

The
**LITTLE
PARIS
BOOKSHOP**



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*The International
Bestseller*

1



How on earth could I have let them talk me into it?

The two generals of number 27 Rue Montagnard – Madame Bernard, the owner, and Madame Rosalette, the concierge – had caught Monsieur in a pincer movement between their ground-floor flats.

‘That Le P. has treated his wife shamelessly.’

‘Scandalously. Like a moth treats a wedding veil.’

‘You can hardly blame some people when you look at their wives. Fridges in Chanel. But men? Monsters, all of them.’

‘Ladies, I don’t quite know what . . .’

‘Not you of course, Monsieur Perdu. You are cashmere compared with the normal yarn from which men are spun.’

‘Anyway, we’re getting a new tenant. On the fourth floor. Yours, Monsieur.’

‘But Madame has nothing left. Absolutely nothing, only shattered illusions. She needs just about everything.’

‘And that’s where you come in, Monsieur. Give whatever you can. All donations welcome.’

‘Of course. Maybe a good book . . .’

‘Actually, we were thinking of something more practical. A table, perhaps. You know, Madame has —’

‘Nothing. I got that impression.’

The bookseller could not imagine what might be more practical than a book, but he promised to give the new tenant a table. He still had one.



Monsieur Perdu pushed his tie between the top buttons of his white, vigorously ironed shirt and carefully rolled up his sleeves. Inwards, one fold at a time, up to the elbow. He stared at the bookcase in the corridor. Behind the shelves lay a room he hadn't entered for almost twenty-one years.

Twenty-one years and summers and New Year's mornings.

But in that room was the table.

He exhaled, groped indiscriminately for a book and pulled Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* out of the bookcase. It didn't fall apart. Nor did it bite his hand like an affronted cat.

He took out the next novel, then two more. Now he reached into the shelf with both hands, grabbed whole parcels of books out of it and piled them up beside him.

The stacks grew into trees. Towers. Magic mountains. He looked at the last book in his hand. *When the Clock Struck Thirteen*. A tale of time travel.

If he'd believed in omens, this would have been a sign.

He banged the bottom of the shelves with his fists to loosen them from their fastenings. Then he stepped back.

There. Layer by layer, it appeared. Behind the wall of words. The door to the room where . . .

I could simply buy a table.

Monsieur Perdu ran his hand over his mouth. Yes. Dust down the books, put them away again, forget about the door. Buy a table and carry on as he had for the last two decades. In twenty years' time he'd be seventy, and from there he'd make it through the rest. Maybe he'd die prematurely.

Coward.

He tightened his trembling fist on the door handle.

Slowly the tall man opened the door. He pushed it softly inwards, screwed up his eyes and . . .

Nothing but moonlight and dry air. He breathed it in through his nose, analysing it, but found nothing.

— *'s smell has gone.*

Over the course of twenty-one summers, Monsieur Perdu had become as adept at avoiding thinking of— as he was at stepping around open manholes.

He mainly thought of her as—. As a pause amid the hum of his thoughts, as a blank in the pictures of the past, as a dark spot amid his feelings. He was capable of conjuring all kinds of gaps.

Monsieur Perdu looked around. How quiet the room seemed. And pale despite the lavender-blue wallpaper. The passing of the years behind the closed door had squeezed the colour from the walls.

The light from the corridor met little that could cast a shadow. A bistro chair. The kitchen table. A vase with the lavender stolen two decades earlier from the Valensole plateau. And a fifty-year-old man who now sat down on the chair and wrapped his arms around himself.

There had once been curtains, and over there, pictures, flowers and books, a cat called Castor that slept on the sofa. There were candlesticks and whispering, full wine glasses and music. Dancing shadows on the wall, one of them tall, the other strikingly beautiful. There had been love in this room.

Now there's only me.

He clenched his fists and pressed them against his burning eyes.

Monsieur Perdu swallowed and swallowed again to fight back the tears. His throat was too tight to breathe and his back seemed to glow with heat and pain.

When he could once more swallow without it hurting, Monsieur Perdu stood up and opened the casement window. Aromas came swirling in from the back courtyard.

The herbs from the Goldenbergs' little garden. Rosemary and thyme mixed with the massage oils used by Che, the blind chiroprapist and 'foot whisperer'. Added to that, the smell of pancakes intermingled with Kofi's spicy and meaty African barbecued dishes. Over it all drifted the perfume of Paris in June, the fragrance of lime blossom and expectation.

But Monsieur Perdu wouldn't let these scents affect him. He resisted their charms. He'd become extremely good at ignoring anything that might in any way arouse feelings of yearning. Aromas. Melodies. The beauty of things.

He fetched soap and water from the storeroom next to the bare kitchen and began to clean the wooden table.

He fought off the blurry picture of himself sitting at this table, not alone but with — .

He washed and scrubbed and ignored the piercing question of what he was meant to do now that he had opened the door to the room in which all his love, his dreams and his past had been buried.

Memories are like wolves. You can't lock them away and hope they leave you alone.

Monsieur Perdu carried the narrow table to the door and heaved it through the bookcase, past the magic mountains of paper onto the landing and over to the flat across the corridor.

As he was about to knock, a sad sound reached his ears.
Stifled sobbing, as if through a cushion.
Someone was crying behind the green door.
A woman. And she was crying as though she wanted nobody,
absolutely nobody, to hear.

2



‘She was married to You-Know-Who, Monsieur Le P.’

He didn’t know. Perdu didn’t read the Paris gossip pages.

Madame Catherine Le P.-You-Know-Who had come home late one Thursday evening from her husband’s art agency, where she took care of his PR. Her key no longer fitted into the lock, and there was a suitcase on the stairs with divorce papers on top of it. Her husband had moved to an unknown address and taken the old furniture and a new woman with him.

Catherine, soon-to-be-ex-wife-of-Le-Dirty-Swine, possessed nothing but the clothes she had brought into their marriage – and the realisation that it had been naïve of her to think that their erst-while love would guarantee decent treatment after their separation, and to assume that she knew her husband so well that he could no longer surprise her.

‘A common mistake,’ Madame Bernard, the lady of the house, had pontificated in between puffing out smoke signals from her pipe. ‘You only really get to know your husband when he walks out on you.’

Monsieur Perdu had not yet seen the woman who'd been so coldheartedly ejected from her own life.

Now he listened to the lonely sobs she was desperately trying to muffle, perhaps with her hands or a tea towel. Should he announce his presence and embarrass her? He decided to fetch the vase and the chair first.

He tiptoed back and forth between his flat and hers. He knew how treacherous this proud old house could be, which floorboards squeaked, which walls were more recent and thinner additions and which concealed ducts that acted like megaphones.

When he pored over his eighteen-thousand-piece map of the world jigsaw in the otherwise empty living room, the sounds of the other residents' lives were transmitted to him through the fabric of the house.

The Goldenbergs' arguments (Him: 'Can't you just for once . . . ? Why are you . . . ? Haven't I . . . ?' Her: 'You always have to . . . You never do . . . I want you to . . .') He'd known the two of them as newlyweds. They'd laughed together a lot back then. Then came the children, and the parents drifted apart like continents.

He heard Clara Violette's electric wheelchair rolling over carpet edges, wooden floors and doorsills. He remembered the young pianist back when she was able to dance.

He heard Che and young Kofi cooking. Che was stirring the pots. The man had been blind since birth, but he said that he could see the world through the fragrant trails and traces that people's feelings and thoughts had left behind. Che could sense whether a room had been loved or lived or argued in.

Perdu also listened every Sunday to how Madame Bomme and the widows' club giggled like girls at the dirty books he slipped them behind their stuffy relatives' backs.

The snatches of life that could be overheard in the house at

number 27 Rue Montagnard were like a sea lapping the shores of Perdu's silent isle.

He had been listening for more than twenty years. He knew his neighbours so well that he was sometimes amazed by how little they knew about him (not that he minded). They had no idea that he owned next to no furniture apart from a bed, a chair and a clothes rail – no knick-knacks, no music, no pictures or photo albums or three-piece suite or crockery (other than for himself) – or that he had chosen such simplicity of his own free will. The two rooms he still occupied were so empty that they echoed when he coughed. The only thing in the living room was the giant jigsaw puzzle on the floor. His bedroom was furnished with a bed, the ironing board, a reading light and a clothes rail on wheels containing three identical sets of clothing: grey trousers, white shirt, brown V-neck jumper. In the kitchen were a stove-top coffee pot, a tin of coffee and a shelf stacked with food. Arranged in alphabetical order. Maybe it was just as well that no one saw this.

And yet he harboured a strange affection for 27 Rue Montagnard's residents. He felt inexplicably better when he knew that they were well – and in his unassuming way he tried to make a contribution. Books were a means of helping. Otherwise he stayed in the background, a small figure in a painting, while life was played out in the foreground.

However, the new tenant on the third floor, Maximilian Jordan, wouldn't leave Monsieur Perdu in peace. Jordan wore specially made earplugs with earmuffs over them, plus a woolly hat on cold days. Ever since the young author's debut novel had made him famous amid great fanfare, he'd been on the run from fans who would have given their right arms to move in with him. Meanwhile, Jordan had developed a peculiar interest in Monsieur Perdu.

While Perdu was on the landing arranging the chair beside the kitchen table, and the vase on top, the crying stopped.

In its place he heard the squeak of a floorboard that someone was trying to walk across without making it creak.

He peered through the pane of frosted glass in the green door. Then he knocked twice, very gently.

A face moved closer. A blurred, bright oval.

'Yes?' the oval whispered.

'I've got a chair and a table for you.'

The oval said nothing.

I have to speak softly to her. She's cried so much she's probably all dried out and she'll crumble if I'm too loud.

'And a vase. For flowers. Red flowers, for instance. They'd look really pretty on the white table.'

He had his cheek almost pressed up against the glass.

He whispered, 'But I can give you a book as well.'

The light in the staircase went out.

'What kind of book?' the oval whispered.

'The consoling kind.'

'I need to cry some more. I'll drown if I don't. Can you understand that?'

'Of course. Sometimes you're swimming in unwept tears and you'll go under if you store them up inside.' *And I'm at the bottom of a sea of tears.* 'I'll bring you a book for crying then.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow. Promise me you'll have something to eat and drink before you carry on crying.'

He didn't know why he was taking such liberties. It must be something to do with the door between them.

The glass misted up with her breath.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes.'

When the hall light flared on again, the oval shrank back.

Monsieur Perdu laid his hand briefly on the glass where her face had been a second before.

And if she needs anything else, a chest of drawers or a potato peeler, I'll buy it and claim I had it already.

He went into his empty flat and pushed the bolt across. The door leading into the room behind the bookcase was still open. The longer Monsieur Perdu looked in there, the more it seemed as though the summer of 1992 were rising up out of the floor. The cat jumped down from the sofa on soft, velvet paws and stretched. The sunlight caressed a bare back, the back turned and became — . She smiled at Monsieur Perdu, rose from her reading position and walked towards him naked, with a book in her hand.

‘Are you finally ready?’ asked — .

Monsieur Perdu slammed the door.

No.

3



‘No,’ Monsieur Perdu said again the following morning. ‘I’d rather not sell you this book.’

Gently he pried *Night* from the lady’s hand. Of the many novels on his book barge – the vessel moored on the Seine that he had named *Literary Apothecary* – she had inexplicably chosen the notorious bestseller by Maximilian ‘Max’ Jordan, the earmuff wearer from the third floor in Rue Montagnard.

The customer looked at the bookseller, taken aback.

‘Why not?’

‘Max Jordan doesn’t suit you.’

‘Max Jordan doesn’t suit me?’

‘That’s right. He’s not your type.’

‘My type. Okay. Excuse me, but maybe I should point out to you that I’ve come to your book barge for a book. Not a husband, *mon cher* Monsieur.’

‘With all due respect, what you read is more important in the long term than the man you marry, *ma chère* Madame.’

She looked at him through eyes like slits.

‘Give me the book, take my money, and we can both pretend it’s a nice day.’

‘It is a nice day, and tomorrow is the start of summer, but you’re not going to get this book. Not from me. May I suggest a few others?’

‘Right, and flog me some old classic you’re too lazy to throw overboard where it can poison the fish?’ She spoke softly to begin with, but her volume kept increasing.

‘Books aren’t eggs, you know. Simply because a book has aged a bit doesn’t mean it’s gone bad.’ There was now an edge to Monsieur Perdu’s voice too. ‘What is wrong with old? Age isn’t a disease. We all grow old, even books. But are you, is *anyone*, worth less, or less *important*, because they’ve been around for longer?’

‘It’s absurd how you’re twisting everything, all because you don’t want me to have that stupid *Night* book.’

The customer – or rather noncustomer – tossed her purse into her luxury shoulder bag and tugged at the zip, which got stuck.

Perdu felt something welling up inside him, a wild feeling, anger, tension – only it had nothing to do with this woman. He couldn’t hold his tongue, though. He hurried after her as she strode angrily through the belly of the book barge and called out to her in the half-light between the long bookshelves: ‘It’s your choice, Madame! You can leave and spit on me. Or you can spare yourself thousands of hours of torture starting right now.’

‘Thanks, that’s exactly what I’m doing.’

‘Surrender to the treasures of books instead of entering into pointless relationships with men, who neglect you anyway, or going on crazy diets because you’re not thin enough for one man and not stupid enough for the next.’

She stood stock-still by the large bay window that looked out over the Seine, and glared at Perdu. ‘How dare you!’

‘Books keep stupidity at bay. And vain hopes. And vain men. They undress you with love, strength and knowledge. It’s love from within. Make your choice: book or . . .’

Before he could finish his sentence, a Parisian pleasure boat ploughed past with a group of Chinese women standing by the railing under umbrellas. They began clicking away with their cameras when they caught sight of Paris’s famous floating *Literary Apothecary*. The pleasure boat drove brown-green dunes of water against the bank, and the book barge reeled.

The customer teetered on her smart high heels, but instead of offering her his hand, Perdu handed her *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*.

She made an instinctive grab for the novel and clung to it.

Perdu held on to the book as he spoke to the stranger in a soothing, tender and calm voice.

‘You need your own room. Not too bright, with a kitten to keep you company. And this book, which you will please read slowly, so you can take the occasional break. You’ll do a lot of thinking and probably a bit of crying. For yourself. For the years. But you’ll feel better afterwards. You’ll know that now you don’t have to die, even if that’s how it feels because the guy didn’t treat you well. And you will like yourself again and won’t find yourself ugly or naïve.’

Only after delivering these instructions did he let go.

The customer stared at him. He knew from her shocked look that he had hit the target and got through to her. Pretty much a bull’s-eye.

Then she dropped the book.

‘You’re completely nuts,’ she whispered before spinning on her heel and tottering off, head down, through the boat’s book-filled belly and out onto the embankment.

Monsieur Perdu picked up the *Hedgehog*. The book’s spine had

been damaged by the fall. He would have to offer Muriel Barbery's novel for a euro or two to one of the *bouquinistes* on the embankment with their boxes of books for people to rummage through.

Then he gazed after the customer. How she fought her way through the strolling crowds. How her shoulders shook in her suit.

She was crying. She was weeping like someone who knows that this small drama is not going to break her, but is nonetheless deeply hurt by the injustice of the here and now. She had already suffered one cruel, deep blow. Wasn't that enough? Did this nasty bookseller really need to rub salt in her wound?

Monsieur Perdu suspected that on her personal idiot scale of one to ten, she ranked him – the paper tiger idiot on his stupid *Literary Apothecary* – about a twelve.

He agreed with her. His outburst and his high-handed tone must somehow be related to the previous night and to the room. He was usually more sanguine.

He was generally unperturbed by his customers' wishes, insults or peculiarities. He divided them into three categories. The first category comprised those for whom books were the only breath of fresh air in their claustrophobic daily lives. His favourite customers. They were confident he would tell them what they needed. Or they confided their vulnerabilities to him, for example: 'No novels with mountains, lifts or views in them, please – I'm scared of heights.' Some of them sang Monsieur Perdu children's tunes, or rather growled them: 'Mm-hmm, mmh, dadada – know that one?' in the hope that the great bookseller would remember for them and give them a book featuring the melodies of their childhood. And most of the time he did know a book to match the songs. There had been a time when he sang a lot.

The second category of customers came aboard *Lulu*, the original name of his book barge in the Port des Champs-Élysées,

because they had been lured there by the name of the bookshop: *la pharmacie littéraire*, the *Literary Apothecary*.

They came to buy wacky postcards ('Reading kills prejudice' or 'People who read don't lie – at least not at the same time') or miniature books in brown medicine bottles, or to take photos.

Yet these people were downright entertaining compared with the third kind, who thought they were kings but, unfortunately, lacked the manners of royalty. Without saying '*Bonjour*' or so much as looking at him as they handled every book with fingers greasy from the chips they'd been eating, they asked Perdu in a reproachful tone: 'Don't you have any plasters with poems on them? Or crime-series toilet paper? Why don't you stock inflatable travel pillows? Now that would be a useful thing for a book pharmacy to have.'

Perdu's mother, Lirabelle Bernier, formerly Perdu, had urged him to sell rubbing alcohol and compression stockings – women of a certain age got heavy legged when they sat reading.

Some days he sold more stockings than literature.

He sighed.

Why was such an emotionally vulnerable woman so eager to read *Night*?

All right, it wouldn't have done her any harm.

Well, not much.

The newspaper *Le Monde* had feted the novel and Max Jordan as 'the new voice of rebellious youth'. The women's magazines had worked themselves into a frenzy over the 'boy with the hungry heart' and had printed photo portraits of the author bigger than the book's cover. Max Jordan always looked somewhat bemused in these pictures.

Bemused and bruised, thought Perdu.

Jordan's debut novel was full of men who, out of fear for their

individuality, responded to love with nothing but hatred and cynical indifference. One critic had celebrated *Night* as the ‘manifesto of a new masculinity.’

Perdu thought it was something a bit less pretentious. It was a rather desperate attempt by a young man who was in love for the first time to take stock of his inner life. The young man cannot understand how he can lose all self-control and start loving and then, just as mystifyingly, stop again. How unsettling it is for him to be unable to decide whom he loves and who loves him, where it begins and where it ends, and all the terribly unpredictable things in between.

Love, the dictator whom men find so terrifying. No wonder that men, being men, generally greet this tyrant by running away. Millions of women read the book to find out why men were so cruel to them. Why they changed the locks, dumped them by text, slept with their best friends. All to thumb their nose at the great dictator: *See, you’re not going to get me. No, not me.*

But was the book really of any comfort to these women?

Night had been translated into twenty-nine languages. They’d even sold it to Belgium, as Rosalette the concierge had been keen to note. As a Frenchwoman born and raised, she liked to point out that you could never know with the Belgians.

Max Jordan had moved into 27 Rue Montagnard seven weeks ago, opposite the Goldenbergs on the third floor. He hadn’t yet been tracked down by any of the fans who pursued him with love letters, phone calls and lifelong pledges. There was even a *Night* Wikiforum, where they swapped their news and views about his ex-girlfriends (unknown, the big question being: was Jordan a virgin?), his eccentric habits (wearing earmuffs) and his possible addresses (Paris, Antibes, London).

Perdu had seen his fair share of *Night* addicts in the *Literary*

Apothecary. They'd come aboard wearing earmuffs and beseeching Monsieur Perdu to arrange a reading by their idol. When Perdu suggested this to his neighbour, the twenty-one-year-old had gone deathly pale. Stage fright, Perdu reckoned.

To him, Jordan was a young man on the run, a child who had been proclaimed a man of letters against his will – and surely, for many, a whistle-blower on men's emotional turmoil. There were even hate forums on the Web where anonymous posters ripped Jordan's novel apart, made fun of it and advised the author to do what the despairing character in his novel does when he realises that he'll never be able to master love: he throws himself from a Corsican cliff top into the sea below.

The most fascinating things about *Night* were the author's descriptions of male frailties: he wrote about the inner life of men more honestly than any man had done before. He trampled on every one of literature's idealised and familiar images of men: the image of the 'he-man', the 'emotional dwarf', the 'demented old man' and the 'lone wolf'. A feminist magazine had given its review of Jordan's debut novel the appropriately mellow headline MEN ARE HUMAN TOO.

Jordan's daring impressed Perdu. Yet the novel still struck him as a kind of gazpacho that kept sloshing over the edge of the soup bowl. Its author was just as emotionally defenceless and unprotected: he was the positive print of Perdu's negative.

Perdu wondered how it must feel to experience things so intensely and yet survive.