

A MAN WAKES WITH a start. Grabs his watch. It's easily in reach—his bed is a mattress on the floor. Beside him, a woman sleeps facedown, under thick bedclothes, arms akimbo, her features not visible. The man rises, sprays something over his face from an aerosol can (a French thing?), then finishes dressing in two (!) silk scarves and a snug blazer. A last look at the sleeping woman and he's out the door. But he doesn't go far, yet—just down the stairs to the next landing, in fact, where a neighbor answers his knock. He asks if he can borrow her car and she promptly agrees, but reminds him the turn signal doesn't work. She offers her own solution: "I never turn left." How much accommodation to what's broken, we might quickly wonder, is too much? Cars are like us, abundant and complex, entirely of their age, often beautiful, evident in their diminishment, unmistakable in their ultimate breakdowns.

Turns out it's one of those Peugeotts about the size and patina of a stylish bike helmet. Having parked along a boulevard, the man appears to be on some kind of genteel stakeout. He sits in the driver's seat wearing sunglasses with oval lenses, scowling over *Le Monde*. When he leaps out it's to waylay a group of four students, three of whom walk on while he blocks the way of the fourth, a woman who seems irritated by his unexpected presence. "I wanted to tell you, 'I've come to get you,'" he announces, parrying her annoyance with his imagined version of how their meeting would unfold. (My school French a dim memory, I rely on the subtitles—one of translation's anonymous genres, and all the more difficult to trust.) It turns out they were lovers, now aren't. He urges her to consider all the precious time they've already lost. *Temps perdu*, he even says—we're having a Proustian encounter. After someone leaves you, after the tether of commitment snaps, there's nothing left but this abstract, bloodless talk, and yet there's a duty to say it all, like washing the plates after a bacchanal. "You should have said, 'I expected you,'" he instructs her, as their conversation shifts to a park bench before they carry on to a café (only after she agrees to pay). "You know," he tells her, "I feel you in me so deeply, so near—I can't believe you feel nothing." "What novel do you think you're in?" she asks. Funny, this familiar tactic, to accuse the lover of living in a book or a movie, as if those forms did not flower from the soil of feeling and experience. And isn't this a movie.

JEAN EUSTACHE'S *LA MAMAN et la putain* (*The Mother and the Whore*), from 1973, is a bit hard to come by, as Eustache's family has thus far prevented the DVD or streaming release of this or any of his films. I hadn't seen it in years. My girlfriend Rachel went home to Paris for two months, and as a way to commune in her absence we'd gone back and forth suggesting movies to watch "together," hitting play simultaneously in our respective time zones. She'd heard Eustache's film mentioned before, and was curious to see it. I told her I'd like to watch it again, too—but how? It turned out she'd obtained a ripped .mp4 from an acquaintance with a trove of obscure films at his disposal. At some level she knows, or could guess, that this acquaintance had once been a rival of mine, in a bygone romantic entanglement, but probably didn't give a second thought to asking him. The severity of one's own drama drops off so precipitously in the estimation of others. It was all so long ago. And besides, she and I are far from love triangles these days, unless we count, as our third point, the almost singular figure the past becomes, or on the contrary some unknown person who might walk out of the future—a possibility this movie is about to insinuate—with a timing so arbitrary it's indistinguishable from grace.

WHY WON'T THE WOMAN return to the man? Might as well ask, why does she hear him out all afternoon, when she has, by her own admission, another lover waiting, and classes to attend. Desperate, perhaps wondering if she'll ever quite decisively cut the cord of his devotion, he tells her, "The day I stop suffering, when I work it out, as you say, I'll have become someone else, and I don't want that. That day, we'll have lost each other forever." The novel he thinks he's in is *À la recherche du temps perdu*. This woman even shares her name with Proust's narrator's first love: Gilberte.

THE MAN IS ALEXANDRE, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, who was 29 years old in 1973. He had already played many roles, including the character of Antoine Doinel—the filmic alter ego of director François Truffaut—in four films by the time he made *The Mother and the Whore* with Eustache. Truffaut had cast him in 1959's *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) based on a sense of affinity with his own troubled youth. “Jean-Pierre,” said Truffaut of his star, “seeks to hurt, shock and wants it to be known...Why? Because he’s unruly, while I was sly. Because his excitability requires that things happen to him, and when they don’t occur quickly enough, he provokes them.” The director of Léaud’s school warned Truffaut that the boy was arrogant and defiant. Truffaut found him brilliant and kind. The relationship was more than that of director and actor; Léaud grew up a double. He revised, even as he played, over decades, a version of Truffaut’s past self.

LÉAUD IS MESMERIZING TO watch, compact and energetic, a cockerel. His masculinity, like anyone's, is an interpretation, a variation on a theme. I wince at its shrillness. He never stifles his egoism, and seems to only flash his vulnerability in order to periodically release the tension his overbearingness creates around him. But by this same token, he seems manifestly a little boy, and the women around him tasked with letting him perpetually remain one.

ALEXANDRE TELLS GILBERTE HE'S ending their conversation. It has exhausted him. He even touches his temples, winces, and struts away—his bellbottoms toll. Emoting, imagining, and persuading are labor. Like directing a movie. Léaud played a director, this same year, in Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. Truffaut-like, his hands raised in two L shapes to frame a prospective shot, he sets out to evoke on film the magical childhood of his lover, played by Maria Schneider. But we understand him to be pretentious, overly sensitive, cut off from the animal energy that animates Marlon Brando, to whom Schneider is erotically drawn—and whom she finally kills, for the hopelessly tangled, twofold reason of being appalled by his lower social class and frightened by his violence. Bertolucci's movie, along with Eustache's, marked a distinct aftershock of the New Wave of French cinema, its exuberance now curdled to disillusionment, its hoped-for new forms—social, aesthetic—collapsed into wreckage. The rot is not only described, it is enacted: to film *Tango's* most notorious scene, in which Brando anally rapes Schneider, Bertolucci changed elements of the script—telling Brando to use butter as a lubricant—without warning Schneider, denying her right to know what the scene would demand and violating both her person and her image. Schneider attributed her later drug use, and attempted suicide, to the trauma of her experiences with the film. The destruction depicted in these famously lifelike movies went beyond them, into the lives they consumed.

ALEXANDRE AND A FRIEND sit side by side at the café Deux Magots, looking out onto the street. Alexandre always talks fast and sits up very straight. He tells his friend, "I read all afternoon. I plan to do it regularly, like a job." But a moment later he's rushing off, until caught in motion by the flagrant gaze of a woman at another table. He passes, turns back to catch her gaze again, she's gone. He wheels around and she's marching off down the sidewalk, the fringe of her long black shawl swaying with each step. He jogs after her, says something, the scene fades. Now Alexandre knocks on the door of the same friend he'd left earlier in the café. All this rushing around will be familiar to anyone who has experimented with indolence, which is like standing on a frying pan as it heats. And begs the question, is one's real wish to be forced to leap into the fire.



WORTH REMEMBERING: WE'VE ALL had a callow friend, but they've also had us. We could be watching a film by Éric Rohmer, whose *L'Amour l'après-midi* (*Love in the Afternoon*) had come out the year before, and whose *La Collectionneuse* (*The Collector*) features an early scene exactly like this one, right down to the friend showing the protagonist a sculpture he's made (in Rohmer's film, a paint can so spiky with attached razor blades that it can barely be handled). I remember the friend with whom I first watched Eustache's film (and Rohmer's, for that matter), at *fin de siècle* Film Forum, and how our wish to be bright and experienced in those days was like a botched translation, since we moved through the world cavalier and insolent instead. Watching now, I sometimes feel that former self inside me, the way a tree might chafe at some never-healed deformation of its inner rings. Other times, I know it would be as perverse to identify with that self as it would be for a creature to drag around the shed husk of its molted skin.

THE PAIR DISCUSS THEIR mutual appreciation for Jack Daniel's. (Lacan, who was analyzing patients in Paris in 1973, called it the best thing he'd found in America.) Alexandre reports that he picked up a girl and got her number. They try to figure out what she might do for a living, but give up since, according to his friend, the modern leveling of social classes means that "maids, working girls, and bourgeois women" are now indistinguishable by any outward signs. Alexandre anatomizes his conquest: blonde hair, blue eyes, possibly a "big ass." It's almost idiotic to have to say what I anyway only half-believe: every viewer watches a different movie. But this movie—long, cyclical, increasingly claustrophobic—emphasizes more than most this fact of each being thrown back on our own idiosyncratic daydream. It is more suggestive than narrative, and in its silences the viewer is haunted by conversations and glimpses, arguments and affairs whose tone or texture the voices and gestures on screen seem designed to beckon from memory. He stopped for the woman, he says, because she saw him first. "She looked at me insistently. That beautiful myopic stare."