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*Love Stories*

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*To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life: A Novel*

by Hervé Guibert, translated by Linda Coverdale.

Quartet, 246 pp., £12.95, November 1991, 9780704370005

*The Man in the Red Hat*

by Hervé Guibert, translated by James Kirkup.

Quartet, 111 pp., £12.95, May 1993, 0 7043 7046 8

*The Compassion Protocol*

by Hervé Guibert, translated by James Kirkup.

Quartet, 202 pp., £13.95, October 1993, 9780704370593

Hervé Guibert died on 27 December 1991 from complications resulting from an unsuccessful suicide attempt. He had been ill with Aids for several years and in 1990 had made a spectacular appearance on French television during which he’d discussed his illness and the book he’d written about it, To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life. The thousands of letters he received as a result encouraged him to write another book, The Compassion Protocol, and to participate in another prime-time interview. This time he was wearing a red hat, the very one referred to in the title of a subsequent work, The Man in the Red Hat. During his final year of life he also made a home video, La Pudeur et l’impudeur, which was screened on television a month after his death. Yet another Aids book, Cytomégalovirus, was published at this time and a posthumous novel, Le Paradis, appeared at the beginning of 1993.

As an heir to Sade and Bataille, Hervé Guibert had never felt squeamish about rubbing his reader’s nose in all his bodily excretions. His very first ‘text’ (for once this pretentious term is useful, since Guibert’s writing often confounds genres) is unqualifiedly disgusting. In fact La Mort propagande combines several of the themes he would develop more extensively later on. First, the desire evinced by Proust’s character Mlle Vinteuil to humiliate her father in Guibert’s case becomes a nearly erotic pleasure in spitting on his parents’ image. Guibert has a grotesque flash to his childhood, when his mother would become so excited chatting with the butcher that a fluid would flow down her leg and mix with the sawdust on the floor, a process the little boy beside her would observe with fascination. Other tropes include sessions during which he photographs his bodily wastes, which he’s been saving up for the occasion; cottaging, during which he’s beaten up and repeatedly violated; and a concluding scene during which his dead body is dissected, a moment that mixes science with sexual frenzy. Later Guibert would become a well-known photographer and the photography critic for Le Monde. His taste for sexual masochism would produce a slim volume of out-and-out pornography, Les Chiens, in which a master treats his slaves like dogs, confining them to a kennel where they are allowed to lick and play with slabs of cooked meat but never to swallow them. He later claimed this volume had been inspired by Francis Bacon’s paintings. The brutal way of regarding his own body, prefigured in the suggestively titled La Mort propagande, was fully developed only in his last Aids books.

A collection of Guibert’s photographs, Le Seul Visage, begins with a startling admission. ‘In my writing there’s no brake on what I do, no misgivings since I’m virtually the only one who counts (other people become abstract characters bearing just initials), whereas in photography there’s the body of other people, relatives, friends, and I’m always a bit worried: am I not about to betray them by turning them in this way into visual objects?’ What’s arresting about this admission is that it suggests the very real betrayals in his fiction don’t count for him since Guibert feels he alone fully exists on the page. Although his narcissism may give an antic energy to his prose, fortunately it does not hood his observing eye. His characters are very real indeed and his betrayals as succulent as those Genet promises but seldom delivers.

Among his photographs are portraits of his friends, many of whom also show up in his books: Gina Lollobrigida, Isabelle Adjani, the director Patrice Chéreau (with whom Guibert wrote the filmscript L’Homme blessé), the novelist Mathieu Lindon (book critic for Libération and son of Jérôme Lindon, publisher of Les Editions de Minuit, Guibert’s first publisher), Guibert’s parents and finally his mentor, Michel Foucault, shown in a dressing gown before a mirror and the multiplied, distorted reflections of lacquered doors.

I first met the hyacinthine, ringleted, foggyvoiced young Guibert through Foucault in 1983. He was perhaps Foucault’s best friend. Although Foucault liked working with women (Arlette Farge was a favourite), he didn’t like socialising with them; once I invited Susan Sontag to dinner and he hissed at me when she left the room for a moment: ‘Why did you invite her?’ He preferred all-male evenings, preferably with talented youths such as Jacques Almira (whose first novel he introduced), Gilles Barbedette (to whom he granted his last deathbed interview), Mathieu Lindon and Guibert – all novelists, all gay, all attractive in a slender, ambiguous way, a bit like the willowy ephebes gathered around Plato in the painting by Théodore Chassériau in the Museé d’Orsay. I hasten to add that these boys were the exact opposite of the men Foucault felt attracted to. Since his ephebes were neither intellectuals nor objects of desire but artists, they suited his love of beauty and his cult of friendship.

Guibert, who was only 28 at the time, had an earnest, wide-eyed, almost somnambulistic manner, devoid of the irony and bitchiness characteristic of his extremely rude generation in Paris. He was polite, remote, abstracted, although the moment he drew Foucault aside he became hushed and serious, incandescent. Oh, and I forgot to mention he had the most arresting, angelic face I’ve ever seen, with his heavy down-turned lips, vast blue eyes, perfect skin, blond curls. Later he cut all his hair off, which only threw the beauty of his features into higher relief, freed at last from their conventional Burne-Jones frame.

The first good things he wrote were a story in Les Aventures singulières and a short novel, Voyage avec deux enfants, both published in 1982, the same year he brought out the pornographic Les Chiens. The last story in Les Aventures singulières is called ‘Le Désir d’imitation’ and is a heartless but moving account of his friendship with Gina Lollobrigida. He goes to visit her in Italy; her chauffeur picks him up at the train station and drives him to her house, where he is given her basement sex hideaway as his bedroom, decorated with Indian statues of lascivious goddesses and perfumed with clouds of burning incense. The rest of the house is lugubrious, the grounds guarded by savage dogs that can be called off only by shouting commands in German (Sitz! Platz! Auf!). Every night she lets her guest choose another of her films to watch; she keeps the reels in a frigidaire. In a safe beside her bed she hides her jewels, tapes of her telephone conversations with old lovers and nude photos of herself when young (no one has ever seen these pictures).

The old actress is in love with the narrator, but he despises her and dreams of killing her. When he confesses his evil thought, she laughs a huge laugh, delighted by the idea of dying at his hands. They spend New Year’s Eve together and she makes him a bizarre toast:

You think my mouth smells of powder, that it smells of flesh, of mucus or rather that it smells of wine, that it smells of vagina, that it smells of death. You say my mouth disgusts you, that my mouth stinks, that it stinks of death. This house is like a bank. I don’t sleep. I’m alone and the dogs roam around it. Don’t leave. The champagne is warm, too bad. Cheers. Happy New Year. Stay a little longer with me, all right?

The beautiful young gay man and the ageing star keep circling around one another. The story ends when she says: ‘Even in our impossible love there is still a little bit of love.’

Voyage avec deux enfants is a very different sort of love story. The narrator leaves his real lover, a young man his own age, in order to make a trip through Morocco with another man, B., and two pubescent boys. The narrator isn’t even attracted to the kids but talks himself into desiring them, almost as though he’s submitting to a monastic discipline. Characteristically, he chooses to concentrate on the homelier of the two boys. Nothing much happens. They travel from one town to another, staying mostly at cheap camping sites but splurging on the Gazelle d’Or, a luxury hotel in Taroudant. The boys are wise to the fact that the men desire them but deny them, tease them, insist on their privacy. Only on the last night, before flying back to Paris, do the narrator and his chosen finally have some sort of dragged sex on the rooftop of their hotel, where no sooner does the nightclub next door at last turn off its rock music than the muezzin begins to chant his morning prayers. Guibert captures perfectly all the nose-picking tedium and jokey empty-headedness of paedophilia, the exhausting boredom of wasting so much time on idiotic brats just to secure a few seconds of bliss. Not since Humbert Humbert has anyone made this condition so crystal clear.

After the narrator returns to Paris he discovers that in spite of himself he’s fallen completely under the boy’s spell. He rejects his adult lover, daydreams about Morocco, forgets to bathe or eat. He persuades the boy to write him a letter, which the boy does: ‘It contained no expected, conventional formula of tenderness, it didn’t even say “I kiss you” at the end, still less “I love you,” it made no allusion to a shared experience, to a memory, and yet its very structure emanated, like a watermark, a marvellous tenderness.’

Guibert’s next novel, Les Lubies d’Arthur, was the first I read, soon after it was published in 1983. At the time I liked it enough that I felt moved to write in American Vogue that Guibert was one of the most promising new French writers, but now the novel strikes me as mannered, formless, misguided in its surreal high jinks. Two homosexual bums, glorying in their filth, wander all over the world performing disgusting, sadistic acts. Even here, however, Guibert’s constant inventiveness, his ease and pleasure in writing, his pétillant style are present, as they are in all his texts, even the least successful. I doubt if a talent such as Guibert’s would have prospered in the English-speaking world, where books are expensive, launched with fanfare and extensively reviewed. In France he was free to publish three or four books a year, they cost just forty francs or so each in the soft-cover Editions de Minuit format, and they were never taken too seriously. In fact they were read more as chapters in one long oeuvre than as crucial, individual milestones.

Des aveugles, which came out in 1985, was his first book to be published by Gallimard. Guibert had done a reportage on the Institut National des Jeunes Aveugles and later became a volunteer reader for the blind; his novel, which created a stir, was adapted for the stage. Less extravagant than Les Lubies d’ Arthur but similarly imagined, Des aveugles is about a young blind couple, Josette and Robert, who live in an institution for the blind. When another blind man, Taillegeur, falls in love with Josette, he sets up an elaborate series of obstacles designed to kill Robert, but Robert outwits him and uses the same pitfalls to engineer Taillegeur’s death. The melodramatic plot is unconvincing, but once again Guibert beautifully evokes an impossible love, a love between two unfortunates, a love that contains large measures of need and hate – true love, in short.

This is the sort of love that circulates among the family members in Guibert’s best book, Mes parents. Pitilessly, Guibert details his parents’ rituals, their superstitions, their favourite magazines, their fears, the emotional blackmail they practise on their children. First the narrator’s 16-year-old sister becomes pregnant and refuses an abortion; then the parents discover their son’s homosexuality. The mother shouts: ‘A daughter pregnant at 16 and a son who’s queer, what did I ever do to the good Lord?’ The parents begin to police their son. The father pretends he could lose his job if his son’s homosexuality becomes known. The mother roots through the love letters her boy is receiving and throws them hysterically in his face. The narrator coolly remarks: ‘When I’ll lean over your dead bodies, my dear parents, instead of kissing your skin I’ll pinch it, I’ll pull out a hank of your hair.’

And yet a curious sensuality circulates between the parents and their handsome child. When the boy’s foreskin becomes infected, the father administers the treatment every evening and, at the son’s insistence, even shows him his own penis, which the boy perceives as though it is an x-ray, a visionary phallus denuded of its flesh. Years later, when the son is grown-up and living in Paris, the father comes to visit. He seems timid, provincial, and insists that his son order for him in a restaurant. He tells his offspring that he is en beauté, something he’s never said to his wife, and remarks that he is sure he will like everything his son writes since it is ‘the voice of my blood’. On a holiday trip home the son becomes more and more passive, fills his days with the leaden performance of basic functions, longs to escape, doesn’t, finally bars his father from the room and photographs his mother, halfundressed. Time, he notices, slows down, becomes festive; the pictures don’t come out but these phantom images point toward something ‘other than imagery – towards narrative’.

Having broken a taboo with his frank and sometimes repellent account of his feelings for his parents, Guibert is now free to launch into his most horrendous book, Vous m’avez fait former des fantômes, a nightmarish, stomach-turning récit about capturing and torturing children. The title comes from a passage in a letter Sade sent to his wife: ‘You’ve filled me with fantasies that now I must realise.’ Guibert’s fantasies run to boys, no longer invited on lovely trips to Morocco but branded, put into burlap sacks and hung from hooks. One of the adult men stabs a particular sack and sucks the fresh blood from the cloth. A sustained infamy, this novel has only one parallel in English today, Dennis Cooper’s narratives about murdering boys, Frisk and Closer.

Two years later, in 1989, Guibert brought out his purest, most idiosyncratic love story, Fou de Vincent. It is the tale of an abortive affair with someone totally ‘unsuitable’. When a friend meets Vincent he asks Guibert: ‘Who’s that?’ On discovering the kid’s name he says: ‘That’s Vincent?’ Vincent is a very young ne’er-do-well on a skateboard, half-wild, whose erotic fantasies are all heterosexual, who has an ugly face but a beautiful torso, a small penis, rough palms, who refuses his ass to Guibert (‘that’s for caca’), and when Isabelle Adjani asks if at least Vincent loves Hervé, all Hervé can do is blubber the noncommittal Roman verbal shrug, ‘Beuh ...’

If the other characters in Guibert’s previous autofictions were just initials, Vincent is named, has pride of place in the title and is studied in detail. For the first time one believes in Guibert’s love, which is not an ‘interesting’ obsession he’s talked himself into or a scary story he’s cooked up to frighten himself. I own a Mapplethorpe photo of a French guy, a young white man, one of Mapplethorpe’s lovers. The picture was taken in the mid-Seventies, and it has the same density, the same specificity as Fou de Vincent. The man is as particularised, adored but not stylised, as Vincent, unlike Mapplethorpe’s totemic blacks or Guibert’s faceless initials. What lends an aura to Vincent is his particularity, the mole on his haunch, his severely infected foot, and his death, for at the very beginning of the book Guibert announces to us that Vincent is already dead, that he jumped to his death while stoned (there’s a suggestion that Vincent knew he had Aids). In this book Guibert has exchanged one Proustian theme (spitting on the beloved parent’s photo) for another (a passionate love for someone who isn’t even one’s type). The book is scarcely organised at all, just journal entries, some of them dated, though the years ascend and descend. Snapshots.

Guibert lived in Rome for two years (1987-9) at the Villa Medici; he had won the modern equivalent to the Prix de Rome and wrote a bored, spiteful book about his sojourn, L’Incognito, named after a gay pick-up bar for gigolos. The tone is listless. He takes note of all the absurdities of the villa, which he calls the Spanish Academy. He has encounters with hustlers that go nowhere. Almost casually, at the end of this 227-page novel (published in 1989), Guibert mentions he has Aids, which he jokingly tells the reader he contracted from reading the newspaper.

Quickly he must have realised that Aids was not just a medical curiosity or a product of American hysteria but rather his destiny and his subject, one that would bring together his hatred of his own body, his taste for the grotesque and his infatuation with death, a subject that would also give him something new, a pressure of fate brought to bear daily, hourly, on his previously aleatory existence. Henceforth if he travelled, if he read a book, if he talked to a cute guy with crossed eyes, the comings and goings of his life would no longer extend towards a sickeningly indefinite horizon; now death, which he’d always flirted with, was immanent, and dying might at any moment lend a sense of order, ending, necessity, to his most random acts.

Or as Guibert himself put it in To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life (1990):

Jules had once said to me, at a time when he didn’t believe we were infected, that Aids was a marvellous disease. And it’s true that I was discovering something sleek and dazzling in its hideousness, for though it was certainly an inexorable illness, it wasn’t immediately catastrophic, it was an illness in stages, a very long flight of steps that led assuredly to death, but whose every step represented a unique apprenticeship. It was a disease that gave death time to live and its victims time to die, time to discover time, and in the end to discover life, so in a way those green monkeys of Africa had provided us with a brilliant modern invention.

Michel Foucault appears in this book under the name of Muzil. He tells no one he is ill, not even his lover. Guibert would have liked to be as discreet, ‘allowing friendships to live as lightly as air, carefree and eternal’. But he needs the sympathy of his friends, starting with that of Jules, his lover, who is also married. The title of the book refers to a former friend who works for an American drug company and has promised to give the Salk Aids vaccine to the narrator and to his lover Jules as well as to Jules’s wife and children. The ‘friend’, however, keeps putting the narrator off, though he does manage to administer the vaccine to a casual sexual partner easily enough.

The novel begins with the narrator’s announcement that he is not going to die, that he is going to be the first person to beat this disease. He vows not to tell his parents (‘my chief concern, in this business, is to avoid dying in the spotlight of the parental eye’). When Muzil first hears of the disease he falls off the sofa laughing (‘a cancer that would hit only homosexuals, no, that’s too good to be true. I could just die laughing’). After the narrator suspects that he and Jules are infected, ‘this certainty changed everything ... sapped my strength while at the same time increasing it tenfold’. A large part of this new energy goes into writing: ‘when I’d learned I was going to die, I’d suddenly been seized with the desire to write every possible book – all the ones I hadn’t written yet, at the risk of writing them badly: a funny, nasty book, then a philosophical one ... and to write not only the books of my anticipated maturity but also, with the speed of light, the slowly ripened books of my old age.’ Guibert is even forced to admit that he is exhilarated by his new close proximity to death: ‘Ever since I was 12 years old ... I’ve had a thing about death.’

One of the successful aspects of this book is the portrait of Foucault – something new for Guibert, the observation of someone outside the orbit of his obsessions. The worst part is the recital of grudges, the settling of scores – against Adjani, because she lets her whims interfere with his chance to earn some badly-needed money, and especially against Bill, the friend who did not save his life. The end of the book is devoted to hopes for the vaccine and efforts to corner Bill into delivering it, all to no avail. The narrator has been told that the vaccine is no longer effective if the patient has fewer than 200 T-cells; on the last page of the book the narrator has hit 200 and Bill has vanished. (The scandal caused by Guibert’s novel apparently convinced the American drug company in question not to conduct a trial for the Salk vaccine in France, which was judged to be too disputatious a nation. In any event the benefits of the vaccine are still in doubt and even its defenders now set the cut-off point not at 200 but at 600 T-cells.)

In The Compassion Protocol Guibert, energised by anti-viral pills his lover steals from the bedside of a dead ballet dancer, begins a new journal (‘It is when what I am writing takes the form of a journal that I most strongly feel that I am writing fiction’). Beautifully translated by James Kirkup, the book brings together themes such as Guibert’s intermittent fight to survive, his continuing struggle to write, to deal with his parents, to find the proper treatment, even to accept his rapid ageing (‘In 1990 I am 95, although I was born in 1955’).

Having dealt directly with the disease in To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life, The Compassion Protocol and Cytomégalovirus, Guibert then wrote three fantasias, as one might call them, on his grim theme. The Man in the Red Hat, which is about the art world, recounts in a haphazard way: attempts to find a missing painter in Moscow during the last days of the USSR; a disastrously gloomy stay in Crete in the house of a rich Greek painter named Yannis; and the successful pursuit of the eccentric, reclusive painter Balthus. The effect of putting Aids in the background of a cops-and-robbers tale of the art world is to make it all the more menacing. At the end of a long paragraph the narrator mentions he’s in a café where he’s served by a new waiter:

He kept glancing sidelong at me from time to time, his innocent eyes wide with fright. I too was watching him sidelong. I was longing to lick his hole. But we were already in different worlds separated by an invisible glass which is the passage from life to death, and who knows, from death to life.

He mentions his unquenchable taste for work, just as at the end of To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life he acknowledges that he prefers writing to living, that he so dislikes his fellow men that his only remaining companion is whatever book he happens to be working on. In Mon valet et moi Guibert builds a short narrative on the idea that Aids makes young people old. Without once mentioning Aids, the book gives the thoughts of a very old millionaire (living in the next century) who becomes more and more a victim of his valet, a sort of fiendish secret sharer. After making himself indispensable, the valet, a former movie actor, pushes the master out of his bedroom and barricades himself inside. Behind closed doors he transforms the room into a Sioux teepee (a dim recollection of a similar scene in Cocteau’s Les Enfants terribles). The valet even begins to avail himself of Monsieur’s morphine. And yet the complicity between master and servant is loving if bizarre and violent, and the valet is willing to let his master dictate the very text we’re reading, which is dated ‘Kyoto-Anchorage-Paris. January-February 2036’. Throughout Guibert’s eventful and rushed writing career he had regularly alternated surreal novels filled with invented characters and events with thinly disguised autobiography (often not disguised at all). Mon valet et moi is perhaps his most successful invention, partly because it gives in such lip-smacking, shocking detail the truth of physical decline and of the humiliation of being dependent on a hired helper. It’s also a very funny book. In one scene the master makes his valet drive him to the Rambouillet forest, where he’s discovered a factory that does nothing but pulp the novels of Marguerite Duras, ‘a writer of the Eighties’. As he explains: ‘This occupation doesn’t amuse my valet, he thinks it’s unhealthy, he says: “Why do you have it in for this poor woman?”’

Guibert’s last book, Le Paradis, was written during the summer of 1991, a few months before his death. He is no longer escaping his destiny by projecting himself into the future. Now he’s concocted an Other who is a contemporary, a hero who is Swiss, heterosexual, healthy, vacationing on a tropical island. But this ‘paradise’ is not immune from the author’s fears, since the story begins with the narrator’s girlfriend’s death. Jayne has gone swimming where she shouldn’t have, and her body has been dragged by the tide across a coral reef, which eviscerated her.

Although the first two-thirds of this narrative are coherent, the last third is a delirious confusion. Sometimes the character is the heterosexual Swiss, but at other times he is Hervé Guibert. Sometimes Jayne is dead, but at others alive. Real events in Guibert’s life impinge on the action. He loses his memory temporarily. He travels to Africa against his doctor’s advice (an accident first recounted at the end of The Man in the Red Hat). He remembers Muzil-Foucault, who never properly understood that his philosophical works were really novels. His lover Jules tells him he looks like a zombie. He is haunted by his mad heroes – Artaud, Strindberg, Nietzsche. (At the beginning of the book Jayne is writing a thesis on Nietzsche, Strindberg and Robert Walser). But Rimbaud is his true model, the Rimbaud who travelled to Africa and staked everything on earning a fortune so that he could marry a respectable woman and return to his village in glory, the Rimbaud who died of a wound contracted in Abyssinia. The narrator has installed a stuffed green African monkey on his desk, the very monkey that he claims transmitted Aids to the human race.

Despite attacks of delirium and amnesia, despite a loss of motor control, Guibert continues to write. He knows that he has become old like a thousand-year-old iguana, its hide tanned by the sun. He takes note of Rimbaud’s remark in a letter from Africa that he has aged five years in one. He contemplates suicide. But until the final moment he will continue to write, this man who, like Cocteau, can say he has turned his body into a fountain pen. ‘When I no longer write I start to die,’ he remarks near the end of Le Paradis.

Guibert placed himself in a tough Continental line of writers. He himself cites Sade, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Strindberg, Artaud, Bataille and Thomas Bernhard (Guibert admired Bernhard for his tenacity and autobiographical honesty). Because of his heritage and a natural inclination towards the sordid, he approached Aids with a lot less charity and emotion than such American writers as Larry Kramer and Paul Monette, and with less of a turn for psychological realism and moral exactitude than the English novelist Adam Mars-Jones. And yet this very taste for the grotesque, this compulsion to offend, finally affords Guibert the necessary rhetorical panache to convey the full, exhilarating horror of his predicament.

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