



Marie NDiaye

AUTHOR OF *THREE STRONG WOMEN*

**Vengeance
Is Mine**

a novel

ALSO BY MARIE NDIAYE

(IN ENGLISH)

That Time of Year

The Cheffe

My Heart Hemmed In

Ladivine

Self-Portrait in Green

All My Friends

Three Strong Women

Rosie Carpe

Among Family

VENGEANCE
IS MINE



Marie NDiaye

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY JORDAN STUMP



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

French lawyers are, in professional contexts, referred to by an honorific, of the same sort we might use to refer to a doctor or a professor. The title for a French lawyer is *Maître*—literally, “master.” The central character of *Vengeance Is Mine* is referred to by a shortened form of that title throughout the novel. In Marie NDiaye’s original she is known as “Me Susane”; to avoid confusion with the English word “me,” I have chosen an alternate form of that abbreviation, and refer to her as “M^e Susane” throughout, occasionally using the full form of the title for references to others.

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THE MAN WHO TIMIDLY, almost fearfully entered her office on January 5, 2019, was, M^e Susane realized at once, someone she'd met before, long before, in a place whose memory came back to her with such force and clarity that it felt like a sharp clout to her forehead.

Her head snapped back a little, momentarily preventing her from answering the uncomfortable mumble of her visitor's hello, and an awkwardness went on between them even after M^e Susane sat down and greeted him warmly, with the cordial, reassuring smile she took care to show everyone who came to see her in her office.

Twice she distractedly rubbed her forehead, thinking she felt a dull ache there, then forgetting all about it.

When, that evening, sitting up in her bed, she would again raise a slow, heavy hand toward her brow and then stop herself, since it didn't actually hurt, she would suddenly remember her pain on seeing that man walk into her office, that slight, discreet man, as nondescript in his face as in his figure.

Which left her very surprised: Why had she felt anguish rather than joy?

Why, convinced that after thirty-two years she was seeing someone who had enraptured her, did she feel as if her life were in danger?

M^e Susane listened as Gilles Principaux went on at length, several times thinking: I know you and I know your story, mingling her certainty that she'd once been very close to that man with what she knew from the papers of the sorrow that had come to him.

Not once, in that conversation, did he show any sign that he remembered meeting her, that that distant memory had even, perhaps, played some part in his decision to seek her out.

Because what high-profile cases did M^e Susane have to her credit?

What, she wondered, could have motivated a well-to-do man, stricken but sane, to choose M^e Susane for his wife's defense, if not, perhaps, a dim, superstitious allegiance to the luminous moments life had offered him?

But Principaux said nothing of the reasons, however confused, however foolish, for his choice.

He looked at M^e Susane with a gaze at first evasive and then ever more assured as he answered her questions, and no matter how she tried M^e Susane could not, in those eyes fixed on her face, make out any hint of an "I know you."

She couldn't very well ask him: Why did you come to me, I who am not a lawyer known throughout Bordeaux, particularly given the seriousness of the case? so she let him know that his wife, Marlyne Principaux, currently in custody, would have to formally accept M^e Susane as her attorney.

Was that what she wanted?

"Of course it is," he answered, as if it went without saying, and suddenly there was something so brusque and so unlikable in his clenched features that for a moment M^e Susane doubted she had before her the man she'd never forgotten.

“Maître Lasserre was my wife’s lawyer before, but we don’t like him, neither one of us,” Principaux had told her when he came in. “So I want a new lawyer, for Marlyne’s sake.”

Just as Principaux was standing up to leave, she asked if he’d once lived in the Caudéran neighborhood.

“Yes,” he said, “when I was young, why?”

He smiled at her then, and his whole face brightened joyously, childishly, now graced with a charm that M^e Susane noted all the more keenly in that she’d found that same face, a minute earlier and to her acute disappointment, almost repellent.

But what was there to be disappointed about, whether Principaux was the one she remembered or had nothing to do with that afternoon?

Caught off guard, she answered that as a child she’d known a family in Caudéran.

She didn’t need to hear him exclaim: There are lots of them! to realize the absurdity of her answer.

Yes, of course, many people lived in Caudéran.

Who, to her, was Gilles Principaux?

How to know, how to trust the thrilling, painful, disturbing intuition that he was once the teenager she’d fallen in love with for all time, long ago, in a Caudéran house that she couldn’t possibly recognize today?

M^e Susane found herself stumbling over her words.

“What was this family’s name?” Principaux had asked with what seemed eager anticipation, as if already delighting in a connection he would surely find between himself and those people, and even, she thought, as if delighting in the prospect, if necessary, of inventing and substantiating a connection between himself and that family, simply to give M^e Susane the pleasure of something shared, some bond amid everything else.

“I don’t know, I mean I don’t remember,” M^e Susane mumbled.

In the end she put on her lawyerly voice again and told him she’d be expecting Madame Principaux’s letter appointing her to her defense.

She opened the door, stepped aside to let him out.

He leaned on the doorjamb and, in a weak, cavernous voice, whispered:

“Only you can save us.”

M^e Susane would later question her memory of that moment, uncertain whether he’d said “us” or “me.”

He added something banal, something like:

“You’ll get us out of this nightmare, won’t you?”

At that M^e Susane was more than a little taken aback.

Hoping to be rescued from the consequences of some terrible judicial mistake, some outrageous case of mistaken identity, that she would of course understand.

But in this case the nightmare hadn’t arisen from some mix-up, some misunderstanding, it was this man’s very life, and the acts that were ravaging that life had happened and couldn’t be undone, since the dead were not going to extract themselves from his bad dream and be born a second time.

So, she wondered, did Principaux really want to be awakened?

Did he really believe that a bright and diaphanous morning would then dawn, and his children would come running to him, unhurt, joyous, and innocent?

Exactly what dream was he hoping, by way of M^e Susane, to be freed from?

—

Freezing rain had put the tram out of service when she went home that night.

Had it been only the day before, feeling her shoes slip on the frozen pavement, her first thought would have been for Sharon.

I hope she managed to get the tram in time, M^e Susane would have told herself, not liking to see her housekeeper ride off into the cold and the dark on her bicycle.

But this night she didn't think of Sharon, absorbed as she was in recalling every detail of Principaux's visit, already feeling anxious when she realized that some of his words hadn't indelibly fixed themselves in her memory (had he said "my wife" or "my spouse," had he used her first name or did M^e Susane think she remembered it that way because she'd read the name Marlyne in the newspaper?), impatient to be back in her apartment so she could write down everything she had left in her head.

Who was Gilles Principaux to her?

And so, opening the door and finding every light ablaze in the hallway, the dining room, and the kitchen, she was briefly afraid, having forgotten that Sharon might still be there even with the tram shut down, despite M^e Susane's many reminders that she was free to go home whenever she thought best, whether the work (of which there was in truth so little) was finished or not.

M^e Susane had always said or suggested to Sharon that she would rather know Sharon was tranquilly looking after her children, helping them with their homework and judiciously thinking of their futures, than find her here at work late in the day.

It makes me uncomfortable, M^e Susane didn't dare tell her, that you think it necessary to scour a bathtub I never soak in, to give a weekly washing to windows that are already clean and that I rarely look out of, and to scrub toilets I scrub every day so as to spare you any contact with my private functions, yes, M^e Susane didn't dare tell her, it makes me very uncomfortable that you take my wish to employ someone to look after my interior so literally and that, in your uprightness and integrity, you somehow manage to spend hours putting the finishing touch on a job that out of modesty and consideration I've already seen to, it makes me uncomfortable, yes, M^e Susane could not tell Sharon, she who until recently had never felt the need for a housekeeper, who even professed, against that need, an insurmountable prejudice.

Sharon, I employ you as an act of militancy, to help you and to further a cause I support, so you don't have to prove to me how scrupulous, honest, and irreproachable you are, as if you fear I might not be satisfied with your

work, I always will be, Sharon, because in fact there's nothing I actually ask you to do, M^e Susane did not say to her, again out of consideration, but of a different sort.

Her heart had not yet recovered from its surprise when Sharon came to meet her in the hallway.

M^e Susane gave her the usual quick hug, she could feel her heart beating against the mute, serene, imperturbable breast that was Sharon's, Sharon who never physically showed any sign, ever strong, fatalistic, and upbeat, that her life might be harder than M^e Susane's.

Sometimes Sharon seemed even to pity her.

Or so at least M^e Susane liked to joke when she was invited to dinner and had, she told herself, to pay for her board with funny stories, since she never had guests.

She would cry out, heated and waggish, japing and pained:

“Can you imagine, my Sharon doesn't envy me at all, quite the contrary!”

And her friends would laugh, and then they would put on a serious air as they tried to understand what could stop Sharon from grasping just how far M^e Susane outstripped her when it came to happiness, what could stop Sharon from realizing she should wish she were M^e Susane instead of who she was, an undocumented Mauritian blessed but also encumbered with two children of uncertain future and, M^e Susane believed she had gleaned, a deeply depressed husband.

But wasn't all that just a jumble of speculations?

Because the face Sharon showed her was never anything but tranquil, and her heart beat softly, almost imperceptibly, when M^e Susane embraced her, her own savage heart vainly trying to rile Sharon's, to fill it with her own fervor and revolt—but why?

M^e Susane couldn't say.

—

“Sharon, you should have gone home, they've shut down the tram for the night.”

M^e Susane turned off the riotous lights beaming down from the ceiling.

Sharon, you don't have to turn on every light in the apartment, M^e Susane didn't say either, because that mark of respect, that show of thoughtfulness you think you have to offer your employer when she comes home late and tired by dazzlingly illuminating her entrance, none of that suits my spirit of frugality, economy, and temperance in every act of daily life, no, Sharon, really, turn on only the lights you can't do without for your work, M^e Susane would never, absolutely never, tell her.

She was so fond of Sharon that she found these little vexations not worth the risk of seeing even the shadow of a disappointment or an anxiety in the young woman's green-gray eyes.

M^e Susane couldn't bear Sharon fearing anything that came from her.

I work for you, Sharon, I will never inflict the slightest unpleasantness on you, and I will never give you an order, said M^e Susane mutely, hoping those charitable, uncontained, ardent thoughts would stream from her mind like eggs in a spawning bed, where Sharon's own thoughts, her unknowable emotions, would bond with M^e Susane's silent declarations and she would perhaps feel hope, the result of an immaculate, unspoken fusion of fear and trust.

I'll never let you down, Sharon, believe in me, thought M^e Susane, as hard as she could.

"I'm going to drive you home," she told Sharon.

Seeing her sudden unease, she added:

"I told you just now, the tram isn't running, there's ice on the tracks."

"That won't be possible, thanks, I have my bicycle, we can't fit it in the car," Sharon shot back.

Why did she often give M^e Susane the feeling she wanted nothing to do with her outside the walls of this apartment?

Did she believe, did she fear (and why?), that M^e Susane was hoping to become her friend?

M^e Susane had no such ambition.

But she'd once happened onto Sharon and her children in a supermarket at the Lac shopping center, and she was stung to see Sharon very clearly pretending she hadn't spotted her.

Sharon, you're not placing yourself in any danger by consenting to recognize me, to say hello to me, to introduce me to your children, who are every bit your equals in beauty and grace, what harm could I possibly do you, how could I ever seek to make you the victim of some evil spell?

I have no dark motive, Sharon, for employing you, it complicates my life, and I don't like to be served.

I'm simply trying, Sharon, to do good, in the way that I can.

M^e Susane took off her ice-spangled jacket and hung it on the rack in the entryway before Sharon could take it from her.

Tiny, thin-faced, narrow-shouldered, slim-hipped, as if she'd made the decision to take up only the most minimal space in this world, the young woman looked up with her vague, gentle, tortured gaze at M^e Susane, who was tall and wide, imposing and assured.

"I'll take you in the car," M^e Susane said carefully, "and tomorrow morning you can come back in the tram to get your bicycle."

"No!" cried Sharon with a sort of fierce, unyielding anguish that shocked M^e Susane. "That doesn't work for me," Sharon went on, slowly, "but thank you, thank you, thank you."

M^e Susane raised her hand, conciliatory and humble, mortified.

Then, the incident forgotten (except by M^e Susane, whose mind tended to wipe out her happiest memories and remember forever what there was no need to recall), Sharon put on an enthusiastic voice to describe everything she'd accomplished during her working hours in this apartment on the Rue Vital-Carles, an apartment certainly grand in its appointments (herringbone parquet floors, seventeenth-century fireplace, tall windows with little panes) but of middling surface area, forty square meters in all likelihood carved from an imposing residence divided up long before for easier sale.

M^e Susane knew there were no rational grounds for the presence in her apartment of a vigorous, tireless, driven Sharon, determined to prove that her

capacity for hard work was being put to a useful and even necessary purpose.

M^e Susane knew she didn't need Sharon's energy, youth, or abilities, she knew full well that those virtues were wasted in her apartment, where there was literally nothing to do.

But what choice did she have?

She was handling Sharon's case, her application for residency papers for her and her family.

"Well then, I'll see you tomorrow," she said. "Thanks, Sharon, and do be careful on your bicycle."

Suddenly she clasped Sharon's little hand, pulled it toward her, and whispered:

"You know what, I'm going to be taking on a big case. A woman who killed her three children, very young children, just little kids, you understand."

Sharon snatched her hand away, a leap backward protecting her from M^e Susane, from her breath, her words, perhaps her strange intensity.

"That's horrible," she mumbled in a cold, disgusted voice.

And it was as clear as if she'd closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears: Oh, I don't want to hear another word!

She turned away, took her jacket from the coatrack, bent down to pull on her fleece-lined boots.

M^e Susane then noticed that the undersized collar of her jacket, which was itself much too light for winter, did not cover Sharon's fine, golden, palpitating neck.

She hurried to her room and came back with an orange cashmere scarf.

M^e Susane's mother had given it to her and she'd never worn it, too unsure of her own radiance to display that fire at her throat.

She wordlessly tied it around Sharon's neck.

I'm not saying anything, Sharon, because I don't want you to turn down my scarf, I don't want to argue about the possibility of your catching a chill tonight riding your bicycle all the way back to Lormont.

Sharon too kept her mouth shut, docile as an impotent child forced to endure the inexplicable violence of adults, and as she tied the two ends of the

scarf over Sharon's nape M^e Susane could or thought she could feel the young woman's delicate skeleton quivering in fright or repulsion beneath her fingers.

Only the day before, she would have been terribly hurt by that.

What is it in me, Sharon, that stops you from liking me even as I treat you with the greatest respect and see to your case out of the goodness of my heart, since I won't be charging you for my work? Does it never occur to you, Sharon, that I could have refused to take your case without payment, which would have left you helpless and alone, you don't have any money, I wouldn't have dealt with your problem, I never would have gotten involved in your life? How, Sharon, can you not understand the way things are? How can you be so devoted and so fickle, so meticulous and so ungrateful, so sensitive in general and so brusque with me? Am I not, Sharon, a woman exactly like you?

Yes, only the day before, she would have been so shaken by Sharon's behavior that sadness and rancor would have filled her as she ate the dinner her employee had made.

She would have dined on spitefulness, on sorrow, a dish of tears, hers, shameful and humiliating, unable to enjoy the fare Sharon had so exquisitely prepared, too overcome even to console herself with the thought that Sharon could never have cooked like this for someone she hated, which could only mean that Sharon didn't hate her, and M^e Susane was being ridiculous and oversensitive.

But that evening she calmly let Sharon set off for home in her furtive, tense, hostile way, as if some grave, unspoken conflict had erupted between them.

She closed the door, and immediately her thoughts wandered far away from Sharon.

She reheated the fried rice, the shrimp with ginger, the sautéed pork with garlic, the very tender carrots.

And although, her thoughts fixed on Principaux, she'd forgotten Sharon, or rather relegated her to a corner of her mind where nothing carried any weight, she enjoyed Sharon's dinner as she rarely had before.

Nonetheless, though she'd always been a sound sleeper, she was awakened that night by a question that wouldn't leave her alone: Why was Principaux turning to her, how did he know her?

Should she interpret that choice as Principaux's desire to give his wife the best possible defense, or on the contrary was it his perfidious intention that her defense not be all that good?

Because M^e Susane had opened her office only the year before, and she'd had just a handful of clients, cases of no interest.

If she were Principaux, she told herself, she would have gone to see Maître *** or Maître ***, whose successes in difficult cases were known far and wide, certainly not the obscure M^e Susane who, though aged forty-two, could easily be thought a novice.

Any big-name lawyer would have leapt at the chance to defend Marlyne Principaux, whereas for M^e Susane it should have been nothing more than a dream.

Who was Gilles Principaux to her?

Who was M^e Susane to Principaux?

Did they have the same memories, she wondered, or were neither he nor she the person they thought they remembered?

A bit before dawn, just as she was drifting off for scarcely two hours more, she had an image of the slight Sharon pedaling through the icy streets toward Lormont, hurrying back to a household of which she was, as M^e Susane understood it, the hub.

Then she couldn't help but see Sharon fallen to the ground, blood flowing from her head and soaking the orange scarf that would attest to M^e Susane's brutality—because wouldn't any normally solicitous employer have insisted on keeping her housekeeper safe, would anyone think it enough to tie a scarf around her neck before turning her out onto the treacherous streets?

M^e Susane tossed back and forth a few times in her bed.

She laid out her defense: I wanted her to stay, I repeated the offer, she refused with that way of hers, as if she'd rather die than...

No one would believe such a story, she'd only be digging herself in deeper, thought M^e Susane, with a sadness and a sense of incompetence that colored her dreams until morning.

And at eight o'clock she was out again, again in the dark, walking against the frigid wind to the parking lot under the Allées de Tourny.

M^e Susane found a certain vain delight in convincing her friends that she had no interest in owning a high-status vehicle, that she was perfectly happy driving a battered twenty-year-old Twingo, that she was proud to display her indifference to such conventional notions of social standing.

M^e Susane wasn't unhappy to let her friends see her that way: bohemian, fanciful, independent—hoping deep inside that in time their image of her would shape her, would force her to live up to it, and she would actually become a woman of discreetly eccentric charm.

That, M^e Susane knew, was pure fantasy.

She yearned to be rich enough to buy a big, beautiful, sumptuous car.

She was thoroughly sick of her dear old Twingo, and sensed that her parents could scarcely bear the thought of her still driving that car when they wanted to see her prospering, since that was the picture she gave them when she told them of her work and her life (oh, she loved them so!).

Her parents lived in La Réole, where M^e Susane had spent her childhood and adolescence.

If Monsieur Susane, a city employee, had looked favorably on his daughter going to college, it was because he thought it went without saying that she would go on to work for the city as well, and his pleasure, his quiet boast, suited to the modest man he was, was to say:

“One day she'll be my boss, she'll be giving me orders!”

M^e Susane had always thought that her gentle, amiable father could imagine no more glorious success than a daughter overseeing men such as him.

Proud and humble, he liked to say:

“She’s got more on the ball than we do.”

A vaster ambition, vaguer, more torn, had led Madame Susane to follow her daughter’s studies as closely as she could, encouraging her, spurring her on even as M^e Susane, become a young woman, was tormented by her own tendency to drive herself too hard, she didn’t need to be encouraged or spurred on, she would rather have been quieted, restrained in her hunger for work, and Madame Susane’s exhortations, at once loving, anxious, and haphazard (because she couldn’t grasp what her daughter was studying, she could only give it an occasional intimidated glance), often brought her to the brink of nervous exhaustion.

And then, with sorrow and terror, M^e Susane had taken to thinking that only a slender thread (her boundless love for them? her pride?) prevented her from falling into what her mother most dreaded and so heavy-handedly endeavored to protect her from: the abandonment of lofty aspirations, the retreat to a mediocre way of life, comfortable, befitting her rank.

She loved them so!

And how it hurt to love them, sometimes!

They understood her so well, but so little in the way M^e Susane wanted to be understood—with her ordinary weaknesses, which they didn’t see, with her fears, which they couldn’t imagine!

She loved them so, and sometimes it so hurt her to love them that she wished, tormented, wretched, and ashamed, that they would just disappear!

Because she loved them so, and what else could she do but lie to them, or at least give them a glittering version of her existence, of the world in general, to shield them from the painful truth?

But who were they, M^e Susane asked herself, to be spared the painful truth, to be protected from their own moments of ignorance, passivity, and religious complacency in the face of life’s hard realities?

Sometimes she resented them for being the kind of people who needed to be spared things, to be sheltered from unhappiness simply because they were good-hearted and emotional.

Give safe harbor to my troubled heart, console me, hear my pleas, see the signs of a sorrow that's devouring me, that I myself can't define—rescue me as all vigilant parents do!

All the thoughtful parents M^e Susane knew looked on their adult children with a gaze free of illusions.

They walked beside them, pragmatic and tireless, one arm always at the ready in case of a stumble, all advice sealed away, and in their relationships there was no room for disappointment, felt or expressed.

Whereas M^e Susane never forgot that any remark carelessly let slip before her parents, a complaint, an ordinary regret, could transform their forthright, unguarded, smiling faces into masks of anxiety.

It was so unreasonable that it annoyed her, and immediately after filled her with pity.

She reassured them, all the while thinking: When will it be your turn to reassure me? Is it right to virtually forbid me to confess my failings to you?

But they loved her so, she knew!

And in their immeasurable love, did they sometimes wish for a respite from that love, did they sometimes wish M^e Susane would disappear?

She would have understood perfectly, she told herself.

—

That morning, that cold, sharp morning, as she drove toward La Réole on a highway packed with automobiles far more powerful than hers, making her feel she had to squeeze into the right-hand lane so they could deploy their self-proclaimed eminence, she thought once again that, were it not for the car, which made it impossible to lie, Monsieur and Madame Susane would have been entirely capable of convincing themselves that their daughter had a flourishing career.

She could tell them whatever she liked.