

Claire Wolniewicz

The Weeping Lady

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BIOGRAPHY Born in 1966, Claire Wolniewicz is originally from Poland. She splits her time between the city and the country.

PUBLICATIONS *Terre légère*, Viviane Hamy, 2009; *Le Temps d'une chute*, Viviane Hamy, 2008; *Ubiquité*, Viviane Hamy, 2005; *Sainte Rita, patronne des causes désespérées*, short stories, Finitudes, 2003.



Rita and Adam live together with their young son, Félix. Adam is a painter whose “off the beaten path” artwork is highly regarded by his gallery owner.

After being away a few days, Adam returns home devoid of desire, energy and emotion; feelings of love and inspiration have inexplicably faded away. Around this time his grandmother, Joséphine, dies. At the funeral, he is reunited with Joséphine’s childhood friend, Marthe, who gives him Joséphine’s few mementos—photos, letters, several other possessions ...

Strange things start happening: Adam comes across pictures he does not remember

painting, artwork that doesn’t reflect his usual style. Images showing the back of a woman, scenes depicting various stages of a murder ... More and more paintings appear, and Adam finally recognizes the recurring figure he has apparently been painting: Joséphine as a young woman. He later questions Marthe and tries to find witnesses to a long ago affair ...

Who was Joséphine? And who is he? ...

The Weeping Lady introduces the reader once again to Adam Volladier—a character from *Ubiquité*—and sheds light on the origins of his bizarre “non-personality,” while at the same time demonstrating how much family secrets can influence a person’s destiny.

Adam is a painter who finds himself lacking inspiration. Physically drained, he asks his neighbor Alice, an osteopath, to unblock his back and arms, thus bonding them in friendship. Adam and Rita are now separated. Félix, their six-year-old son, lives with his mother.

Morning, soft knocking on my door. The night before, I’d stretched out on the sofa and allowed my mind to drift after looking at the paintings of Joséphine. Sleep eventually overtook me and I was carried off, far away from my thoughts, questions, Marthe’s comments and my worries in general. Drowsy and disheveled, I answered the door. Alice was standing there, without her dog.

“Hi, I’m not disturbing you, am I?”

“Not at all, would you like to come in?”

“No. I have a favor to ask of you. I thought that maybe ...”

She hesitates, embarrassed.

“Go ahead.”

“Would you mind looking after my dog the next couple of days?”

“You won’t need him?”

“Someone is taking me to the train station and then a friend is picking me up from there. She already has a dog—a male, like Hector. It could pose a problem ... Another friend was supposed to take care of him but something came up at the last minute.”

“Sure. You just want me to walk him?”

“Uh, not exactly ... I wanted to ask you if ... he could stay with you ... He’s not used to being alone.”

I’d never particularly cared for dogs but I wanted to be nice.

“Of course, I’d be happy to.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

We went back to her place and she explained Hector’s routine, what he ate.

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

“You can if you want, but you don’t have to ...”

“When are you leaving?”

“Right now.”

“In that case ...”

I grabbed his bowls, dog food, mat and leash while she explained to him how long she’d be gone and who she was leaving him with. Simple, reassuring, sentences—she could have been talking to a child. With that, her friend charged in out of breath, urging her to hurry because she was double-parked. Alice bid Hector and me goodbye, then dashed out with her friend. The dog didn’t move as he watched her disappear from view, then turned to me as if waiting for my lead.

I walked along briskly, tugging on the leash more than necessary. Hector wasn’t used to this pace or roughness. When I pulled too hard, he turned and looked at me inquisitively; I felt a pang of remorse. I apologized, but then five minutes later, I did it all over again. (...)

My cell phone rang. It was Rita saying Félix had agreed to spend the night. I’d proposed the sleepover, counting on the dog to alleviate the tension between us. My son was dying to have a pet but we hadn’t given in yet. I stood there imagining my son’s joy as I watched Hector sniff a female Dalmatian ...

It was lunchtime, I had the whole afternoon to get organized. Buy a mattress, sheets, a nightlight—Félix was still afraid of the dark. A toothbrush, pajamas? No, Rita would pack a knapsack with all of his things. But I still needed to get milk and cereal, clean the loft, and buy a small chair—I ate at the coffee table, so Félix would need a lower chair. I stopped by some stores on the way home. At a bazaar, I found some star-shaped nightlights. I chose red, a stimulating, not exactly sleep-inducing color, but the only other color they had was green, and it was a dreadful, ghostly green at that. I also bought the sheets there. At another shop, I found a footrest that would place Félix at the same level as the coffee table. At every stop, I tied Hector to a pole or fence and made it a point to explain to him what I was doing. The dog not only listened but sat down immediately before the explanation as if he’d guessed my intentions. I didn’t

bother to tie him up in front of the store where I bargained for the twin-sized mattress. I asked the manager if his salesperson could help me carry the mattress to my studio, a hundred meters away. When I asked him to watch the dog in my absence, the man leaned out to look at him.

His face lit up:

“Oh it’s Hector!”

“You know him?”

“Of course. He’s that lady’s dog, the blind lady. No problem. He’s a very good dog.”

Animals opened the doors of communication in an extraordinary way. Walls tumbled, mouths dropped open. Even children didn’t spark that much attention. Was it just Hector in particular? A dog bearing the name of a Trojan hero was bound to be more than a dog. I started seeing Hector in a different light.

By six o’clock, I was ready. A Schubert quintet was gently playing in the bleach-scented studio. I’d gone a little heavy on the bleach, but Rita expected her son to sleep in a relatively clean environment, so I knew she’d find the smell reassuring. The loft was practically wiped clean of all germs and the bed was adorned with clean, bright sheets. The red star lay next to the pillow and a mobile with huge, graceful, multicolored dancing elephants hung from the ceiling. The cupboards and fridge had milk, orange juice, cereal and jam. For dinner, I’d planned to let Félix have whatever he wanted. In short, I’d thought of everything.

When I answered the door, Rita didn’t rush in to inspect the loft or the food in the cupboards. She stayed on the stoop. She looked at me but didn’t lower her guard as she held out Félix’s backpack.

“It’s all there—his pajamas, t-shirt, underwear, clean socks, toothbrush and toothpaste. His solfège notebook is also in there, the class is at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. I’m warning you—he’s tired.” Tired meant that right now, Félix would be grumpy, whiny, and taciturn, and later, he was going to be a real pain. But the child who was dragging his feet toward me without even looking up, suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“A dog! You got a dog!”

“No, he’s not mine.”

“You borrowed him?”

“Not exactly. I’m taking care of him for a few days.”

“Whose is he?”

“A neighbor,” I said quietly, fearing Rita’s reproach.

“He’s beautiful!”

And with those initial questions answered, he rushed over to the dog as his mom left.

Félix didn't notice the loft, the mattress or the fresh sheets either, nor did he see the red star casting light on the flying pachyderms' bellies—all he saw was Hector. Hector with his thick, black fur, long tail, and floppy ears—“They're so soft!” He inspected his paws, gray pads, nipples—“He's got so many!”—and the red leather collar adorned with an orange bone. He studied the dog's sparkling, chocolate-colored eyes, then went on to his eyelashes, gums, and teeth—“They're really pointy!” The dog lay on his back and let Félix touch him all over, allowing the boy to blow in his ears and feel his muzzle. Fearing Hector might retaliate, I stood close behind Félix, ready to pounce at the slightest baring of teeth; but there was none, no annoyance, nothing. Félix was transformed. His fatigue was gone and he was brimming with enthusiasm. We quickly decided on dinner, then the three of us left and walked as long as our dinner schedule permitted. Luckily, our favorite takeout place, the Lebanese spot, was also the farthest away. Our nighttime outing was absolutely wonderful. Félix strode along proudly, Hector's leash in hand.

“Can I bring him home with me tomorrow?”

“I don't think your mother would like that. Besides, his owner left him with me.”

“Daddy, I want one.”

“Félix, we've already talked about this.”

“Yeah, I know,” grumbled the little boy, “you and mom don't want one, and I always will.”