into the bin and not being allowed to take it out, I stopped going to work for ten days from the following morning to avoid leaving her alone in the house for a second. I stayed with her night and day, rolled in a ball on the bare floor at the foot of the bed in the guest room, where she'd now moved all her things. I stopped sleeping. I watched her slightest move as she slept; when she woke up, I hurriedly sat up and waited for her first words, gazing up at her, I lowered my eyes when she ordered me with hers not to look her in the face, I nodded my head in case she was upset by the sound of my voice, I asked permission before speaking to her. I left the room when she ordered me to leave the room; out of a sense of decency, I didn't dare show my joy when she asked me to stay to keep her company; I waited for her orders pacing up and down in the corridor; out of a sense of decency I didn't dare sit down for a rest on the living room sofa, I didn't dare switch on the TV, I didn't dare open a book, I didn't dare think of myself, even for a second. I didn't even dare look at myself in the mirror any more because I was revolted by the face of a man who had destroyed a wife and mother, I was like Macbeth after the king's murder, I'd murdered innocence and now I was making myself pay dearly for it, honest to God, I'm not exaggerating, it's true. From then on, I spent

two-and-a-half months in total self-denial, verging on masochism, and I thought there was nothing strange about it—nothing strange about not allowing myself to cry or laugh in front of her, nothing strange about being a shit, nothing strange about not throwing myself under the wheels of the first car that came along out of respect for her grief, nothing strange about hearing her say: “There’s only one thing that could ruin your life as much as you’ve ruined mine and that would be for me to commit suicide. But I’m damned if I’m going to give you the satisfaction.” I thought her treating me like a dog was nothing, I was completely lost, she was my furious owner, I could hear her crying and sniffing for hours on end behind the walls of her room and it was killing me; I was willing to submit to any kind of humiliation, any kind of violence, just for a magnanimous hand on my hair or against my cheek, just for a simple smile and, in fact, the very evening the drama unfolded, she forced me at the point of a kitchen knife to yell nonsense down the phone at the singer, whose legs she would’ve smashed with an iron bar in the middle of the night at her hotel, had Gassy still been in town. In fact, the morning after, she bit my hand and drew blood when I forcibly removed about twenty pills from her mouth as she was trying to swallow them in her room. In fact, a half-an-hour later, she took all our love letters from all those years, mine to her and hers to me, along with all our photos, and threw them into the fire in front of my eyes, hundreds of photos and negatives from so many years together, and I had no right to bat an eyelid. In fact, the next day, she spent a good twenty minutes passing messages

to me through our six-year-old daughter who, until then, had been kept completely out of the picture, messages like: “Dad, mum wants me to ask you how Gassy is”, “Dad, mum wants to know when you intend to get rid of the pests to make room for Gassy”, “What does *get rid of the pests* mean, dad?”, “And who’s Gassy, dad?” And, in fact, the following Saturday, at lunchtime, after spending the whole morning playing the same sad song called *What You Did to Me* over and over, in which the woman has been deceived by her lover, she telephoned a friend to come and get the children and, after the children had left with her friend, when she and I were alone in the house, with no witnesses, she switched off the CD player and started hammering on the locked door of the toilet, screaming at me to get up from the throne where I was taking a shit. She screamed at me to open the door immediately, so I opened it, I opened it because I wasn’t in any fit state to disobey her and also because I wasn’t in the habit of disobeying Alex, even before the nightmare. So I opened the door, wondering a little what was going on, still holding up my unfastened trousers, and saw her standing there, transfigured, gripping an aluminium broom handle from which she had unscrewed the brush. Her face was unrecognisable with hatred, she was gripping the broom handle in her fist with all her might and she said, full of that song which she must’ve played forty times between nine o’clock in the morning and midday, she said, her eyes and mouth filled with a disgust I didn’t recognise, a disgust that made me think, “You don’t actually know Alex, your wife is a stranger,” she said: “Get ready to pay for what you’ve done.” So I

immediately realised what was in store for me—my heart wasn't thumping as loudly as it should have done because I must already have known deep down, I must already have been instinctively expecting what was about to happen, I must even have been expecting, more or less consciously, for all those years, that a situation could materialise that would define the underlying relationship we'd had from the start: her potentially violent fragility versus my potentially cowardly guilt. So it didn't even cross my mind to refuse, I didn't try to play the innocent, I didn't ask any questions, I calmly buttoned my trousers and walked over to her saying: "I'm ready". I gritted my teeth and she immediately began beating the living daylights out of me in the doorway of our bathroom with the handle she was gripping so tightly that it gave her blisters that lasted for several days; she began by hitting me vigorously with all the might of a woman built like a competitive swimmer, non-stop blows to the back of my head and neck, she beat my legs, my hips, my back, like one of the Furies, she aimed for my balls, my face, like a woman possessed, she screamed at me with every blow, raving at me with insults like "bastard," "wanker," "fucking shit," "you're nothing but a shit," "fucking bastard," "eat shit and die, that's all you deserve," "you're not worth a shit," and I let it happen, too wracked with guilt to feel the effect of her blows and insults, putting off the pain, focusing on the whistle of the air as it swept down the aluminium tube, thinking every time her outraged eyes met mine behind the shaft: "I've married a lunatic." And when, after three or four minutes, the broom handle folded in two from

its repeated contact with my bones, she threw the two pieces in my face, went into my study, unplugged the little wooden lamp and smashed that into my face. She did it with so much force that both the lamp and its shade broke into pieces at once—the blow was so forceful and precise that it didn't even hurt. Without skipping a beat, she picked up the white wire with the plug at one end from the debris on the floor and started whipping me; she whipped me for a good two or three minutes more until the plug also flew off from the repeated blows, then she started trying to slash my face with the bare wire, screaming that I had no right to protect myself, that she had to disfigure my handsome face so that it wouldn't appeal to women any more—look, you can see the scar there, on my temple, there, you can't miss it in the light, see? It's from the electric wire, a more accurate blow than all the rest, I had the cut for a month, and, to protect Alex, I told everyone I'd been hit in the face by a branch in my garden. It's only because I used aloe vera that it's as unnoticeable as it is. Aloe vera is brilliant for scars, did you know that? Then, when the wire was so covered in blood that it kept slipping out of her hand, she gave me two resounding right-handers to the jaw, she floored me with a punch to the stomach and finished me off with kicks to the chin, back and top of my head. All that time, like a pathetic piece of shit, I refused to defend myself. She wanted to disfigure me, she wanted me dead, and, doubled up on the tiled floor, struggling for breath because of the punch to the stomach, my face swollen and streaked with blood, a cut over my right eyebrow and my T-shirt ripped and soaked with blood,

I stared numbly at the wedding ring on my left hand and thought I deserved it, I thought she had every right to do what she did to me because I was a pathetic little shit, so I was prepared to die and have my handsome face ruined. And when, after seven or eight minutes, she eventually decided that my face was virtually unrecognisable and that I'd had as much as I could take, she stopped hitting me, she caught her breath, she waited for thirty or forty seconds then, probably realising she'd gone a bit too far, she calmly said: "Okay, now we're quits, I'll run you a nice hot bath and patch you up." And you can't imagine how happy that made me, that she was speaking so kindly to me, that she soaped me down with her bare hands in my bath, that she didn't mind dabbing my bleeding gash with cotton wool, Betadine and hydrogen peroxide and putting Biafine on my bruises, you can't imagine how grateful I felt that she was prepared to say categorically that we were quits, I even thought I'd got off quite lightly in view of the terrible thing I'd done and that I'd have gone through three times as much for a result like this. That was the state of mind I was in—that scene is a good indication of how out of it I was, for me as well as for you. It's all the God's honest truth; honestly, I haven't exaggerated at all.

I didn't put a foot wrong for the next two months, honest to God, not a foot wrong, I let myself be treated like dirt, I was obedient as a mangy dog, I made myself totally pathetic for her, but it was no good, from the next morning onwards, the beating in the bathroom and the "Now we're quits" were forgotten, no forgiving hand on my head or cheek, no smile. I kept watching

her hoping for a change, hoping she'd cool off, but she couldn't forgive me for spending twenty minutes openly contemplating leaving her for a semi-professional singer, for contemplating leaving her at all, she needed me as a scapegoat for her suffering and as a witness, she made me pay as much as she could every day for my betrayal, and not by halves—you know Alex—so I didn't really give a shit about my father's hilltop house, I really couldn't have given a flying fuck about Florence and Italy. I just thought that I hadn't seen my father, stepmother and kid brother for a while, that it would be simpler if they lived in France and that I'd have to plan around the loads of meetings and lunches I had in Paris so that I could give myself a weekend off in Italy. It never occurred to me, of course, that my life would be altered forever on the very evening I arrived.

So I arrive in Florence on the first Saturday in September, my heart and mind in a mess. Right from the start, Alexandrine had planned to let me come on my own because, for one thing, she obviously wasn't keen on visiting my father and stepmother with me and, for another, she preferred to make the most of this break in our short stay in Paris without the children to relax and spend some time with her sister and friends. Anyway, I only suggested she should come with me to Florence as a formality; because she'd have been furious with me if I hadn't, even though I knew perfectly well that she didn't really want to come. That's another example of our fucked-up relationship for you: asking her to come to Florence just to avoid being told off for not asking her. I found it impossible to communicate simply with her, she always made me

feel like I never did anything right. And I couldn't tell her that either, she'd dig her heels in if I moaned. I wouldn't want you to get the idea, from the example of that weekend in Florence, that I'm selfish. Quite the reverse, to be perfectly honest, and I'm not just saying that to blow my own trumpet: I spent all those years with Alex not presuming to think about my needs too, so that I didn't upset her. Because I was mad about Alexandrine. Mad. I was mad about her right up to the end. And whatever she's said about that, whatever she might have told you—because I suppose she must have told you that I never really loved her, didn't she? She's talked to you about it, hasn't she?—well, on that point, I'm sorry, I don't need to justify myself. She knows perfectly well I was madly in love with her.

Asking her to come with me to Florence when deep down I didn't want her there, symbolises the way we were with each other in the end: I needed a break—and there were a good many reasons for that too, but I'm not going to go into them now, and anyway I'm afraid I'd be biased, I don't want to bad-mouth Alexandrine to you. I needed a break for loads of reasons that in my opinion were objectively good, but I didn't dare say so frankly, in case Alexandrine reacted violently the way she could in those situations out of wounded pride. So I ended up lying and doing the opposite of what I really wanted and thought. Of course, Alexandrine sensed that and suspected me of lying, and I denied it to avoid any conflict, which drove her crazy, I denied it even more vehemently, I put on my sweetest voice: “no problem, darling, honestly I couldn't be happier,” and she, helpless, ended up in a furious mood because

of my insincerity, and I put up with her hurtful words and her black looks with my saccharine voice, I just put up with the endless insults. Fucked up, isn't it? Whose fault was it? Mine, the sweet-talking, two-faced bastard who exasperated Alexandrine, or Alexandrine the shrew, who terrorised me? Complicated, isn't it? It's the everlasting riddle of the chicken and the egg. Even though I—you'll have to forgive my clear bias here—even though I think I might have found it easier to be more honest, more myself with a kinder wife. But anyway. If I wanted to go into that, you see, I'd have to go into more detail, into our individual personalities and history, childhood, families, education, traumas, but this is neither the time nor the place.

So I'm a quivering wreck when I show up in Florence in early September, on my own, my guilt at having cheated on her first now seamlessly replaced by a new type of pain: the pain of being cheated on. Because to pay me back, Alexandrine, purely out of a desire for revenge, and also to prevent herself from going to pieces at my betrayal, had, a month earlier, not just kissed some bloke from Liberia in her fucking hotel room in Bangkok, I'll tell you that much. At least, not just on the mouth. Sorry, very bad taste—and I don't mean her Liberian ... Oops! Sorry again, I'm terrible, I don't know what's wrong with me, it's not even funny, but I couldn't help it, I'm sorry, it's a way of distancing myself from all this, you know. Anyway, it shouldn't stop us having a laugh, should it?

I was a quivering wreck when I arrived, but a different culture always makes an impression. You know, I'm very sensitive to all kinds of insignificant details

that make all the difference. When I tell people what I remember about a country I've visited, they don't understand, they always tend to take me for a fool or a snob. I'm sorry, but Italy is a complete change of scenery. I'm not exaggerating, no need to look very far if you use your eyes. People can tell me there's no difference between Italy and France till they're blue in the face, but I'm sorry, they're like day and night. I'm not just saying this to be provocative, but museums and monuments bore me, even in Italy. Even in Italy, yes, I don't mind admitting it, without being at all snobbish, honestly. I'm not saying I don't like them. Obviously I have a great deal of respect for them, obviously they're extraordinary. I even have a pretty good eye for architecture, painting, and all that. I have an instinctive grasp of the history of art, I know all the main periods, I can date a façade, a style, a feature pretty accurately but, I don't know, when I go into a museum to look at all that stuff religiously, edging forward without a sound to avoid disturbing other visitors, having to spend at least three minutes inspecting every single picture at the risk of seeming ignorant, I immediately get a mental block, I'm immediately bored stiff by the mandatory, sign-posted, sacred aspect of things. On top of that, Giotto, all those Fra what's his names, the basilicas, the Palazzo Pitti, Palazzo Vecchio, Santa Croce, David, the bas-reliefs by God knows who, the ceilings by Raphael and the like, are beautiful, I'm not saying they're not, but they're boring. That's not what I like, in Italy. What I liked, the day I got there—I hadn't been to Italy for ten years—started with the view from the plane window. It was just the simple fact of looking at Italian trees, Italian

fields, Italian roads and Italian factories below and thinking: "I'm about to land in Italy and spend two-and-a-half days there. A complete change of scene will take my mind off things. Another trip under my belt, lucky me: for two days, I'll see loads of tiny details that no one else would find interesting but will give me a real boost." Because I sensed that, whatever anyone might say, Italy is totally different from France in every way, which was already an adventure in itself. I don't need much, you know, to arouse my curiosity and get my imagination going. I'm not hard to please, which is bloody lucky. I may be amazed a little too easily, perhaps even a little too much, but I do get something out of these things.

So, as I said, just thinking: "I'm landing in Italy," with all the myths surrounding Italy—because Italy is quite a big deal, isn't it?—just arriving *somewhere else* is already quite something. And, from that point on, everything is amazing and the insignificant, so-called ordinary, impersonal things become a permanent source of entertainment: the colour of the tarmac at the airport, the sunshine, the way the air tastes, the first Italians you meet, Italians *in Italy*, the names of Italian companies on the signs, the original Italian brands, the vehicles, the machinery, you know, all the signs of a country's creative and economic independence, the design of the airport shuttle, the streamlined shape of the glasses worn by the driver who is chatting quietly with a colleague. Then the way the driver is holding his steering wheel, looking in his rear-view mirror and pushing the buttons on his dashboard, more relaxed and less jerky in his movements than his French counterpart. And just from the driver's glasses, the

spontaneously expansive, controlled movements, the quiet, musical verve of that perfectly ordinary driver *in Italy*, just from his normal *presence*, you start learning your first lessons, you tick off the real cultural differences that anyone else would have tried to find in a museum or in the renowned ritual of some Sicilian village. You start thinking: the Italians aren't as tense as the French, they're more direct, more level-headed, more robust than the French, they're more comfortable with their Latinity, they're described as show-offs but it's just that they enjoy themselves without worrying as much as the French about what other people may think of their so-called excesses, they're never caught between two stools. You start thinking—well, I do, in any case, I've started to think—that the Italians, despite all the generalisations about them in France: the showing-off, the gift of the gab, the Mafia, Berlusconi, poor public utilities, the sequin-studded TV programmes, Eros Ramazzotti, racism on the football pitch, well, despite all that, I say that they've got more spirit than the French, more personality, more get-up-and-go, and they're more at ease with themselves than the French. You just have to compare the influence of Italian and French culture on the rest of the world. Well, of course, by culture, I don't just mean the Quattrocento, or Dante, or opera. When it comes to those things, by definition, they've got us well and truly beaten in France, they're a hundred and fifty years ahead across the board when it comes to aesthetics. Because, honestly, apart from Impressionism and the French philosophers, when it comes to art, the French have always been austere, power-mad copiers of Italian style to some extent, don't you think? And, of

course, I'm not talking about the Romans, they don't count. Because, when it comes to exerting an influence on the world, I don't think anyone has done it better in the history of mankind than the Romans, when it comes to space and longevity, wouldn't you agree? No, I'm talking about real popular culture, the existing culture: I'm talking about pasta, Vespas, pizza and espresso; can you think of anywhere in the world that doesn't have them? I'm also thinking about the influence of Italian immigrants on the United States, the films, the actors, all that stuff. Because when you think about it, the Italian character was perfectly suited to the niche they've carved out for themselves in American history and culture. Because, in the United States, don't you agree, they haven't got time for spineless cultures, they assimilate the most efficient, the most universal things. The French, apart from Lafayette ... sure, there's Vuitton, Dior, Saint Laurent, Bocuse and bottles of Château-Margaux. But I'm sorry, that's not popular culture, there's just no competition. The French have had colonies all over the place, sure, but when it comes to 'a popular collective consciousness', if I can put it like that, what have the French actually given the world? I really don't want to pick holes in France. I love my country, I'm very happy to be French, I'm just critical. And I just think we should stop telling fibs about the extent of our influence throughout the world. Even about the quality of our cuisine. At the risk of going on a bit, haven't you noticed that bad restaurants in Italy are extremely few and far between? The proportion of good and bad restaurants seems to be the exact opposite to France. In Italy, not only

is the service better than in France, but you're also more likely to eat well. Go into the first trattoria you see and the pasta, the pastries, the coffee, the way the meat is cooked, the seafood, they're all good. While in France, you must agree, the local cafés just take the piss: disgusting bread, plastic-coated salad, transparent vinaigrette, a sorry excuse for steak and chips, a carafe of chlorinated water, desserts tasting of the fridge, shitty coffee, and a bad-tempered waiter who thinks he's the dog's bollocks. Don't you agree?

Which is a long-winded way of saying I wasn't actually feeling too bad in that restaurant. Outside, the night was balmy, it had been a perfectly sunny day, the early morning taxi ride from the airport had been very cool, very relaxing. And my father's house had also been a very pleasant surprise. I'd been expecting a normal house, you know, in a normal street, with a normal view. Something in the shade with a tobacconists downstairs, traffic lights, cars parked along the kerb and neighbours. Well, that couldn't have been further from it. His place is straight out of *A Room with a View*—you've seen that film, haven't you? You're two minutes from the town but it's right out in the countryside, the taxi drops you in front of the tall iron gates, you ring the bell as if entering a château, the gates swing open automatically and you walk down a path lined with cypress trees, vines and fruit orchards to a seventeenth-century house with thick walls, a real terrace overlooking all of Florence, the red tiles, ochre façades, cathedral domes, the Basilica and the Uffizi Gallery on the right and the mountains in the distance, all bathed in a late summer Mediterranean light, not

a cloud in the sky. Incredible, I couldn't get over it—it was perfect. The errands I ran with my father on his motorbike, in a shopping precinct in the town centre, were also perfect: prosciutto, fruit, the mini-market in a former convent with a vaulted roof, the golden bakery, the smells, the attractive packets, the art of living, the *ciò, ciò* of the shopkeepers who weren't as stingy as in France to judge by appearances. It was a very good start, I sensed it subconsciously. And at the restaurant, that very evening, my distress was soothed by the hubbub in Italian, the Italians' behaviour and appearance—they take a damned sight more pride in their attire than we do, their shoes, the labels, you must've noticed that, haven't you? The light was warm, seductive, I found time to examine the tablecloth, the distinctive way the napkins were folded, the plates, the grissini in their paper packet, the labels on the bottles of fizzy mineral water, the slices of pink meat brought to the tables on a small wooden board by the waiters; I felt totally at home in this cheerful, upbeat, bright, reassuring atmosphere, I felt I was in a kind, familiar place. Anyway, although I didn't realise it, I felt okay.

So back to the story—do tell me if I'm wandering too far from the subject—at the end of the meal, the waiter hands me the restaurant's card with the phone number of a girl called Alice. He's very vague about her physical description, and I have no idea who it might be. I remember a table with a large group of people behind me, but I don't recall any particular girl at that table. I ask him again jokingly if she was pretty, and he still has no idea how to answer, he doesn't really reply, he looks so thrilled by the situation, he's