Your Father's Room

Michel Déon

translated from the French by Julian Evans

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His parents would tell him, 'You can't possibly remember. You weren't even a year old when we moved from the apartment in Rue de la Roquette.' But he was adamant, and even now, at his very great age, the perfection of the image remains. He can still see himself sitting in a pram at the foot of a winding staircase lit by a window on the landing. The carpet is bright red. Under the stair, a frosted glass door opens and a short woman dressed in black, neither young nor old, looks at him. He remembers the name of the concierge who came over to talk to him only because he was told what it was when he recalled the memory later. Her name was Madame Lebas. She looked after him when his parents went out for the evening, which they did often.

Later, although he wondered about the scene so precisely etched in his memory, he refused to see a psychiatrist specialising in infantile recall. He merely accepted it as a flash of clarity that for some unknown reason had embedded itself in his baby memory, imprinting an indelible colour image there, an image that, incidentally, was completely unimportant and one he would have loved to replace with another – of his mother and father bending over his cradle, for example, or kissing each other. As the years went by, following several

dreams in which he seemed to split in two and be able to watch himself, he conceived a theory that might have been plausible: that the soul – or in any case the immaterial, impenetrable thing that stands in for the soul – likes to divest itself of the body it inhabits occasionally and to contemplate its empty physical form, either out of impatience at being held captive by a child whose speech, sight and physical coordination are still in a larval state, or because that same physical form, despite being grown-up and perfectly comfortable with itself, is immersed for several hours in the torpor of sleep, which prevents it from reacting, other than by moans and groans, to the incoherent, absurd language of dreams. It should be added that the soul never goes far away, two or three metres at most, for fear that in its absence the sensory life of its protégé might suddenly be extinguished, a phenomenon that does sometimes occur in the course of such separations, to the bafflement of medical science. So wasn't it possible that the soul might exist from birth onwards in a perfectly functioning state, in possession of all its faculties, knowledge and memory, and sometimes go off on a short adventure to breathe the air of freedom and gain the necessary distance to perfect its awareness of things? That little adventure out of the way, it can then resume, in a baby's case, the process of educating the body it has been entrusted with, or the simple path of an existence that is already fully developed but perhaps just a touch monotonous.

He has never been able to call to mind the hall, the staircase with the red carpet, and Madame Lebas the concierge without a completely different scene following immediately – different because this time he is nearly two years old. They are living in a middle-class house in Châtenay (that detail filled in some time later), and, in a room that has its curtains drawn, a white sheet has been hung over a big Norman wardrobe. A copper-and-

gold magic lantern stands on a console table; Papa is selecting coloured glass slides that he slips into the machine's innards. And who appears on the white sheet? Pulcinella himself, with his hunchback, his beak-like nose and his extravagant hat sewn with bells. The scene is as sharp as it was nearly eighty years ago. There must have been other performances, other glass slides, showing the wicked fairy Carabosse, the wizard Merlin, and Sleeping Beauty, but Pulcinella is the only one whose grotesque figure, imprinted on his memory as he leant back into a large bosom, has remained. A warm hand had clasped his tightly. Later, photographs provided the round face, pulled-back hair and solid frame of his nanny: Madeleine Schmidt.

From Châtenay he also has, from what must be around the same time, the image of his father naked to the waist, face covered with lather, shaving himself with a cutthroat razor and singing off-key a tune of Paul Delmet's, 'Sending Flowers'. The little boy takes hold of the razor, lying on the rim of the basin, and slashes his left hand deeply at the base of his thumb. Blood spurts from the cut. Papa lifts the boy, who neither shouts nor cries, onto his shoulders, dashes out into the street in his pyjama bottoms and races in the direction of the chemist's, where he bursts through the door with blood running through his hair and down his face. Only now does the little boy, thinking his father has been hurt, start shouting and burst into tears.

At this point the memory box closes shut, but to prove that it is all true he still has, just at the base of his thumb, the scar that for the rest of his life he cannot see without also seeing his father's bloodied head as he ran at breakneck speed down the empty street with him on his shoulders.

There are no more memories of Châtenay, apart from

those that can be re-assembled from sepia photos: of him standing on a round table in the garden, and of Madeleine holding his hand. He wonders whether in those early years he really loved anyone but her. Or snapshots, still relatively sharp despite their age, of his parents, his father in white trousers with shirtsleeves rolled up and a sleeveless cardigan, racquet in hand on the tennis court with her, Blanche, and two extremely pretty friends wearing the black headbands that were fashionable at the time, a detail memorialised in a pastel drawing of Blanche that still hangs on the wall in his study. During one of his moves the drawing, carelessly packed, had been damaged, and afterwards the picture framer had only been able to save her head, but her son has not forgotten her posing with bare shoulders wrapped in a gauze scarf which scarcely hid her breasts.

Although he was four years old by the time they moved to Rue Henri-Heine in Paris, he hasn't a single memory of Madeleine there. She must have taken him to Ranelagh, carrying him up the stairs of the footbridge over the 'Little Belt' circular railway, watched him making his first mud pies, and picked him up when he fell off his scooter. But no. Nothing. Everything has been erased, until with a click the shutter opens again: leaning on the balcony with his mother and looking down, he sees Madeleine getting into a green Renault taxi with its hood down. She is going back to Alsace. Blanche says, 'Look at her. You won't see her again.' As the driver signals with his left hand to indicate that he is turning into Avenue Mozart, Madeleine turns round on the back seat and waves a handkerchief. He is sure she is crying.

His mother was wrong. Almost as soon as the war was over, in 1945, he had travelled to Alsace, going from parish to parish to find Madeleine, now married, with five children, of whom

the eldest had recently died, clearing the road of landmines. She had recognised him instantly. They cried together. She was a solid woman in a grey smock with a gentle face that radiated such calm goodness, such clemency and generosity that later he put her into several of his books, under her real name or different names, but recognisable to him alone.