

Alex Christofi was born in Dorset and read English at the University of Oxford. As well as working as an editor, he writes occasional essays and reviews. His first novel *Glass*, also published by Serpent's Tail, was longlisted for the Desmond Elliott Prize and won the Betty Trask Prize.

PRAISE FOR *GLASS*

'Charming and funny . . . there's enough here to show you the author has plenty more to offer and that, like his hero, he definitely has his heart in the right place' *Daily Mail*

'Christofi's writing really does gleam with wit, inventiveness and an offbeat charm' Kate Saunders, *The Times*

'[An] impressive, tightly paced coming-of-age story . . . a multi-layered story that follows one man's refracted path through life's prism' *Financial Times*

'Entertaining and affecting' *Herald*

'A moving, funny coming-of-age tale' *Independent*

'A thoughtful, comic look at an ordinary life lived well' *Guardian*

'A rare novel . . . rollicking' *Dazed & Confused*

'A tale about growing up, one that's as funny as it is touching. A talent to keep an eye on' *Shortlist*

'A confident and frequently adroit first novel . . . enjoyably mercurial and quixotic' *Morning Star*

‘Charming, quirky, unexpected . . . Christofi is a writer to watch. Witty and incredibly inventive’ *Saga*

‘A promising debut from an intriguing new voice’ *We Love This Book*

‘With a first novel this good, great things are surely in store for Alex Christofi’ *BookHugger*

‘A confident, swaggering entrance into the literary world . . . Skilfully swinging from brilliantly funny to dark morbidity, Christofi displays considerable mastery of his craft . . . An accomplished opening effort from a writer well worth keeping an eye on’ *Hot Press*

‘Günter Glass, with his flaws and his limitations, and his belief in the better part of human nature, is a great pleasure to spend time with. I was moved and amused and ultimately comforted by Günter’s sky-reaching spirit and his quest for deeper meaning in a world of transparencies’ Stephen Kelman, author of *Pigeon English*

‘*Glass* is a brilliant novel with a first-person narrative voice that’s so natural and understated, I found myself re-reading passages in order to relive emotional experiences that were happening as a result of the gentle, but Nabokovian precision of Alex Christofi’s prose’ Simon Van Booy, author of *The Illusion of Separateness*

‘*Glass* was such a pleasure to read, funny, beautiful and perceptive. I found Günter a gentle, endearing hero, a unique little fish in an extremely moving bildungsroman. It struck a deep note about the fleeting nature of existence’ Sara Crowe, author of *Campari for Breakfast*

LET US BE TRUE

ALEX CHRISTOFI



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Paris, 1992

It would be easy to believe, Ralf thought, looking down at the river, that time was in the moment, falling and evading the hands like a down feather. But time was a process of fulfilment: time gathered. One left each moment behind and it rested there. How often had he walked past this spot without knowing he would be standing here today, with all these gathered moments, leaning over the stone wall to watch the river boats?

I

RALF, Paris and Deauville, March–April 1958

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Ralf first met Elsa when she began punching him in the head. It didn't much hurt, since he had been drinking for a couple of hours already, but she had a surprisingly sharp aim. It would certainly have been preferable to begin with names.

It had happened in Jacques' bar, of all places, where Ralf had settled in for the night. Jacques was a barman of the ancient stock: gruff, suspicious of newcomers, his fingernails so dirty one could barely make out the lunula, his dishcloth employed to ensure an even distribution of grease across his glasses. But to be recognised and accepted in a place like Jacques' bar was a beautiful thing. One's glass got bigger and refilled itself; on warm evenings, one might doze in the corner for hours without being disturbed.

Ralf had sat at his usual table. Back in his student days, he used to drink in the Two Mandarins, celebrity-spotting, when he still thought he might complete his doctorate. The university had made the mistake of handing Ralf a lucrative sideline in the translation of scientific papers from the German (the most interesting research still being done by Germans, even after everything). But Ralf had discovered there was easier money still in tutoring language students at Berlitz, and he had set up a new life, albeit a temporary one, in the Marais. The buildings

were condemned, which made them cheap, and it was the perfect place to get by while he formed a plan. He had his little maid's attic, bread and wine. Of course, the temporary became the permanent if you didn't mind waiting, and Ralf was beginning to see life as an accrual of the probable in the face of the possible.

About an hour before the attack, another of the regulars, Fouad, had woken up, smoothed down his moustache, wrapped his sleeve around his hand and screwed the ceiling bulb back into its fixture. Ralf suspected he did not have an apartment at the moment, difficult as it was to find a landlord willing to take an Algerian. In the few hours between finishing one job and starting the next, he would walk the streets, stopping at Jacques' to doze for an hour or two before the bar closed and he found himself back out among the rubbish and the trees. He always carried a copy of the day's paper with him, which lent him a certain urbanity, but which likely doubled as bedding.

Ralf made no attempt to conceal himself when Fouad's eyes met his own. Fouad waved him over. Once they had broken into a good bottle of wine, they set about solving the various political crises dogging the Fourth Republic, starting with the limpness of the coalition government and moving quickly on, as Fouad often did, to the war in Algeria, which he insisted on calling the 'war of independence'. Ralf fell back on his usual position, arguing that it was important to stand together, but political aims were poorly served by violence, implying as it did a lack of confidence in one's arguments. Fouad argued that the object was not to force the government's opinion, but to force them to listen. At the end of the bottle, they still hadn't found a solution that was acceptable to all parties, so Ralf went to the bar for another.

Jacques made him wait while he went to the cellar to replace a barrel, lifting the trapdoor beneath his feet and disappearing

through the hole. A handbag sat on the counter. There was only one woman in the bar, so Ralf picked up the bag and went over to her.

‘You left your bag at the counter,’ he said.

She looked at him with affable bewilderment.

‘Not mine. Here’s mine.’ She hefted her own on the seat next to her.

Ralf went back to the bar and opened the bag. Jacques was cursing as he rolled the new barrel up each step. Ralf found a lipstick; a bag of other assorted make-up; a diary, which he put to one side (it didn’t have a name, but it did give times and places); a single deadlock key; a compact mirror. Sticking plasters; aspirin. A purse had sunk to the bottom. If he could get a name, or better still, an address . . .

Something hit him quite hard on the side of the head. He stumbled as he was punched a second time. The top of his ear stung. Someone was tugging at the purse, which he clutched tighter by instinct. A woman was screaming for him to let go.

‘Thief! Give it to me!’

Ralf let go just as Jacques shoved the barrel up the last step.

‘Call the police!’ the woman shouted. ‘This man was trying to steal my bag.’

‘What? Ralf?’ said the barman. ‘He won’t even let me round up his change.’

She looked across at him. He had one arm half raised to defend himself. She seemed to be deciding whether or not to keep hitting him.

‘I was just trying—’ he began. She burst out laughing. ‘I was looking for your name,’ he finished limply.

‘Elsa,’ she said, holding out her hand. Behind her, Fouad was putting on his coat. He grinned at Ralf, tucked his newspaper under his arm, and slipped out.

‘Can I . . . offer you a drink?’ Ralf asked.

She smiled.

‘I just punched you in the head.’

‘Yes, and now I need a drink.’

‘All right. But I’ll pay,’ she said.

‘No, don’t worry.’

‘I insist. It’s your reward for finding my bag.’ She stood next to him at the bar, smiling to herself. She had not apologised, as such. Jacques’ expression implied he didn’t care who paid, as long as they did it quickly.

They went back to Ralf’s table and she took off her gloves, throwing one leg over the other.

‘I hope you’re not staying to keep me company?’ Ralf asked. ‘You seemed to have been on your way somewhere?’

‘Only home, and I don’t want to go back there.’ She rested a cheek on the palm of her hand, one finger stroking the down above her ear. ‘Why, have I interrupted your plans?’

‘No, I’m not up to much at all tonight. Unless you count smoking.’

‘Smoking isn’t an activity. It’s an ellipsis between activities.’

Ralf entertained the possibility she was being forward. He was terrible at flirting, because he hated taking risks.

‘Well, then, I’m free all evening,’ he said cautiously.

‘Good. Then you must take me for dinner.’ She drained her wine, stood and walked over to the phone booth. He drank as much of his own as he could manage, having only just sat down, grabbed her bag for the second time that evening, and threw a bleary smile at Jacques.

‘Let him starve, then. I can’t be there every moment of the—’

She saw Ralf, cupped her hand over the receiver and turned her back to him, as if the phone were a child and he a grenade. Her green overcoat hung from her shoulders as on a clothing rail, taut only where it was cinched in at the waist, making an illusion of her body. Ralf somehow hadn’t noticed, while they

were talking, how small she was, almost malnourished – she had seemed imposing at first.

He looked outside. Jo Goldenberg's had full covers. He stood waiting, holding her bag by a corner, in case holding it too naturally implied ownership. The smell of leeks and boiled meat wafted down from one of the apartments above. A couple of metres away a thin, grey cat watched him as it licked at a gutter. Holding the door open, he heard the metal of the phone cradle ring out dully as the phone was slammed.

'Let's get out of the Marais,' said Elsa desperately. 'Find somewhere fun. It's so stifling in these narrow little streets.' She was already off towards the river.

She led him off to the Left Bank and, from there, to the Tour d'Argent, a restaurant that had been doing very well without Ralf's patronage for several hundred years.

'May I take your coat, madame?' asked the waiter on their way in.

'No, you may not,' she replied.

'We have a cloakroom, if you feel it would be convenient?'

'I shall bear that in mind.'

She strode off in the direction of a window table, leaving Ralf and the waiter to hurry after her, Ralf shrugging helplessly at the waiter as if to confirm that she was not under his control.

The table was set with silverware and thick Egyptian cotton, three lit candles casting a warm, buttery light over Elsa's face and chest as she sat across from him.

'Our speciality is the pressed duck,' informed the waiter.

'What's special about it?' asked Elsa.

'The duck is eight weeks old, fattened for the last fifteen days and then strangled to retain the blood. It is a great delicacy.'

The waiter upended their gleaming wine glasses, and presented Ralf with a four-hundred-page wine menu. Ralf wondered how he'd come to be sitting here. He felt a surge in his

stomach, as if he were falling backwards off a wall and was about to crack his skull against the earth. The colours here were nothing like the faded interiors of the Paris he knew.

‘Pick something that goes with duck,’ she said.

‘I don’t know what goes with duck.’

Elsa held up an arm, not taking her eyes off him, and waved her hand about. The sommelier arrived.

‘Has sir decided what he will be drinking tonight?’

‘We would like something that makes duck taste nice,’ Ralf said, hoping she might acknowledge the challenge.

‘What year were you born?’ she asked.

‘What?’

‘What year?’

‘1927.’

‘God, are you that old?’

Elsa passed the heavy menu to the waiter.

‘A nice red from 1927. And squash us a duck.’

The waiter obediently took up the book and went gliding off in the direction of the cellar. Ralf suppressed a smile. Elsa seemed to have sensed Ralf’s discomfort, and was puncturing the waiter’s superciliousness for his amusement.

From here, Ralf could see the people on the road below, the river, the Île Saint-Louis and Notre-Dame. How could he hope to reciprocate in a place like this, when even the view seemed to hold more interest than he could? He didn’t even have the money to pay for the food, let alone the wine. She must know that, if not by where she found him, then by his clothes. But he had set his course – he might as well enjoy it. Browsing the other diners, he spotted one man with slick dark hair, large round ears and a preposterous moustache.

‘Is that Dalí?’ he muttered.

‘Which one?’ She swivelled her whole person, putting a hand on the back of her chair for leverage.

‘Salvador Dalí.’

‘I mean which one is he?’

‘The one with the bloody Dalí moustache.’

‘Oh. Yes, it is.’

‘Aren’t you interested?’

‘Not really. Melt a clock, do a couple of statues, put them in a desert and call it something idiotic like “The Perception of Loss”. He’s hardly Da Vinci, is he?’ She unfolded her napkin. ‘And anyway, I thought he lived in Spain.’

The sommelier returned to present a dusty wine bottle.

‘I’m sure it’s fine, thank you,’ Ralf said.

The sommelier removed the cork, a conductor giving the first flourish of his baton, and poured a splash into Ralf’s glass. Ralf glanced up at him, and at Elsa, who looked ready to burst out laughing. He opted for a quick half-mouthful.

‘Yes. Thank you.’

The sommelier started to pour, holding the bottle as an extension of his forearm, taking care not to touch the glass.

‘Oh, just leave the bottle,’ Elsa said. ‘We haven’t got all night.’

He knew he should be appalled but he thrilled at her rudeness. She seemed to acknowledge quite naturally that Ralf would betray himself to be with her. And it was true: he wanted to take her part. He felt a silent allegiance developing, a softening of the boundary he had put up around *me* and *mine*, the admittance of *us* and *ours*.

The waiter came pushing a trolley, his white apron covering his legs. He lifted a cloche to reveal two plates, on which sat two perfect duck breasts, pouring on a thick, dark, almost purple sauce. Then he spooned two soft little potatoes onto each plate and bid them a good appetite. It was done. The sauce was poured, the wine unstopped. He estimated the meal would cost him eight thousand francs. Perhaps they would be trusting enough to accept a cheque?

‘Eat it while it’s hot,’ commanded Elsa. He looked over at Dalí, who had one eyebrow raised at his dining partner and was dabbing at his mouth with a napkin, then out at the Seine, which ran off towards the rest of the city and the Tower. Overhead, the clouds bruised and cracked. There was a brief flash of lightning, the thunder inaudible behind the glass. He was in the world’s oldest restaurant, eating duck with a stranger who had just punched him in the head. The multiplier effect of probabilities necessary to bring all this about made his presence here as good as impossible. Certainly these things happened in the world, but never to him. These last few years, he had not lived every day anew but had worked towards perfecting the same day, over and over, interested only in subtle variations. Now, here, tonight, this beautiful woman had broken the cycle, without ceremony, quietly leading him away to a new day, with no intimation of what might come next.

He lifted his silver fork and pulled away the tender flesh. It was soft, almost melting into nothing as it landed on his tongue, and yet the flavour was rich, earthy and sweet. Like plums and gravy. He rolled his wine, watching it cling to the glass. It had sat for his whole lifetime untouched in a shadowless rack under the soil, trapped with a tiny bubble of the air that had existed before his father had died and they had fled Hamburg, before England, the war, the toil of learning to speak French not just correctly, but gracefully.

He took a sip. The flavour shuddered down the sides of his tongue, so tart it was almost sour, fighting against the heavy splendour of the duck.

‘Are you crying?’ asked Elsa suspiciously. She lowered her glass, from which she had been about to drink.

‘Of course not,’ he said, blinking. ‘My wine caught in my throat.’ She did not look convinced and held his eyes in hers as she drank her wine.