

THE END OF THE LINE

New horror stories set on and around
the Underground, the subway, the Metro
and other places deep below

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THE LURE

Nicholas Royle

I've always thought that the Paris métro would make a great setting for a horror story. Knowing that Nicholas Royle has more than a passing knowledge of the city, I suggested it as the background for his contribution to The End of The Line. Nick has managed to capture the essence of that European capital in a story that has a powerful and dangerous erotic charge. There's something of the feel of a Robert Aickman tale here and, like Aickman, Royle is a master of suggestion.

AS A YOUNG man I lived in Paris for a year, in the north-eastern corner of the city, the 19th *arrondissement*. My nearest métro station was Bolivar but I almost never used it. Jaurès may have been further away, but it was a pleasant walk down avenue Secrétan, past the *boulangerie*, the *épicerie*, the *charcuterie*. Past the cheap supermarket – Monoprix or Franprix. I can't remember. It was a long time ago.

I was teaching English in a school on rue de Seine in the 6th, so I used to take line 5, *direction* Place d'Italie, from Jaurès to Gare du Nord and then change to line 4, *direction* Porte d'Orléans. I would get off at Odéon, then walk up boulevard St Germain and turn right up rue de Seine. I used to enjoy the various colours of the different times of day. In the morning everything seemed golden, the polished brass and gilt of the shop fronts, the windows full of *pains* and *baguettes*, the early autumn sun flashing on the flanks of passing trains on the elevated métro line at Jaurès – line 2. By late afternoon, when I left the school to walk back down rue de Seine, everything

had turned red. Giant hams and sausages, the scarlet faces of pheasants hanging by their feet. Beaujolais sloshing into glasses at pavement cafés. As I descended into the métro at Odéon, the sun would be suspended in the sky behind me like half a blood orange. By the time I emerged from underground at Jaurès, the sun would have set.

I first saw him on the final leg of my homeward journey one Friday afternoon in October. He sat with his guide dog at his feet. He wore glasses – an old, unfashionable frame with smeary, fingerprinted lenses. There was something about his eyes. They weren't right, somehow. He was sitting diagonally across from me, on the other side of the aisle, so my view was not the best, but I couldn't tear my eyes from him. He alighted, as I did, at Jaurès, but while I made for the exit, he veered off to change to line 7b, *direction* Pré-St-Gervais.

He was of average height and appeared to be in his late fifties, the same age as my father. Iron-grey hair, stiff as wire wool. A crumpled, resigned look to his jowly features. But the eyes...

I poured myself a glass of wine before dinner and sat at the round table in the centre of my tiny studio apartment. The brown wallpaper featured large pale-coloured flowers with dark centres that thrived in the damp conditions. Yellowish artificial light filtered through the lace curtains covering the tall windows giving on to the courtyard. In the kitchen, I kept the radio permanently tuned to a jazz station. I could barely hear it, but it was the only place where I managed to get any reception at all. The shower room was located just off the kitchen and late at night I would run the hose until the shower tray was full and then sit in it listening to the radio. I missed being able to have a bath.

My single bed was pushed into a corner. There was a nightstand with a bedside light that I kept switched on at all times to try to create a little cosiness. In addition, I had Blu-tacked some postcards to the wall to give me something to look at other than the sickly flowers. On the wall facing my bed I

had put up a couple of large film posters. At the foot of the bed was a door that the landlord had advised me would remain locked. It was partly glazed, like an interior door, but both the glass and the wooden panel below it were papered over with the same extravagant blooms.

I lifted my wine glass to my lips and thought about the man on the métro. It was not uncommon to see blind people wearing glasses, of course. He could be partially sighted. But the odd thing, I realised as I got a *demi-baguette* from the kitchen and took a knife to the Boursin, was his fixed stare. I couldn't remember seeing him blink.

I saw him again a couple of weeks later. It was a Sunday and I had gone to have lunch at the apartment of a colleague, an older woman whom I knew only as Madame Villemain. On my originally taking up my duties at the school at the beginning of the autumn term, my fellow English teachers, all of them French, had not been overly friendly. I had put this down to what I regarded as excessive French formality.

Madame Villemain was one of the older English teachers, in her early fifties like my mother. She commanded a certain fearful respect from the rest of the staff, smiling rarely, but she had favoured me with a flash of slightly gappy teeth on several occasions. I would smile back, taking pleasure in the illusion of complicity. She stopped me in the corridor and asked me how I was getting on. She didn't condescend to me by speaking in English. Instead, she stood very close and held my gaze with her ice-blue eyes. I was peripherally aware of a strip of lacy white undergarment visible at the open neck of her blouse. The combined aroma of coffee and cigarettes mingled with her strong body scent to produce a powerful cocktail. I felt myself start to blush and automatically lifted a hand to the side of my face. She smiled at me then but continued to speak in a low, fast voice. I was close to fluent and my understanding was better than my spoken French, but I had difficulty following her. Was she inviting me to lunch? Just me or would other people be

present? Obviously I couldn't ask. She scribbled her address and phone number on a scrap of paper torn from a student's homework and handed it to me before turning to go. Suddenly I was alone in the corridor, unsure what had just taken place, my face burning. I felt, somehow, as if her eyes were still on me.

Madame Villemain's home was a large apartment in an ancient building on the Isle St Louis. Out of breath from my climb to the fourth floor, I was taken aback when the door to the apartment was opened by a tall, gaunt man with a wide forehead and shoulder-length black hair streaked with grey. He failed to introduce himself beyond shaking my hand and issuing a grunt. He retreated into a book-lined study while Madame Villemain ushered me out on to a little balcony. While I stared at the view over the river, Madame Villemain's blue eyes seemed to bore into the side of my head. I asked about Monsieur Villemain and briefly turned to look at her, to catch a flare of irritation in her eye. She used her hands to make a dismissive gesture and muttered something about Freud, Jacques Lacan and the Université de Paris.

Over a lunch of salad and cold meats, she watched me while her husband pushed his plate to one side and lit a cigarette. He had been talking about his work; his wife's apparent lack of interest must have been as obvious to him as it was to me, but he seemed indifferent in turn. When he had finished his cigarette, he pushed back his chair and left the room. Madame Villemain and I then discussed the Luc Besson film, *Subway*, which we had both seen, separately, the week before. I confessed to having most enjoyed the look of the film, its fluorescent glimmer, while Madame Villemain gave a dark smile and made a remark about the film's star, Christophe Lambert. She used an idiomatic expression that was unknown to me, but its general tenor was clear and I looked down at my empty plate, embarrassed. She immediately apologised and placed her hand on my arm. I transferred my gaze from my plate to her hand: tanned from a summer spent in the Midi, it was marked by

spots of sun damage that revealed her age. I imagined her long, tapering fingers pressing into the flesh of my bare back.

Monsieur Villemain could be heard opening the door of his study. I looked at Madame Villemain, waiting for her to release my arm before her husband entered the room. She did so only at the last moment, but continued to hold my gaze while Monsieur Villemain roved about for something in a bureau at the far side of the room. I expected him to sense the tension in the air, but he paid neither of us the slightest heed. I left shortly afterwards, when Madame Villemain said she wanted to have a lie down. I half-imagined that it was intended as an invitation, even with her husband in the apartment.

I crossed the river via the Pont Marie and instead of descending into the métro continued walking. If you had asked me, I would have said I was wandering at random, but as Dr Freud understood, a man walking in a city is controlled by forces he may not even be aware of. I soon found myself walking up rue St Denis. At the lower end of the street, the young, lithe girls in their 20s and 30s in their bustiers and suspenders were of no interest to me. Regulation erotica for sexual conformists. Each to their own. It wasn't until I had crossed rue Réaumur that my responses began to remind me of Madame Villemain's apartment on the Isle St Louis – without the tension provided by the presence of Monsieur Villemain, perhaps, but then the absence of touch began to create another, very particular tension. I looked at each woman in every doorway and as my gaze slithered over exposed flesh and plunged into areas of shadow, I felt as if my eyes were an extension of my sense of touch. As on previous visits to this part of town, it was on rue Blondel that I came closest to surrendering control and crossing a threshold I had never crossed.

On the north side of rue Blondel, a tall, well-built woman in black stood in an open doorway at the top of a short series of steps. Statuesque, she towered over me. As I walked past, I tried to make sense of what she was wearing. It revealed a

certain amount and yet still contrived to leave much to the imagination. Mostly she seemed to be covered by a filmy veil, or veils, a fine mesh, offering a partial view of a magnificent décolletage and long, strong, powerful legs. When I reached boulevard de Sébastopol, I crossed over and walked back along rue Blondel on the other side. After a third pass, I felt a familiar combination of intense desire and self-loathing. I hurried towards the métro at Strasbourg St Denis, but on reaching the top of the steps realised it would make more sense to keep walking up boulevard de Strasbourg to the Gare de l'Est, which would obviate the need to change lines.

I saw him as soon as I entered the over-crowded carriage. The guide dog, the old-fashioned glasses. I was going to take a seat opposite him, but yielded to a determined-looking middle-aged woman. She said nothing, didn't even glance at me.

"*Je vous en prie, Madame,*" I said with heavy sarcasm, standing with my legs apart in the middle of the carriage.

The woman dismissed me with a glare.

The guide dog lifted its head and sniffed the air. The *signal sonore* announcing the closure of the doors rang out and the dog allowed its head to sink back down to the floor. The man's eyes did not blink and now that I was closer to him I could see why. He was wearing a mask – a rubber eye mask similar to a sleep mask but with eyes painted on to it. I couldn't tell if they were hand painted or if the mask had been imprinted by a machine. Now I understood why he wore the glasses – to obscure the outline of the mask and soften the intensity of the painted stare – though of course now that I had seen that he *was* wearing a mask, the presence of the glasses seemed even more bizarre.

Closer to, he looked a little older than I had first thought – early sixties perhaps – though it was hard to be sure without seeing his eyes.

The train pulled into the platform at Gare du Nord, the *signal sonore* was heard and the doors sprang open. The blind man leaned forward and patted his dog. A large number of

people got off, the woman among them, and I took her place. An Arab sat down next to the blind man, who checked on his dog again, making sure it was lying down between his feet and not blocking the way. The train was very soon back in the darkness of the tunnel. By the interior lights of the carriage I could make out the round edge of the mask at the side of the blind man's face. In fact, the mask had a slight curl on it, just above the elastic that secured it to his head, leaving a narrow black gap between rubber and skin. It wouldn't matter how long he stood in front of a mirror with his painted-on eyes, he wouldn't see that, and it would be hard to detect by touch.

The Arab got off at Stalingrad. There were now no other passengers in our immediate vicinity. I wondered if the blind man knew that someone was sitting opposite him. I imagined so. I raised my arm and waved it in the air between us. The dog stirred and the man patted the dog, murmuring reassurance. He sat back in his seat. I wanted to know what lay behind the mask. Did he have eyes at all? Were they open or closed? (Closed, surely.) What did they look like? Did they look anything like the ones painted on the mask? Had they ever worked or had he been born blind? Was it preferable to have been born blind and therefore never known what he was missing? Or to have lost his sight and therefore understand what it meant to see and have memories to draw on? Would that be a source of comfort or anguish?

At Jaurès, he got up, the dog preceding him as he headed towards the doors. I followed. When he went to change to line 7b, I still followed. I stood ten yards away on the platform. I watched him while we waited. After a couple of minutes, he turned his face towards the stillness and silence of the tunnel, and seconds later I heard the first rumblings of the approaching train. There was no doubt in my mind that he had sensed it before I did, whether he'd heard it or felt the slightest draught on his face. We were alone on the platform, and when the train arrived, the nearest carriage was empty. I followed him through the doors and remained standing while he went to sit down, led by the dog.

To my surprise he got to his feet as the train entered the next station – Bolivar. I maintained a careful distance between us as we ascended to street level. He crossed the road and walked a little way up avenue Secrétan before turning left into a doorway between a café and a *pâtisserie*. While he was inserting his key into the lock, I drew level. I stood on the pavement and watched as he opened the door. The dog was leading him into the hallway, but he stopped and looked back. His protuberant painted eyes found mine among the passing crowds and watched me for a moment before he turned back and followed his dog into the hallway. As the door started to close, I saw his hand reach up to open his *boîte à lettres*.

MADAME VILLEMMAIN INVITED me to go with her to the Bois de Vincennes. Again, it wasn't clear to me who or how many people would be going. Part of me hoped it would be just me and Madame Villemmain, and part of me didn't. She proposed that we meet at Bastille, which meant I could get line 5 from Jaurès, *direction* Place d'Italie, and stay on it past Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est. I felt jumpy on the métro and I wasn't sure if it was the prospect of spending the day with Madame Villemmain or the fact that I now half-expected to see the blind man whenever I descended below street level.

At Bastille I made my way to line 8, *direction* Créteil-Préfecture.

I spotted her as soon as I stepped on to the platform. She was wearing a long green woollen overcoat and had tied a gold silk scarf around her neck. I approached tentatively, but as soon as she saw me, she caught hold of my arms and offered me first one cheek and then the other. She started talking excitedly – in French – about what we were going to see or do at the Bois de Vincennes, but I was lacking key bits of vocabulary and I was distracted by her hand on my arm. Her left hand had remained attached to my right forearm, her long ringless fingers curled

around it. To emphasise certain points, she would squeeze my arm lightly. I wasn't sure if even she was aware she was doing it. There was a naturalness about it that I found exciting.

The métro arrived and its metallic doors rumbled open. It was busy and we stood leaning against the back of one of the blue-upholstered seats. Our hands touched on the vertical steel pole and neither of us hurried to reposition our fingers or apologise for the touch.

“J'aime beaucoup le métro,” she said. *“C'est comme si on était descendu à un autre niveau de la réalité.”*

“I don't know about another level of reality,” I said, “but I sometimes think of it as representing our subconscious.”

“Exactement!”

We got off at Liberté and crossed into the park. Madame Villemain was walking quickly and I almost had to break into a trot to keep up. It was entirely possible that I was imagining something that was not happening. Madame Villemain was nothing more than a friendly colleague who had gone out of her way to make me feel a little less isolated and lonely. The fact that she and her husband appeared rather tired of each other was not unusual and it certainly didn't mean she was about to have an affair with a callow Englishman young enough to be her son.

A horseshoe-shaped crowd had gathered between the velodrome and the lake. At its centre a man in old-fashioned dress wearing a sturdy gauntlet on his left hand used his right hand to twirl a lure on the end of a long line. Suddenly, the crowd gasped and people ducked as a large bird appeared, arrowing in low and catching the baited lure in mid-air. Madame Villemain clapped her hands together in excitement and then pointed at the bird, some kind of falcon or hawk, as it settled on the grass some metres away. It held down the lure with one claw and tugged at its meaty cargo – the reward – with its large, fearsome-looking beak.

“It is an 'arris' 'awk,” she told me, in English.

The falconer whistled and the bird, still clutching its prize, flew the short distance to his glove, settled and folded its magnificent wings. Deftly, like a magician, the falconer removed the lure from the hawk's grip while allowing it to keep the reward.

"Named," Madame Villemain went on, leaning towards me conspiratorially, "by Audubon after his great friend Edward 'arris."

I wanted to tell Madame Villemain that I liked the way she dropped her aitches. I looked at the hawk's yellow feet gripping the falconer's gauntlet. I could feel Madame Villemain's fingers on my arm again. The hawk adopted an upright posture on the glove. The slight overhang of its brow gave it a stern expression; its eyes were the same chestnut shade as the leading edges of its wings, while the body was a darker, muddier brown. Now that it had consumed the meat, the bird was constantly switching its gaze between the falconer and the crowd, reacting to the slightest movement. Its flexible neck allowed it to turn its head almost all the way around while its body remained still.

"Look," said Madame Villemain.

The falconer had produced a little leather hood, which he now slipped on to the bird's head from behind. The hawk accepted the imposition of the hood without protest and instantly became still.

"*La nuit est tombée*," said Madame Villemain in my ear, adding in English, "It thinks it is night-time. It immediately becomes compliant."

I turned to look at her but she was watching the hawk. A smile crept on to her lips.

AT THE END of the display – it continued with an eagle owl and a peregrine falcon, but it was the Harris' hawk that had impressed me most deeply with its docile acceptance of temporary blindness – Madame Villemain smoked a cigarette while we walked back to the métro. Our train rattled through

the tunnels and I watched the tendons in Madame Villemain's neck as she followed the toing and froing of other passengers. At one point she looked at me and I raised my eyes, too slowly. I lifted my hand to the side of my face and Madame Villemain's own hand went to the scarf at her neck, but instead of tightening it, she loosened the knot.

"I am 'ungry," she said. "Where do you like to eat? Take me where you like."

I decided to take her to Chartier – or to Le Drouot. That was the problem. I knew they were two restaurants under the same ownership, but in my mind they had become one. I had eaten in both a number of times, but I didn't know which was which or how to get to either. Instead of owning up to this, I allowed Madame Villemain to think I was confident and in charge. As a result, we got off the métro at least two stops early at Strasbourg St Denis and before I knew where we were we were walking south down boulevard de Sébastopol. We had already passed one turning on the right, which meant that rue Blondel would be next. I knew I had made a mistake and that we needed to head west, whichever of the two restaurants was our goal, since they were located close to each other either side of boulevard Montmartre. I couldn't suggest that we turn back, and to go straight on would only lead us further from our destination.

We turned into rue Blondel.

"Are we going the right way?" Madame Villemain asked me.

"Yes," I said without looking at her.

Women stood in doorways up and down the street. Many of them were about the age of Madame Villemain. I looked, because not looking seemed too obvious somehow. I never liked to do what was expected of me. I felt my skin prickling inside my clothing. I looked across the street. The tall woman in black was in her usual spot. She looked down at me and I looked away. Madame Villemain walked closer to me. I felt her arm bump softly against mine.

“It’s OK,” she said, but I couldn’t look at her.

We turned right at the end of the street and moments later we were walking west along boulevard de Bonne Nouvelle.

“I think I took us the wrong way,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said as she linked her arm through mine.

When we were finally sitting at a table in Le Drouot, I realised I had probably made a mistake in the choice of restaurant also. The reason I liked the place – and its sister restaurant – was because the prices were cheap and I enjoyed the legendary rudeness of the waiters. Bad wine didn’t matter to me. I always drank Beaujolais and didn’t know any better. But Madame Villemain would be accustomed to a better class of restaurant. To combat my nervousness, I drank quickly, and Madame Villemain matched my pace. Soon it didn’t matter that the wine was a bit rough and the veal rather thin. It wasn’t really about the food and drink.

We talked about school and Madame Villemain was indiscreet about colleagues. She propped her head in her hand, elbow on the table. Her shoes had been slipped off and her legs were crossed, one stockinged foot sticking out into the aisle, reminding me of my mother, who would often take off her shoes in restaurants, on the few occasions we ate out, and always wore nylons. If Madame Villemain didn’t retrieve it quickly enough, the waiter would catch the stray foot as he strode by. I felt certain that if I were to suggest we leave and take the métro to Jaurès, Madame Villemain would agree, but the very thought brought into my head an unwelcome image of the blind man sitting in the middle of an otherwise empty carriage, his dog at his feet.

I heard myself asking about Monsieur Villemain.

“What does he do in that study of his?” I asked. “What’s he into?”

By now we were speaking a mixture of French and English.

“Freud, mainly. The Oedipus complex,” she said, lighting a

cigarette. “Also Lacan. His theory of the Gaze. Laura Mulvey and the Male Gaze.”

“It means nothing to me,” I said, laughing.

She asked me why I had laughed and I explained that if I had said that line back home, among friends, one of them would have responded, “Oh Vienna.”

She didn’t get it. It meant nothing to her.

“You mean because of Freud?” she asked, smiling and frowning simultaneously.

“No,” I said, laughing again and dropping my hand on to hers for the first time. “It’s a line from a song.”

“So,” she said, “are you going to take me ’ome?”

I looked at her, aware that my mouth was hanging slightly open.

“Or I can just get the métro myself,” she added.

The penny dropped. “*Non, non. Je vous accompagne.*”

Outside it was just beginning to get dark. We went down into the métro at Rue Montmartre, then changed at Strasbourg St Denis, *direction* Porte d’Orléans. We didn’t talk much, just rocked with the motion of the train and watched other passengers. I asked her if she wanted to change at Châtelet, but she shook her head.

“I’ll walk from the Île de la Cité,” she said.

The Seine at dusk, Notre Dame floodlit by passing Bateaux Mouches – I had heard it said that if Rome was the City of Love, Paris was the City of Lovers. As we crossed the Pont St Louis I had to fight an urge to blurt out some romantic foolishness. I shoved my hands in my pockets so that they couldn’t grab Madame Villemain and press her up against the stone embankment. We stopped outside her building. She removed her shoes and held them in one hand, then offered her cheek and was gone, the heavy door clicking shut after her.

At Pont Marie I skipped down the steps into the métro. I watched the other passengers through an alcoholic haze. For some reason, I wasn’t at all surprised when I changed to line

5 at Gare de l'Est and found myself in the same almost empty carriage as the blind man.

I was surprised, however, when he opened his mouth and spoke: "How are you this evening?" he said, across the space between us, in heavily accented English.

I felt as if the métro tunnel had become a lift shaft. "What?" I stared at his unblinking eyes, which were pointed straight at me. I moved closer to him, took a seat opposite. "You can see," I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

He didn't bother to answer that.

I stared at him but his face gave nothing away.

"Why did you speak to me in English?" I asked.

"Because you are English."

The whites of his painted eyes glimmered. I looked at him, but felt as if I was seeing someone else. I tried to think of another context in which a man might speak to me from behind a mask. There was nothing sinister about the surgical mask a doctor or dentist might wear out of courtesy for you, for your benefit. You could see the eyes and the movement of the jaw, maybe even the push and pull of the fabric of the mask as words were spoken. This, though, was like speaking to an automaton or doll, although the lips moved with a naturalness that was denied by the mask. It was bewildering, alienating.

"How did you even know I was here? On this train, in this carriage?"

"I can smell you. I can smell your fear."

I got up and looked down at him, feeling nauseous, full of violence and chaos. The dog immediately rose to its feet, a low growl building in its throat. The man reached out a hand and the dog sat back down again, but kept a wary eye on me.

"How did you know I was English?" I asked, my jaw clenched.

"You spoke. You let a woman have your seat and she didn't thank you and you said, '*Je vous en prie.*' A Frenchman would never say that. A Frenchman would not be so sarcastic. Ironic,

yes, perhaps, but not sarcastic. Your sarcasm was very English. Actually,” he went on, “your accent is quite good. It was your mentality that gave you away.”

I moved across and stood by the doors.

“This is not your stop,” he said.

I needed some air. I needed to be above ground.

The doors opened and I stepped off the train. In the brief silence before the *signal sonore* I heard him mutter, ironically, “*Bonsoir, Monsieur.*”

OVER THE NEXT ten days, I spent more time in my apartment than I had during recent weeks. Some evenings I got through two bottles of Beaujolais instead of my customary one. I had a lot of ‘baths’, listened to a fair amount of jazz.

I didn’t see much of Madame Villemain. If our paths crossed, it always seemed that one of us was in a rush to do something or be somewhere. She smiled at me and I stored those smiles up. I walked the length of rue Blondel a couple of times but I didn’t climb any steps or cross any thresholds. For a few days I used different routes to get to work. I walked down rue de Meaux to Colonel Fabien and took line 2 to Nation, then changed. Or I wandered over to Louis Blanc and took a roundabout journey on line 7, *direction* Mairie d’Ivry, getting out at Châtelet and crossing the river on foot to reach rue de Seine. The unpredictability of these routes meant that either I was late for work, or I sat on the métro worrying that I would be late for work. And if I knew I had plenty of time I experienced non-specific anxiety instead, only it wasn’t really all that non-specific.

Gingerly, I returned to line 5, changing at Gare du Nord. I did see him in the distance on one occasion, but he was at the other end of the carriage and there were enough people between us that I doubted even his sense of smell was acute enough to alert him to my presence.

I had just reached the end of a seemingly endless lesson with a class of 14-year-olds, none of whom had any interest in learning English, when I noticed Madame Villemain coming towards me in the corridor.

“Are you finished?” she asked.

So many of her questions or statements could be interpreted in a number of ways, it seemed to me. I said that I was and she demanded that I take her for a drink. We went up the road to La Palette, a few doors down from La Galerie 55, the so-called English theatre of Paris.

“Have you seen that?” she asked me, pointing with an unlit cigarette to the poster in the window advertising the theatre’s latest production, *The Pink Thunderbird*.

I shook my head.

“*C’est nul,*” she said.

“I’ll cross it off my list,” I said.

I remarked that she seemed agitated. She told me that Monsieur Villemain – she used his Christian name, Bernard, for the first time in my presence – was spending the evening with one of his students. The French for this – “*une de ses étudiantes*” – included more information than the same line in English would have done. Madame Villemain was jealous, but I didn’t mind being used.

“*Je veux aller au cinéma,*” she said.

“*Qu’est-ce que tu veux voir?*”

“Un orange mécanique.”

“*Ça se joue où?*”

Madame Villemain abandoned her cigarette in the ashtray and took that week’s *Pariscope* from her bag, turning to the cinema pages. *A Clockwork Orange* was playing at Studio Galande, a short walk down boulevard St-Germain. There was a screening in three-quarters of an hour. Madame Villemain said she would prefer to walk by the river. I paid and we left, walking up rue Guénégaud to the *quai* and turning right. She asked me if I had seen the film and I said I had been to see it

in my first week in Paris. I explained about its having been withdrawn from public exhibition in England and assured her that I was more than willing to see it again. She had seen it many times, she said. It was her favourite film.

During the rape scene, she took hold of my hand.

As we left the cinema, she said she did not want to go home. In fact, what she actually said – “*Je ne veux pas rentrer chez moi*” – arguably contained a double meaning.

Emboldened by the spirit of Malcolm McDowell’s portrayal of Alex DeLarge, I said, “*Vous préférez rentrer chez moi?*”

She nodded, linked my arm and we walked toward the métro at St Michel. Between Etienne Marcel and Réaumur Sébastopol, she kissed me. We changed at Gare de l’Est and on the platform for line 5, *direction* Eglise de Pantin, I kissed her back. I kept my eyes closed, partly because that was the normal thing to do and partly because I was afraid of whom I might see further down the platform if I opened them. We walked up avenue Secrétan arm in arm. I apologised for my apartment because I felt I had to.

“*Vous êtes jeune,*” she said once we were inside, as if this explained – or excused – the lamentable standard of my accommodation.

I went to switch off the bedside light, but Madame Villemain requested that I leave it on.

Her hands were soft.

Afterwards, we lay together in silence. Suddenly self-conscious, I picked up my crumpled shirt from the floor and put it on, fastening a couple of buttons.

Madame Villemain lit a cigarette and looked around for an ashtray. I went and got her a side plate from the kitchen. She smoked for a few moments, then asked me to make her a coffee. I said I only had wine and she said that would do. I fetched the bottle and filled two glasses. A claw-like hand shot out to grasp one of them and she swallowed half of its contents in one go. She pointed to the half-glazed door at the foot of the bed.

“What is beyond the door?” she asked.

“Nothing. I mean I don’t know. It’s locked. It’s got wallpaper on it.”

“I can see that. You should decorate.”

“I’m not allowed to. The landlord was very clear. The apartment stays as it is.”

“Did the school find it for you?” she asked.

I nodded.

“I have to go,” she said.

“I’ll take you back,” I said.

“There is no need.”

I protested, but she insisted. She would get a taxi.

I watched her get dressed.

“This will probably not happen again,” she said. “My zip, please.”

Overcome by a terrible weariness, I struggled to an upright position and helped her with her zip.

After Madame Villemain had gone, I lay awake for a long time staring at the half-glazed door at the foot of the bed. Thoughts of the falconer and his Harris’ hawk became jumbled up with images of Monsieur and Madame Villemain in their apartment, and of Madame Villemain in my apartment, indeed, in my bed. I slept badly, dreaming that strange noises were keeping me awake. In the morning the apartment smelt of cigarette smoke.

I STOPPED USING the métro. I found I could no longer take the stairs down without expecting to bump into the blind man. I felt his painted eyes on me as I walked along the platform. Every time the *signal sonore* rang out and the doors snapped open, I expected to see his dog leading him into the carriage.

I discovered that I could get at least half way to the river by walking along the Canal St Martin and then there were a hundred different routes to the Left Bank that didn’t go anywhere near rue Blondel.

At school, Madame Villemain still smiled at me, but it was a kindly, motherly smile, now, more than anything. I wondered if perhaps it always had been, if what had happened had been some kind of accident, a mistake. I didn't feel any pressing need to question Madame Villemain about it.

Then one night I went to the kitchen to open a second bottle of wine and happened to notice, just in time, the two empty bottles on the worktop. I put the corkscrew back in the drawer and pushed the third, unopened bottle away. I walked into the shower room and leaned my hands on the sink. I had avoided mirrors for a few days after reading up on Lacan and the Gaze. I looked exactly like someone who had got through two bottles of wine in three hours. Behind me the radio played Thelonious Monk.

I left the shower room, passed through the kitchen and re-entered the bed-sitting room. I sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. I looked at the walls, at the flowers on the wallpaper, pale petals and dark centres. I looked at my film posters. I looked at the half-glazed door with its own plastering of wallpaper. I looked at the bed itself and remembered Madame Villemain lying there.

I sighed deeply and got to my feet. Putting a jacket on, I left the apartment. I turned left into the street and then left again into rue Baste, and left once more into avenue Secrétan. When I reached the doorway between the café and the *pâtisserie*, I had to wait ten or fifteen minutes before someone eventually exited the building. I let them get a few metres away before grabbing the door and slipping inside. I looked at the bank of *boîtes aux lettres* mounted on the wall. I had not forgotten which one was his. The second one from the left on the bottom row. Number seven, I saw. There was a name written on a piece of card in that strangely illegible handwriting that all French people seemed to have, but I wasn't particularly curious.

I passed apartments 1, 2 and 3. A door to the courtyard stood ajar. On the far side were numbers 4 and 5. I heard music coming from one of them. Another door led to a dark passageway. I

pressed the timer switch, but the bulb was not working. I delayed to allow my eyes to become accustomed to the dark, then proceeded. There was a door on the right – number 6 – and a short way after that I found number 7 on the left.

I stood in front of the door for a moment listening, but no sound came from within. I knocked once. Twice. There was no answer. All I could hear was the faint music I'd heard in the courtyard. I knocked again. Once I had decided there was no one in, I barged the door with my shoulder. With a splintering of wood, a narrow gap appeared. I gave the door another shove and it yielded. I entered and pushed the door to behind me, waiting to see if anyone would come to see what all the noise was about. No one did.

The apartment was a similar size to mine, but the layout was different. I had entered directly into the kitchen. There were some dirty pots and cutlery both in the sink and on the work surface. They had not been left to soak: the food on them was congealed and would be difficult to remove. There was a head of garlic on top of the fridge. It was dried out, little more than a husk. Some over-ripe tomatoes sat in a chipped bowl on a shelf. At the left-hand end of the kitchen, behind a plastic curtain, was the shower room, which was no better appointed than mine.

A doorway led from the kitchen into the bed-sitting room. Under the skylight, which was the only window in the apartment, there was a small desk with a chair tucked beneath it. On the desk was a spiralbound notebook with a number of pages missing (otherwise empty), a couple of cheap ballpoints, and a small, neat pile of three books – one of Simenon's Maigret stories, a *Série Noire* translation of a Robin Cook novel and *Djinn* by Alain Robbe-Grillet. They were standard paperback editions, not Braille. Elsewhere in the room there was a single bed, a dog basket, a free-standing radiator, a small chest of drawers and an armchair that needed re-covering. Behind the armchair was another door, glazed at the top, wooden panel at the bottom. The glass was covered over, but only on the other

side. I dragged the armchair out of the way and tried the door handle. The door appeared to be locked. I inspected the top half more closely. There was small hole in the covering on the other side of the glass. The hole was more or less at eye level. I approached the hole and peered through into my apartment – the bed, the nightstand, the round table in the middle of the room. You could see just about everything. It offered a very good view of the bed.

I pictured the half-glazed door from my side. The wallpaper on the glass. The hole must have been cut in the dark centre of one of the flowers.

I moved away from the door and repositioned the armchair. I sat down in the armchair. Faintly, I could hear the radio in my apartment. I looked around the room from where I sat. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I noticed something I hadn't seen before, a little bedside table with something resting on it. I got up and walked across the room. From the bedside table I picked up the rubber eye mask. I turned it over in my hands. It had been hand-painted. There were little holes in the centre of the pupils that looked as if they had been made with a large-bore needle. I held the mask at arm's length and decided I could only see the holes now because I knew they were there. Besides, I had only ever seen the mask behind a pair of glasses.

I went to put the mask back down on the bedside table and saw that it had been resting on a piece of paper. I picked it up. It was a photocopied notice giving advance warning of a talk by Bernard Villemain at Université Paris V. The title of the talk appeared at the top of the page: 'Falconry and the Oedipus Complex: the Psychology of the Lure'. It was in French; the translation is mine. There was a bit of blurb, which mentioned names and theories that were familiar to me: Freud, Lacan and the Gaze, Laura Mulvey and the Male Gaze.

The date was two weeks hence.

I replaced the notice on the bedside table and positioned the mask on top of it.

I stood in the middle of the apartment, thinking.

I knelt on the arm of the armchair and had another look through the spy hole into my apartment.

I walked into the kitchen and opened various drawers and closed them again.

I inspected the damage to the door.

I took a glass from a cupboard and filled it from the cold tap. I drank the water and placed the glass on the worktop next to a dirty knife.

I went back into the other room and sat down in the armchair to wait.