

**GUROV AND ANNA: MELODRAMA, METAFICTION, AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF NARRATIVES IN FILM AND FICTION**

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Abstract

This thesis contains an original feature screenplay entitled *Gurov and Anna*, and an accompanying scholarly essay. The essay examines some of the themes found in my screenplay, with a focus on anxiety about the creation and consumption of narratives, and situates them within a grander literary, dramatic, and cinematic tradition, as well as in relation to the scholarly writings of Patricia Waugh and Peter Brooks.

Cette thèse contient un scénario original intitulé *Gurov and Anna*, ainsi qu'un texte d'accompagnement. Le texte d'accompagnement décrit quelques-uns des thèmes présents dans mon scénario, en mettant l'accent sur l'anxiété liée à la création et la lecture de récits et les situe dans un contexte étendu de traditions littéraires, dramatiques, et cinématographiques, ainsi qu'en relation avec les textes de Patricia Waugh et Peter Brooks.

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Above all, all my love and thanks to Mom and Dad for their unwavering love, support, and encouragement, without which it would have been impossible for me to do any of this.

Celeste: Mom, I want to be a writer.

Mom: So, be a writer. Write.

Thank you.

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Introduction

This thesis aims to portray and analyze two character types, what I call ‘reader’ and ‘writer’ characters – literally and figuratively – who construct narratives in their lives, either by ‘plotting’ or ‘editing’ reality (writers), or by ‘reading’ or projecting consumed fictions onto reality (readers). The accompanying scholarly essay then surveys a history of these character types, and discusses a history of anxiety – from *Exodus* to a recent study featured on the arts and culture show *Q* with Jian Ghomeshi – about the consumption of cultural artefacts and their potential to destabilize our place in a tangible reality.

GUROV AND ANNA

A note on language:

BENOIT: Speaks English with only the slightest French Canadian accent. In French, he speaks with a mildly Eastern accent (e.g.: Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships).

MERCEDES: Speaks English with a French Montreal accent, but not with significant difficulty.

AUDREY: Speaks French with a Parisian accent.

CHANTAL and NICOLE: Speak French with a Parisian-like accent, as they are private schooled in the French system.

JEAN: Speaks French with an urban Quebecois accent. His English is also spoken with a thick accent and is mostly limited to common and simple expressions.

FADE IN:

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

BENOIT, mid-40s and exhausted, lectures to a class of about 40 students.

BENOIT

But the artist and the myth in Lawrence Breavman are always more powerful: on page 179 Cohen writes... "He could taste the guilt that would nourish him if he left her." So, like in the dance hall as a teenager, Breavman plans a catastrophe. A catastrophe that will nourish the artist in him. He knows that by hurting Shell, he will release a flood of creativity inside of himself.

(He glances at his watch.)

Ok, we're out of time. Remember, read the first part of Chekhov's *Lady with the Dog* for next time.

Benoit's eyes rest on an EMPTY SEAT as the students gather their things and exit.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - BENOIT'S OFFICE - LATER

Benoit puts his coat on and slings a satchel over his shoulder. He turns off his lamp.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY

Benoit's sneakers squeak over the freshly mopped floors as he passes through the hallway and into the deserted atrium toward the exit.

INT. ATWATER METRO - EVENING

Benoit waits among the other commuters for the metro holding his copy of *THE LADY WITH THE DOG* in his hand; the cover against his chest.

As the METRO pulls in the station, Benoit catches his reflection in a window. He flips his book over so that the cover is facing out.

INT. 535 NORTH BUS - LATER

Benoit is shoved deeper and deeper into the overpacked bus as passengers board.

EXT. AVENUE DU PARC - EVENING

It's now dark. Benoit walks along St. Viateur approaching Clark.

INT. CAFE CAGIBI - MOMENTS LATER

The small front room of the cafe, by the counter, buzzes with quiet chatter. In the back room, a YOUNG WOMAN's voice is heard on the microphone, reading from a story. She reads in English, but with a French Canadian accent.

Benoit enters and approaches the counter, perusing the desserts.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Henry woke up, aroused, at almost zero hour in the cold morning house to the sound of his son, Xavier, who had popped up out of sleep to shout him that he had an insect in his ear. Henry attended to his son and read to him...

The BARISTA stands in front of Benoit.

BENOIT

Four chocolate cupcakes, to go please.

The barista nods and walks off to fetch a pastry box.

Benoit pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, listening to the reading. He pauses while looking in his wallet, his interest piqued.

WOMAN'S VOICE (O.S.)

Henry then looked after his baby daughter, Sophie, who would not accept the pacifier and insisted on a bottle. And as she was drinking and Henry was changing her diaper, he was thinking about Helen, that they could never be together, and Xavier, in his sleep, said very distinctly, "That's not true."

Benoit places a ten dollar bill on the counter as the barista quickly ties a string around the box. Benoit signals to the barista to keep the change and takes the box. He walks to the doorway to the back room to see who is reading.

IN THE BACK ROOM

About fifty people, mostly in their 20s and 30s, sit listening to MERCEDES, 19, serious and attractive, as she reads from a paper. Mercedes sits on a stool on a makeshift stage under an orangey light, speaking into the microphone.

Benoit sees a poster on the wall beside him for a READING SERIES, listing the names of a half dozen authors, including MERCEDES BEAUREGARD.

MERCEDES

Henry remembered rejecting the possibility because he imagined it was too difficult to live through and yet too easy to entertain or promise as a way of buoying up some other arrangement...

A very long pause. Benoit's fingers tighten around the pastry box.

Mercedes takes a sip from a beer, and then continues:

MERCEDES

...But part of what was currently feasting on his entrails was the discovery that he was wrong about that. He could suddenly contemplate, even calculate, the smash-up. The carnage. The surviving.

Mercedes looks up from her paper and sees Benoit. He stiffens once he's been seen, and shrinks back slightly.

MERCEDES

I'll... stop there. Thanks.

The audience applauds as Benoit watches.

His Blackberry BUZZES. He glances down at it and exits.

INT. JACOB'S CONDO - NIGHT

A large condo overlooking the Lachine Canal.

The bathroom door is open and Mercedes sits in a bubble bath reading a book and looking confused.

JACOB, 28 and intelligent-looking, walks around hurriedly, grabbing items and shoving them into an expensive leathers duffel bag. He does a double-take as he passes the bathroom.

JACOB

Uh-oh, she's reading.

IN THE BATHROOM

Mercedes turns a page, and then closes the book.

MERCEDES

I don't get this.

JACOB
What don't you get?

MERCEDES
The Lady with the Dog.

JACOB
Chekhov, no less...

He keeps moving about the condo.

MERCEDES
He's a self-satisfied misogynist and she's...
boring, I guess. I don't see the attraction.

Jacob is unresponsive.

MERCEDES
Maybe I don't get it.

Jacob opens a closet door where he has a stacked washer and dryer. He opens up the drier, which stops, and he pulls out a large flannel pyjama top and a towel.

He goes into the bathroom. Mercedes stands up in the tub.

JACOB
You probably don't get it. Just read the French version.

MERCEDES
What does that mean?

He throws her the towel.

JACOB
See? French version.

She makes a face as she dries herself. Jacobs holds out the pyjama top. Mercedes drops the towel on the floor and holds her arms up, smiling.

Jacob glances away from her naked body.

JACOB
Don't tempt me, young lady.

He pulls the pyjamas over her head and kisses her unceremoniously -- but she slips him the tongue and leans into the kiss as he withdraws.

He pulls away and raises an eyebrow at her suspiciously.
Beat.

JACOB

Don't kill my plants or burn the place down or anything.

MERCEDES

Bye. Be good.

JACOB

I'll do my best.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Benoit is washing the dishes as Audrey, 40 and beautiful, reads the newspaper while eating a chocolate cupcake. A dog-eared copy of Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog* sits on the table. Audrey picks it up and looks at it.

AUDREY

Ça fait combien d'années que t'enseignes cette histoire? (How many years have you been teaching this story?)

BENOIT

C'est l'une des plus belles histoires jamais écrites. (It's one of the most beautiful stories ever written.) Don't get chocolate on it.

Audrey turns back to her paper. Finally:

AUDREY

J'ai fait une demande d'emploi chez Cantos. (I applied for a job at Cantos.)

BENOIT

Bien. C'est bon. (Good. That's good.)
(Beat.)
Pourquoi? (Why?)

Audrey sighs and ignores the question.

AUDREY

Ces gens voulaient même pas m'interviewer. Parce que j'ai pas complété mes études universitaires. (They wouldn't even interview me. Because I didn't finish my degree.)

Silence.

BENOIT

Tu pourrais peut-être aller à l'U de M à temps partiel. (You could maybe go to U de M, part-time.)

AUDREY

Ou bien, je pourrais retourner à la Sorbonne,
et on pourrait tous vivre à Paris? (Or I could
go back to the Sorbonne and we could all live
in Paris?)

BENOIT

Qu'est-ce que je vais faire à Paris avec une
maîtrise en anglais de l'UQAM? (What would I
do in Paris with an MA in English?)

Audrey sighs. After a long pause.

BENOIT

Écoute. On pourrait en reparler. Mais pas
maintenant.
(Listen, we can talk about it again. Just not
now.)

CHANTAL, 8, runs into the kitchen.

CHANTAL

Maman, je peux avoir un coca? (Mom, can I have
a Coka?)

AUDREY

Non, il est trop tard. T'auras du mal à
dormir. (No, it's too late, you won't sleep.)

BENOIT

Coca? Un coca?

Benoit grabs Chantal and pulls her into his arms.

BENOIT

Répète après moi: Co-ke. (Repeat after me: Co-
ke)

She doesn't respond.

BENOIT

Co-ke.

CHANTAL

Coca.

She giggles. Benoit releases her and she scurries out of the room.

Benoit approaches Audrey from behind. He kisses her on the ear and gently slips a hand down the front of her sweater -- an act of intimacy and comfort more than seduction.

BENOIT

Regarde ce que tu fais à nos
filles. (Look what you're doing to
our girls.)

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - LATE AFTERNOON

Benoit lectures to his class, including Mercedes.

BENOIT
How many of you would agree that Dmitri despises women?

The students look at each other, uneasy. A couple of hands go up, including Mercedes'.

BENOIT
How many of you read the chapter?

Everyone raises their hand.

BENOIT
Honestly.

Most hands go down. Benoit rolls his eyes.

BENOIT
Ok, but how do we know Dmitri despises women?

DAVE, a young man in his early 20s, raises his hand.

DAVE
He says so.

BENOIT
What does he say?

DAVE
Uhh...

MERCEDES
He says they're a lower race.

BENOIT
A lesser race, right, but--

MERCEDES
But he also says he's at ease in the company of women.

BENOIT
Right. Exactly.

MERCEDES
I wonder what that says about a man; if he looks down on the opposite sex and yet feels most comfortable around them.

A beat before Benoit nods.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY - LATER

Mercedes drinks from a water fountain.

Benoit comes down the hallway and sees her. He hesitates briefly. She stops drinking and sees him. He approaches, but doesn't slow his pace.

BENOIT
Félicitations pour ton... (Congratulations on your...)

MERCEDES
Merci.

He walks past her without slowing.

BENOIT
Ton truc l'autre soir. (Your thing the other night.)

EXT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - MORNING

The Mile-End street is quiet and peaceful. On one of the doorsteps, Benoit's, sits a medium-sized PASTRY BOX, pristine and white in the gray morning.

Benoit comes out his front door onto his porch. He nearly steps on the box.

He looks at it for a long time. He looks around. He picks up the box and opens it. There's a small cake inside with bright fresh flowers on top. It's beautiful. He looks around again.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY - LATER

Mercedes leans against the wall outside Benoit's office. A couple of students are sitting against the wall behind her, also waiting.

Benoit opens his door and a student comes out.

STUDENT
Thanks.

Benoit pokes his head out into the hallway.

BENOIT
Next. Mercedes.

INT. BENOIT'S OFFICE - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Mercedes sits across from Benoit at his desk.

Benoit's office-mate, ROGER, 50, works quietly at his own desk.

MERCEDES

I just don't know what I'm supposed to take from the scene.

BENOIT

It's clear isn't it?

Mercedes sits quietly for a moment, embarrassed and unsure how to respond.

BENOIT

Read it to me. Read me the scene.

Mercedes opens her book and begins to read, unsure of herself.

MERCEDES

The attitude of Anna Sergeyevna--"the lady with the dog"--to what had happened was somehow peculiar, very grave, as though it were her fall-- so it seemed, and it was strange and inappropriate. Her face dropped and faded, and on both sides of it her long hair hung down mournfully; she mused in a dejected attitude like "the woman who was a sinner" in an old-fashioned picture. "It's wrong," she said. "You will be the first to despise me now. There was a water-melon on the table. Gurov cut himself a slice and began eating it without haste. There followed at least half an hour of silence.

Silence.

BENOIT

How could Gurov have eaten a watermelon?

Mercedes repeats this monotonously:

MERCEDES

How could Gurov have eaten a watermelon.

Roger chuckles quietly.

BENOIT

There's what you're reading, and then there's the sex you don't realize you're reading.

Beat. Mercedes nods.

BENOIT

Do you see it now?

A flash of hesitation.

MERCEDES

Yeah.

Benoit smiles to himself, satisfied with her. It's contagious, and she smiles back. He sees it and turns to his book, fanning the pages nervously.

Silence. Then:

BENOIT

It's none of my business, but if you want to work on your accent I can probably help.

MERCEDES

What's wrong with my accent?

BENOIT

Nothing. It's just... there.

MERCEDES

And? You have an accent.

BENOIT

Hardly.

ROGER

Coffee.

Roger gets up and leaves. Mercedes looks at Benoit, waiting and smiling playfully. Benoit shifts in his seat.

MERCEDES

What is that... Knowlton?

BENOIT

Sherbrooke.

Mercedes smiles. Benoit sighs.

BENOIT

I have to teach in 5 minutes...

MERCEDES

Oh, sorry.

Mercedes gathers her things. Benoit watches her. He battles with himself quietly until finally:

BENOIT

Mercedes.

(She looks at him.)

You didn't, by any chance, leave something on my porch this morning, did you?

MERCEDES

Hein?

BENOIT
Ce matin. As-tu laissé quelque chose sur mon
paillasse?

MERCEDES
I heard you. But... what? I don't even know
where you live.

BENOIT
No, I know. I just asked everyone I know
and...
(He shrugs.)
S'cuse.

Silence.

MERCEDES
What was it?

BENOIT
No, it's ok.

MERCEDES
No it's not, I want to know what you thought I
may have left you. On your porch.

Silence.

BENOIT
It was a cake.

Mercedes looks confused, but smiles. Benoit smiles
back, embarrassed. Mercedes turns around and leaves.

INT. JACOB'S CONDO - BATHROOM - LATER

Mercedes soaks in the tub. She holds cue cards up and
reads them silently. She holds them away and recites
something, quietly to herself, whispering.

The phone RINGS a long distance ring. Mercedes puts her
head back and listens to the ringing.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - EVENING

Mercedes stands in front of the class with her cue
cards, reciting nervously. Benoit sits in the last row,
listening and watching her.

MERCEDES
In some ways, the story seems to be about
finding the eternal in a given moment.
Chekhov's characters, Gurov and Anna, can
reject mortality and meaninglessness, if only
for a little while, by turning to each other.

But, it's also important to remember that at this point in the story, Gurov obviously hasn't fallen in love with Anna.

As Benoit looks down to take notes, Mercedes rolls her eyes back in her head jokingly, exhausted. A collective CHUCKLE emanates from the class, and Benoit looks up and around at them, irritated.

MERCEDES

Nonetheless, the passage is exemplary of Chekov's skillful and handling of the theme of transcendence through love. That's all. Thank you.

The class applauds.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY - LATER

Mercedes walks briskly through the hallway. She arrives at Benoit's office door, which is partially open. She knocks.

BENOIT (O.S.)

Yeah.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - BENOIT'S OFFICE

Benoit puts on his coat. Mercedes enters.

BENOIT

Hi. Good job.

MERCEDES

Thanks.

BENOIT

What can I do for you?

Silence.

MERCEDES

J'ai des billets. Il y a une projection ce soir. Le première de *L'Embrasseuse*. J'ai gagné des billets à MusiquePlus. Voulez-vous venir avec moi? (I have tickets. There's a film tonight, the premiere of *l'Embrasseuse*. I won ticket from MusiquePlus. Do you want to come with me?)

After a glimmer of surprise, Benoit turns serious. Mercedes sees his expression.

MERCEDES

I'm not trying to bribe you, right? I'm having a weird week and I need to go out, and the movie is French and we're both French, so... Consider it charity. For me. Not for you. I think.

BENOIT

It's always been my policy not to fraternize with my students. Present nor former.

Silence. She waits for more. Nothing comes. Mercedes flushes, then turns and exits.

INT. ATWATER METRO - LATER

Mercedes descends the stairs to the platform, a take-out container in her hand.

A metro car pulls up, and Mercedes runs down and into the closest car. The doors close behind her, and she turns and faces the door, leaning on a post.

The metro car pulls out of the station, and the benches and disembarked passengers seem to whizz by until the windows go black in the tunnel.

In the REFLECTION in the windows, she suddenly sees Benoit standing behind her to her left, looking at her. He looks away. She looks away. He looks back at her again.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - LATER

Benoit lies on the sofa reading *The Lady with the Dog*.

Audrey passes through to the kitchen and stops when she sees Benoit. She watches him for a moment.

She walks into the kitchen. She runs the tap. Benoit keeps reading.

Audrey comes out of the kitchen with a glass of water and passes by the sofa.

BENOIT

As-tu couché les filles? (Did you put the girls to bed?)

She sneaks up behind him and kisses him on the back of the neck.

AUDREY

Qu'est-ce que tu penses que j'ai fait toute la soirée? (What do you think I've been doing all evening?)

She walks out. Benoit turns the page.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Benoit sits at the kitchen table, dressed for work and eating a bowl of Raisin Bran. He reads the newspaper. His daughters, Chantal and NICOLE, 6, chase each other around the kitchen behind him.

BENOIT

Ok, ça suffit, les filles. Mettez vos manteaux. (That's enough, girls. Get your coats on.)

They don't listen.

He turns a page in the paper and sees a REVIEW for *L'EMBRASSEUSE*.

Benoit closes the newspaper.

BENOIT

Assez! (Enough!)

The girls stop chasing each other and walk out, sullen.

INT. PIERRE ELLIOT TRUDEAU AIRPORT - ARRIVALS - MORNING

Mercedes waits with a small crowd at the arrivals gate. Jacob comes out with an even smaller group, rolling his suitcase behind him.

He approaches her. They smile. They kiss.

EXT. PIERRE ELLIOT TRUDEAU AIRPORT - PARKING - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Mercedes and Jacob walk to the car. They arrive at it -- a small hybrid -- and Mercedes goes for the driver's side.

JACOB

No no, I'm driving.

Mercedes tosses him the keys. She goes around to the other side and gets in the passenger seat as Jacob loads his luggage into the trunk.

INT. JACOB' CAR - LATER

Jacob and Mercedes drive mostly in silence. The radio plays Virgin 96.

Finally:

MERCEDES
So. Were you good?

Jacob chuckles awkwardly.

JACOB
No, I was baaaad.

Mercedes glances at him. She looks out the window. A long silence.

MERCEDES
I'm tired of being kept.

Jacob makes a face, as if to say "Come on."

JACOB
Mercy.

Mercedes nods.

MERCEDES
Oh, ok. You love me?

They stop at a red light. Silence. She looks at him. He looks straight ahead. Rigid. Finally.

MERCEDES
I already know. Just say it.

After a moment, Mercedes sighs and rests her head back on her seat. The light goes green and Jacob presses the gas, not hard.

With a CRASH they collide with another car which was blasting through the early red. The car is struck on Mercedes' side and her airbag deploys.

INT. 80 NORTH BUS - NIGHT

Mercedes sits on the overcrowded bus, bruised and scratched with a black eye and looking out the window, holding the box in her arms.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - NIGHT

The door opens and Mercedes flicks on the light. The apartment is tiny and unlived-in. Dusty.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - BEDROOM - LATER

Mercedes lies in bed awake. She sits up. She turns on her lamp on her makeshift night stand -- really just a stool.

The bedroom: a mattress and boxspring on the floor, a small dresser, a chair, and an orangey-red sarong hanging as a curtain over the window above her bed.

She gets out of bed and walks to her dresser. She opens up a bottom drawer to reveal a small white stuffed toy dog.

MERCEDES
Johnny Depp.

She takes him out and looks at him.

MERCEDES (CONT'D)
What's up, old friend.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY - DAY

Mercedes, black eye and all, approaches Benoit's office. She stuffs an essay into a large brown envelope.

She arrives at Benoit's door, which is closed. She goes into her bag and takes out a pen. She presses the envelope against the door and checks her watch. She begins to write the time on the envelope when the door OPENS.

The envelope falls to the ground and Mercedes crouches down to pick it up. She is suddenly at Benoit's feet.

BENOIT
Mercedes?

She grabs the envelope and stands up to face him. He sees her face.

BENOIT
Mercedes! Are you ok?

MERCEDES
I was just dropping off my paper -- I don't think I...

She sees Roger working at his desk behind Benoit. Benoit follows her glance and closes the door behind him. He hesitates for a long moment. Finally:

BENOIT
Suis-moi. (Follow me.)

INT. SECOND CUP - ATWATER/DE MAISONNEUVE - SHORTLY
THEREAFTER

Benoit and Mercedes stand in line waiting to order.

A barista arrives in front of Benoit to take his order.

BENOIT
Mint tea, please.

BARISTA
Sure.

The barista starts for the hot water--

BENOIT
Hold on... and?

He turns to Mercedes.

MERCEDES
Oh. Umm. Vanille, s'il te plaît.

BARISTA
Thé?

Mercedes nods. The barista goes off and Mercedes starts digging in her bag for change.

BENOIT
Please. It's on me.

MERCEDES
Oh. Thanks.

EXT. SECOND CUP - ATWATER/DE MAISONNEUVE - SHORTLY
THEREAFTER

Benoit and Mercedes sit quietly, blowing on their teas.

Finally:

MERCEDES
You're mistaken.

BENOIT
Sorry?

MERCEDES
19-year-old student shows up at
your office with a black eye.
You're thinking... Her dad. Her
boyfriend.

BENOIT
I didn't assume--

MERCEDES

You said you didn't fraternize.

She takes her mug of tea and clinks it against his in a one-sided cheers.

Quiet. Benoit nods earnestly.

BENOIT

Well, I couldn't ignore it.

(Pause. He examines her face.)

But I really didn't want to embarrass you, either.

MERCEDES

I'm not embarrassed. Are you embarrassed?

A pause.

BENOIT

So what happened? If you don't mind--

MERCEDES

I picked up my boyfriend from the airport. I made the mistake of breaking up with him while he was driving.

BENOIT

You mean he--

MERCEDES

It was an accident.

Benoit sighs, relieved.

Mercedes points at her eye.

MERCEDES (CONT'D)

Airbag.

He nods sympathetically.

BENOIT

Are you ok?

MERCEDES

Shaken up a bit. And he says women are shit drivers.

Benoit shrugs.

BENOIT

I don't even know how to drive.

Mercedes laughs. Silence.

MERCEDES

Really?

Benoit nods. He smiles and shrugs. They blow on their teas again. It's awkward. A trace of slyness appears in the corner of Mercedes' mouth.

MERCEDES (CONT'D)

Now I see why you don't fraternize.

Silence.

BENOIT

Can I ask you something?

MERCEDES

Did someone leave a pie on your porch?

Benoit laughs, embarrassed.

MERCEDES (CONT'D)

Cause it wasn't me.

Silence.

BENOIT

Your reading last week was surprising. Excellent. What... where did that come from?

MERCEDES

I don't know. Or. I guess... everything. Everything in life is fair game.

Beat.

BENOIT

I've been thinking about it every now and then... It was... I guess... insightful.

MERCEDES

Thanks.

(Silence.)

It's going to be published soon.

Silence. Benoit raises his eyebrows. He chuckles to himself and sits back in his seat, looking at the passers-by.

MERCEDES

What?

Benoit starts to chuckle again. He runs a hand over his face, embarrassed.

BENOIT

No, good for you. You're just... so young... I used to want to be a writer.

MERCEDES

What happened?

BENOIT

Just. Life.

MERCEDES

That's sad.

BENOIT

Well. I wasn't great at it.

MERCEDES

You weren't great at writing or you weren't great at life?

He shoots her a look that shuts down her question. Silence. He watches people walk by.

MERCEDES

I want to have dinner with you.

Beat. He looks at her, confused by the non-sequitur.

MERCEDES

(pointing at her good eye)
I'll get the other one if it helps--

BENOIT

Non.

She glances at her REFLECTION in the cafe window.

MERCEDES

Yeah, not so appetizing.

BENOIT

Trust me, it would take a lot more than just a black eye.

Silence. He looks at her very carefully. He glances over his shoulder nervously, and stays quiet for another beat. Then:

BENOIT

It's always been my policy--

MERCEDES

Yeah, yeah ok.

Mercedes digs in her bag and takes out some change. She puts it on the table.

MERCEDES

For the tea. See you in class.

She gets up and leaves. Benoit blows on his tea.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Benoit sits on a bench in the hallway putting on his shoes.

Audrey stands over him.

AUDREY

Pas plus tard que deux heures du matin, s'il te plaît. (No later than two, please.)

BENOIT

(mock-adolescent)

Deux heures et demie, s'il te plaît? (Two-thirty, please?)

The doorbell RINGS.

AUDREY

C'est ça. Réveille les filles. Bravo! (That's it, wake the girls. Way to go!)

Benoit opens the door to reveal JEAN, 40-ish and good-looking despite obvious attempts to appear younger than he is.

JEAN

Woooooooooooooooooooo!

Benoit chuckles, shushing him. Audrey laughs and walks off.

AUDREY

(chuckling)

De vrais sauvages. (Savages.)

JEAN

Alors. Qu'est ce qu'on fait? (So. What are we doing?)

INT. BLIZZARTS - NIGHT

The bar is quiet while a beautiful, voluptuous POET reads from a poem.

Benoit and Jean sit in the back near the exit. Benoit is in heaven; Jean is pissed off.

Benoit repeatedly and surreptitiously sneaks glances toward the door.

POET

Snow.
Snow once again
covers everything.
Record breaking
snow.

Icicles hail down
from quill pedals
I imagine
are yours.

Mercedes enters quietly and take an empty seat on the aisle of a middle row. Benoit and Mercedes make eye contact and, surprised (mock-surprise for Benoit), nod hello politely.

POET

I see your foot push
forward with
incredible force,
propel wheels

out from deep
trenches, slip
away beneath
ice.

Your foot driving
your body away
from me,
but then -
as in fairy tales -

the body
disintegrates
into a lesser,
stranger
being.

The bodies I spy
spinning in a
powdered frenzy
are never you,

only brothers
in ambition
to escape
my fever eye.

Out from under
sun. Glass cut
December.
You turn to me -
open to receive.

Silence. Benoit shifts almost imperceptibly in his seat.
Then: applause.

INT. BLIZZARTS - LATER

Benoit and Jean sit at the bar, drinking heavily. At the other side of the room, Mercedes speaks to the poet and a few others.

Jean is taking a SIM card out of a new-looking Blackberry and placing it into an even newer-looking Blackberry.

BENOIT

Pis? Comment ça va? (So? How's it going?)

JEAN

Ben, j'ai 41 ans, je suis célibataire et j'habite avec des chums. Fait que... Heureux pis perplexe en même temps. (Well, I'm 41, single again, and living with friends. So, happy and perplexed at the same time.)

(Beat.)

J'expérimente. (I'm experimenting.)

He grins a shit-eating grin. Benoit chuckles.

JEAN (cont'd)

Pis toi? (You?)

Benoit shrugs.

JEAN

L'écriture? (Writing?)

Benoit makes a noise that says "Yeah, right."

JEAN

Audrey?

Benoit makes an effort to nod.

JEAN

Ça peut pas être si pire que ça. Regarde-la donc. (Can't be that bad. Look at her.)

Silence.

BENOIT

Non, c'est pas si pire. (No, it's not so bad.)
(Beat.)

Elle veut s'installer à Paris. Tous les quatre. (She wants to move to Paris. The four of us.)

JEAN

Je te l'avais dit! Tu déracines une femme de son pays -- une Française, no less -- et rien de bien en sortira. Tu la sors de son école-- (I warned you. You uproot a woman from her country-- a Frenchwoman, no less -- nothing good will come from it... Take her out of school...)

BENOIT

Jean, tu oublies qu'elle voulait bien être déracinée. (Jean, you forget that she was quite happy to have me uproot her.)

JEAN

Ça crée des disputes, ça? (You two fight about it?)

BENOIT

Non. Jamais. On se dispute jamais. (No. Never. We never fight.)

Jean looks at Benoit suspiciously-- something in Benoit's voice, deadpan and careless.

BENOIT

"Man and wife can't help quarreling if they love each other."

Jean doesn't get it.

BENOIT

Tchekhov.

JEAN

Tsé, déjà, avoir des enfants ça bouleverse un peu le tableau familial, tu crois pas? (Anyhow, having children disqualifies you from rearranging life's furniture that easily.)

Benoit holds his hands up defensively.

INT. BLIZZARTS - LATER

The bar is now overrun with young Mile-End HIPSTERS. Where poets were reading earlier, there is now a crowd of people dancing.

IN THE DANCING CROWD

Jean dances on one end. Mercedes dances on the other.

Jean, who is very drunk, dances with the poet. She turns away from him. He turns around and moves through the dance floor, and women turn away from him as he approaches -- he's obviously on the prowl.

Jean finally starts dancing with Mercedes. He smiles at her. She smiles back. He takes her hand and pulls her in a bit closer. She doesn't resist. They continue to dance. Mercedes steps on his FOOT. She's a little drunk. She laughs.

MERCEDES
(shouting)
S'cuse!

Jean shrugs it off and smiles. They keep dancing. Eventually he leans in.

JEAN
(shouting, pointing at his eye)
Wo! Beau travail! (Wow, nice work!)

Mercedes laughs.

JEAN.
(shouting)
C'est quoi, ton nom? (What's your name?)

MERCEDES
Hein?

JEAN
(shouting)
Ton nom! (Your name!)

MERCEDES
(shouting)
Mercedes!

JEAN.
(shouting)
Comment? (Huh?)

MERCEDES
(louder)
Mercy!

He grins.

JEAN
You're welcome.

Jean leans in and kisses Mercedes on the cheek. After a quick beat, she pulls away, shy and laughing.

JEAN
(shouting)
Qu'est-ce que tu bois? (What are you drinking?)

MERCEDES
Vin rouge! (Red wine!)

Jean nods and walks off.

AT THE BAR

Benoit sits alone, drinking. Jean leans over the bar next to him. Jean takes a sip from Benoit's beer.

JEAN
Ce soir, je vais baiser une mongole avec un
oeil au beurre noir. "Mile-End-style!"
(Tonight, I'm going to fuck a retard with a
black eye. Mile-End style!)

Benoit looks at Jean.

BENOIT
Quoi? (What?)

Jean grins and nods.

BENOIT
Où ça? (Where?)

Jean turns and points at Mercedes. Benoit turns back to the bar, shaking his head.

BENOIT
Non, non.

JEAN
Oui.

BENOIT
Non. Tu la baiseras pas. C'est mon
étudiante, et elle a dix-neuf ans.
(No, you're not going to fuck her.
She's my student and she's
nineteen.)

Jean looks at Benoit.

JEAN
Pis l'âge de consentement, y'est à
quoi ces temps-ci? (What's the age
of consent nowadays?)

BENOIT
(irritated)
Jean....

JEAN
Tu te la gardes, c'est ça? (Ah, you're keeping
her.)

BENOIT
C'est tard, peut-etre... (It's late, maybe--)

JEAN

Non non non.. Moi j'ai resté pendant "Snow.
Snow is cold. It falls from da hair." (No no
no... I stayed during "Snow. Snow is cold.
It falls from da hair.")

The bartender arrives.

JEAN

Une Ex et un vin rouge, s'il te plaît. (An Ex
and a red wine, please.)
(nods towards Benoit)
Et assure-toi qu'il se saoule la gueule. (And
make sure he gets shitfaced.)

Jean places a wad of cash on the bar.

INT. BLIZZARTS - LATER

The bartender puts two shots in front of Benoit and takes one of them. He waits.

Benoit realizes what he's supposed to do and takes the shot. They cheers, they knock it back, and the bartender clears the glasses.

Benoit wipes his mouth with a napkin and glances over his shoulder at Mercedes who is talking with another YOUNG WOMAN.

Jean is now speaking to a more BEAUTIFUL WOMAN than Mercedes.

Benoit looks at his watch: 2:10 a.m.

EXT. BLIZZARTS - LATER

Benoit stands in the pouring rain and hails a cab.

A cab pulls up to the curb and Benoit climbs in and closes the door behind him.

INT. TAXI CAB - CONTINUOUS

The CAB DRIVER looks at Benoit in the rearview mirror. The rain is coming down hard over the roof and windows of the car.

CAB DRIVER

On va où? (Where to?)

BENOIT

Pas loin. Juste-- (Not far. Just--)

The cab door OPENS and Mercedes climbs in. She closes the door behind her.

Benoit looks at her, stunned. He's speechless.

She's soaked. She looks at him and waits.

MERCEDES
I can get back out if you want.

Silence.

BENOIT
Where are you going?

MERCEDES
(to the driver)
Parc et Fairmount, s'il te plaît.

The cab driver turns on the meter and starts to drive.

BENOIT
(quietly)
We're neighbours.

They sit together quietly for a long time as they drive.

A VOICE on dispatch monotonously rattles off a series of addresses.

The driver looks at Mercedes and Benoit in the rearview.

Silence. Mercedes looks out her window. Benoit looks out his. He quietly clears his throat.

She looks at him. Nothing.

MERCEDES
What?

Nothing.

MERCEDES (CONT'D)
Dis-le. (Say it.)

He speaks to his window.

BENOIT
Ok. I'm taken with you. As I think
you know.
(He looks at her.)
But I'm taken.

They look at each other for a long time.

He looks out his window again.

BENOIT (CONT'D)
And there's nothing more
pathetically cliché.

The cab pulls over.

CAB DRIVER
Parc et Fairmount.

Benoit looks at Mercedes.

BENOIT
Est-ce que c'est compris? (Do you understand?)

Mercedes looks back at him, unblinking.

More addresses on the radio; rain pounding on the roof of the car; but nothing from Benoit or Mercedes.

He leans over and kisses her.

After a very long beat, he pulls away and looks at her.

She looks back at him, blankly.

She opens the door, climbs out, and closes the door behind her.

Beat.

CAB DRIVER
On va où? (Where to?)

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - LATER

Mercedes walks into her bathroom.

She runs the water in the sink and starts to wash her makeup off. As she does, her black eye becomes more and more apparent. She looks at herself. She leans in closer to the mirror. She pokes at the bruising lightly with her finger.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - LATER

Benoit tiptoes into the bedroom. He takes off his clothes, and slides into bed next to Audrey, who is asleep.

She starts to wake as he settles into bed.

BENOIT
Shhh...

AUDREY
Quelle heure il est? (What time is it?)

Pause.

BENOIT
Je suis désolé. Il est tard. (I'm sorry. It's late.)

Audrey turns to him in bed. She kisses him. He starts to pull away.

AUDREY
Je t'en prie. (Please.)

She kisses him. He kisses her back. She pulls him on top of her and they start making out. Occasionally Benoit glances down at himself awkwardly. Audrey keeps kissing him.

BENOIT
Écoute, je suis désolé, mais pas ce soir.
(Listen, I'm sorry... not tonight.)
(Audrey looks at him.)
Désolé. (Sorry.)

INT. MERCEDES' DAD'S CAR - DAY - DREAM

Benoit's fingers plunge into the juicy pink pulp of a watermelon. He scoops out some fruit and stuffs it into his mouth.

Beside him, Mercedes drives smoothly and capably down a long, winding, suburban avenue on a grey day.

Benoit lets the fruit dissolve in his mouth as he watches Mercedes drive. It's pouring rain outside.

MERCEDES
On est presque là. (We're almost there.)

BENOIT
(speaks Russian, unsubtitled)

Benoit runs his hand through Mercedes' hair. She stops at a red light. She looks at him and he sees that she's been crying.

CUT TO:

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

Audrey bursts into the bedroom and Benoit wakes with a start. Audrey goes to the curtains and opens them up. It's pouring rain outside.

AUDREY

Hou-la, le paresseux! (Whoa, lazy bones!)

Benoit realizes he has an erection and pulls a cover over him and rolls onto his side to camouflage it.

AUDREY

J'ai des courses à faire aujourd'hui, et j'ai emmené les filles chez Claire. Pourrais-tu aller les chercher à 4 heures? Il est midi et demi maintenant. (I have lots to do today so I brought the girls to Claire's. Could you go get them at four? It's twelve-thirty now.)

Benoit processes.

BENOIT

Ok. J'avais prévu d'aller au bureau aujourd'hui. J'irai les chercher en rentrant. (Ok. I was going to go to the office today. I'll get them on my way home.)

AUDREY

Et une bouteille de rouge? Christine vient souper. (And a bottle of red? Christine's coming for dinner.)

Audrey walks out of the room.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Benoit masturbates in the shower.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - DAY

Mercedes lies on the couch under a blanket watching TV, holding Johnny Depp (the stuffed toy dog) in her arms. There's a small garbage pail in front of where she sits.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - BENOIT'S OFFICE - SAME

Benoit finishes grading a paper and places it on top of a pile. He takes another paper and puts it down in front of him. He stares blankly at the wall in front of him.

He slowly opens up a drawer in his desk and takes out a folder. He opens it and looks at it for a long moment.

He reaches over and picks up the phone. Then he dials, looking at the folder for the number.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - INTERCUT - TELEPHONE
CONVERSATION

Mercedes' cell phone begins to RING.

She picks it up from the coffee table and looks at the screen. It reads "DAWSON COLLEGE." After a beat she picks up.

MERCEDES
Hello?

Silence. And then:

BENOIT (O.S.)
I'm sorry. It's Benoit.

INT. BENOIT'S OFFICE - INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

Benoit shifts in his chair.

BENOIT
Hi.

MERCEDES
Hi.

He shifts in his chair.

BENOIT
I think... I have to talk to you.

Silence.

MERCEDES
(softly)
Come over.

More silence. Finally:

BENOIT
Ok.

CUT TO:

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Mercedes cleans her living room;
- Mercedes makes her bed;
- Benoit sits icily and motionless in his chair;

- Mercedes purchases some mint tea at a coffee shop across the street;
- In the men's room, Benoit rinses his mouth with water;
- With the vacuum cleaner running idly on a rug, Mercedes sprays her apartment with Febreeze;
- Benoit stands on the crowded 80 North while a woman's umbrella drips water onto his shoe.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - LATER

Mercedes sits on the floor by the front door, waiting.

Finally, the intercom BUZZES. She stands up, waits a few obligatory seconds, and then buzzes him in. She presses herself to the door and watches through the peephole.

She can hear the echo of his footsteps as he comes up a few short flights of stairs before he APPEARS, a dark and hazy figure IN THE PEEPHOLE.

Mercedes steps back from the door. He knocks. Again, she waits a few obligatory seconds before she unlocks and opens the door.

BENOIT

Tu m'attendais derrière la porte? (Were you waiting for me behind the door?)

Mercedes shakes her head.

He shifts awkwardly on his feet. He runs his hand nervously along the door frame. Taps it.

MERCEDES

Come in.

Pause.

BENOIT

I'm going to come in. But nothing's going to happen. Ok?

Silence. Eventually, Mercedes nods.

MERCEDES

Ok.

BENOIT

Ok.

Benoit comes in and crouches down to untie and remove his shoes. When he stands up again, he looks huge in the tiny apartment. Awkwardness.

BENOIT

You have the perfect student apartment.

MERCEDES

Thank you.

(Beat.)

Do you want some tea?

BENOIT

Please.

Benoit follows her into the tiniest kitchen in the world -- there's hardly enough room for both of them.

IN THE KITCHEN

Benoit watches as Mercedes fills up an electric kettle and plugs it into the wall. She reaches up on a shelf and pulls down a few boxes of tea.

MERCEDES

Vanilla, mint, ginger...

She holds up a CELESTIAL SEASONINGS box of tea called "TENSION TAMER."

MERCEDES

Tension Tamer?

She smiles. Benoit lets out a soft chuckle.

BENOIT

Mint, please.

Mercedes removes the plastic wrap from the box. A RECEIPT, which was statically attached to the plastic wrap, falls to the floor and Benoit sees it without commenting.

BENOIT

Your eye looks like it's healing.

Mercedes take two non-matching mugs out of the cupboard.

MERCEDES

Yeah well I puked hard enough last night to burst some blood vessels in this one -- even it out a little.

Benoit smiles at this. Silence. They both shift and look at the kettle.

MERCEDES
Should we sit down?

BENOIT
Ok.

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Benoit sits on Mercedes' cheap Ikea sofa -- it's a bit low for him so his knees are high when he sits down. Mercedes sits beside him -- but not too close. She turns to face him, and he shifts as well.

BENOIT
How do you pay for this place? If you don't mind me asking.

MERCEDES
Parents pay for it. The writing doesn't pay for anything. Yet.

BENOIT
Oh, of course...
(Pause.)
Somehow I forgot that you would have parents. There's something of an orphan about you.
(Beat.)
I'm sorry, is that mean?

MERCEDES
Probably.

BENOIT
I'm sorry.
(Pause.)
How do they feel about your writing?

MERCEDES
Uh... if they bothered to have an opinion? I guess they'd think it was silly. Adolescent. Is this really what you want to talk about?

Beat.

BENOIT
No.
(Silence.)
Mercedes... You and I... we're at opposite ends of the stretch of life in which you get to decide who you want to be in this world.
(Silence.)
You're entering it with... enormous promise. And I'm exiting it with...
(Pause.)
Quiet desperation? Relief at having survived?

Benoit looks at Mercedes. Silence.

MERCEDES

You rehearsed that the whole way here.

A beat. Benoit nods, smiling; half-impressed by her discernment and half-annoyed that she ruined it. He gets serious again.

BENOIT

You're a CEGEP student. You're not a child but--

MERCEDES

Not yet a woman?

Mercedes smiles. A beat. They become serious again. Finally, in deliberate and precise movements, Benoit inches toward her on the sofa.

The kettle WHISTLES.

BENOIT

Laisse. (Leave it.)

Benoit puts his hand on Mercedes' hand and looks at her. She looks down at their hands.

The kettle finally CLICKS off. It lets out a sigh as the boil calms.

BENOIT (CONT'D)

How does that feel?

Mercedes lets out a sigh.

BENOIT

It just occurred to me that I have never touched you. Not once.

Mercedes makes a face that says "Believe me, I know."

A BABY in an adjacent apartment starts to scream and cry. Mercedes sighs.

MERCEDES

(apologetically)
Neighbours.

Benoit shakes his head, "It's ok." He looks at her.

Mercedes looks away and down at her knees. She feels his gaze and keeps her eyes on her knees; she knows what's coming.

Benoit shifts more toward her, and he puts a hand on her shoulder. She turns and looks at him and lowers her gaze. He takes this as a "Go."

He kisses her softly on the mouth and lingers there for a moment. Then, he kisses her more forcefully and she reciprocates.

He puts his hands on her face when his Blackberry begins to VIBRATE across the coffee table.

They stop kissing and, still very close to each other, stare at each other in utter consternation.

The Blackberry persists.

Finally:

BENOIT

Shit.

He grabs the phone and dismisses the call. Checks the time on the screen. Silence.

BENOIT

I have to go.

Mercedes nods.

Benoit stands up and walks to the hallway. Mercedes follows him. Benoit kneels down to put his shoes on while Mercedes stands above him, visibly upset. She puts a hand to her forehead. Benoit looks up and watches her. A beat.

BENOIT

How could Gurov have eaten a watermelon?

Mercedes keeps a blank expression; she doesn't really get it. He stands up and Mercedes escorts him to the door. She opens the door. They look at each other.

BENOIT

I'm never coming here again.

MERCEDES

I know.

BENOIT

Bye.

MERCEDES

Bye.

He walks out and she closes the door behind him. Once it's closed, she lets out a deep breath.

EXT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT BUILDING - AFTERNOON

Benoit stands in the pouring rain, trying to recompose himself. A taxi approaches on the street. Benoit hails it.

EXT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

The taxi pulls up in front of a large Outremont house. Benoit gets out of the cab and runs to the house and rings the doorbell.

INT. CLAIRE'S HOUSE

CLAIRE, a stout but polished woman in her early 40s, opens the door to a drenched Benoit.

CLAIRE

Benoit!

BENOIT

Salut Claire -- s'cuse-moi, je bloque la rue. Est-ce qu'elles sont prêtes? (Hi Claire -- sorry, I'm blocking the street. Are they ready?)

CLAIRE

Les filles, Papa est là! (Girls, your dad's here!)

NICOLE (O.S.)

Non!

CHANTAL (O.S.)

On veut pas partir! (We don't want to go!)

NICOLE (O.S.)

Ouais, on veut pas partir! (Yeah, we don't want to go!)

BENOIT

Too bad. Allez, on y va! (Come on, let's go!)
(To Claire, French)
Merci de les avoir gardées. (Thanks for watching them.)

CLAIRE

Ça me fait plaisir. (My pleasure.)

JULIE, Claire's daughter, a porcelain-skinned and delicate girl of about 9, descends the stairs followed by Benoit's pouting daughters.

In the hallway -- and much to Benoit's irritation -- they say melodramatic goodbyes in their poshest French accents as though they'll never see each other again. They ignore Benoit's best but clumsy attempts to get their coats on each of them, as they grasp desperately for each other's hands.

JULIE

À lundi, mes amours! (Until Monday, my loves!)

CHANTAL

À lundi! (Until Monday!)

NICOLE

Tu nous manqueras! (We'll miss you!)

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER

Benoit fills a LARGE WINE GLASS with Beaujolais. He takes a large gulp and takes it with him to the stove where he stirs something hot.

IN THE BATHROOM

Audrey scrubs the tub.

AUDREY

(Shouting)

Et alors, ce souper, toujours pas là? Elle arrive bientôt! (Where's that dinner, she's going to be here soon!)

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - SAME

Mercedes lies in bed writing in her Moleskine.

There's a BUZZ at the door. Mercedes stops writing. After a beat of stillness, she gets up and bolts to the door and presses a button.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - SAME

Benoit presses a button on his intercom and opens the door. He takes his wallet out from the back pocket of his jeans.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT

Mercedes opens the door to reveal Jacob standing there.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - HALLWAY

A DELIVERY MAN from À la Carte Express takes out a bunch of paper bags and hands them to Benoit.

DELIVERY MAN
Soixante-douze et cinquante, s'il vous plaît.
(Seventy-two and fifty, please.)

Pause.

BENOIT
C'est-tu des farces? (You're kidding.)

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER

Benoit pours some orange powdered cheese into a pot and keeps stirring. Audrey arranges the Indian food on a designer plate and hides the evidence (the take-out containers).

BENOIT
Sais-tu combien ça a coûté? (Do you know how much that cost?)

AUDREY
Parfois, c'est mieux que de me taper toute la journée dans la cuisine. (Sometimes I'd rather just spend the money than spend the whole day in the kitchen.)

BENOIT
Dans ce cas, je me demande pourquoi on invite des gens à souper. (Then why have people over to dinner?)

AUDREY
T'exagères... (Please...)

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - SAME

Mercedes and Jacob sit on the couch. Jacob sits where Benoit was sitting just a couple of hours earlier.

JACOB
I've never seen the place this clean before.
(Silence.)
My grandma died.

Silence.

MERCEDES
When?

JACOB
Yesterday.

Mercedes sighs.

MERCEDES
I'm sorry.
(Pause.)
How are you?

JACOB
I miss you. I'm really sorry.
(Silence.)
I want you to move back in.

Beat.

MERCEDES
Back in?

JACOB
Well. You know what I mean.

MERCEDES
I'm sorry. That's not going to happen.

Jacob sighs.

JACOB
I need a drink.

MERCEDES
Sure.

Jacob gets up and walks to the kitchen. Mercedes follows him.

IN THE KITCHEN

Jacob looks in the fridge, which is mostly empty except for condiments and Diet Coke, a bag of sliced bread and a bottle of Absolut Vodka.

JACOB
Is that the same bottle of vodka from last year?

Mercedes nods.

JACOB
I'll be hung over before I'm drunk.

He takes it out and pours himself a glass. He notices the two empty mugs with fresh tea bags in them, sitting on the counter.

JACOB

Were you expecting company?

Mercedes starts for the mugs.

MERCEDES

No, those are just from... earlier.

Jacob takes one of the mugs and looks at the tag of the tea bag. He smells it.

JACOB

You hate mint.

Silence. Mercedes sighs.

JACOB (CONT'D)

How long has that been going on?

MERCEDES

I just bought it today.

Silence.

JACOB

I guess you guys skipped tea, then.

Silence. Mercedes can't look at him.

JACOB

I wanted to ask you if you would come to the funeral with me. On Monday. I just don't feel like explaining to everyone--

MERCEDES

No, I get it. Of course.

JACOB

Yeah?

MERCEDES

Yeah, I'll come.

Beat.

JACOB

If mint tea guy doesn't mind.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Chantal and Nicole sit on the floor at the coffee table eating Kraft Dinner and watching TV.

IN THE KITCHEN

Audrey and CHRISTINE, a plain woman in her late 30s, eat dinner and drink wine. Benoit moves food around on his plate while observing the two women, exasperated.

AUDREY

(French)

Franchement Christine, non, je ne comprends pas. Tu savais très bien que c'était un menteur, et tu as donné quatre ans de ta vie à un homme qui te mentait sans arrêt. (Honestly, Christine, no, I don't get it. You knew he was a liar and yet you willingly gave four years of your life to a man who deceived you about everything.)

CHRISTINE

Je sais, mais ces années sont passées, donc je préfère juste lâcher l'affaire. J'aurais simplement voulu savoir pourquoi. (I know, but I'm never getting those years back, I'd rather just let it go. I just wish I knew why.)

AUDREY

On saura jamais pourquoi les hommes agissent de façon si pitoyable. Ça, ça restera un mystère. (Who knows why men do the sad things they do.)

Benoit with straight face.

BENOIT

Du vin, Christine? (More wine, Christine?)

CHRISTINE

S'il te plaît. (Please.)

BENOIT

Tu sais, si t'es à la recherche de quelqu'un, j'ai un chum qui... (You know, if you're looking for someone, I have a friend who--)

AUDREY

Qui? (Who?)

Beat.

BENOIT

Jean.

AUDREY

Hou là. (Wow.)

CHRISTINE

C'est qui, Jean? (Who's Jean?)

AUDREY

Ignore-le. (Ignore him.)

BENOIT

C'est un ami de longue date. Récemment divorcé. (He's an old friend. Recently divorced.)

AUDREY

Qu'est-ce qu'elle a fait pour le mériter? (What did she do to deserve him?)

BENOIT

Ce qu'elle veut, c'est peut-être tout simplement d'avoir quelqu'un à ses côtés la nuit. (Maybe she wants a warm body to sleep next to at night?)

AUDREY

En effet, il est vivant. Voilà un homme avec du sang dans les veines, du moins dans certaines d'entre elles. (Yeah, he's alive. Blood pumps through at least some of his veins.)

Audrey and Christine look at Benoit as though he's growing another head.

CHRISTINE

Chépa... (I dunno...)

BENOIT

Non, non. Ça va. Pardonnez-moi. (No, no. That's fine. I'm sorry.)

Audrey pats Benoit on the hand, and they all continue to eat in silence. Benoit pokes at the food on his plate. Finally:

BENOIT

Désolé, Christine, je pense avoir trop bu hier soir. J'ai pas d'appétit. Excuse-moi. (I'm sorry, Christine, I think I drank too much last night. No appetite. Excuse me.)

Benoit gets up with his glass of wine and passes a hand along Audrey's back as he heads to the living room.

CHRISTINE

C'est délicieux. (This is delicious.)

AUDREY

Merci. (Thank you.)

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Benoit lies on the sofa and watches TV between the heads of his two daughters. He notices that they've hardly touched their Kraft Dinner.

BENOIT

Vous ne mangez pas? (You're not eating?)

They ignore him.

BENOIT

Allons. (Come on.)

They ignore him.

BENOIT

Bon ben, dans ce cas, passez-le moi. (Fine, then I'll eat it.)

Chantal passes her dish to Benoit. He starts to eat it. The girls glance at each other and smirk. Then they can't help it, they start giggling. Benoit stops chewing, worried that they've done something to it.

BENOIT

(mouth full)

Quoi? (What?)

The girls giggle more.

BENOIT

Qu'est-ce qu'il y a? (What is it?)

A beat. Then:

NICOLE

C'est pour les pauvres! (It's for poor people!)

The girls burst out laughing.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Benoit and Audrey lie in bed -- Benoit on the left, Audrey on the right. Audrey's reading *LE CODE DA VINCI*. Benoit grabs his copy of *The Lady with the Dog*.

BENOIT

J'espère que c'est pas l'influence de Claire. (I hope that's not Claire's influence.)

AUDREY

Elle nous a donné un coup de main. (She did us a favour.)

BENOIT

Elles deviennent gâtées. Elles ne comprennent pas la valeur de l'argent. (They're becoming spoiled. They don't understand the value of a dollar.)

AUDREY

Une boîte ne coûte que 89 cents. (A box of that stuff is 89 cents.)

BENOIT

Toujours prêtes, en tout cas, vous autres, à dépenser mon argent. (Yeah, you're all more than happy to spend my money.)

AUDREY

Et toi, toujours prêt à m'empêcher d'en gagner moi-même. (And you're more than happy to keep me from making my own.)

BENOIT

Je t'ai dit que tu pouvais aller à l'Université de Montréal. (I told you you could go to U de M.)

Audrey closes her book and snuggles up close, nestling her head into Benoit's neck.

AUDREY

(whispering)

Mais je rêve de retourner à la Sorbonne. Mais toi, mon rêve, tu t'en fous. (But I dream about going back to the Sorbonne. Don't you want to give me that?)

BENOIT

Qu'est-ce que tu veux de moi? Quand on s'est rencontré, t'étais à la Sorbonne et tu sortais avec ce con, et t'étais miserable. Je t'ai donné une nouvelle vie, deux superbes petites filles...

(What do you want from me? When I met you you were at the Sorbonne with that prick and you were miserable, and I gave you a new life and two beautiful girls...)

AUDREY

Et donc? C'est tout? "Fin?"
(And? That's it? "The end?")

BENOIT

Je pense qu'on devrait les sortir de Marie-de-France, et les mettre dans une école publique. (I think we should take them out of Marie-de-France and put them in public school.)

Audrey looks up at him, displeased.

BENOIT

Je veux pas qu'elles se transforment en petites snobs égocentriques. (I don't want them to grow into egocentric snobs.)

Audrey sits up straight and thinks.

AUDREY

T'empêches tout le monde dans cette maison d'avoir une meilleure éducation que toi. C'est qui l'égocentrique, là? Et en plus, tu quittes la table à 20 heures quand on a des invités? Franchement. (You keep everyone in this house from getting a better education than yours, so where's the ego in that scenario? And leaving the table at 8 when we have company?)

He opens his book.

BENOIT

Je voulais pas être artificiel pour le restant de la soirée. (I wanted to avoid having to fake through the rest of the evening.)

Silence and Audrey's disbelief.

AUDREY

Il me faut une cigarette. (I need a cigarette.)

Audrey gets out of bed and walks out.

Benoit closes his book and lies down.

INT. FUNERAL HOME - DAY

Jacob takes Mercedes' hand as they enter the crowded funeral parlour. Jacob's mother, ALICE, late 50s, approaches them. She hugs Jacob and then turns to Mercedes and kisses her on both cheeks.

ALICE

Oh, sweet Mercy you poor girl, as if you haven't been through enough these days. Let me see it.

Mercedes lifts her sunglasses.

ALICE

Oh. Well that's not so bad, is it? Let's get you some coffee.

INT. SAME - LATER

Mercedes stands in the corner as Jacob hugs his dad, JERRY, 65, for a long time.

Jacob's sister, JACKIE, 33 and skinny, approaches Mercedes and stands next to her.

JACKIE
How're you holdin' up?

MERCEDES
Unfortunately I hardly knew her, so--

JACKIE
Yeah, neither did I. I was talking about the accident.

(Jackie leans in and lowers her voice)
And he says women are shit drivers.

MERCEDES
Oh, I'm fine. It's not a big deal.
(Silence. Jackie nods. They sip coffee.)
Except at night. Suddenly I'm very paranoid.
I have to check the locks on my doors and windows 3 or 4 times before I can sleep.

Jackie looks at Mercedes.

JACKIE
You're not staying at the condo?

Damn. Mercedes looks at Jackie.

MERCEDES
I just mean when I'm not there.

Pause. Jackie nods.

JACKIE
You're too old for him anyway.

Jackie smiles at her. Mercedes smiles back.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Benoit paces at the front of the class. Mercedes is conspicuously absent.

Benoit tries to lecture, distracted. He writes out a diagram on the BOARD: The name "Anna" in the centre, with an arrow on either side, both pointing to the word "LOVER."

BENOIT
Thomas Winner has pointed out that the Annas in *The Lady with the Dog* and in *Anna Karenina* have to escape the oppression of their marriages, for one by taking a lover; and for the other by taking her life.

A STUDENT raises her hand.

BENOIT
Yes, Emily.

EMILY
You wrote lover twice.

BENOIT
Sorry?

EMILY
On the board, you wrote lover twice.

Benoit looks at the board and sees his error.

BENOIT
Ah, right. Sorry.

Benoit erases the mistake with the back of his hand. He begins to correct it but stops. After a beat, he turns and faces the class.

BENOIT (CONT'D)
Let's get into groups of four.

A collective mumble of disappointment is emitted from the class.

INT. 535 NORTH BUS - LATER

Benoit stands on the crowded bus, holding onto a pole.

INT. JACOB'S CAR - SAME

Jacob and Mercedes drive up avenue du Parc. Jacob has removed his Kippah.

MERCEDES
I think I accidentally spilled the beans to Jackie.

They stop at a red light.

JACOB
And? She didn't try and steal you for herself.

MERCEDES
I don't know, she hugged me pretty tight.

Mercedes and Jacob chuckle and smile.

The 535 is stopped right next to their car, on Mercedes' side. Benoit is looking directly at her.

IN THE BUS - INTERCUT

Benoit looks at Mercedes, who is smiling and talking.
She sees him and the smile fades from her lips.

Benoit notices she's wearing a dress. He bends his
knees slightly to get a better view of Jacob but he can
only see the nice suit.

The bus pulls away. Then Jacob speeds ahead and passes
the bus.

IN JACOB'S CAR

Mercedes glances at the bus in her rearview mirror.

JACOB

Anyway, she knows I've got a secret of hers.
She won't tell anyone.

MERCEDES

I don't think that's a secret, Jacob.

Jacob smiles.

INT. MCGILL GHETTO APARTMENT BUILDING - HALLWAY -
EVENING

Benoit knocks at the door. A YOUNG MAN in his early 20s
opens the door.

A moment of confusion.

BENOIT

Euh... est-ce que Jean est là? (Uh... is Jean
there?)

YOUNG MAN

Jean, it's for you!
(to Benoit)
Come in.

The young man walks away and Benoit steps in. He sees
more MEN and WOMEN in their 20s sitting and watching TV.
They ignore him and he doesn't mind.

Jean comes out of the bathroom down at the end of hall.
He's wet and wearing just a towel around his waist. His
wet feet make a squeaking sound on the hardwood floors.

JEAN

Ei!!!!!!leeeeeeee! (Heyyyyyy!)

BENOIT

(trying)
C'est sympa, ici. (Nice place.)

INT. JEAN'S BEDROOM - LATER

Benoit sits in a chair near a computer desk. Jean, bare-chested in sweatpants, sits on his bed rolling a joint on a large hardcover book on his lap.

BENOIT

Elle conduisait... Smooth, capable... Je pense que c'était le char de son père... Je savais pas où on allait, mais elle, apparemment oui... C'était censé être une petite balade, rien de plus. J'ai caressé ses cheveux... (She was driving. Smoothly... Capably. I think it was her father's car. I didn't know where we were going, but she did. It was going to be a short trip. I... touched her hair--)

JEAN

Wo, wo, wo... tu parles le russe? (Whoa, whoa, whoa... Do you speak Russian?)

Beat.

BENOIT

Non.

JEAN

Non. C'était donc rien qu'un rêve. (No. So it was just a dream.)
(he says it again, whimsically, gesturing with his arms)
Un rêve! (A dream!)

BENOIT

J'ai comme l'impression que quelqu'un a emprunté ma vie pendant un petit bout', et maintenant j'en reprends possession. (I feel like someone borrowed my life for a while and I'm just now getting it back.)

JEAN

Benoit.

BENOIT

J'en ai marre d'attendre ces moments d'intuition commune, tsé, quelqu'un qui est miraculeusement sur la même page que moi. (I'm tired of waiting for those moments of shared insight, you know, someone who's miraculously on the same page as I am.)

JEAN

Elle a dix-neuf ans, Ben. T'es sur le page dix-neuf? (She's nineteen, Ben. You're on page nineteen?)

This sounds strange coming from Jean, but it strikes Benoit as true nonetheless. He sighs an exasperated sigh.

BENOIT

Je l'ai vue. Elle était dans une voiture-- (I saw her. She was in a car--)

JEAN

Euh, Benoit! (Ugh, Benoit!)

BENOIT

Non, pour vrai. Aujourd'hui. Elle était en voiture avec un gars. Un jeune homme, je pense, je voyais pas son visage. Ils étaient bien habillés tous les deux... comme s'ils allaient à une soirée. (No, for real. Today. She was in a car with a guy. A young man, I think, I couldn't see his face. They were dressed nicely, like they had somewhere nice to go.)

JEAN

Good. Autre raison pour la laisser tomber. (Good. Another reason to let it go.)

A beat.

BENOIT

Ouais. (Yeah.)

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - EVENING

Mercedes and Jacob sit on her living room floor eating dinner -- spaghetti -- on her small Ikea coffee table. Mercedes finishes her last bite; Jacob has already finished and sips a glass of water.

JACOB

Thank you.

Mercedes nods. Silence.

JACOB

Can we go lie down?

Beat.

MERCEDES

No.

JACOB

I don't want to have sex with you. Just to lie down. Beside you.

Mercedes thinks about what he just said. She sighs and gets up. Jacob gets up and follows her into the bedroom.

INT. MERCEDES' BEDROOM - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Mercedes and Jacob lie, facing each other, in bed. Jacob moves a little closer and wraps an arm over her. She closes her eyes. He closes his eyes. She buries her face in his chest.

JACOB
(whispering)
We can try again.

MERCEDES
(whispering)
I can't.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - MORNING

Mercedes runs up an escalator and hurries down a hallway. She disappears around a corner.

IN THE HALLWAY

Mercedes stops at Benoit's office door, which is propped open with a doorstop. She knocks.

BENOIT (O.S.)
Yeah.

Mercedes enters.

IN BENOIT'S OFFICE

She sees he's alone. She kicks aside the doorstop and the door closes behind her.

Benoit's expression is blank; heavily encoded.

MERCEDES
That was Jacob. My ex. I only went to his grandmother's funeral. For his family.

Benoit gets up from his chair and they kiss. There is a KNOCK at the door. They step away from each other.

BENOIT
Will you be home?

MERCEDES
Until 4.

Benoit nods and opens the door. Mercedes walks out.

BENOIT
Yeah, next...

A male student enters. Benoit knocks the doorstep back in place with his foot.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - LATER

Mercedes stands pressed to her door looking through the peephole. She opens the door as Benoit approaches in the hallway.

He enters and Mercedes closes the door behind him.

BENOIT
Hi.
MERCEDES
Hey.
BENOIT
I shouldn't be here.
MERCEDES
Tea?
BENOIT
Please.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER

Two mugs sit on the counter, each with a dry tea bag in it.

BENOIT (O.S.)
"Dmitri Dmitritch!"
"What?"

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Benoit and Mercedes sit facing each other, curled up on opposite ends of the sofa. He reads to her from *The Lady with the Dog*.

BENOIT (cont'd)
"You were right this evening: the sturgeon was a bit too strong!"
These words, so ordinary, for some reason moved Gurov to indignation, and struck him as degrading and unclean. What savage manners, what people! What senseless nights, what uninteresting, uneventful days!

The rage for card-playing, the gluttony, the drunkenness, the continual talk always about the same thing."

He stops reading and looks up at Mercedes. She waits for more. None comes.

MERCEDES

Why do you read in English?

Beat. Benoit's face tightens fleetingly.

BENOIT

Why do you write in English?

Mercedes doesn't respond. She pulls her knees up to her chest and wraps her arms around them.

Benoit watches her. He shakes his head. He leans back and reaches for her hand. She gives it to him and he pulls her so that she's lying on him on her stomach. He wraps his arms around her. They lie in silence. Eventually Benoit lets out a groan.

BENOIT

I don't know if I can handle another dinner thing tonight. It seems as though everywhere I go, everyone's talking about how the sturgeon tasted.

He sighs.

MERCEDES

What's the dinner for?

BENOIT

Audrey's birthday. My wife's birthday.

Silence.

BENOIT

Sorry... I should have made something up.

Mercedes shakes her head.

Benoit chuckles. And then he laughs heartily, almost hysterically. Mercedes watches him, confused.

BENOIT

So much of this thing requires me to go home and get my story straight.

Silence. Mercedes doesn't see the humour on it.

BENOIT

I'm sorry. I'm dizzy.
I keep imagining things. Scenarios.

MERCEDES

Like?

BENOIT

Like...I see myself giving up my life like a deluded old goat and losing you... or gaining you and never seeing my daughters again.

(Silence.)

Or getting everything I want like the selfish prick I am and watching the waves of damage spread out around me.

He glances down at Mercedes. She gives him a masked look, and it makes him nervous.

BENOIT

This is just one of many channels my thoughts run in throughout the day. Ignore me.

Mercedes looks up at him sympathetically. He looks at her and sighs. And then he kisses her. They begin to make out heatedly. He flips her around so that he's on top of her, running his hands through her hair and along her body.

He runs a hand over her breast and begins to slip it up her shirt--

MERCEDES

Wait wait wait.

He stops. Silence. They look at each other.

BENOIT

"Oh no, not that old guy," she thought?

Mercedes shakes her head.

MERCEDES

I'm scared. I just don't know how much further I'm prepared to go. Yet. I don't know... What happens now? You undress me.

(A pause...)

Then we hate each other? I don't want to do that.

Benoit is silent. He thinks.

MERCEDES

I'm sorry.

He thinks some more.

BENOIT

Mercedes. I don't think I've had a happier time in my life than the time I'm spending here with you on this sofa. So no.

I won't undress you. Never. Never if not doing so will allow me to stay here and talk to you.
(He mimes cutting of his own arm.)
I'll amputate myself and be just your friend.

Silence. Finally, he smiles at her. She smiles at him. She kisses him, and they begin to make out again, feverishly, intertwined. Benoit's breathing gets louder and he lets out a soft moan. His Blackberry vibrates once on the table. They stop.

BENOIT
Ugh.

MERCEDES
It's ok. Go.

EXT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT BUILDING - AFTERNOON

Benoit approaches his apartment building and sees a MAN standing on the porch holding a small white pastry box. His van is idling in front of the building.

Benoit hurries his step as the man places the box down in front of the door.

BENOIT
Attendez! Monsieur! Attendez! (Wait! Mister! Wait!)

The delivery man stops.

DELIVERY MAN 2
Je cherche Mme Audrey Gallant. (I'm looking for Mrs. Audrey Gallant.)

Benoit trots up the steps and picks up the box.

BENOIT
Oui, vous êtes à la bonne adresse. (Yeah, you're at the right place.)

He opens the box and sees the exact same kind of cake he found on his porch last week. The delivery man looks at a slip.

DELIVERY MAN 2
Ça vient d'Édouard et Sylvie Gallant. (It's from Mr. and Mrs. Edouard Gallant.)

BENOIT
On a reçu le même gâteau la semaine dernière. (We received the same cake last week.)

DELIVERY MAN 2

On s'était trompé de date. Chanceux! (We mixed up the date. Lucky you!)

The delivery man descends the stairs and gets in his van.

INT. CAFE DELLA POSTA - NIGHT

Benoit, Audrey, and a dozen of their closest friends, including Christine and Jean, have the small restaurant entirely to themselves.

FRIEND #2

-- Toutefois, on dit que la majorité des divorces sont causés par des disputes sur l'argent..
(--Still, they say that most divorces are the result of financial arguments.)

FRIEND #3

Non, non. Michel et Diane divorcent pas pour une raison d'argent. C'est tout simplement parce qu'ils ne s'aiment plus.
(No; Michel and Dianne aren't divorcing because of money but because they simply do not love each other.)

Benoit shifts in his seat.

FRIEND #2

C'est faux. En tout cas, l'amour n'est qu'une construction occidentale et n'a rien à voir avec le mariage. C'est un concept qu'on a inventé au Moyen Age.
(False. And love is just a Western construction anyhow and has nothing to do with marriage. It's a concept we invented in the Middle Ages.)

Benoit has had enough:

BENOIT

Vraiment? Et donc en l'an 1 avant Jésus Christ, Ovide, il parlait de quoi dans *Ars Amatoria*? Et au 11e siècle, Asad Gorgani -- un Persen en passant -- à quoi faisait-il allusion dans *Vis et Ramin*?
(Oh yeah? So in year 1 B.C., what was Ovid writing about in *Ars Amatoria*? And Asad Gorgani -- a Persian, by the way -- was writing about what, exactly, in *Vis and Ramin* in the 11th century?)

Beat. Friend #2 smiles.

JEAN

Ben, passe-moi le poivre?--
(Ben, pass me the pepper?--)

FRIEND #2

C'est vrai. T'as raison.
(Ah yes. You're right.)

Silence. Benoit takes a bottle of sparkling water from the table and refills his glass. He's about to put it back down when, as an afterthought, he refills Audrey's glass as well.

Jean reaches past Benoit and grabs the pepper.

FRIEND #1

Hé: apparemment -- je répète ce qu'on m'a dit --
- mais Richard et Élise se vantent de leurs
rénovations bien qu'ils n'aient pas encore
payé leur contracteur. (Hey: apparently -- and
this is just what I heard -- but Richard and
Elise have to halt renovations because they
didn't pay their contractor.)

FRIEND #2

Pire -- le contracteur avait même payé un sous-
contracteur pour, je ne sais pas, un sablage
quelconque, et il est dans le trou à nouveau!
(What's worse: the contractor paid a
subcontractor for, I don't know, sanding or
blasting or something, and how he's out of
pocket!)

Benoit stares at his plate.

BENOIT

(quietly)
Qu'est ce qu'ils vont dire, *les gens*? (What
will people say?)

AUDREY

Ça pourrait m'arranger. Parce que chaque fois
qu'ils sont dans une situation difficile,
Richard force Élise à vendre tous ses
vêtements chics sur Ebay, et elle et moi, nous
avons exactement la même taille! (That could
work out for me. Every time they're in a
tight spot, Richard makes Elise sell all her
clothes on Ebay, and we're exactly the same
size!)

They all laugh. The waiter comes out holding Audrey's birthday cake with a sparkler in it. They all turn and look. They all take a deep breath before singing:

JEAN AND BENOIT

Bonne f--

EVERYONE ELSE
Ma chère Audrey--

An awkward beat. Quiet. Jean gets things going again:

JEAN
Ma chère Audrey...

Christine smiles at him, and he winks at her.

EVERYONE
C'est à ton tour, de te laisser parler
d'amour; Ma chère Audrey, c'est à ton tour, de
te laisser parler d'amour.

They all cheer and applaud as Audrey tries -- and fails --
- to blow out the sparkler.

INT. SAME - LATER

The cake is almost entirely eaten. The wine bottles on
the table are empty. The gang is sipping on espressos.

CHRISTINE
Bon ça suffit. Et si on déballait les cadeaux,
hein? (Ok, that's enough. Let's open some
presents, eh?)

Audrey laughs modestly.

JEAN
Benoît, à toi l'honneur. (Benoit, you go
first.)

Benoit smiles, tense.

BENOIT
Vous savez, après 11 ans, pour trouver quelque
chose d'original, c'est pas toujours évident.
(You know, after 11 years, finding something
original isn't exactly obvious.)

He hands a wrapped gift to Audrey. Everyone watches as
Audrey opens it.

BENOIT (cont'd)
C'est pas vraiment grand chose. (It's really
nothing big.)

Audrey finishes unwrapping it. It's a novel.

AUDREY
"AnGES et Démons."

Quiet. Jean raises an eyebrow at Benoit: "Seriously?"

BENOIT

Dan Brown. C'est lui qui a écrit "Da Vinci Code". Je savais que tu avais aimé, alors...
(Dan Brown. He wrote The DaVinci Code. I know you loved that one so...)

Quiet.

BENOIT

Couverture cartonnée. (Hardcover.)

FRIEND #3

C'est vrai, Dan Bown, il est superbe. (It's true, Dan Brown is excellent.)

Audrey turns to Benoit and kisses him on the lips.

AUDREY

Merci.

BENOIT

J'ai gardé la facture au cas où tu veux l'échanger. (I kept the receipt in case you want to exchange it.)

CHRISTINE

Ok, ok, mon tour! Ça, c'est de la part de nous tous. (Ok, ok, my turn! This is from all of us.)

Christine hands over a large envelope with a small bow on it. Audrey opens the envelope. Benoit shoots Jean a look and Jean replies with a shrug.

Audrey pulls out a plane ticket. There's a moment of quiet anticipation and, for Audrey, processing.

AUDREY

... Paris!!! Des billets pour Paris! (Paris! Tickets for Paris!)

There's an awkward lull around the table before she realizes.

AUDREY

Un billet pour Paris. (A ticket for Paris.)

Silence.

CHRISTINE

Tu nous avais dit que Benoît ne pouvais pas y aller. On a alors pensé que tu pourrais, toi, rendre visite à tes parents. Rencontrer des gens à la Sorbonne... (You said Benoit couldn't go. And so we thought you could go visit your parents. Take a meeting at the Sorbonne...)

FRIEND #4

Benoit, ça te dérange pas, j'espère. (Benoit, you don't mind, right?)

Benoit's face is tense but he tries to keep up some semblance of a smile.

BENOIT

Bien sûr que non. (No, of course not.)

AUDREY

Merci, mille fois merci. Merci! (Thank you, thank you so much!)

Audrey gets up and does a round of kisses around the table: "Merci, merci, merci, merci..."

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - LATER

Benoit and Audrey enter the apartment and are greeted by MARIE-EVE, 22, the baby-sitter.

MARIE-EVE

Elles dorment. (They're asleep.)

AUDREY

Merci, Marie-Ève.

Benoit pulls out his wallet and hands Marie-Eve some cash.

BENOIT

Désolé. On est un peu de retard. (Sorry, we're a little late.)

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT BATHROOM - NIGHT

Benoit washes his face. He looks at himself squarely in the mirror.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Benoit enters as Audrey undresses. He helps her with her back zipper. She turns around, and after a beat, he kisses her passionately.

They undress each other and fall into bed. Benoit makes love to her, fast and without much tenderness, until she comes.

When she does, she begins to weep. Benoit stops and looks at her. She looks away. Benoit lies beside her, watching her.

He finally reaches his hand over to caress her but she shrinks away. He lies on his back staring up at the ceiling and listening to her weep.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Benoit reads to the class.

BENOIT

Page 374 for example: "it seemed to them that fate itself had meant them for one another, and they could not understand why he had a wife and she a husband; and it was as though they were a pair of birds of passage, caught and forced to live in different cages." What do you think of this metaphor; what does he mean?

(Silence.)

Come on guys, this one's easy.

Mercedes sits among the group, in the middle somewhere, taking notes.

EXT. DOWNTOWN STREET - DAY

Roger and Benoit walk together while eating submarine-style sandwiches.

ROGER

Do you have any students in the Dome play next week?

BENOIT

I have no idea -- you?

ROGER

Yeah, a bunch. I was thinking of going out and supporting them, I was gonna say if you're going...

A beat.

BENOIT

You don't feel strange about seeing your students outside--

They stop in front of a LIBRARY.

ROGER

I need to pick up a text in here, is that ok?

AUDREY walks out of the library. She stops by Roger and Benoit and there's a quick awkward moment where Audrey and Benoit look at each other; the strange feeling of running into your partner unexpectedly. Then:

BENOIT

Allo! Qu'est ce-que tu fais là? (Hey! What are you doing here?)

They both chuckle lightly and give each other a quick kiss on the lips.

AUDREY

Bonjour Roger.

(Roger nods hello with a mouth full of sandwich)

Je suis juste venue faire un peu de lecture.
(I just came for a quiet afternoon of reading).

BENOIT

Où sont les filles?

(Where are the girls?)

AUDREY

Elles vont à l'école, Ben...

(They go to school, Ben...)

Silence. Benoit chuckles, sheepishly. He looks at Audrey for a moment. Roger looks at Benoit.

BENOIT

Bon, ben... À tout-à-l'heure? (Ok, well. I'll see you later?)

AUDREY

Oui. Ciao.

They kiss quickly on the lips again.

AUDREY

(to Roger)

Au revoir.

Audrey walks off. Roger watches Benoit who walks into the library.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Benoit carries a suitcase to the front door. Audrey stuffs a bunch of papers and a passport into her purse.

AUDREY

Ok les filles, venez dire au revoir à Maman.
(Ok girls, come say by to Mommy.)

The girls run into the hall from their bedrooms. They hug their mom and start crying dramatically.

AUDREY

Allons, ne pleurez pas, ce n'est qu'une petite semaine. (Come on, don't cry, it's just one short week.)

NICOLE

Prends-nous avec toi! On veut aller à Paris!
(Take us with you! We want to go to Paris!)

AUDREY

Pas cette fois-ci. (Not this time.)

Benoit tries not to lose patience. Audrey looks at Benoit.

CHANTAL

T'en fais pas pour lui. On s'occupera de lui.
(Don't worry about him, we'll take care of him.)

AUDREY

Je vous aime, les filles. (I love you girls.)

She kisses each of the girls, and then Benoit.

EXT. LAURIER AVE WEST - DAY

Benoit walks down the street with a coffee. He enters the MULTIMAGS store.

INT. MULTIMAGS - DAY

Benoit peruses the rack of magazines. He selects a couple. He slowly wanders over to the English literary magazines. As he's browsing them, a store WORKER carries over a stack of MATRIX MAGAZINES and he places them on the rack. Among the captions on the cover, Benoit reads: MERCEDES BEAUREGARD. He takes a copy.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY

Mercedes washes the dishes. There's a BUZZ at the door.

IN THE HALLWAY

Mercedes comes out of the kitchen and presses a button on her intercom. She opens the door and dries her hands. She goes back into the kitchen.

IN THE KITCHEN

Mercedes fills the kettle with water and plugs it in. She takes down two boxes of tea, mint and vanilla, from the top shelf.

BENOIT pokes his head into the kitchen.

BENOIT
How did you know it was me?

MERCEDES
Well there isn't really anyone else.

Benoit can't help but like the sound of this.

BENOIT
I bought you a present.

Benoit walks into the living room and Mercedes follows.

IN THE LIVING ROOM:

Benoit sits on the sofa, Mercedes sits beside him. He pulls a MAGAZINE out of a plastic bag and hands it to her.

Mercedes looks at it and smiles. She opens it to her story and her smile widens.

MERCEDES
Thank you.

Benoit takes the magazine from her and looks at it.
After a beat:

BENOIT
So. This... Henry guy. Who's that?

MERCEDES
You read it already? This gift is used.
(Benoit waits.)
It's you.

BENOIT
This man has a son. I don't.

MERCEDES
I didn't know that when I wrote it.

Silence. Benoit looks at the story.

BENOIT
You know, when I heard you reading this that day, I knew it was about me. It uh... Well, it pissed me off. Like the tribesman's soul stolen by the camera.

MERCEDES
I'm sorry.

BENOIT

No. It's a gift. It's such a gift you've given me.

Benoit kisses Mercedes softly. He's about to run a hand through her hair when he stops and looks at her.

BENOIT

What are you writing about now?

Beat.

MERCEDES

Still you. I only write about you. In one way or another.

Silence. He grabs her and kisses her gratefully.

BENOIT

Will you read me some?

Mercedes gets up and disappears for a moment into the bedroom. She comes back out with some papers and sits back down on the sofa.

MERCEDES

I don't know which part to read.

BENOIT

Whatever you like. Read me what you wrote last night or this morning.

Mercedes skips a few pages. She clears her throat.

MERCEDES

This is pretty rough...

She clears her throat again and reads aloud:

MERCEDES

Edward and Jaime's visits began to develop a recognizable arc. First five minutes: Awkward. Nervous. Then they would touch each other and unclench a little and it would feel powerfully good. Then, they would alternate between talking and kissing, and as they ran out of time, they would work up to a fever pitch of desire and sadness and teeter on the... Teeter on the edge of fucking. And in that teetering, Jamie thought she saw not so much fear or scruples anymore, but a kind of pleasure and intimacy in holding onto that point; in being on the edge together. Still, she couldn't help fearing that they were tearing up neighbourhoods to build an expressway to the Palace of the Fleeting Fuck.

Silence. Benoit is still.

MERCEDES
I don't like that last part.
(Silence.)
Are you mad?

BENOIT
No. No, you always get it just right and it
chastens her every time. Thank you.

Benoit kisses Mercedes.

BENOIT
Do you really think that's what we're doing?

Mercedes shrugs, sad. Benoit kisses her again, and once
again it starts to get feverish. He lays her down and
leans over her, kissing her. His Blackberry buzzes on
the table. He looks at her.

BENOIT
I have a departmental meeting...

He hears the words come out of his mouth.

Mercedes nods. He shakes his head.

He kisses her once. Then again for a little longer, and
he moans softly with pleasure and they work themselves
into a frenzy.

MERCEDES
What about your meeting?

BENOIT
Not happening.

MERCEDES
Are you going to get in trouble?

BENOIT
(between kisses)
I'll tell them my daughters were sick.

He kisses her more and more and crawls on top of her.
They make out. He pulls off her top. While kissing
her, he reaches one hand beneath her and undoes her bra
and removes it.

He pulls back to look at her but she quickly covers
herself with her hands.

MERCEDES
Wait. Benoit.
(He kisses her neck and her collar bone
and her shoulder...)

If we do this, that's it. I will have fucked a married man.

He looks at her.

BENOIT
You're already fucking a married man,
Mercedes.

He scoops her up in his arms and carries her to the bedroom.

IN THE BEDROOM

Benoit lays Mercedes down on the bed. They awkwardly fumble as they help each other undress. And then Benoit makes love to her, also fast and without much tenderness -- much like he did with Audrey.

As he comes, he presses his hand down on her throat. She instinctively lifts her chin up to gulp for air, but he loosens his grip and collapses on top of her.

He lies on top of her for a while, hand resting gently on her throat. Then, he lifts himself off her and lies facing her. They lie in silence. Finally:

BENOIT
Someone light a candle for Gurov and Anna.
Adrift.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - LATER

Mercedes lies under the sheets with the light on. Half of her bed is messy and unmade -- sheets crumpled where Benoit used to be.

She sits up and grabs a T-shirt from the floor. She puts her underwear back on and walks into the living room.

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Mercedes sits on the sofa and turns on the TV. ETALK DAILY is on, too loud, too bright, too upbeat for the circumstances. She turns it back off.

She gets up and puts on a CD. She grabs her Moleskine from the coffee table and walks back into the bedroom.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Benoit is fast asleep.

Chantal opens his bedroom door and enters. She walks to his side of the bed and pokes at him. He doesn't wake up. She pokes at him again.

CHANTAL

Papa. Papa, je me sens pas très bien. (Dad. Dad, I'm not feeling well.)

Benoit opens an eye.

BENOIT

Hein? Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas, qu'est-ce qui t'arrive? (Hmm? What is it, what's wrong?)

Chantal VOMITS at his bedside.

BENOIT (cont'd)

Wo wo wo!

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Chantal leans over the toilet bowl. Benoit wets a face cloth in the sink and dabs it on Chantal's face and neck.

Nicole walks into the bathroom.

BENOIT

Retourne te coucher, chérie, ta soeur se sent pas très bien, c'est tout. (Go back to bed, sweetie, your sister's just not feeling well.)

Nicole VOMITS in the sink.

BENOIT

Mon Dieu. (My God.)

Chantal VOMITS again in the toilet.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATER

Benoit dials the cordless phone from a number on the fridge.

BENOIT

Oui, Mme. Gallant, c'est Benoît... Oui, je sais qu'il est ... 2 heures et demie du matin. Oui, je peux parler à Audrey s'il vous plaît? (Hi, Mrs. Gallant, it's Benoit... Yeah, I know...it's 2:30 here. Yeah, can I speak to Audrey please?)

INT. THE GALLANT RESIDENCE - PARIS - MORNING - INTERCUT-
TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

Audrey, in her robe, comes down a flight of stairs into a charming but quaint living room. She takes the phone from MRS. GALLANT, a jolly-looking woman in her 60s.

AUDREY

Allô? (Hello?)

BENOIT

Je suis désolé. Je t'ai réveillée, hein? (I'm sorry. I woke you up.)

AUDREY

Je me levais de toute façon. Qu'est-ce qui se passe? (I was getting up anyway. What's wrong?)

BENOIT

Les filles sont malades... Elles n'arrêtent pas de vomir, et je sais pas quoi faire, et je sais même pas où est le thermomètre... (The girls are sick... They can't stop throwing up and I don't know what to do, I don't even know where the thermometer is...)

AUDREY

C'est probablement une gastro -- quelques enfants l'avaient à l'école la semaine dernière. Le thermomètre est dans ma petite boîte à lunch Betty Boop dans mon armoire. Y a aussi du Gravol au gingembre là-dedans. Donne-leur deux à chacune, avec un peu d'eau tiède. Appelle Livraison 24 heures. Commande-leur 6 bouteilles de Gatorade. Et puis, ne leur donne pas de nourriture solide jusqu'à ce qu'elles arrêtent de vomir. Et même après, pas de steaks, ok? Si leur température est en-dessous de 37, elles ont peut-être une intoxication alimentaire et tu devras les emmener à l'urgence. Laisse-moi leur parler et va chercher le thermomètre... (It's probably just a stomach flu, some kids at school had it last week. Ok, the thermometer is in the Betty Boop lunch box in my armoire. There's ginger Gravol in there, too. Give them two each with some lukewarm water. Call the 24-hour delivery service and order 6 bottles of Gatorade. And don't give the girls any solid food until they stop vomiting. And even then, no steaks, ok? If their temperature is under 37 degrees it could be food poisoning and you could bring them to the ER. Let me talk to them while you go get the thermometer...)

BENOIT
(choked up, grateful)
Ok... Merci Audrey.

AUDREY
Ok... Passe-leur le téléphone... (Ok, put them
on...)

Benoit takes the phone into the bathroom.

IN THE BATHROOM

The girls are lying makeshift beds of towels in the
bathroom floor.

BENOIT
Les filles, Maman est au téléphone. Elle veut
vous parler. (Girls, your mom is on the phone,
she wants to talk to you.)

Benoit gives the phone to the girls and they share it.

NICOLE
Maman!

CHANTAL
Tu nous manques! (We miss you!)

Audrey says something on her end that makes the girls
laugh.

NICOLE
Il avait l'air d'avoir si peur! (He looked so
scared!)

The girls giggle.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Benoit sleeps on the couch.

The TV has been wheeled over to the bathroom doorway.

IN THE BATHROOM

The girls, now with pillows and bottles of Gatorade,
sleep on the floor while the TV plays cartoons on low
volume.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Benoit's English class, including Mercedes, waits for
Benoit to arrive. Finally, a young STUDENT, about 18,
checks his watch.

STUDENT #1
15 minutes, I'm outta here!

STUDENT #2
Sweet!

Two students get up and leave the classroom. A few other students then follow suit. An exodus ensues.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - HALLWAY - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Mercedes walks down the hall and stops in front of Benoit's office.

A Post-It reads: "BENOIT BEAUCHEMIN - OFFICE HOURS CANCELLED TODAY."

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

Benoit and Jean sit on the sofa drinking beers. Benoit looks like shit. Jean looks like he's going out after. He's listening, but he doesn't look happy.

Benoit speaks quietly.

BENOIT
J'arrête pas de penser à ce qu'on a fait, et comment je me suis senti. Même si on se connaissait pas, on répondait bien aux réactions de l'autre. Lui faire l'amour m'a semblé vraiment la chose à faire. (I can't stop thinking about what we did together, how it felt. It's as though, even though we're new to each other, we were alive to each other's responses. It felt right to make love to her.)

Silence. Jean doesn't say anything, he just stares.

BENOIT
Arrête. (Stop.)

JEAN
Chriss de bâtard. (Stupid son of a bitch.)

BENOIT
Arrête. J'ai besoin de ton aide. (Stop. I need your help.)

JEAN
Je suis en train de t'aider, là. Ça paraît peut-être pas, mais je suis en train de t'aider. Câlin. Check-donc la situation: cette fille est jeune, elle est belle, et elle t'admire.

De l'autre bord, toi, t'es vieux, t'es pathétique, pis t'es désespéré. Alors, t'as couché avec. (I am helping you. It might not look like it but I'm helping you. Christ. Look: She's young, she's hot, and she's into you. You're old, you're pathetic, and you're desperate. So you fucked her.)

BENOIT

Non, je suis pas toi, Jean. (No, Jean, I'm not you.)

JEAN

Je le sais que t'essaies d'être méchant, mais oublions ça. Puisque évidemment, t'as complètement perdu la tête, mais t'es un homme, fuck. Tu l'es. Et si tu veux tromper ta femme, vas-y fort, mais ne le fais pas de façon à te retrouver sur les nouvelles de 6 heures en le justifiant avec une histoire d'amour de merde. Y a des épisodes de CSI qui commencent de même. (I know you're trying to be an asshole but I'm going to let it slide because you're obviously out of your head. But you are a man, Ben. You are. And if you want to cheat on your wife, knock yourself out, but don't do in a way that'll get you and your family on the 6 o'clock news and try and justify with some bullshit love story. Episodes of CSI start like this.)

BENOIT

Je suis en amour. (I'm in love.)

JEAN

Non. (No.)

BENOIT

Ouais. (Yeah.)

JEAN

Non. T'es pas en amour. (No. You're not in love.)

Jean reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pack of gum. Shoves a piece into his mouth.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Benoit wanders around the apartment searching frantically for something. He looks between sofa cushions, in drawers, etc. He pokes his head into Nicole and Chantal's bedroom.

IN THEIR BEDROOM

The girls, looking healthy, play bowling on a Nintendo Wii.

BENOIT

Les filles, je cherche mon livre. L'avez-vous vu? (Girls, I'm looking for my book. Have you seen it?)

CHANTAL

Lequel? (What book?)

NICOLE

Celui qu'il lit tout le temps. Non, je ne l'ai pas vu. (The one he's always reading. No, I haven't seen it.)

CHANTAL

Moi non plus. (Me neither.)

IN THE LIVING ROOM

Benoit empties his satchel of all its contents.

IN HIS BEDROOM

He opens the drawer in his night stand. In it is the copy of *ANGES ET DEMONS* he bought for Audrey's birthday. He looks at it for a moment, processes. Then he looks stricken. He throws the book on the bed.

INT. AUDREY'S BEDROOM - PARIS - LATE NIGHT

Audrey sits up in bed reading Benoit's copy of *THE LADY WITH THE DOG*.

EXT. ST. CATHERINE STREET WEST - NIGHT

Mercedes walks aimlessly down the street and sees a small crowd huddled in front of Cinema Banque Scotia checking out movie times. Mercedes stops and has a look at the showings.

INT. CINEMA BANQUE SCOTIA - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Mercedes waits in line at the concessions counter. When it's her turn:

MERCEDES

Une Coke. Moyen.

CLERK

Autre chose avec ça? (Anything else with that?)

MERCEDES

Non, merci. (No, thanks.)

CLERK

Cinq dollars s'il vous plaît. (Five dollars please.)

INT. CINEMA BANQUE SCOTIA - THEATRE

The theatre is crowded. Mercedes enters and scans the room for an empty seat.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Jean sits with a DATE, a woman in her 30s wearing too much makeup. He sees Mercedes and takes a beat to place her. It strikes him, and suddenly he stands up.

Mercedes sees him and freezes. He points.

JEAN

Mercedes!

She turns around to walk out.

JEAN

Bouge pas. Mercedes!

Jean climbs over a bunch of knees and runs down the stairs.

JEAN

Hey!

IN THE CONCESSIONS/ARCADE ATRIUM

Mercedes runs out of the theatre. Jean follows a short ways behind her. He chases her down the escalators into an exit vestibule which, the outer doors of which are locked. A sign reads "SVP UTILISEZ L'AUTRE SORTIE (ST. CATHERINE)"

Jean grabs Mercedes by the shoulders and both of them try to catch their breath.

JEAN

Coline que je suis pas en good shape. (Holy shit I'm out of shape.)

Mercedes is silent and embarrassed. She covers her face with her hands.

MERCEDES

S'il te plaît, ne dis rien. (Please don't say anything.)

Silence.

JEAN

Mercedes. Ecoute. Je ne te blame pas pour les problemes de Benoit. Et je suis pas en train de dire que t'es pas une bonne fille, parce que je suis sûr que tu l'est. Mais Benoit a "left da building", si tu me comprends. Et il est convaincu qu'il est en amour avec toi. Et moi je suis prêt à gager que toi t'es pas en amour avec lui. Je me trompe? (Mercedes. Listen. I don't blame you for Benoit's problems. And I'm not going to say you're not a nice girl because I'm sure you are. But Benoit has left the building, ok? And he's convinced he's in love with you. And I'm willing to bet you're not in love with him. Am I wrong?)

(Mercedes doesn't respond)

J'ai peur qu'il soit sur le point de gâcher sa vie. Et je pense pas que c'est ce que tu lui souhaites. Alors. Mercedes, s'il te plaît. (I'm worried he's about to ruin his life. And I don't think that's what you want. So. Mercedes. Please.)

Long silence. Finally, Mercedes begins to quietly sob, and lowers her head in shame. Taken aback at first, Jean wraps his arms around her.

JEAN

Mercedes. Hey. C'est pas de ta faute.
(Mercedes. Hey. It's not your fault.)

MERCEDES

I kept pushing. I wouldn't stop.

JEAN

Pas grave, il aurait dû lui aussi se retenir. Sssshhhh...(Doesn't matter. He should have known better. Sssshhh..)

Jean sees his date looking at them from the other side of the glass. She makes a gesture that says "What the fuck?" and walks off. Jean watches her go, regretfully, but continues to console Mercedes.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Mercedes, looking worn-out, takes notes as Benoit finishes a lesson.

BENOIT

Bon. We're out of time. Don't forget your papers are due in one week. If you need more time now's the time to ask; don't wait till next week.

The students begin to file out of the classroom and a group of them swarm Benoit, presumably to ask for extensions.

As Mercedes gathers her things, a sweet and charming young man next to her, DAVE, 20, turns to her.

DAVE

I think everyone needs an extension. Who even understands the thing?

Mercedes smiles.

MERCEDES

Really? I thought it seemed pretty straightforward.

DAVE

Way to make a guy feel like a dummy.

The two laugh and Benoit eyes them as he is bombarded with students.

DAVE

I'm just heading to the food court for a bite. If you come and explain the assignment to me I'll buy you a slice of pizza.

MERCEDES

Or I'll buy my own 99 cent slice and just help you for free.

Dave concedes. Mercedes glances at Benoit as she leaves with Dave.

DAVE

You know, it's not 1960; slices aren't 99 cents anymore.

Benoit flinches at Mercedes' laughter which follows her into the hallway.

EXT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT BUILDING - EVENING

Benoit walks slowly down the street and glances up at the 3rd floor of a building across the street, where a light is on.

In the vestibule of the apartment building Benoit spots a YOUNG WOMAN who resembles Mercedes exiting the building.

Benoit ducks into a small CAFE across from Mercedes' apartment.

INT. CAFE

Benoit watches the woman walk down the street -- it's not Mercedes.

Benoit exits the cafe and crosses the street.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - SAME

Mercedes mops the floors of her apartment.

There's a BUZZ at the door.

Mercedes puts the mop into the bucket to head for the door but the mop topples over and splashes water across the floor.

MERCEDES

Merde.

Mercedes half-assedly wipes up some of the water with a bare foot -- or at least spreads it around a little. The BUZZER rings again.

Annoyed, Mercedes heads to the door and presses a button on the intercom. She opens the door and walks back to the bucket. She wrings out the mop, wipes up the spilt water, and, wrings the mop out another time.

Benoit appears in the door and he is about to step in.

MERCEDES

NON! Don't come in, je viens juste de passer la moppe (I just mopped the floors)... The hallway's fine though.

Benoit is not thrilled by the welcome and leaves the door open a crack behind him.

Mercedes approaches and leans against the wall.

BENOIT

I can't stay. I just missed you. Haven't seen you in a few days.

MERCEDES

Tu m'as vue il y a quatre heures. (You saw me four hours ago.)

Benoit notices the French; plays along.

BENOIT

Tu sais ce que je veux dire. Comment était ton rendez-vous avec Dave? (You know what I mean. How was your rendez-vous with Dave?)

Mercedes ignores the insinuation.

MERCEDES

I helped him with his assignment but now that I think about it I think I might have made a mistake -- I don't know if I understand it as well as I thought I did. I hope I didn't screw him up.

Benoit leans in and caresses her neck.

BENOIT

Could you please concentrate on ruining my life and let other guys fuck up on their own?

Mercedes raises an eyebrow at the exaggeration and pulls away from him gently.

After a beat, Benoit looks sheepish. He looks down at the floor with a crooked smile.

BENOIT

Amant jaloux. (Jealous lover.)

Silence.

MERCEDES

Alors... (So...)

He silently tries to interpret her behaviour. Then:

BENOIT

Rien. Je voulais simplement te voir. (Nothing. Just wanted to see you.)

He steps in closer and slips a hand into her jeans. She starts to step away but he wraps his other arm around her and pulls her closer.

MERCEDES

Qu'est-ce-que tu fais? (What are you doing?)

He ignores her. It isn't long before she's putty in his hands. Eventually:

MERCEDES

Come in... Ok, let's go, come in.

He shakes his head.

BENOIT

Tu viens juste de passer la moppe. (You just mopped the floors.)

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - SAME

Mercedes lies on the floor in the hallway, staring up at the light fixture on the ceiling, with her jeans around her knees.

After a while, she pulls her jeans back up and sits up.

EXT. PARC AVENUE - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Benoit walks happily down Avenue du Parc.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - DAY

Benoit lectures energetically to his class -- not Mercedes' -- and the class listens attentively, writing down his every word.

He takes a book from his desk and starts reading to them from it, gesticulating passionately.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - BENOIT'S OFFICE - LATER

Roger is sitting and working quietly when Benoit enters. They exchange nods as Benoit starts packing up his stuff for the day.

Roger watches him.

ROGER
Everything ok?

BENOIT
Yeah, everything's great, why?

ROGER
I don't know... you seem out of sorts recently.

Benoit smiles.

BENOIT
Nope.
(He keeps packing. Then:)
I just taught one of those great classes, you know when the energy is just so?

Roger nods, but is not satisfied -- Benoit seems almost too good now.

Benoit sighs contentedly and slings his satchel over his shoulder.

BENOIT
Have a good one.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Benoit folds laundry in the hallway. He REMEMBERS being with Mercedes, and the images BLAZE in his mind, overexposed: KISSING ON HER SOFA; HER READING TO HIM IN HIS OFFICE; him FUMBLING TO UNDRESS HER; PUTTING HIS HAND ON HER HAND.

Benoit starts to smile to himself, wide, grinning, but at some point it sours, mutates and turns into a one, quick, fleeting SOB.

He puts a hand on his face and then, becoming aware of himself, quickly glances around to see if one of his daughters are around.

KEYS jingle on the other side of the front door.

CHANTAL (O.S.)
Maman!!!

Audrey opens the door and walks in with her suitcases and Chantal and Nicole hurl themselves into her arms.

She looks at Benoit and they smile politely at each other before Benoit makes his way over.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Benoit sits on the bed watching Audrey unpack. Silence.

BENOIT
Tes parents vont bien? (Your parents are good?)

AUDREY
Papa a l'air un peu mince, mais Maman compense. (Dad's looking a little thin, but Mom makes up for it.)

Benoit chuckles a mandatory chuckle.

BENOIT
Et le vol de retour? (And your flight back?)

AUDREY
Il faisait trop froid, tu sais, comme toujours. On est à dix mille mètres, je comprends pas pourquoi ils mettent la clim? (Too cold, as always... We're thirty thousand feet in the air, why do they turn up the A/C?)

Another polite chuckle from Benoit. She glances at him this time, a glance that says "stop that."

She reaches into her suitcase, pulls out Benoit's copy of *The Lady with the Dog* and plunks it on the bed in front of Benoit, and without a beat starts folding a sweater, glancing up at him every few seconds.

He watches the book for a moment, and glances at Audrey. Then at the book. He does his best to pick it up nonchalantly. Then he puts it back down beside him.

Benoit and Audrey lock eyes for a fraction of a second.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Mercedes takes a shower and shaves her legs;
- Mercedes brushes her teeth;
- Mercedes puts on makeup;
- Mercedes makes her bed.

Mercedes sits on her crisp, freshly made bed and waits.

There's a BUZZ at the door.

Once again she walks to the door and presses a button on the intercom. She unlocks the door and opens it a crack, and sits down, back against the wall, in front of it.

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. After a long moment, the door opens slowly and hits her thigh with a soft thud. She stands up and opens it, and Benoit ENTERS.

Mercedes takes off his satchel and places it on the ground. And then his coat, as well.

He looks at her as she does this, but doesn't kiss her, refuses to kiss her first this time.

She looks up at him, unsure what else to do. Then she steps closer and stands on her toes to kiss him.

Satisfied, he kisses her back passionately, and scoops her up to carry to her bedroom -- but her arms hang awkwardly and one of her legs falls from his grip. He stops walking and jumps up lightly to regain his hold, and then continues his march into the bedroom.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - BEDROOM - LATER

Benoit holds Mercedes under the sheets. They lie quietly and he caresses her.

BENOIT

The happiness you've brought me is starting to spill over into every other part of my life... As a kind of generalized tenderness. I don't know how to thank you.

Silence. He looks down at her and she buries her face into his neck.

BENOIT

What is it?

He pulls away a little, but only to force her to reveal herself. She's quiet for a long time until:

MERCEDES

My favourite thing to eat is Kraft Dinner, with ketchup, a day old and reheated.

Benoit smiles and starts to laugh.

BENOIT

What?

MERCEDES

I have a habit of tearing off my fingernails and throwing them all over the floor. And I leave them there for ... A long time. I let food go bad in my fridge. It takes me an hour to get ready to go anywhere. I spend 50 dollars on shampoo, but don't have a job. I have a stuffed animal -- a puppy -- named Johnny, as in Depp, and I keep him in a drawer but I can't bear to get rid of him. I'm incredibly selfish, and an egomaniac, and I'm manipulative. I've read all of the *Shopaholic* books. And sometimes I just screw everything and take off and reset my life or my feelings, no matter what the damage to anyone else.

Silence. Benoit perches himself on an elbow and thinks. He smile a poker smile.

BENOIT

I'm trying to figure out whether you think that telling me these things will make you less attractive to me-- because you consider them defects of character-- or more attractive-- because telling me them builds intimacy.

Mercedes doesn't say anything. He watches her, waiting for more, so she kisses him instead.

BENOIT

I think I knew most of these things about you already. But what I know more is that you're... a miracle of felicitous combination ...and that you'll probably go through life both untroubled by your extraordinary qualities, and surprised at the clamour they excite in other people.

(Silence.)

And this, among other things, is why I love you.

He waits for a reaction.

BENOIT

That annoyed you.

MERCEDES

On dirait pas une question. (It didn't sound like a question.)

A beat, he thinks.

BENOIT

No. It's not an exchange of hostages.

He kisses her and waits for something -- anything -- from her. Nothing comes. He smiles, teased and exasperated.

He gets up and walks into the bathroom. Runs the shower.

Mercedes listens to the water running in the bathroom, and lies back on the bed.

IN THE BATHROOM

Benoit showers, smiling slightly to reassure himself.

IN THE BEDROOM

Mercedes puts on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans from the floor. She grabs a piece of licorice from a package on her night stand, and tears off a piece of it with her teeth.

IN THE BATHROOM

As Benoit rinses off, he freezes suddenly in realization.

IN THE BEDROOM

Benoit walks in, naked but mostly dry. Mercedes averts her eyes, and he notices.

He gets dressed quietly, and then stands towering over her as she sits on the bed.

BENOIT

There's also the possibility that the list was just a stylish way of getting to the last item. The disappearing. And that it was your way of saying goodbye to me.

Quiet. He kneels down in front of her.

BENOIT

If you've become so unhappy to know me that you have to say goodbye, don't do it like that. Hmm? My Anna?

She shakes her head.

MERCEDES

I'm going to Vancouver for a few days to check out UBC. That's all. I probably won't get in, I'm even missing a recommendation letter, but I'm going anyway. I just need to find my footing.

BENOIT

Why?

A long pause. Mercedes lowers her head. Her hair hangs down sheltering her face. She starts to cry.

MERCEDES

Cause I can't handle the thought of the damage I'm doing in your life. It's wrong. I can't be a married man's paramour.

Benoit puts his arms around her.

BENOIT

Mercedes, you're so young... And that comes with a harshness, both to yourself and to me... A severe edge that life has a way of sanding down. We're going to be amazing.

MERCEDES

I can't. It's too fucked up. I feel really fucked up.

She looks at him tearfully.

Silence. He stands up.

BENOIT

Then what are you doing with me? To me? Why did you do this?

Mercedes starts to cry harder and stands up to kiss him. He kisses her back.

BENOIT

Mercedes, I love you.

He pulls away to get a good look at her. Nothing.

BENOIT

Now I've annoyed you twice in one afternoon. I better go before you realize just how odious I can be. When are you leaving?

MERCEDES

Mercredi, après ton cours. (Wednesday. After your class.)

Benoit nods.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Benoit walks in and takes off his satchel and his coat.

The apartment is eerily quiet.

BENOIT

Allô?

AUDREY (O.S.)

Je suis dans la chambre à coucher. (I'm in the bedroom)

BENOIT

Où sont les filles? (Where are the girls?)

AUDREY (O.S.)

Elles soupent chez Claire. (They're at Claire's for supper.)

Benoit walks into the bedroom and sees Audrey sitting on the bed reading *The Lady with the Dog*.

BENOIT

Tu n'as pas eu le temps de le finir à Paris? (You didn't get to finish in Paris?)

Audrey reads with a thick accent, and with some difficulty.

AUDREY

"there were others, like his wife for example, who loved without any genuine feeling, with superfluous phrases, affectedly, hysterically, with an expression that suggested that it was not love nor passion, but something more significant..."

BENOIT

Audrey, s'il...

AUDREY

"these were capricious, unreflecting, domineering, unintelligent women not in their first youth, and when Gurov grew cold to them their beauty excited his hatred, and the lace on their linen seemed to him like scales."

Silence. Audrey represses tears.

AUDREY

C'est qui, ça? Moi? Celle avec les écailles?
(Who is that. Me? The one with the scales?)

Silence. Benoit represses his annoyance for a safer response.

BENOIT

Bien sûr que non. (Of course not.)

Audrey gets up and tosses the book on the bed.

AUDREY

Pourquoi tu ne lis pas *Playboy* comme tous les hommes? (Why can't you read *Playboy* like other men?)

Audrey walks out.

AUDREY (O.S.)

Il reste de la lasagne dans le frigo. (There's lasagna in the fridge.)

EXT. DOWNTOWN MONTREAL - DAY

Benoit and Jean unload a U-HAUL truck outside a trendy building of lofts.

BENOIT

Ce qui me fait le plus chier, c'est sa façon d'attendre que je me rende compte moi-même des situations. Elle me lance des indices -- du sous-texte. Très *écrivaine* de sa part, tu ne trouves pas?

(What really pisses me off is the way she waits for me to realize what's going on. She'll give me hints -- subtext... very writerly of her, don't you think?)

They climb into the back of the truck and start unloading a king sized mattress.

JEAN

Comment vont les choses à la maison? (How are things at home?)

BENOIT

Le cauchemar. As-tu déjà lu *Moonstone* par Wilkie Collins? (It's a nightmare. Ever read *Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins?)

(Jean makes a face that says, "What do you think?")

Il y a un passage qui raconte l'histoire d'un couple qui semble se croiser constamment dans les escaliers. C'est un peu comme ça chez nous. On se croise dans les escaliers, jour et nuit. (There's a passage about a couple who are constantly crossing each other in the stairs. It's kind of like that at home. We're constantly passing each other in the stairs.)

JEAN

Ça pourrait être ben pire pour toi. (Could be a lot worse for you.)

BENOIT

T'avais raison. Une jeune fille me montre un peu d'affection, et voilà que je me libère de toute restriction émotionnelle. (You were right. I get a little validation from some teenager and I'm ready to unbuckle all emotional restraints.)

JEAN

Personnellement, je pense que tu devrais remplacer tes chaînes, big time. (Well you can spend the next few days strapping yourself back in.)

BENOIT

La vérité c'est que je trouve quelque chose de pitoyable en elle. (The truth is, I think there's something of the pathetic about her.)

JEAN

Exactement. (Exactly.)

BENOIT

Non. Pas "exactement". Je trouve qu'elle est étonnante. C'est juste que cet élément sublime qui nous a rapproché est si obscurci par les faits que je deviens fou rien que pour un simple aperçu. (No. Not exactly. She's wonderful. It's just that the beautiful thing that drew us together is so obscured by the situation, I get frantic for a sighting of it.)

Jean ignores this last bit.

JEAN

Monte, toi. (Move.)

They unload the mattress, Benoit walking backwards and reversing into the building.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Benoit stands in the hallway putting on his jacket.
Audrey appears before him.

AUDREY

Où vas-tu?
(Where are you going?)

BENOIT

Une lecture de poèmes.
(Poetry reading.)

AUDREY

Où ça?
(Where?)

He hesitates.

BENOIT

Au Arts Cafe.

Beat.

AUDREY

Je t'avais dit que je voyais Christine ce soir.
(I told you I was seeing Christine tonight.)

BENOIT

Elle peut venir ici.
(She can come here.)

AUDREY

Mais j'ai jamais l'opportunité de sortir.
(But I never get to go out.)

BENOIT
T'étais sortie l'autre jour...
(I saw that you were out the other day...)

Silence. A sigh. Benoit takes off his jacket.

INT. ARTS CAFE - NIGHT

Mercedes sits on a small stage reading her story into a cheap microphone. She reads with little energy. Pained. Exhausted.

MERCEDES
She called it self-control, but to Edward it felt more like hypocrisy; wanting to hold on to the safe minimum dose of him -- as if there was such a thing -- no matter how his vital signs might flutter as a consequence. She wanted, somehow, to put the genie back in the bottle. She wanted, somehow, to be able to love him and not love him at the same time. She wanted, somehow, to throw herself at the danger and the difficulty and the pain of loving him, but realized that what she needed was safety. Safety from him.

INT. SAME - LATER

People mill around the coffee shop. Mercedes leans over the counter waiting for her tea.

AUDREY (O.S.)
Could I have a chai latte, please?

Mercedes pays no attention. She is slumped over the counter, observing her own hands, fingers spread wide over the marble surface.

AUDREY (CONT'D)
You're a very good writer.

Mercedes looks at Audrey and nods once, bashfully.

MERCEDES
(quietly)
Merci.

AUDREY
Your story is very sad, though.
(Beat)
Painful.

Mercedes looks away, uncomfortable.

BARISTA (O.S.)
Chamomile tea?

MERCEDES
It's mine.

Dave appears behind Mercedes. He puts a hand on her shoulder.

DAVE
Hey, great job!

MERCEDES
(to Dave; again, quietly)
Thanks...

Mercedes nods again self-consciously at Audrey, and walks away with her tea, and Dave.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

The class, including Mercedes, are busy with tests.

Benoit writes on the chalkboard: REMAINING TIME: 25 MINUTES.

Dave gets up from his seat and brings his paper to Benoit's desk. He hands it over -- Benoit nods a thank you -- and Dave walks out.

Benoit watches Mercedes finish the test. The muscles in her arms flex and release as she writes. She has her hair pushed to one side and it hangs down and brushes against the surface of the desk.

She puts down her pencil and looks up at Benoit. He sits up.

Mercedes grabs her things and walks to Benoit's desk and hands him the paper. He takes an envelope from his desk and hands it to her.

BENOIT
Here's the recommendation letter you asked for.

Mercedes pauses before she takes it, looking at him gratefully. He says very quietly.

BENOIT
(Quietly.)
If you're going to put me out of your life forever, I'll comply. But I'm holding onto the hope that going away and "finding your footing" means finding a way not to.
(Volume up:)
Safe trip.

Mercedes walks out. Benoit sits and, with difficulty, does not watch her go.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT - LATER

Mercedes packs a bag with the essentials -- jeans, T-shirts, underwear.

INT. CAFE ACROSS FROM MERCEDES' BUILDING - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Jacob waits in a long line.

EXT. PARC AVENUE/FAIRMOUNT - SAME

Benoit gets off the 535 North and walks down Fairmount.

INT. CAFE

Jacob waits at the other end of the counter for his coffee.

Benoit ENTERS and looks out the front windows at Mercedes' apartment.

He then stands in line and gives his order to a barista.

BENOIT
Un thé à la menthe, s'il te plaît. Moyen.
(Mint tea please. Medium.)

A second barista at the other end calls out an order.

BARISTA
Tall latte no whip?

JACOB
Yeah, that's me.

He takes the coffee and then walks over to the free magazine rack in the back corner to check out the *HOOR* and the *MIRROR*.

Benoit keeps glancing over through the windows at Mercedes' apartment.

INT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT

Mercedes zips up her suitcase with difficulty.

MERCEDES
Putain. (Fuck.)

INT. CAFE

Benoit takes his tea from the barista and walks over to the windows to watch Mercedes' departure.

Jacob takes a magazine and turns to leave. Benoit catches his attention.

Jacob heads for the exit but is blocked by Benoit's back. Jacob makes a face, irritated.

JACOB
Excuse me?

Benoit looks back at Jacob.

BENOIT
S'cuse.

Benoit lets Jacob pass and continues to look out the window at Mercedes' building. Jacob walks out of the cafe.

ACROSS THE STREET

Mercedes comes out of her apartment with two large suitcases, and Jacob hurries to her aid.

IN THE CAFE

BENOIT
Merde.

Benoit watches through the window as Jacob says something to Mercedes, at which the two of them look across the street at Benoit. Mercedes looks especially confused.

Benoit walks out onto the street.

EXT. CAFE

Benoit, tea in hand, stands outside the cafe to face the music.

Mercedes gestures at him, annoyed: "What are you doing?"

He shrugs apologetically and walks off with his tea as Jacob loads the suitcases into the trunk.

Benoit's look as he walks up the street is one of self-loathing.

INT. JACOB'S CAR - A MOMENT LATER

Mercedes sits quietly in the front seat.

Jacob gets in and closes his door. He starts the engine.

JACOB

20 bucks says that guy was drinking mint tea?

Mercedes opens her mouth to speak--

JACOB

It's ok. Let's get you out of here.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - NIGHT

The clock on Benoit's night table reads: 1:40 a.m.

Benoit is wide awake. He sits up in bed.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Benoit sits down at his desk with a glass of water. He clicks a button on his laptop and it comes to life.

He enters WWW.YVR.COM

ON THE SCREEN a page comes up for Vancouver International Airport.

He clicks on ARRIVALS.

He SCROLLS down to find Flight # AC195 : ARRIVED - EARLY: 20:17.

INT. DAWSON COLLEGE - CLASSROOM - DAY

Benoit sits back in his chair, coffee in hand, looking at his students, deadpan.

A small sea of students stares right back.

It's awkward.

BENOIT

How many of you didn't do your reading for today?

A few hands go up. He waits. More hands go up. And then more.

Benoit thinks.

BENOIT

Give me your homework and go away.

The students nearly jump out of their seats and swarm him with papers, and then bolt for the door. He sips his coffee, smiling bitterly at them.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Benoit enters and stealthily closes the door behind him.

He sits down at his desk and picks up the phone and dials.

INT. ARITZIA STORE - DRESSING ROOMS - SAME

Mercedes is in a dressing room trying on a dress. Her phone RINGS and she takes it out of her coat which is hanging on a hook. She answers the phone.

MERCEDES

Hi.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - OFFICE - INTERCUT- TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

BENOIT

Hi. I just wanted to know you arrived safely.

MERCEDES

You mean you didn't check the arrivals online?

Benoit is silent: guilty.

BENOIT

I feel really embarrassed about lurking and watching you from across the street.
Je ne sais pas ce qui m'a pris. À part de mon immaturité. (I don't know what came over me. Apart from my immaturity.) ...I think I know what's going to happen to us... and I don't like it at all, but I'm determined to accept it if--

Benoit is interrupted by CHANTAL entering--

CHANTAL

Papa, on est prêts à manger. (Dad, dinner's ready.)

Mercedes hears the little girl's voice and instinctively HANGS UP.

Benoit quickly regains composure.

BENOIT
Merci, Chantal.

INT. ARITZIA STORE - DRESSING ROOMS

Mercedes holds her phone for a moment before sitting down in the dressing room.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Audrey, Nicole and Chantal all sit at the table, eating, smiling, chatting laughing.

Benoit sits down at the head of the table and the room is hushed.

They all eat in silence for a while.

AUDREY
(delicately)
Tu es rentré tôt, aujourd'hui. Tout va bien?
(You were home early today. Everything ok?)

BENOIT
Ouais, j'avais juste pas le goût de dealer avec une classe pleine d'idiots. (Yeah, I just didn't feel like dealing with a class full of idiots.)

Nicole laughs gleefully while Audrey frowns.

More silence, more eating, some amplified clanking of cutlery on plates.

CHANTAL
Quand on va acheter nos skis et nos combinaisons de ski? (When are we going to buy our skis and ski suits?)

NICOLE
On peut surtout pas les louer -- plutôt mourir! (We can't rent them -- I'd rather die!)

BENOIT
C'est quoi, ça? (What's this?)

AUDREY
Classe de neige. (Ski trip.)

BENOIT
Mais quand? La neige a déjà fondu. (But when? The snow's melted.)

AUDREY

Les pistes de Whistler sont ouvertes jusqu'au 18 mai. (The slopes at Whistler are open until mid-May.)

Silence. Disbelief.

BENOIT

Whistler? Combien ça va me coûter tout ça? (Whistler? How much is that going to cost me?)

AUDREY

On en parlera plus tard. (We'll talk about it later.)

BENOIT

Pas question. (No we won't.)

NICOLE

C'est seulement huit cent dollars chaque pour le week-end -- (It's only eight hundred each for the weekend--)

AUDREY

Nicole--

Benoit drops his fork on his plate.

BENOIT

Absolument pas. (Absolutely not.)

The girls squeal.

CHANTAL

Papa! S'il te plaît! (Dad! Please!)

Benoit shakes his head and keeps eating.

AUDREY

Les filles ont eu de bonnes notes dans toutes les matières, elles le méritent-- (The girls got good grades in every subject, they deserve--)

BENOIT

Pas dans "toutes" les matières-- (Not in "every" subject--)

AUDREY

Benoit!

BENOIT

Les filles, écoutez-moi. Les gens de votre école, on les paye royalement, bien plus qu'on peut se permettre, et pourquoi?

Pour qu'ils vous disent que vous êtes smart, que vous êtes douées, que vous êtes uniques -- mais la vérité, c'est que vous n'êtes pas riches, vous n'êtes pas spéciales, vous n'êtes pas parfaites. Et vous savez quoi de plus? Vous êtes québécoises! (Girls, listen to me. The people at your school, we pay them royally -- more than we can even afford to, and why? So they'll tell you you're smart, you're talented, you're unique -- but the truth is, you're not different than anyone else. And you know what else? You're Quebecoise!)

At this the girls start to cry.

BENOIT
Chriss! (Christ!)

Benoit gets up and leaves the room. Audrey gets up and follows him.

AUDREY
Ouais, t'as intérêt à te lever!-- (Oh yeah, you'd better get up!--)

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM

Benoit walks in and slams the door behind him but it's STOPPED by Audrey, who is on his heels.

AUDREY
Mais, qu'est-ce qui t'arrive, putain? (What the hell is wrong with you?)

BENOIT
J'en ai jusque-là! (I've had it up to here!)

AUDREY
Toi, t'es rien qu'un cliché, tu sais? Rien qu'un québécois de merde qui a horreur de lui-même. (You're nothing but a cliché, you know that? A fucking self-loathing Quebecer.)

BENOIT
Parce que je veux que mes enfants grandissent dans la vraie vie? J'en peux plus: je les sors de cette école! (Because I want my daughters to grow up in the real world? I can't do it anymore: I'm taking them out of that school.)

AUDREY
Essaye pour voir! (I dare you to try.)

BENOIT
(taunting)
Ah oui? Ou quoi? (Oh yeah? Or what?)

AUDREY

Il n'est pas question que je mette mes enfants dans le système public! (I'm not going to put my girls in the public system!)

BENOIT

T'as un problème avec le système public? (You have a problem with the public system?)

Benoit leaves.

Audrey sits on the bed and starts to cry.

CUT TO:

INT. LUX AT CAPRICE LOUNGE BAR - EVENING

A crowd of young twentysomethings erupt in laughter at some joke we didn't hear -- mouths full with overpriced food and wine -- Mercedes watching quietly from one end of the table.

STACEY, 20, at the other end of the table smiles at Mercedes.

STACEY

Mercedes looks confused.

WINSTON, 22, a harmless looking guy sitting beside Mercedes, jokingly puts his arm around her.

WINSTON

Mercedes is too smart for TV.

JERRY, 20, sits next to Stacey.

JERRY

Is that like Too Hot for TV?

Some of them laugh half-heartedly.

WINSTON

Seriously, she doesn't watch it! I hung out at her place a few times when I was in Montreal and I'm telling you, the girl has rabbit ears and two channels: CBC and CTV! (More polite laughter from the table.) Oh, and some French channels.

JERRY

Bleu Nuit!

INT. LOFTS ST. ALEXANDRE - JEAN'S LOFT - NIGHT

The loft looks like a sales model and is lit like a hip cigar lounge. Benoit sits on the sofa with a a joint.

Jean comes in from the kitchen and passes Benoit a beer. He takes a good look at him as Benoit takes a drag off the joint.

JEAN
Chriss, qu'est-ce qui t'es arrivé, toi?
(Jesus. What happened to you?)

Silence.

JEAN
Puff-puff-give.

Benoit cracks a smile and hands over the joint.

INT. MERCEDES' HOTEL ROOM - DAWN

Mercedes lies asleep on her stomach with last night's makeup still on. Winston lies back facing her, also asleep. Both are in last night's clothes.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Benoit lies under a blanket on the sofa, awake.

EXT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

The sun is up but the streets are still deserted.

It's cold enough for steam to streak though the air with Benoit's breath. He sits down on the curb and takes out his cell phone. After a beat, he dials and puts the phone to his ear.

INT. MERCEDES' HOTEL ROOM - BEDROOM - SAME

Mercedes' cell phone starts to ring softly on her bedside table, the light emitted from it cuts through the deep blue haze of early dawn. Instinctively and without looking, Mercedes reaches over and presses a button on it, thinking it's her alarm, and puts it back on the table.

BENOIT
(ON THE TELEPHONE, FAINT AND MUFFLED)
Hello?... Mercedes, allo?

Mercedes hears the faint voice and is suddenly alert. She snatches the phone off the table and looks at the screen: it reads: "BENOIT BEAUCHEMIN." She clears her throat then speaks quietly.

MERCEDES

Hello?

EXT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - INTERCUT - TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

BENOIT

Hi.

MERCEDES

Hi.

Silence. Mercedes looks at her clock: 5:20 a.m.

BENOIT

I'm sorry I'm calling you.

More silence.

MERCEDES

Benoit, it's 5:20 a.m. here.

(She waits.)

Just ask me.

BENOIT

What?

MERCEDES

Just ask me what you want to know.

A beat. Benoit chuckles morbidly.

BENOIT

Toutes les femmes sont avocates. (Every woman is a lawyer.)

(Beat.)

Are you alone?

MERCEDES

Yes. Stop this.

BENOIT

Stop acting like a man in love, Benoit.

Winston shifts in his sleep. Mercedes sighs.

BENOIT

I'm sorry.... I see now how easy it is not to feel jealous when I have you in my arms...

and how the prospect of not seeing you for a few days makes me feel uneasy about the young, unattached and inoffensive fellows who swirl around you...

MERCEDES
What are you doing?

BENOIT
I'm refusing to give up the pleasure of thinking about you and talking to you.

MERCEDES
Jesus Christ, I'm still drunk.

A long pause. Benoit thinks. Is about to speak. Hesitates. Then:

BENOIT
I told her.

Silence.

MERCEDES
No. Benoit, no you didn't.

BENOIT
I did. It was terrible. Screaming. Weeping. I feel like I killed her.

Mercedes's eyes well up.

MERCEDES
Why?

At this, Winston gets up and walks into the bathroom and closes the door.

BENOIT
You said you couldn't be a married man's paramour.

MERCEDES
That's not what I meant.

Silence.

BENOIT
Tu m'aimes, Mercedes, et tu fuis. (You love me, Mercedes, and you're running away.)

MERCEDES
Please stop.

BENOIT
Dis-le s'il te plaît, Mercedes. (Say it, please, Mercedes.)

Silence. Finally:

MERCEDES
I love you.

BENOIT
Dis-le en francais! (Say it in French!)

Silence. She won't say it.

BENOIT
Câlisse. (Jesus.)

They're both silent. Finally, Benoit hangs up the phone.

Then Mercedes hangs up the phone.

EXT. VANCOUVER HOTEL - DAY

A battered-looking Mercedes loads her luggage into the trunk of a taxi.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Benoit sits at the kitchen table, reading Chekhov.

Audrey passes the doorway of the kitchen and glances in as she walks by.

Benoit ignores her; takes his cup of tea from the table and lifts it to his lips.

His Blackberry vibrates on the table. He puts down his tea and picks up the Blackberry and looks at it.

ON THE SCREEN:

"1 NEW E-MAIL MESSAGE."

"FROM: GUROVANNA@GMAIL.COM"

SERIES OF SHOTS:

- Mercedes sits in the back of the taxi cab, looking out the window as it drives through the city;
- Mercedes is cleared through the security gate at the airport;
- Mercedes watches as a flight attendant gives safety instructions on board the plane;

- Mercedes chews on a piece of red licorice, looking out at the cloud formations outside the window on the plane;
- Mercedes watches suitcases go by on a carousel, waiting patiently for her own;
- Mercedes emerges from the arrivals gate with her luggage. Crowds wait with balloons and flowers for their loved ones. Mercedes passes unnoticed through the crowd; on the other side, she sees Jacob sitting patiently on a bench. No fanfare. He stands up when he sees her.

ALL SHOTS INTERCUT WITH BENOIT READING THE E-MAIL ON HIS BLACKBERRY

OVER THE ABOVE WE HEAR:

MERCEDES (V.O.)

I just woke up from a dream. I was riding on the Parc 80 bus, which was designed so that passengers entered from the front, essentially through the windshield, where an elaborate automatic door and auto-lift platform were installed to allow passengers to enter right where the driver sat looking out. The driver was new and learning this system; her instructor, another woman, sat to her right and behind her, while some other employee or supervisor behind her to her left. All women, all talkative and high-spirited. The bus stopped, people got on in this strange fashion. A little basket with morsels of cake was passed around; some talk of buying wine - a festive atmosphere. Then we were mounting the slope towards Mount Royal, and from over the crest of the snowy park we saw people running towards us, and, behind them, a helicopter. The helicopter was shooting. It was shooting at the running people, and then we saw it fire rockets at the tall building by the Parc/Pine interchange, and the snow of the park erupted in huge blue flashes of bombs going off, and then the bus began to sway, and people scream. We drove through black clouds of smoke, to our left we saw the pavement piled up in a high ridge of broken slabs. The door of the bus opened and panicking riders hurled themselves out onto the rushing road. The driver was now a man, we were moving very fast, "It's war," someone said, and someone else "It's civil war." Woke up. But just before this section I was watching you with your wife, who had lain down and uncovered herself to show you with a hostile flourish that she had stocked her vulva with piercings. Unwound a strip of protective cloth that loosed dangling lengths of metal and allowed me to examine them.

Preceding this were two encounters whose sequence I'm not sure of. In one, you were saying goodbye to two young women who were planning, I think, to go out on the town. I don't know who they were, except that they were young ladies. Your students. One was in a bathrobe, and you commenced fondling her while your wife looked on disapprovingly. And immediately before this, at the beginning of what I remember of the dream, you were frozen in a kind of static intercourse with a young girl. What's appalling to me is that I woke up in horror at the end of the dream, because of the fighting, and not at the beginning, because of the raping.

BACK TO SCENE

Benoit, Blackberry in hand, gets up suddenly from his chair and heads out of the kitchen into the hallway.

IN THE HALLWAY

Audrey watches at Benoit puts on his coat and boots.

INT. JACOB'S CAR - EVENING

Jacob drives as Mercedes looks out the passenger window. Silence.

MERCEDES

Thanks for picking me up.

Jacob nods. Silence.

JACOB

You're not going to just disappear without telling me?

MERCEDES

I'll tell you.

SHORTLY THEREAFTER

Jacob and Mercedes pull up in front of her apartment building.

Benoit, bundled up and freezing, leans against the brick wall by the front door of the building.

Jacob and Mercedes look at Benoit.

Benoit looks back at them.

JACOB
Want me to stick around?

MERCEDES
No, you gotta go.

EXT. MERCEDES' APARTMENT

Mercedes and Jacob get out of the car. Jacob goes around back and opens the trunk. He lifts out Mercedes' luggage and places it on the pavement in front of her.

He gives her a look that says "You sure?"

She nods.

Jacob gets in the car and drives away.

Mercedes walks up to Benoit. They look at each other for a long time.

BENOIT
Would it kill you to just say what you mean?

Beat.

MERCEDES
What?

BENOIT
"Finding your footing."
What you really meant was making a clean getaway. Getting me out of your life. You've pretended, or been polite, and expected me to go along with the pretense. So you can drop that bomb and leave me and my life in shambles.

Mercedes shakes her head at him and takes out her keys.

BENOIT
Hey...

She puts the keys in the door.

BENOIT
HEY!

MERCEDES
What?

BENOIT
You acted confused and passionate, but really you made a quiet, rational decision, and then waited for me to figure it out.

You didn't help me to understand what obviously bewildered me!

MERCEDES

Don't try to explain my actions to me.

BENOIT

Explain them to me! Explain to me how you can play a shell game with your feelings!

MERCEDES

(crying)

You were supposed to keep me in my place! You were supposed to know better!

BENOIT

That's what I've become, in your eyes? A war zone? A rapist, for fuck's sake?

MERCEDES

What?

BENOIT

Your email. Bombs going off, piercings, intercourse with a...

He trails off...

MERCEDES

I don't know what you're saying to me.

It takes Benoit a moment. A long moment. And then he gets it.

Suddenly, Benoit becomes aware of the PEOPLE on the streets around them.

He looks at Mercedes and sees her as they see her: young, afraid.

And finally, he becomes intensely aware of himself, and how he must look right now, to all these witnesses, and to Mercedes.

Silence. Finally:

BENOIT

(softly)

Mercedes. I wish I could give you some sense of all the things I see in you. But I can only give you that--

MERCEDES

Stop.

(Pause.)

Someone sent you that letter. And it wasn't me.

(Pause.)
Stop thinking about *me*.

A long beat. They're done.

INT. BENOIT'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Benoit enters through the front door. The apartment is dark and quiet.

IN THE GIRLS' BEDROOM

Benoit opens the door. The girls are gone.

IN THE MASTER BEDROOM

Benoit slowly opens the door.

Audrey is lying on her side on the bed, her back facing him. One of the bedside lamps is on.

Benoit enters cautiously and sits down on the floor beside the bed, leaning his back against the bedside table.

Silence.

BENOIT
Les filles? (The girls?)

AUDREY
Chez Claire. (Claire's.)

Silence. Audrey rolls over to face Benoit.

AUDREY
Est-ce qu'il y avait plus qu'une? (Was there more than one?)

BENOIT
Non.

AUDREY
C'est Mercedes, ton Anna Sergeyevna? (Your Anna Sergeyevna... it's Mercedes?)

Nothing from Benoit.

AUDREY
Elle est jeune. (She's young.)

Beat.

BENOIT
Ouais.

AUDREY
Elle est belle. (She's beautiful.)

BENOIT
Ouais.

AUDREY
Intelligente. (Intelligent.)

BENOIT
Oui.

Silence.

AUDREY
Et elle a couché avec toi? (And she slept with you?)

Beat. Benoit nods.

AUDREY
Plus d'une fois? (More than once?)

Benoit nods again. Silence. Then:

AUDREY
Bravo.

Silence. Benoit covers his face and weeps. Audrey watches.

AUDREY
Elle te veut pas. (She doesn't want you.)

Benoit shakes his head.

BENOIT
Non.

Silence.

AUDREY
Et moi, tu m'aimes? (Do you love me?)

BENOIT
Je ne sais pas. (I don't know.)

She thinks.

AUDREY
Tu viendras avec moi et les filles à Paris. Tu la laisseras derrière, et le livre aussi. (You'll come with me and the girls to Paris. You'll leave her behind. The book, too.)
(Beat.)
C'est ça ou rien. (It's that or nothing.)

Benoit rests his head back on the bedside table and takes a deep breath.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. PARIS METRO - EVENING

Benoit stands, packed into a metro car, with the rest of the rush hour commuters.

The metro stops and Benoit wants to get off; he struggles with the lever on the metro car door -- another commuter helps him to open it.

INT. PARIS LANGUAGE SCHOOL - NIGHT

In a dingy, dilapidated and overcrowded room sit 100 or so students of all ethnicities, age 25+.

One of them is already ASLEEP in the back row.

Benoit enters with his satchel and smiles politely at the class.

BENOIT

Bonsoir tout le monde. Bienvenue au cours intitulé Introduction au Anglais Langue Étrangère, section... (Good evening everyone. Welcome to Introduction to English as a Foreign Language section...)

(he glances at a paper)

Quatorze. Pour commencer, je pensais qu'on pourrait apprendre à se connaître, et ensuite discuter du contenu de ce cours-- (Fourteen. To begin, I thought we could get to know each other, and then discuss the content of the course--)

He sees the SLEEPER in the back.

BENOIT (cont'd)

On appelle l'ambulance pour ce gars-là?
(Should we call an ambulance for that guy?)

Nothing. Someone coughs in the middle of the room.

BENOIT

Ok. Je m'appelle Benoît Beauchemin, et comme mon accent l'indique, je viens du fin fond de--
(Ok. My name is Benoît Beauchemin, and as you can probably tell from my accent I come all the way from--)

A hand shoots up; a heavy blonde woman in the third row.

BENOIT

Oui?

WOMAN

En fait, nous payons par l'heure, alors...
(Actually, we're paying by the hour,
so...)

A mumble of agreement from the class.

Beat.

BENOIT

Bien sûr. Si vous n'avez pas de questions...
(Of course. So if there are no questions...)
(Nothing.)
Alors, sans plus de cérémonie... (Then,
without further ado...)

Benoit takes a piece of chalk and writes on the poorly maintained chalk board, already cloudy from the dozen or so lessons that have been written on it today.

He writes a table: "I. YOU. HE/SHE. WE. [YOU.] THEY."

He turns around and looks at the class, who stare back at him blankly.

INT. UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA - CREATIVE WRITING CLASS - DAY

Mercedes sits uncomfortably in a group of students in their late teens and early twenties. Their desks are arranged to form a circle. They are led by a PROFESSOR in her 40s.

PROFESSOR

Ok so today we're going to be workshoping Mercedes' short story, "Gurov & Anna." I asked you all to read Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog* for reference. Did everyone read that?

The class collectively mumbles a yes.

PROFESSOR

It's one of my favourites, Mercedes. Chekhov. Beautiful story, beautiful beautiful story.

She looks at Mercedes, waiting for something.

Is it? MERCEDES

BLACK.

Gurov and Anna: Melodrama, Metafiction, and the Construction of Narratives in Film and Fiction

In January of 2009, Jian Ghomeshi, host of the arts and culture show *Q* on CBC's Radio One, interviewed Dr. Bjarne Holmes, Associate Professor of Psychology at Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University, and Director of the University's Family and Personal Relationships Lab. In the interview, Dr. Holmes and Ghomeshi discuss the various ways in which the romantic comedy, as a film genre, has caused audiences to develop unrealistic expectations of their romantic partners and relationships. Holmes' study, which emphasizes the manner in which the concept of "soul mates" is portrayed in such films, argues that the genre inspires couples – especially women – to develop impossible standards regarding the level on which a couple should be able to understand each other and anticipate the other's needs and desires without having to express them, leading, inevitably, to discord within the relationship.

One of the films used in the study, Peter Chelsom's 2001 romantic comedy *Serendipity*, starring John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale, features two young would-be lovers, Jonathan and Sara, who meet one night and have immediate chemistry, only to have Sara put them through a series of tests to be sure that their meeting is "destiny." "There are no accidents," she says, when her phone number, scribbled on a small piece of paper, is whisked away from Jonathan's grasp in a gust of wind. She then writes her phone number in a used copy of Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and sells it to a used bookstore the next morning; if Jonathan finds it, they are destined to be together. This film is

of the sort that Dr. Holmes sees as partially responsible for couples' fantastic expectations of their relationships, but one might be inclined to think that the film's heroine, Sara, too, has seen one too many romantic comedies. She not only impregnates every turn of events with meaning; she is also oblivious to the way she attempts to make herself the author of a romantic narrative, one that she prefers to reality, thus subverting what she calls destiny.

The first section of this essay will demonstrate that Dr. Holmes' anxieties about the effect of the romantic comedy – which have also been published in *Time Magazine* – are not, by any means, new, nor are they specific to film or the romantic comedy genre. I will trace these anxieties about irresponsible or incompetent creation and consumption of cultural artefacts back to the writings of Matthew Arnold during the explosion of print media in the Victorian era, to Plato's *Republic*, and to the book of *Exodus*. I will then survey the way these anxieties manifest themselves in literature and film through a thematic tradition of characters who are readers and writers – literally and figuratively – who construct fictions in their lives, either by 'plotting' or 'editing' reality (writers), or by 'reading' or 'projecting' consumed fictions onto reality (readers). I will situate the characters of my screenplay, *Gurov and Anna*, within this tradition, and as well as in relation to the scholarly writings of Patricia Waugh, Peter Brooks, and Wayne C. Booth (among others).

Art as Threat

Dr. Holmes' study does not acknowledge that a fear of the arts dates back to long before *Serendipity*. In the *Book of Exodus*, it is written:

“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in earth beneath, or what is in the water under the earth./ Thou shalt not bow down thyself to any such thing, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God.” (*Exodus*, 20:4-5)

If art is essentially mimetic, we have been warned for thousands of years against the evils of both creating it and consuming it.

In Plato’s *Republic*, we discover that the artist is unwelcome in Plato’s ideal state. As in the book of *Exodus*, anxieties about the creation or consumption of fiction in *Republic*, as Iris Murdoch explains, are “expressed in terms which are obviously moral or political rather than aesthetic” (Murdoch, 12). But while *Exodus* warns of a jealous God, *Republic* is concerned with the ills of irrational pleasures, suggesting that good art should aim to “reduce disharmony” rather than provide pleasure (Murdoch, 57). Among art’s many social ills is what is seen as the accompanying delusion of both the art and the art-consumer. In *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Iris Murdoch explains:

“Art and the artist are condemned by Plato to exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness, *eikasia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion; in terms of the Cave myth this is the condition of the prisoners who face the back wall and see only shadows cast by the fire. Plato does not actually say that the artist is in a state of *eikasia*, but he clearly implies it, and indeed his

whole criticism of art extends and illuminates the conception of the shadow-bound consciousness.” (Murdoch, 5)

The result of such a consciousness is an inevitable blurring of the line between fiction and reality.

For Plato, the danger is not only intrinsic to the art itself, but to the creator and the client as well. In the artist and the sophist, Plato finds an amplified human inclination to lies because of their heightened connection to the world of the abstract and the fictional (Murdoch, 42). In *Republic*, the artist and the bad man are aligned, in that they see only “shifting shadows” rather than a “steady reality” (Ibid, 48). Artists are responsible for the corruption of even the good man because they create “images of wickedness and excess” which tempt even the morally strong to cultivate his weaknesses (Ibid, 6), all the while deluding him into the belief that he has somehow enlightened himself: “The bright flickering light of the fire suggests the disturbed and semi-enlightened ego which is pleased and consoled by its discoveries, but still essentially self-absorbed, not realizing that the real world is still somewhere else” (Murdoch, 42). Plato is concerned that the art-consumer becomes infected through exposure to such images of wickedness, and that psychological harm is done when we enjoy and then adopt such wickedness; that “words lead to deeds,” and that this is one of the striking ways in which literary genres affect societies (Murdoch, 14, 5).

According to Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, there are four dominant reasons for which people read novels:

“1) To pass time not unpleasantly; 2) To obtain vicarious satisfaction or compensation for life; 3) To obtain assistance in the business of living; and 4) To enrich the quality of living by extending, deepening, refining, co-ordinating experience.” (Leavis, 48)

But while in 2010 we are generally pleased that the public is reading at all, be it the works of Dan Brown or J.K. Rowling, for Leavis, in 1939, “a taste for novel-reading as distinct from a taste for literature is not altogether desirable” (Leavis, 132), and this is especially true considering numbers three and four on Leavis’ list of reasons behind fiction-consumption; that we turn to literature for guidance in and understanding of our lives.

Leavis’ study examines a cultural shift that occurred over three hundred years; a shift in the tastes of the reading public in Britain once circulating libraries created a constant need for new fiction – what Leavis calls “worthless fiction” (Leavis, 133). She points to a passage in Clara Reeve’s *The Progress of Romance* (1785), which reveals how a cultivated woman perceived the circulating library at the end of the eighteenth century; that “they are one source of the vices and follies of our present times” (quoted in Leavis, 133). An 1863 article in the *Quarterly* similarly speaks of the sensation novel as “preaching to the nerves” of indiscriminate readers and promising them “temporary excitement” (quoted in Leavis, 160). Coleridge, in the first of his *Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton*, is even less forgiving of the popular novel, the reading of which, he claims,

“occasions in time the entire destruction of the powers of the mind; it is such an utter loss to the reader, that it is not so much to be called pass-time as kill-time. It conveys no trustworthy information as to facts; it produces no improvement of the intellect, but fills the mind with mawkish and morbid sensibility, which is directly hostile to the cultivation, invigoration and enlargement of the nobler faculties of the understanding.” (quoted in Leavis, 137)

Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings* reveals a renewed anxiety, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, over the consumption of cultural artefacts and new print media – newspapers in particular – as being degenerative to the mind. The increase in literacy in Late Victorian England led to “debates around how and what people were reading [which] were marked by anxieties around class, gender, citizenship, and the public and private spheres” (Hammond, 84). The discourse around the popular novel at this time was concerned with the potentially dangerous effects of sensational and sentimental literature on the impressionable minds of women and the working class. The access to media by the lower classes was a particular point of anxiety. Informal regulation of available texts through ‘Bowdlerization’ came into effect in order to prevent ‘impressionable’ minds (women; the working class) from the threat of questionable or inappropriate content (King, 85). In Tory rhetoric especially, the popular novel by the 1890s had come to be associated with a number of social ills such as adultery and alcoholism (Hammond, 92), was often perceived as

infectious, and was likened at times to alcohol or pre-digested food; easy to swallow but lacking in nutrition.

Socially undesirable attitudes and behaviours, then, have been attributed to the creation and consumption of certain types of cultural artefacts for thousands of years; anxieties concerning the sensational novel in Late-Victorian England are akin to anxieties about the consumption of rock and roll music in the 1950s, or to contemporary anxieties about the consumption of the romantic comedy or violent video games. Essentially, it boils down to anxieties about the blurring of the line between the real world and the world of fiction, and these anxieties manifest themselves not only in religious, philosophical, political, and scholarly writings dating as far back as the *Book of Exodus*, but in the art of the last many centuries; from the plays of William Shakespeare to the films of Preston Sturges and Marc Forster.

Writers and Plotters

In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks writes of the ways in which our lives “are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue” (Brooks 1984, 3). He describes the narrative impulse as one of the means by which we attempt to understand our lives and our world when other explanations have failed, and notes how natural the impulse is; how early it manifests in an individual’s development,

at the age of about three, “when a child begins to show the ability to put together a narrative in coherent fashion and especially to recognize narratives, to judge their well-formedness” (Ibid, 3). In *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, John Fowles writes that “fiction is woven into all... and I find this new reality (or unreality) more valid” (quoted in Waugh, 2). This gets at the idea that fiction and reality bleed into one another, whereas Brooks notes that part of the narrative impulse is to try and create an opposition between fiction and reality through our attempts to frame the fiction: “When we ‘tell a story,’” he writes, “there tends to be a shift in the register of our voices, enclosing and setting off the narrative almost in the manner of the traditional ‘once upon a time’ and ‘they lived happily ever after’: narrative demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders” (Brooks 1984, 4).

While metafiction is a term coined by William H. Gass in his essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction” (1970), its increased practice in the 1960s, according to Patricia Waugh, marks “a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct, and mediate their experience of the world,” and that the term is “required in order to explore the relationship between the world *of* the fiction and the world *outside* the fiction” (Waugh, 3). But the term metafiction is less concerned with supporting an opposition between real and fictional worlds than with how insecure we are about “the relationship of fiction to reality;” metafictional writings, after all, examine not only structures of fiction but also “explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (Waugh, 2). They do not “enclose,” as Brooks puts it, but rather work to demolish the boundary between fiction and reality.

In Wolfgang Becker's, *Goodbye Lenin!*, for example, Alex Kerner, with the help of his sister, Ariane, and his friend, Denis, tries to reconstruct a fictional East Germany after the destruction of the Berlin Wall, in an attempt to protect his mother – recently emerged from a coma – from having a second heart attack that would be sure to kill her. After the doctor's urging to protect their mother from "any kind of excitement," the children begin to censor the world for their mother in a kind of altruistic fictionalization of reality; they attempt to recreate the East Germany their mother loved by redecorating their home, changing their clothes, filling jars – marked by familiar East German brands – with new German products, literally censoring television and radio, and eventually even creating fictional newscasts for their mother's eyes only.

There are more ethically dubious reasons, however, for which characters plot and edit the subjective realities of other characters. For Peter Brooks, seduction appears to be among the dominant motives, "be it specifically erotic and oriented toward the capture of the other, or more nearly narcissistic, even exhibitionistic, asking for admiration and attention" (Brooks 1984, 236). In Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* (1941), Jean Harrington, a con artist, plays a role by profession. But when she is discovered and subsequently loses the man she loves, the wealthy Charles Pike, she adopts a new role, as Eve, and through her fictionalizes herself in order to create a foil *to herself* in order to reunite with Charles again at the end of the film.

The work of fiction can also serve as what Murdoch describes as "a magical pseudo-object placed between the artist and his client whereby they can

both...pursue their private fantasy lives unchecked” (Murdoch, 40). In John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, Garp seduces the women in his life through fiction. Garp, a writer, chooses Helen, a reader and student of English literature, to be his wife after she voices appreciation for one of his stories. But in his married life, he also seduces his mistresses through fiction; Cindy, the young babysitter, with whom Garp has his first affair, is awed by his writing. Later, Garp reads Alice’s writing to her aloud, and then they make love. Garp is not the only writer in the novel to seduce through fiction. Michael Milton, with whom Helen has her affair, gives her one of his stories to read, and this fills Garp with a sense of dread, knowing that Helen is reading someone else’s words; that someone else’s words are keeping her up at night.

During Helen’s affair with Michael Milton, Garp tries to overcome an extended battle with writer’s block, and writes a new story to give to Helen; not to seduce her but rather to regain her attention. But the state of their relationship is revealed just as accurately through Helen’s response to the story as through her sleeping with Michael Milton: “Oh it’s *funny*,” she says, “but it’s funny like *jokes* are funny. It’s all one-liners. I mean, what *is* it?...It’s self-serving, it’s self-justifying; and it’s not about anything except yourself” (Irving, 327). Helen and Garp are no longer connecting through Garp’s writing, because they are no longer connecting. Or, perhaps, vice versa.

In *Gurov and Anna*, the seduction of Benoit begins once he hears Mercedes publicly reading a story she has written. Benoit and Mercedes are at opposite ends of a particular stretch of adult life, and the story Mercedes reads

provides a liminal space in which they can meet; Benoit is immediately able to locate himself in the narrative she has written. Once Mercedes' story is published, Benoit buys a copy and brings it to her apartment, where she admits for the first time that she has been writing about him. She reads him a portion of her fiction and then, like Garp and Alice, and like Helen and Michael, they make love.

Brooks also sees the potential for aggression through the constructive of narrative, and finds it "often inextricably linked to the erotic: a forcing of attention, a violation of the listener" (Brooks 1984, 236). In Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont corrupt and humiliate the innocents around them; the Marquise does so by plotting, claiming the control of the fates of those around her and even claiming others' acts of free will as her own "masterpiece" (Laclos, 230); while the Vicomte does so by "playing a role," "feigning," and "playing his part perfectly" (Laclos, 202, 350, 387).

Another common trope in metafictional texts are characters "who are involved in a duplicitous situation requiring the perpetration of some form of pretence or guise. These characters usually appear as inauthentic artists. They may be professional artists such as actors, writers, or painters" (Waugh, 117). In Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, John Sullivan, a director of popular escapist movies, decides that in his next picture he wants to "hold a mirror up to life... [and create] a true canvas of the suffering of humanity!" His producers, however, object because they claim that Sullivan is not qualified to make such a picture, having not suffered a day in his life. "You want to make a picture about garbage

cans,” says a producer, “what do you know about garbage cans? When you eat your last meal outta one?... You wanna shoot ten thousand feet of hard luck and all I’m asking is what do you know about hard luck?” Sullivan finally concedes: “You’re right, I haven’t any idea what it is... I wanna make *O Brother Where Art Thou* but I tell ya what I’m gonna do first... I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m not coming back till I know what trouble is.” In order to create something ‘authentic’ he needs to make himself inauthentic; he chooses to fictionalize himself – by dressing as a homeless wanderer – and tries to live, briefly, a life of suffering before returning to direct a picture about suffering.

Prospero, of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, though not a literal artist, also appears as a ‘writer’ figure. Waugh writes that many metafictional texts present characters who “manipulate others explicitly as though they were playwrights or theatrical directors” (Waugh, 117). Prospero, like the witches in *Macbeth*, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, and Paulina in *A Winter’s Tale*, is considered to be among Shakespeare’s ‘playwright’ characters in his manipulation of other characters and their emotional states. Prospero is a “putter-on of shows” and the tempest is one of them – it is not merely to punish his usurping brother, Antonio, but also works as an interesting manipulation of his daughter, Miranda; a show on her behalf. It appears that Prospero feels it is important for her to watch the storm as a prelude to her history; as though he were setting the stage as playwright would do. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Stephen Greenblatt asserts that

“the entire action of the [*The Tempest*] rests on the premise that value lies in controlled uneasiness, and hence that a direct reappropriation of the usurped dukedom and a direct punishment of the usurpers has less moral and political value than an elaborate restaging of loss, misery, and anxiety.” (Greenblatt, 144)

So Prospero, ostensibly, has decided to put these people through a series of losses. Playwriting, after all, can be about producing pleasure or pain in an audience, and Prospero is a skilled artist of anxiety. Prospero also, for example, makes Ferdinand a bit of a slave – perhaps to purify him – before he has Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love. Ostensibly, Prospero thinks Ferdinand will value Miranda more if he is made to suffer first so, while it is ethically dubious, he once again manages anxiety and then induces gratitude. This arch orchestrated by Prospero is not unlike the arch in a romantic film or play; Prospero is conscious that obstacles need to be overcome in Act 2 before the lovers can unite in Act 3 – so he plots these necessary obstacles.

William H. Gass writes that we “select, we construct, we compose our pasts and hence make fictional characters of ourselves as if it seems we must to remain sane” (quoted in Waugh, 116). Willa Cather’s *Paul’s Case* is one metafictional text that dramatizes this astutely. One of the first things we learn about Cather’s Paul is that his eyes had to them “a certain hysterical brilliancy, and [that] he continually used them in a conscious, theatrical sort of way” (Gioia, 107). Paul, who works at Carnegie Hall, is deeply concerned with the aesthetic. He prefers to “lose himself” in front of the paintings in the picture gallery and the

symphonies at the hall (109-110), much like Benoit loses himself routinely in his Chekhov story, rather than confront the quotidian; Paul cannot even walk up his own street without a “shudder of loathing” (111). Benoit and Paul both feel themselves to be better than their lives. When Paul sees his English teacher at the theatre, he is startled and wants to usher her out: “What business had she there among all these fine people and gay colors? He looked at her and decided she was not appropriately dressed” (109). Paul not only loses himself in art, but also sees the world as a tableaux vivant of which he is both the subject and the author. When the symphonies at the theatre are over, Paul feels “irritable and wretched” and has “the feeling of its being impossible to give up this delicious excitement which was the only thing that could be called living at all” (110):

“After each of these orgies of living, [Paul] experienced all the physical depression which follows a debauch; the loathing of respectable beds, of common food, of a house penetrated by a morbid desire for cool things and soft lights and fresh flowers.”
(Gioia, 111)

Patricia Waugh writes that, in metafictional narratives, “envy and personal dissatisfaction... are frequently shown...to lead to obsessive and controlled practices of self-fictionalization” (Waugh, 118). This is precisely the kind of behaviour Paul exhibits. Paul mistakenly feels that it is at the Carnegie theatre that he “really lived” and that “the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting” (113). But that it is also described as his “fairy tale” reveals that Paul feels that his real life is the life he creates imaginatively. He tells his classmates “the most incredible

stories...of his acquaintance with the soloists who came to Carnegie Hall, his suppers with them and the flowers he sent them” (114). When Paul begins to lose his audience, he becomes “desperate,” bidding goodbye to the boys and “announcing that he was going to travel a while; going to Naples, to Venice to Egypt” (Ibid). Paul’s tangible reality, however, makes it impossible for him to sustain such fictions, and “each Monday he would slip back, conscious and nervously smiling; his sister was ill, and he should have to defer his voyage until spring” (114).

Paul’s teachers begin to develop theories that the boy is what I would call a “reader” or “projector” type; that “his imagination had been perverted by garish fiction.” But Paul is an author of fiction, not only because he does not read very much at all, but because he gets “what he want[s] much more quickly from music....he need[s] only the spark, the indescribable thrill that [makes] his imagination master of his senses, and he [can] make plots and pictures enough of his own” (114).

The “sense of defeat” and “the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness” that follows each concert at the hall inspires Paul’s plan to rob Denny and Carson’s of the one thousand dollars he uses to steal away to New York and recreate himself (111). He purchases new clothes, hats, shoes, and a new scarf pin from Tiffany’s (115). In his hotel he finds that “everything was as it should be” – except for the lack of flowers, which he rings the bellboy and sends down for (116). He spends more than an hour dressing, the last step in his process of self-fashioning and self-fictionalization, and finds at last

that “he was exactly the kind of boy he had always wanted to be” (117). Once in the dining room, among the music, the champagne, and the “gay toiletries of the women,” he finds himself even doubting “the reality of his past” (118).

When Paul learns in the Pittsburgh newspaper that his father is on his way to New York to retrieve Paul and bring him home to reality, he has “the old feeling that the orchestra had suddenly stopped; the sinking sensation that the play was over” (119). But rather than return to the vulgar life on Cordelia Street that he so despises, Paul takes his own life on the railroad track. His death is described in terms of “the picture-making mechanism [being] crushed” (121). The essence of Paul, then, is not mind or spirit, but rather his ability to fictionalize, and Paul’s primary subject of interest is himself.

Garp, too, is guilty of self-fictionalization, and the effect of that practice creates problems for himself artistically. Garp feels that his second novel reveals a weakness in his writing, that he fails to imagine “far enough beyond his own fairly ordinary experience” and that he had been “limiting his ability as a writer in a fairly usual way: writing, essentially, about himself” (234). *Second Wind of the Cuckold* is described by a reviewer as “bitterly truthful,” but that had some of the bitterness been “refined away” then a “purer truth would have emerged” (219). His third novel, after the death of Walter in the car accident, is full of his own guilt, and as a result, it is doomed to be his “worst work” (446).

Waugh writes that these author characters are also commonly guilty of “the inauthentic fictionalizing of others” because they “see only the salient points of these lives without taking into account the details of corrosion, [thus] mak[ing]

these lives into works of art” (Waugh, 118). Garp exhibits such practices in subtle ways throughout *The World According to Garp*; he turns to the phonebook in search of characters’ names, and then fictionalizes the people he finds in the directory, and often imagines strangers on the streets in narratives. Garp eventually finds himself longing for a job because he was running out of people he could imagine – he needed to meet new people so he could fictionalize them (240). While Benoit, in *Gurov and Anna*, is seduced by Mercedes’ fictionalization of him in her story, after reading *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, Helen feels like Garp has exploited her and Alice and Harrison. In *Gurov and Anna*, it is Mercedes who is startled to hear Benoit’s daughter at the other end of the phone, confirming that Benoit is a real man in a real world with a real family who will suffer because of Mercedes’ actions. But Garp feels defensive, not contrite: “It’s not about *us*,” Garp argues, “It’s not *about* any of that, it just *uses* that” (220). Nonetheless, Helen feels that her privacy has been violated, and that Garp has “his own terms for what is fact, and what is fiction” (222). Helen’s philosophy can be aligned with Plato’s; Plato, as Murdoch elucidates, feels that “the Creator who gazes at the eternal and intelligible produces what is good, but he who without intelligence simply copies the world of becoming produces something worthless” (Murdoch, 57). Garp perhaps feels this way as well – he, too, recognizes that this is partly why he is limited as a writer, and perhaps this is why he feels that art is of no help to anyone, and why he “reject[s] the idea that art [is] of any social value whatsoever” (247) – because he assumes that other artists create in the same way that he does.

For Waugh, these writer characters need not necessarily be literal artists or writers, but artists in that “they assume roles which destroy their own and others’ integrity and existential freedom through the confusion of ‘role’ with ‘self,’ or of appearance with reality” (Waugh, 117). In *Stranger than Fiction*, author Karen Eiffel accuses her new assistant, Penny, of not knowing how to help her with writer’s block because she has never thought about leaping off a building – so how would she be able to help her kill Harold Crick, whom she still believes to be a fictional character of her own creation? Karen treats the matter as though it were truly a matter of life and death, but she has yet to realize that it is, indeed, a matter of life and death for Harold Crick who is living and breathing in the world, and who has suddenly become alert to Karen’s narration in his head. Karen’s own existential freedom is compromised, too, because in not realizing that she is plotting the future (and death) of a real man, she is equally ignorant of the fact that, in doing so, she is plotting her own fate and is unable to untangle what she is writing and what she is living; her world and Harold’s are about to collide. Either the fictional character she is writing is not fictional at all, or her life is as fictional as his. Essentially, there is no distinction or boundary here between fiction and reality.

In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Prudie’s sense of identity has been compromised by her mother’s fictions. In the car with her student, Trey, she plays a game in which Trey has to name something he wants to do with her, to which Prudie replies “let’s not and say we did” – a game she learned from her mother. We discover that Prudie’s mother taught Prudie to privilege fiction over

experience; that the former can easily replace the latter. When young Prudie would ask for a birthday party, her mother would lie, “You had a birthday party last year... and you hated it.” The lie is planted, in detail, in young Prudie as a false memory, and the girl’s sense of identity is thus compromised by her mother’s fictionalization of her. As a grown woman, Prudie has a picture of a man whom her mother claims to be her father – but realizes that the picture she carries could be anyone. Prudie’s awareness of the instability of her identity and its lack of foundation in a tangible reality induces her current crisis.

In *Goodbye Lenin!*, Alex’s mother, Christiane, is guilty of a similar fictionalization of the history of her children. Rather than raising her children in the reality in which Christiane is too fearful to follow her husband into West Germany and begin a new life there with their children as planned, Christiane gives her children an alternate narrative, in which their father abandons them for another woman in West Germany, and never attempts to contact them again. Christiane rewrites her children’s history to attempt to absolve her of guilt, not accounting for the ways in which she is inauthenticating her children’s personal narratives and, thus, their identities.

Garp, on the other hand, resents his mother to some extent for writing her autobiography and making him a “leading character in someone else’s book before he’d even written a book of his own” (180). But Jenny Fields, Garp’s mother, at least allowed Garp his identity, un-tampered with, by refusing to “invent a mythology for Garp’s father – to make a marriage story for herself to legitimize her son” (32). Jenny privileges truth and reality over fiction, and while

in the context of the era in which Jenny raised her son, to refuse to legitimize Garp with a narrative may be perceived as a kind of cruelty, in the context of this analysis it appears to be an act of generosity on her part.

In *Gurov and Anna*, and in an act of attempted kindness, Mercedes tries to withdraw from her relationship with Benoit without shattering his fantasy, and she does so by putting on a role of confused, passionate, and contrite woman – a role which, unfortunately for Mercedes – is easily aligned by Benoit with Chekhov's Anna. When Mercedes' role-playing fails her, Audrey attempts to salvage what she can of her marriage, and protect Mercedes, too, by hijacking the narrative. She opens a newly minted email account, "gurovanna@gmail.com," and writes a letter to Benoit, as Mercedes, and tries to tell him in a language that he understands – the language of dreams and metaphor – that he has to let Mercedes go. Audrey realizes that Mercedes and Benoit are both struggling to create narratives and both failing, and so she decides to claim authorship over what is about to happen to her life and to her family, and she does so by playing the role of Mercedes. *Gurov and Anna*, then, like *The Tempest*, as well as *Paul's Case*, *The World According to Garp*, and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, gets at the heart of the bewildering relationship between reality and unreality; that, as Erving Goffman writes, "all the world is not of course a stage" and "the crucial ways in which it isn't" (quoted in Waugh, 4).

Readers and Projectors

Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, reminds us that we live "in the age of narrative plots, consuming avidly Harlequin romances and television serials

and daily comic strips, creating and demanding narrative in the presentation of persons and news events and sports contests” (Brooks 1984, 7). Plot, for Brooks, is one of the ways in which we make sense of narratives we consume; but furthermore, it becomes one of the ways we make sense of the world around us:

“Narrative is one of the ways in which we speak, one of the large categories in which we think. Plot is its thread of design and its active shaping force, the product of our refusal to allow temporality to be meaningless, our stubborn insistence on making meaning in the world and in our lives.” (Brooks 1984, 323)

For Brooks, the “traditional metaphor of the world as a book” (Waugh, 2-3) extends beyond the world of metaphor; he views the reader as being a virtual text, “a composite of all that he has read, or heard read, or imagined written” (Brooks 1984, 19). This portion of the essay will survey a series of characters in fiction who are characterized by what Brooks calls, in his book of the same name, the “melodramatic imagination” – more specifically, characters who consume fictions and then project them onto their worlds in order to charge their lives with meaning.

Brooks speaks of melodrama as less of a genre than an “imaginative mode” (1995, vii). He traces its origins to the French Revolution and its aftermath, which he sees as the

“epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative

institutions (Church, Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of literary forms – tragedy, comedy of manners – that depended on such a society” (Brooks 1995, 15).

Melodrama, then, allows us to recreate lost grand narratives in a post-sacred era, and “tells us that in the right mirror, with the right degree of convexity, our lives matter” (Brooks 1995, ix). The melodramatic imagination is characterized by its insistence on “pressuring the surface of reality” to make it “yield meaning;” creating drama “from the banal stuff of reality;” and refusing to “allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence” (Brooks 1995, 1-2, 22).

When characters in fictional works are characterized by this imaginative mode, what arises is an exploration of what happens when we assume “that we are the heroes or heroines of our own life-dramas rather than a part of a larger drama in which we are merely walk-on extras” (Waugh, 118). These characters are deeply – though perhaps not always consciously – invested in narratives, and often either try and read their lives as though they were works of fiction; at times even specific works of fiction that they idealize or relate to.

In Henry James’ *The Beast in the Jungle*, John Marcher reveals himself to be rather invested in a ‘good story.’ He perceives his relationships with the people around him as narratives, and when he reencounters May Bartram he realizes he had “lost the beginning” of their story; that he “knew it...as a continuation, but didn’t know what it continued” (Fadiman, 549). Once May reveals to him the

details of their meeting, John frets about re-joining the others at the party, realizing that their actual story is not very interesting; this second meeting would be more gratifying if they had originally met by him saving her from a capsized boat, or had she nursed him back to health from an illness (552). John realizes that he would like it if he and May could invent another story to tell the others once they reconvene with them (Ibid).

John Marcher's emotional and psychological stake in narrative manifests itself in his growing anxiety that his life is without a grand narrative; without meaning. He spends his life anticipating an event, expecting something to happen to him – he feels it “crouching like a beast in the jungle” and he is full of anxiety for it, and for this reason keeps May Bartram at his side (562). This trait of John's is seen in other characters who possess an imagination invested in narrative. Willa Cather's Paul, too,

“could not remember a time when he had not been dreading something. Even when he was a little boy, it was always there – behind him, or before, or on either side. There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not to look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him.”

(Gioia, 116)

Garp also spends most of his adult life elaborately imagining catastrophes, until he finally frets one into being – the death of his son Walter; his worst nightmare. Paul, in having agency and authority of his life by fleeing to New York, feels a “curious sense of relief, as though he had at last thrown down the gauntlet to the

thing in the corner” (116). John Marcher, however, never has this sense of relief. His anxiety that something terrible is going to happen to him eventually transforms into an anxiety about “the thing to happen that never does happen” (566). John becomes defensive at May’s first insinuation that this may be the case: “You say ‘were to have been,’” he says, “as if in your heart you had begun to doubt... as if you believed...that nothing will now take place” (567). He becomes dreadfully aware of a question “that he would have allowed to shape itself had he dared. What did everything mean...unless that, as this time of day, it was simply, it was overwhelmingly too late?” (574). And once John realizes that this is, indeed, the case, he realizes that he would have rather been bankrupt, dishonoured, or hanged, than to fail to be anything at all (575). He feels that he would have accepted any fate had it “only been decently proportionate to the posture he had kept, all his life, in the threatened presence of it” (575). The anti-climax, for John, is the ultimate failure. The beast crouching in the jungle was a projection of his own fear, and the only meaning he arrives at after his lifelong wait is the absence of meaning, the absence of the grand narrative.

In Marc Forster’s *Stranger than Fiction* (2006), the narrative in Harold Crick’s life is altogether too present for his liking. The film begins with the words “this is a story about a man named Harold Crick,” and once Harold becomes aware of this narrative – by suddenly hearing the voice of a very literal narrator, critically-acclaimed author Karen Eiffel, in his head – his life is disrupted. With this comes an awakening, however, because it is only by hearing Karen’s narration of his life that Harold comes to realize that, as Professor Hilbert puts it,

“there doesn’t seem much to narrate.” While he may not have been living his life to its fullest, Harold feels nonetheless like his existential freedom has been compromised, and with the help of the Professor, tries to prevent his imminent death foretold by his narrator. Together the two determine what kind of story Harold is in, and the only way to do that, as Professor Hilbert points out, “is to determine what stories [he’s] not in.” Harold does this first by trying to determine whether his the narrative he is living is a tragedy or a comedy, but as the threat of his death looms, he realizes that he is not in a character-driven narrative, but a plot-driven narrative, that he doesn’t control his own fate. In the third act of the film, having had the opportunity to read a draft of his own, personal, narrative, Harold is forced to decide whether to live, but live a mediocre narrative void of poetry or meaning, or die – as we all will – but in a way that is poetic and meaningful. Harold chooses a premature death (and Professor Hilbert chooses this for him, as well), essentially because it makes for a better story.

In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Jocelyn says that, to her, love feels like fiction, to which Sylvia replies that her recently estranged husband, Daniel, has thrown away twenty years of marriage for fiction. It is a criticism laced with all the bitterness of a scorned wife, but it is also laden with a subtle hypocrisy, in that Sylvia – and, indeed, all of the women in the film – view their lives through the lens of fiction; the fictions of Jane Austen. This is a dramatization of what Plato warns of in *The Republic*; that “obsession shrinks reality to a single pattern” (Murdoch, 79). Allegra chooses *Sense and Sensibility* for the book club because it speaks on some level to her new living situation with her mother (though Prudie

assures her that she is misreading the novel), and Jocelyn, the matchmaker of the group, chooses *Emma*. Sylvia compares herself to Fanny Price, saying that she feels like she has been “banished from Mansfield Park” and later defends Fanny for being faithful and patient and “sitting on that nest and hatching that egg.” Prudie’s subject of discussion on *Persuasion* is “the long-suffering daughter” – this after her mother has come to visit – and Prudie blurs the lines between *Pride and Prejudice* and her real life (the relationship between her mother and father) at the library dinner, realizing to what extent her personal history is a work of fiction. It is hard to determine, at times, whether the women are reading personal experience through the lens of the novels, or vice versa. Again, this is how the real world and the fictional world become difficult to untangle.

The characters of Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics* also read their lives through the lens of consumed fictions. Conchita says in Act 1 that, with the reading of *Anna Karenina*, she is “seeing everything through new eyes.” “What is happening in the novel has been happening to us,” she says, “Anna and her husband reminds me of us. Except I’m more like the husband” (29). Santiago, approaches it from the other direction, locating himself within the fiction rather than projecting the fiction onto his life; he sees traces of his former self in the character of Levin, and likes him for it – locating himself in the story enhances his appreciation for the story” (33).

In the “Writers and Plotters” section of this essay I discuss how author characters seduce through their work, but the ‘reader’ characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club* also connect romantically and sexually by meeting, in a sense,

in the fictions through which these characters read their lives. Grigg initially flirts with Jocelyn by recommending his favourite literature and offering to read hers. He later buys her the Ursula LeGuin books that he has recommended. Once Jocelyn finally reads LeGuin and appreciates her novels, Grigg kisses Jocelyn and is ready to embark on their relationship. Prudie similarly needs her husband to read *Persuasion* in order for them to save their marriage. After Dean reads *Persuasion*, they make love again for the first time. Danny reads *Persuasion* to reconcile with Sylvia – reading it through the lens of his life and their marriage – and takes a lesson from it to write a letter to Sylvia.

A similar trope is found in Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics*. When Conchita cannot get her husband, Palomo, to speak with a frankness of feeling about Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, their relationship begins to crumble; Palomo attributes the difficulties in their marriage to the novel: "this book will be the end of us," he says (28, 30). *The Jane Austen Book Club* and *Anna in the Tropics* both portray a meeting of lovers through fiction as essential to a harmonious relationship.

In *Gurov & Anna*, the relationship between Benoit and Mercedes is facilitated, in part, by their consumption of the same narrative: Anton Chekhov's *The Lady with the Dog*. They are able to use the story as a kind of lingua franca in the first act of the screenplay, making allusions and references to it – it is their common ground, and it is the lens through which Benoit reads their relationship. Benoit has failed as the author of his own life, and has instead become a character in search of a narrative. As a bachelor, he tried to be a hero in a narrative by

rescuing Audrey from a toxic relationship and bringing her to Montreal. But once they ‘lived happily ever after,’ Benoit began seeking a place in a new narrative that spoke to his current situation: *The Lady with the Dog*.

Mercedes, unlike Benoit, is not a ‘reader’ character, and does not project Chekhov’s story onto their relationship; Benoit thinks they are meeting in this fiction together, but Mercedes is, pun intended, not on the same page – she is on a page that she is writing, because she is a ‘writer’ character. Much of the struggle between Benoit and Mercedes is that they are both meeting in fiction, but they are not meeting in the same fiction; there is the fiction that Benoit is reading and projecting onto their relationship, and there is the fiction that Mercedes is plotting for them. Audrey, however, is alert to both fictions. By finally reading Benoit’s dog-eared copy of *The Lady with the Dog*, she becomes aware of what is happening to her marriage; and by witnessing one of Mercedes’ public readings, she becomes aware of how desperately Mercedes wants to find a way out. It is at this point that Audrey realizes she must insert herself into the narrative.

Anna in the Tropics also reveals some of the dangers of fiction-consumption. In his preface to the play, Nilo Cruz writes that “literary reveries” enable us to escape monotony; that they “permit one to escape the weight of the world and defy the laws of gravity” (6). While reading *Anna Karenina*, Marela dreams of borrowing her friend’s fur coat and running away to Russia, and Ofelia finds comfort in reading, in the middle of summer, a novel that takes place in the winter: “It’s like having a fan or an icebox by your side to relieve the heat and the caloric nights” (25). Both of these are relatively innocent escapist dreams and

pleasures. But Cheche blames love stories for his wife leaving him; he believes that they “got under her skin” (21). Palomo also describes literature as being like alcohol in that it “brings out...the worst part of ourselves. If you’re angry, it brings out your anger. If you’re sad, it brings out your sadness” (52).

Again, the idea that art – or, in this case, literature – causes the better part of the soul to “relax its guard” can also be located in Plato’s *Republic*, (Murdoch, 6), and is an idea that is also dramatized in George Gissing’s Late Victorian novel, *The Odd Women*. It reveals contemporary fears that an overconsumption of the sensational novel may lead a reader to commit adultery and results in “a callousness to crime, an a doubting of revealed truth, going on to the actual commission of one, and to the absolute denial of the other” (quoted in King, 42). Gissing also makes clear, via the debate between Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot over the fallen woman, Bella Royston, the role of the novel in hindering social progression as it pertains to the woman question. Rhoda Nunn ventures that “Miss Royston – when she rushed off to perdition – ten to one she had in mind some idiot heroine of a book” (82).

“All her spare time was given to novel-reading. If every novelist could be strangled and thrown into the sea, we should have some chance at reforming women. The girl’s nature was corrupted by sentimentality, like that of all but every woman who is intelligent enough to read what is called the best fiction, but not intelligent enough to understand its vice” (Ibid).

What Rhoda is getting at in her description of the “idiot heroine” is the danger of imaginative identification in which the pleasure in fiction-reading lies, but which also causes the reader to “lose touch with sober reality” (Altick, 112), much like Benoit does in *Gurov and Anna*. Lise Shapiro Sanders writes of such reading practices in Gissing’s novel as “symptomatic of [a woman’s] inappropriate longing for pleasure and stimulation, in turn rendering it impossible for her to assimilate herself to conventional norms for marital and domestic self-conduct” (192).

Monica Madden’s consumption of popular literature, though at first more moderate than Bella’s, leads her on a similar trajectory to becoming a fallen woman. While she does not claim to be an avid reader, Monica, by virtue of being a shopgirl, is surrounded by popular novels, and their influence is evident in the manner in which she attempts to fashion a marriage plot for herself. Patricia Meyers Spacks describes this practice as “constructing fictions [to] counteract life’s tedium” (172), a common practice of the novel readers in *The Odd Women*.

Monica did not ‘write’ her marriage plot particularly well, however; she realizes that the “narrative hang[s] together but awkwardly,” and she later accuses Mildred of not liking “the story” (129). Sanders argues that Monica’s “failure to reproduce the ending of the romance plot within her own life causes her to pursue a fantasy romance plot which...offers the stimulation she lacks” in her marriage (194). This is Benoit’s trajectory, as well. Monica is unhappy with a husband who insists on having her within his sight at all times, and who feels threatened unless she her mind is occupied by tedious household chores for longer than

reasonable or necessary. It is no wonder why she would, as Spacks argues is common in the reader, remove herself “from immediate actuality” and, through reading, “liberate [herself] from routine and tedium as well as the pain life more actively inflicts” (Spacks, 1).

It is after reading the yellowback left behind by fellow travelers in Guernsey that her withdrawal from reality into fiction becomes explicit (180). She finds the suggestion of her ideal man in books first – and he is not anything like Widdowson – and she then finds more than just the suggestion of him in Bevis (213). Widdowson of course sees the dangers of Monica’s reading practices and prefers her to read either the Bible – seeing religion as “a precious and powerful tool for directing the female conscience” (170) – or something less harmful than the yellowback, like historical fiction by Sir Walter Scott (180). In allowing her a subscription to Mudie’s, Widdowson ensures that at least someone is regulating the content his wife is consuming (213). However, Monica’s exposure to the novel has already resulted in her imaginative identification with the sensation heroine, who (as described by Oliphant) “waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her,” and she seeks this in Bevis (quoted in Pyckett, 34).

After poorly writing her marriage plot, Monica just as poorly writes her sensational plot in choosing Bevis. He, too, is in a fantasy of his own, and locates himself as the creator or pursuer of a narrative; after conspiring to get Monica alone at his flat, he says: “I will make you a cup of tea, -- with my own fair hands, as the novelists say” (218). Bevis’ association with the novel in *The Odd Women*

could problematize the assumption that it is only women who are deluded by the novels they consume, but Gissing more likely attempts to emasculate Bevis here, making him an unfortunate choice of man if one wants to be swept up by “strong arms,” and also preparing us for his eventual cowardly abandonment of Monica (218). As soon as the fantasy threatens to become a reality, Bevis retreats, all the while trying to keep the fantasy intact via his letters.

The detrimental effects of the novel are rather severe and explicit in Virginia Madden, as well. When Alice comes to stay with Monica and Virginia in Volume Three, she says of Virginia: “She seems to have become weak-minded...she reads nothing but novels, day after day” (307). Virginia’s love for ‘entertaining’ literature (as she describes it) and her love for drink are not purely coincidental, either. She locks herself in her bedroom with her novel and her gin (301) – and one of the perils of novel-consumption was that it was perceived in this period as closely associated with an inclination for drink and addiction. Virginia Madden’s overconsumption of the novel, though, is portrayed to be just as threatening to her physical and psychic well-being as her overconsumption of alcohol.

Healthy or not, Brooks writes that the search for meaning – narrative – is part of “the Promethean search to illuminate man’s quotidian existence by the reflected flame of the higher cosmic drama” and that it “constitutes one of the principal quests of the modern imagination” (Brooks 1995, 21). Patricia Waugh agrees that we now occupy not “selves” but rather “roles” and that, consequently,

to study ‘reader’ and ‘writer’ characters in fiction is a way of “understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside” fiction (Waugh, 3).

Close-Readers of the World, Beware?

The final chapter of Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is entitled “Deep Readers of the World Beware!” It seems a fitting phrase to usher in my concluding remarks for this thesis. While Booth is referring to Saul Bellow’s warnings against “deep reading” (Booth, 265), and the distressing evidence that many readers privilege meaning over feeling, the (somewhat reserved) warning of my subtitle is not to close-readers of the novel, but rather to close-readers of the world. This essay is not intended to warn against the dangers of consuming cultural artefacts, and my screenplay is not a cautionary tale about the disciplining of the bad reader or bad artist. I merely am surveying and expressing anxiety about the line between the real world and the fictional world; whether and how we blur that line, and even whether one exists at all.

As Booth writes, critics have attempted to put forth standards by which we can judge what is an appropriate distance to maintain between author, audience, and work of fiction (Booth, 38). Sartre, somewhere in the middle, deems it acceptable for a novelist to be witness or accomplice to his fictional characters, “but never both at the same time” (Booth, 50). Q.D. Leavis lauds Charles Dickens for being “one with his readers”; while “they enjoyed exercising their emotional responses,” she explains, “he laughed and cried aloud as he wrote” (Leavis, 157). Dickens and his readers, then, like many of the characters I discuss above,

somehow connect through the fiction he writes. Despite his arguments for distance between author, reader, and text, Booth, too, concedes that “when any good novel is read successfully, the experiences of the author and reader are indistinguishable” (Booth, 39). This does not suggest an appropriate distance between author and reader as Booth originally proposes, but a virtual lack of distance between author and reader.

Roland Barthes’ pleasure of the text involves a particular kind of engagement with the text, and not with the author – an engagement that he explains in physical terms, involving agency and activity on the reader’s part. His enjoyment of a narrative comes “not directly [from] its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions [he] impose[s] on the fine surface” (Barthes, 12). For Barthes, “the more a story is told in a proper, well-spoken, straightforward way, in an even tone, the easier it is to reverse it, to blacken it, to read it inside out.... This reversal, being a pure production, wonderfully develops the pleasure of the text” (Barthes, 26). In a similar manner that Leavis and Booth discount writers who merely reproduce their lives or preoccupations on the page, ostensibly, for Barthes, a good reader’s engagement with a text necessitates a kind of action on it or with it – as opposed to a lazy consumption and subsequent projection of it – but the same time he stresses the importance of “abolish[ing] the false opposition of practical life and contemplative life” (Barthes, 59). Iris Murdoch does not see this opposition as false, and in response to Plato’s *Republic* asserts that “learning to detect the false in art and enjoy the true is part of a long-life education in moral discernment” (Murdoch, 83).

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