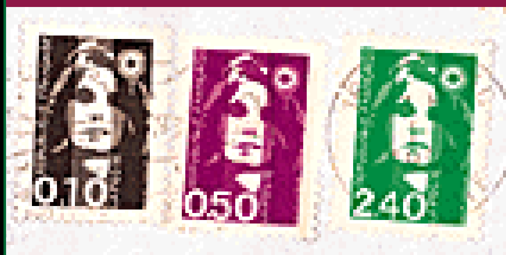
Pascal Dujac

Ananda



Online Originals

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Car le refoulement dont parle la psychanalyse consiste en ceci que le sujet s'engage dans une certaine voie—entreprise amoureuse, carrière, oeuvre—qu'il recontre sur cette voie une barrieère, et que, n'ayant ni la force de franchir l'obstacle ni celle de renoncer à l'entreprise, il reste bloqué dans cette tentative et emploie indefiniment ses forces à la renouveler en esprit. Le temps qui passe n'entraine pas avec lui les projets impossibles, il ne se referme pas sur l'expérience traumatique, le sujet reste toujours ouverte au même avenir impossible, sinon dans ses pensées explicites, du moins dans son être effectif. Un présent parmi tous les autres acquiert donc une valeur d'exception: il déplace les autres et les destitue de leur valeur de présents authentiques. Nous continuons d'être celui qui un jour a vécu dans cet univers parental. Des perceptions nouvelles remplacent celles d'autrefois, mais ce renouvellement n'intéresse que le contenu de notre expérience et non sa structure, le temps impersonnel continue de s'écouler, mais le temps personnel est noué.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Phenomenology of Perception

Prologue

Winter. The cold has the city in its grip. Outside ... a gray immensity of sky. The clouds hang low, oppressing the city with their frigid weight. Inside … the plaster cast of the curving roof arches around my head. A log fire flickers in the grate, strewing gaunt, ungainly shadows across the rounded walls. Raindrops shatter on the skylight window. Tilting down they coalesce, gathering speed as they ride the pane. Sometimes the rain falls down so hard that the drops no longer retain their frail but dense identity, joining, merging, blending until the window swims in a shimmering sheet of water. It is as though this attic room were suspended deep beneath the sea. The rain has sealed me into this room, has sealed me into my memories.

Can the ghosts of the past be raised through the ritual of remembrance, raised and so laid to rest again? I don't know, nor can I even claim to know whether trying brings its own rewards. I only hope that at the end of all these abortive trials the truth will dawn as effortlessly and as inevitably as the day. For the moment I am waiting, awaiting the exactitude which reaches out of chaos to assume control. For the moment I only own these disjointed pages, pages which litter this little room like Autumn leaves waiting to be burned. Perhaps these useless jottings are all that ought to be retained, the residue of deeds recorded as they were originally lived—in the margin of awareness.

Some of these pages date right back to the time that

Margaret began to return my letters to me (premature rehearsal of that tragic/comic stereotype—the mother-in-law). For a while I continued writing to Ananda, bearing each letter boldly to the post, but ducking, so to speak, as I let it drop into the box, as if I had already seen it boomeranging back with those syllables scrawled across its face: Return to Sender.

Nevertheless, I went on writing, writing letters which I never sent, preparing myself for the writing I had yet to undertake, but to which I had already been committed by these announcements of intent. And so I have filed these pages away like promissory notes, the record of a debt to myself which I have yet to repay. I must write. I must go back along the links of pages such as these, pages which recall me to my life here in the city.

And yet it will not be easy to reconstruct the past out of the murky distillations of memory. For these residual passages remind me of a time I would rather forget. They lie strewn in the empty places of my mind like beads that have lost the thread of their conjunction. This page, for instance, stained with the wine that I must have been drinking at the time in some forgotten cafe we used to frequent together. It must have been written while I still lived in the fading shadow of Ananda. At that time, (hardly more than a year ago but already thrust back into history) I still held on to the hope that the future would repair the damage wrought by the past. I was not yet prepared to admit that the doors of her accessibility had slammed definitively in my face.

All Spring and early Summer I worked for my final examinations. Thankfully, I plunged back into those doughty, legal tomes, as though I hoped such plain, ungarnished fare might serve to cut the bitter taste of

disappointment. It was not until the orals were all over, not until I had been informed that I had done much better than I had any reason to expect, that I gingerly resuscitated the dissonant register of the past. I wrote to the sanatorium, only to be informed that Ananda's condition had not improved. (Could madness be a last defence against the flood-tide of reality?) The news converted my success into a profitless absurdity, a travesty of the life it was supposed to underwrite, the life we were supposed to lead together. With nothing left to do I walked the streets of Paris, besieged by the reminiscent features of the city. Then, towards the middle of the Summer vacation, I drifted down to the South of France. And for several weeks I inhabited a region of the mind somewhere near the deadline of unconsciousness.

I would go to the beach in the early morning, bearing a long white loaf and several bottles of cheap red wine. I would drink until the taste of the grapes soured my mouth and then lie back, letting the fierce Mediterranean sun stew the humours of my psyche. Throughout the day I would lie on the beach at the very confluence of earth and fire and water—the sand tearing at my skin, the wine washing in my bowels, the sun blazing in my head, neither sleeping nor awake, aware and yet inert, stretched out, diffuse, disintegrating.

I might never have emerged from this nerveless state if it had not been for my friends. I still remember the sentiment with which Angelo sought to console me, a sentiment so true to his fickle disposition that it sounds even now like a parody of his 'romantic' outlook. 'Another woman will help you forget,' he said, encouragingly. And it had been Herman who had intervened with a remark so truly perceptive that it finally dispelled any idea I might

have had of forgetting, of simply going on instead of attempting to return. ‘Time will go on,’ he had remarked, ‘but you will not go on in time. You will be fixed in a time from which you will not be able to liberate yourself.’ So it was on Herman’s advice that I decided to withdraw from the world, work through the past until the past, in its own good time, resolved to set me free. But would it ever have occurred to me to try to write a novel if I had not been goaded into literacy by Robert? ‘Write it out,’ was his recommendation. ‘Not introspection but expression—something in the literary order of things. ‘

And so the idea had taken root, the idea of reworking in words this past that has worked such a change in me. It had been hard at first, staring for hours on end at the great white sheets of writing paper, not knowing how to begin. And then the frenzied scribbling, just to get something started, ‘to elicit a literary elimination,’ as Robert would say. Pages I would be embarrassed to read today. For I was still too near to the event, too near then as I am still too near today. Between myself and the slab of my life which has fallen away beneath my feet, time has still to intervene.

The time to outgrow the attitudes of my prospective profession. I have to get past the point of passing judgment. For the open seas of understanding lie beyond the reefs of right and wrong. ‘Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner.’ A hackneyed phrase , but one which I still find it difficult to improve upon. How can I presume to pass judgment upon Margaret, Ananda and the other members of the family? Were they not each and every one of them right—from their own point of view? So that the time I need is the time it will take to reconstruct the multiple perspectives of these, our interpersonal transactions.

But also, the time to grow into a new familiarity with

words. For I was taught to reckon with words, to marshal thoughts like pieces in a regimented game. I was taught to define my terms, not to let words release their varied ranges of significance. So I shall have to learn new ways of working with words, new ways of evoking in words the dumb loquacity of deeds. If I am to retrace my steps, review the chances and the choices which have conducted me to where I am, here, in this hermetic, attic room, I shall have to let time itself stand still, transpose past and future to the spreading frame of the ever present. I shall have to learn to conjugate the tenses of my time.

To help me with my task I have kept certain items which bear upon the past. Ananda's letters, for instance, and the copies of the letters which I sent to her. I suppose it was the lawyer's instinct which induced me to make copies of everything I wrote. But I am grateful now for my carefulness. For these letters are all safely laid away—mementos of the year when our relation had to be enacted upon the plane of writing. As I lift the lid of the leather box in which they are all contained, a whiff of vent vert sidles out, assembling a facsimile of her very presence, here, in the room beside me.

And in the drawer beneath my desk, the silver ring she gave me, that afternoon we spent together at the Château de Marly, that afternoon when we first cleared the fence that marks off the boundaries of two solitary bodies. And here, intricately woven into the filigree, three simple words, words which cry out at me in jest: Amor vincit omnia.

I also keep a few records which I play sometimes upon a demented turntable. I have selected these records because they help to reinstate the scenario, restore the past to its present place in memory. There are records of the pieces she used to play on the piano or on the guitar. Records of

the more memorable performances we went to hear together—Brahms' Fourth symphony, Nielsen's *Fifth*, Mahler's *Kindertötenlieder*, Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. Not to forget the records of the records I gave her on her birthdays—three Schubert string quartets, an Album of Bach's organ music played by Schweitzer, Bartok's *Music for Strings and Celeste*, Messaien's *Quatuor pour le fin du temps*.

Finally, there are the photographs. If I have left the photos to the last it is because they help me least. These photographs are so steeped in the crude stupor of the real, so obsessed by the stark indubitable stamp of all things seen, that they hold out obstinately against the colourful inflections of fantasy. This snapshot, for example, is so exactly dated—Ananda, standing at the main gate of the Château de Villiers, the Count on one side, the Countess on the other—that it fails to convey an essence, something which might survive her every daily change. These photographs make no allowance for the passage of time. They fall short, in that they fail to enlarge the span of time to the scale of eternity.

I am living in a chambre de bonne, lodged in the roof of a building on the rue Etienne Marcel. It is quiet up here, perched among the chimney tops, cut off from the streets below by high protective walls which tone down the sound of passing cars to an indistinct continuum. No one disturbs me on this, the seventh floor. For the lift only goes as far as the fifth. The last two flights are nothing more than an afterthought, an appendage to the unsightly contents of the apartment block. The rooms on the sixth floor have been converted into storage space and are connected by a corridor which runs the entire length of the building. At the very end of this corridor a narrow spiral staircase winds up

to the landing of the seventh floor. There is only one room up here, this extraordinary globe of a room which crowns the whole apartment block.

The ill-lit landing of the topmost floor accommodates what the landlord is pleased to call the 'facilities', consisting of two gas burners grimed with soot, a water tap and a noxious hole over which I have to squat to relieve myself. Naturally, there is nothing like a bathroom up here. However, I have managed to rig up a bath of sorts, by installing an old electric boiler which pours its quantum of steaming water into a large tin tub. I have also invested in an imposing array of salts and oils which I use to work up the water into a rich lather of scented suds. I often wallow for an hour at a time. For I find that this ritual has its part to play in my struggle with words. The warm perfumed water raises to the surface of my mind ideas and images which would otherwise have been submerged by the ponderous gravity of concentration. Close at hand, I keep a soggy pad on which I catch these fragments as they float into view, trap them before they can sink away again as elusively as they appeared.

Across the landing from the facilities stands the door to my room, a heavy oak door set into one flattened side of this otherwise circular chamber. The room is lit by a single skylight window. Through the window I am able to see an unbroken stretch of sky, sometimes clear and sometimes clouded. From the ever-varying tapestry of this lighted sphere I can take the pulse of each day's weather. Every morning the sun creeps across this opening. And once a month a full moon hangs, with menacing lucidity, right at the centre of this frame.

From where I sit at my desk beneath the window I can hear the local church clock chime. But I take no notice of

this time. For I am learning to live by natural rhythms, eating when I am hungry, sleeping when I am tired, writing when I have something to say and, for the rest, resting long hours upon my bed. Something in me goes to sleep and something else awakens. Inertia induces reverie. Out of the erratic cracks which wander all over the wall, I begin to fabricate the visible equivalents of my desires. Images float before my mind. But I am so far in control that I can freely summon up an apparition, regulate its exits and its entrances.

Thus it is that she still appears to me. I tempt her down the streets outside, entice her into the apartment block, guide her up the seven flights of stairs, to the landing where I almost hear her tread. Such is the suggestive force of this fantasy that I often sit bolt upright on my bed ... waiting, waiting for the knock which never comes. So I close my eyes and let her in. Longingly, I lapse into the phantom arms of this figurine, rehearse the modalities of her return, each variable gesture etched in an empty silhouette whose outlines tremble in a swim of tears.

When I leave the room, descend the endless echoing steps, manoeuvre down the shabby hall, past the ‘poubelles’ with their entourage of festering smells, I find myself in the flagrant streets which cluster around my home ... rue Saint-Denis, for instance, which intersects rue Etienne Marcel. Shaded, red-lit bars proclaim the business of the street. Hands reach out towards me as I pass ... whispered kisses, behind the glass of twenty minute hotels, call girls lurk, legs bared and breasts entailed. Or else they stand out on the street, handbags at their side, ever ready to bolt back at the first sign of alarm. An occasional ‘flic’ saunters by, turning his back with conspicuous gallantry.

Groups of onlookers gather round ... watchers watching for a girl, or watchers watching watchers watching for a girl, watching for the shy, sly approach of a prospective client as he fronts the woman of his choice. Sometimes she turns him down, spurning the notes which he holds out, invitingly. Or she asks for more. And he fondles his wallet, figuring the debts to pay, wondering whether he can throw away the future's claims for the honeyed moments of the present hour. Eventually a bargain is struck. She walks off sedately to her room while he trails a good few steps behind, conjuring up an imaginary space between himself and his disgrace. Tomorrow he will go to confession to expel the impiety from his mind.

As I stumble down these stricken streets on my way home, I am often importuned by the local ladies, accosted with indelicate proposals, invited to spend myself upon the treadmill of their limbs. But I am not as lonely as I might appear to them, more constantly accompanied than I ever used to be. I have no need of their garnished bodies, even if I could afford their fare. Indeed, I have discovered that I have to be more faithful to her now than ever I was before. For when I fall away, the words die on me like birds with broken wings, and I am left with empty, unmarked sheets which mock me with their superfluous virginity.

Every now and again Béatrice calls on me ... Béatrice, another woman, another facet of my story. And sometimes she leaves her child behind when she goes to work. On such occasions the child will squat on the floor beside me as I write, brows frowned, lips pursed, and a crayon in each mitted fist. While I write, he coils his rubber body around the great white sheets of drawing paper on which, with infinite patience, he depicts the vivid images of his dawning

mind, applying himself to his own colourful world as seriously as I to my world of words. The child seems to understand my need for quiet. For he will spend whole hours on end crouched over his creations, not uttering a sound, except perhaps for a muttered imprecation, as if soliciting a hidden God to guide his stumbling hand. But then, as I wrestle with a reluctant phrase, he will offer me a bouquet of literary flowers, effortlessly plucked from the garden of his innocence, a simple offering which puts my strenuous labours to shame.

One afternoon when the wind jostled the chimney tops, fingering the window latch as if it wanted to enter in and violate the homely warmth of my attic room, one evening while the wind rehearsed its lamentable dirge, the child turned to me and asked: 'Does the wind have a home or does it always live outside?' And I hesitate to answer a question which is an answer in itself, a question which has already trapped the elements in the net of a living metaphor.

The child, in his own unfathomable way, knows what I am writing about and lends the details of my narrative the tenor of a fairy tale. As I write, he paints the Ananda of his dreams cast in the hold of her insanity. Only, I have been dispossessed. And in my place an unmistakably childish face rides to the rescue of the damsel in distress.

Only the other day the child, who has heard so much of a word I always assumed he was much too young to understand, asked me, out of nothing: 'What is Love?' I tried to reply. But as I struggled with my gross abstractions, endeavouring to reduce them to the compass of his puerile mind, the child broke in, dispersing my clumsy approximations with one poignant phrase: 'Love must be like having a mother your own age.'

Love yes ... but also death. Little did I suspect when I

withdrew to set about my writing that I would be invoking death, twin brother and collaborator in the erotic urges of the psyche.

It happened once, when I was standing at a balcony, spread-eagled over Montparnasse and desired, in answer to some siren's call, to fling myself from the concrete shaft, arms open wide and glide. Divided into two parts, one of which was bewitched and enticingly invited me to spread my wings, while the other, gross and gnomish form of rationality, warned me what would actually transpire. And how reason managed to prevail, driving my loath and grudging limbs to the head of the stairs, down which I raced, five steps at a time, in leaps and bounds, till I felt the solid ground again beneath my sore and quaking feet.

Another time, in the Metro underground, when I joined the mindless shuffling of the throng, creeping with centipedal tread along long airless corridors until I was disgorged upon the quai. And then ... the headlight boring out of the dark, the rumble and the rush of wind, mesmerized by the cyclop's eye and wanting, longing to throw myself before this roaring monster scaled in steel whose wheels scream menacingly against the rails. Backing away, I cling to a bench. The train draws up. Doors agape. Passengers spewed out, sucked in. Doors clenched. The train is gone, as suddenly as it appeared, leaving me to drag myself on shell-shocked feet across the treacherous siding of the quai to the nearest exit where my legs press up against the steps, press urgently up, up, up to the level of the sunlit city, to the level of my sanity.

And then the questions. Why did I try to kill myself? And how could I have really tried? For if I had, then who could have saved me from myself? No, this Judas is myself and yet another. Not I myself but some other 'I' which still

inhabits me. Not the 'I' of the time of writing perhaps but the 'I' of the time I was writing about—old sores festering in forgetfulness, revived by the act of recollection, which is a form of sickness, I suppose, but one which may yet yield the only cure which germinates, of its own accord, in the culture of the disease.

This very morning I returned to the scene of the crime, suspended myself above the vista of Montparnasse, bivouacked boldly for a good half hour upon the surface of the quai, challenging the enemy to show his face, but without eliciting any response, not even a faint and fitful replay of that very close encounter, so temptingly proffered that, had I given in to it, I know my last moments would have been lived out in a state of bliss, the whole of my life consummated in this, the sweetest instance of my death.

Chapter One

Life is the way back to one's own birth,' wrote Robert in his journal. 'From the womb not to the tomb, but back into the womb again.' As if to remind me of this sentiment, I have inscribed across a corner of my writing desk, in letters deeply cut into the mouldering wood, the following maxim: Return to Origins. Of course, I had suspected all along that this writing would be a retrospective flight, a suspension of myself while I returned. But at first I thought it would be enough to begin with my first meeting with Ananda. But as soon as I tried to write about that evening at the Opera, that fateful if not fatal night when Ananda swam into my senses like the most beguiling aria, I found myself assailed by questions, questions which I hardly knew how to answer but the answers to which, I vaguely felt, were locked up in the ancestral chest of childhood.

And so, in the end, I decided to go right back to the very beginning, back to the place in time from which I come, back to an image which is all that I can remember of my parents. This image is so unexceptional in itself that I sometimes wonder whether it was not invented later, to certify my legitimacy. At any rate, it still remains with me, this image of my mother and my father presiding at the nightly ritual of my bath, standing ceremoniously around while a baby plays in the soapy water. This is all that I am able to recall. And yet it is enough. For in my memory this image is infused with joy. It is fringed with bliss.

One memory and one memento; a photograph in which my parents managed to catch a moment of their happiness. There they stand, forever young, their arms around each other, laughing out of the faded print. The carefree expression on their faces convinces me that my childhood would have handed down a joyous treasure box of memories—if they had lived. Instead they died. But they died a death which somehow seems in keeping with their love for one another.

It was during the war, in a large rambling house by the river Thames, at Twickenham, a fashionable suburb only a few miles away from the centre of London. Late one night a stray plane, crippled by machine gun fire, relieved itself of its last bombs, one of which fell upon my parents' home, blasting its way into the insular confines of their dreams. At any rate, that is how I like to imagine the event; my mother and my father fast asleep, propelled into death from the border land of the little death of sleep. I was asleep in another room, further from the centre of the blast. I survived because I was small, securely lodged in some negligible interstices of the shock. I survived the blast and the blast survived with me. As though the blast were a second birth, a belated echo of that shock which I must have felt on encountering the world at birth. So that the interval between my birth and my parents' death now appears to me in the guise of a second pregnancy, a hiatus which lasted as long as I lived in the warm, enclosing womb of my parents' home, which lasted until that bomb blasted me into a world to which I only half belonged. When I try to recall the event, no concrete image comes to mind, only this distinctive sense of rebirth, of beginning again in a world from which my mother and my father had withdrawn, to leave me with my aunt.

My aunt—what am I to make of her? That grotesque parody of a parent who always did her duty by me, who brought me up by every precept save that of love and understanding. What am I to say about her now, now that I no longer have to listen to her interminable complaints? That she came to stand for my expulsion from the Eden of my parents' home? Yes, that must be why she still appears to me occasionally in my dreams, standing obtusely at the garden gate, armed with the rusted sword of her principles and her piety.

'I am bringing you up out of the very goodness of my heart,' my aunt would remind me, never neglecting any opportunity to draw attention to her charity. Not until much later did I discover that she supplemented her income from a trust set up in my name, a fund made up of the money that had come from the sale of the remains of our home and the proceeds of a life insurance policy. The money was earmarked for my education and was placed at the disposal of my aunt who thereby became my legal guardian. In her more amiable moods my aunt would insist: 'Now that your real mother is dead you should call me 'mother' instead.' But I refused to adopt this nomenclature. For although I was never called an orphan, that was how I felt constrained to think of myself.

Certainly, my aunt never failed to do her duty by me. I got as much or more than most other children of my age, but only if I was good. My bonuses were conditionally offered and grudgingly given. Gratification never fell, like manna, out of the sky. On the contrary, it was only served out to me after I had completed a pilgrimage to a holy land where my aunt resided, enshrined in virtue and redolent in deeds. She was my confessor and inquisitor, judge and jury rolled into one. Her duty it was to lay down the laws by

which my actions would be appraised. Whenever I was 'naughty,' she would install herself in a high-back chair especially set aside for such judiciary purposes. And I would have to defend myself as best I could, defend myself against this guilt which lurked in the quicks of my eyes, this guilt which blossomed fulsomely in the flush of my cheeks, this obdurate, defiant guilt which betrayed itself in the jut of my jaw, or the tight-lipped silences with which I tried to confound my prosecutor.

The court was in session every evening, just before I was due to go to bed. The omissions and commissions of the day were solemnly paraded before me. Naturally enough, it was always assumed that I was guilty unless I could prove my innocence. And I was never entirely innocent even then. For in her eyes I was damned with an original sin which I could never hope to expiate altogether. I was guilty of having lost my parents, of not having had the decency to die a death that was good enough for them. And then I was guilty too of being her sister's son. For she had never managed to have a child of her own and would refer obliquely to her loss by deploying statements charged with insidious intent. 'If I had a boy of my own he certainly would not behave the way you do.' She used to refer so frequently to this exemplary son of hers that I came to accord him a quasi-existence, began to think of him as a cherubic prototype of myself, laid up in some platonic heaven, who would be forever frowning down on my many misdemeanours.

How did my aunt ever come to be my guardian? I ask this question only because I refuse to believe that it could have been my parents who entrusted me to her. She was, of course, a relative. But I suspect that my aunt volunteered her services of her own accord, with a view to claiming the

income from the fund. Besides, I am sure she had no difficulty in making a good impression upon the administrators of the trust. For she possessed all those masculine traits which invariably inspire confidence in others—authority, efficiency, and a matter of fact intelligence. Indeed, she was one of those persons of indeterminate sex whose true nature is perverted by the accident of birth. Her upper lip was flecked with a tentative growth which would undoubtedly have developed into a most impressive moustache if only her chromosomes had been weighted a little more decisively in the other direction. She was a large, flat-chested woman with that sort of booming voice which is ideally attuned to the imperative. And yet to the citizens of Ampleford she was a paradigm of virtue and enlightenment, with her visits to the prison and the old folk's home, her charity functions, not to mention her devotion to her sister's boy. 'Even the convicts are more grateful for what I do for them,' she would grumble disparagingly on returning from one of her many visits to the county jail. 'If I didn't have you on my hands I would be free to devote myself to more worthy causes.'

She had a habit of referring to those on whom she had agreed to bestow her charity as 'causes.' I was one case amongst many others. Only I was an insufficiently pitiable case. She preferred to administer to the crippled or to the condemned, to those, in short, who were not in a position to resist the inevitable invasion of their privacy, those who could only return a dog-like devotion in token of their gratitude. Hers was that odd inversion of intimacy which is only effective when all the established distances are maintained. In public she could be the very soul of gentility. But no sooner home than the war was on, almost as though the testament of privacy menaced the foundations of her

credibility. I was too close to her for comfort. I knew her far too well. I pricked her where she was most vulnerable. I was the irreducibly private thorn in her utterly public flesh.

It is difficult for me to think of Mrs. Barnes as married. But she was married once, though it hadn't lasted long. She chose a gentle little fellow with a whimsical smile, a retiring chin and a scruff of dowdy brown hair which floated negligently in the wind. I say she chose him. For I can't imagine my aunt's erstwhile husband choosing her, or anyone else for that matter. He was before my time. But from what I've heard, he was essentially indecisive, a good-natured drifter with enough money of his own to be able to indulge his more moderate fancies. My aunt must have managed to convince him that she would be good for him. By marrying her, he would be making up for all the wasted indecision of his former years. With my aunt behind him he would be able to take his life into his own hands, carve out a place for himself in society. As incompatible as they must have been, my aunt had reasons that her heart knew nothing of. With a little care he could be made to look quite presentable. She would be boss. And with his money behind her, she might well aspire to the status of a local dignitary. Unfortunately, Mr. Barnes proved more incorrigible than she had ever imagined possible. He refused the shining path of reform down which she tried to propel him. He spent less and less of his time at home, and was to be found most evenings in one or the other of the local pubs, complaining bitterly about the life he led at home. 'Mr. Mild and Bitter' they used to call him, after the two kinds of beer with the help of which he would regularly reach forgetfulness, that is, until he tried to get back into the house. At which point he would be treated to a salutary reminder, a withering volley of words from my aunt which would leave him mouthing

helplessly. One day he must have decided that he had had enough. He left, and my aunt promptly sued for desertion. She had no difficulty in getting a handsome settlement out of him.

It was really the ideal marriage for my aunt. But to hear the way the worthies talked you would think that she had suffered a calamity. 'Poor Mrs. Barnes. Married a man who turned out a good for nothing drunkard. Out every evening, leaving her alone at home.' Alone, indeed! In all the time I lived at her house the place was hardly ever empty. What with committee meetings, charitable functions and my aunt's interminable tea parties, the house was more like a town hall than a home. It was I who was obliged to seek out places where I could be alone; the attic for example, slung between the eaves, and lit by grimy dormer windows where I would retire with the books which were my only childhood companions. The once upon a time of fairy tale, of mystery and narration soon became the fabulous time to which I returned with all the literal seriousness of my beginning years.

It was my books which first enabled me to overcome the confines of my situation. But although I could outwit my aunt by the time I was half way through preparatory school, my rhetorical ingenuity rarely did me any good. For when she had run through her stock of arguments, she would invariably fall back upon an armoury of prejudices that she was pleased to call her principles. Retreating behind the parapets of her principles she would lodge herself securely in some impregnable form of words. And my plaintive query, fired at random, would splinter against the stone of her unquestionable convictions.

Naturally, she was never so sure of herself as when the issue turned upon the Church. At first I was not a little

impressed by my aunt's religiosity. Then I began to suspect that her attendance at church had more to do with her neighbours than it ever did with God. In due course of time I began to have my doubts, doubts which I attempted to communicate to my aunt. I couldn't see the point of going to church any longer as I had always done before. But my aunt was adamant.

'Of course you have to go to church.'

'But I no longer believe in God.'

'God will fortify your faith.'

'God is doing nothing of the kind.'

'Because you don't believe in Him.'

It would have been useless to point out to her the merry-go-round of premises and conclusions on which we embarked whenever we had an argument. She would simply have taken such pedantry as further proof of my wickedness. 'You're just trying to be clever;' as though this was enough in itself to dismiss the case in her favour. Initially, I would get quite upset at these non sequiturs. She seemed to be breaking the rules of the game, or making them up as she went along. Then I threw in my hand. I realized that there was no point in trying to outbid her so long as she insisted on dealing herself whatever cards she pleased.

I was really quite glad when the time came for me to be sent to the local prep school. For home had already become a school, and worse than a school. By going to school I was only substituting, for the irrational tutelage of my aunt, the far more reasonable authority of my tutors. But when it came to the choice of a public school, my aunt elected to deploy her powers of judgment more discriminately. I needed more discipline, a school that would thrash some sense into me, precipitate me forcibly into a state of grace.

Chesterton was the very epitome of my aunt's ideals,

small-minded, unenlightened and traditional to the last degree. The school was conceived on an analogy with the pyramid. Year by year you went up a row, but only because you got older. If you demonstrated any aversion to the place which had been allotted to you, you were promptly outlawed as an 'individualist.' This word, which has since come to mean so much to me, was a word I first encountered as a term of abuse. Not that I can claim to have had, at that time, any very definite sense of myself. Rather, I was afflicted by a vague and indefinite sense of the threat to myself that the system represented, the many little compromises which add up to one great all-encompassing surrender.

And so it was only to be expected that I should have entered into particular alliances with those who, like myself, were somehow set apart. There was a Latin master, for example, who was notorious for his eccentricity. He must have been one of the most cultivated teachers that the school possessed. Nonetheless, he was blackballed for his oddity, his whole unconventional address. And then there was Simon—a Jew. Naturally, he became a victim of prejudice.

Though it took me entirely by surprise, I suppose I should have anticipated Simon's expulsion from Chesterton. It was not what he did that mattered but the person who had done it. Homosexuality was a common enough occurrence at Chesterton. And an entirely forgivable offence—provided only that it was treated as an inadvertent lapse into the ribald travesty of the flesh. Lust was understandable. Only love was reprehensible. But Simon was in deadly earnest, over a boy who was quite unworthy of his attention. For several weeks I watched him vacillate between the two extremes of defiance and servility,

uncertain whether to condemn himself or the school which had condemned him. In the end it was his parents' attitude which weighed against him. By failing to stand by him, they robbed him if the strength to stand by himself. I tried to talk him round. But I suppose it is only possible to encourage those who have already set their hearts upon a certain course of action. By the time I became aware of the extremity of his state of mind he had already decided to do away with himself. And, for all I know, my arguments to the contrary only added a certain desolate poignancy to his intention.

Simon's suicide transformed my outlook on the school. Over the years I had managed to work out a certain accommodation with Chesterton, a treaty of non-aggression which it was in the interests of both parties to observe. I campaigned against games until they let me run alone in the afternoon. I made a nuisance of myself in class until I was allowed to study on my own. Towards the end of my third year, I began to enjoy an inviolate space which made it that much easier for me to overlook the stupidities and the injustices. I watched others suffer the tyrannies, but left them to make their own peace with the system. Simon's expulsion restored my sense of solidarity. His death brought home to me the simple truth, that each one's fate affects us all.

I went to see the headmaster, with a view to bringing home to him his part in the tragedy. I never expected a confession. But I did hope for some expression of regret. Instead, I was treated to yet another recital of his crimes. The well-worn cliches of morality were solemnly paraded before me. As I listened I remember feeling overpowered by a sense of the sheer futility of reason, when arguments are no longer used to get to the truth of things, but to release a

smoke screen of evasions behind which Power is always able to beat an exemplary retreat. In the face of this unreasonableness it seemed only natural to let blows speak, break the silence which had settled over argument. Of course I was expelled. Striking the Headmaster was the *ne plus ultra* of scholastic mutiny.

I suppose there was no reason why I should not have gone on to a University in England. The headmaster threatened to do everything in his power to thwart my plans. But scholarships are not awarded on the basis of behaviour. A year's studying on my own and I should have stood a good chance of success. A little prematurely perhaps, I took it for granted that I would be able to live and study at home.

But if I ever expected either sympathy or understanding from my aunt, I was sorely mistaken. She was far too concerned about the way the scandal might reflect on her. Her only advice was an abject apology to the Headmaster. It was then that I realized, for the first time perhaps, that this emblazoned battleship of a woman who would, no doubt, have charged recklessly into the most murderous fire, had duty demanded it, was nevertheless a prey to one obsessive fear. She was dreadfully afraid of what others might think of her.

I remember arguing for several hours, arguing with a kind of desultory desperation, knowing that the outcome had already been settled, that we had reached a parting of the ways. This house that I had called my home began to grow strangely unfamiliar. The ashen smell of the open hearth, the eccentric voices of the boarded floors, the chests and the drawers where I had hidden as a child, this house haunted by the ghosts of so many childhood games, all became a part of someone else's past, barren soil into which

someone else had tried to put down roots. And so, when my Aunt fetched up from the arsenal of her rhetoric the once conclusive argument to end all arguments, the answer seemed as inevitable as it was entirely unpremeditated. No sooner had she declared: ‘As long as you are living in my house you will jolly well do as you're told,’ than I took my leave.

Leaving was much simpler than I had ever imagined. Most of my belongings were still at school. I simply picked up the suitcase I had brought along with me and walked out of the door. My aunt refused to believe that I actually meant what I had said. ‘You'll be back again within the week,’ were the very last words she ever addressed to me. But even this parting shot failed to carry conviction. She already seemed to have some premonition of finality. For I still carry with me this last image of her massive frame standing at the garden gate, vacillating in the vacancy like a mollusc that has lost its rock.

Leaving—first my school and then my home. It seemed at the time as though I had been condemned to lead my life amidst these symbols of my dispossession. And so it was only to be expected that I should have envisaged a yet more drastic disinheritance, one that I might freely take upon myself—as though exile might yet be the best way home. Nor did the choice of another country present the slightest problem for me. Indeed, it is difficult for me to remember a time when I had not already been aligned within the gravitational field of France.

There was French blood on my mother's side, a relative many times removed who lived in the South of France. M. Duquesne ran a boulangerie in a little village by the sea. He only made a modest living. But it was enough for himself, his wife, and his two young children. I still recall

his portly, balding figure and the genial smile which invariably embraced a smouldering cigarette. He would stand behind the counter every morning sharing the local gossip with his customers, whilst his wife bustled in from time to time with the steaming loaves that she would bake at the back of the shop. My aunt wasn't sure that she approved of the Dusquesne's. For in the rigid framework of her cosmography, my cousin featured as a tradesman, a species that my aunt deemed it more prudent not to recognize. But she consented to my visits on the grounds that they could be classified as 'educational'.

It was at Suresne-sur-mer that I first learnt the meaning of gaiety, a glad light-heartedness which contrasted starkly with the grim sobriety of my aunt's. Each visit seemed to relieve me of a burden of accumulated gloom; indeed so noticeably so that it became something of a local joke that my aunt would not recognize me when I returned home. At Suresne-sur-mer, the sun always shone in a cloudless sky. And M. Duquesne's beaming smile seemed to spread more broadly across his oval face each time he came to meet me at the station in his deux cheveaux.

It was at Suresne-sur-mer that I first fell in love. A shy, innocent affection it must have been. For I was only a boy of thirteen while she was a girl of twelve. We never arrived at those formulations by which love is supposed to declare itself. Indeed, my command of the language was far too limited for gallantry. But her endearing glances and the cheerful chime of her voice meant more to me than words could ever have said. I even found myself repeating my more memorable errors, just to hear her laughing out in response to my incompetence. But in all likelihood it was the place, the setting, the sense of escape which I cherished as much as Sylvie herself.

Carefree days those were, days which always ended too soon. But an impression of those summer afternoons must have survived the whole year through. For I applied myself with particular seriousness to the study of French. As soon as possible I made the study of languages one of my specialities. By the time I left Chesterton I was not only fluent in French, but as conversant with the history and culture of France as I was with that of my own country.

And so it was not in the least surprising that I should have left for France. More surprising, perhaps, was my decision to go on studying, more particularly, to study law. Such was my disenchantment with school that at first I toyed with the idea of giving up my further education altogether. I travelled around Europe for a bit. Then, when I ran out of money, I took a job. It was not until I got a job, any job, that I realized how much books had come to mean to me. Nine to five—rising to face a stretch of day; rush hour and the long incline, lunch and then the decline of afternoon, then rush hour, over and over again—senseless repetitions which I quickly learnt to loathe. A year or so of this and I gladly reverted to my original intention. But I made one concession to circumstance. I decided to re-orient my studies in a more practical direction. For a while I thought in terms of the sciences. Then I leaned towards economics, even enrolling at the London School of Economics for a couple of terms. Finally, purely out of curiosity, I happened to attend one of those introductory lectures which are given to the general public by specialists in the field of their choice. A practising barrister, who also taught at one of the Inns of Court, came down to talk on the subject of Justice and the Law.

He spoke with the impassioned conviction of one for whom the manner is as important as the matter. I no longer

remember the details of his thesis. But the central theme still stands out clearly in my mind. He began by drawing a distinction between the principle of Justice and the practice of the law. A legal system, he argued, is supposed to put into practice the principle of Justice. In practice however, Power often occupies the place which belongs by right to Justice. For the natural outcome of human association is inequality, not equality. For this very reason the principle of Justice was originally developed to redress the inequalities of the natural order. Through the instrument of Justice, society undertook to provide the weak with some means of recourse against the strong. However, the more powerful members of society were able to turn the very same instrument to their own advantage. They regained control by entering into an alliance with the lawyer, using his knowledge of the law to advance their interests. Lawyers, I remember him concluding, are amongst the worst offenders against the principle of Justice. Those of us who still believe in the principles which inspire legality must take care to see that the letter of the law is not allowed to prevail against the spirit of Justice.

What was said matters much less than the effect his lecture worked on me. In the space of an hour, the tangled threads of my life had been unravelled and then tied back together again into one tidy knot of intelligibility, so plain, so very obvious, that I wondered how I could ever have overlooked this salutary denouement.

Shortly thereafter I left for Paris to take up the study of the law.

Chapter Two

The Pavillon Franco-Britannique at the Cité Universitaire —a monolithic red brick block threaded with airless corridors that stitch together, with gloomy precision, a complex of box-like cells; a construction of which Robert once remarked: 'C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la gare.' This was where I lived when I first came to Paris. In this monument to Cartesian clarity, conceived in the logo-maniacal mind of some misguided architect, everything runs according to rule. The rooms are all exactly alike; the floors are set out on the very same scale. A list of regulations prescribes what the residents may or may not do with themselves, or with one another.

Segregation of the sexes is built into the very structure of the building, divided as it is into two opposing wings. Men are housed on one side, women on the other. As in the monastic orders, poverty, chastity, and obedience are the three guiding principles which every student is expected to respect. Visits are only permitted at certain, particularly inconvenient times. A public lounge has also been provided—neutral ground where men and women are allowed to meet outside official visiting hours. But if it was the intention of the lounge to defuse the more dubious forms of intercourse, then it has to be admitted that this concession to morality has not met with success. During the day the lounge remains largely unoccupied. But as night approaches it begins to take on an aspect of iniquity, a sexual

turnstile through which the uninhibited receive admission to their sins. Encouraged by the dark, harassed lovers strive to complement each other within the reach of commodious chairs.

It is rarely quiet at the Collège Franco-Britannique. Students are forever coming and going, to class, to the restaurant, to each other's rooms. The mock-marble stairway amplifies the shuffle of feet throughout the day. The only time when it is still is early in the morning, after the last reveller has retired to his or her own room. Then, for a few hours, the Pavillon lapses into the silence of sleep, before the arrival of the femmes de chambre heralds the start of another day.

No recollection of the Pavillon would be complete without a reference to the chambermaids—a bevy of elderly ladies who loom over the horizon like an invading army at the dot of dawn, routing the dreams of the still sleeping students with their tin-cracked voices, the clatter of their mops and pails. The Reveille call of a brisk 'bonjour' is blown in the doorway of each room. 'Sleepers wake,' a voice is calling. But it is not the watchman on the walls; only the industrious hum of a femme de chambre making her matinal rounds, spreading polish like a disease across the ochre floors, wrestling with metallic taps until they gleam malignantly. Once the femmes de chambre have arrived it is pointless trying to go on sleeping. And those unwary M'meoiselles who have failed to leave their boyfriend's beds before the femmes de chambre appear have to be hustled briefly into empty cupboards where they must stand as quiet as falling snow until the maid has finished cleaning out the rooms. For if they are caught the offence will be reported to M. le Directeur. And, as likely as not, the two offending parties will be expelled from this parody of a paradise where

the students are continually being reminded that it is a privilege for them to live.

Some would not have it otherwise. Angelo, for instance, has always maintained that the element of risk adds an exotic flavour to the whole enterprise of making love. Angelo is a romantic of sorts, in the sense that the trajectory of his life seems to fall into two complementary phases, falling in and falling out of love. Force de circonstance, he has become something of an expert in the art of inveigling women in and out of his room after hours. His latest discovery often turns out to be someone who is already well known to the inmates of the Pavillon. But until Angelo turns the light of his attention on her she only exists in embryo.

Before very long the scenario became familiar to us. An unassuming miss would suddenly assume the most redoubtable accoutrements. An altogether refurbished person, she would shuttle to and fro from Angelo's room, and we would know that she had joined the ranks of those whom Angelo had promoted. But each unqualified enthusiasm, each extravagant recital of the virtues of his latest find, would only be the prelude to that first disquieting disgust, a disgust which would gradually infect the affair until it had entirely compromised his feeling for her. 'Elle me dégoute, celle-là,' would be his final comment on the woman of his election.

Nature had been generous in endowing Angelo for the role which he seemed destined to play. He was an Italian —tall, dark, well-built, with a welcoming smile that put you instantly at your ease. But his 'pièce de résistance,' the ultimate weapon in his armoury of amatory techniques, were two moist eyes which, in tender moments, could be relied upon to brim with tears, reflecting in their lazy

depths a humid sensitivity that few young women were able to resist. Angelo's emotional outpourings were as sudden and as short lived as an April shower. But as long as they lasted, flowers blossomed in the parched soul of his beloved. And yet the honeymoon had hardly begun before it was eclipsed by the end of the affair. It would not be so much a matter of his tiring of the girl, still less of his discovering another who pleased him more. No, the logic of his infatuations seemed to demand a more emphatic rupture. There had to be something positively wrong with her—too fat, too thin, too sensual, too prim. The recital varied; but the end result remained the same. Moreover, until he had definitively broken with one, he seemed to be quite incapable of turning his attention to the next. In fact, Robert always insinuated that it was the gambit of the broken heart which served him in good stead during those anguished interludes between one romance and the next.

'Gouter jusqu' au dégout,' Robert remarked one day by way of a description of Angelo's emotional metabolism. And Herman had added: 'Yes indeed; if Angelo could only assemble all his little disgusts he would see that they add up to one great despair.' And yet I doubt whether Robert intended his observation to be taken in a spirit of condemnation. For when, on quite another occasion, Herman proclaimed: 'creativity is the sublimation of sexuality—a divine reward for renouncing an earthly paradise,' a generalization which was, no doubt, intended to provoke debate, it was Robert who took up the challenge. 'On the contrary,' he replied. 'Creativity is the supreme expression of sexuality—a feast of flesh, the more you eat the hungrier you become.'

By his own admission Robert is something of a rebel, very much in revolt against his origins. He was brought up

in England, but is by birth half French. He is a poet, writes in English, but refuses to acknowledge a debt to English literature which, he claims, was in any case the invention of the Celts. Robert professes Rimbaud's 'déreglement systématique des sens.' He dislikes the English for their virtues and admires the vices of the French. 'Unisex,' I remember him saying one afternoon, 'is a typically Anglo-Saxon invention.' 'Vive la différence' could never have been the cri de coeur of a race so devoted to conformity.' No doubt this is why he goes out of his way to make fun of the English ideal of the gentleman. Ask him what he takes to be the essential prerequisites of the genuine English gentleman, and he will tell you, dropping his jaw in a parody of the marbled tones of an English Lord: 'Elementary, my dear fellow. Stiff upper lip and limp upper leg. Eh? What, what!'

It was Robert who contributed so largely to my metamorphosis, Robert whose flamboyant style of life set him apart from anyone I had ever known before. Robert—I still like to think of him as the night watchman of the city, watching the city while the city sleeps. For typically, he rises as the day declines, stays out all night, and does not come home until the sun shoulders the horizon. Robert has money and can afford to ride out the night on oysters and champagne. He does not eat much, but when he does it is usually some exotic delicacy which is liable to make me ill. He contends that alcohol is an adequate substitute for food. And indeed, I do believe that he has succeeded in converting the internal combustion of his bowels to accommodate his diet. Many's the time I would try to keep up with him on one of his all-night seances. But after a few hours drinking I would be forced to retire, defeated, to my room. I have to admit that I do not have his indefatigable stomach and his

inverse eyes for seeing in the dark.

It was from Robert that I received my bacchanalian baptism. Whenever I called on him in his room, I would stride in sober and stagger out drunk. But for all my inexperience in the art of dissipation I liked to watch him in action. Robert, clad in the mantle of the poet, departing to dispense the seeds of his vocation; Robert, returning at break of day, with a few lines garnered from the harvest of the night's festivities; Robert, arising at the crack of noon, stumbling down to lunch in his florid dressing gown, his head still swimming in an alcoholic haze, but muttering invincibly to himself: 'Dignity in death. Above all, dignity in death.'

It goes without saying that many of the students at the Cité dismissed Robert as a pompous ass. But the air of incorrigible pretension, the histrionic affectation, was only a mask which hid a guileless simplicity. Proof positive: his ability to get along with the representatives of what one could not even call the working class, since they rarely, if ever, actually worked—the outcasts, the winos, the clochards, in whose derelict circles he moved as easily and as confidentially as in the salons of his upper class acquaintances. Indeed a communist friend of his, seeing him one day in his most elegant tenue , was so foolish as to bet that he didn't have it in him to give up his bed to a down-and-out. No sooner had the bet been laid, then Robert was out in the streets searching for his prey, returning some time later with what he slyly described as 'a real stinker.'

'Who's this type?' the clochard asked suspiciously upon being introduced to the communist. He was duly informed that Monsieur was a friend of the working class. To which the clochard promptly retorted: 'Then he's no friend of mine. Never did a day's work in my life.' Indeed, after a few

minutes in his vicinity, the friend departed and was last heard expostulating in a grieved tone of voice, 'The smell. My God, the smell.' At any rate, the clochard was ceremoniously installed in Robert's bed, and the two of them held open house through the night until Robert eventually fell asleep on the floor beside him. The look on the face of the femme de chambre the next morning had, according to Robert, to be seen to be believed. Poking the mass of odorous flesh gingerly with the tip of her broom, she was heard to exclaim: 'How did this trash get in here?' 'Dear Madame,' Robert replied with dignity, 'I invited this trash in here myself.' At which point the clochard woke up and promptly started making gestures of such obscene solicitations that the femme de chambre flounced out of the room, much to the delight of them both.

In theory, Robert is still working towards a degree in literature. But I have my doubts as to how much studying he ever does. He refuses to attend lectures, to submit to what he dubs 'the barrack room bark of the professorial martinet.' Indeed, his most abusive remarks are reserved for critics, 'literary parasites,' as he is wont to call them,' for ever riding their barren panaceas across the plains of learned journals.' As far as Robert is concerned, literature is not the product of intellectual industry, but the fruit of exquisite idleness. In this respect he is utterly unlike Herman, who is a paragon of industrious scholarship. And yet they get along together famously, as though each needs the contrast of the other to set off his own peculiar qualities.

Herman is a German-American of the first generation. He was born in Germany just before the war, and lived through the destruction of the Fatherland. Then his parents emigrated to America, where he went to school. Now he is back in Europe completing a doctorate in philosophy. He

describes himself as one engaged in the perennial quest of every enlightened American, the quest for identity and social roots. As he so aptly put it to me one day: 'I am looking for somewhere to be from.'

Herman looks just like the archetypal philosophe—tall, lean, his limbs awry, as though he had been put together by some lackadaisical carpenter. Behind the cover of his spectacles, two vacant eyes appear to be scanning the furthest horizons. In his mouth one invariably sees a stout briar pipe. When you ask him a question he will suck in noiselessly, stemming the emission until he has made up his mind. Then a little puff of acrid smoke will preface his decision, like the cloud above the Vatican upon the election of a Pope.

He is reputed to be absent-minded. Once, he stuck his lighted pipe into his jacket pocket where it set fire to a copy of Marx's Manifesto. Only the prompt arrival of a femme de chambre saved him from something like an auto da fe. He has a habit of muttering 'come in' when you knock at his door, and then omitting to unlock it, assuming, no doubt, that any true friend of his would be able to percolate through of his own accord.

He tends to talk in the most far-reaching generalities. But he is subject to intermittent flashes of specificity, when he condescends to descend from the giddy heights of his abstractions. At such times you can almost see him scrambling down the ladder of his own self in a frantic effort to find the right rung.

In retrospect, I have to admit that it was Robert and Herman who made the most vital contribution to my education; not the education which took place in the lecture room, or the library of the rue St Jacques; not the official education which I received at the time but the education

which has made it possible for me to write about that time. It was Robert who introduced me to the luxury of words, Herman who imparted a certain rational economy. Had it not been for Robert I might not have learnt how to let words slide into the devious moulds of metaphor. Had it not been for Herman, I might not have known how to set about the task of understanding. It was Herman, after all, who, à propos of Robert's facetious injunction that we love one another, fervently, replied, and without a moment's hesitation: 'There is no other, only the self learning to recognize itself in the guise of its relations with others.'

Chapter Three

'A waste of good money,' Robert retorted when I told him that I intended to go to the opera. 'This bastard child of a misconceived marriage between theatre and concert—drama driven mad by its own excesses. Every action floundering in a slough of song. One sits out the evening in a frenzy of exasperation, shouting, sotto voce: Get on with it. For heavens sake get on with it. But no, the wooing has to proceed by proxy. The dying has to be gone through by degrees, drawn out on the rack of adenoidal arias.' A glance at me, as if to test my reactions and then. 'I'm sorry to dampen your enthusiasm, but I simply refuse to believe in these hefty heroines clumping about in Nordic helmets, these swans which arrive and depart with all the monotonous regularity of a scheduled service. Or is that ballet?'

I did not allow myself to be deterred. But a good seat at the opera represented quite an investment for an indigent student like myself. The money I had brought with me to France ran out after the first few months. Although I had managed to get an allowance out of the trust, it wasn't enough to meet all my needs. To make up the difference I gave English lessons around town. The work was relatively well paid, but only on an hourly basis. And one had to travel back and forward by Metro from one appointment to another. After a while I reconciled myself to this subterranean existence which came to take up a certain part of two or three afternoons a week. Indeed, the Metro

gradually became a part of my appreciation of the city—the dimly lit corridors reverberating to the banjo twang of some itinerant bard, the overcrowded compartments, the almost musical cling of the bell preceding the slam of doors, this whole mélange of touch and sight and sound ushered into the senses and held in thrall by a discrete accompanying odour, a distinctive Gallic blend of garlic and gauloise.

A few additional lessons from a benevolent old lady who didn't really want to learn English but who liked to keep up with the younger generation, and I had the money for a box seat to the opera. I had been advised to wait for one of the better-known opera companies from abroad. And so it was a performance of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, offered by the Berlin Opera Company, that I eventually went to hear.

Appropriately enough, it was at the opera that I first met Ananda—life paying art the compliment of an aesthetic arrangement of events. At this remove, it is difficult for me to think of our meeting as a chance encounter. But at the time I am sure I would have called it a simple coincidence. For at the time I still subscribed to a kind of realism, the realism that is the natural, if not the national, philosophy of every Englishman. In the meantime however, I have outgrown my native realism like an old, worn-out suit of clothes. Such work as I do now, sequestered in the solitary confines of this room, no longer bears upon the facts, but upon the meaning they have come to assume for me—in retrospect. It was Robert who wrote: 'Time is the womb of the world in which reality is brought to birth.' Perhaps all that is, or ever will be, has already been conceived, and so only awaits the ineluctable moment of its delivery? Am I the victim of a misconception, sponsored by my writing, or am I right in thinking that we were only enacting something that

had already been decreed, that our roles were, so to speak, already preordained? The creaking of that door, that creaking summoned from eternity to disturb the melody of the time, surely that creaking had to be in order that I should become the person I now am?

At any rate it was that sound, the insidious but insistent creaking of the door, a creaking which I first registered with annoyance rather than alarm, that creaking which first heralded the advent of Ananda. Ananda or, more likely, her mother gingerly pressing against the door to my box, slowly, so as to make less noise, and so prolonging indefinitely the agony of the rusted hinges. The sound cuts into the overture, fretting the darkness of the box. I try to shut it out, without success. Words drift past, words which speak to me in English. It is the intonation of my tongue which captures my attention. In spite of myself I strain to catch the drift of the conversation.

'We're in the wrong box.'

Another voice answers, so softly that the words are lost. A chair scrapes across the floor. Then a man's voice protests, in French.

'Madame, that seat is reserved.'

The voice that answers speaks a French which is heavily overlaid with an American accent. I am just able to make out the one word 'libre.'

'Someone will be coming shortly,' the man objects, curt, uncompromising.

'But ...'

'Out of the question Madame. Now if ...'

The sentence is cut short by the sound of the door being opened again, abruptly this time, so noisily as to break the line of the overture. I turn around, and am just able to make out a young girl and an older woman standing toward

the back of the box. Further back in the doorway stands an usherette. She snatches two tickets from the woman's hand.

'Just as I thought. You're in the wrong box.'

'But can't we stay here for the moment?' The woman's voice trembles uncertainly, pleading her cause.

'Absolutely out of the question. You'll have to wait until the interval.' The usherette stands defiantly at the door, holding it open for the two of them to leave.

The woman starts to move towards the door, but is held back by a slight deflection of the young girl's hand. She addresses the usherette in perfect French, but in a tone of voice which hardly conceals contempt.

'There is no reason why this disturbance should continue any longer. We will stand here until the interval.' She turns around to face the stage, cold-shouldering the usherette.

Light from the landing filters through the open door and falls upon her figure. Something about the superb composure of the girl compels attention, the classical lines of her face, the mould of her body set in the cast of an evening gown. At a glance an image leaves its imprint on my soul, so that all our future intimacy would sometimes seem to be little more than an embellishment of this primordial stance, she standing at the entrance to the box, outlined in a shaft of light, I watching from the shadow of my seat.

The rest followed almost automatically. There was an empty seat adjacent to my own. I indicated the two vacant seats as I walked back to assist these victims of officialdom. The usherette viewed my intervention with the utmost disapproval, having counted on the support of all the other members of the box. I told her that I would stand at the back until the interval. She hesitated. I drew out a bill from my trouser pocket. She yielded reluctantly, withdrew.

At the end of the first act the lights came up. I waited at the back of the box. The woman to whom I had conceded my seat gathered her coat and walked up the aisle between the seats, followed by the girl.

'I don't know how to thank you enough.' A nervous smile guttered uncertainly on her face. 'If it hadn't been for you we would have missed the first act altogether.'

'Don't mention it.' I glanced from the woman to the girl. 'I don't see why the public should be bullied by usherettes.'

'I know what you mean,' the woman replied, wrenching my attention back again. 'The French can be so officious. And once they realize you're a foreigner they won't lift a finger to help.' She hesitated. 'I take it you're not French.'

'Nothing as interesting as that,' I replied. 'Just plain English, with Celtic overtones.'

She turned to the girl. 'You see what I mean. I always told you the English were so well-behaved.'

And then as if to make up for the oversight. 'Oh, by the way, I'm Margaret. And this is my daughter, Ananda.'

I was immediately struck by the difference between Ananda and her mother. Margaret was lean and angular. Her flesh cleaved incisively to the framework of her bones. She might have been very attractive once. But now her skin was crossed with lines. Dull brown spots clotted the surface of her face—freckles which had somehow spread out into leaky patches. Ananda, on the other hand, was endowed with an unblemished complexion, her skin a creamy, almost phosphorescent tone. An oval face, almost too exactly proportioned I remember thinking to myself, as I looked for some distinguishing irregularity. But the long golden hair, dressed in ringlets and held in place with a diamond brooch, the rounded forehead, the arched eyebrows and the fleshy

crescent of her lips might have come off the cover page of a fashion magazine. Not until I stepped aside to let her pass did I notice the uniqueness of her nose, moulded, as it seemed to be, in two separate sections. It was above all the Caesarean presumption of her nose which gave her face a commanding poise, a massive but unthreatening assurance which prompted others to oblige. Even as we left the box I was treated to a first instalment of that impression which she so readily aroused in others, especially men. For the man who had tried to keep Margaret out at first was waiting for us outside, hovering nervously on the threshold like a school boy called upon to give an account of himself. I noticed it was Ananda he addressed and not her mother.

'Excusez moi, M'meoiselle. But you might as well take advantage of the empty seat next to my own.'

'But if your friend turns up?' It was Margaret's turn to advance the very objection which he had previously used to keep her out.

'If she hasn't arrived by now, she never will. So please ...' There was a coaxing tone to his voice which contrasted oddly with the harshness of his earlier attitude, a voice which asked to be forgiven. He seemed eager to attach himself to our group. But, with a delicate finality which I could not but admire, Ananda found the words with which to dismiss him, kindly.

We walked along the circular corridor which connected the boxes on the second floor, across to the vast central stairway and down towards the vestibule. The greater part of the audience was out there already, stretching their legs, moving with the studied elegance of mannequins on display. Despite the old dinner jacket which I had managed to drag up for the occasion, I felt distinctly ill at ease. Ananda, on the other hand, appeared to be in her element. As we began

to talk she adopted a pose which was to become so familiar to me later on, right elbow cupped in the palm of her left hand, her right hand aligned along the right side of her face, a pose whose first instalment in my mind was vividly rendered by a pair of long white gloves which accentuated the alignment of her arms. I noticed that she had an odd habit of sucking her upper lip from time to time.

She left the talking to her mother. And before very long, England became the focal topic of conversation. Margaret had only been to the country once before, a brief visit in the early days of her marriage. But out of her relative ignorance she had managed to construct an image of my homeland which was as far-fetched as a medieval engraving, a largely fanciful portrayal of the 'olde countrie'. In her eyes, England seemed to represent a tasteful bouquet of discrete sobriety and old world charm, seasoned with braided butlers and glossy gentlemen gliding through the porticoes of stately homes.

'My husband enjoyed the visit as much as myself. Quite unusual for a Frenchman. Normally all they can talk about is 'perfide Albion'.'

'Oh, but that was a long time ago.'

'But they just can't stop harking back to the past.' She adopted a histrionic pose. 'The glorious history of France. Le roi soleil. Napoléon. Oh, and Waterloo.' She looked at me admiringly, as if she were congratulating me on my country's victory. 'The French still haven't forgiven you for that one.'

'It was either us or them,' I said.

'Of course it was.' Margaret's voice sounded through the void as though it came from a long way off. 'Believe me, I've no sympathy for dictators. He deserved all he got and more besides. But if you were to read the history books they

hand out to the kids at school, you'd think he was a martyred saint.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'They're quite incapable of seeing things from any point of view but their own. That is why I always wanted to send my children to school in England.'

I looked inquiringly at Ananda only to encounter a non-committal gaze, aloof, like an umpire at a tennis match, there and not quite there, as though she had raised the art of observation to a point approaching participation. I was just about to break the silence when she cut me off, anticipating the very question which I had it in mind to ask.

'No, I'm through with school.'

'That's right,' Margaret confirmed. 'Ananda studies at home now, with a few extra courses here and there—the British Council, for example.' She paused, then resumed the momentum of her commentary. 'But I've another daughter at a boarding school in the West of France.'

'And you'd like to send her to school in England?'

'If only I knew the names of some first rate schools.' She leaned forward eagerly. 'Perhaps you could help us here.'

A dozen names sprang to mind like targets on a rifle range; the names of schools which were the female counterpart of the school to which I had been sent. 'I could easily find out for you. But if you're talking about a prestigious school, the fees could be exorbitant.'

Margaret turned to Ananda with a slightly sardonic grin on her face. 'That's one problem we don't have to worry about, now do we dear?' And then with a chuckle. 'On the contrary, the more it costs, the happier they will be.'

For the first time Ananda looked concerned. Her eyebrows drew together, crinkling the skin above her nose, not a frown exactly but an intimation of disquietude.

'Do you really think they'd agree to an English school?'

Margaret laid a reassuring hand on her daughter's shoulder. 'Don't worry dear. I know how to handle them. If it's a snobby school which costs the earth, they'll be only too delighted.'

'They?' My confusion must have been apparent.

'Oh, just some crazy French in-laws of mine. Naturally they would prefer Ananda to be educated in France. But I'd much rather she was educated somewhere else.'

'And her father?'

'He doesn't care two pins one way or the other. As far as Georges is concerned, the less he has to bother with his children the better.' There was a pause, a long uneasy pause, which ran away like a laddered stocking. She seemed to be debating whether or not to continue further. Then she rushed out with the words: 'You see, we're divorced,' words which were uttered with such confidentiality that, for a moment, I assumed she was going to tell me the rest of the story. Instead she simply shook her head and concluded with an air of finality: 'But I'm sure it would only bore you to hear about our problems. Tell us more about yourself.'

As I started filling in my background I could not help being struck by the irony of our respective situations, gravitating as we seemed to be in opposite directions, I toward and they away from France. Ananda was watching me as I spoke, watching with an air of rapt attention, watching and yet not really seeing me. I noticed that her eyes did not really focus, but somehow managed to embrace the whole perceptible horizon, sea green pools reflecting in their tranquil depths an entire expanse of sky. And yet, even as I looked, the languid surface of her eyes was invested with a shadow of anxiety. I heard her catch her breath.

'Don't turn round now, Maman. But Aunt Madeleine is

over there—right behind you.'

Margaret stiffened. 'Is she coming this way?'

'No. She's talking to someone at the foot of the stairs.'

'Do you think she's seen us yet?'

'I'm sure she hasn't.'

'Well in that case I think we should just move slowly out of sight.' Margaret had already taken a couple of steps before she remembered me. Looking back hastily over her shoulder she added, almost as an afterthought:

'I'm sorry about this. But we don't have the slightest desire to meet the person in question.'

Ananda and her mother started moving away together, leaving me to identify the person who had prompted this alarm. There was only one person standing at the foot of the stairway, a tall elderly lady bedecked with jewels, who was holding a small boy by the hand. She was talking to a distinguished looking gentleman. The person to whom she was speaking left, and she began to mount the stairway. The boy slipped on the polished marble before they were halfway up the first flight. She stooped to help him to his feet. As she straightened, she happened to survey the scene below. I watched what looked like recognition pass across her face. Then she walked back down the stairs and swept across the floor.

The distance which separated her from Margaret dwindled rapidly. Margaret was moving a little faster now, but short of running there was little she could do to avoid her pursuer. I waited, sensing some impending conflict, not yet knowing what could be the cause of it. I suspected that my protective custody was no longer welcome. Nevertheless, I followed Margaret from a distance, letting myself be overtaken by Aunt Madeleine, still grimly bent upon her party. The little boy looked up at me as they

passed and I smiled at him, a smile of inexplicable confidentiality which he shyly returned.

'What a surprise!' Aunt Madeleine's voice was so commandingly levelled at its target that even at this distance I could hear every word she said. 'If I had known you were coming to the opera tonight I would have invited you to join me in my box.'

Margaret had to turn to face her interlocutor. But her embarrassment was such that she had some difficulty articulating in French. 'Quelle surprise,' she repeated vaguely, her voice falling into the vacancy like a well-worn penny into some long since dry well. She passed her tongue across her lips before continuing: 'You see, we only heard about the performance at the very last minute.'

'But that's very odd.' A puzzled expression came over Aunt Madeleine's face. But the puzzlement seemed deliberate, contrived, the puzzlement of someone feigning surprise. 'Georges told me quite distinctly that he had invited you himself.'

'Well, that's right ... in a way.' Margaret looked down at her feet and shuffled awkwardly. 'But he neglected to tell us that it would be the Berlin Opera Company.'

'When it comes to Opera,' Ananda interjected, reverting to that slightly supercilious tone which she had used upon the usherette, 'the Germans are so much better than the French.'

Aunt Madeleine appeared a little disconcerted. 'I'm not at all sure I agree with you. Still, I must admit that the performance has been quite outstanding. Quite an education.' Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned back to Margaret again. 'About Ananda's education ... Georges is most concerned you know.'

'We've just found a new tutor who is simply excellent.'

'But don't you think Ananda would be much better off at school?'

Margaret put one arm around Ananda's shoulder. 'She prefers to study at home, don't you dear?'

Aunt Madeleine drew herself up to her full stature. 'It's not a question of what Ananda wants. It's a matter of what is best for her. If she went to a good school she would be certain of getting a first-class education. And then she would also have an opportunity to meet other young people of her own age.' By this time it must have occurred to her that my own proximity could not be altogether accidental. For she nodded in my direction as she addressed her next remark. 'And who, may I ask, is this young man?'

Margaret hastened to reply. 'Just someone who happens to be sharing the same box with us.'

As if to make up for the manifest inadequacy of the response, Ananda added: 'We arrived late and got into the wrong box by mistake. The other occupants of the box were extremely rude. But he was courteous enough to offer us his seat.' Then, with an emphasis which embarrassed me, more especially as I suspected it was expressly designed to irritate Aunt Madeleine, she added: 'You see, he's English.'

The explanation did not seem to call for anything in the way of an introduction. For, turning back to Margaret, Aunt Madeleine resumed her interrogation. 'Oh, by the way, something I've been meaning to ask you for some time now. Don't you think it's time Ananda was presented in society? Officially presented.'

From the vantage point of my exclusion from the restricted circle of the conversation I was able to study the interaction of the two protagonists in some detail. It was clear that Margaret was getting the worst of it. She had developed all the defensive ingenuity of a boxer trying to

survive the round, ducking, swaying but quite incapable of landing a blow. 'Well thank you for thinking about it,' she parried feebly. 'But Ananda is so involved with her studies these days that she really doesn't have time for anything else.'

'Nonsense!' The sharp directness of the word struck Margaret like a blow to the head. Aunt Madeleine followed up her advantage. 'She could easily afford the odd evening out. I'm sure she would make a most favourable impression if she were to attend one of my soirées.'

Margaret's jaw sagged. She glanced despairingly at Ananda as if she hoped to solicit from her the riposte with which to repel Aunt Madeleine's advance.

'Really, Aunt Madeleine.' The haughty expression reappeared on Ananda's face. 'All those young men with nothing to recommend them except a title.'

'My dear girl. Clearly you haven't been moving in the right circles. I know of several families whose sons have secured a place at the école normale or the polytechnique.'

'Are you thinking of the Marquis de ... by any chance?'

'Amongst others.'

'The last time I spoke to him he made marriage sound like a mathematical equation.'

Aunt Madeleine was on the point of replying when the conversation was cut short by the bell. We all started walking back up the stairs to resume our seats for the second act. Aunt Madeleine took her leave of us on the first floor, while we continued on together. As we reached the second floor, Ananda started to move off in the direction of my box. But she was held back by her mother, who was studiously examining a ticket which she held in her hand. 'Ananda dear, our box is around the other side.'

'Aren't we going to sit where we were before?' Ananda

seemed genuinely puzzled by her mother's behaviour.

'We can't let anyone else give up their seats for us again.'

'But there are enough seats for everyone.'

'All the same.' Margaret reached for Ananda's arm and drew her in the other direction. A brief farewell and they were gone.

I returned to my seat, tried to devote myself to the events of the second act. But the drama of Suzanah and Figaro had been overshadowed by this other drama in which I had become involved. The second act dragged on interminably, an endless stretch of time before the second interval freed me from the confines of my seat. I tried to move out quickly but my way was blocked by the man who had volunteered the seat next to him. I tried to move past him but he held me back with a question about 'my friends', a question which, I suspected, was intended as a device whereby he too would enter into the conspiracy of an unmerited friendship. With a growing sense of exasperation I fended off his offer to join with me in a common search for Ananda and her mother.

By the time I had disposed of him and hurried out of the box, the corridor outside was already full of people, a stately column ambling slowly toward the stairs. I filed forward with them till I reached the head of the stairs where I stood and looked right down to the vestibule. I searched the vestibule and the connecting corridors. But neither Ananda nor her mother were anywhere to be seen. At one point I passed within view of the tall imposing person of Aunt Madeleine. But if she recognized me it certainly wasn't apparent in her behaviour.

I returned to my box at the end of the second interval, sat through the resolution of the plot, then readied myself

for a rapid exit. But again I was accosted by the man with the vacant seat. This time it seemed to be deliberate, the truculent riposte of one who had concluded that if he couldn't have her then neither would his rival. He popped a series of questions in rapid succession: 'Had I seen them again? What were their names? The charming girl. Who was she? And the lady. Was she the mother?' The more I denied any relevant information the more inquisitive he became, as if the denials were proof of my complicity.

By the time I had managed to shake him off, the corridor outside had filled again. Such was my sense of exasperation that I pushed through the crowd, earning at least one comment which might have moderated Margaret's assumption with regard to the manners of the English. Even so, by the time I had reached the head of the stairs they were already crossing the vestibule. A solid mass of bodies interposed itself between myself and them. Short of sliding down the ample width of the marble balustrade, there was no way I could reach them before they left the building.

Waves of exasperation crashed against me, great rolling breakers of frustration which lifted me up then flung me down in a tortuous cycle of emotions. I thought of shouting. It seemed appropriate that my first utterance of her name should be declaimed *multo maestoso* from the head of the stairs at the Opera, so appropriate that I had already drawn the breath with which the sound would have been expelled before I recognized the foolishness, the utter silliness of my venture. I pulled myself together and moved away from the crowd. At the least, I could keep her figure in view, watch from my vantage point as she moved across the floor of the vestibule, carried along inexorably by the press of bodies. Margaret was the first to disappear through the main door of the Opera house. Ananda was about to follow suit. But

before she reached the exit she turned around to survey the crowd. Something about the momentary fixity of her regard, the directed trajectory of her person, told me that she had seen me standing above. She raised one gloved hand and waved a greeting, a simple gesture, hardly noticeable to those around. But to me it spoke more eloquently than anything she had said before. For it was utterly superfluous, this indeterminate semaphore. Because it was uncalled for, it could only appeal to me. Across the nodding congregation of heads the tenuous wave of a hand connected. I watched her leave, regretfully, yet filled with a sense of gratitude: that out of the dark unvarying solitude of anonymity there should have flared, for an instant, this spark of mutual recognition

I tried to put Ananda out of mind. But she kept on reappearing, more especially in my dreams, where her appearances took on a puzzling, almost paradoxical character. Night after night I would meet her again, benign yet remote, smiling, but not so much at me as at some private joke. It was as though my dreams had become a stage on which she played. I would be present, but only as a member of her audience. Occasionally, she would acknowledge my overtures—but she acknowledged them as though they were her due, as though I were simply applauding a performance in which she starred. Sometimes there were others with her, usually young men, for whom I felt an intense jealousy. Once I stumbled upon her in the middle of the countryside, engaged in what appeared to be a picnic luncheon. There were several young men with her, elegantly dressed young men whose cultivated style seemed entirely inappropriate under the circumstances. I sat down on the grass a few yards away. But they ignored me

altogether. And then, just as they were packing what remained of the picnic, Ananda picked up a hard boiled egg and threw it to me, much as one might throw a beggar a coin.

I stopped dreaming about her. But instead of appearing to me at night, she began to invade my conscious mind. I would be sitting in the law library of the rue St Jacques. For a while my mind would focus on the cases, the twists and turns of 'legalese' confined within the dull red bindings of Dalloz. Then my thoughts would stray, leaping joyously like skittish colts across a broken stretch of fencing. Whole fractions of an hour would canter by before I could drag my concentration back, like some reluctant beast of burden. I could hold it for an hour or so. And then the joyous escapade would once again be ventured. At first I allowed myself to indulge my fancies, assuming no doubt that with time the memory would fade. But instead it seemed to build upon itself, throwing forth a gossamer web of fantasy in which I became progressively more ensnared. I began to experience a certain anger, as though Ananda had deliberately conspired to stand between me and my academic ambitions. I tried to put her out of mind with the simple, all-too-simple device of an alternative attachment. But every time I set about the fabrication of affection I found myself filling in a profile, an ersatz outline coloured in with the nuances of Ananda.

Ananda. The name already intrigued me. A name I had never heard before but which seemed to have an Indian ring to it. The name of someone who was no one to me as yet, but who, by some not altogether reassuring witchcraft, had set me resonating, attuned to the mantra of her name. Later I would ask her why she had not made some effort to re-establish contact that first night at the Opera and she had

explained, with that air of prophetic certitude which was so typical of her, but which I had no idea how to interpret at first: 'There was no need. I knew we would meet again.'

But how? Did she really think that in the teeming press of Paris we would run into each other by accident? Or had she forgotten that in the course of our conversation nothing, or next to nothing, had been said which could have enabled me to locate her. Admittedly, if Aunt Madeleine had not intervened I had the feeling I would have learnt a great deal more. For Margaret had seemed to want to take me into her confidence, to tell me even more than one would ordinarily communicate to a stranger. The lighted circuit of her personal life had been generously exposed to view, a chink at first but widening rapidly with the promise of an almost premature confidentiality. And then, of a sudden, the blinds had been pulled down.

I found myself reconstructing the conversation, sifting through the sentences like a miner panning ore; until eventually I found what I was looking for. A chance remark that her mother had made. Something about Ananda taking courses at The British Council. It was all I had to go on. But already this fragment encouraged me, reducing the illimitable compass of the city to a more manageable frame. The next day I paid a visit to The British Council.

The British Council stands on the rue des Ecoles, a street that sweeps past the main entrance to the Sorbonne. It is a tall, narrow building laid out, like Dante's *Inferno*, on a series of planes. A steep winding staircase bears the feet of students up and down interminably. They are mostly either French or English, the French coming to learn English and the English learning French. Ananda already spoke both languages so perfectly that at first I was at a loss to

understand why she bothered to attend. But then I learned that, in addition to the regular language courses, there were also a number of courses devoted to the study of English literature and civilization.

The reception desk was not very helpful. First names were insufficient. Nor was the registrar ready to respond to my attempt at a description. However, I was able to find out from her that the students borrowed the books that they needed for their courses from the Council library.

Afternoons were then spent reading in the library of The British Council. I invented the best of reasons for doing what in any case I felt obliged to do. After all, it was a more pleasant environment than the law library in the rue St Jacques. I would even bring my law books along, with every intention of doing my duty by these forbidding tomes. But the alternative reading matter usually proved too irresistible. I found myself spending more and more of my time with the novels of Balzac and Stendhal, of Maurois, Gide and Camus, volumes which helped to recreate for me an image of the country in which I now lived, and to which Ananda herself belonged—daily routines which belied the very conclusion I had long since reached, that I would never see Ananda again.

And then, one afternoon, I climbed the stairs to find her already there. For some reason I had always assumed that it would be she who found me there when she arrived. And so I had already rehearsed what appeared to be the only possible alternatives. Either she would recognize me. Or I would catch sight of her when next I looked around. Accordingly, I had already prepared two alternative overtures to meet either eventuality. And so her presence there before me, already installed at a window seat, left me without any means of response.

She was gazing through the window when I came upon her, gazing out distractedly, her whole being drawn out after her in the wake of her gaze. She did not seem to be in the room, but out there, a part of every little incident that fell within her view—a part of the boisterous joy of a barking dog or the gloomy curb of a street sweeper's back, a part of every rendezvous enacted on the street below. She seemed so far from where I was that I dared not disturb her ubiquity with an initiative of my own. Her very remoteness forestalled my approach, as though she would have to gather together the fragments of herself bestowed on the scene below. I stood watching from across the room, immobilized by the solitude which she seemed to have spun around herself like an invisible cocoon. I wanted to interrupt her reverie, and yet I was afraid that her reappearance in my life might shatter the picture I had built up in my mind. So I turned to a nearby shelf and pretended to be looking for a book. My fingers traced out the titles for me whilst my eyes remained, hovering like moths, about the person of Ananda. And so it was my hand which, quite unintentionally, established our connection; my hand, which fumbling, let a book fall noisily to the floor. A dozen eyes reverted in my direction, accusing me of a breach of peace. But I had already returned the volume to the shelf before the sound eventually registered in the chamber of Ananda's brain, as though she were reacting not to the sound, but to an echo of its effect. Then she too turned, shook her head in disbelief, and finally returned a smile which freed me from my embarrassment.

The rest was easy, so much easier than I had ever anticipated. My deliberate overtures were rendered entirely obsolete by her own spontaneous delight. We talked together for a while, conversing in eager whispers which

only drew on us a warning from the librarian. We left under a cloud of official disapproval. I invited Ananda to a nearby cafe where I was known. The patronne served us a couple of eclairs and hastened to prepare a pot of tea. As a concession to my origins she put loose leaves into the pot instead of the usual bags. Nor was Ananda left in any doubt as to the significance of this gesture. ‘Monsieur is very particular about his tea,’ the patronne volunteered. ‘And if I ever forget to warm the pot beforehand. Oh la! la! la! la!’ And she wrung her hands in a caricature of complaint. I could not help feeling grateful to her for filling in so generously this aspect of my life, a life of which Ananda knew so little; for conferring upon us so ingeniously the stamp of her approval.

We finished the pot of tea between us. And then Ananda suggested a film. I paid the bill and followed her out of the door, forgetting to collect the overcoat which I had hung on a peg along the wall. But we hadn’t gone more than a dozen yards before the patronne’s assistant called me back. ‘Monsieur. Your coat!’ I returned to collect the garment. ‘You’ll freeze to death without a coat,’ she remarked as I thanked her and put it on. The patronne smiled out over her assistant’s shoulder. ‘Voyons! When one is young, love is enough to keep one warm.’

The film was by Fellini—‘La Strada’, one of his best—with Anthony Quinn in the title role, making an early appearance. It was shown in the original Italian and, for some reason, the subtitles were virtually illegible. I remember being impressed by the fact that Ananda had no difficulty following the Italian, a facility which I was obliged to take advantage of from time to time in order to find out what was going on.

After the film, Ananda told me that she had to be

getting home. We were in the Latin Quarter, after dark, with the chill of winter drawing in. The pavements had become unfriendly ground, a no-man's land between one warm interior and another. Ananda led the way. But she followed a route which deviated continually through those streets which had a story to tell—crumbling alleys which were restored by her recital. We crossed the Boulevard St. Michel, and dived into the maze of streets which led towards St. Germain. But before we had gone very far, Ananda stopped and pointed down a narrow alley. 'I want to show you something,' she remarked as she set off down the street.

Along both sides of the street the walls of the buildings bulged out threateningly, heavily laden with the bulk of the rooms inside. Misshapen structures of steel and cord jutted out from windows in the wall—skeletal frameworks draped with clothes. A trickle of water ran down the gutter alongside the curb.

'You see that lantern?' Ananda's outstretched hand directed my attention to a lantern which shone so feebly that it only served to accentuate the darkness of the street. 'Gerhard de Nerval hanged himself from that lantern late one night in a fit of depression.'

A gust of wind blew down the street. The lantern stirred in its iron bracket, casting fitful shadows against the wall. Ananda mused for a moment and then continued: 'They say that the soul of one who kills himself haunts the place where he died. So I come here sometimes to cheer him up. Because he was always most unhappy while he was alive.'

'But surely you don't come here by yourself?'

Her eyes met mine, dismissing my objection. 'Oh, I go everywhere alone.'

At the time I hardly believed her. For Paris is a city where pretty girls caught walking by themselves are deemed fair game by every aspiring hunter of the heart. And at that time she had hardly turned seventeen. Only later did I come to appreciate something of the peculiarly inviolate nature of her beauty. Hers was an almost incorporeal beauty, the beauty of an aesthetic creation. Inscribed at the foot of the column on which she figuratively seemed to stand, one could almost make out the warning words: ‘ne pas toucher aux objects d’art’.

We walked on for a while in silence. And then at the end of another street, she turned around to face me.

‘Don’t bother to come any further.’

‘Don’t you want me to see you home?’

‘It’s only a few streets away. I’ll be quite all right on my own.’

Once again I experienced this abrupt reversal, this sense of dismissal following hard upon our fellowship. I was so taken by surprise that I hardly knew what to say. She had already walked away before I was able to draw on the words which served to delay her departure.

‘Ananda.’ She turned around.

‘I would like to see you again.’

‘I should like that too.’

‘But how am I to get in touch with you?’

Something of the pathos of my situation must have dawned on her, the days spent waiting for someone who might never come. She reached into her handbag and pulled out pen and paper. ‘Here’s my telephone number.’ She handed me the slip of paper and had turned away again before I thought to ask: ‘And your name, I mean your family name?’

There was a pause, and for one unbelievable moment I

thought she was going to keep the name to herself. ‘De Villiers,’ she said at last. And then almost as an afterthought. ‘It’s the name of the place where my family is from.’

Chapter Four

Often, when I called at her apartment on the rue de l'Université, to take her out to a film, a concert, or a theatre, Ananda would be playing on the piano or on the guitar. So my recollections of our outings are associated with standing at her door a while, standing … listening.

The other day I slipped out to a nearby cafe to break the monotony of writing. I ordered a coffee and sat down at a table near the doorway. A young girl came in, walked over to the jukebox and selected an anonymous romance, a piece for guitar that Ananda often played herself. Hearing the familiar melody again I had the distinct impression that I was standing right outside her door, just a few feet away from her. The music continued playing and I settled into a trance-like state, following the instrument along the wistful stages of its way to a sad and quiet termination. Then silence succeeded like an anathema pronounced upon the past, shattering my reverie with its mute intrusion. Tears were already collecting in my eyes as I staggered to my feet, left my coffee half undrunk and hurried back to the covered shelter of my room.

Yes, it is these unexpected introductions to my past which catch me off guard; I am better protected against the deliberate remembering of my writing. For I can remind myself, as I remember, remind myself that this past is indeed just that—past and gone for ever.

And yet memory has its consolations. I still like to

re-enact our excursions in the city; revisit the ramshackle palaces of the Marais or the cathedral of Notre Dame; walk again along the towpath round the Isle Saint-Louis—our 'lovers' walk' so faithfully taken at the close of day; or browse again through the bookstalls posted along the quai, stalwart sentinels guarding the culture of the city; or stroll back through the threadbare streets of the Quartier Latin, the dilapidated alleys where we used to eat and drink or be entertained in one of those tiny, crumbling cinemas whose air had been breathed again and again. These are the moments which memory retains, moments which are forever pressed, like flowers, between the stone walls of the city, precious moments still so vividly present in my mind that I can not believe you will never again rejoin me for a rendezvous.

You were always a little late, Ananda, but somehow the delay only heightened my relief when at last your joyous face broke through the crowd and you quickened your usual sober gait to a breathless run and flung yourself into my waiting arms. So dignified, so coolly composed when you chose to be and at other times (and I like to think those times were largely cordoned off for me) so disarmingly informal, as if in mockery at the peevish personage which I donned to remind you of your tardiness, the words of reproach I had so icily stacked together simply falling apart, dissolving in the sunny stream of your personality.

There is a cafe on the Quai Voltaire where we sat one wintry afternoon and watched the great gray river flushing out the bowels of the town. And I listened while you recited from the *Spleen de Paris*, from the half crazed recitals of Nerval and the truant poems of Rimbaud (hardly younger than you when he came to Paris). As I registered the deliberate inflections of your voice with its generous

undertones (warm like the sun in a bottle of wine), I realized, for the first time perhaps, that you were in truth a child of the city, one of the city's noble born.

'The name of the place where my family is from,' you said just before we parted that first evening out together. At the time I knew nothing about the ancestral château perched on a hill overlooking the town of Villiers, grim reminder of an age when only force of arms could enforce security. I was ignorant then of the history of your family, its soldiers, statesmen ... and saints. The Counts who habitually took up arms in the name of Christ and went off to fight the infidel, for which they were duly rewarded by the church. Strange to think that this family—whose history is now so familiar to me (as though I hoped to compensate for the vast anonymous plains of my ancestry with the elevated rumour of a family which had accepted me, adopted me almost)—should have first been drawn up out of the nebulous haze of the unknown by your own ambiguous idolatry, admiration and dismay, fighting in the lists of your affections, as also by the far more forthright ribaldry of your mother; so that the first impression I received was a travesty, a web of fanciful projections, innuendos, slanderous accusations, and fabrications so cunningly disguised that I am still engaged in the ungrateful work of unravelling the tangled skein.

'How did Ananda get her name?' Margaret echoed with a quizzical chuckle. 'Now that's what I call a funny story.'

It was soon after Ananda had brought me home to meet her mother. Margaret and I were having drinks in their apartment—a de Villiers apartment in reality, but one which had been made available to Maggie (as the family were wont to call her) to bring up the children. We were all going to have dinner together. But Ananda had been

'unexpectedly' delayed at the Ecole des Beaux Arts where she went from time to time to attend lectures. I have written 'unexpectedly' in quotes, because that was how the matter was presented to me by her mother. However, I suspect that Margaret had taken care to arrange things this way in order to have an opportunity to get to know me better, in private—the all-too-familiar concern of a mother towards a prospective son-in-law. And although my attention was divided equally between Margaret and the clock which ticked off, all too slowly, the dwindling interval which separated me from Ananda's return, I for my part also relished this chance of finding out more about Margaret and the family—that family whose quirks and foibles, malice and capriciousness Margaret never tired of recounting.

'It was while I was going through my spiritual period, so to speak, and had somehow got it into my head that the answer to all of life's problems was to be found in the East.' She reached for a pack of Gauloise cigarettes lying on the table and offered one to me. When I shook my head she drew a cigarette out of the packet and stuck it between her lips. 'I'd heard of an Ashram somewhere in the neighbourhood of San Francisco, not too far from where my parents lived, founded by a disciple of Vivekananda—you know, the man who made such an impression at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and then lived off his reputation ever after, very comfortably I believe.' She drew a lighter out of her pocket and lit her cigarette.

'Our teacher was something of a lesser star in the spiritual firmament, but good-looking enough to capture the attention of starry-eyed maidens like myself who were all too eager to learn about sex and the single Guru—the Tantric way.' She exhaled, and a puff of acrid smoke floated over in my direction.

'Well, we tried, we certainly did our darndest, we spiritual aspirants, we devotees. We donned our holy robes, shed our shoes for sandals, made no complaints about the curried-rice/rice-pudding routine, lay cramped and aching in our celibate beds, spent long hours in the lotus position, performing lobotomies upon our minds in the hopes that something sublime might enter in and take possession. All to no good.'

Absent-mindedly, she picked up a cocktail stick and started stirring her drink, a Bloody Mary, the various ingredients of which were scattered about on the table. 'Mind you, it's not that I didn't have my moments. One day when I was meditating alone in my cell, I heard the sound of a flute stealing over my senses in the most mysterious way. I strained to catch the gist. No doubt about it. A flute was playing somehow, somewhere, seemingly in the midst of nowhere. Of course, I knew immediately what this must mean, especially as I had just finished reading a chapter of the book by Swami Muktananda on the "Celestial Music". The Lord Krishna had come to clasp me to his bosom and had, most considerately, decided to forewarn me of his arrival with a little preparatory toot on his flute. I set my face at anticipatory rapture and waited to be ravaged by the heavenly hosts.' Margaret clasped her hands together and rolled her eyes upwards in a prayerful gesture. 'I waited ... and waited ... and waited, while the flute went on, sounding ever more earthly and less divine as it meandered through numberless arpeggios. But apart from an itch at the base of my spine which I longed to, but dared not, scratch, for fear of disturbing the awesome solemnity of the moment, no very remarkable sensation was forthcoming. In the end I was forced to give up and look for a natural rather than a supernatural explanation. Guess what?' She paused and took

a sip at her Bloody Mary. 'In a neighbouring cell, someone was playing a record of classical Indian music. What a let down. Hells bells! If there's one thing worse than not being able to find a perfectly natural explanation for some unearthly phenomenon, it is, precisely, finding one.'

I laughed, not so much at the story as at the way she told it, the incongruity of a Californian 'country girl' and her quest for the Divine. Margaret appeared to appreciate my reaction. For she picked up my glass and offered to refill it. 'Another gin and tonic?' I nodded. She poured some more Gordon's into the tumbler. A splash of soda. And she handed back the glass. 'Help yourself to ice.' I dropped a cube from the plastic container on top of the still foaming liquid and watched as its icy blast provoked the tonic into another spurt of fury.

'So you never found God after all?'

'Well, I can't say I tried all that hard,' she admitted, as she fluttered her eyelids demurely. 'Mind you, I did put quite a bit of time into meditating. Even clocked up a good half dozen hours of flying time. You know, trying to get off the ground, by levitating. But somehow I always remained earth-bound. However, in my dormitory there were quite a few fanatical devotees who couldn't even wait till dawn. They would get up at three o'clock in the morning and meditate till six. With the result that whenever I left my cell in the early hours to answer the call of nature, I would be exposed to something weird. As I groped my way down the corridor my nostrils would be assailed by the smell of incense, my ears assaulted with the strangest tinkling of bells, and by an odd sort of moaning—whether of pleasure or of pain I dared not ask—which, upon closer approach, turned out to be the sound of "ohming", the whole goddam dormitory "ohming" away in the stillness of the night. Now

that really freaked me out.' Her eyes widened in a grimace of amazement. 'One morning, I couldn't help myself. I opened a cell door, just a crack, and caught a glimpse of a dimly outlined figure squatting on the floor, his eyes gazing blissfully into space. Had he found God?'

She paused, as if she intended to let me into a well-kept secret. 'God only knows—least of all myself. At four o'clock in the morning it was as much as I could do to find the toilet, let alone God.'

Once again the pregnant pause, as if by continual retelling she had learnt that this was the moment to expect applause. She may have been slightly disappointed by my response—a smile where perhaps she had hoped for a laugh. For instead of continuing, she sipped at her cocktail appreciatively. 'Bloody Mary. My favourite. But they haven't the faintest idea how to make them in France. You know, a dusting of pepper, a dash of Worcester sauce and a twist of lemon.' She shook her head as if the ways of the French were beyond her comprehension.

'Anyway, that was where I first met Georges. He sauntered in from Stanford one sunny afternoon, dressed in his best Parisian suit, to see if the East had anything to offer which could measure up to his blessed saints—ironic, because his own family had just pushed him off to the States to get him out of the way, such was the rumpus he had been creating back at the ranch. He was quite remarkable, I must say, what with his astonishingly handsome Latin looks and the "holier than thou" attitude which he assumed towards the rest of us—which, it turned out, was because his family counted amongst its number half a dozen saints. Well, hell bent on heaven as I was at the time, the Guru soon found his personal attractions eclipsed by Georges. We ate our curried rice together, wore the same holy robes, shared our

Mantra. We stopped doing anything whatsoever and learnt to be, just be together. Our energies began to overlap. We became one with each other. Everyone thought it was great—until we were caught making love in the meditation chamber.'

A slightly nervous laugh—as though the air of liberated femininity which she had created somehow exceeded the bounds of what I might deem proper. 'We quoted the Guru right back at him.' Margaret adopted the clipped and nasal tones of an Indian speaking English. 'The body is the temple of the soul. Despise your body and you despise yourself. Go towards your body, your desires ... and then transcend them. For satiation is the death of desire.' She gestured towards me. 'You know the sort of thing. But he insisted that his words were only supposed to be taken metaphorically. A metaphorical conjugation! I ask you. Do you think we were about to fall for that, a couple of red-blooded youngsters like ourselves? In any case, I don't think he really held it against us—a little peeved perhaps that he hadn't had the opportunity to take my communion in hand himself. Later, when I got pregnant, he gave us his blessing and said we should call the child "Ananda".'

My mind must have been wandering. For the name Ananda brought me back with a jolt. I remembered that the name had sounded a little odd to me at first, but had rapidly become so fervently enshrined in every memory of her that no other name would have sounded right. I looked at Margaret. 'So that's how she got her name.'

'You bet. The inside story. It seemed like a cute enough name to me, and quite unusual. But oh, my! The problems it created. First thing, I had twins. Now I didn't have the faintest idea whether Ananda was supposed to be a boy's name or a girl's. But Georges suspected the family might

make a fuss about Ananda. So he'd already thought up another name, just in case it was a boy. Augustin. I ask you? What kind of a name is that? But apparently it's just the sort of name the family used to call their boys in the good ol' days when they all charged around with casseroles on their heads, saving dragons and slaying damsels in distress. Or whatever.' Her arms crisscrossed in token of a possible confusion. 'Anyway, they loved Augustin. But they couldn't stand Ananda. Wanted us to christen the baby all over again.'

It came back to me that Ananda had told me once that her family refused to accept the 'heathen' name Ananda and so had always called her Anne instead, an approximation so far removed from the original that any other misnomer would have sounded no less idiosyncratic. In this particular respect, it gladdened me that Margaret had held her ground, and I told her so.

'Heck!' she exclaimed, 'the more they yelled and screamed, the more defiant I became. And just to show 'em, I started calling Augustin "Gus" for short. You know, like the character out of that cartoon strip. You should have seen my poor dear father-in-law. Gus? Mais non, Madame. Augustin, s'il vous plaît. Eet ees ze name of a saint ...'

The door bell rang, cutting her short. Two short bursts and then a long. Margaret looked up. 'That's got to be Ananda home from school.' A little unsteadily, she rose to her feet. 'Our secret code. She must have left her key at home.'

The 'Countess' was, of course, a joke, expressly designed to draw attention to the straightened circumstances in which Margaret lived. In actual fact, the spacious first floor apartment could have been made to look quite 'chic' if it

had been tastefully decorated. Admittedly, the sun never found its way down to the base of the courtyard onto which the apartment looked. But with a little attention to lighting arrangements, the sombre interior could have been brightened up.

As it was, the off-white muslin curtains permanently hung across the windows (supposedly to protect its inhabitants from prying eyes) had the effect of diminishing what little light still managed to filter down the well of the building, almost as though the pervasive gloom was expressly designed to cover over the obvious shortcomings of the interior—the soiled curtains folded back on heavy satin linings, the threadbare carpets, the meagre furniture, the dust accumulating in little unattended flurries. Dirty linen heaped in a corner of Margaret's bedroom and unwashed crockery stacked in the kitchen helped to complete the effect.

Indicating the setting in which she had been condemned to pass her days, Margaret complained to me one day: 'When I married Georges he promised me a Château with nothing to do all day but arrange flowers in antique vases. And look what I finished up with.' She grabbed the back of a chair and shook it on its obviously shaky legs. 'They have half a dozen châteaux stuffed with antique furniture and we have to put up with sticks like this.' But when I offered to look around for some sensible, second-hand pieces or at least to attempt some elementary repairs on the broken arms and legs which were scattered around the apartment like cripples on display in some frontline hospital, my offer was immediately rejected.

It was the same thing with the food. At the beginning of the month we dined in princely fashion. If ever I arrived unexpectedly when there was nothing 'fancy' to eat in the

house, she would take us all out to an expensive restaurant. But as the end of the month approached, the domestic economy would be reduced to platefuls of spaghetti. And then, with predictable regularity, on the first of the month, I would hear the same complaint. ‘Georges is late with the alimony again. It’s his sadistic nature. He just can’t pass up a chance of hitting back at us.’

I once spent an hour with her trying to show her how she could arrange her budget in such a way that she would have something saved up at the end of the month for a few extra days. Even as I laid out my plans, I could see she wasn’t really paying attention. She kept on paying visits to the kitchen or the toilet, doing little chores she had meant to do all day. When I reached the end of my presentation, she dismissed my labours with a simple factual statement. ‘As a student of jurisprudence, you must know that in France the law discriminates against the woman. The alimony is totally inadequate.’

If ever I were to call around mid-day, it would be to find Margaret just getting out of bed, coaxed to her feet by the innumerable cups of coffee which her daughter prepared for her, or spurred into a semblance of activity with a handful of pills from oddly-labelled bottles. Throughout the afternoon she would stagger about, engaged in gestures of domesticity which did little or nothing to improve appearances. Not until evening did she come into her own. Then, as the light faded from the sky, lights would be turned on in the rooms. Margaret would take a sumptuous bath to finally emerge, like Venus rising from the waves, resplendent in her dressing gown. Bottles would be produced. And over a Bloody Mary, a Manhattan or a Tequilla Sunrise, she would relay the latest dispatch in the never-ending war she waged with the family.

After a while I stopped trying to make any helpful suggestions. For I came to realize that Margaret actually preferred to stagnate amidst these symbols of her dispossession. The role of the martyr was the one she had chosen for herself. And she certainly contrived to look the part. I remember thinking early on that every one of those lines which scarred her face could be traced back to an identifiable injury, as though her face were a wax impression into which the family habitually stuck the pins of their disapproval. But then, as I got to know her better, I began to suspect that many of the wounds were self-inflicted. For, like all true martyrs, Margaret had learnt to love her martyrdom, to embrace her misfortunes joyfully, as though they redounded to her credit. When the wounds that she claimed to have received failed to inflict a visible injury, she would stab at herself with the knives of her disconsolate reminiscences, until at last the damage showed.

The gloomy apartment with its air of studied neglect was the perfect setting for this pantomime, a pantomime so masterfully enacted that I joined with Ananda, initially, in according Margaret my unqualified sympathy and support. Also, as strange as it may now seem, I have to keep on reminding myself that Margaret welcomed me unreservedly at first, if for no other reason then, at least, because I wasn't French. So it was only understandable, I suppose, that I should have found her performance convincing. For the pathos of Margaret's life did seem to consist in the promise of life she had never been allowed to lead. It was the spectre of this promised self, the Countess de Villiers she had never really been, which haunted the apartment, transforming the dismal setting into the scene of a tragedy in which she featured as the ill-starred Queen, nobly upholding the title to her woe-begotten throne.

'Georges would never have had the gumption to file for a divorce if it hadn't been for his mother.'

We were sitting around the table in the salon eating dinner, Ananda, Margaret and myself. A lighted candle stood in the centre of the table, stuck into the top of an empty wine bottle which served as a candle holder. A vase of freshly cut flowers stood beside the wax-encrusted bottle. The lights were off in the salon but two further candles were burning in a wall bracket above the mantelpiece, an antiquated piece of iron scroll which must have designed for the days when candles were a standard form of lighting. It always struck me as a little odd that this intimate atmosphere should be recreated every time I called for dinner, more especially as the tête-à-tête invariably involved a party of three. But by now I had come to look forward to these habitual arrangements, since they almost always set the scene for the staging of a further act in the drama of the de Villiers family.

'Charlotte was the problem from the very beginning. If she had given Georges the love and understanding he needed as a child, he would never have become the emotionally disturbed person he now is.' Margaret paused to refill my glass with the deep-red Château Neuf du Pape which she had bought for the occasion. She divided the remains of the wine between Ananda and herself, then set the bottle back on the table again.

'Now let's drink to the bad health of the family.'

We drank.

'Do you know,' Margaret continued, leaning across the table towards me. 'I once got Georges to go to a psychiatrist. Guess what he said? He said he couldn't do anything for Georges unless he stayed away from his mother for at least five years. Well, by then he was tired of

being the “enfant terrible”. He was ready to do anything to get back into his mother’s good books.’

‘She’s the one with all the money?’

My question brought a grin to Margaret’s face. ‘You better believe it. If it hadn’t been for her money, the family would never have let their eldest son marry a Jewess.’

Ananda interrupted. ‘But the Fauchiers were converted to Catholicism generations ago.’

‘Yes, but the point is, dearie, Charlotte would never have been able to marry into the aristocracy, and an eldest son at that, if it weren’t for the fact that her father was ready to put out practically every penny he possessed.’ Margaret looked back at me. ‘I believe he was one of the richest men in France at the time. A financial wizard of the first rank. And Charlotte was his only child.’

She started to open another bottle. ‘How’s your bifsteck?’ The anglicism was lisped with an intentionally exaggerated accent.’ Probably horse meat if I know the French. But the best I can do until Georges comes up with the alimony, après le week-end.’

She replaced the cork in the bottle and set it down on the table. ‘Well, that marriage meant that Louis, Georges’s father, was pretty nicely set up. All he needed to clinch the deal was a son and heir. He tried and tried and tried. But Charlotte could only come up with girls. A pretty poor outlook for the family. Girls are expensive. Several million a piece to get them married off to a marquis or a count. Even a viscount doesn’t come cheap these days, what with inflation.’

I looked at Ananda and she smiled back at me. ‘Oh yes. They’ve been trying to marry me off to a marquis for some time now.’

Margaret put her hand on her daughter’s head. ‘Too

bad for the family that it was your little brother who died instead of you.'

She drew her hand back and pointed vaguely with one finger. 'I read somewhere that masculine women have a tendency to produce girls. In which case it was a miracle that Charlotte ever managed a boy. Probably got the family saint onto the job.' She crossed herself and bowed her head. 'Filed a complaint with the Almighty. No more alms for the poor unless the family gets a son. Result: Georges.'

She beamed at us, then set her face at grave again. 'But that was only the start of the problem. An only son, spoilt by his sisters and bullied by his mother. You can guess what that did to Georges. In next to no time the family had a delinquent on their hands.'

Quite suddenly, Margaret sat back in her chair, slapping her hands on the table as she threw her head back and laughed.

A smile appeared on Ananda's face. 'I think I know what's coming next. Selling the family art treasures, n'est-ce-pas, Maman?'

Margaret nodded, struggling desperately to control her laughter. 'Yes, indeed.' She turned to me. 'One day Georges shows up at a leading art gallery. Wants to know whether they'd like to buy some Goyas and Rembrandts. More where these came from, if they're interested.'

She plucked Ananda's arm. 'Can you imagine what old M. Bouvier must have thought when this cute little schoolboy trotted into his expensive establishment with his satchel full of chewing gum, pencil stubs and half a dozen Goyas and Velasquez?'

'Funnily enough,' Ananda commented, more to me than to her mother. 'The same M. Bouvier did buy one or two or my father's paintings later on. When he was working

with the Surrealists.'

'Oh, the Surrealists,' Margaret snapped. 'He introduced me to some of them himself. Silly lot. They had the idea that you could write better poetry or paint better pictures if you didn't think about it. Well, if you don't have a mind to start with ...'

'Maman,' Ananda remonstrated. 'You know very well that Papa is most intelligent.'

'Intelligent perhaps. But totally irresponsible.' She flung out her arms in a gesture of abandonment. 'What about the time he brought the jazz band over to play in the Greek temple?'

She turned to me. 'Oh yes, they've even got a Greek temple in the garden of their hôtel particulier. They use it for private concerts. Paderewski played there. Menuhin played there. Famous quartets from all over the world have played there. Then Georges and his pals let fly with the latest hot numbers from New Orleans.'

I watched Margaret while she cleaned up her plate with a piece of bread, a little surprised that she should have adopted so very French a habit.

'His parents were away for the week-end. But right next door there just happens to be a very select convent. The sisters thought the devil had dropped in for a visit. Every time they heard the boogie-woogie beat their prayers got positively pornographic. Naturally, they complained. Even threatened to report the matter to the head of the order. That was when my parents-in-law decided it was time to ship the black sheep out of the country—to California of all places. As if the folks back home weren't crazy enough already.'

Margaret raised one arm. 'He came.' She imparted a theatrical flourish to the wrist. 'He saw.' Her arm swung

around in an elegant arc. 'He conquered ... me.' She singled herself out with her hand. 'Mind you, if he hadn't been so darn good looking, I might have had the sense to turn him down. But there I was, an innocent country girl, when this young French count comes galloping up on his snow-white charger.'

She paused to scratch her head. 'Come to think of it, I'm sure I've got some photos of him somewhere.'

She left the table and went over to a chest located in the far corner of the room. After rummaging around for a while she came up with what looked like a photograph album. 'You might like to leaf through this for a few minutes while we're clearing the plates away.'

Ananda collected the plates from the table and stacked them on a tray. The album was placed on the table and I opened it at random. Thumbing through it I was struck immediately by the startling contrasts which were apparent on almost every page, photos of castles and palatial residences set alongside photographs of humble homes tucked away in unobtrusive villages, photos of distinguished looking ladies and gentlemen and the work-worn faces of French peasants smoking pipes on municipal benches, drinking glasses of wine at café tables. And then, scattered here and there across the pages, sometimes set in the one environment, sometimes in the other, a family group, one member of which was clearly recognizable to me, a younger, much-younger looking and, at times, remarkably attractive, Margaret.

Margaret had returned with a cheese plate and a bowl of fruit which she deposited on the table. She came around behind me and looked over my shoulder. A finger planted itself firmly beneath a photo.

'There he is. Our hero.'

I studied the photo more carefully. The man in question was obviously her husband, but looked much younger than I would have expected him to be—early twenties at most. Tall, with aquiline features, surmounted by a head of jet black hair which was swept back deliberately from the brow. His eyes were particularly remarkable, large intense eyes which gave his face a sultry look. There was a child in each of his arms, both of whom had their arms around his neck.

'Oh yes, he likes to come across the big strong man. But in his heart of hearts our Georges is really quite a mother's boy.' Margaret's voice had a caustic edge to it. 'Not that there's anything unusual about that. You'd be surprised how many Frenchmen spend their lives with their mothers. And who does 'maman' object to most? Her daughter-in-law of course. I should have thought of that before we went to live at their hôtel in Paris.'

She pointed to another photo in which a slender, elegant, if elderly man stood rather self consciously beside the robust form of a woman, the upward tilt of whose face gave the impression of someone looking down upon the world. 'There's my father-in-law, with his wife.'

The two of them were standing on the steps of the front entrance to a large, glass fronted building. 'Bon Papa's not such a bad old chap on his own. But the hôtel belongs to his wife. Part of the gigantic dowry she brought with her when they married. The Crystal Palace I used to call it. Full of priceless furniture, paintings, dinner sets designed for Kings. Well, living in the lap of luxury turned out to be the most difficult thing I've ever done. Georges treated me disgracefully. But I wasn't about to let him walk all over me, count or no count. So we finished up fighting. Of course, Charlotte always took his side.'

She paused to pick up a packet of cigarettes lying on the table. I waited while she lit a cigarette. 'Yes, there's no doubt in my mind that it was Georges' mother who talked him into a divorce. Though she would never have dared to breathe a word about it to my father-in-law.'

I must have looked puzzled. For my silence solicited a chuckle from Margaret. She looked at me for a moment as if I had failed to make an obvious connection. Then she turned to her daughter. 'Did you notice that, dear? He can't understand why Bon Papa nearly had a fit when he heard we were going to get divorced. I see we're going to have to fill him in on some of the crazy attitudes of the French aristocracy.'

Ananda was on the point of going to the kitchen with another tray of odds and ends. She stopped for a moment to address her mother.

'Tell him about the family tree.'

'Oh yes. The family tree.' Margaret hugged herself as though the memory were a dear companion. 'My poor, dear, father-in-law. He simply couldn't believe it. Brought out the family tree, all the way back to Charlemagne, or God knows who, just to prove there'd never been a divorce in the family before.'

Margaret stood back from the table and executed a sweeping gesture with her arms. 'Of all the men I might have chosen, I had to marry the only son and heir of one of the foremost Catholic families in France. They're so out of it, they didn't even know there was such a thing as a divorce. Ask Ananda, if you don't believe me.'

Ananda had just returned from the kitchen. 'Yes,' she confirmed quietly. 'As far as my grandfather is concerned, Mama and Papa are still married.'

'Oh, I'm sure they don't think of me as a wife.' The

sarcastic edge had returned to Margaret's voice. 'More like an unpaid governess. Someone who can be relied upon to look after their children for them until they're old enough to be married off into "Tout Paris".'

Ananda smiled. But the smile was as frosty as the gleam on a coffin's brass plate. 'Not that they really care about us. But a good marriage would help to make my father's side of the family respectable again.'

'And as soon as Ananda starts having children of her own, I shall be out on the streets, faster than you can say a Paternoster.'

'Maman. You shouldn't say such dreadful things.' Ananda's voice was tinged with rebuke, but also with good humour, as though the well-turned phrase had saved the remark from tastelessness.

'All the same. Might as well face up to it. What else do I have to look forward to?' Margaret chuckled. 'Can't you see it in the news? Countess books her grill with Mister King Clochard.' She conjured up the headlines for us, her two hands spreading out the capitals.

'But you know perfectly well they can't afford another scandal.'

'You're so right my dear. After our divorce, a clochard in the family would be just too much. Genteel poverty is more likely to be my lot. You know. One of those little old ladies who spend their lives watering the geraniums and talking to their cats. Not that they're likely to let me fade away in peace. That would be much to decent a way to dispose of me. Believe me. They're always talking about their saints. But what about their martyrs!' Her face broke into a grin as she treated herself to the morbid prospect of her future. 'It wouldn't surprise me in the least if they had a couple of hungry lions cooped up at the château. When

they're through with me, they'll simply feed me to the beasts.'

'Please, Maman.' Ananda seemed embarrassed. And I wondered whether it was my presence at table which occasioned this complaint. 'Stop being so self-pitying. You know I wouldn't let anything happen to you.'

'As long as you're around, of course. But what's going to happen when we send you off to University in England.'

'That's if Bon Papa will let me go.'

'Don't worry your pretty head about that. I've fixed it for you good and proper.' A note of triumph entered her voice as she turned to me. 'You can imagine how the family reacted when I first suggested that Ananda should be sent to Oxford or Cambridge for her University education.'

She drew herself up into a prim and proper caricature of her father-in-law. 'Chère Madame.' Then let herself go momentarily, and giggled. 'He's always calling me a Madam. Makes me feel a proper whore.' She withdrew back into the caricature. 'Chère Madame. Are zere not Ooniversities as good in France? To which I replied: I doubt it ... but don't worry ... I'm sure Ananda isn't smart enough to get accepted. And so, of course, they immediately took the opposite point of view.'

She tapped the end of her cigarette into an ashtray. 'Oh yes. At first I thought I only had to make a reasonable request and it would be granted. Holy smoke! How naïve can you be? I soon discovered that if ever I wanted something, I had to pretend I wanted the very reverse. And then they'd give me what I really wanted—out of spite.'

She struck a theatrical attitude. 'You should have seen the performance I put on for them. Everyone knows that Oxford and Cambridge only take girls from the very best families. And then the cost! Besides, Ananda doesn't want to

live away from home. And it worked. They changed their minds immediately. Why? Because they don't have the slightest idea what Ananda wants. Or what I want either. I keep them all in utter ignorance. The Margaret Wall.' Her two hands materialized in front of her, palms extended outward. 'Nothing gets through. Impenetrable. So they have to come to me for every scrap of information. Which is why Charlotte is always trying to find out about us through our friends. But they're all under strict instructions not to give a thing away. Mum's the word as far as I'm concerned.'

'Mum's the word,' Ananda repeated, as she raised her glass. And the two of them clinked their glasses as if to celebrate a compact which had just been sealed.

I was often surprised by the closeness of the bond between these two persons who differed in so many ways. In the immediate vicinity of the family, Margaret could only admire, without being able to reproduce, Ananda's self possession—much as a duck might view with amazement the evolution of one of its ducklings into a swan. The spontaneous combustion of Margaret's conversation had no place amidst the elaborate courtesies of the château or the hôtel particulier, environments which called for those very ornate refinements which Ananda knew how to cultivate so well. And yet Ananda had an affectionate word to describe the kind of talk with which her mother humoured herself, talk which in another person she might well have considered vulgar. She called it 'quaint'.

I looked at the two of them, their arms around each other, so different and yet so closely tied together, by ties of blood … and by a common misadventure. I remembered a photo from the album, the Countess de Villiers with two of her brothers-in-law, the three of them standing together with their arms around each, looking as if they owned the

world. It suddenly struck me—the difficulty the family must be having with these two, Margaret and Ananda, hoping to reclaim the one, disclaim the other.

‘I know what,’ Margaret said to Ananda, almost as if she had been reading my thoughts. ‘Why don’t you take your boyfriend down the road to see the Crystal Palace.’

As we walked towards the hôtel particulier, I could not help noticing the change of mood which fell upon Ananda, ranging as it did from the eager sense of adventure which inspired our departure to the ever more impenetrable reserve which she put on as we progressed towards our destination. The flights of conversation wilted on the wing as she withdrew into an aloof composure, an unapproachable remoteness—with which I was however already sufficiently familiar, to be able to detect, behind the serene facade, the traces of some seismic drama whose epicentre was located not so very far off.

‘Everyone thinks I’m so serene,’ I remembered her having told me once, but in a tone of voice which cast doubt upon the impression she so naturally created. For normally she did look so serene, abstracted as she usually seemed to be from the disturbing trivia of the daily round. It was not that she was ever lost in herself, lost to the world the way I sometimes was. Rather she would be lost to herself, lost in a fascinating world, a world of colours, scents and sounds, a world that she touched with the brush of her senses—and, at the same time, a figurative world, a world she had already transfigured with the stroke of her imagination. For this very reason, no one could have been more impressionable than herself, more vulnerable to every scrap of wind which caught the sails of her emotions.

Even before she stopped, so suddenly that I had walked

on several steps before I noticed that she was no longer beside me, I had already begun to suspect that the show of impassivity which she now put on was no more than a perilously thin veneer, a front with which she strove to conceal the crumbling rubble of an emotional upheaval.

'Are you sure you want to go through with this?' she asked as I turned around to face her—to face a face which had suddenly assumed a seriousness that seemed entirely out of keeping with our mission.

'Through with what?' I replied naïvely. 'We're only going to take a look at your grandad's pied à terre.'

She smiled at the diminutive. 'Alright. But I don't want them to see us together. Especially not my grandmother.'

'Not grand enough for her?' I remarked.

'It's got nothing whatever to do with you.'

'Then what?'

'They would immediately start making trouble for my mother. Who is he? What does he want with Ananda?'

'The Baron de Rothschild,' I replied portentously. 'And he wants to marry your grand daughter.'

'No, seriously,' she said.

I was about to say something facetious. But her prodigious gravity left me speechless. I reached out towards her and she took my hand, squeezing it so tightly that I could feel the hardness of the ring on one of her fingers. She held me firmly for a while then tugged at my hand and we started off again, along one street, across another, around a corner flanked by a café where one or two after-dinner clients were sipping at their coffees in the glassed-in terrace. She moved now with a sort of determined abandon as if something decisive had been resolved.

'Where are we going?'

'Nowhere.' And when I turned to query her response.

'We're there already. Or very nearly.' She paused and gestured down the street. 'That's strange. The gates are usually left open, at least until much later in the evening.'

I looked where she seemed to be pointing and saw, in the distance, a pair of massive iron gates, standing at least ten feet high and set into walls of the same height which ran along the other side of the street. The walls appeared to enclose a property of some consequence. The gates were closed. But through the ornate iron scroll I could see two cars parked in the drive, a large black Rolls Royce and a Citröen 19 equipped with an official looking pendant. Four motorcycles were parked on the gravel close to the Citröen, idly supervised by a small group of uniformed policemen.

'The Rolls is theirs,' Ananda explained. 'But the dix neuf must have brought someone over for dinner. Probably a foreign dignitary with a security problem. You noticed the police escort, I suppose.' I nodded.

'Come on,' she said, with a sudden burst of enthusiasm. 'Let's take a closer look.'

As we crossed the street there was a shout from a small house built into the corner formed by the front wall and the right hand side of the property. The four policemen turned and started walking in the direction of the lodge.

'That must be Michel,' Ananda explained. 'The concierge. Probably invited the policemen in for a drink.'

By the time we reached the gates, the policemen had disappeared, leaving the courtyard in the sole possession of an illuminated fountain whose waters spouted forth from a piece of statuary of the kind one might expect to find in an Italian Piazza. Beyond the fountain, thrown into full relief by two searchlights pitched in the rose gardens planted on either side of the drive, an elegant three story building came into view. As far as I could tell, it was built in the style of a

Renaissance Palazzo. The ground floor was fronted with a series of columned arches, entirely glassed in to keep out the inclement weather.

'There you are,' Ananda remarked. 'The Crystal Palace.'

I began to take in the structure, the gilded doorway beneath the ornate portico from which there hung a massive chandelier, the oval niches on the second floor each occupied by a statue, the elaborate cornice above the third storey windows—when suddenly the lights went on along the entire length of the ground floor, immediately conferring a third dimension upon the columns which, I could now see, actually formed an interior cloister. At the same time, the front door began to open. I could hear the sound of booted feet scrambling back over the driveway.

Ananda clutched at my arm. 'They must be leaving. Time for us to be off.'

She turned and started walking, deliberately but unhurriedly across the street. I followed her, trying to cultivate a similar nonchalance. From the other side of the street, we both looked back. A small group had formed upon the steps of the portico, a man and a woman facing us with another man standing somewhat to the side. Another couple was standing on the lowest step, with their backs to us, a man remarkable for his height and beside him, a woman. It was clear that the couple on the lower step were taking leave of their hosts. A brief exchange of greetings and the two invitees dipped their heads to climb into the Citröen which had pulled up beside them. All around, the discrete murmur of the night was fractured by the stacatto sound of motorcycles starting up.

Ananda pulled me into the doorway of a shop as the concierge began to open the great iron gates. 'That was my

grandfather and his wife facing us. The man slightly to one side. My great Uncle. Head of the Catholic party. Ancien Ministre de la Justice.'

I studied the group Ananda had pointed out. But it was too far and the light too faint to make out more than a general impression. A stocky man in evening dress, bespectacled, his forehead crowned with a leonine mass of silver hair. A little to one side of him: the tall, gracefully built figure of another gentleman. At his side, a woman whose features it was impossible to make out in detail but who seemed to strike a quite distinctive pose, her feet planted squarely on the ground, arms folded massively across her chest, her head thrown back in such a way as to throw into relief the curved edge of her nose.

'My grandmother,' Ananda whispered. 'Looking just like a bird of prey. An Eagle. No, a Vulture. Perched on a promontory—surveying the world.'

The Citröen had begun to circle around the fountain on its way out of the drive, preceded and flanked by the cycle escort—an ocean liner guided out of port by tugs. On reaching the street, the cavalcade turned left, bringing them across the street and right in front of the shop in whose doorway we stood. I focused on the rear window of the car as it passed, not more than fifteen feet away from me. The street was dimly lit but the light from a nearby lantern sufficed for me to make out the unforgettable profile of the head of state. This glimpse of that lofty Gallic face gazing disdainfully through the smoked glass window struck me as an auspicious ending to an outing which had started almost as an afterthought. I turned to Ananda to confirm my impression.

'Is that who I think it is?'

Ananda winked. 'De Gaulle? No doubt about it.

Probably plotting something political with my Uncle.'

'Bonne Maman', they used to call her in the best traditions of the family. Ironically. For in Margaret's estimate she was anything but good. Our conversations gravitated so frequently around the person of Ananda's grandmother that she soon came to assume mythical proportions in my mind, an ogress capable of every evil, even that of devouring her own children. As far as Margaret was concerned, Charlotte was undoubtedly the evil genius behind the scenes, the person to whom she owed her exclusion from the bosom of the family. And so it was around the person of her mother-in-law that she wove her most exotic fabrications—this story of her pregnancy, for instance, which remains a supreme example of Margaret's inventive powers, her capacity to construct out of a few factual scraps a fantastic edifice of malevolent intentions.

I can still remember the occasion of the telling of that story. For it happened to coincide with a small celebration of my own. Every Sunday morning I used to train with a group of athletes from the P.U.C. And it had become an established routine for me to call at the rue de l'Université thereafter for lunch. Sometimes, instead of the training session, there would be a meet—cross country in Winter or track in Summer. And the Paris University Club would enter a team. So it was that one, crisp Sunday morning towards the end of November I found myself striding across the frozen ground at the head of a pack of cross country runners. Whether it had something to do with the length of the course (more like a British than a Continental cross) or whether it had more to do with the poverty of the competition I can't be sure. But I managed to do quite well and, for my pains, was awarded a case of Möet et Chandon.

After the awards were over, the champagne was loaded into the boot of a friend's car and delivered, along with myself, to the address on the rue de l'Université which I had given.

'Möet et Chandon,' Margaret observed as we opened one of the two bottles which had been placed in the refrigerator to cool for an hour. 'One of the very best brands. I can't remember when I last drank a bottle of this stuff ... or could it have been ...' She paused for a moment to ruminate. 'My God. I think it was. You remember Guy de Rothschild, don't you Ananda.' Ananda nodded. 'Well, he sent us a case of Möet et Chandon to celebrate the birth of Catherine.'

By this time I had managed to get the cork out of one of the bottles without an explosion—an expertise on which I prided myself, and started filling the three glasses Ananda had brought in from the kitchen. Margaret picked up her glass and clinked it against my own.

'Well, here's to you. May you win many more to come.'

'I only came second,' I protested. 'Had I won, you would have had a refrigerator instead.'

'Just as well,' Margaret commented. 'At least we can drink the champagne. Besides, who needs a fridge with the weather as cold as it is.' She shivered and placed a hand upon the radiator just behind her. 'Which reminds me. I've never been so cold as when I was having Catherine up at the château. Midwinter in the Pyrenées. But Bonne Maman is so damn mean she won't spend a penny more on heating than she absolutely has to. As for the champagne, it was taken to the cellar to be stored until such time as the baby was born. But when the time came for celebration, guess what? Bonne Maman tried to fob us off with local wine. Said she couldn't remember what Guy had brought around. You bet she remembered. Just didn't want to be reminded of

the fact that her daughter-in-law had just given birth to another child ... and a girl at that.'

'It was a terrible pregnancy. Much worse than the first time around—when I had twins. But that was California, surrounded by family and friends, with the best medical attention at my disposal. At the château however ... it makes me shudder just to think of it. Bonne Maman would not let me have the food I needed. Kept serving me stuff that made me ill. I'll swear she tried to poison me on the side. One evening I really thought I was finished. My parents-in-law had left for the week-end taking Georges with them. By that time I was seven months pregnant and much too sick to move. So they left me in bed at the Château. Soon after supper I began to feel quite dreadful. Sick and terribly weak ... and then I started to get contractions. Naturally, I thought I was going into labour two months early. I rang for help. Nobody came. I rang again. The same. I struggled out of bed and found that I was bleeding. Blood all over the place. By this time I was scared, I mean really terrified. But I managed to pull myself together and staggered out of the bedroom to look for help. I went from one room to the next, shouting all over the place. Nothing. There were half a dozen servants living permanently at the château and not one of them came to my rescue. Later I was told they had all slipped out for a couple of hours to attend a marriage. But if you ask me, they were under strict instructions to leave me alone as much as possible, in the hopes that there might just be ...' she shrugged her shoulders '... an unfortunate accident. There nearly was. After dragging around, shouting myself hoarse, I finally collapsed and lay for hours on stone cold flags, until Nanny happened to find me. Too old or too dimwitted I suppose to understand what my mother-in-law really wanted. Luckily for me. For when she found me lying

unconscious, she had the sense to call the doctor.'

'So I was saved and Catherine was born. A double misfortune for Bonne Maman. But she is not one to give up without a fight. With Catherine permanently in my care she turned her attention to the twins, to see if she could get rid of one of them. Baptisez-les, baptisez-les, she started screaming one nice, cold day. And before I realized what she was up to, the twins had been snatched away from me, taken to a freezing cold church and duly dunked in icy water. Baptism indeed.' She snorted. 'Murder I would call it. The two of them were brought back blue with cold. Ananda survived, thank God.' Margaret put a reassuring arm around her daughter. 'But shortly thereafter, Augustin died.'

I can recall making a point of watching Ananda's face as her mother told this story, a story she must have heard many times before. For already I knew enough to know that Augustin's brief appearance in the world had left a trace which extended far beyond his lively performance—that, for Ananda, he had become more real with every passing year, a spectral counterpart of herself, an unearthly alter ego with whom she claimed to have remained in more or less continual communication. With what veiled irony I used to chide her for what I took to be at best an engaging childishness, only to feel the searching tracer of those sea-green eyes sweep round and hold me in a look of such solemnity that the flippant flicker of my mirth was immediately extinguished in an icy wave of sobriety. Or else she would answer with such artless simplicity that the ambiguous levity of my question would be entirely circumvented.

'Is that what he looks like now,' I asked her once, pointing to one of the few remaining photos of Augustin as a baby.

'Of course not,' she had replied. 'He's grown up . About your height. With your light blue eyes and hair that hangs down around the neck, a little like your own.'

Then, to my delight, she had raised one hand, kneading the nape of my neck into willing compliance. 'That was the very first thing that struck me about you when we met. You looked so like Augustin. Not just the form of the face but something about your manner—a discrete, but unassuming certitude—as though you already knew but simply didn't want to impose your truth, your sagesse, upon the rest of us.' Her eyes embraced me for a moment, then thrust me back again. And her voice, when eventually it came out of her, was as cold and as flat as a sarcophagus. 'I don't like to talk about Augustin. For I know that a part of me went with him when he left this world.'

No wonder therefore that she should have felt so strongly about the woman who had 'murdered' her twin brother, to the point of harbouring murderous thoughts herself, thoughts which could find no outlet in the charitable tenor of her waking mind and so were forced down, down into the depths of her unconsciousness, where they took upon themselves a bloody guise. I mean those lurid, bloodthirsty dreams which Ananda would recount to me sometimes, somewhat shamefacedly, dreams in which she strove to inflict upon her grandmother every imaginable evil, tracking her along the interminable corridors of the château, chasing her up the winding staircase to the tower, then forcing her back over the battlements; or, more frequently, dragging her down to the torture chamber located alongside the dungeons. There her grandmother would be chained to massive rings set into the walls. There the rusted instruments would be made ready—garrottes and thumbscrews cleaned, brands, tongs and pincers heated,

blades sharpened till their gleaming edges caught the dull red glow of the brazier—made ready and applied. Sometimes she would be assisted by a giant figure, black as a bible and stripped to the waist, an unrecognizable apprentice who, obedient as a djin, would calmly execute her every order. And the two of them would drill their way into her grandmother's body until the screams gushed out like oil from a well, drawing her ever closer to the death she so much desired but which she was never allowed to obtain.

Violent, demonic dreams those were, dreams in which her desires assumed the status of realities. Not that Ananda and her grandmother ever came to blows. But later I was to witness the surreptitious duel which went on constantly between the two of them, the verbal skirmishing in which Ananda always managed to hold her own. For she possessed one means of defence with which to parry every thrust. She was a de Villiers by birth, whereas her grandmother had had to buy her way into the family. Watching the two of them confront each other at the château I would be reminded of that colloquial paradox, the irresistible force and the immovable object, Ananda with her icy composure stemming the fiery charge of Bonne Maman.

And Catherine? My recollections of Catherine are surprisingly limited. For her visits at the rue de l'Université were quite infrequent. Unlike Ananda, Catherine had elected to remain at school, a boarding school located a good hundred kilometres from Paris. Throughout the term she lived at school. And in the vacations she preferred to stay with friends or travel. She was a year or so younger than Ananda. But for several years she had led a life which kept her away from her mother and her sister. I had almost given up all hope of meeting her when Ananda rung me up

one morning to tell me that Catherine would be arriving to stay that same week-end, the week-end before Christmas. She was going to spend a few days in Paris and then go on to spend the holiday with her father at his house in the suburbs.

I suppose I must have been expecting another version of Ananda. For I remember being surprised to recognize in Catherine a younger version of her mother. The same taut features, the same freckled skin, the same red colouring to her hair. Hers was an attractive, mobile face, a face which either sparkled or smouldered, a face which always seemed to be on the point of catching fire. It was as though the flesh had been stripped from her bones, leaving the skeletal network of her nerves exposed. Whenever the two sisters quarrelled it would be Catherine who beat a retreat before the implacable calm of her sister's composure. And yet, in the end, it was Catherine who won her freedom from the tensions to which they were both exposed. For instead of holding her feelings in, she shook them off as a dog shakes water from its coat. By cutting herself off from her family, she was able to outgrow the rancour Margaret had salted away against the day when she would be able to exact her long awaited measure of retribution.

And so it was entirely appropriate, I suppose, that my arrival at the apartment should have coincided with a family quarrel, something about a young man named Pierre whom Catherine wanted to go out with the following evening, a proposal which her mother strenuously resisted on the grounds that the family would be most distressed to discover that their grand daughter was consorting with a grocer's boy. So vehement had the discussion become that, soon after my arrival, I volunteered to go out in search of any dinner items which might still be lacking. Seizing the

chance to get away herself, Catherine had insisted on accompanying me to pick up some more paté and a gâteau for dessert. It turned out that the young man in question actually worked at a nearby delicatessen where these articles were to be obtained. We dropped in at the shop and Catherine took the opportunity of hurriedly postponing her rendez-vous. I was then introduced to Pierre as Ananda's boyfriend. He greeted me warmly and insisted on supplying us both with four chocolate truffles, one for each member of the family.

'We certainly can't take these truffles home with us,' Catherine noted, almost as soon as we had left the shop. 'Maman will know exactly where I got them. And then the row will start all over again.'

'Incriminating evidence,' I agreed, rather pleased to be drawn into Catherine's intrigues. 'I suppose we'd better dispose of them ourselves. I know. Let's drop in at the café down the road.' Catherine nodded her agreement.

The place I had in mind was a tiny café in the rue Jacob, run by an elderly proprietor and his wife who must have lived there all their working lives. I had already taken Ananda there many times before. For the prices were much more reasonable than those by which one was accosted at any of the other cafes in the neighbourhood. The proprietor was one of those staunch conservatives of peasant stock whose family had settled in this street a generation or so ago when the quartier still retained something of a village atmosphere. Now this little bistro with its wooden tables and long uncomfortable benches was entirely out of place amidst the ever growing cluster of boutiques and expensive restaurants. The proprietor must have been offered handsome sums of money to retire. But he had chosen to stay on in the little establishment where he had spent his

life. As soon as he died, the property would be snapped up by a speculator. But as long as he lived, it would continue as it had always done, no longer serving the residents of the street so much as a motley collection of students, from the Law faculty, from Sciences Politiques, but mostly from the Ecole des Beaux Arts a few hundred yards down the street.

'What will you have to drink?' I asked Catherine as she seated herself at the only unoccupied table. 'A Martini please,' she called out as she laid her coat along the bench on the other side of her, and spread the truffles out upon the battered table top. I ordered a couple of Martinis and joined her at the table. So that was Pierre?' I queried.

'Yes,' she said, swirling the Martini. 'I'm very fond of him. He's got the nicest grin I've ever seen on a boy.'

'But not nice enough to impress Maman?'

'Naturally, you mustn't say a word to her.' Her voice had a slightly anxious ring to it. 'Though I can't say I pay much attention to what she says ... not any more.'

She dipped into her bag and brought out a packet of Gitannes. She slit the top with a movement of her thumb using the nail as a knife, then asked.

'Does my smoking derange you?'

I laughed. 'Don't worry. I'm totally deranged already.'

I lit her cigarette for her and watched as she blew a cloud of bluish smoke into the already smoke infested air. Gitannes. The Gypsy cigarette. The brand somehow seemed appropriate. I noticed that the hand which held the cigarette trembled slightly.

'At home they regard me as something of an "enfant terrible". They say I take after my father.' A pause. And then, with a hint of coyness in her voice.' I suppose they must have told you a lot about me already. '

'Not so much really. It's your absence which seems to

impress them most.'

She shook her head, smiling quietly to herself. 'It's not that I don't want to see them or anything. Just that I refuse to get involved in any more discussions about the family.' She pronounced the word 'discussion' almost as though it were French, rather charmingly I thought, with a Latin lilt to it distinctly different from Ananda's slightly Americanized English. 'For one thing, I'm very fond of my father. And, as you must have noticed, Maman tends to blame him for everything. It's really most unfair because Papa—you've never met him, I suppose.' I shook my head. 'Well I don't suppose you ever will. His visits are even more infrequent than my own and always end up with everybody shouting.'

'Has it always been like this. I mean between your father and your mother.'

'As far back as I can remember. Even in California, which is practically pre-history. Here, try one of these.' She pushed the package with the truffles in my direction. 'I was only three or four at the time and I can remember nothing distinctly, just a general impression, sunny skies outside and storm after storm inside.'

'This was when your father was studying at Stanford?'

'Good heavens no! As soon as my grandparents heard about the marriage, they refused to continue financing his University education and cut him off without a cent. Of course, he did break all the rules, marrying without his parent's knowledge, let alone their consent, a foreigner, a Protestant, a girl from a family which had no resources to recommend it, at least by my grandparent's rather demanding standards. Still, Papa must have been very upset by their reaction. For he did his best to keep in touch with his parents. In fact I was born on one of our visits to the Château. I think Papa hoped that if my mother had her

third child in France—you know Ananda had a twin brother, don't you?—it might help to reconcile the family to the marriage. But it all turned out quite tragically. About the time I was born, Ananda's brother Augustin died. To this day Maman is convinced that his death had something to do with the family. And for several years, Ananda could not be persuaded that my arrival in the world was not directly connected with the departure of her own twin brother.'

She looked at me for a moment, as if expecting me to interrupt. 'Anyway, that visit was sufficiently disastrous to keep us in California for another four years. We lived for a while in Lafayette. It's a small town to the East of San Francisco. Rather pretty if you like blue skies, rolling hills and redwood trees. Funny, come to think of it, that my mother's family should have come from a town named after the hero of the revolutionary wars. You know. The Marquis de Lafayette.'

She paused, sipped at her drink and then continued. 'In Lafayette we lived with my mother's family, for want of anywhere else to stay. Papa tried his hand at this and that—art work, a theatre group, teaching French. But nothing ever came to much. So I suppose he must have concluded that he stood a better chance in France.'

She paused to glance at me for a moment. 'Another truffle?'

I accepted. And she went on.' The French are crazy about truffles, you know. Train up teams of pigs to root them out. The only problem. How to prevent the pigs from eating up the truffles before they can be turned into recipes like this.' She scrunched up the paper bag in which the truffles had been wrapped and threw it deftly into a nearby waste bin.

'Back in France, things were not much better. The

attitude of the family seems to have been: you made your bed, now sleep in it. Papa had to give up his artistic ambitions. And went into business instead. But with his education only half completed and no practical skills to speak of, there was nothing much for him to do except become a factory worker. Now that is something Maman prefers to forget. The fact that Papa, who had been brought up to believe he could do anything he wanted, was forced to work on an assembly line for several years, just to bring in enough to feed us.'

Catherine paused, with the far away look of reminiscence in her eyes. She drew in deeply on her cigarette and then exhaled, a series of almost perfectly round smoke circles which hung for an extraordinarily long time in the air, encircling one another like the symbolic rings of the Olympic games.

'Those were not very happy years. We all lived in a little house in a village near Arcachon. Papa would come home after work, exhausted, not so much with the work as with the hopelessness of it all. And Maman would get to work on him, complaining about this and that, until he lost control.'

'And Ananda? How did she react to all this?'

'Oh, you should have seen her.' Catherine laughed. ' She was a good year older than me. But that hardly accounts for it.' She leaned forward across the table in an attitude of confidential disclosure. 'You know, I think she was born old, mature beyond her years. Whenever Maman and Papa started scrapping she would rush in to break up the fight. It was funny sometimes. The two of them would be yelling and screaming, with me in one corner of the room, my hands clapped over my ears.'

She leaned towards me. 'You know, for several years

they thought I was retarded, hardly saying a thing and then getting the two languages I was brought up with hopelessly confused. A sort of mental block which protected me from the feuds to which the two of us were constantly exposed. But which Ananda always seemed quite capable of coping with. She would come running in, a tiny toy of a girl, impeccably dressed of course, demanding to know what the row was all about. And then, when they tried to ignore her, she would take up a position in the middle of the room and shout at the top of her voice: Stop shouting will you—as if they were her two naughty children. And they listened. Because it was Ananda they were fighting for, or fighting over—beautiful, brilliant Ananda.'

Catherine pronounced the last three words with such exaggerated emphasis that I looked up to see if she was being sarcastic—the jealousy of a younger for an older sister perhaps. But she simply smiled, a smile of conspiratorial exuberance, a smile which seemed to challenge me to better the description, as indeed I would have been only too ready to do. I was still in that early phase of our relation when adoration knows no bounds, when every perfection can be bestowed upon the loved one without the slightest risk of insincerity. Later, there would be the difficulties, the loss of assurance. But, for the moment, I was like a champion skier on a sheer decline, revelling in the exhilaration of the headlong flight, carried along in spite of myself towards some vaguely outlined destination which, I was sure, lay waiting to receive me.

'You don't have to convince me,' was all I said. Then added. 'But your father doesn't seem to have been able convince his daughter.'

'No doubt about it,' Catherine confirmed. 'Papa was fighting a losing battle. And he knew it.'

She paused as if to scan the store of her memories. 'One day, as the two of us were coming home after an evening out with friends, we heard the two of them at it, yelling and screaming. We opened the door as quietly as we could, hoping to slip in unnoticed. But I kicked something over in the dark. There was a moment's silence, and then Papa came rushing out into the Hall. I could see his face quite clearly in the light from the living room. There were tears in his eyes, and he came towards us with his arms held out. Your mother is turning you against me. Your mother is turning you against me. That was all he could say. But I shall remember those words as long as I live. Papa holding out his arms towards us, and then collapsing, sobbing, into a chair.'

A burst of laughter erupted from a nearby table. A young man had just lifted a Mao cap from the head of one of his companions. The offended party lurched to his feet to retrieve his prize possession. On his way around the table he bumped into Catherine , and apologized with an extravagantly theatrical display of gallantry.

'Ils s'amusent bien,' she remarked as the young man continued on his way. The cap was being passed back and forth and we watched for a while as the owner vainly tried to recuperate his revolutionary headgear. 'Gauchistes,' Catherine observed. 'Probably a member of one of the radical student groups.'

'Radical student groups?,' I echoed, advertising my ignorance.

'You haven't heard? The Sorbonne is full of left-wing politics these days. The Ecole des Beaux Arts. Much the same story. Even Sciences Po., which always used to be so conservative. Each trying to outdo the other in revolutionary zeal. But it's only a game. Until they have to

settle down to making a living. Papa was as far to the left as any of them at first. In fact he even became a member of the Communist party when he started working on the assembly line. But then he got his first big break and has never had anything to do with the party since.'

She raised her Martini to her lips and drank, a long reflective draught.' Actually it was largely thanks to my grand mother. One of the companies in which she has a sizable holding owned a factory that was losing money. They were going to close it down. My grandmother must have suggested that they hand it over to Georges, to see if he could turn it around. For one whole year we hardly saw him, even on week-ends. He would leave first thing in the morning and come back last thing at night. Perhaps it was the best thing for us all. With Papa gone all the time, the fighting stopped. Maman took over at home and Papa got his chance to prove what he was worth as a businessman. He's never looked back since. A director of the company he once worked for, with several companies of his own.'

She seemed to be on the point of saying something else, then looked down at the table instead. 'Hey!' she called out. 'Your glass is empty. Time for a refill.'

I stood up, but she waved me back to my seat.

'No, this one's on me.'

She collected my glass and walked up to the counter. The proprietor reached back for the Martini bottle. As he began to pour, Catherine started to engage him in conversation. I noticed Catherine was wearing a coat that Ananda sometimes wore herself, probably borrowed for the occasion. To my surprise she looked very like her sister from the back, about the same height, the same slim lines, the same magnificently thick and curly head of hair, though of another shade, auburn instead of gold. Alike and yet so

different. More reserved on the surface and yet more outgoing in reality. For the solitude which I had come to recognize in Ananda was more like an atmosphere which she discharged around her, and which never seemed to leave her, even when she was in company. Now that I had been vouchsafed this glimpse into her childhood, it occurred to me that her solitude might be nothing more than an extension of the natural self absorption of the child, a self possession which had hardened, deepened into something more inaccessible, a sense of her own sufficiency which had become her only defence against the emotional piracy to which she had been exposed. For years she must have kept these two parts of herself, like fighting fish, in separate compartments, her love for her father and her mother, fearing that if either were to reach the other they would tear each other apart. So it must have been with a deep sense of relief that she finally surrendered one of the two poles of her attachment. And yet her hostility to her father had never been entirely convincing, at least not to me. I remembered having come upon her unexpectedly, not so long ago, when she was sitting by herself in the attic store room where they kept the bric-a-brac which had been banished from the apartment. She was sitting on a packing case, her eyes still red and moist with tears. A slim volume of poetry lay on the bandaged table right beside her, a volume of her father's poems. On the page at which the book stood open, I had found a love poem, addressed to someone who could only have been her mother.

'A penny for your thoughts?' Catherine 's voice broke into my reflections. I looked up to see her standing over me, smiling, with two full glasses of Martini in her hands.

'Nothing much,' I replied evasively. 'Just thinking about your father.'

She sat down across the table from me and for a while we simply sipped at our drinks without saying a word. The silence began to take on a weighty consistency, as if each one of us were waiting for the other to begin, and thereby becoming ever more ensnared in taciturnity.

'Your father,' I ventured. 'He was something of a poet, I believe?'

'Oh yes. He had already made a small name for himself in literary circles before he left for the States. A sort of Rimbaud manqué who never managed to find his Valery.

'He doesn't write any more?'

'Not so far as I know. Though I've been told there is a novel which his mother won't let him publish. Probably all about his scandalous marriage.'

'I've also seen one or two of his paintings in the attic.'

'Quite likely. He moved for a while in Surrealist circles. Salvador Dali, André Breton and the like. It was almost one of the rules of the game. The poets painted and the painters tried to put colours into words.

'Poet, painter, and now a company director.' My statement must have sounded slightly disbelieving. For Catherine immediately sprang to her father's defence.

'My father is really an extremely talented man. He could have made a success of anything he turned his hand to.'

She glanced at her watch. 'My goodness! We've been away forty minutes already. We'd better be getting back or Ananda will think I'm trying to seduce you.'

Chapter Five

And so Winter turned over in its sleep to make way for Spring. After months of bullying wind, after months of bloated cloud, months of driving rain, of frost so fierce it laced the windows with an icy filigree, the sun wrenched the sky apart, drenched the sky in a warm expulsion of breath—till the seeds started splitting the earth.

This Spring skipped in like a vision of the Promised Land, lightening the load of those who, like ourselves, were still en route. But words which were devised to relieve us of the dead weight of despair cannot do justice to something so wholly at one with itself, so wholly at peace with itself as happiness. 'La magique étude du bonheur,' wrote Rimbaud. Oh, but it eludes us every one, is there for a moment, and then is gone.

All that remains are these images whose fugitive transactions fix a moment of our happiness; this image, for example, of our two proportionate bodies walking down the Boulevard St Germain, hips interlocked in a dovetail of thighs. Or picking cherry blossoms on the banks of the Seine, one of those days when the river suddenly bursts into bloom. Or standing behind Ananda in the Orangerie, watching her looking at Monet's lilies, so wholly absorbed in the panorama that she absent-mindedly grasped the hand of her nearest neighbour, a young man in a business suit who, for one heaven-sent moment, held her as his own.

It was moments such as these which marked the stages

of our intimacy, moments remembered with such exactitude that I can recall not merely what was done or said but the tone of voice, the mood which we cast about us like a net in which, from time to time, a passer-by was caught. And then, impressed upon these moments, drawing them ever closer together, weaving them in together into one glowing pattern, the growing accord of our affection.

The first time I invited her out. The first time I slipped my arm around her waist, shyly, like a snake. The first time we kissed. It was not the first kiss really, but a kiss so different from any we had exchanged before that it became the first kiss of its kind.

Ananda was accustomed to according me the conventional kiss, which is little more than the Latin equivalent of shaking hands. These ceremonious kisses were invariably granted as the last contact of the day, kisses which brought the day to a close as conclusively as the setting of the sun. And then, one evening, as I was standing at the door, on the very point of going home, she added, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye:

'Kiss me.'

'I already have.'

'Kiss me properly.'

I must have hesitated. For she took my head in her own two hands and kissed me fully on the lips. I could feel the weight of her body gathering slowly in my arms, read in the languor of her eyes something of the meaning of this donation which seemed to demand so much more from me than she had ever asked before that at first it left me apprehensive. And then I was wide open. She sprang the door to myself as swiftly and as skilfully as a burglar with a jimmy.

By the standards of the times our courtship must have

seemed traditional, proceeding as it did to the stately rhythms of a waltz, much to the disgust of Angelo, who was always pressing me for news of new developments. 'Are you there yet?' he would ask. And I would answer: 'No. We are still en route.' At which point he would make a face and laugh. But then I, for my part, always found it difficult not to laugh at Angelo's affairs, those momentary exposures which, like flash lamps, were briefly charged with the current of sex, before burning out.

Slowly we began to inhabit each other, slowly but so surely it seemed as if nothing could prevent the eventual intermingling of our lives. How certain we were of ourselves, of each other, of the future in which we had already plotted out the graph of our equation. And yet ...

'Would it amuse you to attend a high-society event?' Ananda asked me one evening, holding out for my benefit the invitation which she had received that very morning.

'What kind of an event?'

'It's a coming-out ball. The de Villiers are trying to marry off their eligible daughters and dispose of their old maids.'

She handed me the elaborate gilt-lettered invitation. Reading it through I felt obliged to point out that there was no mention of her bringing someone with her. But she didn't appear to be bothered by this observation.

'You'll be my escort for the evening.'

'Do you think I'd make an eligible escort for a de Villiers?'

'Oh, don't worry about that. I'll think up a title for you. They'll be falling all over you before the evening is out.'

I remember feeling distinctly put out when she proposed my name, the Marquis de Vilero de

Montecasino—as though, by assuming an alias, I would be betraying myself. 'What's wrong with going as myself?' I protested. But all I got in the way of an answer was another question, a question which she posed with what I took to be a trace or mockery in her voice. 'If only you knew who you were?'

No doubt she found this insistence on my being myself a trifle naive. For already by the age of eighteen she had had to come to terms with the multiform character of her self, if only because her life had overstepped the single track of simplicity. But her duplicity, if one could call it that, really amounted to nothing more than an ability to duplicate herself, by playing several roles. The masks of social propriety came easily to her, so easily indeed that she was as much herself as she ever was on such ceremonial occasions as the one on which we were embarked. She revelled in the world of feminine embellishments, a world that France knows how to cultivate so well. But there was never any question of her identifying with this role. For she only donned these disguises for an evening, played the role (so well that no one would have doubted that she was what she appeared to be) and then reverted to the routines of her day-to-day existence.

It was the intermittent character of her appearances as the daughter of a 'grande famille' which enabled her to assume an ironic distance from the person she was brought up to be. But far from exhibiting any aversion to the role, she played it to the hilt. 'What's in a name, after all?' she insisted, with a view to breaking down my resistance. But she knew full well that, as far as that evening was concerned, the name would make all the difference between tolerance and acceptance.

As the evening wore on I discovered, much too my

surprise, that in actual fact the mask allowed me to be truer to myself than I would otherwise have been, or truer to that multiform self which we each of us are, but which is often inhibited by sincerity. By assuming the mask of someone I was not, I was able to develop a side of myself I hardly knew existed—my sociability. Like antique silver saved up for some special occasion, my social self was brought out, dusted, polished and, furthermore, rendered such impeccable service that I surprised myself by the genuineness of the impression I was able to create. The title which, at first, I wore so uneasily gradually began to fit, like new shoes worn in by much walking. At the same time, I could not help being aware of my imposture, so much so that I found it difficult to believe that the other invitees were not equally aware of the posture they had assumed. And yet they were so wholly convinced of their roles. The clothes that they had put on for the occasion seemed to have become a sort of social skin, as much a part of themselves as the skin they clothed. So instead of releasing them from themselves, the masks they wore restricted them to being one single unequivocal person who was, for that very reason, little more than a projection of the social imagination—its norms, values, prohibitions and expectations incarnated in the person.

The very ambivalence of Ananda's social environment freed her from such fanciful fixations. And yet her self-development must have been arrested by a naïveté as fundamental as my own. For it was my very determination to be myself which forced me to an ultimate disjunction—the point at which I had to admit the vertiginous freedom of the self. By being several selves she was never led to ask herself who she really was. And so she never had to come to terms with the nothingness at the very centre of the self, the

latitude which allows the self to assume a role while still remaining something other or, more exactly, an emptiness which is only temporarily occupied by a role. She skirted this annihilating centre of herself, threw herself into her several selves, so much so that eventually she became the victim of their incompatibility.

But I digress. Or rather, I am running too far ahead of myself. For, as I approached the main gate of her aunt's hôtel, I was aware of nothing more than an incipient separation within myself, as though a lever had been inserted into some crevice of my being. We left our coats in the cloakroom. But then, just as I was pocketing my cloakroom ticket, I happened to catch sight of myself in a full length mirror, a mirror which gave me back so very unfamiliar an image that, for a moment, I had some difficulty in recognizing the impeccably-dressed individual who looked back at me. Ananda had decided that I should go as an Italian officer training at a military academy. So she had bronzed my skin with a lotion of some kind and affixed a moustache which lent my face a belligerent bravura. With the result that I might have been brought to deny myself had it not been for the person standing beside me in a long silk gown, a person whose provocative smile recorded my bewilderment.

'Eh bien, M. le Marquis.'

'Après vous, M'meoiselle.'

And so we proceeded, across the hall and down a corridor to the entrance to the ballroom. I suppose I must have hoped that my presence at the ball would be marginal, that of an observer rather than a participant. For I was not a little alarmed at the prospect of the liveried butler who took our names at the door. No sooner had we stepped across the threshold than the butler announced our arrival in the most

stentorian tones. The orchestra chose that very moment to conclude a minuet. The silence stripped me of my anonymity, then invested me with an identity which was cast into the midst of the company defiantly, like a gauntlet thrown down at the feet of an opponent. I shuddered inwardly as the unfamiliar syllables resounded throughout the room. But the slightest pressure from Ananda's hand confirmed her presence at my side, held me true to our intention. 'Now you're really it,' she whispered. 'A real Marquis in spite of yourself.' And indeed it was Ananda who provided me with a suitable genealogy on the many occasions when our identity was called into question. Whether she had thought out my lineage in advance or whether my line of descent was simply contrived on the spur of the moment, I shall never know. For Ananda was always most convincing when she could inhabit a twilight zone where the real exigencies of truth had already been usurped by the work of an artful imagination.

We stepped into the midst of the gilded throng and were rapidly swept away in a current of activity. It was obvious that Ananda was well known to the company. For after our first waltz together she was immediately accosted by numerous young men all claiming the privilege of dancing with her. I let her go, reluctantly, reclaimed her again then watched her leave on someone else's arm. This time she had engaged herself for two or three dances in a row. She suggested I sample some of the other young ladies. Instead, I finished up hovering nervously at the edge of the dance floor, a non-swimmer afraid to take the plunge. Eventually I found a vacant seat near the orchestra from which I could watch Ananda without being seen myself. Indeed, so absorbed was I in the intricacies of her performance that I failed to notice the menacing proximity

of a lady whose massive bulk was already overshadowing me, until her voice abruptly cut the cord of my attention.

'Who are you?' I looked up to face a pair of eyes which scrutinized me curiously through the frame of a lorgnette, for all the world as though I were a rare biological specimen.

'The Marquis de Montecasino de Vilero,' I stammered, recognizing my error almost as soon as the name had left my lips.

The Grande Dame glanced at the sheet that she held in her hands. 'I don't find you on the list of invites.'

'To tell you the truth, I didn't expect to be able to get here tonight. It's not so easy to get special leave from a military academy.'

'Oh, so you're in the army. Interesting.' She pointed an interrogatory finger at me. 'Then you must have heard of my cousin, le General de ...'

'The Italian army,' I hastened to explain. 'The Italian army, not the French.'

'The Italian army.' Her voice rose, hovered momentarily , then plunged again. 'And how, may I ask, does an officer of the Italian army come to be acquainted with Ananda de Villiers?'

I stood up, searched out Ananda, gestured despairingly in her direction. Fortunately she was not far away. In a moment she was back at my side. 'I hope you two have been introduced,' she said, sizing up the situation immediately. Neither of us were ready to admit that we had ever had the honour.

Indicating the person of my interlocutor, Ananda continued. 'The Countess ... de ...'

'And he, I take it, is the Marquis de Montecasino de Vilero ... or so he tells me.'

The Countess continued to eye me suspiciously. 'I can't say I've ever come across a family by that name before.'

'But you must have heard of the Duke of …' Ananda replied, but in such a way as to indicate that ignorance of the person in question would be quite inexcusable. 'A leading figure in Italian society and a close friend of the Pope.'

'Ahhhhh. I have not had the honour of meeting the Duke. But of course I know the name.'

'Well it's really quite simple. His mother is the old Duke's niece.'

The genealogy sufficed to allay the Countess' suspicions. 'In that case I must present you to my daughter.' She turned around. 'Ghislaine. Ghislaine. Come over here for a moment.'

Such was the bulk of the Countess' person that I had not noticed a lightly built girl standing directly behind her. The Countess hauled at her hand and landed her, gasping, at our feet. But instead of introducing herself she floundered helplessly, entirely out of her element until Ananda came to her rescue. Before very long the two of them were deeply engaged in conversation.

Observing the two girls I could not but be struck by the contrast that they represented. They were both about the same age and had been brought up, from childhood, to play the part that these occasions called for. Indeed it was clear from what they said that they used to attend many of the same social functions together. But as time went on Ananda had withdrawn more and more from the world to which she would otherwise have belonged.

For all that she still looked much more at home than Ghislaine. She was able to play the part of the débutante that much more convincingly, precisely because she always

withheld a part of herself. Like any accomplished actor she had learnt to turn her disassociation to account. Inasmuch as she failed to coincide entirely with her role she was able to see herself from the standpoint of her audience and so to prefigure the very effect she intended to convey. But if the effects were contrived, nonetheless, they were contrived to appear more natural than spontaneity could ever have been.

To someone as graceless as the Countess, this inborn elegance must have seemed unnerving. It was difficult not to notice the slightly supercilious air with which Ananda treated her, as though she hardly merited the company she was keeping. However, Ghislaine's admiration for her former companion was such that in all likelihood she missed the slightly insidious nuances which coloured Ananda's dialogue with her mother. Indeed, so thankful was she for this momentary respite in the gruelling routine of being presented, that I am sure she would have preferred to remain with us a little longer. But her mother had another curriculum in mind for her. 'Come along my dear,' she commanded, as she dragged her daughter off to be introduced to some other more receptive prospect. 'I can see that the Marquis only has eyes for Ananda tonight.' And then, to me: 'Some other time perhaps. Ananda knows where I reside.'

'La vache,' Ananda muttered as soon as the Countess was out of earshot. 'She always shows up at these functions, making a thorough nuisance of herself. Just the sort of person who brings the aristocracy into disrepute.' She followed the retreating form of the Countess for a moment, then turned back to me again. 'And as for you. Getting your name the wrong way round.'

'I'm sure it didn't make the slightest difference,' I objected. 'What saved the day was my connection with the

Duke of what's his name. Who is he anyhow?'

'Oh, just someone my grandfather knows. After all, the Countess might be excused for not having heard of a mere marquis. But a Duke ...'

'And a close friend of the Pope.'

'Exactly. She held out her hand. 'And now, how about another dance—to keep you out of trouble.'

We took to the floor again and danced to the rhythms of what turned out to be a mercifully slow waltz. Then the orchestra fell silent and a young man in a chequered suit approached Ananda and invited her to be his partner for the following dance. I watched her go with some relief. For, on the whole, I preferred to sit and follow her performance, relish the execution of a step which would have been inhibited by my clumsy partnership. Each time she negotiated a turn that I would never have been able to put her through myself, I would imagine Ananda in my arms. The imperceptible stretch and strain of my ligaments would register my vicarious presence at her side, out there on the ballroom floor, dancing with the borrowed skill of one for whom the pas de deux was an indispensable passport to gentility.

Besides, I only had to catch her eye, twist my face into a grimace of impatience and she would find some excuse to break away and come back to my side. And as she thanked her erstwhile partner, I would confront in his eyes a reflection of the very jealousy which had prompted me to intervene.

'That boy I was dancing with just then,' she said on one occasion.

I followed her indication. 'You mean the one with the crimson cummerbund.'

'Yes. Now his father is one of the richest men in

France, a horrible bourgeois industrialist who makes bombs and guns and dreadful things like that.' And then later in the evening, while we were sitting in the dining room with a plate of cold food between us. 'You see that young man over there.' She pointed to a rather heavily built youth who was helping himself at the buffet. 'He's related to the Bourbons. You know—the family that used to rule the country.'

'Not a direct descendant.'

'Of course not,' she replied as she drew the knife edge of one hand across her throat. 'The direct descendants got what they deserved.'

'At any rate his branch of the family must have survived.'

'And doing very nicely thank you. Since there are no new creations, any family that survived the revolution has been able to sell its title at a premium. Mine, for example.'

I looked at her as she sat there dressed in the Dior gown which her father had bought especially for this occasion, hardly able to believe the twist of fortune which had brought me to this ball.

'What would your family say if they knew I was keeping you from a brilliant alliance?'

She laughed.' They'd have a fit. Especially Bonne Maman who already has a Marquis lined up for me. Naturally there'd be a handsome dowry.'

'And if I married you?'

'Not a cent. They only give to those who have already.'

'So what are you doing on the arms of a pauper like myself?'

She looked at me gravely for a moment. Then her face eased into a smile. 'You have your uses.' I watched her lift a chicken bone from her plate and lick it clean. Then she gestured towards a cluster of smartly dressed young men

lined up at the buffet. 'Amongst other things you help to keep the popinjays at bay.'

Popinjays perhaps. But there were times when I found it difficult to take this verdict seriously. Even before we had finished our meal, a young man in his early twenties walked across and drew up a chair at our table. Ananda introduced us and we exchanged a word or two. He lifted a couple of cigars out of his lapel pocket and offered me one which I refused. He lit the other. And the two of them then proceeded to converse, conjuring up a world of persons and of places which was quite unknown to me, a shared domain whose lateral connections were articulated in an urbane, cultivated French which I could understand but could not have hoped to simulate.

I consoled myself with the thought that intelligence and good breeding do not always go together, that an impeccable comportment might be nothing better than the decorous wrapping around a gift of little value. Indeed, I even managed to convince myself that there was something a little effeminate about these courtly proceedings, more particularly the dancing which Ananda thoroughly enjoyed but which took her away from me so frequently.

It was while I was sitting out not long after dinner that Ghislaine joined me, intrigued perhaps by my disconsolate expression.

'You look somewhat disconcerted.'

'Only because my partner always seems to be the centre of attraction.'

I pointed to the far end of the ballroom where Ananda stood encircled by admirers. The orchestra had just finished playing and Ananda had taken leave of her former partners. Five or six young men were pressing her to accept their invitation to join them for the following dance. She looked a

little out of breath. I saw her press her right hand to her breast and make a face, as if she were trying to excuse herself. But her protests only seemed to inspire more insistent declarations.

Ghislaine nodded. 'That doesn't surprise me in the least. At every de Villiers function I've ever attended she's always been the queen bee in the middle of the hive.'

'Well,' I concluded, glad of the opportunity to relieve myself of an excess of malice. 'There certainly appears to be no lack of drones.'

Ghislaine laughed. 'I wouldn't let it bother you if I were you. I've never seen her come to a ball with anyone else before. Usually she arrives by herself, dances with one man after another and then goes home alone. No one quite knows what to make of her. That's why we were all so surprised when she came with you this evening.' She paused. 'I don't suppose I'm the only person who's wondering what is going on between you.'

I smiled in what I took to be a suitably mysterious manner, then looked back towards Ananda. She was standing at the far end of the room, watching the two of us. When she saw me glance in her direction she excused herself and started back across the room.

'You see what I mean,' Ghislaine observed. 'She's not going to leave me alone with you for one minute.' She got up and was immediately gobbled up by a young man in a sharkskin suit who had been eyeing her anxiously for several minutes.

Ananda sank down into the seat which Ghislaine had just vacated. 'Ouf! That last dance was quite exhausting.' She ran one hand up the nape of her neck and lifted her hair, then let it fall back into place again.

'Did you want to dance with Catherine?' I thought I

detected a trace of anxiety in her voice.

'Not especially. I'd much rather dance with you.'

'I'm tired of dancing. I thought I'd sit out for a while.' She took my hand and squeezed it lightly.

The orchestra was warming up again, dissolving the groups of dancers into complementary units of two. I turned back to Ananda. The dancing had brought a flush to her cheeks, colouring the pallor of her skin with a faintly hectic decoration. I remembered our earlier partnerships, when I had held her in my arms, but at the distances prescribed by the formalities of the dance, tantalizing proximities, like tasting food without being able to swallow. More than anything else I wanted to embrace her.

'Are you sure you don't want to dance?' she asked at last.

'Not really.' I paused. The same thought went through my mind several times before I dared to put it into words. 'What I'd really like to do is kiss you.'

'So would I.'

I leaned towards her but was stopped with one finger laid across my lips. 'Not in front of all these men.'

'To hell with all these men.' I surprised myself with the vehemence of my rejoinder. The words spurted out of me as uncontrollably as a reflex action.

There was a silence. I could feel her eyes moving over my face, exploring my face like the hands of the blind. Then she tugged at my hand. 'Come with me. I know of a place where we can be alone.'

She led me across the ballroom floor. On the opposite side from which we had come in there was another door. We went through and found ourselves in a corridor whose resonant walls prolonged the raucous of the ball. The corridor fed into a small hall way from which a narrow

flight of stairs led upwards. We climbed two flights, turned down another corridor and then continued on till we came to a door before which Ananda halted. 'The library,' she announced in a whisper. She pushed. The airtight door popped open to admit us and then sucked shut again. For a moment we stood in utter darkness. Then Ananda flipped on the light and the oblong mass of the room sprang into view. As I gazed around me, I became aware of the silence, a silence that seemed in keeping with the studious atmosphere of the room, its walls arrayed with row on row of books. It looked as though the shelves had been arranged by centuries. Works by Diderot, Montesquieu and Voltaire were stacked up to my right. To my left I found the classics. I turned around to encounter Ananda, standing back against the shelves that lined the adjacent wall, standing back and saying nothing. As she waited, she combed her right hand through the splendid meshes of her hair, her head thrown back against the soothing pressure of her fingers. I took a few steps towards her. The whiteness of her face contrasted starkly with the brown ground of the leather bindings, floating out against the musty odour like a lily in a stagnant pond.

'Ananda,' I said, as I clasped her to me.

'Mon bien-aimé.'

That was the first time I ever heard her use that quaint expression. And the two words sank right into me like a glass of cool water in the heat of day. The sense of her was so overwhelming that I closed my eyes, unwilling to see before me someone whom I seemed to have inhaled, someone whose inspiration had already stopped the cavities of my discontent. But she shook me gently.

'So, M. le Marquis is jealous, is he?'

I disengaged myself from her and placed my hands

upon her shoulders. ‘M. le Marquis would like to inform Mme. la Marquise that unless she reserves the next few dances with him he will probably take a mistress.’

She looked right back at me. ‘Mme la Marquise would like to inform M. le Marquis that unless he reserves the next few dances with the “maitre de dance” she will probably make a fool of herself.’

I took one step back and turned my head to address an imaginary party. ‘Would you kindly inform Mme. la Marquise that M. le Marquis is of the opinion that dancing is a disgustingly frivolous exercise and quite unbecoming to the dignity of Man.’

Ananda turned her head to address the same third party. ‘Would you kindly inform M. le Marquis that Mme la Marquise is of the opinion that dancing is a delightfully entertaining exercise and quite becoming to the dignity of a woman.’ She pirouetted on one heel, to end up facing me again. Then, as if to bring the performance to an end, she took up her characteristic stance, right elbow cupped in the palm of her left hand.

She looked quite exquisite standing there, like some expensive piece of jewellery the price of which one dares not ask for fear it may exceed one’s means.

‘Ananda,’ I asked. ‘Couldn’t we renounce our titles?’

‘You’d rather be yourself again?’

‘Much rather.’

‘So would I.’ She dropped her hands into her lap and meekly inclined her head.

I had to laugh at this sudden transformation of herself from princess into servant girl. I took her drooping head between my hands. ‘Slave of my passions,’ I exclaimed, with what I meant to be the sadistic exultation of the sexually obsessed. She looked up at me from behind dimmed lids.

'My Lord and Master.'

I drew her to me, held her in an embrace so tight it cut the laughter out of her. The library had become entirely silent. But far off, so far off that it seemed to come from another galaxy altogether, I could hear the sounds of the orchestra, not so much the music they made as the rhythm they generated between them, the unmistakable, swirling triad of a waltz. I felt the silken coolness of her gown, smelt the brilliance of her perfume, as I pressed myself against the outlines of her body, hoping perhaps to leave her imprint upon my own receptive flesh. She went quite limp in my arms, so pliant that I wondered for a moment whether I might not be forcing myself upon her. She remained for a while, enveloped in my arms, unmoving, unresisting. And then I began to feel the first faint stirrings of her own response, nothing more than the vague and vagrant passage of her arms at first, curling along my shoulder blades and up my neck. But then as her hands reached around my face she raised her head from the place where it had been resting on my breast. I could feel the moist exposure of her lips upon my neck, my chin and finally across my lips. Now it was she who was insisting, pressing forward with her mouth, brushing my mouth into a compliant parting which she immediately took possession of, darting in with the tip of her tongue, accompanying the quick strong strokes with an indistinct but avid hum a strangely impersonal tone that seemed to issue forth not from her throat but from somewhere deeper inside herself. I felt my body flowing into hers, our two bodies flowing into one embracing mould.

Then, with a abruptness that startled me but which I had already come to associate with her, the decisive signature of her embrace, she pushed her body away from

mine to front me, joy in every line of her face, a joy so fresh and vigorous, so unlike the regal propriety of her social posture that I was doubly surprised—surprised by the suddenness of our separation and then surprised again by the sudden change of mood, light and buoyant now, two schoolboys swapping risqué stories, copains meeting on the street. She flung one arm around my neck. 'Time to get back before we become conspicuous by our absence.'

We went back the way we had come, back down the stairs, along the corridor. And then, just before we reached the entrance to the ballroom, she stepped to one side, gathered herself together for one moment and waited for me to open the door. I pressed the ornate lever which served as a handle and stood aside as she walked on through.

Once again we were assimilated into the main body of the guests. But apparently our absence had already been noticed, by Catherine, as shyly coy as ever, who wanted to know what we had been up to, but also by three or four young gentlemen, who were determined to claim Ananda for one last dance before the evening was over. While Ananda was away I went through the motions of a tango with a young lady who reminded me a little of Sylvie but more to keep up appearances than out of any genuine interest in the proceedings. For this was the first occasion on which my relation to Ananda had been exposed to other eyes. And it was with an almost overwhelming sense of gratitude that I felt that what had been so readily and naturally negotiated within the exclusive circuit of our private meetings was now confirmed, had set into a recognizable fixture which could withstand the world. Perhaps it was for this reason that it seemed important to me not to end the evening without taking leave of Ananda's Aunt, our hostess.

Quite early on I had recognized the tall, imposing figure of the woman I had first met at the Opera. I mentioned the fact to Ananda. But she seemed in no hurry to present herself, indeed dismissed her with a wry remark which bordered on impoliteness. Clearly there was no love lost between them. Equally clearly, our hostess has begun to display an interest in me, the all-too evident escort of her niece. I caught her glancing in my direction on several occasions. Once, in response, I essayed a smile. But she turned away, a little shamefacedly. I suspected her of harbouring doubts about my aristocratic identity, an identity which, by now, must surely have made the rounds. And it was this suspicion which kept me from introducing myself, at least not without the accompanying support of Ananda. And so, when she approached me again soon after midnight with the suggestion that we should leave, I took the opportunity of pointing out to her what I took to be a social obligation.

'We should at least say goodbye to your Aunt..'

'That's exactly why I want to leave a little early—so I won't have to say goodbye to my Aunt.'

'You think she might see through my persona?'

'Well, of course she would.' Her hands were placed upon my shoulders and she looked up at me as she spoke. 'Why, I can't even rely upon you to remember your name correctly.'

And so we left without saying "au revoir", left as unobtrusively as our arrival had been clamorously acclaimed.

Throughout the following week the phone kept on ringing, young men from families with impeccable credentials who hoped to renew her acquaintance, a whole series of new

invitations which Ananda steadfastly declined to entertain. On account of me? My self esteem would certainly wish it so. But it could just as well have been on account of her mother who would most certainly have been unacceptable in such circles. Or again, it might even have been Margaret herself who imposed these patterns of restraint, knowing full well that her greatest misfortune would have been the promotion of her daughter to the rank of a society from which she would have been excluded on account of her divorce.

And then, on top of the divorce came the remarriage. I knew that Georges' remarriage had come as something of a shock to both of them, even though it was only to be expected. But I entirely underestimated the effect that the news of a second family might have upon Ananda. Or am I simply projecting back upon that event an explanatory category which will help me come to terms with the onset of her illness? Perhaps it was just an accidental conjunction which I am only tempted to grace with the name of cause and effect because it helps to make what came to pass appear much more intelligible—at least in retrospect.

At any rate, it was Margaret who relayed the event to me two weeks after our appearance at the ball. But she must have had a difference of opinion with her daughter on this score. For she addressed me with the beguiling insistence of one who is looking for support.

'He came over here only yesterday with the news that he now has a son by his second wife. And he expects us all to jump for joy and pat him on the back for being such a virile boy.'

'But Maman,' Ananda protested. 'It is not normal to congratulate someone on such an occasion.'

'Congratulate him for what ?' Margaret's voice had

acquired a shrill and desolate edge. 'For fornicating with that woman of his. Not likely.'

The very next day Ananda had her first fainting spell. She tried to pass it off as a joke—the sudden sinking feeling which left her lying on the floor, the world revolving around her like a giant gyroscope. But I could see she had been shaken by the experience. Margaret attributed it all to fatigue—too much studying and the unremitting strain of living in Paris. So she welcomed my suggestion that we should make an excursion out of the city to visit a neighbouring château. Nor did Ananda seem to be in any doubt as to where we should go; Marly-le-Roi, a former royal domain, complete with château, landscaped garden and a hunting forest.

I still remember the quality of that morning—a great awakening, as though the year had only died to be born again, fresher and more vigorous than before. A chill still lingered in the breeze. But the sun sparkled brightly in the streets. The trees that lined the boulevards pointed insolent green-tipped fingers at the sky. In their branches birds were trying out unprecedented trills, gingerly, like sopranos recovering from bronchitis. Rather than travelling underground in the Metro, I caught a bus at Denfert Rochereau and watched the city shaking itself free of the clammy manacles of Winter. From the back of the bus, on the platform with its iron railings, open to the world, I watched and saw tourists researching the city, shuttering each monument in the camera obscura of their memory. I saw babies trundled out in prams, peering out from their swaddling clothes like spacemen from another planet. 'Eh bien,' observed the conductor as he came around to clip my ticket. 'Fini l'hiver.'

I called at the apartment to collect Ananda. She met me at the door wearing a woollen jersey and a pair of slacks, garments drawn from that other wardrobe which co-existed peaceably alongside the items of haute couture. Seeing her dressed in such ordinary clothes I was tempted to think that I had finally reached the simple centre of herself. But perhaps her simplicity was just another pose—like those rustic huts which used to be built on the grounds of a château, and to which the residents would repair to replenish their sense of simplicity.

We climbed into the suburban train. And as the miles rattled off along the sequestrated rails, the increasing distance from the city served to draw us closer together. It was the first time we had ever been out of the city in each other's company. Through the grimy windows of our compartment we watched the apartments blocks, the offices, the factories fall away. Before very long the branches of the forest began to overhang the train, foreshadowing, or so it seemed, a whole new freedom, the freedom to discover a true reflection of ourselves in the immediate presence of each other, rather than one that had been mediated by the distorting mirrors of the city, of the family.

When we reached our station we got out of the train and walked the few hundred yards to the main gates of the domain. Through the gates, a long slow incline, planted with lawns and interspersed with artificial lakes, bordered on each side by ornamental cedars. About two thirds of the way up we could see the château, dominated by the massive dome round which the building had been built. A notice at the gate informed us that the park and adjoining forest were open to the public. But the château itself was only opened up one day a week, a Wednesday. The day was Friday and it was with a certain sense of annoyance that I pointed out to

Ananda that we weren't going to be able to visit the château after all.

'I wouldn't be so sure about that,' Ananda replied with an infuriatingly mysterious smile.

'But the château isn't open to the public today.'

'I knew it wouldn't be open to the public.'

'And you brought us all this way ...'

'For nothing?' Her eyes were two springs welling with amusement. 'No. Because we're not the public.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

She said nothing. 'Ananda,' I insisted as she maintained an enigmatic silence. 'You're hiding something.' She had developed the look of a jack just sprung out of its box. 'Tell me,' I pleaded. 'What's it all about?'

'Come with me.'

She took my hand and led me through the gate and up to a little house which stood in the far corner of a formal garden, a little to one side of the château. 'This is where the concierge lives.' She addressed me as though I were a small child on an outing. 'Let's see if she's in, shall we?'

She rang the bell. I heard footsteps in the house. The door opened up a crack, held in place by a chain. 'What is it?' a female voice called roughly. And then before Ananda had a chance to reply. 'The château isn't open to the public today.'

'Jeanine,' Ananda called out softly. 'It's me.'

The change was astonishing. The door closed momentarily as the chain was unlatched and was then flung open. An elderly lady came forward to greet us. 'Mais...' she exclaimed, unable to find the words to match the joy which had taken possession of her. She threw her arms around Ananda, then let go of her again. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming?'

'A surprise.'

'A wonderful surprise.' The concierge grasped Ananda's hands in hers. 'But come in. Come in both of you.'

We went in. I was introduced and then we were taken through to the parlour where the concierge drew up three chairs and a little round table. On the way in we had passed a room where a man was to be seen sitting weaving. Ananda had stuck her head in briefly. While the concierge was out in the kitchen fetching a bottle of rosé, she left me for a moment to be excused. I heard the cistern flushing. But then, instead of coming straight back, she must have slipped in to speak to the weaver. For I caught the sound of her voice in the next room.

The concierge returned with a bottle of rosé and three glasses. She poured a liberal helping into each of the glasses, handed me one and then looked up as Ananda came back into the room. 'Ah, there you are?' she noted as she handed a second glass to Ananda. 'Santé.'

'La vôtre,' Ananda replied and the two of them slipped easily into the leisurely language of reminiscence.

'Madame la Baronne will be most disappointed to hear that you called while she and the family were away.' The concierge lowered her voice to a confidential tone. 'You were always one of her very favourites when you were a child. Only the other day she asked after you. But all I knew was what you told me on that letter you sent me two or was it three Christmases ago. 'She sipped at her rosé thoughtfully. 'My goodness, how the years fly by.'

A silence. Then I saw Ananda nod in the direction of the next room.' The man in there ... weaving.'

'Ah, yes. One of the tapestries was in such a state of disrepair that M. le Baron has decided to have a copy made. He's working on it now.'

'Isn't it the one that used to hand in the Queen's bedroom, above the bed. A battle scene if I remember correctly.'

'What a memory. You're right my dear. He's been working on the copy for several weeks. It should be finished soon.'

'I'd like to see it when it's ready.'

'You're welcome any time. I know Mme la Baronne would be delighted if you came back on a visit. And bring your friend with you. He will be welcome too.' She gave my arm a friendly squeeze.

'Well actually I was rather hoping I could show him around today. He's never seen the château before. Perhaps we could borrow the keys for the afternoon?'

'Why of course. Now you're here. And with the château empty you'll have the place to yourself.' She hurried off, returning a few minutes later with a massive iron ring loaded with a diverse assortment of keys.

'Here you are. The keys are all labelled in case you don't remember which goes where. A little more rosé?'

Our glasses were replenished and for several minutes more Ananda and the concierge continued to converse about this and that, the state of health of the Baron's family, the new central heating system that had been installed in the château, the plans for transforming the formal garden. I was getting a little weary. And so it was with some sense of relief that I watched Ananda drink down the remaining wine in her glass and lay the glass down on the table with a gesture of finality. 'Time we were on our way.' She picked up the ring of keys and gave them to me, then turned to address the concierge. 'We'll bring the keys back to you when we're through.'

The concierge held the door open for us to leave. 'I

may be going out later on this afternoon. If I'm not here when you get back just drop the keys off on the kitchen table.'

And so I took Ananda by one hand, holding in the other the massive ring of keys, feeling a little like St Peter with the keys to the gates of Paradise. Could any art thief walking unnoticed out of the Louvre with the Mona Lisa wrapped inside his coat have felt a greater sense of exhilaration than I with Ananda close at hand? Could any mountaineer have approached the summit of an unclimbed mountain with a greater sense of awe and triumph than I, as I fitted the largest key into the front door of the château and swung it open in front of us, turning around afterwards to close it again, solemnly, behind us? Could any mystic, blessed with a vision of the Divine, have gazed upward more reverently than I, as I walked beneath the cupola, admiring the frescoes by Le Brun? It was as if we had suddenly entered into our own home, inherited the château with all its priceless treasures, been betrothed, so that all that now remained was the consummation of our marriage.

For an hour or more Ananda showed me over that marvellous palace as if it had been her home, and I had stared at the Gobelins tapestries, the paintings by David and Daumier, Wateau and El Greco, the porcelain services from Sèvres. And then, as we were looking out of one of the many windows that lined the corridor along the second floor, gazing out from our vantage point and down upon the terraced lawns, with their artificial lakes and fountains, she had told me there was something special she wanted to show me.

We descended the marble staircase again, crossed the entire length of the château and then climbed a little

backways staircase located in one of the two wings, the wing which faced the formal garden. She selected another key and let me into a room at the very end of the corridor. ‘Make yourself at home,’ she said, as she pointed through the doorway. ‘I won’t be a moment.’

The room into which I had been brought was, if anything, much less impressive than many of those we had visited already. It was a fairly small square room that was clearly used to live in. There were cupboards and chests placed here and there. In one corner I found a wash basin and, sitting beside it, the inevitable bidet. I walked over to the basin and ran the tap, noting with relief that hot water was proceeding from the tap marked with an ornate C. I heard the sound of flushing in the immediate vicinity, an oddly exaggerated sound amidst the silence which inhabited the room. A moment later, Ananda returned to the room and was standing at my side.

‘Look!’ She pointed at the two oval mirrors on either side of the room. I looked and immediately recognized the effect to which she wished to draw my attention. For the two mirrors were so arranged that if you placed yourself correctly an infinity of diminishing perspectives opened up, each identical with the one before, but set in the frame of its predecessors. I stood beside Ananda, gazing at these many replicas of myself, each one attached to its own partner. And when we embraced the several reflected couples stepped simultaneously into each other’s arms, a well drilled regiment of guards executing, with exemplary precision, an unorthodox parade ground figure.

Then Ananda drew my attention to a portrait, one of the many hanging around these walls. The portrait showed an elderly lady surveying the confines of the room with grave severity. Approaching closer I found an inscription set

into the frame: 'La Baronne de ... née de Villiers.

'An ancestor?'

'My great, great Aunt.'

Once again I was struck by the polymorphous character of the family, its blood circulating through the arterial thoroughfares of France. I looked at the Baroness and then back at Ananda. 'Is that what you brought me here to see?'

'That ... and all the rest.' She gestured around the room, then caught my eyes in one of the mirrors. 'You see. This room has a very special significance for me. It was my room many, many years ago. I used to sleep in that bed over there.'

It would have been impossible to overlook the bed, built as it was on a massive scale, a vast four-poster hung around with dark red velvet curtains. 'When I was small,' Ananda explained, 'this bed almost seemed to be a whole house in itself.' She crossed over and stood by one of the posters at the foot of the bed. 'My father used to come in to say goodnight. And I would make him ask permission before I would let him in.'

'And what about me?'

'Please come inside.'

It was almost dark within the canopy of the bed, so dark that when Ananda followed me in her body was immediately transformed into a rustling mass of shadow. The air was heavy, filled with a musty dust-bound odour, as though the bed had not been slept in for quite some time. But through it all, backing it all like the lining of a coat, I could just make out the pervasive smell of rose-water.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark I could see that we were both sitting cross-legged on a richly embroidered bedspread. I watched as Ananda turned the bedspread down at the head of the bed, bringing to light

two soft white pillows frilled with lace. She gestured to me to raise my body and rolled the bedspread back to the very foot of the bed where it lay folded over upon itself. Beneath we found a multi-coloured quilt covering with its silken touch the rougher material of the blankets.

'It's hot in here,' Ananda exclaimed. And, for the first time, I became aware of the heat of the room, its windows closed against the sun, its little radiator gurgling noisily in a corner by itself. The heat of the room had been magnified by the heat of our bodies, held in within the curtained seclusion of the bed. Ananda started pulling at her sweater. But her hair got caught in the turtleneck. And I had to help her disentangle herself. I took my sweater off myself. As I dropped both garments over the side of the bed, I heard Ananda singing out. 'Man overboard!'

'A house and now a boat,' I remarked, amused by the wonderland which we now seemed to occupy, free to make of anything whatever we wanted.

'A houseboat,' she replied, obviously pleased at the ease with which the circle had been squared.

I laid myself down along the full length of the bed, one head resting upon a pillow. She stretched herself out opposite me. And for a while we lay motionless together, staring at each other without saying a word. I vaguely felt that something was expected of me. But I continued doing nothing, letting the tension build up relentlessly between us.

I shut my eyes and my mind immediately wandered back to Suresne-sur-Mer, at first just blankly indicated as a name—a name which kept on nagging at me until it filled out into a concrete image, an image of myself and Sylvie, lying in the hot sun, on the beach, just a few inches away from each other, so close that every time I opened my eyes her face would be enlarged until it occupied the whole

horizon. Sylvie. The sun, the sand, the sea. I must have smiled, delighted by my vision. For a moment later I heard Ananda's voice strangely interpolated into the scene.

'You're thinking something?'

I opened my eyes to find Ananda's face, grown strangely unfamiliar.

'Not thinking—dreaming.'

'I wonder what?'

'My one and only boyhood romance.'

'Ooh, là là. Tell me more about it.'

I raised myself on one elbow. Sylvie? I must have told you about her before. We used to lie for hours on end like this, on the beach, in the sun, enjoying each other.'

'And you were never naughty?' I smiled at the verbal regression, sex transposed into the innocent vocabulary of childhood.

'We were much too young for that. Or much too shy.' I thought a moment. 'But I do remember we used to take a bottle of sun tan lotion with us to the beach, not because we needed the protection, because it gave us an excuse to touch each other, lightly and gently, all over our bodies ... except of course the parts that were covered by our bathing suits.'

Ananda laughed. 'How old were you then?'

'Fourteen, fifteen maybe.'

'And after that ... who?'

'After that no one ... until I met you.'

She looked at me, her eyes wafting over my face like a bird circling, uncertain where to alight. Then she reached out with one hand. For a moment I thought she was going to touch my face, but instead her hand moved down to my open neck. Pressed against the soft skin of my chest. Started moving around in little circles, hemmed in by the aperture of my shirt.

'Is this how Sylvie used to treat you?'

'Except that ... on the beach, I didn't have my shirt.'

Her fingers slipped down and undid the topmost button, then another and another. 'Roll over on your front,' she said as she began to pull the shirt away. Now the entire expanse of my back was free and I closed my eyes as her hand ranged over, sweeping across my shoulders and into the angle by my neck. I lay unmoving, rejoicing in the play of her hand. But the initiative still seemed to me immensely ambiguous, spanning the gulf between role and reality. It could be no more than a replay of the scene with Sylvie, bed instead of beach, on a curtained stage, another person taking the part that had just been written into the scenario. Or it could have been an invitation to intimacy, the needful immediacy of a role deliberately adopted to circumvent reality; let make-believe rush in where truth would have feared to be so bold. How like Ananda, I thought, to slip into a role when what I needed to know, desperately needed to know, was precisely whether the role was real. Her hand was still running over my back. I longed to return the gesture with a caress of my own and almost did so. Instead, I lay still until her hand, in turn, lay still, resting quietly against my skin.

We were both quite motionless now. And in the stillness I could hear her breathing, feel the envelope of her lungs distending outward, holding for one breathless moment, before beginning the exhale. The silence grew around us, denser, more familiar, forming a medium through which our bodies could communicate. I felt her streaming towards me in the silence, the river of blood which her heart was driving around and around, now bursting out of its bounds and washing across the intervening shallows.

Her leg stirred, lightly touched my own, withdrew, then moved forward again. I felt her weight adjust itself, sending a tiny tremor through the buoyant volume of the quilt. I had the absurd idea that I was lying on a rubber mattress, floating on the ocean. I rolled over on my side, facing her again. Her hand lay limp where my last movement had left it, resting on my ribs. I drew my left hand up and laid it on top of hers. She was smiling, a hazy smile like the sun seen through mists in the early morning. I raised my hand on two stiff finger tips and walked it step by step across the bridge of her arms. She drew closer to me as I plunged my fingers into the splendid meshes of her hair, combing my fingers upward from the nape of her neck. I could feel the wind of her breath upon my cheek as I ran my fingers out through the length of her hair, sifting the tresses through my fingers until they snagged. A shoot of straw, at least four inches in length, stuck fast in her hair. The incongruity struck me. Outdoors suddenly finding its way inside, just as here inside we had fancifully recreated the great outdoors, the sand, the sea. A topsy turvy world where everything becomes its opposite.

I drew the straw out and showed it to her. She studied it carefully as if it had been a lost art treasure, then took the ravelled end between her lips. She held if for a moment in her mouth, motionless, stuck out at a jaunty angle. Then, with the slightest movement of her lips she began to flaunt the tasselled end about, waving it back and forth in the space between us, brushing it up and down across my lips, inviting my mouth to search it out, trap and cap its liberty. The drama of challenge and response had now been staged, enacting itself in this symbol of the link between us, a length of straw teasing the enclosure of my mouth until it is caught between my teeth. Then drawing in, drawing in

slowly along the tasselled line of straw. Lips pressed forward to gain a purchase, then biting backward with my teeth. Cliff climbing; the marlin spike stuck in a crevice. Hauling up, consolidating each new reach with the scissor clamp of booted feet. My heart was beating wildly as I drew nearer to my mark, each new nearness piling up until our lips touched, tip to tip.

There had been no precedent for that kiss, a kiss that started out as just another in a long sequence of exchanges but had then overstepped the established ranges leaving us quite unprepared for the feverish haste with which we removed each other's clothes, as though the exposure of our bodies were nothing more than a natural enlargement of the initial imprint of that kiss. Her eyes closed as I began to explore her body with my mouth, the curve of her neck, the girdle of her collar bone, the double mound of her breasts, the nipples now outstandingly erect, swollen to a firmness which resisted the sweeping brush strokes of my tongue. My mouth moved on across the casing of her ribs, down the long slow slope of her belly with its two incongruous irregularities, the wrinkled membrane of the navel and the line of white where a surgeon had reached for her appendix. I could hear her heart, pounding beneath her ribs and listened for a moment, amazed by the contrast between this huge commotion deep within and the languid relaxation of her surface appearance. I felt her hands reaching down to take my head between her fingers, guide my head across the wavering landscape of her limbs, briefly down, as if to confirm her readiness, then up, back up to the level of her face again.

Her face had taken on a slightly anxious expression, a child about to ask for some forbidden sweet, uncertain whether reward or punishment would follow its request.

'Please come inside,' she said.

I was struck by the incongruity, or even perhaps by the fitness of the expression. Not so long ago it had welcomed me into the bed. Now it bade me take possession of a space more private still. I must have hesitated. For her voice came again, more insistently this time.

'Inside me, please. I want to feel you inside me.'

I must have imagined this moment so many times before, no doubt in accordance with the conventional norms of masculinity, as a moment of triumph when a man attains his goal. In an instant these irreverent fantasies had been cast aside. In their place another image arose, more real than the fantasy it deposed. Penetration as a sacrilegious act, the temple occupied by soldiers as a temporary abode. The crude clumsiness of the male organ now impressed itself upon me, no longer sheathed and languishing decorously in place, but straining upwards in a grossly extended space, the hands of a prisoner reaching blindly up the wall, knowing only one thing, wanting only one thing—release.

Ananda must have sensed my nervousness. She had been lying beside me with her arms thrown back across the bed in a gesture of abandon, her legs slightly parted and thrusting down, almost holding her body up, the overly stiff and rigid posture of a patient in the dentist's chair awaiting the onset of the drill. Now suddenly she relaxed. She turned on her side and pressed her body up against mine. I could feel my organ nudging up against the soft flesh of her belly, knew she knew as she undulated lightly against my strain that physiology had nothing whatsoever to do with it, that something else would have to come to pass if our two bodies were yet to come together.

'Well,' she said, mockingly. 'Aren't you going to say you love me?'

'Well,' I replied, with the very same measured expulsion of my breath. 'If you want me to.'

'I don't.'

'Then why?'

'Because I know already.'

'How?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'One of those things a woman has to know if she is not going to get into trouble.' She looked at me. 'It's more than just the way I am with you, more than any good feeling, which can always be misleading. A sort of assurance. As though this was meant to be and had to be and would go on being between us, no matter what.'

'Inevitability?'

'Not even that. More like finality really. Something I've never felt with anyone else before. No risk because no matter what I do you'll always be there to reassure me, a step ahead to catch me just before I fall.'

'So that explains it.'

'What?'

'Your totally shameless behaviour.'

Her face took on a puckish grin which was somehow magically transformed into a pout. 'Mon bien aimé. Am I really so ... méchant?'

I said nothing, enchanted by these seductive transformations, the mood of the moment capable of taking on any guise. She advanced her head towards me, her lips still funnelling out into a pout. I felt her tongue sliding up and down the parting of my mouth, lubricating its way in. We had done this before, many times before. Since kissing had become the limit of our sexual experience we had made a point of unlocking all its riches, till the colloquial euphemism of the tongue in cheek had almost become a

metaphor for something more illicit. Whose tongue? Whose cheek? A private joke between the two of us which only those could have appreciated who had hung for a while in this suspended state between petting and penetration.

As the full stretch of her tongue found its way into my mouth I could feel my body dissolving along its length, something giving way inside me, a limpness from which somehow I managed to draw my strength. Suddenly, I found myself astride her. In an instant and with an ease which left me stupefied, my ignorance had been turned to expertise. It was as though I had been born with sexual skills, skills that were called into play not by any innate compulsion driving me from within, but by her own attraction, drawing me out of myself, as if my body were an instrument on which she played.

I felt myself uplifted by some impersonal charge which neither stemmed from me nor yet from her but seemed to have been engendered by the field of force we generated between us. I closed my eyes and the blank horizon lit up with a thousand flares, pin points of light which streamed towards me, swelling to incandescent orbs. I felt like a sailor caught in a storm. A mighty wind seemed to catch the sails, tearing them away in one stupendous thunderclap. Stripped of myself, I experienced a surrender of all the instruments of control, my body now no longer my own but answering to some alien call. Far, far off, I thought I heard a desolate cry, the cry of a sea bird gliding above a deserted shore. I clung to her like a shipwrecked mariner to a log, as though she were my only hope, the only stable point in a vast dissolving wilderness.

I opened my eyes and the rushing fell back into a stable frame, the bed, the body. Ananda, her eyes wide open, staring with an almost savage intensity, at me, through me,

past me, toward some menace which she dared not name.

'Did I hurt you?' I asked, lifting myself off her body and laying myself down beside her again.

'Oh no, my dearest. Not you. Or maybe. I really can't say.' She shook her head. 'A little of both I suppose, pleasure and pain, terror and assurance.' She flung her arms about me, drawing me back into the cosy ambience of her body. 'Does that make sense?'

'No. But I think I understand all the same.'

She stirred, and I waited while she collected herself again into a new alignment. A thought crossed my mind and was immediately cancelled, crossed again and was cancelled out again. But again it stood there, wilfully withstanding my retaliatory efforts. I said it, then realized I had said it to myself. I said it again and this time my lips must have moved. For Ananda raised herself on one elbow and leaned towards me, straining.

'What was that?'

'Have you taken precautions?'

The sentence sounded both crassly understated and outspoken, fraught with so many alternative interpretations that I wished I had kept it to myself. I realized with a sense of dumb bewilderment that I didn't even know what I had wanted to convey myself; alarm, concern, my hopes, my fears.

She read my apprehension.

'What if I said no.' I could feel her eyes moving over my face, questioning in subtle tones. Gravity or mockery? I could hardly tell. 'Would you blame me?'

'Of course not.'

'And if I got pregnant?'

'We'd have to get married.' Again I sensed the appalling inadequacy of my response, the cliché expression with its

overtones of irate fathers, revengeful brothers, mothers in tears. I added. 'I'd love you to have my child, you know.'

'But I could always have an abortion.' She tossed the little word 'always' off with such exaggerated casualness that I knew she was back to make-believe.

'Now I know you're not serious.'

'Let's just say I was testing you.'

'How did I do?'

'Passed with flying colours.' She reached out and touched my shoulder blade. So now I can tell you that in actual fact I do have a little device inside me. Hate the thing. But as soon as I started going out with you Maman insisted that I get myself a diaphragm. Said you never knew what a man might spring upon a gal.'

'Ananda you amaze me.'

'Amaze you. Why?'

'The way you swing from one extreme to the other. It took me months to earn a kiss. Then, when finally I held you in my arms, I said to myself, I did. Steady as you go m' boy. Steady as you go.'

'You thought you'd gone about as far as you could go?'

'I did indeed. Now this.' I kissed her on the shoulder. 'It never crossed my mind ...'

'I knew.'

'You knew?'

'Don't laugh. I've seen this all before. It's déjà vu.'

'A dream?'

She nodded.

Oh, now I understand. You've always been telling me you could see into the future. And now, to prove it, you decided to do what you'd already dreamed, just to make it all come true. That's cheating.'

'Not really. You see, there were some things I saw

which were quite outside my control. In my dream we had the château to ourselves. But I didn't know the baron and his whole family would be away today.'

'A happy coincidence.'

'Then how do you explain the weaver?'

'You saw the weaver too?'

'The very same man. The very same tapestry. In fact I recalled his face even more clearly than your own. That was when I knew I knew.'

'And you never told me.' I touched her on the lips with my finger. 'What else do you know that you haven't told me?'

'You'll have to ask me, won't you.'

'Well, since we seem to be running through the usual unseemly catalogue of personal revelations.' I paused. 'Was this your first time too?'

'More or less.'

'What on earth do you mean?' I laughed. 'You don't think I'm that old fashioned, do you?'

She trained those great green eyes upon me, looked away, then looked back at me again, a look so solemn and enveloping that it held me in its grip, held me as a rodent might be held in the gaze of a snake.

'I was raped.'

The revelation was so unexpected, so far from any explanation I had thought to hear that I simply looked right back at her in sheer amazement. Rape. The word stood out in my mind in all its gigantic enormity, shrinking every other thought to pygmy proportions. As the word took hold it began to travel through regions of association, throwing off layers of meaning which wound themselves around my mind, like blood soaked bandages around a half healed wound. Rape. A dirty word best left unspoken. Rape. A

social problem to be dealt with by the professional. Rape. A personal crisis dividing the whole body of mankind into two separate spheres. Men and women. Victors and victims. I felt as helpless as a human being coming across a creature from another planet, not knowing what common ground of experience could serve to support either sympathy or assistance. I looked at Ananda again. She looked now as she usually looked, inviolate, composed, so that I found it difficult to believe what I had just heard.

'Rape? Who? When?'

'Don't get so excited. There's nothing you or anyone else can do about it.' She glanced upward where the canopy hung over us, then sat upright on the bed. I thought she was going to tell her story. Instead she parted the curtains and left me by myself. I waited a while inside, waited until I thought I heard what sounded like a sob, weeping snagging against the edge of her restraint. I parted the curtains and found her sitting in the window seat, her head held in her hands. An attitude of rapt dejection. I sat down opposite her only to discover I had no idea what to do or say. I looked through the window and saw two sparrows sitting together on the wall that ran around the formal garden, nuzzling each other. Spring fever. Birds of a feather flocking together. I took her head in my hands.

'You don't have to tell me anything. Not if you don't want to.'

'She shook her head free of my hands again. 'But that's just it. I do. I want to get it off my chest. Tell someone.'

She looked out of the window, and I had the sense that she was no longer in the room but somewhere out there, suspended above the formal garden, or back there, back there in time, reliving the experience. 'I must have been about twelve at the time.' Her voice ventured out, a little

shakily. ‘My parents were still living at St Jean de la Croix, near Arcachon, though shortly thereafter Maman moved to Paris. I was already at St Dominique’s by then, had been for several years and so only came home for the vacations. It was Summer, a very strange vacation for me. My father was totally engrossed in making a success of his business career and was hardly ever to be seen at home. My sister was away as usual, staying with friends. The friends I knew from the days when I went to the local école had moved on somewhere else. So there really was nothing for me to do at home, no one for me to see. To make matters worse, Maman was in a most peculiar mood, no doubt due to Papa’s continual absence. I read a lot and went for long walks by myself in the country.

It happened on one of those afternoon walks. A man from the village followed me. He had seen me around from time to time and must have taken a fancy to me. He came upon me in a wood, when I was reading—alone. Of course, I struggled. But he was much too strong for me. He hit me about the face and body, trying to get me to lie still. Just as well in a way as I hardly felt the pain of the deflowering, overpowered as it was by all the other injuries he inflicted upon me.’

‘Afterwards, I did a stupid thing. I threatened him. It wasn’t the pain, the blows which I hardly felt in the course of the struggle. It wasn’t even the indignity, the violation of my adolescent sense of amour propre. It was the sight of him standing there above me, his undaunted complacency, the grotesque smirk on his face as he tried to console me. “Now that wasn’t really so bad, was it?” ’

‘Instead of accepting the fait accompli, I threatened to report him. He laughed at first. Apparently he’d done this kind of thing before, with village girls whose parents were

much too frightened of him to report the matter to the police. When I told him my name his face caved in. He slapped me and told me I was lying—until I pulled out my carte d'identité and shoved it in his face. My uncle was Minister of Justice at the time and the name de Villiers was pretty much a household word, especially in that part of France, with the château only a hundred miles or so away. I could read his face; anger, fear, self pity, fury, succeeding one another in rapid succession. Then a desperate look came into his eyes and I knew he was going to try and kill me. He grabbed me by the throat and started strangling me. I kicked. I knew enough about the male anatomy to know the place which would cause the sharpest pain. He let out a scream and retreated, clutching his midriff. Instead of running off I told him to his face that if he laid his hands on me again I'd have him thrown in jail. Of course that only made him worse. He rushed at me once more, twisted me around so I couldn't get at him, and once again his hands were clamped around my throat. I don't know why, but by this time I felt strangely fearless, as though I had already moved past the point of death. I let myself go entirely limp and, in a moment of total disassociation, found myself floating away outside my body. The best thing I could have done. For he thought he had killed me and that changed him completely. He was terrified, absolutely terrified of what he thought he had done. He started muttering 'Mon Dieu', 'Mon Dieu', over and over again, shaking my body, slapping my cheeks as if he hoped to force me back to life again. Then he dropped me and started pulling on his coat, glancing around wildly all the time. I remember feeling entirely in control of myself, free to remain outside my body, free to return, and able—I don't know how to explain this properly—able to see right into his soul. The whole

mean, miserable bundle of jangled nerves, so petrified by now that I knew I had nothing more to fear from him. So I sort of entered back into myself, sat up, and then, with all the authority I could muster, pronounced the one word: "Go".'

'He stared at me as though he was looking at a ghost. Once again he exclaimed "Mon Dieu" but this time more out of astonishment than anything else. He raised his hands in a beseeching sort of gesture, as though he wanted to help me to my feet. Somehow, I managed to pull myself up by myself and simply repeated the same word over again.'

'Go.'

'And he went, still muttering to himself. "Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu".'

She said no more. And in the silence which ensued I became acutely aware, almost embarrassed by the contrast between the two lines of association. For me, the act of love had conjured up a moment of my happiness, the memory reaching joyously back across the years to gather into its embrace a vision of Sylvie, laughter, innocence and grace. For her, the act had brought to life a skeleton whose whitened bones she had long since locked away in some secluded closet of her mind. I wondered whether I was the only person to whom she had told her story. Instead, I asked her whether she had told her parents.

'No,' she replied. 'I have always kept it to myself, hidden inside me—till today. I did think about having the man arrested. Instead I decided to check up on him. I think he must have learnt his lesson. For I never heard of any more such incidents in the village.'

She turned to look back out of the window. And again I felt her presence leaving the room, slipping out through the window like a cat on a hot night called by the moon. I

reached out with my hand, not so much to touch her as to bring her back, bring us back into contact with each other. 'Ananda,' I said and my voice sounded full of a false solemnity, so much so that I nearly left the rest unsaid. 'Ananda. I'll never let anything like that happen to you again.'

I don't know what I had hoped to produce by this avowal, a sense of protective custody I suppose. But the words came out so stiff and stilted that I could never have anticipated the effect they actually produced. She looked at me, a quick uncertain look, as though she were standing at a cross roads, not knowing which way to turn. Then her eyes filmed over. The upper lip began to quiver, trembling in the grip of some unannounced catharsis, some play of passion which had stolen up upon her. She blinked and bit her lip, but the eyes kept flooding over and her jaw had already begun to fall when she threw her arms around me, weeping.

Her weeping fell upon me like a waterfall, continuous, unending, majestic almost in its limitless cascade, a wall made up of waters which had flowed from far, far back and which would eventually flow right on but which momentarily joined to form the selfsame image of arrested passage, mobility frozen to an opaque slide. I realized there was nothing I could do to comfort her except perhaps just hold her in my arms. For she was gone, carried along this torrent of herself. And yet it seemed important that I should be there, to be the channel through which these dammed up waters flowed, to be the breach by means of which the wound might heal.

I looked over her shoulder, heard the sound, and saw, in the grained wood of the window shutter—a scene at school, the door to a dormitory at which I had paused on my way to bed, hearing behind the panelled wood the shuffle of feet,

the thud of pillows and the crack of knotted towel ends and, beyond it all, a desolate wail. And although I had not yet nor ever would attain that prefectural authority which would entitle me to intervene, I had, nevertheless, opened the door and watched the tormentors—for such they were: five pimply, pyjama'd boys—scurry back to their beds, leaving a huddled mass lying under the blankets from beneath which there still emerged this desolate wail. I had said nothing, done nothing because in the end there was nothing left to do except, perhaps, just stand there in the doorway and let the sound impress itself. And yet, when eventually I left, it struck me that something had been accomplished, not so much the termination of mob rule as the establishment of this stretch of time in which the sound stood out, no longer swallowed up in the press of inquisition but regenerated, divorced from what had caused it, standing out alone, accusing.

I drew Ananda closer to me, ran my right hand through her hair. I felt the weight of her head shift slightly. But the sobbing continued. And yet it seemed to me that the tone had changed, no longer the heavy stride of sadness but little tripping steps of girlish laughter, gladness caught out of control and whisked away in giddy eddies of delirium. I listened carefully, and more and more it seemed to me that the convulsions were ambiguous, made up of one part joy and one part sorrow. I pulled myself away and held her before me, smiling right into her eyes. And now there could be no doubt about it. She was laughing, crying, both at once, relieving herself of some huge pent-up reservoir of feeling, luxuriating in the new-found sense of absolution. I shook her slightly and the laughter came, surprised by itself at first then unashamedly acclaimed, a laughter born of lightness, bright, like a butterfly shuffling off the mortal coil

of its cocoon.

Once again she threw her arms around me and her voice came through, clear and distinct this time. 'I've never cried like this before.' She dried her eyes with one hand drawn across her face. 'But I feel much better for it all. As if I'd left a whole part of myself behind, a burden I no longer have to carry with me. Not just that awful incident but all it came to represent, the loss of childhood, family and friends. You see, that very same Fall, my mother left my father and moved to Paris to be near to my school. One whole phase of my life had ended and yet the next never really seemed to begin. I hung in limbo, going through the motions, treading water without progressing.'

I took her hands in mine. Hands which I had held so many times before and yet had never really looked at. The graceful tapered fingers of a practising musician, the nails cut short and free of varnish, free of all encumbrances, except for a ring, a ring whose fretted edges I remembered having felt against my skin from time to time. I looked at the ring more closely. It was not a ring I had ever seen her wear, antique silver worked in filigree. She saw me looking at it, smiled, then drew the ring off her middle finger and held it out towards me. Woven into the filigree, in Gothic script, I found the three words: 'amor vincit omnia'.

'It was given to me by the baroness many years ago,' she started to explain. 'I must have been about nine at the time. She wanted to give me something from the family collection. She was a little disappointed when I chose this ring. She thought it plain and showed me other rings, rings set with precious stones. Bracelets. Pendants. But I wanted this ring. When she saw that my heart was set upon it she gave it to me, telling me that it was once an engagement ring. She asked me whether I knew what the insignia meant.

I told her I had already had two years of Latin. So she kissed me on the forehead, laughing, saying I was much too young to be thinking of "amour".'

Ananda turned the ring over briefly in her fingers then pressed it into my hands. 'Here, please take it. I'd like you to have it.'

'What can I give you in return?'

'Nothing.' A pause and then she added. 'Or, yes. A solemn promise?'

'A promise?'

'The easiest and the most difficult thing of all to give.'

'I promise.'

'Silly. I haven't told you yet what you're supposed to promise.'

'Tell me.'

She turned her great green eyes on me. 'I want you to promise that you'll never leave me. Ever.'

'Till death do us part.'

'Till death do us part.'

The air was full of unspoken words, unformulated covenants, a silence as full and as expectant as the moment when the conductor lifts his baton. A dozen responses crossed my mind each one more inadequate than the one before. So instead of saying anything I simply recaptured her fugitive hand and held it close against my cheek. She let it rest there for a while then whisked it away and thrust it under my arm.

'Promise.' The gesture was so incongruous that, for a moment, I could not connect it with anything that had gone before.

'Promise what?'

'Promise you'll never leave me.'

'Ananda, really. What's the use ...' But the sentence

lurched off into peals of laughter as her fingers rummaged under my arms, unleashing waves of ticklish shivers. 'Stop it, please,' I begged as I tried to give her the slip. But she had me securely wedged in a corner of the window seat, ransacked by the scrimmaging fury of her fingers. Her voice sounded through my laughter with the sepulchral sonority of a gong.

'Promise.

'Yes anything.'

'That's not a serious promise.' Her fingers redoubled their efforts. 'Promise you'll promise seriously.'

'Promise!' I yelled between bursts of laughter, managing at last to slip past the blockade of her arms. She came on after me. But with the room to manoeuvre in I was able to switch from defence to attack. Bearing down upon her I drove her back to the bed, on which she now collapsed, laughing, as my hands found their way under her arms. And for a while we lay together, locked in the convulsive hold of this embrace. Then, as if it were the most natural transition imaginable, the strained trajectory of our laughter was solemnly launched into tranquil waters which closed over as we made love again, but calmly and longingly this time, as if we had the rest of our lives to complete this voluptuous arabesque, each mobile figure suffusing the density of our limbs with the exquisite red-toned dye of pleasure.

This time it was so very different that it hardly seemed to fall into the same species of activity. The first time sex had taken us by surprise, taken us, shaken us, stripped us down, leaving us helpless and alarmed. Now the nervous edge was gone. Gone the feeling of being dismembered, divested of every protective layer. Gone the sense of rushing headlong toward some unknown destination, anxiously

foreshadowed in advance. All this had been replaced by a new untroubled serenity. The past had fallen away from us. The future did not yet concern us, only the present, a continuous present, indefinitely prolonged. We had become weightless, thrown out of space into some secluded orbit where we gravely circled one another. Not only our imagination but also our desires had stepped beyond all finite bounds. Our bodies too had entered into the conspiracy, the parliament of our joints and limbs, having already declared its independence, was racing free, supporting our initiative. The gap between intention and execution had been closed, the firefly glow of attraction no sooner catching than it burst into a steady flame. Each gesture had become a ceremony whose meaning far surpassed the doing of it, a language before language was invented, emotions spouting forth, foregathering in little collecting pools of ritual. We were engaged in the conversation of two bodies which had lost their sense of separateness, which mingled freely with each other, establishing a secret code. The sounds we uttered now could no longer have been mistaken for cries of pain. They were the outward sign of mellifluous harmonies played on pipes whose joyous tunes were set against the background of deep-throated sounds of satisfaction, a constant humming tone that sounded like the heady drone of bees in flowers.

We made love until our love-worn bodies cried out for respite. And then we lay back, angled adroitly towards each other, studying the loaded script of each other's physiognomy. Our love making had made us hot. I noticed a thin layer of moisture, more like dew than sweat, covering the surface of Ananda's body. Beneath the canopy the heat had been slowly building up till it hung around us, an almost sensible presence with its own distinctive aroma, the

faintly musky smell of sex.

With one brisk movement Ananda sat up, pulled aside the curtain and stepped out into the room. I heard her go over to the window and throw it open. Through the gap in the curtain a waft of cooler air brushed past me. I hauled my body off the bed and joined Ananda at the window seat. The sun was setting across the formal garden. Above and beyond the trees the clouds had twisted themselves into scarlet bands, lying like gory wreaths upon the forested horizon. As if in answer to this colourful pageant, a dozen birds had begun their sunset song.

We continued to sit there for a while, looking and listening. Then Ananda turned toward me.

'I wish I'd known you years ago.'

'You wouldn't have liked me.'

'I'm sure I would. A good-looking public schoolboy.'

'Oh, at school I was quite impossible. They tried to make me play games. I refused. As a form of punishment they sent me on long runs by myself. I won the cross-country championships. They would have loved to write me off as an intellectual wet blanket. Except that, for two years, I was the middleweight champion of the school. Which enabled me to end all disputes by simply saying: "If you have any complaints I suggest we settle the matter in the ring, like gentlemen." It never failed. Needless to say, I was not very popular.'

'No friends?'

'Well, of course, one or two.' It occurred to me to mention Simon. But that would have dragged in its train the story of my expulsion, about which I still felt extremely angry. So much so that the mere recital of the event would have brought to the fore hostilities which might have overthrown the beauty of the moment. It never ceased to

amaze me that that inglorious occasion should still cause me so much grief. The more I tried to leave it behind, the more it seemed to creep ahead, blocking my advance. Ananda must have sensed my change of mood. For she asked. 'What's bothering you?'

'Nothing. It's just that my schooldays were not the happiest days of my life.' A thought occurred to me that had never crossed my mind before, astounding me by its very obviousness. 'Perhaps that's why I learnt to play the organ. To get away from everyone else. You see, the organ loft was out of bounds to everyone except the organists. Up there I was entirely inaccessible, out of reach and yet obtruding. No one could get to me and yet, at the slightest touch, I could fill the school grounds with the volume of my playing. The perfect place for me to be. Making my presence felt without being present in person. A symptom of the sort of life I led at school.'

'And what about the vacations?'

'Mostly spent abroad. France, Italy, Spain, Greece. Anywhere really, just as long as I had the English Channel behind me.'

'You travelled alone?'

I nodded. 'But somehow I never felt alone on the Continent. I became another person altogether. I would get on the boat at Dover, dour, grim-faced, uncommunicative. And by the time I got to Calais I had taken on another personality. France always drew me out of myself. Then England threw me back into myself again. For years on end I lived through this alternation. As natural as the seasons themselves. The summer in France, in Spain, in Italy, in Greece; light-headed, light-hearted. The world opening up. Then closing down on me again.'

Ananda said nothing and I thought I might have bored

her with my recital. There was more I wanted to say but the subject somehow seemed an eternity away, another life, whose details I was now recording as though they referred to someone else. So instead I asked her about her school.

'St Dominique's? It was rather amusing really. The other girls tried to treat me as something of an impostor at first, on account of my parent's divorce, not to mention my mother's humble origins. Bourgeois bitches most of them, so terribly concerned about their social standing.' She minced her words in a mimicry of their attitude.

'In the end I was accepted. More than accepted. As soon as I started inviting a few of my school friends up to the château there was no more talk about my social standing. They were all on their very best behaviour—as obsequious as can be.' She ran one hand through her hair. 'By the time I got into my fifth year I was beginning to enjoy myself at school. But my mother's health had broken down. And there was no one else to look after her at home. So my school days came to an end. Of course, I was fully provided with private tutors. But it wasn't the same. There was no discipline for a start, no one to compete against.'

Undoubtedly, it was the oddity of her education which had contributed to that attitude of inviolate integrity, the luxurious sufficiency of one who went her way. But even then she must have been aware of her shortcomings, at least in so far as her education had become a topic of concern to the family. For after a moment's pause, she added: 'That's why my grandmother is quite convinced that the only thing left for me to do is marry.'

'And you?'

'It all depends to whom.'

And so it began, this talk about our marriage. Of course, we had talked of marriage before but somewhat in

the vein of make-believe, an older version of playing at parents. Now it took a more urgent turn. Our marriage—or rather, what we hoped to make of our partnership. For we were still at that uncontrollably romantic stage when marriage seems little better than a convention, a mere formality dressed up to hide what might be really lacking. What we sought was a truth of feeling, an affinity from which marriage, or its equivalent, could have been deduced as a matter of course. This was the 1960s, and youth liked to think it had seen through the formulae with which their elders tried to keep up appearances. Ananda and I were heirs to a spirit of liberation which moved as surely through our age as that spectre of communism which Marx had once foretold. It was not that we ignored the claims of marriage. Rather, we wanted to establish a surer foundation, a more natural partnership. We wanted to re-invent the institution and in so doing take away from it its institutional character, make of it a spiritual union far surpassing any bond that society might foist upon us. For this reason we wanted our marriage to be either as inconsequential or as consequential as possible, either a token recognition of what had already been established or else a glorious celebration, either the registry office with one friend for a witness—or else, the château. Lately we had been thinking in terms of the former. So a part of my surprise must certainly have been due to the fact that she seemed to envisage neither one of these two alternatives.

‘Of course the family will want the marriage to take place in the chapel at the château. But I am going to insist upon the parish church at Villiers. A lovely old Gothic church with a glorious organ and the dearest curé you could wish for. Père Martin.’ A pause while the name reverberated in her memory. ‘He was a real father to me at a time when I

didn't feel I had one.'

'At least you've always had your mother.'

'That's just it. I've never been anything but my mother's daughter. Which is a little odd, considering most of my time is spent mothering my mother. But I suppose I shall have to go on being a daughter until I have a daughter of my own.'

Another huge shift, a quantum leap into another order of reality altogether, the same universe perhaps but entirely rearranged. Just as I had always assumed that love would lead to marriage, so I had always assumed that marriage would lead to a family, but so unquestioningly so that I had never brought the subject up. Now it had been brought up for me, but in such a way that I had almost been left out of account, or so it seemed. I felt an urgent need to demonstrate my desire to be something more than the agent by which a daughter would be made a mother.

'Ananda. I'd love you to have my child.'

'And I think you'd make a marvellous father.'

'Would he look like me?'

'She. The first will be a girl.'

'Don't count your children before they are conceived.'

'Oh, they've already been conceived, at least in my imagination. You see, I see them sometimes in my dreams. First a girl and then a boy.'

'I trust she will look like you.'

She took my hand and smiled into my eyes, the kind of smile that only lovers can give each other, when eyes no longer thrust back, set up tensions, but let two persons enter into possession of each other. The thought went through my head: 'When Irish eyes are smiling.' No sooner entertained then dismissed, then again reclaimed. I'd forgotten that, after all, she was part-Irish through her mother.

Her face clouded over. 'You know, I didn't want to tell you this. But I have this awful premonition. Something is going to go dreadfully wrong and everything we hope for will slip away.'

I clasped her hands more tightly, a reassuring gesture. 'Not if we stick together.'

She ignored my last remark. 'I can feel it, even see it in my dreams. A frightful void, a falling away from everything that might have been. Swedenborg once wrote a book called "Heaven and Hell", in which he envisaged Hell not as a place of torture but as a place where you are condemned to witness the delights of heaven without being able to enjoy them. Shut out of the garden. Hell as paradise lost, never to be regained.'

She was beginning to upset herself by her recital. I wanted to calm her, but she seemed to need the solace of this grievance.

'That's why I feel this sense of urgency. To do what can be done. While there's still time. A child.' She turned to me, her eyes alight. 'I mean, there's really nothing to it. All I have to do is take out this contraption and then, if we did again what we have just been doing ... It's so exciting, isn't it?'

'But isn't that exactly the mistake your mother made?'

I regretted my remark as soon as I had made it.

'That's got nothing to do with it,' she almost shouted. 'My God. I offer you what half a dozen young men from the best families in the country have been angling after and all you can do is make a stupid observation.'

'I'm sorry. But I don't see why we shouldn't go through the usual routine. Marriage first. Children after.'

'Of course we'll get married.' She smiled. 'We'll have to get married.' A pause as the smile dissolved into seriousness.

'A child will make my grandmother realize how much I care for you.'

'And your mother?'

'It'll be the same as when she had me.'

'Here comes the bride,' I sang with mock solemnity. She smiled again, a smile that turned into a grimace of indignity as I continued: 'All fat and wide.'

She dug me in the ribs. 'Now you're being silly. Get serious this instant or I'll torture you with tickles.'

I patted her gently on the stomach. 'I'd love to be that baby growing inside you. Knowing I had the very best mother in the world.'

'As long as I don't have to mother you too.'

'I'm too big to be a baby.'

'A big baby too.'

And so it was decided. Once again she disappeared out of the room and then reappeared looking, I thought, a little like Botticelli's Venus—naked, her hair falling over her shoulder, her uterus now unguarded. And once again we stepped behind the curtains on which we had staged our two previous performances, the bed now smelling slightly redolent of the familiar scent of sex. Once again she laid herself down on the crumpled quilt and enclosed me in her arms. Only this time she ran her hand lightly down the length of my back and around the base of my spine to take my sex between her hands, as if she wished to familiarize herself with the instrument with which the work would be done. And this time it was she who guided me slowly, precisely into the moist enclosure, indicating with a brisk and business-like kiss that the time had come for the work to begin.

For this time what we were about was work not play, creation not recreation. We felt as God must have felt on

the sixth day, wondering what kind of creature to bring to birth. Gravely we took the measure of each other as though the earnest of our effort might help to determine the quality of the child we were about to beget. Like Sisyphus, we laboured up the mountain of desire, rolling the stone on which our hopes were fixed, our bodies bathed in sweat, taking our pleasure lightly at the top, a momentary respite in the lifelong labour, then plunging back down the slope again to gather our forces for the next ascent. Our bodies were no longer our own but crucibles in the universal laboratory of some great cosmic experiment where organic parts were mixed together, heated up, that life itself might be composed.

Sex no longer threw us above and out of time but drew us down into a transient continuum, an impersonal flux of which we were the temporary custodians. We flowed forth in a stream which overreached the current of our own existence, the stream of life itself in which we streamed together, back and forth, back and forth, back beyond our own beginnings and on beyond towards the cradled focus of some future existence.

How often we resumed I don't remember, nor could I have told where one arousal left off and another started, so wholly integrated was the effort in one unbroken line of pleasure. Once, I opened my eyes to find her staring—staring with an almost savage intensity, her eyes dilated beyond all normal measure, a soundless stare which verged upon expression. Her mouth opened and I heard her voice exhorting me to some new effort. The sound of her voice, the words no longer spaced in the even modulation of a phrase but scrambled into the keen assemblage of a cry, reached down inside me, down to where the flow had dwindled to a trickle, and once again I felt a surge well up,

an upsurge drawing its reserves from further down, my thighs, my calves, the soles of my feet. I closed my eyes and found myself visualizing her womb in the minutest detail, the pale contraction and dilation of her uterine walls embracing me as I raced the corridors of nativity, threading a labyrinth that I already knew by heart, running at an immensely easy speed, outrunning every competitor, to where the oval of her ovum marked the end of my exertion.

I felt so certain we had done it, felt so sure of that final rush of semen that, when at last we spoke the exalted trivia of gratitude, it almost seemed to me as if our words were overheard by yet another family, that other family whose half-known members already hovered on the outskirts of our consciousness—our family, the family we planned to have together.

I opened my eyes to find her already sitting upright on the edge of the bed.

'I'll be right back.'

'Again. You went not an hour ago.'

She laughed. 'It's a funny thing. But it's been like this for several weeks. I have to go again and again—as though my waterworks had sprung a leak.'

How we laughed at these habitual visits, as though this disability had materialized precisely in order to lend a comic relief to the events of the afternoon. But we would not have laughed if we had known that fate, with heartless irony, had masked the symptoms of her malady in the harmless guise of a joke.

The days are growing longer and warmer. In the evenings the Latin quarter is already beginning to take on that air of aimless activity which will distinguish it later on. Collected in the wedge formed by the boulevards St Michel and St

Germain, students swarm, singly or in groups. Couples saunter on each other's arms. Many of my friends from the cité Universitaire are out there in the lengthening summer evenings. For the passeggiare forms a part of student life, as natural and as predictable as the seasons themselves and susceptible to the same alternating rhythms of fecundation and rebirth. It is in the fallow, Winter months that these youths blunder doggedly through the strains and deceits of untried passions until they find each other. In the livening spring the wooing begins in earnest. And now, as summer is drawing in, they can at last display, before a watchful and appreciative world, the fruits of their labours in the earthworks of the human heart. But I have no heart for the season's song. For I am witnessing the decline of one with whom I would otherwise have walked these streets.

Diabetes. At the time it meant nothing more to me than the name of an ailment I knew next to nothing about. But as the enormity of the thing began to make itself known, I took the trouble to investigate. I found out that diabetes was generally hereditary. But when I asked Margaret, she assured me that there was no trace of diabetes on either side of the family. Upon further investigation I also learnt that diabetes could be induced by severe emotional shock. It was then that I began to appreciate, for the first time perhaps, something of the lethal tension of that tug of war between her and her feelings—her loyalties and her affections constantly pulling in opposite directions.

It was only a few days after our visit to Marly-le-Roi that Ananda passed out in a coma. Within a few hours a diagnosis had been made and she had been transported to the American hospital in Paris where she was placed under close surveillance. A few days later I went to visit her in the private ward where she had been consigned. She tried to be

her usual cheerful self. But I could tell that the humour was forced. At the end of an hour she had to confess that she was tired of talking to me. When I tried a kiss she let it happen, the imprint of my lips seeming to mean no more to her than the impression of her head upon the pillow. Her helplessness aroused unfamiliar feelings in me, compassion rather than passion I suppose, as though I hoped to transmit strength across the poles of our accord. But she continued to lie there, lacklustre, emptied of incentive.

I remember searching for a form of words which would convey to her my concern about what we had attempted together at Marly, fearing that what was to have been our greatest hope could now become a source of anxiety—pregnancy at the most inopportune moment, when her body had caved in under her. She said she didn't know, but with such unbelievable disinterest that I found myself unable to grasp her words. Her noncommittal attitude fell from her lips like the syllables of a foreign language, leaving me more worried than before. Over the next few days I could not prevent my thoughts reverting to the worst of all alternatives, her death, brought on by the double burden she now laboured under, for one part of which, at any rate, I had to count myself responsible. I could not forgive myself for having let her make love unprotected, more especially as I knew well enough that she would rather risk her life than allow herself the easy option of an abortion. I rang her at the hospital. She thought she had had her period. I felt like a man buried beneath some massive weight and barely breathing who, at the last possible moment, has been rescued from oblivion. Then she rang me. Her period had been inconclusive. Now she had the feeling—in whatever way women are able to feel these things—that (and as she told me this I was certain I detected a note of triumph in her

voice) she was pregnant.

Pregnancy. Our wildest hope, our most cherished dream now suddenly became a nightmare. I dropped what I was doing and called on her at the hospital. We talked like conspirators, in whispers, afraid that the subject under discussion might become a matter of general knowledge. Despite the crippling weakness of diabetes her words, her gestures, seemed to have acquired a new vitality. If—and she pronounced this word with all the fervour of a Jehova's Witness speculating about the second coming—if she was pregnant, she was determined to have the child. And she imposed upon me the strictest secrecy, fearing already that the authorities, in the light of her condition, would insist upon an abortion. I tried to make her understand that, lodged in a hospital as she was, it was only a matter of time before the secret got out anyway. But she had already devised a strategy, pushing back the day of discovery as far as possible, thereby committing her body to a course of action from which she thought it would be difficult for her to be withdrawn. I came and went, came back again, always with this same sense of conspiracy, relieved by the reviving interest in herself which she now showed, but still tormented by the thought that, strictly speaking, I should have turned her in. And then one day I was turned away from the hospital, summarily informed that she was too ill to speak to me. And although I pressed for further details, no further information was forthcoming. With a sinking sense of certainty I knew that they now knew, and that events had passed entirely out of my control.

I no longer went to the hospital in person but rang instead, giving a false name to the official sounding voice that questioned me. The first time I rang, my worst fears were confirmed. She told me the hospital had found out

that she was pregnant. Her mother and her grandparents had been informed. Everyone was of the same opinion. She had to have an abortion. The tone of voice with which Ananda pronounced this odious word already told me all I needed to know of the struggle in which she was already engaged, demanding as her right the privilege of risking her life for the life that was taking shape inside her. And perhaps it was because I already anticipated the hopelessness of the struggle that I asked if there was anything I could do. When the answer came back: nothing—an answer spoken so flatly and unemotionally that there was nothing left for me to say—it seemed to sum up my own double impotence, the helplessness of every man at one remove from the process to which he has nevertheless made his contribution and then my helplessness with regard to her particular situation, delivered over as she was to doctors, to her mother and her grandparents, all of whom were pressing upon her the only reasonable course of action.

The next time I rang, her voice was barely recognizable. The reasonable course of action had been pursued, without her knowledge, against her will. Stealthily, at dead of night, and while she was under an anaesthetic, the thieves had broken in and stolen away her child.

Little enough was said about the abortion when Ananda returned home. It was as though that operation were nothing more than an unexpected complication connected with her diabetes. Ananda had now been put on a special regime of prescribed foods and insulin injections. Characteristically enough, she tried at first to wish the malady away, no doubt hoping that the reproduction of the overt forms of normality would suffice of itself to hold the disease at bay. At the end of the second day, she collapsed in a coma. I tried to make her understand that she had to

reconcile herself to the exigencies of her body, to come to terms with the fact that her body had now become a complex piece of machinery, that she now had to be the engineer of this machine, checking pressures, gauging fuels, forever fiddling with the treacherous levers of her flesh as if her life depended upon it. Which indeed it did. She began to understand this after a while and started to organize her life around the demands of her body. But as she became more proficient in the maintenance of her corporeal machine so I sensed the spirit dying within her, bit by bit.

She began to retreat from the real world into the gentler world of her fantasies. I would find her gazing long hours into space, glazed eyes veiling the solid scene, seeing only what she chose to behold. And when I shook her to remind her where she was, she would take an interminable time to return from wherever she was gone. And then she would say: 'It's you. Oh I'm so glad it's you,' just as though she hardly expected to find me there, as though I were securely lodged on the other side of a divide which had opened up between myself and her. It became difficult for me not to feel ashamed of my own boisterous health and my undiminished energy. When I was with her I would try to elongate the circuits of my speech, distend my gestures till they matched the petty pace she crept along. But it was difficult. For her rhythms were no longer my own, as they always used to be. I reminded her of someone she used to be, who was now beyond recall.

Perhaps this was why she now began to depend much more upon her mother. For in her mother's sickly form she must have found a comforting reflection of herself. Moreover, with the onset of Ananda's illness, Margaret began to draw upon reserves of strength which had never been in evidence before. Margaret would now be the one

who cooked and served or brewed the cups of coffee with which she would spur her daughter to her feet. As Ananda sank so her mother learnt to swim, her own privations vastly overshadowed by her daughter's disability. Between the two of them a sympathy sprang up from which I felt excluded.

Gradually, and almost imperceptibly, I began to feel that I had been displaced. Although Ananda refused to allow her mother to lay the blame for her pregnancy at my feet, I was made to understand that I constituted an undesirable temptation. 'It takes two to tango,' Margaret snapped one afternoon. And it struck me like a thunder clap how unfortunate we had been to pay so heavy a price for the single dance which we had been able to complete. I imagined Ananda well again and the whole summer lying before us, a time to continue that exploration of each other which had so barely been begun before it had been cut short. Or I exchanged her diabetes for the sickness that goes along with pregnancy. And I wondered how I would be confronting the prospect of fatherhood, making the arrangements for our marriage. I wondered idly whether I would have been able to persuade the trustees of my fund to increase my allowance in view of my new responsibilities. At times I felt so truly married that any reminder was enough to throw me into a state of despondency. As when, one evening, just before I was due to go back to my room at the cité, Margaret had caught sight of me kneading the muscles of Ananda's back, trying to ease away the stiffness which followed from so much inactivity, she had insisted on taking over. And when I complained that I was coping perfectly well by myself, she had remarked. 'How can a man know what a woman's body feels like.' That night I left her in the bed which occupied one whole corner of her room, a magnificent four-poster hung about with satin curtains and

covered with a peacock canopy—one of the few items which had been allowed in from a family château. But I knew that whenever she had a serious relapse she would be transferred over to her mother's smaller double bed, so that there would be someone right on hand in case of a crisis.

A chance remark remains with me still, a remark which she made in jest, but which I have since come to interpret in a rather different light, much more literally, I am sure, than she ever intended it to be taken at the time. Jokingly, she asked one night, as I wheeled my bicycle out from the space beneath the stairs where I would closet it upon my arrival: 'I wonder sometimes. Did someone forget to cut the umbilical cord?'

Chapter Six

Damn Jesse! Just the kind of thing he'd do. Slyly prying into my past. Giggling guiltily into his drink. The bloom of treachery on his cheek. Should have been more careful. Watch what you're doing! Mercedes thinks he owns the street. All these cars. Nose to tail. Engines idling. Fouling the air with their exhaust. Move much faster on a bike. Through the doldrums in which the bourgeois lies becalmed. The rue de l'Université. Straight ahead and to the left. Would be taking Ananda out tonight if it hadn't been for Jesse. Little monkey of a man. Fifty years old and three times married. Drunk half the time. Proposing to Ananda in florid French. 'Veuillez accepter, chère M'meoiselle, l'expression de mes sentiments conjugales.' Though Margaret took it as a joke. Jess the jester was his style. Laughing at everyone else's expense. Should never have told him about myself. That night at the café Bonaparte. Didn't say much. But just enough to give him his chance. In that grating voice of his. 'Hate to say this, Margaret but your daughter's boyfriend was expelled from school.'

Red light flaring the end of the road. Time to become a pedestrian. Carry my bike while the cars wait up. Full of bureaucrats on their way home. Nine-to-five rodents packing the street. Walking stiffly like automatons. Pendulous bellies. Joyless gait. No wonder. Trussed up as they are. Tied at the neck. Dandruff on their lapels and

their trousers turned. The last men regretting the end of the world. Wreaths laid over the graves of their own unburied souls. Excusez moi, monsieur. The look he gives me. Completely blank. Glazed eyes revising the yield of the day. Balance sheet of a print out mind. Was it Robert who said? First man invented the machine to serve man. Then man invented the machine-man to serve the machine. Dinosaurs of the human species. Soon be extinct. What's the matter with him? Eyes like an owl. Chauffeured car to boot. Couched in plush. Staring at me. So back at him. See yourself as others see you. Man against the machine. No match for a centaur. Get thee behind me, my sluggish friend.

Wonder what time? Good heavens! Late already. They will be waiting for me by now. Embarked upon a round of drinks. Bloody Mary for Margaret. Martini for Ananda. Gin for me when I arrive. Will need a drink to see me through. In vino valor if not veritas. Brought to justice by the long arm of Mama. Funny how the past catches up with you. Wesen ist was gewesen ist. Just as well it all came out in the end. Nothing to hide as the nudist said. Knew there was something wrong all along. Margaret's furtive hostility. Ananda's pretence of indifference. Not the usual story either. Would have been told about a crisis with the family. Margaret's handy confidant. No doubt Jess consoles her now.

Watch it! Flic across the street. Knows I'm a student. Lazy lay-about skipping work. Almost as bad as a goddam artist. Give him his due. Old Jess knows how to handle cops. Je ne comprends rien. Am-er-i-can. Savey? Cowboys. Coca Cola. Man on the moon. Stumbling around the Quartier drunk as a wake. Harnessed to his portfolio. Inviting himself to sketch the prettiest girls in town. Not a bad opening

gambit really., The way he got to know Ananda. Outline in crayon. Then filling in with whatever comes to hand. Coffee black. Wine red. Flowers smeared into the features of la belle. Never fails to draw a crowd. The string of jokes in dreadful French. Is there life after birth? Born in the Bronx. Brought up on the streets. Fleeced by dealers. Sued by alimonious wives. Pensioned off by rich New York relatives. Would rather he did his thing elsewhere. Vowing never to return. Then ending up the best friend of the country girl.

Should have told Margaret myself. Never did say much about my school. Rubbing salt into healing wounds. The indignity of being thirteen years of age. Its the songs that stick in your mind. Bewildered huddle of boys. Singing for the amusement of the school. How did it go? I am a nasty new boy. A whining, pining new boy. No good at all. With bat or ball. Novus, novum, novi. The games people play. Or refuse to play. Lucky to have a house master as tolerant as the major. Bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. Every sentence marching out as if it were an order. Behind the mask of the martinet a glimmering of understanding. Breaking the rules with impunity. Until I committed the great offence. The headmaster's face when I clouted him. Simon's face. Simon alive. Then Simon dead. For whom the bell tolls. My little measure of revenge. Small satisfaction. But done for a friend. No man an island unto himself.

'Well, so, er, you see,' Margaret exclaimed stirring her drink with a cocktail stick. She took a sip, then put the glass back on the table. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something. But I felt no particular inclination to help her out of her embarrassment. I looked at Ananda, and found her looking out of the window. The old trick. Looking out

as a way of being not where her body was but wherever she had cast her gaze. Slipping out of her body as easily as one might slip out of an overcoat.

'I gather,' I said, in as formal a tone of voice as I was able to muster, 'that there was something you wanted to see me about.'

'Well, naturally, I had no way of knowing whether there was any truth in what I had been told.'

'By whom?' I asked, knowing she knew I knew who the informant in question was.

'Jesse.'

'Jesse!' I feigned surprise. 'The last time I spoke to Jesse, he told me the Guggenheim museum had offered to buy one of his paintings for a colossal sum of money. Since I also happen to know that he was thrown out of his hotel last month for failing to pay his bills, I assume he must be holding out for a better price.' Margaret smiled, a leery ghost of a smile which haunted her face like a stubborn poltergeist. 'I agree, you can't always believe everything Jesse says. However ... he did say you had told him.'

'But what did he say I told him?'

'That … that you had been expelled from school.' The last words came out in a rush, like schoolboys just let out of school. A pause, lengthening into a clumsy silence. I had the impression that Margaret would have liked me to deny the charge, thereby relegating the whole affair to the realm of malicious fantasy. The possibility had already crossed my mind, if only because I knew full well that any rehearsal would drag back with it the sense of outrage, the resentment which I had felt and still did feel, the passage of time not seeming to have the curative power to heal this particular wound.

'True enough,' I conceded. 'But did he say why?'

'For assaulting the headmaster ... or something to that effect.'

Again that apologetic attitude, asking, almost pleading for the disavowal which would bring the interview to an end.

'Was that all he said?'

'No ...' She hesitated again, as though she were in some doubt as to whether she should continue further. 'He also said that you had had to leave the country ... to avoid a charge of assault.'

'Good heavens!' The disclosure was so unexpected that for a moment I had no idea how to respond. 'A charge of assault?'

'That's what he said.'

'In connection with what happened at school?'

'No. He said you assaulted someone else, shortly after you had been expelled. Could it have been a policeman?'

I couldn't help laughing, laughing at Jesse's extravagance, but also laughing with relief, that he should have pushed his accusations to the point at which they could be so easily met. 'You mean, striking out became a way of life. Punch drunk school boy leaves dozens flat on their back.'

Margaret's face broke into a grin. 'That's not the way he put it.'

'There's no charge of assault I do assure you. Pure fabrication on Jesse's part.'

'Well, you know what he's like. We'd never have paid the slightest attention, except that ...' Her face took on a nervous intensity again, 'that we really know so little about you. After all, it is a little unusual to be expelled from school.'

'I suppose I should have told you before,' I said, then

realized, almost as soon as I had said it, that there was no reason why I should have told her before, no reason why I should parade before me an incident which I had tried to leave behind. I almost decided to limit my avowal to a simple statement. Yes, I was expelled—and leave it at that. Until I remembered that the person for whose benefit I was putting on this performance was not Margaret at all, and that, in consequence, I had no choice. The danger, the only real danger I wished to forestall, was that of allowing Margaret any further latitude to place upon the incident whatever interpretation she pleased without my being there to counter it. And if such a danger existed, this again was only because of the subtle but uncanny power which Margaret seemed to exert over her daughter, a power of which I was only just beginning to become aware. La mère. La mer. Sounding the same in French, as though the sea, its tides, its depths, its life-supporting origins were somehow present in the fluid ambiance of the womb. I reached out for the gin bottle and refreshed my drink. The ice crackled in the glass, dissolving in the warm embrace of the alcohol.

'It was a stupid thing to do,' I admitted, hearing my voice coming out of me, distantly. 'But at the time there didn't seem to be any other way of getting the message across.'

'Message?' Margaret's voice was full of surprise and I realized I had skipped a step or two.

'Sympathy, concern, a sense of obligation towards those in your charge. Call it what you will. But in my opinion, the Headmaster was directly responsible for the death of a friend of mind. Simon. He committed suicide, the week after he had been expelled.'

'I'm so sorry.' Margaret's face took on a contrite aspect. She turned to Ananda as if to solicit her approval. 'But we'd

love to hear what really happened, wouldn't we dear?' Far from drawing Ananda into the conversation, this last remark seemed only to propel her further away. Mechanically she nodded her assent, then gazed back out of the window again, as though she would rather be where her eyes already were, beyond the confines of this room.

I engaged Margaret's attention again. 'Do you know what a Public school is like?'

'It's the private school system, isn't it?'

'Right. Public is private in England.'

'And only boys—between the ages of thirteen and say eighteen.' This information was offered with an assurance which indicated that Margaret had already made a few enquiries. 'From what I've heard, a Public school is more or less run by the older boys.'

'Which is not such a bad thing in itself. After all, that's more or less the way it is in real life. Except that in real life even the humblest citizen is entitled to certain rights.'

'Such as?'

'Privacy, for a start. Simon was a very private person, acutely sensitive, the sort of person who needs an inviolate space of his own. And of course that was impossible. The new boys, novi, as they used to be called, were all herded in together. They worked together, ate together, slept in the same dormitory together. Fine if you were one of the boys. But otherwise ... Not that Simon was antisocial. Just different, very much himself. But that was enough to arouse the wrath of his fellows. By the time he managed to get a study to himself he had already become a figure of fun. Not that it was difficult to make fun of him. He looked just like a cartoonist dream. Tall, lanky, hopelessly uncoordinated.'

'But I thought a Public school was supposed to turn out gentlemen.'

‘Oh, the gentleman!’ The word echoed emptily in my head. I looked at Margaret but could detect no trace of irony in her earnest, intent expression. ‘In my experience,’ I added, ‘the gentlemen were the very first to be ostracized.’

‘Your friend Simon?’

‘If the word means anything at all, Simon certainly deserved to be called a gentleman, in this sense at least, that he was gentle, too gentle for his own good. I still remember the first time I set eyes on him. It was in class, at the beginning of term. When his name was called out a titter ran through the room. It was quite obvious to me that everyone was gearing up for a laugh. I’d heard about Simon before. He was known to be something of an aesthete, with several poems published in literary magazines. Not that that was anything of a recommendation. On the contrary, the most scurrilous transliterations of his verses used to circulate around the school, his finest sentiments converted into dirty doggerel. And then he was always getting into trouble, mostly out of absent-mindedness. He could never remember which hand he was allowed to put into which pocket. He was forever breaking rules whose logic was so obscure as to surpass his understanding. More serious still, he was known to be a Jew.’

‘Is that so bad?’

‘Quite bad enough. Now it wouldn’t have been so bad if he could have laughed at himself. But instead he chose to put the case for Jewry with the utmost seriousness. As you can imagine, that only encouraged his tormentors the more. The jokes they told about him don’t bear repeating. Well, I did my best to defend him, if only because he was quite incapable of defending himself. He almost seemed to take a perverse pride in his vulnerability, as though suffering were a mark of true refinement. And this was essentially the story

of his affair with Francis.'

'Affair?' Margaret's eyebrows rose.

'That's what I would call it.'

'A love affair?'

'Shut adolescents of the same sex together and what do you get.'

'Boy meets boy.'

'Exactly. Except that I would call it more of an ersatz heterosexuality really, with new boys in the role of girls.'

'I'll be darned. Sounds like a pervert's paradise.' Margaret giggled, then took another pull at her glass. 'And what did the masters have to say about all this?'

'The official policy was abstinence. Lots of exercise was supposed to take your mind off sex. It might have worked for some. But for the rest, the official policy meant only one thing—the equation of sex with immorality. Instead of being something natural, or as natural as the circumstances permitted, sex became guilt-ridden. Mind you, no one would blame you for it, just as long as you were ready to laugh at your own depravity, the gross indulgence of the flesh. Simon's fault was to fall in love.'

'Charles was a new boy when Simon was in his third year, a blond, blue-eyed beauty of a boy who soon became the schools' favourite pin-up. He looked like a cherub, had the charm of a Cupid and yet, for all that, was simply a vain, selfish, juvenile incapable of either love or affection. And Simon knew it. Though it didn't seem to make the slightest difference. He still continued to lavish attention upon him. He couldn't even bring himself to upbraid Francis for his faithlessness, the most serious consequence of which was that it made Simon appear more ridiculous than would otherwise have been the case. When I think of all the secret meetings I arranged for them, so that no one would know.

And all the time Charles was boasting to his other admirers of the impression he had made on Simon. Admittedly, Simon did go to the most absurd lengths to satisfy his cupidity. Simon's parents were very well off. But everything they gave to Simon was spent on Francis. Books, records, even sports equipment, anything just as long as it would mean another meeting.'

'I often asked myself what attracted Simon to Francis. His beauty perhaps, which must have touched an aesthetic chord in Simon's soul. Or his seductive initiatives which so easily penetrated the protective shell of Simon's defences, putting down invisible feelers which tempted him out of his habitual reserve. Or even his very emptiness, which left Simon free to impute to him all kinds of qualities which in fact he never possessed. But there was more to it than that. Simon seemed to revel in his degradation, almost as if suffering were a sign of true refinement. Indeed, his misery squeezed out of him some of the best poems he had ever written. When I tried to remonstrate with him he would point to these productions as if they vindicated him, as if his anguish had been redeemed, word by word and line by line. It didn't seem to matter to him that these flowers of evil flourished in the compost of his self respect. It was enough that they existed, witness to the depths which he had reached, or rather, to which he had let himself be dragged by binding himself to the millstone of this misplaced attachment. Indeed the smell of death gradually began to insert itself into the very texture of his poems which, by the end, took on the form of odes to dissolution and decay. At the time I was too immature to make the connection between the poet and the poem. I still thought of the arts as cultural adornments, a sort of interior decoration designed to beautify the plain and sober edifice of the social self. But

if I had known how to read those lines, I might have read his death in them as a palmist reads the future in the lines of a client's hands.'

'Had I been able to anticipate the final outcome, I am sure I would have tried to intervene. Instead, I watched these developments with admiration and alarm—admiration for this total concession of himself, but alarmed that he should have chosen so ungrateful a beneficiary. Though chosen is hardly the right word for what came nearer to being a compulsive infatuation, and one which led inevitably to a tragic conclusion. For, in the end, the day of reckoning came. They were discovered together at a hotel in a nearby town.'

'To make things easier for Francis, Simon took full responsibility upon himself. So the headmaster didn't even have to draw upon the not inconsiderable resources of his anti-semiticism. But I don't think it was his expulsion which brought him to the point of suicide. In a way he would have been better off out of Chesterton. It was his parent's attitude which tipped the scales against him. His father was a highly successful barrister who had played down his Jewish background with a view to climbing the social ladder. He was so angry at the scandal his son had caused that he refused to let Simon back inside the door. Then there was his mother, a sensitive soul from what he told me, too sensitive perhaps to stand out against her husband. Simon had always been very close to his mother. And so her reticence cut him to the quick. I'm sure she assumed that the whole thing would blow over before very long. But she was never given the opportunity to arrange a reconciliation between her husband and her son. Within a week of his expulsion Simon committed suicide in a basement off the Edgeware road.'

‘I was called in to identify the body, most probably because he had left a note for me before he died, a single sheet of paper on one side of which he had taken his leave of me while, on the other, he had written the three words “nihil sperandum est” which, I suppose, was the nearest he ever got to a joke. Oddly enough, I remember the chaplain taking this last message in a distinctly less desperate spirit. In order to mitigate the sin he stoutly affirmed that by “nihil” Simon had meant nothing other than death itself and that, accordingly, Simon had faced death hopefully. Personally I couldn’t see Simon believing in everlasting life, if only because he would have been much too afraid that it might entail an unending perpetuation of the very absurdity which he had managed to bring to an end, by doing away with himself.’

‘I was the very last person to see him alive. And that was certainly the first time I had ever seen anyone dead. I couldn’t believe it at first. He looked so peaceful, stretched out on the bed with the smell of gas still in the room. I wanted to shake him, wake him up, make him admit that it was all a joke. Except that of course a joke was the last thing Simon would have been capable of. What struck me at the time was the sheer futility of his death, the pointless waste of it all. The circumstances of life at school were so peculiar that one could not possibly call what he had suffered from a vice. His life had gone to pieces not on a misdeed but on the name of a misdeed.’

‘I returned to school in an angry mood. A life full of promise had been cut short, quite unnecessarily. Another year and Simon would have won a scholarship to Oxford and begun to enjoy the independence which would have freed him from the nightmare of the past. I felt that I owed it to Simon to exact some expression of regret from those I

held responsible. I wrote to the headmaster and got no reply. So I went to see him in person. I said what I had come to say and got the same old story over again, the extermination—that was the very expression he used—the extermination of perverse practices, the dishonour to the school. When I tried to argue on Simon's behalf he said he was much too busy to listen to me. I remember the tight-lipped expression upon his face, like a purse whose neck is tied with string. There seemed only one thing left to do. I hit him. A futile gesture, and yet in a way the perfect gesture. The blow didn't injure him physically. But it did puncture his self esteem.'

My words gave way to silence, a silence in which innumerable other sounds became audible—the traffic in the streets below, a waltz played upon a piano somewhere else in the building I noticed that the light had drained away, transforming our figures into rustling parcels of shadow. We sat for a while. Then Margaret got up to turn on the light, catching Ananda with the vaguely bemused expression of a burglar caught in the act.

'So much for Jesse's story, ' Margaret volunteered, with an air of finality.

'But I told you he wasn't to be trusted.' It was the first time Ananda had contributed to the discussion. As if to make up for her former reticence she now walked over to me and laid one hand upon my shoulder. 'Don't you remember me telling you it was sure to be a pack of lies.'

'But we have to be absolutely certain about these things—on account of the family.' Margaret walked back to her chair and sat down.

Ananda poured her mother another drink and then turned around. 'They already know about you and me by the way. I told them myself, the last time we had dinner at

the hôtel.'

'And I've tried to give you the very best write-up I can.' Margaret stirred her drink with her index finger. 'Then along comes Jesse and starts telling us these dreadful things.'

'From now on we won't believe a word he says, will we Maman?'

'Of course not dear.'

And so the matter was closed. And yet Ananda must have guessed how much it rankled. For she followed me down the stairs when I left to return to the cité Universitaire. As I walked my bike across the courtyard she threw one arm around my shoulder.

'I'm so glad you came,' she said. 'My mother has been carrying on about this thing ever since she heard.'

'But surely you could see what Jesse was up to?'

'I did, of course. But Maman seems to have taken a fancy to him. He buys her things. Takes her out from time to time. My mother has so few friends that Jesse has been very good for her.'

'It's not your mother he's interested in.'

'Well, I know. But it didn't seem to matter until Maman started saying I should take what he said about you more seriously. Not nice at all. All about getting drunk. The other girls you were going out with. I told Maman it was utter nonsense. And then he came up with something that seemed to make some sense. At least Maman thought so. You see, she remembered your having said something about leaving school early. But you never told us you had been expelled.'

'It's not that I'm ashamed of it. It could even be made to look heroic. But it wasn't really. It might have been if I had done it deliberately. But I didn't. It just happened, on the spur of the moment. And got me into a lot of trouble.'

'I know.'

'How do you know?'

'There had to be a reason why you decided to study in France.'

'Yes, I suppose that's why I'm here.'

'And I'm so delighted you're here.'

'No more doubts? No regrets?'

'None whatever.'

I got on my bike and left.

Doubt. A crack, a crevice in the breachless edifice of trust, gaping to an open maw, thriving on a meagre diet, feeding on every attempt to shut it down, growing big with each belittlement. Was it this doubt which opened the way for Béatrice, gnawing through the ring of faith which intimacy casts about itself? Admittedly, I could never have taken the initiative myself. My life was still too closely linked to the person of Ananda. And then Ananda's own despondency was beginning to have its effect on me—long hours, or even days on end, when I would sit staring moodily, chained to the black dog of depression. Indeed it was just such a mood which left me stranded one afternoon on a bench in the Jardin de Luxemburg, flotsam washed up after a morning's fruitless activity in the library of the rue St Jacques.

Even as I sat down my attention was drawn to a young woman sitting not so very far away from me. For she seemed to be taking an especial interest in me, glancing in my direction from time to time, but obliquely, as if she were slightly disconcerted by her own indiscretion. Such was my inertia however that it could not have been I who took the initiative. But nor could it have been Béatrice. For there was something of the prim provincial about Béatrice which would have forbidden her to speak to a strange man of her

own accord. No: as I recall, it was her child who, quite unwittingly, brought us together.

He couldn't have been more than five years old, a little slip of a boy who was busy sailing a boat in the basin of the fountain. The large white sailing vessel towered proudly over the other ships until an unusually forceful gust of wind keeled it over and left it lying, like a sodden moth, a few feet away from the rim of the pool. He looked around for someone to help him get it back. The onlookers were all subjected to an intensive scrutiny before he finally settled on me. I took off a shoe and rolled up my trousers, reaching out with one foot planted knee deep in the water. But no sooner had I retrieved the boat than he invited me to stand on the other side of the pool, catch his boat when it arrived, turn it around, and send it back. And for several minutes the boat sailed back and forth, bearing a message of friendship between us.

Then a voice called out. 'François, it's time for dinner.' The little boy turned around and waved back at the woman I had noticed earlier on. After lifting his yacht up out of the water, he took me by the hand and led me up to someone he announced as his mother, but so proudly that he might have been introducing me to the Queen of France.

If I needed a word to capture my first impression of her I would use the word agreeable. Her slightly withdrawn smile, her warm brown eyes, her well-presented person conveyed a nature that reminded me of the English landscape, green, fertile, ever varying, but with nothing dramatic or out of place. We chatted for a while. And then she suggested that we join the two of them for dinner. When I told her that I didn't have the money for a meal, she invited me. And so it was around the dinner table of a little corner café that we first got to know each other.

Somehow she had already divined my state of mind and, moreover, the cause of it; though if I had been asked I would no doubt have imputed her unerring accuracy to the Latin temperament, the readiness to trace all of life's joys and ills to the affairs of the heart. But I was in no mood to tell my story. And so, if only to deflect her questions, I pressed her to tell me more about herself.

'What would you like to know?' she asked.

'Whatever's most important to you.'

'Well, what's most important to me is my boy.'

'Married?'

'No.'

'Funny. You look so respectable.'

This last remark provoked a laugh. 'Oh, but I am. I am,' she insisted, clasping her hands together in a caricature of rectitude.

She said no more. So I prompted her. 'I can keep a secret as well as the next.'

'But I hardly know you.'

'Confessions are always made to strangers.'

'Who then become your best friends and betray you.'

'Try me.'

She looked at me a little stiffly I thought. Then her face relaxed into a smile, a decorous smile to all appearances, and yet a smile which harboured hints of impish jubilance.

'Where shall I begin?'

'At the beginning, of course.'

'My family?' She smoothed the paper table cloth with a sweeping gesture of one hand. 'Well, I was brought up in a little provincial town, the sort of place where everyone knows everyone else. My parents are what you would call respectable working class people, as conventional as they come.' She shrugged her shoulders impatiently. 'Oh really.

It's all so boring.'

'Parents are always interesting,' I insisted. 'Especially if they happen to be one's own.'

'But they had such ridiculously old-fashioned ideas on how to bring up children.'

'So you rebelled?'

'I suppose you could call it that.'

'Sounds like Rimbaud.'

'Except that I never ran away from home.' She paused, as though something had just crossed her mind. 'Come to think of it, that's exactly what I did do.'

'Now we're getting somewhere. A liberated woman.'

'Me?' She shook her head. 'I hardly think so. It's just that there are certain situations which conventional morality is quite incapable of dealing with.' She looked at me uncertainly, as if she were testing my reactions.

'So you didn't get along with your parents?'

'I wouldn't say that. It was a sheltered, uneventful life, but pleasant enough; the convent where I went to school, a few friends, boys as well as girls at first, and then, as I grew older, only girls.' She rolled up a ball of bread and chewed at it thoughtfully before continuing. 'I don't know quite what my parents had in mind for me. But they managed to intimate, when I reached my teens, that it wasn't right for me to be seen out with boys any more. So stupid really. Because, as a result, my first affair was more of an infatuation than anything else, something that might have been avoided if I had been allowed to go through the usual preliminaries on the way to the "grande amour".'

I remember my amusement at the way she pronounced the two words 'grande amour', her two hands carving grandiloquent figures out of the grease-laden air. For everything about Béatrice betokened moderation. Of course

she only meant it ironically. She was only laughing at her inability to contain her feelings within reasonable limits. I realized this when I mentioned something about the ineffectual titillation which is the usual lot of home-bound adolescents.

'Oh, but at least that's real,' she replied, correcting me most emphatically. 'My parents wouldn't even let me go out with a boy. With the result that when eventually I fell in love, as they say, I was totally unprepared for this absurd passion which took hold of me. Absurd because, for Jacques, it couldn't have been more than a casual flirtation.' She chewed at her food, solemnly, for a moment. 'He was the only son of the family that lived in the local château—though Jacques didn't really live there, he just came down on the odd week-end to get away from the city. I'm sure Jacques had other girl friends in Paris. But it must have been nice for him to know that I would always be waiting for him on his odd visits to the country.'

From the way she spoke about him, without the slightest trace of bitterness or resentment, it would have been difficult to estimate the extent of the catastrophe. Only later did she speak to me about that most humbling of all experiences, not so much the rejection as the depreciation of the gift of oneself, the most precious gift, offered in the only way an adolescent knows how to give, wholly and without reservations.

The most that can be said is that this experience precipitated her out of adolescence into maturity but so rapidly that she hardly had time to take stock of herself. All she was ever aware of at the time was the disintegration of the person she had thought she was, the 'good girl' burnt away in the acid bath of her infatuation. And yet, at the very heart of this graceless state, she already sensed the presence

of a new emerging person whom she acknowledged with alarmed respect, as a child might first acknowledge its foster parents.

She would long for his coming, then hate herself for wanting him to come. She would make up her mind not to see him again, then find herself down at the station, meeting him off the train. She would try to convey to him something of the impression he had made on her, then cringe as he would casually deflect her poetical declarations. And so she quickly learned to keep her feelings to herself. While she was with him she would try to live up to his light-hearted expectations. But as soon as she was back at home her body would cry out for those deliberate caresses which, in the end, she would have to offer herself, working herself up into a fever pitch of incontinence, of which she would then feel heartily ashamed.

What saved her was her charity. If she hadn't been able to forgive, she would have turned into a libertine or a sour old maid, either wasting away in the capricious luxury of her sex or contracting back into a grim, forbidding mask of propriety. In either case she would have been a prisoner for life, imprisoned in the very attitude with which she tried to fight him off. Instead she forgave, and so was able to go her way, but not before the affair had burdened her with a new responsibility, one which she now took upon herself gladly and willingly, as though her child might thereby become the rightful beneficiary of her passion.

'Yes,' she said at one point in the narrative, as she read on my face some intimation of understanding. 'How did you guess? I got pregnant.' Again that laugh, a frank forgiving laugh, as though almost any misfortune could be accommodated if only it were seen in the right perspective. 'It was understandable that Jacques should have thought

that I knew all about the facts of life. After all I was seventeen. But of course I didn't. Needless to say, his family was absolutely horrified to learn that their son and heir was the prospective father of my child.'

'And the time honoured solution?'

'Marriage? Oh, but there was never any question of his marrying a provincial like myself.'

'Didn't your father have anything to say about that?'

'You don't understand. Jacques' father was the local mayor, judge, superintendent and everything else rolled into one. It was "Yes, M. le Marquis. No, M. le Marquis." Besides, Jacques' parents took it for granted that I was to blame. Why else would a girl from an undistinguished family make love to their son?'

'Eve tempted me and I did sin.'

'Something like that. As for my father, he simply couldn't believe it. His little Béatrice, pregnant. Impossible! Why, she wouldn't even know how to go about it'.

'Not so far off the mark from what you've said.'

'Yes, but mother Nature has a way of teaching you all you need to know in next to no time at all.'

'And your mother?'

'She was even worse. Crying and crying. How could you possibly do this to us after all we did for you. And then, the long debates. What to do about it all. You see an abortion would have been entirely contrary to my parent's Catholic principles. But then, an illegitimate child was just as bad. Either way I would have brought disgrace upon my family. And in a little country town where everyone knows what is going on. But the most remarkable thing was that neither of them seemed to think that my opinion was of the slightest importance. It was my child. But they were going to decide for me whether I should be allowed to keep it.

Jacques' parents did their best to convince my father that an abortion could be performed painlessly, and in secret. As soon as my father realized that no one need ever know about it, the matter was closed as far as he was concerned.'

At this point in the narrative, I remember Béatrice sending François away to fetch another carafe of wine and some more hors d'oeuvres. She watched him for a moment before continuing. 'In the meantime, this thing was growing inside me, this creature that hadn't asked for life but had been condemned to death before it had even reached the world.' She looked at me, her amber eyes turned dully melancholic. This may sound a little far-fetched. But already, before François was born, I thought of him as a person, not just someone who happened to me, but someone I was destined to encounter. And now.' She opened the palms of her hands, a gesture of benediction. 'Well, I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that I need him as much as he needs me.'

Across the room I could see the patronne handing François his carafe and a plate of crudités. I heard her asking him if he could manage by himself. And he nodded, insisting upon his responsibility. Then he turned around and beamed at us as he began the journey home, proudly inviting us to approve his autonomy. Béatrice declaimed across the intervening space. 'Careful François.' Then she turned to me. 'To think that the person I most cherish in the world would not now be alive if I had listened to what I was being told.' She thought for a moment, then continued. 'Though I don't think my mother was ever convinced. It eased her conscience when I said I wouldn't go through with it.' She pulled François' chair out for him. 'So François was born after all. Jacques' parents promptly washed their hands of the whole affair by making over a sum of money which

actually came in very useful later on when I left home.'

'You mean your parents threw you out of the house?'

'Not exactly. But you'll never believe what my father expected of me. As soon as the baby was weaned, he wanted me to send it off to an orphanage. He told me in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't have a daughter with an illegitimate child living in his house. So I did what I hardly thought I was capable of doing. I left home, came to Paris, picked up a few secretarial qualifications, and found a job.' She folded her hands and looked at me—a gesture of finality.

So there you are. Now you know the whole story.'

'What story?' François inquired, as he deposited the plate of hors d'oeuvres upon the table.

'The story of François and Béatrice,' Béatrice said.

'Oh, that's a good story,' François confirmed, as he slithered sideways into his seat.

That was the first of several meetings, mostly meals that we would eat together, and in the course of which I got to know Béatrice better. I learned about her job, for instance. Not that she really enjoyed the work. But her employers were more than satisfied. And when I visited their offices on the right bank one day the reason became apparent. She was obviously most efficient, capable of dealing with details that would have maddened me. I also came to appreciate that the decorous exterior was no more than what was demanded of someone in her circumstances. All the other secretaries in the firm had the same well-finished look. But from a few odd conversations I happened to overhear I gathered that her fellow workers were quite surprised at the extent to which she kept to herself. In spite of her conventional address, Béatrice was clearly something of a mystery to

them.

‘It’s not that I’ve anything against them,’ she explained one day. ‘It’s just that they belong to a world—the world of work—that I want to forget as soon as I leave the office. I do my job as best I can. But it’s not something that I chose to do for myself. I do it to earn enough to bring up François.’ And then, with a defiant toss of her head. ‘Besides, I know perfectly well its a dead end job. As soon as the right opportunity turns up I’m going to start a business of my own.’

Before very long I became familiar with the dual life she led, not only the trappings of respectability, the restraint, the carefulness, appearances which had to be maintained as much for her son’s sake as for her own, but also the would-be bohemian, the incorrigible romantic.

That evening, for instance, when she invited me home for dinner. François sat up with us through the meal, as tactful as a diplomat, letting us speak and then, whenever an awkward silence intervened, reinstating the conversation with some childish remark of his own. Finally, it was time for him to go to bed. We saw him off with a bedtime story before returning to the living room. But even after he had gone to sleep his presence still inhabited the space we shared, as if our common feeling for him were simply an indirect expression for an involvement which we were not yet ready to admit. We talked together for a while, rallying awkwardly across a net of words. And then, in the very middle of a sentence, Béatrice stopped, her words overwhelmed by a charge of feeling which only a look could convey.

It was one of those instants when everything hangs in the balance, when the future is entrusted to the present. She was sitting only a few feet away from where I was. But all of

a sudden such distances grew out around us that she seemed to be irretrievably far, and yet so near that I no longer felt I was seen but rather felt her seeing, her eyes admitting me to a scene of such intensity that I almost shrank from the longing I beheld. For quite some time I swung between the two extremes of restraint and release, longing to gather her into my arms, yet knowing that I was not really free to sustain the expectations I would arouse. So instead I just held out one hand and muttered lamely: 'C'est comme ça, tu comprends?'—dreadfully aware of the inconsequence of my apology. Béatrice took my hand in hers, saying nothing, but establishing a channel through which her benevolence flowed. And from the glad constellations which surrounded us, I knew that a happy conjunction had been formed.

Perhaps it was better that we did not push things to a more final conclusion. For our restraint has helped to preserve the relationship from the vicissitudes with which it might otherwise have been beset. And yet, who knows? Angelo, for instance, was absolutely aghast to hear of my incompetence, of my unreadiness to kill, as he so pointedly advised, two birds with one stone. Nor would he be convinced that in so doing I might be compromising either one of them. For in his own romantic imagination he had already envisaged a wondrous chemistry, making love to Béatrice with all the fervour I felt for Ananda, each so complementing the other that these two women who have never met would be brought together through the medium of myself.

'Quelle chance, hein!' he grumbled despairingly, as he pointed out to me the evils of omission. 'There she is, a lonely, love-sick mother, and you do nothing to console her.' And then with a decisive change of inflection. 'Did you ever think of the service you might be doing Ananda. Why,

purged of all your carnal lusts, purified, refined, you would be free to conduct your true love affair upon a more spiritual plane.' His face took on an air of subliminal ecstasy as he depicted the heavenly delights of our relationship in the radiant tones of a Fra Angelico fresco.

And yet it seemed to me even then, and still seems to me now, that what took place, or rather, did not take place, was not dictated by any sense of moral propriety but by a natural feeling for what was fitting at the time. Why otherwise would I still find it so difficult to write about Béatrice. For our relationship has always been comparatively simple and straightforward in itself. I can only conclude that it must have more to do with the fact that my feeling for her was marked by a critical equivocation. What if I had met Béatrice first? Would this have meant that Ananda could never have been anything more to me than a friend. Or was there not something about Ananda which provoked in me an especial intensity? Her very inaccessibility perhaps? For even in our most intimate moments I always felt that there was some part of herself that she kept from me, some part of herself that had not been reached. It was this ever retreating horizon of herself which drew me on, irresistibly, enchanted by the rainbow's end of her desirability. As for Béatrice, homely, down to earth Béatrice, the gift of herself was always complete, always candid, wholesome and whole.

And so it was that the two relationships pursued an entirely different course. An outline of my feeling for Ananda had been suggested from the first, an outline which already seemed to prefigure all that it would later come to include. Each engagement was inspired by the need to give substance to this primordial form, to fill in the precarious silhouette of our attachment to each other. With Béatrice,

on the other hand, I always stood on solid ground. Our first meeting had been quite inconsequential in itself, except that it made another possible and so another, and another. Familiarity wore away the abrasive edges of our idiosyncrasies until we seemed to fit together, flow together, flawlessly. So that with Béatrice I grew to be ever more at ease. And yet, can I really say that I love Béatrice? Does the English language do justice to this difference with its distinction of like and love? Not that my feeling for Béatrice ever fell short of what I felt for Ananda. Rather, it was of a different order altogether. Each time I was with her I liked her better than before. And then the perspective of our ever-deepening friendship was always coloured by what I can only call Béatrice's devotion to me, a devotion that had something of the character of her feeling for her son. Like him, I grew to know that Béatrice was always there to console me when it hurt. Like him, I came to depend upon Béatrice, her own reliability making up for my neglect. I would wear through a pair of trousers, intend to buy another, remind myself again and again, and yet, when in the neighbourhood of shops I would forget, or forget to bring my money with me. And so, in the end, it would be Béatrice who, of her own accord, would perform the service for me. Consequently, I have come to rely upon Béatrice, probably much more than I ever suspect. These may be undramatic dependencies. But, for all that, they are the day to day dependencies that are the stuff of life.

More than once I have asked myself: Does 'liking' shade into 'love' somewhere along the spectrum of affection and dependence? I don't know, yet. Maybe some day I will.

Chapter Seven

Time went by almost without my being aware of it. I stayed in Paris that summer instead of travelling as I had intended, preferring to remain within easy of reach of Ananda, and making the best of the disappointment by doubling up on my studies. The summer passed, and the academic year began again. Students returned from vacation, tanned and loquacious, with elaborate stories of their adventures. I listened, feeling oddly out of the swing of things, my life oscillating between the two routines of long hours in the library and regular visits to the rue de l'Université. From time to time I was driven to reflect upon the breakneck speed with which our relationship had seemed to proceed the previous year, the hectic novelty of Paris, of Ananda and her family. Now all that had subsided to the languid tempo of a stroll, the tempo called for by the requirements of recuperation.

By the end of the summer, Ananda had managed to get her diabetes more or less under control, largely thanks to her mother, who had become something of an expert in every aspect of her daughter's illness, taking the same pride in Ananda's fitness that a chauffeur might take in keeping a vintage car on the road. But in spite of her mother's ministrations there would be days when she would suffer a relapse, days when she would rather not let me see her at all than let me see an expurgated edition of herself. But then there would be other, more resilient days when she would

be almost restored to complete good health, at least until the evening. Then, as if to indemnify the lease of life which she had drawn upon throughout the day, her vitality would be withdrawn. And I would face a depleted sequel to the person with whom I had spent the afternoon. So I would stay and keep her company in her room, playing records of the performances which we were no longer able to get out to hear.

But instead of sitting on her bed as I used to do I would now sit on a chair beside her. For curiously, this distance helped to reinstate the closeness we had enjoyed before. And yet this innocence was so obviously artificial. Her person had already become an erotic invitation, arousing desires which should have been discharged in her. We had already run through our reserve of words. The time had come for that metamorphosis which is called for at a certain point, the return to the body which is, for all that, the only way on.

Fall drew into winter, the first heavy rains clearing the streets like cannon shot, the leaves on the trees turning russet brown, but grimly holding on with the resigned tenacity of the elderly. Ananda now had her diabetes entirely in hand. And yet the normalization of her body did not seem to bring with it a return to the state of mind which she had enjoyed before. It was not that she had given up. Rather, the limitations under which she now laboured seemed to have spawned some new, unrealistic ambition, a far-reaching aspiration for what lay entirely beyond her grasp.

At one point I thought it would do her good to take on a part-time job. There seemed to be something unhealthy about the life she led at home and I thought that a few hours spent somewhere else in the city would both serve to

get her out of the apartment and help to give her a sense of independence. Quite by chance I happened to encounter someone who ran a modelling agency. He was excited at the idea of practising the art of fashionable embellishment upon a scion of one of the first families in France, and when I introduced him to Ananda his admiration knew no bounds. She listened to what he had to say, allowed him to dress her up, carrying off the style he wanted to display as though she had spent long hours training to be a model, but all with the most complete absence of enthusiasm, with a disinterested condescension which the designer mistakenly appraised as just another sign of her phenomenal suavity. I, however, knew full well that it meant in effect that she was not impressed with the occupation to which I had tried to introduce her. And when I told her of my friend's enthusiasm for her performance and his hopes that she would join his staff, she simply said: 'It just wouldn't do for me to take up modelling,' as though one of France's foremost industries were little better than an exalted form of prostitution. But then when her grandfather proposed that she work as a hostess in an embassy, the sort of job specifically reserved for the daughters of families such as hers, she also turned that opportunity down—on the grounds that she didn't want to take advantage of her family connections!

My efforts to re-orient her studies in a more official direction met with an even more ludicrous reversal. It was difficult enough for me to persuade her to sit an exam at all. But eventually she did agree to put her knowledge of British literature and history to the test, by taking some exams set by the British Council. She failed. I knew full well that the exam was well within her competence, but all I could get out of her was a perfunctory statement to the effect that the

questions were stupid. Eventually, I was able to tackle one of the examiners on the subject of her failure. It was clearly a most embarrassing subject for him. For it took me three glasses of wine to thaw him out to the point at which he was prepared to discuss the matter. And then what he meant was conveyed more by a shrug of the shoulders than by anything he said.

‘What could we do?’ he asked. ‘Her answers were brilliant. But they had very little to do with the questions. She set her own questions and then proceeded to answer them instead.’ He looked at me, the world-worn look of a man whose life has been taken up with tedious responsibilities. ‘I’m not supposed to tell you this, but I wanted to pass her with flying colours. However, the rest of the committee disagreed. Said she must have known perfectly well what she was doing when she answered her own questions and should be made to pay the consequences.’ He shrugged his shoulders again, that gesture of kindness overwhelmed by the harsh necessities of the world.

Oh how she would infuriate me with that air of noblesse oblige which she would put on whenever I tried to remonstrate with her. Any effort I might make to help her capitalize on her advantages were summarily dismissed as just so many expressions of petty bourgeois careerism. The more I worked myself up the cooler she became, looking at me as a Cardinal might look upon some arrant, nonconformist preacher thumping the tub of his dogmas. If only I could have convinced myself that her diabetes had made of her a cripple, incapable of leading a normal life. But I knew this not to be the case—knew that, for the most part, she now had her body under control, knew that the mood of fatalistic resignation under which she now laboured had

other reasons, other causes, the uncovering of which would be a far more complex task than simply putting her on the right road.

I got some sense of this on the few occasions when the subject of her aborted child came up, the only subject which seemed capable of arousing her from her complacent slumber. I remember the whited knuckles clenched around a book she happened to be holding when she cast aside my somewhat perfunctory efforts to justify the decision. 'With all the resources of medical science at their disposal,' she protested, 'they couldn't get my diabetes under control and save my child—wouldn't even try—wouldn't even listen to me when I told them I was ready to risk my life.'

'That's just it Ananda. They didn't want you to take the risk.'

'Or were instructed not to try.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'My grandmother, of course. She already has the death of my twin brother on her conscience. Now she's taken my child.'

I looked at her and was amazed. Never had I seen her in such a state before, a storming fury which was all the more impressive for being so massively constrained. Later, when confronted with this apparition, I learnt to face up to it. At this point I was still sufficiently naive, or overawed, to try some noncommittal response.

'But,' she insisted, staring me right in the eyes, the unflinching gaze of a pugilist challenging his opponent, 'the fact remains that my grandmother murdered my child.'

'How can you possibly say such a thing?'

'My grandmother murdered my child.'

I looked at her and realized immediately that she would not relent until I had at least admitted her plea, accepted

her contention, even if I did not consent to it.

'Ananda,' I replied, hearing my voice change register from an argumentative to a sympathetic tone. 'It was my child too.'

Our child. That symbol of the link between us which never really existed but which we sometimes toyed with, asking such questions as 'what would you do if she …' (for it had already been established that it would have been a girl), thereby cancelling the past, or rather, investing the present with a significance which it could only have had if the past had not been what it was. Our child. As I took note of the bitter resentment Ananda still felt towards whose who had robbed her of her child, I also came to understand the precipitate haste with which she had pressed on with our engagement at Marly-le-roi—half sensing, I suppose, that that which had already been ordained, which had already been disclosed to her as hers 'by right', was slipping out of her grasp. Where earlier I used to listen to her relate her dreams as one might listen to a child telling a fairy story, I now began to pay more serious attention, recognizing in her one of those kindred spirits who dwell at that crossing where worlds intersect.

'The truest part of me,' she once assured me, 'is the part that dreams.' By that time I had already learnt enough of her uncanny prophetic power not to disregard what her dreams foretold. Once, she had advised me not to take part in a cross country race. I had dismissed her worry as a womanish fancy, or perhaps as an expression of some niggling resentment she might feel towards those parts of my life which she could not share. But sure enough, in the course of the race, I twisted my ankle and was out of action for over a month. On another occasion, when I had planned to travel to London with a friend in his car, Ananda had

insisted I go by train instead. This time I complied, only to discover on my return that the friend had got into an accident, not too serious as it happened. But it could have been much worse, as he conceded when he jokingly congratulated me on my 'lucky escape.'

And so it was with a chilling sense of apprehension that I prepared myself to hear the dream she eventually decided to relate to me late one January evening. Throughout that evening her mood had been one of unrelieved despondency. And although I had pressed her to let me know what was on her mind she had declined to do so until the very end, just as I was on the point of leaving for the cité Universitaire. It was then when she added, almost as an afterthought: 'I had a rather peculiar dream last night.'

My immediate reaction was to try to reassure her. 'You take your dreams too seriously.'

'Not this one. This was very special.'

'Alright I'm listening.'

'I saw myself in my dream.'

Somewhere I had read that seeing oneself in a dream was both unusual and somewhat ominous.

'How could you be so sure it was you?' I asked, hoping to steer the conversation around into shallower waters.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I just knew,' as though such knowledge could be no more problematic than knowing who one was oneself.

I waited and she continued. 'I saw myself standing a little way off, right at the top of a snow covered hill, standing so still that at first I thought I was a statue. But it was an ice-cold day. And I noticed little puffs of condensation issuing from my mouth. There were several people walking around, wrapped in heavy winter coats. But I ignored them, this "I" that was somehow separate from

myself. Eventually everyone left except one person who turned out to be you. You tried to speak to me. But I didn't respond, just stood staring straight ahead, my hands buried deep inside a muff. You shook me, walked off, walked back, then finally walked away again leaving me alone with this immobile figure whom I knew to be myself.'

She hesitated, as though she had reached a point in her narrative which she found it difficult to recapitulate. 'I shouted across at the figure. But although I could hear the words resonating inside my head, no sounds came out of my mouth. I crossed over to myself, floating so lightly that I left no tracks in the snow. I took hold of one arm. But the figure didn't seem to feel me touching. And that frightened me. I remember telling myself how desperately important it was to bring this replica of myself back to life again. I tried and tried to get inside myself. But I couldn't.'

'It was only a dream,' I remarked, with whatever reassurance I could muster, as soon as she had finished. But I knew even then that this dream could not be so easily dismissed. For it was unlike any dream she had told before. In place of the spontaneous candour with which she usually told her dreams, this telling had almost taken the form of a confession, except that it did not seem to bear upon anything she had been or done. I tried to convince myself that it must be an indirect expression of her diabetes, or perhaps that the self she saw and with which she had tried to unite herself was that of her own stillborn child. And yet these explanations hardly appeared convincing, even to me. With a growing sense of dread I began to suspect that what the dream was about was something we had yet to encounter. Like Nebuchadnezzar in the bible, I would gladly have welcomed an interpretation, however unpleasant, from some young Daniel, if only to exorcize the

spectra of uncertainty. In the meantime, it occurred to me that the mood of resignation had to be resisted, if only because it tended to bring on exactly what it anticipated.

Eventually, even Margaret began to be worried by her daughter's fatalistic attitude. But her solution was so unexpected, and was sprung upon me so suddenly, that it took me entirely by surprise. One day, when Ananda was out on her own, Margaret took me aside and told me she thought it was high time Ananda got married. In itself, there was nothing new in what she said. Ananda and I had already discussed our marriage many times before, though never in the presence of her mother. We had agreed that I should first complete my licence, and then look around for a job. What was surprising was Margaret's alternative solution to the practical difficulties of which she must herself have been only too aware. 'I'm sure I can arrange a dowry,' she explained, in an offhand manner, just as if she were giving her daughter away in the grand de Villiers manner.

Was it Margaret who arranged for me to meet the family in order to wrest from them the dowry which she thought her daughter merited? Or was it not rather the Count himself, no doubt concerned about the young man who had already got his granddaughter pregnant, who persuaded Maggie to invite me over, hinting perhaps at some financial arrangement which had given Margaret cause to believe that she could 'fix' a dowry? This is one of those questions which will forever remain unanswered. Suffice it to say that, towards the end of March, I received a personal invitation from the Count to spend Easter with the family at the château de Villiers.

With every mile that we travelled across the east of France in the train destined to transport us to the Pyrenees, my

excitement mounted. Ananda also appeared lively and outgoing as we mounted the Express at the gare de l'Est. But already by the time we reached Bordeaux, I had become aware of the mantle of solitude which she began to wrap around herself. As we crossed the pine-covered dunes of Arcachon, I expected her to fall into a vivid mood of childhood reminiscence. Instead, she hardly even looked out of the window, burying herself ever deeper in a novel by Malraux.

When we got to Pau, we were met at the station by the chauffeur of a large black Rolls that had been sent to conduct us to the château. We started climbing the foothills of the Pyrenees. But even the enchantment of Lourdes, with its pilgrims going about their other-worldly business, proved insufficient to draw Ananda out of herself. From time to time I would glance at her as she sat back against the plush upholstery. But she ignored me. She had already withdrawn into a shell of inaccessibility more remote and impervious than anything I had ever known before. For the solitude with which I was already quite familiar was, in effect, a solitude which included rather than excluded, a solitude that subjected the common features of the world to the alchemy of her imagination. At such times the visible substance of herself seemed to subside and, in its place, there opened up the empty space of her solitude, a residence which invited me to enter in and share with her her own peculiar vision of things.

I remember such a moment in the course of a visit we made to the tower of Notre Dame. She was alone, standing at the parapet, when I came up on her. She didn't know I was there, watching her watch the city whose landmarks were all exposed to view—St Chapelle, the Panthéon, the Eiffel tower—monuments that had already taken on for me

something of the significance of the fixed stars in the sailor's firmament. I looked at the city and then back at her. And as she faded into the empty centre of her seeing, so the city that I knew so well became her city, the city seen through her own embracing eyes. Her very absence from me became the means by which I recovered an unexpected nearness, by which I shared with her this transformed city over which she had cast the spell of her personality. The intimacy was so complete that I stood away from her for a while, not wishing to make the move which might distract her from the very perspectives in which she was engaged, and in which I was engaged with her. Then she turned, and seeing me, she smiled. All of sudden, the common world dropped down upon us like a curtain call.

So well known to me was the quality of this solitude that I might have been forgiven for assuming at first that I was walking on familiar ground. But as the mountains began to tower up on every side, unfolding steep precipitous vistas into meadowed valleys, I had already been forced to acknowledge a facet of her personality that had not been manifest before. It had already occurred to me that the walls behind which she now retreated might well be walls erected to exclude the family. For all that, they were walls which also seemed to shut me out from her.

'Well,' Margaret remarked, as we rounded the final corner to find the weather-beaten stone of the castle rearing up above us, 'that's a good sign. The drawbridge is down. Who knows? If we're really lucky they might even have the welcome mat laid out for us on the other side of the portcullis.'

The Rolls crept over the moat, through the arch of the gateway, to draw to a halt in the middle of a courtyard. I don't know what I had expected, the Count standing on the

steps perhaps, guests strolling in the grounds, servants about their daily business, because I do remember being surprised by the lifelessness of the surroundings. Massive stone walls capped with turrets and set within innumerable latticed windows. A timber-covered well set in the centre of the courtyard. An ornate porchway with a carved oak door from which at any moment I expected someone to appear. But apart from a black cat which slunk away as the car approached there were no visible signs of life. Through the sliding windows which separated us from the cab I could see the chauffeur leaning back in his seat, relaxing, in relief at the end of the demands made upon him by the tortuous ascent. For a while he did nothing. I glanced at Margaret but she too gave the impression of someone waiting for something to happen. Eventually, the chauffeur hooted, a long low blast that reverberated around the closed in courtyard. Almost immediately, a side door opened and a couple of footmen emerged and headed straight for the boot where our luggage had been stowed. Another person, whom I took to be the butler, advanced sedately upon our party.

'Mme is ready to be conducted to her room?' he asked impassively, as he held the door open for Margaret to dismount. Margaret nodded as she stepped out of the car. It seemed to me we made a rather foolish party, the two footmen scampering ahead with the luggage, then the butler, followed by Margaret, Ananda and myself, a sorrowful procession, like prisoners being led off to the tower.

We were taken through the main door across a vestibule and into an immense chamber roofed with massive timbers, which I took to be the banqueting hall. A maid materialized and led Margaret and Ananda off to the right. I was on the point of following when the butler barred my

path. 'This way Monsieur.' I followed him to the left, down long stone corridors, up winding wooden staircases, till we came to a room in what appeared to be a remote corner of the castle. I noticed that my suitcase had already been deposited on the floor. The Butler gestured towards a bell rope. 'If you need anything you have only to ring.' He paused, as if waiting for me to formulate a query. I said nothing, so he simply added. 'Otherwise, Madame la Contesse will be ready to receive you for tea, in the salon, at four o'clock precisely.'

After a few minutes spent trying to make myself more presentable I found my way back down to the salon. There was still no sign of our host. But Ananda and her mother were already there before me. Ananda was sitting in a high-backed chair. But Margaret had chosen an uncomfortable looking wooden rocker and was pushing herself backward and forward, her feet pressed down against the floor. Neither of them said a word, not even when I entered. I sat down at one end of a spacious settee and waited. Time went by. Feeling a little impatient I got to my feet and sauntered around the room. I noticed a magnificent mahogany bookcase with a complete set of the works of Victor Hugo. Adjacent to it my eyes fell upon a dozen Rembrandt miniatures hung in three descending rows of four. Idly I wondered whether any of these had featured in that collection which Georges had stuffed into his satchel and taken along for sale to M. Bouvier.

The grandfather clock in the far corner of the room struck four. Hardly had the last chime died away when a maid came in with a large tray and started setting the table for tea. When she left, Margaret got up, lifted the lid of the large silver teapot, and began to stir the steaming fluid. She seemed to be on the point of pouring herself a cup when

Ananda observed: 'Better wait for Bonne Maman.' In the distance I could hear the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Margaret scrambled back to her rocking chair, looking a little like a schoolgirl caught on a prank. She had hardly regained her seat when the door swung open to admit the Countess, followed by her husband.

The Countess was instantly recognizable from the many photos of her I had already seen: a large, robust, dark haired woman who immediately moved to the centre of the room and took command of the situation.

'Voyons Anne. You will have to make the introductions.'

Ananda got up and presented me to her grandparents. Hardly had the Countess let go of my hand when she remarked upon the length of my hair, not especially long by the standards of the sixties but long enough to attract attention in official circles. The tone of her voice was harsh, challenging me to establish my credentials. I remembered something Ananda had said about the rigid demarcation between acceptance and rejection. I racked my brain to find a line of argument which might draw me back from the social periphery to which I had evidently been consigned.

'In the middle ages,' Ananda ventured, 'it was perfectly normal for young men to wear their hair down to their shoulders.'

'In the middle ages, perhaps. But not today.'

'It's become quite normal, lately,' I insisted, 'ever since the Beatles set the fashion.'

'The Beatles? You mean the English music group? I heard them on television not so long ago. I must say I thought they were very good.'

'And already very rich,' I added. 'Apparently their earnings are on the scale of a middle-sized industry.'

‘Really. Now that’s very interesting.’ Clearly I had struck the right chord with this talk of earnings. ‘Perhaps my father would have done better to take up music instead of banking.’

The Count broke out laughing and Margaret followed suit. I heard my breath escape from my lungs, evacuating the tense constraint. There was a pause in which I found myself wondering at the Countess’ almost perfect English, until I recalled an odd remark of Margaret’s who, in the course of one of her psychoanalytical explorations of her mother-in-law, had told me she had been brought up by an English nanny—one of those severe representatives of the old school who were not about to spare the rod and spoil the child.

‘And what, may I ask, does your friend intend to do with himself; that is, assuming he has no intention of being a pop star?’ The question was addressed to Ananda and it was Ananda who answered for me.

‘He’s training to be a lawyer at the Faculté de Droit in Paris. He’s doing very well. At least his professors tell me so. In any case, he expects to be finished with his Licence in another two years or so.’

‘Eh bien.’ The Countess eyed me up and down as though she were trying to make a snap assessment. ‘An exemplary student, or so I’ve heard.’

From the way she said this I suspected that everything she was now being told had already been communicated to her before and that I was being put through some kind of a review, answering questions the answers to which already lay open before her—in my dossier.

‘Ananda is inclined to exaggerate,’ I interjected with what I hoped would be taken for an unassuming modesty.

‘He also won the Championnat Universitaire de Cross

this year.' Ananda turned to me and I immediately noted the supercilious curl of her upper lip. 'Deny that if you can.'

I was beginning to enter into the spirit of the game—of the game I now suspected Ananda of playing—with her acting as my counsel of defence, forcing me to confess to my many sterling qualities.

'A little lucky,' I protested. 'A long, hilly course, which I always like. And then, two of the best runners were out of the competition with injuries.'

'Besides, you should hear him on the organ,' Ananda now turned to her grandfather. 'He was having some difficulty in getting permission to practice in Paris. So I sent him off to see Marie-Claire Alain. She was so impressed with him she recommended him immediately to several of her organist friends.'

'Evidently a man of many talents,' the Countess continued, nodding approvingly in my direction. But before she could say any more, the Count broke in. 'But zat ees magnifique.' He gestured helplessly. 'Ow you say?'

'Magnificent,' I volunteered. 'Or better still, marvellous.'

'Exactement. Qvite marveloos. Ee can play for us at ower church in Villiers, à Pacques.' Again that helpless gesture. 'Ow you say?'

I remembered another of Margaret's caricatures of her father-in-law. 'Ow you say', he keeps on saying. "You better believe it. I've been saying 'ow' and 'ouch' as long as I've been married." The memory tumbled clownishly across my mind and I had difficulty holding back a giggle.

'But Bon Papa,' Ananda interrupted. 'Surely the curé will celebrate Easter Mass up here at the chapel?'

'Well, my dear, since eet eez something of a special occasion we sought we would take Mass, en ville. Zey do

expect to see us from time to time.' Then turning to me. 'Besides, we cannot possibly manquer, ow you say, such an occasion. Ze organeest. Ee ees simply terreeble. Eet weel be marveloos to listen to an expert.'

And so, on this approving note, we sat down to tea. Ananda joined me on the settee and the high backed chair was taken over by Bonne Maman. Margaret pulled the rocker closer to the table and then sat back, once again adopting that eccentric pose, rocking herself back and forth with the tips of her toes. While we talked about England, about the family, and about Ananda's plans for the future, she continued rocking herself gently backward and forward, a hang dog expression upon her face. I noticed that her mother-in-law ignored her altogether. But the Count made several efforts to draw her into the conversation with a question which lay within the bounds of her competence, all to no effect. She either said nothing or made some entirely noncommittal response. Certainly, to look at her you would have thought that she had been the victim of some villainy. But then it became increasingly difficult to identify the other dramatis personae who might lend her role a certain verisimilitude. Admittedly, the Countess was extremely overbearing, but somewhat in the manner of someone used to having her way. When she posed a question it was often with a brutal 'quoi' rather than with the more conventional and accommodating 'comment.' But as I got to know the other members of the family I came to realize that this was not in the least exceptional. It was the typical behaviour of women of her standing. These titled wives invariably appeared more domineering than their husbands, but so predictably so, that this air of infallibility could hardly be construed as an offence. And yet, each time Margaret was addressed by her mother-in-law, I could almost feel her

shrinking back before the impetuous thrust of Charlotte's unabashed verbosity, retreating shakily into that caricature of violated innocence.

We must have been sitting in the salon for a couple of hours when a uniformed maid appeared at the door, waited in the doorway until her presence had been noticed, and then announced. 'Mme la Contesse est servie.' Ananda leaned over towards me and whispered in my ear. 'Grub's up.' The Count got to his feet and showed the way with one hand held out like an affable policeman posted at an intersection. The Countess stood up, moved toward the door and Margaret followed. I held back, holding Ananda back with the slightest pressure of one arm. 'Wasn't that a little overdone?' I protested, sotto voce, as soon as the others had left the room.

'Oh, it's the only way to deal with them,' she replied, without the slightest hesitation. 'If they think you're not something special they'll walk all over you.'

And so began my three week stay at the château, days so full of little incidents that they seemed interminable and yet raced past. Now that my life is tunnelling down to one fine point of recollection, it is strange to recall the exhilarating sense of expansion which I felt at the time as I advanced, step by steady step, into the confidence of the family, gaining with unbelievable ease new friendships and new alliances. For the first week, our little party made up the only visitors. But as Easter approached, a trickle of guests began to arrive—a trickle which rapidly turned into a torrent until the better part of the forty-odd rooms were occupied by friends and relatives of the family.

Anticipating the rush that was to come, Ananda insisted that I be moved from the small and rather poky room in

which I had been lodged at first into la chambre de St Laurent. Inevitably, the story had to be rehearsed, the story of Laurent de Villiers who, on the eve of his marriage, and just before he was due to inherit the estate, had let himself down on a rope from his room and disappeared to begin life again as a wandering monk. He had of course been immediately disowned by the family and the title given over to a younger brother. But as the rumour of his spiritual progress began to spread abroad, so the family had become reconciled to the wayward Count. And when, after his death and the founding of an important Catholic order, Laurent had been canonized, St Laurent had become one of the most redoubtable entries in the annals of the family.

A few days passed. And then I was taken to the organ of the church at Villiers and given permission to prepare for my performance on Easter Sunday. I was more than satisfied with the instrument which had been entirely renovated only a few years previously, largely thanks to a generous donation from the Count. The original repertoire of finely modulated stops had been retained but supplemented with batteries of far more powerful pipes—16 and 32 foot diapasons—a thunderous collection of brass. For my entering voluntary, I chose Bach's *Passagalia in C minor*, saving for the end the *Toccata* by Widor, a sonorous and florid piece by a well-known French organist and composer which had the additional merit of appearing much more difficult than in fact it was.

Ananda joined me in the organ loft on Easter Sunday to act as my assistant. As I played the *Passagalia*, I could see her leaning over the edge of the loft, gazing down into the nave. I was only into the fourth variation when she reported back that the church was already half full—mostly guests from the château who had taken their seats in advance. And at the

end, when the huge rolling sounds of the *Toccata* began to fill the building, Ananda could hardly contain her joy. Catching my head in her hands she almost brought the voluntary to a premature close by planting a lavish kiss upon my forehead and exclaiming, so loudly that I thought her voice must surely have surmounted even the monstrous volume of the 32-foot Tuba: 'Epatant! The whole family has stayed behind to listen to the voluntary.'

Afterwards, I found the Count standing waiting for me in the South Transept. He clasped my hand in his with an enthusiasm which outran his usual dignified decorum. 'Marveloos. Zat *Passagalia*. Ze same seme over and over again but always deefferent. And zen ze *Toccata*. Superb! Ow better to express ze idea of Christ—'ee 'ees arisen!'

Most of the guests stayed on at the château for a few days after Easter. The children of the various branches of the family which had gathered together at the château were by now becoming a little restive. Throughout Holy week they had been induced to keep their behaviour within the bounds demanded by the nature of the occasion. But as Christ crucified gave way to the Resurrection so they became more unmanageable. Upon an inspiration, Ananda and I decided to organize an 'Olympics'. To one side of the château there was a large lawn planted out in a circle. Here we marked out a track with, in the centre, a high jump and a long-jump pit. The children were arranged into three groups according to age, and then again into four teams, each one bearing the name of a family château. Ananda took over the duties of official time-keeper and referee. And for two whole afternoons the fortunes of the château de Villiers were pitted against those of the châteaux de St Sebastien, St Loup and Château-neuf.

And then, inevitably, just as Margaret had predicted,

the Count took me into his study one afternoon and brought out the family tree. Between us we propped the massive document up against the wall for closer examination. At a glance the extent of the family connections became apparent. Not only the names of French and Italian families already known to me, a baron de Montesquieu, a Marquis de Dupleix, a Duc d'Aumale whose château at Chantilly I had visited where it was now the Condé museum, a Borghesi and a Farnesi, but also an extensive collection of Spanish grandees, not to forget a representative of the Portuguese family of Braganza—clearly something of a Catholic hegemony whose borders extended as far as the sway of the papacy.

'As yoo can zee,' the Count explained, 'our family 'as been married into families from Zpain and Italy, as well as France, even a family which came from Ireland'—and he pointed out a descendant of the well-known marshal MacMahon. 'But we 'ave never 'ad an Engleesh in ze family.' He turned to take me by the hand. 'Soyez le bienvenue.'

They were all too idyllic those first three weeks, and I should have known that they could not last, should have suspected that what delighted me, my acceptance by the family and, more important still, the way in which Ananda had been brought back into relation with her family, through me, could not but be a source of consternation to Margaret. Naively, I allowed myself to believe that Margaret's differences with the family were the result of a genuine misunderstanding or were based upon a misadventure so far removed in time that it had long since ceased to be a bone of contention. When I recommended Margaret, the Count at least seemed only too ready to let

bygones be bygones, pointing out for my benefit the absence of his son. 'Long ago' he remarked, 'we decided zat Maggie and Georges should not be invited togezer. And, as you can zee, Maggie, 'oo is still ze wife of our son, 'as ze precedence.'

So engrossed had I become in the life of the château that I hardly noticed Margaret's evermore pronounced abstention. Indeed, it seemed better that she should stay in bed in the morning, have her lunch sent up to the room and join in only occasionally in the family gatherings—since, whenever she was present, she never failed to cast a dismal cloud over the proceedings. When we went to visit her in the spacious suite she occupied almost across the courtyard from the chambre de St Laurent she would complain from time to time of little rudenesses, incivilities inflicted upon her, by Bonne Maman. As if in response to the ever-present threat of banishment, she seemed in her room (generally known as 'la chambre de la Reine') to have organised a rival court where she held sway amidst the items which she found essential to her own more up-to-date existence—a glass fronted cabinet well stocked with liquor and stacked with cocktail glasses, and a stereo system upon which anything from Bach to the Beatles, Beethoven or Irving Berlin might be heard at almost any hour.

The one event for which she rarely failed to show up was dinner, perhaps because by then she had managed to summon a certain courage from the numerous cocktails she consumed between the hours of five and seven. I noted this habit with some apprehension. But until that fateful night my misgivings proved unfounded. The alcohol seemed to make it that much easier for her to appear on good terms with the world. Not that she ever said very much. But at least a slightly vacuous smile would be conjured up

whenever she was addressed by someone seated around the vast oak table. So that in the end I myself joined her in her 'happy hour', helping to tone her up for what she called the 'body count'.

When one evening she finally broke out of her habitual reserve, she broke out with a vengeance. The incident is indelibly imprinted on my mind—not only on account of the consternation which it caused at the time—but also because the topic which set the table alight was one which ventured perilously close to an issue that was still at the forefront of Ananda's mind.

We were in our final week and the guests had dwindled down to a dozen persons. The Catholic Church was the topic of conversation and, perhaps somewhat injudiciously, the Count had allowed himself to be manoeuvred into a position where he was called upon to defend Catholicism's stand on birth control. His task was made that much more difficult by the predominance of women around the table that night including, of course, Margaret herself. As soon as the subject was broached, I could see that Margaret was having some difficulty containing her feelings. Every now and then she would teeter on the brink of speech. Her cheeks would colour and her hand would work convulsively. But sooner or later the tension would abate and she would look away as though she had not even been following the course of the argument. Once, she did manage to deliver herself of a clumsy mouthful of words. But the silence which ensued so unnerved her that she let her intervention lapse into a broken commentary on what had just been said. Finally, after a hasty gulp of wine, her voice broke through, in French— indeed erupted in the very middle of a sentence, scattering the carefully-assembled pieces of the Count's elaborate exposition.

'But you have to look at the matter from a woman's point of view. No intelligent woman wants to spend her life having babies.' There was a hysterical edge to her voice which already indicated that the debate was unlikely to remain upon the plane of a reasonable interchange. No doubt this was why the Count adopted a conciliatory tone. 'I rather agree with you, Maggie. Zat ees why ze Church 'as always argued in favour of continence.'

'But you can't expect a married couple to abstain. It just isn't natural.'

'Morality,' the Count contended gently, 'is not concerned with what actually ees, only with what ought to be. Ze church can only exhort zeir members to do zeir best.'

'Which means, in effect, that the woman is condemned to having baby after baby.'

'She can alwayz abstain, if she zo chooses.'

'Refuse to give her husband what he wants? You forget that men are stronger than women.'

'Margaret.' The Count was clearly a little shocked by the insinuation. 'Surely you don't sink zat I condone brutality?'

'It's a biological fact. Men are stronger than women.'

'And elephants are stronger zan men. But zat hasn't prevented us from exercising dominion over ze animal kingdom.'

Margaret ignored the Count's last remark altogether. 'So the woman gets pregnant. For want of a simple contraceptive device she finishes up having to get an abortion.' The word 'abortion' seemed to take the Count by surprise. 'Well, certainly! If there's no other way out.'

'You know ze church does not accept abortion.' For a moment I thought he was going to leave it that. But I suppose the very same thought which had just taken hold of

me must also have occurred to him. For he added '... unless, of course, zere is any real danger to ze mother.'

'That's not the point,' Margaret insisted. 'A woman has the right to dispose of her body as she pleases. It's her body after all.'

'Eef eet was only a question of 'er body, zere would be no problem. But zere's another body, ze body of another person inside.'

'But a fetus isn't a person!' The unwelcome word dropped into the conversation like a bomb. The repercussions of this explosion were clearly visible on the faces of the other guests, whose sudden concentration upon their food relieved them of the obligation to comment upon the course of events. The Count continued, picking his way as warily as a trooper might pick his way across mined territory.

'According to Catholic doctrine, an unborn infant ees a potential human being, endowed with a soul. As such, eet ees already entitled to certain rights.'

'What about the mother's rights?' Margaret's voice cut in a like a commercial. 'What if the mother doesn't want the child, or can't afford another child? What if the woman isn't married ... or, or if she 's deserted by her husband?' Margaret turned to the other members present at table but failed to solicit from them any sign of encouragement. 'I repeat: the problem has to be considered from a woman's point of view.'

'I'm sure his Holiness has considered ze problem from every conceivable point of view.' The Count raised one hand in a gesture of finality. 'And now if you don't mind ...'

'How could the Pope be expected to understand a woman's point of view?' Margaret took a quick, revitalizing sip at the glass which stood before her. 'Why, I don't

suppose he's ever made love to a woman in his life.'

This last remark so clearly transgressed the bounds of propriety that the Count was utterly taken aback. He made some attempt at a response. But the words died in his throat like the sound of a car that won't start. In the end it was the Countess who replied on his behalf, but with a certain comic theatricality—as though the remark had not been intended seriously.

'Good gracious! A Pope who makes love to women. I should hope not indeed.' And her jovial demeanour solicited from one or two of the other diners the beginnings of a smile. She turned back to address Margaret again in person.

'But that doesn't mean that the Pope is incapable of understanding our point of view. On the contrary, the Church has always been most concerned to preserve the integrity of the family.'

'Which means that a woman is expected to stay at home, cleaning, cooking, looking after the children.' Margaret glanced around the table. 'What kind of a life is that, I ask you?'

'I'm sure the great majority of women are only too happy to be able to devote their lives to their families,' the Countess observed, with unshakable conviction.

'Only because, in France, there's nothing else for them to do. After all, they're so completely dominated by their husbands ...'

'Dominated by their husbands?' The Countess addressed her question to the company at large. 'Do you mean to suggest that I, for example, am dominated by my husband?' The very idea of the Countess de Villiers being dominated by anyone, let alone her husband, was so ludicrous in itself that it elicited a round of laughter. But far from relieving the tension, the laughter only seemed to spur

Margaret on to greater heights of intensity.

'But the law discriminates against women in France. Nothing's been changed since Napoleon. Just look how difficult it is to get a divorce. As for the alimony payments, they're quite inadequate.'

'Divorce is not something that is encouraged in this country, thank God.' The Countess adopted the peremptory tone of an adult reprimanding a child. 'We prefer to keep the family together wherever possible.'

'But a family has to be held together by love.'

'You speak from experience, I presume.' The sarcasm was not lost on Margaret. Her face paled, and her upper lip began to tremble. But she managed to pull herself together.

'We had our difficulties, certainly. But that was only because we really loved one another. At least at first.'

'One fights with those one loves? Hmm—an interesting notion.' The Countess contemplated the statement with the faintly disbelieving air of a logician trying to evaluate a metaphysical proposition.

'It's only when you try to get close to someone that the problems come out.'

'Really Margaret. Your attitudes are childish, to say the least. There will always be points of disagreement between husband and wife. But as long as there is mutual respect, they can always be resolved.'

'It's all very well for you to talk like that.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'Getting along is no problem at all if you never loved your husband in the first place.'

No sooner spoken than these words brought about a dramatic transformation in the manner of the Countess. Gone was the mask of affability, the mildly condescending attitude of one dealing with a wayward child. A stern

severity now took its place. ‘That’s quite enough. I will not have my marriage disparaged by someone whose own private life has been a disgrace, to say the least.’

‘But if Georges had only had a normal upbringing.’

‘Enough.’

‘It’s you. It’s all your ...’ The sentence terminated in a flood of tears. Waves of exasperation poured out across the table, lapping at the onlookers who retreated in consternation to their individual islands of propriety. Margaret mopped at her eyes with her napkin while the other guests either picked at their food or tried to start conversations amongst themselves, but in such strained whispers that these ghostly punctuations only served to advertise their embarrassment.

Throughout this scene Ananda maintained an outward show of composure. Only those who knew her as well as myself could have inferred from her overly stiff and formal posture the inward signs of her distress—a reticent, remote distress which seemed to be coloured by a kind of resignation, as though she had been through all this before, as though the outcome was a foregone conclusion. She said nothing for a while. Then she turned aside to whisper something in her mother’s ear. Margaret put down her napkin and staggered shakily out of the room. No sooner had the door closed behind her than Ananda, in her turn, folded her serviette, placed it carefully beside her plate and then, with icy calm, excused herself.

Silence settled in the room like dust, a long stifling silence which was not disturbed until, some while later, the Count turned to his wife. He chose to speak in English, the language in which the debate had just been held. ‘My dear. I sink you are a leetle too severe on Maggie. I’m sure her convictions are sincerely held.’

'But really Louis. It's always the same story. Either she says nothing at all. Or else there's a hysterical outburst. It's most embarrassing for everyone else.'

'I know she ees not ze easiest person to deal with,' the Count replied, wiping his mouth with his serviette. 'But one 'as to bear in mind zat zese scenes are most distressing to Anne. Perhaps it would be better if I went to speak to them myself.' He looked at me, then half rose from his chair, but uncertainly, as if he doubted the efficacy of his expedition. I read in his hesitancy an invitation to take his place myself, a course of action which he must have hoped to prompt. For he acknowledged my offer with a readiness that appeared premeditated.

By the time I reached the door to Margaret's room, I could already hear the sounds of sobbing proceeding from within. I knocked, a little hesitantly. There was no response, so I knocked again. Again no answer. I pictured Ananda at her mother's side, drawn once again into the debilitating sphere of her mother's fears and anxieties, trying to make up what her mother lacked with her sympathy, her devotion. One part of me wanted to leave them alone, to come back later, after the histrionics had worked themselves out. But something else spurred me on—a mounting sense of the danger Ananda ran, unwittingly trying to fill up the emptiness at the centre of her mother's life, little suspecting that the abyss was groundless, the vacuity so bottomless that no other life could ever begin to fill it up, but would be sucked into the vortex instead.

I pushed open the door. My presence was acknowledged first by a twist of Ananda's head. Then Margaret looked up, suddenly, with a nervous gesture of her head. 'Well,' she said, her eyes still red, but with the feverish glow of wrath, I thought, rather than the tender shade of

sadness.

I stood uncomfortably for a moment. 'Bon Papa,' I ventured, 'wanted to know if you were alright.'

'As if he cared.'

'I think he does.'

'Preaching to me about the sanctity of marriage.' She gestured wildly, clutching for words which seemed to be fluttering by her. 'When he only married Charlotte for her money.'

'I don't think your mother-in-law sees it quite that way.'

I thought my remark might cause offence. Perhaps it did, because she chose to ignore it altogether.

'She's even worse. Nobody ever loved Charlotte. So now she has to take it out on me.'

And then, as suddenly as the tears had disappeared, they flooded back into her eyes again. Again, her hands went over her face. And again, Ananda's arms were around her shoulders, soothing, consoling.

I felt a growing sense of irritation at her unthinking, or perhaps even deliberate, callousness, fighting out these unreal battles whose locus was the field of her own imagination—battles into which she recklessly flung herself only to injure those whom she most loved: her husband first, and then her daughter.

I glanced at Ananda and already I thought I detected a certain aversion to my presence, as though my attempt to mediate was making matters worse.

'I think you're really making too much of all this,' I said in fumbling desperation. There was no answer, at first. But then, from between a gap in her hands, Margaret looked out at me, quizzically.

'Who's side are you on?'

'No one's side. There are no sides.'

Her hands fell away from her face and clamped themselves to her sides. She got up clumsily to her feet. And her answer, when it came, burst through the tears like a bolt of lightning through the clouds.

'There's one thing we should straighten out right now. There are two sides. Anyone who's not for me is against me. Is that understood?'

'But there's absolutely no reason for me to take sides.'

'Oh yes there is. A very good reason. For you to take their side.' A smile materialized in one corner of her mouth. 'Could it be that you are, as they say, très intéressé?'

The use of the French word, 'intéressé', so much more culpable than the English, caught me off guard. I mumbled something in a tone of offended dignity, then turned around and took my leave. But perhaps it was because I heard her repeat the offending word, just as I was closing the door behind me—the key word, intéressé—that I began to turn it over in my mind, until it seemed so clear, so evident to me, that the very accusation which she had directed against me was one of which she was herself most guilty. A projection of her very own intentions. Like a thunderclap it struck me that her anger at the family was not just anger at the way they had treated her but anger at herself for not having calculated correctly, for not having succeeded in obtaining what she had thought she would be entitled to, just as soon as she achieved her marriage.

But I am going a little too fast. For the evidence with which I began to reinforce these revelations was only vouchsafed to me that evening, several hours later, after I had already had to concede my uselessness in the role of mediator.

It was while I was writing at the plain oak table in my room that I heard a knock at the door. I thought it must be

one of the domestiques. But when I opened the door, the Countess walked in. She seemed a little uncertain as to how to begin.

'I trust I'm not disturbing you.'

'Not at all.' I removed my coat from the back of a carved wooden chair, an antique piece which must have been at least five hundred years old. But she chose to remain on her feet.

'I hope you find the furniture entirely to your taste.'

'I don't think I've ever been surrounded by such memorable pieces.'

'And that wardrobe?' She gestured towards a large Louis Quinze cabinet which, admittedly, was the only item which did not blend into the almost monastic atmosphere of la chambre de St Laurent. 'I put it here because I couldn't stand the sight of it where it was before.'

'I must admit that it doesn't really fit.'

'I could have it removed.'

'Please don't bother.'

The Countess sat down, reflected for a moment and then came to the point without further preamble. 'You must have been a little surprised by the scene this evening.'

'Not altogether. I was already aware that there were certain, how shall we say, differences of opinion.'

'No doubt she has spoken to you about us already.'

'From time to time.'

'Not altogether flattering, I presume.' The Countess looked right at me, challenging me to say the worst. But I preferred to find a more noncommittal avowal.

'You know how it is.'

'I do indeed. Of course it all goes back to her marriage with my son.' She paused for a moment. 'I don't think you've ever met Georges.' Then without waiting for my

answer. 'You should talk to him one day. I don't pretend to understand the rationale behind their marriage. But when things started going wrong, I took his side, not unnaturally. After all, he was my son. And then it was obvious to me from the first that their marriage wouldn't work. Completely unsuited for each other. Different backgrounds. Different ideas. Different expectations. To cap it all, she was much too old for him.'

'Really. I wasn't aware of that.'

'No?' My response seemed to surprise the Countess. 'Well, judge for yourself. He was only eighteen at the time, just starting his university education, much too young to even think about getting married. And she was twenty eight.' The Countess paused as if to allow the weight of this disparity to register. 'And then there was the question of her pregnancy.'

'Pregnancy?'

'I may be old-fashioned,' the Countess confided. 'But I was brought up to believe that you got married first and pregnant afterwards. Otherwise ...' She shrugged her shoulders. 'Otherwise, marriage ceases to be a voluntary engagement.'

'You think Georges might have had to get married?'

I was afraid my question bordered on the indiscrete. But the Countess responded immediately. 'Well, what do you think?'

She paused for a moment, waiting for me to venture an opinion. I said nothing. So she continued. 'The first I knew about it all was when Georges phoned to say he had a child. He phoned from Margaret's parents home where he was living at the time. I find it difficult to believe that they didn't apply a certain pressure. I wouldn't have minded if she had only made him happy. But they were fighting from the time

I first got to know her, and have been fighting ever since.'

She stared out of the window, stared out into the darkness through which I could just make out the crenellated boundary of a tower, biting into the lighter background of the sky. 'Yes, on the whole I think that a divorce was the only thing for them. Except that Georges has more or less lost touch with his own children.' She confronted me with a questioning look, a look which suggested that my place in the conversation was no longer merely incidental. 'We have tried to do our best for Georges' daughters. But we see them so very infrequently. And then, no matter what we did, I'm sure Margaret would find grounds for complaint.'

'I'm afraid she's a bit of a complainer by nature.'

'But its difficult for us to be of any assistance if we don't know what the problems are. Margaret, of course, won't tell us anything. We have been in touch with one or two of her friends. But they too have all proved singularly uninformative.'

Margaret's injunction flashed through my mind. Mum's the word—an echo of the sentiment which she had expressed to me on more than one occasion. And yet I could see the Countess' point, that the only way to break the deadlock was to establish a line of communication between 'us' and 'them'.

'I have no idea what truth there is to her allegation,' I pointed out, hoping that this qualification would enable me to maintain a neutral footing between the two contending parties. 'But it might be as well for you to know that she thinks she doesn't have enough to live on.'

'Not enough to live on?' The tone of voice betrayed her disbelief. 'It is tempting to point out that most people solve that problem by getting a job.'

'But you know her health is not too good.'

'In my opinion, a job would do wonders for her health. But leaving that aside, if she doesn't work it's because she doesn't have to. She has more than enough to live on as it is. There's the alimony to start with.'

'She says the alimony is quite insufficient by itself.'

'Of course it is. It was fixed at a time when Georges's salary was extremely modest. Now he's much better off. But he also has a second family to look after. We decided it would be better if we took over the main responsibility for Margaret and her children.'

'So the alimony is not her only source of income?'

'By no means. There's a separate allowance from us, more than she gets from Georges in fact. And then all medical and school expenses are paid. She has the use of the apartment in the rue de l'Université. We even pay the gas, the electricity and the telephone. Add all that up and see what you get. Much more than the average professional salary, I'm sure. No, I suspect that Margaret is simply most uneconomical. But if she expects us to put her into a château with a retinue of servants to look after her ...' The Countess rolled her eyes heavenward.

'I must say I've also had doubts about Margaret's poverty,' I admitted. 'Unfortunately, Ananda takes everything her mother says for granted.'

'Oh, with Anne—excuse me. But I've never been able to stomach that peculiar name, Ananda—with Anne it's a different story altogether.' The Countess paused. I could almost see her switching her train of thought from one track to another. 'It's been exceedingly difficult for us to know how to deal with her. Her emotional commitments are absolute. She loves her mother. She detests me. There is nothing to be done about it. Once she has made up her

mind about a person she can't be moved by reason.

'I've always found her most intelligent.'

'Certainly, she is. But she is also extremely headstrong. When it comes to judging people, her head is ruled by her heart.' The Countess looked at me—a cool, appraising look. 'You could be of great assistance to her.'

'I'd like to think so,' I replied. 'Only, things have not gone the way I had hoped.'

I knew the Countess knew what I had in mind and wondered whether she might take my vagueness as a reason for avoiding the issue altogether. Instead she came straight to the point.

'You mean the pregnancy?'

'Yes.'

'A most unfortunate accident.'

'It wasn't an accident.'

My words spoke out against me—spies in the house of love, forcing me to press on further. 'She wanted us to have a child ...'

Another incriminating silence, demanding further explanations. 'It's a little difficult to know what to do when the girl you love tells you she wants your child—immediately.'

'Fortunately, I've never had to deal with such a situation.' The slightly condescending tone carried hints of critical asperity. 'My husband and I were married in our teens. With us it was very simple. Marriage first, children after.'

'That's rather what I suggested myself.'

'And what was her response?'

'She said I was being very bourgeois.'

The Countess threw back her head and laughed. 'Mon Dieu. Exactly what she's always said about me.'

'Naturally, I had no idea about the diabetes.'

'Neither had we. There's certainly no trace of it on our side of the family.'

'And the abortion. Was it really necessary?'

'No question about it. We got the very best medical advice. They were all of one opinion. Her pregnancy had to be terminated. Later, it may very well be possible for her to have children. Only this time, I trust she will take the trouble to get married first.'

There was a silence. I thought the Countess was going to say something more. Instead she stood up sharply. 'Well, I mustn't presume to enquire into your personal affairs. I don't feel qualified to offer advice in any case. The younger generation has always been something of a mystery to me.'

I watched her move towards the door, slowly, as if she were already turning over in her mind what I had said, just as I was already beginning to think over what she had just been saying to me. It was as though I had been viewing Margaret's situation from one single standpoint, the point of view from which she presented her dilemma herself and from which certain features of her situation remained obscure. A step to one side and many things that had previously appeared incomprehensible now fell into place—like the pieces of a puzzle once you are in possession of the key.

The Countess had reached the door and was just about to make her exit when I held her back. 'Oh, and there's one thing more. Something that seems to have caused Ananda some distress.'

The Countess turned around. 'Really?'

'Her twin brother.' I searched desperately for a formula which would leave the issue open-ended. 'I don't think she's ever managed to get over her brother's death.'

‘But she was only a baby at the time.’ The Countess seemed genuinely astonished by my observation.

‘All the same, she seems to have taken it very much to heart.’

‘It was a tragedy for all of us. But not so unexpected really. They were both of them very weak at birth, as is often the case with twins. Augustin only survived a year or so.

‘But he was baptized?’

‘Oh yes. We made sure of that. A pity,’ she continued, almost to herself. ‘A great pity. We were all so delighted when we heard that Margaret had had a boy.’

She opened the door, then looked back at me once more. Powerful feelings were working just beneath the surface of her self-restraint.

‘The family has been most unlucky with its sons.’ She turned around again and left, closing the door behind her, noisily.

That last week was different, entirely different from the four weeks which had preceded it. Everything that had grown up between us now seemed to wither. Not that the Count and Countess were not as sympathetic as before. Rather the contrary; only, I now no longer felt it possible to take advantage of their kindness. It was impossible for me not to be aware of Margaret’s watchful eyes, so that every move in the direction of her parents-in-law now meant a move away from her. In the space of day, I came to understand the field of forces which had worked upon Ananda throughout her life. By now it was quite obvious to me that she was very fond of her grandfather. And yet he was the consort of the woman whose menacing shadow lay athwart her mother’s life. And her father? More than ever I have become

convinced that the Countess was not so very far from the truth when she remarked, the morning after our tête à tête. 'In her heart of hearts, Anne adores her father.'

That same afternoon, I wandered into Ananda's room to see if I could interest her in a game of tennis. She was out, but on her desk I found a little photo album. I flipped it open and half a dozen photos fell out on the inlaid wood, photos of her father. Her father playing with her on the beach, her father standing beside her in front of the main gate of the château, her father dancing with a tiny scintillating child in the ballroom of his parents' hotel in Paris, and another, which she later confided was the one that she liked best, a photo of herself leaping into her father's arms, the camera fixing the intrepid flight, the joyful confidence of a girl—so many images of her father which returned to bless and curse her in her dreams.

For it was at the château that she dreamed her most impressive dreams. The château seemed to cast a spell over her, so that each night she was plunged back into an enchanted world of dreams, a world in which the events of the day were vividly re-enacted. Dreams at first so gloriously reassuring that, after breakfast, she would take me aside to tell me of them. Then came that fatal week, when her angels turned to devils, turned upon her as if to exact a penalty for the treasures which they had bestowed upon her previously. Once again she withdrew into her self, into that shell of inaccessibility from which I thought she had, at last, been tempted out. Her withdrawal troubled me, kept me from my sleep, as if I too had grown a little afraid of what might lurk behind the sun-lit door of consciousness.

Or woke me up in the middle of the night. That night, for instance, when I awoke in the early hours, convinced that the day had already dawned. For my room was bathed

in a eerie light. But when I looked up, I found myself staring at a moon so luminously full that it shed its light into the furthest corners of the room. For a while I stood at the window, marvelling at the aspect the château had assumed: the turrets and parapets all picked out in a light which shaded colours down to a silver-tinted sheen. Then, prompted by some inexplicable whim, I decided to steal into Ananda's bedroom and watch her while she slept.

The château was so very quiet, bathed as it was in this translucent light which seemed to deaden sound, that I was not prepared for what I heard, even before I opened the door to her room—a low moaning as of someone in great pain. I went in to find Ananda tossing in bed, her eyes fast shut, one hand working convulsively, the other hand clenched. The thumb of her clenched fist was pressed down into the funnel of her palm. It was the oddity of this imprisoned thumb which engaged my attention. I took hold of her hand and tried to prize the fingers open. The effect was quite astonishing. First the words: 'Ne fais pas de mal à Maman,' and then, a wail, a clamorous unnerving note which reverberated abominably in the hollow of the room. She seemed to be crying for help. Only the call had moved beyond the reach of relief to achieve a depth of despair which was more like a natural phenomenon than any attempt at communication. I called her name, gently at first and then a little louder, ranging up toward the threshold of awareness, only to elicit from her the further dream-soaked exclamation: 'Papa. Oh Papa!' But uttered with such horrified alarm that I felt compelled to end my experimentation in the crucible of her dreams. I remember standing beside her for a while, watching this tortured restlessness, far from all hope of intervention, intruder in a scene I did not see. Then I left, as unacknowledged as I had

come.

The following day I asked Ananda to relate the dream of the night before. She seemed a little embarrassed at first, tried to laugh away my question and the insistence with which I angled at the theme, till at last she confessed. 'Yes. How did you guess? I dreamt about my father. Ridiculous, come to think of it. In my dream I saw my father beating my mother. And when I tried to intervene, he violated me instead.'

The very next day our visit was brought to an abrupt conclusion. Ananda informed me in the morning that we were going to have to leave the very same afternoon. When I asked her why our departure had been sprung upon us so suddenly, she told me that her great-grandmother was arriving that evening. I pointed out the extent of the château, large enough to accommodate at least another thirty persons. Her answer was as bitter as it was to the point.' My great-grandmother refuses to live under the same roof as my mother. She says my mother ruined my father's life.'

And so we were all packed off to the station in the Rolls. And yet, surely this 'goodbye' was only intended as an 'au revoir.' For even as I stepped into the vast accommodating limousine whose door was held open for me by the chauffeur, the Countess stopped me for a moment with the hospitable words: 'I assume we shall be seeing you soon in Paris.'

The invitation to re-establish relations with the family was never taken up. Margaret insisted now, more than ever before, upon the need to maintain the barrier which formed the corner stone of her strategy. I suppose I could have gone to see the Count behind her back. But with what I now

recognize to have been a misplaced sense of loyalty I refused to allow myself any such underhanded manoeuvre. And so things went on very much as before, except that I was no longer able to accept the case against the family. And already these reservations began to place a strain on my relations with Margaret. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, I began to feel the counterweight of Margaret's jealous presence drawing Ananda into a new alignment, another gravitational field.

And then one evening, quite unexpectedly, the door reopened on our intimacy—just as though the intervening months had never transpired, as though we had stepped sure-footedly from one stone to another without getting caught in the dismal current of the river. Or should I say that the door half-opened and then was closed on us again. Perhaps it is a sign of our fallen condition that we should be limited to these glimpses of perfection. And perhaps it is better that these visitations should be of limited duration, leaving images of loveliness which are never made stale by repetition. But I anticipate.

I had been invited that evening to go out to the theatre with Ananda, her mother and another friend of theirs. But when I arrived at the apartment Ananda was still in her dressing gown. She told me she was not feeling well. Margaret wanted to stay in to look after her daughter. But Ananda insisted that they had no right to disappoint their friend. And so I was delegated to keep an eye on the patient instead.

Margaret left and I returned to Ananda's room. She had seated herself beside her bed and was going through the motions of reading. I asked her if she would like me to put on a record for her. 'If you like,' was all I got in the way of a response.

'What would you like to hear?'

'Oh, anything. It doesn't really matter.'

I glanced through her collection and pulled out a symphony by Nielsen. The first. A good humoured work which, I thought, might help to put her in a better mood. But the music had only gone a few bars into the *Allegro* when she laid down her book and looked at me crossly.

'Whatever possessed you to choose that record?'

'I thought it might help to cheer you up.'

'But that's not what I want.'

'How was I supposed to know?'

'Why don't you ever know what I want?' she demanded angrily.

I was tempted to reply in the same intemperate manner. Instead, I merely asked her what she wanted.

'Sibelius perhaps. Or Mahler. Yes, I'd like to listen to the *Kindertötenlieder*.'

'All that gloomy bile?'

'That's exactly what I want.' I glanced at her, smiling, hoping my smile would tease her into a compatible response. But her face retained its stern composure.

'All right.' I changed the records and was just about to sit down when Ananda interrupted. 'Oh, and while you're up, perhaps you'd get me a glass of water.'

I went to the kitchen and filled a glass. By the time I got back she had re-immersed herself in her book. I placed the glass on the shelf above her head and sat down. She continued reading for a while, then glanced up at me again.

'I'd like a drink.'

'The glass is right above your head.'

'Bring it to me, please.'

'Try reaching up.'

She scowled at me. 'I told you I wanted a drink.'

I didn't answer for a good half minute. She was on the point of repeating her instructions when I broke in. 'I'm not your servant you know.'

'Perhaps you've forgotten,' she answered sarcastically. 'I'm supposed to be ill.'

'If you want to be.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

'I mean, you've made up your mind to be ill.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'First your mother. And now you.'

I suppose I had been probing for the nerve. Even so I was not prepared for the bolt of rage which lifted her clean out of bed and onto the floor beside me. 'How dare you!'

I looked up at her from my chair, looked up to confront a towering column of rage. She was obviously beside herself and yet entirely collected, as cool as the blue at the very centre of a flame. It was the sort of spectacle before which one either cowers or giggles. I chose to giggle, only to feel the whip lash of a slap across my cheeks.

I stood up slowly. 'If you do that again, I'll hit you back.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Just try me.'

She struck again. But a moment after the blow had landed I hit her back with the flat of my hand, much harder than I had intended. The blow sent her reeling onto her bed where she lay hunched up, her head in her hands. I remained unmoving for a moment, horrified by what had taken place. A moment later and I was kneeling on the bed beside her, stammering my apologies, only to find her doing the same by me, an exhibition of apologetics which, if it had been viewed by some third party must have appeared ridiculous, the two of us muttering over and over again 'I'm

so sorry. I'm so sorry'—as though each one of us was solely to blame for the hurt which had occurred. And then, somehow, the saying turned to kissing. The sounds of our apology faded, like the hiss of a red hot iron plunged into water, drowned in the salivate waters of a kiss.

'You're right,' she said at last when we reverted to words. 'I'm not feeling ill any longer.' She stood up and executed a ballet movement across the floor. 'In fact, I'm feeling better than I've felt for quite some time.'

'So.'

'So, we'll have to make the most of this evening alone together.'

Surprise and delight must have fought for control of my face. For Ananda burst into laughter before remarking. 'You look like someone whose just been told he's won the lottery.' Still cherishing the thought that she had managed to astonish me, she went to the kitchen and came back with a couple of bottles of champagne.

'They were supposed to be for a party next week. But we'll celebrate tonight instead.'

'What are we supposed to be celebrating?'

'My revival.'

'May you never have another relapse.'

So infectious was the mood of the moment that we really believed in the toast to which we drank in glass after glass of champagne. Or perhaps our state of mind had more to do with the euphoric effect of the wine, which produced in us the conviction that every wish would now be granted, and instantly, the wish having gathered within itself all the needful efficacy of action. I remember thinking how lovely she looked, clad only in her nightgown, a diaphanous garment which floated easily about her person, reproducing every movement, but a moment behind, swirls of material

following her every turn, then breasting the tide of her return, creasing into restless folds which sunk back lovingly upon her limbs.

And thus it is that I see her still, lighting the candles in the candelabrum, dancing to the music of the *Rites of Spring*, her bare feet stamping out the rhythms of renewal. I hear her laughter as the champagne cork explodes across the salon, trailing a wake of foaming wine. I taste the mellow effervescence, smell the humus of her body, milk and honey overlaid with the faintest trace of vent vert. I touch her through the silk skin of her gown, the curve of her legs, her waist, her arms, the breasts pressing gently but insistently against the hollows of my chest. Desire rises in her eyes again, crouching in the quicks like a hungry cat. The prickly taste of her lips still fizzing with the froth of champagne, curious half-articulate sounds, between laughter and crying, tense relief, the reach of bodies encircling each other, englobing each other, the most primal act of incorporation, protoplasm spreading itself around, assimilating the other within the circuit of its self.

We retreated to her bed, that great four-poster with its peacock canopy, slipped between the sheets, lay naked at each other's side. We were wondrously still and curiously silent, lying unmoving side by side as though this outward immobility set the scene for whatever intensity we might feel within, each moment stretching out indefinitely across a timeless screen, full and yet frozen to the inestimable consistency of a dream. Indeed, we were almost dreaming, eyes half-closed, feeling each other's presence by senses other than those that opened onto the world, locked into worlds of our own which somehow interlocked, gliding smoothly through the ethereal medium of projection, gliding, gliding silently until ... that ring.

A rasp of sound which hardly registered at first, or was registered not as a sound but as a shock, a boulder flung into a placid pool, dispatching shock waves out in ever-widening circles. Another ring. The sound shattering our collective dream into separate realities. The sound of a key turning in the lock. Ananda upright in her bed, startled into vigilance. Footsteps in the hallway. The door to the bedroom turns, swings open. Through the curtains, collected back in their velvet rings, framed in the satin aperture, Margaret, standing, one hand poised upon the handle, the other thrusting back against the doorway, her arms outstretched in an angry semaphore.

'What on earth do you two think you're doing?'

'Maman.' Ananda's voice, surprisingly collected, a still centre at the heart of violent waves of aggravation. 'I didn't hear you knock. '

'I might have known.' Margaret off now on a tangent, set in a trajectory of her own, beyond the reach of persuasion. 'Thank God I came back early.'

'Maman. This is my bedroom.'

Margaret took a step inside the room and closed the door behind her. A slam, with much more menace in it than anything she had said thus far. 'You don't have the sense you were born with.'

'I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.' Ananda's voice, plugged full of holes, muffled slightly as she pulled her nightgown over her head.

'After getting yourself knocked-up once already?'

'And having my baby stolen from me.'

'It would have killed you.' The way Margaret said this was just too automatic to be altogether unpremeditated. A rehearsed reply? If so the wrong one, as she must have recognized herself when she added, hastily. 'Anyway, you

weren't even married.'

'Neither were you.'

'That was different.'

'The difference is, we love each other.'

The lilted emphasis which Ananda sprung upon the 'we' caught Margaret's attention. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'You know very well.'

'How could you think such a thing?'

'Think what?' The innocence was entirely feigned.

'That I and Georges, that we ...'

'Now, Maman.' Ananda's voice had a firmness to it which was slightly threatening. 'Would you kindly leave my room.'

'What are you trying to tell me. That I never loved your father?' There was a whimper in Margaret's tone of voice that seesawed uncertainly at a point of balance, capable of falling either way, into tears of rage or tears of sorrow.

Ananda picked up a brush, a long-handled hairbrush with an ivory backing. She started brushing her hair, a gesture of deliberate disengagement.

'Please, Maman.'

'What do you think I was after? The family heirlooms? I'd have done better to stay right where I was in sunny California.'

Ananda continued brushing, the familiar gesture, her head way down, brushing the hair down, downward toward the ground. The noli contendere with which she ignored her mother appeared to infuriate Margaret all the more. 'Well, tell me. Let me hear it. From my own daughter.'

Ananda's head came up and she brushed the hair away from her eyes before she resumed. 'I think it's best you went

back to your room.'

'Is this all I get after all I've had to put up with. For you. On account of your damned family.'

'Maman.' The one word whistled through the air, a whiplash cracking Margaret out of her attitude of bland defiance. Never before had I seen the touch of Bonne Maman in Ananda. But now I saw it, sensed it, not only in her voice but in the alignment of her body, the hairbrush held out threateningly before her, the face tilted upward, the scimitar of her nose unsheathed.

Her mother must have sensed it too. For she looked up, unbelieving. Her legs puckered under her and she tumbled clumsily into a chair, letting her face fall sideways into her hands. She shuddered, a long, slow shudder that ran right through her from head to toe, remained suspended for a moment, then gave herself up unashamedly to tears.

Ananda held back for a while. Then she put the hair brush back upon the dresser and stepped across to the huddled figure, her two hands massaging the sloping shoulders of her mother. 'I think it's best you went back to your room.'

Margaret made no response at first, seemed not to have noticed her daughter's comforting displacement. She continued crying, quietly, to herself. Then, with an abruptness which was all the more impressive for being so entirely unexpected, she flung one accusing arm out in my direction.

'Out!,' she screamed, her voice erupting like explosive. 'Get him out of here. Out! Out!' She was breathing heavily now, her rib cage flying up and down like pterodactyl wings. There was nothing left for me to say, nothing that would not have simply added fuel to the flaming pyre of her fury.

'It's time I left,' I said, not to Margaret but to Ananda,

hearing my voice coming out of me like an alien force, hopelessly detached from my intentions, ludicrously far removed from any possibility of execution, given my nakedness. I thought of releasing the curtains from their velvet rings, thereby transforming the bed into a sort of beach hut in which I could make myself respectable again. But this contrivance proved unnecessary. For by now Ananda had raised her mother to her feet and was escorting her out of the room. I heard their footsteps dragging down the parqué corridor, the slither of Ananda's slippers, the scraping sounds of her mother's booted feet. As soon as they were gone, I hopped out of bed and began to dress as quickly as I could. But all of a sudden a familiar, almost automatic, operation had become incredibly complicated. The buttons of my shirt seemed to have swelled to bulbous knobs which were far too large for the holes. My tie was nowhere to be found. And the laces of one shoe were tied so inextricably that the knot resisted my every effort, becoming all the more intransigent as I strained.

Finally, I was ready to leave. Ananda was waiting for me in the hall. Mechanically, I started to say goodnight. But she looked so forlorn as she stood by the door, one hand laid upon the latch, looking down at the wooden floor, that I hesitated, unwilling to let the course of events end on such a discordant note. But she had already anticipated my objection. Laying her free hand upon my shoulder she insisted: 'Please not tonight. Ring me in the morning.'

The front door closed behind me. I wanted to leave. But the dead weight of my body held me back. I felt the need to reassemble all the various parts of myself which had been dislodged. Instead of walking down the remaining flight, I sat myself down on the topmost step. The silence was unnerving, attesting to Ananda's stance behind the door.

I pictured her as immobile as myself, standing, with one hand still upon the latch. The picture fractured in my mind, like a reflection in waters that have been disturbed. The sound of footsteps, voices raised in argument, one accusing while the other protests, obscure at first, then sounding through, the odd phrase sticking, stirring the confusion, blurred, fixed like items in a family album, 'you didn't go too far did you', 'every man's the same, only wants his way' ... The clichés of a loveless ethics, detectives visiting the scene of crimes, questioning, forestalling the suspect's getaway.

I raised myself to my feet and let myself down the dozen steps which led to the courtyard, leaning heavily like a cripple against the iron railing. On reaching the street I turned to the left and wandered aimlessly along the rue de l'Université. Then, following the whim of a light which beckoned greenly at me, I turned left again towards the river.

Even before I got to the quai, I found myself drawn by a cry, a cry which welled up out of loneliness but which still defied, which wrote its challenge across the unchangeable face of things. An old, gray bearded clochard was squatting on the quai, head now sunk upon his chest, now rearing up to fling this sound at the passers-by. Empty bottles stood on either side of him, beacons marking the spot on which he had elected to take his stand against the world. The wine had locked him into his mind. He no longer felt the cold or the hardness of the paving stones; his hunger or the itching scabs which thrived like weeds in the dunghill of his body. He could hear nothing but his own brutal sounds, see nothing but these errant shadows crossing the screen of his hostility, the shadows of a humanity that he had lost and was lost to them as a forest loses its trees. He lifted his head and

hurled at them his lifelong hurt, his loathing. And yet I was strangely grateful to him, grateful that amidst these signs of his own extremity he should still find the courage to protest. And it was his voice which encouraged me still when I walked down the steps to the water's edge to catch a glimpse of myself, gazing out of the ruffled waters, dark and oily, treacherous and yet a friend, each dimpled vortex of the waves kissing the air, whirls of water curling down to invite a body to their depths. It was his voice which made me fear my affinity, made me tear my eyes away and grope along the bank until at last I stumbled into a tree. I flung my arms around the trunk and something of the strength of this massive tree impressed itself, this tree slow-growing through the years, surviving each winter of its life, the little death that it dies many times in the certitude of rebirth, something of its tenacity helped me to come to terms with myself, reminded me of the day-to-day, the usual course of events.

I remembered that I had been invited to a party at the Albert Chatelet student centre on the rue Jean Calvin. The invitation had almost slipped my mind. For I had intended to spend the evening with Ananda. But now the promise of warmth and wine, the prospect of forgetfulness prompted me to join the company of my fellows. The party was being held on the top floor of the glass and concrete structure which housed the office of student affairs. As I reached the top of the stairs, a door opened and my senses were assailed— music and a jolly blast of voices, the heavy cloying smell of sweat and cigarettes. Smoke blurred the edge of bodies as they clasped and parted, stamped and swivelled to the rhythms of the dance. I wanted to join in but found I could not muster the party spirit. And then my desolate expression was conveyed back to me by a girl who

laughingly danced by, one finger pointed in my direction. 'Quelle tête, celle-là. Quelle belle gueulle désespérée.'

And so I opted out, watched from the side, drank a glass of the fortified punch and then another and another.

The punch begins to take effect. A stupid torpor clogs my mind, the stifling congestion of my lungs, relieved by a waft of air which drifts in from the balcony, through a glass panelled door, a sliding door drawn back upon itself. I manoeuvre across the obstructed space, slip through the door, away from the crowd, to stand alone, at last, beneath the stars. A strong wind blows, shepherding flocks of wayward clouds across the meadow of the sky. The building rocks, in the teeth of the wind a full moon shines, blazing a pathway to the ground, moonbeams studding the darkened space, pearls in the necklace of the night's embrace, around her face, round and round, roaring rivers in my head, my limbs like down, climbing up the parapet, remotely grasping bodies fall, but faith to overcome it all, the faith to walk on waters, yes, the faith to reach the face that shines so sweetly down on me. I come, am coming, on and on.

Fingers tangle with my feet, hands grip my waist and haul as I fall, fall backward into their arms.

Chapter Eight

'Feeling,' Robert wrote in a letter he addressed to me soon after I arrived in Heidelberg, 'feeling is not the effect of life but the legacy of reflection. For in the actual course of life, feeling goes directly over into action, so much so that it loses itself in the action which is its natural outcome.'

Prophetic words, prophetic words indeed, words which already prefigured the outcome of our separation. For this separation brought about a disconnection which let our feelings stand out on their own. Separation forced from us these letters in which we first took the measure of our feeling for each other. But at what a cost?

And yet it would not have been easy to avoid this separation. The scholarship which took me to Germany for a year was an opportunity I could ill afford to pass up. But the meagre student's allowance was barely enough to meet my needs, let alone those of a partner. And then Margaret had become strangely ambivalent of late. The marriage which she had seemed to want to precipitate before now hung inconclusively in the sky, a barren cloud which would neither float away nor yet redeem its promise. Ananda was too young, I had to have a job. She even invoked the authority of her husband, the devil suddenly summoned forth to give evidence on her behalf (though I doubt whether he was ever actually consulted). Certainly, she made no attempt to appeal to the wishes of her parents-in-law. Indeed it might well have been their declared approval

which provoked her change of mind, the right direction always being the very opposite of the one in which they pointed. I might have stayed on in Paris if Margaret had not already made up her mind to leave. But she had had enough of the tensions and frustrations of life in the city, in the vicinity of the family.

It had always been agreed that Ananda would go to Britain for her University education. And since Margaret's ancestors on one side of her family had come from Ireland, it seemed reasonable enough that the two of them should go to Dublin, where Ananda would be able to complete her advanced level requirements and prepare for her University entrance examination.

And so we parted, but not before we had committed ourselves to writing the letters which would maintain the link between us, letters we had never had to write before. Re-reading these letters now in the solitude of my attic room, it has dawned on me that we were not simply continuing what had been before, by other means. Rather, we were starting all over again, as though our former proximity had dulled the edge of discrimination.

Life began to reproduce the indirect itinerary of literature, re-enacting itself upon a plane which was dictated by our remoteness from each other.

Here is Ananda's first letter to me, still smelling faintly of vent vert. For often she would sprinkle a few drops of the evocative fluid upon her pages, preparing the blank sheets for her words as a muralist might prepare his wall. At the head of this, as of most of the other letters, she has written the words: 'mon bien aimé'—just as though this quaint endearment were the exact equivalent of my name.

Dublin, Oct. 15th

Mon bien aimé

I am afraid, terribly afraid of losing you. You had become so much a part of my life in Paris that I never stopped to think what it might be like to live without you. And yet here I am, sleeping, waking, working—without you. And I survive. This is what surprises me most. Your absence does not seem to matter as much as I thought it would.

Perhaps it is because I am so very busy. Or because you are still there after all, not so very far away, months instead of minutes, weeks instead of days. Or it may be because I don't really need you as much as I thought I would. Perhaps I'm quite happy to be on my own. Now that you have been reduced to silence, I can dwell on the things you used to say. I can feel for you now in my own way and in my own good time.

Could it be that I am becoming a little complacent, a little set in my ways? Certainly the life I lead is quite monotonous. But I have no reason to complain. After all the extraordinary things I have been through, I am beginning to appreciate the restfulness of ordinary happenings. Would you understand if I told you that I need this pasture, this backwater set away from the mainstream of events?

And then, at times, I have been beset by doubts. I ask myself if it would not be better for me, for you, for both of us, if we were simply to cherish what has been. Why stir the settled sediment of so many joyous memories? Can we ever recapture the freshness of our earliest days, when I was alive and full of vigour. Now that I am but a vestige of my former self your own vitality seems to cast a mournful shadow over me.

And so I let the weeks go by without writing to you, almost relishing the odd sense of control which I derived from my little bit of surplus knowledge, the fact that I had an

address to write to you in Heidelberg while you had no idea where to write to me in Dublin. You must have been driven nearly frantic by my callous silence, which you had done nothing to deserve. You may even have thought that I had managed to put you out of mind. Well, if I tried, it was only because I knew I would fail. You have remained with me like a pair of well-worn spectacles, sitting so closely upon my nose that I was often hardly aware of you. And yet, everything I see, I see through you.

But I am glad I waited. For I have given myself the time to reassemble you out of the cloudy residue of memory. And now at last you stand before me, conjured up like a djin fresh from his bottle. Now I know that I want you back more than ever before. So write to me soon. Please write to me. Let me see your ungainly hand stretched out across an envelope addressed to me.

Heidelberg, Oct. 20th

My dearest Ananda

Merciless tormentor, skilled in the art of slow torture! How you have lengthened me on the rack of your pitiless silence, not even hearing my screams. At last I can rush to your side with a letter.

It is difficult to believe that this is the very first letter I have ever written to you. But of course there was no reason to write before. Just a few numbers on a dial, numbers I shall never forget as long as I live, and there you were. Even now it is as much as I can do to keep myself from the phone. Only this time it wouldn't be a local call. And remembering how long we used to stay on the phone in Paris, I know that if ever I got into this routine my entire stipend would be donated to the telephone company.

But how I miss you—or at least I think I do. For, like

yourself, my first reaction, prompted by your silence, was to try to forget you, get on with my work as best I could. And then, just a few days ago, I had to go back to Paris to collect a few books, enrol at the Faculté de Droit and make some arrangements for my return next year. And when I had done what I had come to do I found I had an afternoon and an evening to kill before the night train back to Heidelberg. So I walked around the city—a very sentimental journey, I can assure you. I walked past your apartment—and how could it possibly be that you were not there to welcome me. And the little café in the rue Jacob where you are so well known. The patron wanted all your news. And then in comes a most imposing gentleman for his afternoon tea, a high official from the Ministry of Justice, no less. And the patron tells him all about you, and of course he knows your Uncle. And at the little tabac where you used to buy your copy of *le Monde*, the same again. And so on throughout the whole afternoon. At the Museums, the Libraries and the Galleries they all knew you and wanted to know all about you, where you were and how you were getting along. So that I kept on finding you wherever I went, finding this ghostly presence of yourself which so haunts the streets I love that I hardly know how to separate them all from you.

By the end of the evening I was in such a state that it was as much as I could do to get myself to the station. I had been drinking a little and thinking a lot, as you can imagine. I had expected to be miserable and instead I found myself rejoicing at the thought that you are as permanent and as readily accessible as Paris itself. Like this city, you lie in the fallows of my mind, simply waiting to be unearthed.

Now I am back again at the student hostel in Heidelberg. I have been very lucky to get a room at the Collegium Akademicum—the only student hostel right in the centre of the old town. My friends are all in the bar downstairs, drinking, talking, enjoying each other's company. In a few moments I shall go down and join them. But for the

moment I prefer to stay up here and abide with you. I even have a glass of good white German wine to drink your health. Perhaps this separation will bring us closer together after all. For we shall have to create our closeness now by coming to understand each other *in absentio*. So that when I see you again I shall be able to recognize not only the person but the soul, that diffuse, elusive but unchanging essence of yourself that I shall always love as I already do love you.

Dublin, Oct. 26th.

Mon bien aimé

I have been working very hard these past few days. For I have a whole series of advanced level examinations coming up quite soon. And I have every intention of doing well. You will be proud of me I promise you. But you can have no idea how difficult it has been. At school it was easy. But then at St Dominique's there was the discipline, the long uninterrupted hours of study. Then I left school to look after Maman. Life became chaotic. Finally, just when I thought I had my life under control, largely thanks to you—this diabetes. Yes, I am afraid my diabetes has been playing up again. What a disease! Never well, and never really ill either. If I didn't stick to my regimen I would be dead within the week. But with the aid of injections I manage to stay alive, kept alive by the resources of medical science. Sometimes I feel I don't own my body any more. It seems to have a life of its own which goes on more or less independently of me, except that each sickening relapse carries me down with it, till I pray for release. I have come to understand so well the other-worldly longing of the Christian mystics, longing to discard this earthly shell, longing for the awaited flight of the soul. Theresa d'Avilla for example, dying to die in order that she should finally begin to live.

I should also say that my frailty made me feel somewhat ambivalent towards you. Whether you intended it or not, I couldn't help feeling that you were judging me, condemning me for not living up to your expectations. Sometimes I would reach out to touch you only to cut myself on the edges of your intellect. Whenever I saw you locked away in the fastness of your mind, so remote, so secure, I would want to drag you down into my world, force you too to go through the agony and the ecstasy which comes from being me. For my world is a world of images and impressions, a tumultuous world which I cannot hold at bay as you seem able to do, a world which strikes right through to the core of myself, which strips me of my autonomy.

I wonder whether you really know me as well as you think you do.

Heidelberg, Nov. 2nd.

My dearest Ananda

Perhaps you are right when you say that I do not know you as well as I thought I did. The impression you made on me was so immediate and so complete that I assumed I knew you from the first, knew all about you. But now that I have known you quite some time I find that I am constantly discovering new facets of your personality. For example, I now know why you were always asking me what was on my mind. But if I sometimes kept my thoughts to myself it was certainly not to shut you out, simply to spare you the tedium of a problem in Contract Law or a point of Civil Defence, some dull assignment which I was working on at the time. So there really was no need for you to be annoyed with me. Indeed, you often used to infuriate me by being so self possessed, so much in command of yourself. Perhaps this is what attracted me to you at first—the inviolate space which

you contrived to wrap around yourself. But which brought with it the consoling thought that if you were just a little inaccessible to me, how much more inaccessible you must have seemed to those who envied me my intimacy.

Now, of course, I trust you are even more inaccessible than before, especially to those admiring young men who must be clamouring at your door. Now I have the very best of reasons for encouraging you with your studies. Nothing could be more reassuring than the thought of your lovely head stuck deep inside a book, working for the exams which you will certainly succeed in passing—brilliantly.

Dublin, Nov. 8th.

Mon bien aimé

In the midst of all the turmoil and uncertainty of dislocation your letters come as a such a relief—your support, your faith in me at a time when I need it most. My stomach has been turning somersaults and my blood sugar levels have been fluctuating so alarmingly that even my mother—who has become something of an expert in the regulation of my internal economy—now has the greatest difficulty with my diet and injections.

How I envy you your independence, your commitment to what you are doing. The future must look so settled, so predictable—your studies, leading up to your qualification, leading up to employment in the field of your choice. Sometimes it even seems to me that you have sealed yourself up into a course of life so regular and so complete that you have hardly left a crack for me to slip in through. If only I could see my life in such straightforward terms. But when I look back at myself, all I see is a nebulous miasma, a mirage spun out of a sticky cobweb of relations. Am I French or American? Rich or poor? Do I have to make my way in life

or is marriage supposed to provide the river bed through which the waters of my life will flow? And these are not just options which confront me from without. Rather they are so many internal conflicts, conflicts which consume me and which cast my ashes to the winds.

Were we too young, too young to know what it could really mean to be in love, not just to play at loving one another but to make a final, irrevocable commitment? Before you arrived on the scene I was a child. And now? Well now I feel as though I have been thrown into a maturity for which I was not at all prepared. What happened to my adolescence, those carefree days a girl is supposed to enjoy before taking on the responsibilities of womanhood?

Sometimes I feel like opting out altogether, withdrawing to some safe haven set off from the world. 'Get thee to a nunnery,' said Hamlet to Ophelia—in cruel jest I do admit. But that very thought has crossed my mind more than once. Except that in my case religion is just another area of conflict. As you know, my mother never stops making fun of the Catholicism of my family. And so I was never brought up within the framework of the church. Rarely, oh so rarely did I go to Mass, and then only in the early days when my mother was still married. But I cannot tell you how many delirious hours I have spent by myself in St Germain or St Sulplice or St Severin or even in Our Lady of Paris (how odd it sounds in English!), usually in the evening, after dark, not praying so much as breathing in the prayer-laden air, not speaking so much as listening—to the silence, to the funny little noises which a building breeds, and to the organ. Oh the glory of that instrument, when the sound bursts out of silence and fractures the colossal solidity of the dark. The majesty of Bach, as calm and as purposeful as the hand of God. I even got to know the organist at St Germain. And he would take me with him when he practised late at night, long after the church had been closed. I would listen down below while Fugues and Toccatas ruled the space in which I

was enclosed.

Strange to change places and languages and acquaintances and yet find one thing the same—the Catholic church. Semper Fidelis, they say of the Irish, and with good reason too. Of course, my mother loves to make fun of them. The 'Whisky Christians' she likes to call them. But she is more tolerant of Irish Catholics, if only because they're not French. There is a Father McGrath who runs the local church in the rather middle-class neighbourhood in which we live. And he has taken my spiritual welfare into his hands. So now I do go to Mass from time to time—with my mother's blessing. I wrote to my Grandfather to tell him about my 'conversion'—though conversion is the wrong word really, since I neither left the church before nor am I entering it now. As you can imagine, he was absolute delighted. It has helped to reconcile him to our departure which has, I think, been a matter of grave concern to him. Though, with all his aristocratic reserve, he would never say anything to this effect. In his own discrete and delicate way I think he understands that we had to leave, for my mother's sake.

And as for my mother, you would hardly recognize her now. Away from France she has become another person altogether—happier, healthier. She has even managed to put on a little weight. If only for her sake, I have to be glad we came away from Paris.

Heidelberg, Nov. 14th.

My dearest Ophelia

No matter what Hamlet might have said, I want you to know that there is one person who would be most disappointed should you ever decide to 'get thee to a nunnery'. Too young! How could we possibly be too young? Because we

are young, all we have to do is hold on, remain true to each other and Father Time, at his own relentless pace, will do all that needs to be done for us. Now if we were too old, that would be another story altogether.

And how could you be so contrary as to praise and condemn with the same word 'independence'. Surely you can see that my so-called independence is also the outgrowth of a set of relationships, the very different set of relationships in which my life took root—or rather failed to take root. If I have become at all independent it is only because my dependencies turned out to be traps in which I got caught, again and again, until I became a little sly, like an old grey fox, and learned to avoid the snares. No, if independence means anything to me it means the freedom to choose the persons on whom I will depend—not persons thrust upon me by sheer force of circumstance but soul companions and mates. On these, the select circle of my friends, my dependence will always be as great as my dependence upon myself. If I have anything at all to offer you it is due to what you call my independence. For I can give you no more than what I have discovered in myself, by turning towards myself, away from the attractions and distractions of the common world.

One of the rewards of learning German is that it brings you into contact with so many exponents of the 'world within'—Goethe, Rilke, Nietszche, Thomas Mann—so different and yet so entirely in agreement on this one point: the supreme value of the world within. How they would bewail our presumptuous disregard for personal cultivation. How they would ridicule the puny efforts of modern man to extend his sway all over the planet—and even beyond it. We are creatures of this earth and so perfectly adapted to it by nature that it is most unlikely we will ever find another world in which we could live naturally. And yet we like to call this the 'space age', the age in which mankind proudly celebrates the crossing of the last frontier. And in the name

of this adventure we construct engines which could just as well be used to destroy the planet. Could it be that space fiction and the futile, fragile toys which we throw out into the void are only the symbols of our fear to turn the other way and explore the world within? Perhaps we only reach out into the void to ignore another void—the void which we bring into ourselves by turning away from ourselves towards the world?

Paradoxically enough, it may well be under the protective cover of that great mushroom cloud which we already prefigure in our eschatological imaginations that we shall work out our salvation, fearful of the catastrophe which would befall us if we failed.

Dublin, Nov. 20th

Mon bien aimé

The postman is fast becoming one of my best friends. Whenever I see him walking down the street, I scuttle out across the lawn to collect your letter just a little before he would bring it to me himself. You should see how he teases me at times, reckoning out the other dull epistles while I wait in a jitter of impatience for the only letter which really matters. Then he mutters something about another letter —from Germany perhaps?—and where could he have possibly put it, before he finally produces it, with a flourish, from beneath his postman's hat. I could murder him for keeping you from me for two whole minutes.

Oh, and by the way, now that you are in Germany you should try and get hold of some of Rudolf Steiner's works—a fascinating combination of Eastern mysticism and Catholicism. For a while he was associated with the Theosophists. But he then went to found his own alternative school of esoteric knowledge, which he called

Anthroposophy.

My mother has been looking for another house. She cannot stand the smug, middle-class neighbourhood in which we now live. However, I have nothing to complain about myself. The house is nice enough. Three up, three down. We each have our own little room and there is a spare room for guests to spend the night. My own room even has a pale blue bathroom attached, with birds and butterflies inscribed all over the walls. When I take a bubble bath I feel as if I were floating in the heavens.

There is also a garden behind with a rose bed, a vegetable plot, a lawn and one vast chestnut which so overshadows everything else that it's a miracle anything grows at all. But I love that chestnut—a great, grave presence, so well established and so strong. Food for squirrels and a home for birds, a sort of city in the sky, held up on massive piles of living fibre. It is also used by sundry boys as a training ground in which they monkey around for hours on end, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Man has long since descended from the trees. I can only pray that they are still as agile as their ancestors used to be and don't fall out and break their necks.

One of the boys is feeling very sorry for himself. His parents are getting divorced. They live just down the road and to all appearances they made a perfect couple. Georges and Mary. They seemed so attached to each other that the one name immediately conjured up the other. Could it be that they have been playing a game over all these years, the game of the happily married couple, and so storing up for themselves a smouldering reserve of animosity? At any rate, now they are hardly on speaking terms. And what can I say to David, the little boy whom they both adore? That he should take one side or the other? Or ignore them both and try to go his separate way? Or pretend that nothing has actually changed? In the end I know there is really nothing I can say or do. For it does not seem to be anybody's fault, just

one of those things which happens but which, when it happens, changes the whole course of a life.

At times I fear we are living in an age of disintegration. Everything is falling apart, in spite of ourselves. And there is nothing we can do about it because we are hardly aware of what is going on. Like radioactive fallout, we breathe in this disintegration day by day, quite unawares, until, of a sudden, we start getting sick. And the sickness spreads and spreads until it has such a hold on us we know we must die but still without ever really knowing why.

Oh, my dearest, we must hold together, you and I. And perhaps if here and there, across the ocean of estrangement, little islands of communion do thrust up and stand out against the elements, perhaps then this process can be reversed. Perhaps then there can be restoration of the family, of humanity through the family. With every child a new beginning. Hope!

Heidelberg, Nov. 20th.

My dearest Ananda

Just recently I have been getting involved with student politics. Not much going on in Britain or even in France from what I hear. But over here in Germany there is a thriving student movement—intelligent and well informed—searching for a way between the two competing reefs of cut-throat capitalism and totalitarian communism, of untrammelled individualism and uncontrollable authoritarianism. It may all have something to do with the fact that Germany is divided, lives out this sterile opposition at the very heart of its national life. So that Germany simply has to find a way out or risk shipwreck.

At any rate there is an organization which calls itself the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS for short)

which is active in University circles. Meetings and demonstrations and that kind of thing. Not much accomplished as yet except a vigorous exchange of ideas, a change of heart which might amount to next to nothing or might be exactly what is needed to break with the past.

Above all this involvement has helped me to combat that sense of helplessness of which you speak, the feeling that there is nothing that any one of us can do, except perhaps step back and watch the slow disintegration or step in and join the dance of death.

We are like prisoners condemned to die and, in their last hours, are allowed the gratification of any wish. Instead of preparing for the end, we try to put it out of mind with senseless diversions of one kind or another. Sex, drugs, travelling and spending sprees—just so many expressions of our helplessness, of our hopelessness. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we shall destroy ourselves. And certainly, the means of accomplishing our destruction are already in place and will be used against us if we do not succeed in redirecting them towards new ends.

But who is this 'we'? Whenever I try to estimate the specifics of my life against the measuring rod of humanity I keep falling back upon a 'we', a wishful invocation of enlightened solidarity. We. Not you or I. But some collective body with whom we tend to identify ourselves and from whom we hope for some solution. Who could it be?

The politicians? We would need men of vision, whereas we only have party hacks.

The scientists? They are already so indoctrinated with positivist ideology that they can not be expected to take account of questions of value and of ultimate goals.

The church? We would need mystics and prophets, whereas, in fact, we only have either fanatics or clerics doing their job.

The lawyers? We would need men and women dedicated to the cause of justice, whereas we only have

litigants ready to take any side.

The common people? We would need active participants, whereas we only have apathetic bystanders.

No wonder we give in to the awful weight of resignation. The future is being made by others without our consent. But then there is nothing left for us to do but to be against the future that is being made, against the economics of affluence which impoverishes, against the politics of freedom which enslaves.

We students, who are both the most potent and the most impotent members of society, perhaps we have a special role to play. Invested with our health and strength we are still divested of all the instruments of control. Endowed with knowledge and intelligence, we are not yet responsible for what is being done. And we are still poor enough and powerless enough to retain something of that purity of spirit without which no solution can be found.

But first we have to overcome our isolation, reach up out of our individual wells of loneliness and make common cause. Separately we can do nothing. But together we can choose and make that choice effective.

Though really there is no choice left at all. For there are no acceptable alternatives. We can choose life or let death overtake us. But in letting death take over we will have failed to choose, failed to rise up and protest against that remorseless logic which presently rules our affairs, a logic which is already at work in the world engendering its deadly trends.

If we prolong the past into the future, there will be no future for our grandiose projections. If we live out the next fifty years as we have lived the last, we shall be murdering our children.

The path of life can no longer be taken for granted. It has already become a challenge, a way of confronting the trends. We challenge or we resign ourselves to defeat.

Dublin, Dec. 4th.

Mon bien aimé

Your letter arrived at a very bad moment, just when I was weighed down with depression—though depression is the wrong word for a state of mind which drives me to such frenetic outbursts of activity, as though I thought I could keep the sadness back by simply stepping up the pace. But even sadness misses the mark. For sadness comes and goes, while this thing stays. Like a great black shadow it squats upon my shoulders, grimacing. And yet, I am always able to maintain appearances. So much so that hardly anyone suspects the presence of this ghastly gargoyle.

Even in a state of bleak despair I can still manage to fake a face to meet the faces that I meet. So serene, so graceful, so assured—that is the kind of thing 'they' say. But then they also say that the eyes are the windows of the soul. So how could they fail to see the anguish and the turmoil which lurks within. But then, on the other hand, it is also something of a relief to know that only my closest and dearest friend has any inkling of the icy desolation which I sometimes sense at the centre of myself.

Maman went out for the evening leaving me here at home, alone. I was quite beside myself at first, until I picked up my pen just a minute or so ago. But now that you are with me I feel reassured. I could write and write and write but will not do so for fear of downing your enthusiasm with my negativity. Yes, I suppose we have to keep on trying, striving towards the light as they are wont to say. But at times such as these I really wonder whether it matters what happens to the wrong-headed species to which I have the dubious privilege of belonging.

Just look at the history of the human race. An unending record of bloodshed and brutality, a record which we love to grace with the name of heroism, patriotism, revolutionary

commitment and the like. What good have we ever brought upon this earth which could outweigh our harmfulness? What could be more fitting than that we should be judged and condemned, condemned to be our own executioners.

The only thinker who consoles me when I fall into one of these pessimistic moods is Sri Aurobindo, the Indian sage whose life and work I told you about in Paris. Remember? Just recently I managed to get a copy of the *Life Divine* from the city library and I have been re-reading it. The idea of a spiritual evolution is nothing new. Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin were already on this track, to name only two. But a spiritual involution?

A descent of the Divine through those of us whose spiritual development has reached the right point—so we become the means by which pure Spirit works its way out in the world. I think this is something truly astounding. An idea which could not have been conceived before and which has perhaps come just in time to guide us through the close of the millennium.

Before I bring this letter to an end, I should say that I had hoped to be able to invite you over for Christmas. But Maman has decided to spend Christmas in New York. And, obviously, I could not let her go off by herself. She has relations in the Bronx who have invited her to stay with them. When she wrote to Bon Papa to let him know her plans he sent the address of some other relations of Bonne Maman—fearfully rich I'm afraid—who live somewhere in the vicinity of Central Park.

So it will be a study in contrasts, meeting these two sides of my family. In my next letter, which will come to you from New York, I shall let you know how we have been getting along in the new world.

New York, Dec. 14th.

Mon bien aimé

So here we are in New York. What a city. Heaven and Hell rolled into one! A seething cauldron of cultures—Irish, Italian, Jewish, Greek—mostly living in their own localities but overlapping, intermingling—an exotic soup which boils and bubbles, throwing up waves of grace and aggravation. A gourmet's paradise. But not because the Americans have developed their own cuisine to a high point of perfection, as have the French, but rather because every imaginable cuisine is so well represented. And then, alongside these tasty exhibitions of the culinary arts, those awful concessions to the vulgarity of the modern world: the hamburger and the hot dog stands, essential carbohydrates swallowed down in tasteless haste to keep the engines of the body running.

And the arts. Opera and Ballet as good as anything you will find elsewhere. Theatre which bears comparison with London. The Galleries. The French would not admit as much, but the centre of the art world does seem to have moved over to New York. And yet my sympathies are still with the French. For there is something terribly disturbing about these new world canvasses, a chaos barely under control. After submitting to them for an hour or two I feel totally oppressed. I long once again for the settled tranquillity of a Monet or a Cezanne, the intense but lucid energy of a Van Gogh.

New York has much in common with Paris. The same stupendous rush of energy, the same invigorating tension. But unlike Paris this tension is borne along a current of physical violence. In Paris they shout at you or ignore you, but you never feel threatened in your person. Paris is a battle of nerves where defeat is rarely signalled by anything worse than a nervous break-down. In Paris the young men ogle and hustle but I always felt I could talk my way out of trouble.

But here, the men and women pass each other by, their eyes averted, as if the simple and relatively innocent overture of the look were already more than could be accommodated. And perhaps they are right. For the look, when it comes, is already deadly in intent, the look of a hunter stalking his prey.

It happened to me a couple of times. I got this look and knew that it had nothing to do with amorous play. I knew what it felt like to be singled out and hunted down. I knew that nothing stood between me and rape but the other people by whom I was surrounded—people who, I am sure, had not the faintest conception of my predicament but who, by simply being there, shielded me from something whose bare ferocity amazed and astounded me. On one occasion I even turned to talk to 'him', and saw in his eyes what I never thought could exist entirely on its own: sex, bare and unadorned, without a trace of feeling or compassion. A blind, raw act of appropriation. I spoke to him and he refused to respond. Nothing of the gallantry of the French roué, nothing flirtatious about it at all. Just those razor eyes which bored right through me, wanted to cut me up into little shreds. I caught a taxi and left him standing on the sidewalk.

I am afraid I have no address to give you for the moment. We are staying at a hotel because there is no room with my mother's relations. However they expect to be able to make room for us before too long. Or we might even be invited to stay with my other relatives on Fifth Avenue. I will let you know.

New York, Dec. 20th.

Mon bien aimé

I told you Bon Papa had given us the name of some relations on his wife's side of the family. Well, Maman wouldn't have anything to do with them. But she thought it might be fun for me to find out who they were and what they were up to. It all turned out to be more extravagant than I had expected. The Steins are financiers—extremely rich. Wall street wizards who are wedded to Dow Jones. They talk money, breathe money, eat dollars and cents, so much so that, in my humble estimation, they almost make fools of themselves. After all, you would never hear my Grandparents talking about their wealth, though admittedly they never stop talking about their aristocratic connections. So when I am with the Steins I play the game of the princess—the Jewish American Princess. They must think me an awful snob. But the more I give myself airs the more expensive the presents they buy me!

Maman's relations are completely different, a couple of kind, warm hearted Irish folk. So with them I am just the opposite, a simple country girl, naive, unpretentious, full of fun. The Kelly's are third generation and just breaking through from one side of the law to the other. Apparently Mr Kelly's father was some kind of a gangster and not too successful at it either. So Mr Kelly decided to go the other way and become a cop. He is also a first rate story teller and has countless dramas to relate about moon-shiners, gunrunners, dope peddlers and the like. I could listen to him for hours on end.

I am off to do some Christmas shopping, including, of course, a present for you. So you will have to forgive me if I cut this letter short.

New York, Dec. 30th.

Mon bien aimé

I hope your Christmas was as enjoyable as my own. We spent Christmas at the Kelly's. A very full house. For the Kellys have five children of their own. And then they invited two brothers who also brought their families along with them. So you could hardly hear yourself speak for the sound of children's voices. All those little busy bodies hard at work, tearing at the wrapping paper, clawing at the knots. And sitting in the middle of this sea of pulp, a baby, barely old enough to walk, a trifle bewildered by the fuss but beaming graciously all the same, as if it were all on his account.

As befits an Irish household, the liquor flowed in a ceaseless stream from morning to night. Indeed, it was Mr Kelly himself who remarked , *a propos* of the quantities of alcohol which were consumed: 'You can lead an Irishman to water, but you'll never get him to drink the stuff unless there's lots of whisky in it.'

Everyone was most intrigued by the present to me from Germany, especially since none of them seemed to have any very clear idea where Germany was! However, with Heidelberg I found myself on more solid ground. For one or two of the Kellys had been to see the Student Prince. So you can imagine how intrigued they were to learn that I too had my student prince.

I received the most exquisite pearl necklace from the Steins and went over to Fifth Avenue to thank them for it. They have invited me to a New Year's Ball. The evening's entertainment will include a brisk walk to Time Square to see in the New Year. I shall be thinking of you when the clock strikes twelve and wondering what the New Year holds in store for us.

New York, Jan. 7th

Mon bien aimé

It was our intention to spend a couple more weeks in New York. We were getting along so well that we thought it would be a good idea to prolong the visit. And then it happened. The mother of one of Mr Kelly's brothers—a frail old lady, gentle as a dove—assaulted in the kitchen of her own apartment. Little or nothing taken, hardly anything misplaced. Just an old lady strangled, and then raped.

Mr Kelly says this kind of thing is not so uncommon—and he should know. But the more he tried to explain, the more confused and horrified I became. Crimes for profit, crimes of passion, crimes to prevent crimes being discovered. All this I can at least comprehend. But a murder without a motive, a haphazard act of revenge against society at large, against humanity? It makes me shudder. For it could just as well be you or me or anyone else, singled out by the sheer contingency of time and place. And then one starts looking at every passer-by with grave suspicion. Could he be one of those who strikes, for no reason at all, at anyone, and so why not at me, now that I am within striking distance.

From one day to the next New York has become a different place. I had been warned already where not to go and at what times. But it was just a piece of information which I filed away without really paying attention. Besides, in the company of the Steins, I was always under the protective custody of wealth, taxis taken from place to place, security guards permanently on the watch. But now the warning has come alive, as though that frail old lady were ever at my side, living witness to a death which was not really hers, inasmuch as it might just as well have been the death of someone else.

As a result of all this we have decided to change our plans once again. We shall be leaving the day after tomorrow

and will be back in Ireland early the following morning
Be sure to write to me soon.

Heidelberg, Jan. 14th.

My dearest Ananda

I am not sure whether you are back in Ireland to receive this letter. But at least I now know that you will be there before too long. I was even afraid my gift might not get to you. But I assumed that you would be keeping in touch with the Kellys even if you were staying somewhere else.

After your adventures my Christmas here in Heidelberg seems very boring. One or two parties. But I missed you so badly that I felt quite unable to enter into the spirit of the festivities. I moped and maundered hoping that your head had not been completely turned by Stein and company.

Please bear with me if I don't have much to say. Christmas is a lonely time for those without their families. I have been consoling myself by taking long walks in the forest, up the Philosophenweg to the very roof of the mountain, from where you can look right down into the Neckar valley. A rather desolate prospect in mid-Winter but one which happened to match my mood. At times such as these, when one feels alone with others, one feels less alone by staying with oneself.

My best wishes to you and your family. Speaking of which, what has become of Catherine? She seems to have faded out of the picture altogether. I was always rather fond of the black sheep of the family.

Dublin, Jan. 20th.

Mon bien aimé

What a pleasure it is to return to a place you left behind a few weeks back. Even though I only arrived in Ireland last Summer, this going away and then coming back has had the effect of making Ireland appear quite familiar. Returning to it now, I can even think of it as home.

And what a joy to find your letter waiting for me—though I think I detect a note of envy. My student prince is worried that his princess might be making too much of an impression.

Well, I must say, I have never ceased to be amazed at the impression I can make by simply dressing up and stepping out in style. No hint of intelligence is required, no critical faculties, no vivid turn of phrase, not even a flash of vitality which is always slightly threatening to men—just this immaculate conception and the world is at your feet. The men because they are quite genuinely bedazzled, so much so that one can hardly respect them for their indiscriminating adoration; the women because they sense you are stunner and hope that a little of your glamour will brush off on them.

You can have no idea how difficult it is to establish real relations, and I don't mean love or even friendship, but simply an appreciation of those qualities which make up what is worthwhile in the soul. Not with a man, because he only sees the outward show, an object which he covets and aspires to carry off like any prize possession. Nor yet with a woman, because she only sees the impression that is made on men, an impression which she hopes to divert in her direction—by becoming your friend.

Women tend to respond to beauty in other women rather as men respond to power in men, an ambiguous relation fraught with conflict, respect and resentment, attraction and aversion, an envious adulation which feigns to

extol what it really wants to debase. Childish really. And yet women are often thought to be more mature than men. Well, they may mature earlier. But for this very reason they tend to develop less. To really grow, develop herself, a woman has to forego this facile maturity, remain the child that she was and will have to continue to be if ever she is to become a genuine person.

So you see there was really not too much for you to be concerned about. Yes, I made a marvellous impression. Yes, one or two young men did put their arms around me. We women suffer from the disadvantage that we are obliged to tolerate embraces that we don't invite. But what of that? They were only holding a shell, a decorous exterior whose resident was thousands of miles away in Heidelberg.

As for Catherine. What can I say? She rarely writes and never visits. The last I heard she was living with a man in the South of France. She has been no help to my mother. But I do believe she keeps in touch with Papa.

Heidelberg, Jan. 26th.

My dearest Ananda

I was delighted to learn that you would be returning home even earlier than I had hoped, delighted ... and horrified by the reasons for your decision.

A murder without a motive? Well, I suppose every murder has its motive, though sometimes the motive is so perverse that it hardly seems to count as such. In this case I would say it has something to do with another senseless affirmation of male superiority. We start with the natural advantage of strength and then instead of enjoying the sense of security which this advantage should have brought with it we seem to feel the need to demonstrate the reality of the advantage over and over again, even when it is not in

dispute.

But it has always been this way. In all societies throughout history there has always been a division of labour based upon a difference of strength. Man took over the functions of command—war, hunting, the accumulation of wealth and power—leaving to women the tasks of bearing children and looking after the affairs of the family at home.

But there are signs that changes are on the way. In student circles the 'liberation of women' ranks high on the agenda for discussion. I would love to know what you think.

Dublin, Feb. 1st.

Mon bien aimé

I am the last person with whom to discuss the liberation of women. For nothing in my background or upbringing has prepared me for the idea that women might be enslaved.

To start with my family. The de Villiers women have always been and will always be tyrants, ruling their family with a rod of iron. Certainly, they never went out into the world and worked. They would have regarded any such thing as quite beneath their dignity. But you may be sure that whenever a de Villiers held a position of authority—as minister, counsellor of state, superintendent, bishop, judge—the moving spirit behind the decisions which he took would have been his wife. An enviable situation; all the effective power with none of the tedious responsibility.

As a small girl I moved in two entirely contrasting circles: the working class company of my father's early years in business, and the aristocratic company of my Grandfather's invités. Like any young girl I never questioned these dramatic changes of environment but simply accepted them as a natural part of my life. In the village near Arcachon where I grew up, I mixed in and mingled with the

other boys, ran about with them, fought with them—and more than held my own. At the château I was of course outrageously spoilt, more so perhaps than I would have been if I had been a boy. In the town of Villiers I was known to all as the Granddaughter of the Count. And the peasants ('mes paysans' as Bon Papa still likes to call them, with good reason, since he does so much for them) would do anything to make me happy.

Then I went to school, where I managed to distinguish myself without too much difficulty. St Dominique's would organize dances and social occasions from time to time. But there was never much to admire in the shy, gangly, gawky youths who called to pay their respects, certainly nothing to evoke the romantic image of carefree, confident masculinity on which we had been brought up to believe—in books. In our early teens we girls certainly thought we were vastly superior to boys.

At fifteen I left school to look after Maman. Maman never ceased to complain about the subjugation of women in France. But it was not my father, still less my Grandfather, who really crushed and humiliated her. My father and mother were simply quite unsuited for each other. But they would have muddled along somehow, if it hadn't been for my Grandmother—a woman who is more than a match for any man I have ever met. If there is one thing for which I cannot forgive my father it is for his not having had the courage to stand up to his mother.

Certainly, it is only a matter of time before women win their 'freedom' as they call it. But the liberation of women will be a much more ambiguous affair than has generally been supposed. Much simpler than has been assumed—because it will follow inevitably from such irreversible trends as contraception or the complexity of modern life, which must put a premium on intelligence. And much more complex—because the liberation of women will upset the precarious balance established by the traditional roles and

because the final significance of liberation is most likely to be misinterpreted.

If it only means that henceforth women will be able to participate in and enjoy the prerogatives of a male world then we shall see the worst of all possible worlds, the all-pervasive domination of the masculine—masculine men and masculine women busily manipulating the levers which articulate the structure of a masculine world. There will be no counter-image to redress the balance, as before there was at least the stereotypical image of the lady. When women eventually work their way to the top, when they become statesmen, directors, generals—as undoubtedly they will—men are going to be most surprised to find that their feminine counterparts are just as ruthless, just as competitive, just as unprincipled in the pursuit of their ambitions as men have ever been. Indeed our liberated women may well pursue these same ambitions with all the fanatical fervour of the convert, forgetting in the process the far more important task which still lies ahead, the task of recreating society, humanity even, in the image of the feminine.

Man recreated in the image of the feminine, a true and authentic femininity. This is the truly regenerative liberation which the world awaits.

Heidelberg, Feb. 6th.

My dearest Ananda

You become more intriguing and more puzzling with every letter you write. Every idea I have formed of you has been called in question by your letters.

When I first met you, you seemed to be so completely integrated into the atmosphere of high society that I felt like a poacher upon your estate, an intruder upon the territory of

your family. My life, deflected from the first by the death of my parents, seemed to close upon your own like a straight line upon a circle. The best I could hope for would be to touch you for one moment at a tangent before you swung away again.

Throughout those weeks I spent with you at the Château, as the guest of your Grandparents, I prepared myself for the French equivalent of that scene in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest*, the scene where Lady Bracknell questions the candidate for her daughter's hand. 'To lose one parent,' I could almost hear your Grandmother protest, ' might be counted a misfortune. But to lose both looks to me like carelessness.' And so I was deeply touched by their kindness and hospitality. All of a sudden the laws of nature had been modified to make an exception out of me.

Now, on the other hand, it is your own hostility towards your family which frightens me. More than anything else I would like to see you reconsider your attitude, call a halt to all the bad feeling which has built up over the years.

Surely it would not be very difficult for you to use your influence to moderate rather than aggravate the conflict between your mother and your Grandmother. After all, your Grandfather adores you. Your Grandmother holds you in high esteem (a fact which you probably prefer to disregard). Your father is very proud of the daughter whom he so rarely gets a chance to meet. Your sister has long since concluded that the family feud is not worth fighting over. Surely the time has come for you to intercede, to bridge the gap between the two sides of your family?

It was difficult for me to say this to you in Paris. It is one of those things that can not be said but has to be put in writing, and stated *sotto voce*. And I never had an occasion to write to you before. But now. Let me know what you think.

Dublin, Feb. 16th.

Mon bien aimé

My Grandmother. Yes, how odd that in families such as mine the talk keeps going back, like the tongue to an aching tooth, to la grandemère, if not to l'arrière grandemère.

My Grandmother is much more complex and much more dangerous than you could ever appreciate. Certainly, I was surprised and not a little relieved to find that she took to you so readily. But do not be misled. Her behaviour is not dictated by friendship or respect but by a game plan in which you figure as a pawn. Certainly, she has had to revise her strategy to accommodate an unforeseen contingency—you. She could just as well have turned upon you the withering scorn and contempt which she cast upon my mother. Instead she decided to go the other way and integrate you within the family, in order precisely to have another ally in her grand alliance against my mother, a spy I would be almost inclined to say, a spy in the house of love who will be used by her to find out all she needs to know. Once she has you in her hands she will drive you like a wedge between myself and my mother, so that I too can be recuperated by the family, leaving my mother entirely on her own. She has already tempted my father and my sister away, which leaves only me, whom she now undoubtedly hopes to recuperate—through you.

All this may sound bizarre to you, these Byzantine dealings in the corridors of emotional power. But only because you have no idea how the aristocracy operates and must operate if it is to perpetuate its power. But believe me—or read François Mauriac if you want to get a better idea.

And notice, it is not the genuine descendants who create the problems, not my Grandfather or his brothers, true de Villiers, but the pretender, the one who has assumed

the name but who brings into the family another spirit altogether. Not the traditional spirit of nobility but the modern spirit of manipulation, profit taking the place of honour, calculation in place of conscience.

So you see it would be quite impossible for me to take the course of action which you recommend.

Heidelberg, Feb. 20th.

My dearest Ananda

Your letter arrived this morning. And I am hastening to reply. You sound angry with me. Naturally, I do not want you to do anything which runs contrary to conscience. But my life has gone so wrong for me at so many different points that I cannot stand by and watch you ride full tilt towards what looks to me like an avoidable calamity. I would dearly love to see you relieved of all those tensions and anxieties which you have inherited from your family and from which you could surely free yourself in either one of two ways: either by using your influence to mediate between your mother and the family; or, if you are so minded, by going your own way, you and your mother, and having nothing more to do with the family. Instead of which you have somehow managed to get stranded in a no man's land between these two equally viable lines of defence.

Forgive me if my suggestions disagree with you.

Dublin, March 1st.

Mon bien aimé

You talk of your life going wrong for you and you write as if this could hardly apply to me—I who surely fit this

description even better than you.

For the first time in my life I have had the time and the occasion to take a good look at myself, my life laid out in the distance, brought upon me by this stay in Ireland. On the whole I am reassured, reassured beyond my wildest dreams. In France I always had this sense of a wrong turn taken, off from the great highway down which I was supposed to travel—first class, of course. At school everything was expected of me. Academic success, a brilliant marriage, money and that odd sort of borrowed glory which comes of being the wife of a man of distinction and renown. Then came the divorce. Funny how through all those years of domestic strife it never really occurred to me that my mother and my father might actually get divorced. The never ending conflicts just seemed to express the peculiar style of their partnership. And my mother was much better equipped to survive the conflicts themselves than the sense of abandonment which followed upon her separation from my father. I watched her deteriorate day by day, shrinking visibly into a dilapidated remnant of her former self. But in rallying to her side, I came to experience something of the same sense of abandonment myself—abandoned by my family, by my former friends and then even by myself, abandoned by my body. I wandered, lonely and confused. But the more I tried to get back onto that great broad highway—so comfortably public, so approved—the more I seemed to deviate down little byways. Frightening at first, until I realized that these were my ways, solitary and lost only because they were the ways along which I alone could move and which, in the end, might lead me to myself. I say ‘might’ because I have still so far to go. But I am learning patience and the faith to accept myself and so to hold to that direction which I must take, take me where it will.

Of course I have my mother. We are close, so close and yet so very far apart. We border and protect each other but without ever really reaching through. There are whole areas

of myself that I have not nor could I ever reveal to her. I relate to her as if she were my child. I am sometimes almost more alone with her than I am with myself.

But you, my love, do hold a very special place in my heart. For I sense in you a depth which helps to bring me to myself. How odd that you and I should go our separate ways and yet still find each other, just as though there is a place reserved for those who walk by themselves, a haven where they can come together, unexpectedly, to share their solitude.

Your birthday coming up soon, my Mad March Hare. An old man of twenty five. But remember: Age is only in the mind. You will never be older than I think you are.

Heidelberg, March 5th.

My dearest Ananda

You can have no idea of the effect your letter had on me. Yesterday was dark and gloomy and I was in a melancholic mood. The sort of mood in which one looks back upon one's life and starts to rehearse that time-worn lament: 'If only ...' If only I had stayed on at school. If only I had remained in England. If only we could have stayed on in France together. As a result of running through this morbid litany I came to see that instead of enjoying what was already within my grasp I had made my life more difficult for myself at every point by questioning, by challenging, by testing my limits to find whatever truth there might be in me. Then came your letter, reminding me of the difficulties you had had with your life, reminding me and so relieving me of the oppressive thought that I was alone with my problems and perplexities.

Ananda, my dearest Ananda, I read my own life in every line you write.

For the first time I am beginning to understand what draws me to you—a deep rooted affinity which is all the more compelling for taking such a different form in me and you—your solitude, my solitude, no common ground—but the miracle of two separate worlds which somehow match and overlap, reflect and confirm each other.

Having read your letter, I ran out of the room and across the street to a café on the Hauptstrasse, ordered myself the biggest, richest slice of chocolate cake, smothered it with cream and ate it all in memory of you.

Dublin, March 28th

Mon bien aimé

I apologize for not having written sooner. But there is a reason. We have moved. We are no longer even in the same area, but have rented a ramshackle house in a slum area of Dublin, quite near to the Port. We are saving money and having much more fun into the bargain. Maman got so bored with our mediocre neighbours, their middle-class conventions and their bib and tucker manners. Here all is colour, crude jest, singsong and affection. Children playing hopscotch in the streets. Diapers hanging on the lines. Our house would be large enough except that it has become a refuge for stray cats and dogs and a haven for every crawling tot for miles around. So no one is getting their fair share of oxygen, let alone their Lebensraum.

The poverty in these parts is quite extreme, usually accommodated without too much trouble, but occasionally real cases of misfortune. I have joined a social welfare program. And for a few hours a week I work in the slums, helping old people get along, but also young mothers with more children than they know how to count. It's tiring work, but rewarding all the same, the glow of satisfaction when

these poor people tell you how much they appreciate what you have done for them. Only the other day I was called in to clean out the house of an old sailor who lives with his small Grandson. His own son was killed at sea and his son's wife ran away soon after the baby was born. The old man is a shaggy bearded dear but without the first idea about keeping house. He spends his day staring moodily into his beer and telling stories about the sea while rats and mice romp around the room. I noticed the little boy's body was covered with bites. When I checked his cot I found that the mattress was infested. Ugh! I got so angry that the old man almost cried and solemnly promised never to let it happen again.

Well, what do you think of my life in the slums? Quite a change from la vie de château, n'est-ce-pas?

O saisons, ô châteaux
Quelle âme est sans défaut?
O saisons, ô chateaux.

Rimbaud. Remember?

Dublin, April 3rd.

Mon bien aimé

I can't wait to tell you what happened to me recently. A friend of the Steins, a young man by the name of Nelson, called to visit me last week. I first met him at a reception given by the Steins. And he insisted on taking me out once or twice in his new Porsche. His father is a multimillionaire and he is a student at Yale. I was grateful for his company in New York, especially when I discovered that it was not too wise for girls to go out on their own. But I never thought any more about him, since he never wrote. And then last week, right out of the blue, he flew in from the States and took a room at the local Hilton. I felt I was under some obligation to reciprocate his hospitality. He hired a car and I

showed him around the city. But I had no idea of his intentions until he suggested a sail one bright and sparkling afternoon. We hired a boat here at the Port and then put out to sea. But we hadn't been gone for more than half an hour when a small plane flew out along the coast and started circling over us. I thought this rather strange but managed to put it out of mind until I noticed clouds of crimson smoke issuing from the tail. As we watched, the plane started writing in the sky. And before it had finished, my face was as red as the sky-born letters. For there in the air, writ large for all to see, were the incriminating words: I love you Ananda. Will you marry me?

No April fools—a genuine proposal.

Well, I reminded Nelson that I had already told him all about you, that in any case we hardly knew each other etc., etc. He admitted as much, but said he was shocked that a woman as 'fine and proud' as I could live in such strained circumstances. 'Let me take you away from all this,' he kept on saying. 'Let me set you up real nice.'

I put him off as kindly as I could. And when he saw there was nothing more to be gained he took the plane back to New York. But they won't let me forget it in the Port. For the sky writing started just about the time the pubs were closing for the afternoon. So it made a most impressive spectacle for the local lushes. And now it's become a local joke that Nelson never had his victory but met his Waterloo.

Heidelberg, April 6th.

My dearest Ananda

I loved your story about Nelson—though I must confess it left me somewhat apprehensive. For it brought home to me the same old niggling truth. If I had Nelson's money we could now be married. Perhaps we should have got engaged

before we parted. I blame myself for not paying due attention to those ceremonies by which a person's intentions are publicly recorded. But they seem so incidental, the outward expression of something which has already been decided and which concerns only you and me. In my vocabulary the word love already spells finality. My heart is already engaged and will always be engaged—to you.

Perhaps I take too many things for granted. So much that still seems entirely natural to me might just be the outcome of my own quite peculiar circumstances, the absence of normal family life, English boarding schools, years spent abroad. Anyway, whatever the explanation, I never got a chance to play my part in the mad, sad spectacle of teenage sexuality—the young man launching assault after assault, the young girl resolutely defending the citadel of her virtue.

All I have to report from my teens is one exquisitely delicate and sublimely-innocent relationship, the relationship in fact which first endeared me to your country. I told you about Sylvie, who is now married with one small child. She was a little older than me. Between us there developed a sexless intimacy, or rather an intimacy which replaced sex with sensuality. We kissed, lightly and deliberately, but no less tenderly for that. We let our seaside limbs brush up against each other. Every contact, be it ever so discrete, dragged in its train a comet's tail of glowing sensuality which was as intense as sex could ever have been. Perhaps we were too young, or too inhibited. (But what is this so-called sexual revolution? Before, we repressed sex and experienced passion. Now we repress passion and experience sex and somehow manage to convince ourselves that we have taken a great step forward.) In any case, we never took advantage of the giant strides which our bodies had just taken. We had no desire to experiment with sex. For we already enjoyed the best: delight in the other person and a sort of protean sensuality which was all the more

encompassing for not being localized in sex. As a result of my 'inexperience' you are the very first woman to whom I have ever made love. I say this with pride not with apology. For I ask no more than that you should also be the last, the alpha and the omega of my liaisons amoureuses.

In this perspective, the delay of a year or two seems little enough. Just enough for me to qualify, for you to reach what is euphemistically known as the 'age of discretion', after which our lives will be entirely ours to dispose of as we please. And yet I wonder whether I am not asking too much of you, exposed as you are to so many covetous eyes.

Dublin, April 9th.

Mon cher Othello

I hasten to reply to your 'covetous eyes'. Jealousy, like love, is in the eye of the beholder. What the jealous lover sees is only what he projects upon the other. So I should really be asking you what you have been up to lately. What tempting prospects prompt you to question my fidelity?

Heidelberg, April 12th.

My dearest Ananda

Touché. I propose to reply to your question with a story of my own.

Not so long ago Fasching was being celebrated here in Heidelberg, a riotous time preceding Lent. For weeks on end party follows party, all of which is eventually crowned by Karnival, spectacular processions in the streets, particularly of South German towns. The other night I was at one of the innumerable student parties given at this time of the year

and found myself talking to a most attractive girl who, like yourself, was French. Just to have an opportunity to speak your tongue was such a joy that I leaped at the opportunity. And I think I must have helped her feel at home. For after a while she took it upon herself to invite me to dance, and we danced together for most of the rest of the evening. But the more she tried to get close to me the more distant I became, as though we figured in a nightmare world where the more you try the less you are likely to succeed. In the end she brought the matter up herself and so I felt obliged to tell her all about you. But even then I don't think she was entirely convinced.

After all, you were away and she was there, ready to replace you, at least for the moment and then, who knows. In fact she pressed herself upon me so insistently that I almost felt ashamed of my reserve. Certainly it had little or nothing to do with her, only with myself, or rather with you to the extent that you have become a part of myself. For, as absurd as this may sound, you have become so much a part of myself that it would be as futile for me to look for someone to replace you as to look for someone to replace myself.

Also, I didn't think that a woman as attractive as she would remain alone for long. And I was right. Within a week she had her Klaus. And now that she has her boyfriend I can be much freer with her again. We go out to dinner from time to time and act out a hypothetical charade. We act 'as if'—as if you didn't exist, as if Klaus were not in evidence. At the end of the evening she looks at me as if we were going to go home together. I am sure she thinks she has the best of the bargain. After all, she can go home and act out all her fantasies with Klaus. While I can only get out my pad and write to you. But I know that I am really the lucky one. For Klaus will be here and gone tomorrow. And then she will have to find another Klaus, and then another, and another. But I live in the certitude that I have you—forever.

Dublin, April 16th.

Mon bien aimé

Forgive me for sounding a little abrupt on the phone at first. Such an indignity, that dreadful ringing noise and so late in the evening too, after I had gone to bed. How could I have guessed it was you. All I wanted was to put a stop to the catastrophic ringing, say whatever had to be said and then get back to sleep again. When I heard your voice I thought at first I must be dreaming. But no, the voice was really yours, so real it made me realize how much I miss you.

Well, I have one consolation which may surprise you. You may be absent yourself. But I find a little of you in everyone I meet in Ireland. Sometimes the face, but just as often the temperament. Such a friendly, genial crowd, the Irish, each one a quite distinct personality. With a gift of the gab you would have to hear to believe. A few hours in a pub and you would have all the materials you needed for a play. All talk of course. But such rich, melodious talk, talk that thrives in the fertile soil of an inexhaustible imagination.

And then there is the countryside. Unless you had been to Ireland you would never believe that gray can be a colour. Not the drab, monotonous gray that you find elsewhere but a large expansive gray that embraces every colour—light gray, dark gray, green gray, blue gray, yellow gray, even a rusty, orange gray, all bathed in the misty atmosphere which seems to enshroud the island. These nuances of tempered light are that much more enchanting for being gathered under the one umbrella of this omnipresent shade. ‘Pays des pleurs’ indeed. This gray has all the melancholic tenderness of tears, weeping woven into the very fabric of a nation’s countenance.

You must come and visit me in Ireland some time this summer and I will introduce you to my friends, living beings certainly, but also the moors, the clouds, the sea.

Heidelberg, April 20th.

My dearest Ananda

Something happened on April 11th, something which has shaken every student here in Germany. Ruddi Dutschke, the spirit behind the SDS, was the victim of an assassination plot. He has not been killed but too badly injured to play any further part in student politics. The student body was quite outraged, especially when they learned that the young man responsible was a fan of Adolf Hitler and an advocate of National Socialism.

In France, students responded to the assassination attempt by demonstrating in front of the German embassy. The French student movement is now being led by a young man from Nanterre who also happens to be of German Jewish origin. Daniel Cohn-Bendit. I am sure you will be hearing more about him before very long. For he has formed a group which calls itself the 22 Mars and which is rapidly taking over the leadership of the student movement in France. Things are heating up in Paris. Demonstrations on campus and still more scheduled for the future. Up until now the student movement has been largely ignored by the leaders of the left, particularly the Communists, who are mortally afraid of being outflanked. But the students are working hard to develop a sense of solidarity between themselves and the workers. There has already been some fighting in the streets. So the French authorities have been reinforcing the regular police with a band of villains known as the CRS, a notorious crew who are equipped with every possible device. The principal weapon on the student side is the famous pavé. Yes, the paving stones are being ripped right out of the streets and then launched, with deadly effect, against the police.

The German student movement has suddenly been eclipsed by these developments in France. Efforts are being

made to organize support from this side. I am hoping to be able to go with them, if not to participate, at least to be an observer of this extraordinary event.

Dublin, April 23rd.

Mon bien aimé

I don't know what is the matter with me. I have been depressed of late, so depressed that it was only with the greatest difficulty that I could bring myself to write at all. Perhaps it has something to do with this wretched, lingering cold that has been haunting me for several weeks. Or is my body about to spring some new surprise on me?

At first I thought that my mood might have been brought on by the cold wet days we have been going through, the last desperate assault of winter. But then this weather matches my mood and so helps to console me. Only this afternoon I left the library to do some studying. I was supposed to be reading up on my Medieval history. But I got bored with that and finished up with a volume by that extraordinary lady Madame Blavatsky—*The Secret Knowledge*. I worked for a while in the warmly lighted reading room, a room whose timbers smell of centuries gone by. And I suppose that I should have been grateful for the protection from the outdoor weather. Instead, the incessant tapping of the rain drops on the window pane and the low moaning of the wind began to call me, inviting me to step outside and share with them their cheerless gloom.

So I left the library and caught a bus and then started walking, hardly aware of where I was going until I found myself high up upon the moors. And then, for several hours I chased the wind, running, yes running through great lowering clouds until I reached a promontory from which I could see the whole city laid out at my feet. It looked like

something out of a child's nursery, small and yet so delicately crafted. Dublin, with its streets and houses, its tugboats churning about. And a foghorn uttering such a mournful sound that it almost broke my heart. But who could have told my tears from the salt-laden drops which the clouds unloaded on me? I watched over the city for a good half hour and then went home to the most glorious bath, and glass on glass of hot rum punch.

And so I am recovered, enough at any rate to write to you. And to let you know my doubts and fears. For I am sure that it is these uncertainties which contribute to my moods. This separation. When, oh when, is it going to end? When you are with me, life is so simple and straightforward. But as soon as you are gone, I fall down into a pit of complications. I can't help feeling that we are both of us a little lost—though for such spiritual refugees as ourselves there is at least this consolation: belonging nowhere we are capable of making any place a home. Perhaps your studies are already enough for you. But I confess I also need your presence here beside me, your living presence, not just the record of your presence which your letters leave with me.

If only I had our children with me, living witness to your life and likeness, your absence would be so much easier to endure. Instead, I only see them in my dreams, or rather only him. No longer two but just the one. Which makes me afraid that the child I lost was the other one, the girl.

So do look after yourself, I beg you. And if you have to go to Paris keep your head away from truncheons. Survive, as my family have always managed to survive, innumerable revolutions.

Heidelberg, April 26th.

My dearest Ananda

When I read your letter such a sadness fell upon me that I had to shut myself in my room. For your letter came at a time when I was going through a mood not unlike your own. Three days ago, in fact the very day you wrote to me, I too went for a walk high up in the mountains overlooking Heidelberg. Oh, the giddy freedom of the far horizon, when all the nagging details of daily life are blurred down to more manageable proportions and laid out there before you, clearly and distinctly and so readily negotiable. Until you come back down the mountain to the narrowness and the niggardliness of that limited perspective which is, I suppose, the constrained perspective of ordinary life.

For some time now I have been struggling to master the German language, struggling to become familiar with another language and another literature, another way of life, just as I had to do in Paris. It was interesting at first. But now that I am able to speak and read quite fluently the adventure is beginning to lose its charm. For the reading is still so unbearably slow. And my conversation only reminds me how far I still have to go before I can speak as well as a German child of five. And so I fell to wondering whether I should ever know again what it is to live in familiar surroundings, surrounded by friends. Then your letter arrived, evoking an image of your face and of all the familiar things we used to do together. And the sweetness of those memories only served to spread my sadness round about me, deepening my sadness until it came to stand for all the things I had ever lost throughout my life—for the loss of my parents and my friends, for the loss of my country, for the loss of Paris and, of course, for the loss of you. It seemed as though I had been condemned to roam the lonely ranges of the mind when all I ever really wanted was to nestle in some

sheltered valley along with you.

At moments such as this I dream of being a simple peasant, brought up in some outlandish village where the natives live and die close to the place where they were born. For I would have met you there as a boy, grown up with you, married you there and died beside you, nurtured and remembered by the people and the places I had always known. What a life we would have led together. Can't you imagine how we would have been? Stupid. Oh, so stupid. Knowing so little about the world. But what divine stupidity! What blissful ignorance! And then, when we were old, we should have been all smiles and wrinkles, with such a softness in our eyes from looking so long upon each other.

Yes, I am really beginning to wonder whether this freedom which we prize so highly is really not something of a two- edged sword, an ambiguous weapon which is only at the disposal of him who stands far off, above and beyond the manifold attachments which make up the substance of our lives. Now, more than ever before, I want to be bound, though there must be a certain freedom to this bondage; the freedom to choose the bonds by which I will be bound. I want to be bound to a place, bound to a profession. Above all, I want to be bound to a person, to you. For I am sure that all the freedom I shall ever need may be enjoyed within the boundaries of these bonds.

Dublin, May 1st.

Mon bien aimé

Your letter came as such a blessing, a real blessing. You miss me my dearest, and I miss you. We are far apart. And yet I feel closer to you now than ever I did before. For you never had to tell me what you felt for me before. And so I could never quite be sure. But now that we can no longer see each

other there is nothing left to hide. Now that you can not speak to me your words reach through to me and confirm my most cherished expectations.

It is late, late into the night (two in the morning), a time I like to write to you. For the stillness helps to overcome the distance that divides us. The distance becomes a sort of darkness which could be of any extent. You could be at the garden gate, watching the light in my room. And across the intervening stretch of night you would still appear to me as far away as you really are—or equally as near.

Mozart is playing as I write. And I am washed by such unspeakable waves of beneficence. You can have no idea how an orchestra sounds to me: the cheeky flutes, the seemly violins, the pompous brass and the would-be-fearful drums which, like all dreadful things, are only creatures calling out for help from us. From time to time I tiptoe out into the other rooms to watch my mother and a friend of mine by the name of Lucy, who is spending the night. They are both far away, lost in the company of their dreams. But in the solemn peace of sleep I can see their souls as clearly as if they were made of crystal, shining through. For in sleep there is no dissimulation. I watch them, watch over them and feel such tenderness for them as I share with them the slow and regular rhythms of their breathing.

You must be asleep by now. How I would love to steal into your room and look upon you. And even as I watched you sleeping, you would be dreaming about me, would you not?—little suspecting that the sponsor of your dreams was standing right beside your bed.

Paris, May 7th.

My dearest Ananda

It may surprise you that I am sending this letter from Paris.

But a contingent of German students took off yesterday for France to assist their Kameraden. And I was among them. We arrived early this morning after a night of rioting. You would hardly recognize your city. Paving stones torn out of the ground, trees knocked down, cars overturned. But these are only the outward signs. The real revolution is located within, a change of heart which is already written upon the face of Parisians.

Something new and beautiful has just broken out. Language, that first flower of human cultivation, has just burst into bloom. The barriers may be up in the streets but they are down where it really matters, where human beings address each other. Over and across these battered barriers the words are flowing forth in a flood tide of communication. In the class rooms, the playing fields, in the shops and streets, the theatres, bars, museums, people are talking to each other. The unspeakable restraint has gone, the pressing weight of fear and respect; all the constraints of isolation and antipathy have come crashing down; and in their place, speech reigns supreme. From the depths of a long-standing silence, born not of ignorance but of repression and distraction, everyone now finds, to their amazement, that they have something to say. Children are talking to their parents, pupils to their masters, students to their professors, employers to employees. They have all discovered the gift of speech. And the gift of listening too. The radio speaks and passers-by crowd round to catch the latest communication. The posters speak, an ideographic language full of laughter and good humour (je suis Marxist, tendance groucho). Even the walls speak (les murs ont la parole) and listen to themselves, dumb witness to events the like of which they have not seen for many a year.

Was it Shelley who wrote of another revolution, at another time in history? ‘Bliss was it in that day to be alive. But to be young was very heaven.’ Well, imagine how much more appropriate these words are today. For the young are

no longer just the enthusiastic hangers-on of a middle class revolution, led by middle-aged men. They are themselves the perpetrators and executors of this last great overturning of authority. They have astonished themselves by engineering a bloodless revolution, a revolution pumped and primed by that most exhilarating of all transfusions—a change of heart.

Dublin, May 10th.

Mon cher Danton

Beware of Robespierre. A nasty little lawyer with a treacherously legal mind. Beware of his zealous sincerity and the fanatical detachment with which he, most sincerely, detaches his comrades from their heads.

Seriously, I thank you for your letter. Though I now feel curiously out of touch since I have no idea where to write to you (care of the Bastille?). And then, the strain of studying for exams is beginning to tell on me. With the result that the very thought of your mobile face and your inexhaustible energy is enough to wear me out.

It may well be these intermittent states of exhaustion which are bringing me back to a state of mind which I have not known since I was a child, and which I hardly know how to describe. A sort of universal love, a vast expansion of myself which comes over me sometimes when I go for a walk across the moors. Now that the weather is improving I like to stretch my legs across the purple heather carpet of these illimitable hills. For out here I feel so much a part of everything that it changes my whole idea of life. It seems to matter less who in particular one loves, as though the particular person were just the occasion for loving something larger, loving all things equally, whether living or dead (St Francis' birds, his friends the flowers, brother wind

and sister sea). At such times I am able to adore the changing pattern of the clouds, the wild cries of the sea birds or the stunted form of a pygmy tree that has held out against the elements so heroically. I love them all with a love that brings with it a great deep peace as human love so often fails to do. There is no need to prefer one thing over another, to gain one and in so doing lose the other. There is no changing these things. And so there is no room for judging or condemning.

Does all this sound absurd to you. I can't say that I know what it means myself. However, it is not that I love you any the less, only differently. In the light of this illimitable love your person takes its place in a more extended scheme of things. Past, present and future fall together into one continuous stream of events. So even if we should never find our way back to each other again, our life together would not have been in vain. It has been, and so will last forever. But never fear. These thoughts only arise in my mind every now and then. Like the shadow of an aeroplane they sweep across the moors, touch me for one timeless instant, and then are gone. Afterwards, I want you back, just as you are, a little different from the way you used to be, I'm sure, but underneath it all, the same.

Paris, May 12th

My dearest Ananda

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I am staggered by the proportions which this revolution has begun to assume. Initially I thought of it as just a change of heart, a spontaneous expression of long-repressed ideals which could have no very immediate results. But almost of its own accord, almost without foresight or planning, the snowball has been set in motion. And now it simply keeps on rolling.

At first the parties of the left tried to ignore what was happening. Now they have been forced to throw in their hand or risk losing their own following. At first the movement was confined to Paris. Now it has spread throughout the whole of France. At first it was just a student movement. Now it has penetrated every section of society. At first it was merely a matter of extracting concessions. Now it is the old order itself which is in question.

On the night of the 10th, there was a mighty test of strength. Tear gas bombs going off in the streets, charge after charge from the police—the night of the barricades as it is already being called. This morning the Sorbonne (which has been taken over by students) was alive with activity. Action committees were being formed to cover every contingency from propaganda, to doctoring, to cleaning out the lecture rooms. As if to justify what we have been doing, two events are also scheduled to take place soon. The Vietnam peace conference and a UNESCO conference on Marx.

But the only serious question in my mind is the question: will we keep the faith? This revolution might just fizzle out, or it may very well be suppressed. And yet the revolution could still be going on in the hearts and minds of those who have been affected by these events, if they remain true to the ideas and ideals which have surfaced in the last few days, if they perpetuate these ideals after they have graduated, gone into business or politics or the professions, married, settled down. On the other hand, the government might be overthrown and the revolution might still be betrayed—by its success. For this revolution is not about a change in the political system or in the economic order. It is not bound by the specific circumstances of any nation, race , class or creed. It reflects a will on the part of the young to lay the foundation for a new society, a new humanity.

In the end, the only revolution that really matters will be the generational revolution, the revolution which takes

place, inevitably, when one generation gives way to the next. Will the ideas and ideals which are alive and burning in the hearts and minds of innumerable students here today still be alive and burning when these same students have taken over the reins of power? Will they hold true or will they mutate into the very thing which we are all of us against today?

Dublin, May 13th.

Mon bien aimé

I wanted to write to you all evening. But I have been too upset to get started until just now. My own fault really. I made up my mind that if I was going to continue eating meat it was time I witnessed the crucial step, the step that transforms flesh into food. Horrible, too horrible for words. It may have been my choice of slaughter house, but I can assure you that the animals knew, knew quite well why they were there. And they were terrified. If you were to see what animals have to go through in order to finish up on our table I am sure you would think again before you bought another piece of meat. And this is not just my opinion. Listen to what the wise Confucius has to say. 'Any one who has ever heard the screams of an animal being killed could never again eat its flesh.' Or Bernard Shaw, the favourite author of so many of my Irish friends. 'While we ourselves are the living graves of murdered beasts how can we expect any ideal conditions to prevail on earth.'

No, I can not share your enthusiasm for revolution. For every revolution has always been betrayed. The integrity of a revolutionary movement lies not in its animating principles, still less in its personnel, but simply in the fact that it has not yet gained power. As long as it speaks from powerlessness it may well tell the truth. But as soon as it succeeds, it has already begun to fail.

I shall be taking my Cambridge Entrance Examination soon. When it is over I shall be free, free to travel, free to call on you. I live for the day when these letters will no longer be necessary, when I can hold you in my arms again as I always used to do.

Heidelberg, May 16th.

My dearest Ananda

Back from Paris to find your two letters waiting for me as faithful and as friendly as a dog on the doorstep, wagging its tail. Such has been my preoccupation with events in France that I had almost forgotten that the academic year was drawing to a close—until you reminded me. I should be delighted if you were to come here for a visit. With the whole of the summer ahead of us we could travel over this age-old continent of Europe, drinking in the sunshine, sleeping out under the stars.

And what about next year? You know that I have to go back to Paris to finish off my degree. So I shall need a place to live. If you plan to stay in Dublin I could rent your apartment in Paris for the year. I hope to get a poste de lecteur—a few hours of English teaching which should also leave me enough time for my studies.

I shall be quite well paid, though not enough to be able to afford the whole rent on my own. However, I am in touch with a friend of mine who would like to share with me. Let me know what you think.

Dublin, May 20th.

Mon bien aimé

I shall be travelling to London shortly to sit my Cambridge examinations. I have decided to try for a scholarship because I have been told that even if I miss the mark it will make it easier for me to get a place as a commoner. My Grandfather has arranged for me to stay with some diplomatic friends in London. From there I shall take the train to Cambridge every morning. I am a little apprehensive. For this will be my very first competitive examination. I pray that my diabetes does not play games with me. Nervous tension is inclined to make my body do the strangest things. To look on the bright side, Maman is already saving up for our vacation. By the way, she is absolutely delighted that you have volunteered to take over the apartment. She is not at all happy with the tenants presently in residence. They are frequently late with the rent. And when she sent a friend around to investigate she learned that they had made all sorts of alterations, without her permission.

If I don't have time to write to you for a while you will know that it is because I am caught up in a mad mad rush of preparations.

Heidelberg, May 23rd.

My dearest Ananda

Just a note to wish you luck and, enclosed herewith, please find a five leafed clover which I found in the forest. With that in your pocket you can't possibly fail. Write to me as soon as your exams are over.

Heidelberg, June 13th.

My dearest Ananda

What has happened? I haven't heard a word from you for ages. Did your exams go off alright? In any case it really doesn't matter. One can only do one's best. Whatever has happened has happened and should be laid to rest. Besides, everyone is waiting for you at this end. Not just myself but all my friends. Please don't keep us all in suspense.

London, June 23rd

Mon bien aimé

I don't know how to tell you this. But please try to understand. I am flat on my back again—a dreadful relapse. The doctors say I must stay in bed, rest for quite some time. So I can not come to visit you in Heidelberg. But don't be too disappointed. For I have some good news too—some very good news. I have been offered a scholarship to Cambridge. I hardly thought it possible. For I only had just enough Ordinary and Advanced level certificates to qualify for the examination. But apparently they liked my papers, especially my general papers. Et voilà!

Well, if nothing else I certainly deserved it. I worked for this scholarship as I have never worked for anything else in my life. And ironically, I have been told that that was the cause of all the trouble. The preparations simply proved too strenuous. I was already beginning to feel the strain by the end of the first week. But I managed to hold out to the end. Finally, a few days after I had returned in triumph to London, I started having fainting spells. I thought at first it must have something to do with my diabetes. But no, this time it is mononucleosis.

I am writing this from my room in a hospital in London. For some time now I have not been able to muster the energy to do anything, let alone to write to you. But now at last I can feel the first vibrations of returning strength, enough at any rate to write and let you know what I have just been through. My Grandfather's friends have been very kind to me. But it must have been most embarrassing for them to find me expiring on their hands. However, the worst is now over, though I'm still as white as a newly-laundered sheet. My temperature goes up and down like a roller coaster. And then my heart. Sometimes it beats so strongly. And then at other times I can hardly hear it. As quiet as the most surreptitious whisper.

Most of the day I lie here in bed, quite inert, unable to move a muscle. It's the strangest feeling—certainly not a painful feeling or even a feeling of exhaustion. For these feelings are just so many ways in which your body tells you you are still alive. No, the feeling I am trying to describe is really no feeling at all, a feeling of utter nothingness. But this makes it sound quite insignificant. Would you understand if I said that this sense of extinction comes very close to an experience of bliss? Such peace, such warmth, such welcomeness. The first time this feeling came over me I was afraid. Not so much afraid of dying as afraid of dying alone, entirely by myself. I could feel my heart beat and my breathing coming slower, ever more slowly until it seemed that an eternity went by between one tremor and the next. The time for innumerable images to tumble through my mind; images of my father, my mother, my sister and, of course, images of you. I tried to call for the nurse but found I didn't have the strength to emit a sound. So instead I started calling you, not audibly of course. But I could hear my calling in my innermost ear, like an echo of the sound I had been unable to make. The sound of your name began to reverberate in my head, louder and louder until it aroused your answering call, our two names resounding together in

the chamber of my brain. And I wasn't afraid any more. I knew you were with me, somewhere, somehow.

So the next time I felt this draining away of all my strength, I decided to open up to it, to let it take me where it would. And that was when I began to experience this sense of bliss. On more than one occasion I left my body altogether. I could see it lying there upon the bed, pale, fragile and composed, myself and yet something other than me, a mould into which I had been poured and from which I was free to withdraw myself. If this is at all like dying, I remember thinking to myself, then dying is really the most liberating, the most enlarging experience of them all. For it was only when I thought that I was dying that I felt I had touched the flowing, throbbing pulse of the universe, a cosmic caress, not altogether unlike sex only broader and deeper and more, so very much more exalted. As a result, I am now convinced that there is more to life than I ever imagined—and very much less to death. For now I know that in death the best part of us still holds on, or is held onto beyond the grave.

Does this make any sense? Do you think I am losing my mind? Well, even if you do, you can at least appreciate how badly I need to rest, to recuperate. And if I can't come and visit you, why don't you come and visit me in Ireland, some time towards the end of the summer vacation. By then I shall be as confident as a convalescent, knowing that the worst is over, that it is only a matter of time before this weakness falls away from me and I emerge, renewed again, like a moth crawling out of its chrysalis to enjoy a more airy, spacious world. And now, my dearest, I am so tired. My eyelids weigh like dumbbells upon my eyes. I must go to sleep, 'to sleep perchance to dream'. (Yes, Hamlet was one of our A-level texts.) And in that dream, who knows, perhaps you will appear to me.

And then Béatrice. I thought at first she might prefer to forget about me with my departure from Paris. But not a bit of it. Her letters arrived and kept on arriving with characteristic regularity. She would write on Sunday and the letter would get to me on Tuesday morning. And then, one day, shortly after I received my last letter from Ananda, she announced that she was coming to visit me for a weekend.

I remember meeting her off the overnight train, a brighter, fresher, more confident Béatrice than I had ever known before. She told me that her plans for starting an agency were working out well and that, before very long, she expected to be an entrepreneur. Her enthusiasm was so infectious that in no time at all we fell into the old, familiar patterns of our former fellowship.

We spent the whole of that Saturday together, walking, talking, dining, dancing. Then I took her back to the little house in the forest which I had borrowed for the weekend to accommodate her. It was little more than a cabin really, stuck high up on a hill overlooking the Neckartal, owned by the family of a student friend of mine who had told me I could make use of it whenever the need arose. Béatrice was delighted with the house from the very first. And from the way she kissed me at the end of that first evening out together I could tell she was loathe to let me go. The next morning I returned to have breakfast with her. And we stayed together for the rest of that morning and afternoon. But as evening drew in I dropped her off at the house to change while I returned to my student quarters to finish up a few chores and get dressed for dinner.

I was ready for dinner a little earlier than I had anticipated. I drove around to pick her up in the ancient Volkswagen I had mustered for the occasion—again, borrowed from a friend. When I arrived, the house was dark

except for a light in Béatrice's room. I was on the very point of knocking at the front door when it occurred to me that it might be amusing to play a game with her, a trick that I had often played before. Béatrice could be very easily frightened by an unexpected visitation. Many's the time when I would stand behind an open door, absolutely motionless, waiting for the momentary convulsion which would seize her as she closed the door and caught sight of me. If I were feeling especially malicious, I would let myself be discovered with some contorted expression upon my face, my mouth twisted into a grimace of demonic fury. She would clutch at herself, then burst out laughing. And we would both enjoy her momentary panic. It was a silly game. But it had become a part of our repertoire of personal familiarities.

So instead of announcing my arrival at the door, I crept around the side of the house to the large open window of her room. I managed to step over the window sill and station myself behind the curtain without being noticed. I could hear her moving softly about in the room, humming quietly to herself. At what I took to be an opportune moment, I drew the curtain back dramatically, to discover Béatrice busy pulling on a second stocking and, for the rest, completely naked. Funnily enough, she was almost too surprised to be surprised. She made the beginnings of a movement to cover her breasts with her arms—then, realizing the foolishness of such a gesture, she let her two hands fall to her side.

I was instantly struck by the discrepancy between the Béatrice I already knew so well and the Béatrice I now saw. The clothes which she had worn before should have prepared me for the smooth, neat lines of her figure; the poise and the proportions of her legs, her waist. And yet her clothes had always been so much a part of her decorum that

the person I now saw seemed absolutely different, more sinuous, more accessible, more beguiling than the Béatrice I had known before. At the same time there was an innocence about her that I might never have been able to solicit had I not surprised her in this way.

Instead of the burst of laughter which was the usual sequel to my sudden appearances, she simply looked straight back at me—a long, wise look, as unabashed as the look with which a baby explores the face of a newcomer. I meant to offer some apology, but only managed the one word, 'Béatrice.'

She smiled. 'So now you know.' And almost as though my clothes could replace the garments she had not yet had the time to put on, I wrapped myself around her. 'Not fair,' she whispered between kisses. 'You with your clothes on and I with none.'

'Would you like me to let you put yours on?' I asked. My offer was half intended as a joke and was taken as such by Béatrice—this new Béatrice whom nudity revealed, not shy and dilator, as I might have assumed, but so supremely self-assured that her nut-brown skin might well have been her most exotic costume.

Smiling broadly, she replied: 'No. I want you to take yours off.'

And so we made love, simply and with so little premeditation that we didn't even have the time to think about it until it was all over. As luck would have it, we were the artless victims of a fate whose casual allocations enabled us to celebrate a victory which might not have been ours if we had had to choose, to consider and reflect. We entered into our possession ingenuously, freed from guilt or guile by the fateful dealings of a hidden hand.

And all that evening as I sat opposite Béatrice at dinner,

or round the table from her at a Weinkeller, I was filled with this new knowledge which demanded fresh interpretations of every word and gesture—the slightest pressure of her hands, the light in her eyes which had been kindled by caresses bestowed upon the secret parts of her exfoliate body.

And then it was time to take her to the station to catch the overnight train. As we waited on the station platform, somewhere in the penumbra between two lights, I edged towards the question which had been on my mind throughout the duration of her visit, but which I had not wanted to put to her before, a question which of course related to Ananda and to the place Béatrice would necessarily have to take up alongside, or even behind, the one to whom I was already committed.

She screwed up her mouth for a moment. Then she placed one cool hand upon the side of my cheek: 'I have never been able to believe in the reality of Ananda,' she remarked. 'She sounds to me more like someone you might have made up, a composite personality put together out of all your most far-fetched dreams and fantasies.' She drew her hand away and a wily smile came over her face. 'Now, how can one be jealous of a figment of someone else's imagination?'

Chapter Nine

She was kneeling at the edge of the vegetable bed, working the earth, when I first caught sight of her, late in the afternoon. A bundle of freshly-clipped rhubarb sticks lay on the grass beside her. She was wearing a slightly muddied pair of slacks and a tattered sweater. A brightly coloured scarf was tied around her hair, gypsy fashion. From the moment I set eyes on her, I knew that there had been a change.

I suppose I had been half-prepared for something of this kind. The letters I had received from Heidelberg described a setting which bore very little resemblance to the one in which I had come to know her. It was only to be expected that the change in her environment would bring about a change in her. Indeed, even as I walked down the streets towards her house I found myself taking careful note of the surroundings, as though the peculiar features of her neighbourhood might attest to the transformation she had undergone.

Rows of cottage standing side by side like soldiers on parade, each identical with the next. Slum alleys lined with cats which paused to stare at me for a moment before streaking away. Children playing in the street, their boisterous shouts provoking cries from red-eyed sea-birds. And the sea presiding over the whole garrulous colloquium, like a host at an informal dinner party—the smell of the sea, the smarting tang of salt on one's lips, the names of the pubs

(The Admiral's Arms, The Trident, The Skull and Crossbones), the fishing boats beached in the front gardens, the nautical trophies hung upon the walls.

Ananda's house was just like the rest, except that it stood on a corner. And so, as I walked up a lateral street, I was able to catch a glimpse of her through the hedge before I turned the corner. Instead of knocking at the front door, I unlatched a gate which led through to the garden. She was on the point of returning to the house when she saw me. Dropping the bundle of rhubarb, she raced across the lawn and flung her arms around me, an exhibition of sheer spontaneity to which she would never have committed herself before. For a while we both looked into each other's eyes, unable to find the words with which to record this instant of reunion. Then she remarked: 'You haven't changed in the least.' Almost automatically, I replied. 'Nor have you.'

But of course she had, though not in the way I thought she had. I had thought that this new life in the slums would help to bring her down to earth. And this expectation had been confirmed by my first impression of her, kneeling, working the earth with her trowel. But as the days went by, I began to realize that the diminished circumstances in which she now lived had not reduced her to the literal foundations of her existence. Rather, these very limitations had come to acquire a fairytale allure. The liveliness of the neighbourhood, the dilated calibre of its joys and woes, stood out so vividly against the deliberate formalities of the world with which she was familiar, that she could not envisage the substitution of the one for the other as anything but an exotic enrichment of her life. So far from enforcing a sense of reality, the exiguous scene of her life in Dublin had simply propelled her into new and excitingly

unfamiliar areas of fantasy. The world had become a stage on which she acted out the pageant of a peasant make-believe.

She associated with the impoverished tenants of the neighbourhood as naturally and as familiarly as if she had lived there all her life. And yet, so obviously, she didn't belong. She wore the most ordinary clothes. But hers was a beauty which even the drabbest garments could not hide. She carried herself with a poise which was intended to appear entirely natural, but which was in fact the product of hours of hard work at a Parisian ballet school. She fitted in, largely because she was entirely unclassifiable. She had neither the slithering lisps nor the eiderdown affectations of an upper- class English girl. Rather, she spoke a mid-Atlantic English, an accent which was so very far removed from the scope of her neighbour's experience that, for all they knew, she might just as well have been an inhabitant of the lost state of Atlantis.

And then this sense of unreality had been heightened and confirmed by her neighbours' attitudes. From time to time we would slip into one of the local pubs, rude uncultivated places where the language often bordered upon the obscene—until she stepped inside the door. At which point an expurgated version of the conversation would materialize, as vivid and as dramatic as before, but keyed up to accompany her appearance. The more naturally she interacted with them the more theatrical their gestures would become. So that at times I almost wished that she would adopt once again the supercilious posture which I had often seen her assume before, if only to elicit from them a natural reaction, the healthy contempt of the proletarian for the snob.

At times I missed the forcefulness of her former

personality which, as I now began to realize, had been intimately bound up with her presumption. The presumption had gone. Its place had been taken by a disarming simplicity which at first I was inclined to equate with weakness. Then it began to dawn on me that something else had transpired. It was as though the world had become a fluid medium through which she glided —merging, blending, and so meeting no resistance. It was as though she had reversed the evolutionary order, slipped back into the carapace of some more primitive form of life whose needs and demands were so elemental that they could be readily satisfied in any environment.

By contrast, Margaret had evolved in a different direction altogether. I realized as much from the moment she appeared. Ananda called out, 'Mother. Guess who's arrived?' And Margaret materialized in the oblong frame of the door. She shaded her eyes for a moment, then stepped out briskly across the lawn, one hand held out in front of her, to grasp mine firmly in a grip that was quite unlike the limp concession that I remembered from Paris. She looked as though she had put on a little weight. But the weight seemed to have been so distributed that she now carried herself more effortlessly. And yet there was something ominous about her revival, a jangling shrillness in her voice that had not been there before.

'He hasn't changed one bit, has he mother?' Ananda observed, grasping my hand in hers.

'Of course he has,' Margaret answered. 'We all have. You, for one, have been terribly ill.'

Ananda dismissed her mother's observation with a carefree laugh. 'Mother. Don't exaggerate. I'm all right now.'

'Only so long as you are careful.' Margaret snatched a

glance at her watch. 'Which reminds me. It's time for you to give yourself another insulin injection.'

While Ananda went upstairs to her room, Margaret took me through into the parlour. She poured out a whiskey for us both. I sipped at mine while she tossed hers off in a couple of gulps, then poured herself another. She drew out a packet of cigarettes and offered them to me. I declined, drawing from her the comment: ' Oh, of course, you don't smoke. Still as healthy as ever.' She drew a cigarette out of the packet. 'Well I hope you don't mind if I go ahead and incinerate myself.' The sarcastic tone of voice left me without a reply. A constraint fell upon us both as she blew clouds of smoke into the air. The silence accumulated painfully, building up against our words, a solid stone wall of a silence which was not breached until Ananda returned.

'How do you like our new house?' Ananda asked.

Margaret interrupted before I had a chance to speak. 'It's a roof over our heads. That's about all that can be said for it.'

'All the same,' Ananda insisted, 'you have to admit that this neighbourhood is a lot more interesting than where we were before.'

'Oh yes, that's a story in itself.' Margaret's face brightened as she swung into her narrative. 'We started off in a pretentious upper-middle class district somewhere near the centre of town. The first thing that happened, I was invited to dinner by my Protestant neighbours. They wanted to know if I was Protestant. I told them no, I wasn't. So they refused to have anything more to do with me. But that was O.K., because I was immediately invited over by the other half, who assumed I had to be a Catholic. When I told them I wasn't a Catholic either it stumped them completely. I might as well have said I wasn't male or

female. I explained that I had no religious convictions whatsoever. And they looked at me as though I'd told them I was the local madam. After that no one would speak to me. So I said to hell with it, and came to live down here.'

'They're very religious down here too,' Ananda continued. 'Only here they really mean it.'

'Religious my foot,' Margaret snorted. 'If they met the Virgin Mary on the streets, they'd hustle her for the price of a drink.'

'Mother, really. Our neighbours are as generous as can be.'

'And as simple-minded.'

'That's most unfair.'

'But, Ananda. I can't even make out what they're saying.' Margaret waved one hand impatiently.' Old Mrs what's-her-name from around the corner, the one with a couple of chins instead of a neck. I'm not kidding, I can't make out a word she says.'

'It's the accent,' Ananda explained, leaning eagerly towards me. 'Personally, I find it rather quaint.'

'And then the living conditions are primitive, to say the least. This house doesn't even have an indoor toilet. And the bath.' Margaret chuckled. 'Oh my God, you should see the bath. It's small to start with. But to make matters worse, the gas heater is on a meter. And of course, the money always runs out halfway through. Then there's an overflow pipe which somehow manages to collect every breath of wind that blows across the Irish Sea and shoots it out at you in one concentrated jet of ice-cold air. Every time you sit up to wash yourself down, this blast of cold air hits you in the midriff.'

'But we're really quite fortunate,' Ananda admitted. 'Some of our neighbours don't even have a bathroom.'

‘Why bother?’ Margaret snapped. ‘Most of them don’t know what a bath is for.’ A grin spread across her face. ‘Mrs. O’Reilly came over the other day with some home-grown tomatoes. When I asked her how she had succeeded in growing tomatoes in Dublin she said she had an indoor greenhouse. Well, I didn’t know anyone who had an outdoor greenhouse. So I thought I’d go over and take a look. Sure enough. There they were—tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuces, all doing very nicely, thank you, in the bath! Just right for the job after all. A drain hole to let out all the excess moisture. And two taps to water with, cold in summer and warm in winter. How’s that for Irish ingenuity?’

Yes, it soon became clear that Margaret had changed dramatically. And yet, it was not until we were near the end of dinner that I began to take stock of this new posture, this disturbing authority which did not belong to the repertoire of her remembered gestures. The cynical humour was still there. But it no longer seemed to emanate from a sense of her utter helplessness. Rather, it had become a retaliatory weapon, a spur with which she hoped to goad herself on, to drive herself to the point at which she would be capable of redressing the balance of her former humiliation. It was not a little ironic that it should have been a somewhat desultory conversation about my professional plans, after graduation, which put her on the retaliatory track.

The dinner was over and we were sitting back, relaxing. Margaret had laid in some Guinness and it was while she was refilling my glass that she started to spell out what she had in mind.

‘I’ve been in touch with an American lawyer in Paris,’ she remarked, and by the change in tone, a new incisive firmness, I knew that a plan of battle had already been

drawn up. 'His name is Mr. Taylor.' She paused to let the foam settle for a moment, then topped me up again. 'There's been a change in the divorce laws recently. And I was hoping I might be able to get the alimony payments raised. But Mr. Taylor seems to think I've got a much better case than I ever imagined. He's all for suing the family for all they're worth. Don't know why I didn't think of it before. After all, they'd do anything to avoid a scandal. If we can frighten them enough, they might be ready to agree to a sizeable settlement.' She turned to Ananda. 'What shall we sue for? A million, five million? Ten million perhaps? After all, a Countess is supposed to live in style.'

I could see that Ananda was disconcerted by her mother's questions, hardly knowing whether to dismiss them as a humorous extravagance, or to take them seriously. She laughed, a brief uncertain laugh, then added: 'We've got more than enough to live on as it is.'

'But I have to beg for every cent they deign to give me,' Margaret objected. 'Now, if only I could lay my hands on a sizeable chunk of capital, we could afford to buy a house of our own and to hell with them.' She tossed back the rest of her Guinness. 'How about a villa in the South of France?' She turned back to me, as if to solicit my approval of her strategy. 'But seriously. I would like you to go and see Mr. Taylor when you get back. After all, you are a lawyer.'

I was reminded of a general who, beaten in battle, had managed to escape to a friendly country. Behind the protective frontier of her exile, she seemed to be marshalling her forces with a view to an eventual repatriation. More than ever before, this polarization of her position seemed to demand from me a declaration of allegiance which I was loathe to concede.

'Certainly, I'll look him up as soon as I get back,' I

replied, without too much enthusiasm.

Margaret must have noticed my noncommittal attitude. For she looked up instantly, a testing glance. 'Please do,' she repeated, 'and let me know what he says.'

It disturbed me to discover that, at this remove from France, the family should still be the central topic of concern, as though Margaret were attached to them by an elastic cord whose tension increased the further she withdrew from the point of attachment. The familiar slogan 'reculer pour mieux sauter' came to mind. And yet already I felt convinced that nothing she might gain by continuing the fight could possibly make up for the continual dislocation which the struggle brought about. I watched her as she sat at the table, kneading a piece of bread into a ball, rolling the dough with such ferocity that the veins stood out on her hand.

'Also ...' Margaret picked the ball of dough up in her fingers and flipped it into her mouth. 'I don't want him to start proceedings until I know exactly where I stand. How much the case is going to cost. What my chances are.' She looked across at me again. 'You should know what lawyers are like. Rogues one and all. They'll bleed you dry and not do a damn thing for you, unless you keep on after them all the time.' She paused for a moment, then added with almost theatrical solemnity. 'That's where you could come in handy. I'm counting on you to represent my interests in Paris.'

I resented being enlisted in a war I had no desire to wage. But I wasn't sure how to head her off. 'But really,' I complained, in a tone of voice which I hoped would convey my sense of aggravation. 'If you really need more money, wouldn't it be simpler for me to speak to your parents-in-law in person. I'm sure something could be arranged.'

I was going to say more but Margaret cut me off. 'My parents-in-law are not to know you have anything to do with this.'

'Well, I suppose they'll put two and two together. Me being a lawyer, living at your apartment. They'll probably think I put you up to it.'

'They won't think anything of the kind. As far as they're concerned you're still in Heidelberg.'

'But aren't they going to find out anyway? What if something goes wrong at the apartment? Who am I supposed to get in touch with?'

'I'm glad you reminded me.' An edge of uncertainty crept into Margaret's voice. She got up, went to a desk and rummaged about. A few minutes later she was back with a letter which she scanned briefly before resuming the conversation. 'Roger Kimberley. He's the tenant at the moment. Tells me there's been a leak in the plumbing. I've written to my father-in-law. But knowing him he probably won't get around to doing anything for quite some time. And then he'll probably want to inspect the damage himself before he gets a plumber in. If the problem has been solved before you get there, all well and good. But if not, there's going to be trouble. However, I've asked him to phone in advance of his arrival. So if you get a call from him, just don't let on who you are. Fix a time for him to visit and make sure you're out of the house yourself when he calls.'

This arrangement seemed the height of absurdity, a pantomime in which the exits and entrances of two parties who are looking for each other are so contrived that they never appear on the stage together. I said as much. But Margaret elected not to respond to my humorous caricature.

'I've already explained,' she insisted solemnly. 'I don't

want my father-in-law to know that you are renting our apartment.'

'Don't you think it would simplify matters if you simply told the truth?' It was this reference to rectitude which keyed the argument up into shrill octaves of recrimination.

'I hope you're not accusing me of being a liar?'

'Of course not. It's just that I think it would be much better for Ananda if she were to re-establish normal relations with her family.'

'Ananda wants nothing to do with the family.'

'Not even her father?'

'After what he did to me?'

I looked at Ananda. But almost immediately she looked away, wearily, as if it required more strength than she could muster to meet my gaze. It suddenly crossed my mind that by offering to take over the apartment I had once again become a point of conflict, fracturing the fragile cast of Ananda's peace of mind, unwittingly re-establishing the link with Paris, with the past, with the family and all that they had come to symbolize in Margaret's mind—her humiliation, her frustration.

'And so, once again, I must ask you not to communicate with my parents-in-law.' I looked away, out through the window. But Margaret's voice lassoed me in again.

'Do you agree?'

'Of course, if that's what you really want. But I must say, I still don't understand ...'

'Whether you understand or not is beside the point. It's a matter of our peace of mind. Unless I can feel absolutely sure about this I can't possibly let you rent our apartment.'

Naturally I reassured her. But her insistence rankled, jarring the relief of our reunion. I searched for another topic of conversation, something that would get us off the

ill-starred track. But before I could come up with anything, Ananda got up and told us she was going to bed. I was a little surprised. For it was still quite early. 'It's this mononucleosis,' she explained. 'I'm supposed to spend half the day in bed. But I'm much better than I was. A few months ago I could hardly move around.'

I had almost forgotten that she was a convalescent. But now that she mentioned it, I could tell that she had already exhausted her reserve of strength. I was able to study her more closely as she stood behind her chair. Never had she looked so fragile, nor so attractive, the exponent of a gracefulness which often attends fragility, the delicacy of a soul that is barely anchored in the world, that is already poised on the threshold of some unearthly transmigration.

'Besides,' she said as she moved towards the door, 'tomorrow will be a long day for me. I'm going to take you to Dublin and show you all the sights of the city.'

And so the days passed. At times we managed to recapture something of the freshness of our earliest months in Paris, old associations injected under the skin of new discoveries. For we seemed to be enacting the same script over again—a city, its history, its monuments, its curiosities prepared and delivered over to me like a carefully-assembled bouquet of flowers. On several occasions we borrowed a car and drove up into the Wicklow mountains. Every now and then I would stop the car and carry Ananda piggyback across the measureless extent of the moors. For she was still under doctor's orders not to tire herself more than was absolutely necessary. But we managed to make this debility the occasion for a celebration of the united effort which was needed in order that she should be abroad.

For at home the storm clouds never ceased to

accumulate, breaking out from time to time into lightning blasts of argument; as when, after dinner one evening, I suggested that it might not be such a bad idea if Ananda were to live away from home.

'Away from home!' Margaret repeated incredulously. 'Ananda wouldn't survive a day by herself.'

I was on the point of replying, when Ananda took over from me. 'Mother, you know perfectly well I'd be all right.'

'My dear girl,' Margaret expostulated, 'if I wasn't there to remind you, you'd forget all about your diet and injections.'

There was an edge of exasperation in Ananda's voice as she confronted her mother. 'If it would make you feel less anxious, I could always live with a friend. Lucy, for example. She's very reliable. I'm sure she'd make sure I stayed alive.'

'This is his idea.' Margaret pointed an accusing finger in my direction. 'I've never heard you say anything like this before.'

'It was my idea,' Ananda said, putting one arm across my shoulder. 'I asked him to suggest it to you myself.'

The change in Margaret was remarkable. It was not merely that the ground on which she had been walking so sure-footedly seemed to have given way beneath her feet. It was as though she had been forced into a position where she had to gesture helplessly for assistance from those very persons whom she held responsible for her plight. Her voice, when eventually she committed herself to words, had a pleading ring to it. 'You're not seriously thinking of leaving home.'

Ananda stood up and leaned across the table toward her mother. 'I want you to understand that I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.' Every word was spoken as if it were a sentence in itself.

Margaret hung her head, seesawing down as Ananda hovered over her. But even then it struck me that this might just be another theatrical performance, sounding the one chord which could be counted upon to bring Ananda back to her side. It was all a little too overdone, the quivering lips, the piteous manner, the air of abandonment. 'You can't be thinking about leaving. I won't believe it for one moment.' A handkerchief materialized in her hand. 'I'd—I'd go out of my mind if I had to live here—alone.'

Ananda straightened up, walked around the table and put one arm around her mother's shoulder. 'Of course I won't leave you, if you really need me.'

Looking at Margaret and Ananda, their arms around each other, I was reminded of two persons stranded in the sea, out of their depth, who separately might have managed to swim to shore, but who instead insisted on clinging to each other, so dragging them both down.

It was in order to stem the disruptive implications of disputes such as these that Ananda and I decided to get engaged. We spent an afternoon choosing the rings, and then returned home to spread the news. Margaret was surprisingly unenthusiastic, raising objections which she had never entertained before. In Paris, the practical aspect of marriage never seemed to have crossed her mind. Now she veered to the other extreme, suggesting, even recommending, that if I was serious about getting married I should abandon my law studies and look for a job right away.

'When we got married,' Margaret pointed out, 'Georges went straight out and got the first job he could find, working in a garage.'

'Hardly the best way to start a marriage.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, dispensing petrol is not the most fulfilling task.'

'What's wrong with pumping gas?' Her voice had become as taut as a hawser. 'It's honest work.'

'If that's all you have a mind for.'

She looked at me disparagingly. 'The trouble with you is, you're a snob.'

'I simply think that one should do the work for which one is best qualified.'

'That's not what I meant,' she remonstrated. 'You think you're too good for manual labour.'

At the time I thought that this line of argument was prompted by her desire to hasten the outcome of our engagement. I thought she might be worried by the possibility that my present course of studies would have to be supplemented by further studies, that at the very least it might take some time for me to find the job for which I was qualified. But even then I couldn't help feeling that there was more to it than that. Previously, she had been only too ready to impress the family with a recital of my prospects. But these same prospects had since become too good for her, threatening her with the idea that my prospective advancement might take us away from her, and closer to —the family.

'In any case,' she retorted, 'Ananda will be going up to Cambridge next year.'

'Mother,' Ananda said softly, holding out the hand with the engagement ring upon it, as if to remind her of the occasion we were supposed to be celebrating. 'We just got engaged to be married.'

'Well, we'll have to see about that, won't we. If he gets a job in Paris and you go off to Cambridge, there won't be much point in getting married.'

‘There’s no reason why I shouldn’t look for work in England,’ I observed.

‘With a French law degree?’

Ananda took a few steps in my direction and grasped my hand. ‘And there’s no reason why I shouldn’t give up my University education, to be with my husband, in Paris.’

‘Now don’t be silly, dear.’ Margaret wagged a warning finger. ‘After all the work you’ve put into your studies. Surely you’re not going to throw away your chances, just to get married.’

‘That’s what happens when a woman gets married.’

‘A fat lot of good it did me.’

‘Yes, but there’s a difference. We do love each other.’

‘Exactly what I thought about my husband, until he started mistreating me.’

I could see that Ananda was deeply hurt by this unexpected outcome. What should have been the climax of my visit had somehow slumped. The very commitment which, she thought, would bring us all together, had only brought about a redefinition of our respective positions, leaving Ananda in a no-man’s land between her mother and myself. Once again, such qualities as sympathy, loyalty , filial duty—qualities by which under other circumstances she would have been upheld—had turned against her, or rather had forced her to a critical juncture from which she could not retreat without betraying herself, nor advance without being torn apart.

It was considerations such as these which prompted me to cut my visit short by a week or so. I told Margaret that the administrators of my trust wanted to see me before I left for France. I also said that my fellow tenant-to-be in Paris, Richard O’Rourke, a graduate just down from Cambridge, wanted to talk to me about arrangement. I paid the first

month's rent in advance and booked a ticket for London.

We spent our final evening in Dublin at the Abbey Theatre watching a performance of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. The story was about a poor young Irish lad who had managed to win, but then had finished up losing, the woman of his choice, largely due to the fact that the girl's own family turned against him. I wondered idly whether there was a moral in the story for me.

After the performance we took a bus to the corner of Ananda's street. She was unusually quiet on the way home. She looked tired. But her weariness had a quality of sadness to it, sponsored perhaps by the knowledge of my imminent departure, already foreshadowed by the two packed suitcases lying on my bed. At any rate, instead of going straight home, she suggested we should walk down to the harbour wall.

A thin drizzle filled the air, falling almost imperceptibly. But here and there the glistening beads were caught in the yellow cones of light which hung from the harbour lanterns. The boats were nestling in the darkness, lining the darkness with their masts and emitting every now and then a complaining groan as their bows pressed up against the pier. A pungent smell of rotting weed hung over the whole aquatic vista.

We sauntered out to the end of the pier without saying a word. The only sound was the surreptitious surge of the incoming waves, lapping in the stillness that fell upon us with the fog. We sat for a while at the end of the pier, our legs dangling out over the murky water, watching the great damp compress of the fog close down upon us. Something about the rigidity of her stance disquieted me. I nudged her. But she had become as unresponsive as a statue. I nudged her again. But I still could not reach her, only touch this

empty shell which she had left behind to mark the point of her departure. It was as if the radiating circles of her self-diffusion had suddenly reversed themselves, contracted backwards into some black centre of absorption. Instead of herself I was left with an anti-self—like herself, and yet completely different—a mirror image, coldly, flatly reproducing a copy of someone I could no longer apprehend. I nudged her yet again, more forcibly this time, as if I hoped to knock her back into some tangible semblance of herself.

'Ananda,' I asked, 'what come over you?' But all I was able to elicit in the way of an answer was a barely audible whisper in which I could just make out the one word, 'separation.' I reminded her that it was only for a while, that we would be back together before very long. But with a dizzy leap of intuitive comprehension I found myself feeling what she was feeling, sensed that what she was reacting to was something much more fundamental than just such incidental comings and goings, something that marks the very nature of our human condition—the separate sacks of skin in which we are sewn.

By the time we got back to the harbour wall the fog had already begun to invade the land, probing forward in long gray columns. We groped our way up fogbound streets, guided by the redeeming blur of successive street lights. And then, just as we reached the doorway of her house, a foghorn started blowing. Ananda paused briefly, as if to acknowledge the sound, before unlocking the door and letting us in.

All night long the foghorn boomed, a warning sound, striding across the sightlessness of the foggy bay. The sound kept me awake. So, sometime in the early hours of the morning, I wandered into Ananda's room. She was asleep,

her pale face wrapped in filaments of fog which drifted in through the open window. I watched as long as the foghorn sounded, time notched off along the awesome plumbline of that sound. Then I returned to my room, fell into a troubled reverie which lasted until I was awakened by a tickling sensation, as though a column of ants were marching across my face. I opened my eyes to find myself enveloped in a canopy of hair—Ananda stooping over me, her face framed in an envelope of golden tresses.

Then it was time to leave. Ananda saw me off at the station. We stood on the platform for a while, waiting for the train. I talked rapidly and with forced good humour. Ananda said nothing or very little. Over the announcer, a voice informed us that our train would be delayed. So I went back into the buffet to buy two cups of tea. We stood apart, drinking, our conversation strained through mouthfuls of tea. Eventually the engine drew in, casting cinders like confetti. I got on, found my way to an empty seat, and lowered my compartment window. There were some serious things I meant to say. But my half-formed thoughts dropped into depths I could not fathom. And yet I remember my presentiment as I held her hand through the open window, the presentiment that this scene of my leaving would be recorded by an image which endured, would come to signal a separateness which it still seemed possible to avoid. Even as we exchanged the trivia that helps to fill the numbing cavities of such moments, I remember wanting to get down off the train, stay with her, go away with her, anywhere. So powerful was this presentiment that I even went through a ritual of reassurance, dismissing it with a dozen decent arguments which I had time to rehearse before the train drew out of the station. I reminded her that before very long I would be through with my studies, free of

the restrictions of studenthood. This future seemed so very close. It seemed so eminently reasonable to leave this last and final time, and so to earn the right to our reunion. And yet I was beset by a presentiment that we should stay together, go away together, that very minute. But if I had given voice to this presentiment I am sure that she too would have tried to dismiss my most unreasonable request, yet sensing too what I already sensed, this awful presentiment that there would be no future time but only a time for me to recover the time that I had lost.

As the train drew out I fixed my gaze upon the figure, that forlorn figure standing on the platform, all by herself, and it seemed to me even then that she was receding, receding out of my life and into the pitiless cycles of memory.

And what if I had never taken over the apartment in the rue de l'Université? No doubt Margaret would have unearthed some other bone of contention. But could she have located as convincing a ground on which to construct the edifice of her animosity? Our disagreement was already apparent to Ananda. But Ananda could easily have remained astride the twin pillars of a simple difference of opinion, bridging the difference as she had so often done before. The apartment, on the other hand, was a more delicate issue altogether. It remained the one outstanding link with Paris. And so the apartment, which I took over on the first of September, rapidly became the locus of an ambush, a trip wire triggering off the cross fire of Margaret's hostility towards me and towards the family.

But it would be wrong to surmise that the trap was sprung in advance. I have no reason to doubt the genuineness of Margaret's relief when I agreed to move into

the apartment. Even while I was at Heidelberg she wrote to me to express her fears about Roger Kimberley. On one occasion she had asked a friend to call around to collect a tape recorder. And from what Margaret was told, it appeared that there were more persons living at the apartment than she had been informed of, women as well as men, a situation which had caused her some concern in view of the delicate nature of her relations with the family.

All the same, I suppose I should have anticipated a certain confusion, the sort of confusion that invariably prevailed whenever Margaret made arrangements. The first time she wrote to me on the subject of Roger Kimberley, she said she was quite dissatisfied with him and would be giving him notice. At her invitation, I found an old friend of mine to share the apartment with me. Then she wrote again to say that she might have misjudged Roger. Perhaps I would write to him and find out whether he would be willing to share the apartment with me. I told her that such an arrangement might have been possible earlier, but that it was now too late. I had already made other arrangements. When I visited Margaret in Dublin the situation had, I thought, been finalized. She had given Roger notice to leave by the end of August.

It was Roger who opened the Pandora's box of Margaret's animosity. Not that he ever intended to unleash the furious blast of her recriminations. On the contrary, all he wanted was to stay on at the apartment. And with good reason, for apartments were not that easy to come by, especially at such short notice. Besides, he had devoted a considerable amount of time to redecorating the apartment. Margaret's complaints of 'irresponsible innovations' sounded a little thin in the face of the improvements, which left the apartment looking better than I had ever seen it

before. And then, to complicate matters further, he claimed that he had only taken over the apartment on condition that he would be allowed to stay on for at least a year. He also claimed that he had not been given proper notice, a claim which he was able to substantiate by showing me his correspondence with Margaret. Not only were her letters indecisive on the question of his continued tenancy, it looked as though Margaret had attempted to transfer to me the task of dismissing him or keeping him as I saw fit. But by the time I got to Paris, it had already been decided that I would share the apartment with my friend Richard.

I might have been disposed to change my mind if I hadn't taken an instant dislike to Roger Kimberley. His credentials were impeccable. He came from a titled family which had distinguished itself in the world of diplomacy. He had been to Harrow and on from there to Oxford. The rather lowly degree he had earned at Oxford had made his entry into the diplomatic service somewhat problematic. And so he had come to Paris for a year with a view to brushing up his languages. The following year he intended to sit the Foreign Office examination.

Or so he said. For he was one of those who prefer to keep their doings to themselves, no doubt because the camouflage of secrecy made it that much easier for him to operate with impunity. He had succeeded in reducing morality to a form of politeness. It didn't matter what you did as long as you observed the proprieties. He talked about the working class as though they had all been brought up in Borstal. But he would never have allowed any personal scruples to stand between himself and a course of action from which he might expect to derive some advantage. There was an affable assurance about his manner which was designed to gain your confidence, so much so that it tended

to produce the opposite effect—that is, if you were not used to the effusive salutations: ‘My deah fellow. So delighted to make your acquaintance.’ His intimacy was of a kind which implied that we all belonged to some exclusive club. Only I was always left with the uncertain feeling that one day I would receive a note on a silver platter: ‘Regretfully, your membership had been terminated.’

He exuded charm, but in so extravagant a way that I often longed for blunt familiarities. I had some difficulty in determining whether his affectations were deliberate, whether they were simply theatrical. It was also possible that he really believed in the scrupulous sensibility which he cultivated, but from which he seemed to be protected. In any case, something about him bothered me. And my suspicions were confirmed by Richard. We agreed that he should not be allowed to stay on longer than was absolutely necessary.

At the same time I felt it was only fair to give Roger time to find another apartment. I intended to return to Heidelberg to collect my effects, mostly books, but also a few clothes that I had left behind at the Studentenheim. Instead of going and coming straight back, I decided to extend my visit through to the end of the month. Roger would be free to use the spare room until I returned, by which time I assumed that he would have found another apartment for himself.

I should never have communicated these arrangements to Margaret. I realized this as soon as I got her reply, a six-page letter in which she made a mountain out of the relatively minor modifications in our plans. Roger could not stay another day unless he retracted his claims. She had never told him that he could remain in the apartment for a year. Of course she had given him notice. Was I implying

that she had not told the truth when she had informed me that the apartment would be vacant by the first of September? Was I calling into question her right to dismiss Roger, or any other tenant of hers, as and when she pleased?

I was surprised by the tone of her reply, more especially since it seemed to miss the point of my letter altogether. I reassured her that there was no crisis. Roger was disappointed, but had agreed to move out by the end of the month. There was no question of his retracting his claims, for he had never made any. In short, there appeared to be a misunderstanding which had since been cleared up. Everything would return to normal by the first of October.

And then I left for Heidelberg. I took the overnight train from the Gare de l'Est, and happened to find myself sharing a sleeping compartment with the mother of a normalien who was studying at Heidelberg. I remembered him from the year before—a short, squat youth whose pipe never seemed to leave his mouth. He was writing a thesis on the relationship between philosophy and poetry, with special reference to Rilke and Heidegger. Clearly he had succeeded in interesting his mother in his project. For she talked brilliantly on the subject for several hours that night. She was herself a professor at a provincial university in France, and seemed to embody in her attitudes something of the paradox of Franco-German relations: Germany, the traditional enemy, and yet the country with whom France's fortunes had been most closely associated. As an Englishman, albeit one who had lived in both countries, I was, for her, the perfect audience, a neutral observer who could be relied upon to understand both her sympathies and her antipathies.

We arrived at Heidelberg just before dawn. I walked through darkened streets past the university and on up to

the old bridge, a narrow stone construction which was guarded at both ends by a fortified tower. It was just getting light as I positioned myself at the very centre of the bridge. I stood looking up the Neckar Valley, whose thickly forested sides climbed steeply up into the mountains. The morning mist was rising off the water, filling the 'V' of the valley with an ambiguous concoction, half air, half water. On the wall of the bridge I found a Heraclitean fragment, deeply inscribed in the mouldering stone. Punta Re—everything flows. Standing there, at the first light of dawn, I felt the various tributaries of my past flowing together: England, France, Germany; merging, blending, uniting in one person.

It was too early to call on my friends. So I went and had breakfast at an inn just off the river. As I waited for the innkeeper to bring my breakfast, it occurred to me that this was the first time I had been away from Germany and come back again. A country which, only a year ago, had seemed so alien to me, now appeared familiar, and yet different. I had exchanged the *elan vital*, the wit, the ebullience of French esprit for the methodical calm, the purposeful concentration of the German *Geist*. The seventeenth century had left its mark upon the town. But the timbered walls, the gables, the homely individuality of Heidelberg's historical buildings had no equivalent in France. The domestic elegance of a French château had been replaced by the massive simplicity of the Schloss.

I finished my breakfast and then took a tram to the Studentenheim am Klausenpfad, the residence where most of my student friends still lived. Orhan, Paulo, Yannis, Donaldo, Carlos, and others were there waiting for me when I called. In their company I revisited many of our old haunts of the year before, the villages clinging precariously to the side of the Neckartal, the forests stretching out

around the town, the wine cellars, the discotheques. Three glorious weeks went by, at the end of which I had almost forgotten about Paris, so completely had I been reassimilated into the familiar routines of student life at Heidelberg. And then I returned.

I knew that something had gone wrong as soon as I got back to the apartment on the morning of the first of October. Clearly Roger was still living in the spare room. The drawers were full of his clothes. His suits were hanging in the wardrobe. He had tacked his pictures up on the walls, filled the bookcase in his room with his reading material. In my room, the room in which Ananda used to sleep, there was a note for me from Richard:

> Am leaving this note for you because I will be unable to be your *fides Achates* when the Cyclops gets back from work this evening. Sorry. Have to be in Orléans for the day. But you must be wondering what I mean ... Roger—Cyclops? Yes, I could see it. It's not just the cross-eyed look he gives you. He's a veritable ogre and worse than an ogre. He kills with kindness, or rather with its verbal equivalents. If he calls me 'my deah' anything again ... And then, his tastes. Now I'm rather partial to cigars—in moderation. But in clouds—poisonous yellow clouds that roll down the corridor like something the Germans sent over the trenches in the First World War. Cigar smoke in your clothes, in your hair, on your mind. No doubt in order to redress the balance he then goes off and bathes in eau de cologne. The times I've been tempted to fill the flagon by his bedside with hearty, wholesome eau de Javel! Now all this would be tolerable if it were only for a month. But it looks as though we might be saddled with him for the rest of the year. Yes, I'm afraid the worst is still to come. I'd have written to tell you about it if I'd had an address in Heidelberg. The conniving blighter has

> left the gas and electricity bills unpaid for the last six months. With the result that we are quite likely to be plunged into darkness within a few days unless we do something to satisfy the demands of the utility company. Now he could pay them off out of his spare change. But he's not going to do that unless he's allowed to stay on. You see the kind of fix we're in. I'm sure he has enough money to buy himself an apartment. But for some reason the rue de l'Université has taken his fancy. Or is it us? Could it be that he is, as they say, a gentleman of the second declension? Heaven forbid! I have nightmares about him trying to get into bed with me. The groaning springs. The soft flesh spreading about me like protoplasm. To be drowned in flesh like a wounded beast in a swamp. Quelle horreur! I wake up shouting like Cromwell in the House of Commons: In the name of God—be gone! But how are we to get rid of him? He has one principle, if you can call it that, his philosophy of life, so to speak. Kiss ass or kick ass—apparently the only viable alternatives. So what do we do, my learned friend, kick or kiss his reverend ass? Now if it were up to me ... But I must not indulge my fantasies. Conseil de guerre when I get back. But a word of advice in advance. He's a sly devil, not above stabbing a friend in the back. So above all let us preserve a united front, nay more—a united rear. Hence my motto for the day: bottoms up and bombs away.

I was in my room when Roger came back that evening. I heard him tramp down the corridor to the salon. By the time I got there, he was comfortably installed in an armchair, sipping a gin and tonic. I thrust the gas and electricity bills at him. But my indignation wasted itself against the plausible facade of his affability.

'My dear fellow. Why don't you take a seat? I find it impossibly difficult to converse with someone who stands over me, gibbering like a monkey.' He gestured me into a

nearby chair with one lackadaisical wave of this hand.

'That's better. Now let's lay our cards on the table, shall we? I want to stay on at the apartment. But you, for reasons best known to yourself, would rather I removed myself. Am I right?'

'Right.'

'Except that you can't afford to pay the bills.'

'It's got nothing to do with money. I don't see why we should be held responsible for your debts.'

The retort failed to ruffle the smooth surface of his nonchalance. 'Exactly. Exactly, dear boy. It was never my intention to fail to meet my obligations.' His eyes narrowed. 'But then I have no desire to leave the apartment either.'

'Like love and marriage,' I commented facetiously. 'You can't have one without the other.'

'Precisely. Either yours truly continues to be the life and soul of the party. Or you'll have to come up with the money yourself.'

'With my salary, that would be quite impossible.'

'In which case, I strongly recommend that you accept the inevitable with as much good grace as you can muster. Needless to say, I am ready to overlook your lack of civility, if you will forgive me for having caused you some small measure of inconvenience.'

I was about to say something, but he broke in before me. 'The bills will be paid, I do assure you.'

'It looks like a *fait accompli*.'

'I hoped you'd see it like that.' A smile hung upon his face, endlessly, like a picture on the wall. 'Oh, and if I were you, I wouldn't mention a word of all this to Margaret.'

'She specifically asked me to let her know what was going on.'

'I must say, your honesty does you credit.' His right

hand doubled over as he scrutinized his fingernails. 'But it's likely to get you into trouble.'

'What do you mean?'

'Your landlady—or should I say, your mother-in-law?' He looked up sharply. 'In case you weren't aware, she's totally neurotic.'

I was about to protest. But he silenced me with one flash of his palm, as white as a pocket handkerchief.

'Now, there's nothing wrong with being neurotic. It's quite fashionable these days, especially amongst the aristocracy, or the pseudo-aristocracy.' He looked at me in a way which suggested that he already knew much more about Margaret than I had suspected. 'But the point is, neurotics do take careful handling.'

'You don't think I have the knack?'

'I don't think you realize what you're up against. Plausible pleasantries is what she wants. Facile reassurances, not facts and arguments. They only frighten her.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'In any case, it really doesn't matter what we do. She'll never find out.'

'Now, there you're wrong.' I was delighted to be able to correct him. 'As a matter of fact, she wrote to me last year to say that she had found out a thing or two—not altogether to her liking.'

'Maybe she did. But nothing I wasn't able to explain away. It's not what you do that matters. It's how you go about accounting for it.' He paused, as if he'd just thought of something. 'By the way, I suppose you know the one about the difference between the lady and the diplomat.'

I thought he was trying to change the subject. But I admitted that I didn't.

'If a diplomat says "yes", he means "maybe". If he says "maybe", he means "no". If he says "no", he's not a

diplomat.' He chuckled, almost to himself. 'But if a lady says "no", she means "maybe". If she says "maybe", she means "yes". And if she says "yes", she's not a lady.' He looked up at me. 'Never heard that one?' His eyebrows arched in astonishment. 'Surprising. It's an old favourite with my Foreign Office friends. But the point is, your situation is a little more complicated.' He leaned forward in his chair. 'You have to deal diplomatically with a lady. You can't say "no". That wouldn't be diplomatic. But neither can you make her say "yes". 'Cos she's a laidy.' He pronounced the word in the manner of a fishwife.

'So what do you recommend?'

'Subtlety, dear fellow, subtlety.' He eased his cumbersome frame back into his chair and spread his hands about his belly. 'Essentially, she doesn't want to have to make decisions. So you are going to have to make the decisions for her, but subtly, so she thinks she's still in control. You are going to have to put ideas into her head, but subtly, so she thinks she thought of them herself.' His tongue flickered over the rim of his lips.

And of course he was right; though, as a matter of fact, I didn't follow his advice. But if I presented Margaret with the problem and asked her to agree to a solution, it was because I thought she would realize that the only beneficiaries of our proposal would be Roger and herself. I suggested that Roger should be allowed to stay. And that in order to compensate her for the inconvenience of a third tenant, the rent should be raised. Reasonable arrangements, or so I thought. But they only solicited from her a further letter in which she continued to protest. 'I can't imagine why on earth you let Roger stay on—unless of course, it's to your advantage. If you are trying to exploit the situation, you have only yourself to blame. Deception never pays off

in the end.'

And so they began to arrive, those vivid, violent letters which exploded like firecrackers in my mind, until I came to dread the appearance of the concierge at the door in the morning with another vitriolic packet of words.

Roger took note of these exchanges. For he must have seen in the deterioration of my relations with Margaret an opportunity to further his cause. It was Richard who first became suspicious of the letters Roger began to receive from Margaret. One morning, while Roger was out at work, he decided to investigate, and came up with a correspondence which included three letters from Margaret to him and a letter which he had been on the point of sending to her. From this correspondence, it became apparent that Roger had been telling her more or less what she wanted to hear: that, for the most part, everything was dandy at the apartment, that the only problem was his fellow tenants. And from his analysis of the situation, Margaret had already reached the conclusion that her best policy would be to dismiss Richard and myself and replace us with Roger.

We confronted Roger with the correspondence when he got home that evening. His usual imperturbability was not equal to the injury he had sustained. He roundly denounced what he was pleased to call our 'inexcusable audacity'. He informed us that gentlemen did not read each other's correspondence. He threatened to call the police. His bluff was called. So he threw a tantrum, told us he had no intention of spending another day in the company of cads such as ourselves. We informed him that his departure would be no loss to us, just so long as he paid the arrears of bills. He produced a cheque book, wrote out a cheque, slapped it down on the salon table, then returned to his

room to pack his bags. He left that night without saying goodbye. Apparently our behaviour had placed us outside the pale of those social proprieties which, ordinarily, he was only too ready to indulge.

The next day I deposited his cheque in my account. A few days later I received a note from my bank stating that Roger's bank had informed them that there were no funds in his account to cover the cheque. I went to his branch office and was told that he had closed his account with them. There was no forwarding address.

Roger's departure meant that we had to face once again the old problem of the arrears of bills. I wrote to Margaret suggesting that we should divide the burden between us. If she would agree to a reduction in the rent to cover her half of the bills we would take over the rest ourselves. Her response was anything but sympathetic. 'I am astonished and dismayed by your behaviour. I must have the whole rent by the first of every month. As for the bills, they are your responsibility and have nothing to do with me. Don't ask me how you are going to be reimbursed. That's your look out. If necessary, you'll just have to beg, borrow, or steal the money that we need to stay alive in Dublin.' In case she suspected that the bills might be fictitious, I sent her a note from the gas and electricity company. Her reply was no less acrimonious than before.

I am trying to record these matters truthfully. But of course the truth was quite immaterial, for it was rapidly superseded by her own successive versions of events which laid their lurid colours down, layer by layer, upon the barren outlines of my sketch. Certainly, Margaret always acted as if she had good reasons for what she was doing. But in actual fact her reactions were committed to another logic which dictated that any contrary evidence should only provoke

from her more vehement accusations still. Not only was she angry at me, she was angrier still at my attempts to prove that she had no reason to be angry with me. And certainly I overreacted to her letters, largely because I envisaged her saying the very things that she wrote. But what she said in her letters was in effect an outlet for feelings which she was quite incapable of expressing in person.

I began to get some inkling of all this when I started ringing her up to explain some detail of the apartment's administration. I would expect her to set the same tone she had already established in her letters. But instead she would listen quietly and patiently to what I had to say. When I asked her at the end if there were any outstanding issues, my question would be greeted with an accommodating silence. But then, by the very next mail, I would receive another letter—accusing, condemning, as though she had to make up for the compromise which she had just conceded on the phone.

And so I suppose her letters were a reaffirmation of herself. In her letters she was able to voice once again the cries of rage which were denied her on the phone, denied her in so far as she was, after all, the Countess de Villiers; that is, someone whose social standing precluded such uncivil outbursts. Only in the absence of the other person was she able to achieve a dimension of personal presence; with this essential qualification: that what she lived out in her letters was not so much a spontaneous expression of her person, as an expression of her reaction to the fact that she had had to suppress that person.

And then her anxiety must have been aggravated by the fear that I would get in touch with the family. Hating them as she did, she must have assumed that they hated her too, and would take steps to punish her if ever they succeeded in

penetrating the screen of secrecy which she threw up around her doings. I had become a rent in that screen: hence her fears that through me she might lose the apartment altogether. 'Don't you realize that you are endangering our right to the apartment?' she wrote in one of her more self-pitying letters. 'How can you be so irresponsible? We can't afford to lose the apartment. We have nowhere else of our own to live.'

From the standpoint of the family, however, Margaret had already become a problem which could no more be eliminated by attacking her than a guilty conscience can be eliminated by repression. Indeed, she benefited by the very traditions which she had so often scoffed at—more particularly, the finality of marriage which ensured that she would remain a family responsibility for as long as she lived. Indeed, if I had been in touch with the family at the time I might have been provided with some useful advice on how to deal with her. For they were already familiar with forms of behaviour which I had only had occasion to suspect. For example, the psycho-analytical explanations: 'Your problem,' she wrote, 'is that you have allowed yourself to become obsessed by vindictive notions of revenge. Against what or whom, for heavens sake? If you can't work it out for yourself I suggest you consult a psychiatrist.' Such pseudo-psychiatric explanations would have been instantly recognized as projections—either by the Countess or, even more certainly, by her son.

When eventually and inevitably the Countess did get to hear of the happenings at the apartment, her comments were characteristically *à propos*. 'With Margaret it's always been the same story,' she told me then, too late for her insight to be of any value. 'First love, then hate.' And later that same evening: ' Margaret has a distinct tendency to

translate her private antipathies into objective properties qualifying the other person. With the result that it's always the other person's fault.' And, after a moment's reflection. 'That is why I have always thought that there was absolutely no point in arguing with her. One either ignores her. Or else one puts a stop to the amateur dramatics.'

Of course I was aware from the very outset that the person for whom these theatricals had been arranged was Ananda rather than myself. The more she was able to goad me into a defence of my actions, the easier it must have been for her to portray herself as the victim of my malevolence. The more she was able to work herself up, the more impressive her distress must have been in the eyes of the only person that she needed to convince. As might have been expected, it was not long before the witness had become a casualty of the very accident to which she was called upon to testify.

'In consequence of your mismanagement of our affairs,' Margaret wrote, 'Ananda has just had another relapse. Even if you don't give a damn about me, you might spare a thought for her.'

From time to time I would try to reach Ananda on the phone. But it was always Margaret who answered. At first she would tell me that her daughter was not at home. Later I was told that she had had to go back to hospital. And my letters? Were most probably intercepted before they got to Ananda; those at least which were not sent back with the desolate words 'Return to Sender' scrawled across the front of the envelope. 'I don't know what good you think you're doing yourself by trying to get in touch with Ananda,' Margaret remarked in one of her last letters. 'She's beginning to see that your whole attitude towards women is vitiated by an idea of independence which no self-respecting

woman wants—the sort of half-baked, free-thinking ideology which every female intellectual in France professes, and which makes French women such a nasty-minded, vicious breed.'

Towards the end of November, all the problems had at last been solved. With nothing left to complain about, I allowed myself to believe that the crisis had been surmounted. For a couple of weeks an ominous silence reigned. Then came a telegram, just before Christmas, short and to the point: 'Vacate apartment December 23rd.' Followed by a letter, special delivery, more hysterical than anything I had received before, as though the provisional peace was more intolerable than the war. Predictably enough, her letter ended with a statement in which my name was connected with that of her former husband. 'First Georges, and now you. You both insinuated yourselves into my confidence and then betrayed the trust I placed in you.'

A few days later, I received a telegram from Ananda: 'What is going on? Maman is sick with anxiety. Come, please come soon.'

Just after Christmas I received an unexpected visit from Catherine. I knew she was living in the South of France—'with a man', Margaret had said, resentfully. But I had never been given her address or I might have tried to write to her myself. When I answered the doorbell the last person I expected to see was Catherine. Indeed, I hardly recognized the rain-flecked figure when she stepped in through the doorway. She was wearing a bright-patterned skirt and a cardigan. She had cut her hair to shoulder length. But, most remarkable of all, there was a new assurance about her which seemed to have changed her features altogether. The nervousness had been transformed into vivacity. The

smouldering intensity of her eyes had been converted into sparkling points which danced in the arms of the upward curve of her mouth.

'Catherine ,' I exclaimed, with surprise and delight.

'I'm sorry I didn't let you know I was coming. But I'm only up here for a very few days, visiting my father and my grandparents.'

'I'm delighted to see you.'

I let her through to the salon, apologising on the way for the untidy state of the apartment—the half-packed suitcases awaiting my departure.

When we got to the salon I helped her out of her rain coat. 'Yes,' she said, 'Bonne Maman told me you had telephoned a few days ago to explain about the apartment.' I cleared a chair for her and she sat down, placing her umbrella on the floor beside her. 'I'm really sorry it had to turn out this way.'

I poured her a gin and tonic. 'To be honest with you, I'm glad it's all over. It's been a pretty miserable few months for me.'

'I'm sure it has.' She sipped at her drink. 'I was wondering if there was anything I could do to help.'

'Well to start with, you can help me take my mind off it all by telling me what you've been up to lately.'

She looked at me, a provocative smile half-formed upon her face. 'You mean you haven't been told?'

'Been told what?'

'That I'm getting married.'

The news was so unexpected that it took me some time to assemble a response. 'How wonderful,' I said at last. 'May I be the last to congratulate you.' I hesitated, wondering whether I knew her well enough to press the matter further. 'And the family? What do they think about it all?'

'My grandparents were a little stuffy at first. He's not quite what they were hoping for. Middle-class, without too much money and no social pretensions. But as soon as they got to know him better they came right around. They even bought a house for us in the hills behind Cannes. He's a professor of literature at the University of Nice.'

'Very respectable. I don't see what the family could possibly complain about.'

Once again she produced that smile, as if she were about to say something slightly risqué. 'Ah, well you see, we were living in what they call "sin" for quite a while.'

'Good for you,' I volunteered. 'Give the devil his due.'

She laughed. 'We simply wanted to make sure we weren't rushing into something we might regret later on.'

'But your grandparents weren't too happy about it.'

'I've always been the black sheep of the family—a little like my father.'

'Perhaps they were afraid that you too might have to get married.'

She glanced up sharply. 'You know about my father?' For a moment she looked a little like the taut explosive Catherine I had known before. Then her face subsided into a smile. 'After all, there's no reason why you shouldn't.' She shook her head. 'No, I'm not pregnant. We decided to do things the proper way, more for their sake than for our own.'

'No more weddings to put the record straight.'

She laughed, a warm expansive laugh, quite unlike the brittle trills I still remembered. Then her face assumed a serious poise. 'You know, I think that was what saved me. Being legitimate, I mean.' She stood up, walked once around her chair and then sat down again. 'You see, Ananda was always tormented by the thought that her father might

only have married on account of her, on account of the child which my mother was about to have. And that made her feel very responsible about their marriage and therefore about their relation to the family. As for me, it was much easier for me to take the family for granted. Like my father, I knew I had the liberty to rebel without ever ceasing to be a member of the family. Ananda always seemed to be so terribly concerned about what was expected of her as a de Villiers. I simply went my way. For this very reason, paradoxically enough, it has been much easier for me to establish normal relations with the family—my father, my grandparents, even my great-grandmother, who still lords it over everybody, even though she is nearly eighty eight.' Her face brightened suddenly. 'There's going to be the most magnificent wedding up at the château this summer. You must come.'

I wanted to reply, match her happiness with my own. But the words stuck in my throat. The conversation clotted. In the silence I could hear the rain drumming in on the window panes, nailing us in together. Intuitively, I knew she knew what I was thinking—that, almost in spite of ourselves, the conversation had been brought around again to the starting point, the reason for our being here together. Clumsily, I groped my way towards the question I had been meaning to ask all along.

'What should I do about Ananda?'

'There's only one thing left to do,' she said. 'Go and speak to her in person.'

Chapter Ten

'Maya the spider weaving her web of lies,' Robert observed mysteriously as he twisted coils of spaghetti around his fork. Robert, Herman, Angelo and myself were having dinner at the apartment, a few days before I was due to leave. I had just finished telling them about the history of my difficulties with Margaret.

'In a manner of speaking,' I answered dubiously.

'Oh, but indubitably so,' Robert insisted, waving his fork in the air.

'A spider?' Herman repeated, hoping to prod Robert into a further elaboration.

'A black widow,' Robert continued, drawing each word out slowly, like a cork out of a poison bottle.

'But she's not a widow,' Herman pointed out with the faintly amused detachment of one who has already anticipated the drift of the conversation. 'She's only a divorcee.'

'But that's just it,' Robert insisted. 'A widow's husband dies. But a divorcee's husband is killed—by her.'

'Or she by him,' Herman added.

'Not in the case of a black widow. She's much too strong for him. Picture it for a moment. There she is, lying in wait for him at the very centre of the web.' Pointing with his fork, Robert indicated the blob of meaty sauce nestling at the centre of his plate of spaghetti. 'She oozes, she throbs, she exudes an irresistible attraction. He knows it's likely to

be a fatal move. But how can he hold out against the seductive splendour of her primeval personality—everything he ever wanted in a woman, even her frightening enormity. For in his heart of hearts he is not a little fascinated by her destructive potential. So he thinks to himself, how about it? After all, I have the advantage of agility. I could slip it in, have it off, and be away before she could get around to catching me. But there's a catch, as the old lady knows full well. Before, he's as frisky as a jigger. But afterwards. Yes, my dear Angelo, you lascivious reprobate you. From the look on your face I can see that you are keeping abreast of me, if not one step ahead. You have already foreseen the fatal snag. Post-coital lethargy.' A blissful smile appeared on Robert's face. 'It's been so good. Such a mighty climax and heightened by the most delicious trepidation. Now all he wants is to sleep it off, enjoy the inertia of his carnal stupefaction. Fatal.' He raised his forked right hand. One timely grab and she's got him.' Robert stabbed at a chunk of meat. 'Into her mouth with a vengeance.' The piece of meat was conveyed to his mouth, where its place was taken by a smile, the smile on the face of the tiger.

'Now if he'd died at the height of his passion,' Robert continued, 'it might almost have been worth it.' He swilled the mouthful down with a draught of wine. 'But to be caught napping afterwards. Typical of our modern times, n'est-ce pas? The most exalted moments trivialised.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Angelo. 'As for me ...'

'Premature ejaculation, Angelo, old fellow,' Robert retorted. 'That was only Part One—the literal. Now for Part Two. The transliteration of the literal into the symbolic.' He looked at us with the specious innocence of a conjurer about to perform a trick. 'Has it ever occurred to you, gentlemen, that our sexual introductions might only be

the symbolic substitutes for a far more deadly sacrifice? Reincarnation—but literally, the whole of ourselves back in again.' Robert shuddered, as though the thought had chilled the nerve of his recital. 'Consummation devoutly to be avoided. So instead we offer Aphrodite the least part of ourselves, our littlest member, that she may spare the rest.'

'And to think that our friend is walking right into the jaws of death.' Angelo granted me a commiserating look.

'Ah!' said Robert, raising one finger portentously. 'But he still has to win his spurs. What's the good of a knight in shining armour if there are no damsels in distress?'

'A knight in shining armour?' Angelo echoed incredulously.

'Indeed, a latter-day Lancelot. Mind you, the armour's a wee bit tarnished. But nothing that can't be remedied with a little spit and polish.' He looked at me instructively. 'And remember, the damsel won't be yours until you've slain the dragon. Perseus and Andromeda, if you know what I mean.'

'What a man will go through for a woman,' Angelo muttered sorrowfully.

'So what do you recommend?' I asked.

'There are other women.'

Hoots of laughter from Robert. 'Just listen to old Don Juan.'

'To limit oneself to one woman,' Angelo continued, unperturbed, 'is tantamount to insulting all the rest.'

More hoots of laughter from Robert. He turned away from Angelo to address us. 'Can't you guess what Don Juan's problem really was? Why all those women? Why could no one woman ever satisfy him? No? Well, I'll have to let you into the secret. What he really wanted was a man. He was a homo—'

The sentence was broken off as Angelo set upon him,

overturning his chair and depositing him upon the floor.
'—sexual,' Robert concluded, floundering like a well-dressed seal on an icy floe.

'Tais-toi misérable,' Angelo growled as he clambered astride Robert's prostrate body.

'Oh Angelo,' Robert simpered. 'I never knew you felt this way about me.'

'Tais-toi,' Angelo repeated, and the two of them locked arms in combat. Herman watched their struggles with the curious detachment of a spectator watching circus animals going through their paces. Then, from somewhere underneath the mass of writhing flesh, there emerged, in a series of breathless interjections, one of Robert's more notorious compositions:

'Said Don Juan, unzipping his limb,
My darling dear, if I weren't so prim,
I'd not squander my powers
Deflowering flowers,
When I'd rather hitch up with a him!'

'Ta gueule!' Angelo commanded as he extracted a soiled handkerchief and stuffed it into Robert's mouth. There was a gurgling sound, not unlike the bath water running away. Then Robert signalled his defeat by thumping his one free hand upon the floor. Angelo let him get back onto his feet, but not without a final parting shot.

'Who the hell do you think you are?'

'A writer,' Robert answered promptly.

'A writer, huh!' Angelo snorted. 'Aren't we all writers these days?'

'Pen pushers more like,' Robert objected. 'Now I ...' Robert singled himself out with one hand pressed

expressively to his breast. 'I have earned the right to call myself a poet.'

'What of it,' Angelo complained, 'I write too.'

Another outburst of hilarity from Robert. 'The only literature I've ever seen you write is not the kind you'd leave around when Aunt Maude called for tea, eh Angelo?'

Angelo chose to ignore the insult. 'You forget,' he reminded us. 'I intend to become a journalist.'

'Which only goes to show that there are writers and writers. More specifically, the creators, like myself, and the destroyers, like the literary critics, not to mention the journalist, who, of course, ought not to be mentioned.'

'Children, children,' Herman pleaded. 'Order in the house, if you please.'

Robert assumed the well-behaved look of a child who has just been reprimanded. 'Well, Herr Professor, since you seem to have assumed the role of pater familias, perhaps we should invite you to tell us what you think.'

'I think,' said Herman with lofty condescension, 'therefore I do not speak.'

'Good Lord!' Robert exclaimed. 'Did I say pater familias? Pater Noster would be more like it.' He paused to straighten his tie. 'Well, the analogy is not so inappropriate. After all, this is our last supper.' He surveyed the remnants of the meal with melancholy solemnity. 'All we need is a few more disciples. And, of course ... a Judas Iscariot. Angelo, would you oblige me with a kiss?'

More inarticulate grunts from Angelo, whose mouth was too full of spaghetti to be capable of formulating an intelligible response.

Herman took advantage of Angelo's temporary disability. 'No betrayals,' he declared. 'Friends now and friends forever.'

‘Loyal to the last,’ Robert rejoined. ‘Let’s drink to that.’ He quaffed the entire contents of his glass, sighed a deep sigh of satisfaction, then turned to me again.

‘So when do you move out?’

‘The end of next week.’

‘What’s happening to the apartment?’

‘I’ve found someone else to take it over.’

‘Not Richard.’

‘No. He refused to stay on after I was given notice.’

‘So you found someone else for her.’

‘She’d never have been able to find a replacement in Dublin.’

‘Serves her right. You should have left her with an empty apartment.’

‘You can imagine how that would have been interpreted.’

‘Turning the other cheek, eh? What’s happened to that good Old Testament spirit?’ He took a piece of bread and mopped up the remains of the spaghetti sauce. ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Moses and the Ten Commandments. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife nor her ass, nor any other part of her. Those were the days. Then Jesus Christ got into the act.’ He stretched out his hands as though he were about to deliver a benediction. ‘Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his wife for his friend.’ He let his hands fall to his side again. ‘But I’m telling you, it just won’t work. It goes against the grain or, if you prefer, the groin.’

There was a silence, a long meditative silence. Then Herman went to the kitchen to brew some coffee. He came back a few minutes later with the coffee pot and poured a little into each of our cups. As I watched them sip their coffee, I began to envisage an eventuality which had never

crossed my mind before, that we would each of us go our separate ways, reuniting, if at all, for brief fugitive moments across the years. I wondered whether we would remember to the end such times as these, and the context which had made them possible—the context of student life, men and women in the flush of youth, assured of their powers, yet still dispossessed of every worldly adjunct, making the most of what they have to offer each other, the best of themselves, their souls, their bodies.

Somewhere in an upstairs apartment, the sound of a recording could be heard—Edith Piaff singing her most memorable song, 'Je ne regrette rien.'

Robert laid his cup back on its saucer. 'Time for us to be on our way,' he announced, as he rose deliberately. 'Angelo is pining for his bedfellows. And Herman has to get his eight hours sleep or his little gray cells'll pack up on him.'

They all got up and went to collect the equipment with which they intended to brave the rigours of a winter's night.

'Bonne chance,' said Angelo, as he stood in the doorway, his overcoat draped around one shoulder. 'And remember. Out there.' He gestured vaguely in the direction of the street. 'Out there, there are women and women and women, each one lovelier than the one before.'

'Get out of here will you?' Robert complained as he pushed Angelo through the doorway. 'A case of obsessional neurosis if ever I saw one. Take away his idée fixe and he'd immediately be overcome by existential anxiety.' He bowed, as Herman, complete with silver-handled cane, approached. 'Bitte schön, Herr Professor.' Herman stalked out in stately fashion, leaving Robert to deliver his final salutations.

'Eh bien, mon cher. Do your duty like a man. England expects, you know.'

'Does she indeed?'

'Oh yes. Hadn't you heard?' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'Between you and me, Britannia's in the family way.'

If Margaret was surprised by my appearance at her door, she certainly didn't show it. Indeed, it was I who was surprised by the matter-of-fact way in which she accepted my arrival. I had decided not to let Margaret know I was coming in order to increase my chances of catching her at home with her daughter. For already I suspected that I would be unable to prevail upon Margaret unless I could count upon Ananda as a mediating agency.

I remember so well my state of mind that morning, the violent outbursts of emotion which I would try to control, reminding myself that an imperturbable demeanour would prove far more effective than any display of indignation. Again and again I went over the prescribed tracks of my argumentation until the sentences acquired a deadly uniformity, echoing flatly in my mind. And then my body had become so loaded with fatality that every step required an effort, as though I were on the last stretch of a mountaineering expedition. When eventually I reached the door to their house, my hand clung hesitantly to the knocker for a while before letting the lead fall sonorously into place.

'Do come in, won't you?' Margaret said, on opening the door. I walked in and we chatted amiably enough for a while, deliberately avoiding any topic which might be controversial. I began to think that it might be possible to talk things out in a spirit of compromise. But, once again, when I asked to see Ananda, I was told that she was not at home. And then, before the conversation could get any

further, Margaret excused herself on the grounds that she was in the middle of a piece of work. She suggested I should wait for her in the back garden. It might have occurred to me that the garden was an odd place to be sent to wait if there hadn't been a friend of theirs out there already, doing a little gardening. Margaret introduced me to Lucy and I recognized in her the person to whom Ananda had already referred in one of her letters. She was a slight, attractive, dark-haired girl, with a singsong lilt in her voice which made her accent a delight to listen to. She told me she was a student at Trinity. And so, as Margaret left us to return to the house, I asked her what she thought of Ananda's success at Cambridge. She agreed that she had certainly deserved it. But when I tried to press her further, I began to sense a certain reluctance on her part to talk about Ananda. My questions were deflected in such a way as to avoid the very answers I was hoping for. And then I noticed that her reticence became that much more deliberate when I mentioned the difficulties over the apartment. As the conversation began to lose its impetus, I became increasingly aware of the ominous stillness of the house. There was no sign of life on the ground floor. And the windows of the upper floor had been curtained off with a heavy, dark material which might have been specifically designed to keep the sunlight out. The minutes passed, long, drawn out minutes, weighted with the urgency of my expectations. At one point a blackbird flew over the flower bed, crying shrilly. Lucy returned to her gardening with a baleful word of apology. I felt entirely superfluous, standing there at the edge of the lawn, with Lucy working on one side of me, and Margaret going about her business in the house, but so soundlessly that I began to wonder what on earth could be keeping her. Then I heard a car draw up, and

a little while later the sound of voices in the house. I was on the very point of going back in to find out what was going on, when Margaret reappeared. For a moment her figure filled the rectangle of the back door. Then she moved through and stepped aside to make way for her escort—two policemen.

I confronted a very different Margaret from the one I had greeted not so long before. Her eyes had narrowed down to steely points of light. She gestured vigorously with her arms. And her voice, when it came out of her, was as hard and brittle as shards of glass.

'That's the young man, officer. I want you to remove him from the premises immediately.'

The two constables seemed a little embarrassed by the duty they had been called upon to perform. They shuffled awkwardly at the other side of the lawn, like adolescents working up the courage to invite a girl to dance. Then one of them, a ruddy hulk of a youth, summoned up what was clearly meant to be a gruff, interrogatory tone of voice.

'Are you the young man who's been causing all the trouble?'

'I don't know what you mean by trouble,' I replied. 'I'm a friend of the family. I called around to see how they were getting on.'

Margaret pointed accusingly in my direction. 'Don't listen to a word he says. He's certainly no friend of mine.' I became acutely aware of the oddity of the dialogue, passing, as it did, by way of these two total strangers who had been so inexplicably introduced between ourselves, like telephone operators trying to establish an international connection. With surprising presence of mind I remembered the engagement ring which Ananda had given me. 'To be more exact, I'm engaged to be married to this lady's daughter.

Here is the engagement ring.' I held up my hand to display the evidence.

The two constables stepped forward as if to examine the exhibit more closely. But they had not taken more than a step or two before they were reined in by the whirling, whistle-stop coil of Margaret's voice.

'So you think you're marrying Ananda, do you? Well, have I got news for you. She doesn't want to see or speak to you again.'

'I'd like to hear her say as much in person.'

Margaret entirely overlooked this last remark. 'Thank God we saw through you in time.' She turned to the senior constable, who stiffened visibly in his shoes, preparing himself for the mental equivalent of a salute. 'Would you believe it, officer? This man,' and she flung an arm in my direction, 'this man deliberately set out to steal our apartment away from us.'

I tried to remain calm. 'I'm the one who has grounds for complaint. Unpaid bills. Tenants who said they had not been given notice.'

She looked at me, her eyes as hard as carborundum. 'In that case, I suggest you go and see your lawyer.'

'It's not a legal question, at least as far as I'm concerned. I was hoping we could simply straighten things out between us in a friendly fashion.'

Throughout this dialogue, the two constables had been standing aside, following the proceedings with all the compulsive fascination of spectators at a tennis match, their two heads swivelling back and forward with each and every interchange. The senior officer must have felt that my last remark exempted him and his companion from taking any further action. He stepped forward.

'I've no idea what this is all about,' he remarked,

sucking the strap of his helmet, 'but if you two want to talk it over between yourselves, you won't be needing us any more.' He made a preliminary move in the direction of the door, only to be held back by Margaret.

'I've no intention of talking anything over with this young man. I want him removed from the premises, immediately.'

They stood, perplexed. The junior constable took off his helmet and scratched his head. 'To tell you the truth, Ma'am, he doesn't look in the least bit dangerous to me.'

'I've already explained. I have nothing more to say to him.'

Something about the unrelenting fixity of her attitude infuriated me. I could feel the months of tension and anxiety accumulating into one explosive node of exasperation.

'Only because you know damn well you don't have a leg to stand on.'

Margaret's arm described a histrionic arc, to end up indicating the garden gate at the side of the house.

'Will you get out?' Every word was underlined with an emphatic stab of her hand.

'Not until I get an honest answer out of you.'

She turned to the nearest constable. 'What on earth are you waiting for? This is my property. Am I, or am I not, entitled to order someone off my property?'

'If you put it that way, Ma'am,' the constable answered sheepishly. Then he turned to me. 'Well, son. Time to be off.'

I adopted an air of innocent bewilderment. 'Do I look as though I'd committed a crime?'

Margaret jumped in again before the constable had a chance to respond. 'You are trespassing on my property.'

The constable nodded in my direction. 'Sorry son, but

that's the way it is.'

And so I was escorted out in the custody of the two policemen. But before I reached the garden gate, my attention was briefly drawn to the upstairs window. One corner of the curtain was just falling back into place, or so it seemed to me. Could it have been my imagination which projected into the expanse of window, so momentarily exposed, the white blur of a face retreating into the interior of the room?

Days passed, pale layers intercalated between the nights, each one resembling the one before—opaque slides laid alongside one another, darkening to a fatal shade.

I spent long hours sitting in a café at the end of the street on which Ananda lived, drinking cups of tea, pretending to be engaged in study, but really watching, not even thinking, simply watching for a glimpse of that remembered figure. Many a time I caught sight of Margaret moving up and down the street but always alone, never in the company of her daughter. I rang the home, but it was always Margaret who answered. I would put the phone down without saying a word, aware of the strangeness of my behaviour, the sense of straying ever further away from the cheerful conventions of propriety.

I visited the tutorial school which Ananda used to attend. But I was told she had not re-enrolled. Then, one afternoon, as I was strolling through the precincts of the University, I ran into Lucy. For a while we stood there, glued to the spot like flies on a strip of flypaper, not knowing how to break away, nor how to profit from this chance encounter. We exchanged pleasantries for a while, deliberately skirting the topic which was foremost on our minds. But the ever-narrowing circuits of circumlocution

brought me to the point in the end.

‘What’s happened to Ananda?’

‘You haven’t heard?’ She seemed genuinely surprised by my ignorance.

‘Haven’t heard what?’

‘I don’t know whether I should tell you this.’ Her face became the double face of a cat, relaxed at times, and then suddenly alert.

I guessed at the reason for her reticence. ‘What’s Margaret been saying about me now?’

She smiled. ‘I think it would be better if I kept that to myself.’

Margaret’s letters came to mind, each sentence raising its voice, shouting out in the crumbling shelter of her house.

‘Does Ananda let her say whatever she likes?’ I asked at last.

‘Certainly not. But what’s the good of an argument? It only makes her worse.’ She paused to fetch a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. She lit one, drew the smoke deep into her lungs, then continued. ‘There was a dreadful row the evening of the day you called.’

‘So she was at home after all.’

‘Yes, but upstairs, resting in her room.’ She looked away, looked back again, her voice uplifted in alarm. ‘Can’t you understand? She’s been very, very ill.’

‘She was more or less all right when I visited her last August.’

‘And then there was another relapse.’ Lucy took a pull at her cigarette. The tip glowed for a moment, then dulled back to gray. She flicked the ash off with her finger.’ I’ve no idea what happened over the flat. But Margaret was in a terrible state. Which set Ananda back again.’ Lucy’s name was called. A couple of students were passing by, a young

man and a girl, walking arm in arm. Lucy turned round, waved, turned around again. 'It might have been better if you'd stayed away.'

'I couldn't leave things the way they were.' My voice sounded far away from me, as though it were coming out of a ventriloquist's dummy. 'Does Ananda really believe what she's been told?'

'I doubt it. But she was much too weak to argue.' She looked up at me from behind a veil of smoke. 'If it's any satisfaction to you, she did try ... and that did it.'

'What do you mean?'

'She's in hospital.'

'Again?'

'This time it's much more serious.'

'Good God.' My mind started turning somersaults, wheeling backwards and forwards in dizzy circles. 'What's the matter with her now?'

'Amnesia, I think they call it. Some kind of mental block. She can't remember who she is. Or who her mother is either, or me, or any of her friends.' Her voice cracked as if she were walking on thin ice, the cracks spreading further and further. 'And then she keeps on breaking down into fits of weeping. It's too awful for words.'

Her mouth snapped shut. Something about the tight-lipped silence, the way her eyes bored into the ground, staring and yet not really seeing, convinced me that she had been a witness to all this, that she bore this witness in her memory, painfully, like an unhealed wound, and reproachfully too, as though I might have contributed to the hurt.

'What can I do?'

'Stay away from her.' Her voice was as harsh as sciatica. 'That might be all you can do for the moment.'

More days passed, slivers of light inserted into the dark of successive nights. Dreams of falling, dreams of fleeing on leaden feet, dreams of fighting with crippled weapons, roses in the barrel's mouth, knives like butter, cutting up.

I managed to locate the hospital to which Ananda had been consigned. I went to speak to the matron of Ananda's ward. She was suspicious of me at first. But I must have succeeded in convincing her. For eventually she promised to help me if she could. But for the time being, she insisted that there was nothing to be done but wait.

Wait and watch. For several hours a day Ananda would be left to look after a group of retarded children who were housed at the hospital. Through an observation window it was possible to watch her as she played with these derelicts, watch without being seen by her. They would gather around her, moon-shaped faces trailing stunted limbs, communicating not with words but with the shrill vibration of their cries, the logic of disjointed gestures, longing in their eyes, a vast, unspoken tenderness beyond the comprehension of the sane. I would watch them climb upon her knees, stroke her skin, run their fingers through her hair. I would watch and share with them their unintelligible affinity—till it was time to leave.

I came, left, came back again, my visits projected upon the bleak continuum of days which were mostly spent upon the moors, slogging across the sides of hills, buffeted by shafts of wind which twisted my words into writhing coils of rhetoric, then cut them short. Most days the hills were covered in cloud. But every now and then the clouds would lift to dramatize the bright effulgence of the sun, whose rays would crystallize the mist, laminate the valley with their sparkling incandescence. Other days, the clouds would turn to rain, and I would have to return, wet clothes clinging to

my skin.

Ananda was getting better by degrees, or so the matron told me. They had been keeping her on tranquillizers. And she seemed to be recovering from the fits of anxiety which had ravaged her before. She was still unable to recognize her mother, or any other of her former friends. But she could remember the names of those whom she had met since the onset of her mental breakdown. More particularly, she was on the best of terms with the sanatorium children and was never happier than when she was playing with them in the nursery.

Watching her through the observation window one afternoon, I began to feel that we were in communication. She couldn't see me. But I seemed to feel her thoughts reaching out, like radiation. Her body would assume a stiff, immobile posture, a trance-like poise which puzzled the children at first. One or two of them walked right up to her and stared into her eyes. But she didn't seem to see them. They touched her. But she didn't seem to feel them touching. So they went back to their games. And a few minutes later Ananda relaxed, stretched herself, and then went over to join them again.

I returned the following afternoon, this time with a view to confirming my impression of the previous day. I shut my eyes and emptied my mind, then tried to direct my thoughts toward her. Almost immediately, she stiffened, and I felt her picking up on me. She seemed to be in an intermediary state, neither wholly herself, nor free from herself, tied to herself and yet unable to deploy the instrument that was her body. I sensed in her a longing to resolve this conflict, either to die or to be reborn. Her thoughts came over, subtle constellations of yearning and desire, directed to me, inviting me to be the means by which

she would be reunited with herself. The longer I remained with her, watching through the window, the more convinced I became that she wanted me to clear the cluttered channels of her senses. She wanted me to reappear before her, re-establish a direct connection. So that her seeing, hearing, and touching me might be the means by which she would be restored to herself again. At the very centre of these radiating cycles of distress I thought I overheard something that sounded like a cry for help.

I went to speak to the matron. I told her nothing of my experience. But I tried to find arguments which sounded plausible, arguments which were compatible with the rationale of therapy. I told her that the drugs they had been giving her were only a makeshift solution. They suppressed her anxiety. But in so doing they only postponed the day when she would eventually have to come to terms with the root source of the problem—the past and the personal conflicts embodied in her history. I talked about catharsis and abreaction. I argued in favour of reliving the traumatic experience. I suggested that I might be an appropriate catalyst. By stirring the sediment of her memory I might be able to bring her back to a more complete normality. The matron resisted, preferring the treatment that had already brought her a certain way towards recovery.

The Christmas vacation was almost at an end and I seemed to be no nearer to my goal. In a few days I would have to return to Paris to prepare for my final examinations. I made one last, desperate appeal and the matron relented, not so much because she thought that there was anything to be gained by following my advice as because she no longer felt that there was anything to be lost. A day was fixed for my encounter with Ananda.

A cold day it was, as I recall, only too clearly. A cutting

wind keened in from across the sea, whining softly but insistently. A few inches of newly fallen snow lay on the ground, enough to deaden the sound of my footsteps as I walked up to the sanatorium. It was a Sunday afternoon, and there were very few cars to be seen. The streets were deserted—desolate vistas whose lifelessness was captured and confirmed by the sound of a church bell tolling somewhere in the distance. I climbed the hill on which the sanatorium stood, putting the city behind me, below me.

The matron greeted me at the door of the sanatorium, warmly, but with certain hardly-concealed reservations. She insisted that my visit should proceed as simply and straightforwardly as possible. She thought it highly likely that Ananda would not recognize me at all. In which case she wanted me to behave as though I had never met her before. The children were to be brought in to her first. And I was to join them later. Above all, there were to be no emotional demonstrations.

She was playing with five or six children when I stepped into the room, and with such naturalness that I found it difficult to believe that there was anything wrong with her. One child in particular claimed her attention, a little red-haired shock of a boy, who perched on her knee while she pointed out scenes from a picture book. He was listening attentively to everything she said, but with a kind of misplaced concentration, as though the sound of her voice was more important to him than any meaning it might convey.

Ananda took no notice of my arrival. Or rather, I noticed that as I approached she became all the more preoccupied with the boy, bending over him, enunciating more deliberately, so much so that the boy no longer followed the directives of her finger, but attended instead to

the unfamiliar intensity which gripped her voice. I was right upon them. And yet neither one of them appeared to be aware of me. The attractive field which they laid down between them seemed to repel every other person in the room—myself, but also the other children, who stopped what they were doing to stare at me. The very eventuality which I had hoped to avoid was now occurring: a polarization of all the personal energies at work in the room. The longer I delayed, the more the tension accumulated, the words which I had it in mind to utter transformed into debts whose interest built up ruthlessly against me.

The silence twisted into me like a thumb screw clamped around my heart. Struggling to effect a casual tone I ran my hand through the boy's red hair and asked: 'Now can you tell me your name?' The result was all the more extraordinary for being triggered off by so banal a question. The boy was immediately engulfed by a nameless terror which compelled him to fling his arms around Ananda's neck. Ananda turned to look at me, a blank, uncomprehending stare. Her eyes became devolving centres, set in a featureless environment, fixing me with such absorbing intensity that I had to look away to break the spell. Uneasily, I looked back at her again.

'Ananda ... you do remember me.'

The same unbroken disregard. And then the face disintegrated. Her cheeks streamed tears as she shook her head.

'Ananda,' I cried. 'Please, Ananda, please try to remember.'

For just one moment she glanced at me with what I took to be a trace of recognition filtering into her face. Then her mouth flew open and she screamed. A terrible,

unrelenting scream. Not a scream of rage or pain, but a curiously impersonal scream, as though the scream were a stream into which each tributary conflict had poured its waters over the years. Not a cleansing, releasing stream, but a stream which flowed deep underground, flowed away and then flowed back to its source again, infecting itself with its own muddied waters. Through the noisome orifice of her mouth, there poured forth this deadlocked volume of her screaming.

The scream caught me in the pit of my stomach, jolting me out of myself. There was a moment of total disassociation. Then I stepped forward and clasped her head between my hands.

As soon as I touched her, the screaming stopped. She stiffened momentarily, then collapsed like a piece of paper crumpled in my grasp. I held her for a few seconds, limp, folded over in my arms. Then I let her slump back into her chair.

I walked to the door and pushed it open, though whether to escape or to call for help I really can't say. As I left, people hurried in. Out of the corner of my eye I could see them gathering fussily around Ananda as the door swung back, obliterating the room behind me.

I felt as if a great stone gate had closed in my heart for ever.

Epilogue

> Parfois au crépuscule en rentrant à l'hôtel, je sentais que l'Albertine d'autrefois, invisible à moi-même, était portant enfermée au fond de moi comme aux 'plombs' d'une Venise intérieur, dont parfois un incident faisait glisser le couvercle durci jusqu'à me donner une ouverture sur ce passé.
>
> Marcel Proust: A la recherche du temps perdu.

Her name was Ananda too. And from the way she stood at the passerelle, looking out across the Seine, her right elbow cupped in the palm of her left hand, gazing over the water, distractedly, I thought she really was Ananda. Not like the likeness I had followed on the street, blindly, like a somnambulist, my heartbeat storming thunderously, till she turned around with a sudden, nervous jerk of her head; not like the phantom I went to meet off the train, prompted by some inexplicable premonition, waiting till every traveller had passed me by—waiting, waiting for the familiar form in a calfskin coat that never came; nor even like the figure I glimpsed through the upstairs window of a house at whose door I knocked, once quickly, and then again more persistently, without eliciting any reply. No. This time it was really her. Or was it?

At least her name was Ananda. And when I called her name, so softly I could hardly hear myself speak, she turned around and seeing me, she smiled. The same green eyes, the almost phosphorescent skin, her hair let loose and lounging

down in luxurious folds, but darkened now as if it had been dyed; the same full lips, the same ... and yet entirely different.

She smiled as if she knew me, had always known me, knew more about me than myself, the warm enduring smile of a sunset in possession of eternal skies, and smiling freed me from anxiety. No need for an apology, for an explanation of any kind, neither who she was, nor why she was there, nor why her name was on my lips, nor what it was I saw in her or she in me. All that had already been decided.

She told me she had known I would be by. And when she spoke, her English sang in a transatlantic key, a song of places far away, of mountains crashing down upon the beach, of forests tottering to the skies, of pockmarked deserts, empty as the moon, and fertile plains where poppies and cannabis grow between the lines of orange trees.

We talked a while and then she unslung the great, black leather bag which hung unsteadily at her side. She reached inside and rummaged around. Drawing out a cigarette, she let me light it, looking deep into my eyes while the lighter caught the end of it in a flickering noose of flame. She drew in deeply, holding her breath, then handed over the glowing stub. Not like any tobacco ever smelled, nor tasted either, harsh as glass and hanging heavy in the lungs, pressing in and then releasing, easing me—my mind explodes. I laugh, and my laughter eddies out in rings of humour, ring on ring, wringing out an answering response from her which joins my laughter, laughter harvesting the air between us, binding the air into smoky stooks of congeniality.

She places her arm in mine and together we stroll across the passerelle, away from the presence of Notre Dame, over the river running by, past windows aflame with the setting sun, stopping for a moment to buy some wine

and to watch two clochard lying astride a metro grill, their faces laced with wine and grime, simmering gently, like a country stew.

As we climb the notorious rue Saint-Denis we run the gauntlet of a dozen eyes whose calloused glances throw us together, involuntarily. I pass my arm around her waist and our bodies slip into one synchronous step. We turn the corner of the rue Etienne Marcel and stop in front of the apartment block. I press the buzzer and the door springs back upon its lock, eliciting a vista of the cobbled courtyard where the poubelles are already giving off the musty smell of decaying food. We turn in at the staircase, climb the seven flights of steps, to the landing where we stand, for a while, slightly out of breath, before the doorway to my room.

It is dark on the landing and I fumble with the key until it turns. The door swings open to let us through. I reach out automatically to switch on the light. But she catches my hand in mid-flight, holds it for an instant in her own. As my eyes grow accustomed to the dark, I begin to see her form before me, outlined in the dusk, an attractive mass which draws me across the arched bridge of her arms. I hesitate, then throw my arms around her, hold her close, feel the warmth of her body and the stealthy tiptoe of her heart.

My head swims slowly like a camera arcing about its shot. I can smell the fragrance of her hair, mixing in and mingling with the scent of vent vert. But as I breathe in deeply, inhaling her, she steps abruptly out of my arms. Her departure is so unexpected that I almost fall. But her hand is on my shoulder, bearing me up. She smiles, a smile as swift and graceful as a flight of birds, then moves back gradually into the room.

I start to follow, but my attention is arrested by a face,

the glassy stare of a countenance framed in the mirror on the wall, gazing back at me, my face and yet so different that I hardly recognize myself at first, the physical details rearranged by a new expression, new and yet so old it seemed to me that I would always find it through the years, embossed in every face of mine, my face in ten, twenty, or even fifty years, the same unchanging pattern, glowing faintly like a light inside a skull. I smile. I frown. I cross my eyes. But these inflections leave the face unchanged, this face that I will have to face again and again, supporting the changes like a frame on which there would be daubed the fleeting impressions of my flesh—not like any face I own, more truly me than anyone I have ever known—myself, and yet another, unknown person.

I step back staring still at my resemblance, watching my face recede into a distance which receives another face, her face correcting the retreat. I watch the ground returning to the fore, her figure drifting through the gloom, the luminous shadow of her body; watch as she sets her bag upon the desk, her hands reaching in, drawing out a candle, sticks of incense, a box of matches, a phial, a chalice, another cigarette.

She place the candle upon the desk, lights the wick and then stands back as the room grows into view. A stick of incense is held in the flame. A few bright sparks and then the end begins to smoulder, heavy oriental fumes curl up towards the skylight window. She lights the cigarette, then looks towards me, staring not at me but at my reflection, her reflection drawing closer, ever closer, hands now around my throat, then shaving the surface of my chin. I close my eyes as her hands explore, the hands of the blind, unseeing insight finding out my eyes, nose, mouth ... between my lips, a cigarette. I draw in, taking the smoke down deep into

my lungs, my chest contracting, hoops of brass clamped tight and then as suddenly released. A momentary sense of weightlessness. The room begins to revolve again, spinning about the shaft of light which dives in through the skylight window. I try to turn but my legs give way. I fall to my knees, crouching down, with one hand resting upon the ground.

I hear her moving about the room. A cork is drawn, the incongruous pop exploding brutally in my ears, a clink of glasses and a fluid sound, a pouring incomprehensibly prolonged, the intonation slowly climbing the jangled scale of resonance. A pause and then she reappears, a glass of wine clasped in one hand, a metal chalice in the other. She kneels beside me, holding the wine glass out towards me, inviting me to drink.

She gives me to drink and then she mimics my movement with a drinking motion of her own. She drinks and then she looks at me out of sea-green eyes which narrow down and then enlarge, gray orbs of incandescent light, remote, impersonal and yet compelling, almost cruel. She drinks again, puts down her glass and then, from the chalice close at hand, she picks up a wafer, an opaque slip which she places carefully upon her tongue. The silver sliver glistens for an instant between her lips. I reach out towards her with my lips, capture her tongue which flickers wildly inside my mouth. My mouth turns to water, flowing out and away from me, my whole being flowing, flowing away then flowing back to me again, our two life-systems bound together, the halves of a heart, pumping the life force around and around.

She gets to her feet, humming as she walks across the floor. I want to follow but find I am unable to summon the strength. I stay where I am, crouched down low upon the

ground, every sense attuned. I hear her making up the fire. The sound of a match breaking into flame. The fire is alight, roaring comfortably in the grate. Its light has joined with the light of the candle to illustrate the room, burning with a rare intensity of red, casting shadows that flit like bats across the tattooed walls. The record player has been set in motion and the sound of a Schubert string quartet begins to inundate my ears—sweetly, oh so sweetly, that each anguished wail of the violins tears my heart. I weep unaccountably, uncontrollably.

Suddenly, I am conscious that she is no longer in the room. Without lifting my eyes from the ground I know what I will see when I look around, an empty space, haunted by her absence, a space from which she has withdrawn to leave me in this void. It has begun to rain, a mad March shower, a lion with a sheepish grin. The drops beat down viciously upon the pane, the last despairing assault of winter against the quickening force of spring. Anguish takes control of me, a fear so real it thwarts the beating of my heart. I can hardly breathe, each laboured breath a valiant stand against some deadening and deadly force. Desperately I stare around the room, the bed, the desk, the chair, these empty objects dully giving back my isolation and then, over there, beside the chair, the black leather bag, still charged with her presence, conserving my memory of her. I draw the bag close to my side, take one quick breath and then another, adding each little bit of breath, one to the other, until the whole accumulated store bursts out of my chest in one explosive invocation. Ananda. Her name resounding in the room, recharging the room.

Silence, followed by the sound of footsteps on the landing. The door swings open to let her through. She stands before me, clothed in a towel which drapes her body

loosely like a Grecian robe. Drops of water glisten on her shoulders, drain off down her back, her thighs. Her feet are beside me and the towering pillars of her legs. Her face way over, looking down, and the glow of her skin against the fire. That she should be there, simply there beside me, now becomes the most complete fulfilment. Nothing more is needed, nothing wanted, not even the desire to wish for something more. I tremble like an infant in its mother's arms—small, helpless, quite inadequate and yet supremely self-assured.

She lets the towel drop from her shoulders, kneels down beside me, encloses me and begins to lift me to my feet. I rise, almost effortlessly from the floor, my body floating upward in her arms, rising up on legs that dwindle down, like stilts, below my knees. The room retreats beneath my feet. A rushing sound and all around me I can see the stars, pinpoints of light in an immensity of black and soundless night. Once more I am afraid, of the immeasurable heights to which I have soared and from which I must surely fall. Far, far down below I see my bed, lying waiting to receive my precarious limbs. Somehow, I understand that this is a crossing I must attempt. I position myself, measure myself for the fall which follows as I push off from my laddered perch and swing out into space. There is a sickening wrench in the pit of my bowels. And then I am lying upon my bed, weak with exhaustion and panting with alarm.

I close my eyes, momentarily, and out of the darkness, sounding through, I register the rhythms of my heart, gigantic drum beats and my breathing, as remote and impersonal as the rumbling of turbines in the depths of a ship. And then above, soaring over like milk white gulls, a pair of hands bring feeling back into the skin. Wherever

they touch the skin responds, wells of sensation bodying forth the limits of a form which is no longer mine but something into which I have been poured, as much in my legs as in my belly or my arms, wherever the touch stirs, stirring me into exquisite localities of selfless pleasure.

Dissolution; irremediable, irreversible dissolution; my heartbeat and my breathing sounding slower, ever slower as the vital rhythms of my stillborn life are dissipated into myriad cells, a pond in which innumerable creatures swill and swarm, my life force dispersing, draining away as my heart and my lungs are invaded by a chaos, a cacophony of microscopic wills, all draining away to some slow centre, a hole in the slowing nexus of myself which gathers and collects, reassembles the whole immobile weight of me into one uprising column of flesh.

Falling apart to be reunited, dying to be alive again, descending, only to arise, up rising and sliding, oh so slowly, into deathlessness, down a long dim tunnel, warm and moist, a valley of palpitating flesh which gravely cradles and propels, propels me on towards the bottomless abyss, drawn onward and anon toward the light, a point at first but spiralling out in shower on shower of incandescence—red, blue, yellow and then the sober brilliance of white, diffuse at first, then gradually congealing into separate centres—light shining forth from figures clad in white, bright figures gathered rank on rank, unknown and yet familiar creatures of light, lighting the way and radiating warmth and welcomeness.

Light! Oh my God, more light!

Around and about, above and below: stillness, suffused with the most exalted sound; darkness, drenched with the most vivid light; emptiness, inhabited by innumerable forms and in each form, a face, the same face, always, of the one I

love. Ananda, I don't know nor do I even care to ask whether this is just a presage of insanity—but I see you, Ananda, everywhere I look.

I open my eyes wide, wider to embrace the light ...

Darkness; black, enveloping night. Not a sound except the regular rhythms of my breathing. I sit bolt upright on my bed and stare out into the vacancy. Nothing—except perhaps the square of gray where the skylight hangs in the dome of the room, and far, far far beyond, a few last stars, lapsing back into the sallow shades of dawn. The clock has stopped at ten past two, its hands entangled in one long, last embrace. I clasp my head in the palms of my hands, pressing my eyeballs with the quicks of trembling finger tips. The world explodes in a dazzling display of lights, red, yellow, green, but especially red—fierce, stabbing rocket tracers of red that leave behind them orange trails. I open my eyes again and the room creeps into view, the dishevelled bed, the books, the piles of paper upon the desk. I look around. I am alone, quite alone. All is as it was before.

Or is it ?

A dozen questions spring to mind. Who was she? Where has she gone? Did she ever really exist, or was she just a figure of my demented imagination? Questions to which I know there will be no answer, can be no response because such questions can only answered by myself, out of myself, out of my confusion and uncertainty—trying, trying till the truth is sweated out of dust-encrusted pores.

But this much I can say already; that whatever you are, your true soul and body now appear before me; that wherever you are, you are still roaming the paths of my dreams; that whenever you are, I am always ready for you. So, whoever you are, let me lay this charge upon you, that

you become my poem.

I pick up my pen and the images begin to form, spontaneously. I sit down to write and the words flow from me, effortlessly; stiff and inflexible at first, but then more freely, like the first unfreezing of a river in spring. The words begin to gather a momentum of their own, driving in across the page as though they no longer needed me. I am but a hand that writes and which, in writing, simply transcribes what has been given to me to say. But, as I write, I know that everything has changed. I am not the one I was before. For now, at last, and without even knowing how it could have come about, I know that I am on my way, that I am working my way along the tributaries of my mind, back to the source where it all began and on to the ocean where it all must end one ageless day.

There is a knock at the door. For one moment, I am transfixed by the sound. I stare across the room, struggling to articulate. But before I can utter a single word, Béatrice walks in.

She pauses on the threshold, the trace of a smile upon her face. 'Mon Dieu' she says, in the end. 'You look as if you'd seen a ghost.'

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