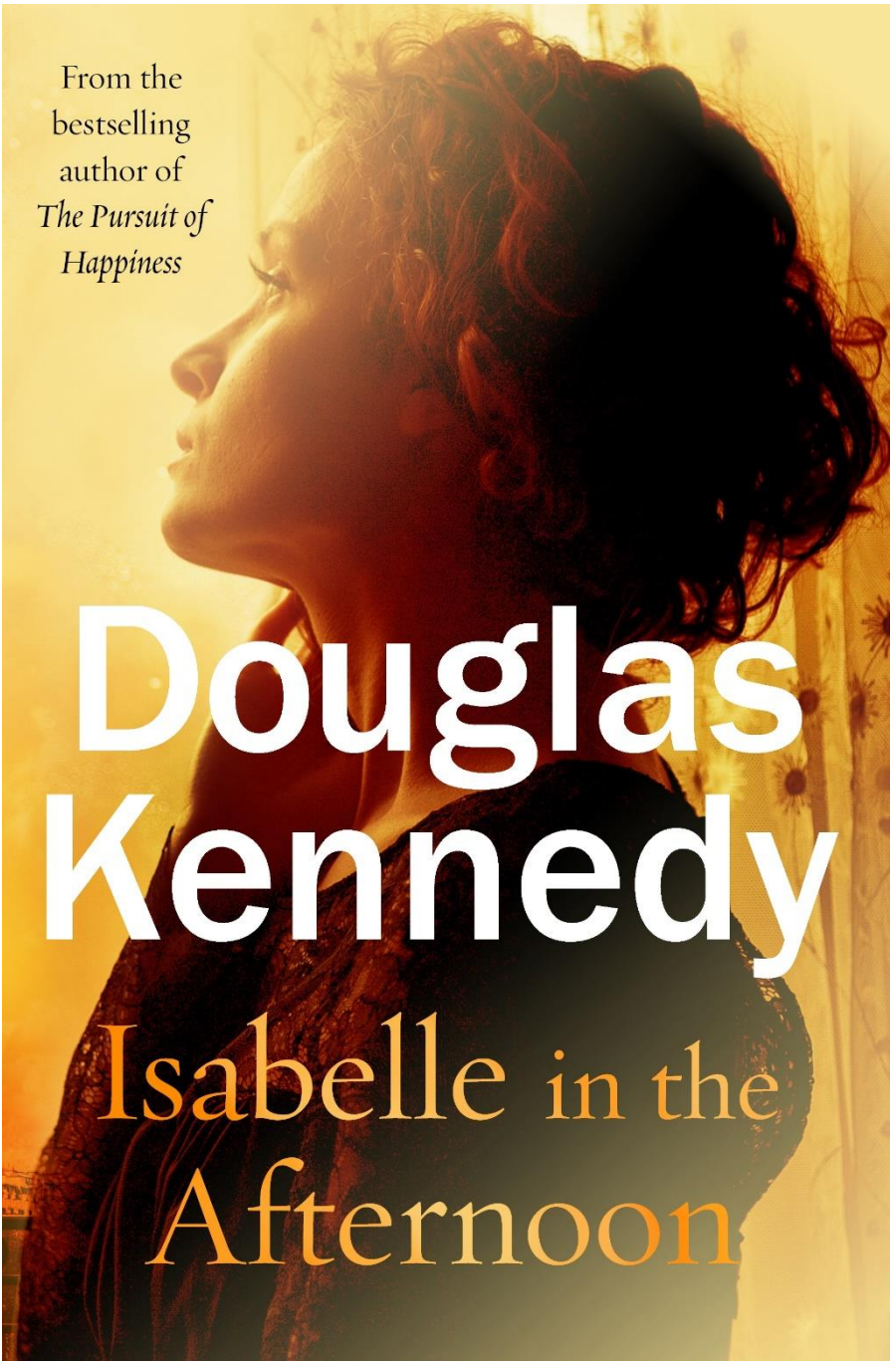
From the bestselling author of *The Pursuit of Happiness*
Douglas Kennedy
Isabelle in the Afternoon

'Same bed, different dreams.'

– Chinese proverb

One

Before Isabelle I knew nothing of sex.

Before Isabelle I knew nothing of freedom.

Before Isabelle I knew nothing of Paris – where sex and freedom are two of its eternal themes.

Before Isabelle I knew nothing of life.

Before Isabelle . . .

Seen through that rear-view mirror called remembrance . . .

Before Isabelle I was nothing more than a boy.

And after Isabelle?

After 'the before' and before 'the after' . . . that is the stuff of all stories. Especially those shaded by matters intimate.

And with Isabelle it was always intimate.

Even when there wasn't an afternoon entwined together.

Afternoons and Isabelle.

The constant trajectory of that little story, which also happens to be, for me, a big story. Because it is the story of my life.

All lives are transient tales. Which is what makes my narrative, your narrative, *our narrative*, so essential. Every life has its own import, no matter how fleeting or peripheral it may seem. Every life is a novel. And every life, if allowed, has its afternoons with Isabelle. When all is possible and infinite – and as fugitive as a sandstorm in the Sahara.

Afternoons and Isabelle.

That one address where, at a certain juncture, I intersected with that most elusive of constructs:

Happiness.

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Paris.

My first sighting of it came in my twenty-first year. Nineteen seventy-seven, 8.18 in the morning, according to the watch on my wrist. Three minutes later I passed beneath an art deco clock overhanging the chilly expanses of the Gare du Nord.

January in Paris. All *noir et blanc* and endless encroaching darkness. I'd fallen off the night train from Amsterdam. An eight-hour trek, punctuated by moments of fleeting sleep sitting upright in a cramped carriage. All the way south the space between my ears was still clouded by pre-departure weed inhaled in a coffeeshop on the Prinsengracht. At the entrance to the Métro there was a small boulangerie where I quelled the effects of a night without food with a croissant and a short black shot of java. Adjacent to that was a *tabac*. Three francs bought me a packet of Camels and a day of smoking. Moments later, just like everyone else awaiting the southbound *ligne 5* train, I was deep in thrall to an early-morning cigarette.

The Métro. At this post-dawn hour there was still elbow room in one of its second-class carriages. Everyone was exhaling clouds of smoke and frosted air. The Métro back then: a pervasive aroma of burnt wood and undeodorized armpits. Dim fluorescent lights casting a subterranean, aquamarine glow in its wooden carriages. And notifications asking that you give up your seat for those mutilated in the war.

I had an address of a hotel at Jussieu. The 5th arrondissement. Not far from the Jardin des Plantes. A half-star hotel with a

half-star price: forty francs a night. Six American dollars. Leaving me another forty francs per day with which to feed and water myself and go to movies and smoke cigarettes and sit in cafés and . . .

I had no idea how to finish that sentence. I was operating without an agenda or any preconceived stratagem. I had just graduated early from one of the state universities in the Midwest. I had already accepted a scholarship at a law school that guaranteed its graduates a clean trajectory into the higher echelons of national life.

The fact that the money Dad had spent on educating me could now be justified meant I was finally deserving of his highest praise: 'You've done good, son,' he told me. What was not good, according to his world view, had been my announcement over Thanksgiving that, as soon as the Christmas holidays were behind us, I would be flying the Atlantic.

My father. A distant, taciturn fellow. Not a monster. Not a terrifying disciplinarian. But absent. Even though he never traveled and was home most nights by 6 p.m. An insurance man with his own small company. Himself and a staff of three. His own father had been a career soldier, always referred to as 'the Colonel'. Dad told me once in a flicker of rare candor – after my mother died of a virulent, fast-killing cancer – that he spent most of his own childhood in fear of that martinet of a man. Dad was never stern with me – especially as I was always the careful kid, the good student. I kept my head down and turned myself into a grind, hoping to please a father unable to show me much in the way of affection.

My mother was a stoic. A quiet woman who taught school and seemed resigned to her chilly fate with the man she had agreed to marry. She never had an argument with my father, always played the dutiful housewife, and raised me to be 'a good boy destined for bigger things'. Mom interested me in books. She bought me an atlas and got me curious about the world beyond our hayseed frontiers. Unlike Dad, she was carefully affectionate with me. I did feel her love, albeit in her own measured way.

When she got sick I was just twelve. My terror of losing her was vast. From diagnosis to death was a six-week nightmare. I was only told that she was in the endgame of her cancer ten days before she left this life. I knew she was sick. But she listened to my father and kept denying the finality enveloping her. The day she admitted to me that her time amongst us was coming to an end was the night before she was rushed to a hospital an hour away from us in Indianapolis. I walked around in a state of silent trauma for days afterwards. That Friday, Dad arrived unannounced at school, conferring in whispers with my homeroom teacher, then motioning for me to leave with him. Once we were outside he told me, 'Your mom only has hours left. We have to hurry.' We said little more to each other on the drive to the hospital. But my mom had slipped into a coma by the time we arrived. My dad let the oncologist on duty do the official thing and confirm that there was no hope she would survive the evening. Mom never came out of the coma. I never got to talk with her again, to say goodbye.

A year after her death my dad announced to me that he was marrying a woman named Dorothy. He'd met her at his church.

She was a bookkeeper. She came from the same reticent side of the street as Dad and treated me with aloof courtesy. When I went off to the state university for my first year of college, Dorothy convinced Dad to sell the family house and buy a place with her. I was actually relieved when this came to pass. Just as I was pleased that Dad had acquired this chilly woman. It took the pressure off me to be there for my father, even though he himself never expressed a nanosecond of neediness. Because that would have meant showing vulnerability to his son. And Dad could never do that. Dorothy told me that I should consider the guest room my home. I thanked her, and used it on the big holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, but otherwise stayed away. Dad and Dorothy made all the right noises when I got into that pinnacle of law schools. But as a man who distrusted the big bad world beyond his own narrow experience of life (he'd never once left the country, except for a stint in the navy during the war), he was not pleased when I told him I was heading to Paris.

'This should have been discussed, son.'

'I'm discussing it now.'

And I quietly explained how all those summers clerking for a local law firm, and the ten hours a week stacking books at the university library, and the strict application of his oft-preached virtue of frugality, had given me enough capital to fund a few months beyond American frontiers. An extra course load undertaken over the past two semesters meant I would be free of college – and its attendant costs – in just a few weeks.

'I don't approve, son.'

But he didn't raise the issue again – especially once Dorothy pointed out that I had just saved him a few thousand dollars by getting my degree a semester ahead of schedule. Dad drove me to the airport on the night I left and even handed me an envelope with two hundred dollars in cash as a 'going-away gift'. Then he gave me one of his cursory hugs and told me to drop him a line from time to time. His way of telling me: you're on your own now. Though truth be told, I was always just that.

On the Métro, a woman only a few years older than me eyed my blue down jacket, my backpack, my hiking boots. I could see her making an instant assessment: *American college kid abroad and lost*. I felt a sudden need to break out of this identikit image; to smash all the limitations and cautious conformities of my life until now. And I wanted to ask for her phone number and tell her, 'Wait until you see me in cooler clothes.' But I had no French.

At Jussieu there was an army surplus store that sold black pea jackets – *Importé des États-Unis*. I tried one on. It made me look like a Kerouac drifter. It cost four hundred francs: a steep price for me. But it was a coat I would wear every day of this winter. And it was a coat that would allow me to blend into the cityscape; would not call attention to my anxious American-abroad status.

And I was anxious.

Because I was alone. And deficient in the language. And friendless. And lacking the rigid direction that had defined my life until now.

Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.

I now had freedom.

And Paris.

And a black pea coat.

And the sense, for the first time ever, that my life was a tabula rasa.

A blank slate can often induce dread. Especially when you have been brought up to believe in the necessity of narrow certitude.

At the hotel I handed over a week's rent, took the key, went upstairs and slammed the door for a few unconscious hours, awaking with this thought:

I am bound to nothing and no one.

A vertiginous realization.

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My hotel room. An elderly brass bed with a wafer-thin mattress. A sink of stained porcelain and semi-rusted taps. A pockmarked mahogany wardrobe, an old café table and one chair. Floral wallpaper yellowed by age and cigarette smoke. A small radiator that banged percussively. A view of an alleyway. Walls that leaked sound. A clacking typewriter. A man with an endless hacking cough. I still slept. And woke in the late afternoon. The bathroom was down the hall. A stand-up, squat-to-shit toilet. Grim. A small shower stall next door, framed by an old green vinyl curtain. There was a hose with a hand-held shower head. The water was hot. I soaped up my body and hair, washing away the all-day siesta. I used the harsh bath towel left on my bed to dry off and hide my nakedness during the dash back to my room. I dressed and went out into the world.

Snow was falling. Paris had been bleached. Hunger was speaking to me. I hadn't had a proper hot meal in over a day. I found a small place tucked away behind the boulevard Saint-Michel. *Steak frites*, a half-liter of red wine, a *crème caramel*: twenty-five francs. I thought: I am too conscious of money, of the price and conflicting values of everything. Frugality and self-denial were two central household credos indoctrinated in me at a premature age. I now wanted to jettison them all. But I also wanted somehow to get through the next five months without needing to run home and find work. There was a summer clerkship with a federal judge awaiting me in Minneapolis on June 1. There was law school and all its future implications come September. Before all that I had this juncture, this space, without obligations – outside of staying within my budget.

I wandered for much of the evening, oblivious to the cold, the still-falling snow. If you have not grown up around epic urban grandeur – or anything that even begins to hint at historic monumentalism – Paris is humbling. But though its great architectural set pieces dazzled me, my peripheral vision was leading me elsewhere: to its backstreets, its spindly labyrinth of alleyways. And there was the sense that sex was everywhere – from the women of the night trawling for custom on the edges of sidewalks to the couples locked in tangled embraces against walls, lamp posts, even the stone balustrade of the Pont Neuf. I followed the path of the Seine: dark frigid water in a relentless drift. I envied the lovers. I envied anyone who had connected with someone else; who didn't feel alone in the dark.

*

I learned to drift.

My first week in Paris was just that: an extended, aimless ramble. Daybreak now for me was around ten in the morning. There was a café next door to the hotel. I ate the same breakfast every morning: *citron pressé, croissant, grand crème*. It was a place frequented by local workers – the trashmen, guys doing roadwork – which kept it cheap. The owner – bad teeth, tired eyes, ever professional – was always behind the counter. After I was there for the fourth day running he greeted me with a nod: '*La même chose?*' he asked. I replied with a *bonjour* and a nod back. We never exchanged names.

A daily *International Herald Tribune* was beyond my budget. But the café owner always had yesterday's edition behind the bar. He told me: 'A compatriot of yours from the hotel always buys it before breakfast, then leaves it on the table when he departs.'

Or at least that is what I thought he told me. I understood barely more than I could speak.

'*Il arrive quand?*' I had bought a notebook, a cheap fountain pen, a dictionary and a book of basic verbs. I had set myself the daily task of learning ten new words and two new verbs conjugated in the *présent, passé composé et futur proche* every day.

'Every morning at seven. I think he doesn't sleep much. A man with eyes that are far too bruised by life.'

I loved that description so much – *Un homme aux yeux trop mâchés par la vie* – that I wrote it down in my notebook.

The café was called Le Select, its name a contradiction. There was nothing select about it. It was small, basic, with a handful

of tables and no real amenities. I had no experience of cafés. Only American coffee shops, American diners, American drip coffee. Juke boxes and grubby linoleum and waitresses who chewed gum and wore battered smiles. Here at Le Select booze was an accepted part of the morning ritual. Most of the trash-tossers – *les éboueurs* – would down a Calva with their coffee, just as a pair of gendarmes often stopped in for *vin rouge*, poured from label-less liter bottles. They never paid for their drinks. Le Select taught me the art of loitering with intent. I would sit there until noon with my breakfast, my day-old newspaper, my cigarettes, my notebook and fountain pen. I was never told to move along, never disturbed. As a result I came to understand a key construct of cafés: their sense of improvised community and heated refuge amidst the cold dispassion of city streets.

Around midday I moved myself along to loiter elsewhere, often to the cinemas on the rue Champollion. Old Westerns. Old film noirs. Obscure musicals. Directors' festivals: Hitchcock. Hawks. Wells. Huston. All in the original English with French subtitles dancing at the bottom edge of the screen. A place to hide for ten francs per *séance*.

Séance: a screening. But also a gathering. A ritual form of meeting.

Another word for my notebook.

I took a decision to explore, on foot, all twenty arrondissements. I haunted museums and galleries. I was a regular at English-language bookshops. I went to the jazz joints on the rue des Lombards. I ate a tagine for the first time. I found myself desperate to keep busy; an antidote to the solitude of my days

and nights. I told myself: floating will tamp down the loneliness. Instead, floating augmented the emptiness within. I was not unhappy in Paris. I was unhappy in myself. I could not pinpoint the reason why. I wasn't missing home. I wasn't longing for things stateside. I was reveling in the newness of all before me. But the sadness – like a stubborn stain – refused to wash away.

The couple in the room next to mine were always fighting. The night man on the front desk – Omar, a Berber from the south of Morocco – told me they were Serbians. Refugees. And always furious at each other.

'Their world would come unstuck if they showed kindness to each other. So they keep up the anger.'

The typewriter clacking was also a constant night-time feature of hotel life. I didn't mind it. It had a metronomic effect on me, the *tap, tap, tap* lulling me into the underworld of sleep. One night in my second week, falling in late from a *séance* at a jazz club I saw the door of my neighbor's room ajar. The light within was clouded by smoke.

'You may enter,' came a voice from deep within the fumes. An American voice.

I pushed open the door. I found myself in an identical version of my own room, albeit one where the tenant had taken up full-time residence. Seated in the bentwood chair was a guy in his mid-twenties. Shoulder-length blond hair, round steel glasses, a cigarette between his teeth, a fogged-in smile.

'You my neighbor?' he asked. 'Should I be doing this in bad French?'

'English works.'

'Is the typing keeping you awake?'

'I don't sleep in my coat.'

'So you saw my door open . . . and just decided to say hello?'

'I can leave.'

'You can also sit down.'

This is how I met Paul Most.

'Yeah I write. No, I have not published a word. No, I am not going to tell you what this novel is all about – which shows great restraint on my part. Yes, I am a New Yorker. Yes, I have just enough of a trust fund to ruin me.'

He was a refugee from an authoritarian father. An investment banker. White shoe. Connected. Park Avenue. High Church Episcopalian.

'The whole prep school/Ivy League trajectory. I got into Harvard. I got thrown out of Harvard. Lack of interest in work. Two years in the Merchant Marine. Hey, it worked for Eugene O'Neill. I got back into Harvard. Daddy connections. I scraped through. I spent a Peace Corps year teaching the hopeless cases of Upper Volta. I worked my way through gonorrhea, syphilis, trichomoniasis. I exchanged Ouagadougou for Paris fifteen months ago. I found this hotel. I negotiated a deal. Here I sit, typing into the night.'

'Your father hasn't tried to force you back home and onto Wall Street?'

'Daddy has written me off. While in Upper Volta, and having a deranged moment brought on by dengue fever, I wrote the *Harvard Magazine* in response to a request for Class Notes. And what words did I send them? "*Paul Most, Class of '74, lives in West Africa with a permanent case of the clap.*" Well, I thought it witty.'

'Did it make it into print?'

'Hardly. But Ivy walls have ears. Papa wrote to me care of American Express in Paris telling me I was now on my own, without his largesse in the big bad world. Of course, he knew he could not stop me benefiting from a trust set up by his father for his five grandchildren. My share of the interest of the principal became payable to me as of my twenty-fifth birthday . . . which happened to be seven months ago. Right about the time that Papa defenestrated me. I now have a nice and tidy monthly allowance of eight hundred dollars. Considering that I have negotiated the management of this scruffy establishment down to twenty-five francs a night, I have my little sliver of bed space in Paris for just over one hundred dollars a month. And they even change the sheets twice a week.'

He then asked me where I'd grown up. I told him. His reply:

'What a dull little place to call home.'

I pointed to the eau de vie. A Vieille Prune. He poured me a glass. I took one of his Camels. He asked where I went to college. I gave him the information demanded.

'My word, aren't you Mr State U.? And now? Are you having the budget grand European tour before heading back to join Daddy's agrarian insurance practice?'

'I enter Harvard Law in September.'

That got his attention.

'Seriously?'

'Seriously.'

'*Chapeaux*. A fellow Harvard man.'

And one who didn't get there courtesy of Daddy.

But that subtext remained unarticulated.

He changed the subject, never once asking a further question about my life.

But two cigarettes and three eaux de vie later, he offered this observation:

'I know why you stood outside my door tonight. The agony of Paris. The city is cruel to anyone on their own. You see everyone intertwined and it points up your little-boy-lost status. And the fact that you are returning home to an empty bed in a cheap hotel.'

'That makes two of us.'

'Oh, I've got someone. Just not here tonight. But you're flying solo. And unable to connect.'

I wanted to contradict this. Wanted to protest. Wanted to slap down his cruelty. But I knew that would send me down a defensive street. Which was where he wanted me to end up. I could see the snare he was setting. So I said:

'Guilty as charged.'

'My, my – an honest man.'

'Any thoughts how I can become less lonely here?' I asked.

'I presume you speak little or no French.'

'It's very basic. Far from conversational.'

'I could invite you to a party tomorrow night. A book-launch thing. A friend of Sabine's.'

'Who's Sabine?'

'The woman who should be here tonight. Don't ask me to explain.'

'Why would I ask that?'

'A farm boy with teeth.'

'I wasn't raised on a farm.'

His reply was a smirk.

'If I invite you, I must warn you: I will not act as your chaperone. Nor will I introduce you to anyone.'

'Then why invite me?'

'Because you said you were lonely. Call it an act of mercy.'

He reached for a notepad and scribbled out an address.

'Tomorrow night at seven.'

He eyed up my flared gray denims, my brown crew-neck sweater, my blue button-down shirt.

'It's Paris. You might want to wear black.'

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