

# Gloria Vynil

Rose-Marie Pagnard

Novel

German



*Gloria Vynil has her whole life ahead of her. The young, talented and imaginative photographer and daydreamer has lived with her aunt Ghenya ever since the death of both her parents. Her mind is teeming with ideas and her head is spinning with projects. Yet, Gloria is missing something, has a tiny gap in her memory: the recollection of a traumatic event that nonetheless haunts the novel's every page. As short a time as this episode may have lasted, this moment of oblivion is enough to plunge her into a turbulent world full of uncertainty and wild fantasies.*

*"[...] amnesia, even if it only relates to a very short period of time and even if it is only as steadfast as a bit of jelly trembling in the palm of one's hand, amnesia can trigger a bout of anxiety, no matter where, no matter when."*

## Title

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## Author

Rose-Marie Pagnard juggles the tragic and the funny with great intelligence to tell us about our need for love. Her books include *La Période Fernandez* (1988, Actes Sud, Prix Dentan), *Dans la forêt la mort s'amuse* (1999, Actes Sud, Prix Schiller), *Janice Winter* (2003, Editions du Rocher, Points Seuil), *J'aime ce qui vacille* (2013, Zoé, Swiss Literature Award).

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Zoé

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Excerpt translated by Rebecca DeWald

For René and our daughter Géraldine

Locked in their kennel at the edge of the forest, the big black dogs were making their usual early morning racket. Well before her normal getting-up time, a little girl floated into the kitchen in a blue nightie with a print of white sailing boats. The sheer desire to take these sailing boats for a walk in the farmyard, as if they were floating at sea, drove the child to leave the house on her own. It must be said that this nightgown was a gift of her brother Till's, a sailor, and that she always wanted to do exactly what she imagined her brother would do. She seemed to drink up the light, this brightness, the subtle sounds coming from the pigsty, these delightful early-morning impressions.

The dogs had begun to cry, their tears spurting from the kennel, flashes of lightning were lashing out: help us, console us, they howled. And the sun shone as if nothing was the matter. I could bring them a piece of the roast or a bowl of milk, thought the child, or let them run around in the woods.

Her bare feet carried her until she could smell the dogs' overpowering odour, and saw the red letters which demanded, do not open, do not open! But the door has already come off its hinges, as if by magic. The child presses it up against her body as she walks backwards, and the dogs – the twelve great hulking brutes to be sold on, as Mummy says – rush straight to the barn where Daddy is cleaning out the sows and piglets, whistling. The child shouts, no, no, don't, run into the forest! Go hunting and munching in the woods! Through the dazzling sun she glimpses a pitchfork, a dog suspended from the handle, she sees ugly colours and Daddy wrapped in a blanket woven of dogs and piglets. Something trickles down her legs, something wets her cheek, her Mummy's voice makes her close her eyes, it would be better, someone said, yes, it would be better for the child to forget such bloodshed.

Splendrous Wonders

Gloria was flying over the broken glass, the holes, the pulled-up cobblestones, Gloria, brimming with life in the fresh morning air, her project fizzing like champagne. The street with the arcades was waking up with the sun after the previous night's battles, the breakage jumping out at you, but you didn't need to let that spoil your fun – it was the morning now, after all, the day was promising to know no bounds, June had arrived.

Gloria was very beautiful to someone who liked a nose that was, quite literally, in your face, with a very slight bend at the bridge, and with eyes, a mouth, and a figure that demanded for life to be an adventure. Her bare legs were shivering just like when she slipped into bed and was enveloped by a feeling of having just received a declaration of love to her whole body. Her bed, in the apartment she had shared with her aunt Ghenya for twenty years, in the centre of the capital. A city of five hundred thousand inhabitants, with arches and fountains, photographed millions of times, with a river, bridges, kilometres of office buildings, two crematoriums, crowded gyms, hundreds of thousands of well-fed dogs, museums, a camp where migrants were housed in containers, parks that were forever green.

Gloria does not know that her aunt Ghenya watches over her night and day, protecting her with the weapons of an old guardian angel, which would seem a little ridiculous if it wasn't for the fact that these noble faculties had stood the test of time: love, intelligence, language, and a woman's clever and cunning ways. She was one of the most highly regarded of old angels. Gloria is also unaware of her brothers' criminal intent, four of whom are alive, one missing. Gloria comes and goes, leads a life of her own, while further afield, and sometimes very close by, Geoffrey or another of her brothers would lie in wait to refresh her memory.

This morning, Gloria was walking along thinking about her project. The street was already crowded with pedestrians heading for work. Some people had expressions on their faces as if they were being hunted rather than going to work, a time

warp to ancient days of bear pits and the need to jump into rivers to escape. Gloria, for her part, was convinced that she was born to be happy. You were born to be happy, Till had assured her, her brother who, one day, had simply vanished (he was officially dead). So that, at twenty-six years of age, she had made the best of almost any situation. Even when she is shaken to the bone, reduced to shreds, this little sentence withstood it all, perhaps because it was so simple. Even the four weeks she had spent producing nothing at all at the Kunstlabor apartment (where a group of men in women were all engrossed in their artistic practice) had not affected her: something had come of it – this project – which is why she was heading to the street with the arcades.

The ripped-out paving stones had been put into sharp-edged heaps, ready to twist one's ankles, to contort one's stride and habits. Those two feet deep holes could catapult you into the underworld: come in and see what isn't working in this town! So many things were not quite right, but were there really more of those than of the things that still functioned like clockwork – the church bells, the trams, the coffee machines? Gloria's hair swung from one side to the other as if in agreement, yet still wanting to remind her that even in this underground world, splendid monuments could disappear if enigmatic machinations demanded their prompt elimination. But I know all that, Gloria thought, I know that splendid, dilapidated ruins are threatened! She loved these words: dilapidated, splendid.

Yes, she did, ever since last night, when she had become infatuated with a new creative subject: photos, perhaps a video if circumstances allowed, of the final stages of the destruction of the Museum of Natural History. She had slept on it a bit; dreamed of the abandoned museum; had at six in the morning opened the door without making a noise and left the apartment where the little princes of the Kunstlabor were still asleep; had made for the exit aisle when a hand suddenly jerked her back: I need you to make a little effort for me, Gloria, will you? She had protested, pale, had threatened to scream, saw a friend crying, and suddenly felt weak, had pity for the man – a sexual pneumatic drill crying croco-

dile tears and carrying a ridiculous name. Forget, forget! That's what she had resolved to do straight after the event.

It was better to focus on the present moment, to jump over the wreckage, not to bump into anyone, to think about her project and about her most recent works, these building site fences she had photographed, those lemon yellow, turquoise, muddy green graffiti, the black outlines she had added to the cortex of a giant brain. She had also photographed the small windows in the fence, the people standing on the other side for hours on end to kill the time, or to silently spur on the workers, or maybe, who knows, to imagine a man and a woman embracing in a lift from hell, like in a Buzzati novel.

As for what happened that night on precisely that street, she did not know. But, of course, the event had already been paraded about on mobile phone screens, had been shared and edited, in one sense first, then in another; here, where languages and dialects mixed, here, where it took more than two accents to tango, hiya, play along, why don't we, ceci n'est pas, gotcha, aye, nope, coppers, why don't ya wanna play, don't make a fuss, seeya. So what? Gloria said, as if it left her cold. Her hair hung to one side, so she grabbed it resolutely and moved it back down her neck.

What's that? She leaned forward and carefully pinched a metal ring lodged between two paving stones that was so sparkly clean and shiny, it must have just slipped off the finger of a passer-by. She made sure that it was not engraved and put it in her skirt pocket. It was a reflex, just like when she opened a book in Ghenya's library hoping to find a note that would explain what happened in the summer after her sixth birthday. A summer as if eaten by moths, yet so alluring. Black, like a dazzling glass prism. A lost memory, to be frank. While everything is fine, while the sun is splendid, while her project is going splendidly, she could kiss the world! But you are an amnesia victim, your parents are dead, and your five brothers are as far away from you as the exoplanets, isn't that right? It is.

Till, brother number one, was a cook on a yacht and a great storyteller (just like a Karen Blixen or Peter Høeg character) and had officially drowned (though Gloria was convinced he was still alive).

Auguste, brother number two, had built himself a studio in the old barn on the family farm and wrote novels. Geoffrey, brother number three, had been Mummy's fragile little darling before becoming a travelling tattooist.

Brunot, brother number four, was hopelessly dyslexic, yet managed a small team of receptionists at the National Library of France, and rumour has it that visitors who had never been to a library before would have got helplessly lost if it wasn't for Brunot Vynil's wonderfully clear directions. Finally, Rouque, brother number five, took over the farm and had just taken out a risky bank loan to have an automatic milking system installed.

What these men had in common was the art of avoiding Gloria; they read her name in magazines, on flyers, and that was enough for them.

As for Gloria, the very thought of meeting one of her brothers plunged her into an insurmountable sluggishness that went so deep that their separation simply dragged on. Gloria thought it funny to say things like my brothers smoke like chimneys or my brothers are total individualists; the light of her life, however, if every life was supposed to need a source of light, emanated from her memory of Till, from her aunt Ghenya, and a little bit from her mother.