

GERMAINE

By

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Translated by William Weaver

That day there was a taxi strike. I took the bus, and standing beside me, clinging to a strap, was a tall man in a dark overcoat whom I couldn't help staring at.

The man looked just like Germaine. The same expressions, same colors, same eyes, cheekbones; only his brows were a bit thicker.

I got off at Montparnasse, almost at the corner of Boulevard Raspail. He got off, too. Then I followed him along the pavement. He paused at a shop window to straighten his tie and make sure his hair was neatly combed. Like Germaine, he was vain. Reassured, after a few steps, he entered the veranda of La Coupole, the area you have to pass through before you reach the stairs down to the dancing. It was half past three in the afternoon.

I don't know why I also entered the veranda. There were a number of tables, some of them occupied. We sat at different tables. He ordered a Coca-Cola. Then he started smoking, one cigarette after another; he jiggled his leg; he was waiting for somebody. His suit was dark, double-breasted, the typical Sunday suit of the fifties, neatly pressed, but worn. The man was poor.

Then a woman arrived, blond in a gray suit, with some mangy foxes around her neck. Her lipstick was bright pink. She was trying to look middle-class, but she was a manicurist or a stripper; her hair was too blond, probably dyed. There was too much powder on her face, and her blue eyes were too heavily made up for a woman her age. As soon as she sat down at the table, apologising for being late, he stopped jiggling his leg and began talking to her. The dancing was about to open. She ordered coffee and they smoked two cigarettes together. They teased each other, talking about their clothes and making plans for New Year's Eve. Where would they celebrate? How much did this nightclub cost, and how much did that other one charge, and what was included in the menu?

The woman who had met him above the dancing called him Paul; her name was Giselle. Paul was a man of sixty. He could have been Germaine's brother; perhaps he bore an extraordinary resemblance to Desmond, Germaine's father.

Desmond had liked nightclubs and chorus girls. Whenever he came to Paris to buy master drawings for his collection, he met black women in a certain hotel, somewhere around the Gare du Nord. Desmond had spent the war in Brazil, and ever afterwards he had been interested only in black women.

His wife, Annabelle, was a Catholic, over-devout, and she had no suspicion of her husband's private life. When he returned from his Paris trip, he always brought her the same perfume, Guerlain. It was a ritual in their life. That time when Desmond had come to Paris with Germaine, they had bought the bottle of Guerlain together for Annabelle.

Germaine had enjoyed herself enormously in Paris with her father. They went to auctions, they combed galleries and bookshops. In the evening they had supper in grand restaurants. Germaine had never found in any other man the worn, perfect elegance of her father. Desmond mingled very precise, serious words with casual, capricious manners. He smoked endless Players without filters, and drank gin straight or with tonic. He read French and German literature, always took taxis, and, whenever possible, he preferred to travel by train.

So who was this man who looked just like Germaine, with the manners of a French clerk who has had no career and is about to be pensioned off, faithful now to his last mistress, who has a bit more money than he has and therefore pays the expenses for their New Year's celebration together? I had no real engagements that afternoon. I had time to go down to the dancing, to follow Paul. Considering all the time I had dedicated to Germaine in my life, I surely had time to find out whether Paul was really her brother.

And what if Paul were a younger brother of Desmond's? This didn't seem plausible to me. Germaine had spoken to me only of a brother of her mother's; he had lived with them, in Brazil, during the war. A fanatical Nazi, who later died in Lugano, in a hospital.

Paul couldn't be the son of Annabelle, because she and Desmond had met at Wengen in 1939, and Paul must have been born long before then. So it was very simple. Paul must be an illegitimate son of Desmond's, born in the late twenties when Desmond was already coming to Paris to visit museums and buy books and drawings and when he still ran after white soubrettes. He had loved many white women up to the summer of 1941. For two years he was faithful to Annabelle, and then, perhaps since he couldn't prevent himself from being unfaithful to her, he went with women who were quite different, black women of Brazil, that is. But he never really betrayed her; most of all, he felt a need to seduce, to change. Change satisfied his impatience. Change gave him the illusion of being less bored. For that matter, the fact that he couldn't manage to drive was a symptom of that great impatience. Perhaps, in the days when he still had white women, he was less nervous, the world was different, there hadn't yet been the war, money had a different weight, and his social class still enjoyed many privileges. But nightclubs always remained an important release for him, a way of losing himself without too many risks.

So it was clear why that fairly unsuccessful bank teller liked to go dancing on Saturday afternoons. Was it because, even though he was poor, he had inherited from his father a taste for nightclubs? In any event, when I saw him dance, I realised Paul was an expert dancer, and could deftly execute very different assortments of dance. The same could be said for his partner. In their dancing there was something noble. But between them there was no love. I observed this, thinking that Germaine and I, though we danced badly or at least without that special pleasure, had perhaps had love, or at least, for years, the awkwardness and timidity of love. We had danced at parties, we had held each other's hips, backs; stroked hands, exchanged long looks; and Germaine possessed the strength of an extreme sweetness and also of disapproval. She disapproved of my gaze, which was the mirror of my self. She didn't find me sufficiently true, or sufficiently penetrating.

She reproached me for not delving deeper into questions of life; in her opinion, I avoided things, and I looked at them only superficially.

I became sure that Germaine and Paul were brother and sister, many hours later, in a brasserie of the quarter.

Gestures are what reveal great resemblances; and in the case of Paul and Germaine it was the slow stirring of the sugar in the coffee cup. The slow movement, the application, the way of holding the spoon. For years I had thought of Germaine every time I could be distracted from the obligations of life and my work. I imagined how we would meet in that given place, how we would dress, what hotel we would stay in. At what time would I telephone her? After eleven? But after eleven could be too late! What would I take her? Jewelry? But how would I explain it? She might consider it vulgar, out of place.

I had to be very careful.

Ours was a spontaneous relationship, but also difficult because of our reciprocal shyness. I knew what thrilled me or what hurt me, but did she? What did she think of me? Was she fond of me? Was she afraid? She was at ease in my company because she could talk to me about Desmond.

About the secret Desmond, the man that Annabelle didn't know. But Germaine never suspected that this father, whose only confidant she thought she was, could have a secret son, older than she. Identical, but crude, French, of a different upbringing, a drinker of coffee and Coca-Cola. But did Desmond himself know about Paul? And did Paul know that he had an English father and a very beautiful sister who made men fall in love with her because of the way she looked at them and intimidated them? For Germaine the cities were Los Angeles and Rhodes; for Desmond, Istanbul and Paris. And for Paul? Perhaps Paul had once been to northern Italy, after a trip to Nice, where he may have gone to visit some cousins of his mother. But did his mother know that Paul was Desmond's son? Had he and she kept in touch? Had Desmond sent her money? Or was she herself unaware of the identity of the boy's father?

I looked at Paul as he ate a lettuce and tomato salad, dipping bread into the French dressing. From the way he ate, you could tell he had been in the army. Perhaps he had fought in Indochina, and also in Algeria. What would happen if Paul and Germaine were to meet? How could I approach him? I would have to present myself, or else follow him, discover where he lived, where he worked. I couldn't let him get out of my sight if I meant to talk to him about Germaine. I postponed the moment when I would have to decide whether to introduce myself at once, or not.

Time and again I had postponed my declaration of love to Germaine, on the pretext that it wasn't the right moment. Everything between the two of us had always been postponed. The idea that there was time, plenty of time to declare our reciprocal love, was a consolation. Whenever I saw Germaine I thought it would happen, and then almost nothing happened at all. Perhaps a slight hint, not even picked up. And yet I never considered anything lost, and our lives went on. As soon as I saw Paul, I was seized by an overpowering desire to telephone her, say to her: "Come to Paris, it's urgent."

But was that meeting something to encourage? What would they talk about, supposing Paul knew nothing of Desmond? Was it right to make the revelation, or should I keep quiet?

I had never been a real confidant of Germaine's, but the discovery of an unknown brother justified many things. I would tell her briefly over the phone what it was all about. She would ask, more than once: "Are you really sure?" and she would say: "I'll call you back." And when she called back, I would repeat my near-certainty and she would finally say: "I'm on my way!"

Unfortunately, planes from the States arrive in the morning, she would be sleepy, and we certainly weren't sufficiently intimate for me to say: "I'll come up to your room with you." But there was the long automobile ride from the airport to the hotel. I could drive slowly, take a longer route. And then, during that ride I could declare my love and then immediately give her a passionate kiss. But maybe it wasn't possible, it wasn't the right moment, the proper setting to talk to her about love. What was more important? To receive a declaration of love or to discover you have a brother whose existence you knew nothing of? They were two different things, but perhaps not all that incompatible.

Why be indecisive? Germaine is right, accusing me of not getting to the bottom of things, of being evasive. But so it goes: you think and think of how to act in a given situation and then something blocks you. Even the simplest thing becomes complicated, tormenting.

At that moment, in the brasserie, what was I to do? Was I to introduce myself to Paul, interrupt his meal with Giselle, speak to him freely about my ideas concerning him and Germaine, or was I to remain silent, wait till they left, follow them, locate his house and subsequently his office?

If I had been absolutely certain that Paul was Germaine's brother, it would have been more tactful to write to her. But where could I write to her? How many times had I wanted to tell her that we should have our own secret post office box, just for us. But how could I talk to her about organising our secret, when I didn't know if there was the slightest secret between us?

Nor did I know whether Paul wanted to share with Giselle a secret as private as the discovery of a sister. But we are always the same, in whatever circumstance. And so, when Paul and Giselle stood up, I didn't approach them; instead I followed them home. They lived near the Montparnasse cemetery, in a dark street, in a shabby building. One of those buildings whose front door opens with an electric lock and the light on the stairs remains lighted only for a few minutes. Germaine's eyes had a slight squint; they were very pale and unforgettably expressive. Though she was physically tiny, when she entered a room she immediately communicated a good humor all her own, a way of expressing and disguising her worries. Looking at Paul, I wondered if Germaine would be shaken, irritated, jealous at having an older brother with whom to share memories of Desmond. Or if all my hesitation and my uncertainty were due to the fact that I was jealous, jealous because the meeting of Germaine and Paul might erase my secret with Germaine. Perhaps I was afraid of breaking the tension and the ambiguity of love.

And what if Paul weren't Germaine's brother? If I had only imagined for a whole afternoon and evening that I was bringing to life a double of Desmond? That dreamed-of father who, in certain moments, I had the illusion of replacing in Germaine's mind. And what if it had been only another of my innumerable fantasies about how to see Germaine alone, even only for half an hour, in the hope, this time, of finding the courage to make my declaration? An excuse to be able to tell her I would like to sleep with her at least one night and that I loved her very much.

And yet, in that way of stirring sugar, in those eyes, and in that walk, Germaine and Paul were identical.

And to think that if Paul had not had an artificial arm, a limb of wood or of celluloid, on the bus I wouldn't even have noticed him. It was his black glove, smoothly fitting over the artificial hand, that had attracted my attention. He moved it well, with great elegance. How had he lost the arm? In the war, surely. Had he been a cruel soldier?

Now I had let him go up to his apartment, in Rue Maurice Ripoche. Was it his house, or Giselle's?

As always, my courage failed me. I didn't get in touch immediately with Germaine, and I decided to wait and make sure that Paul really was her brother. But why was I so timid, so insecure with her? I didn't know her husband. I had heard that he was a very handsome man, also intelligent, but she had married him, at least this is what people said, without really loving him.

Were they happy? Germaine was not a woman who could be defined as happy. Happiness was a situation, a sentiment that didn't interest her at all. And what did interest her? Love? Did she know how to love? Of course, she knew how to love, but only men who were very special, or seemed so. I want one of those. I was too middle-class, too much like her husband. Not enough like Desmond, not free enough from the opinion of others, not sufficiently master of myself and my faults.

After a few days of stationing myself outside the door in Rue Maurice Ripoche, one morning between seven and eight I saw Paul come out, and I followed him on to the bus. He got off in an elegant street in the eighth arrondissement, and after about a hundred yards he entered an impressive building. The offices of a ministry.

I waited until lunch time, but I was told that the employees ate in their own canteen. I came back at half past five, and around six I saw him come out with a colleague. I fell in behind them; they entered café. No doubt about it: Paul stirred his sugar like Germaine. He came out of the café alone and I followed him to the bus stop. We got off together at Avenue du Maine. I mustered the nerve to approach him. All day I had been waiting for this moment, and though I was shy as ever, I said: "Excuse me for speaking to you like this on the street; we've never met, but I have something important to say to you. At first I thought it might not be right to tell you, but it's a secret I can't keep."

"What is this all about?"

"I know it will seem absurd to you, but you are the double of a very dear friend of mine. She's in America now, and I was wondering if you might not be her brother. The resemblance is amazing."

"Don't worry; I've been told that on other occasions. But I have no family. They all died, and I was brought up in an institution."

"Forgive me if I take up another moment or two of your time. Believe me, it's very embarrassing to have to say certain things, but you see, this friend of mine had a very special

relationship with her father, who died a few years ago; and you look very much like her father as well. Seeing you, I asked myself if you might not be his son.”

“This isn’t the first time such a thing has happened. Those without family often find a family thrust upon them. When I lost my arm in the war, in a British hospital one of the volunteer nurses told me we were relatives. She was very pretty, quite young, with big blue eyes. Would you like to have a coffee with me?”

“Yes, of course.”

In the few minutes that separated us from the café, I thought how friendly Paul was, and how generous. He had Germaine’s eyes; there could be no doubt about his being her brother. I had never made love with Germaine. I had only kissed her on the mouth, once. What intimidated me so about Germaine? Her courage in life? Her courage not to be presumptuous? To go ahead? To attach importance to things? To know how to wait with anxiety? And Germaine, too, was childish and laughed heartily, like a happy child.

I would have liked for Paul to become my friend, and for the two of us to meet Germaine, and then for a new bond to be created among the three of us, a new intimacy.

When we entered the café, I asked him: “What was that nurse’s name?”

“I don’t remember, but we pretended to be brother and sister.”

“Have you met since?”

“Yes, once, but times had changed.”

There was a silence, we sipped our coffee, and then Paul asked me: “Why don’t you come to my house tomorrow evening? Number 9 Rue Maurice Ripoché. I hope you’ll be content with plain cooking.”

“Fine, thank you. I’ll bring a photograph of my friend who looks so much like you, and also a photograph of her father.”

“Good, then we’ll look at them together. Come around seven, seven-thirty. All right? Fifth floor, stairway B, on the right.”

In my hotel I stretched out in the bathtub, still dressed, and looked up at the air; I felt I had entered a movie. I searched in an envelope and picked out a photograph of Germaine in a bathing suit; she was very thin; the photograph had been taken three years ago. I also found a picture of Germaine as a child, with her father. Desmond: a pink face, apparently youthful, not frowning, an absent gaze, a bit watery; with a very blond little girl beside him. One of those Kodacolor snapshots of the fifties, where all the colors are too bright and the faces too tanned.

Germaine and I had met in a restaurant, among other people. We saw each other again in New York. We met every day, she would accompany her husband to a bookshop where they sold European papers. I would smile at her, but I spoke with her husband, about politics; it was the period of the Red Brigades. Then Germaine came once to my house with a friend of mine, a photographer. Another time we dined with her husband and my first wife. We were at the home of an Italian gentleman who later died of a heart attack. He complained all the time about his poor health; nobody believed him; in fact, everybody teased him; then he died. A few months after that supper, we began to talk on the telephone. She would call me at the office and leave messages under the name of Mrs. Stilton.

Thinking of Germaine like that saddened me. She would never be my woman, she would always share her life with another man, and I would never have the courage to take her away. In taking away "forever" I saw something ridiculous and not very credible. At that moment I would have liked to see her come in, heavily made up, with very elegant clothes on, her hands carefully manicured. I would have liked her to undress and join me in the bathtub.

Paul's apartment was tiny, the table was laid in the kitchen. A not very clean kitchen of strawberry-pink and pea-green formica, then there was a bedroom with simple, modern furniture, but now old, surely bought second- or third-hand. On the walls I remember prints, postcards, photographs, little drawings, memos, calendars.

On the furniture: boxes, feathers, dolls, many of those dolls you win at a shooting gallery in amusement parks. Smoking, Paul told me how he had been wounded and lost his arm. He begged me to drink a bit of red wine and to excuse him for not doing the same. For some years now he had been unable to drink. Just a sip and he went crazy, hallucinating. He saw wolves and forests and began to yell, or else he went to look for his pistol because he wanted to start shooting.

The only embarrassing moment of the evening was when I showed him the photographs of Germaine and her father. Why did we have to become so intimate? Paul didn't think it necessary to confirm to me that the English nurse was Germaine. Instead he asked; "Will you be in town next Saturday?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Too bad. Giselle has a friend, Paule, very nice, a mulatto. She's a widow, and would like to find some company. What I was thinking was, Saturday afternoon we would all go dancing together!"

"Thanks, but I'll be gone by then. Yes, I'm going to Milan."

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