
Hélène Frappat

Break-in

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Foreign Rights Manager: Estelle Roche
edallia@wanadoo.fr

Translation: Imogen Forster
imogen.forster@talktalk.net



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BIOGRAPHY Hélène Frappat was born in Paris in 1969. She is a writer and film critic, and since 2004 she has produced the monthly radio magazine programme *Rien à voir* for France Culture. She is also a translator and the author of a number of essays.

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Digging around in the Clignancourt flea market, the narrator buys a box of home movies dating from the 1950s. In them he discovers Aurore, the daughter of upper-middle-class parents, whose life up to the age of 30 has been filmed, first by her father, then by her fiancé. He is astonished when he finds the story and dreamlike visions of A, a young woman with telepathic powers superimposed on the images of the young woman. The mystery becomes ever more disturbing as he begins to suspect that the two characters are one and the same.

Under its charming surface, the portrayal of this provincial bourgeois family, with its

hidebound, conventional ways, gives *Break-in* the power to draw the reader into the very heart of the issues facing the contemporary world. The author is constantly breaking down the fragile boundary between what is public and what is private. The novel's "intimate thefts" reflect a pervasive atmosphere of voyeurism, and each of the characters has in his or her gaze some aspect of this: A's young friend, Sabrina, who insinuates herself into the home of a classmate's parents, or the narrator, who watches these filmed moments. But this voyeurism also has a subtle and insidious effect on the reader, who "breaks in" to the characters' lives.

**Aurore ...
Aurore ...
and Aurore again!**

I

On Sunday September 23 2004, in a side-alley of the flea market at the Porte de Clignancourt, you bought for the sum of 40 euros a yellowed cardboard box with the Franprix logo on the side.

The stall-holder (who was offering an assortment of "old" bits and pieces) told you, without going into detail, that the lot consisted of home movies. When you got home to 17 rue des Deux Gares, in the 10th arrondissement, you didn't open the box right away.

It stayed in a corner of your bedroom, with the rest of your purchases (a jacket that was too big but which you didn't bother taking to be altered, an incomplete run of a Marxist journal and a few LPs), until that evening when, without knowing why, you projected the reels onto the white walls of your room, just as they came to hand.

II

In the first shaky, unsteady sequences she appears in black and white.

Of the blurred shape of a tiny baby, the super 8 camera catches no more than its smile.

The images go by too fast, the way they do in silent films. The baby stirs in its cradle, raises its arms, plays with its feet and then, suddenly, turns its face away with a movement that will become familiar.

In the grounds of a large house, whose outline you can make out by peering almost furtively at it, under the shade of an oak tree the baby's mother is rocking it, wrapped up in lace and embroidered baby-clothes. The dark-haired, serious-looking mother bends over the wicker basket to the jerky rhythm of the film.

III

The first time A felt that she possessed a strange gift, she was alone with her piano-teacher. Throughout the lesson, the dissonant racket of her scales could not conceal from the little seven-year-old the sad thoughts that emanated from her silent teacher's head like the luminous dance of spirits set free by a witch's magic spell. Embarrassed at having access to the private dreams of an adult who was standing politely behind her, A excused herself by pretending to have a series of illnesses, until her parents got tired of insisting she learn the piano. Shortly after the teacher's departure—the governess accompanying him to the front door, where his hat and overcoat were waiting—A took refuge in the old nursery, suffering from a violent migraine. She stayed for hours in the unused room in the attic that now served as a laundry, hunched up on the rocking chair where her nurse used to lull her, waiting for nightfall, when she hoped her migraine would stop. She did not know at the time that every manifestation of her mysterious gift would be followed by a violent headache.

Before she had learned the rules that governed the adult world, A understood her unspoken situation: the impossibility of silence. Day and night, in noisy city streets or in the muffled hush that stifled every sound in their house, whether alone or in company, with friends or in front of the mirror, adults never stopped talking. They carried on conversations with other people much less frequently than they talked to themselves, usually contradicting the words their mouths had politely spoken out loud with a secret monologue in which they poured out passions and bitter feelings.

Their voices passed through walls, floors, ceilings, doors and windows to lodge themselves in A's ears, and she developed the habit of hiding under her dark plaits the pink wax earplugs she bought discreetly at the village pharmacy. She started by putting them in at night to protect her sleep from the dreams of her parents and sisters, then she wore them even during the day, preferring to give strange answers to the grown-ups' questions than to hear the discordant background behind them.

At school, all she had to do was to gauge her teacher's mood from time to time, and she could continue to appear to the class as a slightly absent-minded, average pupil. At home, her parents—who were often away—entrusted their three daughters to the stiffly formal care of staff who were trained to keep their mouths shut; when A's parents returned from the weekly business trips, on

which her father invited his wife to join him, motivated perhaps by some kind of presentiment they never worried about their youngest daughter's silences. They would ask the governess a few questions about how she spent her time, before sharing with their two elder girls amusing anecdotes from their travels.

Very soon, within the family's extensive property, A set the boundaries of her own territory with the tacit agreement of her parents and sisters. She took over an empty house at the far end of the grounds that the caretakers had given up (the old couple had moved into the top floor of the big house, an attic that had been turned over to the staff), and every day, when she got home from school, she would take refuge in the old-fashioned rooms protected from human noise by the foliage of the tall trees. A never heard anything but man-made noise; all her life she remained deaf to the indecipherable messages from the world of birds, plants, oceans and stones, seeking in vegetable and mineral silence a respite from the cacophony of human life.

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IV

A dream about the house of magic spells.

A spell holds sway over this house whose granite façade dominates the upper end of a dreary hamlet. In its odd way, the house chose me. Its walls—I don't know what tranquil or terrible life they lead when their occupants are away—send me signs, and sometimes wink at me.

A shutter comes loose in the night, and bangs. The cold tap in the kitchen runs boiling hot. The door of a worm-eaten cupboard comes crashing down. The sky, blocked out by the low window-frames, darkens, the way it does during an eclipse.

Nature mingles its voice with the voice of the stones. An army of red ants creeps around my ankles, pricking my skin like needles. Day by day, the sandy beach at the end of the village is disappearing, swallowed up by falling tree-trunks and the strangely rapid advance of the pine forest. Under the water, whose surface reflects the pink and grey rays of the setting sun, mauve shoals of jellyfish, pelagia noctiluca, harass me—never in vain—with their venomous filaments. On the highest branches of the pines the tiger mosquitoes are dozing; they'll attack at dusk.

V

When you recall that winter evening you spent projecting the films, not even leaving your bedroom to answer the phone that rang relentlessly on the other side of the door, your memory puts these reels—which you had found in a complete muddle—in the wrong chronological order.

Long before you had meticulously organised and numbered the reels, *Aurora's* life appeared before you, in all its reckless and chaotic adventurousness.

Spring 1949 ...

VI

Each reel lasts three minutes. Sitting on the edge of your bed, you keep an eye on the projector, wedged between two cushions on your left. The time it takes to load the films seems interminable. Nothing exists but Aurore's dazzling smile.

At the end of the rue des Deux Gares, at the top of the steps looking down over the railway lines of the Gare de l'Est, under the vast sky the noise of the trains has stopped completely.

VII

Perhaps disappointed at not having a son, or perhaps anxious at the thought of bequeathing to their three daughters their hundred-year-old country house, Loup-Boiron, A's parents decided to have another child. The two elder girls were settled, one in Paris, the other in Geneva, each with a fiancé they wasted no time in marrying, each in an apartment bought by their parents with that in mind.

A was left alone. As a newcomer without any friends, who made no effort and did not shine in the last year of primary school, she hid the radiance of her inner visions behind a mask of dullness. After school on Friday evening, she would go to her maternal grandfather's house, a few miles from her parents' home, and would stay there until Sunday evening in the company of the old man, who no longer had the strength to perform his duties as a Senator in Paris.

Her grandfather had a gentle voice, and tranquillity emanated from him in waves. After lunch, while he was resting upstairs, A would shut herself in his study, and practise breaking into the safe hidden behind a still life, hung between two French windows. Standing on the slippery leather armchair, her ear pressed to the cold metal of the safe, she tried again and again to break the mechanism's sixteen secret codes, waiting to catch the characteristic "click" of the lock when the safe opened. This safe with its sixteen indecipherable combinations, its four-times-four puzzles that all her mental strategies never managed to crack, this enclosure inside the wall was a challenge to her, less for its contents (bundles of letters and bank notes) than for the perfect mystery of its combination, which she was always wary of trying to tease out of the old man.

One Sunday evening in winter, A was playing on the front steps when she caught a snatch of conversation between her grandfather and her parents, who had come to take her home. As if they had guessed that their voices could be heard through the thick stone walls and the French windows, frozen shut by

the cold, her parents were almost whispering, but a sound with a particular strident frequency pierced the walls and windows and lodged deep inside A's ear. Her mother's grave voice was going out of control, sliding into the shrill register that broke its unvarying dying fall whenever she fell prey to fatigue or anxiety. *"Child's too solitary ... Perhaps if she had a little brother ..."*

On the nights that followed, A's dreams were so loud she did not hear those of her parents.

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