

# THE THRESHOLD OF THE VOID

## CHAPTER I

That day, April 9, had dragged on terminally since I woke in the early hours of the morning. I didn't feel like doing anything, had hardly any appetite—which was fortunate—and I was completely incapable of making a proper gouache. I wonder if I've ever managed to make one in my entire life. Oh! I've sold some... even a few canvasses. And once I was in charge of the sets for a small theatre production that lasted a month. All that is so ridiculous. Not a way to start out.

Yet, I do feel I have something... But the others are taking their sweet time to notice it. The result? At the age of 24, Wanda Leibowitz, a regular at the Dôme, finds herself on a certain day in April out in the fine rain of late winter, with the taste of failure in her mouth. No workshop, no bed, and 2,000 francs in her pockets.

Through the smoke of my cigarette, I watch the regulars crossing the covered terrace, the waiters slipping lightly and quickly between the tables, pouring fruit juice in an effort to hasten spring. A greeting here, another there... But it's as if everyone is in a rush this evening. It's as if the men are no longer interested in my blond hair, my mouth, which I know I have highlighted well, my green, almond shaped eyes. Only one individual, a 50-something, with the face of a satyr is examining my knees.

I think sadly about Franck, the American student who had been living with me for four months. I never accepted any money from him apart from the rent for my workshop. When he left, yesterday, he had assured me that he would get commissions for me in Philadelphia... I don't have any illusions. How many avant-garde artists are languishing in America and France? No, I prefer to keep the memory of his childish chattering and the gentleness of his clumsy kisses.

Weakly reflected in the window, I see the blurry face of a very old woman sitting behind me. The middle-aged man has stood up, tired of his contemplation no doubt. He must have realized I'm not available for just anyone. I look back at the window, a bit disconcerted by the attire of the old woman reflected there. Is the glass causing some sort of deformation? She seems a little strange to me.

"Wanda!" says a voice next to my ear.

I turn my head. It's Alain. The only guy I've seen here all evening that I know. And it would have to be Alain. The vain young man is lurking about looking for a homeless girl to offer to share his apartment with. He's slippery. Already sitting at my table.

"Good evening," I say to him in a gloomy voice. "I'm out on the street."

"Come on," he says coarsely. "Don't boast."

"I mean that I've been expelled from my workshop," I explain patiently.

"Yeah? Poor girl!" he moans, eyes gleaming.

I conclude, "Honestly. But I'm not counting on you to bail me out."

He stands up.

He gives me a fake smile and reaches out a limp hand to me, saying "Sorry about that... Good luck anyway, eh?"

Alain leaves the Dôme and heads for La Rotonde. Why is it that you always meet the most unpleasant type of guy under such circumstances?

I abandon my chair and go to make a few S.O.S. telephone calls.

A small voice pipes up behind my back, "Miss!"

I turn around. The old woman is leaning forward, waving at me. In her cup, the cold tea is reminiscent of the obscure salons where fossils chatter. Her clothing is, in fact, rather strange. She is wearing a sort of pieced jacket totally devoid of shape and color and, on her head, shading her face which is as wrinkled as a dried apple, she is wearing something made of beaded material, looking much like a lamp shade used to decorate an old-fashioned oil lamp.

“Madam?” I ask suavely.

“Come and sit with me for a moment,” she says in a quavering voice.

I give her a smile filled with pity. She’s worse off than I am.

“Just for a moment...” I say, sitting down.

She nods her head, saying, ‘Come, come now. Don’t tell me that you’re in a rush. I’m not so deaf I didn’t hear what you said to that young man...’

“Precisely,” I say, fully expecting an endless ramble. “I have to call a few friends before it gets too late.”

“Come now, don’t get all worked up. I like you. I like young people.”

She pauses for an instant, tips her head to one side, and looks at me with small, blinking eyes.

“I might be able to give you a place to stay if you’re a serious young girl... And if you don’t make noise at night. No parties, no boys. You won’t be able to work there like you do in your workshop. There’s just one ordinary window. But you will have a bed.”

I open my eyes wide. I reply quickly, “You can rent me a room? That’s very kind of you... But I must admit, I have no money to pay an advance...”

She laughs, her voice cracking, then says in a grating voice, “The money we pay in advance, we put it aside to have it at the end... How are we supposed to find it?”

What a really strange old lady!

“No, no, no,” she continues. “I won’t ask you for anything in advance. Only the rent every three months.”

She gives me a very low figure.

“It’s in a building I own,” she adds. “On St. Séverin St. Number 10. On the second floor. The room has been empty for several months. I was keeping it for my sister who lives in the country so she could have a place to stay when she comes to Paris. My poor sister won’t been needing it ever again...”

She crushes a tear at the corner of her parchment thin eye lid.

“I’m so sorry...” I stammer.

I’m not sorry at all. What do I care about the death of an unknown old woman who is leaving me her bed?

“What’s your name, young girl?” she asks.

I tell her my name.

“My name is Léonie Gallois. There is no concierge in my building. Do you want the keys for the main door and the room right now?”

I don’t know what to say.

“But... the rent...”

“In three months, in three months... I’ll come to collect it myself. I live nearby in another building that belongs to me as well.”

She takes two keys from her black fabric purse and hands them to me. I grab them, uttering a series of protests and acknowledgements. She stands up, moaning.

“And keep one of your paintings for me. I will buy it from you. Now, it’s getting late for old people. Good evening. I’ll see you soon young Wanda Leibowitz.”

She leaves. I see her through the window of the terrace. She trots across the square and I lose sight of her in the rain. Existence can be strange... I could have wandered day after day, spending a night with a guy in too much of a rush that I would have to run from, spending another night or two with a girl friend who would have found it hard to put up with me... Yet the very same day I lose the roof over my head, I find another one without even lifting a finger.

That extraordinary luck makes me brave. I immediately set out to find my new room. No matter how bad the bed is, it will look great to me. No matter how dark the room is, I’ll work there tirelessly. I’ve got shelter for three long months. And by the end of that time, I know I will have found the ridiculously small sum I need for my rent.

I get up, pay my bill, and go down to the basement where I had deposited my suitcase, my boxes of paints, canvasses, drawings and easel. I go back upstairs, weighed down like a donkey, leave the building and head to the metro.

The trip to Saint-Michel is short and that’s fortunate since my luggage is heavy and the men are most definitely not gallant. Yet, I still have another 35 paintings to pick up at the workshop. I have 24

hours to collect them. I'll go tomorrow morning with two or three friends... or with Marc, who owns a 1926 car with an engine that will no doubt never die.

Outside, it is still raining. The Arabs living in the neighborhood are out in the cafés. Standing under a streetlight, a Chinese man catches my eye and smiles at me, closing his eyes. I reach the front door. It opens, creaking, when I insert the largest of the two keys in the lock.

I deposit my burden in hallway and look about me. There is not a single switch on the wall. I light a match. No, the wall is smooth. I light another match and use it to guide my way up the stairs. The silence around me is total. The tenants must be incredibly quiet. Although it is true that it is late.

On the second floor, there is a single door. No way I can get this wrong. The smaller of the two keys opens it easily. I leave it wide open and go back downstairs to pick up my meager belongings in the shadows. Without light, the staircase is difficult. But since I've already been up and down it, I manage to make my way back to my room. "My" room! The light from my match reveals a true marvel. A switch! I have electricity!

The light bulb turns on. I step back, caught off guard. The room is triangular.

The expression "within four walls" has no meaning for me. I only have three. The door I came in through is in one of the walls, quite close to the right angle it forms with another wall, which has a window. The third wall joins the other two to shape what initially looks like an isosceles triangle. Along the third wall, there is a daybed with the most hideous bedspread. On the floor, a large bedside rug covers almost the entire room. A small table stands under the window and next to the door there is a wardrobe with twisted columns and an impeccable beveled mirror. I will have just enough space to set up my easel in the middle of the room.

But what architect could have planned a triangular room? But I didn't see everything. Across from the foot of the bed, there is a second door in the longest wall. I walk over to it. The door seems to be out of service. There is a small note stuck to it. In yellowed letters, it reads, "Do not open."

What does that mean? Why is the note there since the door obviously seems to be out of service, having no button, no latch and no handle? But... There is a hole for a key... Perhaps the key to the room will open it?

Come on, what am I supposed to do with this door? I have barely put my packages down on the floor and here I am planning on breaking a rule! To hell with the stupid door... I place my suitcase on the table, take my clothes out of it and place them in the wardrobe. I place my boxes of paint on the floor of that piece of furniture along with my easel. Suddenly I'm so very tidy! I believe that the useful space here is restricted enough to account for this strange behavior.

The bed is made. I feel that I am about to snuggle down into it, fully aware of its providential nature. One negative point. There is no running water. Not even a basin. And as I make that disappointing observation, I bump into something hard that pokes out from behind the garnet-colored double curtains. What a miracle! Once the curtain is raised, I find a hollow in the wall. There is a tiny sink with a drain and a brass tap. Filled with joy, I empty the contents of my purse on the table, rumple the bedspread and light a cigarette. I'm surrounded by objects that belong to me and the room immediately takes on an intimate air as if I have been living there for a week. At least I try to convince myself of that.

As I undress, I suddenly realize why the room is triangular. Originally it was square. And, for whatever reason, someone built a wall, dividing it along the diagonal.

The unused door would provide access to the unused part of the room.

It is 10 o'clock in the morning. I slept like a baby, given the events of the previous night and the softness of the mattress. A shaft of grey light enters the room between the curtains, slanting across the oblique mirror of the half-opened wardrobe which deflects it directly onto my face. Oddly enough, it comes at me from two different directions. That, combined with the narrow shape of the room, gives the place the air of a universe of tangled angles that seem to be moving. But, of course, everything is still. It's an undefinable impression, never experienced before, that I plan to try to reproduce in an abstract painting. Abstract... that it will be for those who see it... In fact, I will not have done anything figurative, since the painting will provide a direct image of reality...

It's not time for work yet. I have to get up, wash, dress and get over to Montparnasse after first calling Marc. I don't know what my paintings are worth, but I don't intend to lose two years' worth of

work. In any case, I hope that, once the choice is made, there will five of six interesting ones I can show in some future exhibit.

When I get up, I open the double curtains. Between the curtain and the windows, there is no other screen and I suddenly find myself looking straight at the hilarious face of a fat, bald man leaning over the sill of the window across from me, four or five meters away. I'm naked.

I cover the window again, furious. I make fun of the whale but I don't want him following me everywhere or coming to knock on my door. It takes me a good half hour to get ready to go out. On my way out, I uncover the window. The fat man has left his window and I can see, as if I were actually there, the inside of his dump. It defies description and I prefer to turn my attention to the mysterious door.

I give in to my curiosity. I bend down and look through the lock hole. My effort is pointless. I see absolutely nothing. Either it is completely dark on the other side of the door or the lock is blocked with something.

When I straighten up, my neighbor from across the way is examining me from a distance while picking his teeth with a toothpick. I turn away and leave. I'm going to have to keep the curtains closed.

Once outside, I go to the tavern that is located near the metro station. I order a coffee and croissants. I make a call.

"Hello? Marc?"

"..."

"Yes, that's about it. I've got a new place. I'm in the Latin Quarter. Can I ask you for a favor?"

"..."

"You're an angel. I can see your halo from here. I need to move my leftovers from the workshop, with your car."

"..."

"OK. I'll meet you there in an hour."

An excellent guy. But, of course, he's very ugly. All I have to do is enjoy a quiet breakfast. At the terrace, my cup is waiting and this time the sun is out. I hope everything will work out.

It's all done. Marc came, with his square car, which could hold all of the furniture in a parlor. We handled the move together and he carried most of the paintings and frames up. He found the shape of the room dumbfounding.

"When you stand up in your place, do you stand on one foot?" he asked me.

He occasionally makes these enigmatic jokes which seem to have some sort of hidden meaning for him.

I accompanied him to the post office since he had a letter to send. I had something very important to do there as well: collect the 15,000 francs I receive each month, an income my parents bequeathed to me. It isn't a large amount, but given the ridiculous rent I am paying, life will be easy.

Now, Marc has left. He's responsible for amateur theaters and he has inspections to make. He earns good money, 30,000... perhaps 40, 000 francs. I've never known exactly where it comes from.

I worked tirelessly all afternoon. A composition with barbed lines, pointed spots barely visible on a trellis of gray shadows. Here and there, a burst of hard colors and the rest falls back into nuanced gray. It's progressing and I must admit that I don't find it displeasing.

Someone knocks.

It must be Marc. No one else knows my new address. I stand there a moment, my paintbrush poised, then wipe my hand on my torn blouse and call out, "Come in!"

The door opens to reveal a small, blackish limping lump. I recognize the landlady. I put my paintbrush down awkwardly and start to apologize, "Oh, I thought..."

She stops and looks at me with her small eyes, that shine like black diamonds. In the yellowish light of the late afternoon, with a voluble conversation under my window as a backdrop to my sensations, the small, very old Léonie Gallois reminds me of some sort of poorly balanced insect whose wings have been torn off.

"Good day, Wanda!" she says, closing the door.

And the noise of the hinges mingles with the grating of her voice in an out-of-tune duet.

“Good evening... Mrs. Gallois...”

I pick up my paintbrush, with its cadmium-coated bristles, as it starts to roll, threatening to fall on the bedside rug.

She places her old-fashioned purse on the table and sits down, using the edge of the table for support.

“Well,” she says, turning her small face where the bone structure mingles with the wrinkles and folds of withered skin, toward me. “Well, I see that you are already at work! That’s fine, my dear girl. Did you get some sleep?”

“I slept well. The bed is very comfortable! I really don’t know what I would have done if you had not rented me this room...”

“It’s nothing. Rest assured, it’s not a matter of philanthropy... My entire living comes from the rent from my two little buildings and I cannot afford to rent only half of them out... But I didn’t come here to talk about that...”

She falls silent for a moment, blinking in the direction of the window. I remain standing, glancing at her square shape sidewise, noting the childish appearance so many old people have. She is certainly well over the age of 80.

“You no doubt saw the small sign on the door near you...”

“I... yes, of course... But I must admit I don’t really understand...”

“Why not?”

“Well, the door seems to have been condemned... So, it seems to me that...”

“Don’t get things wrong. The door hasn’t really been condemned. But I insist that no one tries to open it... I didn’t mention it to you last evening. It slipped my mind. My great-grandmother wrote that little note. In fact, I don’t really know why. I’m only asking you to abide by the instruction out of respect for her. My grandmother, who always obeyed her own mother, piously transmitted that instruction to my mother and my sister and I always respected it. Why? I have no idea... The reason must have gotten lost between generations. But I do insist on it, my little Wanda.”

“Of course, madam. Rest assured that I won’t touch that door, that it is of no interest to me. This room is more important to me... Would you like me to pay the rent now?”

“No, no, no... I said in three months. Today, I only came to insist on the sign... Well now, I won’t keep you from your work any longer.”

She stands up, leaning against the table, and walks over to my easel.

“Hmmm!” she says, running her eyes over the painting. “I’m not really into these modern paintings. I don’t understand them at all! Well, at least you’ve used nice colors! Good day, good day, Wanda.”

She places her purse under her arm and heads for the door.

“I’m sorry,” I say as I accompany her—well, actually I’m two steps behind her. “I have nothing to offer you... And I can’t heat anything up, no tea, nothing...”

“No, I know that! Don’t bother yourself. Goodbye... and keep up the good work!”

She leaves.

I sit down on the daybed and light a cigarette. I always light up a cigarette when I feel disoriented or idle. What struck me the most and I didn’t notice so intensely the previous day is her extremely old appearance. And she spoke to me about her grandmother! What period did she live in? During the reign of Clovis?

I’m joking but I think it’s more a reaction, a form of self-defense. I can’t help but think that one day I’ll be old and ugly. More than ugly: horrible. I set that thought aside; it’s so far in the future! For now, I have one thing to do, something that cannot be put off. I have a ferocious appetite and I have decided to eat a complete meal, with hors-d’œuvre, cheese and dessert and not just a single dish as I usually do.

I leave everything as it is. I will have to sleep with the window open if I don’t want to be asphyxiated by the odor of turpentine. In my workshop, I had a small bedroom with a balcony... Too bad! In any case, I could have kept it if I was willing to die of hunger, purchasing cheap paints and poor-quality canvasses.

I have gone quite mad; my dinner cost me almost 7800 francs. After my meal I went back to the Dôme where I offered two cognacs to a shabbily dressed guy who was trying to sell me some atrocious

watercolors. I also gave him some advice, which will only reduce the quality of his work. Naturally, I then had to do everything in my power to get rid of him.

Here I am again, surrounded by the perfume of turpentine... My window open, I close the double curtains in the face of the bald man who spits into the street, over the top of his railing. In the electric light, my painting has lost all meaning. It's nothing but a maze of scribbles in dull and glaring colors. Disgusted, I undress and go to bed.

I'm unable to fall asleep. There is something bitter in me that keeps me on the edge of tears. Yet, I should be happy to have a bed... I think I have too many doubts as to my possibilities. And then, even worse, I often don't feel like painting any more. More and more often, over the past six months.

At the start of my relationship with Franck, I came up with a large number of ideas and I managed to create harmonious colors. Now that he's left for Philadelphia... Oh, I never really loved him. Yet, I feel painfully alone.

Why did that crazy old woman come to my home to poison me with her tale of the forbidden door? I don't care about the door. I'm no eight-year-old devoured by an unhealthy curiosity. I'm three times that age. Twenty-four. Twenty-four years of anything, with a great emptiness everywhere. The emptiness I would find if I were to open that door.

Emptiness? Well, that's irritating! Who thinks of building a wall to cut a room in two, installing a door, and then forbidding your great-grandchildren from opening it! Let's go to sleep. Let's count sheep.

Nonsense! That's the best way to stay awake—and to get furiously angry on top of it all. I'll get up, drink a glass of water, smoke a cigarette... try to draw. It's fine to have a room, but the "conveniences" are outside, on the landing. And there's no stove... If it weren't so expensive, I would have bought one of those small, propane camping stoves. With a pot, I could make tea. That would be pleasant. Too bad. I'm constantly obliged to punctuate my thoughts with those two words: "Too bad"!

I get up, turn on the light bulb. In front of me, my painting grimaces, more terrible than ever. I remove it from the easel and place it on the wardrobe.

Standing still in the middle of the room, I listening to people speaking endlessly in Arabic under my window. When I got home earlier one of them called out to me. He uttered a short sentence to me in his incomprehensible language and his friends burst into laughter. Next time, he will trap me against the wall and try to kiss me. And the time after that...

I'll have to take care not to come home too late. After all, what do I have to do at the Dôme now that the evenings filled with feverish discussions of the past four years have been replaced by the boredom of sitting in front of an empty cup... where I annihilate myself in silence or through futile conversations with uninteresting people, tourists looking for a bohemian lifestyle they don't find?

I stand in front of the *door* and I examine the sign. The paper must have come unstuck several times over the course of the years. It is now held in place by four rusty pushpins. "Do not open". The sentence has not changed. How could it have changed? It remains there, a motionless, silent prohibition, a silent presence watching over the triangular room.

I grab a pair of scissors from my suitcase and fit the tip of one blade into the lock. It encounters nothing. I push it in up to ten centimeters. The lock is not plugged. Obviously, the key to my door opens it.

Dumbfounded, I look at my right hand. Without noticing it, I've picked up the key and I'm holding it between two fingers. Has my childish curiosity come back? Had it ever gone away? I return the key to its place, not because my scruples are too strong for me to disobey the prohibitions, but because I insist on controlling myself. This door is of no interest. I fill my glass with water and drink it in a single gulp. A cigarette will set everything right. I light a cigarette. I inhale once, twice, three times. Nothing is set right. I sit down on the daybed and burst into tears.

What a stupid crisis! What is happening to me? Whining miserably... Why? My eyes are dry now and I glance around me, hopelessly. What a great deal, having a bed and a sink, when I can't even faithfully reproduce the images that fill my mind and when I am invariably alone with my own hair, my own lips... and a mirror that reflects my image which is always despairingly identical.

An absurd idea comes to me from out of nowhere. I relight my cigarette which had gone out after I butted it out in the soap dish. Let's suppose that the closed door is not there just by chance but as the intersection of a line of unknown luck with my own lifeline... Let's suppose that, all this time, I knew deep down that this triangular room had hidden the only means for me to escape outside myself... and

that old Léonie Gallois is an unsettling personification of my guardian angel? There's no point in developing suppositions that can serve as a ramp if you are constantly climbing up the endless stairs of solitude and mediocrity...

Unfortunately, I still have a great deal of commonsense, acquired through contact with obstacles. If I'm mistaken—and it's a safe bet that I'm filling my head with illusions—I would open that damned door, just to find the emptiness I find in myself. And that old vixen of a landlady, who must have some way to see if I've behaved like some vile curiosity seeker, will realize the next time she visits that I've violated the prohibition. That will result in my return to homelessness because she will in all likelihood put me out without a moment's pity. And I know what the conclusion will be. I think it's ridiculous to lose the little I've acquired trying to find something that's just an illusion...

I think about these stupidities for a half hour. I wonder how, at the age of 24, I can hold on to such primitive superstitions, as well as such disproportionate fears! Either I open the door or I don't. I don't have to justify my action or deny it. The only thing that counts is that I do what I want to.

I get up, pick up the key, and insert it into the lock of the mysterious door. I turn it... Nothing. It hits something. It only turns partway. I force it. Waste of time. The old lady's words were meaningless. The door has definitely been sealed. I leave the key in that lock that it doesn't open, just as a challenge.

I go to bed and this time sleep comes to me.

The first thing that strikes me when I wake is the light. The light that comes from two different directions, making the room look like some sort of fake puzzle. The second is the key. The key stuck in the lock that is foreign to it. Following my contact with reality, all this gives me a strange sensation of artificial things, permanent inadequacy, like that sculpture by Giacometti representing a wedge of an orange hanging over the orange from which it comes, almost embedded in the hollow it made when separating from it—but *almost*. It's enough to make you shout in frustration. There are two ways to escape from this singular bewitchment. I leap out of bed and try to pull the key out.

It resists. Is this a key like Blue Beard's? I turn it every which way, furious.

The door opens, gently, with a sound that makes the hair on my head stand up. It remains open about 10 centimeters. I step back, overcome with an incomprehensible fear.

I believe I have managed to open it by turning the key in the direction opposite to the usual one. And now, I no longer want to know what lies behind it. All I want is to close it. That's plain stupid. It's not the modest scruples from the previous day that frighten me. It's something else. It's a feeling of fear that I've never experienced before, manifested by my intuition as a warning. I'm afraid. Honestly, the miserable door that has intrigued me up to this point terrifies me now that it is open.

I move ahead. One step... I have a terrible urge to open it fully. But *what lies behind it* frightens me too much for my curiosity to get the upper hand. Trembling slightly, I grab the key, pull it towards myself... and close the door. I pull the key out slowly and return it to the lock it should never have left.

I sit down on the bed. From there, I see a narrow strip of the house across the way between my double curtains. In that strip, the bald man's hand is beating a rhythm against his railing. Is that man welded to his window? What does he do with his days?

Whatever. I only think those thoughts to escape from myself... to escape from the hold of the door I stupidly closed before trying to see what it hides. And now I no longer have the courage I need to open it.

And the worst thing about this curiosity is that it is mingled with a pointless terror. A terror rooted in the most nebulous intuition. A sensation of *absolutely new* terror that is impossible to conceive. The impression of being watched by a faceless thing hunkered down in the shadows, waiting, motionless and silent, for centuries for an incautious hand to free it... Are fairy tales, or perhaps myths such as Pandora's Box, coming back to my mind to return me to a childish state?

It is so very easy to erase all this from my mind... to stop thinking about the odious door and return to my uncompleted painting and make it into something interesting. That's where life is, where the solution to my problems is. In fact, I need to express myself in some manner or another and, at the same time, earn some money so I can feed—and dress—myself a bit better. When all you have on your back is colorless, worn-out clothing, you cannot take existence by the throat and force it to bend to your demands. You're diminished from the outset. You look for unlikely solutions, like the one I evoked

earlier, comparing the landlady to a guardian angel... The opposite is just as inept. The real way to act is to develop a concrete plan.

I stand up with the firm intention of taking my painting from the wardrobe and placing it on my easel, but...

But, once again, I take my key from one lock and place it in the other, turn it in the opposite direction, and open the mysterious door wide.