

1

I once played volleyball with the archbishop of Barcelona. He was fast around the court and had a useful serve. Attired in clerical garb and sporting a long dark beard that waved in the wind, he looked like somebody impersonating himself. I know a little about how that feels.

When I was twenty-two, a gift for languages and wishful thinking broke me out from my parents' home in Dulwich and eventually set me down in Paris. There, I hoped to make a name for myself some day, and while I hadn't yet sold my soul to the devil, I had come pretty close. I was in love, however, and confident the good life was just around the corner – that luck or fate or whatever you want to call it was inevitably turning my way.

One unforgiving Monday in mid-July I learned how wrong I was.

Summer had arrived early, I remember, and quickly hit the roof; long scorching days and short airless nights, and the panting sun-soaked city of my dreams seemed permanently on edge, as if waiting for the storm that had to break. I'd spent most of a stifling day translating book reviews in the basement studio of a doomed poetry journal, and had barely eaten. By late afternoon I was exhausted and on my way home, my mind on automatic as I surfed the Metro.

I hadn't encountered my half-brother for a year or more, not since our father's fiftieth birthday party – a guilty affair cloaked in furtive small talk and pyrotechnic chaff – so when I turned the corner and saw Eugene standing in the doorway to my building, it took me a while to recognize him and get over my surprise. He was propped against the wall in a lonely patch of shade, fanning himself with a newspaper and admiring the women in the café across the street. He seemed tired and irritable. Two fat suitcases and assorted bags huddled at his feet. This was a bad sign.

I saw him before he saw me. As always, looking at him was oddly like gazing into a distorting mirror: slightly darker hair; a similarly wide mouth; the same irritating nose – yet people generally considered Eugene to be uniquely handsome. Usually fussy about his appearance, he needed a shave and a haircut, and his prized Diane Arbus t-shirt was faded and creased. He looked vaguely altered since the last time we'd met. I watched and puzzled until finally I saw it: he had grown to resemble our father, with a heavy brow and piercing, rather vulpine eyes. This resemblance disturbed me, I don't know why.

My first instinct was to draw back and hide until he went away, but I knew Eugene was tenacious enough to hang around for days until I showed up. How had he found me? I was certain I hadn't given him my new address. Probably, he'd weeded it out of my mother, who was always a pushover for Eugene and forever anxious that 'her boys' get along. He noticed me while I stood there debating with myself and biting my lower lip; he stopped his fanning and beckoned peremptorily with his newspaper; now I had no choice but to dodge through an avalanche of traffic and greet him. He

frowned as we shook hands. ‘Where the hell have you been? I’ve waited hours. Get some of these bags will you?’

He shrugged on a backpack while I summoned the lift. When it failed to budge, I was obliged to lead the way up six flights of stairs while his luggage tore at my arms. ‘This is an awkward time for me,’ I warned him as I struggled for breath on the half-landing. ‘Things are delicate.’

‘Your things are always delicate.’

I toiled upwards, unlocked my door and turned off the alarm. We left his bags in the entrance hall while I showed him inside.

‘Nice.’

My half-brother has a penchant for understatement. The truth is my luxurious penthouse apartment is exceptional: a stunning living room with acres of hardwood floor; a kitchen that could double as a science lab; four magnificent bedrooms. The furnishings are tasteful, barely comfortable and hyper-expensive. Original artworks bask in subdued lighting. Outside there’s a wrap-around terrace, where inscrutable sculptures languish gracefully beneath orange trees that sway in the breeze off the Seine.

I watched Eugene take it all in. Immediately, I thought it prudent to put him straight about my borrowed opulence, as sooner or later I knew he would tap me for a loan. ‘It’s not actually mine. It belongs to a guy named Serge. He travels a great deal. I just look after it. I’m really lucky.’

Eugene looked disappointed. He went over to appraise a life-size bronze of a horse’s head displayed on a plinth by the fireplace.

I cleared my throat. ‘You could have phoned at least.’

He picked up a copy of a prominently displayed arts magazine that happened to contain my latest published article. He flicked listlessly through a couple of pages and dropped it back on the table. ‘I wrote you a letter.’

I watched him prowl around the room. He had a way of scrutinizing things that reminded me of a suspicious hotelier. I went over and straightened the magazine while he walked to a bookcase. ‘Well I didn’t get it.’

Eugene took out a first edition of *The Long Goodbye* and put it back in the wrong place. ‘Well I certainly sent it. I specifically informed you I was coming. In fact I expected you at the airport. Do you have *any* idea how long it takes to get here by bus?’

I replaced the book correctly. ‘You should have taken the train. It’s really direct.’

He walked to the window and tweaked the blind for a view of the street. He spoke over his shoulder. ‘I sent it from Cuba. They have an excellent postal service.’

I get so few letters, I was sure I’d recall one from Cuba. I tried hard to remember. ‘There was something weeks ago – a square blue envelope smothered with stamps of bearded dignitaries.’

‘That’s the one.’

‘I’m sorry. I threw it away. I thought it was junk.’

Eugene turned and stared. ‘You threw it away?’ He looked hurt and incredulous. ‘I took a lot of care over that letter: fascinating anecdotes, local colour – exactly the kind of thing I knew you’d appreciate.’ He shook his head. ‘And you threw it away.’

‘It was a genuine mistake. I always throw away letters that start with a long list of unlikely misfortunes and a demand for money.’

A motorbike whined on the road outside. Eugene skulked at the window. I felt tense.

So far this was completely typical. Eugene had a way of putting me on the defensive right from the moment we met. Somehow I always ended up having to justify myself, to explain actions that were self-explanatory and apologise for mistakes I hadn’t made. It had always been that way, ever since childhood: he’d paint himself into an impossible corner with his thoughtless behaviour, all the while staking some higher moral claim on the situation that made me feel guilty even though I’d done nothing wrong. It was really annoying.

‘What were you doing in Cuba?’

His eyes narrowed and he became evasive. ‘Believe me, you don’t want to know.’

‘Yes I do.’

‘In any case I can’t say.’

‘Why not?’

‘I was there in a semi-official capacity. That’s as much as I dare tell you.’

‘Come on!’

His face took on a concerned expression. ‘It’s for your own safety, Howard.’

I pondered this for a moment and decided it was bull. No sane government would ever employ Eugene to do anything more dangerous than fetch the mail. I looked sceptical while I headed for the kitchen. ‘Drink?’

‘A cold beer would hit the spot.’

‘Shaken not stirred?’

In the kitchen I tried hard to put a lid on my anxiety. The more I thought of that mountain of bags dumped in the hallway, the more I realized I’d have to be extra smart to avert catastrophe. I opened some beers and a packet of madeleines while I sought inspiration. My girlfriend Delphine and I had arranged to meet later on. I had hoped she would stay over afterwards. What I had in mind would be out of the question with Eugene in the adjoining bedroom. Just knowing he was in the same city was enough of a distraction.

I brought out the beers and tried to get at the facts. ‘What are you doing in Paris? Or is that a state secret?’

‘I’m here on a photo assignment.’

I had to admit it was a plausible explanation. Eugene had proved to be pathologically incapable of acquiring a second language, but he was a gifted photographer from an early age. He’d even persuaded our father to rig up a darkroom in the attic. I had not been allowed in there for months,

until I discovered Eugene smoking there one morning while reading *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. After a heated exchange, I was allowed in whenever I liked, except when the red light was on.

‘Oh?’ I said, in a casual tone. ‘How’s that going?’

Eugene lowered himself into a sofa as if he thought it might be soiled. He leant his elbows on the back of the cushions. ‘Fine. I had an exhibition. You may have read about it.’

I felt an immediate acid-burst of envy. We’d both been passionate to get our work acknowledged, and Eugene was childishly competitive. I glanced at the magazine he’d riffled and wished I’d had the sense to leave it open at the right page. ‘So what are you here to photograph – rocket installations?’

He shook his head. ‘This is strictly tourist stuff – a commission for a series from an in-flight magazine. It should be a pushover and it’s really good money.’

‘But that could take weeks!’

‘Two or three at least.’

I concealed my dismay with masterly self-control. We drank our beers. Silently, Eugene belched. ‘What things?’

‘Hmm?’

‘You claimed earlier that things were delicate.’

I opened some more beers while I considered how to respond. ‘It’s personal. Delphine and I have reached another critical juncture in our relationship. It’s really delicate. I can’t have anyone around to disturb the balance of possibilities.’

Eugene looked dubious, said nothing. I felt compelled to fill the silence with some specially selected wish-fulfilment. ‘We’re discussing the future, moving in together, maybe even marriage. Stuff like that.’

His mouth fell open. ‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

His lips formed a silent whistle. ‘And Delphine’s that Algerian nurse you met at a party? The one with the really big breasts?’

‘That’s Samia. And they’re not that big. She and I split up a while ago.’

‘Over Delphine?’

‘Of course not. I knew Delphine –’

‘In the biblical sense?’

‘No! We got together a long time afterwards. That’s what makes it special. We’d had the time to become friends. Our relationship developed naturally, with none of the pressure of wondering “is this the one” and all that romance crap.’

Why was I telling him all this? He hadn’t been here more than a few minutes and already I was pouring my heart out. My feelings for Delphine were personal and precious. I did not want them ridiculed, least of all by him. I cursed myself.

Eugene raised an eyebrow. ‘All that romance crap? You’ve always been hopelessly romantic – sickeningly so. Every girl you meet is the love of your life. You idealize them out of all recognition until they can’t take it any more and dump you.’ He leant forward to pick up a madeleine. ‘It’s all part of your reality aversion problem.’

‘My what?’

Eugene pointed at me with half a madeleine. Crumbs sprayed from his lips. ‘You can’t abide the sordid realities of life, so you dress them up in delusional romantic notions and then get traumatized when they fall to the ground. That’s probably what happened with the nurse. Tell me I’m wrong.’

‘You’re wrong.’

I frowned at Eugene, but he had a point. Naturally, I couldn’t let him know that.

The truth is my relations with girls tend to overheat extremely quickly and become unfit for purpose. Many women mistake the intensity of my feelings as a dangerous indication I’m emotionally unbalanced. One of them told me she felt smothered by my attentions, although we hadn’t met for months. It seems that even when I’m playing it cool, I’m frequently regarded as overwhelmingly needy.

While Eugene was busy with another beer, I attempted to reclaim some moral ground. ‘Unlike you, I’ve never been able to treat girls as means to an end. I have to have a genuine affection for them or else keep them at a distance.’

He smiled ironically and reached for another madeleine. ‘You express a genuine affection for them *and* keep them at a distance. Women find this confusing and want out. It’s as simple as that. Haven’t you noticed this recurring pattern in your relationships? I have.’

‘Delphine is different. I can’t have you spoiling it for me.’

‘Now you’re being paranoid.’

‘Damn right I’m paranoid. I haven’t forgotten that Kiki thing.’

There. I’d said it. I watched as Eugene made an elaborate pretence of choking on his madeleine. ‘You can never let that go, can you? I’m barely inside the door and you bring up Kiki – which was, by the way, all your own fault.’ He coughed some more and gulped back his beer. ‘You have to stop living in the past, Howard.’

‘Then stop dragging it into my life!’

We both fell silent while we contemplated our next move. Unfortunately, I’ve never been any good at anticipating what other people might say in difficult situations. Delphine had a definite gift for it, which meant she won most of our arguments. I wished she were with me, so I could benefit from her advice. Also, my stomach was rumbling; I had saved myself for dinner.

‘Where’s my room?’

I became exasperated. ‘Haven’t you listened to a word I said?’

Eugene frowned his incomprehension. ‘Why are you so inhospitable? This apartment’s the size of an arrivals terminal. It’s just one night.’ He stabbed a finger at me. ‘*And* it’s what your mother would want.’

‘It’s not my mother’s apartment.’

‘It’s not yours either.’

‘Paris pullulates hotels.’

‘Howard! I need shelter.’

Eugene gazed at me with that wounded stag look he had perfected since childhood. Avoiding eye contact, I got to my feet and stood over him for psychological advantage. ‘You don’t understand the situation here. There’s the whole Delphine thing ...’ I looked at my watch. ‘I have to get ready ... Plus there’s my work. It’s all incredibly complicated. I’ve constructed a fragile web of key influencers. It only takes one stupid remark to pull it apart. I can’t have you around, and that’s final.’

Anger glinted in his eyes. ‘I am not the kind of guy who makes stupid remarks or doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.’

‘Hah! Now who’s averse to reality?’

‘In my line of work you have to watch everything you say or you wind up in a lot of trouble.’

‘You always wind up in a lot of trouble. That letter from Cuba sounded desperate.’

‘I am desperate!’

My jaw clenched in frustration.

Abruptly, I collected the empties and carried them to the kitchen. Through the crack in the door I watched Eugene slump deeper into the sofa, his hands clasped at the back of his head. He put his feet up on the coffee table. I desperately needed to think, so I decided to clean some dishes – I usually find housework congenial to reflection and reappraisal. This time though my thoughts went round in circles, propelled by a tumultuous resentment ... that crack about my mother. All I could do was wish him gone and forgotten. By the time I’d finished, I was convinced I’d resolved not to capitulate to my half-brother’s wholly unreasonable demands.

When I returned to the living room, determined to stand my ground, I found Eugene reading my article. For several minutes I watched his lips move and his eyelids flutter. He looked up with an amazed expression I half-suspected was covertly insulting. ‘Wow! I mean ... congratulations! This is really insightful!’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Certainly I do! Witty, persuasive and extremely well argued. I’m impressed!’

‘Thanks Eugene.’

I was moved by his approbation and pathetically grateful. Writing is a lonely job and it’s always hard to get any kind of perspective on it. Generally, the articles I write seem excellent right up until the time they appear in print – if they do. As soon as they’re published they start to stink.

I stared at my half-brother and sighed in what I hoped indicated provisional acquiescence to an extremely temporary arrangement. ‘I’ll show you to your room.’

‘And the bathroom. I need to get ready for your future wife. Where are we going?’

Afterwards, I brushed the crumbs from the sofa. I punched the cushions he’d crushed. And I remembered something Chandler wrote: *there is no trap so deadly as the trap you set for yourself*. I punched the cushions again.

Then I took deep breaths and stared at the floor.

My half-brother had done it again – arrived out of nowhere and taken over my life. I was disgusted with myself: Eugene had mixed me the same old cocktail of guilt and inferiority and like a fool I’d downed it in one. Now all that was left was damage limitation. It was so depressing. I paced the apartment in an aimless fashion for what seemed like hours. I could hear Eugene humming tunelessly in his bathroom. I checked the time and went to my own room to freshen up for Delphine. I opted for my brand-new Bill Shakespeare snowboarding t-shirt and a pair of lavender chinos.

Delphine phoned a while later when Eugene was still in his room. ‘Howard, I have to work late. I’ll meet you at *Bistro Loulou*.’

This was more bad news. I swallowed my disappointment and tried hard to gauge her mood, which was difficult over the phone. I really needed visual clues, yet I knew from occasionally bitter experience that even they could seldom be taken at face value. She sounded curt, but that was her default business mode.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Only ... ’

‘Only what?’

‘There’ll probably be an extra person. Eugene arrived today. There’s no getting rid of him. I hope you don’t mind.’

I winced at the long silence. ‘Hello?’

‘Eugene your brother?’

‘Half-brother.’

‘Oh.’

‘Well don’t get too excited.’

‘Is he really that bad?’

‘Yes he is.’

More silence, longer this time. A door closed in the background. ‘Then perhaps I should bring someone with me.’

I paused to consider. ‘A woman you mean?’

‘Yes. It could make things easier. Celeste, for example.’

‘Celeste? Celeste’s a really nice girl. I don’t know if she’d be right for Eugene. Nice girls bring out the worst in him.’

‘Celeste can take care of herself. I’ll ask.’

‘Okay then, but warn her.’

After we’d hung up I went over our conversation, as was my habit. I was unsure if it had advanced or retarded our relationship – it was often difficult to arrive at firm conclusions about Delphine. I also became somewhat concerned for Celeste, whom I liked a lot. Delphine’s assessments of social situations were usually superior to mine, but in this case she was acting out of reasonable assumptions that simply did not apply.

Whatever happened, my plans were in ruins. A romantic *tête-à-tête* with Delphine was out of the question; instead, I faced the prospect of an awkward four-handed affair at which Eugene would only embarrass me and probably everyone else. My thoughts turned to Kiki and how her mind had been poisoned against me.

That way madness lay.

Desperate for distraction, I reread my published article while I waited for Eugene.

There had been a Fellini retrospective at the cinémathèque française, and I had written an in-depth analysis of *La Dolce Vita*, one of my favourite films. I was reasonably pleased with the article. Its combination of hard-headed nostalgia and wistful realism was close to my heart. I also hoped it would increase my profile among the literati and pave the way for my fiction debut. I could use it at the book launch I was attending the next day, at which I intended to make some significant moves and talk to Henri Klosterman, a near-legendary fiction editor, with whom I had a tenuous business connection.

‘We’ll walk to the café,’ I told Eugene when he finally emerged from his room. He’d showered and shaved and changed into a Robert Capa t-shirt and blue linen suit. As usual, he’d overdone the cologne.

‘Is it safe?’ He approached the window and peered into the dappled street.

‘Of course it’s safe. By the way, Delphine may bring a friend. Her name’s Celeste and she’s a really nice girl.’

‘Sounds good. What does she do?’

‘She’s a trainee lawyer like Delphine.’

‘Delphine’s a lawyer? That could be useful.’

Eugene did not elaborate on this remark, which I thought strange even for him. I collected my keys and took a last look round the room. Serge’s kindness was mostly indolence on his part, but his generosity was unquestionable. Ethically, I felt obligated to treat his home with the utmost respect, and I had the habit of checking things carefully before I left the apartment.

When we reached the street, Eugene glanced around before standing beneath a sycamore and looking up at the building. ‘Which one’s our balcony?’

‘*Our* balcony?’

‘The one with the fern thing and the imitation Brancusi?’

‘It’s not imitation.’

‘Then whose is that with the plastic chair and the motorbike?’

‘How should I know? Does it matter?’

Eugene pursed his lips. ‘Habit. I like to assess security. You never know when you might need an alternative exit.’

It was another sultry evening, airless and enervating. The heat was intense; a furious sun glared off store windows and passing cars; the crowded streets were heavy with the aromas of unidentifiable deep-fried gristle and noxious pollutants. I felt fretful and sticky under my fresh clothes.

We had a little time so I gave Eugene a tour of the neighbourhood before heading for *Bistro Loulou*. I knew some of the writers and artists who lived around there, whose ranks I hoped one day to join. I thought he would be impressed by the *arrondissement*, with its chic boutiques and gourmet restaurants; its tree-lined boulevards and mysterious shaded gardens; its busy cafés with tables beneath the sycamores, and little ethnic food stores with their produce artfully arranged in glossy pyramids. I showed him the artisanal boulangerie around the corner that makes incredible bread and pastries. It seldom closed and I was on friendly terms with the proprietors.

‘The bread in Paris is generally not what it’s cracked up to be,’ I told Eugene as we sauntered. ‘These days most of the croissants are manufactured in secretive factories dispersed in remote locations throughout Eastern Europe. You’d know all about that kind of thing, after your Cuban assignment.’

He made no reply and seemed distracted, oppressed by the heat. I went through the motions of showing him some historical landmarks, but his reactions were monosyllabic and apathetic. It occurred to me later that this was in fact a good thing: if he remained unimpressed then I’d have less trouble getting him to leave.

‘So who’s Serge and what does he do?’ Eugene asked, soon after a non-committal appreciation of a baroque church.

‘He travels a lot. He’s some kind of comprador; at any rate, he’s into import–export. I don’t know what.’

‘Tanned like a reptile with a lot of gold chains around his neck?’

I was startled. ‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘It’s typical of men who make their living from illicit drugs.’

‘Serge is actually an extremely moral person. He’s been very kind to me.’

Eugene laughed. When Eugene laughs it’s always short and dry and somewhat joyless, like an explosive guffaw. An old lady in grey pigtailed looked round in alarm.

‘You’re really naïve, Howard. Aren’t you in the least bit curious about this character?’

‘Not to the point of prying. And he’s not a *character* – not in the way you mean. He knows several languages. I’ve seen him read text that looks like a row of paperclips.’

‘That’s worse than I thought. Have you searched the apartment?’

I halted and looked Eugene in the face. ‘Stop now, will you? Serge happens to be a cultured cosmopolitan – a polyglot and patron of the arts. Accusing him of criminality is no better ... well, it’s really no better than the Nazis.’

Eugene smirked. ‘I’m merely putting forward an obvious hypothesis you appear to have left unconsidered in your haste to appropriate his lifestyle. Just look at the evidence’ – he held out a hand to count off his fingers: ‘(a) no apparent means of support, (b) an expensive apartment, (c) priceless works of art and (d) bad taste in jewellery. In any court of law I’d have a good prima facie case.’

‘Delphine wouldn’t agree with you. She’s a lawyer, remember?’

‘*Almost* a lawyer.’

I sighed and resumed our walk. There was no point in arguing. Eugene would never let go of anything once he got it inside his head.

Gradually, the sound of our footfalls on cloistered streets induced a melancholy mood. I gazed between the swaying branches of the sycamores and watched the sky prepare to darken. Soon the streetlamps would flare and the miracle of night would begin. I had looked forward to the evening and my hours alone with Delphine. I had rehearsed the things I meant to tell her; I had relished the moment when I would kiss the tender skin where her neck and shoulder meet. I trembled at the memory of her voice, when she breathed beautiful words – beautiful and intimate words as sweet as love, whispered for me alone.

‘I’m sweating like a pig. Why’s it so damned hot?’ Eugene wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

A dense fog of despair billowed inside me; I manoeuvred my thoughts around as best I could. ‘Climate change, Eugene. Melting ice caps, oceans rising, weather all over the place ... we watch and do nothing. Evidently, humanity is hopelessly in love with the prospect of its own extinction. Eros and thanatos – they’re in all of us. That looks a pleasant hotel.’

Eugene glanced idly at the pink and white façade of a family run pension and nodded his agreement. ‘I say bring it on. The closer we get to destroying the planet, the more chance we’ll have of colonizing space. Tell me about Delphine.’

I wondered how much I should open up to Eugene, who could in principle be relied upon to use anything he was told against me. However, I decided honesty was the best policy, as it would provide him with fewer hostages to fortune. Also, I had a grudging respect for his insights into female psychology, and I needed help.

‘Delphine is one of those women who fundamentally despise weakness in men. She needs someone she can lean on, but at the same time she hates it if a man is stronger than she is. It can be confusing. Sometimes I don’t know how to react to her moods. I often feel she’s watching me to see what I’ll do.’

‘God! That’s tough. She’ll make a great lawyer.’

‘You’ll find Celeste is somewhat similar. In fact, now I think of it, so are most women over here. I was really bewildered at first. The French are superficially like ourselves, but deep down their ways are not ours. Especially Parisian women.’

‘Are you sure you’re not rationalizing your own romantic failures by blaming them on gender stereotypes?’

‘I try not to think in terms of stereotypes.’

‘Then perhaps you should. There’s a lot of truth in stereotypes. That’s what makes them stereotypes.’

While we crossed the road to cut through a children’s playground, I tried to explain to Eugene my admittedly amorphous thoughts on the French national psyche. ‘It’s more complex than you think. There are a lot of nuances.’

Eugene looked on dispassionately as a toddler fell head first off a climbing frame and began to bawl. ‘For instance?’

‘For instance, the French people you’ll meet might come across much like yourself: arrogant and overbearing. Beneath that surface layer, however, they’re fundamentally insecure and uncertain. It all goes back years – at least to the Second World War. Of course, they had the Resistance and all that, when women wore berets and played the accordion. What’s underneath it, though? Occupation. Vichy. Collaboration. There’s a national shame that few people acknowledge. Instead, they bluster and project amazing self-assurance.’

Eugene nodded. ‘Interesting theory. Don’t mention it tonight. We want to enjoy ourselves.’

My voice became a little shrill. ‘I’m simply warning you not to assume you know what everyone is thinking. Whenever you do that you get out of your depth and start saying things you shouldn’t. And just because you’re nine months older doesn’t give you the right to tell untrue stories about me.’

‘I think you’ll find it does.’

I checked the time and began to head for *Bistro Loulou*. When we arrived, Eugene insisted on a table at an open window that faced the street. He sat with his back to the wall. ‘I’ll order.’

‘You speak French now?’

‘You pick these things up in my business. *Monsieur? Dos cervezas por favor.*’

‘*Comment?*’

‘That’s two beers, please,’ I translated.

‘*Ah! Merci.*’

Eugene stared after the waiter. ‘Did you see that? He looked right through me.’

‘God! You’re so disrespectful!’

Eugene guffawed. ‘On the contrary, I was paying him a considerable compliment.’

‘The fact is you’re incredibly arrogant.’

Our beers arrived and we became morose. I was angry with my half-brother and also a little puzzled. Eugene was not entirely himself – whatever *that* was – and his eyes were everywhere. He

watched the tables outside and he took a keen interest in the comings and goings of *Bistro Loulou*. It was already crowded, with the usual parade of ravaged misanthropes propped up on bar stools, their heads slumped over glasses of *pastis*. I was beginning to know how they feel. A raucous group of office workers was seated on the far side of the annexe. At least someone was having a good time. A waiter went over and handed out menus the size of newspapers.

Eugene sat up and stared. 'God! That's a great looking girl.'

I glanced over my shoulder. 'Good. Celeste is here.'

'Which one's Celeste?'

'The redhead.'

'Oh! Pity.'