

How did their story really begin? He couldn't say.

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Those near him knew Dominique as an emotional and modest man. At times he could get uppity. He could overstep himself in heated debates with friends. High on the list of things he loved, he loved to write. Truth be told, beyond writing little else mattered to him. Now in his fifties, to his great satisfaction, he lived, as it were, by his plume. Without looking back, Dominique Valarcher left his job as a university librarian at the Sorbonne, where his wife Laetitia taught French literature and Latin.

His books were translated around Eastern Europe and in the United States. At times the writer had the impression of being better known outside his country, and this didn't bother him. However, France appeared to be waking up to him lately: he was invited to lecture at conferences. He had been granted writing residencies. "*Nobody is a prophet in his own land*" was an old saying especially fit for his case until the last couple of years. Dominique Valarcher had taken this late success in his country with a grain of salt and of

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course with certain satisfaction. Editors in America and Romania would offer him the privilege of publishing his poems or his plays in bilingual editions. The writer didn't ask for such favors. He had recently been invited to Benson College, a prestigious university in New York, an all-girls college that touted itself for educating of the most influential women in the world. Valarcher didn't think that studying French or even studying his own books would prepare these girls very well for the afore-mentioned task, but he was flattered by the fact that this prestigious, very selective university would pay him this homage this way. He would have been happy to be able to practice speaking English with the students but the American Professor, Jim Cole, warned him: No English in the foreign language and civilization classes. The rule was very strict. And in this establishment where the best of the best were recruited to teach, they didn't mess around with the rules.

Valarcher had been invited for a week at Benson College in extremely advantageous conditions. The writer realized during that year that he might be able to abandon his work without any inconvenience at 51 years of age, something unhoped for. At the University, the man in charge of the French language

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and literature department welcomed him with these simple words: “Hi, Dominique! How’s the Eiffel Tower? Are its feet still cold?”<sup>1</sup>

The typically American ease of the salutation didn’t baffle our writer, who smiled and answered without losing a beat, “Theoretically no. I bought her two pairs of slippers before leaving!” His answer made the gathering of students and professors laugh. Cole was teaching French here in exceptionally good conditions: approximately a dozen students in each class, a lot of money invested in educational material, young, cultured women, and hand-picked on top of everything. The selection was pitiless: many students, even from privileged families, had to borrow heavily to be admitted into the holy of holies. How could one fail to assure quality teaching in these conditions?

The students watched the writer with great attention. Toasts were made. Everyone seemed familiar with his new books, which amazed him. Well, life was beautiful! *God bless America.*<sup>2</sup>

Back in his small village in the Ile-de-France,

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<sup>1</sup> Allusion to *Paris s’éveille*, a song by the French singer Jacques Dutronc.

<sup>2</sup> In English in the original.

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he was pleased to find a calmer atmosphere. Laetitia welcomed him by saying simply, "I've missed you."

Grisette, the cat, didn't even look at him. This was a manner of saying to its master that nothing had changed while he was absent and that life had gone routinely on, at least for the feline. Indeed, students' papers to be corrected, books about naturalism and others, piled up on his wife's busy desk. No, nothing had changed, except that from now on he'd be handing in his resignation as a librarian at the Sorbonne. What a joyful thought! He had dreamt of this for such a long time! The change took place without any problems. He wouldn't be constrained to follow regular hours any more, that's all. To be able to dedicate his time to his work, wouldn't that be the most wonderful freedom of all, an unquestionable sign of his achievement? Dominique Valarcher had always thought life was the opposite of work, which all those years back he believed he loved and which, with the passing of years, had changed into something strictly necessary for survival.

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A little after his trip to New York, he received a message from a young Hungarian student, Nora Nemeth. She corresponded by mail with an American

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girl studying at Benson. Rebecca Wilson spoke to her enthusiastically about Dominique Valarcher's visit to the University. Obviously, he had made a strong impression on the students as well as on their professors. Rebecca Wilson? That name didn't ring a bell. Nora, who wasn't familiar with his work, researched on the internet, visited the writer's site and read a few of his poems and plays. Rebecca had sent her Dominique's most recent books. Nora was thinking about doing a Master's thesis in French on Valarcher. And for this purpose, she dared to contact him directly. The title of her thesis would be *The Estranged Dominique Valarcher: Romanticism and Heartbreak*.

Nora was seeking his seal of approval on the theme before starting the work. Attached to the letter she'd sent a photo. Valarcher took a moment to contemplate the face with harmonious traits which disturbingly resembled the actress Tatiana Samoilova. When he was a child, Dominique Valarcher saw the Russian movie *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Quand Passent les Cigognes*) on a French TV station. He must have been around 10 then. It was during the sixties. The Russian movie had received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes' Festival in 1958. The child didn't understand

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everything, of course, though he was definitely charmed by the young woman's interpretation. He saw her in his dreams; she smiled at him, took him into her arms, talking to him in an unknown language with melodious inflections that made him tingle. Nora was like an incarnation of the Russian actress to whom, a few years back, he had dedicated a poem that she would never read.

*To Tatiana Samoïlova*

*The street you live on  
Narrows more and more  
It deadens walkers' steps,  
Passers-by lost in a past.  
A little child lost his way too  
Amid the dirty snow-banks that overran  
Your neighborhood.*

*In vain you clean  
The steamed windows of your house  
One cannot distinguish anything outside.  
At times a solitary passer-by slows his pace  
But with a gesture of your hand  
You sweep him away from your horizon*

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*Tatiana,*

*It would be much better to stop whispering your name*

*Since the little boy doesn't recognize you anymore.*

*Your life is out of breath*

*Silence has become a misunderstood realm*

*You are looking for the bottle of oblivion*

*But someone stole it from you*

*Instead of taking you by the hand*

*When the night is falling, Moscow disappears*

*Don't open the window, Tatiana,*

*Don't you see that everyone has left*

*Taking your beauty with them far from here?*

*You won't be able to soar again.*

*Let alone this little boy*

*Leave him to lament his past*

*Yours disappeared long ago*

*In vain you clean*

*The steamed windows of your life*

*The horizon wears away*

*Under the pressure of your hand.*

It was rumored that Tatiana Samoilova had  
given in to alcohol and drugs because her

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international career was crushed by the Soviet Union, left sinking in lonely old age, wholly forgotten. For Dominique, the actress had remained Veronika, Boris's passionate bride-to-be, the beautiful leading star of a movie that had troubled him so much. When in 2014 he found out that she had died, strangely enough he suffered as if he had known her very well. A part of his childhood disappeared with her passing. He went searching feverishly for her photos on the Internet and printed some before furiously destroying them a few days after.

*The Estranged one? Romanticism and Heartbreak?*

Yes, it was exactly his portrait; Nora Nemeth had found the perfect expression. She found *the right words*.

He glanced again at her photo on the screen of the computer. Once again he was fascinated by that resemblance. Nora was beautiful: the student had a large brow, hair black and thick, eyes shaped like almonds and her face had the regular traits of *his* Tatiana, like and like. How could this be? Thoughtful, the writer turned off the computer. Still he needed to think, although his decision had been made.

Valarcher was about to name his older daughter Veronika, but changed his mind at the last moment, renouncing it as foolishly sentimental. He

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didn't dare talk to Laetitia about this matter, thinking without doubt, but maybe being wrong, that his wife wouldn't understand. Laetitia was a very rational woman, contrary to her husband, and this fact gave a relative stability to their lives as a couple. Their two daughters, Natacha and Laure, took after their mother. The parents saw them rarely now because the girls were working abroad. Natacha, the eldest was working in IT within an international company in Frankfurt, and Laure was working at a London Bank. Neither of them read a single line of the books written by Dominique Valarcher. They showed serene indifference—or so it seemed—for their father's creativity. When he was younger, the writer was affected by this. Maybe it was his hurt pride? It was as it was though; he didn't understand why this happened. Dominique was certain that if his father or his mother had been writers or artists he would have been very proud of them. His children's lack of interest seemed to him almost against nature. The girls simply never manifested any desire to talk about his art to their father, or to ask him a single question about his books. This stung the paternalistic pride of Dominique Valarcher, but he refrained from asking for justifications. That's the way it was, though, he just

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had to accept it. In his innocence, the writer imagined that a father of girls wasn't a man like any other and would have a privileged relationship with them. This was another pipe dream!

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Nora's interest touched him deeply because of their age difference. The young Hungarian girl could have been his daughter. The student loved his work and she was twenty-three like Laure his daughter, being at the same time the spitting image of Tatiana Samoilova. More wasn't necessary for Dominique, *the romantic and the estranged*, to become exalted. It was certainly ridiculous, and so what? He was perfectly aware of this, while he tried hard to delay answering the young girl's letter with the enthusiasm of an adolescent. For now, he wouldn't say a word about this to Laetitia knowing pertinently that he would do it sooner or later. With difficulty the writer resisted the urge to turn his computer back on and contemplate the photo of the young girl.

Valarcher went out to the garden, walked a few steps here and there. He loved these moments of solitude. It was the end of winter. The air was a little frisky. The garden, yet sleepy, would soon blossom. All of the greenery would appear again. He took his