

The Oyster

to whom, starting from nowhere,
arrives nowhere, travelling everywhere.

One more breaker of salted and iodated water crashed on the dike and sprinkled the window of a smoky garage. Except for the squawk of some hoarse gulls and the rumble of the Atlantic Ocean, the harbour was known as the most silent place in the entire kingdom. Some people would say that it was also the rainiest and cloudiest place: they were right. Nowhere in the whole world was life that sad and boring. Here was a garage, in the middle of a harbour: interestingly weird, wasn't it? The old neon sign "Tonio's Cars" on the pediment cast a strobe light on the flooded pavement. The headlights of a Jaguar shone out faintly through the opaque vapour on the windows. Most of the time one or two cars at the most (three in the excellent days) crowded in the tiny garage. Why was it so strange for a village in which fish outnumbered fishermen and boats outnumbered cars? Rare were the people who entered the garage and set the keys of their cars on the dusty Formica table just right to the door. A reek of petrol, paint and motor oil crept up from tins spreading their contents on the greasy floor and blended together with a smell of freshly hooked herring. The smell of cod permeated the very heart of the wall covered with a faded yellowish paint. An old Phillips transistor tuned on the BBC resounded in the whole room. The permanent crackling of the loudspeaker gave more intensity to the former songs broadcast on the wave. On the wall close to the car all the metallic tools were anarchically fixed, but strangely the scene was full of poetry and harmony. From a glass ashtray full of dead cigarette ends, a dense blue smoke rose and whirled with the mechanic metal. The smoky atmosphere was warm: it was cosy to stay in and patiently watch the rain patter on the door. In the background, behind a stack of tires an Old English sheepdog was serenely sleeping on a tartan. The oily remains of fish and chips spoiled by the Jaguar exhausts filled his bowl. Every detail, even the most insignificant one, contributed to the whole visual brouhaha in the garage: the portrait of the Queen hung with a golden needle above the door, the pale green mackintosh rolled on the doormat, the bottle of double distilled Scotch from Edinburgh hidden close to the right leg of the table and the pile of books and LPs dangerously tilting on the left. Surprisingly, this disorder seemed to be minutely orchestrated by a blend of poetry and creativity.

Eight o'clock. It was time for the garage mechanic to go back home. Every evening - when the hands of the all-plastic clock hung over the window pointed at the barely readable "VIII"- the quasi-royal formalities began. The skinny garage owner dried his hands with the dirty rag on the bonnet of the car he had just closed. He switched off the headlights so that there was but the glimmer of a street lamp in the garage. Silence prevailed. Not even the wind over the foamy waves was noisy enough to disturb the quiet ceremony. He sat on a chair and sighed: once again he had to bear the weight of a humdrum day. He guzzled down a glass of whisky, another and another one until the Formica table began to move psychedelically. Hardly had the last puff of smoke sprung from his mouth when he laid a hand on a crumpled pack, took a cigarette and lit it. He then stood up and put on his mac. Ready to go, Tonio kicked the floor twice with the heel of his grimy white Repetto shoe. Straight away, the half-black, half-white dog solemnly got up at the back of the room and joined his owner on the porch. Here, up against the damaged roughcast wall there was a fishing rod left under the pouring rain.

Nothing strange for the citizen of a harbour, wasn't it? But what was strange was the bait hung to the hook: everyone would expect a sticky worm. Everyone? *He* had decided to fish with a penny, poor soul. No, no, no don't be so pragmatic: let him show his worth. He got hold of the fishing rod at the end of which the little copper red coin was fixed, and left.

Now, Tonio was pacing up and down in a dark corner of the harbour, where the trawlers, their hulls coated with mussel shells, moored in after their exhausting fishing days. The stamping of his feet on the cobblestones resounded in the deserted village. He sat in front of the ocean on a bollard surrounded by empty fish crates and waited with the fishing rod pointing offshore. He stared at the old wine cork floating on the surface among nauseating seaweed and checked for the slightest move with great care. Every evening after work, he would remain there, the rain pouring on his mac for hours and hours. The moony man was full of hope. The float oscillated lazily and mechanically while Tonio dozed off. The soporific never-ending ballet performed by the cork was absolutely tedious. Tedious until something strange happened. Suddenly, the water began to bubble frenziedly and to dazzle as if fireworks were shot in the abyss. The drenched sheepdog sprang to his feet and looked at the seaside with a blend of fear and amazement while the cork dived. It was to be the end of all these years of failure. In all the time the mechanic had angled oysters, he had never seen anything like this. His trembling hands clung to the bending rod and vigorously got his catch out of the water. Here was an oyster. An oyster caught with a penny. His weak dreamy heart pounded wildly. He stubbed out his cigarette and took a blade out of his pocket to open the oyster. Every time it was the same excitement. Tonio closed his eyes not to see the content of the shellfish. Unfortunately there was nothing else but the usual and ordinary pearl. He cupped his distraught face in his cold soaking hands: it was time to go home. Tonio's elongated figure moved away in the foggy main street and disappeared into the faraway night. Followed by his dog, he arrived in his own district where for years street lamps had been out. The amber light shining out from the glazed doors of the few brick-red houses guided his steps. He reached number 5 and pushed the door. On the left, in the narrow corridor, he threw the contents of his pocket onto the sideboard: a few coins, a cigarette pack, a brown paper Moleskine notebook and a bunch of keys. The ping startled an old lady out of her sleep, ensconced in an armchair in the sitting-room. She was a plump lady. The rose-pink blusher on her chubby cheeks most suited her small sky-blue eyes. In her silver-grey hair rollers were lined up in military lines. She was a former English teacher in a conservative convent school. Two or three cheap golden rings ornated each finger of her podgy hands. The large red and pink fake diamonds sparkled in the lamp light and she was comfortably slouching in a soft velvet armchair, her arms crossed on her breast and her rolls of fat flowing outward. Her flowery dress showed every bulge and she camouflaged herself in the old-fashioned wallpaper decorated with petunias and magnolias background. Strangely, the room smelled of nice fresh flowers. Just on the table where the lamp was laid, magazines full of crossword-puzzles piled up like a trophy. And here it was. For years that crone had been the Kingdom Champion of Crosswords Games. She was unquestionably the

titleholder, travelled to every city and village across Wales, England and Scotland to confront other elderly ladies and spent her days filling the little squares with accuracy. The word in the street was that she had already filled more than a billion squares.

'You're late, boy!' she barked.

No answer. Anyway he had never talked to anyone in the five years since that *very special* day. Without a glance, he hung his beige cardigan on the coat-rack and drew near the gas stove in the middle of the room to warm up his hands. The creaking of the polished parquet was muffled by a patchwork of carpets. Close to the window covered with thick woollen pinkish curtains a small wooden desk filled the corner. The kind-hearted mechanic settled down in front of the Remington typewriter. The sheet of paper loaded in the machine roll was immaculate except for two printed words that stained its virginity. It had been a long time since the key springs had not been pushed by his long tapering fingers; it had been a long time since the ink pad had not stamped its letters on the paper, a very long time since the narration had not been continued. The magician he used to be had vanished, and so had the desk varnish he scraped off with his nails yearning for the creative urge. He stayed put for hours, the old hag snoring in the background. The shadows under his eyes grew darker. The dog was comfortably curled up close to the stove where a pressurized tea kettle whistled. In the kitchen, just across the corridor, the remains of old granny's dinner were left on a table dressed with a Vichy tablecloth. The chipped plates of Staffordshire porcelain were filled with baked beans and fried fish still steaming. The bottle of HP sauce played the Queen of the table governing its people of royal-blooded napkins, working class Pyrex glasses, nouveau riche spoons and fringe pickles. This wonderful little kingdom at large was ruled with an iron hand. The walls of the tiny room were decorated with gold medals and cups. Her favourite one was the platinum cup inlaid with ruby, on the plate of which one could read: "Thousandth victory, 1958 Crosswords Puzzle Championship". Every corner of the kitchen was dedicated to her. Her presence on each photograph at each corner of the room was oppressive. There was nothing but that plump lady bouncing against the glass of the frame in which she was kept prisoner, guilty of her conceit. Outside it was still raining. The beacon of the lighthouse, swept in by high tide, flashed through the slate-blue fog and lit the neighbourhood with the perfect synchronism worthy of the best Swiss clock watches. He smoked his last cigarette upstairs in his room before he nodded off in his bed too small for his slender body.

Hardly had he begun to dream of a better life when the frail sunlight of a sunny Sunday caressed his greying hair. Hardly had he opened his eyes when it was time to attend service. In the harbour, Sunday was a special day but you cannot understand in what way it was so special. The mysterious humdrum fishing village turned into a frenzied bustle every Sunday. Definitely, something was wrong there, wasn't it? The weak daylight and the mild air were barely threatened with the mushy cloudy sky. Higgledy-piggledy a procession paraded to the little church up in the hills away from the unusually flat Ocean. At the top of the Cubist-styled steeple, a horde of gulls magnificently watched the cortege. The entire holy chapel made of limestone from a neighbouring quarry was cajoled by a lukewarm ocean languor . . . The hesitant sun

shone through the blue-and-green stained glass window on which Saint Andrew and Saint Peter were to remain for eternity. The patron saint showed fishermen the way to prosperity and kept an eye on the rusty fishing boats scouring on the destructive Ocean. On the grassy shore, sheltered by a hundred-year-old oak tree, the whole village was present: the little big fish-and-chips man peering through his thick glasses as he tried to catch a familiar face, the alcoholic bartender hiding his rum flask under his waistcoat so that His Lord may not see him, the poorly-clad depressive dispensing chemist, the elderly ladies proudly sagging under the weight of their richly-decorated hats, the priest fully engrossed in a mathematical book that thrilled him more than the Bible ever had. They were all there, gathered in silent clans, avoiding each other's eyes with great care. All gathered? Once again, Tonio was alone, expelled by them all. Sitting against the oak, staring vacantly, he snapped his fingers assiduously until the small bronze bells began to ring, scaring the gulls off. A gust fragrant with a blend of iodine and metal blew some leaves away. A little serrated leaf swirled melodiously down onto the skull cap of the cleric muttering some pious invocation on the porch to invite his flock in. As soon as the last parishioner was in, the holy building closed like an oyster. And the stony interior of the Lord's house remained a mystery to any passing stranger. The ongoing rite was doomed to secrecy.

Outside, the drizzle wetted the lush grass, emphasizing the smell of withered wild flowers next to the gravestone where a dingy gull was perched. Tonio's dog stared at the lame bird with curiosity. He pricked up his drooping ears and began to incline his head to one side and then to the other trying to assess the dangerousness of such a predator. The dog spent more time sleeping comfortably in a warm room cradled by his owner than setting off to explore the world on his own, which undeniably had but developed his lazy side and his invasive fear. That dog living the life of Riley was undoubtedly the most yellow-bellied dog in the country. All of a sudden, he scampered off, his tails between his legs at a slight flutter of the gull. It took his owner ages before he went out of the church, which gave the dog plenty time to enjoy a good rest. The pale sun peaking through the branches carved his black-and-white marbled fur while he indulged in the wind blowing on his nose. Stretching on the soft floor he blissfully relished this glorious moment. Afar, the whistle of some liners transporting passengers across the Atlantic sounded harmoniously with the chiming bells rocking the sheepdog. On his way out, Tonio followed the cortege as it spread out little by little in the narrow streets. The smooth wind blowing on his tweed jacket mended at the elbow released a smell of eau-de-Cologne and dark tobacco. Under his jacket, a white oversized shirt was unbuttoned to the middle of his chest on which a long string of pearls fell. His slick and shiny hair was combed back with Brylcreem so that he really looked like a young Royal Air Force pilot. Impassively, he walked with a stoop to the village centre, wetting his ankles disclosed by his faded rolled-up jeans, while his clumsy dog followed him, yawning and struggling to keep his eyes open. Behind the opaque cloud of smoke that permanently wrapped up the mechanic there was a smart and gentle man who spent his Sunday afternoons busking on the dike, magnificently accompanied by Oceanic Orchestra. The entertainer was surrounded by a sober set: a plank decorated with a metaphysical

fresco drawing the words "Magic & Poetry". An arc of a circle of oyster shells marked the boundary of the stage where he performed his show and a small trunk stolen from a circus mysteriously protected its contents. Simplicity. Yes, that was the word. He hoped to entertain the world unpretentiously. But who would like to be entertained by a tacit bizarre mechanic? And the answer was easy to get if you went for a walk at the time when everybody was home for tea: the only audience he could disappoint was a wall of falling rain. To the rhythm of the gramophone needle running on the black vinyl, here appeared and disappeared coins, scarves and cards on which Charlemagne, King David, Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great trembled, soaked by the rain pouring on their face. The Mozart *Requiem* rang out in the marine spray while he concentrated on the star attraction, with his frowning bushy eyebrows and a cigarette wedged meticulously between his incisors. He rolled up his sleeves and suddenly a fountain of shiny coloured splinters, confetti, curls of intoxicating perfume and celestial dust rose up into the air from his clapping hands and mixed with the darkening sky. It was breathtaking. Silently, the colourful explosion fell on the flooded floor and everything went back to the ordinarily normal: the rain, the cloud, the pounding Ocean, silence. As usual he reached number 5, dragging his trunk on the cobblestones. As usual, the neighbourhood was barely enlightened by a few households awake. As usual, he would sit in front of his Remington writing machine for hours. As usual... Not exactly. Why was a window-pane broken? Why was the light of the living-room switched off? Strange, strangely strange wasn't it? Inside, on the kitchen table, a beef roast had been hardly started and a saucepan full of potatoes was boiling on the gas ring: the dinner had been interrupted. Across the corridor, the curtains twirled to the liking of the wind which blew away pages of crosswords magazines. On the arm-rest of the old lady's armchair there were long nail tracks as if somebody had tried to drag Medusa out of her throne. And she was absolutely not soft-hearted. Instead of the usual fragrance of flowers, vapours of chloroform emanating from a black silky handkerchief filled the room. Next to the ashtray where a Havana cigar was stubbed out, a pack of French Gitane cigarettes and gold cuff links were laid. The fight must have been merciless so that the man had to take off his cuff links and to roll up his sleeves. No wonder. Imagine that plump shrew scratching the face of her aggressor with her red nails, squashing their toes with her little patent-leather shoes and clinging to her sacrosanct couch with her chubby hands. But she had miserably failed. Tonio leisurely scanned the room in search of the slightest clue. "S.S.C.P." was engraved on the gold cuff links and "Hotel Georges V" had been scribbled on the pack. Grandma was not there anymore and the only clue that could lead to her was a few scribbled words he had never heard of. It was not that he was specially attached to his mother's mother but something urged him to resolve that mystery. Many questions began to crop up in his mind: why should somebody care about that old lady? Where was she now? Is the tedium of all the previous pages you have been compelled to read but an unhappy memory? All of a sudden, the poor soul remembered a former advert he had kept in a box in a corner of the garage. Nothing interesting you may think. But let's follow him in the streets. Don't tell me that you are afraid of the rain. Just before he left, he had picked up the pearl he had put down on the desk the day before.

On his way to the garage he never gave up gripping the pearl in his hand as if for a while the unflappable mechanic was in contact with anxiety. The beat given by the heels of his Repetto shoes sounded more old rock and roll music than chamber music. A hoarse breath blew out from his sooty carcass. As soon as he arrived in the garage, he sat on the chair and poured in a dirty glass what was left of amber whisky in the bottle. It was not enough to relieve his dry throat but he always kept a “bottle for emergency situations” somewhere, between a plug and an adjustable spanner. He wobbled delicately between the Shell tins to the back of the room and rummaged through a shoe box full of drawing, photographs and letters. To judge from the tear forming in his circled eyes, it must have been a long time since he had enjoyed the reading of the calligraphic letters impeccably drawn on the flowery paper. And there, hidden between two letters, an ad of Hotel Georges V shyly stuck out. He dragged the small paper out of the box. The dog, overexcited at the idea of acting in Sherlock Holmes, barked and jumped around: strange for a stay-at-home dog. May be he did not understand that the quest would take them across the Channel. No doubt. Again and again Tonio read the few words written on the crumpled sheet on which the black and white luxury hotel proudly displayed its four stars: “Enjoy Paris in Hotel Georges V”. France. He guzzled down the remains of a bottle of old Jamaican rum. France. These damn mafia men had dragged her off to Paris and he *had* to follow them. The only thing he knew about France was a few lines of a Prévert poem he particularly loved:

“Little boy singing away
And little boy away from my mind
Little boy of youth
All in a sudden
His shoe lace broken
Heard the silence of the fair
The big top of the fête
The frail happy fragile voice
The frail sorry voice of child”

He had not thought of this poem for five years. Overwhelmed by a stream of nostalgia, alcohol flowing through his veins, he crossed the street to sit on the dike wondering where the old woman could be at that time. Southampton? Portsmouth? Le Havre? Paris? As he set foot on the cobbled street, a black Dauphine travelling at high speed almost knocked him down.

“Next time I won’t let him get away with it,” barked one of the two men sitting in the car now leaving in the lane that the yellow headlights drew in the night. He could hardly stand on his trembling feet but was able to notice that the number plate was not a British one: “401 RS 95”. Undoubtedly the two men in the car were grandma’s abductors. He entered the garage, picked up the keys of the Jaguar hanging next to the door and started up in a rush. Certainly the car was not his, but it was no time for

mature reflection and anyway he was not in a fit state to think. Tonio took the Portsmouth road. On the beige Leatherette back seat of the Renault, the pink crosswords fan was trussed up like a chicken and muzzled not to annoy the black-suited French men. The car must be far now and the needle of the petrol gauge hitting the stop would not help matters ... The dog on the backseat seemed more concerned about keeping an eye on the windscreen wipers sweeping the torrent of water than Tonio about the gauge. His Marfan fingers delightfully fitted the shape of the varnished wood wheel and he almost beat the rhythm of the lively music played by the radio. The calm pursuer was comfortably slouched in the leather and tweed seat and stepped on the chromium-plated accelerator to catch the last ferry for the Norman coast. The weather was dreadful. Dreadful for a Frog not for a Cornish man: one point. The two vehicles went along the seaside, in the dark, alone to disrupt the monastic harmony of silence. On the side, a small grimy filling station lit up the street with the red-and-yellow neon light surrounding the Shell Brand logo tarnished by car exhausts. Tonio whistled for the old petrol pump attendant dressed with stained overalls who ran up toward the car to fill up the tank with unleaded petrol while he slept a 5 pound banknote in his pocket. The roar of the pump woke up the dog that had dozed off and began to growl and bare his teeth. Do not be surprised the dog hasn't become brave overnight but the glass which protected him from the gull perched on the pump gave him some courage. He knew that lame bird. These plucked wings, this hoarse squawk, these filthy feathers. Here was the gull from the church. Odd coincidence, wasn't it? This sea pigeon had followed them all the way. Tonio came near and reached for the bad ominous animal which hid its head in its wings out of fear. Delicately he stroked, feeling closer to the bird than he had ever been to any another human being. In the Jaguar, where the interminable ticktock of the mini square clock escalated, the gull was now comfortably perched on the rear-view mirror on the dashboard. The little trio was now heading for Portsmouth, all together and yet so solitary and rejected. The tyres screeched at the crossroads in Portsmouth where tabby cats ferreted in battered zinc rubbish bins. On the deep dark billows, the funnel of the giant ferry boat released a hissing white vapour. On a seedy black trawler moored alongside, an old barnacle-back chewing tobacco grouched at Tonio: "Damn idiot! You missed the last one. You should be very proud of yourself." The copper buttons which decorated his dark blue sailor's jacket shone in the light of the thin crescent moon. Pointing at the Great Bear in the sky, he continued: "The oyster. The oyster, boy. I saw *her*. Right there." Tonio looked up to the sky stinking of burnt rubber. Completely mad that one. Anyway. The triumvirate remained there on the quay for the night while the mafia pair had taken French leave.

Six o'clock. Tonio checked in at the reception on the main deck. The reception desk in cherry wood was ornate with golden cross motif. The crystal chandelier was reflected in the glossy wooden bar where an elegant bartender was shaking cocktails. The floor of the low-ceilinged room was covered with huge Persian carpets smelling of Indian incense. The mild-mannered music played by a pianist in the corner masked the roar of the engine. Sitting on a leather club sofa, cross-legged, Tonio smoked a cigarette while

he read the fresh news in *The Telegraph*. "Her Majesty the Queen officially visits Saint-Vincent and the Grenadines", "British cod sales: worse than French", "Celebrate Christmas with style: immortalize it with the New Kodak Super 8 camera. Only £599.99". Fortunately, a waiter came and interrupted the boring reading: "Monsieur?" No answer. Tonio stood up in a hurry and crumpled the newspaper he threw on the coffee table. He knocked about the young boy and left without apologizing. He sorely went up on the upper deck where the Union Jack flapped proudly; he rested his elbows on the guardrail close by a couple of French lovers taking photos of themselves with a Lubitel camera. Click. The shiny coin attached to the line dived into the marine water. From the rocky abyss where chic and conservative mussels yawned out of boredom, the lustre of the polished metal coin woke up the little aquatic kingdom. The cod's eyes more accustomed to stupidly stare to the swelling billows were suddenly caught by this bright strange object. To catch the oyster Tonio had chosen his shiniest and precious coin whose brilliance gleamed in the sea. The bait should be as attractive as the *what-you-call-it* the oyster had swallowed with total indifference five years ago, condemning the poet-mechanic to his fatal life. While the coast dotted with blue beach huts got closer, fish and shellfish continued to snub the royal profile stamped on the coin. The sea dog was wrong; there was nothing there, no oyster, no hope. The ship had docked within reach of the hustle and bustle of French life. The dockers lifted big crates, street urchins were running around playing cowboys, customs officers solemnly squeezed into their tight blue uniforms: everything part of that vivid scene. Rain and tedium were now far behind, across Channel. Tonio was caught by the frenzy of the harbour and the subtle sun radiating through an apricot-coloured sky. The contrasting colours artistically blurred enhanced the pastel of the verdigris water. Life seemed to be kept prisoner in an old colour photograph overexposed to sunlight for years. The impressionist shade was caressed by the texture of the light. It was a strange blend of paleness and fauvism. But it was much stranger for a man who had never seen the hint of a colour as pale as it may be. The teal chroma of the Jaguar paint was now zigzagging on the Norman road lined with plane trees. The six eyes in the car were enraptured by the new landscape they discovered. The white road sign on the verge of the road showed the way to Paris. Hair flying in the wind through the open window, Tonio seemed to forget why he was there. All that was needed was but a camera to make him the perfect tourist in quest of the most famous French vineyard.

A few hours later, the Englishman went up the Champs-Élysées where street lamps, neon signs above luxury shops and hotels drew a perfect perspective to the triumphal arch. City of light: yes it was. There was something of art, magic and poetry here. The British mechanic felt fine in the middle of the glittering avenue where lights blended in shimmering harmony. Strings of fairy lights dotted the pediment of the Georges V luxury Hotel. The glass revolving door was bravely guarded by a smart porter wearing a red steward hat embroidered with golden cotton. On either side, two Oriental-inspired wrought irons fitted a screen to huge doors through which one can see the splendour of the hall. In front of the palace, a procession of luxurious cars paraded with arrogance. A brilliant black DS car arrived and a big man went up the stairs. He was smoking a

Havana cigar as huge as each of his fingers. A button of his striped three-piece suit was ready to take a flight, pressurized by a stomach fully inflated with caviar, champagne and oysters. While that sturdy leader entered the hotel, he gave a thin wad of banknotes to the porter and disappeared in the hall. In the centre of the room, the sculpted plaster roof displayed a crystal chandelier overhanging a fountain of marble. At each corner, ancient Rome statues of Carrara marble invited the guests not to be stingy with the receptionist. The sculpture of nude Jupiter exposing his well-developed muscles, must have been freezing in this stiff-necked atmosphere. Tonio was now sure that he would have to find another place to spend the night. It was not the few coins he had into his pocket that could give him the right to stamp his feet on the floor painted with a gold rosette, to wear out the mirror hung of the wall looking at him on and to smell the sweet scent of the sumptuous lily bouquet.

The big man who had just entered the palace had dropped a small sheet of paper from his pocket. Tonio interested in knowing more about the man with a toothbrush moustache, picked it up. It was the page of a crosswords magazine. Strange. But even stranger still: the letters perfectly drawn, each well-behaved letter quietly enclosed in the squares. The pinkish colour of the ink and the military calligraphy with which the holy letters were written reminded him grandma's writing. Strange. He was on her track, for sure. Also, if that shrew in the button rose woollen jumper had been dragged right here, it was just because of her gift for finding an interest in these brain teasers that were real headaches. The three-piece suit, the gold watch, the Havana cigar, the gold signet ring on his little finger and the dark Ray Ban sun glasses: the moustachioed man most likely was the boss behind the kidnapping. He had class. He had money. And he had grandmamma. Do not be so fatalistic. Tonio had got a clue to track his mother's mother. Suddenly, inspired by his over-brimming imagination he wondered... No, that sheepdog cannot pick up a scent. The only thing he had ever sniffed was the aroma of the grub which filled his bowl every evening at the same time. Anyway, let's try. Tonio approached the sheet of paper toward the lazy dog's nose apprehensively so that his hand shook. Who can say what a simple paper smells of? The task was not easy but the dog seemed to be doing it nicely. His long fur dropping on his eyes, he was now sniffing the dirty Paris floor to find Miss Crossword. Coolly, the dog was followed by his owner, himself followed by the flying gull. In front of this unusual scene, every Parisian remained speechless, everyone even two thieves who almost forgot what they were doing while stealing a car. The British trio crisscrossed Paris for hours with complete confidence. Besides, in the eyes of the leader you could see all the concentration and the effort he devoted to the quest of that lady he had never liked very much. Why should a dog love a girl who spent her life pampering cats? But yet, he continued to sniff the track, until they reached a grooming store. The shop window was over-ornate in the rococo style. Rustles and lace surrounded a nice pink neon heart in the middle of which was written "Jacqueline Toutou". The corny store smelled of flowers, of petunias and magnolias. That was why they were now all there, in this too calm and too quiet Parisian neighbourhood. On the door covered with old-fashioned velvet curtains, a small poster read: "Tuesday at 8 pm., Place Vendome: National Crosswords Championship. First

prize: Frs 100,000". If grandma was somewhere to be found it had to be in Place Vendôme.

Seven o'clock. Tonio and his menagerie had settled on the foot of the sumptuous obelisk. They felt home, sitting against their Parisian-styled lighthouse substitute. In the middle of the square, submerged by a wave of poetry, the mechanic-magician improvised a show. The stream of creative inspiration began to flood the square like tide breaking down on the marine obelisk. The torrent of people and cars streaming past him enhanced the force of magic. The fading day light blurred down the skyline of the square won over Britishness, Tonio performed breathtaking tricks. Ignored by the pretentious Bourgeois streaming around, Tonio wrapped in his blanket of cigarette smoke was attentively admired by a kid. The eyes of the young girl were like bewitched when Ziggy the gull magically disappeared. The sequined feathers of the smart bird illuminated the dreaming eyes of the child. For the first time, Tonio held spellbound an audience that was not only composed of rain drops. While the last magical gale blew on Vendôme Square, someone applauded strongly.

"Wonnnderful, wonderrrrrrful!" a man shouted for joy in deep voice. "It was awesome!" he continued, his voice quivering, like a child moved by the scene. "May I invite you for dinner tonight?"

Tonio opened his eyes. It was the Mafia man with a moustache from Hotel Georges V. His cigar in the corner of the mouth, he put his sunglasses at the end of his nose to better see the artist and firmly shook Tonio's hand. "May I invite you for dinner, boy?" If there was a chance to get closer to grandma, he couldn't miss it. So the smart Briton politely nodded in agreement. He sat on the passenger seat in the black DS parked in front of Cartier. Tonio enjoyed the perfect mechanic sound of the engine: the ping of the piston rod, the pop of the petrol spray and the cling of the plug. Silently, only accompanied by the poetic roar of the three-stroke engine, they drove toward *L'Ambroisie* restaurant. "Do you like oysters?" the big man exhaled a cloud a smoke. Confronted to a dialogue Tonio had avoided for five years, he managed to find a smart way out of the situation, getting the string of pearls out of his greasy shirt. The eyes of the greedy Mafioso shone out of his dark glasses at the sight of the number of pearls. Indeed, the string was a good two feet long after all the time he had angled oyster in vain. Tonio took a pack out of his pocket and offered the driver a cigarette. His chubby fingers got hold of a silver Zippo and struck a dancing golden-brown light.

An hour later, Tonio was sitting at the table with sinister-looking men. It looked as if more gold was gathered around the table of that restaurant (watches, teeth, rings and cuff links) than the Royal Household had ever possessed. The boss offered Tonio an oyster. Strangely he seemed more concerned about the cuff link than the oyster so that for a second, he stared out stupidly to his host's wrist. "S.S.C.P.". Tonio realized that all the black-suited men had their signet rings and cuff links engraved with this mysterious acronym. What did it mean? The intruder ached to solve the mystery of grandma's abduction. But the beautiful glass of old Scottish whisky he had been served reminded him he could wait awhile. He opened the oyster. All of a sudden, the world began to whirl around the table in a harmony of shimmering colours and lights. Time seemed to

stand still. The mafia men, the noise in the restaurant, grandma, his glass of whisky, nothing had the slightest importance anymore. A perfume escaped from the oyster and intoxicated his nose. It was the perfume of love, the perfume of the end of all these years of quest, the end of all these days spent in the pouring rain in front of this stinky Ocean. It was the end. The world could end tonight. Tonio was filled with a precious and treasured feeling. He felt alive. And one tends to forget how wonderful life is. At the heart of his mistreated carcass, a fountain of delicate delight sprang in a sensory outburst: clinging acoustics, divine colour-range, scented alchemy. In the shell of that stupid oyster which had kept prisoner for five years a diamond set on a gold ring glittered. Undoubtedly, Tonio recognized the ring he had given his fiancée the day they got engaged. He had devoted his life to finding this jewel since that *very special* day. A day of storm he could never forget. Never forget how shameful he had felt. A loving day sailing on the Ocean, a storm, a wave. She had fallen and disappeared forever, taking with her the symbol of their fresh and still naïve love. And he had seen that oyster that had come and eaten the ring. He had vowed he would find it even if it meant spending his entire life. Even if life had deserted him. After all these years of tedium, loneliness and silence, he felt relieved of a pain he had kept secret in his heart. Why bother about resolving the mystery of the « Société Secrète des Cruciverbistes Parisiens »?

Britain. Sitting in front of his Remington writing machine staring with starry eyes at the tactful rain drops on the window, Tonio continued his story:

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The oyster

Another breaker of salted and iodated water crashed on the dike and sprinkled the window of a smoky garage ”