

Hélène Cixous Eve Escapes



书馆

TRANSLATED BY PEGGY KAMUF

EVE ESCAPES

Ruins and Life

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

TRANSLATED BY PEGGY KAMUF

polity

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DAY OF SUFFERANCE

It is thus the New Life which I see. Its aged face where eternal youth shines. Right in front of me and caught up in a rush. I saw that I was seeing time fall

This emotion

Sitting in front of Mama who was no longer Mama but Omi herself – I was struck by distance I saw Omi who was Mama as if through a thickening of my crystalline lens, enlarged by the presence of a perceptible distance between us, a distance of so much time, and this time was, I guessed, the one that was looming, the one that was going to come, the one that would come, a folio of imminent things – I was not seeing Mama, I was making her out, I was holding her, despite myself, at the end of this invisible spyglass that the filter of foreboding inserts between us when we are hurried motionless into the fated future. I saw her masked with distance, she was smiling very broadly at me, the prominence of her teeth brushed with a strange sparkle of love held my gaze, they were like the double of her teeth, which she held out to

me tenderly, my heart groaned, my inner dog, he lay flat and groaned although Mama did not hear my soul sounds

From this distance I made out Mama's pupils, which were laughing, laughing, skipping about in mischief, the trick they were playing on me, "I am an old woman who is still human," she said, that was Mama, and that laugh was not Omi, but just when I was about to believe it, she turned terribly pale, and that white on the lips was Omi – "wait!" she said, shaken by a little anxiety, guessing that I was going to retire upstairs to my writing study, and this, this was new for Mama, this little call frightened by not knowing what she was afraid of, what she wanted, "wait!" and what was she looking for, what did she want to remember, this had never been Mama, this frail fear, and not Omi either, "do you want something, little Mama?" and this, these words in that voice, that had never been me, in a deep shiver I *saw* us, we were trembling old veal calves who, having been moved at night, through incalculable darkness, from an habitual lodging, wake up in the unknown daylight of another world. The day before will never come again. Never again will we climb at a lively pace the marble steps of the life before.

I forbade it, this immense pain. I retained only the feeling of immensity that this prodigious piece of an hour had given me.

"I want a second slice of toast," said omified Mama. That had never been Mama. This was the first time. She had found what she wanted to want. The slice of toast was the plank over the abyss. Solid, probable, reassuring. "I want-a-second-slice-of toast!" had procured for Omi-Mama the satisfaction one feels when slotting in the missing piece. That was Omi all right. She always loved little triumphs. Never, Mama would never have, had, has never been able to ask anyone in the world, never been able to ask for what she's always done by

herself for herself. Having always been for herself her whole household, her mistress and her servant, herself herself. This was therefore no longer Mama. "She has changed places" was the thought thrown at me.

— So *without any delay*, at least perceivable, at the speed of lightning-thought,

I hurled myself with a leap into Mama's old age. Pray, I thought, while leaping and in the very time of the leap, that Mama not feel, not have had the time to notice the least trace of the threat of anachronism between us. If there was a delay, I filled it in. I went to the kitchen to get a second slice of toast for Mama sitting in the dining room in front of her cup of café au lait *exactly* as if thousands of times I had made this trip that I had never made. I invented a habit in mid-air.

"Mama is being replaced," a thought briefly thought, and I acted quickly as if it was not I who was thinking and who was replacing Mama. Furtive thoughts in the dark corners of my dome, they thrash against the ceiling so silently that I doubt they really nest up high to the right, they are perhaps but the illusory wings of the Fears. The Fears, here is a species of Chiroptera that escapes all scientific observation. When their slight, imponderable and mute phantoms brush against our hair, we never know if they are real or figures beneath the forehead, if they are in the present or if they scurry along in that other time which we dread absolutely because it will happen to us and it will happen to us only as the Forbidden itself. It will get to us and we will not get there. It is what awaits us so as to nail us to our own bones.

I let the thought get lost over the stove. These thoughts have the briefest life. They are extinguished at the speed of forgetting a dream.

I returned in a second with the desired slice of toast, and Mama carefully spread cream on the outline. The passion for cream, that's Omi.

These accelerations galvanize my brain. My brain and I are living in a new apartment, much larger and more bizarrely conceived than the former one. To see myself with Omi for Mama is to have the cane of old age for being.

I noted down all this with great difficulty and retouching, limping the words, with anxious and awkward gropings, reading with the tips of my eyelashes the vision called Premonition, which occupied the whole expanse of the canvas, I was filled with tears all down my throat –

I noted down all this, I noted, in one of those large Leader Price notebooks that Mama used to buy for me in the past – I start again: that she doesn't buy for me anymore, that she stopped buying for me, going to buy for me, because she has stopped going to the market, her perimeter of movement has shrunk, she has stopped going into the garden alone and under her own steam, while I began to try to paint the radiant vision of Mama (seized mutated transfixed turned translated) into Omi, of Mama omified, I had reached out my right arm toward the pile of notebooks and copybooks and pulled from the pile at random one of those large letter pads best price *meilleur prix mejor precio* that were for years the canvas signed spirit-of-Mama on which I have painted so much. This notebook, I saw, contained a first page dated July 12, 2003, which is an uncertain indication because all the dates dotting my texts are half-fictions, imprecisions kept secret, even from me. This notebook thus added a floating time to the set of times that were crowding – a people of cherished and anxious traces – all around the edges of the True Vision.

I saw that I was seeing the Truth. I was seeing true. I kept its silence. Yet I had almost a need to break it, an audacious need, temerarious but timid, a timirarious need, one of those movements of the soul that are ready to take flight when they step forward. So I said: "Things going OK, Mama?"

And more precisely: "Are things going OK, Mama?" Thus I urged her on a little. I cracked open the door for Truth. She was omified, but all the same Mama. She could tell me everything a little. I was well aware that everything happening to us was very difficult to say, to think, to think to say, no one is sure of anything, no one stands on anything, sitting a little on the other's side, there is amphibology everywhere, in the articulations, in the interior monologues, and for a good reason, this kind of alteration, both clear-cut and fluctuating, overcomes all the characters, from the moment Mama was Omi too me too, I contracted a slight stuttering of thought, I was speaking to Mama, but I clearly felt that one of the intonations of my voice, a certain flexibility, came from the voice that in the past, a long time ago, I used to address to Omi. I even recognized, in a manner of leaning forward and pushing out my words, a few at a time, and like mouthfuls of bread, toward her eyes, the kind of gentleness that in the past I used to send toward Omi, in consideration of her age, of her very small size, of how the different exiles had made her force fragile, and it all made me unhappy. To be gentle with Mama struck me with sadness.

Pray that I have the strength of conscience needed to note down these signs of time lag, these processes of contamination, at a moment when the gust of an emotion virtually threw me to the ground beside my chair, at Mama's feet, this shows just how much the shock of the apparition had split me apart, disjoined me, and how much I was a stranger to myself, by the blow of Mama's Omification. The question arose in me: did Mama have, by way of reflections, a retouched Vision of "me"? Did she see, in my different aspects, that I saw in her something that she did not see or that she perhaps hid from herself and that worried me? When I say "Things going OK, Mama?" it is a serious, intense question, I mean: "where are things going, Mama? Do you know?" I set it down for an

instant on the table, before her cup of café au lait, then “on the telephone,” that is to say, on that invisible telephone with which one goes deeper, from thought to thought, in this way perhaps she will be able to tell me the things she puts carefully aside, behind a corner of thought straight as a gate, so as to avoid losing them altogether, and so as at the same time not to be able to find them again. The things that are in her head and that she does not recognize and that preoccupy her like a raw silk blouse which she has been wearing lately with a certain surprise because every day she wonders where it came from. Prey to the feeling Freud described, under the name of screen-impression of the never seen. The mystery of the blouse occupies all her reflections. If she could resolve it, it seems to her that All she hides from herself would be revealed to her. The raw silk looks like the piece of green fabric stretched over a window pane that had been broken in the window of the pantry, so as to bog down the attention of the narrator who meant to cross the room in search of past time, believing he was in the salon when in fact he was on the other side. Where does it come from? she wonders every two or three hours. The silk resists. My mother as well. Where are we going? I ask myself.

Perhaps, I thought, she will be able to say a key-sentence to me on the heels of “I am an old woman who is still human,” which would allow me perhaps to get a clear and immediate idea as to the station where she’s waiting for me, which is now inaccessible to me. She is perhaps ahead of me. Perhaps she has been on the way to Omification for a long time and was humbly and patiently waiting for me to join her? For me to recognize her?

– Yes, things are going OK mydaughter, and you, did you sleep OK? Her wisp of a voice crackles, stumbles, almost breaks and with a vibrating effort hoists itself up to -K.

I am losing time.

It is an awful loss that I myself am making, while making every effort.

– Where are we going? I say. – To London, says the dream. Get ready. The dream discovers my new apartment, while I am readying my baggage. It is a beautiful morning. The dream is pregnant. When I see its belly, I rectify: it is, then, a feminine Dream. Above all don't miss the train. The Dream is lively, active, and beneath her round, warm eyes Mama's smile is attached. She finds the apartment much bigger than the other. Myself, I think it is interesting, pleasant, light, without any ulterior motive. One can hear a chorus of school children. No doubt there is a school very close by. When approaching the bay window you look out on a narrow, flower-lined path peopled with a line of schoolchildren, who are buzzing as in the present days and like the buzzing of my mother when she inspects the row of geraniums, her arm knotted in my arm. I am a little distracted, getting lost in thought associations I follow a comparison, I get lost, the Dream is ready. One must have breakfast. One must be in London by 10 o'clock, no later. Nine o'clock at the airport station. It will soon be 8 o'clock. I still have an hour. The hours buzz. London rings. – London? you say. What is London? She doesn't answer. I shake London, *Londres, l'onde, l'ombre, long, londi, allons dre*. Come on hurry up, the Dream is in front of you. I gather up my things, which gives you an idea of the Dispersion, it's like gathering up dispersion, there is some everywhere to be forgotten and then I am traversed by the bald blade of a Fear. The Fear of Forgetting flutters in front of me, and naturally I forget the urgency of gathering things. If I could put my suitcase on the couch, what would I be putting on the couch? According to Wilhelm Stekel the baggage you take with you is the weight of the sins by which you feel crushed. I hesitate.

My sins escape me. Oh! Toiletries. And the word *toilette*, how long it has been apostrophizing me. A first-rate mocker. You, *toi*, who is always missing a letter, like the tooth missing from the woman singer who allurepels Stendhal. But, I say, it's Mama who gave me this suitcase. I love it. I could take the suitcase, the suitcase itself, that will suffice for my needs. Moreover according to Freud it is often precisely the case that baggage symbolizes without a doubt our own genital organs. According to me the suitcase is the uterus of the dream. The Dream has her suitcase in front, my mother travels with her pack on her back. On my side, I am never separated from my suitcase full of unique notebooks. The value of my suitcase increases with time. Its powers never cease growing, in reality, symbolically, in French and in memories. It can do almost anything. And with charm and discretion. It is light brown. Here is its new function: starting this year it has taken on the role of Tomb

Finally I do it: put the suitcase on the couch. Each word, each gesture, counts. I open it. It is open. An idea occurs to me: perhaps the totally incomprehensible and paradoxical pleasure, which consequently is unaccepted by me and many times shoved with my foot back under the couch all year long, which entered like a wedge into my mental space, a psychical curiosity that I have spoken about to no one, characterized rather by the absence of repulsion, horror, rejection, where one might normally expect to find them, and by the undeniable presence of a feeling of well-being where everyone else would feel fear, perhaps this kind of tolerable happiness, which I had never heard anyone speak of, and which arose in the spring when I had acquired the tomb, perhaps this foreign body that has grown in my head, which should kill me and does not prevent me from living, this burial chamber in the brain with which, to my great surprise, I am quite at home, would find an explanation in the suitcase: either that I

am remaking the suitcase for myself with the tomb. Or that the suitcase has always lived by my side as a portable tomb, a chest of secrets, an earth-colored animal. This idea and the ones following came out of the suitcase as soon as I pulled on the zipper. I am losing time. But I would be unintelligible if I didn't note down here a few dates and facts. I follow the order of the accidents. Thus, in 2005, but perhaps it was in 2006, it didn't really have a date because it was eternity breaking through, in Algiers, I found my father again, his tomb, being one on one with him, although it seemed to me that ten steps behind our embrace there was an improbable flute player, true or dream, this took place and I remember it, if we had not been alone, I say to myself, the prodigy could perhaps not have taken place.

In March 2007, at the end of a long series of chance events, for the most part unfortunate, and all of them necessary, I won't tell the story but I see it clearly, I obtained via official letter, against every expectation, the promise of some possession, uncertain, on my side, like a property that is unspeakable, unappropriable, undesirable, inestimable, address, location, passport window, place, room, ticket, vehicle, dock, port, entry, vessel, I don't know what, on the other side, according to the Law and the Office, a thing named "Concession" – a word designed to induce humility in those who are granted it – in the Cemetery, the *Cimetière*, called "Ci." This event, as is suddenly obvious to me when I open the suitcase, changed my whole life. I have only just received the notice, with the delay that frequently accompanies events that surpass us. The same day as the Concession, *Tombe* was republished, a book that I had omitted frequenting since 1972, date on which, although I have never realized this before these pages, all corporal link with my father within the tomb and as a tomb was interrupted forever, at least until the contrary reappearance, and without my being able to do anything about it.

There must be a hidden relation between these two events, but I don't see it. I see in my imagination these three unequal rectangular volumes. They look like letters sealed in destiny's envelope.

To come back to the suitcase on the couch – but I panic: my passport! I pat myself down. It is indeed in my right pocket, slender cardboard rectangle. I drink barely a sip of coffee, and it's the last minute.

We hurry. Here we are in the Train without Dream. She must have taken the car in front I say to myself, but we are in the same train, I reassure myself. I am alone with my brother, without a coat, without any woollens. I am going to be cold. I see us getting off at the airport. The baggage is unloaded onto a conveyor belt. Dream comes back toward me smiling the smile that my mother wears from now on. It's a look of ravishments, a hymn to life that death concedes to us. It means: "It is better to be old than dead." I read this sentence in my mother's thought. Dream has already finished with the formalities. She has passed through customs. I am still waiting for my suitcase. When I see it, the first one to arrive, I put my hand on it, it is not mine, it's a mistake. Some time passes in front of me. I walk along the baggage conveyor, but not one is my suitcase. The fear of a delay is preaching to me: how far away already is the time of dawn when I thought I was leaving for London in a little while. Suddenly the conveyor stops. In my head the sentence doesn't have time to write itself to the end. One can read: the conveyor sto. Nothing is moving anymore. I cast a last glance. Everything is stopped. I understood that it was a death. I had lost time.

– *Et toi mafille, tu as bien dor-mi?* My mother's voice hoists itself from syllable to syllable, squeaks on all the hoarse vowels up to the last syllable. Once at *-mi*, it rests. Pause. Sentence

accomplished. A modest satisfaction colors her cheeks. The world rises now before her everything is inclined at every moment it's necessary to carry the whole burden one's two arms are hardly enough with their hands spread wider and wider into fists with their thickened fingers to raise the trunk, the slopes, the long and rough ropes of the sentences weighed down with knots and many modalizing ornaments. She lives surrounded, followed, hedged in by staircases, there is one just in front of her bed, between her bedroom and the dining room, the chairs are so many steps in her way. She dreams in short of an ideal, pruned, rich but sober language, as light as the silkiest silk, like the one that we speak between the cats and me, but without cooing because for that you need a supple throat, without *i*'s and without *u*'s the *o*'s and *a*'s being flatter and thus more practical. Moreover she has already tried it out a few times. Soon she'll be able to say: *et toi mafille* (the *ma* helps her get out *fille*) *ta bien dorma*? That is what seems pleasant and worthwhile to her. Often this dreamed-of language even formulates practical models exactly by itself, without any effort on her part. Since she is not its author but its user, she casts a quick glance at my face (*visage* is avoided) to see if it passes muster. It does, Mama, I reassure her little visage, which is more and more mobile. She uses it as a supplement. I admire the number of utterances she can translate into shudders, shimmers, looks. Thus I say to myself we have been going to school for the last few months, it took me some time to realize it, we are acquiring new basic skills, Mama is writing otherwise and in that very moment I can see to read. Myself I have changed languages, but not fluently, I tinker together a speech especially for Mama, a little bit secret, clipped squared off, not at all ruminated, not equivocal, as if cut out of jute fabric, rough even, straightforward and totally asyndetic, on which she can get a sharp and firm hold.

And on the landing of *-mi*, Mama stands still in the state

of the god of the seventh day with a foot on the spade chin on the handle of the tool, and as if come back to herself, pulled out of the phase of Omification, she looks at me with delight while I look at her with delight on the one hand like a young mother looks at her baby who looks at her blissfully, the one nourishing the other with light, in such a way that from the two faces emanates the double radiance that is called beauty,

on the other hand – since this appears to me in the middle ground and thanks to a stretching out of time that delays its earths and its days in vast depths around our two characters held in suspension – she looks at me look at her looking at me looking at her with long warm sweetened reinvigorating draughts, drinking us up in a thick, sublime drinking, while resembling in a way that is fascinating for me, as if I was discovering in that moment that we were the unexpected and absolutely unquestionable double of the couple Cimon and Pero, linked by the supreme milk.

This is a fact. I cannot explain it. This scene takes place in front of the banister of thirty-foot-high iron rails that stand guard over the floors of the house and that Mama grasps in order to make the every day more difficult climb that takes her from her bedroom to the bathroom. The difference between the staircase in Montaigne's Tower and the staircase in my mother's tower is the high rails. At the end Montaigne no longer descended the steps that would have led him from his bedroom to the chapel, for lack of the black rails that serve Mama as prosthesis. He contents himself with making a few somewhat shaky steps hastened by that weakness of age that is pushing him from behind, sometimes using the wall to lean on, especially when there is no one to see him, sometimes even when there is someone, and in this way while tottering he reaches the divine port, cut into a notch in the auditive fireplace, sits down on the prayer stool, having given up