

Chapter One

Illuminated by the glow of flying cars, two figures approached the decaying building with the view of recapturing their former years, distilling its essence in the attempt to preserve what had (before the curse of immortality) made them human. The world had changed, but they had not. Survivors from the wreck of the eighteenth-century, they clung to the sublime music of Mozart, Bach, and Handel, for the sounds provoked a reaction – profound yearning. The plaintive melody of *Saint Matthew's Passion* would, from time to time, cause them to weep wildly. In those moments, they craved the eternal slumber offered to the human parasites that inhabited the surrounding skyscrapers. *They live, raise families, then die. Oh, how I hate them.* As they trudged through the long, wet grass – fertilised by the victims of the *Cleansing Wars* of 2065 – they froze as the ground was cast in the technicolour light from a floating billboard, advertising holidays to the moon. In that surreal sheen, it revealed them as a young woman and an old man, both of whom were dressed in a pastiche of clothes from different centuries. ‘Hurry,’ said the woman, dragging the man like a doll. For a moment, they heard the dishevelled building calling out to them, ‘go away,’ yet they drew close.

‘Do not tempt fate,’ mumbled the withered man, ‘Only in our dreams can history exist. We are forever chasing the past.’

The decay from the corrupted château swept over them, imprinting its presence in their collective memories. The woman’s eyes brightened with delight, and for a moment, she was entranced, but when the foul fragrance flitted away, she felt pathos envelop her, choking her heart with bitterness. With tear-laden eyes, the young woman looked upon the dilapidated dwelling with nostalgia, for the events of a bygone era seemed to rot into amnesia. ‘Who could have imagined a beautiful château had once existed here?’

‘I shudder when remembering Le Comte de Lautréamont,’ said the man, planting himself on a fallen column.

Her breath matched the coolness of the evening, ‘Mathieu, do you think he has forgiven us?’

Scratching his head, the man said in a muffled voice, ‘I don’t know, Caroline.’ His glowing eyes flickered for a moment. ‘If we wait a few centuries, he might.’

‘As time marches forward, he is unchanging.’ She smiled, wiping away her tears. Images flashed through her mind of Lautréamont’s lambent eyes that she wanted to reignite with her perverse passion. *Oh, how I have changed. He knew the temptation would be great.* Her eyes

sparkled, then returned to their blank coldness. The old man coughed, waking Caroline from her phantasmagoria. She said, 'That is our shared fate, him and us.'

'He haunts us.'

'Still, we long to go back to him,' her voice was tinged with regret. She closed her eyes, hoping to recall the night when the creature to which they were referring changed her life irreparably; however, time, like a rat tasting flesh, had eaten away her memories to where they had become fragmented and unreliable. Caroline's mind tried to reconstruct the eerie evening of 1773...

'I will come when you least expect,' breathed the vampire, whose cold breath warmed Caroline's desire to taste those rosy, rounded lips. Before dissolving into a haze, he coerced, 'Only by proving yourself will I be yours.' Like a melody carried away on the evening breeze, the mesmerising voice gave way to silence.

She staggered to the window from which he left, pressing her hand against the cold windowpane, she said, 'In death, I will prove myself.'

Weakened by the magnificent monster's appetite, she slumped onto the closest armchair. The pale supple colour reminded her of his sallow skin. One more visit from the charming creature would despatch the girl to delicious death and, not unlike a stallion mounting its mate, caused her to groan, 'I am here for the tasting.' Caroline undid her corset, her fingers followed the trickle of blood from her neck to her bosom, coquettishly she whispered, 'oblivion is not to be feared... for in Hades I shall be with him.'

Unlike the fading fire, Caroline's carnality was becoming aroused to where her body convulsed with waves of pleasure. Dissimilar to a princess in a fairy-tale, she was fascinated by the gallant whose occult sway no longer terrified her but left her wanting more. A musky balm swept through the room, causing her body to throb. Arching her back, Caroline's hands explored every curve of her body, and at the peak of ecstasy, she gasped, 'Out of all the men in the world, I want him the most. Please God, bring me this angel.'

Once the pleasure (like the surreal scent) had dissipated, it reduced her to a frozen feeling of mortification. A tear slid down her pallid cheek. *Is he real, or the creation of my imagination?*

All her life, Caroline believed in the sanctity of the Church, yet now she was unsure whether the communion wine could expiate the sin of her wantonness. *God is testing me*, she supposed, *I cannot fail Him again, I must resist further temptations*. Caroline was conscious that good and evil were arranging her on life's stage, and as the light of the fire dwindled in her bedroom, Caroline felt – out of fear – compelled to go to the flames, for comfort. She sat

pensively, staring at the dying luminosity. *Look! What is this?* She saw in bold letters *La Gazette de France* and its year of publication, 1723. To her amazement, the yellowing broadsheet had defied many blazes. Prizing it from the hearth, Caroline surveyed the cornucopia of scandalous stories from fifty years ago. When she, however, saw an engraving of Maldoror, Le Comte de Lautréamont, her eyes widened with disbelief. *Heavens be praised. That is him.* She pressed the image to her lips. Like the fire before her, the passion in Caroline's heart roared into life – illuminating the recess of her conscience with the prospect of gaining Maldoror's affection. Yet, from time to time, her passion was usurped by the realisation *I am wicked for craving him.*

Agitated, Caroline crept to bed, and after tossing and turning, like the tumultuous wind outside, she plunged into the abyss of sleep, where there were no dreams. But she sensed an icy hand caressing her breasts, too real to be a dream, and a seductive voice saying, 'Tomorrow, I'll send Mathieu to collect you.'

'Yes, my love,' she whimpered, stretching her hand to stroke an invisible presence.

A cold hand touched her shoulder. Startled, she opened her eyes with a flash of fury which would have frozen a mortal with terror, but it was her companion. She said irritably, 'Mathieu, I hate when you do that.'

'You were dreaming about him.'

'So what if I was,' she retorted, casting a censorious gaze, that was once loving, at the elderly Mathieu. Caroline loved him as much as she lusted after Lautréamont. Now, she was drawn to the foreboding abyss that was her sentiments for Maldoror. Again, he touched her shoulder, but like the remnants of love, she rebuked him, 'You were a fool to love me.'

'I can never compete with him,' sighed the old man. 'When I warned you, still you pursued the monster.' His pallid cheeks warmed with wrath. 'Wasn't my love enough?'

Her glaring eyes betrayed her guilt.

'Ah, I have hurt you, but he will hurt you more. Let him moulder for another century....' She turned away, evaluating what he had said. 'Caroline, you are a fool for letting Lautréamont manipulate you.' Her head twisted back with such speed that he thought it would break off. Before she had chastised him, he implored, 'From the beginning, he's been planting seeds of doubt in your mind. Let us leave!' She suppressed her contempt by biting her lip. 'Like your yearning for Maldoror, your memory is malleable – not to be trusted.'

'Please don't take that from me. It's all that I have left.'

'Look.' He pointed his withered arm at the crumbling château. 'At what your love for him has brought.'

...Reverberations from yesteryear infected Caroline's consciousness to where she perceived (from the vantage point of the carriage) a beautiful, secluded château peppered with flowers, rather than (as it would later become) a mouldering monument to mortality.

'It must be marvellous to live with Le Comte,' said Caroline to the driver, who smiled nervously, and tugged on the reins to slacken the horses' pace.

'What attracted you to him?' asked the man with a curious tone.

'He makes me feel alive, before...' she stopped before the maternal dread caused her to weep

She must have lost someone, thought the man, who tried to comfort her, 'Time always heals our sorrows.'

She wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve. 'Monsieur, I disagree.' For a moment, they were quiet, then she resumed, 'Please forgive me,' she dug her nails into the palms, 'yesterday was the anniversary of something I'm hoping to forget.'

Touched by her honesty, he asked, 'By making the acquaintance of Le Comte, you hope to negate these emotions?'

The tension in her hands diminished, her face relaxed, and she admitted, 'He is the anodyne to my woes...' her voice became that of passion, 'with him I feel as if I will transform into something more appealing.'

As the carriage meandered along the path, she heard the young driver warning her 'be careful' and 'not to surrender.' Disbelieving, Caroline asked, 'why?' The driver became circumspect (fearful that his act of rebellion against Lautréamont's designs would be rewarded with brutality).

Piqued by curiosity, she wondered, *why his lips are quivering. He wants to tell me. What is he hiding?* Unnerved by the man's avowal, Caroline continued to pry; however, his aloofness caused her to retort, 'Stop this carriage at once!'

He twisted his head around and implored, 'I can drive you back to safety.'

For the first time in their journey, she saw his apollonian features and was dumbfounded by his handsomeness – causing her cheeks to warm with wantonness. *Humans never change.*

They are always thinking about pleasure. His eyebrow arched in surprised agitation as he cautioned, ‘Nothing is what it appears. The same is true with Le Comte.’ Caroline found his candour attractive, she adjusted her corset seductively, and the driver – embarrassed by her sensuality, cast his gaze to the ground.

He must like me as I do for him.

He motioned the horses onward and lamented, *do not be fooled by the charming creature.*

The tension (as it seemed to Caroline) dissipated when the carriage reached the moonlit château of white stone. Standing at its entrance was Maldoror, Le Comte de Lautréamont, whose seductive eyes compelled her to come closer. In time, those eyes would hypnotise her to do what he required – to sit still and be quiet – if she ventured to act out of line, the consequences that followed were harsh. Caroline could not resist as her body was directed along a mesmeric current to its source, and the closer she got, the more delighted she became. *If I wanted to, I could not stop. I am a stranger to myself.* Flashing his white, sharp teeth at the doe, he grimaced. For a moment, she saw his face display a map of insincerity. Each furrow revealed someone who was not candid, let alone courteous, but cunning and callous. *How predictable, she is not resisting, yet I sense an awareness tainted with apprehension.* His gaze penetrated her soul. So, *Mathieu must have warned her.* Disarming the girl of any worries, he reached out and caressed her hand. ‘I hope you enjoyed the journey?’

Speechless, Caroline nodded. As a hunter studies the doe on how best to kill it, Lautréamont followed the outline of her supple body, the way it was breathing in bursts. Yet he was intrigued by what lay behind her eyes, whether there was a maelstrom of abhorrence and attraction towards him. *I love the internal conflict in people. Never do I grow tired of it.*

‘Did you chat with Mathieu?’ She blushed, causing him to snicker, ‘Ah, mademoiselle, you must believe nothing he says.’

‘How is he untruthful?’ she asked, suppressing a whimper.

‘Mathieu’s a rake, unlike me...he would say anything, feigning love, or desire for marriage, to get hold of your money.’

As if carved from stone, his smooth skin glistened in the moonlight. Such smoothness did not disturb the girl, for his preternatural powers had infected her with the deadly disease of desire. Instead of resisting, she welcomed the touch of his hand on the back of her neck with a gasp. Although she imagined with terror that same hand wrapped around her throat, she continued to listen.

‘He’s interested in wealth rather than beauty,’ said Le Comte de Lautréamont, who was delighted with what his act of deceit was engendering in the forlorn girl – powerlessness.

The hoots of an owl interrupted his pontification and likewise unsettled the woman, who sensed a strange sensation stir within her soul as if it were desiccating from his attention. The more uncomfortable and desolate the woman had become by his feigned compassion, the greater Lautréamont obtained an occult hold with which to control and likewise nourish his sick soul from the now weeping woman. ‘He couldn’t love you as I do. He doesn’t appreciate a beautiful woman as I do.’ With no sense of shame, he drained the girl’s strength by asking, ‘Do you wish to fall prey to a fortune hunter?’

The coldness of the night enveloped her. When the owl hooted again, she jumped, and her terror resurfaced.

‘Mathieu isn’t that sort of man.’ She gasped, for her bodice felt like a restraint jacket.

He rejoined acerbically, ‘Yes, Caroline, that’s what he is.’ The perfume of putrefaction on his clothes caused Caroline to move away, but his bewitching eyes drew her back. ‘Why in God’s name, are you defending him?’

Even though Caroline did not know why she was championing Mathieu – a man she scarcely knew – she was determined to be correct in her estimation. Defiant, she countered, ‘He isn’t a rake, as you described him.’

The bushes behind them rustled, causing the girl to look back to where the sound emanated, and as she did so, Lautréamont’s eyes turned malevolent. But before the tempest of violence was to be enacted, they changed to a cool calm the instant she turned to face him. She did not sense this malice but deluded herself into believing that he, like Mathieu, was good, and she foolishly said, ‘I sense integrity in Mathieu.’ Again, his breath invited uncertainty into her conscience, for her quivering lips wanted to say, ‘Unlike you.’ Instead, she pushed him away, and asked, ‘What secrets do you possess, Lautréamont?’

‘Ah, I know how men operate.’ Her heart throbbed with a mixture of distress and delight. Sensing this amalgam of emotions, Lautréamont drew close, and said *sotto voce*, ‘They inject their poison into weak-willed women, who welcome the falsehoods and niceties as a distraction from their fate to marry and produce progeny.’

‘I welcome it with all my heart.’

‘Don’t you wish for something better?’ His breath drew the warmth from her cheek. ‘Don’t you wish to transcend time?’ His eyes were brilliant before returning to their cold state. ‘To escape ageing... to escape death... for that is why I brought you here.’

She scoffed, ‘Where is this fountain of youth of which you speak?’

He said in a whisper, 'Come with me, and you'll discover it.'

'No!' Startled, she saw two gleaming eyes amidst a thicket of trees. So strange were the eyes. They seemed to her human, but also animal. Whatever they were, Caroline was afraid, yet also curious to discover what creature they belonged to, so she asked, 'Did you see it, Lautréamont?' He discredited what she saw with a laugh, which annoyed the girl who said vociferously, 'Your madness is poisonous. It is affecting me more than you might imagine.'

He knew what she had seen, but rather than tell her the truth, he dissembled his knowledge with a cryptic response, 'Only by giving in to curiosity will it elevate you above men.' His hand caressed her neck. 'For your sake, don't resist me.' He whispered in her ear, 'Are you brave? Will you come with me and drink from the fountain of immortality?' She felt his lips on her cheek. 'If not, *adieu*.'

... The filament of this memory was disturbed by the alarm on his iPhone booming into life. Adam wiped the sleep from his eyes, lumbered to the bathroom to have a piss and a shower. As the warm water wiped away the sweat from his overheated body, he knew today would be a day where he had to satisfy his publisher, Sam Sears, with a new novel. Over twenty-one years, Adam had managed, against all the odds, to achieve a level of respect and recognition in the literary community. His first novel, *Epiphany of Life*, was a commercial and critical success, yet he was questioning the quality and quantity of his fictional output... In addition to his uncertainty, Sears was wondering whether Adam would write a horror novel: not your usual run-of-the-mill ghost or vampire story, but something new and terrifying. As he turned off the taps, stepped out of the shower and towelled himself dry, he gazed into the mirror. 'What scares me?'

He opened the medicine cabinet. In front of him was the familiar bottle of olanzapine; the white powdery pills managed his schizophrenia, which, despite the pressures of life, kept him sane and stable. *What scares me*, he thought, *would be to pour the drug down the sink. Without it, I will be screwed up. I will not know what is real or imagined.* Afraid, he closed the cabinet; he could not chance it: no matter the creative possibilities it may generate. He smiled at his reflection and said, 'I can't do that.'

Nevertheless, the dream he had had the previous night was so strange, but so familiar that it could be crafted into a story. As he picked up his toothbrush and put a dab of toothpaste on it, he wondered, *how could it be done?* He knew how to release the demons from hell – to stop taking the little, white saviours. In the process, he could write without fear of censure from the critics and especially from Sam Sears, who was about to telephone him now.

The phone bellowed. For a few seconds, Adam was unaware, so lost in his thoughts were he that its heaviness smothered the life out of him. It was when Adam regained control that the noise registered. ‘Fuck! It’s gone to voicemail,’ Adam waited for the voicemail to be recorded, then punched in the numbers to retrieve the message and listened:

‘It’s Sam. Adam, get your arse over to my office. I got great news.’

Puzzled by what his publisher was referring to, he got dressed so fast that his black polo shirt was inside out, exposing the clothing’s *Ralph Lauren* label. As Adam drove his red BMW to Sears’s offices, he smiled, for whatever this news was, it was monumental because the intonation of Sears’s voice indicated more money than Adam reasoned, *has he sold another of my book’s film rights? If he has, then I’ll ask for another hundred thousand.* In the past, money did not seem to matter to Adam so much as it did now. Twenty-one years of triumph had corrupted him to the point – I hate to say it – that he had become a pompous dilettante whose appreciation of art was reduced to how much it could increase his coffers. Do not get me wrong, Adam was an acceptable writer who aimed for high-quality prose, but as his success accumulated, so did his pretentiousness. What he enjoyed – composing fictional brilliance – began to wane, becoming mediocre.

Even so, Adam was unaware (whether intentional) of such shortcomings, as he parked the car and entered the offices, he continued to indulge this delusion. Whiffs of music – the third movement of Vivaldi’s *Cello Concerto in E-Minor* – filled his mind with angst for former ages, but when did they happen? Twenty-one years had passed, punctuated with the highs and lows of life, and all that remained was a heart of indifference – even callousness. It was these emotions Adam was afraid of releasing. He could not face the censure from the critics, not to mention, his fans, who demanded more from him. Such expectations drained him to where he had nothing to give except trite tales that generated money. What he wanted, above all, was to write a masterpiece. Adam hoped these anxieties would be dissolved into something more appealing – enlightenment. As he entered Sears’s office, Adam thought, *I will not be a failure. I can do this.*

Sam half-smiled, pointing to a chair in which the writer sat. Sam blurted, ‘What makes you so sure you can write a horror novel?’ Adam was speechless, unable to articulate that he

was determined to try. Therefore, the writer sat and listened to the publisher, who pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and said, 'My wife will have a heart attack if she knew I am still smoking, so it'll be our secret.' He lit it and took a drag. 'Horror is something you've never done.' Smoke poured from his nostrils like a demon. 'I don't think your audience will like it.'

Did he not want me to write a scary story? I thought he wanted me to, was not that the point of our meeting today? Damn it. I will prove him and my fans wrong. Adam now found his words, 'How could you be so certain they'll hate it? I write because it is a compulsion... it drives me... I have no control....'

'All authors say the same thing...', his voice changed to concern, 'but in your case, it could destroy you.' He noticed Adam's shirt was inside out, but instead of drawing attention, he asked, 'When were you last unwell?'

Once more, Adam was speechless, for it had been a while since he was hospitalised. The memory of being ill enabled him to calculate the date confidently: 'It was February 10th, 1997... Six years before the publication of my first novella.'

'For twenty-one years, you've been stable, but if you indulge in the world of horror, it could drive you mad.'

'I promise you it won't. My medication has worked all these years. I shan't stop taking my little, white saviours.' Sears looked at him with disbelief. 'Don't you believe me? I have never let you down, nor have you, so let me try. If you think it will damage my health and reputation, then you can put the manuscript in a safe, and once I've recovered....'

He reached out his hand and said, 'You're a stubborn bastard, Adam.' Sam Sears knew Adam was piss-weak. They shook hands. The doubt that had dogged Adam was for now abated. 'Ah, before you leave to write, I want you to sign the film rights....'

'To which book?'

'United Pictures wants exclusivity for all of them.' Adam's face flushed, which caused the publisher to chuckle, 'I'm surprised at you, Adam. However, the company's chief, Monsieur Lautréamont, wants to meet you at his château.'

That is the name as in my dream. I must make up an excuse not to go... Adam stuttered, 'I cannot... besides, I need time to write... and this trip will disrupt my schedule....'

'I had a feeling you'd say that.' Adam's face diminished in its radiant hue, so he dissimulated his feelings with a tense smile. Oblivious to the author's anxieties, Sears said casually, 'I asked Lautréamont if you could stay for two months at his château.' Adam's smile ached from pretending to be happy. Let me be clear, it overjoyed him to have more money in his account, but the prospect of going halfway around the world to a stranger's place was

terrifying him. Besides, he listened to Sears, who said enthusiastically, ‘He was more than happy to oblige. What is more, Lautréamont told me, he’s been following your career and believes you’ll write a masterpiece at his château.’

What a fool Adam was: his vanity had triumphed over any semblance to protect oneself from danger. Unaware – unlike you, the spirit whose presence will dictate his fate – Adam pondered, *Oh well, it cannot hurt. If this executive believes in me, I cannot let him down. Think of the praise I will receive. My self-esteem compels me to go to this man’s castle.* Waiting for a response, Sears made a coughing noise, which snapped the writer from his internal monologue. Adam smiled and said, ‘I haven’t been to France for a while, so I’ll go.’ The publisher took a contract from his desk, and handed it to Adam, who smirked, ‘Where do I sign?’ He put pen to paper, and as he signed it, he asked, ‘What’s Lautréamont’s first name?’

‘Maldoror.’

‘What an unusual name....’

Piqued by curiosity, the writer asked for more information about this mysterious man. Sears said, ‘He’s innocuous and charming. He’s what people refer to as a Renaissance Man. Besides gaining a business degree from Harvard, he’s also a musician.’

My God, Maldoror is the man I have been yearning for all my life. Adam had the nerve to inquire whether Maldoror was the same age as him and, more importantly, handsome, all to which the publisher answered, ‘Maldoror was born in 1977,’ and feeling uncomfortable about evaluating a man’s looks, Sears added, ‘Many consider Lautréamont good looking. His voice sounds as if he is attractive. They say his eyes lure them in wondrous ways. I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.’

‘Perhaps he’s so handsome people feel compelled to obey.’ Adam imagined this Apollonian creature in whose image he would find perfection. He smiled and said shamelessly, ‘Anyway, I’ll Google him to see for myself.’

‘Fat chance, Adam. There is nothing,’ Sears snickered and said, ‘except for an eighteenth-century portrait of Le Comte de Lautréamont. If Lautréamont is related to the man in the painting, you will have nothing to worry about. He’s the type you like.’

Irritated that the publisher had manipulated the author’s opinion of himself and what that was, he thought it anyway, *Sears believes I am an airhead.* To save face, Adam said, ‘There’ll be a photo if he went to Harvard. Unless – unless he is an impostor. How do you know what you have told me about Maldoror is true?’

‘All I know is that the studio is a player in Hollywood. The info about Lautréamont was on their website.’ Adam at the door when Sam muttered, ‘Anyway, we can’t back down now.’

Adam felt this sounded like both an appeal and a threat. He asked, 'Why not? Are you hiding something?'

'I'll tell you another time.'

What has he gotten me involved in? Adam clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the door handle. 'Tell me, Sam.'

'It's nothing....'

'Tell me now.'

Sam forced a smile, 'All you need to worry about is writing that magnificent manuscript.' Adam frowned and turned to leave. Realising that if he didn't offer some solid reassurance, Adam wouldn't take the deal, Sam took a drag of his cigarette and said, 'All the years I've known you, have I ever deceived you?'

Adam heard the air of desperation in Sam's voice. He paused in the doorway. 'Well, no... But there's always a first time for anything. And right now, I think you're bending the truth.' The door slammed behind Adam as he left. Sam cursed, stubbed out his cigarette and dashed into the hall. Halfway down the corridor, the staunch publisher grabbed his writer and pushed him back into his office.

'Two weeks ago, United Pictures....,' he lit another smoke, 'Transferred ten million dollars to our company's account.'

'Is it that much?'

Sears nodded.

Both men paused in deep contemplation. After a silence, Adam resumed, 'Maldoror wants something from you....' afraid of uttering the words, yet he said it anyway, 'he wants me.' The flame of fury ignited in his soul, 'Have I become a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder?'

'Well, no.' Sam grabbed Adam's arm. 'Aren't you inquisitive?'

'Yes... but I don't want to die like a cat to fulfil such curiosity. Lautréamont could be an axe-wielding maniac who will chop me up... and... and bury me, God knows where.'

'Save your melodrama for your novels, Adam. Besides...'

Adam arched his eyebrow with disgust as he asked, 'Besides what? As I am determined not to go, what could you say to change my mind?'

'I know you better than yourself....'

'Like hell.'

Sam paused before saying weakly, 'Well, you're instinctual....'

'Look where my hunches have led me....,' said Adam with disbelief.

‘To fame and fortune? Any author would give everything to be put in the same situation as you, Adam.’ Ashamed of having complained about his fortuity, Adam remained taciturn, yet his mind was a whirlpool of self-doubt and self-hate. Adam clenched his jaw. Sam noticed this and said, ‘Besides, your impulses drive you as they do for all of us... and if we did not follow them, then we would not evolve.’ The writer’s reluctance surprised him, but he was astonished by the revolt directed at him. He thought Adam was piss-weak a moment ago, yet now he did not know what to think. So, Sears had to handle him with care; thus, he said with empathy, ‘Look, I know you are afraid... but you can harness those feelings.’

He is right. He has never doubted my ability until now. But life is dangerous that if I go, I may not return... I cannot chance it... do not be weak ... After mulling over these irrational beliefs, Adam said in a muffled voice, ‘To be honest with you, my instincts are split between staying and going.’

‘Only by leaving will your curiosity be sated.’ He drew Adam close. ‘Don’t you wish to explore the enigma that is Lautréamont?’ Sam knew his next words would stroke the writer’s *amour-propre*¹. ‘Besides, it could result in a horror story.’ Although this supposition ran counter to Adam’s ambivalence, his eyes sparkled with the realisation that what Sears had said seemed logical. Sears asked, ‘Isn’t that what you want?’

‘Yes.’

Sears applied more weight by reiterating, ‘Lautréamont’s château may prove a desirable backdrop... its splendour may stimulate your imagination.’

Adam slammed his fist on the table. ‘Shut up and stop banging on about it.’ He felt the restraint jacket wrapping around his mind. Doubt smothered him, on the verge of experiencing what he had dreaded for a long time, a panic attack. ‘Please give me time to think it through?’ Another sensation surged through his mind. *Only my little, white saviours could ease this.* ‘Don’t force me into an untenable position because it’ll be me who suffers, not you.’

With that parting shot ringing in Sears’s ears, Adam lumbered out of his office with a belief he had triumphed over the publisher. In hindsight, these flawed attitudes would be used against the author. Arrogance and avarice were Adam’s Achilles’ heels, and it were these weaknesses he tried to eradicate from his conscience. Unfortunately, as he exited the building and got into his car, Adam was smothered with the thought, *I am a third-rate writer. I cannot write. I am a failure.* No matter the literary success, Adam could not bear to be considered *passé*². Yet if he did not leave for France, he would become that: a flame whose brilliance no

¹ Self-esteem.

² Past one’s prime.

longer lit the world in which he and his characters dwelled. Before turning the ignition key, Adam took a deep breath, reached for his iPhone, dialled Sears's number, but before it connected, he pressed the disconnect button. Adam turned the ignition key, and the BMW sped off.

Buildings, trees, and people were blurs of light and shade where Adam was severed from the rational world. Lost in his imagination, he thought he saw two gleaming eyes in the car's rear-view mirror. He heard an alluring voice whisper, 'Come to me, come to me, Adam. Drink from the spring of immortality.' Adam could feel a hot breath against his ear. He felt an energy surge through his body. Every hair was erect. Again, the voice coerced, 'Adam, come to me. You will never be alone.' Oh, how Adam ached to know from what man this captivating voice came. Adam felt he knew its identity but was apprehensive about uttering it for fear of being awoken from this phantasmagoria.

Without warning, the radio blared, *If it's the last thing we ever do, We Gotta Get out Of This Place*, an Animals' song Adam hadn't heard in a while. Unnerved by these eerie events, Adam put his foot down on the brake, and the car stopped with a jolt, 'What the hell.' Adam exclaimed.

For a moment, Adam was trying to call back that enthralling entity, the source of his creative and sexual passions, and yet, as he wanted to evoke it, he was made impotent. Exhausted, he sobbed, 'It is Lautréamont who's calling me. It is he to whom I must go.'