

## BERTHE

Berthe was my paternal grandmother. More than one metre seventy (about five foot seven) tall, with dark red hair, she wore spectacles with bakelite frames and blue lenses. She smoked Chesterfields and 555 State Expresses without filters, and spoke French with a strong Alsatian accent. In Paris she spent much of the day in her dressing gown, always perfumed and made up with a lot of lipstick. Her husband, my grandfather Armand, was a mild man with a polite manner; he was short, less than one metre sixty (five foot three) in height.

When in Paris my grandparents lived at the Hôtel George V. I don't know why they stayed in a hotel, but that's how it was. Their apartment had two sitting-rooms and a large entrance hall that did duty as a dining-room. I remember a refrigerator that looked like an ice-box in the kitchen, and it was always full of pots of foie-gras, apple pies, plum tarts and bottles of champagne. The bathroom contained various soaps and small bottles of Guerlain eau-de-cologne.

My grandparents had two cars, both black: a Rover 90 for use in town and a Cadillac of fifties vintage for longer journeys. Their chauffeur, Hubert, was a fat man from Lorraine, a great beer-drinker with red cheeks like beefsteaks who wore a blue uniform with a white shirt, or in summer a light-grey uniform with a blue shirt.

My grandfather dressed in dark clothes, with a watch in his waistcoat pocket and a felt hat; or when on holiday a panama hat, and light-coloured linen or light wool houndstooth. He always chewed American gum flavoured with liquorice.

My grandmother would put on a tailor-made costume and furs to go out, or from May onwards blue silk or bottle-green. I remember she had a great number of shoes and was always inspecting herself in the mirror. She liked to play bridge and gin rummy and particularly chemin-de-fer and sometimes roulette, but my grandfather never gambled.

On Sunday afternoons they would go to see a sister of my grandmother's called Florine, who lived with her daughter Colette, a relentless smoker of Gauloises whose taciturn husband worked as a representative in my grandfather's firm. Colette's children were brilliant at school, always passing all their exams with top marks. Her sister, Margot, had married a very rich Dutchman in Brazil

where they lived, and their son, Jean Pierre, was studying at the MIT in Boston.

My grandparents' friends and acquaintances lived in Geneva or Paris and could be seen during the holidays; they were nearly all gamblers who frequented the same casinos. My grandparents had first met some of them during the war in New York, where they had taken refuge.

In particular I remember Raymond Grelsamair, at one time a leading executive who was president of Coty in the United States. By day he wore smart light-coloured suits, and in the evening blue alpaca and white dinner-jackets. He owned one of the first Mercedes 600s, which had been custom-designed for him so he could sit in it with his hat on his head without having to bend forward. He smoked long fat Cuban cigars.

Another friend was a Lebanese called Monsieur Fary, partial to blazers with gold buttons and bicoloured black-and-white shoes. He and his wife had a blue Pontiac. Then there were the Garniers, Jean and Marie-Claude. He was tall and strongly built with white hair, drove a Riva speedboat on Lake Annecy and wore a sea-captain's peaked cap. She was dark, thin and heavily suntanned. The Garniers were friends of both my grandparents and my father.

In July and August we would go on holiday to Évian. My grandparents would stay in a large hotel in the hills called the Royal, which had a very beautiful and well cared-for garden, a swimming pool and a park. From the window of their rooms – two bedrooms separated by a sitting-room – one could see the lake and, across it on the other side, Lausanne.

On the first afternoon my grandfather and my father would play golf, while later on my grandmother would go down to the casino. My grandfather would join her for dinner at nine and then return to the hotel while she went back to the casino.

Another who spent his holidays at the Royal was the well-known French historian Philippe Erlanger, always in a safari jacket with a silk foulard round his neck. Then there were the Hassan brothers from Tangier: Elias, who had a very rich wife, lived in Lausanne and drove a white Jaguar, while Salvador was a bachelor who lived in Geneva and had a grey Chevrolet. Until the independence of Morocco and the nationalisation of the banks that followed, the Hassans were the most important private bankers in Tangier.

Another ever-present personage was the Vietnamese prince married to the

American multi-millionairess Barbara Hutton; they owned a big black Rolls Royce. He liked playing golf while she, apart from occasional evening sorties to the casino, spent all her time in the hotel.

As I child, I watched all these figures in the dining room and sometimes in the pool, but especially from the window; in fact, my own room did not face the lake like those of my grandparents, but the park and the back of the hotel, where the cars stopped and guests went in and out. I would watch the coming and going of these elegant people and their extremely clean and highly polished luxury cars and I got to know their chauffeurs, each proud of his own particular employers and their car.

Besides mixing with the hotel guests my grandparents had regular visits from two friends they also saw in Paris and at other holiday resorts. One was Gaston Rhein, who made them laugh with stories about his life. The other was Madame Anin, a widow of my grandmother's age, who played at the casino and owned a blue Buick, but stayed at the Splendid, a less luxurious hotel than ours. A few years later she took a rented apartment instead, and this turned out very useful for reasons that will become clear later.

I don't remember what my grandparents discussed with their friends, but it was probably gossip about people, money and business and – naturally - about gambling.

For me the highlight of the day was breakfast, which I had every morning with my grandmother. I remember her in her dressing gown, with dishevelled hair, blue spectacles and lipstick, facing a round table on wheels spread with coffee, milk, yoghurt, butter, jam, brioches, croissants, hot rolls and toast.

Sometimes she smoked three cigarettes at once. She would have a 555 State Express in an amber or tortoiseshell holder between her lips while a Chesterfield lay smouldering on an ashtray; then perhaps, putting down the 555 State Express for a moment, she would light another without the holder, staining the cigarette paper heavily with her lipstick.

She would tell me about her evenings at the casino and her games of chemin-de-fer, and often say “the banker cheated” and explain to me why; and then tell me about an Italian who had won a huge sum and add, “He's a fine man,” since she had a natural admiration for anyone capable of winning lots of money.

When she was in a particularly good mood – I must have been about seven years old at the time – she would be so carried away by the excitement of her own story-telling and endless cigarette-lighting that she would sometimes forget how young I was and offer me a cigarette she had just lit; after all I was her grandson so it must be natural for me to smoke.

She would never go anywhere without a bottle of kirsch and some exceptionally fine Lindt or Frigor chocolates. I'm not sure how old she was then, perhaps sixty-five or seventy, but to me she seemed really old. She never scolded me, far from it, but often gave me generous presents.

One night at Évian my father woke me and my sister and took us down into the park in our pyjamas and dressing gowns.

“What's happening?” I asked.

“There's a fire,” my father said. “The hotel's burning. Grandfather's asleep locked in his room and Grandmother's at the casino. Children, wait here.”

He left us on the grass with our governess, together with other guests and other children, and we all gazed at the flames rising from the central tower of the hotel. Suddenly there was a terrible thud: the lift had crashed to the bottom of its shaft.

Firemen were trying to extinguish the blaze. My father – I only knew this later – had to climb over the balcony to rescue my grandfather from his room, while my grandmother took her time to get back from the casino asking, “What's all this nonsense about a fire?” By next day the hotel was a ruin and we became refugees in the apartment Madame Anin had rented.

That fire marked the end of an age, the end of a world, and the end of a way of living and spending holidays. I never again saw the people who had gone to Évian, driven by chauffeurs at the wheel of their wonderful cars, to gamble at the casino and take the thermal waters.

Now all cars look the same, women no longer wear evening dresses or keep their jewels in bank safes, and men no longer go out in white dinner-jackets, or wear black-and-white shoes or panama hats. Nor do any women now smoke a 555 State Express at the same time as an unfiltered Chesterfield while discussing a game of chemin-de-fer with a seven year-old grandson. There is no longer such a thing as blue air-mail writing-paper, and fountain pens hardly exist. Grandmothers have given up tailor-made costumes for blue jeans, and men like

Salvador Hassan no longer wear grey flannels in August, because when it's hot you have to wear wool. And there is no one now able to order a custom-built Mercedes so that he can comfortably sit in the car with his hat on.

For a few summers after the fire, while the Hôtel Royal at Évian was being rebuilt as a sort of luxury spa, my grandparents still came to spend the month of August at Lake Léman, but stayed in Ouchy, the port of Lausanne. Here Hubert the chauffeur taught my sister and me to fish. And at a jewellers' shop in Place St François my grandmother bought me a Mido automatic watch with a black leather strap.

One day we went over to Évian for lunch on the ferry *Helvetia* and there, for no reason that I can remember, for the one and only time my grandfather gave me a slap. At Ouchy my grandmother still had a hotel room, her bottle of kirsch and her boxes of Frigor and Lindt chocolates, but there was no more talk of gambling, and no one came to see us apart from Elias Hassan and his wife, who lived there.

I remember my father and I saying goodbye to my grandmother at the station at Lausanne; she was wearing a blue silk dress. I never saw her again, because she died a few weeks later. She was buried in Paris, in the cemetery at Montparnasse.

I was twelve years old and realised I had lost for ever a woman I had never known well, but who had loved me and protected me. Things were quite different after that. I never again experienced the security of being loved and accepted for what I was, independently of the fortunes of my parents. I would never again see so many cakes, so many exquisite dishes, so many perfumes, or such well-washed and highly-polished cars with chauffeurs in double-breasted blue suits and peaked caps. I never again saw my grandmother's sister Florine, or Florine's daughter Colette, or the Picard cousins, or cousin Margot and her son Jean Pierre.

In Paris my grandparents had lunched at Maxim's on Saturdays. Much later I went there with my father, but there was no longer the same service, the same routines, or the same customers as before. No one had a large black Cadillac or a Rolls Royce with a window dividing the back seat from the front like in a London taxi. And head-waiters no longer wore dark-blue dinner jackets. The world of Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Jean Gabin and Maurice Chevalier

had gone for ever. Replaced by colour television and a Europe stuffed with things made in Japan and America.

Nor could anyone ever have imagined that there would be no more Communism, or that the Soviet Union would fall apart, or that the simple, spartan China of Mao, where everyone rode a bicycle, would become a great capitalist power, or that in California Bill Gates and Steve Jobs would transform the whole world with the computer, or that Europe would have a single currency. Nor could anyone ever have dreamed that telegrams would be replaced by SMS.

A few months after the death of my grandmother Berthe in Lausanne, my grandfather Armand died at Christmas in Paris. My grandparents had lived through two world wars, in a society where the international languages were French and German and you reached the Far East or America by steamship. But now that world only lived on in the memory of a seven year-old boy who with his sister had watched a hotel burn without really understanding what was happening, and what the consequences would be.

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