

SOPHIE CALLE

Exquisite pain



Thomas Nelson



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Many thanks to the friends and the strangers who have confided to me the story of their sufferings,  
to Jean-François Leven of AFP in New Delhi,  
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and, with the passing of time, to M., without whom this project would not have existed in the first place.

 **Thames & Hudson**

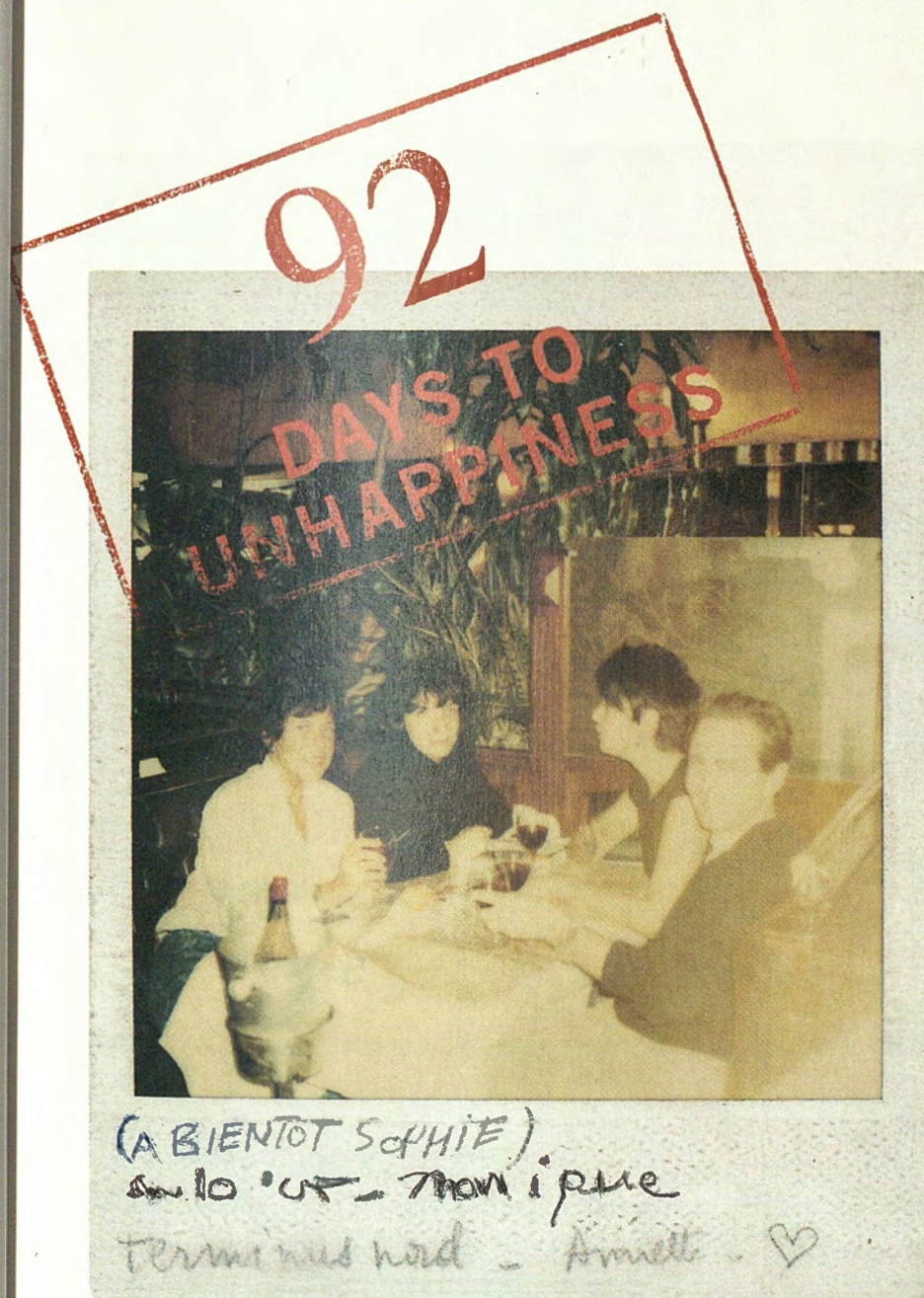


In 1984 the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs awarded me a grant for a three-month scholarship to Japan.

I left on October 25, unsuspecting that this date would mark the beginning of a 92 day countdown to the end of a love affair.

Nothing extraordinary-but to me, at the time, the unhappiest moment in my life, and one for which I blamed the trip itself.





October 25, 1984 at the Gare du Nord restaurant. Régis, Annette and my mother come to see me off. He preferred not to be there. He doesn't like goodbyes. At 5.10 p.m., my mother offers her last words of advice: "Be good, careful, circumspect, and not 'promiscuitous'." Annette and Régis just keep on waving and waving. I start to cry.





January 25, 1985, 2 a.m., room 261, Imperial Hotel, New Delhi.





**6** days ago, the man I love left me. I used to dream about him as a little girl. He was so handsome. At thirty I managed to seduce him. For our first night I wore a wedding dress. We had been together nearly a year when they gave me that damned three-month grant for Japan. He warned me that he'd forget me if I left him. But still I went, on October 25, 1984. Out of pride or bravado? In spite of his threat, he suggested we meet up in India at the end of my journey. About the trip itself there is nothing to say, except that I counted the days that kept me from this man. On January 24 he called me a few hours before setting off to confirm the details: he was flying in from Paris an hour before me and would wait at New Delhi airport for the flight from Tokyo. After all that waiting, here it was: happiness! As I was boarding they handed me a message: "M. can't join you in Delhi due accident in Paris and stay in hospital. Contact Bob." Must have been a crash on the way to the airport. It was my fault. I had to call my father, who is a doctor. To hear that he was dead? In New Delhi it was impossible to get a connection. It took me ten hours to get through to Bob, who didn't know what I was talking about. Yes, M. had been in the hospital but only for an infected finger. So I called him at home. As soon as he picked up the phone, I knew it was over: "I wanted to come and explain things to you." "Have you met another woman?" "Yes." He hoped it was serious. I hung up. I sat on my bed for hours, staring at the phone and the moldy carpet of room 261 in the Imperial Hotel.



It was an image of happiness that caused me the greatest suffering. It happened in 1964. It was springtime. On Boulevard Montparnasse. One sunny Sunday morning. I had bought an American convertible, light blue with blue leather upholstery. In the car were the woman I loved and our son, who was wearing a lemon yellow raincoat. And as I was driving, I realized how rare such moments of happiness are. Well, I lost that happiness and this image came back to me like a knife. As sharp as the death of happiness. The irremediable impossibility of happiness. Every night I had the same dream. It was in the street, in a public place. The woman I loved said nothing but it was clear: "I don't love you anymore!" As plain as God the Father speaking on a panoramic screen. I had this nightmare every night for seven years. Exactly as many unhappy nights as I had lived happy days. Like the negative of my happiness. During the day, I would think of that blue car and that yellow raincoat and at night, there it was again...



I left for Japan on October 25, 1984, unsuspecting that this date would mark the beginning of a 92 day countdown to the end of a love affair. Nothing extraordinary – but to me, at the time, the unhappiest moment in my life, and one for which I blamed that trip itself. I got back to France on January 28, 1985. From that moment, whenever people asked me how it went, I chose to skip the Far East bit and tell them about my suffering instead. In return I started asking both friends and chance encounters: “When did you suffer most ?” -- I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people’s, or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition.