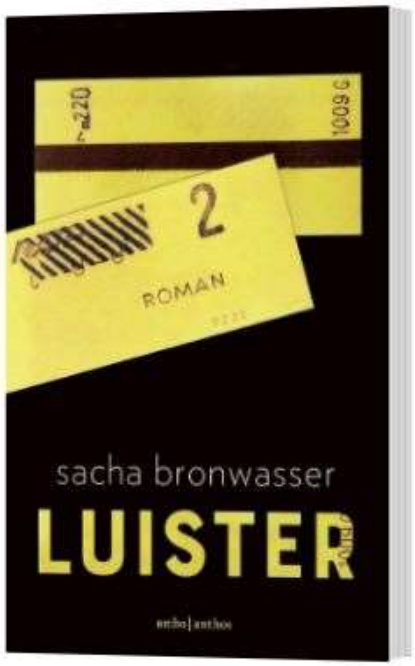
LISTEN

a novel by

Sacha Bronwasser

Sample translation by David Colmer



Pages: 256

ISBN: 9789026352065

Publication date: 8 February 2023

Original language: Dutch

Publisher: Ambo|Anthos

Rights information: Susanne Rudloff srudloff@amboanthos.nl

ambo|anthos uitgevers

Synopsis

In the summer of 1989, Marie, a young Dutch photography student abruptly abandons her studies and leaves for Paris. She finds work as an au pair in a bourgeois family and tries to build herself a new life. The unfamiliar language, the thankless work in a complex family and the imposing, yet merciless city offer the anonymity Marie longs for.

Paris has recently celebrated its bicentenary. Far away in Germany, the Wall is coming down; the world likewise seems to be making a new start. While the family she works for is falling apart, Marie is picking herself up.

Half a lifetime later, Marie is cast back to this time when the news bulletins fill with images of the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, on café terraces and in the Bataclan theatre.

Marie's former photography teacher Flo appears to have been involved in the attacks. Flo, the teacher who formed her. Who taught her the difference between looking and seeing, between observing and telling a new story; who gave her the mental tools to build herself up again. But Flo was also the teacher who flagrantly betrayed her trust and set in motion her flight to Paris. 'Our history was a piece of grit in my shoe that I'd been ignoring, but once I'd removed it, it wouldn't allow itself to be pushed back in again' said Marie.

In Listen, Marie unravels the knot of her coming of age. Throughout, Philippe Lambert, the difficult-to-fathom father of the French family she worked for, turns out to have been the link between the past and present. The violence, whether between individual people or playing out on the streets of the metropolis, likewise was not an isolated phenomenon.

Listen, Sacha Bronwasser's second novel, takes the reader to Paris, both in the 1980s and now, in a hallucinatory search for identity, friendship, guilt and penance.

Listen's structure:

Epilogue Paris, September 2021

Philippe's story 1986

Marie's story 1989

Flo and M 1987-1989

Marie, Philippe 1989-1990

Flo's story 2015

From the Dutch Press:

'Ingenious new novel ... Masterfully constructed. ... A novel that you can only admire. ' – *Trouw*

★★★★★ 'Sacha Bronwasser describes Parisian life irresistibly, in a thought-provoking novel. ... She heightens the tension deftly and with great precision. ... She makes writing look easy, as if her story could logically be told in only one way, exactly the way she tells it. ... It's a rare thing, a book that can be read as simply a 'good read' but with enough in it to make you think.' – *de Volkskrant*

●● ● ● 'Bronwasser has written a highly ingenious novel that is also moving. ... Her inventive second novel tests your patience, but fulfils its spirited promise. ... *Listen* is somewhat reminiscent of W.F. Hermans and Peter Terrin, with its sense of a stalkerish, indefinable foreboding, while the story is nevertheless resolute and evocative, and told in a way that definitely rewards the reader. ' – NRC

★★★★★ 4.5 stars 'Whoever sees can tell. That could be the motto of *Listen*, Sacha Bronwasser's second book. The writer who made a brilliant debut with the highly praised *All They Say Is True* once again grabs her readers by the throat with a meticulously constructed and convincing story that gets under your skin from the very first page. ' – *De Telegraaf*

'You expect a predictable story about abuse of power between teacher and student, but Bronwasser surprises the reader with a different, more multi-layered story, with an interesting structure. ' – *Het Parool*

'When I finished the book I sat for a while in silence, staring ahead. Haunted and moved. So that's possible too; I mean, so that's possible still, in literature. ' – *Kees 't Hart in De Groene Amsterdammer*

About the author:

Sacha Bronwasser is a writer, speaker, art historian and curator, in no particular order. She made her debut in October 2019 with the highly praised *All They Say Is True*. Her stories are published on the art platform *Mister Motley*.

An excerpt from *Listen* - Translated by David Colmer

Paris, September 2021

The news travelled fast, news like that does.

I knew it was about you too the moment the first reports came in from Paris. Almost six years ago now on a Friday the thirteenth. A date like a bad joke.

All sorts of people checked in online as 'safe'. Friends, a niece, a distant relative. People I'd studied with, my own former students. Exhibitors from the photo show, your fellow photographers. Others, vague acquaintances; I was surprised how many people I knew on the fringe of a world event. You were there too, Flo, and your profile stayed quiet. Ominously quiet, as they say.

That night and in the days that followed I studied the videos and news photos. I scrolled through dozens of shots of toppled chairs at outdoor cafés, pavements covered with shattered glass, people in space blankets being carried away on improvised crush-barrier stretchers. Pictures of ambulances and fire engines stranded at odd angles, clusters of police cars. The boulevards, avenues and squares were packed were relief troops but everything was in short supply.

Was this the place and hour? Was that your hair? Were they your long limbs? Your boots? Would I recognise you after all these years, in this setting?

Were you still alive? That was what I should have asked myself first, of course.

'Looking and seeing aren't the same thing,' you taught us long ago when we were still so young. Me, not even twenty; you, not yet thirty. The lecture theatre wasn't darkened like it usually was. You, our lecturer, weren't going to whip up our enthusiasm for a photographer's body of work or the history of the first image, not going to take us on an expedition with a glass plate camera that was being lugged to a distant corner of the world to record the view for the first time in the history of the universe.

No, you were going to teach us what comes first, before a photo. And you were going to do it close to home. The lecture theatre we had been gathering in at a fixed time each week was, at best, a place we had looked at occasionally but probably never seen. It was now going to be our starting point. You asked us to let our eyes roam for fifteen minutes while mentally naming everything. Only after that quarter of an hour was over were we

allowed to take notes: as an exercise it was childishly simple. We did as you asked, we did everything you asked. Back then, ten years' seniority was the difference between duckling and swan. You sat in silence the whole time, staring out through the window, your sharp profile lit by the low autumn sun. With your boots on the table; it was the eighties.

We'd been coming here for months and only now did I notice how everything in the lecture theatre hung, from the sagging venetians with the grimy cords to the listless ceiling panels. Dusty cobwebs swaying between neon lights. We saw and named it all silently, from the gleam on the old lino floor (mustard, dented) to the discoloured plaster moulding between wall and ceiling. Everything condensed and then etched itself into memory like the light on one of the Daguerreotypes you had told us about a few lectures earlier. To this day I can still list those neutral, completely unexceptional details, even the faded cards in the metal slots on the filing cabinet in the corner, sixteen drawers high – and I understood what you were trying to achieve. Someone who sees can tell. And someone who can tell records. We need language to guide our eyes.

Only later did I realise that whatever happened, whatever reason you had for choosing me, whoever was guilty of what, that was still something I learnt from you.

At first I waited. After the attacks I waited. I soon heard that you had survived. Also how and what and where, messages came whooshing in. But I waited. For Kairos who reveals the right moment. For courage. Or maybe I was waiting until I'd forgotten you again. So much time had already passed.

But then, in this autumn of 2021, that night in Paris returned to screens everywhere. Again those streets, the flashing lights, the dull bangs. The stories. The men who did it had gone on trial and the French newspapers I read for work and discuss in class were filled day after day with the testimonies of bystanders and survivors. They even turned it into a Netflix series.

I didn't see your face among the talking heads. Your story wasn't told, you've always remained silent. Again those images, but you will never see them.

I took some leave, came to Paris, and I'm still here.

Where else could I tell this story? I had you to thank for this city and you me, it had inadvertently become the hinge that links us. Here I would find the words – for me and for you.

I rode one of those grey self-service bikes down familiar streets to all the addresses I knew off by heart. I followed the Seine far beyond the city limits, everything seemed to have shrunk.

I also rode to the locations of the attacks, which I had marked on a map. A wobbly red line. And that was how I was riding yesterday afternoon on the warm asphalt of the empty Boulevard Voltaire; it was the car-free Sunday.

Comptoir Voltaire no longer exists. The red awnings have been replaced with blue (Did you see that they were red? Did you name the colour?) and the brasserie is now called Les Ogres. Meat is still the speciality.

I stood on the pavement for a while trying to evoke that Friday, trying to find you in this place. That was still beyond me and I rode further. On the other side of the city Parisians and visitors were thronged around the Arc de Triomphe, which was wrapped in shiny silver fabric, a posthumous art project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude. It looked like an altar, surrounded by people taking photos of themselves.

Maybe there was nothing under the material. There hadn't been anything there when the time came for Marie Louise to ride under the arch and into the city either, the building work had come no further than the foundations. Napoleon had a trompe-l'oeil of the Arc painted for her benefit, canvas on a wooden frame, a life-size illusion. She rode under an arch of air and flapping linen. If there's anywhere history is continuously reappraised, rewritten and believed again, Flo, if just for a moment, it's here.

I'm sending you these messages from here in Paris. Our history was a pebble in my shoe I'd been ignoring, but once I'd pulled it out that was no longer possible. You'll have to make time for it.

Listen.

I

Philippe's Story

1986

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I need a third person for our story because every story rests on three points. Otherwise it falls over. The three points are you, me and Philippe Lambert. A man I only knew briefly and you not at all, but without whom this story can't be told. I don't need to explain to you, Flo, that it's less awkward talking about someone else.

You and I can spend the coming period outside ourselves, in neutral territory, with him. A character cobbled together from memories and recovered scraps of paper. Assumptions, reconstructions. Rumours, paintings, snippets from other people's stories. Shirts to iron, unfinished sentences, coffee grounds in a cup, cigarette butts in a small ashtray in a stairwell. And the data and coordinates, of course, those too.

Philippe.

Every family has one child who's 'a bit different' and with the Lamberts it was the youngest. The first three children, two boys and a girl, all showed the self-assured, determined traits of the paternal side from an early age. They were born in Rue Leclerc in the 14th Arrondissement in 1948, 1949 and 1951.

Every morning at quarter past eight the white tyres of a Traction Avant glided up to the high pavement and the driver waited until father and director general Christian Lambert had emerged, opened the rear door (he thought himself too modern to make the driver get out and walk around) and lowered himself onto the back seat while taking the hat off his head in a single flowing movement. In 1952 he had been named chairman of the board at the Ministry of Telecommunication; the culmination of a steady march through the French civil service. Considered a dandy and a moderate modernist, he steered clear of politics. In the turbulent waters of the Fourth Republic, the period without General De Gaulle, it was essential for La Poste to plough on like a reliable steamboat – M. Lambert had a predilection for metaphors.

Essentially the pinnacle for a French civil servant, his new position called for a larger home and a better neighbourhood. He settled on a spacious, horse-shoe-shaped apartment with seven bedrooms, a library and a salon with tall windows, located in Rue Marbeau on the edge of the fashionable 16th Arrondissement, with various embassies and the German

consulate around the corner. The green haze of the Bois de Boulogne was visible at the west end of the street, on the other side of the Périphérique.

This step also called for a fourth child.

Philippe's arrival on a February morning in 1954 proceeded so swiftly that there was no time to make it to the hospital. His mother, Ghislaine Lambert, gave birth in the lobby on the new parquet floor, the doctor who had been alerted by telephone had just stepped in and still had his coat on.

The new baby was healthy but jittery, he cried a lot and had a lazy eye. In his first months he suffered convulsions that made him jerk his arms and legs wide. The child outgrew this but seemed permanently on his guard and was easily upset. For the first five years it was impossible to leave him alone. He held on tight to the nannies' aprons and his mother's couture dresses. She blamed it on Philippe's birthplace. They should never have moved.

During the Exposition Universelle of 1889 this neighbourhood had been home to a bullfighting arena, La Gran Plaza de Toros: an enormous metal-roofed, brick construction that could seat 22,000 spectators, financed by a consortium of Spanish bull breeders. Matadors were brought in from Madrid, the cheering from the arena rang out over the streets, the ladies of the neighbourhood suddenly began appearing with mantillas and fans and carrying signed photographs of El Gordito in their handbags. But after four years the Iberian fever had already passed. Due to a lack of interest, the building was demolished and the block that came free was filled with Hausmannian apartment buildings.

According to his mother, that arena from more than a half a century ago explained Philippe's character. 'On this ground,' Ghislaine said regularly, pointing at the polished parquet, 'too much violence has been committed. Blood has been spilled. A child feels that.' This annoyed his father, who said: 'We live on the third floor, darling. And the first three were practically born on the catacombs. It never bothered them.' In any case, which square metre of Paris hadn't seen bloodshed?

It could only be coincidence that his youngest son was a little different. More sensitive, on a less steady keel. Nothing to worry about. He was sure to be smart enough, they all were, and, if not, Director General Christian Lambert had the right contacts to ensure that Philippe too landed on his feet.

On the four paintings made of the family over the years you don't notice it at all. Philippe's left eye, which continued to droop despite all of the expensive treatment, was retouched. All in all he became quite a handsome boy with straight chestnut hair he would later pass on to his sons, a very slight stoop and the angular Lambert jaw that lends itself so well to being captured in oils.

When Philippe was thirteen his grandmother was hit by a bus and killed while leaving Parc Monceau. Without warning, she had tried to cross Boulevard de Courcelles and the bus, which was coming from the left, had been unable to stop in time. She was a sparrow of a woman and the distraught driver picked her up and sat down on the side of the pavement with her on his lap, a Pietà in uniform. Grandmother hadn't suffered, she died instantly.

For days beforehand, Philippe had been restless, not wanting to go to school, hardly eating. He had said that Mamie was getting too old to live on the other side of the city, in fact she was getting too old to carry on living alone, couldn't they let her move in with them? His brothers and sister had reached an age at which they found grandparents irritating. They avoided Sunday dinners, gushed about Serge Gainsbourg to annoy their parents and smoked Afghani black in the deserted servants' rooms on the seventh floor. Their youngest brother was excluded from this pact and adored his grandmother. His parents thought he shouldn't make such a fuss. That morning he hadn't wanted to leave the house but his father had taken him with him in his official car and made sure he went in through the gates of his strict private school.

A few hours later the family received the telephone call. 'Philippe had a premonition,' they whispered at the funeral. 'He was very close to his grandmother. There's a child like that in every family.'

Their greyhound's sudden death from food poisoning in 1971; the zinc plate that crashed down onto the pavement just outside their front door after a heavy storm and came within a hair's breadth of crushing the concierge; a fire in the Galeries Lafayette, where Philippe's mother was shopping at the time – in retrospect he was quite often scared of things that ended up happening. But sometimes he also got wound up about events that never took place at all. On the way to a weekend on the coast, already three-quarters of an hour outside of Paris, he once begged his father to go back home, convinced that a pipe had burst in the building. The water was sure to be dripping through the floors. His panic in the car was so tangible that Ghislaine talked her husband into turning back. At home they found an unstirring apartment behind closed shutters. When they set out again for Saint-Valery-en-Caux an hour later, Philippe immediately fell asleep on the back seat, exhausted.

There were places in the city he gave a wide berth: bridges, stations, cemeteries. He could only sleep with the curtains open, ate his meals clockwise and refused to let the housekeeper polish his shoes, insisting on doing it himself. Words like compulsion, obsession and anxiety were carefully avoided – the Lamberts did not suffer from things like that. A little sensitive, perhaps. *Un peu nerveux*.

Before he started studying economics at university his parents sent him to a psychologist who recommended relaxation therapy, then a fairly new phenomenon. He learnt to breathe with his stomach and discovered that he could rationalise away his fears,

ignore them, sometimes even laugh them off. And also that nobody wanted to hear his warnings. In his circles, self-confidence was the norm. Adversity, failure, fate – they were for others. Even the war had not changed the family's fortunes, although the details of that were something they didn't talk about. 'Always remember, Philippe,' his father said, 'people like us help the country to advance. We direct the flow of money. We head factories and laboratories. We're responsible for the development of the Concorde and the first European space launch. These things don't happen by themselves, all those trains that run, all those hospitals... Think of the hundreds of thousands of people who get onto their bicycles and climb into their yellow vans in the name of La Poste to ensure that all that information ends up where it is supposed to be' – the image of an army of anonymous functionaries moved him deeply, he used it every year in his New Year's speech at head office – 'these are great processes, wheels that keep society turning and yes, yes, people like us are behind them. We bring forth leaders, managing directors, what am I saying – presidents. There is no room for doubt. Be a man.'

Philippe slid a lock of hair in front of his left eye and did what was asked of him. Apparently that was possible. Apparently you could stuff your fears into a mental box and screw down the lid. They were still there, but you grew around them. That also made them invisible to others, who weren't interested in them anyway. He'd learnt that.

He completed his studies, obtained a management position with Renault and, on one of his first business trips to Germany, met Laurence, a meticulously coiffured Air France stewardess. She could spot a passenger with flight anxiety in seconds, it was quite common in first class. A little attention could make the trip so much more comfortable. She remained standing in the aisle with the coffeepot in one hand and conversed with Philippe until the descent had commenced. Something about the clammy face turned up towards her appealed and she decided to breach company protocol by asking for his card.

Thanks to their slight figures, straight dark-brown hair and somewhat reticent gait, they could already have been taken for family. Laurence covered up her frugal childhood in Compiègne, Philippe didn't mention his fears – they both longed for a regulated existence. Philippe Lambert and Laurence Duclos married a year later and moved into an apartment in Rue Dorian near Place de la Nation, where tall linden trees filtered the sunlight that shone in through the windows. In June 1983 Nicolas was born.

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It would not have come as a surprise if the birth of his child had stoked the smouldering mountain of fear inside Philippe. Every district nurse knows that young parents suffer from an aftershock of anxiety and responsibility a few days after the umbilical cord has been cut. Even those without a nervous disposition. There, in the cot or on the breast or lying between

them, is their Achilles' heel. Nobody warned them and if someone did mention it, they weren't listening.

But while Laurence wondered out loud how she could carry on living if anything ever happened to this tiny human being, Philippe became a picture of serenity. He changed nappies, fed the baby (breastfeeding was not a success and they soon replaced it with bottles) and was deeply content to break with French custom by using all of his free days to spend the first weeks fathering his son. 'Nothing will ever happen to him,' he told Laurence. 'He will always stay healthy, grow very old, and never break as much as a finger. Believe me.'

Those first summery weeks, Nicolas generally only cried when the twilight was starting to fade. Every evening around ten, Philippe left his exhausted wife to fall asleep on the couch, took his son in his arms and carried him all the way around Place de la Nation, following the pavement of the outermost ring, where the child's howls invariably calmed. Back in the apartment, he stroked his gently pulsing head, laid him over his shoulder and continued to walk to and fro in the kitchen until the tense little body relaxed against the side of his neck. Fear had never been further away.

That someone would come to look after the child was a given. Philippe and his brothers and sister had grown up with these temporary, caring, shadowy figures around the house. Young women whose names and builds changed, but whose hands and voices melted together in the children's memories to a single movement, a single feeling. Hands that dressed you, made meals, packed bags, pushed prams, retrieved balls from flowerbeds, tidied and picked things up, checked the temperature of the bathwater and combed wet hair. Silhouettes that appeared in the morning, waved them goodbye, stood waiting at the school gates, never sitting down but always sliding to and fro between the salon and the playroom, the kitchen and the bathroom. Disappearing at a certain moment to their chambre de bonne on the top floor by slipping out the back door, through which they made their equally silent entrance again the next day. Until the end of Philippe's Collège their presence was self-evident, he couldn't imagine it being any different for his children. Laurence soon came round. Nicolas was an easy child, Philippe seemed more balanced than ever before in the time she had known him, she missed her work and her parents-in-law were willing not only to search for a girl for them, but also pay and house her; the maid's room on the seventh floor at Rue Marbeau was empty, after all. Times had changed: an international au pair seemed a good, modern variant of the classic nanny.

'I'll look in the northern countries,' Ghislaine said. 'I don't want my grandson adopting an African accent or starting to use Arabic words. What's more, girls from the north are clean and quick to learn the language. We'll look for a new one each year, that's how it's done these days.' After having worried most about her youngest son, she was happy to be able to contribute to his perfect, white, catalogue-picture family.

'Let me take care of it. That's best for everyone.'

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Later, when Philippe thinks back on these years, the first three with Nicolas, it seems a bright, timeless intermezzo. The days thread together in calm happiness. He goes to work and occupies himself with pleasant, abstract activities: he's responsible for cost minimisation. Planning a new production line, relocating jobs, mainly to Asia – these are all major developments involving thousands of employees, packaged as numbers and pastel-coloured histograms on overheads he explains at weekly meetings.

In the evening he returns to a neat, fresh-smelling apartment. His son has been bathed and fed, Philippe says, 'See you tomorrow,' to the au pair who lives on the other side of town in a maid's room above his parental home, pleasantly out of sight. He waits for Laurence, they warm up something from Picard Surgelés in the microwave, drink a glass of wine. He makes love to his wife at least twice a week. She has recovered her shy enthusiasm from before the birth and likes to walk around the house naked, which excites him. Sometimes they smoke a joint – they buy Dutch weed through the cook at the brasserie around the corner – and air the bedroom afterwards.

Within a few months Philippe no longer remembers what he was like before. He forgets the constant tension in his neck, the headaches, the nights he only skimmed the surface of sleep, he forgets the calamitous visions that beset him through his entire childhood and adolescence, flaring up at any moment. Visions he has never mentioned to anyone, that not even Laurence knows about: dead animals on the side of the road, torn-off limbs, a body floating in the river, water washing away houses, a child choking on a sweet, an unending stream of cockroaches from under the skirting boards, toppling bookcases crushing toddlers, chain collisions, diseases that make your tongue turn black. He forgets that those images were always there. He forgets what fear feels like. This phase of his life is so bright, almost bleached, a sun-drenched impression. For the first time in his thirty years of life he approaches the future trustingly, without reservations, and slowly that starts to feel normal. Philippe starts to believe that it will continue like this forever.

This isn't necessarily strange. Fears can grow, but they can also shrink, disappearing as inexplicably as they appeared. But around Philippe, outside the brightly-lit cage of his happiness, the city is moving in the opposite direction. In these years Paris, as people say later, is gripped by fear.

In mid-July 1983 a bomb explodes at the Turkish Airlines check-in desk at Orly Airport. Eight dead, fifty wounded; the bloodbath is claimed by the Syrian branch of the Armenian liberation army ASALA – almost no one understands what it's about. 'Paris in fear' declares the cover of *Time Magazine*. Air traffic comes to a brief standstill (not too long, it's the summer holidays, the middle of the exodus of Parisians fleeing the hot city) and more police appear in the Metro corridors. But it is remarkable how quickly the attack is rationalised. This

is an attack on Turkey, not France. On French territory, true, but... This hatred is directed elsewhere. Laurence, too, still at home on maternity leave when it happens, simply heads off to the airport to start work again at the end of the summer. Philippe looks at his son, confident that he is invulnerable behind his shield of foolish bliss. The months pass quietly. Nicolas gets his first teeth, crawls, stands up on his chubby legs and takes his first steps in the presence of the au pair, who has him repeat the trick in front of his parents. He grows, he starts talking – there has never been a brighter or better-looking child in all of France.

Nobody knows when frogs realise that the water is about to boil. Nobody decides where the tipping point is going to be, it can only be identified afterwards. Just before Christmas 1983 a bomb explodes in the air-conditioning of three-star restaurant Le Grand Véfour in the Palais Royal. The ten wounded are riddled with glass, crystal and porcelain from the windows, chandeliers, plates and bowls. There are no fatalities, no bombers are found.

There is an attack on a Marks & Spencer department store in February 1985 and, a month later, another on the Rivoli Beaubourg cinema. Actions people take as targeting a Zionist chairman and a Jewish film festival. 'It's terrible,' they say over aperitifs and office coffees, 'See, anti-Semitism is still among us.' For many Parisians that 'us' still feels very distant, even if they don't say that out loud. On Minitel, which delivers the news to their homes faster than the newspapers ever could, events are reduced to white block letters on a black screen. They are scared, but not scared enough. That comes later.

Maybe it's because of the pictures, produced more quickly with each attack, sometimes already being printed in colour. Maybe it's because of the reporters, arriving at the scene faster and faster and now specially trained in how to cover events like these. They have learnt not to approach those in charge first, but to get their quotes from: one – victims who are still capable of providing a response; two – the most distraught eye witnesses; three – the emergency services, preferably in action with bandages and bags of blood.

Maybe somebody has just suggested the right word, a word that gnaws its way deep into the populace, making people quicken their pace on the street and anchoring fear in their consciousness so that it can no longer be expelled by sleep, but however it happens, in the course of 1985 the facts and incidents become a 'wave'. And a wave never comes alone.

On 7 December 1985 – the city is getting ready for Christmas – bombs explode among the shoppers in Galeries Lafayette and Printemps Hausmann. More than forty casualties lie between the shattered porcelain services in the basement of one department store and in the perfume section of the other. One of the first reporters calls it a 'hellish odorama': perfume mixed with the smell of blood, urine and sweat. The TV keeps repeating footage of collapsed Christmas decorations, shocked shoppers, blood-smeared marble floors and scattered shopping bags.

'Lafayette and Printemps' feels like that tipping point. It can now happen anywhere, it can happen to anyone, you can't arm yourself against it unless it's by giving up your public life and that would mean 'giving up our French soul', as the mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, puts it. The government urges everyone to be alert for abandoned luggage, to notify the authorities of suspicious packages, to watch out for 'conspicuous behaviour', even if nobody knows exactly what that means. From out of nowhere, Hezbollah has become a household word, forcing its way into daily conversation.

February 1986 is a chain of black days. In the month people traditionally prefer to skip on their way to spring, a bomb explodes at a hotel on the Champs-Élysées, an explosive device is dismantled in the last minute on the third floor of the Eiffel Tower, packages explode in Gibert Jeune and FNAC bookshops. The target is vague and that's what's most frightening. Look, they say, there's no longer any doubt, French life itself has been taken hostage. Our culture, our music, our way of life.

There is an explosion in a high-speed train from Paris to Lyon, the count has risen to 87 injured. Spring is as bleak and pale as the face of President Mitterrand, who can't find the words to reassure the nation. On 20 March the shock is greater because there are fatalities again – that's how quickly people have adjusted, as long as there are only injuries, it's not too bad. Nobody remembers amputated legs or ruptured eyes. Nobody remembers who has lost her ability to speak for the rest of her life or the man who will never be able to put that moment behind him.

A bomb explodes at the entrance of the shopping arcade Galerie Point Show on the Champs-Élysées. After hearing the muffled bang, the audience in the adjoining cinema flee outside and find themselves in a horror movie on the pavement. 'All the shop windows, all that glass, all that blood,' stammers a young man into a camera. His gaping eyes, the numb faces around him, the flashing lights, the blood, the newspaper headlines (C'EST LA GUERRE!) become the ingredients for extra news bulletins that already seem familiar.

To Philippe it all feels like reports from another country. He switches the TV off with the remote control and takes his son to Jardin de Reuilly, a new park in the neighbourhood. Because of the terrorism, the garbage bins have been removed and replaced with jerry-rigged contraptions, transparent green plastic bags hang from rings in the spring breeze. They're hung up all over the city, in the Metro, on the Champs-Élysées, where Japanese tourists take photos of them. He brushes off Laurence's warnings ('Be careful on public transport, take the car instead, if it gets busy you have to leave, Philippe, do you hear me?'), with his son on his shoulders he is inviolable. He is looking forward to the summer holiday at Cap d'Antibes, he is looking forward to announcing his imminent promotion during Sunday dinner at his parents', he is looking forward to every single day.

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She's seventeen. A little young, but Ghislaine is impressed by her application in immaculate French and her bonbon of a name: Eloïse Schiller. Besides working fulltime in her parents' hotel in Tübingen, she has also completed her Gymnasium Abitur and would like to spend a year as an au pair in Paris before studying international relations. 'I adore children and have a ten-year-old brother and a six-year-old sister who I love very much.' The passport photo shows an apple-shaped face crowned by thick, reddish-blonde hair pulled back in two high ponytails.

She would like to come a little earlier, on 1 July 1986, to get used to the city right away. That's convenient because the current, third au pair has been homesick all year. Dutch Chantal, from a town with the tongue-twisting name of 's-Gravenzande, doesn't need a single second to think about whether she'd like to stop a couple of weeks early – her suitcase is already packed and waiting.

As agreed, Laurence spends half a day with Eloïse getting to know her duties and meeting Nicolas before Philippe arrives home. 'The contact with the father of the family can be difficult at first for a young au pair. Build this up gradually.' It's their first years as employers and they do everything according to the tips provided by the agency Ghislaine has engaged. When Philippe comes home on Tuesday 1 July 1986, the full girl in tight jeans is standing on the play rug. She turns towards him and says, while curtseying, 'Eloïse.' Philippe sees ginger eyelashes above greenish eyes that are looking up at him, below them an accumulation of round shapes – then he doesn't see anything at all. He's collapsed in the hall of their apartment.

When he comes to, the shocked au pair has already left for her chambre de bonne. 'Thank God,' is the first thing he thinks. Thank God she's gone. In the living room where he's been laid on the sofa, an ambulance driver is talking calmly to Laurence. Blood pressure is normal, heartrate normal, brain activity normal, everything is normal, madame, we can only wait until your husband regains consciousness. Take it easy, monsieur, just stay there. You're at home in your own apartment. Nothing to worry about, everything will be fine.

Reassuring murmurs, the sound of documents being filled in, the light of lamps they've turned on, although it's nowhere near night-time – Philippe takes it all in as through a layer of foam. Readings are taken, lights are shone into his eyes – try and sit up now, calmly, on a straight chair – reflexes, a mouthful of water, that cuff around his arm once again.

After the paramedic has left, he can't explain what happened. Maybe he hadn't had enough to eat today, a busy day, the heat that has settled over the city? He's exhausted, goes to bed and leaves for the Renault head office in Boulogne-Billancourt the follow morning as usual. There he spends a long time staring out at the view through tall windows that take up almost the entire wall. From his fifth-floor office he has a view of the Seine, which curls around this neighbourhood like a lasso. In the course of the day the hazy July sky condenses

as smog. Planes draw their patterns to and from Orly, traffic flows along the avenue like a second river – a familiar spectacle unfolding on the other side of the double glazing, accompanied by the soundtrack of work. The rustle of air-conditioning, the constant ringing of the telephone in his secretary's adjoining office, the krrtkkkrrrt-kkkkrrrrt of the fax, all noises that should reassure him. But he feels his left eye drooping. He skips the lunch outside, unable to bear the thought of the busy brasserie, the steak tartare, the salad, the wine and the heavy feeling that slows the pace of work for a couple of hours afterwards.

On the deserted floor, the realisation of what he already knew just before he passed out sinks in: it's back. The fear. Like a patient dog that sits outside the supermarket waiting for its master even if he takes three years to do the shopping. An old, troublesome, abandoned dog that now stands up, wagging its tail, ready to accompany him at his heels, by his side, leading the way.

It's to do with Eloïse.

It can't be anything else, it struck the instant he laid eyes on her. Eloïse, a girl so innocent he initially rejected the idea that the two things could be related. Eloïse, who timidly awaits him the next day and asks in a frightened voice if 'it's going alright now, monsieur'. She turns eighteen in September, a child still. Philippe wonders what possessed her parents to let her go to Paris by herself.

Eloïse is irrefutably good with children, at least. After just three days shy little Nicolas automatically holds out his hand when they're going out together and calls her 'Ouweeze' with his childish lisp. They play peekaboo, she sings him to sleep in lilting Southern German and has him eating all kinds of food – Laurence is so enthusiastic about her new au pair that she's already forgotten that Philippe fainted the first time he saw here. It's simply inconceivable that the two things could be connected.

But Philippe notices that his stomach shrinks in Eloïse's presence, that he has trouble breathing and gets a stabbing pain in his left shoulder. He doesn't like to look at her, he avoids being in the same room and does his utmost to keep the period when he's comes home and the au pair is busy tidying up the last bit of mess or rounding off Nicolas's bath-time ritual as brief as possible. Any excuse to send the girl home an hour earlier. She doesn't object but disappears to the Metro, to her room, to the wings.

At night it's not the old images that pursue him. These are much less clear, more colours than shapes, more smells than images: smells that are still so strong in his nose when he wakes up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night that he tries to wash them out after he's given in and gone to the bathroom for a while. He stares at his sleeping son's face, dimly lit by a Care Bears nightlight. He stares at Laurence's face in the glow from the streetlight shining in through the chink in the curtains. She is relaxed, the hair that is so like a helmet in the daytime, loose on the pillow, her bare and narrow shoulders defenceless. He touches her gently. She doesn't wake. There is no reason to be afraid. Before there was always a reason, a

specific threat, a concrete suspicion of disaster that would strike in his vicinity. Now he doesn't have a clue about the cause or purpose of his fear. He goes back to bed, climbing in between sheets that are still clammy from his sweat a half hour earlier. He falls asleep anyway and it starts all over again: doors that refuse to open, façades that go on forever, a road that suddenly cracks open and a murky, stinking sky. Above all this, he sometimes sees a pale green haze; on awakening he pushes away the thought that it's the colour of Eloïse's eyes.