



# The Woman in the Fifth: A Novel

By Douglas Kennedy

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Leaving the World* and *The Moment* comes the riveting story of a luckless college professor for whom Paris becomes a city of mortal danger.

A runaway bestseller in the UK and France that has been made into a film starring Ethan Hawke and Kristin Scott Thomas, this suspenseful tour de force from the internationally renowned Douglas Kennedy is the quintessential sophisticated commercial novel.

Harry Ricks is a man who has lost everything. A romantic mistake at the small American college where he used to teach has cost him his job, his marriage, and the love of his only child. Hounded by scandal, he flees to Paris, where a series of accidental encounters lands him in a grubby room with a job as night watchman for a sinister operation. Just when he begins to think he has hit rock bottom, romance enters his life in the form of Margit—a cultivated, widowed Hungarian émigré who shares Harry's profound loneliness but who keeps her distance, remaining guarded about her past. As Harry wrestles with Margit's reticence, he begins to notice that all those who have recently done him wrong are meeting unfortunate ends—and it soon becomes apparent that he has stumbled into a nightmare from which there is no escape.

*The Woman in the Fifth* further establishes Douglas Kennedy as an author who “always has his brilliant finger on the entertaining parts of human sorrow, fury, and narrow escapes” (Lorrie Moore).

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## The Woman in the Fifth: A Novel By Douglas Kennedy Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“*The Moment* is an observant, compassionate, and romantic portrait of emotional turmoil in troubled times.”  
—*Publishers Weekly*

“*The Moment* is utterly engrossing... Kennedy is astonishing at communicating his characters’ emotional turmoil, the complexity of their situation, and the coldness of the Cold War, and he tosses tough ethical questions our way as he ponders that ‘moment’ that could change everything—and the very nature of love. Highly recommended for all types of fiction readers.” —*Library Journal* (starred)

“In *Leaving the World*, bestselling author Kennedy has created a shape-shifting hero, a brilliant, harrowed, and profane goddess who transcends every infernal trial. In this surging epic, a veritable decathlon of the spirit, Kennedy incisively dramatizes the enigma of chance, petty cruelty, and catastrophic evil, ‘unalloyed grief,’ and the tensile strength concealed beneath our obvious vulnerability.” —*Booklist* (starred)

“In *Leaving the World*, Kennedy dexterously combines a fast-paced plot with complex characters, provocative themes and difficult moral questions about family, love, loss, betrayal and the impact of the past upon the future.” —*BookPage*

### About the Author

Douglas Kennedy is the author of eleven previous novels, including the international bestsellers *The Moment* and *Five Days*. His work has been translated into twenty-two languages, and in 2007 he received the French decoration of Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. He divides his time among London, New York, and Montreal, and has two children. Find out more at [DouglasKennedyNovelist.com](http://DouglasKennedyNovelist.com).

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The Woman in the Fifth

## One

THAT WAS THE year my life fell apart, and that was the year I moved to Paris.

I arrived in the city a few days after Christmas. It was a wet, gray morning – the sky the color of dirty chalk; the rain a pervasive mist. My flight landed just after sunrise. I hadn’t slept during all those hours above the Atlantic – another insomniac jag to add to all the other broken nights I’d been suffering recently. As I left the plane, my equilibrium went sideways – a moment of complete manic disorientation – and I stumbled badly when the cop in the passport booth asked me how long I’d be staying in France.

‘Not sure exactly,’ I said, my mouth reacting before my brain.

This made him look at me with care – as I had also spoken in French.

‘Not sure?’ he asked.

‘Two weeks,’ I said quickly.

‘You have a ticket back to America?’

I nodded.

‘Show it to me, please,’ he said.

I handed over the ticket. He studied it, noting the return date was January 10.

‘How can you be “not sure”,’ he asked, ‘when you have proof?’

‘I wasn’t thinking,’ I said, sounding sheepish.

‘*Évidemment*,’ he said. His stamp landed on my passport. He pushed my documents back to me, saying nothing. Then he nodded for the next passenger in line to step forward. He was done with me.

I headed off to baggage claim, cursing myself for raising official questions about my intentions in France. But I had been telling the truth. I didn’t know how long I’d be staying here. And the airplane ticket – a last-minute buy on an Internet travel site, which offered cheap fares if you purchased a two-week round-trip deal – would be thrown out as soon as January 10 had passed me by. I wasn’t planning to head back to the States for a very long time.

*‘How can you be “not sure” when you have proof?’*

Since when does proof ever provide certainty?

I collected my suitcase and resisted the temptation to splurge on a cab into Paris. My budget was too tight to justify the indulgence. So I took the train. Seven euros one-way. The train was dirty – the carriage floor dappled in trash, the seats sticky and smelling of last night’s spilt beer. And the ride in to town passed through a series of grim industrial suburbs, all silhouetted by shoddy high-rise apartment buildings. I shut my eyes and nodded off, waking with a start when the train arrived at the Gare du Nord. Following the instructions emailed to me from the hotel, I changed platforms and entered the *métro* for a long journey to a station with the aromatic name of Jasmin.

I emerged out of the *métro* into the dank morning. I wheeled my suitcase down a long narrow street. The rain turned emphatic. I kept my head down as I walked, veering left into the rue La Fontaine, then right into the rue François Millet. The hotel – the Sélect – was on the opposite corner. The place had been recommended to me by a colleague at the small college where I used to teach – the only colleague at that college who would still speak to me. He said that the Sélect was clean, simple and cheap – and in a quiet residential area. What he didn’t tell me was that the desk clerk on the morning of my arrival would be such an asshole.

‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘My name is Harry Ricks. I have a reservation for—’

‘*Sept jours*,’ he said, glancing up from behind the computer on his desk. ‘*La chambre ne sera pas prête avant quinze heures*.’

He spoke this sentence quickly, and I didn’t catch much of what he said.

*‘Désolé, mais ... euh ... je n’ai pas compris ...’*

‘You come back at three p.m. for the check-in,’ he said, still speaking French, but adopting a plodding, deliberate, loud voice, as if I was deaf.

‘But that’s hours from now.’

‘Check-in is at three p.m.,’ he said, pointing to a sign next to a mailbox mounted on the wall. All but two of the twenty-eight numbered slots in the box had keys in them.

‘Come on, you must have a room available now,’ I said.

He pointed to the sign again and said nothing.

‘Are you telling me there isn’t *one* room ready at this moment?’

‘I am telling you that check-in is at three p.m.’

‘And I am telling you that I am exhausted, and would really appreciate it if—’

‘I do not make the rules. You leave your bag, you come back at three.’

‘Please. Be reasonable.’

He just shrugged, the faintest flicker of a smile wandering across his lips. Then the phone rang. He answered it and used the opportunity to show me his back.

‘I think I’ll find another hotel,’ I said.

He interrupted his call, turning over his shoulder to say, ‘Then you forfeit tonight’s room charge. We need twenty-four hours notice for cancelation.’

Another faint smirk – and one which I wanted to rub off with my fist.

‘Where can I put my suitcase?’ I asked.

‘Over there,’ he said, pointing to a door by the reception desk.

I wheeled over my suitcase and also took off the computer knapsack slung over my shoulder.

‘My laptop is in this bag,’ I said. ‘So please—’

‘It will be fine,’ he said. ‘*À quinze heures, monsieur.*’

‘Where am I supposed to go now?’ I asked.

‘*Aucune idée,*’ he said. Then he turned back to his call.

At a few minutes past eight on a Sunday morning in late December, there was nowhere to go. I walked up

and down the rue François Millet, looking for a café that was open. All were shuttered, many with signs:

*Fermeture pour Noël.*

The area was residential – old apartment buildings interspersed with some newer ones from the ugly school of seventies brutalism. Even the modern blocks looked expensive; the few cars parked on the street hinting that this corner of town was upscale and – at this time of the day – lifeless.

The rain had quieted down into an insidious drizzle. I didn't have an umbrella, so I marched back up to the Jasmin *métro* station and bought a ticket. I got on the first train that arrived, not sure where I was heading. This was only my second trip to Paris. The last time I had been here was in the mid-eighties, the summer before I entered graduate school. I spent a week in a cheap hotel off the boulevard Saint-Michel, haunting the cinemas in that part of town. At the time, there was a little café called Le Reflet opposite a couple of backstreet movie houses on the rue ... what the hell was its name? Never mind. The place was cheap and I seemed to remember that they were open for breakfast, so ...

A quick study of the *métro* map on the carriage wall, a change of trains at Michel-Ange Molitor, and twenty minutes later I emerged at Cluny-La Sorbonne. Though it had been more than twenty years since I'd last stepped out of this *métro* station, I never forget my way to a cinema – so I instinctually turned up the boulevard Saint-Michel and into the rue des Écoles. The sight of the marquee of Le Champo – advertising a De Sica and a Douglas Sirk festival on their two screens – provoked a small smile. When I reached its shuttered doors and peered up the rue Champollion – the name of the street I had forgotten – and saw two other cinemas lining its narrow wet pavement, I thought, *Fear not, the old haunts still exist.*

But at nine in the morning, none of them were yet open, and Café Le Reflet was also shuttered. *Fermeture pour Noël.*

I returned to the boulevard Saint-Michel and started walking towards the river. Paris after Christmas was truly dead. The only working places nearby were all the fast-food joints that now dotted the streets, their neon fronts blotting the architectural line of the boulevard. Though I was desperate for shelter from the rain, I still couldn't bring myself to spend my first hours in Paris huddled in a McDonald's. So I kept walking until I came to the first proper café that was open. It was called Le Départ, located on a quay fronting the Seine. Before reaching it, I passed in front of a nearby newspaper stand and scored a copy of *Pariscope* – the 'What's On' guide for the city and my cinephile bible back in 1985.

The café was empty. I took a table by a window and ordered a pot of tea against the internal chill I felt coming on. Then I opened *Pariscope* and began combing the cinema listings, planning my viewing for the week ahead. As I noted the John Ford retrospective at the Action Écoles and all the Ealing comedies at Le Reflet Medici's I felt something that had been absent in my life for months: pleasure. A small, fleeting reminder of what it was like *not* to think about ... well, *everything* that had so preoccupied me since ...

No, let's not go there. Not today, anyway.

I pulled out a little notebook and my fountain pen. It was a lovely old red Parker, circa 1925: a fortieth birthday gift, two years ago, from my ex-wife when she was still my wife. I uncapped the pen and started scribbling down a schedule. It was a blueprint for the next six days that would give me space in the mornings to set up my life here, and spend all other available waking time in darkened rooms, staring up at projected shadows. 'What is it that people love most about a cinema?' I used to ask my students in the introductory course I taught every autumn. 'Could it be that, paradoxically, it is a place outside of life in which imitations

*of life take place? As such, maybe it's a hiding place in which you cannot really hide because you're looking at the world you've sought to escape.'*

But even if we know we cannot really hide from things, we still try. Which is why some of us jump planes to Paris on forty-eight hours' notice, fleeing all the detritus we've left behind.

I nursed the pot of tea for an hour, shaking my head when the waiter dropped by to ask if I wanted anything else. I poured out a final cup. The tea had gone cold. I knew I could have sat in the café for the rest of the morning without being hassled. But if I just continued to loiter without intent there, I would have felt like a deadbeat for hogging a table all that time ... even though there was only one other customer in the café.

I glanced out the window. The rain was still falling. I glanced at my watch. Five hours to go until check-in. There was only one solution. I reopened *Pariscope* and found that there was a big cinema complex over at Les Halles which started showing movies at nine every morning. I put away my notebook and pen. I grabbed my coat. I tossed four euros down on the table and headed out, making a quick dash for the *métro*. It was two stops to Les Halles. I followed the signs to something called 'Le Forum', a bleak concrete shopping center, sunk deep into the Paris earth. The cinema had fifteen screens and was like any American multiplex in some nowhere suburban mall. All the big US Christmas blockbusters were on show, so I chose a film by a French director whose work I didn't know. There was a screening in twenty minutes, which meant first sitting through a series of inane advertisements.

Then the film started. It was long and talky – but I followed most of it. It was largely set in some slightly rundown, but hip corner of Paris. There was a thirty-something guy called Mathieu who taught philosophy at a *lycée*, but (surprise, surprise) was trying to write a novel. There was his ex-wife Mathilde – a semi-successful painter who lived in the shadow of her father, Gérard. He was a famous sculptor, now cohabiting with his acolyte, Sandrine. Mathilde hated Sandrine because she was ten years her junior. Mathieu certainly didn't like Philippe, the info-tech business executive that Mathilde had been sleeping with. Mathilde, however, liked the lavish way Philippe treated her, but found him intellectually exasperating (*'The man has never even read Montaigne ...'*).

The film began with Mathieu and Mathilde sitting in her kitchen, drinking coffee and smoking and talking. Then it cut to Sandrine who was posing naked for Gérard in his country atelier while Bach played on his stereo. They took a break from this modeling session. She put on some clothes. They went into his big country kitchen and drank coffee and smoked and talked. Then there was a scene in some expensive hotel bar. Mathilde was meeting Philippe. They sat at a banquette and drank champagne and smoked and talked ...

On and on it went. Talk. Talk. More talk. My problems. His problems. Your problems. And, by the way, *la vie est inutile*. After around an hour, I lost the battle I was fighting against jet lag and lack of sleep. I passed out. When I came to, Mathilde and Philippe were sitting in a hotel bar, drinking champagne and smoking and ... *Hang on, hadn't they done this scene already?* I tried to keep my eyes open. I didn't succeed. And then ...

*What the fuck?*

The opening credits were rolling again – and Mathieu and Mathilde were sitting in her kitchen, drinking coffee and smoking and talking. And ...

I rubbed my eyes. I lifted my arm. I tried to focus on my watch, but my vision was blurred. Eventually the digital numbers came into view: 4 ... 4 ... 3.

*Four forty-three?*

Oh Jesus, I'd been asleep since ...

My mouth was parched, toxic. I swallowed and tasted bile. My neck was rigid, nearly immobile. I touched my shirt. It was soaked through with sweat. Ditto my face. I put my fingers to my forehead. Intense heat radiated from my brow. I put my feet on the floor and tried to stand up. I didn't succeed. Every corner of my body now ached. My body temperature plunged – the tropical fever turning into a near-Arctic chill. My knees caved a bit as I attempted to stand up again, but I managed some sort of forward propulsion that moved me out of the aisle toward the door.

Everything got a little blurry once I hit the lobby. I remember negotiating my way out past the box office, then moving into a maze of walkways, then finding the elevator, then getting disgorged on to the street. But I didn't want to be on the street. I wanted to be in the *métro*. So why had I gone up when I should have gone down?

A smell hit my nose: fast-food grease. Check that: fast-food grease goes Middle East. I had emerged near a collection of cheap cafés. Opposite me was a tubby guy, deep-frying felafels at an outdoor stand. Next to him, on a rotating spit, was a blackened, half-carved leg of lamb. It was flecked with varicose veins (do lambs get varicose veins?). Beneath the lamb were slices of pizzas that looked like penicillin cultures. They provoked nausea at first glance. Aided by the felafel fumes, I felt as if I was about to be very sick. A moment later, I was very sick. I doubled over and heaved, the vomit hitting my shoes. Somewhere during my retch, a waiter in a café opposite me started shouting – something about being a pig and driving away his custom. I offered no reply, no explanation. I just lurched away, my vision fogged in, but somehow focused on the plastic ventilation shafts of the Pompidou Center in the immediate distance. Halfway there, I got lucky – a cab pulled up in front of a little hotel that was in the line of my stagger. As the passengers got out, I got in. I managed to give the driver the address of the Sélect. Then I slumped across the seat, the fever reasserting itself again.

The ride back was a series of blackouts. One moment, I was in a dark netherworld; the next, the driver was engaged in an extended rant about how my vomit-splattered shoes were stinking up his cab. *Blackout*. More hectoring from the driver. *Blackout*. A traffic jam – all spectral yellow automotive lights prised through rain-streaked windows. *Blackout*. More yellow light and the driver continuing his rant – now something about people who block the taxi lanes, how he never picked up North Africans if he could help it, and how he would certainly steer clear of me if he ever saw me again on the street. *Blackout*. A door was opening. A hand was helping me out of the car. A voice whispered gently into my ear, telling me to hand over twelve euros. I did as ordered, reaching into my pocket for my money clip. There was some dialogue in the background. I stood up, leaning against the cab for ballast. I looked up at the sky and felt rain. My knees buckled. I began to fall.

*Blackout.*

And then I was in a bed. And my eyes were being pierced by a beam of light. With a click, the light snapped off. As my vision regained focus I saw that there was a man seated in a chair beside me, a stethoscope suspended around his neck. Behind him stood another figure – but he seemed lost in the encroaching shadows. My sleeve was being rolled up and daubed with something moist. There was a sharp telltale stab as a needle plunged into my arm.

*Blackout.*



## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **John Bullen:**

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