

UNE TRADUCTION COMMENTÉE DES
« CHEMINS DE KATMANDOU »

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree
Master of Arts

McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (2006)

McMaster University

(French)

Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: Une traduction commentée des “Chemins de Katmandou”

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 178

Merci à Barjavel

La première fois que j'ai lu *Les chemins de Katmandou* j'étais bouleversée, mais aussi attirée, par la sévérité de plusieurs chapitres, et par les abus que les personnages souffrent à travers le roman. C'est une histoire fondamentalement morale mais dans laquelle le bon choix n'est pas toujours évident. Chaque personnage a un caractère unique et cherche quelque chose que personne ne trouve, surtout la paix. C'est une histoire d'espoir, de désespoir, et d'amour dans une époque divisée par le communisme et le capitalisme.

Je savais tout de suite après avoir lu ce roman que je voulais le traduire un jour, même si c'était dans mon temps libre. L'histoire m'avait vraiment frappée et touchée car le message est vrai. Chacun cherche son propre chemin et personne ne sait à quoi on sert dans cette vie. Chaque personnage pourrait être vrai, et chaque chemin que le lecteur suit pourrait être possible aussi. Barjavel a bien fait en employant tant de personnalités différentes parce que cela ajoute à la diversité dans le roman et nous montre où nos choix peuvent nous mener.

Après ce roman j'ai lu une dizaine d'œuvres de Barjavel et chacun m'a touché et ouvert les yeux un peu plus. Ils finissent tous avec un message sur la vie et des leçons morales qui oblige au lecteur de réfléchir sur sa propre vie. J'aimerais être capable de dire en quelques mots pourquoi j'aime tant ce roman mais peut-être que mes sentiments sont dûs à cela, le fait que je ne peux pas l'énoncer. J'espère que des autres lecteurs partageront aussi après avoir lu ce roman, soit dans sa version originale soit dans sa traduction.

ii.

Remerciements

D'abord j'aimerais remercier Dr Marie-Madelaine Ahmed et Dr Caroline Bayard. Elles étaient une inspiration pendant mes années à McMaster et sans elles, je n'aurais jamais pensé faire une maîtrise en français et à McMaster.

Puis je dois un grand merci aux amis qui m'ont aidé cette année avec leurs conseils, leurs avis, leur appui, leur amitié et leur patience. Il y en a trop pour tous les mentionner, mais il y en a deux qui le méritent : Heather Marrin, qui m'avait prêté ses compétences dactylographiques et son oreille plus des fois que je peux compter ; et Justin Hill, qui me donne de la force et de l'inspiration tous les jours. Je t'aime.

Ensuite, merci à mes parents qui étaient toujours là pour moi et qui ont dû subir le poids des temps difficiles.

Plusieurs mercis à Dr Alexandre Sévigny. Merci d'avoir été mon directeur de thèse ; merci pour votre aide et vos conseils ; merci pour votre encouragement ; merci pour votre amitié ; et surtout merci pour votre appui et pour avoir eu confiance en moi – sans vous je n'aurais pas pu faire cette traduction comme thèse.

Finalement, merci avec tout mon cœur à Anne-Laure et François. Sans eux je n'aurais jamais pu poursuivre mes études de français ; grâce à eux mon français est au niveau où il est, et en plus, je n'aurais jamais fait connaissance de ce roman qui a changé ma vie. Merci Aniu et Chouchou.

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René Barjavel

1911-1985

Introduction

René Barjavel est surtout connu pour avoir été un des premiers écrivains de science-fiction en France et pour ses romans d'anticipation dont certains thèmes y reviennent souvent : la chute de la civilisation causée par les excès de la science et la folie de la guerre, caractère éternel et indestructible de l'amour, et le sens de l'action de l'homme sur la nature. À la fin de la plupart de ses œuvres, le lecteur reste pensif, frappé par le sentiment d'avoir appris une leçon ou une morale, et avec deux questions fondamentales : Et si c'était vrai ? À quoi on sert ?

Il n'y a que quelques sites web consacrés à Barjavel. Parmi ceux-ci, on ne retrouve aucun détail de sa vie personnelle, et il est décédé il n'y a que 21 ans. Pour un écrivain fondateur de la science-fiction, un homme qui a écrit une trentaine d'œuvres et quelqu'un qui a mené une vie tellement variée quant à sa carrière, cela paraît un peu bizarre. Peut-être qu'il faut encore du temps avant que le monde se rende compte que c'était un écrivain important avec des idées importantes, ou peut-être qu'après un bout de temps il disparaîtra sans que le monde arrive à cette réalisation, comme beaucoup d'écrivains avant lui. C'est pour cette raison qu'il faut que ses œuvres soient accessibles au grand public. C'est pour encourager la dissémination de ses œuvres que j'ai décidé de traduire ce roman.

René Barjavel est né en 1911 à Nyons, dans la Drôme. Fils de boulanger et petit-fils de paysans, il travaille avec son père tout en faisant ses études. Il obtient son baccalauréat en 1929, mais ne peut poursuivre, faute de moyens financiers, des études supérieures. En moins d'un an, il est alors tour à tour répétiteur, démarcheur pour agent immobilier, employé de banque, puis journaliste au *Progrès de l'Allier* où il restera cinq années. En 1935, il rencontre l'éditeur Denoël, qui lui propose de travailler pour lui, à Paris. Pendant dix ans, il occupe le poste de chef de fabrication, tout en collaborant à différents journaux et revues, en particulier en tant que critique de théâtre et de cinéma. Ses quatre premiers romans, *Ravage* (1943), *Le voyageur imprudent* (1944), *Tarandol* (1946) et *Le diable l'emporte* (1948) ne rencontrent pas le succès, et il doit explorer d'autres pistes : le théâtre, puis le cinéma. C'est ainsi qu'il écrit le scénario d'un film de science-fiction, *La nuit des temps*, qui ne sera pas adapté, mais qui, en tant que roman, est un succès (Prix des librairies 1968). Suivront d'autres grands romans comme *Le grand secret*, *Les chemins de Katmandou*, *Le blessé* ou encore *La tempête*.

Parallèlement, René Barjavel signe une chronique hebdomadaire dans le *Journal du Dimanche*, « Les libres propos de Barjavel » jusqu'en 1979. Quelques années plus tard, il consacre des chroniques à l'enchanteur Merlin, au Graal, et écrit, en collaboration avec Olenka de Veer, deux romans qui accordent une large place au merveilleux : *Les dames à la licorne* (1974) et sa suite *Les jours du monde* (1975), puis *L'enchanteur* (1984), version romanesque de ses réflexions sur Merlin.

René Barjavel est décédé en 1985.

Biographie

René Barjavel est né le 24 janvier 1911, à Nyons, dans la Drôme paysanne. Son père, un boulanger, est mobilisé pour la guerre et n'est pas disponible pour son fils pendant ses années formatives. Sa mère, une remplaçante, n'a que peu de temps à lui consacrer. Étant seul la plupart du temps, il découvre la nature et le plaisir qu'elle lui donne. Il découvre aussi un amour des livres et se plonge dans la littérature.

Malgré ses intérêts littéraires, Barjavel n'est qu'un médiocre étudiant. Quant à lui, son futur est déjà planifié, voué à la succession de son père. Son professeur de français s'aperçoit de ses talents dans cette matière et l'encourage à continuer ses études.¹ Il poursuit, tout en travaillant avec son père, jusqu'à ce qu'il réussisse son baccalauréat en 1929 au Collège de Cesset près de Vichy. Il ne peut pas continuer ses études supérieures faute de moyens financiers.

Pendant l'année suivante il fait toute une série de petits travaux avant de devenir journaliste pour un quotidien de Moulins. C'est là, qu'en 1935, il rencontre l'éditeur renommé Robert Denoël, au cours d'un entretien, qui lui propose une place comme responsable de fabrication des éditions chez Denoël, à Paris. Il se marie en 1936 et devient père de Renée et Jean dans les deux années qui suivent.

En même temps, il forge ses grands thèmes sur la vie et la médecine. Il voit mal la guerre qu'il fait dans les zouaves, est en désaccord avec la nécessité de la guerre, et se révolte contre l'esclavage du soldat et la bêtise militaire. Dès sa rentrée à Paris il est témoin de la libération de la capitale. Son premier roman, *Ravage*, qui évoque une société fondée sur la valeur du travail et le refus de la modernité, est publié en 1943, pendant cette pleine occupation allemande. L'année suivante a vu la publication du *Voyageur imprudent*, un roman à propos des paradoxes du voyage dans le temps.

À cause de ses problèmes de manque d'argent et l'échec de son roman, *Le diable l'emporte*, qui paraît en 1948, Barjavel s'aventure dans le monde du cinéma. Il reste dans ce monde dix ans, mais sans toucher à la renommée qu'il désire. Quand il écrit le scénario pour *La nuit des temps* (1968), une histoire d'amour qui dure à travers des époques dans un cadre de science-fiction, il trouve enfin du succès. Le scénario n'est jamais adapté mais comme roman, l'œuvre connaît beaucoup de succès, gagnant le *Prix des librairies* en 1968, et commence ainsi sa carrière de grand écrivain. Plusieurs œuvres importantes suivent, dont *Les chemins de Katmandu* (1969) et *Le grand secret* (1973). Parallèlement, il se fait chroniquer dans le *Journal du Dimanche* où il reste jusqu'en 1979. Sa vie est partagée entre le roman, le journalisme, et un peu de cinéma.

René Barjavel est décédé le 24 novembre 1985. Il repose au cimetière de Bellecombe-Tarendol, son village natal ainsi que celui de son père boulanger.

¹ "René Barjavel."

Œuvres

- 1934 : Colette à la recherche de l'amour
- 1942 : Roland, le chevalier plus fort que le lion
- 1943 : Ravage
- 1944 : Le voyageur imprudent
- 1946 : Tarendol
- 1946 : Les enfants de l'ombre
- 1948 : Le diable l'emporte
- 1951 : Journal d'un homme simple
- 1953 : Collioure
- 1957 : Jour de feu
- 1962 : Colomb de la Lune
- 1966 : La faim du tigre
- 1968 : La nuit des temps
- 1969 : Les chemins de Kathmandu
- 1972 : Les années de la lune
- 1973 : Le grand secret
- 1974 : Le prince blessé
- 1974 : Les dames à la licorne
- 1975 : Les années de la liberté
- 1976 : Si j'étais Dieu
- 1976 : Les années de l'homme
- 1976 : Brigitte Bardot aime des animaux
- 1977 : Les jours du monde
- 1978 : Lettre ouverte aux vivants qui veulent le rester
- 1978 : Les fleurs, l'amour, la vie
- 1980 : La charrette bleue
- 1981 : Une rose au Paradis
- 1982 : La tempête
- 1984 : L'enchanteur
- 1985 : La peau de César
- 1986 : Demain le paradis (inachevé, édité de façon posthume)

1968 : Une année significative

L'an 1968 était une année de bouleversements sociaux, et une année dans laquelle le monde entier a beaucoup changé. C'était une année pleine de drogues, de sexe, et de rock n' roll. C'était aussi l'année qui a vu l'assassinat de Martin Luther King Jr. et Robert Kennedy ; le mouvement contre la guerre et la TET Offensif ; « Black Power » ; la naissance du mouvement des femmes, et le début de la fin pour l'Union Soviétique. Partout dans le monde il y avait des soulèvements spontanés, aux États-Unis à New York, Miami, Berkeley, et Chicago, en Europe à Paris, Prague, Rome, Berlin, et Varsovie, ainsi qu'au Tokyo au Japon et au Mexique.

Au Moyen-Orient, l'organisation guérilla de Yasir Arafat devient importante ; le Festival des films à Cannes et la Biennale de Venise devaient être fermés à cause des manifestations ; les Olympiques étaient un désastre, car le gouvernement mexicain y a massacré quelques centaines d'étudiants qui protestaient contre la brutalité de la police ; et le concours de « Miss America » a subi un assaut par des féministes qui tenaient des bannières présentant l'expression « la libération des femmes » au peuple américain, et au monde entier ensuite.

C'était aussi une année importante à cause de la télévision. Le monde a vu la première retransmission depuis la lune et les gens pouvaient regarder les images de ce qui s'était passé dans la guerre à Vietnam le jour même. On passait aussi les images de la police qui matraquait des manifestants à Chicago ; un reportage en direct de Tchécoslovaquie dans lequel des étudiants sans armes étaient en face des chars soviétiques ; et une guerre de famine à Biafra. L'impact était énorme, non seulement pour renforcer le mouvement anti-guerre, mais pour renforcer les avantages d'avoir une télévision. Le fait que désormais on n'avait besoin que d'une télévision pour mettre des choses en marche était une révolution culturelle avec des conséquences énormes.²

La Chine et le Maoïsme

Pour la République de la Chine, les années 60s étaient aussi une époque de soulèvements et les déchaînements de la Garde Rouge de la Révolution Culturelle de Mao Zedong avaient des ressemblances superficielles aux manifestations des étudiants dans l'ouest.³ La base de l'idéologie de Mao était le Marxisme-Léninisme, et sa conception de la démocratie était basée sur le rôle principal du Parti communiste.⁴

² "1968: The Year That Rocked The World."

³ "1960s."

⁴ "Maoism."

Les conflits de base

1. Le résultat du « baby boom » dans les années 60 en France était une population d'étudiants dix fois plus grande qu'au début de la seconde guerre mondiale. Les enfants de la bourgeoisie voulaient une éducation qui leur garantirait un emploi. Les étudiants français avaient des raisons pour leurs plaintes : leurs cours étaient surpeuplés et il y avait un manque d'accès à l'administration de l'université, qui était bureaucratique, inflexible, et centralisée.⁵

2. Le salaire de la classe ouvrière était toujours bas même si les autres salaires augmentaient, cela en dépit du fait que le commerce extérieur avait triplé. 25% de tous les ouvriers gagnaient moins de cinq cents francs par mois. Le nombre de gens sans emploi avait atteint cinq cents mille, et cela dans une période de boum d'après-guerre.⁶

3. Mars 22 1968, Nanterre. Huit étudiants entrent par effraction au bureau du doyen comme un moyen de protester contre l'arrestation récente des six membres de la Commission Nationale de Vietnam. Parmi ces membres était un étudiant de sociologie qui s'appelait Danny Cohn-Bendit. Il faisait partie d'un groupe qui avait organisé une grève de plus de dix mille étudiants en novembre 1967. C'était une manifestation contre le surpeuplement dans les écoles.⁷

Prélude au « lundi rouge »

Après des mois de conflits entre les étudiants et les autorités à l'université de Nanterre, dans la périphérie de Paris, et une semaine d'affrontements entre des groupes d'extrême gauche et des étudiants qui luttait contre la guerre à Vietnam, l'administration à Nanterre a fermé l'université le 2 mai 1968.

Une réunion était organisée pour le lendemain à la Sorbonne, l'université au centre de la ville dans le Quartier latin, afin de protester contre la fermeture de Nanterre. Des étudiants des deux universités étaient présents. Plus le jour s'avancait, plus il y avait de participants. Les autorités à la Sorbonne ont commencé à paniquer et avant la fin de l'après-midi la Sorbonne a été entourée par la police et par la Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité (C.R.S.). La C.R.S. a commencé à arrêter des étudiants pour des raisons ineptes et les nouvelles de ces brimades sont vite arrivées aux étudiants partout dans la ville et ils sont venus donner leur appui. Le combat a commencé à libérer ceux qui avaient été arrêtés. Avant la fin de ce combat, qui s'est déroulé sur le boulevard Saint Michel, une soixantaine de policiers et un chiffre inconnu de jeunes avaient été blessés, et six cents avaient été arrêtés.⁸

⁵ "Paris, May 1968: icons of the revolution/Icons of Revolution."

⁶ "Paris 1968: 25 years ago: When France rebelled."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "May 1968: France's month of revolution."

Tel était le combat entre les étudiants et la police que la Sorbonne a fermé. Ce n'était que la deuxième fois dans son histoire de sept cents ans qu'elle a été obligée de se fermer ; la première fois étant en 1940 quand les Nazis ont pris Paris.

L'Union National des Étudiants Français (UNEF) et le Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieure (SNESup) ont lancé un ordre de grève et demandaient le suivant :

1. Une réouverture de la Sorbonne.
2. Le retrait de la police.
3. La libération des prisonniers.

Le problème de base de ce conflit était le mécontentement du surpeuplement dans les écoles, mais là le mécontentement commençait à prendre une perspective plus large.

« Lundi rouge »

Le lundi 6 mai, une foule de plus de vingt mille s'est rassemblée à la Place Denfert-Rochereau et, scandant des slogans, ils ont marché vers la Sorbonne, à laquelle l'accès était toujours interdit par le C.R.S. En arrivant à rue St Jacques ils se sont trouvés en face d'un cordon policier. Tout à coup la police a commencé à attaquer les étudiants. Eux, à leur tour, lançaient des pavés vers la police et renversaient des voitures pour créer des barricades. La police jetait des grenades lacrymogènes dans l'air mais les étudiants n'arrêtaient pas. Après chaque attaque par la police les étudiants luttaienent encore plus fort. Le boulevard Saint-Germain est devenu un champ de bataille sanglant. Les chiffres officiels à la fin de la journée étaient : 422 arrestations et 345 gendarmes blessés.⁹ Les journaux du lendemain appelleront ce jour le « lundi rouge », un nom qui restera pour toujours.

Les jours suivants

La classe moyenne était épouvantée par la brutalité que la police a utilisée contre les étudiants, et des groupes de classe ouvrière étaient inspirés par les étudiants à faire leur propre manifestation contre l'état. Le 10 mai, la « nuit des barricades », a vu un combat encore plus grand que celui du 4 mai, avec une soixantaine de barricades.¹⁰ La dévastation était énorme et la violence était la plus intense que la France avait vue depuis la guerre. Tout le pays est resté en éveil cette nuit, écoutant la radio pour des reportages. Les syndicats ont appelé une grève d'un jour et un défilé immense à Paris pour le 13 mai. Partout en France des gens préparaient des grèves et des manifestations. Le gouvernement a dû reculer et le Premier ministre, Georges Pompidou, a annoncé la libération des prisonniers. Ce n'était pas assez, les manifestations ont continué, et aux yeux des manifestants, Charles de Gaulle était l'ennemi. Plus d'un million de gens étaient présents à Paris pour le défilé et la police ne s'y est pas mêlée. Les chefs des syndicats étaient contents ; leurs voix avaient été entendues et le gouvernement s'est dégonflé. Ce n'était pourtant pas la fin.

⁹ "Paris 1968: 25 years ago: When France rebelled."

¹⁰ "Jour par Jour : Mai 1968."

Les syndicats n'étaient pas contents avec seulement un jour de grève et ils en planifiaient encore d'autres et commençaient à occuper des usines. Le 17 mai, cinquante usines étaient occupées et 200,000 travailleurs étaient en grève. La fin du 18 mai a vu 2,000,000 de travailleurs en grève et en cinq jours ce chiffre s'est levé jusqu'à 10,000,000.¹¹ Ce n'était pas seulement les syndicats ; l'industrie des textiles, les grands magasins de Paris, et Citroën étaient tous en grève. La France était paralysée : le règne du gouvernement et la classe moyenne supérieure qu'il représentait étaient en ruines.

Fin

Avant que le lundi 27 mai ait vu le lever du soleil, le gouvernement avait garanti une augmentation de 35% du salaire minimum industriel et 10% pour le reste de la population.¹² Charles de Gaulle a eu tellement peur de la possibilité d'une révolution qu'il a discuté avec les plus hauts généraux de l'armée afin d'être sûr qu'il aurait leur aide pour maintenir son pouvoir dans le pays. Le 5 juin la plupart des grèves étaient finies et celles qui duraient encore étaient écrasées avec un style militaire, au moyen de véhicules blindés et d'armes. Charles de Gaulle a gardé le pouvoir et le capitalisme français a continué.

¹¹ "May 1968: France's month of revolution."

¹² "Jour par Jour : Mai 1968."

Le Népal

Le royaume du Népal s'étend 885 km de l'est à l'ouest et 193 km du nord au sud. Le terrain entier est comme une pente raide qui descend du haut de l'Himalaya glacé jusqu'à la pleine marécageuse et chaude de Terai. Le pays a une superficie de 147,181 km carrées et partage ses frontières avec la Chine dans le nord, et l'Inde dans l'est, le sud, et l'ouest. Le Népal est un pays enclavé. Sa langue officielle est le népalais et le pays compte 35 millions habitants. La monnaie officielle est la rupee népalaise.

Katmandou : Une ville métropole parmi l'Himalaya

Katmandou est la capitale ainsi que la plus grande ville népalaise avec une population de 1,5 million. Elle est aussi le cœur métropolitain de la région de l'Himalaya. Son histoire est longue, datant d'il y a plus de deux mille ans, et sa culture est bien raffinée. Actuellement elle est un centre financier et commercial, une destination touristique, et un lieu sacré pour des pèlerins. Elle est située dans une vallée dans le Népal central avec deux autres villes, Patan et Bhaktapur. Son élévation est à peu près 1,300m.

Quelques chiffres importantes de Népal à l'époque du roman

Faute de pouvoir trouver un chiffre pour 1968, voici quelques chiffres pour 1969 et 1971. La population en 1969 avait atteint 11,115 million ; le revenu national brut par personne pour 1969 était 80\$ américain ; le taux de fécondité était 6,3 ; le taux de la mortalité des bébés était 159,6 ; l'attente de la vie à naissance était 41,9 ; et la population urbaine comptait 3,8% de toute la population.¹³

La population en 1971 était 11,55 million. De ceux-ci, juste 10% de la population était lettrée. Parmi les hommes le chiffre était 24,72% et parmi les femmes 3,66%. Il n'y a pas de chiffre pour des personnes âgées parce qu'ils étaient si rares. Quant aux gens qui étaient actifs dans le secteur d'économie en 1971, seulement 0,54 avaient une éducation au-dessus d'un niveau secondaire.¹⁴

Un peu de culture

Ce n'était que récemment que Katmandu a commencé à donner des noms à ses rues. Jusqu'à ce temps-là, la plupart des résidences et bâtiments étaient localisés par des régions générales.¹⁵

La vieille ville est notable pour son abondance de temples et des palais bouddhistes et hindous, la plupart datant du 17^{ième} siècle. Mais ce n'est que dans la vieille ville que les

¹³ World Bank, pp. 416, 418.

¹⁴ Bhooshan, pp. 26, 29.

¹⁵ "Kathmandu."

temples et les palais se retrouvent, ils sont vraiment partout. Il y a même dix sites d'héritage mondial reconnu par l'UNESCO dans la région, y compris des sites naturels et culturels.

Finalement, Katmandou est une ville de festivals. Il y a des festivals pour tous les mois et chaque jour un Dieu est célébré. Des pèlerins et même des touristes marchent de ville en ville et de montagne en montagne pour célébrer des fêtes et des festivals. C'est un peuple très religieux et le Bouddha, né Siddhartha Gautama¹⁶, est le Dieu le plus connu.

Le « hippie Trail »

Le « hippie trail » est un terme utilisé pour décrire les voyages entrepris par des hippies dans les années soixante et soixante-dix de l'Europe jusqu'en Asie par voie de terre. Il y avait deux raisons principales pour ces voyages.

D'abord, un tel voyage n'était pas cher. L'auto-stop était la méthode de transport la plus populaire, puis les trains et les autocars, qui ne coûtaient pas cher. Ceux-ci étaient plutôt utilisés à travers l'Europe de l'Est et la Turquie jusqu'au Moyen-Orient, et celui-là à travers le Moyen-Orient et l'Asie. Après leurs voyages, certains aimaient comparer combien ils avaient dépensé. Même actuellement, dans des mémoires et sur l'Internet, on peut toujours trouver des histoires où l'auteur se vante qu'il a fait le voyage entier avec l'équivalent de cent, cinquante, ou même vingt dollars américains. La moindre somme, et évidemment la plus difficile à croire, était six dollars. Ce ne sont que des histoires et des rumeurs, donc impossibles à confirmer, mais quand même intéressantes. Elles nous montrent que on n'avait pas besoin de beaucoup d'argent pour survivre à Katmandou à l'époque.

La deuxième raison était plutôt spirituelle. Plusieurs voulaient « se trouver », communiquer avec des étrangers, briser la monotonie de la vie quotidienne, et faire l'expérience d'une culture différente. Des hippies de partout se sont rencontrés sur la route ou dans des auberges ou dans d'autres lieux, et ils ont échangé des idées et des expériences. La plupart des hippies étaient des jeunes qui ne voyageaient qu'avec un sac à dos, mais des fois il était possible de voir des personnes âgées et des familles. C'était rare mais il y avait même des voyageurs qui avaient fait toute la route en voiture. Une atmosphère d'amitié, d'amour, et d'unité s'est infiltrée parmi ces hippies.

Katmandou était une destination principale à cause de deux choses : la religion et la drogue. Il n'existe probablement pas d'autre peuple dans le monde civilisé qui est tellement mené par des festivals, ce qui donne un aperçu profond de la culture népalaise. Katmandou et ses environs sont inondés de temples, stèles, autels et lieux de pèlerinages. C'est souvent dit qu'il y a autant de temples que de maisons au Népal, autant d'idoles que d'habitants, et que chaque jour a sa propre importance locale.¹⁷ Il n'y a aucune preuve pour soutenir cette affirmation mais en voyant la quantité de publications qui existent à

¹⁶ "The Buddhist World : Gautama Buddha."

¹⁷ Majupuria, p.3.

propos du Népal et de son histoire, de ses cultures, ses dieux et ses festivals, il n'est pas difficile de croire à sa vérité.

Jusqu'en 1973, quand elle a été interdite à cause de la pression exercée par les Etats-Unis, la vente de marijuana au Népal était légale.¹⁸ Les hippies qui y sont arrivés pouvaient acheter autant de « herbe » et de haschish qu'ils voulaient et sûrement il devait en avoir ceux qui ont halluciné à cause de cela et le fait que les drogues étaient si bon marché. La marijuana poussait presque partout, même, des fois, dans les rues.¹⁹ Le hasch était disponible partout aussi et était consommé beaucoup par des tribus et des groupes ethniques pendant des festivals. Le peuple népalais avait l'habitude de la marijuana et du hasch, mais il était très rare de trouver un toxicomane népalais. Parmi les hippies, cependant, il y en avait beaucoup. Quant aux autres drogues, la cocaïne n'était pas encore si courante mais elle était trouvable, et l'opium et l'héroïne n'y étaient pas produits. Il n'y avait pas de lois ou de restrictions en ce qui concernait la marijuana et le hasch. La seule restriction était que personne n'avait le droit de sortir du pays avec ces drogues, et des gens qui essayaient à l'aéroport ou aux frontières étaient arrêtés.

Évidemment la vie en France était tout un autre univers que la vie au Népal en 1968. La vie en France était plutôt comme une prison par rapport à celle au Népal. Celle-là était un monde de capitalisme où rien n'était plus important que l'argent, et l'autre était un monde pauvre quant à l'argent, mais riche en fêtes, en drogues et en liberté. Il n'est pas surprenant que tant de gens, hippies et touristes parallèlement, aient entrepris ce voyage afin de trouver un mode de vie différent et une autre vérité qu'ils pouvaient trouver eux-mêmes et à laquelle ils pouvaient croire.

¹⁸ Whelpton, 226.

¹⁹ "Social Systems and Values, Nepal."

THE PATHS OF KATHMANDU

To the Orange Goddess
of Kathmandu

René Barjavel was born in 1911 in Nyons, in the Drôme. Son of a baker and grandson of farmers, he worked with his father all while doing his studies. He obtained an undergraduate degree in 1929, but lacking financial means, could not pursue further studies. In less than one year he was a teacher's assistant, a salesman for a real estate agency, a bank employee, and then a journalist for *Progrès de l'Allier* where he remained for five years. In 1935 he met the editor Denoël, who offered Barjavel a job working for him, in Paris. For ten years he occupied the position of head of production which kept him in collaboration with different journals and magazines, in particular as a critic of theater and cinema. His first four novels, *Ravage* (Ravaged, 1943), *Le voyageur imprudent* (The Imprudent Traveler, 1944), *Tarandol* (Tarandol, 1946) and *Le diable l'emporte* (The Devil Wins, 1948) weren't successful and he had to explore other paths in the theater, then in the cinema. It was thus that he wrote the screenplay for a science-fiction film, *La nuit des temps* (The Night in Time), that wasn't adapted but that, as a novel, was a success (Prix des librairies 1968). Other great novels followed, like *Le grand secret* (The Big Secret), *Les chemins de Katmandou* (The Paths of Kathmandu), *Le blessé* (The wounded) and also *La tempête* (The Storm).

At the same time, René Barjavel wrote a weekly column in the *Journal du Dimanche* (the Sunday Newspaper), "Les libres propos de Barjavel" ("The liberal sentiments of Barjavel") until 1979. A few years later he devoted some columns to Merlin the Magician, at the Graal, and in collaboration with Olenka de Veer wrote two novels that put a lot of emphasis on the supernatural: *Les dames à la licorne* (The Unicorn Ladies, 1974) and its sequel *Les jours du monde* (The Days of The World, 1975), then *L'enchanteur* (The Enchanter, 1984), a Romanesque version of his thoughts on Merlin.

René Barjavel died in 1985.

boulevard – boulevard

gare – train station

rue – street

* - Signifies that the word/phrase appears in English in the original French version.

//11// > //375// - The page numbers in the original version.

Those who go to Kathmandu
will not recognize what is written
in this book.

Those who follow the paths that
lead there will not recognize the
paths of this book.

Everyone follows their own path,
which is not similar to any other,
and no one ends up in the same
place, in life or in death.

This book does not seek to give
an idea of reality, but to get closer
to the truth.

That of Jane, and that of Oliver,
the teller of the story.

//p11// A fire burned behind the fog. Jane saw its vague light above and to the right of the windshield. This gave the appearance of a roll of film fogged by a shard of red sun to the hazy image framed in the window. To the left and right of the car, the grey fog continued to slowly flow like the sewers that have poured into the end of the river since eternity.

Jane didn't know where she was, didn't know what was burning and began to no longer know who she was. She would have liked to no longer know anything, anything at all, nothing, and for the whole world to burn and collapse over her in order to erase from her memory what she had seen, what she had heard: the suddenly stiff face of her father, the surprise movement interrupted, the words of the Other, the hand, the laughter of the Other, the distraught look of her father upon her, the desperation in his stare, the whole still life, engraved for eternity in black and white, in the depth of her frozen memory.

Why had she opened that door? Why? Why what? She no longer knew why, she no longer knew what, she no longer knew... She had run out of the house, biting her lips //p12// to contain her wail, thrown herself into her car, run into the bumper of the car before her and the car behind, grated a bus the colour of hazy blood, plunged herself into the river of grey fog. For hours, days maybe, how long? There was no more day, no more time, she drove, stopped, drove off again, eyes attached to the halo of lights of the car slowly preceding her, that stopped, started again, at the end of the dead river that drowned the city.

The lights that preceded her stopped and did not move again. The faint red glow above and to the right of the windshield quivered. In the grey river outside the car were the smothered sounds of bells and sirens, shouts and screams, and whistles muffled in cotton. Jane got out of the car without turning the motor off. It was a small, pretty sports car from the continent, lemon-coloured, which the fog covered like a dirty canvas. Jane got out and walked away, leaving the door open. She reached the sidewalk. The garden gate of a house interrupted her. She continued, following the path of the gate. The fog was one of the thickest that London had ever been smothered by. It smelled like soot, heating oil, garbage, and rats. It settled on Jane, wound itself around her wet and frozen arms, kissed her periwinkle eyes, hung tears to her eyelashes, soaked her hair, turning it the colour of polished mahogany, flowed with it over her shoulders, and drenched her clothes.

Jane felt neither the cold nor the odour of the fog. She walked along the gate of a house, and then along another, again and again, passing an unending river of similar-looking gates. She saw neither the beginning nor the end, three rungs at a time, from the corner of her left eye, the grey river drowned the rest.

//p13// Her short green silk dress, drenched, under which she wore only orange underpants, had become almost transparent, soaking her barely drawn out hips and her slight tender breasts gripped by cold. She walked along a gate, and another gate... She collided with a dark figure, heavy, taller and bigger than her. The man watched her and from up close he saw her naked under the fog. She wanted to keep moving. He drew an arm out against her. She stopped. He took her by the hand, led her to the end of the gate, entered into a narrow alley with her, made her descend several stairs, opened a door, pushed her gently into a room and closed the door behind them.

The room was dark and smelled of salted herring. He turned a knob. A weak bulb lit up on the ceiling veiled by a pink lampshade. Along the wall to the left stood a narrow bed, carefully made, covered by a white crocheted bedspread, whose design depicted angels with trumpets and which hung over the sides with points of diamonds ending in tassels. The man folded up the bedspread and laid it on the back of a chair at the head of the bed. He pushed the black button of the radio and a Beatles song began to fill the entire room. Jane heard them and it gave her a warm feeling inside, a familiar comfort. She had remained standing near the door and did not move. The man came and took her by the hand, led her to the bed, sat her down, removed her underpants, laid her down and spread her legs. When he laid himself on top of her, she began to scream. He asked her why she was screaming. She didn't know why she was screaming. She stopped screaming.

//p14// The Beatles had finished singing and were replaced by a sad and measured voice. It was the Prime Minister. Jane fell silent. The man on top of her panted quietly, busy by taking care of his own pleasure. Before the Prime Minister had begun to cite the bad pieces of news, the man became silent. After several seconds he sighed, stood up, dried himself with the orange underpants which had fallen by the foot of the bed, went to the little table next to the gas furnace, emptied what was left of a bottle of beer into a glass, and drank.

He returned next to the bed, made Jane stand up with gestures and kind words, climbed the stairs with her, led her to the end of the short alley, accompanied her along a few paces of the gate, then gently pushed her into the fog. For a moment she was a pale green outline, then she disappeared. He remained there, immobile. In his hand he had hung onto the orange underpants that at the end of his arm revealed the ghostly blur of a bright little stain. He put them in his pocket and went home.

2

//p15// Sven had been in London for 2 weeks. It was the first stage of his journey. He didn't know London, but he had found refuge with some friends, a couple of German hippies who had shown him the pleasant areas of the city. They had come to London because it was the city of youth, but he had left home to go a lot further. Every afternoon he went to Hyde Park, sat himself down at the foot of the same tree and on the lawn around him laid out images of flowers, birds, Buddha, Jesus, Krishna, Muslims, the seal of Salomon, the swastika, the Egyptian cross, and several other faces and religious symbols drawn by his own hand on paper of all colours, like a photo of young Krishnamurti, handsome like Rudolph Valentino, and one of Gourdieff with a bald head and a Cossack moustache. All these multicoloured papers blooming in the grass around him were witness to his eyes of the blooming and joyous multiplicity of the appearances of the Unique Truth. A truth that he knew existed and with which he wanted to be familiar. It was his reason for living and the goal of his journey. He had left //p.16// Norway to go find that truth in Kathmandu. London was his first step. Kathmandu was at the other side of the world. To pursue his journey, he needed at least a little bit of money. At the center of his blooming images he placed a sign bearing the inscription: "Take a picture and toss me a coin for Kathmandu." He placed an empty tin on the sign, sat down with his back to the trunk of a tree and began to sing songs he had created by caressing his guitar. They were songs mostly without lyrics, with a few words that he repeated:

God, love, light, the birds and the flowers. For him, all these words designated the same thing. It was their common face that he hoped to discover in Kathmandu, the most holy city in the world, where all the religions of Asia met and merged.

The Londoners who passed by didn't know where Kathmandu was. Some believed the name they read on the sign was that of the boy with the blond beard and long hair, handsome like the adolescent Jesus must have been during the mysterious undocumented years of his life, when no one knew where he was, and during which he was maybe simply hiding himself while he bloomed, too tender and too handsome, before growing into the body of a man strong enough to be nailed down. For a couple of moments they listened to the nostalgic song of which they understood only a few words – but there were no other ones – and watched this boy, so handsome and so illuminated, with his short curly beard of gold and his long hair, and his guitar, worn in the spot where the fingers of his right hand struck, and the flowers of twenty colours that he had placed //p.17// around himself. They understood that they did not understand, that they had missed something here. He nodded his head a little bit; they felt a sort of remorse, and they gave a little money before leaving, and quite quickly forgot the image of this boy and the air of his melody so that their lives wouldn't be troubled. Those who took a flowered paper looked at it upon leaving and didn't know what to do with it. Separated from the other images, it seemed less cheerful. It was like a flower that had been cut, in passing, from amid other flowers, and which, all of a sudden, at the end of one's fingers, is nothing more than any little thing, cumbersome, dying. They regretted having taken it, they didn't know how to separate themselves from it, they folded it and placed it in their pocket or in their bag, or even quickly disposed of it in a garbage can.

Sometimes the women – certain tired and no longer so young – watched Sven for a long time and envied his mother. And they bent down to slide a coin into the tin.

Sven's mother did not know where her son was. She didn't worry herself with knowing. He was old enough to be free and to do what he chose.

That afternoon he had sat down in the usual spot, he had laid down his blooming pictures, his sign, and his empty box, and had begun to sing. The fog had descended on him in one fell swoop. He had folded up his garden, raised the hood of his duffle coat and continued to sing, not in the hope of money, but because people had to keep singing, even in the fog. The humidity loosened the strings of his guitar, and by fractions of tone he descended to the melancholy of the minor chords. The bottom of the slow river pushed the body of Jane before him. At eye level he saw pass the foot of her soaked dress, her //p.18// long wet legs, an open hand that dangled. He raised his eyes but the top of her head and body were blurred in the grey water. He seized her frozen hand just as she was about to disappear, rose, and discovered Jane's face. It was like a flower which opened itself after twilight, and which thinks that there is only night. Sven understood in an instant that he had to teach her the sun. He removed his duffle coat, laid it on her shoulders, and closed it carefully around her and around the warmth that it gave her.

3

//p.19// Mister Seigneur propped himself up on his elbow and tried to sit himself up on the edge of the bed. He didn't succeed. All the weight of the world weighed down on his stomach and crushed him against the mattress. But what did he have? What did he

have in there? No, it was not the... No, it was not a... No, that word need not even be considered... The doctor had said enteritis... something, congestion, adhesions, illnesses that can be cured. Not the... Do not think about it... One must take care of one's self, be patient, it will be long... But everything gets cured these days... Medicine is something, progress... It is not like before, when the doctors did not know... They felt the pulse. "Stick out your tongue." The tongue!... The poor people who lived in that era... Today they give treatments... Doctors have studied... They know... They analyzed me... They saw well that it was not the... Doctor Viret is a good doctor. He is young, he is energetic.

Mr. Seigneur looked at the nightstand on which rose a cluster of pill boxes, like a miniature of the skyscrapers of New York. Mr. Seigneur had read all the leaflets that the boxes held. There were a lot of words that he had not understood, that he had even had //p20// trouble reading. The doctors, they understand. They had studied, they understand, they know. They take care of you. The leaflets are written by the educated. It is a serious business. The doctors, the educated, represent progress. That's modernity. With them, one risks nothing.

Mr. Seigneur let himself fall back down on the pillow. His face was covered in sweat. His enormous gut had not wanted to move. And at the other side of his gut, he hardly knew if he still had legs. He called for Mrs. Muret, the cleaning lady. But the kitchen, where Mrs. Muret was in the process of preparing lunch, was filled with Mireille Mathieu's²⁰ crying, the sorrow of her voice resonating because the man she loved had just left on the train. She had cried out to him that she would never forget him, that she would wait for him for the rest of her life, every day and every night... But Mrs. Muret knew well that he would not come back. A man who boards a train without looking back is a man who will never return. She shook her head, tasted the saucy stew, and added a little pepper. Mireille was at the end of her latest sob. There was a hundredth of a second of silence in which Mrs. Muret heard Mr. Seigneur's call.

She took her transistor radio and opened the door of his bedroom. It was a fine little radio, Japanese, completely wrapped in leather, with holes on one side, like a sieve. It was Martine who had given it to her. She would never have dared to buy one herself. She was always thrifty; Oliver's mother was often late in sending her money orders. Fortunately, since Mr. Seigneur had been sick, and with Mrs. Seigneur occupied at the store, they held onto her all day, at four hundred francs an hour, which made for good //p21// weeks, and at noon she was fed. At night, she took the leftovers home, for Oliver. Upon arriving, she would put it on the stove and alter it a bit; she added sauce or potatoes, so that it seemed like a new dish which she had specifically made for them. It was always very good. She was a very good cook. Oliver didn't pay attention though, he was used to her good cooking, it seemed only natural to him. What was essential was that he was well. He was almost a man now, and he was so handsome and so kind... She was very lucky; it was a great happiness.

She was never far from her radio. Ever since she had had it, she had never been alone. There were no longer those terrible silences in which one ends up thinking. It was her whole life, all the time. Obviously there was news that wasn't always good, but one knows well that the world is the way it is, it's not explainable, it can't be helped. The main thing is to do the best one can with what one has to do, and to not cause harm to anyone, if everyone did as much, things wouldn't be so bad. And then there are all those

²⁰ A popular French singer in the 1960's and 70's.

songs, all those boys and girls, so young, who sing all day. This warmed her heart. She, she had never known how to sing. She had never dared. So, she listened. From time to time, when a boy or girl began to sing a song she had already often heard, she let herself be carried along, mischievous, humming a bit with him or her. But she would quickly stop herself. She knew that her voice wasn't beautiful.

A chorus of announcers entered Mr. Seigneur's room with her.

"Petitjean²¹ noodles are the only ones that contain *nutrigent*²²!"

//p22// Mr. Seigneur groaned.

"Could you not stop that thing, for one minute?"

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Muret, conciliatory. "I'll stop it. What's the matter?"

"Thanks to *nutrigent*, Petitjean noodles nourish you without adding weight.

"Go find my wife, I need a bedpan."

"You're not thinking, this hour, it's crucial, she doesn't spend enough time in the boutique with the two little ones. I will take care of it."

She placed the radio on the nightstand next to the skyscrapers. "There's nothing to be ashamed of when one is sick. Turn on your side. A little, there, a little more... come back... there!"

"Thanks to the *nutrigent* that breaks up the starches, Petitjean noodles nourish you without burdening your body's cells."

"I'm going to make them for you to try," said Mrs. Muret. "I'll tell Mrs. Seigneur to bring up a package from the boutique. It's what you need to deal with your large gut."

Now, it was Dalida²³ who was singing, tragically. She had also been abandoned. One could say that women are made for this, the unfortunate ones. Mrs. Muret asked herself if she would take a package of Petitjean noodles with her for Oliver, with grated cheese and a good bit of butter. But Oliver rather needed to fill out. He had sprouted so quickly, and he worked so much. She would have liked for him to gain a few pounds.

4

//p23// Oliver stopped. Something to his right moved, on the lawn, a clear quivering that clung to the dark side of the frozen grass in the last glow of twilight. It was a wounded pigeon trying to flee his approach. Oliver caught it cautiously. His fingers sunk into the warm feathers and felt the beating of its concealed heart. He half-opened his Canadian²⁴ and lodged the frightened bird in the warmth of the wool.

All of a sudden there was an unexpected brightness. Spotlights had just lit up the Palais de Chaillot, its gardens, and its fountains. Oliver saw the illuminated hill framed by the dark pillars of the Eiffel Tower, like the scenery of a theatre awaiting the entrance of the first character. He breathed deeply, elated by the light and the solitude. The Champ-de-Mars was dark and deserted. The whole night closed its infinite sphere of cold, misfortune, and injustice around him. He was here, standing up, facing the lights, at the center of this black world in from which the hum came towards him from everywhere,

²¹ A brand name of noodles in France at the time.

²² Neither a translation nor a definition could be found for this word so based on the context it seems to be a type of nutrient or vitamin with health benefits.

²³ An Egyptian-born French singer and actress popular at the time.

²⁴ A type of brown velvet jacket.

silently, like the moan of a sick person. And, before him was that light towards which //p24// it was sufficient to walk with a rising chin. Night, injustice, and misfortune could be chased away, the light would fill the world, there would be no more men exploited by men, no more harassed women, endlessly washing dishes, no more children crying in the slums, no more wounded birds... The night had to be driven away, broken; the dark, the injustices, all had to be illuminated everywhere. Someone had to want it to be done. It had to be done. We would do it...

The tower lit up, raising its long auburn leg to the sky. Oliver had to lean back to see the point at which the beacon stirred among the stars. The sky was clear, the night would be cold. Oliver slid his right hand into the slit of his jacket to prevent the pigeon from falling out, and made his way to Patrick's house. He had been there before, accompanying his friend on foot from the law faculty. Patrick had smiled a bit while Oliver passionately spoke of what had to be undone, of what had to be done, of what had to be built, of what had to be destroyed, of the unjust and absurd world that had to be razed, of the new world that all men would then build together. Patrick's parents lived next to the Champ-de-Mars. Oliver had never been inside though. He rang the bell with his left hand.

It was Andrew, a private secretary of Mrs. de Vibier, who came to open the door. Mr. Patrick had not yet returned, but he would not be long.

Andrew went to inform Mrs. de Vibier that a friend of her son's was waiting for him in the sitting room. She put down her pen and folded up her glasses. She was in the process of editing the speech that she had to give two days hence in Stockholm. She //p25// asked Andrew to call Mrs. Cooban, at UNESCO, to verify the numbers of the rice harvests in '64 and '65 in Indonesia, and to try to get the one from '66 as well. It was not yet 6 p.m. and Mrs. Cooban should still be in her office. In any case, her secretary would be around. And she wanted him to look over the conclusion a bit. It was too lyrical, not precise enough. What the congress participants ask for are the facts. She would be returning by plane Tuesday after 9 a.m. The responses had to be prepared through the mail. At least, the ones that she could, given that, she would not have a lot of time; she would be leaving at 5 p.m. for Geneva and she had a meeting at Carita's at 2 p.m.

"You will not be seeing Mr. de Vibier?" asked Andrew. "He is not returning until Wednesday..."

"We will meet up in London on Sunday," she said. "Patrick might invite this boy to stay for dinner. Let Mariette know. The Mâcon we drank at lunch was dull. It was the latest one that Fourquet delivered?"

"Yes Madame."

"Call him to take it back, I do not want it. If he has nothing better in the way of Beaujolais, he should give me a bit of Bordeaux, not too fruity, something for everyday. When I say a wine for everyday, I do not mean a good-for-nothing wine!"

"He is very busy. For a start he should give us satisfaction. Try his Bordeaux when he gets here."

"Yes Madame."

She rose to go see this boy who was waiting to see her son. She liked to keep contact with young people. With Patrick, no contact was possible. When she tried to speak with him, he looked at her with a slight smile, as though what she was saying was

//p26// of no importance. He responded “yes, mother”, with a lot of kindness, until she ceased to speak, discouraged.

There was, almost in the middle of the sitting room, a big bundle of flowers in an ancient pale green porcelain vase, placed on the ground, on the edge of a Chinese carpet, next to the pale green harpsichord painted in pink garlands. Upon entering, Oliver went straight to the flowers and bent over them, but at the end of their long stems he couldn’t smell anything. Between the two windows, which opened out on the tower, and over Chaillot, there was another bouquet on a low table. This was one of dried flowers, of feathers and palm leaves, and a dead bird with mohair feathers was positioned almost at the top, wings open, like a butterfly.

Oliver sat down on a pale green couch whose twisted legs were threaded with aged gold, and looked around. Above the dry flowers was a Gauguin with violet and crimson girls and a yellow horse. Above the harpsichord was one of Renoir’s bathers, totally ravaged by the sun, and in the middle of the panel facing the windows, a large red Cardinal, dry, a little cracked.

In looking at it, Oliver recognized the eyes and nose of Patrick, and when Mrs. de Vibier opened the door, he believed he was seeing the Cardinal entering, who had cut his hair, beard, and gown.

He rose. She came towards him smiling, and extended her hand.

He brusquely took his right hand that was holding the pigeon, out from his jacket, took the bird in his left hand, and extended his right hand to Mrs. de Vibier.

His right hand was stained with blood, and in his left hand, the pigeon was dead.

//p27// “Oh my God!” said Mrs. de Vibier, “You hunt pigeons?”

“Me?” said Oliver, dumbfounded.

“Poor creature. How dreadful!”

Mrs. de Vibier had drawn her hand back and was clenching it on her chest while looking at the pigeon whose head hung between Oliver’s thumb and index finger, its beak open, and its eye dimmed.

Oliver felt himself grow crimson with confusion and anger. How could anyone think that he... His eyes burned. He threw the pigeon at the feet of the Cardinal and crossed the sitting room with three strides. At the entrance he mistook doors, opened a closet, a study, and an office. He finally found the exit concealed under a curtain of plum-coloured velvet, slammed the door, ran to the middle of Champ-de-Mars, and then ran to the Military School. The frozen air burned his chest. He began to cough and stopped running.

5

//p28// “What did you want her to think?” asked Patrick. “Put yourself in her shoes.”

He looked at Oliver with a hint of mockery and a lot of friendship. They were sitting down on the patio of Sélect. Oliver was drinking orange juice and Patrick mineral water. Patrick resembled his mother, in smaller form. He was as tall as her, who was as tall as the large portrait of the Cardinal. He was smaller around the waist. It seemed that the last reserves of the vital strength of his race had exhausted themselves to construct a bony framework stretched out vertically. And nothing had been left with which to build

flesh around it. His pale blond hair was cut almost close-cropped, with a very short fringe high up in the front. Frameless glasses sat astride his big thin nose, pointy, a little broken and bent to the left, like that of his mother's, and that of the Cardinal. On the spot of the break, the whiteness of the bone stood out. His mouth was big, and his lips pale but open, lips that loved life and that could have been greedy had they had blood beyond the skin. //p29// His ears were small and of a perfect form. Ears of a girl, said his mother. One was always pinker than the other, never the same. This depended on a gust of wind, the sun's rays, an emotion. When he smiled, he revealed very white teeth, translucent at their tips. They seemed new and fragile.

In all of this pallor, this slenderness, this fragility, one all of a sudden discovered a solid element: the expression of his brown eyes, extraordinarily bright and full of life.

"But what did you come to the house to do?" he asked.

"Carlo had just told me that you were leaving, I thought that I could still make you change your mind..."

"You know well that I've had my mind made up for a long time now..."

"I really believed you were joking, that you were just talking, and that at the moment of leaving..."

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

"You're completely crazy!" There are eight hundred million of them!..."

"Five hundred!..."

"Five hundred million, you think that's not enough? That they are still in need of you, *in addition*, to dig wells?"

"Where I'm going, yes..."

"You must be joking! Hot air! It's not for them that you're going, it's for you... You're clearing off, you're deserting..."

Patrick, very calm, watched Oliver while softly smiling.

"Everything that we do, is initially for us. Even God on the cross. He wasn't //p30// very happy with what men had become. It tormented him. He got himself nailed down to bring an end to that torment. He agonized a good bit, but later he was at peace..."

"And now, you think he's still at peace when he watches us from above his clouds, your bearded man?"

Patrick's smile faded.

"I don't know... I don't believe so..."

He repeated, almost in a breath: "I don't believe so..."

He had become very solemn. He murmured:

"He has to suffer anew, he has to bleed..."

"Don't make me laugh," said Oliver. "You're taking off to India, you're taking off into the clouds, you're always taking off, you're leaving us to fall."

"You don't need me... You have loads of strong types."

"Fine! To break the place, when we put ourselves to it, we won't need you, but for reconstruction, there are never enough guys like you... They'll have to be found! You heard what Cohen was saying, last night, it's the roots that have to be reinvented!... What's important, is to define the relationships of man with..."

Patrick pinned his hands to his ears. He grimaced as though he heard a saw grinding a glass.

"I'm begging you!" he said... "Words, words, speeches and more speeches! I'm filled with them, I'm overflowing, no more can enter, they're coming out of my ears!" He sighed and drank a mouthful of Vichy.

"A speech? It's not a speech," Oliver said, a little taken aback... "We have to..."
//p31// "The bearded man," Patrick peacefully said. "Every time my father and my mother are at home, I hear them speaking of measures that *have to* be taken against hunger in the world, plans that *have to* be elaborated to come to the aid of this and that... And when they're not at home, it's because they're in the process of presenting a speech on the same subject before their committees or their sub-committees, in Geneva, Brussels, Washington, Singapore, or in Tokyo, everywhere where there is a meeting hall big enough to hold the delegates of the whole world, all of whom have a speech to present against hunger! And you and your friends, you're the same! You talk, you talk, and you say nothing. What is it, a consumer society? It's regurgitation! Four words that tickle your throat and head in passing. A small pleasure... You masturbate with words. Do you know of any societies that don't consume? Me, I do. The one to which I am going, for example. The people sleep on the ground and don't consume more than that because there is nothing to consume. And when they are finished with not consuming, it's the maggots who consume them. All the while, we give speeches everywhere. You talk and you talk, and the dying die. They don't even have the consolation of hearing that we are pleading for them and that one day or another we will reinvent the roots of society. Even if your revolution is next week, it doesn't concern them, they will already be dead..."

"Well said, I say!" said Oliver. "You, who doesn't like speeches!..."

"It's done," said Patrick. "I'm going. I'm going because I'm ashamed. Ashamed for all of us. I'm going to make little rifts in the sand, like you said. And even if I succeed
//p32// in only extracting three drops of water to grow one radish to feed one person for three months, at least that will be one job done."

6

//p33// And then came the month of May. While the winter passed, Jane forgot bit by bit the dreadful shock that she had experienced that afternoon in November when the fog had drowned the city like a dead river. Forgot isn't accurate. The image in black and white, the fixed snapshot, had remained engraved at the back of her memory, but she no longer attached any importance to it. There's no longer anything tragic in her world, everything around her has changed.

She did not return to live in her father's house. Her mother was in Liverpool, remarried to a man who owned ships that sailed on all the seas. Jane now understood why her mother had wanted a divorce. Unless it was because her father had remained alone that he... Not important. Her father is free... Sven had said to her: liberty, love. *Love*.^{*} Love for all creatures. God is love. Man has to rediscover the voice of love. At the end of love he will find God. Sometimes he made her take a few drags of marijuana. So she again disappeared into the river of fog, but it is a warm pink fog, in which she feels good, like when we are at the point of falling asleep, and we detach ourselves from our weight on earth.

//p34// She lives with Sven, Karl, and Brigitte, in a room that Karl rented. There are smallish beds, a gas stove, and an oil stove. Sven had painted flowers on the walls.

Karl and Brigitte are from Hamburg. Ever since Sven had spoken to them of Kathmandu, they had decided to go there with him. At night, they light the oil stove and some candles. They don't like electricity. With the flame of a candle Sven lights a cigarette that they pass around. Cigarettes are difficult to find, and expensive. In Kathmandu, hash can be found at the market, freely sold, totally natural, like parsley in Europe. And nobody forbids anything. It is the city of God. Liberty. *Love*.^{*} The hash isn't more expensive than the parsley, perhaps even less.

Day by day, Jane had felt the shell of fear, of selfishness, of prohibitions, of obligations, of grudges, that her education and her relationships with other humans had cemented around her, crack, flake off, fall away, disappear completely. She is set free. It seems to her that she has been reborn, or rather that she has just been born, into a world where the beings no longer create wars, but hold hands with smiles of friendship.

Sven had explained to her: The society that forces or prohibits is wrong. It makes humans unhappy, because a human is made to be free, like a bird in the forest. Nothing belongs to anybody, everything is for everyone. The money which allows for the accumulation of personal goods is wrong. We must leave this society; live on the fringe of it, or elsewhere. Combat is wrong. Violence is wrong because it creates conquerors //p35// and the conquered; it replaces ancient constraints with new obligations. All the relationships between humans that are not those of love are wrong. We have to leave this society, go away. When enough of us will have left, it will collapse upon itself.

Sven takes his guitars and sings. Jane feels light, free. She knows that the world in which she lived before was horrible and absurd. She is outside of it now. She considers it a prison from which she has just escaped. Behind its iron doors and jagged walls of glass, the prisoners continue to fight and tear each other apart. She pities them, she loves them, but she can't do anything for them, they themselves must make an effort to get out. She can call them and hold their hands, she cannot break the doors. She, now, is outside in the sun, at peace, with her friends, in love. They threw away the armor and the arms, they are naked, they are free.

The cigarette is passed from one to the other. Sven sings the name of God. *God*.^{*} *Love*.^{*} Outside it is foggy or it isn't, it doesn't matter. In the bedroom is the golden light of candles. The scent of marijuana mixes with that of the wax and the oil. They are set free. They make love, a bit, like a dream. *Love*.^{*}

7

//p36// To cross the borders, Jane needs her passport and her father's signature. She had returned to see him and announce her departure. The police had returned the car the morning after the fog. He had not spoken of the disappearance of his daughter, because of the scandal. He had enlisted a private detective, a serious fellow, who had quite quickly given him news.

He's a doctor; he had recognized the marijuana in Jane's eyes. Worried, he had reached his hand out for her, placed it on her arm. Jane had smiled at him. It seemed to him that the smile came to her from an incredible distance, across years of thickness of nothingness. He had pulled back his hand.

She had started a long and dangerous voyage. He knows it. But he can't do anything, can't say anything to her, he had lost the right to forbid or counsel. He offers

her money, she refuses it. They look at each other for a few seconds, then he says *good luck**... She looks at him, she opens her mouth to speak, she doesn't say anything, she leaves.

They left, the four of them cramped in the lemon yellow car. In Milan, they had no money left. Jane sold her car and her ring, and Brigitte her gold necklace. This gave //p37// them enough to pay for four plane tickets to Bombay. Sven had a desire to cross India before arriving in Nepal, but at the Consulate they were refused a visa because they couldn't produce a return ticket. India doesn't have the means to accommodate and look after useless mouths. They exchanged two of the one-way tickets for return ones, and with the sterling they had left, bought a secondhand motorbike and a small wad of dollars which they divided in two.

Karl and Brigitte accompanied Sven and Jane to the airfield. They watched the plane takeoff, climb towards the sky, supported by four pillars of gray smoke, turning like a homing pigeon to heed the call of the orient, then disappear into the horizon from whence the sun arrives every morning.

Karl got back on the bike, Brigitte sat down behind him, he turned the motor on with a joyful easing of the back of his knee. He forced it to spit out all its noise and smoke to signify the joyful departure, then he calmed it down, and they gently started off towards the east, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Kathmandu...

It was a marvelous journey, they were free, time didn't matter, they had enough money to buy gas until the end. They would see what they could do for food. And to sleep, there's always a place under the sky.

The bike was red, Karl was a redhead. His hair fell in thick curls to his shoulders like the wig of a great lord from the 17th century. His beard and his moustache flamed around his face. His entire head was like a sun. He had thick and very pink lips and big eyes the colour of mint leaves, sparkling with gaiety. For the drive, he had bought blue //p38// glasses, big like portholes, to prevent his hair from drifting over his face, and around his head had tied a ribbon of green silk from which pompoms hung down to the nape of his neck. He was wearing pants with vertical multicoloured stripes and a rust-coloured sunflower print shirt. Brigitte held on, pressed against his broad back, her arms clasped around his waist. She was a bit sleepy. She had been smoking marijuana since the morning. She was wearing blue jeans and a faded blue cotton polo, with a long necklace of wooden pearls from an olive tree. She was very slender. Her black hair was cut short, shapeless. She looked after it herself with scissors.

Their voyage ended when they had barely covered half of their distance. They had, after several days, after several breakdowns, and more and more difficulties finding fuel, abandoned the bike, its tires permanently torn open by the stones on the road. They continued on foot, sometimes taken in by a truck or car before a downpour, spending most of the time alone on the endless road, traveling between one poor village to the next miserable village, exhausted by the lack of drugs and food, crushed by the sun, burning with thirst and dust.

That day they had marched for hours without seeing a human being or animal, besides the flies which followed and harassed them, appearing suddenly, it seemed, out of nowhere. Enormous horseflies circled around them, in the odour of their sweat, waiting for a second of inattention to set themselves down on a corner of naked skin and inject

their stinger. On both sides of the road extended a landscape of red hills sculpted by //p39// the erosion of water and wind, without one tree, without a blade of grass, stretching to the horizon and beyond, in charred desolation.

The sun hung behind them, casting a longer and longer shadow before them that pierced the white fragments of the stones. They continued to advance in spite of their weariness, in the hope of finding a village with water and maybe something to eat, before nightfall. They both carried everything they possessed in a little well-built cylindrical satchel carried on the back by the rope that served to close it. Brigitte's was of white canvas, and Karl's buttercup, made similar by the red dust that the sweat on their backs transformed into putty.

Karl was the first to hear the sound of the motor. He stopped and turned around. Turned crimson by the enormous sphere of fading sun, a cloud of dust drew towards them from the far end of the road. Then they saw the truck. Once it approached, Karl gestured grandly and the truck drew level with them and stopped. It was an old German military truck, which seemed to have been through thirty wars. The windshield was cracked and the doors of the cab were missing. A giant with a shaved head and skin almost black held the wheel. He looked at Karl and Brigitte while laughing under his enormous moustache. Two other men sitting beside him were laughing and joking almost to the point of crying. In the trailer were a load of bricks and about ten men either sitting or standing. Some were dressed in European rags, others in the local dress, all of them covered in the same dust. Laughing, they signaled them to hop in. The trailer was high. Karl pushed Brigitte, who had no strength left, up. A moustached man took her by the wrists and lifted her like a feather. Karl hauled himself up upon his turn. The truck set off. A man sat Brigitte //p40// down on the bricks, before him. Once she was seated, he put his hands on her breasts, laughing. She hit him to make him let go. He bent down, grabbed her cotton polo at its base, lifted it violently and tore it off over her head, obliging her to raise her arms so that she couldn't resist. Another was already tearing the straps of her bra. Karl threw himself at them. One man hit him on the head with a brick. The brick cracked, Karl fell. They laid Brigitte on the bricks. She continued to struggle while they removed her jeans. The sight of her little blue underpants made them roar with laughter. They held her arms and legs and she stopped moving. The first finished with her very quickly. The man's weight crushed her against the bricks. The fourth one made her faint. The driver stopped the truck and went with his two companions to join the men in the trailer. The sun was setting. The sky to the west was red like a forge and almost black at the horizon where a gigantic star was already shining. The driver was too impatient to wait his turn. He grabbed Karl, unconscious, whose blood ran through his red hair, and threw him on the road. He tore off his pants and his underwear and began to satisfy himself with him. Two others had followed him and watched, laughing, one who was old with a white beard, head dressed in a filthy turban. The pain revived Karl who was screaming. The old man placed his bare foot over his mouth. The bottom of his foot was rough like a pumice stone. Karl turned his slashed head, freed his mouth, screamed, and wrestled. The old man bent down and drove his knife into his throat. It was a knife he had made himself. The blade was wide, long, and curved, and an inlay of copper adorned its handle of white bone. It was a fine artisan object that would have given joy to a tourist.

//p41// When they were all satisfied, even the old one, either with her, or with him, or with them both, they smashed Brigitte's head with a brick and dragged the two naked

bodies behind a hillock. They took Karl's ring, Brigitte's necklace and bracelet, and all of their clothes.

The horizon was dark and burning like an extinguishing coal, with a hem of fire that reflected the same red light on the sperm and blood shed on the two corpses.

A wild dog, impatient, crazy with hunger, howled amid the hills. Other voices responded from the depth of the night that was coming.

The truck took off spitting and creaking from all of its joints. In the trailer, chattering, they emptied the yellow satchel and the white satchel and fought over their contents. The old man put the necklace of olive wood around his neck. He laughed. His mouth was a black hole. The driver lit up the headlight, the left one. The right one no longer existed.

8

//p42// The best was to get out at Odeon station, but the police had probably already shut it. The train nevertheless stopped. There was no one on the platform. Only three of us got off. The other two were an older woman carrying a worn out shopping bag talking to herself in a low voice, with a lost stare, and a tall and very thin Negro, dressed in rosewood pants and a greenish jacket that hung around him. Wearing huge pointy yellow shoes, he walked nonchalantly with large soft strides. I arrived at the escalator before him. The old woman, behind, was scraping the rough cement with her worn-out slippers. The gates were open as usual. I walked out without any problems.

It was Monday May 6, 1968, the day that the newspapers the next day would call "Red Monday" because they ignored that other days, even more scarlet, would follow. The students who had for weeks been demolishing the University of Nanterre's structures had announced the preceding Saturday that they would be coming to demonstrate before the Sorbonne today. It was as if they had announced that they were going to light a //p43// bonfire in a hayloft. The whole building risked being burned. They knew it. It was without a doubt what they desired. To burn the place. Ashes, it seems, are a good fertilizer for new crops.

It is an unusual occasion to learn from the press and the radio and the television that a revolution will start Monday at two pm, between place Haubert and Saint-Germain-des-Prés.²⁵

I am consumed by a curiosity that will never be satisfied. I would like to know everything and see everything. I am consumed by a perpetual anxiety concerning the fate of those and that which I love. And I love everything. I couldn't not be here this Monday afternoon. I left my car at the Invalides²⁶ and took the subway. Odéon station was open. I walked out.

I sprang up into the unusual. Boulevard Saint-Germain was empty. The stream of cars had totally disappeared, leaving the bottom of the river bare. A few guys and girls appeared, moved quickly over the asphalt, like fish searching for a puddle. To the west, a crowd of scattered students who had "come to see" occupied the Mabillon intersection and that of the rue de Seine. They spoke in little groups, they hardly moved. They hadn't yet engaged themselves in the event. To the east, a thin cordon of helmeted police

²⁵ In the Latin Quarter of Paris.

²⁶ A key subway station in Paris.

barricaded the roadway a little before the Saint Michel intersection and seemed to be waiting for the event to take shape. Halfway between them and the crowd, the boulevard was held up by the pathetic outline of a barricade, composed of a few panels of wood laid //p44// flat on the roadway, crates, garbage cans, and three or four boxes. A hundred students moved around it like ants that have just discovered the thin corpse of a dragonfly and want to make it known to the entire anthill. On the highest crate, Oliver was standing.

Upon leaving the subway, I felt that I was penetrating a fragile moment, brief and tense, like when a firing pin strikes the cap but the explosion doesn't come. We don't know if the cartridge is bad or if the gun is going to go off. We watch it and we wait, in silence.

There was a great silence, despite the trails of shouts that rippled along the boulevard and sometimes swelled into protests or chanted slogans. None of this succeeded in filling the void left by the huge absence of the flood and noise of the cars. It was like the sudden disappearance of the sea at the beach. Something would come and settle into this emptiness. It was inevitable, physics, cosmic. There was a hole in the universe of habits, something would fill it in, nobody yet knew what.

Around the outline of the barricade, the restlessness grew. The students tore fragments of asphalt off of the roadway and threw them at the police who threw them back at the students. A few boys sometimes crossed the barricade, ran to add velocity to their projectile and leapt to let it go, Propelling it with their insults. It was a sort of dance, alive and light, these guys young and weightless, all in lively movements, in grand gestures, with their whole bodies to the sky. The crowd at the rue de Seine intersection quickly thickened and began to stir. The groups joined each other at the barricade and //p45// ran at it, throwing pieces of wood, fragments of asphalt, screaming louder and louder their cries of defiance.

The police retaliated with tear gas grenades, which exploded with a soft blast, releasing swirling jets of white smoke at ground level. The assailants surged back at a run to avoid the immediate effects, then took off again for another attack, provoking a new downfall of grenades. The assailants surged back again, then started again.

Still, at that moment, there was something joyous and merry in the engaged action. It was a very brief instant, like the one that is a prelude to a big storm, when, below a sky still blue, sudden gusts of wind turn up the branches and tear off the leaves. If we turn our back to the horizon where the darkness and blaze pile up, we see only the movements of the trees which the wind invites to liberate themselves from the slavery of their roots, and which creak and moan in their efforts to take flight.

For all the youth of Paris, it had been a huge break that had interrupted the university year. These two sides, face to face, these races to and fro on the large empty roadway made me think of the old game of "barres" of which there was already question in the novels of the Round Table and that we still played in high school classes when I was a student and supervisor. A grenade exploded a few away from me. The tear gas violated my nostrils. I started to cry, but suddenly I ceased to be an absent spectator, like at the movies, and became a witness.

With a sort of alacrity, rid of the weight and rules of the years, I joined into the //p46// crowd of boys and girls that surged back and forth over the large terrain of this game without referees and without laws. They ran in one direction, then in another,

passing on both sides of me without seeing me, like the water of a tide that rises and falls around a small boat full of sand. And older alarmed woman, a little heavy, a little foolish, had chosen this moment to walk her dog, a black and white fox terrier. One guy put his feet in the leash, caused the woman to fall down, flung the wailing dog far off without it seeing him or his master. She was on the ground, stunned, and trembling. She had lost a shoe, her heel was bleeding. She was scared, she didn't understand. They ran around her, around me, they didn't see us, we were not in the dimensions of their universe.

Standing on the highest crate in the middle of the barricade's eye, Oliver was gesticulating and screaming. A tissue pressed against my nose, my cheeks wet with tears, I moved closed to be able to see and hear what he was saying.

He was wearing his brown velvet Canadian, on the back of which floated the tail of a nasturtium scarf that was wrapped around his neck. It was his grandmother that had knit it for him. She had insisted that morning that he take it because he had been coughing and complaining about his throat.

His smooth, fine hair, the colour of raw silk, ran down to the base of his cheeks and partly hid their youthful hollows. His skin was matte, as if tanned, but pale underneath from a long fatigue. Between his black eyelashes, so thick that they seemed painted on, his eyes had the bright colour of ripe hazelnuts fallen on the grass and polished by the morning dew and sun.

His right arm raised, he shouted out to his comrades to leave these premises and //p47// go join the Denfert-Rochereau march. But they no longer heard anything but the beating of their own blood. They started to enjoy their movements and their shouts. The comings and goings of their denser and denser masses excited them more and more. Their attacks became harsher, faster, plunged further into the boulevard. From the peak of their violence now spurted out cobblestones and fragments of cast iron.

Facing them, the cordon of police had become a compact plug. Elbow to elbow, back against chest, over twenty meters thick, wearing helmets and dressed in oilskin that glistened like in the rain, the policemen were a frightening mass of silence and immobility. Behind them, cars with wire netted windows slowly lined up in rows, tire to tire, side by side, from one sidewalk to the other, and over many layers. When everything was ready, they began to move at an overwhelming speed, like one of those monstrous reptiles from the Mesozoic whose shifting leveled the earth and made ponds overflow. The creature projected heavy blasts of water that washed the sidewalks, knocked over and catapulted the panels and the garbage and the men, shattered windows and drowned apartments. The tear gas grenades rolled and exploded everywhere. In the approaching twilight, their ribbons of smoke appeared even whiter. The students had quickly fled into the little streets. Groups of policemen followed them. On Rue de Quatre-Vents, a down-and-out, who was sleeping under the sand pile of a construction site, brusquely woke up. He was an ex-legionary²⁷, still strong, lost in a haze of nostalgia and wine. He rose and //p48// saw the uniforms launched into attack; he stood to attention and saluted.

At the corner of rue de Seine, a rain of cobblestones halted the arriving policemen. They flooded the street under a rain of grenades. A white fog ascended to the tops of the buildings. Large gray clouds rolled over the roofs. A motorbike backfired, carrying two journalists masked in white, heads covered by enormous yellow helmets inscribed with the name of their agency. The one that was driving received a cobblestone in the ribs,

²⁷ Legionary: A member of a legion; legion: a large group of soldiers; an army, (Webster's p.1035).

while a grenade exploded under his front tire. The bike crashed on the sidewalk in front of the shop window of a shirt maker. He had already drawn his bars. Frantic, he tried to distinguish through the window who had arrived in the smoke. It was the beginning of the end of his world. He did his best to save his shirts. He quickly removed them from the window and passed them to his wife, who hid them in some drawers.

9

//p49// At five thirty in the morning, Mrs. Muret, carrying her transistor, descended the stairs of her small apartment, crossed the buildings' two paved courts, exited and stopped on the sidewalk. She looked to the left and to the right, hoping to see Oliver's tall silhouette suddenly appear, with his scarf around his neck. But the rue du Cherche Midi was empty. It was the end of the night; the glow of the street lamps was waning and appeared exhausted. The air had an acidic odour that made her eyes blink like when she chopped onions. The transistor sang softly. She sat herself down on the stone marker at the corner of the coachman door. Her legs couldn't take anymore. A 2 CV passed by, hurriedly, noisily, like an insect. There was only one person inside. She couldn't see whether it was a man or a woman.

She had heard everything on her radio: the barricades, the burnt cars, the fights between students and the police. And through her window she had heard the blasts, without stop, at the barricade, beside the rue de Rennes, the sirens of the police cars that stirred in the whole quarter, and the sirens of the ambulances, at full blast. Each time her //p50// heart stopped. Oliver, my little boy, my big boy, my infant, it's impossible, it can't be you that they're carrying off? As soon as he had left the maternity ward, she had taken him in her arms and always watched over him. He had been a few days old, now he was twenty. Sometimes, when he was little, his mother would come by, take him, carry him off for a week or two to the Riviera or to Saint-Moritz, or God knows where. She would return him with a cold, thinner, filled with wonder, full of stories that he never succeeded in telling to the end. He would wake up crying at night, during the day he dreamed. It always took him a very long time to regain his serenity.

As he grew up, his mother had found more and more reasons to avoid taking him away. Oliver always waited to recover his interrupted dreams at her side, but she would pass by quickly, hug him, tell him "next time, soon," leave him with an item of clothing too big or too small inappropriate for his age. She didn't know what a child was, a boy, a young man. After each of her flash visits, each of which left a long hard-to-forget trail of perfume in the small apartment on rue de Cherche-Midi, Oliver would remain gloomy, bad-tempered, and quick-tempered, for days or for weeks. She sometimes brought piles of magazines, from all over, filled with colour photos of her. There were even some from Japan and India, with odd characters that resembled cartoons. Oliver had covered the wall above his bed with them. Some were full-page like the magazines had published, others close-ups, carefully cut out with his grandmother's embroidery scissors, and pasted on cream, blue, green, or charcoal-gray drawing paper.

//p51// All these dissimilar faces of his mother, with or without a hat, with hair long or short, straight or curly, black, blond, red, or even silver, with a mouth pale or raw, had a common trait: pale blue eyes, very big and that always seemed surprised and a little frightened, like those of a little girl discovering the ocean. The crowd of faces ascended

to the ceiling of Oliver's small bedroom. It was like a sky where all the stars would have the gaze of his mother. In a large commercial envelope, at the bottom of the drawer in an old table which served him as a desk, beneath the notebooks and class notes, he kept the pictures in which she was almost naked.

The day of his seventeenth birthday, she gave him a pipe and a package of dutch tobacco. His grandmother had ordered a mocha cake from the rue de Renne's pastry cook. He had promised to put make it using only butter, it was a long-standing client, he had to make her happy. But he had made it with margarine, as usual, with a touch of butter to give it the right aroma. We have the right. We can write on the shop window "Butter Confectioner" as soon as we use a little, it's legal. The pleasure of the clients, is that they believe, if we made everything with only butter, they wouldn't even appreciate it. His grandmother had laid the little round kitchen table with a crocheted tablecloth, three plates with gilded threads, and very old silverware. She had bought a bottle of champagne at the Prisunic and planted seventeen small blue candles on the mocha cake. On the gas stove, in the cast-iron pot, a fine chicken was finishing browning amidst new potatoes and cloves of garlic. It was a recipe that she had gotten from Mrs. Seigneur, who was //p52// from Avignon. Cloves of garlic baked this way in the juice, one couldn't imagine how good it is, how tender. Marrow.

Oliver, on the lookout at the window, saw a little red Austin cross the portal between the two courts, turn almost on the spot, reverse right up to the door of the stairway, and stop dead. His mother got out. She was dressed in a tailored green leather suit with a very short skirt, a light blue blouse, and a long jade necklace. Her hair that day was pale blond and sleek like her son's. She plunged her chest into the car and stood up embracing a pot wrapped in golden paper from which emerged an enormous pink azalea. On her index finger hung a little blue package at the end of a thin brown ribbon, and at her elbow, a green leather purse, a little darker than her suit.

Her face buried in the flowers, she searched for the entrance to the stairwell with her feet. She was comical, confused, and ravishing. Oliver, happy, rushed down the stairs to help her. His grandmother received the azalea with a nod of her head. Where was she going to be able to put it? She did a tour of the two rooms and returned to the kitchen with the plant. It was too big and didn't belong anywhere. Finally, she placed it in the sink. It was quite a lot higher than the faucet, rising halfway to the pantry. It stuck out to the back of Oliver's chair. It intruded everywhere, one could no longer move, one could not look after it. She asked Mrs. Seigneur to take it into her dining room. But how to get it there? They wouldn't let it in the bus. A taxi was needed. That was going to cost her one hour's pay... Oh decidedly, she was very kind, but she hadn't thought, as always. //p53// Oliver sat himself down to open his package. Alarmed, he looked at the joke in gazelle skin with gold coins, the bowl pipe enrobed in leather, with an amber stem. He made himself smile before lifting his head to look at his mother. He had actually written her at the beginning of the trimester that with Patrick and Carlo, they had decided to never smoke while there were men in the world for whom the price of a cigarette would be able to prevent dying from hunger. Each one of them had committed themselves before the faces of the other two. It was a solemn commitment, almost a vow. That decision was very important for Oliver, he had told his mother about it, and given the reasons in a long letter. Had she already forgotten about it? Maybe she didn't read her

letters... She only sent postcards... Maybe she had never received it... Her mail had to run after her around the world.

He turned towards her, she was bent towards the stove, breathing in the aroma rising out of the pot.

“Oh! A chicken casserole!”

One would’ve thought that she had discovered an extremely rare dish, a marvel that one never gets to eat.

“It smells so good! What a shame! I’m taking a plane at 2:15... I have to run, I barely have time. Let’s hope that there’s no traffic jam between here and la porte d’Orléans²⁸!”

She hugged them quickly, promised to return to see them soon, encouraged Oliver to “be well-behaved,” quickly descended the stairs, tap-tap-tap, raised her head to the window, smiled and waved at them before rushing into the red Austin that roared, screeched, pulled off in a whirlwind and disappeared beneath the porch of the first court.

//p54// It was an old building divided into two parts. The one that surrounded the first court had four floors. It had been mainly inhabited by families of officers up until 1914. The last general had died in time, just before the war. The second court was surrounded by stables and car sheds, surmounted by the coachmen’s and orderlies rooms. The stables now served as warehouses or workshops for the artisans of the quarter, and the rooms had been joined together by two or three to form cheap lodgings. There were four flights of stairs. Between the two bottom ones there remained a fountain with its stone trough where the horses had come to drink and its huge copper tap from which nothing flowed.

Oliver remained immobile for a minute, his teeth clenched, the muscles of his jaw tense, fixed on the dark porch into which the little poppy-coloured car plunged and disappeared.

His grandmother, standing back a bit, watched him with anxiety, without saying anything. She knew that in such moments, it was better to say nothing, that we are always clumsy, we believe we are being soothing, but we wound. The noise of the little car’s motor was lost in the far-away hum of the quarter. The sounds of the road only reached the end of the second court as a muffled rumbling, a little monotonous, which one ended up no longer hearing. It was rare to find so much calm in such a lively quarter. It was this that had convinced Mr. Palairac, who had his butcher’s shop at the front, to buy the whole left wing. There he installed a modern apartment, lit by neon, indirectly in the ceiling’s cornices. He used his stables to park his van and two cars. The one at the far end //p55// served as storage into which he placed iron baskets with bones and scraps that an anonymous truck came to collect every Tuesday. Palairac said that this served to make fertilizer, but some people of the quarter joked that it was a truck from a mayonnaise factory, others that it was from a factory of “soup stock” in tablets. In winter, this wasn’t bothersome, but as soon as the heat began, this corner of the court smelled of stale blood, and the odour attracted large black flies to all the apartments.

Oliver turned away from the window, slowly returned to the table, pushed the chair to be able to pass by without jostling the azalea, stopped and looked at his plate. The rare pipe and the luxurious joke were resting there on the unfolded paper that had wrapped them up. The thin brown ribbon hung over the white tablecloth. It carried, in

²⁸ An exit off of the Paris peripheral highway leading to the airport.

darker letters, shade on shade, the name of the store that had sold the two objects. Oliver rewrapped the paper around them and handed them to his grandmother.

"Here, you'll get it reimbursed. You'll have some money to buy yourself a coat for next winter".

He entered his room, took off his shoes, got onto his bed, and, starting at the top, set himself to removing the pictures of his mother from his wall. Some were stuck on with scotch tape, others with thumbtacks. If they didn't come off easily, he pulled and tore. When he had finished, he returned to the kitchen holding flat between his two hands the wad of photos. With his foot he opened the cupboard with the garbage bin, below the sink, and bent below the azalea.

"Oliver!" said his grandmother.

He stopped what he was doing, was still for a moment, then stood up and looked //p56// around, looking for a spot to put that which he held between his two hands and no longer wanted to see.

"Give me that," said his grandmother. "You really shouldn't... She does what she can... If you think life is easy..."

She went to take the photos into her room. She didn't know where to put them. She would definitely find a spot in the wardrobe. In the meantime, she placed them on the marble top of her nightstand, under the radio. She didn't turn it on when Oliver was at home, it irritated him. On the other hand, when he was home she had no need for music.

10

//p57// The radio announced that everything was over, the last protests broken up, the fires extinguished, and the barricades in the process of being cleared away. Oliver had not returned. She was certain that he had been injured and taken to the hospital. Fear squeezed her heart. She felt the stone marker melt beneath her and the wall topple over behind her. She squeezed her eyes tight and shook her head. She had to stay together, go to the police station, make inquiries. Just as she was getting up, she heard Palairac's shop assistant, Robert's, motorbike backfire. It was he who arrived first in the morning, with the key to the shop, to set up. He had started at Palairac's in 1946, he was 52 years old, he knew the clients better than the boss.

He cut the motor and got off the bike. He saw Mrs. Muret pass beside him like a ghost. He held her by the arm.

"Where are you going like this? What happened?"

"Oliver hasn't returned. I'm going to the police station. Something has for sure happened to him."

//p58// "You must be joking! They made a fine mayonnaise, last night, with his friends!... They must be in the process of drinking to it."

"He doesn't drink! Not even beer!"

"They drink fruit juice, it's their vice... There's no point in going to the police station, we'll call there. Hold on a minute, I'm going to open the grating, you'll call from the cash desk."

He pushed his bike into the court. He was tall and thin, with arms hard as iron. Just as she was going to call, he said that he'd thought about it and perhaps it was better

not to call. There was no point in giving Oliver's name to the police who might put his name on their list. Once one is on a list, it's for life.

"Oh my God!" said Mrs. Muret. She would have liked to sit down, there was no chair in the shop, except for that of the cashier, and it was built-in. Robert wanted to accompany her back home, she said that she would rather like to stay down below; in her apartment she would go crazy. She returned to sit on the stone. The radio had resumed its ditty. All night it had played nothing but instrumental music. If it was beginning to play songs again, it was because things were better.

Oliver returned at quarter to seven. He was exhausted and beaming. He had a black streak on his right cheek and across the front of his Canadian. He was surprised to find his grandmother down below. He kissed and scolded her gently. He helped her climb the stairs, reassuring her: she shouldn't have been scared, they were the stronger ones, when they resumed, all the people of Paris would follow them and the system would crumble. Then they could rebuild. And this time, they wouldn't let themselves be owned by the politicians, from the left or the right.

//p59// Mrs. Muret's heart beat in very short blows, at full speed, in her chest, like that of the wounded pigeon. She had thought that the nightmare had ended with the night, but she now understood that it had just started. She forced herself to hide the trembling of her hands; she put a pot of water on the fire and told Oliver to stretch out while she prepared him a café au lait and some sandwiches. But when the café au lait was ready, Oliver had fallen asleep. His feet hung over the side of the bed because he hadn't even taken the trouble to take off his shoes but he hadn't wanted to soil the covers. Carefully, she took off his shoes, lifted his legs and stretched them out. He opened his eyes a little and smiled at her, then fell back asleep. She went to get a duvet from the wardrobe to cover him with. It was a red-stitched American eiderdown, turned old and pink over time. She placed it over him, straightened up, and remained upright, immobile, beside the bed. To see him here, so peaceful, abandoned in sleep like a child, she felt her strength come back to her. He breathed calmly; his features were relaxed, his supple hair flowed over the pillow and uncovered the base of his ears. The smile that he had given her had slightly remained hanging on his lips and created a glow of tenderness on his face. He was handsome, he was happy, he was tender like a bud, he thought that everything would flourish.

Mrs. Muret sighed and returned to the kitchen. She emptied the bowl of coffee back into the pot and put it on the stove. The gas just had to be lit. She had to go to Mr. Seigneur's, she couldn't leave him like that, that poor man, the way he was...

//p60// When she returned that night, Oliver was gone. He had drunk the café au lait, eaten the sandwiches, also eaten the rest of the sheep's shoulder and half of the reblochon²⁹. He had washed the bowl, the pot, and everything else. On the kitchen table, he had left a note: "Don't worry, even if I don't return tonight."

He didn't return until the month of June.

11

//p61// Closterwein's private mansion occupied the heart of that oasis of greenery and peace that constitute, at the brink of the great hubbub of the outlying boulevards, the

²⁹ A very fatty mild-tasting cheese from the Savoy region.

Montmorency villa. The gate that surrounded its park was made of two walls joined at its summit with metal sheets painted a neutral green. From the outside only the summit of the trees was noticeable, and even as the portal was crossed, the residence, skillfully surrounded by trees of all heights, with a sufficient quantity of persistent leaves to protect it from sight, even in winter, could not be seen. This curtain had to be crossed through a double bend to discover, behind a perfect lawn, a grand and harmonious white house, horizontal, preceded by a column of little steps in the colonial American style that surprised and disorientated visitors, struck the poorest with a disinterested admiration because it exceeded their desires and their dreams, and vexed the livers of the richest. There was not another billionaire in Paris who possessed such a house in such a location. It wasn't just a question of money: luck and chance was also required. The Closterweins //p62// had taste, money, and luck had been serving them for several centuries.

One entered the house by way of three large low steps of white marble that were welcoming, soothing. César's last masterpiece was conspicuously placed in the middle of the entrance hall, on a bronze column, a bouquet of toothpaste tubes twisted into the shape of a screw.

It was the ironic smile by which Romain Closterwein made known that he didn't ignore the necessary snobbery, but rather that he voluntarily gave it up. But this didn't extend further than the hall. His private collection, carefully stored in his armoured and air-conditioned cellar, consisted of a thousand paintings that included the primitive to the Fauves³⁰ to a few contemporaries for the most part unknown by the critics, but also Botticelli, Brueghel, Gustave Moreau, Van Gogh, Paul Klee, and Carzou. He only bought what he liked. He had refused a Rubens that had nevertheless been a bargain, and if by chance a Picasso slipped into his cellar, he would pay for it to be swept up.

From time to time, according to the season, his mood and taste at the moment, he had the canvasses hanging in the apartments changed. But in his bedroom he permanently kept a cock by Lartigue, red, orangey, and yellow, an explosion of joy to which he liked to awaken, and an unknown plate from the Dame à la Licorne, the one that explained the mystery of all the others, and which for years now the curator of the Cluny museum had been begging him in vain to at least let him look at.

In his study, to regain his serenity after the business-filled days, he had had hung, //p63// just opposite his office couch, a large plaque with a lead appearance by Rémy Hétreau. He just had to raise his eyes to lose himself in a magical setting where lace trees exited through windows and where the roofs of a baroque castle were surrounded by a thousand waves embroidered by a suppressed sea. The characters played with glass balls or harps in full bloom like aloe. On a three square foot raft, where a tree grew, a woman gloved to the shoulders was getting ready to land and held out a graceful hand, from which hung a fashionable purse, towards the shore. Her dress enveloped her from the ankles and left naked her slight breasts, hardly perceptible. To maintain her balance, she had wrapped her long blond hair around the tree. At the bow of a little wooden hand-carved boat, on which a slave was holding out the sails, a girl standing on tiptoe was throwing a ball to a boy with a pointy hat who was waiting for her on the shore. She had forgotten to button up the back link of her pleated skirt and innocently showed off the naïve roundness of her behind. At the horizon, miniscule pilgrims leaning on their

³⁰ Members of the young French school of painting circa 1900. The *Fauves* used pure and violent colours in juxtaposed tones, (Le Petit Robert, 1043).

walking sticks climbed unhurriedly toward the moderate mountains. This painting emanated such peace, such grace, that it sufficed for Romain to look at it for two minutes to forget that he was an intelligent crook carving out a path with saber blows in a crowd of imbecilic idiots, and to regain the certainty that he existed, or that he had existed, or that there would some day somewhere exist a paradise for the souls that are just like those of children. He didn't need to look at it any longer or he would have lost the icy //p64// indifference that he needed. His soul was perhaps like that of a child's, because he felt at home when he entered that scenery, but his mind was nothing but an objective intelligence and his heart a muscle that functioned perfectly. Without that armoured heart and mind he would not have possessed the soft white house bordered by a perfect lawn or the thousand paintings in the cellar.

Tall, big, wide but without a belly, he appeared to be barely forty years old. He was 55. From his Baltic ancestors he got very light blond hair that he had cut short, and eyes the colour of ice. He liked to be comfortable in his clothing and not feel the burden of what he was wearing. He dressed himself at Lanvin and chose his wines at Chaudet, under the advice of Henry Gault or François Millau because he acknowledged that he wasn't an expert in matters of the palate. Both were his friends, as much as he could have friends. He sometimes invited them to his table to get their opinion on a new or classic preparation by his chef, an inspired cook, student of the great Soustelle, who had stolen him from Lucas-Carton and admitted into his kitchen after having made him follow a training course at Denis.

Mathilda knocked at the door of his study and entered before he had invited her in. She resembled him in a striking way, maybe because she wore her hair almost as short as his. She had the same icy stare, the same resolve in her jaw, the same thin mouth, but harsher. She was dressed in a seasoned blouson-style rain jacket, with a large zipper, faded blue jeans, and brown moccasins with black socks. She had a long black scarf around her neck.

//p65// She came right to the desk, looked at her father with a sort of defiance and said to him: "I'm going to the protest".

She smiled at him with affection and a bit of irony. She was the youngest of his children. A little odd. It would pass, it was the age, all of them at her age were odd, she was eighteen years old. He understood his sons better. The eldest was studying business at Lloyd's of London, the other, after having quickly obtained a law license, was broadening his theoretical knowledge at Harvard, before entering training at the Deutsche Bank. Mathilda didn't really know what she wanted. For the moment she was taking sociology courses.

He was surprised that she had come to tell him where she was going. Normally she didn't say either before or after.

"You go where you want," he said softly.

Then he tried again because there had been a word he hadn't understood. "What protest?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The student protest... This time, we're passing on the Rive Droite. We're going to reunite at the Bastille, at Saint Lazare, and at the gare de Nord. They think that they're

keeping us confined in the student quarter, that they only have to put a wall around it, with their cars and their bastards from C.R.S³¹! They'll see..."

Romain Closterwein slowly stopped smiling. He asked: "'They', in your opinion, who are, 'they'?"

"Them", she said, "You!..."

There she was, standing before him, tense with a cold passion... So similar to him //p66// but so different at the same time. A girl... His girl... He thought it was time to intervene.

"Would you sit down, for a minute?"

She hesitated for a second, then sat down on a chair, the one where the secretary, Mrs. de Stanislas, sat when she came to jot down the instructions for the day.

"It's very good to be revolutionary at your age," he said; "Léon Daudet wrote somewhere that he had no respect for a man who had not been either a royalist or a communist at age twenty. Today, being a royalist no longer means anything. We say 'fascist'. And the communists have become the socialist radicals of Marxism. The words we use have changed, the remark remains accurate. It purges the intelligence. But if we move about too much, we risk remaining sick for the rest of our lives.

She listened without dropping her gaze from his eyes. He held an open pack of cigarettes out to her. She gestured "no" with her head. He took one but stubbed it out in the ashtray after the second drag.

"You are making me nervous," he said. "You are my daughter, and you are behaving as if you were stupid... You know well that this whole movement is made up... Of course your boyfriends are sincere, but the horse that gallops towards the post is also sincere. He has a coachman on his back however."

"A jockey," she said.

He was surprised, then smiled. "I don't know what I'm saying anymore... Your friends ignore that they are driven, but you, you should know that... You're not the daughter of a grocer, you know... You heard George a couple of days ago... He hushed //p67// up when you entered, but you heard enough... You know that he works for Wilson, but with the dollar, the pound is too poor. He subsidizes several groups, the Chinese, the anarchists. Through two or three layers of intermediaries. And not very expensively, so that they remain pure. It's money that they are told came from a donation box. He also pays several individuals, more solidly. Oh, not those whose names we hear on the radio... Others more obscure and efficient... And it's not only George... There are also the Americans who work with Mark. There is also Van Booken, you know him, the Dutch man? I don't know how he has roubles... There's even an Italian, but he only has words..."

He was hoping that she was going to smile, but she remained glacial, mute. He continued.

"There's even me! I give my advertising to the *Monde*³², which encourages these young people pretty earnestly. It's my way of intervening. You see, I keep within the law. All these actions become a little muddled, of course, but they're effective. They are different yeasts, but the dough only rises better. It's good, the French are gullible, and the youth also. So, the two... You can't imagine, of course, that any of us have the intention

³¹ Republican Company of Security

³² A major French newspaper.

of subsidizing a revolution all the way to success? It is merely a question of breaking de Gaulle. The Americans want him out because he prevents them from settling down in France, the English because he's in the process of suffocating them, a feat that neither Napoleon nor Hitler succeeded to do, the Dutch because they want to sell their margarine in England, the Italians simply because he ignores them. The Germans don't do anything. In any case, they are winners.

//p68// "We, my group, simply want him to go before he tries to carry out this project of "participation", the grand idea of his old age. Participate! It's quite the idea of an old soldier, that is to say an infantile idea... The working class and heads of firms have as much desire to participate as the dogs and the cats! Employers don't want to give anything, naturally, and the workers, naturally, want to take everything..."

She watched her father as if he was a child who was trying to make himself interesting by pouring out incoherent words. Little by little he realized that he had a stranger before him, a type of being with the face of a woman, but who came from another universe, and through the veins of which ran blood as cold as that of poison. He became quiet, for a moment, lit a new cigarette, closed his eyes as though he was bothered by the smoke, and when he opened them, finished up quickly.

So I beg you, go to the protest if it entertains you, but don't be taken up by it! And try not to take any risks, it's not worth it!..."

"We're familiar with all that," she said very calmly. "Your little imbecilic games... You believe that you have lit the fire... You believe that you will be able to put it out at your whim?... We are going to burn everything! In the whole world!... You don't understand anything, you're still at the other end of the century, you're too far behind to even see us, you are disgusting, you are dead, you are rotten, you still manage to keep upright because you imagine that you are living, but we are going to sweep you up like swine!"

//p69// With large stiff strides she moved to the door. Once she reached it, she turned towards him one last time. He had tears in the corners of his eyes.

"I hate you," she said, "I will have you shot down!" She left.

He rose, slowly, after a few long minutes, by leaning on the sofa's armrests with both hands. The universe around him was no longer the same. There was nothing but ruins.

12

//p70// Her mother!... It was her mother who should deal with her!... When she returned this evening, she must find her mother at the house. Her mother would know how to speak to her, he had presented himself as completely stupid, he had spoken to her as if to a boy. It's not a girl's reason which should be addressed, even if she is intelligent. Besides, even the most intelligent girl in the world is not really intelligent in a sense that the masculine mind understands. It doesn't have to be "explained" to a girl, that doesn't serve any purpose, she has to be touched in another way, he didn't exactly know how, he had never asked himself that question, it had not been necessary, he had gotten married, he had had mistresses without any effort, his money made him like a god, and he had always gotten along perfectly with his own daughter, he had always given her everything she desired, and given her the greatest liberty, he had trusted her, he didn't think he had

been wrong, had acted wrongly, had erred... So then, those horrible words, why?... Because of what he said, certainly, he had hurt her feelings, profoundly, he had gravely offended her. Only her mother could mend that, explain to her... No, not explain, talk //p71// to her, convince her, take her somewhere far away from that idiotic herd. It risked becoming serious, she risked getting hurt, being belted by hooligans. She was running risks for nothing. It was too foolish, foolish, foolish!

But where then was her mother? He could no longer remember. Oh right, in Sardinia, at the Khan's... He called. He couldn't find her. The connection was interrupted. He asked if there was a strike. A masculine voice with a southern accent told him that they didn't know. Then there were no more responses.

He called Jacques, his top pilot, gave him orders to go find the Mrs. in Sardinia. He didn't know if there was an airfield there. If there wasn't, he ordered him to land in Italy and rent a boat. Immediate takeoff.

Jacques responded with regret, it was impossible; the control unit was on strike, no planes could take flight from any field.

He called General Cartot. Of course, let's see now! The military control unit was functioning... Romain obtained radio contact with Toulon, a hydroplane from the air force and navy to go to Sardinia, and the assurance that they would bring Mrs. Closterwein back to Brétigny.

But Mrs. Closterwein had left the Kahn's village a week ago on Niarkos' yacht. She had disembarked in Naples from whence she had flown to Rome, and from Rome to New York. She was going to spend Whit Sunday with her Philadelphia cousins. She had written all this to him, but the letter didn't arrive in Paris until July. In any case, her presence in Paris would have been futile. Mathilda didn't return that night or the next, but //p72// only on the 29th of June. Her hair had grown. She was skinny and dirty. She was wearing the same socks. Her scarf was gone. She went directly to the bathroom without looking at anyone. The servants didn't dare talk to her, but Gabriel, the butler, called his master, at the bank, which had only closed for three days, in a symbolic strike. Gabriel said to him "the young lady has returned". He responded, "thank you Gabriel". He had looked for her at the Sorbonne, at the Odéon, everywhere that he was able to enter. He knew from the prefect that she wasn't in the hospital, and that she had never been arrested. One morning, he decided to stop looking for her and to stop waiting for her. When he found himself facing her, it was he who resembled his daughter: he had lost all tenderness for this stranger who carried his face.

She had bathed, scrubbed, put on make-up, perfumed, and dressed herself. She had tended to her hands, but her diminished face was hard as stone, and her gaze even colder than on the day of her departure. She had certainly not forgotten the short sentence that she had said to him, and she knew that he couldn't have forgotten it either. He asked himself whether she regretted having said it, or not having been able to do what she had promised.

She sat down on the velvet green couch. They didn't exchange any words concerning her absence or her return, nor did they express an emotion or a simple courtesy. It was she who spoke first. She said she thought she was pregnant and wanted to go to Switzerland for an abortion. She already had the necessary authorizations in her passport //p73// to cross the border. She just needed some money. He gave her a cheque

for a bank in Geneva. She left in her Porsche. He didn't receive any news until the telegram from the ambassador of France in Kathmandu.

13

//p74// At the Sorbonne, Oliver occupied a little office with Carlo at the top of a staircase. He had taped one of the posters drawn by the students of the art school on the door. In big letters it bore the words: STUDENT POWER. Underneath, in chalk, he had written, "Permanent discussion". Guys and girls constantly ascended there, pushed open the door, uttered their assertions, asked questions, descended to push open other doors, ask other questions, maintain their certainties and their uncertainties. In the dull blue-green light that fell from its glass roof, the large lecture hall sheltered a permanent circus of ideas. And it really was like a large free market where everyone praised their own merchandise with the impassioned conviction that theirs was the best.

Oliver had only to cross a few steps to pass from his office to one of the upper galleries of the lecture hall. He sometimes went there; cast a vertical glance towards the rows of benches almost always entirely occupied. It was a mosaic of white shirts and colourful sweaters. Red dominated. The round heads sat on the backs like marbles. On //p75// the platform, in front of the black and red flags, one speaker followed another. Oliver listened, got irritated at not being able to understand what so-and-so wanted. He found that they were confused, diffused, and sometimes hazy, that they lost time to word games, whereas everything was this simple: they had to demolish, raze the old world and build up a new one with total justice and fraternity, without classes, without borders, without hate.

"Student Power". Yes, it was up to them, the students who had had the privilege to acquire culture, to lead their working class brothers on the quest for a life free of the slavery of capitalism and the constraints of the socialist bureaucracies. The old slogan of the Republic made his heart beat. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. These three words said everything. But ever since the Bourgeoisie had engraved them on the façades of their town halls where they recorded the names of their slaves and embroidered on the flags that led them to slaughters, the three words had become lies that concealed the contrary of what they proclaimed: Oppression, Exploitation, Contempt. They had to be purified in the great fire of revolution and joy. It was simple, simple, simple. All these people behind their microphones, busy splitting hairs, were going to choke off the Revolution with their words.

Leaving the hall, one afternoon, on the wall of the hallway he wrote, "Wretched Speakers!" and underlined it furiously, breaking his chalk. He threw the fragment that remained clenched between his fingers down the stairs, shrugged his shoulders, and returned to his office. He found there a girl sitting on the corner of the table, having a //p76// discussion with Carlo. Oliver vaguely knew her. She was studying for a diploma in sociology, like him. He had seen her a few times in class. Someone had told him that her father was a banker.

Carlo, standing, was putting on a show of Italian charm for her. He spoke, paced, gestured, smiled, carried his words towards her with his hands. She aimed an icy blue stare at him. He explained Oliver's point of view regarding the role the students had to

play next to the working class. He didn't have a lot of his own ideas; he was the echo of his friend.

She interrupted him in a curt voice.

"You are pretentious like lice! What do you want to teach the workers? To do so you must know something yourselves! You, what do you know? What did they teach you, at university?"

"They taught us to think!" said Oliver.

She turned towards him: "You think so? You're lucky!"

"Your 'Student Power', it's a story of little fools... You saw, what Mao did with the students? At the factory, okay, but in chains! And the professors, at the rural commune! Gathering manure!"

"I know, said Carlo, "but what good does it do to think of that?"

"And you? Of what use are you? You burned a few old jalopies and now you're making whipped cream with words... You're occupying the Sorbonne instead of demolishing it!... You didn't even kill one C.R.S.! They're all there, beaming red and nicely fat, one hundred meters from here, busy playing cards and waiting for you to fall asleep in your own discussions in order to throw you out! "Student Power"! You make //p77// me laugh. Power – my balls!"

"You don't have any," said Carlo.

"You don't either! You're foolish little bourgeois!..."

"You, you aren't a little bourgeoisie?" said Oliver, "you sleep in caviar, and you have drunk from golden cups at every meal since you were born..."

"That which I drank, I vomited!"

She left abruptly. Carlo felt an urge to follow her but then thought better of it. He would have liked to show her that he did actually possess that which she had accused him of not having. But a girl like that, she had to be convinced, shown that... He didn't like that type. Girls who remain on the defensive, even when they are enjoying themselves, take away all the pleasure of knowing them. So let her go masturbate with the Little Red Book³³.

14

//p78// There was this surprising Sunday where all of Paris came to visit its lost children in the Latin Quarter. It was nice out; like a holiday, the Parisians in new jackets, their wives in light spring blouses, in clumps on the sidewalks of Saint-Michel Boulevard, or Place de la Sorbonne, around young speakers explaining their ideas. The street peddlers profited from this unexpected audience, spread out their merchandise: ties, wallets, postcards, fancy jewelry that sparkled under the sun like flowers. A little elderly man with a yellow beard was selling Chinese paper dragons.

The inquisitive and the curious filled the courtyard of the Sorbonne, its hallways, its stairwells, a slow-moving crowd that read the posters and inscriptions with astonishment. A vertical phrase started in the middle of one wall and ended at the bottom of a landing. It prescribed: "Kneel down and look around!" There was nothing to see but the dust.

³³ A book of citations by the communist president of China at the time, Mao Zedong.

It was a little after 3pm when Romain Closterwein almost encountered his daughter. He had explored all the offices and lecture halls without seeing her. He went //p79// back down to the courtyard, passed before a sign that indicated, in red letters on rippled cardboard, that there was a children's nursery on the third floor, stairway C, to the right, and stopped, thoughtful before a poster, which seemed to reveal, with humour and kindness, a hint of weariness, and maybe also a hint of resentment in face of the material demands of the workers on strike. It displayed a barricade of little black cobblestones on which stood a group of students, colourful and tightly packed like a bouquet. They were brandishing a red flag on which the horizontal flame carried the words: "We demand that our interests be satisfied: NO MORE THAN FORTY HOURS OF BARRICADES PER WEEK!"

Mathilda passed behind him, a few steps away. She didn't see him anymore than he saw her. A slow, thick current of a crowd separated them. She entered through the door from which he had exited. She forcefully elbowed her way through the hallway. She was full of rage towards the grocers who had come to see the revolt as if they were going to the circus. She began to climb the stairs.

The first chalk inscriptions were beginning to fade: *Forget everything they taught you, begin by dreaming!* Someone had crossed out the word "dreaming" and written "burning" underneath. Another hand had crossed out "burning" and written "kissing" underneath. Facing the office door of the "Student Power", a very recent inscription, written in black spray paint asserted: "The unions are brothels". The door of the office was wide open. The curious entered, looked at the four walls, the little table, the chairs and sometimes one of them sat down to rest for a bit. They left their curiosity and their surprise unsatisfied.

//p80// Mathilda had the desire to see Oliver again. She had remembered the sentence he had used: "They taught us to think" or something similar. He had to be set free of this enormous error. She had left too quickly. He had the manner of a good person. She had thought of him as she was waking up in the seedy hotel room where she had spent the night with a black man, following a moment of anti-racist conviction. It wasn't any more awful than with a white man. She had slept well, afterwards. It was him who had woken her up. He had wanted to start again. She had pushed him away, he had almost hit her, but her eyes had scared him. She had thought of those two people at the top of the stairs, and especially of the one with hazel eyes and silk hair, running to the base of his cheeks. A person who believed, but what he believed was foolish. She had returned, to convince him.

In the little office she found only the curious who slowly came and left. Carlos was on a horse at the Sorbonne on the back of a stone thinker. With amazement he watched a funny anarchist street peddler, who had, for one day, replaced his tray of ball-point pens with illustrated political leaflets which smoothly spoke against Dassault and the Rothschilds.

Oliver had fled, disgusted by the dreary flood of the curious. He had tried to have a discussion with the first ones. They had responded with idiocies or looked at him with astonishment, as though he had just come out of a flying saucer. He had left to have lunch at his grandmother's. He had found her totally distraught: Mr. Seigneur had died Friday night, very suddenly. The events had disconcerted him, he hadn't been able to put it all away and he had let himself go. He had held himself back from dying for so long that

others kept thinking that he was actually close to it. And his misfortunes were not yet over, the poor man: the undertakers were on strike, there was no one to bury him. Mrs. Seigneur had appealed to the police station and it was soldiers who had come, with a casket that was too small, given his girth and the fact that there had been no one to take a real measurement. Everyone was on strike, so they had taken him away like that, in their van, wrapped in a blanket, the poor man. Mrs. Seigneur didn't even know where he was, and she had closed the dairy for a whole day, it had had to be done, and on a Saturday, on a day where everything was selling so well; the customers were carrying away full shopping bags on each arm, anything and everything: canned goods, rice, sugar, everything that was edible to put in their cupboards, they were scared.

15

//p82// Matilda went back down the stairs and did not go up again. The curious flowed out of the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter. The violence had resumed. Mathilda integrated herself into a small active group that had mysteriously obtained chainsaws to cut trees, crowbars to pull up cobblestones, motorcycle helmets, pickaxe handles, and waterproof anti-tear gas glasses for the combatants. During the days of respite, the group went from one faculty to the other, put motions into vote, constituted committees of action. Mathilda completely forgot about the two guys in the small office. Carlo forgot about Mathilda, but Oliver didn't. Her words had struck him. He wasn't going to let himself be indoctrinated by a Maoist millionaire worm, but some of her affirmations had found taut strings in him totally ready to resonate. Yes, too many words, yes, too much intellectual pretension. Yes, too many foolish young bourgeois who were treating themselves to some small safe revolutionary entertainment. Knocking down cops, breaking tiles, torching cars, yelling out slogans, was more exciting than a surprise party. If it suddenly became dangerous, they quickly returned to mom and dad. Every time //p83// they were able to grab hold of a microphone they made long-winded speeches against the consumer society, but they had always been good little consumers, since their very first baby bottle.

Yes, the truth lay with the workers. They were honest because they really suffered, each minute of their lives, the trials of injustice and slavery.

Oliver realized without even speaking, while he was simply trying to formulate the thoughts and feelings within himself, that he kept turning over and over the same futile images, the same clichés of all the morons shouting into a microphone. It shouldn't be *talked about* anymore, even within one's self, it should be *acted upon*.

He led Carlo in the retinue that was going to Billancourt, to bring support and friendship from the rebellious students to the workers on strike at Renault³⁴. The reception from the strikers was very cold. They wouldn't let anyone enter inside the occupied factory. They didn't need these kids to carry out their affairs. None of the workers, even the youngest, believed that a revolt would always bring repression. Those barricades at the Latin Quarter were nothing but a spoiled child's game. The C.R.S. put gloves on before charging at the children of the bourgeois. The beatings were nothing but a livelier form of spanking. When the workers, themselves, tear out the cobblestones, it doesn't take long; they get fired at from above, with lead. But the bourgeois can't let their

³⁴ A major French car manufacturer.

children be shot at. They had installed the bourgeois order, in 89, by liquidating an entire class with the guillotine. They would have happily liquidated the working class had they //p84// not needed them to manufacture and to sell. But they can't kill their children, even if they break the furniture and set the curtains on fire.

The workers and the students watched each other through the bars of the factory gate. They exchanged trivial words, the banner "Students & Workers United" that two boys had carried from the Sorbonne hung softly between its two supports. The red flag and the black flag looked tired. They would have needed a bit of wind, a bit of warm movement to make them flutter. There was only that closed gate, and those men behind it, who seemed to be defending the entrance against friendship. Oliver suddenly had the impression of finding himself in a zoo, in front of a cage wherein were found animals born to roam in vast spaces, from whom had been stolen their freedom. Visitors came to say kind words and bring tidbits. They believed themselves to be good and generous. They were on the same side as the hunters and the jailors. Through the bars a student passed the result of a "collection of solidarity". Oliver clenched his teeth. Peanuts! He moved away with large furious paces. Carlo didn't understand. What's wrong with you? What's come over you?

Back at the Sorbonne, Oliver tore off the "Student Power" poster taped on the door of the little office. He crossed out the word "permanent" that followed the word "discussion" and wrote another one above it in capital letters: "Discussion TERMINATED!" with a large exclamation point.

He fought furiously at every skirmish with the police. During the "terrible night" of May 24th, he climbed to the top of the barricade and set himself to bellowing out //p85// insults at the cops. Suddenly, he realized with lucidity that he was in the process of "posing", of creating a living painting, of parodying historic images, but the image remained an image: the cops didn't shoot, they didn't collapse, bleeding, on the barricade. Moreover, with his white cap and large glasses, he had the air of a character from a comic strips for adolescents dreaming of fantastic adventures. He tore them off and threw them behind him. Gripping his pickaxe handle, he jumped down in front of the barricade. Cars burned, grenades exploded, their whirlpools of white vapour frayed in the red and black night. Behind its fog, Oliver vaguely saw the somber and sheen mass of the police moving. Running, he charged at them. Three policemen came to meet him. He hit the first one with rage. His baton struck a rubber riot shield and rebounded. He received a blow from a billy club on his hand and another on his ear. He let go of his weapon. Another blow of the club, on the side of his skull, dropped him to his knees. A kick in the stomach knocked him flat on the ground; heavy shoes struck his kidneys and his ribs. He tried to get up. He cried from shame and from rage, and from the tear gas. His nose and ear were bleeding. With two hands he managed to grab hold of the club of a policeman and attempted to tear it away from him. Another club struck him in the joint between his neck and his shoulder. He fainted. The police picked him up to throw him into a police van. But through the white fog crossed with flames a group led by Carlo suddenly appeared, roaring insults and attacked them. They let Oliver fall like a sack to face the pack, who dispersed immediately, leading the police to chase after them. Oliver, //86// unconscious, his red scarf trailing in the gutter, the bottom of his face glistening with blood, lying legs spread on the sidewalk and the roadway, his feet above his head. A grenade exploded a few meters away, and covered him in a white veil. Carlo and two

other guys arrived coughing and crying, gathered Oliver up and carried him aside the flames.

16

//p87// Two gigantic white elephants were standing in the blue of the sky. Long-dead hands - but death is deliverance - had carved the rock in the summit of the hill that, around them, had been cleared and taken far away. This happened a thousand, maybe two thousand years ago... Men dressed in white, women in saris of all colours - of all colours except yellow - who climbed towards the path near the elephants, towards the sky, towards god, who didn't know what a thousand or two thousand years signified. It wasn't further than the day before or the day after, it could have been today.

The footpath that circled the hill three times before reaching between the legs of the elephants that had been dug, century after century, by the bare feet of pilgrims. Bit by bit they had made a narrow trench of which the edges rose to their knees. One could only walk along one after the other, and it was good like this, because everyone found themselves alone on the slope to climb, facing god who watched them coming from the heart of the hill.

Sven walked in front of Jane, and Jane in front of Harold. Sven, without turning //p88// around, a little breathless, explained to Jane that the Indians didn't imagine time under the form of a river that flows, but like a wheel that turns. The past returns to the present by way of the future. These elephants, that are here today, were already here yesterday. And the wheel of time, by turning, will reach tomorrow, will find them already here. In this way for a thousand years, in this way since a thousand years. Where is the beginning?

Jane listened vaguely to what Sven was saying over the murmur of the pilgrims' voices and the jingling of their small leather bells. She felt happy, light, carried, like a ship that has finally left the filthy port and gently floats on an ocean of flowers, chooses its ports of call, settles there if it is pleasing, loads what it wants, and picks up the wind of freedom again.

Yesterday it had rained, for the first time in six months, and driving in the night, the hill had dressed itself in short and thick vegetation. Each blade of grass finished with a closed bud. At sunrise they had opened their millions of gold calyxes all together. In an instant, the hill had become a flame of joy, radiant and round, burning at the centre of the naked plain. The flowers entirely covered the hill with a lavish dress, the colour of the sun.

They were virgins; they didn't smell and didn't produce seeds. They were born only to flower and stretch their miniscule lives that resembled them towards the sun. Tonight, at bedtime, all will close together and not open again.

Jane, Sven, and Harold had eaten little the day before. Sven had given half of his //p89// biscuit to Harold. And, this morning, they had had no more. They had five remaining cigarettes. They had shared one before beginning to climb the hill.

The crowd, piled up around the hill, which had been waiting for days and days for the golden cry of God, had responded to him by striking their little bells, and by raising them, from all directions, towards the fruit of light that had just ripened in the middle of

the grey earth. Then they began to slowly stir around the hill, pronouncing the name of God and the names of his virtues.

Astrologers had said at what moment the rain would fall on the hill, and the pilgrims had come from everywhere. Most of them were farmers who had come to ask God to hold back the rain and shed it on their fields. Because they had sowed in autumn and it had not rained since. Their seeds had not germinated, and the earth had become like ash. They had walked for days with their wives, their children, and their elderly. Hunger was so habitual for them that they no longer knew that they suffered from it. When one of them had no energy left to walk, he lay down and breathed while he still had the energy. When he had no more, he stopped.

Every morning, the crowd that had been waiting for days around the hill carried its dead a ways away from the hill, all around it, and removed their clothes so that the slow and heavy birds who had also come to the meeting could give them a burial place. And the rain had fallen, and this morning the living were happy to have remained alive and to have seen the golden god flower over the plain of ashes.

//p90// At the moment when all the little bells had rung, the heavy birds, bothered by the noise, had torn themselves from the dead, and they hovered over the crowd which stirred around the hill.

Sven was looking up, Jane was looking down, Harold was looking at Jane, Jane was looking at the hill's golden dress that seemed to plunge into the slow eddies of the crowd as through a sea of milk, strewn with floating flowers. The flowers were the women in saris of all colours - of all colours except yellow - because yellow was, here and today, the colour reserved for god. The white crowd blossomed, moved around the hill, stretched out into the stone path and climbed, drop by drop, towards the open door between the elephants, below the arc of their trunks united like hands in prayer. At the edge of the crowd, above it, in the newly blue sky, circled the ring of black birds.

At the bottom of the hill, through another door framed in stone lace, the pilgrims that had seen their god exited. He filled the hill into which he had been carved. Seated level to the plain, to the summit of the pyramid, he raised his sixteen heads that smiled towards the sixteen directions of space, and unfurled around his torso the harmonious circle of his hundred arms that held, displayed, and taught both objects and gestures. Openings pierced in the rock shone on him from the reflection of the sky. Every pilgrim, while climbing towards him, had picked a flower, a single one, and while descending by way of the path that turned around him inside the hill, offered it to him. When Jane entered through the door between the elephants and discovered the first face of god, whose closed eyes smiled at her, the carpet of golden flowers brought one by one already //p91// reached the tensed finger of his lowered hand, which pointed out the earth, beginning and end of material life. Inside, outside, every male, every female, moving around the hill, on it and in it, continued to murmur the name of god and the names of his virtues, and before starting again lightly struck his or her little leather bell. The sound of these bells flourished above the rustle of voices and covered it with the same colour as the flowers of the hill.

Harold had had enough. At the rate that this was going, they would still be there that evening, and they still hadn't eaten anything. He regretted having decided to follow Jane and Sven instead of descending to Goa with Peter. They had met them at the airfield in Bombay. Peter and he were getting off the plane from Calcutta. It was Peter who had

paid for the tickets. He was arriving from San Francisco, he still had money. Harold had started travelling over a year ago, he knew the possibilities and the perils. He had told Sven and Jane, when they had spoken of Brigitte and Karl, that the path they had chosen was full of danger. Few girls came out intact. Lives were even at risk there. Then they had spoken of other things. Karl and Brigitte was yesterday's news. We meet, we gather, we help each other, we separate, we are free...

Harold had been born in New York to an Irish father and an Italian mother. He had the clear eyes of his father and the enormous eyelashes of his mother. His brown hair fell on his shoulders in long waves. A thin moustache and a short beard framed his lips which stayed quite red even when he hadn't eaten enough. When Jane had seen him for //p92// the first time, he had been wearing green corduroy pants, a faded red shirt, imprinted with black flowers, and a lady's gardening hat, of straw, with a broad brim, garnished with a bouquet of plastic flowers and cherries. On his chest at the bottom of a black string hung a Moroccan box, in engraved leather, which contained a verse from the Koran. Jane found him funny, and handsome. He found her beautiful. At night, they would make love at the edge of the ocean in the heavy and humid heat, while Peter slept, exhausted, and Sven, sitting at the edge of the water, tried to collect all the harmony of the enormous and blue night into himself.

Harold had asked Jane to come with him and Peter to Goa, but she had refused. She did not want to leave Sven. Sven was her brother, her liberator. Before her meeting him, she had been a huddled larva, in the black waters of absurdity and anguish that filled the stomachs of the lost; Sven had taken her in his hands and pulled her towards the light. She did not want to leave him, they were going to Kathmandu together, they would go where they wanted together. It was he who wanted, it was he who knew.

She had slept with Harold because it had given pleasure to both of them, and because there were no limits or shame. The laws of the new world into which Sven had introduced her were love, talent, freedom. Sven had hardly any physical needs and had no idea what the word jealousy signified. Harold smoked little and ate a lot whenever possible. He wasn't at all mystical, he thought that Sven was weird and Jane superb. After all, Goa or Kathmandu, it was all the same to him, he had let Peter leave towards the south with his money, and had followed Jane and Sven north. It wasn't exactly the //p93// direction of Nepal, but Sven had wanted to visit the temples of Girnar, and it's only an accidental thought that the shortest path is the one that runs straight.

Jane blossomed with happiness amid the two boys. She was united with Sven through tenderness and admiration, and with Harold through the joy of his body. But sometimes, at night, at a stopping point, she would lie down beside Sven in the dry grass or in the dust on the edge of the deserted path, and gently begin to undo his clothes. Because she needed to love him in this way as well, to love him totally. And without knowing well how to express this, she felt that by reminding him in this way with his body, she prevented him from entirely committing himself to a route in which he risked losing himself. He would smile at her, he let her do it, despite his greater and greater detachment from this desire. A desire from which he hoped to completely deliver himself. But he didn't want to deceive Jane or to cause her any pain. Besides, with her it wasn't blind rutting, but rather an exchange of tender love. He said very few words to her, kind, full of praise. She hardly dared to listen. She said childish little things to him, in a very

low voice that he barely heard. She cuddled up to him, caressed him. It took a long time for his erection to rise with desire. He quickly set it free in her, like an exhausted bird.

Harold, slowly descending the hill, found that his god was superb, okay, but he was too hungry to entirely appreciate its beauty. And to find something to eat, among all those dying, it wouldn't be easy. They didn't have any more money, and hardly any //p94// cigarettes. He had to find some rupees.

When he came out of the low door, he sat down on the edge of the path and put out his hand to beg.

17

//p95// Oliver had regained consciousness behind the barricade and had resumed the battle. Each pulse of his arteries drove a knife into his left ear. The inside of his skull was full of fantastic noises. When a grenade exploded, he believed he was hearing Hiroshima. The calls of his friends swelled in great clamours, and alarm bells converged from the four horizons towards the centre of his brain. The violent night roared in resonant rumblings and swirlings, and his head felt like it contained all of it.

In the days that followed, bit by bit the students began to leave the Sorbonne. From the dirty and deteriorated old building, the number of those leaving grew every day. Strange elements penetrated and took root there, adventurers, vagrants, and several policemen. One of these, to put them the off scent, had come with his wife and three children, blankets, baby bottles, an alcohol stove - a whole jumble - and installed them under the roof timbers. He feigned unemployment and homelessness. The students made a collection for him, in the street, but nobody was giving anymore. The Parisians found that the party had lasted long enough. The workers had received incredible raises and the //p96// employers and shopkeepers began to think about the bill.

Mr. Palairac grew violet with fury in serving his customers. These little pretentious cretins who wanted to break everything, what were they looking for? They didn't know anything! The unions, they, knew what they wanted! They hadn't lost their war, the unions. They had only to wait, arms crossed, seated on the heap. We had been well obliged to give them what they wanted, so that they would resume working. All this, it was those little shits that had triggered it. And now, the bill, who was going to pay that? It's still not them!...

As a precaution, Mr. Palairac had started to raise the price of the sirloin, just a bit, not enough to be noticed. Not the cheap cuts, they're never wanted, they serve a miroton³⁵ or a stock better, they had to be cooked instantly, there are no more cooks, only good women who think only of going to the movies or the hairdresser, not surprising that their kids want to devour everything without lifting a finger. He, himself, still rose at four o'clock in the morning to go to the Halles³⁶. He was no longer twenty years old, nevertheless, not even forty... But working, they had taught him that with a kick in the backside. At twelve years old, after the diploma... They hadn't asked *him* if he wanted to go to the Sorbonne!

And with indignation he threw the piece on the tray of the automatic scale. The arrow leapt about, he wrote down the highest number, removed the lump before it could

³⁵ A dish of sliced boiled beef that is cooked with onions, bacon and vinegar, (Le Petit Robert, p.1643).

³⁶ A market in central Paris.

go back down. He always forgot to remove a bit of fat or waste. Not a big deal, a few grams. At the end of a year it made a few tonnes. At the cash register, his wife made mistakes when giving back change. Never to her disadvantage. And not with just //p97// anybody. Not with the real bourgeois who count their coins well, but with the little housewives, the young, who get their change, collect it, and don't even look at it. And with the men. They would be ashamed to count. Sometimes, someone would take notice. She would excuse herself, she was confused.

18

//p98// Right up to the last day, Oliver refused to believe that they had lost. Everything was shattered, it would be enough to push just a little bit more, to give it a good shake, it was enough for the workers to continue striking for a few more weeks, maybe a few days, and the whole absurd society would collapse under the weight of its own appetite.

But the factories re-opened one after the other, there was gas in the pumps again and trains on the tracks. He went to Flins to encourage the strikers at Renault, and it was there that he understood that everything was over. There weren't more than a handful roaming around the factory, pursued by the C.R.S., watched from afar by the indifferent, if not hostile, workers' pickets. On the verge of being captured by the C.R.S., driven back against the bank, he jumped into the water and swam across the Seine.

There were barriers on the roads, he had to take shortcuts through the fields. A farmer sent his dog on his heels. Instead of running away, Oliver crouched down and waited for the dog. It was a briard, muddy, and deprived of love. Oliver welcomed it with friendly words and patted it on the head. The dog, hazy with happiness, put his front //p99// paws on his shoulders, stuck out his tongue between his hair, licked his entire face with two swipes, then set himself to leaping about around him while barking in a low other-worldly voice. Oliver slowly stood back up. The joy of the dog stirred around him without reaching him. He felt cold like the water of the Seine from which he had just emerged from.

He returned to the Sorbonne and shut himself up in the little office. He remained stretched out on a blanket, without speaking, eyes open, looking inside himself at the enormous emptiness left by the collapse of his hopes. Carlo brought him something to eat, worried to see him so down, told him that nothing was lost, that it was only the beginning, that they would start it again. Oliver didn't even try to argue. He knew it was over. He had come to understand that the working world, without which no construction was possible, was a foreign world that would never accept them. They were the botched products of the bourgeois society, the fruit of a dying old tree. They themselves had summoned the storm that had detached them from the branch. The tree was going to die during one of the following seasons but they wouldn't ripen anywhere. They weren't a beginning, but an end. The world of tomorrow would not be constructed by them. It would be a rational world, cleared of vague emotions, mysticisms, and ideologies. They had carried the war in the clouds, the workers had won the battle of pay slips on solid ground. In a material world, one has to be material. It was the only way to live, but could that constitute a *reason* to live?

Oliver didn't participate in the last stand at rue Saint-Jacques. Around him, in the Sorbonne, final accounts were being settled between the students, the ruined, the thugs, //p100// and the police. When these latter entered the office to make him leave, he didn't even have a reflex of defence. The ship had run aground, they were leaving the deck. It was a wreck without glory, mired the mud. They came out of the Sorbonne onto the sidewalk encumbered by packs of police in uniform and in plainclothes. Oliver said to Carlo:

"I will never come back here."

Carlo accompanied him along rue de Vaugirard and rue Sainte-Placide. The day had just risen, a few cars passed by quickly. A milk truck stopped in front of a dairy shop, then took off, leaving the quarter's milk ration on the sidewalk. Carlo threw a one Franc coin into a cashbox and took a carton. He tore off a corner with his teeth and drank with long gulps, then handed Oliver the crooked container.

"Want some?"

Oliver shook his head. Pure milk made him nauseous. Carlo drank some more, and threw the carton under the tires of a truck that made the rest of its white blood spurt out.

"What are you going to do?" asked Carlo.

"I don't know."

A few paces further on, Oliver asked him the same question:

"And you?"

"I only have a diploma. I'm not going to drop it now..."

"You'll be a prof?"

"What do you want me to be?"

Oliver didn't respond. He bent his shoulders and put his hands into his pockets. He was cold. It was at that moment that he realized he no longer had his scarf. During the worst brawls, he had always made sure he didn't lose it because he knew that that would //p101// have pained his grandmother. And, finally, he had simply forgotten it in the small office at the top of the stairs. There was no question of returning to the office. The scarf had to blossom out of its arabesque nasturtium at the corner of its deserted floor. No... it was on the back of the chair behind the desk. He remembered now, he saw it. He felt a quick shiver, as though he was naked.

"Do you still have enough cash to buy a coffee?"

"Yes," said Carlo.

The café at the corner of rue Cherche-Midi was open, all of its interior neons lit up, there was fresh sawdust scattered on the floor. At the counter, Mr. Palairac was drinking his first white wine of the day. He weighed almost a hundred kilos. With age, he had grown a bit of a gut, but he basically had remained meat and bone. He hadn't started working yet, his white uniform was immaculate. The heavy apron on his right hip enveloped him like armour. He knew Oliver well, he had watched him grow up. It could even be said that he had nourished him. Of course, his grandmother had paid for the steaks, but it was still he who had supplied them! Since his first baby-bottle!... That gave him the right to tell him what he thought, to that little snot-nose! He watched him enter with his friend, and shouted at him when they passed before him.

"So, it's over, the big joke?"

Oliver stopped, looked at him, then turned around without responding and went to lean on the counter. Carlo joined him.

"Two espressos," said Carlo.

"So, we don't even respond?" said Mr. Palairac. "What? I no longer have the right to speak? The right to breathe? I'm too old? Just good for dying? And your grandmother, who's been worrying herself sick since she last saw you weeks ago? Should she die as well? She's old! You, you don't care! You turn the place upside down, you create havoc everywhere, and you come here with your hands in your pockets to peacefully drink your little coffee. It's quite a world!"

Oliver seemed not to hear. He was looking at the cup that the waiter had placed before him, put two sugars in it, plunged his little spoon in, stirred... Mr. Palairac took his glass of wine and drank it in one gulp. It was his boss's own muscadet. Good... He put down his glass and turned toward Oliver again.

"And what did it bring you, all that, huh? Everybody made a profit, except you! The workers, the state employees, they carried out steaks for themselves on your back! You're the dupes!"

Oliver, now, looked at him, with a stony glare, his face expressionless, his eyes immobile, eyelids fixed. He was like a statue, like an insect. Mr. Palairac felt a surge of fear and became angry to shake off the strangeness, to return to the ordinary world of ordinary men.

"Who's going to pay the bill now, huh? Who's going to pass by the tax collector? It's still not you, dirty little shits!"

The reference to the tax men made him violet with fury. He raised his enormous butcher's arm as if readying himself to slap someone in the face.

"If I was your father, ah!..."

Was it that threatening gesture or the word "father" that triggered Oliver's counter-attack? Maybe the combination of both. He jumped out of his immobility like a flash of lightning, swiped the aluminium sugar container off the counter, and with the same surge smashed it on the butcher's face. The transparent lid broke, an edge grazed the cheek of Mr. Palairac who began to howl, retreated, stumbled over a case of empty Cinzano bottles that were waiting for the passing of the delivery boy and fell backwards into the middle of a rain of sugar cubes. His hundred kilos landed on the jukebox that that crashed into the façade of the Cherche-Midi. The glass crumbled in daggers of light over Mr. Palairac spread out in the sawdust. The jukebox lit up, an album slipped into place. Oliver grabbed a pedestal table and flung it over the counter into the shelves of full bottles. He grabbed a chair, and holding it by its back, began to strike everything: he swung it around him like a cyclone and hit everything he could reach. His eyes were full of tears and he could only see vague forms of the blurred colours that he was hitting. The waiter crouching behind the counter amid the spilt shards and alcohol tried to reach the telephone. A blow of the chair made the latter fly into the coffee machine. A jet of steam gushed out towards the ceiling. Carlo screamed:

"Stop! Oliver! Stop! Good God, stop!"

From the jukebox came the voice of Aznavour³⁷. He was singing:

What is love?...

What is love?...

³⁷ A French singer, composer, and actor who was popular from the 1950's until the end of the 1980's.

What is love?...

No one was answering him.

19

//p104// “But why did you do that? Why?”

She let herself fall onto a kitchen table chair, she couldn't take anymore, raising her head a little she looked at Oliver. He was standing in front of her, immobile. He wasn't saying anything.

She hadn't seen him since the death of poor Mr. Seigneur. No news, nothing. She only knew that he had been in those brawls, that craziness... She had become very thin... It wasn't too noticeable from the outside, but she had become light as an empty box. That morning the radio had finally announced that everything was over. Oliver was going to come back! And here, he had returned with this horror!

Just at the moment when the nightmare was over!... Everything was starting again! And worse!... It wasn't fair, my God... It wasn't fair, she had already seen enough, endured enough, she should have the right, now that she was old and tired, to hope for a bit of tranquility; she wasn't even asking for happiness, but peace, a little peace...

“But why did you do that, my God? Why did you do that?...”

Oliver shook his head softly. What could he say to explain it all to her? After a //p105// moment of silence she asked him, in a voice that hardly dared to make itself audible:

“Do you think he's dead?”

Oliver turned towards the table, where his café au lait was growing cold.

“I don't know... I don't believe so... Guys like him, it's tough... He was cut by the glass...”

“But why did you do that? What came over you?”

“Listen, I have to go, the police are going to arrive...”

He spoke to her very gently, to avoid hurting her. He bent over her and kissed her grey hair.

“Can you give me a bit of money?”

“Oh, my poor little one!”

She stood up in a burst, effortlessly, she had become so light, she went into her bedroom, opened her armoire, took a book covered in a piece of paper painted with big flowers. It was an agenda from 1953. She unfolded the paper from the cover. It was here, between the paper and the binding, that she hid her savings, a few notes, a sad pultry little wad. She took all of them, folded them in two and went to put them in Oliver's hand.

“Go on then, my pet, go on quickly before they arrive! But where are you going to go? Oh my God, my God!...”

Oliver unfolded the bills, took a single one that he shoved into his pocket and placed the others on the table.

“I will pay you back. Do you know where Martine is at the moment?”

//p106// “No,” she said, “I don't know... You just have to call her agency...”

They heard, at the same time, the sirens of the police car, whose noise reached them in a smother, over the courtyards and buildings.

“And there they are! Go, quickly! Write to me, don't leave me without news!...”

She pushed him into the stairway, crazed with worry.

"Don't write to me here! In case they are watching!... To Mrs. Seigneur, 28, rue de Grenelle... Hurry up! Oh my God, they're here!"

The sirens were right there. But they didn't stop, they continued, moved away, died off. When Mrs. Muret realized that there was no more danger, Oliver was gone.

20

//p107// A naked child was sleeping at the edge of the sea. It was a boy, golden like a husk of wheat in August. A chain bracelet of gold encircled his right ankle. His newborn hair had the colour and lightness of virgin silk. Every soft part of his body was elastic and full of possibilities of joy, and only joy. He was a grain that swells and germinates and will become a flower or a tree, a joy or a strength. Or joy over strength: a tree that has blossomed.

He was asleep on his right side. Oliver, passing near him, looked at him vertically, saw the profile of his left eye, closed by the fringe of eyelashes the colour of honey, and the chubby little right hand, spread out on the sand, palm towards the sky, like a pink daisy.

He counted the petals: a little, a lot, passionately, crazily, not at all...

Not at all.

It was all that he could hope for, him like the others, one, two, three, four, five. Not at all. The universal stamp.

Oliver took a few more steps and stopped. He had arrived.

//p108// Six horses from Camargue³⁸ draped all over in flowers and psychedelic arabesques, in the colours of sugared ice, were held with leashes by six sophisticated girls, dressed in fur coats, under the large Mediterranean sun. A seventh one, draped uniquely in enormous yellow daisies, was mounted by the most beautiful of the girls, the only one whose bones were surrounded by savoury skin. She was wearing a short and full coat, made of horizontal bands of white and pale blue fox. Her long blue wig was crowned with white daisies.

Animals and mannequins made up, on pinewood sediment overcome with impeccable azure, an unusually handsome group, before which a photographer shifted and bustled about like a fly that has had a wing cut off. Bent over his camera, he saw the universe in pieces, pressed – click! -, imprisoned a piece of it, ran further, closer, to the left, to the right, knelt down, stood back up, shouted:

"Soura, in the name of God! Are you holding him for me? That nag, yes or shit?"

Soura, whose head the horse was brandishing, responded shit with an English accent, stroked the horse, petting his nostrils.

*Quiet! Quiet!... Be quiet!... You're beautiful!**

She kissed him on the lips.

Click!

"Will you hurry up a bit? We're dying under these things!"

It was a redhead who was protesting, with short flamboyant curls pricked with three balls of unripe hydrangeas, in a green that was beginning to turn into an unconscious pink. Her eyes were painted a lawn green right to the middle of her temples.

³⁸ An area in Provence, a region in the south of France.

//p109// In one hand she held onto the bridle of a garden horse, in the other she held closed the mink coat in the shade of a copper cock under which she was naked.

"It's your job to suffer! Stick yourself to your duck! And smile! A bit of sex, my God! As if it was your man!"

There were a few giggles, because Edith-the-redhead didn't much like males.

"He smells, this cow!" she said, "he smells like a horse!"

"She stuck herself to him and gave him a dazzling smile, in profile, just below his eyeline.

Click!

Marss watched over the operations from the steering wheel of his unique vehicle that he had baptized Bob. He had had it made to move about on his property. It was a sort of two thirds jeep, with four electric motors on its four wheels. It passed by everywhere with a buzz like a bee, and could turn on the spot because the wheels were independent. There was a seat in front of the steering wheel, and another one that swivelled so that he could turn his back.

So that it would be in harmony with the collection that he was in the process of having photographed for *Vogue et Harpar's Bazaar*, Marss had had it painted the colour of an iris-flower-crushed-in-cream the week before. He was wearing a matching bathing suit embroidered with a vertical ear of corn in the area of his genitals. His skin was the colour of a cigar, including the skin on his head that could be seen beneath the blond haze of his light and sparse hair. He tried to keep himself in shape by swimming, horseback riding, massages and the sauna, but his musculature was getting tighter and tighter, and his flank of wheat peeped out below a paunch that he claimed was due to soda water, even though he always drank his whiskey neat.

//p110// Sitting down on the seat that swivelled, Florent, called Flo, the creative designer of the collection, bit his nails with anguish in looking at his work, and from time to time stamped his feet.

"It's not bad, all this," said Marss.

He had a very low voice, nonchalant and tired.

"...It's not bad, but it's not with it..."

Flo, deeply distressed, turned towards him.

"What? What? What? What are you trying to say?"

"I'm trying to say: it's not with it," repeated Marss very peacefully. "With what had just happened in Paris, the flowered style, it's completely out-of-date... Your painted horses, two months ago, it was brilliant, today, it's older than old aunts..."

"Ooooooh!..."

Flo uttered a long groan and jumped to the ground.

"You dare say this to me! To me!..."

"Who do you want me to say it to? It's you who's thinking, right? And well, you're thinking behind the times... You should have gone and taken a tour of the barricades."

Flo's assistant, a blond adolescent with a tender face, well-groomed from head to toe like a virgin intended for the sultan, was looking, distressed and torn, at his distraught master dizzily come close to a fit of hysterics. He flew to his assistance.

"And if we put a red flag on them?" he suggested.

Marss, surprised, turned towards him.

“...I’m trying to say... on the horses... a red flag behind... or two or three, like this, a sheaf... on their large backsides.”

“That’s it,” said Marss, “to really frighten all my American buyers!...”

//p111// He turned again towards Flo.

“He’s completely stupid, your lad...”

“Martine! What’s the matter with you?” shouted the photographer. “Is something wrong?”

At the centre of the group, the girl on the horse with daisies had abandoned her pose and, pressing her two hands on the horse, turned straight towards Marss, her mouth half-open with stupefaction and fear. Her coat was open, revealing a bra and tiny panties, in rust-coloured lace. She shivered suddenly and, with both hands, closed her coat right up to her collar.

Marss did a half-turn on his seat to look behind him to see who was looking at Martine. He saw Oliver. Oliver was looking at Martine.

Marss knit his brows, descended and approached Oliver:

“What are you doing here? This is private property!”

“Excuse me,” said Oliver without being roused. “I came to see Martine...”

“You know her?...”

Oliver had an almost sad little smile.

“We’ve known each other for a long time, but we don’t see each other often...”

“Who are you?”

Martine’s horse arrived in a gallop and stopped dead. Its hindquarters jostled Marss who held onto Bob’s windshield. Martine bent down and extended her hand to Oliver.

“Come! Get on!... Don’t stay here! You’re disrupting everything!...”

He jumped, she pulled him, he crawled onto the back of the daisy-horse, succeeded in installing one leg, found himself astride between Martine and the horse’s rump, and it was really by a miracle that he managed to face forward.

//p112// With her naked heels she struck a petal on the right side, on the left side the heart of a flower.

“Giddy up!”

The horse took off in a small trot. Marss, pressed against Bob, hadn’t said a word. He watched the girl and the boy on the animal move away towards the other extremity of the beach, become smaller on the golden sand. That sand had cost him a lot. He had imported it from an island in the Pacific. A full cargo. There wasn’t another beach as radiant in the entire Western world.

He walked around Bob and found himself near Flo.

“It’s over for today,” he said. “Try to find another idea for tomorrow.”

Just as he was about to get back into his vehicle, Soura came up to him. She was as thin as a fishbone. She was wearing a chequered red and white coat. Each square measured twenty centimetres by twenty centimetres. The white ones were made of ermine³⁹, the red ones of dyed ermine. She had on a white wig that framed her face made up in red ochre, crossed by immense greenish eyes. She pointed a finger, extended by a

³⁹ Any of several weasels found in the northern parts of Europe, Asia, and America, whose fur is brown in the summer but white with a black-tipped tail in winter (Webster’s, p.620).

disproportionate nail, towards the bucephalus⁴⁰ that was disappearing at the end of the beach behind a string of rocks imported from a high plateau in Spain, then moved her hand to the back of Marss' head, spreading out her index and middle fingers in the form of horns.

"Yoo-hoo... Cuckoo!" she said.

"Possibly," responded Marss quietly.

21

//p113// She had told him a hundred times that she did not want him to come see her at work, she had forbidden him from getting to know her photographs and learning about her professional relationships. She practised a terrible profession. The merchandise that she was selling was the likeness of her face and her body. For twenty years she had learned how to give them more and more value. For more than ten years already she had been battling aging every day, to stop it from eating away her flesh and her skin. Even though the price of a success increased everyday, she managed to appear much younger than she was: at least in appearance. Time had, despite everything, dug its little tunnels inside her, like in each living being, its multiple and miniscule residences that would finish, inexorably, by joining to build the enormous cavern whose roof would one day collapse. She was fully conscious of the fragility of her equilibrium. She was what she appeared to be, and what she appeared to be could suddenly appear sinisterly different. The competition, in her profession, was atrocious. A multitude of young girls, thin, //p114// starving like locusts, battled over the smallest photo with a fierce savagery, mercilessly, that the male world cannot even imagine. If it wasn't contrary to common practice, each one of them would have cut the others up into pieces with delight, while continuing to smile for the photographers. If those girls learned that the young, superb Martine had a son their age, they would roar with triumph, would devise wrinkles for her everywhere, withered breasts and buttocks hanging down to her ankles. In a second, she would become the old one, the bald one, the toothless one, the fossil. They would trample her to death and cram her corpse into the garbage.

"Are they really that mean? That heartless?" asked Oliver.

"Mean? Heartless?" said Martine. "You could call them crocodiles!... And more... Beside them, crocodiles are like kittens... Well, you've come... The main thing, is that they don't know who you are."

She didn't have a grudge against him. She had never held a grudge against anyone, not even against life, which had nevertheless played many tricks on her. And the first fear having passed, she was happy to have her son in her arms. She was holding onto the reins, her arms extended on either side of Oliver. The horse was marching in ten centimetres of water, parallel to the beach. Each blow of a hoof made a shower of light spurt out from the sea, which splashed Martine's naked feet and Oliver's worn-out shoes. The latter was hot. He had placed his wind-breaker on the horse's neck, crosswise. Martine's coat had opened and her arms and the coat's tails surrounded Oliver and held him tight against her like at the bottom of a nest.

She felt her son's body against hers like she had never felt it before, even when he //p115// was very young. He weighed against her chest, she felt the skin of his back

⁴⁰ The war horse of Alexander the Great (Webster's p.235).

against the naked skin of her stomach, through the shirt drenched in sweat, she received the odour of his perspiration mixed with that of the horse's whose large spine opened his thighs as if for a delivery. The sun burned her face under the make-up and bathed her under her coat with a sweat mixed with that of her child's. He was wet from her, as though he had just come out of her, with his feet still in her stomach.

She had never known this. She had not wanted to suffer, she had given birth under anaesthesia. Waking up, she had found herself the mother of an ugly little thing that she hadn't pushed out herself with all the energy of her flesh to spurt him into life, that she hadn't taken in, a small larva so atrociously ripped from her, to the immediate shelter of the basket of her arms, on her exhausted belly, in the warmth of her inexhaustible love. He was born without her, while she wasn't there. When she had returned, they had told her "it's a boy," they had shown her a grimace swaddled in white linen. They had presented one to the other like two strangers destined to cohabit during a journey of unspecified duration. She had fallen back asleep, relieved, because the event had been inevitable. It was over, disappointed to have created something so miserably ugly.

They had put him to sleep in rough, sterilized linen. He had continued to cry, turning his small lukewarm grimace still saturated with inner waters to the left and to the right, searching with drowned despair for something that was the buoy of life, something //p116// hot in the icy world, something tender and soft in this shorn world, a fountain in this withered world.

He didn't know it at the time, but he would never find what he was looking for. His mother was sleeping, they had bandaged her breasts in a very tight camisole of stiff cloth, to pass him the milk. They had presented a soft object that smelled of a dead odour and contained an immaterial liquid to the mouth of the eager little grimacer. He had refused it with anger, shielding his little puckered up face, tightening his lips just until a wail of rage re-opened them. So they had introduced the teat and sweet water had flowed onto his tongue. He drank, enabling a reflex that came from time immemorial. He had ceased to cry, he had drunk, he had fallen asleep.

22

//p117// They were seated on umbrella pine whose shadow and perfume caught up with the sea.

The horse, annoyed by the paint that glued his hair together, was sprawling in the water, his hooves in the air. He sprang back up, snorted, whinnied with pleasure, and left in a small trot towards the lawns and the clumps of alluring flowers, the melting daisies trickling down the slopes of his body.

Martine had taken off her wig and her coat. After all, they were in the Midi⁴¹, and what's the difference, between underwear and bikini? And it really was too hot... She had gathered long pine needles and was braiding them while she listened to Oliver justify his coming and give his reasons for it. When you have kids, you have to expect blows, one day or another. She felt a wave of fear all of a sudden and asked the same question as his grandmother.

"You didn't kill him, at least?"

Oliver gave the same response. She made a carefree gesture.

⁴¹ The south of France on the Riviera.

"All that will subside... There'll surely be an amnesty... You just have to stay on the coast for a while, then you'll be able to return to Paris..."

//p118// Quietly, he responded:

"Never..."

"Never?..."

She was surprised, a little irritated. What was he still going to look for?

"The butchers! The cops! The profs! The unions! The swine! The idiots! I'm sick of it! I'm taking off!..."

"You know," she said with wisdom, "wherever you go, the swine and the idiots, will still be legion."

"Possibly, but I don't want to be the cretin and the cuckold in the middle of them anymore... You see, you know me... Actually, I don't know... maybe you know me... maybe not... but you know that I never lie..."

"I know..."

"I can't lie... I can't... Even if they had to cut off my head, I can't... It's grandmother who taught me that... She told me: "A lie, it's disgusting." And when I lied to her, not even about anything big, instead of punishing me, she would look at me as if I were a piece of rotten tripe. She would avoid me in the apartment, keep well away from me, as soon as I arrived in one room, she would go into another, grazing the walls far away from me, she didn't hold her nose, but just to see her face, I knew that I reeked. And when I would throw myself at her for forgiveness, she would stretch out her hand to hold me at a distance, and say to me: "First go wash yourself! Lather yourself! And scrub!..."

Martine smiled, a little touched, she said softly:

"She's something, that grandmother!..."

"She's getting old," said Oliver. "Think of her when I leave, go see her, don't //p119// leave her alone too long..."

"Leave? Where do you want to leave to?..."

"Listen... All this blah blah blah about lies, it was to tell you that I've become like grandmother, lies, I can't put up with them, they stink, they make me vomit... And all of your society, it's nothing but a mountain of lies, a mountain of rotten vultures inhabited by maggots. The political men lie! All of them! From right to left! The priests lie! The scholars lie! The merchants lie! The writers lie! The profs regurgitate all the lies they swallowed when they were students. Even the boys girls and the boys my age lie, because if they saw themselves as they are, they would drop to the ground stone dead. I believed that we were going to be able to change all that, I swear! I believed it! I thought that we were going to be able to toss all the maggots to the same flamethrower, and start over again with a society of free men and women! Genuine ones! With love! And with truth! I swear, I believed it!..."

"You're completely crazy," said Martine. "The truth, what truth? We have to put up with everything, if we want to live!..."

"It is not essential to be living," said Oliver."

"Oh!" said Martine, "what grand words... And where is it that you hope to find a place without lies?"

"Nowhere," said Oliver. "I know that it doesn't exist... But I know a place where I can get a pile of cash! I'm going to go find it and I'm going to scatter it to harvest an

even bigger pile. I will be a bigger pig than the biggest pig and more of a bastard than the worst bastard! And all without ever lying! That will make a mound of maggots die //p120// around me. And when I am a billionaire, I will shout out the truth so loud that either the world will have to change, or have to die.”

“You make me laugh with your truth,” said Martine. “What does it mean? It doesn’t exist!..”

“Yes! It exists!” said Oliver, “and it’s not complicated... It’s the opposite of lies.”

23

//p121// Seated in Bob, half hidden behind the trunk of a blossoming lime tree that buzzed with a colony of bees, Marss was watching Martine and Oliver through binoculars. He saw Martine shift to lean back better on the rosy trunk of a pine tree, then put her arm around the shoulders of the boy, and pull him gently towards herself just until he was stretched out along her, his head resting on her thighs. He saw the lips of one and the other moving, and was enraged to not be able to hear one word of what they were saying.

“My big baby,” said Martine, “where are you counting on finding it, your pile of cash? Ah, that’s pretty: “your pile of cash.” Do you remember when you were little, when I used to recite: a pile of rice, a pile of rats, the pile of rice tempted the pile of rats, and the pile of rats partook in the pile of rice?”

“You never recited that to me!” said Oliver. “It was grandmother...”

Martine sighed.

“You think so?”

“You bet!”

“Maybe that’s true... She used to tell it to me too when I was a kid, it fascinated me.”

Oliver felt himself overcome by a wave of tenderness. He saw his mother’s face //p122// from below, with the little holes of her nose between her big eyes painted blue right to her hair. She had the air of a little girl who had played with her mother’s make-up sticks.

“You’re beautiful,” he said to her. “You’re much more beautiful than all those whores. Why are you scared of them?”

She gently caressed his brow, pushing back the little curls of his hair wet with sweat. She nearly hadn’t recognized him with his short hair. He had cut it himself before leaving Paris, because of the cops. He was very handsome like this, harder, manlier.

“You’re kind,” she said, “but you’re silly... I would be ten times more beautiful... You see, I don’t even dare to say my age aloud to myself, I don’t even dare think it... The twenty year old girls, if they knew, to them, I would be no more than an old carcass... Like one of those buggies, you know, that you sometimes see abandoned at the side of the road, in the ditch, all smashed open, with the tires pinched, the motor, its seats, even the rear - view mirror. It’s only use to become a pile of rust.

She drove away the horror of the image and recalled all her optimism.

“Good! It’s not for tomorrow! So, this pile of money? It interests me! Where are you going to unearth it?”

Oliver spat out a bitter pine needle that he had been busy chewing on.

"Very simply, in the pockets of your husband!"

"Your father?"

"It seems..."

"Hey, you!... Rascal!"

"Excuse me... I wanted to say, it appears that I have a father, somewhere in the world..."

//p123// "I don't even know where he is..."

"Me, I know..."

Marss was more and more furious that he couldn't hear anything. What could they be saying to each other? Who was this little gigolo? These girls, they're all the same, as soon as a young boy appears, with his fresh little mouth and hard little butt, they go crazy! Their stomachs are nothing more than vacuum cleaners!...

By reflex, thinking about the young boy, he inflated his chest and pulled in his buns. He was sweating, he felt old, ugly, and soft. It was a masochistic error owing to his enormous wealth. He didn't believe that it was possible for him to be – not loved, love let's leave for the readers of *France-Dimanche*⁴² – but, at least, desired or even pleasantly tolerated by a woman. He thought that they were all after the crumbs of his millions. He wasn't wrong. Except in regard to Martine. She was a girl with a good heart, she felt great affection for him, and took great pleasure in sharing his bed. He had the face of a man from the North, with clean lines, and a solid body, a little heavy, but handsome. She liked to caress him, place her head on the trunk of his chest, then make that heavy weight become soft and topple over onto her, violent, supple and hot like a slightly over the hill wild animal. If she had to lose him, she would experience not only boredom, because he represented a security, a well sheltered port in which she had moored her boat, but she would also have been upset. Truly. And even more than with the girls, it was him that she was scared of leaving her for her age. She was certain that he would immediately experience a recoiling reflex, maybe even repulsion. He would gladly eye the young girls...

//p124// Without totally believing in Martine's affections, Marss vaguely felt that she wasn't like the others. Her eye was less polarized towards jewellery shop fronts, sometimes they passed moments together, stretched out under the sun, or in the shade, without desire, without calculations, silent, just happy to be together. Before having Martine next to him, he had never known such calm. He had always been on guard, even between the sheets. It was because of this, the certain shared spontaneous joys, certain bursts of laughter burst forth simultaneously, that this affair was lasting longer than the others ever had, even with women more beautiful. It was because of this that the abrupt appearance of this young rascal and the image in his eyes of his intimacy with Martine gnawed at Marss with a type of rage of the heart that he, or she, had ever known before.

"But what could they possibly be saying to each other? He's not even petting her!"

Abruptly, he thought that he had an independent microphone, on an amplifier, long like a telescope, with which he could hear a fly fart a kilometre away. He pushed the starter all the way in, Bob did a whirl around the tree and climbed towards the villa. The microphone had to be somewhere in a cupboard.

⁴² A French tabloid magazine.

"I read an article about him in *Adam*," said Oliver. "About ten pages of colour photos. He's in Kathmandu, in Nepal, he organizes tiger hunts for millionaires..."

"Nepal? Where is that?"

"North of India, right at the foot of the Himalayas. He also leads them on Yeti hunts! The idiots!"

//p125// "What a guy!" said Martine, with a bit of nostalgia.

"He has sherpas, loads of elephants, Jeeps, trucks, it's a large scale enterprise, a real factory. It gave the rates of his hotel. *Nothing but the hotel*: 80 dollars per day per person!"

"That makes how much?"

"40 000 Francs!"

"Shit!"

"So the elephants, the jeeps, the hunters, the whole kit and caboodle, do you realize what he must pinch from them?"

"Yeah, what he must put in his pockets!" said Martine. "And to think that he's never given me a penny, the bastard!"

She felt admiration rather than bitterness. Oliver noticed it. He asked:

"You still love him?..."

"What do you think? He had a funny personality... We got along well, we were both young... Especially me!... So we hardly paid attention... Then you arrived!... You know how it is, at first you don't believe it... It seemed impossible... In the novels and in the movies, they endlessly make love and the girls never get pregnant!... The novelists who write stuff like that, and the directors, we should make them pay contributions for girl teenage mothers. You can't even imagine what it's really all about, young girls who get taken in by them! Love, love, never kids! It's nice in the books! The rubbish! There was no pill, at that time! Me, I didn't want to abort you. Moreover, he didn't either. And //p126// he didn't try to ditch me, he's honest, he said to me: "We'll get married so that he has a name, and after his birth, we'll divorce. I accept full responsibility. I will pay you child support to raise the kid, and everyone remains free. Okay?" I said okay, in any case, it was good for a laugh, he wasn't serious. He wasn't a husband..."

Oliver propped himself up on one elbow. He asked: "That child support, he paid you it how many times?"

"Six months... Maybe a little more, mind you... Still, in any case, less than one year, of that, I am sure!... Afterwards, he left for Madagascar, then I received a Christmas card from Venezuela, for years afterwards, and now, he is... Where is it that he is, you say?"

"In Nepal..."

"That then!... To go into such a village, it's quite like him!"

"Why didn't you pursue him in court?"

"He would have had to be caught! And then, I wasn't going to have your father put in prison!..."

What she didn't throw in, because she didn't even realize it herself, was that it had seemed totally natural that he had forgotten about her like she had forgotten about him. It was a story without importance, like a game of hopscotch. We never remain prisoners in hell or in paradise. We jump through it, and fall back on our feet.

Now, because Oliver had been talking about him, she remembered, and she was moved, not too much but a little, because it was so far away, and she had been so young.

"You're unkind," she said, "you could have brought that article... Has he changed a lot?"

//p127// "He actually appeared younger than in the photos of Grandmother's album. It's true, that in the article he was in colour... He had a large full-page photograph, on an elephant, in hunting clothes, with gold stripes, a bare head, a rifle in his hand, he was smiling, he has white teeth, he had the air of a king's son!"

"Yeah..." sighed Martine, "he was handsome..."

In talking about a king's son who was his father, Oliver had lowered his voice like when one tries to recount his dream. A father so handsome, so young, on an elephant, in a fabulous country...

He tightened his jaw, recalled his grudge.

"The price of his rifle alone would sustain grandmother for three years!" he said. "The pension, I swear he's going to pay it! And with interest!... I calculated it with interest, it equals thirty million!..."

"What?" said Martine. "Are you crazy?"

"No, I rounded it, but not so much."

"And so... And so..."

She was aghast. Money passed through her hands but never stayed there. To add up sums, those that she didn't receive, was as removed from her mental capabilities as those from a flower of an apple tree.

"I'm going to find him," said Oliver. "I will present him with the bill, and I will send you half in a Cadillac!"

"Idiot," said Martine. "You'll have nothing left!..."

Both of them started to laugh, she hugged him and he stretched out again, his head on the soft hot cushion of her maternal thighs.

"Don't worry," he said, "there will be enough left to start over fresh. I will go to //p128// Canada, or to Brazil. What I need, to become rich, is to have a little wad to get started, and to think of nothing else but money, money! money!... Because it's only money that counts!"

"Big baby!" she said. "And to get to your father, who's going to pay for that trip?"

He turned his face a little towards his mother's head, squinted his eyes because a ray of sun was aiming at him through the pine branches.

"You!" he said with innocence.

She smiled and shook her head.

"Me! On my own?... That's got to cost at least a million... Where do you want me to get it from?"

"It doesn't cost that much," said Oliver, "but that is just about what I need so that I can be at ease. Can you find someone who will trust you? It's a short-term loan. Offer them interest..."

She sighed...

"You seem to be just as strong in business as I am... You think that people lend money like that, without a guarantee?... You're good looking, look! If you could see yourself!..."

He had traces of paint everywhere. It had melted on him when she had hugged him. White, blue, green, a trace of red on his right temple...

"You look like a clown!... Do you have a tissue?"

He didn't respond, wiped his face with his hand, mixing and spreading the colours.

She stretched her arm out towards the blouse lying near her coat, rummaged in the pockets, pulled out a tissue, and set herself to carefully wiping her son's face, who had his eyes closed, and gave himself up to the softness of her caress, to the heat of the afternoon in the odour of the pines, to the maternal voice so desired since his birth, so rarely heard.

//p129// She spoke to him softly, seriously, barely louder than the calm sounds of the sea.

"Millions or no millions, you really want to go see your father?..."

He didn't re-open his eyes, he seemed to swallow the question through his skin, waiting for it to reach the deepest point within him, and let a response rise to his lips, without fuss...

"I want to make him pay..."

"You want to see him?..."

There was another silence, then he responded softly:

"Yes..."

She threw the tissue wet with sweat and a rainbow.

"Good... I think that I will find the money for the trip."

He smiled, without opening his eyes.

"Thank you..."

She placed her hand back on the curls that hemmed his stubborn forehead - his totally renewed forehead - stroked them gently, from one finger to the other. They were like silk. And from his body born on its own, without her being aware of it, the instinctive movement that lulls a child lying on its mother. Her thighs moved gently, lulling the tanned head of her newly found man-child.

It was hot. Three Cicadas creaked in a nearby olive tree. The pine needles burnt by the sun exhaled an odour of resin. Oliver, eyes closed, let himself fade to a slow swaying that gently relaxed his head. He smelled the scent of pine, the scent of the grease paint, the scent of the edge of the salty water that was drying on the sand at the outer //p130// limits of the sleeping sea, the calm and marvellous scent of all those odours of his mother, the scent of unique happiness, incomparable, of a child who's going to fall back asleep on the flesh from which he had awoken.

"Am I interrupting anything?" asked Marss.

Oliver straightened up in one bound.

"Don't run away, I beg you!"

Standing up a few paces from them, immobile, Marss was smiling. He had left Bob a bit further away and approached on foot, cautiously. He had found the infamous microphone and, from the top of the hill, had aimed it right on the couple, the headset on his ears. He had heard thunderous noises and roars, the earth cracking and the sky collapsing, and the seagull trumpet like an elephant. He had pulled off the headset just before his eardrums became dead to the depth of his skull.

He had thrown that junk onto the lawn. Professional thingamajigs, always! We can never use anything without paying the whole crew! With social security contributions,

retirement funds and paid holidays! Always paying! Always! A pile of blokes who need four co-workers to turn the three buttons of a thingamabob. Shit!

He had gotten out of Bob and had recalled the old tactic which consisted of approaching with a fox's step and a finely-tuned ear. He hadn't heard anything.

But he had seen.

Martine stood up on her turn.

"He's not running off!... He doesn't have to run off!..."

"And if you introduced us?"

"Mr. Marss... Oliver..."

"Oliver what?"

She keenly invented a name before Oliver had the time to respond.

//p131// "Oliver Bourdin."

She remembered too late that that was the name of her masseuse: Alice Bourdin... But maybe Marss didn't know her name. Everyone called her by her first name. Alice... Alice...

Marss did not extend his hand towards Oliver, and Oliver looked at Marss with the kindness of a dog ready to bite.

Marss smiled at him.

"I'm throwing a little party tonight at the villa," he said. "It would give me pleasure if you would accept to join us."

Without giving him any time to respond, he turned to Martine:

"We're going to be lacking men..."

And he left with nonchalant and heavy paces like a bear that nothing hurries and that isn't scared of anything.

"You must come!" said Martine in a low voice.

"I don't have the slightest desire to," said Oliver.

Marss, who was thirty metres away, turned around and shouted:

"It will bother me very much if he doesn't come. Decide on it Martine!"

24

//p132// Marss' villa was attached to both the cloister and the florentine palace. He himself had sketched the general plan that an Italian architect had detailed. Before anything else it was a Mediterranean garden, cleverly wild, planted with cypresses and massive thick plants that gorged on heat and light during the sunlight hours and at night exhaled violent and soft perfumes. A few ponds sang below intermittent jets of water. Statues of the ancient world, among the most beautiful, either bought or stolen, exposed to the amorous light of the sun and the moon that have been caressing them for a millennia, their beauty sometimes mutilated, all the more beautiful, a torso without arms, a broken nose, smile, happiness, beauty, for thirty centuries and for how many more?

All the flowers and grasses that only liked the violent heat crawled through the dry stones, then roasted and bloomed there in voluptuous colours and odours.

The villa, without storeys, wrapped around the garden, on three sides, dark and fresh arches forming a sort of terrace laden with Romanesque heaviness. The rooms //p133// opened directly onto the terrace, by doors as big as the arches. Pushing some buttons hid the doors, with either heavy glass, or a succession of thicker and thicker

curtains. But, in general, Marss' guests preferred not to set up obstacles between themselves and the incredible symphony of the garden's nocturnal perfumes.

The fourth side of the garden was partly enclosed by a building whose roof, covered in thyme and thickly flowering plants, rose to a man's height behind a pool with walls of gold mosaic.

The pool and the building sank down together into three subterranean levels. On the side opposing the gardens, the hill descended in a slope rather sharply, and the rooms of the house opened their windows of unexpected shapes there, between the rocks, the bushes, and the roots of the olive or green oak trees. Each level was gated by a door the colour of earth and pebbles.

The top floor was comprised of games' rooms, electronic billiards, darts, sharp shooting, fairground attractions, and mini-bars in all of the gaps in the walls. The pool extended into the interior, so that one could pass from the inside to the outside, and vice versa, by diving below the gold mosaic wall. Underneath, the interior wall was made of glass, right down to the bottom of the last level, which was Marss' space, frequently occupied by him and his servers.

All the walls of the house were crooked and irregular, like animals' natural shelters: nests, lodges, or caves. When you entered for the first time, it was surprising to find yourself so extraordinarily well-off, and you thus understood that there something //p134// artificial and monstrous about a straight line, which makes the homes of men machines that injure. To be able to sleep, rest, love, and be happy, a man needs to curl up. He can't curl up in a corner or against a vertical plane. He needs a hollow. Even if he finds it at the foot of a bed or sofa, his gaze bounces like a ball from one level surface to another, it scratches at all angles and he never rests. Linear houses condemn me to resting tense, hostile, to fidget, to leave. One can't find anywhere to make one's peaceful little niche.

Between the amusements and Marss' personal floor, there was an entertainment floor. Immense sweeping divans molded to fit the shapes of the walls, a record player with dance, jazz, and classical music records, and the moaning of women making love, films from "Laurel and Hardy" to much more intimate ones, permanent spotlights of flowers, shapes, colours, that transformed the curved walls into unusual horizons where sometimes sprung up, unexpectedly, a gigantic penis in full gush, or a woman's vagina, open to two hands. Both, usually, caused laughter.

25

//p135// Sven, Jane, and Harold had slept during the most overwhelming hours of heat in the shade of the last shanty of the village, a narrow stirring shade. They would wake up all of a sudden because the sun would be piercing their feet or their faces. There wasn't a single tree as far as the eye could see, towards all the horizons.

Gesticulating, the inhabitants of the shanty had offered them some shelter indoors where it was cooler. But the odour that reigned there was atrocious. By smiling and saluting with their joined hands, they made them understand that they preferred to stay outside. At sunset they had been able to buy a bit of cooked rice and three eggs, before taking to the road. They had swallowed the eggs raw. It hadn't been a very poor village because they could sell three eggs and three handfuls of rice. But not rich enough

however, to feed its hens. They lived off of insects, off blades of dried grass, off dust. Their eggs were tiny like pheasants' eggs.

After having walked a portion of the night they had arrived at the edge of a pond around which the shanties of an old village were crumbling, the people chased away by //p136// monkeys. Attracted by the well, the monkeys had settled themselves in, first on the roofs, had proliferated, stolen the provisions of the peasants, devoured everything that could be eaten, and soiled or destroyed the rest.

The villagers, whose religion prohibited them from defending themselves against the apes/monkeys by killing or wounding, or even striking or scaring them, had had to give up their site to them, to leave. They had founded another village, in the dust, without water, far enough for the apes to find the distance too great to come and steal their food. The women of the new village came to get water from the pond, with large jugs, because to make it there and back took nearly twenty kilometres, and they couldn't make the trip twice a day.

When Jane and her companions arrived, they found a small community of hippies who lived in a few huts with the monkeys, against which they defended themselves better than the Indians, but without violence. With the straw roof of a collapsed hut, they had just lit a small fire at the edge of the pond. They maintained it twig by twig. Some were sleeping, faces covered by mosquitoes, desensitized by the marijuana. A small group assembled around the tiny fire were discussing in short sentences, in half-silence, music, love, God, nothing. They pushed themselves back a bit to make the circle bigger and make room for the newly arrived.

Barely seated, Harold slapped himself repeatedly on the cheeks and forehead.

"The filth!" he said. "We're not going to stay here! We'll catch malaria!..."

His neighbour, smiling, handed him a cigarette.

"Smoke!... They don't like it."

Sven coughed a bit.

//p137// Jane wrapped a very thin scarf that she had bought for pennies at a market, around her face several times. In the intermittent glimmer of the fire she had the look of a foreign white flower, a little plump, or of a swollen button ready to pop. She protected her hands and wrists with a layer of mud scraped out at the edge of the pond.

Sven wasn't bothered by the mosquitoes. They never attacked him. He placed his guitar on his knees.

"Love! Love!" said a boy who came from Paris, "you make me laugh! What is it? It's the desire to get laid, that's all."

Sven softly strung out a series of harmonies. A family of monkeys, on a roof, began to squawk against the music, then went silent. There was nothing more in the silence than the fine fabric woven by the flight of the mosquitoes.

"I'm going to tell a story about love," said Sven.

"In Spring, a nightingale alights on a cherry tree. The cherry tree says to the nightingale: 'Open your buds, bloom with me!...'"

"The nightingale says to the cherry tree: 'Spread your wings, fly with me!...'"

"They're off to a good start, your friends!" said the boy from Paris. "All the lost who get married are the same. All are also well matched! Saucepan-horse, piano-fish, toe-roller, and each one of the two thinks only of grazing the other or of making one walk

in the other's shoes!..."

Sven, even softer now, delivered a harmony that shut even the mosquitoes up.

"I'm going to tell the end of the story!"

"So, the nightingale opens its buds and blooms. And the cherry tree spreads its
//p138// wings and flies off carrying the nightingale."

The boy from Paris hadn't really understood. He asked: "What is that? A fable?"

"It's love," said Sven.

To the song of the returned mosquitoes, those who were still capable of thinking, dreamt, vaguely filled with wonder, disbelieving of the force of a love that gave a tree the power to transform its roots into wings.

Sven picked out a little melody, a few notes, always the same.

He said, "It's rare..."

Then, a bit more music, then he said: "With God, it's also rare... It's the same thing..."

26

//p139// After the sentence that Marrs had thrown at them at thirty metres, Martine had remained seized for a minute, looking in the direction from which the sound of his steps was still coming.

She said to Oliver in a low voice, "You're going to have to come! It's not possible otherwise. If not, God knows what he's going to think!..."

"And what could that do, what he thinks?" retorted Oliver surly.

"Are you an idiot? He's my boss, isn't he?... Listen, you'll come around midnight, you'll stay a short while, then you'll say that you're tired and that you're leaving... Okay?"

He arrived at twelve past midnight.

For the length of the driveway that went up to the villa, lamps concealed in the landscape discreetly guided the steps to the door of the second floor. Oliver pushed it and entered. He found himself on top of several stone steps that descended towards the teak floor. The voice of a black singer sobbed an alcoholic blues. Some couples were dancing slowly, others, stretched out on the divans, dozed, kissed, or caressed each other without conviction. In the middle of the room, a pink stucco column was surrounded by a circular
//p140// bar where everyone could serve themselves. Oliver thought it was perverse and that he would leave as soon as possible. Near the transparent wall of the pool, a small group of laughing people surrounded a blindfolded man, who was trying to recognize an immobile girl by passing his hands over her face. Marrs was in the group. He was holding a glass in his left hand and his right arm was resting around Martine's shoulders.

When he noticed them, Oliver, who was descending the steps, stopped abruptly and tightened his fists. The pig!

"Oh! *The baby!*"* cried a voice near him.

Soura, stretched out on a carpet at the foot of the stairs, near a glass and a bottle of whiskey, rose, rapidly climbed towards Oliver, and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"*I love you, darling! You're beautiful!... Kiss me!...*"*

She was wearing a tiny dress with multicoloured plastic sequins, under which, very visibly, she wasn't wearing anything. She was finer-bond than him and a head

shorter. She drew herself up on her tiptoes to try and kiss him on the mouth but couldn't reach. He looked down at her as if she were a wooden mannequin attached to him, cumbersome.

The blindfolded man was now pawing the girl, who was chuckling.

"Be quiet!" said Marss, "you're laughing like a turkey! He's going to recognize you!"

"But he's tickling me!"

"Do be quiet girl! You twit!"

The girl bit her lips and suppressed her laugh. The man had without a doubt never heard her speak or chuckle.

//p141// "I don't know her," he said with an apologetic air.

He placed his hand on one thigh and raised it, pushing up her skirt.

"You're an idiot," said Marss, "there where you're going, they're all the same!"

The whole little group burst out laughing. The man, vexed, took the girl in his arms and kissed her on the mouth. She returned his kiss at length. He freed himself and triumphantly exclaimed, "It's Muriel!"

Marss tore off his blindfold.

"Bravo! She's yours!..."

The man lifted Muriel up and carried her towards a bedroom.

"*You're not a good baby!*"* yelped Soura. "*Kiss me!... Kiss me!...*"*

Martine turned around and saw Soura hanging off of Oliver's neck. She quickly went towards the steps, grasped Soura by the shoulders, and tore her away from Oliver.

"Leave him alone!"

Soura, having fallen back on her carpet, responded with insults in English.

Martine took Oliver's hand and led him towards Marss. He smiled and came to meet them. At the passage he placed his empty glass on the bar and took a full one. In the other hand, he was holding the headband from the blind man's bluff.

27

//p142// Two hours earlier, in his room, she had asked her to lend her a million, that she needed really badly.

"I know your need... He's called Oliver!"

Silence from Martine

"It's for him, right?"

"He'll give it back to you in a few weeks!... He's offering you ten percent interest."

Marss burst into laughter.

"Ten percent to fill your gigolo's pockets! That's the best thing I've ever heard."

She protested violently.

"You think I'm old enough to have a gigolo, me?... Have you looked at me? Who do you take me for? He's a friend, that's all! It's to go on a trip, he has to go seek out a large sum that's owed to him, but he doesn't have money for the ticket."

"They can't send it to him, this large sum? Cheques, you know, they're sent in the mail... A stamp suffices, no need for a million..."

"It's impossible. I can't explain it to you."

He had been relaxed, completely naked, on a bed sheet of crimson silk. The other //p143// sheet, raw green, clung to the bottom of the bed. Martine, seated before the dressing table, in a light dressing gown, was putting on make-up.

He rose and went to plant himself behind her. He watched her in the mirror.

“Promise me that he’s nothing to you, and I will give you the brick⁴³.”

She saw him, tanned, solid, behind her, dominating her, demanding, and she understood that he loved her in his own way, as much as he was capable of loving anyone with his universal distrust. She was stricken with panic at the idea of losing him. But she couldn’t swear that Oliver was “nothing” to her. He was her son...

She was too superstitious to make a false oath, even while crossing her fingers under the dressing table.

“I hate swearing, you know that!”... Do you trust me or not?...”

“Promise... Or go...”

“You’re vile... I’m going!...”

She took off her dressing gown to get dressed. Marss watched her. She was very beautiful. He never got tired of looking at and loving her. He wouldn’t have wanted to lose her. But he didn’t want to be lied to.

She got dressed slowly, but made it seem like she was in a hurry, hoping that he would regret it, stop her. He remained upright, silent, never taking his eyes off her, immobile and naked, like a statue of Hercules in retirement and a little overfed.

Martine’s eyes filled with tears. It was just when she believed that she was going to lose everything that she found inspiration. She planted herself before Marss, raised her head and looked him in the eyes.

“You want me to swear?”

//p144// “Yes...”

“And if I swear a lie to you?”

“I know you, you won’t do that...”

“If you oblige me to swear, you know that that will break something between us... If you don’t trust me, it’ll never be the same.”

He said, “Promise”.

“Fine... Because you want it... I promise you that there was never anything between us, and that there never will be. Is that enough for you?”

He knitted his brows a little. He turned the ambiguous, but at the same time precise, phrase over in his head. In a way it reassured him, but also enveloped the truth instead of revealing it. And after all, maybe she was capable of lying while swearing, regardless of her childish superstitions. He had to find proof, to know, *to know*.

“Okay,” he said.

“You’ll give me million?”

“We’ll see... Later on...”

28

//p145// Four enormous fish descended into the pool. There was a gold one, spherical, with blue eyes as big as saucers; a pointy black one, sharp as a dagger; a red one in the shape of a snail, with luminous horns; a pale blue one all in sails, marked with

⁴³ One million old francs, before 1960 (Le Petit Robert, 305).

large orangey spots. The fish opened up and four superbly beautiful naked girls came out, swam right up to the transparent wall, blew kisses to Marss' guests, did a somersault simultaneously, and stuck their bottoms to the glass wall.

At the equator, there was a black sex, red sex, blond sex, and chestnut sex, all painted and embellished with false eyelashes. Their cleverness evidenced by the giggles they inspired. Marss always had extraordinary ideas...

The girls linked two by two and let themselves rise to the surface while caressing each other. They were on their last breath and last number. To them, all this was the same as if they had been paid to get ready for the crook of the starter pistol in an Olympic race.

Oliver, jaws clenched, asked himself in what sort of manure he had stepped into.

//p146// "Don't pay attention," Martine said to him, "it's nothing, they're girls who couldn't care less. They do that or whatever!..."

Marss had arrived next to them. He was smiling with a hint of ferocity. His well taken care of white teeth were as fresh as they were when he was twenty.

"And well," he said, "that's our youth... thirsty?"

He held out his glass of whiskey to him. Oliver took it as a challenge, even though he normally only drank fruit juice.

"It's your turn to play," said Marss. The girl that you recognize with your hands is yours for the night..."

He mounted the step behind Oliver and started to tie the blindfold over his eyes. Martine tore it away from him.

"Leave him alone, it's not his style! He doesn't like games like that..."

"What doesn't he like?" demanded Marss in a loud voice. "Touching girls... That doesn't please him? He prefers guys?"

"You're disgusting!" said Martine.

The guests looked at Oliver, laughing. The girls were laughing harder than the men. Oliver looked at each group, at that whole little world of filth of which he had vaguely heard, but in which he didn't want to believe existed, in the purity of his heart.

He raised his glass and turned to Marss to throw it in his face.

"Please!" pleaded Martine.

He turned back to her, saw her tragic face, exhausted beneath the paint, imagined in a split second everything that she had had to accept, for him, to make him what he was today: a fresh young man, in good health morally and physically, pure, demanding and //p147// hard. It obviously wasn't his grandmother's housekeeping that had sufficed to get him to where he was now. It had also been - it was above all - his mother's sacrifice. In reality there hadn't been any sacrifice on Martine's part. She loved her career, her milieu. Everything that happened around her seemed habitual, banal. And her anxious face expressed only her fear of losing Marss.

Oliver thought of his Maharajah father on his elephant, and a hateful bile of hate rose to his throat. He put the glass to his lips and emptied it.

Then he held out his hand towards the blindfold that his mother was holding.

Seven naked girls re-descended into the pool and formed amorous combinations. It wasn't easy to maintain one's self at the bottom in those absurd conditions while seeming to take pleasure. It was a sport. They trained every day.

//p148// The audience formed a circle around Oliver. It had started in a trivial fashion, and all of a sudden it was exciting. What did that bastard Marrs have in mind? To start off he had pushed Judith, a blond with hair cut short like shavings, into Oliver's arms.

"How do you expect me to recognize them?" Oliver had asked. "I don't know them!"

"Just say 'blond' or 'brunette,' that'll be enough for you."

Two couples had remained at the far end on a divan, raw green, below the window in the shape of an egg behind which a lamp lit up a tousled pine tree.

They were trying to put a little interest into the evening, as dull as so many others, by exchanging caresses and making discoveries without any surprises, to soon transform themselves into an exhausted and disgusted quartet.

The unusual whiskey filled Oliver with euphoria, buzzed a song of pleasure in his ears, excited the fervour of his young body. The girl he was touching was well constructed, her breasts naked beneath her light dress were aroused by the touch of his hand. He asked himself: blond or brunette? Heads or tails... He raised his hands back up //p149// to her face, touched the round cheeks with the tip of his fingers, the round nose, the tiny ears, the curly hair...

"Brunette!" he said.

There were a couple of bravos. The girl smiled, she liked him.

"No," said Marss, "she's blond."

She started to protest and he put his hand over her mouth and threw her on a sofa.

"You're not used to this," said Marss. "You have to try again. Another!..."

He looked around him, pretending to search. Oliver waited, hands raised, fingers spread out a little, like a blind man who's not yet used to being blind. Marss decided and put his hands on the shoulders of Edith-the-Redhead, who jumped back.

"This one!..."

"This really won't work," said Edith.

"It doesn't appeal to you, to take a handsome young male?... Fine, fine, fine...

Another!"

He took Martine abruptly by both her shoulders and pushed her in front of Oliver.

"This one! Blond or Brunette?..."

Martine felt all the blood in her body freeze and her heart started to beat violently, panic-stricken, to put her blocked circulation back to work...

A surprised silence came upon the room. What was he up to, that pig Marss? They knew it wasn't his style to share women or anything else.

Oliver smiled, raised both his hands and placed them on Martine's hair.

"No," said Marss, "not the hair, that's too easy. Move down..."

//p150// Oliver let his left hand fall, and gently laced the tips of the fingers of his right hand on the face that he thought he didn't know. He followed the fine eyebrows, for a moment touched the eyelids that had closed, caressed the slightly hollow cheeks, between his thumb and index finger followed the short line of the nose, reached the mouth. The lips were moist and trembled a bit. He placed his index finger horizontally between the lips and spread them. He didn't recognize anything. He smiled. Martine

forced herself not to faint, to keep holding on. Icy and burning waves filled her head and moved towards her face. Her nose and eyebrows grew covered with beads of sweat.

"So," said Marss, "blond or brunette?"

"I don't know," said Oliver.

"Maybe you'll know better a little lower, search..."

Martine was attired in a dress by Paco Rabane, similar to Soura's, in blocks of gold-plated plastic.

"That dress is hampering you," said Marss.

He pushed down the straps and the dress fell around Martine's feet, sounding a little like falling coins.

Oliver's hands, that were falling towards her shoulders, stopped abruptly. He had only seen two dresses that could make that noise. Sourra's and... Whose?... His memory, suddenly, refused to answer him.

There was no face underneath that dress. Blond? Brunette? Whiskey... He never drank... Two dresses, maybe three, maybe a lot... He hadn't seen them all... Dresses, so many dresses... Two dresses...

The tips of his fingers were trembling.

"So," said Marss, "are you falling asleep?"

Oliver placed his hands on the bare shoulders.

//p151// Martine tensed herself into a rock.

"Lower," said Marss, "search!"

He unfastened Martine's bra in the back, pulled it off, and threw it far away.

No one was saying anything anymore. No one even heard the whining of the Negress anymore, who was on her fiftieth lament on the record player.

Oliver tried to recall the face over which he had run the tips of his fingers. The eyebrows, the nose, the mouth... He didn't know, he hadn't recognized anything.

It had to be Soura, or another, anyone...

Oliver's right hand slid down from the shoulder to the neck, descended between the two breasts. It stopped for an instant. Marss watched, eyes fierce as one corner of his mouth curled. Slowly, Oliver's hand detached itself from the lukewarm skin, moist from terror and emotion, shaped itself into the form of a cup and went to envelop the left breast without touching it. His hand clenched, he made a fist, reopened it...

Before Martine's eyes, Oliver's face, blocked off by the dark blindfold, grew larger, filled the whole room, the whole universe. Oliver's hand approached slowly...

Abruptly, like lightning, he hit, in the small of his hand, in the most perfectly sensitive spot, a peak of firm flesh that rested there, and carved out an icy and fiery chasm. Martine fell like a rag, either unconscious or dead.

Soura tore off her dress, glued herself to Oliver, took his hands, pinned them on her breast plates while yelping:

*"It's me, darling! I love you! You're beautiful! Kiss me, darling! Take me!..."**

//p152// Oliver took a hand to his head to take off the blindfold. He hesitated a second, then let his hand fall.

"Lead me," he said.

//p153// A light noise awoke him. He didn't know what it was. He was tired. He was fine. He listened without opening his eyes. There was nothing but the silence, the soothing sound of the water jets, and of several crickets. Far away, very far away, the faint heaving of a fishing boat's motor. And then the noise started again. It was the light sigh of a woman, coming in from outside through the open bay window, that seemed to fill the night.

Oliver opened his eyes and sat up. He had gone to bed on a large and low bed, sheets printed with large violet flowers. Beside him, Soura slept fully naked on her stomach, drugged with whiskey and love. Her small hard buttocks resembled those of a boy's. Oliver caressed them with his hands and smiled. She didn't move.

There was that sigh in the air again, that seemed to come from the sky, persistent.

Oliver lost his smile, rose, and got dressed. In one of the wall's nooks, near the night light, was standing a diver's flashlight, encased in rubber. He took it and went out below the gallery that went around the garden.

A cricket that was singing nearby fell silent.

The round illumination of the flashlight preceded Oliver. He entered the next //p154// bedroom, shined the light on the fur that covered the floor and a gilded pair of woman's sandals, close to a camera. He left.

A woman passed behind Oliver in the dark, singing a German song in a very low voice, soft and sad, a song that waited for and asked for the impossible.

The round light entered into the following room, lighting up the bed. A dark girl, eyes closed, arms entwined above her head, was sleeping. On her naked chest, Edith's red hair burned like an abandoned fire. The flashlight left the bed, caught a large laundry basket full of multicoloured silk rags in one corner of the room. Under the rags slept a naked child, a gold bracelet around his ankle. It was the child of the two women. They had wanted a child. They had gone to Sweden, for a year. They had come back with a newborn. No one knew who had done it for them. No one knew which one of them had done it. It was their child.

Oliver went out and again there was that sigh that seemed to come from everywhere and that was prolonged with a little groan, the beginning of the profound joy of love.

Oliver understood. There were, scattered throughout the garden, speakers that were playing an album.

Or maybe not an album...

He made out a type of phantom in the dark and raised his flashlight. It lit up a white horse painted with large pale blue flowers, which was sleeping upright at the edge of a basin. Behind it, a fountain of water rose and shattered into pearls in the beam of light.

A light gust of warm wind mixed the perfumes of thyme, rosemary, cypress, and pepper plants, and dropped them in a soft and heavy puff all around Oliver.

//p155// Now, the woman was no longer stopping. It was slow and deep, it came from the core of her stomach and rose right up to the stars.

It wasn't an album...

Oliver walked with large paces to the far end of the garden. The crickets became and stayed quiet as he passed. To the east, the edge of the sky began to gleam with a pale pink light, revealing the curved line of the sea.

The woman who was softly singing the German song had sat down on a carpet of countless flowers that encircled the sundial, level with the ground. She was undressing while still singing. She was blond, tall and strong, with very white flesh. She had let age reach and surpass her a little. When she was naked, she stretched out entirely on the multicoloured flowers at the foot of the sundial, and her heavy breasts blossomed out on either side of her torso. She was still singing and she was waiting, her hands laid flat on the coolness of the open flowers.

In the dark, the colours of the flowers didn't have a colour, and time didn't start flowing until the sun placed its fingers on the dial that slept, to wake it.

On the small piece of lawn, at the foot of the bamboos and the Apollo with broken arms, the male model and his assistant were sleeping side by side, impenetrably dressed, hand in hand. Oliver's flashlight passed over their faces without waking them up.

The woman's moaning had become like a protest before so much joy, and his a stupefaction ceaselessly increased, and a passionate thank you to the one who was giving it to her, and to herself, who was capable of feeling it to such an extent, and to the God //p156// who had made them and united them to make love. That swell of joy entered all the rooms and rose higher than the cypresses, and flowed over the hill to the sea. Sleeping couples awoke and got closer.

Oliver ran the length of the pool, hurtled down the path, arrived at the door of the second floor. He pushed. It was open. The blind man's bluff room was deserted and in disorder, smelled of spilt alcohol and mixed perfumes. The woman's cry was not coming to him from the speakers anymore, but from the inside of the house, discreet, intimate, ever deeper and burning.

He opened the doors, hurtled down a staircase, appeared suddenly in Marss' room.

At the head of the bed, a small dark Chinese table held up a lamp with a red shade. It lit up Marss' massive and tanned body, stretched out naked on Martine's tanned and quartered body, and was doing her slowly, since forever and until eternity.

Martine had her eyes open and her face towards the door, but she didn't see anything. She didn't see Oliver come in. She rolled her head from one side to the other, then to the other, then to the other, and her nearly closed mouth let escape that song of joy that she didn't hear, the song of her penetrated flesh, inhabited, stirred, transmuted, liberated from its state of flesh, from its dimensions and its limits. A sea of gently rocking joy.

Marss had a tuft of hair on his kidneys. Oliver grabbed hold of another Chinese table that was near him, lifted it to the ceiling, and struck right at that spot. Marss wailed, Oliver seized him by the neck and tore him off his mother's stomach. Marss fell to the ground on his back. Oliver kicked him with his feet, savagely, thrashing his head, his //p157// stomach, everywhere, until he became quiet.

The male model and his assistant had awoken and sat up, without letting go of each other's hands.

"What's wrong with him?" asked the frightened young man.

"It's nothing. He must be having himself whipped... He's a pig!..." said the model.

Nothing else was heard after that.

"Don't you worry, my hen."

He took the boy's delicate hand to his lips, kissed the ravishing fingers, and extended himself on the grass.

Martine, who had been flung from paradise to hell, looked with horrified eyes at Oliver bent over Marss, who was unconscious. Slowly, Oliver straightened up and looked at her. She then realized that she was naked. She vainly tried to pull an end of the sheet to her to hide herself, she didn't understand, it was appalling, dreadful, she was going crazy, she crossed her arms over her chest, crossed her knees, it wasn't possible, not possible.

Oliver's eyes were like those of a dead animal.

He turned around and left.

31

//p158// An enormous red sun was rising up from the blue horizon of the sea. Oliver, on his knees in the sea, rubbed himself with water and sand, his chest, stomach, and face. He was moaning, trembling, sobbing, screaming, it seemed to him that he would never be able to rid himself of the filth. He stank to the deepest point within him. He rolled around in the water, submerged himself, swallowed water, spat out, rose crying, let himself fall on the sand, arms outspread, eyes to the sky. Bit by bit, his fatigue and the gentle sound of the sea calmed him. His sobs became less frequent, then disappeared. He sank into sleep, all at once, and woke up just as abruptly. He hadn't slept one minute. He got up and got dressed.

Some metres away, two boats were moored in Marss' private jetty. He made his way towards the biggest one and jumped inside.

At the far end was a diver's mask, a woman's red dress, soaked with seawater, a faded bouquet in an empty champagne bucket, blue cotton pants, an underwater rifle, and its arrows to which was still attached a large fish covered in flies.

Oliver used the dress to gather the fish and throw it in the water with the rifle. He //p159// rummaged through the pockets of the pants, found a gold cigarette lighter, a few hundred-Franc notes, coins, and a handkerchief. He kept the money and the lighter, threw the rest in the water, then cast off the mooring rope and made his way towards the motor. He knew vaguely how it functioned. He had gone out, several times, at Saint-Cloud, in Victor's boat, a friend at university, the son of the great deluxe grocer, Victor. He hadn't been seen at the barricades...

A few minutes later, the boat was motoring off towards the rising sun.

32

//p160// He disembarked on a little Italian beach, and hitchhiked to Rome. He sold the lighter, exchanged his French francs, went into a post office, took the telephone directory for the letter E and searched in vain for the address on his mind.

Nearby, a Roman, round head and round bottom, was flipping through another directory. Oliver asked him,

"Excuse me... Do you speak French?"

The man smiled, ready to be of assistance.

"A bit..."

"How do you say 'team' in Italian?"

"Team? That's Squadra! The 'Squadra Azura! What? Do you know it?"

"No..."

"You're not into sports?..."

He started to laugh.

"What are you looking for?"

"The International Teams of Solidarity⁴⁴, I know they have an office in Rome."

The man pushed away the directory that Oliver was consulting.

"It's not that one, wait!"

//p161// He took another one and set himself to quickly flipping through it.

Upon leaving, Oliver bought some French newspapers and went to sit down on the patio of Café de la Colonne to read them.

On the third page of Paris-Presse⁴⁵, in the Parisian gossip column, there was a story about how the playboy millionaire Anton Marss had fallen on the staircase in his villa after an eventful evening and had to stay in bed for several days.

Manzoni was sitting behind a miserable little table that served him as a desk, covered with files and scattered letters. There were two telephones. Manzoni was busy talking on one of them, passionately, almost wildly, gesticulating grandly with his other arm. Oliver, standing behind the table-desk, watched him, not understanding what he was saying. He only heard from time to time "Commendatore," "Commendatore..."⁴⁶

Manzoni was a poor man, or rather a man who didn't own anything, because he had given everything to the Teams, his goods and his life. He was fifty years old, had curly grey hair. He was rather fat, because in Italy the poor ate only spaghetti. He was explaining that he needed money! And even more money! The Teams had just opened a canteen in Calcutta, to serve rice to children, but it could only serve six hundred portions, and every morning there were several thousand children who stood in line, and every morning there were several who were dead. They needed *more* money!

And at the other end of the line, the Commendatore was protesting. He had already given so much, and so much, and this, and that... Manzoni should plead to somebody else for a bit!

//p162// "And who do you want me to talk to," thundered Manzoni, "if not those who give?"

He obtained a promise, hung up, and wiped his forehead.

"Excuse me," he said in French to Oliver. "I had to call. It's terrible!... I have to find more elsewhere!... We never have enough! Never enough! So, you want to go to India?"

"Yes," said Oliver.

"You know what we do there?"

⁴⁴ Translated literally from « Les Équipes Internationales de Solidarité », the French name for the "International Solidarity Movement".

⁴⁵ A Parisian newspaper whose first edition appeared November 13th, 1944. It was absorbed by "France Soir," another large French newspaper, in the mid-1960's.
[fr.wikipedia.com, 25 mars, 2006]

⁴⁶ Commendatory – one who holds a benefice in commendam; Commendam – formerly, in ecclesiastical law, the entrusting of a benefice by the king or head of the church to the care of a layman, to retain till a proper pastor is provided, (Webster's, p363).

"Yes..."

Manzoni rose, approached Oliver to see him better and to tutoyer⁴⁷ him.

"Who did you hear about us from?"

"A friend from Paris. He left for India last year."

"Why didn't you speak to our office in Paris?"

"Paris disgusts me!... I left France, now I want to leave Europe."

Manzoni banged his fist on the table.

"We don't need disgusted types, on the Teams! We need enthusiastic boys!

Loving boys who are ready to make sacrifices! Do you have all that?"

"I don't know," said Oliver harshly. "I am how I am, you either take me or you don't."

Manzoni took a step back, put his hands flat on his hips, and looked at Oliver. This boy seemed to him to be of good quality, but they couldn't send just anybody over there. No, not just anybody...

Oliver looked at this little round man, and, above his head, a poster of the Teams, //p163// representing a child with a dark complexion, with immense eyes, which asked of the men to save its life.

"What's your friend's name?" asked Manzoni abruptly.

"Patrick de Vibier."

"Patrick! You should have said so sooner! He's a wonderful guy! Look, he's here..."

Manzoni approached a map of India pinned to the wall near the poster, and raising himself on his tiptoes, with difficulty reached a red thumb tack at the top of the map.

"... in Palnah! He's digging wells... He was supposed to stay there for two years but he's sick, he has to come back, we don't have anyone to replace him... We lack everything, but mostly volunteers!... All these ruffians! They prefer hanging about on the streets and cruising women! They're good for nothing! And you, the Parisians, you believe there's nothing better to do than form barricades in the world?"

He was screaming, he was furious, covered in sweat. He sponged himself again, and went to sit down behind the table.

"You want to go replace him?"

"I would like to..."

"I'm going to telegraph him, and if he guarantees you're you, I'll send you. You know our conditions?"

"Yes."

"You commit to staying there for two years!"

"I know..."

"You'll work for nothing... You're not going there to earn a living... It's to earn a living for others!"

"I know..."

"Naturally, it's us who pay for the journey..."

//p164// "I know..."

Manzoni banged his fists on the table and got up again.

"We need money! Money!"

⁴⁷ In French, to address as *tu*; to be on familiar terms with someone.

He went to open all the doors in the office, screamed some names. Boys and girls of all ages came running, alarmed, all the volunteer employees, the trainees, all the personnel of the Rome Team. Manzoni took an armful of collection boxes from a shelf. On their cylindrical bodies was glued a small reproduction of the poster representing the starving child. He distributed them with shoves and screamed:

"Ci vuol danaro! We need money ! Go beg! Drop everything!... Beg! Mendicare! Mendicare!..."

"You too," he said to Oliver, sticking a box in his hand.

He pushed them all outside, sat down again, mopped himself, picked up the telephone and called another Commendatore.

33

//p165// There was hardly anyone on the plane. Oliver was seated on the right, in front of the wings, near the cockpit. At first he had watched the scenery go by, then fell asleep. It was nighttime when he woke up. An enormous star twinkled in what he could see of the sky. The sky was dark. He had never seen a star so big, or a sky so dark.

The gentle voice of the stewardess announced in several languages that the plane was going to make a short technical stopover in Bahrain, that the passengers didn't have the right to leave the aircraft, that they were asked to attach their seatbelts and put out their cigarettes, thank you.

Bahrain, Oliver recalled: a tiny island in the Persian Gulf. Oil-rich. The plane turned, began to descend. The enormous star disappeared. Oliver buckled his seatbelt. He had compartmentalized the images of the night at Marss' villa in his head. He didn't want to think about it anymore, he didn't WANT to. When an image escaped from the reserve where he kept them piled up, compressed, forbidden, and presented itself, blinding, to his mind's eye, the metal claws of a bulldozer started grinding the interior of his chest //p166// above his heart. And to make it return to forgetfulness, he needed an effort of will almost muscular that locked his jaws and covered his face with sweat.

When the aircraft stopped, Oliver left his seat and went out on the platform at the top of the ladder. He was hit by a hot wind, steadfast, that came from the depths of the night, flowed soundlessly, horizontally, and brought an odour saturated with oil and camel dung.

He had another stopover in Bombay, where he had to change aircrafts. Budgies were flying around inside the airport. Unknown birds were nesting in the cells of the iron beams. An enormous lizard, its spangled claws stuck to a windowpane, was sleeping, its stomach baking in the sun.

34

//p167// Patrick was waiting for him at the airport. When he slapped him on the shoulder, Oliver jumped: he hadn't recognized him. Patrick, already spindly in Paris, had gotten even thinner. His hair was clipper cut and his complexion had become the colour of a cigar. Glasses with metallic frames enlarged his eyes with a look as pure and clear as that of a child's.

After enjoying Oliver's confusion for a second, Patrick burst into laughter.

"You, you haven't changed," he said.

"What happened to you?" retorted Oliver, passing his hand over his head, "did you smoke some of Gandhi's weed?"

"Something like that... Do you have any luggage?"

"Oliver lifted his bag.

"Wow, that's it?"

"Perfect, we'll get through Customs faster. I'll take care of it. Give it. Go show your passport over there..."

Oliver presented his passport to a government official who, seeing the visa was good for a stay of two years, became hostile. He asked him in English what he had come to do in India. Oliver didn't understand and responded in French that he didn't //p168// understand. But the government official knew. It was another one of those Occidentals who had come to "save" India with their advice, their money, their morale, their techniques, and their certainty of superiority. The passport was in order. He couldn't do anything. He stamped it with a blow but really would have preferred to knock Oliver with his fist.

Large fans similar to some outdated airplane propellers garnished the airport's ceilings and softly brewed a torrid breeze. Oliver let himself fall onto a couch. He was too hot, he was thirsty, he had a guilty conscience, he felt very uneasy. Patrick arrived with his bag.

"Go on, get up, lazy! The jeep's waiting for us outside. And there is ground to be covered before tonight!"

Oliver rose and took his bag. Patrick was as happy as someone who had found his brother again.

"When Rome telegraphed me, I said to myself: It's impossible, it's a joke!"

"Almost," Oliver said softly.

"I would've liked to stay with you. Both of us here, can you imagine? It would've been fabulous! But I'm cracking... Amoebas... Maybe the lack of meat, the heat... I don't know... I'm dragging my heels, I'm not good for anything anymore... I need to go breathe for a few months... But we'll find each other again! I'll come back!"

He gave a light affectionate slap like the caress of a wing on Oliver's shoulder.

They arrived next to the door. Oliver stopped and turned his head a little towards Patrick. He was concerned.

"Are you really tired?"

"Pretty close to the extreme end of my energy... It's not easy, you'll see, but you, you're strong..."

//p169// Oliver lowered his head. How to tell him? And then he stood up straight and faced him, eye to eye. He had to tell the truth. He had already lied too much since his arrival in Rome.

"Listen, this is bothering me... I think they'll send you someone else without delay... But me, I'm not going with you..."

"What?... Where are they sending you?..."

Patrick was dismayed, but not angry. He understood the immensity of the task undertaken by the Teams, and the pathetic limits of their means. They took things on where they could, as well as they could.

"They're not sending me anywhere," said Oliver. "It is I who's going elsewhere... I'm going to Kathmandu..."

"Kathmandu? What are you going to do in Kathmandu?..."

Patrick didn't understand. This story seemed absurd to him.

"I'm going to settle an account," said Oliver. "With a bastard. It's necessary. I didn't have any money, I used the Teams to get to here, and now I'm continuing on, that's all."

"That's all?"

"Yes..."

"You're telling me about a bastard... And you, what do you think you are?"

"I am what they made me become!" said Oliver, furious. "I will pay you back for the cost of the journey! It's only a loan! No point in making a mountain out of it!"

Patrick closed his eyes for a second, exhausted, and reopened them trying to smile.

"I'm sorry. I know well that you're not a bastard..."

//p170// The physical exhaustion of Patrick, his leniency, and his friendship, exasperated Oliver.

"Even if I am a bastard, I don't care! And if I'm not one now, I hope I'll become one! Ciao!"

He put his bag on his shoulder and turned his back to Patrick. When he was about to go out the door, he called after him.

"Oliver!"

Oliver stopped, irritated. Patrick joined him.

"We're not going to get mad, that would be idiotic... Listen, Palnah, it's on your way... If you want, I'll take you with the jeep, that'll save you two thirds of the road. Afterwards, you can do the rest by foot and by train, to the border of Nepal..."

He placed his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"You have your reasons, It's just too bad, that's all..."

Oliver relaxed a bit.

"Okay, thank you for the jeep..."

He finally managed to smile. He said, "It would've bothered me to miss spending a little time with you..."

35

//p171// Once the jeep left the city's suburbs to take a country road, Oliver, pale, closed his eyes and rested for a long while before opening them. Beneath his eyelids the images that he had just seen, and couldn't manage to believe were possible, unfolded again. He suspected that Patrick had chosen that road on purpose, but maybe all the other roads would have shown him the same thing.

At first they had followed a series of incredibly lavish avenues, wide, bordered with huge gardens bubbling with greenery and flowers, beyond the depth of which large low houses snuggled up in the coolness could be made out. It was a rich quarter, after which followed the quarter of grand hotels and businesses. A lot of space, very orderly. A scorching heat beamed down from a half-veiled sun. The shirts of the two boys were soaked with sweat but Oliver guessed that it had to be okay in all those residences where air-conditioning certainly reigned.

And then Patrick left an already narrower avenue and turned onto a road. All at //p172// once it was an entrance to another world. Before Oliver had the time to really look around, the jeep had to stop before a skeletal cow, standing in the middle of the street, immobile, its head hanging. Patrick revved the engine and honked. The cow didn't budge. It seemed that she didn't have enough life left in her to move any further, not even one centimetre. And there was no room to pass, to the right or to the left.

There were men, children, women, crammed along the wall where the shade fell. They were either sitting or sleeping, and those that had their eyes open were looking at Patrick and were looking at Oliver, and their looks didn't express anything, neither curiosity, nor hostility, nor sympathy, nothing but an endless wait on/for something, someone, maybe friendship, maybe death. The latter was the only visitor which they could be certain would not fail to come. It came at any moment. With astonishment Oliver realized that one of the men he saw lying among the others, with a piece of his clothing turned down over his face, was dead. There was another, facing him, lying fully in sunlight, who didn't have enough energy to go to the shady side, and who was waiting for the visitor. He was wearing a thin rag around his waist, and every one of his bones was sculpted through his tobacco and dust coloured skin. There wasn't enough water left in him for the sun to succeed in making him sweat. His eyes were closed, his mouth half-open in the middle of his grey beard. His chest rose lightly, then fell. Oliver watched the casing of bones become immobile and a moment thus passed where he asked himself if this was the end, or if... And the chest, through an incredible stubbornness, rose again.

//p173// The cow still wasn't moving. Patrick got down from the jeep, rummaged under his seat, and pulled out a handful of dry grass and went to present it to the cow. She sighed and advanced her muzzle. Patrick retreated, the cow followed. When it had cleared enough space for the jeep to get by, Patrick gave it the grass.

They set off again. Oliver didn't take his eyes off the man in the sun. He turned his head to continue to look at him, until a group of children hid the man from him. The group of children were looking at him. All the children were looking at him. He didn't see anything but the children's eyes, huge, watching him with frightening solemnity, waiting for him to... What? What could he give them? He had nothing, he was nothing, he *wanted* to give nothing. He had decided from now on to be on the side of those who *take*. He clenched his teeth, stopped looking at the crowd in the shade. But the jeep moved slowly, clearing a path on the narrow road encumbered by vehicles pulled by gaunt men or buffalo. It had to stop a second time to let a knot of interminably slow traffic loosen.

A naked boy, five or six years old, ran towards the jeep. He held out his left hand to beg while uttering words that Oliver didn't understand. And in his right arm he held an infant of a few weeks, also naked, who was dying. Its complexion was a greenish yellow. It had closed its eyes to the world that it wouldn't have time to get to know, and it still tried to breathe a bit of air, with the same gaping as a fish thrown on the sand a long time ago.

36

//p174// A cloud of dust surrounded the jeep. Large foreign trees bordered both sides of the rugged road, and between the trees Oliver could see right to the horizon, to

his left and to his right, the desiccated countryside, on which countless villages were stuck like scabs on the skin of a mangy dog.

"It hasn't rained in six months," said Patrick. "It should have rained after the sowing period... It didn't rain... There where there weren't any wells, there is no harvest.

"And so?"

"So those who don't have any reserves are dying."

Oliver shrugged his shoulders.

"You tried to get me by crossing the city, you're trying again here... but I'm not taken in. They have a government! They have the Americans. UNESCO!"

"Yes," said Patrick softly.

"If there are a hundred million dying of hunger, what can I do? What are you doing there, you, with your drops of water?..."

"Even a single drop," said Patrick, "is better than no water at all."

//p175// There were no more trees, and the road had become a trail that ran across an earth cracking like a pond bed sucked up by the sun over countless summers. They had been driving for hours. Oliver had lost all notion of time. It seemed to him as though he had arrived either by magic or a nightmare on a strange planet that finished by dying with its occupants.

They passed beside some vultures milling about, busily devouring something – a dead cow or buffalo. They couldn't see what it was. On the prey were several thick layers of vulturous predators. Those on top were trying to make a path to the food by plunging their long necks through the mass of the others. And more were arriving, in soft and heavy flight, appearing suddenly, it seemed, out of nowhere.

They crossed a miserable village, half deserted, whose straw huts huddled against each other to protect themselves from the heat and the world. Oliver could only see women and children, and some elderly at the end of their lives.

"It's a village of pariahs," explained Patrick once they had passed through. "They are without caste, untouchables. Dalnah, where I am at the moment, is the same... All the men go to work in the neighbouring village, a rich village... Well, rich... I mean to say a village of men who have a caste, men who have the right to consider themselves men, even if they're from an inferior class. Pariahs aren't men. They are made to work like buffalo or horses. They and their families are given the means to nourish themselves, like //p176// how an ox that has done its work is given an armful of fodder, and they are sent off to a stable, that's to say, to their village... If they want to want to eat the following morning, they have to return to work... They have their own land, that the government gave them, but they don't have the time to work on them, don't have the time to dig a well... Before reaching water, they'd be dead from hunger.

"They're fools!" growled Oliver. "What are they waiting for to revolt? They just have to open fire everywhere!"

"They don't understand that idea," said Patrick. "They only understand the idea that they're pariahs. They have this idea since birth, for thousands of years. Since forever. Could you convince an ox that he is anything other than an ox? From time to time they could butt something. But pariahs don't have horns.

The jeep was a small cloud of dust that moved in the desert. A dry desert, but inhabited, with villages everywhere, some surrounded by a bit of vegetation, most of

them dried up right to the edge of the huts. What was incredible, was that so many living there could still exist...

"Their revolution," said Patrick, "it's us who are creating it. We arrive with money. We don't give them alms. We pay them to work. But to work *for themselves*. They dig their wells, cultivate their earth, sow, harvest. As soon as they have enough reserves to make it to the next harvest, we can leave, they're saved. When we arrived, they were animals, when we leave them, they're men."

Oliver didn't respond. He was overwhelmed by the fatigue, the change of surroundings, and the incredible absurdity of what he was seeing. The dust entered his //p177// throat, crunched between his teeth, covered him with what seemed like a layer of lunar dust.

Bit by bit, the trail rose level to the ground. Soon the jeep rolled along the embankment that rose a metre above the plain.

"Here," said Patrick, "when it's not a drought, it's a flood. This whole region is submerged every year. The trail, at the moment, shows just its surface. Sometimes, it's flooded.

The sun was lowering on the horizon, but the heat stayed the same. The cloud of dust began to tint itself pink.

"When I arrived in Palnah, they were naked. There are places where nudity is innocence. Here, it was only animal nudity. Before anything else, we dressed them...

They approached a village whose huts piled up on a sort of knoll, a suggestion of a hill that is supposed to partly shelter it from the floods.

"This is Palnah," said Patrick.

37

//p178// At the foot of the village, there was a sort of funnel of which several meters were dug into the earth, with a raised circular embankment all around, and a path that led from the top of the embankment right to the bottom of the funnel. It was the well.

It wasn't finished; it had only just reached the layer of earth saturated with water. There was more digging to be done. There were men digging at the bottom of the funnel, and women standing all along the circular path that rose above the embankment. They were passing each other basketfuls of runny earth, and once they arrived above, other men took hold of them and spread the contents outside the funnel. The earth was yellow, sandy, and it ran with the water it contained, it ran on the faces, on the shoulders, and the bodies of the women, and the women laughed at the blessing of that water finally coming out of the earth, and at that earth that was running over them and adorning them with golden make-up.

The jeep stopped at the foot of the well, followed by all the children of the village, who had seen them arrive.

The men and the women who had been in the well interrupted their work, and those that had been in the huts came out, and all of them assembled around the car and //p179// the two dust and mud coloured men.

"You see," said Patrick to Oliver, pointing the circular embankment out to him, "it's to protect the well against the flood. Here, you have to defend water from water. The

flood's water transports all the debris, the manure, and the corpses. It enriches the earth, but it spoils the wells. You have to prevent it from entering...

There was a large attentive silence around them. The men, the women, and the children were listening to these mysterious words that they didn't understand.

Patrick sat up in the car and greeted the people of the village by joining his hands in front of his chest and inclining himself towards them, in several directions. It wasn't a ceremonious greeting, it was a greeting of friendship, accompanied by a smile.

He jumped to the ground. Oliver got up next and saw every eye fix its gaze upon him, the men's, the women's, and the children's. They didn't have the same look as those in the town where the laying men were waiting to die, but they resembled them: they were open. All the eyes he had seen since his arrival in India were *open*. The word came to his mind abruptly and he realized in an instant that up until now he had only seen *shut* eyes. They didn't want to receive anything or give anything. They were hardened like trunks, impassable.

//p180// Here, at the other side of the world, eyes were open doors. Black. Under the gloom of emptiness. They were waiting for something to enter and switch on the fires of light. Maybe the gesture of a friend. Maybe only a hope of God at the end of the unending eternity. To die, to live, didn't seem to be important. What was important, was to receive something, and to hope. And all the doors of those eyes were immensely open to receive that sign, that suspicion, that atom of hope that had to exist somewhere in the world, infinite, and that had the face of a brother, or a stranger, or a flower, or a god.

In the open eyes of the women and the men and the children that surrounded Oliver was something that was missing in the eyes of the city. There was, at the depth of the darkness, a small flame that glowed. There was no longer emptiness. They had been listening for a thousand years, and someone had finally arrived and switched on that first light. In each look there was a small light that was waiting for another. They had already received something, they were waiting for more. In exchange, they gave themselves.

Oliver felt himself overcome by vertigo, like at the edge of an open and bottomless crevasse in a glacier. It was him whom all those open eyes awaited.

"At least come greet them," said Patrick... "I'll tell them that you're being sent elsewhere and that I'm staying. I can't tell them the truth."

Oliver shook himself and slapped himself to chase away the dust, and jumped out of the jeep.

"Tell them what you want," he said, "me, I'm taking off. Where's my path?"

Once he had put his feet on the ground, the women and the men joined their hands //p181// in front of their chests and inclined themselves towards him with a smile. The children did the same thing and inclined themselves several times, laughing.

"Greet them!" said Patrick in a low voice. "They've done nothing to you!"

Oliver, awkward, embarrassed, conscious of being ridiculous and obnoxious, imitated their gesture, bent forward to the left, to the right, facing them...

"Is that okay like that?" he asked, furious. "Where's my route?"

"You don't to want sleep here? It's going to be dark... You'll leave tomorrow morning."

"No," said Oliver, "I'm going."

He took his bag out of the jeep and threw it on his back.

"They've prepared a small party for your arrival... Stay tonight at least... You owe me that..."

The crowd looked from Patrick to Oliver, from Oliver to Patrick, he felt the negative weight on him, the insufferable/unbearable appeal.

"I owe money, that's it. I'll pay it!... If you don't want me to go into danger, show me the direction."

But the circle of visitors had closed around him and Patrick, and to leave, he would have to push his way through it, push aside the people with both hands like branches in a forest when you've lost the trail. Patrick became quiet. Leave in which direction? North... The sun was setting to his left. North was before him. He just had to go straight ahead.

He took a first step and the crowd opened itself up. It opened from the outside of the circle right to him. A little girl from the village arrived carrying something in her two hands, raised in front of her at the height of her chest. When she reached Oliver, she gave //p182// what she was carrying to an older man who was standing there. It was a bowl, a simple pale green plastic bowl, ridiculous modern junk, but full to the brim with clear water of which the child, running, had not spilt one drop.

The elderly man, bending forward, gave the bowl to Patrick, delivering a few words at the same time. Patrick presented the bowl to Oliver:

"They're offering you what to them is the most precious," he said.

Oliver hesitated a second, then let his bag fall, took the bowl with both hands and drank the contents right to the last drop, closing his eyes with happiness.

When he reopened them the little girl was standing before him and was looking at him as she raised her head, smiling, happy, with eyes as big as the night that was falling, and like her, full of stars.

Oliver gathered his bag and threw it in the jeep.

"Fine," he said, "I'll stay tonight, but tomorrow morning, I'm taking off!"

"You're free," said Patrick.

38

//p183// They had lit a fire in the middle of the village square, a small fire, because wood was just as rare as water, but for a party given for a friend, you sacrifice what you have. They were sitting on the ground, all around, in a circle, and a woman was singing. A man accompanied her by striking a type of log of dry wood with a small cylinder of heavy wood. There wasn't any other type of instrument in the village.

Facing the woman, on the other side of the fire, Oliver and Patrick were sitting side by side. Oliver was suffering in his frog position. He didn't know how to sit without a seat. His folded up thighs were hurting him, and he didn't dare move because the little water-carrying girl had come to sit next to him and, watching him with her huge eyes without saying anything had, bit by bit, let herself be overcome by the natural fatigue of a child at night, had inclined herself towards him, had placed her head on his thigh, and was sleeping.

A man's voice rose above the woman's singing, that had become subdued and veiled like a sort of accompaniment. He, who had a nearly white beard, was speaking //p184// while looking at Oliver and making gestures with his arms and his hands, with

fingers spread out or joined together. It was the leader of the village, the elderly man to whom the little girl had given the water so that he would give it to the one arriving.

"He's thanking you for coming," said Patrick in a low voice.

Oliver shrugged his shoulders. The little girl sighed in her sleep, stirred, fell over a bit, the nape of her neck resting on Oliver's thigh, her cloistered and peaceful face turned to the crest of the night. She was visibly, totally relaxed. She was secure. She was happy.

Patrick smiled looking at her. While the elderly man continued to speak, he softly said to Oliver:

"You could say she'd adopted you!..."

A defence reflex gripped Oliver. He felt as though if he stayed there a few moments more he would be taken in to the trap of that confidence, of that love, of the crazy desire that he felt rising in him to stay with these people and this child curled up against him like a kitten, the desire to forget his trials and tribulations, and to end his journey there.

To help him, he recalled the memories of May, the lies, the confrontation of egos... And the evening at the villa, with his mother in the crimson bed. He heard her moans in the cypress and rosemary scented night. He plugged his ears with both hands, tightened his shut eyes, shook his head with pain.

Patrick watched him. Surprised and worried, he moved away from him cautiously. He had to not say anything, not do anything. He began to realize that his friend carried a bleeding wound somewhere that Patrick didn't want to touch upon. Any hand that is //p185// extended towards a tormented soul gives it nothing but pain. Healing can only come from within one's self, and with time.

Oliver pulled himself together, looked at the villagers whose faces the fire made dance. They had become indifferent to him like the trees.

He lifted the little girl's chest, turned her gently, and laid her on the ground. She didn't wake up.

"I'm going," he said to Patrick.

He rose and left the circle of light.

The elderly man abruptly became silent. Then the woman. Everyone looked in the direction that Oliver had disappeared.

Patrick stood up next. He said a few words to them in their language. The friend who had arrived had to leave. He had been called elsewhere. But he was staying.

Oliver took his bag from the jeep and began to walk between the huts. The trail crossed the village and was supposed to continue northwards. At sunrise he would orient himself.

He stumbled over a cow sleeping on the path. He swore at the cow, at India, at the universe. A gaunt hen sleeping on the roof woke up frightened, cackled, and fell back asleep.

Oliver reached the bottom of the other slope of the hill, there where the last of the huts stopped. In the dark he made out someone standing waiting for him. It was Patrick. Oliver stopped.

"Okay," he said, "it's this way?..."

"Yes... Straight ahead; after one or two days of walking, it'll depend on you, you'll find a city, Mādirah. The train goes through there. Do you have money for the train?"

"A little."

"It doesn't go any further than the border. Once you're in Nepal, you have to continue on foot."

//p186// "I'll manage," said Oliver... "I'm sorry: here... I can't... I hope that they'll send you someone soon..."

"Don't worry about me," said Patrick... "Here, you forgot something essential." He held out a plastic flask to him, full of water.

39

//p187// It was the third day after he entered Nepal that he met Jane.

On the Indian train he had found the same crowd as on the city's roads. A little less miserable, but even more packed together. Daily life continued in the carriages as if it had just been put on wheels. In vain he had searched for a place to sit. In one carriage, a woman was cooking rice between a traveler's bare legs, on a little gas lamp. In another, a very thin holy man, laid out on a seat bench, was either dead or dying, or maybe she was just meditating. The other occupants were praying aloud. Some sticks stuck in a small leather object placed on the floor burned and gave off a mixed perfume of incense and sandalwood.

Every time Oliver framed himself in the doorway of a crammed/packed compartment, all eyes turned to him. Only the holy man and those who were praying didn't look at him. He ended up sitting in the corridor, among some other passengers sitting or lying down. He clenched his bag to him and fell asleep. When he woke up, //p188// they had stolen the money he'd had in his shirt pocket. It had only been three one dollar bills. He still had twenty dollars in his bag.

At the border, the Nepal government officials didn't create any difficulties for him. They were extremely kind. Smiling they spoke an atrocious English of which Oliver didn't understand a single word despite all his school boy memories. They stamped his passport, made him sign a few poorly printed forms on poor quality paper. He couldn't figure out how much time he was authorized to stay there. He exchanged a few dollars at the small Royal Bank office that was there for that sole purpose. They gave him some rupee notes and some copper change. He signed some more papers. He asked in his novice English how he could get to Kathmandu. They responded abundantly with big warm smiles and sentences of which he understood only "Kathmandu." He found himself on the other side of the border post. There were two busses on a single track. The busses were old centenary trucks on which had been arranged an artisan coach painted with cheerful landscapes and garlands of flowers, and which had been topped with a sort of sculpted wood lace frieze. Both one and the other were already crammed full of passengers sitting, standing, packed together, almost spurting through the open windows, all the men dressed in a sort of white or grey canvas shirt that hung over pants of the same material, very large around the rear and tight from the knees to the ankles. Their heads were dressed in either a white or coloured canvas bonnet. Several among the youngest wore either European-style shirts or pyjama buttons.

//p189// Oliver approached one of the vehicles, and asked in a very loud voice, pointing to the bus:

“Kathmandu?”

All the passengers who heard him gave him a large smile and signalled “no” with their heads. He got the same result with the other bus. In any case, he would have hesitated in climbing into either one, already too full of a crowd of individuals who, he had realized upon approaching, although they were in an overflowing good mood, were surprisingly filthy.

That which he didn’t yet know, was that the head nod that they had simultaneously given him, and that for him had signified “no,” for them meant “yes.” Neither one of the busses, however, was going to Kathmandu. But nobody, among those kind people, had wanted to upset a stranger by telling him no.

On a map in Rome, Oliver had seen that only one road to Nepal existed, that went from the Indian border to that of China, and that passed in proximity to Kathmandu. A road opened up before him. He hoped that it was the one. He stepped out onto it. Once more, he had changed worlds.

After having crossed the never-ending dried-out Indian plain whose skin carried the eddying scars of floods, Oliver began to climb the first range that served as a border to Nepal. Soon there was nothing but greenery. Everywhere that the forest left the land exposed, it was meticulously wrought, right to the smallest possible fragment, and covered with crops which he didn’t recognize. Parisian, son or grandson of Parisians, even in France he would not have been able to distinguish between a beet and a shoot of corn.

//p190// The route crossed passes and bypassed valleys. Oliver took shortcuts, hurtling down slopes and climbing hills to find it on the other side. Each peasant that he met smiled at him and responded “no” to everything that he tried to say. They didn’t understand anything of what he was saying to them, and when you don’t understand anything it is courteous to respond yes. They responded yes and he understood no. He began to suspect his error when he became hungry and was looking for food. He approached a farm, which quite resembled a little French country home. The brick walls were covered with a layer of worn away roughcast, red to mid-height, ochre to the straw roof. When he approached, three naked children came out of the farm and ran towards him. They looked at him, laughing and chattering, with intense curiosity. They were well fed and visibly happy with life, and dirty from head to toe. A woman came out next, clothed in a red brick-coloured dress, with a white linen belt wrapped several times around her waist, that visibly sheltered a new hope...

She had brown skin, smiling eyes, black hair, well-combed and divided into two plaits woven with red wool. She was just as dirty as her children, if not more. Oliver greeted her in English, and smiling she signalled a “no.” Through gestures he explained to her that he wanted to eat and showed her a bill, to make her understand that he would pay. She started to laugh with mischief and gaiety, signalled another “no,” and entered the house.

Oliver sighed and got ready to leave again when she came back with a basket containing small new onions, and oranges and foreign fruit, which she placed in front of //p191// Oliver. Then she made a second trip and brought a bowl containing a mixture of rice and vegetables.

Oliver thanked her, she made another “no,” and when he squatted to eat, she remained standing in front of him with her children. All four watched him, chattering and laughing. Oliver ate the rice with his fingers. The vegetables that it contained were barely cooked and crunched between his teeth. It all tasted like smoked wood. He tasted the fruits and found them to his liking, and finished with an orange that was more like a sort of large and very mild mandarin. The dirtiest of the children brought him water in a bowl in which his fingers had been considerably dipped. Oliver kindly refused, rose, offered a bill which the woman took with great satisfaction. He asked “Kathmandu?” “Kathmandu?” She responded verbosely and signalled towards the horizon. It was exactly that way that he’d counted on going.

The children accompanied him to the bottom of the valley, playing like puppies, then climbed back up to their house, running. There was a nearly naked man working in the field, quite a ways away, bent over a tool with a short handle. He straightened up and looked at Oliver. Then went back to work.

Oliver walked for two days, eating on farms, drinking and washing himself in streams or rivers, sleeping under trees. The temperature was very hot during the day and mild at night. On the road he was frequently passed or crossed by busses similar to those that he had seen at the border, or by simple trucks into which standing passengers had crammed themselves, but he hadn’t seen a single one carrying commodities. It seemed that cargo was reserved for human spines. On the road and on the trails, he was //p192// constantly meeting families of sherpas who, father, mother, children right down to the smallest, carried baskets proportional to their size. The baskets were suspended on a type of flat weave passed over the head, a little above the forehead, and contained immense weight. Oliver thus saw men, women, and children, carrying more than their own weight on their backs, attached on their heads, walking, trotting, running, disappearing behind trees, mountains, horizons, towards a goal that was fixed for them, and where they relieved themselves of their loads.

Thus he walked himself, with his load of resentment, of pain and hate. His goal lay somewhere behind a second chain of mountains that he couldn’t even see yet. On the third day, he no longer had any idea of the distance he had covered and of that which he had left to cover. But it was enough to continue walking, and the moment would come when he would take his last steps, find himself before his father, place his load before him, and present him with everything that he had brought for him from the other side of the world.

The day had been very hot. A thunderstorm had grumbled, rumbled, rattled above the mountains, without wanting to explode with a wrath that trembles and soothes. Oliver, after having crossed a valley where a suffocating mugginess reigned, had rejoined the route on the opposite side. He decided to rest a bit before continuing, stretched himself out on the stiff grass, at the edge of a small wood with strange trees, which for the most part bore flowers and needles.

Large white and grey clouds budded in the sky where great black birds swirled //p193// about. Oliver remembered the swarming of the vultures at the edge of the dried up hill in India, then of the face of the little girl in the village, of her eyes open like the doors of the night, that watched him with a very small light of hope in their depth, and an immense opening for love. He felt the weight of the small body, relaxed, confident, happy, on his thigh.

He grumbled, turned over onto his stomach, then fatigue overcame him and he fell asleep.

40

//p194// They were walking at the edge of the road, always in the same order, first Sven, then Jane, then Harold, always lagging behind a little, maybe because it was he who ate the most every time they actually had something to eat. Sven and Jane had less energy, but they had attained an animal lightness.

They found Oliver, who had turned onto his back again and was sleeping profoundly, his mouth sort of half-open. He had shaved and washed himself that morning in a stream, his curls had lengthened since his departure from Paris, the skin on his face had become darker than his hair but held onto its tanned reflection. His brown eyelashes created a lacy shadow under his shut eyelids.

Jane and Sven stopped, stood near him, and looked at him. And Jane smiled at him. After a short silence, Jane said in English:

“He’s French...”

“How do you see that?” asked Sven.

“I don’t see it, I know...”

“A girl, she never makes a mistake about a Frenchman,” said Harold, who had //p195// caught up to them. “She would recognize one even through a wall...”

They didn’t try to speak with lowered voices, to spare his sleep. But he didn’t hear anything. He continued to sleep, far away from everything, relaxed, innocent, and handsome like a child.

“He sure sleeps like a log!”

“He sleeps like a tree,” said Sven.

Harold noticed Oliver’s bag resting near him and grabbed it.

“Maybe there’s something to eat. The French are resourceful, for food.”

“Leave it! said Sven. “We have to ask him.”

He crouched down next to Oliver and put his hand on his shoulder to shake him.

“No!” said Jane. “Not like that!...”

Sven pulled his hand back, stood up and looked at Jane who was moving towards the trees and the bushes and started to gather flowers.

She covered Oliver’s chest and stomach with flowers, she put some in her hair and put some in the boys’ hair. Then she sat down next to Oliver, facing his face and signaled to Sven. The latter sat down next and placed his guitar on his knees. Jane began to sing, softly, an Irish ballad, and from time to time Sven accompanied her with a chord. Jane, bit by bit, sang louder and louder. Harold was sitting two feet away, next to Oliver’s bag. He found the wait very boring.

The music and the softness of the voice entered Oliver, mixed in with his sleep, then filled his whole head, and he had no more room for sleep. He opened his eyes and saw a girl crowned with flowers, who was smiling at him. Her long hair hung over her //p196// shoulders like a light and a shadow of red gold.

Her eyes, which were watching him, were large and of a very pure blue, almost violet. Behind her head, the sun had made a hole in the clouds, through which it sent flames in all directions, and into the flowers that crowned her and bordered her hair.

There was joy in the sky and in the flowers. And the face that was smiling at him was at the centre of that joy.

41

//p197// Jane spoke French with a ravishing accent. Oliver listened to her, amused. He listened to her and watched her. Above her moving image, he never stopped looking at her fixed image, radiant, haloed by the sun, like she had appeared to him as he had opened his eyes.

The sun had set, they had eaten some fruit, lit a fire, and now chatted a bit, relaxed, discussing themselves and the world, Jane was sitting next to Harold who from time to time placed his hand on her, and every one of his gestures made Oliver ache a little.

Sven, who was leaning against a tree, stretched himself out and lit a cigarette; Harold stretched himself out as well and laid down, his head resting on Jane's thighs. There was a silence, which Oliver abruptly interrupted.

"What exactly are you going to do in Kathmandu?"

He was looking at Jane and Harold, but it was Sven who responded, tranquilly, without moving.

"Kathmandu. It's Buddha's country... He was born there... He died there... He's buried there... And all the other Gods are there too... It's the most sacred place on //p198// earth... It's the place in the world where the face of God is closest to the Earth..."

He held out his cigarette in Jane's direction, who extended her arm, took it, and happily took a drag.

"Buddha!" exclaimed Oliver. "And hash sold freely at the market, like radishes or spinach! Isn't it rather for *that* that you're going there?"

"You don't understand anything!" said Jane. "*That*, that's joy!..."

She took another drag of the cigarette and handed it to Oliver.

"Thank you!" said Oliver, "you can keep that filth!"

Harold slid his hand under Jane's blouse and caressed her breast.

"You wouldn't be unhappier!" said Jane.

"I'm not unhappy!" said Oliver.

In the small woods a bird was singing a strange song, three long notes ceaselessly repeated, a sad and soft but nevertheless peaceful song. Jane started to become breathless under Harold's caresses. She would have liked to convince Oliver.

"Leave me alone!" she said to Harold.

"Leave him..." said Harold, "alone... He thinks what he wants... It's his right..."

Jane gave in. Harold laid her down on the ground, unbuttoned her blouse, and pulled at the groove of her pants.

Oliver rose, gathered his bag, kicked what was left of the fire, and disappeared into the night.

The next morning they caught up to him, even though he had walked faster than //p199// them. But he had stopped at the edge of the road, persuading himself that he needed to rest. And when he saw them arriving on the other side of the valley, like tiny little flies, the enormous load that was weighing on his heart vanished. They walked

together. Sven walked first, then Jane and Oliver, and Harold a bit further, lagging a little behind.

"Kathmandu," said Jane, "is a country where no one bothers you, where everybody does what they want."

"Paradise, huh!"

Jane smiled.

"Do you know where Paradise is? Me, I imagine... It's a place where no one forces anything on you, no one forbids you anything... Whatever you need, you don't take from others, others give it to you... You share everything, you love everything, you love everyone... You have nothing but joy...

"With harp music and angel feathers!" said Oliver smiling.

"You laugh, but it's possible on earth, if you want it... You have to want it... And you, what are you going to look for in Kathmandu?"

Oliver became silent again, all of a sudden.

"The only thing that counts: money."

"You're crazy!... That's what counts the least!"

He took his furious tone again, the one that helped him convince himself that he was right.

"What counts then? What do you want to do, to be stronger than the bastards?"

She stopped for a second and looked at him with a surprised air that opened her shaded flowery eyes even more.

"If you fill your pockets with money, you become a bastard also!... Me, I had as //p200// much as I wanted... My father is *full up*⁴⁸ with it, full of money... He takes it from everyone, everyone takes it from him! It's as if they take his flesh from him... So to forget, he..."

Abruptly she became silent.

"He what?" asked Oliver.

"Nothing... He does what he wants... He's free... Everyone's free..."

She started walking again.

"And yours, what does he do?" she asked.

"Mine what?"

"Your father, is he rich?"

"He died... When I was six months old."

"And your mother?"

"I just lost her..."

In the evening, they lit a fire at the bottom of a small valley where a stream flowed. They had bought rice and fruit with Oliver's money. Harold cooked the rice in a tin can. They ate it that way, without any seasoning. Oliver was beginning to get used to simple tastes, the essential, food whose only purpose is to nourish. Compared to this rice, fruit was a marvel.

Harold stretched out and fell asleep. Sven smoked. Oliver, leaning against a tree, recounted the days of May to Jane, stretched out next to him, in a low voice.

Jane straightened up and, on her knees, faced Oliver.

"Fighting doesn't achieve anything, ever... Everyone knows that, and everyone fights... The world is stupid..."

⁴⁸ In English in the original French version.

She took Sven's cigarette and took a drag.

With one of her fingers on the hand that was holding the cigarette, she drew a small circle on Oliver's forehead.

//201// "Your revolution, it has to happen here..."

Slowly, her hand descended the length of his face and presented the cigarette to Oliver's lips.

He grabbed her hand gently and firmly, and took the cigarette from it, raised it, looked at it.

"Your theories, we could discuss them, if there wasn't *this*... Your world, you build it with smoke..."

He threw the cigarette into the embers.

Harold sat up with a spring, shouting.

"Listen! Shut up! Shut up! Listen!..."

He held out his finger, commanding, in the direction of the pass they had crossed just before stopping for the night.

They all listened. They only just heard, they made out, what Harold's ear, always sharpened like a cat's, had discerned in his sleep before them: the powerful and steady hum of a motor from a large car.

"An A-me-ri-can car!" Harold shouted.

All of a sudden, a paintbrush of headlights lit up the hillside, and revealed a hundred metres of the road. The sound of the motor accelerated.

"Hide! Quick!"

Harold pushed Sven and Oliver towards the bushes, gathered Jane's bag and stuck it in her arms.

"You, on the road!"

He threw her towards the middle of the road, and ran to join the two boys in the gloom.

The car: a super powerful American sports car with all the latest gadgets. Someone alone at the wheel. On the road, in the middle, moving straight ahead, headlights discovering and lighting up a girl in blue jeans and half-open light blouse, who is blinking, dazzled, and signalling the car to stop.

//202// A gloved hand hits the horn, without letting go. The right foot pushes on the accelerator. The girl stays in the middle of the road. The horn blares. The girl doesn't move. There isn't enough room to pass. Foot flooring the brake, the tires tear the road. The car stops dead, a few centimetres from the girl.

The door opens, someone gets out of the car, and goes to join Jane in the headlights. A woman, of that undeterminable age that well taken care of women are once they've passed forty. She's a redhead, as much as can be judged by the apparent colour of her hair, that she wears long like a young girl. She's wearing a green tunic over cherry red Bermuda shorts. She is clean, rubbed down, grated, washed, massaged; not a gram too much, just the right count of vitamins and calories.

She insults Jane in American, she orders her to remove herself from there, to clear the way, her car's not a garbage collecting truck. The woman raises a hand to hit her. Another hand comes out of the shadows and grabs her wrist, twirls her around and sends her against the open door that slams shut. Oliver, having entered the headlights' paintbrush, interrogates Jane anxiously.

"Are you okay? Nothing's wrong? She almost ran you over, that tramp!

"Oh!" said the American. "A Frenchman! You couldn't have shown yourself sooner?"

"And an Englishman," said Harold, smiling, appearing suddenly out of the shadows. "And a Swede!..."

He extended his arm to point out a spot between the light and the shadows, and there Sven appeared, puncturing the night's wall, his guitar hanging from his neck.

//p203// The American entered into the light next and stopped in front of Harold. She turned her back to the headlights, and looked at him without saying a word. The boy's short brown beard and curls of his hair shone in the light. He didn't move. He couldn't see anything but the woman's silhouette, serrated by the powerful beam of light. It was a thin and ageless silhouette. He was thinking about the rich car, the comfortable seats, and about everything that it had to have "around." He smiled, revealing superb teeth.

"Saint John!" said the American with surprise. "It's saint John with the sinner!"

Harold started to laugh. He introduced his companions. She said her name: Laureen. She made them get in and they drove off. Harold was sitting beside her, and the three others were behind, Jane between Sven and Oliver. Oliver couldn't manage to forget the image of Jane in the darkness, sculpted by the light of the car charging at her, and not moving, immobile, indifferent, serene, unconscious. Happy!

The cigarette...

Filth!

He couldn't do anything. It didn't concern him. Let her poison herself if that's what pleases her. He questioned Laureen aggressively.

"You're obviously going to Kathmandu, right?"

"I'm not going," said Laureen, "I already am... I'm coming back from a small trip... I've already been in Kathmandu for five weeks..."

"What are you looking for, there?... The face of God, you too?"

Laureen started to laugh.

"It's much too high... for me!... I take what I find... At my height!..."

//p204// With her right hand, she drew Harold's head to her and kissed him on the mouth. The car swerved, a huge tree and a red house charged at it. Harold freed himself roughly.

"Hey! Careful now!"⁴⁹

He grabbed the wheel and straightened out the car. The tree and the house disappeared into the night, behind, devoured. Laureen laughed.

They drove for almost an hour, then Laureen said:

"We won't make it to Kathmandu tonight. We're going to stop here, I know a place..."

It was a small plateau that the road crossed in a straight line.

Laureen slowed down, turned off to the left onto a type of trail, moved forward slowly for about a hundred metres. In the headlights, sheltered by a chapel hardly larger than him, appeared a sitting Buddha, eyes shut, smiling an ineffable smile of certitude. He seemed to be carved from a block of gold.

⁴⁹ In English in the original French version

//p205// Sven was sitting in the lotus position, facing the Buddha with the shut eyes. The Buddha was sitting facing him in the same position, heavy and well balanced, with that belly weight on which his stability was built. Sven was light as a reed, as a bird, he didn't feel weighted to the earth anymore. He had hardly eaten and smoked two joints. On the third one, he had understood that he was in communion with the Buddha, the one, exactly the one with the gold face, gold clothes, open on his gold chest and stomach, whose nostril's dark hole was looking to the sky. This Buddha had sat down in this spot centuries ago to wait for Sven. He had waited for centuries and centuries and finally, this evening, Sven had come.

He had gone to sit facing the Buddha, he had looked at him, and the Buddha who saw everything looked at him through his shut eyelids with his imperceptible blissful smile. Sven understood what the Buddha was saying and, to answer him, took his guitar and pressed it against his stomach. The cigarette burned slowly between his lips. He took //p206// a long drag and thus knew what he had to say, where he had to place his left hand, which chord to pinch, and with which correct note and correct strength he should speak to the Buddha. A single chord, a single note, a perfect round note like the harmony of the universe, and which contained it entirely. What he had to say to the Buddha was this: everything.

An old bonze⁵⁰ with a saffron robe had come out of nowhere, lit three copper lamps at the Buddha's feet, and had returned into the night. Laureen had lit her butane lamp at the edge of the long basin that separated the two Buddhas. In the harsh light of the lamp she had opened the three camping bags. Plates, utensils, ice, caviar, champagne, Coca-Cola, sandwiches, milk, salads, tablecloth, napkins... At the other end of the pond, the other Buddha had his eyes open. He was made of bronze, the colour of grass. With solemnity and love he watched everything that wanted to be watched.

Indistinguishable things stirred in the pond's thick green water. Long and slow backs undulated across the water's surface without penetrating it. A mouth inhaled a scrap thrown by Laureen. Small dark swirls that sunk into the green water. Nothing could be seen.

Laureen poured more champagne into the yellow bakelite⁵¹ glass that Harold was holding out to her.

"Drink, my handsome boy," she said to him. "You're handsome! Do you know that?"

"Yes," said Harold.

"You drink too much," said Jane, "you're going to be sick..."

"No,"* said Harold. "I like it..."

He emptied his glass and kissed Laureen on the mouth, for a long time. She choked, rose, took him by the hand and made him get up.

"Come!*"... Come... Into my car...."

⁵⁰ A Buddhist monk from, especially of China or Japan, or nearby countries.

⁵¹ A synthetic resin made from formaldehyde and phenol, and used for the same purposes as hard rubber, celluloid, etc. (Webster's p.140).

//p207// She pulled him towards the long red car sleeping at the other end of the basin. Harold let himself lag behind a bit, nonchalant, amused, barely drunk. Jane yelled to them. She was only tipsy.

*"Good night!"**

*"Same to you!"** responded Harold.

The notes of the guitar, rare, round like pearls, fell from Sven's long fingers from time to time.

Oliver took the bottle of champagne and bent towards Jane's glass.

"No," she said, "Cola..."

He served her some coke and served himself some champagne.

"You don't mind?" he asked her.

"What?"

"To think that he's busy undressing her and spreading her out on the car cushions?"

She started to laugh, softly.

"I think it's her rather, that's doing all that to him!"

"And you don't care?"

"If he goes there, it's because he likes it."

"You don't love him?"

Her big violet eyes looked at him with surprise over the rim of the blue glass.

"Of course I love him!... If I didn't love him I wouldn't sleep with him!... I love him, I love Sven, I love the sun, the flowers, the rain, I love you, I love to make love... You don't love to?"

She put her empty glass down and, pushing on both hands, drew closer to him. He threw the champagne that was left in his glass onto the grass and answered without looking at her.

"Not with just anybody..."

//p208// "Am I just anybody?"

This time, he turned to her, looked at her with a worried uncertainty and softly said:

"I don't know..."

"You don't find me beautiful?"

She faced him, on her knees like she had done when she had found him sleeping, like she had done again a few hours earlier, next to the fire lit at the side of the road. Between three fingers she undid the buttons of her blouse, and opened it, her two hands that were holding it open were outstretched towards him, as if to give him, as an innocent offering, new, the breasts that she was unveiling to him, in their perfection. They were small, and golden, like peaches, crowned with discreet tips only just darker. The harsh light of the lamp didn't manage to take away their infantile softness... They were like two fruits from Paradise.

Those breasts... The blindfold over the eyes... That breast that he had just barely touched... Almost in his hand... Was it Soura's... Or was it... The crimson sheet... His mother under that pig...

He screamed, furious:

"You show them like this to everyone?"

She rose and closed her arms on her chest, frightened.

He rose at the same time as her and slapped her forcefully.

She barely had time to cry out, more from surprise than from pain, that he had already taken her in his arms, held her tight against him, spoke in her ear, in the neck, kissed her, asked for her forgiveness.

"I'm an animal! A cretin! Forgive me..."

All of Jane's fear melted with Oliver's words and in his arms. She smiled and //p209// started to kiss him everywhere, on his eyes, on his nose, in his ear hole. She laughed, he laughed. He took off her blouse, her pants, her underwear, took her by the hand and distanced her from him to the end of his arm to have a better look at her... He repeated: "You're beautiful! You're beautiful!" She laughed, happy to hear him say that to her.

He made her spin around, slowly, several times. The pallid flame of the butane lamp gave her a statuesque air that was a bit pink, a bit white, a bit pale. She had nice, round but small, girl's buttocks, and when Oliver looked at her from the front, at the top of her long thighs a small triangle of golden lawn attached everything warm that it had to the light.

He gathered her towards him, took her in his arms, lifted her, and carried her.

"Where are you taking me to?"

He walked along the basin, the night took them, she was soft.

Jane curled up against Oliver's chest. He carried her, she was light and fresh and warm in his arms. He placed her before the open-eyed Buddha. There also were three lit copper lamps. He wanted to look at her again.

He undressed, and laid her on his clothes. She had closed her eyes and let herself be taken, passive, happy, spread out like the sea to the sun.

He was standing naked before her, his feet joined with hers, and his erection aimed towards the stars. He looked at her. She was thin, but not skinny, made of long soft bends that the lamps hemmed with light. The tips of her small breasts were like two pearls of tanned gold that burned.

//p210// He stretched out against her, on his side, continuing looking at her. He had never seen a girl so beautiful. Or maybe he had never taken the time to really see.

She felt, tight between him and her, against her hip, his hard and soft extended member. She let out a small giggle of happiness, slid her hand towards him and enveloped him.

Oliver bent down and kissed her eyes, her nose, the corners of her mouth, lightly, without lingering, like a bee who is gathering nectar from a blooming mint stem while continuing to fly. Then he descended, broke away from her, took the tip of one breast in his lips, then the other, placed them on his shut eyes, caressed his cheeks with their soft plumpness, took turns with one cheek and then the next, nudged them with his nose like a hungry infant, bit them with his lips, took them in his hands, and without letting go, descended his lips further, over her soft flat belly, over the tender and warm line of her groin. Jane's leg opened out, like a flower, blossoming. The short curls of the small triangle revealed their secret. Oliver saw the flower of the light hatch. Slowly he bent towards it and placed his lips there.

From the peaks of her breasts that were caressing his hands, to the peak between her legs that his mouth was melting, Jane was nothing more than a wave of joy, a triangular river that ran over itself with intense eddies of something greater than pleasure,

all the joy of the earth and the sky that she was taking and giving. And then, it was tremendous, it was no longer possible, she grabbed Oliver's hair fully with both hands, clung to his head, wanted to plunge him into her, burst, faded, nothing more was anything, even her.

So Oliver, gently, vacated the golden flower, tenderly kissed the soft and warm //p211// line of her groin, her shut eyes. And Jane felt him slowly, powerfully, enter her.

Half asleep, half dead, she felt that it was going to begin again, what she didn't believe was possible, and overtake her. She began to live in her body's innermost depth, around the god that was penetrating there and that was busy illuminating the sun and the stars.

The Buddha who watches was watching. He had already seen all the love of the world.

43

//p212// Laureen honked. A packed truck from Nepal was driving in the middle of the road and sending a long cloud of dust behind it. She pushed a button, and the top sprung up from the trunk of the car and closed above them, the windows rose and tightly shut them in.

The passengers on the truck, astonished, cried out with joy and laughed.

Laureen pressed on the horn. Finally, the large vehicle moved to the left and grazed the embankment. In Nepal you drive on the left, like in India, that's to say, like in England. The American passed in a whirlwind, very nearly ran over a family of porters loaded with bricks that were trotting along in front of the truck and then moved off. Laureen swore in American. She didn't like for anything to make itself an obstacle for her. In the seat beside her, Harold was sleeping. With a push of her thumb, Laureen rolled the windows and top back down.

In the backseat, Oliver was in the middle, with Jane on his right. Leaning sideways against the backseat, she looked at him without being able to understand what had happened to her the night before. What did he have, this boy? Yes, he was handsome, //p213// but so was Harold. Yes, he had made love to her well, like no one before, not anyone ever... But what she had experienced had been a greater pleasure than all the other times, it had been... What? Bliss?... She hadn't been happy then, before, with her boyfriends?... She thought that if he stayed with her, with them, it'd be wonderful... She sighed, smiled and nestled against him. She was broken.

Oliver looked at her with a tender, ironic little smile. He had taken her right up until sunrise, and now he felt that detachment of young males whose body is recovering its strength. Now, the important thing, was what was going to happen between him and his father in Kathmandu.

He leaned forward and asked Laureen:

"Do you know the people in Kathmandu?"

"I know everyone... I mean not the *natives*, of course*... The civilised, yes... They aren't many, it's a village..."

"Do you know one named Jamin?"

"Jacques? Everyone knows him! It's him that you want to see?"

She looked at him in the rear view mirror with curiosity. He let himself fall back, answering "yes."

"At the moment, he's not in Kathmandu," said Laureen... He's getting ready for a safari with my husband... George wants to bring back a few tiger heads to hang up between the Picassos... But he shoots like a slug."

"After a silence, she added with disgust:

He does everything like a slug... Thankfully, Jacques shoots at the same time!... Without which he wouldn't have any more clients... They would all be eaten! He's in his hunting camp, in the forest... If you want, I'll drop you off there on the way..."

//p214// Jane, anxious, took one of Oliver's hands in hers. He looked at her, then turned to Laureen. He told her that he was okay with that.

The road continued to descend now. The first mountain chain had been crossed. The car reached the bed of the wide valley towards the middle of the afternoon. A sort of heat reigned there, very humid, tropical. A sort of sparse forest bordered the road on either side. The trees were enormous, widely spread out, separated by tall grass and clumps of dense bush, covered with huge flowers.

Laureen stopped at the beginning of a trail. A small wooden sign was nailed to a tree. A tiger head was painted on it, underlined with an arrow that indicated the direction in which the trail disappeared between the trees.

"This is it, boy," said Laureen.

Jane got out to let Oliver out. She accompanied him to the beginning of the forest's shade.

"Where are you going? What do you want from him, from this guy?"

"To take his money!..."

"You're crazy! Forget it, the money... Come with us!..."

"No..."

He looked at the car. Harold was eating a sandwich. Sven was smoking. He recalled the night before, the innocent body stretched out in the lamplight, the pleasure – the happiness? – that he had given her...

"Leave these guys! They're larvae! Come with me!..."

She looked at him with distress. How could he ask her that? She didn't want to, //p215// she couldn't return to that world that she had left, the ordinary world, of money, of obligations and prohibitions. Sven had shown her freedom, and nothing could make her renounce her new life, which was the only real one, the only possible one. She wouldn't leave Sven, even for Oliver. She didn't think about Harold, Harold didn't count. But when she answered Oliver, it was Harold that he thought of, of the scene from the night before last, next to the fire...

"So, see you! Ciao!..."

He lifted his bag and put it over his shoulder. She realized all of a sudden that this separation could be definitive, and she got scared.

"So, we won't see each other again?"

"Do you want to see me again?"

"Yes... You, don't?"

Yes, he wanted to see her again, but he couldn't forget the other guy undressing her. They're all the same! All! All!...

"There are things that I don't share," he said.

“What things? What are you trying to say?”

She didn't understand. She would have liked for him to explain, she could still maybe win him over.

“Hey!” cried Laureen! “Hurry up, Oliver!... The tigers start to get hungry at 7 o'clock!”

“Ciao!” said Oliver.

He turned his back to her and stepped onto the trail.

44

//p216// Facing behind her, Jane watched the forest that had just swallowed Oliver. The trail disappeared, there was a truck, a bend, dust, Jane kept looking backwards. She felt Sven's hand on her shoulder. She turned back. He smiled at her with kindness. She gave him a little smile that attempted to look happy. He showed her a blank piece of paper that he had pulled out of his pocket. He unfolded it. It contained white powder.

“I have a bit left... Want to share it?”

She stopped smiling. No, not that, she was scared.

“As you wish,” said Sven.

But just as he was taking the paper to his nostrils to snort it all, she held out her hand.

“Give it!...”

45

//p217// On a rope hanging between two trees hung seventeen tiger skins quartered with sticks. At the other end of the clearing, a man, standing in a jeep driven by a chauffeur wearing a red turban, passed in review of about thirty harnessed elephants, wearing hunting gear, each one carrying an official guide and an indigenous hunter, the beaters were lined up in front of them.

The jeep made an impeccable turn and turned to face the elephants, right in the middle.

The man standing up grabbed a megaphone and uttered a harangue in English. Oliver understood almost all of it, because it was English pronounced with a French accent, the kind that he had learned in secondary school...

With the tone of a general-in-chief, he gave recommendations for the hunt that was going to start in two days.

He ended by giving the time of the gathering. He was bareheaded, dressed in short khakis and a military shirt of the same colour. He was wearing a leather belt studded with copper on which hung a revolver's holster. In front of him, a tawny rifle was attached to the jeep's rear-view mirror.

The jeep turned on the spot and crossed the clearing, coming towards Oliver. The //p218// man, who was about to sit down, stood up upon seeing him and spoke to the chauffeur. The car stopped level to Oliver. He didn't move, didn't say anything. The man looked at him, intrigued, then irritated. He asked:

*“You want something?”**

Oliver asked him next:

"Are you Mr. Jamin?"

"Yes..."

"I'm Oliver..."

"Oliver?"

Oliver, Oliver, that meant something to him... Suddenly, his face lit up:

"Oliver?... You mean to say... Oliver... Martine's son?..."

"And yours, according to the registry office," said Oliver icily.

With a leap, Jacques jumped down from the jeep screaming, over Oliver's head:

"Yvonne! Yvonne!"

A voice responded from above the trees, demanding what was happening.

Jack screamed:

"Come see! It's wonderful! It's MY SON!"

He took Oliver by the shoulders, turned him around, and introduced him.

In the giant trees, between the branches, were constructed large huts of logs and straw, which were reached by wooden steps. They were the rooms meant for the hunters, deluxe "wild huts" for millionaires.

A window of the closest one framed the chest of the woman whom Jack had //p219// been addressing. She was dark, with flat hair that hung to just below her face. She was wearing a man's orange shirt, a bit faded. She looked at the two men without saying anything. Jack's enthusiasm didn't arouse any surge from her, even politeness. From as much as Oliver could judge from below, she seemed sad, and a little thin.

"That's Ted's wife, my associate," said Jack. "It's she who greets our clients, and me who supplies them with powerful emotions..."

46

//p220// During the few quarters of an hour that passed before the night's arrival, Jack took Oliver on a tour of the fittings of his hunting quarter, talking endlessly or shouting out orders to the domestic staff that appeared from every corner. He never became aware of Oliver's coldness, to whom, in any case, he didn't give the time to say a word.

He had hair the same colour as his son's, but flat and styled English-style, with a part on the left side, without a single grey hair. His eyes were lighter than Oliver's' and much less serious. It was Oliver's gaze that seemed to be adult, and his father's similar to that of a child.

"You'll sleep here: It's Rockefeller's hut. I'll leave you, you must need to have a bit of a wash. We'll eat in one hour..."

The dining room took up the largest hut. The trunk of the tree crossed it at one end, and one of its branches rose diagonally from the floor to the ceiling, crossing the entire room. A soft thickness of tiger skins and Indian carpets covered the whole floor. //p221// Heads of tigers, buffalo, and rhinos were hung on the enormous branch and on the walls, between the lamps where perfumed oil burned. Hunting weapons of all calibers, capable of killing anything from an elephant to a fly, were placed between the trophies, glossy, well maintained, ready to use. In the centre of the large mahogany table, a copper god held out its numerous hands in all directions, whose attributes had been replaced by

candle rings. A collection of candles burned there, illuminating a tablecloth of precious lace, fine dishes, and crystal goblets.

Jack's chair was empty. Standing up, he was recounting a story, miming out the hunting scene. He had put on a white tuxedo and Yvonne an evening gown embroidered with pearls, with straps, without any style, made to please Anglo-Saxon clients. Oliver had on a white jacket, but was shaved, washed and combed.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!" cried Jack, raising an imaginary rifle, "I put two slugs in his eye and one in his nose! If I had missed, he would've fallen on my client, turning him into steak tartar! I promised not to reveal his name, he was incognito, but if I had missed that beast, the largest kingdom in the world wouldn't have a king anymore!..."

"Don't exaggerate!" said Yvonne coldly, "he's not a king."

Jack burst into laughter and went to sit down again.

"It's true! His wife's the queen! That happens, in married life."

Two children and one elder sitting near the tree trunk were playing a perky but melancholic air on small indigenous violins. The kitchens were behind the tree trunk. Servers dressed in white, barefoot, heads dressed with small Nepalese bonnets, hurried //p222// from the tree to the table, endlessly either carrying in or taking away something, with attentiveness and obvious pleasure.

Two of them lifted up the enormous gold platter placed at the feet of the candelabra god, and in which bled the rest of a piece of meat surrounded by plenty of cooked fruits and vegetables.

Jack asked them to leave the dish, his son hadn't finished yet... And to replace the champagne, quickly, the current one was warm. He emptied his glass in the bucket where the bottle was standing, took a thick piece of meat from the dish and placed it on Oliver's plate.

"Eat! When I was your age, I ate like a wolf, now I eat like a lion! You have to eat meat! If not, you become unhappy and get old!"

He uncorked the new bottle that they had brought, and held it out to Oliver's goblet. But it was still full, and on his plate the new piece of meat overlapped another that he hadn't finished.

Jack vaguely realized that maybe something wasn't absolutely right in his son's attitude.

"What's going on? What's the matter with you? You're not eating, you're not drinking!... I didn't father a priest, did I?"

Oliver grew very pale. Yvonne, who, since his arrival, had noticed the nervous tension in which he was enclosed, saw the bottom of his eyes sink and turn pale under the pigments that had come of the strong sun of his travels.

Oliver settled himself straight up against the back of his chair. Jack, watching him with an intrigued air, filled his own glass and emptied it.

//p223// "I'm sorry," said Oliver, "to have accepted sharing your table before having told you what I have come to say to you. My excuse is that I was hungry... You can retain the price of my meal when we settle our account..."

"What are you talking about?" asked Jack, stupefied. "What account?"

Yvonne grew a little smile and looked at Oliver with increased interest.

A server had taken the bottle from Jack's hand and refilled his glass. The faint music had resumed its folk song with variants, and the elderly man began to sing in a nasal voice.

"I've come to ask..." said Oliver.

He interrupted himself, then shouted:

"Can't you shut those musicians up?"

Jack looked at him with astonishment, then calmly spoke to the old man and two children, who became silent.

There passed a couple of moments of extraordinary silence. The servers had stopped moving, the golden flames of the lamps and the candles rose straight up into the immobile air. Outside, you could hear the squawking of a tribe of frightened monkeys, then the roaring of an annoyed tiger.

"They're not far off tonight!" said Yvonne in a low voice.

"They're where they want to be, who cares!" said Jack, irritated, without taking his eyes off of Oliver. "So? Ask me what?..."

Oliver had become silent again, cold. He pulled out a small piece of paper from his shirt pocket.

"I've come to ask for what you owe me... The unpaid child support... thirty million... Here are the numbers, you can verify them..."

//p224// He unfolded the paper, put it down in front of him, and pushed it towards Jacques, who took it and looked at it like an incongruous object, unseemly, and at the same time stupefying, something that shouldn't have been in any way found here, on this table, at this moment.

"I didn't count," said Oliver, "all the dirty laundry and dirty dishes that my grandmother washed for twenty years... As for what my mother has done, your fortune wouldn't be enough to compensate her, neither her nor me..."

Yvonne, facing Jack, was watching him fervently, like a photographer, waiting for the birth from the misleading blankness of paper soaking in developing solution, of an image that he hopes will be exceptional.

"And so, Jack," she said softly, "here's the moment of truth..."

"Truth?..."

Jack shook the paper he had just read, and with that gesture rid himself of his stupor.

"The truth, is that my son isn't a priest, he's an accountant!... I, who thought you had come to see your father... Hunt with him... Become a friend... Fine, I'll give it to you, your millions!... I'm sorry, it's a ruined evening!... Excuse me, I'm going to bed..."

He emptied his glass and got up.

"He won't give you anything at all..." Yvonne said to Oliver, "because he doesn't have anything."

Jack, who was moving away from the table already, stopped and turned around.

"Nothing here is his, NOTHING!" continued Yvonne softly.

She had a deep voice, of a woman whose life has not been tender.

//p225// "The fitting, the capital, the rifles, even his tuxedo! Everything is my husband's!..."

"I beg your pardon!" said Jack. "The capital, okay! He's the one who supplied it. But half of the business was built up by my work! And when I say half!... What would this business be, without me? And Ted, what would he be? Zilch!"

He went back to his chair, wanting to take his glass that a server had refilled. Yvonne stopped him.

"Stop drinking, would you!" she said, very wearily, "and sit down..."

She turned to Oliver.

"I can't do it anymore... I wonder if there's a solution... I love him because he's like a child, and at the same time I'm trying to make a man out of him... Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know anymore..."

"Do you think that any of that interests Oliver?" asked Jack.

He had remained standing and was choosing a cigar out of a box.

"Yes! It concerns him! Because you're going to have to tell him the *truth*!..."

Maybe it'll do something for you to hear out of your own mouth that you are nothing and that you have nothing! Not even that cigar!..."

Bit by bit, rage got the upper hand over his lassitude, it had risen as she spoke, and it had wrung the cigar, that he was delicately trailing over the candle's flame, out of his fingers.

"Everything is Ted's! Everything! Your work! Your life! Everything that you do only helps to camouflage his trafficking!"

The servers, silently, quickly, cleared off the table, changed the plates and brought in platters piled high with fruit, a gigantic multicoloured ice sculpture. They didn't //p226// understand a word of French, they couldn't begin to imagine what was happening, didn't try to understand. They were like ants, busy, efficient, quick. The old musician and two children, who had nothing to do, were watching peacefully, waiting until he ordered them to start playing again. Everything that was happening was supposed to be happening, nothing was out of the ordinary. Monkeys, cows, people, from here or elsewhere, were doing and saying what they had to do and say. It didn't concern anyone.

Jack had tranquilly chosen another cigar and lit it on a flame. He calmly protested against what Yvonne was asserting. She had often spoken to him of the secret market with which she was persuaded Ted was involved in. For derisory sums he bought statues stolen from temples, erotic statues most often, and resold them very expensively to tourists. Jack maintained that all that was false, the pure product of a romantic feminine imagination.

"You know well that it's true!" said Yvonne, "but you pretend to not believe it, to be able to continue your charade!"

Oliver was watching and listening to the development of the confrontation that had been set off by the appearance of his paper folded in quarters.

"Napoleon!" Yvonne said to him. "He's playing Napoleon! Big Chief! The Great Sioux! The Long Rifle! From the movies! He acts in the movies every minute of every day of the year. And nothing belongs to him. Not the scenery, not the accessories, not the costumes, not even his role!"

Jack, without sitting down, took his glass and emptied it. He seemed very calm, but his hand was trembling slightly. Then, smiling, he also addressed the witness and the judge, Oliver.

//p227// “All that, it’s just a woman’s irritation!... Because she can’t manage to persuade me to abandon this business, which is superb, to leave with her, return to France, to go cultivate a couple of hectares of land that she’s inherited from her parents!... Can you see me, planting beets?”

He started laughing boldly, and with an air of quiet certainty added:

“These stories of statues, it’s sheer madness! Ted is an honest man!...”

“Ted is a thief!” screamed Yvonne. “He’s stealing your life! Like he’s stealing from the whole world! When he buys a statue, he’s stealing from the one who stole it, and he’s stealing from the one he sells it to for ten times its worth, under the pretext that it’s dangerous! Dangerous for whom? Who goes to tease the tigers, to distract them? One day, you’ll miss, and you’ll be devoured!”

“Miss a tiger? Me?”

Jack burst into laughter, threw his cigar into the champagne bucket, picked up a rifle, took aim, spun around eight times, firing on each spin. This lasted five seconds. The empty cases had shot out on the table, on the musicians, on one of Yvonne’s shoulders. A small cloud of hardly visible blue smoke stretched out between Oliver’s look and his father’s face. The servers had frozen on the spot, without fear or emotion. On the walls, four tiger heads, four buffalo heads, and one rhinoceros one had each lost one glass eye.

Jacques smiled, happy with himself.

“You see! It won’t be tomorrow that your father will be devoured!...”

Yvonne moved towards him. She looked at him with indulgence, with love and pity. She took the rifle from his hands and handed it to a server.

//p228// “Now that you’ve performed your number, come look your son in the face, and repeat to him that you’re going to give him what he’s asking you for.”

She gently pushed Jacques towards the table, he struck back at her.

“Leave me alone! Don’t get involved in this, it’s men’s business...”

“For that,” said Yvonne, “you have to have TWO men!... You will never again find such an occasion to become one!... Tell him the truth!... Let’s go!... Tell him!... Speak!... Are you going to give him only one million, of the thirty that you owe him?...”

Jacques, after having looked to the right and to the left, finally looked at Oliver who was looking at him. He pulled his chair back a bit, sat down slowly, abandoned all pretence and was undressed of his appearance, naked under the shower of truth.

He took his refilled glass, then realized that it was no longer a game, put it back down, shrugged his shoulders, looked at Oliver with a miserable little smile.

“It’s not the idea you had of your father, huh?”

Oliver seemed to be thinking it over. He took a bit of time to respond.

“No...”

Then after a silence he added:

“I thought he was a bastard full of money who was leaving us to die...”

Slowly, his face relaxed, something loosened in his chest and freed all his
//p229// clenched muscles. He wore the smile of a child, took his glass, which he had not touched since the beginning of the meal, raised it to his father, and drank.

//p230// The jeep stopped at the junction of the trail and the road. Oliver jumped to the ground. Jack, at the wheel, handed him his bag. The already high sun was starting to give off a harsh heat.

"It's far, on foot! You really don't want to wait until the end of the hunt? And return with us?"

"No..."

"What's rushing you so much, to Kathmandu? A girl?"

"Yes," said Oliver.

Now there were no more obstacles. The money that he had erected around himself like a wall had turned into a cloud, into vapour, vanished. Jane was there, visible, a few paces away. He just had to walk to rejoin her. The other guys, he wouldn't even need to sweep them aside, it was she who would push them out of her life.

"Is she beautiful?" asked Jack.

Oliver smiled and lifted his right fist, thumb in the air.

"Like this!"

"Are you in love?"

"Maybe."

Jack sighed.

"Pay attention with women!... It's nice and pleasant for a minute, but, all the //p231// time, what a nuisance!... Go on! Have a good trip!... See you!..."

He waved and turned the jeep around, disappearing into the forest.

At the beginning, Oliver counted the days, two days, five days, six days, then he became confused and didn't know anymore, and it didn't matter to him. He walked, climbed, descended, walked, climbed, and always came upon a new obstacle to overcome. He didn't feel any fatigue, and if not for his impatience to find Jane, he would've taken pleasure in the unending road. It wasn't only the race to Jane that was making him fleet-footed, but also to have lost that weight of hate and contempt towards his father.

He had come from the other side of the world with a knife, to carve a pound of flesh from the stomach of a vile millionaire, and he had found an unconscious and joyful infant, as poor as he was. The few bills that Jacques had given him, which he had at first refused, then accepted so as to not humiliate him, securely packed in his bag, lifted him like an air balloon because they represented the affectionate gift of a father and the friendship of a man. Had he collected them, he would have carried the millions that he had come to force out of a stranger, of whom he was the son, like a heavy rock.

He hadn't shaved again since the evening at the hunting house. One night, as he was arriving near a new pass, he ran his hand over his cheeks and his chin, and realized that he must have been gone for a long time.

The road crossed the pass and turned and plunged into a light that seemed clearer and more intense. Oliver reached the summit and stopped, astounded.

//p232// At his feet stretched out a wide valley, green like an English lawn, embroidered by the work of men and festooned with countless patches, with hardly any free space for wild grass or fallow land. Behind the valley, far from the horizon, enormous chains of dark mountains leaned on each other to continue climbing even higher. Their final summits disappeared into a gigantic mass of clouds, resting on them

like a constraint, a space without limits and without form, which the world of men shouldn't cross. Above their slow disproportionate buds a universe of white and pale openness, jagged, sharp, unreal, light as a dream and overwhelming with force, which took up half of the sky, soared upwards.

"The Himalayas!..." murmured Oliver.

The mirror, pale, immense, of the superhuman mountain, was sending a faint light towards the valley, an extract from the sky, juice from the sky, light from light, whiter than white, more transparent than the absence of everything, that penetrated the ordinary light and burst into it without joining it there, resting, on top of the clarity of the great day, on every contour of the landscape, every house, every tree, every ant-like peasant pierced the earth, and hemming it with beauty, even the hideous truck that was climbing towards the pass, rumbling. It made the air thinner, easier to breathe, and all the effort expended joyful. It was a light of celebration from God offered to men to give them the certainty that what they are searching for exists: justice, love, truth. You have to seek them out, walk, always continue. If death interrupts the journey, no matter, the goal continues to exist.

//p233// When the truck was passing Oliver, still immobile, he shouted "Kathmandu?" pointing to the valley. And all the truck's occupants joyously made a "no" with their heads, laughing and shouting out comments.

Oliver took a shortcut and started to descend singing pom-pom-pom, with an air of idiocy, and happiness.

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//p234// On all the paths, the masses were converging toward Kathmandu, in their most colourful clothes, of which some were almost clean. Family by family, village by village, the adults, the old and the young of all ages were hastening cheerfully, coming from the north, the south, the east, the west, and from all the intermediary degrees, to the center of space on this day in time, the great solar space of Kathmandu, where temples of all sizes rose as numerous as the trees of a forest and inhabited by all the gods of the heavens and the earth. This day here, in this place, the men and the gods were going to see each other and speak to each other, and rejoice together to each be in his place in the universe, and to do here what had to be done, in the successive joy of life and death, opposed and the same.

Oliver, on the road, was soon wrapped up in a crowd that grew more and more dense, joyous and filthy - a crowd that smelled of grass and dung. Surrounded, pushed, carried, he entered Kathmandu through its western gate.

The crowd narrowed on a cramped road that led to the square. A pungent dust was //p235// rising from the ground, composed of the dried up molecules of cow, dog, and monkey feces, of human excrement, dehydrated by the sun and trampled on all year long. It entered Oliver's nostrils, carried a powerful odour of shit to them that suffocated him. He brusquely put a tissue under his nose, but the fine dust filtered through it, drying out the back of his nose like bitter lime. He put the tissue back into his pocket, breathed in a deep breath through his mouth, filled himself to the nostrils with the odour of shit, and didn't smell it anymore. It's like the sea when you throw yourself in and swallow the first

mouthful. If you refuse it you continue to swallow the bitter water until you drown. If you accept it you become a fish.

The masses stopped to let a cow coming out of a house's alley nonchalantly cross the road. It was plump and thriving, not hungry. It went to tilt its muzzle into a store facing it, but only found some inedible pots there, turned and slowly starting walking towards the temples. The crowd overtook it taking good care not to bump into or disturb it. The road was lined on both sides with windowless shops, an assortment of wide-open workshops which displayed metal utensils, ropes, tools, pious pictures, red pearl necklaces, wool weaves, Nepalese and occidental clothing, bonnets of all colours arranged in small drawers, small piles of red and yellow powder on either green leaves or pieces of rice paper, fragments of food assembled in cones, flower petals, objects and goods for which Oliver couldn't imagine the nature or use, mixed with poor quality plastic goods, bowls, bracelets, and horrible statues that came from Indian factories, were displayed. Above the sparkling merchandise, the houses seemed ready to collapse, the shops to cave in. Admirable windows carved from wood were coming apart, the wooden lace that circled the shops eaten by time, piles of worn-out doors and bulbous beams. But a lively crowd, young in health and humour, crossed and mummified the city and carried Oliver along.

Without great hope he looked above the shoulders and the heads, searching for Jane's silhouette, or that of one of her companion's. But he didn't make out a single European face and only heard foreign words and exclamations, as if plunged into the middle of another living species, with whom he could have no more communication but for the ants or the chickens. A benevolent space, in which he guessed nothing bad could happen to him, nothing good either, nothing but smiles and friendly gestures and incomprehensible language, kindness and indifference, and the infinite distance of another world. The old and the young, the males and the females passed around him without paying more attention to him than to a useless object, all joyful to go celebrate their gods and rejoice with them.

He could already see, at the end of the road, above the last houses, the forest of temples peeping out, he heard the din of music and high-pitched chants. He was pushed onto the square at the same time that an orchestra was arriving opposite them, with small violins and bizarre instruments, wind, percussion, and strings, of wood and of metal, some painted in loud colours, from which the musicians pulled harmonies that would have made amateurs of atonal music faint with happiness. But the rhythm was lively, and the melody casual. The musicians preceded a buffalo covered in flowers and waves of colourful wool, pulled by a man masked with the face of a red monkey.

Behind the buffalo walked a type of warrior with enormous arms and shoulders, dressed in a single fabric sash, and who was carrying the thick, long, large, curved heavy blade of a sabre, whose sharp edge was on the inside of the curve, on his right shoulder. Behind the warrior, a group of dancers dressed to their feet in shimmering fabric, masked with faces of either gods or demons with freshly painted grimaces, were miming an episode of time and creation while walking.

To Oliver's right, the gigantic temples scaled the sky. Built with ochre-coloured bricks, in the shape of a pyramid in degrees, with four faces, it was surmounted by eleven superposed quadrangular roofs whose size diminished as they rose, continuing its surge towards the sky into which they disappeared.

Under the first roof, at the top of the steps, opened a door through which Oliver saw a thousand golden flames burning. To the left of the door he noticed a group of hippies, about twenty of them, girls and boys, with long beards, long hair and extravagant clothes, either sitting or standing, above the crowd piled up on the face of the pyramid, watching the retinue that was arriving like him.

They were too far away and too high for him to make out their faces but, despite the distance, he was certain that he would have recognized Jane if she had been among //p238// them. At least they could be able to tell him where she could be found, they had to know her.

He slid in profile between the compressed groups and reached the temple. On the first steps, farmers had spread out their vegetables, bunches of spinach with leaves as big as newspapers, piles of radishes bigger than bottles, heaps of fresh small onions with long green tails, all kinds of fruit, that overflowed to the ground, onto the dust that was of that world, and that and no longer smelled like anything to the one that had accepted it.

Oliver passed between the temples' two guardians, crouching at the bottom of the steps that climbed to the door of lights. They were a stone lioness and her good-natured lion, moustache and sex painted red. Devout fingers had rubbed their foreheads with saffron powder, and strewn flower petals on their heads. The retinue of the musicians and singers pulled the buffalo around the square, stopping at every altar, at every column, in front of every statue of every god, all blossoming with powders and flowers. Before the god the musicians played, the dancers danced, the retinue left, the lowered buffalo head knew to what it was being led.

Oliver arrived at the top of the pyramid, and, as soon as he had put his feet on the last step, recognized the odour of marijuana, but stronger, more acrid than Sven's cigarettes. Two boys and two girls were smoking - the famous hashish of Kathmandu probably.

The group welcomed him with a friendly passiveness. There wasn't a single Frenchman there. Oliver asked them:

*"Jane? Jane? You know Jane? Sven? Harold? Jane?"**

//p239// They made gestures that signified "no", they responded in English, in German, in Dutch. No, they didn't know. An American who spoke a bit of French told him that there were a lot of male and female "travelers" in Kathmandu, they arrived, they left, they came back, they didn't all know each other.

"But where are the others?"

He mapped out a circle that encompassed the whole horizon.

The red American car? Yes, he believes he has seen it. When? Where? He doesn't know... He should ask at the Himalaya Hotel. That's where the rich Americans go. Where's the Himalaya Hotel? Another vague gesture... Over there.

Oliver turned around to go back down. Three other retinues each pulling a buffalo were arriving at the square, coming from three other cardinal points. The orchestras of the four retinues were each playing different music; their rhythm, their air, and the tone of their instruments, like the four corners of the sky, and the four elements of the earth, different but nevertheless united.

The crowd above them, thick, moving, opened and closed, slowly swirling, following one, following the other, adding the chants of their voices, isolated or grouped, in multicoloured embroidery on the woven web of the music. From within the crowd of

men sprang up the roofs on which a crowd of monkeys moved about, scratched themselves, and chattered.

Above the roofs, the grand transparency of the Mountain had drawn the rolling veil of clouds over its hidden mystery from bottom to top. The clouds continued to rise to the summit of the sky in white, grey, or black masses, which overlapped and fought, arising from themselves and multiplying.

//p240// Oliver could no longer see the city. The forest of the temples hid it from him. There was an immeasurable quantity. It seemed to him that they stretched out beyond all limits and covered all the world. He had, for a very brief moment, the impression that it was fine, that everything was in order. And then he didn't think anymore. The square was a key. His eyes had seen, his physical brain had received the clear image, but his intelligence had not been made to read or understand it.

All the temples had been built on the same model, but their positioning, the height of their pyramid, and the degree of their angles and their rooms varied according to the significance of the effective site that had been given to them in the architecture of the square. It was an active image of the living universe, visible and invisible. Every temple was fulfilling its motor function, of brakes, of hinges, a muscle, a bone, the heart of a soul, or the open eye, or a hand extended to either receive or offer.

At the center of the universe, in the middle of the square, a granite basin was being created, square like the temples. At the bottom of the basin stood a column resting in a round dish. It was the lingam⁵² in the yoni⁵³, the male sex and the female sex united in the stone's eternity for the eternity of the shared lives created by their wisdom. The universe, around them, the square, the temples, the crowd, the cows, the dogs, the clouds, the hidden Mountain, and the stars that were coming with the night, were the fruit of their eternal uninterrupted love.

Lying perpendicularly on the western edge of the basin, facing the sun's horizon, a stone cow, painted yellow, was worshipfully watching, the junction, the encasing, the //p241// in-fill, the adhesion, the fusion of the emptiness and of the fullness, in which it was living, its dead end.

A dog barked above Oliver. Surprised, he raised his head and saw a cigar-coloured crow, sitting on the edge of the temple's interior roof, which was looking at him with a yellow eye. The mocking bird pointed his beak towards him and started to insult him again with the voice of a dachshund. An irritated monkey screamed, jumped at him and grabbed him by the tail. The crow bit his hand with a savage peck. The monkey ran away screeching. The bird winked, puffed out its throat, and began to sing.

A tiny white cloud was born into the sky vertical from the square and began to grow round like a rose. The first retinue had arrived at the edge of the basin. The musicians set themselves up all around and continued to play. The mountain clouds approached the cloud in the middle of the sky, rumbling from one horizon to the other. The man with the red monkey mask jumped into the basin and pulled on the rope

⁵² In Hinduism, the phallic symbol worshipped as representative of the god Siva or of the productive power of nature, (Webster's, 1052). Or, in Sanskrit grammar, the masculine gender, (Dictionary.com).

⁵³ In Hindu mythology, the phallic symbol used in the worship of the supreme female energy of nature: usually associated with the lingam, (Webster's, 2121). Or, in Shaktism, the external female genitals regarded as the symbol of Shakti, (Dictionary.com).

attached to the buffalo's horns, forcing it to advance its head in the direction of the stone coupling.

The music of the four orchestras, mixed with the loud hum of the chanting crowd, responded to the concert in the clouds towards which rose sharply the women's high-pitched voices emitting long vertical notes. The monkeys were yelping in bunches from the rooftops. The crows took flight simultaneously, drew long curves and arabesques, knotted and stitched with a shower of hoarse cries, between the sky and the earth. A cow lying in the dust got up, raised its head and lowed. The naked warrior raised his terrifying sabre vertically above his monstrous arms, held himself still for a moment and, all of a sudden, with a roar, struck and severed the buffalo's head in one swoop.

//p242// A fountain of blood hit the lingam and ran down the yoni. The crowd let out a tremendous clamour. The decapitated animal remained upright on all fours, blood gushing out of its neck, with steaming pulsations. It collapsed. The clouds joined together at the summit of the sky in either the fury or the joy lit up with flashes of lightning. The second retinue approached the second buffalo. The crowd stirred and swelled, and budded like the clouds, singing the names of the gods, who are the faces of life and death, and of eternity.

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//p243// At sunrise, the cigar-coloured crow descended from its perch on the edge of the temple's roof, alit next to Oliver's sleeping head on the highest step, and started to dig through his hair with the point of its hard beak, perhaps searching for some savoury ticks.

Oliver sat up abruptly, and the indignant crow jumped back growling with anger. Oliver smiled at it, scratched his head, yawned, opened his bag which had also served as a pillow, took out a package of cooked rice wrapped in a piece of plastic and started to eat it in little balls that he made with his fingertips. The crow, standing still a metre away, watched him with one eye, and with the other asked himself what this moron was waiting for to give him his share. Oliver threw him a little ball. The bird lowered its head sideways to see this food with his right eye, straightened back up, poked it with the tip of his beak, tasted it, gave a horrible squeal, spit it out, and flew off to the other end of the square, ceaselessly shrieking like a dog whose tail just got run over by a truck. And so all the city's crows, the cigar-coloured ones, and the black ones who are as black as crows //p244// should be, and those, brown or dark, that age had turned grey, and the bluebirds with red crests, the doves and the sparrows, the long green birds that resemble branches, and the dogs, and the cows, the whole monkey population, and the only cat of Kathmandu, that is the leopard with round ears, in the Boris palace, all the animals and some men that understand them, knew that a rascal that had arrived the night before during the celebration and in the hair of which nothing could be found to eat, had offered poisoned rice to their bird brother.

It wasn't poison, it was only the odour of the plastic wrap.

Oliver, aching, lay back down on his brick bed, closed his eyes, and reopened them after a second. The sun was lighting up the oblique beams that were holding up the roof. Each one was carved and painted its whole length through, thus transformed into a god or a goddess, whose face, attitude, attributes, number of arms, and posture, differed

from one beam to the next. It was all the people of heaven holding up the roof. The people of the earth were holding up the people of heaven by accomplishing their essential function on every beam, under the god's or goddess's feet, serving as a support, joined together, in a diversity of positions. More precisely, the woman was carrying out daily work, pounding out grains, pricking the rice, washing her hair, breastfeeding her child, washing the floor, making a crêpe, milking a cow, and the man, without disturbing her and each of her deadline-filled tasks, didn't stop seeding her with an enormous member, //p245// in the front, in the rear, from below, sometimes with the help of a neighbour, sometimes also inviting his wife, but never so that the woman, the mother, the subject, the sea, stopped doing what she had had to do since forever and for always: create order everywhere, every life in its place, extract food from the living for the living, make earth from fruit and fruit from a child, grind unrefined grain to bake a golden loaf, and all the time welcome the new seed in the depths of herself, to germinate, to continue, to multiply.

Oliver, amused, rose and walked around the temple, his nose in the air, following the man's exploits from one beam to the next. He soon found an air of stupidity to him. He looked like a fireman, hose in hand. But he would never manage to put out the fire. And that object, that he believed belonged to him, and that he sunk into every hole that he came across insistently, it very much seemed that he was nothing but its carrier and slave.

Oliver arrived at the end of the cycle. On the last beam, the man had disappeared. The woman was alone, her chest vertical, both her hands holding up her legs lifted to the sky, her sex open like a cab door, giving birth to a girl fixed in the same position as her, and who was giving birth to a girl who was giving birth to a girl who was giving birth... The last visible one was as big as a lentil, but between her quartered thighs the floodtide of life continued to flow to infinity.

A boy about ten years old, hair cut short, snout-nosed, came out of a door behind which only a few lamps still burned. His face, his shirt, and his trousers were the same colour of universal filth, but his eyes shone with a new and healthy glow, with a joy that //p246// nothing had tarnished. He was holding a baguette in his hand. When he saw what Oliver was looking at, he went to camp himself behind him laughing, planted the baguette above his sex and moved it up and down crying "zip! zip! zip...", then he turned around and went down jumping from one step to the next with his legs joined shouting "zip!... zip!... zip!..." on every step.

Below, the farmers arrived trotting along, loaded with their piles of greenery that they were carrying not on their backs like sherpas, but on two trays suspended on both ends of a bar resting on their shoulders.

The whole square was turning pink under the sun's caress, reborn every morning. But under their make-up of false youth Oliver saw that the temples, like the city, were incredibly old, worn-out, wobbly, bent, their steps toothless, their roofs indented, ready to sink under the weight of the monkeys.

The intensity of life in the celebrating crowd had perked and straightened them up for a few hours but, the party being over, they slumped back down like older people at the corner of a chimney as a fire's flame is going out and the embers become ashes.

Oliver had searched for Jane the night before, among the crowd, in the last hours of the day. He had encountered hippies of all nations, all of them completely lost in the nonchalance brought on by the drugs. Not a single one knew Jane, or Sven, or Harold. He had found the Himalaya Hotel, in front of which were stationed four taxis, with a tiger's

head painted on the hoods and their bodies striped like those of the big cats. But not a single American car. Tourists came to Kathmandu by plane. Very rare were those that //p247// risked the trip by car. He had advanced to the hotel door that was guarded by a superb Gurkha⁵⁴ in a turban and an impeccable white uniform. But he had abruptly stopped. Ask who? He didn't know anything about Laureen except for her last name...

The night was falling. The crowd of villages was flowing out of Kathmandu, led to the countryside by either small groups of musicians or isolated violinists. The shopkeepers were closing the wooden shutters of their shops, the lights of the temples went out. Oliver all of a sudden felt horribly alone, lost as if lost in the ruins of a crater in the moon. He attached himself to a couple of filthy American hippies, on which hung hair, clothes, necklaces, and amulets, that led him into a dark room occupied by a long table flanked by two benches where other hippies, passive, were waiting for one of them to arrive with a bit of money to pay for some food. It was Oliver who paid. For a couple of Rupees, the owner, an Indian, placed a large plate of rice dotted with some vegetable debris, some plates, some spoons and water glasses for everyone, in the middle of the table. They filled their plates but few emptied them. After two mouthfuls, they no longer felt like eating, they didn't feel like anything, they were like vegetables who receive the rain, the sun, and what the earth gives them, without having to stir a single leaf.

Facing Oliver was a blond girl cleaner than the others, hair tied back in a big bun at the nape of her neck, cheeks rosy, with the air of a Flemish schoolteacher. She was looking at something in the emptiness over Oliver's left shoulder, she didn't even attempt //p248// to eat, she didn't put anything on her plate, she didn't move, her forearms were crossed on her thighs, her limp hands abandoned. She was breathing very slowly. Her head was straight and still, without being stiff. She was looking over Oliver's shoulder, and Oliver knew that there was nothing to look at over his shoulder. During the whole time that he stood there, she continued to look at that nothingness, speechless and motionless. Oliver didn't dare raise his eyes to her anymore. He was scared of her.

He watched the boys and girls who were spreading the rice out on their plates, turning it over, making little piles, spreading them out again, from time to time taking a couple of grains to their mouths. He noticed that the girls were more absent than the boys, farther gone, separated more profoundly from the elementary laws, necessities and obligations of living. Fear seized him at the thought of Jane, where was she? Was it possible that she, also, was already installed in that shore of haze, where it was the real world that seemed like a ghost more and more improbably remote, vanished?...

No one around the table knew Jane, but there were other "meeting" spots, other tables, other roads, other temples, and other celebrations. It was the country of gods, and every day celebrated one of them, because every day received the light. The musicians and the congregation went from one to the other, through valleys and over paths, from hill to hill packed with temples. And the "travelers" from all corners of the earth also went across the countryside, believing they understood, but understanding nothing, having lost their world without finding another one, wandering in search of a reason to //p249// exist, drowning the memory of what they had left and the fear of not being able to grasp anything to replace what they were refusing in with/in the smoke.

⁵⁴ One of a warlike Rajput people, of Hindu faith, living in the mountains of Nepal, (Dictionary.com, p.811).

Jane, Sven, Harold? Maybe they were in Swayanbounath, maybe in Patan, maybe in Pashupakinath, maybe in Pokarah,⁵⁵ maybe elsewhere... They walked... Everyone walked... Nobody found their spot or peace anywhere. They set out again... They smoked... The clean blond girl with the tightly pulled bun was looking over Oliver's shoulder. She wasn't looking at anything.

Oliver didn't know where to sleep. The two Americans took him to their hotel. The deserted roads were dotted with a few scrawny dogs, lit up here and there with a weak electric bulb attached to the junction of two wires at an intersection. The shops were shut and padlocked. The crows and the monkeys were sleeping.

The hotel opened through a narrow door between two shops. Above the door, a small wooden god with twelve arms was growing old at the bottom of an alcove, lit up by a nightlight, honoured with grains of rice and fresh petals. The corridor emerged onto a square courtyard in the middle of which a lingam was standing in a yoni, in the middle of an assembly of stone gods that were watching and adoring them. The gods' foreheads were rubbed with either red or yellow, and their hands were full of rice, their shoulders and their heads flourished with fresh flowers.

Around the courtyard, wooden columns held up a gallery carved out in lace, worm-eaten and serrated, under the gallery opened the doors to the rooms.

Emerging from the corridor, Oliver smelt the strong odour of hash again. Despite //p250// his disgust, he followed the two hippies to their room that was found to the right at the end of the courtyard. The boy pushed the door open and entered first, without worrying about the girl, who followed. Oliver took a step to enter behind them and sharply stopped in the doorway. The room was lit up by a butter lamp that was burning in a hole in the wall, between two bricks. There was nothing other than a row of straw mattresses on the hard packed ground, without sheets or blankets. The boys and girls lying down were either sleeping or smoking. Four straw mattresses were unoccupied. To the right of the door, a couple who had made love had fallen asleep only just disunited, the boy and the girl both half-undressed.

Oliver turned around, holding his breath, crossed the courtyard, ran down the corridor, arrived in the street, stopped, raised his head to the sky where the stars were shining, and took a deep breath. The odour of manure entered him down to his toes, and seemed delicate, natural, fresh, and healthy to him, like that of the spring's first violets.

The waxing moon lit up the top of a temple's roof at the end of the road. He fell asleep, exhausted, on the highest step. A yellow dog that had followed him went to lie down next to him, head on his chest, to warm himself up and keep him warm. When the crow arrived at sunrise, the dog had already left in search of the first food of the morning.

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//p251// He searched for her again all day long. He went all over Kathmandu, street by street, asked all the hippies, only got negative or vague answers from those that could understand him. Despite his search and his fear, bit by bit he guessed what the incomparable climate of Kathmandu did, in which he was struggling like a bee fallen into a bowl of milk. He ran into gods everywhere, above doors, between windows, even in the middle of the streets, in the holes dug out in the roads, or on the pedestals planted in full

⁵⁵ All important places of worship in the Kathmandu valley.

circulation, or sheltered in temples at every intersection, assembled in courtyards, leaning over on windowsills, holding up roofs or perching above, as numerous as the human inhabitants of the city, maybe more, and just as diverse, and just as similar. They didn't make up a simple décor, a still population in the midst of which moved about the living population, they participated in the activity of every minute. The men and women talked to them, greeted them in passing, gave them two grains of rice, a flower petal, rubbed their foreheads with an affectionate thumb, the children climbed on top of them, the monkeys and the birds took their rice and gave them their droppings, the cows went to //p252// scratch their bellies against them, the sheared sheep fell asleep at their feet, the cigar coloured crows perched on their heads to bark compliments and insults at the passers by, their farmers attached their onion bunches to their extended hands. They lived everyone's life with everyone. Animals, men, and gods were weaved together like hair, the flowers and the strands of red wool in women's hairstyles, in one single familiar and uninterrupted friendship. God was everywhere, under a thousand faces of flesh, stone, fur or feathers, and in the eyes of the countless children grouped in naked bunches in front of houses where they didn't seem to know how to do anything other than laugh with the happiness of being alive.

God was everywhere, and the "travelers" who had come this far to find him couldn't find him anywhere, because they forgot to look for him in themselves.

Kathmandu had been built in the shape of a star with eight arms. Starting at the Temple Square, eight merchant streets opened out to the eight directions of the valley. Between them extended the eight artisan quarters, where the small studios overlooking the roads replaced the shops. To the north, outside of the star, along the road that led to the airport, were built the hideous cement buildings of the Embassies, the tourist hotels, the Red Cross hospital, the bread factory, the barracks, the bank, the water tower, the electricity company and the prison.

To the south, the potters' quarters stopped at the edge of a pond with dark water. It was here that Oliver, at the end of the second day, finished his exploring.

//p253// At the end of the road were clay jars and pots of all sizes piled up against the walls level to the roofs, he emerged onto the dark landscape. The circular pond was big enough that the people who found themselves on the other side seemed tiny to him. The water was the colour of the night. A multitude of black pigs, low on their feet, long, hairy, stirred about around it, searched out the dark mud on their sides with their snouts, and devoured it along with the maggots and larvae found within. Buffalo bathed to their horns there, rolled around and raised black from the mixture of the water and the mud. A villager went to it to empty out a blue plastic bowl, which contained the family's daily excrement, then scrubbed the receptacle with her hand. A bit further down, three women, laughing and chattering, soaked laundry in the pond and wrung it out, soaked it again and wrung it again. One of them undid her hair, soaked it for a long time, then crouching over got entirely undressed and rubbed herself with water from head to toe, with great decency, without exposing any of her nudity.

Turning around to go, Oliver saw Jane. She was lying on her back, almost in the mud, her face in profile, one cheek flat to the ground, her tangled hair covering her face, her blue jeans spattered with mud. A pregnant sow snorted at her, opened her blouse with a turn of its snout, revealing a breast. Oliver rushed forward screaming Jane's name. A pig passed between his legs and caused him to fall. While he was getting up, the sow had

turned around and was urinating on Jane. Oliver arrived like a shell and kicked the animal with his feet. It ran away squealing, unable to stop pissing. The three washerwomen //p254// had turned around and were watching. Oliver, overcome with horror, bent down, lifted Jane's chest and pushed back her hair. It wasn't her.

She resembled her, in size, shape, and the colour of her hair. But she had a large skinny nose and almost yellow eyes that were looking at him from the depth of the world of drugs, where a man's compassion and a sow's urine are equal things, neither one nor the other of any importance. She was a bit older than Jane. She looked a hundred years old. He tried to make her stand, to make her walk. Her legs wouldn't carry her, she slid from between his arms and fell sitting down. She opened one hand and tried to extend it to him. She was saying "upee, upee"... He understood that she was asking for a rupee. He put a bill into her hand and closed her fingers around it.

The three washerwomen were laughing, as if they were watching a comic scene between foreign animals. He left without turning back, his heart relieved, and asking himself where Jane was, Jane! Jane!...

He got back on the potters' road, sat down on a step of a small temple, whose four walls were decorated with horned animals with leather heads. They made faces to the sky, showed it their fangs, and scratched the air with their front paws. They were the ferocious guardians in charge of scaring the demons.

But the demon was living in Oliver's chest. Was this love?

This girl, that he barely knew, had held her in his arms a single night, had all of a sudden, after his interview with his father, seemed to make up the response to all of his questions, the answer to all of his problems. He had walked towards her for days and //p255// days, recalling her big eyes that watched him without the shadow of a lie, her bright smile, her words, and most of all the fullness, the calm that he felt when he was near her, even without speaking, even without looking at her. She had been sitting on the grass, both next to him or a few feet away, and around him and in him everything was good, harmonious, peaceful.

As he had been walking to Kathmandu, his joy and his impatience had risen. He had come running down the last mountain, the way one rushes towards a spring, a lake, a waterfall, to throw yourself in laughing, to stir it up, to drown in it with life.

He had found nothing but dust.

Hour after hour, while he searched in vain, he had the progressive revelation of the chasm of absence that had bored into him and also surrounded him from the minute that he had separated from Jane, almost lightly, without attaching any importance to it. His haste to leave his father, his race to Kathmandu, it had been the need to live again by finding her again, to fill in that unbearable emptiness, of which he hadn't been conscious as he walked on the path that he knew, as long as it may be, was taking him to her.

At the end of the path, there had been no one.

There was nothing more in the world and nothing more in him. Sitting on a brick step, head in his hands, at the end of his strength and hope, he was nothing more than a suffering, an appeal, a need greater than mortal hunger and thirst. Jane's absence hurt him like a deep wound, as though an enormous hand with harrowing fingernails had emptied his insides of everything, scraped right through to the skin. Her absence almost emptied the universe around him, houses, cities, shadows that moved and were people and animals became colourless, odourless, noiseless images.

//p256// That she had left him, that he had not found her seemed to him not only atrocious, but also so absurd, so impossible to believe, that he closed his eyes and stretched out his left hand, CERTAIN that he was going to feel his palm and his fingers rest down on HER, that SHE would start to laugh with happiness, and throw herself at him and curl up in his arms, and that he would hold her so tight that she would cry out with pain and with joy...

When he reopened his eyes, he saw three naked children sitting facing him on the other side of the narrow road, between two piles of jars and pots, and who were watching him in a serious and friendly way. He closed his hand that had not come to rest and brought it slowly back to himself. And so the children began to laugh and move their arms about. They shouted "Bye bye! Hello!"* at him. Thanks to American tourists, they had begun to become civilized.

Oliver rose, and breathed deeply. He shouldn't be despairing. She was definitely somewhere, in Kathmandu or its surroundings. He was going to find her! And if he didn't find her? Ever? Was he going to stop living because of a girl? What more did she have than the others? Was he becoming an idiot? If she didn't want to appear, she could go to hell! Why hadn't she gone with him when he had asked her? Because she had slept with that guy! And how many others had she slept with, before? There were plenty of girls, in Kathmandu or elsewhere, who were worth it, and even more.

He started to walk with big strides, sure of himself, re-inflated, relieved. But before arriving at the end of the road, he knew that the other girls didn't count, be they a //p257// thousand and more beautiful, and that the universe without her was nothing but an absurd and dismal construction that didn't signify anything or serve any purpose. She could have slept with that guy and ten thousand others, it wouldn't have been any more important than a few specks of dust. What was important, unique, was that they had been made to be together, since the beginning of beginnings everything had been done so that they would be reunited together in the middle of everything. And their separation was against nature and monstrous like a black sun.

He had slowed down his pace, he didn't know where to go anymore, and the emptiness surrounded him on all sides, he didn't feel his presence except by his pain.

He ended up finding himself at the same table as the night before, in front of a plate of rice. It was here that he met Gustave, the boy from Marseilles, a former baker's boy who had ditched the kneading trough one day to follow a group of hippies, because he found it a lot more pleasant to live without working than to bake from morning to night. He was a small skinny man about thirty years of age, with long black curly hair ruffled into balls, with small lively plum-coloured eyes, and a moustache and goatee. He didn't smoke. He was playing a small tinplate flute. He noticed that he had made the farmers from the market laugh by playing *Plaisir d'amour*⁵⁶! He didn't know why the melancholic air made them double up with laughter. He played, interrupted himself, and held out his hands before continuing to play. They gave him some onions, a radish, a spinach leaf, an orange. He always came back with a full sack.

He knew where Jane was and told Oliver where he could find her.

⁵⁶ A popular old song in France.

//p258// Roman Closterwein called me at two o'clock in the morning to ask me to leave with him for Kathmandu at eight o'clock. I've known him since 1948. In a few words he recounted what Mathilda had been doing since May. The night before, a telegram from the French ambassador in Kathmandu had arrived, that had respectfully informed him that his daughter was in Kathmandu and was trying to enter communist China. He had decided to go find her and bring her back by the ears kicking and screaming. Enough freedom, enough idiots.

He didn't know anything about Nepal. He knew that I had been there a little while ago to prepare the screenplay of a Cayatte⁵⁷ movie. I could be useful, he begged me to accompany him. I told him that I scarcely knew anymore than him of Nepal. I had been there just long enough to breathe in the local colour and hadn't formed any relationships. But I understood that above all he needed to not be alone. I accepted. My vaccinations were still good. As for him, he made light of regulations and cholera. I rose, shaved, and started to pack my bags.

//p259// In '48, when I met Roman Closterwein, he was starting to replace his father, Hans Closterwein, in some of his activities, and he wanted to add cinema. He judged it possible to profitably invest in that industry. Americans were making a lot of money with movies, why couldn't they make as much in Europe? He financed a film whose writing and screenplay I was in charge of. That was how we met, and how an intermittent friendship between us was formed, based on a reciprocal, objective, clairvoyant, and skeptical esteem.

From time to time he invited me to his white house to have me admire one of his acquisitions, or simply just to chat, when he'd had enough of meeting no one but imbeciles. He knew well that I wasn't one, and I knew it too, which was almost of no help to me. And he was one of the few intelligent men that I have met. Less than a dozen in twenty years.

We have the same tastes. I like, like him, to live with the unicorn, or the blue virgin of the Maître de Moulons. He has treasures buried in his cellar that are of no use to him or to anyone. Me, I have my fill of shit and not a dime. But I like meeting up with him. Intelligence is rarer than gold. I watched Matilda, year after year, grow up. He called me again at four in the morning to tell me that we were leaving at six. None of his planes had a long enough range. He had rented a Boeing, which landed in Kathmandu at the end of the runway that was too short, just half a centimeter from disaster.

We went down to Boris' place. A former dancer from Diaghiler to whom a //p260// previous king had given a palace as a present. He had transformed it into a hotel, before the Chinese had built the only road that crossed Nepal from Tibet's border to India's border. On their backs and across the mountains, sherpas had carried the huge Victorian bathtubs and copper sinks, the tonnes of paint, all the furniture bought in India, and all the accessories, including the bidets, which he had had to import from France.

Boris' hotel had aged, the Himalaya was more modern, but less picturesque, and Boris knows everything. Not only what's happening in Kathmandu, but also in Hong Kong, in Tangiers, in Beirut, and even in London and in Paris. He knew why Roman

⁵⁷ A French director named André Cayatte who lived from 1909 to 1989.

Closterwein was coming to Kathmandu, but he welcomed him with discreet reserve, and didn't say a word.

The tiger taxi made the journey back in a few short seconds. In one of the corners of Boris' palaces huge gardens, a rectangle of jute roof was stretched around a tennis court. On the few even steps of a wooden platform of planks, all the male and //p261// female diplomatic bodies were present, clapping weakly at the exchanges of the ball between a redhead in white Bermuda shorts, and an Asian in dusty blue shorts. It was extremely hot. The ball itself seemed to have problems moving, the audience was sweating, and they could feel the sly effects of the amoeba and quinine milling about in their stomachs, everyone was bored and wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else.

In the grand gardens of the royal palace, around the small jute triangle that protected the occidental elite, horses, cows, and chubby pink pigs wandered around freely, all of them having the very exceptional peculiarity of being clean. A horse entered the hotel at the same time as us and the ambassador. But he abandoned us at the foot of the stairs.

In Roman's room, the ambassador told us that Matilda, who had arrived in Kathmandu a few weeks earlier, had camped at the Chinese embassy to obtain an entry visa into the country of Mao. They didn't tell her no, they didn't tell her yes, they told her that she had to wait a day or two, she went back, she had to wait some more, she went back, she had to wait...

Four days ago, she had left her room at Boris' and had not returned to the Chinese embassy. The French ambassador didn't think that she had acquired a visa. No one ever got one. He didn't know where she was...

Boris knew, but he didn't tell us, because he also knew that it was too late. He pretended to believe that we had a good chance of finding her among the Tibetans. Nearly all of the Occidental boys and girls went there almost every night. We waited for //p262// the end of the day. Roman told me about the terrible scene in the month of May, between Matilda and him. I stayed silent for a minute. We were sitting on dirty old couches, in a huge room with a partitioned ceiling. An attentive server had brought us tea, jam, fruit, pieces of foreign bread, and butter that came from Boris' farm, in the mountains. Either yak or buffalo butter, I didn't know.

I told Roman that Matilda was right, he was meant to be shot and was going to be, one day or another.

He was convinced of it himself. He was fully conscious of belonging to an outdated and condemned world, whose end was rapidly approaching. But he threw in that Matilda, who believed herself to be on the side of the shooters, in reality was herself on the same side as him, whatever her feelings and convictions may be. Her heredity, her education, her background, her blood, her flesh, her spirit had year by year had built a precise and particular being. The daughter, granddaughter, great-great-granddaughter of billionaires. It's what she was, physiologically, intimately, in her smallest mental and physical reflexes. And she couldn't change anything about it, even if she had acquired, under the influence of her professors and companions, some new ideas and terminologies. She was what she was, she would also be shot.

But if they didn't manage to convince her, very quickly, she risked being shot down before him...

He had the solid intention of still enduring. The shooting that concerned him, the fire of his white house, it wouldn't happen today...

The night having come, we went to the Tibetans. I knew where it was, I had never set foot there. It was also an old palace, which had belonged to a prince before he was //p263// exiled by the new dynasty. It was composed of four large wings surrounding a huge garden planted with trees, small temples, and statues. The King had given it to the Tibetans fleeing from their country that was being invaded by the Chinese. They lived in the rooms on the ground floor, by the families or tributes, and rented the rooms upstairs to "travelers", to whom they left the care of doing their own housekeeping.

At night, all the hippies of the floor, all those in Kathmandu, and all those who were in passing, gathered together in the garden, in small groups, around small fires, smoking, dreaming, singing, falling asleep where they were, making love or satisfying their needs in a dark corner, at the feet of a god or a giant tree.

We passed under the deck and entered the garden. There were more than a thousand boys and girls there, around several small fires or grouped around the flame of a butter lamp. Several guitars were trying to sing. It brought to mind the assembly of gypsies at Saint-Mary-of-the-sea the night before the celebration, but without the crackling flames of joy.

A veil of weariness and old age that smothered the sounds and lights, and all appearances of life, was resting on this youthful crowd. And the disgusting rotten autumnal odour of hash was stagnant like liquid manure within the palace's four walls.

I turned to Roman. His frozen face expressed a certainty that he expressed in words.

"Matilda can't be here!"

I shared his opinion. However, we started to look for her meticulously. He //p264// went off to one side, I went to the other, passing from one group to the next. I looked at all the girls' faces, and at those that were so far gone that I couldn't tell if they belonged to a girl or a boy. Every so often I stumbled over someone lying in the shadows. I used my electric lamp as little as possible, but I realized quite quickly that it didn't bother anyone... I moved about on an island of ghosts, encircled by the night, without precise limits between one and the other, an island on which a population of absent beings pretended to be alive. Here and there a lively fire pushed back the grey obscurity, and there rose a choir, with voices resembling those of the living, a ballad, a folk song, a blues that engulfed itself and slowly died. Cigarettes, pipes, and oil burners passed from one mouth to the next, and bit by bit, behind them, the groups, the fires and the singing died out. The grey night submerged them.

Breathing in, despite myself, the smoke through which I passed the eddies and stagnant thicknesses of, I felt the ground soften beneath my feet, the island became a huge life raft, being carried by a slow swell on a lost sea from which it could never again reach anywhere.

I collided with someone standing up, solid, who pushed me back. I shined my light on him. It was a red and black god, with an elephant head, carved into a rectangle of stone, that was carrying the sun and the moon in his hands. I lowered the beam of light from the god's face to that of a girl's sitting at his feet, pressed against him. She was very beautiful, lonely, and tired. Long mahogany hair ran over her thin shoulders, her eyes were shut but she wasn't sleeping. She was waiting. Her name burst out behind me:

//p265// "Jane! Jane!"

It was more than a call, it was a cry of resurrection, like Jesus' cry to Lazarus, but cried out when Jesus himself came back to life!

She heard it, opened her huge violet eyes, straightened her chest, lit up. It wasn't the light of my lamp that lit up her face anymore, but the glory of the sun.

Oliver arrived running, entered the light, fell to his knees, joined their hands and looked at her. They looked at each other, filled with wonder. They opened their arms, took each other slowly in, cheek to cheek, eyes shut, without saying a word.

Under my feet I felt the solid ground again, and around me the living world. I turned off my lamp.

52

//p266// "You're alone? Where are your friends?"

"Which friends?"

"Harold, Sven..."

"Oh yeah!... Harold left... With an American..."

"Laureen?"

"You know her?..."

"Of course!"

How could she have forgotten? He was worried to find her so absent despite the happiness with which she had received him. He ran his hands over her delicately, in the returned obscurity. He felt her fragile bones surfacing everywhere on her long thin body that he had discovered in the pale butane light.

"You've gotten thinner... Don't you eat? Don't you have any more money?"

"Yes, we eat..."

"And Sven, where's he?"

"He'll be back, he's at the hospital."

"Sick?"

"No, he went to sell his blood..."

"Now? At this hour?"

//p267// "There's always a nurse on guard, with dollars..."

Oliver knew that that was the last resort for the hippies. When they had sold everything they had, they still had their blood left to sell. The hospitals of the countries they crossed, or on which they washed up, were always takers and paid well. The girls, in general, preferred to prostitute themselves. Three Rupees, that was the rate. One franc fifty. The price of a bit of rice and a bit of hash. In Kathmandu, even the ugliest men found customers: Nepalese merchants, Indians. The farmers didn't have money: it was their wives who sold the vegetables.

Jack had said to Oliver:

"Pay attention to those kids. Drugs, Pox, and Tuberculosis. They end up in Pashupakinet, on a pyre..."

He put his arms around Jane. He would have like to close her into himself, from everywhere, to put her in the shade. He was going to take her far away from all this. He felt her frail body, fragile, weightless. She shivered. He asked her if she was in pain anywhere.

"I'm going to rent a room at Boris'. Tomorrow we'll call a doctor. Since there's a hospital, there's got to be a doctor!..."

She refused to go to Boris'. She was waiting for Sven. They had a room here, on the floor. He could sleep with them... She trembled more severely. She didn't want to leave.

Sven arrived like a shadow in the shade. He didn't show any surprise at seeing Oliver, only an amicable joy. Oliver could barely see him, but heard his very calm voice, assured, warm and abstracted at the same time, which contrasted with Jane's anxiety. //p268// Sven sat down next to her and gave her two flat packets of paper, whose whiteness Oliver could see in the night. She stuck one in the pocket of her blue jeans, opened the other, brought it to her nostrils, and breathed in a portion of its contents. Sven coughed. He placed his guitar on his knees and began to play a happy tune, interrupted by holes and stops. He had already taken his dose. He was in a state of euphoria, with the attendant ruptures of time and consciousness. Jane's action had frozen Oliver. In so little time she had arrived at this. He had to tear her away from this city, from this filth, quickly, quickly...

She wasn't trembling anymore. She wasn't waiting anymore. She started to laugh, tightening herself to Oliver and sang to him in English of the happiness of having found him again. Then she told him in French. She had been very unhappy, she had needed him in the same way that she needed to drinking or to breathe, and he hadn't been with her, and she thought that she would never see him again...

But he had come back! He was here! It was wonderful! She pointed out all the stars in the sky that were singing for him, God was love, God was him and her, they wouldn't leave each other again, they would always be happy. She laughed, sang, spoke, rubbed herself on him, took his face with both hands and kissed it everywhere, laughed because his beard prickled, she told him that she hadn't slept with anyone else since he had left her, and nothing that she had done before counted. There was only one night, a single one, that night with him in the Buddha's golden light, a night as big as her whole life, only that night, with him.

She took one of his hands, opened it and kissed his palm, then slid it inside her //p269// blouse and pressed it to her. Oliver had a broken heart. In the hollow of his hand, the poor little breast, the diminished breast, burning, whose soft tip was trying to rouse itself again, made him think of the hurt pigeon that he had welcomed in his, and that he hadn't had time to save.

"Jane, Jane, my love, I love you..."

He said it to her very softly, with a large enveloping warmth, to start by protecting her with words. He made her get up and led her across the night and the smoke toward this nightmare's exit. But arriving on the porch she didn't want to go any further. She refused to go to Boris' and led him to her room. They climbed a staircase of wood and earth sowed with debris, lit up by a weak bulb hanging onto the end of a wire. They emerged onto a square terrace bordered outside by a railing of wood carved into a thousand divine characters and all the animals of the earth. Vultures were resting all along its length, some sleeping, crouched over, others drawn up, stretching out their moulting necks. Some, seeing Jane and Oliver arrive, shook their heavy wings, then fell back asleep. Oliver shivered with disgust. Jane laughed, lightly, pulled him by the hand, pulled him down a wide hallway with the paneling half hanging, where the doors of the

rooms opened up. Between the doorways still hung portraits of the prince, in a grand composite uniform, pants of zouave, a fireman's hat, medals down to his thighs, silver ribbons, puffed-out sleeves, a cavalry sabre, and a dreadful air, trembling to the flickering flames of the butter lamps nestled in some enclaves.

//p270// There were "rooms" of all sizes. In the former reception lounges several hundred hippies were sleeping, on straw mattresses or even on the ground. A thick odour of sweat, filth, urine and hash flowed out of its open doors. Jane was still pulling Oliver by the hand, chirping like a joyous bird, an English bird whose language he didn't understand. She led him almost to the corner where the hallway turned to the right, pushed open a door, made him enter what had to have been a vast cupboard or wardrobe that contained four small unoccupied straw mattresses. The remains of a candle had been placed on an old suitcase, beside a box of matches. Jane lit it, let herself fall onto a bed with a dark blue blanket, pulled Oliver to her, kissed him and undressed him, endlessly talking and laughing, then undressed herself, very quickly, cuddled up against him, stretched herself out under him, on him, laughing, crying, talking, biting his ears, his nose, nestling her head under his arm, moaning with happiness like a cat who can't take any more purring, rubbing her face against his sex, loving it with both hands, taking it between her lips, leaving it to lie down with all her length on this man's body, this man's warmth, the only man, the unique, so desired, so waited for, turning around to also feel him from the back, from behind her knees and behind her thighs, everywhere, like a fish needing to feel, everywhere around and in him, the water that is him.

Bit by bit, she calmed herself, satisfied, thirst quenched, and nestled back to Oliver's chest, thighs tight, arms crossed on her tiny chest. Oliver drew her into his arms, //p271// glued himself to her to keep her warm, and started talking to her very softly, continuously repeating the same thing: you're beautiful, I love you, I'll take you away, we'll be happy, everything's fine, we'll go to the end of the earth, under the deep sun, with the flowers and the birds, you are more beautiful than the flowers, you are more beautiful than the sky, I love you, I love you...

She fell asleep in his arms, in his warmth, in his love, in the rapture, in the happiness...

Oliver stayed awake. His own happiness was mixed with fear. How to take Jane away from this country of quicksand where so many boys and girls sink into drugs and into death, attracted by the mirage of freedom, and of the brotherhood between all the living beings and the nearness of God? In Kathmandu, you do what you want. That's true. Our brothers the birds weren't even annoyed when you stepped on their tails, because for ten thousand years now no one had killed a bird. That's true. God is present everywhere, under ten thousand faces. That's true.

It was true for the men and the women and the small children born in the country. It wasn't true for the Occidental children with long hair and long beards. They were the children of reason. It had separated them forever from the simple understanding of obvious facts, inanimate, living, divine, that are the same and by which everything is clear, from a blade of grass to the infinite. Upon their birth, the blindfold of reason had been placed on their eyes even before they were open. They didn't know how to see what //p272// was visible anymore, they didn't know how to read the clouds, listen to the trees, and spoke only the rough language of men living amongst themselves between the walls

of explanations and proof. The only choice they had left was between the negations of that which cannot be proven, or an absurd and blind faith in unlikely fables.

The big obvious book of what is, the balance of the universe and the wonders of its own bodies, the petal of a daisy, the cheek of an apple, the golden down of a big cat, the worlds of specks of dust wasn't any more for them than material and analyzable organisations. It was as if experts were to lean themselves over an open book solely to analyze the ink and the paper, not knowing how to actually read it and even denying that the symbols drawn on the pages have any significance.

There was a difference however between the boys and the girls who came from the Occident to Kathmandu and their fathers: the children had realized that their parents' reason and logic had led them to live and kill each other in an unreasonable and illogical fashion. They refused that absurdity and its obligations, vaguely guessing that there had to exist another way of life and death in accord with the order of creation. They frantically searched for a door through which they could escape from within their walls. But the walls were in them since birth. Through the drugs they created an illusion of an opening which they crossed through in their dreams, in the deterioration of their spirit and their bodies, achieving nothing but their ruin.

Oliver asked himself how he could find the money to take Jane far away, very quickly... He thought of Ted, his father's associate. Jack had ended up recognizing that it //p273// was true that Ted was a trafficker of statues stolen from temples. He sold them to tourists and took care of delivering them to either Europe or America. Jack didn't know how. Oliver decided to go find Ted and offer him his services. He could thus maybe earn enough money fast. In the meantime, he would look after Jane, and stop her from continuing to intoxicate herself. But where did they live? His father had offered him the key to his small apartment where he lived near the Temple Square. He had refused with the reflex of a proud child, and regretted it, because he now found himself with a man's responsibility. Maybe he could find a decent room to rent somewhere. The first thing to do was to go find Ted. He knew where. Several times, during his search for Jane, he had passed by the front of "Ted and Jack's"* office on the ground floor of a modern two-storey house, on the border of the Occidental quarter and old Kathmandu. He would go there first thing in the morning.

Someone coughed far off in the hallway. Jane woke up. At first she didn't remember, then all of a sudden she felt herself embraced by Oliver and knew that he was there. She turned around to face him in one swoop, attached herself to his shoulders and tightened herself against him.

"You're here! You're here! You're here!" she said.

It was a marvel, the un hoped for, the incredible, he was here, against her, in her arms, she felt him all along her from head to toe, from her feet to her cheeks, on her cheek, he was here, he whom she had waited for, waited for eternities.

"Why did you let me sleep? Why?..."

She pulled him to her and opened out. She also opened her mouth and her hands, she received him in every pore of her body.

//p274// Fully stretched out on her every surface, his mouth on her mouth, his hands on her hands, his fingers intertwined with her fingers, he felt her body crushed, fragile, breakable. He made himself light, relieved her from his weight without separating his skin from her skin, that he nourished with his warmth and his life, and slowly entered

her, with all his power and a vast gentleness, little by little, step by step, desired, pushed a little bit further, with more and more impatience, right until he was at her core.

And when he got there, it was as though he had broken the seal that had bound all her illusory refusals, fears, negations and satisfactions with the tip of his irresistible, gentle, and stiff force. The seal evaporated, everything that had refused called, everything that had been scared was dazzled, and the memories of what she had believed to be pleasure were swept up to leave room for the great truth that was going to be given to her. She felt, from the middle of her core, Oliver's presence fill her to all the limits of her body.

He moved slowly in her, opened and closed, and each movement increasingly made her flesh and her bones melt and transform into a state that has no name, and that had to be that of the first days of creation, before the shapes of beings, when the unimaginable dazzling sight of light on the waters was born, that was nothing more than the waters but contained everything that was going to exist, and that knew it.

Oliver had entered her, into her naked and living flesh, like an opening made by a blade, and now, having arrived at her core, he settled and multiplied there, and in the depth of himself, all his thoughts and his love.

//p275// He felt, sought for, imagined, anticipated, searched further, deeper, to the left and to the right, and always further, further still, releasing the hot springs, measureless, of the oceans of joy.

She didn't know anymore, she had lost her shape, her weight, her presence, herself. She was pure joy, unrecognizable, inexpressible, liquid, uninterrupted, where the beginnings of the world moved; and from where she stretched out in boundless waves that ceaselessly followed one another and threw themselves again and again until it was all so enormous that you had to cry out to God's ears, a moment that surpasses all that a being can feel, and whose powerless and frustrated memory remembered that it was, but can't remember what it was, because neither the head nor the heart, nor words, can contain it.

And then it was the invasion of peace in her returned body, nourished with a happiness whose warmth and weight she could feel spread and spill her out on the cloud on which she was laying. Was this happiness or sleep or death in Paradise? Eyes shut, she was slightly smiling. She had the strength to say "Oliver... You...", then fell asleep. Oliver softly kissed her shut eyes, left her, lay down against her, and pulled the blanket over them.

Sven woke them up as he was going to sleep. He had made the least amount of noise as possible, but as soon as he was stretched out, he began to cough. He put his hand over his mouth, forced himself to stifle the fits, but they came up from his lungs with mucus that he disposed in old bits of paper. A couple of seconds later, it started again. Oliver woke up and felt that Jane wasn't sleeping anymore but was listening. He spoke to her very quietly in her ear:

//p276// "Has he been coughing like that for a long time?"

She nodded "yes" with her head.

"He needs to be looked at. He should go to the hospital..."

She shook her head nervously, as if Oliver was touching on an impossible act. Then he remembered the small packets of white paper. The happiness and the presence of Jane's love had momentarily pushed back their menacing image in his conscience.

First thing in the morning, he was going to go find Ted. But Jane was going to have to make an effort. Now that he was with her, she would have to tear herself away from that habit. He wouldn't leave her again, he would help her.

Sven had stopped coughing and seemed to be sleeping. Oliver asked softly:

"That powder, in the paper, what was it? Coke?"

He felt that she had stopped breathing. Then after a good minute she answered:

"It was nothing... Don't worry..."

"You know that it's poisoning you!... If you continue, it could kill you!..."

"You're crazy, it's only a little, like this... To keep Sven company... It's nothing..."

"You don't have to anymore... I'm with you now... Never again, promise?"

She nodded "yes, yes, yes" very rapidly with her head.

"Promise me! Say 'I promise!'"

"You're silly, since it's nothing..."

"Promise!"

She stayed silent, still... Very tenderly, he insisted:

"Go ahead... Promise..."

//p277// She turned to him, kissed him on the lips and said:

"I promise!... Are you happy now?"

He responded simply:

"I love you..."

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//p278// The faint light of dawn entered through a shield-shaped window, shut with a wooden panel hem-stitched with a thousand laced holes. Oliver got up without waking Jane, re-covered her, slipped on his pants and knelt down to look at her. In place of the great peace of love, a state of nervous worry started to follow, even in his sleep, a worry that translated itself through small sudden twitches of the corner of his lips or of his right hand that was hanging over the straw mattress.

He was going to have to leave her alone while he went to see Ted. He didn't want to run any risks, took Jane's blue jeans, found the open packet and the intact packet in one of the pockets. He left, barefoot.

In the trees, thousands of birds were singing. In the middle of the still dark sky, the summits of the immense mountains were like flowers of light cut off from the rest of the world.

Oliver breathed deeply, he felt calm, happy and sure. He and Jane had arrived at the end of their malicious paths, both on their own, and now they were going to embark together on a difficult but clear road.

//p279// He scattered the contents of the small packets to the moving wind, threw away the crumpled papers and made his way to a fountain that he had heard singing the night before, next to the red and black god.

Jane woke up trembling. She needed a few moments to find herself present in the world again and to remember. She was cold, she sat up, wrapped herself in the blanket, and glanced around for Oliver. He wasn't there, but she saw his shirt, his jacket and his

bag. She needn't worry. He was coming back. It wasn't Oliver that she missed at the moment.

With one leg she grabbed hold of her blue jeans, pulled them to her, put her hand in one pocket and then in the other. Her heart jumped in her chest like a panic-stricken rabbit. She rose, letting the blanket slide off, gripping the blue jeans whose pocket she was emptying, throwing down everything that she found in them, a dirty tissue, a worn-out lipstick, a small empty powder leather compact, with a broken mirror, and some Nepalese coins; three copper pieces, two aluminum. When the pockets were empty she rummaged through them again one by one, several times, panic-stricken to find nothing in them, threw the blue jeans to the end of the room, dropped down on all fours to the straw mattress, searching for everything she had thrown, re-opened the compact, the tissue, that she had already opened before letting them fall, searched under the blanket, on the ground, everywhere, naked, on all fours, shivering, teeth chattering from the cold and from the horror.

It was in this way that Oliver found her, like a thin animal searching for food without which it would soon die. She no longer knew what she was seeing, what she was touching, her ribs protruding, her poor empty breasts barely hanging, she placed her hands everywhere, rummaged under the mattress, moaned, searched again where she had already searched, turning both to the wall and to the door, and she saw Oliver's bare feet before her.

She stood back up with incredible energy, like a steel spring. She understood.

"You're the one who took it!"

He said "yes", softly.

She put her left hand out to him, palm up, fingers stiff, almost tetanised.

"Give it! *Give it!* GIVE IT!"

He responded very calmly:

"I threw it out..."

She took the sentence in like a ram's kick in the chest. It was a reality in which she *couldn't* believe.

"Go find it! Quick! Quick! Before they take it!"

"I emptied it in the wind... No one can take it anymore..."

She backed right up to the wall, as if something enormous was weighing her down and pushing her. Once she touched the wall, she leaned with her back and both her hands pressed against it, palms to the wall. Above her head, the wooden window cut up the rising sun into pink lace.

"Why did you do that?... Why?... Why?..."

He saw her frozen, shivering, lost, he moved gently towards her, his forearms half extended to embrace her, take her, envelop her, warm her up again.

"Because I don't want you to poison yourself anymore... You promised..."

He arrived next to her. He held out his hands, placed them on her arms, felt her skin cold like a dead fish. She freed herself by screaming and clawing at his chest with her ten nails, from top to bottom.

"Don't touch me!... Get lost!... Idiot!... You want!... You want!... What are you thinking? You want! And me, who am I, ME? I'm free! I do what *me* I want! You robbed me! Robbed! Robbed! You're a monster! You're horrible!... Get lost!..."

Oliver didn't move. Sven, awoken by Jane's screams, had risen and was coughing. He softly said to Oliver:

"It would be better... that you go... now..."

Oliver gathered his stuff. Jane, with her back still against the wall, watched him without moving her head. Only her big violet eyes, whose dilated pupils revealed two dark holes, followed him. Her teeth were chattering.

Oliver put on his shirt and his jacket and his shoes, collected his bag and moved to the door. He hadn't raised his eyes to her once. Just as he was about to leave, she shouted:

"Wait!"

He turned around to her, looked at her, waited.

"Now, I have to buy more!... I don't have any money!..."

She had started in a low, hoarse, voice, but with each word she spoke louder and louder, and finished by screaming:

"You slept with me! That costs money!..."

She held out her left hand again, palm upwards like the paw of a naked animal.

Oliver took the remaining bills out of his jacket pocket, and threw them on the mattress. Then he left.

//p282// Jane collapsed in tears on the bills, the blanket, the debris thrown out of her pockets, and the smell of their night of love. She collapsed into the rotten odour of sweat and filth of everyone who had stretched themselves out on that bed that had been for a moment transfigured by the greatness of their union. She felt nothing, not the cold nor the stench, nothing but emptiness, frustration, defeat, despair. Everything was lost, wretched. Everything was dead, and the need for drugs gnawed at the inside of her stomach like a colony of rats.

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//p283// "Mister Jack's* son?... Oh! Very Surprising... It's true that you faintly resemble him!... I'm happy that he has such a handsome son!... *Hello? Mr. Ted? Mr. Jack's son is here. Yes!... His son!... Yes, he says... he's asking for you... Well! Well!...*"*

He hung up. It was "Ted and Jack's"* blond secretary, fertile, smiling, optimistic, clean like an English dame, pink like a Dutch woman. She was sitting behind a desk covered with piles of tourist leaflets under an enormous tiger head attached to the wall. She rose to open the door for him and to point out a staircase at the end of the hallway.

"You climb to the second floor... Mr. Ted is waiting for you... In his office..."

All along the wall of the hallway other trophies were hanging, and at the foot of the staircase a buffalo head underneath which huge horns below which had been placed, as if to illustrate the dreaded sabre that had sliced it.

"I'm really sorry," said Ted, "but I don't see how I can help you..."

//p284// He was a large man with pink skin and transparent hair. He looked like one of the well-fed pigs in Boris' gardens. He had asked Oliver for his passport, to be sure of his identity, and, half sitting on the corner of the Empire desk, that also had to have crossed the mountains on the backs of sherpas, he was casually leafing through the document, after having examined it, paying a lot of attention.

He placed it on the desk and picked up a bronze statuette representing an exquisite goddess that he caressed with a mechanical pleasure, sliding it in the tunnel of one closed hand, then in the other.

This young girl in which you are interested... Unfortunately... There are so many in the same situation ... They come here, boys and girls, they believe they have arrived in paradise... It's nothing but a dead end. They can't go any further... The Himalayas... China... Eh? Not easy!... Not possible!... Those that can, leave!... The others rot away!..."

"Take her away, take her away, little one!... Take her away!... If she's willing!... She undoubtedly needs her drugs more than you... You were wrong to throw away her coke... That's not how you nurse them... You've created for her, on top of the emptiness, a frustrating shock that had to have given her excruciating pain... With the first dose, she'll forget all that and she'll want you again, but to cure her, you need a real treatment, in a serious clinic. Here, it doesn't exist. In Delhi, maybe... Europe would be better... Do you have the money to take her away?"

//p285// "You know well that I don't. That's why I have come to ask you..."

"You're dreaming, little one, this story of statues, it's a fantasy... Our agency is exactly what it is, a travel and safari agency that lives largely on the money of suckers who want powerful emotions, and can tell their friends from Texas that they climbed to the top of the Himalayas, collected yeti fur and killed fourteen tigers... The yeti fur is really the fur of a yak's tail. As for the Himalayas, the fools look at them from below. The tigers? your father's the one who kills them... He has a famous shot, your father... Apart from that, he's a child. Were he a little mature, he'd be as rich as me... But he'll never pass the age of 12... Believe me, let go of this girl... She's already lost... You can't do anything else... There's no work here for a European... Do you have your return ticket?"

"No."

"Ah!... Listen, I can talk to the Ambassador... He can maybe repatriate you... They do it sometimes... He's a friend..."

Oliver endlessly repeated to himself what Yvonne and Jack had told him:

"He's a bastard!... He's a bastard!... He's a bastard!..."

His blood boiled, but on the outside he remained icy like the mountain's summit.

"I'm not leaving without her. My well-being is of no consequence. It's *her* I want to save. I *know* you sell statues. I can go looking for you wherever you want. Everywhere that no one dares to go. If you pay me well enough. I'm not scared of anything. Of //p286// anyone. I want money, fast... If you help me earn it, you'll earn ten times more!..."

Ted abruptly placed the statue on the desk and took the passport that he held out to Oliver.

"I've heard enough talk of this story! And I don't like that they are telling such stupid stories about me, it could get me deported from the country and ruin me if ever a police officer's ear heard them! I advise you to shut up! If not, it's you that I will get deported, and without delay!... And when your father returns I'll have a few words with him!"

There was a heavy threat in that last sentence. Oliver took the passport. His stare stayed fixed on the statuette of the goddess on the desk. She was made of dark bronze,

almost green, and had a golden forehead, nose, buttocks, hips, everywhere that Ted's caresses had, day after day, worn out the sheen.

Ted followed Oliver's gaze and burst into laughter.

"Take it! Look where it comes from!"

He lifted the statuette and presented the bottom of its miniscule pedestal before Oliver's gaze. The latter saw a little yellow label glued there where two printed words read: SOTHEBY LONDON⁵⁸.

55

//p287// Oliver returned to the Tibetans. Jane's room was empty, but her and Sven's bags were there. He wandered a bit in the nearly deserted garden. Several hippies knocked out by drugs were sleeping in the spots where they had fallen. A brown and dirty girl, stretched out next to a bush, sat up on his approach and made him an offer in a language he did not understand. So she spread her legs and put her hand on her pants where her sex was, then lifted her hand with three fingers spread apart.

"Tree roupies...Drei roupies...Trois roupies...You Frenchman? Me...ich been...gentille...Trois roupies..."⁵⁹

He passed without answering, his heart clenched in an iron noose.

He sat down at the foot of a tree and opened his bag. A cow approached and put her nose into the open bag. It had nothing to give him: the cow chose a tissue and ate it then slowly left to stir its lower jaw.

Oliver plunged his head in his gear, found the last of his reserves, an envelope that had taken the rounded shape of the bottom of his bag and that held his last ten dollar //p288//bill, five thousand former francs. How many rupees? He didn't know. He went to the royal bank. They gave him the minimum, several grimy bills, some coins, and papers to sign. He had to show his passport. They needed all the legal proof of an official profit.

He returned to the market street. It was very sunny, and the crowd was sparse. Young people on bikes circulated at full speed through cows, dogs and gods. Kathmandu didn't discover the wheel until fifteen years earlier but its youth was buying into it deliriously. There were bicycle sellers and renters everywhere. The elderly didn't dare believe that you could keep your balance on these things that turned, but the young threw themselves on them with madness, tearing along at full speed, breaking sharply, skidding, taking off again, stopping, balancing acrobatically on the spot, laughing with happiness. Those who could, bought them instead of renting them, the sons of rich merchants, painted them a hundred different lively colours, planted caravans of gods on the handlebars, attached flowers to the pedals and ribbons everywhere, that flew far behind them, making a trail of joy.

Oliver looked in shop after shop, received lots of offers and smiles, an enormous amount of politeness and kindness, and ended up finding the tools that he needed for a tiny sum. He then returned to the square, climbed to the highest step of the large temple and settled down for the night, after having eaten a dozen exquisite bananas, as big as his thumb.

⁵⁸ Sotheby is a London gallery known worldwide, specialising in the sale of paintings with great value and very rare objects of art. [This is the translated footnote from the original French version of the novel, p286].

⁵⁹ This is the exact sentence that appears in the original French version.

The next morning, he was in Ted's office again. The latter had refused to receive him, but Oliver told the secretary that he wasn't going to leave until he saw him, and then walked confidently into the office on the second floor.

//p289// Ted arrived, in his dressing gown, furious, having woken up poorly, unshaven, ready to throw this little shit down the stairs.

But his initial words stopped in his throat when he saw what Oliver had placed on his desk. His mouth stayed opened. He was breathless.

Two statues, or rather two groups, stood before him. The first one consisted of a woman standing, clothes falling over her ankles, legs spread apart, knees bent, framed by two men each holding one breast, one inserting his penis in her right hand and the other in her left hand. Optimistic, Marseillais, Pharoic penises, which extended at length beyond the inquisitive hands. One of the men had a rather rosy complexion, and the other rather yellow, but their faces looked alike, tranquil, adorned with thin moustaches, capped with embroidered bonnets that were their only clothing.

The woman's face, on the other hand, had a very perplexed expression. She was visibly busy comparing the respective merits of her suitors and found one to be as interesting as the other. In her semi squatting position, her open sex was waiting, and was certainly growing impatient. The three figures, of sculpted wood, painted in a primitive fashion, weren't conjuring anything pornographic or even erotic. They were drawing a naïve portrait that felt familiar, and even a bit comical.

The second group held the solution to the afflicted woman's perplexity. Still standing, but having rid herself of the clothes that had been hindering her, she was receiving her two candidates at the same time, one in the front, one from behind. All three holding each other by the shoulders to keep their balance, and the one taking //p290// her from the front, too undoubtedly make this double operation easier, was holding one of her legs raised horizontally, so that she found herself perched on a single foot like a heron. She benefited, its true, from the other two supports almost as big as her thigh. The faces of the three figures weren't expressing sensual pleasure or any sort of an emotion. The one who was operating from behind had placed his free hand on one of the woman's breasts, but it could have been simply for balance and support. Neither one of them had lost their embroidered bonnets.

And on the three heads, like on the ones of the first group, was posed a bare, enormous, foot of a god, which Oliver had had to saw off just as he had had to with the humans on which they had been bearing their existence.

Ted turned red, violet, pale, then exploded:

"You're crazy! Completely crazy! You should be locked up! Everyone knows these! They come from all over the world to see them! The police must be searching everywhere already! You're completely nuts! Gather this up and clear off! And fast! Go! Go! Get Lost!"⁶⁰ I don't want this in my house a second longer!"

Oliver hadn't said a word. He was watching Ted who appeared very appalled, and he asked himself if, in the end, Jack and Yvonne hadn't been wrong about him.

Oh well, it had failed, too bad. He went to the desk, put his bag next to the statues, stuck one into his bag, wrapped the other in a shirt that he put under his arm and moved towards the door.

⁶⁰ There isn't a strong enough translation for this phrase so a capital *L* gives it added emphasis.

Ted was wiping his streaming forehead with a large pale green handkerchief. Just as Oliver was about to leave, he shouted:

//p291// "How much do you want for your crap?"

He was still mopping himself, and blew his nose. Oliver didn't answer. He had no idea how much the statues could be worth.

"They're not sellable!" said Ted. "I'm going to have to hide them for years! It's risky for me! Are you aware of that? It's as if you had stolen the Eiffel Tower... So, how much?..."

Oliver didn't answer.

"I'll give you..."

Ted stopped. The covetousness, the fear, the prospect of a fabulous profit were beating in his head. He couldn't see clearly anymore.

"Shut that door, for god's sake! Bar the lock! Turn the key! Show me those again..."

He himself took the package from under Oliver's arm and extricated the one from in his bag. He placed the two groups on his desk, looked at them and started to laugh.

"They're oddly funny! It has to be admitted... They're funny... A bit of whisky?"

"No thank you," said Oliver.

Ted opened an invisible fridge wall, took out a bottle, a glass filled with ice, served himself and drank.

"Sit down then! Don't stay rooted like that!"

Oliver sat down on the edge of an armchair, Ted sat at the end of a divan bed placed beneath the secret fridge. He put three pillows behind his back, drank, looked at the two groups again and was more and more thrilled.

"You have balls, but you're crazy! Deliriously crazy. You must never, ever do that again! Something like that!... I mean... If we work together... Why not... If you're //p292// reasonable... You're intelligent... You've understood... One of these groups is not bad, it would be a curiosity... But the both of them? It's incredible!"

Right away he regretted having let go so carelessly. He glanced at Oliver from the corner of his eye, made a disgusted expression.

"But they're not saleable... Not saleable! Even if I find a customer how do you think you are going to get it out of the country?... Can you see yourself leaving France with Milo's Venus?... Not sellable!... I'm going to have to hold onto them myself... for my personal collection. And what risk! Do you understand? One search, and I'm fried! Twenty years in prison and Nepalese prisons, they're something!... Even the rats die there!... At the same time I don't want you to have done this for nothing!... Heroism, even be it reckless, deserves a reward!... I'll give you... for the two... look... I'll be generous because I find them funny, these two objects, I really like them... And then, I like you, you have balls, feelings, you're in love, to me all that, it overwhelms me... Twenty dollars... For both! Okay?"

Oliver closed his eyes and saw Jane again on all fours, naked on the straw mattress, distraught, crazy like a famished dog that has eaten its young... He reopened his icy eyes, and said:

"A thousand dollars!"

When he left, an hour later, he had four hundred dollars in his wallet, was carrying a sixteen millimetre camera and precise instructions. He had to live at Boris', tell

him that he had come to write a news report on Nepalese celebrations. Boris could rent him a motorcycle that would allow to him to get around, he had to visit the small temples //p293// and far off monasteries in the mountains. Never again operate in Kathmandu! Ever! During the day, he was to mix in with the crowds at the celebrations, they're everywhere, all the time, scope out what was interesting, and return at night when there was no one there. Preferably even several nights later. And above all to not forget to use the camera. All the time! That he always be seen with the camera to his eye! A cretinous filmmaker, an Occidental nut who grows delirious before everything that is ordinary in everyday life, a sad case that makes police smile.

He must never come back to the agency during the day! Ever! Here's a key that opens the back door in the alley way. He must leave his bike far away, come by foot, at night, make sure there is no one around, open, close, climb directly to the office, sleep on the divan, wait for Ted to arrive. Okay like that? As for fees, they would always work it out, according to the interest in the piece... And also according to demand, obviously... At the moment, it's not going very well, Americans let go of their money with elastic bands, and Germans aren't so keen... But he could still collect money quite quickly to take the girl away and have her treated. The poor kid... Is she beautiful?... What a shame! It's always the most beautiful ones that do the stupidest things...

Oliver went to Boris'. They gave him a huge room with a bathroom that could have held a Parisian apartment.

Boris offered him a cocktail in his own apartment to which you got to by climbing a forged iron spiral staircase. All of its sides opened out to a rooftop terrace. The //p294// leopard-cat lurking under a divan watched Oliver with drawn together eyes, and rounded pupils, with great curiosity and equal distrust. Oliver told Boris his little story of the news report. Boris either believed him or pretended to and promised him a motorbike for the following morning, with a list of all the celebrations he could reach with a vehicle, and a rudimentary map.

Then, he excused himself, he had to leave him, a pitiful story: a little Parisian who had wanted to pass through to China. A little maoist, can you imagine? With a billionaire father!... She had tried to get a visa. It was like trying to get an entry ticket into an anthill...

So she had rented a plane and a guide. The plane had landed in the valley next to the border, the guide had led her close to a pass where she had a chance of getting through. He had let her go forward alone. When she had reached it, she had found herself face to face with a Chinese patrol. She had shouted: "Comrades!" They had all fired at the same time... Yes... Yes... There are Indian troops in Nepal, all along the Tibetan border, well, I should say Chinese... Just as there are troops of Chinese workers that maintain the road that crosses Nepal to the Indian border. The Nepalese army is neutral. No, no, they don't get involved with anything... They're good soldiers though, terrific... The famous Gurkhas, have you heard of them? The English could never beat them. Thanks to them, Nepal was never occupied. But the current king is intelligent... This story between China and India, is not something he wants to get involved with... Some patrols don't bother anyone, on the contrary, they secure its border... And the road, well, it's useful..."

//p295// The young girl, shot from the front and from behind, had rolled down the slope, on the Nepalese side. The guide had picked her up and brought her back to the

plane. Her father's here... Yes, here at my place... He doesn't want them to burn her... He wants to take her back to Paris... He has a plane as big as the Eiffel tower. But I have to find ice for him, at least a hundred kilograms of ice to preserve her, until he's got enough gas to leave. Would you mind excusing me? Cat! Come here, Cat! That's his name. Come, my pretty one... Come, my handsome one... No, he doesn't want to... He's a bit wild... I need to find him a female friend, it's hard... He doesn't get used to the daytime easily, he's a night animal. In the middle of the night, he jumps in my bed, and he gives me big pets with his paws on my cheek, to wake me up. He likes to play. During the day, he'd rather sleep. He won't get any bigger, that's his size. He weights a pound and a half..."

To a question from Oliver, Boris answered that there was an excellent English doctor at the Red Cross hospital, a Dr. Bewall. And he took off.

Oliver went to the Tibetans to look for Jane. He was going to take her to Boris', to have her examined by the doctor. He wouldn't commit the same stupid mistake of suddenly taking away her drugs. As soon as he had enough money they would leave. They would also take Sven if he wanted.

Jane and Sven's room was occupied by four American hippies. Three boys, and one girl who spoke French. They didn't know Jane and Sven. No, they didn't know where they had gone to. They didn't know anything. Jane and Sven's bags were no longer there.

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//p296// Oliver stayed absent longer than he would have liked to. Even the smallest temples, the furthest ones, the most lost at the end of insanely difficult trails, almost never stayed deserted at night. It wasn't a country where you locked God up with a key after hours. There was always someone there to greet, adore, pray. Conversation between gods and men weren't interrupted by the light of day or lamps. Oliver was growing crazy with impatience and fear thinking of Jane. Not only wasn't he earning anything, but she, during this time, had to be continuing to poison herself, to lose weight, to demean herself...

Finally, one night, he found himself alone in a small temple where he had discovered, during the day, a bronze statuette of a goddess, with six arms opening out, with a ravishing smile and a charming chest, easy to pull free and transport in his bag.

He found the temple on the slope of a mountain, at the top of an endless staircase. Oliver had hidden his bike in the valley, the moon lit up the empty staircase, he went to work knocking the hammer and the chisel, the hammer wrapped in clothes to muffle the noise.

//p297// But the crumbly cement hid thick bars of bronze that constituted the base and that drove into the holes of the four stones that narrowly encircled the base. The work of an artisan, dating from the construction of the temple, with which the statue formed the body.

Oliver swore at and insulted all the gods of the universe, took a saw from his bag, oiled it and succeeded in sliding it between the stones and the base, and started to attack the first bar.

It was then that he heard music, a pop song accompanied by flutes and guitars. He turned and saw a flock of hippies carrying torches, paper lanterns, and flashlights, busy climbing the stairs.

A murderous rage took root in him against these nutcases, these bastards, these poisoners, who were coming here to prevent him from saving Jane. He threw himself down the stairs, hit the first ones forcefully with his bag full of tools, hurled them down on the others, roared out insults, struck their hands, their feet, their heads, their elbows, made them tumble down the stairs, roll over each other, over their guitars and their lanterns, swallow their teeth and their flutes. Stunned, passive, trembling, understanding nothing, they ran away without any thought or idea of resisting. There were about thirty. He could have culled them like sheep. They found themselves at the bottom, some bleeding, limping, not even trying to understand, got back on their road to another place, another temple, another face of a more welcoming God. Oliver watched the halos of the several flashlights that were still running. He went back to work.

He finished with the fourth bar just before sunrise, buried the statue in his bag //p298// under his clothes, jumped on his bike, threw it on the slope, without turning the motor or the headlights on, at breakneck speed over the barely visible trail, eyes wide open, missing by a tenth of a second the deepest holes and murderous bumps. He went full speed when he met up with a sort of road. But he only made his return to Kathmandu in the afternoon. Too late, too early to go to Ted's. He went back to Boris', bathed in the bathtub that would have been suitable for an elephant and into which a greenish water flowed, shaved, changed clothes, and left to search for Jane. He carried the statue in his bag. He couldn't run the risk of leaving it in the hotel. His "boy", a Nepalese of about forty, whose name he couldn't manage to remember, charming, smiling, attentive, always on the lookout behind his door in the hope that he was going to ask him to do something, was certainly very honest, but certainly not less curious.

At the Tibetans, Jane and Sven's room was empty. The room only contained only three straw mattresses. No bags. He went into the other rooms, where some dirty idiotic girls and boys were hanging around and sleeping. He couldn't get any more information from them than from those he had run into in the garden. He went to sit down at the restaurant where he had met the boy from Marseilles. He wasn't there. The blond with the bun still was. She had changed spots. She was on the opposite bench, she was watching the door, without seeing when someone entered. She had gotten thinner, she held herself less straight, a lock of hair was hanging from the bun on her back. Her rosy skin had become pale, her hands, resting on the table, dirty, and her nails, black.

//p299// Two men with beards, on either side of a chess game, were looking at it while seeming to think. During more than the one hour that Oliver remained there, neither one nor the other moved a piece. In the end, the owner, who remembered Oliver, approached him, and with a movement of his head pointed out a table that was waiting, patiently, without even being conscious of waiting, for someone to come or not come to pay for the group's plate of rice. He asked:

*"Rice... Riz... You pay?"*⁶¹

"Let them starve!" said Oliver.

He left, his bag on his back, the chord sawing his fingers and his shoulder. She was heavy, this goddess, and she was at least a thousand years old, maybe more, he was

⁶¹ This is the exact sentence that appears in the original French version.

going to demand a good price. The night had fallen, the roads were empty, except for a few swift Nepalese, some hippies that were hanging about in twos or threes, yellow dogs in search of garbage, and cows sleeping everywhere.

Oliver risked the alleyway behind "Ted and Jack's". There was no one there, all the windows were dark, except for those of Ted's own abode, on the first floor.

A final glance. He took the key out of his pocket. The lock worked easily. He entered and found himself before the buffalo head. He gently pushed the door, climbed to the second floor. The stairs creaked. Thus Ted knew that he had arrived.

Actually, hardly had he placed the statue on the desk that Ted arrived and started to reproach him sourly for having come so early. It was crazy carelessness, if he continued like this, he would see himself, him, obliged to break off their association. He shut up abruptly when he saw the goddess, approached it, weighed it in his hands, looked //p300// at it from all angles, remarked the stumps of the sawed bars, demanded explanations which Oliver provided him with, insisting that they were proof of the very great age of the antiquity of the statue.

Ted pulled a face. He said that the temple could very well have been built fifty years ago, that the statue was made in a hybrid style, with both a Hindu and a Chinese influence. A trivial piece. He offered him ten dollars.

Oliver was too Occidental to understand that here it was, the extreme and even ridiculous base through a game of haggling that, in the Orient, is the rule of every transaction.

He could only see, like at the time of their precious bargaining deal, Ted's dishonest expression.

"You're a bastard!" he said. "You'll give me two hundred or I'll chuck it out the window!"

He tore the statue from Ted's hands and marched to the heavy felt curtains embroidered with animals that disguised the only window.

Ted, with incredible agility, caught up with him and seized him bodily.

"But you're sick, little one!... You discuss before becoming angry! Two hundred, you say?"

"Yes."

"It's craziness. But you are Jack's son, and you have to save that poor little girl, I'll give it to you!"

He went to open a safe as secret as the fridge and that he covered with his body so that Oliver wouldn't see its contents. When he returned, he was holding fifteen ten dollar bills and the safe was locked again. He was jubilant. He had, from the beginning, decided to go up to three hundred dollars. It was worth a good thousand.

//p301// "How is she, the poor child? The story just breaks my heart..."

"I don't know where she is, or her friend," said Oliver, darkly. "She's no longer at the Tibetans', no one can tell me anything, they're all passed out! They wouldn't see Everest if it was under their noses."

"Don't worry," said Ted while pushing Oliver gently towards the door. They undoubtedly left to go on a short pilgrimage somewhere. They're all the same, busy going in circles around Kathmandu, to give themselves the illusion that they can still move about, that they're not at the end of everything... In any case, if she's gone, it

proves that she has less of a need for drugs. The powder, she can only find it here. It's quite a good sign!..."

"You believe so?" said Oliver suddenly re-inflated with hope.

"Obviously!... It's only logical!..."

Just as he was about to put the small bundle of money in his pocket, Oliver, taken by a sort of reflex, began to count it.

He raised his head back up to Ted. Such a tranquil and audacious swindle stunned him.

"But... there's only a hundred and fifty dollars! We said two hundred!"

Ted smiled and patted his shoulder.

"I held onto fifty for the camera... That way, you own it... When you leave, I'll take it back from you for the same price... Unless you manage to sell it for twice as much!... It's not hard, if you've got some skill."

Oliver knew a lot about cameras. He had friends who owned them. He knew that //p302// the one Ted had entrusted him with was an ancient antediluvian used and abused and that it let in light from all over the place. He also knew that his only chance of not ripping or warping the film was that there wasn't a centimeter of it inside.

He wanted to argue again for his fifty dollars, then gave up. He was exhausted and discouraged, he wanted to sleep, above everything else, sleep, but he had to go on the hunt again, and do it faster. He had taken two weeks to earn a hundred and fifty dollars. Gas, room, rental of the bike deducted, he had nothing left. He decided to take more risks and fight Ted to death to draw out the maximum from him. He had to somehow manage to net five hundred dollars per week, for a month. Afterwards, to the wind!... But *first*, he had to find Jane.

As they arrived together at a door on the first floor, it opened and a woman was framed there. It was Yvonne. She exclaimed:

"Oliver! My word! What are you doing here?"

"I'm..."

"He came to ask me for advice," interrupted Ted brusquely. "He's a kind boy, who has a love story with a little hippy girl. I'm trying to help them... Go find her quickly, little one, go... Take the back door... The front door is locked. Pull the door shut behind you."

Oliver didn't move. He was looking at Yvonne who was dressed in bush attire, visibly having recently arrived.

"Is my father here?" he asked.

All of a sudden, he felt like a child whose father is going to be able to help him, a strong father, a father who knows, a father who can, a father, first resort, a father...

//p303// "No," said Yvonne, "I came back by plane. He doesn't come back until next week, with the jeeps, once he's gotten rid of all his staff... But come back and see me! Tomorrow!"

"He'll come back! He'll come back!" said Ted. "Now that someone is waiting for him, the little rascal..."

He pushed Oliver towards the stairs, smiling widely.

"You'll come back? For sure?" asked Yvonne.

"Yes," said Oliver.

//p304// Ted and Yvonne's apartment, on the ground floor, consisted of only two rooms, a small bedroom, occupied by a big bed covered with an exquisite embroidered cashmere blanket, and a large living room opening out onto the landing, with couches, a bar, divan, trophies, the unavoidable tiger skins on the ground, and a table against a wall, cluttered at the moment with weapons, which Yvonne had brought back from the hunting house, and surrounded by suitcases.

Yvonne entered the living room, followed by her husband.

"I hope you haven't dragged that kid into your dirty schemes," she said.

"What schemes?... I don't have any schemes... And can you see this innocent involved in any sort of scheme? He's even more of a fool than his father!..."

He followed Yvonne into the bedroom where she opened a cupboard wall and took out a pair of sheets. She returned to the living room. He followed her.

"I put him in touch with a guy from NBC who passed by two weeks ago. He ordered a film about Nepal's celebrations from him. It's a good business. American television pays well, but... What are you doing?"

Yvonne was taking the crimson purple satin bedspread off of the divan and starting to spread out a sheet.

"You can see, I'm making my bed..."

"But... But... Your bed..."

"My bed is no longer your bed... It's done! I'm leaving you... I'm gone!..."

Ted paled.

"With Jack?"

She nodded.

"Jack and I are leaving for Europe... As soon as he arrives, we're taking the plane..."

There was a bouquet of fresh flowers in a vase near Ted. He ripped the bouquet from the vase, twisted it with both of his enormous hands covered in lucid hair, and threw the stems on the floor on one side, the flowers on the other.

"Idiot!... I know that you're sleeping with him... I tolerate it... What are you going to gain, by leaving?"

She stopped smoothing out the bed, stood up to face Ted.

"I want to live decently!... With a decent guy!... Can you understand that?"

He had a look of slight astonishment, then started to laugh.

"Live?... Live with what?..."

"I have my parents' land... We'll farm it. I'll sell my jewellery, and I have some money..."

"What money?... What jewellery? It's mine!... I paid for it and it's in my safe. Your bank account is in my name... You have nothing but a power of attorney that I'm going to annul first thing tomorrow morning. You have nothing! Not a penny! Not even that!"

//p306// He took Yvonne's bag and placed it next to the weapons, emptied it out on the table, grabbed the few bills and the two rings that fell out on it and put them in his pocket.

"You have nothing!... Jack has nothing! When you resemble a pig, like I do, and you marry a girl whom you desire, you take precautions to hold onto her... That I disgust you, I know, since the day that I picked you up in Calcutta, where you were playing Célimène. Your acting was poor, but you were beautiful. Your shabby play had no money left to return to France. Coming to act out Molière before the deadbeats of Calcutta, that was a great idea! You didn't even have money for food!... I offered you dinner, champagne, a ring, a car, dresses, and marriage!... It all seemed so fabulous to you that you accepted. But when we made love... No, let's be precise, it wasn't a question of love, even less so on your part... I took you, you let me, but I saw your little Parisian face fully clenched... You closed your eyes so that I couldn't read your disgust... A fat pink bastard lying on you with his belly... A fat pig, you were thinking, a fat pig... and Swiss, on top of everything!... I have to admit that you didn't cheat - pretended to experience pleasure. You didn't vomit either, and when I desired you, each time you dutifully let me. You didn't pretend to be tired, like so many honest wives... You paid loyally... Giving, giving. Correct. When I took in this pretty little cretin Jack as an associate, I knew what I was doing. You were going to find compensation in him. You needed a bit of joy. It was normal... But I still assumed you had a medium of //p307// intelligence... You can't really imagine though that that bloke is capable of doing anything other than kissing you and shooting rifle rounds?... How is he going to keep you, your handsome hunter?... By hunting nightingales?..."

Ted took the sheet that Yvonne was still holding from her arm, and tore off the one from the divan.

"I'm going to sleep in my office... Your room is still your room... You're at home here... Until your departure..."

He walked around the red velvet couch that was blocking his access to the door, turned back around towards Yvonne who had sat down on the edge of the divan, and who was looking at him with eyes simultaneously full of terror and of defeat. He leaned on the back of the chair, letting the sheets hang over the velvet.

"But what's come over him, all of a sudden, that little man? He had it really good here, the situation suited him perfectly!... A job that allowed him to impress princesses and millionaires, a woman that didn't cost him anything... He decided all of a sudden to abandon all that to become a worker?"

Yvonne rose, tense, dry, scornful.

"You can't possibly understand... He met his son, and saw himself in his eyes, and he felt ashamed... He wants to start again from scratch. He wants to become a man."

Ted burst into laughter.

"Ah! Ah! Ah!... A man!... Listen! I'll be a good loser!... I'll pay for your plane tickets... For both of you.... Return... That gives you one year!... He'll be back before three months... *And you know it*... Here, he's someone! There, zilch! He won't forgive you for it! He'll start to hate you! He'll ditch you! He'll return in a supersonic! Beg me to give him back his position!... And you'll run behind like a lunatic!..."

//p308// He gathered up the sheets to leave, smiled, stopped.

"But after everything, under his infantile airs, he knows how to manage his affairs very well... He's always managed to lead a very agreeable life... Without money... But with that of others... Once you've told him that contrary to what he might think you

don't have a quarter of a rupee, I'll bet you a honeymoon night that he'll have no more desire to leave... Deal?..."

She didn't answer. He wished her good night and left.

She slowly approached the mirror that hung over the tables where the weapons were stored. She looked at herself, without pity. The climate was destroying her. Also destroying her was her horror of Ted's businesses, and the battle in her heart between her love and her contempt for Jack. In the mirror she saw her complexion yellow, her cheeks fall, wrinkles dig in at the corners of her mouth, wither her eyes, her breasts sag, her flesh soften. She felt Ted's vile weight on her stomach and his animal odour from when he had sweat on her, she heard Jack hold forth, laugh, saw him show off, unconscious, indifferent, satisfied, not even jealous... She knew he wouldn't leave. Ted was right. She was going to rot right here, between this pig and that egotist, and once she had become unmissable, Ted would throw her back out somewhere in Calcutta, and Jack would let him do it, gently, with a lot of sympathy.

She opened the table drawer, took out a tube of tranquilisers. The prescribed dose was two tablets.

She took six.

58

//p309// First thing the next morning, Oliver left Boris'. On the way, the concierge handed him a letter that had been delivered a few days before. Oliver asked why they hadn't given him the letter the night before, upon his arrival. The man excused himself, with a disagreeable tone. He was Indian. Oliver opened the letter. A few words on an old piece of dirty paper.

You're a fool, Jane loves you. Hurry up. Sven.

The two lines of wavering handwriting, trembled like an old man, bent, tilted, and fell to the right of the page. The curlicue, that had been started under the signature, hadn't been finished.

The concierge, clearly malevolent, couldn't or didn't want to say how long the message had been waiting. Crazy by worry, Oliver ran straight to the Tibetans' palace, found nothing, got nothing from the hippies that he asked and sometimes shook, in the streets. He arrived at the Temple Square and asked the same question twenty times over:

Jane? Sven?... Jane? Sven?...

And it always provoked the same evasive gestures, indifferent, the same absent smiles.

//p310// He all of a sudden thought that maybe Yvonne could advise him. He moved towards the road that led to "Ted and Jack's". Just as he was about to leave the square, he heard the shrill and out of tune voice of a flute that was playing *Plaisir d'amour*... The Marseillais boy! He couldn't recall his name anymore... He ran, turned around the big temple, pushed through a group of farmers that were laughing... Gustave, seeing his harrowed face suddenly appear, stopped blowing in his pipe.

//p311// *Sven's dead. They burned him in Pashupakinat today. Jane's got to be there... Yes, surely, she's there...*"

That's what the flute player had said. Oliver, on his bike, repeated the last words to himself over and over again: "Jane is there, Jane has to be there."

Flooring the gas, he drove without seeing the road. Reflexes beyond his control guided his engine and himself. He passed other cars, he crossed, to the left, to the right, trucks and cars, not knowing what was his left or his right anymore, terrifying the trotting families, causing squadrons of birds thrown into a panic by the bike's noise to fly away. He was like the gust of a tornado that roars between obstacles and passes...

He stopped at the top of the crematorium valley, got off his bike, put it on its chock and went right to the top of the steps. His legs were trembling.

The staircase that descended right to the sacred river was big enough to give passage to a parade of people or an army. But between the two rows of elephants that bordered it, trunks in the air, facing the river, it was deserted from top to bottom. Every one of the stone elephants was ten times the size of a live one. The ones at the bottom //p312// looked as big as rabbits. Most of them no longer brandished more than a stump of a trunk, the stairways' steps were loose and chipped, the valleys' slopes were but a forest of temples, altars, columns, statues, none of which were really ruined, but all of which were a bit chipped, or tilting, ready to collapse in a few days, or maybe only in a few centuries.

Over this population of stone fixed in its invisible movement, on the ladder of eternity, the accelerated population of jumping and chattering monkeys was frolicking, leaping about ceaselessly like pursued fleas, from the shoulder of a god to a goddess' head or to an elephant's ear.

A few retinues of men were carrying their dead without haste, accompanied by colourful banners and sharp music.

To the left of the steps, at the very bottom, an enormous golden Buddha was sleeping, lying in the water of an oval basin, locked up forever behind seven doorless walls. You could only see and pay tribute to him from the top of the stairway. Nobody had approached him for a eighteen hundred years, when the first wall had been sealed around him. The basin was still full. Its water clear. The Buddha's hands were joined on his chest and his intertwined fingers were emerging from the water and shining.

Oliver started to make his way down the steps jumping like a bouncing ball. The monkeys, perched on the back of the stone elephants, cried and jumped up and down with excitement as he passed. He had seen the pyres from the top. Three were actually burning, others were awaiting either the dead or the flame. They were erected on the quay, //p313// each on a type of platform of bare stone, the length of the river that afterwards received the ashes.

The river was almost dry. A thin current meandered from one bank to the other, across a blackish and cracked mud. Cheerful women dipped their laundry in the little bit of water that they found. Coloured sashes and shirts blurred by filth were drying on a rope hung between a small chapel's spire and a god's raised arms.

At a certain point on the staircase, on a particular leap towards the steps, after other jumps and other leaps, Oliver plunged into the *smell*. It very nearly stopped him. It

was the smell of grilled, burnt, carbonized flesh, mixed with the smell of the smoke of wood on which flowed the grease and the excrement of the bodies torn open by the fire.

He thought that Jane was there, at the bottom, right beside one of those horrific hearths. He charged ahead.

Sven was stretched out on the traditional pyre, on a small number of logs, very little wood is needed to burn a man. In the process of a natural death, except for a few particular sicknesses, the last days and above all the last hours of passage relieve a man of his water, the rest burns like kindling. Water is the universal support of life. The dying man no longer needs it, it has nothing left to do in him, it leaves him, he becomes dry, tiny, reduced to the essentials. If he's still conscious and willing, he knows that water is leaving him, and that what remains and is going to leave, none of this is his, only a bit of everything endlessly changing locations, time, shapes. What he is, him, he doesn't //p314// know, but if he accepts it in peace, maybe he'll become something in the peace of the last moment, after so many heartbreaking and vain battles.

If he refuses and if he's scared, maybe he'll continue to refuse, to battle, to be scared, just like in this life that he's just finished covering and that's nearing its end. But most often the unjust suffering contorts and takes hold of him, making his conscience present at the instant of his death impossible, or even the needle authorized by a pitiful doctor plunges him into absence, and the passage is made without him.

What happens to these clandestines? What happens to the others? Do the ten thousand gods of Kathmandu tell those who understand them? Do the flowers of the cherry trees that re-open every spring give and answer? Does the flight of birds inscribe it on the sky? We have eyes and we don't see. That's our only certainty.

Sven's were shut on this life. His face was relaxed and peaceful, surrounded by his hair and blond beard that someone had painted and decorated with flowers. There were other flowers arranged everywhere, on him and on the pyre. His guitar was placed on his stomach, and his crossed hands were holding a small green branch that resembled a bird.

When Oliver arrived, a tall thin boy, dressed in a type of white veil, tightened at the head and at the belt by a golden rope, was busy lighting a fire on the four corners of Sven's last bed with a paper torch. About twenty-two hippies, boys and girls, squatting in a circle around the logs, were singing an American song, whose words Oliver didn't understand, in low voices. Its melody was both melancholic and joyful. A girl was //p315// playing a flute, a boy was tapping a sort of tambourine with the tips of his fingers. Hash cigarettes passed from mouth to mouth, interrupting a voice in the choir, releasing another one. A woman who seemed to be fifty years old, sitting level to Sven's face, was breathing greedily, both through the mouth and the nose, the smoke of an oil burner. Sven's beard and hair caught on fire, illuminating his face. The smoke of the hash mixed in with that of the pyre. Jane wasn't there. Oliver realized it with a single glance.

He saw her as he was turning around. She was lying at the feet of a triangular pillar, each side of which was engraved with a god whose forehead had been rubbed with red, yellow or white powder by the piety of passers-by.

She was in the exact same position as the girl he had mistaken to be her, at the edge of the pond of pigs. He had the fear, and the hope, of being wrong again, knelt down, pushed back her hair, and recognized her.

She was barely breathing. Her eyes were closed, her hair tangled up, her face grey with dirt. Submerged with weariness, pity and love, Oliver very nearly succumbed to his distress, lay down beside her and started to sob.

He closed his eyes, forced back his tears, called her softly by her name. She didn't move, didn't answer.

"She can't hear you, she's drunk," said a voice above him.

He raised his head, saw a person with long grey hair dressed in half-European, half-Oriental garb. He was smoking a pipe. And this miraculous pipe smelled only of tobacco.

"Drunk?" asked Oliver, into whose head the evidence refused to enter...

//p316// The man knelt down beside him, he smelled like sweat, grime and French tobacco. He raised the sleeve of Jane's blouse, revealing the bleeding on her left arm, mottled with pricks and scabs.

"Heroin," he said. "You find everything, in this filthy country... Excuse me, I'm wrong... It's not the country that's dirty. It's an amazing country... I've lived here for ten years, I'll never leave... The filth, is what the bastards bring to it... And the travelling rot of that group of damned fools!..."

He was pointing at the hippies singing and gently swaying their chests around Sven's pyre that was starting to blaze beautifully.

"She's beautiful, wow!" continued the man. What surprises me is that she hasn't yet embarked for the brothels of Singapore or Hong Kong. The mafia is starting to organize itself around here. She must have defended herself, the little lass... For what good it did her..."

"She's really sick, you think?"

"I'm not a doctor... But no need... You can see as well as I can... If you could put her in a clinic right away... But here!... You don't have a French pipe, by chance?... You live for nothing here, but this shitty tobacco, you have to have it brought in by plane, it'll ruin you!..."

Oliver had risen and was looking at the unending succession of steps that seemed to climb to the sky.

"I'm going to take her away... I have my bike at the top... You want to help me carry her?..."

"Nobody helps anybody," said the man... You think you're helping, and you end up harming. Nobody knows what is good or what is bad... You can take her away, maybe you're right, or maybe it would be better to leave her here... You don't know... Me neither..."

//p317// He spit on the ground and left.

Oliver saw him bend down, pick something up, a cigarette butt? A crust forgotten by the cows and the monkeys? Put it in his pocket and move towards the small bridge, a down-and-out with one foot in the Occident and the other in the Orient, philosopher, egotist...

Nobody helps anybody... Nobody... Nobody...

Oliver, standing before an unconscious Jane, watched the dead burning, the living swaying, the gods limping, the monkeys jumping, and all of it bit by bit grew red like a flame in his eyes, it was all an enormous flame that burned everything and everyone in a total absurdity, without reason and without a goal, a universal pyre of pain and idiocy.

Jane...

There was her and there was him, and one simple thing to do: try to save her.

He kissed her, picked her up carefully, not knowing if one abrupt movement would be fatal for her weak heart.

Once she was in his arms, across his chest, he started to climb the endless stairs between the elephants with broken trunks. The sky was there at the top. He would reach it. She was in his arms, she weighed nothing, he carried her, he would save her. Let the world burn...

60

//p318// Jane, still unconscious, was stretched out on a bed. A doctor was busy taking her pulse. He couldn't believe his eyes or his dial. He pushed down on her face again, released the pressure, then did it again. Even though he was a Brit, on the third try he couldn't stop himself from making a face, raised his head to Yvonne and said to her in English:

"Almost zero... Logically, she should be dead."

Oliver understood only one word: "*dead*"*, dead. He rebelled:

"It's not true! She's not dead!"

"Shhh," said Yvonne. "He didn't say that... He says he's going to save her..."

The doctor understood French and understood that Oliver needed to be reassured. But save her... In any case... He kept his skepticism to himself, started to write a prescription, and gave Yvonne some instructions.

For the moment, the sick one was not transportable. As soon as she was in good enough shape to handle a move, she had to be taken to the clinic in New Delhi for which //p319// he gave them an introductory letter. In the meantime, they were going to give her a drip and they would have to feed her as soon as she was in a state for eating. Porridge and starch, like a baby. Then the drugs that she wanted. With heroin, you couldn't deprive her of it, it would kill her.

He would come back with a serum for the drip, and a box of vials that made up the first treatment: a solution of heroin mixed with another product. He gave them the letter for the clinic at the same time. A decent nurse couldn't really be found, here, he had to do everything himself.

He left quickly. He wasn't the best doctor, he knew it, and he also knew that the most important thing, in this case, was to move fast. He was already scared that he would be too late when he got back.

Yvonne explained to Oliver what he had said. She made him sit down and offered him some coffee and food, both of which he refused. He was at the foot of the bed, on a chair, his face covered in dust, and hadn't taken his eyes off Jane. He had succeeded in making her sit up on the bike behind him, the time it took for him to sit down himself and attach her to his back with his shirt.

He had returned at a snail's pace, avoiding the smallest pebbles. Sometimes she slipped, to the left or to the right; he had had to stop to put her Jane's arms around his own neck and tie her hands under his chin, with a handkerchief.

He had made his way straight to "Ted and Jack's", only Yvonne could help him.

The doctor came back, suspended the large phial of serum over the bed, installed //p320// the rubber band, pierced the vein, regulated the drip. He had brought bands of cloth, with which he rigged Jane to the bed. They could free her once she had regained consciousness, but *real* consciousness, and only from that moment could they clean her up and undress her.

In a vein on her other arm, he injected a vial of heroin. He showed Yvonne how it had to be done. It was delicate. Above all no air bubbles... If he could, he'd come back to do the injections himself. But he was all alone, and there were so many sick people...

Above all he said to not give in to her pleas if she begged for another needle during the day! And not leave the phials and the syringe within her reach! In her state, one overly powerful dose could make her crazy, or kill her.

61

//p321// "Thank you for having welcomed her into your home," said Oliver.

He was sitting on the divan, in Ted's office, a glass of coke in his hand. Ted was standing up, nicely pink, nicely fresh, smiling, was drinking a whiskey.

"It's the least I could do," he said.

"No... You could have told me to take her to the hospital... She'd be dead there... Now, she's saved... Thanks to you... I will never forget it..."

At the end of three days, Jane seemed to have come back to life. When she had opened her eyes, Oliver was in front of her. The horrible soothing heroin was flowing in her veins. A slow happiness had entirely overcome her. Oliver... Oliver... Oliver... He was here. The joy rose right up to her face, making her cheeks rosy and giving light to her eyes whose violet had turned pale blue. She had smiled, opened her lips. She had said in one breath:

"Oliver!"

In turn he had smiled at her, tightening his lips well, sniffing and batting his eyelids, to avoid the beginning of the tears that he hadn't been able to prevent from suddenly appearing. He had patted her hand still immobilised by the straps. He had finally been able to speak.

//p322// "It's okay!... Everything's good!..."

The doctor, having returned, had been very surprised, very happily surprised. He announced that they could move her very soon. She ate voluntarily. She had, in forty-eight hours, regained some of her natural colour, and it seemed, a bit of weight.

Yvonne gave her her needle in the morning. Oliver didn't leave her during the day. It was the night that was hard, when Oliver left and the lack of heroin began to be felt. Yvonne kept the vials and syringe down to her apartment, out of her reach. Knowing that there was nothing else to do, she ended up sleeping, waking up more and more frequently as the night advanced, feeling the anguish and suffering grow more and more intense, up until the blessed moment at which Yvonne arrived...

"In two or three days, I believe I'll be able to take her to Delhi," said Oliver. "Unfortunately, I don't have the money, for the trip and the treatment. Could you please lend me a thousand dollars? I'll pay you back afterwards, working for you, for nothing..."

"You're a very kind boy," said Ted... "And that child is ravishing... But a thousand dollars!... Do you realize?... And if you don't come back?..."

Oliver stood up brusquely.

"Who do you take me for? I'll sign a contract for it!"

"It's worth nothing to me, your contract, if you choose to be dishonest with me!"

Oliver went pale. He roughly placed his glass on the desk.

"Don't get excited..." said Ted. "I can't lend you such an enormous sum..."

//p323// Look... You must understand that!... Be reasonable!... But I can have you earn it... Have you already been to Swayanbounath?"

"Yes..."

"Are you familiar with what they call Buddha's Tooth?"

Oliver furrowed his brows, trying to remember.

"Okay, I'll show you..."

Ted put his glass down and went off to find a large format book on a shelf from which he pulled out a series of colour photographs. He spread them out on the desk. They represented a wooden polychrome Buddha taken from different angles, head curiously dressed with a turban, sporting a fine moustache, and an enormous rectangular emerald embedded in his navel. He was niched in a small chapel, on whose summit a curtain of large mesh of forged iron was raised.

"Ah yes, I see..." said Oliver.

"Good!... It has the reputation of being the authentic portrait of Buddha, made according to nature, of the living one, which made this statue at least two thousand five hundred years of age... It's enough to look at it to realize that it's infinitely more recent. The Persian influence is obvious. Something else about it, for me, constitutes its rarity and value. But for the faithful that go to adore him from all over the Orient, almost like the Buddha himself, it's the real, *the unique* genuine portrait of Çakya-muni⁶², authenticated by this..."

Ted placed his pink finger on the image of the emerald navel.

"A tooth from Gautama himself, taken from him after his death... A nice touch of piercing, isn't it?..."

//p324// He gathered up the photographs and put them back in the book that he put on the shelf.

"I have a client for this little Buddha... An American, of course... He comes back every year. He always asks me: 'And so, that tooth?...' I had never wanted to agree. It's too risky. But if you want to try your luck... He's offering five thousand dollars."

Oliver was suffocated by the enormity of the sum. Ted pointed out to him that if the emerald had been authentic, it alone would have been worth more than double. But he had taken the precaution of photocopying it with the right filters. It was just tinted glass. It was better not to tell the American. It wasn't the jewel that interested him, just the rarity of the statue.

He had built himself a fantastic museum that had to be peppered with some pretty funny pieces... It was he, Ted knew, who had had the head of King Lépreux sawed and brought to Angkor, failing to be able to transport the entire statue because it was too

⁶² Siddharta Gautama Çakya-muni, the original name of Buddha.

bulky. But he also claimed to possess a lock of Christ's beard, cut off by a Roman soldier. Which was at the very least a dubious claim.

"He's here at the moment, at the Himalaya Hotel. If this interests you..."

"I'm in!" said Oliver.

"I didn't doubt that you would be. You're the only one who can succeed at this. You have a motive more urgent than simple curiosity, you have balls, agility, a cold stare, and you don't doubt yourself... His name is Butler... I'll let him know. That's *all* I'm going to do... I'm not getting mixed up with anything! As soon as you have the piece, take it to him at the hotel, he'll give you the sum, bring me back half..."

//p325// "What?"

"You don't actually think that I'm giving you this business on a silver platter uniquely for your pleasure?... But I'm going to save you money!... He came in his personal plane. I'll ask him to take you with the little one, and drop you off in Delhi. As soon as he has the object, he'll be in a big hurry to go fly off and put it in a safe place. If you bring it to him at night, first thing in the morning all three of you will be gone. No one left behind, no traces of you! It's a superb feat. It depends solely on you to succeed... If you fail..."

"I won't fail," said Oliver. "But I don't agree with the cut. Two thousand for you, three thousand for me..."

"You're in the process of becoming someone," said Ted smiling. "Okay..."

62

//p326// "There's a letter for you, Mrs. Muret," said Mrs. Seigneur.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! It's from my little one! You'll forgive me, won't you!... I told him to write to me here... I was scared of the police... I didn't know there'd be an amnesty... Oh my God, I can't see anything... My glasses are dirty... Say, would you look at it?..."

It was still early when the telegram arrived, but Mrs. Seigneur was already sitting behind her register, eyes watching over everything, and the first customers entered, the youngest women, for fresh milk for the first bottle, and the oldest also, the lonely who hardly slept anymore, who are up before the baker, who don't know what to do with what's left of their lives, and go from shop to shop, as soon as they open, buy some scraps, or nothing at all, feel out the merchandise, chat, giving themselves the impression that they still need to keep up their existence...

"Mrs. Muret's glasses weren't dirty, nothing on her or in her was ever dirty, but her eyes were misty and her hands were trembling. She held the envelope out to Mrs. //p327// Seigneur who opened it. It contained a postcard, and a ten dollar bill.

"Well, I'll say! He seems to be coping, your kid!"

The bill in dollars had rendered Mrs. Seigneur full of consideration and a bit resentful. Youth! There's money for them! Millionaires at twenty, through nothing but selling ties! Who would have believed it from that little Oliver?"

Oliver's grandmother was growing impatient:

"What does he say? What does he say?"

"He says: 'Don't worry, I'm doing well, everything's good. Exchange the bill in a bank. I'm thinking of you. Oliver.'"

"He's doing well! He's doing well! Oh my God, bless you!... He didn't say where he is?... Where's it from, the card?..."

Mrs. Seigneur looked at the card and saw a snow-covered mountain.

"From Mont Blanc," she said...

"Oh well my word! What's he doing on Mont Blanc? Another one of his ideas, that!..."

Mrs. Seigneur had a suspicion. Maybe it wasn't Mont Blanc... She looked for an inscription. She found it on the back, in several foreign languages.

"It's not Mont Blanc," she said, "it's not written in French... There's a name, Kathmandu... Since he's sending you dollars, it must be in America..."

"In America!... What a delight! He's going to meet up with his mother there! You //p328// know that Martine's there, since her poor boss had that accident... You see, we torture ourselves, we fret, and then things end up fixing themselves, the Good Lord isn't so bad... Thank you Mrs. Seigneur, thank you!... I'm going up right away to vacuum..."

She took the bill, the envelope, and the card, and with small steps crossed the bright shop that smelled like fresh milk and good cheeses, she was innocent and good like them, and wrapped in happiness like in a piece of cellophane.

63

//p329// Halfway up the Mountain, at the top of a tall mountain surrounded by a circle of smaller mountains, stands the temple of Swayanbounath.

It has the shape of a white breast whose base is as big as a city.

Inside, right in the middle of the Temple and the summit of the mountain, have remained for twenty five centuries the remains of prince Sidharta Gautama, who became the Buddha Çakya-muni, by discovering the path that men who want to forever deliver themselves from suffering have to take.

Thus Swayanbounath makes up one of the three summits that balance the rotation of the world, the second being Golgotha, on which, five centuries later, Jesus Christ opened up a new way, by taking the suffering of man upon himself.

The third summit hasn't yet cropped up from the water. That's why there's still suffering present everywhere, unjust and unexplainable.

The temple of Swayanbounath, two thousand five hundred years old, had stayed new, constantly maintained since its construction, the fervour, the technique and the skill of a population of artisans that live in the mountains' villages that circle the mountain, //p330// and who haven't done anything else in twenty-five centuries, other than repair what is worn, and replace what can no longer be repaired. But the mass of the breast itself, built and hermetically closed once and for all around the Buddha, had never, since, suffered any imbalance or weakening.

Its point is made up of a quadrangular tower with a top layer of gold, which extends twenty-one smaller and smaller gold disks out, the last ones plunging into the interior of a crown topped by a cone. The cone is protected by a pyramid formed by three trees of gold whose summits join together in the shape of a triple cross.

From the pyramid's summit thousands of strings set out and met up with all the tips of the mountain and the mountains surrounding it, the summits of all the secondary temples, of all the buildings, of all the chapels, the trees, the posts, with everything that

crops up and rises. Rectangular pieces of cloth are suspended on these strings. On each of these rectangles, a man's hand had written a prayer. Thus the wind that blows and stirs them prays day and night in ten thousand colours.

The miraculous whiteness of the Breast is constantly maintained by painters dressed in white, faces and hands hidden with white makeup, who move about hour after hour, day after day, in the direction of the sun, each one at the required height so that the slices of whiteness that they've been painting their whole lives match up, devoted to the unique task of the whiteness, lost in the white.

On each of the four faces of the gold tower are painted Buddha's huge eyes. Their //p331// irises without pupils are blue like the night, half covered by the bent curve, pale blue and golden, of the upper eyelid, that surmounts the perfect arc of the king-blue eyebrow. The look is neither inquisitive nor indulgent nor severe. It's not a look that judges or expresses. It's a look that looks, in four directions.

A continuous crowd of pilgrims winds over the trails, among the mountains in a circle, and climbs towards the Temple by all the paths and the stairways that lead to it. Around the Breast itself extends a vast square covered with annexed buildings, chapels, columns, statues of all the gods of Hinduism and Tantrism that have come, they also, to pay homage to Buddha's wisdom. And among them endlessly circle the faithful, the dogs, the monkeys, the ducks, the water porters, the flower givers, the bigwigs, the cows, the hippies, the tourists, the onion sellers, the sheep, the pigeons, the cigar-coloured crows, the violin-playing children, a multicoloured and slow crowd over which the light shadow of a hundred thousand aeolian prayers flutter.

In the afternoon Oliver had located the chapel of the Tooth, and had stopped before the small moustached god for a length of time. There would be no surprises such as with the six-armed goddess. The wooden statue was simply resting on a short stone pedestal, fixed to it by two chains sealed in the stone and linked at the other end to rings planted at the base of the statue. Between the rings and the end of each chain a foreign and enormous instrument was interposed that Oliver recognized by having seen some familiar ones in a shop in Kathmandu. It looked like the canon of a mortar and a //p332// crossbow at the same time: it was a padlock.

The whole scrap iron was thick and forged by hand, but Ted had given Oliver sharpened wire cutters capable of slicing the cables of the Tancarville Bridge⁶³. There wasn't a problem from this side, even if you pulled down, for the night, the steel curtain whose every mesh was as thick as a thumb.

The difficulty came from the crowd.

Oliver realized that nothing would be possible at the beginning of the night. He went back down to the bottom of the valley where he had left his bike beside a stream, ate some provisions that he had brought, stretched out, bag under his head, and watched the huge stars light up one by one. He fell asleep thinking about the life he was going to build for Jane with the three thousand dollars. First off, he make her better then take her to a new country, a decent country, Canada maybe, with all of its snow, simple men, its trees and its axes. And make her happy right until her last day. Never had the turbaned Buddha, in all of his centuries of existence, favoured a clearer destiny, an act so glorious. It was for this, surely, and for this only, that it had been sculpted, painted and chained to

⁶³ A suspension bridge in France.

that spot, waiting with the patience of a tree and a god for a boy with a heart as pure as his to come cut its chains and carry it to love.

The rising moon woke Oliver up. He was a bit cold, but he warmed up fast climbing up to the temple. He crossed groups and lone individuals who were descending. He understood that he would definitely still have to wait.

//p333// This was confirmed to him when he arrived at the square. There were still a few everywhere, between the chapels and the columns, some small prayer groups and some others hanging back before leaving, or sellers who were slowly folding up their small piles of coloured powder in pieces of paper. Lamp flames were flickering everywhere. Oliver approached the chapel of the Tooth, not too close, but enough to have it in his sight, put his bag on the ground and settled down for the night. He noted with satisfaction that the curtain of steel mesh had remained raised. It was probably never lowered. They counted on, more than anything, the reverence inspired by the Tooth, to defend it against all covetousness.

Bit by bit, as the night advanced, the square emptied. There would soon be no more, as Oliver saw it, than one deeply devout acolyte dressed in white, with a black bonnet, who, kneeling, hands joined before a god on his knees himself with hands joined, didn't stop talking to him, agreeing with him, asking him, and begging him. The god remained impassive and didn't get tired. The devout one wasn't made of stone. He ended up growing tired, stood up with some pain, and slowly went to the closest stairway, holding onto the railings.

Oliver rose, pretending to stretch out and yawn while looking all around him. The moon, almost in its last quarter, was high enough in the sky to give off enough light. He didn't see anyone. Maybe someone was sleeping somewhere, lying on the terrace, but he couldn't check everywhere to reassure himself. He had to move very fast, and in silence.

//p334// He approached the chapel, placed his bag at his feet nonchalantly, took out the wire cutters, and stuck both arms into the obscurity of the niche.

A demon flew out at him, giving off sharp cries. Oliver jumped back, his heart beating like a hammer. He recognized a monkey, who went to perch himself a few metres away on the head of a stone lion, turned to him, and continued to insult him. It was Buddha's companion. He lived with him in the chapel. He was furious to have been disturbed. All the monkeys in the square woke up and started to yelp, the dogs and the crows to bark, the ducks and the chickens to shout out their stupid alarm. Oliver quickly put the wire cutters away in his bag and walked away at a nonchalant pace. In an adjacent building, a door opened up, a solemn procession of bonzes came out, carrying lit lamps.

Not paying any attention to the commotion, they started on their morning journey around the unending circumference of the Breast, making the prayer mills arranged on it turn, and chanting the sacred verses that linked their circular movement to that of the planets, the galaxies, the universes, the atoms and the universes contained within those atoms, and to the harmony of everything, infinitely diverse and the same, infinitely extended and entirely contained on every part of it.

The sun was rising, waking up the saffron of the monks' robes, making their closely cropped scalps glisten, extinguishing the lamps and lighting up the colours of the wind's prayers.

It was too late. Oliver tempered his disappointment by thinking that without the monkey he would have without a doubt been surprised in the middle of his operation. He

knew what the deadline hour was. He had acted too impatiently. Ted had advised him //p335// to stay in observation for at least two or three nights, before moving. The American would wait.

But there was also Jane, Jane, who was waiting...

He went back down next to the stream, made sure his bike was there, assured himself that no one had stolen his gas, drank, rose, bathed and shaved, and slept for a couple of hours.

When he woke up, he dipped his face in the fresh water again, and tried to find an answer to what was now the main problem: how to get rid of the monkey?

He thought that the most effective way would be to offer him a drugged banana towards the middle of the night, which would keep him asleep until morning. If he would actually want to swallow it, that is. And drug it with what? Hash risked repulsing him. He had to try though. He would definitely find some in the village. All the peasants understood the young Occidentals who mimed the smoking gesture, and knew what they were asking for. If he didn't find any, he would return to Kathmandu and ask the doctor, as if it was for him, for an effective sleeping pill. But that would make him lose another day.

He arrived in one of the villages that circle the mountains by foot. He also needed to buy some food for himself. He would definitely find some hash. And he would succeed that night...

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//p336// Jane's state had stopped improving since Oliver's departure. He had advised her before leaving not to worry, he would be back right away, and they would leave together, just as fast. And Sven? Would Sven go with them?... Yes, yes, Sven would come. The question had surprised him, there would be time later to tell her the truth, that she had forgotten...

Two hours after his departure, she already started to grow impatient and worried. She continuously asked Yvonne:

"Where's Oliver? Will he come back? When? Why isn't he here?"

Yvonne didn't know where he was but she assured her that he would be back soon...

She interrogated her husband who claimed not to know anything, Oliver had only assured him that he was going to find the money for the trip and the clinic. He hoped that the kid wasn't going to do anything foolish. In any case, he washed his hands of it. He had already been quite good, accepting a druggie. If Oliver did something foolish, he wasn't disposed to making him suffer the consequences.

"You could have lent it to him, the money!... He's an honest boy..."

Ted took on a surprised air, naïve.

//p337// "Lend it to him?... Me?... I'm not his father!..."

He savoured his find for an instant, then insisted:

"Jack will be here soon... I'm surprised Oliver didn't think to wait for him to ask him for what he needs... And your travel plans, for the two of you, where are they at?... Have you thought it over a bit?"

Yvonne looked at him with total hate, carnal, visceral, mental, a hate and a repulsion that rose to her eyes from the marrow of her bones.

"You think you'll hold us back," she said, "but we're leaving!..."

"Good!... Good!... Good!... As soon as he returns and you've chatted with him, you'll confirm it with me... I will take care of your tickets... My offer still stands..."

Both of them kept to the landing of the second floor, between the door of Ted's office and that of Jane's room. Ted went into his office, leaving Yvonne immobile, fixed at the top of the stairs, petrified with hate and despair. She knew well, she KNEW, that Jack, once he learned that she had no more money, would give her a thousand reasons to stay here, all the while smiling... Were they not good? Was she not happy?... A marvellous country... A fabulous career... And a husband that gave her everything and asked for nothing...

She had assured him, to avoid any scenes of jealousy, that for a long time now there hadn't been any sexual relations between Ted and her. She wasn't sure he had believed her, but he had appeared to because it suited him, just like he appeared to be rich, to be the boss of the elephants, of the forest, of the tigers, of himself.

//p338// Just like he appeared to be happy.

To tear him away from that imaginary world without destroying him, she had proposed another world to him, different, but also brilliant: a gentleman-farmer, a rain of tractors, a hunt in Sologne, an apartment in Passy, all of Paris, Maxim's...

It would have been possible, with the jewellery that Ted had bought for her year after year... A fortune in precious stones. Mostly rubies, that he had gone to pick out himself once a year from the miners in Bahrain that reserved their most beautiful finds for him. He sent them to Holland to be cut and had them mounted into necklaces, into bracelets, into rings, by the artisans of Nepal and Kashmir...

But they had been married under the system of the separation of goods, contract registered in Paris and in Zurich. He had paid for the jewellery himself. She had worn them... Oh, so seldom! In this hole!... But they didn't belong to her anymore than the air she breathed. She had nothing, but a piece of a beetroot field, sinister, in the Somme, that had to be fought over with a farmer... Jack wasn't going to leave, she knew it...

She also knew that she could never again, NEVER, endure Ted's belly on hers. And the idea of feeling him enter her again gave her a nausea that she could not contain. She hurtled down the stairs to go throw up in the bathroom.

When the night arrived, Jane was so agitated that Yvonne phoned the doctor. She told him that the young girl was asking for a second needle, that she was groaning and twisting in her bed. The doctor absolutely forbade her to grant the patient's desire. Evidently, this child had two drugs: heroin and that boy. What was his name?... //p339// Oliver?... That's it. She missed him, she wanted to replace him with the other drug. It was normal. Compensation. But she mustn't. Was this boy going to be gone for a long time still? His presence was more effective than any other treatment. Why had he left? Of course, of course, he has to earn a living... But in any case, no second needle! Not a chance! At any cost!

"But what can I do? She's suffering!..."

"Nothing... You can't do anything... Leave her alone... She won't complain anymore and she'll at least be less unhappy..."

"But does she risk doing something foolish?"

"Foolish like what?"

"They say that sometimes, drug addicts in withdrawal commit suicide."

"No danger there! She *knows* that she'll get her needle tomorrow morning. She's going to get impatient, groan, suffer, but she'll wait, because she's sure that tomorrow morning she's going to receive her little poisoned paradise... Leave her alone, leave her. Within her suffering, a good half of it is blackmail. Once she's alone, she'll have nothing but her real suffering. It's not funny, of course, but she'll end up calming down thinking about tomorrow morning and she'll sleep..."

Once she had received her needle the following morning, Jane became beautiful like she had never been before. The antidote mixed with the heroin solution softened the most violent effects of the addiction in her. After an endless night of waiting and physical suffering became atrocious at daybreak, she received peace, she recalled and thought of Oliver, of Oliver's love, of the certainty of the great happiness that waited for her next to //p340// Oliver. Her complexion became fresh like that of a child's, her eyes grew large, happiness radiated from her face. Yvonne, seeing her so beautiful, kissed her and assured her that Oliver would be back soon. Jane cuddled up to Yvonne's chest and started to hum an Irish song. She immediately stopped, kissed Yvonne, huddled up to her again, told her:

"I love you!... You are so good!..."

Yvonne was submerged by a wave of love, of tenderness, of horror. This girl, this beautiful child, this lost child, could have been her daughter. She would have liked to defend her, save her, take her away, love her, to finally have someone to effectively fight for, someone of her flesh or her love. She didn't have a child, didn't have a husband, a lover in a technicolour poster, and she herself was nothing but a wreck, a waste, a slave, the portion of flesh necessary to make a pig ejaculate...

And that adorable and beautiful child, that fragile, wonderful child, the doctor hadn't hid from her that they would have trouble saving her... He had explained to her that she had already been lost before starting to smoke her first marijuana cigarette. Something had to have happened in her family life, which had hurt her fatally. And the flight into drugs was nothing but a slow agony camouflaged with flowers, music and illusions. As the illusions collapsed, she continued to look for more violent and illusory ones. She had encountered one chance, one single chance: that boy... What was his name? Oliver... He alone could save her, hold her back from the fatal path she was on. In his letter to the clinic in Delhi, he explained that the boy had to be admitted to stay near her. //p341// But where was he, that imbecile? What was he doing, far away from her? Without him, she was drowning. She really, really, didn't have much breath left!...

She was radiant. She ate fruit and buttered bread, she drank yak's milk, she laughed... "Oliver... I love him... Oliver... I love him..."

Yvonne brought the breakfast tray down, pulled the door with her foot. Jane had never in her life felt so light. Oliver was going to be back soon. She wanted to make herself beautiful for him. She sat in her bed, put her feet on the ground, hesitated a second, then stood up. The world around her capsized slightly, it was light, she was light, like a flower slightly balanced in the sun at the end of a branch, lightly, by a hint of breeze. She spread out her arms like a tightrope walker and took a step, then two. It was funny, it was touching, it was without risk, a seesaw, the whole room a seesaw... She continued,

another step still, then another, towards the bathroom door. She started to laugh, it was so funny, so light...

Ted, coming from his office, was moving towards the stairwell. He heard the laugh of a bird. The door had stayed half-open. He stopped and looked. Jane was taking off her nightgown, threw it far away from herself, passed through a ray of sunlight that was coming in through the window, arrived at the bathroom, took a hairbrush, was brushing her burnt-gold hair, at length, generously, kept brushing. Her hair became a living wave over her shoulders, her raised arms made her little girl breasts pointy, a mirror was sending a reflection of sun onto her thigh and her hip. Ted grew violet.

65

//p342// Oliver not only found hashish, but opium. He had seen brownish bowls of it for sale in a shop at the market of Kathmandu. Upon recognizing it next to a field of blooming poppies, the idea came to him to ask the farmer for some. The man quickly understood when Oliver showed him the flowers. He went into his house and brought him back a bowl of opium as big as an apple. Oliver pointed out his thumbnail. The farmer smiled, took back the apple and took out a walnut. A second explication allowed Oliver to obtain a hazelnut, more than enough for what he needed.

At another farm, he obtained an even more precious object: hash from the year before, dried out, pulverised and kneaded with butter. The Nepalese thus conserved it from one season to the next. When they wanted to use it, they melted the butter and drew out the powder from the grass.

Oliver thought that the rancid butter would please the monkey, but he wasn't sure if it was certain of acquiring the desired result. The hippies maintain their non-violence with marijuana, but most of the American killers from the mafia are also smokers of weed...

//p343// He decided to prepare two bananas, one with opium, the other with the buttered hash. And it was with this that he nearly failed, because bananas seemed to have disappeared, like all the other fruit and the rest of the supplies. An uninterrupted rain of pilgrims was crossing the village, moving towards Swayanbounath. They had already bought almost everything in passing. They were carrying coloured paper lanterns, and lights of all kinds. Oliver saw the villagers putting up their own lights everywhere as well, on the façades of houses, on the branches of the trees, on the altars and the gods of the intersections, on top of the lingams and around the yonis, on hanging chords and raised perches.

A band of hippies, who seemed joyful, less "rubbed out" than all those that he had encountered up until now, arrived in the village singing, and sat down around the fountain. There was a Belgian among them, who explained to Oliver the reason for all this movement. Tonight was the Festival of Lights. That evening, the moon, in its last quarter, would rise right to the highest point of the tallest white summit of the Mountain. And from Swayanbounath, that was also half of a white sphere, the image of the reconstituted Universe in the totality of its form, earth and sky reunited, material and spirit, being and non-being, and in the totality of its contents, just as the white is the light that contains all colours.

The Belgian boy explained this to Oliver while eating a boiled sausage, the last from a tin of sauerkraut, that he had been carrying all the way from Europe, and had opened the night before. He found this event very impressive and grandiose. It was a Dutch girl that had explained it all to him: that little brown one, over there, sitting next to //p344// the redhead. She doesn't speak French, but me, I understand Flemish. She never wears underwear, and is always in a skirt! As soon as she sits down, she pulls up her knees and spreads them so that you can see her twat... See, look! look!... You see!... Freedom, it's this, she says: to show her bottom as freely as her nose. She's a bit twisted, don't you think? Nobody pays attention anymore, to her thing... Maybe because she has a nose like a potato! That counts a bit also, the nose, don't you find?...

The Belgian boy started to laugh. He didn't smoke, he had come because he was on holidays. Afterwards, he was going back. What the Dutch girl had explained to him was what a guru had explained to her. Or maybe simply a travel agency... It was to feast the meeting of the Moon and the Breast that all the lights were going to be lit that night.

"All night?" asked Oliver, anxious.

Was he going to lose another twenty-four hours because of a ridiculous festival? Festivals! Always festivals! There couldn't be another crowd of people in the world who endlessly celebrated as many festivals all over the place!

But the Belgian boy, having finished off his sausage, declared that at the exact moment when the half-Moon detached itself from the mountain peak, all the lights had to go out, and everyone had to return to their houses or their shelter, or hide their faces, to stop watching what was happening in the air, to leave the Moon and the Breast together, alone in the sky.

Oliver bought some cooked rice and bananas from some hippies and returned to the stream. Tonight might be his only chance, or maybe nothing would be possible. Maybe there would be groups of pilgrims asleep all around the Temple... Maybe they //p345// would all be gone in search of shelter... He couldn't know, he had to be ready to move, find himself up top when the lights went out, and have already drugged the monkey.

He prepared the two bananas and ate a bit of rice. The moon had reached the top of the Mountain near the middle of the night. In the early obscurity, thousands of small lights made the Earth a replica of the Sky. Just as many stars were shining down below as up top. But a portion of those below were moving, gathering in slow and long paths of light, mobile milky lines that snaked between the mountains of the circle, and flowed towards the mountain's summit where the Buddha was sleeping in the bosom of the Breast.

Oliver told himself that he shouldn't wait any longer to make his own move. He checked his machine once more, pushed it next to the trail from where he would be able to start riding, ready to leave in a split second. Then he threw his bag on his back and started to move.

66

//p346// The end of the second day of absence was even harder for Jane than the preceding one. From the beginning of the afternoon, she had started to feel the anguish

reintroduce itself bit by bit in her veins, rise to the front and press towards the outside to make her explode. She hid her trembling hands under the sheets.

Yvonne didn't leave her, forced herself to distract her, told her about the beauties of the forest and the jungle, spoke to her of Jack, of the elephants, of the enormous flowers that hung on the trees and of the multitudes of birds of all songs and colours. Jane listened less and less, her face covered with sweat, her limbs extending in nervous spasms. When the night came, she refused to eat and started to beg Yvonne to give her another needle.

Yvonne couldn't handle seeing her suffer. She called the doctor again. He wasn't there. He called her back an hour later, repeated his formal forbiddance, and his advice to leave her alone. And if they knew where that boy was... what was his name?... make him return urgently. It was more important than anything.

Yvonne was certain that Ted knew where Oliver was, certain that, playing with //p347// the circumstances, he had engaged him in some sort of dangerous adventure for one and profitable for the other. She said this to him, and profited also in saying, regarding the bargain, one more time, everything that she thought of him. But she didn't get anything but smiles and silence.

She went to embrace Jane who clung to her, begging her with cries and moans. She entreated her to calm down. Oliver was going to return, he had gone to work for her, to cure her, to take her away. And in any case, she would have her needle the following morning. She would even come a bit earlier...

She put her back to bed, tucked her in with a light sheet, wiped her streaming forehead, descended to the first floor, took three sleeping pills and set the alarm for six in the morning.

Ted waited for one o'clock, to be sure that Yvonne was definitely sleeping. Then he opened his chest, took out a small jade bottle, a hypodermic needle, a silver spoon and a tiny copper butter lamp chiselled and embossed, ancient, a marvel. He put all of this in the pockets of his bathrobe under which he was naked.

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//p348// Just as Oliver was arriving at the foot of the Mountain of the Breast, it lit up. It was all of a sudden a fruit of pure light in the night. Oliver heard the noise of the generators that were feeding the projectors. The bonzes had taken from the Occidental life that which might serve their traditions.

Above the Breast, on the wall of the Gold Tower, Buddha's eyes were watching the night. These are eyes that see what is happening here and elsewhere, and at every moment of everyone's life. If the watcher is pure enough, devoid of selfishness, of small miserable desires, blue enough like the eyes painted on the gold, he can see in their dark pupils what they see in regards to what concerns him, him, in the totality of the world.

Oliver climbed keeping his head raised, and couldn't detach his look from this look that wasn't watching him. Painted in blue below the two eyes, in place of the nose, was a symbol that resembled an interrogation mark, and that was the letter I in Nepalese characters. The unity of everything, of diversity, of the One, into whom one has to merge to become one.

For Oliver, it was nothing but an agonizing question mark, under those eyes that //p349// saw something, that saw what? Around him, on the steep trail, joyous men and women were climbing, carrying lights that burned with an odour of fried goat butter. It was a slow and happy crowd, which was even carrying its children, some suspended on their mothers' backs with a piece of fabric, others carried by their fathers, in their arms, with infinite delicacy and tenderness. The whole caterpillar of lights, to the sound of the small violins and sharp orchestras, was hauling itself up to the round whiteness in the sky, which Oliver could no longer see. He could only see the night blue look that was looking in the distance and that saw, and the interrogation mark that was asking him what he was doing here, him, imbecile, far from Jane, having abandoned her one more time... Even if it was for her, to take her away, to save her, was this more important than being with her, near her, around her, the shelter and the warmth that she needed?

Head raised, he watched the serene eyes, without human emotion, the gold-encircled eyes that saw and that knew. All of a sudden, he understood, he knew that he had gone astray on a road of uselessness and stupidity, that he was guilty and crazy. He turned around with the abruptness of a machine, and started to carve out a path with his elbows and shouts and insults across the peaceful and guileless crowd that was climbing towards the Breast and towards the Moon, and that was parting itself with indulgence before this poor lost boy, who came from the other side of the world, where one knows nothing.

68

//p350// Ted crossed the landing and lingered before the door to Jane's room, under which a ray of light filtered through. He listened. She remained silent for a moment, then all of a sudden let out a sort of a groan mixed with sobs. He knew that at the moment, it was in her stomach that the lack of drugs was eating away at.

He turned the doorknob cautiously and entered without haste, without hesitation. He mustn't give her the time to be scared or to see him appear with the face of a monster, of a dragon, of a spider, of God knows what horrible thing. He spoke, as he was entering, in a peaceful voice.

"Good evening, Jane, it's not going so well?"

She weakly shook her head, signaling no. She was wide-eyed, her face contorted, covered in sweat, the sheet that was covering her half-crumpled and damp.

"Are you in pain?"

She signaled "yes".

"These doctors aren't always intelligent. Especially here, you know... To finish up as a doctor in Kathmandu, you really must be the lowest of the low..."

//p351// He approached the bed and started to place the objects that he was pulling out of his pockets on the bedside table.

"I'm going to give you relief. You will have a good night, and we won't say anything to anyone..."

She sat up sharply upon seeing the hypodermic needle. He tucked her back in with very tranquil words, calmed her down gently, pulled up the left sleeve of her nightgown, tied her arm up with a big rubber elastic into which he inserted a pencil. Innocent objects...

The veins took a long time to swell up. Ted worried a bit, she was really nearing the end, this little one, it would be annoying if an accident happened. Oh, after all, the doctor had not hidden it, he had said: "Logically, she should be dead." He would pay attention though. Measure out the dose well. He had never used it himself, but this wasn't the first time he had injected one of these kids. When they were unconscious, they couldn't see that he resembled a pig, and even he managed to forget, for a few seconds...

He lit the butter lamp, removed the lid of the jade jar. It contained a white powder.

"And this, it's the real thing," he said, "not that pharmaceutical junk that the doctor gives you."

He put a bit of powder in the silver spoon, reflected, hesitated, put some back into the bottle, and started to trail the spoon over the flame with the goatish odour.

Oliver ran like a madman along the torrent that was rushing down the mountainside before becoming a stream. He saw obstacles in the night, jumped over bushes and roots, pushed, carried by a force either cosmic or divine, he ignored it, he just //p352// knew that he was here and that he should have been down below, and that there was space and time that he had to cross, pulverize, violate. He was faster than the torrent that was falling from rock to rock with the noise of ripping water.

"I hear water!... I hear water!..." said Jane... "I hear water!... Water!..."

She had never, never, never, been so happy, light, universal, widespread... She had already forgotten the needle. After having suffered the thousand bites of a knot of vipers in her stomach, she was resting in a cloud of white.

"Oliver's in the water... He's coming... In the water... He's coming."

"Yes," said Ted, "he's coming, Oliver, he's arriving, he's here..."

He took off his bathrobe. Jane's eyes, full of ecstasy, were watching Oliver across the ceiling being carried on the water, in the water, fish, water lily, eel, enormous eel, eel in her, flower of the water. Oliver, the reflections on the water, the sun in the water; Oliver the sun...

"Oliver..."

"He's coming," whispered Ted... "He's here..."

He pulled back the sheet, raised the nightgown and looked at Jane. Despite her thinness, she was incredibly beautiful.

"Oliver?... Oliver?... Are you here?..." asked Jane...

"I'm here... I'm here..." whispered Ted...

He held himself a bit away from her, in the big bed. He turned off the lights and started to caress her. Jane let out a huge sigh of happiness...

"Oliver!..."

The bike charged towards Kathmandu with deathly urgency. Its three headlights //p353// dazzling the walking families who were terrified by the noise of the motor, revealing the bloody faces of the gods in the bends of the road, crossing the villages and rousing howls from all the dogs. He finally had Kathmandu at the end of the straight road, just a few more kilometres. Oliver tried to go even faster, to force the gas pedal, to go further than the maximum, but it was blocked at the end of the end. He laid himself on the handlebars like he had seen champions do on television and he entered the city without slowing down. A tranquil cow was crossing the road, perpendicular to the bike. The bike crashed into it and turned it over. Oliver flew out over the stretched-out cow. He still had the strength to remember that it was a major crime. If the cow was dead, he

would do ten years in prison. If the cow was simply hurt, jostled, if the police found him, they would grab him and lock him up before expelling him. He had the strength to get up, to run, to march, to lag behind, before collapsing in a shadowy corner. All the skin of his right cheek and hands was ripped and torn, and his head was aching atrociously. He fainted.

When he came back to, he didn't know how long he had been unconscious. The night was still black. The sky, above him, was spreading out a crystal clear carpet of stars between the roofs and the narrow street. There were no more visible lights anywhere. Even the light bulb of the intersection was out. Oliver, after a moment of confusion, concluded that the moon had to be up, all the rooftops were illuminated by a slice of blue light.

He got up painfully, his head was hurting him, he didn't know where he was. He //p354// looked around himself and noticed, across all the roofs, the roof of the big temple that was rising into the light of the moon. Walking towards it, he started to recognize and finally found himself in the lane behind "Ted and Jack's".

The walk had soothed him, his head was less painful. He opened the door very gently with the key. He didn't want to wake anyone up, his whole venture now seemed absurd. Why had he come back? When he got to the foot of the stairs, he listened. Everything was silent, everything was fine, he had simply lost time, demolished the bike, compromised his stay in Nepal, driven himself like a madman. He was hurt, exhausted, ashamed and he only wanted to collapse somewhere and forget, he had never done anything good, he only hurt the ones he loved, why had he gotten mixed up in the affairs of Marrs and his mother? She had told him clearly that she was happy! To sleep, to forget... He would sleep on the divan in the office... but first he would glance in on Jane, to be sure that everything was okay. No, Jane, he couldn't hurt her, he loved her and she loved him, everything that he was doing was for her, he just had to stop to think before letting himself be carried away by thoughtless impulses, like a quick-tempered child. She was calm, she was reasonable, she would help him.

Despite his best precautions, he made a few stairs creak and first entered the office to look at himself in a mirror. He couldn't remember if there was one there. He fixed himself up a bit - he didn't want to scare Jane if she was awake. He could wash himself with his shirt and a bit of whiskey.

He was surprised to find the office light on, the divan open, and Ted's clothes //p355// thrown about haphazardly, his enormous pants, his white shirt, his shoes and his socks in the middle of the room. He stopped thinking about finding a mirror somewhere...

He left the office and crossed the landing. He hesitated an instant before Jane's door, then opened it softly to avoid waking her up. The room was dark, but the bathroom was lit up, and its door hung open. The opening was wide enough to reveal the sheet on the floor, Jane spread out on her bed, her nightgown raised to above her breasts, the bottom of her belly carrying the fresh marks of a man's visit.

All of a sudden, petrified, he ran to the bed screaming: "Jane!"

His cry tore her from her torpor and appalled her. She saw bent over her, in the middle of the night, a bloody and grimacing face, similar to those of the gods charged with scaring the demons. She wailed and called for Oliver. He told her that he was Oliver, tried to take her in his arms, reassure her, but only succeeded in raising her panic. She

shrank away from him, looked at him with terror-filled eyes, tried to disappear into the mattress.

Abruptly, the bathroom light went out. Thus Oliver knew that the bastard was still there. He ran to the bedroom door and stood against it. Through the open window entered the blue light of the moon, and the morning breeze that was making the transparent net curtain sway.

Oliver's eyes quickly got used to the half-obscurity, and he made out Ted's black mass that was coming with fox-like steps towards the door, with which he himself was merged.

He tightened his fists, inflated his muscles, made use of his arms to warm himself //p356// up, with a murderous, carnivorous hate, similar to what a tiger would feel if it wasn't an innocent killer.

Ted made it next to Oliver. Oliver stopped breathing. Ted slowly put out his hand towards the doorknob and found Oliver's hand, which closed around his pink fingers like an iron noose.

Ted made an "ah!" from panic and terror half held back. Oliver ensured his grip with his other grazed hand, then savagely struck Ted with a blow of the knee to his stomach. But the blurry curtain of the bathrobe cushioned the impact. It was violent enough though to cause Ted to bellow out while buckling. Oliver was still holding his right hand with his own bleeding hands. He moved, made a quarter turn, and violently brought Ted's tensed arm down on his raised knee. The elbow broke. Ted bawled. Oliver seized him by the neck and started to strangle him. But his neck was huge and sweaty, and Oliver's hands bled in the sweat and slid. Ted escaped from his grip, ran towards the bathroom. Oliver caught up to him before he succeeded in closing the door, knocked him down and started to crush his face with blows to the head.

For Jane, it was total hell and horror. In the vaguely blue-tinted obscurity of the moon, she made out two demons that were battling and shouting. They endlessly got bigger, jumping from the floor to the ceiling, filling the obscurity of the room, soon they would be on her... She managed to get up. To run away, escape from them, run towards the light, through the blue window... She walked, faltered, stopped, she couldn't take anymore... A demon fell roaring right at her feet. Her fear mobilized the last of her strength, adrenaline multiplied it tenfold. She ran, jumped into the curtains, took them with her, crossed the window, flew towards the sky...

//p357// The ground of the street of Kathmandu, which for thousands of years the animals and the men without cruelty and without a sense of modesty nourished with the products of their bodies, received her with mercy and gave her peace. White in the white curtain lying abundantly around her, she had the air of a butterfly, of a flower born at dawn, and who bit by bit grows glorified with red in the pink light of the morning.

Yvonne, woken up by the shouts and the commotion, climbed the stairs running. She hit the switch at the exact moment that Jane was flying out the window, towards God knows what, and if God is really a fair judge she climbed straight into his arms, to find her innocent father there, her loving mother, amorous Oliver, Sven and his guitar, and all her friends and the flowers and the birds of this world, and everything that this world could never contain.

The two men were on the floor next to the bed. Ted had regained the advantage because of his weight, he was crushing Oliver with his weight and was clenching his

throat with his left hand. But his fingers were short and Oliver took his broken arm and twisted it. Ted let out a dreadful scream and rolled onto his side.

Yvonne came towards them and kicked them with her feet while insulting them, and shouting Jane's name. With one glance, she had seen on the nightstand the syringe, the lamp, the jade bottle still open... Ted, the vile, vile pig...

At the mention of Jane's name, Oliver leapt up. His cheek was bleeding onto his neck and his shoulder. He saw the empty bed, the torn curtains, the open window. He grabbed a chair, struck it with all his strength on Ted's face, who was getting up, and ran to the stairs.

"Vile pig!" said Yvonne. "Vile filth! I hope that he kills you!..."

//p358// Ted, his nose crushed, his forehead open, had not yet understood what had happened. When he was upright, he himself saw the empty bed and the window. He started to tremble.

"She was... She was crazy..." he said. "She was drugged up... It's not the first time that a druggie has flung herself out the window... He broke my arm, that bastard... Call the doctor!... Go call!... Quick!..."

The pain of his elbow tore cries from him that he couldn't suppress between his words. He went towards the nightstand, started to gather up the syringe in his left arm and put it in his pocket, but Yvonne hit him on his arm that was hanging. He howled, ready to faint. She took the syringe from him, placed it beside the rest, pushed him out of the room, locked the door with a key and put it in her pyjama pocket...

"Go down," she said, "I'll call..."

69

//p359// Oliver bent towards Jane. Her big violet eyes were open and her mouth half-open. A bit of blood was flowing from her right ear and from the right corner of her mouth, and a pool of blood was growing like a cloud under her head, on the veil of the white curtain.

He could not believe it. He said to her very softly: "Jane, Jane!..." Jane was no longer Jane. She was nothing more than something broken and that was going to, very soon, become something else.

He passed a hand under her shoulders, raised her slowly. Her head rolled backwards and her mouth opened up like a hole. He closed his eyes to not see her, tightened his grazed cheek against the still warm one of this child that he loved and that he couldn't love anymore, who was no longer anything, no longer anybody, dead meat, blood on which landed the first flies of daybreak...

At the end of the road, the large roof of the Temple was pink with the rising day, and higher than him, in the middle of the sky, the summit of the unchanging mountain from whence the day was being born was sending over Jane's face a blue and white light, //p360// the one that lasts but a few seconds, before the dust rises from beneath the footfalls of men.

Already the windows were opening, people were arriving, stopping with their loads of vegetables, at a distance, with respect, with compassion...

Oliver slowly placed Jane's chest back down on the ground like a mother places her sleeping child in its crib. He didn't shut her eyes or her mouth. All this, now, left nothing to say.

He stood back up and sharply raised his head. He saw, at the first floor window, Ted watching him. Yvonne was standing at the other window. Ted abruptly backed inside.

Oliver calmly walked to the house, entered the hallway and slammed the door behind him. When he reached the bottom of the staircase, he detached the bent sabre from below the buffalo head.

The weapon was heavy like a canon-forging hammer. He started to climb, holding it by the handle with one hand and the tip with the other.

Ted, leaning his shoulder against the living room door, was pushing the bolts with his good hand, all while shouting out to Oliver who he could hear climbing the stairs, step by inexorable step.

"Listen, Oliver, in any case, the doctor had said that she was lost!... He didn't say it to you, but he said it to me!... Lost! You hear? She was going to die!... It's probably better this way, at least she didn't suffer!... Yvonne called the doctor, he's coming!... He might be able to save her!... There's no point in making a drama out of it!... All these girls, when they arrive here, they're already done for!..."

The sound of Oliver's steps stopped on the landing.

"I... I slept with... good... Okay!... Do you think that I'm the first one?... What //p361// do you think she was living on?... They're all the same!... They have to pay for their drug somehow!... The whole world screws them!... Even the Tibetans!... At least, me, I'm clean!..."

There was a "ha!"⁶⁴ on the landing, a shock against the wood, and half of the blade passed through the door.

Ted jumped backwards in the air and let out a cry, because he had forgotten his broken arm.

He looked around. The terror and the suffering had destroyed his pink complexion. He was green with red patches, blood flowed from his nose and from the broken skin on his forehead.

Yvonne arrived in the bedroom, where the phone was. She looked at the door, she saw the blade disappear, then there was another blow and a piece of the door flew to the middle of the room.

"He's going to kill you," she said, "he's going to kill you like an animal!..."

Ted, holding his right arm with his left hand, sweating with pain, reached the table where the safari weapons were still stored. He took a magazine with his left hand, a magazine for the tigers, with eight strikes, and tried to introduce it into its housing, on a rifle meant for big cats.

Yvonne threw herself on him, he pushed her off with all his might. She charged back. He seized the rifle by the canon and hit her with it at full force, right in the face. She was thrown against the couch. She stayed motionless.

Ted succeeded in arming a rifle, sat down on a chair and pressed the canon of the rifle on the edge of the table.

⁶⁴ The "ha!" in this case does not represent a laugh but rather the muffled sound produced when one is making a violent effort, (Le Nouveau Petit Robert, p.1242).

Once again, the sabre blade slashed the door and tore off a new piece of teak wood, thick and hard, of which it was made.

//p362// Ted shot. Twice. The blade, that was busy pulling itself out, stopped dead in its retreating movement, and didn't move again.

"Oliver!... Oliver!..." called Ted, "do you hear me?... You're about to fracture my door, I have the right to kill you!..."

While he was speaking, he was pulling his chair closer to the door, while carrying another one.

"Don't be an idiot! Listen, that three thousand dollars, I'll give it to you... You can start your life over anywhere, with it..."

He sat down on a chair and placed the barrel of the rifle on the back of the other chair that he had placed in front of him. The end of the canon was a few centimeters from the door, at point-blank range.

The sabre blade slowly started to withdraw. Ted's voice broke and sped up.

"Don't screw around, Oliver! Do you know many boys who have three thousand dollars at their disposal, at your age? You could become a big shot! Girls on both your arms! And not just druggies or whores!... Pay attention, Oliver, if you continue, this time, I'll kill you!"

The sabre blade disappeared on the other side of the door. There was a silence that lasted a second, an eternity.

"Speak! Good God! Say something!" cried Ted.

With a terrible noise, the blade, hitting through, smashed the whole panel of the door.

The gunshot exploded almost before the sabre had started to pass through the door.

The rifle fell. Ted had the strength to get up. His stomach was bleeding from an enormous wound. He made a quarter turn and found himself facing Yvonne who was //p363// awkwardly holding an enormous bush pistol with both hands. She had just shot him in the kidneys. She pulled the trigger again, and emptied the whole magazine. The bullets flew through him, tearing his back upon exiting and throwing him against the wall, against which he remained standing, nailed to the wall by the force of the impact.

Then he fell forward, on his nose.

Oliver had just passed through the broken door. His torn face was bleeding. From his bullet-pierced chest his blood flowed, glistening, right down to his belt, and started to reach his thigh. Gathering all the strength that he had left, slow and heavy like a stone statue, he moved, step after step, towards Ted, who was stretched out in shreds on the fitted carpet.

When he arrived next to him, he made a fantastic effort, vertically with both hands, like the sacrificer, raised the sabre by extending both his drawn-up arms... But his strength abandoned him. He fell to his knees, the point planted itself in the floor through the carpet, a few millimetres from Ted's neck.

Oliver, feeling that he was about to faint, clung with both hands to the handle of the sabre, and placed his head on his hands.

He looked like a prayerful knight.

//p364// A flash of blinding light entered through all the windows, quivered and went out, lighting the room up as though daybreak had arrived. A tremendous crash of lightning made the floor and the walls tremble. The mountains seized it and endlessly reflected it from one end of the valley to the other, over which it rolled in every direction, like an army of innumerable and panic stricken chariots.

There was another flash, then others, closer and closer together, and the rolls of thunder met up with each other and joined together in one uninterrupted rumbling, with roars and crashes, and almost peaceful purrs.

At each tearing of the sky, Oliver was shaken by a movement that came from within him. His adrenaline-fueled body was battling against a mind that was still pushing back the moment of remembering.

Bandages covered his face and his chest. The rest of his body was naked, the sheet of the hospital bed turned down right to his hips. All over his visible flesh, sweat pearled and ran down...

Jack, sitting by his nightstand, was looking at him with worry. He had arrived just //p365// in time to give him his blood. The Nepalese intern had asserted that he was going to regain consciousness on and off. They had only administered a minor anesthetic. Jack was sweating as much as Oliver. He was experiencing a sort of disgust and a light vertigo, which he attributed to the taking of his blood, or maybe to the smell of the ether, which he hated, that filled the entire hospital.

Oliver was the only European in the room. In the other beds peasants were deposited, who instead of staying at home and waiting for the sickness to leave or for death to come deliver them, had preferred putting themselves in the hands of strangers. They were young men for the most part, more apt than the elderly to accept the rampant lifestyle changes and who, under the influence of the Occident, were beginning to suffer from suffering and the fear of death.

There was a flash of lightning and thunder simultaneously. It seemed like the earth and the sky thrown against each other were crashing and collapsing. Then an enormous and soft noise settled itself on the city, smothering the furious flashes of unending thunder that filled the valley in all of its dimensions. The rain... The monsoon was beginning. Every one of the raindrops was as big as a fruit, and all of the assembled gods would not be capable of counting up their multitude. The drops burst upon hitting the ground, brutalized it, scoured it, washed it, carried it to the streams, the little rivers and the big ones, one year of dust, garbage, excrements - a thick harvest that, after having drowned careless people and stray animals, would make the most beautiful vegetables in the world grow.

A huge relief pervaded the room, relaxed tensed muscles, calmed jangled nerves. Oliver stopped quivering, and after a minute opened his eyes. He heard the sound of //p366// the rain, and in the distance, the anger suffocating the clouds. He saw a blurred face that was bending towards him, and the memory came back to him before he even recognized his father.

Jack asked him softly how he was feeling. He didn't answer. The world in front of his eyes was drowned in fog, but inside his head, clear visual memories had awoken at

the same time as he regained consciousness. He watched them, he recognized them, he was gripped by horror.

He closed his eyes again but the images were still in him and he knew that they weren't the debris of a nightmare. All of this was real, real... Jane quartered on her bed, Jane spread out in the street, mouth lolling open, with a bit of blood at the corner of her lips... This was true, this had happened and nothing could ever be done to make it untrue.

He reopened his eyes, he saw the ceiling and the face of his father whom he recognized. He tried to speak, but didn't succeed at first, then managed to ask:

"It's true?"

Jack understood the question and nodded his head several times, with small movements, softly, with a lot of pity, to affirm that it was true.

Oliver took refuge in the delirium and the unconsciousness. But under the exaggerated and hideous shapes, he found the unbearable truth there again. He struggled with it for nights and days. The rain fell endlessly on Kathmandu, showered, washed, drowned the city. The inhabitants must have discovered the umbrella at the same time as the wheel. Over the river of yellow mud in the streets ran a river of black umbrellas. But //p367// the children were running naked in the rain, laughing, screaming, raising their faces to it and drinking it. The cows, the dogs, were welcoming it and shaking themselves, rolling around in the puddles, licking themselves and rubbing themselves to the gods. All the cigar-coloured crows were reassembled on the roofs of the big temple and the rain streamed over their waterproof feathers. They were all together barking their recognition and their pleasure. The rain was washing the gods' faces of all the yellow or red or white powder. They would be new for new offerings. And in the beautiful earth of the valley, the seeds were gorging on water and exploding.

Oliver found peace when he was at the end of his strength. He stopped battling himself and accepted the truth. His fever broke, his wounds healed, he grew skin back over his protruding bones. He exchanged a few sentences with his father who came to see him morning and night. He never spoke of what had happened. Something in his eyes had been extinguished. His eyes looked like those fine stones that are left unworn for a long time and that one might say are dead.

As soon as his condition allowed it, Jack had him transferred to his apartment, which occupied the first floor of an old house. Jack had had window panes put on the windows, had covered the beat-up floor with a carpet, and had hung up some hunting trophies and some admirable old paintings, on paper, that pictured the adventures of the gods, on the walls. The beds were made in an indigenous fashion, that is to say the mattresses were not placed directly on the floor, but over tiger skins, with silk sheets from India and wool blankets from Tibet. A smiling Nepalese man, who Jack had taught, cooked in a chimney over a wood fire.

//p368// On the third day, Oliver was able to get up, but he didn't leave the apartment, and didn't even go to the window. The whole afternoon he remained seated in an English armchair, listening to the enormous patter of the rain and the faraway roar, uninterrupted, of thunder that resonated right through the earth across countless fathoms of vertical water.

When his father entered, he told him that he wanted to leave as soon as possible. Jack answered him by saying that he was still weak, that it was too soon, that he had to wait. And Oliver said "no".

. They were sitting in front of the chimney that was burning a scented wood. Dishes were simmering in clay pots. Behind them a barefooted, silent Nepalese was setting the table. Then Jack started to speak again and told Oliver everything that had happened since the moment that he had fallen on his knees next to the prone body of Ted, his head twisted and his back blown off. Yvonne had easily been able to prove, with the jar full of heroin, the needle, and thanks to a examination of Jane's body, that Ted had voluntarily drugged her before...

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have spoken to you about this, but well, you already knew it... They understood that you reacted in sum as a defender of justice and that Yvonne shot Ted just as he was about to kill you... There was no guilty culprit. Or rather the guilty culprit is dead... But all these dramas among the Occidentals annoy them, they don't like us settling our accounts here... They expelled Yvonne immediately... The poor thing, her forehead was still open from the butt of the rifle... And you, they decided to expel you as well, as soon as you could travel. But I managed to make them go back //p369// on their decision. That was difficult, not because of Ted, but because of the cow... Fortunately she wasn't dead. Finally they told me that you could stay... I am the only boss, now, and I found a trunk full of dollars!... The bastard! He should have just sold statues!... Heroin also, for sure... You stay with me, we'll put up an incredible business!... completely modernized!... Ted, in the end, was a washout, he was low-class!... Yvonne is waiting for me in France, among her beetroots... It's not serious... I like her a lot, but really... Can you imagine?... beetroots, me? She's got means now, she took her jewellery, there was a bundle of it... Guess where I found the combination for the trunk?... In Ted's address book, just like that!... Under the word "trunk"!... He wasn't even very bright!... She'll console herself, note, she's still beautiful... But between her and me, it was no longer very... What I was missing, here, was a friend... Then are we good to go? You and me?..."

He talked, he talked, Oliver had at first looked at him, then had turned around and watched the fire, and the sound of the words blended with the sound of the rain and sound of the thunder, and none of this had anything to say, it was nothing but absurd and useless noise...

Jack stopped for a second to breathe. Oliver asked in a low voice:

"Jane... What did they do with her?"

Jack, who was going to start his discussion again and lay out his arguments, shut up. He understood that he had spoken for nothing. After a few seconds, he said only:

"Burnt..."

A log cracked, and sent a stream of sparks towards a pot that was boiling... Oliver //p370// thought of Sven, of Jane spread out a few feet from the flames, and of the down-and-out from two worlds...

"Nobody helps anybody..."

Nobody...

He turned towards his father and regained his look of a questioning child.

"What is it all supposed to mean?... All this?... Why?... What are we here for?..."

A father should know all the answers. But Jack didn't know the answer to this one. He slowly raised his shoulders, let them fall back down, and sighed.

//p371// All of the Ganges flood plain was under water. After six months of drought, a frightening monsoon had opened the largest locks in the sky over all the country. The water invaded village after village, first drowning the livestock on the ground then dissolving the earth walls of the crumbling houses, then welcoming and drowning the peasants, the monkeys and the chickens who tried to take refuge on the roofs, and carrying them away in its heavy yellow whirlpools, men and animals bobbed along among the torn trees, and rotten debris of all kinds. The vultures, attached like dark fruit to the trees that were emerging swooped down, clumsy, starving passengers, on a traveling corpse, to cut into it, shake it and fly away when it toppled over.

Oliver walked in the rain on the submerged trail. He had left Kathmandu with a ticket to Paris. His father had said to him that it was the start of the new year you have to finish your degree you would be wrong to abandon it at the end you simply had rough holidays, right, and then you returned. But his joke had bothered even him. After a long silence, anxiously:

//p372// “We’ll see each other again?”

Oliver had answered:

“Yes...”

But neither one nor the other was certain of the meaning of that yes. Oliver had refused the bundle of money that his father had wanted to give him. You came to me to demand thirty million, and now that I’m giving you three you’re refusing them?

Oliver hadn’t answered. Jack had put the dollars back in his pocket, promising to send it to Martine, to his grandmother, to Yvonne, to the whole world... He was very certainly, after a bit of time, going to find himself without any money again. He would take off on a new illusory adventure... or maybe to the beetroots... He wasn’t that young anymore despite his smooth face... He knew it...

Oliver had accepted the ticket to Paris and a bit of travelling money, so that he wouldn’t have to explain himself. And what would he have explained? What did he want? what did he know? what could he have said? Words seemed to him to have nothing but futile meanings and to carry only falsehoods. None of them expressed their primordial truth anymore.

But when his father hugged him at the airfield in Kathmandu, he knew that he wasn’t going straight to Paris.

At the stopover in Delhi, he exited the airport and entered the dense sheets of rain. He rented a jeep, managed to make the driver understand the name Palnah. The driver didn’t know where it was. They left all the same, stopped several times, to ask an agent, a shopkeeper, a hotel porter: “Palnah? Palnah?” Nobody knew. He finally got the information in a bus station. Then he became frightened and told Oliver that Palnah was //p373// in the floodplain and that one couldn’t go there. Oliver didn’t understand, believed that he wanted more money, and gave him everything he had left. The driver thanked him by joining both hands, took the wheel and took off. The rain was hitting the hood like fingers on the skin of a tambourine, spraying across, entered through the doors and through all the cracks and joints. It ran outside of the jeep and inside. The car drove for hours, and arrived in the waters. The raised trail emerged alone. To the left, to the right, and above up to the clouds, it was the world of water. The driver continued right up

to the moment where the water covered the trail and made it invisible. He refused to go any further. Oliver descended and continued on foot. The driver watched him grow distant for a moment until he disappeared into the depths of the rain. Then he left in reverse. Between the waters on the left and the waters on the right, he didn't have enough room to turn around.

The rain fell from the sky to drown what had to be drowned, wash what could become new, and to hatch what should be born. Oliver walked in this thickness towards the look of a child that had waited for something from him that he hadn't given her.

The rain entered him through his hair, covered his face like a curtain, hit his shoulders, drenched his clothes, ran all down along him like a river and joined the slow yellow water that was rising and churning.

He walked straight ahead. He knew that it was straight ahead and if he missed the trail and drowned, too bad. He was walking towards the image of a confident child, who had laid down on him to fall asleep, whom he had pushed away and placed on the //p374// ground in the night so that he could leave.

He walked less and less quickly, because the water was rising higher up his legs. It didn't matter to him. He would arrive when he arrived. He threw away his bag because it was hampering him - he didn't need anything. The thunder in the immense thicknesses of the clouds was a continuous clamour, the voices of a race of gods who spoke with pebbles in their immeasurable mouths.

Oliver soon felt that he was naked. The water that was running over him and in which he was walking had stripped him of his clothes, of his past and of his pains. The naked child was coming towards him smiling and holding out her two hands, cupping water. He was going to join her and accept what she had to offer. He wasn't coming alone. Jane was with him, naked with him, his mother was with him, naked with him, his father, his friends, Carlo, Mathilda, the cops were walking with him in the depths of the water of the sky, naked and stripped of their lies. As the night fell, he noticed a slight bump in the horizon above the water, the embryo of a hill, a fervour of hope on which the families had built their derisory houses. He knew that it was Palnah and that all its men, its women and its children were busy fighting to save their wells, their animals, their homes, their lives, with the help of Patrick, or of another, or of no one.

While walking with greater and greater pain, with all of his will and muscles, in the thickness of the rain that was filling the space between the sky and the earth, he asked himself if he was going to find the answer to his question at the end of the drowned trail, on the hill that was still emerging before him, where some living beings were fighting to //p375// continue to live, the answer to the question that he had asked his father:

"What are we here for?..."

March 31 – September 13 1969

From all corners of the earth, boys and girls start walking towards Kathmandu, a city that erects its two thousand temples at the feet of the Himalayas, on the border of Tibet. What are they going there to look for? The illusion of a closer God? The freedom to live how they want and to smoke “grass” without fear of the police? For most of them it’s a journey towards their own destruction...

Jane and Oliver each took one of the “paths” of Kathmandu, maybe because they had been hurt in their relationships with their parents. These paths begin among us, and even if you doubt it, one of them might begin near you!...

Les chemins de Katmandou n'est pas un texte difficile à lire quant à la grammaire, et évidemment il y avait des mots que j'ai dû chercher dans des dictionnaires, mais j'ai souvent rencontré deux problèmes principaux : des mots divers et un style d'écriture peu commun. D'autres problèmes mineurs incluent : des verbes obscurs ; des locutions que je ne connaissais pas ou pour lesquelles il n'y a pas de traduction; des phrases que j'ai eu des difficultés à comprendre parce qu'elles ne sont pas des locutions courantes ni de vraies locutions, c'est-à-dire qu'elles sont des locutions que l'auteur avait inventées lui-même.

Un catalogue des problèmes et comment ils ont été résolus

Les noms obscurs

D'abord, Barjavel utilise beaucoup de mots obscurs pour lesquels j'ai eu des difficultés à trouver une traduction. Quelques exemples : bobèche (p.221), cassolette (p.264), cocu (p.118), cornac (p.217), fiente (p.251), sanie (p.313), et toubib (p.316). Pour les traduire j'ai dû soit improviser soit donner une définition au lieu d'un seul mot. Cela était dommage parce que les mots en leur forme originelle ajoutent à la richesse d'un roman, mais en même temps une traduction ne sera jamais aussi bonne que l'original.

D'autres exemples incluent des mots qui ont une orthographe semblable en anglais mais qui sont peu utilisés. Des exemples : bakélite, bonze, gourka, harangue, inexorable, sacrificateur, sherpa, et lingam et yoni. Pour les mots les plus obscurs, j'ai mis une définition dans une note en bas de page.

Les noms étrangers

Ensuite, Barjavel emploie souvent de l'anglais ou une sélection de mots étrangers. Avec eux je ne savais pas s'il fallait les traduire. À la fin il n'y avait qu'un mot italien que j'ai traduit : *commendatore*, qu'en français est un commandeur et en anglais est un commendatory, et puis dans une note en bas de page j'ai mis une définition du mot. Pour les mots et les phrases qui restaient en anglais dans la version française de Barjavel, j'ai inséré une note dans le glossaire anglais qui explique que le symbole * signifie ce fait. Pour les mots et les phrases étrangers qui restent, je les ai laissés dans leur forme originelle et, encore dans une note en bas de page, j'ai expliqué que je les ai laissés comme ils paraissent dans la version originale. Quand il le fallait, j'ai donné une traduction des mot ou de la phrase.

Le style d'écriture

Barjavel n'est pas un écrivain verbeux. Il ne donne que l'information nécessaire afin que le lecteur puisse formuler une idée ou un jugement objectif. Alors, la majorité des phrases dans le roman sont courtes et faciles à comprendre, avec quelques exceptions quant aux descriptions d'un lieu ou d'un paysage – parfois elles comprennent toute une page. Il y en a celles pourtant, qui ne suivent pas de règles d'écriture. Je donne trois exemples.

1. « *Harold poussa Sven et Olivier vers les buissons, ramassa le sac de Jane et le lui colla dans les bras.*

- *Toi, sur la route !*

Il la lança vers le milieu de la chaussée, et courut rejoindre les deux garçons dans l'obscurité.

La voiture : une sportive américaine surpuissante avec tout le confort du dernier modèle grand luxe. Quelqu'un seul au volant. Sur la route, au milieu, en pleine ligne droite, les phares découvrent et illuminent une fille en blue-jean et blouse légère à demi ouverte, qui cligne les yeux, éblouie, et fait le signe du stop.

Une main gantée appuyée sur la commande du klaxon, sans arrêt. Le pied droit appuyé sur l'accélérateur. La fille ne bouge pas. Il n'y a pas assez de place pour passer. Pied à fond sur le frein, les pneus s'écorchent sur la route. La voiture s'arrête pile, à quelques centimètres de la fille. » p201-p202.

Le style de ces deux derniers paragraphes donne de l'importance à l'élan de la lecture. On peut presque entendre la voix d'un commentateur au lieu d'un narrateur en les lisant. Chaque fois que j'ai rencontré un passage comme celui-ci, un événement peu fréquent, je l'ai traduit dans le même style. Le problème pour moi avec un cas comme celui-ci est que les deux styles sont très différents, un est plus moderne que l'autre, et je ne savais pas si je voulais les mélanger. Finalement cependant, je suis restée fidèle à la version originelle.

2. *« Jacques avait fait mettre des vitres aux fenêtres, recouvert de tapis le sol de terre battue, suspendu aux murs des trophées de chasse et d'admirables tableaux anciens, sur papier, représentant les aventures des dieux. » p.367.*

Cette phrase est difficile à lire et à traduire parce qu'elle ne coule pas facilement. L'ordre des mots et des idées est mélangé alors il faut bien lire la phrase pour comprendre ce qu'elle veut dire. Il y a plusieurs exemples de phrases comme celle-ci dans le roman. Chaque fois, dans ma traduction j'ai changé l'ordre des mots et j'ai rendu la phrase la plus simple que possible en essayant de ne pas perdre le sens ou la signification de la phrase.

3. *« Sur la piste submergée, Olivier marchait dans la pluie. Il avait quitté Katmandou avec un billet pour Paris. Son père lui avait dit c'est la rentrée tu devrais finir ta licence tu aurais tort d'abandonner au fond tu as eu simplement des vacances un peu agitées quoi et puis tu rentres. Mais sa plaisanterie l'avait gêné lui-même. » p.371.*

Ici on a une phrase où Barjavel avait opté de ne pas employer de guillemets ou d'autre ponctuation. Pour moi, cela est représentatif du fait qu'Olivier est en train de réfléchir, plutôt que de relater tout simplement, à ce qui s'est passé entre son père et lui. Ce manque de guillemets a l'effet de mieux faire couler la pensée et la phrase. Des exemples de cette technique sont rares dans le roman, pourtant je les ai tous traduits de la même façon.

Des verbes obscurs

La raison pour laquelle je dis que ces verbes sont obscurs est parce que je n'ai pas trouvé de traduction pour eux dans les dictionnaires que j'avais. J'ai trouvé des définitions dans *Le Petit Robert*, et puis je les ai traduits selon le contexte. Quelques exemples incluent :

bossuer (p.206), confluer (p.234), édenté (p.246), égrener (p.138), fluer (p.46), et nimer (p.197).

Des phrases et locutions

D'abord il était difficile de traduire des phrases comme : « Tais-toi donc ! » (p.140), « Tout de même » (p.222), et « Voyons ! » (p.266) et de maintenir leur gravité dans le contexte, donc pour la plupart des circonstances comme celles-ci j'ai utilisé l'équivalent anglais, sauf dans le cas de ce « voyons ». La phrase entière est : « Bien sûr, voyons ! » et je l'ai traduit : « Of course ! ». Le point d'exclamation dit presque la même chose que le « voyons ! ».

Finalement il y avait des phrases que je n'ai pas comprises et que je ne savais pas si elles étaient des locutions ou pas. Dans les deux cas je les ai cherchées dans des dictionnaires, des livres de grammaire, et sur l'Internet. À la fin quand je n'avais toujours pas de réponse à quelque chose, j'ai mis une phrase qui allait le mieux selon le contexte.

Des exemples :

s'arrêter pile (p.52)

en avoir plein les jambes (p.91)

donner le change à quelqu'un (p.95)

« tiens ! » (p.102)

« je n'en ai rien à fiche ! » (p.141)

« au bas des quatre lunes » (p.145)

« qu'est-ce qu'il peut bien mijoter ? » (149)

faire ronfler son moteur (p.171)

donner un coup de corne (p.176)

à lier (p.291)

à la volée (p.297)

prenant le jour (p.302)

un théorie de (p.334)

En voyant ce catalogue de problèmes, il pourrait paraître que j'ai rencontré beaucoup de difficultés, mais pour un roman de 375 pages, il n'y en avait pas tellement. Les difficultés les plus décourageantes étaient les mots pour lesquels il fallait vraiment chercher et trouver une définition parce que je ne voulais pas omettre un mot qui était dans le texte originel. Finalement, je crois que j'ai bien résolu les problèmes. J'ai beaucoup appris et j'ai écrit ce que je crois représente une bonne traduction.

C'est bizarre d'arriver à la fin de quelque chose qui a consommé tant de temps et d'énergie dans ma vie. Au début de la traduction je savais déjà que cette année serait difficile, et oui il y avait des moments où je me suis demandé si j'étais sur la bonne voie, mais je n'ai jamais pensé que je ne le finirais pas. Le processus de la traduction était parfois difficile, mais surtout un plaisir. J'ai aimé toutes les étapes : trouver la traduction des mots difficiles, finir des chapitres longs, atteindre des objectifs, et surtout me rendre de plus en plus compte que je suis capable de faire ce que j'aime faire. Avant tout, cette traduction est un travail fait par plaisir.

La mémoire, par contre, est un vrai travail. J'ai pris beaucoup de temps entre le moment où j'ai fini la traduction et le moment où j'ai commencé à faire des recherches parce que je savais que ceci serait un défi pour moi. J'avais raison. C'était difficile de trouver des informations sur plusieurs sujets, de tout organiser d'une façon logique, et surtout de rester motivé, mais j'ai appris beaucoup de choses et c'est un bon sentiment d'avoir fini quelque chose qui a causé tant de stress.

Les chemins de Katmandou n'est pas un roman qui donne de bonne humeur. Il est dur, triste, et parfois, difficile à lire, mais ce que j'aime tant c'est qu'il y a toujours un sentiment d'espoir dans la tête du lecteur. Une fin n'est pas toujours une fin. René Barjavel a vraiment captivé mon cœur et mon âme avec l'histoire de Jane et d'Olivier. Je serai toujours reconnaissante du génie qu'il a manifesté en écrivant ce roman. C'était pour cette raison que j'ai voulu le traduire, pour partager l'histoire avec autant de gens que possible. J'aimerais que tout le monde l'adore autant que moi. Le mieux que je puisse faire cependant, c'est de garder l'espoir qu'il y en aura d'autres qui liront l'histoire, qu'ils la partageront avec encore d'autres, et qu'ils apprendront quelque chose en la lisant. Je peux dire sans hésitation pourtant, que même s'il n'y restera que moi qui adore ce roman, je ne regretterai jamais le fait d'avoir passé un an de ma vie à le traduire. Merci M. Barjavel.

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le 10 septembre, 2006

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