

EXCERPTED FROM

SELF-PORTRAIT IN GREEN

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December 2003 — Evening has come, and the Garonne is rising hour after hour in the dark.

We all know the river can rise nine meters above its banks before it overflows, thanks to the levees surrounding the village.

That much we know. It's the first thing you learn when you make up your mind to settle in this place, eternally under threat from the floodwaters of the Garonne. What we don't know this evening is what's coming tonight, or tomorrow—if, like last time, ten months ago, the water will stop at the top of the levees, or, as it did twenty-two years ago, spill over, submerge the streets, invade the ground floor of the houses, sometimes the second floor, sometimes the whole house.

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We can only wait and watch. Once the level nears eight and a half meters, we'll be told to park our various vehicles on the plateau, just outside the next village. That hasn't happened yet.

We can only keep waiting and watching. No sign, for the moment, of the long, slow column of trucks, cars, tractors, campers, and combines rolling through the night, crossing the canal, making for a place the Garonne will never reach.

We wait, we watch. The object of our vigilance is not some Old Man, it's not *le Mississippi*, it's not *le Danube* or *le Rhône*; no one here doubts for a moment that *la Garonne's* essence is feminine. She's brown tonight, heavy, almost bulging.

2002 — Because it was in front of her house that I saw her each day, for a long time I couldn't distinguish that green presence from her surroundings.

I drove by, taking the children to school, then I drove by again later, now alone, on my way back, then twice more in the evening, going off to pick up the children and bringing them home, and each time, without exactly meaning to, I glanced at that old farmstead's front steps and barren yard, and each time my gaze encountered an undefined form that immediately after melded in my memory with the single tree on the lot, a tall, spreading banana tree.

Four times a day, then, I drove by her house. And I looked at her and didn't see her, and yet a vague unconvinced feeling always turned my head in that direction, though I noticed nothing, ever, but a lovely, surprising banana tree. I stepped on the brake as I drove past, almost at a crawl, and never once did my gaze fail to meet with the still, watchful silhouette of the woman in green standing near the far-more-imposing banana tree, and I know that beyond all possible doubt. Because four times a day my heart was gripped by something unnamable, though not absolutely malign, the moment I passed by the farm with the lone banana tree in its fenced yard, and then afterwards, all along the road to the school, in all sorts of yards, I looked at many, many other banana trees with the most perfect indifference.

But I like knowing names, and, convinced it was not knowing who lived in the farmhouse that was bothering me, I asked around. "Oh, that place? Those are just the X—s," people said. And it was a common name in the area, and belonged to many other families besides. There was nothing to be had from a name like that, nothing to learn.

One morning I stop the car in front of the house. I shut off the engine, pull the hand brake, then turn to my four children, three of them in the back seat and the oldest beside me in front. It's a spring morning, warm and glittering. The children's arms and legs are bare. Their hair shines. The windows are rolled down and the car is filled with the smell of honeysuckle, as if we were all wearing perfume. But my children's skin smells naturally of honeysuckle, their necks and their cheeks. I smile at them all with the playful squint that announces I've come up with a new game. They're still small. I whisper:

"Look closely at that banana tree. Is there something or someone anywhere near that banana tree?"

And each of my children looks toward the farmhouse, and their attentiveness, their docility, and their concentration, the utter lack of reserve in their obedience, all that brings me to the verge of tears. It's something else, too. It's also the nearness of that banana tree, of course, with its leaves so broad that any one of them could enfold my youngest child, it's also the imminence of a discovery. A golden dust floats above their heads. Their foreheads are curved and serene, their napes still pale. Have I mentioned this? My children's arms and

legs are bare, because the air is warm, intoxicating.

They were a little disappointed.

“There’s nothing at all beside that banana tree,” they whispered.

“Sure?” I asked. A shiver ran down my back.

“Sure,” said my children, with unmingled certainty.

I turn the key, put the car into gear, and start off a little faster than necessary, not taking a last look back at the farmyard. “You’re the one I need,” I begin to sing under my breath, and when I check the rearview mirror just to be sure, I can see that my uncalculating, unafraid children are happy, they’ve already stopped thinking about that big banana tree. They’re not thinking about the desolate farmhouse, they’re not thinking about what they didn’t see near the banana tree. We drive slowly, alone on the little road, in the odorous breath, warmer with each passing moment, of a gigantic mouth. That’s how I see all this, but I keep it to myself.

“You’re sure?” I asked my children, my spine suddenly cold.

And since my children never delight in deceiving me, how could I not believe them? But at the same time, how could I answer that I myself had just seen, had just for the first time made out, beside that banana tree, a woman in green? How could I tell them I found it hard to believe they hadn’t seen that woman in green just as clearly as I could now see her, her who until that morning, I realized, had eluded not my eye but my awareness?

Then I said to myself: that woman in green has always been there. She’s there every morning and every afternoon, beneath that banana tree, and she watches us creep past her house, and she sees me looking at her without seeing her.

* * *

What I don’t know is: is she waiting for me? Does she somehow resent not being seen, does it somehow frighten her, or is that just what she wants?

I realize that my children are still in the first stages of this phenomenon, where I myself was stuck until that radiant spring morning when I first found myself seeing a woman in green in her graceless garden, a garden she seems to occupy only at intervals, when it suits her, a garden whose bleakness and blighted look she’s surely not to blame for.

The woman in green is there, every day. Is she still there when I’m not around? I obviously can’t question my children about that. Or can I? My children, with their bare legs and perfect arms, are utterly without guile. Anything they believe, anything they sense, they’ll tell me.

I pull up in front of the school’s lilac. The lilac is covered with little white flowers, and all at once their honeyed scent fills the car. It’s almost more than we can tolerate. I ask my children if their heads aren’t swimming a little, as mine is, and they answer no, and I

sense that they don't quite understand the expression "my head is swimming." Other children come crowding around the car. Some put their heads through the windows, bringing with them a fresh gust of lilac, and I worry it might nauseate my children. The others' legs and arms are also uncovered, their limbs are plump, their skin packed tight with hard, dense meat. Every one of these children is friends with my own. All smiles and darkly glinting braces, their faces are puffed up with excitement, with joy, with the many anticipations and unexplored wonders of the day just begun. I feel relieved. I look at those children with an affection full of gratitude. I feel relieved, swollen with kindly thoughts. Before my children get out of the car, I put on a sly voice and ask:

"If you see someone whenever you go by his house, does that mean he's there all the time, or only when you go by his house? What do you think?"

My four children sit still for a moment to ponder. Then they shrug apologetically, all together, to signal I've asked them a question they can't possibly answer.

Now they're out in the schoolyard, and my two youngest stand glued to a spot beneath the plum trees, with that wavering look, that vaguely lost, uncertain, disoriented air that often comes over very young children when they suddenly find themselves alone amid shouting and jostling. Seeing that makes me melancholy. I'd like to walk into the schoolyard, take them by the hand, and drive them back home. I can't help thinking it's wrong to desert them like this, but I know that's a wrong, dishonest feeling, I know they know perfectly well that they're not being abandoned, not being consigned to some horrific fate. I remember my own fright when I was their age, I think I can remember that, and that's why a lump comes to my throat when I see such young children alone on a vast, raucous playground. Still, what are they thinking? Are they sure this day will end? That they're not stranded here, alone among dozens of frenetically active bodies, for all eternity? They know, they know. Is that certain?

Then a disturbing memory comes back to me: I remember a woman in green from my grade-school days. Tall, brutal, and heavyset, she promises us all a trip to prison if we eat too slowly, if we dirty our clothes, if we don't raise our eyes to meet hers. Her eyes are green, and she matches them with long checked skirts and turtleneck sweaters. Because of her, a pall of dread hangs over the school. She carries more than one child off toward a dark hallway, proclaiming that prison waits at the far end, and cries of terror resound as that stout woman disappears with her little prisoners clamped beneath her green-sleeved arms. The children are never seen again. They must have been seen again, surely, and yet it seems to me that they never come back, that their two tiny chairs sit empty in the classroom, and that this is the natural way of things, terrible and coherent. They hadn't behaved.

And my two little ones, under the Japanese plums, do they behave?

Now they've all gone inside. The schoolyard is empty, the sweet lilac has numbed me. I must have been one of those children the woman in green carted off down an endless hallway, but fear and the inescapability of the torments to come kept me from crying out. Was I ever seen again? It's true that green can't possibly be the sole color of cruelty, just as green is by no means inevitably the color of cruelty, but who can deny that cruelty is particularly given to draping itself in all sorts of greens? Before going on my way, I pull three

leaves off the lilac and slip them into the pocket of my shorts. That might come in handy, I tell myself, though for the moment I have no idea what's awaiting me.

All the young women are in shorts, because it's a shimmering spring morning, and in the amber air there's an imperceptible threat of the sweltering summer that will unavoidably follow this season, so mild and at the same time heavy with that warning—it's a wall shining bright white in the blazing sun, for example, or a shadeless gravel courtyard I cross through on my way into the town hall, the baking heat already contained within those four walls enveloping me in a way I've forgotten. All the young women are in shorts and sandals. The sandals' soles smack their heels with a certain resolute gaiety. What makes that sensual? Is it the slightly slack strap that lets the foot slip this way and that, and the heel slap the sole? Or is it the vision of unveiled legs? What makes it sensual, and must the legs be beautiful, must they be lustrous, smooth, and long? Or is the beauty of legs, knees, and ankles superfluous for the burgeoning, in the main street of this drowsy town, of an eroticism still enfeebled by winter? Is all that possible in a town this far removed from the breeziness, the rustle, the hum of the city, is it possible?

All the young women were in shorts, that dazzling morning. Leaving the town hall, I walked with long strides in my army-style khaki shorts, perfectly pleased to be who I was in that place—the main street of a humdrum little town—and at that time, and this contentment was crowned by a vague surprise at the very existence of such a plenitude, the conceivability of such a pleasure. That's when I run into Cristina, but as soon as I see her I'm not sure it's her rather than Marie-Gabrielle or Alison. Not that her name escapes me: it's just that, among those three women, I no longer know which this one is. Deep in my pocket, my fingers squeeze and shred the little lilac leaves. This person who might be Cristina is a young woman, so she's wearing shorts, elastic and clinging, with a print of green flowers against a green background. My elation dwindles a little. It occurs to me that wariness might be called for. And yet I like the idea that soon I'll be driving once more past the house of the woman in green, and she'll be standing there, knowing I'm going to stop. But Cristina's shorts are something else altogether, because I hadn't expected them, and because green isn't the usual color for women's shorts, in the first days of spring, is it? Cristina keeps her hands behind her, pressed flat against her powerful hindquarters to display her shorts' exuberant color as flagrantly as she can. She stands with her legs commandingly spread, blocking the entire width of the sidewalk. As luck would have it, she keeps her sunglasses on, and I've forgotten what her eyes look like, or Marie-Gabrielle's, or Alison's. Her blond hair is pulled into a ponytail so severe that the skin on her temples seems stretched to the splitting point. If this woman really is Cristina, I remember that she's my friend. Cristina has a stronger claim to that title than Marie-Gabrielle or Alison, who are, as best I can recall, nothing more than cheerful companions, in whom one would never think of confiding, because any admission of weakness, of any tiny private anxiety, would be met with frosty disapproval and nothing more. Have I ever revealed anything at all to Cristina? Certainly not, it's not in my nature. But her entire person is awash with sympathy, with understanding just waiting to be called on. I then thought, in a surge of abandon, that the woman in green beside her banana tree might have been waiting for just that: for me to unburden my heart to her.

“Oh, this has never happened to me before,” says Cristina in her hoarse, muffled voice. “There are two things, and they're both different from each other . . . The first . . . you

already know . . . I, you know, I left the kids . . . for two days, I think . . . two or three days . . . with my parents, yes, for a holiday . . . just a little holiday . . . at grandma and grandpa's . . . and . . . you know my kids, you know them . . . are they . . . how can I put this . . . are they intolerable . . . coarse . . . completely disobedient?"

"Not at all," I say, taken aback.

As I remember, my friend Cristina has no children. In which case, who is this woman?

"No one could say that . . . call my kids that," she goes on. "Oh, they like to run around . . . they . . . they're full of energy . . . like all children . . . children today . . . vigorous, healthy. . . . Anyway, they're out at grandma and grandpa's . . . at my parents', I mean, and yesterday, Sunday, I go . . . you understand . . . I go . . . get them . . . pick them up, and I drive up to the house . . . grandma and grandpa's house . . . my parents' house . . . and it was . . . oh, absolutely silent . . . just . . . just the insects cheeping . . . maybe . . . absolutely silent . . . and I tell myself . . . they're . . . they're all taking a nap. . . . I don't want to bother them . . . so . . . I don't jiggle the bell . . . the big metal bell on the gate . . . so I . . . I climb over the hedge . . . a hole . . . a sort of hole, a low spot . . . in the hedge . . . and I climb over it, without making a sound . . . and I come to . . . the terrace . . . and there . . . I hear . . . my God, I hear . . . someone crying . . . a man crying and I . . . I look . . . I look through the glass door and I see . . . I see my father, grandpa . . . papa, quietly crying . . . in front of grandma, my mother . . . she's standing there, helpless . . . her arms hanging limp . . . head down . . . pitiful, miserable . . . oh, that's the first time . . . my father crying . . . first time I've seen him . . . anyway . . . and he's talking . . . no, he's almost shouting . . . and my God, he says . . . he says . . . and he's talking about my kids, I can tell . . . his grandchildren . . . who really aren't all that . . . right? . . . About my kids on holiday with them . . . he says . . . to my mother . . . 'I can't take them anymore, I can't take them anymore' . . . and he also . . . also says . . . 'I'm leaving, I can't stay here, I can't stay in this house with them here' . . . and he's talking, you understand, about my . . . about my kids . . . and I . . . I left . . . discreetly . . . I climbed over the hedge the other way and then . . . I . . . I came back . . . later . . . and everything was . . . everything seemed . . . normal . . . just two kids on holiday at grandma and grandpa's . . . and I knew . . . I knew . . . that wasn't how it was . . . wasn't how it really was at all!"

Two tears rolled out from under Cristina's (?) tinted lenses. I wasn't sure what to say. What bond was there between us? And was she not guilty of having such children? Who was she? I really couldn't think what to say. I was looking down at Cristina's thick brown sandals. I took the little bits of lilac leaves from my pocket and carefully crumbled them over her feet.

"The other thing," says Cristina, "maybe you've already heard . . ."

No, I answer playfully, I never hear anything. And since, for anyone who knows me, that's an obvious, barefaced lie, I tell myself that if this woman really is my friend Cristina she'll protest, give me a little swat on the shoulder—but no, she goes on, grim-faced, standing perfectly still.

"A bunch of us saw it, in our yards, on the riverbank, in . . . Apparently there were

even people who saw it in the schoolyard. The mayor . . . the mayor knows all about it. He saw it too. Something black, and quick. Oh, there were plenty of people who saw it.”

Cristina’s words are coming faster now. Her voice is sharper than usual. With a little hop she pulls her legs together and keeps them that way, squeezed tight. I ask:

“What is it? What did it turn out to be?”

“You haven’t seen anything?” Cristina asks.

“But what is it?”

“You haven’t seen anything?”

All at once she pulls off her sunglasses. And then it’s clear, I don’t know that face. On the opposite sidewalk a young woman waves in my direction. It’s Cristina, wearing little pink shorts.

“You haven’t seen anything?” the first woman says again, and her tone is at once urgent, suspicious, and frightened.

I resolve not to keep this conversation up one moment longer. She vigorously wriggles her right foot, without looking at it or lowering her eyes, to shake off the shredded lilac leaves. Then she shoots me a glance full of unspoken anguish, whirls around, and hurries off, raising little clouds of dust under her sandals.

I’m so rattled I hardly notice Cristina crossing the street in her tiny pink shorts, with her graceful, jaunty gait. She kissed me twice on each cheek and I inhaled her flowery scent. Cristina smelled like a spring flower, a simple white flower. What she then said I’m not sure I can believe myself. Still, I know I didn’t imagine it. She really did say it, however unlikely it seems.