

GEORGES

SIMENON



# Three Bedrooms in Manhattan



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born in Liège, Belgium, in 1903. He is best known in Britain as the author of the Maigret novels and his prolific output of over 400 novels and short stories have made him a household name in continental Europe. He died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life.

GEORGES SIMENON

*Three Bedrooms in  
Manhattan*

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AND LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN



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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published in French as *Trois Chambres à Manhattan* 1946  
This translation first published by the *New York Review of Books* 2003  
Published in Penguin Classics 2020  
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Set in 12.5/15 pt Dante MT Std by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd, Pondicherry  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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

ISBN: 978-0-241-46156-3

[www.greenpenguin.co.uk](http://www.greenpenguin.co.uk)



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# *Three Bedrooms in Manhattan*



# I

He woke up suddenly at 3.00 a.m., dead tired, got dressed, and almost went out without his tie, in slippers, coat collar turned up, like people who walk their dogs late at night or very early in the morning. Then, when he was in the courtyard of the building, where after two months he still couldn't bring himself to feel at home, he glanced upward mechanically and realized that he'd forgotten to turn out his light, but he didn't have the energy to climb back up the stairs.

What were they doing, up there in J.K.C.'s apartment? Was Winnie vomiting yet? Probably. Moaning, at first softly, then more loudly, until at last she burst into an endless fit of tears.

His footsteps resounded in the nearly empty streets of Greenwich Village, and he was still thinking about the couple who once more had made it impossible for him to sleep. He had never seen them. He didn't even know what the initials J.K.C. stood for. He'd read them, painted in green, on his neighbor's door.

And he knew, after passing by one morning when the door was open, that the floor was black, probably varnished – a glistening black lacquer that was all the more striking in contrast to the red furniture inside.

He knew a lot about the two of them, but only in pieces he couldn't quite fit together. That J.K.C. was a painter. That Winnie lived in Boston.

What did she do? Why did she always come to New York on Friday nights, and only on Friday nights? Why didn't she ever stay the whole weekend? Well, of course there were jobs where people had different days off. She came by taxi, probably from the train station, just before eight. Always the same time, give or take a few minutes – that's what made him think she'd arrived by train.

At first her voice would be shrill and piercing. She had two voices. He could hear her, bustling about, speaking with the animation of someone who was just stopping by.

They ate dinner in the studio. Like clockwork the meal was delivered from an Italian restaurant in the neighborhood fifteen minutes before she arrived.

J.K.C. spoke little, his voice muffled. Despite the thinness of the walls, it was impossible to make out what he was saying, apart from a word or two on those nights when he called Boston.

And why did he never call before midnight, and often not until long after one?

'Hello . . . long distance?'

Then Combe knew that it would go on for hours. 'Boston' he could recognize but not the name of the exchange. Then the name 'Winnie' and a surname starting with a *p*, an *o*, an *l*. He never caught the last few letters.

Then the endless hushed whispering.

It drove Combe out of his mind, but less so than these Fridays. What did they drink with their dinner?

Something strong – at least for Winnie, since her voice quickly turned throaty and deep.

How could she let herself lose control the way she did? He had never imagined passion of such violence, such unrestrained animality.

And J.K.C., faceless, remained calm, self-possessed, speaking in a level, almost patronizing voice.

After each new outburst she drank again; she shouted for something to drink. He pictured the studio in shambles, glasses shattered on the black floor.

This time he'd gone out without waiting for what always came next, the frantic comings and goings from the bathroom, the hiccupping, the vomiting, the tears. And, finally, that unending wail of a sick animal or a hysterical woman.

Why did he keep thinking about her? Why had he gone out? He had promised himself that one morning he'd be there in the hallway or on the stairs when she left. But every time, she managed to get up at seven sharp. She didn't need an alarm clock. She didn't bother to wake her friend. Combe never heard them talking in the morning.

Stray sounds from the bathroom, perhaps a kiss on the forehead for the man lying asleep, then she opened the door and slipped out. He imagined her searching briskly for a taxi to take her back to the station.

What did she look like in the morning? Could you make out the night's traces on her face, in her sagging shoulders, her hoarse voice?

That was the woman he wanted to see – not the one who got off the train, brimming with self-confidence,

who then showed up at the studio as if she was just dropping in on some friends.

He wanted to see the woman at daybreak, when she went off alone, leaving the man asleep, selfish, stupefied, his damp forehead grazed by her lips.

He came to a corner that seemed vaguely familiar. A club was closing. The last customers were out on the sidewalk, waiting in vain for a taxi. On the corner two men who'd been drinking were finding it hard to say good-bye. They shook hands, pulled apart, then immediately turned back for a final confidence or renewed protestations of friendship.

Combe, too, looked like he'd been in a bar, not like someone who'd just gotten up.

But he hadn't been drinking. He was sober. He hadn't been out listening to jazz. He'd spent the night in the desert of his bed.

A subway station, black and metallic, stood in the middle of the intersection. At last a yellow cab pulled up to the sidewalk and a dozen nightclub patrons rushed in its direction. Not without difficulty, the cab drove off again, empty. Perhaps nobody was going the right way.

Two wide streets, almost deserted, with garlands of luminous globes running down the sidewalks.

On the corner, its high windows lit violently, aggressively, with boastful vulgarity, was a sort of long glass cage where people could be seen as dark smudges and where he went in just so as not to be alone.

Stools anchored to the floor along an endless counter made of something cold and plastic. Two sailors swayed

drunkenly, and one of them shook his hand solemnly, saying something Combe failed to understand.

It wasn't on purpose that he sat down beside the woman. He realized it only when the white-coated black waiter was standing in front of him, impatient for his order.

The place smelled of fairgrounds, of lazy crowds, of nights when you stayed out because you couldn't go to bed, and it smelled like New York, of its calm and brutal indifference.

Picking at random, he ordered grilled sausages. Then he looked at his neighbor and she looked at him. She had just been served fried eggs, but she hadn't touched them. She lit a cigarette slowly and deliberately, leaving a trace of her lipstick on the paper.

'You're French?'

She asked the question in French, a French that at first he thought betrayed no accent.

'How'd you know?'

'I didn't. As soon as you came in, even before you said anything, I just thought you were French.'

She added, a hint of nostalgia in her smile, 'Paris?'

'Yes.'

'Which part?'

Did she see his eyes dim slightly?

'I had a villa in Saint-Cloud . . . You've been there?'

She recited, as they do on the Paris riverboats, 'Pont de Sèvre, Saint-Cloud, Point-du-Jour . . .'

Then, in a lower voice: 'I lived in Paris for six years. Do you know the church in Auteuil? My apartment was next

door, on the corner of rue Mirabeau, a few steps from the Molitor swimming pool.’

How many people were in this diner? Ten at most, set apart from one another by empty stools and by another emptiness, indefinable and hard to pierce, which perhaps emanated from each of them.

Two black men in white overcoats linked them together – nothing else. From time to time one of the two men would turn to a kind of trap and take out a plate of something hot, before sliding it down the counter to one of the customers.

Why, despite the blinding brightness, did everything look gray? It was as if the painfully sharp lights were helpless to dispel all the darkness the people had brought in from the night outside.

‘You’re not eating?’ he said, since silence had fallen.

‘I’m in no hurry.’

She smoked like American women – the same gestures, the same pouting lips you saw on magazine covers and in movies. She struck the same poses, too, shrugging her fur coat off her shoulders to reveal her black silk dress, crossing her long legs in their sheer stockings.

He didn’t need to turn to check her out. A mirror ran the length of the diner, and they could see themselves sitting side by side. The image was unflattering, almost distorted.

‘You’re not eating, either,’ she said. ‘Have you been in New York long?’

‘About six months.’

What made him introduce himself just then? His vanity, of course – he was sure he was going to regret it.

‘François Combe.’ His voice as he said it wasn’t nearly casual enough.

She must have heard him. She didn’t seem surprised. And yet she’d lived in France.

‘When were you in Paris?’

‘Let’s see . . . The last time was three years ago. I passed through on my way from Switzerland, but didn’t stay long.’

Immediately, she added, ‘You’ve been to Switzerland?’

Without waiting for a reply, she said, ‘I spent two winters at a sanatorium in Leysin.’

Strangely, it was those words that made him look at her for the first time as a woman. She went on with a show of gaiety that somehow touched him, ‘It’s not as terrible as people think. At least not for the ones who get out. They told me I was definitely cured.’

She stubbed out her cigarette in an ashtray and again he looked at the bloodlike stain her lips had left on it. For the space of a second, he thought of Winnie, though he’d never laid eyes on her.

It was the voice, he realized suddenly. This woman, whose name he didn’t know, had one of Winnie’s voices, the voice of her tragic moments, wounded and animal.

A low voice that made you think of a scar that hadn’t healed, of a hurt that lingers beneath consciousness, soft and familiar, deep inside.

She ordered something from the black man and Combe frowned, for she’d used the same intonation, the same facial expression, the same fluid seductiveness she’d used on him.

‘Your eggs will get cold,’ he said testily.

What was he hoping for? Why did he want to get away from this room where a dirty mirror reflected their two images back at them?

Was he hoping they’d leave together, just like that, though they were total strangers?

She began to eat her eggs so slowly that it annoyed him. She stopped to shake pepper into the glass of tomato juice she had ordered.

It was like a movie in slow motion. One of the sailors was being sick in a corner, just as Winnie must be doing right now. His friend was helping him like a brother, while the black waiter looked on indifferently.

They had sat there a whole hour and still he knew nothing about her. It irritated him that she kept drawing things out.

In his mind, they’d already agreed to leave together, and her inexplicable stubbornness was cheating him of the little time they had.

Several minor problems were preoccupying him. Her accent, for one. Her French was perfect, but there was something about it he couldn’t quite place.

When he asked her if she was American and she replied that she’d been born in Vienna, he understood.

‘Here they call me Kay, but when I was little I was Katherine. Have you ever been to Vienna?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah.’

She looked at him almost as he’d been looking at her. So she knew nothing about him, and he knew nothing

about her. It was after four o'clock. From time to time someone came in from God knows where and with a tired sigh hoisted himself onto a stool.

She was still eating. She ordered a hideous cake covered with bright frosting that she picked at with the tip of her spoon. Just when he hoped she'd finished, she called the black man over and ordered coffee. It was scalding when it came, so they had to wait even longer.

'Give me a cigarette, won't you? I'm out.'

He knew she'd smoke it down to the end before leaving, maybe ask for another one, too. He was surprised at his own impatience.

Outside, wouldn't she simply offer him her hand and say good night?

At last they were outside. The corner was deserted except for a man who was asleep on his feet, with his back against the subway entrance. She didn't suggest a taxi. She started walking down the sidewalk as if it made perfect sense – as if it was taking her somewhere.

She stumbled a few times because of her high heels. After about a hundred yards, she took his arm, and it seemed like the two of them had been walking the streets of New York at five in the morning, from the beginning of time.

Later he'd remember the smallest details from that night, though while he was living it, it seemed so disjointed as to be unreal.

Fifth Avenue stretched on forever, but he only recognized it after ten blocks, when he saw the little church.

'I wonder if it's open,' Kay said and stopped.

Then, with unexpected sadness, she said, 'I'd be so happy if it were.'

She made him try all the doors to see if one was unlocked.

'A pity,' she said, sighing and taking his arm again.

Then, a bit farther on, 'My shoes are killing me.'

'Do you want to take a taxi?'

'No, let's walk.'

He didn't know her address and didn't ask her for it. It felt strange to be walking like this through the huge city without the slightest idea of where they were going or what would happen next.

He saw their reflection in a shop window. She was leaning on him a little, perhaps because she was tired, and he thought they looked like a pair of lovers, a sight that just the day before would have made him sick with loneliness.

He had gritted his teeth – especially the last few weeks – whenever he passed a couple that was so plainly a couple, almost reeking of intimacy.

And yet here they were, looking like a couple to anyone who saw them pass. A funny couple.

'Do you want a whiskey?' she suddenly asked.

'I didn't think there was any place open this time of night.'

But already she was off with this new notion of hers; she led him into a cross street.

'Wait . . . No, not here. On the next block.'

Nervously, she picked the wrong place twice, then pushed open the grilled door of a little bar where a light shone and a man with a mop stared back at them with startled eyes. She questioned him, and after another

fifteen minutes of roaming, they found themselves at last in a basement where three gloomy men were drinking at a counter. She knew the place. She called the bartender Jimmy, but then remembered his name was Teddy. She launched into a long explanation of her mistake, though the bartender couldn't have cared less. She talked about some people she'd been here with before. The man listened without saying a thing.

It took her nearly half an hour to drink one scotch, and then she wanted another. She lit another cigarette. It was always going to be the last cigarette.

'As soon as I finish,' she promised, 'we can go.'

She grew chatty. Once outside, her grip on Combe's arm was tighter. She nearly tripped as she stepped onto the curb.

She talked about her daughter. She had a daughter somewhere in Europe, but it was hard to tell where, or why they were no longer together.

They reached Fifty-second, and they could see the lights of Broadway, where silhouetted crowds were streaming along the sidewalks.

It was almost six. They had walked a long way. They were both tired. Out of the blue Combe asked, 'Where do you live?'

She stopped and looked at him, and at first he thought she was angry. He was wrong, he saw at once. There was trouble, perhaps even real distress there. He realized he didn't even know what color her eyes were.

She took several hurried steps on her own, as though running away. Then she stopped and waited for him to catch up.

‘Since this morning,’ she said, looking him in the face, her expression tight, ‘I don’t live anywhere.’

Why was he so touched that he wanted to cry? They were standing in front of a shop, their legs so tired they were trembling, with a bitter, early-morning taste in their mouths and an aching emptiness in their heads.

Had the two whiskeys put them on edge?

It was ridiculous. Though they were both teary-eyed, they looked like they were scowling at each other. The gesture seemed sentimental, and yet he seized both her hands.

‘Come on,’ he said.

After a moment’s hesitation, he added, ‘Come on, Kay.’

It was the first time he’d spoken her name.

She asked, already yielding, ‘Where are we going?’

He had no idea. He couldn’t take her to his place, to that hole in the wall he hated, to the room that hadn’t been cleaned for a week, with its unmade bed.

Again they started walking. Now that she had confessed she had nowhere to live, he was afraid of losing her.

She talked. She told a complicated story filled with first names that meant nothing to him but that she dropped as though anyone would know them.

‘I was sharing Jessie’s apartment. You should know Jessie! She’s the most seductive woman I’ve ever met . . . Three years ago, her husband, Ronald, got a very important job in Panama. Jessie tried to live with him down there, but because of her health she couldn’t . . . She came back to New York, it was okay with Ronald, and we took