

*13 November*

*10.37 p.m.*

Melvil fell asleep without a murmur, as he usually does when his mama isn't there. He knows that with Papa, the lullabies are not as soft and the hugs not as warm, so he doesn't expect too much.

To keep myself awake until she gets home, I read. The story of a novelist-turned-detective who discovers that a novelist-turned-murderer did not actually write the novel that made him want to become a novelist. After twist upon twist, I find out that the novelist-turned-murderer did not actually

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murder anyone. Much ado about nothing. My phone, lying on my bedside table, buzzes. I read the text:

‘HEY, EVERYTHING OK? ARE YOU AT HOME?’

I don’t want to be disturbed. I hate those text messages that don’t really say anything. I don’t reply.

‘EVERYTHING OK?’

‘...’

‘ARE YOU SAFE?’

What’s that supposed to mean, ‘safe’? I put the book down and rush to the living room on tiptoes. *Do not wake the baby*. I grab the remote. The box of horrors takes for ever to come on. Live: Terrorist attack at the Stade de France. The images tell me nothing. I think about H el ene. I should call her, tell her it would be a good idea to take a taxi home. But there is something else. In the corridors of the stadium, some people stand frozen in front of a screen.

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I do not see the images on that screen, only the expressions on the people's faces. They look appalled. They are watching something that I can't see. Not yet. Then, at the bottom of my screen, the news on the ticker that slides past too fast suddenly stops. The end of innocence.

'Terrorist attack at the Bataclan.'

The sound cuts out. All I can hear is the noise of my heart trying to burst out of my chest. Those five words seem to echo endlessly in my head. One second lasts a year. A year of silence, sitting there, on my couch. It must be a mistake. I check that that is where she went. Maybe I got it mixed up, or forgot. But the concert really is at the Bataclan. H el ene is at the Bataclan.

The picture cuts out. I can't see anything now, but I feel an electric shock go through my body. I want to run outside, to steal a car, to go out and look for her. The only thing in my head now is this burning sense of urgency. Only movement can put out those flames. But I am paralysed because Melvil is with me. I am trapped here. Condemned to watch as

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the fire spreads. I want to scream, but it's impossible. *Do not wake the baby.*

I grab my phone. I have to call her, talk to her, hear her voice. Contacts. 'Hélène', just Hélène. I never changed her name in my contacts list, never added 'my love' or a photo of the two of us. Neither did she. The call she never received that night was from 'Antoine L.' It rings out. Goes to voicemail. I hang up, I call again. Once, twice, a hundred times. However many it takes.

I feel suffocated by this couch that seems to be swallowing me up. The whole flat is collapsing in on me. At each unanswered call, I sink a little deeper into the ruins. Everything looks unfamiliar. The world around me fades. There is nothing left but her and me. A phone call from my brother brings me back to reality.

'Hélène is there.'

In the moment when I pronounce these words, I realise there is no way out. My brother and sister come to our flat. No one knows what to say.

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There is nothing to say. There is no name for this. In the living room, the TV is on. We wait, eyes riveted to the twenty-four-hour news channels, which have already begun competing to come up with the most lurid, grotesque headline, the one that will keep us watching, spectators to a world that is falling apart. ‘Massacre’, ‘carnage’, ‘bloodbath’. I turn off the TV before the word ‘slaughter’ can be uttered. The window on the world is closed. Reality returns.

N.’s wife calls me. He was at the Bataclan with H el ene. He’s safe. I call him, he doesn’t answer. Once. Twice. Three times. Finally, he picks up. He says he doesn’t know where she is. H el ene’s mother joins us.

I have to act, do something. I need to go outside, quickly, so I can find her, so I can escape the army of unspoken words that have invaded my living room. My brother clears the way for me. Without a word, he picks up his car keys. We confer in whispers. Close the door quietly behind us. *Do not wake the baby.*

The ghost hunt can begin.

There's silence in the car. In the city around us, too. From time to time, the painful screams of a siren disturb the hush that has descended on Paris. The party is over. The fanfare has ended. We go to all the major hospitals, anywhere that might be taking in the wounded. Bichat, Saint-Louis, Salpêtrière, Georges-Pompidou . . . That night, death has spread to all four corners of France's capital. One of its ticket-sellers awaits me at each stop. 'I'm looking for my wife. She was at the Bataclan.' Her name is not on any of the lists. But each time, they give me what I'm looking for: a new reason to keep going. 'Not all the wounded have been identified yet.' 'They're taking survivors at Bichat too.' 'Some of them have even been taken to hospitals in the suburbs.' I leave my mobile number, knowing that they will not call me back. Run to the car. I miss the silence of the road.

The streetlights speed past by the side of the ring road. The night deepens. Each light brings me one step closer to hypnosis. My body is no longer mine.

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My mind is on the road. If I keep going around and around this too-tight belt that suffocates the city in its grip, something will eventually happen.

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Even when there was nothing left to look for, we kept going. I needed to escape. To get away as far as possible, not to turn back. To keep going to the end of the road . . . to see if there is an end to it, an end to all of this.

I saw it, the end of the road.

It shone from the screen of my mobile phone when my alarm went off. Seven o'clock in the morning.

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In half an hour, Melvil will drink from his bottle. He must still be sleeping. A baby's sleep, uncluttered by the horrors of the world.

Time to go home.

'Take the Porte de Sèvres exit . . .'