

Château Muzot-sur-Sierre, Valais (Switzerland)  
February 23, 1923

Dear Balthus,

In a few days you will once again celebrate the outward absence of your rare and discreet birthday. *Many happy returns*, my friend: let this year of your life about to commence be a happy and prosperous one—*despite everything*, I have to add, since it seems we have fallen back into the worst of the political turmoil that has already ruined so many years and that little by little deprives those of my generation of any reasonable future. It's different for you, you will see the dawn to come after this night engulfing our world; you *need* to see it and call it and prepare for it with all your strength.

Now that you've been to Muzot and seen the shops we have in Sierre, you will understand perfectly why I have no choice but to come to your party empty-handed . . . Frida baked you a cake, but it won't be able to come, poor thing. She just showed it to me and I had to agree it was neither transportable nor presentable. It's more of a *ghost story* than a cake! Frida told me in a toneless voice, eyes still wide from her doleful vision: "*At midnight, on the stroke of midnight, it half-collapsed!*"<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is now a lunar cake, since if you look at it from one side only it admittedly looks magnificent, but that is not enough for a real Bundt cake, especially if you have to travel with it! She's planning to make another one, but I'm afraid

the mail is too slow, it probably won't reach you in time for the party.

And here comes Minot to wish you a happy birthday, my dear Balthus. She's an almost full-sized cat now, very smart, extremely sweet, and a big sleeper. The swipes are all used up, every last one, as we might have known they would be, and now she shows you her slow and empty paws with distracted caresses sleeping deep inside them.

Her kittenhood ended with a remarkable exploit: One night, a very cold night—I think it was still December—Frida (whose heart is not the most loyal) had forgotten her out in the snow. At around midnight, practically the very moment when cakes half-collapse, what do you think this little creature dreamed up? She must have been circling the house trying to find some hole she could slip in through, then, not finding any, she climbed (just think, she's so young!) up the tree next to the house, the plum tree, ventured all the way up to the top, then dared the magnificent leap onto my little balcony. From where, since the door is always open, she could come into my bedroom. I was woken up by her little voice, half plaintive, half angry, and at first I had no idea what she was doing there in the middle of the night . . . A "promising" display of intelligence, don't you think?

Lately she's been sleeping all night, every night, on the large woodburning stove in the dining room. As for her "job," mice hardly interest her at all, she chases flies and wishes she could chase birds. But luckily for them, they learn in their schools that cats don't have wings.

And you, my friend? How is the Academy of Art? You're going there now, right? And do they like your Oriental piece? Or are the events of the "Ruhr" preventing all that? (As they are everything . . .)

Be strong, have courage, my dear, and be in good health, that's all one can hope for when one is waiting. Very, very best wishes to Pierre and to your dear mother and your father, Balthus my dear.

Love,

RENÉ

Château Muzot-sur-Sierre (Valais)

February 27, 1924

Dear Balthus,

The day after tomorrow, for the first time in four years, you will finally accept a piece of actual birthday cake. It will be worth it, you'll see, since the following day you're off to Paris! This happy situation permits me to send you my wishes for an extraordinarily happy birthday, wishes which will quickly come true. So, my dear, leave for Paris and be happy. How could it be otherwise, considering that you have Paris to look forward to, and André Gide, and your brother, who you will all doubtless find is quite grown up!

Everyone here at Muzot is suffering somewhat this winter—even poor Minot, who has kept Frida from baking you a cake. Every night it takes Frida so long to wash and tend to the poor thing, who doesn't understand the treatment she's getting and wants only to escape these irritating treatments that don't feel nice and get her fur wet.

May I keep your Piero della Francesca a little longer?<sup>9</sup> I look at it slowly, lingeringly, and I imagine that you won't miss it during your first few days in Paris. There will be so many realities and so many other images in its place! If you do miss it one day, just let me know.

I send my love, my dear Balthus, and am happy for you!

RENÉ