

Somewhere I Have Never Travelled ...

A novel

by

Wolfram Fleischhauer

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Wolfram Fleischhauer: Somewhere I Have Never Travelled. Novel.

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(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens;only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody,not even the rain,has such small hands

e.e. cummings

Prologue

Dear Bruno,

I am on my way to my meeting. I didn't sleep much last night.

I thought about you and longed for your warm body next to mine. Now I am on the subway, surrounded by people who are all in a hurry. Time seems to be precious here. I am among equals.

Last night I wanted to write to you. I just couldn't bear it anymore. I needed to hear your voice, but you weren't there. Where were you? It will be at least a week before you read this. And even if it took much less time — are not all letters written by the dead, addressed to the unborn? By the time you tear open the envelope that I sealed with my tongue, everything will be different already. Oh, how much I miss the sound of your voice!

Have you made any progress translating my story? How does it sound in your language? It thrills me to think how every word I wrote passes through your mind, filling it with the images I saw. I wish I could be each of those words. It makes me jealous to imagine your eyes looking at them and your tongue moving to their sound.

I walk through this city, through the present, witnessing scenes that are just like the past. The setting is different, but the characters are not.

People in New York are friendly. The hotel porter even speaks a little French. His eyes shone when I told him that I come from Paris. "Merveyeuh," he said. The hotel Serge recommended is now a home for the elderly. I only stayed one night and then moved here. Serge would be amazed if I told him what happened to his favorite hotel. The lobby smells of old people and disinfectant. I managed to make out a few traces of the fine house it must have been, but now it looks ransacked. Today, I heard that the city subsidizes some of the rooms for senior citizens. As long as they can somehow cough up twenty dollars a day, they are allowed to stay.

It reminds me of Marie, the life she led in Belleville back in 1867. I think of her all the time, feel close to her. I see her standing on the weir by St. Martin's Canal, staring at the black waters below.

You know that telling her story kept me from going mad. I wanted you to read it to

tell you something I couldn't say. What we cannot speak of, we must tell stories about.

So when are you going to tell me your story? How much I miss the sound of your voice. If I could only hear it now, speaking my name.

I speak your name with every beat of my heart.

A bientôt mon amour

Mainsdepluie

Chapter I

1.

The thaw brought no cheer.

When the ice cracked in the spring of 1867 and the first floes started drifting down the Seine, they would from time to time yield up some remnant of a human being, the remains of people who had drowned in winter because they had ventured too far out on the treacherous surface. Somewhere beneath the white ceiling, they had caught fast and frozen solid. Now, as the current swirled into fissures and set chunks of ice in motion, it ripped their trapped bodies apart. The gruesome discoveries would not taper off for some weeks.

How cold the winter had actually been was a matter of opinion. The average reading had been nine degrees below freezing on the Celsius scale. A sizeable crowd had gathered each day on the Pont Neuf to consult a thermometer installed by the engineer Chevalier. Skeptics disputed its accuracy, arguing that the warm breath of inquisitive onlookers distorted the readings. Most cared little for such technical quibbles. They still measured the cold with the traditional yardstick, the number of poor souls who had frozen to death, hoping quite simply that it would soon be over.

Until ten thirty on that Monday evening in March, things had been quiet. There were four of them on duty. Duvergnier, the station inspector, was sitting in his office. The stove was drawing badly because of the cursed weather, but at least it was not as cold as last week. Lobiau and Grol were in the front room playing cards. Thermann was out on patrol. It was against the rules to go alone, but that is the way it was that Monday evening. Besides, Thermann was back before the tanner turned up.

Duvergnier had been brewing tea. The shot of rum that went with it was another little breach of the rules, but after all, nobody noticed. In any case, he never had a chance to drink his tea. He did drink the rum, later, without the tea, but nobody would have begrudged him that after what had happened. Duvergnier had seen a thing or two in the course of his work. The fighting on the barricades in 1848 had not exactly been a pretty sight. In 1858, when Orsini's bombs struck the emperor's carriage outside the opera house, he had heard the explosions. He saw with his own eyes the carnage the grenades had wrought among the crowd. The head wounds were the worst. He was thick-skinned about most things, but not

heads. A disfigured face could haunt him for weeks. Fortunately, since that attempt on the emperor's life nine years ago, he had been spared such nightmares. Had he known what was floating out there in the canal, he would have sent his colleagues out alone. The tanner who came to the station might have warned them about the face. But the man had merely mentioned a child.

Thermann had pulled off his wet boots and placed them by the stove when Duvergnier came out of his office into the duty room to fetch some ink from a cupboard under the counter. He was in the middle of his daily report, a task that fell to him as officer in charge. Grol had been dealt a poor hand and he was in a foul mood, too, so when Thermann asked if anyone had a piece of newspaper, he simply tossed yesterday's *Figaro* across the room. Duvergnier vanished into his office again, finished the report, and filed it away. Too hastily, as it turned out, because then somebody rapped noisily at the door. Right away, Duvergnier heard voices in the vestibule, so he did not bother to go out, assuming his constables would be perfectly able to manage the affair. He heard them talking for a while in subdued tones and he was just standing at the stove to inspect his tea when his door flew open.

"Sir!" called Grol from the doorway. "Would you step out for a moment?"

"What is it?"

But Grol tilted his head toward the duty room.

When Duvergnier emerged, Lobiau was standing at the reception desk filling in an incident form. Thermann was still sitting by the stove with the *Figaro* on his lap, kneading his damp socks. Opposite Lobiau, a man in advanced middle age was dictating his address.

"... Passage Feuillet."

"Number?"

"We ain't got numbers."

"Occupation?"

"Tanner."

Duvergnier appeared at Lobiau's side.

"Monsieur ...?"

"Briffaut, Charles," said Lobiau. "Monsieur Briffaut, this is Inspector Duvergnier. Would you please repeat what you have just told us?"

The man seemed impressed by Duvergnier's uniform. At least, he pulled himself up respectfully. His straggling gray hair framed a haggard face. Under his cape, he wore a dirty leather apron and a thick gray woolen pullover. His coarse shoes had left pools of slush on the wooden floor.

"I just went down to the canal to tip out lye," he said. "When I turned to go, the dog had gone."

"What dog?"

"My dog. Bernadette. I called her. Then I heard her barking. Further up, near the weir. On this side, you can't get far along the top because of the iron fence. Bernadette had crawled under it, so I had to walk up the bank a bit to pass the railings. I called her again, and when she barked, I saw her down by the canal, jumping this way and that. But she wouldn't come back up. So I went down, as far as I could, and then I saw something lying in the water. It looked like a drowned lamb or something. So I called to the dog again, but she refused to come, just kept running back to the lamb. In the end, I worked my way through the undergrowth to fetch her. And then I saw it. There's a baby in the water."

"A baby?" asked Duvergnier.

The old man nodded. "No lamb, anyway. About this big, perhaps." He indicated the length with his hands. "Floating in the water down there, yes, face down."

"Did you pull it ashore?"

"Lord, no! I grabbed hold of my dog and climbed back up the embankment. I came straight here. That's a job for the police, I says to myself."

"Did you see anyone?"

The man shook his head. "No, there's no one down there this time of night."

"Thermann!" called Duvergnier. But the constable had already pulled his boots on again. "Grol, you go to Hôpital St. Louis and fetch a doctor. Where did you say? Just before the weir?"

"Yes, not a hundred yards away."

"What about me?" asked Lobiau.

"You stay here and make sure the stoves don't go out."

Duvergnier and Grol hurried to the storeroom for oilskins and lamps. Thermann's waterproof cape was still dripping from the hook on the door. Lobiau slid his report toward the tanner for signature. The man traced large, shaky letters in a slow hand, his tongue protruding between his lips.

When they stepped out into the street, they were greeted by a bark at the door. Briffaut untied his dog and strode down the road ahead of Duvergnier and Thermann, while Grol headed in the opposite direction toward the hospital.

As they crossed the canal on Rue des Ecluses, the bitch suddenly started barking and whimpering. The water below them was sluggish. It had begun drizzling softly and raindrops

tickled the black surface of the canal. Duvergnier stopped and struck his forehead with his palm.

"Damn it, a barrow. We forgot to bring the wheelbarrow."

Thermann turned on his heels and vanished. Duvergnier followed Briffaut across the bridge. The path along the embankment was soft and slippery. With some effort, they reached the third iron fence, crossed it, and soon found themselves above the place where the tanner guessed he had found the child. The dog was increasingly nervous, and Briffaut hissed at her angrily. Duvergnier circled the ground with his lamp. There were footprints. Duvergnier asked Briffaut to set his foot in the mud by one of the marks and was disappointed to see that it left the same print. Bernadette's light paw was easily identified beside it.

The shrubs and bushes that smothered the bank were chest-high here. Shielding his knees with the lamp, Duvergnier cautiously carved a way through the thicket, working slowly down to the canal. The slope descended about fifteen feet to a narrow strip along the water that was free of vegetation. Briffaut kept close behind, and the dog crawled panting through the undergrowth between them. As Duvergnier emerged from the scrub, he straightened up, lifted his lamp, and scanned the canal. Briffaut stepped up to his shoulder and pointed to a spot at two arms' length from the bank, where something pale was floating. Duvergnier moved closer, extended the lamp over the water and pulled back, startled. A dark shadow shot into the reed bed. A second followed. The bundle rocked jerkily in the water as if goaded by tiny prods. Then the motion ceased. Bernadette whimpered, crouched low, flattened her ears, and emitted two loud barks and then a warning growl.

"Tie the dog up somewhere back there," snapped Duvergnier nervously, searching for an object to pull the bundle toward the bank. He put the lamp on the ground, began wrestling with a bush, and after considerable pains, managed to break off a thick branch. Then he turned back toward the canal, picked up the lamp, and stared uneasily at the child, now floating calmly again on the water. He could see that the tanner had been right. It was lying face down. The head was almost totally immersed, but Duvergnier could make out the back of the skull and a tuft of dark hair above the surface. The baby was wrapped in a cloth that had fallen loose at the shoulders and begun to unwind in long, insipid swathes. The arms were out of sight. He saw the hint of pale pants, but the legs, like the arms, were hidden under the water.

Duvergnier carefully maneuvered the tip of his branch toward the child and tried to hook it below the arms. The body turned easily. As it faced him, the policeman shuddered at the sight of dark patches along its side. He fixed the top of the bundle with his branch and drew it carefully toward the bank. It glided compliantly through the water, and after a few seconds, it

came to rest at Duvergnier's feet. Briffaut had joined him now and watched the pale flotsam in dread. The back was creamy white and glowed in the light of the lamp. The arms and legs were still invisible. The back of the neck was tinged dark. The child seemed to be peering down at the canal bed with its arms and legs tucked firmly beneath its chest.

Duvergnier gave Briffaut the lamp to hold, laid the branch aside, and removed his black raincoat. He knelt down, eased his coat under the corpse, folded it over the bundle, and hauled it out of the canal. For a moment, he stood there undecided, waiting until the bulk of the water had drained from the salvaged cargo, and finally lowered the coat with the baby inside to the ground. He looked at Briffaut, but the tanner was silent, gazing anxiously at the black dripping oilskin package before him.

Further down the canal, three specks of light appeared on the bridge, making their way across like will o' the wisps. Duvergnier grabbed the lantern, waved it to and fro, and was gratified by a silent echo from the second light up on the bridge as it flickered on and off.

"Another ice corpse?" asked Briffaut.

Duvergnier shook his head.

"No," he answered gravely. "This child has not been dead long."

"Who would do a thing like that?" he heard the tanner say.

"Animals," said Duvergnier.

"No, an animal wouldn't do that."

It was still drizzling. Duvergnier shivered. The two men stood side by side in silence.

"Shouldn't we take a look?" ventured Briffaut after a while.

Duvergnier shook his head. "I'd rather wait for the doctor. There's nothing more we can do, anyway."

How had the baby gotten here? It must have been thrown in the canal at the weir. Or could it conceivably have been an accident? Nobody had reported a missing child. The doctor would establish how long the body had lain in the water. Then they could work backward and ask the other stations whether they had heard anything. The current from the weir flowed toward the city. That meant that the child must have entered the water somewhere on the hundred-yard stretch up to the weir, presumably from this bank, but they could not be certain, so they would need to search both banks for clues. They might find footprints or items of clothing. Duvergnier was tempted to uncover the corpse, but he could not bring himself to do it. No, the doctor could have that task. The first examination was always crucial. Duvergnier had seen Dr. Tardieu in court on many an occasion and learned how even the most unassailable evidence of a violent crime could turn out to be an optical illusion once it was subjected to

scientific analysis. It was so easy to make a mistake. And more often than not, the police were to blame because they were taught so little about forensic techniques.

Steps resounded on the slope above. Duvergnier recognized Thermann's call and answered him. The bushes began to sway and the glow of a lantern appeared between them. Briffaut went to his dog, which was barking again, and sought to calm her. Thermann and Grol emerged from the thicket, followed by another man with a leather case. Duvergnier quickly told the doctor what had occurred and indicated the black oilskin on the ground. The doctor was breathing heavily, apparently exhausted by the expedition. He was short, but fat. His glasses had misted up and he took them off to wipe them as he listened to Duvergnier's account. When the policeman had finished, he bent over the bundle without further ado and pulled the wet oilskin aside. Thermann and Grol retreated a little. Duvergnier stood motionless, observing the doctor as he performed his duty.

The corpse was lying on its side. The head was tilted back. The eyes and mouth were closed. A dark gray cloth was wrapped around the head and knotted under the chin.

The doctor took one tiny arm. He managed to move it a little each way, but the limb itself was rigid. He turned away to open his bag. He drew out a thermometer, placed it to one side, then took hold of a pair of scissors to cut open the seat of the pants as far as the crotch. Then he walked around the corpse, held the crotch apart with his thumb and index finger, and slid the thermometer inside.

"Would you kindly record this?" he asked, looking at Duvergnier. "And you, gentlemen, might I have some more light?"

Duvergnier took out his notepad as his two colleagues came closer with their lanterns. The little creature lay there in a huddle, its legs tucked up against its belly, its arms folded across its chest, as if it had been trying to fit into a small box. The back was very bent, suggesting to these onlookers that its mother might have been carrying it before her in a sling.

"When did you remove the body from the water?" came the doctor's matter-of-fact question.

"Just before you arrived. About ten or fifteen minutes ago."

"At least we are being treated to a complete body, after all the bits and pieces of recent weeks."

Duvergnier did not respond to this tasteless quip. The doctor was feeling the groin and began to dictate.

"Monday, twenty-fifth of March. Deceased is six to eight months old. Found floating in the water by the east bank of St. Martin's Canal half an hour before midnight. Recovered without

force ...”

Duvergnier conscientiously transcribed the doctor’s monotonous words. Thermann and Grol stood close by in quiet conversation with the tanner. Fragments of the forensic protocol wafted over.

“... rigor mortis in embryonic posture ... no goose pimples ... face and entire body livid ... traces of grease on the cheeks ... slight discoloration at the back of the neck ... tongue not swollen, but tip lodged behind closed lips ... corrugated skin on the hands and feet ... time of death estimated between twelve and twenty-four hours ago ... thorax hard and taut ... no external signs of maggots ... traces of rodent bites on soft facial tissue and left thorax ...”

Duvergnier stared mechanically at the ground, where the lifeless body was now fully unclothed. “... internal temperature ... are you taking this down?”

With a start, Duvergnier caught the doctor’s eye, then looked again at the baby’s face. The cheeks had been gnawed away. He sensed a bitter taste in his mouth and something gripped his throat. He barely made it to the bushes. He could not banish the image in his head, the face floating on the water, staring down, the sharp mouth swimming toward it, tearing a slither of skin with its sharp teeth.

Thermann came over and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. “Shall I take over?”

Duvergnier nodded and handed him the pad.

“Carry on,” said Thermann.

The doctor turned back to the body and looked again at the thermometer. “Ambient temperature ...”

Duvergnier staggered up the slope. At the top, he stood erect and took several deep breaths. Then he spat for a while to rid himself of the disgusting taste. His nose and throat burned with acid vomit, and every time he remembered what was lying back there, his stomach would well up and cut off the air to his lungs. Slowly he regained control, and twenty minutes later, when he descended the embankment, the examination had been concluded and the corpse lay rolled up in his oilskin. Grol and Thermann carried it between them. Once the report had been completed, the body continued its way to the morgue, arriving at around four in the morning. And so it was that by Tuesday it was available for public view.

The contentious practice of placing corpses on public display at the Morgue reaped rewards once more. That same day, a water carrier from Belleville identified the body with the help of clothing that had been discovered that very morning nearby and laid out beside the body.

The mother, one Marie Lazès, was arrested in the evening.