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THE COMPARTMENT

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The Compartment

(Fiction for the Valérie Belin exhibition)

First Station

No one is smoking in the compartment, which is full. The sign with the crossed-out cigarette makes it perfectly plain that smoking is forbidden.

The travellers keep absolutely quiet. They act as if they had never met or seen each other before. Perhaps their paths have crossed on some platform some day, but it seems unlikely. The only noise is an occasional restrained cough from the teenage boy with the text books on his knees. Just his cough. Nothing else.

For a moment, a sense of disquiet has broken the dense silence: the man with the glasses has taken a packet of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and raised one mechanically to his lips. And in that single moment, all the passengers in the train compartment, all except Marie, stirred impatiently in their seats. But not Marie. She didn't move.

Marie sits with her forehead leaning on the window. Her eyes, lost in the world outside, watch thousands of eucalyptuses as their vertical off-white trunks hurtle past unceasingly. She is unaffected by the fear the other passengers in her compartment share. She does, however, notice – as anyone would- something in the tense air: the attitude of the man in the glasses is making his neighbours nervous. The problem is the man in the glasses himself, not the cigarette he is holding between his lips. It is he who at any moment might contravene the clear order not to smoke, if he

eventually pulls out his lighter or matches and dares light the cigarette. All the indications are that at any moment, he's going to commit a crime, he's going to light the cigarette.

Marie sees it all reflected in the window pane. She sees the teenager as he coughs, grasping his books even tighter; as if seeking protection against the approaching dialectic storm. She also sees the reflection of the older woman who smells of some old-fashioned lavender perfume, and the man sitting beside her with his black briefcase between his legs. Each of them looks at the man with the glasses out of the corner of their eyes, unable to find anything that will make them less nervous. They look as if they don't belong in this place, where until just now they were travelling calmly along. They are planning what to say when the occasion arises: "There's no smoking here"; "What are you doing?"; "How dare you?"; "Well, honestly!"; and so forth.

The only passengers Marie can't see from this angle are the ones sitting immediately beside her: the man with the cigarette and a young woman who looks like a student, who's just removed the headphones from her *Walkman*. She can't see those two. To see them, she'd have to move her forehead back a few centimetres from the window pane, to widen her angle of vision. And she has no intention of doing so. She feels good like this, with her head leaning on the window, far-off, her gaze resting on the eucalyptuses as they rush past.

It feels good to feel the movements of the train transmitted directly by the vibrating glass to her head. Between the eucalyptus trees and her eyes, she sees the traces of other hands and other foreheads on the pane. Traces of sweat and breath from previous travellers. From other people leaning in the same place. Human grease.

These blurred brushstrokes on the surface of the glass improve her reflected view of the inside of the compartment. She can see everything more clearly. Opaqueness is more effective for reflecting things than transparency. She can even read – back to front, of course – the title of the first of the books the teenage is clutching on his knees: *esiaçnarf eriammarG*.

The other passengers' nervousness doesn't disturb Marie's private accounts. She is counting the number of koala bears grazing in the tops of the eucalyptus trees. So far, however; she has seen none. In the eighty kilometres of interminable forests that cover the entire view outside. Not a single koala bear.

They were talking about it the other day on the television. On a quiz show. They asked one of the contestants: What tree do koala bears basically feed off the leaves of? Before the regulatory twenty-five seconds were up, the contestant – a lanky boy from Lyon – answered without thinking much: bamboo. Yes, that was what he said: bamboo.

Then a horn was sounded, meaning that the answer was wrong, and she heard the sound effect of the audience over the loudspeakers: Ohhh. The presenter over-deliberately said: “The right answer is eucalyptus. I’m sorry, you’ve just lost half a million”.

And there was another disappointed “Ohhh” from the audience.

The contestant gave a slight smile and said: “I knew what the answer was, but I just got it wrong. I knew the answer was eucalyptus. It’s pandas that eat bamboo leaves, not koalas. I got it wrong. I got nervous”.

And that’s how Marie knows that koalas eat eucalyptus leaves.

If there were bamboo groves passing by out there instead of trees, she’d count pandas.

Second Station

Robert wonders how long he’s been like that. Forever. It was on Tuesday, two days ago, that he said he’d never do it again. He’d never light up another cigarette in his life. He said it so firmly, with so much conviction that his wife actually believed he was serious about it this time. I’m going to give it up once and for all, he said.

The joke’s over: Mark Twain said it was simple to give up smoking – he’d managed to do it seventy-eight times. The joke’s finally over. This time he’s serious. He said.

– Well I think that’s marvellous. It was about time. The doctor told you not to; the company told you not to; I asked you not to; I don’t know how many times your three daughters have asked you not to. You know it’s no good for you; you know it’s killing you; all your friends have given up already...

– Not Mathieu. He’s no intention of ever giving up. He always says: it’s one thing to die before my time, but quite another to die without smoking.

– Mathieu always was an idiot. You know that perfectly well.

– Mathieu’s my friend. You shouldn’t pick on him like that. Leave him alone.

– It serves him right: he’s a real asshole. Everyone knows.

– Maybe so, but he’s my friend, and do try not to ruin my day right at the beginning.

– Fair enough, but give it up once and for all. You know I managed to. It’s not that hard, you know. It’s just a question of making your mind up.

Robert knows he has to give up. Indeed, this time he really intends to stop. He is really going to give up. He hasn’t had a single cigarette for two days now. The problem is he can’t concentrate. He feels nervous, as if nothing could hold his attention. The situation is unbearable, all the more because it’s so petty. He’s not in any pain, he doesn’t feel sick; he’d thought the withdrawal symptoms were going to be much more difficult to bear. But it’s nothing serious, just a slight superficial nervousness, just a general feeling of instability. A slight nerviness which catches him off balance. Nothing else.

He mentally repeats to himself that he’s not saying goodbye to tobacco for ever. That would drive him mad. It would be like jumping off a cliff. He just tries to say no to the next cigarette. Which he never plans to smoke. That’s not so hard. It’s not a matter of saying no to all the tobacco in the world: he just has to refuse the next cigarette. He just has to be strong against one cigarette. Against the next one. Just that.

That shouldn’t be so hard for a man like him, accustomed as he is to performing difficult – even impossible – tasks. Take last week for example, when he managed to sell the entire batch of old diving suits to the Naval Museum. His boss said: “Congratulations, Robert. If you could sell those broken old diving suits, you can sell anything. You’re a skilful and purposeful man, no doubt about it. Now you should try to get rid of those three steamrollers we have lying round the warehouse. Maybe you could get them into the Transport Museum or something. You should use the same sales pitch as you used with the diving suits”.

But at this rate, Robert isn't going to be able to sell anything. The steamrollers will just have to wait. He doesn't feel capable of getting on the phone to anyone. Maybe when he gets over this sense of unease. They say the feeling begins to diminish after the tenth day. In the meantime, he just has to hang in there as best he can. Just as if he was submerged underwater.

Anyway, he could assuage the withdrawal symptoms if he just had a couple of drags. A couple of drags, and then he'd put the cigarette out. Then he wouldn't smoke any more. Just a couple of pulls would be enough. Just to get by and not be going crazy all the time.

On Tuesday, when he decided he wasn't going to smoke any more, he put a half-finished packet of cigarettes in his briefcase. There were about seven cigarettes left – maybe less. Perhaps half a dozen. He didn't count them. But there must be more than four, at least. He takes them with him just in case. In the briefcase he's holding between his legs. Beside his diary. Just the thought of going out without any cigarettes brings on something approaching vertigo. Even though he knows he's not going to take it up again, he put a few cigarettes in his briefcase, just in case of an emergency. He feels less helpless that way.

However, he forgot the silver lighter his wife gave him for Christmas. He doesn't have a light. That's why he's hoping the man with the glasses lights that cigarette for once and for all. He'll ask him for a light, and then he'll go out into the corridor or to the buffet car, where he can smoke in peace.

For just two drags, the last thing he wants is to get into trouble with the other passengers. The sign over the door of the compartment clearly says: No Smoking.

Third Station

She hasn't recognised me. She hasn't even looked at me. What should I do now? What should I say? I wouldn't dare to say anything to her with all these people here. I'd get really embarrassed. There's no way she wouldn't recognise me. It must be that she hasn't seen me yet.

She's got her head stuck to the window, like she was hypnotised or something. She hasn't moved the whole way either. She's like a statue that's toppled over and is just leaning there, held up by the windowpane. It's as if she was looking for something out there in the scenery, but it's all the same

on this route: just eucalyptuses and more eucalyptuses. But I bet she's thinking about something else.

I remember the first day in class: "Good morning", she said. "I'm your new history and geography teacher. My name is Marie Bayard, though I presume you'll all call me something else. There's nothing I can do to help it so you can call me whatever you like, just as long as I never get to hear it. As far as you're all concerned my name is Mademoiselle Bayard and nothing else, I'm warning you".

We were really taken aback at first. We thought she was going to be another tough nut. But then it turned out that she was just very serious. She's a good teacher, though to be honest, I've never really liked history and geography much.

Sometimes she's nicer than other times, and she cracks jokes. Those are the days she comes to class in a good mood: "I'll give a pass in history to any of you who can tell me right now the exact number of wives Napoleon had". Things like that.

Another time, she asked us what country we'd like to have been born in. I didn't know what to say, but when it came to my turn I said I'd like to have been born in Hawaii. It was the first thing that came into my head. "I bet that's because of the Hawaiian girls", she said. And I said no, it was because of the big waves they had there. "Oh, surfing's nice", she said and I went all red, because, of course I haven't a clue about surfing. I come from miles away from the sea.

I remember Belot said: "Abyssinia", and we all sat there wondering why the heck he'd picked on Abyssinia. Eventually, he explained: "Because I don't know where it is", he said. So Mademoiselle Bayard said that was a very poetic reason and very powerful one, and congratulated Belot on his choice.

But, what do I do now? Sooner or later she's going to realise I'm here. And anyway, with this uncontrollable cough, everyone in the compartment must have noticed me by now.

"Manuguet, I didn't see you there" – she'll say – "Why didn't you say hello?" What will I say then? I can't tell her I'm too embarrassed to say hello to her in public. But I can't pretend I didn't see her. She wouldn't believe me.

I could tell her she looked so wrapped up in the scenery I didn't want to disturb her. Yes, I'll say something like that. That's if I can get the words out, of course.

Right from the start she knew we weren't going to call her by her real name. Even before she knew our faces and our names. She's smart. She knows all the answers, but I bet she doesn't know what we all call her. Nobody would have dared tell her. I don't know who started calling her that: *la Baker*. Because of Josephine Baker, of course. The dancer.

Actually, Mademoiselle Bayard is really pretty. Of all the women teachers at the Lycée, she's the one I like best. I like the way she dresses, the way she leans on the table when she gives us history and geography. I like the way she speaks, her voice. When she dresses in a skirt, it's difficult to concentrate on what she's saying, but it's her eyes and her mouth that really distract me, not to mention other things.

I bet Eric and all the others imagine her dancing nude with fruit hanging from round her waist, like Josephine Baker. Sometimes I've imagined her like that. And other ways too, of course.

I hope I don't blush too much and she doesn't notice it when I tell her I didn't want to interrupt her thoughts. That's if I can find the words to say that to her, of course, because that's another question.

Fourth Station

Sometimes it frightens me to think what's in store for me. I look at that old woman smelling of lavender, and I imagine myself like that in a few years' time. I suppose that's what they call the future. This *walkman* is crap.

Mum always says: "You girls today think you know everything, but you didn't invent anything new. When I was your age, I was already hitched with your father. But the way you lot rush round, you're going to wind up on the shelf in the end. You'll be left all alone".

As if she weren't alone. As if Dad was still with her. Mum doesn't want to see it, she doesn't want to know what's going on. She just doesn't want to realise that men always leave you, even when they end up staying. She just doesn't want to see that.

How long is it since they stopped loving each other?

Take that woman. She's not that old. She must be about fifty-five. She's wearing a mauve dress she's bought in the sales. She's just had her hair done, but there can't be anything in her life. It's all over for her now. She's empty and only the dress and the smell of perfume manage to make something out of her. She has no other body apart from that dress. Without it, we wouldn't even see her. She wouldn't exist; she'd be a piece of wrinkled air hanging in space. A piece of someone who was something and who isn't anything and who never can be now. Something nobody would see. Something nobody would want to see. What do her feelings matter, if they don't affect anyone? It's like standing up and shouting somewhere where no one can hear you.

The only thing left of her children are her waist and her breasts. And maybe some obligatory visit at Christmas. As for her husband, better not to ask. Perhaps he's dead or dying. Perhaps she's sitting there right now planning how she's going to kill him.

What's she going to do? Where's she heading? Who'll be waiting for her?

Katia always says (and she's right) that all marriages are the same: a bit of passion at the start, then it's all habit and custom and then in the end, it's just a matter of just putting up with each other as best you can. If you're lucky.

You can't talk to blokes about anything like that. They just run away – like Xavier, like Jean-Pierre... They're all the same. They just go for the one thing and then wham, bam, thank you ma'am. They're such morons. But I can understand them. I think I'd do the same if I were them. We're the stupid ones. There's no escaping it.

Look at that other guy in the glasses. He's mad. The sign's quite plain: No Smoking. He's taken out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. He's looking for trouble. The moment he decides to light it, the other passengers will be down his throat. I couldn't give a toss though. The smoke doesn't bother me. I smoke too, but only when I go out for a drink or when I'm having coffee with a friend. Katya always says I'm not a real smoker, because if I was I'd smoke over a packet a day like her. She can't help it. Katya spends a fortune just on cigarettes. But then it's always the same story when it comes to paying for the coffee.

This week I'm on the night shift. That's crap too. I have to restock everything other people have bought during the day: sanitary pads, lemonade, mayonnaise... I really have a crap job. Though the other day the manager said he'd put me on the till whenever there was a vacancy. I hope it's true, though I don't trust that guy much. Katya says that's what he tells all the girls.

At least I'd be sitting down and I wouldn't get that aching back from lugging heavy weights around all day. This is no way to live. But, what can I do? Until something better turns up, I'd be better off as a cashier.

Katya says it's just as bad – cashier and shelf-packer are both shitty jobs. She says we should look for a job in a boutique in town. She says you can really make a killing there. We'll see.

Today's Thursday. Thank God, it'll be Saturday soon. I'm meeting Néstor. We should have a great time. Katya and Roman are coming along too. We're going to ride round town on motorbikes, though I told Katya I get scared. If we go to fast, I'll tell Néstor, and I'll get off.

Fifth station

The man in the glasses has taken out a lighter in the end. It's one of those ordinary lighters, one of those disposable ones. It's red. It doesn't go with the way he's dressed. From the way he looks, you'd think he'd have some other more expensive type of lighter. Gold or silver maybe; a classy design, at least.

Without letting go of the lighter for a second, the man in the glasses has very carefully adjusted his cinnamon-coloured tie, inside the collar of his shirt. He moved the knot into place. He executes every movement with perfect precision. It's as if he needed to plan every move in advance. Those amber cufflinks peeping out from under the sleeve of his jacket show how much he looks after his attire. If you look very carefully, you can little specks in the cufflinks: prehistoric insects trapped in the amber resin.

It's surprising to see someone dressed like that in the second-class carriage. From the look of him, you'd think he'd be travelling in first class or in the saloon car. He looks out of place with the other passengers, just as if he were dressed in a diving suit.

Let's go over this again – he thinks: three women on the train... three: one little birdy one who looks like a student; one old sardine who smells of God-knows-what perfume; and a queen looking out the window, staring out at the horizon. The little bird is for the cat; the sardine's for nobody; and the queen is for me.

She's fabulous, that black woman really is fabulous. She's awesome. She has a certain *je ne sais quoi* there, with her eyes staring out at the horizon. Her pure bright face looks like some ebony African mask. Like one of those ones André Breton had hanging on his wall.

I caught her a couple of times looking at me in the reflection in the window. She must have thought I wouldn't be wise to the trick. She's very wrong. She moves a few centimetres back from the glass to see my reflection. Maybe she's looking for trouble. I don't miss a trick. I may have glasses, but I've got good sight. My oculist always says: "With those glasses, you can see everything perfectly". And he's right, I see everything.

I've started the cigarette trick. I did it the other day on the bus. It works like a charm. I wait till the ticket inspector comes. The effect is just the same as if I'd loaded a double-barrelled shotgun in the compartment. I'd remove the shotgun from its case and then I'd take two green cartridges out of the belt, I'd open the shotgun, click, with that sound of perfection you get with good shotguns. Then, one by one, I'd load the cartridges, and shut the gun again. Click.

The other passengers would get nervous, of course. They'd look to see if the safety catch were on. A shot from a shotgun isn't the same as the smoke from a lit cigarette. But, why should I bother bringing a shotgun? I can get the same effect with a cigarette. The same confusion. It's much easier to carry a cigarette (and a lighter) around, than a shotgun and cartridges. So I just hope the inspector comes round and finds me with the cigarette in my mouth. With the lighter at the ready. I always carry a red one to make it more obvious.

He'll say: "Hey, what are you doing? Didn't you see the sign? You can't smoke here".

And I'll say: "Who's smoking? Why are you picking on me? Are you some sort of fool?' Just that.

What do I need a shotgun for? I hunt, and I collect fools. All I really need is a cigarette. Economy of resources is an indispensable condition for achieving a perfect action.

Sixth Station

Sometimes, when I'm surrounded by people I don't know, like now, I feel happy. Very happy: nobody notices me. That's what I really appreciate: having some time to myself, taking the train there and back again. Nothing else.

If I want, I can imagine there's someone waiting for me at the other end. He's waiting there impatiently, his eyes on the tracks, hoping to catch the vibration that heralds the arrival of the train carrying me there, long before he can actually hear it. I can imagine Monsieur Duprat waiting restively for me there on one of the benches on the platform, with his poodle tied up by his side.

I can imagine myself walking past him, walking on towards the way out, as if I hadn't seen him. And then he calls me, "Nathalie!", and I turn round: "Don't be so rash. Anyone might recognise us, Monsieur Duprat". And he'd do his best to hide his blushes: "We're grown up, Nathalie. You're a widow and I'm a bachelor. You know that. Remember that kiss in our youth. Remember that love, unlike any other I have ever known".

I know he's lying. I know it's just words. He doesn't remember. He could not remember.

And I won't say that I don't remember either. I won't say I don't remember that holm oak whose roots dug into my back at dusk, or the salt of the sweat on his moustache, the taste of which is still on my lips. I won't say I can't remember that moan and that spasm.

Later we'll have a *café au lait* or something at the station buffet. Perhaps he'll have a brandy. And he'll ask me to stop playing for once, this game of coming and going that's driving him mad. He'll ask me to give him a definite answer.

I'll say that maybe I'll give him an answer tomorrow, if he's prepared to keep waiting. A woman like me has a lot to lose, I'll say.

And he'll say that it's just the same as yesterday and the day before, that a man can't go on waiting indefinitely on the platform of a train station: he deserves some glimmer of hope.

I'll say I understand him perfectly. Then I'll take the train back to find myself lost among strangers like these ones in the compartment with me now. Another boy coughing like this one, another man hiding his secrets in a briefcase. Another man like this one with the cigarette who thinks he's making us all nervous, or other young people, like that girl with the tape recorder, who still don't know where to get off.

Despite how close they are, nobody sees me in the compartment, nobody feels me. Nobody's bothered by my happiness, because nobody suspects it. I am the invisible woman: I could get up and go to the lavatory and not come back. No one would miss me.

I know it can't be true, but through the window, I thought I saw an animal up in the top of one of the eucalyptus trees. It looked like a monkey or something.

The black girl who was leaning her head against the windowpane must have seen it too, because she looked at us all as if she were wondering whether we'd seen it too. Then she asked: "Did anyone else see a koala bear?"

Excited, she's changed her position, as if she'd finally found something she'd been looking for a long time. She wanted some confirmation of her vision, and I nodded my head and said I'd seen the animal too. Yes indeed: it was slow and brownish.

I'm glad she saw it too.

The other passengers didn't answer, though the gentleman with the briefcase smiled as if to say "Are you quite mad?" The boy who'd been coughing all the time went red when she turned away from the window to talk to the rest of us. Then he said: "Hello Mademoiselle Bayard. How are you?"

"Manuguet! I didn't recognise you – she said – Did you see a koala bear out the window?"

"No Mademoiselle Bayard, I didn't see it", answered the boy just before she turned back to look for confirmation in my eyes.

I just caught a fleeting glimpse: the animal was eating the greenest leaves, up in the branches of a eucalyptus tree, but I can't be one hundred per cent sure. The train goes so quickly through these forests.

Three years ago I saw two elephants and a zebra grazing in a field beside some dairy cows, and I'd thought I'd begun to lose my mind. It was just a few weeks after my husband Roger died. Of course, in those days, I wasn't the woman I am now. The next day I read in the paper that they'd escaped from a circus.

I'm sure the koala bear I saw must have escaped from somewhere too. Probably some zoo or other.

We'll read all about it in the papers tomorrow.

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