

## Mabrouck Rachedi

Extracts from two novels

From *Le poids d'une âme*  
(Paris, 2008)

### The Weight of a Soul

*There once lived a humble peasant, a widower, who only had a son and a beautiful white horse which he was fond of. One day, his horse disappeared. All the neighbors sympathized with him and said that he was not a very lucky man.*

*"Perhaps so, perhaps not..." said he. "The horse is no longer in the stable; it is a fact. How are we to know if it is good luck or bad luck?..."*

*The people mocked him for his simple-mindedness...*

*Three days later, the white horse returned... accompanied by three other wild horses. The neighbors were envious:*

*"What luck you have! You were right..."*

*To which he responded:*

*"Perhaps so, perhaps not... The horse has returned; that is all. How are we to know if it is good luck or bad luck? It is only a fragment of the story... Can one know the contents of a book by only reading a sentence?"*

*The neighbors went away, convinced that the old man was talking nonsense. Finding four horses, in place of one, was a gift from heaven...*

*Then the son of the peasant attempted to climb one of the horses, fell and broke his leg.*

*And the neighbors, still ready to share their opinions, exclaimed:*

*"What rotten luck! You were right; these wild horses have not brought you luck!"*

*"Perhaps so, perhaps not... My son has a broken leg, let's not exaggerate anything! Who can say what that will bring us? Life presents itself in small pieces. No man is able to tell the future..."*

*Some time later, war broke out and all the young people in the village were enrolled in the army, except the invalid!*

*"What luck you have, old man! You were right, your son can no longer walk, but that has kept him from getting himself killed..."*

*"Don't judge so quickly," said the peasant. "Your children are enrolled in the army; my child is staying at home. That is all that we can say. Only God knows if it is good luck or bad..."*

Lao Tse

It is eight o'clock in the morning. The screaming of his mother reminds Lounès that today is a school day. A soft shiver travels across his face, the remnant of a good dream, without a doubt. A one-sided battle begins against sleep; Lounès loses each time.

The caress that had put him in a good mood changes into an unpleasant tingling. On these early mornings, rubbing his face is a chore. He scowls, twists his mouth and his nose, and wrinkles his forehead. The squirming does not relieve him, he raises his hands reluctantly, scratches himself, but instead of a smooth chin, he stumbles upon a rough surface. Disturbed, he wrinkles his eyelids. A clump drops from the ceiling which causes him to roll to the right, two fingers away from toppling over his narrow bed. The thing responsible for this morning exercise is a film of plaster that drips from a crack. He is relieved even if he will never get used to it.

Lounès gets up and trudges to the kitchen. You're early in your lateness, jokes Tarik, his brother. His mother, who has not seen him, curses his laziness. Everything is in order in the Amri family.

It is eight o'clock in the morning. In front of the refrigerator, Catherine Lespinasse reads her husband's note: "I am taking out the dog. I'll return in fifteen minutes." She nervously adjusts her bangs; Gérard is unworthy of her trust.

Yesterday, she surprised him in the arms of another woman, Isabelle Laforêt, the gym instructor at the Georges Brassens School. A bimbo dressed in a candy pink tracksuit, Gérard could have done better!

Catherine had just returned from her TV quiz-show group meeting when she interrupted the lovers. In their marriage bed, curled up in the arms of her husband, Laforêt was wearing her favorite bathrobe, an anniversary gift from Gérard. She had returned early, because of a splitting headache. Gérard could not have suspected it, Catherine never left early from her sacred meeting. She is angry and, more especially, she is ashamed. If her Maurice Baquet gym friends found out about it! If her mother learned of it: she had predicted that Gérard was nothing but a womanizer.

Just then, Gérard arrives at the doorstep, disconcerted like a guilty child, his head drooping toward his shoulders. Without a word, Catherine turns off the television during the closing credits of *Télématin*. She puts herself to work. At her home, habit always prevails.

It is eight o'clock in the morning. Jean-Marc Lemoine paces around in circles at the bus stop. Chubby-cheeked, with a rounded stomach and the manners of a Parisian kid, from a distance he has the traits of a person with a good life. However, his gnawed fingernails, his deep-set eyes and his clenched jaw reveal a bad life.

Yesterday, the PSG—the Parisian soccer team—lost to Marseille. Ever since his wife left, when he's not betting at the horse races, he's watching eleven men fight over a soccer ball. Every match in which his team is defeated, every bet lost, is a personal disaster. The collapse of the Parisian team unearths eternal emptiness. He kicks a can of beer which rolls

to the trash can. And there's the goal! Victory to his team! It's heroic! Instead of raising his arm, he swallows his saliva and shrivels up. Jean-Marc lives his life by proxy.

At eighteen, Lounès is a beanpole with a dried-up face. Disheveled, his shoulders drooping, his hair shaggy, his appearance would be overlooked if not for his intelligent eyes, which give him the air of a dandy. His tiny pupils and his beak-like nose give him a disturbing look.

After his morning coffee Lounès stands in front of the kitchen window, pensive. He stares at his lost reflection in the urbane monumental architecture. His mother, despairing because of his repeated absences, pats his cheeks. Lounès flinches. The apartment seethes in the ruckus, the transition is violent. His four brothers, Tarik, Ahmed, Khaled, Kamel and his three sisters, Khadija, Habiba and Souhila form a line in the hallway leading to the bathroom. Lounès zigzags his way to the bathroom, washes up, gets dressed and leaves. He escapes.

Without waiting for the elevator, Lounès slides down the stairs, makes his way through the lobby, takes Acacias street, in the direction of the bus stop. Fatigue quickly slows down his stride. At a hundred meters from his destination, he allows himself to take a well-deserved break.

In the rearview mirror of the school bus, Jean-Marc Lemoine watches a secondary school student who is running, then stops. The surrender, the defeated attitude, his hands on his hips reminds him of the big loss of the PSG. Here is the twelfth team member, he will not set foot on his bus. He starts up. Wait, there is someone here! It's not even time! No protest wards off his decision, too late to backtrack; yielding to the yelling would be a sign of weakness. Impetuously, he accelerates under the amplified protest.

Bus 232 slips away at the corner of Muguet Street. A nasty blow for Lounès who examines the empty scenery. Violent, unusual, vain, his effort paints a distressing picture. The natural course of history once more prevails over his will.

It is 8:30. Lounès wanders along Églantine Street. Why the hurry? Whether one minute late or twenty minutes late, the result will be the same, a long siesta will begin in the back of the classroom. No one will know that today, he had strived to be on time. Did the bus leave early? His reputation renders him guilty in the eyes of his teachers. He had sweated for nothing.

Arriving before the 10, he ties his shoelaces. A muffled and crackling voice escapes from the radio of the spice shop of Old Mohammed:

“A group of armed terrorists were arrested last night in Grigny. These young people, with all likelihood, Muslims, were taken by surprise in their building with an arsenal: hand guns, revolvers, pistols and machine guns... The leader of the gang, the eldest of the seven men, a twenty-seven year old Algerian, was wounded in the shoot-out which preceded this bust. His injuries are not life-threatening. This incident could be related to Al-Qaeda and the wave of arrests of these past weeks.

Soccer. Zinedine Zidane, the leader of the French team struck hard when he scored an outstanding goal twenty eight minutes into the game against Real Madrid—Barcelona...”

That’s a load of shit, says Lounès to himself. The Grand Borne district is several kilometers from the Pyramids, his neighborhood. The people there are sworn enemies of the people here, go figure why. The gangs of Évry are going to react just to see themselves on television. With the upcoming presidential election, the media coverage will be beautiful. That much more action! Fed up of going nowhere in a dreary city. Hocine who lives in the Grand Borne neighborhood will tell him the details.

Lounès looms within several cable lengths of the secondary school, a deep breath before a painful silence.

“To say yes, it is necessary to sweat and roll up your sleeves, grab hold of life full-handedly, up to your elbows. It is easy to say no, even if it means that you must die. All you have to do is stay still and wait. Wait to live, or even wait to be killed. It is too cowardly. ‘No’ is man’s creation...”

The noisy entrance of Lounès into class distracts Mrs. Lespinasse during Anouilh’s reading of *Antigone*. He gets ready to give his usual excuse, that his alarm didn’t go off, but his jaw hardly opened, she gives him a lecture. This time, she will not pretend to swallow any phoney excuse; the role-playing is over. Distracted, Lounès finds his way to his assigned seat, in the last row, believing that it is a purely formal chastisement. The flippancy does not pass, the teacher loses her temper in the most beautiful way. In a high-pitched voice, tears in her eyes, the betrayal of Gérard re-emerges because of *Antigone*.

Mocking murmurs accompany the anger. There is too much of it, and someone must pay. In order to grab their attention, she suddenly lifts her head, after remaining silent for some time. Lounès is the designated victim of a necessary forceful comeback.

“Amri, go to the principal’s office!”

Lounès emerges from his stupor, turns his head to the right and to the left, casting questioning glances.

“Go, I said!” puzzled shoulders shrugs. “Yes, I’m speaking to you!”

Raising his eyes to the sky, his arms dangling, Lounès mimes his lack of understanding. His first words of the day will not be directed to his French teacher.

Insolent, Lounès advances towards her, thrusting out his chest and looking her up and down while forcing a scornful smile. The silent defiance ends when he turns, then trudges to the door which he slams.

When the footsteps of Lounès no longer echo in the hallway, Catherine makes up an urgent excuse for discontinuing the play. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, her gestures are jerky. No room for weakness in a priority education zone, it is necessary for her to hide her grief.

Francis Vermeulen is a round figure. Nose, face, body, his look is made of concentric circles, giving him a friendly air which stands out at his job. Mr. Vermeulen is the principal of the Georges Brassens of Évry Secondary School.

At forty-two years old, he is jaded, weary of the empty promises of his administrators, of the apathy of the teaching body, of the wantonness of the unmotivated students. “For a new curriculum, new premises are needed.” The inaugural plaque, half detached, signed by Jack Lang, minister of national education fourteen years ago, reminds him vaguely of the fiasco of the former younger principal of France. He believed in changing the world with revolutionary principles. In his absence, today, Mr. Vermeulen has modified the regulations, eliminating the disciplinary committee.

Every two years, a repressive fever pushes him to strengthen his pedagogical methods. Lounès Amri, whose tall shadow appears in the door frame, is going to mark the start of this era of heightened strictness.

“So Amri, you have not lost your bad habits.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Of course not.”

“It is just a tardy!”

“It is a tardy *again*,” Mr. Vermeulen interrupts, frowning. “We no longer tolerate repeat offences. You are suspended for three days.”

“Three days!”

“And two hours of detention for protesting. You will receive an additional hour of detention for each word that you say. Go, leave, think about the thousand and one ways to throw away your life outside.”

Lounès rubs his chin without arguing. In class, at home, at the police station, it’s always the same old thing. Hasty justice leaves little room for speech, so one must keep quiet. The right to silence allows him to think about the consequences of being twenty minutes late.

*Translated from the French by Chinelo Okparanta*

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From the novel  
*Le petit Malik* (Paris, 2006)

## Le Petit Malik

### Age Five

You know, Bruno, he was different. About thirty, massive, the guy had the slender voice of a castrato. If you closed your eyes you'd have sworn he was a girl; in silhouette, you'd have thought of a gorilla. You get the picture; there was only one like him in the projects.

Bruno sold ice cream. He came by every afternoon at five and cheered up the neighborhood with his old show tune: "cling, cling, cling". As soon as we heard his bell we ran like crazy to get to him. Since he wasn't very bright, it was real easy to con him out of an ice cream or some change.

"A euro fifty for the cone. Out of five. How much do you get back?"

"Four euros."

"OK."

Scamming Bruno to the max had become a game. The trick was to show up with big bills, like twenty euros. The poor guy was completely lost with those amounts. Sometimes he gave back more than he was given. One day I got thirty euros cash back thanks to that little sleight of hand.

Then the big kids' took a turn. Bruno was like a Tintin comic. Anyone from seven to 77 could have a go. Some really mean old creeps would stick him with their useless francs. Kids asked for loans they never paid back. Bruno had a problem. He was too nice and he didn't know how to say no.

"Can I get two scoops for the price of one?"

"No problem."

"Can you put some more on top?"

"No problem."

"Can I pay my bill next month?"

"No problem."

"Can I pay last month's bill next month?"

"No problem."

Bruno always lost at that game. The problem was that he owned his little business. He believed in his business so much that he had mortgaged his inheritance, his deceased mother's house. His cash flow was merrily melting away but he kept on smiling. A childlike look always crossed his face when he asked us what we wanted. "Fool" was the word that described Bruno best because he was the dumbest of us all. But he was the happiest too.

Strangely, despite Bruno's Swiss cheese style memory, he always remembered everyone's favorite flavor. Me, it was chocolate; Abdou, my life-long friend, coffee. He never once made a mistake even though he couldn't add one plus one.

One day though, the inevitable happened. Bruno had to close shop. I would never again hear him say "so, you want a scoop of chocolate, right?" in that peerless voice.

His dream was gone and so was the roof over his head. We weren't too proud of ourselves when we saw him sitting on a piece of cardboard a few feet away from where he used to park his truck. The guilty conscience of the former scammers' and Bruno's kindness attracted generous relief from those who had forced him onto the streets. Go figure Bruno. He turned down all the big gifts.

"That's too much Mrs. Gazi; what will your children eat tonight?"

"No, Mr. Dupuis, not ten euros; I didn't do anything to deserve it."

"Mrs. Dialo, don't bring me anymore of this good stuff. I noticed that your children are getting thin. Keep it for them."

"You made some good tips, Mr. Gueireiro. Use the money to fix your kitchen. You were just talking to me about it."

"Mrs. Ming, your sheets are too nice for sleeping on the ground."

Everybody loved Bruno. If the Martians had landed, they would have been friends with him too. For sure.

Winter was cold that year. Bruno's face turned bluer by the day. Everyone took a turn inviting him in, to no avail. His pride - or his stupidity - stopped him from accepting what was freely offered. He was the only person we'd ever think of offering shelter to. The neighborhood was changing and trust was no longer in fashion.

One day Bruno lost it. The guy who had refused all handouts held up the Société Générale branch next door. He grabbed the cash with a water pistol. A helluva feat. The only problem was that it was *his* bank, in *his* neighborhood and that after the hold up, he went to back to sleep on *his* piece of cardboard. Bruno's castrato voice was one in a million. There were fifteen people in the bank when he went in. All fifteen recognized him. For a while they stuck to the theory that it was all a joke then, after an hour or so, they called the cops. Even the ruthless branch manager, Mr. Soulier, the one who throttled people with endless recovery procedures and commissions without the slightest tinge of guilt, he winced when Bruno was arrested.

During the trial Bruno explained that he had chosen that branch because it was the one that had ruined him. Mr. Soulier cried. The whole town testified for Mr. Le Guerrec, including his victims. Mr. LeGuerrec was Bruno, but no one had known his family name. To us, Bruno was just Bruno, like Mark, Luke, John and Matthew were Mark, Luke, John and Matthew in the Gospel. Believe me, Bruno was a Saint.

The Saint was sentenced to five years in jail. For armed robbery with a water pistol. The new President of the Republic had decided that a crime was a crime, period. He didn't want to hear about mitigating circumstances.

Bruno welcomed his friends to his vast gray prison, all one thousand of them. It drove the prison staff crazy. But since Bruno always got everyone on his good side, they gave him extra visiting hours and not one of the other prisoners complained.

One day it was me and my mom's turn. Thinking about the money I had stolen from the good man filled me with endless remorse. My jaw was clamped tight and not a word came out of my mouth. As simple as he was, Bruno was the most selfless one among us. He picked up on my mood.

"Are you mad at me, Malik?"

"No, that's not it. I've got a confession to make."

His eyes widened.

"We used to cheat you when you gave us our change."

The confession rose up from deep within me, like an alien thing. I lost control and burst into tears. My mother watched me anxiously.

"Don't cry Malik. You're hurting yourself."

"What do you mean? Look where it got you. Hey, I always wondered if you knew we were ripping you off."

"No..."

He didn't even know.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No... We had a good time. That's all that counts, right?"

The nicest man in the world...

The bookstore closed down shortly after it became self-service. Then it was the turn of the corner store, the new dealer hangout. The coffee shop was the only victim of a shoot out.

Then one day, all the shops in town were gone.

### Age 13

Mrs. Perdessian was reading Romain Gary's *Promise at Dawn* out loud. It was the part where the mother gave up everything for her young son. She fed him steak but never touched it. Her excuse was that she didn't like vegetables or meat. When he got up from the table, he surprised her scraping the bottom of a frying pan with bread. She was eating avidly. He realized that misery and devotion were the real reasons his mother was a vegetarian.

*I stood there for a moment, unmoving, petrified, gazing with horror at the pan half-hidden under the napkin and at my mother's anxious, guilty smile. I burst into tears and ran away.*

I couldn't say what moved me more, whether it was the mother's spirit of sacrifice or the distraught look on Perdessian's face. Her inflections came back to me as I twisted the excerpt every which way going home from school. The part where Gary burst into tears and ran away still got me all worked up.



The same scene was acted out that evening at dinner time. My mom never sat down with me to eat. Never. Was she, the woman my father left when I was born, scraping up my leftovers? I hadn't seen her with another man since Boualem. She had rejected him because of me. She was about forty and still beautiful. She could have seduced someone. Instead, she was making sure I had a future. Gary's mother was my mother.

The awful scene made me bratty again. My mother shopped at super discount stores where she stuffed me with ersatz brand name products. Instead of Coca-Cola, I got Artic Cola; instead of Nutella spread, I got Mustella... I wanted all of the things everyone else got and I whined every time we went shopping. Sometimes my sniveling won the day. I felt just like everyone else. I was a little jerk.

My nights were filled with dreams of my mother licking the bottom of a pan. The next day I started stalking her. I spied on her but I was never able to catch her red-handed. She was too smart for that. Sometimes, when I tried to sneak up on her from the kitchen or some other room, she would jump out of a corner and shout "hey!" to scare me. She seemed to have special radar that could sense me coming, like Spiderman or Daredevil, my favorite superheroes.

I turned to the mail and looked for a letter from a lawyer, unpaid bills, or... whatever. My mind was alert to some invisible tragedy. Since it never came, I resorted to radical action: I ate only as much as was absolutely necessary.

I lost nine pounds in a month. I wasn't very thick to start with. I became deathly pale. My mom pressed me with questions about problems I might be having. I denied everything. *Is someone bullying you at school? Are you in love? Did you get a bad grade? Did you see an accident? Is a grownup bothering you when you leave school? Did something happen to you, like on TV?* "TV" meant sordid stories about pedophiles. She feared the worst for the apple of her eye.

My grades crashed. What bothered me most though, other than my Mom's anguish, was the soccer. I could still out-manuever an opponent but didn't have the speed to get away. I could feel the flow of the game but lacked the lucidity to execute. Salomon an Abdou chipped in to buy me some food. It was too late; I'd lost my appetite.

The school shrink's diagnosis was anorexia nervosa, very rare in men. "My son's not mentally ill!" my mother answered. The social worker stuck her nose into our business, looking for abuse.

"Does your mother hit you?"

"No."

"Are you protecting her?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Does that mean yes?"

"It means no."

(Me? Protect my mother when it was exactly the opposite!) And yet, my sardonic laugh was interpreted, over-interpreted, and misinterpreted. The shrink's brilliant mind saw a defense mechanism. Defense means attack, attack means aggression, aggression means aggressor, and aggressor means crime or transgression. That's

more or less the reasoning that got me sent me to a foster home for two weeks. I just got worse. I wouldn't eat at all. My foster parents called the social worker who called the shrink who, by some miracle, guessed that I would let myself die if they didn't give me back to my mother.

When I got home, my mom hugged me and covered me with kisses and Lindt, Poulain, Milka and Nestle chocolate. She insisted that I wash down entire bars with real Coca-Cola. She explained that they would tear me away from her again if I had any more problems. I swore I would eat more. No more shrinks, social workers, or foster homes would ever come between us again.

First they shot my butt full of vitamins. Then I ate without appetite and gained weight for appearances' sake. My soccer skills and grades didn't recover. Too bad. As long as I looked normal, no one was too concerned.

Yet, the promise at dawn was the twilight of my innocence.

*Translated from the French by Gary Gluck*

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