

Yen Nguyen
The rendezvous

Translated from French by Andy Pham

Iwent to see him despite my resolutions. His cheeks were gaunt and his eyes sunken burning with fever. He stared at his hands flat on the table and refused to look at me.

— Why did you do it? I asked, trying to control my voice.

— ...

— You would do again if you had another chance?

Superfluous question that I asked anyway to get to the bottom of it. How to redo what he had done? Drug dealing to see his wife die from a bullet to the heart during a police raid and scooping seven years in prison without parole. Before his silence, I insisted:

— You would do it again?

He gave a dry laugh:

— What else do you want me to do?

I clenched my fists. This man could not be Serge, my brother and my childhood idol. Was he aware that it was about Maud, his wife?

— “I loved her,” he interjected with an air of defiance.

— You loved her!

— She was happy.

I would have laughed if my entire body had not begun to tremble. Rage suddenly grabbed me. I threw at him meanly: “Obviously, we can count on you to make it to our rendezvous, right? See you tomorrow.” Had he perceived my irony? I did not wait for his answer. I left without a word.

Maud was the most wonderful woman I have ever known. She used to live in the semi-detached house next to ours. While growing up, she and Serge naturally were destined to one another. I was Serge’s five years younger brother. Being by myself after the death of our mother, I followed him wherever he went. He was always surrounded by a swarm of kids ready to execute his will and often forgot me. Maud took me under her wings. She smeared me, arranged my clothes, and made sure my meals were correct. While Serge played group leader, she sat me at the foot of a tree and told me stories of ogres and witches. I felt no desire to integrate the pack my brother led. I could spend hours watching Maud and listening to her. I accomplished all her wishes, as absurd as they could be, such as climbing trees, jumping in the river one day in October, or picking the neighbor’s strawberries.

On their wedding day, I had acted as their witness. When the priest had blessed their union, it had seemed that he had included me in his gesture. I had made a vow in silence to love them and be faithful to them all the rest of my life.

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I regularly came to their home and Serge often teased me with what he called my shyness towards girls. Sometimes I happened to go out with some but very quickly I realized - or the girl realized - that our relationship went nowhere. My visits to Maud and Serge were enough to fill my evenings and my weekends. Unfortunately, shortly after their marriage, I had to leave them for an internship in Lyon as part of my studies. I had not wanted to go, but Maud had insisted. "Listen", she said, "six months go by quickly. You can come back to visit us in the meantime. Let's pick a day." Before my silence, she had continued: "Let's take the 1st of November. It's a holiday. Let's see ..." She had headed to the wall calendar and exclaimed : " What was I saying? It falls on a Friday. We will have the whole weekend. This is fantastic! " Serge had added: " Very good idea." He had stood up and putting his hand flat on his forehead, had solemnly promised that he would rather die than miss this rendezvous. Maud and I had burst out laughing. One after another, we had mimicked him. I had suddenly felt appeased.

How could I have thought that I would go to the cemetery for this meeting scheduled only three months ago? I should never had left them or then listened to my intuition. One night over the phone, Maud had announced that Serge had received a promotion and a fabulous bonus. The amount she had revealed had seemed disproportionate given the company size and Serge's position. But I felt she was so proud that I did not want to play party pooper. I had heard voices in the background. Maud had explained that some of Serge's colleagues had come for the occasion. "They are so loud," I had told her. Maud had laughed: "They are celebrating." When Serge had come to the phone, I had congratulated him. He had declared with a smug laugh: "When you'll be done with your internship, me too I'll be done with getting up at six in the morning." A light feeling of discomfort had seized me. I should have seriously thought of this sentence and known what it had hidden: Serge, small group leader had become gang leader.

The cemetery was not empty at this hour of the morning as I had thought. Some silhouettes moved like me, silently and lonely. One of them caught my attention. Tall, thin, with prominent shoulders under a black leather jacket, slightly swinging arms, with a little air of cowboy, it reminded me of suddenly ... Serge. It walked towards the same direction as I did, originating from the left alley while I came from the center. It was him without a doubt. I took a step towards him when I saw him kneel, arrived at Maud's tomb. Head between his hands, he seemed absorbed in deep meditation. When he stood up, he turned to me and raised his fist twice in my direction. Among us, members of Serge's group, this gesture meant "We are the strongest" as a way of greeting. Then he walked towards the exit. I wanted to rush to him but as if he guessed my intention, he quickened his pace. "See you later," I shouted. My voice carried by the emptiness of the place resounded oddly. Without slowing down, he disappeared at the turn of the driveway.

The phone rang when I opened the door of my house. I had trouble hearing my interlocutor's voice as it was so low. The prison director announced that my brother had committed suicide this morning. It was not known how he managed to obtain a piece of mirror. He had cut his veins. "My brother did not have permission to leave?" I asked, haggard. The

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silence on the other end lasted a few seconds. "Indeed, he made a request that the judge turned down. He should have expected it anyway. But ... is that a reason to commit suicide?" I thought of the figure seen this morning in the cemetery. Yes, I would have told the director if my throat did not suddenly block. Yes, knowing Serge, it was certainly a reason. He had a promise to keep.