

1.

A CLANDESTINE CHILDHOOD: 1932–1946

At six o'clock in the morning on Saturday, February 6, 1932, Janine de Monferrand gave birth to a son, whom she named François Roland. Not even twenty, she had her baby in secret, at a good distance from her family's apartment on rue Henri Monnier, where she still lived. Her parents, Jean and Geneviève de Monferrand, had known of her pregnancy for only the last three months. Catholic families frowned upon unwed mothers, and this was particularly so among the Monferrands' neighbors and acquaintances in the ninth arrondissement, a quiet, insular, almost provincial neighborhood in the north of Paris. Janine had found sanctuary with a midwife, over half an hour's walk from home, on rue Léon Cogniet, near the Parc Monceau. Two days later, the child's birth was registered at the town hall of the seventeenth arrondissement.¹

THE SECRET CHILD

The infant was immediately placed with a wet nurse—first in Montmorency, then in Boissy-Saint-Léger—and would only rarely see his mother before the age of three. But after twenty months in obscurity, he at least gained an adoptive father. On October 24, 1933, two weeks before marrying Janine de Monferrand, Roland Truffaut legally recognized the boy, who had been

listed as “born of an unknown father.”² Yet the young couple’s wedding, on November 9, did not put an end to the secrecy regarding the infant’s existence. Indeed, while “the great injustice had been redressed by a man with a noble heart” and the couple was now accepted at the family dinner table, young François remained in the care of the wet nurse. In the spring of 1934, Roland and Janine had another son, whom they named René, but the baby died before he was two months old. One wonders how, had this brother lived, the shared childhood might have affected François’s creative outlook and his path in life. But François Truffaut remained an only child, and an unwanted one.

Deeply shaken by the death of their little René, the young couple decided to leave the family enclave and move into a modest two-room apartment on rue du Marché-Popincourt, in the Folie-Méricourt neighborhood. It was now, more than ever, out of the question for them to take in François. The child reminded his young mother of a gloomy period in her life: “René’s death was a tragedy,” recalls Monique, Janine’s younger sister.³ “For, suddenly, what everyone in the family had until then been hiding became obvious: that François existed, that he would be an embarrassment, the victim of a rigid society and an unloved child.” With François in distant banishment, they continued to pretend he didn’t exist. Between increasingly rarer visits, the boy was wasting away, eating very little, and growing sickly, with a sallow complexion. Sensing he might die, his grandmother, Geneviève de Monferrand, decided to take him in, when François was nearly three years old. Legitimate in the eyes of the law, forgiven in the name of Christian charity, adopted by his grandmother, he found a home in the small Monferrand apartment at 21 rue Henri Monnier. Jean and Geneviève occupied the bedroom; Bernard, their fourteen-year-old son, slept in the vestibule; Monique (their youngest child, aged ten) and François slept in the living room. Geneviève de Monferrand, “*Damère Viève*,” had accepted François into her care, under the strict gaze of her “straitlaced” husband, who would never forget “Janine’s follies with workers in the neighborhood or disreputable types, sometimes even with foreigners.”⁴

MY GRANDFATHER, A PRIM DISCIPLINARIAN

The Monferrands, originally from Berry, belonged to the minor nobility. After a strict Jesuit education, Jean de Monferrand followed his parents to Paris in 1902. He met his wife, Geneviève de Saint-Martin, through the personal ads. She was from the Oc region, between Auch and Brugnac in the Lot-et-Garonne, where part of her family—also from minor nobility—still lived. After graduating from the lycée in Agen, she went to Paris to com-

plete her literary studies. The young couple married in 1907 and settled in Aubervilliers. Following the births of their first two children, Suzanne and Janine, Jean was drafted into the army. Like all men of his generation, he would remain profoundly shaken by the Great War. The experience tempered his conservative ethos, and introduced a certain humanism into a cultural background marked by nationalism, Catholicism, and legitimism. He and Geneviève had two other children—Bernard in 1921 and Monique in 1925. Very much satisfied with the rectitude and discipline of their own good upbringing, they raised their four children in a strict but generous way. At the end of his life, François Truffaut tried to describe the ambience of his early childhood: “There had been titles in the family. My grandfather, a prim disciplinarian who was always impeccably dressed, was frightening to us, particularly at mealtime. He was really a pain in the neck. For example, at the dinner table, my aunt Monique, who was very mischievous, would take a fistful of salt and throw it behind her, just like that, and I would roar with laughter. He would immediately grab me by the collar and say, ‘Take your plate to the kitchen!’ I would finish almost all my meals in the kitchen. That’s what the Monferrand atmosphere was like.”⁵

The family had moved into the apartment on rue Henri Monnier after the war. Jean de Monferrand worked very close by, overseeing the letters to the editor at *L'Illustration*, one of the most important periodicals of the time, which had its offices on rue Saint-Georges. Though the position was a modest one, he was proud of being the editor of a column. Although the Monferrand family always lived quite frugally, the atmosphere at home was a literary and musical one. Geneviève, a former schoolteacher, was a music lover and very well read. An occasional writer, she had penned a novel entitled *Apôtres (Apostles)*,⁶ written in a very mannered style and permeated with mystical fervor. Geneviève shared her passion for reading with François, taking him, at the age of five or six, on long walks through the Drouot neighborhood, from bookstore to bookstore, and to the public library in the ninth arrondissement. All four Monferrand children inherited their mother’s interest in literature and music, though they took quite different career paths. Bernard, the third-born, chose the military, first attending Navale and then, at the end of the thirties, entering Saint-Cyr military academy. Monique, the youngest child, studied the violin and graduated from the Paris Conservatoire during the Nazi Occupation. Janine, the second child, was more dissolute and fickle; she was impeded in her studies by her love affairs and, above all, by her status as a single mother. Nevertheless, she kept up with the theatrical and literary events of the prewar period. But she had to go to work. In 1934, her father got her a job as a shorthand typist at the weekly magazine *L'Illustration*, where she earned eleven hundred francs a month.

For the Monferrands, physical exercise, especially mountain climbing, was as important as intellectual activity. The whole family belonged to the Club Alpin français (French Alpine Club, a prestigious mountaineering society), and in the early thirties, Jean was vice president of the Paris chapter. It was there at the club that Janine, who had a certain standing as the vice president's daughter, met Roland Truffaut, a mountaineering enthusiast. He was not much older than she; of medium height and somewhat scrawny, he often wore a beret and tended to lean his head forward. But he was amusing, attentive, dexterous, and, above all, very well versed in matters concerning snap hooks, ropes, and ice axes.

The different branches of the Truffaut family had lived for several generations west and south of Paris, between the Vexin Normand and the Orge region, with some members moving close to the center of France, to Valigny, in the Allier, where Roland was born in May 1911. These were agricultural areas, populated with prosperous farming families and rural artisans—a completely different milieu from the Monferrands', which was more closed, more cultured, but less affluent. In the 1920s, Roland's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ferdinand Truffaut, had settled in the Essonne, about sixty miles south of Paris, in Juvisy-sur-Orge, a large market town that was still rural, though the farmland was already giving way to industrial development and a network of roads. The couple lived in a modest but pleasant house, with a courtyard, a garden, and, in the back, a workshop giving out on the countryside. Ferdinand Truffaut was a stonemason, working primarily with marble. He had a good reputation—for his carving skill as well as for his modest prices, which hadn't gone up, it seemed, since the early twenties. He worked on commission, making bowls, ashtrays, marble legs for stone tables, and especially tombstones for the nearby cemetery. Life in Juvisy was quiet in the beginning of the thirties, at the time when the couple's three children, Roland, Robert, and Mathilde, were finishing their studies.

Roland Truffaut moved to Paris in 1929 to get a diploma in architecture. He found work at eighteen as an architectural draftsman—in other words, as the most junior member in an architectural firm—drawing map layouts and blueprints for current projects. He earned just enough money to rent a room in the Lorettes district and pursue his passion for mountaineering. He could even buy the latest equipment and take advantage of the Club Alpin's outings to Savoie, Switzerland, the Vercors, or, better yet, the rocky inlets near Marseilles and the Italian Dolomites. At the end of the thirties, his profession and his passion converged when he found work as the architect and decorator for the French Scouts, les Éclaireurs de France, on rue de la Chaussée d'Antin.

By then, he had met Janine de Monferrand at the Paris headquarters of the Club Alpin, where she was one of the organizers. A small woman, about

five foot one, she was lively and dark-haired, slightly plump, and quite seductive. The engagement was short, and the marriage quick. The couple earned a modest living⁷ and pursued their Sunday mountaineering activities. On the eve of the war, Roland Truffaut became a member of the Club Alpin's board of directors, and later he was elected vice president of the Paris-Chamonix chapter; he was actively involved with the magazine *La Montagne* and in managing mountain refuges. Janine de Monferrand did not always follow dutifully in his tracks. Independent and cultivated, she often preferred evenings at the theater or at the Gaumont-Palace movie theater to the Club Alpin's meetings at rue de la Boétie. She read a great deal, especially the trendy writers of the period, such as Maxence Van der Meersch and Charles Morgan, or "modern writers" like André Gide, Jean Giraudoux, and Paul Valéry. She cared about her appearance and spent whatever money she could spirit away from her husband's mountaineering passion on making herself elegant. She also had a few love affairs, and never really bothered to hide the fact, since Roland Truffaut was so wrapped up in his club and his expeditions. There was a "Monsieur Robert," for example—Robert Vincendon, a quasi-official lover, who joined the family dinner table every Thursday evening and never failed to bring a gift—a bottle of wine for Roland or a book for his mistress. In the midst of all these activities, they lived like a childless couple; François was merely a shadow.

Geneviève de Monferrand devoted a great deal of time to raising her "last three children"—Bernard, who was filled with dreams of the army; Monique, whose life revolved around music; and her grandchild, François, who had been snatched from death's door. It was she who had "wanted" François and saved him twice—first when she dissuaded her daughter Janine from having an illegal abortion in 1931, and later when she went to fetch him at Boissy-Saint-Léger, where he was visibly wasting away. By all accounts, the boy—who was nicknamed "Papillon" ("Butterfly") and "Farfadet" ("Elf"), and had very fine blond hair worn in a pageboy—was "extremely alert" and cheerful, though "skinny and of delicate health."⁸ At seven, his hair turned brown; he was still "a bit pale and olive-skinned" and "alternated between vivaciousness and melancholy," "long silences" and "frenzied chatter."⁹ By the end of the thirties, François was already extremely attached to his neighborhood; he knew its every nook and cranny, having tramped through it often on lengthy walks with his grandmother. If you head up the rue Henri Monnier toward the hill of Montmartre, you find a tangle of little streets leading to the steamiest boulevards in Paris, in the area of Clichy, Place Blanche, and Pigalle. Parallel to the rue Henri Monnier, walking uphill and downhill from west to east, you find the rue Blanche, rue de La Rochefoucauld, rue des Martyrs, rue Rodier, and rue de Rochechouart, and a great many little side streets—rue de Douai, rue Condorcet, rue Chaptal, rue de la Tour d'Au-

vergne, rue de Navarin, rue Choron. These form a tight urban web, one of the most densely populated areas in the capital. It is the heart of a nineteenth-century neighborhood, the “quartier des Lorettes,” also called the “New Athens,” traditionally a neighborhood of artists and demi-mondaines, artisans and prostitutes, shopkeepers and junior civil servants. The atmosphere is quiet, despite the noise and cries of the market on rue des Martyrs. Aside from a few private mansions built around the end of the nineteenth century by wealthy men for their mistresses, the apartments are modest, with small rooms.

Truffaut was enrolled at the nursery school on rue Clauzel, and here he learned the alphabet. Reading with his grandmother was a favorite pastime. In first grade, at the primary school of the Lycée Rollin on avenue Trudaine, his report cards throughout 1938–39 were very good. He was an honor student, among the top five in his class. His teacher, Monsieur Dubuc, wrote, “François is a good student with a lively mind and a keen intelligence. His pleasant disposition and even temper have won him the sympathy of all.”¹⁰

In the summer, Geneviève de Monferrand rented a large house in northern Brittany, near Saint-Brieuc, in a small village called Binic—the Ty Rose villa, rue de l’Yc, a two-story house with a garden, close to the sea. François, who hated bathing and swimming,¹¹ spent his time running around or playing in the sand with a group of turbulent older cousins. In September 1939, when France entered the war, Geneviève decided to extend their vacation and spend the year in Brittany. Her son Bernard and her husband, Jean, were drafted, as was her son-in-law Roland Truffaut; all three were stationed in Satory, near Paris. Life in Brittany seemed easier to cope with than an extended waiting period in Paris. After François recovered from a worrisome case of jaundice, he and the Monferrand children attended the village school, at the top of the cliff. François was probably more unruly here than in Paris, for, on February 15, 1940, his grandmother sought help for the first time: “François looks much healthier than he has in a long time and has a good appetite, but he has broken out with such bad pimples that some of them look like little boils. Because of this, I can partly forgive his unruly, inattentive, contentious mood. He is learning a lot in class, good things from his teacher but distressingly bad ones from his classmates, who are really naughty. Roland should write to him in a firm tone and tell him he has to obey without talking back and bear criticism patiently (he sometimes goes so far as to shrug his shoulders). None of this is serious, but it must be nipped in the bud. If not, I’ll soon become a frantic little old woman.”¹²

After spending a second summer in Binic, Geneviève returned to Paris with all the children at the beginning of the school year, September 1940. François entered third grade at the same Lycée Rollin. He kept up the read-

ing and work habits his grandmother had instilled in him and remained a gifted student, but bad behavior had rubbed off on him from his cousins and classmates at the small school on the cliff, and he had become difficult. The comments of his teachers reveal as much: "An extremely intelligent child, who is very good in oral exercises, but so absorbed in play, so absentminded and talkative that his excellent qualities are wasted. Good in French. If he showed a bit more care and were more attentive, he would do extremely well."¹³ This did not prevent him from being an honor student and entering the next grade. The following year, after another happy summer in Binic, a similar statement was made on his report card: "He has no trouble understanding anything, except discipline. . . ."¹⁴

Under his grandmother's wing, François's life consisted of reading, walks, neighborhood errands, school, and summers spent in Brittany; occasionally, there were unwelcome interruptions, including his parents' visits. They rarely went to Binic, usually spending the summer at the other end of France, in the mountains, but every so often they visited the apartment on rue Henri Monnier. François Truffaut retained bitter memories of these visits: "With my father everything went well, but with my mother not at all. Subsequently I came to understand this phenomenon, from reading about it in books. My mother, whom I rarely used to see—mainly on those weekends when I would stay with them—my mother would suddenly want to act the part and would take it into her head—at my grandmother's, for instance—that I should finish eating some dish I couldn't stand, like lentils, until I'd get nauseous and vomit in my plate. Then she'd get angry and lock me in the back room; she'd yell and scream at her own mother and accuse her of being lax in my upbringing; and then she'd break down in tears when she realized she was also to blame. Each time there were scenes and head-on clashes, so much so that I could predict it all and I'd come to dread the times when my mother would come to visit us. My father used to just laugh it all off, while my grandfather—whom I disliked because he acted curt with me and never talked to me, about books, theater, or even the army, which he adored—my grandfather refused to see or understand what was happening, he'd just go into his study and read his newspaper."¹⁵

Also interrupting life's quiet flow on rue Henri Monnier were François's visits to his paternal grandparents' home in Juvisy. He spent some of his vacations there at Easter or on All Saints' Day. When he stayed for longer periods of time, he would accompany his grandfather to the workshop, or to the cemetery where he did his marble work. At the Truffauts', there was no talk of literature or recent shows, but much discussion of the family, which would cause François, as an adolescent, to suspect his grandmother of reporting all his remarks to his parents. Otherwise, these stays were remark-

able for their inactivity: “It was funny, vacations at Juvisy were usually spent at the edge of the road, watching the cars leave for the weekend. There was no highway at the time, and people left on Saturday. They all headed down the road; and on Sunday night the cars headed back up. My grandfather, my grandmother, the dog Scout and I, we would sit on our chairs and watch the cars.”¹⁶ François loved the big bowls of cream his grandmother made with Heudebert flour—the only thing he really enjoyed eating in his entire life.

MY MOTHER

In August 1942, Geneviève de Monferrand died of pleurisy, with tubercular complications. François was in Juvisy, at his paternal grandparents’, when the news came to them—news they had been dreading for several weeks. There was a family meeting, from which the ten-year-old was excluded, only to be told of his grandmother’s death several hours later. His paternal grandparents were perfectly willing to keep him in Juvisy, but Roland, in spite of Janine’s reluctance, now insisted on having François come to live with them full-time. This is how the couple, now in their early thirties, suddenly found themselves caring for a child whom they had rarely seen—a cyclothymic, irritable, clever, hypersensitive, somewhat sickly boy. François was aware of being an encumbrance, particularly to his mother, to whom the child represented the errors of her wayward youth. After the happy years living with his grandmother, François was now left to his own devices in a more indifferent, not to say hostile, world.

Shortly before his death, Truffaut described his adolescence as “an unhappy period, but it was intertwined with a happy side, though I didn’t quite realize it.”¹⁷ He clearly remembered the mixture of fascination and hatred that bound him to the woman whom he was only then coming to know. “*My Mother*”—the possessive could be construed as ironical—was the title he planned to give the introduction to his projected autobiography.¹⁸

What I went through with my mother is difficult to explain. It could probably be better explained in a novel—though Léautaud describes things like this very well in his diary. Bossiness mixed with a touch of contempt, a certain way of calling me “my child” or “silly little fool,” or “little idiot,” and of ordering me around, treating me like a servant, seeing how much I would put up with without complaining, though she didn’t go so far as to hit me, not often at any rate. . . . True, my birth had really burdened this woman, and then she had been unburdened when my grandmother took care of me for her. How fantastic! Then suddenly, after the summer of 1942, she had to take me in, or

thought she had to. It was when I understood this that I began to hate my mother, when I felt I was a nuisance to her. There were signs of this, admittedly small little things, but which hurt me terribly. For example, at every medical checkup, the doctors always said I had to have my tonsils operated on, and my parents were always putting off the operation; then there was the sentence that recurred every Spring, with the vacation approaching—"What are we going to do with the kid?" The underlying thought, which they didn't even bother to hide from me, was always—"How can we get rid of him?" And then the other thing that was hard to swallow was two or three Christmases all by myself, while my parents were in the mountains with friends. At first, this was presented to me as something good: I could do whatever I wanted in Paris, without any interference, I'd have a bit of money, I could go to the movies or the theater with my cousins. . . . I know each time I was terribly depressed.¹⁹

"In spite of everything that had gone on between them, the hatred and the lack of understanding," his childhood friend, Robert Lachenay, wrote, "he very much admired his mother, quite simply because she was a beautiful woman, an independent woman."²⁰ François tried to please her by behaving like a model child, like a man almost; for example, when he was left alone, he tried to repaint the walls, the ceiling and the doors, so his parents would "find the house improved when they returned," or he tried to upgrade the old electrical wiring, placing new sockets and redoing the splices and connections. In spite of his good intentions, these efforts sometimes ended catastrophically. "It wasn't a problem with my father, he always laughed things off, but with my mother it was harder. Her reaction was unpredictable, and sometimes very negative: 'Stupid little idiot, silly fool, no one asked you to do this. . . .'"²¹

In his recollections, Truffaut frequently remarks upon Roland Truffaut's laughter and jokes. He took everything in good humor: the outbursts between mother and son, the boy's stories from school, particularly if off-color or anticlerical, their financial problems, even Janine's suitors—"Madame's gentlemen." A pleasant evening at the theater or the local cinema, and the trials of the day were completely forgotten. This often exasperated his wife—and led to frequent arguments—but delighted François, who always encouraged Roland's joking temperament. But there was one thing that was hardly ever a joking matter—mountaineering; if the itinerary for a big hike was mislaid, ropes tangled, or a set of snap hooks lost, Roland Truffaut's angry fits were like high-altitude storms.

Roland Truffaut never told François he was his adoptive father. But as he approached adolescence, François surmised as much from telltale signs.

First, he noticed his parents' unease when he asked questions about his childhood and his separation from them; then there was his grandmother's and mother's obsession that others think of him as two years younger than his real age. He never found their explanations for this convincing—particularly the one about keeping him eligible for the “children's rate” on the train to Fontainebleau. These suspicions were encouraged by his reading of the great novels of the nineteenth century: “Unfortunately, I gradually felt something was wrong and it stemmed from . . . Charles Dickens. Like all big readers in such cases, I invented a complicated story for myself about the mystery surrounding my birth. . . .”²² It seems that as an adolescent he was especially struck by one of the first sentences of *David Copperfield*—a most memorable novel for him, along with *Great Expectations*: “I was a posthumous child. My father's eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months when mine opened on it. . . .” Truffaut later wrote, “I tried to work things out on my own with this book and this sentence, which was really very intriguing.”²³

At the beginning of 1944, shortly after turning twelve, François was rummaging in a closet while his parents were out, and he discovered a small 1932 Hachette almanac that belonged to Roland Truffaut. In it were recorded different events—hiking itineraries, birthdays to remember, and evenings at the theater. François found no special mention of anything on February 6, the day of his birth. His suspicions were confirmed once and for all several weeks later, when he came upon the *livret de famille*, the family record book. Roland Truffaut was not his father, and from then on, he felt a pang of sadness when he laughed at the man's jokes.

TRUANCY AND LIES

François had begun living with his parents at the start of the school year, in September 1942, when he was ten and a half. For a couple with a child, all the apartments they lived in—rue Clignancourt in 1942, rue Saint-Georges in 1943, and rue de Navarin, which they moved into in January 1944—were cramped. “Still, at 33 rue de Navarin, second floor left, I lived for nearly five years,” Truffaut recalled. “It was very difficult living under the same roof in such a tiny apartment. There was a room that served as a dining room and there was my parents' bedroom, and a little entrance adjoining the kitchen, which was also a bathroom. The toilets were on the landing, half a floor down. Everything was so precarious that my father had built a structure as my bed, in the entrance, that was a kind of bunk which folded up during the day and unfolded at night thanks to a pivoting mechanism. He joked about it

being like a mountain refuge. For me, it was my bed every single night and not much of a joke."²⁴ This structure, which is now famous from scenes in *The 400 Blows*, inevitably reinforced the child's feeling of being unwanted and of interfering with his parents' privacy.

Roland and Janine regularly left their adolescent son all alone in the apartment on weekends when they went hiking and rock-climbing in Fontainebleau. They would set off on Saturday morning and return Sunday afternoon. He would read, tinker, and get bored, confining himself to his room and the kitchen, where precooked meals had been left for him, but he still preferred this kind of idling to rock-climbing, for which he rapidly developed a loathing. When he was older, he would take advantage of his parents' absence to go out with his friends, sometimes staying with one of them for the night.

Janine and Roland did not always understand François's attitude; they considered him lazy and attributed his recalcitrance to an adolescent phase that he would grow out of. They looked down on him as a boy who had been overly spoiled by his grandmother, and for preferring the closed-in atmosphere of the Lorettes district to the great outdoors. Roland Truffaut described this lack of communication in his book, *Du Kenya au Kilimandjaro*, published by Julliard in 1953: "My son François will never understand anything about mountaineering. Feeling both convinced and hopeless about this, I have long stopped trying to influence him. . . . He prefers his scooter and the movies, and feels there is no way of eating that is more unpleasant than gobbling food crouched in front of a tent, even if the landscape is gorgeous. His tastes differ from mine. . . ." ²⁵

François did, however, agree to accompany his parents to Fontainebleau on the weekend when they decided to make a film. *Les Visiteurs du samedi soir* was a parodic remake of a recently released Marcel Carné film, *Les Visiteurs du soir*, known in English as *The Devil's Envoys*. They used some fifty yards of airplane cloth that had been found in the forest and a 16-mm camera borrowed from a friend; Roland Truffaut wrote the script and, with his long nose, played the part of the elderly duenna; Janine played the young female lead; Monique de Monferrand was in charge of the music; the extras were members of the Club Alpin. Everyone participated, including François, who was recruited to play the midget. "This provided a little adventure,"²⁶ he said later. But most of the time, he preferred to withdraw and stay quietly uninvolved, pretending to be unaware of the couple's marital problems, avoiding conflict, and keeping his opinions and adventures to himself. He never asked for anything, but stole regularly from the family till to achieve a measure of independence. François would also make up stories, lying compulsively as a way of settling his score with reality. None of this

went unnoticed, and his parents openly complained to relatives and close friends: “François is turning into more and more of a thief and a liar. He shows no respect for us anymore, for he steals from us and has started lying for no reason.”²⁷ The misunderstanding deepened, and with it, alienation on both sides.

His first year with his parents was also his last at the primary school of the Lycée Rollin, where the effects of his deteriorating family life soon became apparent. Madame Mollier’s first trimester assessment—“a good little student, though occasionally a bit talkative”—gave way to a much harsher comment in the final trimester—“I was very disappointed by this student at the end of the year. He was increasingly disruptive in class and learned his lessons less and less well. In spite of his bad performance, he would derive no benefit from repeating the year.”²⁸ François was required to take an exam to determine his fate: If he did well, he would be admitted into sixth grade at the Lycée Rollin; if he failed, he would be placed into a “graduating class” for the worst students and given a certificate. The exam was scheduled for September 1943, but François did not take it.²⁹ Over the next three years, from September 1943 to June 1946, he would attend three different neighborhood schools, two on rue Milton and one on rue Choron, barely earning his diploma in June 1946.

Truffaut appraised this period of his adolescence at the end of his life:

These were good schools, a bit dirty, grimmer than the Lycée Rollin, but you got used to them. What was more difficult, for me, was going from one teacher to many teachers. This may have had something to do with my grandmother, who had accustomed me to certain educational methods, but I suddenly had the feeling of being abandoned, like a lost object of no interest. Sometimes it was funny, with all those new teachers, who had often just taught primary school, we’d get some weird characters. One of them kept saying, “Things are gonna get rough, Truffaut, watch out!” I liked it, because his voice had a real peasant twang.³⁰

These scenes and characters remained permanently engraved in the future filmmaker’s mind and he drew inspiration from them for *The 400 Blows*: Ducornet, the dry and authoritarian literature instructor on rue Milton, who punished Truffaut for lifting entire passages from Balzac in his composition; Petit, the mathematics teacher on rue Choron, a former Resistance fighter in the FFI (Forces françaises de l’intérieur) who sold his students photos of himself in full uniform; the gym teacher who was so lenient that he lost practically all his students between the school yard and the sta-

dium, they having been swallowed, as it were, by the portes cocheres along the way.

Nothing contributed to the school troubles of François—nicknamed “the meteor”³¹ by the priest at catechism—as much as his truancy and absences. The most foolhardy episode took place in April 1944:

I had taken volume one of *The Three Musketeers* out of the library and on a Tuesday I cut classes in order to read volumes one and two. I was determined to get all three volumes and read them in a square I knew near Montmartre, far enough away from school that no one would see me. So, on Wednesday I cut class again and spent my day reading. Then, at nightfall, a magnificent sight took place, a bomb attack on La Chapelle. I was a bit worried but delighted. A few minutes later, I see people rushing into a subway entrance, for shelter. I immediately run down to the Marcadet métro entrance, for the Boulevard Barbès is already being pelted with bombs. Inside the station, I joined a crowd of people and waited. Finally I slept there all night, with Alexandre Dumas tucked under my arm, and never even thought of my parents. In the morning, I went to school, thrilled that I could tell my chums about it. But my mother, who had been worried to death, came to get me in the middle of class. I felt awful.³²

For Truffaut, school, instead of being educational, was an environment for fabricating lies, for creative falsifications; if classes had to be cut in order to read Balzac or Dumas, if playing hooky was required in order to experience real life, then the thing to do was to defy authority and lie, as one does with one's parents. Hence the well-known reply he came up with in the fall of 1944 when he had to justify a recent absence, a reply that as a filmmaker he would put in the mouth of his screen hero Antoine Doinel fifteen years later: “It's my mother, sir. . . . She died. . . .”³³

LACHENAY, THE FRIENDFRIENDFRIEND

If school had any value to François, it was as a place to make friends. Friendship provided him refuge and made it possible for him to forget his family's indifference and his teachers' oppression. “At the beginning of the academic year of 1943, at the school on rue Milton, when the recess bell went off, a boy spoke to me as I was going down the stairs, ‘I'm sure you pinch money from your parents,’ he said. I looked at him but refused to answer. An hour later, he came into class, in the middle of our French

course, with a proctor. The teacher, who seemed to know him, said to him: 'Go sit next to Truffaut, the two of you will make quite a pair.' It was Robert Lachenay, who became my closest friend."³⁴

The two boys were very different. Robert was older; always the worst student in class, he had just been moved back into sixth grade when he came to sit by François, under Monsieur Ducornet's stern gaze. He was also tougher, more self-confident and mature, knowledgeable on politics and history, and in coping with the school bureaucracy; he was the driving force of the mischievous duo, already adept at playing hooky, as well as forging excuse notes and signatures on report cards. Lachenay's outspokenness was what first attracted François to him. Robert also knew how to lie, of course, and always did so with impressive aplomb. Above all, he minced no words in describing people, whether classmates or teachers, parents or neighborhood shopkeepers. This candor was completely foreign to François, who was accustomed to leaving things unsaid.

Their families were alike, as Lachenay points out: "He felt his father and mother were a bit casual, mine were of the same ilk, though very different. We were really all alone, the two of us, making up for a family and giving each other support in our loneliness. Being a child is very hard, you're forever either hounded or neglected—by your parents at home and by your teachers at school, and in those days teachers really gave you rough treatment—it was a reign of terror. We had joined forces to resist this."³⁵

The two boys used to walk to school together; François waited for Robert every morning at the corner of rue Henri Monnier and rue de Navarin. The Lachenays lived at 10 rue de Douai, just beyond rue Pigalle, south of Place Pigalle, in a very large eight-room apartment that fascinated François. Robert enjoyed relative freedom at home. His mother worked in the theater sporadically but otherwise spent most of her days cloistered in one section of the apartment. She was an alcoholic and when she did go out, she would sometimes be brought home staggering. His father, an elegant, rather lordly man, was secretary of the Jockey Club; his mind was preoccupied by horses and bets, and in this period of shortages he benefited from certain material advantages.³⁶ (The children had access to a refrigerator which, during the Nazi Occupation, was almost always full, and occasionally dined at Trémolo, a restaurant on rue de Biot where Monsieur Lachenay had an account.) The races were his sole passion and cost him dearly; it was not unusual for bailiffs to show up at the house. The apartment was gradually emptied of its furniture; only the most useless keepsakes and trinkets were left, giving the place an antiquated, slightly eerie charm that the two boys adored. They occupied a special space—Robert's room was at the end of a long corridor and isolated from the rest of the apartment; it was sheltered from prying eyes and off limits to the bailiffs. And—the ultimate amenity of freedom—it had its

own service stairway. François spent many long hours there in the spring of 1944, and throughout 1945; sometimes, during periods of truancy, he would sleep over several nights in a row. It was the perfect refuge from parents and school: a place where the two friends talked and read and could indulge in the occasional smoke or drink.

I SÉVIGNE, YOU SÉVIGNE

The summer of 1945 marked the beginning of a long correspondence between these friends. “I can’t do without writing you every day, do likewise,” François advised from Binic, where he was spending his vacation. “I sévigne, you sévigne, we sévigne,” he would quip, playing on the name of Madame de Sévigné, famous for her correspondence. “I go kayaking and write five letters a day. Write me! Write me!”³⁷ Truffaut’s precocious passion for letter-writing would become a lasting and vitally important outlet for him. His letters show his growing friendship with Robert Lachenay—the “old pal,” the “old chap,” the “friendfriendfriend,” or, more generally, “dear Robert”—in whom “Francesco,” “Phronssouat,” “your chum,” “your buddy,” “the truffle,” or, more often, “your friend François” confides.

Whenever one of the two had to leave a school, the other managed to follow. So Robert and François were together in grade after grade, and they hardly associated with the other children their age, with the sole exception of Claude Thibaudat—later an impersonator and variety show entertainer known as Claude Vega—who was the same age as François and shared a passion for movies, reading, songs, and especially the music hall. The son of a concierge on rue des Martyrs, Claude walked to school with them every day. “As kids,” Claude Vega recalls, “we formed groups according to our affinities. ‘Let’s go there, how much money do you have?’ ‘This is what I have left, okay I’ll round things off,’ somehow we managed. We used to swap photos. François would say to me, ‘Do you really like that still from the film?’ Our tastes weren’t always the same, but we respected each other’s tastes, we were discreet and didn’t say anything. I wanted a photo of Yvonne Printemps and Pierre Fresnay and he said to me, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll find you one.’ I was deliriously happy when he gave me a photo he had succeeded in pinching.”³⁸

They considered school a transitional period in their lives and sought a way of establishing their independence.

As Truffaut explained, Robert Lachenay, Claude Vega and I had in common that we lived projected into the future, the near future, a future that had to be close at hand. We were always discussing what

we would do in two or three years. For example, we came up with the same idea, in the fall of 1945, a little venture that brought in a bit of money. It was a very simple idea, the idea of creating a *Pariscope* [arts and entertainment listing] before the time. In those days, because of paper shortages, film, theater and cabaret announcements were listed in the papers in very tiny, close print. We were all three nuts about film and theater. I used to fetch wine for my parents near Barbès, and I'd stop at every movie theater, on the boulevards, to look at the stills of the films that were playing and check the programs for the following week. So, since each of us was doing the same thing in our own separate comings and goings, we were able to make little information-filled booklets.³⁹

The three teenagers recopied their findings on loose sheets, which they then stapled together; the dates and show times of *Three Waltzes*, with Pierre Fresnay and Yvonne Printemps, at the Gaieté-Rochecouart might appear next to a portrait of Fresnay drawn by Claude Thibaudat. Truffaut wrote one-sentence plot summaries and Lachenay checked the spelling of all the proper names. They produced twenty, and eventually thirty, copies which they sold door-to-door on rue des Martyrs. They made a good team, and even put together shows: "There was a maid's room on the seventh floor at my friend Vega's house and we staged five or six shows, essentially 'poetry evenings.' Claude was the star and recited verses from Racine, I must have given a rendition of [Baudelaire's] 'Albatross,' and Robert told anecdotes. Most of the time, we would restrict ourselves to building scenery for Claude's appearances. But in this too, we made a bit of money by charging a small admission fee for people in the building, our parents and classmates."⁴⁰

When they were not holed up in Robert's room, the three boys roamed around the neighborhood. On boulevards Pigalle and Rochecouart, the street entertainers and vendors offered their attractions from December to March; there was fun to be had in the numerous churches in the Lorettes district—poor boxes to pry open, candles to light, and priests to imitate; the shopkeepers were jokers and complainers—the charcuterie saleswoman on rue des Martyrs or "Jo," the greengrocer on rue Lepic. Every so often they rushed over to Lachenay's grandmother, Madame Bigey, who generously loaned them money. In the squares surrounding the "New Athens," they could read and recover from their sleepless nights. And then there was the whorehouse on rue de Navarin, very close to the Truffaut apartment.

For Pigalle is also the neighborhood of the Moulin Rouge and of all the most daring Paris sex shows. There are streetwalkers on the boulevards, and brothels tucked away on the adjacent streets. "Near where we lived," Truffaut recounted, "there was a house which I called 'the Gothic house'