

How I killed the century

(Working title)

By Flore Vasseur

Published in France in 2010: [Comment j'ai liquidé le siècle](#)

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At a glance:

Pierre, a nondescript plumber's son from Clermont-Ferrand, finds refuge from his dull childhood in the world of mathematics.

Now a king of "quant" in a major French bank, he creates algorithmic trading programs that make billions. His personal life is a disaster. His daughter's anorexia, his father's death, September 11th and his peculiar relationship with an endearing prostitute force him to face up to what he has become: a machine.

A formidable septuagenarian woman, supposedly the head of the Bilderberg Group - a secret organization whose aim is to ensure America's domination - summons him to New York: she refuses to see America lose its supremacy. There can be no successors to the American Empire -and above all not China. She orders Pierre to launch a special algorithm on the financial markets. Pierre hesitates: after all, what if a terrorist attack on the markets (one of the FBI's most feared scenarios) was the only way to win back his life?

After her first novel *Une Fille dans la Ville* (Les Équateurs, 2006), Flore Vasseur carries out an autopsy on the oligarchy of the financial world, trapped in its own sophistication and morbid dogmas. The book's gripping and realistic scenario

describes what capitalism's next step could hold for the future.

"Impossible to put down before the very end" Paris-Match

"Flore Vasseur again proves that she knows how to probe our times like no one else. In doing so, she finds herself at the forefront of today's literature." Le Monde

"The revenge of fiction on the economy" Le Figaro.

"Flore Vasseur nails down the finance that rules the world. In today's world, this is as instructive as it is brilliant."
Elle.

The reek of sewers, diesel and cooking fat. May sunshine blazes down on the asphalt of Madison Ave. McDonalds and Texaco: the global stench. I have an hour to kill, a yawning gap in my over-packed schedule. I stare into the windows of luxury stores, searching for something to spark my interest. All I see is my own angular reflection, a product of the international meritocracy. Sleek frames have replaced my old cheap sunglasses; Clinique has gotten rid of my acne. For all the millions I've made, the confidence I've gained, I look like a nerd in a body reshaped by Slow Burn, the latest gym craze sculpting Manhattan's finest.

Working girls in gray suits stride down the sidewalk. Stiff-backed, assertive, masculine. Lunch box in one hand, sports bag in the other, they are capitalism's warriors. Gisele Bündchen is their queen. The bare back of the Brazilian supermodel ripples across the storefront of the latest Victoria's Secret megastore. A tiny bikini dangles suggestively from her French-manicured fingers, the latest bestseller for the world leader in mass-market panties. In 1999, a few days before its IPO, the brand bought several pages in the *Wall Street Journal*. Gisele was lying on her stomach, two angel wings floating above her slim, golden shoulders. On the day of the IPO, she came in person to Wall Street. With her long-fingered hand, she rang the Wall Street

bell. On the floor, traders howled like wolves. Beating all records, the stock quickly became the darling of Wall Street. The photoshopped legs of one of the best-paid women on the planet are the central pillars of the Dow Jones index. Sex rules the world, drives the markets crazy. The dominance of the West hangs by the thread of a G-string.

I have an appointment with Madame Krudson. Well into her eighties, she ought to be one of those East Side Ladies who, at five o'clock sharp, sip tea from an English porcelain cup while showing off photos of their grandchildren. Yet I feel like I'm about to go twelve rounds with Mike Tyson.

At the Starbucks on the corner of 84th street, I notice some traders ensconced in fake leather armchairs, hiding behind copies of the *Wall Street Journal*. Jobless, these wraiths haunt the City. It is spring 2009, a couple of months after the subprimes crisis. Manhattan is starting to breathe again. A female executive in a rabbit-skin jacket and four-inch stiletto heels yells into her earphone: "Buy! Buy! Buy!". Nerves frayed, she pours five sachets of artificial sweetener into her nine-dollar Cinnamon Dolce Latte with Sugar-Free Syrup. A woman in tattered clothes waits in line before me. Her body odor, a mixture of stale tobacco and sweat, overpowers the aroma of ground coffee. Wrapped up under layers of dark clothes, she is carrying a bunch of worn-out Macy's brown bags weighed down with her few belongings. At the

counter, she lowers her eyes and asks for some water. Clients stop talking, take in the scene. The server hands her a paper cup with a mechanical smile revealing his dental braces. *Have a nice day*, he adds in a Bronx accent. She sits at a table in a corner, close to the washroom, arranging her bags under her misshapen skirts. Behind her, the slogan of the international coffee mega brand is painted on the russet and ocher wall: *"Thanks to you, we are not only making great coffee. We are making a better planet."** She takes out a crumpled free newspaper, scans the small ads: wedding dresses and family jewelry for sale, a dime a dozen. The regulars forget about her and the hum of conversation resumes. The server adjusts the hair net on his greasy hair. Beneath the counter, he switches on the store's CD player and plays the latest Starbuck's compilation: *All You Need is Love*.

I walk up 84th street towards Central Park, its horse chestnuts, obese squirrels and blossoming magnolias. Further on, inside the park, sitting on a miniature artificial ice floe, a bored polar bear growls for some M&Ms thrown by kids. What does Madame Krudson want from me, a trader with an impeccable reputation? Tay would bring me back to earth, back to real life. Real life? I tried to text her from the plane: *"Up in the sky, the sun shines as brightly as in my heart."* Writing a cheesy message to an illiterate prostitute: is that what love is at peak oil time?

1030 Fifth Avenue is a large Victorian building. A doorman in tails opens the glass and wrought-iron door. He nods towards a metal detector. I walk through it, unfazed. A voluptuous female security guard with long black hair pats me down just a little too thoroughly. Her beige suit pants fit tightly over her rounded, muscular thighs. She could have gotten a job in General Gaddafi's security service. She speaks into her wristwatch, waits for instructions from her earphone. Then she escorts me to the private elevator.

Five breaths later, the doors open onto a vast, dark room, a thousand square feet. My eyes adjust. The air is cool, almost cold. On the blue-stained windows, I notice some Byzantine designs and a strange, decapitated pyramid topped by an eye. Surrounded by her thirteen identical white Siamese cats - for as many ex-husbands, I guess - Madame Krudson is sitting at a long, glass table at the back of the room.

"Come in," she grunts from her chair.

I take a few steps forward. Photographs hang on the wall behind her: successive American presidents kissing her hand. I clock the amused look on her face, nearly always the same, one mandate after another, from Eisenhower to Obama. All kissing her hand to say thank you: every future President had been to the annual Bilderberg meeting held a few months before the elections. Every four years, history repeats itself: the

ballot box is merely an afterthought.¹

She founded the Bilderberg, the secret transatlantic group, during the Cold War, in a five-star hotel in Oosterbeek in the Netherlands. To protect herself, she has always stayed in the background. Publicly, David Rockefeller² claims paternity of the organization. She made the rules (an innermost secret), selects its members (from the business, military and media elites). She set the agenda: to manage the world's problems, considered far too complex to be left in the hands of politicians and diplomats.

Madame Krudson lifts her eyes from her book, annotated with a fountain pen. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Gibbon.

"Do you know the lessons of history?" she demands.

"Empires fall because of their arrogance and because of the sudden scarcity of the energy they were built on."

"Perhaps I wasn't wrong about you after all. Sit down!" she orders.

She gestures with her chin at a Napoleon III armchair opposite

¹ According to D. Estulin, in *The Bilderberg*, Bill Clinton was a little-known governor from Arkansas until his participation in the 1991 Bilderberg conference in Baden-Baden, eighteen months before the presidential election.

² Honorary President of the Council on Foreign Relations, of the Trilateral Commission, of the Council of the Americas, of the American Society, and former CEO of Chase Manhattan.

her. Silence. My temples pound and that's all I can hear. We stare at each other, adjusting our breathing. Her emaciated chest rises painfully to take air in, as if her pearl necklace weighed a ton. Madame Krudson was a professional swimmer, a fencer and horseback rider. A force of nature. At thirty-five, she was diagnosed with diabetes. Her staple diet has been birch juice ever since. The disease gradually ate away her handsome body, now shriveled up in a wheelchair. She had a toe amputated, then a foot. As heavily guarded as the Sultan of Brunei, Madame Krudson is a pathetic creature in a dust-cloud of Caron face powder.

A bell rings behind me. Round One? A man in livery enters the room holding two red portfolios. He takes a letter-sized sheet from each. It's 5pm: he reads out the closing prices of the Dow Jones and the day's consolidated reports from Merrill Lynch and Citigroup. Madame Krudson bailed them out during the subprime crisis and took a majority stake through various pension funds. For the last twenty years, Western bankers have come to her, cap in hand, every time the markets fall. They see her in person at 1030 Fifth Avenue. Madame Krudson squashes a Dean and DeLuca blueberry scone in the palm of her hand. She watches the ruined bankers nibble from her hand and lick around her wizened, ringed fingers. Literally eating from her hand.

"Those imbeciles!" she sighs, "You stop Merrill Lynch from

going under, they lose seventeen billion, and what's next? They treat themselves to a billion-dollar bonus!"

She waves away the porter who brought in the papers.

"What did you learn from our last meeting in Greece? It didn't seem like you had much to say."

I had been invited to the Bilderberg annual gathering, a three-day conference behind closed doors on the state of the world with heads of government and ministers, secret service chiefs and captains of industry. During a break, I was handed a sealed envelope: the summons to this meeting.

"The transatlantic relationship is dead, the dollar is dead, and the capitalist economies are going to collapse. The West will face deflation and impoverishment. No politician has the courage to come out and say it."

She stares at me but says nothing.

"The party's over."

"And you think I don't know that already?" she scoffs. "Use your brain. I am the neocons' secret weapon!"

To rule the world, Madame Krudson and the Bilderberg invented the *American Way of Life*. They created - and then globalized - credit, advertising and mass media, the three pillars of a totalitarian system of domination. It pledges individual freedom, blurs the lines between happiness and consumption, manipulates the masses.

"Now tell me what you really think."

I don't answer. She yells:

"Now! I'm waiting!"

Madame Krudson has spent her life giving orders. It doesn't work anymore. American imperialism is challenged by the ferocity of the Asian tigers and the coming massive social unrest. Weighed down by useless objects and antidepressants, consumers won't let themselves be fooled much longer.

"Nineteen twenty-nine saw the birth of Nazism, ending with sixty million dead. The same could happen again. I think, Madame, that you have lost control and that you are scared. Your belief in growth as a source for peace has become a reason for war."

"Not too bad," she admits, her steely blue eyes staring straight into mine. "Capitalism has gone too far," she continues as if talking to herself. "But does that mean we should call the entire system into question?"

"Well, it's just that...", I try.

"The Chinese have got us by the throat and the Russians control the energy supply. Even Chavez, that puppet, doesn't need us anymore. He gets his weapons from Moscow and lunches with Hu Jintao. Al-Qaida has infiltrated our surveillance networks and..." - she slams her fist on the table - "... the United States of America is drifting into some kind of Afro-

socialism! That is not leadership!"

She yells again. Her cats don't even blink.

"The sovereign funds have yet to understand what they can do with their money: bring us to our knees, knock us to the ground. By 'us', I mean our civilization, our idea of happiness."

She pauses, leans back in her wheelchair, and looks me up and down again.

"Do you know what the eleven hundred and eighty billion dollars of the latest Chinese stimulation plan are for?"

"Infrastructure," I reply, thinking of the newspapers I read on the plane.

"Infrastructure? You idiot! That's a smokescreen for the media. That money is for military expenditure. The Chinese want to be able to invade another country. I cannot let that happen, do you hear me?"

She flattens her scrawny hands on the glass desk-top. She lowers her head and breathes in through her nose:

"We Americans will always do the best for humanity."

"America has failed, " I interrupt. "The Empire is falling apart, trapped in its own delusions of immortality and invincibility"

"Silence!"

She turns and glances nostalgically at the pictures of her presidential embraces, then, infuriated, spits at me:

"We are and shall remain the only Empire, do you hear me?"

"But..."

"We will never settle for second place, never submit to China. That would be carnage. America is the greatest nation on earth. This decline must stop. Government interventions across the Western world are postponing the final explosion. To free the people, we must dismantle the system before it gets into the wrong hands. *Mort aux cons*, as you say in France. De Gaulle was right, though: it's a daunting task, isn't it? I think he's the only one from your little country I could ever have gotten along with. Him and Aznavour of course. Ah, the two Charles..."

So that's it: fear of the red peril? Beginning to understand what she's getting at, I try to play for time.

"What does this have to do with me?"

"I ask the questions, you answer!" she yells.

I had promised myself not to probe her on anything. I remember my father's advice: *'If your silence is worth more than what you have to say, then don't say anything.'*

"I inject myself with insulin twice a day. My plasma is changed every month. This disease gives me no peace."

Through advertising and mass consumption, Madame Krudson had made half the world obese. She is going to die, poisoned by her own blood sugar. A Siamese cat pads over and brushes against its mistress. A diamond shines from its leather collar.

"The Arabs thought they could impress me with their ornamental city and their private clinic in Switzerland. They offered me a pancreas transplant. But the totipotent embryonic stem cells will come too late. My body, or what's left of it, is far too decayed to resist cryogenics. I will die sometime soon."

Still curled up on her knees, the cat licks between its legs with relish.

"Madame Krudson, I..." I begin, clearing my throat.

"I told you to shut up!" she shouts, slamming her hand on the table.

Breathing with difficulty, she goes on, her voice lower:

"In this world where we all spy on one another, I need someone that nobody notices. I have chosen you for my very last project. Nobody would suspect you, you're such a brilliant trader. An unbeatable track record at Crédit Général, no insider dealing or bending of the rules whatsoever. Some people think you're a genius. For me, you are the perfect nobody."

What's left of her bony fingers take a small object out of her

pocket and slide it across the table. I reach out to take it but Madame Krudson abruptly slams it down, hiding it under her hand. The charm offensive is done:

"Be very aware: others were not up to the task. And I got rid of them."

Lifting her hand, she reveals a gray USB key with a childish drawing of a white cat on it: Hello Kitty.

"You think you're the King of Quant? Well, here's your last equation. Tell your employer, Crédit Général, that it comes from your team. Tell your team you stole it from Goldman Sachs or that the idea came to you during the night. Tell them whatever you want. You know how to do it. Put your Merlin hat on. Launch this program on the markets and impress me. Leak it to the hedge funds. They're on the point of collapse, stuffed by the US government with all those toxic assets. The Geithner plan wanted them to transform this pile of horseshit into gold. This will be the boom of the century, the last one. The funds will be tripping over themselves to get their hands on your product. Let them think they are the only ones who have it."

I try some humor:

"That's always been the best recipe to sell ketchup."

"They will think they are saved, stronger than ever. They believe they are the masters of the universe. That will be

their undoing. Get this program out there, infiltrate those bastards. You are going to start a systemic crisis for me, a real one this time."

I remember Lehmann brothers, AIG, the panic on the markets a few months ago, anguished people queuing outside the collapsing banks, the riots in Argentina in 2001...

Madame Krudson goes on:

"Too big to fail? So they say. We'll see about that! Governments can't afford to save them again. Bailing the banks out has bled them dry. They won't be able to do anything this time."

"Madame Krudson, I ..."

"Enough already! You don't have the faintest idea how far beyond you this is."

"But why would I do this?" I ask, trying to gain some control over the situation.

"I've been watching you for a while. You are disgusted by the system, your life is a disaster. You're nearly ready to understand: you are worth nothing, you are nothing. A grain of sand, a cog in the machine, at most. Deep down, you already know that money won't buy you anything. You are meaningless. This is your chance to become meaningful, to shape your destiny so it matches your talent. Until now, you have lived.

Thanks to me, you will exist."

Intrigued, but against my better judgment, I ask:

"What will happen?"

"Get this program onto the markets quickly. That's all I need you to do. Just jump with them and enjoy the ride. It should be fun. Now go, before I change my mind. If you get out of the elevator alive, consider yourself hired".

I retreat across the bluish loft space. Opponents abducted, economic turmoil, media manipulation... For fifty years, Madame Krudson had gotten rid of anyone who dared to challenge her. From the elevator door, I take one last glance at this tiny waif-like woman. She shouts so loudly that her whole body trembles like a leaf:

"I said: Get Out!"

She puts her oxygen mask on, and glares at me with her steely eyes.

The doors of the private elevator open like jaws. So what now? Other candidates for this capitalist jihad had been here before me? And Madame Krudson just got rid of them like she would kill a fly. Why? How? I hesitate, step into the cabin, press *L* for lobby.

The elevator rumbles its way down. Everything is normal. A thin line crosses the floor. A trap door? I can imagine bodies impaled on the elevator's machinery, after a fourteen-floor

fall. The cabin stops and opens onto the first floor. The Gaddafi woman stares at me darkly, her thighs ready to spring.

An armored candy-pink Rolls Royce is parked outside. One of Madame Krudson's drivers sits behind the wheel, waiting to drive me to JFK. A fire truck hurtles down Fifth Avenue, followed by another, several blocks behind, sirens blaring. At the corner of Fifth and 84th, a team of joggers from PricewaterhouseCoopers hop up and down at a red light. They re-calculate their bonuses while training for the next marathon. In New York, like nowhere else, nothing is lost, everything is transformed: debt-restructuring specialists make billions out of the banks' collapse. They made their objectives, are convinced this is making sense. Just as I was, until a few minutes ago.

Before getting into the Rolls Royce, I walk over to a hot-dog stand. I need to eat something. The guy hands me a boiling hot sausage in a bun leaking oil and sweet mustard sauce.

"If I were you, brother, I wouldn't do that," he says as he gives me my change.

I am not sure I heard him right. The guy carries on as normal, his gaze lowered to the dollar note he is holding out to me. His thumb is placed in the middle, his nail pointing to the truncated pyramid topped by the floating eye featured on every dollar bill. The same as the one on Madame Krudson's stained-

glass windows. I take three steps back.

"Yeah, I'd keep well out of that," he says.

In the distance, I can see lovers on the steps of the Met Museum, their arms around each other. I am trying to figure out the distance to the subway right there to see if I could escape when Madame Krudson's muscular bodyguard emerges from the building. She stares at me, her arm inside her jacket as about to pull her P22 on me. I made it out alive from Madame Krudson's apartment. She is not going to let me go now. I get in the pink Rolls Royce, the Central Park polar bear still growling.

Madame Krudson's Rolls Royce heads towards JFK. Inside, on the white leather seats, sealed off from the sunlight, noise and insanity of Manhattan, I try to find my comfort zone. I spend my life in cars and airplanes, moving from parking lots to airports. The fuselage of a plane, computer screens, complex equations: my shields against real life. I am thirty-seven. I have 40 million euros stashed away in the Cayman Islands. I am a Brownian math junkie. A guy paid to flirt with fractals and to hide the risk.

I bet on the Asian collapse, surfed the Internet bubble, watched the reeling Merrill Lynch employees become civil servants in 2008. I am in charge of quantitative trading at Crédit Général. I write quantitative analysis programs, models with fifty variables. Thirty guys line up miles of code for me, looking for Alpha, the perfect equation. I press enter and launch software programs onto the financial markets. It's like Aladdin's lamp, the genie is about to make a bunch of two-figure ratios. I don't even have to pick up the phone. Algorithms calculate the optimal position in real time, computers send orders within a nanosecond. Today, seventy percent of daily transactions are made using systems like mine, flash trading. Every single day, the future of the world is traded by ultra-intelligent machines, the drones of the financial world.

On the trading floor, while smooth-cheeked traders slave away on phones, I sip green tea and read *The Memoirs of Casanova*. I glance at the performance curve which progresses by itself. Sometimes I go watch a movie at Multiplex in the La Défense business district while I wait for the Stock Exchange to close. As soon as a program loses momentum, I launch another one, fresh off the computers of my team of physicists specialized in fluid mechanics. The bank dresses it up in a marketing blurb and calls the whole thing 'investment products'. The communications department publishes white papers and organizes opulent conferences on the wonders of financial innovation. Nobody understands what I do.

Mathematics and codes have given us power. Complexity is the most potent weapon, the + sign the golden rule. The planet is a game of Monopoly, companies reduced to a list of stock exchange symbols, their executives the footsoldiers of global capital. The world works for us, the 1%, but we are never seen. We bankers live "leveraged", massively in debt. We bet one, borrow a hundred, earn a thousand. GDP, cash flow, currencies, we bet on anything and everything but hardly know how to read a balance sheet. We have never even set foot inside the doors of a regular company, the ultimate treadmill of the rat race. We couldn't care less about what they do, the number of people they hire. Finance was invented to make grand projects happen, to raise people out of poverty. These days,

we are betting against humanity, an extremely volatile security. Finance causes catastrophes then prospers by reabsorbing them. Our profits are your losses.

Lagging behind, politicians publish lengthy diatribes about the excesses of capitalism. They are written by advisors born just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. They call us terrorists. They provided us with our weapons, targets and plan of attack. Just like with Bin Laden. Politicians' anger is for the cameras only. Twenty years of gluttony and collusion have created a rotten system. With the subprime crisis, we have ruined entire populations. Worst case scenario, I lose my job and find a new one with another bank who will double my package. Or, I could do something else: buy a lousy soccer club, like a Russian oligarch. I could watch men run after a stupid ball having already fixed the results in the changing room. No matter what we do, governments all over the world are falling over themselves to help us. We will never be punished. Barack Obama advocated reform. He appointed two of the disaster's masterminds to reform the system. Tim Geithner and Henry Paulson are siphoning off the resources of households for generations to come. From the very heart of Obama's administration, those two stooges are still working for Goldman Sachs. Thanks to them, the firm will succeed in its takeover bid of the world. Billions come out of nowhere, banks are bailed out, the people taken hostage. This is the

heist of the century, the biggest case of insider trading in history. The media is hounding us because of our bonuses. We must not expose the lie: for sixty years, life on credit has been a massacre.

The worst gangsters on this planet are just like me. They fund the fight against malaria, build schools in Africa, invest in wind turbines. They invite Nelson Mandela to their birthday parties. They listen to Bono like he's a Messiah, want to shake hands with Angelina Jolie. They spend their weekends in their Bionics, a deluxe personal submarine. They escape the real world by flying over it in a private jet. On the advice of their PR coach, they appear in newspapers behind the wheel of a Toyota Prius. They seek redemption in art and invest in just about anything. I am a child of Western fascism. I want to hit the escape key. I can buy everything. I take out Madame Krudson's USB key. I want to buy myself back.

My relationship with the Bilderberg Club began last January. A laconic message, handwritten in English and printed on a thick luxurious card, was sent to my home address:

The Bilderberg Club requests the honor of your presence at our next meeting, scheduled for May 14th to 16th. Information on the precise location will be provided at a later date. The conference will examine policy overlaps and differences between Western policies on the subject:

'The global crisis: threat or opportunity for a new world order?'

Yours sincerely,

Robert J. Legall

RSVP

I was informed of the location five days before the conference. This was to prevent intrusions from the press and anti-globalization activists. Like every other participant, I swore never to breathe a word of what I was going to see and hear. Cell-phones were strictly forbidden, nothing can get out. Before leaving for the conference, I got in touch with the few French figures who had been invited to take part in the past: business leaders and former Prime Ministers like Jospin, Fabius, Rocard. Their names had been leaked on the Internet. None of them would speak to me.

At Athens airport, a car was waiting to drive me to the Astir Palace in Vouliagmeni. The limousine, with tinted windows, had a huge letter B on its windshield. The car sped along behind two officers on motor-cycles from the Astinomia, the national police force. They sounded their horns. I felt like Demis Roussos coming back home.

The Palace had been emptied out. CIA and MI6 agents had led a thorough investigation into the background and political affiliations of the staff, from the guy who washes dishes to the hotel manager. Virtually all the suites on my floor were vacant. From my balcony, overlooking the sea, I could see snipers and NATO patrols sealing off the perimeter. A fleet of helicopters was bringing some of the participants who had arrived in Greece aboard private jets. Above them, an F16 was surveying the area. Greek military dinghies were supervising maritime traffic. One had just stopped a speedboat full of journalists. They had tried to reach the shore. They would be spending a few days in a police station.

There were one hundred and thirty of us in a conference room with a view over the Mediterranean. Seated in rows, in reverse alphabetical order, the crème de la crème of Western self-importance waited quietly. Masters of economic power (Tim

Geithner, Lawrence Summers³, the CEOs of JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, Deutsche Bank, KKR Private Equity, North American oilmen, the directors of the West's central banks), military and intelligence agency chiefs (Secretary-General of NATO, Secretary of State for Defense, the heads of the NSA and MI6), press barons (Rupert Murdoch, Eric Schmidt⁴, Peter Thiel⁵, Martin Wolf⁶), European monarchs (Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, Prince Philip of Belgium and Queen Sofia of Spain), as well as the bosses of big international organizations (such as Robert Zoellick⁷), shook hands and exchanged knowing looks, proud to be there. A few women, but not a single Asian, African, Arab, or South American.

A huge videoconference screen was switched on and the meeting began. Madame Krudson appeared in front of a black background. She led the discussion from her Manhattan penthouse:

"Should we favor a long period of depression, forcing people into long-term poverty or a brutal, short-lived crisis which would give rise to a new world order?"

In their respective fields, each participant is a master at manipulating the masses and appropriating the truth. With her,

³ Secretary of State for the Treasury under the Clinton Administration and Director of the White House National Economic Council under President Obama.

⁴ CEO of Google

⁵ Member of Facebook's Board of Directors

⁶ Associate editor of the *Financial Times*

⁷ Director of the World Bank

they were like little boys. Richard Holbrooke⁸ and Henry Kissinger⁹ argued about Iraq. Given the seriousness of the global situation, members of Obama's team were allowed to take notes. Obama had been elected on an agenda for change. The Bilderbergers were all over his administration. Western statesmen had stayed at home to avoid suspicion from the press. They appeared one after another on the screens, sometimes at the same time. Gordon Brown, Angela Merkel, Dominique Strauss-Kahn were all berated for their inability to avoid the derailment of the Western economy. From his presidential office, his shoulder permanently twitching, Nicolas Sarkozy adjusted his tie at least a dozen times. Madame Krudson dictated a list of decisions to be taken in each country or institution. In a prophetic mood, she added:

"Since you are so incapable, try at least to calm the masses. Failing which, prepare to be impaled."

Madame Krudson claims to work for the people. She despised them. For her, the masses lacked self-determination and courage. They had to be controlled. Her aim was to establish a form of global socialism from the top down. It would be implemented gradually, not by force, but through subtle propaganda, gradually winning over opinion. During times of crisis, whether genuine or manipulated, the idea was to

⁸Special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan

⁹Special envoy to Russia, former Secretary of State and national security advisor

reinforce alienation. Madame Krudson had resurrected an old method: infiltration. Politics, real politics, was all about influence. International organizations should be infiltrated in order to manipulate their directors. Bolshevism, with which she shared an objective, was her pet hate; the class struggle and revolution, sheer lunacy. Combined with the power of the media, capitalism was her strongest ally. Together, they would standardize dreams, cities, lifestyles. Conformism and materialism would lead to global apathy. They would give birth to a flat world over which they would reign. Their decisions, laws and policies on economics and education would remove the remaining obstacles. National governments would be powerless. An instrument against the rise of communism in Europe, the Bilderberg soon became the strong-arm of the ultra-conservatives. Since 1954, it has defined the economic policy of the Western bloc. If a government rejected its recommendations, the supervisory board - a small group of ten people including David Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski and the directors of the CIA, MI6 and NATO - would provoke a coup d'état. They would organize a cash-flow crisis or destabilize the balance of trade, plunging populations into terrible suffering. The IMF and the World Bank were their favorite instruments, operating as they were from behind the cover of noble postwar ideals. Ever since the establishment of this secret world government, Madame Krudson had taken part in every G8 meeting via videoconference. She drew up the agenda,

prepared the conclusions and wrote the communiqués. She made the blacklist of tax havens to be closed down at the last G20 meeting. The flag of democracy had been unfurled everywhere. It was the fig leaf of an ideology obsessed with power.

In the hotel corridors, the atmosphere was tense, faces inscrutable. At the end of the three-day conference, a sententious Madame Krudson concluded:

- "What has brought us this far is striking us down today. We are the victims of our own success. We must kill the temptation of evil. Only the end of global consumption will preserve our domination. Be ready."

The screen suddenly blacked out. The stunned participants had been scolded like little children. Released, they began cursing and haranguing each other. I had not understood a thing.

The Rolls comes to a halt on the Rockaway Boulevard a few miles from JFK. We are stuck in traffic. The rundown buildings of Queens flank the expressway. Kids play in a rusting playground. Their mothers, shapeless obese teenagers, watch over them from afar. They don't look like they're old enough to purchase alcohol. Some kids point at the car and laugh. Intrigued by the tinted windows, they come closer.

- "It's Puff Daddy," shouts one.
- "Nah, it's Jay-Z," says another.
- "No way, man, it's Donald Trump, that billionaire guy."

They approach the pink car to get a closer look. Disappointed, they walk off, shouting "Loser" as they go. I am a millionaire nobody.

On the face of it, there was no reason for me to have anything to do with Madame Krudson or her organization. The Bilderbergers - the eighty permanent members - all come from the same inner circle. As the offspring of distinguished American families, they were raised by nannies and tutors in homes as big as the Château de Versailles. At Yale, their university of choice, they join the Skull and Bones, the secret society, just like their fathers before them. During the day, looking like the ideal son-in-law, they study social sciences and English poetry in lecture halls named after their

illustrious predecessors. At night, under the cover of their dark hoods, they engage in rituals indulging their fantasies about immortality: dancing in circles around Geronimo's skull, masturbating in coffins, desecrating burial places.

They take the secrets they share to the grave. When they assume power, whether financial or military, they can seem to be on opposing sides, like John Kerry and George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election. Power and the continuation of an impervious white, western elite are their obsession. Yale, their Skull and Bones delusions, their shared belief in their proximity to God, have sealed their destiny. With Madame Krudson and the Bilderberg club, the world is under their thumb.

I've never set foot inside Yale. I learned my business English on an intensive course at the Crédit Général. My parents had their house built in Clermont-Ferrand. It's a concrete construction, painted a murky green, in a dead-end street. My father was very proud. He was a plumber. On Saturdays, we would eat at Hippopotamus, the cheap steakhouse chain. At the table, I would look at his rugged hands. Had they ever cuddled me? Sat next to him, my mother would devour the all-you-can-eat chocolate mousse. She would be on a diet all week. Her hair dye made her scalp flake. At night, she would rub her lined face with Nivea cream then give me a kiss. I would fall asleep with the smell of Elnett hairspray on my forehead.

On television, an ad for Tide would come on between *The Magnificent Seven* and the national game show. My parents worked hard. I would go through my father's pockets. I never found anything. I always won at Monopoly. At marbles too. During breaks at school, tired of being left empty-handed, the other kids would avoid playing with me.

I cut myself off from reality and became a math nerd. Alienated from the things I couldn't have; from the parents who couldn't have the time; from society telling me to be happy. As a teenager, I would write an equation for everything: the occupancy rate for my mother's hairdressing salon, public sector teachers' propensity for depression. The probability that someone might love me. The numbers were there, telling their story. I wanted to dig a hole and bury myself in it.

I had put together a makeshift office in the basement. It was my refuge. I liked the damp cold, the closed-in smell, the prison-like silence. There was no night or day, nothing changed underground. Time ceased to exist, and so did light. Nothing remained but figures on a page. I could have stayed there forever, never going back to the surface again.

Back upstairs, I would discover a strange world. People crying, laughing. My parents would lurch between incomprehension and compassion. I was their only child, an

abstraction. Their creation.

I would sneak old food containers out of our trashcan, old Buitoni cans splattered with bits of ravioli. Back in the basement, I would cut out the logos and collect old soda cans. I would arrange them by brand on a shelf and note down the time and date in a notebook. Worms, high on artificial sweeteners, emerged from the cans of Coke. They had laid their eggs in the walls, infested the foundations of my first home. I guess I was dreaming of elsewhere, of America.

Right in the middle of eighth grade, the school Principal asked to speak with my parents. I could guess from what I know now. Uneasy, they entered his office, which smelled of a mix of Pritt Stick and sweat. Had my parents noticed my talent for math? What did they have in mind for my future? They should encourage me, I had "potential", he insisted, bouncing up and down on his teacher's swivel chair.

I waited for them anxiously at home. They would want to make me normal, force me to take archery lessons, join the Scouts, dismantle my hideout. My father dashed into his room. Putting on his best suit, he kept muttering "My own son!" I sat petrified on the cheap couch. Overexcited, he sang out "Get in the car!"

He took me to the Fnac, the brand new electronic retail store in Clermont-Ferrand. My father pulled me towards the escalator

and we headed to the hardware section. "I want a computer for my son, the most expensive one you've got," he told the salesman. The guy in the rust-colored cardigan looked him up and down doubtfully. He looked like the French singer, Renaud. At the time, his single, "Mistral Gagnant", was a big hit. My father pulled out a wad of notes: a few months' pay, our vacation in Cancale. The huge IBM box went into the trunk of our rusty Renault 18. Back in the house, my father dragged an extension cable down to the basement. I pressed the ON key. My mother said nothing. I was doomed.

I began to write my first lines of code. For years, I didn't see other people, girls, the sun even. I was underground so much I became pale and insomniac. I didn't need to work at school, it was all a game. Numbers did my bidding. I did like music, especially reading it. The scales looked like the perfect fractal. I was hypnotized by them. My life could be plotted on music paper. Boundary value problems and variables would control my emotions. My life would play out to the rhythm of equations.

Punk was all the rage. Kids with orange mohicans and ripped Sex Pistols T-shirts pushed their way through the crowded school yard. Nice middle-class kids retorted with the Nike logo blazoned across their chests. United Colors of Benetton celebrated the universality of the global market in the colorless streets. Television commercials for Hollywood

chewing-gum told us all to be happy. French businessman Bernard Tapie appeared in a Duracell ad. Kids smoked Malboros while listening to Wham!. On Saturdays, mothers took their children to supermarkets. Levi's sold their clothes there to break into the market. My mother had saved up. She bought me my first pair of jeans, a little too big "so I would get some wear out of them". I never took them off. America had landed in Clermont-Ferrand. And, at around the same time as the High Speed Train, the pre-www. online service Minitel and pop videos. I was a small, fidgety, anxious, clumsy fifteen year-old who looked a lot like a tadpole.

The Principal called the house one night. His tone was solemn. This must have been a high point in his career. He was already thinking about his school's reputation, as well as his probable transfer to the educational institution of his dreams. I was on the radar of the district school board. They were offering me an academic scholarship. So off I went to the best honors classes at the Blaise Pascal High School: the elite scientific option of the baccalaureate, then the intensive preparatory math classes for the competitive entry exams to the *grandes écoles* at the prestigious Louis-le-Grand school in Paris. My mother wept - her son was an alien - and finally my life began. In those preparatory classes, the guys were just like me: scarred by acne, number puppeteers, mystifying the outside world. They'd wear mismatched socks and

not give a shit. At last, I'd come up against some competition. I left them for dead in the exams. My father put his best suit on again and waited with me on the platform of Clermont-Ferrand station. His own flesh and blood had just landed a place at that beacon of the meritocracy, the Ecole Polytechnique, the most prestigious and selective of the French *grandes écoles*. He pumped my hand with his thick laborer's paw then briefly took me in his arms. Mission accomplished.

I spent three years on the campus in Saclay racking my brains over equations. Researchers visiting from Stanford and the MIT gave seminars to packed lecture halls on 'The replication of European options in a regime of uncertain volatility', 'The Wiener-Hopf factorization of the Levy processes and the evaluation of exotic options' and 'Poissonian products of random weights'. I adored it. Thursday night was party night at HEC, the neighboring business school. Our military academy buses would drop us there. Drinks were free, girls everywhere. I would spend the whole evening leaning against the wall, one hand in my pocket, the other holding a plastic glass of disgusting vodka. Around four in the morning, tired and emotional from the cheap tequila they'd been drinking, the HEC guys would get a little teary-eyed to Michel Sardou's '*Les Lacs de Connemara*'. Those same guys must be forty years old now, and I bet that song still puts them in a trance.

On graduation day, my parents hung back in the shadows and watched. They were proud of me. I said goodbye to them outside the gate. I think I knew it would be one of the last times. I traveled the world several times, lived in Singapore, Tokyo, London and New York. I made it into the exclusive Air France Petroleum Club. I have hardly ever been back to Clermont-Ferrand, the French capital of nowhere.

About me:



I am a surfer. This is telling it all: my appetite for life, for experiencing and discovering; my love for free space; my attempt to be agile, to play, to create; my ability to resist to (some) cold and also to change route.

I am also a pure product of French meritocracy and a “drop-out”. Born in the Alps, I launched my trend-forecasting boutique in New York at 24. The initial plan was to attend hip hop classes. I never found the time: I surfed the Internet bubble and made it all (the start up, the VC, the client lists, the 16 hours of work a day). I also experienced September 11th. Since then, I have been trying to understand what happened, processing my fear and anger through writing.

My work questions our relationship to consumption, the cult of performance, technology. I am wondering who rules, why we are obsessed with growth and what we have we traded off in the name of it. And what do freedom and success mean in a world about to perish.

I use fiction books, interviews or portraits, columns in newspapers or radio, speaking at conferences, even TV series screenwriting.

This is how I surf our troubled times, my pain in one hand, a pen in the other. I am relieved to consider that somehow I am looking for clues and solutions. I tend to believe this is serious matter: I am the very proud mother of two amazing human beings.