

The table of Jersey

Maryse Nantel teaches French in high school in California. She has been living with Dennis for ten years, a linguist dedicated to developing software for spontaneous literary acoustic translation.

The couple seemed to lead a serene and happy life, when one day Maryse decides to leave her companion, for whom she no longer has any other feelings but those of friendship. Her decision is sudden, final and leaves everyone in her circle in disbelief. In particular Jessica Wall, the headmistress of the high school, where Maryse is teaching, who is also a friend of the couple. She offers her country house to the young woman, however finding herself in a somewhat awkward position towards Dennis.

Dennis is extremely bruised by what is happening to him. Despite Maryse insisting in continuing to see him, he refuses to maintain any contact with her.

One evening, when Maryse is unsuccessfully trying to contact him via a chat programme on the Internet, a stranger presents himself spontaneously to her under the name of Victor. He pretends to be Victor Hugo in person, talking to her from beyond the grave.

The internet user writes to her in impeccable and no less than lyric French. It amuses Maryse and leads her to suspect Dennis or David (one of her students) potentially to be behind the hoax.

-Dennis, because he possesses the instruments to perform it

-David, because he is a son of a French diplomat. Since the divorce of his parents, he lives in California with his mother and only goes to see his father in France during the school holidays.

The young man, in spite of being absolutely brilliant, is a dark, handsome, impudent and provocative adolescent.

Maryse causes him to feel an obsessive attraction towards her. Despite his apparent self-confidence, he has never been with a woman and is determined to convince the teacher to introduce him to sensual pleasures.

Thus, the young woman finds herself caught in a conversation with someone she believes to be either her troubled 17-year old student, or her ex-companion who she regrets to have made suffer. In the light of these doubts, she plays the game and talks to him pretending to believe that she is indulging in a virtual spiritualism session. She asks him about the purpose of his visit.

‘Victor’ responds that he is watching over her and that he misses her.

The next day at school, Maryse reveals to Jessica about her last night’s conversation making sure not give out the suspicions about David to her headmistress.

Indeed, even if her principles forbid her to imagine giving in to the advances of her student, him being a minor, the disturbance she exercises upon him moves her. The repeated excessive behaviour of the young man is already threatening him with expulsion from the institution and the teacher does not want to overburden the situation.

Maryse tells Jessica that she believes that someone who must know her very well is hiding behind her mysterious correspondent. Victor Hugo is, in fact, taking up an important place in her literature programme since the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2002. The headmistress comes to the conclusion that it is definitely Dennis, in order to convince herself that the separation of the couple is only temporary.

The next evening, when she sends an email to Jessica before going to bed, Victor comes back on her screen to 'talk' to her. He tells her how during his lifetime already one communicated with people who were physically absent without a computer, with the help of a table with three legs.

Hence begins the narration in sequence of the circumstances which have brought the Hugo family to exile to the island of Jersey. We discover how, during the exile, the Hugo family is introduced to spiritualism by a friend of the family: Mrs de Girardin.

Victor tells us of his first reservations about the seriousness of such practice, his son Charles' medium predispositions and their first failed attempts to make the tables talk until the evening of September 11th, 1853, when the table of their salon in Jersey addressed them for the first time: the spirit of Leopoldine Hugo, Victor's eldest daughter, who drowned with her husband in the Seine 10 years ago, had come to reassure and console her family.

Maryse is caught up passionately in the narration. She was aware that Victor Hugo was a follower of spiritualism; however, being fiercely of a Cartesian thought, she had never been interested in it.

The following day, she delightedly reveals to the headmistress and friend that Dennis is pursuing his role-play with her and, for her greatest joy, he has proved a great deal of imagination. Jessica expresses her wishes that the couple renewed their relationship as soon as possible.

The following evenings, Maryse hopes to see Victor again, but he does not appear anymore. She thus attempts unsuccessfully to contact Dennis to see how he is doing. The latter demands her coldly to assume her choices and to leave him in peace.

Her ex-companion's rejection saddens Maryse and leaves her puzzled. The doubt as to figuring out whether it is really him behind the hoax remains, since, on his part, the young David continues to gaze at her with persistence in class, particularly every time she encounters him.

During the literature class, where she compares the differences between classicism and romanticism, David brings up Victor Hugo with verve.

The young woman keeps him after class and asks him what happened to the Hugo family after their first spiritualism sessions. The student responds that their house became frequented by 'the lady in white', a woman who had killed her mother - the official ghost of the island. The teacher points out to him that he seems to know a great deal about the biography of the writer. He informs her that sometimes, when the weather is good, from the island of Jersey one can catch a glimpse of St-Malo, the town where his father resides.

When Maryse asks him abruptly if he is '*the* Victor Hugo' who is visiting her in the evening on her computer, he replies before leaving, that he is willing to be whoever she wants him to be.

In the evening, as she is dozing off on her bed, a loud signal comes out of her laptop left on stand-by. It is Victor who has come to greet her.

Our heroine wakes up and immediately plugs in the microphone into her computer, and, through the software commercialised by Dennis' company, she listens to the interferences by her mysterious correspondent. A male artificial voice recites the text simultaneously in English which, as it goes along, is written in French on her screen. Thus, Maryse is free to move and is able to walk around in her apartment whilst having a conversation with him at the same time.

Determined to finally find out his true identity, she begins an airy discussion in attempt to confuse him. Unsuccessfully! Victor reverts the situation and it is her that goes on to unveil that, from now on single, she is very much sought-after by the men in her circle, however none of them make her want to engage in a serious relationship. She has made the choice to live alone to stay available for the one who would excite her, amaze her, make her laugh. The one who would make her dream.

However, she immediately realises that she may have gone too far in her revelations to 'Victor' whose identity she is still unsure of. She decides to put an end to their little game.

Sometime later, Frank, a colleague of Maryse, invites her to have dinner in a trendy town restaurant. The man is not lacking charm and seems to appeal to her until she discovers that David is also at the same place with a group of friends. From all the indications, the young people are celebrating an event. The student stares at her during the entire evening up to the point where Maryse finds it harder and harder to hide her uneasiness.

Shortly, he retires to the toilet. She joins him, angry, entraps him against the urinal and in a threatening tone, suggests that he found himself a girlfriend of his age. She demands that in the future he should stop looking at her in such an unsuitable manner. He retorts

that if his insistence had really offended her, he would have been sent away from the high school a while ago. She responds back saying that he had just lost an ally.

Later on, Frank drives her back to her place. We learn during the return trip that Maryse was born of a father whose identity was unknown. When they arrive, she hurries to say goodbye and return to her house alone.

To her great surprise, she is welcomed by the artificial voice of Victor. She is astonished to see her computer switched on and asks her mysterious guest why he had come back. He replies that he had not finished telling his story. But Maryse is overwhelmed and confused at the same time. She does not know whether she wishes that he went away or stayed. She bursts into tears, finally pulls herself together and snuggles up in a blanket on the sofa to listen to Victor carry on with his tale.

This time he talks to her about André Chenier, the poet beheaded during the French Revolution, and who addresses himself to his family and their guests so that they would carry on his unfinished verses. He also talks to her of Shakespeare, of Molière, who had succeeded one another at his table, insisting on the fact that he addresses them in alexandrine.

At the time of the sequence, Victor lists a long list of renowned deceased guests who appear at their table between 1853 and 1855.

That night our heroine has a strange dream. She sees herself in the house of Victor Hugo in Jersey, taking part in one of their spiritualism seances. David is leading it. We cannot hear what he is saying. Slightly aside, Victor Hugo in person is taking down the exchanges in a red notebook.

The next day in class, David is absent. After the lesson, Maryse presents herself at Jessica's office to tell her about the plumbing problems she had noticed in the kitchen of her house. The headmistress promises to come to see into it the same evening and informs her on the same occasion that David has decided to leave high-school in order to enrol in the army. Maryse is distressed. She mutters to her friend suggesting an attempt to convince the young man at least to finish the academic year which is coming to an end in a couple of months. But Jessica announces that David is 18-years old since yesterday (which explains his presence at the restaurant with his friends) and that he has sent her an email leaving no doubts as to his determination. She thinks, like Maryse, that he should finish the year but she had threatened to expel him so much in the past that it would make no sense now to insist that he stayed. Furthermore, she always felt him to be predestined for a career in the military and thinks that the military training could do him no harm.

The teacher is about to leave the office when the headmistress tells her, very enthusiastically, that she has found some documents on the internet concerning Victor Hugo's spiritualist experience in Jersey and that she, too, is starting to get passionate about this story. She asks her if Dennis is continuing his evening story-telling. Maryse replies in affirmative and lights up.

A while later we find her in front of the door to David's mother's house. The latter opens it. Maryse introduces herself and asks if she can speak to her son.

The mother of the young man calls him but there is no reply. She offers our heroine to go upstairs to talk to him in his room revealing her hopes that she may succeed in making him change his mind rapidly, since he is going back to St-Malo at the end of the week.

Thus, we see her standing in front of David, who is lying down on his bed and who cheers up having succeeded to attract the object of his desires into his territory. However, he explains that he will not change his mind about his decision, since he had wanted to quit high-school and enrol in the army for a long time. Now that he has no right to 'look at her', nothing motivates him to continue. He also demands her to ask herself as to any interest she may have in him. Maryse does not allow herself to be taken apart, yet she leaves exasperated.

As the sun goes down, Dennis prepares to leave the building where his office is situated. He says goodbye to his collaborators and walks towards his car. Even though he is smiling, his look is revealing an obvious misery.

When he is getting into his car, he notices Maryse watching him further away from her vehicle. He immediately joins her and sits down on the passenger seat next to her. He tells her gently that he is trying to forget her and that she is not helping him with the task. He asks her, kindly this time, to disappear from his life. Maryse promises him to do so if he replies to one question which has led her to contact him: Is he 'Victor Hugo'?

He responds, with sincerity, that he wishes he was him. Perhaps he would have made her 'dream' more and he would not have lost her. As it is, he is not 'Victor Hugo'. The young woman reassures him that had he been the famous author she had never stayed near him for 10 years. The overpowering personality and the legendary ego of the man would have undoubtedly made her walk away.

'Thus, the one who will know how to keep you must be very ingenious' concludes Dennis as he is leaving.

As she comes back, Maryse is annoyed to see Jessica changing the tap in the kitchen, as she is in a bad mood and would prefer to be alone.

For her part, overly ecstatic Jessica approaches the subject of the tables of Jersey by showing her the documents she had collected, but Maryse cuts in and announces coldly that she never wishes to speak about it again.

The headmistress is left gaping for a moment. Maryse apologises right away and explains to her that Dennis has just announced that he is not the one behind the hoax. In order to be forgiven for her bad temper, she invites her to stay for dinner.

Jessica accepts the invitation and asks her if she could use her computer to send an email.

Later at the table, the two women are enjoying a bottle of wine and appear to be slightly fuddled. Jessica cannot help but bring up what she has read on the experience of the Hugos and talks about their troubling exchanges with the Lion of Androcles and the entrance of sepulchre, in other words: THE DEATH.

However, Maryse on her part is convinced that Victor Hugo must have had a trick to move the leg of the table. She believes that the entire story is a fabulous farce.

Jessica argues that it is impossible since, according to the minutes, Victor Hugo was not consistently present at the time of the seances and that he had never even laid his hands on the table. Maryse comes to a conclusion that the seances never took place that he wrote the notebooks himself in secret and it is probably not a coincidence if they have stayed in his drawers for more than thirty years. The discussion turns into a controversy and the two friends almost begin to argue when the artificial voice of Victor Hugo interrupts them. Jessica jolts. Maryse grabs the microphone and asks him if he can come back later, since she has a visitor.

Victor says he has come to say his farewells, for he knows that his interventions are making her suffer and that is not what he wishes.

Maryse asks him why he does not come to see her. He reminds her that he is dead. Jessica intervenes and attempts to know which of the numerous women of his life Maryse could have been back then: Mrs Hugo? Juliette Drouet, Leonnie Daunet? – ‘One that meant to me a lot’ Victor responds briefly.

The young woman replies that she regrets his decision since she would have loved him to tell the end of the story. After a long silence, he invites her to come to get to know it at his house in Jersey.

Jessica informs her friend that the house where the Hugos lived had been demolished. Victor invites her to meet up with him at the hotel closest to the house where they used to live, in the eve of The Good Friday, that is, 10 days later.

Maryse is puzzled. David’s mother had told her the same afternoon that next week her son was going to be at his father’s. She dreads to find herself face to face with her former student. She tells him that she wishes to think it through.

Whilst Victor informs her that he will be there waiting, whether she comes or not, Jessica has grabbed the keyboard and is searching for the IP address of the mysterious internet user. She recovers the number and saves it.

In the meantime, Victor has left the conversation. Jessica asks her friend if she is considering showing up in Jersey. Maryse argues that she does not have the money for it and that she does not know who the man inviting her is.

The headmistress tells her that she will probably be able to clear it out by confronting him. She checks her email account and notices that she has received a message. It is a reply from Dennis to the email she had just sent him before dinner, in which Jessica expressed her regrets that the break-up of the couple had also affected their friendship, Dennis replies that he wishes she minded her own business. She pulls out the IP address of the sender and compares it to Victor's: they are identical.

Maryse is relieved, but has the last doubt: nothing proves to her that somebody is not using Dennis' IP address on his behalf. Such practice exists, thus she is not convinced. Jessica blames her for being either paranoid or looking for excuses not to join him. The young woman agrees, but brings up the last reason not to go: the money for the trip. Jessica proposes to lend it to her.

Without any other argument, our heroine accepts.

The day before the Good Friday, Jessica is waiting for the end of Maryse's class in the corridor. As soon as the students leave the class, she rushes her not to miss her flight. In the car, the teacher confides to her headmistress that she is happy to be meeting Dennis. This separation has helped her to understand how important he is to her.

The two women separate at the airport and Jessica quickly leaves her way.

The next day, the plane lands in Paris. Maryse then takes a train to St-Malo. Later on, she embarks the ferry to Jersey. From the deck of the ship, it seems to her that David is observing from the shore. However, he rapidly disappears.

In Jersey, a taxi drives her to the hotel where she asks if there is a reservation under Dennis' name. She is informed that this is not the case.

After having unpacked her luggage, she visits the places which have marked the history of Victor Hugo during his exile on this island, notably, the rock of the proscribed, where the exiles of Napoleon III regime were used to meet and where one night, Victor Hugo saw the lady in white. During her walk, she again seems to catch a glimpse of David, dressed and combed just like in her dream. She begins to follow him and finds herself confronted by another self, with dark hair, dressed as the women in the middle of the 19th century. This 'vision of herself' is embraced by the 'vision of David' who is kissing her passionately.

Maryse observes them stunned from the other side of the street but a truck passes in front of her. After the vehicle had passed, the mysterious couple has disappeared.

The night is about to fall and whilst our heroine is having dinner alone in the hotel restaurant, it is still Friday morning in California. Jessica is driving to the church. On her way, she sees Dennis at the petrol station filling up his tank.

She immediately turns around and asks him how come he is not in Jersey! Dennis reminds her that he has already asked to mind her own business. Nevertheless, Jessica gets angry, blaming him for deliberately sending Maryse to France to join him and adds that she finds his vengeance very petty! The linguist denies having ever given the slightest hope to Maryse. But when Jessica tells him that she has proof, he realises something serious is about to happen.

Later on, it is night in Jersey and Maryse is trying desperately to call to Dennis' and Jessica's, who are at the country house, reading the logs of the conversations between Maryse and Victor during the past few weeks.

It is late night now in Jersey. Maryse is looking for a telephone number in the telephone book. She is sitting on her bed, her elbow resting on the bedside table. The calm has taken over the room until a popping downright tap is heard. Maryse jolts. The sound repeats, followed by a series of others. The young woman sits up and notices that her bedside table is in fact a pedestal table with three legs, similar to the one that served the Hugos a century and a half ago. The taps are coming from one of the moving legs that rises and falls on the ground.

Our heroine gets scared and tries to leave her room but the door appears to be closed from the outside. The table is now moving in sudden and jerky movements and begins to rise while Maryse is shrieking that she does not believe in all this. Unable to leave the room, she pounces on the table and pushes it towards the floor. The table allows to be rested.

'Why all this mise-en-scene?' asks the young woman, irritated.

The leg of the table breaks out to hit the floor in a series of regular taps.

Maryse protests that she cannot hold the table, count the taps and retranscribe.

Other knocks echo. This time they are coming from behind the door of the room.

The young woman yells that she cannot open, since the door does not open anymore. However, suddenly it opens, pushed by David.

Maryse lets go of the table to walk towards him. But David stays gaping looking at the table which rises up again.

He demands an explanation as to what is happening. Maryse grabs him, pushes him on the bed, mounts him in order to immobilise him and, furious, requests to explain what he is playing at. The table is still in suspense in the air and David seems extremely uncomfortable. He explains that he saw her getting on the ferry and, seeing Maryse alone, he thought she had come for him. Also, he had found out which hotel she was staying at and whether he was allowed to join her. Nevertheless, Maryse is not satisfied by the

response of the young man and forces him to admit that he had lured her to this place by stealing the IP address of her previous boyfriend. David ardently denies it. He admits suffering from an obsession that she brings out in him and thus he has left to forget her. He asks if he can go now. Maryse asks him to stay, it is time to blow over the mystery, and directs him to place his hands flat on the table. He does as he is told. The three legs immediately land on the floor.

Maryse takes a seat in the armchair in front of the table with a pen and a red notebook that she has found in the drawer.

A series of taps is heard. As it goes along, the young woman takes down in the notebook the letter of the alphabet that it corresponds to.

Thus resumes the conversation she had completed at her house ten days ago.

The first message transmits that he is happy to see her.

She asks the guest of the table to reveal who he is. He suggests that she should rather ask who he *was*. Maryse poses her question in the past tense.

‘I was the author’ he replies first.

‘The author of your days’ specifies finally.

From words to phrases, from phrases to paragraphs Victor reveals us the epilogue of his mysterious history in Jersey. Thus he talks to us of the most inconspicuous of his witness, often brought up during their previous conversations: Miss Adele Hugo, his younger daughter.

The young woman was 23 at the time of the events. It is during her stay in Jersey that she met Lieutenant Albert Pinson.

A fatal connection linked her to this man whom she later seemed to be losing her mind for, following him wherever his military career was obliging him to settle: first Halifax, then Barbados. She did not come back to France until 1872, only to be put in a psychiatric ward.

Pinson had taken part in one of the seances of the tables. An active karmic link is still connecting him to Adele in this existence. This is why Maryse and David have such a mutual fascination for each other.

After the premature disappearance of Leopoldine, Victor devoted such a cult for the deceased that his youngster, Adele, had become invisible to him. Thus, the young woman hoped one day to find a place in the heart of the officer, who displeased her father so much. However, contrary to her expectations, after having seduced her in Jersey, Pinson responded to the harassment with nothing but rejection and humiliation.

It is through her insanity and nearly a decade of foolish wandering that she had finally had the occasion to take a crucial place in the conscience of her father which, once liberated, did not cease to contravene the name. The fame of Victor weighed her down so much that she began to declare to have been born to an unknown father.

Such being preferable to the one she had known in her previous existence, Maryse, as we have learned earlier, had never known the identity of the man who conceived her.

However, David is impatient. Tired of holding the table which is expressing itself in a way that his messages are impossible to understand, he asks Maryse to read to him what it has said during all this time. She promises to give him the notebook if he completes his mission as the intermediary without arguing.

There is in fact one last point that she wants to clear up with Victor. Why did he let the ambiguity hang during all this time? Why did he steal the IP address from Dennis? If he had caused such phenomena at hers, she would have believed it much sooner. Why did he intervene with her life now, and why did he reunite David and her in this hotel?

The leg of the table is tapping the floor endlessly to dictate to Maryse the answers to her questions:

Victor had only suffered too much having been unable to help her in the past. Now that the internet offered him the possibility to contact her easily, he was bound to open her eyes to the profound nature of her feelings for Dennis. He kept the ambiguity during his interventions so that her awareness would come from within herself. On the other hand, if he understands better than anybody else her need for dreams and escape, he knows also that such needs are ephemeral and that the real unions are precious entities which need to be preserved.

As far as David is concerned, the hour is crucial to him, since his fate will be decided after their conversation:

If Maryse refuses him, he will forget her at the frontline in Iraq where the events will lead him to insanity followed by a secluded life.

If she gives in to him tonight, he will give up the army; however will continue to harass her. If she gives him her heart, David will despise it soon. Maryse will be bruised by it for a long time and this wound will take a long time to heal.

The young woman refuses to accept the fact that their destiny is fully traced and asks how she could liberate herself from the fatal link that is joining them. But David refuses to continue the seance. He complains to be exhausted and wants to finish it. Also because he has not followed anything in the conversation.

Maryse disdains his physical and psychological resistance and suggests a change in the orientation of his career.

‘If a ghost of an old man is putting you into such a state, what will happen when THE DEATH will sweep children away under your eyes?’

Now truly at the bottom of his strength, David is seized with convulsions. Maryse takes him into her arms as he calms down. She cradles him. He falls asleep and wakes up at dawn. Maryse is no longer in the room. Next to him on the bed lies the red notebook. He grabs it and begins to read.

For her part, the young woman is meditating on the rock of the proscribed. Her mobile phone draws her out of her dreams. It is Dennis who has finally managed to get in touch. He is extremely relieved to hear her and asks her what had happened. She promises to tell him everything when she comes back, if he agrees to see her. He accepts if she promises to never leave again.

A while later she returns to her room. David is no longer there. Only the red notebook remains on the bed.

A few days have passed. Dennis, Jessica and Maryse are at the table enjoying a nice meal. Dennis is reading the red notebook whilst Jessica is listening to Maryse with fascination.

The following week, the classes have started. Maryse is surprised to see David in his usual seat. His face is serene and he seems very interested in a classmate who he had humiliated at the beginning of the story.

When Maryse enters the classroom he walks up to her desk to greet her. The teacher asks if he had changed his mind about the army. He says he wants to take some time to finish the year to think it through and reassures her of his intentions. He had not come back for her. The lesson starts; the story concludes.

The End.