

A Gallic Book

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*There is little but the sublime to help us through
the ordinary in life.*

Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier)

The taxi had dropped her on the corner of the boulevard. She was barely fifty metres from home. The road was lit by streetlamps which gave the buildings an orange glow, but even so she was anxious, as she always was when she returned late at night. She looked behind her but she saw nobody. Light from the hotel opposite flooded the pavement between the two potted trees flanking its entrance. She stopped outside her door, unzipping her bag to retrieve her keys and security fob, and then everything happened very quickly.

A hand grabbed her bag strap, a hand that had come out of nowhere, belonging to a dark-haired man wearing a leather jacket. It took only a second for fear to travel through her veins all the way to her heart where it burst into an icy rain. She instinctively clung to her bag. The man pulled harder and when she held on, he put his hand over her face and shoved her head back into the metal door frame. She stumbled in shock, seeing stars that shimmered above the road like hovering fireflies; she felt a tightness in her chest and let go of the bag. The man smiled, the strap swirled through the air and he ran off. She leant back against the door, watching him disappear into the night. She was breathing heavily, her throat was on fire, her mouth dry, but her bottle of water was in the bag. She reached over and tapped in the entry code, put her weight against the door and slipped inside.

The glass and black-iron door provided a safety barrier between her and the outside world. She sat down carefully on the marble steps of the hallway and closed her eyes, waiting for her brain to calm down and start working normally again. Just as the safety signs are gradually switched off on an aeroplane, so the warning lights flashing in her head – I'm being attacked, I'm going to die, my bag's been stolen, I'm not hurt, I'm alive – disappeared one by one. She looked up at the rows of letter boxes and focused on the one bearing her name and floor number: 5th floor, left. But since she was without her keys at almost two o'clock in the morning, she realised she would not be going through the door of the left-hand flat on the fifth floor.

The implications of this realisation took shape in her mind: I can't get into my home and my bag's been stolen. It's gone and I'll never see it again. A part of her had been brutally torn away. She looked around as though willing the bag suddenly to materialise, wiping out the scene that had just taken place. But it definitely wasn't there. It would be streets away by now, snatched, flying on the man's arm as he ran; he would open it and inside he would find her keys, her identity card, her memories. Her entire life. She could feel tears welling. Her hands could not seem to stop shaking from fear, helplessness and anger, and the pain at the back of her head suddenly got sharper. When she raised her hand to where it hurt, she realised she was bleeding, but of course her tissues were in her handbag.

It was 1.58 a.m. She could not possibly knock on any of her neighbours' doors at that time of night. She couldn't even disturb the friendly man whose name she couldn't remember who worked in graphic novels and had just moved in on the second floor. The hotel seemed the only solution. The light in the hallway had just timed out and she felt for the switch. When the light came back on again, she felt mildly dizzy and had to steady herself against the wall. She needed to pull herself together and go and ask to spend the night at the hotel, explaining that she lived just across the road and would pay for the room the next day. She hoped the night porter would be sympathetic because she was struggling to think of an alternative.

She pulled open the heavy front door and shivered. Not from cold but from a vague sense of fear, as if the buildings lining the street had soaked up something of what had happened and the man might suddenly magically step out from a wall. Laure looked around. The road was empty. The man was clearly not coming back, but it was difficult to control her fear, and it's hard to distinguish between the irrational and the possible at almost two o'clock in the morning. She crossed the road and walked towards the hotel. Her instinct was to hold her bag close to her body but she found nothing but empty space between her hip and forearm. She stepped into the light under the hotel awning and

the automatic door slid open. The grey-haired man at the desk looked up as she walked in.

He agreed to let her stay. He had been a little reluctant, but when Laure began taking off her gold bracelet to leave as security, he had raised his hand in surrender. The young woman was visibly distressed and almost certainly telling the truth; she seemed a trustworthy character and he judged the chances of her coming back to pay her bill at a good nine out of ten. She had left her name and address. Besides, the hotel had faced cases of non-payment that went well beyond a single night's stay for a lone woman who said she had been living opposite for the past fifteen years.

She might have phoned the friends at whose house she had spent the evening, but their number was in her phone. Since the advent of mobile phones, the only numbers Laure knew by heart were her own home and work numbers. The receptionist also suggested she call a locksmith but that too was impossible. Laure had used up her cheque book and had been slow to order a new one; she wouldn't receive it until early the following week. Other than her debit card and forty euros in cash, both of which were inside her wallet, she had no means of payment. It was remarkable how, in situations like this, all the tiny details that had seemed totally insignificant an hour before suddenly seemed to conspire against you. She followed the man into the lift, then along the corridor to room 52, which looked onto the street. He turned the light on, briefly pointed out the bathroom and handed her the key. She thanked him, promising once again to come back and pay as soon as possible the next day. The porter gave her a friendly smile, tiring a little of hearing the same promise for the fifth time. 'I believe you, Mademoiselle. Good night.'

Laure walked over to the window and parted the net curtains.

She could see straight across to where she lived. She had left the living-room lamp on and placed a chair in front of the part-opened window so that Belphégor could look out. It was very odd seeing her flat from here. She almost expected to glimpse herself crossing the room. She opened the window.

‘Belphégor,’ she called in a whisper, ‘Belphégor,’ making the sharp little kissing sound all cat owners can make.

A few moments later, the black shape leapt up onto the chair and two yellow eyes stared back at her in amazement. How on earth was it possible for his mistress to be across the road and not inside the flat?

‘That’s right, I’m over here,’ she told him with a shrug.

She gave him a little wave and decided to get ready for bed. In the bathroom, she found a box of tissues and some water to clean the wound to her head. As she leant over, she felt dizzy again, but at least she seemed to have stopped bleeding. She took a towel and laid it over the pillow, and then she got undressed. Lying down, she could not stop replaying the scene of the mugging. The incident, which had lasted no more than a few seconds, was now developing into a slow-motion sequence. Longer and more fluid than the stylised sequences in films. More like the ones in science documentaries of dummies in simulated car crashes. You see the inside of the vehicle, the windscreen blowing out like a vertical puddle of water, the dummies’ heads moving smoothly forward, the airbags inflating like bubble gum and the metal shell lightly crumpling, as if rippled by a warm breeze.