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CHAPTER ONE
How TO LOVE

LIFE TODAY

There are few things humans are more dedicated to than unhappiness. Had we been placed on earth by a malign creator for the exclusive purpose of suffering, we would have good reason to congratulate ourselves on our enthusiastic response to the task. Reasons to be inconsolable abound: the frailty of our bodies, the fickleness of love, the insincerities of social life, the compromises of friendship, the deadening effects of habit. In the face of such persistent ills, we might naturally expect that no event would be awaited with greater anticipation than the moment of our own extinction.

Someone looking for a paper to read in Paris in the 1920s might have picked up a title called L'Intransigeant. It had a reputation for investigative news, metropolitan gossip, comprehensive classifieds and incisive editorials. It also had a habit of dreaming up big questions and asking French celebrities to send in their replies. 'What do you think would be the ideal education to give your daughter?' was one. 'Do you have any recommendations for improving traffic congestion in Paris?' was another. In the summer of 1922, the paper formulated a particularly elaborate question for its contributors.

An American scientist announces that the world will end, or at least that such a huge part of the continent will be destroyed, and in such a sudden way, that death will be the certain fate of hundreds of millions of people. If this prediction were confirmed, what do you think would be its effects on people between the time when they acquired the aforementioned certainty and the moment of cataclysm? Finally, as far as you're concerned, what would you do in this last hour?

The first celebrity to respond to the grim scenario of personal and global annihilation was a then distinguished, now forgotten man of letters named Henri Bordeaux, who suggested that it would drive the mass of the population directly into either the nearest church or the nearest bedroom, though he himself avoided the awkward choice, explaining that he would take this last opportunity to climb a mountain, so as to admire the beauty of Alpine scenery and flora. Another Parisian celebrity, an accomplished actress called Berthe Bovy, proposed no recreations of her own, but shared with her readers a coy concern that men would shed all inhibitions once their actions had ceased to carry long-term consequences. This dark prognosis matched that of a famous Parisian palm reader, Madame Fraya, who judged that people would omit to spend their last hours contemplating the extraterrestrial future and would be too taken up with worldly pleasures to give much thought to readying their souls for the afterlife — a suspicion confirmed when another writer, Henri Robert, blithely declared his intention to devote himself to a final game of bridge, tennis and golf.

The last celebrity to be consulted on his pre-apocalypse plans was a reclusive, moustachioed novelist not known for his interest in golf, tennis or bridge [though he had once tried draughts, and twice aided in the launching of a kite), a man who had spent the last fourteen years lying in a narrow bed under a pile of thinly woven woollen blankets writing an unusually long novel without an adequate bedside lamp. Since the publication of its first volume in 1913, In Search of Lost Time had been hailed as a masterpiece, a French reviewer had compared the author to Shakespeare, an Italian critic had likened him to Stendhal and an Austrian princess had offered her hand in marriage. Though he had never esteemed himself highly [`If only I could value myself more! Alas! It is impossible') and had once referred to himself as a flea and to his writing as a piece of indigestible nougat, Marcel Proust had grounds for satisfaction. Even the British ambassador to France, a man of wide acquaintance and cautious judgement, had deemed it appropriate to bestow on him a great, if not directly literary honour, describing him as, 'The most remarkable man I have ever met — because he keeps his overcoat on at dinner.'

Enthusiastic about contributing to newspapers, and in any case a good sport, Proust sent the following reply to L'Intransigeant and its catastrophic American scientist:

I think that life would suddenly seem wonderful to us if we were threatened to die as you say. Just think of how many projects, travels, love affairs, studies it — our life —hides from us, made invisible by our laziness which, certain of a future, delays them incessantly.

But let all this threaten to become impossible for ever, how beautiful it would become again! Ah! if only the cataclysm doesn't happen this time, we won't miss visiting the new galleries of the Louvre, throwing ourselves at the feet of Miss X., making a trip to India.

The cataclysm doesn't happen, we don't do any of it, because we find ourselves back in the heart of normal life, where negligence deadens desire. And yet we shouldn't have needed the cataclysm to love life today. It would have been enough to think that we are humans, and that death may come this evening.

Feeling suddenly attached to life when we realize the imminence of death suggests that it was perhaps not life itself which we had lost the taste for so long as there was no end in sight, but our quotidian version of it, that our dissatisfactions were more the result of a certain way of living than of anything irrevocably morose about human experience. Having surrendered the customary belief in our own immortality, we would then be reminded of a host of untried possibilities lurking beneath the surface of an apparently undesirable, apparently eternal existence.

However, if due acknowledgement of our mortality encourages us to re-evaluate our priorities, we may well ask what these priorities should be. We might only have been living half a life before we faced up to the implications of death, but what exactly does a whole life consist of? Simple recognition of our inevitable demise does not guarantee that we will latch on to any sensible answers when it comes to filling in what remains of the diary. Panicked by the ticking of the clock, we may even resort to some spectacular follies. The suggestions sent by the Parisian celebrities to L'Intransigeant were contradictory enough: admiration of Alpine scenery, contemplation of the extraterrestrial future, tennis, golf. But were any of these fruitful ways to pass the time before the continent disintegrated?

Proust's own suggestions [Louvre, love, India] were no more helpful. For a start, they were at odds with what one knows of his character. He had never been an avid museum visitor, he hadn't been to the Louvre for over a decade, and preferred to look at reproductions than face the chatter of a museum crowd ['People think the love of literature, painting and music has become extremely widespread, whereas there isn't a single person who knows anything about them']. Nor was he known for his interest in the Indian subcontinent, which was a trial to reach, requiring a train down to Marseilles, a mailboat to Port Said and ten days on a P&O liner across the Arabian Sea, hardly an ideal itinerary for a man with difficulty stepping out of bed. As for Miss X, to his mother's distress, Marcel had never proved receptive to her charms, nor to those of the Misses A to Z; and it was a long time since he had bothered to ask if there was a younger brother at hand,

having concluded that a glass of well-chilled beer offered a more reliable source of pleasure than lovemaking.

But even if he had wanted to act according to his proposals, Proust turned out to have had little chance. Only four months after sending his answer to L'Intransigeant, having predicted that something like this would happen for years, he caught a cold and died. He was fifty-one. He had been invited to a party and, despite the symptoms of a mild flu, he wrapped himself in three coats and two blankets and went out all the same. On his way home, he had to wait in a glacial courtyard for a taxi, and there caught a chill. It developed into a high fever which might have been contained, if Proust hadn't refused to take the advice of doctors summoned to his bedside. Fearing that they would disrupt his work, he turned down their offer of camphorated oil injections, and continued to write, failing to eat or drink anything besides hot milk, coffee and stewed fruit. The cold turned into a bronchitis, which snowballed into a pneumonia. Hopes of recovery were briefly raised when he sat up in bed and requested a grilled sole, but by the time the fish was bought and cooked he was seized by nausea and was unable to touch it. He died a few hours later from a burst abscess in his lung.

Fortunately, Proust's reflections on how to live were not limited to an all too brief and somewhat confusing reply to a fanciful question from a newspaper — because, right up to his death, he had been at work on a book which set out to answer, albeit in a rather extended and narratively complex form, a question not dissimilar to the one provoked by the predictions of the fictional American scientist.

The title of the long book hinted as much. Though Proust never liked it, and referred to it variously as 'unfortunate' [I914}, 'misleading' [1915) and 'ugly' {1917}, In Search of Lost Time had the advantage of pointing directly enough to a central theme of the novel: a search for the causes behind the dissipation and loss of time. Far from a memoir tracing the passage of a more lyrical age, it was a practical, universally applicable story about how to stop wasting, and begin appreciating one's life.

Though the announcement of an imminent apocalypse could no doubt make this a concern uppermost in anyone's mind, the Proustian guidebook held out a hope that the topic could detain us a little before personal or global destruction was at hand; and that we might therefore learn to adjust our priorities before it was time to have a last game of golf and keel over.

CHAPTER TWO
HOW TO READ

FOR YOURSELF

Proust was born into a family where the art of making people feel better was taken very seriously indeed. His father was a doctor, a vast, bearded man with a characteristic nineteenth-century physiognomy, who had the authoritative air and purposeful glance that might readily have made one feel a sissy. He exuded the moral superiority available to the medical profession, a group whose value to society is unquestionably apparent to anyone who has ever suffered from a tickly cough or ruptured appendix, and which may hence provoke an uncomfortable sense of superfluity in those with less certifiably worthwhile vocations.

Dr Adrien Proust had started modestly, the son of a provincial grocer specializing in the manufacture of wax candles for the home and church. After pursuing brilliant medical studies, culminating in a thesis on The Different Forms of Softening of the Brain, Dr Proust had devoted himself to improving standards of public sanitation. He was especially concerned with arresting the spread of cholera and bubonic plague, and had travelled widely outside France,

advising foreign governments on infectious diseases. He was appropriately rewarded for his efforts, becoming a Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur and a professor of hygiene at the Medical Faculty in Paris. The mayor of the once cholera-prone port of Toulon presented him with the keys to the city and a hospital for quarantined victims was named after him in Marseilles. By the time of his death in 1903, Adrien Proust was a doctor of international standing, who could almost be believed when he summed up his existence with the thought, 'I have been happy all my life.'

No wonder Marcel should have felt somewhat unworthy next to his father, and feared that he had been the bane of this contented life. He had never harboured any of the professional aspirations which constituted a badge of normality in a late-nineteenth-century bourgeois household. Literature was the only thing he cared for, though did not, for much of his youth, seem too willing, or able, to write. Because he was a good son, he tried at first to do something his parents would approve of. There were thoughts of joining the Foreign Ministry, of becoming a lawyer, a stockbroker or an assistant at the Louvre. Yet the hunt for a career proved difficult. Two weeks of work experience with a solicitor horrified him ['In my most desperate moments, I have never conceived of anything more horrible than a law officel and the idea of becoming a diplomat was ruled out when he realized it would involve moving away from Paris and his beloved mother. 'What is there left, given that I have decided to become neither a lawyer, nor a doctor, nor a priest . . ?' asked an increasingly desperate twenty-two-year-old Proust.

Perhaps he could become a librarian. He applied and was chosen for an unpaid post at the Mazarine Library. It might have been the answer, but Proust found the place too dusty for his lungs and asked for an ever-longer series of sick leaves, some of which he spent in bed, others on holiday, but few at a writing desk. He led an apparently charmed life, organizing dinner parties, going out for tea and spending money like water. One can imagine the distress of his father, a practical man who had never displayed much interest in the arts [though he had once served in the Medical corps of the Opera Comique and had charmed an American opera singer, who sent him a picture of herself dressed as a man in frilly knee-length pantaloons]. After repeatedly failing to report for work, showing up one day a year or less, even Marcel's unusually tolerant library employers finally lost their patience and dismissed him five years after he had first been taken on. It had by this time become evident to all, not least his disappointed father, that Marcel would never have a proper job — and would remain forever reliant on family money to pursue his unremunerative and dilettantish interest in literature.

Which could make it hard to understand an ambition Proust confided to his maid once both his parents had died, and he had finally started work on his novel.

'Ah, Celeste,' he said, 'if I could be sure of doing with my books as much as my father did for the sick.'

To do with books what Adrien had done for those ravaged by cholera and bubonic plague? One didn't have to be the mayor of Toulon to realize that Dr Proust had it in his power to effect an improvement in people's condition, but what sort of healing did Marcel have in mind with the seven volumes of In Search of Lost Time? The opus might be a way to pass a slow-moving train journey across the Siberian steppes, but would one wish to claim that its benefits matched those of a properly functioning public sanitation system?

If we dismiss Marcel's ambitions, it may have more to do with a particular scepticism towards the therapeutic qualities of the literary novel than with all-encompassing doubts as to the value of the printed word. Even Dr Proust, in many ways unsympathetic to his son's vocation, was not hostile towards every published genre, and indeed, turns out to have been a prolific author himself, for a long time far better known in the bookshops than his offspring.

However, unlike his son's, the utility of Dr Proust's writings was never in question. Across an output of thirty-four books, he devoted himself to considering a multitude of ways in which to further the physical well-being of the population, his titles ranging from a study of The Defence of Europe Against the Plague to a slim volume on the specialized and, at the time, novel problem of Saturnism as Observed in Workers Involved in the Making of Electric Batteries.

But Dr Proust was perhaps best known among the reading public for a number of books conveying in concise, lively and accessible language all that one might wish to know about physical fitness. It would in no way have contravened the tenor of his ambitions to have described him as a pioneer and master of the keep-fit self-help manual.

His most successful self-help book was entitled Elements of Hygiene; it was published in 1888, was fully illustrated and was aimed at teenage girls, who were deemed to need advice on enhancing their health in order to produce a vigorous new generation of French citizens, of whom there was a shortfall after a century of bloody military adventures.

With interest in a healthy lifestyle having only increased since Dr Proust's day, there may be value in including at least a few of the doctor's many insightful recommendations.

How Dr Proust Can Change Your Health

(i) Backache

Almost always down to incorrect posture. When a teenage girl is sewing, she must take care not to lean forward, cross her legs or use a low table, which will squash vital digestive organs, interrupt the flow of her blood and strain her spinal cord, the problem illustrated in a cautionary drawing.
She should instead be following the example of this maiden:
N

(ii) Corsets

Dr Proust did not hide his distaste for these fashion items, describing them as self-destructive and perverse [in an important distinction for anyone worried about the correlation between slimness and attractiveness, he informed readers that, 'The thin woman is far from being the svelte woman'). And in an attempt to warn off girls who might have been tempted to wear these corsets, Dr Proust included an illustration showing their catastrophic effect on the spinal cord.

(iii) Exercise

Rather than pretending to be slim and fit through artificial means, Dr Proust proposed a regime of regular exercise and included a number of practical, unstrenuous examples —like, for instance, jumping off walls .
... hopping around .
... swinging one's arms .
. . . and balancing on one foot.
With a father so masterful at aerobic instruction, at advice on corsets and sewing positions, it seems as if Marcel may have been hasty or simply overambitious in equating his life's work with that of the author of Elements of Hygiene. Rather than blame him for the problem, one might ask whether any novel could genuinely be expected to contain therapeutic qualities, whether the genre could in itself offer any more relief than could be gained from an aspirin, a country walk or a dry martini.

Charitably, one could suggest escapism. Marooned in familiar circumstances, there may be pleasure in buying a paperback at the station news-stand ['I was attracted by the idea of reaching a wider audience, the sort of people who buy a badly printed volume before catching a train,' specified Proust]. Once we've boarded a carriage, we can abstract ourselves from current surroundings and enter a more agreeable, or at least agreeably different world, breaking off occasionally to take in the passing scenery, while holding open our badly printed volume at the point where an ill-tempered monocle-wearing baron prepares to enter his drawing room — until our destination is heard on the tannoy, the brakes let out their reluctant squeals and we emerge once more into reality, symbolized by the station and its group of loitering slate-grey pigeons pecking shiftily at abandoned confectionery (in her memoirs, Proust's maid Celeste helpfully informs those alarmed not to have made much ground in Proust's novel that it is not designed to be read from one station to the next).

Whatever the pleasures of using a novel as an object with which to levitate into another world, it is not the only way of handling the genre. It certainly wasn't Proust's way, and would arguably not have been a very effective method of fulfilling the exalted therapeutic ambitions expressed to Celeste.

Perhaps the best indication of Proust's views on how we should read lies in his approach to looking at paintings. After his death, his friend Lucien Daudet wrote an account of his time with him, which included a description of a visit they had once made together to the Louvre. Whenever he looked at paintings, Proust had a habit of trying to match the figures depicted on canvases with people he knew from his own life. Daudet tells us that they went into a gallery hung with a painting by Domenico Ghirlandaio. It was called An Old Man and a Boy, it had been painted in the 1480s and it showed a kindly looking man with a set of carbuncles on the tip of his nose.

Proust considered the Ghirlandaio for a moment, then turned to Daudet and told him that this man was the spitting image of the Marquis de Lau, a well-known figure in the Parisian social world.

How surprising to identify the Marquis, a gentleman in late-nineteenth-century Paris, in a portrait painted in Italy in the late fifteenth century. However, a snap of the Marquis survives. It shows him sitting in a garden with a group of ladies wearing the kind of elaborate dress you would need five maids to help you into. He has on a dark suit, a winged collar, cuff links and a top hat, but despite the nineteenth-century paraphernalia and the poor quality of the photo, one imagines that he might indeed have looked strikingly similar to the carbuncled man painted by Ghirlandaio in Renaissance Italy, a long-lost brother dramatically separated from him across countries and centuries.

The possibility of making such visual connections between people circulating in apparently wholly different worlds explains Proust's assertion that 'aesthetically, the number of human types is so restricted that we must constantly, wherever we may be, have the pleasure of seeing people we know'.

Any such pleasure is not simply visual: the restricted number of human types also means that we are repeatedly able to read about people we know in places we might never have expected to do so.

For instance, in the second volume of Proust's novel, the narrator visits the Normandy seaside resort of Balbec, where he meets and falls in love with someone I know, a young woman with an impudent expression, brilliant laughing eyes, plump matt cheeks and a fondness for black polo-caps. Here is Proust's portrait of what Albertine sounds like when she is talking.

In speaking, Albertine kept her head motionless and her nostrils pinched, and scarcely moved her lips. The result of this was a drawling, nasal sound, into the composition of which there entered perhaps a provincial heredity, a juvenile affectation of British phlegm, the teaching of a foreign governess and a congestive hypertrophy of the mucus of the nose. This enunciation, which, as it happened, soon disappeared when she knew people better, giving place to a girlish tone, might have been thought unpleasant. But to me it was peculiarly delightful. Whenever I had gone for several days without seeing her, I would refresh my spirit by repeating to myself: 'We don't ever see you playing golf,' with the nasal intonation in which she had uttered the words, point-blank, without moving a muscle of her face. And I thought then that there was no one in the world so desirable.

It is difficult when reading the description of certain fictional characters not at the same time to imagine the real-life acquaintances who they most closely, if often unexpectedly, resemble. It has, for example, proved impossible for me to separate Proust's Duchesse de Guermantes from the image of the fifty-five-year-old stepmother of an ex-girlfriend, even though this unsuspecting lady speaks no French, has no title and lives in Devon. What is more, when Proust's hesitant, shy character Saniette asks if he can visit the narrator in his hotel in Balbec, the proud, defensive tone with which he masks his friendly intentions seems exactly that of an old college acquaintance who had a manic habit of never putting himself in a situation where he might encounter rejection.

`You don't happen to know what you'll be doing in the next few days, because I will probably be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Balbec? Not that it makes the slightest difference, I just thought I'd ask,' says Saniette to the narrator, though it could equally well have been Philip proposing plans for an evening. As for Proust's Gilberte, she finds herself resolutely associated in my mind with Julia, who I met on a skiing holiday at the age of twelve, and who twice invited me for tea [she ate millefeuilles slowly, dropping crumbs on her print dress) and who I kissed on New Year's Eve and never saw again, for she lived in Africa, where she might today be a nurse if her adolescent wish came true.

How helpful of Proust to remark that, 'One cannot read a novel without ascribing to the heroine the traits of the one we love.' It lends respectability to a habit of imagining that Albertine, last seen walking in Balbec with her brilliant laughing eyes and black polo-cap, bears striking resemblance to my girlfriend Kate, who has never read Proust and prefers George Eliot, or Marie Claire after a difficult day.
Kate/Albertine

Such intimate communion between our own life and the novels we read may be why Proust argued that:

In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have experienced in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity.

But why would readers seek to be the readers of their own selves? Why does Proust privilege the connection between ourselves and works of art, as much in his novel as in his museum habits?

One answer is because it is the only way in which art can properly affect rather than simply distract us from life, and that there is a stream of extraordinary benefits attached to what might be termed the Marquis de Lau phenomenon [MLP), attached to the possibility of recognizing Kate in a portrait of Albertine, Julia in a description of Gilberte and, more generally, our selves in badly printed volumes purchased in train stations.

Benefits of the MLP

(i) To feel at home everywhere

The fact we might be surprised to recognize someone we know in a portrait painted four centuries ago suggests how hard it is to hold on to anything more than a theoretical belief in a universal human nature. As Proust saw the problem:

People of bygone ages seem infinitely remote from us. We do not feel justified in ascribing to them any underlying intentions beyond those they formally express; we are amazed when we come across an emotion more or less like what we feel today in a Homeric hero ... it is as though we imagined the epic poet ... to be as remote from ourselves as an animal seen in a zoo.

It is perhaps only normal if our initial impulse on being introduced to the characters of The Odyssey is to stare at them as though they are a family of duck-billed platypuses circling their enclosure in the municipal zoo. Bewilderment might be no less intense at the thought of listening to a louche character with a thick moustache, standing in the midst of distinctly antiquated-looking friends:

But an advantage of more prolonged encounters with Proust or Homer is that worlds that had seemed threateningly alien reveal themselves to be essentially much like our own, expanding the range of places in which we feel at home. It means we can open the zoo gates and release a set of trapped creatures from the Trojan War or the Faubourg Saint-Germain, who we had previously considered with unwarranted provincial suspicion, because they had names like Eurycleia and Telemachus or had never sent a fax.

(ii) A cure for loneliness