

THE FIRST WOMAN



SUSAN SMIT

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'The story of a passionate love between a dashing handsome heartbreaker and a prima donna is described by Susan Smit in a compelling fashion' *De Telegraaf*

The First Woman

She was the diva of all international opera houses that had sworn never to get married. He was the fighter, the gambler, and the heartbreaker with the angelic face who excelled on stage. Together Geraldine Farrar and Lou Tellegen starred in silent movies and were one of the most legendary Hollywood couples of their time.

In *The First Woman* Susan Smit depicts, with a razor-sharp pen, their boundless ambition, their doubts, fears and passionate love that is doomed to fail. But at the same time the novel is the story of an exciting era, in which Europe loses its innocence after a gruesome war; the women's movement slowly gains power and a mass medium is born that will change the world for good: cinema. With this dazzling novel, based on historic facts and which takes us from the backstreets of Paris and the courts of the German Empire, to New York and Hollywood, Smit will again touch the heart of her readers.

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Quotes

‘Smit describes the magnetic relationship between the two stars in a sensitive manner and endows the reader with something from the zeitgeist, the First World War about to break out and the rise of the movie as a mass medium.’
– *Trouw*

‘The story of a passionate love between a dashing handsome heartbreaker and a prima donna is described by Susan Smit in a compelling fashion.’ – *De Telegraaf*

Susan Smit has chosen her subject well, a star couple from the beginning of the twentieth century, and has written it up carefully in a novel that is somewhere between a documentary (with an eye for the First World War and the rise of the moving pictures) and a psychological novel.’ – *de Volkskrant*

It’s clever how Smit’s novel involves you totally in the marriage of those two ambitious reckless and faithless people. You also get to experience the state of affairs in the world just after the First World War.’ – *Veronica Magazine*

‘With *The First Woman* an unknown, beautiful love affair is being thrust into the spotlights again.’ – *Hebban* *****

Susan Smit

The First Woman

Lebowski Agency, 2017

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Nimwegen, 2017

© Lebowski Publishers, Amsterdam 2017

Cover design: Peter de Lange

Photograph of the author: © Danique van Kesteren

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

www.lebowskipublishers.nl

www.overamstel.com

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For 'the indecent, the greedy, the imperious, the unruly,
the apostate, the flammable and the tumultuous'.

(after Toon Tellegen, whose great-great-grandfather was
Lou's brother)

Geraldine

Hollywood, 1935

Shortly after midnight the telephone rings. My father is in bad health and I dash into the living. As I take up the phone a man asks me if it's me talking. Breathless I confirm. His matter-of-fact tone reassures me. This is not the voice of someone bringing bad news.

'I'm with the press and I thought you'd probably appreciate to know Lou Tellegen deceased.'

Hearing your name increases my heartbeat. You being dead does not pervade immediately.

I loved you the way a person probably can love only once in a lifetime. I worshipped you, but the image of you as well. Oh, the fantasies in which we garb our lust. I was young, not yet aware that our gaze upon our beloved says more about our own heart than about the other one's. In time, reality drove off the dream, but that is no more than a rule – one best accepted without bitterness.

I was attracted by your darkness, not by your light. It was a fatal, irrevocable beckoning, like the sucking power of a pitch-black void. Your obscurity was hanging hea-

vily around me. At the same time some playfulness shone through your masculine earnest, cool like a street kid's. There was a frivolity which seemed to keep you from really losing your grip, whatever the circumstances.

You were a bum with a gentleman's distinction, muscles steeled, face aristocratic. Side view sharp and powerful, the way they would print them on countless movie posters in the years to come, most of the time looking down on a woman in your arms, either willing or recalcitrant.

When we first met, you were an enigma to me, but your keynote reached me already. It was a deep, humming note, as breathtaking as it was uncanny, which, given the chance, would drown everything else out.

I let you into my life, fully aware I did put it all in jeopardy doing so – all I had achieved, all I had acquired. I did it in the blink of an eye, though I made it seem you still had to conquer me.

'How do you feel hearing this, and what can you say about it?'

The man's voice on the other end of the line has an excited quiver now.

I expected my desires to have worn away over the years, to have been perished together with my rancor and resentment. But time did not do its healing job. And your death does not bring mercy.

There should be a song about you and me. I would sing it in a thin voice alternately resounding with disarray, flaring

hope and resistance. I would make my voice whine, rise, fall, shiver and exult. I would sing it once. And never again.

I reach for the table's edge, then for the sofa's back, stooped down. It feels like someone kicked a ball into my stomach.

'Why would his death interest me anyhow?' I ask calmly and I hang up.

Part 1

1 Lou

August 1901, Paris

A screaming sound awakens him. Someone wiggles up a window, pulls it up and beats a rug. Lou pulls himself up, sitting on the wooden street bench. Now he can hear the voices of day laborers, maids and clerks walking to their jobs. Their laughing echoes from the facades. People suddenly disappear underground, on a stair to a stop on the new subway line. The line is said to cross underneath the whole city, from east to west.

So he did fall asleep, partly sprawled across his suitcases. Getting up from the bench he feels his rigid muscles and stretches his stiffened limbs. Pain is pounding in his head and whining in his pelvis. He lifts his two suitcases, again surprised by their weight. Yesterday an uninvited call boy took up one of the valises on the platform in the Gare du Nord. The boy lifted it slightly, dropped it cursing and disappeared into the crowd. The suitcases are filled with books, clothes, shoes, everything he owns.

In the shrill morning light the baroque of facades, windows, porches and balconies shows its filth and damages. It's the very patina on the stately blocks of houses and the wide

boulevard, that he missed in yesterday's gloaming, bringing out the city's grandeur, like the crackled skin of a grand lady. He likes this city's mug: arrogant, gracious, demanding. As if the city is meant for him, a feeling he never had before in the cities he lived in.

Yesterday night he had stopped in front of a sign saying *chambres meublés à louer*, and had walked into the alley. The concierge showed him a stuffy room with only a bed in it, but as he drew back the curtains he saw an elegant balcony looking out on strollers on the Avenue de Clichy. The room was half a franc a night, payment in advance. Not much later he woke up by a vague sensation of disquiet and itch. In the light of the candle he lit he saw the origin: the bed was crawling with beetles and lice. The walls as well were covered with insects. Panicking and disgusted he dressed and took his things. He did not bother to walk down the stairs but dropped his suitcases from the balcony and jumped down after them.

In a public bathhouse, open around the clock, he took a private bathroom and washed. Another half a franc. Now he's got two of them left in his pocket.

This morning he's not concerned with his money problems. The sun had gained power and the August foliage in the trees is casting a vibrating mosaic of summer light and shadow across the pavement. The light seems to have taken an advance on his golden future. Paris will do him good. Something in the air is giving him the feeling he could live here forever, like a god.

In his coat pocket there's a letter. This introduction is his

entrance to Paris' artist world, eventually bound to guide him to the theatre world. It had been written by Constantin Meunier, a Belgian sculptor he modelled for, and it is addressed to Auguste Rodin. There's no address on the envelope, but as Rodin is a well-known artist, there can't be a problem tracing him.

After some asking around he finds indeed someone who can tell him the way to Rodin's studio, midtown, on the Rue de l'Université.

To save money for his Parisian adventure Lou had worked for months as a nude model for sculptors in Brussels. His last job was one many models refused, even though the payment was good: his whole body was being plastered. All of his body hair had to be shaven off, even the small hairs on his arms, and his skin was oiled. Every session ice cold soaked plaster was applied to a different body part, and then he had to stand completely motionless until it had dried. Pulling it off caused a biting pain from every hair left behind.

He was asked to take a difficult pose: legs bent as if sitting on horseback, his left arm raised as if holding a sword. Worst was the drying of the plaster on his stomach and chest: as he was ordered to move as little as possible, he was forced to take such little gasps of air that his vision went black.

The whole procedure took about a week and afforded him a month's wages. Sadly enough he lost the amount, as well as all his other savings, in four days' time, gambling.

Every time he was convinced the next night he would win all of it back, and more.

Money or not, he was determined to go to Paris. A train ticket was just affordable.

On the Quai d'Orsay Lou drops his suitcases, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Someone asks him a question in French. Only as the man gestures he wants a smoke, Lou shakes his head. Sitting in the train from Brussels he had already been shocked noticing the French here is completely different from the Walloon he was used to hear in the past months. He will have to take a language course before he will be able to present himself at the Conservatoire Nationale de Musique et de Déclamation.

Two things are necessary here to make it as an actor: speaking flawless French in de Parisian society edition, and possessing a certificate of the Conservatoire, which admits only very few foreigners.

At the studio he knocks at the door. A young man opens the door slightly and asks him stiffly what it is he wants. Lou hands him the letter. The young man accepts it and closes the door.

He is feeling neither afraid nor excited. In moments as this the restlessness, usually following him in his tracks, disappears. Time opens up and everything shrouds in a vital silence. The kind of silence preceding a thunderstorm. It is the vacuum from which things are born. He loves the non-existent, the yet to be shaped, the uncertain. The moment the dice is rolling after throwing it.

Seventeen years old he is, but years ago he already left his birthplace in Brabant, that didn't have anything to offer to him anymore. When circumstances are weighing you down, you have to change the circumstances, is how he feels. Never let them define you. When things don't appeal to you, it is time to throw the dice again. The timorous don't touch their dice, fearing they will do even worse than they've done so far. They comply with their circumstances.

Mankind can be divided into two kinds: those who're satisfied with what suffices, and those who are not.

He has been waiting for more than ten minutes now. He looks up, at the bright blue. Suddenly the door swings open and the young man summons him inside. He passes through three rooms with high ceilings and pale grey paint on the walls. Countless stone and marble statues are piled together, most of them studies, fragments, unfinished torsos and busts. The next moment he is eye to eye with the master.

Rodin turns out to be a sturdy man of average height, but with an unusually big head, a full beard and bristly eyebrows. One of Rodin's hands is resting on the clay figure he's working on, his other one is holding Meunier's letter. He is looking at him inquisitively.

Before turning around he says: '*Déshabillez-vous.*'

Lou is sufficiently used to hear this, in Walloon as well, that he moves to a corner and undresses completely, without an afterthought. When he is done, Rodin is engrossed in his work. After a few minutes Lou clears his throat. Rodin turns and starts walking around him to view him from every

angle. Then Rodin says in a neutral tone he can get dressed again.

‘Come back at five. You can leave your luggage here.’

After a few hours Lou finally is getting used to the silence in the studio. Any intention of starting a conversation has ebbed and there is a peaceful noiselessness now. Only the scratching of charcoal on paper.

Rodin not only likes to work in silence, as many artists do, but he is silent on any other moment as well. The day before, during the trip by train from Paris to Rodin’s house and studio in Meudon, just outside the city, not a word had been said. The lack of communication had embarrassed Lou, but he was also relieved that this way he was not confronted with this hardly intelligible French.

At his arrival madame Rodin had shown him around the villa, where he would be allowed to take his meals, taken him to the studio where he was supposed to pose, and the garden guesthouse where he would be staying. She insisted he would call her Rose. Only because it is widely known that Rodin and Rose are a couple – though not married – he did not presume she was his housekeeper. Even the two of them hardly did exchange a word. With her robust nose and tiny mouth Rose certainly is no beauty, but her eyes bear witness of a gentle enthusiasm.

Without looking him in the eye Rodin walks toward him and slightly changes the stance of his left arm, as if taking a flower’s stem, rearranging a bouquet. Then he turns back to his easel to continue his sketching.

To this man he is not a living human but an object of study. Lou does not manage to see this as a personal insult. As long as the very image of him, soon and for eternity to be seen by thousands of people, will be worthwhile.

He can feel *their* eyes pointing at him, not Rodin's.

Lou's job is to file sketches and to pose in moments convenient for Rodin. Which is often. The man can't be caught taking a moment's rest. Even when he comes home from his Paris studio he's constantly at work, only pausing to sleep and take his meals.

During the sessions Lou has to embrace a woman with one hand, holding on to piece of rock with the other. To his regret Rodin has separate sessions for the male and female models.

In order to shed his *patois*, he trains his French in conversations with Rose and two young assistants working in a workroom at the villa's backside. In the library he finds works of Victor Hugo and Corneille to recite from.

The weekly gages are more than moderate. Enough to save some and to send a monthly extra to his mother, for the rent.

A few months earlier he had just been employed by the Rotterdam Theatre Company, acting in a mediocre comedy, and one time, just before entering the stage he found out his father had died. Browsing a newspaper his eyes fell on his father's name, Second Lieutenant in the Dutch forces and author of manuals about warfare strategy. The

article said he had fallen in action in the Second Boer War in Swaziland, fighting side by side with the Dutch Boers against the British.

Minutes later Lou was playing his part, feeling as if he was having a strange dream, adequately delivering the jokes and puns but scarcely aware of his co-actors and the laughter of the audience, which did not have a clue. That same night he resigned from the theatre and boarded the train to Maastricht.

On his arrival he found his mother in distress and was to learn his father had been buried already. The newspaper containing the article turned out to be three days old.

Not long before his parents had broken up, and his mother didn't want to tell him why. She, a dancer of Spanish-Dutch descent, had been his mistress for nearly twenty years.

A couple of weeks later they found out both of them had been disinherited. His own fate did not surprise Lou, having a history of quarrels with his father, but his mother's did. His father had taken care all his life to make sure she could live in wealth. Now his whole fortune ended up with his legal wife and their two daughters.

During the hours of posing for Rodin Lou's mind circled around his father, the man with the neatly combed hair, the bellowing voice and the broad torso wrapped in a uniform covered with decorations that jingled and jangled with every step. Just like Rodin, his father used to talk in orders, be it in a much louder and grimmer tone.

'You could grow up to be a man, Lou,' he can hear his

father say, as if he's standing in front of him at this very moment. He must have been around fourteen. 'If you'd learn to forgo, if you'd sacrifice your self-preservation to a higher goal, if you'd protect your country, your people, your belongings. In your case,' – Lou recalls exactly how in that instant his father bent over to him, so close that he could feel his breath on his skin – 'you'd have to conquer your weak character. And now I should go to my children.'

The man was not afraid of anything, literally. His last battle he had fought like a barbarian, without a rifle but with a sword. Seventy-three stabs were needed to cut him down.

In fact he had been chopped to pieces.

The Meudon days elapse one by one, ever more colorlessly. Rodin himself does not seem to feel the need of a social life. Once in a while a friend joins the dinner table, but generally he has dinner together with Lou. Even Rose has her meal elsewhere.

And just around the corner sizzling Paris is waiting. Rodin must feel his restlessness, for he himself advances the subject.

'Here you've got all you need, and there is no reason to roam the streets of Paris,' Rodin says without expecting a reply.

Lou does not offer him one, knowing it would only afford him another severe look.

It is dark when Lou climbs the fence to walk down the hill to the highway leading to Paris. Wagons filled with vegeta-

bles, fruits and other fresh food are driving to Les Halles, the big covered market on the edge of town. The wagons are only being led by the horses, for most of the drivers have fallen asleep, bridle in hand. They are plodding along. One of the carts is driving faster. The driver lashes the horses for more speed. That's the one he needs.

Lou waves his arms to get the man's attention. The very moment he thinks the cart will pass him by, the man slows down allowing Lou to climb on the driving box beside him.

'To Paris?' he asks, to be certain.

'Forty-five minutes,' the man says.

Satisfied he rushes on.

De surroundings are getting less and less rural. Street lights shine on the cart. His thoughts wander to everything he has seen this one day he was strolling through Paris. The bustle, the beautiful women, the promises floating in the air.

The marketplace is a complete commercial city. In front of the iron pavilions, on the sidewalk, crates are piled up, containing onions, cauliflowers, oranges, potatoes and leeks, wagons filled with milk cans and pushcarts. Some of the pushcarts are loaded with cheeses, some with fish and others with entire animals, freshly slaughtered. It seems hardly possible all of this could be eaten by Parisians.

The pavilions turn out to be surrounded by public houses. He walks into one of those, sniffing the familiar smell of tobacco and stale beer.

From time to time somebody slips into a room in the

back of the pub. Lou takes a look, seeing what he hoped for. A couple of men are playing cards at a round table. Their faces almost hidden behind the clouds of smoke they produce. In the middle of the table banknotes and coins.

He's being watched.

'Play?' one of the men asks in a biting tone. 'For just watching is not the game here.'

'Play,' Lou says.

A chair is being moved to the table.

The first fifteen minutes he keeps a low profile. He is hardly able to follow the conversation, but that allows him to better concentrate on the game. The French call jacks, queens and kings Lancelot or Judith, but anything else is familiar to him.

He has been dealt a reasonable hand, so he puts in a few coins and feels a soft buzz rising.

He likes the sedation connected to gambling. It chases all thoughts and trivialities, it's only the game that counts. You go down a hole in time. He can go on for whole nights, utterly focused and agitated, colors and shapes becoming so intense he thinks he is hallucinating. The higher the stakes, the more time seems to stretch and even come to a stop.

That night he gains fourteen francs.

'I could gain a lot more,' he calls out to torment his opponents, 'but I have to get back.'

One of the players gets up a little too quickly, looking grimly his way.

His hands raised apologetically Lou walks away.

On the first empty wagon leaving the city in the early

morning he rides back.

In Meudon the villa's curtains are still drawn. Unseen he climbs the fence and reaches the guesthouse.

His heart pounding he undresses and slips under the blankets.

In the weeks to follow he is spending at least four nights a week in Paris, usually in the vicinity of Les Halles. He is drinking beer, eating onion soup, chatting with market people, drunkards and night hawks, playing cards and dice. It's unclear whether Rodin – or more likely Rose – is aware of his trips. They do not mention it anyway.

Those nocturnal adventures do not expel the creeping disquiet from his body. Things seem too predictable to him. Predictability is a standstill. Sleepwalking. He is taking ever bigger risks, returning home ever later in the morning and drinking ever larger quantities.

There is three of them, and immediately Lou knows his chances to win a fight are none. In his pocket are the coins he gained playing baccarat during the last hours. He is just about to return them, in order to appease the situation, as the largest one deals him an uppercut, knocking his head backwards.

When he is back on his feet something has changed inside him. Fighting back is what he wants, not minding the outcome.

There's no need to take a step forward to punch the man in the stomach. This time it is him surprising the other

one. The man buckles, gets up flinging for Lou's head, but Lou dodges the fist in time. One of the others approaches, kicking him in the side.

He is able to remain upright. Then he feels a sharp stinging pain in his hand. From the corner of his eye he sees a flash. The third man raises the knife, looking at him, frowning.

'*En plus?*' he asks mockingly.

Lou gives the man his most loathing look, shaking his head. Then he raises his hands and surrenders.

One of the men is holding on to him while the others empty his pockets.

As they're walking away, he can feel his heart pounding fiercely. He realizes he is smiling.

The hours Rodin is working in his city studio, Lou is spending in the library. He studies the French language and trains his brain by memorizing large stretches of text. Most of Victor Hugo's works he knows by heart now. The ideal spot to recite them is the museum building in the garden, where the high ceiling is resounding and the statues that have not found an owner yet form his audience. There he recites *Hernani* and *Ruy Blas*, Rodin's bust of Victor Hugo at an arm's length away.

One Sunday, when he's assisting Rodin filing his studies and sketches, words are leaving his mouth before he thought them over thoroughly.

'I'll be off,' he says.

‘When do you plan to leave?’ Rodin reacts.
‘Tomorrow,’ he can hear himself say.

2 Geraldine

1901, Berlin

If I'd want to tell you who I was before I met you, Lou, I would have to start with this moment: the decisive performance which unlocked the Berlin opera world – and, all things considered, the world – for me.

I recall the sight of heavy velvet curtains. I cannot see the audience, but I can hear it. The door is ajar and through the crack I can see part of the ballroom. The Vom Rath's mansion is weighed down with gold leaf, chandeliers and ornamental plasterwork. Every inch meant to impress.

Incessant buzzing is putting me off focus. German, a language I neither speak nor understand, sounds like a range of rough vocals and pale consonants. Single men's voices sound up over the chatter. The higher their position, the louder people tend to talk – widening their audience. People swarm around them, hoping to be noticed by the speaker and advancing their positions that way.

I am not different in that respect. When I'll start singing in a while, it has to be to one man's liking: count Von Hochberg, director of the Berlin Königlichen Hofoper.

I've been asked to sing for guests from the Berlin elite. Not much later it turned out the very night of the performance there was to be a ball at the imperial court. To be sure the count would be able to attend, the party was advanced a couple of hours, to teatime. First it was the acoustics that worried me, but now it is the atmosphere embarrassing me. Teatime is fit for eating pastry and chattering, not for listening to grandiose arias.

The value of illumination to the effect of the performance is not to be underestimated, as my mother says. Shril daylight vests all in a sobering clarity that is detracting all drama. Therefore my mother has requested the curtains should remain closed and the lights on, as if this is a soirée. Moreover she wants me not to just step up from the floor, but to make an entrance.

Frau Vom Rath was reluctant, so my mother had to insist, but in the end she conceded.

My fingers are grasping the pearls around my neck. Still, after all these years, I can evoke this sensation of these cool, smooth drops underneath my fingertips.

I am wearing a pale blue evening gown, made for the occasion, *crêpe de Chine* with silver thread broidery and white silk gauntlets up to my armpits.

My mother pinned up my brown hair loosely around my face.

'To emphasize your youth,' she said.

My dress is acting like a shield, a mask, I am safe behind it. A young woman attired like this can't possibly fail.

The steward appears in the door, giving me a nod. It is almost time. I'm forcing my tightened jaws to rest, deepening my breath, which is threatening to get way too shallow. Breathing is everything. The ribs form a resonance box, in which air should be able to move around freely in order to sing well. Nothing should muffle, pinch or slow down.

My ever more regular breathing is calming me down. Under all circumstances humans can count on their breathing, hold its hand, let it guide them on its rhythm.

Over the High-German I can hear my name being mentioned. Frau Vom Rath introducing me, I reckon. I straighten my back and take a step forward, into the ballroom.

Take one step, the rest will follow suit. You'll be blocked when trying to compass in your mind all you've got to do. You won't succeed and so you'll panic. Better to take one well advised step, trusting your preparations, training, talents and experience will take you further.

My evening dress seems to strike as rather silly and excessive, for I can hear some mumbling about 'this *verrückte* American woman' but I do not care. I'm getting the immediate and full attention my mother and me have hoped for.

I give the pianist a nod and he starts playing. My singing teacher and I have selected a French aria and an Italian one, matching my soprano. Especially in 'Sempre libera' from Verdi's *La Traviata* my middle register mixes well with the higher register.

I open my mouth and I can hear sounds flowing into the room. The acoustics are not the best, but I am pleased with the clarity of my voice. For theatrical reasons I rest

my gaze on every corner of the room, but I'm not looking properly. In the back, on the left side, are my parents, I know that, but I am evading their undoubtedly tense and expectant looks.

I studied the pieces thoroughly. In front of the mirror I have perfected my posture and look, to match the text and the things it brings about inside me. In those initial days I did not yet chance to rely on myself.

Today this profound preparation is saving me, as I'm singing as if in a daydream, unaware of the moment itself. I only awake when there is an enthusiastic applause after the last aria. Only after the modest bow I have practiced (a *révérence*, right foot hooked behind left one, slight nod), I dare to look at my parents. My father is applauding passionately and, much more important, my mother is looking satisfied.

It was good enough.

'A flower, this young lady, isn't she?'

After the performance Count von Hochberg rests his hand on my shoulder for a moment, looking at his conversation partners. It seems as though he does not say this to compliment me, but rather to demonstrate his impeccable Oxford English. It is unclear whether his remark is meant to be approving or mocking. For a short moment I feel disabled, left alone in a world I do not yet belong to.

Whatever his purposes, I smile. Smiling is always good. Customs in Europe are not too different from those in the better circles in the United States where I come from – and

where, by the way, I tend to be embarrassed as well on such occasions. My background provides me the dubious benefits of the outsider: small flaws in my behavior are being forgiven. Which does not mean I'm feeling comfortable.

'I really would like to hear her sing in German,' the Count tells mother.

When she nods kindly, he turns to me.

'Would you be able to perform, let's say 'Elsa's Traum' from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, in a day or ten?'

'Ja, gerne,' I reply.

I say this in German, as if I'm already taking an advance on mastering the language.

The Count claps his hands.

'Then it's a deal. An audition of Miss Geraldine Farrar in the Hofoper, with an orchestra.'

Often enough during the years of our marriage I told you about my youth. At first you asked me questions – what did I mean by that, when exactly did that happen –, later on, this lessened. You came to know my parents and you developed your own image of who they were and how I related to them.

Especially concerning my bond with my mother you had reservations. 'Fused' was the word you often used: we were fused with one another. You didn't have to say you thought this was sick.

And indeed, I don't recall which one of us dreamt earlier about my future as an opera singer: my mother or I. My mother used to make quite a show whenever I performed

at home, she made costumes for me, for the dog and cats. When I went to high school, mother made sure I was allowed to study music and history as well as languages and literature, things she said to be essential for an opera singer. Mother enlisted me for singing classes and not very successful piano lessons, and she took me to the opera. When mother reckoned the time was ripe, we moved to Manhattan – without my father, who stayed behind in Melrose –, to give me the chance to be instructed by the best teachers.

I can only recall my father giving my mother and me a mild, slightly astonished look when we were singing, when she was braiding my hair, when we were talking about everything and nothing at all. All choices concerning my musical education he left to her, without any doubt whatsoever. In hindsight I think he was one of those fathers in a women's household who suffered of an excess of respect for the other sex. He did not have a child, he had a daughter: a girl, by definition closer to her mother than she was to him.

Music is under my skin, I suppose. My grandfather was a violinist and composer; he had his own little orchestra playing on special occasions. Every day the house was filled with the sounds of the violin lessons he gave, and his love of music naturally was transferred to his daughter, my mother. She met my father, a professional baseball player, in a church choir in Melrose, Massachusetts, where both of them were soloists. One year after their marriage I was born, their first and only child.

In my family the story goes I was laying in my cradle humming instead of crying. Mother likes to state I effort-

lessly adopted the melody of the barrel organ, playing in the street every day, to my repertoire.

One fact that is certainly true, is me singing my first solo in church at the age of three. The moment the last notes of the hymn faded away, I, according to the family legend, stepped up to the edge of the stage, asking my mother in the first row: 'Did I do all right, mummy?' As my mother did not answer immediately, I am said to have been insisting on a reply, not bothered by the amused laughter of the churchgoers.

Because of my brown curls, frizzy on certain days, as well as my dark eyes, my appearance developed into a gipsy's, with no connection whatsoever to fairytale princesses' lustrous blond locks. My features are too pronounced, my nose is too sturdy, my eyes set too close to one another to call me a beauty by prevailing standards. I have always believed, though, I do possess some sort of magnetic power, the faculty of transmitting something and reaching others that way.

As a girl I developed a tendency to dramatize every single event. In my perception, I was on stage all day long and the others, depending on their positions, were co-actors or members of my audience. Imagination and reality merged.

When I was ten, an opportunity opened to take this penchant to the extreme. An older brother of one of my friends took a shine on me and insisted to carry my books to school for me. A little while I felt flattered, but I lost interest and I refused to have him accompany me any longer. A few days later he went ice skating, rode into an ice hole and drowned.

Instantly I had become a widow. I played my part and at the same time I felt all the emotions connected to my personage. I dressed in black, shunned all mirth, regularly rubbed my tearful eyes with a handkerchief. In school all the others kids fell silent as I passed by.

For six weeks I lived a tragedy, after which the condition I was in dissolved. It lifted like a mist: as unquestionable as a weather change.

Still I'm alive to imagination and suggestion. To me the imagined is as veritable as the real. And why not? All of our senses react to things we imagine. Thinking of a lemon you'll produce saliva. Thinking of a touch you'll get goose bumps. To either mind and body the real is not more genuine than the imagined. It's only reason that is boggling.

But reason has to know its place, is what I already thought at an early stage. Intellect can serve us as long as it is subordinate to sentiment.

This was the conclusion I had reached after taking acting lessons in New York. The acting method had been developed by Delsarte, the nineteenth century French actor and teacher who had studied human emotions and their expressions on face and body. No doubt his method once was complex and authentic, but by the time I encountered it the acting technique had slipped down to a range of mechanical postures and gestures.

During the lessons the purpose was to let hands, bodies and faces express various emotions following the music, in a pre-arranged way. Every feeling, and thus the spirited core

of any acting that is worthwhile, was lacking. Initially I fell silent, later on I started to protest and eventually, frustrated, I resigned and took up my vocal training.

Ten days is a short time, but it has to suffice. Firmly I apply myself, together with a singing teacher, to studying 'Elsa's Traum' and brushing up a French waltz and an Italian aria. The German aria I imbibe completely.

Miraculous the way a music score can disclose itself to you. At first you're just staring, seeing only musical notes, almost without meaning, but subsequently the chaos will give room to order and coherence. You have to be prepared to peer at it endlessly, that's the thing. Nothing just *is*. It only becomes something when we're looking at it. Notes are just notes until they're being thought out, felt, captured and sung, over and over again, that's when they acquire their meaning.

Some singers prefer to at first optimize the technique of a musical piece before adding their feeling to it. Impossible. When you start buttoning your coat, putting the first button into the wrong hole, you'll never get it right. You'll have to unbutton your coat completely and start over again.

Even then, and still, I do not give a dime for a perfect, inanimate rendition. Neither for slavishly following instructions. As a singer you can only *suggest* a feeling, when following the composer's intentions – a deformed, second hand feeling, if you ask me. A singer should interpret. Co-create.

Ten days later I'm able to render 'Elsa's Traum' as if it has been on my repertoire for years.

Mother's plan is to make me gain experience in Europe, where the opera originated, and eventually make a career at home, in America. I do not doubt my aptitude for the opera, but I'll have to work hard on it. God provides you with gifts and talents, but you have to cultivate them yourself and present them at suitable moments.

'God asks for dedication, to test if you deserve the gift, otherwise He will take it away,' is what my mother always says.

The auditions are so convivial, I suspect my real audition was with the Vom Rath. Right after my performance my mother and me are invited in the count's office. On his desk sits a three-year contract with the Königlichen Hofoper, drawn in advance.

'Geraldine will only be offered parts fitting her youth and voice,' the count tells my mother. 'She can sing her aria's in Italian, until she has mastered the German language.'

'That is a novelty in Berlin,' my mother says.

'People are ready for a novelty,' the count replies.

For the first time during the conversation he turns to me.

'And you are a novelty, as to your voice, personality and appearance. So much different from the ladies who currently have to convince the audience of their cruel fate and youthful innocence.'

He picks up a pen and offers it to my mother, who has to sign, as I am nineteen years old and still a minor.

'If you would agree, during the coming season Geraldine will sing leading parts in *Faust*, *La Traviata* and *I Pagliacci*

– in Italian.’

Mother and I exchange a short glance, she accepts the pen and signs the contract.

I have until the fall to rehearse. Ascetically devoted I attack the music scores. Summer is a long litany of study, exercise and honeyed tea. I concentrate on every detail of these three opera’s, even the parts in which my character does not participate.

We’re having the costumes made in Paris. Mother regards fine clothes as essential for a debut as the voice condition. In Europe an opera company’s wardrobe is endlessly reused and adapted to the singers’ various bodies – and the Berlin opera is no exception.

‘Cramming you into one of those dresses,’ is the way my mother puts it, ‘would be drowning you in a sea of stiff satin and brocade.’

By the end of summer we learn the date of my opera debut, October 15th 1901, and I am being summoned for rehearsals. Especially for me, being a newcomer, the piece is being run on stage, accompanied by a pianist and the conductor. The cast is observing me meticulously, but they seem favorable. One time they even applaud after a successful aria.

I shall make my debut as Marguerite in *Faust*, the young woman who succumbs to Faust’s seductions, gets pregnant and is abandoned by him. She strikes me as a far more powerful character than the way I’ve seen her presented by others, and that is the way I shall present her.

I am sharing my dressing room with other cast members, and sitting at my toilet table I try to shut off the bustle around me. I guess they'll be thinking I want to focus, and indeed that's true, but moreover I wouldn't know what to tell them. During a performance the arrangements between audience and artists are clear; off-stage I'm at a loss.

What I see in the mirror calms me down. I am wearing a medieval robe, not made of heavy fabric but of airy, cream colored crepe de chine, enfolding my slender figure and looking like silk, seen from the second row. I took off the usual long gauntlets, though my mother objected. Under a little lace bonnet a long tress braid down my face. I am looking angelic, I note with some satisfaction.

On stage beauty is more important than historical correctness, I still think.

All day long I felt like a racehorse just before the start. I rehearsed scales, went over scenes in my mind and saved up energy for the performance. By five o'clock I had a cup of tea and a poached egg on toast to ease my restless stomach, a meal I shall be taking before a performance for years to come.

I still remember the programme, it must be in some shoe box somewhere.

Again and again my eyes are wandering to my name on the paper sheet, as if to ascertain I really am expected to enter the stage in a while.

'Marguerite: Fräulein Geraldine Farrar aus New York als Gast' it says, in slightly bolder characters than the others.

Father is in the audience with some friends, and mother

will be at a few meters distance in the wings during the whole performance, as a favor done to us, due to the Vom Raths' endeavors.

The call is sounding and all the cast members jump up. Patting on my back, hand kisses in the air. '*Glück auf,*' is what I hear all around me.

As my first scene approaches I take a deep breath and step up to the stage in front of the row of gas lamps forming the footlights, that blind me for a short moment.

The heat of the lamps reaches my skin, I can feel the music filling me from head to toe and I breathe in for the first note.

All is well here.

3 Lou

He must leave this tiny room, create some clarity in his mind. He puts on his coat and starts just wandering about outside, but it does feel refreshing. The cold is pushing tears into his eyes. He is smelling coal dust in the air, thinking of his own stove, that is mainly standing idle, as he cannot afford coal. Now winter is coming, Paris showing a grimmer face.

He staggers for a moment. This morning he ate a piece of stale bread, which tasting fine, but that's about seven hours ago now. Thinking of food, hunger is flaring up fiercely. It is trashing about inside him like a wild animal, sharp claws scraping his innards. He is breathing in and out deeply, as if he could live on air.

He had longed for an existence in the middle of it all. In a spot where his talents would be tested at the highest level, where he could compete with the greatest, where things count. That is the life he is living now.

Lou is living in an attic room over a brothel in the artist quarter around Montmartre. There is only one window and in the corner there is a sink for washing socks and underwear, which you can hang out to dry on a clothesline outside. Using a little pulley you can bring them in again.

He does not mind poverty. His hair is long, he wears a loosely noosed tie and a wide brimmed felt hat. He is just one of the many *artistes dans la dèche*, needy artists – a type of person not without some status here. He even is treated with a certain respect.

The same morning he arrived here from Meudon, he visited the Conservatoire to register. He had not passed beyond the janitor's lodge. To enroll as a student there was a matriculation once a year, as it turned out. The old man had advised him first to take acting lessons and get rid of his Dutch accent. He had given him an address Lou visited immediately. Wasting time never was his habit.

The lessons had to be paid for – strangely enough he hadn't realized this. He was asked to recite. He chose a scene he regularly had been rehearsing in Rodin's library. He couldn't have been too bad, for in the end he was allowed, exceptionally, to attend all classes for free, as an 'auditor'. Afterwards he was permitted to study with the great actor Paul Mounet, as soon as Mounet would return from his European tour, provided Lou would have saved enough money by then.

Modelling jobs are scarce. Contrary to Brussels the supply of models in Paris is vast, moreover Lou had not yet made the necessary acquaintances among painters and sculptors. Sometimes he has a job for a few days at the Académie Julian. The wages are hardly enough for paying the rent and sending money to his mother, let alone for saving some for acting lessons.

Keeping his body in shape is crucial for getting jobs and

thus for staying alive. In a local public gymnasium it is possible, for a small fee, to practice weightlifting. He exercises boxing and wrestling with butchers' sons, day laborers, fist fighters and petty criminals.

The wind is whining around the trash cans, making dogs bark, howling in chimneys. A young woman is clamping her coat collar with both hands under her chin, looking at him. He still can turn people's eyes in the street. It's a comfort. Apparently he still looks like a man able to achieve something great.

Interested girls are never far. He doesn't even need to say much to them, for he possesses – as he is told and he knows it's true – a gladiator's body and a monk's face. Whenever he, tall and broad, enters a class room, many conditions are met already. He's putting up with the attention. The girls in the acting classes where he is allowed to observe are like gusts of wind, playing with his fire, fanning it, extinguishing it and making it blaze again. Their tickling, delightful gusts, ever blowing from different directions. Every time the excitement is violent though ephemeral.

The affairs do not linger on in his mind, and seldom have a sequence. He is feeling an uncurbed desire for something deeper; confidentiality, intimacy, friendship. It is an abstract craving, not directed to any existing woman or even one of his imagination.

It is getting quieter in the streets and he turns back to his room, where no comfortable warmth or meal is awaiting him. He is sick of his pent-up botching. He falls asleep

aslant on the bed, fully dressed.

A sharp pain is piercing through him. His adversary hit him a few times full power beneath his ribcage. Four punches at least. The heavy pain is drowned in a fit of nausea, but he cannot dwell on that too long either. The last punch was one to his liver. He turns away, is able to strain his muscles in time so he won't fold. He takes a few steps sideways, assuming a defensive position.

Gaining time. Taking in air. Staying beyond reach for a while, dancing around him. After ten seconds most of the pain has blown over. Recuperating and landing a blow himself, that is the plan.

The racket in the audience compasses him again now. It's a massive sound, a thick wall of heated yelling. As they are busy too long swirling around each other, his adversary and him, people start whistling.

The audience's bloodthirstiness has to be quenched, boredom expelled, routine breached. They are circling the boxing ring, close to the ropes. Every movement he makes is watched from every side. Strangely enough this knowledge muffles the panic, as if he's not really in danger.

He is in a boxing ring in Marseille, in a factory hall where illegal boxing matches are staged. The lads from the public gymnasium do this every weekend and are making a living out of it. Lose and you'll be in shambles, win and you'll be ten or fifteen francs the richer.

His adversary takes a punch at his head.

Of course, he could have known. Among professional

pugilists he is known to have a 'paper face'. His face's bone structure is fragile, so it's a weak spot. His skull will crack easily. He has developed two tactics to prevent this: keeping up speed and protecting his head. He has only been hit in the face a few times, without leaving any traces, but one wonders how long this will last.

The match is enacted in a murky haze of excitement and fermentation. One moment he is punching his opponent into the ropes, the next he himself is forced into a corner. Later on, in the nights following, all thwacks received and dealt will come on to him like fiery sparks from a grate-fire.

At the end of the fight, five rounds later, he can feel his arm being raised by someone. Shouting all around. Apparently he's been proclaimed the winner.

He is gasping for air, blood is in his shoes, but he is the winner.

After Paul Mounets return from his European tour, Lou's fortune returns. As he still does not own enough money, he has to show Mounet his skills. After the first class, Lou attending as an auditor, Mounet asks him to stay.

'Undress,' orders Mounet.

A seasoned model, Lou does as he is asked. Mounet scrutinizes his body, which looks like an athlete's.

'Fell down the stairs or what?' Mounet asks, pointing at the crimson bruises on his torso.

'Oh, those,' Lou says heedlessly. 'Those are from a ring fight with a boxer. He was sixteen stone and his name was Picardo. I did some damage to him, serious damage.'

Mounet has a laughing fit.

‘Picardo did win, if you care to know, but it took hem twelve rounds.’

Grinning, Mounet gestures he can put his clothes on.

‘Could you recite for me?’

Lou has prepared a scene from Racine’s *Horace*, in which various emotions are resounding: bitterness, anger, flaring hope. For each emotion he found fitting gestures and facial expressions.

‘I could fit you in my class,’ Mounet says after Lou has finished. ‘I will charge no fee for the time being.’

Lou raises a clenched fist, as if an arbiter proclaimed him the winner after a fight.

‘But one thing you’ll have to promise,’ Mounet says, a finger raised. ‘That you’ll keep your body intact and won’t fight for money anymore.’

Lou makes the promise.

Winter is here and competition between models is more intense than ever. Some Italian models are working for half the wages, spoiling the market. Lou isn’t keeping up with the rent, an ever more often skips a meal. He has not been able to send one centime to his mother for weeks now. Most of his wardrobe is sold, and he’s wearing only one set of clothes, washing them in the night.

There comes a day he has to survive completely without food. Shortly after it’s two days in a row.

One morning he wakes up coughing and feverish. It must be below zero, for the window is covered with frost

flowers, though he is so hot he throws the blankets from his body. He has to go out for bread, arrange anything on tick, look for work. He sits up, but powerless he falls back into the pillows.

Just a while. He indulges in staying in bed just for now. Just a few moments to gather his strength, than he will rise.

In his fever dreams his father appears. This damned father, who never has acknowledged him as his child, and has officially registered him as his adopted son. That man, who did not embrace his birth in the first place, and who dismissed him definitively by disinheriting him.

He can see him before his eyes, in his smeared uniform, at the front line. Barefoot, bareheaded. Sabre in hand. Like a trapped animal he is storming forward. He attacks, with an urge that gives away his agony. There is nothing in him of the man who thrives on rules and uniformity, seeking honor in sacrifice, adaptation and sameness, living a life lumping along. He is beyond himself.

The image dissolves and now Lou can only see his father's face floating before his eyes. Again it's wearing the inquisitive expression he is used to.

Weariness imposes as he is constantly trying to withdraw from his father's gravity. For a moment he can relax, an instantly he feels pressed to the ground, crushed by a deadly load.

He awakens in a hospital bed. A nurse is bending over him, smiling.

'You are suffering from double pneumonia,' she says.

‘You are in Neuilly hospital.’

He looks around, blinking at the bright light.

‘How did I get here?’

‘You were unconscious when they brought you in. A friend accompanied you. An older man, he said he used to meet you in a bar. Could that be?’

Lou thinks for a moment and then concludes this must have been one of the brothel’s regulars, who apparently had noticed he has not shown up for a while.

‘You are undernourished,’ the nurse continues, ‘so we are going to make you regain your strength. It may take a few weeks.’

Lou does not mind. This means not having to struggle for food, warmth and a shelter for some time. Besides any tiny effort, every breathing-in is hurting. It seems like his lungs are shrunk to half empty, viscous balloons, hardly capable of admitting air.

The first days go by half asleep, as phantom-like nurses carrying drinks, food, white powders, wash cloths, bedpans, appear and vanish again. Gradually the days grow clear and definite again. The cough disappears.

After three weeks he is outside, and three days later he is posing again.

The Académie Colarossi, a private studio where once a week young painters and sculptors submit their work to the criticism of experienced masters, hires him as a regular model. He meets an older dancer, who is preparing for *Salomé*, a piece consisting only of dance and pantomime. She is

looking for an actor to play the part of John the Baptist. For once his Dutch accent is not a problem, being a pantomimist. The part is his.

The money he earns permits him to quit the stuffy attic. He moves to a room on the respectable Rue des Beaux Arts.

At first he had refused another, too expensive room in the building, and asking for a cheaper one he perceived some doubts in the owner. The man showed him a smaller but charming backroom, and when Lou accepted, again he felt the owner's reserve. He had to pay for a week in advance before the man was willing to tell him the reason: an artist had committed suicide in that room, taking a drug overdose, and ever since nobody had been sleeping there. The man was the Irish poet and writer Oscar Wilde.

While the owner feels the room is doomed, Lou thinks it a romantic notion to dwell in the neighborhood of this great man, across the border between life and death. He imagines a residue still hovering about, filling him with an impelling energy. Forward he can go.

He is coinciding with the world again, but his hospitalization has expelled him from his childhood forever and plunged him into adulthood. His unduly self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, had ebbed. Anything could happen to him, he knows now, just like any other he can fail or prevail, die or survive, win or lose. Just like fighting in the ring.

'It is not believing in some success which turns a boy into a man, but trying nevertheless,' his mother writes to him.

Despite his different role, the students in the Académie Colarossi adopt him as one of their own. They are young, struggling artists as well. During the sketching classes he sometimes has to pose from nine in the morning until ten in the evening for five different classes of students who show their works to be judged for fifty centimes.

‘Is today’s stance similarly challenging for you as it is for me?’ he is asking one of the female students, as he is rubbing his painful back expressly with one hand.

She is laughing.

Jeanne de Brouckère is her name. She has been on his mind all the time these last days. Her blond hair and slender waist please him, but what captures him especially is her mildness. Judging from her sketches, which he examines more interestedly than those of the others, she’s talented.

‘My pencil just can’t capture the curve of your back,’ she says, ‘but of course this can’t be compared to the discomfort you must be feeling.’

‘I’ll survive,’ he says.

‘Anything for art,’ she says, jollity in her voice.

‘Anything for art.’

During the remaining afternoon he does not feel his back muscles protest anymore, but he is constantly aware of Jeanne’s eyes, which seem to notice him for real now. Her gaze is filling him up like an empty jar that is being filled with water. He had become more than just an object of study.

The acquaintance feels like an opening, the start of so-

mething else.

A few days later, when his feelings for her have grown into an infatuation, she invites him to a party at her place.

The night of the party they go on conversing until the last guest had left. He is admiring the small distance there seems to exist between her words and her heart. She talks openly, almost dreamily, as if she's just amusing herself. The moment they are alone, he dares to kiss her; she feels willowy in his arms. He stays over. That's the way things go with her: spontaneously and fleet-footedly.

She makes love fluently, intuitively, like her pencil gliding across the paper. Free, without hindering second thoughts. She is as tender as she is resolute. No doubt she is the most experienced lover he ever had.

For her it's the current moment which counts; future and past do not exist to her. She merges into her drawings, without worrying what will become of them afterwards, or if anyone notices them. She's not pursuing a career or any recognition. She's creating and then forgetting she was. She embodies *l'art pour l'art* in its most pure form: everything has a value in itself. Because it exists, and for as long as it does so.

He himself has the impression he has to stay inside her view in order not to be forgotten. Her lightness is intriguing him, but instilling fear in him as well. This fear induces his hasty proposal.

Springtime 1903 they get married. She is dressed in a borrowed creamy white wedding dress, and he in the only

decent suit he owns. On her head she's wearing a crown of white marguerites.

Audition day dawns at the Conservatoire. Lou arrives early in the morning and only in the afternoon, a half an hour before the committee is being disbanded, it is his turn. A great part of his energy has flowed down by the long wait, just as probably is the case for the jury. Lou is waiting in a narrow dark hallway at the back of the stage until the previous candidate is done.

Weeks before Paul Mounet has informed him the examination committee has been put together and that he himself will be one of the members. There are fourteen vacant places, and the number of enlisted actors and actresses totals nine hundred sixty-four. Lou and another actor are the only foreigners.

In the semi-darkness he is mumbling phrases from his *Hamlet* scene, Hamlet accusing his mother. He knows the text thoroughly. Being rejected will mean forgoing any chance of a significant career on stage; being admitted means doors will open effortlessly. Sarah Bernhardt, *la divine* as she is nicknamed, did her studies here as well.

The audition instructions are clear and simple. As soon as one is summoned onto the stage, one starts the practiced scene and goes on until a bell signal, at which point – whether in the middle of a sentence or not – one stops one's performance, bows to the jury and leaves the stage.

As a uniformed man urges him to step onto the stage, he can see from the side scene that the jury members have

already started debating – he is horrified. A couple of men even have gotten up from their chairs. How for heaven's sake must he draw their attention to his acting?

He has to make a dramatic entrance.

'Mère, Mère, Mère!'

He is shouting, remaining in the side scene, prying into the auditorium. Everyone stops talking, watching the empty stage. They must be thinking someone is being killed.

Lou stumbles onto the stage and continues acting. Spitting out the words, raising his arms to the heavens, tears running down his cheeks as he points at the black wall where his father's fictional portrait supposedly is hanging. For a moment his own father's face flashes before him, full of disapproval of all this affectation.

He is taking it one step further. Just as he's trying, trembling with rage, to explain to his mother his feelings about her current husband, the bell rings.

An older man, holding a stack of papers, climbs up to the stage.

'Are you Danish or Dutch?' he asks.

'I think I filled in my registration papers correctly,' says Lou, his voice still trembling with rage, but this time because of the interruption.

'Fine,' the man says, not unkindly. And then, wrapping it up: *'C'est bien!'*

The uniformed man is already opening the door for him. Lou does not move.

'This is not good!' he yells.

There is a frosty silence. Incredulous eyes are looking at

him. Lou stays put, not the least intimidated. Then there is a hushed deliberation, followed by: '*Recommencez!*'

Lou plays his scene up to the end, using all the emotions running through him, no bell is ringing. After that he takes a bow, walks off stage and out the door.

The next morning he is in the Conservatoire courtyard, together with the hundreds of other applicants. A man appears, a piece of paper in his hand. One by one he calls out the names of ones admitted.

Seven names are being mentioned before his.

Because of his study at the Conservatoire it is impossible for him to keep posing. Jeanne and he move to an apartment near Parc Montsouris. She starts working as a chambermaid in order to pay the rent and his tuition fees.

The days are crowded. After the day's lessons Lou visits a gym until about eleven in the evening. Jeanne gets pregnant and gives birth to a girl they name Diane.

After two years, when he has graduated as a *lauréat*, and finally has more time for his family, love proves to have faded. He does not feel the same for Jeanne anymore, and her interest seems to have waned. When he looks at her it is like he is watching a photograph in which she is smiling. She's not really there. She does not see him anymore.

Jeanne is not the kind of woman recalling old feelings or even feeling nostalgic about them. He makes an effort to approach her, but it is arduous. They fall silent conversing. Phrases crumble on his tongue even before he is able to

utter them. Everything is falling apart.

Just as Diane is able to walk, they are getting divorced.

‘Things last until they’re over,’ is Jeanne’s comment.

He himself has no bitter feelings about the separation either. He does not feel guilty or even responsible – only with regard to his daughter he is feeling oppressed.

‘Turn it into something beautiful,’ Jeanne says, as he is carrying the last moving box. ‘Your life, I mean.’

‘Just as beautiful as it was,’ he says, ‘all these years with you.’

He meant to say something nice, but he can hear it sounds overdone.

She just shrugs weakly.

Maybe Jeanne is right, and it did last until it was over.

After his graduation he is smoothly contracted by the Théâtre de l’Odéon company. He is casted for the most glorious parts, Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette* and Hamlet in *Hamlet*. Each time he is playing the scene with Hamlet’s mother, this time in front of an actress of flesh and blood, he is thinking of this important audition of his. Fortunately, as there is a genuine painting hanging on the stage, the image of his own father no longer appears before his mind’s eye.

The reviews are mostly positive, and every night there is a full audience. People of importance, people of the trade are attending. At one time somebody even has seen the great Sarah Bernhardt in the audience.

He has a couple of short affairs, with young actresses in the company and with a dresser, but none of the relati-

onships make him lose control. His roles too do not give him the satisfaction he expected.

Again he is being tormented by some desire to be elsewhere. Wanderlust is springing like a fever. He terminates the rent as well as his engagement with the theatre company, says goodbye to his daughter for the time being and leaves Paris, not knowing for how long.

First stop: Monte Carlo's gambling palaces.

4 Geraldine

Prince royal Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia is exactly my age, eighteen years, just graduated in Bonn. His tall, slender figure and his clear eyes make him quite attractive indeed. Especially when dressed in his dark uniform with a golden-yellow sash and covered in decorations he makes a handsome impression. The first time we meet is when I am summoned to the Palace to sing at a diplomats' dinner.

That afternoon the chamberlain informs me I am supposed to wear the regulative court dress, black or lavender blue, gauntlets and no jewelry. I refused.

'I am terribly sorry, but black and blue do not become me,' I said, 'and besides I do not wear gloves anymore when singing.'

The chamberlain, shocked, objected these conditions had to be met. I insisted, and later that afternoon I got a telegram saying: 'Miss Farrar can wear whatever she wishes.' I chose one of my white dresses.

After singing two arias from *La Traviata* and being introduced, together with my mother, to the emperor and empress, I am approached by the prince royal.

His bright blue eyes are observing me as if I were a work

of art.

'You have treated us on an excellent performance,' he says. It sounds formal, too solemn for someone his age.

'It is always a pleasure to impersonate Violetta,' I say, regretting it immediately. Am I stating I enjoy playing a prostitute? I can feel the blood rushing to my cheeks.

'And you do so like no other,' he says in a low voice, but fun is sparkling in his eyes.

Then his attention is claimed by the attending diplomats, and he speaks politely to them all, though with a visible nonchalance. I think it funny to see elderly gentlemen doing their utmost to impress a boy not even twenty years of age.

Civilities, social talk: I am not equipped for this. At parties I usually meet confused, somewhat surprised looks, because apparently I said something inappropriate. At those occasions it is all for the best when I restrict myself to silence and smiles, though this might be interpreted as prima donna behavior. And so I smile.

Before the prince leaves the room he gives me another glance, as shy as it is amused.

My mother and I found lodgings in Hotel Adlon, situated on Unter den Linden. We are renting three rooms: one for her, one for me and one for my singing practice. Visitors we receive in the hotel lounge. Apart from my mother I see few people – and even her I am keeping at a distance during the day, with the excuse of having to concentrate.

I always liked to be alone, Lou, as you know like no other. You never understood anything about my desire of solitude, and used to make jokes of it. Maybe you never experienced the beneficent, productive effects of chosen seclusion, ever feeling the urge to surround yourself with others.

During the hours spent in one's own company, a void is opening up. One coincides with oneself and the moment. It offers a chance to observe the changing light in a room, to listen to one's own thoughts, all those things one does not notice when in company.

I do not consider myself an eccentric, I am not unsociable. The truth is I am lacking the agility to make and keep contacts. It has always been my mother deciding who could be around me, mostly teachers or relatives, and I do not question this.

I know two ways of being: among people, aware I am being watched from every corner, or alone with my own thoughts. Either isolated or in the center. It is only on stage I am able to relate to others. There I may turn myself inside out for the part I am playing. I scatter dream dust, it's true, but I have a deep felt link with my audience.

A connection coming directly from my deepest core to theirs; where does one find this in daily life?

Taking a bath in the morning, as hot as possible, mint and chamomile leaves added, inhaling deeply the vapor. Cautiously easing the voice in deep gutturals and fluent scales. Tiny sips of honeyed tea at breakfast. First singing the pieces that appeal the middle registers, then diversifying

with more exacting arias. Taking a stroll through Tiergarten. Having lunch. Rehearsing new parts, accompanied by a singing coach, closing with an aria from the opera at hand. Having a light, early meal. If necessary getting to the opera house to perform, otherwise to bed early.

Before you came into my life, Lou, such were my days. It might have been oppressing for anyone else, but I loved method. You might call me dutiful or diligent, but it did not even occur to me to do something else than studying music.

In those days I considered myself an instrument needing to be tuned. I might have had a God given talent, this same God did not crack the nut he had thrown at me.

The journals are praising my acting talents and I am called 'a personality'. My singing qualities are being less admired, as my high tones are said to sound shrill. I do not mind too much, because at that time I find already – and still, all these years later – that sweetness of sound always should be sacrificed to the dramatic effect.

'Farrar is captivating, as she stays away from stereotypes and follows her own inspiration,' is what I recall from the first reviews. And: 'She is a living, loving, suffering Marguerite.' The audience shows its appreciation as well, when it is my turn to receive the applause. I remember saying to my mother I would never get any better reviews.

In the years to come they never appeared indeed, but I was certain I was on the right track: the one of the artist's heart trying to reach the audience's.

‘It is just inappropriate the amount of skin you show,’ my mother says in the dressing room before *La Traviata* is being staged.

‘Is that a fact?’ I ask defensively.

In this performance I am wearing bare-necked dresses and my arms are naked, no long gauntlets. For weeks now my mother is trying to put me up with ribbons and bows around my shoulders and neck, she even has given me an enormous Austrian fan to cover myself with.

‘I mean: you do not need that, with all your talent,’ she says, a bit more indulgently.

‘I should be able to move on stage,’ I say stubbornly.

I can see I am hurting her, this is the first time I am countering her. I turn around and go on dressing.

Especially a courtesan like Violetta should be allowed to expose herself sensually, without concealment. Each fiber of my appearance, from coiffure to footwear, should breathe the part I am playing. Everything should fit the character, not me as such.

It is annoying she won’t see the distance between Violetta and me, that she wants to take it away from me. That distance is sacred to me, it does give me room to move into and out of the character.

Some of the costumes I wear on stage I would not dare to put on in public, just as I would not dream of the seductive stances my characters are assuming, or the passion they show.

They are not acquainted with shame and rigidity. I am.

I am playing Violetta my way. Instead of walking onto the stage arm in arm with a gentleman, making my entrance, I am sitting back to the audience before getting up to mingle with the guests. Instead of placing my future lover's glass on the table, like every Violetta before me, I throw it on the floor after taking a sip.

Apart from the whispers – sometimes deliberately loud, for me to hear – that the new American girl is a little *verrückt*, I guess it is being said I am beautiful, as suddenly there are many young officers and unmarried members of court in the audience.

Prince royal Wilhelm, too, frequently shows up in the royal box. He is there with every new part I play, from Nedda in *I Pagliacci* to Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*. Operas not featuring me he does not attend.

One night, after a performance, Wilhelm visits me in my dressing room. The Hofoper staff has strict rules regarding visitors behind the scenes, but one cannot refuse the prince royal. There is a short knocking at my door, and as my dresser opens, a servant asks whether the prince could be admitted. Startled, she immediately opens the door wide.

Wilhelm's head pears around the door, blushing, elated. I am still wearing my grease-paint and costume. I just removed my hair pieces, which I regret now.

I am taking the traditional bow for court members, and he takes my hand, which is less customary, and kisses it lightly.

My dresser has taken her leave and the servant is waiting

outside in the hall.

During the following conversation his solemn tone is substituted by a more playful one, and he seems more at ease with it. It is not hard to discover the common boy behind the prince.

There is a silence, and Wilhelm observes me, suddenly earnest. He approaches me. I am feeling clumsy, not having an idea how I am supposed to respond to something like this. I do not feel aversion, no desire either, just nerves.

Motionless I am just standing there. It is giving me trouble to keep looking at him, but I manage. My heart is pounding palpably.

‘May I kiss you?’ he asks.

Only as he is standing there waiting, strangely close, I realize I’ll have to answer. I nod.

His face approaches mine and I hold my breath.

Wilhelm’s visits behind the scene, and later the ones to the Adlon Hotel lobby, start getting noticed, because he takes no effort whatsoever to conceal them. I still can see him riding down Unter den Linden in one of the royal coaches, accompanied by officers, wearing a scarlet red hunting jacket, and, getting down, people in the avenue stopping to stare and wave.

It is clear Wilhelm does not share his imperial father’s puritanical ideas, but he does not seem quite sure what will have to replace them. He indulges in petty mischief and disobedience, scouring the limits of his position, and his candid interest in me is a part of it, as I suspect. As an artist,

not of noble descent, I certainly am not a suitable match. Being a young opera prima donna, I am destined for the court's entertainment, not for adopting as a future empress.

The reason of this does not occupy me. I have started to relax in his company and he makes me laugh. In front of his cheerfulness my inborn seriousness vanishes. We amuse ourselves at the grand piano, partly joking, partly sincerely making music. He is interested in my ideas, my taste, my past, on the other hand I am surprised by all he has to tell me. There is a kind of balance between us. In spite of our young age we both are moving in adult circles of major import.

It seems we will inevitably fall in love, but I only sense some quiet familiarity whenever I am with him. Only at a distance, when I am thinking of him while taking a walk or a bath, I can feel a sort of desire. As soon he is with me, those feelings seem extravagant and lyrical.

My mother, our chaperone, kindly leaves us by ourselves, sometimes. She would never do such a thing if Wilhelm were not the prince royal. He does not seem to notice this prerogative, being used to his privileged, self-evident world.

One afternoon Wilhelm pulls me onto his lap, sitting on the music stool. I let him, laughing. He kisses me on the nape of my neck and I can feel his hands groping upward from my waist.

I know I should enjoy his touch, but my muscles are tensioning, as if I am resisting. My breath blocks. His hands reach my breasts. I do not protest, but I keep sitting there

like a piece of wood. Fortunately I cannot see his face.

His hands are kneading far too vigorously the flesh of my breasts and I try to push them away from me. It feels like a transgression, something I have to fight.

I get up, abruptly.

‘My mother,’ I say, as an explanation.

Surprised I notice his face has turned red.

The fact that touching my breasts had an effect on him excites me, not in a sexual sense, but like a new experience can do.

Even though everyone seems to know better, I am not interested in marriage, not with any man. I do not need a husband to make the difference between sense and nonsense. More than that: getting married will result in some restriction, or in any case a delay in my singing career. Neither do I wish for a lover or a provisional fiancée. Male attention – flowers, postcards, invitations, overt admiration or transmitted by others – I get them all the time, but I never respond to them.

I do not want to provoke expectations I’ll have to make true afterwards. Whatever those men may want from me, it can’t be good for me. In any case my mother is acting very scared about the misery it might cause for my career, my reputation and my wellbeing. If she had not taken her chances with my father in the first place, she could have achieved something as a singer, is what she always says. I am sure she loves him, but apparently the price is high.

Something in this repellent attitude must have appealed

to you, when you met me, years later. I guess it felt like an achievement when you pried me open. And eventually broke me. But I am anticipating.

More opposing voices are being heard as I get hold of a new lead, Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette*. Protests start from the other prima donnas in the company. One older soprano announces in the press she won't sing on the same stage as the American upstarts, and everyone understands she's aiming at me. Once before an American singer has been forced to leave. Being thwarted, her position had become untenable, and she cashed twelve thousand marks for terminating her contract.

The knives are out. There is a rumor, ever less reservedly published in the German newspapers, that the court is offering me unprecedented privileges, that a singer with impure higher registers should not be permanently employed, that my costumes are a disgrace to the Hofoper's decency standards.

On stage I am still a success. Juliette's character suits me well. I make her young, impulsive, excited. I do not endeavor into the coleratura effect, this bombardment of high notes without words, like earlier Juliettas did, but I take the tempo down, as if I am singing in reflection. Critics respond in praise, though there's the occasional side note concerning my voice, it being not rich enough.

Ten there is the first newspaper mentioning of my supposed affair with the prince royal. The American press gets wind of it and uncritically copies the news, adding some

sensational, made-up details. The Hofoper staff gives me a warning and suddenly denies my mother access to the wings, where she had been watching my performances for almost two years.

My father reacts with indignation to all those imputations. Usually he is untouched by criticism of my acting or my provocative style of clothing. His daughter and his wife understand about art and the way things should look; he does not. Blindly he assumes I know what I am doing and everyone else is just exaggerating.

Now that his daughter's character and private life are under attack, his very essence is revolting. He wants to clear my name and sues an American newspaper for defamation, but it only seems to result in adding fuel to the flames.

My father has the amiable habit of covering everything up with his love, even things he does not understand in my mother or in me, and that might clash completely with his own ideas.

Every night before I, as a young girl, went to bed, he sat down on the edge of my bed, showing a sweet, slightly amazed smile about everything I was telling him. His attention did not faint, he was listening to anything I thought and felt and made up, all the time stroking my hair.

At the peak of all this commotion, members of the American Women's League in Berlin speak up for me openly. They send a statement to the press in which they are expressing their disbelief in the gossip about me and the prince royal.

'We have been searching for any possible source of this

slander,' they write indignantly, 'and we did not find any proof of its existence. Having been accompanied by her mother all her life and Miss Farrar being an example of rare purity and honor herself, we have not been able to find the slightest evidence of any crime, not even of frivolity, on her part.'

The news reports stop. The gossiping in the opera drops off. After being reprimanded by the court, the opera staff allows my mother once again to assist me from the stage wings.

It is clear I shall not leave Berlin.

I possess some instinct of self-preservation, as you yourself have been experiencing. After these attacks on my personality I am keeping Wilhelm – who does not seem to be impressed by the commotion – at a distance. I tell him I'm being too much involved in rehearsing to see him, and I ask my dresser to stay around whenever he makes an unannounced visit to my dressing room. After the relentless comments on my high pitched notes, I'll start working on them more vigorously. This too won't surprise you, I guess.

Whenever one decides to show oneself to the world, one will meet resistance, I figure, and there will always be people, frustrated or cowardly waiting for others to judge and then join up with those. When showing force one may count on counterforce. I have to improve to such an extent that nobody can have reservations. It's as simple as that.

I always assumed the nature of my voice does not allow too powerful high C's, but I am willing to give it a try. Lilli

Lehmann, a former opera star and for nearly forty years singing teacher and voice expert, I consider the only person able to help me in this. Reportedly her intensive lessons will not take half an hour or one hour, but for as long as the student's stamina permits. I am ready for that.

At my mother's insistence Lehmann agrees to see me, and after singing for her she offers her services, provided I shall be prepared 'not only to learn, but especially to unlearn as well.'

I shall remain her pupil for twelve years, but our cooperation never runs smoothly. To her, technical control is paramount, to me it is emotional coloration. We have to make compromises. I am ready to do so, for she points out to me things I was not aware of. For instance she emphasizes using lips and mouth as much as possible for pronunciation, allowing the face to relax and be used for expression. I am being trained not to make too much use of my hands – big, mobile and nervous as they are. Lehmann ties them down behind my back, while I am singing song after song, neck and arm muscles painfully swollen from restraining power.

Every day, for forty to sixty minutes, I am supposed to sing scales in the Lehmann way: ejaculating series of vowels in half or whole notes in ascending or descending scales, at such a rate they almost seem fluid. I have to do so without glissando, as if I were descending a flight of stairs not missing a step, cautiously but flexibly, as if preventing a fall.

By the time I get my first part in a Wagner opera, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, my voice has grown more even and flexible, my expression has become more lively and my

diction – pardon my self-esteem – is unparalleled. I am offered a new three years contract with the Königlichen Hofoper, which I accept, my mother having stipulated for a clause allowing me to accept invitations from opera houses in other European cities.

And so my mother and I end up in Monte Carlo, the place where all great European singers perform during the summer season. I could have run into you there, Lou. Suppose I had? I am almost certain we could not have had more than a short affair at that moment. I was too young, my faculties not yet having sufficient power to be able to captivate you for a very long time.

My Monte Carlo debut, *La Bohème*, I sing with a young Italian tenor, Enrico Caruso.

For the first rehearsal he enters almost skipping – enormous brown eyes and an exuberant grin beneath a grey felt hat, yellow gloves clutching a gold knobbed cane, squeaking shiny shoes – and I like him on the spot. During rehearsals he has spared his voice, as is apparent at the premiere, when I am hearing his first notes rising above the music. I am so surprised, the conductor has to use his baton to remind me it is my turn to intone.

Monte Carlo is frivolous and fascinating. Frequently half of the audience has left by the end of the first act, the gambling tables being more attractive in the end. This does not affect our wages. We are unprecedentedly well paid, thanks to the casino, and our contracts are being negotiated orally or telegraphically.

Gambling turns out to be just as contagious as a fever, all the artists are at it. Every now and then I place a fiche on the roulette table, as a joke, and I gain so much so easily that I can understand the hold it can get on you. When I learn of singers putting on stake even their own contracts in order to continue gambling, I quit.

I perform, on invitation, in the Stockholm, Paris, Munich, Salzburg and Warsaw opera houses. I am able to switch languages after a few hours of concentrated study. It is quite possible for me to perform *Faust* in German, then take the night train to Paris and sing the same opera in French the next night, while two nights later I'll be performing the Italian version in Poland. Travelling is very demanding of my voice, and although Lehmann taught me to rather use the power of suggestion than volume, the higher registers of my voice remain vulnerable.

'Darling,' my mother says one morning in the breakfast room of some hotel, looking up from her morning paper, 'this is news that might interest you.'

The careful tone of her voice makes me look up.

'Prince Wilhelm is engaged. To some grand duchess Cecilie. I suppose his father insisted.'

She chatters on about the emperor and his wish to see his oldest son rapidly married to an aristocratic girl, as if she's meaning to ease my pain. She is annoying me, for I'm not feeling the least hurt or shocked. It was to be expected. It does not feel if it has anything to do with me.

On June 6 1905 Prince Wilhelm marries his Cecilie in Berlin. Even this hardly puts me off balance. It is only when the two of them attend a performance for the first time, and I give them a royal salute during the applause, that I can feel something pinching in my heart. Could it be jealousy? Longing for his exclusive attention?

Cecilie has a kind of mysterious beauty, and she is almost as tall as he is, so I notice, after the performance. In their private box she congratulates me with my performance, admiring my costume with sparkling eyes. Her fingers lightly touch the silk and she observes it is such a pity that fashion does not dictate these enchanting dresses anymore. Shortly after she will summon my seamstress from Paris to the palace, to take her measurements.

One night there is a knock on my dressing room door. As soon as my dresser opens the door he sends her away. There is no valet. No lady-in-waiting. No spouse.

He is standing there, sad.

‘I cannot manage this.’ He makes a vague gesture. ‘This married life.’

He encloses my face with his hands, looking at me.

‘I cannot stop myself from missing you.’

Things go very abrupt. I am unprepared. I am tired from performing. Whatever the reason, I gently push him away.

‘Let us not take this road,’ I say.

Later on I’ll praise my firmness, but directly after Wilhelm left my dressing room I am just feeling shameful wonder-

ment. All the time I tell people alluding to my unmarried position that I love my art and never shall marry. So far so good. But no secret infatuations? No flirting? No affairs? God knows I've seen enough intimacies and embracing within the Berlin company and in Monte Carlo, and the women venturing these all had flourishing careers.

Am I a healthy woman?

I do not particularly believe it is a matter of the right man. If a handsome, kind hearted prince is not able to set my heart on fire, then who is?

Fortunately there are exciting developments asking for my attention. New York appears to be interested. It is the Metropolitan Opera. Feverishly and boldly my mother is starting negotiations. She sends over a copy of my Berlin contract as a base. It's of a tremendous size, for conditions and repertoire have been cumulating throughout the years and recorded in full detail. The American response is that a contract like this is not customary. The standard contract they send by way of counteroffer is rejected by my mother. 'Won't we discourage them?' I ask anxiously.

'They will be back,' she says, smiling unyieldingly.

Indeed, a few weeks later an American agent is send over to us. He objects to everything, but my mother is implacable. Negotiations last all summer. The important thing is I'll have to perform frequently enough every season, and should play the big roles. To start a career across the ocean it is crucial for me to appear before an audience. If we cannot secure this, I'll have little chance in front of competing, reputable sopranos having older claims.

As I am signing the contract the agent bends over to me and says confidentially: 'Your mother knows more about protective clauses than the average legal advisor does.'

Immediately my mother shows her most courteous face.

She does not have to sign on my behalf, as I am a major now, though she could have done so, as far as I am concerned.

Late summer the moment is there; on the Kaiser Wilhelm II we sail to our homeland, where my father is waiting as well. November the 16th I shall not only make my American debut singing Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette*, it is also the Metropolitan's season's opening.

As I am taking walks on the deck, I consider how amazing it is, my Berlin period vanishing in the distance. Beside a couple of friendly colleagues I am only leaving behind prince Wilhelm and the possibility to play a part in his life.

When we said goodbye, he gave me a diamond tiara engraved with a W and a C, for Wilhelm and Cecilie. It must have been her idea. Had I fostered any romantic feelings for him, I should not have wanted to wear a tiara carrying her initial. I think it's splendid.

In those days, untouched by passion, I wondered if one could decide to direct one's love to someone in particular. Or is this independent of one's aspiration, and does love hit you yes or no?

Maybe I should not think I am not capable of love, only because love has not revealed itself yet. O, wasn't I fooling

myself. If love should show up, I certainly would run the other way – direction stage.

Apparently I was a cold, heartless woman.

5 Lou

Unsteadily Lou is climbing the stairs to his bedroom. Whenever he fears tripping, he grasps the banister, which seems to wriggle under his hands. It must be the absinth he consumed besides the usual champagne and cigarettes. Inside the bedroom he draws the curtains to keep out the emerging morning light and fully dressed drops onto his bed. He has left the bedroom door ajar, to be able to hear his guests' ongoing talking downstairs. From the garden as well laughter is sounding up, from a bunch gathered around the swimming pool.

His house is open. Guests come for the weekend and stay for weeks. Sculptors bringing their clay, painters their canvases, actors their paramours, poets are walking reciting around the garden. His villa in San Domenico, halfway Florence and Fiesole, has become a Garden of Eden, populated by a curious mishmash of avant-garde and eccentrics, local elite and vagrants, artists and libertines. There is the glamour of utter freedom, with all the sensuality attached. In the heat of noon, around siesta time, muffled cries of variable couples sound from open windows, his as well. The only thing he has to do is sustain the supply of champagne and food.

The old villa is situated on a hill, overlooking Florence, the Arno River and an undulating landscape of vineyards, cypresses and lemon trees. He sold the exclusive right to grow white gardenias in the surrounding fields to a gardener. Now they are in bloom, at night the ground seems to be covered in a snow blanket.

The festive sounds calm him down. Every now and then he can hear Caruso tirelessly accumulating anecdotes, blaring at the top of his voice in broken French with a thick Italian accent. Lou is smiling. He has a weak spot for the tenor, this sentimental big child, given a talent bigger than he is able to carry. Lulled by Caruso's familiar deep voice he falls asleep.

Lou had bought the house off the proceeds of two nights gambling in Constantinople. In Monte Carlo he was at the green gambling tables day and night. The cards and the roulette wheel had been favorable to him, but the whisky poured was sharper than the beer and wine he was used to, and this had impaired his chances.

An extraordinary voluptuous redhead widow, about thirty of age, had attracted his attention. Her late husband left her a fortune plus the title of duchess, and she exploited both to the extreme. She knew more about playing cards than Cartier knew about diamonds, but she was bored. Lou chased her boredom as well as his own disquiet by starting a relationship with her.

When the widow expressed her wish to travel eastward, Lou had proposed she'd take him with her. The next day

they took off, he with only one suitcase, she with twelve portmanteaus, eight hatboxes and a cortege of five. In Constantinople they were invited to a game of baccarat in a rich Armenian's house. In two nights' time the widow gained 650,000 dollars, he almost 120,000. It was an unbelievable amount of money, more than he had ever owned.

They travelled on to Calcutta, Persia, Isfahan, Bagdad. In all these places he had glimpses of landscapes and monuments, but most of the time he spent in dark backrooms and exuberant playing salons, accompanied by the widow. His interest both in playing and the widow had slackened by that time. In Cairo he took his leave and travelled alone to Alexandria, where he was able to breathe freely again. From there he took the ferry to Sicily, and eventually he landed in Italy, hoping to find a place in the theatres again. Stage lust took over as soon as wanderlust had been satisfied.

He did not have illusions of settling somewhere permanently, but he craved a spot in the world to return to from time to time. Easily he could picture himself as an old man, sitting on a bench beneath the plane trees in Tuscany.

He is not a nomad, as he has discovered during the past year. Some travelers are living in the world, perfectly happy with the place they happen to live for a short time. His travelling around is more like a pilgrimage. It is a search, a hunger for changing views, adventures, contacts, hoping he would run into something or somebody to satisfy this hunger for ever.

Here, in Tuscany, the search goes on, only from a fixed

point now. Instead of walking around at a party, it is like sitting at the bar, watching the people pass by him. There is not so much difference, though it is more comfortable.

By the end of the afternoon he wakes up, as usual. Arriving downstairs he can see the remains of last night in the living room; well-thumbed glasses, empty bottles, some leftover nuts on a tray, a grapevine picked almost bare, date pips. In the center of the room, not bothered by the mess or the intention to do something about it, Enrico Caruso is sitting, browsing a novel that does not interest him very much, by the looks of it.

‘Well, there you are,’ Caruso says. He puts the book away, grinning.

‘Have you been home to get some rest?’ Lou asks, knowing the answer. Caruso is wearing the same gear as he did yesterday.

Caruso’s wave dismisses the question. He looks furtively at a young man waking up from his nap in a corner, and proposes a walk.

Lou snatches a few grapes and approvingly gestures to the hall. There must be something Caruso wants to discuss, as he is dismissive of any form of exercise.

The two men walk onto the terrace and down the hill, Lou nimble on his long legs, Caruso staggering, poking his cane into the ground to get some support. Caruso’s coattails are fluttering behind him. His brocade waistcoat, tight around his belly in spite of his youth, his double gold watch chain and shiny shoes make him a genuine well-off

gentleman. Lou is dressed fine as well, but his hair, falling down his neck and front, and his loose silken scarf give him a dandy look.

They walk on briskly, passing the villa belonging to Eleonora Duse, the actress in whose company Lou does minor parts in the Italian theatres. Press and audience response is benevolent. The fact his Italian is not without an accent, is not considered an offence, like in Paris, but condoned. The mere effort is being appreciated.

The wind is surging, making the cypress tops sway. They stop at a vantage point, overlooking the next valley.

Caruso raises his cane, pointing in the direction of his own house.

‘There she is waiting for me,’ he says, unconcealed rage in his voice. ‘Probably,’ he adds more softly.

‘Trouble at home?’ Lou inquires.

That is enough to make Caruso burst out.

‘She has been shagging one of the servants. The chauffeur, mind you!’

Lou recalls the chauffeur, a handsome fellow.

‘A woman married to me, the world’s best tenor, tackling a three-penny driver.’

Miserably he shakes his head.

Lou is feeling sorry for Caruso, but after the words ‘the world’s best tenor’ he realizes he cannot help him. Fame or talent are no guarantees for fidelity. Neither is beauty, for that matter. He himself frequently has lost his interest in even the most beautiful and talented women, and left them for other, less gifted ones.

Currently he is sleeping with Isadora Duncan, a famous solo dancer. There's no woman in this world more beautiful and talented, and yet he can feel his attention dwindling again. Discontent tossing inside, a restlessness that is easier to chase by the painter's model someone lately brought into his house, than by Isadora.

'Could you forgive her?' Lou asks.

Caruso keeps on staring at his house in the distance, as if the answer lies there.

'You could try,' Lou insists.

Caruso remains silent, but Lou can see he is considering the idea.

'And fire the chauffeur,' Lou says, mockingly patting him on his shoulder.

'You think I did not do so in the first place?' Caruso exclaims. 'That one won't even be allowed to transport a dog in these parts.'

Laughing they walk on.

Lou is thinking of the women in his life whose infidelity would have left him indifferent. He desires a woman that might cause him as much pain as Caruso is feeling, but whom he would be willing to forgive.

She has to exist, because he does.

Acting with Eleonora Duse takes out his desire for foot-lights, applause, a many-headed audience watching him. On stage everything seems of importance. Each act one performs, each word one says is gaining weight under all this attention. It has a value, because other people, a whole

crowd, attach a value to it.

One single person could be an audience as well, he often thinks, provided one respects that person highly enough. Most people are acting on a daily basis – in front of their partner, a friend or their children. They sense they are being encouraged, animated by their gazes and they are making theatre. Just hear the high pitched, cooing mothers' voices when they are addressing their children. And mark the forced sultriness of these same voices talking to their lovers. Those flirty giggles, this moaning in bed. Nobody can fool him, no-one is completely free of 'make believe'. Everyone feeds on other people's attention.

We are self-domesticated animals, searching for love – as much as possible from as many people as possible, whether we know them or not. In that respect we are greedy. Insatiable. He is not the only one.

It is an honor, working with Duse, as Italians call her affectionately, for she is seen as the best Italian actress of her time. She exhorts him to rule out himself, when acting. 'Empty yourself,' she would say, 'and then fill yourself up with your character.'

Duse herself does this in a casual way. She hardly uses greasepaint on stage. When asked, she says she 'made up spiritually'. Internally this transformation of hers into the part must be palpable, to the extent that she can do without wigs, costumes and greasepaint.

Lou does an effort not to figure out definitely when to make which gesture. As soon he is connected strong enough

with the character, it has to make him spontaneously feel fitting emotions, which he is able to express. Sadly enough he seldom succeeds.

He never 'dissolves', the way he has seen Duse do, because the others', the audience's eyes, fuel him to keep on acting and enjoying it. It is the same feeling as when posing before an artist, or fighting in a boxing ring; the awareness of being watched meticulously lends his work sense and meaning.

During one of their Italian tours in the fall of 1908, the whole company is strolling through Rome, a few hours before the performance will start. Lou's eye meets a *nickelodeon*, a theatre the size of a baker's shop, showing moving pictures.

'Continuous performance of *La Tosca*,' it says on the signs. 'Come in and see.' There is a display of photographs and Nouveau Art posters featuring Sarah Bernhardt acting as Tosca, a fragile lady sporting brown curls beneath a large hat. She poses grandly, a determined look in her eyes. Lou never has seen Sarah acting and he wants to go in, like a few other actors. Duse refuses.

'This is meant for the poor who cannot afford a theatre seat,' she says. 'Some weak infusion of a theatre show.'

'But Sarah is in it!' one of the cast members exclaims.

There is a sudden silence, for the other actors know about the feud between the two actresses. At some point the playwright who was Duse's lover for many years, had offered Sarah the lead in a new play, after which Duse ended the relationship. It is only now that Lou remembers this.

'Those vulgar electrical theatres are a disgrace for histri-

onics,' she adds surly.

Lou pays a few coins and enters together with two colleagues, the others follow Duse.

It is a narrow, airless room, and the wooden kitchen chairs are uncomfortable. In the front is a screen suspended, top and bottom stretched by wooden slats. The lights fade away and a shaky image appears on the screen.

Everything he sees is rigid, blurry, colorless, recorded from a single point of view, but before his eyes at last is emerging the world famous Sarah. She is playing the key scenes in the piece on a stage, just as she would do in theatre, but without sound. After a while, when he is used to the image, it is like he is sitting in that theatre himself, just a few yards away from her.

When the movie has finished, Lou and some other men are invited into the projector box to look at the projector. The film reel consists of a strip of photographs in a row, which come to life under a lamp. The contraption is a kind of magic lantern, capable of rendering movement, ever the same, till infinity. Life suddenly becomes repeatable, seizable, clear.

Fifteen minutes later, impressed – by Sarah as well as by this amazing piece of science, he steps out, blinking in the sharp light.

Caruso makes up with his wife before he will separate from her for good. Lou sees a good reason to break up with Isadora, as it turns out she has a lesbian relationship with another dancer, and sets his mind on other young ladies. His villa is

sheltering a growing group of people and the Free State is succumbing under a proliferation of guests. He has become a scale consumer of absinth. He goes on drinking till there's nothing left than empty space.

The parties are starting to feel worn.

Those who dance fall into each other's arms, those who drink fall down. Everyone is stumbling through the house in a lonely togetherness. Circling around, clinging onto each other, sucking greedily and tearing away again. One by one they leave, their impudent conversations and ecstatic attachments left behind in oblivion.

He has to get out for now. Paris is an obvious choice, visiting his daughter and some friends. He hands his key to one of his regular guests, and asks Caruso and Duse to keep a watchful eye.

In Paris he rents a two room studio in the Rue Fontaine, on the right bank of the Seine. He had to pay two months in advance. The trotting of horses' hooves and the rattle of coach wheels give him a sense of coming home. Amidst the hubbub he will certainly be able to relax.

As it turns out many of his old friends have left Paris or are on tour. His daughter has grown up to be a toddler, who does not recognize him. Jeanne is not striving to make the situation much easier, though apparently she does not blame him for anything.

'You cannot have it both ways, Lou,' she says calmly.

She is right. This is the logical consequence of his choices, and in hindsight he would not have wanted it any other

way. Maybe he could forge a bond with his daughter when she is older and he will be able to talk to her. This idea, not even an intention, is his solace.

In this sudden isolation the gamble joints surrounding Les Halles have a strong attraction. Before he realizes it, he has been on the play tables every night for two weeks.

One morning he wakes up having lost everything he owned: clothes, watch, savings. He even gambled away his Tuscany villa. In that instant it seemed like a good solution to regain the previous nights' losses. It means a total bankruptcy. The guys he played cards and dice with have a reputation to fear the worst. He is forced to sell the house to the first bidder, for not paying back a gamble debt, or paying it back too late, will mean his death. An Italian developer buys the fully furnished villa at a humiliating price and turns it into a guesthouse, which in fact it has been all the time.

Suddenly Lou is the pauper he had been before having been admitted to the Conservatoire. He detests past's and present's rhyme. This time he is not suffering from poverty to achieve some ideal – acting at the highest level – he has done so before. This poverty does not feel romantic or grand, just stupid and unsatisfactory.

In order not to find himself on the streets, he joins the first theatre company offering him a job. The pathetic level of his co-players as well as the third rate theatres depress him. Acting does not feel like an art anymore, but like a cheap trick. He disdains his co-actors, the audience, which

seems to like the lot, and therefore he despises himself as well.

Charming a mediocre audience does satisfy him just as little as impressing a witless, ugly woman.

He plays the part of Christian, the lover, in a burlesque version of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, an imposter who takes all the credit for Cyrano's letters, pursuing the girl of his dreams. In fact he is just the same, as he gloomily thinks sometimes. The actor, the way he is impersonating him now, is a forger, a poseur, having levelled hypocrisy to an art form. He is distilling delight from sham, falsehood, embellished lies.

While playing the part of Christian, he never feels elevated, and he never 'disappears' at all, but he is painfully confronted by the darkest side of who he is, who he has chosen to be.

After one especially depressing performance he is walking towards the Café de la Rotonde. He could visit his current paramour, called Mimosa, but he likes to be alone. Or rather: he is longing to disappear on his own into a crowd. In the bar he submerges in a sea of voices, in which his own mind will have to dissolve. He orders a glass of absinth. It gives him the intoxication he is missing since he has no money to join the gambling tables.

This liquor is called 'the green fairy' and he can certainly agree. It stops thinking as if a hatch in his head is being closed, and he has no longer access to his reason. Only the experience remains, entering without judging or second thoughts. In a way this is pure. Honest. He is feeling free

this way. The infernal liquid disturbing his sleep and blurring his speech, he takes for granted. It's doing tricks to him on stage, lately the words leave his mouth more slowly than he wants them to do.

Who cares? His talents are wasted on this company anyway. Does he in fact has any talent left, he is wondering suddenly, or is it likely to wane if not used?

The drink is served, a pitcher of ice water on the side. He picks up the elegantly perforated absinth spoon, puts a sugar cube on top of it and carefully pours the ice water over it. The mixture is dripping down into the green liquor, milky spirals appear, muddling ever so more the drink. Absinth has the aura of delight and danger he is looking for. Sometimes he will mix pure absinth with some other liquor, something reserved for people who, just like him, do not have to go to work early in the morning: artists, moneybags and fringe figures.

That evening he will not talk to anyone. There are more people sitting at their tables staring rigidly in front of them, focused on their own experiences. That is what absinth does to you.

He does not know how long he has been in the bar or how many glasses he has had. It is like pieces of time have been cut loose. By turns he is feeling sinking down and rebounding, without a clue of what was in between. Anything he experiences after a rebound suddenly is of the utmost importance. It had a symbolic meaning, even a predictive value. He is falling prey to this magical thinking, seizing him likewise whenever he has been gambling for too long.

An ace of clubs on the table means he's having a winning streak. A man across the table taking a sip just before drawing a card, means it is a bad card.

For example, this very moment he sees a feather on a woman's hat, covered with down moving on the air current like marram grass in a breeze, and he thinks to observe an incentive to move along with life as it comes. Bend, do not resist, or you will break.

All things around him are splotchy, he only can discern silhouettes, and then again everything is so crystal clear it is hurting his eyes. Colors and shapes are burning and sharp, taking away his breath until they flow down, together with himself, into a diffuse entirety. He is doubting his own existence. He does not sense any contact with his body or the setting he is in. When someone addresses him, he is relieved. Apparently he is still there.

He is incapable of answering, but gratefully he empties the glass of water that has been put in front of him.

The cab that has been called for him drops him off at his house, and he climbs the stairs to his studio, one step at a time. His breath is rising and falling inside his chest, the swishing sound deafeningly waving through him. He drops down on the bed, exhausted.

He is feeling too young to die and too drunk to live.

Is this puffed face his? He distends his eyes more, pinches his cheeks, but the mirror keeps reflecting a puffy head and an empty gaze. Hunched, as if to better suffer the splitting headache, he walks to his sink. He cuts two big pieces of

bread, covers them with salted meat and pours a large glass of water.

It is late in the afternoon and he decides to visit Mimosa on foot. With her mother she lives on the other side of the city entirely, on the Boulevard Montparnasse, but a walk will freshen him. Besides he has no other occupations whatsoever.

Maybe this friend who is staying with Mimosa will be there as well, but so be it. This woman visited him lately in his studio and made advances to him which he ignored. He did not say a word to Mimosa. The woman clearly is of good descent, lavishly covered with pearls and diamonds, but he is not interested in her in any way, and when it turned out she was ready to cheat on her friend, she put him off completely.

He is walking along the Seine, feeling his spirits lighten more with every step. Evening is approaching. They could be going out for dinner together and attend some performance. He has to give Mimosa more attention. She is beautiful and funny. Yet he cannot help sensing contempt for her as well, because she wants him as he is now, in this beggarly state he is in. She is content with so little.

As he arrives at her apartment the concierge informs him she went to the theatre with her mother and girlfriend. He walks home again, disappointed. It has been getting colder and he is shivering. He should have put on an overcoat.

The Paris streets do not cheer him up this time, and the bars have no attraction to him. Home again he takes out

his hip flask of absinth. He does not bother to dilute it with water, and there is no sugar in the house. The liquor is tasting bitter, all wormwood, coriander, fennel and anise. It is this bitterness that is satisfying, like a well-earned whacking, quenching an embarrassing guilt.

Nipping he empties the flask, knowing he will be awake all night. Curious, the way something he considered to be his ruin only this morning, now seems to be nothing else than his rescue.

Next afternoon there is a loud knocking at his door. Mimosa. She is breathless and her face is showing panic.

‘Everything gone,’ she says. ‘All jewelry.’

Pacing through the room she tells her story. The night before, when they were all in the theatre, there has been a break in, and her friend’s jewelry has been stolen. The police was informed immediately. Two cops came by and found a man’s hat.

‘Yours,’ she says.

It is true. He has given her a hat of his, because it looked so lovely on her. ‘I swore I got this hat from you, but I do not think they believed me. And my friend said she had not seen it before.’

‘Calm down,’ Lou says.

‘Maybe they’ll lock you up,’ she says theatrically, covering her face with her hands.

‘Seems a bit overdone,’ he says laughing, ‘based on a hat.’

‘But you do not know the severe laws over here. Or the French police. They consider you a *cambricoleur* already. We

have to go to the station, so you'll have a chance to explain.'

Eventually Lou accompanies Mimosa to the police station, in order to calm her down. He himself thinks it is quite ridiculous. After making his statement, he is told by the cop he will hear from them, today or tomorrow.

Though he does not worry, he discusses the matter with a French friend of his, the painter Edouard. Edouard seems to be worried as well and proposes to manufacture an alibi. During the evening of the burglary they would have been playing billiards together in the Café de la Rotonde, and when asked they both will stick to that.

Next morning Lou is awakened by a pounding at his door.

'Telegram, monsieur,' he hears.

Lou opens the door and three men invade his studio. They arrest him on suspicion of breaking in and burglary. He is barely able to prevent them from handcuffing him, by promising he will run along with them quietly.

In the Palais de Justice he is being held for eight hours and interrogated. He is sticking to the story he made up with Edouard. During the last hour he is forced to tell it again to the magistrate, who stares at him vacantly. After he is finished, Edouard is escorted in. Tears are running down his cheeks.

'Forgive me, I could not carry on with our lie,' he exclaims. 'I have told them the truth.'

Aghast, Lou looks at his friend. How could he not have persevered? By now he himself has adopted the alibi as a

thing that really happened.

‘We know you are an actor,’ the magistrate says, ‘but you cannot fool us.’

The next moment two cops take him by the arms and carry him off to the van that will take him to the Prison de la Santé. This time he is in handcuffs indeed.

Court is closed during summer vacation, lasting three months. All France has come to a stop, even the investigation will start only after the recess, and he is locked up.

Mimosa shows an amazing devotion. Every week she visits him, every days she writes. He does not have any savings, so he has to rely on the services of an inexperienced pro bono lawyer, who qualifies the case as ‘hopeless’ from the start.

The hours he is not in the prison yard or receiving visitors, he spends on exercising and reading the bible he has requested for, but there are too many hours left for contemplating. Thoughts he was able to keep at a distance for so long, concerning impotence and emptiness, the vacuity of all things, are gaining ground.

He is feeling like his luck had ran out, and only adversity is awaiting him. In this position he cannot throw a dice to turn the tide, decisions are being made for him. It is possible he will be in jail for five years on this accusation, his lawyer says. And after that time, who would be ready to accept a condemned criminal in a theatre company?

Mimosa is not able to help him in his misery. The poor child does not know what to say, and should she say any-

thing that makes sense, he would not accept it from her. For him she's sunk just as low as he has, only by standing by him. He wants to be a winner in the eyes of his lover, and nothing else. The more kindness she shows, the more he pushes her away.

In the end she stays away.

Breathing is different in a small space. After a while one feels like the air one is exhaling bounces off the walls, bumps on the floor, returning all clouded. One starts breathing more superficially in order to inhale less clouded air. One wants to break out, outside, expand one's chest and take a deep draft of air. All this time all things are minimal: thinking, feeling, moving. The whole mechanism is depending on breathing.

He is lying on the bed, motionless. The bed is hard and sagged at the same time, a filthy, potholed mattress. His cell is narrow and bare. Beside the bed is a little sink with a mirror. No table, no chair, no permission to hang photographs or postcards on the wall.

His eyes are wandering through the room, getting stuck on a crack in the wall. It is shaped like a mountain top, sliding down into a valley on one side and climbing up again.

It is only afterwards, after the crisis, one can define where one was at a certain time, he reflects. Is one standing just beneath the top, and is this just the beginning, or is one deep down in the valley, after which things will improve quickly? Will the track go down even further or is this the lowest point? It is hard to see. That is why a crisis feels ho-

peless, when one is in the thick of it. In one's mind it will last endlessly, forever.

He should try to see past it, past this misery, up to some future, when this all will be over. When it will have become a tall tale, fit to peddle to the guys. He'll just have watch the present with this detached look. This will not go on forever, it only seems that way. Sometimes he seems to succeed, but then again the larger perspective vanishes again, and leaves him looking at a crack in the wall.

Now that he is void of company and stimulants, his father returns to his consciousness. It is as if he is watched by him, reducing him even more than he already feels. From the other side his father must conclude he himself made better choices. Who should want a condemned criminal to be his legal son and heir?

Other, even darker thoughts ascend. Thoughts of dissolving completely in some collective, flowing down into something bigger. This desire for nothingness did never before appear so blissful, but it does not go beyond a vague, undefined need. He knows fellow inmates could provide him with some substance to put an end to his misery – if he could come up with the money – and the idea gives him peace. Should he want to, he could.

The only benefit of his imprisonment is the effortless victory over his absinth addiction. It is no longer the wormwood in his blood that is keeping him awake. The shaking and sweating have stopped and after one month his face is no longer swollen and his speech is fluent again.

He gets out of bed and walks up to the crack. Using his

finger nail he cuts a nick through the descending track, just before it goes up again. This is where he is now, he decides. Things will deteriorate for a little while, but then it will be over.

When finally the court is in session again, his case is being evaluated. One of his theatre companions returns from a holiday and pays the considerable bail. Suddenly, after almost four months, he is out in the streets again, waiting for his trial. Everyone expects him to flee France, being used to rambling, but he chooses for the opposite. He stays put, looking for publicity.

He visits madame Cora Laparcerie, who is about to initiate the production of *Lysistrata*, the classical comedy by the Greek poet Aristofanes. He makes his audition, together with a handful of others, and to his own surprise he is given the part of Alexandros.

His position is well known, but his co-actors pretend there is nothing going on and they treat him kindly. The play is about Greek *Lysistrata*, who has to suffer her husband Alexandros being sent to the frontlines as a soldier. She unites the women of both sides in order to force their men to make peace, by stealing the treasury used for financing the war, and by denying their husbands sex, as long as there is no peace. Lou presents Alexandros as a lustful man, used to fighting, but who will invent himself anew.

The part makes him feel triumphant over his father, the ambassador of war. The satire elevates him over the subject, in a glorious and intelligent way. Warfare is nothing more

than an infernal machinery, grinding men and spitting them out legless, covered in decorations. He is fighting the war ideal of his old man with his own world, the world of imagination.

The opening of the play is a huge success. The fact he is a prisoner on bail is being used for promotion. The audience consists of people who never saw him on stage and just want to see him, as well as people who know him and want to encourage him. Paris is on his side.

His wages are enough to pay a good lawyer. When his case finally goes to court, his lawyer manages to exculpate him.

After one performance he is delivered an unbelievable message. It turns out the great Sarah Bernhardt has been looking for him for a long time. He is asked to contact her agent. Lou sends a telegram and by return he gets the answer: in a few days he is expected in London, where Madame Bernhardt is acting in the Coliseum. Crossing the Channel is paid for.

Before knocking at the suite door in the Carlton Hotel, he strokes his hair and straightens his back. The upcoming meeting is of great import. Rather than nervous he is elated. The first impression he will make, will be crucial. And he is good at first impressions.

A man with delicate features opens the door and introduces himself: Pitou, Sarah's personal assistant.

'You are expected,' he says, 'please, sit down.'

A servant girl opens the door of Sarah Bernhardt's adjoining bedroom, and everyone is silent. There is this same expectant, tense silence one experiences in the theatre, when the lights are fading away and the curtain is being raised. Indeed, Sarah appears in the door as walking up to the stage. She is elegant, smaller than he expected, wearing a white lace dress and she is unbelievably svelte.

He gets up, and she walks up to him, smiling, her hand elegantly stretched out for him to kiss.

'Enchanté de faire votre connaissance,' she says.

Lou can hear why she is called 'the woman with the golden voice'.

'The pleasure is all mine,' he says.

They sit down and Pitou stands behind Sarah's armchair like a gatekeeper.

'You have given me a lot of trouble finding you,' she smiles. 'I gather you have been making long journeys?'

There will be no talking of the fuss about his arrest, the true reason he was traceable all of a sudden, as he gratefully understands.

'The Far East, the Mid East, indeed. Calcutta, Persia, Isfahan, Bagdad. Enchanting places.'

'You have to tell me all about them.'

Lou smiles reluctantly, presuming she is being polite.

'Please, I am serious. Tell me like Sheherazade did.'

He starts telling, and every time he has completed an anecdote she asks him a new question, followed by requests for elaborations and examples. Her eyes grow big when what she hears is to her liking. He knows she is sixty-nine

years old, and that age is showing in the wrinkles in her face, but her energy is a twenty years old girl's.

All this time Pitou keeps standing behind her, and as Lou is narrating more and more, he can see his expression soften, putting him at ease. Suddenly Sarah gets up, asking him to return in an hour to have lunch.

'Then you can tell me more about your travels and we can get to business.'

Pitou is already beside him, to usher him out of the door.

There is a lot to see in London's streets, but he pays no attention. They are going to do business, which means he practically is hired. He will act together with this miraculous woman, the most important actress of his time. Even if he'll only get supporting roles, even if it will cost him money, this is what he wants.

At his return a table for two is set with delicate china, roses in a vase, silverware and a wine cooler. Sarah is hardly eating or drinking, she does not smoke, but she converses a lot. They are on a first-name basis now, for a Frenchwoman a sign of affection. Again Sarah is showing genuine interest, and he is getting the idea this is the way she is. This inappeasable curiosity must be the secret of her youthful appearance.

After dinner she moves to another room, returning with a stack of paper in her hand.

'The tour will last twelve months, or fourteen months, who is to say?' she says, matter-of-factly all of a sudden. 'I have had a contract drafted for you as my co-actor. For four

years' time, and wages for 52 weeks, whether we will be on stage or not.'

In a little lower voice she adds: 'Should you like to join my company.'

Lou takes the sheets of paper she is handing him.

'I must insist you read the contract fully first,' she says.

He does so, and having reached the final page and reading the fee, he cannot believe his eyes. Never has he earned so much money. A fee? It is a royal grant.

'Madame, this offer is too big for my modest services. You are overestimating me. I shall try not to disappoint you.'

'So you accept?' she exclaims joyfully. 'Then let us drink to the upcoming tour and to Armand Duval, to the duke of Bedford, Jean Gaussin, Scarpia, Duca d'Este – in short: to you.'

They raise their glasses, and on she chatters about roles, plays, tours and routes, until he is dizzy.

'In eleven days we will set off to America,' she says finally. 'I'll arrange to have your scripts waiting for you in my Paris theatre tomorrow. Memorize as much of your parts as possible. I'll see you on the boat, and we can rehearse there.'

He promises so. On parting she gives him a hundred golden guineas.

'An advance of the contract.'

He leaves the hotel, dazed. At the corner of the street he hands one of the coins to a beggar, who says out of habit: 'The Lord bless you, sir.'

That night he visits Limehouse, where he gets intoxicated, gambles, gets in a fist fight, drinks even more and ends up in his hotel room with a Chinese girl. The next day he takes the express train to Paris. His right eye is swollen and pounding. His vision is blurred, which does hardly bother him.

Thanks to his gambling, no longer a hundred gold pieces are jingling in his pocket, but eight hundred.

Back in Paris he goes by the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt to pick up a bundle of worn play scripts. At home he discovers the roles are many and the texts are of considerable length. This repertoire is a career in itself. Unfortunately he never played in one of the classics, he did not even watch them all as a visitor.

He has only ten days to prepare. It should be possible to learn four out of the twelve roles by heart, though he might miss a word or two.

The scripts are not only used, but also contain lines, stains, scratches and tears, making the text unreadable sometimes. Yet all this is giving him renewed energy. He is at the start of something great. A glorious turning point.

He informs his friends and relations of his upcoming departure, and one by one they come by to say goodbye. The press brings the news of madame Bernhardt doing a new American tour accompanied with his name, being her new acting partner, and so more knockings at his door follow. Farewell dinners, parties and even breakfasts are being organized for him. Sarah's press agent arranges more interviews

and photo shoots for him than he has had in all of his career.

At the times he is alone, there is an agitated restlessness pushing him to the pub.

On October 23th 1910 he is standing in the waiting room of the Gare Saint-Lazare, with the two suitcases he is allowed to bring. Around him are flocking dozens of company members, glad to meet again, talking and laughing hilariously. Nobody does introduces him to anybody. He is being observed, people are giggling, though not viciously. Not a trace of *la grande Madame* yet.

The many parties have exhausted him. His head does not store one single word of his texts.

6 Geraldine

When I am sitting motionless, eyes closed, I still can evoke the turmoil. I can hear the questions being shouted, only partly intelligible, tumbling over each other, the clicks of a dozen cameras. I can feel my mother's hand, resting loosely on the back of my waist, protective and encouraging at the same time.

When the Kaiser Wilhelm II has moored in New York harbor and my mother and I walk down the gangway, a crowd is rushing towards us. The purser fetches me hands full of welcoming telegrams, letters and flowers. On the quay Mr Concried, the Metropolitan's director, is the first to walk up to us and shake hands. Conversation is impossible, because of the journalists and photographers swarming around us. Mr Concried takes a step aside, watching amusedly.

The questions are nearly all shockingly personal, much more intimate than usual in Berlin or Paris. Yes, I am hoping to double my European successes in my homeland. Yes, I did sing for the German emperor. No, the prince royal and I did not have an affair. No, I am not engaged. Neither secretly married. Why not? Well, because I am not.

Cameras are flashing continuously from every angle. I

am glad I am wearing my small turban and my fur coat, which make me look somewhat older than my twenty-four years. It is made of the miniver that provoked reprimands from the Berlin Court, as it is supposed to be 'royal fur'.

Answering the questions I do not have to look at my mother to know what she might be thinking: this is everything we worked for.

I have come home, even in a way I would have considered unseemly to dream of back then, when I left America.

I must have been about sixteen when, at my first visit to the Metropolitan Opera House, my mother adjured: 'One day you will be singing here.'

The biggest stars performed at the Metropolitan. Besides, America is home, the place where one likes to triumph above all others.

As rebellious and impatient as I have been in Berlin, just as nervous and smallish I am feeling now. Successes in the European opera houses in no way do guarantee success in America; many of the great European stars turned out to be no more than transitory over here. The opera house's dimensions are impressive; the structure is about two times as big as the Berlin one.

I am not happy about the choice for my debut. Sopranos before me, especially Emma Eames, had big successes with *Roméo et Juliette*. It will be hard to impress with this opera, but Mr Concried is adamant.

'The house will be sold out,' he says cheerfully and decidedly, indicating his priorities.

On my debut night, amply in time, I am riding, together with my mother in the coach to the opera house. I keep silent and my eyes are closed, to retain the focus I built up earlier in the day. It is no use. I can feel images of fear pulling the strings of my nerves. I can see before me everyone in the audience shifting in their seats, as not a sound is leaving my mouth, or as I tripped on the hem of my dress.

I open my eyes to chase the images, staring outside. My mother is stroking my arm.

In a corner of the lady soloists' dressing room, hanging from a clothing rack with other dresses, is the costume my maid servant delivered earlier in the day. On the dressing table sit other sopranos' trinkets and compacts. They embarrass me, interrupt my concentrated privacy. I push them aside, setting out my own makeup on the table.

I intend to make a modest use of greasepaint, fitting the fourteen years old enamored Juliette. No need for a hair dresser, as I am not wearing a wig, just a soft feather in a narrow braid in my own hair, which I let hang down loosely around my face.

While I am preparing, the door opens without knocking. I feel irritation rising – they really should understand I need my privacy – until I recognize Emma Eames.

'I was hoping you were here,' she says.

She walks up to me, puts her hand on my shoulder and turns me back to the dressing table. She looks at me in the mirror, cheerful and incisively.

'You will be fabulous tonight,' she says. 'I heard you re-

hearsing, you will be an irresistible Juliette.’

I have to swallow, and I nod. Said by an opera star whose Juliette has been worshipped in Paris and New York, this certainly means something. This is her signature role.

I watch this woman, seventeen years older than I am, mellow, proud, and I can sense she means it. She gives me one last pinch and leaves.

It is always the undercurrent I respond to. Friction under the skin, unspoken sentiments, venom floating in the air. Disdain disguised as politeness. Envy dressed as kindness. Opportunism masked as affection. I can register the emotions lurking behind the words. So often the two do not match, in some cases underneath the words is an opposite meaning, which confounds me. I know I should react to what is said properly, but I am blocked.

Now I am overwhelmed by this woman’s forthright generosity at all levels.

My reflexion looks different. Something had changed in my eyes, they are radiating the boldness Emma has left behind.

I get up and take my dress from the rack. It has been modelled after a Botticelli painting by my Parisian designer. All along the neckline are small silken roses, and it has been sprinkled with tiny stones, shining in the light. The fabric is supple and airy, and an outline is created purely by a belt, loosely tied around my waist.

One hour later my gear is perfect, but my throat is dry. I do not risk drinking more tea, fearing to be on stage with a full bladder later on.

In the wings I am doing my breathing exercises. I take a deep breath, expanding my diaphragm until my ribs seem to give way and I am able to breathe more sideways, creating space which will be useful later. Exhaling is slow, to prevent hyperventilating. I only stop my exercises when I can hear the strings soft timbre swell out.

A tense smile on my lips, I walk up to the stage and to the footlights, as calmly as I can. All of a sudden, as if all those four thousand people had made an agreement, a generous applause explodes from the theatre's black hole. So uproarious and stormy it is, it almost makes my stress dissolve.

I have to recover after this surprise and focus again. This is the moment.

My first solo is a waltz. I decided to present the piece softly, almost dreamily, not hesitatingly but even more airily and ethereally than I did in Berlin. I succeed. In scene four I do not present a Juliette singing of love sitting upright in a chair, but a relaxed and happy girl, lying on a sofa in Roméo's arms. Maybe my volume is less forceful in this position, but I believe in the scenic effect. I have been taking risks, and the enthusiastic final applause tells me I have chosen the right thing.

The next day the New York newspapers mention my 'dauntless originality'. 'Her whispered waltz a dream' headlines *The Evening Sun*. My mother cuts out all reviews and keeps them in her folders.

I have never looked into her clippings folders – by now there is a whole stack of them, which ended up in my attic

after her death. Back in those days I seldom had a thought about the receiving side of my art anyway; the people who bought tickets, left their warm homes in the evening just to look at me. It was important to my career they were there, in large numbers, but their judgement was no more weighty than mine. For me a glorified performance did not have to be a successful one *per se*.

Now I am older, I know better.

Sound can only turn into music inside the ear, just like written words turn into sentences in the eyes of the reader. There are good listeners just like there are good readers. Precise and patient listening, not applying one's own taste or fashion, not demanding hastily or immediately, but being ready to let it unfold by itself, that is an art in itself. The interaction between performer and receiver is what creates art.

One can hear a performance is being understood in this special silence setting in, a rebound, a sympathy.

In hindsight I can see the open and intelligent reception by the New York audience – the most critical and cool audience in the world, as they say – has rendered glamour and weight to my American debut. Here was a place for me.

Although the audience is treating me warmly, the opera staff is hesitant. All these sopranos claiming rights on the repertoire turn obtaining roles into a struggle. My contract, accurately as it may have been drafted, securing performances for me, on the other hand does not prevent me from being put in less prestigious matinees and touring theatres in other American cities.

The confusion I am feeling every day is countered invariably by my mother, saying 'flowers bloom where they have been planted'. This is where I came from, this is where I belong and here my star will rise. Her words soothe me. When mother says things like this, they are not reassurances or hope, but prophecies.

Mother is, as she likes to put it herself, the sensitive kind. She is receptive for the yet unshaped, the intangible, she experiences omens and visions. Now, in America again, she lives with my father in a Boston home most of the time. There, spiritism runs rampant, and nearly each week she visits an occult soiree.

I do not care for those handsome young swamis, mumbling incoherent sapience, descended upon them from above. The ladies, agitated and admiring lying at their feet, I consider lost, impressionable souls.

My mother's gift, though, I hold in high esteem. She does not bother to wrap her internal 'knowing' in exotica. And when she foresees something and ventures to say it out loud to me, it will happen.

I took my lodgings in a corner apartment in New York's classical Hotel Netherlands, containing a room for my mother, one for myself and one to entertain people. In this room I am practicing every day to maintain my voice, waiting for a steady, big role. When at last it comes along, Marguerite in *The Damnation of Faust*, the theatre is only half filled. Eventually only a few performances follow. Singing with Enrico Caruso in *La Bohème* is a success though,

and not long after this there is an offer bigger than I could have dreamt of.

It concerns a new opera, *Madama Butterfly*, after a well-known play, which triumphed as an opera in London last summer. The production's star does not want to come over to New York, and so I have been chosen. To my utter joy Caruso has been asked for the part of Pinkerton, and the composer, Puccini, will be over for the occasion.

From the moment I dispose of my music scores, I start rehearsing my part as Cio-Cio-San. I want to learn to walk, eat, dance, gesture and think like a Japanese, aided by photographs, books and a Japanese actress. I even hire a Japanese servant, whom I can observe all day long. I copy her modestly bowed head, her tiny, trailing steps, her serenity and grace. Dressed in merry silk kimonos, wearing a heavy wig, and my feet in small Japanese canvas shoes, I am rehearsing my arias. I shave my eyebrows, replacing them with little arcs drawn with kohl.

Rehearsals onstage are not many, and by far not as meticulous as in Berlin. In the audience people are listening. They invited themselves, equipped with sandwiches and claptrap. In between acts mother rushes by with a new invention, a thermos to keep drinks warm. It is filled with strong chicken broth.

On the opening night I am nervous, but I am acting out confident detente, I manage to believe in myself in the end.

At crucial moments, like opening nights, one has to gather all one's strength and not forsake. One moment of

backsliding can mean it is all over. One has to show oneself. Most people, especially women, tend to minimize themselves in order to please, they want to be amiable in an unthreatening way. This does not work onstage. One has to stretch out, to occupy space, ruffle up one's feathers like a peacock.

That night I can sense I manage to play the audience's minds, to transfer emotions. From deep inside my abdomen I work them up and out, as when shouting, crying or laughing. My voice is flowing along, in every key and modulation.

Madama Butterfly is being reprogrammed endlessly. Night after night I let myself slip into Cio-Cio-San's head, heart and too narrow shoes. I did her for the first time – and the most often – in America, so the role gives me a feeling as if it is my property. Or at least my signature part.

I am no longer promising. I am accomplished.

With the status of being accomplished, first lady or prima donna as some are starting to call me, come two servants, a secretary and a dressing room just for me, the first time ever for an Metropolitan opera star. I chose for a small, windowless room, formerly used for storing props, as not to make anybody jealous. The room may be cramped, but it is mine and mine alone. I can leave my dresses and wigs there, arrange my toiletry and put my photographs in the mirror frame.

They are mostly publicity pictures of me in other roles, and a few showing my father and mother arm in arm on a bench. And one of Sarah Bernhardt onstage. No pictures of loved ones at home I could be missing, no notes from

lovers, no souvenirs of moments in daily life.

I told you before about my first time meeting Sarah, which resembled so much yours, a few years later. Yet I want you to hear it once more, this time including all the details I can recall. It was in the spring of 1908, as I returned to Europe for a while to have a series of concerts. My costume designer had carried Sarah's wish to have lunch with me, and for fear she should have second thoughts, I proposed the next day pronto.

She is sitting there when I enter the restaurant. Breathtaking she is. She gets up, she looks willowy, though not tall, dressed in long draperies, eyes sparkling. Somehow she manages to look as if in her twenties and in her sixties at the same time. She shakes my hand in a surprisingly firm grip.

She inquires after my appetite and preference, and routinely orders for both of us.

'I hope you like white wine?' she asks.

I nod, even though I seldom drink for lunch.

'A bottle of Chablis,' she informs the waiter.

The she turns her eyes to me. Curiosity I detect, genuine interest, far from just politeness.

'Tell me, my little dove,' she says, 'what do you act currently, how do you prepare? I want to know everything!'

Thank God my French is good, due to the French lessons my mother used to force me to take. I start telling about the Juliette I perform in Paris, and it turns out she knows a lot about that part, from the dramatic details up to the renovations in the *mise-en-scène*. Also she knows I am trying for

years now to insert modern acting into my performances.

‘People are not attracted to watching singing machines anymore,’ she says. ‘Neither to actors who just recite their text. They want to see, but above all to feel. The contents of what you are singing ought to perspire from every fiber in your body.’

I nod enthusiastically.

Spontaneously the conversation takes a personal turn. We are discussing books, dogs, clothes. Even men.

‘Indulge yourself enjoying men,’ Sarah says emphatically, as if entrusting me with a big secret, ‘and beware they do not engage you.’

‘But I do not want to marry,’ I say.

She lets out a gurgling laughter.

‘My girl, those men will come soon,’ she says, ‘proposing or not.’

She is ageless, fearless, uncompromising. Deeply impressed I leave the restaurant.

When I will be old I hope to be a bit like her.

After Paris I travel on to the Berlin Hofoper, where I shall always remain ‘*unsere*’ Farrar, and right after that the New York season is starting again, with guest performances in Boston. It is a lot. My voice tells me I am asking too much from it. It is not yet faltering, but some hoarseness is noticeable, and the high notes aren’t completely fluent. My mother sends me to a doctor, who prescribes me more rest and less work. A predictable and sensible advice, but I do not think I can permit myself. In this stage of my career I

cannot slow down. I will pay the price later, I decide, at a time when less depends on it.

If we think later on we will be more able to bear the effects of our acts, not only are we shifting the load, we also add some more weight to it. The extra load sticking to it will assert its rights. At that moment, against my better judgement, I chose the path of carrying on the weight until ones muscles start hurting, ones vision turns black and one will have to let go eventually.

Mister Concried is being replaced by two new Italians, who made La Scala in Milan great: Mr Gatti as general director and Mr Toscanini as a conductor and artistic director. It is leading to unrest amongst the singers, for everyone fears the introduction of La Scala singers.

My first meeting with Arturo Toscanini is a superficial acquaintance. We shake hands and he looks at me, not completely straight but notably sharp. Spontaneously I take a more upright attitude.

Reputedly he is a hot-headed man. His Italian irascibility seems to translate into brown hair, waving backwards as if he is standing in a breeze, and a moustache dancing gracefully above his lips.

There is a rumor he once made a soloist stand up during a rehearsal, asking him when he was born, and yelling out to him: 'That was a black day for music!' Some other time he called all the orchestra members 'imbeciles', after which he started to bullyrag himself. He supposed he must be a complete failure, being forced to work with those idiots.

During a *Madama Butterfly* rehearsal Toscanini is standing on the rostrum. He is continuously shaking his head and his irritation distracts me. Every now and then I throw a fierce look at him.

For the third time he stops the music to point at a musical error I made.

‘Maestro,’ I say, ‘would you please follow me when I am singing?’

‘So you feel like you are the star?’ he says in a lashing voice. ‘Stars are shining in the sky, should you not know.’

‘The audience pays to see my face, though, not your back,’ I snap back.

After the last chord I change clothes and tramp off to Mr Gatti’s office, to find a furious Toscanini. As soon as he sees me he directs his anger my way.

‘This was too much Farrar and too little Butterfly. You are much too dominant, where it should be the music domineering!’

‘The audience wants to feel a character down to their toes,’ I object.

‘All this drama is just diverting from the essence.’

‘Drama does underline the essence. That is what I want to transmit, and in my own way as well.’

‘This personal contribution is not necessary at all,’ he snorts. ‘Interpretation is an invention of performers meant to glorify themselves. Divas like you talk about ‘my Juliette’ and ‘my Tosca’. It is all just vanity.’

‘I have a right to my own conception,’ I snarl.

‘There is only one conception, the conscientious one,

rendering the music score correctly. It is a question of respecting the symphony.’

I like to go at him, but I decide to walk away.

Shortly after Mr Gatti calls me on the phone. The singer who is supposed to do Butterfly that very evening has been struck by the flu. Could I take over her part, Toscanini standing on the rostrum? After my consent a silence falls. A silence resounding amazement.

That evening Toscanini reveals a benevolent little smile, raising the baton.

Other members of the orchestra and cast get nervous under Toscanini, fearing they will fail. On some nights one can hear fear of the maestro’s fury in the music. I am not like that. I am feeling strong. Focused. He is bringing out the best in me, my precision and passion, while I still cling to my own interpretation of Cio-Cio-San.

Arturo Toscanini is directing with a delicate complacency. He is guiding me accurately, but leaving room for my contribution. Afterwards we share the applause. When I feel his warm hand on my back, I look aside into two laughing brown eyes and I know we have made up.

It is strange the way resistance can change into attraction. Feeling an unquiet which only diminishes when one is around someone. Then all is well, that is the place where one wants to be. Anything happening in each other’s company does not matter. That is the way I felt with Arturo.

Arturo must have felt the attraction too. He summons

me to his office to go through piddling business he could easily have handled with my mother, and he starts to come by, using silly excuses. After a while I start recognizing his series of three quick knocks on my dressing room door. At first he just saunters around a bit, picks up a fan here, admires a photograph there. Then he starts talking about some moments in the opera needing improvement, or just simply wishes me luck.

I notice I am starting to look forward to his little knocks on the door. Whenever Arturo fails to visit before a performance, or he turns out to be absent in the building during rehearsals, it feels like something important is missing.

Arturo is more than fifteen years my senior, he must be in his early forties, and besides, he is married. Everything about him seems to move, even when he is sitting down with his long, gangling body. The energy inside him is boiling and fizzing, at times exploding steamily, but most of the time it is just floating through the room in a catching way.

One night he stands behind me when I am making up, puts one hand on my shoulder, looking at me in the mirror. It is a fathoming gaze, searching for encouragement or rejection. I put my hand over his, somewhat solemnly. It is the answer to a question, an answer I did not know was inside me.

We keep staring at each other, me, head raised, from my chair, him looking down. It does not seem possible to disentangle our gazes anymore.

Arturo pulls me up, gently, and turns me around. We are

standing there across from each other, knowing a kiss is to follow, but still too surprised to exchange it.

Semi-darkness in the hotel room while Arturo is undressing me, but I'd wish it were completely dark. With every garment he removes from me I assist half-heartedly. When I am standing in front of him, naked, I want to fold my arms over my breasts, but I restrain myself.

He lays me down upon the bed. Then he undresses himself and lies down, partly over me. His breath is agitated, it is swishing in my ears as he kisses my neck. His hands are all over me.

The only thing I know is kissing, so that is what I do. Again and again his mouth releases mine, in order to kiss me on other, intimate spots. Down there his fingers are touching me. I am petrified. I hardly ever touched myself there.

I am undergoing it all in a mixture of fear and wonderment. A heat is starting to spread through me, which I do not know how to handle. I am trying to stay in control, as if it were a fainting fit one has to hide onstage.

Arturo's member is protruding from his body, strangely up in the air. Then he lies down on top of me and inserts it. It is a strange feeling, by far not as ecstatic as I had imagined. Still the heat inside me is growing.

I suspect Arturo wants me to do something, but I do not know what I am expected to. So I just lie there, waiting till it is over.

So that is it. For the first time in my life I am having

an affair. Could you believe that, Lou? At my age you had several dozen in your past already.

All of our encounters are secret, not to nourish any rumors in the theatre world. And of course his spouse should not grow suspicious. Arturo's marriage is on the brink of exhaustion, according to him. I resist every thought of his wife, acting simply as if she does not exist.

Arturo lives the way he conducts. Compulsively controlling, at his best laid-back, at his worst convulsive. When he is directing me I can see, knowing him better now, the fear in his eyes for something going wrong in spite of everything. On the rostrum he is a ruler and a scared deer at the same time. Always his goal is to let the composer speak, not he himself, and he is convinced he is the best one to do so. He is both humble and self-confident, both a star and an anti-star.

When I am with him, I can feel his intense, sharp gaze running over me, this gaze nothing escapes from, but conversely he never gives anyone a real look into himself.

In Arturo's company my senses have been sharpened, anything reaches me, driven by a higher consciousness. Wine is tasting fuller, music is sounding richer, words keep resounding. All of a sudden everything is important, nothing should escape my attention, lest something could be neglected. Something that will bring me closer to him.

I use this intense feeling in my performances. In new parts, like Cherubino in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and Manon in Bizet's *Carmen*, it pushes me to higher levels. Arturo's love, however poor it is in its expression and du-

ration, enhances my output, no matter if he is conducting, sitting in the audience or just joining me in my thoughts. And this is how I legitimize his part in my life: my career is not suffering from it, it flourishes on it.

The encounters in hotel rooms, the few rendezvous in town and the secret embraces in my dressing room become part of my daily routine. At that time I am not yet aware I have started to live from one encounter to the next, that an ever bigger part of my being is focused on it.

I still have to discover that love is always asking for more, ever more, at the expense of anything, until nothing else remains.

7 Lou

Sarah Bernhardt has something supernatural about her, Lou discovers during the long boat trip to the United States. There's a reason she's nicknamed 'the divine'. She survives on three or four hours of sleep per night. She never complains, ever. She's never tired, nervous, or nagging. She has a private physician, a manager, two maids and Pitou, but in the end she takes care of everything herself. She never rests, save for a catnap amidst her *troupe*. However, she can get excessively angry about a small thing, usually at Pitou, but it never lasts long. It has to be a necessary means of venting her extraordinary vitality. In any case that's the explanation given by the members of her company, who all adore her.

The only problem is that accursed knee. During the last scene of *La Tosca* in Rio de Janeiro, a couple of years ago, Sarah was playing the role of Floria Tosca, jumping from a prison window into what was supposed to look like the river Tiber. She had done so for a hundred times and there had always been mattresses laying there, out of the audience's sight, cushioning her landing. But that night the stage manager hadn't covered the whole floor and Sarah's right knee landed on the concrete floor. She had to be carried to her dressing room, only to thank for the applause with smiles

and butterfly kisses shortly after. Nobody in the audience had noticed anything.

‘It’s an animal, gnawing at my nerves and sinews,’ she tells Lou about her knee. She never gave the broken knee proper rest to heal and it has been hindering her movements ever since. During the rehearsals at the steamboat she’s leaning on furniture, or on another actor. She’s not heavy, but Lou can feel her full weight pulling on his arm. When she lets go of him she walks across the stage in a fluent motion, until she can grab hold of another sofa, table or pillar. She’s refusing to take the painkillers her physician advises her to take, preferring sips of champagne.

Lou is supposed to be Sarah’s romantic counterpart, and whenever they’re on stage one can feel the romantic tension between them, but in real life she never displays any amorous feelings towards him. Neither does he cherish any. Sarah is his boss, his superior, a woman who could have been his grandmother, on top of that. Sarah’s authority comes naturally, unemphatically, she may have been born with it, and that’s why everybody around her accepts it.

Every day of the trip is filled with endless rehearsals of the plays planned during the beginning of the tour. Most attention goes to the opening play, *Jeanne d’Arc*. In addition Sarah will instruct Lou for hours on end about every page of the script. She discusses the interpretation of the role, what nuances he might add to his performance, where he should stand, where he should walk. Whenever he doubts out loud if he’ll manage to master all the plays in time, Sarah just looks him in the eyes and says: ‘Study!’

The New York skyline. 'Skyscrapers' is what they call those slender buildings reaching for the heavens. How on earth do these things even stay upright? When Lou is in the harbor, walking the gangway, he's thinking he'll be able to explore the city before nightfall, but they're put on the train to Chicago right away. That's where his first performance is planned, tomorrow night; he'll be playing the duke of Bedford. A foretaste of the tour schedule, with two different five act plays every day, and several night trips to the next town, where the same thing is in store for him.

Half an hour before curtains up Lou goes to Sarah's dressing room. He's wearing a costume that's been adjusted to his body the best they could, sporting a collar that's chafing his chin annoyingly. His upper body feels stretched, and it's as if he hardly has a neck.

Sarah laughs heartily at him and takes a good look. She then grabs a big pair of scissors.

'Stand still for a moment, and don't breathe too deeply,' she says.

He's startled when she uses the scissors to cut a deep, square neckline into the thick, embroidered cloth, using only a few bold movements.

'There you are,' she says.

He looks into the mirror. His muscular chest, neck and jaws are visible. Suddenly he's a Bedford with masculine powers and sex appeal.

He walks over to the side of the stage, his gait suddenly springy. Carefully he pushes the curtain aside just a little,

to look into the theatre room. He expected the theatre to be half empty, because Sarah will only appear after half an hour, but it's packed, and the audience seems cultivated enough. They will follow the play, which is in French, by reading the English translation handed out to them.

The stage manager gives him a thumbs up; he can go on stage. The first act of *Jeanne d'Arc* is all him.

Apparently he has taken a few steps, because there he is, at the center of the stage. Withstanding the urge to commence quickly, he lets the delicate silence of tense anticipation linger. Never start in a hurry, he knows, let time work for you. It's the white passe-partout surrounding the engraving, which makes it come to its own.

He commences. The words keep coming, one after the other. Never march ahead in your mind, just let the sentences progress, one following the other. Hear what you say while you're saying it, let the expressions and gestures arise from there, tune out any peripheral thoughts.

To his surprise, right in the middle of a sentence he sees Sarah sitting on a chair backstage, one hand supporting her chin, her concentrated gaze fixed on him. She's following his every move.

When Sarah walks on stage in knightly yet still feminine costume, he can grab hold of something. He can aim his acting at her. In their shared scenes they act like two wildcats, circling each other, testing their opponents' strength. He feels challenged, lifted up by her, even more than during the rehearsals. Her timing is impeccable, he's straining to keep pace with her, then slow himself down again, depending on

her acting. The air seems to be vibrating. This is fireworks.

After the final applause Sarah follows him closely, to his dressing room. He's expecting some instructions on how to perform better next time.

Sarah puts her hands on his shoulders – she has to reach up high – and looks him straight into the eyes.

'Will you always be performing the way you did tonight?' she asks.

'I don't know, *madame*,' he stammers. 'I have done my best, but I apologize if it wasn't satisfactory.'

'Because if you do, I won't ever settle for another leading man.'

That's really what she says.

Sarah takes care that Lou's name is printed in large font on the posters, the ads and the program booklets. She insists he travels with her in her private car, which is more comfortable. She asks him to escort her to all the parties and receptions, to partake in interviews and photo sessions, where he's being treated with the utmost respect. It's her presence that lends him his panache, and he uses it as much as he can. It leads to gossiping and envious looks amongst *la troupe Sarah Bernhardt*. He can deal with that.

As a rule, there's a natural hierarchy between the older and the younger artist, which doesn't need to lead to the kind of inequality that precludes friendship. There's a growing familiarity between the two of them, but sometimes Sarah acts in an outspoken motherly way. She constantly informs whether he's healthy, if he's sleeping well. She calls

him *mon fils*. Every week she gives him just enough cash to make do and puts the rest of his fee on a French bank account, so he won't be able to gamble.

Somehow, Sarah is always aware of whatever takes place within her company, up to the smallest details, especially when love affairs are involved. She doesn't seem to be active in that field anymore herself.

'I left all that behind,' she always says when they're talking about relationships.

Lou has a notion it hasn't been completely to her liking.

Could that be the reason Lou isn't using his charms on the girls of the company? In order not to hurt her? He's not sure, but he's careful not to risk it. He rather chats up the American girls that linger around him after each show. His English is terrible, yet he always manages to make an impression. He keeps saying to himself that he's a mixer, someone who's not just content with one group of people, someone who has a wider gaze.

It's only when he starts having an affair with a married woman, who's not living with her husband anymore, that he realizes that he has felt, unconsciously, how Sarah's motherly behavior has a possessive edge to it as well.

The woman has been following him around for a couple of weeks now. After the last showing of *Phèdre* in Oakland – a matinee – they're able to spend a few hours together before the company has to leave for Los Angeles and the woman will return to New York. They've agreed she will prepare a meal. After the showing, when he's preparing to leave in a hurry, it turns out Sarah has prepared a surprise dinner, just

for him. For two hours, she forces him to sit at a table with some complete strangers, before finally dismissing him, so that he's able to go to his mistress.

When he arrives, around midnight, the apartment is empty and the woman has left.

In every American town they visit there's a couple of nickelodeons in former stores, bars or fairground tents, even most villages boast one. In Los Angeles there's an excessive lot of them.

One afternoon, Lou walks into a small theatre. 'Kindly remove your hats', 'No smoking' the signs outside say, and 'Stay as long as you want'.

In the gloom, he seeks his way to an empty chair. He has to watch where he's going, because there's children crawling on the floor. It's a continuous show and people are hooting and cheerfully commenting whatever is happening on the screen. Next to the stage a pianist is playing, in order to musically underscore the purport of the scenes, and to drown out the noise of the projector. When the reels are being changed he's playing tunes, with everybody singing along loudly.

He notices the films are becoming longer and the stories more convoluted. He hasn't seen any of the classic slapstick for a while, with jokes and pratfalls. Today's film is a light drama, with some funny scenes and explanatory text in between. The exaggerated facial expressions and theatrical gestures of the actors, all wearing ashen face-paint, are necessary to compensate the lack of spoken words, but it's

about something. The shaky theatre sets have been replaced with seemingly lifelike rooms and outdoor scenes. Suddenly he has no trouble imagining himself playing a part in a film.

The actors and actresses are mostly former vaudeville performers and have a huge reputation throughout society. Cinema could be for him what the invention of the gramophone has been for Caruso, who has sold a million copies of an aria from the opera *I Pagliacci*: he could tap into a completely new, massive audience.

He remains seated for another hour, until he has seen all the films the theatre has to offer. How comfortable would it be to be able to perform endlessly, without having to be present yourself. He wouldn't even have to travel; the copies of the film reels would do that for him. If he manages to start a career in cinema, he could win eternal fame with a lot less effort.

All things considered it could mean immortality.

Ever since Lou has been playing opposite Sarah, he has never given the same performance twice. Sarah may have performed a play for three hundred times, she will do it differently every night, meaning he's forced to adapt as well, only contributing to his enjoyment. It's a way of life for Sarah. Sometimes, when they're in a car or a train compartment, she will hardly look at the gorgeous landscapes; she'll just rummage through her thumbed scripts. After an hour of study she will suddenly call out that she has found a new edge to a scene, which they can try out the very same night.

Performing with Sarah is asking a lot of her co-actor. It

lifts you up, enhancing your abilities. There's no question, you just have to act well. Sarah does not have any standardized method, mannerisms or habits. Nothing about her performance is mechanical. She's well aware of the meaning of the words. That's the only thing you need to do on the stage: to be aware of what you're saying, why you're saying it and mostly what you're not saying, but do wish to convey. The theatre is always about what's not being said, she teaches.

He's being taken into account. He matters, as a serious actor. In the reviews, which are read out loud by the company members the next day, he's always being mentioned and usually praised for his strong, energetic performance. And his charm. 'French, butterfly-kissing, dashing romance; Tellegen evokes it all' one newspaper article reads. He cuts it out carefully, using a pair of golden scissors, a gift from a fan. His Dutch heritage has been erased, he's being taken for a Frenchman.

In Sarah's wake, the fame he's always been chasing is handed to him matter-of-factly – with admiration to boost.

The fame can be felt as a physical sensation. On stage his skin is tingling with the attention from the audience, as if all these people's intense gazes are covering him like a soft veil. Hours after the final applause he's still glowing. It feels like the beginning of being inebriated, when the alcohol is still sharpening the senses instead of dulling them.

He doesn't like those few occasions where he goes to his hotel room alone, after a showing. Once he's alone, the glow subsides and he starts to feel cold. The soft veil is taken away and his skin is left bare and barren. Nothing replaces

that glow, that's the scary part. Nothing but an endless void approaching. He's slipping away into an empty space, with nothing to hold on to, it feels like death. Like non-being.

Back in Paris, after the end of the American tour, he pays a visit to the Gaumont Palace-cinema which opened earlier that year, 1911. The venue is a refurbished hippodrome and boasts thousands of seats. Overwhelmed, he's looking at the baroque façade, flooded with electrical lights, the long undulating rows of seats, the enormous balcony and the orchestra pit filled with musicians and *bruiteurs* providing sound effects.

The actors on the screen are moving much slower and less wooden than he's used to. The projector must have a master's touch here.

Again Sarah is asked for a film recording. She wants to refuse, because she was unsatisfied with the results of *La Tosca*, the film in which Lou has seen her perform for the first time. Lou tells her what he has seen in the Gaumont Palace, how the technology has advanced and how she should give it another try – not in the least because he's hoping he might also land a part. She still refuses, but after the badly received theatre play *Les amours de la*

reine Élisabeth, which the company has to cancel after a week, she succumbs to the lure of money and publicity. She signs up for a two reel film, consisting of the highlights of a play they have performed for hundreds of times, *Camille*.

Lou gets to play the part he also took upon himself

during the tour: Armand Duval, who finds the woman of his dreams in Sarah. He's acting the part in a slow, sort of clumsy way, as young, enamored men can be. During the tour, Sarah has already exhaustingly instructed him about the postures, expressions and inflections which have proven their worth during the performances of a variety of other actors.

A few more rehearsals are needed on the set, in order to get the timing and positioning right. After that the film is recorded in one day, with a single take per scene, from the same vantage point. They're saying their lines like they always do, even though they won't be audible in the film theatre. In order to get the message across they overact a bit more, just like in America, where the audience couldn't understand them either, but had to read the translated lines. Under Sarah's critical eye, Lou remains within the boundaries of drama and the exaggeration doesn't become comical.

To Lou, the shooting day is a revelation. Having the camera aimed at him feels the same as those hundreds of eyes in theatre. The sensation gets even more intense knowing that whatever gets recorded can be repeated endlessly. In a certain way, it's a reassuring experience.

He won't be unnoticed.

A few weeks later, seeing himself on the screen, he's impressed. Numerous times he buys a cinema ticket to *Camille* and watches the picture, sitting in one of the velvet chairs, hunched into the collar of his coat. Never before has he seen himself walk around, stand still, talk, gesture,

move. He likes what he's seeing. His delicate features and kohl-rimmed eyes are beautifully captured by the camera. His athletic movements and youthful appearance form a sharp contrast with Sarah's matureness.

He regards his own looks not in the way one looks into a mirror, but without experiencing his inner feelings at the same time. Now he is able to see what others see: a self-assured, lively young man. He observes which posture makes him look most manly and how he looks strongest from the side.

Afterwards, walking in the street, it's as if the camera is still aimed at him. He sees himself walking, as if floating outside of his body. The sensation makes his gait springy and his eyes sparkle, he locks his breathing up high in his chest, making his torso expand.

He can conjure the glowing himself. He's playing a part in his own film.

Camille is a moderate success and leads to a new offer of a whole different order. An American producer and owner of a chain of cinema houses approaches Sarah with the request to adapt the whole of *Les amours de la reine Élisabeth* into a film, with a total length of almost forty minutes. It will be a four-reel film, something that has never been seen before.

Lou plays the role of the count of Essex, a young man who gets into a tragic romance with the elderly queen, and who finally gets decapitated, to her great sorrow. On set he's surprised by all the craftsmen walking around: a director, lighting technician, cameramen, set designers, make-up

artists and assistants. He's acting to the very best of his abilities, aided by Sarah, who whispers instructions to him in between takes.

The film premieres as *Queen Elizabeth* in the summer of 1912, at the Lyceum Theater in New York, to an audience consisting of journalists, high society and celebrities. It's a box office success, in both Europe and America. The film is not just a crowd pleaser, it's also attractive to the upper classes. Those who have never deigned to exchange the opera houses and theaters for the people's palaces of cinema come to see Sarah *la divine*, the embodiment of French art, the pinnacle of femininity and creativity. And they are not disappointed.

For Lou, this means a female fan base the likes of which he has never seen. His fame is simple compared to Sarah's, but it's considerable and ever-growing. The Americans nickname him 'the great lover'.

The postcards bearing his picture are selling well, in the street he's accosted and asked to hand out signatures, and photographers call out his name at every public appearance, to make him look into their camera lenses. His accomplishments are even mentioned in the Dutch press; his mother reads about him and writes him a letter, telling him how proud she is.

He's a personality. Someone to look at, to nudge, to point out, to gossip or giggle about. Someone you mention having seen.

'It's so funny,' people tell him, 'you being here and me as well.'

To him, it's something that happens all the time, him being there and other people as well. But he learns to smile and confirm the miracle.

During his career, Lou has learned to recognize different types of applause. There's the welcoming applause, when a favorite of the public makes his or her appearance halfway through the play, there's the applause after a scene that is well-received, and then there's the final applause. There's a lot of gradations to that last one, from perfunctory to enthusiastic.

The final applause that he and Sarah receive tonight is of a whole different sort. It's frantic. And it keeps on going: the moment he thinks it's diminishing, a new wave washes over them, of unprecedented height.

It's the last night of Sarah's Farewell America Tour in the Palace Theatre in New York. After this, she will only perform in Europe, either that, or she finds it useful calling this a goodbye tour, you can never tell with her. The performance consisted of cleverly interwoven highlights of her repertoire. It has been a sensational tour, the theatres were filled with folks wanting to see today's greatest *tragedienne* one final time.

The clapping goes on and on, boosted by whooping and whistling. Everybody is standing and nobody seems to be moving towards the cloakroom. The audience won't let her leave. Lou keeps a hold of Sarah's hand and feels tears stinging in his eyes.

During the other nights of the goodbye tour he has

simulated his emotions, for dramatic effect, but tonight they are heartfelt. It will also be the last time he'll be sharing a stage and an applause with her.

Sarah glances at him, wary and somewhat quizzically. He understands. He lets go of her hand, walks over to the wings, grabs a chair and puts it in the middle of the stage for her. She sits down on it like a queen on her throne, bowing, laughing, waving and sobbing. The applause grows even louder.

Her knee has been getting worse. These final weeks, Lou has been positioning himself in a way that made him able to support Sarah's arm, to grab her during a hug, or to have her lean against him. Whenever they were not touching each other he has kept an eye on her, ready to come to her aid.

Finally, when Lou hears the applause slowing, a signal that it's time to walk into the wings, he offers her his hand. She gets up, bows one final time and then graciously exits the stage, holding his arm.

The entire company and the staff of the Palace Theatre are waiting for her. They're clapping their hands, crying, hugging Sarah and each other. Someone hands Sarah a handkerchief.

'It's good, this way,' Sarah says, dabbing her eyes with the handkerchief. '*C'est fini et c'est bien.*'

'*Quand même,*' someone calls out.

Sarah smiles.

'*Quand même,*' she says.

It's her personal motto, which she bandies about at any time. Despite everything, the theatre life is a way of living

that demands your all. Despite everything, love is worth diving into head over heels. Despite everything, life is worth living. To the fullest.

She sits down in an armchair and the members of the company take turns sitting with her for a bit. Everybody receives her attention. She holds faces between her hands, strokes hairs, gives advice, encourages, kisses cheeks.

Lou waits until the end of the evening before going to her.

‘Just the man I need,’ she says cheerfully, holding out her hand to indicate she needs help getting up. He accompanies her to her dressing room. Once there, she stands before him and makes an attempt at a solemn expression.

‘Do me a favor, *mon fils*,’ she says, ‘and learn to speak English. They love you, here in America.’

Her index finger is pointing at the floor.

‘This is where your future lies.’

Lou returns to Paris with Sarah and the company, travels onward to London by himself and studies English for three months, until he’s confident enough to take it on stage. The French bank account which Sarah set up for him contains a small fortune, enabling him to produce his own play. He chooses *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, after the book by Oscar Wilde, casting himself in the leading role. After that he takes the boat back to the United States.

With his fame still actual, keeping himself visible is of the essence. People have to be aware that he has returned and, even though Sarah’s not there, that he can be booked.

He has set his sights on a career in film, but first he'll have to make do with some roles in theatre productions.

The media are of great importance now. Sarah taught him how to make the press work for you. Having an extravagant persona helps. Sarah exaggerated her whims and quirks, her royal lifestyle and decadent love life, because she knew it would generate attention, boost the sale of theatre and cinema tickets and thereby strengthen her leverage with producers. She elaborated on her exotic entourage, shopping sprees and preference for male roles. She would also spread rumors about former lovers, including and especially that one homosexual she managed to seduce and have sex with, after which he was vomiting for twenty-four hours.

'You should know, she's such a liar,' one journalist who was onto her wrote in the paper, 'she could even just be fat.'

She loved confabulations – and she wouldn't even hide that fact, because it could be used to strengthen the myth of Sarah Bernhardt.

'Throw them a bone, or they will make up things themselves, things that you'll like a lot less,' she used to tell Lou laconically.

Lou takes care that he's always being seen at the right parties and premieres, always with another young socialite or aspiring actress. He always has a few one-liners ready for the reporters at the scene, about a made up pet – a baby crocodile – or a nonexistent habit of having champagne for breakfast. Whenever he sees their ink pencils greedily scratching across the paper, he has to hold back his laughter.

Simultaneous to the development of technology and mass entertainment the concern about peace and safety is growing in early 1914. All American eyes are aimed at Europe, where there is a lot of political unrest. Lou hardly reads any papers, he just glances at the society pages, but it's clear even to him that war is a possibility. An arms race has started and all of Europe seems enthralled by uniforms and military show of force.

There's even those who claim that war is not a necessary means of defending oneself, but that it's a good thing in its own right. It's supposed to purge the world of decadence, something which would not be ideal for Lou. Prominent thinkers dare to paint a picture of war as a means for human progress, a sort of big cleansing. After all, it's always the healthier, more developed people imposing its will on another nation.

Being his father's son, he should have a proclivity for the glorification of violence and the call for display of power, but instead he feels an instinctive revulsion. A sincere disdain. If masculinity means to be fearless, to abandon self-interest and to follow orders, he's fine being a bit less masculine.

These days everything is either weak or energetic, anyway. It all has to be fast and full of aggression. His performance is often called 'energetic' in the newspaper reviews, which is the biggest compliment imaginable. 'Good' or 'bad' or 'successful' or 'failed' don't matter anymore, just 'energetic' or 'slow' or 'powerful' or 'weak'.

When war is finally declared in August 1914, after some

ultimatums and failed diplomacy in the sweltering month of July, he's not even surprised. Everybody has been prepped and readied.

'It's beautiful, living in peace,' one British war poet writes in the newspaper, 'but it's even more beautiful dying for your brothers.'

Marching to the battlefield, proudly and enthusiastically, to get your head chopped off; they've lost their minds, or their sense of self-preservation, in any case. He congratulates himself on not being amidst the warmongers in Europe, but at a comfortable distance, in New York. He would just like to have his mother near. He offers to arrange and pay for her passage, but she refuses.

War does not break out, the way everybody around him keeps saying, as if it's a flu epidemic. It's prepped and declared – by people like his late father, who think the highest purpose in life is dying for a piece of land, a nationality, a sentiment, thereby dooming everybody else.

One night, after a performance of the play *Taking Chances*, a distinctive man approaches him in the theatre lobby. He looks like a typical Jewish creative entrepreneur: pinstripe suit, balding, bow tie, twinkling eyes behind round glasses.

The man shakes his hand and introduces himself as Samuel Goldfish, film producer.

'My compliments for your performance,' he says, 'though during some scenes I felt like I had ended up in your bedroom.'

'The critics agree with you on that,' Lou says, not in the

least insulted.

‘Pay no mind to the critics,’ Goldfish says, ‘don’t even ignore them.’

Lou starts laughing heartily.

Two weeks later Lou is sitting in the offices of the Lasky Film Company, located in a farmer’s village near Los Angeles called Hollywood, to sign a contract. Goldfish is sitting behind his huge ebony desk, with a stack of papers that Lou has had his lawyer examine. Beside the stack sits a bottle of champagne, ready to be opened.

The offices overlook Vine Street, a shabby village street, but the refurbished cattle barn and the surrounding terrain offer space for huge sets, to shoot films. The sleepy village is surrounded by vast hilly farmland, which is the reason the most important director, Cecil B. DeMille, wanted to shoot here. During the tour Lou was given that morning he saw three films being shot simultaneously. Set pieces were everywhere, as well as wires and headlights and people running around.

While Goldfish is going through the papers, Lou is studying the film posters and framed publicity photos of actors and actresses, covering the wall. One of them, showing a young woman, piques his attention.

‘Who is this young lady?’ he asks.

‘That’s Geraldine Farrar,’ Goldfish says, ‘the famous opera singer. I’ve just signed her on as well. She’ll be coming to the coast soon. You may get to work with her.’

In the picture, the woman is posing proudly, like an aris-

toocrat. Her dark eyes hold a careful aloofness, though there's also some derision in them. She's young, but she seems untouchable, like a queen.

Goldfish gets up and walks over to Lou.

'She's a big one already, but her name will get much bigger,' he says.

The twinkling in his eyes behind his glasses announces a quip Lou has heard him utter before:

'God creates the stars, I produce them.'

8 Geraldine

I should withstand my urge to downplay my feelings for Arturo on paper, because they're almost insignificant in the light of our love affair. You and me, it was like lightning striking. Lightning always seeks the most efficient conduct towards the earth. You need an astonishingly short moment in order to strike me, and the effect was devastating.

Back then, in Arturo's arms, I did not know of your existence. It was the first time my heart was touched by a man. I can still point out when it happened. We're having dinner somewhere. Arturo says something, I'm not sure what, but I like it and I look him in the eyes. He looks back at me and the tiny wrinkles around his eyes deepen. That's all. In a flash, I can feel something tear open deep inside me and some part of his being slipping in.

It's an act of extradition, and there's no turning back. All of your alacrity and choices derive from that point. I think I'm aware I will be asked to sacrifice a lot, because Arturo is married. To any other woman that fact could have been a limitation, to me it feels like my salvation. I'm saved from the danger of being held back by a man. My art is protected.

The first years of our affair I did not wish for any more than what I received. Later, when I'm urging Arturo to leave his wife, it's not because I'm strongly longing for it, but mostly out of boredom and pride. I'm sick of the secrecy surrounding our dates, my one-sided waiting, his measured affection. I want to know what I'm worth, how deep is his love.

But I'm moving too fast.

In the spring of 1909 I travel to Paris to study for the part of Floria Tosca with Sarah Bernhardt. The opera is based on a French play which was once written for madame Bernhardt. Who else can help me discover how to play Tosca? Before me, sopranos have played the part harshly, and I will do it differently. My Tosca should be a young, passionate woman: full of temperament, warm; bold, not frivolous. No libertine, but devoted to love.

Sarah takes me through the script, page by page. She lays out her theatrical approach, for my consideration, without pushing me. Sarah reads the lines the way she would on stage, and then I sing them. It helps to hear her inflections, the subtleties in tone and expression she uses. All these layers form a whole which makes sense – not in the sense that it's an unambiguous message, but in the sense that it conveys the contradictions and complexities which together tell the whole truth.

She never tells something matter-of-factly, everything is well thought out. Just the way I'm used to doing it. First we try to demystify a part, to get to the bottom of it, only then we try to convey it. First we peek underneath the false

appearance of a character – the more refined the mask, the harder it is – and only when we understand what makes her tick we rebuild the façade, but we let the deeper layer shine through.

The mask that you pick tells something about you as well. Stripping down characters to the core makes me realize how deformed we humans are, how we think we can navigate the world by hiding underneath a thick layer of appropriateness or rebellion, refinement or crudeness, depending on your taste.

We might be performing artists, but working with Sarah strengthens my conviction that as a singer or an actor, one can be creating something as well.

The power to build a world which does not exist and yet is valid, using immersion and imagination; it's a delightful process. Now that Arturo has shown me what it's like to love a man, I'm using chunks of reality for the very first time. Arturo is just as elusive as the painter Tosca loses her heart to. Tosca's confusion about their relationship, her surprise about the pull of longing; it's all so close.

During the first act of the play Sarah is always sitting in a huge gothic chair, center stage. A chair offers me interesting possibilities for postures and embraces with Tosca's lover, and I feel like adapting the idea.

I propose so to Sarah.

'I hope you will never have to do it for the same reason as I,' she says.

Only then I realize the chair has been introduced to avoid

burdening Sarah's knee. I put my hand over my mouth.

'It's okay,' Sarah says, laughing, 'I enjoy it when even people like you don't see through it. I'd be a bad actress if it were all too obvious.'

Shortly after that, without planning to and almost without wanting so, I tell her about Arturo. Nobody knows about our affair, not even my mother, and the secret is starting to burn on my lips. Sarah calmly listens to my confession, sometimes nodding and smiling to reassure me.

'The heart wants whatever the heart wants, my dear,' she says, 'if this is the man you want to love now, *have* to love now, then you'll just have to go with it.'

'But he's betraying his family,' I say, though it's really because I'm expected to feel guilty, not because I actually feel guilt. 'And he's not always very devoted to me.'

'*Quand même,*' she says. 'Love is never thanks to, but despite.'

The night of the premiere I receive a telegram from Sarah.

'May the sun always shine upon your path, my young friend,' the dresser reads to me. 'May luck be your guardian angel, may all the lyres and harps play forever in your key.'

I'm so touched, I start crying. Something about encouragement by other women always strikes something in me. The women who are able to enjoy someone else's power, and there's quite a lot of them, know there's enough love, success, beauty, luck and talent to go around for everyone. Somebody else's glory never diminishes yours.

Somebody brings champagne. I drink it.

When the dresser has just finished helping me put on my costume, my mother enters.

‘Can’t it be a bit more modest?’ she asks while arranging my sabre-lined robe to cover a bit more of my gown, made of paper-thin cloth.

With an annoyed movement, I uncover my neckline.

‘Some scenes are just so unseemly,’ she says.

‘In what way?’ I ask her sharply.

‘The way you move across the stage. The way you drape yourself all over that man.’

‘He’s Tosca’s lover!’ I call out.

The dresser, who’s arranging feathers and plumes on my bonnet, looks up.

‘People are supposed to grasp how much she’s in love with him,’ I add, a bit softer.

‘I haven’t raised you like this, Gerry.’

‘I’m not your daughter on stage, you should know that by now, I’m the character. And the character is who she is.’

‘The audience doesn’t see it that way. They see you.’

‘Really?’

‘It’s indecent,’ she insists.

‘Art should never bow down to mediocrity. That’s what I would find indecent.’

My mother pinches her lips together in resignation. I’ve brought art into the discussion.

The critics are charmed with my interpretation of Floria Tosca, or at least with my acting. At my best moments it could stand the comparison with the great Sarah, according

to several papers. Not everybody is so happy about the force and range of my voice.

‘The music of the second act calls for a voice with more body, a lower timbre and more force than Miss Farrar’s,’ one reviewer writes.

True to tradition, others state the upper ranges of my voice remain ‘shrill and thin’.

Maybe the critics are right, maybe my voice does lack the solidity to sing at full force all the time. I can accept that truth. I’d rather have my acting be convincing than to show of perfect clarity and range. I want my singing to be emotionally layered, to alternate singing with spoken word, to achieve the effect I’m after: to thrill my audience.

Lili Lehmann’s lessons may have improved my singing, but it’s the continuous overload undermining my voice. I never consider refusing parts to allow my vocal cords some rest. Opera is the axis of my life, with everything revolving around it. The rest is just preparation. When I take out opera, what do I have left?

I’m thriving on stage. There’s no capriciousness there, no coincidence, no deception. Everything unfolds just the way you have prepared it, some nights a bit more smoothly than others, but still, it’s repeatable and understandable. All the actors know their jobs, everybody is aimed at serving the others and the greater whole. It all works. You can relax.

Lou, I don’t need to explain to you how you can be like fingers on the same hand with your co-actors.

In my memory Enrico Caruso is playing by my side every week at least once. I can still see him standing there, singing at the top of his voice, perky, his belly stuck out, wearing some gaudy costume, his engaged leg straight underneath him and his free leg forward. He once lifted me up during the final applause and carried me into the wings. That's what it's like: you're carrying each other. You're being carried.

'Farrar *fará*,' he always says whenever a challenge occurs. 'Farrar will do it.'

Life has never fitted me the way theatre did, talking has never fitted me the way singing has. Somehow daily life is too much of a burden to me, while most people think of opera as heavy-handed. They don't understand a thing.

Opera can help you escape the burden of life, by expressing it in the most dramatic way possible. Enlarging it makes it manageable. All sorrow, despair, love, betrayal and joy are given their space, within the safe and comfortable rules of the theatre. And by giving them that space, they're getting some air, allowing them to get lighter.

Opera is full of big feelings and passion, disaster and euphoria, weddings and funerals, the incongruous and unexpected. Some people think it is grotesque, but it's raw reality, just compromised.

You're lighter, after visiting the opera. The feeling that has been so intolerable, too breathtaking and fatal to allow in the shrill light of day, has been allowed to exist for a while. Now it feels acknowledged, comforted, and it will stay quiet for some time.

The hotel bed's sheets are bunched at the footboard. I pull them straight and cover up my naked body. Arturo is standing in a corner of the room, getting dressed, putting one leg in his trousers, then balancing himself and pulling it over his hips. He tugs his shirt into the waistband, reaches for his suspenders and snaps them over his shoulders.

I'm reminded of my father, the way he allowed me to hold on to his suspenders, when I was a little girl. I would put my feet on his shoes and we'd shuffle across the room together. I didn't have to do anything, I just had to follow his movements and shift my weight from one leg to the other, and we'd move forward. I can't help smiling. To be able to hide with someone.

Arturo sits at the end of the bed. I'm looking at his back. I'm about to lay my hand on it when he bends over to put on a shoe. I'm overwhelmed by a sudden longing to be little with him. I want to mention it, but the words won't come out. The speed of his movements, the efficient way he's tying his shoelaces; it's all in contradiction with this.

Arturo doesn't show a big willingness for romance. He keeps it down-to-earth and prosaic, even when we're making love. It's the masculine way, I suppose. There's hardly any seduction, no petting afterwards, no soft whispers. He approaches me as if he's going into war and leaves me like a wounded man on the battlefield.

And still I'm taking pleasure from it, with a certain devilish rebelliousness. As measured as his lovemaking may be, it's helping me getting to know my own lust. Now I know I can let my body be loved, and I'm able to make love to

another body.

He gets up and walks over to me. I'm sitting in the middle of the bed, knees pulled up. He sits down on the mattress and glances at me. Then he looks at his watch and makes a face.

'I'm sorry, my dear, I have to leave. Rehearsal at five.'

'Of course,' I say, smiling cheerfully.

He kisses me on the lips. On his way to the door he grabs his coat and hat, and looks back at me for a moment before closing the door.

The problem with love is how quickly we think: that one is mine. We assume that we gain ownerships of the other and their time, as swiftly as our own feelings develop. I take Arturo's resolution when demanding my company for a great longing, equivalent to mine, but afterwards I think he's just used to things going his way.

I get out of bed, wrap myself in the sheet and stand by the window. People are walking on the sidewalk, next to each other and behind each other, as if drifting with the flow of a river. I keep standing there, hoping to see Arturo.

There he is. He's crossing the street swiftly, scurrying a bit. Two women nudge each other and watch how the great Toscanini is moving through the common world, just like that. He does not return their gazes. When a car approaches, he holds up his hand for a moment. The car slows down.

He's directing life. And life follows suit.

For the past time, on those nights I'm playing the role of Madam Butterfly, I seem to coincide with my character. Cio-Cio-San is a rose petal, fragrant like a cherry blossom in her garden, the embodiment of female love and devotion. Waiting patiently for the American lieutenant who promised to marry her, nothing can shake her confidence. He has to, he will return. She scrutinizes every ship that enters the harbor. Three years later, when the lieutenant finally arrives, she's a pale, delicate flower. He's in the garden, talking to a strange woman who turns out to be his wife.

I tell the press I never want to commit myself, but instead devote myself to my art. 'I will never marry, because no man can mean to me what opera means to me,' I tell them. And: 'Being married is like having to eat the same cake for the rest of your life.'

The feminists, long before they're called feminists, like that. Back then they were still called suffragettes, women fighting for women's rights and women's suffrage. I'm becoming the living symbol for the independent woman, focused on her career, successful, used to operating alone. The New Woman.

If only those women who admire me knew I'm becoming committed to one, virtually unavailable man, how I want to be the woman who makes his life worth living.

On the society pages I read about Sarah, who's all the rage in American theatres, with someone called Lou Tellegen. It makes me snigger, Sarah and her young men. She's sovereign in a way I have not mastered at all.

I remember a photo of you standing next to Sarah, wea-

ring a medieval costume in some play, your strong shoulders and elegant face.

My voice is letting me down after all. Fall season 1913 in the Metropolitan has drained my last reserves. An exhausting schedule full of performances, annual spring- and fall tours, rehearsals, private study and travelling has worn down my voice's golden layer.

During a performance of *Faust*, at the end of the 'Jewel Song', I'm straining to find the high B. I can't reach the note. Reflexively I turn my back at the audience. The following notes sound just as inept. The sound coming from my throat is nothing like what I had in mind. The audience is applauding to fill the stunned silence that follows. It's meant to be sympathetic, I can feel that, but also to control their own nervousness, which spectators always feel when something on stage is not going according to plan.

Forcefully I throw the hand mirror I'm holding to the side of the stage. I gesture at the conductor, then hurry off the stage. The rest of the performance is cancelled. I've been let down by my body, and it feels like high treason.

My personal physician tells me I have to rest for a month, and this time I don't have a choice. My mother presents herself as my nurse, as could be expected. Arturo is not there for me. I wonder if he was there for his wife, years ago, when they lost one of their children to diphtheria.

I'm surrounded by whiteness, my eyes can't focus on anything. I myself have been absorbed by steam, enveloping

me like a blanket. The wet mist surrounding me forces my attention inward. I'm sitting down, breathing heat and moisture, until that's all I seem to be made of.

Every day in the Munich sanatorium I spend hours in the steam chamber. My voice was feeling reliable again, and as always in summer I was travelling across Europe to fulfill my duties, but after a few performances in Berlin I collapsed, the result of a combination of flu and chronic stomach pains. My voice has disappeared completely now.

I'm forbidden to even whisper to my fellow patients. I'm not panicking or worrying. I'm subjecting.

In the steam chamber my thoughts keep swirling around him. Arturo is so damned secretive about our affair, he thinks it's an act of fundamental decency. The crime of adultery is acceptable, as long as it does not come out. A textbook example of hypocrisy, I do know that, but I'm actually not interested which criterion he uses for himself, when being an adulterer. If only I have him to myself, once in a while.

In his arms I calm down. There's a certain tranquility to be found there, until the war of being separated starts all over again.

Did I really love him? Writing this down I keep asking myself that question.

His admiration, coming from such a judgmental man, was flattering. I wanted to hold on to that love. I was immersed in it, let it feed me, tried my best to be worthy and got insulted when it was being denied to me, or less tangible

for a moment.

For me, it's all about love, or supposed love, instead of my love for him, that's what I see reading this back.

In August, war breaks out. There had been speculations about war for so long, that it didn't seem possible anymore that it would actually happen. And now it's become reality after all. It's a reality that I can't really imagine, except for young men fighting each other on a battlefield.

The sanatorium patients are restless, everybody wanting to leave the country as soon as possible. My French maid and Belgian driver are being put on a train and taken across the German border. I'm not able to leave my bed for more than a couple of hours, let alone travel. I don't share their fears about what could happen to us foreigners here. I feel at home in Germany, and as long as the United States are not involved, I don't feel the need to leave.

Stoically, I occupy myself studying the scripts of *Madame Sans-Gêne* and *Carmen*. Every day I feel a bit of my strength returning, until I deem myself ready for the return journey.

I travel by train to Rotterdam, because the Dutch boats are still in service. The railway tracks are burdened with hundreds of trains full of soldiers, so the journey is slow, but comfortable.

I don't know yet that by the end of the war, the German emperor and crown prince Frederick Wilhelm will take the exact same route to flee.

The final destination is Amsterdam's Central Station, where an impenetrable crowd is awaiting. Antwerp has fal-

len and refugees are flooding the city. There are no boats leaving from Amsterdam or Rotterdam anymore, because the Dutch boats are stopped by the British authorities, on suspicion of smuggling.

I my hotel in Amsterdam I receive a daily telegram from Mr Gatti in Milan. He's trying to get the Metropolitan company, which was performing there, from Naples to New York and he wants to put me on that boat as well. I'm forced to travel back to Munich by train and then through Switzerland and the Alps to Italy. A young officer, whom I know from Berlin, takes care of the formalities at the borders, and countless golden francs also help convince the authorities that I am who my passport says I am.

Upon arrival in Naples I hug Mr Gatti so tight that it makes him shy. Arturo is also part of the company, and once we're alone in his sleeping quarters I let myself fall into his arms. I can feel my tired body relax and my worried thoughts slip away in an all encompassing 'everything will be alright'. He's stroking my hair and soothing me.

When we make love that night, I get emotional. He doesn't notice, or pretends so, because he doesn't know what to do.

During the boat trip we rehearse in the giant dining room every day, featuring a disciplined Arturo on the piano. Mr Gatti decides my first role of the season will be Carmen.

Carmen has not been performed since 1908, and the New Yorkers are ready for it. The role is best suited to a mezzo voice and the register is pretty low for a soprano like me,

but my voice regains her strength and width, especially now, in those lower regions. As Carmen, I can avoid those notes that proved fatal to me that last time.

My Carmen is more than a pretty gipsy girl: she's a sensual, brave woman, a seer and priestess in touch with the Fates. She knows Fate and is able to foresee it, and doesn't make any attempt to escape it. I make her ever more sinister, fatal and flirty, and I even add a flamenco dancing scene. I can see I'm pushing Arturo to the limit, but I carry on.

Once we're alone he lets out a deluge of condemnations. I'm deviating too much from the original. I don't respect the intentions of the composer. I'm eager to show off my abilities at the expense of the role. Why do I assume I need to think, when things have been thought out for me?

Arturo and me spend more time together during the voyage than ever before. We sleep together every night in his cabin, where we meet each other after everybody has gone to their quarters. But there's still a distance between us, which I have always ascribed to our busy lives and brief encounters, our obdurate existence.

No matter how close I hug him in bed, no matter how often we make love, no matter how long we talk, he's always at an arms' length away from me.

During dinner the conversations are still unabatedly considered with the war, the same as at the other dining room tables.

'We could run into a German submarine just like that,' one of the singers of the ensemble remarks.

‘I trust Geraldine’s Berlin contacts might generate some goodwill,’ Mr Gatti says, throwing me a roguish glance.

I laugh and instinctively look at Arturo next to me. His expression is one of contempt. Arturo is a prominent and principled antifascist, and I know he regards my activities in Berlin with horror.

When we arrive at his cabin he looks at me with angry eyes.

‘We can’t go on like this,’ he says. ‘You have ties with the enemy and you have to sever them as soon as possible.’

‘My colleagues in Berlin are friends, not enemies.’

‘The German people is the adversary, goddammit!’

‘I don’t deal with peoples,’ I say, ‘just with people.’

‘It’s opportunistic and ridiculous to still cooperate with them, just because it fits into your career.’

‘I’m no opportunist, I’m loyal. Don’t you see? You’re the rigid extremist yourself.’

Finally we’re both quiet and encase ourselves in sulking silence.

I can hardly breathe. The cabin air is poisoned with the harsh words spoken.

Words are lingering in the room, thickening the atmosphere. You can open the windows or whistle loudly, but they can’t be chased away. They’re sticking to the walls, get stuck under the furniture, attach themselves to the ceiling. You will have to neutralize them using other words – sweet ones, sly ones.

I can’t find any.

‘If you want to keep me, you’ll have to leave your wife.’

I say it calmly, as if I've spent time thinking it over.

I want to break something open, exacerbate things. The longing is constructive as well as destructive. If we can't construct anything we'll have to break something down, because I'm unable to reconcile with the halfhearted.

The distance between us is no longer a comfort; it's become unbearable. I feel an inordinate need to be closer to another human being, to descend together into the both of us and meet each other there, under the surface.

'I'll have to think about that,' he says softly.

Carmen premieres in November, when my voice has regained its strength, and it's well received.

'Miss Farrar never leaves the dressing room, only Carmen is on stage,' I can still clearly remember that line from one review.

Every showing of *Carmen* is sold out, just like with *Madama Butterfly*. I'm the American opera lovers' sweetheart – of both men and women, young and old – and I'm aware of it. In January 1915 I follow up with the comedic opera *Madame Sans-Gêne* and after that, as suggested by Caruso, I go to the studio to record some arias. He tells me my fans want to hear me from their own recliners, whenever, and as often as they like.

My success contrasts with Sarah Bernhardt's hardships. I read about her ordeal in *The New York Times*. In the leg that has been torturing her for so many years, gangrene has developed. To save her life, it has been amputated from the thigh down.

Europe is burning and it's starting to become hot here as well. Every day the war feels closer. The United States are officially neutral, though it's clear that the sympathies of the American people are with the allies. My loyalty towards Berlin, going back many years, is not just ill-regarded by Arturo, but by everybody. My colleagues advise me to publicly denounce my German contacts. I ignore their advice; I'd feel like a coward if I did what they told me to. How idiotic it would be to hold my old acquaintances personally responsible for a war their government started?

Through others I hear about spicy, completely made up rumors, like me being a spy for the Germans, paid by the court in Berlin. Everybody who does not speak out fiercely against the Germans is being mistrusted. People are competing to show their patriotism. Suddenly everywhere, on every public building, the American flag is waving. Once the national anthem is heard, and it is heard a lot these days, everybody jumps up and solemnly puts their right hand on their heart.

I'm being watched.

A violinist whom I know from Berlin and who moved to the United States, is being boycotted by the theatres. When I invite him and his wife to a party in my hotel, it renders me eight disapproving letters and some acquaintances turn their heads away when they meet me in the street. On another night, when we're performing a potpourri of opera songs with a small company, I fail to recognize the first notes of the national anthem quickly enough and I'm one of the last persons to rise. A handful of acquaintances

ignore me for the rest of the night.

‘And? Have you thought about it long enough?’ I ask Arturo one night.

I see him flinch, so he knows what I am talking about. My question to him, or rather my ultimatum, has been left untouched for the last couple of months. He was probably hoping it would go away if he did not mention it.

By now, his sacrifice has become of the greatest importance to me. I have no idea if I could handle a steady relationship with Arturo, or what it would mean for my life, but his willingness to leave his family for me symbolizes everything I cannot put into words.

Looking back, I can see a human being is never as clearly a perpetrator, victim and accomplice as in love’s domain.

‘I can’t do it,’ he tells me, defeated.

What I hear is: I don’t love you enough.

It’s over.

I decide my heart is broken. It has to feel like this: like being aggrieved. You’ve been rejected, found lacking. You’re irrelevant.

At the same time it feels like a glass bell has been lifted, and I didn’t even notice I was under it. I can breathe again. No longer do I have to defend myself from his prejudices and reproaches, nor do I have to feel his disapproval for the way I deal with my art, who I am, what I represent. No longer do I have to deserve his love.

Playing Carmen helps. She’s the antidote to disillusion,

to disenchantment. She understands how fate follows its own thought-out, premeditated course, the inevitability of things. Within me the realization is growing that anything not in tune with your nature cannot exist, has to die, because otherwise you will die yourself.

Weary of my own indignation I resign with the rejection. The humiliation let's go of its grotesque resentment and has become a plain fact: I've gambled and lost.

In those days I confused loving, truly connecting to another person, with demanding love as a proof of one's lovability.

During times of heartache you never know who will turn out to be your savior. Often it's not your greatest confidant, but rather an acquaintance whom you get close to, a neighbor, a colleague. In my case, it's Emma Eames.

After confiding in Emma, she keeps visiting me, holding me, talking to me. She has been divorced twice, first from a society painter, later from a baritone, and she fancies herself an expert in the field of men and relationships.

'Bad luck in love is the debt we pay for a successful life,' she thinks. 'In the end, most men don't want a woman they admire. They mostly want to be admired themselves.'

I'm inclined to believe her.

The most adequate solution seems to be to just renounce men. In interviews with journalists I keep on repeating that I don't long for marriage, that I'm married to the opera, that I'm living for my art. That I'm autonomous. It's not a lie, because I don't want to be married, but to be alone without

anybody sharing your love doesn't make me happy either.

I tell myself I'm not pining, that I nurture neither hope nor despair.

As it turns out, it's a controversial attitude for a woman to not marry out of conviction, judging by all the responses I receive. Some young women think it's amazing that I'm staying a bachelorette out of my own free will, without regarding myself as a spinster or a bluestocking. Others disapprove of it, saying I'm probably promiscuous, and that I'm setting an example which is destabilizing to society.

After the New York winter season, a summer tour through war-torn Europe is not an option. The summer months are spread out before me. For the first time in years I'm presented with an ocean of leisure time, which I can use as I please.

Right at that time I'm being approached by a theatre man, Jesse Lasky, who's focusing on film. He asks me if I'm interested in playing a main part. Shooting will be at the California seashore, where it's sunny and pleasant.

Carmen's Fates are taking care of me. I answer with a resounding 'yes'.

The other big man of the Lasky Film Company, Samuel Goldfish, insists on organizing a party in New York on my behalf, to celebrate my departure to Hollywood.

He thinks he's doing me a favor.

The room in Holland House on Fifth Avenue is filled with well-dressed, eloquent, elegant people none of whom I know, but who have all seen me in some opera house and exhaust themselves praising me. Lasky and Goldfish introduce me to everybody, replenish my champagne glass whenever I have taken a few sips, do their utter best to make me feel welcome. Still I'm longing for the moment I can retire and be on my own. The pleasantries are exhausting me, the gazes aimed at me burning on my skin.

I walk onto the roof terrace, where a lot less people are present. A cool breeze, able to blow freely up here, offers me some relief right away. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. When I open them again, you're standing in front of me.

'Tired with all the attention?' you ask me.

Your intense gaze surprises me. Looking into your eyes, a delightful kind of fear comes over me. It's like looking into an abyss and being startled by my sudden longing to jump in.

'I'm rather standing a bit farther away, on stage, instead of walking amidst people,' I tell him.

It's the truth, but I realize right away how pretentious it must sound.

'In the blinding spotlights, so you can't see the audience,' you tell me, in an understanding tone.

Only now I'm realizing we're speaking French.

'Are you a stage actor?'

You offer me your hand.

'Lou Tellegen.'

Part 2

9 Geraldine

It couldn't have happened any differently. You and me.

I wonder if that feeling is only there looking back. The inevitability of a relationship, of an encounter, even, the way everything was preordained and how you were lead to each other unrelentingly; it's all in the eye of the lover. The thought that it might as well have not happened, that it's simply a coincidence, is unbearable. The big and important gift you were handed – your beloved –; your name was on it, and nobody else's.

I'll tell you my version. I'm doing so to my best abilities and very conscientiously, always aware of the flaws of reminiscence. Forgive me my omissions, false interpretations, reasons thought up in hindsight, my gushy romanticizing.

This is the way I have kept you.

I'm sure of one thing: you lead me to a severed part of myself. When life is an ocean, I had been spending the years before we met only at the ocean floor. In my self-chosen solitude I descended into the silent depths, only to emerge for mandatory, polite meetings. You challenged me to frolic in the waters, to kick my feet, to swim, to brave the waves. You were standing in the sea, submerged up to your waist, and you reached for me, seemed to know what you were

doing, and I dared to grab your hand and let myself be pulled along.

You showed me real life.

I felt safe with you. Protected. It's clear I'm not exactly bestowed with my mother's prophetic gifts.

After the party, you insist on accompanying me to my hotel room, a couple of blocks away. In your French, with no accent, with an enviable ease you tell me about the films you are going to make in Hollywood, the Lasky Film Company which has contracted the both of us, the stunningly beautiful California nature.

I don't know how to behave. I'm fearing that I seem distant, but I can get myself to break through that. It's an acquired behavior, that restrained, measured enthusiasm towards strangers. People always want something from you, I have started to believe. So do you, but this time I'm not sure if I don't want to give it to you.

When we reach my hotel, I start to walk slower until we're standing still.

I'm just standing there, mute.

'You will understand I will have to keep seeing you,' you tell me, 'after such a magnificent night.'

It's not a question, not a request, and yet there's no coercion in your statement.

I'm giggling with your roguish bias. The doorman looks away, routinized.

You keep on looking at me, and now there's a twinkle in your eyes.

‘In Hollywood, next week?’ you say.

Even now it hardly sounds like a question.

I nod.

‘Next week.’

Satisfied, you grin. It’s a smile that defies time for a bit.

Hat held against your chest you make a gallant bow and you stroll off. I watch you go, struck with the vitality you’re emanating. You’re walking like a man who knows where he’s going.

Upon arrival at the Los Angeles Santa Fe Depot a red carpet is laid out from the train to the limousine. I slide into my Geraldine Farrar-mode right away, the woman unfazed by anything, who accepts things graciously and waves and smiles until she has disappeared from the sight of the crowd.

I’m welcomed by Mr Goldfish, the mayor, some assorted press and school children throwing blossoms at me – or actually, ‘she’ is welcomed. After some ado I can get in the limousine which takes me to the house offered to me by the studio. It turns out to be a charming white two-story villa in the Hollywood hills, with five staff members and fresh flowers in every room. I’m provided with a car with a private driver and a private railcar to take me and my loved ones from one coast to another, whenever I wish.

At the set, too, nothing is lacking. A personal assistant saunters around me with coffee, snacks, parasols and blankets. My own private bungalow has been built for me on the grounds of the Lasky Film Company on Vine Street, featuring several different dressing rooms, a fireplace and a

piano, where I can rest during the shooting.

I'm paid ten thousand dollars every shooting day, an amount that staggers me, and leads my mother to declare it's not just payment for my acting, but also for my acquired prestige, which has to make the film fashionable and classy. I'm the first opera star to take her chances with this medium and, after Sarah Bernhardt, I'm the biggest name.

'Those movie bosses are going to rope others in because of you,' my mother says assertively, 'just you watch.'

I hadn't noticed any of that before my departure for the west coast.

'How could you?' opera singers and stage actors asked me.

They consider acting in a film a stain on my position as an opera diva. The board members of The Metropolitan Opera were even more disapproving. They fear that when people have to pay just fifty cents to see me in a movie theatre, they won't be willing to pay six dollars for an opera ticket. Still they can't stop me, because the shooting takes place in summer, not during the opera season. I myself am not concerned with my reputation and I definitely don't care about ticket prices, I just want to expand the acting part of my profession.

'There's nothing in the contract about it,' my mother tells the board dryly, and that's the end of the matter.

Maria Rosa is the first movie shot. It's a small production, allowing me to get a grasp of the new art form. After that *Carmen* will follow, based on the opera which has brought

me so many triumphs. It will premiere first and therefore be my film debut. And lastly we will shoot the contemporary film *Temptation*.

It's not hard to get to the bottom of Maria Rosa, the feisty Spanish farmer's daughter and the center of rivalry between two men. She has enough depth and temperament for the acting bit, but also enough simplicity to leave me some attention for the technicalities of shooting film.

A film set is so much simpler than a theatre stage. All the director, Mr DeMille, really does before shooting is summarize the scene for me and my co-actors, then there's one rehearsal to fine-tune the positions and movements with the other actors, then it's 'Camera! Go!' and I get to start. There's a camera in every corner to capture the first enthusiasm of a scene, because Mr DeMille believes the spontaneous impulse is the best interpretation. After that we do a retake of the scene and the cameraman follows my every move, for a close-up.

In a close-up, the camera registers everything, every squinting of the eyes, every tiny frown. You can't lie to a film camera; it's almost like it can register your thoughts. I notice it looking at the rushes at the end of a shooting day. The merciless detail in which a machine can depict reality makes me flinch.

I'm forced to act smaller. More refined. On stage I'm used to using my entire body to convey the emotions to the far rows and the balconies, because from the third row onwards the audience is unable to see my eyes. During a close-up, the subtle raising of an eyebrow or the beginnings

of a smile are enough to reach an entire movie theatre. The technology brings the people closer to me, I don't need to reach out to them.

Lili Lehmann used to tie my arms behind my back while I was singing. Here, I have to tie them up myself, in my mind.

Because of the Klieg-lamps, with their bright lights and intense heat with no protection from glass, my eyes water and swell up. It's like staring into a sun. Sometimes I have to lay in a dark room for hours on end before the blots in my vision disappear.

One time when watching the rushes, I notice the Klieg-lights have washed out my grey eyes so much that I look like a Greek statue. I stipulate we do a retake of that scene. An assistant puts a black velvet cloth just behind the camera, for my pupils to focus on, so my expression stays normal. From then on nothing is being shot without that cloth.

During the outdoor scenes, and there's a lot of those in *Maria Rosa*, the wretched lights are not present. And sometimes, hanging around in the nearby parks and forests with the studio people and extras, I have to remind myself we're not on some picnic outing.

It looks like films become me. After a heavy, demanding opera season it feels like a carefree harbor. It's a strange experience, not having to take care of my voice. There's no curtain rising. No audience. There's no conductor standing in front of me, indicating the pace.

First that freedom feels awkward, like a space too big to fill, but after a while I learn to trust my instincts.

And suddenly you're walking besides me. I'm strolling across the grounds to my bungalow, my face slightly raised towards the sun. The smocked cloth of my wide skirt is rushing along my bare legs, a breeze pleasantly caressing my face.

'I couldn't decide whether or not to pay you a visit or let myself be surprised by a chance encounter,' you tell me.

'And which one did you choose?'

'The latter, but if it hadn't happened, it would have been the former, tomorrow. It was taking far too long.'

You offer me your arm and we walk on together, past half-built sets and grey warehouses. Entire village streets have been erected, their facades leaning on wooden poles. The empty space between the facades, the barren earth of the studio grounds, it gives me a haunting feeling. Like the front side of things can't be trusted.

You throw me a sideward glance.

Instinctively, I wonder what I look like now: wearing a Spanish farmer's dress, greasepaint, a blur of powder to dull it, and some eyeshadow around my eyes. My hair is curly and twisted into a bun in my neck. Not too bad, all in all, I think, satisfied.

'I wonder if my character from *The Explorer* would go for Maria,' you say.

You're not talking about you and me, but still I can notice.

'She might be too simple for him,' I tell you, pointing at the tailored British tweed suit you're wearing.

'With that angel's face? Impossible.'

When we arrive at the bungalow I unhook my arm from yours. The bud of feeling I was aware of the first time I saw you is growing to be something bigger, something embarrassing, which I force out of my thoughts resolutely.

Again you nod at me to say goodbye. You disappear as quickly as you have appeared.

I'm starting to understand that talking to you is a game of riddles. Things are meant to be left unresolved. The confusion you're causing is part of the fun you derive from it. I'm supposed to read between your words, knowing I might be wrong.

From that moment on you visit me during every free minute. When you're not busy with work on the grounds yourself, you come over to the set of *Maria Rosa*, making jokes with the boys of the crew and applauding when a scene is finished. You hang around my bungalow, you pop up whenever I come walking over.

Every time you offer me your arm and every time I dare to walk a little closer to you, hip to hip, leaning on your forearm a bit, until it feels almost familiar. It never does completely so. I'm so aware of the patches of skin you are touching, it's like they're no longer a part of me.

You're a whole head bigger than me, I can feel the strength of your arms through the sleeves of your suit.

What is the thing with tall men? Why do women feel protected by them, in a way that goes beyond physical protection? It must have something to do with the days we were walking hand in hand with our fathers, looking up at the

person we thought had hung the moon in the sky.

When I'm just about to remove my make-up there's a knock on the door. I put away the oil-drenched cloth that I use to wipe off the thick beige greasepaint and walk over to the door.

When I open it, you walk past me without saying a word. Somewhat bewildered, I close the door and follow you. When you turn around, I can see determination in your eyes. You have been planning to kiss me.

I feel a shame I have no name for, as if I'm supposed to apologize beforehand for not living up to your expectations. Still I don't walk away when you approach me. I smell the musk of your shaving cream and the pomade in your hair. Then: soft, exploring lips.

After the first touch you recede again, focusing on my face, apparently reading permission from it, because gently you take my face between your hands and pull me towards you. Your mouth flutters my lips apart and there is your warm, soft tongue.

Whether it's because it's so long ago that I have been kissed, or because I'm sensing something underneath what you're showing the world, I don't know, but the intimacy of this kiss is overwhelming.

You're obtaining me.

I notice courtship comes easy to you and that's what keeps me on my guard at first. It's clear you have played this game of seduction many times before, and you have perfected

your moves. You're so damned convincing – courteous, sensitive, subtle and then again dominant – I have to keep telling myself you're an actor.

At the same time it's like you fancy yourself beyond all etiquette, or are unfamiliar with it. There's no way to know from which class you hail, based on your behavior. Sometimes I sense the follies of a farmer's boy, then again you behave with the noblesse of a gentleman. As a European, you're exotic anyway, with your boldness, straightforwardness and broken English. You're the outsider I was as an American in Europe. *Hors concours*.

I keep my distance, out of habit more than as a way of keeping your interest. It won't do for much longer, my reticence. With a mixture of delight and fear I allow the longing. At first it's not sexual. It's an overwhelming desire to reveal myself to you and get to the bottom of you as well.

Once I'm alone I inebriate my mind with images of us. In my imagination I dare to do anything, casting off shame like a burden.

In allowing the desire I can feel my shoulders slumping. Though I don't do anything even close to what I'm dreaming of, you are bound to feel that relaxation somewhere, at some level.

I open myself up and wait for you.

Maria Rosa is finished and I have four days off before the shooting for *Carmen* starts. You have announced you will come and take me for a motorcycle ride today, but I didn't expect you so early in the morning. While the maid is

pouring you a glass of iced tea I'm trying to quickly prepare myself, though I'm doubting about everything. In the end I pick an airy summer dress. I'm about to put my hair up in a loose bun, but then I realize we'll be driving and I put on a colorful headband, pinning it tightly.

'We're going to Venice,' you tell me exuberantly, while we're walking to your motorcycle on the driveway.

I sit in the sidecar as elegantly as possible. With care and precision you fasten the belt around my waist. The nobleman. When you're bending over me, briefly and stealthily you put your mouth on mine. Rascal.

'Are you comfortable?'

'Don't talk so much,' I say. 'Drive!'

You chuckle, get on your motorbike and start the engine. I'm startled by the speed when we lurch forward and I'm gasping for air. My hands grab the rim of the sidecar, but soon after I get used to the pace and I relax. My initial dizziness turns into some sort of weightlessness. It's like my body is getting more airy, as if I have become transparent and the wind can blow right through me.

I let the environs pass me by; the trees flashing by, the green hills, the iridescent blue of the ocean and the birds overhead. I'm awake. Grounded in reality. Alive.

An abundance of free time is spread out before me. Even after a while, when shooting starts again, the days will be short and spacious. Gone is the rigid rhythm of the opera season and the ceaseless taking care of my voice, I'm feeling like a truant boarding school student.

After a while you gesture me that we're about to stop.

I raise my thumb. We take a side road into the hills and come to a halt. You hold out your hand and help me get out of the sidecar.

You grab a wicker basket I had not seen yet, tied to the back of the motorcycle.

‘Madame,’ you say theatrically, after you have spread out a checkered blanket on the grass, making a grand gesture.

I sit down on the blanket in a way that seems both sporty and romantic and I’m looking at all the things you’re taking from the basket. Sandwiches, berries, nuts. A bottle of white wine. A corkscrew. Two glasses wrapped in a dishcloth.

I’m touched by your careful preparation, your thoughtfulness. I want to let you know I am, but I disappoint myself. After feeling so free only a moment ago, everything is locked up again. Damn self-awareness.

‘How delicious,’ I manage to utter.

You grin and uncork the wine.

When we’re toasting, you don’t make some obligatory remark. No suggestive ‘to us’ or winking ‘to the future’.

I could never accuse you of any clichés.

Your hand takes mine and I turn towards you.

‘You and me, we’re forging our own destiny,’ you tell me, earnestly. ‘Do you realize how few people do so? Do you know how many people just meekly accept life?’

I nod.

‘You have compelled everything within your reach, Geraldine, and now you have the world laying at your feet.’

I smile, not because it’s true, but because I understand it’s

a compliment. It doesn't feel like wresting something from life to me; more like having an urge, and being willing to sacrifice everything for it.

Contented, you're staring into the distance, sucking in the view.

The way you're sitting there, one hand around your leg and your eyes on the environs, to me you're the embodiment of life to the fullest, of fearless participation.

You're putting the world to your lips.

10 Lou

Whoosh. After putting his foot in the stirrup to get on the horse, he slips and his body folds on the ground. Intense pain courses through him, followed by a wave of nausea. He keeps bending over in order to deal with the worst pain and when it starts fading, he stands up straight again. He puts his foot on the ground for a moment, but it feels like some limp attachment to his body, unable to support any weight.

Two extras grab him by his armpits and carry him to his chair.

‘I’m okay,’ he manages to say. ‘We can continue in a bit.’

He tries to loosen the laces of his army boot, but when he attempts to take it off, he almost faints with pain. He perseveres and once the boot is off, he sees his ankle is already beginning to swell up.

It’s a week after the first shooting day of *The Unknown* and it’s clear to him that he won’t be able to work today, in any case. Shooting is halted.

His heel and ankle tightly swathed, resting on a pillow, and his head buzzing with restless thoughts, he’s sitting on the sofa at home.

The pain is searing, as if his ankle is broken. The bottle

of morphine, doctor's prescription, is half empty. The afternoon is fleeting past. Images of the previous days appear, him walking in uniform on the reconstructed battlefield, fighting soldiers and riding horses. In *The Unknown* he's playing a young man who enlists in the French Foreign Legion and has to deal with a commander who has it out for him.

'You're acting, but my brother is really on the battlefield,' a crewmember remarked.

He had half forgotten that remark, but now that he has remembered, it keeps haunting his thoughts. Gradually, the remark starts to sound like an accusation, a nagging insinuation: 'You're *playing* a hero, others *are* heroes.'

After a while it's not the crewmember saying it, but his father.

Lou awakes in the afternoon. The sounds from the open window now enter his mind clearly. High, whooping children's voices. The surf of the quiet ocean. A car engine being cranked up.

Once his mind starts to work, his thoughts move to Geraldine and circle around her for a long while, just like the days before. Women haven't caused him any enthusiasm for a while now. They appeared, threw themselves at his feet, showed their admiration, let themselves be loved and then disappeared from his life again.

Now, suddenly, there's a woman drawing a line, something to conquer. Up to now, when they're together, Geraldine has been behaving with a self-control that is al-

most regal and lofty. He wants to break through it and he should not use a battering ram for it, but a pair of nail scissors.

Some women throw up a veil of mystery in order to mislead a man. It's a game of shadows, a way of titillating men and thereby luring them closer. He thinks Geraldine is not like that, while staying an enigma. It can mean two things: either she's a woman who is a mystery to herself as well, or she's a woman who does not want to be known by anybody else.

For weeks now he has been using motorcycle rides to Venice and Long Beach, dinners and walks to make her his. They have kissed, but she still has not told him her secrets. She doesn't share any of the musings and feelings women normally use in order to forge a bond, and that turn stale after a while.

And then there's all those contradictions. Her dark eyes contain wisdom, but there's also some derision in them. One moment she's a diva, the next she's an insecure girl. She abides by the rules of civility, but at the same time she possesses an intractability that reminds him of Sara, something untamed, that Duse possesses as well.

He does not see anybody the whole day and has to face the night by himself as well. He loves the night, but he doesn't want to spend it in solitude. He wants to be surrounded by people, doesn't matter who, with booze and cigarettes and entertainment. Formality fades under these circumstances. Alcohol makes us shed our chastity and reconciles us with

our animal side.

Whatever civility and context has been build up during the day will come crashing down at night, if one only waits long enough. And other forces are released, counterforces like dream, urge and lust. Creeping from their dens like wild animals.

There's an unspoken agreement that it's allowed then, to forget the codes, and alcohol is the excuse. The truth is that alcohol is nothing more than a socially accepted pretext for relaxation. People want nothing more than to shed their self-imposed armors. He has seen enough fellows who were hardly tipsy, but used the cover of a bottle of liquor to drop their masks, with a sigh of relief.

Now it's morphine taking care of his haziness. He takes a big sip.

Geraldine is back in his consciousness again. He can see her before him, taking off her gloves, slowly and carefully. First she unbuttons them, forcing little pearls through tiny buttonholes, then she pulls the leather fingers from her hand, one by one, and finally she peels off the entire glove until her narrow, white hand is freed.

How naked a hand can be.

He can hear her talking. Her voice is glowing and melodious, as one would expect from a soprano. Sometimes it's so soft he has to bend over to understand her, but then she lets her sentences echo around while her hands flutter through the air like butterflies.

He limps over to his gramophone and puts on one of her records. The first tones of 'Sì, mi chiamano Mimì' from *La*

Bohème resounding through his room. There is her voice, first thin and ethereal, then ever more insistent. Her energy filling the space.

He imagines pulling her towards him, feeling her body go limp, seeing soft surrender in her eyes. The way he takes her over to the bed, to possess her, and end her restraint.

One should not be childish in such matters, he thinks. In order to win a woman's heart, one has to use every means possible, everything should be aimed at her. One has to decipher her language, explore her strangeness, awaken her lust, shelter her needs. Nothing else should be more important.

It has to be before eight o'clock when Geraldine comes at his door, because the morning light is pale. She holds up a brown paper bag.

'Cucumber sandwiches,' she says, when he opens the door.

'I love them,' he says, though that's not entirely true. Already he is lying; it means he's seriously falling in love.

Grinning, he takes the bag from her and lets her enter before him. That way he can limp after her unseen. Luckily he's still wearing his clothes from the previous day. He's trying to sit down on the sofa in a way that is as normal as possible, but in the end he has to plump himself down.

'Are you okay?' she asks, worriedly. 'I only heard about the accident yesterday night, or I would have come sooner.'

'Everything is under control,' he says. 'That foot just needs some rest.'

Geraldine looks around his apartment as if she is searching something and walks into his kitchen. She's not going to clean up, is she? He can't get up quickly, so he will have to let it happen.

'What are you up to over there, Geraldine?'

No answer.

Minutes later, she presents him with a cup of tea. Her expression is so triumphant it's disarming. She takes the sandwiches from the bag and puts them on a plate. He follows her graceful movements. How does she manage to make such trite things look so elegant?

She takes the bottle of morphine from his hands.

'That's enough,' she says in a friendly tone.

Lou grabs the bottle, takes a long sip and hands it back to her, smiling.

Every morning before and after her working day she comes by with sandwiches, fruit and copious meals. Her cook must have prepared them, but still he's touched. He never expected her to have a caring side.

Her presence is torture, because he wants to lift her up and carry her over to his bedroom. He swallows his longings knowing he's not able to do much, with that foot. Thank God he manages to limit her care to bringing food; the minute she lifts a hand to clean something up, he protests until she stops.

At the same time he's reveling in the intimacy between them, a result of her being in his house every day, rummaging around with his teakettle and his china. They're not

touching each other, she even refuses to kiss him for fear of hurting him, but he's drinking in her presence.

After a week the swelling has gone down and he can put his foot on the ground without feeling pain, as long as he does not put too much weight on it. He returns to the film set.

During every scene he takes care that his proper side is turned at the camera, allowing his good foot to support him. Sometimes he ignores the pain and takes a few paces.

The actors around him, trying to mask his handicap, remind him of himself at Sarah's side. A few months before he has heard the news about her having to let her leg be amputated. Back then, he wasn't even sure if she would survive the radical operation, but she did. They exchanged telegrams, but he hasn't seen her since.

The last few days he has been feeling fierce pangs of loss.

The newspaper articles question if Sarah will ever return to the European stages. The divine Sarah turns out to be only human; that must be why people are so upset. He's sure she's coming back. She'll acquire some garishly decorated wheelchair or the best wooden leg available, and she's be the best actress there is, on the stage, in films and European salons, *quand même*.

The day she stops acting will be the day she dies, not the day she loses a leg.

They will launch *The Explorer* as his film debut, even though he has been on the silver screen beside Sarah for three times already. He's fine with it, because there's no better intro-

duction imaginable than in the role of Alec McKenzie, a British adventurer in Africa. He gets to ride horses, shoot, run, fight, love the woman everything revolves around and wear a linen safari outfit that really becomes him, judging from the glances of the women on the set.

During the shoot, there's no long texts to rehearse, no endless rehearsals or going over the positions like in theatre, there's no audience to take into account. As the leading man, he sets the pace for the other actors. The scenes are shot before he even realizes it.

The unknown factor of making a film, exploring uncharted territory, it's titillating. He never understood why people feel fear when they take a step in an unknown direction, like they won't find solid ground there. There's always solid ground, everywhere.

He's on his way.

He gets up in the middle of a conversation with a cameraman in a bar, mumbling something about a forgotten appointment. He has to be with her, now, right away. His foot has healed, nothing is keeping him from doing what he has been imagining for so long: exploring her uncharted territory.

Once he's at her door he's finally able to assess his actions. He has never visited her place, he has just picked up some things there. Geraldine could be a woman who abhors unannounced visitors. He grabs the doorbell knob and pulls it forcefully.

'What can I do for you?' asks the maid, appearing in

the doorway. She's holding a knitted shawl underneath her chin. The fire in the fireplace must have gone out already. Suddenly he realizes the late hour.

'Is Miss Geraldine still able to take visitors?'

His voice sounds agitated.

'Tell her Lou would like to see her.'

The maid scuffs before leaving. Almost directly after Geraldine appears; she must have heard his voice. She's wearing a silk dressing gown, a sash knotted around her improbably narrow waist.

He simply says: 'I had to see you.'

She doesn't say anything, just looks at him, then takes his hand and pulls him in, into the hallway. She leads the way, holding his hand, showing him up the stairs. To her bedroom, he realizes, his breath quickening with that thought. Every stair feels like a victory.

After closing the door behind her she turns around to him, quickly, impatiently. She raises her face towards him, her mouth asking for it, being offered to him. He runs his hands along the curves of her narrow back, down to her hips.

He pushes her towards the bed, just as roughly as she's pulling him along, shuffling backwards, and they end up on the mattress. With joint determination, they pull off all the clothes between them. Everything is disappearing, the world dissolving. Nothing but the sensation of skin on skin.

She's limber and willowy, like a twig. His hands are sliding across her breasts, then his lips. They're round and firm, as he suspected, the nipples small and raised. He closes

his mouth around her nipples, pinches it between his teeth and feels her shudder.

Only then his mouth reaches her lips, half-opened, waiting for his. They kiss wildly, almost grimly. She pulls him on top of her, as if she wants to be crushed by him.

The distance she maintained is shattered by her sudden surrender. She's soft and open, no longer locked inside herself. At the same time she's claiming him with a determination that robs him of his senses. Her showing him her desire – something he would have never thought possible with her – means he does not have to hold back.

This lovemaking is devouring, an annexation, and only after the second time, once he's able again, they have sex more slowly and attentively. He feels the softness, the creaminess of her skin, the way she moves under his hands.

Again they are rapt, but now they keep their eyes open, smiling at each other like they're sharing some secret.

It's the first day of *The Explorer's* cinematic run and Lou is sitting in the audience, his collar turned up. The visitors are babbling frantically and they stay noisy even when the film has started. They're eating, drinking, shouting at the screen and whistling when a pretty lady appears. It will only get worse, he knows. This kind of audience has such a damned short attention span. They're lured more by the promise of entertainment, going out together, than by the film itself.

His profile is featured prominently on the film posters put up around the city. 'Jesse L. Lasky presents the internationally famous romantic star Lou-Tellegen' the caption

reads. The dash between his last and first name was a tip from Goldfish, who claimed it would have an exotic ring to it. It looks kind of classy, Lou thinks.

When he sees himself walking in the frame for the first time, he can feel adrenaline rushing through him. The man on the screen seems confident, moving with ease.

Earlier that week he saw Sarah in *Jeanne Doré*, the first film she made after her leg amputation, making it clear to the world she's not saying goodbye. She must have been aware that everybody would be watching her wooden leg, because her acting is more poignant than ever. It's restrained and realistic. She manages to convey the thoughts and feelings of a mother losing her son, using her eyes. Lou knows how much courage is required to keep it small, to not go all out using big gestures and exaggerated poses, especially when you can't use your voice or your lines.

'Think, when you're acting,' Sarah often told him, 'always keep thinking. Watch how a great actor does nothing yet keeps the audience captured. It's his thinking that makes it happen.'

When Sarah was beside him on stage, he could use her acting to better his own.

The man on the screen is prancing around in his flattering safari outfit. He's fighting, fleeing, riding horses, seducing; he's doing it all, but he's not thinking. Nobody will use this against him or even notice it. But he sees it.

'What are you waiting for,' someone from the audience shouts at his character, 'grab that broad and let her have it!'

The war is keeping its grip on Europe and it's growing larger every day. It's the talk of the town, even though the United States are uninvolved. Even a few months earlier, after a German torpedo had sunk the *Lusitania*, a passenger ship carrying hundreds of people including 128 American citizens, it was not followed by a declaration of war. It probably had something to do with the ship carrying heavy American ammunition for the British army, greatly endangering the civilians. On top of that the German generals, concerned with the commotion the assault rendered amongst Americans and fearful of interference by the powerful nation, backed down quickly. They guaranteed that the submarine war would no longer compromise the safety of American ships.

The Americans are still deeply divided over whether or not to partake in the war. To Lou's relief, there's no glorification of the violence, like in Europe.

'There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight,' president Wilson says in a speech. 'There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right.'

It looks to be a lengthy matter with an uncertain outcome, like wars usually are. The soldiers who told the ones staying behind that they would be home before Christmas – as the victors, of course – have been in their trenches for over a year now. A government sending men to war always makes it look as if it will be a short, successful battle. Commanders know better. Lou's father always used to talk about 'mutual exhaustion' instead of decisive victories.

Stories are circulating about Eleonore Duse, claiming she

has turned her back to the theatre in order to be a nurse on the front and tend to the wounded. He listens to them with fear in his heart. Soldiers can destroy an area the way a flock of locusts can, and Duse is right in the middle of it.

Goldfish urges him to improve his English. A bit of an accent is fun, he says, but if you want your fans to stay loyal you need to be able not only to be understandable during interviews and public appearances, but also to tell jokes and make subtle remarks.

‘I’m happy to admit I’m not always right,’ he adds, ‘but I’m never wrong.’

Until then Lou used English phrases and words that always seemed to fit, and he was leaning on his charm, but he’ll have to start studying again. Even though English has been in his ears for so long and he manages to get around, he will have to get used to the new words his tongue needs to use.

In an effort to support him, Geraldine has stopped talking French to him. She’s babbling away in her mother tongue and seems to enjoy it whenever he does not understand her, before she translates it to French. He can’t resist the urge to repeat it in Dutch as well. To tease him, she then repeats it in German.

This devilish woman just has to best him in this field as well.

‘I have to go back to New York next week.’

Geraldine mentions it as if it’s a bit of news, but they

have both known for months that the Metropolitan expects her in October for the American fall tour.

Lou nods, hiding his disappointment.

'I'll have to go eastward, whether I want to or not.'

'Don't you want to?'

'Yes. No. I don't know.'

He sniggers.

'My voice is rested and I can't wait to perform again. But...' She falters.

He takes her in his arms.

'But you're going to miss me so much?'

'At least you don't lack any self-esteem,' she says laughing.

'It's because I feel the same. I would love to start shooting my next film, but it won't be the same without you here.'

Suddenly, she looks at him spryly.

'I've signed up for three films next summer. I'll be here again.'

The words 'next summer' sound like 'in the next life' and he must have loosened his grip without knowing it, because she looks at him quizzically.

'You could come to New York in the meantime, if you want to?'

'You betcha.'

His words are muffled because he's kissing her neck. He lets his warm breath caress her neck, licks her ear and softly bites her earlobe.

When he's looking her in the face again, he sees an expression he's gotten used to; the expression of being rapt, of just wanting to be a body.

He pinches her arms over her head, as if he's overpowering her, and using his tongue to push her lips apart. They kiss and she lets out a lowering sigh.

It might just be the contrast between her public decency and her helpless lusting for him when they're alone, that makes her so irresistible.

The morning after the goodbye party the film company threw for Geraldine, the train is ready to take her to the east coast. It's been a beautiful night, with white tents on the lawn surrounding her house, a string quartet and colorful lanterns in the trees. Everybody who was big in film was present.

Geraldine's mother came too, and Lou had been trying to amuse her for the better part of the night. When you don't manage to win the mother of your beloved for you, you don't stand a chance, he knows. He's not completely sure about it.

Goldfish, somewhat inebriated, made a speech, using his usual irony which not everybody understood.

'I usually don't make predictions, definitely not about the future,' he said and then was silent for a spell to make sure they caught the joke, 'but this young lady will be at the top of the film star sky for a long time. You better believe me. I know about these things.'

Lou has had fun, but no amount of booze could make him forget the reason for the party.

Now he's on the platform with his forehead pressed against hers. They have spent the night together, not

sleeping, not wasting a minute. A strange, restless fatigue is coursing through him.

For the first time she lets go of the modesty she always displays in public and presses him against her, as far as her enormous hat allows. There's no press around, but people are watching them. She doesn't seem to notice.

'We'll be telephoning a lot,' she says with tears in her voice.

'And we'll write letters.'

'I'll be waiting for you,' she says, looking at him urgently.

He knows what she means and he also knows what she's trying to ask him.

'So will I,' he whispers. 'No other women.'

She lets out an almost inaudible sigh.

The last suitcases have been loaded on board. Her mother is throwing them a pointed look from the window. One more time Geraldine presses her lips to his and then she lets go. She gets on the train and it takes a while before he sees her again. Then she appears behind a window, which she opens to lean out. Her dark eyes are sparkling.

She reaches for him, then pulls back her hand and takes off her glove before reaching out the window again. He wraps his fingers around hers. No tears, no shouts, not even words anymore. Just their hands holding each other. They're not letting go, not even when the train starts moving, making a great racket.

He's aware of the drama of the moment, like a film scene. In his mind he can see what it has to look like: a man reluctantly saying goodbye to a woman in a display of superior,

tragic romantic love.

He starts to walk along the moving train, ever faster, until he's forced to run. Only when the platform ends he lets go of her hand and looks at the train leaving the station.

11 Geraldine

Whenever I'm writing I'm back with you, dining, strolling along the surf at Santa Monica and Venice Beach, talking on a film set. The first weeks with a lover always stay with us. We see great importance in every word, every act, every sign of getting closer to the other, and those images never leave us.

Before I knew you I thought being in love was like having great gusto for something, really looking forward to it, being jumpy with expectation. After I met you I knew being in love is like a flu that overwhelms you and takes control of your body, breaking down your immune system, gaining ground and paralyzing you. It's all-encompassing. Only the presence of the loved one can soothe you, only by loving, the symptoms of the disease can change into a pleasant drunkenness.

Something triumphant has taken hold of me, because I'm able to be touched by love, the all-encompassing kind, and a new kind of fear, because something important could be taken from me.

I feel twice as mortal. You could die as well.

How you finally won me over; I can't tell after all these years. In my long life I have fallen for a jawline, a well-cho-

sen remark, the way the skin around the eyes wrinkles with a smile.

It might have been your way of walking: bent a bit forward, greedy, as if you're taking an advance on the future.

I'm navigating through the days. Chats with cast members and other actors don't get my full attention anymore, only during shooting my concentration abides. Until now, I was living my life with myself as the fixed and unmoving center, but after a Copernican revolution I'm now revolving around your sun. Nothing to be done about it.

Lovers will and must, they have to. All day long they're caught in this thick, gluey wanting, forming a barrier between themselves and things that have nothing to do with the object of their love. They don't really perceive them, they feel like a waste of time.

The days without you are starting to feel like downtime.

I'm condemned to a position I have always feared: that of a languorous woman.

Then finally you're at my door, gorgeous, with fiery eyes under dark eyebrows. It's late in the evening, and after one look I know why you came.

I can't stand any further delay, and in an act unprecedented for me or anybody of my sex, I show you upstairs. There, only your warm breath and mine remain, our mouths close together. The heat I'm feeling turns into a roaring fire. It's as if I no longer have a will of my own, I'm reduced to mindless desire.

I can't remember much of the sensual struggle that follows, but I do remember feeling lifted outside of myself. You take me on a road where no thought can follow. It seems I am able to leave myself.

That's your gift to me: you're freeing me of myself.

Whenever we meet a new lover we think they are the gift we receive. In truth, we're receiving the gift of being able to start over ourselves. To do things differently: to bring into practice whatever we spilled blood, sweat and tears for to gain, as if things have never been different.

With the other person on our side we're building a new part of our own history. From higher ground.

Shooting *Carmen* can cost as much time and money as needed, because it's supposed to be my breakthrough as a film star and the biggest film by the Lasky Film Company up until that moment. I decide to ask Mr DeMille for a small orchestra on set. During the shooting of *Maria Rosa* I was surprised by the continuous racket on the floor, even when shooting. Every moment the set builders are hammering and sawing, working in a corner of the studio, and the assistants are talking and laughing. To drown it out and to get me in the right mood, I need music. Mood music, is what I call it.

And so every day a piano is put on the set. The piano player is aided by a violinist and a cellist. The Broadway jazz and classical music help me more than the drops of glycerin in my eyes to make me cry, or the jokes on set to

make me laugh.

In my contract it is stipulated that the film will follow the opera script without compromise, as lavish and daring as it may be. The story of Carmen may not be violated in any way in the script, the shooting or the editing.

From the first day of filming onwards Carmen slips under my skin as if she's never been gone. As Carmen, I have no issues swaying my hips, winking, getting outrageously mad in public. She has no problem breaking through my genes and civility.

In a scene where I'm supposed to be having a row with a girl in the cigarette factory, Carmen won't let me play a fight, she makes me actually fight. After Mr DeMille has yelled 'cut', it turns out I have slapped my co-actor's wig off with my first swipe. She was holding it in one hand while attacking me with the other. Looking at the rushes, I can see the scene has turned out phenomenally. It's as if the girl is trying to protect herself against my Carmen, a Spanish fury.

The cheers and applause of the extras are growing louder. There must be thousands of people there, brought together for one megalomaniac scene. Behind them looms a bull-fighter's arena, reconstructed in detail, based on the arenas in Spain. The film company had to apply for special permits with the city of Los Angeles in order to build it.

Holding the arm of the actor playing Escamilio, I walk along the path to the arena where the shooting will take place, dressed as Carmen in a red, gold-embroidered Spanish dress. Hundreds of children are throwing rose pe-

tals at us and people are cheering. Other Lasky-stars walk the path and are being cheered at. I wait in front of the arena entrance until I see you. You're walking past the crowd, wearing a black suit, and I can see how you let yourself be showered with attention, relaxed, with a broad smile. You even stop a few times, to shake hands and throw butterfly kisses.

Then there's a march of matadors, toreadors and picadors, brought in from Spain and dressed in their black and red Spanish costumes.

It takes almost an hour for everyone to find a seat on the arena grandstands, so shooting can begin. I'm in a booth with Samuel Goldfish and Jesse Lasky.

'Mr DeMille does like a bit of spectacle, doesn't he?' I say when the first bull is freed from the waiting pens and trots into the arena sands.

Goldfish nods.

'Thinking small will get you a small life,' he says.

We're sitting in my bedroom with our backs against the bed. We've brought up a bottle of whisky and two glasses. I'm taking small sips of the sharp liquid and throw you a sideways glance.

You're always moving. Something is always bouncing or drumming; a foot, your fingers. I don't think it's because you're nervous, it's the result of some impatience about everything that is to come. It's like rubbing your hands. Craning your neck.

Only when you know you're being watched, this strange

peace comes over you. This gracious serenity. The way you walked past the extras towards the arena, completely in control and at ease, just shy of lingering. The way you absorb all attention. You're calm amongst other people, when you're talking to journalists, when you hand out signatures or pose for photographers. When you're turned towards the world. Or rather: when the world turns toward you.

One could call it a pose, but it isn't. It's like the public affection is rocking you gently, enabling you to relax, like a baby in a loving mother's arms.

You pour yourself another drink. I force myself to take a bigger sip and the stuff burns in my throat. It's somewhat comforting.

'Did I tell you about that one time I got chased by a gang in Constantinople?' you ask me.

When I shake my head, you take it as a sign to start telling. You've transformed your past into a series of anecdotes, to amuse others. This story is about a night when you were playing baccarat and won so much money that the other players followed you after you left the bar.

I can tell from the way you pause and emphasize certain phrases that have proven to be successful that you have told this story many times. It bothers me that so many parts of our conversations are not genuine, not meant just for me. Only when I really start to listen I get amused. When you describe how you promised some street urchins money if they fought along, I put my hand over my mouth.

My dismay makes you laugh.

'You're a doll,' you tell me.

It sounds endearing and I give you a kiss.

‘No, really, you are,’ you tell me. ‘You’ve travelled the world and you’ve seen a thousand times more than your contemporaries, but it’s like you have never crawled out of your dollhouse.’

For a moment I feel indignant, but I know that you’re somehow right. I’ve only experienced the front of things: theatre stages, hotels, soirees, the star treatment. I’ve never been exposed to the dark backstreets of cities, or people.

After you have emptied your third glass there’s this delectation in your eyes. This haze that has fallen over you like a soft veil. I’m looking at you, but my gaze isn’t reaching you. I have to get behind that veil, behind that daze, the same way you managed to get behind it.

I empty my glass in one gulp. The liquor is tearing a hot trail through my throat and chest. My muscles let go of any tension and my eyes lose their focus.

‘Who are you?’

I’m not sure whether I’m saying it or just thinking it. In any case there’s no reply.

I give you an incisive look, but something in you is avoiding me, something stubborn that might not be accessible by yourself either. Whenever I detect it, I lose track of it again and it fades into the distance.

It staying out of reach is part of the enchantment.

You touch me, your fingertips stroking my arm very softly.

I give in to your hands and your lips that follow. I’m merging with you and all the movements we are making, as

if we're submerged in warm water. I kiss your neck, breathe my hot breath into your ear, press my breasts against you. I'm inciting you, and the fact that I dare to do such a thing incites me.

You're undressing me and whenever a piece of clothing has been cast off, you touch the bare skin. It's as if you want to make my skin yours by leaving a mark with your fingers. You're taking possession, like a home owner who has just received his key and is walking through all the rooms.

Finally your hands are touching my breasts, ending at one nipple, which hardens. You take it between your fingers and give it a teasing squeeze, a bit too hard, making me flinch. You grin, satisfied.

I grab you tight when your finger starts circling my moistness and finally burrows itself inside me. My nerves are shooting little bolts of electricity, almost enough to climax.

You keep your eyes aimed at mine, almost reverently, then you lay on top of me and push your arms beside me. I can't move, don't want to anymore and submit myself to you. Then I can feel you enter me.

Within the rhythm that we find all differences and secrets between us slowly fade away.

Good Lord, your member. It's standing at attention, like a palace guard when the queen passes by. The shaft is thick and slightly bent, your balls are round and hugging your body. And how quickly it becomes big and hard.

God, how I loved your sex.

I dare to write it down now, secluded in my writing room, but I have never told you. You were much more open. On any moment of the day, in whatever company, you could whisper in my ear the things you wanted to do to me. While we were making love you could tell me things about the curving of my hips, the softness of my breasts, the taste of my womanhood.

With Arturo, nothing indicated we were about to make love and after the deed was done everything was neatly forgotten again. Our sex life was situated in a room outside of reality, with a door that could open and close. You let it all merge, on any hour of the day, dressed or undressed, in a sensual, sometimes vulgar whole.

You could grab my hand and drag me to the bedroom without a word or a kiss. I knew I was going to give in, like I always do. It's embarrassing, how fast you set me ablaze. Those nice discoveries I had made with Arturo paled in the heavenly bliss you brought me.

The way I left your arms, with an empty head and a feeble body. My flesh remembers it all.

I'm sitting amidst twenty-five hundred people in a huge cinema in Boston, in between my father and mother. You're in the first row, a couple of seats away from me. We did not yet dare to appear together at the premier of *Carmen*, you and me. But nobody finds it strange that you are present, you being one of Lasky's stars.

Before the film starts, three tenors and a full symphony orchestra perform parts of Bizet's opera, in the arrangement

written especially for the film. After the applause the three men bow to me and my co-actor.

When the rattle of the projector sounds and the first images are being projected, my mother grabs my hand. Soon a close-up of me is shown. It startles me: my face looks so different from what I'm used to see in the mirror. I always pull my neutral 'mirror face' and now it's full of expression, as ghastly as it is irresistible. And on a huge screen, no less. I have to stop myself from putting my hands over my eyes.

It's like I'm sitting in the audience during my own opera show. With my mother right beside me I understand how the sensual, seductive behavior of Carmen in the opera might offend her, how she's just seeing her daughter wearing a costume she deems too revealing. Tonight she doesn't give a peep.

The arena scene, with gladiators and bulls, is shot in such an overwhelming way that people start to applaud spontaneously. My father sits up in his seat and starts to applaud as well, enthusiastically. Something like this has never been shown in cinema.

Throughout the film it feels as if I have left my seat and I'm on stage, acting.

'Mother, this is Mr Lou Tellegen.'

When she offers you her hand, you give it a gentle kiss.

'So you're the woman Geraldine speaks so highly of,' you say.

I haven't told you much about my mother, actually.

'Mr Tellegen is one of Lasky's top actors,' I say.

‘O, I’m just messing around. The theatre is my true love, actually.’

‘But Mr Tellegen, one should never turn one’s back to one’s true love,’ my mother says.

‘That’s why I will never leave her,’ you tell her, grinning, ‘I take every chance I get to be back on stage.’

‘He’s played beside Sarah *la divine* for years,’ I add for good measure.

My mother throws me a sharp glance and I try to make my expression as neutral as possible. She’s starting to understand there’s more going on here.

‘It must have been a big privilege for you, but it might have been for her as well,’ she says with a restrained smile.

Serving trays full of champagne are making the rounds. You grab some glasses and hand them to us.

‘That’s very kind of you, but tonight let’s make a toast to your exceptionally talented daughter, and to the film that will make her even more famous and loved than she already is.’

‘To Geraldine,’ my mother says approvingly as she raises her glass.

The reviews in the newspapers are improbably laudatory. My acting skills are called ‘passionate, cruel, witty and courageous’.

‘It’s a pity Farrar can sing,’ the *New York Tribune* writes, ‘because she’s a remarkable film actress. In a true democracy the public would be able to demand her talent be used for the cinema crowd instead of for the select company of the

opera house.’

However, throughout America the local small-town press turns out to be less broad-minded. My interpretation of *Carmen* is disapprovingly called ‘fleshly’. Concerned friends of my mother send her the articles.

‘Whenever Miss Farrar is not laying in someone’s arms or almost being kissed, she’s involved in some fight.’

She reads it to me in a neutral voice, but I can feel she wants to rub it in: these are the consequences of my unconventional approach. At the same time she knows *Carmen* the opera way better than the typical cinemagoer, and she was not shocked by what she saw.

The critics attack three scenes in particular: one in which *Carmen* seduces a man, instead of the other way around, one in which *Carmen* lights a cigarette, and one in which she gets in a fight with the cigarette girl. It is claimed the libertinage in those scenes sets a bad example for young women in the audience.

I’ve gone too far.

Outside and inside, decency and reality; I’m unable to close the gap between these things in my mind. Apparently, in public life a woman can’t be ‘fleshly’ or show lust without consequence, while in real life, behind closed doors, that is exactly what is expected of her.

You would not be interested in me if I would behave ladylike in your arms. On the other hand, men don’t seem to appreciate it when a woman demands too much between the sheets, because that means she’s insatiable. A girl shouldn’t be too outspoken in bed, she should always be

satisfied.

Other women, even my mother and Emma Eames, seem to understand exactly how to deal with these contradictions and they adjust themselves.

Carmen never lets anyone tell her how to behave and what to feel.

When it's about art, I'm like her.

In some parts of America the film is being censored. The commotion only adds to the success, even of the censored, boring version. *Carmen* becomes Lasky's biggest box office hit until then.

Finally we have to let go of each other's hands. The train leaves Los Angeles railway station and you're left behind at the very tip of the platform. I'm hanging out of the window to wave to you, so far that my mother is holding my skirt worriedly. And then you're out of sight.

I throw myself on the seat and my mother is looking at me half-amused, half-concerned.

'You've got it big time,' she says.

I shrug.

'There's players and there's gamblers,' she says.

I want to protest, but she lifts a finger to shut me up.

'And this man is a gambler. I've gathered some information and everybody tells me he would gamble away the shoes on his feet. Also he is known as a drinker and a womanizer.'

I sigh ostentatiously.

'Besides, it's not right when a man is too handsome,' she goes on. 'He starts to lean on it, and he gets lazy.'

‘Mom!’

She raises her hands defensively.

‘I know you don’t want to hear any of it and I’ll quit,’ she says, ‘I just want to have said it.’

Of course that’s not the end of it. During the rest of the train ride my mother tells me that, because of her clair-sentience, she can tell that Lou is a ‘quick lover’. I don’t assume she’s right, like I do with her other predictions. I suspect her of being jealous, not prepared to let go of me and trust me with a man, any man.

When she discovers she can’t weaken my feelings for you, she tells me not to give in too soon.

‘You should let men beg,’ she says, ‘especially a man like that. He won’t know what hit him. Don’t offer yourself to him, you hear me?’

I nod cowardly, because it’s too late anyway.

The warnings we receive and deliberately ignore.

We prepare the hopeful version, the way it could be when everything would turn out improbably well. We aim ourselves at everything that supports us in our belief that the other is the right one for us.

I’m reassured by the fact that Lou does not want to have children with me. He has a little girl he hardly sees, and he says he does not feel the need to start a new family. I also find hope in his respect for women’s careers. When he speaks about Sarah and Duse, his first wife who is a visual artist, I can sense his respect for their abilities and what they

have meant for his own career. He can receive things from women without feeling stripped of his masculinity. He does not feel threatened by strong, independent women; it's as if he's seeking them out.

At his side I think I'm able to hold my own, to spread my wings. I won't have to make myself any smaller than I am.

The train rumbles on, to the allegros, moderatos and fortissimos of a new opera season and away from the man who will be a summer love or my life partner – for the moment that's unclear.

12 Lou

‘We’re done, right?’ Lou says.

‘One more take. Starting positions, please.’

The director’s voice sounds irritated and Lou walks back to his place to do the scene over again. Yesterday night’s booze is still in his legs, despite strong coffee and an omelet. They like their drink, these film folks. After a long day of filming there’s always a cameraman or a set builder who is up for a visit to a bar.

He’s finishing the third and last film, *The Black Wolf*, as per his contract. He’s starring in the role of a bandit who terrorizes the rich and helps the poor, like Robin Hood, meanwhile wooing the duke’s wife.

He’s in a hurry. Geraldine is waiting for him in New York State.

His agitation causes flaws in his acting and made the director complain with Goldfish. When Lou explained to him the cause of his hurry, Goldfish told him: ‘You’re an idiot, but I would always prefer a clever idiot over a stupid genius.’

And that was the end of it.

Lou knows his position and it’s secure. The cinemas showing his films are always full, mostly with young girls and women. His work in *The Explorer* was given good reviews.

‘Tellegen dominates without wanting to monopolize all too clearly,’ *Variety* wrote in an article he saved in his clippings.

He doesn’t have to make an effort for that. People look at him, on stage or on screen, whoever might be next to him and whatever he does. He attracts their gazes.

He can see her standing on the Adirondack platform from far away. Her silhouette so recognizable, with those straight shoulders, slender waist and her posture full of calm and strength.

Time seems to go even slower when he has to wait for the train to come to a standstill. He has travelled thousands of kilometers, two days and three nights, right after his final day of shooting. The script of *The Ware Case*, a play in the pipeline for New York, has been on his lap all the time, but his head was too full of thoughts about Geraldine to study it properly. He had to dampen his yearning and resorted to writing letters to give to her.

He’s no letter writer and that made for clichés: her eyes being the prettiest, how he wants to take her in his arms. It will have to suffice.

Finally he can unlock the door and step down. On the platform he throws his valise over his shoulder and walks towards her. Once she sees him, she runs over to him. She loses her hat, but she doesn’t pick it up. He puts his valise on the ground so he can catch her.

‘Lou,’ she says softly.

Everything one could say about being separated from

one another is in that word. She says it again.

‘Lou.’

Holding that woman against him tightly, it’s like he’s being reunited with a part of him, an arm or a leg. Things make sense again.

Everywhere dew is glittering on the grass. The morning light is descending on the landscape, veiled in mist.

They’re on the porch in front of the fully equipped log cabin in which they have slept. Geraldine has made coffee on a gas burner. Both her hands are folded around an enamel cup, and somehow he finds that endearing.

Geraldine is in the game reserve preparing for the rest of her American concert tour, but when he’s around there’s not much practicing of scales or studying scripts.

‘Does your mother know I’m here?’ he asks.

Geraldine shakes her head no.

‘It’s not about you,’ she says quickly. ‘She’d disapprove me being with any man, me being an unmarried woman.’

Lou nods, not fully convinced.

‘And what about your mother? Does she know about me?’

It’s been years since he has seen his mother. A couple of times a year he writes her a short letter about his pursuits and adds a few banknotes. Since he went on tour with Sarah she has been living with some older man, so he doesn’t have to provide for her anymore. The Netherlands are neutral in this war and despite some food shortages, the situation is manageable.

‘I will tell her about us soon,’ he says, at the same time taking the decision to do so. ‘She’ll love it, because she used to perform herself.’

‘Was she an actress?’

‘A dancer.’

He’s looking at the sweeping landscape, the naturalness of it all. The way everything is just there, not made up or phony.

‘When she was performing she was living at night, mostly sleeping during the day.’

‘Were you alone often?’ Geraldine asks, gingerly.

‘I knew everyone on the street, the neighborhood kids, the shop owners, I could always join in. I took care of my own meals, I knew where to get food and how to prepare it.

A flock of birds passes by. They both look up to the sky.

‘When I was six years old my mother let me perform in one her shows, as a mime,’ he says, still staring ahead of him. ‘She said I had to act as if I was being chased. I was sneaking across the stage acting as if I wanted to hide behind my dancing mother, which of course did not work out, and it made the audience laugh. I still remember looking up at my mother and seeing her laughing too.’

He’s looking at Geraldine now.

‘I made her *laugh*, can you imagine? And people were *looking* at me.’

She nods.

‘But did she love you, your mother?’

‘A person doesn’t need to show love all the time,’ he says, ‘like some steady, reliable stream. Love can be served in

small bits as well, and come from anywhere, from people you know just vaguely or people you will never see again afterwards. All in all, that's a lot of love.'

'Actually, the only ones to show me love were my parents,' Geraldine says.

'Maybe that's just what you thought.'

She seems to consider the possibility.

'Love flows from one person to the other without a sense of time, proportions, space,' he says. 'It's not about the sort of relationship. It's there or it isn't, and then it's gone again.'

The days are filled with walks, shopping in the nearest village, chopping wood, cooking on a gas burner. When it gets dark they watch the stars that seem to shine so much brighter in the great outdoors than they do over the city, and they make love until they fall asleep exhausted, bodies tangled.

Never before has he experienced so little space between him and a woman, these days they seem locked together, without it making him nervous. Amidst the wide open nature they are making their world ever smaller; the walk to the village, the log cabin, the bed, each other's arms.

He dares to tell her he loves her and she seems to breathe in the words. She looks at him with wide open eyes, unable to reply.

The letters he wrote on the train are still in his valise. They're too superficial to express his feelings, which go much deeper. He's thinking about marriage. He wants to be able to call her his, because that's what she is. What he wants her to be.

After ten days of living in a perfect cocoon, they have to wriggle themselves out. Work is calling. Geraldine's next Chicago concert is approaching and Lou is expected in New York to rehearse for *The Ware Case*.

With great reluctance he kisses her goodbye on the same platform in Adirondack where they first embraced, and Geraldine's train is the first to leave.

When he presses his nose to the window of his hotel room on Broadway and looks sideways, he can see the poster of his second film *The Unknown* hanging on 50th Street. He's featured prominently, partly turned away from the camera, giving a good look of his torso, holding his co-actress in his arms.

He cuts a clipping about the film from *The New York Times*. It reads: 'The beauty of his Greek features and the grace of his physique add a lot to the film'. In the clippings he has already saved, he's called 'an exceptional mime' and 'one of the best-looking film actors'.

All in all he's mostly getting good reviews because of his looks.

The intensive rehearsals for *The Ware Case* help distract him from thinking about Geraldine. After a summer of shooting film his brain has to get used to remembering long texts again. As sir Hubert Ware, an English lord suspected of murder, he's the one talking for almost half of the play. Forty-seven showings are planned at the Maxine Elliot Theatre in New York.

The expectations have been stirred up. The mystery play was a hit in London and the press is all over it. He's usually called a matinee idol, meaning he's a favorite of young girls who are not yet allowed outside late at night and have to visit the matinee.

No more than a week after the opening night on November 30th, 1915, without Geraldine present because she had to perform herself, he can feel the first signs of boredom approaching. His performances start to show a certain premature routine, while he's still in the phase where one should expand and vary. His co-actress always sticks to her lines and is not challenging him and he's fearing that he is not pushing her to great heights either. Instead of deepening their performance they're making it hollow; every night the play loses some of its color and vitality.

The newspapers praise his subtle performance and the theatres are filled.

'Do you love me?' Geraldine asks.

Lou puts the phone a bit closer to his ear. There's people walking in the hallway of his hotel, laughing and talking.

'Yes,' he says.

'How are you so sure?'

'Because it's not so much that I know it, I can feel it in my bones.'

And because 'bones' sounds so crude in this context, he adds: 'And with all my heart.'

She sighs. It's a calm, happy sigh.

He has struck the right chord.

Three quarters of his money is spent on endless phone calls with Geraldine, that are supposed to neutralize or at least soften her absence. His phone bill is over a thousand dollars a month.

A lot can be heard in the voice on the other end of the line: her longing, her loneliness, her strength. Nothing matters except the sound of her voice. Nothing matters except being able to whisper the words that she needs to hear.

Geraldine is pretty, but she's not prettier than many of the other women he has been with. Each on its own her features might not be exceptionally beautiful, but together they are stunning. It's what glows behind them that makes her gorgeous.

Beauty is mysterious. One can meet an old lover after years and suddenly notice she's not all that special. Once, her appearance made one experience deep and rare feelings, but no matter how one looks at her now, it's not there anymore.

One moment one can see a shape in the clouds and the next moment the cloud is just a cloud again.

Lou is walking into the Boston hospital ward, holding a bag of apples. Geraldine's father has been admitted with appendicitis and she asks him to visit him. He would visit her cat at the shelter, if she asked him to.

The nurse tells him it's the first room around the corner. He looks inside and sees Geraldine's mother sitting on a chair next to the bed, listening to her husband intently. Lou stands in the doorway for a bit, in order not to disturb the

conversation. Her face is grave, but when she looks up and sees him it opens up into a surprised smile.

‘Lou, what are you doing here?’ she asks, getting up and smoothing her skirt.

‘Geraldine asked me to come take a look, because she’s unable to visit herself,’ he says, walking over to her.

‘But I update her every day,’ she says.

Geraldine’s father is pushing himself up on the pillows so he can shake Lou’s hand.

‘What a welcome surprise,’ he says.

They shake hands.

‘Geraldine would have loved to be here herself.’

Geraldine’s mother briefly looks annoyed, and he realizes it

must seem as if he’s trying to squeeze himself between her and her daughter.

‘Just let my little bird sing,’ Geraldine’s father says, satisfied.

Lou sits down on one of the chairs.

‘While we’re here together,’ she says once he’s seated, ‘I would like to know what your plans are with our daughter.’

‘Henrietta!’ Geraldine’s father says, half rebuking and half amused.

‘It seems like an honest question,’ he says, to gain some time. Strategies are racing through his mind and his heart begins to beat like crazy, but he knows he can rely on his calm appearance.

‘Over the last few months I’ve become very fond of Geraldine.’

‘But do you have serious plans with her?’

Lou is not sure which answer would satisfy her. Most mothers would press for a marriage, but this lady is not so conventional. He decides to just tell her the truth.

‘I’d like nothing more than to become her husband.’

Geraldine’s father looks at him with delight, but her mother is still frowning.

‘So I gathered,’ she says. ‘You should know my daughter has never thought about getting married. I’m afraid I have not raised her to be a good sparring partner.’

‘I’ll just have to give a little bit extra,’ he says as charmingly as possible.

‘Her constant travelling and performing,’ she continues, ‘the delicate problem of her voice, which has to be tended with daily routines and rhythms, the lack of domestic skills... You can always be assured of her love, but not of her presence. Singing comes first. Always. You’ll have to be able to deal with that.’

‘I expect myself to be able. I’m not exactly a homebody myself.’

‘Then there’s another problem: two careers under one roof. She’ll best you when it comes to fame and fortune. Can you stand that, young man? Will you accept her greater purpose?’

It’s clear he’s not known as a great catch or the savior of an unmarried lady of thirty-four. It annoys him that, with all that he has reached, he won’t be welcomed as a good match. With some difficulty he swallows his annoyance and smiles.

‘My dear lady, I will do everything in my power to make your daughter,’ and now he turns to her father, ‘*your* daughter happy and not hinder her career in the slightest. If she will allow me, of course.’

He looks at her father.

‘May I ask you for her hand?’

‘You have my blessing,’ he says, beaming.

Geraldine’s mother nods in agreement, thoughtfully.

In the trance-like quiet that comes with absinthe he is looking around his room. Things fall apart into fragments and those fragments are falling apart into smaller pieces. Everything is reflecting light, to all sides, as if it’s broken like a mirror.

Drinking helps with keeping his libido in check. The first glasses make for a greater risk, because they make him reckless and impulsive, so it’s important he quickly drinks so much that he’s unable to do any damage, even if he’d want to. Sleeping with new girls is nothing more than satisfying his curiosity, anyway. It would not mean anything. But it would to Geraldine.

Booze does not diminish his longing for her. After an irresponsible amount of absinthe he is surrounded by her absence, clearer than ever. His loneliness is greater than before he knew her, when he was still alone.

It was not easy to get this bottle of absinthe. A couple of months ago, in France, the liquor was held responsible for the ‘malpractice’ of the French soldiers. Quickly and quietly the absinthe law was adopted, further reinforced by

the incarceration of a Breton innkeeper for 'endangering the French race'. The wormwood fields were set ablaze.

The war seems to center around Verdun these days, a famous fortified city the French are defending at any price. The Germans bombed it for hours, then followed up with an infantry attack, in order to get the stalled western front moving. Tens of thousands of grenades had been fired at a small piece of ground, one square kilometer.

He doesn't have a clue how the French soldiers, caught like rats in their trenches, could have countered the canon fire. What kind of practice would not have been 'malpractice'?

In Paris he could have easily bought some bottles of absinthe in most bars, sold under the counter, from illegal distilleries. Here in New York some shady bartenders, in the worst neighborhoods, are selling the stuff, for an absurdly high price.

It's worth every penny. He can disappear in it, it's like he's invisible. You're not there when nobody sees you. He doesn't have to make an effort, doesn't have to keep it all in.

He can breathe out.

There she is, a couple of meters away from him, but un-touchable like a queen. Her chest swells and she opens her mouth to sing the first note. A sound, so sweet and full, fills the room of The Metropolitan Opera House and takes him away to other worlds.

She looks fragile in Madama Butterfly's silk kimono. On stage the elegant pride of an aristocrat and the urges of an

untamed creature, which he recognizes from their bedroom, are merging. There's no more disunity, this is one creature, complete and finished, free of any form of phoniness.

She pretends to be pretending.

In one of the first scenes officer Pinkerton admits he's not sure whether he really loves Butterfly or if he's just in love, but enchanted by her innocence, charm and beauty. He sees her fluttering around like a butterfly and coming down with silent grace, so beautiful 'he just has to have her, even if it means damaging her wings'.

When those words are being sung, he is so aware of the presence of Geraldine's mother, sitting next to him on the plush, that it's as if someone is pinching his side.

He's looking at the soprano on stage, feeling incredibly proud that he has possessed this woman and that he, if it's up to him, will possess her many times more.

Afterwards, when they're leaving the theatre to get in the limousine, Geraldine hooks her arm in his. In a tender gesture, he puts his hand on hers and he can picture what they must look like together.

A group of people has been waiting at the stage entrance. 'Miss Farrar!' 'Mister Tellegen!'

It's a pleasant feeling, to hear their names being called excitedly in the cold winter air. Geraldine nods to the people, smiling amiably, and she wants to walk on, but he stops to shake hands. A young woman asks for his autograph and jauntily he scribbles his name on some paper, including the dash in between. They put a pen and paper in Geraldine's

hands as well.

He can feel the people watching them. The opera star and the actor.

They enter Geraldine's suit in Hotel Netherlands, quite a bit more luxurious than his hotel room. She lifts a foot and reaches backward to pull of her shoe, then she does the same thing with the other foot. She navigates the room in stockings. Every move she makes is full of grace, like on the stage, but now it's more peaceful. He finds her irresistible, as if she has stripped away the public Geraldine Farrar and is now his exclusive property.

Geraldine, for her part, does not seem impressed by his fame, nor is she by her own. Being known and admired, or, like in her case, worshiped, to her is a means to an end. As long as people come to see her the directors will give her roles and she can keep on singing. She maintains her luxurious image with mink coats and limousines, but the position of prima donna means nothing more than being able to evolve as an artist.

It's become clear to him that Geraldine doesn't have fans; she has devotees. An army of women. She's the role model for headstrong, well-educated young women, uninterested in marriages or motherhood. The New Woman. To thousands of girls she's proof that one can be successful without a husband, maybe even because of that unmarried status.

'Want a drink?' she asks, walking over to the liquor cabinet.

She pulls the stopper from one of the crystal bottles and smells it.

‘Gin,’ she says, ‘that okay for you?’

He nods and she pours him a glass. Then she pours herself a tiny bit.

‘Don’t choke on it,’ he jests.

She points at her throat.

‘My voice.’

‘Your voice is unbelievably beautiful,’ he says, stroking a strand of hair from her face, the way he has done it countless times in plays and films, ‘just like you are.’

She sniggers.

He bends over to her. When his lips touch her mouth he can feel her becoming soft and warm, like a bit of wax between one’s fingers. ‘I’ve missed you so,’ she whispers in his ear, to his contentment.

‘I’m intending to marry her.’

He says it loudly and a bit rowdily. They’re the last ones left, a small company, at the party after the final performance of *The Ware Case*. Everyone in the room is laughing, and so is Geraldine.

He turns to her and tells her calmly and seriously: ‘I’m going to marry you.’

She jumps up, giddy because of the champagne.

‘Me? Getting married?’ she says laughing. ‘No. I won’t get married before I’m forty, and maybe not even after that.’

She empties her glass.

‘And when I do, it will be to an American. You’re a

Frenchman.'

'Excuse me, I'm a Dutchman. But it doesn't matter. I'm determined to marry you.

Now it's quiet in the room.

'Well, you'll have to hit me on the head like a caveman and drag me to the altar by my hair.'

Lou holds his glass up, showing he thinks it's a good idea. Relieved laughter resounds in the room.

She knows very well that deep inside it's what she wants most, he thinks.

13 Geraldine

For a few moments my thoughts are frozen. My mother helping me put on a slim cut satin wedding dress, me seeing her in the mirror, secretly wiping a tear from her cheek. Me holding a bundle of English roses, tied with a white satin sash. My father, who hasn't yet recovered completely from his appendectomy and actually isn't allowed to stand up yet, his face beaming, nevertheless rising when I enter the room, arm in arm with the manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. And you, the way you take my hand when we're facing the official, holding it for the entire ceremony, as if you're scared I will walk off. The way you look at me, how you seem to take in every little detail of my face before saying 'Yes, I do'. The way you kiss me, a bit wildly, your enthusiasm tangible, and the way that fills me with sparkling joy.

It's February 8th, 1916 and we are married. The wedding has been kept small, because my father is not yet able to deal with a big event. My parents' house in Boston has been garishly decorated with white flowers. The ceremony takes place in the music room with only my parents and a few friends present.

Time speeds onward, dragging everything along in its

wake. The only way to cheat time is to live in the moment. To be thoughtful. Everything you allow yourself to really be aware of is saved, because it becomes a part of you.

You certainly did not want to have an austere wedding. You wanted to go all out and have a Hollywood marriage. You wanted to tell it from the rooftops, how much you loved me, you told me, and invite the press as well, let the exposure boost our careers. We have enough money for something spectacular, you urged me.

A comedy in three acts, that's how I pictured it. Thank God I could use my father's condition as an excuse to keep it intimate.

This is not the opera star Geraldine Farrar marrying the actor Lou Tellegen; something like that could happen in a movie, and it would mean nothing. This is Gerry and Lou getting married.

The past two months, during my tour, separated from you, suddenly all I could see were couples – a man, a woman and sometimes one or two children – in the street, in restaurants, in the opera houses. Everywhere. It's as if people think they can only move in pairs, as if they're legs that can only swing forward when another leg is put in front of them, to stand on.

I never felt like I needed someone on my side, never felt like something was missing. I was not lying to the press when I told them being married is not my dream; at worst I was being cheeky. With Arturo, before a meeting, I was drawn to being together. Now, with you, separate encoun-

ters would not do. I want you near me. All the time.

Suddenly I was aware of walking alone. Sleeping alone. Eating alone. And you not being in the audience whenever I performed. Nothing that happened maintained its former fullness. I could feel an emptiness I did not know was there. It was a hidden space, as if an unknown door had been opened in a room.

‘I love you,’ I told you during one of our daily phone calls, just to hear a phrase I had never said aloud before.

‘I love you, I love you,’ I kept repeating, dizzying myself with those words.

The relief I felt when letting it out.

Losing you frightened me more than accepting your proposal.

You insist on carrying me across the doorstep, even though this is not our house.

‘We’re artists, hotel rooms are our houses,’ you say.

It could be the buzz from the champagne, but it’s as if I’m moving into a space that’s expanding, then shrinking again. When you put me down I have to grab you to stay on my feet. I want you to carry me, just curl myself up in the palm of your hand and let you take me anywhere.

We’re staying in a hotel in downtown Boston, in a suite that takes up half of the upper floor. Spending our wedding night in my parents’ house was too much for me as well.

You start to undress me and with devoted earnestness you cover every bit of skin in licks, bites and kisses. I let myself be pleased. Everything is surrounded by solemnness,

making me observe it from a distance, not allowed to let your touching get through to me.

I'm consumed by the thought of this marriage play we'll be acting out together, neither of us knowing our parts yet. And just now I feel myself becoming melancholic.

A honeymoon is impossible. The day after the wedding you're starring in a new Broadway play, *The Man of Nowhere*, while I'll be performing a couple of days later as Tosca in The Metropolitan Opera House. My voice, well rested during the summer and warmed up during the tour, is in excellent condition. I keep transforming from Tosca, to Madame Sans-Gêne, to Carmen. No new plays are offered yet, so I keep things interesting by deepening these older roles and by improvising.

Instead of throwing a rose in Caruso's face like we rehearsed, I slap him. He's surprised and gains some time by rubbing his chin theatrically. Then he plays along by keeping me in a stranglehold while singing his aria, my arms flat against his body, and then pushing me away dramatically.

'Being a married woman made you vicious?' Caruso asks me afterwards, surprised. 'Or is Lou giving you a lot of reasons to slap him in the face?'

I'm being watched carefully. 'Where does that woman think she is?' people in the opera house are whispering. 'In a cinema?'

My mother tells me astutely that there's talk in the press about 'cinematic exaggeration' and 'Hollywood tricks!': 'Farrar went as far as hindering Caruso in his singing', she

quotes. Only *The New York Times* seems to be pleased with my Carmen and her greater emotional intensity compared to last year.

Emma Eames is kind as always.

‘Envy is the admiration people don’t think themselves capable of,’ she simply says. ‘Just let them talk.’

Being married feels unreal, as if my marriage is a role I have played in an opera or a film. People no longer call me ‘Miss Farrar’ but ‘Madame Farrar’. I find introducing myself as ‘Misses Lou Tellegen’ unthinkable, as if everything I am, everything I have reached has turned to dust after taking the vows.

You don’t seem to care what I call myself, or you don’t show it. In any case you’re thinking much bigger than I am when it’s about our careers. You’re expecting yourself and me to be world famous, encourage me to believe in myself, to push myself as far as I can. This I recognize from my father and mother, so it has to be love.

We’re moving into a luxurious *hotel privé* on 20 West 70th Street, which we have furnished elegantly, with European art and luxurious curtains. It looks like a miniature palace; a king and a queen could reside there. At night we fan out to the concert halls and theatres where we’re performing, but during the day, when the weather allows it, we hire a *fiacre*, an old horse-and-carriage, and ride through Central Park. Or we sit in the upper deck of a bus and drive up and down Fifth Avenue, gloating because nobody recognizes us, while our drivers are idly smoking fags.

You point out a woman who has clearly just had a row with her husband and is walking beside him with pinched lips, you notice a decorator putting pearls around a mannequin's neck, you ask me if I see the child loitering around the roasted chestnut stand, with no money but some hope.

If you want to get to know a man, don't ask him 'what are you thinking about?' but 'what are you seeing?' when you're walking down the street together.

New York is welcoming but promiscuous, full of opportunity but ruthless. It keeps pushing me onwards, higher, further. When I'm in our apartment I feel restless, as if life is passing me by. The throng, the speed and the hustle of the city are starting to annoy me. There's something vulgar about the concrete, the stream of traffic and the ongoing visual bombardment of the ads.

I'm longing for space to breathe, a feeling of lightness. I'm longing for the Hollywood hills.

In the spring it finally happens. We're taking the train to the west coast.

It's clear that Carmen has lifted the curse off cinematic work for theatre personalities. Famous theatre actors are having their names put on film posters and are giving interviews about their latest film. Broadway stars and opera singers no longer see filming as an undignified, reprehensible activity. Caruso, too, signs a contract for two films. It has become a legitimate form of dramatic expression: suddenly it's fashionable, instead of just popular with the crowd.

For California, cinema these days is what the gold rush

was around 1950: there's an influx of fortune seekers. Everybody has a chance for the pot of gold. It's pioneer work: nobody's father or mother has ever done it before, rules are being thought up and formulated on the go.

The film I'm about to make, which will take up all of the summer, is *Joan the Woman*. I play the role of Joan of Arc, one of my favorite historical heroines. With its crowd scenes involving courtiers and soldiers, its sets with cathedrals and castles, its new light effects and double projections of Joan's visions, it should set a new standard for show movies.

Whatever people may have claimed these last years, cinema really seems to have a future.

'Ready? Camera!' Mr DeMille shouts through his megaphone.

I have to climb up the ladder placed against the city wall. I grab it with one hand, using my other to lift a three meter tall banner over my head. It was made very clear to me that it's supposed to wave behind me gallantly. In the next scene the wall has crumbled down and now I have to climb over it gloriously, showing the towers have been conquered.

We've been filming the siege of Orléans for over a week now, the siege that is supposed to end the dominance of England over France. The retakes, close-ups, dressing the hundreds of extras and their war outfits consisting of hauberts, axes, swords, lances and arrows are taking a lot of time to prepare.

I'm concentrating on placing my feet on the rungs, without being able to see what I'm doing, and holding up that cursed banner that, once the wind catches it, has a huge

pull. Once I'm standing on the wall I'm told through the megaphone that they have stopped shooting. The cameras are being moved for a close-up and somebody takes the banner from me. I descend from the ladder. Unfortunately taking off my breastplate and arm covers – weighing about forty kilo's altogether – takes my dressers about fifteen minutes, so I will have to wear them until the end of the shoot.

Mr DeMille hurries towards me. For some reason he's always dressed in britches and riding boots and he's still holding the megaphone.

'Are you okay?' he asks, ever worried. 'Isn't the wind too cold?'

'Don't worry, everything's still working,' I tell him cheerily.

Yesterday we have been submerged to our shoulders in the cold water of the moat for hours on end, and ever since he has been asking if I have not taken ill.

After I slipped from the saddle during a riding scene and was dragged along for a couple of minutes, dangling from the horse's waist, Mr De Mille hired a stunt woman for the long shots, so I'm only needed for the close-ups, which are less dangerous. Winking he told me that he could afford no delays and that 'this' – pointing at my face – had to stay unmarred.

'Five minutes,' he shouts, which means about half an hour of waiting with Mr DeMille. And he's gone again.

A chair is brought for sitting on, not exactly pleasant either, wearing the breastplate and the thick skirt. I don't mind. I don't want to yield to the real Joan, the female pa-

triot loved by men, fighting with men and being killed by men, while always keeping a woman's heart. For this role nothing is too much. After Mr DeMille showed me some historical depictions of Joan, I had my long hair cut to just above my shoulders.

Meanwhile you're working on *The Victoria Cross*. Our stars are rising simultaneously, just the way you predicted it. Lasky always greets us with 'Ah, the famous film star couple'.

We're staying in the film company's house in the hills, while we're having our own mansion built on Hollyridge Drive.

The film company's house is where we first made love. When I enter the bedroom, I often think about the night you were standing at my door. So many hot nights have followed since; as my husband, you're definitely no less warm-blooded than as a lover.

Women say they want a sensitive man, but between the sheets the rules are different. We want a man who's brutal, or at least a resolute man who is somewhat dominant. We want hands pressing us down on the mattress, a compelling tongue, imperious looks. And only moments later we're pining for tender, loving, soft and fluttering. Your caresses, the most tender ones and the cruelest, I love them all equally.

You can give, but you can also receive. You prop yourself up in the pillows so you can watch me while I'm pleasuring you. The first couple of times it made me shy. I know you're watching my face, my mouth licking, sucking, nibbling. I don't know what it looks like. Probably vulgar. Or dedi-

cated. Something deep inside tells me it's a despicable sin which is not really allowed, or just when the lights are off.

'Do you think we're perverts?' I ask you after we have collapsed on the pillows.

'We're artists,' you say. 'Nobody can call himself an artist unless he's sexually liberated. When you constrain your urges, creative as well as sexual, the juices will dry up.'

The word 'juices' makes me giggle.

'Restraining yourself is like putting stones in a stream until finally it's dammed. When that happens, you're just like all these other people, going to work in their best suits or baking apple pies in flowery dresses.'

'But I don't know what happens in their bedrooms once the suits and the flowery dresses are taken off,' I put forward.

'I think I have an idea,' you say.

Our tenderness, the intensity and at the same time the temporality of it; sometimes it frightens me. Especially when I hear you talk like that I wonder if I, or any woman, have enough to offer to satisfy your urges.

How completely can you own a lover? Even in the most heartfelt embrace the lover is still another person. Is that the secret of longing? Hoping that this time we'll manage to merge together?

Meanwhile, the war is growing ever more grim. Every month it devours the lives of young men. The idea of a

swift victory has been replaced by the reality of protracted trench warfare.

In July of 1916 tens of thousands of soldiers are dying at the Somme every day, sometimes for only a few hundred meters of gains. Every meter the front advances means the death of sons, fiancés, husbands, fathers. The warring countries are plunged into mourning and poverty.

I'm thinking about the people – artists without a shred of belligerence – with whom I have worked in Paris, Berlin and Monte Carlo, and anxiously I wonder how they are doing.

The Old World is starting to look at the New World ever more emphatically. When will the richest and mightiest nation send troops to end this unending carnage? When will New York, the financial center of the world, spend some money to bring victory closer?

'If people see only half their faces, they probably also want to pay half the price,' Goldfish says.

'If you do not recognize Rembrandt lighting, I'm afraid I cannot help you any further,' DeMille answers laconically, without taking his eyes off the screen.

We are looking at the first version of *Joan the Woman* in the cinema room of the studio on Vine Street, and I am well pleased. Those dreadful Klieg lights were already replaced on set by spots and natural light, and it has a magnificent effect. The overpowering and blinding even light is gone; I can see shadows, depth, shades. There are even a couple of scenes in which afterwards a color is added, fitting the atmosphere and setting.

The end result of filming Joan at the stake is incredible. The towering flames have been turned red, but my face is still in black and white. You can almost feel the heat coming from the screen. I can't help shivering recalling the stifling heat and smoke.

My clothes, skin and hair had been sprinkled with a liquid that was supposed to protect them against the flames. Balls of cotton soaked in ammonia were shoved up my nose and into my mouth and I was placed between oil containers. The sudden flames and plumes of smoke instantly reached terrifying heights. I was scared, but exaggerated the fear in my acting and funnily enough that calmed me down.

'The Catholic Church will object to it.' Goldfish sounds pleased.

'Won't that lead to bad publicity?' I ask.

'There is no such thing as bad publicity,' he replies.

After this production Goldfish leaves the Lasky Film Company and starts his own motion picture production company called Goldwyn, together with the Selwyn brothers, two Broadway producers. He later changes his name to Goldwyn.

'The end of an era of the goldfish gags,' he says.

'And it also suggests the company is solely named after you,' I add, and I immediately regret my audacity.

'That won't hurt either,' he says with a knowing wink.

The mansion on Hollyridge Drive is completed by the end of summer. It resembles a Spanish castle. Situated on top of

a hill, it is surrounded by twigs, foliage, knots, shrubs and flowers, where light and shadow dance together. There is a rocking chair on the patio with striped upholstery. Sitting there and overlooking Los Angeles is simply breathtaking. I can see myself sitting there with you, as far in the future as I dare to imagine. Your hair will be grey around your temples and maybe you will need glasses to read your book. Now and then I will pet the dogs lying at our feet.

The housewarming party is spectacular. I thought things would become more tranquil afterwards, but there seems to be no end to the parties at our place. Every Saturday evening you ask people over and also during the week there are get-togethers that get a bit out of hand and last until the small morning hours.

I remember the plates of hors-d'oeuvres and bottles of liquor on the table. Cars parked in the driveway. The air filled with chatter and laughter. Making acquaintances and exchanging names that are immediately forgotten. I remember you in your white summer suit, a glass of gin in your hands, in animated conversation or just looking around, pleased. Your sunburned face, the quick wink you give me when our eyes meet.

I envy you. The way you combine your innocence with life experience. You know the effect of alcohol and lack of sleep on your body and your work, but decide to just forget about that. You are aware of the dangers and take the leap anyway. The outcome isn't important and you don't care about what's at stake.

You just go. You do it. Whatever might happen.

The bed is shaking and I wake up. I feel you getting into bed next to me. I press myself against you and you slide an arm underneath my head.

‘What time is it?’ I ask.

‘Around three o’clock,’ you say. ‘I wrote a few letters.’

‘Oh?’ I say, stifling a yawn.

‘One to my mother.’

‘Do you miss her?’

‘I don’t know. I think so. She saw me in a movie, playing an army officer. She said I looked like my father.’

‘How do you feel about that?’

‘I could do without it. He probably wouldn’t have liked it either.’

A shiver runs through your long limbs.

‘Come on, every father wants his child to resemble him.’

‘I’m not wearing a uniform on the frontline, I’m wearing a costume on a film set. He would look down on that.’

‘Then he simply doesn’t understand who you are. So what?’

‘Sometimes I think that I’m always, even now, trying to...’

Your voice is trembling and trails off.

‘Make him proud?’

The silence indicates consent.

‘Do you know what matters far more?’

‘Mmm?’

‘Not caring about other people’s opinions. Rising above your injury and believing that, in your own eyes, what you do and who you are will be good enough.’

‘Easy for you to say. You are your parents’ pride and joy.’
‘Just as you are to your mother. And to me, your wife.
Let it be enough.’

You pull me closer to you.

‘It does make me happy you are proud,’ you say, contented.

A little later I hear you breathing regularly.

You always need someone else to feel good about yourself. When you hear that I love you, or that others do, only then you allow yourself to love yourself. You always need to take a roundabout way.

Love shouldn’t be about filling a bucket, but about lighting a fire.

I don’t feed on your love and appreciation for me, like I did with Arturo, but I live on the love I feel for you. It comes from me, or rather it flows through me and makes its way out. The stream is so strong it opens my heart whether I want it or not, it opens it to life itself, to others, to me, more than ever. That is what you do to me.

To be loved is meagre and fickle compared to loving.

Come morning everything we said will be forgotten – or we will pretend we have. Once I made the mistake to return to a nightly conversation, in which you had dropped your *panache*, and you looked at me as if I was publicly undressing. Since then I keep my mouth shut, afraid you will not show yourself to me in the night.

The wounds, the little mistakes, the essence forcing its way out right through the veneer is what makes a person

loveable. You just don't seem to understand that.

You regard that side of yourself with suspicion and contempt. You want to concur it, embezzle it, put it under lock and key. When you keep doing this, you will always be cut off from the purest part of your being.

To love is never because, but always in spite of.

14 Lou

On arriving in the limousine at the 44th Street Theatre in New York, Lou and Geraldine are met with a crowd. A security guard opens the door and Lou steps out of the car, after which he takes Geraldine by the hand. By the time they are standing next to each other on the red carpet, people are jostling against the railing. The flashlights of dozens of cameras dazzle his eyes and he can feel Geraldine strengthening her grip. He looks at her and sees her beaming smile, which he recognizes as her nervous one.

The only role she plays is being a public figure – never on stage, because there she is as authentic as when she is at home with him.

She is wearing a figure-hugging satin dress and her hair, after having it cut for the role of Joan of Arc, is still short. It is at shoulder-length and not long like it used to be, when the curly strands reached to her waist. He wonders if it ever will be like that again. Together with her long locks of hair, she lost something of her youthfulness and he can't get used to it. She thinks he finds her more beautiful than ever.

Loving a lot means lying a lot.

In the cinema lounge, normally filled with man-sized posters and flickering electric light signs, there are now

hanging historical paintings of Joan of Arc. The walls of the auditorium are covered with red banners embroidered with lilies. The lights are dimmed and in the center of the stage burns a large candle is burning, reminiscing them of a French cathedral. It is the day after Christmas.

He is talking to the press, somewhat tipsy from all the admiring glances.

‘How does it feel to be married to Miss Farrar?’ a journalist asks.

The man gives him a playful wink, which he answers with a roguish grin.

‘Every day it is a great pleasure, especially waking up next to her,’ he says.

At once his fuddle is over.

Joan the Woman is received as ‘the high-water mark of the movie picture’. Film critics are tumbling over each other to praise it and it becomes a worldwide hit as a *special feature film*. Compared to this triumph, Lou’s last film, *The Victory of Conscience*, entered and exited the movie theatres rather quietly this autumn.

Geraldine deserves to be celebrated. The way this woman gave herself to that project, body and soul, as if she were the Virgin of Orléans herself, fills him with pride and wonder. Yet he never felt like he was her Bedford, like he did when Sarah played Joan of Arc. Geraldine did everything by herself, and fearlessly so.

She came home with bruises and scratches as a result of the fighting, cramped muscles from wearing heavy costu-

mes and objects, and headaches due to the merciless California sun. She only allowed her double to stand in for the horseback riding scenes on set, and solely after things almost went horribly wrong.

‘I will not use a stand in for my action scenes, no more than I will let someone sing my high notes for me,’ she said.

They showed each other the injuries they suffered on set, as if comparing war wounds. During the filming of *The Victoria Cross*, which premiered without too much of a fuss a few months earlier, he also suffered his fair share of damage. The severest injury was a burn when a wrongly adjusted explosive went off too early. The pressure and heat of the bomb explosion pushed him to the ground and scorched his shoulder.

The pain he suffered the following day in his shoulder was real, but he felt he had no right to it. He fought off the pain and went back to work three days later.

The movie industry, just like the rest of society, is preoccupied with war. Lou is making one war movie after the other. How long is this supposed to go on? If the United States get involved in the Great War, and he is sure this will happen, there probably will be no other movie themes whatsoever. It is as if the romantic, idealized stories about war heroes are there to warm cinemagoers up for taking part in the war.

All things considered, playing the uniformed war hero, which earned good money, also will contribute to glorifying the acts of war. In his eyes, being an opportunist wasn’t necessarily a bad thing – it was just making the most of

any situation –, but in this case it felt like posthumously admitting his father was right.

He calls his wife his Siren, the one who lures him closer with her tempting voice, but most of the time he calls her Gerry. If she wants to tease him, she calls him caveman. Her mind is always active, always finding quick and clever replies to his unsuspecting remarks. She reads faster than anyone he has ever met, with a calm and focused expression he just can't stop looking at. Her movements are precise, feminine, whether she is getting dressed or arranging flowers.

The moment she steps across the threshold, nothing remains of the *persona pública*. At home she dresses simply. The summer dresses she wears in and around the house are made by her own hand.

Their different rhythms rise to the surface in domestic life. She is like a bird; going to bed around ten and rising at dawn. He is more like a night owl. He effortlessly writes letters at night, but during the day he can't even muster scribbling something on a postcard.

If he could, he would like to be invisible in the morning and only fully materialize by lunchtime.

During the morning hours, he prefers to be left alone and only tolerates people who keep out of his way. Unfortunately, she starts practicing scales at the crack of dawn. Her notes echo through the apartment, high and delicate, low and growling. Sticking his head under a pillow or plugging his ears with cotton wool doesn't help. Her professional volume penetrates everything and drives him to distraction.

At moments like these, her pet name Siren has a considerably less poetic meaning.

His head tells him she needs to practice her vocal cords. That she can't lower her voice because otherwise there's no point in it. That her vocal talent is one of the things he fell for.

'I am my own instrument and I need to tune it,' she always says with a hint of pride.

Someone like Sara also has a golden voice – a carrying one with depth, strength and a honey-like quality. She doesn't take any special trouble or denies herself anything. She doesn't drink tea, wrap scarfs around her neck, lock windows to avoid drafts or go to bed early.

He is in a new play on Broadway, written especially for him, which is also produced by him. It isn't a success. In the few reviews that comment on it, his acting is dismissed as 'silly mannerisms' and 'too theatrical'. He doesn't cut out the articles and throws away the papers.

A next project – a stage adaptation of one of his films that he wanted to bring to the theater, something no one has ever dared to do in this order before – fails.

It is in these unguarded moments that shame seizes its opportunity and the opprobrious words in the reviews pop up in his head. No amount of praise in his scrapbook can drown them out.

Geraldine stretches like a cat on the linen sheets, laying on her side next to him. She places her hand on his chest and,

teasingly slowly, circles it down. She puts his member in the palm of her hand and he hears himself growl as it swells up.

‘They’ll deliver a new stock of coal this afternoon,’ he says.

‘Mmm-mm,’ she says, not discouraged. She knows his habit of stretching the transition between the normal and the erotic, of postponing the moment when lust leaves them both speechless. Sometimes he enjoys to keep talking and sighing, to moan but keep his body still, sliding into the warm bath little by little, instead of plunging in.

She now clasps one hand around the root of his member, pinching it softly, whilst caressing his balls with the other.

She lets out a squeal when he throws her on her back in one swift motion.

To really feel the pulsing energy streaming between them, they lay intertwined and motionless for a few moments. When they start to move, all accumulated energy seems to be released in waves. He is going straight for his goal, to the center of the whirlpool raging inside him. She clutches her legs around him, trying to make him go deeper inside her. That gives him the last push and he is heading for a blind, terrific climax.

For a while he rests inside her. Then he rolls to his side.

‘Was that to your liking, Mrs Lou Tellegen?’ He asks.

‘With hyphen, that is?’ she asks playfully.

‘With the hyphen.’

A few months earlier he not only changed his stage name, but also his official name to Lou-Tellegen. Geraldine thinks only the hyphen is new, but his real name is actually Van

Dommelen, after his mother. His father gave him his own first name – or perhaps his mother insisted on that –, but he didn't want his son to have his surname. Now he arranged that himself.

'And is Mr Farrar pleased as well?' she asks.

'I believe your father isn't here' he says curtly.

She looks startled.

'Thank god,' he adds quickly with a smile, 'the good man would probably feel rather embarrassed.'

He gives her a kiss and descends to attend to her pleasure.

'How are things here?' he asks softly when he arrives.

Rumor has it they are experimenting with sound in movies. One Thomas Edison is developing a *kinetophone*, a device combining the *phonograph* with the *kinetoscope*, used in cinema. It is said to be a perfect synchronization of sound and movement.

It makes him feel a bit uneasy. His English is good enough to engage in conversation and giving interviews, but not to pass for a native speaker on the silver screen. As soon as films will have sound, the lead will be a thing of the past for him, and he can, at best, hope for supporting roles like the exotic European or the foreign villain.

That night he drinks more absinth than he did for a very long time. In a dream he hears the explosion that burned his shoulder. From the plush cinema seats, he can hear the sound of his scream, as if he is a visitor.

Then he sees strips of celluloid skillfully being set to fire. Everything that is made before the sound-film has had its

day. As if by magic, it has lost all its value. It is all scorched. Eternity has become the past.

Geraldine shivers. She is getting ready for a performance and has a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. To keep the blanket in place, she is sitting in a somewhat hunched position in front of the mirror. It is cold in her dressing room.

The Great War raging on the other side of the water is starting to become tangible. Due to food and coal shortages, people are queuing in front of the shops and sometimes coal is even out of stock. Winters in New York are harsh and this year is no exception. At home in their luxury apartment the cold doesn't affect them since the coalman gives them plenty of supply, knowing he will receive a generous tip, but inside the theaters and opera houses it is freezing.

Lou watches his bride. The hairdresser has put a wig on her, bringing back her long locks of hair, and Geraldine herself is painting with black kohl a dark line around her eyes. She has a concentrated look on her face, looking very serious. She is preparing for the concert as if she is going into battle and her life depends on it.

Arturo Toscanini will be conducting the opera over the next few nights, but that doesn't bother Lou. Arturo, that hot-blooded Italian, will have no scruples in trying to make advances, even now she is a married woman, but Geraldine is faithful to him.

Too much fidelity can also indicate a lack of imagination and intrepidity. Absolute certainty will leave a lover bored.

It is her devotion that makes him nervous, not her fidelity.

The bell rings to signal it is five minutes until show time. The blanket needs to go and the costume is showing her cleavage and shoulders.

‘Shouldn’t you put on something warmer, Gerry?’ he asks.

‘Tosca would never do that,’ she says, smiling.

In the concert hall, sitting next to Geraldine’s mother, he listens to the dancing sounds of the strings until the entry of Geraldine’s golden, resonating vibrato.

She must be cold, but one can’t tell. She is standing upright, chest open, without twitching a muscle, singing. Geraldine sings for the same reason a bird whistles. People say birds whistle to attract a mate. To keep their species alive. The question remains: why? The answer must be: out of sheer pleasure. They whistle out of a zest for life.

Art reminds us of the superior value of futility. Lou is looking at the conductor, who isn’t conducting to make the orchestra finish more quickly. The dancers on stage aren’t trying to go somewhere. Geraldine isn’t singing for appreciation, fame, money or attention.

Her singing doesn’t serve another purpose but singing itself. She was able to find that part of herself. The part he can’t

find in him.

She recognizes what is important, the gold between the scrap, and displays it in a place where it is appreciated and

where her valuables aren't wasted. The rest is nonsense. Useless clutter. This she understood a long time ago.

The veil of clouds makes for a soft, filtered light. The sparkling water of the Pacific is a little less blinding than usual, which, considering his hangover, isn't unwelcome.

Seagulls are leaning on the thin air. Every now and then one stands on the tide line or on the sand closer to him.

He sighs. Somethings is dropping inside him. The sound of the billowing waves and receding water, the continuous breaking and sucking motion, again and again, never fails to calm him down. There is nothing to add here, nothing to complete. The ocean is movement – the thing he holds so very dear –, but with a sense of peace, echoing eternity.

He feels more at home in Los Angeles than in New York. Here he is away from Geraldine's family, away from her mother's watchful eyes that seem to look straight through him. Besides, the house is bigger, so her vocal exercises don't bother him as much in the morning.

He suddenly remembers something Geraldine said when they moved in, that they could grow old together in this house. We never have to leave again, she added. Isn't that a pleasant thought?

Houses are temporary places for entertaining friends and for sleeping when you happen not to sleep somewhere else that night. For as long as it lasts. The only place he could picture himself returning from his travels for the rest of his life is Tuscany, albeit each time with a different woman by his side. Unbeknownst to him, his wife built a moat around

the house.

The clouds have drifted away and the scourging sun is burning down on his head. He can feel his temples pounding. Carefully, without aggravating the thumping in his head, he gets on his feet. He's expected on set.

He has started assisting the director with the film *What Money Can't Buy* in the Lasky film studio. Small jobs to learn the tricks of the trade. Geraldine gave Lasky the idea to give him a chance.

He's keeping the ball rolling. He enjoys getting his teeth into something new. In his next project, *The Long Trail*, he will be playing the lead and directing the whole film himself.

People divide the world into good and bad; heaven and hell, light and darkness, angels and demons. For him there are only two interacting forces in this world: progression and conservatism. One pushes towards growth and evolution, and the other serves stagnation and 'keeping things as they are'. One force opposing the other. That's all there is to it.

Give it time and our certainties will prove to be fragile, our strongest convictions capricious. There are no established truths in this world. Time will play a trick with them. After a while the constant will prove to be just as changeable as the variables.

In April 1917, the fourth year of the war, the United States enter the war, although a few months earlier president Wil-

son won the elections and promised the country to remain neutral. America is dragged into the war when Germany, after the collapse of the Eastern Front due to Russian resistance, announces unrestricted submarine warfare. It provokes a reaction from America, and the country starts to take action.

The few existing arms factories are operating at full speed and there are posters hanging in the streets saying '*We want YOU!*' to recruit soldiers. Lou is amazed by the rapidly growing number of volunteers. Do these boys want to become heroes? Do they yearn for the unusual, the danger and the glory, in an attempt to escape the daily grind? Or is it just about finding a job and having food on the table?

To him the resounding patriotism seems a bit excessive. Suddenly everybody has the desire to go to battle.

This country doesn't know war, he thinks. Not like the Old World does. America fought against Mexican rebels and went on a few colonial expeditions, but the main experience with modern warfare was the American Civil War, half a century earlier. The fact they remain unbeaten must attribute to their sense of invulnerability, something Americans so self-evidently seem to exude. More than other countries they fail to grasp that optimism is by definition out of place, when it comes to war.

'What does a strong, healthy young man like you do on a film set when your country needs you?' DeMille asks, slapping him on his back.

'Precisely for that reason: that I would like to remain

strong and healthy,' he answers with a wink.

DeMille shakes his head in disapproval.

Lou knows DeMille enlisted in the army, but was refused because he wasn't fit enough. To do something military, he established the Lasky Home Guard. On the premises of the Lasky Film Company, he drills about twenty young men, standing abreast, proud in their uniforms. The sight of it has been annoying Lou for weeks now.

A few weeks later none other than actress Mary Pickford gives the troops a send-off, with a silk American flag with hand-stitched stars waving in the background and a film camera in front. No doubt the recordings will bring in thousands of new recruits.

In May 1917, military conscription is introduced. Lou has to register, but isn't called to arms yet, since he wasn't born in the US.

He only just got out of bed when he bumps into Geraldine on his way to the kitchen, to let the maid pour him a cup of coffee. She wraps her arms around his neck. He kisses her in in her hair, far from her mouth, so she doesn't smell the alcohol on his breath.

'Let a man have a moment to drink his coffee,' he says playfully.

It's not easy pretending to be in a good mood, but he's trying.

She beams at him, presses a kiss on his lips and lets him go. Thank God she doesn't follow him into the kitchen.

15 Geraldine

‘Hot milk,’ I write. ‘Please,’ I then add. Even on paper I try to observe a minimum of manners.

My mother nods and disappears into the kitchen.

This is the price I have to pay for overusing my voice for so many years, something I kept putting off. Time to pay back the interest.

I had a throat polyp removed from my vocal cords last week. It was a delicate operation and it is hard to say what my voice will sound like later; worthy of the Metropolitan or not. A couple of months of absolute silence is crucial, even whispering is a no go, because it puts pressure on the vocal cords. If all goes well I can recommence performing at the Met in the Autumn of 1917.

Last season, they had the opera *Thaïs* on the repertoire, with a leading role for me. Again, the heroin was a loose woman, this time a voluptuous Egyptian prostitute in revealing costumes. Waiting in the unheated wings made me become sickly and feverish. I developed a cough and eventually my voice couldn’t reach the highs and lows any more.

‘There you are, my dear,’ my mother says. ‘Don’t burn your tongue, it is quite hot.’

I take the mug from her hands.

She insists on taking care of me since the operation, even though I'm perfectly healthy and I do have maids. I suspect you are appreciating it a little less, judging by how you seem to avoid us, but I simply can't bring myself to object to it. I like having my mother around in circumstances like these. She might be the only person in the world with whom I don't feel awkward not speaking.

I wrap my hands around the warm mug.

'Why don't you come with me to a séance,' she says. 'You have time for things like that now.' I reply by putting on a very doubtful face.

'Honestly, you will gain insights you would otherwise never have.'

And are these insights your own or are they forced upon you, is what I would like to ask. But I can't be bothered to grab my notepad and pen.

'I attended a séance in Boston a little while ago. The medium received a message that you should pay attention to your health. Not now, but in the future.'

I sigh ostentatiously.

'I'm merely passing it on. I didn't think a warning from the beyond was something I should keep from you.'

'I will pay attention,' I write down. 'You may pass that on to the beyond.'

I hold the text up before her eyes and my mother pulls a face.

'The heart can feel what remains hidden from our eyes, Gerry,' she says worriedly as she stands up. 'When the time

comes, you will know exactly what it meant.’

That is why I don’t discuss my inner life with my mother: with the best of intentions, she will smother it with her wisdom and protectiveness and take over the whole thing.

Eventually the United States do get involved in the World War. Also in the opera and film world, men abandon The Muses to follow Mars. The conscription act leaves them no choice, but the willingness to end careers and leave for the front surprises me.

Germany now being the official enemy, the already watchful eye on my German past has turned into open distrust. People talk about me as if I support the Germans’ ideology and even cooperate with them. The weekly letters I get forwarded from the Met are so offensive my mother now makes sure I don’t get to see them.

Newspaper articles are being published about my ‘German sympathies’ and there are whispers that this is the reason why the Metropolitan didn’t continue my shows. We managed to keep the operation on my throat out of the papers. You think I should bring it into the open as the reason for my absence, but I refuse. I hate responding to gossip.

Remarkable how a crowd of admirers can brutally lash out from one moment to the next – it shouldn’t surprise me, after what happened to the prince royal.

Why is it that people can’t wait to rob you from your standing, when they are the ones who attributed it to you in the first place? And why do they assume their scandal-mongering doesn’t hurt you? As if fame would neutralize

your feelings.

Living in the limelight can rob you from your life, if you let it. Implausible tales, gossip and myths will create a divide between your name and who you really are, an illusion public relations agents will call 'your image'. You become vulnerable. Being famous is essential for keeping my position and therefore being able to create the art I want to create, but it does feel like a bothersome side-effect.

The only thing within my power is keeping my true self away from the limelight, ensuring it will never become public property.

The reverse side of it all is becoming clearer to me now. I can see the big, ugly picture. The condemnation of my past is part of a propaganda strategy to bring matters to a head. The American antipathy towards the Germans has to be brought to a boiling point in order to convince the people to go to war. Everything below the boiling point is depicted as weak, corrupt and unpatriotic. People make vomiting sounds to point out their horror.

Judging by the enormous cost of war in Britain, France and Italy, billions of dollars are needed in the war chest, and the only way to obtain them is by raising taxes and selling Liberty Bonds. In their campaign, the government uses celebrities, air shows, stickers, buttons and posters showing German bombers above the skyline of Manhattan. Everything to conn the crowd into buying them.

You and I travel to the west coast, where the silent movies are a godsend: I can work without having to use my voice.

You are focusing on the director jobs Lasky gave you. I do not tell you that I more or less had to threaten to never sign a film contract again, in order to persuade him.

I am filming *The Woman God Forgot* with Mr DeMille, a fairytale movie set in sixteenth century Mexico. I play Tecza, an Aztec princess. I wear a headband with feathers, a leather top with rocks only just covering my bust, and an enormous leopard fur coat. After the success of *Joan the Woman*, the movie sets for this film are even more impressive. DeMille has built a twenty feet high pyramid in the Hollywood hinterland. During the fighting scenes, I lead hundreds of extras dressed as native warriors. A green forest and a lake are created inside the studios for other scenes. The net around it has to keep a few thousand rare water birds from escaping.

All this time I don't say a word. I use my notepad when I'm with the other actors, smile at the extras and communicate with Mr DeMille using signals that after a couple of days of shooting feel very natural.

DeMille does not direct like a general commanding his troops, but like a lady instructing her house servants. Only the slightest coercion in his tone of voice is enough to make us work even harder. When he, holding his hands like a funnel in front of his eyes as if looking through a camera, walks into the water, his assistants follow him, since he might hold out his hand and need a megaphone. He expects and receives the very best – from me as well.

Once, on arriving home from a day of shooting, I see cars parked in the driveway. We have guests, as is often the case. I had hoped to spend an evening alone with you. Since the operation, we make love so often and so intensely one should think speaking becomes unnecessary. It almost does.

No one sees me when I enter, and I stand in the doorway for a moment, looking. You are talking to a man about the film you are directing. You tell your stories as if you are offering the other a present. It always makes me smile.

You have the gift of keeping conversations flowing by adding the right joke, bringing lightness when things tend to become heavy, soothing where things chafe. You can feign interest without showing all your cards, and you can keep this up for hours. I am watching you with a mixture of appreciation and amazement: why all this effort when such a large part isn't authentic?

Your face lights up when you see me.

'There is my beautiful wife,' you say, making a large gesture with your arm.

We kiss each other on the mouth.

'A woman who has to save her voice,' you say equally enthusiastically, 'is every man's dream wife.'

People laugh and I smile.

For me, not being allowed to speak is the perfect excuse not to engage in all the chatter. It allows me to relax in the company of strangers and to observe them, without having to mingle.

I sit down on the armrest of a chair.

The conversations have already switched back to movie

projects, directors and some sound device that is being developed.

One of the women, an elegant brunette, lets her eyes linger on you. Immediately you straighten up. Always being aware of possible sexual candidates around you. You instinctively receive and send out signals. You can't help it, it is your nature.

I observe it with a loving look.

One only truly loves someone when one sees their idiosyncrasies and shortcomings, and embraces them. Merely loving the beauty in someone, isn't love.

After half an hour I retire upstairs.

Only movies and stories have happy endings. In real life, you need to make everything end in time to have a happy ending. Nevertheless, Lou, I will finish our story. Only now, after your death, I can write it down. As if now you are gone you are at a safe distance, yet at the same time, esoterically, closer. My mother would have understood.

By the time I am shooting my next movie, *The Devil Time*, the tissue in my throat has healed and I am allowed to carefully speak again. My voice doesn't have much power, but it is clear. The hoarse, raw edges have gone. I will not hazard vocal exercises just yet, but my timbre is surely promising for my singing voice.

I manage to not think about opera houses for now and concentrate on acting. I am playing a Breton fisherman's daughter who finds a magic emerald and suddenly remem-

bers she once was a Norse Queen with a pack of wolves at her feet.

Cinema is a one big show those days.

Not showing my concern that you drink too much is somewhat difficult. You are not the kind of man who allows himself to be reprimanded by a woman and I tell myself this is one of the things I like about you.

You are invariably drunk after six o' clock. Tonight I am joining you.

I watch you poking the fire, in a way only men can do, and I tinkle around the ice cubes in my glass.

'If you are expected on set as early as I am tomorrow morning, we probably should go to bed soon.'

You look at me in surprise and I wonder if I said something strange.

We find ourselves between the cautiousness of the newly in love and the intimacy of the longtime married.

'You think I don't do my job properly?'

'That's not what this is about.'

'What is it about then?'

'Well, directing is quite a responsibility.'

My voice sounds nervous and stifled. This all is going in the wrong direction.

'One I'm perfectly able to handle, with or without lack of sleep and a hangover' you say, frigidly.

'Of course,' I say, and I try to grab your hand.

'You think you can lecture me because you have arranged this job for me.'

I wince at your words and shake my head.

'You are nothing but discipline and presence and duty,'
you say.

With clenched fists you press your hands against your
body, like a boxer trying to control himself.

'I'm *alive*,' you say.

'I am too,' I say shaky. It doesn't sound convincing.

You enter the bedroom shortly afterwards.

You look at me with remorse, grab my hand and kiss it
in a most tender way. Then you hold my face between your
hands.

'You are the best thing that ever happened to me,' you
say humbly.

Suddenly I see it: you are acting your emotions. Under-
neath them, there is nothing but an infinite void.

It must look like I'm touched, because you think your
acting works. You add a little bit more.

'And you know I think you are a great artist. I am so
proud to be by your side.'

You are accomplished indeed, you have been practicing
your whole life. I have no trouble seeing through the pho-
niness of other people, but with you it has taken me years.
Reading you requires the eye of an expert. That must mean
you believe it yourself. You are trained to such an extent that
you can't recognize your own acting anymore.

It is as if I'm leaning against the front of a house that
turns out to be a piece of scenery and falls over. I feel disor-
iented. Unsafe. Damaged.

Your body language, words and expression all point in the same direction, but your intention lies somewhere else.

How deep is your love for me when you need to pretend?
Maybe I'm wrong.

'It's ok,' I say.

I walk to the bathroom and pour the water from the wash jug into the bowl. I wash everything off that I put on my face.

I stare at the dripping, naked face in the mirror. Then I grab the towel and dry my face.

That night you lure me closer to you like a satyr. For you, making love is the best way to solve any problem. Everything can be put right in bed, according to you.

The need for reconciliation drives away my resistance. My body reacts to yours as if it were attached to it by a thousand threads. Everything I know is wiped from my mind and I don't understand how there ever was any disagreement between us.

Our sighs are partially smothered by kisses, I feel your teeth teasing my lower lip. My hands are stroking your lower back. Far away, I can hear your name escaping from my lips.

I can feel it all again, writing his, underneath the palm of my hands, on my lips. The racing rush of lust, followed by the languid relief of satisfaction.

Only when I lose myself, do I find myself.

The way we react to damage, if we harden or soften, determines whether we enrich or mutilate ourselves. I kept putting off making a decision and chose to keep up the illusion. I wasn't ready to drop the curtain because the show was too beautiful.

I chose to keep believing you loved me just as much as I loved you.

16 Lou

‘That’s how it is, Lou. The films just didn’t do well and that’s nobody’s fault, but we can’t justify to our investors giving you another contract.’

Lasky sending DeMille to deliver the news is a stab in the back for Lou. The most celebrated director of the film company coming over to tell him he isn’t up to scratch as a director.

He knows the films he directed weren’t a commercial success. The first two only made a little bit of money and the third, *The Things We Love*, didn’t even come close to the box-office hit it was supposed to be with a star cast like that.

‘We have to bear the future of the film company in mind.’

‘Why should Lou be to blame people didn’t turn up?’ Geraldine asks. ‘It might just as well have been the script or the subject.’

‘Gerry,’ is all Lou says.

DeMille coming to their house and Geraldine witnessing the dishonorable discharge is humiliating enough.

‘Understood,’ Lou says. He stands up from his chair to signal the conversation is over. DeMille follows him to the door.

Lou forces himself to shake his hand.

‘It’s alright,’ he says, ignoring the rage inside him.

After this, Geraldine is determined to never sign a contract with Lasky again. As soon as she shares this with a few people in the film industry, she receives a telegram from Goldwyn inviting her for a coffee.

She returns triumphant. Next summer, she will be making three films, as soon as all the details are settled, and Goldwyn wants to speak to Lou about playing her leading man.

She doesn’t need to say it. He is her castaway.

With her hands pressed flat against her chest and looking upset, Sarah utters the phrases of a woman suddenly plunged in deep mourning. Everything about her radiates despair.

Lou and Geraldine are sitting in the hall of the Brooklyn Academy of Music. They sent a note to Sarah’s dressing room to let her know they are in the audience. The callboy immediately returned the message that Madame Bernhardt would be delighted to welcome them in her dressing room after the show. They are sitting on the third row, right behind the footlights, and Sarah should be able to see them during her performance.

Despite her American farewell tour, Sarah is back in the United States for a short visit – probably to show everybody that after her leg amputation she isn’t defeated, but reborn. She is standing just as proud and strong as before the accident, without the support of pieces of scenery or actors, and

is gliding across the stage with her wooden leg.

Sarah's voice is rising and falling, withdrawing and bursting out like the natural beating of waves. The words are coming from within and are pouring out on a rhythm following her emotions.

Her performance, its richness and depth, confuses him. Only playing opposite her, next to Sarah, he was able to approach a similar level. After that, all he did was just messing about. Would Sarah have seen his films? In his mind he can see her sitting on a chair in the wings, her hand under her chin, looking at him with a fixed, concentrated gaze, following his every move, like she did during his first performance, and he winces at the thought.

Sarah is seventy-three now, and it shows, but it is her talent that is the center of attention. She is magnificent. He himself has been relying on his appearance his whole life. What will be left of the reviews when his looks begin to fade?

He is thinking about Geraldine and Sarah, these two women together, his past and his present, both pushing him upwards to a height where he can't hold his own, a height of which he could fall down at any moment when they let him go.

The sound of applause startles him. People are standing up from their chairs, cheering and shouting. He glances at Geraldine next to him, who is also applauding enthusiastically.

Sarah takes a bow in every direction, leaves the stage to return again, blows a few kisses to the audience and seems

to be looking straight at them.

‘Let’s go,’ he says when she has left the stage.

‘Perhaps we should give her a moment to catch her breath.’

‘Not to her dressing room, but home. I don’t feel well.’

Geraldine’s worried expression hits him like hailstones.

‘Probably something I ate.’

‘I will get the coats, darling,’ she says worriedly, ‘you go ahead to the driver.’

Back home in the apartment he convinces Geraldine to go to bed and leave him alone. When the noises in the bedroom have stopped, he walks over to the drinks cabinet and pours himself a glass of gin. He knocks back the first two and takes the third with him to the couch. Only alcohol can give solace when feelings get to you.

After the fifth glass he feels his thoughts subside and his emotions soften. He is seeking oblivion bordering on stupor and pours himself another glass.

The room disintegrates into meaningless spots. His limbs seem to weigh a ton and he sinks down on the couch.

When he wakes up early in the morning, with the first light of day shining through the uncovered windows, all the memories, thoughts and furniture fall into place again. Nothing has changed, unfortunately.

A soft lament is waking up the old demons, those of self-hatred and emptiness. The futility of life becomes apparent.

Languid and dispirited he walks to the bedroom and lays

himself next to Geraldine, who can wake up any moment now to start her day.

In the spring of 1918 they don't leave their New York apartment for their mansion in the Hollywood hills, since the studio of Goldwyn Pictures is in Fort Lee, New Jersey.

They can look back on a successful winter season. In war, culture hibernates, some artists say after Nietzsche, but somehow the opera houses and theaters are still packed. People want to take their minds off the ever-growing number of casualties and wounded. The audience in the hall are given horsehair blankets and everybody is keeping their coats, scarfs, hats and gloves on. It makes the applause sound a bit strange and muffled, as if his ears are stuffed up from a fever. People have made a habit of stamping their feet on the floor to show their appreciation.

Geraldine achieved her regular success in the Metropolitan and signed contracts for no less than four films this summer. Lou will be playing on Broadway for the summer in the play *Blind Youth*, which has been drawing in full houses night after night for months now.

Every day Geraldine takes the ferry from New York City to New Jersey to work on a modest romantic drama. After that, she will be in a light comedy, playing a mother for the very first time. The studio and budgets of Goldwyn Pictures are considerably smaller than those of the Lasky Film Company, and certainly not sufficient for the epic drama Geraldine has become accustomed to. Compared to Hollywood, the choice of extras and actors for smaller roles is

limited in Fort Lee and it is clear Goldwyn hasn't managed to attract the best screenwriters.

His wife has made a big sacrifice for him, and he finds her relentless cheerfulness incredibly annoying.

Throughout the spring, millions of soldiers battle away. Both sides must be suffering great losses. Every day the wireless reports the names of fallen and missing soldiers.

The American government, and the ones of the other allied forces, want everybody to believe we are on the verge of a breakthrough. Although the German armies have never advanced this far, both on the western and on the eastern front lines, it is clear Germany can no longer win the war. They have lost most of their strength, their loss of manpower and weaponry is beyond replacement, and the enemy remains unbeaten.

Tens of thousands of American soldiers are arriving every day and the fresh troops are giving the moral a new boost.

On the 18th of July 1918, a superior number of allied cannons, tanks and airplanes prevent the Germans from advancing to Paris. In the newspapers Lou reads about 'a mighty offensive using all available weapons, forcing German troops to retreat'.

Paris has been rescued. Sarah is safe.

Jaunty as ever, dressed in a summer suit with all the buttons of his vest stretched tightly around his majestic belly, Enrico Caruso enters the house. He embraces Lou the Italian way: with a firm grip, a slap on the back and a kiss on the cheek

to finish.

'You've got taste,' he says, looking around the apartment.

Geraldine rushes towards Caruso and falls into his arms.

'But of course I knew that already,' he says, smiling, referring to his wife.

Geraldine giggles.

Caruso takes a good look at her.

'Married life becomes you.'

'Aren't you tying the knot yourself soon? Didn't you bring your fiancé?' she asks.

'Dorothy is visiting a potential wedding location, I believe. We are getting married in August.'

'That's a pity, we'll be filming then,' she says, walking into the drawing room.

Caruso steps through the house and starts bellowing an aria from some opera, Lou recognizes it but doesn't know the name. Geraldine joins in and for a while they sing together, smiling at each other, until Caruso, out of breath, drops into an armchair.

'The movie industry really is quite something,' he says. 'Last week, there was a viewing of a film in the Cohan and Harris Theater, with me in it. And I could hear myself sing!'

'Did they play a record?' Lou asked.

'No, my voice came from a machine that can send sound into the hall, with a volume that makes you sit up. It is similar to the electrical speakers on American warships.'

Caruso takes his cigarette-box and hands Lou a strong, Egyptian cigarette. He takes one himself too. Although a few women do smoke these days, he knows better than to

offer Geraldine one.

‘Are you sure these things won’t damage your voice?’

There we go already.

‘Gerry always likes to play mother,’ Lou says.

‘They make me sing even better,’ Caruso answers. ‘It gives my voice character.’

Geraldine looks doubtful.

‘You really have to go and see it, that movie. There is a little orchestra to support it all, but you can really hear our voices from that machine, as if you are sitting in the opera with me. How this will change cinema!’

Lou tries to look enthusiastic.

‘I swear to you,’ Caruso says, ‘it is only a matter of time before you’ll be hearing yourself talk in cinemas.’

‘Well, let’s not get carried away,’ Geraldine says.

She glances at him and he pretends he doesn’t notice.

When Caruso has left, Geraldine opens the windows a little to let the cigarette smoke escape, and wraps a scarf around her neck. She fears draft, snow, rain, colds, smoky rooms and everything else that might affect her voice.

Of course she brings it up.

‘Someone told me about a speech therapist who is really good at training people to lose their accent.’

‘Really?’

He pretends to be ignorant, but feels the irritation welling up inside him.

‘Wouldn’t that be something for you?’

He strokes her hair.

‘If I ever need to, I will definitely consider it.’

‘Shall I call him and make an appointment?’

She never knows when to stop.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ he says, it came out sharper than he meant. ‘Thank you,’ he therefore adds before leaving the room.

On the eleventh of November, 1918, the war is over. After difficult diplomatic negotiations between president Wilson, on behalf of the allied forces, and the German Government for a peace treaty, a truce is signed early in the morning.

During the past few weeks, when people knew negotiations about ending the war were under way, the newspapers were still full of reports about battles. It wouldn’t surprise Lou if the generals of the French, English and American armies were competing to see which one could advance the furthest.

How senseless it must feel to see your comrades fall, to see them choke in poisonous gasses when negotiations about ending the war are happening at that very moment. Apparently, the German troops were at the end of their tether and a general strike broke out in Berlin.

It being sweet and honorable to die for your country is an old lie people no longer believe in – until a next generation, not having experienced the destruction of total war yet, also falls for the myth of a quick heroes’ victory.

‘War does not determine who is right, but who remains,’ he heard his father say once. At least this time the aggressor was the losing party.

A few days earlier, the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II was announced in Berlin, as demanded by the allied forces, and the man is said to have fled the country.

When they were in the theater last night, an acquaintance approached Geraldine about it and called the emperor a coward.

‘You can only call someone a coward when this person is present,’ Geraldine said, ‘otherwise you could be accused of the same thing.’

He has to hand it to his wife; she is brave.

Europe is bankrupt and exhausted. Now the war has marginalized European cinema, not Paris but Hollywood is the movie capital of the world. After all the poverty and misery, the world is in need of light entertainment. And escapist recreation is exactly what Samuel Goldwyn has in mind.

Lou signs a contract with Goldwyn Pictures for three movies, which will be filmed next summer. He will be playing opposite Geraldine, in an equivalent role as her lover. Judging by the scripts, the movies offer entertainment as light as a feather.

They are in luck: the film company is moving to the Culver City Studio in California. They can move back to their mansion in the Hollywood hills this summer.

17 Geraldine

A parasol is protecting me from the strongest sunlight. I am stroking the cotton fabric of my flower print dress, pleased with the look of it. I gave the dresser a sketch to turn a simple farmer's dress into something charming. In my head I go through the scene we will be playing in a few minutes. You are standing a little further, joking with the stable boys. Playing a Russian prince, you are wearing an elegant riding costume with a white tie and a flower in your buttonhole.

We are about to shoot one of the main scenes of the film, the scene where we meet. It is full of delicate moments.

I walk over to the little group.

'Shall we take a moment to focus?' I ask you.

'I am having a perfectly good time,' you say.

'We are about to start.'

'Acting can only be just like the real thing when it isn't real,' you say, winking to the boys, who smile.

The prince gazes into the eyes of the farmer's daughter with such loving interest that it touches me and I have to ascertain it isn't Lou looking at Geraldine. You have moved so close to the camera that we need to stop.

'You are blocking Gerry, Lou,' the director says. 'A little

bit more distance, please.’

We retake the scene.

We are filming *The World and Its Woman*, about the Russian Revolution. My peasant girl and her prince flee from the revolutionaries, who are after him. I am happy to be able to work with you every day.

During this take you stay where you are, but give in to the temptation of making large gestures, whereas the scene requires subtlety. You laugh heartily, instead of with surprise and hesitation. The prince falls for the farmer’s daughter, that much is clear.

When we hear the sound of ‘cut’, you walk over to the fans that came to the film set. After a few days of shooting outside people know where to find us, especially young women and girls. They also call my name and I wave to them, but decide to go somewhere quiet to stay in character.

Now the Great War has ended, the women who took over the jobs of the men on the frontline aren’t so easily persuaded to go back to their kitchens and salons. They had a taste of being independent and moving freely in the world.

I am really enjoying the revealing clothes that are in fashion now, women taking their time before getting married, the loosening up of manners. My Carmen, especially the film version, would probably not have caused that much controversy these days. I amuse myself with the thought that also my Carmen contributed a little to the new female audacity.

Moving the curtain of my dressing room window a little, I can see them. Dozens of girls are coming to the film set for you every day. I see them standing while you sign pictures with your image and kiss their held-out hands.

I would like to scream out to them: leave him alone. You are ruining his life, can't you see? He thinks this is love. You maintain the very thing that will destroy him when it vanishes.

Believing in applause will be your downfall. When you are susceptible to praise, you are also susceptible to reproach. One should receive approval without becoming attached to it, otherwise one jeopardizes the authenticity of art. In craving more recognition one becomes a circus act.

Applause is the ultimate misunderstanding. More than an expression of appreciation, it is an act in which the audience can find release. It neutralizes the emotions stirred up by the performance. Applause is a demarcation of fiction and the real world. Reality prevails over drama again. It is a spell. Now everything is back to normal.

The phone rings. I slide out of bed from under the silk sheets and take the phone from the hook. After a short thank-you I put the phone down again. Like the start of every working day the production assistant wakes us up. You moan when I give you a little shake.

'Time to get up.'

You turn your back to me.

'I won't be needed till noon.'

I remain seated on the edge of the bed, indecisive. You

say this every morning and usually you are right. With your previous film the director worked around it until you appeared on set, but this director isn't this tolerant. He wants to shoot *The Flame of the Desert* as quickly and as well as possible. He already complained once to Goldwyn who apparently answered: 'I accept fifty percent efficiency to receive hundred percent loyalty.'

Because the film is set in modern Egypt, we have shot the exterior scenes in the Oxnard desert with artificial palms and real camels. Now it is time for the interior scenes, which we shoot in the studio.

I leave you in your bed.

There is a certain ambivalence of ambition and self-destruction in your being, of building up and breaking down. I'm becoming aware of that more and more. Nothing you achieve will ever release you from that conflict. You can singlehandedly smash it into smithereens at any moment.

I always arrive on set in my costume and make-up before nine. I want to worth the outrageous amount of money Goldwyn is paying me every day, whether I have scenes or not.

I have grown accustomed to wait for hours, designing costumes, reading books and learning opera lines, until I am called and needed in front of the camera. Sometimes it turns out I am not needed at all and I go back home.

That morning you are in luck and you aren't missed.

On the film set lights are placed behind the window frames to suggest daylight. The filming is taking longer than expect-

ted so the director makes us work long hours these days. In reality it is night.

'I need a close-up to be able to really convey it' you say to the director.

The director nods.

'Take five,' he says.

An almost inaudible groaning follows. Light assistants and cameramen change the position of lights and cameras and we have a small break.

I walk over to the table with sandwiches.

'Just shoot it and then we'll throw away the material,' I hear the director whisper to the cameraman.

You look at me, unmoved and frosty.

'Wanna bet?' you say. 'If I'm right, I get to fuck you.'

We were talking about current events, something in the papers.

Your vulgarity shocks me and for a moment I can see a triumphant look in your eyes. Then your face becomes soft and you walk over to me.

'I can't think of anything more delightful,' you say flatteringly.

You hold my face between your hands and kiss me, a kiss just as compelling as it is ardent.

Our erotic relationship is becoming more cruel and merciless. Heavy-handed you lead me to the bed or push me over the table face down and take me roughly. You force me to say I'm yours, that you can do what you want with me. You slap my behind with a flat hand, a bit too hard to give

me any pleasure.

No longer is your dominance intended for our mutual delight, like a game, but to force me into submission. At some point an invisible equilibrium has been disturbed and the bed is your chosen domain to restore it.

Afterwards you are so tender, my body regains its dignity. I receive your caresses like a hungry pet being fed.

In the distance I see a billboard by the roadside of *The World and Its Woman*.

‘Could you pull over, please?’ I ask the driver.

The first newspaper advertisements for the movie showed my name in big letters and yours in smaller ones. You were furious. I asked Goldwyn sharply to print both our names the same size on all forms of publicity when the movie is released and he objected to it, but eventually agreed.

It is indeed a billboard for *The World and Its Woman*. I am horrified to discover it has my name on it in huge letters. Yours is missing altogether.

Goldwyn lied to me. Without thinking I open the door, walk to the wooden structure and start to climb the giant thing. With my bare hands, I frantically start ripping off strips of the poster.

I keep on tearing and the fear, hidden beneath the anger, the fear of having to see the hurt expression on your face, subsides with every strip of paper that falls on the ground. I don’t stop until the advertisement has become unrecognizable.

‘Could you please drive around the whole of Los Ange-

les?’ I ask the baffled driver. ‘Let’s go and visit all of them.’

Your acting is competent and skillful, but also risk-free and predictable. You manage to ruin moving moments with heavy gestures, your timing is just a little too slow to make it flow. I notice I am holding myself back in order to keep the same pace.

One who wants to show everything, eventually shows nothing. Nothing but lack of imagination.

In the third film we do together, *The Woman and the Puppet*, my role is loosely based on Carmen, a lively, cheerful Spanish beauty.

‘It was much better playing opposite Sarah and Duse,’ you say out of the blue when we walk to our trailer.

‘Well, I am an opera singer first,’ I say, not having the courage to stick up for myself.

Without noticing it, I have engaged myself. You need not provide cage nor key. I am the songbird that, of her own free will, doesn’t fly away anymore, but remains whistling on her little branch, hoping to be heard. Praying she is singing the right song.

It is an insidious process, restraining yourself to not offend or outshine a man. Somewhere in history we have been programmed like that, us women. He has to be the one protecting us, our superior, and to achieve that we belittle ourselves – just a tiny bit, it’s hardly noticeable.

In exchange for his well-being you give up on certain things, tacitly, because you think that is part of loving so-

meone. You twist and mold yourself to give him what he wishes to receive and to receive what he wishes to give. You hold things back, conform and compromise until nothing is left of you but the version that suits him.

This you do with great perseverance, but failing, because eventually your true nature always shines through, but you are willing to provide what is desired and make it work. You even find a certain pride in that: look how well I understand him! Look how he adores me! That can be most fulfilling, like winning a competition every day.

Biting my tongue and not emasculating you isn't even a conscious decision, it is a reflex.

In those days, I thought I could change myself into something different, if only I would try hard enough. A better, renewed version of myself. One that would please you more.

Now that I'm older, I'm not so eager to be always polishing and improving myself anymore. I know now that nobody ever really changes. Trying to improve yourself is doomed to fail if it comes from self-loathing or a desire to please, no matter how determined the fight. A flower can raise itself up to the sun and grow, but a flower can never change into another flower. It is better to embrace who you are, because you'll have to make do with it for the rest of your life.

You can only change in the direction of yourself. Layers of habits, nurture and assumptions can be uncovered and shed until you reach an inner core that turns out to be not so bad after all.

Eventually, one sooner than the other, we all become who we really are. Just like the smallest bud on a young twig eventually becomes a knot on an old tree, everything becomes visible when people are older. All the charms and conformations are nothing but temporary camouflage. Your true nature will always pervade, like body odor through perfume.

'Assume-toi,' Sarah advised me once.

Take your true form.

We are entertaining guests for a formal lunch and dessert is about to be served when the butler announces there is a visitor at the door.

'Mr Goldwyn has urgent business to discuss with you and would like to see you,' he says.

'Please excuse me for a moment,' I say to my guests and I walk to the music room.

Goldwyn quickly gets up from his chair. He seems nervous.

'I understand you have guests, so I will come straight to the point,' he says.

There is no sign of his usual banter, something I have never seen before.

'Geraldine, you probably know people no longer go to every movie that is being released. There is a new film out every week now.'

I nod.

'Your movies did not bring in the profit we hoped for and your contract runs for another two years, with twelve weeks

of camera work, and a guaranteed sum of 250,000 dollars.'

An awkward silence follows.

'The truth is...'

'...it is putting your company at risk,' I say kindly.

'Exactly.'

Somewhat ashamed, he is looking straight at me from behind his round glasses.

'Perhaps it is an idea to not appear on the screen for a year? A star's popularity often increases when he or she isn't available for a while.'

I look at him and he appears to be even more embarrassed.

'Or would Mr Tellegen perhaps be willing not to play opposite you for a year?'

'I see,' I say calmly. 'Wouldn't it be better to tear up the contract altogether then?'

'I think that would be best for both of us,' he agrees.

'If you think so, Mr Goldwyn, then let us terminate the contract here and now.'

I hold out my hand to Goldwyn and he shakes it.

'That is most considerate and kind of you,' he says.

I smile.

'You never treated me any other way.'

I walk back to my guests without this fortune to my name. Sometimes you have to take the bitter with the sour, Goldwyn would have said if he were his usual self.

Most decisions we take without thinking and only afterwards do we build a construction of supporting arguments.

You can always find valid reasons, for all possible choices. Have you ever noticed that, Lou? We might consider ourselves to be capable of independent thinking, but the thinking only happens afterwards.

I convinced myself my time with Goldwyn was over because it didn't fit into my life anymore, my married life.

What if I had chosen for my own career? What if that would have given you the space to achieve something yourself, without having to be grateful to me?

Back in New York there finally is a new opera in the pipeline for the winter season of 1920. Vocally and musically, *Zazà* isn't that challenging, but it has great theatrical potential. I ask David Belasco, the producer of the original play, to help me with the interpretation of my part, and my colleagues are kind enough to come to my apartment for rehearsals as well.

On rehearsal days we disturb your lie-ins, to your great dissatisfaction. But when you come to have a look in the music room around noon, you amuse yourself with the cast.

Zazà is a singer in a Paris café and becomes the lover of a man who visits her performances. When he is seen with another woman in Paris, she goes over to the house of her rival. There she discovers her lover has a wife and a daughter.

Mr Gatti refers to me as the public's 'pet child'. Now the war has ended and the allegations about my German past have disappeared to the background, I apparently have the largest host of admirers of all the Metropolitan soloists,

people of all ages and all walks of life, but mostly consisting of young women.

The *Flapper Girls* consider me their example. These young girls show their defiance of convention by not fastening the flaps of their galoshes. They wear their hair above the shoulder, like I have done for a while, drive cars, smoke and drink in public and visit jazz clubs. *The New York Sun* refers to my followers as 'Flapper Girls who see a goddess in Farrar' and nicknames them 'Gerry Flappers'.

They see me in audacious, sensual roles and are calling me a liberated and brave woman. Though I am married, I show people my career doesn't suffer from it. To be appreciated, women always had to be obliging, amiable and adapted. They believe to have found proof in me it doesn't have to be like that.

Indeed, I do not apologize for taking up so much space. I display myself as a sexual being. I don't belittle myself. My vigor, success and fortune I achieved on my own merits. I am radiant, I am standing up straight, I'm giving myself and I'm receiving.

On stage.

Playing Zazà in the opening scene of the première, I am brushing the hair of my wig, while I try to stay in character. The applause and cheering since my entrance has been going on for minutes and seems to fade away only now. There must be hundreds of Gerry Flappers in the audience.

'Your women's army is out there as well,' you already said in amusement before I went on. 'It is becoming some kind

of cult, with you as their high priestess.’

At the end of the dressing room scene I turn away from the audience and undress until I’m only wearing my chemise. I try not to be aware of the eyes of the audience. I focus on how the tenor is touching me, Zazà’s admirer, who is caressing her spine with his hands.

I only have the nerve to do this because of Belasco’s encouragement during rehearsals. ‘Every throb of my heart will be for you and your triumph’ said his telegram.

My mother advised my father to join her in the loge after the first act. I can just see him, calmly smoking his cigar until all the excitement is over.

During the third act, I play an utterly devastated Zazà, with her lover’s daughter behind the piano. I sing my part so full of emotion and sorrow, with interrupted vocal lines and broken, irregular breathing, that everywhere in the audience people are grabbing their tissues.

The final applause is ecstatic and goes on for dozens of minutes. I feel like I have sung my soul out. People are throwing flowers on the stage, all of which I try to pick up. My arms full, I disappear into the wings.

It is Emma who enters my dressing room, not you.

‘You have made me weep,’ she says to the screen behind which I’m changing.

‘With emotion, I hope, not disapproval?’ I ask enthusiastically.

‘Utter emotion,’ she says, ‘but that dressing room scene can cause you a great deal of trouble.’

'Times are changing,' I say.

'People will be fighting for a seat on the first row, that's for sure.'

Dressed in my evening gown I step out from behind the screen and give her a kiss.

'Come,' she says, 'time for people to stick some feathers in your cap. You deserve it!'

People start applauding when we enter the opera lounge. Emma unhooks her arm from mine and joins the applause, smiling from ear to ear. I can't see you anywhere.

'You were truly magnificent,' my mother says.

I give her and my father a quick hug.

'Let's see where my husband hangs out,' I say breezily.

I notice my mother giving me a searching look. Mothers are like sorceresses. They know things.

I drag Emma along to look for you, together.

We find you talking in a corner of the lounge talking to one of the girls in the company. You are standing close to each other. When you notice us, you take a step back.

'My gorgeous,' you exclaim. 'We were just saying your Zazà got even better than during the rehearsals in our music room. Who would have thought!'

The elaborateness of the lie doesn't surprise me. You always do that. It is rather convincing.

18 Lou

He closes the curtains even though twilight is only just setting in. If only it were dark already, it would suit his mood better. He pokes up the fire and pulls out the ashtray to empty it, harder than necessary.

There are enough servants, but Geraldine doesn't even lift a finger when it comes to housekeeping. It's not out of ill will; she just doesn't notice when something needs to be cleaned, bought or served. She walks past reality.

Of course he knew where he got himself into when he married an opera diva and she never pretended otherwise, but sometimes it feels like a personal insult.

Making films together turned out to be a catastrophe. Her strict rhythm and sense of duty oppresses him. Discipline is like a cramp. He is after a different kind of perfection: going where the stream takes you, rising and falling with the tide.

His contract with Goldwyn has ended and will not be renewed. Everybody in the film business has been knowing this for months, but nobody mentioned it to him. They did to Geraldine, who signed a contract with Pathé for filming next summer.

Every relationship has a chorus. Theirs is about a power

struggle. About standing in the ring and winning a round.

It is said that Sarah, now truly old and crippled, is being carried around in a lifting chair. She is on tour in America with a drama called *Daniel*, in which she is playing a dying drug addict. People are coming to see her with the same curiosity they would have shown examining a relic in a museum.

Over the last few months, Duse also did a final attempt to prolong her worldwide reputation by touring through Europe and America, playing to full houses.

He doesn't go to any of their performances, neither Sarah's nor Duse's. He can't bring himself to face the women he so greatly respects. Not now, at this low point in his career.

'Where were you last night?' Geraldine asks.

The tone of her voice tells him she already knows the answer. Does she want to hear the truth or does she want to give him a chance to end his affair after taking a sideswipe at him? He isn't sure what tactic to choose.

'You can't remember?' she asks, sharper now.

'I went to see a play.'

'According to my sources you were with a young actress.'

He should have known better. She isn't the sideswiping type.

'I have complimented a young actress on her acting after the show, if that's what you mean.'

'You left with her. You have been seen.'

'According to your sources...' he says sneeringly.

She looks at him, defiantly.

He knows she has the better cards. She is holding them in her hands. The thing to do now is just bluff, going past the fear of losing your bet and feeling the kick of possibly doubling it.

‘Afterwards I went for a drink with some of the actors, yes. Is that against the law?’

Going to a bar probably doesn’t sound too convincing after prohibition.

She turns away from him, her eyes clouded by tears of anger, and walks to the bedroom.

The girl she is referring to means nothing to him. There was indeed a kiss after he had brought her back to her house, but he isn’t planning on seeing her again. Much further go his affections for Stella.

He met her at a party, unworldly like an angel. She is only nineteen years old, an actress and Spanish, just like his mother. She is pretty, but for him it is all about the way she looks at him, intensely and full of admiration. She believes in him just as he should wish to believe in himself. It is this look he wants to see when he visits her, never mind what happens next.

So far this led to embraces and some petting, but not to intercourse. He should keep it that way.

Of all variations of love, the romantic one is the least reliable because the heart is fickle and the flesh is weak. Exactly when fidelity and dedication are needed most, there is also

the highest risk of feelings fading away. You nod off for a minute and they're gone.

Who is responsible if life doesn't bring you what you think it promised? What counter do you go to for complaints?

When it comes to sexual fidelity, again this marriage wasn't a success. Meeting with girls and stealing kisses is his latest addiction. This he allows himself. The sense of danger makes him feel alive. Geraldine isn't the type of woman who turns a blind eye. It is like gambling, like placing your bets right before they say *'Les jeux sont faits'*.

On their wedding day he promised to remain faithful to her and he had meant it. We exchange our old ideas for new ones. Let's not forget they are only human fabrications.

Mid-January 1921 he finds himself in the middle of the cheering audience at the opening night of Charpentier's *Louis*, with Geraldine playing in it. Gerry Flappers scream whenever she comes on stage, does something frivolous, has a dramatic note and eventually when she takes a bow for the final applause.

'This is most unusual in an opera house,' Mr Gatti says after the performance. 'And perhaps also a little unseemly.'

After the opera season they move back to their house in Los Angeles. Geraldine will be filming *The Riddle: Woman*, a movie about a young bride who is being extorted by a former lover. Lou has no obligations in New York, so there is no reason for him not to come as well. He has no prospect

of work in Hollywood, it is unlikely a part will become available this late in the season and his days as a director are over.

All things considered, he comes with her as her luggage. Or her valet.

He amuses himself by throwing parties and taking trips on his motorbike or in one of the four cars standing in the garage: three Packards and a Diana, which he only bought for sentimental reasons because of the name of his daughter. Now the war is over he should go and visit her in Paris.

When they are out in public, the reactions still confirm his celebrity status. Girls are still screaming his name, journalists still want his story and the photographers still want his picture. It is just a matter of being offered the right part in the right movie by the right film company and everything will be back on track.

He just needs to be patient.

He has the growing desire to pry open his marriage and jeopardize it, to liberate himself and drag everything good down with him. Everything that needs to be sacrificed in order to breathe again.

It's not that he doesn't find Geraldine lovable anymore; he doesn't find himself lovable when they are together. How he feels when he is with her: contrite. Because of the way she reads him, opposes him, exposes him, maps him out little by little. Nothing escapes her eye. She digs, points out and eventually lets him get away with the half-truth, but in her eyes he notices she sees right through him. He endures

it like a whipping. A reprimand.

He caught himself on a sweet-smelling flower with pointy leaves. Her appeal to his love doesn't excite feelings of tenderness, but of irritation. Can't she see how different they are? How can she gloss over it? It doesn't seem to stop her from loving him, wanting to embrace him time and again, looking in his eyes, saying how happy she is. It infuriates him.

He has been ignoring his growing aversion for so long that it has become overwhelming.

He sits down behind the desk and starts writing a letter to Stella.

Eventually it does start to rain, softly though. He doesn't put on the raincoat wrapped over his arm. He is almost there, he can already spot the little beach houses. His feet are sinking in the shifting sand. He can hear the continuous rumbling and splashing of the ocean. He parked his car a little further away from the Santa Monica Boulevard, so it won't attract attention. It should be the third house after this one. That is the house he has rented. There she is waiting for him.

Light is burning in the white wooden house. He walks up the stairs. Stella must have already seen him, because the door swings open and she throws her arms around his neck.

'Whoa,' he laughs, looking around. There is no one to be seen.

Once inside he holds her face between his hands and lets his eyes wander. Her beauty is still innocent, like all young

girls'. An adorableness that doesn't raise any questions.

'I thought you had forgotten me' she says.

'I could never, even if I wanted to,' he says, undoing the buttons of her dress with his fingers.

Him and Geraldine sit down together to have dinner. Just like yesterday, the day before yesterday, last year. The butler enters with the dishes.

Geraldine seems a bit down.

'Are you alright, honey?' he asks. 'How was the preview of your movie?'

She screws up her face.

'Abominable. Not only does it have an absolutely horrible script, which I already realized, but also the photography is turning out to be pretty poor. It is well below my level.'

Below her level. He resents the assumed superiority.

'I have been thinking about it all the way back home and I am going to end my contract with Pathé.

'What?'

'Maybe I will quit making films altogether,' she says.

'And how do you suppose to continue living like this?' He makes a large gesture with his arm.

Geraldine shrugs.

'We'll just move to a smaller house. No payment in the world will persuade me to play in movies that are only getting worse. I would much rather remember *Carmen* or *Joan the Woman*.'

She should have stayed with Goldwyn or, even better, Lasky. She slipped down the ladder because of him. She

doesn't say it, but he can hear it loud and clear.

'What about your fans? They want to see you.'

The amount of stupidity makes her sigh.

'You know I don't create my art for other people.'

'Yes, of course, you live for your art,' he says, his voice breaking. 'You live for yourself. You sing and act for yourself. The world doesn't exist for you. You cannot love real people, your fans.'

'And you are a balloon that needs to be pumped up by others.'

She immediately regrets her outburst, he can see it.

With a squeaking sound he pushes away the chair from the table and gets up. He gives her his most hurt look and stalks off.

He can skip the dinner he didn't want to go to in the first place, and leave for the little house by the sea.

19 Geraldine

My throat is contracting and I need to wait a little before I can speak again.

‘It is always the same woman he is seen with.’

My mother wraps her arm around me and I rest my head on her shoulders like a little girl.

‘Infidelity of the body is a wretched human weakness,’ she says, ‘but not necessarily a reason for making any drastic decisions. Betrayal of the mind is.’

I release myself from her embrace.

‘You have always been against it,’ I say angrily.

‘I have always had a bad feeling about it, but hoped I was wrong,’ she carries on regardless, ‘and it seemed that way for a very long time. What you need to find out now is whether you are the type of woman who can endure the *by-sides* of her husband.’

I try to stop the word from resounding in my head – the word belonging to a marriage breaking up. Because then it will work its way out, then the unthinkable will become thinkable and come into being.

You are like a closed door. I knock on it and sometimes it is slightly ajar, but it never swings completely open anymo-

re, not like it did in the beginning. Hope makes me keep on knocking, keep rattling the doorknob and eventually pushing against it with the weight of my body.

You act kindly to me, but it takes effort and thinking – as if a camera is rolling and you are constantly aware of yourself. I try to feel what you need: not asking too many questions when you are silent, listening when you want to talk, being sexy when you are aroused. Keeping things light, trying not to dig too deeply. The goal is to open the door little by little, unnoticed, and then seize the opportunity – to enter and connect.

It doesn't give me the desired result. Your embraces remain distant, when I tell you something it hardly seems to register with you. Each time disappointment is blowing through my body like a cold gust of wind, lingering in my belly. It makes the corners of my mouth sink and evaporates all lightness in my being – ironically the most unattractive attitude for a lover. It probably only closes you up even more. To make sure you don't notice, I usually turn around.

Your words are meant to cover up the truth. They are exactly the right words, that's not the problem. You talk and think fast. What is the right thing to say? What will soothe her at this moment? When a strategy doesn't seem to work you quietly choose a different approach that sometimes is the complete opposite. Your arguments are inconsistent and contradictory. Like a wet soap bar you are slipping through my fingers.

Your words aren't spoken from the heart, but constructed with the mind. I still value what you say and promise,

you barely do. You forget, it turns out time and again. The words don't sink in, because they aren't carried in the heart.

When you say the things someone wishes to hear, you yourself can't hear what you're saying.

Every trace of affection feels like you are throwing a coin to a beggar. I stoop to pick it up and, like a beggar, am grateful for it. I know it doesn't come easily. You are still prepared to make that effort.

And all that time I keep loving you, more and more vigorously.

My voice has always been the barometer of my moods and constitution, and now that is no different. The opera season at the Metropolitan is in full swing and the stress is affecting my vocal cords. Some arias in *Carmen* and *La Bohème* are becoming difficult to sing. *Zazà* is the only one I can sing effortlessly.

My mother hasn't read anything about it in the papers yet.

Caruso hasn't worked since Christmas Eve due to after-effects of bronchitis and pectoral abscesses. Before he leaves for Naples, I visit him in New York.

I startle when I see him lying on the sofa, white and wearied.

'Dorothy keeps the cigarettes away from me, don't worry,' he says before I have the chance to give him a kiss.

'That saves me a rummage through your house,' I joke.

'How are things at The Met?'

'You are being missed. The audience grumbles when you are replaced by someone else, and we all think it's awfully dull without you.'

'Perfect. The question is: whose arm do you raise now when they raise the curtain, Gerry?'

I smile, but he suddenly looks at me very seriously.

'Are you all right, my dear?'

'Marriage isn't always smooth sailing,' is all I say.

'You can say that again,' he says.

You do whatever springs to mind, whatever gives you pleasure. You are involved in a play on Broadway in some way or another and apparently it is taking up a lot of your time, but you can't exactly explain what position you have there.

You get into bed later and later, often around daybreak, almost when I get up again. Before I go to sleep, I always look at the spot where you are not lying. Sometimes I stretch out across your side of the mattress.

This night I keep tossing and turning, trying to find sleep. I feel the echoes of your breath on my shoulder, which cannot be real because you aren't here. I turn around and there you are. I must have fallen asleep for a while.

'Are you awake?' I whisper.

'Yes,' I hear.

I hold my breath.

'I was dreaming about my father,' you say.

'A bad dream?' I ask.

You say nothing and I snuggle up to you.

‘You can’t hate your father without hating yourself, Lou. Try to forgive him.’

My hand caresses your cheek, my heart fills with love for you, with hope for us.

‘Understand that this is what he was capable of, that it has nothing to do with you. He wasn’t able to love more deeply and generously. In that sense his love was complete.’

You turn towards me and we kiss. I wrap my arms around that tempestuous body of yours and later also my legs. We make love without me feeling greedy, without thinking of everything you don’t tell me.

Tightly embracing a loved one, with open arms. That is what humanity needs to do.

When my obligations during that opera season have come to an end we leave for California, as usually, but without either of us having a film contract. We are calling it a holiday in the uncomfortable knowledge that I, unlike you, am not really used to that.

Without obligations to distract us, the days are dominated by bridging great distances, reconciling differences of opinion or at least accepting them. Our marriage is a wonky animal on the verge of collapsing that in its blindness keeps bumping into walls. Spoken words are prone to be misunderstood, silences are turbulent and every touch is timid.

Is it an animal that needs to be put out of its misery? This I don’t ask myself.

I keep holding on.

My hands have turned to claws.

By the time I sit down for lunch I have already had a busy morning. You just about manage to get out of bed before lunch time, most of the time.

On my plate is a telegram from Mr Gatti. I rip open the envelop while the butler puts the coffeepot on the table.

My eyes are flying over the lines and I put my hand to my mouth.

Caruso is dead.

He died of a lung infection early this morning in a hotel in Naples.

‘What is wrong?’ you ask when you come down.

‘It’s Caruso. He died this morning.’

I speak slowly, as if the words are sticking in my mouth. You drop into your chair, upset.

‘But he wasn’t that ill, was he?’

‘He was recovering from yet another lung operation.’

‘Good lord...’

We look at each other.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ I say. ‘I’m so sorry for you.’

You get up from your chair and go and stand behind me, wrapping your arms around me. Your chin is resting on my head.

‘And I am sorry for you,’ you say, ‘I know how much you adored him.’

‘He was a fine strapping fellow,’ I laugh through my tears.

‘Just like me,’ you say.

This self-knowledge surprises me. You are right: you two

are alike in that respect. Full of life. Guilelessly destructive. No malicious selfishness, but just focused on yourself.

That night, when throughout the world the news of Caruso's death at the age of 48 has sunken in, you have invited people over to remember him. I assumed it would be a quiet and dignified occasion, but when I enter I find the usual, exuberant party.

Prohibition or not, we always have a couple of bottles from the black market at ours. Now the bars are no longer allowed to serve alcohol, our house on the hill is more popular than ever.

The room is drenched in a golden light and filled with cigarette smoke. Someone is playing the piano and people are dancing. Every now and then a shrill laughter rises. A girl, she can't be much older than eighteen, bursts out laughing at the slightest provocation. One of the guests is pouring champagne in glasses that are handed to him laconically.

The appalling superficiality of it all. The futility.

I see you standing in your white costume, clearly drunk, talking to a woman looking at you in adoration. You spread your arms wide open, illustrating something in your story.

A man whom I have seen before, I can't remember where, starts talking to me and I listen with only one ear. I search for your eyes and find them, but they look straight through me. An unfathomable smile is stuck to your face. There is nothing behind it but hollow space.

You have started weighing anchor. Suddenly I can see it very clearly. You are breaking with me like a bad habit.

I apologize to the man and retire upstairs.

I run a bath and climb in. The water is too hot. First I get down on my knees and then, when I can bear it, I lower myself into the water.

The warmth drowns out my bad thoughts, melts them away.

Strangely enough, the illusion I believe in so willingly appears to be strong enough to survive in the battlefield of daily desperation. My hopeful image of our marriage, of how it once was and could be once more, is breaking free from real life, but still persisting.

How vigorously the heart can hold on to a dream, against all odds.

I fall prey to a morbid sensitivity. I am fishing for compliments that give no satisfaction because they are caught in shallow water, I take refuge in distant embraces that give no comfort. Every pebble you give me I use to shore up the illusion wall.

The last bit of doubt vanishes when I receive an envelope with pictures of you and her, embracing, walking in the street, entering a hotel. It is sent by a photojournalist who is giving me a choice: paying a substantial amount of money or watching the whole thing being published.

Through my lawyer, I make sure the photographer signs a contract of silence that very day and I buy him off with a sum that is significantly higher than what the papers will give him.

That night I don't see you anymore, but the next morning I wake you up.

'There is something I want to show you,' I say.

You wipe the sleep from your eyes and sit up straight against the pillows with a look that is both irritated and alarmed.

I hand you the envelope and you look at the pictures, suddenly wide awake.

'And?'

'This proves nothing,' you say.

You are keeping your cards close to your chest.

'Stella is a good friend, we sometimes go for a walk and had a drink in a hotel lobby.'

You continue, unstoppable now.

'I consider the fact that you had me followed as a sign of great distrust.'

'I haven't hired anybody. The envelope was sent by a photographer wanting to earn some money from them. Or do you perhaps want these published, since it is no big deal anyway?'

'I can see what it must look like,' you say, suddenly adopting a conciliatory tone, 'so I don't think that would be desirable. For both of us.'

Your two faces, emerging and subsiding, jingle in front of me like the two bells on a fool's cap. You must know very well that when adultery is proven, the adulterous party has no claim to money or joint property in case of divorce.

'I have always known you were a gambler,' I say with such composure I surprise myself, 'but only now I realize

you are a cheater.’

Your eyes harden and you throw the photos on the bed.
‘This is all completely useless.’

You get up and after a few steps you suddenly turn around.

‘But I want you to know I have been unhappy for years.’

The words keep ringing in my ears and I am left behind with a shattered past. So it is possible: retroactively destroying a complete relationship.

When I get home later that afternoon you are not there and I can sink into a chair unnoticed. I left the incriminating pictures at my lawyer’s office.

Dissolving a marriage is legally possible, but considered morally wrong in the eyes of most Americans. It is a sin. Is staying with a man who doesn’t love you anymore, and who you know is keeping mistresses less sinful?

I write you a note saying that if you do not end the affair with this woman, I see no other option but to ask for a divorce.

Carefully I fold the piece of paper in an envelope, write your name on it and place it on the dresser in the hall.

Love doesn’t stop promptly; love starves. It can only diminish by starvation and rehearsing its death scene over and over again.

You let our love waste away by moving your affection to another, or to God knows how many others. You have turned me into a hunger artist.

It isn't dead yet, you know, our love. Something inside me is still hoping for pleas, apologies, declarations of love. Part of me just wants to scare you with my threat, wake you up, bring you back to me. Another part knows better and chooses the painful truth instead of the languishing, hollow illusion.

Guessing where you are right now doesn't bring me any further, but I can't help doing it.

It has been three days since you must have read the letter, and you haven't been home since, haven't telephoned or replied the letter. You are trying to find salvation somewhere else.

With a woman named Stella, probably.

The daylight is eating away at the curtains, working its way in. The chambermaid enters and draws the curtains when she sees I'm awake. Then she leaves the room without saying a word, her head bowed.

The light is throbbing behind my eyes like a loud drum. The doctor gave me sleeping powder that does make me fall asleep, but gives me a splitting headache when I wake up.

It must be after twelve already.

'Try to get a lot of sleep, darling,' my mother keeps saying. 'Sleep has the wonderful power to put everything back in its right place.'

Sleep should bring oblivion, but even in my dreams my emotions don't let go of me. They force me to wake up because I fear otherwise I will capsize. I woke up like that twice last night, after which I took some more powder.

There is no 'I told you so' coming from my mother's lips, but even more important is that she doesn't want to say it to me either. Not even a tiny bit. She is completely there for me.

I get up with difficulty. My body seems to have a life of its own, with nerves vibrating under the skin and involuntary muscle spasms. My face has turned red and blotchy I notice in the mirror above the wash basin. A blue-white pallor filters through my skin and my cheeks are hollow.

I must have lost a good few pounds.

It doesn't feel like I'm looking at myself when I look in the mirror, not even like I'm the one looking. My body feels like a crypt somebody died in.

Grief pounces on you from behind. Like a coward murderer, it sits in your neck and hangs on your throat. Grief is literally taking my breath away. I am back in New York to rehearse for a new role in my repertoire, Anita, in the classical opera *La Navarraise*, but there doesn't seem to be enough air in my lungs to sing.

Slowly my throat is closing up, a little bit more each day. Breathing out goes fine, but breathing in is becoming somewhat difficult. Why doesn't my body want to breathe in? Is it afraid of bringing in more pain and is it protecting itself?

I can hardly manage focusing on the music of *La Navarraise*. In my head the notes don't turn into music, but remain individual sounds, like letters refusing to form words. I can't get down any of the food my mother brings me, except for soup, which is going down ok. People need to

repeat what they are saying to me before I can hear them.

I can no longer take anything in. The body is closing.

In New York, journalists and photographers are following me even more than in California. The tabloids need to fill their pages. They want to know what I'm eating, drinking, what clothes I'm wearing, what lipstick I'm using.

When I step outside to visit my lawyer, I put on make-up like I am about to perform and am wearing my sable coat and a large hat. That, and my smile, is supposed to mask everything.

'Why isn't Mr Tellegen accompanying you in New York?' a journalist asks. 'Is it true there are marital problems?' another asks.

I pretend I can't hear them, give the photographers one last exuberant smile and bend down to get in the car.

20 Lou

It is already late at night when Lou comes home. On the dresser in the hall a lamp is shining on an envelope with his name on it. He tears it open and reads the lines. Anger is blowing through his body like a cold gust of wind. The nerve. Thinking she can command something like that.

His driver has already gone, so he takes the letter with him and walks to his motorbike standing in the garage. He starts the engine to drive to the beach house he just came from. Stella is probably already asleep.

Surely Geraldine will come round, she is feeling rejected and humiliated right now, but she doesn't want to lose him. He just can't determine whether that is what he wants for himself. Driving away from the house on the hill is giving him a sense of space. It feels like an escape, a breakout.

He reaches Santa Monica, but carries on driving. He wants to go further. Away from the house. Away from his marriage. Away from her. Each yard he is moving him away from all of these things, he feels lighter and more free.

The night is only lit by an almost full moon and there is hardly anyone on the road. He increases his speed. The wind is blowing around him. He is breathing in the fresh air.

Something valuable inside him has been jeopardized. He can't fathom what it is exactly, but being with Geraldine repressed something inside him, confined his life and belittled him. It is now emerging in its full glory.

The dice is rolling. The cards are being reshuffled.

Stella looks at him like he is the answer to all the world's problems, or at least the one who can come up with it. Another young actress he started an affair with, Lorna Ambler, gets out of her other appointments just to see him. With Geraldine, he was more like a member of her royal household.

One should feel invincible with a woman.

He can't dwell on the desperation Geraldine must be feeling right now. He needs distance to break free from her. The distance gained will immediately vanish if he starts worrying about her feelings.

In the heat of being with other women, he tries to scorch the memory of Geraldine lying in his arms, letting go of all control and the satisfaction this gave him. It is difficult to hold on to memories of lust and pain anyway. As time goes by, they fall into pieces, helplessly and relentlessly, and mix with all other passion and pain you felt in your life. Anonymously.

The things that once delighted him, her ambition, her haughtiness, even the way she plans everything, now fill him with disgust. When in love, we are prepared to take a big step towards the other, only to retrace our steps back to ourselves afterwards.

Being in love is the result of the right combination of factors. Mostly these factors remain hidden, somewhere far beyond our understanding, and one day the combination doesn't work anymore.

Love being gone, doesn't mean it was never there. Love is love until it isn't. It is like enduring a rainstorm.

It's an absurd and sentimental notion that true love should last forever.

As soon as Geraldine leaves for a new opera season in New York, he moves into their house on the hill. Not wanting to distress the staff and because Geraldine is still the one paying for everything, he does not invite any women.

Here, in the rooms they decorated together, he constantly feels her presence. A house absorbs its past, but it evidently also holds a future; as is apparent from the conflicting present. The piano is empty without her music scores on it, her side of the bed is empty without her sleeping body. Normally he wouldn't even be here this time of the year.

It is his first autumn on the hill. From one day to the next, or so it seems, the green leaves in the valley have burst into a feast of red, yellow, orange and rusty brown. The day before yesterday, people were still walking in their summer costumes and today they are wearing an overcoat.

Every day he looks out over the valley, seeing how time rushes by, observing the rapidly fading colors, and the thickening blanket of leaves on the ground, everything constantly changing, nothing taking a rest.

Without putting up a fight, he resumes his old gambling

habit. There turn out to be plenty of places in Los Angeles to play baccarat or poker. When his cash has evaporated, he starts signing promissory notes and eventually signs every miserable obligation that is put in front of him.

He is avoiding his thoughts. When he isn't sleeping, partying or visiting women, he numbs himself with alcohol. He also drinks in the company of others, but when he is alone he keeps on drinking till he reaches a state of sleep bordering on unconsciousness. The next day, he dulls the shame with the same remedy that caused it, bringing new shame that needs to be dispelled.

Alcohol affects everything, when intoxicated as well as hungover. It tempers the senses and the mind. It covers up and brings order. Moreover, you can always depend on it: the effect is predictable. When the first signs of drunkenness set in, he can relax.

His failure, the breakdown of this second marriage and failing to remain faithful, all turn to rage directed at her. He is furious she turns out not to be the woman he needs beside him, that she always kept on prodding, stirring and fishing for something to her liking, demolishing him bit by bit, till almost nothing remained of him. It overpowers all shame and guilt.

Is it my fault I lost interest? Lovers simply don't really talk to each other, but to masked versions. The image we have of the other is based on the assumptions we had in the beginning of the relationship, on the spell evoked by mystery

and unapproachableness. It is a *commedia dell'arte*. When the masks fall or when you start to see behind them, the curtain drops. And then you have to wait and see if love is still there.

Things are rarely logical. And if they are logical, they are probably made up.

He hasn't told his old mother about the marital problems yet. She asked about Geraldine in her last letter, but he wrote back to her about other things, circling around the subject. His father, were he able to witness the failure on the other side, probably wouldn't be very surprised.

With Geraldine having left, fame also seems to have abandoned him. The telephone never rings and there aren't any new projects on the horizon. Every night he sinks away in unsettled dreams and every morning the day seems rough and pointless, devoid of all sparkle.

It is never as dark before your eyes as after looking into a Klieg light and stepping off the set, back into normal life.

'After an annulment, all claims ex-partners could make against each other become invalid,' one of his three lawyers says.

The man deeply inhales the cigarette smoke into his throat and ostentatiously blows it out again. Then he points to the papers from Geraldine's lawyers.

'We therefore recommend to go along with Miss Farrar's wishes and annul the marriage, and we would advise you to ask for a divorce.'

His gaze is wandering to the window where outside a young woman with a child is walking on the other side of the road. The little boy is holding her hand, naturally, innocently.

‘It is clear Miss Farrar wishes to end the marriage as quietly as possible,’ continues one of the other advisers, ‘and if you aim for a divorce, which would bring quite some unpleasant publicity, she is probably easily tempted to a settlement.’

She has plenty of money. Only a little of it will pay off his gambling debts.

The media get wind of it and he doesn’t do anything to reduce the commotion. He talks to journalists, poses for photographers with a fitting, modest smile and chooses his words carefully. He makes sure he only speaks about Geraldine with respect so that nothing can be held against him.

Bad publicity is publicity nonetheless, as he learnt from Sarah. It adds to your reputation and therefore also to your name. Geraldine hasn’t publicly commented on it whatsoever, she probably thinks herself above it, so he can just as well use the press interest for his own good: putting him back on the map. She has plenty of work, but he is in need of a new film contract.

Now his name regularly appears in the national papers, he is receiving offers from all over the country. With a sense of irony, he chooses a leading part in the play *Don Juan*, and changes Hollywood for New York again.

The yellow press is publishing articles about every detail

of his life. They write how much money he spends and in what shop and on what product, where he has a night out, and with whom. Every suspicion regarding the reason of their break-up, mainly him being unfaithful, and every new development in the divorce case is widely reported, alternated with rumors of a possible reunion.

Meanwhile, Geraldine's lawyers hand him papers forbidding him to, under no circumstances, go near the house of Miss Farrar or to get in touch with her in any way. Like that is something he wants.

The public splits up into two camps: the Gerry Flappers and the Lou Lovers.

Lou Lovers are saying Geraldine focused too much on her career and apparently didn't know how to keep him satisfied, forcing him to find salvation with other women. Gerry Flappers are calling him an adulterous rotter or worse.

If he gives a girl like that a little attention in real life, she often rapidly softens. Nothing gives him more satisfaction than taking one to a hotel room and turning her from a Gerry Flapper into a Lou Lover.

He walks into the courtroom, flanked by his lawyers. They spread their folders out on the table. His vision is still blurred with dark spots, created by the flashes of the photographers on the stairs leading to the courthouse. Geraldine and her advisors are sitting on the other side of the aisle. She ignores his eyes, staring ahead of her.

She is sitting straight backed and with her chin up, like

the queen he knows, but this queen is battle-weary. Her eyes have lost their shine and her face has become thin. He registers it all with a strange combination of pity and satisfaction. Seeing her up-close now, he is suddenly surprised by how hostile things have become between them.

There is an awkward silence all around. The members of the jury are called in and take their seat. Everybody rises when the judge enters.

He doesn't flinch during the whole hearing, even when Geraldine's lawyers – as was expected – bring up Stella Larrimore, complete with the incriminating pictures he already knows. His lawyers got Stella to agree with testifying, under oath, that she is innocent of the crime she is charged with. As an actress, she will probably be very convincing.

Geraldine's lawyer calls a private detective as a witness. The man testifies he has seen Lou spending many hours in Stella's apartment on Riverdale Drive, and one time staying for the entire night. He describes an intimate scene between him and Stella on a bench in Riverside Drive Park and shows pictures of it.

Lou sees his lawyers shuffling their papers, but they don't raise an objection.

'We will reconsider whether it is wise to call Stella,' one of them says during a break, 'or whether it will only make you look untruthful.'

The following day, newspaper headlines around the world are reading 'First hearing in Farrar's divorce case'. In America, court records are open to the public and press, just

like the hearings.

Everything is spelled out to the finest detail. Including the fact he accused Geraldine of throwing herself into her roles and becoming neurotic and hyper-temperamental and impossible to live with, and that 'Miss L.' officially denied the accusations. This is followed by accusations against Lorna Ambler, with whom he enjoyed a month of fun in a beach house in Long Beach, and those against Miss Clifford from San Francisco. Geraldine's lawyers present pictures that are so explicit, the judge has to ask the press and audience to temporarily leave the courtroom.

The three names and pictures are enough to continue the divorce proceedings. Both agree to a temporary divorce, awaiting the lawsuit.

21 Geraldine

After the last note on the opening night of *La Navarraise*, on the 30th of November 1921, I quickly make my way to the wings and start to tremble uncontrollably. I can hear the applause and see the others getting ready to take a bow. I can't stay here. I grab the arm of my co-star and keep a firm grip while I appear in front of the audience with a stiff smile.

In my dressing room the trembling becomes worse. I must have kept all the tension in the rest of my body in order to sing and keep my throat open.

With the excuse that I'm not feeling well, I skip the opening night party.

The reviews for *La Navarraise* are a bit tepid. People agree that Emma Calvé's interpretation of Anita was better than mine, dramatically as well.

'Consistent and dramatically effective', my mother reads delightedly from an article she brought along for me. Apparently that is the best they have to say about it.

I never have demanded perfection from myself as far as singing is concerned, but I did when it came to acting. This sorrow, which I don't see ending any time soon, is standing between me and my role, between me and the audience. It

is making me stiff and uninventive because I have to pull out all the stops just to sing.

Consistent and effective. I can't imagine any qualifications worse than that.

I forgot you were a boxer once.

You are treating the divorce proceedings like a fight, standing in the ring with bare fists. You only come closer to throw a punch. You are able to take a defeat only to seize a chance in the next round again.

I thought you would go about it like an actor, like you did in our marriage: exploratory, talking, cunningly wriggling yourself out of your own words, creating something together because you know we are dependent on each other in how things come to an end.

In the court room you claim I turned out to be unfit as a peaceful and loving wife in real life. The addition of 'in real life' is what hurts me most. What I hear is: you are a successful artist, but you failed as a human being. You are unfit for love and perhaps also for life.

I have to face the demons. The fear, the despair, the shame and the self-reproach, the rage of love scorned. I'm finally able to cry and, little by little, I feel it all disappearing, as if everything is in the tears themselves.

In a way it is very pure, that deep sorrow. It opens you up, and you shed something. What is underneath, however, is cleaner. It is closer to who you really are.

It's not the emotions that get me on my knees. Every

time I let them in and allow them to rage out, those demons shrink a little more into angels, cherishing and embracing me. They are of service to me. No, the thoughts are far worse. The endless circle of thoughts is driving me insane.

‘You have to come back’ is one of those thoughts. ‘You won’t make it without me.’ ‘How can you suddenly be so heartless?’ And: ‘Why do you throw away what we have, just like that?’

Each time, my brain comes up with suitable solutions, as if I’m able go back to the crossroads where it was still possible to turn the tide or take a different direction. It thinks it can retroactively fix things, to create a better past and enforce a different present.

When you are in love and this love is requited, everything seems to work. When love dies, you are thrown upon an imperfect, backward reality of ‘if only’ and ‘why’. If only I had done a little less of this and a little more of that? Would you perhaps not have turned away from me then? If, then. If, then. I feel as if I’m doomed to go through all unused possibilities and unseized opportunities for eternity.

Normally I feel like my life is one big journey, waving goodbye to people and moments on my way. Now I feel like standing still and life is passing through me. I can’t take a step forward, I feel petrified, merely undergoing things. Time hasn’t changed, the hours, the weeks merging into each other, but the movement is different. I am no longer walking through the days. The days are falling over me.

At certain hours, I don’t do anything but pacing up and

down. I walk through my house, picking up things along the way to smash, changing my mind and putting them down again. I slap my forehead with the palm of my hand. My throat is slammed shut. I cannot scream, cannot wail, cannot cry audibly.

I walk to the kitchen to get the bread knife. The heat needs to be released. Purposefully, I place the blade in the skin of my lower arm. It feels cold, the skin is shrinking. I push. The skin yields. The sight of my arm fascinates me, the desire to see blood surprises me. If I push any harder, the skin will crack.

I freeze and my grip on the knife is weakening. I look away. The spell is broken.

The yellow press is following me everywhere now and waits outside my house, the Metropolitan, my lawyer's office, the court house and with my driver. The press hounds aim their flashes at me – not the opera star, but the private person – and increase the wattage.

It is all out there on the streets. Newspaper headlines go back and forth between a possible reunion and news from the court room proving the marriage is a wreck. Each article contains just as much malicious lies as it does facts. I see my mother's hands tremble when she is reading the newspaper articles, my colleagues at The Met tell me about the ludicrous rumors that apparently are circulating, I can feel the excitement in the air when I come on stage in the opera hall. An excitement that isn't without sensationalism.

‘Of course the public wants to know everything about you,’ Emma says when I express my surprise at all the attention. ‘After all these years, you have acquired a place in their conscience, they have seen and heard you so many times they feel like they know you personally. They project things onto you, in their heads they make you bigger, stronger and more beautiful than you really are.’

She puts her teacup on the table.

‘And on top of everything, you go and marry ‘the great lover’. When a marriage that appears to be made in heaven fails, it is a source of excitement for people, and perhaps also something to gloat over. It proves that success, fame and wealth can’t protect you from misfortune. In a way, that probably is a comforting thought.’

‘Glad to be of help,’ I say cynically.

‘Oh Gerry, it’s not about what they say about you. It’s about whether you listen to it.’

That brings a smile to my face.

‘I have never been a woman living in the shadow of her reputation,’ I say confidently. ‘And I do not wish to become one now.’

‘Farrar *fará*,’ Emma says.

The court case is becoming more vicious. Like in a trench war, we attack each other, each time with even heavier artillery, without forcing a breakthrough. It is clear you want to claim as much of my fortune as possible.

You have no trouble receiving from women, it does not jeopardize your masculinity. Why did I allow myself to for-

get that?

When extramarital relations have taken place within the marital home, the court would immediately grant a divorce. It doesn't look like you are guilty of that or that my lawyers will be able to collect evidence for it. It is impossible to say how long this court case will drag on, but it looks like it's going to be a long one. It's like you are trying to wear me out and break my spirit.

Only when my lawyers bring up your criminal record in France, things finally start to move a little faster.

Eventually, although now I know it will take another two years, the judge will decide in my favor and grant the divorce without me having to pay you any large amounts of money.

During a performance of *La Navarraise*, I take all your accusations and threats, all the stress around our divorce, with me on stage. I do not sing from the heart, with spontaneity and a desire to play, but from experience and with discipline.

The audience, showing unabated enthusiasm, give me a round of applause and I leave the stage well before it fades away.

You cannot take art away from me, I won't allow it. In your eyes I may be unfit as a wife, but I will not fall short as an artist. My love for opera, the ultimate and most sublime, hybrid art form, is so big I am prepared to let it go, now that I cannot give it my best.

Without much hesitation, I take my decision. When it

comes to singing I always know what to do. Mr Gatti, other members of the company and my mother are filled with surprise and horror. They all try to change my mind, but my mind is made up.

On the 19th of January 1922, I publicly announce my departure from the Metropolitan.

I retire at the age of forty.

We all have a house of the future, where the life still ahead of us is taking place the way we imagine it. We don't have the key yet, but we already move in, decorate the rooms, see ourselves walking around them. It is very realistic, but it isn't real.

When the house falls apart before our eyes, we are angry and sad because it doesn't meet our expectations. Sometimes, when our lover runs away or someone hurts us, we can put the blame on that person. The other has willfully avoided fate and deprived us of something.

Truth is that we don't know. There is no established destination or predetermined plan. There is only reality. It doesn't matter how things could have gone, how we feel things *should* have gone. The only thing that matters is how things *did* go.

Love scoffs at our agreements. It doesn't care about the iron discipline we think can control it, its burden of high expectations, how we adorn it with decorations.

Love doesn't feed on hope or expectations. Love only feeds on love.

Towards the ending of *Zazà*, my farewell concert at The Metropolitan Opera House on April 22nd 1922, it is impossible to walk across the stage without stepping on flowers. And people keep on throwing them. One of the bouquets lands on the head of baritone Giuseppe De Luca, but fortunately he can laugh about it. He has long since dropped the idea of a normal performance.

In the middle of a scene, a girl from the audience comes up to the front edge of the stage to offer me a tiara and a scepter. If I take them, the performance will be truly over, but when I look at her delighted and hopeful face, I have no choice. I bend over and accept them from her. When I put the crown on my head and hold the scepter in my hand, the audience starts to cheer. A little later the American flag is placed on stage in a stand.

When the final curtain falls and we go back on, I see a mass of faces around the stage. Hundreds of Gerry Flappers have come to the front, screaming 'bravo', crying, calling out my name. They are holding banners saying 'Hurrah, Farrar!' and 'None but you'.

I did not want to have a traditional farewell and insisted that Mr Gatti wouldn't present me with a public laudation by the management, an official farewell dinner, golden wreaths, goblets, dishes or other mementos. Instead, we agree I get the privilege to deliver my own farewell speech.

I raise my arms and the house becomes silent.

'Twenty years ago I hoped and prayed I would achieve something,' I say, 'that someday I would attain a position as a singer in my own country, but I never expected any-

thing like this. There are two people down there in a corner, probably shedding a tear right now, who gave everything to let me have my start, and I think their parent's hearts are proud of this moment.'

People cheer.

'I do not want to have a single tear in the house today.'

'I can't help it, I already wept bushels,' a Flapper Girl cries and the crowd roars with laughter.

'I may be saying farewell to this institution, but I do not say farewell to you,' I say. 'These have been sixteen years of happiness, such great happiness that if I should die tonight, I wouldn't regret it. I love you all dearly.'

For a moment I can't hear myself for all the professions of love.

'But we are all weary and we must say goodbye.'

The curtain falls.

Behind the curtain, everyone embraces and kisses me, from the management to the errand boys.

'40th Street is filled with people between Broadway and Eighth Avenue,' Emma says to me. 'They are waiting for you!'

I get changed and do not bother to remove my make-up.

When I step outside, with the tiara on my head and the scepter in my hand, I see a crowd of Gerry Flappers and older fans, and policemen trying to contain them. People are standing on fire escapes, throwing bouquets and strings of ribbon. Banners are reading 'Always with you' and 'We love you'. The traffic cops have given up keeping a lane

through it. Everything is standing still.

I am helped into a car and the large American flag is draped over the hood. A rope has been attached to the front of the car. Some enthusiastic stagehands are apparently planning to pull me all over Broadway, like they used to do in New York with barouches.

The driver toots the horn and off we go in a trailing procession of singing, cheering, screaming and weeping fans, two blocks long.

In my mind you are sitting next to me, alternately looking at me and waving at the crowd.

For a long time, people keep doing things together when they are on their own.

Geraldine

Hollywood, 1936

Since the news of your death, I no longer turn away from you, but towards you, so I won't collapse under the mess you made.

I stitch you back together in my writing. Breathe back life into you. Build you back up like I think you were, with emotions I suspect you had and words I remember you saying. I play with time, embellish, paint in, paraphrase, imagine and remember. This time with clarity of mind, not the blurred eyes of someone in love or recently abandoned. I write with what I know and have come to accept.

Like this, this way, things must have gone.

You, the deceased, are unaware of this book. Your eyes will never read these words, but somehow I do hope its meaning will reach you in some way or another. Deep inside, I want to show you who I really am, make you feel my devotion so the rest doesn't matter anymore.

Ultimately, I am still trying to make you love me.

One doesn't need to search for the past. It is waiting for us, quietly. Every time we pay it a visit, we also leave something behind. Something fake. Taken from the present.

As time goes by, there are fewer people to dispute our version. The past becomes a story. It takes on a life of its own as a cohesive and logical whole. The things that do not make the story are doomed to disappear, to sink into the oblivion of our head and heart.

I am now entering the state of forgetting and depicting we call 'remembering'. Every time I pick up my pen, I fall through time and I am back, with you, my love.

Looking back, I realize how little I knew of myself, of life. Now that I'm older, at 52, I understand so much more.

I wanted to be appreciated, on stage and by you as my lover. Now I know: one should learn to appreciate oneself.

My opera life consisted of rehearsing, trying my best, giving my all, with the private safety of an opera hall as my reward, a place where I dared to unfold myself. I never really cared about applause, not like you, but preferred the silence in a performance, more than I dared to admit in those days. Contained in that silence, being the focus of it, I felt safe.

There are no guarantees in love or performing arts. The stage is yours until the next young star takes it, a lover holds you in his arms until the eyes wander and the heart makes room for another.

After the divorce and my retirement, I learned how to abide in a quiet room inside myself. At first sight, the room ap-

pears to be empty, but when you enter, the walls turn out to be made of gold, there are doors leading to new spaces and windows with light beaming through, it has a sturdy floor that will never collapse under your feet and no ceiling, because it reaches to the sky. That is the room you are vainly trying to find in the embrace with another person, in being acknowledged and loved.

In that room I now spend most of my time. Free of yearning and living on the love flowing through me, a love that belongs to no one, not even to me, and especially not to someone special. I can send it to what or who I want and feel it glowing inside me. Nothing is lost when you are still capable of loving.

I have become a person who is content to be with herself.

And with my cats, I must admit. My long-haired, Persian cats. All right, I have become a cat lady.

The embodiment of my comfort is lying in front me. Through these letters, I have been able to talk to you.

Perhaps you were right in thinking our characters were so completely different that it was impossible to close the gap. You were a fortune hunter and I am a truth seeker. You pursued happiness and I don't rest until I know the truth. We aim for different layers in life. You cared about how things appeared, I only care about how things are, no matter how painful or unpleasant.

To me, art is a way of connecting to the truth, for you it was a way to be visible. I live from the inside out, you lived from the outside in.

We could never be allies, because we were playing a different game. Sitting together at a gaming table was impossible, not as teammates, not even as opponents.

People say you must have taken leave of your senses when you did it.

I think you never were more clear-headed.

I don't regard your decision as proof of regret or a profession of love. It had nothing to do with my love, but with love for the world. You decided to give up the life still ahead of you, an existence without millions of eyes focused on you. Your fame had been reduced to old celluloid strips, it was overtaken by technology, a different taste, new heroes. The immortality of film turned out to be rather short-lived.

You already died a public death: years after the commotion surrounding the divorce and even before your last movie the press had enough of you.

They say you were looking quite smart when they found you. You probably directed it that way.

Great stars are always remembered the way they looked in their heyday. That is the picture they print next to the obituary, not the one of the old turkey. Public condolences and well-attended ceremonies follow and after that they can file them away in the archives like a legend.

Only when we die, we truly become an object. We forever turn into other people's perceptions. We solidify.

Your death didn't mean you would disappear, it meant you became visible again.

You stood in front of the wash basin in the room you rented for free from a rich widow, one of your most loyal fans. Through the window, on the hill in the distance, you could see our old mansion on Hollyridge Drive, where now new owners were living.

You were clean-shaven, had combed your hair, put on your silk dressing gown and powdered your face as if you were about to perform. You placed a cushion on the cold floor tiles, where your head would land when you fell.

You picked up your golden scissors.

Maybe you had your father in mind, running barefoot toward the enemy to a certain death. You choose, you act, you are not a victim. You are the one throwing yourself at the enemy's sword, instead of letting yourself be butchered by him.

You didn't inflict yourself as many stabs as your father must have taken. Seven in the chest, of which two in the heart, did the trick.

You will walk up the stairs. With the sound of your footsteps, an involuntary sigh will escape from my lips because you are about to join me. The cord of my desire will somewhat loosen, because soon you will be lying next to me.

I will turn around, you will slide your arm underneath my head. I place my hand on your chest, rising and falling with your breath. Your heart is beating underneath the palm of my hand. My lips seek the warm skin of your neck. Your hand is slowly caressing my spine.

We stay like this, two pieces of a puzzle, interlocking,

each other's perfect opposite.

Epilogue

Lou Tellegen (born on the 26th of November 1883 in Rooi, the Netherlands) married to his co-star in *Blind Youth* in December 1923, days after he officially divorced Geraldine. She was the young actress and rich heiress Isabel Craven Dilworth, who gave herself the stage name Nina Romano. They kept their marriage a secret from the press for eighteen months and had a son called Rex. That same year, Lou signed a film contract with The American Vitagraph Company, where he made six films with varying degrees of success. After that, he signed with the Fox Film Corporation. He no longer played the romantic hero – because they thought he was too old for that – but the villain.

In 1928, he divorced Nina, who felt he neglected her, and his career went downhill. Film roles didn't come his way and the movie he directed, *No Other Woman*, wasn't even released by Fox. He turned his back to Hollywood and went to New York. He travelled the country with vaudeville companies and met his fourth wife during one of the tours: chorus girl Eve Casanova.

Around Christmas 1929, Lou stayed in a hotel room in Atlantic City and fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth. The bed caught fire and he was taken into hospital with se-

vere burns. After his recovery in 1931 he wrote his memoirs, *Women Have Been Kind*, with facts, half-truths and fabrications. The American author Dorothy Parker jokingly called it *Women Have Been Kind of Dumb*, referring to all the women who helped him in his life and ended up disappointed.

In 1931, when Lou was in his late forties, he was one of the first men to undergo a facelift in the hope of securing a part in the talking picture *Enemies of Law*. He didn't get the role, partly because of his Dutch-French accent. With the arrival of talking pictures, his career seemed doomed. From that moment onwards, the press was calling him 'old and weary' or ignoring him. He tried to find happiness in gambling, alcohol and adultery, and again his marriage failed.

In 1934, he was diagnosed with cancer and had three operations. Completely bankrupt, he again let himself be saved by a woman: the rich widow Edna Cuhady. She allowed him to stay for free in one of the luxurious rooms in her big mansion on North Vine Street.

This woman was the one who found him, together with her butler, shortly after Lou had decided to take his life. He was lying in a pool of blood, surrounded by his scrapbooks. Next to him were the scissors he used to stab himself in the heart – some people say it was a golden pair, engraved with his name, scissors he used to cut out all the reviews of his plays and film parts. He was still alive, but unconscious. He was urgently taken into hospital, where he died the next day at the age of 52.

Eve Casanova did not come to claim his body at the mortuary because of 'theatre obligations' and didn't attend

the funeral at the Edwards Brothers Chapel in Venice Beach, Los Angeles. Geraldine and his first wife Jeanne de Brouckère together with his daughter Diane, also didn't come over, but his third wife and mother of his son Rex did, arm in arm with her new husband. A small group of photographers and fans was standing outside the chapel. A few weeks later, his ashes were scattered into the Pacific Ocean.

His death was widely covered by the media. 'He was born for tragedy', read *The New York Times*. *The Los Angeles Times* wrote: 'Lou Tellegen, once the idol of theatre visitors from all over the world and ex-husband of Geraldine Farrar, dramatized his final act like he was on stage or in front of a camera.'

Many people, including his grandson James, claimed his suicide was a last attempt to become a legend.

In 2016 the sculpture 'Eternal springtime' by Auguste Rodin, for which Lou said he posed, sold for 20.4 million dollars at an auction in New York, a record price for a work by Rodin.

Rexford Tellegen, Lou Tellegen's son, was a large, strong and rather stand-offish man. During the Second World War he was the commander of a battleship in the Pacific Ocean. After the war, he designed psychological tests for traumatized soldiers. Suddenly he disappeared into thin air. His son James Danneskiold, Lou Tellegen's grandson, suspects his father killed himself, but the body was never found.

Diane, Lou's daughter from his marriage with Jeanne de Brouckère, grew up in Paris with her mother. There is no information about the rest of her life.

Geraldine Farrar (born on the 28th of February, 1882 in Melrose, Massachusetts), after leaving the Metropolitan, threw herself into an intense farewell tour with a modern adaptation of *Carmen*, for which she wrote the English libretto herself. The tour lasted for two years and was a great success, artistically as well as financially. During one of her performances she was called back home because her mother died unexpectedly. In the night of January the 24th, 1923, **Henrietta Barnes Farrar** had fallen asleep in the arms of her husband and softly passed away. Despite her grief, Geraldine fulfilled her contractual obligations 'because that's what her mother would have wanted'.

Near exhaustion, she regained her strength in the years after her farewell tour in her father's spacious farmhouse in Ridgefield in the Connecticut countryside. She renamed the house Fairhaven, after the safe haven she longed for so much. She refused every interview. In 1932, she permanently retired from the concert stage and never sung for an audience again, only among friends.

At the end of the 1930's, Geraldine cleared the way for opera singers of African-American descent. She protested against discrimination and made an effort for the young black soprano Camilla Williams to start off her career and acted as her mentor.

She spent her days gardening, travelling, taking care of

her dogs and cats, corresponding with friends and visiting the theatre and opera houses. Furthermore, she composed and arranged songs and wrote her autobiography *Such Sweet Compulsion*. During the Second World War, she translated the correspondence between soldiers and their non-English speaking (or -writing) parents for the American Red Cross and was actively involved in other charities.

At the age of 85, Geraldine died of a heart attack in her farmhouse in Ridgefield. She was buried with her parents in Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, New York

‘Art offers no crown for mediocrity,’ she wrote in her memoirs, ‘art is about inspiration, emotion and poetry: it demands sacrifices and pain that determine its glory, and one’s soul knows what price one is prepared to pay for it.’

Sidney Douglas Farrar, Geraldine’s father, was a Major League Baseball player from 1883-1890 and for that reason – and because of his famous daughter – remained a public figure in America throughout his life. After the death of his wife in 1923, he travelled a lot with Geraldine, even abroad, to see her perform. For his seventieth birthday Geraldine organized a gala at the farm in Ridgefield, inviting all his old friends from his golden days.

Sid Farrar died on the 7th of May, 1935 in New York City, a few months after an unsuccessful operation. Farrar Lane in Ridgefield is named in his honor.

Auguste Rodin continued to work as a sculptor and exhibited his work till the end of his life. He married his lifelong

companion **Rose Beuret** by the end of 1916 when she was terminally ill, only a few weeks before her death. Rodin himself died in November 1917 in Meudon. The studio in Paris where he worked during his final years now houses the Rodin Museum.

Isadora Duncan opened her own ballet school in Paris after Lou disappeared from her life. She challenged the morality of her age by openly being bisexual, having two children born out of wedlock and leaning towards communism. During her relationship with Lou, Isodora allegedly had a relationship with the female dancer Mata Hari. Moreover, there were rumors about a romantic affair between Duncan and Eleonora Duse, but they never confirmed this themselves.

In September 1927, she met her death when the long, silk scarf she wore around her neck became entangled in one of the open-spoked wheels while driving away in an open car. She is considered one of the founders of modern dance.

Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia became an army officer in 1907 and was a convinced nationalist until 1914. He headed the Verdun Offensive during the First World War, but left the rest of the military operations to his Chief of Staff and devoted his time to seducing French girls. On the 13th of November 1918, he and his father, the emperor, fled to The Netherlands by the same route as Geraldine. The Dutch Queen Wilhelmina allowed them to stay in a vicarage in the isle of Wieringen. The marriage between Wilhelm and Cecilie only existed on paper: she refused to join him

in Wieringen along with their children, and Wilhelm had countless affairs. On December 1st, 1918, he signed the document of abdication.

In 1923, after his exile, he returned to Germany but he and Cecilie continued to live apart. Because in the 1930's Hitler promised him to restore the monarchy, he publicly supported the Nazis. When in 1935 the Führer outlawed all monarchist organizations, Wilhelm realized a new empire was out of the question and turned away from the Nazis. When Russian armies drew closer to Berlin in 1945, he had to flee from Berlin with nothing more than a few suitcases. Wilhelm died of a heart attack in 1951, Cecilie died three years later.

Sarah Bernhardt died in harness indeed, in between takes of the movie *La Voyante* that was being filmed in her spacious house. Suffering from kidney failure, her body gradually weakened by blood poison. On March the 26th, 1923, after shooting a scene, a few strong men carried her to her bedroom where she was found dead a few hours later.

Her funeral was one of the grandest in history. Tens of thousands walked in the procession leading from the church of Saint François de Sales to her resting place on Père-Lachaise. For a moment, the crowd stopped outside the Sarah Bernhardt Theatre.

Lou was one of the pallbearers. When the coffin was lifted, he backed away and briefly hid his face in his hands.

Lilli Lehmann continued teaching until her death. Her book *Meine Gesangkunst* is still a leading work in the field of vocal techniques, and in Salzburg the Lilli Lehmann Medal, a prize named in her honor, is still regularly awarded to people who made a great contribution to classical music. She died in Berlin in 1929.

Emma Eames and Geraldine remained friends throughout their lives, even though Emma lived in Paris for a long time. In 1936, she moved back to New York City, where she gave singing lessons and frequently visited the theatres on Broadway. She died in 1952, after a protracted illness.

Arturo Toscanini remained married to his wife until her death in 1951, despite multiple extramarital affairs on his side. He conducted the New York Philharmonic from 1926 until 1936 and briefly returned to Europe, only to emigrate to the United States permanently in 1938, because of the ever-growing Nazism and the admiration of Mussolini. He continued conducting for radio-broadcasts until he was very old.

He died at home on the 16th of January, 1957, at the age of 89 in The Bronx, New York City. According to his last wishes, his body was returned to Italy and buried in Milan.

Giulio Gatti-Casazza remained general manager of The Metropolitan Opera House until 1935. In 1928 he divorced his first wife, a soprano, and married a dancer. He spent the last years of his life in his native Italy. He died in 1940, in

the Italian city of Ferrera.

Samuel Goldwyn continued to build on his movie imperium. In 1925, ten years after divorcing the mother of his daughter, he married an actress and they had a son together. He created the roaring lion trademark, that after a merger continued to be used by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). Before the merger, Goldwyn had already withdrawn to focus on high budget quality movies. In the 1980's, the Samuel Goldwyn Studio was sold to Warner Bros.

Goldwyn died in 1974 at the age of 94, at home in Los Angeles. A theatre in Beverly Hills was named in his honor and he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

After Geraldine's divorce from Lou, Samuel Goldwyn said to her: 'On the silver screen he didn't play opposite you, but against you.'

Jesse Louis Lasky ran into financial difficulties during the Great Depression. His film company went into receivership and for a while he produced films together with Mary Pickford. In 1945 he founded his own production company again. He died of a heart attack in Beverly Hills at the age of 77. Lasky Drive in Beverly Hills was named in his honor and he has a star on the Walk of Fame.

Cecil Blount DeMille was the first director to become a celebrity in his own right. 'All right mister DeMille, I'm ready for my close-up,' actress Gloria Swanson says in the final minutes of *Sunset Blvd.* (1950). It became an iconic

movie quote.

In 1928, DeMille signed a contract with MGM and his first talking picture was a film where he employed moving cameras, something that had never been done before. He travelled around Europe and the Soviet Union to learn new cinematographic techniques and hosted a radio show about films. He made a total of seventy features, both silent and sound films. After his last film in 1956, he continued developing scripts.

He died of a heart attack in 1959 at the age of 77. He had been married for almost sixty years and left behind a wife, a daughter and three adopted children. DeMille is considered the founder of the movie industry in Hollywood and the most commercially successful producer-director in film history.

Interview by *Het Parool*

'This is the tragedy of successful women'

By Maxime Smit (24-09-2016)

Lou Tellegen. Never heard of him? He was one of the first Hollywood stars and he was Dutch. It is said that the Oscar winning film *The Artist* is loosely based on his life.

These days hardly anyone knows Tellegen, but the new historical novel by Susan Smit is about to put an end to that. In *The First Woman* Smit wrote down the story of Tellegen and his big love: the American opera singer and Hollywood star Geraldine Farrar.

How did you find this story?

‘When I’m looking for a new subject for my novel – in history because that’s my genre – there is an atmosphere I’m searching for. This time it was that of the 1910, 1920 era. I started thinking about French actress Sarah Bernhardt, because she has ancestors from the Jordaan (at that time a working-class area of Amsterdam). But that story goes so far back; it would end up being a big epos. During my

research I stumbled upon Lou. Then I thought: Lou, from Brabant (a southern province of Holland) and the biggest Hollywood star of his time? Why was I unaware? That's when I realised I had found my subject.

Smit wants to write from the psyche of her subjects, but it has to be about real people. The historical novel, where fact and fiction are mixed, offers that possibility. Smit did the same in *Gisèle*, about the artist Gisèle d'Ailly-van Waterschoot, and in *High Tide*, about Smit's great grandmother.

Where do you draw the line between fact and fiction?

'All the facts have to be correct. But what these people said to each other, what they felt and how they made love, that's my interpretation. I do find it very important though to have the feeling: that's the way it must have happened. That's why I start off with a few chapters, throw these away and start all over. Only then do I have the feeling that I know the main characters.'

Love is often central to your books. Why?

Love is a minefield, right? So much of our happiness depends on it. That makes it interesting. You can easily write eight books about Lou Tellegen. I could have covered the time he was a model for the sculptor Auguste Rodin or the time he was touring with Sarah Bernhardt's *troupe*, but I thought: no, Geraldine is my woman. She changed him. But he was also her downfall. She lost her voice, literally.'

Some passages are quite painful. In what way do you use your own experiences?

In this case it was really extraordinary. I've been working on this book for two years. When my boyfriend left me last year, the father of my children, I knew that I would reach the point where Lou left Geraldine. I dreaded writing that, but when the moment came, I was able to describe a rawness I would not have been able to reach otherwise'.

Smit loves wilful women and is a feminist. In that sense it's interesting to know that Geraldine Farrar is one of the first Western feminists. She swore never to get married, cut her hair and had a lot of young fans – flapper girls – aiming for a similar kind of life: the Gerry-flappers. It's all the more interesting that Ferrar should fall for Tellegen.

'Geraldine is a feminist close to my heart' says Smit. 'She celebrated her femininity, was autonomous and creative and said what she thought. Lou on his part was a womanizer and searching for fame and recognition his whole life. His mother was a dancer and had little time for him. As a child he would sometimes be on stage with her and notice that he got love and attention from the audience.'

When Smit writes, she wants to understand why characters act the way they do. Geraldine Farrar for instance drives through Hollywood at one point – and this truly happened – to tear down the posters of a film they did

together. The reason: Just her name was mentioned, not Tellegen's.

'It was out of fear not to eclipse Lou', says Smit. 'That she would emasculate him and loose him. That did happen in fact. It's the tragedy of successful women: they need a strong man beside them'.

For Geraldine Farrar Tellegen was her last love. Do you believe in a big love?

'No, I believe in various people who spend some time with you, in a different manner. The way I saw my family and myself in eternity, that it was self-evident, I don't feel that anymore, though I'm happy with a new boyfriend. Love is finite in most cases. It also has a very pretty and fragile quality. Maybe it makes love even more precious. Geraldine and Lou for instance had a tragic love affair but a beautiful one never the less.'

Biography

Susan Smit (1974) is a writer and a columnist. So far she has written fourteen successful books. She has sold more than 30.000 copies of her novel *Gisèle*.

