

The Tower

My friend Saez will have spent no more than an hour of his life in the company of his father-in-law, no more than the time it took to pick him up at the airport and bring him back to the apartment on the 26th floor where Saez lives with his wife, Marie. The moment he set foot in the apartment, Saez's father-in-law, who until then had never left the mountains of the Armenian Caucasus, walked straight to the bay window, leaned out, ostensibly to take in the view, and vanished. Later Saez explained to me that he was so busy dragging his father-in-law's enormous suitcase out of the elevator that he heard nothing, not a cry or a curse of any kind. Actually it was Saez who had cursed, suitcase handle in hand, as the elevator doors closed abruptly on his shoulders, and when he had finally entered the apartment after having pushed the suitcase along the landing, his father-in-law had disappeared. He

thought he might find him in the bedroom or the bathroom—he went back into the empty living room, then called his name. It was the first time he'd met his father-in-law, the first time he'd said his name out loud. He thought perhaps the old man, who had not uttered a word since leaving the airport, had gone back downstairs, but the empty elevator was still on the landing, so Saez took the stairs all the way down to the ground floor, thinking he'd find him lurking in some corner. Nothing. He went back upstairs to the apartment, opened the wardrobe, the closets, looked under the bed, even went so far as to slide open one or two of the dresser drawers, before pausing finally in the middle of the living room, seized by a thought that was hazy at first, but that slowly grew clearer, until a strange sound, a kind of hoarse warble, escaped from his throat, and he became aware that his palms were prickling and that his head was involuntarily bobbing. Jaw clenched, he walked to the bay window and looked straight ahead, as if his father-in-law could have been flying in the air or perched on top of another apartment tower. The sky was empty. It was because of the sky and because of the view, though partly obscured, of the Saint-Denis basilica, that Saez and Marie had taken the apartment.

Hypothetically, if one were to stand at the far right edge of the bay window, stick out one's chest and crane one's neck, part of the basilica could be seen on the left, its ancient stone and stained glass, as well as the adjacent green—the sight of which, Saez explained, must have hypnotized his father-in-law, vaguely familiar as it must have appeared, in an otherwise completely foreign, undoubtedly disconcerting urban landscape. A landscape, added Saez, at which he had barely glanced since leaving the airport, sitting stiffly in the passenger seat, eyes glued to the glove compartment.

The next hours passed as one might imagine. The body was gathered at the foot of the tower, stuffed into a plastic bag, and brought to the morgue, at which point Saez came knocking at my window. I live a few streets away, in a ground floor apartment with no view whatsoever, a situation Saez had always found absurd, but apparently not today. As soon as he entered he demanded a drink, which he downed immediately, then he approached my window and looked out at the uneven pavement in the small courtyard, the garbage cans aligned against the brick wall, refraining from his usual comments. He seemed nervous, though Saez—I've known him more than twenty years—is a