

BOULEVARD de SEBASTOPOL

by

Alain Elkann

Calevras sat limply at a table at Zimmerman's. He was spinning his arm back and forth with increasing speed, resting his forefinger on the table.

"I would stick my finger in her ass like this and twirl, and she would laugh, otherwise the rest of the time she had a sad, frightening look in her eyes. We lived in Athens; it was just after the war. We had a cat named Alfonso, who used to run away almost every night. She would get all worried and drag me along on endless walks, screaming in the dark, 'Alfonso, here Alfonso, where are you?' I haven't been back to Athens since '57. It's the only place in the world where you can get a delicious tuna and mustard mousse... So much for French cuisine!"

As he spoke, Roman Calevras continued to twirl his finger and arm, looking straight into Bianca's eyes. Roman was a lean man, with tapered, gnarled hands, long, well-manicured fingernails, an aquiline profile, nose and chin, and sparse grey hair, which was always puffed up and lacquered. He wore rings on both hands, a bracelet on one wrist, and smoked with a black and gold cigarette-holder. Even his shoes were lean and tapered, and very shiny: the shoes of a Spanish dancer. Bianca listened to him in a trance, pale and myopic behind thick lenses set in tombac frames. She loved Calevras's erotic stories.

The racket was infernal. Fatima, implacable, was running the electric floor-polisher, the children were screaming, the telephone ringing non-stop. Calevras turned over in bed, trying to ignore the noise. At last he grew impatient and stole toward the kitchen, wrapped in a blanket. A disaster area. Louise was having breakfast in her dressing-gown, while in the background one could hear, humming simultaneously, the dishwasher and washing machine. The telephone started to ring again and Calevras gave up hope. As usual, he couldn't decide whether to have coffee or tea. Tea woke him up more gently and gave him energy; coffee made it easier to defecate. That morning, his mind cluttered with noise, he remained standing in front of the stove.

Louise, meanwhile, kept sipping her hot liquid, eating bread and butter and scrambled eggs, and distractedly glancing through the newspaper. He was about to greet her, but then went grumbling back to his room without having eaten or drunk a thing. As he started to retreat, Fatima shouted:

"Careful! Can't you watch where you step? You think I like doing this?"

Always unpleasant, always efficient, always rushed, always irreproachable. Roman Calevras despised day-people, the sun-light hyperactives. He liked only darkness and the opera. To take revenge for that ear-splitting din, he put on a record: *Otello*. If not for that accident, he would have been the greatest, the greatest Greek baritone of all time.

Double Scorpio, thought Calevras as he descended the stairs and walked out onto the Boulevard de Sébastopol, his customary street. Though he'd been living in Paris since sixty-one, he still barely knew the city. He had arrived there from Germany, at the Gare de l'Est. Then it was on to the boarding-house at the corner of Rue Reaumur, and then the theatre.

Alfonso had stayed behind in Athens with her. She occasionally sent him a postcard, always the same one of the Parthenon in black-and-white. By now he had received some fifty-seven identical postcards and over the years had covered the northern wall of his room with them. Double Scorpio: his mother, his aunt and three women. Double Scorpions all!

Bianca, the sweet professor of Greek who at Zimmerman's listened to the tales of his exploits, was a Gemini with Leo rising. What nonsense. To him the Zodiac was merely irritating, like superstitions in general and canned food, abstract painting and the sun. As well as women who were too blonde or too brunette.

Fatima was dark, with hair black as pitch and very white teeth, and she moved unappealingly. Louise had moved into the boarding-house six months after his arrival, but they had never made friends. They rarely spoke.

He met Bianca again at Zimmerman's.

"You see," he said, looking into her eyes and moving his hand through the air like a beetle, "being *Otello* is much different from being *Rigoletto*. That's obvious. Verdi is not Rossini and Puccini is not Bizet, no doubt about that! Don't tell me you actually liked *Carmen*?"

"I haven't said a thing and you know full well I don't understand you when you talk that way."

"I've been listening to *Otello* all day. To punish them, and to drown out their racket with my opera. Only the sea is more thunderous. But here there's no sea. Just imagine. Licia had the gall to accuse me of being three days late in paying the rent, and right in front of Louise! And then as if that wasn't enough, she stuck two leashes in my hand and said scornfully, 'At least you could take these things out for a walk,' meaning her two disgusting Pekingese dogs. But I'll have my revenge, I swear it. Licia doesn't know it, but I'm saving up, and I'm going to punish her. Another fifteen hundred francs and vengeance will be mine."

"Calm down, Roman. Do you want some hot soup, or a beer perhaps?"

"What I'd really like is some muscat grapes, a locum, a baba au rhum and some marzipan. But unfortunately I've got to go in a minute: the theatre opens in an hour: and I still have to sew three buttons on my uniform. Last night some pig bumped into me, one of those fat Rhenish businessmen who come to Paris looking for amusements: women, theatres and cafes. Last night, at the premiere of *Attila*. It's depressing to have to endure a mediocre Verdi festival, and a Socialist festival at that!"

"Why don't you seduce Louise tonight? I'm sure she'd be willing."

"Rubbish. You're just saying that to trick me, to tempt me into eroticism, but you're mistaken. Louise doesn't find me attractive; we're too much alike. We both have weak characters; we hardly even talk to each other. I think she's disgusting: she's flabby, puffy, not very clean, and her voice is too husky. There's something unhealthy about a husky voice, and anyway, she only speaks French. But now I have to go. I'll be seeing you."

"Till tomorrow, I guess."

"*Ermani* - Victor Hugo," thought Calevras as he went back up the Boulevard de Sébastopol. Another fifteen hundred francs and Licia would be punished. Ever since he'd stopped going to her room at night, Licia had been treating him like a rag; but never again would his penis, his Greek phallus, sully itself in so vile a puddle. Yes, Licia was cruel, nasty, overbearing, old and authoritarian. Authoritarian without authority, however, because she lacked intelligence. She was one of those people who believe themselves intelligent but are not, and so in their insecurity feel compelled to be authoritarian. Licia always wanted to be right, and thought that those who didn't see things her way were fools.

Walking along, Calevras felt alone, he felt his life was meaningless, and this cheered him up, for he'd been thinking this every evening for the past twenty years. For twenty years he'd been wasting his life, and he aspired to nothing more than to be able to waste it for another twenty.

Calevras was awakened by Fatima, who was shouting, "Madame, I take pride in my work, and if you're incapable of appreciating it I'll just leave. Your house is a moral cesspool. It stinks, it's rotten as a decayed tooth. With that filthy madame Louise who always complains and does nothing but smoke and read, and that crazy Greek who for years has done nothing but sleep all day and listen to music."

"Anything else, Fatima? Is it that time of the month?"

"Who told you?"

"It's the same every time. How's your little girl?"

Roman was about to get up and make a scene, but fortunately the phone rang. It was Licia's new lover. Calevras could tell from the sugary tone in which she spoke to him, making sure she was heard: the telephone was in the corridor.

Although he didn't really feel like it, to punish her he decided to listen to *Tosca*, locked inside his room.

He knew that Licia hated *Tosca* and *Bolero* because she thought they brought bad luck. He turned it up to full volume and listened serenely. The night before, upon returning home, he'd slid under Licia's door an envelope containing the rent money. At eleven o' clock Licia was still on the phone, striking a languid pose. Seeing her still there as he came out of his room, Calevras looked her over and decided she was too thin: too bony, angular and wrinkled. She noticed Roman's look of disgust and turned her back to him.

Having resolved to drink a café au lait, he went into the kitchen and found Louise, Elena and Sardanapalos seated around the table. The latter two were back and telling Louise about their trip. The dishwasher was making its usual racket, but miraculously the washing machine was silent. Calevras sat down with the other three boarders.

He felt a kind of affection for Elena and Sardanapalos because they needed him. Sardanapalos needed him for confessing himself, Elena needed him to make love to her. The certainty that he would meet back up with her in the afternoon immediately lifted Roman's spirits. No matter how much Licia babbled over the phone, he knew she missed the feel of his fingernails on her back.

With Elena it was quick and vertical, as usual. In the shower, before going out. The din of the shower drowned out Elena's cries and moans of pleasure. Sardanapalos would never get jealous because he wasn't there at that hour, and once Calevras had satisfied Elena's vertical needs, she, in turn, would zealously satisfy Sardanapalos's horizontal needs.

Calevras had forgotten it was Tuesday, his day off. He decided to dress up in black to go dancing. Seeing him heading towards the door, Licia, who happened to be in the corridor, asked him if he would have dinner with her.

"I can't, I've got other plans."

"With whom?"

"With Bianca, at Zimmerman's."

"Still seeing that near-sighted, tubby Cavaphy? Why? What do you see in her?"

"I like her."

"I don't believe it."

"I like the way she speaks Greek. It's the Greek of someone who's always lived abroad, the daughter of Alexandrian Greeks who used to live in Turkey. It's a beautiful language, but you wouldn't understand; with your French you can only go to the movies or at best, listen to *Carmen*."

"You're a vulgar swine and you're not very funny."

"Well, I have to go now."

"Who's keeping you! The Greek of Greeks who've never been to Greece but were born of Greek parents in Egypt. You must be crazy!"

Calevras met Bianca in front of Zimmerman's. It was a muggy, mid-May evening.

"We're going on foot," said Calevras in a categorical tone, as if making the conclusive decision in a matter of monumental importance.

"Where?"

"Never mind."

They turned onto the quai and walked along a sidewalk where cages of animals for sale were on display: geese, turkeys, rabbits, swans, turtle-doves.

"Which do you prefer: white swans or black swans?" asked Calevras out of the blue, holding out his hands as in a sunburst and pointing to two adjacent cages, one containing two white swans, the other three black swans.

"I don't like swans; they're nasty. They think they're beautiful, but I find them monstrous."

Calevras's shoes clicked against the cobblestones. They had iron cleats on the heels and shone bright in the night.

He dragged Bianca on a long walk around Notre-Dame. He talked without interruption and then, reversing the customary order, he first took her dancing and then to dinner, at a Greek restaurant where they both got drunk on Retsina.

They parted company in front of Zimmerman's.

"Are you sure you don't want to come home with me?"

"You know I don't want anything. Actually that's not true. I wish I had a pair of dark glasses, so I could see everything darker than it already is. I want to walk down the same street I always do every evening: Boulevard de Sébastopol. You'll never get me to change my habits. Just because you desperately want to make love to me doesn't mean that *I* want to. With you I only want to talk, to speak Greek, your Greek. To speak mine and listen to yours. Zimmerman's is all you should know about me. I don't want to know where you live. Boulevard de Sébastopol is mine."

"I find it reassuring that you never change your mind. It means you are a man of firm principles. I only ask you if you want to come with me because I want to hear you say no. I like being rejected by a despicable person - - a maniac, an unsavoury, dishonest man who plays with life as if it were excrement. And why not? I think it's exciting to have danced with you, an ordinary person who finds me ugly, or plain at least. Being plain is worse than being ugly. If I were ugly, you'd probably find me attractive. You disgust me: you're so flaccid. And what strange tastes! What interest could you possibly have in swans? I know: you always go for the most obvious things. The great baritone Calevras, uniformed and

selling concert programmes at Chatelet. At least La Scala might not be so bad. But Chatelet? Without Diaghilev? Or perhaps you're so ignorant you don't even know who he was. Good night, I'll see you tomorrow."

Calevras laughed and walked away, the laugh turning into a sneer. When he laughed, his gold and silver teeth showed. The rest were all yellow with nicotine, but he couldn't afford to have them taken care of. Perhaps he was gravely ill. He would die, however, before giving in and asking Licia for a loan. He had worked up a drenching sweat while dancing earlier, and now he stank. Sweat and deodorant had blended into a single odor. He decided to go home, but first he went and urinated in a public latrine. Feeling cleansed, he climbed the boarding-house steps half running, opened the door and, sniggering noisily and making his shoes clomp, he crossed the corridor. The night-time entrance was in retaliation for all the assaults he was sure he would have to endure the following day.

Sardanapalos was awake and stopped him in the hall.

"I have to talk to you, Roman."

"About what?"

"About Licia."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"But she's very upset. She can't understand why you're suddenly so indifferent."

"I'm a free man. Licia disgusts me. I don't need her any more. Her money stinks."

"If you can't stand her any more, why don't you go live somewhere else? As they say, out of sight, out of mind."

"I can't go anywhere else because for me there isn't anywhere else. I have my room here. I pay for it and no one can send me away."

"But have you no humanity?"

"Listen, Sardanapalos. I'm very fond of you and Elena, but let me live my life as I see fit. There's no such thing as humanity. There are only human beings, and I despise them. Licia only wants my fingernails, the extraordinary fingernails of Roman Calevras, the only man in Paris with fingers yellow from nicotine and snow-white nails, tapered and lightly lacquered. These wondrous nails are mine, and mine alone, and I happen to need them for other things now. Licia can't stand opera and I can't stand Pekingese dogs."

"Well then try not to see each other any more."

"That's impossible, living in the same flat."

"Good night, Roman."

"Bianca, you have to give me some money. I haven't much time; I want to buy a little bath, actually a rubber swimming pool, and I haven't enough cash."

"Money? I, give money to you, who refuse to come home with me? And for a rubber swimming pool? Never."

"Bianca, I can't explain right now. You wouldn't understand. But if you want me some day to come to your house, ask no questions and lend me the paltry sum I need to free myself."

"Free yourself by buying a rubber pool?"

"Yes," said Calevras, casting a withering glance at her.

"Are you sure?"

"Bianca, one more question and this will be the last time we ever see each other. I want three hundred and seventy two francs in cash at exactly six p.m. next Tuesday, here at Zimmerman's. If you don't have the money you'll never see me again."

"But this is abominable! It's blackmail!"

"It's an order. To another man it might be a test of love, or a request for a romantic gesture."

"Money for a rubber swimming pool!"

"And now, that's enough. I'll see you Tuesday and don't forget: six o'clock, on the dot, because I won't have any time to waste."

All weekend long, in Mme. Licia Cominienski's boarding-house flat on the third floor of a six-story building at the corner of Boulevard de Sébastopol and Rue Reaumur, dreadful things went on.

The customary noises multiplied deafeningly, and two camps formed: the Calevras camp and the Licia camp. Those who took Licia's side, such as Louise, spent two whole days in the sitting room listening rapturously to a Magyar orchestra of buzukis, violins and accordions that played, by turns, Serbian, Greek and Balkan songs. Some even danced instead of just listening. Calevras stayed in his room, systematically alternating *Bolero* and *Tosca*. Only Elena, who remained neutral, made any attempt to silence the intolerable cacophony of overlapping melodies, which made the walls and floors rattle.

The neighbours protested with phone-calls and threats. At first both Licia and Calevras ignored their complaints, but around two o'clock Monday morning the ringing phone inevitably summoned first Licia, then Roman into the corridor. They both retreated back into their rooms and for six hours thereafter, all noise ceased in the boarding-house.

At exactly eight o'clock, the silence was shattered by Fatima's electric floor-polisher. Undaunted, she seemed not to miss a single corner of the apartment. Before going out, Calevras found a letter under his door.

Dear Roman,

Please let's not hurt each other so much, I beg you. I understand your need to distract yourself, to ignore me, your desire for freedom. I accept it, and am asking you for a truce. Allow me at least to tell you that after all these years, in my weakness I still am very fond of you, I'm not asking for affection or respect in return, just a truce, and good manners. Tomorrow, as you know, I'll be away - - I am leaving this afternoon. When I return Wednesday morning, I hope to find a message of peace from you.

Forever yours

Licia

Calevras sneered and left for work.

Tuesday morning he got up early: he felt rest restless and paced up and down the flat before finally heading for the kitchen. Louise was unusually communicative:

"You look glum today, Roman. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

The conversation ended there, and Elena asked if she could speak with him a minute.

"This afternoon it has to be before four o'clock."

"I can't this afternoon," Calevras replied drily.

"Earlier, then."

"Not today."

At six o'clock sharp Bianca was waiting for him at Zimmerman's.

"Where's the money?"

"Here it is, but I could only bring two hundred francs. I'll have the rest on Friday."

"You idiot! Why didn't you tell me? Couldn't you let me know beforehand? Jesus Christ, my whole plan, the whole thing, down the drain for a hundred and seventy bloody francs. Damn you, you should have come and told me."

"I don't know where you live."

"I've told you a thousand times that I live in a boarding-house on Boulevard de Sébastopol. Who knows how many times you've followed me home, taking advantage of the fact that I never turn around?"

"I swear I don't know where you live."

"Well then it's hopeless!"

"Do you really have to buy that pool?"

"Non-aesthetes can never understand the things that seem to them like useless details but in fact are essential to the choreography of the whole. It's too bad you don't know Wagner, and Germany. Ah, Germany! The one and only land to carry on the Greek tradition! The Calevrases have a few drops of Prussian blood, you know."

"I'll try to have the money by Thursday evening."

Calevras snatched the bills out of her hand and, lighting a cigarette, said peremptorily:

"Now get out of here and leave me alone. I need to think."

Turning his back to her, he was rid of her in one laconic gesture.

Calevras was proud of his notorious habit of turning his back to people. In this connection, he'd been saying for years: "He who has the courage to turn his back fears neither death nor the past."

He sipped on a beer and sank into despair. Thursday he would be working, and Licia would be there. Postponing it would lessen the pathos. To hell with decorum, he had to act immediately.

As much as he regretted having to scrap his choreographic design, he figured it was more important to realize the plan at the moment of greatest tension. Licia was expecting a truce, but she was going to find herself as though struck by a tornado: she would finally realize whom she was dealing with.

Calevras rushed to the quai with the animal cages on display, where he'd been with Bianca several days before. When a salesman approached him, he said, "I'd like a white swan and a black swan. Here's the money."

"I'm sorry, but I won't have any white swans until Monday."

"It doesn't matter."

Calevras watched the heavy traffic filing past the sidewalk and felt alone, misunderstood.

"When did you say you'd have both the white one and the black one?"

"Next Monday, but if you don't buy the black one now, there may be none left by Monday, and black swans are hard to come by. In fact, in the last few months they've been in great demand. And to think that for nearly two years everyone seemed to have forgotten they existed at all...."

After a moment of doubt, Calevras said:

"Supposing I bought the black one now, would you do me the favour of holding it for me until next Tuesday, so I could pick them up together?"

"Certainly, if you pay for the white one too. But you have to tell me what sex you want them to be."

"The male black and the female white."

"But that's promiscuous."

"Right. Promiscuous."

Returning home, Calevras ran into Licia in the elevator.

"Back already?"

"Why, does it bother you?"

"No, but you said in your note you'd be back tomorrow morning."

"Well, as you can see, I'm back earlier than expected. Do you want to eat something?"

"No, thanks, I'm very tired."

The pathos hadn't worked out, and Calevras fell ill. Licia, abetted by Elena and Louise, tried to persuade him to let her take care of him. He refused every attempt and survived on dry biscuits and water.

Tuesday morning he appeared in the kitchen. He ate a huge breakfast, then went off in search of Elena and brutishly forced her to accompany him into the shower. She followed him meekly and gratefully.

As agreed, Bianca, at Zimmerman's, gave him the rest of the sum. Now it was just a matter of not spending it.

Friday morning he received a postcard from Athens, the usual Parthenon in black and white. It announced the death of Alfonso and the acquisition of a Siamese: Alfonso II. In a postscript she asked him to send her a money order. She urgently needed the equivalent of one thousand French francs in Greek drachmas.

Calevras spent the day torn between genuine concern for Marilena and his annoyance at having to forgo the pool if he decided to send the money. In any case, he didn't have the thousand francs, but perhaps Bianca could help him out.

"What do you take me for? I don't have any money and that's that. I just gave you some anyway. What's the matter with you, Roman? You look upset."

"I'm worried because I'm in dire need of cash. It's terrible to get old without ever having managed to set anything aside. Every little unforeseen event is a disaster, a new source of anxiety and humiliation."

"What sort of caprice is it this time? That's what I'd like to know."

"Someone from the past, a good, loyal person, wrote to me from Athens; she needs a thousand francs immediately, and I don't have them."

"Send her what I gave you yesterday."

"Thanks for the advice."

Calevras made a painful sacrifice: he decided to sell his rings to an elderly jeweller on Boulevard de Sébastopol. They were precious mementos, and very valuable, but it was a step he had to take. With a great deal of effort he removed one of the rings for the old jeweller, who proceeded to look at it through a lens.

"The diamonds are fake and the gold is just plate. I could give you seventy-five francs for it."

"What?" shouted Calevras, mortified by the insult.

"That ring's an antique, a family heirloom!"

"My dear sir, I have the reputation of being an honest, competent man. In my opinion the ring is worth, at the most, seventy-five francs. If you think you can get more for it, go to another jeweller."

"What about this one?" shrieked Calevras, pale with rage as he pulled off his other ring. The jeweller repeated the same operation and said:

"Yes, this one is nicer. It's not gold, but I'll offer you two hundred seventy five francs for it. And I'll make you a deal, since I realize you wouldn't so readily part with family rings unless it was an emergency: I'll give you four hundred francs for both."

Indignant, Calevras looked the jeweller up and down and said with contempt:

"Enough talk. Give me the money."

He added the four hundred francs to Bianca's three hundred and seventy-two and went to the post office to buy a money order for Marilena.

He emerged from the post office in a state of utter desolation. He looked around as he walked, and when he was near Beaubourg he thought the architecture was horrendous, like everything else that modern man had done. He thought of the rubber swimming pool. Why on earth did he buy that check, for a woman he hadn't seen for twenty years? Regretting his

overly chivalric gesture, he went back to the post office and tried to retrieve the money order, but it was too late. Now he could no longer buy the pool, the garlands, or even the colouring for the water.

On Monday he went to see the swan salesman: he saw a black swan and a white swan.

He asked if they could live without water.

"There's no water here, and they're alive, aren't they?" the salesman said.

"Yes, of course. How does one transport them?"

"In a cage."

"Do you provide the cage?"

"Certainly: it costs four hundred francs."

"And if one doesn't want to buy a cage?"

"Then one doesn't buy it."

"How will I carry them, then?"

"Sir, that is no concern of mine. If I 'm not mistaken, you're supposed to come and pick them up tomorrow. I suggest you buy a cage, but if you prefer, you could come with a large, closed basket, or with a van."

Calevras despaired. He had to be at work in several minutes and had no time to spare.

At Zimmerman's later, he asked Bianca:

"How does one transport swans?"

She laughed and replied:

"And clouds?"

Calevras in the end decided that large plastic bags would do the job.

On Tuesday morning, exhilarated by his brilliant idea, he dashed into the kitchen early in order to rob a pair of the light blue plastic bags used for garbage. Unfortunately he found Licia, the Pekingese and Sardanapalos already there. Right away they asked him:

"Why so early today?"

"Oh, that's my business. Why, can't a man feel like having a coffee? If I'm disturbing anyone, please let me know."

"How touchy you are these days, a bundle of nerves!"

"Nerves, nerves."

He poured himself a cup of coffee, then opened the cupboard where the garbage bags were usually kept, but he couldn't find them.

He turned distractedly to Licia and in a grave tone asked her:

"Where are they?"

"Where are what?"

"The garbage bags."

"How should I know? Are you crazy, at this hour? Ask Fatima."

Half an hour later he asked Fatima who, with an air of irritation and self-importance led him into the kitchen, opened a small cabinet, pushed aside five boxes of detergent and pointed to the light blue roll of garbage bags.

"Only two now, mind you. What do you need them for anyway?"

"Sorry Fatima, that's my business," he said between clenched teeth, but she had already put everything back in order and was on her way back to the ironing room.

He had the bags! Now all he had to do was get ready. He washed, shaved, sprayed his hair, got carefully dressed, removed the fifty-eight postcards of the Parthenon from the wall, put *La Traviata* and *Aida* on the automatic record player but did not turn it on. He couldn't get used to seeing his hands naked and ringless. He wondered if he would ever learn to bear the sight of his hands so unadorned.

Licia, seeing him so dressed up in early afternoon, asked him to take the Pekingese for a walk. He grimaced, and nodded in consent. As he held them by their leashes on the street, however, he gave them each several little kicks in the ass with the shiny point of his shoe. At each kick the dogs gave a little yelp, or some other pathetic sound.

"Poor things!" Roman Calevras thought to himself.

The salesman asked him how he planned to carry the birds. Calevras replied that a pair of plastic bags would be ideal for the task.

"You must be joking! They'll die of suffocation. Do you own a van?"

"No, I'll take a cab."

"It won't work."

"Of course it'll work. I'll tie up their feet and beaks."

"What do you mean? The poor animals! You're a sadist."

"Are they mine or yours?"

"If I had known this, I wouldn't have sold them to you."

"Now please be so kind as to give me the animals; it's getting late."

"Have you considered that they're living creatures?"

"Look, I'm older than you. I know what I'm doing."

Calevras gave it his best, grappling first with one swan, then with the other. After a few awkward, superhuman attempts under the scornful, disapproving eyes of the salesman and several clients, he finally managed to tie up the swans, however poorly. He then slid them into the plastic bags, but immediately one of them broke open and the white swan fell out and started writhing on the sidewalk.

Trying to calm the beast while holding the other bag steady, Calevras hailed a cab. As soon as the driver realized what was happening inside his car, he said:

"Get out."

"Just drive," commanded Calevras.

"Come on, out."

"Are you afraid?"

"Of course I'm not afraid. I just don't want any birds in my cab."

"Look, we've only a few hundred meters to go and we'll be there, so stop making such a fuss."

"Get out or I'll call the police."

"Just calm down, drive, and try to act like an adult."

The driver stopped suddenly and pulled up to the curb. Calevras remained seated, unruffled, while the animals rebelled, flopping about on the seat.

"Out!"

"Not on your life!"

Then the driver turned around, livid in the face, grabbed Calevras by the collar and slapped him.

Though shocked and infuriated by such brutal, gratuitous behaviour, he tolerated the insult to avoid losing control of himself and said, with feigned calm:

"Stop making such a pathetic scene and drive. If you were a little less emotional and more mindful of earning your pay, and a little less cowardly, we would already be there."

In a blind rage the other opened the car door and shoved him out into the street with the swans. Roman picked himself back up with great effort then headed home at a desperate, breathless pace.

Looking stealthily around, he slipped into the elevator singing an aria from *Don Giovanni* at the top of his lungs; then, making a horrible racket with his shoes, he crossed the corridor, concealing the birds under his jacket, and went and locked himself in his room.

Safe at last! He'd made it!

He heard voices in the corridor:

"Same old madman!"

Calevras set the two swans free and they began to squawk. Frightened, he put on *La Traviata* at full volume. The birds made as if to peck at him. On top of *La Traviata* he put *Lohengrin* on the turntable and left the room, leaving swans and music behind. He saw Licia standing at the door to her room then ran into Elena, but he was as though on another planet. Saying nothing, he bolted out of that dreadful place where he'd been living for the last twenty years.

He held in his hand a small knapsack in which he'd put the objects most dear to him. Without delay, roaring with laughter and singing melodies of his own invention, he stepped out onto Boulevard de Sébastopol at a run and headed straight for Zimmerman's, where Bianca was waiting for him.

"Bianca, how many years have we been meeting here?"

"It'll be seven this autumn."

"Ours is a strange marriage."

"A verbal one, consummated entirely at Zimmerman's."

"Indeed. Perhaps we could change things."

"Why? That would be the end of it."

"I meant perhaps we could meet more often, perhaps in the daytime, in a park or something."

"Roman, don't tell me you're becoming romantic."

Roman thought of the swans and the havoc they must have wrought in his room. He chuckled and said:

"Maybe you can't understand, but I have freed myself this evening. I've done away with Licia, the past and the boarding-house."

"Are you tired?"

"No, I'm ecstatic, free, free to come home with you, to follow you, to seduce you, to live with you."

"Perhaps even to stick your finger in my ass and twirl it so I'll laugh; to scratch my back and bite my earlobe till it bleeds."

"Bianca, I want us to be serious. I want us to go out together, to go to your house, to listen to Chopin."

"Roman, this syrupy manner is getting on my nerves. I've had a trying day and your words are silly and insincere. It's getting late and I want to go home."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, I want to be alone. All marriages go through a crisis after seven years. Let's not let ours be ruined by it."

"I want to come with you, Bianca; I've left the boarding-house and I don't know where to go now."

"Oh, drop the pathetic tone, please. I'll see you tomorrow, at the same time as usual."

"I'm coming with you."

"Roman, you know perfectly well you can't come with me, you mustn't. You're going to go back up Boulevard de Sébastopol just like every other night."

"Tonight I want to change route."

"I don't know what to say. These things don't concern me. Once we leave Zimmerman's, our destinies part. You know that's the immutable rule of our game."

"What if I wanted to change the rules?"

"It would become a different game, and I don't know how to play any other games with you."

When they were out on the street Roman put an arm around her neck and tried to pull her close to him.

"What are you doing?"

"I want – " he tried to kiss her.

"Let me go. Don't you ever try to touch me again. I really have to go now."

"Bianca, why do you deny me? Why are you pretending not to understand?"

Calevras was almost crying.

"Good night, and goodbye!"

Bianca hurried away.

Calevras found himself alone. Feeling foolish and at an utter loss. He walked to the river and leaned out from the parapet. He watched the water rushing by and thought the only thing left to do was to throw himself in. He shuddered. It would be cold as ice, to die in the water. That liquid death seemed not for him. He stepped away from the parapet and mechanically, with his hands crossed behind his back, he began to walk up the Boulevard de Sébastopol.

Back at the flat, he approached his room, heard no noise, went in and turned on the light. Everything was in perfect order: there was a scent of cleanness in the air, fragrant and springlike. In the background the phonograph was playing songs by Charles Trenet; on the

bureau-top, in a large brass vase, he saw, instead of flowers, two swan-heads, one white and one black. Looking at them he was overcome by a sudden feeling of nausea that soon turned to horror and violence.

Standing silent, he rubbed his hands together, left the room, walked down the corridor and stopped in front of Licia's door. He listened in: total silence. He gave the door a kick and opened it.

Licia was lying in bed, bony under the pink satin eiderdown; on the bedside rug the two Pekingese lay dozing. The smell of garden violet in the room was sickening. Calevras woke Licia and with his fingernails ripped open her night-gown as if it were made of paper.

Licia looked at him and he at her, then he began scratching her uncontrollably, stopping only when he was sure he had left wounds in her flesh. When he finally withdrew his hands, covered with the blood of that scrawny body, she gave him a passionate look and said:

"What did you do with your rings?"

"I sold them."

"Tomorrow we'll go together and get you two new ones. Without rings you're less seductive. Your hands without rings are like a painting without a frame. Until tomorrow, Roman. I'll come and wake you, and together we'll go and buy your rings. And afterward we might even go to a pastry shop, if you wish. Remember the one near the Gare de l'Est? You really used to like their baba au rhum and marzipan. Do you still like baba au rhum? It's funny how months, even years go by when you stop doing things you used to do every day. But I'll see you tomorrow, Roman, and we'll find you two beautiful new rings."

Her use of the adjective 'beautiful' made an impression on him, and as he left he imagined two very shiny rings of solid gold, shaped like swans.

Back in his room, Calevras replaced the Trenet record with *Tosca*, removed the vase that had been placed on his bureau and put it in the corridor together with the Trenet records.

Then with great care he hung the postcards of the Parthenon back on the wall, making sure they were in correct chronological order. This done, he got undressed and went to sleep naked. He dreamt of Bianca, gold rings shaped like swans, Pekingese dogs, and suddenly found himself on the streets of Athens, where he distinctly smelled the aroma of hot mantis prawns. Some of Bianca's words came back to him, words of an outdated Greek, a Greek of another age, spoken only by certain exiles of a certain social class.

Translated from the Italian by Stephen Sartarelli