

Wonderful Clouds

FRANCOISE SAGAN



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Penguin Books
Wonderful Clouds

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Françoise Sagan was born in 1935. Her father is a prosperous Paris industrialist whose family were originally Spanish. She took her *nom de plume* from the Princesse de Sagan of Marcel Proust. She was eighteen years old when she wrote her best-selling *Bonjour Tristesse*. She had failed to pass her examinations at the Sorbonne and she decided to write a novel. The book received great acclaim in France, where in 1959 it had sold 850,000 copies, and also abroad. Her second and third books, *A Certain Smile* and *Those Without Shadows*, have also had tremendous popularity in France, Great Britain, and the U.S.A. Her fourth book, *Aimez-vous Brahms . . .*, appeared in 1959. Her latest publications are *La Chamade* (1965), *The Heart-keeper* (1968) and *Sunlight on Cold Water* (1971). All these books have been published in Penguins. She has also written several plays.

Her hobby is driving fast cars, of which she has five, and in 1957 she was involved in a bad road accident. Her ballet *The Broken Date* has been produced in Paris and London.



Françoise Sagan

Wonderful Clouds

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à mon ami Philippe

L'étranger

- Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique, dis?

Ton père, ta mère, ta soeur, ou ton frère?

- Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni soeur, ni frère.

- Tes amis?

- Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu.

- Ta patrie?

- J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située.

- La beauté?

- Je l'aimerais volontiers déesse et immortelle.

- L'or?

- Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.

- Eh! Qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?

- J'aime les nuages . . . les nuages qui passent . . . là-bas . . . là-bas . . . les merveilleux nuages!

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

(*Poèmes en prose*)

Florida

I

The mangrove stood out black against Key Largo's garish blue sky and its formal, dried-up shape seemed less like a tree than some sinister insect. Josée closed her eyes, sighing. Real trees were a long way away at present, especially the poplar of her childhood days, the poplar that stood by itself in a corner of the field near the house. She used to lie under it, her feet propped against the trunk, watching hundreds of little leaves shaken by the wind, all bending the same way, and, high, high in the air, the distant height of the slender tree top, so fine that it seemed about to take flight. How old could she have been then, fourteen, fifteen? Or else she would lean against the trunk, her head in her hands, her mouth pressed close to the rough bark, whispering promises to herself, drawing in her own breath, disturbed by adolescence, by terror of the future and by its very inevitability. She never imagined that she would leave her poplar, or that returning ten years later, she would find it cut to the ground, the scars of the axe on the trunk hard and dry.

'What are you thinking about?'

'About a tree.'

'What tree?'

'A tree you don't know,' she said, and began laughing.

'Of course.'

Without opening her eyes she felt the mounting tension that she always did when Alan's voice took on a certain tone.

'I'm thinking of a poplar, when I was eight.'

Then she wondered why she had put her age back in telling him about it. Perhaps because she imagined that by moving farther away in time, Alan's jealousy would cool slightly. No, at eight years old, he would not ask, 'Who were you in love with?'

There was a pause, but he was aroused, she could sense him thinking at her side, and his torpor of a moment ago had given way to intense interest. She could also feel the canvas of the deck-chair against her back and a drop of sweat at the nape of her neck running on and on.

'Why did you marry me?' he asked.

'Because I loved you.'

'And now?'

'I still love you.'

'Why?'

That was the way it began. These three questions were like the three classic knocks before the curtain goes up in a French theatre: a sort of convention which they had come tacitly to accept, before Alan proceeded to tear himself to pieces.

'Not now, Alan,' she implored.

'What made you love me?'

'I took you for a very quiet American - I've told you this a hundred times over - and I thought you very attractive.'

'And now?'

'I take you for an unquiet American and you're as attractive as ever.'

'An American full of neuroses? With a mother who has too much money . . .'

'Yes, all right, so I did marry the image I formed of you, is that what you want me to say?'

'I want you to love me.'

'I do love you.'

'No.'

'How I wish the others would come back,' she thought,

'and come back quickly. What an idea to go fishing in this heat! He'll drink a little too much, he'll drive too fast, he'll sleep like a log. He'll sleep so close to me that he'll crush me, and I'll find myself loving him for an hour or so because he seems so lost. Tomorrow morning, he'll tell me about all the horrible dreams he's had. He has an extraordinary imagination.'

She sat up and looked at the white jetty. Not a soul in sight. She relaxed in her chair.

'No sign of them yet,' he said acidly, 'too bad. You're bored, aren't you?'

She turned her head towards him. He was staring at her. He was really too much like the young hero of a Western: china blue eyes, bronzed skin, frank expression. Simplicity itself, apparently. Alan. Yes, she had loved him and still loved him a little when she looked at him closely. But more and more often lately, she looked away.

'Well? Shall we go on?'

'If you must.'

'How did you feel when I asked you to marry me?'

'I felt happy.'

'Is that all?'

'I had the impression of being rescued. I . . . I was worn out, you know that perfectly well.'

'Worn out . . . Who by?'

'By Europe.'

'Who in Europe?'

'I've told you about it.'

'Tell me again.'

'I'll go away,' thought Josée suddenly. 'I must be quite clear, I must get that firmly into my head. I'll go away. He can do whatever he likes, commit suicide if he must, he's talked about it often enough. That phoney psychiatrist of his has talked about it often enough too. So has his mother. All right, let him kill himself. Let him go mad like

his wretched father. Let them all get on with their stupid drunken lives. *Vive la France* and Benjamin Constant!

Yet at the same time, it filled her with nausea to think of Alan as dead, Alan who was so haunted by death. 'The first excuse that comes along will be the right one and I don't want to be that excuse.'

'That's blackmail,' she said.

'So what? I know what you're thinking about.'

'I can't have any respect for you so long as you try that kind of blackmail on me,' she said weakly.

'Why should that worry me?'

'Why indeed?'

What did he care about her respect? Besides, the low opinion she had of herself tended to be catching. She was reduced to playing the part of a life-line, a safety device against disaster. At twenty-seven. Only three years ago, in Paris, living alone or with whomever she pleased, she could breathe freely. Now, she was perspiring in this artificial setting with a neurotic young husband who had no idea what he expected of her. She began to laugh and he sat upright, eyes screwed up. He hated her to laugh on such occasions, although sometimes he had a sense of humour.

'Stop laughing like that.'

But she went on laughing softly and with a kind of tenderness as she thought of her apartment in Paris, of the streets at night, of the wild, carefree years. Alan got up.

'Aren't you thirsty? You'll get sunstroke, darling. Would you like me to fetch you some orange juice?'

He knelt, laid his head on her arm, looked up at her. That was his second weapon: whenever she escaped his jealousy, he grew affectionate. She ran her hand over his even features, outlined with her fingers the firm mouth and wide set eyes, wondering yet again what made the quiet virility of his face so ineffectual.

'I'd rather you brought me a Bacardi,' she said.

He smiled. He liked drinking and liked her to drink with him. She had been warned against that too. But although she was not particularly fond of alcohol, there were times when she felt like getting drunk and remaining so for the rest of her life.

‘Two Bacardis, then,’ he said.

He kissed her hand. A white-haired woman in flowered shorts threw them a tender, approving glance, but Josée did not smile back. Her eyes followed Alan as he walked gracefully away with the confident stride of someone for whom life has always been too easy, and, as happened each time that he went away, a feeling of sadness overcame her. ‘Yet I don’t love him any longer,’ she whispered and quickly shielded her face with her arm, as though the sun itself might contradict her.

*

When the others returned, they found them lying on the sand, Josée’s head on Alan’s shoulder, talking passionately about books. Several glasses were scattered around, and Brandon Kinnel’s glance mutely pointed these out to his wife. Eve Kinnel was both intelligent and ugly, but not aggressively so. She was fond of Josée and, like Brandon, apprehensive of Alan. Indeed, the Kinnels saw eye to eye about everything, shared everything except, of course, Brandon’s hopeless and secret infatuation for Josée.

‘What a day!’ cried Eve. ‘Three hours at sea for one miserable barracuda . . .’

‘Why range the seas?’ asked Alan. ‘Happiness is right here on the beach.’

He kissed Josée’s hair. She looked up, saw Brandon’s eyes resting on the empty glasses and mentally sent him to hell. She had whiled away a pleasant hour. She felt happy, the landscape was superb, Alan brilliant and relaxed: did it matter if a few Bacardis had contributed to this? She laid her hand on Alan’s bronzed leg.

'Happiness is right here on the beach,' she repeated.

Brandon looked away. 'I've hurt his feelings,' she thought, 'I suppose he must be in love with me. Funny, I've never thought of it.' She held out her hand to him:

'Help me up, Brandon, the sun's made me dizzy.'

She stressed the word 'sun'. He stretched out his hand. A good many people wondered why Brandon Kinnel, who looked like an absent-minded buccaneer, had come to marry Eve who looked like an ant. There were two reasons why he had: she was understanding and he, timid. So he helped Josée up and she staggered and clung to him.

'What about me, Eve,' Alan complained, 'are you going to leave me here on the beach, all alone, all night? You can see for yourself that I'm as drunk as Josée, because she's drunk too. She told you we were happy, didn't she?'

He lay on the sand, gazing up at them with a little smile. Josée dropped Brandon's arm and then grasped it firmly again.

'If you can't stand a couple of drinks, that's your affair, I'm dead sober and, what's more, I'm hungry. I'll have dinner with Brandon.'

She wheeled around, forgetting Eve. For the first time for a year she remembered that there were other men in the world beside Alan.

'He's too tactless,' she thought aloud. 'He ruins everything.'

'You ought to leave him,' said Brandon.

'He'd be a wreck, that is, I mean . . .'

'He's a wreck already.'

'I know.'

'But an attractive one, isn't that it?'

She opened her mouth to protest, then shrugged her shoulders.

'Yes, that's probably it.'

They walked slowly towards the restaurant. Brandon

could feel Josée's hand on his arm and wondered if he should not withdraw it before they reached the restaurant. His arm had got into an awkward position and a sort of cramp paralysed it.

'I hate you to drink,' he said.

He spoke too loudly, too emphatically and knew it. Josée raised her head.

'Alan's mother hates it too. So do I. But what can it matter to you?'

He freed his arm, mildly relieved. This was one of the rare occasions he had ever talked to her alone and he had managed to irritate her.

'No, it's none of my business.'

She turned and looked at him as he was walking at her side, with his arms dangling. He had a straightforward reassuring face. She imagined when she married him that Alan was this sort of man.

'You're right, Brandon. Forgive me. Your arguments are so practical, which is not always a European virtue. I live with Alan, you see. I can't tell myself "I must leave him," as I might say, "I must have my appendix out."'

'Yet you must, Josée, and if there's anything I can do to help . . .'

'Thank you, Brandon. I know. You and Eve are very kind.'

'Not only Eve and me, I meant just me.'

He was scarlet. Josée did not answer. Yet, in Paris, she used to enjoy teasing men and would have seized on an opportunity like this. 'I've grown older,' she thought. The restaurant was full. In the distance on the beach, the shadowy forms of Eve and Alan followed slowly behind them.

*

Once more they were alone and at home. The bungalow consisted of three very long rooms, furnished in light

coloured bamboo, decorated with Negro masks, curious objects of plaited straw, harpoons, anything and everything that satisfied Alan's mother's idea of what was exotic. Although Alan had lived there alone for a long time, there was no hint of his presence. The books and records they had brought together from New York. She had never known a man so little interested in his own past. He could only see himself in his relation to her, in which he adopted so sedulously the role of tormentor that she sometimes wanted to laugh. In fact, he shaped their relationship into such a set pattern and abandoned himself so completely to it that she was occasionally seized with a kind of dizziness, like when she saw a bad play or a pretentious film. But in this case the ambitious author of the bad play, or of the pretentious film, was Alan, and she could only wait for the unavoidable flop and grieve with him.

He was pacing up and down before her. All the windows were open and the warm Florida air lightly touched their cheeks, bringing with it the smell of the sea, of exhaust fumes and perpetual heat. She watched him as he moved to and fro, thinking that she had never felt so alienated from her surroundings or from her life. And had never been so sensitive – so exposed – to anyone.

'Brandon's in love with you,' he said finally.

She smiled. He always noticed everything precisely when she did. Two days earlier, she would have taxed him with being obsessed. Two days later, with being blind. Yet she knew that she could not joke with him over such things as she might with any other man.

'What has Brandon got?' he asked dreamily, and stopped walking to lean against a window.

'Nothing much,' she answered.

'Let's see . . .' he continued. 'He's a fine figure of a man, solid, reassuring. The only possible man in Key Largo at present. His wife is intelligent and knows how to behave

herself. I can very well imagine his knocking me down if I insulted you. You know, the perfect gentleman: "There are things, old boy, that a man can't put up with and Lady Joséé's above suspicion . . . etc."'

He began to laugh.

'You don't say anything. Do you think such a scene unlikely?'

'No. Nothing seems unlikely to me.'

'Even sleeping with him?'

'No. But it doesn't appeal to me very much either.'

'Oh, but it will, in time. You'll see.'

He moved away from the window, and once again she was struck by his sense of theatre. He liked to adopt an attitude before speaking his lines, and he calculated his silences with almost professional care, as though he felt the need of underlining what he had to say by appropriate 'business'. She watched him through half-closed eyes, lying on a canvas chaise-longue with her hands clasped behind her head. She felt sleepy and yet could not help wondering how much longer she would be able to bear all this. She smiled to herself. Today for the first time she had formulated her feelings in definite terms: 'I've got to get out of here.'

'Maybe Brandon bores you to death, but you shouldn't make such a secret of it,' continued Alan. 'You whisked him off the beach in fine style, leaving poor Eve alone with me. She looked wretched as she watched you two go off.'

'That didn't cross my mind. Do you think . . .'

She was about to ask, 'Do you think I've hurt her feelings?' but stopped. In any case, he was bound to answer, 'Yes.' He always tried to create a sense of guilt in her. Suddenly she felt furious.

'I didn't hurt her feelings. Eve trusts me. So does Brandon. *They* don't imagine that I live on my back, arms outstretched, waiting for a male. They're normal.'

‘Meaning that I’m not?’

‘You know perfectly well you’re not and you’re proud of it, aren’t you? You cosset your little neuroses from morning to night. You’d be desperate if you had to come down to earth and behave like an ordinary human being . . .’

‘My God,’ she thought as she said this, ‘I’m talking like the *Reader’s Digest*. Me of all people, who loathe common sense, I’m preaching at him like a heavy uncle. In the end he’ll succeed in turning me into a bore. And he’ll be delighted.’

And sure enough, he came up to her, smiling.

‘Josée, do you remember what you told me once: “People have to be accepted as they are, I’ve never wanted to change anyone, no one has the right to say a word about anyone else.” Remember?’

He sat by her, talking so gently that she could no longer be sure whether he was repeating her words like a sort of gospel on which his happiness depended, or whether he simply wanted to shame her. Yes, she had said that, one winter day in New York. They had spent an hour with Alan’s mother, and she had left with him afterwards, full of tenderness, compassion and fine principles. They had walked for an hour in Central Park, and he had seemed so bewildered, so dependent on her . . .

‘Yes, I did say it. And thought it. And still think it.’ She paused, then went on more softly: ‘Alan, you aren’t helping me.’

‘You think I’m being deliberately cruel?’

‘Yes.’

And she shut her eyes. He had won by making her admit that he caused her pain, which was exactly what he wanted: to pierce her defences, to hurt her deeply, no matter how. He took her in his arms, raised her up, then laid her down by him, his head on her shoulder. Whisper-

ing her name beseechingly, caressing her. He would have liked her to cry. But she didn't cry. Then he made love to her, just as she was, half dressed, and all but grudged her the pleasure which they shared. Later, he undressed her and carried her to their bedroom, asleep. And there, he fell asleep himself, clutching her hand tightly. In the morning she found him still sprawled out across the bed: he had fallen asleep before he could get into it.

'A strange portrait of a sleeper . . . One hand lying open on the sheet, face turned away, legs pulled up against his chest. There was a name for that, what was it? The foetus position. Did Alan miss his mother, his unbearable mother? Had Freud foreseen Alan's mother?' She began to laugh and reached out for a glass of water. 'I hate Bacardi. I hate this tasteless, sterilized water as it runs down my throat. I hate this closed window and this air-conditioning. I hate bamboo and two-dollar African mascots. I hate travelling and tropical landscapes. Do I hate this stranger sprawled out asleep across my bed?

'He is very beautiful. His thighs are long and smooth, the slender thighs of a youth, thighs so smooth to the touch of my lips. I can't hate this young man. I turn my head a little and the stranger sighs, stirs when my mouth touches his skin, before awaking completely. But now it isn't because he's being torn from sleep, he is sighing from enjoyment. His legs outstretched, he has left his mother, found his mistress once more. *Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses* . . . Baudelaire? Verlaine? I shall never know which. He has taken me by the back of the neck, turned me over, drawn me gently to him. He whispers my name: it's true that I'm called Josée and he, Alan. It's impossible that all this should mean nothing, Alan, it's impossible that things should ever be the same again after this, it's impossible that I could ever want to say any name but yours.'

'You've forgotten your hat.'

He shrugged his shoulders. The car was already whirring or rather, purring. It was an old dark red Chevrolet. Alan took no interest in sports cars.

'It's going to be terribly hot,' insisted Josée.

'Get in. Brandon will lend me his. He has a thick skull.'

The only subject he wanted to talk about was Brandon, the only people he wanted to see were the Kinnels. It was Alan's new game. He assumed the air of a spectator helplessly watching a passionate love affair, called Eve 'my poor fellow-sufferer' and smiled meaningly whenever Brandon spoke to Josée. The situation was gradually becoming unbearable, in spite of the combined efforts of Josée and the Kinnels to turn it into a joke. Josée had tried everything: anger, apathy, entreaty. She had even gone off by herself, refusing to see the Kinnels, but Alan found her and spent the afternoon drinking and praising Brandon's charms.

They were supposed to go fishing together that day. Josée had slept badly and looked forward with a kind of savage delight to the moment when Eve, Brandon or she would burst out hysterically. With a little luck, it might happen today.

The Kinnels stood on the jetty with the dejected look they had worn for the past week. Eve held a basket of sandwiches, and with her free hand made what was meant to be a light-hearted gesture. Brandon smiled wanly. The

large chriscraft rolled indolently in the small port, the sailor waited.

At that moment Alan stumbled and put his hand to the back of his neck. Brandon came up to him, took his arm:

‘What’s the matter?’

‘The sun,’ said Alan. ‘I should have brought a hat. I don’t feel well.’

He sat on a stone bollard and bent his head. The others looked at one another hesitantly.

‘We’ll stay here if you don’t feel well,’ said Josée. ‘It would be madness to go out to sea in this sun.’

‘No, no, you adore fishing, you three go without me.’

‘I’ll drive you back home first,’ said Brandon. ‘You’ve possibly got a touch of sunstroke and it would be better not to drive.’

‘But you would lose an hour’s fishing and you’re such a keen fisherman. No, much better if Eve drives me home. She hates fishing and would probably prefer to look after me or read aloud to me.’

There was a silence. Brandon turned away and Eve, who was looking at him, thought that she understood.

‘That’s the best idea. I’m sick of sharks and what not. And after all, you’ll be back soon.’

She spoke calmly, and Josée, who was about to protest, said nothing. But she was seething with rage. ‘That’s just what he wants, the fool. And without running any risks . . . he knows perfectly well that the boat is only a fourteen-footer, and there’s a sailor aboard. And there is Eve, looking discreet, and Brandon blushing . . . What does he really want?’ She wheeled round and walked up the gang-plank.

‘Eve, are you sure . . .’ ventured Brandon.

‘Why of course, darling. I’ll take Alan home. Good fishing to you and don’t go too far out, the tide is coming in.’

The sailor whistled to himself, impatiently. Brandon reluctantly got into the boat and leaned his elbows on the hand-rail, by Josée. Alan raised his head and looked at them, smiling: he seemed perfectly all right. The boat slowly left the quay.

'Brandon,' said Josée suddenly, 'jump. Jump ashore at once.'

He looked at her, looked at the quay now a yard away, cleared the hand-rail at a leap, slipped and recovered his balance. Eve screamed.

'What's going on?' asked the sailor.

'We're off,' said Josée without turning. She looked Alan straight in the eye. Brandon stood on the quay nervously dusting himself down. Alan no longer smiled. Leaving the hand-rail, she sat in the bow of the boat. The sea was magnificent and she was alone. She had not felt so well for ages.

The basket had of course remained on the quay, so she shared the sailor's food. The fishing had been excellent: two barracudas, each caught after a thirty-minute struggle. And she felt exhausted, famished, delighted. The sailor apparently lived on tomatoes and anchovies, and they joked over the thought of a huge succulent steak. He was very tall, rather loose-limbed, burnt black and had the eyes of a spaniel.

The sky began to cloud over, the sea grew choppy, and on reaching the end of the Keys they decided to turn back. The sailor lowered a line into the sea and Josée took the fishing seat. Sweat streamed unceasingly from their bodies, each staring silently at the sea. Once, she felt a bite, but she struck too late and brought up an empty hook. She called the sailor to ask him for fresh bait.

'My name is Ricardo,' he said.

'And mine, Josée.'

'You're French?'

‘Yes.’

‘What about the man on the quay?’

He said the man, not ‘your husband’. Key Largo was evidently not an island where couples were asked to show their marriage lines. She laughed.

‘He’s American.’

‘He doesn’t like fishing?’

‘No. Sunstroke.’

Since putting out to sea that morning they had not spoken of their strange departure. He bent his head. His hair was cropped short and very thick. He baited the huge hook very quickly. Then he lit a cigarette and handed it to her. She liked the easy familiarity with which people treated one another in this part of the world.

‘Do you like fishing by yourself?’

‘I like being by myself now and then.’

‘I’m always by myself. I like it better that way.’

He stood behind her. She vaguely thought that he might have been lashing the tiller and that it was not a very wise thing to do with the sea growing rougher.

‘You’re hot,’ he said, and laid his hand on Joséé’s shoulder.

She turned. He looked at her steadily with pensive dog-like eyes and there was nothing threatening or ambiguous about his expression. She examined the hand on her shoulder, it was large, square, ill-kept. Her heart beat faster. What disturbed her was that quiet, watchful look, without a trace of embarrassment. ‘He’ll remove his hand if I tell him to and that will be the end of it.’ Her mouth felt dry.

‘I’m thirsty,’ she said faintly.

He took her by the hand. Two steps separated the deck from the cabin. The sheets were clean and Ricardo very brutal. Afterwards, they found a wretched fish hooked on the line and Ricardo laughed like a child.

'Poor thing . . . we weren't bothering much about him . . .'

His laugh was infectious and she began laughing with him. He held her by the shoulder. She was in a happy mood and did not remind herself that this was the first time she had been unfaithful to Alan.

'Are French fish as stupid?' asked Ricardo.

'No. They're smaller and much more wily.'

'I'd like to go to France and see Paris.'

'And the Eiffel Tower?'

'And the French girls. I'll start the engine again.'

They returned slowly. The sea had calmed down, the sky was tinged a livid pink by a storm that had failed to develop. Ricardo steered, turning now and then to smile at her.

'A thing like this has never happened to me before in all my life,' thought Josée and smiled back at him. Before they landed he asked if she would go fishing again and she said no, that she was leaving soon. He stood on deck for a moment and she looked back at him once.

On the landing-stage, she was told that her husband and Mr and Mrs Kinnel were waiting for her in the bar at Sam's. The Chevrolet had remained where it was. She joined them after taking a shower and changing her dress. In the mirror, she thought she looked ten years younger and had recovered the half-mischievous, half-embarrassed expression that had been hers in Paris from time to time. 'An exasperated woman is easy game,' she said to the glass, quoting an old saying of her closest friend, Bernard P.

They greeted her in polite silence, the two men rising a little too hastily. Eve gave her the ghost of a smile. They had spent the afternoon playing cards and seemed to have had a dull time of it. She talked about her two barracudas, was congratulated, and the conversation died. She made no attempt to revive it. Seated with her head bowed, she

was staring at their hands, involuntarily counting their fingers. When she realized what she was doing, she burst out laughing. They jumped.

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘Nothing. I was just counting your fingers.’

‘Well, at any rate, you’ve come back in good form, whereas Brandon has been dull as ditchwater the whole afternoon.’

‘Brandon?’ She had forgotten about Alan’s game.

‘Why?’

‘You made him abandon ship. Don’t you remember?’

Strangely enough, all three looked annoyed.

‘Oh yes, of course. The fact was that I didn’t want Eve to spend the day alone with you. You never can tell . . .’

‘You’re trying to turn the tables,’ said Alan.

‘There are four of us,’ she said gaily, ‘enough to make crossed lines. Don’t you think so, Eve?’

Eve looked at her in bewilderment and did not reply.

‘But since you were eaten up with jealousy, and completely obsessed by the idea of Brandon and me cosily angling for little fishes together, you wouldn’t have paid any attention to Eve, and she would have been horribly bored. So I sent Brandon back. That’s all. What are we going to eat?’

Brandon nervously stubbed out his cigarette. He did not like her making fun – even imaginary fun – of the wonderful day they might have spent together. For an instant she felt sorry for him, but she was wound up and could not stop.

‘Your jokes are in exquisite taste,’ said Alan. ‘I hope Eve finds them amusing.’

‘I still have a good one in reserve,’ said Josée, ‘I know you’ll find it wildly funny. I’m keeping it for dessert.’

She no longer made any attempt to control herself. She had found again the wild euphoria, the taste for violent,

irreparable gestures that had been for years a permanent element of her nature. She felt inside her the laughter, the freedom, the glorious detachment of an earlier existence bursting once more into life. She rose from her seat and went to the kitchen.

They dined in heavy silence broken only by Josée's jokes, her holiday reminiscences and her reflections about food. The Kinnels finally thawed and began to laugh too. Alan remained completely silent. He stared at her and drank a great deal.

'Here comes the dessert,' said Josée suddenly, and she felt herself turn pale.

The waiter brought in a round cake topped by a single candle and placed it on the table.

'One candle,' said Josée. 'It's to celebrate the first time I've been unfaithful to you.'

They sat petrified, looking from Josée to the candle, as though trying to solve a riddle.

'The sailor on the boat,' she said impatiently. 'Ricardo.'

Alan got up, hesitated. Josée looked at him, then lowered her eyes. He went out slowly.

'Josée . . .' said Eve. 'What a very bad joke.'

'Not at all. Alan understood it perfectly.'

She picked up a cigarette and her hand shook. It took Brandon a full minute to find his lighter and snap it open.

'What were we talking about?' asked Josée.

She felt exhausted.

*

The door of the car shut with a bang and Josée stood by it, wavering. The Kinnels looked at her silently. Not a light in the house. Yet the Chevrolet was there.

'He must be asleep,' said Eve, without much conviction.

Josée shrugged her shoulders. No, he was not asleep. He was waiting for her. There would be a monumental scene. She had a horror of scenes, of any kind of conflict and,

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