



THE INTERNATIONAL  
BESTSELLER

*a novel*

'Sad,  
beautiful, indignant,  
wrenching, important'

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SERPENT*

DAVID  
FOENKINOS

Charlotte learned to read her name on a gravestone.

So she wasn't the first Charlotte.

Before her, there had been her aunt, her mother's sister.

The two sisters were very close, until one evening in November 1913.

Franziska and Charlotte sing together, dance and laugh together.

But never to excess.

There is always a reserve to their displays of happiness.

Perhaps this is linked to their father's personality.

An intellectual, strict and unyielding, with an interest in art and antiques.

For him, nothing could be more fascinating than a handful of Roman dust.

Their mother is gentler.

But it is a gentleness tinged with sorrow.

Her life has been a series of tragedies.

But more on that later.

For now, let's talk about Charlotte.

The first Charlotte.

She is beautiful, with long dark hair like a promise.

It all begins with the slowness.

Little by little, she does everything more slowly: eating, walking, reading.

Something inside her is slowing down.

Her body, I imagine, being infiltrated by melancholy.

The kind of melancholy that devastates, that never goes away.

Happiness becomes an island in the past, unreachable.

But nobody notices the arrival of this slowness in Charlotte.

It is insidious.

People compare the two sisters.

One simply smiles more than the other.

At most, someone might remark the occasional daydream that goes on  
too long.

But night is taking over her.

The night she must wait for, so that it can be her last.

It is such a cold November night.

While everyone else is sleeping, Charlotte gets out of bed.

She gathers a few belongings, as if she's going on a trip.

The city seems at a standstill, frozen in this early winter.

Charlotte has just turned eighteen.

She walks quickly toward her destination.

A bridge.

A bridge she loves.

The secret locus of her darkness.

She has known for a long time that it will be the last bridge.

In the black night, unseen, she jumps.

Without the slightest hesitation.

She falls into the icy water, her death an ordeal.

Her body is found early the next morning, washed up on a riverbank.

Completely blue in places.

Her parents and her sister are woken by the news.

The father is paralyzed, utterly silent.

The sister weeps.

The mother howls with pain.

The next day's newspapers run stories about this girl.

Who took her own life without any explanation.

And perhaps that is the ultimate outrage.  
 Violence added to violence.  
 Why?  
 Her sister considers this suicide an affront to their closeness.  
 Mostly, she feels responsible.  
 She never saw, never understood that slowness.  
 Now she moves forward, with guilt in her heart.

## 2

The parents and the sister do not attend the funeral.  
 Devastated, they shut themselves away.  
 They probably feel a little ashamed too.  
 They flee the eyes of others.

A few months pass like this.  
 In the impossibility of taking part in the world.  
 A long period of silence.  
 To speak is to risk mentioning Charlotte.  
 She hides in wait behind every word.  
 Silence is the survivors' only crutch.  
 Until the moment when Franziska touches the piano.  
 She plays something, sings softly.  
 Her parents move over to her.  
 Surprised by this manifestation of life.

The country enters the war, and perhaps this is for the best.  
 Chaos is the perfect backdrop to their pain.  
 For the first time, the conflict is global.  
 Sarajevo brings the fall of the old empires.

Millions of men rush to their deaths.  
The future is fought over in long tunnels dug in the earth.  
Franziska decides to become a nurse.  
She wants to heal the wounded, cure the sick, bring the dead back to life.  
And to feel useful, of course.  
This girl who lives each day with the feeling of having been useless.  
Her mother is horrified by this decision.  
It gives rise to tensions and arguments.  
A war within the war.  
But it makes no difference: Franziska signs up.  
And finds herself near the danger zone.  
Some think her brave.  
But she is quite simply no longer afraid of death.

In the heat of battle, she meets Albert Salomon.  
He is one of the youngest surgeons.  
He is very tall and very concentrated.  
One of those men who seem in a rush even when they are still.  
He manages a makeshift hospital.  
On the front, in France.  
His parents are dead, so medicine is his only family.  
Obsessed with his work, nothing can distract him from his mission.  
He shows little attention to women.  
Barely even registers the presence of a new nurse.  
She smiles at him constantly, all the same.  
Thankfully, something happens to change this.  
In the middle of an operation, Albert sneezes.  
His nose runs, he needs to blow it.  
But his hands are deep in a soldier's guts.  
So Franziska approaches with a handkerchief.  
It is at this very moment that he finally looks at her.

. . .

One year later, Albert takes his courage in his hands.  
 His surgeon's hands.  
 He goes to see Franziska's parents.  
 They are so cold that he loses his nerve.  
 Why has he come here?  
 Oh yes . . . to ask for their daughter's . . . hand in . . . marriage . . .  
 To ask for what? the father grumbles.  
 He doesn't want this gangly beanpole for a son-in-law.  
 He's not good enough to marry a Grunwald!  
 But Franziska insists.  
 She says she is deeply in love.  
 It's hard to be sure.  
 But she is not the type for passing whims and fancies.  
 Since Charlotte's death, life has been reduced to its essentials.

The parents finally give in.  
 They force themselves to rejoice a little bit.  
 To learn to smile again.  
 They even buy flowers.  
 It has been so long since colors were seen in their living room.  
 Somehow they are reborn through the petals.  
 At the wedding, though, they look like mourners.

3

**R**ight from the beginning, Franziska is left alone.  
 Is this really *married life*?  
 Albert returns to the front.  
 The war is mired in mud, it seems endless.

One vast slaughter in the trenches.  
Just don't let her husband be killed.  
She does not want to be a widow.  
She's already a . . .  
Actually, what is the word for someone who has lost a sister?  
There is no word.  
Sometimes the dictionary says nothing.  
Frightened by pain, just like her.

The young newlywed wanders around her large apartment.  
On the second floor of a bourgeois building in Charlottenburg.  
*Charlotte town.*  
It is located at 15 Wielandstrasse, near the Savignyplatz.  
I have often walked that street.  
Even before I knew about Charlotte, I loved her neighborhood.  
In 2004, I wanted to entitle a novel "Savignyplatz."  
That name resonated strangely within me.  
Something drew me to it, though I didn't know why.

A long hallway runs through the apartment.  
Franziska often sits there to read.  
In the hallway, she feels as if she is at the border of her home.  
Today, she closes her book quite quickly.  
Feeling dizzy, she heads to the bathroom.  
And splashes some water on her face.  
It takes her only a few seconds to understand.

While caring for a wounded man, Albert receives a letter.  
Seeing his face turn pale, a nurse becomes worried.  
My wife is pregnant, he finally sighs.  
In the months that follow, he tries to return to Berlin as often as possible.

But most of the time, Franziska is alone with her belly.  
 She walks along the hallway, already speaking to her child.  
 So desperate to put an end to her solitude.  
 Deliverance comes on April 16, 1917.  
 It is the first appearance of a heroine.  
 But also of a baby that cries constantly.  
*As if she refused to accept her birth.*

Franziska wants to call her Charlotte, in homage to her sister.  
 Albert does not want his daughter to bear a dead woman's name.  
 Still less one who committed suicide.  
 Franziska weeps, outraged, infuriated.  
 It is a way of making her live again, she thinks.  
 Please, Albert begs, be reasonable.  
 But he knows that she isn't.  
 It is part of why he loves her, this gentle madness.  
 This way she has of never being the same woman.  
 She is by turns free and submissive, feverish and dazzling.  
 He senses that conflict is pointless.  
 Besides, who ever feels like fighting during a war?  
 So Charlotte it will be.

## 4

**W**hat are Charlotte's first memories?  
 Smells or colors?  
 More likely, they are notes.  
 The tunes sung by her mother.  
 Franziska has an angel's voice and she plays piano too.  
 From her first days of life, Charlotte is soothed by this.



Later, she will turn the pages of sheet music.  
 And so her early years pass, enveloped in melody.

Franziska likes going for walks with her daughter.  
 She takes her to Berlin's green heart, the Tiergarten.  
 A small island of peace in a city still sunk in defeat.  
 Little Charlotte observes the damaged, mutilated bodies.  
 She is scared by all these hands reaching out toward her.  
 An army of beggars.  
 She lowers her eyes to avoid seeing their broken faces.  
 And does not look up again until she is in the woods.  
 There, she can run after the squirrels.

Afterward, they must go to the cemetery.  
 So they never forget.  
 Charlotte understands early that the dead are part of life.  
 She touches her mother's tears.  
 This mother who mourns her dead sister as she did on the day of her death.  
 Some sorrows never pass.  
 On the gravestone, Charlotte reads her name.  
 She wants to know what happened.  
 Her aunt drowned.  
 Didn't she know how to swim?  
 It was an accident.  
 Franziska quickly changes the subject.  
 And so comes the first arrangement with reality.  
 The play begins.

Albert disapproves of these trips to the cemetery.  
 Why do you take Charlotte there so often?  
 It's a morbid attraction.

He asks her to visit less frequently, not to take their daughter.  
But how can he know if she obeys?  
He is never there.  
He thinks of nothing but his work, say his parents-in-law.  
Albert wants to become the greatest doctor in Germany.  
When he is not in the hospital, he spends his time studying.

Never trust a man who works too much.  
What is he seeking to avoid?  
Fear, or simply a feeling.  
His wife's behavior is increasingly unstable.  
She seems absent at times, he notices.  
As if she were taking a vacation from herself.  
He tells himself she's a daydreamer.  
Often we try to find pleasant reasons for other people's strangeness.  
In the end, the way she acts becomes worrying.  
She lies in bed for days on end.  
She doesn't even pick Charlotte up from school.

And then, suddenly, she becomes herself again.  
In the space of a minute, she snaps out of her lethargy.  
Without the slightest transition, she starts taking Charlotte everywhere.  
Into town, to the park, to the zoo and museums.  
They must walk, read, play piano, sing, learn all there is to learn.  
In lively moments, she likes organizing parties.  
She wants to see people.  
Albert loves those soirées.  
They are his deliverance.  
Franziska sits at the piano.  
It's so beautiful, that way she has of moving her lips.  
As if she were conversing with the notes.

For Charlotte, her mother's voice is a caress.  
 When you have a mother who sings like that, nothing bad can happen to you.

Like a doll, Charlotte stands up straight in the middle of the living room.  
 She greets the guests with her brightest smile.  
 The smile she worked on with her mother, until her jaw ached.  
 Where is the logic?  
 Her mother shuts herself up for weeks at a time.  
 Then, suddenly, the social demon possesses her.  
 Charlotte enjoys these transformations.  
 She prefers anything to apathy.  
 A deluge is better than a drought.  
 But the drought returns now.  
 The rain of life ceases as abruptly as it started.  
 And once again, Franziska lies in bed, exhausted by nothing.  
 Lost in contemplation of some other world at the far end of her room.

Faced with her mother's mood swings, Charlotte is docile.  
 She tames her melancholy.  
 Is this how one becomes an artist?  
 By growing accustomed to the madness of others?

5

Charlotte is eight when her mother's state worsens.  
 The depressive phases drag on.  
 She no longer has any desire to do anything, feels useless.  
 Albert implores his wife.  
 But the darkness is already settled in their bed.  
 I need you, he says.

Charlotte needs you, he says.  
She falls asleep, for the night.

But gets up again.

Albert opens his eyes, watches her.

Franziska walks over to the window.

I want to see the heavens, she says to reassure her husband.

Often, she tells Charlotte that everything is more beautiful in heaven.

And adds: when I'm there, I'll send you a letter to tell you all about it.

The afterlife becomes an obsession.

Don't you want mama to become an angel?

Wouldn't that be wonderful?

Charlotte says nothing.

An angel.

Franziska knows one: her sister.

Who had the courage to put an end to it all.

To exit life silently, without warning.

The death of an eighteen-year-old girl.

The death of promise.

Franziska believes there is a hierarchy of horror.

The suicide of a mother is a superior suicide.

She could occupy first place in the family tragedy.

Who would contest the supremacy of her devastation?

One night, she gets quietly out of bed.

Not even breathing.

For once, Albert does not hear her.

She goes to the bathroom.

Picks up a vial of opium and swallows it all.

Her groan finally awakens her husband.

He rushes over, but the door is locked.  
Franziska does not open it.  
Her throat is on fire, the pain is unbearable.  
She doesn't die, however.  
And her husband's panic ruins her goodbyes.

Does Charlotte hear all this?  
Does she wake up?  
In the end, Albert manages to open the door.  
He brings his wife back to life.  
The dose was too small.  
But now he knows.  
Death is no longer merely a fantasy.

## 6

**W**hen she wakes up, Charlotte goes in search of her mother.  
Your mama was sick in the night.  
You mustn't disturb her.  
For the first time, the little girl goes to school without seeing her.  
Without kissing her.

Franziska will be safer at her parents' house.  
That is what Albert thinks.  
If she stays alone, she will kill herself.  
It is impossible to reason with her.  
Franziska goes back to her old bedroom.  
The place where she grew up.  
The place where she was happy with her sister.  
With her parents' support, she regains a little strength.

Her mother tries to conceal her anxiety.  
How is it possible?  
Her second daughter attempting suicide, after the first killed herself.  
No hope of any respite.  
She seeks help wherever she can.  
They call a neurologist, a family friend.  
She has gone through a rough patch, but it will pass, he reassures them.  
An excess of emotion, a highly sensitive personality, nothing more.

Charlotte worries.  
Where is mama?  
She is sick.  
She has flu.  
It's very contagious.  
So it's better not to see her for the moment.  
She'll be back soon, Albert promises.  
Though he doesn't sound altogether convincing.  
He is angry with his wife.  
Especially when he sees Charlotte in such distress.

All the same, he visits her every evening.  
His parents-in-law greet him coldly.  
They hold him responsible.  
He is never at home, always working.  
The suicide attempt is obviously an act of despair.  
Provoked by her terrible loneliness.  
They have to blame someone.  
And what about your other daughter, he wants to shout, is that my fault too?  
But Albert remains silent.  
He ignores them, and goes to sit next to the bed.  
Alone with his wife at last, he brings up a few memories.

It always ends like this, with memories.  
 For a moment, things look hopeful.  
 Franziska takes her husband's hand, manages a faint smile.  
 These are instants of peace, even of tenderness.  
 Brief passages of life between the dark desires.

They choose a nurse to care for the patient.  
 That is the official version.  
 Her real job, of course, is to watch over Franziska.  
 The days pass under the gaze of this stranger.  
 Franziska never asks about her daughter.  
 Charlotte no longer exists.  
 When Albert brings one of their daughter's drawings, the mother turns her  
 face away.

## 7

The Grunwalds eat in the large dining room.  
 The nurse crosses the room, sits down next to them for a moment.  
 Suddenly, the mother is seized by a vision.  
 Franziska alone in her room, walking over to the window.  
 She glares at the nurse.  
 Jumps to her feet and runs upstairs to her daughter.  
 She opens the door, just in time to see the body falling.  
 She screams her head off, but it's too late.  
 A thud.  
 The mother moves forward, trembling.  
 Franziska is lying in a pool of her own blood.

## Part Two



When she hears the news, Charlotte says nothing.  
A violent attack of flu has taken her mother.  
She thinks about that word: flu.  
One word and it's all over.  
Years later, she will finally learn the truth.  
In an atmosphere of general chaos.

For now, she comforts her father.  
It's all right, she says.  
Mama told me about this.  
She has become an angel.  
She always said how wonderful it is in heaven.  
Albert does not know how to respond.  
He wants to believe this too.  
But he knows the truth.  
His wife has left him.  
Alone, with their daughter.

Everywhere he goes, memories haunt him.  
In every room, through every object, she is there.  
The air in the apartment is the same air she breathed.  
He wants to rearrange the furniture, smash it all up.  
Or, better still, move to a new house.  
But when he speaks to Charlotte about this, she refuses.  
Her mother promised to send her a letter.

Once she is up in heaven.  
So they have to stay here.  
Otherwise mama won't be able to find us, says the little girl.  
Each evening, she waits for hours.  
Sitting on the window ledge.  
The horizon is dark, gloomy.  
Perhaps that is why her mother's letter has not found its way here.  
Days pass, without any news.

Charlotte wants to go to the cemetery.  
She knows every inch of it.  
She walks up to her mother's gravestone.  
Don't forget your promise: you have to tell me everything.  
But still nothing.  
Nothing.  
This silence, she can't stand it anymore.  
Her father tries to reason with her.  
The dead cannot write to the living.  
And it's better that way.  
Your mother is happy, up there.  
There are lots of pianos hidden in the clouds.  
What he says doesn't make much sense.  
His thoughts get tangled up.  
Finally, Charlotte understands there will be no letter.  
She is terribly angry with her mother.

## 2

**N**ow, it is time to learn solitude.  
Charlotte does not share his feelings.

Her father hides in his work, buries himself in it.  
Every evening, he sits at his desk.  
Charlotte watches him, stooped over his books.  
Piles of books, high as towers.  
Mad-eyed, he mumbles all sorts of formulas.  
Nothing can block his progress on the path to knowledge.  
Nor on the path to renown.  
He has just been given a professorship at the medical faculty in Berlin.  
It is a consecration, a dream.  
Charlotte does not seem very happy about it.  
In truth, it has become difficult for her to express any emotion.

At the Fürstin-Bismarck school, people whisper as she passes.  
They must be kind to her, her mama is dead.  
Her mama is dead, her mama is dead, her mama is dead.  
Thankfully, the building is comforting, with its wide stairways.  
A place where pain is soothed.  
Charlotte is happy to go there every day.  
I took the same walk myself.  
Many times, following in her footsteps.  
There and back, in search of Charlotte as a child.

One day, I went inside the school.  
Girls were running through the lobby.  
I thought that Charlotte could still be among them.  
At the front office, I was welcomed by the academic counselor.  
A very affable woman named Gerlinde.  
I explained to her the reason I was there.  
She did not seem surprised.  
Charlotte Salomon, she repeated to herself.  
We know who she is, of course.

. . .

So began a long visit.  
 Meticulous, because every detail matters.  
 Gerlinde talked up the virtues of the school.  
 Observing my reactions, my emotions.  
 But the most important was yet to come.  
 She suggested I go to see the biology equipment.  
 Why?  
 Because none of it has changed.  
 It is like diving into the last century.  
 Diving into Charlotte's world.

We walked through a dark, dusty corridor.  
 And came to an attic full of stuffed animals.  
 And insects spending eternity inside a jar.  
 A skeleton caught my eye.  
 Death, the ceaseless refrain of my quest.  
 Charlotte must have studied it, Gerlinde announced.  
 I was there, almost a century after my heroine.  
 Analyzing, in my turn, the form of a human body.

At the end, we visited the beautiful auditorium.  
 A group of girls was posing for the class photo.  
 Encouraged by the photographer, they were goofing around.  
 A successful attempt to immortalize the joy of living.  
 I thought of Charlotte's class photo, which I had seen before.  
 It was not taken in this room, but in the schoolyard outside.  
 It is a deeply disturbing picture.  
 All the girls stare into the lens.  
 All of them, but one.  
 Charlotte's eyes are turned in a different direction.  
 What is she looking at?

## 3

Charlotte lives with her grandparents for a while.  
She stays in her mother's childhood bedroom.  
This confuses the grandmother.  
She gets her eras mixed up.  
A child with the face of her first daughter.  
A child with the same name as her second.  
In the night, fearful, she gets up several times.  
She has to check that little Charlotte is sleeping peacefully.

The girl grows wild.  
Her father hires nannies and she does all she can to drive them to despair.  
She hates anyone who tries to take care of her.  
Worst of the bunch: Miss Stagard.  
A stupid, vulgar woman.  
Charlotte is the most badly brought-up girl she has ever known, she says.  
Thankfully, on an outing one day, she falls into a crevasse.  
She screams with pain, her leg broken.  
Charlotte is in seventh heaven, finally rid of her.

But with Hase, everything is different.  
Charlotte loves her instantly.  
As Albert is never home, Hase practically lives there.  
When she washes, Charlotte gets up to spy on her.  
She is fascinated by the size of her breasts.  
It is the first time she has seen such big ones.  
Her mother's were small.  
What about hers: what will they be like?

She would like to know what is preferable.

On the apartment landing she sees a neighbor boy her own age, and asks him.

He seems very surprised.

Then finally answers: large breasts.

So Hase is lucky, but she isn't very pretty.

Her face is a little puffy.

And she has hairs on her upper lip.

In fact, you could probably call it a moustache.

So Charlotte goes back to see her neighbor.

Is it better to have large breasts and a moustache . . .

Or small breasts with the face of an angel?

The boy hesitates again.

In a serious voice, he replies that the second solution seems better to him.

Then he walks away without another word.

After that, he will always be embarrassed when he sees the strange girl next door.

As for Charlotte, she feels relieved by this response.

Deep down, she is pleased that men do not like Hase.

She loves her too much to risk losing her.

She doesn't want anyone to love her.

Nobody but her.

4

It is the first Christmas without her mother.

Her grandparents are there, colder than ever.

The Christmas tree is immense, too big for the living room.

Albert bought the biggest and most beautiful one he could find.