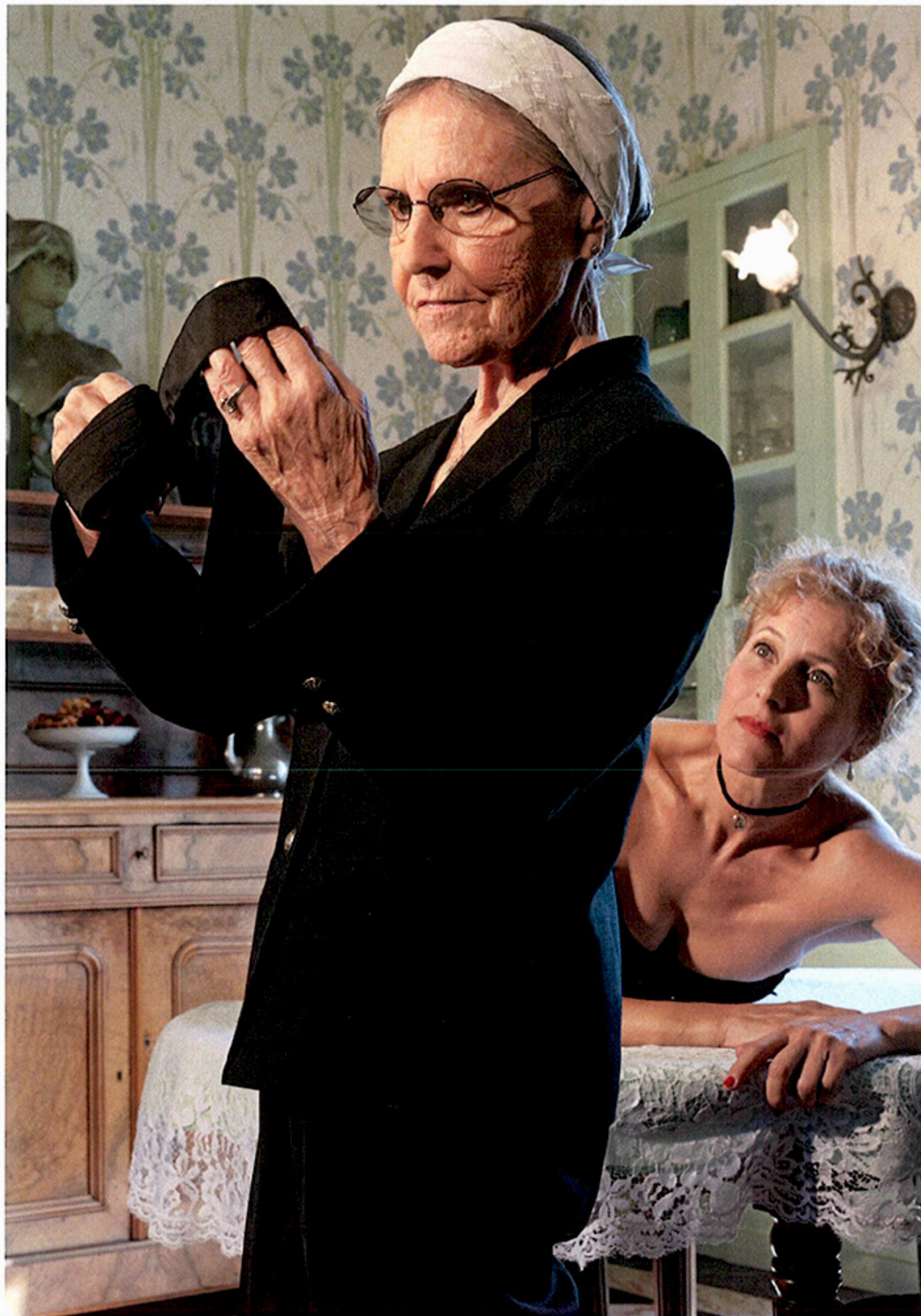




The THIN EN

The life of Catherine Robbe-Grillet makes *Fifty Shades of Grey* look like a Disney sadist—Alain Robbe-Grillet, whom she later married. Today, an 83-
Visiting the 17th-century château where Robbe-Grillet conducts some of her
de Sade, her relationship with the much younger Beverly



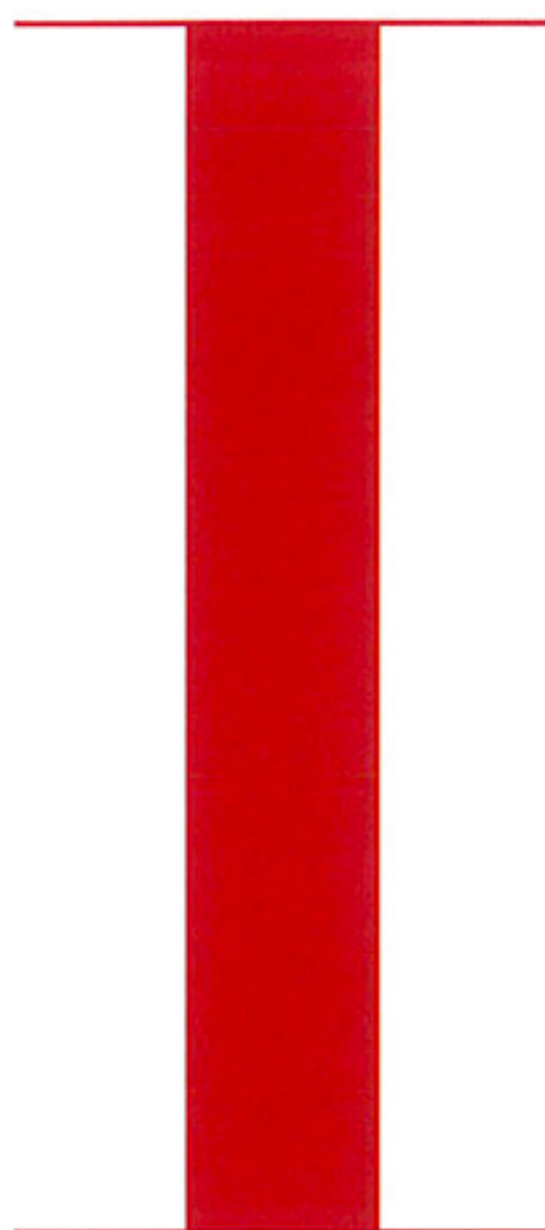
HAIR AND MAKEUP BY ALEXANDRA LEFORESTIER; FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS



MÉNAGE À DEUX
Catherine Robbe-Grillet and Beverly Charpentier, photographed at the Château du Mesnil-au-Grain, in Normandy, France.

D of the WHIP

movie. In 1951, she became the mistress of the writer—and accomplished year-old widow, she is France's most famous dominatrix. rituals, TONI BENTLEY delves into the world of a modern-day Marquise Charpentier, and her journey from submission to dominance



I am going to meet the most famous dominatrix in France. It is a gray but bright day as the taxi drives from Paris through the lush green fields of Normandy. It is late afternoon. I have been invited to dinner and don't want to be late. The address I have been given is so abbreviated as to be comical: no numbers, no street, no postal code, just the name of the château and the province in which it resides. The G.P.S. is having none of it.

I had asked in an e-mail a month earlier if I might observe one of Madame's sadomasochistic rituals. I was told "no one observes, there are only participants." I replied—what the hell—that I was willing to participate, imagining that I might be given a candle to hold in a doorway. "Madame is doubtful," I was told, "but said she will think about it. But *absolutely no photographs*."

The driver finds the concealed turnoff, and I see the white gate I was looking for. A sharp right and we are thrust instantly into a Louis XIV fairy tale. An enormous horseshoe drive embraces a vast green field dotted with thousands of yellow buttercups. At its turn, the 17th-century Château du Mesnil-au-Grain sits in full glory and perfect symmetry. The black car drops me off and departs. I climb the stairs to the main entrance, where I am greeted by a tiny lady wearing a white scarf wrapped stylishly about her head, slim white cotton trousers and blouse, and a fluffy, sage-green mohair cardigan.

It is well known in France that this woman has *une chambre secrète* (a secret room), but no one knows quite where it is, though Edmund White has written that she "tortures" people in the "dungeon of her Norman castle."

Catherine Robbe-Grillet is the 83-year-old widow of Alain Robbe-Grillet, theoretician, novelist, filmmaker, sadist, member of the Académie Française, and acknowledged "pope" of the

avant-garde literary movement known as the *nouveau roman*. He is perhaps best remembered as the writer of Alain Resnais's 1961 masterpiece, *Last Year at Marienbad*.

The young Robbe-Grillet bought the château in 1963, making them only its fifth owners since its construction, around 1680, and the first without aristocratic lineage. Despite their modernist leanings, the young couple dreamed of being châtelains, and thanks to a loan from Alain's courageous publisher, Jérôme Lindon (famous as the French publisher of Samuel Beckett), the deed was done.

"Bienvenue," Madame Robbe-Grillet says to me. (She does not speak English.) "Un petit château pour une petite dame!" (A little château for a little lady!) As she says this, she dips girlishly in a small curtsy, a charming, and disarming, gesture. The power she wields, standing at a majestic four feet eleven inches and weighing in at 88 pounds (she has worn a child's size 10 her entire adult life), is obscured, though not for long, behind the most courteous carapace of the smallest and sweetest little old lady one might ever meet.

Having read her 1985 book, *Cérémonies de Femmes* (*Women's Rites*), where she writes wryly, "You absolutely must believe that Sisyphus is happy!," I knew that this lovely woman was a modern-day Marquise de Sade, and had, over the past four decades, pierced and cut some of her guests with hatpins—she has many varieties with beautiful ornaments that she keeps in a white lace pin cushion—locked others in small iron cages, crowned them with acacia thorns, handcuffed them to chains on walls, and basically beaten the shit out of a rather large number of people, male and female.

Beverly

And there, just behind Madame, is the other person I have come to see, the woman she lives with, rather notoriously: Beverly Charpentier. The South African-born Beverly is a very pretty and vivacious 51, with lovely green eyes and soft tendrils of blond hair escaping her beautifully coiffed Gibson-girl bouffant. She is impeccably dressed in a long satin gold lamé skirt and pale, collared blouse. A string of pearls peeks out behind the top button. Her black shawl sets off her red fingernails. Madame likes them red.

The following morning, we sit, one on one, in the dining room of the warm and cozy house—"La Petite Maison," built for the gamekeeper—that she lives in just south of the château. (The two women also reside in side-by-side apartments when in Paris.) Beverly has lit a towering inferno in the giant fireplace, and the hem of her long skirt is singed. She is a Cinderella to be reckoned with, not least because her prince turned out to be a woman.

"There is an awful lot out there about us that is wildly inaccurate," she says. "They talk about me as Catherine's 'sexual slave.' When I imagine an older woman and a younger woman and the term 'sexual slave,' the pictures that get conjured up in my mind are grotesque. Like her dressed in leather and boots, and me, chained, dangling from the rafters." She roars with laughter while I wonder just what exactly *does* go on between them.

"FROM THE MOMENT I MET HER,
I WAS OBSESSED
WITH HER," SAYS BEVERLY.

"Catherine is my secret garden," she says quietly when I inquire about the nature of their intimacy. "I have given myself to her, body and soul. She does whatever she wants, whenever she wants, with either or both, according to her pleasure—and her pleasure is also my pleasure." When I ask what she will do when Catherine dies, she starts to cry.

The back door of Beverly's cottage opens onto one of two enormous ponds that frame the vast back gardens of the château. In summer, Madame and Beverly occasionally picnic in a little white-and-green rowboat, while in winter the ponds freeze over and the ladies ice-skate on them.

The park is also the setting for other bucolic events—like the warm summer afternoon when, under Madame's instruction, a local woodcutter fulfilled his lifelong equestrian fantasy. Ever since he was a young man and worked as a groom for a beautiful, rather severe woman, he had aspired to be her horse. Now, naked, barrel-chested, on all fours, his genitals tied with weights, he was outfitted with a leather bridle, bit, and reins, specially made for him by a saddler—"not one of those cheap sex-shop toys," says Beverly—and ridden, one by one, by each member of Madame's *petit clan*, her close circle of dominatrix cohorts of whom she is "chief Queen." Hierarchy is all, democracy is naught, in this world. Beverly, who briefly trained on the tightrope in South Africa, mounted the beaming man last, standing on his bare back, riding crop at her side in case he slowed down. An afternoon worthy of Fellini.

But it began with Disney. Beverly first saw *Sleeping Beauty* when she was five or six, but the beautiful princess was of no interest at all to the little girl: "I was fascinated when the queen [the wicked fairy] chained up the prince when he came to find Sleeping Beauty. I saw myself as that woman. I found the idea of chaining a man up so exciting."

"My fantasy since I was a small child was to dominate a dominating man," Beverly explains. "That turns me on more than anything, a man who does not want to be dominated—like Sean Connery, a really macho man. The kind of man who has no desire for submission. It's truly perverse. It's the power play: who has it, how long you have it for, and what you do with it." Far from being a "slave," Beverly, too, is a dominatrix of note, and her relationship with Catherine is increasingly difficult to categorize, even for a connoisseur of the unconventional.

Beverly was a sexually precocious young lady. "Since age 14, I never had boyfriends, but I had lovers," she says. "For me, a one-night stand meant the fantasy was never destroyed. So exciting! Mini-fantasies I would live out, dominating them." She smiles: "They hated it! They genuinely hated it. They would get angry... but excited. Really excited." But, she adds, "I didn't love anyone I was with. Never."

Beverly first met Catherine more than 20 years ago in Mexico when both were reluctant spouses at an official function. Beverly was married to a French diplomat whom she had met in Soweto and married at age 23. (They remained married until his death, last October, and he and their two children, ages 23 and 27, visited the château regularly.) He was, at the time she met Catherine, the director of the Alliance Française, in Guadalajara, and he was hosting an evening in honor of Alain Robbe-Grillet.

"I saw this tiny woman standing all alone in a corner holding a glass of water while the great man was being fêted, so I introduced myself to her," Beverly says. She found Robbe-Grillet's wife to be "literally, immediately" the most fascinating person she had ever met. Their friendship continued when Beverly and her family

FRENCH CONNECTION
Charpentier and Robbe-Grillet walk on the château's grounds.



relocated to Paris. "From the moment I met her, I was obsessed with her. I wanted to hear everything she had to say, I wanted to do things for her, I wanted to take care of her. I wanted to be with her. That little woman has more balls than any man I've ever met."

Had women ever featured in her fantasies? "Never. Never. Never. And they don't now, either." She pauses and smiles. "Unless I could chain them up."

After many years, Beverly mustered the courage to tell Catherine that she would be interested in participating in her "ceremonies"—as Madame calls her sadomasochistic stagings—and eventually she became one of the privileged *petit clan*. Then, at a ceremony one evening some years ago, everything changed. "I watched as she put her hand around the back of a submissive's neck, and I realized in that moment I wanted that to be *my* neck." A few days later she wrote a letter to Catherine dated May 5, 2005. It is her oath of allegiance:

Madame, you have asked nothing of me; it is, therefore, of my own free will that I offer to you allegiance, obedience and loyalty. I swear to serve you faithfully in all things great and small, to obey your orders, carry out your wishes, whatever they may be. I commend to you everything I possess, material, intellectual and physical that you may dispose of what I have as you see fit. I swear to dedicate myself to you, to remain by your side as long as you choose, as your attendant, servant, defender; to support and protect you, whatever the circumstances, in every way possible, even should it cost me my life.

Catherine suggested they have tea a few days later—and so it has been, as in Beverly's pledge, for over eight years.

complex, paradoxical portrait emerges. Beverly is a heterosexual, a dominatrix of men, submissive only to one particular person—who is a woman. "Is your driving desire to please Catherine?" I ask. She doesn't miss a beat: "Absolutely. Yes." "She is the only person who has ever dominated me," says Beverly. "What I feel for her is not because she's a woman, or an older woman, or a tiny woman. It's because she's Catherine. She has this power—this thing that is like nothing I've ever encountered in anyone else. You read poetry about love, and I think of all the millions of words that have been written about it, and I've never read anything that comes close to describing what I feel."

I ask if Madame feels the same way toward her. "Oh, no, she doesn't!" she replies instantly. "She's never felt that for anyone. She loved her mother, her father, her sisters, her sister-in-law, and her husband. And me. But what we call 'being in love,' that loss of control where you can't imagine life without the other person, she has never felt that. She feels sad that she has never known that, but on the other hand it causes a lot of suffering and so she's quite happy the way she is."

The ladies live their daily life in civilized calm busyness and perfect equanimity, frequently checking their respective iPhones, though Madame leaves the e-mails to Beverly. They have never had a conflict: "Catherine decides everything," explains Beverly, "so there can never, ever be any disagreement between us,

because Catherine is right even if she is wrong!" And there are indeed a few things that Beverly doesn't like, such as the time that Madame handed a certain gentleman a pair of Beverly's black lace panties as a keepsake after a ceremony, thus orphaning a matching camisole.

In both Paris and Normandy, they live in their separate abodes and have breakfast and lunch separately, as Catherine does not appear in company before two P.M. The shelves in the libraries of their residences are overflowing with books, and they also have an inordinately busy social life in Paris, attending gallery openings, films, cocktail parties, and the theater frequently—both trained and worked as professional actresses. Though women of independent means, they do not live lavishly.

Beverly is a superb cook, and, when home, they will spend hours over a meal in animated conversation until well past midnight. But when not at the table, Beverly often sits at Catherine's feet, gazing adoringly into her face, listening closely, blushing easily, while gently holding a few fingers of one of Madame's tiny hands. Catherine "transmits" much of her power, according to Beverly, through her hands: "She has the hands of a blind person."

Beverly pledged her life to Catherine three years before Alain died, in 2008, at 85. He and Beverly were good friends. "We had terrific fights about wine and Shakespeare," she says. Alain was glad to know that Beverly would take care of Catherine after he died. The perpetual bad boy of French intellectuals to this day overlooks the ladies' proceedings from the black-blue urn where his ashes reside, on a bureau shelf in the château's dining room. The lip of the vase has great drips running down its tall, curved sides. "It is the urn," says Madame, "that weeps."

Just below the urn, perfectly aligned across the entire width of the bureau, lies a great, graduated, tightly braided length of soft brown leather; a silver snap hook shines at the thick end, while the single tail has a well-worn three-inch cracker. This beautiful weapon is the Robbe-Grillet "Marital Whip." Catherine bought it as a gift for Alain, as "a symbol of my submission," in 1954. It is the only whip, she says, he ever used on her: "It is my whole life." In 58 years it has never been out of use.

Alain

grew up in a world of women," says Catherine, "my sisters, my mother, my grandmother, and the nuns." Born Catherine Rstakian in Paris in 1930, she was the eldest of four sisters. Her father, who was Armenian, worked in an insurance agency but was absent for much of her childhood, ensconced in a sanatorium with tuberculosis. She attended a strict, all-girls Catholic school.

A perfect student, courteous, well behaved, and insistently honest, Catherine was always at the top of her class. But even then she unfailingly followed directions with a perceptible superiority.

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**"BEING A DOMINATRIX
IS WONDERFUL AT MY AGE,"
SAYS CATHERINE ROBBE-GRILLET.**

FROM FUR TO ASHES

"It drove the nuns crazy," she says, "but they couldn't do anything about it. I was called 'The Sneering Student.' I was irritated at being preached to. Even now, any kind of moralizing annoys me. Instinctively, I argue the opposite to whatever is conventional." To this day she remains an ascetic: she doesn't drink or smoke, hardly eats, and is moderate in all things but one.

She lost her virginity at 18: "It hurt, and I remember thinking to myself, If this is making love, it doesn't interest me." It—intercourse, that is—interested her even less after she endured a horrific, illegal, backstreet abortion in 1950, just prior to meeting her future husband.

She met Alain Robbe-Grillet on a train to Istanbul when she was 21. Alain was eight years older than Catherine. A qualified agronomical engineer with wild unruly hair, he was penniless and living in an attic room above his parents' Paris apartment. And he was obsessed with writing. She knew he was a bad bet.

Catherine embodied his lifelong obsession with young girls, resembling a little girl in her height, size, and manner. "Alain always said, 'She's my wife and my children,'" says Catherine. Well into her 30s she was regularly mistaken for Alain's daughter. (Vladimir Nabokov met Catherine when the Stanley Kubrick film of his best-selling book was being cast and abruptly announced, "I want her to be Lolita!" He was sorry to learn that she didn't speak English and so couldn't play the role.)

Alain and Catherine's affair was strange from the start. "I'm happy to do all kinds of things with you erotically," she told him, "but nothing that could possibly lead to a pregnancy." This suited him better than she knew.

"I was intrigued," she says. "He was a man of great control. From the beginning I knew what turned him on: it was cruelty."

For the six years of their courtship, Catherine was "a kept woman"—but by her other lover, a diplomat, who rented her an apartment and gave her money. She still wears the diamond ring he gave her.

In 1956, 25-year-old Catherine, under the male nom de plume Jean de Berg, published a taut and scandalous novel, titled *L'Image* (The Image), about the escalating sadomasochistic encounters between Claire, a dominant, attractive career woman; Anne, her beautiful slave girl; and Jean, a handsome male acquaintance. The story culminates when Jean takes over Anne's "punishment" and finally has sex with the young slave. The next morning, Claire arrives on Jean's doorstep, dressed exactly like Anne, finally willing to submit herself to him, to love.

L'Image is a deeply symbolic tale about the battle for integration between a woman's own disparate selves—mistress and slave—an eroticized allegory of one of feminism's central psychological dilemmas. Susan Sontag named *L'Image*, alongside *Story of O*, as an example of pornographic books that she regarded as "belonging to literature." And the book uncannily foretold Catherine's own future erotic switch—17 years later—from submissive to dominant.

L'Image was banned upon publication. The police arrived at the office of the publisher, Jérôme Lindon, demanding to know who was this "Jean de Berg"? "I have no idea," lied Lindon, and, under their orders, he handed over copies of the book, which were burned. However, he continued publishing the book *sous la table*. Soon afterward Lindon, Alain, and Catherine began playing complex erotic games with one another—with Lindon as Jean, Alain as Claire, and Catherine as Anne, Claire's slave.

By 1957, Alain had published three books to considerable, and controversial, acclaim, and Catherine finally agreed to marry him. They spent their honeymoon sailing along

CONTINUED ON PAGE 138



Kit Harington,
photographed in
Beverly Hills.

HARRINGTON WEARS A
COAT BY Z ZEGNA.

The last season of *Game of Thrones* was tough on its beefcake contingent: Robb Stark (Richard Madden) caught the wrong bouquet during the famous "Red Wedding" scene, while Jaime Lannister (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) bid his right hand adieu somewhere on the road to King's Landing. Happily, Jon Snow, played by the doe-eyed, raven-haired English actor Kit Harington, remains alive and intact, though when we last saw him he had three arrows in his backside courtesy of erstwhile girlfriend Ygritte. It is a tribute to Harington, a more Byronic Adrian Grenier, and Rose Leslie, a *Downton Abbey* alumna who plays the "wildling" Ygritte as a medieval Annie Oakley, that theirs is the one romance on the show viewers sort of actually care about; we do hope the couple's paths will cross, non-lethally, in the upcoming Season 4, scheduled to begin on HBO this spring.

In the meantime, Harington's fans will have to content themselves with the film *Pompeii*, due out in February. Or more than content themselves: While the actor is buried under mangy furs most of the time on *Game of Thrones*—his story line has him stuck in icy northern climes—he will be displaying far more of himself in the new film as a gladiator, complete with the usual swords, sandals, and body oil. Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson, the man behind the *Resident Evil* series, *Pompeii* looks to be an ingenious mash-up of *Spartacus*, *Volcano*, and *Titanic*. Harington's co-stars are Carrie-Anne Moss (the *Matrix* movies), Emily Browning (*Sucker Punch*), and rivers of C.G.I. lava. —BRUCE HANDY

Johnny Carson

to Los Angeles. What may have helped persuade Carson to decamp were the dissolution of his marriage to Joanne and meeting his soon-to-be third wife, Joanna Holland, a 32-year-old model. California would represent a new life, and a new wife, for the 46-year-old television star.

So "The Great Carsoni" pulled off an amazing disappearing act: he left New York, and the show began broadcasting from Burbank on May 1, 1972. Television had come of age in New York, but it had decided to grow old in California.

"When he moved to L.A. he was very, very concerned that it was a creative mistake," recalls David Steinberg, who began his long and successful career as a comedian on *The Tonight Show* in 1968, when it was still broadcast from New York. (Steinberg's extraordinary rapport with Johnny would see him appear a staggering 130 times on the show, bested only by one of Carson's

idols, Bob Hope.) "California was a better decision for his life, but he was never sure that it was better for the show. *The Tonight Show* represented New York, the glamour and sophistication of Broadway as it was then. I think Johnny missed it. He was still excited by his stardom in New York," explains Steinberg, who has brought his own comedic gifts as a television director to episodes of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Mad About You*, as well as the occasional *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Marshall Brickman observes that the show had a different feel once it moved west. "The prior show had that New York DNA. When he went out to California, there was no sense of compression at all. You know, 6B [in New York] is a small studio. I don't know if it held 400. It was originally a radio studio, was it not? But out there in Burbank on Alameda, there was a big barn into which they put bleachers, so it was less like theater."

The show was taped earlier in Los Angeles, first at 6:30 and then at 5:30, so it was

more Blue Plate Special than Happy Hour. Perhaps it was the seven P.M. taping in New York that had inspired Carson to be more spontaneous and risqué—no wonder the New York shows seemed sexier.

Brickman remembers the trip from his apartment on West 67th Street down to 50th and Sixth Avenue, and "going in the NBC entrance at Rockefeller Center, or Radio City, as they called it. It was architecturally spectacular, and you go up in these very classy wood-paneled elevators—and you're really in the center of New York, which feels like the center of the world. When you're out in California, you drive on the freeway. You go to Studio City. You could be on the moon. You walk into this complex that could be an agricultural distribution center, but it's NBC," whereas in New York, "you were at the absolute heart of what was going on."

Though he lives in California now, Mike Zanella is glad *The Tonight Show* is coming back home to New York. "Maybe," he says, "it'll be a party again." □

Catherine Robbe-Grillet



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 113 the Adriatic coast, and there on that fateful night they later called "la nuit de Zadar" the young bride discovered, to her shock, that her husband had "problems of virility." Alain thought she had known because in their six years together they had never had intercourse, but she had assumed this was due to her early request for no pregnancies.

"He had no problem at all with getting erections, but not for penetration. So Freudian!" she says. "He never explained it and we never discussed it. Years later I thought it must be the problem that some men have of fearing that the vagina is going to swallow them." Clearly amused, she adds: "If my married life were judged on the number of penetrations, mine was pitiful."

More upset than Catherine at this stunning misunderstanding, "he immediately gave me my freedom," and so began her happy 50-year marriage, taking numerous other lovers, both male and female—"I was always bisexual," she says. But Alain remained her only Master.

A year later, he directed her to a small five-page scroll tied with a red ribbon that he had left in a secret compartment of her writing bu-

reau. There she found a handwritten document that he had written in perfect literary French titled *Contrat de Prostitution Conjugale* (Contract for Conjugal Prostitution), which outlines, in eight detailed points, exactly what he would require for their sadomasochistic sessions.

"Her presence being solely to gratify the husband's vices, he shall treat her accordingly, with relentless harshness and brutality." Robbe-Grillet's "vices" make Christian Grey's demands look downright feeble:

On the appointed day, at precisely the designated time, his wife shall present herself at the rendezvous, dressed strictly according to instructions . . . she shall kneel immediately before her husband, eyes lowered, hands behind her back. . . . These postures will nearly always be humiliating. They may be accompanied by chains or any manner of restraint . . . during the infliction of torture, or merely to emphasize the condition of slavery. . . . She shall be relentlessly slapped, bitten etc.; her flesh—preferably in the most sensitive areas—shall be rent by fingernails; finally, she shall be beaten repeatedly during each session, on any part of the body chosen by the husband, with a leather whip.

For each session, Catherine was to be compensated 20,000 (old) francs (roughly \$450 in today's money) to spend as she wished.

Catherine never signed this contract and they never spoke of it. But they continued their sessions, much as outlined in the contract. In her recent biographical book *Alain*, she writes that while finding the Sadean theater outlined—along with the offer of being remunerated—"rather agreeable," she was disappointed in an imperfect master who deigned to offer "mercy" to his "victim." "The very notion of a contract ran contrary to my erotic fantasy

wherein the Master, once elected, requires no permission whatsoever from the woman who has agreed to submit herself to him."

And so we arrive at the heart of the matter: Robbe-Grillet's "little girl" wife was, it appears, a dominant from the start, from her first sneer at the nuns, at Catholicism (she is not a believer), at convention, from her keeping of multiple simultaneous lovers, and now here with her *grand seigneur*.

So, I ask Madame, how can you tell who is really the submissive and who is really the dominant in any given relationship? Appearances are so often deceptive. Her answer cuts to the quick. "The one whose need is the greatest is the submissive."

The recently published letters of 40 years of the Robbe-Grillet marriage leave little doubt as to whose need was greatest. Alain, the "cold" theoretician of the abstract novel, is revealed to be a man brimming with sentiment for his "darling little flower":

More and more, I see that the important thing for me, now, is to make you happy. . . . I have such waves of tenderness, with the memory of words and gestures from you, you, you, so small and easily tired, that I always want to hold you tight against me. . . . You're sweet, Catherine, sweet, sweet, and I love you. And I know so well that you, yes you, are all my happiness in living.

Le Petit Clan

On January 6, 1976, Alain told Catherine that he had decided to renounce his sexual life with her—and with anyone else. He had had a tempestuous love affair with the beautiful actress Catherine Jourdan (with his wife's knowledge and help), and her demands had suffocated him. "His love affair

was with literature," says Madame, and so he retreated, at the age of 53, into the world of his books, perversions, and fantasies.

A few years earlier, at age 43, his wife had a revelation with a handsome young lover named Vincent, who revered Alain and who had become her second master, adept in the art of domination. One night, in 1973, he ordered her to take charge and dominate him, and so she obeyed. She liked it. Very much.

"I suddenly realized that I felt like doing what I wanted to do. I wanted to decide for myself," she says, "I became dominant." And she had learned how, for over 20 years, at the other end of the whip, from a master.

In the four decades since, she has acquired a considerable following and, in France, a certain unique renown, much coming from the publication of *Cérémonies de Femmes*—written under the nom de plume Jeanne de Berg, the feminine form of her previous pseudonym. The book details, often graphically, some of the ceremonies she has conducted over the years, including the one that went terribly wrong—a submissive inadvertently moved at an inopportune time—and ended with a fountain of blood in the emergency room. Since then she only rarely uses knives. Catherine, it is worth noting, is not a "professional" dominatrix and has never, ever accepted money: "If someone pays, then they are in charge. I need to remain free. It is important that everyone involved knows that I do it solely for my pleasure."

"There is this little universe," Beverly explains about the ceremonies, "where a few people offer their freedom and renounce their will and give it to another. One goes into what we call 'the bubble,' where what's outside no longer exists and inside one person is possessed by another. It is not a game; it is a spiritual experience."

These ceremonies usually take place in the company of Madame's *petit clan*. There are currently six women in the group—Beverly is the youngest, Catherine the eldest. "We are a tribe, all equal," says Beverly. "But Catherine is not equal to anyone. Everyone bows to Catherine. She is law."

The ladies all live in Paris and have known each other for many years, some for decades. The identities of the members are totally secret; no one in their ordinary lives knows. One is a well-known classical-music critic; one was an actress with the Comédie-Française. All but one identify as heterosexual, are married, or once were, and have children; some even have grandchildren. "We have this unusual thing in common," says Beverly, "an overwhelmingly male desire and—I use this term with care—a sexual deviance, this desire to dominate men. Most women look for something else in relationships. . . . But we are not sadists. Real sadism is non-consenting, but we share an enormous mutual gratification with those who come to us."

The women get together for purely social

outings and, on other occasions, for ceremonies, which are scripted and directed by Catherine. Madame's *chambre secrète* is, in truth, wherever she chooses it—the lowest *quai* of the Seine at midnight (a whipping lit by the lights of passing boats), or, for "La Chasse" (The Hunt), a private Parisian park at dusk (where the *petit clan* indulged one young woman's fantasy, chasing her down, capturing their prey, and tying her up).

One poetic evening was called "Les Belles Endormies" (The Sleeping Beauties), where each dominatrix was nestled, "sleeping" on the floor in delicate bundles about a large salon. "The man had to wake each of them by caressing them," explains Catherine. "It's a beautiful scene set to Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden.'"

More recently she staged "Le Soir de DSK" (The Evening of DSK). The evening took place in four scenes set in a hotel bedroom: a man rapes a chambermaid, a man has consensual sex with a chambermaid, a woman rapes a bellboy, and a woman has consensual sex with a bellboy. I ask Madame which of the four scenarios worked best. Her blue eyes twinkle. "Well, the woman who played the hotel guest was very convincing."

Catherine explains repeatedly that it is *la complicité* (the complicity) with the other women that drives these events, that the bonding created between them is the great satisfaction.

"Being a dominatrix is wonderful at my age," she says. She has a large pool of submissives at her disposal. "So many men have this need," explains Beverly. "The number of phone calls and letters we get! They come from every social status, from the wealthiest, most influential politicians in France, to a woodcutter, to a policeman."

Beverly and Catherine have anything they want done by their devotees, including window washing, running errands, and pond cleaning. One gentleman cleans Beverly's Paris apartment after serving her a dry martini in the bath followed by a "wonderful foot massage," she says. "And whatever else I want, frankly. Spectacular!"

And then there are, of course, the backstage preparations and ceremonial whippings. The usual results of sexual satisfaction are not the purpose of these rites. "Orgasm doesn't have a role in this," Beverly says. "It's not aimed for and not taken into consideration. Though of course it happens." She pauses. "But only if permission is granted."

"Though what everyone does after," she adds gaily, "is another question entirely!"

Ceremonies can be as simple as an elaborate dinner (prepared by one of their submissives who happens to be a master chef), which includes the attentions of other men worshipping the ladies under the table, or a butler—a British publisher—receiving a postprandial caning for a service infraction. But

more serious ceremonies usually take place only with Madame's "*fidèles*," a small circle of men she has known for many years with whom the trust is absolute—there are no tourists in Madame's dungeon.

"As a dominatrix you must dominate yourself," says Catherine. "Otherwise you take the chance of killing someone or doing serious damage, so you have to know your limits." How far will she go? "Blood is only drawn with initiates," says Beverly. "It is considered a special mark."

"I stop at what is irreversible," Madame says. Except when she doesn't.

Christian first contacted Catherine in 1986 when he was a beautiful young man of 23. He wanted to meet her, to serve her. One day, some years later, he delivered to her a handsome brown box, lined in olive-green velvet, in which lay an exquisite and unique object. It was a branding iron with a carved ivory handle and the initials of Catherine's nom de plume, "JDB," on its end. He wanted her to brand him. She did.

"I fell into my dream," he says of his relationship with Catherine, "and I have never left it." Over the course of almost 20 years, the marks faded, and a year ago there was another ceremony, to renew them.

I met Christian. He is now a beautiful man of 50 with large hands and a Byronic head of dark, thick, long, wavy hair. At Madame's request he presents himself, bare-chested, in front of me. The pale skin on his chest is smooth and hairless. Then I see these amazing marks, five in all, each burned into his flesh by a different woman of the *petit clan*. Madame's was first, thus the iron was hottest, melting the skin on his upper left chest; others follow on his right chest, left upper arm, upper left back, and then last, in the very center of his back, between his shoulder blades, the clearest and most perfectly legible one. It is Beverly's.

I run my fingers across the rise and fall of these stigmata as he stands, hands clasped behind him. He is proud and humble. When I am done, he bows, and vanishes.

Ceremony

As I say good-bye to Madame, I am cued by Beverly, and drop to my knees before her and offer my thanks for her time and indulgence with my endless questions. She looks down at me sweetly, her delicate hands loosely interlaced before her like an expectant child. As I rise to leave she lands a swift, almost imperceptible, tug on my hair.

And I remember those tiny hands the previous evening wielding the marital whip with the art, the ease, and the accuracy of a master cellist, and the stupendous force of a karate expert. I had been told that afternoon to go to a certain famous Paris café on the Right Bank at 8 p.m., order a glass of champagne, pay for it immediately, and leave my phone on the table, face-up but silenced. I was

Catherine Robbe-Grillet

told how to style my hair and exactly what to wear. Exactly. Right down to the height of my heels. The phone lit up at 8:40. I answer. “Viens.” (Come.) It is Beverly in the full force of her métier, and I finally understand: she is not only Madame’s expert attendant, but her veritable extension, dominatrix-in-waiting to the “chief Queen.” I walk to the nearby address that I have been given down a small side street, ring the buzzer and step through a door inside a door, ring another buzzer, go through that door, and take a rickety old elevator with heavy brass sliding doors to the fourth floor. As I step out, Beverly, transformed in a plunging, tightly laced black corset, black O-ring choker, silk harem pants, and shiny black boots, opens a door and pulls me inside.

Without a single word, she blindfolds me with a wide black silk ribbon around my head, checks closely that it is both secure and comfortable, places her hands on my shoulders, and leads me forward. “Left,” “right,” “step up,” “step down.” Finally we stop and I hear the angelic chorus of Allegri’s prayer for redemption, “Miserere mei, Deus” (Have mercy on me, O God.) My blindfold is untied.

We are in an enormous room with a towering 20-foot ceiling. More sanctuary than dungeon, it resembles the Hall of Herod in Gustave Moreau’s *Salome Dancing Before Herod*. Muted lights, some blue, some red, glow softly, and candle flames flicker in various corners. A fire blazes at one end, and Persian carpets cover the floor. The pale salmon walls are hung, floor to ceiling, with mirrors and paintings of Belle Époque beauties in their furs and finery. On a small side wall, all alone, hangs a delicate wood carving of Christ twisting on his cross. Christian, dressed in a black three-piece suit, cravat, and evening shoes, stands at attention, back to an adjacent wall, waiting.

In a small clearing among the brocade divans, velvet armchairs, mahogany side tables,

piles of books, and marble statues sits a 19th-century Catholic prayer stool with a worn red velvet base, a crucifix carved into its tall wood back, and more red velvet on the slim, high elbow rest. Standing beside this altar is Madame, dressed entirely in black: knee-high boots, black belted dress, and black turban glistening with silver thread. In the center of her chest hangs a gold amulet with multiple chains dangling from its broad base. It glows on her, in this room, like the sun descending on the horizon of a storm.

Catherine Robbe-Grillet practices a theater of secular High Church sadomasochism, and her ceremonies, so clearly sacrificial rituals, are informed by the sacraments, the music, the language—she calls her submissives “acolytes”—and the props of her Catholic girlhood. “It is not about pain,” Beverly has carefully explained. “It is about how to suffer beautifully, like Saint Sebastian.” They are practicing, in effect, the tenet of conscious, voluntary suffering, a kind of devotion—like Beverly’s for her “petite Madame”—and these ceremonies are hard-edged theatrical poems where, Catherine has written, she “plays with the faces of death.”

A young woman is led to Catherine by Christian. She is beautiful with a great mound of curling dark hair clipped up on top of her head—Madame likes necks—and she is tightly wrapped, mummified from chest to knees in layers of black translucent chiffon held in place by a great length of pearls looped around her neck, crossed above her breasts, and tied around her waist, with pearls trailing down to her feet behind her. She is naked under the chiffon.

She is laid on the carpet and tied down at each wrist and ankle. A long cut with a small silver switchblade is made down the center of the chiffon, and the fabric is peeled back, leaving her bosom and belly exposed. Only the pearls remain on her skin. Christian kneels between her legs, bending over her lower body,

caressing her gently while Madame sits on a low stool beside her and administers to her, less gently, with small unidentifiable instruments. The woman emits low sounds, pain and pleasure mixed.

She is eventually untied, lifted to her knees by Christian, and Madame steps in close to her, above her, whispers to her, and as she cradles the young woman in her arms *L’Image* leaps to life. In this Pietà, this embracing of a young woman by an old one, I see the entire arc of 60 years of Catherine Robbe-Grillet’s brave life from Alain’s submissive wife to Mistress of herself.

The woman, whose face is wet with tears, is radiant. She is placed on the prayer stool, head bowed, elbows extended across the high shelf, palms up. The ceremony is not yet over.

There is a unique rhythm to the music of the whip: the great crack that slices the air just before the leather finds its surface and unleashes its great length around the pale softness of naked hips. An immediate moan, the woman’s, follows the whip’s final snap. As the last vibrations taper into silence, Madame passes the whip to Beverly and continues the incantation: “*Un autre coup*” (Another lash). Precision is all.

The quartet plays on, whip and woman escalating in ever heightening crescendos and cries. Suffering made beautiful. The Mistress who is Master plays her instruments into a clear and present ecstasy. No wonder she allows no photographs: they would be but frozen shadows of a mystical passing. □

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Killing in Oklahoma



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 90 when the motorcycle he was riding hit a manhole. According to his mother, Chancey had had very little contact with his biological father. Manuel, who had married Chancey’s moth-

er, divorced her, and re-married her, was the dominant adult male figure in his life.

Jennifer Luna, 38, watched her son become even more introverted after the two deaths. When he did get upset, he became temperamental. He got the flu and missed so much school that at some point during the winter Jennifer decided to just pull him out and have him repeat his sophomore year, beginning in the fall. With nothing much to do until then, he spent a lot of time hanging around in the streets. His de facto clubhouse was the federally subsidized Elm Terrace apartment complex, down on the southeast side of town. Edwards and Luna were often there together. So were several other teenage kids, including one who people said had left Duncan to go up

to Oklahoma City and was believed to have come back as a full-fledged gang member. Despite public officials’ insistence that there was little to no gang activity in Duncan, the school district itself had identified four students they believed had gang affiliations.

Jennifer Luna figured her son was only a wannabe gang member. Chancey had gotten into a little trouble with the police, but it was small-time stuff, like missing Duncan’s curfew for minors. He could still be sweet: when his mother got a cold he doted on her and was protective of her in general.

Jennifer thought he probably smoked weed at Elm Terrace, but she thanked God it wasn’t meth. She had been raised in Duncan and had seen the drug take hold of the community and make people crazy.