

I have good news and bad news. The good news is that there is life (of a kind) after this life. The bad news is that Jean-Claude Villeneuve is a necrophiliac.

Death caught up with me in a Paris disco at four in the morning. My doctor had warned me, but some things are stronger than reason. I was convinced, mistakenly (and even now it's something I regret), that drinking and dancing were not the most hazardous of my passions. Another reason I kept going out every night to the fashionable places in Paris was my routine as a middle manager at Fracsa; I was after what I couldn't find at work or in what people call the inner life: the buzz that you get from a certain excess.

But I'd rather not talk about that, or only as much as I have to. When my death occurred, I was recently divorced and thirty-four years old. I hardly realized what was going on. A sudden sharp pain in the chest, her face, the face of Cécile Lamballe, the woman of my dreams, imperturbable as ever, the dance floor spinning in a brutal whirl, sucking in the dancers and the shadows, and then a brief moment of darkness.

What happened next was like what you sometimes see in movies and I'd like to say a few words about that.

In life I wasn't especially intelligent. I'm still not (though I've learned a lot). When I say intelligent, what I really mean is thoughtful. But I have a certain energy and a certain taste. What I mean is, I'm not a philistine. It couldn't be said, objectively, that I'd ever behaved like a philistine. It's true that I graduated in business studies, but that didn't stop me from reading a good book or seeing a play every now and then, or being a keener moviegoer than most. Some of the movies I was pressured to see by my ex-wife. But the others I saw for love of the seventh art.

Like just about everyone else, I went to see *Ghost*, I don't know if you remember it, a box office hit, with Demi Moore and Whoopi Goldberg, the one where Patrick Swayze gets killed and his body is left lying on a Manhattan street, or in an alley, maybe, on a dirty pavement anyway, while in a special-effects extravaganza (they were special for the time, anyway) his soul comes out of his body and stares at it in astonishment. Well, apart from the special effects, I thought it was idiotic. A typical Hollywood cop-out, inane and unbelievable.

But when my turn came, that was exactly what happened. I was stunned. First, because I had died, which always comes as a surprise, except, I guess, in some cases of suicide, and then because I was unwillingly acting out one of the worst

scenes of Ghost. One of the many things experience has taught me is that there is sometimes more to American naiveté than meets the eye; it can hide something that we Europeans can't or don't want to understand. But once I was dead, I didn't care about that. Once I was dead, I felt like bursting out laughing.

You get used to anything in the end, but in the early hours of that morning I felt dizzy or drunk, not because I was under the influence of alcohol on the night of my death — I wasn't; on the contrary, it had been a night of pineapple juice and non-alcoholic beer — but because of the shock of being dead, the fear of being dead and not knowing what was coming next. When you die the real world shifts slightly and that adds to the dizziness. It's as if you'd suddenly put on a pair of glasses that don't match your prescription; they're not all that different, but not quite right. And the worst thing is you know that the glasses you've put on belong to you and nobody else. And the real world shifts slightly to the right, down a little, the distance separating you from a given object changes almost imperceptibly, but you perceive that change as an abyss, and the abyss adds to your dizziness, but in the end it doesn't matter.

It makes you want to cry or pray. The first minutes of ghosthood are minutes of imminent knockout. You're like a punch-drunk boxer staggering around the ring in the drawn-out moment of the ring's evaporation. But then you calm down and what generally happens is that you follow the people who were there when you died — your girlfriend, your friends — or you follow your own body.

I was with Cécile Lamballe, the woman of my dreams, I was with her and saw her just before I died, but when my soul came out of my body I couldn't see her anywhere. It was quite a surprise and a great disappointment, especially when I think about it now, though back then I didn't have time to be sad. There I was, looking at my body lying in a grotesque heap on the floor, as if, seized by the dance and the heart attack, I'd completely fallen apart, or as if I hadn't died of a heart attack at all but dropped from the top of a skyscraper, and while I looked on and walked around and fell over (because I was completely dizzy), a volunteer (there's always someone) gave me (or my body) mouth-to-mouth, while another one thumped my chest, then someone thought of switching off the music and a murmur of disapproval swept through the disco, which was pretty full in spite of the late hour, and the deep voice of a waiter or a security guard told them all not to touch me, to wait for the police and the magistrate, and although I was groggy I would have liked to say, Keep going, keep trying to revive me, but they were tired, and as soon as the police were mentioned they all stepped back, and my body lay there on its own at the edge of the dance floor, eyes closed, until a charitable soul put a blanket over me to cover what was now definitively dead.

Then the police turned up along with some guys who confirmed what everyone already knew, and later the magistrate arrived and only then did I realize that Cécile Lamballe had vanished from the disco, so when they picked up my body and

put it in an ambulance, I followed the medics and slipped into the back of the vehicle, and off I went with them into the sad and weary Paris dawn.

What a paltry thing it seemed, my body or my ex-body (I'm not sure how to put it), confronted with the labyrinthine bureaucracy of death. First they took me to the basement of a hospital, although I couldn't swear it was a hospital, where a young woman with glasses ordered them to undress me, and when they left her on her own, she spent a few moments examining and touching me. Then they covered me with a sheet, and moved me to another room to take a complete set of fingerprints. Then they brought me back to the first room, which was empty now, and I stayed there for what seemed like a long time, though I couldn't say how many hours. Maybe it was only minutes, but I was getting more and more bored.

After a while, a black orderly came to get me and take me to another underground room, where he handed me over to a pair of young guys also dressed in white, who made me feel uneasy right from the start, I don't know why. Maybe it was their would-be sophisticated way of talking, which identified them as a pair of tenth-rate artists, maybe it was their earrings, the sort all the hipsters were wearing that season in the discos that I had frequented with an irresponsible persistence: hexagonal in shape and somehow evocative of runaways from a fantastic bestiary.

The new orderlies made some notes in a book, spoke with the black guy for a few minutes (I don't know what that was about) and then the black guy went and left us alone. So in the room there were the two young guys behind the desk, filling out forms and chatting away, there was my body on the trolley, covered from head to foot, and me standing beside it, with my left hand resting on the trolley's metal edge, trying to think with a modicum of clarity about what the days to come might hold, if there were any days to come, which was far from obvious to me right then.

Then one of the young guys approached the trolley and uncovered me, or uncovered my body, and scrutinized it for a few seconds with a thoughtful expression that didn't bode well. After a while he covered it up again, and the two of them wheeled the trolley into the next room, a sort of freezing honeycomb, which I soon discovered was a storehouse for corpses. I would never have imagined that so many people could die in the course of an ordinary night in Paris. They slid my body into a refrigerated niche and left. I didn't follow them.

I spent that whole day there in the morgue. Every so often I went to the door, which had a little glass window, and checked the time on the wall clock in the next room. The feeling of dizziness gradually abated, although at one point I got to thinking about heaven and hell, reward and punishment, and I had a panic attack, but that bout of irrational fear was soon over. And, in fact, I was starting to feel better.

Throughout the day new bodies kept arriving, but never accompanied by ghosts, and at about four in the afternoon, a near-sighted young man performed an

autopsy on me and established the causes of my accidental death. I have to admit I didn't have the stomach to watch them open me up. But I went to the autopsy room and listened as the coroner and his assistant, quite a pretty girl, performed their task efficiently and quickly — if only all public servants worked like that — while I waited with my back turned, looking at the ivory-colored tiles on the wall. Then they washed me and sewed me up and an orderly took me back to the morgue again.

I stayed there until eleven at night, sitting on the floor in front of my refrigerated niche, and although at one point I thought I was going to doze off, I was beyond the need for sleep, so what I did was just go on thinking about my past life and the enigmatic future (to give it a name of some kind) that lay before me. After ten o'clock, the comings and goings, which during the day had been like a constant but barely perceptible dripping, stopped or diminished considerably. At five past eleven the young guys with the hexagonal earrings reappeared. I was startled when they opened the door. But I was beginning to get used to my ghostly state and, having recognized them, I remained seated on the floor, thinking of the distance separating me from Cécile Lamballe, which was infinitely greater than the distance between us when I was still alive. Realizations always come too late. In life I was afraid of being a toy (or less than a toy) for Cécile, and now that I was dead, that fate, once the cause of my insomnia and pervasive insecurity, seemed sweet, and not without a certain grace and substance: the solidity of the real.

But I was talking about the hipster orderlies. I saw them come into the morgue and although I noticed something cautious in their bearing, which sat oddly with their oily, feline manner, like wannabe artists out clubbing, at first I paid no attention to their movements and their whispering until one of them opened the niche where my body was lying.

Then I got up and started watching them. Moving like seasoned professionals, they placed my body on a trolley. Then they rolled the trolley out of the morgue and along a long corridor, sloping gently upwards, which eventually led into the building's parking garage. For a moment I thought they were stealing my body. In my delirium I imagined Cécile Lamballe, the milk-white face of Cécile Lamballe; I imagined her emerging from the darkness of the parking lot to give the pseudo-artists the sum they had demanded for the rescue of my body. But there was no one in the garage — clearly, I was still a long way from recovering my powers of reasoning or even my composure.

To tell the truth I'd been really hoping for a quiet night.

For a few moments, as I followed the orderlies between the unwelcoming rows of cars with a certain trepidation and disquiet, I experienced the dizziness I had felt in my first few minutes as a ghost. They put my body in the trunk of a gray Renault, covered all over with little dents, and we emerged from the belly of that

building, which I was already beginning to think of as home, into the utter freedom of the Paris night.

I can't remember now which avenues and streets we took. The orderlies were high, as I was able to ascertain from closer observation, and they were talking about people well beyond their social reach. My first impression was soon confirmed: they were pathetic losers, but there was something in their attitude, something, I thought at first, like hope, and then it seemed like innocence, which made me feel close to them somehow. Deep down, we were similar, not then and not in the moments leading up to my death, but they were similar to how I imagined myself at twenty-two or twenty-five, when I was still a student and still believed that one day the world was going to fall at my feet.

The Renault pulled up in front of a mansion in one of the most exclusive neighborhoods of Paris. That's how it seemed to me, anyway. One of the pseudo-artists got out of the car and rang a bell. After a while, a voice from the darkness told him to move, no, suggested that he move a little to the right and lift his chin. The orderly did as he was told and lifted his head. The other one looked out the window of the car and waved in the direction of a television camera that was observing us from the top of the gate. The voice made a throat-clearing sound (at that point I knew that I would soon meet a man of the utmost reserve) and said that we could enter.

Straightaway the gate opened with a faint squeaking sound and the car drove in along a paved drive that snaked through a garden full of trees and shrubs, with a slightly overgrown look that owed more to whim than to neglect. We stopped beside one of the wings of the house. While the orderlies were removing my body from the trunk, I looked at the building in dismay and awe. Never in all my life had I been inside a house like that. It looked old. It must have been worth a fortune. I couldn't say any more without stretching my knowledge of architecture.

We went in through one of the service entrances. We crossed the kitchen, which was spotless and cold like the kitchen in a restaurant that has been closed for many years, and then we followed a dim corridor at the end of which we took an elevator down to the basement. When the doors of the elevator opened, there was Jean-Claude Villeneuve. I recognized him immediately. The long white hair, the thick glasses, the gray gaze that seemed to belong to a helpless child, while the firm narrow lips denoted, on the contrary, a man who knew very well what he wanted. He was wearing jeans and a white, short-sleeved shirt. I was shocked, because in the photos of Villeneuve that I had seen, his clothes had always been elegant. Discreet, yes, but elegant. The Villeneuve before me now, by contrast, looked like an old rock star suffering from insomnia. His gait, however, was unmistakable; he moved with the same unsteadiness that I had seen so often on television, when he stepped up onto the catwalk at the end of his autumn-winter

or spring-summer shows, almost as if it was a chore, hauled out by his favorite models to receive the public's unanimous applause.

The orderlies put my body on a dark green sofa and took a few steps back, waiting for Villeneuve's verdict. He approached my body, uncovered my face, and then without saying a word went over to a little desk made (I assume) of fine wood, from which he extracted an envelope. The orderlies took the envelope, which almost certainly contained a considerable sum of cash, though neither of them bothered to count it, and then one of them said that they would come back at seven the next morning to pick me up, and they left. Villeneuve ignored his parting words. The orderlies went out the way we'd come in; I heard the sound of the elevator and then silence. Paying no attention to my body, Villeneuve switched on a television monitor. I looked over his shoulder. The pseudo-artists were at the gate, waiting for Villeneuve to let them out. Then the car drove off into the streets of that highly exclusive neighborhood and the metal gate shut with a brief squeaking noise.

From that moment on, everything in my new supernatural life began to change, in accelerating phases that were perfectly distinct from each other, in spite of their rapid succession. Villeneuve went over to what looked like a standard hotel minibar and took out an apple juice. He removed the cap, began to drink straight from the bottle and switched off the security monitor. As he drank, he put on some music. Music I had never heard, or maybe I had, but when I listened carefully it didn't seem familiar: electric guitars, a piano, a saxophone, a sorrowful and melancholic piece, but strong as well, as if the composer's spirit was determined not to yield. I went over to the stereo hoping to see the name on the cover of the CD but I couldn't see anything. Only Villeneuve's face, which looked strange in the semi-darkness, as if being on his own again and drinking the apple juice had given him a hot flush. I noticed a drop of sweat in the middle of his cheek. A tiny drop rolling slowly down toward his chin. I also thought I could see him trembling slightly.

Then Villeneuve put the glass down beside the CD player and approached my body. For a while he looked at me as if he didn't know what to do, though he did, or as if he was attempting to guess what hopes and desires had once agitated the contents of that plastic body bag, which were now at his disposal. He stayed like that for some time. I didn't know what his intentions were — I've always been an innocent. If I'd known, I would have been nervous. But I didn't, so I sat down in one of the comfortable leather armchairs in the room and waited.

With extreme care, Villeneuve unwrapped the parcel containing my body, rucking the bag up under my legs, and then (after two or three endless minutes) he removed it entirely and left my corpse naked on the sofa, which was upholstered with green leather. He stood up straightaway — he'd been kneeling — took off his shirt and paused, but keeping his eyes on me, and that was when I stood up too, came a little closer and saw my naked body, slightly fatter than I would have liked,

but not too bad — eyes closed, an absent expression on my face — and I saw Villeneuve's torso, a sight very few people have seen, since the great designer is renowned for his discretion among many other qualities (the press, for example, has never published photos of him at the beach), and I tried to read his expression and guess what would happen next, but all I could see in his face was diffidence; he looked more diffident than in the photos, infinitely more diffident in fact than he looked in the photos in the fashion and gossip magazines.

Villeneuve removed his trousers and socks and lay down beside my body. Well, at that point I did realize what was going on, and I was dumbstruck. It's easy enough to imagine what came next, but it wasn't what you'd call bacchanalian. Villeneuve hugged me, caressed me, kissed me chastely on the lips. He massaged my penis and testicles with something of the delicacy once lavished on me by Cécile Lamballe, the woman of my dreams, and after a quarter of an hour of cuddling in the semi-darkness I noticed that he had an erection. My god, I thought, now he's going to sodomize me. But that's not what happened. To my surprise, the designer rubbed himself against one of my thighs till he came. I would have liked to shut my eyes at that point but I couldn't. My reactions were contradictory; I felt disgusted by what I was seeing, grateful for not having been sodomized, surprised to discover Villeneuve's secret, angry at the orderlies for having rented out my body, and even flattered to have served, unwillingly, as an object of desire for one of the most famous men in France.

After coming, Villeneuve closed his eyes and sighed. In that sigh I thought I could detect a hint of disgust. He sat up quickly and stayed there on the sofa with his back to my body for a few seconds, while he wiped his dripping member with his hand. You should be ashamed, I said.

It was the first time I'd spoken since my death. Villeneuve raised his head, quite unsurprised, or at any rate much less surprised than I would have been in his situation, while reaching down with one hand to feel for his glasses on the carpet.

I knew at once that he had heard me. It seemed like a miracle. Suddenly I felt so happy that I forgave him his act of depravity. And yet, like an idiot, I repeated: You should be ashamed. Who's there? said Villeneuve. It's me, I said, the ghost of the body you just raped. Villeneuve went pale, and then, almost simultaneously, a blush rose in his cheeks. I was worried that he would have a heart attack or die of fright, although to tell the truth he didn't look all that frightened.

It's not a problem, I said in a conciliatory tone, You're forgiven.

Villeneuve switched on the light and looked in all the corners of the room. I thought he'd gone crazy, because there was clearly no one else there; only a pygmy could have hidden in that room, not even a pygmy, a gnome. But then I realized that, far from being crazy, the designer was displaying nerves of steel: he wasn't looking for a person but a speaker. As I calmed down, I felt a surge of sympathy

for him. There was something admirable about his methodical way of searching the room. Me, I'd have been out of there like a shot.

I'm no speaker, I said. Nor am I a video camera. Please, try to calm down; take a seat and we can talk. And most of all, don't be afraid of me. I'm not going to do anything to you. That's what I said; then I kept quiet and watched Villeneuve, who barely hesitated before continuing his search. I let him go ahead. While he messed up the room, I remained seated in one of the comfortable armchairs. Then I had an idea. I suggested that we shut ourselves in a small room (as small as a coffin were my exact words), where no speakers or cameras could possibly have been planted, and I could go on talking to him there and convince him to accept my nature, my new nature, that is. But while he was considering my proposal, it occurred to me that I hadn't expressed myself very well, since my ghostly state could not be called, in any sense, a "nature." My nature, however you looked at it, was still that of a living being. And yet it was clear that I was not alive. The thought crossed my mind that it might all be a dream. Summoning some ghostly courage, I told myself that if it was a dream, the best (and the only) thing I could do was to go on dreaming. From experience I know that trying to wrench yourself out of a nightmare is futile and simply adds pain to pain or terror to terror.

So I repeated my proposal, and this time Villeneuve stopped searching and froze (I examined his face, which I'd seen so often in the glossy magazines, and saw the same expression, a solitary, elegant expression, although now there were a few telltale drops of sweat rolling down his forehead and his cheeks). He left the room. I followed him. Halfway down a long corridor, he stopped and said: Are you still with me? His voice was strangely appealing, rich in tones that seemed to be converging on a genuine warmth, though perhaps it was just an illusion.

I'm here, I said.

Villeneuve moved his head in a way I couldn't interpret and continued to wander through his house, stopping in each room and on each landing to ask if I was still with him, a question to which I replied without fail, trying to make my voice sound relaxed, or at least trying to give it a singular tone (in life it was always an ordinary, run-of-the-mill sort of voice), no doubt influenced by the reedy (sometimes almost whistle-like) yet extremely distinguished voice of the designer. To each reply I also added details about the place where we happened to be, with the aim of achieving greater credibility; for example, if there was a lamp with a tobacco-colored shade and a wrought iron stand, I said so. I'm still here, next to you, and now we're in a room where the only source of light is a lamp with a tobacco-colored shade and a wrought iron stand. And Villeneuve said yes or corrected me — That's cast iron — but his eyes were fixed on the ground as he spoke, as if he was afraid that I might suddenly materialize, or didn't want to embarrass me, and I'd say: Sorry, I didn't notice, or: That's what I meant. And Villeneuve moved his head ambivalently, as if accepting my excuses or just getting a clearer idea of the ghost he had to deal with.

And so we went all around the house, and as we moved from place to place, Villeneuve grew or seemed to grow calmer, while I became more nervous, because I've never been much good at describing things, especially if they're not objects in everyday use, or if they happen to be paintings no doubt worth a fortune by contemporary artists I know absolutely nothing about, or sculptures that Villeneuve had collected in the course of his travels (incognito) all around the world.

And so on, until we came to a little room, covered inside with a layer of cement, in which there was nothing, not one piece of furniture, not a single light, and we shut ourselves in that room, in the dark. An embarrassing situation, on the face of it, but for me it was like a second or a third birth; that is, it was like hope beginning and with it the desperate awareness of hope. Villeneuve said: Describe the place where we are now. And I said that it was like death, not like real death but death as we imagine it when we're alive. And Villeneuve said: Describe it. Everything is dark, I said. It's like a nuclear bomb shelter. And I added that in a place like that the soul contracts, and I would have gone on spelling out what I felt, the void that had come to inhabit my soul long before I died and of which I'd been unaware until then, but Villeneuve cut me off me, saying, That's enough, he believed me, and suddenly he opened the door.

I followed him to the main living room, where he poured himself a whiskey and proceeded, in a few well-measured sentences, to ask me to forgive him for what he had done with my body. You're forgiven, I said. I'm open-minded. To be honest, I'm not sure I know what being open-minded means, but I felt it was my duty to wipe the slate clean and clear our future relationship of any guilt or resentment.

You must be wondering why I do what I do, said Villeneuve.

I assured him that I had no intention of asking for an explanation. Nevertheless, Villeneuve insisted on giving me one. With anyone else, it would have become a very unpleasant evening, but I was listening to Jean-Claude Villeneuve, the greatest designer in France, which is to say the world, and time flew as I was given a brief account of his childhood and teenage years, his youth, his reservations about sex, his experiences with a number of men, and with a number of women, his solitary habits, his morbid dread of harming anyone which may have been a screen to hide his dread of being harmed, his artistic tastes, which I admired (and envied) unreservedly, his chronic insecurity, his conflicts with a number of famous designers, his first jobs for a fashion house, his voyages of initiation, which he declined to recount in detail, his friendships with three of Europe's finest screen actresses, his association with the pair of pseudo-artists from the morgue, who from time to time provided him with corpses, with which he spent only one night, his fragility, which he compared to an endless demolition in slow motion, and so on, until the first light of dawn began to filter through the curtains of the living room and Villeneuve brought his long exposé to a close.

We remained silent for a long time. I knew that both of us were, if not overwhelmed with joy, at least reasonably happy.

Before long the orderlies arrived. Villeneuve looked at the floor and asked me what he should do. After all, the body they had come for was mine. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness but also assured him that I was now beyond caring about such things. Do what you normally do, I said. Will you go? he asked. I had already made up my mind, and yet I pretended to think for a few seconds before saying no, I wasn't going to leave. If he didn't mind, of course. Villeneuve seemed relieved: I don't mind, on the contrary, he said. Then a bell rang, and Villeneuve switched on the monitors and opened the gates for the rent-a-corpse guys, who came in without saying a word.

Exhausted by the night's events, Villeneuve didn't get up from the sofa. The pseudo-artists greeted him, and it seemed to me that one of them was in the mood for a chat, but the other one gave him a nudge and they went down to get my body without further ado. Villeneuve had his eyes closed and seemed to be asleep. I followed the orderlies down to the basement. My body was lying there half covered by the body bag from the morgue. I watched them put it back in the bag and carry it up and place it in the trunk of the car. I imagined it waiting there, in the cold morgue, until a relative or my ex-wife came to claim it. But I mustn't give in to sentimentality, I thought, and when the orderlies' car left the garden and vanished down that elegant, tree-lined street, I didn't feel the slightest twinge of nostalgia or sadness or melancholy.

When I returned to the living room, Villeneuve was still on the sofa, with his arms crossed, shivering with cold, and he was talking to himself (though I soon realized that he thought he was talking to me). I sat on a chair in front of him, a chair of carved wood with a satin backrest, facing the window and the garden and the beautiful morning light, and I let him go on talking as long as he liked.