



THE MIRROR VISITOR

BOOK 1

A WINTER'S PROMISE

Christelle Dabos



Europa
editions

Europa Editions
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First publication 2018 by Europa Editions

Translation by Hildegard Serle
Original Title: *La Passe-Miroir. Livre 1. Les fiancés de l'hiver*
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Cover Art by Emanuele Ragnisco
www.mekkanografici.com

Cover illustration by Laurent Gapaillard
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ISBN 9781787701427

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*Translated from the French
by Hildegard Serle*



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Fragment

In the beginning, we were as one.

But God felt we couldn't satisfy him like that, so God set about dividing us. God had great fun with us, then God tired of us and forgot us. God could be so cruel in his indifference, he horrified me. God knew how to show his gentle side, too, and I loved him as I've loved no one else.

I think we could have all lived happily, in a way, God, me, and the others, if it weren't for that accursed book. It disgusted me. I knew what bound me to it in the most sickening of ways, but the horror of that particular knowledge came later, much later. I didn't understand straight away, I was too ignorant.

I loved God, yes, but I despised that book, which he'd open at the drop of a hat. As for God, he relished it. When God was happy, he wrote. When God was furious, he wrote. And one day, when God was in a really bad mood, he did something enormously stupid.

God smashed the world to pieces.

The Promise

The Archivist

It's often said of old buildings that they have a soul. On Anima, the ark where objects come to life, old buildings tend mostly to become appallingly bad-tempered.

The Family Archives building, for example, was forever in a foul mood. It spent its days cracking, creaking, dripping, and puffing to express its disgruntlement. It didn't like the drafts that made doors, left ajar, slam in the summer. It didn't like the rains that clogged up its gutter in the autumn. It didn't like the damp that seeped into its walls in winter. It didn't like the weeds that returned to invade its courtyard every spring.

But, above all, the Archives building didn't like visitors who didn't stick to the opening hours.

And that's doubtless why, in the early hours of that September morning, the building was cracking, creaking, dripping, and puffing even more than usual. It sensed someone arriving when it was still far too early to consult the archives. And that particular visitor didn't even stand at the front door, on the steps, like a respectable visitor. No, that visitor entered the Archives building like a thief, straight from the cloakroom.

A nose was sprouting, right in the middle of a mirrored wardrobe.

The nose kept coming. Soon after, a pair of glasses emerged, then the arch of an eyebrow, a forehead, a mouth, a chin, cheeks, eyes, hair, a neck, and ears. Suspended there, above the shoulders, in the center of the mirror, the face looked to the right, then to the left. Next, a bit

further down, a bended knee poked through, and in tow came a body that pulled itself right out of the mirrored wardrobe, as if from a bathtub. Once clear of the mirror, the figure amounted to nothing more than a worn-out old coat, a pair of gray-tinted glasses, and a long three-colored scarf.

And under these thick layers, there was Ophelia.

All around Ophelia, the cloakroom was now protesting from its every wardrobe, furious at this intrusion that flouted the Archives' rules. The pieces of furniture creaked at the hinges and stamped their feet; the hangers clanged noisily, one against the other, as though propelled by a poltergeist.

This display of anger didn't intimidate Ophelia in the slightest. She was used to the Archives being temperamental. "Gently does it," she murmured. "Gently does it . . ." Instantly, the furniture calmed down and the hangers fell silent. The Archives building had recognized her.

Ophelia went out of the cloakroom and closed the door. On the panel was written:

BEWARE: COLD ROOMS
TAKE A COAT

With hands in pockets and long scarf trailing, Ophelia passed a succession of labeled filing cabinets: "Register of Births," "Register of Deaths," "Register of Consanguinity Exemptions," and so on. She gently opened the door of the consulting room. Not a soul. The shutters were closed but they let in a few rays of sun that lit up a row of desks in the gloom. The singing of a blackbird from the garden seemed to make this burst of light even more luminous. It was so cold in the Archives, you felt like opening all the windows to usher in the warm air outside.

Ophelia stood still for a moment in the doorway. She watched the threads of sunlight slide slowly across the floorboards as the day broke. She inhaled deeply the scent of old furniture and cold paper. That aroma, in which Ophelia's childhood had been steeped . . . soon she would smell it no longer.

With slow steps she made her way towards the archivist's quarters. All that shielded the private apartment was a curtain. Despite the early hour, a strong smell of coffee was already wafting through. Ophelia coughed into her scarf to make her presence known, but an old operatic aria drowned it out. So she slipped around the curtain. She didn't have to search for the archivist as the room served simultaneously as kitchen, living room, bedroom, and reading room: there he was, sitting on his bed, nose in a periodical.

He was an old man with untamed white hair. He'd wedged a loupe under his eyebrow, making that eye look enormous. He wore gloves and, under his jacket, a badly ironed white shirt.

Ophelia coughed again, but he didn't hear it due to the gramophone. Engrossed in his reading, he sang along to the little aria—somewhat out of tune, in fact. And then there was the humming of the coffeepot, the rumbling of the stove, and all the usual little noises of the Archives building.

Ophelia soaked up the particular atmosphere pervading these quarters: the off-key singing of the old man; the waxing light of day filtering through the curtains; the rustling of carefully turned pages; the smell of coffee and, underlying it, the naphtha whiff of a gas lamp. In one corner of the room there was a draughtboard on which the pieces moved of their own accord, as though two invisible players were taking each other on. It made Ophelia want, above all, to touch nothing, to leave things just as they were, to turn right back, for fear of spoiling this familiar scene.

And yet she had to steel herself to break the spell. She approached the bed and tapped on the archivist's shoulder. "Lordy!" he exclaimed, jumping out of his skin. "Couldn't you warn people before springing on them like that?"

"I did try to," said Ophelia, apologetically. She picked up the loupe that had rolled onto the carpet and handed it back to him. Then she took off the coat that engulfed her from top to toe, unwound her endless scarf, and placed the lot over the back of a chair. All that

remained of her was a slight figure, untidy thick, brown curls, two rectangles for glasses, and an outfit more suited to an elderly lady.

“You’ve come straight from the cloakroom again, huh?” growled the archivist, wiping his loupe clean with his sleeve. “This obsession with traveling through mirrors at ungodly hours! You know very well my little abode is allergic to surprise visits. One of these days you’re going to get whacked on the head, and you’ll have asked for it!”

His gruff voice made his splendid moustache, which reached his ears, quiver. He got up from his bed with difficulty and seized the coffeepot, muttering in a dialect that he was the last to speak on Anima. With all his handling of archives, the old man lived entirely in the past. Even the periodical he was leafing through dated back at least half a century.

“A mug of coffee, dear girl?” The archivist wasn’t a very sociable man, but whenever he set eyes on Ophelia, as now, those eyes began to sparkle like cider. He’d always had a soft spot for his great-niece, doubtless because, of all the family, she was the one who most resembled him: just as old-fashioned, just as solitary, just as reserved.

Ophelia nodded. She had too much of a lump in her throat to speak right then, right there.

Her great-uncle poured out a steaming cup for each of them. “I was on the phone with your ma yesterday evening,” he chomped into his moustache. “So excited, she was, I couldn’t grasp half of her jabbering. But still, I got the gist: you’re finally taking the plunge, it seems.”

Ophelia confirmed this without saying a word. Her great-uncle promptly knitted his huge brows. “Don’t pull that long face, please. Your mother’s found you a chap, and that’s the end of it.”

He handed her cup to her and sat back heavily on his bed, making every spring creak. “Park yourself down. We need a serious chat, godfather to goddaughter.”

Ophelia pulled a chair over to the bed. She stared at her great-uncle and his magnificent moustache with a sense of unreality. She felt as though, through him, she were watching a page of her life being torn out, right under her nose.

“I can well imagine why you’re eyeballing me like that,” he said, “except that this time the answer’s *no*. Those sloping shoulders of yours, those gloomy glasses and those sighs of total despair, you can just pack them all away.” He was gesturing with thumb and forefinger, both bristled with white hairs. “There’s those two cousins you’ve already rejected! Granted, they were ugly as pepper mills and gross as chamber pots, but it was the whole family you were insulting with each rejection. And what’s worse, I made myself your accomplice in sabotaging those betrothals.” He sighed into his moustache.

“I know you as if I’d made you. You’re more accommodating than a chest of drawers, never raising your voice, never throwing tantrums, but the minute anyone mentions a husband, you send more sparks flying than an anvil. And yet you’re the right age for it, whether the chap’s your type or not. If you don’t settle down, you’ll end up banished from the family, and that I’m not having.”

Ophelia, her nose in her cup of coffee, decided that it was high time she spoke up. “You’ve got nothing to worry about, uncle. I didn’t come here to ask you to oppose this marriage.” At that moment, the needle of the gramophone got stuck in a scratch. The endless echo of the soprano filled the room: “If I . . . If I . . .”

The great-uncle didn’t get up to free the needle from its groove. He was too flabbergasted. “What are you babbling to me? You don’t want me to intervene?”

“No. The only favor I’ve come to ask you today is to have access to the archives.”

“My archives?”

“Today.”

“If I . . . If I . . . If I . . . If I . . .” the record player stuttered on. Fiddling with his moustache, the great-uncle raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You’re not expecting me to plead your case to your mother?”

“It wouldn’t do any good.”

“Nor to bring your feeble father round?”

“I’m going to marry the man that’s been chosen for me. It’s as simple as that.”

The gramophone needle suddenly jumped and then carried on where it had left off, with the soprano proclaiming triumphantly: "If I love you, look out for yourself!"

Ophelia pushed up the glasses on her nose and held her godfather's gaze without blinking. Her eyes were as brown as his were golden. "Splendid!" said the old man, breathing a sigh of relief. "I must admit, I thought you were incapable of uttering those words. He must have really taken your fancy, that fellow. Spill the beans and tell me who he is!"

Ophelia rose from her chair to clear away their cups. She wanted to rinse them but the sink was already full to the brim with dirty plates. Normally, Ophelia didn't like housework, but this morning, she unbuttoned her gloves, rolled up her sleeves, and did the washing-up. "You don't know him," she said at last. Her muttering was drowned by the sound of running water. The great-uncle stopped the gramophone and went closer to the sink. "I couldn't hear you, dear girl." Ophelia turned the tap off for a moment. Her voice was quiet and her diction poor, so she often had to repeat what she'd said.

"You don't know him."

"You're forgetting whom you're talking to!" sniggered the great-uncle, crossing his arms. "My nose may never be out of my archives, but I know the family tree better than anyone. There's not one of your most distant cousins, from the valley to the Great Lakes, that I don't know about."

"You don't know him," insisted Ophelia.

She wiped a plate with her sponge while staring into space. Touching all these dishes without protective gloves had sent her back in time. She could have described, down to the smallest detail, everything her great-uncle had eaten off these plates since he'd first owned them. Usually, being very professional, Ophelia never handled objects belonging to others without her gloves on, but her great-uncle had taught her to read right here, in this flat. She knew each utensil personally, inside out.

"This man isn't part of the family," she finally announced. "He's from the Pole."

A long silence ensued, broken only by gurgling in the pipes. Ophelia dried her hands with her dress and looked at her godfather over her rectangular glasses. He had suddenly shrunk into himself, as though he had just shouldered another twenty years. Both sides of his moustache had drooped like half-mast flags. "What's this nonsense?" he whispered in a flat voice.

"I know nothing more," Ophelia replied gently, "except that, according to Mom, he's a good match. I don't know his name, I've never seen his face."

The great-uncle went to fetch his snuff tin from under a pillow, stuffed a pinch of tobacco deep into each nostril, and sneezed into a handkerchief. It was his way of clarifying his thoughts. "There must be some mistake . . ."

"That's what I'd like to think, too, dear uncle, but it seems there really isn't."

Ophelia dropped a plate and it broke in two in the sink. She handed the pieces to her great-uncle, he pressed them back together, and, instantly, the plate was as good as new. He placed it on the draining board.

The great-uncle was a remarkable Animist. He could mend absolutely everything with his bare hands and the most unlikely objects yielded to him like puppy dogs.

"There has to be a mistake," he said. "Although I'm an archivist, I've never heard of such an unnatural combination. The less Animists have to do with these particular strangers, the better they feel. Full stop."

"But the marriage will still happen," Ophelia muttered, resuming her washing-up.

"But what the devil's got into your mother and you?" exclaimed the great-uncle, aghast. "Of all the arks, the Pole's the one with the worst reputation. They have powers there that send you out of your mind! They're not even a real family—they're wild packs that tear each other apart. Are you aware of all that's said about them?"

Ophelia broke another plate. Consumed by his outrage, the great-uncle didn't realize the impact his words were having on her. It

wouldn't have been obvious in any case: Ophelia had been endowed with a moonlike face on which her feelings rarely surfaced. "No," she simply replied, "I'm not aware of all that's said and I'm not interested. I need serious documentation. So the only thing I'd like, if you don't mind, is access to the archives."

The great-uncle pieced together the second plate and placed it on the draining board. The room's beams started cracking and creaking—the archivist's black mood was spreading to the whole building. "I don't recognize you anymore! You put up a terrible fuss about your cousins, and now that they're shoving a barbarian into your bed, here you are, just resigned to it!"

Ophelia froze, sponge in one hand, cup in the other, and closed her eyes. Plunged into the darkness behind her eyelids, she looked deep within herself. Resigned? To be resigned you have to accept a situation, and to accept a situation you have to understand the whys and wherefores. Ophelia, however, had no clue. Just a few hours earlier, she didn't even know that she was engaged. She felt as though she were heading towards an abyss, as though her life were no longer her own. When she dared to think of the future, it was just the endless unknown. Dumbfounded, incredulous, dizzy—she was all of these, like a patient who's just been diagnosed with an incurable illness. But she wasn't resigned.

"No, I certainly can't conceive of such nonsense," continued her great-uncle. "And then, what would he be coming over here to do, this stranger? All this, what's in it for him? With all due respect, my dear, you're not the most lucrative leaf on our family tree. What I mean is, it's just a museum that you run, not a goldsmith's!"

Ophelia dropped a cup. This clumsiness wasn't about being recalcitrant or temperamental; it was pathological. Objects were forever slipping between her fingers. Her great-uncle was used to it—he mended everything in her wake. "I don't think you've quite understood," stated Ophelia, stiffly. "It's not this man who's coming to live on Anima, it's me who's got to follow him to the Pole."

This time it was the great-uncle who broke the crockery he was busy putting away. He swore in his old dialect.

A clear light was now coming through the flat's window. It cleansed the atmosphere like pure water and cast little glimmers on the bedstead, the stopper of a decanter, and the gramophone's horn. Ophelia couldn't understand what all that sun was doing there. It felt wrong in the middle of that particular conversation. And it made the snow of the Pole feel so distant, so unreal that she no longer really believed in it herself. She took off her glasses, gave them a polish with her apron, and put them back on her nose—as a reflex, as though doing that could help her see things more clearly. The lenses, which had lost any color when removed, soon regained their gray tint. These old spectacles were an extension of Ophelia; the color they took on matched her moods.

"I notice that Mom forgot to tell you the most important thing. It's the Doyennes who betrothed me to this man. For now, they alone are privy to the details of the marriage contract."

"The Doyennes?" gulped the great-uncle. His face, along with all its wrinkles, was contorted. He was finally understanding the scenario in which his great-niece found herself involved. "A diplomatic marriage," he whispered, flatly. "Poor soul . . ." He stuffed two fresh pinches of snuff into his nose and sneezed so hard he had to push his dentures back in place. "My poor child, if the Doyennes have got involved, there's no longer any conceivable way out. But why?" he asked, making his moustache quiver. "Why you? Why over there?"

Ophelia washed her hands under the tap and rebuttoned her gloves. She had broken enough china for today. "It would seem that this man's family made direct contact with the Doyennes to arrange the marriage. I have no idea what made them target me rather than someone else. I'd like to believe it was a misunderstanding, really."

"And your mother?"

"Delighted," muttered Ophelia, bitterly. "She's been promised a good match for me, which is much more than she was hoping for." In the shadow of her hair and her glasses, she set her lips. "It's not in my power to reject this offer. I'll follow my future husband wherever duty

and honor oblige me to. But that's as far as things will go," she concluded, pulling at her gloves with determination. "This marriage isn't about to be consummated."

Looking upset, the great-uncle stared at her. "No, dear girl, no, forget that. Look at yourself. You're the height of a stool and the weight of a bolster . . . However he makes you feel, I advise you never to set your will against that of your husband. You'll end up with broken bones."

Ophelia turned the handle of the gramophone to get the deck moving again and clumsily placed the needle on the record's first groove. The little opera aria rang out once again from the horn. With arms behind her back, she looked at him with a vacant expression and said nothing more. This is what Ophelia was like: in situations where any young girl would have cried, moaned, shouted, implored, she usually just observed in silence. Her cousins liked to say that she was a bit simple.

"Listen," muttered the great-uncle while scratching his ill-shaven neck, "let's not overdramatize, either. I doubtless went over the top when telling you about this family earlier on. Who knows? Maybe you'll like your guy?"

Ophelia looked closely at her great-uncle. The strong sunlight seemed to accentuate the features on his face and deepen each wrinkle. With a twinge of sorrow, she suddenly realized that this man, whom she had always thought to be solid as a rock and impervious to the passing of time, was today a tired old man. And she had just, unintentionally, aged him even more. She forced herself to smile. "What I need is some good documentation."

The great-uncle's eyes regained a little of their sparkle. "Put your coat back on, dear girl, we're going down!"

The Rupture

Ophelia's great-uncle dived into the entrance of a stairway barely lit by safety lamps. With hands deep in her coat and nose in her scarf, Ophelia followed him down. The temperature fell from one step to the next. Her eyes were still full of sunlight and she truly felt as if she were plunging into icy black water.

She jumped when the gruff voice of her great-uncle reverberated from wall to wall: "I can't get used to the idea that you're going to leave. The Pole really is the other end of the world!"

He stopped on the stairs to turn to Ophelia. Still not accustomed to the darkness, she bumped right into him. "Say, you're pretty skilled when it comes to mirror-traveling. Couldn't you do those little journeys of yours from the Pole to here, every now and then?"

"I'm unable to do that, uncle. Mirror-traveling only works over small distances; covering the void between two arks is unthinkable."

The great-uncle swore in old dialect and continued down the stairs. Ophelia felt guilty for not being as skilled as he thought. "I'll try to come and see you often," she promised in a small voice.

"When are you off, exactly?"

"December, if I can believe the Doyennes."

The great-uncle swore again. Ophelia was grateful not to understand a word of his dialect.

"And who'll take over from you at the museum?" he grumbled. "No one else can evaluate antiquities like you!"

To that, Ophelia could find no reply. That she would be wrenched from her family was bad enough, but being torn from her museum, the only place where she felt totally herself, that was tantamount to losing her identity. Reading was all that Ophelia was good at. If that were taken from her, all that would remain of her would be a clumsy lump. She didn't know how to keep house, or make conversation, or finish a household chore without doing herself an injury. "Apparently, I'm not as irreplaceable as all that," she muttered into her scarf.

In the first basement, the great-uncle swapped his usual gloves for clean ones. By the light of the electric safety lamps, he slid open his filing cabinets to trawl through the archives that had been deposited, generation after generation, beneath the cold vault of the cellars. He expelled condensation, mid-moustache, with every breath.

"Right, these are the family archives, so don't expect miracles. I know that one or two of our ancestors did set foot in the Great North, but it was a dashed long time ago."

Ophelia wiped away a drop hanging from her nose. It couldn't be more than 40 degrees here. She wondered whether her future husband's house would be even colder than this archives room. "I'd like to see Augustus," she said. This was clearly shorthand—Augustus had died long before Ophelia's birth. "Seeing Augustus" meant looking at his sketches. Augustus had been the great explorer of the family, a legend in his own right. At school, geography was taught based on his travel journals. He had never written a sentence—he didn't know his alphabet—but his drawings were a mine of information.

Since the great-uncle, deep in his filing cabinets, didn't reply, Ophelia presumed he hadn't heard. She tugged at the scarf that was wrapped round his face and repeated in a louder voice: "I'd like to see Augustus."

"Augustus?" he chomped, without looking at her. "Of no interest. Insignificant. Just old scribbles."

Ophelia raised her eyebrows. Her great-uncle never denigrated his archives. "Oh," she blurted, "really that terrifying?"

With a sigh, the great-uncle emerged from the fully extended drawer in front of him. The loupe he'd wedged under his brow made that eye

double the size of the other one. “Bay number four, to your left, bottom shelf. Handle with care, please, and put clean gloves on.”

Ophelia moved along the filing cabinets and knelt down at the specified location. There she found all of Augustus’s original sketchbooks, classified by ark. She found three at “Al-Andaloose,” seven at “City,” and around twenty at “Serenissima.” At “Pole” she found only one. Ophelia couldn’t afford to be clumsy with such precious archives. She placed the sketchbook on a consulting lectern and, with the utmost care, turned the pages of drawings.

Pale plains, just above the rock, a fjord imprisoned in ice, forests of great firs, houses encased in snow . . . These landscapes were austere, yes, but less daunting than Ophelia had imagined the Pole to be. She even found them quite beautiful, in a way. She wondered where her fiancé lived, in the midst of all this whiteness. Close to this river edged with pebbles? In this fishing port lost in the night? On this plain invaded by tundra? This ark looked so poor, so wild! How could her fiancé be such a good match?

Ophelia fell on a drawing that she didn’t understand: it looked like a beehive suspended in the sky. Probably the outline of an idea. She turned a few more pages and saw a hunting portrait. A man was posing proudly in front of a huge pile of pelts. Hands on hips, he had rolled up his sleeves to show off his powerfully muscled arms, which were tattooed up to the elbows. His look was hard, his hair fair.

Ophelia’s glasses turned blue when she realized that the pile of pelts behind him was in fact but a single pelt—that of a dead wolf. It was as big as a bear. She turned the page. This time the hunter was standing in the middle of a group. They were posing together in front of a heap of antlers. Elk antlers, no doubt, except that each skull was the size of a man. The hunters all had the same hard look, the same fair hair, the same tattoos on their arms, but not a single weapon between them, as though they had killed the animals with their bare hands.

Ophelia leafed through the sketchbook and found those same hunters posing in front of different carcasses—walruses, mammoths, and bears, all of an unbelievable size. She slowly closed the book and put it back in

its place. “Beasts” . . . These animals afflicted with gigantism, she’d already seen them in children’s picture books, but they bore no relation to Augustus’s sketches. Her little museum hadn’t prepared her for that kind of life. What shocked her more than anything was the look in the hunters’ eyes. A look that was brutal, arrogant, accustomed to the sight of blood. Ophelia hoped her fiancé wouldn’t have that look.

“So?” asked her great-uncle as she returned to him.

“I understand your reluctance a bit more now,” she said.

He returned to his research with renewed vigor. “I’m going to find you something else,” he muttered. “Those sketches, they must be a hundred and fifty years old. And they don’t show everything!”

That was precisely what was worrying Ophelia: what Augustus didn’t show. She said nothing, however, merely shrugging her shoulders. Anyone other than her great-uncle would have misread her nonchalance, confusing it with a certain weakness of character. Ophelia seemed so calm, behind her rectangular glasses and half-closed eyelids, that it was almost impossible to imagine that waves of emotion were crashing violently in her chest.

The hunting sketches had scared her. Ophelia wondered whether that was really what she had come to find here, in the archives. A draft blew between her ankles, lightly raising her dress. This breeze came from the entrance to the stairway that led down to the second basement. Ophelia stared for a moment at the passage barred with a chain on which swung a warning sign: “PUBLIC ACCESS PROHIBITED.”

There was always a draft lingering in the archive rooms, but Ophelia couldn’t resist interpreting this one as an invitation. The second basement was calling for her presence, now.

She tugged on her great-uncle’s coat, as he was lost in his reports, perched on his library steps. “Would you allow me to go down?”

“You know very well that I’m not normally authorized to do that,” the great-uncle muttered, with a bristling of his moustache. “It’s Artemis’s private collection—only archivists have access to it. She honors us with her trust; we must not abuse it.”