

Chapter 10 – Lida Market

(Lida Market Store)

It is autumn. The sleeping city's lights will soon fade. A flurry of passengers get off the number 14 bus. I notice her because she is walking along kicking the dead leaves like a little girl. A twig swirls around her as if to better announce her presence. She comes and sits in the Font Neuve bus shelter. Beside her, a poor woman silently mumbles a name: "Claude? Claude?". We concerned but try to keep ourselves busy. I wait for the number 12 to go to Val de Reille.

The young woman puts down her bag, searches inside and takes out two hairpins. She opens the wave of her lips and clamps two pins between her teeth. Then she gently raises her elbows to the height of her face, which makes her breasts jut out. With one hand, she smoothes a long lock of blonde hair on the right side, twists it with relish, and holds it in a loop at her head. She does the same on her left side. With her right hand, she now holds the two strands of hair together, forming a delightful bun. Finally, in two opposite movements, her left hand picks up the pins and fixes the whole thing. Then a slight head movement allows her to check the stability. Instantly, I think of an orchid that has just bloomed at the end of a beautiful flower stem.

You open this booklet of short stories. You see that it's about you, about that fragile, volatile, budding love. I am writing to you.

The number 12 bus arrives. On the steps, she is in front of me. Her faint scent guides me. I find a seat behind her, just opposite her, but enough to see her profile. As if by magic, the windows reflection in the streetlight carries her to my side. Her deep, restless gaze accentuates her beauty in the glass mirror.

These words are read in the morning of your eyes, there at the moment you awake in me. They will carry you to other words, precious, dripping with hope. I am writing to you.

The bus is now heading towards new districts where the population is thriving. Gone is the city centre. We enclose ourselves in areas and housing estates with very high walls. At the Becquerel station, she gets off and flies away. Did she even see me?

You read further and understand this marvellous chance, this disorder and new order that is taking hold. I am writing to you.

Her slim figure fades away towards the Lida Market. A light breeze tracks her with the last trickle of leaves. She is literally swallowed up. Yet at that hour, this shop is not yet open. Her disappearance intrigues me. Was it a mirage? At 9 o'clock, quite determined, I enter the shop. I see her restocking the tinned food section. She is wearing her work uniform and I can read her name on the badge with surprise: Fleur. Unbelievable! I approach her. Her morning fragrance entices me a little more and I choose whatever from the display. An asparagus can! She quickly looks at me with a slight smile. No doubt my early morning sportswear with a tin in my hand and no shopping bag, is enough to make me look ridiculous. When she returns to the checkout, empty boxes in hand, I present my asparagus can on the conveyor belt. I realise that everything is going to happen very quickly and so I have to react just as quickly. What should I say? How do I get out of the trivial conversation with cleverness? I'll mix my desire and my reality into a false true lie or the other way round! And when it's time to pay, in a few words, I brazenly tell her, "My research work at the University is about Discount, could I interview you?" She looks at me worried. I can barely hear her saying: "Sorry, I didn't quite understand! Could you repeat it? She speaks, while giving my change, then she looks me straight in the eye.

There are always words written on a face. I reach into yours until it lights me up. Then a star explodes, spraying a mist of diamonds. I am writing to you.

I bravely start again. Fleur muses very quickly and objects that she doesn't have much time and that she certainly wouldn't know how to answer my questions. I insist, saying: "It's important, I need background information to present my thesis! So, she replies mechanically, as if to get rid of the situation, looking around her, "I'm stopping at 2 pm, we should meet elsewhere! The appointment is made: Petit Casino market, 2.30 pm.

You know, I've only ever written for you. Words from the past, like the autumn leaves you sent flying, now create an illuminated present. I am writing to you.

At 2 pm, I'm already at the appointment. In the intervening period, in the euphoria, I had time to go home, change my clothes while vocalising halfway between Roberto Alagna, the famous tenor, and Hergé's Castafiore: "Fleurr, Fleurrriisssssi, Fleurrriissssimoooo!" and pick up my student bag. What if she doesn't come? I push the thought out of my mind. On the cafeteria table I place my phone (ready to record), a pen and some notes. She arrives shyly and seems impressed. I order two coffees. She tells me straight away that she has just a simple certificate in business administration, years of unemployment and a short experience at Lida Market shop. She doesn't see how she can help a university student.

I also write to touch your light. You are there, close to me, frank, almost open. The ray of your candor burns me. I am writing to you.

So, I-introduce myself briefly: "Florian, student in Sociology, Paul Valéry University, my subject: Final economy and revival, or perhaps: End of the economy and resurrection. I don't know anymore!" She seems to be laughing because of the first name and the supposed titles of my subject. Anyway, I start the discussion, and my first question puts her at ease.

- How did you find this job in the discount industry?

- It's very simple", she says in a soft voice. "After a few hard years workwise, I met up with my economics teacher at Jean Moulin Technical School who told me about the new economic modernisation law, which in 2008 opened the way to the discount sector. So, I applied on the Lida Market website.

- For what job? What does it involve?

- There weren't 36 solutions. At Lida Market, roughly speaking, you can become a multi-skilled sales employee, head or deputy manager or area manager. We don't know the rest of the management. It's quite secret. With my level of education and experience, it was inevitably the multi-skilled post! At first, I didn't really know what multi-skilled meant. I remembered the words: "You are the primary contact for our customers. Your friendliness and competence, both in the shop and at the checkout, make the difference". In fact, you have to be everywhere. In the shop to stock shelves, present products, clean floors, and at the checkout to quickly register purchases with a smile,—all obviously without making mistakes. All movements must be optimised. You can't just sit back and do nothing. When you leave the shop for the checkout or vice versa, you have to carry empty boxes or products or clean the aisles.

I write the words that have been lying around. As Love, once isolated, finds its innocence and reveals your beauty, your grace.

- Did your employment contract specify all this?

- There were more than 53 items in total, I didn't read them all. What would have been the point? I was happy to get paid work. And then they don't look too closely at the experience you have acquired, it's your personality that interests them most: a sense of welcome, seriousness and flexibility, or what they call flexibility. Do you still have a lot of questions? Are you really a student? How can what I say be interesting?

- Questions, yes! Of course, I am a student and your personal experience can be very useful for my research work. Do you know that on average a Lida Market employee scans 3,000 products per hour and transports 5 tons of goods per day?

- This does not surprise me at all. But that's not the hardest part.

- Ah, what is it then?

There is a long silence.

I am writing to you. And you come to me like someone pushing open the gate of an abandoned garden!

- There's a hateful atmosphere there.

She turns pale and starts to melt.

- I didn't mean to bother you. We can stop here if you want!

The first tear that barely breaks through is quickly followed by anger, so she continues.

- No, no, you can't understand that fearful atmosphere, anxiety and dread that you have to endure every day. Whether it's the manager or the area boss sector head, they are formatted on the same model, they are tyrants. They exert permanent control to put pressure on us. One day I came to work by car, and that same evening when I was about to leave to go home, the head manager demanded to search my car. During the day, he sometimes watches video to see if the cash register is correctly recording all goods. You can only go to toilet once. The cash register is checked several times a day. And there, no mistakes are allowed. You must not have money in your jacket. You must not serve your family. In high school, I studied Taylorism, Fordism and Toyotism, but this is even harder, this world makes us weak from the inside. We work with fear in our stomachs, in a state of unhappiness. Sometimes my self-confidence is worn out like a piece that has been overused. Some people resign or suffer serious depression. Other colleagues say nothing because they are afraid. I know that many of girls want to have children in order to escape this system for the length of their pregnancy.

You come out of this murderous reality. And you cry out for these flowers that have been voluntarily left behind. Soon, we will leave these alleys, those

that gardeners have never irrigated. And together we will trace a passage, a walk aside, to reach more clarity. I am writing to you.

- In fact, what you are expressing is part of my study object. In retail today, there is this form of coercive management inherited from the worst totalitarian systems where employees are harassed. And yet, the Lida Market slogan is "selling the best quality food at the best price". That's pretty attractive! No? In fact, they save on staff costs to offer low prices and increase their profit margin. Employees are seen as products or equipment with an expiry date. Once they are worn out, they go away and are replaced by new ones. The Lida Market bosses are among the richest men in the world, long before Bill Gates. Their system, developed after the Second World War when they were prisoners of war, is an economy of impoverishment. They take advantage of the various employment laws to supply themselves with products made with cheap labour. In Germany and elsewhere, Poles or Romanians are made to work for a pittance. This is legal. They are paid social security contributions according to their nationality at best. Employers take advantage of the diversity of work regimes to minimise costs. Their goal is their own profit. In the process, they destroy all economies that have any respect for working conditions and human dignity.

I write, I am writing to you. To tell you that sentences and words cannot express everything. Beyond words, even the most luminous ones, there is this temporary impossibility to reveal my real emotion!

For them, producing and distributing at low prices means above all reducing staff costs to a minimum wage. And a minimum wage means even lower prices for households. It is like a snake choking on its own tail. The standard of living can only fall, and poverty will become more widespread. This is the end of the economy at the service of mankind.

This is one of the aspects of my research. It should also be added that in the economic circuit, distributors impose their prices, which are of course lower and

lower, which pushes producers, breeders, etc. to enter into this logic of reducing the labour factor. So, some think they can compensate by going into debt for equipment to produce more volume, often at the expense of the environment.

While leaving me to do my economics lesson. Fleur raises her elbows to face level again. Her breasts stick out. With both hands she removes the two pins holding her bun together. She lifts her chin and her head moves briskly from left to right. Then her hair unfurls. It undulates voluptuously and rests gracefully on her shoulders.

Disturbed, I stop talking for good and conclude.

“My God, you are so beautiful!”