

# The Improvisor

A. H. Watkins

Dr. Thomas walked slowly through the Luxembourg Gardens. Though he wore no hat, he didn't mind the rain. It was French rain. Approaching the old aristocratic statues, stepping on the wet brownish leaves wreathed around their pedestals, he leaned forward to look for names or dates. He wandered down path after path, considering the fountains, now full of more litter and leaf pieces than water, and the trees, identified in French and Latin by name plaques fastened on their trunks. When he noticed the gazebo just off the pond, he rubbed his chin and turned toward it.

The green chairs were jumbled randomly under the wrought-iron canopy, pushed together in the middle of the cement floor. The wind picked up. He consulted his watch and decided to linger for a moment. A group of Japanese tourists had come to the gardens in spite of the weather. Dr. Thomas watched them. Their jackets varied in color, most of them neon hues—pink, orange, yellow, and blue—bright colors against the gray weather and the accent of black hair, black cameras, and black camera straps. A few brave, wet joggers huffed into, and then out of, view.

“Just how does one live?” He whispered the words in a low voice and immediately shook his head. “Where do these thoughts come from?”

The tourists gathered around their guide, a Japanese girl waving a red umbrella.

“Is there a right way or a wrong one? A wiser approach? Or are we all just floundering?”

Dr. Thomas felt himself falling through time, further and further from the images he had once held out for himself. Each passing day removed him further from the destiny he once thought possible. And it was such a simple destiny really. Nothing grandiose. Nothing along the lines of political ascension, artistic

accomplishment, or wealth that comes in automatically, dollars washing into his bank account every day on a steady tide. Nothing like that. As a young man, Dr. Thomas had assumed he might meet a woman somewhere along the corridor of days, a woman who would enjoy sitting next to him at movies and then maybe next to him at meals around a table or on a couch watching television. He had spent considerable time imagining the sparks and anticipation that would fill his mind and heart as he wove something romantic and true, an invisible but palpable bond between himself, the world, and a woman who would smile when she talked to him on the telephone.

“How many years has it been?” he asked himself as he sat down, stretched his legs, and placed them on a nearby chair. “For how many years have I been coming home to an empty apartment?”

Too many. Most of his adult life had been spent alone, and now he was well into his forties. His was a problem of connection, of establishing proper contact. At first there was high school, where he had cracked a few jokes and made what he called friends in the chess club. But during those years, he never went to a dance, never asked anyone out. He never really broke through an inner wall which he was aware of but believed he would one day tear down or clamber over. Once someone asked him what he liked to do, and before he could edit his reply, it just popped out, “I like to get A’s on tests.”

He did get A’s on tests, and they got him into a good university, where, for lack of anything else to do, he spent most of his waking hours in the library. He found distinction academically, winning a Fulbright scholarship at the end of his senior year.

“Was it six or seven years in England?”

The rain had almost stopped. Dr. Thomas hadn’t noticed. He was trying to reconstruct the patterns he had lived in and thought in twenty years earlier, wondering why he had thought a Ph.D. in linguistics was what he wanted more than anything else in the world. Why had every decision, every effort been directed toward that end? How could he have passed all the written tests and still miss the more fundamental, human lessons? Lessons like how to forge links with other souls and how to establish a rapport with others, a rapport that might lead to unfeigned friendship,



honest companionship, and conversations that would spark, kindle, and burn of themselves. Watching the drops fall from the roof of the gazebo, Dr. Thomas imagined communications that were not premeditated or weighted with concerns about wording or worry over how one might appear in the eyes of a partner.

He kicked a chair, knocking it over and scattering a congregation of pigeons which had gathered hopefully at the opposite end of the pavilion. "I've got to get out of here."

He headed for the gate on the Rue d'Assas side, but walking around the pond, he was slowed by memories of the gardens in midsummer, when children played with toy sailboats, setting their sails with sticks; when the gardeners rolled palm trees out of the greenhouse; when old men played at boules; and chess tournaments raged near the red-clay tennis courts.

His plane would leave at 2:00 that afternoon. That morning he had purchased a few antique books at the booksellers' stands along the Seine and now was taking a last walk in the gardens before retrieving his bags at the hotel and hailing a taxi for a dash to the airport. He had come to Paris to deliver a paper. The organizers of a linguistic conference had invited him to present his work on computational linguistics, an analysis of his new algorithms for conjugating irregular verbs.

Like everyone familiar with the charms of the City of Light, he was delighted to return to Paris. But the depth of his response to the narrow streets, the tree-lined boulevards, the smells and sounds, had taken him by surprise, had shaken him and dealt him something of a blow. For it was Paris he had mentally selected (was it twenty years ago?) to be the background for the romantic adventures he had once believed would eventually come to him.

He tried to hurry along the old paths, but at every turn he paused, noticing how the elegant faces of the statues were fading, noses and eyes melting away. He saw the thin rain and the old chestnut leaves fluttering down through it, falling on the paths where kings and countesses once walked, but he also envisioned the summer beauty to come—the impressionist sky and clouds and the subtle French forms of enchantment he had once hoped to share with a good, laughing, feminine heart.

Had an outsider the ability to read his thoughts, he would exclaim, "Well, the game isn't up yet, Dr. Thomas. Shake yourself! There is nothing on earth the matter with you. Your hands have five fingers, your feet five toes. Your legs are strong. You have a job, an income, education, health, reasonably straight teeth." And to such comments he would have nodded his assent sadly, for they were true, but they missed the point.

Loneliness is a narrowing corridor, the soul a delicate thing. For unarticulated reasons of its own, the soul might withdraw from contact with the world, with others, might contract into itself so completely that nothing, almost nothing, can call it forth, bring it to the surface, draw it out into the light, put it into eyes, words, and actions where others can sense it, get a feel for it, and grow attached to it. For Dr. Thomas, now reading the inscription under the black marble bust of Eugène Delacroix, the movements of his own soul were a source of embarrassment and frustration. So much out of control.

His nieces and nephews would certainly give a different report of him than the people who knew him at work. And his colleagues' reports would be less alarming than those offered by people he approached socially. When he played Christmas carols on the saxophone, making it honk like a goose, his sister's children laughed and jumped wildly about, and he himself smiled without thinking about it. He sensed the performances were successful, that some important part of him was getting out from under a shadow. But later, when adult guests arrived for the Christmas open house, they would find a polite, but distant, dinner companion, stern of mood, whose tendency toward long silences and erudite observations they would wrongly attribute to arrogance.

He looked at his watch again. "I should hurry." But he didn't. These last few minutes in Paris were stirring something deep within him that hadn't been moved for years.

"How do people meet each other?" he wondered. "It must start from almost nothing, a chance encounter—a woman sitting on a park bench, a waitress bringing soup to the table."

But no sooner had he imagined these scenes than other details altered them. "The woman on the bench, if attractive, is probably married or attached to someone else, and initiating a



conversation with her could prove embarrassing, inappropriate. The waitress, young, charming, and efficient, already has many suitors, one perhaps waiting for her after she finishes work, and he is probably better at talking, at getting through and making her eyes flash. And he is probably not forty-six—no, forty-seven.”

It is said that those who take their own lives feel boxed in, shut up in a tight room with no exit. And yet others looking at the same room can see doors and windows behind the curtains and even places where the walls are poorly constructed, flimsy. A kick or a determined shove could push through them. But Dr. Thomas’s views were his own and those of others could not reach him. To him, the walls stood eighty feet tall, stonework as sturdy as the walls of the Louvre.

Looking at other people’s eyes, he knew the reaction his inner pressures caused at a party, at a business lunch, or at a dinner. And his attempts to explain, to get words out from under the suffocating tightness, only made matters worse, increasing the tension within and without him, driving people further and further away. Many times he had considered approaching a woman only to slow his steps as thoughts of previous attempts replayed themselves on his imagination’s central screen.

“Yes, but this time will be different. This time will be different.”

Will it? How will it be different? Experience suggested that old patterns would reassert themselves, fear slowing the eager steps to a standstill, turning them around, and finally, after a long pause and an inward struggle, directing them homeward. Each time he went to the end of an invisible chain, then came back. Once at the apartment, mirrors were avoided and so was the voice that murmured, “This time maybe it would have been different. This time maybe . . .” Stop!

“Stop!”

He had actually shouted the word. Suddenly his cheeks were hot. He winced and glanced about. But there were few people in the park, no one close enough to hear. Shaking his head with relief and amazement, he moved away from the old trees and the bust of the romantic painter and continued along the path.

Two nights ago, a ballroom full of linguists—many of them bearded, many of them bald—had erupted with applause when

he finished reading a paper that had kept him busy through the evenings of the last eight months. Verbs? He didn't really care about verbs that much. They represented problems to be solved. He rarely thought of them as they are explained to elementary school children: action words, words referring to actions that people might take in or upon the world. For Dr. Thomas, they were just problems to be programmed away, a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to go to work, the compelling reason for turning the computer on and sitting in front of it day after day after day. On paper it all looked good, but alone under the wet, gray Paris sky with nothing to do but walk and ponder, it was not enough.

He was ashamed of the life he led, ashamed of his loneliness, ashamed of himself for not learning the basic lessons when he was younger. As it was now, each night after work he headed straight to his apartment, where he put a few John Coltrane records on the turntable and plopped himself on the couch, sometimes with a saxophone in his hands. As he listened to his jazz records, he marveled at the players' apparently endless capacity for invention, for improvisation, for hearing possibilities and rendering them in music. Improvising was difficult for Dr. Thomas. His own saxophone playing was good as long as he was reading the notes—anything else, impossible. Why should that be?

By this time he was back at the gazebo, wet and almost uncomfortably cold but not yet ready to leave. He was thinking of all the pretty bridges crossing the Seine, wondering which one Inspector Javert had jumped from. After toying with self-pitying thoughts about who might come to his funeral and what might be said of him during the service and whether he would prefer to be buried in France or in America, he laughed sadly, chastising himself for such pathetic meditations, and turned to leave, heading now for the gate on the St. Michel side.

Walking down the crowded, leaf-littered boulevard, he decided that there was no compelling reason to leave Paris that day. He would lose a few hundred dollars when he rebooked his flight. So what; better to lose them in Paris than home in California. He could buy a few grooming items and a few new shirts. At work, life would go on if he showed up a few days later. If they didn't like it, he could invent a few convenient lies. He had a head cold and



was afraid that changing air pressures might damage his eardrums. That was a good excuse, good enough if one were needed.

Dr. Thomas returned to his hotel room, rubbed his hair with a white towel, and changed into drier clothing. Sitting on the bed and looking through his antique books, he decided he was pleased with his purchases and might try to buy some more volumes.

For the next four days, he walked from early in the morning until late in the afternoon just observing things—reading signs and menus, browsing through shops, watching people move in the streets, trying to understand other people's conversations in cafés. In the evenings, he prowled the nightclubs looking for jazz bands with good saxophone players. He always sat at the back, watching through the blue smoke, tapping his right foot. They all just played, threw their heads back and blew; no music stands, no charts, everything in their heads, in their lungs, and in their fingers. Amazing. They stood melodies on their heads, turned them inside out and upside down, played on the beat, between the beats, a little before the beat, and a little after. All the different players playing loose, yet together in that sweet swing groove.

A cloud of nameless longing had been roiling and darkening above Dr. Thomas for several days. In a small woodwind shop near the Opéra, a used soprano saxophone became a lightning rod of sorts. He bought it. In another shop, he purchased some music—a collection of Edith Piaf songs—and some reeds. Putting a reed in his mouth, he ran to the Auber métro station. On the platform, a woman asked him what he had in his mouth. He tried to explain, gesturing to the horn in his hand and to the mouthpiece.

Back at the hotel, Dr. Thomas practiced all afternoon in the tile bathroom, setting the music in the bidet. He enjoyed the slight echo as he blew and filled the narrow space with fat, shimmering notes. For a while, he played directly into the bathtub, pleased with the amplifying effect. He played the melodies as they were written and then began experimenting, holding some notes longer and then playing the rest of the phrase faster to make up for the lost time, adding little descending runs to some of the notes. None of his inventions sounded natural; they sounded much too obvious, too mechanical, too stiff. Nevertheless, he continued, trying everything he could think of to avoid playing the melodies straight.

Considering each variation to be progress, he worked through all of the songs with a growing sense of ease, of communion.

His mouth started hurting. His embouchure would have to rest, at least for awhile. Dr. Thomas stretched on the bed and drifted to sleep.

Three hours later, he awoke with a shiver. He checked his watch. 10:10. "Must hurry," he thought, "before it's too late for dinner." A few minutes later, Jean-François, the night clerk, who had come to expect a few clumsy, but well-intentioned, French phrases or an attempt to discuss jazz clubs in Paris, looked up from a magazine to see a blurred smudge of a linguist dash through the lobby door.

Dr. Thomas headed for Boulevard Montparnasse, where he knew he would find many suitable restaurants, some of which might still be serving. Some had been around for a long time, mentioned fondly in books by Simone de Beauvoir and Ernest Hemingway. He lingered over his dinner: an assiette de crudités, fresh salmon in a delicate dill sauce, dauphiné potatoes, petits pois, and, after the wonder and variety of the cheese plate, lemon and apricot sorbets. Raising a hand in salute to the maître d', Dr. Thomas left the restaurant.

"Taxi!"

He was searching for loose-souled jazz. He hoped to find a smoky oasis where fountains of notes gushed from the horns, where for an hour or two he could bask in the inexhaustible flow of harmonized invention, where, musically speaking, almost anything could happen.

Near Montmartre, on the back side of the hill, he found something close to what he was looking for. Again he sat in the back, tapping his foot against the leg of the table and watching the players move, jerk their horns around, snap their fingers. The players smiled and pointed at each other, thumbs up, laughing sometimes. They honked and squawked, producing intricate squiggles of notes, strands of confetti, and showered them over the clacking train of the rhythm section. After several runs through the chorus, verse, and bridge, each player taking a surgical brass blade to the chord changes, a sudden rhythmic jolt stopped the song, and in a shimmer of cymbals and flickering horn lines, they put it away, impaled on a jagged ninth chord.



People clapped. The musicians nodded. Now, suddenly, the air was drained of music. The silence was almost startling, impressive in its own mute way after the wildly spinning lines and waterfall solos. The smoke remained and other noises were there—the clink of glasses, the low, murmuring rumble of conversations—but the shining notes were gone.

After a brief discussion between the players, some rearranging of mouthpieces, and the moving of horn stands, the drummer clicked his sticks together. “Two, three, and . . .” Dr. Thomas saw him whisper those words, setting the rhythm, establishing where the beats would fall in space and the length of the intervals between.

And the song began. If it were a structure, the drums would be the foundation and the bass notes the pillars or beams the other materials could be laid upon; the piano and the guitar, good sturdy walls and roof. But the horns—the horns were what turned it from a tract house into a palace or a cathedral, the liquid improvisation, running all over the chord changes like the intricate gothic filigree covering the walls of Notre Dame.

“Hey, there’s nothing there.” Dr. Thomas hunched forward in his seat. Actually, a lot was there. The song was there, the notes were there, the players were there, drinks were on the tables. People with all sorts of baggage and memories; parents, cousins, and vague, unarticulated desires listened and talked at every table. Dr. Thomas pondered his foot, tapping in time against the table leg. What was the connection? From sound to soul, from soul to body. His foot shaking the table in time. The idea began to spin outward, like the trumpet notes reworking the melody. The walls of the club connected to a larger building, and that building, like most buildings in Paris, touched other buildings, together forming a quartier and eventually a city. Something had flipped a switch in his head. Dr. Thomas checked his foot again, stopped it, and smiled when a few moments later it started moving again.

“There is nothing there,” Dr. Thomas murmured. He sprang up from the table, burst out of the nightclub, and ran into the wet street, where with flailing arms he hailed a cab, directing the driver toward the Latin Quarter, rue St. Jacques.

As the cab negotiated the narrow streets, Dr. Thomas leaned his head back, breathing heavily. “There is nothing there.” This chant,

quickly becoming a mantra, referred to the moments just before the last song had commenced, the very moment when the drummer clicked off a rhythm, just pulled the cadence out of thin air, out of the eternal void. “Two, three, and . . . BANG!” The song started.

Dr. Thomas handed two twenty-franc notes to the driver. Arbitrary rhythms and arrays of notes filled his head as he pushed open the rain-streaked hotel door and walked through the lobby. “Two, three, and . . . two, three, and . . .” he mumbled, snapping his fingers on the fourth, unarticulated beat.

At three in the morning, there is not much activity in a hotel lobby, so Dr. Thomas was surprised to see a pretty woman, actually a very attractive young woman, leaning on the reception counter and talking quietly to Jean-François. Her hair was dark and longish, falling to her shoulders and a little beyond. She wore boots of soft, supple gray leather and a dark skirt which came down to the top of them. She had on a black velvet jacket which looked modern and expensive. On one lapel, an art-deco brooch, silver and onyx, gleamed as she moved into the direct line of the overhead lights. Her face was at the same time exquisite and bohemian—large gray-blue eyes, an invitational mouth, sharply defined features.

Dr. Thomas approached the counter, thinking Jean-François was a lucky man. “Jean-François, if you could prepare the bill tonight, I can check out first thing in the morning.”

“How was the jazz this evening, Dr. Thomas?”

“Great. Really great. I found a nice place near Montmartre. On the back of the hill.”

The woman leaned toward him and asked in delicately accented English, “What was zhee name of zhee club?”

“Le Lapin Agile,” Dr. Thomas replied, not quite sure how to go about looking directly at such a pretty woman. He glanced at her eyes, and then focused on her brooch.

“I like jazz,” she said brightly.

Her English was charming, with a soft accent, the “th” sound resolved to a whiskery “zh.” Dr. Thomas wondered what the next sentence should be, and finding nothing within easy grasp, he nodded his head. A few moments of silence passed.

“Was zhere a singer?” the woman asked.

Dr. Thomas did not understand her pronunciation of singer.



Jean-François leaned forward to help out. "She asked if there was a singer. Sophie thinks she's a singer." He looked at Sophie for a moment and added, "But she is not a singer."

Dr. Thomas did not catch this last, softer comment or Sophie's quick reply in machine-gun syllables. She whispered a few sharp words to Jean-François and disappeared down a hallway. Had Dr. Thomas a firmer control of conversational French, he would have noticed a defiant tone in Sophie's comments and an affirmation that indeed she did consider herself something of a singer.

Dr. Thomas thought he should leave and began pushing away from the counter, but Jean-François spoke up.

"What do you think of Sophie?" he asked.

"Well, well . . ." Dr. Thomas stammered. "She's very pretty. Is she your wife?"

Jean-François raised a hand to his mouth and coughed. "No," he said, "just a friend."

More moments of silence passed. Dr. Thomas tapped his key on the counter. He considered leaving, but out of the corner of his eye he saw some movement, a dark flutter of skirt. He decided to stay.

Sophie returned to the reception counter; it seemed to Dr. Thomas that she took a position a little closer to him than before. Earlier he had not noticed her perfume, but it seemed fairly strong now, purplish and flowery, something like lilacs in April.

Sophie was looking at the toe of her boot. After a moment or two, Dr. Thomas glanced down to see what she might be looking at. Jean-François asked Dr. Thomas how long he had been playing saxophone.

"For more than ten years," Dr. Thomas replied. The familiar tightness constricted his chest, and he took a deep breath to shake off the heaviness closing in upon him.

A car passed outside. Dr. Thomas knew this because he was looking away, toward the glass door. He decided to make a conversational lunge; after all, he was in a foreign country. Whatever degree of embarrassment he might bring upon himself in Paris tonight, he would leave behind him tomorrow. He took a deep breath.

"You know," he began, looking more toward Jean-François, "I thought of something tonight as I was listening to the music. They

start, well, the drummer starts the song by establishing the tempo. Like this." Dr. Thomas demonstrated the procedure by snapping his fingers, "two, three and . . . on the fourth beat the song begins."

Sophie and Jean-François absorbed this information politely, eyebrows arching slightly.

"There is nothing there, no real beats in the air, no platonic tempo, just emptiness. The drummer just pretends there is something there."

"Excusez-moi," said Sophie, "what means *platonic*?"

Dr. Thomas began to explain and then shook his hands and his head, realizing the conversation was going backwards. "Nothing, really, at least not for the meaning of the sentence."

Sophie had the look that comes on the faces of people who have inadvertently entered rooms they had not expected to enter. She glanced at Jean-François for guidance. He was too diplomatic to do much more than shrug.

Dr. Thomas was beginning to wonder not only about what he should say next, but also about his French deodorant, which he had purchased a few days ago. A film of sweat formed on his forehead, and a few quick drops streaked down his back.

"What I'm trying to say is that the drummer pretends there is a beat there, a rhythm, and then the others pretend, and because they all work together, some playing on the imaginary beat, some playing around it, but everyone playing with respect to it, to something that doesn't really exist, after a while the rhythm actually does exist, and the song exists, and we tap our feet. People dance. The musicians build a structure that moves us, but at the beginning there was nothing there."

Dr. Thomas shuddered. What a stupid thing to say at 3:48 in the morning—to French people. He summoned the courage to look at Sophie's face. She was gazing back, puzzled, her head at an angle.

"I was thinking that maybe love and religion are like that, that people make a leap of faith. They pick something out of the air, out of nothingness and act upon it, like . . . like counting out a rhythm and paying respect to it, by pretending like something is there, and soon something really is there."



At this point, Jean-François took matters into his own hands. “Maybe you could demonstrate this principle to Sophie.”

At first Dr. Thomas was confused, but Jean-François pointed with his head and rolled his eyes toward the stairs. Dr. Thomas looked at Sophie and for the first time established eye contact that lasted longer than a few seconds. “Would you like to see how it works? I mean, I could explain it easily with my horn.” Sophie made her eyes open wide. She softened them as she nodded her head.

Dr. Thomas led her up the stairs where they could get into the miniature elevator. On the way to the fourth floor, having nothing else to say, he asked her what her favorite color was. She said blue and she asked him what his was and about that time the door opened and they went to his room.

His saxophone was on the bed. He unfastened the bamboo reed, put it in his mouth, and went into the bathroom to retrieve the music.

“Why do you have zhat . . .” she did not know the word for reed, “zhat zhing in your mouth?” She was sitting on the bed, leaning back on one arm.

He took the reed out of his mouth and waved it at her. “It has to be soft. Everyone has to do this first. You can’t just play, not the saxophone anyway, until the reed is ready.”

She was a picture. The brooch reflected a little light from the dim lamp on the table. A small reflection glimmered on her lip. Her hair fell like a dark wing over one shoulder. A heavy silence hovered in the air long enough to scare Dr. Thomas.

Sophie looked through the songbook and picked out one: “Les amants de Paris.”

Dr. Thomas nodded and fastened the reed back onto the mouthpiece, showing Sophie how to get it properly lined up. He also checked a loose pad which had been giving him trouble and showed the problem to Sophie, who appeared interested.

“Okay, Sophie—is it all right if I call you Sophie?”

She nodded.

“You hold the music. This is what I was talking about.”

He began snapping his fingers. “Two, three, and . . .” He put the mouthpiece to his mouth and prepared to play the opening phrase. But he didn’t blow. Sophie drew back, surprised.

"It might be too loud. We'll wake people up. Let's go downstairs to the reception area, to those chairs by the door. They won't hear us there. C'mon."

"Non, non," she said, shaking her head emphatically, making her hair move back and forth. "Non, just play softly."

Dr. Thomas stared toward her for a moment, thinking she looked even prettier in his room than she had downstairs. In the thin yellow light from the bedside lamp, her lips looked soft and appealing. He shook his head and focused on his horn. He fingered the keys, making mechanical, valve-like sounds, uncertain about the next step.

"Play, Monsieur, and I'll sing. I like zhis one."

"Okay, Sophie, but let's keep it quiet. I'll try to play soft." He snapped his fingers, establishing a cadence. "Look, here it is. Two, three, and . . ."

Faced with an audience, he decided against any improvisation and just played the song straight. Sophie sang. On the second verse, he decided to play some of the notes in the piano accompaniment, letting Sophie concentrate on the melody. This sounded better and afterwards they looked at each other, surprised.

"Sophie, you're pretty good."

Sophie blushed and looked down. "Encore, one more time, Monsieur." The second time through they made fewer mistakes.

"One more time," Sophie said, "will make perfect." They played it again.

"That really sounds good," Dr. Thomas whispered, nodding his head. "Really good. Next song?" Sophie nodded.

Shortly after six that morning, Jean-François heard steps in the hallway and then saw Sophie—boots, brooch, and velvet jacket. She glanced toward him. Normally she approached the counter. Jean-François straightened up, expecting a short conference. But she waved cheerfully and only said good morning, continuing toward the door.

Jean-François dashed from behind the counter and tried to catch her before she gained the entry, but he stumbled over some luggage near the counter. She was ten meters down the sidewalk when he caught up with her. He grabbed her arm. "And my commission?" he growled.



She looked at him with flashing eyes. "Jean-François, today I owe you nothing." With a quick tug she pulled her arm away and continued walking.

He stood in the doorway, watching her walk away. Jean-François rubbed his eyebrows. The early cars rolled in the wet street and small drops fell through the almost bare branches of the horse chestnut trees. He watched her back until she disappeared in the crowd of workers hurrying down the stairs to the métro entrance.

Thirty minutes later Sophie walked up the stairs to her small fifth-floor apartment near Place Clichy. She pushed open the door and went straight to a closet, where she took out three dusty suitcases, the same suitcases she had brought with her from Aix-en-Provence when she first came to Paris. She opened them, and suddenly, to make sure she hadn't lost it or imagined it, she took from her jacket pocket a card on which Dr. Thomas had written his address and a credit card number.

She sat for a moment on her bed, staring at the card. Then with a sudden shake of her shoulders, she reached for the telephone.

"Two, zhree, and . . ."

She began to dial.

A. H. Watkins is a graduate student in French at Brigham Young University.