



# DO YOU REMEMBER ME ?

A Tale of Love,  
Friendship  
and Betrayal



Pierre Delerive

# Do You Remember Me?

*Pierre Delerive*



Eloquent Books

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*To Toni, my wife and best friend.*



# Chapter One

“DO YOU remember me?”

More than sixty years have passed – it’s a new century, one that I never expected to see – but Bertrand’s voice is unchanged. It is baritone deep with fearsome power beneath the courteous tone that can still obliterate a dissenter at the merest provocation.

“Have you become mute?” he insists. “Do you know who I am?”

“Of course I do.”

We were twenty-two then, survivors, but hell had made us unrecognizable. We were skeletons covered in grayish, sickly skin. A fire burned deep in our eye sockets, a flame that refused to die, like life’s stubborn pilot light and it made people nervous; they hadn’t expected to ever see us again. A few months of rest, care and good food would thicken our blood and wrap our bones in brand new flesh. We wanted to believe. We had escaped death after all.

“You don’t sound too happy to hear me.”

“No, no. I mean yes, don’t be stupid. It’s only that ...”

How could I explain? His voice is like a powerful light aimed at a landscape long buried in the darkness of the past. At times I was actually able to convince myself that none of it ever happened.

Life played a trick on me: it gave me my youth back and then took it away again second by second, minute by minute. Painlessly this time but also without recourse. Each passing day quietly succeeded where my torturers failed and I am again nearing the end. But there’s no room for hope now. This death sentence cannot be appealed and I’m not sure I’m sorry about it.

And what about Bertrand? It didn't take him long to regain his good looks after the war; beautiful women soon swooned over him again I'm sure. And now time must have inflicted damage on him too. His hair, if he still has it, must be white, and he undoubtedly shows the dreadful marks of old age: the knots of blue veins, the liver spots, the deep creases in what once was a handsome face. His skin is surely wrinkled, his flesh sagging, his body slowly falling apart like the one I hate to confront in the bathroom mirror. Only his voice has survived the humiliating debacle. It has remained unchanged after six decades. It is the voice of the young man who no longer is.

"When can we get together?" he asks.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? What sort of question is that? To talk, to catch up. To make up for lost time. So, what do you say?"

"I ... I don't know. Where are you?"

"In town. I just arrived. Say, your place tonight?"

Nothing has changed. He didn't really ask me. Even when he was acting the true democrat pretending to solicit opinions, Bertrand always imposed his will.

I hesitate: "For dinner? It's just that ... I'd have to go out and shop. There's not much in the fridge."

"Don't bother. Let's say nine o'clock."

"You have my address?"

His laughter too is unchanged, less exuberant perhaps, but still arrogant and superior. That's how I always felt it anyway, even when we were just kids aiming our slingshots at crows and magpies.

"My little Louis! If I could find your phone number, I should be able to find your home, don't you think? Besides, Chartres is not the Amazon. See you at nine."

Rain is pelting on the windowpanes. I shiver in my old, frayed purple robe. I drag my feet to the kitchen, pour a cup of decaf and sink into the deep, fat, old leather armchair. "To talk, to catch up," he said. I don't believe him for one second. I suddenly feel a heavy weight on my shoulders and the past makes me nauseous. Sixty-four ago, we returned to France. We had survived Buchenwald, Laura and Ebensee.

## Chapter Two

I CANNOT remember a time when Bertrand wasn't part of my life. Born five weeks apart, we took our first steps together and those early months forged a bond between our families in spite of the disparity in their social status. East of the water tower, my parents owned the riding school pompously called "equestrian center". To the west, the Lestiennes lived in the village château. With two homes – their main residence being in Paris – and two art galleries, they were seen as the local nobility. My father, by nature stingy with compliments, had nothing but praise when it came to René and Jeanne Lestienne. "They're no snobs," he would often say, adding: "And certainly they could afford to be." Indeed, the Lestiennes made me feel like a member of their family; there was always a place for me at their dinner table and I spent many a night on a cot in Bertrand's room.

I glance at the small travel clock on the table next to the unfinished crossword puzzle. It's almost eleven and I still haven't shaved. That phone call has brought time to a stop.

*Are you happy to see Bertrand after all these years?*

*No. Not really. He lied to me. "To talk, to catch up." Yeah, right!*

*Maybe he means it. Besides what's wrong with catching up?*

*I'd rather be left alone.*

*But he was your buddy. Your best friend, even though you haven't seen him in some sixty years.*

*Sixty-four. The rue Lacharrière and the funerals don't count.*

*Maybe so, but you used to call him your brother.*

There's a charcoal drawing above the fishbowl where Un, Deux and Trois swim lazily. It represents the family house with the stables in the back. I took it out of a box and framed it after

Suzanne left me. Distaught to have been so badly misunderstood, convicted even with no extenuating circumstances, I had felt the need to get close to a simpler past. To think that I had naively expected my wife to throw herself at my knees after hearing my secret!

The sketch is clumsy – I had just turned twelve – but it brings back memories so old that I find it difficult to believe they really happened. Strangely, I find it more vivid than the black and white photographs I keep in shoeboxes. Bertrand’s father had given me the sketchbook, the pencils, and charcoal. “You have a gift, Louis,” he had said. “With work it might well turn into real talent.” I didn’t heed his advice though, for Bertrand, my best friend, my idol, my almost brother, was at the time delivering closing arguments in front of imaginary tribunals. Thus, I could only picture myself in a black robe, a famous trial attorney. Had I listened to René Lestienne, kept at it, and tried for the *École des Beaux Arts*, my life might have taken a different turn.

I cringe and groan – my lower back, the burning knots in my neck and shoulders, the ankle that’s not getting any better – as I get up to straighten the frame. The glass-covered paper has acquired a deep ochre patina over the years and the lines have become less sharp – then again it might be my eyesight – but it’s still the most accurate picture I’ve kept of my childhood. In the background are the two oak trees that served as goal posts and, on the right, across the highway, Madame Madeleine’s house, a charmless, nondescript whitewashed affair. One window on the second floor is covered with cardboard; the pane hasn’t been replaced yet. I drew that sketch the day after the incident and recorded every detail.

I see my reflection in the glass. It’s kind of strange, this old, wrinkled face superposed over an image rescued from my childhood.

*The good old days!*

*Yeah, right! Papa who kept whipping my ass. Shoveling horse shit, cleaning up the stalls, being yelled at, that was lots of fun! And Maman drinking like there was no tomorrow.*

*Maybe so, but you had your life ahead of you then.*

*To tell you the truth, I’m quite happy that it’s behind me now. It hasn’t been a walk in the park.*

Memory works in odd ways. I forget names heard only minutes before, I'm not sure I took my medicine when I woke up, but I remember every tiny detail of that hot day of early July 1934. The destruction of Madame Madeleine's bedroom window brought an end to a slingshot contest between Bertrand and me. One of my pebbles had missed a crow by a good foot and sailed across the road.

My old man dragged us both by our ears and made us apologize. Then the sentence came down: ten whacks with the riding crop for the culprit. "Step forward," he said, "and let's get it over with."

My father's anger robbed me of my voice that day. I knew first hand how hard his crop could come down. His outbursts were legendary and his thunderous voice made grown men shake. When his bad knee acted up, my older brother Roland and I knew to expect the worst. Sometimes he went after our mother and we covered our ears to avoid hearing her beg: "Don't be mad at me, Maurice. Don't scream. You frighten me." These episodes were the well-kept secret of the Laisnais family.

My father cracked his crop on his boots. "If the culprit doesn't come forward, I'll punish you both," he threatened, and I was shocked to see Bertrand take a step forward, bow his head and say: "It's me, Monsieur Maurice. I'm sorry. And I apologize, Madame Madeleine. It won't happen again." Then he walked toward the barn for his punishment.

I reminded Bertrand of the incident several years later, but his recollection wasn't as sharp as mine. "You should ask my ass," he said. "It had the best seat in the house. Pardon the pun."

"But you can't possibly have forgotten," I insisted. "Don't you remember how you took the fall for me? I was so scared. My father had threatened to whip us both."

Bertrand laughed. "Then it makes sense. Since you weren't talking, he was going to let me have it anyway, so I had nothing to lose."

Once again, on that day, I admired and hated my friend.



It's been a long, long time since I've thought about my parents. Only the worst memories surface when I revisit my childhood, so why bother? It's probably unfair but I can't control my memory. For example, I cannot erase the image of my father, shotgun in hand, shoving me away as I was attempting to protect Nestor. The red-hot rage in his eyes!

I had just turned thirteen. Nestor was a dog of uncertain breed – I should say breeds – I had found, starving, on the highway and adopted two years before. He'd wait for my return from school and run to meet my bicycle, wildly wagging his tail and moaning with joy. As soon as I dismounted, he'd jump in my arms and furiously lick my face. He'd sit next to me during dinner, patiently waiting for morsels of meat, and always slept at the foot of my bed. Mornings, he'd run behind the bicycle and wait for me to disappear at the curve before sadly returning home.

One Sunday morning, I ignored my father's orders and left Nestor unleashed during a riding lesson. Impeccably ramrod straight in the saddle, my father, a former noncommissioned officer in the Spahis, the elite cavalry regiment, trotted on Alaric while barking orders at his young students: "Volte! Half-volte! Figure eight! Slow canter!"

I was sitting on the fence, my eyes on a girl whose blond hair fell like a golden veil to her shoulders. Her name was Rose, she was at least eighteen, and when she acknowledged my adoring presence with a nod of her pretty head, she didn't know that my heart stopped.

Suddenly, for the first time ever, and for some mysterious reason, Nestor crept under the fence and started running after one horse and then another, barking away and having the time of his life. The horses went berserk. I was petrified. My father shouted orders, the horses reared and kicked furiously, the poor students desperately held on to fistfuls of manes. In the center of all this madness, Nestor kept barking, ignoring my pleas, going for one horse after another. Leaning over the neck of Alaric in the posture of a polo player, my father tried to scare Nestor away with wide sweeps of his crop, but the dog then turned against Alaric. When his horse reared and, in the same move, jumped wildly to the left, my father was taken by surprise and bit the dust. He lost more than face that day, however; as Alaric was trying to kick Nestor,

he stepped on his master's knee and crushed it. An ambulance was called.

I can still see my father coming home from the Hôpital Saint-Sauveur several days later. Without a word for my mother, Roland or me, he entered our home as quickly as his knee allowed. He was walking with a cane and limping badly, but there was rage, not pain in his eyes. "What's the matter, Papa?" I asked. My mother shrugged her shoulders. "Go to your room, Louis," she said. "It's better for you. Go now, I'm telling you. Do as I say. Now!"

I didn't have time to obey. Already my father was coming out of his bedroom, limping and sweating profusely, while sliding two red cartridges into his shotgun. I finally understood when he headed for the lean-to where Nestor was hiding behind my bicycle. The dog's instinct had warned him. I still see him, lying flat on the ground, desperately trying to disappear into the ground, moaning softly as if begging for his life.

I rushed to stop my father and stood between him and Nestor. "No Papa, please don't do this. Please Papa, please!" I implored, but he shoved me aside and sent me crashing against the wall. There was a shot, then another. Nestor's jerking movements were just reflexes because his head was just a bloody mess. I remained there until night fell, holding the dead dog in my arms, stroking his blood-sticky fur.

My mother called me to the dinner table. "Go and have a look in the mirror," she ordered, as my face was smeared with tears, dust and blood. But I couldn't eat. I buried Nestor at the end of the vegetable patch instead.

A question woke me up in the middle of the night, a question I asked my mother in the morning as she was boiling milk for breakfast: "Say Maman, why did you tell me to go to my room before Papa shot Nestor?"

She shook her head: "What's done is done. No point in talking about it."

"You knew Maman. You did, didn't you?"

"What difference does it make?"

"I want to know. You knew he was going to do it, didn't you?"

"Your father had made up his mind in the hospital. You saw how he was when he came back."

“Why didn’t you warn me, Maman? I would have hidden Nestor and talked Papa out of it.”

She didn’t respond. As she was pouring milk into our bowls, I insisted: “Why didn’t you warn me, Maman? You knew how much I loved Nestor.”

She then gave me my first lesson in reality: “And he would have turned his anger at me. Thank you very much!”

That was the day I lost my innocence. I never forgot my mother’s treason.



For many years, Bertrand was like a powerful beam of light in my life, blinding at times, leaving me incapable of movement like some wild animal paralyzed at night in the middle of the highway. Even during our years of mischief, as our efforts focused on escaping the ire of Gilles, the local town crier cum law enforcer, a terror-inspiring bear of a man whose forehead had been smashed in by a shell in a Verdun trench during World War I, there was never any doubt: Bertrand was the leader and I his devoted lieutenant.

The Lestiennes shared their time between Paris – an apartment on the rue Rosa Bonheur in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement and an art gallery on the boulevard Haussman – and the château, Le Vernet, which René’s father had bought in 1922. Later he opened what the family called the “summer gallery” in neighboring Vichy. The wealthy spa clientele made for good business.

My thoughts go back to the winter of 1934 - or 1935 possibly, I’m not sure. Christmas was a few days away and the crèche was at the center of the traditional Nativity display opposite the church in the town square. The Magi, the Holy Family, the animals were all in place, foot-high statues of pastel-colored plaster under a dark blue sky spangled with paper stars. Families came to pay their respects and children put money in the big collection box. Bertrand was in town for the holidays and we were looking for some excitement.

I forgot whose idea it was to kidnap Baby Jesus but I remember how uneventfully it went one moonless night. The following morning, however, the commotion in town was

considerable. Like all my comrades at the Maréchal Foch High School, I was submitted to some tough questioning. Bertrand wasn't even called; how could a Lestienne be suspected? Eager to save face, the mayor blamed hooligans from a neighboring village.

We had planned to return Baby Jesus to his worshippers during the night of December 23, but the square was now under heavy surveillance and some creative strategic thinking was required. As it happened, I had worked two summers before at the Jalabert Patisserie and knew how to enter the store through the garage backdoor.

At three in the morning the village was asleep and deserted. Carrying our hostage in a backpack, we slipped into the patisserie where we filled our pockets with pralines. A large, elaborately engraved crystal bowl with a silver rim, filled with rum punch sat in the center of the window. We helped ourselves to several cups and made ourselves sick with laughter. Then we sat Baby Jesus in the bowl. With his behind in rum-punch, his plump rosy legs over the rim of the bowl, you would have thought God's child was taking a hip bath. His smile was one of deep satisfaction.

The discovery of Baby Jesus in the morning caused an even greater uproar than His disappearance and the investigation was once again opened. Unfortunately, Madame Jalabert, who said that she always thought I was up to no good, suspected me and I ended up confessing my crime. There was more: footprints in the snow behind the garage clearly showed that I had an accomplice and I was ordered to name him. The mayor was a master at alternating promises of pardon with threats of the most terrible punishments. While awaiting sentencing – "Jail, my boy, jail for at least five years, maybe ten!" – I was locked in a closet next to the mayor's office where I spent hours sobbing silently.

My salvation came from Father Mathieu. Moments before the midnight Mass, the priest pardoned me in the name of our Savior and the mayor had no choice but to go along. My father, though, wasn't as magnanimous and gave me the worst whipping I had ever received. He also sent back the new bicycle I had been promised for Christmas.

Several days later, as Bertrand and I were sharing the stolen pralines in an empty stall in the stables, I asked: "Weren't you

afraid I would rat on you?"

"Not at all. I know you," he replied without hesitation and I can still feel the pride that swelled my heart.

*He thought he knew you.*

*Words. They were just words. We had no way of seeing the future then.*

*You knew all there is to know; there's right and there's wrong.*

*No! Life is more complicated than that. We had no idea.*



Bertrand. With his head too big for his torso, his bushy eyebrows, his jutting chin, he certainly wasn't a pretty boy, not even really handsome in the conventional sense of the word. He had such charisma, however, and exuded such interior strength that anyone, boy or girl, man or woman, could only fall for him. When he smiled and his dark eyes lit up, everyone around him, grown-ups and children alike, seemed happier. His teachers forgave his insubordination and praised his independence of spirit. Bertrand himself summed up the situation one day: "Let's face it, life isn't fair. We might as well get used to it." Easy to say when you are one of the fortunate ones.

Like so many of his traits, Bertrand's body was misleading: Massive to the point of looking heavy when he was idle, it became light and elusive as soon as he set himself in motion. One of our supervisors at the Chantiers de la Jeunesse, the new regime's paramilitary camps, got the wrong idea when we checked in and sent Bertrand to the shot put team where he excelled of course. When one of the runners of the 4x100 meters relay twisted his ankle and Bertrand volunteered to replace him, however, the camp record was broken.

Curious about everything as long as it wasn't part of the school curriculum, Bertrand had a phenomenal capacity to absorb knowledge, whether it was painting – a permanent topic at the Lestiennes – sports or politics. When what was then called "the events" took center stage in 1938, Bertrand infused the discussions with his youthful energy. It was remarkable to see how visitors, mostly adults and sometimes the elderly included him in their conversation. Often they would glance briefly in his direction to

ensure they had this teenager's attention and, yes, support.

As far back as my memory registered, the two most important dates of any year had been May 1<sup>st</sup>, when Bertrand and his tutor arrived from Paris and September 1<sup>st</sup>, when we said goodbye. The Lestiennes would then go back to Paris where Bertrand attended the Lycée Buffon. I was therefore ecstatic when in 1939 the Lestiennes decided to close the Paris gallery and make Le Vernet their permanent residence for the duration of what was then called "la drôle de guerre" – "the phony war" – I was overwhelmed by joy: Bertrand and I would no longer be separated. I didn't know how true this prediction would turn out to be.

Five years later in Buchenwald, with no strength left as we were all waiting for death, hoping for a quick end after having feared it, our famished bodies covered with wounds and sores, long deaf to insults or threats, incapable of hope, I sometimes went over the memories of those strange years, revisiting what I called the crossroads of my young life, wondering when and how I could have escaped such a dreadful fate. "You're wasting your energy," Bertrand then observed. Consumed with the determination to live, he was contemptuous of my musings.

*Even there he had to talk you down.*

The sorrows of the past had seemed so insignificant as I lay shivering between the two skeletons with whom I shared a bunk and contemplated death: the jealousy I had felt for my older brother Roland – the only son my parents had wanted, as I was often reminded – my father's violence, my mother's indifference, Sylvie, the vet's daughter, who had broken my heart. To think that I had thought myself unhappy then!

At the Lestiennes' in 1939 art was no longer discussed. All the talk was about the "situation", the exodus, Hitler, the refugees, the occupation, the free zone, the future. The mood was somber. It was at their table that I discovered the "Jewish problem." Never before had I met Jews, or, if I had I hadn't been aware of it. The notion of a difference hadn't been part of my education with the exception of occasional remarks by my father, insulting certainly, but too indefinite to trigger a reflection. And now, suddenly, the Jews formed a group with a vague identity, a group to which I was grateful not to belong, for the threat hanging over their lives seemed quite terrible. And when I understood one night that the

guests at the Lestiennes' dinner table were Jews, I observed them with fascination, trying to guess what horrible crime this old man and woman with the soft voices and sadness in their eyes could possibly have committed for such a fate to be awaiting them.

The Satzes, Claude and Yvonne, stayed only a week in Le Vernet, waiting for a message; then, when it arrived, they left for Sète where a ship was to take them to Oran. But the hours spent listening to them had disturbed me. I had failed to make a connection between my father's pronouncements, the slurs muttered at the Pathé-Marconi radio set and this elderly couple.

"Do you know any Jews, Papa?" I asked the morning after the Satzes had left. I was troubled by something Jeanne Lestienne had said as she waved goodbye to the black Citroën speeding down the highway: "I'm afraid we'll never see them again," she had sighed.

My father spat out his half-smoked Balto. "Yids. No fucking way."

"Why? What have they done that's so terrible?"

"Hard to know," he said, "and that's precisely the point, but when something bad happens, you can be sure they're not far away. And they're profiting. They're everywhere, believe me."



The telephone startles me. Maître Bezard's stentorian voice shakes me out of a torpor. "I was afraid I might miss you," he says, "that you might already be on your way out."

"Damn! I forgot with all this —"

"Forgot! In fifteen minutes your wife and her lawyer will be in my office. I was calling to invite you to lunch afterwards. What's the matter? What's happening?"

I sigh. "It's too complicated to explain over the phone. I ... I can't make it."

Bezard is not happy. "And what am I supposed to say to these people?"

"That I'm sorry. That something came up. Reschedule."

"That's not what I mean. They want an answer. It's not as if you didn't have enough time to think about it."

"I know." I remain silent for a moment, then: "But why does she want a divorce for Christ's sake? Don't tell me she wants to marry again. Not at her age."

"Her motives are none of our business. After so many years of separation, she'll get her divorce whether you agree to it or not. We were supposed to reach an understanding today to avoid going to court. So, what should I say?"

"I don't want a divorce."

I can imagine Bezard standing at the window of his big office facing the magnificent cathedral that he probably doesn't even see anymore. He's upset, rolling his eyes, and slicing the air with the cord of his old-fashioned telephone. "You'll have to tell me one day what you did to her," he finally says.

"Me? I didn't do anything."

"All right. So why does she hate you so much?"

"What is she saying this time?"

"Nothing that I haven't heard before, but to want a divorce at eighty-six because she doesn't want to bear your name when she dies, that strikes me as pretty strong. She only wants her maiden name on her death certificate, Maître Cren told me yesterday. You know, you and I have known each other a long time and you still haven't come clean."

"I have nothing to say. She left sixteen years ago. Just like that. She just packed and left."

"No writing on the wall? No warning?"

"I'm telling you. I can see us like it was yesterday. We had gone to a wedding and were having a nightcap while watching the news on Channel 2. We talked a bit. All of a sudden, she got up, went to our bedroom to pack and called a taxi. The following week, she sent for the rest of her belongings. End of story."

"I know," Bezard says with a sigh. "You told me a hundred times, but I've got to tell you, seems to me a big piece is missing from your puzzle. You must have done something to her."

After hanging up, I stand for a moment at the window with my forehead against the cool pane, watching the rivulet of rain running down the gutter. Yes of course, I did something to Suzanne, I saved her life. Hers and her parents. And she never forgave me for that.

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