

Québécois to British English in Monique Proulx's *Sans cœur et sans reproche*: How Much
(Not) to Translate?

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Abstract

Québécois to British English in Monique Proulx's *Sans cœur et sans reproche*: How Much (Not) to Translate?

Frances Pope

This study takes as its point of departure the extent to which it is necessary to translate linguistic and cultural elements into target terms, as opposed to how much the translator might choose to retain in the source language. The specific parameters of the study are twofold: the translation of a Québécois text for a British readership; and translating Québécois into English in 2017, compared to the same task in previous decades.

Significant shifts in Quebec's sociocultural, linguistic, and literary spheres over the past few decades have resulted in a greater degree of openness and crossover between Quebec and both neighbouring and international cultures. Through analysis of literary and linguistic aspects, we can see that translation plays a crucial role.

With this in mind, specific translational challenges which arose in the translation of *Sans cœur et sans reproche* are analysed in response to the question of "how much (not) to translate?" Particularly when viewed from a postcolonial perspective, it becomes clear that many (sometimes conflicting) factors, including idiosyncrasy and identity of the original, sociocultural significance, underlying nuance, comprehension, and literary voice, must be taken into consideration. Consequently, no single strategy can be applied to all contexts, and translational challenges must instead be approached on a case-by-case basis.

Cette recherche s'interroge sur la nécessité de traduire certains des éléments linguistiques et culturels propres au texte de départ ainsi que sur la possibilité de conserver certains de ces éléments dans le texte cible. Les paramètres spécifiques de notre étude se divisent en deux volets : d'un côté, la traduction d'un texte québécois pour un lectorat britannique ; et de l'autre, la traduction du québécois vers l'anglais en 2017, par rapport aux décennies précédentes.

Au cours des dernières décennies, les changements importants qui sont survenus dans les domaines socioculturel, linguistique et littéraire au Québec se sont accompagnés d'une ouverture de plus en plus grande envers les cultures voisines et à l'international ainsi que d'un transfert de plus en plus marqué entre les cultures. Au moyen d'une analyse des aspects littéraires et linguistiques, il nous est possible de rendre compte du rôle central que joue la traduction à cet égard.

Les enjeux particuliers liés à la traduction de *Sans cœur et sans reproche* sont ainsi analysés à partir de ce contexte spécifique et cela, afin de répondre à la question : « à quel point est-il (in)utile de traduire ? » Lorsque ces enjeux sont examinés à partir d'une perspective postcoloniale, il devient particulièrement évident que de nombreux facteurs (qui entrent parfois en contradiction) doivent être pris en compte, que ce soit les caractéristiques et l'aspect identitaire propres à l'original, la portée socioculturelle du texte en soi, les nuances sous-jacentes, la compréhension du lecteur ou la voix littéraire. Par conséquent, il n'existe pas de stratégie unique pouvant être appliquée indépendamment du contexte et les enjeux liés à la traduisibilité se doivent d'être considérés cas par cas.

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I Commentary

Section 1: Background and Existing Research

Key Terms

Variations persist in the use of certain terms such as *Québécois* and *French Canadian*, precisely due to their politically-charged nature:

As a result of the high stakes of the ongoing debate regarding the political status of Quebec and because so much of that discussion depends on how the concept of a nation is defined, even the terms used to refer to some of the key parties are contentious. (“Quebecers or Quebecois?”, Encyclopædia Britannica Online)

However, as always in sociopolitical research, it is crucial that ambiguous or contested terms be clearly defined. For the purpose of the present discussion, *Québécois* refers to the dialect of French spoken in Quebec, distinct from standard French both in its pronunciation and vocabulary (including slang and swearwords); it is also distinct from *joual*, the socioculturally-specific variety spoken by the working classes particularly in Montreal during the 1960s and early ‘70s, originating in anglophone-owned workplaces and thus containing numerous anglicisms.

Québécois(e), as noun or adjective, is also used to describe a francophone person living in Quebec, while a *Quebecer* is an anglophone person living in Quebec.

French and *English* are used as general terms, and do not refer to any specific standard form or regional variety. *Standard* or *Parisian French*; *British*, *Canadian*, or *US English* are used where differentiation is required.

Introduction

Language and translation have played a key role in francophone/anglophone relations in Quebec, particularly during the upheavals of the Quiet Revolution. Major cultural shifts in the intervening years have also meant changes in the significance of translation, which continues to shape literature and language, and consequently, attitudes and notions of identity.

Enormous progress has also been made in Translation Studies in Canada. Interdisciplinary research has begun to delineate linguistic, social, and literary aspects of translation, and its integral position in postcolonial studies. However, the new century has brought further developments in these fields, in turn impacting our understanding of how translation should be approached. In particular, the expansion of Quebec (literary) culture to international audiences means that Translation Studies must continue to address the inevitable, changing complexities of translating Québécois to English (whether US, Canadian, British, or international), in order to remain relevant to the cultural and linguistic realities.

I have responded to this necessity through my translation of short stories from Monique Proulx's 1983 collection *Sans cœur et sans reproche*, a characteristic example of Quebec literature of its period, in which certain characters' attitudes also reflect sociocultural elements of earlier decades.

The context of my analysis is two-fold, comprising both the translation of Québécois for a British readership, and the considerations (given aforementioned developments in literary and postcolonial research) of this task in 2017. Both of these parameters bring unique questions, crucial to the broader objective of expanding the international reach of Quebec's cultural productions.

The current section outlines the significant changes in Quebec literature over the second half of the twentieth century, followed by a short introduction and contextual positioning of the text I have translated, *Sans cœur et sans reproche*. Next, sociolinguistic concepts of diglossia and codeswitching will be established. Finally, I will review the existing research in the field of Translation Studies with specific emphasis on translation and identity in Quebec, concluding with a brief analysis of how my own study builds on this foundation.

Quebec Literature

In any culture, shifts in political, ideological, and sociocultural domains are inevitably reflected in literature. Quebec's "Quiet Revolution" (*Révolution tranquille*), a period of

political and social upheaval lasting approximately ten years, saw Lesage's Liberal government take over from the Conservative Duplessis in 1960, instigating sweeping changes in education, public services, and language policy – notably taking education out of the control of the Church and into the hands of the state, nationalising infrastructure, and legislating on the protection and status of the French language. The separatist movement added to the political turmoil of the period. These events have directly impacted the literature of the province, which during the 1960s and '70s was largely constructed around sociopolitical questions of nationalism, ideology, and the reassertion of Québécois identity (Whitfield 2015). Yet literature does not only *reflect* political and sociocultural developments; in many cases, it actively incites or advances them. Indeed, writers and poets are often at the forefront of political causes, and this was certainly the case during the Quiet Revolution, as described in the article “Quebec Literature since 1958” (The Canadian Encyclopedia Online):

With a few surrealistic flourishes (Gilles Hénault, Roland Giguère, P.M. Lapointe) and much lyricism (Gaston Miron, Jacques Brault, Fernand Ouellette, Gatién Lapointe, Paul Chamberland), the poets named their country: no longer Canada, but Québec.

To these poets we might add Michèle Lalonde, discussed in Section 3 of this study, as well as the *Parti pris* collective (of which Chamberland was a member) whose work, published between 1963 and 1968 in the magazine of the same name, “added a socialist, populist dimension to the nationalist option” (ibid.). Likewise, prominent novelists and playwrights such as Hubert Aquin, Louis Caron, Roch Carrier, and Michel Tremblay contributed to a body of literature focusing on the lives and experiences of the Québécois, and emphasising their stark detachment from Quebec's anglophone community. Eibl (2008a) provides a detailed analysis of the works of the latter three writers, among others; here, it is sufficient to underscore the considerable impact which these authors had in solidifying Quebec's French-language canon, and in shaping the direction of Quebec literature of the period (and in turn, that of the decades to follow) as well as influencing developments in Translation Studies.

And yet this trend, given the particular visibility in the literary and cultural spheres (as well as in more mainstream media) of, for example, the *Parti pris* poets, has sometimes led to the over-simplification of the period in literary terms. As Eibl is careful to point out, “literary criticism has often overemphasized the idea of the collective in the literature dedicated to the spirit of the Révolution Tranquille” (2008a, 429). Lack of attention to this detail in the

overview of the period would result in the exclusion of such writers as Anne Hébert and Antonine Maillet, whom Eibl describes as occupying “an exceptional position in the history of the Quebec novel of the 1970s” (ibid., 433), and whose subject matter treats not the ideological concerns of the collective but the trials of the individual. Both Hébert and Maillet are particularly relevant to the present discussion, despite their position outside the mainstream in Quebec’s literary trends during the 1960s and ‘70s (in terms of subject, but certainly not of popularity or sales), firstly because of their influence on other writers (especially that of Hébert’s *Kamouraska*, for example, on Proulx’s later work) and secondly, because their English translators, notably Sheila Fischman, Pamela Grant, Barbara Godard, Wayne Grady, and Philip Stratford (among others) have, through their various approaches, helped to shape the course of translation scholarship in Quebec. In particular, Stratford’s stance in translating Maillet’s earlier work has directly informed my own approach to the translation of *Sans cœur et sans reproche*, as detailed in the coming discussion. Nevertheless, Hébert and Maillet were undeniably exceptions to an otherwise (almost) all-encompassing trend for ideological, collective, and nationalist-leaning literature during the 1960s and ‘70s in Quebec.

Two key factors led to an important change in the 1980s and ‘90s. On one hand, political and ideological victories such as Bill 101, which in 1977 made French the official language of Quebec, saw popular conceptions of the Québécois identity moving away from the idea of the colonised, persecuted francophone community; likewise, the aggression with which Québécois autonomy had sometimes been asserted began to ease. On the other hand, disappointment following the negative results of two referendums on possible Quebec sovereignty contributed to “political fatigue in both groups” (Whitfield 2015, 81), and to an ambivalence among writers towards the idealised concept of the Québécois collective. The result of both factors was a shift in the focus of Quebec’s creative production away from ideological questions and towards a greater concern for aesthetic, literary, narrative, and individual perspectives (Whitfield 2015; Eibl 2008a).

It is in this context that *Sans cœur et sans reproche* appeared in 1983, written by Montreal author Monique Proulx and published by Éditions Québec-Amérique. A screenwriter and author of novels and short stories, Proulx gained considerable recognition with this collection, which won the Adrienne Choquette Literary Award in its year of publication. Proulx’s five subsequent novels were published by Québec-Amérique and Boréal to great critical acclaim, and all of her works except *Sans cœur* have been published in English

translations (four of which by Matt Cohen, and the most recent, *Wildlives*, by David Homel and Fred A. Reed), although the short story “Sans cœur et sans reproche” (“Feint of Heart”) was translated into English by Matt Cohen and Wayne Grady as part of their 1986 collection *Intimate Strangers: New Stories from Quebec*.

Sans cœur et sans reproche is a collection of fifteen short stories, each an episode in the life of one of the two central characters, Benoît and Françoise. While chronological (from the birth of Benoît in the first chapter to the death of Françoise in the last), the stories are entirely separate from one another and may be read in isolation. The six stories which I chose to translate reflect the range of styles and voices present in the collection as well as bringing to light some of the key questions and challenges of translating Québécois into English.

The 1980s saw the growing popularity of the short-story collection in Quebec, and of the literary exploration of the human condition, of which Proulx’s *Sans cœur* is a prime example. Eibl (2008b, 453) characterises the collection as “a ‘comédie humaine’ in fifteen stories, carefully examining the ups and downs of human existence between birth and death,” situating the work at the heart of the trend within Quebec fiction at the time. The short stories of *Sans cœur* are centred on the characters’ interpersonal relationships and individual experiences, which are sometimes traumatic. The broader sociocultural concerns of Quebec occasionally feature in a secondary sense: notably, in “Le homard” (“The Lobster”), the character Marceau’s behaviour is motivated by his ideological position – he is deeply committed to his Québécois identity – yet the emphasis throughout is squarely on the characters themselves, and on the *effect* of underlying ideologies on their personal, in this case intergenerational, relationships.

In addition, it is worth recalling that the 1970s and ‘80s were, in Eibl’s words, “the golden age of feminism” (2008a, 438). Proulx’s writing does not focus explicitly on feminist themes (a more salient trend in the preceding decade, among authors such as Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, and France Théoret), but instead reflects the shift in 1980s feminist and women’s writing more generally, which began to distance itself from “explicit feminist discourse” (Eibl 2008a, 438). Further, as Proulx’s work demonstrates, “in addition to irony, humour, and ambivalence, female writing excels in its formal audacity and makes genre hybridity, parody, and intertextuality its dominant form of composition” (ibid., 439).

Proulx’s oeuvre further reflects the aesthetic and self-referential literary trend prevalent in the 1980s and ‘90s in its emphasis on the narrative, linguistic experimentation, and the breakdown and subversion of narrative convention. Her style clearly demonstrates what Eibl (2008b, 452) has called “theoretical knowledge of linguistic operational mechanisms, that is,

their deconstruction and playful staging.” Features of diglossia, codeswitching, borrowing, and language interference are highly present in the text, reflecting Quebec’s linguistic reality; as a key constituent of the present discussion, these features will be explored in much greater detail in the following sections. Additionally, Proulx’s writing often takes an ironic approach to the roles of narrator and reader, for instance in the story “Sans cœur et sans reproche” (“Cold Blood, Warm Heart”), in which the author herself is strikingly present – addressing readers directly, referring to their expectations of the story, and poking gentle fun at their supposedly sentimental nature.

Another characteristic feature of the work is the use of a different narrative voice in each story. In some cases, a neutral, omniscient third-person narrator relates events from the perspective of Benoît, Françoise, or another character; in others, the narration is first-person, and the voice of the character is skilfully handled; ranging between a young boy, a teenage girl, a middle-aged woman, and an elderly man, among others. Throughout the work, standard French (often embellished with highly literary, academic elements) coexists with strongly dialectal and colloquial Québécois in the dialogue and first-person narration, adding an extra layer of complexity to the translational process.

Interestingly, certain names also reappear throughout, attached to different characters. This feature, along with the consistent reappearance of the central characters and the chronological progression of the stories, is reflected in other Quebec short prose collections of the time, such as *Petites âmes sous ultimatum* (1991) by Anne Dandurand and *Caravane* (1994) by Élise Turcotte (Eibl 2008b, 452).

Finally, the language used by characters themselves – what Jansen and Wegener (2013) term “intra-textual voice” – is interesting for the present study, since it contains elements of diglossia and codeswitching as well as reflecting sociocultural attitudes towards the French and English languages. Particularly evident in “Le homard” and “Le rose et le noir,” these features pose intriguing challenges in translation – especially in the case of a largely monolingual target readership, such as that of the UK – as will be seen in Section 3 of this study.

Diglossia and Codeswitching

In a **diglossic** society, two or more languages or language varieties coexist, with speakers routinely and systematically choosing between them according to different contexts and situations (see Ferguson [1959] 2007; Fishman 1967). Quebec may thus be characterised as

doubly diglossic: not only is there coexistence of languages (French and English), but also of language varieties (standard French and Québécois).

Defined as “the alternation of two languages within a single discourse, sentence or constituent” (Poplack [1980] 2007, 214), **codeswitching** is a key linguistic phenomenon associated with diglossic societies. Although codeswitching may at times suggest a random or arbitrary choice of language (and may simply reflect a gap in the speaker’s vocabulary), by choosing to incorporate elements of another language, speakers not only signal their bilingualism, but draw on the specific sociocultural significations which the other language carries with it, thereby communicating a message which may have been incommunicable in a monolingual utterance (Fishman [1965] 2007; Heller [1995] 2007). Finally, Myers-Scotton ([1988] 2007, 101) has pointed out that codeswitching as “a symbol of the speaker’s intentions” may either be an unmarked choice on the part of the speaker (when switching is the expectation) or a marked choice (when it is not); as a marked choice, it can increase social distance by “making power differentials salient” (ibid., 108).

Quebec’s Linguistic Context

The linguistic features just described, prevalent in bilingual societies, have a number of important functions. The first of these is pragmatic; Bertacco (2014, 3) has argued that since “not everything can be translated,” speakers therefore “negotiate such differences in a variety of ways: by developing techniques of code-switching according to the speaking environment, by translating or mixing languages, by letting interferences from one language ‘color’ their way of using the other, and so forth.” Moreover, from a sociocultural perspective, these features are particularly consequential in Quebec writing and translation because of what they communicate of identity and otherness – notions which have been instrumental in the construction of Québécois culture vis-à-vis the hegemony of the anglophone US, the colonising domination of the UK, and the perceived cultural and linguistic snobbery of France (Robyns 1994; Harris 2010). Robyns further observes that translation as confrontation with the alien is a “conspicuous instance of the continuous conflicts which characterize the construction of identity” (ibid., 405); consequently, questions of language attitudes, (un)translatability, and non-translation become especially salient in a bilingual culture. Indeed, for a source culture which has traditionally prioritised the construction of its own identity as separate and distinct from that of more powerful encroaching cultures, translation poses an undeniable risk: particularly within the postcolonial framework, the stakes are high in the translator’s decisions either to *retain* foreign, unfamiliar elements (maintaining source-

culture identity), or to *adapt* these elements into target culture terms (risking the negation of source-culture identity). As will be seen in the discussion of specific translational challenges in Section 3, these choices are rarely straightforward, and several additional considerations must usually be borne in mind.

The current linguistic context of Quebec has been significantly shaped by historical events (see Section 1), of which the sociocultural repercussions continue to be felt – both in prevailing language attitudes and in translation practice, as described by Sherry Simon in her 2015 article “Returns on Translation: Valuing Quebec Culture”:

Few cultural realities in Quebec have not been captured in some way in a dynamic of resistance or acquiescence to the English language or North American culture, a defence of national culture and an openness to cultural imports, a positioning with or against the political and economic policies of English Canada. And so translation is inflected by singular lines of tension in Quebec. (502)

In particular, until the seismic changes brought about by the Quiet Revolution, translation (including self-translation) into English was unavoidable for most urban francophones, especially in official or institutional settings. Simon (*ibid.*) observes that “those who are forced to translate, those who are obliged to be translated, understand the profoundly unequal character of global exchange”; as a result, the use of English carried a bitter undertone for many of Quebec’s francophones, for whom Québécois was a potent manifestation of identity. Language attitudes in Quebec are thus doubly “inflected”: on one hand, the protection of French has been central to Quebec’s defence against the colonising encroachment of English, the hegemonic cultural invader; while on the other hand, Québécois and *joual* have been naturally tied in with the Québécois identity vis-à-vis “the linguistic norms of standard French, seen as a source of cultural domination and alienation” (Lane-Mercier 2014, 211).

Moreover, it must not be overlooked that competence in English as a second language (and consequently, the speaker’s ability to codeswitch at will) has been far from universal; in fact, at a time when education was more directly indicative of economic wealth than is the case today, bilingualism was often a mark of a certain cosmopolitanism or affluence. This is of course closely connected to the sociopolitical factors described above, since in most cases, economic, cultural, and ideological positions are inextricably linked. Heller ([1995] 2007, 166) employs the framework of the Bourdieusian marketplace to explain such contexts:

Linguistic resources are among the symbolic resources which are, generally, not equitably distributed in society. Some people, by virtue of their social position, have

access to more- or less-highly valued forms of language, and are more or less able to control the value accorded to linguistic resources in society in general.

Less philosophically abstract is Joshua A. Fishman's observation, in his 1967 analysis of "diglossia without bilingualism," that "the existence of national diglossia does *not* imply widespread bilingualism [...] amongst most lower class French-Canadians, as distinguished from their upper and upper-middle class city cousins" (Fishman 1967, 50). Made on the cusp of imminent sociopolitical changes, Fishman's statement provides a useful temporal grounding for the comparison of "then" and "now," a central line of enquiry in the present study – compared with the subsequent changes in attitudes (discussed below), the contrast is striking.

The key observation to make at this point is that the significance of code-switching has undergone enormous changes in recent decades; Simon (2015, 508) highlights that today's generation "has a relationship to English that is playful, casual, flippant, and, at times, appropriative. English words are simply there for the using, and in fact become French words once they have inhabited the language for some time," while Rampton ([1995] 2007, 196) describes how his teenage subjects' codeswitching "cultivated a spectacular, dynamic, heteroglossic marginality." This observation both explains much of the underlying nuance of *Sans cœur et sans reproche* and highlights once again the complexities of its translation, especially in light of the changes having occurred since the book's publication.

As previously discussed, the decades following the Quiet Revolution have seen another considerable shift in relations between Quebec's francophone and anglophone communities: according to Malla (2015), "as Canada's industrial centre has shifted west and multiculturalism has thrown dichotomous equations of nationhood for a loop, the drama of Quebec separatism has abated"; furthermore, the "two solitudes," as they were previously known, have opened up to mutual dialogue and reciprocal influence, and Mezei (1998, 242) has asserted that "although class conflict continues to exist, it is no longer exacerbated by the question of language to the same extent." However, the historical background described remains crucially important, as the effects of the often-bitter opposition between the two cultures (along with its socioeconomic corollaries) continue to impact the translational context today. Indeed, communicating the sociocultural significance of diglossia and codeswitching as manifested in Quebec literature presents a challenge in English translation precisely *because of* the historical context of francophone/anglophone relations. Even today, it holds true that "in this asymmetrical field, the traffic in language is ideologically charged" (Simon 2006, 10).

Lastly, one final facet of the changing cultural relations in Quebec is worth mentioning here: while the threatening encroachment of English has lessened in recent decades, “in contrast, multi-ethnic, non-francophone immigration has presented an additional substantial challenge to Quebec’s francophone identity” (Killick 2006, 187). This phenomenon ties back into the original discourse of the threat of English, since – although this is less the case today – Blanc (1993, 248-9) claimed that “the growth of the anglophone population” has been “swollen by the immigration of allophones, who spoke neither French nor English, but [have] assimilated to the anglophone community.”

In summary, the concepts of diglossia and codeswitching provide an essential basis for the analysis of the translation issues described in Section 3, pertaining to issues of Québécois identity which remain highly relevant today, albeit for reasons which have shifted over the years.

Existing Research in Translation Studies

All of these issues considered, it is unsurprising that Quebec literature has posed challenges to translators working from Québécois into English. Such is the extent of the many and complex layers of significance interwoven with Québécois language, culture, and identity that “untranslatability has been an accepted feature of Quebec literature” (Simon 2015, 507). Nevertheless, the challenge has been tackled by a number of well-regarded translators over the years, and I will return in Section 3 to those whose work pertains especially to my own: Sheila Fischman, translator of many Quebec writers including Roch Carrier and Marie-Claire Blais; Ray Ellenwood, translator of Jacques Ferron’s *Le ciel de Québec*; John Van Burek and Bill Glassco, co-translators of Michel Tremblay’s *Les belles-sœurs*; David Homel, whose retranslation of Jacques Renaud’s *Le cassé* was published twenty years after the original; and D.G. Jones, one of only two authorised translators of Michèle Lalonde’s “Speak White.”

Aside from the pragmatic concerns of translating bilingual or diglossic texts for a monolingual readership, translation of a minority language or dialect also raises questions of ethical implications: what does it mean to translate from a source culture historically colonised or controlled by what is now the target culture? According to Niranjana (1990, 773), “translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism,” meaning that the question is an urgent one where translation is effected between such cultures, since “what is at stake here is the representation

of the colonised.” Key aspects of the relationship between translation and postcolonialism have been explored by a number of researchers, including Niranjana (1990), Mezei (1998), Ladouceur (2000), Tymoczko (2007), Hui (2009), and Bertacco (2014), all of whom present valuable arguments for the power of translation to either uphold or subvert established colonial power imbalances.

Postcolonial research therefore lends a valuable framework via which to approach translation in the current context. This advantage can be seen to apply in the opposite direction as well, since “translation as both a lived experience (many people do live in translation) and as an epistemological framework (it implies a comparative perspective) provides an ideal vantage point to forge the discourses of postcolonialism in the new millennium” (Bertacco 2014, 6). An approach which takes into account the overlap and connectedness of the two disciplines is therefore crucial if we wish to avoid unhelpful compartmentalisation, and instead to expand the discussion to include mutually beneficial influences between fields of research.

Solid theoretical foundations into the postcolonial implications of Québécois translation in particular have already been established by researchers and translators including Ray Ellenwood, Rachel Killick, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, and Sherry Simon, among many others. While it has been argued that “the literature of the Révolution tranquille had understood Quebec’s lack of cultural identity predominantly as a consequence of colonialism” (Eibl 2008a, 429), the somewhat knotty question of Quebec’s place in the colonial/postcolonial context remains. In a compelling analysis of the issue, Simon (2014, 105) rightly points out that, at least during the 1960s, “the concept of decolonization was not without its major contradictions,” and goes on to ask:

How could the descendants of European colonizers claim to be fighting the same battle as the liberation movements of Algeria and Cuba? How could they claim victim status when they in turn were in competition with the First Nations communities of Quebec for natural resources, and in fact inflicting on these communities their own form of internal colonialism?

Taking a broad view, Killick (2006, 187) asserts that “the variety and complexity of [Quebec’s] experience as both colonizer and colonized from the sixteenth century to the present suggest a particularly fertile field for postcolonial analysis.” This argument underpins the approach taken in the current paper; that is, while the positioning of Quebec as a colonised society is by no means unanimous or unproblematic, the field of postcolonial

research nevertheless provides a relevant and useful framework for analysing the unequal power relations between the anglophone and francophone communities, especially how these have directly impacted language, literature, and translation, and continue to do so today.

To summarise, the present work is situated squarely within the practice – by now well-established in Quebec Translation Studies – of examining the translation issues which arise from the pragmatic and linguistic particularities of Québécois writing, and from the broader discourse of power imbalance (especially as viewed through the postcolonial lens); this approach seeks to identify shifts in translational currents, and where applicable, suggest directions for the rethinking of models which have previously served to restrict or dominate (for example, standardising linguistic norms of the dominant culture). I wish to build on existing research by comparing the issues which have faced translators of Quebec literature in the past with some of the issues specific to the 2017 translational context; moreover, translating for a British target readership brings new complexities (elaborated in the following section) which themselves lend a unique addition to the wider discourse.

Section 2: Significance and Implications of My Study

In this section, I will clarify the contribution of my study to existing research. I will also identify some of the factors to be borne in mind when translating a 1983 Quebec text for a British readership in 2017 and the translational questions which result, particularly “how much (not) to translate?”, as briefly discussed in the previous section.

First, I will address how my study builds on existing research, considering the position of the translator as an “outsider” to the Quebec context, as has been the case for a number of other translators in recent history. While the focus is on the continuity between existing research and my own, the differentiating feature of my translation project is its target readership, which is not primarily anglophone Canada but the UK.

Second, I will turn to the question of timing: comparing “then and now” in translation of Québécois to English, I will work from the foundations established by previous translators and researchers – either applying these concepts to the present context, or drawing a contrast and suggesting alternatives where appropriate. While such translational issues have been compellingly and extensively discussed in the literature (see Section 1), my study also takes into account the recent developments in Translation Studies and postcolonial research, as well as the shifts in language and identity attitudes in Quebec (particularly within the literary and publishing world) since the mid-1980s, when *Sans cœur* was published. These twin considerations allow me to sketch out the implications of this time-lapse for translational decisions in 2017.

The Outsider’s Perspective

What defines an “outsider,” and what does this mean in the context of translating? Given its popular usage, the term is somewhat vague, and requires clarification in the present context: two distinct elements of “outsiderness” in translation can be elucidated, addressing the degree to which (a) the translator and (b) the target readership is considered to be outside the source culture. Both of these aspects have a profound impact on the translational project at every level – from the choice of author and text to translate, to the decisions made each time a translational question arises. Tymoczko (2007, 226) explains the effects of outsiderness in terms of the Bourdieusian habitus, via which the outsider is hindered by the blinkering effects of being positioned firmly within her/his own culture: “The workings of the habitus make it difficult to understand (and translate) the underpinnings of a culture because dispositions are difficult (or impossible) to observe”; consequently, the outsider is likely to

“see cultural practices and cultural systems as more static, rigid, and deterministic than they are experienced in practice” (ibid., 227). Both considerations (a) and (b) above are fundamental to the current study: my position as a translator from the UK makes me an outsider to the Quebec context, not only *linguistically* (as is the case for any translator working from second language into first); but also – despite the many cultural commonalities between Canada and the UK – in a *cultural* sense: translation of Québécois for UK readers entails a different set of strategies than does translation for anglophone Canadian readers, due to the linguistic and cultural elements which, within Canada, have “crossed the divide” between the francophone and anglophone communities. Let us now consider these two aspects of outsidership in more detail.

(a) As a relative newcomer to Quebec, I (like any new arrival) have a cultural knowledge which is to a large extent second-hand, acquired through discussion, literature, academic study, and anecdotal accounts from friends and colleagues. This situation is well-described by Mackey (1993, 54), who points out that “[linguistic] subtleties are not always obvious, especially to emigre writers, who sometimes find themselves in the position of the educated foreigner.” Without personal experience of growing up in an officially bilingual society, nor of the frictions which have marked francophone/anglophone relations throughout Quebec’s recent history, a translator from “outside” is likely to have quite different attitudes towards the English and French languages than those of a native Quebec resident. Specifically, in a predominantly monolingual society (such as most of Britain and the US), learning a second language, from secondary school onwards, is usually a *choice*. Many Canadian (especially Quebec) schoolchildren, on the other hand, are educated in immersion programs entirely in their second language, as demonstrated by the 2006 Statistics Canada report, “Youth Bilingualism in Canada”:

Outside of Quebec, about 17% of non-Francophone youth had ever been enrolled in an immersion program [...] About two-thirds (66%) of youth had been in French immersion at some point after Grade 6 (some secondary). (Allen 2008)

More pertinently, whether or not they have had to learn it at school, residents of Quebec are faced with issues of diglossia and translation on a daily basis. One possible consequence is that those from outside Quebec may have a more positive (or at least, neutral) attitude towards second-language knowledge and use, since this has been a personal choice for them, and not usually an obligation.

Furthermore, the complex politics surrounding language and identity will not have touched the outsider in a personal capacity. Quebec residents may, of course, have a wholly favourable relationship with the “other” language, based on positive experiences. On the other hand, especially for previous generations living through the turmoil of the Quiet Revolution, their direct or familial experience of language attitudes may be ambivalent or decidedly negative. The translator from outside Quebec is, again, likely to approach aspects such as foreignisation, adaptation, and dialect features in a different, perhaps more neutral, manner. This effect can be observed among other translators such as John Van Burek (co-translator of Tremblay’s *Les belles-sœurs*) who, “having grown up in the United States [...], approached the French language, and French Canada and Quebec, differently than the Anglophone Canadians of his entourage” (Kousta 2006, 269). In addition, translators such as Sheila Fischman, Ray Ellenwood, and David Homel have all come to Québécois translation from “outside,” and the effects of this on their translational strategies will be explored in greater detail in Section 3, where they serve as points of departure for my own approach in translating *Sans cœur*. The most salient effect of my own outsidership, and particularly of my origins in the UK, has been my decision to render Québécois dialect, in translation, as my own native variety from south-east England. This decision reflects the literary quality of the source text, which requires that characters’ individual voices be respected; this is explored in much greater detail in Section 3.

(b) It is a simple fact of translation that readers are necessarily outside the source culture, and every translator, to some extent, must navigate the “gap” when cultures do not perfectly align. As Tymoczko (2007, 43) has explained, “Translation normally involves the interface of languages, semiotic systems, cultural products, and systems of cultural organisation, and it makes manifest the differences and similarities of these features of systems across cultures.” However, in some language/culture pairings, the gap is bigger than others. The Quebec context is particularly interesting in this sense: translation between French or Québécois and Canadian English takes place against the backdrop of the close proximity between the francophone and anglophone communities, and the more recent intermixing of cultures, itself leading to the two-way exchange of linguistic and cultural features. As a result, both francophone and anglophone residents of Quebec are likely to have, at the very least, a minimal familiarity with the “other” language.

Conversely, translating into another variety of English, in this case British, must take into account the additional distance between cultures: while certain terms in Québécois may be easily recognisable to an anglophone Quebecer, the same would not be true for a British or

international English reader – or indeed an anglophone Canadian from outside Quebec, as Malla (2015) has pointed out: “The province has its own TV, film, and pop-music celebrities, completely distinct from those of Hollywood, while Ontario is almost entirely American.” As a translator both *from* and *for* the UK, my position is an interesting one: especially conscious of Canadian cultural references which would be unfamiliar to British readers, my decisions regarding how much (not) to translate anticipate inevitable instances of both in- and mis-comprehension. However, the result has certainly not been a translation which aims for a seamless reading experience with no unfamiliar elements. Instead, my approach has simply been to decide on a case-by-case basis *which* unfamiliar elements give an insight into the Québécois culture (even if semantic content is compromised), and which, conversely, might prevent comprehension of important narrative points, to no great advantage.

Lastly, it is pertinent to recall that, given the growing interest of international publishers and readerships in Quebec’s cultural production (described below), the number of “outsiders” approaching Quebec literature is only set to rise – meaning that careful reflection on the outsider’s perspective is becoming ever more relevant. Indeed, the recent move towards a more outward-looking and international approach is a crucial consideration in the translation (and thus expansion) of a literature traditionally functioning as a vivid reflection of its own social concerns.

Timeliness

As discussed in detail in Section 1, much existing research has examined the inherent complexities of translating Québécois to English. Collections such as Sherry Simon’s *Culture in Transit* (1995) and Agnes Whitfield’s *Writing Between the Lines* (2006) bring together some of the most well-regarded anglophone translators of French and Québécois working in Canada in recent years, many of whose careers began during (and in some cases, as a direct result of) the upheavals of the Quiet Revolution – for instance, Linda Gaboriau, Barbara Godard, Wayne Grady, D.G. Jones, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, and Philip Stratford, to name but a few. The two collections (of which *Culture in Transit* provides first-person accounts of translation processes, while the biographical essays in *Writing Between the Lines* are written by translators, about other translators), themselves published just over ten years apart, give a fascinating insight into the great diversity of paths taken by anglophone translators in Canada. Motivations and beginnings in translation are described, as well as of approaches to particularly knotty translational challenges – especially those pertaining to political and linguistic aspects of both Québécois and Acadian translation. In her contribution

to the recent and equally valuable collection *Translation Effects*, Gillian Lane-Mercier has reminded us that “questions pertaining to selection and timeliness are standard fare in translation theory” (2014, 209), and, over twenty years since *Culture in Transit*, I would indeed argue that collections such as the three mentioned here have paved the way for a contemporary re-questioning of the issues facing translators of Québécois into English, particularly in light of more-recent research in postcolonial literature and its intersection with translation.

My study builds on this foundation by observing what has changed (especially in terms of attitudes and perceptions of language and linguistic features) since the mid-1980s when *Sans cœur* was written, and in the years since the publication of other influential translations of Québécois texts. As Peter Cole (2013, 6) has explained, when translating a work published a number of years before, we must “respond and be responsible not only to the original [...], but also to the body of knowledge that has accrued around it.” To this end, I have taken as a point of departure more-recent postcolonial research such as that mentioned in Section 1. Researchers such as Bertacco, Ladouceur, and Simon have recognised the implications of the postcolonial framework for the Quebec context; drawing on the comparable (though diverse and differing) contexts of postcolonial literature and translation in other cultures such as India, South America, and Africa, they have applied concepts such as the repercussions of foreignisation and adaptation to the context of Québécois in translation.

Finally, I wish to place particular emphasis on the recent shift (in the last twenty years, especially) away from the previously insular, self-contained, or inward-looking aspects of Quebec literature and publishing, towards a more international and outward-looking vision, as described in detail by Pépin (2011), as well as by the contributors to *Translation Effects* (Mezei, Simon, and von Flotow 2014). According to Malla (2015), Dimitri Nasrallah, editor at Véhicule Press, “believes that Quebec writing is developing an international sensibility.” Malla continues by observing that “that perspective has long been absent from a broader conversation, literary or otherwise,” though he also suggests that “perhaps this flurry of new initiatives aimed at disseminating the work of French Canadian writers [...] will finally bring the isolation of those writers to an end.”

This progression has been considerably advanced by the concerted efforts of small Canadian publishing houses. As Pépin (2011) points out,

since the last decade, Quebec writers have drawn their strength from their marginal status, capitalizing on a freedom unavailable to the dominant literatures. In this respect,

the Quebec literary milieu owes much to the emergence of young publishing houses that have brought their energy to the world of the book.

Publishers such as Coach House, House of Anansi, and Talonbooks have been the driving force behind what is described in the article “Québécois Literature” on translation blog *Three Percent* as “the upward swing” in Québécois literature (Post 2015); furthermore, “websites like Quebec Reads and Ambos, both run by translators, keep English-language readers in touch with reviews, translated excerpts, and interviews” (ibid.). This, of course, is a vital consideration in any analysis of literary and translational trends: authors, translators, and readers alike are always to some extent at the mercy of editors and publishing houses, without whom the increased interest in Québécois literature from outside the province – and thus the impetus for translations – would not have occurred at all.

In light of this growing interest from US and international readers in Quebec literature (whether as the cause or result of increased attention from publishers), it is more important than ever that Translation Studies keep its finger on the pulse, so to speak; that is, that translators and researchers continue to address the theoretical implications and complexities of translating Québécois to English, given the evolution and developments during the past thirty years which have made these implications quite different in 2017 to what they were in previous decades. Mackey (1993, 46) has claimed that “the nation-state of the future is destined to thrive in situations of literary diglossia, and its writers in literary biculturalism”; if this is indeed the case, then the broader relevance of these questions in international literature and translation cannot be overstated.

Section 3: Translational Issues in *Sans Cœur et Sans Reproche*

In this section, the questions and challenges which arose in the process of translating *Sans cœur et sans reproche* are explored in detail, providing a more concrete illustration of many of the theoretical points described in the previous sections. This discussion is divided into three main issues which raise questions in translation: Québécois *sacres*; sociolinguistic features of colloquialism, dialect, voice, and register; and finally, language attitudes in the story “Le homard.”

Québécois *Sacres*

Quebec’s idiosyncratic swearwords originate from the anti-ecclesiastical sentiment that developed as a result of the historical dominance of the Catholic Church in the province, and the far-reaching power wielded by the Church’s officials, which led to what Fischman has called “underlying resentment” and a “desire to escape in some way from its strictures” (Carrier 1970, 1). Extensively documented in both academic and popular literature (for instance, Bougaïeff and Légaré 1984, Sanders 1993, Blanc 1993, Peritz 2008, Bauer 2011, and Nosowitz 2016), *sacres*, while once seen as “un chancre qui défigure notre physionomie nationale,” have since been recognised as “un des éléments de la spécificité québécoise” (Bougaïeff and Légaré 1984, 3-4). Both a central element of Québécois linguistic identity and a source of intrigue for many writers and readers outside the province, the “swearing vocabulary” of Quebec has been characterised by Nosowitz (2016) as “one of the weirdest and most entertaining in the entire world.”

The list of commonly-used *sacres* is vast, given that many have generated a string of alternative or euphemistic versions; some examples include *hostie/ostie/estie*, *tabernacle/tabarnak*, *calisse*, *ciboire*, *maudit*, and *crisse*, meaning respectively “host,” “tabernacle,” “chalice,” “ciborium,” “damn/damned,” and “Christ.”

Sacres present a challenge in literary translation for two main reasons. Firstly, Catholicism’s historic role as a dominant authoritative force in Quebec has meant that the specific vocabulary of the Catholic Church and its sacred objects is widely recognised – although Nosowitz (2016) suggests that familiarity is dwindling in the more secular society of present-day Quebec – to a greater extent than in a non-Catholic society such as the UK, where terms like “ciborium” and “tabernacle” remain part of a decidedly specialised vocabulary. In addition, the social and historical significance of the Church’s power in Quebec is precisely what gives the Québécois religious swearwords their profanatory weight;

it cannot be considered sacrilegious to misuse what is not widely revered, or required to be revered, in the first place, as described by Bauer (2011, 44):

“Hostie,” le mot, émergea donc comme un sacre à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et au début du vingtième, moment où l’Église catholique mit l’hostie, la chose, au cœur de sa foi, au cœur de l’identité Canadienne. C’est là où la sacralisation abonde que la profanation surabonde.

Consequently, cultures which (in recent years at least) have not been marked by this kind of religious dominance do not assign the same gravity to religious profanity. Indeed, while equivalent swearwords exist in English, few are of the religious variety (Bauer 2011) – notable exceptions being “God-damn,” “Jesus,” “Christ,” and the intensifier “the hell” – rather generic and colourless compared to the Québécois examples. In contrast, the Catholic vocabulary enables swearing of which the “range is both more extensive and intensive than the members of other faiths are able to accomplish” (Montagu 1967, 56). Literal translation of *sacres* is clearly not an option, since the equivalent terms carry nothing like the profanatory potential in English that they do in French.

The second reason for the particular difficulty of translating *sacres* is nicely summarised by Blanc (1993, 245):

No domain is more indicative of the vitality, expressiveness, and creativity of the spoken language than the use of swear-words or *sacres* (based on religious vocabulary) with which [francophone] Quebecers pepper their informal speech.

Although not universally used by all social groups, *sacres* are inextricably linked to Québécois identity – which is jeopardised when they are replaced by equivalent target-language terms. In addition, the relative blandness of English religious swearwords means that the “vitality, expressiveness, and creativity” of the text are also at stake. From a postcolonial perspective, the question gains an extra layer of significance when we recall translation’s central role in the representation of cultures: the postcolonially-minded translator, at pains to avoid the neutralising tendencies of domesticating translation, must pay careful attention to features which so unequivocally function as identity markers.

In light of these observations, the translator has three options when translating a text containing *sacres*: (a) to retain the original Québécois; (b) to adapt the element into a partial equivalent in English; or (c) to find a “middle-ground” whereby elements of the original are maintained along with the addition of extra information designed to aid the reader’s comprehension. In this case as in any, “no single translation approach or strategy is likely to

suffice – whether it is literal or free, formally or dynamically equivalent, domesticating or foreignizing” (Tymoczko 2007, 215); therefore, it is quite normal in translation that a range of approaches be drawn upon according to the situation at hand.

In the present context, it has been enlightening to reflect on the approaches of two previous translators of Québécois; by observing the precedents they have set in their own work, I have aimed to elucidate the possible consequences of the three options mentioned above. Indeed, I would argue that today’s translator always stands to gain from this kind of reflection on previous work – whether by emulating positive aspects of previous strategies, or by observing those strategies which have resulted in less successful outcomes, and taking an alternate route.

One translator extremely familiar with the challenge of translating Québécois is Sheila Fischman, whose English version of Roch Carrier’s *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (one of her earliest translations) was published in 1970. In this work, Fischman chose to retain many Québécois *sacres* in their original form, as Pamela Grant (2006, 172) describes:

Faced with the challenge of conveying [the significance of the Québécois expression] to an English readership, she decided to retain the original French wording in such passages as, “*Calice de ciboire d’hostie! Christ en bicyclette sur son Calvaire! So you think we enjoyed ourselves in the war?*”

The motivation for this decision (which, given the social and political currents at the time, made a stronger statement than it would today) was twofold. On the pragmatic level, Fischman, not yet the confident translator she would later become, has described taking “a coward’s way out” by choosing *not* to translate: “if I had been a more confident translator, [...] I might have tried to find some sort of equivalent, using the bawdy words we use in English” (Simon 1995b, 186). Yet her decision was also a way to “open [...] a tiny window onto certain aspects of the reality of French Quebec” (ibid.), and thus to (re)construct something of the Québécois identity and experience for a readership largely unfamiliar with them. Fischman has explained this intention to “create some understanding” in greater detail in the preface to her 1970 translation of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*: “Learning to swear in the other language may be an unorthodox way to begin, but it could stir up some interest,” perhaps even helping to “eliminate one of the most frequently used expressions – ‘maudits Anglais’” (Carrier 1970, 3). Nonetheless, over the span of her career, Fischman’s approach has itself undergone certain shifts (perhaps connected to the changing significance of language, identity, and translation in Québécois literature): in her 1990 translation of Michel Tremblay’s *Les vues animées (Bambi and Me)* she translated “J’ai-tu dit un gros mot, moé?”

J'ai-tu dit crisse? J'ai-tu dit tabarnac?" as "Did I say something dirty? Did I say shit? Did I say fuck?" (Grant 2006, 185), demonstrating a propensity to adapt which was not present in her earlier work. She herself has also drawn attention to the change in her approach: while she used to believe that translating Québécois into English "might perform a kind of political function," that is, a rapprochement or bridge-building between the communities, she later qualified this by saying, "I don't think I'd be so naïve as to use that kind of language now" (Simon 1995b, 189).

The second translator relevant to the present context is Ray Ellenwood, whose translation of Jacques Ferron's *Le ciel de Québec (The Penniless Redeemer)* was published in 1984. Ellenwood faced challenges in depicting stereotypical francophone and anglophone Canadian characters and especially in translating the wordplay and in-jokes which punctuate their interactions. Clear parallels can be drawn between these translational challenges and those in "Le homard," and we will therefore return to Ellenwood's strategies in more detail in the following section. At this point, it is sufficient to observe that he has taken a middle-route between total retention of idiosyncratic Québécois features, and total adaptation into English; retaining certain expressions such as "grand tabernacle d'hostie," but conveying information about their meaning or pronunciation to the anglophone reader by way of a "stealth gloss" – Susan Bernofsky's term for the subtle explanation which translators may insert, "useful when a writer refers to something that makes no sense in English without explanation" (Randol 2013).

As to his motivations, Ellenwood has described the "theoretical problem of confronting a text so regionally and linguistically centred as this one, and making it readable in another language, without betraying it" (Ellenwood 1995, 101). The reference to "betrayal" is interesting, since it is not a notion shared by all translators, instead signifying the stance which the individual translator (or indeed the culture at large) has chosen to take vis-à-vis foreignness and "alien elements" (Robyns 1994). In this vein, Ellenwood would not have wished to entirely omit the original features, in this case *sacres*, given what they communicate of the Québécois character of the text; furthermore, he has made his feelings clear on the reception of foreignness by readers: "if they shut their eyes and minds to any non-English words in the text, too bad for them" (1995, 103). Although Ellenwood was not explicitly aligning himself to the postcolonial approach, the comparison nonetheless suggests itself: given translation's historical bent for domesticating the foreign, postcolonial translations have often sought to retain elements of foreignness in order to make salient the original text's identity and provenance. Thus, postcolonial texts (and their translations)

impose themselves as different from the norm in order to mark the “distance, not only from ordinary language, but also from ordinary readings” (Bertacco 2014, 5). Nevertheless, as Tymoczko (2007, 232) is careful to stress, “a translator’s skill in cultural translation lies in large measure in inducing an audience to be willing to learn, to receive difference, to experience newness.” In my opinion, Ellenwood has achieved an equilibrium between retention of the important Québécois elements and the addition of information to aid the anglophone reader. In fact, I would argue that he has done so more successfully than has Fischman (whose two different approaches, described above, fall at the more extreme ends of the continuum between retention and adaptation of *sacres*).

It is pertinent at this point to recall the intention of my particular study; that is, translation for a British readership. In this aspect, my project differs considerably from the translations by Fischman and Ellenwood since, as anglophone Canadian translators, their primary readership would also have been anglophone Canada (notwithstanding international publication) – significant because recognition of Quebec’s idiosyncratic language and cultural items is somewhat greater in anglophone Canada than internationally. It is certainly not the case that Québécois cultural references (of which *sacres* are just one example) would necessarily be understood by anglophone Canadians outside Quebec – or indeed by Americans “just across the border,” as described by Chad W. Post, the American author of “Quebecois Translations” (on translation blog *Three Percent*):

The landscape, the cultural habits, the experiences, especially as a New Englander, are in so many ways familiar, but foreign, not just across border, but across language, with parallel traditions, and ever aware that it’s looking back across the mirrored plane.

Yet, within the narrower context of Quebec itself, certain elements of Québécois, if not fully comprehended, would be likely to be recognised by anglophones (as outlined in Section 2). In the current context, *sacres* may at the very least be recognised as swearwords.

Translational decisions naturally differ according to whether the intended readership is within Quebec, within Canada, or international: the retention of elements in their original form would arguably be more advisable if readers have a degree of familiarity with these to begin with. Indeed, addressing the question of “foreign-soundingness,” David Bellos (2013, 36) has claimed that the retention of original elements is “only a real option for a translator when working from a language with which the receiving language and its culture have an established relationship.” Interestingly, while Bellos points out that this relationship is to be found between English and French, the same may not be said of English and Québécois. It is

therefore crucial to recall that foreign-soundingness can be a double-edged sword; the translator may want to avoid negating the identity of the original, yet s/he must also beware of the translation “dissolving into something different – a representation of the funny ways foreigners speak” (ibid., 42). Nevertheless, it can certainly be counter-argued that readers with no prior knowledge of these linguistic and cultural elements have just as much, if not more, to gain from encountering them in literature – considering the “window” on other cultures which, as Fischman has suggested, translations of foreign writing can provide. Furthermore, the postcolonial approach once again calls for a delicate balance, in which the translator must seek to respect the foreignness of the original, without exoticising it.

Returning to my translation of *Sans cœur*, I made use of all three approaches in translating *sacres* in different contexts, on a case-by-case basis and bearing in mind all of the considerations just outlined. Concerning the question of “how much (not) to translate?”, the following examples illustrate that different strategies may be appropriate according to the context.

(a) Retention of Québécois: In “Partir partir,” the character Max exclaims on entering his friend’s bedroom, “Ça pue en saint chrême de saint cibole de saint simonac de batèche!” (43); my translation reads “Ugh, *saint chrême de saint cibole de saint simonac de batèche*, that stinks!” Retaining the elements in their original form preserves the notable capacity of Québécois swearwords to be linked together into whole phrases, which in the current context both intensifies and adds a comic element to the exclamation. This capacity is not wholly absent from English; near equivalents being “in-fixing” (for instance “abso-bloody-lutely”), or phrases such as “fucking fuck” or “bloody fucking hell” – though these still do not approach the complexity of the phrase-long curse uttered by Max. Unwilling to lose what the narrator terms “le lyrisme” (43) of this phrase, and wishing to preserve the social and regional identity which Max’s utterance conveys, I opted to keep the phrase in its entirety in the original Québécois. As Merkle (2014, 99) has pointed out, adaptation in these cases “may be at the expense of the emotionally charged message that the original text articulates, that is, the author’s [or character’s] sociolinguistic distress or political discontent. [...] It is perhaps more ethical in such instances to opt to non-translation.” By doing so, a further advantage is that readers gain a small insight into a culturally meaningful aspect of Québécois language; as well as the fact that “des sacres originels ou dérivés dont l’arrangement plus ou moins fantaisiste vise davantage un effet de divertissement (faire rire) qu’une expression d’intensité” (Bougaïeff and Légaré 1984, 240) are key to the characterisation of Max.

Moreover, the context of the utterance makes its meaning self-explanatory; it is clear that Max is swearing, and no semantic content is lost by non-translation in this case.

(b) Adaptation to English: In three cases, I adapted Québécois swearwords or phrases into partial equivalents in English. First, for “Maudit qu’y a d’la chance! Maudit qu’y est chanceux!” (“En tout cas,” 26), a ready equivalent in English, with a comparable meaning and (relatively low) level of intensity, is “Blimey, his luck’s really in. Blimey, he’s lucky.” Similarly, I translated “Sans-cœur! Maudit gaspilleux!” (“Le homard,” 181) as “Cold-blooded good-for-nothing!” (Incidentally, as a deliberate repetition of the expression “sans cœur” from the collection’s title, it was also crucial to retain the phrase “cold blood” from the translated English title.) These two adaptations were prompted by the fact that, whereas in example (a) the semantic content was less significant than the inclusion of Québécois elements, the order of priority in the present example is reversed. As colourfully described by Cole (2013, 11), “good translation” takes sense into account, and the translator must be responsive to these “live elements” by seeking to “preserve them through transformation rather than salting or pickling them through superficial mimicry.” In the present context, my decision to adapt was partly due to the nature of the expressions themselves, since “maudit,” for instance (being a single word rather than a phrase), does not have the same idiosyncratic force as the string of swearwords used by Max in the first example. Additionally, I would argue that it is more necessary that the semantic meaning of these utterances be understood by the reader than was the case for the examples in (a), thereby precluding the retention of the elements in (b) in their original form.

Conversely, the third example of adaptation had a different motivation: “Va donc chier!” (“Samedi soir,” 34), although not exclusively a Québécois expression, nevertheless signifies the character Françoise’s ability to “devenir grossière” at will (34) – an important element of her character, and a trend among “les jeunes filles québécoises” since the 1980s, as described by Bougaïeff and Légaré (1984, 206):

Désireuses de revendiquer pour leur compte un pouvoir jusque-là monopolisé par le sexe masculin, les jeunes filles ont adopté le médium linguistique du sacré pour affirmer [...] à l’égard des garçons, un pouvoir efficace de manipulation sociale.

I adapted this element into “Alright, alright, don’t shit a brick!” in order to (at least partially) reproduce the joke: Françoise, who has locked herself in the bathroom, tells her impatient brother to “va donc chier,” and proceeds to collapse into hysterical laughter when she realises the appropriateness of her wording. Moreover, since the utterance does not

contain any features specific to Québécois indicating Françoise's regional identity, the main purpose of the utterance (i.e. in its nature as "bad language" and as word-play) is adequately retained in my English version.

(c) Combination of strategies/addition of information: as demonstrated by the example of Ray Ellenwood's translational strategies in *The Penniless Redeemer*, it can be advantageous to combine the above approaches by retaining certain elements while adapting others, even within the same sentence or passage. Further, the addition by the translator of a stealth gloss or subtle explanation can help readers to comprehend the semantic meaning, or to "get" a joke or instance of word-play – without the obtrusive interruption of the kinds of brackets or footnotes more appropriate to academic texts. In my translation of *Sans cœur*, I made use of this combinational approach a number of times, three examples of which will now be explained in more detail.

Firstly, in "En tout cas," the fishermen, taken in by Maximilien's tall stories, exclaim in amazement, "Ah ben va-t-en donc, toi! Ah ben crisse! Ah ben ciboire!" (26), which I rendered as "No fucking way! *Crisse*, that's incredible!"

Secondly, in "Samedi soir," I translated Françoise's brother's "Vas-tu finir par sortir, ostie de calvaire! Reviens-en, de te pomponner! Arrête de te pogner le derrière!" (34) as "What the fuck is taking you so long? *Ostie de calvaire*... stop powdering your nose and open the door!"

Finally, in "Le homard," one of the strongest uses of Québécois *sacres* in the collection, "Chus écœuré, crisse, CHUS ÉCÉRÉ, OSTIE!" (181) became, in my translation, "I'm sick of it, *crisse*, I'm BLOODY SICK OF IT, *OSTIE!*" (an instance in which I also made use of British English colloquial language, as explained below).

In each of these cases, I have retained enough of the original Québécois to adequately signal the cultural identity of the characters as manifested by their use of language, while conveying the semantic content via the English adaptations or stealth glosses with which they are combined. The reason for taking the combined approach in these specific instances (as opposed to the other approaches previously described) is that here, both Québécois identity *and* semantic meaning are essential; neither could be sacrificed, since the utterances contribute much to the identity of both the characters and the text itself – yet to miss out on semantic content would mean losing some comprehension of the narrative.

Colloquialism, Dialect, Voice, and Register

By identifying the function of the sociolinguistic concepts of colloquialism and dialect, and the literary handling of voice and register, we are able more clearly to delineate their importance in the literary and narrative framework; and thus, why and to what extent they should be retained in the translated text.

Although *sacres* are a prime example of the concepts listed above, it is useful to differentiate between the foregoing discussion of more-or-less discrete, perfunctory *sacres*, and colloquialism, dialect, voice, and register in their broader and more sustained usage in the text.

Colloquialism, defined in the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (McArthur 1995) as “informal speech generally,” especially that which is considered “non- or sub-standard,” is an integral part of natural speech, and by extension, of literature which includes dialogue or otherwise seeks to reflect language use in a realistic manner. Features of **dialect**, which “usually refers to regional speech” but “can be extended to cover differences according to class and occupation” (ibid.), are a key component of this kind of speech or writing. This is similar but distinct from vernacular, which is more broadly the language or variety “spoken as one's mother tongue; not learned or imposed as a second language” (*Oxford Dictionary Online*). Colloquial and dialectal features in a text help to construct three-dimensional characters whom readers can “place” both in the geographical and sociocultural sense. Additionally, their inclusion creates an emotional connection with readers, who relate to language which is familiar to them.

In literary analysis, **voice** has been described as “the specific group of characteristics displayed by the narrator or poetic ‘speaker’ (or, in some uses, the actual author behind them), assessed in terms of tone, style, or personality” (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Baldick 2015). More precisely, the notion of voice as it pertains to translation has been explored by Whitfield (2015) who employs Jansen and Wegener’s (2013) distinction between “intra-textual,” “inter-textual,” and “extra-textual” voice. In the present context, the most relevant of these is intra-textual voice; that is, the speech styles of the characters and narrator(s) *within* the text.

Finally, authors select among different **registers** (according to McArthur 1995, “variet[ies] of language defined according to social use”) – examples include the academic, familiar, and journalistic registers. The choice may reflect more of the social context or environment than of the individual character, although both are relevant; register further

varies according to the relationship between speakers; for instance, professional colleagues, friends, or family members, and each context has a specific intra-group code of language use.

It is through the handling of these linguistic and literary features that an author communicates to the reader aspects of the character's personality and individual traits; for instance, age, socioeconomic position, education, and even ideology – as well as broader parameters such as their relationship with their interlocutors, the social setting, and, in the case of a first-person narrator, the degree of familiarity, confidentiality, or honesty with which s/he addresses readers. Proulx is particularly adept at experimenting with these narrative features, and her writing displays a wide variety of approaches to all of those described.

When dialect is employed in literature, another notable effect is the value and legitimacy – what might be called literary status – conferred on the dialect. It is, of course, possible to use dialect in literature in such a way that *only* signals characters' regionality, as nothing but an “inoffensive element of characterization” (Lane-Mercier 2014, 212), or for a kind of comic or novelty effect – yet, as in *Sans cœur*, when the narrator as well as the characters use dialect features of Québécois in both serious and light-hearted circumstances, the effect is powerful as a legitimisation of the linguistic variety, which in turn makes a sociopolitical statement. In the comparable (though more extreme) example of Homel's *Broke City*, Lane-Mercier (ibid.) has emphasised that it was the “unprecedented presence of *joual* in the narrative passages, traditionally the preserve of civilizing grammar norms and reassuring authorial distancing effects, that caused the greatest uproar.” It should be recalled that *joual* evolved into the variety now called Québécois, with nothing like the social stigma of the former: by the mid-1980s, “not only had issues of national identity receded into the background, but Quebec French was well on its way towards standardization and its distinguishing characteristics were no longer stigmatized” (ibid., 214). Yet the comparison is nonetheless germane, since it highlights the major significance of literary uses of particular varieties or dialects – in this case, Québécois and its antecedent *joual* – recalling in turn the importance of attention to these features in translation.

As a case in point, Proulx's skill and versatility as an author is demonstrated in *Sans Cœur* by her ability to convincingly take on a variety of different voices – for instance, Benoît as a child in “En tout cas”; Evelynne Lamarre, in her sixties, in “Le rose et le noir”; and the teenage friends Françoise and Michelle in “Samedi soir.” Further, strategic use of register creates a clear distinction between the narrator (a quasi-representation of the author herself,

generally employing standard French, often in a highly poetic, lyrical, or academic style), and the characters (whose speech is often colloquial and/or dialectal); although, as previously explained, the narrator also juxtaposes contrasting registers and features, to striking effect. Since voice and register are key to the text's polyphonic quality, the loss of these features through a neutralising or ill-considered translation would result in a text far flatter, far more lifeless, than the original.

The challenge arises in how features such as colloquialism, dialect, voice, and register can be sustained throughout a translated text. As previously discussed, a discrete exclamation or expletive formed of a single word or phrase can justifiably be retained in its original (foreign) version, given its perfunctory nature, and because semantic content, if any, is usually irrelevant. On the other hand, a character's voice, comprising their use of colloquialism, dialect, and register, must be sustained throughout the text in order to create the continuity required for readers to "believe" the character. Regardless of other variables such as interlocuter or setting, or indeed the characters' age (Proulx's characters grow older as the collection progresses), their unique voices must be consistent. How can this be approached when the text is translated? As described by Bernofsky (2013, 229), "translation [has] to find a rhythmical identity and integrity that will convince readers they are encountering a genuine piece of writing"; to this end, features such as colloquialisms must be conveyed through the use of a comparable colloquial register in the target language.

However, the boundary between colloquial register and regional dialect is often indistinct. In the present context, the two overlap considerably, and familiar register is often denoted by dialectal features of Québécois. For this reason, where the original Québécois cannot be retained, it is necessary to find a comparable dialectal term in English. Without attention to this aspect, the texture and grain of the character's regionality can easily be lost to generalised slang. While dialectal features in a translation can never fully mimic the effects of the original – there are no perfect equivalents – they can nevertheless produce a comparable textual fabric; an equivalence, at least, of the personality traits of characters, via what Simon (2006, 133) calls "a kind of remixing, a de- and then a re-scrambling of languages and vernaculars."

The obvious question is *which* dialect of the target language to use – of which a key consideration is the degree of specificity (geographical or sociocultural) of the original. Two alternative English translations of Michel Tremblay's *Les belles-sœurs* provide a striking illustration: the first, produced by John Van Burek and Bill Glassco in 1974, employs what critic Vivien Bosley has described as "diluted" language, *joual* having been "standardized

into generic North American” to the extent that “the English text looks like a drawing room version of the French,” (Koustas 2006, 271). Crucially, “the linguistic specifics that we have come to associate with valorization of Quebec’s national identity disappear.” Conversely, Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay’s subsequent 1988 retranslation into Scots dialect, entitled *The Guid Sisters*, kept the Quebec setting but transformed *joual* into Glaswegian Scots – a dialect sharing many comparable socioeconomic and nonstandard connotations. This well-known example underlines the value of seeking a comparable dialect in the target language (despite its inevitable differences from the original). According to Simon, “translations [of *joual*] into parallel idioms – like Yiddish and Scots – have been most satisfying, by using mirroring histories to project the political embeddedness of cultural references” (2015, 508), yet it is also worth pointing out that such a quasi-equivalence of dialects (and the sociocultural significance which they carry) is rare in translation. Often, regional dialects connote such specific social histories and identities that any such substitution results in a quite different set of implications. Again, a postcolonial approach in which the goal is to avoid the disempowerment through translation of the source culture will necessarily need to tread a fine line here in order not to transpose the original so entirely into an “equivalent” as to misrepresent it.

This being said, translation of one dialect into another need not be as extreme as in the example above; indeed, there exists a middle-ground between the neutralising of a dialect into generalised slang, and the rare matching of a quasi-equivalent such as Scots. I chose to retain the colloquial features in my translations of Proulx’s work (particularly in “Le homard,” “Sans coeur et sans reproche,” and “Le rose et le noir”) by employing features of the variety general to London and south-east England. More geographically widespread and more generalised, this variety of British English carries much less sociocultural weight than does Glaswegian Scots, thereby reducing the risk of the implications of the use of a particular dialect becoming skewed in translation. On the other hand, as demonstrated by Van Burek and Glassco’s translation of *Les belles-sœurs*, it is essential that regional features, when translated, not be neutralised altogether, as this results in the loss of the text’s social specificity; precisely what the postcolonially-minded translator seeks to avoid. However, when combined with the retention of Québécois elements such as *sacres* in their original form, explained above, my approach strikes a balance between the identity of the original and the creation of a sustainable, authentic voice in the translation.

The choice of the London/south-east dialect, while a broader and more inclusive category than Québécois, pertains quite simply to the fact that this dialect is my own. Philip Stratford

([1985] 1995, 95) has pointed out that a translator's only reliable recourse when translating an author's characteristic vernacular is her/his *own* vernacular – likely to be a hybrid comprising several cultural and personal background influences: “Antonine Maillet [whose work Stratford has translated] doesn't write pure *acadien* at all. *Acadien* is just her base. To this she adds, instinctively, her own accent, images, rhythms, expressions.” In light of this observation, Stratford concludes that for this idiosyncratic source variety, which he has termed “Mailletois,” his best recourse in translation is “Stratfordese” (ibid., 96). Similarly, my own approach has not been to select a British dialect as geographically specific to a certain region as is Québécois, nor to aim for complete accuracy (whether temporal or geographical) of terms within this dialect; instead I have simply chosen what I believed to be the most natural and idiomatic terms in my own experience as a speaker of British English, and those which are the most appropriate to the character in question. Although the London/south-east variety has been my basis, it is likely that elements of other varieties familiar to me have become intermingled; for instance, urban London, northern English, or Scottish.

This approach is further substantiated by David Homel (1995, 50): “the worst nightmare for a writer would be to be forced to write in a language which is not the one from his (or her) childhood – not the mother tongue. In other words, to have to use a blunt, unfamiliar set of tools.” I would argue that to Homel's “writer” should certainly be added “translator”; in much the same way that the majority of translators have difficulty translating into a language other than their first, it is equally challenging to translate into a dialect or regional variety other than one's own. It can of course be done, and very successfully so (for example by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, who translates into English, her second language); the critical factor here being the translator's individual experience and degree of familiarity with the target language or dialect – just one of the many contexts in which the translator as individual and as human being takes precedence over theoretical or systematic conceptions of the translation process. Indeed, translation is always shaped by the translator's own “positionality,” described by Luise von Flotow as “the translator's biographical, psychological, ideological and professional background” ([1990] 1995, 32). In the present context, this would of course include my position as a translator “outside” the source culture, as discussed in Section 2, as well as the other factors mentioned by von Flotow.

I will now turn to two specific examples from my translation which illustrate the concepts discussed above.

“Le rose et le noir” (Pink and Black) features only one voice, that of Evelynne Lamarre, a woman in her sixties whose speech is often highly colloquial (although not always markedly Québécois). In the original, Evelynne’s vocabulary is characteristic not only of her age, but also of her gender – phrases such as “doux Jésus” being “les sacres de femmes, inscrits au registre familial” (Bougaïeff and Légaré 1984, 204). In my translation, “Ne soyez pas trop regardant, doux Jésus, la cuisine est à l’envers c’est pas disable...” (183) became “oh, but don’t look too closely, heavens above, the kitchen’s a *wreck*...” and “Ce rond de poêle-là est bien maudit” (183) became “this stove’s a bloomin’ nightmare.” Finally, “il a glissé sur la glace c’était l’hiver avant de se rendre au Parlement et il s’est fêlé la crâne et il est mort comme ça avec une bombe même pas bonne dans le fond de ses poches” (192) became “he slipped on the ice its being winter and all and cracked his skull before he even got to Parliament and died just like that with a no-good bomb in his pocket.”

This approach admittedly results in some loss of cultural and regional specificity, and Québécois expressions (particularly “doux Jésus” and “bien maudit”) have been adapted to British expressions (“heavens above”; “bloomin’ nightmare”) with no particular regional connotation; yet what is gained in the adaptation is a convincing and sustainable voice. While presenting a clear shift away from the original Québécois, elements of British familiar language would nonetheless resonate with target-language readers. In my opinion, the risk of making too concrete a geographical shift is offset by the (re)creation of a realistic and evocative voice, and the vivid characterisation which this enables. Once again, given the combination of this approach with the retention of elements of the regional dialect (for instance, “chrissé” and “viarge” are retained in Evelynne’s impersonation, later in the text, of actors she has seen in a play), we come closer to achieving the balance, mentioned above, between the visibility of foreignness and regional identity-markers, on one hand, and the creation of a sustainable individual voice, on the other.

Another interesting comparison can be made by returning to the example of Homel’s 1984 retranslation of Jacques Renaud’s *Le cassé*. Particularly relevant is Homel’s approach to translating source-language slang: written in 1964, Renaud’s text includes “unprecedented use of *joual* as a political tool” (Lane-Mercier 2014, 208). Homel’s *Broke City*, unlike many other translations of Québécois and *joual* (e.g. Fischman’s *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*) did not retain original elements in their foreign version, but replaced them with what Homel has termed “a generalized, big-city, working-class, northern, white dialect” (Homel 1985, 24). Yet unlike Van Burek and Glassco’s “diluted” *Belles-sœurs*, Homel’s “choice of equivalency” represented a rejection of traditional approaches, instead seeking “new, unfamiliar images of

post-colonial, urban Quebec that eschewed questions of untranslatability, otherness, and local colour by challenging target values and perceptions” (Lane-Mercier 2014, 215-16). This example, when compared to Fischman’s *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*, represents the other extremity of the adaptation-foreignisation continuum. Although Homel’s translation has been somewhat controversial – *Broke City* received strong criticism as well as positive reviews (Lane-Mercier 2014, 210-11) – the comparison helps to solidify the contours of the question: by taking a broad view of the potential strategies, we are able more clearly to trace out a suitable route for the present translation context. Specifically, this means erring away from adaptation as complete and all-encompassing as Homel’s, for the reasons already described, while nevertheless seeking a sustainable and convincing regional voice in the translation.

Having thus weighed up the inherent losses and gains, I argue that the recreation of colloquial or dialectal features, and of the individual voice of both narrator and characters, is a prime example of “when *to* translate”; although this strategy of adaptation would not necessarily be justified without the retention, elsewhere, of original features – nor without the advantage (i.e. the literary integrity of the translated text) to be gained through convincing and effective handling of voice.

Language Attitudes in “Le Homard”

The third and final part of my analysis looks at language attitudes, particularly those surrounding diglossia and codeswitching, in the short story “Le homard” (“The Lobster”). Taking a “case study” approach allows for a detailed, targeted application of the linguistic and sociocultural theories already explored; “Le homard” is especially apt for analysis because it contains many of the features typical of Québécois texts (as explained in Section 1). Following a brief introduction to the story and its characters, the discussion will be divided into two sub-sections: first, the paradox resulting from reference to language(s) when the text is translated; and second, manifestations of diglossia and codeswitching in the text, and the real-life corollaries of the of the characters’ language attitudes. In both cases, I will use my translation of “Le homard” as the starting point for a broader exploration of the translational challenges and the high sociocultural stakes of such decisions.

“Le homard” appears towards the end of *Sans cœur et sans reproche*. By this late stage in the collection (which, as described in Section 1, chronologically follows the two main characters over the course of their lives), Benoît is in his elderly years and is going by the name of Marceau; his wife addresses him in one instance as “Benoît Marceau.”

The plot centres around a family dinner to which Marceau and his wife Laura have invited their daughter Marie, her husband Pete, and the two grandchildren Nancy and Ralph. Marceau's simmering frustration with his situation of relative poverty and bad luck is pushed to breaking point by Pete, whose tendency to codeswitch into English provokes Marceau's irritation, a sentiment bound up with his views on language and identity. Demonstrating what Heller ([1995] 2007, 106) has called "linguistic insecurity constructed through years of subordination and language transfer," Marceau is, on one hand, self-conscious about his own Québécois dialect in contrast with the Parisian French which he reveres as the prestige variety; Blanc (1993, 246) points out that "the dominance of 'hexagonal' French norms prevailed well into the 1970s," which ties in with Marceau's attitudes as typical of the older generation. On the other hand, he is adamant that the use of English has no place among his family, who are of course francophone. This instance demonstrates once again how the fictional events in this text are reflective of the linguistic reality of Quebec – that is, the perceived threat to the French language – creating what Mezei (1998, 232) has described as a "semiotics of defiance towards English."

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Marceau's attitude towards his own Québécois language and the attitudes displayed by quite different colonial voices: Niranjana (1990, 775) explains that the Orientalists imagined Hindu culture to be marked by "impurity and cruelty," and its customs to be "disgusting" and "horrible"; echoing (albeit in a much more extreme fashion) Marceau's opinion of his own "langue commune, si petite, avec des mots tellement pauvres et insignifiants" (179). Marceau's insecurities are therefore borne of the dominating influence of both France (linguistically and culturally) and the UK (colonially); as a result, it is even more crucial to try to fairly represent these elements of Marceau's character, given what they communicate of colonial and postcolonial factors.

The twin challenges of language reference and of sociocultural significance will now be examined in more detail. As will be seen, while a certain challenge is posed by the translation of explicit references to language and of codeswitching (as outlined in Section 1), the most complex and significant aspect of translating "Le homard" lies in conveying the sociocultural import of diglossia and codeswitching; indeed, this aspect contributes a great deal to the sense of the narrative, as well as being integral to the story's literary value as a reflection of Quebec's social and political reality. In this context "how much (not) to translate?" becomes more a question of "what is (im)possible in translation alone?"

Firstly, when reference is made to the language used by the characters or narrator, and/or the language of the translation, the effect becomes somewhat skewed when the text is

translated, and particular attention must be paid in order to avoid contradictions; what Hermans (2007, 27) has described as a “[case] in which the self-reflexiveness of texts invoke[s] the language in which the original was written, thus threatening the translation with self-contradiction.” In addition, the translator must attempt to communicate the original message of the source text – which is often reliant on tacit understanding or background knowledge of language attitudes. This is precisely the effect observed in Michèle Lalonde’s “Speak White,” which presents a “paradox” in the “act of translating this poem into English when its subject is living under English colonialism” (Mezei 1998, 230). References to English and French in “Le homard” are also demonstrative of the emotional charge behind language attitudes in Quebec, complicated by the fact that English is, in this case, the target language. For example, “T’es jaloux, tu sais pas un maudit mot d’anglais!” (176) became, in my translation, “You’re jealous because you can’t speak a damn word of English!”, and “C’est pas des *lobsters*, c’est des homards!” (175) became “And they’re not called *lobsters*, that’s English – they’re *homards*!”

Evidently, these elements translated *into English* do not make logical sense. However, this (not uncommon) paradox does not usually present a problem for readers’ comprehension: as Lawrence Venuti (2004) reminds us, “readers of translations can perform several mental tasks at once. [...] When the meaning turns obscure or ambiguous, we instantly clarify or untangle it by correcting the error in form, in word choice or grammar.”

Additionally, these utterances are central to the sense of the source text at the most basic level. As Jesse Harris (2010, 7) has pointed out, the borrowing of English terms into French can be due to a kind of “French snobbery” in which English functions as a prestige marker. The tensions caused by the generational, ideological, and educational divide between Marceau and Pete are themselves signalled by the fact that of the two characters, only Pete is able to speak English.

In short, despite the (minor) risk of confusion, I would argue that again, this is unquestionably a case of “when *to* translate”; paradoxical here does not mean untranslatable, and the references to language in this text are so central to the sense of the narrative that they take precedence over the slight wrinkle in logic.

The second aspect of particular translational interest in “Le homard” is that of codeswitching, which, as explored in some detail in Section 1, is a key feature of diglossic and bilingual societies such as Quebec. It is to be expected that Quebec literature be coloured by these features, and indeed, “a bicultural writer describing a bicultural milieu to a bilingual

audience cannot afford to ignore the bilingual nature of either, for to do so is to risk irrelevance,” and in the case of codeswitching, “if the audience itself is in the habit of switching from one language to the other, so must the characters” (Mackey 1993, 59). It will be recalled that these features nevertheless present complex questions for the translator – questions which Bednarski (1995, 110) has called “unanswerable” – especially when the translation is geared towards a monolingual readership, in which readers find themselves markedly “outside” the source text’s original target audience (for whom the linguistic behaviour of the characters reflects their own lived reality). In addition, it merits repeating that codeswitching, while a common feature of diglossic societies, was at one time indicative of the hegemonic position of anglophone culture which threatened to subsume the Québécois identity; what Ben-Zion Shek (1988, 89) has called the “crass homogenizing process of North American materialism and commercialism.” A postcolonial approach to translation necessarily pays close attention to this point in order not to perpetuate the subsuming domination of francophone culture via neutralising translational processes, since, as Mezei reminds us, “when translators choose to ignore, or omit to indicate, English-language usage in the French source text, they contribute to a de-politicization of the French text and a flattening of the levels of linguistic irony and play” (in Grant 2006, 185).

Today, however, the significance of codeswitching in Quebec is quite different to what it was in the 1960s, and again in the 1980s – as seen in the example of Homel’s *Broke City* – and “where the presence of English was once an indication of infeudation, it is now the sign of a ludic indifference to language purity” (Simon 2006, 132). This shift is embodied by the character Pete, himself representative of the young adult generation; according to Blanc (1993, 249) “anglicisation coincides with the period of early adulthood, when young francophones seek work in an anglophone-dominated workplace.” As previously described, although Proulx does not foreground the linguistic and sociocultural situation in Quebec, these aspects nevertheless underpin her characters’ attitudes, and as such, these aspects cannot be overlooked in translation.

Returning once again to my translation of “Le homard,” with reference to the strategies used by previous translators of Québécois texts, I will now address how both the pragmatic and the ideological aspects of diglossia and codeswitching can be approached in translation.

Firstly, concerning the pragmatic challenge of translating codeswitching, we can once again refer to “Speak White” and its English translation by D.G. Jones. Mezei’s informative study, “Bilingualism and Translation in/of Michèle Lalonde’s ‘Speak White’” (1998), elucidates Jones’ strategies, of which his use of bold type to signal English demonstrates one

method of retaining the visibility of the codeswitch. There remains the unfortunate likelihood that bold type will be mistaken by readers for simple emphasis; a parallel effect in the translation of Acadian poetry has been compellingly analysed by Merkle (2014). The alternative strategy of use of italics would risk the same effect. Nevertheless, in my translation, I have used italics both in their ordinary function for emphasis and to signal elements of French or Québécois which are retained in the translation in their original form. I also chose to italicise the word “lobster” where it is used in English by the character Pete. The key difference between the translation of “Speak White” and that of “Le homard” is that the latter, as prose, is framed by narration and dialogue which contextualise the italicised terms; the former, as poetry, is devoid of such context. Therefore, whether or not italics be construed simply as emphasis is of little consequence in the translation of “Le homard” – provided the term is brought to the reader’s attention (through the use of italics), the nature of its significance can be inferred from the context.

As a potential alternative, as in Ellenwood’s *Penniless Redeemer*, the translator may communicate codeswitching via a subtle in-text reference or stealth gloss. For example, in a passage in which characters discuss the meaning of the phrase “grand tabernacle d’hostie,” Ellenwood added a subtle explanation of Québécois pronunciation: “You’ve got it, Dr. Scot, you’ve got it; right down to putting the ‘a’ in the tabernacle,” which he has explained as “my way of pointing out to English readers a subtle and significant vowel shift between *tabernacle* [...] and *tabarnacle*” (Ellenwood 1995, 103). While Ellenwood realised that it would be “awkward and useless to *explain* all of that,” he also “didn’t want to obliterate the detail,” and as such, “merely mentioned it for readers who might be interested” (ibid.). To this end, and where appropriate, I supplemented my translation with additional information. For instance, “C’est comme ça, *that’s the way it is*, dit Pete” (176) became ““*C’est comme ça*, that’s the way it is’, Pete answered, switching into English mid-sentence” (which also illustrates the use of italics, described above). The question of how much (not) to translate thus finds another alternative response: in this context, I would argue for the “translation” into concrete textual information of what was initially implicit – what might be called “overtranslation” – for the express purpose of communicating important elements of the source text, and given the target readership’s somewhat limited familiarity with diglossia and codeswitching.

The second challenge, the communication of underlying significance, is one which is perhaps faced by most literary translators. “How much (not) to translate?” again becomes a question of what is (im)possible in translation alone. The addition of supplementary

information is no longer an option in the case of much larger, more complex issues such as the historical significance of codeswitching in Quebec. In this context, “writers [and translators] who wish to address the anglophone public [...] are faced with the daunting challenge of transferring not only the words but also the emotionally charged message that the voice of a hybrid language articulates” (Merkle 2014, 94). One potential solution to this problem is to provide this information paratextually, whether in footnotes, or a translator’s preface or post-script. This can be seen extensively in the work of translators throughout history, a few examples being Andrew Hurley (Borges’ *Fictions*), Richard Pevear (Dostoevsky’s *The Eternal Husband*), and N.J. Dawood (*Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*) among many hundreds of others. As a more recent example, describing Pablo Strauss’ translation of Raymond Bock’s 2011 collection *Atavismes: Histoires*, Malla (2015) draws attention to the “helpful appendix,” which “explains *joual* cursing (in which equivalents of ‘chalice’ and ‘host’ are two of the most vile expletives) and French Canadian touchstones such as the Quiet Revolution.” Relevant once again is Sheila Fischman, who, as mentioned, retained Québécois *sacres* in her translation of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* while providing useful contextual information in her preface.

In such situations, the preferable decision is necessarily *not* to translate, since to “translate” cultural nuances stemming from social, political, and historical source-culture factors is simply not possible. Cultural elements are instead retained in the text and explained in the notes or preface. Of course, this strategy relies on the publisher being agreeable to the inclusion of such paratextual elements – and always entails the risk that readers will ignore the paratextual information, thus missing out on details or context which are essential to proper comprehension of aspects of the narrative, including linguistic features like codeswitching. Nevertheless, whether or not readers ignore such features is far beyond the translator’s control, and indeed, ties in with Ellenwood’s outlook on closed-minded readers: “too bad for them.”

Section 4: Conclusion

In this study, I have addressed the question of “how much (not) to translate?” in the context of a Québécois source text and British target readership. The continually shifting ground in Quebec’s cultural, literary, and linguistic domains means that a re-interrogation of translation’s role in such changes is both valuable and timely. Building on the work of translators and translation researchers, I have sought to contribute to the wider conversation by focusing on two lines of enquiry: how much is it necessary or appropriate to translate, retain, or adapt for a British readership; and what are the particular considerations to bear in mind when translating a 1983 Quebec text in 2017?

Section 1 reviewed the literary trends of the 1980s; notably, the clear move away from the collective, ideological concerns which had coloured much of the Québécois literature of the late 1960s and ‘70s, towards, instead, themes of the individual and of human experience, with a tendency towards experimental subversion of narrative and linguistic structures. Squarely situated in the literary context of its time, *Sans cœur et sans reproche* is characterised by all of the features just mentioned. The centrality of codeswitching and its continued (though shifting) sociocultural and ideological import in diglossic societies such as Quebec were seen to be a direct result of the changing relations between linguistic communities. The historical basis of language attitudes in Quebec have thus provided the background for the translational questions raised throughout the current study.

Regarding the valuable works which have already approached the issues involved in Québécois to English translation, we saw that when it comes to questions of foreignisation versus adaptation, there can be no firm answers – given changes in francophone/anglophone relations and language attitudes – and as such, there is a continued need for the re-questioning of appropriate translational approaches, often on a case-by-case basis. Recently, growing awareness of translation’s role in constructing and perpetuating colonial power has led to the re-evaluation of the importance of retaining foreign elements vis-à-vis their adaptation into target codes.

Section 2 recalled the repercussions of the translator’s “outsiderness,” particularly in the Quebec context. Not only is this my personal position as a translator from the UK, but it has been the position of previous translators such as Fischman, Van Burek, Ellenwood, and Homel – all of whom were relative newcomers to the province when they began translating Québécois. In the present context, the effect of my own outsiderness has resulted in translational decisions which reflect my origins as well as my target readership in the UK, in

two main ways. Firstly, in recognising the features of Québécois language or culture most likely to be unfamiliar, I have made decisions regarding which elements to retain in their original form and which to adapt – decisions which would have been different if the target readership were anglophone Canadian, given the greater recognition within Canada of Québécois elements. While the former has been driven by a desire to preserve aspects of Québécois identity – especially important since British English has historically been a dominating colonial force – the latter has also been a valid choice where comprehension of semantic content took precedence. Secondly, when translating dialectal and colloquial features, I chose to use my own native British dialect in order to achieve the most natural, authentic, and sustainable use of voice.

Another important consideration discussed in Section 2 has been timing: in the thirty years since *Sans cœur*'s publication, and partly thanks to the efforts of small publishing houses, national and international interest in Quebec literature has grown. It is therefore an opportune moment to re-question how translation, especially for readerships outside Canada, contributes to this movement. Moreover, it remains equally important today that attention be paid to the representation of Québécois culture constructed via the translation of its literature, especially in light of postcolonial concerns of identity and sociocultural importance of the source culture.

In my translation of the short stories in *Sans cœur*, discussed in Section 3, I drew on a number of sources in order to reach translational decisions which respected the concerns mentioned above. In the case of translating Québécois *sacres*, three potential solutions suggest themselves: retention of original Québécois (as in Fischman's translation of *La Guerre, Yes Sir!*); adaptation to partial target equivalents (as in the same translator's later work); and a middle-route which combines the two (as in Ellenwood's *The Penniless Redeemer*). All three of these strategies can be observed in my translations from *Sans cœur*. However, concerning translation of the colloquial or dialectal features which construct the character's individual voice, the need for consistency leads to a quite different translational strategy – namely, the selection of a comparable dialect or register in English. With a nod to Stratford's use of "Stratfordese" when translating "Mailletois," my translations made use of my own native variety, that of London and south-east England.

Linguistic features such as diglossia and codeswitching were seen to present challenges in translation both pragmatically and theoretically, as demonstrated by my translation of "Le homard." On one hand, the potentially paradoxical results of English in the original are often circumvented by readers themselves, who may be further aided by subtle explanations or

stealth glosses from the translator. On the other hand, while features such as codeswitching (integral to Quebec's linguistic reality) no longer carry the sociocultural or political weight they once did, they nevertheless represent underlying and persistent language attitudes crucial to the understanding of literature such as *Sans cœur et sans reproche*. Communicating the nuances related to underlying language attitudes has proven a much knottier question, and different strategies have been shown to be appropriate in different contexts.

Finally, where the reader's comprehension of the narrative is underpinned by recognition of sociocultural factors, the only recourse for the translator may be to include a preface or appendix (assuming the publisher's consent).

To conclude, the approaches of previous translators of Québécois have been partly determined by the timing of the work, given the vast changes which quite rapidly changed the face of Quebec literature and translation within the space of a few decades, and partly by the translator's own positionality and ideology; while the same parameters apply today, the circumstances are quite different. Nevertheless, the valuable work of translators and researchers over the course of the last thirty years (particularly in domains of Quebec literature, postcolonialism, and translation's role in shifting cultural relations) has provided today's translators of Québécois with a solid ground on which to base their practice.

The specific requirements involved in translation of Québécois for a British readership in 2017 provide the unique context of the current study; nevertheless, it is intended to be a voice among many, and a contribution to the wider efforts in Translation Studies to keep abreast of literary and cultural movements. In turn, the hope is that curiosity and enthusiasm for Québécois and other translated literature will continue its upward trajectory in the English-speaking world.

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II Translations from *Sans Cœur et Sans Reproche*

Anyway

You'd never believe it, but every time I reeled in my line, there'd be six of them hooked on, bouncing around like diabolos. They kept wriggling, even in the basket, and bleeding, too, because I'd put out their eyes single-handed – bam! – to get them off the hooks. At first I hadn't wanted to, but Maximilien swore to me that fish don't feel a thing, even though they make those weird little cries when you grab them by the gills. Anyway. It was one hell of a fishing trip. We were fishing for smelt, and it was like they could read my mind – I'd whisper the magic words under my breath, *eeny-meeny-abracadabra-piss-shit-almighty-bingo!* – and a whole load of them would whizz towards my line, grabbing the bait like they hadn't eaten for a hundred years. I swear, they were actually reading my mind. Everyone else was just bringing in loaches – but not me. By the end, all the smelt-fishers of Saint-Irénée came and gathered around me, shouting questions, trying to suss out my technique. Maximilien answered for me since I was too busy unhooking all my fish. Twenty feet out on the quay, a big Swedish boat had just dropped anchor. Men were moving around on the deck. They lit their fishing lamps, shining the beams out on the cold water, and then with a *flop* they threw out all their lines at once. When I looked up to the sky, I thought the Great Bear moved a little, and then a shooting star passed right under my nose like a firefly. It was one hell of a beautiful night.

The old man next to me kept saying, “Blimey, his luck's really in. Blimey, he's lucky,” and it started to get on Maximilien's nerves.

“It's not luck, it's a gift! It's plain to see, the boy's gifted!” And he gave me a sneaky nudge with his elbow.

He started telling unbelievable stories: about the trout from the Jacques-Cartier River that would jump into my arms, and the hundreds of salmon I'd caught in Gaspé, and the time when the fish in the aquarium followed me like lost puppies.

“In the end, the owner of the aquarium wouldn't let him in anymore,” he added, sadly. “He was afraid the sharks would escape, trying to follow him. You ever seen that, here? Sharks on rue Saint-Jean?”

They were gobsmacked. “No fucking way! *Crisse*, that's incredible!”

There's no bigger liar than my brother Maximilien. He could make you believe that the earth was flat as a puck. He could convince an amputee that they had four arms. I'm telling you, there's no bigger liar than him. I had to beg him to stop – I was laughing so hard, the

fish were getting away. As for the other fishermen, I'd gone up in their estimation, and they were baiting hooks for me, giving me great mugs of scalding coffee that I had to swallow in a few gulps, shoving rollies into my hand.

"Want a smoke, boy?"

Meanwhile, Maximilien had snuck onto the Swedish boat. He came back with five sailors, introducing them to the rest of us with a warmth that was catching. Hands were shaken, the air rippled with laughter, and amber bottles of fiery liquor began to spring from nowhere. Suddenly it was like a party down by the lapping water on the Saint-Irénée quays. It felt like the night would never end, we were having such a good time. My brother started talking in Swedish like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I realised with astonishment that he knew it, he understood it all – that bloody great lad that everyone loved, instantly, almost as much as I did. Anyway. You can't even *imagine* what a hell of a fishing trip we had.

Like always, when we finally made our way back from Saint-Irénée or from Pointe-au-Pic, Maximilien and me, the sun was already high up in the east – we never got back before seven in the morning. Maximilien crept into my mum's room and sneakily slipped a fish down her back. She woke up with a shriek, and vowed an eternal hatred for him – but in five minutes, her laughter was filling the house like a fanfare. She took me to one side.

"Benoît! Were there women on that boat? Are you sure? I smell drink on you, you little monster. Get to bed, quick."

My mum is almost as much of a liar as Maximilien is, only with her, you can tell straight off when she's not telling the truth. She's always laughing. She's a dancer, and it's as if she walks on the air, if you can imagine that. When she does her acrobatic solo dances, she's like a flame, she's so light that you think she might fly away any second. She's tall, and bendier than a snake. Maximilien calls her Mona Lisa. They get on well, those two, even if she's not his real mum. Actually she's Maximilien's second mum. It seems complicated, but it's pretty simple: his first mum died because of her lungs or her chest or something, and my dad – who is also Maximilien's dad – our dad, then, got remarried to my mum, and then I was born. Got that? But there's no bad blood between my half-brother and my real mum, if you're still with me. It's not like on films when the step-mother and the step-son get into horrible scenes and throw plates at each other's heads, because they're jealous of each other, like, "Damn you, woman, I'll kill you!" – "You pig, I'll tear your guts out!" – nothing like that. My mum loves everyone. And I think that Maximilien loves her more than he loved his real mum. He calls her Mona Lisa and he goes quiet when you ask him about his childhood. He doesn't get cross or anything, he just goes quiet – so you do the same, because you understand that he doesn't

like to dig up the past. It's his business, no one else's. The important thing is that the two of them, they get on. When they both put their heads down, you can hardly tell them apart, because they have the same fair hair with the same pale shine.

So there were the fishing nights, like I said, and then there were Sundays. My mum would get up at dawn, and I'd hear her pacing around the house, keeping a nervous watch, for hours on end. Maximilien always holed himself up in his room, and he wouldn't be out until the evening. Because, you see, we were going to see my father. Sundays were hell.

This time, we got there around one-thirty in the afternoon. My mum couldn't stop talking, but she had that look on her face that she sometimes has when she's dancing – you think she's there, but she's not *really* there. You think it's your mum, and then suddenly you don't recognise her anymore. As for me, I chewed a piece of gum, my nails, anything. And then we were face to face with the old man who was my father.

Maybe it wouldn't have been as terrible if he hadn't trembled like that, and if he hadn't been so thin. But his hands fidgeted all the time, and you could count his bones through his shirt. He said nothing while my mum talked, and when she stopped talking, he still said nothing, but she didn't stop very often – she told the same stories three, four, five times. To tell you the truth, I didn't listen. Neither did my father. He looked at me. He looked at me the whole time. My mum talked, and he looked at me. You have no idea the terrible way that he looked at me. It was like he didn't recognise me, like he hated me or something. It didn't matter if I turned my head away, stared at the floor, or looked him square in the face, he never took his eyes off me, not even for a second. He scared me, if you must know. In fact, I could have screamed, I was so scared of him. Afterwards, I couldn't sleep for days – I saw him in every corner of the room, with his big white eyes. Back at the house, my mum said to Maximilien, "He's getting more and more schizophrenic, you know." Maximilien shot her a nasty look – and it was the only time I'd ever hear him answer her in that voice that was sharp like metal.

"Don't want to know!"

It's true that he never bothered to go over there himself. He'd shut himself away in his bloody room, every Sunday the same, and the house might have fallen down around him before he'd have budged an inch. But then in the evening, he'd come and find me, biting his lip so hard I thought he'd bleed.

"Did he talk? Did he say something?" he'd ask in a low voice.

I said no, and we didn't say any more about it.

Eventually, there were no more Sundays. I mean, Sunday ended up being like any other day, like a fishing day, no different from the next.

And yet I never could relax, not completely. I often dreamt about my father: at first I just saw him from behind, his back poker-straight, then he'd turn towards me, his lips moving but not making a sound – and then he'd start slowly, ceremoniously, pulling off the bandages which covered his face. I always woke up before I saw his eyes, and I never understood why my heart pounded more from sadness than from terror.

One day, I tried to write him a letter. I started and restarted it ten times before chucking it in the bin. I didn't know what to say to him. The words wouldn't come. I should have spoken to him like a friend, but I didn't like him, if you really want to know. I swear, that was the weirdest feeling, to realise that I didn't even like the old bloke that was my father, but I couldn't do anything about it.

All I remember about him, from the time when he lived with us, is that he was as tall as a giant, and he never spoke to me. Hardly ever, at least. And then Maximilien came to live with us, and my father left to go and live in the other place. He must have been rich, because our lives carried on just like before – even better in fact, with our summers in Pointe-au-Pic, rafting on the river, and in the evenings, when it got cold, the three of us huddled together around a big pinewood fire, laughing like mad, the smoke burning our eyes. Anyway.

The next bit... well, I don't like telling the next bit. You know how much I loved them, both of them, but I swear I could have hacked them to pieces like birch wood. If I hadn't gotten a hold of myself (or if I weren't such a chicken), I really would have killed them. But my legs had turned to jelly. I ran down to the shed, I had to get away, to try and get my head around it. You have to understand: there was my brother Maximilien, who taught me to hunt squirrels, to tinker with car engines, to throw knives; and there was my mother, who would take me by the scruff of the neck and call me her little monster; and then of course there was him, out there, and all this got muddled in my head.

I never should have been there in the first place. I know that I never should have crept in, cat-footed, to find them tangled up together, groaning like animals. Afterwards, nothing was ever the same. Afterwards, you can't just sit around saying nothing while your mum is naked in bed with your brother, and your dad is locked up in an asylum. That's the part you have to understand.

And so in the middle of the night, I went down to the quay at Saint-Irénée. There were no fishermen now, it was too windy. The river was churning up dark whirlpools, but down there, far down at the very bottom, something was glowing like the light of a beacon.

Saturday Night

What gets on your nerves the most is the way she looks at you with that beaming, superior expression, as if you were a prize idiot. With your right foot wedged firmly against the toilet seat, you try your best to focus. They say there's nothing to it. They give you little blue and white drawings with letters and figures showing where your various orifices are, so that you don't accidentally stick the tampon in your belly-button. And so, amid the stale odour of menstruation, your fingers sticky with blood, you search for the promised cavity. The tampon is wrecked by now, it's all lopsided – the cardboard tubes don't slide anymore, the whole thing is falling apart. They advise (in their infinite wisdom) that you simply relax and take your time. They assure you that *all* women have been through this, even Raquel Welch, even Mary Poppins. The girl on the Tampax box is triumphant in her purity – white teeth, white dress, white flowers in her white hand – the very picture of immaculate conception. You will never be like her, because your period is always disgusting, and you ooze like a burst pipe. From the other side of the door, your brother is yelling blue murder.

“What the fuck is taking you so long? *Ostie de calvaire*... stop powdering your nose and open the door!”

You crush the Tampax box with your fist, the girl in white tumbles into the bin, and you hurl back your own obscenities:

“Alright, alright, don't shit a brick!”

Realising that this is, at least in part, precisely what he wants to do, you collapse into hysterical laughter that even your brother's profanities can't drown out.

The fifth tampon, for some reason, goes in perfectly. You wash your hands, powder over the spot which has ominously appeared on the end of your nose, and leave the bathroom victorious, truly a Modern Woman.

Michelle is sitting in the living room, waiting for you. She pretends to listen to your mother, interjecting now and then with an *ah!* or an *oh, really?* or a *no way...*, perfunctory as a metronome, her glazed eyes fixed on the television screen. She has seen every *Star Trek* episode at least ten times, but she never gets bored of it, captivated as she is by the exotic and glacial Lieutenant Spock (who she thinks is sexy, despite or maybe because of his diabolical eyebrows). And now that you have appeared, your mother begins frantically flogging her favourite dead horse, urging you to be wise, abstinent, proper – as if you were Red Riding Hood, as if hungry wolves waited for you at every street corner. You want to scream at her that nothing is going to eat you, but you settle for protesting distractedly while pulling on

Michelle's shirt sleeve, in an attempt to drag her away from Spock and his cosmic adventures.

The number 8 lurches towards the Upper Town. Safely on board, you dab mascara on your too-short eyelashes, and another coat of red on your lips – which, for some reason, your parents insist should be kept colourless and dull like unripe fruit.

“I put one in.”

“One what?”

“Tampon, dummy!”

“*Seriously?* Did it hurt? I'm totally trying it too, next month!”

Everywhere you look, smiling, blonde women hold out their delicate hands, offering their fantastic products: the new bra designed by Concorde, created by Boeing; the new toothpaste for a wild love-life; the new cutting-edge, super-aphrodisiac perfume... the bus is plastered with these flawless females who have never had so much as a pimple. In their reflected glow, you suddenly feel about as attractive as an ill-formed maggot. Michelle digs you in the ribs – you've arrived. The bright lights of the clubs await, and as soon as you show up, they'll blaze in the darkness like fireworks.

But the party starts without you, in any case, because at fifteen-and-a-half, the two of you are as likely to get in to a club as if you had shown up with leprosy – no matter how well the make-up masks your youth. Disillusioned, you head once again to Popaul, where you can pass the impatient evenings until the exasperating childishness is shed from your boyish frames, and you can finally get into real nightclubs, and real life.

The moment you step inside, you see that (as usual) there is an overwhelming surplus of girls. The fight will be a tough one – your pet hate. You notice, with envy, Lise Martin and Claire Ouellet coming in with two boys, who – supremely pimpled though they be – will at least save Lise and Claire the awful humiliation of sitting out the slow-dances. You know them only too well, those moments of horror: the frenetic beat suddenly drops to a sensual blues, and you casually nod your head, keeping time; you make a show of going to find a seat; all the while, you look imploringly to the few solitary males who have appeared from nowhere; they look back, evaluating, weighing up, accepting or rejecting the merchandise the girls have become. You throw yourself – brimming with gratitude – into the arms of the first pitiful specimen who shows an interest, and the two of you sway earnestly on the spot, clinging to one another like limpets. You look around with sympathy at the less fortunate,

who sit, partner-less, biting their nails in misery. Most of the time, you share their fate. It's the reason you started smoking: just to have something to do, to save you from ridicule, and to escape from the sweaty heat that always turns your stomach.

The night is young. You feel your head fizzing like champagne. Michelle has chucked her bag down on a table and is already jiggling about, unable to keep still. And you can't take it anymore, either, your toes tap involuntarily, people move robotically aside as you push through with arms out like wings, carving your space on the dancefloor, *danser, danser* sings Nanette, and you dance, dance. Your denim skirt is too tight around your waist, Michelle is far prettier than you, but who cares, a thousand feet are pounding the floor around you now, raising you up, up, like a tornado, an avalanche waiting to drop. Next to you, the rest of them are nothing but dead weights.

"Wanna dance the *boogie*?"

"Okay."

And that's when you see him. He looks so exactly like Clint Eastwood that your heart skips a beat. You and Michelle have seen every one of Leone's westerns, your blood runs salty and the brine tingles on your lips when the men's grey eyes fix on you from the screen, piercing right to your bones.

So there he is, then, a stranger you know by heart. He's looking at you, or maybe at Michelle – of course, he's looking at Michelle. Never shy to blow her own trumpet, she "boogles" better than anyone, showing off as if there were nothing to it. Knees pressed together, she twists like an elastic and elegant corkscrew. You drown her in floods of poisonous bile.

"Why are you staring at me like that, Françoise...?"

"I'm not staring at you! Who do you think you are, Bo Derek?"

Boule Noire is pounding from the speakers now, *emmène-moi*, drowning you out. You have to scream in one another's ears to be heard. Suddenly you notice that Clint Eastwood has gone. It's weird: from this moment, you no longer hear Boule Noire, nor Michelle's yelling; you no longer see the girls hopping all around you like crazed sparrows, and you no longer feel like dancing.

"Françoise! ...*up* with you? ...*cross* at me?" Michelle screams in your direction, while Clint Eastwood in person appears behind her back, with just enough of a sway in his shoulders and hips to complete the beautiful, cinematographic mirage. He even has a cigarette-end between his lips, giving him the added allure of a young René Levesque. It's too much. You stop dancing altogether.

“What’s going on?” bleats Michelle, completely oblivious. Poor girl! Clint, the eighth wonder of the world, is within actual touching distance – and she’s none the wiser.

He chucks his cigarette butt on the floor. He grinds it under his heel, like a bull getting ready to charge. He shakes his mane. Michelle turns around. He’s going to ask her to dance. He doesn’t ask her to dance. He steps back, as if she were rotting garbage. He looks at you as if you were Liz Taylor in her younger days. He asks you to dance, you, you, you. Angels sing in the heavens, it’s the end of the world as we know it, any second now you’ll pass out. As if by magic, the music has started to thicken, covering you like a syrupy caress, and Clint’s arms around you save you from fainting there and then. There’s dark hair on his hands, on his arms, and a genuine beard scratches your forehead deliciously. He must be at least twenty-two.

In your experience, slow-dance partners have either crushed your ribs, choked you around the neck, or pulverised your toes. But not this one. He moves sinuously, and somehow holds every part of you, so that you melt like caramel on his body, and you press against him with every inch of your electrified skin. The musky smell of his leather jacket mingles with another, the more subtle, more intoxicating fragrance of his neck... his hands move a little on you, and you practically collapse, trembling, on the floor... it’s like the wildest dreams of your solitary nights, where shadow-faced, deft-fingered strangers ignite in your belly the most incredible explosive regions, before you wake with a start.

You dance. He doesn’t let go for a moment, even when the song changes. He whispers in your ear the most earth-shattering things, that you’re a good dancer, that your skin is so soft, that you’re beautiful... and the most astonishing thing of all is that you believe him, you, who never pass a mirror without wanting to smash it.

“I’ve left my cigarettes in my car,” he says abruptly, and you understand the gravity of the situation. For a guy like Clint, the smoke he breathes is a part of his being; they can’t be separated. Depriving him of his cigarettes is like taking away James Bond’s gun, shaving the moustache off Omar Sharif, or tearing the trench-coat from Colombo’s back. You offer him yours. He refuses, of course. A guy like Clint doesn’t smoke just *anything* – no run-of-the-mill Rothmans or plain old Players for *him*. The only cigarettes he’ll put between his lips are the slender American ones with names that ring out like horses’ hooves in the Far West. Every girl in the club looks on enviously as the pair of you leave, hand in hand.

You see it all now: the toxic jealousy of your friends when you pass them in the street, proudly clutching Clint’s arm like a trophy; the inevitable, bitter feuds with your family, who have never known you to go with a “steady”; all the violent ruptures that your life will

undergo. And yet you accept all of this – you seize it with frantic impatience – because you’re certain, you feel it in your bones, that there’s a kind of liquid magnetism between the two of you, the scent of everlasting love.

The two of you go to sit in his car for a few minutes – just, you know, for the peace and quiet. Clint has found his cigarettes by now, and twirls the packet deftly between his fingers.

“We’re in no hurry,” he says.

You say no, for the sake of agreeing, but you feel both hot and frightened at once, and your heart is pounding so hard, it threatens to burst out of your chest. Here it is: the biggest moment of your life has finally arrived.

His right hand gropes under your shirt, creeping up to your breasts, grabbing at your nipples – and that’s what worries you more than anything else, because you suddenly remember the tissues that you stuck inside your bra to make yourself look bigger (men love that)... meanwhile his left hand tries in vain to separate your thighs, which you keep pressed together like steel bars. His mouth grates ceaselessly over your throat, your lips, your neck. He’s so busy with all this, he doesn’t notice your protests – he doesn’t even see the Kleenex in your bra. “Oh baby, sweet baby...” he murmurs huskily, and you think that really, you should tell him – admit that it’s the first time, and maybe he’ll go easier on you... “My darling,” he moans, and before you know what’s happening, he’s pulled something out of his pants, and he shoves it haphazardly between your thighs. You’re shot through with a searing pain and, amazed, you hear indecipherable, terrified sounds coming from your mouth. They’re the same sounds that spill from the women’s lips in dirty movies, the ones you had always thought were sounds of pleasure.

It would seem that the biggest moment of your life is now over. Clint runs his hand through his mane of hair, straightens his pants, opens the door, and gets out of the car. You climb out of your side and stand there in an undisguised daze.

“You coming?”

He waits for you a few metres from the car, his eyes half-shut against the wisp of smoke from his American cigarette. Without quite knowing why, you feel horribly embarrassed – humiliated – for not having measured up. And then, of course, there’s the sticky liquid oozing down your thigh, which you can hardly just brush away with the back of your hand, casually, as if scratching your nose.

“I have to go to the ladies’.”

“Okay.”

An enormous gulf of silence stretches between the two of you, and you scamper along at his side, trying to keep up. You can't put your finger on what's changed. You hold on to his arm all the way to the bathroom in Popaul's, ignoring the stiffness in his gesture. Right now, your mind is squarely on other things: in a sickening flash, you have just remembered your period, and the tampon that you'd put in, right where you now feel something like a gaping and painful hole.

With your right foot wedged firmly against the toilet seat, you go in search of the missing tampon. It must have gone a long way, because you can't find the string anywhere. No one told you what to do in this situation – the blue and white leaflet was as mute as a sphinx on the subject of buried tampons.

Obviously, if Clint had thought to pull it out, you wouldn't be standing here like a Christmas turkey, groping at your insides, your fingers red with blood. You wouldn't be wracked with the primordial terror of uterine cancer, intestinal leprosy, or any of a thousand other fates which await you and your tainted belly. Still, you're not cross with *him*. A guy like Clint Eastwood has better things to do than remove girls' tampons for them; a guy like Clint fires his shot, clean and precise, and cuts loose, smoking gun in hand.

That said, when you come out of the toilets and see him slow-dancing with Michelle, stuck to her like a postage stamp, you can't help thinking that something not quite fair has happened to you. But you settle for going to find your bag, repeating under your breath the litany you'll relay to your mother, when, like every Saturday night, she demands to know why you've been out so long.

“Nothing happened! *God*, Mum, it's not even late...”

Partir Partir

Partir partir
On a toujours
Un bateau dans le cœur
Un avion qui s'envole
Pour ailleurs
— Julien Clerc, 1977

No doubt about it, the room had a *smell*. It was so strong that it stung your nose and gripped your throat like the rotting tooth of a vampire – such, at least, was the image which struck Benoît as he stood in the doorway.

“Ugh, *saint chrême de saint cibole de saint simonac de batèche* – that stinks!” Max observed, not one to deprive the occasion of poetry.

As for Ti-Cass, he was already kneeling on the bed, sniffing the rumpled sheets with delight.

“Well, lads, it looks like we have a case of consummation!” he said, jumped off the bed, and danced around the room, chanting like a hooligan, “Sex! Sex! We want sex!”

The room belonged to Benoît’s brother Luc, who, although just a few years older than them, already seemed a world apart: he had a place of his own, above the market in the Latin Quarter, and a girl of his own, too. They imagined her now – spirited and fiery, surely, judging by the suggestive disorder of the bed. Ti-Cass pulled at the bottom sheet in the unsavoury hope of finding even more conclusive evidence; something like an overflowing condom, or a damp, crumpled pair of lacy knickers... but all his search revealed was a large blood-stain, brownish like mouldy fruit, reaching all the way to the bed-frame.

“Woah!”

Benoît was lost for words. All Ti-Cass could manage was an affected snigger. And Max, fancying himself pontificate, gave a little shrug. “*Well!*”

The pause that followed threatened to go on forever, and a peculiar malaise washed over them like a bucket of water, gathering in a puddle at their feet. There was no place in their sexual fantasies for *blood*. Blood belonged to that category of mysterious, troubling things that never failed to crop up where girls were concerned. Benoît took it upon himself to pull the covers back up over the dirty sheets. He was the most circumspect of the three, the most responsible, in some ways – which in itself wasn’t a particularly admirable quality, if his limited success with girls was anything to go by. Everyone knew that for girls to like you, you had to be built like a tank, or else be a joker of the most idiotic kind. Although not

exactly a tank, Max did have a few over-pronounced muscles, which he showed off with pride – already earning him a number of groping sessions, and at least one genuine sexual experience. Ti-Cass, on the other hand, was an expert in monkeying around – which had got him absolutely nowhere, since unfortunately, his behaviour wasn't all that was monkey-like. The three of them had been friends, despite and because of their differences, for an eternity – two years, at least – and they shared almost everything: illicit beers, first unrequited desires, an obsession with girls' hips and Wayne Gretzky's game, and a profound terror of the twin giants that were the Future and the looming obligation to one day Be A Man. And now they were getting ready to share something else, a magical and transcendent experience – they had each swallowed two pills containing a mixture of mescaline, LSD, and mica (really, *really* mind-bending, Claude, the college dealer, had assured them). And so they waited, in the room borrowed from Luc, for something unforgettable to happen, as if waiting for an epiphany, or a promised encounter with an alien.

The room looked like the burrow of some strange animal. Benoît knew that his brother was a hoarder of the first degree, but this, well, this was bordering on genius. In a minuscule one-room apartment (or one-and-a-half, if you were generous enough to include the cupboard that served as a kitchen), Luc had managed to stockpile everything he had brought back from his travels in Mexico and South America: small pieces of wooden furniture which creaked like ancient knuckles when you so much as looked sideways at them; cooking pots made of clay and painted in garish colours; furred and feathered creatures which seemed more alive than dead; enough coarse, woollen blankets to wrap up two whole colonies of shivering boy-scouts; steel machetes that glinted viciously; and even a large flute with multiple tubes, from which it was impossible to coax anything like a note – although, to be fair, none of them knew how to play.

Ti-Cass placed an upturned clay pot on his head and strutted about the room.

“Look, guys... an Argentine bowler hat! All the rage at Lake Titicaca!”

“That's a chamber-pot, you fool! Can't you feel the shit running down your face?”

Horrified, Ti-Cass made a move to yank the pot from his head, at the same time as Max tried to ram it down further, the combined effect of which launched the pot across the room. Benoît, by sheer good luck, happened to be in its path and caught it mid-flight, clutching it to his chest like a football.

“Phew!” they exclaimed in almost perfect unison, and fell about laughing, effortlessly, grateful for the complicity which was never lacking between them, even in the most trifling

of situations. Benoît was the first to notice that his throat was behaving rather strangely – it felt like a narrow bottleneck, or perhaps as if something was wedged inside it, moving around of its own accord, curled up at the top of his windpipe and blocking its passage.

“It’s starting! I think it’s starting...” he said, and was surprised at the gravity of his own voice. The others agreed, just as gravely. No matter how exciting it seemed at first, what they were about to experience made them more nervous than they cared to admit. A ton of people ended up hooked on acid, not to mention all the bad trips they’d heard about – like big Marcel, who had had such awful hallucinations that he’d been afraid of the dark and spooked by silence ever since, and – so said his sister – wet the bed like a baby. Then again, who could say if that were true; the sister in question was notorious for her wild inventions, not to mention the fact that *all* girls lied through their teeth...

Benoît sat down and put his hands to his stomach, pressing it gingerly. The tightening in his throat had moved downwards and now felt like a painful knot, twisting slowly in his belly, freezing and burning at the same time. He also had the odd sensation that his jaw, shot through with a bizarre energy, snapped open and shut of its own accord. Twice he had to touch his chin to make sure he was imagining it. He tried to think of the exact words to describe what he was feeling (having decided beforehand to keep a scrupulous written record of every new sensation, at every stage of the experience) but this already seemed over-complicated. Besides, the sensation had already changed; the tightening had morphed into an overall tremor, emanating from the very centre of his body. In any case, he’d forgotten by now where he’d left his notebook and pen.

When he looked up, he saw that Ti-Cass and Max had also sunk to the floor. Ti-Cass was curled up in the “Fur and Feathers” corner of the room, and a large, exotic bird’s feather lay across his forehead, to rather sinister effect. Max was lying with his head against the foot of the bed, his hand rummaging gloomily between his legs. They lifted their gaze towards Benoît at the same time and all three of them burst into helpless laughter at the sight of one another’s sombre expressions.

“Take acid, they said,” Ti-Cass moaned, lying slumped behind the stuffed bird. “You’ll have the time of your life, they said.”

“Trip out, they said,” Max joined in, “you’ll soar like angels on helium, they said...”

“The stuff you’ll see, it’ll have you in stitches, they said...”

“You’ll be on cloud nine, rose-tinted with pink polka-dots, they said...”

“You’ll have twenty-four orgasms in twenty-four seconds, they said...”

They were suddenly shaking with hysterical laughter which left them gasping and threatened never to let up. Benoît was convinced that his guts wouldn't survive the attack. The others were no better off; Ti-Cass hiccupped and drooled in the toucan feathers, and Max kept hitting his head on the foot of the bed, the laughter now an uncontrollable spasm which came and went like a boomerang. With no memory of having stood up, Benoît realised he was on his feet, blissed out, walking in circles around the room, possessed by a total euphoria – a euphoria that he could have spread on a cracker like peanut butter. By now, they were all talking at once, voluble in their good humour, and because they couldn't do otherwise. Their words collided and combined with apparent incoherence, yet all was perfectly clear, and talking now came with its own delicious physical sensation, as did laughing, and breathing.

“The air's like water, you can move right through it, you can gulp it – and look, it even makes waves when you walk! Splish-splash!”

“Yes! It's like flowing with the current, with fifty thousand life-belts underneath you!”

“Look at that! We're swimming in air, we're drifting in time...”

“Splish-splash... the ground! Where's the ground? Where did the ground go?”

A few moments later, and they had reached another level. They were sinking deeper into something totally unfathomable, and out of their control, they felt sure. Benoît leant on the bed and saw that nothing in the room was holding still: the furniture was dancing about on its legs; the feathers had become huge birds crazily flapping their wings; even the unassuming little paper lamp (which had only ever shed a meagre light in the room) was now shooting out deep purple jets of the most surreal beauty. Contain yourselves, Benoît thought, and that was exactly how it seemed: things were no longer contained; they spilled from their outlines, leaked from their edges. It was as if the essence of things, too long constrained within rigid limits, was now seeping out from all places. Perhaps the lamp, after all, had the soul of a firework. Perhaps the footstool, now folding in on itself like a rotting pumpkin, had a soul of black liquid which longed simply to spread out in a puddle on the floor. Now *there* was an interesting thought, he ought to write that one down – and miraculously, the notebook and pen had reappeared on Benoît's lap. Again, he just needed to *hold still* a minute, long enough to concentrate, but it was impossible. Everything around and inside Benoît continued to squirm and writhe. Every scrap of insight which he tried to grasp would splinter into thousands of tiny, fluttering bits, scattered in all directions, like atoms caught in the act of forming matter. His eyes fell back to his lap, and what he saw flooded him with dread. What was left of the blood in his veins turned to ice. Sliding towards Benoît's stomach was a huge

snake with a white head, uncoiling across his thighs, its mouth stretching horribly like a gaping black hole. Benoît screamed, but the sound died on his lips, and all that came out were little peeping sounds like the sighs of a baby. Where were the others? Why were they not running to his rescue? Benoît couldn't take his eyes off the reptile, its scales now shimmering from indigo blue to sickly beige, and suddenly he knew that the thing he was looking at with such terror was his arm, his own arm moving of its own accord, covered by the sleeve of his old, blue sweatshirt – and at the end of it, nothing but his clenched hand, which he hadn't recognised for those interminable seconds (or was it minutes? hours?). He ought to watch out. The drug had infiltrated his system like a thin layer of gas, and he'd really better be careful, because everything he looked at threatened to transform without warning, for better or worse – there was no telling whether he'd be overcome by apocalyptic terror, or else, struck by delicate, shimmering beauty – that depended on him. He looked again at his arm, reassured to know that he still had a razor-sharp awareness of his mental state – *stoned*, he thought – which simply meant that Drama, Hallucination & Co. would be running the show while his real self, intact, looked down from above and watched the spectacle with a delighted smile. There was the snake again, only this time it was a friendly reptile, comically striped with glowing pink lines (*my veins!* Benoît thought, impressed at his own wisdom) and harnessed with a strange dark collar (*my watch!* he realised, smugly). He laughed out loud, and the voices of Max and Ti-Cass joined his own; they had been watching him all along as he crouched in the centre of the room, and now their laughter cascaded like a waterfall.

“Tremblay, you're completely nuts!” Max howled, bent double.

“Tremblay, you're the biggest hallucinator in town!” Ti-Cass gasped, clutching his sides. They were in stitches. Benoît blinked stupidly at them, baffled.

“Who... what's going on...?”

The other two merged into a compact mass which bobbed about gaily in the middle distance. Benoît continued to stare at them until he no longer recognised their voices, their faces, or anything that identified them as his only friends, Max and Ti-Cass. All he saw was a noisy and hostile blob on the other side of the room.

“My God, he looks like a Zouave who shat his pantaloons! He looks like a rabbit in the headlights!”

“He looks like a guy waiting for his arse to grow wings! Yoo-hoo! Tremblay! Open your parachute... come back down to ea-r-rth... Trembla-a-a-a-y...”

They were laughing, hands cupped around their mouths as if calling to someone lost in intergalactic space. It was *probably* a friendly laugh, and it was common enough that two of

them would gang up on the third; Max-Ti-Cass against Benoît, or occasionally Max-Benoît against Ti-Cass (but never, *ever*, Ti-Cass-Benoît against the great-and-untouchable Max), and the third one would join in, laughing a little sheepishly, waiting for the unfair contest to be over with. This time, Benoît saw things a little differently. Or maybe he was just seeing things as they had always been: his two friends were not really his friends, that was all there was to it. With painful precision – most likely due to the extraordinary intuition the drug gave him – the true flaw in the relationship dawned on him. He shot a critical gaze at the two wavy blobs that still hovered a few feet away. On one side was the great-and-untouchable Max, already serenely, brazenly set in his ways like a kind of ayatollah. (And how could you *not* admire Max? He reigned supreme in everything he turned his hand to – school, dating, the lab, the gym – winning gold medals, girls, and A-grades with the same cool nonchalance. And how could you not hate him, for the same reason?) On the other side was the good-natured, devious Ti-Cass, paddling along closely in Max’s wake, grovelling hilariously, never without a cheeky grin. (And how could you not resent someone for whom nothing was ever complicated or upsetting?)

All of this made Benoît feel melancholy, but it was a melancholy that was bearable, almost soft to the touch. He lay down, stretching out fully, the better to appreciate the warmth of this new feeling. He was alone in the world. He would always be alone. Other people would always form a compact mass in front of him. (*I’m a poor lonesome cowboy...* piped up, in Benoît’s head, the incongruous voice of Lucky Luke on horseback. What would it be like to have a horse, as loyal as a collie, on which you could gallop for hours, he wondered? Come to think of it, hadn’t the three of them, he, Max, and Ti-Cass, once hatched the fabulous plan to buy a ranch together, one day in their far-off adulthood? Yes, that had happened, before – way before – he had realised their... their... what was he thinking about again?) His train of thought came to an abrupt halt. Someone had switched the radio on. That must be music, that cloud of little twinkling notes which shivered down the length of his body, from his head to his feet, although he had never heard anything like this. “Heard” didn’t mean a thing in his current state; he didn’t hear the music, he *felt* it taking him over physically, to the very marrow of his bones, while horses with ladies’ heads and kind smiles capered gracefully in front of him on the wall. He also saw buffalo, blue flamingos, camels, and even a pair of snakes who winked conspiratorially at him on their way past, the whole troupe unravelling in a wonderful chaos, along with the music, lit with colours that dazzled like the beginning or the end of the world.

Next he was overcome with intense pleasure, a kind of whole-body arousal, from the black hair on his shins to the very cartilage of his larynx. It was a delirious vertigo of the senses, compared to which the timid spasms of his laborious masturbations were about as significant as a mouse dropping. Whatever he'd had to go through to reach this point, this was desperately worth the effort – yes, he would face down another ten thousand snakes if it meant his body could relive the electric ecstasy of this moment. He knew from their breathless whimpers that Max and Ti-Cass, lying on either side of him, were feeling the same thing. After what seemed a century, he finally got up, and as if in a dream, stepped over the inert bodies of the others. Still guided by the sparkling notes, he wandered over to what must have been the kitchen – despite the total lack of recognisable objects that could have confirmed this. His legs – but were they really his, these two columns which made their way, of their own accord, from one side of the room to the other, deftly clearing the ill-defined obstacles in his path? – by themselves, his legs avoided the giant frog and the enormous lemurs which crawled towards him, and brought him safe and sound to the window, where he leant on the sill, relieved. It was very important not to look *directly* at things, he told himself firmly, but instead to glance quickly at them, screwing up your eyes, if you didn't want things to morph into bizarre forms. For instance, he knew perfectly well that the giant frog and the lemurs were nothing but the humble little wooden footstools trying to give him a fright. By moving his head and his eyes quickly from side to side, he was able to achieve a more or less normal view of his immediate surroundings. The music was coming from outside the window, where the clear night sky blanketed the rooves of the houses, the deserted *terrasses*, and the spiral staircases. What time could it be? There was no one outside, except an old man rocking himself gently on the balcony directly opposite the window where Benoît stood. How long now had they been in this room, doing nothing but tripping out? Were they behaving normally enough that the neighbours wouldn't complain to Luc later? It came as a surprise to Benoît that he should wonder about such reasonable things while in this dreamlike state, and all the while, he couldn't get rid of the blurry sensation of seeing double, even triple, as if through an out-of-focus lens.

The music was coming from the old man's balcony. It was strange that in the city and at this time of night (what time *was* it?), someone would be listening to the radio at full volume (what radio, though? He couldn't *see* any radio on the balcony...). The old man, in a sleeveless vest, his face rosy and smiling beneath his mop of white hair, rocked back and forth in his seat in time with the music. On closer inspection, he wasn't sitting in a rocking chair, or any kind of chair for that matter – he was simple rocking on his legs, *like a true*

music enthusiast, Benoît thought rather stupidly, starting to see the peculiarity of the situation. The old man himself was odd enough, sitting out on his balcony in the dead of night, bobbing quietly along to some kind of wild ghost-music, wearing only a vest – it was already October, Benoît remembered with a certain detachment, and weren't the nights already terribly cold? But the strangest thing of all was just how clearly Benoît was able to perceive the whole scene: the wrought-iron balcony with its worn-down fretwork, the crinkled face of the smiling old man, the harmonious weaving of his old, spry body, and even the veins in the leaves (were they tobacco?) that he ground up in his half-open hands.

The music came to an abrupt stop. The old man ceased his rocking and calmly looked straight through the window at Benoît, who felt his gaze like a punch in the face – it was neither benevolent nor harsh, simply charged with an intensity beyond mere emotions – and he backed away, right across to the other side of the room, frightened, aware that he'd crossed a boundary into a state now bordering on madness.

"I want to come down, can I come back down now?" croaked Ti-Cass somewhere off to Benoît's side. Looking over, all Benoît could see at first was a bundle of clothing barely a metre from his elbow, before he spotted Ti-Cass himself, who seemed to have shrunk down inside his own body, his teeth chattering furiously.

"Oh Jesus, oh fuck... I want to come back down, mummy, oh *baptême*... mummy..."

Benoît tried and failed twice before he managed successfully to grab Ti-Cass' arm, which felt like gelatine, his fingers seeming to sink right in. He shook it as hard as he could, calling out in a curious falsetto quite unlike his own voice:

"Everything's fine, everything's great, *relax*, it's a voyage, you're just going on a voyage, that's all, a voyage, a voyage..."

Benoît continued to repeat the word "voyage" with an inexplicable insistence, until it sounded hollow and discordant, ringing out again and again like metal striking crystal. And yet still he repeated the word again and again, not taking his eyes off Max who was lying almost at his feet, eyes rolling back, breath shallow, probably fighting his own interior demons.

"We're on a wonderful voyage, just a voyage, voyage, voyage..."

Benoît made a superhuman effort and stifled the shrill voice shooting from his mouth against his will. Suddenly Max sat bolt upright, raising his large hand like a visionary.

"The wall!" he murmured, weakly.

The only bare wall in the room, directly opposite them, was made of pale wood, dusty beige and dotted with clove-like knots. And, look at that, the wall was hurtling towards them,

the entire stretch of wood about to collapse in on them like a loosened tent canvas. Benoît had the childish urge to duck his head, to lessen the impact – though of course, it wouldn't save him from being smashed to a pulp.

The impact didn't come. The wall fell on them at a colossal speed and they were swallowed into the wood, mixed up with the cloves and the dusty surface, part of the wall now, just like the timber grain, the boards, and the little round knots. Meanwhile, all around them, the dry surface was becoming a landscape, a huge desert plain with the three of them in the middle, awkward and swaying where they stood, dazzled by the bright light. They started to walk. They walked on the sandy ground that stretched away in every direction, as far as the eye could see, and they had a precise destination, they were heading for something far away, huffing and puffing as they walked. It was bizarre and exhilarating, like moving in a dream while fully awake. Benoît inched forwards at a snail's pace, though faster than the others nonetheless. He sensed his bending legs, his feet placed down one in front of the other, his mechanical walking motion. He also saw himself from the back – he saw their three pathetic silhouettes etched on the immense, fluid horizon – as if part of himself was left behind, a watchful, indifferent witness.

This part of him noticed every detail with a certain objectivity; he watched like an entomologist as their three figures progressed in an endless zig-zag across the bleached landscape. He calmly observed that there was something different in their general appearance. Their clothes were just the same as in “real” life – their creased trousers, Benoît's dark blue sweater, Max's loose white shirt, and Ti-Cass' striped hoody. No, it was something else – they were lit with a kind of radiating glow which made them almost transparent, carriers of a bright substance which Benoît knew positively to be the *self* of each one of them, their true essence, illuminated like stained glass.

Under Benoît's curious gaze, the luminous substance became more defined and began to split into different zones: some white, some coloured, some striped with shadows, and they all seemed to carry a particular significance (but what? *what?*). Each of them carried a glow, a kind of will-o'-the-wisp, and now Benoît noticed that each one was different – Max's in particular had two separate parts, a small, very bright centre, and a grey belt surrounding it like a storm-cloud. Benoît was so struck that he wanted to turn towards Max for a closer look, but he wasn't able to; he had only a vague awareness of the others' physical presence, breathing heavily on either side of him. He saw that their eyes were locked obsessively on a fixed point somewhere ahead. Max murmured something sleepily, then repeated, louder this time, in the same lethargic tone:

“Tired... I’m tired...”

“What?” Benoît suddenly heard himself muttering. “What?”

“Too far... it’s too far... never gonna get there, never... too tired...” Max’s voice was heavy with sadness, now. He sighed deeply and said nothing more.

The three of them struggled onward, their bobbing lights merging and criss-crossing in the distance, as they made their slow way towards who knew what fateful destination. Max’s light trailed behind, its shadowy belt seeming to weigh him down as he walked. Benoît’s observant and rational self knew that this was no less real than his own dark blue sweater, than Luc’s bedroom, than the musty smell that hung there like incense – that the three of them had crossed over into a parallel reality which, *somewhere*, actually existed, outside and in spite of the blindness of their everyday lives.

Max began to yell – the physical, flesh-and-blood Max sitting in the room – which cut short the vision of the plain and their three glowing silhouettes. The wall became once again what it really was (or what it *also* was?), a wooden-planked surface scattered with knots. (This searing fragment, which Benoît would otherwise have forgotten, came back to him from the depths when, in February of the following year, Max died brutally in a hockey accident; Benoît understood with a jolt that what they’d seen was Max’s Death in the making, gathering like a cloud, eating away at his light – after which he suffered an insomnia worse even than Marcel’s...)

Max hadn’t stopped yelling. The room was almost back to its familiar shape; a couple of objects still jumped and shapeshifted when observed too closely, but that was all. Ti-Cass was sitting on the edge of the bed, teeth chattering, his hands over his ears, in the early stages of a panic attack. Max, meanwhile, stood upright in the centre of the room, yelling like a maniac, deaf to anything other than his personal nightmare. For a moment, Benoît didn’t know what to do for the best. His efforts of persuasion and his calls for calm were an utter failure. Turning in hopeless circles like a dog on a lead, his eyes fell on the kitchen window, through which the opposite balcony was visible. The old man in the vest was still there, just where he had been, from time immemorial. It was getting light, now, the dawn pale and chill. The old man had some sort of musical instrument in his mouth, which he must have been working silently, since no sound was reaching Benoît. The old man held up the instrument with a knowing look. (Later, Benoît would swear on his mother’s life that this episode – the old man and the balcony – was just another hallucination; that it wasn’t, that it *couldn’t be* real...)

So it was that Benoît, without really knowing why or how, took hold of the big flute that belonged to Luc, and began to play. The sounds it made were like the cries of a sparrowhawk and the rustling of leaves. He played for a long time, until eventually Max and Ti-Cass fell asleep, their faces blank, their muscles limp. And the smoky shadow of madness drifting above them finally thinned and disappeared like mist.

When they went back down onto rue Saint-Jean, still shaking off the last remnants of the drug, they had no idea that two whole days had passed – and that Ti-Cass’ father had called the police to search for them. It was a warm and fragrant evening, a final rosy burst of Indian summer, before they’d be shivering once more under the reign of eternal winter. Max, Ti-Cass and Benoît strode along the pavement, three abreast, shoulder to shoulder, bumping shamelessly into anyone who didn’t get out of their way. The hilarity from the beginning had returned – and something more, a brotherly kind of solidarity – and they elbowed each other hard in the ribs, for the simple joy of physical contact. The countless pedestrians pointed at things in the shop windows, trailing from one to the next, “like a herd of cows on their way to the Cross,” Max pointed out eloquently, and they revelled in how different they themselves were from everyone else, in their superiority over the poor crowds of dimwits who knew only banality. Was life even worth living without knowledge of the magical side of things, being always content with the miserable first degree of perception? The answer was no. At that very moment, the houses breathed out a perfume of musk and Canada goose, the wind was the colour of heather, the setting sun sang a triumphant oratorio that they heard through their toes, everything had a meaning and an incredible beauty, and no one knew it but them.

As they passed the window of Bar Chantauteuil, they spotted Luc sitting at a table with a group of his friends – old guys in their thirties, clutching their beers and caught up in a conversation of mysterious importance. Benoît stopped for a moment, and Max and Ti-Cass stopped too – not an insignificant detail, and one which brought to Benoît’s attention the new status of leader which had just been conferred on him...

“We’ll meet back here,” he decided on an impulse. “Same day, same time, ten years from now. Ten. Cross your heart, hope to die. Agreed?”

The other two nodded gravely. They were just kidding around, of course, they would never actually meet back there, the future was so incredibly far off – and Max would never reach thirty, not even twenty – but how could they have known that then? The evening was so beautiful, their happiness was so real, that Benoît started to dance right there in the street, to applause and hoots of laughter from the others.

(Later, Luc would tell Benoît some truly troubling things about the opposite neighbour's balcony, which didn't exist; about the old neighbour, who was a woman; and about the flute that he had bought in Tijuana years before, from an eccentric old Indian – half medicine man, half musician – who was always dressed in an old sleeveless vest, and who rocked back and forth in the moonlight to call on the spirits. Benoît, white as a sheet, refused to answer a single question from Luc.) But that was later. For now, Benoît was dancing, dancing in the street, caught up in the warm night and the hopeful energy. Everything would come at its proper time – love, happiness, eternity – his exquisite destiny lay just around the corner. And how could he not believe it? The future was a gorgeous, blue-satin ribbon, which had only to be pulled and everything would fall into place.

Cold Blood, Warm Heart

I might as well tell you this straight off: love stories really aren't my thing, and only very occasionally do they tickle my tear-ducts. I'm talking about other people's love stories, obviously, the kind that romance writers like Guy de Cars insisted on hashing out until Cupid himself, sick to his stomach, decided one day to shoot him with arrows just to shut him up; the kind of love stories that roll out thick and gooey on our TV and cinema screens, to sweeten our evenings with granulated dreams. Love stories are a personal thing, if you want my opinion. You either have one or you don't, and if you don't, then life is quite nauseating enough without some syrup-dripping sadist coming along to warble their own in your ears. But if you do have one, well then, that's something else entirely – suddenly you know the immense weight and fragility of love; you know that there simply aren't words to describe the dizzying whirlwinds that sweep you to vertiginous heights, and if that's where you are, you couldn't care less about other people's stories, given that you yourself are drifting blissfully through the interstellar regions – which might be the only reality that matters, when all is said and done. Whatever. I'm still going to tell you the love story of Françoise and Benoît, because you are hopeless romantics – I see it clearly from your eyes that glisten with emotion as soon as you spot a pair of insignificant, attractive young people getting started on the tonsil hockey. I'm well aware that the heart, thinly sliced and dressed in whatever abominable sauce you can think of, is the one dish you can never resist, you bunch of sentimental cannibals. So, I'll tell the story – and for all kinds of other reasons, too, that don't concern you in the slightest.

Let's be clear, though – it's a very ordinary story, scant on dramatic plot twists. Our heroes are heroic only in name. There is no hint of fatal leukaemia, nor the slightest cerebral lesion threatening either of the protagonists; they're normal, ordinary people, as healthy as they can be, given their abuse of alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and all kinds of lipids, in which they can't help but indulge, just to squeeze a little enjoyment from existence. Consider yourselves warned, then. And don't come crying to me if the ending isn't rare enough for your taste.

There exists among the young, modern intelligentsia a whole clique of perverse souls; perfectionists who complicate their lives enormously in the name of Independence. But I'll come back to that. For now, I'll just say that Françoise and Benoît were of this group when

they met for the first time in a bar on rue Saint-Jean, which will remain nameless, unless of course the owner agrees to let me drink there for free, for the next week at least.

It was an ordinary, quiet Monday night in winter. Françoise entered the bar accompanied by a friend whose glum look verged on the suicidal. Françoise's somnambulant steps led her – whether by chance or by design – to a table at the very back of the room, right beside the bench where Benoît sat quietly reading. Next to Benoît, an ill-defined creature was slumped, wrecked with drink; the kind of peaceful old tramp often to be found in bars, and who sometimes turn out to be mathematics professors or erstwhile Nobel Peace Prize laureates. Françoise sat down without lifting her gaze, the friend flopped down next to her with a melodramatic sigh, Benoît didn't stir from his book, and the tramp mumbled a few unintelligible words. Time passed.

The friend – let's call her Marie, she's no more than a passing figure in our story anyway – had been reeling off a whole monotonous string of worries to Françoise, about life, love, death, and all such profound things, for quite some time – or so it would seem, at least, from Françoise's weary silence. Suddenly, the tramp let out an alarming, guttural wail. All eyes turned towards him, including those of the small group of people a few tables away, the only other customers in the bar. The inebriated septuagenarian had not died prosaically of a heart attack. On the contrary, his cheeks had suddenly flushed a violent red, and he pointed, aghast and still gurgling painfully, at the walls of the bar. "Dreadful!" he gasped, finally. "Dreadful... horrible!"

All eyes turned with curiosity from the tramp to the cause of his outburst: the walls of the bar. There was nothing immediately striking about these walls, apart, perhaps, from the canvases – paintings by a local artist – with which they were hung. Granted, the artist in question had gleefully daubed the canvas in a jarringly skewed fashion; but given the permissive and culturally mediocre age we live in, who can really claim to know the beautiful from the ugly? Alright then. The tramp, though, not only strongly disapproved of the artwork, he was dead against it. The little group at the nearby table, rather irritated by this, plunged back into their intimate discussion; Benoît chuckled approvingly at the tramp; Françoise contemplated the offending paintings with some amusement; Marie-the-friend attempted to pick up her depressive monologue where she had left off; in short, order seemed to have resumed. The old man saw things rather differently: getting to his feet, he began to hurl

furious invectives in the direction of the paintings, threatening to rip them to shreds if they were not immediately removed from his sight.

“Total rubbish! Dizzgraceful... ‘orrible... dizzguzzting... makes me sick!” he yelled.

And so on. As it happened, the small group a few tables away included a few of the artist’s friends, who were beginning to tire of the joke. A big bearded fellow got up, almost knocking his chair flying, and brandished his fist in the tramp’s direction.

“If that old geezer don’t shut ‘is mouth, I’ll smash ‘is face in...”

But the old geezer was thrilled – encouraged, it would seem, by the opposition – and only bellowed louder, with ever more eloquent vocabulary. Beardy moved aggressively towards him.

Benoît was next to get to his feet, calmly laying his book down on the table.

“I agree – they’re definitely ugly,” he said in a neutral tone. “Actually, I’d say they’re hideous, repulsive, excremental.”

And that’s when fur began to fly. The artist’s mates pushed over the table in front of them, Benoît and Beardy pounded each other mechanically while the distraught waiter tried to break them up, and the tramp, sniggering, took it upon himself to remove the paintings from the walls.

Suddenly a firm, clear voice rang out over the fray, with the odd effect of stopping all of them in their tracks.

“Monsieur Riopelle! Come on, now! Monsieur Riopelle – sit down.”

Françoise took the tramp gently by the arm, and, with a firm yet respectful grip, made him leave the canvases in place, then steered him to sit heavily down on the bench.

“Calm down, Monsieur Riopelle. We’ve got to give budding artists a chance... isn’t that right now, Monsieur Riopelle?”

After a gaping silence, the artist’s pals, who had been frozen to the spot, went slowly back to their table and sat down, and it’s here, finally, that my story really begins – or rather, the story of Françoise and Benoît.

Given that you weren’t born yesterday, you’ll have figured out that the tramp was no famous artist, and his name was *not* Monsieur Riopelle, any more than mine is Simone de Beauvoir. Françoise and Benoît found themselves at the same table, both bent double – albeit discreetly – in fits of hysterical laughter. Marie-the-friend eventually left, the group at the other table gradually thinned out, and the old tramp – who was nothing less than a

professional boozier – sank into a comatose slumber. Meanwhile, Françoise and Benoît couldn't stop talking, laughing, feeling some spiritual connection; and so it was that Françoise's hand strayed, as if inadvertently, to Benoît's thigh; and so it was that they saw in one another's eyes a glimmering light, which after some time rendered them silent; and so it was that not long afterwards, they found themselves in Françoise's double bed, in a fusion and confusion of limbs, laughing, still laughing, the very pores of their skin ablaze.

Make no mistake, such nocturnal liaisons were not an unusual occurrence for Françoise, nor for Benoît. They were both happily verging on thirty, both of them quite accustomed to light, bubbly flings that could be gulped down like champagne and were over in a matter of hours; likewise, to sudden forces of passion which led them, perforce, to the beds of silky-voiced strangers they'd met in some smoky bar.

Sometimes, those flings had happy sequels. One-night-stands might become regular lovers, at least for a time, before the relation was shed with a kind of affectionate complicity, rarely encumbering them further.

Other times, the affair would end in disaster. They'd wake up the next morning with an indefinable angst, close to disgust, shocked once again to be in bed with an insipid stranger who couldn't even hold a decent conversation – but who, in a boozy haze the night before, had been nothing short of dazzling.

Back, then, to the case in hand. The whole thing had gone like clockwork, from the moment that Françoise and Benoît first spoke, to the next morning when they went their separate ways. They hadn't had much sleep though – it was as if their bodies, in being discovered, in being touched, were set ablaze with a fire that couldn't be put out, and then of course there was the exhausting hilarity which shook them the whole night through. In the morning they awoke, hungry, and dragged themselves out of bed – bodies stiff, eyes shadowed, in excellent humour all the same – and continued where they had left off, with mischievous glances, confessions, and outbursts of laughter. The omelette was good, Benoît turned out to make decent coffee (oh, happy surprise), and Françoise didn't turn out to be a fanatic for lentils, raw sugar, and natural products (oh, joy). In short, it was in a state of delight that they said their goodbyes at Françoise's front door, repeating to one another just what a great evening it had been, and this, and that, and one last little hug, and one final wink, and stifled giggles, and a nonchalant “Yep, see you soon” – and that was it, for the beginning.

For the rest of the week, Françoise threw herself into her usual commitments with an excess of feverish energy, which, at the time, didn't ring any alarm bells. Françoise's "usual commitments," it has to be said, would have been enough to exhaust the combined energies of half a dozen people less dynamic than she. Françoise was a born militant, kept awake at night by the pecuniary worries of Monsieur Philémon Tremblay, 3rd Avenue, unemployed (and one-armed, asbestos-poisoned, and tubercular to boot) and the tribulations of Madame Roberte Roberge, tenant of rue de Couillard (grappling with rent increases directly proportional to the "king sized" cockroaches in her apartment). Thus, Françoise could be found at any local meeting with the mission to improve the fate of humankind in general, and the quality of life of her neighbours, in particular.

Benoît was far from inactive himself in the days which followed, but in his own way – inward-looking, reflective – which often took on the rather blank appearance of a daydream. He taught at the Université Laval, in the literature department to be precise, although what he actually did bore a closer resemblance to revolutionary sociology than to literary studies. There was a kind of power, both serene and spontaneous, in the most unassuming of his lectures ("Why don't the poor like to read?"; "Is feminist literature really literature of the Left?"; "Who profits from the book industry?") which tended to ignite impassioned debates among his students. Sometimes, to his great surprise, these even escalated into noisy demonstrations outside the university, and provocative manifestoes would circulate, claiming to have his approval.

All things considered, the week passed as normal, or relatively so: it was only around Friday evening that Françoise noticed a feeling of bitter indifference concerning Monsieur Philémon Tremblay's money woes and Madame Roberte Roberge's bugs, and she began suddenly to think about Benoît and about their night together. This led her to realise that she had been thinking about him all the time, insidiously, despite the various tasks which had consumed her attention, and this, well, this wasn't normal for a little end-of-the-night-fling-that-was-really-nothing. She was surprised and amused to find herself contemplating her phone, which did not ring – or not how she wanted it to, if you see what I mean – and feeling vaguely depressed, wondering if he would call, telling herself that he wouldn't, and remembering his velvet-soft hands, and the cute dimple in his chin, and thinking that maybe she should go back to that bar, just, you know, in case, then convincing herself that no, he surely had a wife and five kids – which is always the way when you meet an interesting man.

Since it had been tacitly implied that there would be no future dates or formal engagements, and since he himself did not dare raise the subject, out of pride or God knows what inadmissible feeling, Benoît, midway through his lesson plans, began to hatch a complex strategy to see Françoise again while making it look like total chance. There was the telephone, of course – and he had indeed kept Françoise’s number, also by total chance, obviously – but he worried that this primitive method might be disagreeable to someone who appeared to skim deftly over such finicky questions of practicality. Never mind, the possibility remained – among those total-chance methods – of the coincidental meeting. Benoît had glanced in a number of times at the bar on rue Saint-Jean (which I won’t name unless the owner etc. etc.), and he hadn’t seen Françoise (since she wasn’t there, she was at home, waiting by her telephone). And he needed no further proof that she wasn’t interested in seeing him again, she who was so beautiful, so free, so untethered-by-finicky-questions-of-practicality, and already overwhelmed, surely, by the attentions of a dozen other men more interesting than he.

So. A pair of idiots, I’ll give you that – but be patient, because the worst is yet to come.

There’s a limit to everything, however, to the darkest misfortune as well as the stupidest nonsense, and so it was that they bumped into each other in the newsagent near where Françoise lived, and where Benoît – oddly enough – had been coming to buy his paper for the last fortnight. They greeted each other immediately, of course – but without a kiss, since both were seized by a stupefied and all-consuming emotion that made them babble absurdly about the snow that would or wouldn’t fall, and the weather they’d been having, and the forecast for next week. Still, they managed to arrange to meet the same evening, albeit with a casualness that rang false: “If you’ve nothing else planned, of course...” They met, then, at Françoise or Benoît’s house, it doesn’t matter, and that was it – the brutal, decisive bolt from the blue which caught them off-guard and threw them together with the force of molten lava. They saw each other again the next day, and the day after, and the day after that, and every evening afterwards for weeks and weeks, with the same electrified passion, in the same perfect delirium.

Here, perhaps, it’s worth coming back to the subject of Independence with a capital I – don’t worry, my lambs, I haven’t forgotten you – which is the pretext for so many sacrifices, especially when it takes on the strictness of a virtue.

Both Françoise and Benoît liked to think of themselves (off the record, of course, since there was some modesty in their social convictions) as belonging to a certain advanced, mature class of individuals entirely dedicated to the search for, and freedom of, the self, having learned to be totally self-sufficient (a rough definition of Independence, if the Petit Robert will forgive me). Consequently, their ideas about love were somewhat breezy – somewhat different to those of Jean Paul II, let's say – being instead critical of unhealthy possessiveness and the systematic lumping together of couples. But as we all know, it's one thing to hold sincerely to our theories, and quite another to put them into practice.

At first, euphoria came naturally. They had only to let themselves be carried along by this powerful groundswell, which they'd long ago stopped believing in (or so they'd thought), but which now left them brimming and breathless.

Every day, as dusk was starting to fall, Françoise would go and meet Benoît at the University; or she would wait for him in a café, feigning nonchalance; or she would throw herself bodily into concocting an enormous meal for the two of them, knowing that she'd take no more than a few bites, because being in love paralysed her stomach and her appetite as surely as nausea. Every day, Benoît became impatient knowing that he'd have to wait until evening to see Françoise's enigmatic smile, and he never tired of seizing her ravenously in his arms, in a violent embrace; of feeling her tremble against him with desire; of murmuring in her ear sweet nothings of the most earth-shattering kind – and both of them would be left staring, speechless, and reeling.

Until... well. Until they noticed, with a shock, the undeniable spanner in the well-oiled workings of their lives. They became more and more suspicious of this new sense of calm and security in which they found themselves plunged up to their necks – and they began to lose their nerve. Françoise, always an eloquent proponent of creative independence and the sanctity of solitude, was horrified to realise that she *needed* Benoît: guilty as charged, she met him at the end of each day with unequivocal eagerness and delight, and at any given time, she'd find him perched comfortably among her thoughts, even when she'd considered herself sheltered by the company of ill-treated tenants and the unfortunate unemployed... didn't this prove that she was sacrificing herself to that feminine regression, sliding into the age-old position of the nearly-wed, devoured by the Other?

Benoît, meanwhile, surprised himself by reacting violently to a light-hearted joke from a student who had caught him with Françoise. He had the sudden and uncomfortable impression that his image was betraying him, that little by little he had lost control of his own emotions, and that he was playing the role of star-crossed lover in a melodramatic set-piece which, in reality, neither he nor his libertarian principles could agree with. He began to doubt the authenticity of this all-consuming feeling which he inexplicably held for Françoise. It seemed to him unhealthy, soppy, restrictive, blandly conformist. The evidence was staring him in the face: he had begun the slippery descent into middle-class bliss.

And so it was Benoît who, with virile audacity, dealt the first blow. He took his phone off the hook and played dead for several days. Françoise, worried and saddened by this sudden silence, eventually ran into him one evening by chance as she wandered the Latin quarter, depressed. She spotted him through the window of a café, and went inside without a second thought, crossing over to his table. He greeted her with great warmth and affection, as if there were nothing wrong, enquiring about her health and about the well-being of Monsieur Philémon Tremblay, unemployed, and launching into a meandering peroration about the latest Altman movie which he'd just seen at the Cartier with Manon or Sandra or Marie, who happened to be beside him now, and on whose thigh his hand was – almost distractedly – resting. Françoise played along, as if there were nothing wrong, grinned cheerfully at Manon or Sandra or Marie, and weighed in on the discussion of Altman's style (so singularly charming, so unexpectedly American) after which she got to her feet, kissed Benoît on both cheeks with excessive politeness, beamed once again at Manon or Sandra or Marie, and left the café, shattered. Her legs trembled. Her stomach churned. She had an overwhelming desire to throw up, or to scream. She dragged herself back home, giving herself the sternest of tellings-off, refusing to let it hurt, kicking herself inwardly. Really, it was nothing to get worked up over, it had just been a casual thing, which, like a pre-pubescent teen, she'd exaggerated rather – that was all. Françoise was almost relieved, despite the terrible pain that was welling up in her stomach, since now she could continue to believe without a doubt in her mind that there was no such thing as love. She lay down on her bed, switched on the television, strictly forbade herself from crying, and ended up falling into a dreamless sleep, just as if there were nothing wrong... stoicism being a virtue most crucial for Independence.

Yet, first thing the next morning, Françoise's telephone rang, and who should it be but Benoît, all sweetness. What he didn't tell her was that he had been up half the night, wracked

by a secret and stubborn terror: what if his inexplicable behaviour had wounded Françoise to her very core; what if she refused point blank to see him again? But no. Françoise answered in her usual voice, warm and kind as ever, and told him that she was doing fine, and yes, they could see each other that evening. And when they met, miraculously, it was as if nothing were wrong. The spark and the passion were there, as always, and the two of them laughed like two old accomplices and held each other tightly. Françoise asked no questions, Benoît made no confessions. Tacitly, they said nothing of what had – perhaps – happened the night before, and any number of nights before that.

From that moment on, the precedent was set. Benoît convinced himself that he had been right to bring some fresh air into the relationship – not only did Françoise not seem to be upset by it, she even seemed to embrace the change with unflappable good grace – perhaps she, too, had wished for it, deep down. And so Benoît's dates multiplied, with Manon or Sandra or Marie, followed by more with Sylvie, Laura, and Julie. He banished the word “guilt” from his vocabulary and from his everyday life. In order to carry on as if nothing were wrong, Françoise persuaded herself that hers was a truly healthy, normal, in some ways privileged situation – wasn't it far too easy for traditional couples to give in to possessiveness, to neurotic jealousy? – and that her relationship with Benoît was turning out to be entirely satisfying, and gave her exactly what she needed. Didn't they see each other at least twice a week? And wasn't every time just as extraordinary, just as passionate as the last? What more could anyone ask for? Granted, she hadn't had the chance to shake off the last vestiges of a culture of romance; its decadent remains were surely the sole cause of the painful jolt, the sharp, inexplicable anguish she felt every time she came across Benoît exchanging familiar gestures of affection with another girl. She likewise decided that a little epidermal recreation would probably do her a world of good, and, decisively, she went back out on the pull – having been something of an expert in this department before she'd met Benoît. And so it was Benoît's turn to feel an icy wave welling up inside him when Françoise's enigmatic smile shone on someone else, or when he spotted her sensual hand casually stroking someone else's leg. But such were the rules of the game, now, and there was nothing he could do but maintain, for better or worse, his pretence of casual swagger, nervously gulp the rest of his beer, and cast around for a woman he could go home with, so he wouldn't be left out.

And then one evening, Françoise was sitting with a friend – you know what, let's call her Marie – in the very bar where we first encountered them, expounding on the many perks and

benefits of her relationship with Benoît, when who should walk in unannounced but Benoît himself. Noticing Françoise, he gave her a knowing wink from across the room. He proceeded to sit down at a table with a pretty blonde woman – another one, it might be said – whom he must have known fairly well, given the spirited conversation he began with her, punctuated with furtive touches and little meaningless kisses, meaningless, Françoise repeated to herself, immediately recognising the vague cramp which now tightened in her stomach... nevertheless she went on feverishly talking about loyalty, yes, the kind of interior, visceral loyalty which she and Benoît shared, even if, from the outside, it would appear that, er, even if... and then, suddenly, she stopped. She trailed off mid-sentence, just like that, without warning, and apparently lost all interest in the conversation, falling instead into a strange reverie from which Marie-the-friend was unable to shake her. When the pretty blonde got up to go to the bathroom – or to hell, same difference – Françoise slipped into the seat next to Benoît and told him, in a small, strangled voice, without leaving him time to kiss her on the cheek or even to smile, that she had just discovered that she wasn't cut out for the big contest of playing it cool, and that she gave up. She quit. She was tired of the stomach aches, she was exhausted from lying to herself. Benoît did not reply. She gave him a final, decisive *bonsoir*, sounding very much like a goodbye, and there she was, already outside, robed in an Olympian calm, Marie-the-friend following in her wake.

We next come across the two women much later on, in another bar, of course, spinning out the eternal reel of feminine woes – he was never capable of love, I should have known, and to think I invested in this relationship, God women are crazy to love like they do – so much, and for nothing – waiter, five more beers, five more beers to forget the harshness of life and the weakness of men... Françoise was adrift in a lyrical drunkenness, she had found her own self again, even if she had lost Benoît, at least the pain was honest, it didn't deceive, and it was easier to quell this way, to cauterise... starting this very evening with the doe-eyed chancer loitering near her table, whom she decided remorselessly to pick up, in the interest of libido, only of libido, and to bring a little warmth to the left-hand side of her bed now that the nights were getting so chilly...

When she eventually made it back home, arm in arm with the stranger (who with a bit of luck might just turn out to be a good lover), who should she find, haggard and shivering on the front step, but Benoît, his eyes shining with what looked like tears. He told her that he loved her – what else! – and that he didn't want to lose her. The truth in his voice was

unmistakable. And all this, on the steps of the shabby apartment, in the half-light just before dawn, with the anonymous stranger standing about like a useless hat-stand before eventually deciding to shove off since no one was paying him any attention.

There you are, my darlings, I've brought you all the way to the epilogue. But the ending, the real ending – where is it? What is it? (What's its name, what's its game?) – I hear you ask, fixing me with your unsated pterodactyl gaze. You're about as subtle as your new-wave neon. Alright. Françoise and Benoît might have got married. I mean, why not? It still happens you know, it's making a comeback, and in the past few years, has had a surprising resurgence among the under-twenty-fives. Don't count on it, though, my little chickadees. I have already pointed out to you that Françoise and Benoît were intelligent young people, well-versed in the facts of life, the first of which is this: that matrimonial arts – inevitably, and in all cases – evolve into martial arts. *Fine*, you'll sigh, like a platypus ruffled the wrong way. Married or not, children or none, Françoise and Benoît might have had a long, happy future, long-long-long as eternity. Well, sure. To tell you the truth, I'd like for that to have happened, too. But that's not how it is in real life, when the happy ending isn't written into the script or published by Harlequin. I'll tell you, then, what happened to Françoise and Benoît: after the twisting, treacherous beginnings we saw, they finally managed to establish a balance – a rare and precious thing – between independence and the demands of a loving relationship. They had the privilege of a deep, close, and passionate love, which lasted three whole years. Or five. Or eight. And then one day, they came to the mutual agreement to separate, because it was time, because it would only be damaging to try to resuscitate what was dying between them, and because it doesn't last forever, alas. They wanted the best, and they refused to pretend. I'm not saying they burned all their bridges – certainly not. When you reach that level of intense, almost total communion with another person – a rare and precious thing – when you've lived a real love story, you never truly leave it behind, not completely. There is a little roped-off section of the heart which will nobody else can fill.

Put it this way: last year, on the anniversary of their first meeting, Françoise received a big rectangular package, by express delivery, from Benoît. She was at home with some friends and a casual lover – let's call him Max, or Pierre, or Victor-Hippolyte – when she opened the package. It was a reproduction of a painting – a bizarre, moustached owl, stuck like a gremlin in the middle of a confused landscape. At first, Françoise started to laugh, immediately recognising the Riopelle. Then she began to sob, if you want to know, to cry like a fountain,

to weep like Mary Magdalene. She wept until her insides were ready to burst. She wept inconsolably, unceasingly, so much that we probably ought to have called on Benoît, to come to our rescue and calm her down a little.

This is why we have alcohol, and weed, and rose-tinted love stories. This is why I told you about Françoise and Benoît, and why I am now off to knock back a couple of glasses of the cheap stuff. There are certain indigestible truths, the kind that have to be swallowed by the teaspoon, drop by drop, so as not to turn your stomach. Such as this one, for example.

Life. When you're strong, you know it's a path that you travel alone – even when there's love, and even when there are people standing along the road, catching hold of your heart as you pass. You have to keep going, keep going to the end, reach out and touch the little light that shines only for you, go and take hold of your own light, every one of us our own light, at the end at the end of the road.

The Lobster

“Are you *mad*? What d’you expect me to do with those? How d’you even eat them?”

As always, Laura’s first words were recriminations. It has to be said that the creatures were no less threatening for being quite dead: amongst the tangle of legs, claws, and feelers which now filled the sink, you could make out here and there the glimmer of a small, black, malevolent eye – more alive than the others, you’d swear – peeking at you with belligerent hate. Marceau had stopped twice on his way home, hearing the wind flap against the big plastic bag, worriedly checking to make sure that the contents weren’t still wriggling, and that his hand wasn’t about to be sliced clean off by a claw.

“You eat them just like that, with butter.”

“With butter?”

“Yes, with butter, with butter, for crying out loud!”

The strained voice of Marie, trying to dissuade the children from stabbing each other with forks, came from the room next door. Meanwhile, apron in hand, Laura was impatient – too despairing to be really angry.

“Butter, my foot, I’m not about to stand here and spread butter on these bloody great carcasses of yours. What am I to do now? We haven’t even got butter, all we’ve got is margarine...”

“That’ll do just fine.”

They were walking ahead of him. Marceau had simply raised his head, and had been immediately drawn to the subtle magnetism of their presence; it wasn’t just their furs (so silken that they seemed to ripple all by themselves, marbled with snowflakes like crystalline stars); it was in their very step, a kind of victorious advance, the animal joy of treading the earth. The woman turned her small, round head towards her companion; he gently squeezed her arm; their every movement betrayed the closeness of an almost priest-like complicity. “*Artists*” off Radio-Canada, no doubt, Marceau had thought at first, but as he looked more closely – staring with a kind of admiring abandon – he decided that couldn’t be true, they were too beautiful, too real. A thousand possible lives seemed to dance in their eyes, in their dazzling smiles. Besides, the man didn’t *look* like a poofter, that was for sure. And when they disappeared inside a shop, Marceau couldn’t resign himself to losing them so abruptly, so he stayed right where he was, in front of the window of the fishmonger, wriggling his toes inside his poor-quality boots to keep the biting cold at bay.

Pierre, aka “Pete,” was doing his best Smart Alec, nut-cracker in one hand and fork in the other, with a pretence of dexterity which irritated Marceau to high heaven.

“See that, Gramps, you take your *lobster* like this, and you...”

“Enough with the advice already! And they’re not called *lobsters*, that’s English – they’re *homards!*”

Once they’d gotten over their initial shock, Ralph and Nancy had found a wonderful use for the crustacean’s claws and, under the table, took violent stabs at one another’s shins.

“That’s for eating, not for fighting with...” Marie said wearily, her eyes glazed. But even she was forgetting to dip the pieces of lobster in the melted margarine, and she was struggling to hide her repulsion.

Pete, as always, was talking: about the cold that had wrecked the doors so they wouldn’t close, about the Nordiques’ last hockey game, about the new government would surely put them in the red, and even about the humble ways of the lobster, which, did you know, can only walk backwards... he knew everything, and on and on it went. At the head of the table, Marceau suffered in silence. Usually mild-mannered by nature, he couldn’t help but be alarmed, each time he and Pete were together, to rediscover this bottomless pit of animosity for his son-in-law.

He had Marie, of course – and she was the only reason that he agreed to Laura’s idea of inviting them to dinner – and yet when Marceau and his daughter found themselves face to face, a kind of reciprocal embarrassment paralysed them both; they never said more than a few words to each other and even those were feebly banal. But what could they have said, after all, over Pete’s vociferations, the children’s shrieks, and Laura’s petulant complaints? Marie sank into a nervous silence which Marceau felt as a reproach. He had discovered to his astonishment that (much like himself) his daughter just wasn’t the family type; at heart, she was quite as elusive and away-with-the-fairies as he was. He even caught himself blaming the children for causing her to age prematurely, and even more so, blaming Pete for willingly drowning her in this wearisome mediocrity.

“Why’s it like that, p’pa, that lobsters only walk backwards? Why’s it like that?”

Nancy was hanging on her father’s forearm, forcing him with her imperious grip to let go of the nut-cracker in her greedy desire to know everything *now*.

“*C’est comme ça*, that’s the way it is,” Pete answered, switching into English mid-sentence. And he proceeded to launch into a generous explanation, the words gushing inexhaustibly from his mouth like the spray of a machine-gun. At the same time he held back

Ralph's hand, which sneakily tried, with well-calculated jabs of the pincers, to pinch his sister's ribs.

Irritated, Marceau bit his lip.

"What *I* want to know is why you speak to your kids in English half the time... reckon you could just talk French to them, like everyone else. It's not like they don't understand French!"

"Dad, *please*..." Marie sighed, feeling the tension ratchet up a level.

"Don't start this again," Laura began.

"He *could* just talk in French," Marceau insisted. "D'you see the rest of us talking English? No, eh? We're all French, here, aren't we?"

"You're a fine one to talk," Laura cut in. "You're jealous because you can't speak a damn word of English!"

"Let it go, let it go," Pete said diplomatically. "This is one subject we're never going to agree on, Gramps and me. For what it's worth, I don't want my kids ending up second-class citizens. I want my kids to be bilingual from the get-go, so they can get a good job, and a decent salary."

"Yeah... and if they follow in their Papa's footsteps, that'll be nothing to write home about!"

"That's enough, Dad, drop it!"

Marie's hands were clenched into fists on the table, and Marceau stopped in his tracks, aware that he was about to push it too far. Again. But it wasn't *his* fault – whenever he was with Pete, Marceau's resentment would skulk like a wildcat just behind his lips, ready to spring out and mangle his every word. All his good intentions (which he never failed to resurrect when he saw Marie) went out the window. But really, this was too much – it was more than he could handle to confront both his daughter's furious glare and the unbearable yacking of his son-in-law, for whom unemployment was like a badge of honour.

"You could have used the good china, Laura," Marceau said by way of a diversion.

"This is the only china we have, Benoît Marceau. Heavens, where's all this coming from?"

"Right, right, well I'll buy you a new set, don't you worry."

"With *what* – your pay from the shoe repair shop? I don't think so!" Laura retorted, and Marceau wanted to tell her to shush, but she was on a roll, obviously still cross about the lobsters, and not about to let him off. "I've never seen anything like it, he's worse than a lobster – he goes backwards instead of forwards, he brings home a smaller salary every year,

I wonder sometimes just how on earth we make ends meet, never in my life have I met a man so lacking in ambition...”

She was off on one. Marceau played with the antennae of the crustacean on his plate, and just for a moment, he had the impression that it looked back at him with sympathy.

He could have stood for hours in front of the fishmonger’s window. Their life was spreading out before his eyes, unrolling dreamily, filling his whole field of vision. It stretched serenely like a beautiful film from which he was powerless to escape. They appeared to be madly in love, and what’s more, they floated serenely above it all – the winter, the slush, the smell of petrol – while Marceau stood on the pavement, wistful, his senses slowly numbing. Their overflowing happiness cut him like a knife. Good God! They must be rich, draping one another with love like that, gratuitously, for all the world to see, with their fancy fur coats and silver-screen faces! *Wait for me*, Marceau longed to cry out, *let me catch up, I want to understand...* but it was impossible, they were in their own little bubble, quite apart from the rest of the world. They were in a foreign universe, as untouchable as extra-terrestrials. The man looked like someone familiar, but who? *Who?* Marceau racked his brains for the answer, but couldn’t put his finger on it...

Without realising what he was doing, Marceau had pushed the door open and now found himself inside the shop, next to them. They were buying everything, as if they had an army to feed, and on and on they went, picking out rare, delicate fish, and bizarre creatures of all varieties, costing upwards of \$10 the half-pound. Up close they were even better, and they radiated a warmth that was catching – and the best part was that you could hear everything they said, *my love, my darling, my treasure*, all in the most impeccable French, no doubt from France. Enchanted, Marceau followed the silken melody of their words, and he was mortified that all *he* could do was mumble his common speech, his meagre language, his poor and insignificant words. The man turned towards him – Marceau recognised him instantly – and the shock was so great that the room started to spin, and he had to grab hold of the counter to keep from falling.

Marceau could practically smell the hostility, which hung in heady distillations like an aura around the family table. With her fists and forearms stained greenish up to the elbows, Nancy was trying to splatter her brother with the liquid intestines of her lobster; in the blink of an eye, despite Marie’s sugar-coated warnings, the tablecloth was plastered in mess; the supper was ruined. “And whose fault is that,” Laura added, “no prizes for guessing! He can’t do a thing right, I told him to get steaks, but *oh no* – look what he brings back instead...”

Ralph was giggling under his breath, Marie stared obstinately out of the kitchen window, and Pete's chin was clenching in a sort of pained twitch, as if from an electric shock.

"Anyway, Gramps, the important thing is, you obviously *feel* like you're rich..." he said.

"Rich? Rich? What's that supposed to mean?"

Laura, having tossed aside her apron, now wiped her hands on the good tablecloth. She was taken over by a sudden, visceral worry as she listened to her son-in-law, thinking she could make out the metallic jangle of cash echoing between Pete and her husband.

"What are you trying to say? If there's one thing we can be sure of, it's that we ain't rich!"

"It's just," Pete said in a strange, throaty voice, "it's just that I find Gramps to be very generous, that's all!"

Laura still didn't get it.

"Why? What do you mean? Not because of those horrid creatures, surely?"

Marceau raised his head and looked Pete straight in the face, his eyes veined with menacing zigzags.

"What does you mean?" Laura repeated stupidly. "Are they really all that pricey, those things?"

"Pricey? *Lobsters*? I'm saying nothing."

Pete had spoken with such uncharacteristic economy that his words dropped as heavily as balls of lead. A deathly silence fell.

"Benoît Marceau, how much did those things cost you? Benoît Marceau, I asked you a question!"

In the fishmonger's, the world had frozen for a fraction of a second; the cashier hurriedly sponged the counter as she leant towards Marceau: "What would you like, Monsieur?"

"Yes... six... six of those..."

The couple were leaving the store, disappearing into the snow – she with her furs and bright laughter, and he with his borrowed face, his stolen, unbelievable face, the face which had belonged to Marceau thirty years ago before life screwed him over, that face he couldn't forget because it was there, shut away in the drawers, etched on every wedding photo... "My double," Marceau said to himself. "It's my double, the happy one," he thought, over and over again, while the cashier handed him the package and he scooped out the money, almost half his pay, from the bottom of his dog-eared wallet.

"Have you finally gone mad?"

Laura was gobsmacked. She hadn't even got her head around the full extent of the disaster yet, nor the gaping hole in their already-tight budget – it was a catastrophe, they'd have to patch this up as best they could – but how? – even if they ate nothing but bread and margarine every day, destitution was hot on their heels, they'd soon be on the streets, crushed by debts, drowned by unpaid bills, and the rent was already two months overdue, and the heating, and the electricity...

“You're being a little dramatic there, Laura,” Pete said, with a rising sense of indefinable remorse.

“Monster!” Laura shrieked. “Madman! How could you be so cold-blooded? Answer me, you useless layabout, say something! What did I do to deserve this? Oh, for the love of God, what did I do...?”

Her despair knew no limits. Marceau babbled apologetically, cringing, wishing he could sink under the table and hide.

“It's not as bad as all that, Laura”, he said, “I'll do extra time at work... I'll buy you a new set of china...”

“Cold-blooded good-for-nothing!”

There was no way out. His whole life, poverty had followed him like a black mark, like a stain; he ruined everything, even his family, who were already up to their eyes in shabbiness. It was a cruel God indeed who let someone be born as unlucky as Marceau – more pathetic than a maggot, more insignificant than a speck of dust, nothing, in fact, *less* than nothing.

“I'm sick of it, *crisse*, I'M BLOODY SICK OF IT, *OSTIE!*” he suddenly exploded.

“Don't you *dare* swear in front of the kids, Benoît Marceau!”

“Sshh, Mum,” said Marie, placing a firm hand on Laura's arm.

Marceau had got up, trembling, his face a deep purple; he felt it all rising in his throat like too-strong medicine; the cancerous frustration he had always brushed aside, the loveless void which yawned, terrifying, all around him...

Ralph kicked his sister under the table.

“Look!” he squawked. “*Look*, he looks like a lobster!”

Pink and Black

Have a seat, then, have a seat – if I'd been expecting a big visit like this... you're really the inspector then, the police inspector, out on investigations – crimes and bandits and real blood, that sort of thing...? Eugène will be kicking himself for having missed you, he's hooked on all that, Kojak, Hawaii Five-Oh, The Six Million Dollar Man, Colombo – oh, but don't look too closely, heavens above, the kitchen's a *wreck*, I was just finishing the sauce for tonight's spaghetti...

Yes, of course, you've come about Madame Sinclair, or no, I mean Madame Bouchard – she went back to her maiden name, didn't she? – I'd been thinking to myself that something wasn't right, it's at least two weeks now that she's been gone... still, nothing's happened to her? Hmm. You don't say. Missing. Excuse me a moment, my mince is starting to stick, this stove's a bloomin' nightmare, it gets hot far too quickly, you know how it is – in fact you probably don't, someone of your standing, it's handcuffs *you* know about, not stove-tops, hee-hee!

Missing. That's got to be a bad sign. You're thinking she's been kidnapped, then? I'm just saying, with a son as important as hers, you know, a celebrity, practically prime minister already, it wouldn't be all that surprising, don't you think? No, of course, you don't think anything yet. You're investigating. Quite right too – never believe anything or anyone, and I'm sure you have an inkling at the back of your mind there, but you're keeping it under wraps, I understand completely, especially in your line of work, and anyway, it's not for me to ask questions, you're quite right. Me...? You want to know *my* opinion on the matter? My dear Monsieur Inspector. I have an opinion on everything, if you want to know, although no one ever asks me for it, hee-hee! You do me quite an honour. And if you could pass me the mushrooms that are just next to you there, well, that'd be an honour *and* a helping hand.

I certainly did know her, Madame Bouchard... Madame Sinclair, if you insist, but I assure you, she'd kept her maiden name, she wouldn't answer if you called her Sinclair, and it wasn't just a whim brought on by the Change, in all seriousness, she had her identification papers changed, she said that her mistakes had followed her quite enough already, she didn't want to drag them to the grave with her – her words, not mine – but it's silly to talk of her in the past tense, as if she weren't alive and well... what's that? Yes, yes, until proven otherwise, obviously, you're quite right, and so optimistic, hee-hee...

Anything out of the ordinary? Like a kidnap, you mean, fisticuffs, stifled shouts, men in black overcoats hurrying down the hallway? Hee-hee-hee. Sorry. No, I'm not making fun,

honestly, no, in all seriousness, I didn't hear anything out of the ordinary. Oh, I'd known her *years*, just think, we were neighbours, and with these paper-thin walls, you could hear each other breathe... She came over for coffee from time to time, not often... Nice? Well yes, if you like, but that doesn't seem quite the right word to describe her... more *different*, yes, different and odd, very odd. Is it Monsieur Sinclair Junior who's looking for her? I'm just asking because, you know, he might already have received a ransom demand, it's none of my business but I'd be surprised, a kidnapping, I mean, for a man like Monsieur Sinclair to be mixed up in all that – such a good man, so elegant, stylish, polite and all, do you think he'll stand in the next election?

Back to Madame Bouchard, yes, I wouldn't want to speak ill of her of course, it's always easy to blame someone who's absent, and I can't tell you anything of consequence anyway, but really, in all honesty, you couldn't deny that she was odd – Eugène would use a much less charitable word if he were here, and if he were, you know what else, I'd ask him to open my jar of Cayenne pepper, this one just here, *thank* you, you're too kind, sometimes I think they seal these new bottles with super-glue, wouldn't you agree? You must understand, I don't mean that she was mad, far from it, she had – she *has* I should say – above-average intelligence, quite frighteningly so, she was interested in all kinds of complicated things, the life cycle of the stars, the reproduction of atoms, the politics of South Africa, the habits of kangaroos, I don't know if you noticed her bookshelves when you were at her apartment this morning, but between you and me, what's the good of all that reading? Does it help solve unemployment, does it help the economy? No. Alright then. And as for her appearance, you know, the way she looked, she had a way of dressing, really you'll say it's just a minor detail and you're right, but not entirely because decency ought to be respected, a basic appreciation of normal standards in clothing and general appearance, even if, as they say, there's no accounting for taste. She'd started dressing in pink, a little while ago, she always wore *something* pink, a scarf, a dress, a big canvas bag... not the kind of sensible pink that a smart woman would wear, either – no, a *provocative* pink, a wayward-little-girl's pink, if you want to know, she said the colour did her good – her words – and her hair, more than anything else, her *hair*, Monsieur, she had it floating around her shoulders like a Mater Dolorosa, not pinned up, not dyed, nothing, you have to agree that there are limits, at the age of sixty-five, there are limits to wanting to look a bit different!

Besides, that was her way of doing things, I mean, nothing like the rest of us – to give you an example, one morning I asked her, she was here for coffee, I asked her just like that, trying to be nice, thinking to myself that she must get lonely, I asked her to come along with me to

the club that evening, Golden Years it's called, we play cards there, and draughts, there's prizes to win, we have coffee, sometimes with a drop of gin, hee-hee, we have a good time and it doesn't cost us a thing, which is a rare thing these days, and she asked me, "what club?" and I told her Golden Years, it's the seniors' club – you see, I'm getting on for sixty-something myself, even if I don't look it – and she started to laugh, my dear Monsieur, I nearly choked on my coffee, she said, "what golden years would they be?" and I didn't even give her a reply because there I was, showing her a bit of kindness, being rather soft on her actually, and I'm quite able to tell when someone's laughing in my face and when someone's asking me an honest question. Speaking of coffee, I don't believe I offered you one, *where* are my manners, and I forgot to add the basil the thyme the bay leaves the chili to my sauce, heavens, I'm away with the fairies, are you positive that you won't have coffee? I've got a little bottle of gin somewhere, too, I always keep some for emergencies, oh but don't tell me your duties don't allow it, like those inspectors on the telly who I've always suspected of lying through their teeth... Your liver. Yes. We've all got to think of our liver, some more than others, you'll forgive me if I have a little drink anyway, without you, to the health of your liver and Madame Bouchard's too wherever she might be at the present moment.

The day after our little misunderstanding about the seniors' club, she came back here to see me, clutching two theatre tickets – imagine – to make up for having laughed in my face no doubt, but also, whatever Eugène might say, because it was her nature to be, there's no other word for it, *generous* – you know, the sort to give away the shirt off her back – even if not everyone likes pink, hee-hee! ...Anyway I accepted, innocent as a lamb, and what would you have done in my position, especially since I could count on one hand the times that Eugène has taken me out for the evening, and that's in thirty years of marriage, *thirty*, my dear Monsieur. I really ought to have realised that *her* kind of theatre wouldn't be anything like what I had in mind, a big hall with velvet seats and smart people dressed up for going out and actors reciting beautiful things, and all. What's the point of sitting in the dark, listening to people speaking the way they would at Saint-Roch mall, that's what I think, anyway, and you can tell me that spaghetti sauce is more my department than theatre shows are – anyway, that's what *she* had no qualms about suggesting, Madame Bouchard, that evening. It was a play about the life of Jesus, from what I could make out, but the actors talked like troopers, "*chrisse*, we're outta wine," "*viarge*, lemme take care of it," and I'm sure you'll agree, that sounds a little surprising coming from the Son of God and the Virgin Mary, although the people around me weren't a bit surprised, all of them young from what I could see, roaring with laughter, they were, in seventh heaven – no pun intended. As for me, I was mortified,

especially since, to give you an idea how tiny the room was, the actor playing Jesus kept flinging beads of sweat into my face, which certainly didn't help my concentration, but *her*, well, she was as happy as Larry, she was laughing loudest of all, swigging her Brador, I remember it quite clearly, and during the interval, she seemed to know everyone, she went around greeting all and sundry, and all the youngsters hugged her and kissed her on the cheek and called her Françoise, sure-fire way to catch some horrid disease if you ask me, and as if she wasn't old enough to be their grandmother!

All this to say that she wasn't the sort of person to keep herself to herself, Françoise Bouchard, or to stay at home quietly knitting woolly slippers, stirring green-tomato catsup and spaghetti sauce for her family, like I've been doing for more than thirty years now, I'm not saying that it doesn't get a little dull but you do what you have to do, and I'll tell you what else, when you're old you ought to keep company with other people your age, it's just common sense, Eugène says the same thing and he's probably right. I could tell you all sorts of other stories like that one, some rather more off-colour than others, but I suppose your time is precious like they're always saying on the telly, which begs the question of what they think of *our* time which we're wasting anyway by listening to the same thing over and over again, hee-hee, but you didn't come here for me to give you Madame Bouchard's life story, you must already know it off by heart anyway, you'll have got it from Monsieur Sinclair Junior, or Senior, or from her daughter, I forget her name now, Marie, Maryse, Mariette, whatever, anyway she came to visit nearly every week. Yes, now, is that important? Ah. Good-oh.

Just give me a moment while I stir my sauce, and gather my thoughts, and pour another little tot of gin – you've put me on the spot rather, after all, I was only her neighbour – and I wouldn't want you to think that I'm not wishing for her family to find her safe and sound, as is surely their intention, and the very reason that they contacted you in the first place, and that you're listening to me so patiently... Oh I see, you're not working for *them*, you're conducting your own investigation as a sort of private detective – oh no, I didn't want to insult you, clearly you're not a private detective, that's obvious from your – and your – anyway that's obvious, not everyone gets to be Kojak after all, hee-hee.

I don't know what they've told you, I don't know anymore what *I've* just told you, but in any case, don't go thinking that I want to speak badly of her, of Françoise Bouchard, I'm simply explaining to you the ways that her oddness came out, if I can put it like that, anyway, she wasn't easy to dislike – except in Eugène's case, he achieved it pretty quickly – she was always so polite and likeable and cheerful, despite her pink clothes and her wild grey hair.

It's true that she spent a lot of her time with young people, no doubt about that, but she was quite old enough to do what she liked, hee-hee, and even older, hee-hee-hee-hee, do excuse me, I've nothing against her really... They must have told you about Marcel T., and the other one too, young Vigneault who always turned up with an enormous bunch of awful flowers, they looked more like huge bugs than plants, he even gave me one once when I just so happened to open my door at the very moment he was knocking on hers, sheer coincidence obviously, wasn't it though? I mean really, no? I was shocked by the whole thing, and especially on behalf of Monsieur Sinclair Junior and Marie-Mariette-Martine who between them made quite a fuss of the whole thing, and I wonder, incidentally, if that's when Monsieur Sinclair Junior got his first stomach ulcer... oh, you didn't know about that.

There were plenty of others who used to hang around at her place at all hours of the day and night, at one point I even wondered if she was opening up a youth hostel, there were so many comings and goings – usually little gaggles of five to ten people at a time, and not the same ones, either, the Monday night lot talked much louder than the Wednesday night lot who were better dressed than the ones who came on Saturday afternoons, the women I should say, it was only women who came on Saturdays, but don't start thinking of brothels or anything sexual like that, Lord no! Hee-hee, quite the opposite, they were more feminist than feminine if you get my drift, every one of them with a face like a wet weekend – of course Eugène found all this to be downright disreputable – fancy being *that* sociable, and knowing *that* many people.

He belonged to the first group, Marcel T., the “work meetings” as Françoise Bouchard called the noisy Monday-night gatherings, the ones that got Eugène so wound up because he's hard of hearing and they upset his television programs. Work meetings for what, even Eugène didn't have an answer to that one, suffice it to say that she'd recruited this lot at the University where she'd got it into her head to take a course in politics – imagine, at our age – and as if it wouldn't have been much easier for her son to have given her private lessons. Well, that led her to get involved in all kinds of business that isn't our business, Amnesia International, human rights, war, imperialism, and it was always Marcel T. who was the most outspoken, I never knew his family name, that was just how he signed the notes he left on her door. Their relationship, yes, their relationship, I knew you'd be coming to that, all of them have racked their brains over that, Monsieur Sinclair Junior and the other Inspector, he was from the Mounted Police, that one, he came to see me a year ago after the death of Marcel T., didn't even smile when I asked him what he'd done with his horse, just goes to show how little humour people have these days. The pair of them started seeing one another outside of

the Monday nights, but he came back practically every other day, he was bordering on depression or so he said in the notes that he left on her door, which of course I didn't read! It's true that he seemed rather lacklustre, he was pale like the walking dead, and unhappy, you felt sorry for him, I can understand how Françoise was rather taken in, whatever Eugène might say – of course *he* only ever sees the bad in people – anyway he was looking for a sympathetic ear, a friend, some emotional support, that's what he wrote, a *mother* more than anything, despite his being well into his thirties. You know what men are like, anyway – you see what I mean. So by that time, if you're still following me, Marcel T. was forever turning up on the landing outside Madame Bouchard's apartment, waiting for her, sometimes for hours at a stretch, knocking on her door with that lost-puppy face, it was already clear that there was something funny about him, and personally I wasn't surprised to find out that he'd made a bomb to blow up our prime minister, obviously he didn't succeed, the bomb didn't go off, I heard he slipped on the ice its being winter and all and cracked his skull before he even got to the Parliament and died just like that with a no-good bomb in his pocket and a silly letter addressed to the prime minister – is that crazy or what, the kind of thing you'd read in the paper and wouldn't believe but anyway it wasn't in the paper.

Needless to say that all this touched a nerve with Monsieur Sinclair Junior who was gearing up to launch his election campaign and certainly didn't need an old *felquiste* separatist in the family – his words, not mine – but perhaps it wasn't fair to throw *that* back in Madame Bouchard's face, she hadn't expected her little extra-curricular gatherings for innocent political chit-chat to degenerate into revolution, but then she probably put a little too much passion into it, as Eugène said albeit in less polite terms. And she was the one who was most affected by all of this, she thought Marcel T.'s death was somehow *her* fault, as if she had invented ice, and then she got such a row from Monsieur Sinclair Junior who didn't come to visit for two whole months afterwards, of course she gave up her politics course at the University, and the Monday gatherings too – but not the Wednesdays – which brings me back to young Vigneault, who I think I may have mentioned earlier.

On Wednesday evenings, she offered her apartment for a young troupe of experimental mime artists – their words, not mine – who didn't have anywhere else to rehearse. To rehearse *what*, I couldn't tell you, but they'd repeat the same routine over and over again, funny because they looked a bit like parrots too, often they were all dressed the same in scarlet and orange silk, must've stood out in the street, I'm telling you, I was almost completely blinded, practically got sunburnt when I bumped into them at the top of the stairs. Young Vigneault was one of their number, as you might have guessed, a little older than the

others but still not yet thirty, still wet behind the ears, a nice demeanour, that's for sure, black curls like an angel or a demon, kind blue eyes like a girl's, and flowers by the armful – oh, he must have brought her twelve big bunches in the space of six months – the sort of boy you'd like for your son, I'd guess, when you're Françoise Bouchard and you already have a son and a daughter as chic and distinguished as hers. Alright then.

I'm telling you all this, you understand, because you seem so reliable and discreet, I'm sure you're bound by professional secrecy, and not the sort to pin a hidden microphone on me so you can play back everything I've said later, I mean it'd be *awful* if Madame Bouchard knew I'd been talking about her, even though everything I'm saying is God's truth and nothing but, and quite well known already by Monsieur Sinclair Junior and Marie-Marine-Marguerite, let's call her Marie for argument's sake. All I want is to assist you in carrying out your duties – which I imagine still prevent you from swallowing even the tiniest drop of gin, but don't go taking me for a drinker, will you, if I pour myself another – alcohol has no more effect on me than pure water, I assure you, it's just better for the digestion, more invigorating, and it helps chase along the afternoons and the evenings when they start to drag, you *must* accept a jar of my spaghetti sauce at least, you can tell me how it is when it's ready, I added some veal kidneys and a bit of liver for flavour... yes, yes, I'm coming back to that. Young Vigneault.

One afternoon she came over, Françoise Bouchard, to explain to me her point of view on the whole thing, love which knows no age, yada-yada, and I have to admit I was almost at the point of understanding her – or allowing myself to be bamboozled, as Eugène said at the time – but it's true that there are limits, morality, rules that have to exist somewhere even if you don't believe in the good Lord. Young Vigneault, my dear Monsieur, started coming over to see her outside of the Wednesday nights, him too, but it wasn't to discuss politics or complain that he was depressed, quite the contrary, we'd hear laughter and rather... significant noises, coming directly from her bedroom, I assure you, it isn't just the walls that have ears.

Yes, you've got it, an affair – sexual, erotic, the whole caboodle – that's what they were having, she an older lady of sixty-five-plus, and he a youngster, barely twenty-five, I mean they wouldn't be the first, there's Harold and Maude from that film I saw on the telly, it made me laugh because it was all just put-on, but you won't convince me there isn't something gone wonky in a world where young boys go out with grandmothers before they go out with girls their own age, and vice-versa, anyway, it certainly won't result in healthy kids.

They didn't even hide it, you'd pass them in the street walking arm-in-arm, sometimes they'd kiss here in the hallway and I'd be blushing on her behalf from the other side of the

door. Everyone knew about it, of course, since she did her best to flaunt it, but even so, it was a good six months before Monsieur Sinclair Junior's entourage got wind, and this time he was well into the leadership race, you know what a hard worker he is. In the meantime, things were going from bad to worse here, not only were they carrying on that dreadful love affair in plain sight and to everyone's knowledge, but then she started dabbling in illegal, immoral things, thanks to his bad influence. I began to smell *smells* coming from under her door, and under mine – you know, smells, I don't need to spell it out to someone in your profession, fumes of hallucinatory drugs and God knows what else.

This time round, when Monsieur Sinclair Junior paid a visit to Françoise Bouchard, well, it wasn't pretty – he turned up just as she was in the middle of smoking you-know-what with young Vigneault. Her son had known about it for some time and was just waiting for me to... for someone to give him the tip-off by telephone, and he arrived almost immediately, I'm telling you, the house itself trembled, so to speak, I've never seen Monsieur Sinclair so beside himself, he hurled all the names under the sun at the young Vigneault, gigolo-parasite-exploiter-user-of-old-ladies, and I think they even came to blows, young Vigneault must have come off worse because he was first to leave but that was far from the end of it, for hours afterwards we could hear Monsieur Sinclair and Françoise Bouchard screaming at each other, Monsieur Sinclair was saying "Your behaviour is inexcusable – you've got it in for me – you're doing everything you can to damage my reputation – you're ruining me – it's my death that you want, isn't it, my political death," and Madame Bouchard was repeating over and over, "No – don't you get it – leave me alone – this is *my* life – no, it's my business – get lost, leave me in peace why don't you – just leave me alone..." and they went on yelling like that for hours, and after that I didn't hear anything more but the building here is L-shaped and they'd left their living-room light on and I saw them hugging and crying on each other's shoulders – it was like a holy scene.

So apparently, after that, they went digging up young Vigneault's past, trying to pin him as a criminal or a revolutionary – I reckon Monsieur Sinclair had got his fingers burnt in that business with Marcel T. – and sure enough, they came across irregularities, overpayments from Employment Insurance, taxes owing and not declared, enough little things to give him a fright, I suppose, and enough that he didn't set foot in Françoise Bouchard's apartment again, and that was the end of it – almost. Later that same month, she popped round, "in passing" she said, but that wasn't true because she never came over here in the evenings, especially when she knew Eugène was in the vicinity. She hadn't even bothered to get properly dressed or comb her hair, she was quite a sight, the dark circles under her eyes reaching practically to

her chin. She started by apologising *very* politely for disturbing us – I don't know why I'm telling you this it's really not important or interesting – maybe it was her eyes, she had a way of looking you right in the eye that made you feel ill at ease, guilty of something, Eugène disappeared into the living room to watch the television, so he said, so I was alone with her in the kitchen, oh, not for long, a few minutes if that, "I've finally reached rock bottom," she said two or three times in a calm and courteous voice, as if she was talking about the weather. I didn't know what to say to her, or what she meant by that, and she stared at me and although her eyes were dry, they were wide, and sad, very sad. I felt bad for her and I offered her a biscuit, a coffee, but she refused, she said "I just wanted to live, but it seems I'm not allowed to anymore, don't you want that too, sometimes, just to live...?" to which I had no answer, of course, it was completely out of place and indecent and awkward, she must have been taking drugs, like Eugène said, and I drank two, three glasses of gin after she'd left, maybe four don't ask me why and I took the old clothes that I'd been repairing, vests, socks, Eugène's underpants, and I threw them in the bin, I really don't know why I told you that, it's got nothing to do with anything I'm sorry.

Anyway, don't let this give you the impression that her family only came to have a go at her – quite the opposite in fact, as I said, her daughter Marie visited every week and even Monsieur Sinclair Junior came fairly often, despite his being so busy, but in any case you've met them, you know how kind, admirable, full of good intentions they both are, that much is plain to see. I'd even say that they cared for her with an enormous amount of love and affection, as if she were their child and not their mother, it's true that she often behaved in a manner infinitely less mature and reasonable than her daughter Marie, for example, who didn't once arrive here empty-handed, she brought food, clothes, all sorts of gifts, "*Maman*, you're not eating well, you're not dressing well," that's what she'd say, but always laughing, without the slightest accusation in her voice, it was heart-warming, really, you felt just how much she wished to see her mother well and happy. Children like that are rare, I'm telling you, she should have been proud, but she never talked about them, it was – goodness, I don't know *how* long before I found out her daughter was a lawyer too, her brother's chief associate, isn't that just wonderful, *two* in the family, now that's what you call success, they must have got it from Monsieur Sinclair Senior, about whom I unfortunately know nothing at all except that he's a businessman and that Madame Bouchard completely erased him from her life during the fifteen years after she left him. Isn't that always the way, the lucky ones don't know what they've got, for years her daughter Marie was trying to convince her mother to come and live with them in their big house in Sillery instead of carrying on the way she

was, living on a shoestring, in a decrepit flat, whittling away at her measly pension. *I* certainly wouldn't have needed telling twice, especially since she could have continued all her chit-chat groups, "within reason," obviously, as Marie put it – and quite right too, since the home of a politically-involved lawyer is certainly no place for mess and chaos, nor is it like one of those old run-down houses in Limoilou where you can invite any old crowd without a care for what the neighbours will say.

Everything changed in the last few weeks that she was here, mind you – Françoise Bouchard had suddenly begun to see sense, if I may say so, especially after what happened with the feminists, which was the straw that broke the camel's back. I told you about the Saturday afternoons when Françoise Bouchard would invite that gaggle of women over to her place, all ages they were, and usually dressed like mechanics, and it turned out I'd been right, they were feminists organised into some group that I forget the name of, they'd stick their nose into everything, kicking up a fuss about the plight of women as if that would make a blind bit of difference. And believe it or not, the group in question had just recently held a public meeting, photographers, journalists, everything, and they began by criticising the government, nothing new there of course – but then, imagine, they got started on the policies of Monsieur Sinclair Junior, who wasn't yet in office but certainly looked set to be. They brought up all sorts of complaints, crying sexism, to use the fashionable term, and who do you think was sitting in the very front row listening religiously to every silly word, as if it were an audience with the Pope? There she was, plain to see, smack-bang in the middle of the photo in next day's paper, her name was even written underneath, Françoise Bouchard herself, yes Monsieur, I suppose you read the same paper as I do.

This wasn't long after the affair with young Vigneault, and it struck me just how *patient* her son and daughter were with her because this time, when they came to her flat, I barely heard a peep out of any of them, despite the paper-thin walls. It seemed that they were talking to her very reasonably, her daughter Marie held her by the arm while Monsieur Sinclair Junior leaned over her, one hand on her shoulder, and she, well, she listened to them both in turn, her face gravely serious, which shows that she was starting to realise how silly and deranged her behaviour had been, how undignified for a woman of her age, and given the social standing of her children. And the fact was, in the days that followed, she completely transformed herself – starting by doing her hair properly, and dressing decently in more muted shades, already an enormous improvement, and she gave up all her outings and fanciful gatherings which in the end had brought her nothing but trouble, and the house was calm again, like it was ten years ago before she arrived, so much so that you'll laugh at this I

began to find it dull, without that wild music she used to play at full volume – just goes to show that you get used to everything eventually.

You'll no doubt have noticed the jumble of boxes all over her living-room, she'd finally agreed to move in with her daughter Marie, whose house was quite large enough to accommodate, and a very sensible decision if you ask me, I'm sure they'll have told you the same thing, I see that they're at a loss as to what's happened, they think she's been kidnapped, and you can never be too wary, when you think of all the maniacs out there in the world.

Except... well. I should perhaps have started with this, with the last time she and I spoke, she had such a curious look about her and you'll tell me that was normal for her but no, there was more to it than that. She was just back from dinner with her two children, they'd taken her out to a restaurant, and she turned up here almost without knocking and asked me to pour her a gin, laughing all the time, a strange mad laugh, well alright, I thought, why not, I have nothing against good humour. "They want me to re-join '*Femmes en Marche*'" – that was the name of the group I told you about – she was still laughing the same odd, forced-sounding laugh. "They say that their advisors think it's a good idea, after all" – her words, not mine – "it seems that after all that, a subversive mother is good for their image – gives a hint of the progressive." I hadn't a clue what she was talking about, obviously, so just for something to say, I asked "who's that then?" and instead of answering me, she stopped laughing and stared at me with that look that made you wish the ground would swallow you. "I have no children," she said, very distinctly, I assure you, just ask Eugène, I told him everything, although I don't agree with him this time when he claims that she was drunk or on drugs.

No, that's not the last time I saw her. The last time I saw her, she had just left the house, she was walking down the street and she stopped for a moment in front of my kitchen window, when was it? I can tell you exactly – just about two weeks ago, two weeks, yes, it was the first warm day of spring, I remember, she looked up as if she already knew I was there.

She smiled and waved, and I was struck dumb, I can't explain, she'd let her hair down and it fell to her shoulders like a grey mane, she was dressed all in pink again, with the big pink canvas bag, and she suddenly seemed twenty years younger – it reminded me of when we were little, the two of us, that's true I forgot to tell you that we were at school together, at the Ursulines, Françoise Bouchard and me – I recognised her straight away when she arrived here because of her big laugh like a stack of logs tumbling down and because of her eyes and that look she had, which even at that age had set her apart from other people, and it's true she

didn't remember *me*, well, I've changed rather a lot in time, and of course life hasn't always been easy.

No, she didn't have a suitcase, but I could tell she was going away. She was going away just like that, you understand – it was a day for that, for following your heart, somewhere, anywhere, all alone without anyone following you, looking for you – tell them not to look for her, I don't think she wanted to be found, make sure you tell them that, it probably makes her what you'd call a runaway, but it takes courage oh such courage, I closed up the kitchen window, I wasn't able, do you see, I wasn't able to call out to her, *take me with you...*

EN TOUT CAS

Tu ne me croiras jamais : à chaque fois que je remontais ma ligne, il y en avait six de bien accrochés, qui se dandinèrent comme des diables. Ça n'en finissait plus de gigoter dans le panier et de saigner un peu aussi, parce que je leur arrachais aussitôt les yeux d'une seule main, vlan ! pour les enfiler au bout des hameçons. Au début, je ne voulais pas, mais Maximilien m'avait juré que les poissons, ça ne souffre pas, même s'ils poussent de drôles de petits cris quand tu les tiens par les ouïes. En tout cas, C'était une fichue de belle pêche. On aurait dit que les éperlans me comprenaient. Je récitais tout bas les mots magiques « mimosa-zamoni-pisse-chie-crache en haut-bingo », et il y avait plein d'éperlans qui se précipitaient vers ma ligne, qui mordaient mes appâts comme s'ils n'avaient pas mangé depuis des siècles. Je te jure : on aurait dit que les éperlans me comprenaient. Les autres n'arrêtaient pas de ramasser des loches. Moi pas. À la fin, tous les pêcheurs d'éperlans de Saint-Irène étaient debout derrière moi à s'exclamer, à épier mes mouvements, à

me poser des questions. Maximilien répondait. Moi, j'étais occupé à décrocher mes poissons. À vingt pieds devant, sur le quai, un gros bateau suédois venait de mouiller. Les hommes s'agitaient sur le pont : ils allumaient des réflecteurs qu'ils dardaient sur l'eau froide, et ils lançaient leurs lignes tous ensemble, flop ! Quand je levais la tête, la Grande Ourse avait l'air de bouger un peu et une étoile filante me passait sous le nez comme un insecte. C'était une fichue de belle nuit. Le petit vieux à côté de moi disait tout le temps :

— Maudit qu'y a d'la chance ! Maudit qu'y est chanceux !

Ça énervait Maximilien :

— Mais non, il n'a pas de chance. Vous voyez bien, c'est un don qu'il a ! Un don !

Et il me donnait un coup de coude, en sourdine.

Il se mettait à raconter des histoires incroyables : comment les truites me sautaient dans les bras, à la rivière Jacques-Cartier, combien de centaines de saumons j'avais ramenés de Gaspé, et la fois, à l'Aquarium, où les poissons m'avaient suivi comme des caniches.

— Même que, ajoutait-il d'un air navré, le directeur de l'Aquarium ne veut plus le laisser entrer. Il a peur que les requins s'échappent pour le suivre. Vous voyez ça d'ici, des requins sur la rue Saint-Jean ?

Les autres n'en revenaient pas.

— Ah ben va-t-en donc, toi ! Ah ben crisse ! Ah ben ciboire !

Il n'y a pas de pire menteur que mon frère Maximilien. Il te ferait croire que la terre est carrée comme une tête d'Anglais, il convaincrait n'importe quel manchot qu'il a

quatre bras. Je te le dis : il n'y a pas de plus grand menteur que lui. Je riais tellement que j'en échappais mes éperlans, je le suppliais de se taire. Les pêcheurs m'avaient pris en considération : ils appâtaient mes hameçons, m'obligeaient à avaler d'un trait de grands bols de café brûlant, me poussaient sans arrêt des roulouses :

— Fumes-tu, ti-gars ?

Pendant ce temps, Maximilien s'était infiltré sur le bateau suédois. Il revenait en compagnie de cinq marins qu'il présentait à tout le monde avec une chaleur communicative. Des mains se serraient, des rires tordaient l'air, et brusquement jaillissaient de nulle part des bouteilles ambrées qui contenaient une liqueur âpre comme le feu. On aurait dit que c'était fête, tout à coup, sur le quai de Saint-Irénée, et que la nuit n'allait jamais finir tellement on était bien près de l'eau clapotante. Mon frère s'était mis à parler suédois comme si de rien n'était, et je découvrais avec émerveillement qu'il savait tout, qu'il comprenait tout, ce diable de grand type que les autres aimaient soudain presque aussi fort que moi. En tout cas, Tu ne devineras jamais quelle fichue de pêche c'était.

Quand on revenait comme ça de Saint-Irénée ou de Pointe-au-Pic, Maximilien et moi, le soleil grimpaît ferme à l'est et il n'était jamais moins de sept heures. Maximilien rampait en silence dans la chambre de ma mère et il lui glissait sournoisement un poisson dans le cou. Elle se réveillait en hurlant. Elle lui jurait une haine éternelle, mais au bout de cinq minutes, son rite remplissait la maison comme une fanfare. Elle me prenait à part :

— Benoit ! Y avait-il des femmes, sur ce bateau ? Tu es sûr ? Tu sens la boisson, petit monstre. Va te coucher vite.

Ma mère est quasiment aussi menteuse que Maximilien, mais elle, tu devines immédiatement quand elle te raconte des histoires. Elle rit tout le temps. C'est une grande danseuse. Elle marche dans l'air, si tu vois ce que je veux dire. Quand elle fait ses solos acrobatiques, on dirait une flamme qui va s'évoler d'un coup tellement elle est légère. Elle est plus souple qu'une coulouvre. Maximilien l'appelle Mona Lisa. Ils s'entendent bien, tous les deux, même si ce n'est pas sa vraie mère : en fait, c'est sa deuxième mère, à Maximilien. Ça semble compliqué, mais c'est simple comme tout. La première mère de Maximilien est morte des poumons ou de la poitrine, quelque chose du genre. Mon père — qui est aussi son père, à Maximilien —, notre père, donc, s'est remarié avec ma mère, et moi je suis né après. Bon. Mais il n'y a pas de tiraillement entre mon demi-frère et ma vraie mère, si tu me suis toujours. Ce n'est pas comme dans les films où la belle-mère et le beau-fils se font des scènes épouvantables et se cassent des assiettes sur le crâne parce qu'ils sont jaloux l'un de l'autre : grosse maudite, je vais te tuer, p'tit verrat, je vais rétriper. Non. Ma mère aime tout le monde. Et je crois que Maximilien l'aime plus que sa vraie mère. Simple-ment, il l'appelle Mona Lisa et il se tait lorsque tu lui poses des questions sur son enfance. Il ne se fâche pas, ni rien, mais il se tait : alors tu te fais toi aussi, parce que tu comprends qu'il n'aime pas déterrer le passé. C'est son affaire. L'important, c'est qu'ils s'entendent bien tous les deux. Quand ils se penchent la tête ensemble, tu ne peux plus les distinguer l'un de l'autre parce qu'ils ont les mêmes reflets pâles dans les cheveux.

Il y avait les soirs de pêche, comme je te disais, et il y avait les dimanches. Ma mère se levait à l'aube et je l'entendais, pendant des heures, arpenter la maison en sentimentelle nerveuse. Maximilien se terrait dans sa chambre et il n'en ressortait que le soir. C'est que, vois-tu, on allait voir mon père. C'était une satanée journée.

On arrivait là-bas vers une heure et demie de l'après-midi. Ma mère parlait sans arrêt, mais elle avait sur le visage cet air distant qu'elle prend quand elle danse, parfois : tu penses qu'elle est là, mais elle n'est pas là vraiment ; tu penses que c'est ta mère, et puis soudain tu ne la reconnais plus. Moi, je machouillais une gomme, mes ongles, n'importe quoi. Et puis, assis en face de nous, il y avait ce vieux qui était mon père.

Peut-être que ç'aurait été moins terrible s'il n'avait pas tremblé comme ça et s'il n'avait pas été si maigre. Mais ses mains bougeaient tout le temps et on pouvait compter ses os à travers sa chemise. Pendant que ma mère parlait, il ne disait rien. Quand elle se taisait, il ne disait rien non plus, mais elle ne se taisait pas souvent : elle racontait les mêmes histoires trois, quatre, cinq fois. À dire vrai, je ne l'écoutais pas. Mon père non plus. Il me regardait. Il me regardait tout le temps. Ma mère parlait, et lui me regardait. Tu ne peux pas savoir de quelle façon terrible il me regardait. On aurait dit qu'il ne me reconnaissait pas, qu'il me haïssait, ou quelque chose du genre. J'avais beau tourner la tête, regarder par terre ou le dévisager brusquement, ses yeux ne me quittaient pas une seconde. Il me faisait peur, si tu veux savoir. J'aurais pu crier tellement il me faisait peur. Après, je passais des nuits entières à ne pas dormir, je le voyais apparaître partout dans la chambre, lui et ses grands yeux blancs. Quand on revenait chez nous, ma mère disait à Maximilien :

— Il est de plus en plus schizophrène, tu sais.

Maximilien lui lançait un regard méchant : c'était les seules fois où je l'entendais répondre à ma mère avec une voix sèche comme du métal.

— Veux pas le savoir !

C'est vrai qu'il ne se dérangeait jamais pour aller là-bas. Il s'enfermait dans sa maudite chambre, tous les dimanches ; la maison se serait écroulée sur lui qu'il n'aurait pas bougé d'un poil. Mais, dans la soirée, il venait me trouver. Et tandis qu'il se mordait les lèvres à les faire éclater, il me demandait à voix basse :

— Est-ce qu'il a parlé ? Est-ce qu'il a dit quelque chose ?

Je disais non, et on n'en parlait plus.

Enfin, il n'y a plus eu de dimanche. Je veux dire que le dimanche est devenu une journée comme une autre, comme un jour de pêche, comme n'importe quel jour.

Pourtant, je n'arrivais pas à me sentir tout à fait soulagé. Je rêvais souvent à mon père : je le voyais de dos, droit comme un i ; il se tournait vers moi, ses lèvres remuaient sans que je puisse saisir un son, et il se mettait en devoir d'enlever lentement, cérémonieusement, les bandellettes qui lui couvraient le visage. Je me réveillais toujours avant d'avoir pu lui voir les yeux et je ne comprenais pas que le cœur me batte alors de tristesse plutôt que de terreur.

Un jour, j'avais essayé de lui écrire une lettre. Je l'avais recommencée dix fois avant de la jeter au panier. Je ne savais pas quoi lui dire. Les mots ne venaient pas. Il aurait fallu que je lui parle en ami, mais je ne l'aimais

même pas, si tu veux savoir. Ça me faisait quelque chose, je te jure, de me dire que je n'aimais pas ce vieux bonhomme qui était mon père, mais je n'y pouvais rien.

Ce que je me rappelle de lui, du temps qu'il vivait à la maison, c'est qu'il était terriblement grand et qu'il ne me parlait jamais, ou presque. Et puis Maximilien est venu rester avec nous, et mon père est parti là-bas. Il devait être riche, parce qu'on a pu continuer à vivre comme avant, mieux qu'avant, avec l'été à Pointe-aux-Pic, les descentes en radeau le long du fleuve, et le soir, quand il faisait froid, on s'entassait tous les trois près d'un gros feu de sapin et on riait comme des fous parce que la fumée nous arrachait les paupières. En tout cas,

La suite, eh bien ça ne me fait pas plaisir de la raconter. Pas du tout. Tu sais combien je les aimais, et tout, mais j'aurais pu les déborder à coups de hache comme on fait avec les boureaux. Je les aurais tués si je ne m'étais pas retenu. Ou si je n'avais pas été si froussard. Mes jambes ne me portaient plus, ça fait que je me suis traîné près du vieux hangar, pour essayer de voir clair dans tout ça. Il faut que tu comprennes : d'un côté, il y avait mon frère Maximilien qui m'enseignait la chasse à l'écurie, à démonter des voitures et à tirer du couteau ; de l'autre, il y avait ma mère qui riait en me prenant par le cou et en m'appelant son petit monstre ; et puis aussi il y avait lui là-bas, et tout ça se mélangeait dans ma tête.

Je n'aurais jamais dû être là. Je sais bien que je n'aurais jamais dû entrer dans la chambre à pas de loup pour les voir se tortiller ensemble et grogner comme des bêtes. Après, ça ne peut plus être pareil. Après, tu

ne peux plus rester assis à ne rien dire pendant que ta mère est toute nue avec ton frère et que ton père est enfermé dans un asile de fous. Il faut que tu me comprennes.

Ça fait que je me suis rendu à pied, en pleine nuit, sur le quai de Saint-Irénée. Il n'y avait pas de pêcheurs, à cause du vent. Le fleuve n'arrêtait pas de brasser des remous noirs, mais au fond, tout au fond, il y avait une lumière qui ressemblait à un phare.

SAMEDI SOIR

Ce qu'il y a d'agaçant, c'est que la fille te regarde avec un air épanoui et supérieur, comme si tu étais la dernière des imbéciles. Le pied droit juché sur le siège des toilettes, tu essaies de te concentrer. Ils disent qu'il n'y a rien au monde de plus facile : ils ont fait de petits dessins bleus et blancs avec des lettres et des chiffres pour te montrer où sont tous tes orifices, pour s'assurer que tu ne vas pas l'enfoncer le tampon dans le nombril. Et toi, dans l'odeur fade de tes menstruations, les doigts englués par le sang, tu cherches la cavité promise, ton tampax est tout de guingois maintenant, amoché comme il n'est pas permis de l'être, les tubes de carton refusent de glisser l'un sur l'autre et se décollent lamentablement. Ils conseillent, dans leur mansuétude infinie, de se détendre et de prendre son temps. Ils t'assurent que toutes les femmes sont passées par là, même Raquel Welch et Aunt Jemima. La fille sur la boîte de Kotex, en face de toi, se perd dans une triomphale pureté, les dents blanches, la robe blanche, des fleurs blanches dans sa main blanche, l'atirail complet de la vraie petite

immaculée conception que tu ne réussiras jamais à devenir durant ces écoeurantes journées qui te voient couler comme une chantepleure. De l'autre côté de la porte, ton frère beugle comme un déchainé.

— Vas-tu finir par sortir, ostie de calvaire ! Reviens-en, de te pomponer ! Arrête de te pogner le derrière !

Tu assènes un coup de poing à la boîte de Kotex et la fille en blanc va choir dans la poubelle, tu deviens grossière :

— Va donc chier !

C'est peut-être, précisément, ce qu'il a envie de faire : cette pensée te submerge sous une ondé de fous rires que même les blasphèmes de ton frère n'arrivent pas à endiguer.

Le cinquième tampon, mystérieusement, finit par trouver sa place. Tu te laves les mains, tu achèves de poudrer le bout de ton nez qui a sinistrement pris naissance sur le bout de ton nez, et tu sors, victorieuse, de la salle de bain, plus femme que jamais.

Michelle s'est assise dans le salon, en t'attendant. Elle fait semblant d'écouter ta mère, elle allimente la conversation de Ah ? de Bon ! de Arrêtez donc ! précis comme un balancier de métronome, pendant que ses yeux et ses oreilles voguent bêatement sur l'écran de télévision. Elle a déjà vu au moins dix fois chacune des émissions de « La Patrouille du cosmos », mais elle ne se lasse jamais, fascinée par la beauté exotique du glacial lieutenant Spock, qu'elle trouve sexy malgré et peut-être à cause de ses sourcils diaboliques. À présent que tu es là, ta mère enfourche avec frénésie son cheval de bataille habituel, elle t'exhorte à la prudence, à l'abstinence, à la décence, comme si tu étais le petit Chaperon rouge que des millions de loups affamés convoitaient

vicieusement à tous les détours de la ville. Tu as envie de lui crier que tu n'es pas comestible, mais tu te contentes d'opiner distraitemment en tirant Michelle par les pans de sa chemise pour la forcer à abandonner le lieutenant Spock à ses ébats astronautiques.

Dans le numéro 8 qui vous emporte en crachotant vers la Haute-Ville, tu ajoutes un peu de mascara à tes cils trop courts et tu te repains sans remords les lèvres que tes parents, incompréhensiblement, s'obstinent à préférer éteintes et fades comme des fruits verts.

— J'en ai mis un.

— Un quoi ?

— Un tampon, innocente !

— C'est-tu vrai ? Ça fait-tu mal ? Je m'en vas essayer, le mois prochain !

Partout où tes regards se portent, des blondinettes souriantes te brandissent au bout de leurs doigts effilés leur marchandise affriolante, des soutiens-gorge à la ligne Concorde, à la ligne Boeing, des dentifrices qui rendent la vie amoureuse trépidante, de l'eau de toilette machin-chouette archi-aphrodisiaque, l'autobus est tapissé de filles lumineuses qui n'ont manifestement jamais connu l'acné et qui te font ressembler soudain à une espèce de larve mal fagotée et mal foutue. Michelle te pousse du coude, vous êtes arrivées, les innombrables discothèques de la ville n'attendent que vous deux pour flamboyer dans l'obscurité comme des feux d'artifice.

Elle flamboieront sans vous, de toute façon, puisque vos quinze ans et demi vous ferment les portes aussi sûrement qu'à des lépreuses, malgré la juvénilité que

vous n'avez déjà plus sur vos visages maquillés. C'est chez Popaul que vous allez noyer votre désabusément, en attendant que l'exaspérante enfance s'efface à tout jamais de vos silhouettes rectilignes et vous permette d'accéder aux vraies discothèques, à la vraie vie.

Tu vois, tout de suite en entrant, qu'il y a comme d'habitude un nombre infiniment supérieur de filles : la lutte sera chaude, et c'est ce que tu détestes le plus. Tu envies Lise Martin et Claire Ouellet qui sont venues accompagnées par deux garçons, superbement boutonneux il est vrai, mais qui leur éviteront l'ultime humiliation de faire tapisserie pendant les slows. Tu les connais trop bien, ces moments terrifiants : la musique, d'endiable qu'elle était, se traîne brusquement tout en langueur : vous dodelinez nonchalamment de la tête au son d'un blues qui s'annonce particulièrement voluptueux et vous faites mine d'aller vous rasseoir, en suppliant des yeux les quelques mâles solitaires qui ont surgi de nulle part et qui évaluent, soupèsent, achètent ou ignorent la marchandise que vous êtes devenues. Tu te jettes, débordante de reconnaissance, dans les bras du premier avorton qui s'intéresse à toi, et vous oscillez gravement sur place, accrochés passionnément l'un à l'autre comme des noyés. À ton tour, tu regardes avec commisération celles qui n'ont pas trouvé preneur et qui se rongent les ongles de désarroi, assises sur leur chaise. Mais la plupart du temps, tu partages leur sort : c'est comme ça que tu as appris à fumer, en cherchant une contenance qui te sauverait du ridicule tout en combattant les effluves de sueur humide qui montent des corps échauffés et te pénètrent jusqu'à l'écoeurement.

La soirée est jeune, tu sens ton cerveau pétiller comme du champagne. Michelle a lancé son sac sur une table et se tremousse déjà d'énervement. La musique vous gligote dans les oreilles, vous n'en pouvez plus, les

autres s'écartent machinalement quand vous foncez, les bras dépliés comme des ailes, pour vous creuser une place sur le parquet et danser, danser, danser, avec Nanette. Ta jupe en jeans étrangle la taille, Michelle est beaucoup plus belle que toi, mais qu'importe, puisque les mille pieds qui te croissent à une vitesse vertigineuse tout autour du corps font de toi un tourbillon, une avalanche de folie près de laquelle les autres se meurent de lourdeur.

— On danse-tu le boogie ?

— O.K.

Soudain, tu le vois. Ça te donne un coup au cœur, parce qu'il ressemble très exactement à Clint Eastwood. Michelle et toi, vous avez vu tous les Leone, vous évoluez dans les westerns comme dans de l'eau salée, avec un petit goût saumâtre et excitant aux lèvres quand les yeux gris des hommes, à travers l'écran, vous transpercent jusqu'aux os.

Donc, il est là, tu le reconnais sans le connaître, et il te regarde, ou il regarde Michelle. Il regarde Michelle, bien sûr. La petite vache « boogie » de plus belle, comme si de rien n'était, elle s'applique à joindre les genoux en une torsade élégante et élastique pendant que toi, tu déferles sur elle des flots de bile empoisonnée.

— Que c'est que t'as à me regarder de même, Françoise ?...

— Je te regarde pas. Pour qui tu te prends ? Pour Bo Derek ?

Boule Noire a succédé à Nanette et vous entrecopieusement sous ses « emmène-moi » frénetiques. Vous êtes obligées de vous hurler dans les oreilles pour vous entendre. Tu t'aperçois tout à coup que Clint Eastwood a disparu : c'est drôle, parce qu'à partir de ce

moment, tu n'écoutes plus Boule Noire, tu n'entends plus les vociférations de Michelle, tu ne vois plus les filles sautiller autour de toi comme des moineaux hystériques, tu n'as plus envie de danser.

— Française !... que t'as ?... fâchée contre moi ?... hurle Michelle dans ta direction, et derrière son dos, s'amène Clint Eastwood en personne, avec juste ce qu'il faut de tangaage dans les épaules et les hanches pour avoir l'air d'un beau mirage cinématographique, avec une espèce de mégot aux lèvres qui lui donne même des allures de René Lévesque à son meilleur. C'est trop. Tu t'arrêtes carrément de danser.

— Qu'est-ce qui te prend ? beugle Michelle qui n'a rien vu, rien senti, la pauvre innocente, qui ne se doute de rien tandis que Clint, derrière elle, cette huitième merveille du monde, est proche à la toucher.

Il jette son mégot par terre. Il racle son pied dessus, comme un taureau qui va foncer. Il secoue sa crinière. Michelle se tourne vers lui. Il va l'inviter à danser. Il ne l'invite pas à danser. Il l'écarte comme si elle était une espèce de pourriture malodorante. Il te regarde comme si tu étais Liz Taylor dans son jeune temps. Il t'invite à danser, toi, toi, toi. Les anges jouent du clairon, c'est la fin du monde, tu vas perdre connaissance d'une seconde à l'autre. En même temps, comme par miracle, la musique s'est épaissie, la musique-sitrop s'enveloppe comme une caresse et les bras de Clint, autour de toi, t'empêchent de t'évanouir tout à fait. Il a du poil noir sur les mains, sur les bras, de la vraie barbe qui t'érafle délicieusement le front. Il doit avoir au moins vingt-deux ans.

Les autres danseurs de slow, quand ils s'agrippent à toi, te cassent les reins par derrière, te renâclent dans le cou ou te réduisent carrément les ortrels en purée. Pas

lui. Il a une sinuose façon de t'enserrer de toutes parts, tu deviens fondante comme du caramel contre son corps que tu épouses de toutes les parois émus de ta peau... — l'odeur fauve du cuir de sa veste mêlée à celle, plus subtile, de son cou, indescriptiblement troublante... —, ses mains bougent un peu sur toi et tu roulerais par terre en gémissant, comme dans les rêves les plus osés qui peuplent tes nuits solitaires d'étrangers aux visages brouillés mais aux doigts si habiles qu'ils réveillent dans ton ventre des régions incroyablement explosives, avant de te réveiller tout à fait.

Vous dansez. Il ne te laisse pas une seconde, même quand la musique s'interrompt : il te jette à l'oreille des tas de choses renversantes, que tu danses bien, que ta peau est douce, que tu es belle, et le plus étonnant, c'est que tu le crois, toi qui ne passes jamais devant un miroir sans avoir envie de le fracasser.

— J'ai oublié mes cigarettes dans ma voiture.

C'est ce qu'il te dit tout à coup, et tu compatiss entièrement à sa détresse. Un gars comme Clint fait corps et âme avec la fumée, tactement et virilement : l'en priver, c'est un peu comme enlever son pistolet à James Bond, raser la moustache d'Omar Sharif, déléster Colombo de son imperméable. Tu lui offres les tiennes. Il les refuse, bien sûr. Un gars comme Clint ne fume pas n'importe quoi : de banales Rothmans, de plébésiennes Players... Il ne se met entre les lèvres que des américaines élancées, aux noms qui sonnent dur comme des sabots de cheval dans le Far West. Vous sortez en vous tenant par la main, sous les regards envieux de toutes les filles de la place.

Les têtes médusées que feront tes amies quand tu passeras au bras de Clint, dans la rue, fière comme une porteuse de trophée, les luites sanglantes que tu

amorceras inévitablement avec ta famille qui ne t'a jamais connu de « steady », tout ce branle-bas passionné que tu vois poindre dans ton existence, tu l'acceptes, tu le sais avec une impatience fébrile. Car il n'y a pas de doute : vous sentez déjà couler entre vous deux des fluides magnétiques, des odeurs d'amours à n'en plus finir.

Vous vous asseyez dans sa Ford, quelques minutes, histoire de vous reposer un peu les oreilles. Clint a trouvé ses cigarettes ; il jongle habilement avec le paquet.

— On n'est pas pressés, dit-il.

Tu dis non, à tout hasard, mais tu as peur et chaud en même temps, ton cœur menace de se décrocher dans ta poitrine. Tu en es donc là : le plus grand moment de ta vie est arrivé.

Sa main droite grimpe sous ton chandail, s'incline jusqu'à tes seins ; ses doigts pressent fiévreusement tes mamelons, et ça te gêne plus qu'autre chose, parce que tu penses soudain aux kleenex que tu a glissés dans ton soutien-gorge pour avoir l'air d'en avoir plus — les hommes aiment tellement ça. Sa main gauche essaie en vain de l'écarter les cuisses que tu tiens crispées comme des barres de fer, et sa bouche n'en finit plus de t'érafler le cou, les lèvres, la nuque. Il est tellement occupé qu'il n'entend pas tes protestations, qu'il ne voit même pas les kleenex dans ton soutien-gorge. « Mon bébé, mon beau bébé... » râle-t-il, et tu te dis qu'il faudrait bien lui avouer que c'est la première fois, après tout, peut-être te ménagerait-il davantage, « ma p'tite minoune... » gémit-il, et avant que tu saches ce qui se passe, il a sorti quelque chose de ses pantalons et il te le darde entre les cuisses, bon gré mal gré. Une douleur fulgurante te traverse et tu tentends, avec ahurissement, émettre

des sons inintelligibles et affolés, les mêmes qui sourdent des lèvres féminines, dans les films cochons, et que tu croyais pourtant associées au plaisir.

Le plus grand moment de ta vie est passé, semble-t-il, puisque Clint se passe la main dans la crinière, rajuste ses pantalons, ouvre la portière, pendant que toi, tu te relèves avec une stupefaction non déguisée.

— T'en viens-tu ?

Il t'attend, debout près de la voiture, les yeux bridés par la fumée légère qui s'échappe de sa cigarette américaine. Tu ne sais pas trop pourquoi, mais tu te sens affreusement embarrassée, humiliée de ne pas avoir été à la hauteur de la situation. Il y a aussi ce liquide poisseux qui suinte le long de tes cuisses et que tu ne peux tout de même pas essuyer du revers de la main, avec désinvolture, comme si tu te grattais le nez.

— J'vas aller aux toilettes.

— O.K.

Un silence énorme s'installe entre vous deux pendant que tu trottes tant bien que mal à ses côtés. Tu ne comprends pas ce qu'il y a de changé, tu ne t'expliques pas la raideur avec laquelle il te donne le bras jusqu'à la salle de bain de chez Popaul. Pour l'instant, tes préoccupations sont tout autres : dans un éclair paniqué, tu viens de te rappeler que tu es menstruée et que tu avais un tampon, à l'endroit même où tu sens maintenant comme un trou béant et douloureux.

Le pied droit juché sur le siège des toilettes, tu te mets à la recherche du tampax perdu. Il doit être rendu loin, parce que tu n'arrives pas à toucher la cordelette.

Personne ne t'a dit ce qu'il fallait faire, dans ce cas-là. Le feuillet explicatif bleu et blanc est muet comme une carpe sur le chapitre des tampons englués.

Évidemment, si Clint avait pensé à le retirer, tu ne serais pas debout comme une dinde à fouiller tes intérieurs avec des doigts rougis par le sang, tu ne sentirais pas monter en toi la peur ancestrale des cancers utérins, des lèpres intestinales, et de toutes les horreurs qui te guettent, toi et ton ventre souillé. Tu ne vas tout de même pas lui en vouloir pour ça : un gars comme Clint Eastwood a autre chose à faire qu'à extraire les tampons du corps des filles ; un gars comme Clint tire son coup, net et précis, et s'en va, le revolver fumant au poing.

Malgré tout, quand tu reviens de la salle de bain et que tu le vois danser un slow avec Michelle, collé à elle comme un timbre, tu ne peux t'empêcher de penser qu'il y a quelque chose d'injuste qui est en train de t'arriver. Mais tu te contentes de prendre ton sac, en te répétant tout bas la réponse liturgique que tu feras à ta mère quand elle te demandera, comme tous les samedis soirs, pourquoi tu arrives si tard.

— Ben non, y s'est rien passé ! Pis y est même pas tard !...

PARTIR PARTIR

Pas de doute, la chambre avait une odeur à elle, très forte, une odeur qui vous saisissait au nez et à la gorge comme la dent cariée d'un vampire — c'est l'image, du moins, qui s'était immédiatement imposée à Benoit sur le seuil de la porte.

— Ça pue êh saint chrême de saint cbole de saint simonac de batêche ! avait fait remarquer Max, qui ne dédaignait pas le lyrisme à l'occasion.

Ti-Caas, lui, était déjà à quatre pattes sur le lit, à renifler les draps défaits avec délectation.

— Les gars, dit-il finalement en se relevant, il y a eu consommation ! et il se mit à sautiller autour de la pièce en vociférant comme un sauvage : « Du sexe ! Du sexe ! On veut du sexe ! »

La chambre était celle du frère de Benoit, Luc, plus âgé de quelques années, seulement, mais que tout un monde, déjà, semblait séparer irréductiblement de ses cadets : il avait une piaule à lui tout seul, dans le

Quartier latin, par-dessus le marché, et une blonde à lui tout seul, perverse et excitante, sûrement c'est ainsi en tout cas qu'ils se plaisaient tous trois à l'imaginer, en contemplant fixement le désordre suggestif du lit. Ti-Cass tira un peu plus sur le drap du dessous, animé par l'espoir grivois d'y faire une découverte plus probante — du type préservatif rempli à ras bord ou petite culotte frillée par l'humidité... — mais tout ce qu'il trouva à dévoiler fut une grande tache de sang, brunie comme un fruit blet, qui achevait de traverser le sommier du lit.

— Ah ! fit Benoît, saisi.

— Ah ! Ah ! affecta de ricaner Ti-Cass.

— Bah ! pontifia Max, avec un haussement d'épaules excessivement supérieur.

Tous trois, le temps d'une interminable seconde, se laissèrent couler à pic dans un malaise singulier, aussi liquide qu'une flaque d'eau. Le sang, décidément, était difficilement conciliable avec les fantasmes sexuels. Le sang appartenait à cette catégorie de choses mystérieuses et angossantes qui ne manquaient jamais de surgir lorsqu'il était question des filles. Benoît se chargea de rabattre les couvertures par dessus les draps sales. Il était le plus réfléchi des trois, le plus responsable, en quelque sorte, ce qui ne constituait malheureusement pas en soi une qualité très estimable, à en croire le succès mitigé qu'il obtenait auprès des filles. L'estime des filles, c'était bien connu, allait aux armoiries à glace et aux pitres débiles. Sans être exactement une armoire à glace, Max exhibait avec fierté quelques muscles plus saillants que nécessaire — ce qui lui avait déjà mérité plusieurs séances de pelotage et au moins une authentique expérience sexuelle — tandis que Ti-Cass maniait admirablement bien les pitreries de singe — ce qui ne

lui avait rien mérité du tout, en fait, sa ressemblance avec le singe ne s'arrêtant hélas pas aux pitreries. Ils étaient amis envers et contre leurs différences depuis une éternité — au moins deux ans —, ils partageaient presque tout, leurs bières illégales, leurs premiers désirs inassouvis, leur fascination pour les courbes des filles et le jeu de Wayne Gretzky, leur terreur face à ces géants redoutables qu'étaient l'avenir et la dure nécessité d'être un jour un homme. Et maintenant, ils s'appréhendaient à partager quelque chose d'autre, une expérience magique et transcendante, ils avaient avalé chacun deux capsules d'un mélange de mescaline, L.S.D. et mica — très très très dément, leur avait assuré Claude, le pusher de la polyvalente — et ils attendaient, dans cette chambre prêtée par Luc, que quelque chose d'inoubliable se passe, comme on attend l'extase ou la rencontre promise avec un extra-terrestre.

La pièce ressemblait au terrier d'un animal étrange. Benoît savait que son frère était un ramasseur de premier ordre, mais à ce point, vraiment, cela frisait l'authentique génie. Dans un minuscule un et demi (un et trois quarts, si l'on était assez généreux pour y inclure le placard qui faisait office de cuisine), Luc avait trouvé le moyen d'empiler tout ce qu'il avait ramené de ses voyages antérieurs au Mexique et en Amérique du Sud : petits meubles de bois qu'il suffisait de regarder un peu sévèrement pour qu'ils se mettent à craquer comme de vieilles jointures, terrines en terre cuite peinturlurée, bestioles à plumes et à poils qui avaient l'air plus vivantes que mortes, couvertures de laine brute en nombre suffisant pour envelopper deux colonies entières de petits scouts frigorifiés, machettes d'acier luisant avec férocité, et même une grande flûte à multiples sections tubulaires de laquelle on ne pouvait

tirer aucun son digne de ce nom — mais il est vrai qu'aucun d'eux trois ne savait jouer.

Ti-Cass se mit à se pavaner dans la pièce, un pot de terre cuite renversé sur le crâne.

— Regardez, les gars... Un chapeau melon argentin ! Le dernier cri au lac Titicaca !

— C'est un pot de chambre, innocent ! Tu sens pas les étrons qui sont en train de te dégoutter sur le nez ?...

Ti-Cass, inquiet, fit un geste pour se débarrasser du pot, tandis que Max en faisait un pour le lui enfoncer plus profondément sur le crâne, ce qui eut pour résultat de faire valser le pot jusqu'à l'autre bout de la pièce où se tenait Benoît, par bonheur, qui le saisit en plein vol et le serra sur son cœur comme un ballon de football.

— Fiou ! dirent-ils à peu près simultanément, et ils se mirent à rire sans effort, heureux de cette espèce de complicité qui ne faisait jamais défaut, entre eux, même dans les moments les plus anodins. Benoît remarqua le premier que l'intérieur de sa gorge se comportait bizarrement — on aurait dit un goulot détraqué, ou plutôt une chose bougeant de sa propre volonté, en dedans, se levant sur elle-même au début de l'essouffement pour en bloquer l'entrée.

— Ça commence ! Je pense que ça commence... énonça-t-il avec une gravité qui le surprit lui-même, et les autres approuvèrent tout aussi gravement, car l'expérience, pour exaltante qu'elle parût à prime abord, les angoissait plus qu'ils ne voulaient l'admettre. Il y avait des tas de gars qui étaient restés « accrochés » sur l'acide, sans parler de tous les « bad trips », qu'on leur avait racontés par le menu — le grand Marcel, entre autres, avait eu des hallucinations si horribles qu'il ne

pouvait désormais plus supporter ni l'obscurité ni le silence, sa sœur disait qu'il pissait au lit comme un bébé, depuis, mais allez donc savoir si c'était vrai, elle était réputée pour ses fabulations débridées — TOUTES les filles, d'ailleurs, mentaient avec une telle facilité...

Benoît s'assit et se tâta l'estomac, précautionneusement : l'engourdissement de sa gorge s'était propagé jusque-là ; une sorte de nœud douloureux, à la fois brûlant et glacé, s'entortillait graduellement dans son ventre. En même temps, il eut l'impression — amusante, celle-là — que ses mâchoires claquaient toutes seules, prises d'une frénésie incontrôlable, et il dut se toucher le menton à deux reprises pour s'assurer qu'il n'en était rien. Il chercha des mots précis pour décrire ce qu'il ressentait (il s'était dit qu'il noterait scrupuleusement par écrit, étape par étape, toutes les sensations éprouvées au cours de l'expérience) mais cela lui apparaissait déjà fastidieux, et la sensation s'était d'ailleurs modifiée d'elle-même : l'engourdissement se doublait maintenant d'un tremblement général qui lui semblait émaner du centre de son corps. De toute façon, il ne se rappelait plus où il avait laissé son stylo et son cahier.

En levant les yeux, il vit que Max et Ti-Cass étaient accroupis, eux aussi, au petit bonheur sur le plancher. Ti-Cass était coincé dans la section « Plumes et Poils » de la pièce, et une grande aigrette d'oiseau exotique lui barrait subitement le front. Max avait la tête appuyée contre le pied du lit, et il se farfouillait sombrement dans l'entre-jambe. Ils levèrent en même temps un regard vague sur Benoît, et ils ne purent s'empêcher tous trois d'éclater de rire, tant leurs visages lugubres étaient irrésistibles.

— Prenez de l'acide, qu'y disaient, grogna Ti-Cass, affaire derrière son aigrette. Vous aurez un fun rare, qu'y disaient.

— Défoncez-vous, qu'y disaient, surenchérit Max, vous planerez comme des anges gonflés à l'hélium, qu'y disaient...

— Vous hallucinerez des choses crampanes, qu'y disaient...

— Vous verrez la vie en rose nanane picoté mauve, qu'y disaient...

— Vous atteindrez l'orgasme vingt-quatre fois en vingt-quatre secondes, qu'y disaient...

Ils furent secoués, tout à coup, par un fou rire dévastateur, quelque chose de quasiment monstrueux qui ne semblait pas vouloir s'arrêter un jour. Benoît fut convaincu que ses boyaux y resteraient. Les autres n'étaient pas mieux : Ti-Cass hoquetait et bavait dans les plumes de toucan, Max se flanguait de grands coups de pied de lit sur la tête, le rire était devenu un spasme incontrôlable qui partait et revenait comme un boom-rang. Benoît s'aperçut qu'il était debout, sans se rappeler s'être levé, et qu'il marchait béatement en rond dans la pièce, en proie à une euphorie totale, une euphorie qu'il aurait pu tartiner sur du pain comme du beurre de peanuts. Ils parlaient tous à la fois, maintenant, volubiles par plaisir et par nécessité, leurs mots s'entrechoquaient et se complétaient avec une apparente incohérence, mais tout était clair, pourtant, parler donnait des sensations physiques délicieuses, autant que rire et respirer.

— L'air est devenu comme de l'eau, on passe à travers, on l'enfile, on dirait qu'on marche en clapotant, filic-flac !...

— Dans le sens du courant, oui, avec cinquante mille ceintures de sauvetage, oui, oui...

— Regardez ! On nage dans l'air, on erre dans l'âge...

— Filic-Flac... Terre ! Où est la terre ? Où est passée la terre ?...

Ils avaient atteint un autre palier, depuis quelques instants. Ils s'enfonçaient dans quelque chose de terriblement insondable, qui échapperait à leur contrôle de plus en plus, ils le sentaient. Benoît s'appuya sur le lit et il vit distinctement que rien n'était plus immobile, autour : les meubles se dandinaient sur leurs pattes, les plumes étaient devenues des oiseaux entiers, immenses, qui battaient frénétiquement de l'aile, et la lampe, insignifiante petite lampe de papier de riz qui n'éclairait que chétivement la pièce, auparavant, jetait dans l'air des flambées de lumières pourpres, violettes, d'une surnaturelle beauté. Contenez-vous un peu, se dit Benoît, et c'était exactement ça : les choses échappaient à leur contour, à leur contenant. L'âme des choses, comme trop longtemps étranglée dans ses rigides limites, s'enfuyait de tous bords, tous côtés. Peut-être qu'après tout, la lampe avait une âme de feu d'artifice, et le tabouret, qui s'écrasait goutte à goutte sur lui-même comme un potiron pourri, une âme liquide et noire qui ne demandait qu'à être enfin répandue par terre. C'était là une pensée singulière, tout à fait digne d'être notée — car le stylo et le cahier avaient miraculeusement réintégré les genoux de Benoît —, mais encore fallait-il pouvoir s'y arrêter suffisamment, ce qui n'était pas le cas : tout continuait de gigoter autour et au-dedans de Benoît, chaque brise de perception qu'il tentait de retenir se multipliait à son tour en myriades de petites choses affolées, s'échevelant dans toutes les directions comme des atomes surpris en plein travail de fabrication de matière. Il ramena les yeux sur ses genoux et mal lui en prit, car ce qu'il y aperçut glaya ce

qui restait de sang dans ses veines : un serpent était en train de ramper en direction de son ventre, un gros serpent à tête blanche déroulait inexorablement ses anneaux sur les cuisses de Benoît, la gueule comme un gouffre noir, béante, tendue, horrible. Benoît se mit à hurler, mais les hurlements mouraient immédiatement en franchissant ses lèvres et il ne s'entendit émettre que de petits sons chuintants, discrets comme des soupirs de bébé. Que faisaient les autres, qu'ils ne volaient pas à son secours ? Benoît n'eut pas la force de quitter des yeux le reptile, dont les écailles serrées viraient maintenant du bleu violacé au beige maladif, et tout à coup, il sut que ce qu'il regardait avec tant d'effroi était son bras à lui, son bras qui se mouvait avec une vie qui lui était propre, revêtu du vieux sweatshirt bleu foncé avec, au bout, la main nue, crispée, sa main à lui qu'il n'avait même pas reconnue pendant ces interminables secondes (ou minutes ? ou heures ?...). Il fallait faire attention, la drogue s'était infiltrée en lui comme une pellicule de gaz, il fallait faire très attention, car tout ce qu'il regardait menaçait de se métamorphoser brusquement pour le meilleur et pour le pire, en fragment d'horreur apocalyptique ou de beauté arachnéenne, cela dépendait de lui. Quand il regarda de nouveau son bras, rasséréné de constater qu'il gardait encore la conscience aiguë de son état — il était STONE et tout cela n'était que Prime, Hallucination et C^{tr}, son vral moi, intact, contemplant de haut le spectacle avec un sourire jubilant —, il revit le serpent sous la forme d'un aimable reptile, parcouru cocassement de courants roses lumineux (Mes veines ! se rengorgea Benoît en se félicitant de sa sagacité) et harnaché d'un bizarre collier sombre (Ma montre ! ricana Benoît à voix haute, et les rires de Max et Ti-Cass, occupés depuis tout ce temps à l'observer, en petit bonhomme dans la pièce, se déclenchèrent aussitôt comme une cataracte).

— Tremblay, t'es inénarrable ! hurla Max, ployé en deux.

— Tremblay, t'es le type le plus hallucinable en ville ! gloussa Ti-Cass, crampé par terre.

Ils s'en tenaient les côtes. Benoît, perdu, papillota stupidement dans leur direction.

— Qu'est-ce qui... ? Qu'est-ce que ?...

Les deux autres formaient une masse compacte qui s'agitait gaiement à l'autre bout de la pièce. Benoît continua de les regarder jusqu'à ne plus reconnaître ni leur voix, ni leur visage, ni rien de ce qui faisait qu'ils étaient Max et Ti-Cass, ses seuls amis, jusqu'à ne plus voir que leur masse bruyante et hostile à l'autre bout de la pièce.

— Ma parole, ma sacrée parole ! L'a l'air d'un zouave qui a chuté dans ses culottes bouffantes ! L'a l'air d'un chat qui a pissé dans le son !...

— L'a l'air de quelqu'un qui attend que des ailes y poussent dans le derrière ! You-hou ! Tremblay ! Rouvre ton parachute ! Redescends à ter-er-er... Tremblay-é-é-é...

Ils riaient, les mains en porte-voix au-dessus de leur tête, feignant d'interpeller quelqu'un qui se serait perdu dans des espaces intergalactiques. C'était probablement un rire amical, il leur arrivait si souvent, comme ça, par jeu, de se liguer deux contre un, Max-Ti-Cass contre Benoît, ou, plus rarement, Max-Benoît contre Ti-Cass — mais jamais, au grand jamais, Ti-Cass-Benoît contre le grand, l'invincible Max... — et le troisième se contentait de rire aussi, un peu plus jaune, il va sans dire, en attendant que le match inégal prenne fin. Benoît voyait les choses un peu différemment, cette fois-ci. Peut-être les voyait-il tout simplement comme

elles devaient être vues : ses deux amis n'étaient pas ses amis, voilà tout. Avec une sorte d'acuité souffrante — due sans doute à l'extraordinaire sensibilité que lui conferrait la drogue —, il perçut tout ce qu'il y avait de malencontreux dans leur relation, et il promena un regard critique sur les deux taches floues qui ne finissaient pas de grouiller à quelques pieds de lui : d'un côté, le grand, l'intouchable Max, installé insolemment dans la vie comme une espèce d'ayakollah (et, en effet, comment ne pas admirer Max pour son habilité à tout casser au collège comme à la drague, au laboratoire comme au gymnase, récoltant du même souffle tranquille les médailles olympiques, les filles et les A+ — et comment ne pas le haïr, aussi, pour la même raison ?...), de l'autre, l'hilaré petit chafouin Ti-Cass, occupé à nageroter le plus étroitement possible dans le sillage de Max, à l'aide de grimaces et de courbettes irrésistibles (comment ne pas mépriser quelque'un pour qui rien n'était jamais triste ou compliqué ?...).

Cela le rendit mélancolique, mais d'une mélancolie très supportable, quasiment moelleuse, et il s'étendit de tout son long pour mieux goûter la tiédeur de ce sentiment nouveau pour lui : il était seul au monde, il serait toujours seul, les autres formeraient éternellement des masses compactes en face de lui (« l'im a pour lonesome cowboy... », se mit à chanter fort incongrûment Lucky Luïke à cheval dans sa tête, et il se demanda tout à coup quel effet cela faisait d'avoir un cheval fidèle comme un colley sur qui galoper pendant des heures, n'avaient-ils pas, d'ailleurs, Max, Ti-Cass et lui-même, échafaudé le projet mirifique de s'acheter un jour, dans leur lointaine adulerie, une écurie et une ferme communes, bien sûr cela se passait avant, bien avant qu'il se rende compte de leur...? de leur quoi, déjà ?... Ses pensées s'arrêtèrent net, d'elles-mêmes. Quelqu'un venait d'allumer la radio. Ça devait être de la musique,

cet agglomérat de petites notes chatoyantes qui se mirent à le parcourir de la tête aux pieds comme un frisson, bien qu'il n'eût jamais entendu rien de tel. « Entendu » ne voulait plus rien dire, ici : il n'entendait pas la musique, soudainement, il la sentait en train de le posséder physiquement jusqu'à la moelle, tandis que des chevaux à tête de femme, aux sourires pleins de bienveillance, caracolait gracieusement devant lui, sur le mur. Il voyait aussi des buffles, des flamants bleus, des chameaux, et même une couple de serpents qui lui adressèrent un clin d'œil de complicité en passant, le tout défilant dans une superbe incohérence, au gré de la musique, illuminé par des couleurs de fin ou de début du monde.

Il sut alors ce qu'était la jouissance, une jouissance généralisée à laquelle participait aussi bien le poil noir de ses mollets que le tissu cartilagineux de son larynx, un délire des sens vertigineux près duquel le spasme timide de ses laborieuses masturbations n'était que de la crotte de mulot. Tout ça en valait désespérément la peine, oui, il affronterait encore dix mille serpents pour que son corps revivre l'extase électrique de ce moment et il se rendit compte, aux couinements haletants qu'ils poussaient, que Max et Ti-Cass ressentait la même chose, allongés à ses côtés. Il finit par se lever, après un siècle, enjamba comme dans un rêve les corps inertes des deux autres, et, toujours porté par les notes chatoyantes, se dirigea vers ce qui était vraisemblablement la cuisine, quoique aucun objet reconnaissable ne pût lui en apporter la confirmation. Ses jambes — mais étaient-elles bien à lui, les deux colonnes qu'il voyait se frayer un chemin en toute autonomie d'un côté et de l'autre de la pièce, franchir lestement des obstacles que lui discernait à peine —, ses jambes évirèrent sans effort la grenouille géante et les lémuriers gigantesques qui rampaient sur le sol à sa rencontre et le conduisirent

sain et sauf près de la fenêtre, où il s'appuya avec soulagement. Il ne fallait pas regarder fixement les choses, se morigéna-t-il, il fallait au contraire les effleurer extrêmement vite d'un oeil clignotant si on ne voulait pas qu'elles prennent des formes fantasmagiques — il savait pertinemment, par exemple, que la grenouille et les lémuriers géants n'étaient que de braves petits meubles de bois qui s'amusaient à essayer de lui faire peur — et à force de s'exercer à déplacer rapidement sa tête et ses prunelles d'un point à l'autre, il parvint à une vision à peu près acceptable de son environnement immédiat. La musique provenait de l'autre côté de la fenêtre, là où une nuit claire engluait les toits des maisons, les terrasses désertes, les escaliers en colimaçon. Quelle heure pouvait-il être ? Il n'y avait personne à l'extérieur, excepté un vieil homme qui se berçait sur son balcon, directement en face de la fenêtre où se tenait Benoît. Depuis combien de temps étaient-ils occupés à ne rien à faire d'autre que de « tripper » dans cette pièce, et s'étaient-ils conduits assez convenablement pour qu'aucun voisin ne vienne faire des histoires à Luc, plus tard ? Benoît s'étonna de se poser des questions si raisonnables dans un moment si onirique, alors qu'il n'arrivait pas à se débarrasser de la flottante sensation de se mouvoir en double, et même en triple, comme dans un film hors foyer.

La musique provenait du balcon du vieux. C'était étrange qu'en ville et à cette heure avancée (quelle heure ?...), quelqu'un se permette d'écouter la radio à plein volume (quelle radio ? il n'y avait pas de radio visible sur le balcon). Le vieil homme, en camisole sans manches, le visage rugueux et souriant sous sa calotte de cheveux blancs, se balançait sur sa chaise au rythme de la musique. À y regarder de plus près, il n'avait pas de berceuse, ni de chaise d'aucune sorte, il se balançait simplement sur lui-même, « comme font les vrais

mélomanes », se dit stupidement Benoît, car il commençait à percevoir l'incongru de la situation et du bonhomme lui-même, se trémoussant en plein cœur de la nuit au rythme d'une musique-fantôme endablée, vêtu d'une simple camisole sans manches — n'était-on pas en octobre, et les nuits n'étaient-elles pas déjà terriblement fraîches ? se rappela soudain Benoît, avec un certain détachement. Le plus étonnant, sans doute, était la netteté avec laquelle il voyait la scène : le balcon en fer forgé aux moulures défraîchies, le visage plissé du vieux qui souriait, le déhanchement harmonieux de son vieux corps souple, et jusqu'aux nervures des feuilles (de tabac ?) qu'il triturait de ses deux mains entrouvertes.

La musique s'arrêta, tout à coup. Le vieux interrompit ses trémoussements et lança un regard tranquille à Benoît, à travers la fenêtre. Benoît reçut comme un coup de poing en pleine figure ce regard — qui n'était ni bienveillant, ni acrimonieux, simplement chargé de quelque chose d'intense qui dépassait les sentiments — et il recula au fond de la pièce, effrayé, conscients de franchir les dernières limites d'un état qui frisait maintenant la folie.

— J'ai envie de redescendre, je veux redescendre, coassa Ti-Cass quelque part à côté de lui et Benoît le chercha des yeux et ne trouva d'abord qu'une enveloppe de vêtements à un mètre à peine de son épaule, puis Ti-Cass lui-même, comme rétréci à l'intérieur de son corps et claquant frénétiquement des dents.

— Oh Jésus, oh baptême, je veux redescendre, maman, baptême, maman, continuait de gémir Ti-Cass.

Benoît dut s'y prendre à deux fois avant de réussir à lui saisir le bras — il avait la curieuse impression d'enfoncer ses doigts dans de la gélatine — et là, il

secoua le plus fort qu'il put, en articulait d'une voix de fausset qui n'était pas la sienne :

— Ça va bien, ça va très bien, tranquillise-toi, c'est un voyage, t'es seulement parti pour un voyage, un voyage, un voyage...

Le mot « voyage », en particulier, que Benoît répétait avec une incompréhensible insistance, sonnait creux et déplacé, comme un objet métallique que l'on se serait obstiné à heurter contre une coupe de cristal. Benoît le répéta quand même, encore et encore, tout en regardant Max qui grisait quasiment à ses pieds, les yeux rétrécis, le souffle court, sans doute aux prises avec des fantômes intérieurs.

— C'est un beau voyage qu'on fait, un voyage, voyage, voyage... et Benoît fit un effort surhumain pour faire faire cette voix atgrélette qui jaillissait de lui contre sa volonté.

Max se dressa soudain sur son séant et laissa flotter dans l'espace une grande main de visionnaire.

— Le mur ! fit-il faiblement.

Le seul mur nu de la pièce, qui se trouvait exactement en face d'eux, était fait de lattes de bois très pâle, d'un beige poussiéreux, avec, à intervalles réguliers, des nœuds qui ressemblaient à des clous de girofle, et voilà que ce mur galopait à leur rencontre. Tout le pan de bois s'apprêtait à leur fondre dessus comme une toile de tente démontée. Benoît eut le réflexe puéril de se rentrer la tête dans les épaules, pour amoindrir le choc, bien qu'il ne pût s'attendre à autre chose qu'à être réduit en bouillie.

Il n'y eut pas de choc. Le mur arriva sur eux à une vitesse foudroyante, et ils se trouverent avalés par l'étui de bois, confondus avec les clous de girofle et la

surface poussiéreuse, appartenant au mur, désormais, au même titre que le tissu ligneux, que la latte, que le nœud arrondi. Tout autour d'eux, cependant, la surface poussiéreuse devenait une terre, une grande plaine désertique au centre de laquelle ils se tenaient tous trois, balourds, vacillant sur leurs jambes, les yeux éblouis par la lumière crue. Ils marchaient. Ils marchaient sur cette terre sablonneuse qui s'étirait à perte de vue, autour, et ils avaient une destination précise, ils s'acheminaient vers quelque chose de jointain, en soufflant et en ahannant. C'était étrange et exaltant, comme de se mouvoir tout éveillé dans un rêve. Benoît avançait péniblement, plus vite que les deux autres, néanmoins, et tout en se sentant plier les jambes, poser un pied devant l'autre dans le mouvement mécanique de la marche, il se voyait aussi de dos, il voyait leurs trois sillouettes pitoyables se découper sur l'horizon immense, fluide, comme si une partie de lui était restée derrière, en témoin froid et attentif.

Cette partie de lui enregistrerait tous les détails avec objectivité, suivait d'un regard d'entomologiste leur progression à tous trois, zigzaguant sans fin sur la terre décolorée, notait sans effarement qu'il y avait quelque chose de différent dans leur allure générale — leurs vêtements étaient pourtant les mêmes que dans la « vraie » vie, sweatshirt bleu foncé de Benoît, chemise ample et blanche de Max, gilet rayé de Ti-Cass, avec des pantalons en accordéon : c'était autre chose, une sorte de lueur diffuse qui s'était allumée en eux, les rendant presque transparents, porteurs d'une substance claire que Benoît savait avec certitude être leur MOI, à chacun d'eux, leur essence véritable, illuminée comme un vitrail.

Cette substance lumineuse se mit à se préciser davantage, sous le regard curieux de Benoît, à se

départager nettement en zones blanches, colorées, en zébrures d'ombres qui semblaient toutes contenir la signification profonde de quelque chose (mais de quoi ? de QUOI ?). Benoît remarqua que les feux follets qui dansaient à l'intérieur de chacun d'eux étaient diffé-rents les uns des autres ; celui de Max, notamment, se composait de deux entités distinctes : un centre petit et très brillant, sur lequel emplétait graduellement une ceinture grise comme un gros nimbus. Cela le frappa tellement qu'il voulut se tourner vers Max, pour vérifier, mais n'y réussit pas ; il eut seulement conscience de leur présence physique, à tous les deux, respirant lourdement à ses côtés, et il devina que leur regard s'attachait aussi de façon obsessionnelle à un point fixe, devant. Max marmonna quelque chose, d'une voix endormie, puis reprit, plus fort, avec le même accent léthargique :

— ... fatigué... Suis fatigué...

— Quoi ? s'entendit tout à coup bredouiller Benoît. Quoi ?

— ... Trop loin... C'est trop loin... (C'était toujours la voix de Max, maintenant chargée de tristesse.) Y arriverai pas, jamais... Trop fatigué...

Il soupira, profondément, et ne dit plus rien.

Devant, ils marchaient tous trois avec effort, leurs lumières dodelinantes décroissant lentement dans le lointain, s'acheminant vers quelque destin fatidique — celle de Max traînant de plus en plus derrière, avec cette ceinture d'ombre qui semblait lui alourdir le pas. Le moi observateur et rationnel de Benoît réalisa que tout cela était aussi réel que son propre sweatshirt bleu foncé, que la chambre de Luc, que l'odeur de renfermé qui y flottait comme un encens, qu'ils avaient basculé tous trois dans une réalité parallèle qui existait vraiment

QUELQUE PART, en dehors et en dépit du quotidien aveugle de leur vie.

Après, Max se mit à hurler — le Max assis en chair et en os dans la pièce —, et cela coupa court à la vision de la plaine et de leurs trois silhouettes lumineuses ; le mur redevenit ce qu'il était vraiment (ou ce qu'il était AUSSI ?), une surface de bois latté grumelé de clous de girofle. (Plus tard, au mois de février suivant, lorsque Max mourrait brutalement des suites d'un accident de hockey, Benoît ressortirait des limbes ce fragment brûlant qu'il aurait oublié, et comprendrait soudain qu'ils avaient vu à l'œuvre la Mort de Max, rôdant comme un nuage et lui grignotant sa lumière — et cela lui donnerait par la suite des insomnies bien pires que celles du grand Marcel...).

Max n'arrêtait pas de hurler. La chambre avait repris ses contours presque familiers — quelques objets, encore, faisaient mine de sortir de leurs gonds lorsqu'on les regardait trop fixement, mais c'était tout. Ti-Cass s'était assis sur le lit, les dents claquantes, les mains sur les oreilles, en proie à un début de crise de nerfs, et Max, lui, hurlait comme un forcené, debout au milieu de la pièce, sourd à tout ce qui n'était pas son cauchemar personnel. Benoît ne sut trop que faire pendant un moment — ses tentatives de persuasion et ses appels au calme échouant tous platement — et à force de tourner désespérément en rond dans la pièce ainsi qu'un chien au bout de sa laisse, ses yeux finirent par rejoindre, au-delà de la fenêtre de la cuisine, le balcon d'en face sur lequel se tenait toujours, depuis un temps immémorial, semblait-il, le vieux en canisole sans manches. Il faisait jour, maintenant, un début de jour hâve et sans chaleur. Le vieux avait entre les dents une sorte d'instrument de musique qu'il actionnait

silencieusement, puisqu'aucun son ne parvenait jusqu'à Benoît. Il lui désigna l'instrument avec un regard d'intelligence. (Plus tard, Benoît jurerait ses grands dieux que cet épisode — le vieux et le balcon — n'était qu'une autre hallucination, que cela ne devait, ne POUVAIT être réel...)

C'est ainsi que Benoît, sans trop savoir pourquoi ni comment, s'empara de la grande flûte de Luc, et qu'il se mit à jouer, toujours sans savoir comment ni pourquoi. Les sons qu'il émettait ressemblaient à des cris d'épervier, à des froissements de feuilles, aussi, et il joua longtemps, tandis que Max et Ti-Cass finissaient par s'endormir, le visage abandonné, les muscles lâches, et que l'ombre charbonneuse de la folie, qui tournoyait au-dessus d'eux, finissait par disparaître en s'éfilochant comme une buée.

Quand ils redescendirent dans la rue Saint-Jean, encore très légèrement empêtés dans les relents de la drogue, ils ignoraient que deux jours entiers s'étaient écoulés — et que le père de Ti-Cass le faisait rechercher partout par la police... C'était une fin de journée tède et parfumée, un ultime rougeolement de l'été des Indiens avant que tout ne se recroqueville sous l'hiver éternel. Max, Ti-Cass et Benoît marchaient tous trois de front sur le trottoir, épaule contre épaule, bousculant avec ostentation ceux qui ne s'écartaient pas sur leur passage. Ils avaient retrouvé leur hilarité du début — et quelque chose en plus, un sentiment de fraternelle solidarité qui les inclinait à s'envoyer de grands coups de coude dans les côtes, pour le simple plaisir de se toucher. Les innombrables piétons gesticulaient et se traînaient de vitrine en vitrine, « comme un troupeau de vaches en train de faire son Chemin de Croix », fit remarquer sentencieusement Max, et ils jubilèrent de

se sentir si différents des autres, si supérieurs à la pauvre foule obtuse qui respirait la banalité. Valait-il la peine de vivre en ignorant toujours l'aspect magique des choses, en se contentant éternellement d'un misérable premier degré de perception ? La réponse était non. En ce moment même, les maisons exhalaient un parfum de musc et d'ode sauvage, le vent avait la couleur de la bruyère, le soleil couchant chantait un oratorio triomphant qu'ils entendaient par les oreilles, tout avait un sens et une beauté prodigieuse qu'ils étaient les seuls à percevoir.

Ils aperçurent Luc, en passant, attablé au Chanteau-teuil en compagnie de quelques vieux dans la trentaine, tous capifs de leurs bières et d'une conversation d'une mystérieuse importance. Benoît s'arrêta un instant — Max et Ti-Cass s'arrêtèrent aussi, du même coup, détail non négligeable qui renseigna Benoît sur le nouveau statut de leader qui venait de lui être tacitement conféré...

— On se retrouve ici, décida-t-il impulsivement. Même jour, même heure, dans dix ans. Dix. Cochon qui s'en dédit. D'accord ?

Les deux autres approuvèrent, solennellement. Bien sûr, ce n'était qu'un jeu, ils n'iraient jamais à ce rendez-vous, tout cela était si merveilleusement loin — d'ailleurs, Max n'aurait jamais trente ans, ni même vingt —, mais comment pouvaient-ils le savoir, la soirée était si belle, le bonheur si présent, que Benoît se mit à danser dans la rue, sous les rires et les applaudissements des deux autres. (Un peu plus tard, Luc ferait à Benoît des révélations excessivement troublantes à propos du balcon, qui n'existait pas, du voisin d'en face de sa cuisine, qui était une voisine, et de la flûte qu'il avait achetée à Tijuana, des années auparavant, à un vieil Indien excentrique, moitié guérisseur, moitié musicien,

qui s'habillait toujours d'une vieille camisole sans manches et qui se trémoussait sous la lune pour appeler les esprits, et Benoît pâlirait comme un linge et refuserait de répondre aux questions de Luc...) Mais cela, ce serait plus tard, et entre temps, Benoît dansait, dansait dans la rue, aux prises avec la nuit tiède et l'énergie de l'espoir. Tout viendrait à point, l'amour, le bonheur, l'éternité, il aurait un destin impeccable, comment ne pas y croire, l'avenir était un beau ruban de satin bleu sur lequel il suffirait de tirer pour que tout arrive.

DERRIÈRE LE SOUPIRAIL

Les yeux de Bleu s'enduisent d'étincelles flottantes lorsqu'il regarde comme ça de côté vers le soupirail étroit d'où suintent des odeurs mouillées d'asphalte et d'arbre, les yeux de Bleu s'amentissent jusqu'à devenir deux minces lattes de lumière, comme si tout le jour était enfermé là, entre les prunelles brillantes, et qu'il n'en pouvait plus de se taire. Françoise n'a pas encore ouvert le carreau, plongée dans une sorte d'ankylose muette qui la soude aux rideaux et à la lumière hâve du dehors, Françoise ne bouge pas et Bleu se tasse derrière elle en guettant de la tête le mouvement sinueux de ses mains qui se replient sur l'étoffe des rideaux sans jamais rompre l'apparente immobilité de son corps.

Dehors, la brume se fige par instants entre les interstices des pavés, la brume monte comme une fumée languissante le long des briques délabrées de la maison Martel. Il ne fait pas jour encore, mais Bleu s'impatiente entre les jambes de Françoise et Françoise ouvre brusquement le carreau, bruit cassé du bois,

— Calvaire, Benoît, bout de cri, ON DORT ! Tu rappelleras demain matin ! Es-tu malade, es-tu saoul ?

— Je suis gai, dis-je sans gaieté de cœur. Est-ce que tu savais que j'étais gai ?

Mon père, à Amos, Abitibi, ne semble pas comprendre, alors je me mets à lui expliquer laborieusement :

— « Gai » dans le sens de pédale, comprends-tu, de fifi, de tapette...

Il comprend. Il raccroche. Je ne sais pas d'autres numéros de téléphone par cœur, alors je sors. Je sors dehors où c'est la nuit et où tous les chemins ne mènent nulle part, joyeux joyeux joyeux Noël.

SANS CŒUR ET SANS REPROCHE

Autant vous le dire tout de suite, les histoires d'amour ne m'intéressent pas outre mesure et ne titillent qu'exceptionnellement mes glandes lacrymales. Je parle des histoires des autres, bien sûr, celles que Guy des Cars s'obstinera à usiner jusqu'à ce que Cupidon en personne, l'estorçac révilé, finisse un beau jour par le larder de flèches pour le faire faire, celles que la télé et le cinéma nous étalent bien laborieusement et bien flasquement sur l'écran pour peupler nos soirées de rêves sucrés et granulés. Les histoires d'amour, c'est personnel, si vous voulez mon avis : ou bien on en a une, ou bien on n'en a pas et si on n'en a pas, la vie est assez échevrante comme ça sans qu'un sadique sirupeux vienne vous roucouler la sienne dans les oreilles. Mais si on en a une, eh bien c'est autre chose, tout autre chose, on connaît soudain le poids et la fragilité immenses de l'amour et tous les mots sont impuissants à décrire les remous vertigineux qui nous aspirent vers le haut, et l'on se fout bien des histoires des autres, à ce moment-là, vu que l'on voyage béatement dans des

régions interstellaires qui sont peut-être la seule réalité qui vaille, après tout. Mais passons. Je m'en vais quand même vous raconter l'histoire d'amour de Françoise et Benoît, parce que vous êtes des romantiques incertains — je le vois bien à vos yeux humidifiés par l'émotion dès que de beaux jeunes gens insignifiants font mine, devant vous, de se bécoter le museau, la lippe et la voûte palatine —, parce que les tranches de cœur frais apprêtées à n'importe quelle abominable sauce constituent toujours votre plat de résistance favori, bande d'anthropophages sentimentaux, et pour toutes sortes d'autres raisons qui ne vous concernent en rien.

Entendons-nous bien, cependant : il s'agit d'une histoire banale dans laquelle les rebondissements dramatiques ne foisonnent pas. Les héros n'ont d'héroïque que le nom : pas le moindre petit cas de leucémie rampante et insidieuse, pas la moindre lésion cérébrale et fatale chez l'un et l'autre des protagonistes. Des gens normaux, ordinaires, aussi en santé que leur permettent les abus d'alcool, de nicotine, de chanvre indien et de lipides de toutes sortes qu'ils ne peuvent s'empêcher de commettre pour tirer un peu de plaisir de l'existence. Vous voilà prévenus, ne venez pas me casser les pieds si le dévouement n'est pas assez sanglant à votre goût.

Il existe actuellement dans la jeune intelligentsia moderne toute une clique d'esprits tortueux et perfectionnistes qui se compliquent incroyablement la vie, au nom de l'Autonomie. J'y reviendrai. Qu'il suffise de mentionner, pour l'instant, que Françoise et Benoît étaient de ceux-là lorsqu'ils se sont rencontrés, pour la première fois, dans un petit bar de la rue Saint-Jean que

je ne nommerai pas, à moins que le propriétaire n'accepte de me verser à boire gratuitement pendant au moins dix jours d'affilée.

C'était un lundi soir d'hiver, calme et quelconque. Dès que Françoise était entrée dans le bar, flanquée d'une amie à l'allure suicidaire, ses pas somnambulesques — hasard ou fatalité — l'avaient guidée tout au fond, juste à côté de la banquette où lisait paisiblement Benoît. Il y avait aussi sur la banquette, près de Benoît, une créature mal définie amochée par l'alcool, une sorte de vieil hobo pacifique que l'on retrouve fréquemment dans les bars et qui s'avèrent parfois docteurs en mathématiques ou ex-détenteurs d'un prix Nobel de la paix. Françoise s'assit sans regarder personne, l'amie s'échoua à son côté dans un plour mélodramatique, Benoît ne leva pas les yeux de son livre et le hobo marmonna quelques paroles inintelligibles. Le temps passa.

L'amie — appelons-la Marie, ça ne sera jamais qu'une figurante dans notre histoire — débitait à Françoise un chapelet ininterrompu de plaintes monocordes sur la vie, l'amour, la mort et toutes ces choses si profondes depuis un assez long moment, vraisemblablement, du moins à en croire le silence accablé de Françoise, lorsque le hobo poussa une espèce de râle guttural et un peu effrayant. Toutes les têtes se tournèrent vers lui, y compris celles d'un petit groupe de personnes — les seuls autres clients de la place — installées à quelques tables de là. Le septuagénaire éthylique ne venait pas de mourir banalement d'une crise cardiaque. Au contraire, ses joues avaient pris une coloration violente, soudain, et il montrait d'un doigt

stupéfait les murs du bar, en continuant à émettre des sons dou loureux: « Affreux!... finit-il par glapir distinctement. Affreusement horrible!... »

Les têtes se détournèrent du hobo pour converger avec curiosité vers la cause apparente de ce grand débordement d'émotion: les murs du bar. Lesdits murs du bar ne présentaient en soi rien de particulier, si ce n'est qu'ils étaient recouverts des toiles d'un artiste de la région. Il est vrai que l'artiste en question versait joyeusement dans le barbouillage informe et agressivement bancal, mais qui peut se vanter, en notre époque troublée, permissive et culturellement médiocre, de savoir discerner le beau du laid? Bon. Le hobo en avait contre l'art de l'artiste en question, il désapprouvait nettement. Le petit groupe de personnes installées à quelques tables de Française, Benoît et compagnie, se replongèrent, de mauvaise humeur dans leur discussion intestine, Benoît émit un ricanement approbateur à l'endroit du hobo, Française s'attarda avec amusement sur les méchants dessins exposés, l'amie Marie tenta de reprendre son déprimant soliloque, bref, tout faillit rentrer dans l'ordre. Le vieux ne l'entendait pas de cette oreille: il se leva et se mit à bramer furieusement des injures à l'endroit des tableaux, allant même jusqu'à menacer de les éventrer si on ne les enlevait pas de sa vue.

— Des cochonneries! hurlait-il. Des z'horribles z'horreurs... Des laideurs qui font mal au cœur!...

Et ainsi de suite. Or, parmi le petit groupe de personnes installées, comme je vous disais, à quelques tables de là, se trouvaient des amis de l'artiste décrié, et

ils commençaient à juger la plaisanterie un peu lourde. Un grand barbu se leva en faisant quasiment basculer sa chaise par terre, et il brandit son poing en direction du hobo.

— Si c'te vieux débris se farne pas, j'y casse la gueule.

Le vieux débris, enchanté, stimulé par l'opposition, n'en vociféra que de plus belle, en choisissant de nouvelles épithètes plus éloquentes encore. Le grand barbu se dirigea féroce dans sa direction.

Benoît se leva à son tour et posa calmement son livre sur la table.

— Moi aussi je trouve ça laid, dit-il d'un ton neutre. Je dirais même plus, je trouve ça hideux, répugnant et stercoraire.

Alors là, grand branle-bas de combat. Les z'amis de l'artiste firent voler la table devant eux, Benoît et le barbu s'apprêtèrent à se colleter méchamment, le waiter, affolé, fit irruption dans la mêlée et le petit vieux, ricanant, se mit en devoir d'enlever les tableaux du mur.

Soudain, une voix à la fois ferme et stridente s'éleva de l'échauffourée naissante et eut le don, bizarrement, de paralyser tout le monde:

— Monsieur Riopelle! Voyons! Asseyez-vous, monsieur Riopelle.

Françoise tirait doucement le vieil hobo par le bras, l'obligeait à laisser là les toiles, à s'asseoir pesamment sur la banquette, le maintenant d'une poigne ferme et respectueuse.

— Calmez-vous, monsieur Riopelle. Il faut laisser leur chance aux jeunes, à ceux qui commencent... hein, monsieur Riopelle?

Après un silence énorme, atterré, les z'amis de l'artiste du bar allèrent tous lentement se rasseoir, et c'est ici, enfin, que commence vraiment mon histoire, ou plutôt, celle de Françoise et Benoît.

Vous qui n'êtes pas nés de la dernière pluie, vous aurez deviné sans peine que le hobo ne s'appelait pas plus Riopelle que moi Simone de Beauvoir. Françoise et Benoît se retrouvèrent assis à la même table, ployés, — mais discrètement — sous la même quinte de rite. L'amie Marie finit par partir, le groupe de l'autre table se clairsema peu à peu, le vieil hobo — qui n'était rien de moins qu'un robineux professionnel — sombra dans un sommeil comateux. Françoise et Benoît, cependant, n'en finissaient plus de bavarder, de s'ébaudir et de se trouver spirituels, et voilà que la main de Françoise, comme par inadvertance, s'égarait fréquemment sur la cuisse de Benoît, et voilà que dans leurs yeux dansait une drôle de leur commune qui, de temps à autre, les rendait silencieux, et voilà qu'ils se retrouvèrent, un peu plus tard, fondus et confondus dans le grand lit de Françoise, à tire encore et encore, mais de tous les pores embrasés de leur peau.

Cette liaison nocturne, qu'on se le dise bien, ne constituait pas en soi un événement exceptionnel, ni pour Françoise, ni pour Benoît. Tous les deux frisaient joyeusement la trentaine, ils étaient rompus aux aventures légères et pétillantes que l'on avale goulûment comme du champagne le temps de quelques tours d'horloge, aux brusques élancements de passion qui les menaient irrésistiblement dans le lit d'une inconnue à la voix trop sensuelle rencontrée dans un bar emboucané.

Quelquefois, l'aventure avait des suites heureuses : les partenaires d'une nuit devenaient des amants réguliers, pendant un temps, du moins, puis la relation se muait en une sorte de complicité affectueuse, rarement encombrante.

D'autres fois, l'aventure s'avérait nettement désastreuse : on était réveillé le matin par une angosse indéfinissable, proche du dégoût, et on s'étonnait encore d'être étendu aux côtés d'un étranger quelconque, insipide, avec qui la communication était impossible, mais que les fumées de l'alcool avaient pourtant fait paraître brillant, la veille.

Pour en revenir au cas qui nous préoccupe, le tout avait glissé comme sur du velours, à partir du moment où Françoise et Benoît avaient amorcé le premier contact, jusqu'au lendemain où ils se séparèrent. En fait, ils n'avaient pas très bien dormi : on aurait dit que leurs corps, en se découvrant, en s'effleurant, allumaient des incandescences à répétitions qu'ils ne parvenaient pas à éteindre, et puis il y avait cette hilarité épouvantable qui les avait secoués toute la nuit. Au matin, la faim les avait tirés du lit, courbatus, les yeux cernés, d'excellente humeur malgré tout, et ils avaient poursuivi sur la même lancée, ceillades, fous rires et confessions. L'omlette était bonne, Benoît savait faire le café filtre — ô surprise —, Françoise n'était pas une adepte maniaque des lentilles, du sucre brun et des produits naturels — ô bonheur. Bref, c'est enchantées qu'ils se laissèrent à la porte de chez Françoise, en se répétant combien la rencontre avait été plaisante, et tout et tout, et dernière petite accolade, et ultime petit clin d'œil, et ricanements en coin, et nonchalant « C'est ça, à la prochaine ». Voilà pour le début.

Le reste de la semaine, François se consacra à ses occupations habituelles avec un surplus d'énergie et de fébrilité qu'elle ne jugea pas, sur le coup, suspect. Les « occupations habituelles » de François, il faut le dire, auraient suffi, en temps normal, à absorber la vitalité d'une demi-douzaine de personnes moins dynamiques. François était une militante née, que les difficultés pécuniaires de M. Philémon Tremblay, 3^e avenue, chômeur — manchot, amiantosique et tuberculeux —, et les tribulations de Mme Roberte Roberge, rue Couillard, locataire — aux prises avec des augmentations de loyer directement proportionnelles à la taille de ses coquerelles « king size » — empêchaient sérieusement de dormir. On la retrouvait donc dans tous les regroupements où il y avait des actions concrètes à poser pour améliorer le sort du monde en général, et la qualité de vie de ses voisins, en particulier.

Benoît ne demeura pas non plus inactif, les jours qui suivirent, mais à sa façon à lui, intérieure et réfléchie, qui revêtait souvent les apparences d'une rêverie stérile. Il était chargé de cours à l'Université Laval, au département de littérature, plus précisément, mais ce qu'il y faisait s'apparentait davantage à de la sociologie révolutionnaire qu'à des études littéraires. Il y avait une espèce de puissance, serène et spontanée, dans ses exposés les plus anodins (« Pourquoi les pauvres n'ont-ils pas le goût de lire ? » — « La littérature féministe est-elle vraiment de gauche ? » — « À qui l'industrie du livre profite-t-elle ? ») qui avait le don d'allumer des flambées de discussions passionnées chez ses étudiants et parfois même, à son grand étonnement, de susciter à l'extérieur de l'Université des manifestations houleuses et des distributions de tracts carrément subversifs qui se réclamaient de lui.

Quoi qu'il en soit, la semaine passa comme à l'accoutumée, ou presque : c'est seulement aux alentours du vendredi soir que les problèmes d'argent de M. Philémon Tremblay et les bébêtes de Mme Roberte Roberge provoquèrent chez François une sorte d'indifférence hargneuse et qu'elle se mit, soudain, à penser à Benoît et à la nuit qu'ils avaient partagée. Ce dont elle se rendit compte, surtout, c'est qu'elle y avait pensé sans arrêt, insidieusement, malgré la diversité des tâches auxquelles elle s'était astreinte et ça, ce n'était pas normal, pour une petite aventure-de-fin-de-soirée-de-rien-du-tout. Elle se surprit même à considérer avec humeur son téléphone qui ne sonnait pas — ou qui sonnait mal, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire —, à déprimer, très vaguement, à se demander s'il appellerait et puis à se dire qu'il n'appellerait pas, et à se rappeler ses mains soyeuses comme du velours et sa fossette amusante au menton, et à se dire qu'elle devrait peut-être retourner dans le petit bar au cas où, puis à se convaincre que non, il devait avoir une femme et cinq enfants — c'est toujours comme ça quand les hommes sont intéressants.

Comme il n'avait pas été question, tacitement, de rendez-vous futurs ou d'engagements formels et que lui-même n'avait pas osé en provoquer un par fierté ou par dieu sait quel sentiment inavouable, Benoît, de son côté, avait ourdi, au milieu de ses plans de cours, des machinations complexes qui lui permettraient de revoir François tout en n'ayant l'air de rien. Il y avait, bien sûr, le téléphone — car il avait effectivement retenu le numéro de François, toujours en n'ayant l'air de rien — mais ce mécanisme de rencontre par trop primitif ne risquait-il pas de déplaire à celle qui lui avait paru flotter subtilement bien au-dessus de ces mesquines

contingences pratico-pratiques ? (passons...) Restait — dans les moyens qui n'ont l'air de rien — la rencontre fortuite. Benoit avait jeté à quelques reprises de rapides coups d'œil dans le petit bar de la rue Saint-Jean — que je ne nommerai pas à moins que le propriétaire etc. etc. — et il n'avait pas vu Françoise (elle n'y était pas, elle attendait, chez elle, à côté du téléphone), et il ne lui en avait pas fallu davantage pour se persuader qu'elle ne devait pas tenir à le revoir, elle si belle, si libre, si dégagée-des-mesquines-contingences-pratico-pratiques, et déjà comblée, assurément, par les assiduités d'une dizaine d'hommes plus intéressants que lui.

Bon. Deux idiots, je vous l'accorde, mais prenez patience, le pire n'est pas encore venu.

Comme il y a une limite à tout, même à la déveine la plus noire et à la sottise la plus crasse, ils finirent par se rencontrer dans la petite tabagie près de chez Françoise où Benoit — bizarrement — venait chercher son journal depuis quinze jours. Ils se reconnurent aussitôt, évidemment, il ne s'embrassèrent pas, pris tous les deux par une émotion stupéfiée et dévorante qui leur fit balbutier des absurdités sur la neige qui tomberait ou ne tomberait pas, le temps qu'il faisait et ferait, mais ils parvinrent, quand même, à se donner rendez-vous pour le soir, avec un reste de désinvolture qui sonnait faux : « Si t'as rien d'autre à faire, bien sûr... » Ils se retrouvèrent donc le soir chez Françoise ou chez Benoit, ça n'a plus d'importance, et ce fut le coup de foudre, décisif, brutal, qui leur coupa les jambes, qui les précipita l'un vers l'autre comme des laves en fusion. Ils se revirent le lendemain, et le surlendemain, et tous les soirs après, durant des semaines, des semaines, avec la même électriante ardeur, dans le même parfait délire.

C'est ici, peut-être, qu'il convient de reparler de l'autonomie en lettres capitales — je ne vous avais pas oubliés, mes agneaux — au nom de laquelle on commet bien des sacrifices, surtout lorsqu'elle prend la rigidité d'une vertu.

Chacun de son côté, Françoise et Benoit se plaisaient à penser — tout bas, quand même, ils avaient la modestie de leurs convictions socialisantes — qu'ils appartenaient à une certaine élite évoluée, mature, tout entière vouée à la recherche et à la libération de soi-même, qui avait appris à fonctionner par ses propres moyens (ce qui est l'Autonomie, à peu de chose près, que le petit Robert me pardonne). Sur l'amour, il s'ensuit qu'ils avaient des théories aérées, assez différentes de celles de Jean-Paul II, tiens, et qui condamnaient l'agglutinement systématique en couples et la possessivité malade. Je ne vous apprendrai rien en vous disant que le hic, quand on a des théories et qu'on est un peu sincère, c'est de les faire coïncider avec la pratique.

Au début, l'euphorie était facile, elle se créait toute seule, d'elle-même, il n'y avait qu'à se laisser porter par cette vague de fond incroyablement puissante à laquelle ils croyaient ne plus croire, et qui les laissait parlant et comblés.

Tous les jours, quand la noirceur commençait à tomber, Françoise allait rejoindre Benoit à l'Université, où l'attendait avec un semblant de nonchalance dans le fond d'un café, ou se lançait à corps perdu dans la concoction d'un repas gargantuesque pour eux deux, qu'elle savait ne pouvoir goûter que du bout des lèvres,

l'émotion de l'amour lui paralysant l'estomac et l'appétit aussi sûrement qu'une nausée. Tous les jours, Benoît s'impatientsait de ne retrouver le sourire indéfinissable de Françoise qu'à la fin de l'après-midi, et il ne se lassait pas alors de la happer violemment dans une étreinte affamée, de la sentir chanceler de désir contre lui, de lui ronderonner à l'oreille des vétilles bouleversantes qui leur mettaient à tous les deux le cœur dans l'eau et qui leur faisaient échanger avec une gravité soudaine des regards chavirés.

Jusqu'à ce que... Bon. Jusqu'à ce qu'ils prennent peur en réalisant à quel point le roulant bien huilé de leur vie se trouve indiscutablement perturbé. Ils se mettent à jongler, chacun de son côté, à trouver de plus en plus suspect l'état de quiétude et de sécurité dans lequel ils sont nouvellement plongés jusqu'au cou. Françoise, qui avait toujours prôné avec lyrisme la nécessité de l'indépendance créative et de la solitude sanctificatrice, découvre avec anéantissement qu'elle a BESOIN de Benoît : elle le rejoint, le soir, avec un empressément et un ravissement indéniables, qui la culpabilisent ; elle le retrouve, à toute heure du jour, juché confortablement en plein cœur de ses pensées alors qu'elle se croyait bien isolée, à l'abri au milieu de ses locataires et de ses chômeurs. ... Est-ce qu'elle n'est pas en train de sacrifier à l'avivisme féminin, de s'engluier dans le rôle millénaire de la presque épouse dévorée par l'Autre ?...

Benoît, lui, se surprend à réagir avec violence à une blague amicale que lui fait un de ses étudiants qui l'a surpris avec Françoise. Il a tout à coup l'impression désagréable que son image le trahit, qu'il a perdu peu à peu le contrôle de ses propres émotions, qu'il joue à

l'amoureux transi dans une caricature de mélodrame qui ne le concerne en rien, qui ne concorde d'aucune façon avec ses principes libertaires... Il se met à douter de l'authenticité de ce sentiment dévorant qu'il éprouve inexplicablement pour Françoise, à le trouver malsain, même, contraignant, banalement conformiste. L'évidence lui saute aux yeux : il est bel et bien en train de s'enfermer dangereusement dans un bonheur petit-bourgeois.

Bref, c'est Benoît qui porte le premier coup, audacieusement, virilement. Il décroche son téléphone et fait le mort pendant quelques jours. Françoise, que ce mutisme soudain inquiète et désole, finit par le rencontrer par hasard, un soir de déprime qu'elle erre dans le Quartier latin. Elle l'aperçoit tout à coup par la fenêtre d'un café, entre sans réfléchir, se dirige vers lui. Il l'accueille avec de grands débordements d'affection, comme si de rien n'était, s'informe de sa santé et du bien-être de M. Philémon Tremblay, chômeur, s'embrouille dans une fumuse péroraison sur le dernier Altman qu'il vient d'aller voir au Cartier avec Manon ou Sandra ou Marie, que voit justement, à côté de qui il est précisément assis, et dont il tapote — presque distraitement — la cuisse. Françoise entre dans le jeu, comme si de rien n'était, sourit joyeusement à Manon ou Sandra ou Marie, surenchérit avec passion sur le style de Altman qui est si particulièrement attachant et si inopinément américain, finit par se lever, embrasse Benoît avec une politesse excessive, rescurrit joyeusement à Manon ou Sandra ou Marie, et sort du café, brisée, les jambes flageolantes, le cœur soulevé par une envie incoercible de vomir et de hurler. Elle se traîne jusque chez elle en se morigénant à voix haute, en se dominant des coups de pied intérieurs pour

s'empêcher d'avoir mal. Il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat, au fond, ce n'était donc que ça, qu'une passade légère à laquelle elle a cru exagérément, comme une adolescente impubère, voilà tout... Françoise est presque soulagée, malgré cette douleur terrible qui lui rampe dans le ventre : elle peut, enfin, continuer en toute quiétude à croire que l'amour n'existe pas. Elle s'allonge sur son lit, allume la télévision, s'interdit formellement de pleurer, et finit par sombrer dans un sommeil sans rêve, comme si de rien n'était : le stoïcisme est une vertu tout à fait indispensable à l'Autonomie...

Mais le lendemain, qui téléphone, chez Françoise, à la première heure ? Benoît, tout sucre et tout miel, ravagé secrètement par une inquiétude tenace qui l'a gardé éveillé toute la nuit : si Françoise, blessée au premier degré par sa conduite inexplicable, refusait carrément de le revoir ?... Et pourtant non. Françoise lui répond avec sa voix de toujours, gentille et chaleureuse, et elle lui dit qu'elle va bien, et ils se donnent rendez-vous pour le soir. Ils se retrouvent, miraculeusement, comme si de rien n'était : avec la passion et la fougue coutumières, à rire et à s'étreindre comme de vieux complices. Françoise ne pose pas de questions, Benoît ne fait pas de confession. Tactement, ils gardent le silence sur ce qui s'est — peut-être — passé la veille et les autres jours avant.

À partir de ce moment, le style est lancé. Benoît, persuadé qu'il a eu raison d'introduire cette aération nouvelle dans leur liaison — non seulement Françoise ne lui en tient pas rigueur, mais elle semble saluer le changement avec une bonhomie inébranlable, peut-être le souhaitait-elle, au fond — Benoît, donc, multiplie les rencontres avec Manon ou Sandra ou Marie, en

instaure d'autres avec Sylvie, Laura et Julie, et bannit le mot culpabilité de son vocabulaire et de son quotidien. À force de faire comme si de rien n'était, Françoise finit par se persuader qu'elle vit là une situation saine, naturelle, privilégiée en quelque sorte — les couples traditionnels cèdent tellement facilement à la possessivité et à la jalousie névrotique... —, que sa relation avec Benoît s'avère, dans le fond, tout à fait satisfaisante et lui apporte exactement ce dont elle a besoin — ne se voient-ils pas, elle et Benoît, au moins deux fois par semaine et n'est-ce pas, à chaque fois, toujours aussi extraordinaire, aussi passionné ?... que demander de plus ?... Ce ne sont évidemment que des vestiges de culture romantique, de vieux restes décadents dont elle n'a pas eu le temps de se départir, qui la font encore sursauter douloureusement et ressentir une angoisse aiguë, inexplicable, chaque fois qu'elle surprend Benoît en train d'échanger avec une autre fille des gestes de tendresse familiers... D'ailleurs, elle décide que quelques galipettes épidermiques lui feraient, à elle aussi, le plus grand bien, et elle se remet à la bonne vieille drague dans laquelle, ma foi, elle n'était pas loin d'exceller avant de rencontrer Benoît. Et c'est au tour de Benoît de sentir monter en lui comme une houle glacée à voir le sourire indéfinissable de Françoise s'accrocher aux yeux de quelqu'un d'autre, à guetter — mine de rien — la main sensuelle de Françoise qui frôle une autre jambe que la sienne. Mais ce sont les règles du jeu, maintenant, il n'y a rien d'autre à faire que de continuer d'arborer, coûte que coûte, cette allure désinvolte et crâneuse, que d'avaler un peu plus nerveusement le reste de sa bière avant de chercher du regard avec quelle femme il pourrait bien rentrer, cette nuit, pour ne pas être en reste.

Et puis un soir, Françoise est assise avec une amie — appelons-la Marie, tiens — dans le petit bar du début de

l'histoire, et elle est justement en train de pérorer à voix haute et claire sur les mérites et les avantages de sa relation avec Benoît, lorsque celui-ci entre à l'improvise. Il aperçoit François et lui envoie, de loin, un clin d'œil complice. Il s'assoit à la même table qu'une belle blonde — une autre, décidément — qu'il connaît déjà puisqu'il engage avec elle une conversation passionnée, ponctuée d'atouchements furtifs et de petits baisers sans conséquence, sans conséquence se répète François qui a reconnu aussitôt la crampe diffuse qui lui noue maintenant l'estomac mais qui n'en continue pas moins de parler avec une fièvre redoublée de la fidélité, oui, de la sorte de fidélité intérieure, viscérale, qui existe quand même dans sa relation avec Benoît, même si, selon toute apparence, hein, même si... Et puis, elle se tait, tout à coup. Elle s'interrompt en plein milieu d'une phrase, comme ça, sans crier gare, même qu'elle ne fait plus mine d'être intéressée par la conversation, elle s'engourdit dans une drôle de torpeur que l'amie Marie ne parvient pas à secouer. Lorsque la belle blonde se lève pour aller aux toilettes ou au diable — c'est tout comme — François, brusquement, se glisse à côté de Benoît et elle lui dit, d'une petite voix rauque, sans lui laisser le temps de l'embrasser ou de lui sourire, qu'elle vient de découvrir qu'elle n'est pas douée pour le grand jeu de la coolerie et qu'elle se retire, elle abandonne, elle est fatiguée d'avoir mal à l'estomac, elle est épuisée à force de se raconter des histoires. Benoît ne lui rétorque rien, elle laisse échapper un bonsoir défilant qui ressemble à un adieu, et voilà qu'elle est déjà dehors, engoncée dans un calme olympien, l'amie Marie à sa poursuite.

On les retrouve toutes les deux beaucoup plus tard, dans un autre bar il va sans dire, à dévider dans l'alcool

le sempiternel échec d'un des rancœurs féminines — il n'a jamais été capable d'amour, j'aurais donc dû le savoir, dire que j'ai investi dans cette relation, mon Dieu que les femmes sont folles d'aimer tant tellement pour rien, waiter, cinq autres bières, cinq autres bières pour oublier combien les temps sont durs et les hommes trop mous... François baigne dans une espèce d'ivresse lyrique, elle s'est retrouvée, même si elle a perdu Benoît, au moins la douleur est-elle franche, sans tricherie, il sera plus facile de l'apaiser, de la caresser, en commençant même ce soir par ce godalureau aux yeux doux qui tourne autour d'elle et qu'elle décide de lever brutalement — pour la libido, uniquement pour la libido, et pour réchauffer un peu, aussi, le côté gauche de son grand lit, les nuits sont tellement fraîches...

Quand elle rentre, finalement, chez elle, au bras de cet inconnu qui se révélera peut-être bon amant, avec un peu de chance, François trouve Benoît — qui d'autre ! — défait, grelottant sur son palier, les yeux abîmés par une moiteur qui ressemble à des larmes. Il lui dit qu'il l'aime — quoi d'autre ! —, qu'il n'a pas envie de la perdre, tout ça sur un ton qui ne trompe pas, sur le palier de cet appartement vieillot, dans la lumière oblique de la presque aube, avec cet inconnu planté là comme une patère dérisoire et qui finit par s'en aller parce que plus personne ne s'occupe de lui.

Voilà, j'en suis rendue à l'épilogue, mes petits coeurs. Mais la fin, la vraie fin, où est-elle, quelle est-elle (que fait-elle ? de la dentelle ?) me demandez-vous avec des yeux de ptérodactyle non rassasié. Bon. Je vous vois venir, avec vos gros sabots new wave. François et Benoît pourraient se marier, tiens, pourquoi pas, ça se

pratique encore couramment, ça a repris du poil de la bête depuis quelques années et ça connaît même une recrudescence de popularité inimaginable chez les moins de 25 ans. N'y comptez pas trop, mes petits blaireaux. Je vous ai quand même laissé entendre que François et Benoît étaient de jeunes gens intelligents, bien au courant de la vie ou, du moins, de quelques vérités premières, à commencer par celle-ci : les arts matrimoniaux se transforment inévitablement, dans tous les cas, en arts martiaux. OK, d'accord, très bien, vous réassignez-vous avec des soupirs d'ornithorynque flatté à rebrousse-poil. Avec ou sans mariage, avec ou sans enfants, François et Benoît pourraient connaître un long bonheur sans faille, long long long comme une éternité. Mourais. Pour ne rien vous cacher, ça me ferait plaisir, à moi aussi. Mais ce n'est pas ainsi que ça se passe, dans la vraie vie, quand l'amour n'est pas arrangé avec le gars des vues ou la collection Harlequin. Je vais vous le dire, moi, ce qui arrive à François et Benoît : après les sinuosités et les tortueuses tentatives que nous leur avons connues, ils réussissent à établir un juste équilibre entre l'autonomie et l'implication amoureuse — ce qui est rare, ce qui est rarissime. Ils vivent, en effet, une relation privilégiée, un amour passionné, et passionnant, pendant trois ans. Ou cinq. Ou huit. Et puis un jour, ils décident d'un commun accord de se séparer parce que le moment est venu, parce qu'ils se feraient mal à essayer de ressusciter ce qui se meurt entre eux, parce que ça ne dure pas toute la vie, hélas, et qu'ils sont exigeants, et qu'ils refusent de faire semblant. Je ne dis pas qu'ils coupent tous les ponts, non. Quand on est arrivé à une communion intense, quasi totale, avec quelqu'un — ce qui est rare, ce qui est rarissime — quand on a eu une vraie histoire d'amour bref, on ne se laisse jamais tout à fait, il y a ce compartiment cadastéré, dans le cœur, que personne d'autre ne peut remplir.

Tenez : encore l'année dernière, à la date anniversaire de leur rencontre, François a reçu de Benoît, par courrier express, un grand colis rectangulaire. Elle était chez elle, avec des amis et un amant de passage — étions-nous Max, ou Pierre, ou Victor-Hippolyte — quand appelons-je Max, ou Pierre, ou Victor-Hippolyte — quand elle a ouvert le colis. C'était une reproduction, la reproduction d'un drôle de hibou hirsute, plaqué comme un diabolon au milieu de paysages embrouillés. François s'est mise d'abord à rire, en reconnaissant le Riopelle, puis elle s'est mise à chialer, si vous voulez tout savoir, à chialer comme un veau, comme une Madeleine, à chialer à s'en faire éclater les viscères, inconsolablement, intarissablement, même que nous avons dû appeler Benoît à notre secours pour réussir à la calmer un peu.

C'est pour ça qu'il y a l'akool, et le colombien, et les belles histoires à l'eau de rose. C'est pour ça que je vous ai parlé de François et de Benoît, et que je m'en vais, de ce pas, caler quelques carafons de mauvaise piquette. Il y a des vérités indigestes, des vérités qui s'évalent à la petite cuiller, doucement, doucement, pour ne pas se faire chavirer l'estomac. Celle-ci, par exemple.

La vie, quand on est fort, on sait que c'est une route qu'on est tout seul à suivre, même s'il y a l'amour, même s'il y a des gens debout comme des haltes qui nous retiennent le cœur. Il faut continuer, continuer jusqu'au bout, aller toucher la petite lumière qui brille seulement pour nous, aller éteindre sa lumière, chacun sa petite lumière, au bout au bout de la route.

Je la vois se rapetisser lentement, s'épuiser dans cette course aux rêves pour laquelle elle n'est pas faite. Maintenant, le samedi soir, quand Française revient de ses escapades qui ne sont plus mystérieuses, elle a le regard brumeux et désespéré des condamnés à mort. Et maintenant, quand je lui dis : « bonsoir, mamant, moi sur qui les vieux beaux jettent souvent des regards invitants, moi dont les mains paresseuses ne sont pas ternies par l'usure, l'arthrite ou la dactylo, moi qui ne sais rien faire, si ce n'est jongler avec des mots creux, des phrases vides, j'éprouve un remords terrible, lancinant, qui m'empoigne aux entrailles, la nuit, et m'empêche de dormir.

LE HOMARD

— E s-tu fou ? Que c'est j'vas faire avec ça ?
Pis comment ça s'mange ?

Comme toujours, les premiers mots de Laura avaient été pour récriminer. Il faut dire que les bestioles, toutes mortes qu'elles étaient, n'en avaient pas moins gardé des allures rébarbatives de combattant : dans le foisonnement de pattes, de pinces et d'antennes qui encombraient maintenant l'évier, on voyait luire ici et là de petits yeux noirâtres et malveillants qui avaient l'air, ma foi du bon Dieu, d'être plus vivants que le reste et de vous considérer avec une haine belliqueuse. Même Marceau s'était arrêté deux fois en cours de route, inquiet, pour écouter claquer le vent contre son grand sac et s'assurer que ça ne grouillait pas, là-dedans, que ça n'allait pas lui happer la main d'un coup sec.

— Ça s'mange comme ça, avec du beurre.

— Du beurre ?

— Ben oui, du beurre, du beurre, c't'affaire !

La voix fatiguée de Marie, dans la pièce à côté, tentait de dissuader les enfants de se battre à coups de fourchettes. Laura s'énervait, son tablier à la main, l'rop désespérée pour être en colère.

— Du beurre tant qu'tu voudras, chus quand même pas pour étendre du beurre comme ça sur c'les grandes carcasses-là. Que c'est j'vas faire ? On n'a même pas de beurre, on n'a rien que de la margarine...

— Ça va faire pareil.

Ils marchaient devant lui, Marceau n'avait eu qu'à lever le regard pour être pris doucement, irrésistiblement, par le magnétisme insinuant de leur présence. Ce n'était pas seulement à cause de leurs fourrures, si soyeuses qu'elles avaient l'air d'ondoyer toutes seules sous la neige qui les marbrait d'étoiles aux pattes transparentes ; c'était dans leur démarche même, comme une sorte d'avancée victorieuse, d'animale complaisance à fouler le sol. La femme tournait sans cesse sa petite tête ronde vers son compagnon, lui la pressait délicatement du bras, et une complicité presque monacale les inclinait l'un vers l'autre à chaque mouvement. Au début, Marceau avait pensé : « c'est des artisses de Radio-Canada », mais à force de les regarder avec une espèce d'admiration éperdue, il s'était dit qu'ils étaient trop beaux, trop réels, aussi, mille vies semblaient se disputer à la fois dans leurs yeux, dans leurs dents brillantes, et puis l'homme n'avait pas l'air d'une tapette, décidément. Quand ils s'étaient engouffrés dans leur magasin, Marceau n'avait pu se résoudre à les quitter si brusquement, et il était resté planté là, devant la grande vitrine de la poissonnerie, à remuer les ortails dans ses boîtes de mauvaise qualité pour chasser le froid que lui mordait les pieds.

Pierre • Pete • falsait son Jos Connaissant, maniant le casse-noisettes d'une main et la fourchette de l'autre avec un semblant de dextérité qui irritait Marceau au plus haut point.

— Vous voyez, là, l'beau-père, vous prenez votre lobster comme ça, pis vous...

— Laissez faire les conseils ! C'est pas des lobsters, c'est des homards !...

Le premier moment de stupéur passé, Ralph et Nancy avaient découvert une utilité quelconque aux pinces de leur crustacé, et ils se donnaient, en dessous de la table, des coups à se démolir les tibias.

— C'est pour manger, ça, c'est pas pour se battre, disait Marie avec lassitude, mais elle-même, les yeux perdus dans la brume, oubliait de mouiller de margarine fondue ses morceaux de homard et n'arrivait pas, malgré ses efforts, à cacher sa répulsion.

Pete parlait beaucoup, comme à son habitude : du froid qui gondolait les portes à ne plus pouvoir les fermer, de la dernière partie des Nordiques, du nouveau gouvernement qui les mettrait dans le trou à coup sûr, et même des habitudes grégaires du homard qui, parait-il, ne pouvait marcher qu'à reculons : il savait tout, il était intarissable. Marceau, au bout de la table, souffrait en silence. À chaque fois, il se découvrait avec stupéur des réserves inextinguibles d'animosité pour son gendre, et cela l'effrayait un peu, lui par ailleurs si pacifique.

Il y avait Marie, bien sûr, et c'était l'unique raison pour laquelle Marceau approuvait lorsque Laura parlait de les inviter à souper. Une sorte de gêne réciproque les paralysait, pourtant, quand Marceau et sa fille se trouvaient en présence. Ils n'échangeaient jamais que quelques mots, d'une banalité désolante. Mais qu'auraient-ils pu se dire, de toute façon, à travers les vociférations de Pete, le hurlement des enfants, et les plaintes acrimonieuses de Laura ? Marie s'enfonçait dans une sorte de névrose silencieuse qui falsait à Marceau l'effet d'un reproche. Il découvrirait, bouleversé, que sa fille

était peu faite pour la famille, tellement semblable à lui-même, au fond, aussi insaisissable, aussi rêveuse, et il se surprénait à en vouloir aux enfants de la vieillir prématurément, et à Pete, surtout, de la plonger sciemment dans une médiocrité laborieuse.

— Pour quoi c'est faire, p'pa, qu'y marchent rien qu'à reculons, les z'homards, hein ? Pour quoi c'est faire ?

Nancy se suspendait de toutes ses forces au poignet de son père, lui faisait lâcher le casse-noisettes d'une poigne impérieuse dans son avidité à tout savoir immédiatement.

— C'est comme ça, dit Pete, that's the way it is, et il se lança dans une explication généreuse, les mots hors de sa bouche se mettaient à rebondir comme des balles, inartissablement, tandis qu'il maintenait à distance la main sournoise de Ralph qui tentait de larder les côtes de sa soeur de coups de pinces judicieusement calculés.

Marceau se mordait nerveusement les lèvres.

— Me demande pourquoï tu leur parles toujours à moitié en anglais, à tes enfants... Me semble que tu pourrais leur parler français, comme tout l'monde. Me semble qu'y comprennent le français !...

— Papa, s'il vous plaît, soupira Marie, sentant venir l'inévitable affrontement.

— R'commence pas ça, dit Laura.

— Me semble qu'y pourrait parler juste en français, s'entêta Marceau. On parle-tu en anglais, nous autres ? Me semble qu'on est tout' français, ici !

— Tu peux ben dire ça, jappa Laura, t'es jaloux, tu sais pas un maudit mot d'anglais !

— Laissez faire, laissez faire, dit Pete d'une voix conciliante. On s'entendra jamais sur ce sujet-là, le beau-père pis moi. Moi, mes enfants, j'veux pas qu'y soyent des citoyens de deuxième classe, plus tard. Mes enfants, j'veux qu'y soyent bilingues en partant, pour qu'ils ayent des bonnes jobs pis des bons salaires.

— Ouais... Si y font comme leur père, ça s'ra pas vargeux !

— C'est assez, papa, c'est assez, là !

Marie crispait ses mains glacées sur les rebords de son assiette, et Marceau se tut soudainement, concédant qu'il était sur le point d'aller trop loin, une fois de plus. Ce n'était pas sa faute, il y avait cette rancœur qui se tapissait au bord de ses lèvres comme un chat sauvage et qui faisait irruption à tout propos en face de Pete, balayant les bonnes résolutions qu'il ne manquait jamais de prendre, pourtant, quand Marie venait. Mais c'était trop dur, au-dessus de ses forces, vraiment, d'affronter à la fois le regard abruti de sa fille et la jactance insupportable de son gendre qui se faisait comme une gloire, on aurait dit, d'être chômeur.

— Tu aurais pu prendre la belle vaisselle, Laura, dit-il pour faire diversion.

— C'est la seule vaisselle qu'on a, Benoit Marceau. J'me d'mande d'où c'est que tu sors ?

— J'vas t'en acheter un autre set, crains pas...

— Sûrement pas avec la paye que tu fais à la condoornerie, en tout cas, dit Laura, et Marceau eut envie de lui dire de se taire, mais elle était lancée, ne lui pardonnant décidément pas le coup des homards, j'ai jamais vu ça, disait-elle, lui, y est pire que les homards, y recule au lieu d'avancer, y gagne moins cher à chaque année, j'me d'mande comment on fait pour joindre les

deux bouts, j'ai jamais vu un homme qui manque autant d'ambition...

Elle était lancée. Marceau jouait avec les antennes de son crustacé, et il eut l'impression, l'espace d'une seconde, que la bête le regardait avec des yeux compatisants.

Il aurait pu rester là des heures, devant la grande vitrine de la poissonnerie : leur vie faisait exprès de s'étaler langoureusement en long et en large, de s'étirer comme un beau film tranquille et captivant auquel il n'avait pas le pouvoir d'échapper. Ils avaient l'air de s'aimer comme des fous, et même plus, ils flottaient sereinement au-dessus de tout. L'hiver, la slotche, les odeurs d'essence, et Marceau, nostalgique, s'engourdissait sur le trottoir, il ressentait comme une blessure leur bonheur trop débordant. Bon Dieu qu'ils devaient être riches pour s'entourer comme ça d'amour gratuit devant tout le monde, avec leurs manteaux de poils exotiques et leurs beaux visages cinématographiques ! Attendez-moi, avait envie de leur crier Marceau, que je vous rejoigne, que je vous comprenne, mais ce n'était pas possible, ils glissaient tous les deux sous une bulle vaporeuse, ils évoluaient à part, dans un univers étranger, aussi impalpables que des extra-terrestes. L'homme ressemblait à quelqu'un, mais à qui, à qui, Marceau avait beau fouiller sa mémoire, il n'arrivait pas à mettre le doigt dessus...

Sans s'en rendre compte, Marceau avait poussé la porte et s'était retrouvé dans le magasin, à leurs côtés. Ils achetaient tout, à croire qu'il avait un régiment à nourrir, ils n'en finissaient plus de choisir des poissons rares et délicats, toutes sortes de bêtes saugrenues qui coûtaient bien 10,00 \$ la demi-livre. De près, ils étaient encore mieux, ils irradiaient une chaleur contagieuse, et surtout, on pouvait comprendre ce qu'ils disaient, mon amour, mon chéri, mon trésor, ils s'exprimaient dans un français impeccable, de France sans doute. Marceau suivait avec ravissement la mélodie caressante de leurs

paroles, il s'en voulait terriblement de ne savoir marmonner que dans une langue commune, si petite, avec des mots tellement pauvres et insignifiants. L'homme se retourna vers lui, et Marceau le reconnut instantanément : cela lui donna un tel choc que le carrelage se mit à vaciller sous ses jambes et qu'il dut se cramponner au comptoir pour ne pas tomber.

Il subsistait comme une aura d'hostilité latente autour de la petite table familiale, Marceau pouvait presque en humer les entêtantes distillations. Les mains verdâtres jusqu'au coude, Nancy s'était mêlée d'éclaircir son frère avec les intestins liquides de son homard ; en un rien de temps, malgré les imprécations doucereuses de Marie, la nappe s'était couverte de cochonneries, le souper était gâché, « à cause de qui, disait Laura, je vous l'donne en mille, y peut rien faire de correct, j'y demande de m'rapporter des steaks, pis r'gardez donc avec quoi y r'vient... » Ralph ricanait à voix basse, Marie regardait obstinément par la fenêtre de la cuisine, Pete avait au visage cette espèce de tic douloureux qui lui crispait le menton, sporadiquement, comme sous l'effet d'une décharge électrique.

— En tout cas, l'beau-père, dit-il, en tout cas, vous vous sentez riche !

— Riche ? riche ? Comment ça ?

Laura avait laissé choir son tablier et elle s'épongeait maintenant les mains à même la belle nappe du samedi soir, prise par une inquiétude soudaine, quasi viscérale, à l'idée qu'il se tramait des choses en signe de plaîtres entre son mari et son gendre.

— Que c'est qu'tu veux dire ? Si y a quelque chose qu'on n'a pas, c'est ben la richesse !

— C'est justement, dit Pete avec une étrange voix de gorge, c'est justement, j'trouve le beau-père ben gênéux !

Laura ne comprenait toujours pas.

— Comment ça ? Comment ça ? Pas à cause de ces bestioles-là, toujours ?

Marceau avait levé la tête et il cherchait Pete du regard, les yeux parcourus de zigzags menaçants.

— Comment ça ? répéta stupidement Laura. Ça s'rait-tu que c'est ben cher, ces affaires-là ?

— Ben cher ? Des lobsters ? j'vous l'fais pas dire.

Pete avait parlé avec une économie qui lui était si peu habituelle que les mots retombèrent en boules de plomb autour de lui ; après ça, il s'installa carrément dans la cuisine un silence de fin du monde.

— Benoit Marceau, comment ça t'a coûté, ces affaires-là ?... Benoit Marceau, j'ai posé une question !...

Dans la poissonnerie, le monde venait de se figer, une fraction de seconde ; la vendeuse, pressée, distante, se penchait vers Marceau en épongeant le comptoir :

— Vous désirez, Monsieur ?

— Oui... six... six comme ça...

Ils sortaient tous les deux, ils disparaissaient sous la neige, elle avec sa fourrure et son rire lumineux, lui avec ce visage volé, emprunté, dérisoire, ce visage que Marceau avait, trente ans avant que la vie s'acharne sur lui, et qu'il ne pouvait oublier parce qu'il était gravé dans ses tiroirs, sur toutes ses photos de mariage : « Mon sosie, se disait Marceau, c'est mon sosie heureux », se répétait-il pendant que la vendeuse lui remettait un colis et qu'il extirpait l'argent, presque la moitié de sa paye, du fond de son portefeuille élimé.

— T'es fou ? T'es devenu fou ?

Les bras de Laura lui en tombaient de surprise ; elle ne réalisait pas encore l'étendue du désastre, ce trou vertigineux dans leur budget pourtant si serré, cette crise d'hystérie qu'il faudrait patcher tant bien que mal, mais comment ? même en ne consommant que du pain et de la margarine tous les jours, la faille les guettait irrémédiablement, ils se retrouveraient sur le pavé, grevés de dettes, harcelés par les factures à payer, le loyer dû depuis deux mois, le chauffage, l'électricité...

— Vous dramatisez un peu, là, belle-maman, dit Pete, empêtré dans un remords indéfinissable.

— C't'un monstre ! braillait Laura, c't'un fou ! Réponds, sans cœur, dis que'que chose, maudit gaspilleux ! Que c'est j'ai fait' au bon Dieu, pour l'amour, que c'est j'y ai fait' !

Son désespoir ne connaissait plus de bornes. Marceau se confondait en excuses, il se serait aplati sous la table tant cette scène lui devenait pénible.

— C'est pas si grave, Laura, disait-il, j'vas faire du temps supplémentaire... j'vas t'acheter un autre set de vaisselle...

— Maudit sans-cœur !

Il n'y avait pas d'issue, sa pauvreté le poursuivrait comme une tare, comme un reproche, sa vie durant ; il avait tout raté, même sa famille qui se vaudrait dans le mesquin jusqu'au cou ; fallait-il qu'il y ait un dieu injuste en haut pour tolérer que l'on naisse malchanceux comme lui, plus retroquevillé qu'une larve, plus petit qu'une poussière, autant dire moins que rien...

— Chus écoeuré, crise, CHUS ÉCŒURÉ, OSTIE ! éclata-t-il.

— Sacre pas devant les enfants, Benoit Marceau !

— Tais-toi maman, dit Marie, et elle posa une main ferme sur le bras de Laura.

Marceau s'était levé, empourpré, tremblotant ; tout lui remontait dans la gorge comme un remède trop fort, les frustrations-cancers qu'il avait toujours tues, le manque d'amour qui creusait autour de lui un vide terrifiant...

Ralph donna, sous la table, un coup de pied à sa sœur.

— R'garde, pouffa-t-il, r'garde, y r'ssemble à un homard!

LE ROSE ET LE NOIR

Asseyez-vous, asseyez-vous donc, si je m'attendais à de la grande visite de même, vous êtes vraiment inspecteur, inspecteur de police avec des enquêtes, des crimes, des bandits, du vrai sang ?... C'est Eugène qui va être tellement mortifié de vous avoir manqué, Kojak, Hawai Five-O, l'Homme de six millions, Colombo, c'est sa nicotine à lui — mais ne soyez pas trop regardant, doux Jésus, la cuisine est à l'envers c'est pas diabolique, je finissais justement ma sauce à spaghetti...

Oui, oui, c'est au sujet de Mme Sinclair que vous venez, enfin Mme Bouchard — elle avait repris son nom de jeune fille, non ? — je me disais, aussi, que ce n'était pas normal, une absence d'au moins deux semaines... Il ne lui est rien arrivé, toujours ?... Iss. Vous ne me dites pas. Disparue. Excusez-moi un instant, ma viande est en train de coller au fond, ce rond de poêle-là est bien maudit, il se met à donner de la chaleur sans qu'on lui en demande, vous savez ce que c'est, enfin probablement pas, votre rayon à vous, c'est plus les menottes que les ronds de poêle, hi hi hi !

Disparue. Ça parle au diable. Vous pensez à un enlèvement, bien entendu ?... Je dis ça comme ça, avec un fils comme le sien, célèbre, important, presque déjà premier ministre, ça n'aurait rien de très saisissant, croyez pas ?... Non, bien entendu, vous ne croyez rien pour le moment, vous enquêtez, vous faites très bien, il ne faut jamais rien croire ni personne, vous avez sûrement votre petite idée derrière la tête mais vous la gardez pour vous, comme je vous comprends, dans votre métier, surtout, et puis ce n'est pas à moi à poser les questions, comme vous dites si bien. Moi ?... Moi, une idée sur la chose ? Mon cher monsieur l'inspecteur. J'ai des idées sur tout, si vous voulez savoir, mais on ne me les demande jamais, hi hi !, vous me faites trop d'honneur, et si vous me passiez les champignons qui sont à côté de vous, là, sur la table, vous jolindriez l'utilité à l'honneur.

C'est sûr que je la connaissais, Mme Bouchard... Mme Sinclair, si vous y tenez, mais je vous jure qu'elle, elle tenait à son nom de fille, elle refusait de lever les yeux quand on l'appelait Sinclair, ce n'était pas une simple lubie de retour d'âge, sérieusement, elle avait fait changer tous ses papiers d'identité, elle disait que ses erreurs l'avaient assez poursuivie comme ça sans avoir à les traîner jusqu'à sa mort, je cite ses propres mots — c'est bête, d'ailleurs, d'en parler au passé comme si elle n'était pas toujours vivante, et bien vivante... Comment ? Oui, oui, jusqu'à preuve du contraire, évidemment, comme vous dites si bien et avec tant d'optimisme, hi hi...

De spécial ? Dans le style « enlèvement », vous voulez dire, avec des bruits de bataille, des cris étouffés, des hommes en cagoule noire qui courent dans le corridor ? Hi hi hi hi. Excusez. Non, je ne me moque pas, sérieusement, non, je n'ai rien entendu de spécial. Je la

connaissais, pensez, voisines de palier depuis des années, et avec des murs en carton qui laissent passer les bruits de respiration, elle venait parfois, pas souvent, prendre un café chez nous, gentille, oui, si on veut, mais ça ne me semble pas l'expression exacte pour parler d'elle, différente, plutôt, oui, différente et BIZARRE, très bizarre. C'est monsieur Sinclair fils qui la fait rechercher ? Je demande ça comme ça, bien entendu, il a peut-être déjà reçu une demande de rançon, ce n'est pas de mes affaires mais ça m'étonnerait, l'enlèvement, je veux dire, un homme si bien, si élégant, monsieur Sinclair, et chic avec ça, poli et tout, est-ce que vous croyez qu'il rentrera aux prochaines élections ?

Pour en revenir à Mme Bouchard, je ne voudrais pas faire la mauvaise langue, ni rien, les absents ont toujours tort, les pauvres, et ce n'est pas moi qui vais y changer quelque chose, mais on ne peut pas dire, vraiment, en toute honnêteté, qu'elle n'était pas bizarre — Eugène emploierait un mot beaucoup moins charitable, s'il était ici, et j'en profiterais pour lui demander de m'ouvrir ma bouteille de poivre de Cayenne, celle-ci justement, merci, vous êtes très bon, est-ce qu'on ne dirait pas, des fois, qu'ils cachètent les bouteilles neuves avec de la Crazy Glue ?... Comprenez-moi bien, je ne veux pas dire qu'elle était folle, loin de là, elle avait même, elle a, je devrais dire, une intelligence au-dessus de la moyenne, une intelligence épurante, quasiment, elle s'intéressait à toutes sortes de choses compliquées, la vie des étoiles, la reproduction des atomes, la politique en Afrique du Sud, les moeurs des kangourous, je ne sais pas si vous avez remarqué sa bibliothèque lorsque vous êtes entré chez elle ce matin, entre vous et moi, qu'est-ce que ça donne de lire tant de livres, est-ce que ça aide à résoudre les problèmes de chômage, est-ce que ça règle la crise économique ? Non. Bon. C'est comme son apparence, physique bien entendu, elle avait une

façon de s'arranger, vraiment, vous me direz qu'il s'agit là d'un détail et vous aurez raison, mais pas complètement, car il y a des convenances à respecter, un bon goût naturel et normal dans la tenue vestimentaire et l'allure générale, même si tous les goûts sont dans la nature, qu'ils prétendent. Elle s'habillait en rose, depuis quelque temps, elle portait toujours sur elle quelque chose de rose, un foulard, ou une robe, ou un grand sac de toile, pas un rose raisonnable de femme distinguée, je dirais, non, un rose provocant de petite jeune fille dévergondée, si vous voulez savoir, elle disait que c'était la sa couleur bénéfique — je cite ses propres mots — et ses cheveux, surtout, ses cheveux, monsieur, elle les avait flottants sur les épaules comme une Mater Dolorosa, pas attachés ni teints ni rien, vous conviendrez quand même avec moi qu'il y a des limites, à soixante-cinq ans, il y a des limites à ne vouloir ressembler à personne !

Elle faisait tout de la même façon, d'ailleurs, c'est-à-dire rien comme personne, un seul exemple par exemple, un beau matin je lui demande, elle s'était arrêtée ici prendre un café, je lui demande comme ça pensant bien faire, je me disais qu'elle devait se sentir seule, je lui demande de venir avec moi au club, le soir, on joue aux cartes, aux dames, il y a des prix à gagner, on se boit un petit café avec, des fois, du petit gin dedans, hi hi, on a bien du plaisir et ça ne coûte rien, ce qui est rare, bon, et elle me demande « quel club ? » et je lui dis « le club de l'Âge d'or », vous comprenez, j'entame mes soixante-quelque, moi aussi, même si je ne les fais pas tout à fait, et là, elle se met à rire, mon cher monsieur, à rire que mon café m'en reste en travers du gosier, et elle me dit « quel âge d'or ? » et là, moi, je ne réponds rien parce que j'ai beau être bonne et même parfois bonasse, je distingue bien quand quelqu'un me rit en pleine face et quand quelqu'un me pose une vraie question. Parlant

de café, je ne crois pas vous en avoir offert, ce n'est pas pardonnable, et le basilic le thym le laurier le plument que j'ai oublié d'ajouter à ma sauce, où Dieu du ciel ai-je donc la tête, vous êtes sûr et certain que vous n'en voulez pas ? J'ai bien une petite bouteille de gin quelque part, j'en garde toujours en cas de défaillance, ne me dites pas que l'exercice de vos fonctions vous en empêche vous aussi comme les inspecteurs de la télé que j'ai toujours soupçonnés de nous mentir au nez... Votre foie. Oui. On a tous un foie, bien sûr, certains plus que d'autres, vous me pardonnerez de boire quand même sans vous à la santé de votre foie et de celui de Mme Bouchard où qu'elle se trouve au moment où je vous parle.

Le lendemain du jour de l'âge d'or que je vous contais, elle revient me voir, figurez-vous, et avec deux billets de théâtre par-dessus le marché, pour se faire pardonner de m'avoir ri dans la face, probablement, et aussi, quoi qu'en dise Eugène, à cause de sa nature, ça on ne peut pas dire, généreuse, oui, le genre à donner sa chemise à n'importe qui, encore que le rose ne soit pas une couleur appréciée par tout le monde, hi hi hi !... Bien entendu, moi, j'accepte, innocente comme le lapin qui vient de naître, qu'auriez-vous fait à ma place, surtout que les soirs où Eugène m'a sortie de la maison en trente ans de vie commune, TRENTE, mon cher monsieur, peuvent se compter sur les orteils de mon pied droit. J'aurais bien dû penser que son théâtre, à elle, ne pouvait pas ressembler à celui que j'avais dans la tête, une grande salle avec des bancs en velours et du monde chic habillé vraiment comme quand on sort et des acteurs qui récitent des belles choses il va sans dire, à quoi ça sert d'aller s'asseoir dans la noirceur pour écouter les gens parler comme au mail Saint-Roch, enfin, c'est ce que j'en pense, moi, et vous pourrez me

répliquer que je m'y connais plus en sauce à spaghetti qu'en spectacles, c'est en tout cas ce qu'elle ne s'est pas gênée pour me laisser entendre, Mme Bouchard, ce soir-là. C'était une pièce sur la vie de Jésus, à ce que j'ai cru comprendre, mais les acteurs parlaient comme des charretiers, «chris, y a pus de vin, «vintage, j'vas en faire», vous conviendrez avec moi que dans la bouche du Fils de Dieu et de sa sainte Mère ce sont des mots qui surprennent un peu, ce qui n'était pas le cas des gens assis autour de moi, tous des jeunes pour la plupart, qui riaient comme des damnés — c'est le cas de le dire. Moi j'étais complètement paralysée, surtout que pour vous montrer comment la salle était petite, celui qui faisait Jésus n'arrêtait pas de m'envoyer ses gouttes de sueur jusque dans la face, ce qui me rendait la concentration bien difficile, mais elle, elle était comme un oiseau dans l'air, elle riait plus fort que les autres en buvant de la Brador, je m'en rappelle très bien, et à l'encontre elle avait l'air de connaître tout le monde, elle distribuait les bonsoirs à la ronde et les jeunes l'embrassaient à bouche-que-veux-tu en la tutoyant et en l'appelant Française, des plans pour attraper des maladies inguérissables et comme si elle n'avait pas eu l'âge d'être leur grand-mère!

Tout ça pour vous dire que ce n'était pas le genre à garder sa place, Française Bouchard, et à rester tranquillement chez elle en tricotant des pantoufles de phentex et en mijotant du catsup aux tomates vertes et de la sauce à spaghetti pour sa famille comme je fais moi-même depuis plus de trente ans, je ne veux pas dire que ça ne devient pas un peu monotone à la longue mais il faut ce qu'il faut, je vais dire comme on dit, quand on est vieux on devrait se tenir avec des vieux, c'est le bon sens même qui parle par la bouche d'Eugène quand il dit ça et il a probablement raison. Je pourrais vous en raconter bien d'autres comme ça, et des vertes et des

moins mûres mais je suppose que votre temps est prétexteux comme ils disent toujours à la télévision que c'est à se demander ce qu'ils pensent du nôtre qui le gaspillons à les écouter répéter toujours la même chose, hi hi, et que vous n'êtes pas venu ici pour que je vous compose une biographie détaillée de Mme Bouchard que vous devez déjà connaître par cœur ne serait-ce que par monsieur Sinclair fils ou père ou par sa fille dont je ne me rappelle plus le nom exact, Marie, Maryse, Mariette, tant pis, elle venait pourtant lui rendre visite presque à chaque semaine. Oui, ah, ça vous intéresse ? Bon. Bon bon.

Attendez une seconde, le temps que je brasse ma sauce et que je m'éclaircisse les idées et que je me verse un autre petit verre de gin, vous me prenez un peu au dépourvu finalement, après tout, je n'étais que sa voisine et je ne voudrais pas que vous pensiez que je ne veux pas que sa famille, enfin monsieur Sinclair fils et fille la retrouvent saine et sauve comme c'est sûrement leur intention et le but dans lequel ils vous ont contacté et pour lequel vous m'écoutez avec tant de patience... Vous ne travailliez pas pour eux précisément, oui, je comprends, vous faites votre propre enquête comme une sorte de détective privé, non, je ne voulais pas vous insulter, vous n'êtes bien sûr pas un détective privé, ça se voit tout de suite à votre à vos, enfin ça se voit, même si tout le monde ne peut pas s'appeler Kojak hi hi.

Je ne sais pas ce qu'ils vous ont dit et je ne sais plus ce que je vous ai dit moi-même, mais n'allez surtout pas croire que j'en parle en mal, de Française Bouchard, je vous explique simplement comment sa bizarrerie s'exerçait, si je puis dire, ce n'était d'ailleurs pas quelqu'un que l'on pouvait facilement détester — sauf Eugène qui y est parvenu très vite, lui — elle était

toujours si correcte et avenante et souriante malgré ses vêtements roses et ses grands cheveux gris de folle.

Il est vrai qu'elle fréquentait beaucoup les jeunes, ça, c'est certain, mais elle avait le droit, après tout elle était majeure hi hi, et même très majeure, hi hi hi hi — excusez, je la trouve bonne... Ils ont dû vous parler de Marcel T. et de l'autre, le petit Vigneault qui arrivait toujours ici avec des grandes fleurs abominables qui ressemblaient plus à des bébêtes qu'à de la verdure, il m'en avait même donné une une fois que je m'adonnais à ouvrir ma porte au moment précis où il sonnait à sa porte à elle, par pure coïncidence évidemment, non ? vraiment non ? ça m'étonne beaucoup, ça m'étonne énormément surtout de la part de monsieur Sinclair fils et de Marie-Mariette-Marine qui avaient fait toute une histoire à ce propos, je me demande d'ailleurs si ce n'est pas à ce moment que monsieur Sinclair fils a développé son premier ulcère à l'estomac... Vous n'êtes pas au courant.

Ce n'étaient pas les premiers qui se tenaient chez elle à toute heure du jour et de la nuit, à un moment donné, j'ai même pensé qu'elle était en train d'ouvrir une auberge de jeunesse tellement il y avait de grouillements de va-et-vient là-dedans, ça rentrerait par pochettes de cinq-dix et pas toujours les mêmes à part de ça, ceux du lundi soir parlaient plus fort que ceux du mercredi soir, qui étaient mieux habillés que ceux du samedi après-midi que j'aurais dû appeler «celles», d'ailleurs, vu qu'il ne venait que des femmes le samedi après-midi mais n'allez pas penser à un bordel ou à une affaire sexuelle, doux Jésus ! hi hi, au contraire, elles avaient le genre plus féministe que féminin si vous voyez ce que je veux dire, toutes un air de beù qui ne trompe pas, n'empêche qu'Eugène trouvait tout ça

louché archi louché, on n'a pas idée d'être si sociable et de connaître tant de monde.

Il faisait partie du premier groupe, Marcel T., celui des «réunions de travail» comme Françoise Bouchard appelait les séances de crailage du lundi soir qui faisaient tant enrager Eugène parce qu'il est un peu dur d'oreille et que ça causait de l'interférence avec ses programmes de télé. Réunions de travail de quoi, je donne la langue d'Eugène au chat, je sais seulement qu'elle avait recruté son monde à l'Université où elle s'était mis dans la tête de suivre des cours de politique imaginez à notre âge et comme si son fils n'aurait pas pu lui en donner des cours privés autrement plus pratiques, et que ça parlait fort de toutes sortes d'affaires qui ne sont pas de nos affaires, l'Annésie internationale, les droits de l'homme, la guerre, l'impérialisme, c'est Marcel T. qui parlait le plus fort, je n'ai jamais su son nom de famille c'est comme ça qu'il signalait lorsqu'il lui laissait des billets dans la porte. Leur relation, oui, leur relation, je savais que vous en viendriez à cette question, ils se la sont toute posée en long et en large, à commencer par monsieur Sinclair fils et l'autre in-pecteur, de la Pôlice montée celui-là, qui est venu me voir il y a bien un an au moment de la mort de Marcel T. et qui n'a même pas souri lorsque je lui ai demandé ce qu'il avait fait de son cheval, c'est vous dire à quel point le sens de l'humour se perd de nos jours. Ils avaient commencé à se voir en dehors du lundi soir mais c'est lui qui venait la relancer quasiment à tous les deux jours, il était au bord de la dépression qu'il lui disait dans les billets qu'il lui laissait dans la porte que je n'ai pas lus pensez-vous ! et c'est vrai qu'il avait l'air plutôt maigrechine et pâle comme un cadavre en surris et malheureux que ça en faisait pitié et que je comprends Françoise quoi qu'en dise Eugène qui voit toujours du mal partout de s'être laissé attendrir, il cherchait une

oreille attentive une amie un support émotif qu'il écrivait, une MÈRE plutôt que je pense même s'il avait trente-cinq ans bien sonnés, vous savez comment sont les hommes enfin je me comprends. Je parle de Marcel T. — si vous me suivez toujours —, c'était rendu que je le trouvais continuellement sur le palier devant chez Mme Bouchard à l'attendre des fois pendant des heures et à sonner à sa porte avec sa face de petit chien malade du va-vite, ça se voyait déjà qu'il n'était pas normal et je n'ai pas été personnellement surprise lorsque j'ai appris qu'il avait fabriqué une bombe pour essayer de faire sauter notre premier ministre mais il n'a pas réussi, évidemment, la bombe n'était pas amorcée à ce qu'on a dit et il a glissé sur la glace c'était l'hiver avant de se rendre au Parlement et il s'est fêlé le crâne et il est mort comme ça avec une bombe même pas bonne dans le fond de ses poches et une lettre de béhées adressée au premier ministre est-ce que c'est assez fou à votre goût, on lirait ça dans les journaux qu'on ne le croirait pas et d'ailleurs les journaux n'en ont pas parlé.

Inutile de vous dire que cette histoire est un peu tombée sur les nerfs de monsieur Sinclair fils qui s'apprêtait à lancer sa grande campagne électorale et qui n'avait pas besoin d'une vieille felquiste dans la famille — je cite ses propres mots —, ce qui était peut-être une chose injuste à lancer au visage de Mme Bouchard qui n'avait pas prévu que ses petites réunions de placotages politiques qu'elle faisait en toute innocence dans le cadre d'un cours dégénéraient en révolution, mais sans doute y mettait-elle un peu trop d'ardeur comme dit Eugène en termes moins polis cependant. C'est elle qui a été la plus affectée par tout cela, la mort de Marcel T. qu'elle s'est mise à se reprocher personnellement comme si c'était elle qui avait inventé la glace et puis l'engueulade de monsieur Sinclair fils qui est bien resté deux mois sans retourner

la voir, elle a laissé tomber bien sûr les cours de politique à l'Université et les réunions du lundi soir après, mais pas celles du mercredi ce qui m'amène à vous reparler du petit Vigneault sur qui il me semble vous avoir glissé un mot tout à l'heure.

Les mercredis soirs, elle prêtait son appartement à une bande de jeunes qui faisaient du mime expérimental — je cite leurs propres mots — et qui n'avaient pas de local pour répéter — pour répéter quoi ça je n'ai jamais su, c'est vrai qu'ils ressemblaient à des perroquets, tous habillés pareil souvent avec des vêtements en soie écarlate et jaune orange qui ne devaient pas passer inaperçus dans la rue, c'est moi qui vous le dis, j'en attrapais quasiment un éblouissement des yeux et un coup de soleil quand je les voyais apparaître en haut de l'escalier. Le petit Vigneault était du nombre, vous l'aurez deviné, un peu plus vieux que les autres peut-être mais pas encore trente ans ni le nombril sec, un bel air ça c'est certain, des cheveux noirs bouclés comme un ange ou un démon, les yeux bleus, attentionné comme une fille, des fleurs en veux-tu en v'là, il a bien dû lui en apporter douze douzaines en l'espace de six mois, le genre de garçon qu'on aurait aimé avoir pour fils, j'imagine, quand on s'appelle Françoise Bouchard et qu'on a pourtant déjà une fille et un fils si chic et si célèbre. Bon.

Si je vous raconte tout ça, comprenez-moi bien, c'est que vous me semblez fiable et discret et sûrement lié par le secret professionnel et pas le genre à cacher des micros secrets dans mon dos pour faire écouter ça à d'autre monde après, je veux dire que je trouverais extrêmement regrettable que Mme Bouchard apprenne que j'ai parlé d'elle même pour dire des choses qui ne sont que l'exacte vérité d'ailleurs déjà connues de monsieur Sinclair fils et de Marie-Martine-Marguerite,

appelons-la Marie pour faire une histoire courte. Je ne demande pas mieux que de vous aider dans l'exercice de vos fonctions qui vous empêchent toujours j'imagine d'avalier ne serait-ce qu'une larme de gin mais n'allez pas me prendre pour une saoulonne si je m'en verse un autre verre, l'alcool me fait le même effet que l'eau pure je vous jure, tout juste est-il plus digestible et revigotant surtout pour tuer les après-midi et les soirs quand ils sont trop longs, au moins accepterez-vous que je vous donne un bocal de ma sauce à spaghetti dont vous me direz des nouvelles quand elle sera prête et dans laquelle j'ai ajouté des rognons de veau et un peu de foie pour accentuer... Oui. Oui, j'y reviens. Le petit Vigneault.

Un après-midi, elle est venue ici, Françoise Bouchard, pour m'expliquer son point de vue sur cette affaire, l'amour qui n'a pas d'âge et patati et patata et j'avoue que j'ai bien failli comprendre — ou me laisser enfiler plutôt comme dit Eugène, c'est vrai qu'il y a des limites une moralité des règles qui doivent bien exister quelque part même quand on ne croit plus au bon Dieu. Le petit Vigneault, voyez-vous, mon cher monsieur, il s'est mis à venir la voir en dehors des mercredis soirs, lui aussi, mais ce n'était pas pour discuter politique ou se plaindre qu'il était déprimé, au contraire, on entendait des rires et des bruits très significatifs qui nous parvenaient directement de sa chambre à coucher, je vous assure, il n'y a pas que les murs qui ont des oreilles.

Vous avez très bien compris, oui, une liaison, sexuelle étroite et tout le bataclan, c'est ce qu'ils ont eu ensemble, elle une bonne femme de plus de soixante-cinq ans et lui un enfantlet d'à peine vingt-cinq vingt-six, je veux bien croire qu'il y a eu des précédents, Harold et Maude au cinéma et au théâtre que j'ai écouté à la télévision et qui m'a fait rire parce que c'est justement arrangé avec le gars des vues mais vous ne

me ferez pas croire que ce n'est pas un monde un peu beaucoup détraqué où allons-nous si les garçons se mettent à sortir avec leurs grands-mères plutôt qu'avec les filles de leur âge et vice-versa en tout cas ça ne fera pas des enfants forts.

Ils ne se cachaient même pas, on pouvait les croiser sur la rue bras dessus bras dessous et ils s'embrassaient parfois dans le corridor, j'en rougissais pour elle à travers la porte. Ça s'est su, bien sûr, puisqu'elle faisait tout pour que ça se sache, ça a quand même pris six mois avant de se rendre aux oreilles de l'entourage de monsieur Sinclair fils qui était cette fois en pleine course à la chefferie, vous savez comment il travaille fort, et entre temps l'histoire s'était empirée, non seulement ils avaient ensemble cette liaison épouvantablement amoureuse au vu et au su de tout le monde mais elle s'était mise à essayer des choses illégales et immorales à son contact, il me parvenait au nez d'en dessous de sa porte et de la mienne des odeurs, des odeurs, je n'ai pas besoin de vous faire un dessin je pense dans votre métier, de fumée de drogue hallucinante disons-le et Dieu sait quoi encore.

Cette fois-ci ça n'a pas été beau lorsque monsieur Sinclair fils a rendu visite à Françoise Bouchard alors qu'elle était précisément avec le petit Vigneault en train de fumer ce que vous savez, il le savait depuis quelque temps il attendait le moment propice que je... que quelque'un l'avertisse par téléphone et il est arrivé presque immédiatement et je vous dis que les murs ont tremblé c'est une façon de parler, je n'avais jamais vu monsieur Sinclair si hors de lui il a traité le petit Vigneault de tous les noms possibles gigolo-parasite-exploiteur-profitreur-de-vieilles-femmes et je crois bien qu'ils se sont même battus et le petit Vigneault a eu le dessous puisqu'il est sorti le premier mais ça n'a pas été

fini pour autant, on a entendu encore pendant des heures les voix de monsieur Sinclair et de Mme Bouchard qui se crisiaient l'une par dessus l'autre celle de monsieur Sinclair disait : « Tu te conduis de façon inqualifiable — tu m'en veux — tu fais tout pour me nuire — tu ruines ma réputation — c'est ma mort que tu veux — ma mort politique », celle de Mme Bouchard répétait tout le temps : « Non — c'est ma vie — veux-tu — laisse-moi tranquille — non ce sont mes affaires — fiche-moi la paix veux-tu — la sainte paix... » comme ça à se cha-mailler pendant des heures et après je n'ai plus rien entendu, la maison ici fait comme un L et ils avaient laissé la lumière du salon allumée, je les ai vus qui se serraient dans les bras l'un de l'autre et qui pleuraient — on aurait dit une image sainte.

Semble-t-il qu'après, ils ont fouillé dans le passé du petit Vigneault pour essayer de déterrer quelque chose de criminel ou de révolutionnaire, je suppose que monsieur Sinclair avait été échoué avec l'affaire Marcel T., ils ont bien fini par trouver des irrégularités, de l'Assurance-chômage reçue en trop, des impôts dus et pas déclarés, suffisamment de petites choses pour lui faire peur, j'imagine, et pour qu'il ne remette plus les pieds chez François Bouchard et l'histoire s'est terminée comme ça — ou presque. Plus tard, dans le courant du mois, elle est arrêtée nous voir, « en passant » a-t-elle dit mais ce n'était pas vrai, elle ne venait jamais ici le soir surtout lorsqu'elle savait qu'Eugène était dans les parages, elle n'avait même pas pris la peine de s'habiller convenablement de se peigner un peu, elle avait une tête à faire peur des cernes bleus jusqu'au menton quasiment, elle s'est d'abord excusée très très poliment de nous déranger — je ne sais pas pourquoi je vous raconte ça ça n'a vraiment pas d'importance aucun intérêt, c'est à cause de ses yeux, peut-être, elle avait une façon de vous regarder dans les

yeux qui vous faisait sentir mal à l'aise, coupable de quelque chose — Eugène est parti dans le salon s'asseyant pour regarder la télévision et je suis restée seule avec elle dans la cuisine oh pas longtemps quelques minutes à peine, « je suis rendue au fond au fond », qu'elle m'a dit à deux ou trois reprises d'une voix calme et courtoise comme si elle parlait de température, je n'ai pas su trop quoi lui dire ni ce qu'elle entendait par là, elle me regardait fixement avec ses grands yeux secs et tristes, tristes, j'étais gênée pour elle je lui ai offert des biscuits un café qu'elle a refusés, elle m'a dit « j'avais juste envie de vivre, ça a l'air que je n'ai plus le droit, est-ce que vous n'avez pas envie de vivre, vous aussi, des fois ?... », je n'ai rien trouvé à répondre, évidemment, c'était complètement déplacé et indécent et gênant, elle devrait être droguée sûrement comme a dit Eugène, j'ai bu deux-trois verres de gin après qu'elle a été partie peut-être même quatre ne me demandez pas pourquoi, et j'ai jeté dans la poubelle le vieux linge que j'étais en train de raccommoder, les gilets, les chaussettes, les caleçons d'Eugène, je ne sais vraiment pas pourquoi je vous raconte ça, ça n'a rien à voir avec le reste excusez-moi.

Il ne faudrait pas, par exemple, que tout cela vous donne à penser que sa famille ne venait la voir que pour lui faire des reproches, au contraire, je vous ai dit que Marie sa fille lui rendait visite à chaque semaine et monsieur Sinclair fils assez souvent aussi même si c'est un homme extrêmement occupé, d'ailleurs vous les avez rencontrés vous savez comment ils sont gentils distingués et pleins de bons sentiments ça se voit à l'œil nu. Je dirais même qu'ils s'occupaient d'elle avec énormément de sollicitude et d'affection comme si elle avait été leur enfant plutôt que leur mère, et c'est vrai que ses comportements à elle paraissaient souvent infiniment moins matures et raisonnables que ceux de Marie sa fille entre autres, qui n'arrivait jamais ici les

bras vides, elle apportait de la nourriture des vêtements des cadeaux de toutes sortes « maman tu te nourris tu t'habilles tellement mal » qu'elle lui disait toujours sans aucune pointe de méchanceté et en riant que ça faisait chaud au cœur à entendre, on sentait tellement qu'elle aurait donc aimé voir sa mère parfaitement bien et heureuse. Des enfants comme il s'en fait peu, je vous dis, et dont elle aurait eu raison de se montrer plus fière mais elle n'en parlait jamais, ça m'a pris je ne sais combien de temps avant de découvrir que sa fille était avocate elle aussi et la principale collaboratrice de son frère, est-ce assez beau imaginez deux dans la famille c'est ce qu'on appelle réussir, ils ont dû hériter ça de monsieur Sinclair père sur qui je ne sais malheureusement strictement rien excepté qu'il est dans les affaires et que Mme Bouchard l'a complètement rayé de sa vie depuis quinze ans qu'elle l'a quitté. C'est toujours comme ça, toujours les mêmes qui ont de la chance et qui ne le savent pas, ça faisait bien des années que Marie sa fille la suppliait de venir habiter avec elle dans sa grande maison à Sillery au lieu de vivre maigre dans un appartement décrépit en mangeant ses petits revenus de pensions, on ne me l'aurait pas dit deux fois moi, surtout qu'elle aurait pu continuer là toutes ses activités de placotage « dans les limites du raisonnable », évidemment, comme le lui faisait remarquer Marie avec justesse, parce que la maison d'une avocate engagée dans la politique, quand même, ce n'est pas une porcherie ni un vieux logement de Limolou dans lequel on peut inviter n'importe qui sans respect pour le voisinage et les qu'en-dira-t-on.

Tout ce que je vous dis là, par exemple, ce n'était plus valable les dernières semaines qu'elle était ici, Françoise Bouchard, elle s'était mise tout à coup à comprendre le bon sens si je puis dire, surtout après l'affaire des féministes qui a été la goutte d'eau qui a fait

déborder le bain. Je vous avais parlé des samedis après-midi de Françoise Bouchard où elle recevait chez elle un paquet de femmes de tous les âges habillées la plupart du temps comme des mécaniciens de garage, eh bien je ne m'étais pas trompée il s'agissait tout à fait de féministes organisées en groupe avec un nom dont je ne me rappelle plus, mais qui fourrent leur nez partout et sont toujours en train de se plaindre du sort fait aux femmes comme si ça pouvait changer quelque chose. Figurez-vous qu'il n'y a pas très longtemps, je fameux groupe en question a convoqué une assemblée publique où il y avait des photographes et des journalistes, et elles se sont mises à critiquer d'abord le Gouvernement ce qui n'est pas nouveau mais ensuite tenez-vous bien à s'en prendre au programme politique de monsieur Sinclair qui n'est pas encore au pouvoir même si cela ne saura tarder, et à dénoncer toutes les choses sexistes pour employer un mot à la mode qu'il aurait dites, et qui pensez-vous qui était là assise au premier rang de leur assemblée écoutant religieusement toutes ces niaiseries-là comme s'il s'était agi d'un discours du pape et qu'on a pu voir en pleine page d'un journal sur une photo qui ne manquait pas de le mentionner par écrit en plus, Françoise Bouchard elle-même en personne oui Monsieur, vous devez lire le même journal que moi.

Cette histoire est arrivée un tout petit peu après celle du petit Vigneault et j'ai trouvé que monsieur Sinclair fils et fille avaient démontré bien de la patience puisque quand ils se sont amenés chez elle, cette fois, il n'y a pas eu un son plus haut que l'autre qui est sorti de l'appartement dont les murs sont pourtant faits en carton, ils avaient l'air de lui parler extrêmement raisonnablement, Marie sa fille la tenait par le bras tandis que monsieur Sinclair fils était debout penché sur elle une main posée sur son épaule et elle, elle les écoutait à tour de rôle avec un visage grave et sérieux qui

montrait qu'elle commençait à réaliser à quel point ses agissements étaient fous et écartelés et indignes d'une femme de son âge et du rang social de ses enfants. Et c'est un fait que dans les jours qui ont suivi, elle s'est transformée du tout au tout, elle a commencé d'abord par s'attacher les cheveux et s'habiller plus décentement en couleurs sombres ce qui était déjà une amélioration énorme, et elle a laissé tomber toutes ces sorties et ces réunions farfelues qui ne lui apportaient finalement que du trouble, et la maison est redevenue calme comme avant son arrivée ici il y a dix ans, même que vous allez rire je me suis mise à m'ennuyer de la musique de sauvage qu'elle a arrêté de faire jouer à tête comme elle en avait l'habitude — c'est pour dire on s'adapte à tout.

Vous avez sûrement aperçu les boîtes péle-mêle dans son salon, elle avait enfin accepté de déménager dans la grande maison de Marie sa fille ce qui était une décision pleine de bon sens à mon avis, ça ils ont dû vous le dire aussi et je comprends qu'ils ne comprennent pas et qu'ils croient à un enlèvement on n'est jamais trop méfiant dans le monde de détraqués qui nous entoure.

Seulement... Seulement. Bon, J'aurais peut-être dû commencer par là, par la dernière fois que je lui ai parlé et où elle avait l'air si drôle vous me direz que c'était son air normal mais non il y avait quelque chose en plus. Elle revenait de dîner avec ses deux enfants qui l'avaient emmenée au restaurant et elle est arrivée ici quasiment sans trapper et elle m'a demandé un verre de gin, tout ça en riant comme une folle, bon pourquoi pas je me suis dit, je n'ai rien contre la galette. « Ils veulent que je réintègre « Femmes en marche » — c'était ça le nom du groupe dont je vous parlais — qu'elle m'a dit toujours avec ce rire de gorge qui me semblait forcé, « ils

disent que leurs conseillers trouvent ça bon, au contraire » — je cite toujours ses propres mots — « il paraît finalement qu'une mère subversive, ça fait très bien dans le décor, ça ajoute du progressiste », je ne comprenais rien, évidemment, pour dire quelque chose, je lui ai demandé « qui ça ? » et là au lieu de me répondre, elle a arrêté de rire et elle m'a regardée avec son air qui vous donne envie de rentrer sous terre « je n'ai plus d'enfants » qu'elle a dit mais très distinctement je vous jure, vous demanderez à Eugène je lui ai tout raconté et je ne suis pas d'accord avec lui, cette fois-ci, quand il prétend qu'elle était droguée ou saoule.

Non, ce n'est pas la dernière fois que je l'ai vue. La dernière fois que je l'ai vue, elle venait de sortir de la maison, elle marchait sur le trottoir et elle s'est arrêtée un moment juste en dessous de ma fenêtre de cuisine, quand ? est-ce que je sais quand !, il y a deux semaines à peu près deux semaines exactement oui c'était la première belle journée de printemps je me rappelle, et elle a levé la tête vers moi on aurait dit qu'elle avait deviné que j'étais là.

Elle m'a envoyé la main en souriant et ça m'a fait un grand coup au cœur, je ne peux pas vous expliquer, elle avait détaché ses cheveux qui lui tombaient sur les épaules comme une crinière grise et remis son ensemble rose avec son grand sac de toile rose, elle avait comme rajouté de vingt ans tout à coup et ça m'a fait penser quand nous étions petites toutes les deux c'est vrai j'avais oublié de vous dire, on a étudié ensemble aux Ursulines, Françoise Bouchard et moi, j'ai tout de suite reconnue quand elle est arrivée ici à cause de son grand rire comme une corde de bois qui déboule et ses yeux et son allure déjà différente des autres à cet âge-là, même si elle, elle ne m'a pas replacée comme on dit, il faut dire

que j'ai un peu beaucoup changé avec le temps, et puis la vie n'est pas souvent facile.

Elle n'avait pas de valise, non, mais j'ai compris qu'elle s'en allait, qu'elle s'en allait tout court, comprenez-vous, c'était une journée pour ça, pour refaire des folles n'importe où quelque part sans personne qui nous retient, dites-leur de ne pas chercher, je ne pense pas qu'elle ait envie qu'ils la retrouvent, dites-leur bien, c'est probablement ce que vous appelez une fugue mais il faut du courage ah il en faut tellement, j'ai refermé la fenêtre de la cuisine sans être capable, voyez-vous, sans être capable de lui crier de m'emmener...

BENNIE ET FILS

Enter et miséricorde. Elle palpe l'unique dix-huitième exemplaire de « Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar » tiré sur vergé blanc de Hollande Van Gelder avec la désinvolte férocité d'un éboueur de la basse-ville qui se collette avec les sacs d'ordures, elle écorne subrepticement le fin papier liséré, elle martyrise la jaquette, elle renifle l'encre neuve de près, de plus près, elle retrousse les lèvres — diantre, vertudieu, elle va finir par en prendre une bouchée!... Claude soufre.

— J'ai une envie TERRIBLE d'escalopes de veau aux morilles à la crème. Hein?... On va à la Ripaille, ou chez Umberto?...

Il doit être cinq heures vingt, la librairie achève de sombrer dans une catalepsie lourde, monastique, et Claude se surprend à détester soudain avec violence les escalopes de veau à la crème et les doigts boudinés d'Olga qui s'entortillent complaisamment autour du si précieux dix-huitième exemplaire de « Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar » tiré sur vergé blanc de Hollande Van