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STARRING CATHERINE DENEUVE, EMMANUELLE BEART,
JOHN MALKOVICH AND VINCENT PEREZ

TIME REGAINED

MARCEL PROUST



Marcel Proust

IN SEARCH OF
LOST TIME

VI

Time Regained

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A Guide to Proust

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Sodom And Gomorrah

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*Time Regained &
A Guide To Proust*

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I should have no occasion to dwell upon this visit which I paid to the neighbourhood of Combray at perhaps the moment in my life when I thought least about Combray, had it not, precisely for that reason, brought me what was at least a provisional confirmation of certain ideas which I had first conceived along the Guermantes way, and also of certain other ideas which I had conceived on the Méséglise way. I repeated every evening, in the opposite direction, the walks which we used to take at Combray, in the afternoon, when we went the Méséglise way. One dined now at Tansonville at an hour at which in the past one had long been asleep at Combray. And because of the seasonal heat, and also because Gilberte spent the afternoon painting in the chapel attached to the house, we did not go out for our walk until about two hours before dinner. The pleasure of those earlier walks, which was that of seeing, on the way home, the crimson sky framing the calvary or mirroring itself in the Vivonne, was now replaced by the pleasure of setting forth at nightfall, when one encountered nothing in the village but the blue-grey, irregular and shifting triangle of a flock of sheep being driven home. Over one half of the fields the sun had already set; above the other half the moon was already alight and would soon bathe them in their entirety. It sometimes happened that Gilberte let me go without her, and I set off, trailing my shadow behind me, like a boat gliding across enchanted waters. But as a rule Gilberte came with me. The walks that we took thus together were very often those that I used to take as a child: how then could I help but feel much more acutely even than in the past on

the Guermantes way the conviction that I would never be able to write, reinforced by the conviction that my imagination and my sensibility had weakened, when I found how incurious I was about Combray? I was distressed to see how little I relived my early years. I found the Vivonne narrow and ugly alongside the towpath. Not that I noticed any great physical discrepancies from what I remembered. But, separated as I was by a whole lifetime from places I now happened to be passing through again, there was lacking between them and me that contiguity from which is born, even before we have perceived it, the immediate, delicious and total deflagration of memory. Having doubtless no very clear conception of its nature, I was saddened by the thought that my faculty of feeling and imagining things must have diminished since I no longer took any pleasure in these walks. Gilberte herself, who understood me even less than I understood myself, increased my melancholy by sharing my astonishment. "What," she would say, "you feel no excitement when you turn into this little footpath which you used to climb?" And she herself had changed so much that I no longer thought her beautiful, that she was no longer beautiful at all. As we walked, I saw the landscape change; we had to climb hills, followed by downward slopes. We chatted—very agreeably for me. Not without difficulty, however. In so many people there are different strata which are not alike: the character of the father, then of the mother; one traverses first one, then the other. But, next day, the order of their superimposition is reversed. And finally one does not know who will decide between the contestants, to whom one is to appeal for the verdict. Gilberte was like one of those countries with which one dare not form an alliance because of their too frequent changes of government. But in reality this is a mistake. The memory of the most multiple person establishes a sort of identity in him and makes him reluctant to go back on promises which he remembers, even if he has not countersigned them. As for intelligence, Gilberte's, in spite of

certain absurdities inherited from her mother, was very acute. But, quite unrelated to this, I remember that, in the course of our conversations during these walks, on several occasions she surprised me a great deal. The first time was when she said to me: "If you were not too hungry and if it was not so late, by taking that road to the left and then turning to the right, in less than a quarter of an hour we should be at Guer-mantes." It was as though she had said to me: "Turn to the left, then bear right, and you will touch the intangible, you will reach the inaccessibly remote tracts of which one never knows anything on this earth except the direction, except" (what I thought long ago to be all that I could ever know of Guer-mantes, and perhaps in a sense I had not been mistaken) "the 'way.'" One of my other surprises was that of seeing the "source of the Vivonne," which I imagined as something as extra-terrestrial as the Gates of Hell, and which was merely a sort of rectangular basin in which bubbles rose to the surface. And the third occasion was when Gilberte said to me: "If you like, we might after all go out one afternoon and then we can go to Guermentes, taking the road by Méséglise, which is the nicest way," a sentence which upset all the ideas of my childhood by informing me that the two "ways" were not as irreconcilable as I had supposed. But what struck me most forcibly was how little, during this stay, I relived my childhood years, how little I desired to see Combray, how narrow and ugly I thought the Vivonne. But where Gilberte corroborated some of my childhood imaginings along the Méséglise way was during one of those walks which were more or less nocturnal even though they occurred before dinner—for she dined so late. Before descending into the mystery of a deep and flawless valley carpeted with moonlight, we stopped for a moment like two insects about to plunge into the blue calyx of a flower. Gilberte then uttered, perhaps simply out of the politeness of a hostess who is sorry you are going away so soon and would have liked to show you more of a countryside which you seem

to appreciate, an avowal of the sort in which her practice as a woman of the world skilled in putting to the best advantage silence, simplicity, sobriety in the expression of her feelings, makes you believe that you occupy a place in her life which no one else could fill. Opening my heart to her suddenly with a tenderness born of the exquisite air, the fragrant evening breeze, I said to her: "You were speaking the other day of the little footpath. How I loved you then!" She replied: "Why didn't you tell me? I had no idea. I loved you too. In fact I flung myself twice at your head." "When?" "The first time at Tansonville. You were going for a walk with your family, and I was on my way home, I'd never seen such a pretty little boy. I was in the habit," she went on with a vaguely bashful air, "of going to play with little boys I knew in the ruins of the keep of Roussainville. And you will tell me that I was a very naughty girl, for there were girls and boys there of all sorts who took advantage of the darkness. The altar-boy from Combray church, Théodore, who, I must admit, was very nice indeed (goodness, how handsome he was!) and who has become quite ugly (he's the chemist now at Méséglise), used to amuse himself with all the peasant girls of the district. As I was allowed to go out by myself, whenever I was able to get away, I used to rush over there. I can't tell you how I longed for you to come there too; I remember quite well that, as I had only a moment in which to make you understand what I wanted, at the risk of being seen by your people and mine, I signalled to you so vulgarly that I'm ashamed of it to this day. But you stared at me so crossly that I saw that you didn't want to."

And suddenly I thought to myself that the true Gilberte, the true Albertine, were perhaps those who had at the first moment yielded themselves with their eyes, one through the hedge of pink hawthorn, the other on the beach. And it was I who, having been incapable of understanding this, having failed to recapture the impression until much later in my

memory after an interval in which, as a result of my conversation, a dividing hedge of sentiment had made them afraid to be as frank as in the first moments, had ruined everything by my clumsiness. I had "botched it" more completely than had Saint-Loup with Rachel—although in fact the relative failure with them was less absurd—and for the same reasons.

"And the second time," Gilberte went on, "was years later when I passed you in the doorway of your house, the day before I met you again at my aunt Oriane's. I didn't recognise you at first, or rather I did unconsciously recognise you because I felt the same attraction as I had felt at Tansonville."

"But in the meantime there'd been, after all, the Champs-Élysées."

"Yes, but there you were too fond of me. I felt you were prying into everything I did."

I did not think to ask her who the young man was with whom she had been walking along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées on the day when I had set out to call on her again, when I might have been reconciled with her while there was still time, that day which would perhaps have changed the whole course of my life, if I had not caught sight of those two shadowy figures strolling side by side in the dusk. If I had asked her, she would perhaps have confessed the truth, as would Albertine had she been restored to life. And indeed when we meet again after many years women whom we no longer love, is there not the abyss of death between them and us, quite as much as if they were no longer of this world, since the fact that our love exists no longer makes the people that they were or the person that we were then as good as dead? Perhaps, too, she might not have remembered, or she might have lied. In any case I was no longer interested to know, since my heart had changed even more than Gilberte's face. This face gave me little pleasure, but above all I was no longer unhappy, and I should have been incapable of conceiving, had I thought about it again, that I could have been so unhappy

at the sight of Gilberte tripping along by the side of a young man that I had said to myself: "It's all over, I shall never attempt to see her again." Of the state of mind which, in that far-off year, had been tantamount to a long-drawn-out torture for me, nothing survived. For in this world of ours where everything withers, everything perishes, there is a thing that decays, that crumbles into dust even more completely, leaving behind still fewer traces of itself, than beauty: namely grief.

And so I am not surprised that I did not ask her then with whom she had been walking in the Champs-Élysées, for I had already seen too many examples of the incuriosity that is brought about by Time, but I am a little surprised that I did not tell her that before I saw her that evening I had sold a Chinese porcelain bowl in order to buy her flowers. It had indeed, during the gloomy period that followed, been my sole consolation to think that one day I should be able with impunity to tell her of so tender an intention. More than a year later, if I saw another carriage about to crash into mine, my sole reason for wishing not to die was that I might be able to tell this to Gilberte. I consoled myself with the thought: "There's no hurry, I have a whole lifetime in which to tell her." And for this reason I was anxious not to lose my life. Now it would have seemed to me an unseemly, almost ridiculous thing to say, and a thing that would "involve consequences."

I did not ask then with whom she had been walking that evening. (I asked her later. It was Léa dressed as a man. Gilberte was aware that she knew Albertine, but could tell me nothing more. Thus it is that certain persons always reappear in one's life to herald one's pleasures or one's griefs.) What reality there had been beneath the appearance on that occasion had become quite immaterial to me. And yet for how many days and nights had I not tormented myself with wondering who it had been, had I not been obliged, even more perhaps than in the effort not to go downstairs to say good-night to

Mamma in this very Combray, to control the beating of my heart! It is said, and this is what accounts for the gradual disappearance of certain nervous affections, that our nervous system grows old. This is true not merely of our permanent self, which continues throughout the whole duration of our life, but of all our successive selves which, after all, to a certain extent compose it.

"Moreover," Gilberte went on, "even on the day when I passed you in the doorway, you were still just the same as at Combray; if you only knew how little you'd changed!"

I pictured Gilberte again in my memory. I could have drawn the rectangle of light which the sun cast through the hawthorns, the spade which the little girl was holding in her hand, the slow gaze that she fastened on me. Only I had supposed, because of the coarse gesture that accompanied it, that it was a contemptuous gaze because what I longed for it to mean seemed to me to be a thing that little girls did not know about and did only in my imagination, during my hours of solitary desire. Still less could I have supposed that so casually, so rapidly, almost under the eyes of my grandfather, one of them would have had the audacity to suggest it.

And so I was obliged, after an interval of so many years, to touch up a picture which I recalled so well—an operation which made me quite happy by showing me that the impassable gulf which I had then supposed to exist between myself and a certain type of little girl with golden hair was as imaginary as Pascal's gulf, and which I thought poetic because of the long sequence of years at the end of which I was called upon to perform it. I felt a stab of desire and regret when I thought of the dungeons of Roussainville. And yet I was glad to be able to tell myself that the pleasure towards which I used to strain every nerve in those days, and which nothing could restore to me now, had indeed existed elsewhere than in my mind, in fact so close at hand, in that Roussainville of which I used to speak so often, and which I could see from the

window of the orris-scented closet. And I had known nothing! In short, the image of Gilberte summed up everything that I had desired during my walks to the point of being unable to make up my mind to return home, seeming to see the tree-trunks part asunder and take human form. What I had so feverishly longed for then she had been ready, if only I had been able to understand and to meet her again, to let me taste in my boyhood. More completely even than I had supposed, Gilberte had been in those days truly part of the Méséglise way.

And even on the day when I had passed her in a doorway, although she was not Mlle de l'Orgeville, the girl whom Robert had met in houses of assignation (and what an absurd coincidence that it should have been to her future husband that I had applied for information about her), I had not been altogether mistaken as to the meaning of her glance, nor as to the sort of woman that she was and confessed to me now that she had been. "All that is a long time ago," she said to me, "I've never given a thought to anyone but Robert since the day of our engagement. And even so, you see, it's not those childish whims that I feel most guilty about."¹

All day long, in that slightly too countrified house which seemed no more than a place for a rest between walks or during a sudden downpour, one of those houses in which all the sitting-rooms look like arbours and, on the wall-paper in the bedrooms, here the roses from the garden, there the birds from the trees outside join you and keep you company, isolated from the world—for it was old wall-paper on which every rose was so distinct that, had it been alive, you could have picked it, every bird you could have put in a cage and tamed, quite different from those grandiose bedroom decorations of today where, on a silver background, all the apple-trees of Normandy display their outlines in the Japanese style to hallucinate the hours you spend in bed—all day long I

remained in my room which looked over the fine greenery of the park and the lilacs at the entrance, over the green leaves of the tall trees by the edge of the lake, sparkling in the sun, and the forest of Méséglise. Yet I looked at all this with pleasure only because I said to myself: "How nice to be able to see so much greenery from my bedroom window," until the moment when, in the vast verdant picture, I recognised, painted in a contrasting dark blue simply because it was further away, the steeple of Combray church. Not a representation of the steeple, but the steeple itself, which, putting in visible form a distance of miles and of years, had come, intruding its discordant tone into the midst of the luminous verdure—a tone so colourless that it seemed little more than a preliminary sketch—and engraved itself upon my window-pane. And if I left my room for a moment, I saw at the end of the corridor, in a little sitting-room which faced in another direction, what seemed to be a band of scarlet—for this room was hung with a plain silk, but a red one, ready to burst into flames if a ray of sun fell upon it.

The love of Albertine had disappeared from my memory. But it seems that there exists too an involuntary memory of the limbs, a pale and sterile imitation of the other but longer-lived, just as there are animals or vegetables without intelligence which are longer-lived than man. Our legs and our arms are full of torpid memories. And once, when I had said good-night to Gilberte rather early, I woke up in the middle of the night in my room at Tansonville and, still half-asleep, called out: "Albertine!" It was not that I had thought of her or dreamt of her, nor that I was confusing her with Gilberte, but a memory in my arm, opening like a flower, had made me fumble behind my back for the bell, as though I had been in my bedroom in Paris. And not finding it, I had called out: "Albertine!", thinking that my dead mistress was lying by my side, as she had often done in the evening, and that we were both dropping off to sleep, and reckoning, as I woke up, that,

because of the time it would take Françoise to reach my room, Albertine might without imprudence pull the bell which I could not find.

During our walks Gilberte intimated to me that Robert was turning away from her, but only in order to run after other women. And it is true that many women encumbered his life, yet always these associations, like certain masculine friendships in the lives of men who love women, had that quality of ineffectual resistance, of purposelessly filling an empty space that often in a house may be seen in objects which are not there to be used.

He came several times to Tansonville while I was there and I found him very different from the man I had known. His life had not coarsened him or slowed him down, as had happened with M. de Charlus; on the contrary, working in him an inverse change, it had given him, in a degree in which he had never had it before—and this although he had resigned his commission on his marriage—the grace and ease of a cavalry officer. Gradually, just as M. de Charlus had grown heavier, Robert (it is true that he was very much younger, but one felt that with age he would only get nearer and nearer to this ideal), had, like those women who resolutely sacrifice their faces to their figures and after a certain moment never stir from Marienbad (they realise that they cannot preserve more than one kind of youth and think that a youthful figure will serve best to represent youth in general), become slimmer and taken to moving more rapidly, a contrary effect of an identical vice. This swiftness of movement had, moreover, various psychological causes, the fear of being seen, the wish to conceal that fear, the feverishness which is generated by self-dissatisfaction and boredom. He was in the habit of visiting certain low haunts into which, as he did not wish to be seen going in or coming out, he would hurl himself in such a way as to present the smallest possible target to the unfriendly glances of possible passers-by, like a soldier going into an

attack.² And this manner of moving like a gust of wind had become a habit. Perhaps also it symbolised the superficial intrepidity of a man who wants to show that he is not afraid and does not want to give himself time to think. We must mention too, if our account is to be complete, a desire, the older he grew, to appear young, and also the impatience characteristic of those perpetually bored and perpetually cynical men that people inevitably turn into when they are too intelligent for the relatively idle lives they lead, in which their faculties do not have full play. No doubt idleness, in these men as in others, may express itself in inertia. But in these days especially, when physical exercise is so much in favour, there exists also, even outside the actual hours of sport, an athletic form of idleness which finds expression not in inertia but in a feverish vivacity that hopes to leave boredom neither time nor space to develop in.

Becoming—at any rate during this tiresome phase—much harder in his manner, towards his friends, towards for example myself, he now exhibited scarcely any trace of sensibility. Towards Gilberte on the other hand he behaved with an affectation of sentiment carried to the point of theatricality, which was most disagreeable. Not that he was in fact indifferent to her. No, he loved her. But he lied to her all the time and his untruthfulness, if not the actual purpose of his lies, was invariably detected; and then he thought that the only way to extricate himself was to exaggerate to a ridiculous degree the genuine distress which he felt at having hurt her. He would arrive at Tansonville, obliged, he said, to leave again the next morning because of some business with a certain neighbouring landowner who was supposed to be waiting for him in Paris; but the neighbour, when they happened to meet him near Combray the same evening, would unintentionally expose the lie, of which Robert had neglected to inform him, by saying that he had come to the country for a month's rest and would not be going back to Paris during his stay. Robert would blush,