

*Bonjour Tristesse*

The first time she began reading the thin little paperback, she was fifteen and lying naked on a narrow bed upstairs from the bookstore on Wilmare Avenue. The book was written by a French author, Françoise Sagan, who was only eighteen when it appeared. The main character, Cécile, was seventeen. There was a quote from Oscar Wilde in the book that the main character claimed she hoped to live by: “Sin is the only note of vivid colour that persists in the modern world.” Clearly it was wonderfully adult, wicked, and romantic to be reading about Cécile and her summer with her father and his mistress on the French Riviera while she herself was in the nude, and Robert—he was thirty-four—was crouched at his desk and working with a pencil and paper on a novel of his own. He’d read her passages from it that were terminally descriptive and dull, but that wasn’t the point. It was Thursday and her parents believed she was staying after school for debate club. She had arrived at the bookstore earlier, the bells tinkling above her head as she came through the door, had seen Robert there behind the desk, sitting not before a cash register but before what always reminded her of the sort of tackle box her father used for fishing. She loved Robert, of course. It ached how much she loved him, how often she thought about his life at the bookstore, about his body, how glad she was that they were lovers. Always when she arrived, he would wait for any lingering customers to leave, would turn the sign on the door to “Closed,” would lead her past the rope and up the stairs to the rooms where he lived, would undress her and push her back on the bed, telling her they shouldn’t be doing this, she was too young, but she was beautiful, beautiful. She thought about him often while listening to her teachers blathering on at school, while talking to her classmates and friends. She felt older now than all of them, as old as the moon, as old as the snow coming down. She first began sleeping with Robert in October, and now, in January, she had begun to dream they would keep up their secret affair until she was eighteen. Then they would marry and move to France, where Robert would be a famous novelist and she would be his muse. Or maybe she would begin to write herself, the beauty of her creations eclipsing even Robert’s success, and he would be jealous and storm out, vowing never to return. But he would come back at once, of course, going down on his knees to press his face against her belly or

maybe lower, to beg her forgiveness, to tell her it was embarrassing to admit, the worst display of sentimental emotion, but he couldn't bear to exist without her. Which is not to say that everything was perfect between them in the bookstore. It was boring sometimes, if truth be told. She enjoyed the rush of emotions when Robert insisted they couldn't keep seeing each other this way, that it was wrong, wrong, that he was taking advantage, that he was far too old. And she loved the way he seemed to worship at the altar of her body. But too often it was just Robert writing at his desk while she was reading, Robert offering her coffee and telling her how impossible the bookstore business was, how broke he was, how slowly his novel was going, that publishers didn't want novels anymore in any case, that the entire publishing business was dying. She wanted to go out somewhere, wanted to sit with him at a restaurant or even at a bar, but always he refused. People wouldn't understand, he said. And they wouldn't, of course, but wasn't that the point? They would bear the shame of the looks from others—and defiantly move past them. Sometimes they also argued about love. Robert kept saying that it couldn't last between them, shouldn't last, but she kept insisting they would stay together forever. And he did love her, she knew. He wrote her love letters that included lines about how much he wanted her, how much he desired her body. And he drew a sketch of them naked together. She hadn't known until then that he was an artist as well as a novelist. It was tragic what they had between them, so it hurt her when she broke it off in May, told him she wouldn't be coming back, that if he saw her again it would only be to ask for advice about books to read. The entire time she'd known him, after all, he had always pressed books into her hands, including the Françoise Sagan novels, and *Confessions of a Mask* by Yukio Mishima, and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. She had read them all, but now she'd met a boy from school named Todd Stevenson, a senior, who seemed actually more worldly than Robert—he'd lived on an army base in Germany as a child—less trapped in a stuffy bookstore and complaining about paying the mortgage. She still loved Robert, though, would always love him, and from time to time she returned to his bookstore to glance through the dusty rows of books, to pick one or two or three novels, to carry them over to Robert and his tackle box, to watch the look in his eyes while he told her they were free, to take them.