

1

I suppose that Madame Lefèvre was the catalyst for most of what happened next. This is surprising, since I doubt that Madame Lefèvre has otherwise been the catalyst for anything in her entire life. Even now I look at the words 'catalyst' and 'Madame Lefèvre' and wonder how they came to cohabit the same sentence.

'It's always good to be at home when you're ill, Monsieur Zhukovski.'

That was the first of two remarks which set in motion a chain of events that transformed my life in a way I would have found unimaginable at the time. It is hard to think of a more commonplace remark, a more unremarkable remark, yet it had such profound consequences.

'If you don't mind my saying so, Monsieur Zhukovski, you're getting a bit too old for all this running around. You should slow down, if you ask me.'

That was the second remark. At the time, I did mind her saying so, especially as I had not asked her, but it is hard to take offence when you are laid up in bed with a raging temperature and your self-appointed nurse chooses to offer unsought advice. So I probably said 'I expect you are right, Madame Lefèvre' and left it at that before receiving the sacrament of the latest parcel of medicines that she had procured at inordinate expense at the pharmacy across the street.

Both remarks were made on the same day: 1st January 1991. That made no impression on me at the time. I am not one to attach significance to such coincidences, or to any other superstitions or hocus-pocus, but now even I must admit that the date was appropriate. I had started to feel unwell on Christmas Eve and had thought nothing of it. Apart from the occasional cold, my health has always been good. I do not make a fuss about it. I do not announce the arrival of the flu the first time I blow my nose. As far as I can remember, I had never previously suffered the flu. Nor can I recall being ill in bed before.

To start with, I thought I was run down. 1990 had been a demanding year with a great deal of travel. I had needed to work harder and more rapidly than for a long time and I am sure it took a lot out of me. October and November had been especially difficult months. So when I started to feel unwell, in a way I was glad for the respite. Christmas is not my favourite time of year. I abhor the absurdities of religion. I have no family on whom to bestow unwanted presents. The handful of acquaintances who can normally be relied upon to help me prop up a bar in the evening all go to stay with relatives they detest. Paris closes down for a fortnight. There is nothing to do. Even without being ill, home is the best place to be; in fact the only place to be.

But I had never considered my apartment to be home, which is why Madame Lefèvre's remark made such a strong impression on me. It was not that I considered anywhere else to be home. I simply had no concept of home. I am not sure I had considered the question. There I was, a settled and comfortably-off man approaching his 61st birthday, who had lived in the same apartment for 36 years, and who was yet homeless. And the more I thought about that simple word 'home', the more complicated it became for me. I realised it was not a word I used. When I returned from my travels each autumn, I did not think

to myself 'I am going home'. When I put on my coat in some bar at the end of an evening, I did not say to my companions 'time to go home'. No. I would think 'I am going to Paris now', or say 'back to the apartment for me'. Home was not a word I used.

Perhaps this would have remained idle speculation but for Madame Lefèvre's second remark about being too old for all the running around. For the previous 36 years I had lived a life that others would perhaps call unusual and interesting, but which for me had long since become routine. In 1955 I started a small travel guide to the countries of eastern Europe. Like many things that turn out to be important in one's life, it began almost by accident. I found myself out of work and needing to do something quickly. I was interested in travel. Particularly, I was interested in eastern Europe. At the time I was a member of the French Communist Party and the idea of explaining communist societies objectively to others appealed to me. It is true that there were relatively few tourists to eastern Europe at that time, but there were some and no French travel guides were catering for them.

So I started the *Guide Jaune*. It was a modest publication initially. There was a section on every country within the Soviet bloc, each containing a brief commentary on the country, a description of principal cities and places of interest, and a list of hotels and restaurants. It had expanded over the years so that by 1991 it had become a sizeable volume. It sold steadily in independent bookshops in France. Later, German and English editions followed. Sales were never huge, but they were reliable and I managed to acquire a life that many people would envy: independent, varied and, if not exactly prosperous, then at least comfortable.

There were no staff. I was able to update the *Guide* quite easily myself, aided of course by helpful information from the tourist bureaux and government agencies in the various

countries. My old friend Benoît Picard had printing works in Paris and he looked after the sales and distribution for me. Everything worked smoothly.

For all that time, I spent more than seven months each year travelling, setting out metronomically on 1st March and returning in early October, living out of a suitcase in the meantime. I made sure I visited each country and each major city at least once every two years. Some places – Moscow, Leningrad, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest – I would visit annually. Another pattern followed my return to Paris each autumn. October was always a feverish month, in which I made the corrections and additions to the publication. The *Guide* was printed in the second half of November, so that the new edition could be in bookshops before Christmas, in time for people to plan their holidays for the following year. And this was how things continued for 36 years.

I must have known that at some point it would have to end, but I do not remember spending much time thinking about how or when it would happen, or what I would do with my life afterwards. But, even before Madame Lefèvre's remark, I had the sense that events were pressing in on me. It had started in 1989, of course. I still find the events of that year utterly bewildering. It would be fair to say that my own attachment to communism was already weaker by then. I had ceased to be a Party member in 1968. But I remained, in principle, a supporter of what the Soviet system sought to achieve and I had no doubt about the permanence of that system in eastern Europe, even if I no longer anticipated its triumph elsewhere. So, when the Soviet bloc collapsed like a pack of cards within a few months, I was astounded. I could not believe it was happening. It felt as if the entire edifice of my life was being torn down in front of me.

It was ironic, but the immediate effect of this on the *Guide* was most beneficial. Suddenly there was this new interest in

tourism to eastern Europe and mine was one of the few guides available. But I did not need to be a clairvoyant to know there would be many other consequential changes that would be less comfortable for me.

This became apparent during my travels in 1990. Everywhere I went, I encountered vast change. In less than a year, the situation had been transformed. All the old familiarities were evaporating. I found myself wondering whether more had not changed in a single year than in all the previous 35 put together. Naturally I cannot pretend that I thought most of this change had been for the better. I found the effect altogether unwholesome. It had also created severe pressure in my working life. Whereas previously it had been easy for me to update the *Guide* single-handedly, I could now see this was becoming impossible.

It was also becoming expensive. Perhaps I was stupid not to anticipate the personal greed that would follow such events. In March 1990 I had gone first to Prague, where I stayed in the same hotel as for many years. When I left, I was surprised to be presented with a bill. I assumed that the new manager could not have been informed of the arrangements but, when I summoned him, I was told bluntly that there no longer were any arrangements. I encountered the same situation elsewhere, to the extent that upon arrival anywhere I now needed first to check the financial status of my visit. I did not find this approach sympathetic. In fact it represented everything I loathed about the opening of eastern Europe to capitalism.

So the entire summer of 1990 had been problematical in one way or another. Everything took longer than it had before. Everything cost more. I found myself in Warsaw at the end of September, torn between the imperative of visiting Berlin on my way back to Paris and the equal imperative of beginning the amendments to the 1991 edition immediately, as there were

so many to make and so little time available. In the end I did not go to Berlin, although that may have owed something to my reluctance to be in the city on 3rd October, when East and West Germany were reunited. In any event, it was a major omission in the circumstances. I would be producing a guide for people to use in 1991 that had no first-hand account of the effects of the demolition of the Wall two years earlier. It was not good enough.

In spite of all this, I had no immediate intention of stopping the *Guide*. When, in October, I had received a letter from an American publisher asking if I might be interested in selling the title, I did not even bother to reply. I was in no mood to sell the *Guide* to anyone, and certainly not to some avaricious American firm. It was a temporary upheaval, I told myself: a lot of hard work for the time being and then everything would settle down again. Besides which, perhaps the eastern Europeans – once they had sampled the unfairness of their new system – would decide they had not been so badly off after all.

The illness changed my attitude; the illness and Madame Lefèvre's remarks. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps I was getting too old for all this running around. Perhaps I had taken more out of myself in 1990 than I had realised. Perhaps it was time to think of retirement. But what would happen to the *Guide*? And to where would I retire? Where did people retire? They retired to home. And where was home?

I came to this apartment at the same time as I started the *Guide*. October 1955: the last time there were major changes in my life. I had been staying with the Picards previously, above the printing works in St Germain. That was where the idea for the *Guide* first came about as a matter of fact, in discussions with Benoît Picard in those rooms. I think the Picards were rather afraid I would stay for ever. When a few orders for the first edition started to come in, old man Picard gently suggested

I might like to look for a place of my own and offered to advance me the money for the rent deposit.

I saw several apartments that I liked but was not offered. Maybe they did not want a foreigner. Maybe they did not like what I was doing. They all asked what my line of work was, of course, and when I told them I could see the disapproval in their faces. One or two asked me if I was a communist and they liked the answer to that question even less.

At first Madame Lefèvre promised to be no different. She owned 22 Avenue Secrétan in the 19th *arrondissement*, a scruffy district of Paris, but a house and a street that have a certain shabby nobility. Her own apartment is on one half of the second floor and she was looking for a tenant for the neighbouring apartment. The rest of the building was already let. She asked the usual questions. I gave the usual answers and expected the usual rebuff. In this case I did not get it. I was certain that Madame Lefèvre had no more sympathy for my politics than the other prospective landladies. When she offered me the rooms, I concluded it was only because it suited her to have a tenant next door who was both single and absent for a large part of the year.

The apartment comprised a large sitting room at the front, overlooking the street, and a smaller bedroom at the back, with a separate kitchen and bathroom. The furnishings were hardly smart or contemporary, but at the time they did not seem dated. The rooms were full of heavy *bourgeois* furniture, with slightly threadbare carpets, nondescript coverings and the odd mirror on the wall. It was perfectly comfortable. Madame Lefèvre was not someone to spend money unnecessarily and, since I had demanded no alterations subsequently, she had made none. I suppose a visitor would have said the apartment was now hopelessly old-fashioned, some relic of a 1950s time warp. They might have said the same of me. I do not know. I do not think I had ever had a visitor. For

myself, I liked it the way it was and had become used to its little eccentricities. I had never seen a particular need to make changes myself. It was not as if it were my home.

If the apartment had changed little over the years, neither had Madame Lefèvre. She had struck me as middle-aged when I first saw her and she has struck me as middle-aged ever since. As I was young when I moved in and am now getting on for being old, how she has managed to be consistently middle-aged for 36 years I could not say. I suppose she must have been about 40 in 1955 and, at that time, it was easy to be middle-aged at 40 if one wanted to be. I do not know why she wanted to be. She could have been very pretty when she was younger. The striking thing about her has always been her abnormally long hair. Most of the time it is worn like a ball of string on the back of her head, held in place by a minor ironmongery. But at times I have seen it unsecured, and it is extraordinarily long and actually very beautiful.

Madame Lefèvre's clothes belonged to the same ordered world as the rest of her. After a while I noticed that she had a different dress for each day of the week: seven dresses for seven days. The best dress was of course for Sundays. If I forgot what day it was, I merely needed to see which dress she was wearing. At first I thought that these dresses never changed, that she had discovered some magical fabric that never wore out or discoloured. Then I noticed subtle changes to the cut and realised that the truth was even more peculiar: that every few years she replaced an old dress with one made from an identical fabric, cut slightly differently to make a token, barely perceptible nod towards fashion. Where did she get them from? Was there some *costumier* in Paris with an inexhaustible supply of timeless fabrics? But I suppose she might have looked at me and thought the same.

I never saw a visitor come to her door either. I think we established at some early point that neither of us had any

family. I do not know what she did with her time. One might have thought the two of us would use some of it talking to each other, but we never did. It would have been easy enough. Although I was away so much and always working hard in October and November, I still had my three rest months of the year – December, January and February. You would think we would have talked then. But we did not. Right up until January 1991, until the time I am writing about, I did not even know her first name. She would have known mine, but never used it.

Why was this? Well, I cannot speak for Madame Lefèvre of course, but for my part I think it was a number of things. I am a reserved person, on the whole. I keep myself to myself and do not go much out of my way to make new friends. Then, Madame Lefèvre represented a class that I despised. I had nothing against her personally; she seemed a reasonable enough woman; but I do not have much time for the *bourgeoisie* in general, and for *les petites rentières* less still. And what would we have talked about? We could not discuss politics. She knew mine from the beginning and I had no difficulty guessing hers. Every so often she would find a subtle way of making her opinions plain. If there had been some big election in France while I was away, she would be sure to leave a little parcel of literature for me from conspicuously right-wing candidates, together with a helpful note saying she hoped I would find it interesting. So we could not talk about politics. We could not talk about my work, although there was plenty to talk about, because that involved politics too, certainly as far as she was concerned and also for me. In fact, as I had always said, everything involved politics in the end. Life was political.

We could have talked about the weather, and needless to say we did, and about small uncontroversial changes in the neighbourhood. Those conversations filled the odd few minutes on the second-floor landing, but hardly constituted

a friendship. To me this was neither surprising nor unwelcome. The surprise was that after 36 years, by which time I was by far the longest-standing tenant in the building, things suddenly changed. The surprise was that it was Madame Lefèvre who became the catalyst for all the other changes in my life. The surprise was also, I suppose, that I chose to respond.

When I was first ill I wanted to eat nothing. After a couple of days, with womanly concern, Madame Lefèvre appeared in my apartment with a bowl of soup and some bread. She had the key to my apartment, of course, and for all I know had frequently inspected its contents while I was away. Indeed she could have been reletting the rooms for six months of every year. I would not have known. I had no reciprocal knowledge of her apartment; in fact I had never been inside it. But I had always imagined this cauldron of soup simmering on her hob, constantly replenished, never entirely depleted, bubbling away over the decades. I had speculated what would be revealed if this soup was subjected to carbon dating. I suspected it would show trace elements of every year since Madame Lefèvre had acquired the building, whenever that had been.

Now she was knocking at my bedroom door and offering me a real bowl of this imagined soup, a bowl that perhaps contained minute particles of a cabbage harvested at the Liberation, a bowl that offered me the opportunity to eat our shared history. As the days went by and I became stronger, other offerings emerged from across the landing: omelettes, cheeses, a *fricassée* of chicken. Few words were exchanged, apart from those two significant remarks, but I must admit that a certain pressure built up to commence a conversation, to express something more than polite appreciation for her care. Perhaps that was why she did it. Maybe she was lonely. Maybe I was.

It still took me well into January to summon the nerve and to find the words to say. In the end I think I said: 'Madame

Lefèvre, we have known each other for a long time. I think it would be appropriate for you to call me Feliks.'

'Thank you Monsieur Zhukovski, I mean Feliks,' she said. There was a pause while she summoned equal nerve. 'And do please call me Sandrine, if you would care to.'

'Thank you, Sandrine,' I said. And then neither of us knew what to say, so we smiled at each other and no doubt both thought how ridiculous it was not to have said those few words many years before.

Madame Lefèvre was the first to recover from our mutual embarrassment and she did it by plunging into the previously taboo subject of politics.

'Have you heard what's happening in Lithuania?' she demanded.

I had heard. It had been on the radio that morning. Soviet troops were storming Vilnius in an attempt to prevent Lithuanian independence.

'It won't do them any good,' she said. 'It's far too late for that sort of thing now.'

'I dare say you are right,' I replied. Then, feeling that this sounded like a terminal remark to a conversation that had barely started, I wondered what else I could say. 'For me it is a funny thing to think of Lithuanian independence,' I said. 'I was not brought up to think of Lithuania as an independent country.'

'Really?' she said. 'Well that's communism for you.'

'It was not communism actually, Sandrine. I grew up in Poland before the war, before communism.'

'I always wondered if you might be Polish.'

'Yes I am. By birth anyway. And of course for many centuries Lithuania was part of Poland, as I am sure you know.' Madame Lefèvre did not know. She seemed to have little intrinsic interest in the history of Lithuania. I did not have much myself, as a matter of fact. I think she felt the conversation had strayed

from its original starting point, namely her great satisfaction at the collapse of communism.

'I'm surprised at you being a communist, Feliks, especially with you being Polish.'

'Not so much a communist,' I said. 'I have always described myself as a leftist.'

The distinction did not impress Madame Lefèvre. 'Same difference,' she said.

I did not know myself why I insisted on the distinction. I used to tell myself it was to do with accuracy and precision, but of course 'leftist' is a less precise term. It could describe anyone from a hard-line Marxist to a moderate Social Democrat. So was I trying to conceal something? No, I do not think so. I never hid my opinions from anyone. Perhaps I had an abhorrence of labels, of being put in a box neatly labelled 'communist'. Perhaps it was a simple declaration of independence. As time went by, the qualification came closer to the truth. By 1991, I did not know whether I was any longer a communist or not, and it was ceasing to matter. But I did know I was still very much a leftist.

'When did you leave Poland?' By now it was clear that neither the history of Poland nor the precise ideological distinctions of the left would deter Madame Lefèvre from finding out more about me after 36 years.

'In 1939,' I said. 'My brother and I were sent to stay with an aunt in Switzerland.'

'The war again.'

'I do not think so. I believe it was something else.'

'What else could it have been?'

'Oh, personal things,' I said.

'Were there problems at home?'

Well, really! Not a word for 36 years, and then this sudden inquisition into the most private family matters.

'It was a long time ago,' I said. 'A great deal has changed since then.'

'And a great deal is changing now,' she said, accepting my return of the conversation to less personal matters. 'It must be disappointing for you.' The last remark may have suggested sympathy, but did not convey it.

'Yes, it is disappointing for me,' I said. 'It is not what I hoped would happen. I do not like a lot of the changes that are taking place in eastern Europe. I do not expect they will prove to be changes for the better. I preferred things as they were before, when everything was settled and everyone knew where they were.'

'If I may say so, Feliks, I find it strange that someone who wanted to change everything should find himself regretting change.'

'And if I may say so, Sandrine, I find it strange that someone who wanted to change nothing should find herself welcoming it.'

She had no answer to that. Indeed, there was no answer. It depended on what sort of change one was looking for, if any. It was in fact a long time since I had sought change of any kind, in the world or in my own life. As a young man, in the years after the war, I was fearless for change. I wanted everything to change and believed that it would. But at some point, and I cannot now remember when it was, I came to accept things the way they were, to accept my own life the way it was. After that, I no longer looked for change. An ideological split divided Europe. I accepted that. I worked on one side of the divide, where my heart was or where I thought it was, and the rest of the time I lived behind enemy lines. I accepted that too.

I found myself telling Madame Lefèvre about my travels the previous summer and what I had discovered. I did not know if it interested her. I doubted she had set foot outside France.

Perhaps she had never set foot outside Paris. Certainly, everywhere else was foreign and where I went was communist foreign, or had been, which was worse still.

'How much longer will you do it for?'

'I do not know,' I said. For the previous week, restless in a slowly improving illness, I had thought of little else. I had reached no conclusions.

'Is there someone who could take it over?'

'I do not think so,' I said. 'I mean, the only other person involved is the printer and I do not think he could do it or would want to.'

'Could you sell it?'

'I do not know. Perhaps.' I remembered the approach I had received three months earlier from the American firm. 'Actually, someone did contact me recently about it.'

'What did you say?'

'Nothing. I did not reply. I was not interested.'

'Why not?'

That was an easy question, but I was reluctant to admit to the honest answer. There were of course any number of reasons why the enquiry might have led to nothing, but only one reason why I did not even want to discuss it. In the end, I did give the honest answer.

'It was from an American company.'

'So?'

'Sandrine, it is probably hard for you to understand, but I do not want to sell my *Guide* to the Americans. It goes against everything I have believed my entire life, everything I have done. It would be a complete betrayal.'

Madame Lefèvre shrugged her shoulders. 'Well, I don't know,' she said. 'It's your business. But I can't see what harm it would do to talk to them. Still, if you want to cut your nose off to spite your face, that's up to you.'

'It is important to me.'

'Still?'

'Yes. I do not know how to explain it to you. It is not just a question of what I believe. It is also . . . well, I suppose that for a great deal of my life the Communist Party was my family. And you do not turn your back on family.'

'Perhaps not,' said Madame Lefèvre. 'But sometimes family turns its back on you.' And I still recall the sourness with which she spoke those words.

That concluded our belated foray into the art of conversation. I did not doubt that others would follow assuming I remained in Paris, in that apartment. Would I? I spent the rest of the day thinking about the *Guide* and its future, my future. I still did not want to sell to the Americans, but no one else had expressed an interest. What was I saying? That I refused to sell the *Guide* to a capitalist company? That was tantamount to saying I refused to sell it to anybody. Would it be a better epitaph for the *Guide* if it subsided to nothing, accompanying me sickly through my declining years? I was forced to admit that, actually, it would be rather appropriate, but it was not what I wanted.

Then there was the question of money. It had never been my first priority, nor needed to be, but it could not be ignored. I was not rich. I had some savings, but they were not huge. Pension provisions in France were generous, but they would not enable me to stay in this apartment indefinitely, assuming that I wanted to. There was no one to look after me if I became ill, apart from Madame Lefèvre, and she was a good deal older than I was. Conscience was all very well, but if I did not assume responsibility for my own life, who would? If I were living in a different society, maybe things would be different, but I was not.

Sandrine Lefèvre was right. There was no harm in having the conversation. I hauled myself out of bed and rummaged in my desk for the discarded letter. Eventually I found it. It was

from a Mike Martins, who styled himself the European Vice-President of a New York firm called Bergelson & King. I decided that, as soon as I was well enough, I would telephone Mike Martins and see if he was still interested.

2

I did my best to dislike Mike Martins, but by the time we met my heart was no longer in it.

I had telephoned him in late January, as soon as I felt better. He said he was still interested in the *Guide* and invited me to lunch the following week. As it happens, it was my 61st birthday. At about the same time I received a call from Benoît Picard, who said he had matters he needed to discuss with me. Since Benoît's printing works were only a short distance from where Martins was taking me to lunch, I arranged to go there first.

The Picard Printworks were located in a backstreet of St Germain, near the church of St Sulpice, in an area that had once housed dozens of small printers. Now there were few left, most of them driven out by the exorbitant rents that accompanied Left Bank chic. Despite being a stalwart of the Paris Communist Party, old man Picard had possessed the foresight to acquire the freehold in the 1930s, so this particular problem did not affect him. He turned down all offers for the site, and most requests for commercial printing, and concentrated on producing political literature of impeccable ideological purity. The windows of his works were decorated with the most provocative posters he could find, to the increasing discomfort of the smart boutiques that were taking over the rest of the street, not to mention the fascist louts of the

neighbourhood. His bill for replacement glass must have been enormous.

I met old man in Picard in 1949, the year I first came to Paris. He printed a number of communist newspapers and periodicals, amongst which was *La Vague de la Gauche* – the paper on which I was working at the time. I came to know him well. Not least, I was most grateful to him for giving me a roof when my job disappeared and for making it possible for the *Guide* to be published in the first place. I owed him a great deal and it was a real blow when he died suddenly in 1961.

His son Benoît took over the business and I had known him for as long. In fact, I would have to say that he is my oldest friend, despite the fact I have never been sure how much I like him. I find this strange: that one can have a close friendship with someone about whom one has deep reservations, whilst other people, whom one likes unreservedly, are not nearly such close friends. I do not know whether it is force of habit, or force of circumstance, or the particular time in one's life that one happens to meet certain people, or what it is.

When old man Picard died, Benoît started to make changes immediately. The first things to go were the posters in the windows. Instead of clarion calls to direct action, they now advertised the company's services. Old man Picard would have been appalled. Benoît also resigned his membership of the Communist Party. I suppose I should not complain as I did the same thing myself a few years later, but I had a reason for it, or thought I did, whereas for Benoît I think it was opportunism. That sort of baggage became inconvenient for him. He started taking on different work. In fact you would say that he became a small mainstream commercial printer. He was always busy.

Some things did not change. The printing works remained resolutely old-fashioned, chaotic in fact. This was surprising as

Benoît had always been a modernist. Although we were more or less the same age – I think he is two years younger than me – it was almost as if we belonged to different generations. I felt I had far more in common with his father. So one would have expected there to have been technological changes. By now, for example, one would have thought Benoît would have embraced computers and digital printing and goodness knows what else. But he had not. At first I had found that comforting, as I also did the continuing occupation of the building near St Sulpice, but then I found myself starting to wonder about both those things.

The Picards had always lived above the printing works. In the early '70s Benoît moved his family out to the suburbs, refurbished the apartment and let it out at an astronomical rent. I taunted him and said he had become another *petit rentier* and he smiled and said no, he would be a *grand rentier*. I came to realise that for Benoît it was all to do with money. The freehold was capital, an investment that could be realised at any time and in a number of ways. Retaining it was a question of expediency. There was no point in him investing a small fortune in printing technology. He could continue with the old equipment until the time came to sell up and take an early and no doubt comfortable retirement. It was an entirely capitalist calculation; it had nothing to do with principle or with people. Apart from Benoît and his family, of course.

If this was depressing, the fact remained that we had known each other for a long time. I also owed much to him. Benoît had been as instrumental as his father in the birth of the *Guide*: in fact, it may even have been his idea. I cannot remember now. The Picard family represented such a large part of my life, stretching back to when I was 19, that its absence from it would feel like the loss of a limb. We saw each other less often than previously. In the '50s we would drink late into the night several times a week. Together with others from those times, we must

have sung the 'Internationale' in half the bars of Paris, especially the smarter ones, where it would cause most offence. One cannot take away things like that. So, whatever my reservations, Benoît was still a dear old friend and it was always good to see him.

I walked into the printing works, as I had hundreds of times before, and found Benoît, as usual, in the back office, surrounded by empty coffee cups and ashtrays full of half-smoked cigarettes.

'Feliks!' he said, embracing me warmly. 'I haven't seen you for weeks. Where've you been?'

'Ill,' I said. 'In fact I was in bed from Christmas until last week.'

'Ah well, age catches up with us all.'

'It was not age. It was the flu.'

'They usually go together,' said Benoît. 'Anyway, you're looking all right now.'

'Yes, I am much better. What did you want to see me about?'

'Good news and bad news. Which do you want first?'

'Oh, the good,' I said. 'I could do with some good news.'

'Well,' said Benoît. 'The good news is that sales of the new edition are fantastic. We've sold out. I've never known anything like it. I'm reprinting already and I expect I'll need to reprint again.'

'Good,' I said. I could not remember the *Guide* ever needing to be reprinted.

'You might sound a little more pleased about it.'

'Oh, I am pleased,' I said. 'But . . .'

'... but you're peeved that far more people want to visit eastern Europe now than they did when it was communist.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Feliks, you're so predictable. Why does every silver lining always have a cloud?'

'Well, you know what I think. I am too old to change now. But I suppose I should say "well done".'

'Thank you. In view of the conspicuous success of the good news, I now rather hesitate to give you the bad.'

'Which is?'

'That I am retiring. Later on in the year.'

'You are only 59!'

'It's as good a time as any.'

'But why?'

'There are lots of reasons,' said Benoît. 'First of all, business is not good and I can't see it getting any better.'

'But you have just told me how well it is going. Sales are fantastic, you said.'

'That's your book, Feliks. It may surprise you, but I can't earn a living from that. I do have other clients, you know, and things are not so good there.'

'Why not?'

'Well, to my certain knowledge, at least three of them are planning to transfer their production to Hungary or Czechoslovakia.'

'Why?'

'Why do you think? Because it will be a lot cheaper for them. Because there is already a lot of investment going into those countries to provide new technology. As you know, I have never chosen to invest in new equipment. Now there's no point in trying to catch up. Even with the same equipment I would be twice as expensive as those other places.'

'It is ridiculous,' I said. 'What has this got to do with human life? What has it even got to do with economics? You are losing your livelihood because a few gangsters see easy money to be made by investing in poor countries.'

'You could look at it that way,' agreed Benoît. 'On the other hand, and at the risk of upsetting your delicate sensibilities still

further, one could ask why nearly 50 years of communism have left those countries so poor.'

'One could also ask why 50 years of capitalism have left you with such antiquated equipment.'

'That was my choice,' said Benoît. 'I could have done things differently. I chose not to.'

'You have changed,' I said. 'You would not have spoken like this 30 years ago.'

Benoît shrugged his shoulders. 'I didn't have a bald head and a paunch 30 years ago. The world changes. I take it as I find it. There are no medals for consistency.'

'I have not changed.'

'No, Feliks, you haven't. And if they ever create a museum about the Cold War, you will be the prize exhibit. But, if you will allow me to say so, even you will need to change now. And, if you don't, the world will not wait for you. It never does.'

'So what will happen to the business? Are you selling it?'

'I doubt it. I'm not sure it's worth anything as a going concern.'

'But this building must be worth a fortune, Benoît.'

'Oh, the building, yes. But not the business inside it.'

'So you are selling the property?'

'Yes.'

I said nothing.

'I know what you're thinking,' he said. 'I knew exactly what your attitude would be. It's all very well sitting there with your lofty detachment and these fine principles when you have no one to think about but yourself. I have a family. I have a wife and four children, and I can assure you it's not so simple then. The tenant is leaving the flat at the end of June. I have received a huge offer for the building: a mad offer, frankly. We have talked about it. We are all agreed it is the right thing to do at this time.'

'And what about me, Benoît?'

'Feliks, I am sorry to say that this will be the last edition I will be able to produce for you. At least we will be going out with a bang.'

'So who will produce it if you do not?'

'I don't know, Feliks. I will give you all the help I can. You've got the best part of a year to sort it out. I've told you before anyone else. No one outside the family knows about it yet. I can't do more. There are people I know, people I can introduce you to, who are in a position to help you. I will gladly do that. Maybe you should think about going to Hungary or Czechoslovakia yourself. You know those countries as well as anyone.'

'I do not think I would care for that,' I said.

'Well, please yourself. But I wouldn't worry about it either way, if I were you. There are plenty of printers who would be happy to have your business, especially with sales the way they are.'

'It would not be the same, Benoît.'

'No, Feliks; it wouldn't. But I think we've already discussed that point.'

I stood up to go.

'Have a think about it, Feliks, and let me know if there is anything I can do to help.'

'Thank you. I will.'

'And we must have a drink soon, hey?'

'Yes. That would be nice.'

'I'll give you a call.'

We did not embrace each other on this occasion, but we shook hands, and I left the Picard works for the last time and stepped out into the cold January street. The next time I passed this way the place would no doubt be a boutique or a perfumery or a jeweller's, selling inessential and frivolous things for a thousand times more than some poor bastard earned to make them. Perhaps I would not pass this way again.

The walk from St Sulpice to the restaurant was a short one, but there was time for many thoughts before I arrived. To start with I was angry: angry at Benoît's greed, angry that he could make such a decision without consulting me. It was a selfish reaction, I know, but that is how I felt. The anger wore off quickly. Who knows if I would have made the same choice in the same circumstances, but it was Benoît's decision and not mine. What was unarguable was that my situation had now changed too, whether I liked it or not.

My next thought was that this was the end of the *Guide*. At least it was the end of my *Guide*: the one I had started and had maintained with Benoît's help for all these years. Whatever happened now, things would never be the same. I had no desire to start a search for a new printer. My heart was not in it. It would involve all sorts of grubby conversations about money. I am not good at things like that, nor have any desire to become good at them. With Benoît the money was simple. Twice a year he gave me a large cheque. It was always accompanied by a detailed statement showing exactly how the sum had been calculated, but I never looked at it. I trusted him. Whatever I may have thought of his *bourgeois* susceptibilities, I always trusted him when it came to business. It would be impossible, not to mention naïve, to attempt the same relationship with someone else.

So if everything would change anyway, why continue with it at all? Why not step away from it? I could see that closing down the *Guide* would be self-destructive. In which case, I would need to find a buyer for it. In which case, why not an American? It was true that I detested America. The country represented everything I disliked in the world. But, if whoever bought it would be doing so with no respect for the past and with the sole aim of making money from it, did it matter what nationality they were? Suppose I scrupulously sold the *Guide* to a company in another country, and then that company was bought by the

Americans? They were buying everything else. The fact was that I had no control over the matter.

By the time I reached the restaurant I was certain what I wanted to do, and that was to be shot of the whole thing as quickly as possible and with the minimum of fuss. When I had left the apartment that morning I had been a detached sceptic, allowing himself the luxury of listening to the blandishments of a suitor before grandly rejecting his advances. Now I was going to meet the prospective purchaser of my business.

Martins had booked a table at the Brasserie du Temps Perdu on the Boulevard St Germain. I was early and arrived before him. Asked if I would like a drink, I surprised myself by ordering a glass of champagne.

The choice of restaurant was predictable. It was precisely what an American would take to be an authentic Parisian restaurant. The irony was that it once had been an authentic Parisian restaurant, before the likes of Mike Martins had turned it into something else. I had eaten there only once before and that had been years earlier, soon after my arrival in Paris.

The Brasserie du Temps Perdu had changed little in the meantime. It was still furnished with red plush banquettes and chairs, with mirrored walls behind. It was still staffed by antique male waiters in black attire and large white aprons, an ancient tiding of magpies. It still featured the menu of traditional France — *pieds de pacquet*, *quenelles de brochet*, *boudin blanc* and so on — that was now only to be found in remote provincial towns, and perhaps not even there. I would not know. The menu itself was set in a typeface not used since the 1950s, at least until its recent resurrection on facsimile gift items manufactured in the Philippines. The clientele seemed to consist almost entirely of tourists. Indeed the restaurant itself seemed to be a pastiche of the era that had given the Left Bank its reputation, when artists

and intellectuals had commingled and copulated with each other, with politicians, with socialites, with showgirls and prostitutes, with anyone. Now the Left Bank was a brand name, visited by Americans in much the same manner and for the same purpose as they would put on a Ralph Lauren shirt or Calvin Klein chinos, in the hope that a small residue of style would rub off and deposit itself on confident squared shoulders and toned legs.

And through this time, while the European world had fought its battle of ideas, while the principles of Marxism and democracy had pitted themselves against the class interests of capitalism, only by some unimaginable coition to produce the screaming bastard of consumerism – through all this time, the Brasserie du Temps Perdu had stood sedately on the Boulevard St Germain, changing not at all. And in not changing, it had changed. And in not compromising its authenticity, it had become a replica. And in remaining itself, it had become something else.

Mike Martins walked into the restaurant about five minutes after the appointed time and there was no mistaking him. A waiter brought him to the table, as Martins followed with what seemed a curious mixture of confidence and the lack of it.

'Hi,' he said; 'Mike Martins.'

'Zhukovski,' I said.

'It's good to meet you, Monsieur Zhukovski. I am so sorry to have kept you waiting.'

He launched into what might have become a lengthy apology for his lateness, had it not been interrupted by the waiter enquiring after our need for drinks. I permitted myself another glass of champagne. Martins looked apprehensive and I wondered if he was teetering on the edge of his expense allowance. He ordered a mineral water for himself, but perhaps he would have done that anyway.

He had spoken in French so far, or had at least made the attempt. It was the sort of French that did not suggest a conversational fluency. He was taking great pains to achieve grammatical accuracy, correcting himself after every small mistake, so that each sentence took twice as long to deliver as it need have. I was not sure I could bear an hour or two of conversation conducted in this manner, so I asked him if he would rather speak in English.

'Well, that is kind of you,' he said. 'Are you sure you don't mind?'

'Not at all,' I said.

'I've not been long in Paris and, although I learnt French in school, I guess I'm a little rusty. I'm taking evening classes to catch up. I do think it is so rude to live in someone else's country and not be able to speak their language.'

I had no difficulty in pigeonholing Mike Martins by now. Most Americans I had met in Europe over the years addressed you in English as a matter of course and with no apology, and seemed unsusceptible to the thought that this might be considered impolite or insensitive. It was a part of the American cultural imperialism that I detested especially. The few exceptions, like Martins, went to the opposite extreme and were fawningly deferential, not to say obsequious. Their respect for old Europe and its assorted cultural arcana amounted almost to a religious devotion. They were mortified by unintended solecisms and venerated each and every absurd and antiquated social custom as if it were the bone of a medieval saint. Mike Martins was a perfect example of the species. He was an eager, preppy East Coaster, probably in his early 30s. It would have been hard not to patronise him and I had no intention of trying. I was starting to be irked by his sensitive use of my surname. I naturally expected Americans to use my first name instantly and without permission. That irked me too. I dare say this sounds irrational,

but what is the point in having prejudices if one cannot indulge them?

'You speak several languages I expect, Mr Zhukovski?' Now he was flattering me.

'Naturally,' I said. 'I speak French of course, even though I am not French . . .' (This statement was technically incorrect, but I wanted Martins to know that it was not unusual in Europe for non-Frenchmen to speak French.) ' . . . I speak English, as you can hear. I speak German. I have some Russian. I also speak Polish, which is my native tongue.'

'Wow,' he said, which I thought an inadequate response, although no doubt the best of which he was capable.

The waiter came to take our order and Martins judged this a good moment to move the conversation towards the matter in hand.

'I was so pleased to hear from you, Mr Zhukovski,' he said. 'I thought perhaps you were not interested.'

'I was busy when you wrote,' I replied. 'And I have been ill for the past few weeks.'

'I am so sorry. I trust you are now recovered?'

'Completely, thank you. So I thought I would take the opportunity to hear what you wanted to say. You are the European Vice-President of a New York publishing firm, I believe?' I think I said that in a tone that put his profession on a par with prostitution or drug trafficking, but Martins was disappointingly slow to take offence. He laughed.

'Yeah, well that's the title,' he said. 'And you do know how we love titles. To be honest, there's just me and a secretary and a small office. But, yes, I do work for Bergelson & King, the New York publishers.'

'What do you do?'

'Two things really,' said Martins. 'B & K is a large firm. We have a long list. Part of my job is to see which of our US titles might sell in Europe and to arrange translation, distribution

and so on. The other part is to find European works that might sell in the US, as well as suitable European acquisition targets for us.'

'So I am an acquisition target, then?'

'Yes, if you put it that way.'

'I think it was you that put it that way, Mr Martins.'

'Yes I did. I'm sorry.' I was flustering him. 'Yes, we have an extensive travel catalogue, but nothing that covers eastern Europe. As I'm sure you know, there is real interest in travel to eastern Europe at this moment in time. It's very much a growth market and we see it expanding hugely in the future. Mr Bergelson asked me to keep an eye open for any suitable guides that we might be able, hmmm, to develop, and I came across yours in a bookshop here. I thought I'd be in touch to see if this would be of any interest to you.'

'I see. Yes, well, that might be something that would interest me.'

'I must confess I know very little about your business operation,' said Martins. 'I am familiar with the *Guide* itself, of course, but I don't know anything about your set-up. I mean, I've no idea whether you publish other titles or anything. Actually, I could not find any contact details for you, so in the end I wrote to your printers, if you recall.'

I did not recall that particular point, as it happens. So Benoît had forwarded the letter. In which case, he had probably read it. I had not mentioned to Benoît that I was meeting Mike Martins. Also, I realised that I was being unnecessarily awkward with Martins, which was not justified by the man himself or by the fact that I was in the position of trying to sell to him. I decided I would try to be more amenable and started to tell him a little more about the *Guide* and how it was produced. I also made sure he was aware how well sales were going. If I was to prostrate myself in front of the dollar, I wanted to make sure I scooped as many of them as possible.

'Fascinating,' said Martins, with reasonable conviction. 'That's a really lean operation you have.' (I thought that a fatuous comment; it was the only sensible way of doing it. Why were Americans always surprised when Europeans did anything efficiently?) 'So,' he continued, making sure he had understood; 'it's your baby and, if you want to sell, it's up to you and no one else.'

'Yes,' I said.

'And do you want to sell?'

'Well, that depends on several things. The price, of course. And also what you want to do with the *Guide*.'

'How do you mean?'

'Are you planning to continue it the way it is or will you want to change it?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Zhukovski, I don't have the answer to that question. That would be for Mr Bergelson to decide.'

'It is important to me.'

'Yes, I understand that, Mr Zhukovski. But it's not up to me to decide.'

'So you will change it.'

'No, I didn't say that either. I simply don't know.'

'You say you have read the *Guide*, Mr Martins. What did you think of it?'

'I thought it was excellent,' said Martins. 'I wouldn't be here otherwise. Very informative; very thorough. Of course I'm not familiar with these countries in the way you are, but it seemed to me to give a pretty good picture.'

'What about the politics?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Well, you can see that I am not afraid to spell out a few political truths.'

'Yes, I see that. I realise it is written from what one might call a leftist perspective.' I began to warm to Martins. Improbably, he had been able to discern my exact political position.

Then again, perhaps he was too nervous to suggest I was a communist.

'Indeed. I am not ashamed to call myself a leftist, Mr Martins. A progressive.'

'Sure. I respect that.'

'You respect it?'

'Yes, I respect it. That is your right. I understand that.'

'So how would Mr Bergelson react to publishing a guide that is sympathetic to what communism has tried to achieve in eastern Europe since the war?'

'I don't know. That would be for him to say. I've not discussed politics with him.'

'Hmmm,' I said.

'Are you saying you would only consider selling the *Guide* if it continued in its present form and with its present political leanings?'

Was I saying that? I suppose it sounded like it, and of course that was what I wanted. But I knew it was absurd even as I was saying it. Of course there would be changes to the *Guide*, whoever owned it. There would need to be, part of the reason I was contemplating selling was to avoid making those changes myself. Of course a New York publisher would not print a Marxist guide to eastern Europe for the American market. I knew that. So did Mike Martins. He was trying not to upset me and risk losing the deal. And much though I wanted to answer 'yes' to his question, that would have been ridiculous. If I took that attitude, I might as well not bother talking to him, or to anyone else for that matter. It was hopeless. I was not engaged in some exercise of intellectual continuity, but in a commercial transaction. I was looking for a way out, not a cul-de-sac. I did not answer his question directly.

'Mr Martins, I have devoted the greater part of my life to the *Guide*. When I started it, Europe was mired in the aftermath

of two internecine conflicts. At your age, you can have no idea what it was like. It was not just that things were a little more backward and people a little worse off, that there were fewer gadgets and conveniences. It was fundamentally different. On one side of Europe was a group of people who wanted to change things, who wanted to sweep away the privileges and unfairnesses and aggression that had caused the conflicts in the first place and that had made life unbearable for most people. And on the other side was a group of people who wanted to do exactly the opposite, who wanted to restore the privileges, perpetuate the unfairnesses, let loose the aggression once again. And these were the people who owned the newspapers and radio stations and TV stations. And these were the people, out of their own self-interest, who denied and denigrated what was happening in the East and who prejudiced the populations of the West against it.

'In my own small way, I have offered an alternative to this process. I have explained eastern Europe to the West. I have tried to clear away the lies and misconceptions. I have encouraged people to come and see for themselves and not to rely on the propaganda they were fed at home. In answer to your question, no I do not expect the *Guide* to continue in its present form. In the circumstances that would be unrealistic. But you cannot expect me not to mind about it and you cannot expect me not to ask about it.'

'I don't,' said Martins. He seemed unfazed by my ideological polemic. 'So tell me, Mr Zhukovski, how much does the fact that you are considering selling the *Guide* at the present time have to do with the fact that the communist bloc has collapsed?'

I found myself unwilling to answer the question. Mike Martins waited a few moments before asking a supplementary. 'How do you feel about communism now?'

'I find it hard to say,' I admitted. 'Whatever impression

I may give, I am not a hard-line communist and have not been for a considerable time. I have disliked many of the practicalities of communist rule. I do not think that eastern Europe was paradise on earth. But it is nevertheless on that side of the fence that my intellectual beliefs lie, and my emotional attachments as well. And whatever misgivings I may have about the side I chose to support, I am unaltered in my opinion of the side I chose to oppose. I feel that what is happening now is a reactionary step. I regret it immensely and believe that, in time, the people of eastern Europe will do the same.'

'So the wrong side won?'

'Yes.'

'And now it's trying to buy you out.'

'Yes.'

'I can see that must be difficult.'

Rather improbably, Mike Martins had managed to draw me into a serious conversation. I had imagined he would talk about money, but he had not even mentioned it. I could not expect him to share my opinions, but he seemed to respect them and I detected none of the triumphalism I had feared. In one way this was irritating. I suppose, if I am honest, that I did feel a sense of moral superiority in my politics. Certainly other people would say I did. Martins was depriving me of a natural opportunity to indulge it. Yet, as the conversation went on, I found myself not resenting this fact, but positively enjoying the freedom that flowed from it.

'Tell me,' said Martins. 'How did you first get interested in politics?'

'That is a long story,' I said. 'I am Polish originally. I was born in Łódź in 1930. But in 1939 I was separated from my mother and went to live in Switzerland with my aunt and uncle. So that is where I grew up. In Basle. That is where I was educated.'

'I doubt you were taught communism in Swiss schools.'

I laughed. 'No I was not. That came later. But perhaps you could say that the ground was prepared for me in Switzerland. I did not like Swiss society. I found it stifling. It was so money orientated in both big and little ways. I think I reacted against it. And of course my entire childhood had been destroyed by fascism.'

'Did you go to university?'

'No. I would have liked to, but there was no money. Actually, that is not true. There was money, but my uncle did not want to spend it on me. I suppose I cannot blame him. I was not his son, not that they had children of their own. But I never got on with him. He was not a sympathetic man.'

'Did you come to France then?'

'Yes. In 1947. I crossed the border and found myself in Montbéliard. It was not difficult to get a work permit. I found a job in the Peugeot factory at Sochaux. That is where I became involved in politics. I joined the union and became an activist. They were heady times. It may be hard for you to believe, in fact I find it hard to believe myself, but the communists were the largest party in France at that time. They were in the government. We thought that France would be the first Western country to have a democratically elected communist government.'

'So how did you get from making cars to starting a travel guide?'

'By accident, I suppose. I always enjoyed writing. I was always good at writing. So, when I first started to get involved politically at Peugeot, I was roped in to help with the propaganda. There were always things to write: pamphlets, posters, press statements. I did that. Anyway, some of my stuff was seen by a man called Fernand Meurice in Paris. You will not have heard of him. He was quite famous then. He had been one of the legendary figures in the Paris Communist Party in the '30s.

After the war he started a communist newspaper called *La Vague de la Gauche*. He invited me to Paris to work on the paper.'

'That was a good break.'

'Yes, I suppose it was, although at the time I nearly turned it down.'

'Why?'

'I was happy at Sochaux. I was spending far more time with the union than I was making cars and what I was doing was, well, if not exactly illegal, then at least subversive. I loved it. And I liked the people around me. It is hard to describe the camaraderie of those times. For the first time since I was nine, I felt that I belonged to a family. I did not want to leave all that behind. But, as you say, *La Vague de la Gauche* was too good an opportunity to ignore in the end.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with the paper,' said Martins. 'Does it still exist?'

'No, not for a long time. But it had a certain prestige in its time.'

'Did it have a large staff?'

I laughed again. 'Goodness, no. There was just Monsieur Meurice and I. And the cat, of course. The cat was called Lenin.'

'Was the cat on the payroll?'

'Quite probably, I should think. Monsieur Meurice was keen to create the impression of a large staff. It was a competitive world, left-wing newspapers after the war, and very fissiparous. New ones started up every month and old ones closed down. Probably none of them was successful apart from *L'Humanité*, but it was vital to create the impression of success. No one knew there were only the two of us. We each had about six pseudonyms. Anyone reading the paper would have gained the impression of a large journalistic staff. Monsieur Meurice kept the best portfolios for himself. He appeared under his own name as the Editor-in-Chief and under different names as the

Political Editor, Foreign Editor, Economics Editor, Social Affairs Editor and so forth.'

'And what were you?'

'I did not get to be an editor, of course. I was the Paris Correspondent. I was the Sports Correspondent, which was ridiculous because I had no interest in sport. Later, I became the Travel Correspondent.'

'You must have been a busy man.'

'Not that busy,' I said. 'I am ashamed to say that much of the material was copied from other sources.'

'And you lived in Paris?'

'Yes, I lived with the Meurices. I did not pay rent. On the other hand, Monsieur Meurice paid me so little for my work that it came to much the same thing. They did not have children, so I suppose I was like a surrogate son to them. That was a funny set-up. Albertine Meurice did not share her husband's political sympathies. I think she came from quite a prosperous family, as did Fernand himself. She insisted on living in one of the smarter Paris suburbs, which did not suit Monsieur Meurice at all. They were constantly at war with each other. She would tell the neighbours that he was the editor of a leading national newspaper. He would tell them that they were running a communist cell from their house. I do not know what was believed. It was very funny.'

'It doesn't sound like the ideal marriage to me.'

'No, but it worked. They had a great deal of affection for each other, expressed mostly in insults. I never once heard them address each other by their first names. She was always *Madame la Bourgeoise* and he was always *Monsieur l'Intellectuel*. I remember when he forgot to bring home a cabbage for supper one evening, Albertine saying "I'm so sorry to have troubled your towering mind with such a trifle. It must have been an intolerable burden for an intellectual." They were always saying things like that to each other.'

Martins laughed. 'How long did you do this for?' he asked.

'For about six years. I came to Paris in 1949 and *La Vague de la Gauche* folded in 1955. By that time, in my capacity as Travel Correspondent, I was running a regular feature on tourism to different countries in eastern Europe. I had not actually been to any of the countries. Nor had Monsieur Meurice, as far as I know. We asked the embassies for their official literature and cobbled it together with some photographs. It was a popular feature, though I say it myself.

'When the paper folded, I did not know what to do. I was living with the printer and his family at the time, Monsieur Meurice having more or less evicted me. I cannot remember if it was Benoît or myself who came up with the idea of putting these old travel articles together into a guidebook, but that is what happened.'

'And the rest is history,' said Martins.

'It would appear so. At the time I hoped it was the future.' I do not think he understood the joke. Few people understood my jokes, so I had largely given up making them.

'I feel so privileged you have told me all this,' said Martins.

I think he meant it. I think he felt as if he had been granted a favoured insight into the rituals of old Europe. I could imagine him relating my story to a hushed audience in Boston or wherever he came from.

I enjoyed talking about it too. It must have been decades since I had even thought about that part of my life, let alone told anyone about it. And, in the telling, I realised myself that I was describing a vanished world, a world that had in fact vanished a long time ago. The offices of *La Vague de la Gauche* had been round the corner from the Brasserie du Temps Perdu, in a small garret close to the Picard Printworks. The only time I had been to this restaurant was when Monsieur Meurice had marched me here in 1952 to celebrate the downfall of a rival

and, in his view, ideologically unsound publication. I had drunk champagne then too.

That seemed to belong to a different life. So it was not the case that now, suddenly, on my 61st birthday, I was being confronted with change. There had always been change. There had been huge changes. It was just that the seamlessness of my life had disguised them. Living day to day there were so many things one did not notice. Which was the greater reality? The idealistic young communist who had sat in this restaurant toasting the demise of *Le Nouvel Citoyen*, or the slightly more cynical leftist who was sat in the same place allowing himself to be seduced by an American publisher? Neither, I supposed. They were both real. Life had moved on.

'So how would you feel now about selling the *Guide* to us?' It was almost a relief that Martins had brought the conversation back to a place where he could be the person I thought he would be, and I could be the person I thought I was.

'Yes, well, I am interested,' I replied. 'How much were you proposing to pay for it?'

'That would be for Mr Bergelson to decide.' (Why was everything important for Mr Bergelson to decide?) 'I sent him your *Guide* last summer and he liked it very much.' (Most unlikely; more probably he saw it as an opportunity to make money.) 'He knows I am meeting with you today and he has asked me to say that he is most keen that a deal should proceed. But he will wish to negotiate all the terms personally.'

'When does that happen?'

'As soon as you like.'

'So he would come over to Paris to discuss it?'

'No. Mr Bergelson doesn't travel widely himself.' (A publisher of travel guides who does not travel widely!) 'He will wish you to go to New York.'

'New York!'

'Yes. That is where our offices are.'

I had not been prepared for that. Mr Bergelson might not travel widely, but as a matter of fact neither did I. I travelled frequently; I travelled intensely; but these were not the same things. Rather shockingly, since leaving Switzerland in 1947, I did not think I had been to any other country beyond eastern Europe and France. I did not think I had been further west than Paris in my life. That was where the civilised world ended as far as I was concerned.

'Is that strictly necessary?'

'I'm afraid so, yes.'

I thought about it, but not for long. I wanted to sell the *Guide* and I was prepared to sell it to Martins. If I needed to go to New York to do it, that is what I would have to do. Perhaps a part of me was also intrigued to know how it would feel to be inside the lion's den.

'Very well,' I said.

'When would you like to go?'

'The sooner the better, I suppose.'

'Do you have a visa?'

'A what?'

'A visa. You will need a visa to enter the United States.'

'No I do not. What does that involve?'

'Oh, just a visit to the American embassy in Paris and a short interview with a consular official.'

'Is that normal?'

'Entirely. That's the procedure for everyone.'

'Well I suppose that is all right,' I said.

'I know one of the officials there,' said Martins. 'Would you like me to get things going?'

'Thank you,' I said. Now that he had the scent of a deal in his nostrils, Martins had suddenly become businesslike. I do not know if he thought I might change my mind, but he had somehow managed to take control of the situation.

'The process should not take too long,' he said. 'Why don't I check Mr Bergelson's availability in late March, if that is convenient for you?'

'Fine,' I said.