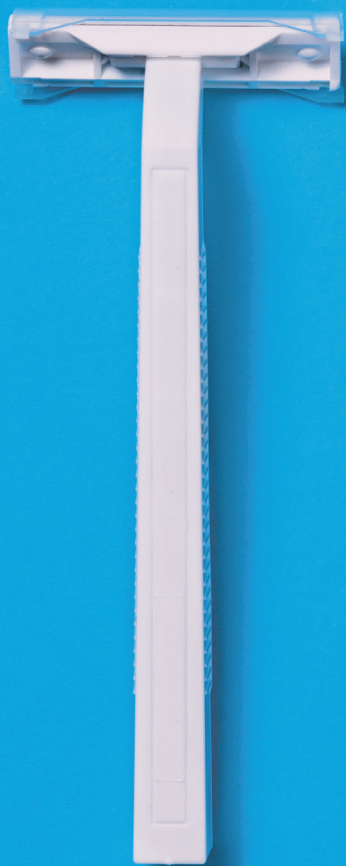


# The Moustache

Emmanuel Carrère



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## Emmanuel Carrère

Translated by Lanie Goodman

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Vintage  
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English translation © Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988

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First published in France with the title  
*La Moustache* by Gallimard in 1986  
This edition published by Vintage in 2024

[penguin.co.uk/vintage](http://penguin.co.uk/vintage)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library

ISBN 9781529949087

Typeset in 11.42/16.2pt Stempel Garamond by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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‘What would you say if I shaved off my moustache?’ Agnes, who was on the living room couch flipping through a magazine, laughed and replied, ‘That might be a good idea.’

He smiled. Small islands of shaving cream sprinkled with little black hairs were floating on the water’s surface in the bathtub, where he had been lingering. His beard was heavy and grew back quickly, which meant he had to shave twice a day if he didn’t want to have five o’clock shadow. Upon waking, before his shower, he quickly performed this task in front of the mirror, as a series of mechanical gestures, without ceremony. In the evening this unpleasant chore became a moment for relaxation; he’d be careful to use the shower to run the bathwater, so the steam wouldn’t cloud the mirrors surrounding the tub. He’d prepare a drink, kept within arm’s reach, then lavishly spread the shaving cream on his chin, going back and forth with the razor, making sure not to come too close to his moustache, which he would later trim with a pair of scissors.

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For better or for worse, this evening rite had an important place in his daily equilibrium, like the one and only cigarette he allowed himself after lunch, ever since he'd stopped smoking. Since the end of his adolescence, the calm pleasure that he drew from this ritual hadn't changed; his work schedule had even accentuated it, and when Agnes affectionately made fun of the sacred aspect of his shaving sessions, he answered that they were, in fact, his form of Zen exercise. It was the only time he had left for meditation, self-knowledge, and the spiritual world, given his trivial but consuming activities as a young, urban professional. 'Yuppie,' Agnes would chide, tenderly mocking him.

He'd finished, for the time being. With half-closed eyes and all of his muscles relaxed, he scrutinized his face in the mirror. It amused him to exaggerate his expression of misty beatitude, then to change his look into efficient and determined virility. A trace of shaving cream stuck to the corner of his moustache. He'd only talked about shaving it off as a joke, the way he sometimes talked about cutting his hair – usually fairly long and combed back – very short. 'Very short? How disgusting.' Agnes inevitably protested. 'Besides, with your moustache and leather jacket, you'd look like a fag.'

'But I could also cut off my moustache.'

'I like you better with it,' she concluded. Actually she'd never known him without one. They had been married for five years.

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‘I’m going downstairs to pick up a few things at the supermarket,’ she said, sticking her head through the half-opened bathroom door. ‘We have to leave in about a half hour, so don’t take all day.’

He heard the swish of fabric from the jacket she was slipping on, the jingle of the key ring being swept up from the coffee table, the front door open, then close again. She could have turned on the answering machine, he thought, so I won’t have to get out of the bathtub dripping wet if the phone rings. He took a gulp of whiskey, turned the thick square glass around in his hand, and enjoyed the tinkling of the ice cubes – what was left of them. Soon he would get out, dry off, get dressed . . .

In five minutes, he compromised, taking pleasure in this little respite. He pictured Agnes making her way toward the supermarket, her heels clicking on the sidewalk, then patiently waiting on line in front of the cashier, without letting any of this trekking around affect her good mood or the vivacity of her gaze. She was always noticing bizarre little details, not necessarily strange in their own right, but she knew how to make use of them in the stories she invented. He smiled again. And what if, when she came back upstairs, he surprised her by actually shaving off his moustache? She’d declared five minutes ago that it might be a good idea. But she couldn’t have taken his question seriously, not any more than usual. She liked him with a moustache, and besides, so did he, although after all this time

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he was no longer accustomed to a clean-shaven face; there was really no way of knowing. In any event, if they didn't like his new look, he could always let his moustache grow back. It would take ten to fifteen days, and at least he would have had the experience of seeing himself differently. Besides, Agnes was always changing her hairstyle without giving him any warning. He complained about it, made fun of her, and then as soon as he started to get used to it, she grew tired of it and appeared with a new haircut. Wasn't it his turn? It would be amusing.

He laughed to himself, like a child about to play a prank. Reaching out, he put the empty glass down on the vanity and picked up a pair of scissors for the major part of his work. It immediately occurred to him that this clump of hair might clog the bathtub drain. All it took was a handful of hair and then what a production, you had to pour one of those cleaning products down the drain that would stink for hours. He took the toothbrush glass, which he placed on the bathtub rim; then precariously poised, he leaned toward the mirror and went about trimming off the bulk of his moustache. The hair fell to the bottom of the glass in compact little tufts, which were very black against the whitish tartar deposit. He worked slowly, to avoid nicking himself. A moment later, he looked up and inspected his handiwork.

While he was at it, clowning around, he could have stopped right there, leaving his upper lip decorated with

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this patchy vegetation, thriving in parts, sparse in others. As a child he'd never understood why male adults didn't make use of the comic potential of their facial hair. For instance, why should a man who'd decided to sacrifice his beard necessarily do it in one fell swoop, instead of granting his friends and acquaintances, just for a day or two, the hilarious spectacle of one clean-shaven cheek and the other bearded, one half of a moustache, or sideburns shaped like Mickey Mouse ears. It would only take one stroke of the razor for this buffoonery to be corrected, after everyone had been thoroughly amused. Strange how the desire for this kind of joke had diminished with age, precisely when it had become possible. Given the same chance, he yielded to what was commonly accepted, and couldn't picture himself going to dinner in this half-mown state at Serge and Veronique's, even though they were old friends who didn't stand on ceremony. Petit-bourgeois prejudice, he sighed, and continued to snip away until the bottom of the toothbrush glass was full. That done, he could begin work with the razor.

He had to hurry; Agnes would be returning any minute. The surprise would be spoiled if he hadn't finished in time. With the joyous haste of someone wrapping a present at the last minute, he applied the shaving cream to the patch cleared of its undergrowth. The razor made a grating sound. He grimaced, but he hadn't cut himself. Fresh flecks of foam, speckled with

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black hairs, many more than before, fell into the bathtub. He started in again and soon his upper lip was even smoother than his cheeks. Nice work.

He'd taken his watch off for his bath, even though it was waterproof. According to his own estimation, the operation hadn't lasted more than six or seven minutes. While he was putting on the finishing touches, he avoided looking in the mirror in order to delay the surprise, so he could see himself the way Agnes would soon be seeing him.

He looked up. Not great. The tan he'd gotten from skiing at Easter hadn't quite worn off. In place of his moustache was a cutout rectangle of unpleasant pallor that looked fake, tacked on: a false absence of a moustache, he thought. The perverse high spirits that had made him do it hadn't quite lifted, but he already regretted his act a little. In ten days, he said to himself, the damage would be repaired. Still, he could have spared himself this silliness by doing it right before a vacation instead of afterward. That way he'd have an even tan and it would grow back more discreetly. Fewer people would know about it.

He shook his head. It didn't really matter; he wasn't going to make a big deal of it. And at least the experiment would have been worth it, to prove that he really looked better with a moustache.

Supporting himself on the rim, he got up and removed the stopper from the bathtub, which started to drain

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noisily while he wrapped himself in a towel. He was shaking a little. In front of the sink, he rubbed his cheeks with aftershave, hesitant to touch the milky spot left by his moustache. When he finally decided to go ahead and do it, the stinging made him wince. His skin hadn't come into contact with the open air in almost ten years.

He looked away from the mirror. Agnes wouldn't be long. Suddenly he discovered that he was worried about her reaction, as though he'd cheated on her and was on his way home after having spent the night out. He went into the living room, where he'd laid out the clothes he was planning to wear that night, and slipped them on hastily. Out of nervousness he pulled too hard on a shoelace, which broke. He cursed under his breath, and a vehement gurgling let him know that the bathtub had finished draining. He returned to the bathroom in his stocking feet, and contact with the wet tile floor made his toes curl up. He rinsed the inside of the bathtub until the remainder of the shaving cream – and most of all, the hair – had completely disappeared. He was about to begin scrubbing it with the cleanser that was stored under the sink, to save Agnes the trouble. But he changed his mind, he'd be behaving like an anxious criminal trying to eliminate any trace of his offense, not like an obliging husband. Instead, he emptied the glass containing the clipped hair into the white steel waste can, then rinsed it carefully, without scraping off the layer of

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tartar. He rinsed the scissors, as well, wiping them afterward so that they wouldn't rust. The childishness of this camouflage made him smile. What good was it to clean the implements of crime when the cadaver was as plain as the nose on his face?

Before returning into the living room, he glanced around the bathroom, avoiding his reflection in the mirror. Then he put on a bossa nova record from the '50s and sat down on the sofa with the distressing feeling that he was in a dentist's waiting room. He didn't know if he wanted Agnes to get back right away, or if he wanted her to be delayed, which would leave him a moment's respite to reason with himself, to put his act into proportion. It was a joke, or at worst, an unfortunate initiative; she would laugh along with him. Or else she'd proclaim herself horrified, which would also be funny.

The doorbell rang. He didn't move. A few seconds passed, then the key felt for the lock. From the sofa, where he hadn't budged, he saw Agnes push the door open with her foot and enter the hall, her arms loaded with shopping bags. Trying to gain time, he almost shouted, 'Close the door! Don't look!' He spotted his shoes on the carpet and quickly leaned over them, as if the task of putting them on could occupy him for a long time, and prevent him from showing her his face.

'You could have opened the door,' Agnes said without reproach. He was frozen in this position as she

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passed. But instead of entering the living room, she went straight toward the kitchen. Straining his ears from down the hall, he listened to the slight buzzing of the refrigerator as she opened it, and the crumpling of the paper bags as she took out her purchases. Then he heard her approaching footsteps.

‘What are you doing?’

‘I broke my shoelace,’ he muttered without looking up.

‘So change your shoes.’

She laughed and plopped down onto the sofa beside him. Sitting on the edge, his torso stiffly bent over his shoes, he took in the minute detail of their stitching without realizing what it was, and remained paralyzed by the absurdity of the situation. He must stay calm if he was to play out this joke, greet Agnes and reveal himself while making fun of her surprise. If that failed, make fun of her disapproval, but not curl himself into a ball, hoping to delay the moment that she’d see him as long as possible. He had to snap out of it quickly, get back on track. Perhaps encouraged by the slick undulations of the saxophone on the record, he stood up brusquely, turned his back to her, and walked toward the hall to the shoe closet.

‘If you really insist on wearing those,’ she called to him, ‘you can always make a knot in the shoelace until you get another pair.’

‘No. That’s okay,’ he answered, and he took out a pair of moccasins, forcing his feet into them as he stood

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in the hallway. At least there was no problem about shoelaces. He took a deep breath, touched his face, pausing on the spot where his moustache used to be. It was less startling to the touch than to the eye; Agnes would just have to stroke it a lot. He forced a smile, surprised to find that he could even manage it, shut the closet door, jamming it with the piece of cardboard that kept it from swinging open, and returned to the living room, his neck a bit stiff, his face unprotected and smiling. Agnes had turned off the stereo and was putting the record back into its sleeve.

‘We should probably get going now,’ she said, turning toward him before gently lowering the cover of the turntable. The red light went out, although he couldn’t recall having seen her push the button.

On the way down to the basement garage, she checked her makeup in the elevator mirror, then looked at him with an air of approval; but clearly this approval was directed toward his suit, not the metamorphosis, which she still hadn’t commented upon. He held her gaze, opened his mouth then shut it again, not knowing what to say. During the ride in the car, he remained silent, considering a number of opening phrases, but none of them seemed satisfactory. It was up to her to speak first, and in fact, she was speaking, recounting an anecdote about an author at the publishing house where she worked, but he was hardly listening to her, unable to

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interpret her attitude, supplying only minimal answers. Soon they approached the Odeon, where Serge and Veronique lived, and where, as usual, it turned out to be nearly impossible to park. The traffic jam obliged him to circle three times around the same block, but gave him a pretext to vent his bad mood, hitting the steering wheel with his fist, screaming, 'Shit!' to a guy honking his horn who couldn't hear him. Agnes made fun of him. Realizing he was being unpleasant, he offered to drop her off while he continued to look for a place to park. She accepted, got out near Serge and Veronique's building, crossed the street, then, as if she'd suddenly changed her mind, marched back to where he was waiting for the light to turn green. He rolled down his window, comforted by the thought that with a few tender words, she would stop teasing him; she only wanted to remind him of the automatic code to get into the building. He leaned out the window to detain her, but she was already on her way, tossing him a wink from over her shoulder that could have meant 'see you in a few minutes' or 'I love you,' or just about anything. He shifted gears, perplexed and annoyed, feeling a strong urge for a cigarette. Why was she pretending not to have noticed anything? Was it so that she could retaliate with her own surprise to the one he'd arranged for her? But that was precisely what was so strange: she hadn't seemed surprised at all, not even for a second to regain her composure and put on a straight face. He had really studied her expression

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during that moment when she first saw him, as she was putting the record back into its sleeve: no raising of the eyebrows, no fleeting look, nothing, as if she'd had all the time in the world to prepare herself for the scene that awaited her. Of course, one could claim that he'd warned her, she'd even said laughingly that it would be a good idea. But that had obviously been in jest, a false answer to what was still, to his way of thinking, a false question. It was impossible to imagine that she'd taken him seriously, that she'd gone to do her errands and said to herself, He's in the middle of shaving off his moustache. When I see him, I'll have to pretend as if it were nothing. On the other hand, her sangfroid was even less believable if she hadn't been expecting it. In any case, he decided, hats off to her. Nice job.

Despite the traffic, his irritation subsided, and consequently, his malaise. Agnes's lack of reaction, or rather the speed of her reaction, betrayed the intimate complicity that bound them, their game of trying to outdo each other and get the last word, a bantering improvisation that was to be congratulated rather than sulked over. Trying to outfox him, that was just like her, that was just like *them*, and he now felt impatient, not to elucidate a misunderstanding, but to revel in this almost telepathic connection with her and share it with their friends. Serge and Veronique were going to laugh, first at his new look, then at the practical joke Agnes had played on him; they'd laugh at his nervous irritation, which he planned to acknowledge,

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sparing no details, making himself look as if he were in a fog, and ridiculously grouchy, playing tit for tat.

Unless . . . unless his opponent, who never ran out of ideas, was one step ahead of him and intended to let Serge and Veronique in on it, insisting that they behave in the same way. He was the one, without a doubt, who'd suggested that she go upstairs alone. If he hadn't done that, she might have suggested it herself. Or, just as he did, it was only now that she'd seen how to make use of this head start. Actually, that's what he hoped, delighted to be pursuing a game in which the humor and the challenge now seemed obvious to him. He'd be disappointed if she hadn't thought of it, but of course, she must have, it was too good a chance. He imagined her in the middle of coaching Serge and Veronique at that moment, Veronique chortling with laughter, on the verge of hysteria from trying to act natural. She didn't have Agnes's acting talent – far from it – neither her aplomb nor her inclination for practical jokes. She'd give herself away instantly.

The prospect of this gag, the pleasure that he was deriving from figuring out its possible developments and snags, dissipated the uneasiness he'd felt a moment ago. Stepping back, he was surprised by his own confusion, and reproached himself for his bad mood – but no, not really, it fit right into the game. In retrospect, it almost seemed as if he'd feigned that as well. He rubbed his face, craned his neck so that he could see it in the rearview mirror. Fine, it wasn't exactly smashing, that

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mushroom-colored upper lip in the middle of his tan, but they would all joke about it, and besides, the white part would tan, the tan part would fade, especially if he were to let his moustache grow back. The only reason to fret, if he was intent on finding one, was that the guy in the car behind him had just taken the space that he'd passed because he was too busy staring at himself to notice.

Serge and Veronique were in rare form. No supporting glances, no ostentatious display of discretion, they looked him straight in the eye, just as usual. Yet he provoked them. Using the pretext of wanting to help, he managed to get Veronique alone in the kitchen and test her by complimenting her on how well she looked. She returned the compliment. Yes, he had gotten a nice tan. Yes, the weather had been beautiful. You look great – you always do. So do you. During dinner the four of them talked about skiing, work, mutual friends, new films, so naturally that the joke began to lose its novelty, like those near-perfect pastiches that look so much like the original that they generate more respect than gaiety. The game was played so well that the pleasure he'd anticipated was spoiled; he almost resented Veronique, whom he considered the weak link in the plot, and who wouldn't give in. No one was taking up the increasingly bigger hints he was dropping about the 'smooth' socialism imposed by the Fabius government or the moustache that Marcel Duchamp drew on the Mona Lisa. Despite the implicit tension that this

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