Beloved Daughter

Prologue: A Journey

Château Les Rochers, Brittany

When dawn broke above the forest, I had already mounted the saddle. The cook handed me a small leather pouch containing the provisions she had hastily prepared. The household steward tried to stall me: “You cannot possibly depart in this manner, my Lord the Marquis! Give us but a few hours to fix up the carriage, gather your entourage, prepare a worthy repast…” I reminded him that I had fought ten years in the King’s army and can make do with nothing more than a horse, a loaf of bread, a skin of wine and a cloak to wrap myself with against the wind.

In the torch-lit courtyard, the servants had gathered in a semicircle and stood there gazing upon me in silence. They were still under the thrall of the funeral Mass that had just been held in the castle’s small chapel, eyes stinging with the excess of smoke emanating from the candles and the incense, throats drained from singing. The priest was awkward and confused, rocking back and forth on his heavy legs that kept getting entangled in his cape. He had not succeeded in pronouncing a single verse of the requiem without mangling the Latin phrasing, but this made no difference to his dirty, gaping, bewildered, wailing flock. Having finished the prayer, the priest addressed the servants and the peasants in their language, his language, a simple Breton:

“Our Marquise was a God-fearing woman, and she built this pretty little chapel for us. She planted trees in the garden, and now they give shade to her son and his bride, our lords, may God preserve them. She loved you, was generous toward you, gave you ample food and drink for the holidays. When she would come here from Paris, to our land of cold and mist, she would with her bring sparks of light. When she would depart, we would sink back into darkness.”

Upon my life, the Pope in Rome could not have delivered a more beautiful funeral Mass than that offered by my country priest in memory of my departed mother. I ordered the head of

the manor to furnish him with several bottles of wine, and to provide a hearty meal with plenty of apple cider and tobacco for the servants and peasants, as recompense for their nightlong vigil and in homage to the generosity of the Marquise de Sévigné.

In my close vicinity, I heard the rising sound of weeping. It was Philois, the old gardener, who had planted so many trees with my mother. I beckoned to him and, leaning down from the back of the horse, embraced him.

The last to approach was Marguerite, her eyes swollen with tears. “Charles, my lord, my love, how shall you ride all the way,” she implored in her fragile voice, “you are no longer in the prime of youth, your back aches, your knees fail you. Spare yourself…”

The rest of her words were drowned out by the tolling of the bell above. In the village another church bell answered its call. Bells of mourning proclaimed the death of she who had been their mistress for as long as they could remember. Somewhere beyond the orchards faint glimmers emerged; the villagers were awakening. I kissed Marguerite’s hand, spurred the horse to a gallop, and before long the castle had vanished behind the tall tree tops.

* * *

The letter had reached Les Rochers the previous evening.

“My dear brother, Mother died yesterday. It all happened so suddenly, so very unexpectedly. Who could have thought that the fever would not abate, that this passing illness would do anything but pass! She alone knew; she had already had a priest sent for some days ago. She died with a clean, shining soul, happy to comply with her Maker’s will as befits the grand-daughter of Saint Jeanne de Chantal. Today she was interred in the sepulcher at the Chateau de Grignan. Would that she had she at least died in her home in Paris and been buried in

the family plot! But here too she rests in fine company, as Christian and righteous as any to be found on earth. My own state is beyond words, and you can picture it well in any case. Imagine that they should have tried to keep the fact of her impending death from me! Today they even went so far as to attempt to prevent me from attending the funeral, for fear that my nerves would not sustain the blow. As you know, between the two of us, I have always been the sickly one. For weeks I have teetered on the brink of death while she attended to me with her unyielding and limitless devotion, as if I were seventy and she fifty. Hurry, dear brother, for I cannot bear the pain alone. My husband, the count, also sheds tears in torrential floods; he too has lost a soul dear to him. We support each other like two severed tree trunks, felled one atop the other by a storm. Yet it is you I need, dear brother. I need to see my mother's face again, reflected in yours."

The letter went on, but my vision was blurred by tears. I barely managed to bid farewell to the servant, who stood gawking at me senselessly, before I burst into tears and cast the piece of paper on the ground. My first thought was that mother died yesterday while I was out riding in the forest, carefree and gay! In the golden twilight hours, while I was strolling along the garden paths, among the trees she had planted, her dead body was strewn in her chambers, surrounded by priests, those black crows! And today, while I exchanged idle pleasantries with the head of the manor, the grim procession descended from the Chateau de Grignan to the sepulcher, that gloomy chapel I remember so well, rising out of the hillside. The priest and his attendants would lead the way, swinging their flaming censers, followed by my sister, collapsing with grief upon the arm of the aging Count. Then would come the local aristocrats, summoned to the funeral of the Count's mother-in-law. Closing the procession would be the villagers of Grignan, young and old, trailing behind in their festive clothes, enjoying the unexpected day off from work more

than they were grieving over the death of the eccentric old Parisian lady who'd wave to them out of her carriage window and summon a special courier every Wednesday and Saturday to ferry her letters to the post office in Montélimar.

It is only when I thought of the post office days and the letters, my mother's great passion, that I realized that of course mother did not die yesterday, and was not buried today but almost two weeks ago – taking into account the week-longjourney the letter had made along the bumpy roads from Provence to Paris, and the waiting period before the mail carriage departed to Brittany, and the three-day carriage ride from Paris to the town of Vitré, and God knows how many hours to track down the messenger and the horse to bring it up to the castle. I looked at the date – it was written on the 18th of April, the same day that saw the arrival of my sister's previous letter: "Dear brother, You should know that mother has taken ill. Her fever is high and her breath somewhat belabored, but do not worry, she is of robust health and her body so vigorous that there is no reason for concern. In a few days' time she is sure to be back on her feet, running around and fussing over me…"

The same moment that I was absentmindedly reading about her illness, she was already lying in her grave! I was filled with impotent rage at those accursed two weeks that separated us from one another. Had I at least felt anything on that fateful day, or during those days of final suffering that must have preceded it, or on the days of mourning that followed! Some dull, mysterious ache, some vibration of an infinitely fine thread connecting mother to son from one end of France to the other! But no, I had not felt a thing with the exception of the usual back pain and financial worries, the ordinary ennui of the late evening hour when Marguerite is absorbed in her ailments and embroidery and I am hunched over a book, straining my eyes in the feeble light

of the candles, which we've also started to use sparingly on nights when Les Rochers is not graced by company.

Marguerite picked up the letter, read it, put her arms around me consolingly, asked if indeed I intended to go to Grignan. I looked at her. The candlelight quivered upon her pale skin, lending it a sickly, milky aspect. She was as gaunt as a shadow.

"No, no."

Somewhere inside I felt a vague need to go, but my legs were old and wooden like the Breton furniture surrounding me. The thought of journeying to the other end of France was ludicrous; even the distance from my writing desk to the door seemed insurmountable at that moment.

How tired we all are, myself, my wife, my sister, her husband the Count. Only my mother exuded health and energy. At her advanced age she could still bear to endure all the rattling back and forth during the three weeks' journey from Paris to Grignan, across mountains and streams. Granted, she had a hidden power, her love for her daughter, which had always imbued her with wondrous strength… And what of myself? Did not my love, the love of a son for his mother, have the power to move me to make the pilgrimage to her grave? No…no. As it was, her soul was already in heaven, her body food for the worms. My love for my sister then? Certainly not.

I wiped away the tears from my cheeks. Sitting down next to Marguerite on the couch, I laid my hand on top of hers. I tried to pray, but my thoughts wandered involuntarily, in spite of my best efforts, to matters of money. Most of my mother's fortune had already been divided between my sister and myself a long time ago, leaving but a pittance to provide for her own daily needs. Nevertheless in my mind I couldn't help but rifle through sales bills, lease contracts, and rental agreements. In vain I tried to put it all aside, to clear my soul of thoughts unworthy of the

hallowed hour: twenty five years of managing a small estate, constantly worried about balancing the accounts, had made a bourgeois of the Marquis de Sévigné. We sat and stared at the portrait of my mother, illuminated by a dozen dripping, dwindling candles in the great candelabra. It was hanging next to a portrait of my father, whom I had never known, the slim, effeminately beautiful Marquis who'd left the world this parting gift which captured his mischievous gaze and the somewhat haughty tilt of his head. They were twenty years old when the portraits had been painted. They too must have sat in this room, holding hands in the evening hour, but how different from the two of us! They were Parisians who had come here like exiles, against their will, in order to avoid the city's exorbitance. How my mother hated this miserable, dingy castle belonging to her husband's family in Brittany, which to her might have been a foreign country, during the years when all she wanted to do was to flit from salon to salon, to sparkle in witty conversation, to glow in the court of the King! She had told me at length about her exuberant youth, about the merry and notorious band that would gather in the court of the young Prince of Condé – then still the Duke of Enghien - about the days and nights that she and my father had spent there dancing, playing games, putting on shows, and plotting elaborate capers with the Duke, the poet Marigny, their friend Lenet, her beloved cousin Bussy… Now that she has passed, none of that set remains. Once, she had shown me a letter sent to them here by their friends in the capital, exactly fifty years ago:

Greetings gentle country folk,
Immovable like Breton oak,
Attached to your rural mansion
Beyond all righteous comprehension.
Hello to both! Unworthy though you may
Be of these lines and of their sway,
Yet some remains of amity
Instill in us a sense of pity

At seeing thus unjustly pillaged
Your finest years in a rotten village,
And that you waste at Les Rochers
Moments precious to all elsewhere.

I was jolted back to the present moment when all at once Marguerite emitted a feeble moan. I looked at her bewildered and noticed that my hand was squeezing hers forcefully. I released my grip, grabbed a candlestick, and began pacing back and forth the length of the room. Finally I stopped in front of my mother's portrait and held the candle up to her face. The painter had contrived, almost miraculously, to capture on canvas the exact color of her eyes, the elusiveness of their hue that flashed from green to blue, to brown and at times even purple. "My rainbow colored eyes" she'd called them, with a gratified giggle.

"Still," Marguerite said behind my back in a frail voice, "You will at least have to go Paris. You'll also have to see to the rest of the estate, preside over the inventories, cancel the lease on the Hôtel Carnavalet." I turned to look at my wife. There is no one more adept at listening, understanding, agreeing and saying exactly what one wants to hear.

"Yes," I said. "I will go to Paris."

She nodded, her chin almost imperceptibly inclined forward. I remembered how disappointed my mother was in her the first time we visited her after our nuptials. For several weeks she derided her son's taciturn, sickly bride, the girl who never went for a walk and was always cold, who "went through a hundred faces a day, all of them sour", who was already exhausted at nine in the evening because "the days are too long for her."

But she too learned to love her, thanks to Marguerite's remarkable ability to listen obediently and to calibrate her desires until they were exquisitely in tune with those of her

interlocutor. Thus my mother was able to indulge herself in long hours of conversation about her favorite subject of all – the innumerable virtues and distinctions of my sister. Entire evenings were spent eulogizing my sister to her ears, and Marguerite would just fix her big innocuous eyes on the Marquise and sometimes exclaim adoringly: “I had not known women such as this could exist!” Then my mother would titter with satisfaction, and later, when we were alone, say to me: “How exceedingly clever your wife is!”

Indeed, cleverer than she might seem. My mother was not the only one she knew how to please. I was blessed with a modest, loyal, pious wife and I am grateful to God for sending her to me, even though she bore me no heirs.

“If we hurry,” she said, “we can arrange a memorial ceremony at the Cathedral in Renne in a week or two weeks’ time, after which you can depart immediately.”

Upon imagining this memorial I felt myself filling with rage. I had no desire to see the ridiculous Breton aristocrats, choice targets for my mother’s pointed scorn, crammed into the Renne Cathedral to listen to a mediocre eulogy that she, who’d been accustomed to hearing the sermons of the kingdom’s greatest preachers, would have despised. Nor did I want occasion to see Marguerite’s father, that glorified merchant who calls himself Baron, and who dared to heap all manner of accusations upon my mother, not least among them the claim that in the name of her excessive love for her daughter she deprived his daughter’s husband and his daughter of our share of the inheritance…No, I did not want grief over my mother’s death to seep from our tired lives for two weeks, to bury her memory in this obscure provincial grave just as her body lay buried in an obscure grave on the other side of France.

“No, Marguerite!” my own cry surprised me. “No! We will have the memorial service tonight, here in the castle’s chapel, and I will depart at dawn! For two weeks already my mother

has been rotting in a dark grave without me knowing, without me feeling…I want to go to her, to Paris, the Marais, to Carnavalet. She is not here. All of her is there, only there shall I find her!"

Marguerite fixed her big eyes on me in fright. She understood not what I was saying, but neither could she imagine contradicting me.

"My mother is dead, Marguerite! My mother is dead!" I crossed the room in just a few paces, the candlestick in my hand banishing the shadows behind the fireplace. All at once I swung the doors wide open and shouted into the darkened hallway: "My mother is dead! Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, the Marquise de Sévigné, is dead!"

Slender fingers fastened upon my shoulder. "Charles, Charles my love, my lord, you are upset. Wait at least until morning to think things through with a clear mind…"

"Now, only now my mind is finally clear," I shouted. "It was the damned marsh mists of Brittany that clouded my thoughts all this time. Up, up, lazy servants! Up, dull peasants! Tonight no one shall sleep for my mother, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, the Marquise de Sévigné, is dead!"

When dawn broke above the forest I mounted the saddle.

* * *

The rain poured down without respite, covering the main road in mud and puddles. The horse almost stumbled into a few of them, which would have cost him his legs. Mist hung over the fields, the same mist that cloaked the whole of Brittany in perpetual sorrow. And still I rode on. By some miracle, the aches plaguing my back and joints had disappeared entirely, as if they had been nothing more than a painful illusion. I replenished my supplies at every inn I passed, changed horses at every postal station, and within only three days I was in Paris.

When our celebrated castle welcomed me, I was nauseous beyond compare. As soon as I reached the entrance of the city I became trapped in the tumult of wagons crowding to pass through the customs gate. Upon my life, I have visited many countries throughout the years and have never seen a more hideous or filthy town. Even after months under siege there was more order and cleanliness in the cities of Germany and Holland than in this giant sewer spilling out into the Seine. One of the peasants began to argue with the customs clerk, whereupon the soldiers decided to resolve the manner with indiscriminate swings of their batons every which way. All at once the peasant's horse went berserk, the wagon was overturned, a cage full of chickens burst open and the wandering street mutts opened chase after them. The noise was deafening; I turned around and circled past the commotion.

This was not hard to do since Paris now stands wanton and breached. Our King destroyed the city walls built by his fathers, and planted leafy avenues and boulevards instead of batteries and moats. Triumphal arches tower where once stood fortified gates. The age of peace is upon us, the sun of Louis XIV having banished all shadows of war.

And yet, could this really have surprised me? Did not my mother do precisely the same thing at Les Rochers, deliberately neglecting the upkeep of the heavy old barricades erected by my Breton ancestors so she could have picturesque ruins to walk among during the twilight hour? Yes, times have changed; there is no more need for battlements, only for topiary and pleasant strolls down shaded alleys. The more France expands and hardens toward the outside, the more a kind of comfortable limpness takes hold from within. The wars to which I had dedicated the years of my youth had, in the end, established the boundaries of a delicate, feminine kingdom, where one could safely give one's self over to the silken chains of Venus and her courtiers.

I preferred to ride on the muddy bank of the river, rather than carve my path through the beggars and panderers that littered the streets. There, a slight breeze dislodged the overhanging stench of putrefaction, and I could take amusement at the sight of the flamboyantly colored boats clustering at the pier. One of them was unloaded of a cage containing an enormous blue parrot. I asked the porter to whom he was to be delivered. “The Duchess of P.” What jungles beyond what oceans had he come from, only to chatter in the silly Duchess’s ears and amuse her guests? He stared me down with a hollow eye. Then suddenly he burst into a horrible jabber, his swollen gray tongue wagging and clicking in a language unrecognizable. His voice went up and down, the tone alternating between anger, merriment, accusation, congratulations, and apology, and finally spinning a yarn that left me trying to make out words and sentences. Profoundly mortified, I fled the scene in a hurry, with the parrot’s squawking resounding behind me for quite a while.

Further along, the bank had been dug up, straightened and covered with a stone pier: the King had decided to delineate the Seine as if it were another lane in one of his royal parks. I passed by Le Nôtre’s new Tuileries gardens, where my mother and he other ladies of the court were fond of strolling, and the desolate Louvre, with its forlorn gates and their spiritless guards, a palace left to gather dust by its King and his court. Beyond, across from the Hotel de Ville, a bloodthirsty crowd was already gathering in the square where a gallows was being mounted; I spurred my horse onward and entered the Marais.

This was my mother’s real homeland. Her entire essence belonged to that special breed of aristocracy that sprouts only between the stone edifices of this quarter. Every street corner reflected her image in my eyes. I rode past the house where she was born; the other house where

she grew up among many cousins - an orphan, but a happy one; the Saint-Gervais church where she married my father in the dead of night, to confound the devil; the house where they lived until my father was killed in that silly duel over another woman's heart – the devil had evidently not been confounded –leaving her a young widow; and many other houses that she'd rented over the years, temporary and permanent, happy and miserable. At the end of my ride I arrived at her final residence, the most wonderful among them, the beloved Hotel Carnavalet. Is there a more beautiful house in all of Paris?

The gate was open. I directed the horse into the courtyard, and almost tumbled from its back to the ground. The fatigue of my journey overcame me all at once. With my wild look and my muddy travel clothes, the servants did not recognize me at first and the coachman tried to cast me back onto the street. Yet, soon enough they were groveling at my feet and competing with each other to proffer their regrets. It was a good thing I had come; I did not like the look of them. My mother exerted an invisible grip on the reins of the household even when she was away. Now, since her death, her domestic affairs had begun to unravel. When I entered, I heard doors and pantries slamming, and a dirty girl in an apron and coif came running down the main staircase, nearly knocking me off my feet.

For an entire week I busied myself with the matters at hand: wills, inventories, notaries, creditors, courtesy visits and condolences. All these errands distracted me from thoughts of my mother. I took my meals alone, listless in these stately rooms that no longer heard my mother's rolling laughter, nor her sobs over each dreaded parting from my sister.

In her bedroom, the furniture had been covered with white sheets to protect them from dust, and I felt like an intruder between the tall pillars of her canopy bed and the portrait of my sister, the work of Mignard, peering down from the wall. Once I tried to open the drawers of the

big cabinet and a flood of paper spilled out onto the floor, yellowed pages covered in the pure and precise handwriting of my sister. My heart dropped; I felt like my mother's innards lay exposed before me. I hurried to stuff my sister's letters back into the drawer, paying no attention to order; I ran out of the room and did not enter it again.

* * *

When I walked the streets of the Marais I was frequently stopped. There are many people who know me there, but these were just shadowy figures from my past who made me feel even more estranged. On one such occasion, a carriage with purple curtains came to a halt beside me and a pair of velvet eyes batted their long lashes in my direction. "Charles, you naughty bunny! You've finally emerged from your hutch!" The full lips continued to prattle about something or other, but I could not for the life of me put a name to the face, which resembled a mask with its layer of white powder and a silken fly glued to the right cheek. She could have been anybody, and besides, so much time had passed since all those flirtations…In another instance, I was stopped in my tracks by the pasty and ring-clad hand of a bishop, reaching out from his sedan chair. Once more a curtain was drawn, and once more I was made the target of babbling lips – pale and thin this time – that spouted empty condolences for my mother's death. On yet another occasion, it was my cousin Coulanges whom I was glad to see as a matter of fact. He and his wife had loved my mother deeply, and she them. How old he had grown! Even the hair in his wig had turned gray. I embraced him fondly and he burst into tears and told me that since hearing of my mother's death he had been rereading her letters to him, remembering days of old.

He invited me to his home. His wife sat with us, her eyes also welling with tears. She asked how my sister was doing. I told her I didn't know. Suddenly she exclaimed: "Pardon me

Charles, but I have never liked her. She has many fine qualities, and I understand why your mother adored her so. She is smart, pious, and was once very beautiful too, but in my eyes she has always been sour and arrogant. -"

"There, there," Coulanges uttered in embarrassment, "Bite your tongue, Madame…"

"Yes, arrogant! And cold and bitter. Just as your mother inspired admirers wherever she went, so she made enemies. She is only a year and a half older than you, but you have always been young, and she has always been old."

"That is the sorrow over the loss of our dear friend speaking," muttered Coulanges. "In the end, with the exception of the beloved Marquise, we all look somewhat old and bitter."

He pulled out a bundle of letters, leafed through them and handed them to me with a sad smile. "Here, read, she was forty-five when she wrote this. A quarter of a century has passed since, who can still remember that silly affair, of Lauzun and 'Mademoiselle'*…"

The very moment he pressed the letter into my hands, my mother's familiar handwriting jumped out at me. As I started to read, a great smile spread across my face. Light streamed from the page, casting sparks upon the faded velvet of Coulanges' drawing room furniture, igniting embers in the extinguished chandelier. It was as if no time at all had passed, and from afar I heard my mother's chiming laughter, saw her approaching, quill and paper in hand, running, shrieking with pleasure, crossing the drawing room and the yellow parlor, throwing the doors ajar, the train of her dress trailing behind to keep up, the light of the candles shivering in the sudden gust of wind, the tinkling of the chandeliers, the servants hurrying to get out of her way as she dashes through the hall, weaves her way between the marble statues, enters the red

* "Mademoiselle" was the name given to the daughter of "Monsieur," brother of the King, and "Madame," his wife. The person in question here is the niece of Louis XIII as opposed to the niece of the present King, Louis XIV, who was also called "Grande Mademoiselle."

bedroom, and here she is floating down onto the little stool next to the bureau, trying to catch her breath –

To Monsieur de Coulanges, Lyon

Paris, Monday, December 15, 1670

I am about to tell you a thing, the most astonishing, the most surprising, the most marvelous, the most miraculous, the most triumphant, the most baffling, the most unheard of, the most singular, the most extraordinary, the most unbelievable, the most unforeseen, the biggest, tiniest, rarest, commonest, the most sensational, the most secret (until today), the most brilliant, the most enviable, in fact a thing of which only one example can be found in past ages, and even that example is not quite right; a thing nobody can believe in Paris (how could anyone believe it in Lyon?), a thing that makes everybody cry out for mercy, a thing that fills Madame de Rohan and Madame de Hauterive with joy, in short, a thing that will happenon Sunday and those who see it will think they are seeing visions - a thing that will happen on Sunday and perhaps not on Monday. I can't make up my mind whether or not to say it, but I will give you three guesses. Give up? Very well, I shall have to tell you. Monsieur de Lauzun is to marry on Sunday, in the Louvre. And who is his brideI give you four, ten, a hundred guesses. Madame de Coulanges will be saying: That's not very hard to guess, it's Mademoiselle de La Valliere.- Not at all, Madame. - Mademoiseile de Retz, then? - Not at all, how provincial of you. - Ah, but of course, how silly we are, you say: it's Mademoiselle Colbert. – You're even further off. - Then it must be Mademoiselle de Crequy. -You're nowhere near. I have no choice but to tell you then: he is marrying, on Sunday, in the Louvre, with the King's permission, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle de… Mademoiselle… have you guessed her name? He's marrying Mademoiselle, of course! Truly, on my honor, on my sworn oath! Mademoiselle, the great Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, daughter of the late Monsieur, Mademoiselle, granddaughter of Henry IV, Mademoiselle d'Eu, Mademoiselle first cousin of the King, Mademoiselle destined for the throne, the only bride in France worthy of Monsieur.

Now there's a subject for discussion. If you shout, if you're beside yourselves, if you say that you've been lied to, that you've been had, that it's all false, a tall tale too tasteless to