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Seagull Books, 2018

Pascal Quignard, *Villa Amalia*  
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To Martine
PART ONE
‘I wanted to cry. I was following him. So unhappy I wanted to die. I’d been driving beside the Seine for more than half an hour when, all at once, night fell. When we got to Choisy-le-Roi, Thomas suddenly turned off into the darkness, into a little side street on the right. He parked up almost immediately under a bay tree and switched off his lights. I pulled in very quickly—and very untidily—a little further up the avenue. I walked back, feigning a normal pace, concealing my haste. He was pushing open a gate. I went over. I was moving quickly and slowly. I don’t know how to explain it.’

She approached the gate.

She brushed her forehead against the rusty iron bars.
She had difficulty seeing through the leaves of the bay tree in the darkness.

Then she glimpsed Thomas. A young woman was clasping his hands beneath the lighted lamp at her front door.

Thomas was trying to take off his coat. The young woman raised herself onto the tips of her toes. She reached out her lips towards his.

The lowest leaves of the bay tree were in her way. She would have liked to have seen the whole of the woman’s face. They were on the point of leaving the porch and going into the house. She wasn’t going to see her face. Suddenly from behind her, she heard: ‘You seem very interested in that house, madam.’

Her heart beat fit to burst. She felt like a child caught stealing.

‘That’s right,’ she replied.

And she turned around.

On the pavement of the darkened street, she saw before her a man in a dark suit, with short-cropped hair. He smelt of perfume. He was smiling, but not doing anything else.

She said: ‘I think you see before you a woman preparing a burglary.’

He grasped the sleeve of her raincoat.

‘Don’t you recognize me?’

She was completely flummoxed by his question. She shook her head. To tell the truth, she had no desire
to engage in any sort of conversation with anyone at all. She nimbly tugged back the raincoat sleeve he was holding in his fingers.

‘I recognize you,’ he said.

Night was falling. She was staring at the gate.

‘You’re Anne. Or, to be more precise, you’re the person who didn’t want to be called Éliane.’

Ann Hidden looked at him. She shook her head. She felt a sense of dismay. Involuntary tears welled in her eyes.

‘That’s true,’ she mumbled. ‘That was . . . ’

‘What did you say?’

She spoke louder: ‘That’s true. That was once my name.’

She edged towards him, examining his face, trying to recognize him.

‘So who are you?’

‘I’m Georges.’

She couldn’t work out who Georges could be.

‘Georges Roehl.’

She couldn’t fathom who that was.

Night was gradually enfolding their bodies, increasingly shrouding them in darkness.

He smiled at her.

He took his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket.

He held out a visiting card.
She had to go over to the streetlight. She read his full name: Georges Roehlinger. The letters had been embossed on the card. He lived on some quayside. At Teilly. She didn’t know where that was either or what port it belonged to. She had no idea what part of the world the quay or the port might be in, what coast they might lie on, facing what ocean. She was beginning to feel rather faint.

‘We were at school together. As very small children. Do you remember Brittany? Sister Marguerite. We . . .’

But he didn’t have time to finish his sentence. She had thrown herself into his arms and broken down sobbing.

* * *

Then he’d squeezed her to him.

He’d helped her to walk, in the darkness, to a little house. The garden abutted on to the avenue.

He closed another gate.

He opened another door.

‘You know, I think I’m getting old,’ said Ann Hidden. ‘Georges, you mustn’t be angry with me, but it took me an age to recognize you.’

‘I’ve changed a lot more than you!’ said Georges Roehl in mild reproach.

‘Oh no, that’s not what I meant. No, no. Perhaps you’ve changed a little bit.’
Going into the living room, he switched on a light beside her.

One by one, he switched on all the little lamps around her.

Ann sat down on a sort of wicker meridienne which creaked.

‘Of course you didn’t recognize me, you were spying.’

‘Georges?’

‘Yes.’

‘I wasn’t spying. The man I live with is called Thomas. It’s him I was following. He’d just gone into the house you caught me watching. Let’s talk about something else.’

‘If you’d rather.’

‘Yes.’

She didn’t want to say anything else about what had brought her to Choisy. Her face had hardened.

‘You’d like a drink perhaps?’

‘Tea.’

He went off to make tea.

The old living room was full of furniture, objects of all ages, many monstrosities.

Ann Hidden went over to the window. The curtains framing it smelt dusty. It had begun to rain. The bare branches of the chestnut trees in the avenue were dripping with water.
Georges came back and set the tray down on the low table. He seemed delighted.

‘I’m pleased to have met up again like this.’
‘I’d like some toast,’ she said.
‘How would you like it?’
‘The usual way. Toast with butter and jam.’
‘I don’t think I’ve got any real bread. But I have packet toast.’
‘Breton butter, while we’re at it.’
‘And what sort of jam?’
‘Cherry jam. Or . . . with apricot pieces.’
‘I don’t think Mum had any salted butter either,’ he said.

He was mumbling as he left the room.
‘At any rate, it would have gone off . . . ’

Then she lowered her head into her hands. She let her pain vent itself fully as she sat there comfortably in this living room between the secrétaire and the curtains, between the dust and the dust, while Georges made toast.

When he came back, he lit a verbena-scented candle.

‘It doesn’t smell too good, Mum’s place.’
She didn’t demur.
‘Do you remember Mum?’
‘Of course I remember your mother. She was a real homebody. A wonderful cook.’
She's . . . dead.’

‘Ah!’

He was emotional. He wasn't crying, but his voice was quavering a little.

‘We're in her house.’

‘Ah!’

‘She died exactly eleven days ago.’

She made no reply. He looked at her.

‘You’ll have to forgive me but I haven’t quite come to terms with it,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she murmured.

‘She died on Christmas Eve . . . ’

There was a tremor in his voice now and he fell silent.

She said nothing.

He went on to explain that he’d moved in for a few days to sort things out. He'd decided to sell the house where his mother had lived alone after she'd remarried. He didn’t want to have it on his hands any longer. He didn’t like the town. When he thought about it, their meeting like this in Choisy-le-Roi was a miraculous accident. Forty years go by, an angel passes, a soul goes up to heaven, a woman looms up on the street, sticks her head in the leaves of a bay tree and suddenly the ghost of Sister Marguerite is there.

‘And two ghosts are drinking tea together,’ she said, finishing the sentence.

‘It’s good, this tea of Mum’s, don't you think?’
‘Georges, you can’t know how true that is. I’m a ghost of a woman now.’

‘I didn’t mean to suggest that. That’s not what I meant at all.’

‘The tea’s delicious. Did your mother go on cooking as well as ever?’

‘She did. Mum married again. Then she was widowed again. But she kept on cooking, even when it was only for herself.’

‘Good. That’s something rare.’

‘You can say that again! There was an obsessive side to it—from six in the morning till nine at night. Mum spent her life cooking. I can’t begin to tell you . . . ’

‘Do we really have to be so familiar?’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because it embarrasses me,’ said Ann Hidden.

‘We always talked like this.’

‘I’m not comfortable with it. It’s embarrassing.’

‘We can’t really be formal with each other! That would be even more embarrassing. Anne-Éliane, you can’t be serious. We’ve known each other forever. Jump up a moment.’

He held out his hand and they went upstairs.

They weren’t talking any more.

They went into Georges’s mother’s bedroom. Ann Hidden felt a sense of indecency. In the middle of the room was a bed with a brass bedstead. It had an embroidered bedspread. It felt to her as if the body of Evelyne Roehlinger were still lying there.
'Mum made the bedspread by hand. It took six years.'
'I can imagine. It’s very beautiful.'
'It’s extremely ugly.'
'Do you miss your mother’s cooking?’
‘Yes and no. You wouldn’t believe how oppressive it was. I’ll be able to lose a few pounds now.’

She was looking at an early twentieth-century ebony dressing table.

Ann had no idea what she was doing in a dusty old bedroom in a south Paris suburb.

‘Here’s the photo I was looking for.’
‘Yes . . . ’

In a very large mahogany frame, there were six overlapping photos of primary school classes.

Ann perched on the edge of the bed on Evelyne Roehlinger’s bedspread.

On one of the old photos, she was sitting on a bench beside Sister Marguerite. She had pigtails and big knee-length woollen socks. Georges was standing in the row above, in a black smock like her and wearing a beret.

‘Do you see yourself there?’
‘It’s funny. How old it is . . . ’

Once again, she had tears in her eyes.

‘In those days, you could still wear something on your head in school.’

She pressed the big mahogany frame back down on the bedspread.
‘Wouldn’t you like to come and have dinner with me?’ asked Georges. ‘You could explain . . . ’
‘Not tonight.’
‘No, not tonight, of course. Another day. In the country. You see, I don’t live here. I live at Teilly. It’s in the Yonne département. On the river Yonne itself, in fact. But first I have to put this house of Mum’s up for sale . . . ’
‘Are you selling everything that was your mother’s?’
‘Yes.’
‘Everything?’
‘Yes.’
‘Perhaps you’re right.’
‘And yet you can’t imagine how painful it is. But I’ve so much stuff. I don’t know who mum was keeping so much stuff for . . . I don’t know why I’m accumulating so much stuff for myself . . . Do you still live in Brittany?’
‘No.’
‘And your mother . . . Is she still alive?’
‘Yes . . . She still lives over there,’ she added more softly.
‘And is she . . . still waiting?’
‘Yes, still in the same house. Every day. Still. She’s still waiting.’

She moved towards the bedside lamp and said, ‘In fact, I have to go and see her on Sunday week.’
In self-justification, and with a sigh, Ann added, ‘It’s Epiphany.’

She straightened up. She put the frame back in its place on the wall. She looked again at her pigtails, her big eyes so round and serious, the flannel sleeves poking out beyond the smock.

‘Let’s go back down,’ he said. There are some really fresh fruit jellies. I made them myself. Without a word of exaggeration, I swear they’re mouth-watering . . .’

They went back down the stairs.

‘Where’s this town you live in?’ she asked.

‘It’s on the borders of Burgundy. The river Yonne runs along the Burgundy border. It’s just half-way between Sens and Joigny. You must come over. There are some wonderful restaurants. It’s so horrible eating alone. You’ve no idea.’

‘That’s not true. I’ve always liked eating alone, quietly by a window.’

‘I hate that.’

‘I like it.’

‘One eats too quickly.’

‘I don’t.’

‘People stare.’

‘It’s true they do. And it’s not the pleasantest of things. But I find eating alone in silence a real pleasure.’

‘I don’t agree. It’s because of the silence that it’s less good. You can’t say what you feel when you taste something, eat something—when you’re chewing or drinking,
It pains me so much to eat alone. Would you eat with me?’

He was imploring her. She simply couldn’t stand it. She put her hand on his arm and said firmly: ‘Another evening, Georges.’

They walked across the garden, He was feeling in his jacket for his wallet.

‘My card, my telephone number . . .’

‘You’ve already given me them.’

* *

On the route nationale 6 she stopped suddenly.

She preferred to suffer without delay.

Or, rather, she preferred to confront her sadness out of the sight of prying eyes.

She took a room in a hotel.

At Alfortville. The room looked out on to a shopping centre and a garage. The service station was open. She went out to get a bottle of water and a bar of caramel chocolate. She closed the door of the room behind her, took off her shoes, went over to the bed, threw the blanket and sheet back roughly, slipped between the sheets without undressing and rolled herself into a ball.

At one point, she got out of bed, knelt on the floor, folded her hands on the mattress and prayed out loud like a little girl.

She went back and curled up under the sheets, her face in the two pillows.
Once the desire to cry had passed, her pain became intense.
She tore herself apart.

* 

It is dead of night. She unbolts the gate, goes up the garden path, climbs the stairs, opens the door and silently enters the house.
She spots a shape moving in the darkness.
Suddenly, he switches on the lights. He is standing in the doorway in his pyjamas.
‘I’ve been waiting hours for you.’
His face seems really panicky and there’s a glint in his eyes.
‘Aren’t you laying it on a bit thick?’ she mumbles.
He starts to shout: ‘Where were you?’
Seeing him raise his voice, Ann goes over and looks him in the eye. She lowers her own voice to a whisper and tells him softly to be quiet.
Right away he stops shouting. ‘I was mad with worry,’ he says. ‘You could have called me. Ann, have you seen the time?’
Ann doesn’t reply. She walks round him into the dining room. She sits down at the table. He follows. She turns her gaze on him, staring for quite some time. She straightens up in the chair. He is breathing violently. She comes right out with it: ‘I’m leaving you. It’s over.’
He stands facing her in the doorway in his pyjamas, hair tousled, mouth wide open.

At first he says nothing. Then, very softly, ‘Say that again.’

‘We’re splitting up.’

‘Why?’

‘Work it out.’

‘I don’t understand. Why would we have to split up?’

‘Thomas, for heaven’s sake. There’s no need to explain. You’re leaving.’

‘There’s no need to bring heaven into it. It’s the middle of the night.’

‘So what?’

‘You’re telling me to leave.’

‘I am.’

‘Ann, look at me.’

Ann takes her time. She looks him in the eye and says, ‘I don’t see much any more.’

She lays her hands on the table. She’s tired. She gets up and goes into the corridor.

‘Are you in love with someone else?’ he asks.

She shrugs her shoulders.

‘Not everyone’s like you, Thomas.’

He holds her back by the arm. He clings on tight. He’s hurting her.

‘Let go of me!’
She fights free of his grasp. She goes upstairs. She’s going to fetch sheets from the laundry room. She goes up to make up a bed for herself in one of the two little converted bedrooms on the second floor under the eaves. She spends Sunday snuggled under her duvet. She doesn’t eat.

*

On Monday morning, it wasn’t even eight o’clock and her car door was open, with Ann at the wheel.

Thomas, standing in the street, was buttoning his shirt.

They were whispering furiously to each other. He said: ‘I love you.’

‘No.’

‘We can’t part like this.’

‘Yes, we can.’

‘It’s been fifteen years.’

‘So what?’

‘We have to talk.’

‘No point.’

‘But I won’t allow you to decide my life like this, without reason or explanation.’

His voice had become shrill and ridiculous. Someone was coming up on the pavement. Very softly, she said, ‘Let go of the door, please.’

‘Ann, I love you.’

‘That’s not true.’
Suddenly, Thomas gave way. His face went quite pale. At last she closed the door.

‘This evening, this evening . . . ’ he was imploring behind the window.

In the rear-view mirror, she saw him steadying himself on the bonnet of one of the parked cars, lifting his head, trying to catch his breath.

*

She pushed open the door of the music publisher’s. She went to her office, lay down her scarf, bag and coat. She went into Roland’s office, switched on the coffee machine and went to fetch water from under the stairs. She looked up at her reflection in the little mirror over the washbasin. She was a woman whose body changed in phases. One day, she was vigorous, athletic and radiant (Ann liked to swim, she swam several times a week). Another, she was lanky, lacklustre, strangely angular. She was having one of her bad days. Triangular and pale.

She called Georges Roehl on the number he’d given her.

He seemed dazed as he answered her questions.

‘Did I wake you up, is that it?’

‘Yes,’ he admitted, after a moment’s silence.

‘I’ll call back. I left you rather brusquely. You mustn’t hold it against me.’

‘I don’t.’

‘I’m very happy to have met up again.’
‘Me, too. I’m happy to have met up.’

‘I needed to be alone. I need to be alone. I think, in my life . . . I think, in the substance of my life, I feel the need to be alone.’

‘You’ve never lived alone?’

‘No.’

‘I’m going to drink to that. I’m going to open one of those good bottles from Mum’s cellar at lunchtime. I’ll drink it thinking of you. I’ll drink to the substance of your life and to our meeting again. Live alone. Live alone and come when you want. I’ll tell you why it’s good to start growing up at the age you’ve reached. Because the age you’ve reached is my age.’
'For me, just the raw foie gras on asparagus.'

After ordering, they fell silent. Then Ann changed her mind. She called the waiter back: ‘I’d like you to make me a salad too.’

‘Just a green salad?’

‘Yes, but no vinegar. Lemon. Just salt, olive oil, lemon.’

The wine waiter brought the wine. Thomas tasted it. When the waiter had gone, Thomas spoke solemnly to her: ‘I’d like us to talk seriously.’

‘We’ll certainly do that,’ she replied.

They fell silent again.

Ann said: ‘Thomas, I hope you’ve remembered I’m going to Brittany this weekend. I leave on Saturday afternoon. I’m going to Mum’s for Epiphany.’
‘I know.’
They fell silent.
‘That’s not what I wanted to talk about. Ann, I’d like you to talk to me.’
‘Ah, that’s more difficult.’
‘To explain to me . . . ’
‘Well that’s really too easy.’
‘Why?’
‘I doubt it’s down to me to explain. Take a look at your life. Think of a garden at Choisy with a bay tree in it. You walk across the lawn. A young woman’s waiting for you at the top of the steps. She leans out to kiss you.’

Suddenly, she has stopped speaking.
He didn’t break the silence. He didn’t look up at her.

Later on, he mumbled: ‘Tell me how you see this panning out.’

She waited for the food to be served. When they were alone, she said: ‘You’re going to clear out’.

‘No’.
‘You have to go, Thomas. The house is mine and now my life is too.’

‘No way,’ said Thomas.

He put his napkin down on the table. ‘Why should I agree to you wrecking everything our life has been up to this point?’
'Because I’m forty-seven. I was born forty-seven years ago in a little town in Brittany where we wore long pigtails and pulled our socks up to our knees. That’s all the reason there is for it. I can’t make any more mistakes.’

‘And I’m the mistake?’

‘What happened with you, Thomas, wasn’t a mistake, it was wrong. You were simply wrong.’

Then suddenly there were threats on Thomas’ lips. He raised his voice. His tone suddenly turned nasal, sharp. He responded not with reasons but with legal terminology. He promised her he would never let her do what she was planning. He swore to high heaven that his whole life was dedicated to her. He took her hands in his and abruptly announced: ‘I love you.’

‘Stop it. Don’t use that word, please, or I’m getting up.’

‘Deep down . . .’

Then he used the word again, and she got up and left the restaurant.

*  

It was lunchtime but she wasn’t hungry. She was in the part of town where she worked. She went to buy newspapers. It was a grey day and too cold to sit on a bench in the square. Leafing through the morning paper, she was about to enter a cafe when she suddenly stopped.

In the estate agent’s big window there were a dozen or so houses on display.
She looked over the photos and the prices. There was all sorts for sale: a little disused railway station way up in the mountains, a detached house in Neuilly, a loft in the Bastille district, a silted-up medieval port on the Atlantic coast, three townhouses in the eighth arrondissement. She was still thinking as she pushed open the door slowly, almost dreamily; she took a seat in front of an older man with long grey hair and a pinstripe suit. He listened attentively. After a while he interrupted her, got up and asked her to follow him.

They went into the manager’s office.

She gave a made-up name. They opened the file under this false name. She didn’t tell anyone about this. She said nothing to anyone. They had only her mobile number. It was an old unblocked mobile that operated with cards. She’d acquired it two years before at the Porte Saint-Ouen flea market.

*

She resigned from her job that afternoon. She quickly reached an understanding with Roland—she had worked for him for more than ten years; he was a music publisher.

‘All right, Ann. To sum up, then, you no longer work for me but I’m still your publisher for anything you compose?’

‘Yes.’

He didn’t know what to say, so he said, ‘I don’t know what to say.’
‘No matter.’
‘It’s a curious start to the year.’
‘Yes.’
‘It’s so strangely warm,’ he added. ‘Plants are in bud all over my garden.’
‘Mmm!’
They agreed she’d work just one more week, not only to put him in the picture about all the current work but also, most importantly, to explain all the whims and foibles of her computer.
‘If everything’s done by then, I’ll leave on Friday. I’m planning to go to my mother’s in Brittany . . .’
‘Of course, we’ll finish everything to suit you.’
‘In that case, I’ll stay a bit longer than the Epiphany holiday.’
‘Ann, here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll pay you your months of notice.’
‘Which I won’t work.’
‘Which you won’t work. I’ll go on publishing you and we’ll stay firm friends.’
Roland got up. For the first time—for the last—he came round the desk, embraced her and kissed her on both cheeks.
Ann Hidden cleared her desk straight away. She left her office with a large cardboard box in her arms, which she tipped out into the big dustbin in the yard.

*
The manager of the estate agent’s called her back that evening. Thomas hadn’t come home.

‘Madame Amiens?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I come round tomorrow with my assistant?’

‘If you like.’

Tomorrow’s Thursday.’

‘Yes.’

Tomorrow, early in the morning?’

‘I’d prefer early afternoon.’

‘I can’t make that, but my assistant will come.’

‘Thank you.’

The female assistant, accompanied by a male friend, rang the bell. They took the measurements. The young woman made little sketches. The young man took a number of photos. They weren’t in any hurry and it took an hour. It worked out that, at the beginning, the buyer also knew her by the name of Amiens. She subsequently explained this away, saying it was her ex-husband’s surname. But she had, in fact, never been married. Thomas hadn’t suggested she marry him and take his name. As for the two men who preceded Thomas in her life, she was the one who definitely hadn’t wanted to. She was a singular woman. As a musician she was known by the name Ann Hidden. She had been baptized a Catholic in Brittany, that being her mother’s faith, in the name of Éliane Hidelstein. She never went out. No one knew her face—admittedly,
contemporary music was held in such universal contempt in the early twenty-first century that every new kind of composition had become more or less faceless. On her CDs, she chose to put magnificent swathes of stormy sky which seemed to her roughly to match her works. Three disks. One every ten years or so. She didn’t compose much. She had loved working for Roland, where she was a little bit more than a proof-reader but not much. She was a strange character—extraordinarily passive. Almost contemplative. But beneath this appearance of inertia there was an underlying activity. She was deeply calm though not at all serene, calm in a relentless, stubborn way, concentrating constantly. She obeyed no one, but even less did she command anyone. She didn’t speak much. She led an almost invisible life, surrounded by her three pianos, sheltered by her three pianos, unfriendly, almost reclusive, living a hard-working, parallel life. When she looked up at the flowing water before her, everything around had gone grey. Only the quay opposite was whitish. The trees and the barge were grey-brown in the dull light.
After the young man and woman from the estate agent’s had left, she’d gone out too. She’d got into her car, driven around, bought a pay-as-you-go phone card in a cafe and a packet of Lucky Strikes. Then she’d driven around some more. She’d gone down to the lower end of Meudon on the road that leads out to Sèvres. There was precious little wind. The Paris air had its very special smell—putrefied, meaty, oily, appalling. By the edge of the grass, she’d spotted a white tree stump, cemented in. She sat on it.

The tree had just been sawn down and it smelled a little of the old, invisible earth. Night was falling.

By around five, it was dark.

She remained seated beside the river, watching the water lap against the bank. Her suffering had become a kind of pained lying-in-wait.
Sitting on her tree trunk, she had tried to think. Rain and a sudden wind drove her from it abruptly.

It was only as she beat a retreat, running very quickly back to her car in the darkness—dashing back beneath the burst of lukewarm rain—that she found a solution to the questions she’d been pondering for an hour.

There, sitting behind the wheel in the shelter of her car, deafened by the sound of the rain hammering on its metal roof and shrouded in darkness and rain, she gradually came to feel at peace as she drove beside the Seine near the Passerelle de l’Avre, lit by its two rows of streetlights.

If it wasn’t genuine peace, then at least a deep, vast, anxious, vigorous sense of calm enveloped her.

To say the least, it was a radical solution.

The simplest solution was also the most wonderful.

Still in the car and sheltered from the rain, she immediately called the estate agent’s on her mobile and made an appointment to see them late next morning.

* 

‘You know, very few people buy in early January.’

‘Can I sell the furniture with the house?’

‘If you like, but it’s complicated. It’s better for you to sell them separately.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s obvious where your pianos are concerned.’
‘I know where to go to sell those.’

‘Admittedly, with the furniture we didn’t examine it from that angle yesterday, because I hadn’t realized what you were wanting to do. But I’m sure if you sold everything together you’d lose out.’

He hesitated.

‘I’d have to take a look myself.’

‘Would you do that? Could you make an estimate? Personally, I’d rather not have to bother with all that.’

He was thinking.

‘If you really want, I can see to it for you. I know some antique dealers. And some second-hand dealers lower down the scale . . .’

‘Are you free to have lunch?’

‘No, I don’t have the time.’

She pressed him.

‘Well, it is Friday’, he said at last. ‘And it’s January. All right, but one hour—just one hour!’

She stood up, smiling.

‘I know a restaurant where everything’s wonderful, if you stick to the specials.’

She leaned over the desk, picked up the telephone and dialled a number.

‘I used to work in this part of town. Let me book a table.’

As she left the restaurant, after she and the manager of the estate agent’s had gone their separate ways, she called Georges Roehl on her mobile. He wasn’t at
Choisy. She called on the Teilly-sur-Yonne number he’d given her.

‘Georges, you haven’t been talking about me, have you?’

‘No.’

‘You haven’t mentioned my name to anyone?’

‘What’s got into you? Who am I going to talk to? Who do you think I can talk to?’

‘Answer me.’

‘No! The answer’s no. I live alone. Since Mum died, I’ve been completely alone! Well, actually, the answer’s yes. I’ve spoken about you *a great deal* to Mum’s ghost.’

‘Don’t talk like that, I’m superstitious!’

‘I’m alone, really alone, Anne-Éliane. You can’t know how alone. It’s such a long time since I had any lovers.’

‘Good for you.’

‘No need to be like that!’

‘Well, again, good for you. And good for me, too. Keep this secret for me, Georges, I beg of you.’

‘I’ll do everything you want.’

‘Promise me. Don’t talk to anyone about me or about us meeting up.’

‘I swear I won’t.’

‘Do you really swear it?’

‘I really swear it.’

‘Georges?’
'Yes.'
'Can I see you in a hurry?'
'I'm at Teilly.'
'I know. How would I get there by train?'
'Go to the Gare de Lyon. The five-thirty’s direct to Sens.'
'No, not today. How about tomorrow?'
'Tomorrow morning, take the nine o’clock train. It’s cleaner. A quieter, more pleasant experience. That one’s direct too, but you have to get it from Bercy. And again you get off at Sens.'
'All right. What do I do at Sens?'
'I’ll wait for you at the station. I’ll call the restaurant at Joigny for dinner.'
'No, I’d like to come home in the evening. I’ve promised Mum I’ll be there for Epiphany . . . '
'So, Teilly then.'
'As you like.'
He fell silent.
'My God, you’re going over to Brittany,’ he mumbled, anxiety in his voice. ‘I haven’t been back there for at least thirty years . . . I’ll put you on the five o’clock train at Sens. You’ll be in Paris by six. You won’t even have to go back home.’
'I prefer it that way.'
'You go direct from Bercy station to Montparnasse.'
'Yes.'
‘No need to change on the metro.’
‘No.’

* 

He was waiting for her on the long, ugly platform of Sens station. He was wearing a black fleece shirt and black jeans. It was raining but he had on a black leather fedora that covered his face.

‘Anne-Éliane, don’t kiss me, I’m not too well. I think I’ve got a cold.’

Ann kissed him.

He was driving an old grey Citroen van.

They followed the river and the willows. He parked on the riverbank in a large, enclosed car park by the gate to the little town of Teilly.

It turned out to be a village on the river between Villeneuve-sur-Yonne and Joigny. Not even a village. A port dating from the seventeenth century, encircled by walls. The three gates to the little township were so narrow that cars couldn’t pass through. It was a sort of little Venice of recent vintage, entirely pedestrianized and rather quiet. The houses were old, black and red, severe. The town council had decided, after the War, not to wish for any more change than did its dead. Later, it had accepted money from the regional or departmental authorities, but had chosen the least visible, most sophisticated modernizations. That was how the village had become more select and expensive, more natural, less outmoded, richer.
They walked a hundred yards.
He pushed open an iron gate that led into a shabby courtyard. There was a solex in the yard.
‘Do you ride that?’
‘These houses belonged to my friend. He died.’
‘Oh, I’m sorry.’
‘No, don’t apologize. He died twelve years ago.’
‘Did you love him a lot?’
‘Much more than a lot. I simply loved him. I loved him.’
‘Do you use it?’
‘I use it to go and fetch parcels from the post office or do my shopping at the supermarket. The town has no cars or lorries, but the authorities couldn’t ban scooters, solexes, mobylettes and skateboards.’
‘Could I use it too?’
‘Whenever you like.’
‘There were solexes in Brittany.’
‘Mainly there were big Peugeot bicycles with enormous paniers.’

They went into the vast main house in whose ten or so rooms Georges lived most of the time. It was rather uninteresting, very clean, very comfortable, over-furnished, with an air of excessive smartness and opulence.

The garden stretched out beyond it with its box hedges, laburnums, bamboos, a clump of hydrangeas, a little fountain against a wall, great rose bushes everywhere.
At the end of the garden two older houses fronted on to the water, the one on the left wisteria-clad, the other to the east buried under ivy.

From the bottom of the garden—when you were down beside the Yonne and turned around—the whole back wall of the main house was covered with vines, up to the black guttering where the roof began.

The pair of houses on the riverbank each had their boat and their tree. The black boat of the ivy-clad house was moored to a ring attached directly to the wall facing the Yonne. It was protected by the enormous, thorny branches of a wild rose clinging to the bank.

The house on the left with the wisteria had four rooms. Georges’s friend had used it as his studio. It was filled with canvases now turned to the wall. Georges stashed all his vinyl records there now, his disused record players and old cassettes. This house had a light-green plastic boat sheltering perpetually beneath the willow.

The right-hand house, hidden by ivy, hadn’t been lived in for years. In the first room that opened on to the garden, there was an old stove and a big moth-eaten billiard table. In the room that opened on to the Yonne, a very high-standing, old-style baluster bed, surrounded by shelves. On the floor above, an empty room with battered suitcases on the floor. At all the windows of the three abandoned rooms were old curtains devoured by clothes moths and covered in dust.

‘It’s unbearable!’
For a second time, Ann’s face got caught in a spider’s web.

‘It’s infested with spiders.’

‘My neighbour’s a cleanliness fanatic.’

‘I don’t see the connection.’

‘He wipes everything down with bleach, including the TV, the toaster and the letter box. He’s charming, but he’s permanently going around with a spray-can after any insect he catches sight of. That’s why I think our garden’s swarming with them. All the persecuted spiders have taken refuge here.’

At the water’s edge, he showed her the arums, the enormous rose tree, returned now to the wild state and soaring out from the bank, the old black Loire boat, the apple trees, the mallards that dabbled beneath the hazels and came to take their rest in the west beneath the willow with the boat beside it.

The very fine rain was still falling, without cutting through the mist above the river.

Above the rainy mist, old Teilly bridge seemed to be hovering somewhere beyond the world.
'Are we going on foot?'

‘Of course.’

He pulled open the door. She waited for him on the pavement outside, by the gate.

‘Can I take your arm?’ he asked.

‘There’ll be tongues wagging all over Teilly-surr-Yonne.’

‘And a good thing too. What fun.’

Arm in arm like this they strolled to the restaurant in the cobbled area of the harbour near the bridge.

The fog had wrapped itself round the piers of the bridge and the lime trees.

The river’s waters were now completely out of sight.

‘It’s so nice.’
‘What is?’
‘To feel a woman’s arm in yours.’

Georges had quail (with fried hazelnuts and potato purée).

Ann had loin of lamb (with pan-fried chanterelles).

Georges kept repeating how overjoyed he was to be eating with her.

Later on, as they waited for the train time to come around, they walked along the river.

The mist had almost lifted and it was milder now. There was a stone bench on the paved riverbank. The wavelets sparkled above the leaves of the water lilies. A little Japanese flowering cherry had grown in the gap in the stones by the river’s edge.

Ann Hidden didn’t, in the end, say anything very precise. Georges urged her to confide in him but she didn’t. He said, ‘It’s clear to me my little schoolmate has become a Burgundy snail and I can see she’s drawn back into her shell.’

She took his hand at that point, bidding him be quiet.

They came to a stop further on. ‘Georges, I want to do more than just break with Thomas: I want to cut off all contact,’ she said. ‘Not with you, of course. With everyone but you. I need you.’

‘What do I have to do?’

‘I don’t know. So far as I’m concerned, I want to extinguish the life that went before.’
‘You’re a bit overwrought.’
‘I don’t know how I’m going to go about it yet. For the time being stay by my side, be patient, be my friend! Be my only friend. Will you do that?’
‘I will, but why?’
‘No asking why—and keep the secret for me!’
‘I adore secrets.’
‘Not secrets. The secret.’
‘I promise you total secrecy.’

George felt a surge of joy. He was an extremely sentimental man. What is a sentimental man? Someone who adores not eating alone. When Georges thought he was going to have dinner with Ann, it brought *tears to his eyes*. Even if he didn’t actually cry, he told himself: ‘I’m eating with her. It’s brought *tears to my eyes*.’

* 

That very evening she was Epiphany ‘queen’.

Late into the night.
A queen in clogs.
To the bitter disappointment of her mother.

It’s a sign, thought Ann, as she slipped into her childhood bed, pulling her eiderdown up over her (she felt with her feet for the copper bed-warmer). It’s a sign that I’m right to want to leave this world.

*
As they were finishing lunch on Sunday, 11 January, Mme Hidelstein explained to her forty-seven-year-old daughter that it wasn’t at all right now, when the Roquefort was being cut, for her to take all the veined part. ‘We should at least all take our share of the white.’ Her brow had furrowed. Then her Breton eyes had turned an intense blue. Blue as shark skin. Within her own body, Ann suddenly felt her mother’s entire belly and chest trembling with suppressed impatience and irritation towards her. After a few hours by her mother’s side, all her early years flooded back. Everything resurfaced—the frustration, the dependency, everything about her upbringing, the manic obsessions, the distress, the hatred. The whole atmosphere tensed once more, like a violin string on the finger board. All the joys she had promised herself before coming turned back into scarcely bearable ordeals. When, at dessert, the only daughter got up and went to fetch the new Epiphany tart from the oven, she rigged things so that her mother could, at last, be the ‘Epiphany queen’. But when she got back to the table and sliced the tart containing the prized bean, her cunning trick had gone wrong. She tried, nonetheless, to place the crown on her furious mother’s close-cropped old hair, but she wouldn’t let her. In those early twenty-first century years, the custom at the time on
the Atlantic coast of Brittany was to cut old ladies’ hair very short. It made them look like boys. Then their hair was dyed an appalling bluish white that resembled the mouthwash dentists prescribe for ailing jaws.
Ann’s mother lived alone in Brittany in a lordly villa built by her grandfather. When Ann’s grandfather had died and her father had abandoned them, Marthe Hidelstein had shown no inclination to be parted from this overly large residence. She had never wanted to leave it, even for the holidays. She was waiting for her husband. She firmly believed that he, moved by some pang of guilt, would suddenly return, go down on one knee on the living-room carpet, if not indeed on the doormat in the hallway—or even perhaps on the sands of the beach—and beg her forgiveness.

She was resolved to grant it.

There were two other, equally imposing Second Empire villas further on, beside the sea, both giving access to the beach, though they were more interestingly ornamented in a fussier, more English style.
The Hidelsteins’ house had no gables, arches or exposed brickwork. Its only ornaments were a large bow window facing out to sea, a tall balustrade that ran around the lower edge of the garden with a long line of blue hydrangeas in front of it, and a large flight of permanently sand-swept winding stairs that led down directly to the road running alongside the beach.

With every large tide, the water came across the road.

At the equinoctial tides, it climbed part way up the relatively stiff slope. Sometimes, if the wind was blowing storm force, it would reach the railings and submerge the hydrangeas.

Two floors with six bedrooms, four of them tiny ones at the very top of the house, themselves also salty and sandy. No one had ever really lived right at the top. Ann had had a little brother who had died in indescribable pain in a Paris hospital. Her father had left almost immediately after the death. Ann was six years old at the time. The wallpaper (parrots in the rooms on the first floor, irises on the second) had always had patches of damp. It was peeling at the corners. Its surface was fluffy, gnawed at by the sea air.

Her mother had suddenly fallen asleep on her chair, before even finishing her piece of tart. Her inner fury had tired her out. Ann left her to doze.

She got up.

She slipped the gold-paper crown into the rubbish bin.
Taking care not to make a noise, she went into the living room.

It was full of old frames, family photos. There were hundreds of pictures all over the walls. Her mother divided her time now between the living room and the kitchen. She had placed her bed in the middle of the living room.

The result was very ugly.

‘I can’t go upstairs, you see, on account of my leg.’

*

Ann felt an urge to walk on the beach. In the hallway she wrapped herself in one of the shawls her mother hung there, in among the scarves and hats. She felt dizzy and leant against the banister. The house door opened suddenly and Véronique came in.

‘Eliane?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s up? Aren’t you well?’

‘Yes, yes, I’m alright. I was going out.’

‘I wanted to tell you we’re all eating at my place this evening.’

‘All who?’

‘All the girls.’

‘It’s the same invitation every time.’

‘So you’ll play something for us the way you always do?’

‘If you like, Véri. But come with me. I want to go out.’
'I’ll go and say hello to your mother first,’ said Véronique.

‘No point.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘She didn’t get to be queen. She’s sleeping.’

‘You might have . . . ’

Ann pulled her out into the wind.

*

She played sitting bolt upright, her hands rounded. She played extremely loudly. Every time—since childhood—Véri had heard Ann play, her insides began to shudder beneath her skin.

It wasn’t music, it was a violence suddenly uncontained.

Her heart and lungs shuddered beneath her ribs—then, when Véronique acquired breasts, beneath her breasts.

They were in Véri’s little flat above her chemist’s shop in Brittany.

Ann was sitting at the almost-red mahogany Gaveau piano.

Strange, noisy, curly copper candleholders were affixed directly to the edge of the music rest and produced a threatening sound.

*
Before taking her shower, Ann had made breakfast herself, because of the time of her train.

She had laid the table in the kitchen.

Her mother had suddenly burst from the living room door, her short blue-and-white hair disarranged.

Ann went up to her room to fetch her bag, came back down, put her travel bag in the hallway and returned to the kitchen.

She served the coffee. Her mother was already in tears. She was sitting between the table and the window, her back stiff and arms tensed.

‘Do you want some coffee, Mum?’

‘No.’

Her mother watched her daughter drink, sniffing. Knitting her brows, she forced herself to cry.

‘Mum, I have to call the taxi.’

‘Give me a kiss!’

Ann got up and went and kissed her mother.

There is an extreme affection in old people that is repugnant, excessive, malodorous and bony. They take you in their arms. Their embrace is painful to themselves, while their bones, with their lightness and delicacy and their copious body hair, their pins, hairgrips and bracelets dig into you.

‘I have to make my list because you’re going.’

Ann put the cup back down in the saucer and looked at her mother. She observed her fingers deformed
and swollen with osteoarthritis, undermined by the constant proximity of the ocean, struggling to grip the biro to write the shopping list she’d give to her cleaner. Mme Hidelstein pursed her lips. She was very tense and concentrating furiously on the words she was writing—carrots, escarole—to make sure they stayed straight on her list.
Back in Paris on the Monday and feeling weary, she saw light at all the windows. Thomas had laid the table in the dining room. He was waiting to eat dinner with her.

‘Did it go all right? Was your mother well? Who won the Epiphany crown?’

‘It went well—very, very well.’

‘Did you see? . . .’ He pointed to the table with the wine glasses laid out, the candles lit.

‘Very nice but I’m tired.’

‘I’ve made . . .’

‘I’m not hungry. I’m sorry, I’m really tired.’

She went up to bed.

The next morning he was waiting for her again at the bottom of the stairs. He had shaved, brushed his hair and put a tie on.
‘Ann, I have to talk to you. We must.’
‘Then talk.’
‘How about us going to England together? Or up to Scotland? I’m off to London in a fortnight. Saturday the thirty-first. I’m going by Eurostar. I have to work in London all week. I’ll be back the following Sunday.
‘You’re coming back on the eighth of February?’
‘Yes, the eighth . . . Here’s what I’d like to do. Why don’t you come and meet me there on the Friday?’
‘The sixth?’
‘Yes, the sixth. We could take three or four days out of the following week. ‘
‘That doesn’t work for me.’
‘Why not?’
‘I don’t feel like it.’
‘That’s no answer.’
‘I don’t want to and I can’t.’
‘God!’
‘I’ve got some work with Roland.’
‘But would you take just the weekend?’
‘No.’
‘You’re still saying no?’
‘That’s right.’
‘Is it no because of me?’
‘It’s not. It’s just how it is. I’m saying no. I don’t need a reason to say no.’
She walked round him.
‘Now I have to go to work!’
She put on her overcoat. She slammed the door and went off down the garden path. She always left an hour earlier than he did and he came home much later. Now she was forced to pretend to be going off to work. She wandered around for a while, waited till he’d left, did a little shopping here and there, came back, looked to see the light at the windows or to see him leave, did some thinking, made lists for hours like her mother, and had an occasional cry. She’d begun to smoke Lucky Strikes again excessively, in an effort to force her luck.

* *

Suddenly she stepped back in disgust from the drawer in the roll-top desk.
That was where she kept all the photographs.
She heard a loud clanking noise down below.
She ran to the window.
The estate agent had pushed open the gate and was standing impatiently in the garden. Pushing with both hands, Ann closed the enormous drawer again.

* *

They went into the kitchen for a coffee while they waited for the antique dealer.
‘I’m perhaps going to change my mind—one last time.’
‘You’ve decided not to sell now?’
‘No, of course I’m selling. I was thinking of the furniture.’

‘Here’s our dealer!’

Through the kitchen window he indicated a crash helmet peeping over the fence.

Ann went out to open the gate.

She took him into the house. She had in mind to show him everything she intended to sell. But that wasn’t how he wanted to proceed.

‘Let’s begin at the beginning,’ he said, taking off his helmet and thrusting his leather gloves into it.

He took out his ruler and began by measuring everything.

Two hours later, he handed her a list.

‘Is that a list of the furniture?’

‘No, it’s the list of objects I’m interested in. I have to go and fetch my camera. Only five pieces really interest me.’

‘Then it’s no. Definitely no. I don’t want to do it like that.’

‘But what do you want me to do?’

‘Make me an offer for the whole of the furniture, minus the pianos.’

‘I can’t afford to do that. I can commit to the five pieces of furniture I’ve mentioned. I’ll make you an offer. I’ll send it to you here.’

‘No, I’d rather you went through the agency.’

‘As you like.’
‘The finest piece you have is undoubtedly the big Steingraeber but I can’t take that.’

‘Don’t worry about the pianos. I’ll take care of them. I know some collectors who’ll be interested. I’ll sort that out.’

He put his helmet back on and Ann saw him to the gate. He got on his motorbike. Ann thought for a while. She turned to the estate agent whose eyes had glazed over. The weather was dull. They were standing on the pavement.

‘For the moment, the house is going on sale. That’s the only thing I’m sure of. As for all the other things, I’m going to have a think. I’ll keep you posted. I’ll call you.’

She saw him to his car.

*

By the time she got back in, it was twelve. The sun was out again.

Its rays flooded the pavement, the garden, the stone steps and the front of the house, which looked beautiful in the wintry light.

I’m right, she thought to herself, this sun is right. This ray of sunshine touching my house is the oldest and surest of signs. I must sell.

She fetched her cheque book, bag and overcoat and went straight to her bank. She asked to take out ten thousand euros in cash.

‘That’s a lot of money.’
‘Would you rather I withdrew the lot?’
‘Don’t take it like that, madam.’
‘Mademoiselle.’
‘We need two days’ notice, mademoiselle. We’ll have to report this cash withdrawal. With amounts over eight thousand euros, we have to . . . ’
‘Then I’ll just take out seven thousand today.’
She took the seven thousand euros from the cashier and left the bank. She drove to the swimming pool. She always kept her sports bag in the boot of the car.

* 
Next day, Ann was almost dumbstruck when the young assistant from the estate agent’s called on her mobile. Someone had put in an offer on the house. The potential buyers had already taken a look through the railings. They lived in Brussels. They’d like to visit—wife, children, everyone—as soon as possible. Everything could be done very quickly—within six months, if possible before the summer, since the buyer would be taking up a position in Paris. He wanted to redecorate throughout, then organize the move during the school holidays. The asking price didn’t seem to pose a problem. It was the location, garden and number of rooms that were the main thing for them. When could she bring them round? Today?
‘No.’
‘Tomorrow morning?’
‘No.’
‘Before the end of the week then. They’re in Paris.’
‘Tomorrow if you like, but not before eleven. I sleep late.’
She also said she preferred not to be there herself. She said nothing to Thomas.
She held the photos of her father in her hands again. He was a slim little man with a sharp nose. His hair was slicked back the way men used to wear it but unruly, a little tousled. She went back down to the kitchen. ‘Everything’s got to go,’ she thought to herself. However anxious I feel about it, the whole place has to be cleared out. I know I have to let everything go. She lit one of the gas rings and set fire to the photos of her father one after the other. She let go suddenly when the flames began to lick at her flesh. She dropped the ashes into one of the metallic sinks. She burnt almost the entire contents of the drawer from the roll-top desk. With a little sponge, she gathered the ashes into her hand. She threw them into the waste bin. That’s it, that’s it, she said to herself. Everything has to be thrown out and what can’t be thrown out will have to be burnt. She
pulled her store of plastic bin bags out of a kitchen cupboard. I’ll fill one each day. She took a piece of matt-white adhesive tape and wrote the name she had given to the estate agent on it, went out into the garden, opened the outer gate and stuck it on the letter box. She climbed to the top floor and filled a 100-litre bag with clothes. That made her more and more anxious. She called the Emmaus charity. She called Catholic Aid. How difficult it was to give! They were happy to receive, but they refused to collect. Someone rang at the gate.

She closed the bedroom door behind her and picked up her jacket.

She gave a set of keys to the manager of the estate agent’s who had come out.

‘Slip them into the letterbox when you’re done.’

She got into her car and drove to the swimming pool.

Each time she dived into the water of a swimming pool—each time she found herself in a swimming pool with all its acoustic strangeness—then her body, exhausting itself, recovered a sort of power.

For all her violent front-crawl swimming, for all her effort and tiredness, she couldn’t manage to wrench the creeping anxiety from the depths of her stomach.

Getting out of the pool, she heard the church bells sound for vespers; she saw the church open.

As her hair was still soaking wet, she hesitated.

She was always a little reverential when she entered the darkness of a church.
But she went in.
She found a corner to sit in, in a little chapel adjacent to the choir.
She listened to the hymns and psalms.
She took long breaths, though to no great effect. The anxiety within her wouldn’t let up, wouldn’t subside.
She got back in her car, found a place to park just in front of the house, removed the name from the letterbox, went up to the second floor and filled a new bag.
It was that evening that she stopped crying.

*A*

A state of weightlessness ensued.
A strange state in which the body becomes slightly distant from itself. In which everything dries up in the inner world. In which lucidity or at least emptiness begins to move within the space of the skull.
In which, though it persists, the pain doesn’t hurt so much.
In which the pain at least hurts from a little further away than from the body itself.

*She walked down the dark street in the sixth arrondissement. The pavement was very narrow. She had applied her make-up with care. She was tall and beautiful, her body slender, her hair tied up in a bun. She was wearing a grey evening dress. She joined Thomas at the private view. They left around nine p.m.*
They came out into darkest night.
In the narrow street again.
‘Do you think there’s a restaurant round here?’
‘I’ve no idea! My car’s parked on the Place du petit marché. By the swimming pool.’
‘I’m very hungry. Aren’t you hungry?’
‘Not really.’
‘We should have dinner here before we go home.’
He took her by the arm.
‘I’d like us to be the way we were,’ he said.
She didn’t answer. He was walking more slowly. He hugged her to him.
‘I love you,’ he said.
‘Hey, look over there.’
‘No, look at me.’
She looked at him.
‘I’m hurting,’ he said.
He looked so miserable that she sighed, ‘Let’s go have something to eat since you’re hungry.’

*

The estate agent’s called again in the late morning. It was a yes. The man from Brussels had put down an initial deposit. Ann asked the estate agent to take care of everything and they were preparing the papers. They would contact the lawyer.
‘There’ll be no need to meet the new owners until the time comes to sign.’
‘When?’
‘Let’s say, three months’ time.’
‘What about the formal sale agreement?’
‘You don’t have to be there in person for that.’
‘When will it be?’
‘Very soon. The beginning of February. At least I think so.’
‘The seventh of February if that’s possible.’
He asked his assistant.
‘I know they can only come near to a weekend.’
The assistant called back.
The seventh of February was OK with them.
The speed or imminence of the signing of the sale agreement took her breath away. The anxiety was sudden and total. She had thought there would be whole months of equivocation.

She told herself the seventh would bring her luck. February was *verging on spring.*

*  

‘I’m leaving Paris.’
‘Where are you moving to?’
‘I don’t know yet.’

The counter clerk explained how to go about setting up a PO box.

She nominated Georges Roehlinger to receive her mail.

She bought travellers’ cheques.
She called the antique dealer from a cafe by the post office. She accepted his proposal on condition that he find a second-hand dealer for the remaining furniture and that everything was done in the first week of February. She called the estate agent’s.

‘In the end, I’ll sort out the question of the furniture myself.’

The second-hand dealer called immediately. He recommended a friend who would do the moving. They agreed on Monday the second of February or Tuesday the third.

She didn’t have time for lunch.

The garage was out beyond the Paris ring road—at Bagnolet.

She said she wanted to sell her car. That she had to move quickly.

‘Why?’

‘I’ve found a job in the US.’

‘Lucky you!’

‘I don’t know about that.’

They went to sort out all the documents. Either they’d leave her the use of her car or they’d lend her another one until the morning of Saturday the seventh. They’d call her.
She went one last time to the branch of her Paris bank. Again she withdrew seven thousand euros in cash. She left the money needed to pay the upcoming taxes and payments, the standing orders. She asked for the rest to be paid to her by cheque.

* 

It was four o’clock. She called Georges on her mobile. Could she stay with him this weekend? He was overjoyed. At least that was what he said.

She bought a ticket for Teilly-sur-Yonne but, arriving too early at the Gare de Lyon, she boarded the preceding train to Dijon. She got out at Sens and took a taxi.

She surprised him by calling from her mobile when she was outside his house, to get him to come and open the door (Georges never answered the doorbell).

They went to the excellent restaurant on Boulevard de Mail. Georges repeated that he was overjoyed. She spoke about Thomas. He said: ‘You’re a classical heroine.’

She replied by saying, ‘Georges, I want to put four questions to you.’

Then she hesitated.

‘Suddenly it’s so strange to be beside you!’

‘Like when we were little, side by side in class with our slates and chalk!’

‘It’s funny to be here talking so intimately to you.’

‘Nonsense, we were always close.’
‘Strange to be together again!’
‘You caught me in a state of bereavement.’
‘Georges, I’m also moving towards a horrible . . . or perhaps wonderful . . . sort of goodbye.’
‘Forget goodbyes, let’s stick with “Hello again”! Now, tell me. What were you about to tell me? I’m going to have the pigeon with broad beans. That reminds me, who got the bean for the Epiphany crown in Brittany?’
‘I wanted Mum to have it. I did all I could to make it happen. I did all I could to make her happy. I don’t know what happened but both times I messed up.’
‘You mean, you were queen twice?’
‘Yes.’
‘And you’re saying that both times you’d seen where the bean was and you’d done all you could to have it end up in your mother’s piece of tart?’
‘Yes.’
Ann glanced up and saw Georges didn’t believe her.

They savoured their first course in silence. She drank a little wine. At last she said, ‘Georges, I want to put four questions to you. Four questions and you have to answer yes or no without the slightest embarrassment.’
‘Why would I be embarrassed?’
‘First, would you agree to me putting some money in your bank account?’
‘No, I don’t think I’d like that. I’ll never agree to that. I’m not rich, but I get by just fine.’
‘It isn’t to help or humiliate you. I just need a bank account that won’t show up.’
‘But I have my pride.’
‘I’ve not gone about this the right way.’
‘Ann-Éliane, consider this. Two old schoolmates meet up again. They go out for a meal together. Surely they don’t rush to mess everything up with putting money into bank accounts.’
‘Never mind, forget it. Second question: I’d like to buy the abandoned little house in your garden. The one on the right.’
‘The house with the ivy?’
‘Yes.’
‘You want it?’
‘Yes.’
‘Why?’
‘I’ll tell you why. It’s a sort of Gumpendorf.’
‘What’s a Gumpendorf?’
‘Papa Haydn called his house at Gumpendorf his “hut”. He said that the whole of his soul was in that hut. That once he was inside it he was sure to be able to write. And it was there, near Vienna, that he wrote his finest works.’
‘But take it, Ann! Take it! It’s yours. I don’t need to sell it to you and you don’t need to buy it to make it your hut and write there!’
‘Listen to what I’m going to tell you. Though first, Georges, I have to swear you to secrecy.’
He swore solemnly to keep the secret.
She asked him to clink glasses to cement the oath.
‘Look me in the eyes.’
The waiter brought the bass (with horn-of-plenty mushrooms) and a plump pigeon (with beans).
‘I’m going to sell the house in Paris.’
‘Heavens, all that for . . . ’
‘Keep your thoughts to yourself, please.’
‘I shan’t express any, then, but are you sure you aren’t about to do something silly because of what you thought you saw in a little street in Choisy-le-Roi where there’s a big bay tree?’
‘Spare me your remarks. No remarks, no judgements. From you I just want friendship and secrecy.’
‘OK. Take it easy.’
‘So, it’s under way. The sale’s going ahead. A couple from Brussels are signing the agreement on Saturday the seventh of February.’

He listened dumbfounded and suddenly worried:
‘Does Thomas know about this?’
‘No, I want to disappear for a short while. And there’s no question of him knowing. None of my friends or family even suspects your existence. Not even Mum knows.’
‘My renewed existence?’
‘Yes. So I’m going to find myself with a lot of money and I don’t want to have an address.’
‘Hold on. So you’re going to leave me too?’
‘Yes.’
‘Ann, I’m really disappointed.’
‘I’ll be back.’
‘And your brand-new Gumpendorf?’
‘Later. I’ll come back later.’
‘So you’re completely erasing everything. You’re hiding the money. You’re changing your name perhaps?’
‘Why not?’
‘I was right just now. You’re worse than crazy. You’re going to become a mythic character.’
‘Do you see now why I’d have liked the discreet hospitality of your bank account, Georges?’
‘I’ve got it.’
‘I’d also need a credit card on that account. Is that possible, Georges?’

He fell silent. He took a drink, looked her in the eye and said: ‘Could we have a joint account?’
‘No, my name would show up.’
‘You simply want a proxy?’
‘Yes.’

The next day they both went to Georges Roehl’s bank at Auxerre. It was open until 4 p.m on Saturdays. Once the forms had been filled and signed, Georges went off to do some shopping and she went into a nearby travel agency. She had long cherished the desire to live in a small apartment in New York, but the young man at the counter revealed that Europeans could no longer travel freely to the USA. Passengers’ personal files
were slavishly sent to Washington by the airlines of all the EU member states.

Ann met up with Georges for lunch on the main square.

He was very gloomy (despite the fact he was going to eat with her).

‘You’re barely back in my life and now you’re off on your travels again!’

She shrugged her shoulders. She explained what she’d learnt from the young man in the travel agent’s.

To keep a little secrecy about one’s whereabouts, it was no longer enough just to dismiss the authorities as wooden idols.

She and Georges had fun drawing up a list of the countries where all movements were monitored.

All American or related airlines had to be avoided on account of what the travel agency clerk had called ‘Passenger Name Record’.

Moreover, Georges had read in a magazine that there was now a way of tracking mobile phone calls.

‘So, no mobile,’ he said.

‘No email address. Can’t keep your computer.’

‘No plane travel outside the Euro zone.’

‘No credit card,’ she said.

‘So, you’ll have to find a destination around the Mediterranean or in Asia,’ said Georges.

They went back to the bank to cancel her card request. Cheques would do. Cheques bore no indication
of where they came from, except what you wanted to put on them. So she also bought some new travellers’ cheques.

*

On the way back from Auxerre, she called the builders and decorators at Villeneuve-sur-Yonne. The proprietor said, ‘I can come round tomorrow if you like.’

‘But it’s a Sunday.’

‘I don’t have anything on at the moment. January’s a quiet month. People don’t have any money after the holidays.’

‘People wait for spring.’

‘Like painters,’ he said.

‘Like flowers,’ she said.
On 20th January, the countdown began to fray and falter. As a result of devoting her time to this furtive clearance operation, surreptitiously throwing things out and planning for emptiness, she was gradually submerged by a wave of distress. It is difficult to separate oneself from what one has loved. It is even more problematic to separate oneself from oneself or one’s self-image. For a few days at Teilly, Georges found fresh hope. He explained to her that there was still time to call a halt to everything. Ann Hidden realized the life she was leading in Paris, though false, wasn’t at all unpleasant. The conditions had changed too. She hardly saw Thomas now. She would have her Gumpendorf hut rebuilt and repainted at Teilly as soon as she wanted it. She had been right to give up her work in the eighth
arrondissement, but would the life she’d find elsewhere really be more focussed? Better for her creativity? Was radical solitude really an unalloyed delight?

And where could she exile herself to?

She couldn’t go to Warren in Sydney any more.

She couldn’t settle in New York, as she had always dreamt of doing.

Fear had begun to grip her.

Her anxiety grew, mingling with the sense of intoxication.

She went to the cinema. It was a fine film, set in Shanghai, in which everything was fluid—fluid in time.

She made the decision to stay in France, in Paris, though not to carry on sharing her life with Thomas. That didn’t in any way prevent her from breaking with everything.

The decision brought her some peace of mind.

*

She went home on foot, feeling freer in her mind. Night had fallen and she walked a long way through the remains of dead leaves and little patches of frost.

She went down to the cellar.

She chose a bottle of Burgundy.

To celebrate her new-found resolve, she chose something sublime which she brought back up to the living room, uncorked and allowed to breathe. It had a marvellous aroma.
A sadder impression came over her and merged with the peace she’d regained.

She drank a mouthful, then carried her glass through to the other room. She put it on the piano.

In the evening, when Thomas came home, she was still at the piano, still working. He was gentle and attentive. He kissed her on the hair while she continued to read, decipher, note, reduce. She could hear him behind her; he must be pouring himself a whisky; he sat down behind her in the big black armchair.

She stayed at the piano, reading the photocopy of a score she had unearthed at the National Library and which she was trying to retranscribe.

Most often, she didn’t compose. She would simplify the scores she exhumed—or their memories—until they were thoroughly pared down. She summarized, deornamented, cut down, abbreviated and condensed until she felt deeply affected by what she’d obtained.

When it reached that point, she stopped. She was very moved.

She took the piece she had reduced and played it right through. She turned around.

He was sleeping in the black armchair.

She took her glass, walked past him into the kitchen, had a quick bite to eat and finished the wonderful bottle of wine. As she came back past the living room door, he was still asleep. She went upstairs. She took a Bromazepam from the bathroom cupboard. But then, unprompted, she began to laugh. She didn’t take
the pill. Out loud to herself, she said ‘goodbye’ as she reached down and dropped the Bromazepam into the little metal bin. She was sure of herself now. She went straight to the second-floor bedroom. She was thoroughly joyous. She knew she was leaving.

*

She opened her eyes, looking up above her head at the bare branches of the elm tree gleaming with water that were touching the glass of the skylight.

She woke in the same state of mind as when she had gone to bed. She thought, ‘My decision must have been spot on. I’ve slept like a log. The anxiety’s gone. I didn’t dream.’

On Friday 23rd January, she sold the three pianos in her life. She sold them for a good price. She even sold the Steingraeber above its price because of who she was. She was known, even if the works she composed were difficult. She felt nothing. The transaction was done in cash. It was a substantial amount of money.

The pianos couldn’t be moved until 5th February.

The sense of abandonment was going away.

As long as it is brewing, the sense of anger fills one’s frame with energy, keys up the brain, sustains the projects conceived by the mind. Sustains the gaze. Carries one through the hours. Intensifies time.

In a few days she grew much thinner.

Her black jeans were hanging off her.
She called up the antiques and second-hand furniture dealers and the removal man.

They all settled on Tuesday, 3rd February.

She went to the tax office, didn’t say she was leaving, didn’t mention the PO box, but arranged to pay her taxes in monthly instalments from her old bank account.

* 

When she went down to the living room, the smell of cigar smoke was so strong in there that she had to throw all the windows wide open.

She couldn’t stand Thomas’ presence any longer. Smells, homecomings, his attentions, his imploring presence, noise, dirty linen and phone calls—everything irked her.

She called Brittany. She didn’t tell her mother anything. For an hour she resigned herself to listening patiently to all her complaints.

She phoned Georges: ‘Can I come?’

‘You can come.’

On the way to Teilly by train, she phoned Thomas:

‘I’m on the train to Rennes. I’m going to see Mum. Véri called. She’s not well at all.’

She switched off her mobile and sat there for a long time. She suddenly slipped her shoes onto the floor of the Regional Express carriage. She placed the tips of her feet on the blue banquette seat opposite.
She tugged the hem of her skirt up to her face to wipe her eyes.
She fell asleep.

* 

She gave Georges the money she’d got from the sale of the pianos.

He was panic-stricken.

‘I am going to take it straight to the bank at Auxerre.’

‘I think you should keep it here. I’m going to need it for going away.’

She explained what she had decided to do.

Nonetheless, Georges got out the grey van and went and deposited part of the money in a safe-deposit box in Auxerre.

The work on the little ivy-clad house was advancing as fast as the builder had promised.

They walked down beside the sodden lawn and the rose garden.

They went to take an admiring, satisfied look at the tiny new bathroom.

As for the rest, it was still just plaster and rubble.

The method of working the builders had devised was complicated because, in order not to trouble Georges, they came in by the river. They stored their materials in a fisherman’s barge.
When evening had fallen, Georges told her: ‘I’m probably going to have the piano tuned. I’d like you to take a look. I’d like you to play something for me now.’

‘What?’

‘Something from the old days, when your mother agreed to us sleeping over at Véri’s.’

‘No, that’s silly.’

‘All right, then. Something you’d really like to play at this moment in your life. I mean what you want to play here and now... some little thing you want deep down to play.’

‘In that case, I do have something. I have the piece that’s obsessing me. You’re like Véri!’

‘Remember that Véri was a much better friend to me than she’s ever been to you!’

It didn’t take long. The piano was an Érard—very narrow, very pale, almost yellow, fragile, with an extremely light touch.

It produced a clavichord-like sound.

But when she had finished, they didn’t dare look at each other. Both of them could feel tears welling around their eyelids and hovering there.

*

On Sunday, as Georges Roehl was driving her to the station in the old Citroën van, she asked: ‘Can you stay at Choisy until the end of the week?’
‘Until Saturday at least. On Saturday I have to be at Teilly. Why?’

‘Oh, nothing. You’ll stay at Choisy till Saturday?’

‘Yes, if you want. In fact that’s what I was intending to do. Can you tell me a bit more?’

‘No, don’t worry.’

‘I’m not worrying.’

The building workers stopped going via the river-bank. She came down twice from Paris. She had the bed and the other furniture delivered that she’d bought near Sens. She didn’t think much of Georges’s taste. She preferred to take care of everything herself. The builder was happy to bow to this new little challenge she posed for him (the winter was so strange and mild; everything would dry out immediately; at least it was near water; she paid him cash in hand). She turned the room that opened onto the garden into a kitchen (a little refrigerator with an electric hob on top, a round, white garden table and two garden chairs).

She made the room that looked out over the river Yonne into a living room, all in white.

Upstairs, an empty—if not, indeed, ascetic—bedroom.

A little bed with a white duvet covered in white pillows framed by two adjoining walls covered from top to bottom with white shelves for holding scores or books.

A tiny toilet to the right of the staircase.
It was still darkest night. She had just got to the station. A swirling wind was blowing on the platform and she took refuge under the canopy. Beneath it, the bare, lighted electric bulbs began to sway dangerously. She turned up the collar of her leather jacket, came out from under the canopy and paced up and down the platform until the train arrived. Once on the train, though she had found a seat and was hoping to be able to doze now that she was back in the warmth, a young North African, shaven-headed and dressed in jogging gear, suddenly held out his packet of chocolate biscuits to her.

He wouldn’t take no for an answer.

She took one.

‘I’d like to talk,’ he said.
'What if I don’t want to hear?’ she replied.

‘I’d like to talk,’ he said, raising his voice. He was threatening. Or, rather, very agitated.

‘Not much I can do about it then. But I agree to listen, on the proviso that I can close my eyes.’

‘All right.’

She gently placed her skull on the headrest and snuggled into the corner. ‘Go on,’ she said, ‘I’m listening.’

‘In Paris I’m going to go and find . . . ’

It was a dark story of punishment. Gradually, she opened her eyes. Something became clear to her.

* 

On the morning of Thursday 29th, arriving back early on the train from Sens, she had to wait patiently for Thomas to leave before she could get into the house. She took advantage of her early morning roaming to buy some large rolls of black bin bags from Franprix.

When she got home, the garage at Bagnolet called. They took in her car and lent her an all-white Renault Espace. She felt a bit awkward driving this big, tall car and parking it in her street.

She called Catholic Aid and got an appointment for the afternoon of Monday, 2nd.

She started at the top of the house. She began by emptying the pockets of all the jackets, raincoats, blousons and overcoats, so as not to leave anything personal in them. She went through the rooms one by one, opened the drawers and wardrobes, and emptied
everything out on to the floor. That took her two hours. She went to have lunch. After lunch, she had to open the new bin bags she had acquired in the morning.

She carefully put into them everything she could give away.

There wasn’t much that belonged to Thomas: a winter coat, a blue sailor’s cap, some woollen scarves, a leather jacket, some shirts and underwear, two blousons and two suits. She left these in the dressing room, in the chest of drawers, and in the cupboard in the bedroom where he now slept alone.

As far as she herself was concerned, she had initially imagined she would keep nothing. But she put into a bag five photos that had survived from the drawer in the roll-top desk, two silk blouses that she liked, some grey linen trousers, a worn old pair of black jeans and some black trainers. She brought down a case and put some sheets and blankets into it for the little Spartan bed in the hut-house with the black Loire boat. She took some pillows, some newish cushions and a white cotton bedspread. Two pans, two frying pans, six plates, six glasses, six sets of knives and forks, an old Italian coffee-pot. She had no trouble stuffing these bags into the white Espace. It wasn’t even necessary to open up the back. She drove to the ringroad and on to Teilly on the A5 motorway. As promised, Georges hadn’t got back to the Yonne yet. All the initial painting work was already done. Three painters were putting the finishing touches to the interior and applying second coats to the outside. She called Georges Roehl. He was,
himself, currently emptying Mme Roehlinger’s house at Choisy. He was waiting anxiously to fill up a first vanload of his mother’s effects.

*  

Thomas was no longer very sure what was happening to him. He was worried. He made frequent calls to Ann, leaving long messages on the answering machine. Ann didn’t help, didn’t reply, refused to have dinner with him. One day he burst in on her in mid-afternoon. She was at the piano.

He took her by the hands.

‘We’ll examine everything afresh. If I’ve done . . . ’

But Ann was already on her feet.

‘I don’t want to talk about that.’

‘But we have to.’

‘No.’

‘Then we can find another way. I can get you the address of a psychoanalyst to help you talk. I know your mother’s not well. I’ve taken that on board. We’ll take our time over this. There’s couple therapy too. We’re exhausted. We ought to take some holiday together. Very soon. We can . . . ’

‘Thomas, I don’t think you understand that it’s over.’

His face tensed. Nonetheless, she said again clearly: ‘I don’t want to see you any more.’
He didn’t look at her. He didn’t answer. He didn’t want to have heard the words that she had, in fact, already uttered. His hands fidgeted feverishly. He was feeling in the air for something to say. He was wandering around the living room.

‘In any case, we’ll be apart next week because I’m going to London. We’ll talk about this as soon as I get back. We’ll go away for a weekend. We’ll talk about it when we’re rested, calmly. We’ll look at it all in a rational way. It’s too absurd . . .’

She let him talk. The provisional agreement was to be signed on Saturday, 7th. She reckoned it would take at least three months for the sale itself to go through. She went to Auxerre with Georges on the Saturday and at the travel agent’s, as he looked on, booked herself a seat on a flight to Marrakesh. Georges wrote out the cheque and signed it. She told Georges she’d keep her mobile till she got to Marrakesh and when she got there she’d buy a card-based, ‘unblocked’ mobile in the souk and mask its number. From Marrakesh she’d travel into the desert, to the Atlas Mountains. It didn’t matter what safari, what archaeological caravan, what group she might be forced to join, so long as she was unreachable in the remotest oases of North Africa. No one needed to know this. That would be for another time. That time would be lived by another woman. It would be in another world. It would open up another life.

*
She now drove the Renault Espace without any of her former diffidence. The mere fact of travelling along the A5 motorway freed her mind, helped her adjust to the decision she had made, helped her remember where she was in the little ruses and lies which she’d been adding to for some time as she went along. Georges was so happy with how quickly the work on the house was going. Happy too not to be having the inconvenience of it or the need to oversee it.

One afternoon, as she was coming out of a restaurant at Chagny, Thomas called her on her mobile.

‘The house phone’s not working any more.’

‘Really?’

‘There’s no tone. The line’s dead.’

‘Don’t worry, Thomas. I’ll call France Telecom tomorrow.’

She was feigning surprise. She had just had the phone cut off.
She was back in Paris on the 30th. They ate quickly in the kitchen without a word. On 31st January Thomas left for London for the week. When, very early, she heard the door close behind him in the darkness, she listened to the silent house. She stayed in her little bed on the second floor for quite a while. She mulled over all the days and evenings to come. This would be the toughest week for her and the one requiring the greatest strength. She began by playing over in her mind all the effort of the week that lay before her.

Then she got up. She went down to the first floor. She began by getting out some new sheets and changing the bedclothes in the main bedroom. She went down to the kitchen to make herself a coffee, then back up to the bedroom, cup in hand.
On the glass shelf in the bathroom, she saw all the shaving paraphernalia—the shaving brush, the comb. She took them and put them all in the bin.

‘Total clear-out,’ she told herself.

She got back into her real bed, took the cup of coffee from the bedside table and began by plunging into the book she had begun the day before.

She was happy to be back in her bedroom with the window that was buried each spring in the dense foliage of the elm tree.

*  

Sitting back against the clean pillows, she looked up at the sky above the elm tree’s bare branches.

She contemplated these patches of sky, so luminous and white, between the branches.

She didn’t want to get up. She hadn’t the heart to get the last few things ready that she still wanted to take. This was the first weekend she was intending to go to the Yonne. She stayed there lying on the bed until night fell.

With the darkness the anxiety returned.

And the desire to run away returned as its companion.

It had become, as it were, the double of the anxiety she felt each day at the point where sunlight collapses into night.

She was up the whole night in her cotton nightdress, sorting and separating clothes, filling the last bags
and all the available cases. She came back to her bed and collapsed from tiredness, falling asleep immediately. It was five in the morning. Everything was ready.

* 

She called Georges: ‘I feel electric. Like a thunderbolt.’

* 

The second day she lit a big autumn bonfire in the garden. She went back up to the top of the house and fetched all the things that were too personal, dismantled the picture frames and threw out everything she’d have hated to find on sale in a second-hand fair or at the Porte Saint-Ouen flea market.

She felt pleasure at seeing all the personal papers, bills, old cheque books, receipts and tax assessments disappear. It took some considerable time, going on all day. An old man accompanying the lady from the Catholic Aid charity went back and forth past the bonfire twenty times. He was carrying the bags of clothing she had readied and the cases she had filled. He loaded them into his van.

She suddenly told herself: ‘I don’t have a home any more.’

Home (the place where our failings are forgiven and our weaknesses accepted) was burning in the middle of the garden.

In the empty afternoon, she suddenly felt the urge to go to the Louvre for the pleasure of wandering around amid great beauty.
She went over to the Avenue Rachel and bought a white hyacinth. She went into Montmartre cemetery, walked down the chemin Billaud, then along the allée de la Croix on the left, stopped at the grave of her little brother and placed the hyacinth on the stone.

By family tradition they made their farewells at the piano (her mother did that, her maternal grandfather did that, her father too had had to submit to this special rule and she’d seen her grandmother do the same at the flat in Rennes). Every family has its rituals that very quickly become unintelligible. You put your cases down beside each other in the hallway, put your raincoat or overcoat on top and your hat on top of the coat and you sat down at the piano and played a piece to say goodbye. You didn’t kiss, but you ran off without another word, leaving the space still echoing with music. She told herself that she would now have to play her farewells everywhere without knowing she was doing so.

*

A ring on the doorbell and the music stops abruptly.

Her heart is beating fit to burst.

She steadies herself against the piano, gets up from her stool and makes her way slowly to the hall. She opens the door, goes down the garden path and looks through the iron panels of the gate.

It is the estate agent.
There had been another offer, which seemed more attractive (though the offer of the people from Brussels still stood).

A pregnant young woman arrived almost immediately with a baby in her arms.

‘You could have warned me.’

‘I thought my assistant had.’

‘No.’

‘Is this really putting you out?’

‘A little bit. Everything’s in a mess.’

‘We won’t look.’

‘There’s dirt everywhere.’

They insisted.

The woman asked when the sale could take place. She wasn’t in a hurry. She was pregnant with another child. They had all the time in the world. The necessary building work would be done in summer, the decorating in the autumn. As she was visiting the various rooms, the woman repeated everything the agent was saying word for word down her mobile phone to her husband and commented on everything she was seeing. In the end, discovering the condition they were in, the young mother wanted to keep the beds and bedding, the kitchen things, the kitchen table, the gas cooker, the refrigerator, the dishwasher, the pantry, the ironing board and the washing machine.

‘Damn it,’ said Ann Hidden, hearing that. ‘It’s too late.’
‘Why?’

‘The removal men are coming tomorrow.’

Ultimately, Ann Hidden chose to stick with the first buyer, the lower price he was offering and the speed of purchase he had specified.

The young mother left, seething.

*

When she got up next morning, Ann found a good omen in the form of a woodpecker in the next-door garden, confirming her Brussels preference. Ann Hidden lived her life surrounded by presages. In most cases, they were happy ones. She could feel when the coming day contained a promise of joy. Or could sense that some marvel would unfailingly occur at one of the places she was planning to be. Then, already happy, in all the hours that followed, she intervened to make them actually occur.

Most often these joys did eventuate.

If, by chance, nothing happened, with twilight approaching she would dash off to the swimming pool. There, in any event, tiredness or hunger gave rise to other ecstasies that confirmed these odd predictions.
She watched the removal men leave. They were finishing their work and sweeping up. She had tipped them and they were putting away their hand trolleys, stowing the remaining boxes and their toolbox. They were putting their jackets on. She was at the kitchen window. She sat on the edge of the sink. Since there were no glasses, she drank a little Chablis straight from the bottle. She opened a remaining packet of peanuts.

She closed her eyes and nibbled.

All that was left in the house were three pianos.
The removal men shouted goodbye from the garden.
They shut the gate behind them.
In her office, she stared at the two upright pianos standing against the marked walls.
She wandered through the rooms, her back suddenly soaked with sweat. It wasn’t just a man she was leaving but her passion. It was a way of living out her passion she was leaving.

The shambles of it all, then the emptiness, then the dirt the removal men had brought in transformed themselves into chaos deep in her body.

Her whole life flowed back over her at a stroke—within these soiled, ageing walls, among the big, black-lacquered instruments.

Seventeen years, then forty-seven years sought to flood back over and engulf her.

She sat down at the Steingraeber grand in the living room but didn’t play. She got up almost immediately, went into what she called her office and sat down at the little study piano. It was a small upright of no great quality—very harsh in tone, even. Much worse than Georges’s at Teilly. She played. She improvised on an old Sanskrit air which she had published alongside other songs when she worked for Roland. That had always been her only recourse in adversity.

Then she told herself that perhaps all this was immaterial: you could find pianos anywhere.

* 

She ate a leftover pineapple yoghurt. There was a grapefruit lying where the refrigerator had stood. She drank a little more Chablis, called Georges who was at Choisy and got into the white Espace to drive there. She slept
in Georges’s mother’s bed. The furniture at Evelyne Roehlinger’s house hadn’t by any means been as fully cleared out as he would have her believe. Georges had to go to Paris the next day. They went to bed immediately after dinner. At eight in the morning, they left for Paris. She asked him in to see her desert, her dust.

‘No.’

He wanted to wait for a taxi by the traffic lights at the point where the street met the roundabout. He dug his heels in, shaking his head. He explained he didn’t want to go into her old house on any account. That house was part of her ‘other life’. He would a thousand times rather be part of her secret than a witness to what her life with Thomas might have been.

‘That’s of no interest to me,’ he said.

He waved her goodbye as he had when he was a child.

Ann parked the Espace outside the garden gate.

Finding herself alone again, she did some cleaning, then went to the post office. She bought two parcel boxes. On the way back, she went to the locksmith’s on the corner of that same street and her own. The locksmith wasn’t there.

She asked his wife when he could come round.

‘He won’t be long,’ she said.

Back home, she was astonished, as she went through Thomas’ papers (tax, bank, military service record, voting card), to discover how few things he kept. A big post-office parcel box would be enough.
At ten o’clock the locksmith rang the doorbell, as his wife had promised. He changed the locks on the garden gate and the front door.

‘Here you are, madam. Here are the old locks and keys. They’re not damaged at all.’

‘Well, keep them then.’

He dropped them into his bag.

‘Are you leaving?’

‘Yes, I’m going away.’

‘Has the house been sold?’

‘Yes.’

‘So why have you changed the locks?’

‘Someone stole a set of keys from me yesterday.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘Back to my mother’s in Brittany.’

‘Very wise.’

She thanked him for being so understanding.

She waited in the almost empty house.

At two o’clock she had a final reading on the gas and electricity meters. The meter reader told her any overpayments would be repaid to her account.

‘Actually, I pay by direct debit. I’m sorry I can’t offer you a coffee. I don’t have a coffee pot any more.’

‘Even if you did, madam, you don’t have any electricity.’

They laughed.

‘Good luck, madam,’ he said, rather inexplicably, holding out his hand.
That hand extended for no reason did her a power of good. She was going to fill the second parcel box with the clothes Thomas had left, but there were too many and she gave up. She threw the crumpled, empty cardboard box and the jackets, suits and shirts into one of the municipal dustbins that were permanently in the street.

She wrote the address of Thomas’ office on the one post-office parcel box she had made up earlier. She didn’t slip any kind of letter into the parcel.

*  

Then the three pianos left. She didn’t manage to speak to the removers. Her breathing was coming painfully. After the men had gone back to their enormous lorry, she remained sitting on the steps in the mildness of the afternoon air, contemplating the bare elm, the empty garden and the spindly roses,

When she had finished cleaning the floor one last time, she got into the Espace the garage had lent her and drove to Choisy. She took a bath and did one last clothes wash.

*  

They went to have dinner a little further along the river Marne. When they got there, it was too early. The restaurant owner told them to come back around eight thirty.

‘Do you want a drink while you’re waiting?’
Georges turned to Ann: ‘Do you want an aperitif?’
‘I don’t want a drink. It’s such curious weather,’ she said.

‘Stifling.’
‘Stifling and muggy. I’m finding it hard to breathe.’
‘That’s the pollution,’ said the restaurateur.
‘I’d rather stay outside,’ said Ann.
‘We’re going to walk along the Marne while we wait,’ Georges told the restaurant owner.

They left him.
They looked at the disgusting river at their feet.
The Marne valley, like Paris, was horribly foul-smelling.

The air was infested with a terrible odour of humanity, industry, diesel oil, tobacco, perfume, sweat and pungent soap.

‘This warm winter’s making me anxious, Georges,’ said Ann suddenly.

He looked at his watch.
‘Come on.’

They walked very quickly. She was holding his arm. They arrived at a large square with bare walls. He pushed open the door of a narrow church.

At least it was ice-cold inside.

The nave smelt of incense mingled with moss; there was a smell of damp, of the forest, of mushrooms.

They sat down appreciatively on straw-bottomed chairs but, shortly afterwards, a priest (a man in a track
suit) came over and asked them to leave since he had to close the church.

‘Church, that’s pushing it a bit’, muttered Georges. ‘It’s a little church but it’s a church.’
‘Father, how long do churches stay open these days?’ ‘During the services.’
‘Afterwards, isn’t God there any more?’ ‘Afterwards, God is left there alone,’ replied the sporty priest.

He closed his eyes. He kept his lids lowered. In a disdainful tone, he told Georges: ‘God is always there, but alone.’

*

They left the priest, the church, the damp, God, the square, the Marne. They had dinner.

Georges was suddenly seized by a kind of fear.

‘What if Thomas hadn’t gone to London? And what if the two of them came here for dinner this evening in this restaurant?’

Ann laughed.

‘That would be funny but it wouldn’t in any way disrupt the meticulous arrangements I’ve made.’

Yet Georges was still worried. Whenever the door opened, he turned to look.

‘Don’t worry,’ she told him. ‘He’s in London.’ ‘Maybe he isn’t.’

*
‘Georges, thank you,’ she said.

They had finished eating. They were walking beside the Marne again. They had had a drink and were holding hands. There were two willow trees. There was a string of brown canoes, then a succession of single-seater kayaks of all colours, chained to each other. He suddenly embraced her. He kissed her excitedly. She pushed him away.

She said: ‘Promise me you’ll never try that sort of silliness again.’

He nodded.

‘It was a mistake,’ he said.

Georges was upset at what he had done.

‘You’ll come back all the same?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we’ll stay in our childhoods,’ groaned Georges.

‘That’s right.’

‘And the school dining room!’

He laughed. He took her hand again.

‘Let’s go back to school,’ he said. ‘We line up in the yard. Sister Marguerite claps her hands. We go into the room with the stove.’

They left the arbour, hand in hand, and walked back up the avenue. Georges was complaining.

‘To think that you’ve sold up entirely and I haven’t finished sorting Mum’s house out yet!’

‘It must be said that you haven’t given an enormous amount of time to it.’
‘Ann, being a dab hand at these things, you wouldn’t like to take the job on, would you?’
‘No.’
‘You’re not nice.’
‘You can say that again. I’m thrilled to be going off to the sun and blue skies.’
‘I’d have liked to be going to the Atlas Mountains,’ said Georges.
‘Don’t bother to get up in the morning. I’m going to start out very early.’
‘What about breakfast?’
‘I’ll have it in a cafe when I get to Paris.’
‘Let me know as soon as you reach the desert. Call me the minute you start climbing the dunes. From the first oases.’
‘From the first oases.’
‘Call me as soon as you can.’
‘It’s a promise,’ she told him.
‘Let me have your new telephone number as soon as possible.’
‘I promise I will,’ she said.
‘Early in the week.’
‘I promise, I promise,’ she repeated.

* 

At six o’clock she fled the house. She didn’t wake Georges Roehl. She got into the white Espace. In Paris,
she wanted to water the garden one last time. She went around it with her humble, yellow hosepipe. There was nothing to water. Two winter roses. She plucked them both and put them in her bag. She picked up the parcel box. She locked the house door and the garden gate with the new keys. She took the car they had lent her back to the garage in Bagnolet. The provisional sales agreement was due to be signed at three in the eighth arrondissement. She was a bit hungry. She went to buy a newspaper. She went for a coffee. She ate a salad. She told herself, ‘I’m going to drink to my own health’ and she bought herself a glass of Côte-de-Nuits. At three o’clock, she went to the local post office and joined the queue. When she got to the counter, she sent the parcel by registered delivery to Thomas’ office. She called the estate agent’s in the eighth arrondissement. Yes, they had signed. She hung up, left the post office and took a taxi to the Gare du Nord.
She joined a queue for tickets and, paying cash, bought one to Antwerp. Ann Hidden then went up to the next floor where the passengers were waiting for the London train. She sat down on a bench and took quite some time destroying her credit card, folding it and refolding it. She threw two of the three pieces into a bin by the Eurostar platform.

She went back down and boarded the ‘Thalys’ high speed train. When it set off, she went to the toilet and threw the remaining part of her credit card out of the window. She called Georges on her mobile.

‘Everything’s fine,’ she said. I’m at Roissy. We’re boarding for Morocco.’

‘Lots of love.’
She set about dismantling her phone. She had fun slowly throwing the pieces one by one down through the toilet and on to the track. She got off at Brussels and immediately changed to a train for Liège. She thought of Thomas and the look on his face when he got back to Paris. She could see how distressed he would be. She hoped he would suffer. For a moment, she imagined him in London, walking by the Thames. She amused herself, several times—and in detail—by imagining what he was going to feel the next day, when he tried to turn a key in a lock it could no longer open; when he would be forced to accept that everything of his life with Ann Hidden—apart from a few documents he’d find an hour later at his office—had gone, vanished into thin air, disappeared into a void emptier and more dizzying than the sky, the astral sky—and much more abstract.

She got out at Tienen. Leather suitcase in hand, she crossed the empty square and went to the department store at its corner. She bought a grey canvas bag she could sling over her shoulder. She bought herself a black skirt, a faux leather jacket and a maroon swimming costume. She changed her outfit completely in the fitting room. Then she took a taxi. She went up to the hotel room and slept. The next day she put all her old things in the old bag, put the new ones in the grey canvas bag, went out and threw the leather bag into a large metal bin. She took a coach to Maastricht. She crossed the border at Lanaken. She ate at Düren. It was Shrove Tuesday.
She went down the Rhine in a coach full of English tourists. It was Ash Wednesday.

* 

She waited until all the passengers had left the coach. Then she got off unhurriedly and went into a sports shop in Freiburg. Ski pants, a white fleece jacket, a hat, fur-lined gloves—she bought a big red backpack and put them all in. She paid for everything in cash. It struck her there was a lot to be said for the Eurozone.

She went to the swimming pool and had a long swim. In the cabin, as she was dressing, she slipped her old things into the grey canvas bag.

She threw the lot into the bins in the yard behind the pool.

With her hair still wet, she found a hairdresser’s. She had her hair cut very short and dyed blond with white highlights.

Viewing herself in the hairdresser’s mirror, she thought to herself that, in getting rid of everything, she might also have lost herself.

In the mirror she looked really lost. And old. She had punished herself absurdly for a wrong done by someone else. Now she had nothing. She was out of contact, out of reach.

She told herself that if she herself was worried about who she might be, as she examined a new reflection in the German hairdresser’s lightbulb-lined mirror, then there weren’t many people who would recognize her.
She took another coach. She crossed the Swiss border above Tuttlingen. At the sight of the first lake, she felt ecstatically happy.

*

At Biel, she had the courage to call her mother from the hotel.

‘Thomas calls me constantly.’

‘Don’t answer, Mum.’

‘I’ll do as I like, girl. Where are you?’

‘I’m in London. I’m going to meet up with him. Don’t worry, Mum. It’s just silly marital troubles. Don’t worry, Mummy dearest.’

‘I am worried, girl. And that’s a fact.’
Something of ancient nature is still present in the Engadine. The forests are the way they were before human beings reached Europe. The lakes are the same. There’s a purity to the air—or, rather, a clarity to it—that you don’t find anywhere else in the world. The first days she was there, she walked all day. The weather was still as mild. She wandered in the forests without a thought in her head. At noon, she pulled a deck chair out on to the balcony of her room, into the sunshine. She watched the anglers venturing on to the lake in their boats, dreaming of a catch as they bobbed about on it.

She watched the sun casting enormous shadows.

In the evening, her hotel neighbours—as in the ancient world—didn’t speak but whispered. They slid gently along the waxed floors. The tablecloths were starched. No laughter rang out at mealtimes.
After two days, she opted for a full spa treatment. For a week she was nothing but her body. She collapsed into her body. She experienced her body to the limits of her body—just ten fingers and toes, a nose, a little sex that stirs into life when one sleeps.

* 

The big dark eyes, the long eyelashes, the smooth, bared forehead, the very full and beautiful lips, the very short blond and white hair, the white fleece.

He likes the look of this woman in the snow.
They have dinner together.

* 

She heard cats whining. They were screaming like children. She opened her eyes. She switched on the bedside lamp and looked at the time. It was three o’clock.

Far from them, on a terrace, two cats were mewing and yelping at each other, screeching and making love.

She turned and looked at the man breathing next to her.

She touched the strange, sharp bristles of hair on the nape of his neck.

She slid in and curled up against his big warm body. The scent of him was wholesome.

There was a gentleness about the crook of his neck and she fell asleep again there.

*
Those who aren’t worthy of us aren’t faithful to us.

That is what she was telling herself in the dream she was having.

It wasn’t their commitment at our sides that led to their fear or laziness, their carelessness or slackness, their regression or silliness.

Sitting in our armchairs, stretched out in our bathtubs or lying in our beds, we see absent, numb people for whom we no longer exist.

We don’t betray them by abandoning them.

Their inertia or their complaining abandoned us before we thought of separating from them.

Night lifted from Lake Como.

She crossed her third border without experiencing any difficulties.

*  

If destiny is that force which, coming from some other place in the world than oneself, takes hold of a creature and drags her in its wake, without her grasping its nature at any point, then she had a destiny. She was conscious of it. She thought to herself, ‘I don’t know where I’m going but I’m heading there determinedly. There’s something missing and I feel I’m going to enjoy losing myself in it.’

*  

She went through just one border check on the country path that took her into Italy. The two customs men
didn’t even open the passport she handed them. They gave her a blueberry flower that had grown by chance in a sunlit spot. When, removing her glove, she grasped it in her fingers, she was filled with a happiness as sudden as it was violent. The tiny flower was a miraculous sign between her fingers.

Swathed in her big white fleece, she went on her way to Lecco.

She took a coach to Monza, where she made for the airport.
PART TWO
The traffic was jammed. March was sticky and warm in Naples. There were car horns blaring everywhere. Soaked sheets were supposed to be drying in the wind. They flapped noisily, endlessly, on the balconies, on the roofs of the buildings, among the TV aerials. The rain clouds piled up above Vesuvius gathered and grew.

The plane had landed in a fine drizzle mixed with fuel oil.

Then came the freezing coach on the airport runway.
Then the damp taxi.
Then the unheated hotel.
At dawn the Bay of Naples remained shrouded in its fog.
She bought an international mobile phone near the Palazzo Sanseverino and immediately had it unlocked in a little alleyway by a young red-headed boy. She bought several pre-paid cards from him. She called Véri at the chemist’s to get news of her mother. All was well in Brittany, even if Thomas was laying siege to Madame Hidelstein, going there almost every weekend.

‘Where are you?’

‘In Ireland,’ Ann replied.

She changed her clothes again. It was a joy to buy a big pale leather bag, some Italian cotton and silk blend skirts, woollen pullovers, a pair of grey jeans, a big yellow wax jacket. She sacrificed her mountain clothes. Threw away the backpack. When she got to the landing stage, it was still drizzling. The taxi driver told her there was still three days’ rain to come.

‘Until the moon goes missing—viene a mancare.’

The wooden slats of the gangway were a little rotten; they were soft and slippery.

Her life? *La mancanza.*

The gangway moved oddly beneath her shoes.

She sat down.

Sitting on her wet wooden bench, she called Georges Roehl. How were the Yonne and the Gumpendorf? All was well in Burgundy. No, the house at Choisy wasn’t cleared yet.

‘Where are you now?’

‘Zagora’s a marvellous town,’ she replied.
The hydrofoil was arriving.
Moving on water, you sometimes feel a fear of sinking into it, falling into it, dying in it.
She went into the cabin and sat down by a window. She suddenly had a rather unfamiliar impression. It wasn’t anxiety any more that made her heart beat faster. It was the old solitary distress, more ancient than all other feelings.

It was—at last—the core fear.

She wandered from island to island, from cliff wall to cliff wall, without ever returning to Naples.
She hesitated between two delightful hotels, one at Ravello, the other on the little island of Ischia.

She chose the little hotel on the Phlegraean island across from the castello, on account of a room that looked out directly on to the sea.

The room had a long quiet terrace unconnected to any other room.

When you opened the window, the first thing you saw was the bay and the island of Procida. Then you saw that endless sky reaching down to touch the water.

*

One night, unable to sleep, she had got up and done her gymnastic exercises naked (she repeated these long sequences without fail each time insomnia struck). Tired, pushing the curtain aside with her forehead, putting all her weight on her forehead and all of her forehead against the window pane, she looked out at
the bay in the night, the marvellous bay, so ancient and unlit.

She experienced a dull joy.

Then a tremor of excitement ran through her, rising and sweeping away everything within, radiating into her throat and leaving it feeling tight.

Her body began to seethe with insomnia, with wakefulness.

She slipped on the white hotel bathrobe. She slid open the French window and walked out on to the terrace overlooking the sea.

She settled herself, shivering, on the edge of the cast-iron chair.

It was somewhere between two and three in the morning.

A beam of light suddenly began to gleam at the other end of the bay. The sun was rising over Sorrento. The dawn was sublime. She spent the rest of the day walking the island’s paths.

At noon she telephoned Georges.
‘Everything’s sublime. I’m at Ischia now, near Naples.’

‘I thought you were at Zagora. I imagined you at the wheel of a four-by-four in the Tassili mountains.’

‘There are such things as planes.’

‘I don’t know Ischia.’

‘Georges, I’ve become happy.’

‘Heavens, don’t say you’re happy.’
‘Yes, I’m happy.’
‘I’ve never been able to stand people who claim to be happy.’
‘Why?’
‘They’re lying. It frightens me.’
‘I don’t give a damn about you being frightened. I’m not lying. I’m happy on my island.’
‘Because Ischia’s an island?’
‘Yes.’
She explained where she was, what the place was like. What a surprising, independent creature the place was. Explained about the elements of a burgeoning spring she was finding there. Georges Roehl listened uncomprehendingly. He interrupted her: ‘Do you know what, I’ve got someone for Mum’s house at Choisy.’
‘I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you, Georges.’
‘You’re kind. I’m so concerned about it. It’s somebody nice. Someone who won’t dishonour the memory of my mother that still moves within those walls.’
‘You’re mad.’
‘And you’re definitely mad if you’re saying you’re happy.’
‘That’s true.’
‘You’re clearly not missing me.’
‘That’s true as well but come as soon as you can. As soon as you’ve sold the house, come and take a break here. You’ll see. It’s marvellous. I got my bearings right away. I felt at home immediately—on the paths, in the
alleyways, on the tight little flights of stairs up to the tiny squares, by the three little volcanoes, in the forests, on the hills, in the clouds. I felt at home everywhere. The people are delightful. Not a single French person. There’s only Neapolitans and Russians.’

‘You don’t feel too alone among the Russians?’

‘Sometimes I feel very alone and I’m beginning to like that enormously.’

‘I’m not sure I like it enormously,’ mumbled Georges.

‘No word from anywhere?’

‘No. Only your Gumpendorf hut’s waiting for you. It’s champing at the bit. It’s spoiling. It’s threatening to fall into the water—on to the black boat, into the wild rose tree.

‘Lots of love, Georges.’

‘I’ll be waiting for you, Éliane. I miss you.’

It was noon. She switched off her mobile.

She took a fork to her little plate of polpi down by the harbour.

The strange sound of boats banging together made her look up. Two red hulls in single file. A blue hull. Two red hulls, a blue hull. It was strange. It was a strange sign. The wind was getting up. The island’s wine was delicious too.

*
Ann Hidden said: ‘There’s a diffuse gleam in the sea’s waters that seems to well up from the depths. A gleam that never reaches the surface but plays beneath the bodies and the seaweed in the shadows of Ischia’s rocks. It may perhaps be volcanic in origin. The bodies that swim here seem lit by a light that doesn’t come from the sun.’

When it was time to bathe, she went to change in her room, slipped her white cotton hotel dressing gown over her swimming costume and slid her feet into the little cream plastic hotel sandals.

She climbed over the rocks just beneath her own terrace.

There was no path.

Her little plastic sandals slipped on the fallen pine needles.

She placed the dressing gown on an iron guardrail that served no particular purpose, then dived into the sea.

*  

Alone, she slept less and less. So she read at night. She asked the hotel to attend to her room first and as soon as the chambermaids arrived, her room was done. She left the building in the earliest light of dawn, between 5 and 6 a.m. In grey jeans and yellow trainers, she wandered around in the cool, calm air amid the long, long shadows of night’s end or dawn’s beginning. She walked out beyond the little resort, taking the country paths or
roaming in the grass, getting her feet wet in the dew. Among the vines, olive groves and copses, she tried to get lost, loved to get lost, did get lost. She was curious about anything that might be hidden behind a fence or a low wall. She wasn’t at all homesick for her house in Paris nor, it must be said, for her unplanned little new home under the ivy at Georges Roehl’s place by the Yonne. Were it only the hood of her wax jacket, the corner of a wall, an outcrop of rock, any source of invisibility sufficed to make her happy. It was enough that her body was enhanced by some attendant screen behind which she couldn’t be seen. By a room that wasn’t overlooked, where she could curl up. By a little terrace or stretch of balcony into which she could withdraw and peep out at the day. She scurried about in the nascent daylight. She was curious about people’s habits at dawn, about their first actions when the tone of the day is set—a ceiling light going on in the kitchen, someone opening the door to let the dog in, people dressing and combing their hair and suddenly stepping back from their mirrors to get a look at themselves. Once the sun was up and the streets and alleyways became filled with life and bustle and the smells of tobacco, white coffee and eau de Cologne, she hailed a micro-taxi, which, amid engine backfires and the blaring of its horn, took her back to the hotel. She ate a pantagruelian breakfast in the hotel dining room beneath the great white arches covered with still-budding Virginia creeper which only in places unfolded its leaves, still plastered together with sap. She rested by the pool
which was more or less steaming with the warm water of the volcano. In front of her, two or three hours before the Russians, the Germans were already diving in, splashing everything. She waited for Germany to leave the pool before taking her turn for a long swim. Dripping wet, she went up to her room, showered, slipped into bed and worked.

It was there she composed the tiny quartet dedicated to Katherine Philips.

In Naples she acquired a computer. She had it set up in her room and used it to order the scores and books she wanted to take a look at.
‘O, Oh how I!’ she sang to herself for several weeks.

Katherine Philips was one of the greatest English poetesses of the seventeenth century. She wrote an elegy entitled ‘O Solitude!’, set by Purcell to an endlessly roving melody.

These lines had come to match her life.

Her face had grown thinner. Her body had grown thinner too. All that remained were the bones, sadness and a strange, entirely novel elegance.

Her hair had grown back and she began to be able to tie it in a little bun again.

Her skin was now taut and browner. The sea water and the treatments in the Engadine had smoothed it out.
Dresses looked good on her. Though slightly loose for her body, they fell wonderfully.

Swimming had made her slenderer. She swam alone. She walked alone. She ate alone. She read in her corner.

‘O solitude
my sweetest sweetest choice
devoted to the Night.’

Purcell’s song kept on returning to this refrain, which served her as a march.

She had always walked—marched—determinedly, straight ahead, thrusting her knees and thighs forward impulsively.

‘O Oh how I
solitude adore!’

Katherine Philips had noted in her poem how a solitary voice arises, addressed to no one, within the depths of the soul,

as immaterial as a ray of sunlight,
an ecstasy within nature,
Nativity of Time.

*

Her shoes dirtier and dirtier,
filthy,
muddy,
full of grass,
dirty from walking all over the island. She walked inexhaustibly. She criss-crossed the island’s paths each day, scrambled down all the slopes of the volcano.

* 

All that she had composed would have fitted into a small album. She played very little. Everything she had managed to write had been recorded. She never had any great liking for creative artists. Nor those who played their work. Nor the critics. Nor the musicologists. She never complicated her life with meeting them. She never read biographies, collections of correspondence or obituaries. She loved only works and, within works, passages. All that she venerated within music that had been written or transcribed would have fitted into a single little volume. A book that might have been called *Nativity of Time* if the publisher agreed to take Katherine Philips’ words as title. The essentials can be carried around so easily.

* 

One day a premonition drove her to Milan. Perhaps mysterious anticipations didn’t change how the days spun out, but they did flush out opportunities. They prompted sudden bouts of audacity.

She entered the old Viennese-style building. She pressed the old ivory button to call the lift.

The fragile ancient lift descended. A glazed lift, made of Pernambuco wood.
She slipped between the two very narrow, tinkling doors.

She exited the shaky, resonant glass lift cage.

She stood nervously stock-still outside the large black door of the Milan flat.

Her throat was as tight as in the past.

Almost choking.

She is wearing a pale green skirt and a black roll-neck pullover.

She is at the piano.

The maestro is standing behind her.

She is explaining the piece she has just composed but to no avail.

He doesn’t understand her. He doesn’t understand what she is playing. He doesn’t understand what she is telling him. She runs off when the maestro puts his hand on her shoulder.

*

For life between women and men is a never-ending storm.

The air between their faces is more intense—more hostile, more searing—than between trees or rocks.

Sometimes, some rare times, some fine times, lightning really strikes, really kills. That is love.

A particular man, a particular woman.

They fell backwards. They fell on their backs.
One morning she saw the Vendesi—For Sale—sign on the balcony of a large yellow villa. Ann Hidden went into the property.

She follows the porous pink stone of the enormous swimming pool.

Before her two very dark cypresses stand out against the sky. The handsome shutters are grey against the yellow walls. She takes a look at the garden.

She realized that hotel life was beginning to feel oppressive—the religious timetable of that life, the whispering of the staff, the constraining, almost compelling rhythms, the smells. Particularly the smells. The overwhelming smells of meals, treatments, mud, sulphur, tobacco and the soap and linen on the trolleys in the corridors. But she hated this splendid property with
its universal comfort, admirably crafted for tourists whose only desire was to be nowhere, pain-free, on that fringe of death they called ‘vacation’.

*

Suddenly the downpour strikes.

She runs.

She dashes out of this villa ‘for sale’.

The walls darken. Water streams along the gutters on the volcano’s slopes. The whole hill is aflood beneath her feet. A hundred little streams are rushing seawards.

The squares she crosses are empty.

The crossroads are empty.

The church steps are all covered in black-clad women trying to protect their bodies beneath the porch or in the shelter of the building.

The car roofs rattle as the rain beats down on them.

‘What a downpour!’ she says as she takes off her raincoat after coming through the hotel’s revolving door.

‘Really and truly horrible!’

She comes out of the bathroom and back into her room, her head buried in a towel she is using to dry her hair. She has taken off her pullover.

‘I’m cold,’ she says out loud.

The hotel room is freezing. She’d like a fire. She thinks: ‘I want a fireplace. I need a fireplace. I need a roof over my head. I need something to care for that’s
more substantial than a song. I need a garden where I can prepare for this whole spring. I need a house.’

By the time she thinks these words, she has already taken her skirt and tights off.

She slips into the bed.

With the blanket drawn up to her chin and a biro top in her mouth, she begins to read.

* 

She read: ‘The emperor Augustus, who did not like human beings, fell in love with a place.

‘He exchanged Ischia for Capri when he discovered the power of that island in the mist. Kaproi, the island of boars, had until then belonged to the Greek town of Naples. Later the emperor Tiberius made it his residence with twelve zodiacal villas (the way the Valois would later choose the Loire).’

Ann Hidden lay the guidebook on the sand.

The air smelt of the very first roses.

It was a mild day.

She had been for a swim. She had stretched out on the hotel beach down below the swimming pool. She was reading a book she had borrowed from the hotel library telling the story of this island she had fallen in love with.

The sand was of a paler grey than the dawn sky.

She turned towards the blue hill and, on that blue hill, had the impression she could see a blue roof.

*
It was Good Friday. It was the 25th of March.

To Georges, she said, ‘I saw the path among the eucalyptus trees. I didn’t see the house. When you’re on the beach, there’s an umbrella pine above the beach that hides it. And from the road on the corniche you can only see a small part of the blue roof.’

‘I went to check your mail,’ he said. ‘Your tax return’s come.’

‘We’ll do all that on the Internet, it’ll be easier that way. Thanks, Georges. I’ll see to it right away.’

She told him about the villa she’d discovered a few hours earlier up among the bushes.

She went back there.

It was actually quite a long way from the beach. You had to climb a very steep, dark, densely wooded path before you came face to face with the facade in black volcanic stone. The house was actually topped with a roof of volcanic stones so shiny that they seemed blue.

She saw it more than twenty times before thinking she might live there one day.

She loved it before it occurred to her that one might actually love a place.

To tell the truth, the house on the clifftop was almost an invisible one. Whether you were on the beach, sitting in the cheap eatery where she ate a lunchtime salad or looking from the road, you couldn’t see much more than the back half of the blue roof in semi-profile on the hillside that swept down to the sea.
Both the terrace and the house had been very largely dug out of the rock itself.

It wasn’t for sale.

It was uninhabited.

* Sheltering among the rocks, the villa looked out unhindered over the sea.

The terrace afforded endless vistas.

In the foreground on the left was Capri and the Sorrento headland. Then it was water as far as the eye could see. Once she began looking, she became rooted to the spot. It wasn’t a landscape but someone. Not a man nor a god, of course, but a being of some kind.

With a singular gaze.

Someone. A definite, though inexpressible face.

She made enquiries to discover the owners of this long, narrow, deserted house that overlooked the sea to the south-east—or at least to learn its history.

They knew nothing at the property agencies.

She got the name of the owner from the priest in the little church on the headland. It was a peasant woman, whose farm lay on the other side of the island, at Cava Scura near San Angelo. She went by bus.

‘I don’t know anything. My grandfather died in 1870.’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed Ann.

‘Signora, why would you feel pain at learning of the death of my grandfather in 1870?’
‘Signorina,’ Anna corrected her.
‘You are French, signorina?’
‘Yes.’
‘I can tell. Understand this, signorina, my grandfa-
ther is mine. This isn’t about your ancestor.’
‘No.’
‘So there’s no need for you to mourn him.’
‘No.’
‘Moreover, 1870 in Italy isn’t 1870 in France.’
‘No.’
They fell silent.
Then Ann Hidden said: ‘But 1920 in Italy wasn’t
1920 in France.’
‘But Ischia, signorina, isn’t Italy at all. Let me tell
you, nobody could get anything to grow in the garden.
My grandfather built this little house for his sister, my
great-aunt Amalia. But my great-aunt Amalia is dead.
My grandfather is dead. My father is dead. He was the
last one to live there. He lived there as a widower and
he is dead.’
‘I’m sorry . . . ’
‘Once again, signorina, I don’t need you to be sorry
for the deaths of my people. Now I would like you to
leave me to work.’
The woman wasn’t inclined to ask her into her
home.
Ann went back one day and the old peasant woman, exasperated, lost her temper with this young tourist over from Ischia Porto, who was bothering her in her work. She asked in no uncertain terms to be left in peace. So as to leave no room for misunderstanding, she even began to shout. Then Ann, raising her own voice, had smartly grabbed the hands of the San Angelo peasant and flown off the handle herself, shouting absurdly: ‘You’re like my mother! You’re shouting at me like my mum!’

At that the old woman had broken down sobbing.

They were both in tears, holding each other by the hand.

Then they had gone inside the farmhouse and drunk a glass of fortified wine, dipping sweet biscuits
in the wine and recounting their respective—unhappy—life stories, speaking of selfish, lustful, domineering, timorous, contemptible men. They talked of joys that grew old as bodies grew old.

*

Two days later, Ann Hidden went to fetch the old woman in a taxi. The car dropped them at the bottom of the hill. They climbed up to the house concealed by the umbrella pine. Until you reached the rocky outcrop, the slope was very steep. It wasn’t a vertiginous path but it did wind around the hillside. The old woman climbed as best she could, growing breathless. She clung on to an old thick rope that Ann hadn’t noticed before, fixed to the side of the volcano itself, among the brambles and wild roses.

Pointing to a ruined old wall that could be seen in the hedge, the old peasant said: ‘There was once a watchtower here—against both the Saracens and the French.’

‘Yes.’

‘It became a donkey stable. Do you know General Murat?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know he colonized us?’

‘Yes.’

‘Does that mean nothing to you?’

‘No.’

‘Why do you answer like that?’
'Because I’m not a general and I don’t plan to end
my days as a marshal.'

The old woman turned around, patted her on the
head laughing and carried on up the hill.

You had to be right outside the—long, single-
storey—house to understand its strange power. The old
peasant from Cava Scura herself couldn’t help but fall
silent in contemplation as she rediscovered it. The thick-
ets around it and the hedge were a very deep green,
almost black, almost as black as the rock. The terrace
was itself very long—as long as the wall of the volcano.

Either you could only see the trees on the hillside
that enveloped it or only see the sea.

The sea everywhere.

Ann liked the place more and more, this tremen-
dous sea view. She didn’t speak. Holding her hand once
more, she let the old woman be, though she too said
nothing.

The house was shrouded in a sort of luminous rain.
It was something immaterial, slightly opaque, like a fog
of light, like the elevated, granulated substance of the air.

‘Why don’t you live here?’

‘Where the body is concerned, my legs. Where the
heart is concerned, memories.’

That was the riddle her friend the peasant from
Cava Scura proffered. Then she added: ‘You can’t know
how violent the light is here in summer. And the heat!
How can I put it? What is your name, signorina?’

‘Ann.’
'I'm called Amalia.'
'Like your grandmother.'
'Like my great-aunt, not my grandmother. Zia Amalia was my grandfather's sister. My grandfather loved her very much. Call me Amalia. I'll call you Anna.'
'Amalia,' repeated Ann.
'Well, Anna, I won't tell you how hot it can get here! What a fearful beast the heat can be!'

None of the keys she had brought in her bag fitted the lock on the door.

The old peasant sat down on some hurdles and posts that had been piled up beside the door, deeply annoyed at having made the climb for nothing.

In front of her, stretching all along the terrace, were chairs, tables, old tubs with dead lemon trees in them, empty earthenware jars.

Behind her, the wall at the back was black. It was the bare lava of the volcano. The outer walls were of yellow tufa. The dusty windows all along the front opened on to the immense, blue sea of the bay.

Through the dirty panes you could just see two large chalky fireplaces.

Silence spread along the terrace, slipping between the rusty cast-iron tables and chairs that were scattered all over the place.

Ann came and crouched down beside Amalia, her back against the door.

They rested.
Amalia said; ‘I’ll have to ask my brother Filosseno where the key can have got to.’

‘Mind your feet,’ Ann Hidden shouted out.

‘Filosseno will know.’

Ann helped Amalia along the precipitous path which she found as difficult to walk back down as it had been to climb.

‘I think my father would have liked you,’ said Amalia suddenly, still clinging to her arm.

‘You can’t imagine how nice it is to hear that,’ whispered Ann . . .

‘Why is it so nice?’

‘My father didn’t like me.’

‘Your father’s dead?’

‘No, he left. I was very little at the time.’

When they had reached the road, the old woman said, ‘You do realize that I won’t come bothering you very often once you’ve moved in, Anna!’

‘So you agree!’ exclaimed Ann Hidden.

Her arms were around the old peasant woman. She was as happy as could be.

*

The renting of the house took a long time to arrange, though not because of the—quite low—price they very quickly agreed on. For a year, ‘Anna’ would pay hardly anything since she would be financially responsible for all the necessary work on the house. But the agreement
of the other members of Amalia’s family had to be obtained before the work could actually begin.

Ann didn’t have the key to the house but she climbed the steep path to it time and again.

She was in love—that is to say, obsessed.

From that day on, she never gave another thought to what Georges called the hut beside the Yonne at Teilly. Nor the Paris house she had put up for sale. Nor her mother’s home in Brittany.

She was passionately, obsessively in love with Zia Amalia’s house, the terrace, the bay, the sea. She wanted to disappear into what she loved. In every love there is something that fascinates. Something much more ancient than can be indicated by the words we learnt long after we were born. But it wasn’t a man now she loved this way. It was a house that called out to her to be with it. It was a mountain wall she was trying to cling to. It was a recess of grasses, light, lava and inner fire that she wanted to live in. Something both intense and immediate welcomed her each time she arrived on the lava overhang. It was like an indefinable, exhilarating creature which, in some way you don’t understand, recognizes, reassures, understands, hears, appreciates, supports and loves you.

*

Down below the house, she found a cave and two inlets where she could swim without being seen by anyone. It was a difficult coast. The inlets were tiny. They invariably
had volcanic rocks overhanging them, making them difficult of access.

You climb up, you look to see if there’s anyone on the blackish sand below. Sometimes an iron ring to moor a boat. Sometimes a few concrete steps make it possible to get down to the Tyrrhenian Sea without the need to jump.

Her hair is growing long again. Her shoulders are still narrow despite her dawn and evening swims. She swims every day now in these inlets. She puts her clothes in the little stable.
Arriving at the house one day, she found the peasant woman and an old man sitting there in the most complete silence. It was evening. They were on the terrace in a mist of light, sitting on the iron chairs at the rusty table. They weren’t talking and their backs were turned to the stunning view. They seemed to be asleep. In fact, they had their backs to the sun and watched her emerge from the slope and come towards them.

‘Ah, here’s my girl!’ said Amalia. ‘I’ll not get up, I’m exhausted. Anna, let me introduce my brother Filosseno who was determined to make a pilgrimage here before letting you restore the little house.’

The aged Filosseno got up. He wanted to show Anna something. He took her over to the edge. Behind a yellowish rock, a kind of precipitous terrace had been dug out.
‘I dug this for my father,’ he said proudly. ‘Look, signorina!’

Ann Hidden grasped the vigorous hand he extended. She had to climb down and, since the old white-haired man ordered her to, lie flat on her stomach.

From the top of the artificial terrace, hidden by the overhang, one could, by leaning over, see the castello, the hotel and the harbour.

The sailing boats which were barely moving.

The sparkling, clear water.

They admired the view. They got up again. The old man and Anna went back up to the main terrace. Each dusted the other off and they came back slowly to Amalia.

He solemnly gave her the keys to the house.

He wanted to shake her hand to seal their agreement.

She shook him by the hand.

Then, in the silence, the woman they called ‘Anna’ felt she had to speak and she made a long speech to thank them.

Still seated, her eyes lowered, Amalia listened attentively. When Ann had finished, she got up and went and kissed her noisily on the forehead.

Then all three of them moved toward the door. Ann wanted to give the key back to old Filosseno but he responded with a peremptory gesture. So she it was who slipped it into the lock.
The key turned without difficulty but the old man had to ram his shoulder against the wood of the enormous door before it suddenly sprang open.

They all three went inside.

The house was dry. She smelt a mixture of cats, jasmine and dust.

Neither Ann nor the old man could open the windows—except for one.

Air rushed in, whirling up an enormous quantity of dust which began to choke them. They all three found themselves coughing and doubled up, unable to catch their breath.

Amalia went back out, crying.

Ann finished looking through the two long rooms, coughing violently in a way that resonated strangely in the almost empty spaces. (Left there were a table and its eight chairs, a big plaster Zeus abducting Europa and some sunken armchairs. She had everything removed afterwards, retaining only the gilded mirrors over the fireplaces, the gold of which she whitened.)

‘My father’s father was a lawyer at Ponte,’ explained Filosseno, ‘and his younger brother was the priest at Serrara.’

With every step, dust flew up, as did moths.

When they were back outside and he had recovered from his hoarse coughing, the old man said: ‘Anna, there’s one other thing I have to show you. There’s a hot spring outside.’
It was a natural spring in the rock, blocked up with a big piece of fabric. Filosseno tugged on the cloth plug. A little scalding water dripped out into a basin which the hot, sulphurous water of the volcano had eaten into.

The sun was going down.
The house was beginning to turn red.
They remained standing there.
They had nothing more to say to each other, so they decided to go home.
Ann saw them back down to Amalia’s brother’s van. Old Filosseno refused to take back the keys.

* 

After they had left, Ann Hidden went back up. When she emerged from the path and reached the terrace by the first of the windows, now shining red, a large red-currant bush seemed to be burning in the evening sun.

She was seized by the memory of her little brother on his bed in Paris.

She had to sit down in one of the old rusty cast-iron armchairs on the terrace.

In the almost incomprehensible silence (probably due to the way the terrace and the two cavities of the long rooms were set back into the wall of the volcano), she could feel all through her body the extraordinary embrace between this place and nature. There were no other houses to be seen. All you could see was the sea, the sky and now the darkness shrouding everything.
She kept her room at the hotel but her body lived in the villa on the hill. She washed everything with the water from the hot spring. It happened that she slept at the villa—or at least stretched out and fell asleep there—since, at the slightest bout of insomnia, she went up to it.

At night’s end, she bade good morning to the shepherds who were already moving about the hillside with their animals.

In the space of a minute, the sun cracked the surface of the water and everything was splashed with light. The place was gradually invested with depth. The distance came initially from the sounds that sprang up all around. In those first moments, everything emerged in a sort of creamy substance mingled little by little with violet and black.
Then with green around the trees and on the sides of the hill.

Then shadows appeared around the shapes, throwing the houses and animals into relief.

As she waited for the long villa by the sea to be habitable, Ann threw out rubbish, turned over the earth, had flowers delivered, bags of compost brought, along with earthenware jars, shrubs and lemon trees.

* 

For the place itself, as she waited for electricity to be connected and the house to be repainted, she didn’t purchase much: only a huge easy chair upholstered in pale yellow velvet (it had to be dismantled and hauled up with ropes) and a leather armchair.

For the rest—bookshelves, kitchen, shelves and cupboards—she had almost everything made by a carpenter, who brought the planks of wood to the site on the back of a donkey.

It took two donkeys to bring up the cement, the door and window frames, the shelving, the coils of electrical wire, the picks, trowels and shovels, the handsome copper pipes to carry the water from a cistern ten yards further up the hill and pipe water from the hot spring.

Half-way down the slope, in the stable where she had up until then put her clothes when she changed to go and swim in the inlets, she piled up the bags and the pots of paint inside an old chest consisting half of wood and half of earth.
It was raining. As soon as it rained, or as soon as it became misty even, the slope up to the house was not just steep but muddy. The piano dealer who was with her shook his head. He said he would never be able to haul an upright piano—even a very poor-quality piano, even a plastic one—up to the villa of Zia Amalia.

She went to Naples. She couldn’t find anything worth making the effort for. Yet sound wasn’t the most important thing to her. She used her computer to find out which of the keyboards on sale gave away the least in terms of articulation and touch.

Though she had given up playing concerts about fifteen years ago, she still wanted to be able to interpret the piano pieces she composed. She always wanted to record them herself—at least in a first version—so as to set the tempo and character of the piece. Then subsequent players would at least have an idea of what she wanted. In concerts, she could be extraordinary—and it was indeed through her concerts that she had met with success in her early days—but she could also be cold, cramped, lifeless, bad or even execrable. That is why she had tiptoed away a few years earlier from the concert circuit and festivals. She hated teaching. She hated playing in front of television cameras or even in the half-dark of a radio studio. She had begun to be afraid of herself. She was never sure who she was going to be, how she was going to react to any particular interruption, any particular sensation. She wasn’t even sure of having enough anxiety to stay sufficiently concentrated for two hours on end, of being capable of
playing with all the violence she wanted to see resurface in art.

In the end, she acquired a digital keyboard which she got them to send over from Milan. It was extremely complex, extraordinarily light (the delivery man brought it up himself to the villa by the sea—the palazzo a mare, he’d called it) and she hated it immediately.

* 

All lovers are afraid. She was terribly afraid of not living up to the house. She was afraid of not knowing how to go about getting the work done. Afraid of diluting its force. Afraid of disrupting an equilibrium. Afraid also of disappointment. Afraid of not being as happy as she thought she was going to be when she first discovered the villa.

Spring swept away the fear.

It was the big wild jasmines that did it.

It was the rose bushes.

It was the countless anemones with such deep colours and a silken beauty.

It was the poppies.

She had loved swimming in the cold sea that reminded her of Brittany.

She loved to tire herself out in a sea that had grown warmer and more restive with the spring. Tiredness brought her a kind of physical ecstasy or euphoria that was difficult to describe. The sea, green or blue, slid over her shoulders, over the back of her neck, between her
legs; it enwrapped her in its current and its power. She swam only the crawl and gave no thought to returning to the shore until overcome by tiredness. At that point she would flip over on to her back and come back slowly, dreamily, either staying on her back or turning slightly and swimming sidestroke, so as not to be caught out by a rock.
An old woman has stopped in the bus shelter.
   She is motionless.
   She has put her shopping bag down on the white plastic seat.
   Those whom death is approaching find their muscles suddenly melting. Their eyes grow empty.
   The old woman is holding a bunch of flowers in one hand and her handbag in the other. The handbag has itself been curiously slipped into an old black string shopping bag.
   ‘Mum,’ she whispers.
   ‘Éliane, it’s you.’
   Madame Hidelstein gestures with her chin towards the flowers.
   ‘I bought you these.’
'Thank you, Mum.'

It is May.
Ann Hidden is back.

‘Help me, girl.’

They both walk along with their heads lowered, battling the Breton wind.
The one is holding her handbag and flowers. The other her case and the shopping bag with a loaf of bread sticking out.

* 

Ann puts her mother’s shopping bag down on the sink. She fills a pewter vase with water. She bumps her locket and it comes open against the sink’s aluminium edge.

She slips her locket into the pocket of her cardigan.

She rushes to help her mother whose arm hurts and who is standing by the kitchen door and can’t get her overcoat off.

Her mother has lost weight. Poking from the short sleeves of her dress are long, thin arms, the skin floating around the bones like bare branches.

‘Why are you alone now?’ her mother asks her point-blank. ‘I don’t understand you.’

‘The main thing, Mum, is for me to understand myself.’

But her mother always has the last word. She is unsteadily carrying a soup tureen filled with cold water that she has put the lentils to rest in.

She says, ‘No one understands themself, Éliane.’
‘And aren’t you alone? Haven’t you been alone for forty years?’ asks Ann mischievously.

‘No, I don’t live alone. I’m married. I’m waiting for my husband and, in any case, girl, I don’t claim to understand myself.’

Every time they met up again it was the same. After an hour with her mother, she was at the end of her tether.

The sale of the Paris house was set for the 20th of May. Ann Hidden had taken advantage of the journey to stay with her mother for a few days. Georges Roehl hadn’t wanted to go with her to Brittany. He had gone to pick her up at the airport and driven her to the gare Montparnasse. They had dined together a hundred yards from the station, on the boulevard, in a fish restaurant. On no account did he want to revisit the haunts of his childhood.

‘Your boyfriend called.’

‘Ah!’

‘He wanted your address.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘The truth. I said I didn’t have it. That’s true. You didn’t give it to me,’ observed her mother.

‘Mum, I’ll say this again: I don’t have one.’

‘A likely story. But as you like. Your boyfriend also said, “I didn’t see this coming”. He kept saying, “I didn’t see it coming, Madame. I assure you, Madame.” He was crying on the telephone. It was very sad to hear.’
‘That’ll rinse his eyes out’
‘My God!’
‘With his eyes rinsed out, he should be able to take a clearer look at his life.’
‘You really aren’t funny, girl!’

*

Her mother was in a child-like rage.

It was Ascension Day.

Marthe Hidelstein was absolutely set on her daughter going to Mass with her.

‘I don’t believe any more, Mum.’
‘Can’t you walk five hundred yards with me and sit beside me for three quarters of an hour?’
‘Of course I can, Mum.’
‘So, come!’
‘But it’s silly, Mum. I’m telling you I don’t want to. All that stuff gets me down.’
‘Do you think things never get me down⁈’
‘But Mum, the illusion’s gone. I’m not religious any more.’
‘You could force yourself.’
‘No.’
‘It wouldn’t hurt you to pray a bit.’

Ann wearily gave in.

Then they had to find the stick with the silver knob that her maternal grandfather had given her and that had been lost somewhere in the house. The two of them went to church.
The whole village watched them trudge by.

Old Mme Hidelstein stumbled along beneath the umbrella that Ann held open over her head.

Once they got to the church and settled in to their pew, her mother took from her handbag not only her own missal but her daughter’s too, which she had been careful to bring along as though Ann were still twelve years old.

It was, in fact, lucky for Ann Hidden, as she spent the whole of the service with her nose in it.

Ascension is the festival devoted to leaving.

God said: I left my father to come into this world and now I am abandoning the world.

A man thought he heard a voice saying ‘Rise up and go. Leave your house and seek out the place I shall show you.’

He left.

He went to show his face in another land that wasn’t a land.

* 

‘Transcutaneous hexomedine, Nurofen, Lysanxia, Toco 500.’

‘Hello, Véri.’

‘Hello, Éliane.’

Ann had just come out of church. Véronique left the chemist’s shop in her assistant’s charge and they went down to a cafe by the harbour where Mme Hidelstein was waiting for them.
‘Thomas called me. I’m sick of your troubles.’
‘It’s not me that’s talking about them.’
‘We’ve seen each other a bit. I think you should call him. At least have it out together once and for all.’
Ann Hidden didn’t reply.
‘Forget that silly business at Choisy-le-Roi.’
Ann didn’t reply.
‘You do know he’s broken it off with her?’
‘That’s of no concern to me. He can do what he likes. I don’t want anything from him.’
‘Just get over it.’
‘No.’
‘I’m your friend.’
‘Not when you talk to me like this. Anyway, I don’t know why but I’ve a feeling you’re lying.’

* 

It was a day when she wasn’t quite in her right mind.

Her mother barely moved out of the kitchen. She was eighty-six. She sat hunched in her folding chair, an extremely lightweight tubular construction, like a hare quivering in the bushes.

Just as some animals deceive their predators, congeneres or competitors by their stillness or by looking like plants, concealed among her pillows and blankets she was trying to throw death off the scent.

Marthe Hidelstein kept up a low mumble that only she could understand.
‘Even I get lost in the ten rooms in this house. I don’t know where things have been put away. That was in another age.’

She suddenly shouted out: ‘Éliane, Éliane, go and see that they haven’t stolen your father’s bed! Éliane, do you know where the dresser is that belonged to your grandma from Rennes?’

* 

She lifted up her old mother in her arms. She had grown really small and light. Her skin hung off her bones. She was laughing. Her eyes had become a child’s eyes again.

Her mother was clearly going to speak. She began to gesture with her face, her hair, her hands.

But she gave up.

She had forgotten what she wanted to say.

Her body had become shorter and much lighter. She now spent most of her time in her armchair. Her neckless head was facing her directly; she was straining towards her, wide-eyed and worried.

With her right hand, she spun her emerald rapidly around her finger.

Her mother was waiting for something. She knew full well who her mother was waiting for. Ann couldn’t meet that expectation. She couldn’t respond to the question in her mother’s eyes. She didn’t even want to think about it. She didn’t think about it. She got up.

‘Mum, shall we do a jigsaw?’
'No, thank you, girl. I’m not quite in my second childhood yet.'

*  

It is a quarter to six in the morning. The sun is already shining. She wants to say goodbye to her mother, but tells herself that it’s too early. She must still be sleeping. She opens the living room door gently. But her mother is already dressed and sitting on her bed. She isn’t exactly cheerful. She doesn’t even turn towards her.

‘I’m going,’ says Ann.

Her mother nods.

The daughter leans over to kiss her.

Her mother pulls away.

‘I’ll call you,’ says Ann, without kissing her.

But her mother shrugs her shoulders. There are tears in the corners of Ann’s eyes.

Her mother says, ‘Éliane, you’re going to miss your train. Go on.’

‘Mum, do you want me to bring you breakfast?’

‘Go, girl. Abandon me.’
She arrived at Montparnasse station at the end of the morning. She dived into the metro and made her way to the old, empty, echoing house that was brimful of silence.

She found it brimful of remorse.
And foul-smelling.
And shrouded in a tiny film of black dust.

Three months had passed. Behind the gate into the little garden, spring was making a timid showing. She watered the parched earth. From the letter box she took the little bit of mail that had evaded the PO box. She went over to the solicitor’s office in the eighth arrondissement. She signed with her real name, handed back the keys, took the cheque that was due to her and bade everyone goodbye. Georges met her at Sens station. They went straight to the restaurant on the harbour at Teilly,
where they had dinner. Georges told her how much she seemed to have changed. She had lost weight (though he had lost much more in two months than she had) and acquired a tan. That evening she was wearing a black woollen tunic, a long grey silk skirt that swayed gently around her and little grey ankle boots. She didn't talk so readily on this occasion. (Beef, diced beetroot.)

She was more distrustful, well-mannered, fearful and reserved. She had been too much alone.

She had perhaps become too Italian. He felt brave enough to suggest that to her. (Monkfish, cream of lettuce.)

She didn't reply.

They walked back. She handed Georges the cheque. He decided that they had to change his authorization to manage her bank dealings into a joint account at the Auxerre branch, in case one of them should die.

She laughed.

‘Ann-Éliane, we are the same age.’

‘Hooray.’

‘When I’m old, you will be too.’

‘What you say has some plausibility to it.’

‘Let’s live together.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘It’s not about you sleeping with me.’

‘I didn’t think it was.’

‘Let’s get married.’

‘No.’

*
Georges was, in fact, ill. She discovered this in an underhand sort of way from a hospital letter placed on the writing desk in the hall. She tried to talk about his being ill, but he denied it. She thanked him, all the same, for keeping her secret about Italy.

‘Did you doubt that I would?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re no friend.’

‘I was distrustful of men and you were a man.’

‘I was a man.’

And he began to cry.

One evening, in a restaurant on the Joigny road, since he didn’t want to talk about his health or himself or the days to come, she spoke about the island, the villa above the sea, the extraordinary terrace, the peasant-farmer from San Angelo called Amalia, and beauty. When would he come? She’d had a bed brought up for him.

Georges Roehlinger promised to come to the island next month.

*  

‘Is this the big spring clean?’

Monsieur Delaure nodded.

Everything had been brought out on to the doorstep and the cobbled quayside of the Yonne: broom, ladder, bucket and floorcloth, bucket and sponge, bleach, detergent, Mr. Clean.
She parked the solex in the little front courtyard, a carton of Lucky Strikes in her hand.

*

It was sunny enough to drink their aperitifs down by the Yonne. Georges was happy to be alone again with Ann at the end of the lawn, with the Gumpendorf hut beside them and the black boat and new-born ducklings nestling in its shadow. A curious event occurred. They were drinking peacefully and quietly, not speaking, when all of a sudden a big blackbird trotted toward Georges and perched on his shoe.

It didn’t move.
Georges didn’t move.
The blackbird called out four times and flew off.
Ann was transfixed.
‘It’s a sign,’ she said, ‘it’s a sign! It’s a good sign, Georges!’
She left again on the Friday evening.
The island emerged from the fog. Heavy and magical. She was running from death. She was running from her mother. She was running from Georges. She moved into the house, uncomfortable as it still was.

She would put on a pullover or two and go and eat breakfast on the terrace in the greyness before dawn. She would contemplate the first rays of the sun that emerged from behind the little black pine, rays sometimes pale gold in colour, sometimes white like the hairs of a violin bow.

Then the first blue ones.

Then the violent, swift, inexorable welling-up of the light wresting itself from the sea.

She began by feeling much emptiness, distress and enforced idleness up on the hill.
VILLA AMALIA

Hotel life provides a prop for the body insofar as you have to leave your room, move around, go out, hurry back, dress, go down to dinner, greet people, smile. But she gradually recovered the pleasure of spending hours on end reading her scores and losing herself in them, of letting them grow little by little like plants or clouds or waves. She re-learnt how to be without a man, not having anything to prepare, not having to wash herself, not having to dress with care, taste or attention, not put on make-up or do her hair. The pleasure of collapsing into an armchair, lighting a marvellous cigarette and closing her eyes without anyone shouting, humming in the distance, coming up to you, speaking, commenting on the weather, the day or the passing hour, tormenting you.

From her bed she could see the bay.

She had placed the bookshelf and the bed near the window, on the right. The back of the bed was up against the bookshelf. An old, not very tall standard lamp gave her good light, a low light, confined distinctly to her working area and her fingers, a light that neither burnt her head nor stung her eyes.

The bookcase was still empty but would soon be full thanks to her Internet purchases, her ‘printouts’ and her press cuttings.

Soon, absorbed in her minimal music, she would see the bay—and wouldn’t see it.

Day and night she would see the bay and, seeing it, would see only an inner world.
She would hear the bay, of which she would become part.

On her left was a revolving bookstand she had bought on the square in Filosseno’s village—it was already filled with French or Italian magazines, all of them opinionated, violent, necrological, political, bombastic, religious, funereal—on which she stood her tea.

* 

The leaves, flowers, jars, cups, tables and branches shone like crystal on the terrace.

She nibbled at her meals outside, taking her fruit bowls, ramekins and mismatched saucers out on a tray.

The light of the Bay of Naples is perhaps the finest in this world. Everything smelt and looked like water—the tiny, distant, ceaselessly kindled waves, the tide of light, the rejuvenated soil of the garden which she dug over into brown and black wavelets after every shower.

She became really attached to this spot which made her feel she was living in the heart of the sea. She tended this fragment of nature with care. She was anxiously concerned for the life that grew there, came there, multiplied there. She got up in the night at the slightest noise that seemed out of place. She jealously maintained this tongue of earth and the long, narrow villa. She decked its edge in flowers, washed the volcanic rock. She became attached to it door by door, window by window, step by step and corner by corner.

*
She was moved by each dawn.

She brought in a big white sofa (it was this she called ‘Georges's bed’) so that she could watch the day break.

And a huge, faded blue carpet, bought for next to nothing (so big that it was sold for next to nothing) in front of the hearth in the first of the rooms.

And a handsome table with ten chairs by the kitchen fireplace.

* 

She rang her mother after Mass on Sunday, was met with abuse and rang off again violently. She set about putting away the books she had been to fetch from Ischia Porto post office by micro-taxi. Reaching up to the highest shelf in the attempt to slide in a big book on opera, she got up on tiptoe and, as she tried to push it further on to the shelf, fell suddenly to the floor.

It was the painter who found her.

She had passed out—a little more than passed out. She had to stay in a Naples clinic for two weeks. It was populated only by heartless old people and there was hardly any way of making friends, except with the doctor (Leonhardt Radnitzky) who was German and a great music lover (the Italian wife who had left him was quite a renowned singer) and who knew her, admired her records, gave her excellent care and helped her recover.

She plagued Dr Radnitzky with a single-minded, obsessive desire to be allowed back to Villa Amalia, which he, for his part, thought excessively remote.
In the end, he agreed to her going back to Ischia, provided she took a room at the Hotel Moreschi. It would only be a short stay. The time to convalesce and to complete the necessary tests.

He also forbade her to swim alone in the bay.

She went to Villa Amalia during the day. The electrician and the stonemason had finished their work. The carpenter and painter were finishing theirs. When the workers left, she stayed reading on the terrace. As soon as night began to fall, she went off to the hotel that was just a hundred yards away.
To the right of Reception at the Hotel Moreschi stretched an enormous lounge. It was split into three major parts. First there was a large room with a bar, a piano bar, numerous big leather armchairs and some little low tables, always well populated.

Then came a dimly lit library with a fine eighteenth-century fireplace (though it wasn’t permitted to light a fire in it) and some broad grey armchairs.

Last, there was an old-fashioned games room, with a billiard table in the middle—two doors with very fine, very old marquetry were laid across it, covering the green baize—pouffes of Moorish leather and a rather dusty but infinitely comfortable chaise longue. No one ever went there and that was where she drank her aperitif alone. The bay windows, covered in bougainvillea
flowers and clumps of wisteria, made the room quite dark and, on rainy days, relatively oppressive. It was a haven of peace and, in summer, of coolness.

One Friday evening, Dr Radnitzky was there.

He told her he often took a room at the hotel for the weekend when he was alone in Naples. This was why, taking the view she had needed to rest, he had given her the name of this particular hotel. He liked to go sea fishing, though at the moment he was busy preparing a diving expedition between Vivara and Procida, beneath a headland bearing the name of Petronius.

He was leaning over a map of the region that he had spread out fully over the marquetry doors on the billiard table. That map showed the wildest inlets and the tiniest paths on the islands.

She pointed out the house with the blue roof to him.

‘It’s there,’ she said.

‘What is?’

‘The location of paradise.’

She showed him a little black square at the end of a path. Suddenly she felt his body, the presence of his body beside her.

‘Actually, it’s blue.’

‘Before Punta Molina, before the villa Neuzi Bozzi.’

‘You have to go along the sea-front road?’

‘No.’
‘Look!’

She pulled the lamp over the marquetry panels. Suddenly he looked into the face of this woman, who was radiant with joy in her contemplation of the map. He leant over again. The island was surrounded by the colour blue. His forehead touched hers and their eyes met.

* 

They had dinner together. He told her that the evening of the day after next was a big moment. His wife was bringing his daughter back to him from New York. He was anxious.

‘What’s she called?’

‘Magdalena.’

They went up to Leonhardt’s room together.

That night, on the terrace, she told Leo Radnitzky: ‘I think there’s a core of passive obstinacy in me that’s made me unhappy in life.’

‘Passive?’

‘Yes, it’s difficult to understand but that’s what I think.’

‘Yet you’re a free woman on your own and you’ve created some very beautiful things . . .’

‘I’ve not created much. And I’ve not been on my own long. I’ve wasted my time with men who didn’t love me. Are you divorced?’

‘Yes.’
‘Do you have a girlfriend?’
‘No.’

* 

The next day they sailed out to Procida.

He dived, as he had planned to, beneath the Grotta del Petrone.

He gave her permission to start swimming again, in his presence and under his supervision. They spent all the hours of the day and the two nights together. She showed him around her house.
'No, with music, I wouldn’t say I was in love with it from the first. It wasn’t a calling either. It was something more tremendous than that. And I was much too young at the time for it to be a calling. It was very much like a panicky sense of vertigo. My father was a musician—and yet this wasn’t to do with my father. It was similar to anxiety. You suddenly have a sense of being engulfed by a whirl of emotions and you can’t resurface. You feel you won’t make it back out again. You’re going under. There are no sides to cling to. You’ll never regain your balance. This happens when you’re very much in love. For me, it defines that. Do you feel this vertigo? That’s the sign. The abyss is there and it truly opens up and truly sucks you in. I’ve experienced this total sensation once, this feeling that knocks you sideways, body and
I was really small. I’m not sure precisely how old I might have been. It was before I could read.

“We—the two children—weren’t allowed to go up to my grandfather’s floor of the house. When I say grandfather, I’m talking about my mother’s father. I never knew the other one.

I dash to the stairs, I dash along the black wooden floor of the corridor, I don’t know why, I don’t know what prompts me to do it, I open the door. They were all four of them playing. It made such an intense noise. Louder than the ocean. I’d never heard anything so loud. Each one had their standard lamp beside them. Each one had their wooden music stand in front of them. My grandfather’s face was resting on his violin. He was the oldest of the four and had his eyes closed. My father, gifted in so many ways, could play any instrument. He must have been playing the viola part. No one had heard me come in. They were playing something incredibly fast. They were playing a very moving piece. I now think that it was Schubert.

“A very beautiful young woman playing the violin, sitting opposite me with her eyes wide open, didn’t see me. She was smiling at me but not seeing me.

“It was an excessive, vertiginous sadness and it wouldn’t end. It even intensified.

“A sadness too great, even though there’s never any sadness too great for little children. Little children experience those primary—primal—terrors, terrors that have no anchorage in experience, that they’ll never meet
again on their path through life. The worst sadesses. Abyssal sadesses.

'I just sat there on the floor with my back against the door. The entire surface of my skin was covered with gooseflesh. The hairs on the back of my neck, tiny, barely grown child’s hairs, stood on end. I was shaking. It wasn’t with happiness or sadness. It wasn’t psychological. I don’t know what my body was trembling with. I heard the piece out. When it was all done and they were putting their instruments away in their black cases, I went to ask my grandfather, whispering in his ear, if I could come on the other occasions when they played.

‘“If you stay sitting in a corner and behave yourself like you did today, then of course you can, Éliane.”

‘He glanced around for the assent of the other musicians and they gave it—nods of the head and, in my father’s case, a shrug of the shoulders.

‘On quartet days I went up to his office well before the appointed hour. I settled in by the door.

‘They saw me, of course, as they came in, but they pretended not to—a little girl hidden behind a square, ebony, vaguely Chinese-style rotating bookshelf, with her back against the wall near the heating pipe. I pretended to look at the shelves decked out with reproductions of paintings, photos of musicians and great men, books of all kinds. They pushed back my grandfather’s desk. They moved in the chairs, the music stands, the scores. Suddenly they fell silent. Suddenly the music struck up. So distinct from them. So much
louder than it can be when you’re listening to records and you spontaneously lower the volume of the stereo in the hope you can decrease the emotion you’re going to feel. Each time my throat tightened, I had goose-bumps and my heart’s muscle trembled. I wanted to sob, I couldn’t breathe, I was overwhelmed.’

* 

‘That’s how the inner world opened up within me. My body formed the habit of passing through that obscure opening—the habit of leaving the earth, of leaving external space.’

* 

‘Sometimes, at a moment in the piece, it was so beautiful.

‘There was pain mingled with the intense beauty.

‘I stopped moving, I stopped living.

‘Children begin by being stunned by beauty. Flabbergasted by it. Dying in it.’

* 

Leonhardt Radnitzky: ‘I don’t know if my little Lena will love music. I love opera. At night, with my headphones on, I play arias or listen to them. I love the voice more than music itself. Do you sing?’

‘No.’

‘I love the pitch and timbre of your voice even if you don’t sing. Her mum sings. At least she sang back
then. I loved her voice. I fell in love with her for her voice.’

‘Do you still love her?

‘Yes. A little. She was the one who left. Lena’s coming from her mother’s tomorrow.’

‘I really think music, in its effect on very little children, because of the hearing within them which exists even before they do and precedes their coming into the world, is their undoing.’

‘She’s coming back tomorrow.’

‘Can I point out that’s at least twice you’ve mentioned your little girl coming back?’

‘Three months with one of us, three months with the other. That was the court’s stipulation. Bringing up a child aged two-and-a-quarter alone—I don’t know if I’ll be able to do it. I have to admit I’m frightened. That’s why I’m talking to you about it. I’d be so happy to be capable of bringing her up. Do you want to see her?’

‘Why not?’

‘Don’t come too early. Don’t come tomorrow. Don’t come the day after that . . . ’

‘I can not come at all if you like.’

‘Don’t be so touchy. Come Thursday.’

*

Sadly, Dr Leonhardt Radnitzky was just as generous with his worries about his body, his obsession with his family difficulties, and his professional problems as he
was unstinting in his joys, his sudden desires, his
impromptu appetites, his unplanned walks and his
sudden diving expeditions.

* 

Ann to Véri: ‘In the arms of the men I’m attracted to, I
feel an increasingly insubstantial pleasure.’

* 

Mediocre excitement mingled with fear.

The men she desired were now dream men. They
moved as men did in dreams, though floating a little
more. As for the rare living men, she had recognized
them in the past by their stillness, their silence, the
secrecy surrounding them in the shape of their fierce
reserve. But now she was wary. Now she judged men
solely by the very particular way their feet made contact
with the ground and their eyes opened wide.
He lived at number 4. She very quickly sensed, before entering the street, that something was going to happen to her. Yet, to be entirely frank with herself, she felt only friendship for Radnitzky—a sensual friendship but not love. This she knew. She knew herself. But something was going to happen in the next few hours. She felt a tug at her heartstrings. She was standing straighter. She had made up her face and was very beautiful. In Naples she had bought tall lilies for the father, chocolates for the child. At 8 p.m. she rang the doorbell. A little, bare-footed, two-year-old, reaching mysteriously on to her tiptoes and looking up to her with enormous, black eyes, beautiful as a fairy-tale princess, showed her ceremoniously into a large bourgeois-style apartment, delivering a speech in a childhood Neapolitan studded with American words, which Anna couldn’t at first decipher.
They went into a living room filled with—entirely bookless—shelves, on which were placed hundreds of old photographs.

The walls were blue.
The window-boxes had white geraniums in them.
There was an—electrified—white grand piano.
‘Your home is lovely,’ she said to her.
‘My home is lovely.’
‘It’s funny having these white geraniums everywhere.’
‘Yes, funny all these geraniums.’
The light fell on the white flowers. The petals radiated out on to the walls which were as violently blue as the hull of a fishing boat.
‘My name’s Ann,’ she said.
‘My name’s Magdalena. Mummy calls me Magda. Daddy calls me Lena.’
‘What do you want me to call you?’
‘Like Daddy.’

The hospital had called the father out to deal with an emergency. The two Neapolitan women who looked after the child went back to the kitchen where they were preparing the successive dinners.

One of them came back suddenly carrying a long vase with the lilies in it, then left as suddenly as she had come.

Magdalena was slumped back in her armchair in a tangle of limbs, her knees squeezed tightly together.
Ann didn’t know what to do. She got up. She went over to the electric piano, lifted the lid of the keyboard, set the sound and touch controls. She played to the child. Mouth agape, the child stared back.

‘Again.’

The little girl began to rock.

‘Again.’

She didn’t want to have her dinner in the kitchen. She had to be made to eat by the piano.

Ann carried on playing.

The little girl didn’t want to go to bed.

It was quite frightening, this tiny, rather tragic child—this infant on the verge of tears—as soon as Ann Hidden stopped playing.

When Leonhardt got back, he immediately went to put little Magdalena to bed.

She asked to have Ann come to her.

‘Forgive her,’ he said. ‘She wants a last kiss. Her mother’s a musician too. You must remind her of her.’

‘Does her mother play the piano too?’

‘Very badly. It’s me who plays. When I get up in the night, I play with the headphones on . . . Ann, forgive me for asking this, but the little one wants a last kiss.’

Ann got up.

She pushed open the door, which had been left ajar. Beside the girl’s cheek, she quietly sang one of the Rumanian songs she had been playing. She dropped on
to the bedroom floor, between the child’s bed and the wall, still intoning the song, her nose full of that little children’s smell made up of milk, cream, pastry and sugar. All at once, heaving a great sigh, Magdalena fell asleep.
Their bodies *created* the silence in which the two of them lived: even more than music perhaps, the little Radnitzky girl loved this silence that surrounded the body of Ann Hidden or was her enigmatic companion. Around the two of them, around their legs, their bellies, their torsos, the silence and the light intensified mysteriously as they moved. Noises faded to nothing, so imposing was their presence. It is the same around felines. It was very strange.

Little Lena wanted constantly to be by her side.

Ordinarily, after the age of two, children begin to talk freely and precisely.

Magdalena wasn’t a good talker. Ann presumed she was waiting for a sign from her mother.

‘A sign?’ asked Leonhardt. ‘But she’s only just left her!’
‘Yes, a sign. An assurance. Something. I’m an expert in these things.’

‘I’m going to call her but I find this annoying. It’s my first three-month period. It’s annoying to ask her mother for that. She’s going to want to take her back. She’ll use any excuse to take her back.’

He didn’t call.

‘You’re wrong,’ Ann repeated. ‘This little one is calling out for something.’

She was a child whose face was nostalgia personified. Ann Hidden had seen the portrait of his ex-wife at Dr Radnitzky’s flat. Her mother was now living with an American conductor.

Little Lena (Magdalena Paulina Radnitzky) had discovered that love affair all on her own and mysteriously acclimatized to it.

A sort of fervour, almost a madness, overcame her each time Ann went to the piano and played her the old childhood songs of Brittany, Catholic hymns or tunes from Rumania.

Then, at Villa Amalia, on the island, on the terrace, she had Lena listen to the spring, to the noise of the first leaves on the trees, to the sound of the birds celebrating the sun, to the wind at night, to occasional distant voices and to the muffled backwash below the cliff.

The child’s ear had first to be attuned to the meaning of what was being heard.
Then, more slowly, with words, she taught her to orchestrate in space the initially incomprehensible symphony of time.

‘Everything in nature—birds, tides, flowers, clouds, the wind or the hours when the stars come out—tells time its time,’ she explained to Lena.

Thunderstruck, Lena lapped up all that her new friend whispered to her.

Within a few days she could decipher in sound the whole of the place at the top of the hill, the whole of the life around the house.

* 

On all fours, on the big tiles in the living room, head forward, humming, she was pushing a line of little fire engines and ambulances towards the fireplace.

Ann Hidden gave her a xylophone with brightly coloured keys, which Magdalena never touched.

* 

One day there was a storm. The two of them, on Dr Radnitzky’s balcony, watched it sweep in over the sea.

The bay plunged into a darkness deeper than night itself.

Lightning furrowed the sky.

To Véri: ‘Then I felt a little hand slip itself into my fingers. She was shivering. I rubbed her frozen fingers to warm them. “Are you all right?” I asked her. “Tell me, Magdalena, are you all right?””
She pushed at my knees to be picked up. She clung on, huddled in my arms, her head turned towards the sea. By now she was trembling with joy.

It was a magnificent storm.

From that day onward, she adored storms and all the sudden changes and inexpressible surprises that go with them. She declared herself in love with storms (at least she was in love with them so long as she was in Ann’s arms). The little girl now had her god.

From the outset, she had chosen the most ancient of gods.

She pestered her father to let her see the friend who unleashed storms again.

* 

Magdalena Radnitzky had such skinny little thighs. Thighs and legs as thin as bird’s legs. She was a girl who wasn’t particularly graceful, who had a lot of very long hair, who was plump in the upper body, whose beauty lay entirely in the animation of her face. Her body radiated an incredible glow around her the moment she was happy (when she saw Ann sit down at the piano, when the sea was in swell, when a storm came up above the islands in the bay). An incredible energy was generated in the pair of them as soon as they saw each other. You could almost say they were in love. It was impossible to tell which was the more in love.
It was raining. Ann Hidden was waiting for Georges Roehl on the landing stage.

Back bent and head soaking, he climbed out onto the quayside with a big black leather backpack strapped to his shoulders.

Georges was the first to spot a girl standing on the back seat of Radnitzky’s black Fiat, three yards from the landing stage, staring into space. Her face was deeply sad. She was watching the rain fall on the car window or on the fish market.

When she saw them coming, her face suddenly lit up in an unforgettable way. She began to hammer her fists on the window with all her might. Ann smiled at her, opened the car door and introduced her to Georges who was thoroughly ill at ease.
Georges Roehl’s troubles were beginning.
He didn’t like children because he didn’t know how to deal with them.
Also, the very moment he saw the two of them embrace through the open door in the rain, there was immediate, fierce, raging, unpardonable jealousy.
Then came resentment and loathing of the island, or perhaps even of the sea itself.
A fine drizzle was falling.
The alleyway they cut down was scattered with large stones that had grown slippery. The moss covering them was saturated with water.
The slope up to the house was particularly muddy. He nearly fell. It was difficult to get along a path so steep and slippery. Yet there were almond trees. Roses.
Georges was intimidated not only by little Magdalena but by the Italian language.
‘Look how happy I am here,’ said Ann.
He observed Magdalena huddled against her belly.
He noticed the rain falling everywhere.

* *

He hated the island’s restaurants.

* *

‘The downpours came every quarter of an hour.
‘It’s starting again,’ the baker said to Ann.
'It's starting again,' repeated Magdalena imitating him (it was her great mocking phase).

The downpour was so violent that Ann was reluctant to leave the baker’s.

Georges was waiting for them in a raincoat, a black nylon hat on his head and a furled umbrella in his hand, on the other side of the street, outside the Ischia seminary, looking dead on his feet.

*

He didn’t like the remoteness of the little house with the blue roof—and, particularly, the filthy, at-times-impassable path that led to it. He announced to Ann that this Breton rain falling on this Breton sea was depressing for a man who had had good reason to leave Brittany. Then—and Ann was wounded by this—he went off and took a room in a hotel. He spent most of his time away from her, down on the harbour and in the many cafes around it. Between showers, he pulled his white plastic armchair closer to the edge of the quay to take advantage of the rare sunny periods and gain a better view of the sailors who came from the ships in rowing boats or motor boats and headed towards the sea wall. He watched the holiday-makers disembarking, the boats berthing. He sat there letting his senses dull, or growing bored, or intoxicated, or dreaming.
In Leo’s flat in Naples Ann squeezed out an espresso.

Lena was standing close by, very upright, clinging to the sink with both hands.

Leo was cutting her hair.

Ann watched the curls of the child’s hair falling onto the tiles of the kitchen floor.

‘Shorter,’ said Lena.

‘Even shorter?’ asked her father.

‘Yes. Shorter. To my shoulders. Like Ann.’

Leo sighed and took the scissors to his daughter’s hair once more.

Her mother had wanted to call her Magdalena because of Bach (whereas Leonhardt Radnitzky claimed to be a direct descendant of Johann Radnitzky who was
Joseph Haydn’s copyist. He died in Vienna before the age of forty. He was found frozen to death in his room one morning in January 1790, as he was copying out a Haydn score).

‘My father,’ says Ann Hidden, ‘had been an orchestral musician in Rumania before the pact with Berlin. My father was my teacher until he left. Between the ages of four and six, we did two to three hours of piano lessons a day. I remember my little brother screamed at the door, wept for me to come and play with him. He hated music.’

‘And then?’

‘Leo, do you want a coffee?’

‘No.’

‘Then, I don’t know. I don’t remember well. I must have sulked for a year when he left.’

‘Sulked for a year!’

‘More than a year, to be honest. Eighteen months or two years. And, on top of that, Nicolas was dead.’

‘And after that?’

‘Then my mother saw I’d started composing all the time. I spent hours writing tunes, hymns, music, and she encouraged me. A major concert pianist, who’d been a very close friend of my father’s, sometimes came out to the Conservatoire at Rennes. Other times, I went to see him in Paris.’

‘Who?’ asked Leo.

‘I won’t tell you his name.’
'Who?' repeated Leo.

'He still lives in Milan, more famous than ever. The experience was a dreadful one for human reasons . . .'

'What reasons?'

'Don't press me on this, Leo, there's no point. But I freely admit he was an extraordinary teacher. No use as a pedagogue. No use as a human being. A fascinating master. An irresistible pianist. Since then, I've had a lot of difficulty with men.'

'I know that.'

'What do you mean, “I know that”?'

'One can tell.'

* 

Entrusting one’s sleep to another is perhaps the only real indecency.

To let oneself be watched while sleeping, feeling hungry, dreaming, growing erect or dilated is a strange offering.

An incomprehensible offering.

She could see his eyes quivering beneath his lids, moving beneath the pale, fragile skin. She could see everything. She could see he was dreaming. Who was he dreaming of? Curiously, she dreamt he dreamt dreams that weren't dreams of her.

It turned out that he too sighed in his sleep—just like his little daughter.

They both of them gave enormous sighs—like sighs of relinquishment.

*
The dawn had broken. Never in her life had Ann slept as long as she did beside this man. Leo had gone to wash. The toddler was pulling on the sheet. She inspected Ann’s belly. She told her that she hadn’t a sex.

‘I have a little, all the same,’ said Ann, pulling up the sheet and covering herself.

But little Lena opened her legs, showed her her sex and said that she hadn’t either.

‘A little, all the same,’ Ann repeated and she took her in her arms and they mused together.

*[1]*

Throughout the spring, Ann Hidden worked on the forty-two eclogues (the seven collections of six pieces that Jan Křitel Tomášek published between 1807 and 1823).

‘I can see you reducing them to seven,’ said Georges.

‘Perhaps to three. I’m making enormous progress, you know.’

*[2]*

The rain had stopped.

Georges went out into the street, walking with difficulty.

It wasn’t yet daylight but night had begun to leave the sky. There were still some stars to be seen. It was hot already.
He tried to find a micro-taxi, but couldn’t. He had to walk all the way to the villa.

When he got to Villa Amalia, he knocked on the window.

He woke her by whispering her name from behind the pane of glass, tapping on the window.

* 

She put on a T-shirt. She came and opened up.

She screamed. He was covered in blood.

‘What happened?’

‘Don’t ask any questions, Anne-Éliane. I’m too old. The handsome ones all find me too old. They have their fun.’

‘That’s dreadful. We have to call the police.’

‘No, I’d feel dreadful about myself if I went to the police. I was asking for trouble.’

‘We have to do something.’

‘No, they’re having their fun. They’re right. They can have their fun and get away with it. It was such a laugh. We drank so much.’

She washed him. She tended to his wounds. Frightened by the sea, not understanding Italian, jealous of little Magdalena and covered in bruises, a depressed Georges decided to go back to Burgundy. She drove him to the airport at Naples.
PART THREE
I was drowsing in the sun, leaning back against the gunwale of the little sailing boat with a book beside me on the deck. The weather was marvellous.

‘Look, Charles! Look!’ shouted Juliette suddenly.
I looked up.
‘Look!’
I raised my head above the rails but couldn’t see anything.
‘Don’t you see?’
‘No.’
‘Tell me at least what I’m supposed to be looking at!’
‘Oh, my God!’ she groaned.
I stood up on the deck of the boat. That was when I saw the blond-and-white hair spread out on the water.

‘Signora! Signora!’ my friend was shouting.

‘Perhaps she’s just floating on her back,’ I mumbled, as I spotted the dark form floating on the sea.

But the swimmer—or corpse—didn’t respond to Juliette’s calls.

Juliette went to the tiller and brought the boat towards her. We were well out to sea to the east of Anacapri. The woman still wasn’t responding.

‘She isn’t moving. Her eyes are closed. Go on!’

‘Turn a bit more.’

I dived—or, rather, jumped—into the water.

I moved cautiously toward the floating body.

‘Signora.’

She didn’t open her eyelids but, merely moving her lips, said in French, ‘I’m exhausted. I have terrible cramp.’

I replied in French: ‘Don’t move, then.’

She murmured somewhat irritably: ‘I haven’t moved for a long time. My eyes are burning horribly.’

I’d slipped my arm under her shoulders. I slid completely underneath her. I took her weight onto the surface of my body and brought her gently to the boat.

‘Can you call Dr Radnitzky in Naples?’ she asked, after we had hauled her aboard.

On her mobile, Juliette dialled the number she gave.
She was very pale. She was stretched out on the deck. She got up on one elbow.
Then she tried to sit up. I helped her lean back.
‘What’s your name?’
‘Charles Chenogne.’
‘Thank you. You saved my life.’
‘What’s your name?’ I asked.
‘Ann Hidden.’
‘The musician?’
‘Yes.’
‘I know you.’
‘I know you too.’
‘Ah!’

* 

The ambulance and Dr Radnitzky were already by the quayside.

In front of the ambulance a—not at all sad—little girl was watching attentively. She was interested most of all in what was going on inside the vehicle.

Outside the marina cafe, the piano rentals man was drinking an espresso.

Opposite him, in his cassock, the priest from the mariners’ chapel was drinking a Coke straight from the bottle.

Standing in the corner of the doorway to the left of the cafe, just before the newsagent’s, a layman with a
thin, clean-shaven, wrinkled face was leaning against the wall. He was smoking. He was approaching old age. He was bald, with some sparse blond hair around his ears, wore round metal-rimmed glasses and had big pale eyes. What remained of his voice was reedy in quality—when he spoke. But he spoke so little that everyone had forgotten him in his corner. He drew the smoke from his cigarette in little gasps, breathing in deeply, half closing his eyes. He was going to die. That was me.

* 

‘Excuse me,’ she cried out.

She got up suddenly from the table and left the restaurant.

‘What’s wrong with her?’ I asked Dr Radnitzky. ‘Nothing. Don’t worry,’ he answered. ‘Really, nothing?’ ‘Yes, what’s the matter with her?’ Juliette insisted. ‘Some little snatches of music have come to her. You must understand that, Charles.’ ‘I’ve never composed,’ I said. ‘Meaning?’ asked Juliette. What’s she going to do? Is she going to abandon us for the evening?’ ‘No, no. She’ll write them down in the car—it’s parked in the street—to get them out of her head. Then she’ll be back.’

*
In winter, the pizzeria on the main street was almost constantly empty. At the end of the main dining room, there was a little extra one that was only really used in August and that opened onto the garden. You couldn’t eat there in winter but that was where I met Ann Hidden three days later. The woman owner was happy to serve us tea and cakes, on condition that we didn’t smoke. We smoked one or two cigarettes all the same, standing up by the half-open fanlight. There were shelves stacked with bottles of local olive oil and lemon syrups. There were two fish tanks. One had no water in it. The other was full of rather feverish little fish and crustaceans. In truth, the empty one wasn’t the least attractive—at least to my eyes—a little desert, grey pebbles, shrivelled seaweed, spiders’ webs, live spiders. It was beautified by a soft thin layer of dust. I was very fond of this empty fish tank. It was Death Valley from the film I liked best in the world—Greed—because it speaks the truth of this world.

There was also a juke-box which, as luck had it, was faulty.

Juliette came and joined us at our afternoon tea. She thoughtfully explained to Ann how things stood with our life together.

‘I don’t love him any more. We’re barely together now. I sleep apart. I have a room of my own.’

‘Perhaps it’s wrong to say room of my own or even room of one’s own,’ declared Ann Hidden peremptorily. ‘What we need is a room apart from the very idea of
house. A place apart from the enormous global human city.

‘From human greed,’ I said.

‘I’ve found it,’ Ann went on. ‘I’ve found a real room, a long room directly overlooking the sea. Do you want to see it?’

‘Yes,’ said Juliette.

‘I’ll show you what I’ve found.’

Ann got up.

‘I’m finishing my coffee,’ I said. ‘Who’s having another?’

Without coffee I couldn’t live. After five or six coffees I began to shudder at the idea of living.

‘Do what you like and let us do what we want to do!’ exclaimed Juliette.

‘I’ll have another coffee—very strong this time,’ I said to the cafe-owner, who was standing in the doorway.

Juliette asked the woman for a carafe of Ischia white wine, got up and went over to Ann.

She began to touch Ann’s face with her hands.

‘You ought to rest. You look as though you’ve come from another world,’ she told her.

‘That’s a nice thing to say,’ said Ann Hidden.

‘You don’t understand what I’m saying. You look like you come from somewhere other than Italy.’

‘I can believe that.’

But the young woman pressed the point.
'Where did you get that face?'

She had taken her hands in hers. Juliette suddenly poured herself a drink, and in fact swallowed down two glasses of iced white wine one after the other. They went out. I followed some way behind after drinking three more coffees.

An espresso.
Then a ristretto.
Then a succinto.
Such are the various stages.
We went up the steep path.
I dozed off in an armchair.
Waking, I found them sitting on an airbed that had been left on the lawn for Lena. They spent the evening touching hands and telling each other their life-stories.
The flat I rented in the Traversa Champault had been very carefully repainted in an attractive silk-finish grey by the owner’s son-in-law. The grey of the woodwork, doors, shutters, cupboards and radiators was darker. The windows of the master bedroom—the embroidered white cotton curtains against the grey surround—looked out on to the hill when it wasn’t engulfed by cloud. Juliette had monopolized the back bedroom. In Italy, she liked me to call her Giulia—and sometimes even Maria. Everything is possible in wonderful places. She was so young and beautiful. I irritated her so much. She found life mortally wearisome beside a man who read and, as respite from reading, read some more.

The doorbell made me jump.

I put my book down on the table.
Juliette sped past me, opened the window and leant her elbows on the white wooden handrail. She wasn’t dressed yet but she had put her hair up. She turned round with a smile.

‘It’s my rescuee.’

‘It’s our rescuee,’ I said.

‘I’ll leave her to you.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I have to get dressed.’

I looked into the face of the young woman I lived with and she kissed me. Though, to tell the truth, it wasn’t quite possible to look at her. I was hampered by the shadows, the sun, her laughter, her nudity, her haste, her existence—everything.

*

I introduced Ann and Leo Radnitzky into the most sophisticated local circles.

It was the hottest time of year.

It was at that point that Juliette left me.

Juliette, weary of doing nothing, took to looking after little Magdalena Radnitzky full time, after Ann had pressed the idea on Leonhardt. (More exactly: she looked after little Magdalena for three months. Alternating every three months.)

*

On the island, there were only three-wheeled trucks with little wooden roofs to transport you, together with
a few all-white micro-taxis. These were more comfortable because they were sealed against the elements but there were fewer of them and they were never there when the wind was getting up or rain was falling. In our group, only Princess Kropotkin hired a Fiat from Naples airport, took it on the ferry and used her little car to get around the island.

But she refused to drive us around.

The micro-taxi had difficulty climbing the little winding road through the lemon groves.

The three of us were going to Jolly Dodderer’s place.

We trundled along merrily.

‘Buy some bottles of water when you come by!’

Ann dressed in a mixture of browns and blacks.

Juliette in multiple shades of yellow.

Then, as summer went on, they began to dress alike. They swapped clothes, which amounts to saying that Ann changed her wardrobe overnight. She became infatuated with everything Juliette wore, differing only in her choice of colours (which were a little darker or older or more distinguished or severe or lugubrious).

Big blue shapeless pullovers. Long black skirts. Both of them were very beautiful. Both stopped dyeing their hair. They let it grow back in its natural colour.

Juliette was twenty years younger than Ann.

Juliette didn’t tell her secrets. She shrugged her broad shoulders.
Surly, wondrously assured, almost theatrical.

A little taller than Ann Hidden, a little less slim, with smaller eyes, a dancer, an austere countenance, very athletic and shorn of body hair, she was like a piece of muscle in its pure state.

It was incredibly hot.

*  

Magdalena lost a tooth eating a boiled egg. Admittedly, she sucked endlessly on bread ‘soldiers’. Ann Hidden was to meet Leonhardt on the island, going straight to Armando’s. She regretfully abandoned Magdalena to Juliette’s care. Sitting at the kitchen table, Magdalena was trying to get a new bread ‘soldier’ covered in butter and salt into her mouth (six immense teeth minus one), the butter and salt being the only parts she ate. Ann managed to catch the last boat from Naples to Ischia. She went up to Villa Amalia, where she barely had time to shower and change. When she arrived, they were all standing waiting for her, impatient to sit down to dinner.

Armando peeled posters with close-ups of politicians’ faces from their hoardings and collected them. He reworked them extensively, tore them up, re-drew them. He showed them in an exhibition entitled ‘Huge Faces of the Mentally Ill’.

They were on the hillside at Ischia in a modern steel and glass cube—modern in the eighties sense of the word—in which every point in space was visible from
all the others, where every odour emitted or the tiniest cigar lighted immediately spread throughout the immense expanse of the place, where the slightest whisper reverberated a hundred yards away as it had in a cathedral in the Gothic world.

The only non-industrial objects were the enormous re-painted faces that fell from the ceiling with the help of steel cords.

Armando was streaming with sweat.
He was already drunk.
‘I shan’t have an aperitif,’ said Ann Hidden, when she saw their famished faces.

They all rushed around the cast-iron and frosted-glass table, barely taking the time to sit down. No one spoke. They reached out their hands. Their lips were shining, their eyes gleaming.

* 

It was so extraordinarily hot that the snakes left their nests and made for the shade, the courtyard, the edge of the hot well.

The spiders fled to the cool and darkness beneath the beds.

Humans, night, fear, memory.
Juliette was at the oars. The boat reached the sand. She helped Magdalena out and pulled the boat up on to the Castello beach. She went up on to the pier. Ann was on the rock above them. She shouted: ‘Do you want a drink?’

‘I’ll have what you’re having.’

Ann went into the cafe to get glasses of Diet Coke with ice.

When she came back, Magdalena rushed up. On her arm she had a magnificent white plastic bag. She opened it with difficulty. She took from it the black pebble she used for playing hopscotch: ‘It’s for you.’

But Ann couldn’t get her to learn the names of the chalk hopscotch squares.

*
She didn’t hear him coming. Ann was in the little garden at the corner of the terrace, standing on one of the kitchen stools, her hands in the air, busy gathering apricots which she placed gently in a wicker basket that she held by squeezing it tight between her knees.

She lifted her head in the sunshine.

Her outstretched arms and her fingers striving to grab the golden fruits tugged up the material of her T-shirt, exposing the skin of her stomach.

Leo relieved her of the basket.

She held out a handful of fruits still warm with the warmth of the sun. Only then did she look at him.

‘Hello.’
‘Are they good?’
‘Taste.’
He ate one.
‘They’re very warm. They’re delicious.’

She was wearing a straw hat with a band of white fabric around it. Looking beyond him, she let out a cry of joy.

She saw emerging from the path little Magdalena who was coming up with Juliette.

She jumped from the stool to the grass. She hugged the little girl.

‘Do you want an apricot?’
‘I want a drink,’ she said.

And the two of them, hand in hand and laughing, went off to the kitchen.

*
Leo was sleeping in the deck chair in the shade of the villa. The vibrations of the heat on the hill above the terrace were extraordinarily mobile. They were like rings contracting. As they progressed, these contractions modified the trees, the blue roof and the cast-iron chairs, then, as they slowly separated from them, restored them, two or three minutes later, to their previous state.

It was more than a snake.

It was a translucent beast with metamorphic rings.

If it hadn't been so hot on the hill, she could have observed its wild movements for hours.

*

The earth had become a mixture of powder and bits of cracked mud. The sun had devoured all the water. This mist of water constantly in the air made its transparency painful.

*

Sitting on the steps at the very end of the terrace, with a plate full of tomatoes and mozzarella on her knees, she was staring blankly at the sea.

‘Ann?’

Ann stirred herself. Little Lena was by her side, looking up at her anxiously.

‘Yes, my love.’

‘Here! But first close your eyes.’

She closed her eyes.
‘Open your hand.’
Ann opened her palm.
She felt something very light.
‘You can open your eyes now!’
In her hand she saw a milk tooth.

Ann Hidden wasn’t just a renowned musician, she wasn’t just a great shaman who could raise storms, she was a woman laden with gifts.

* 

It was so hot that they weren’t eating. There was always someone asking for water.

‘They’ve run out at the grocer’s. Someone’s going to have to put themselves out and go to Naples.’
‘I can’t live without coffee.’
‘It’s too hot. I don’t feel up to the crossing.’
‘Ask Charles. Charles is the crossing specialist.’
‘You know very well I don’t see him any more,’ said Juliette.

Magdalena Radnitzky had climbed onto the chair. At full stretch, she was sorting the apricots in the fruit bowl on the table.

‘What are you doing, Lena?’
‘I’m sorting them by size.’

It was an operation that could take two hours—by which time the fruits had mostly gone soft, burst open and were virtually stewed fruit.

*
Leonhardt to Ann: ‘I don’t enjoy life without you. I need you. I need you to be there beside me more often—in Naples, at the flat. I need to hear you breathing close by me when I sleep.’

‘And?’

‘I love you.’

It was a season of gifts. The gifts continued.

With a ring Leo gave to Ann.

What are you to do with a ring when you prefer to live with bare fingers?

She distinctly preferred a tooth or a black pebble from a little girl.

*  

The path was so steep that, when I went to Ann Hidden’s place, I made the effort most times to stop off at the grocery on the Corso Colonna. I would take up a few bottles of mineral water or some lettuces or fruit by the little stone stairs and then the pebbly path, clinging to the rope that had become as dry as bamboo leaves.

I was always welcome.

Our hours matched up.

Later, I had to leave off doing this because it was so hot.

*  

She would never be able to get to the island’s chemist’s. She needed her medicines. She was holding her umbrella
open to protect herself from the sun. The asphalt was soft. She had difficulty walking. Each step left a mark in the tar. Then the street slowly re-formed, as though it were an animal bestirring itself. A sort of young sticky dragon. A crazed, crackled skin, white around the outside, where the black liquid showed through.

* 

It felt as though we were living four thousand years back. The extreme heat was a goddess. All fell silent before her. Everything suddenly moved aside. Human beings feared to find themselves on her route. Only when night had fallen did we go out. There wasn’t a breath of air.
The storms came. Lena yelled for joy in Ann Hidden’s arms. Most often, there was just extraordinary lightning of all kinds: trees, volleys of shot, positive rendings of the sky, in which areas of pure blue showed through. Scarcely any rain fell.

The heat came back, even more fearsome than before.

They met up every Thursday—Leo, Armando, Kropotkin and Charles—at Dio’s. Dio talked like an unscrambled cable channel. He was inexhaustibly rich, inexhaustibly exhausted, limited, illiterate. His life-blood, his calling, his objective: happiness. By that, he understood a sustaining background of porn, a little exercise, a lot of sleeping pills and plenty of merriment.

We called him Jolly Dodderer.
The island was teeming with Russians. They were young, dynamic, gangsterish, brotherly, drug-addicted, drunken, childish, muscular, aggressive.

They were the masters of the last hours of night.

It was in a large, late-nineteenth-century villa entirely occupied by Russians that I discovered the piano. A real concert piano. A Bösendorfer. I gestured to Juliette, who had come with me that evening, Ann having stayed with Leo in Naples. Little Magdalena was back with her mother. As a precaution we closed the library door behind us. We were concerned not to upset our friends. We would have introduced them to sadness, decency, nostalgia, beauty, expectation, refinement: the group would have immediately imploded and we would have found ourselves alone again.

Juliette helped me pull the yellow stool, which was quite some distance away, up to the piano. I lifted the lid and began to play. The instrument was wonderful, though sadly a little muffled by the furniture, the size of the room and the wall hangings and curtains.

I was no longer with Juliette, no longer at Ischia.
I was with my dead sisters.
I was at Bergheim.

* 

When I brought the black lid down on the keyboard, an hour had passed like a dream. I was filled with a strange sense of grief. Sorrow is older and almost purer in us than beauty. I went to find my linen jacket, then looked in the pocket for my mobile phone and called Ann Hidden.
‘I’ve found the piano. It’s a Bösendorfer.’
‘Where?’
‘At the Russians’ place.’
‘What Russians?’
‘The young Russians.’

Ann was very excited. She told me she couldn’t come that evening, as she was at Naples. They were just leaving their friends’ house.

‘I’m sorry, Ann, I didn’t check the time.’

She asked me to come and fetch her the next day, to call her and take her to the piano I’d discovered.

I closed my mobile. Juliette said: ‘I didn’t know you played the piano, I thought you played the cello.’

‘They’re waiting for us at the osteria. Have you seen the time? Luigi and his wife are waiting for us.’

It was past midnight. We met up with them. The air was still scorching. I was dreaming of my sisters. I could hear them speaking. They had taught me to speak. I chose the shark meat.
'The sun is about to set. It’s the time the two women like best. Everyone who has been brave enough to come out has gone home. The water is calmer and cool. It climbs up their legs. When it reaches the swimsuit, out of sheer habit the two of them raise themselves on tiptoe in a single movement.

Juliette says: ‘If you love me, call me Giulia.’
‘Call me Anna.’

Anna and Giulia laugh and talk. Then suddenly dive and swim out into the open sea.

Anna is lying by Giulia who has taken off her bikini top. Giulia turns over to offer her back to the dying sun or the coolness of the air. Giulia slips her hand gently under Anna’s wet stomach.

She has become slimmer than her. She had a very delicate face, a more athletic body, the broad back of
the gymnast, while the rest of her body was much bonier and more elongated.

Anna has round little buttocks.
Giulia has dancer’s ankles.

Giulia hated the past. She lived in the moment, constantly drinking, giving nothing away. Ann Hidden never learnt anything about her.

* 

Each of them had their particular realm: Lena, when she was in Italy, storms; Ann her long room that looked out on the Tyrrhenian Sea; Giulia the sofa and her glass of white wine; Armando the studio made of steel; Jolly Dodderer the evening drug sessions; Phyllis the church pews; Kropotkin the mountains; Charles every book in his library. They were friends but saw little of one another. They were each in a hurry to return to their realm.

* 

I could fill the months that followed with details. They were busy, amorous, constructive. But I shall skip over this. And more. And yet more. I come to the following March. I come once again to the cold. Giulia and Ann were living together at Ischia during the three months Magdalena was at her mother’s.

In the three months the girl was in Italy, Giulia came back to Naples during the week. On weekends, they went back to the island.

* 

209
Ann had become Italian in Giulia’s arms.

Re-found sexual desire beautifies the body, spreads to those around you, purifies the air.

They walked hand in hand. They came back up from the sea. They didn’t speak.

Ann was carrying the beach towels.

Giulia was holding her absurd magazines. Their sandals shuffled along in the scorching dust.

Magdalena was ten yards behind them, singing. She was toddling along, brooding, wearying, yawning.

They were all three thoroughly tanned.

Even Giulia’s skin had stopped reddening and was gradually turning brown.

* 

Giulia was sitting on the sofa—a worn-out Chesterfield—barefooted and with her feet drawn up underneath her, glass of white wine in hand, munching her peanuts. Magdalena said very quietly: ‘Here, Kitty!’

A little cat that had come from the terrace poked its head into the bedroom.

Ann came out of the shower stark naked and dripping wet, with her towel in her hand.

‘Have you seen?’ asked Magdalena.

‘He’s so lovely!’

Ann opened the French window wider. She laid the towel on the ground and knelt down by him.

‘You’re a handsome chap,’ she said.
‘Have you seen the black patch?’ asked Magdalena.
‘Do you think it’s a sign?’ Ann asked.

* * *

Lena was sleeping on Giulia’s stomach.

They were both on the sofa.

Giulia was drinking her white wine, reading the magazines she bought in the Corso Colonna and eating her peanuts, while Magdalena gave great exhausted sighs, tossing restlessly in her dreams.

Ann was sitting on the tiled floor in the coolest corner of the room, the corner by the fireplace, with her back to the black rock of the volcano, a musical score unfurled in her hands.
Constant, slanting rain made it impossible to see the bay. The residents were reluctant to go out. One morning, coming back up from the post office in a micro-taxi (the post office was on the avenue that led down to the harbour) in the fog of heat and storm, I thought I glimpsed the old pine tree clinging to the rock above the beach, the tree that marked her house. I stopped the scooter that was pulling me.

The rain, coming down in stair rods, was so dense that the path was barely visible.

I always carried a sabretache with me—a saddle bag with two huge pockets—in which I stowed everything. I moved the books aside, trying to find my mobile. Still sheltered by the little wooden roof of the micro-taxi, I called Ann to make sure there was some point in making
the climb. We had become friends. When Giulia was in Naples, we saw each other often. I brought her cigarettes.

*

In the mornings, we would drink a coffee in silence. Then I’d go back home on foot.

*

On other occasions—as the Traversa Champault wasn’t open to motor vehicles—I was forced to go via the Piazza dei Pescatori. Only when it was bucketing down or when squalls of wind were coming off the sea, did I not give in to the pleasure of sitting by the waterside and downing an ice-cold beer. She often met me there in the evenings.

*

When Ann Hidden was lost in her music, she sat in a curious position. Her body was almost thrown back. She had the magnificent air of a woman without a thought for the impression she might be giving. It seemed at that point that it was possible she would suddenly disappear, fall, fly away, throw herself into the harbour from the top of the rocks, dive into the sea.

*

She was a woman entirely bound up in her hunger, her music, her walking, her passion, her swimming, her destiny.
When that was the case, I wouldn't disturb her. I was content with just a little wave. I would sit down two chairs away and order an ice-cold beer. We wouldn't say much to each other. We might say nothing. For an hour we would watch the fishermen bringing their boats in, the tourists going out to the yachts by dinghy, the sun sinking over the castello and, further on, going down precisely along the line of Tiberius’ citadel on Capri.

* *

‘Why did Éliane Hidelstein, the daughter of a Breton Catholic and a Rumanian Jews, become Ann Hidden?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘To hide? Because Jews have to hide?’

‘No, I don’t think Jews have to hide. And I don’t think hiding protects them either.’

‘So why?’

‘The first man I lived with was a mountaineer.’

‘I don’t see the connection.’

‘He’d climbed Hidden Peak. Basically, he was the one who, for fun, turned Hidel into Hidden. He gave me the name.’

‘Did you love him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did you leave him?’

‘Why would I have left him? He died.’

*
Ann Hidden resembled Marcelle Meyer at the keyboard—for anyone who had the good fortune to see that virtuoso before her sudden death. Her left hand was extraordinarily powerful. But, cheating with scores, simplifying everything to a sort of great, radiant melodic slowness, the result wasn’t directly comparable.

What she did was incredibly stark.

She read the score first, far from the piano, then put it back down. She went and sat at the keyboard and—suddenly—delivered the whole thing in the form of a rapid, whirling résumé. She didn’t interpret the music. She re-improvised what she had read or what she had chosen to retain of it, de-ornamenting, de-harmonizing, searching anxiously for the lost theme, seeking out the essence of the theme with minimal harmony.

And it even happened that she sometimes got lost in long, oriental variations that roved around solely to allow the theme to return as the very origin, and at that point she would abandon the keyboard and jump straight up. Sullen and pursuing the theme in silence, she would go off elsewhere, out into the garden, would walk and walk or climb the rocks. She was a genius.

She was—in a way—an Indian artist.

Sometimes she would sit herself down in a hotel lobby—in one of the lounges of the Hotel Moreschi or in a bar in Naples, provided that it was virtually silent.

She would choose the most comfortable armchair, the furthest from the door, the best placed to see the customers suddenly emerge and invade the space in front of her.
This was how she sorted out her ideas—or judged the musical ideas she had deep inside herself or consented to rise above those ideas. She tested out melodic lines in silence, before she could love them and note them down or banish them from her thoughts.

* 

She was a complex woman.

As Magdalena saw it, the mistress of the storms was, in some deep way, a magical being, a fairy creature.

In the eyes of Leonhardt, Ann was an extraordinarily inward artist, almost indifferent to those around her, strong, wild or at least relatively untamed, solitary.

In the eyes of Giulia, she was a great gentle body that was silent, sensual and reassuring, a bundle of bones, evasions and elusions.

In Georges’s eyes, she was a little girl who was proud, rather hostile, always on her guard, easily upset, fragile, worried, mysterious.

In my eyes, she was a genius of a musician. I very seldom heard her play. Yet I did everything I could to do so.

* 

It happens that, suddenly, in the depths of oneself, tunes you have never heard produce themselves and yet you haven’t composed them. You have to note them down immediately. Afterwards, you either work on them or you don’t. These calling voices belong to no one—particularly not to those they call to (because it must be
admitted that all those they would call, if they called, are dead).

Jan Dussek running away with Sophia Corri to Hamburg.

Ann Hidden running off with Magdalena Paulina Radnitzky to Herculaneum.

* 

For Christmas, Ann bought Lena a dog. It was a fox terrier. Ann and Lena called him Matro. He wasn’t allowed to go to Naples. He stayed on the island watching over the sea, or the path, or the area around the terrace.

* 

Scarcely had they arrived and they were buying fish at the harbour. Then they went back up the avenue to the market. They bought haricot beans and veal. They had lunch on the terrace. Then it was siesta time for Lena. Giulia undid her sandals. Still in shorts and T-shirt, she lay down beside her.

* 

Lena wakes up, gets straight up and aims a kick at the belly of the slumbering dog.

Matro runs off howling.

For this, Magdalena gets her bottom smacked by Giulia.

She cries.

‘Why are you bad?’ asks Giulia.
‘I’m not bad,’ says the little girl slowly.
‘If you hit dogs, I’ll hit you.’
So Magdalena Radnitzky goes off crying, holding her doll in her arms.
She sits herself down in front of the living-room hearth, in Ann’s corner.
Giulia lets her play dolls in her corner.
She surrounds her dolls’ tea party with candlesticks she has taken from the mantlepiece.
She hums a tune, interrupting it only to make great interminable speeches to her doll.

* 

A ray of sunlight appeared.

Giulia went and sat on the bottom step but one, taking with her all her sundown bits and pieces: peanuts, olives, a bottle of chilled white wine, sunglasses, absurd magazines, some knitting that she never worked on.
She sat there with her legs dangling.
She pulled her dress right up and her feet played in the clear water in Lena’s blue rubber bathtub.
With her head thrown back, exposed to this very earliest sun, she lay tanning herself.

* 

The next day they found punnets of blueberries at the market. Magdalena, the ends of her fingers blackened
and unwashable because of the lunchtime blueberries, decided to go and play on the hill.

Giulia put cream on the little girl’s lips, chapped by this first sun of the year.

Ann made coffee.

*

Little Magdalena came back into the house exhausted. She had spent the whole hour rolling down the side of the hill in the pebbles, new grass and remnants of the straw, before landing up on the terrace and howling with joy. She was red hot and covered in scratches. She was out on her feet. Ann took her in her arms. She carried her into the living room where Giulia was already taking her siesta, surrounded by her paraphernalia of silly magazines, cigarettes, olives, peanuts, pistachios, little Roma tomatoes and white wine. She propped the toddler between two pillows.

Ann wiped her sweat-soaked forehead and saw her fall fast asleep in a trice.

She watched the two of them sleeping on the white living room sofa.

She went down to the harbour and waited for the hydrofoil, climbed the gangplank and left for Naples to meet up with Leo.

*

Lena’s face blue.

Giulia screaming.
She was standing in the frame of the French windows, holding in her arms the little girl who had stopped breathing.

There was an autopsy. Magdalena Radnitzky had died at the age of three, absurdly, choking on a peanut.

The child hospitalized, autopsied, then sent home to Dr Radnitzky.

Giulia fled.
All night Ann waited fruitlessly for Giulia. In the end she managed to get through to her on her mobile. She went to bring her back forcibly from the island. She tried to calm her down, but Giulia didn’t want to go back with her to Leo’s.

Ann took the boat back to Naples alone.

As she reached the flat, the sun was going down.

She slipped quietly into the bedroom Leo had holed himself up in. She told him she was going to sit up with Magdalena’s body. She was going to spend the night in the girl’s bedroom. He nodded assent. So she went down the corridor. She opened the door and closed it behind her, not looking at anything in the room.
She was standing. It was very dark. The shutters were closed.

She crouched by the bed, fell to her knees with her eyes lowered, and took a sudden look.

She felt an intense pain rise within, though not the tiniest tear came to her aid. She lay her head by the child's cheek.

Later, she slipped her hand under the dead little girl's tiny hand.

* 

She was in terrible pain. She had no natural connection to this child. And yet it was the worst pain and it rent the fabric of her life. Curiously, she was completely unable to cry. Not even a dry sob. Not even a twinge in the heart. Nothing.

Bottomless pain, with insomnia as its only effect.

She stayed awake for days, neither undressing, going to bed, changing her clothes, nor washing.

Even the dog Matro kept his distance, staying—such was the heat—worriedly in the shade.

They buried Magdalena without Giulia being present.

* 

Ann Hidden hadn't made it up to the second terrace. She was sitting on the ground in the shade, leaning against the scorching wall of the donkey cabin. She was looking at the empty water bottle in front of her.
On the rounded green surface of the glass, she could see her distorted reflection.

She saw an old woman dripping with sweat.

She could make out long gleaming white hair hanging down. She seemed drunk, though she had drunk only mineral water for ten days which she poured into glass bottles so as to have it colder when it came out of the fridge. She fell asleep. She dreamt. She cried in her dream. It was her own tears flowing down her face that eventually woke her on the steep path.

* 

Giulia no longer answered her calls.

No one quite knew where Giulia was living and sleeping.

Even those close to her—those who had been close to her—didn’t know where she might have gone to ground.

* 

In the Naples flat, Ann was dressing. She was looking for her ankle socks on the floor and picked one up by the armchair.

Behind her, she heard Leo’s shattered voice. It wasn’t his usual voice. It was a big child’s voice ringing out behind her: ‘Don’t get dressed!’

She turned around just to see. He was actually crying. He was fiddling with the top sheet like a child. He wiped his eyes on the sheet.
He sat up against the pillow.
‘You can’t leave like that. I can’t stand to see you go. I can’t bear to see you dress at dawn and set off back to your island.’
‘No.’
‘I’m so alone.’
‘I know.’
She put her pants on. She buttoned up her jeans.
He said very softly: ‘Ann?’
‘Yes.’
‘Let’s leave here.’
She didn’t reply. Then: ‘Yes.’
Then: ‘Perhaps.’
He went on: ‘We could take the boat.’
‘Yes.’
‘Let’s run off like thieves.’
‘Yes.’
‘We’ll get on the ferry. We’ll dash to the airport. We’ll go wherever you like. I’ll buy new things. I’ll buy you new clothes.’
‘You’ll get me new clothes,’ she said, as she finished buttoning her blouse.
‘Today. We’ll just have the afternoon. Then we’ll meet up at the pier at eight, by the ticket office.’
She sat on the edge of the bed and tied the laces of her white trainers.
‘No,’ she said at last.
‘But why?’
‘Because, wherever we go, we’ll have the same memories. Your face or mine will bring back the pain at every turn. Do you want to know what I think?’
‘Definitely not.’
He had buried his head beneath the sheet.
Despite that, she said: ‘Not only do I think we shouldn’t go away together . . . Not only do I think we shouldn’t live together . . . ’
He cried out from under his sheet: ‘Ann, don’t say what you’re building up to saying!’
‘I think we should split up.’
She went over to the bed. Then she kissed the head hidden beneath the sheet. She left. As she reached the outer door, she could still hear him crying. She left the keys to the flat on the marble top of the chest of drawers.
A fisherman took her hand and she jumped into his motor boat. She disembarked on the southern side of Procida. Dr Radnitzky had invited her to have lunch in a cheap tavern on the island.

She swallowed a salad leaf.

Leo began by telling her: ‘You must eat something.’

They were sitting opposite each other at a table.

‘I’m forcing myself to eat.’

She ate another rocket leaf.

‘Thank you, Ann. You do have to eat. Personally, I don’t understand why I eat so much, when . . . ’

‘Can we talk about something else?’

‘Why? I’m talking coldly, technically, about what concerns us. In the beginning, I was your doctor.’
‘I think I’m going to leave the island.’
‘So what? That’s just one more reason to have muscles so that you can carry a case. Another reason to have thighs so that you can walk down the street.’

She didn’t dare talk to him about her own pain.

‘You can’t guess how tired I am of my own restlessness, Leo. I’ve had enough of me.’

In front of them, an old man laid an old mahogany cupboard door on some trestles. He poured out a big basket of apples, vegetables and lemons and two plucked chickens.

A carabiniere went by.

‘I still think we should settle down in the same place. We should get married. We have to live together,’ he mumbled.

She took his hand.

‘You’re broken. I’m broken. You can’t expect the broken to mend the broken. We have to forget all that . . .’

‘Forget all that . . .’ he said, sniggering.

In a whisper, he added: ‘Yet you loved the little one . . .’

At that point, she could control herself no longer. For the first time in front of him, she burst out sobbing.

*

Then he radiated distress.

He moved close to death.
He was drinking too much. 
He suddenly exploded into intolerance, accusations, violence, unfair allegations.

*  
He could no longer remember how his child’s body had been in death. He begged for details. Were there wounds or bruises? Was she as pretty as she had been? Was her mouth open? Did she cry out at the moment of death? He wanted to know more about what he hadn’t really been able to look at.

*  
When an event reduces to the enduring of it, no consolation can console.  
No alcoholic drink, drug, coffee, tobacco, chemical means or sleeping pill is any help.  
The soul has to turn towards suffering; it has, so to speak, to take it head on, to give it its time, its depth, its distress. It has to tempt it out of the body. It has to feed it on something else than itself. It has to be tempted, to be thrown some bait; an object has to be sacrificed to it, as though it were some sort of creature.

Ann Hidden decided to sacrifice the villa by the sea.

*  
Sometimes there is no remedy for sorrow. Passing time only amplifies it.

*
She loved Giulia.

I learnt that Giulia was living in a flat in Naples. She was giving lectures to tourists. I took her one evening to Giulia’s.

But Giulia didn’t patch things up with Ann Hidden. They no longer touched each other. They no longer spoke to each other. They didn’t sleep together. They no longer ate.

They drank.

They looked at each other. Giulia took Ann’s face between her palms.

Ann looked adoringly at her lips, her breasts. She took them in her hands. She looked at them before placing her cheek on them.

‘Farewell.’

*

Giulia left the island. She never made contact again. She didn’t reply to any of the calls on her mobile or any of the letters Ann sent her. She never went to Teilly.
On the tomb of little Magdalena Paulina Radnitzky in Naples.

Ann went there alone and dreamt.

It was the same sweet, soothing, recurrent image.

The scene was almost always the same: it was evening and they were taking their bath before dinner.

They were so beautiful, the three of them around the table, sitting in front of their plates, pink and clean, with wet hair and immaculately clean pyjama jackets.

Less commonly there was a different image: the three of them still eating a salad at lunchtime in the little woodworm-infested bar that reached out on its rickety piles into the Tyrrhenian Sea.

*
Georges Roehl was happy. He put down the telephone. She was coming back.

In the afternoon, he cleaned and tidied the Gumpendorf hut the way Monsieur Delaure would have done—with floorcloth, sponges, bleach and all the windows open.

* 

Ann, on the phone, to Georges: ‘When I saw little Magdalena’s father for the last time and told him I was going to give up the villa and leave the island, I won’t say I saw joy in his eyes but—how can I put it?—a hostility verging on joy.

‘He seemed both to hate me and to be intensely relieved. He was content that no witness to his pain would be around any more. Very satisfied.

‘He was, perhaps, so unhappy, that he couldn’t be anything but alone now.

‘Perhaps it was a sort of cowardice.

‘He’d had enough of his life being a succession of dramas, insomnias and operas, of being an abandoned husband, the father of a dead girl, the problematical lover of a woman who loved the child more than she loved him.

“I guessed it long ago. In loving me, it was she you loved. It was plain for all to see. I realized immediately. You didn’t love me.” ’
She went to visit the old peasant woman of San Angelo. In just a few words, she evoked the death of the child. Amalia said nothing.

Ann had brought the dog Matro with her and handed him over.

Amalia gave a slight bow, sighing.

Ann quietly told her she was going to leave the island. She put a set of keys on the table.

The old woman turned her head away and again made no comment.

Afterwards, they drank a little lemon liqueur. They talked for a long time about their respective childhoods in little villages that were also partly ports.

Ann said, ‘I never knew how Mum could live there in the winter. The house had been built by my maternal grandfather . . .’

‘For his sister?’

‘No, for himself, on the edge of the dunes. It begins with three streetlights that light an asphalt path permanently covered in sand. The moment you get to the last streetlight, everything’s shrouded in darkness. When I was little, I went along by the sound of the waves. In winter. When the sky was just one big cloud. You must know what that’s like, too?’

‘Yes, my child,’ said Amalia. ‘This island’s often entirely shrouded in cloud.’

‘When I was small, I remember I’d use the crunching of my steps on the sand on the roadway to stop me getting lost in the darkness.’
‘Ah!’

‘As soon as the sound faded and my foot was on the soft grass, as soon as it sank into the damp sand, that showed me I’d left the little road leading to my house. It was dark. I got back on the road by ear.’

‘My child, I really like you.’

The vegetable plot beside them was mere dust. There were just a few bare, hairy stalks. Most of the plants had shrivelled and burnt the previous month.
The boxes full of books and musical scores were already piled up in the room by the fireplace. I went into the kitchen.

‘Ann!’

She was stirring jet-black aubergines in a cast-iron casserole pan.

She turned her head.

‘Yes,’ she mumbled.

But she saw how I was looking at her.

‘Charles, what is it?’ she shouted.

She had guessed. She was suddenly aggressive. Her eyes widened. She lay the wooden spoon down abruptly on the gas cooker.

I took her in my arms and said, ‘It’s your mum.’
The way elastic suddenly snaps, she fled from my arms, the kitchen and the garden, heading as fast as she could for the hill.

After a time I stopped chasing her through the undergrowth.

I came back to the house.

Even before I went in, I could smell the appalling odour of burnt cooking.

I took the ratatouille, now burnt to a crisp, and put it in the sink.

* 

The fax was still on the kitchen table.

It had been sent to the Hotel Moreschi.

There were two big lines in black felt-tip: *Your mother died peacefully yesterday evening, Thursday. Véronique.*

The headed paper bore the fax number of the chemist's.

* 

The terrace is full of big terracotta pots that are empty. She is sitting by the sea.

She has gone into the little Ischia harbour church. She is sitting on a straw-bottomed chair by the low, black, cast-iron rail that separates off the choir.

She takes the boat. She sits on the wooden bench on deck.
She passes by Sancio Cattolico, Lake Avernus, Posilippo, the via Partenope.
She passes the sea-front villas lit up in the night.
She is sitting in the little Breton church. She kneels down on the extraordinarily hard prie-dieu. It is made of solid wood.
She places her hands on its handles.
Then she lays her head on her hands.
She is musing.
She mused.
She dreamt of her mother then suddenly a great many things welled up entirely unrelated to her. She dreamt of her dreams, of Giulia, of her life on the island, of her once again solitary life.
She prayed for Magdalena Radnitzky and for Marthe Hidelstein lying alongside each other among the dead.

* 

Véri is standing in front of her—vociferous, malicious, insulting, vehement: ‘She had an attack a fortnight before!’
‘You might have called me!’
‘She didn’t want you to be told. She couldn’t talk.’
‘So how did she tell you I wasn’t to be told?’
‘Stop it, please. Your mum had great difficulty speaking. You know . . .’

236
She gave the impression she was about to explode. She looked up, distraught, staring at the ceiling, compressing her poor twisted lips . . .

‘Don’t tell me.’

‘As though she were going to shout out, shout out a name, but nothing came . . .’

‘Don’t tell me, Véri, don’t tell me. Thank you. Thank you for everything.’

She fell silent.

Later she grasped Véri’s hands. In an undertone, she said: ‘Actually, I’m just like Leo with Lena. I don’t want to know.’

*

She went to the retirement home to thank the two nurses who had shared the care of her mother in the last moments of her life.

The day nurse told her the same story as her chemist friend.

‘It’s better like this. Your mother wanted to die. She lay there with her chin in the air, her eyes full of horror.’

She went to see the night nurse who, thankfully, said nothing and simply hugged her.

When she reached the harbour hotel, she came across a lost-looking Georges. He had overcome his fear. He had found the courage to come to Brittany for the funeral.
He was skeletal. He was neatly dressed in black and wearing his black leather hat.

‘Go get your things,’ she ordered.
‘No.’
‘Come and sleep at the house,’ she said.
‘No. You don’t know what it’s like. I’m in such a state to be back here in the village.’
‘Come.’
Crying softly, he shook his head.
Ann Hidden went up to him. Taking his hand, she mumbled: ‘My friend, I need you.’
He went and fetched his travel bag.

* * *

‘Thomas has come for the funeral.’
‘Who told him?’
‘I did,’ said Véri. He stayed with me. After you left, he came over several times. It wasn’t really sexual . . . ’
‘But a little bit, all the same . . . ’
‘He came to cry.’
‘I thought as much.’
‘Are you cross with me?’
‘I pity you.’
‘To be honest, I pity myself.’

* *

The pebbles are dark grey. The water that lifts them from the sand and shuffles them around is yellow. Night
is falling. The sea goes on endlessly swirling and howling. She closes the shutters on the windows that look out on to the beach.

She goes down. She’s going to give Georges a good-night kiss. He is in the living room. He has got into her mother’s bed and is watching television.

‘Is it any good?’
‘Quite awful.’

He’s drinking a glass of whisky. He has snuggled up warm under the blankets. He’s wearing pyjamas. He laughs.

‘Stay strong,’ he tells her.

* 

Night has fallen.

She leaves the house on foot, wearing boots, her big yellow wax jacket and a long mohair scarf knitted long ago by Madame Hidelstein.

She goes along the sea front to the harbour.
She’s heading for the restaurant.
There’s a biting wind and it swirls at full tilt around her legs.

She sees him on the quayside from a long way off. He’s already there, in the darkness, pacing up and down.

The boats, unlit, bump against each other.

They don’t embrace. She walks in front of him. As she walks, she’s thinking ‘I’m with the man who was suddenly wiped from my brain one January day in
Choisy-le-Roi.’ But she says, ‘You should have gone into the restaurant. It’s cold.’

‘I didn’t know what you wanted . . . ’

‘You can want things too.’

They sit down near the window. He doesn’t ask her what she’ll have. For himself he orders whelks and a sole. He asks for some cider.

She chooses brown crab and velvet swimming crab. She wants a white wine.

He has told her he wants to talk.

He talked.

It was simply a long moan that she allowed to drone on in her direction.

She made no significant reply.

She thought: had he ever wanted her to open her mouth? Or wanted her to think? Or to live? Or to name something?

Thomas said: ‘There wasn’t a word on my mobile. Your mobile was unreachable. Apart from a parcel to my office, nothing. Even my leather jacket, even my coat, my suits, my shirts had disappeared. Nothing. I’d never have believed anyone could act like that. All we’d been through together meant nothing. Nothing. A puff of smoke. I can’t tell you how humiliating that is . . . When I opened the parcel, no letter from you. That’s what began to destroy me. I tried to work but couldn’t. I went to your office. When Roland told me you hadn’t worked there since the beginning of January, I realized all was lost. I went and got drunk. Imagine it: it’s as though you don’t count for anything any more. You never did. You
didn’t exist. You’re like a fish on the riverbank. You’re suffocating and don’t know why. It’s terribly cruel because you don’t die right away. With each hour I died a little more. With each hour that came, a little more air was sapped away. Each night brought greater anxiety. Nothing existed any more—the house, the woman I’d loved for more than sixteen years, the future I’d imagined without realizing it, habits, evenings together. There was nothing to show it had existed . . . I couldn’t bring a lawsuit. I paid for the cleaner, I paid for the shopping, I paid for deliveries, I paid for our trips. When I came into your life, the house was already yours.’

Thomas was enjoying his recriminations.

Ann sucked at her crabs’ legs.

She thought, ‘He must have been in psychoanalysis to be so in love with memory.’

He seemed to come to life again by re-living his life.

He had gone into a little mime.

‘I try to put the key in the lock. It’s not the right key. I try again. Impossible. I look down and the lock’s new. I think I’m going mad. I step back on the pavement. And out into the road. I look at the house. It is ours. I go and get the locksmith from down the road. ‘But the lock’s new, sir. I fitted it.’ ‘Ah, why?’ ‘Doesn’t the house belong to the lady who’s lived there for years?’ ‘Yes, of course it does. It’s hers. But it’s where I live.’ ‘No, sir, I can’t force a lock that I’ve just fitted.’

I rang next door. I asked, ‘Have the removal men been?’ ‘Yes, the house has been emptied.’ ‘Over the weekend?’ ‘No, over the whole of last week. Your young lady was there. It was one heck of a commotion. The
new owners have already been to pay us a neighbourly visit. They’re from Brussels . . . ’

Ann had turned to the window.

She was calmly drinking her wine, looking out at the harbour, the masts and the villas in the night.

‘I had a dreadful few months. I’d got myself a hotel room. It was comfortable but I hated it. I did all I could not to go back there in the evenings. I drank. I was scared of my life, of you, of all women, of abandonment. I was even a bit scared of myself.’

She turned from the harbour and looked at him.

‘A bit,’ she said.

‘I was sure you hadn’t run off with another man and, deep down, that was perhaps the worst feeling. I wandered the empty streets—totally empty after two in the morning. I got by at work, since I knew my clients like the back of my hand, but my appearance gave me away. My diction gradually began to let me down too, from so much crying and drinking.’

‘From drinking,’ she said.

Then she finished the bottle of white wine she had ordered.

‘But they couldn’t fire me for problems with pronunciation or for looking weary. I decided myself that I wanted to get away to London, so as not to be in Paris any more. We did a deal on that. That’s the long and the short of it.’

‘And what about Véri?’ asked Ann Hidden.

He began to justify himself again. She got up. She walked home slowly along the seafront.
'I haven’t been back here since I was nine, Véri.'

Georges was rediscovering Brittany after almost forty years’ absence.

‘It’s where you first saw the light of day!’

He was laying his black clothing delicately on the pebbles.

He kept his underpants on.

Shivering, he went down into the waves.

‘Come on, Véri! Come on, Ann!’

‘It’s madness,’ mumbled Véronique. He’ll kill himself! I’m not going in.’

‘It’s been forty years. This is the last time, Éliane.’
‘It’s madness, Georges!’

‘It may well be madness, but you’re really timid for a girl who likes water.’

He was frightfully thin. He went on into the waves. He was shivering with cold as the spray wafted on to him in the wind. He turned to Ann and begged her.

‘Come in!’

‘It’s too cold,’ Véri repeated. ‘Stop your silliness.’

His efforts were so absurd that Ann undressed in her turn.

‘Take your bra off!’

She took her bra off and stood there in her cotton pants. He held out his hand to her for them to go into the water. They were, in effect, six years old. He swam three strokes and got out almost immediately. She swam longer than she had expected to. The water wasn’t as icy as she had imagined.

* 

They had showered. Véri was waiting for them in the living room. Ann described the previous evening’s thoroughly pointless dinner. Georges said: ‘If you’d had a child, you’d still be together.’

‘No doubt,’ she said.

‘More chained together,’ said Véri.

‘More unhappy,’ said Ann.

‘Perhaps not,’ argued Véri. ‘Children change the women and men who think they shape them.’
‘More social, at any rate,’ said Georges.
‘More disillusioned,’ mumbled Ann.
‘But is that possible?’ Véri muttered in turn.
‘Less deep, less proud,’ said Georges.
‘Certainly.’

* 

She couldn’t stand. She remained seated on the front row throughout the funeral. The priest pronounced some hollow, soothing phrases which shocked her.

She kept her eyes closed.

People lined up in the church porch to express their condolences.

Her mother had asked to be buried twenty-five miles away in her own mother’s vault in her mother’s village.

* 

She could smell the dull smell of dug earth. It was piled up at the edge of the old open grave, near the stone.

Once again there was a procession, though much smaller in size.

The chapel stood in a typical little Breton parish close with a trunk road running by.

Milk tankers and lorries carrying vegetables passed noisily by, slowing up to negotiate the bend.

She threw earth on the coffin. Then came a second line-up for people to express their sympathies.
The priest approached her. He pointed to a plush limousine that had pulled in beside the main road.

There was someone who wanted to speak to her.

‘Who is it?’ she asked.

But suddenly she guessed. She almost fell to the ground. She didn’t turn around.

‘I don’t want to,’ she said, ‘tell him I don’t want to.’

* 

She couldn’t help but turn around. She saw the old man stumbling unsteadily towards her with the aid of a stick. Turning her back to him, she began to run. She ran screaming from the cemetery.
PART FOUR
He was very small. He was over ninety and had a face like a little shrivelled apple. His hair was white. It was cut very short and slicked back, a little tousled. Pale eyes. He spoke curtly. He didn’t want to go to the village. He didn’t want to see the house on the beach again.

A fisherman was selling lobster on the quay.
‘Come with me, daughter. I’m hungry. I love lobster.’

They went into a cafe not far from where the fisherman was standing. It was very noisy. They sat down in a corner near the billiard table.

He began by eating his lobster very hungrily.
‘Why didn’t you keep my name?’
She makes an impotent gesture.
‘Do you know, some of your pieces are very fine,’ he says immediately.

She cries.

‘Daddy, I’ve often wondered. Did you fight in the war?’

He picked up his glass. He drank down all the Loire Valley wine that was in it.

‘No, they were all anti-Semites—the Communists, the Resistance, the fascists, the royalists. I hid. I had just one idea—to leave. Making it through meant leaving. That’s how I’ve been all my life. That’s how I am. I run away.’

‘I know.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because I always run away the way you do.’

‘Yes, I ran away. I wanted to live a bit longer. Music means you can earn a crust anywhere. There are always funerals and weddings. I make muzak. You make music.’

‘That’s not true!’

‘It’s true. But what does it matter when you think of the final outcome. Musicians like you or me can beg for money squatting on any bridge in the world.’

* * *

‘Can I have one of your cigarettes?’

‘Yes.’

He took a Lucky Strike. He said: ‘I’ve only ever escaped depression by drawing on everyday things. In
my life, only filling up the hours with detailed work kept me more or less afloat. And when I say filling up the hours, I’m overegging it. It’s half-hour by half-hour that I face time!’

‘So I truly am your daughter.’

‘You really would be my daughter if you were as alone as I’ve always been.’

‘And what makes you think I’m not as alone as you claim to have been? What do you know about me? You’ve never wanted to know.’

‘Don’t shout! I hate that!’

‘I’ll do as I like. I’ll shout if I like. I say you should have stayed. You could have stayed. You should have been able to stay. You could at least have sent some sort of word . . . acted the way everyone else does. Not left Mum with no news of you. Sent a card at Christmas! Or Thanksgiving! Or Rosh ha-Shana!’

‘You remember Rosh ha-Shana?’

She didn’t answer.

‘I mean, act like normal people!’

‘No, no, what you say isn’t true. I’ve never known any normal people in my life, daughter.’

‘You’re a bit too ready to say “daughter” to someone you’ve never seen.’

He began again: ‘There is no love at all. There is no normal existence.’

‘That I can understand.’

‘Daughter, you still have things to understand.’
But her ears buzzed strangely. Nothing was going in any more. It was even as though she was brooding on a pain that hadn’t yet appeared in the depths of her body.

*

They are walking on the sea wall.

‘You see, I’m old but I can walk. I’ve always walked a lot. I like to walk for a long time every day. When I walk my earliest memories come back to me. Since I knew happiness a little when I was very young.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘I had handsome, silent grandparents. No doubt I’m walking to get back to them. That’s going to get harder and harder.’

‘I walk a lot, like you, every morning. Each and every day.’

‘I walk but I seldom see what’s around me. I see lost places all the time. I can see the lycée. I can see the coloured geography map a bit but what I mainly see is the two wooden cabins of the toilets in the schoolyard and the stinking holes in them. When we got to school, we hung our coats up by the stove on an iron coat stand. There was a smell of rain, wet wool, chalk, dust, insipid ink and the sour sweat of young boys. They’re all dead, the children who were in my class. I’ve done research on the computer. That’s why I’m here. Just two of us have survived, him and me. Yes, I have to say: I’m here for him. I didn’t come for you, can you believe?’
'I believe it.'
'I never left that time. I ran away but I never left this impossible land. We worked wrapped in shawls.'
'I was never born then?'
'You were born but your birth or the death of your brother weren’t things I was really able to survive.'
'Daddy, shut up. I think you’re hurting me.'
'I’ll stop then. That’s not what I want. Goodnight, girl. Let’s go and get some sleep.'
'You don’t actually want to sleep at the house?’ she asked timidly.
'No way. I hate that house. I’m going back to my hotel.’
'What is it you want?’
'To teach you something useful now that your mother’s dead.’

*  

In his hotel room: ‘In the evenings in Brittany, beside the sea, I came home as late as possible. My Catholic wife was always angry. You screamed all the time. Your brother, poor little boy, whined away in his cradle, enervated by the tang of the sea. He held his hands out at all hours of the night, moaning for me to pick him up. Unfortunately for him he stank horribly and then I’m too much of a musician and I’m Jewish—I can’t stand screaming. For me, screaming means ‘over there’, it means in the war. That Breton town was so small, so
Catholic, so suspicious, with the curtains twitching and people watching your every move. There was no one there for me. Your mother, you, your little brother—none of you could fill that void. In a way, you were too alive.

‘Are you aware of what you’re saying.’

‘I’m perfectly aware of what I’m saying. The worst thing would be to lie to you, to make out I went to America to get rich or run to the arms of another woman. It’s true I live in Los Angeles, that I’m rich, that I make muzik/muzak/muzok, that now that your mother’s gone I’ll be able to remarry, but in those days I had betrayed the dead horribly by marrying your mother—understand, I’m talking about the real dead. It wasn’t her fault. Thanks to her, I had documents. I was alive. I was warm. I had food on my plate. I taught music. I would battle against the wind on my bicycle, my cap pressed down over my eyes, to give piano lessons to the Bretons here and there. And everyone screamed at me.’

‘Dad, Nicolas was a baby, I was a child.’

‘That’s right. Nicolas was a baby. You were a child. Your mother was a praying, whining Breton wife, very kind, very Catholic and a very good cook. That’s precisely how things were.’

‘So what?’

‘It wasn’t a baby, a child, a Catholic fountain of tears or a very good cook that I needed.’

*
In the hotel lobby: ‘You see, I don’t think the void can be filled with lamentations. I understand why you break off all your pieces so suddenly.’

He fell silent.

‘You know, I admire you. It was a photo of you that made everything clear to me. I buy your work. I particularly admire your second disc.’

‘You could have told me. Given some indication.’

‘No, no . . . ’

‘Stop talking. Let me have a good cry.’

‘Ah, you see, you’re really French! You’re really your mother’s daughter! You’re really Catholic! You have good cries!’

She laughed.
The sea was still noisy, green, violent. They came back in Véri’s four-by-four. The wind had blown all the chairs over in the backyard of the chemist’s and pushed them up against the garage door. They ate a quick dinner (cold skate, watercress salad) and Véri gave them a lift back.

Georges claimed he’d never seen such high waves breaking on the black sand.

‘You just don’t remember,’ Véri told him.

‘Georges’s memory’s going,’ said Ann.

The ocean waves leapt across the stairs and up into the garden. They encircled the stems of the hydrangeas and came licking around the whitewash on the house frontage.
Ann had her boots on and was looking at this enormous house which she had decided, with Véri’s help, to offer for sale immediately. How had her mother been able to put up all her life with all these rooms, all this violence of wind and sea, all these impossible jobs—and on her own too?

During all that time, in the US city of Los Angeles, her father was patiently waiting on her death so that he could re-marry.

In that huge villa the two women had been so unhappy, so alone.

* 

She turned around one last time to look at the violent sea framed in the embroidered linen of the curtains.

Curtains her mother had embroidered in solitude, one by one.

She opened the window.

The deafening noise of the ocean invaded the living room.

Her mother had lived her whole life with the endless noise of the ocean.

Her life as a mother abandoned by her little boy. As a woman deserted by her husband. And apart from her daughter all the rest of her days.

Anxious, Ann regarded the stems of the hydrangeas standing in the remains of the foam and the big stairway that spiralled down to the beach.

As they receded, the night’s waves had left the stairs bright and shiny.
The sand had turned as brown as the leaves on the trees.

Way out in front of the villas, by the harbour wall, she was squatting on the damp sand the tide had left behind. Fully exposed to the wind, her knees were pulled up to her chin, so that the smell of her boots filled her nostrils.

Only when she was sitting—or squatting—by the sea was her music drowned out.

She could spend hours down by the waves, in the din they made, engulfed by their rhythm and the ever-noisier, ever-more-immense grey expanse. Down there, it wasn’t just her music that disappeared but the very memory of her life, the very sense of her body.

She went back with Georges by train.

In the train taking the two of them back to Paris-Montparnasse (then in the train from the Gare de Lyon taking them both back to Teilly), Ann Hidden couldn’t read any of the magazines she had bought at the station.

Georges was reading a novel. His rather hairy fingers were as thin as the legs of velvet swimming crabs.

She and Georges found it harder to walk in Burgundy than in Brittany. Great carpets of dead leaves strewed
the ground. They stuck to the paving stones. They stuck to the soles of your shoes.

In November, Ann slipped on some big chestnut leaves and twisted her ankle. But the smell they gave off when she buried her head in them was even more marvellous than the pungent smell coming off the sea.

She limped around for days in that other—itself intoxicating—smell of leaves being burnt in big braziers at the four corners of the quay where the lime trees stood.

Then they had difficulty finding their way in the late November fog.

She had hurt her foot so badly when she fell that she wasn’t able to go out for around three weeks. Georges looked after her. One evening he told her these had been the happiest days he’d known since Éric died. She spent her time letting herself be pampered. She didn’t talk much. Her afternoons were lived out to the fragile sound of the Érard piano.

*  

Kraus liked only Gluck. He played everything he had written and only that. He transposed Gluck at the piano. He never stopped humming him.

A life of absolute devotion.

Her life had become similar to Kraus’.

Georges came to hear her working—hear her condensing—at the piano.
Then, at six, Georges would light a fire in the hearth. Barely had he shut himself away in the kitchen to do his little bit of cooking, than she went to sit by the wood fire to read.

*  
Re-establishing contact, on her own, with the old warm body,  
the wonderful smell,  
the arm that carries, holds and cradles,  
the sound that reassures.  
An enormous sofa for the body to curl up on,  
a big fireplace in which the fire rises against the black fireback,  
a toaster, fruits, flowers, a big pot of lavender inside the house summer and winter, so you can crush the flowers from time to time, on a whim,  
an excellent armchair in the window corner, but away from the scorching rays of the sun,  
a record-player.

*  
Georges stopped, corkscrew in hand. He was gazing at his friend. She was looking for a score. Her face was positioned just above the lamp. Her chin and cheeks were lit. She was very beautiful.

*
She was immersed in Jiri Benda.

Once upon a time, Benda’s Medea had totally captivated Mozart.

*  

The special feature of Ann Hidden’s pieces was the way they suddenly broke off. There was no end to them, but a sudden, seemingly unprepared silence that appeared to come at the worst moment, at the most painful moment, at the point when one was most expecting a continuation. Long ago in Baghdad, Scheherazade didn’t round off her tale as the darkness lifted and night came to its end. Such, at least, was the rather enigmatic argument she used when the abrupt endings of her sequences were criticized.

*  

Her compositions were difficult. The wider public showed no interest in what she did. But there were the fanatics. And there were enough fanatics for her to be able to make a living. They felt the music went right to their hearts. They sent her letters. Each time this happened, she would be flabbergasted. She was, for an hour or two, filled with gratitude at the idea that she was of such importance to some people. But she very quickly forgot that it was so.

*  

In December it was very cold. The autumn sun shone, the colour of egg yolk.
The sky was magnificent—a much paler blue than in Italy.

Winter was coming in Burgundy.

The last fallen dead leaves on the ground, once red but now black, crunched beneath footsteps. A light steam rose from the noses of human beings and began to hover around their mouths. Dogs too spat out their breath at ground level. A grey light sealed their shadows and imbued the earth with them more than with the shadows of passing humans.
She opened the picture window on to the terrace filled with cacti. From where she stood, she could see a large part of Los Angeles. Ann Hidden had refused to attend the wedding that had taken place some ten days earlier. She’d also made it clear to her father, when she’d called him from the airport, that she didn’t wish to be introduced to the new wife who was replacing her mother.

A young female domestic had seen her into the living room. Her tiny old father, with his short, spiky white hair, came in, a little unsteady but walking without a stick and carrying in his outstretched hands a splendid white orchid that he gave to her.

She thanked him.

He gave a rather forced smile.
While she was still holding the large white orchid, he was already pointing to the big black Yamaha piano.

‘But why?’

He threw his arms wide.

‘To bid farewell?’ she mumbled.

He nodded.

Visibly, he wasn’t able to speak.

‘To bid farewell already?’ she repeated, incredulously.

She gave a sob. Emotion is contagious. It was too much for her. She cried for a moment, her nose in the orchid.

‘Daddy!’ she said.

He was uncomfortable.

She put the flower on the tiles—on the tiled floor—near the sliding door of the living room, making ready to leave.

They hadn’t much to say to each other.

After one long silence, she asked: ‘Daddy, I don’t understand. Why mustn’t we see each other again?’

‘It’s too much of an ordeal,’ he said. ‘And then my new wife is very sad that you’ve rejected her without even agreeing to meet.’

So they promised never to see each other again.

He didn’t drink even half the glass of fortified wine he had poured himself.

‘Play,’ he said, indicating the piano.

‘Why don’t we play a little together instead?’ she replied.
'Do you transpose everything?'
'Yes.'
'Me too.'
'We’re gifted that way.'
'Missaïl was the same.'
'Who was Missaïl?'
'Michel. My father was called Michel. Mum pronounced it Missaïl. That’s the only memory I still have of her. I hear the whisper of that name, from time to time, inside my head. Do you say it like that in French?'
'I don’t know and I don’t care. We could transpose one of the Haydn trios I saw on the coffee table.'
'Let’s do that.'
She went and fetched the music.
She opened it out on the Yamaha.
They read it as they stood there side by side.
They sat down side by side on the piano stool.
She was shaking with grief.
They closed their eyes.
They played.
The river Yonne froze over. It was fearfully cold. The water pipes burst apart. The ground was entirely covered with ice. You couldn’t either walk or drive in the side-streets. Only the main street and the bridge were gritted each day, but those who ventured out on them still couldn’t keep their feet. Georges spent days in his bed, which they had had moved in front of the fireplace. Everything was full on—the gas boiler, the electric radiators, the fire in the hearth—and still the temperature didn’t reach 14 degrees. The sky was dark grey. The light was dark grey.

The bedroom on the first floor of the ivy-clad house turned out, when she really lived there, to be extraordinarily conducive to working.
All you could see from there was the water. All you could hear were the ducks and the raucous cries of the swans. A tidy room, very light, very white, furnished with a little white bed, a little white table on which she placed her computer—from beneath which, with the aid of the printer, she could pull out all the scores she wanted to discover or re-read—an all-white, plastic bedside table with three drawers, covered in books and notebooks and filled with pencils, rubbers, felt-tips, ink-erasers, scissors, rolls of sticky tape.

She worked more than ever. Often she even composed. Something welled up within her that was for the little round cheeks of a girl she liked to wake up with and talk to.

The downstairs room was much less tidy—bookshelves, a CD player, cushions, big pots of flowers, alive or dead, in the corners, and an immense mirror. She barely lived there. As soon as her work was done in her ‘teeny-weeny house’, in her tiny ‘Komponierhäuschen’, she went off to be with Georges in the big one.

As something of a ritual, she went over to Georges’s house to play in the living room at tea time.

She wasn’t playing for herself. She was playing for Georges. She was playing to take a rest from composing, since she was composing more and more. For six months she played Kraus the way she imagined Kraus played Gluck. For six months she played Schobert the way Mozart played Schobert (for six months she played Haydn the way Radnitzky played Haydn). She fancied herself a musician of the Ancien Régime. Her work
was played by three or four mad aristocrats. The global market in music had gone over wholly and solely to the music of the herd—communal, national, religious (Georges called it sentimental, jingoistic, sanctimonious). There remained the solitaries, the atheists, the mad, the outliers, the birds.

* 

An die Musik. To music.
An mein Klavier. To my piano.
In her hands she held a flat black pebble.

* 

They say that, depending on its size, shape and solidity, its snares and its beauty, the web, at the very last moment, weaves the spider it needs.

Works invent the author they need and build the biography that fits.

* 

Musicologists wrote highly complex studies of her works which were so short and delicate. To tell the truth, Ann Hidden’s music simply bore the mark of grief.

It was a very simple grief.

It was the inconsolable grief that forms the backdrop to the dawning day.

Being discreet, she went round in circles and the circles came to an abrupt end, falling into a sudden abyss with a memory of the darkness.

*
She was everywhere with her increasingly singular song.
Hailing those she had lost.

The pianist Magdalena von Kurzböck was at Haydn’s side during his last concert in 1808.

Ann Hidden published her—sublime—sonatas and trios which had never before been published or played.

There was perhaps an undisclosed reason for the choice of this work.

Ann didn’t seem to notice it. She said: ‘It so happens that Magdalena von Kurzböck loved to pass things on. She passed on the works of Haydn. I, in my turn, love to pass on things that have been forgotten.

Ann also told an American journalist: ‘In the world of bees, the workers change function as they age. In their first days, they clean cells, then act as nurses. They produce wax in the second ten days of their imaginal life, then, until they die, act as foragers. As I’ve aged, I’ve become a forager.’

* 

She composed increasingly strange songs; songs that were shorter and shorter and full of long rhythmic bouts of silence that added a sort of wildness to the sadness that characterized everything she did.

* 

On his scores Hugo Wolf noted, in bewilderment, the hour and the date when the bursts of creativity came upon him.
Eight o’clock, the 5th of June, in my bedchamber. Monday the 12th at 1.30 p.m., walking in the forest.

* 

Ann Hidden: ‘Music composes itself within me without any instrument, almost as I’m standing, head upright. It composes itself in my proffered mouth, in the whole space of my upper body. Like orgasm, music arrives just above the head. All that is composed at—or with the aid of or the intention of being played on—an instrument simply conforms with what can be produced on the instrument, reaches out for that instrument and is no longer music. The body is left out of it and it is merely a performance on the part of the instrument. Every instrument leads us astray. Even the voice itself, when regarded as such—when thought of in terms of a sung aria—pulls the music toward itself and leads us astray.’

* 

As soon as it was fine outside, she went off walking. In the late morning, returning from the baker’s, Georges found her leaning against the quay wall. She was bent forward, lost in thought and still absorbed in the morning’s work, not even glancing at the panting joggers as they passed.

She no more noticed the joggers an hour later, though they streamed past her endlessly, ever plumper,
ever more fetid, red-faced, sweat-soaked, ecstatic and horrifically ugly.

When she came back the Yonne way, George immediately knew from the tiled floor that she had, because her shoes would be wet.

* Georges carried wood. Or a watering can. Or a hammer, wire, a nail. Or he wandered around with secateurs in hand.

He would mutter: ‘The Kapellmeister is waiting for her firewood, her grog, her candles.’

He’d grown thin as a grasshopper. His hair was gone. The medicines he was taking left him speaking slowly, softly, evanescently, cloudily.

‘Éliane, I’d like you to agree to share rather officially, rather demonstratively, in the last moments of my life. I would personally find such joy in your being, in the eyes of everyone, the thing dearest to me in the whole world. And then I’d leave.’

‘Go easy, Georges. I’m very grateful but you’re getting better. I’m here.’

‘Éliane . . .’

‘Stop it, Georges. Open your eyes: I’m here. I’m totally here. I live here, I pay my taxes here now. We live side by side. It’s fine like this.’

She explained: ‘I don’t want anything from anyone any more. I don’t want to expect anything of anyone. I don’t want to depend on anyone any more.’
‘You’re too proud. You’re annoying. I’ll tell you, Ann . . . ’
‘Yes.’
‘You’re not nice.’
‘That’s true. At school, when I was little, you and Véri spent your time dinning that into me. Now, you’ve spent three whole years rambling on about it again.’

* 

At fifty, he could sulk like a child for three days. He did the resentful look, the twisted mouth, the frown.

* 

They say that, in a symbiosis, the two organisms provide each other with assistance and nutrition.

First, with aid and vigilance.

Second, with food (Georges would actually have put that first).

In symbiosis, each organism irresistibly exploits the other in proportion to what it gives in return. If, by chance, the one tries to take advantage of the other, it asphyxiates its partner. If the other starves it, it dies.

Symbiosis doesn’t even describe a state of balance. It’s an extremely unstable conflict—like the weather in the sky above the province of Burgundy.

Only the pursuit of a never-achieved, impossible equality, an equality that comes, goes and endlessly returns, keeps its heart beating, keeps it alive.

Their thoughts began to meet half way.
Then to coincide even sooner. Simply with their intonation. And even before that: as soon as they opened their mouths, as soon as there was a tremor around the mouth. With the mist on their lips in winter. With their smell. Their anxiety. Their sighs.

They lived so closely together that they no longer spoke.

She wasn’t young any more; life had receded further and further into her body. Though wrapped in any number of shawls, her sharp face shone out like a light-bulb.

Georges would say (as though making a clearer point): ‘Something incommunicable was communicated to that woman and lights up my life.’

*

I remember Ann saying to Giulia (when she lived with her and Magdalena in the long villa she had rented overlooking the sea): ‘When you’re still a child, each part of the body you love gives off a light. Nothing yet emanates entirely from the solar world. The light comes from the child’s heart.’
In Milan.

Once again she pushed open the glass doors of the Pernambuco wood elevator. The door to the flat was ajar. She pushed it open. She closed the door behind her. She stayed in the hallway, intimidated as she had been in adolescence.

The living room was empty, the piano closed, the curtains drawn.

She left the room.

She found the aged man sitting in the dining room—sitting doing nothing at the big black table. He turned his face towards the door and looked her up and down. His eyes frightened her. He had a mad look about him. Then he recognized her and his aged face lit up. He tried to stand.

‘Don’t move! Don’t move’ she shouted, rushing towards him.

Reaching him, she leaned down and took his hands in hers.
His lips and voice trembled. ‘Little Ann,’ he said (he spoke in English).

He tried to make his voice sound stronger, to recover his voice of yesteryear: ‘Little Ann, you bring me great pleasure, coming to see me like this.’

She looked around her. The room was still the same. Low, long, poorly lit and even emptier than fifty years before. She had rarely been admitted to it. The—exposed—beams were still as dark and oppressive. The hearth was empty and above it was the black crucifix. No other images. The same silence. The same violence.

* 

It was a grey day, and very hot. When she got off the plane she saw, some ten yards away, a shepherd in a yellow boubou, leaning on a stick and regarding her without interest.

Three or four goats were grazing on the grey grass a little further away, on the landing strip.

She gave her travel bag to the driver, who had trotted up. For hours and hours they passed through shanty towns. Eventually she found herself in a wonderful drawing room. The black tuner was still working on the old, nineteenth-century Pleyel piano.

* 

In Australia.

She hadn’t much of a long-term memory, but that memory could be intense at particular moments.
It was very simple: as soon as she drank wine, she forgot everything.

In the evening, she forgot everything.

When she was playing or recording, she stopped drinking. She turned the day around. Once night had fallen, she would stay in her room and read. It didn’t matter what type of score—orchestra, quartet, trio, organ, Lieder. She was very quick at memorizing. She would put the score back down and, with her eyes open, staring at a bare hotel-room or dressing-room wall (or a wall from which she had removed the paintings, photographs or prints), would contemplate its panoramic image in the void.

Bolt upright and concentrating fiercely, she would walk cautiously—so as not to lose anything of her vision—down to the concert hall or studio and go to the pianos.

She recorded on two very different (day and night) Steinways—pianos with an extraordinary, very deep touch.

Seated there, she raised her hands and was silent for a long moment. Then, suddenly, she was playing.

All the concentrating was done in her dressing room. The technicians were ready and waiting. She went down and did just the one take.

* 

At Sydney she slept in Warren’s flat. She explained to him: ‘It seems that sleep gives over control of our bodies
to the oldest of our brains. The right hand loses its competence at night. That’s when the left rediscovers its skill. If she is a composer, a pianist ought to record at an hour when she should be sleeping. Her left hand flows freely. At the same time, the fingers of the right hand that were previously dominant lose their mastery.’

Another time, she told a Japanese journalist, who had come to interview her: ‘The painter Klee forced himself to draw with his left hand during the daytime, so as to be inept and childlike, unpredictable. I play at the time when the left hand is in command. At that hour, the score is simply a dream unfolding at a tempo beyond my control.’

* 

Before each concert, she had to follow an ascetic regime that gradually made her life impossible. She limited this regime to her recordings, which she grouped together and which she buckled down to just once every two years. For months on end, she declined any invitations in the evening. She went to bed at ten o’clock exactly, got up precisely at four and never took a nap or dreamt during the day. She called this, ‘Freeing up the left hand.’

Warren told her: ‘Here the aborigines call that “Going back to the Dreamtime”.’

* 

She got out the key and went into the recording studio. It was empty. It smelt of tobacco. The switches near the
door weren’t working. They must have been switched off at the meter. Then she stepped cautiously through the wires and cables and transformers lying around on the floor. By the back wall, on the stage, beneath the second Steinway, she found her handbag (it was actually more of a big black rubber bag). She opened it. She took out ‘Lena’s little thingummyjig’. This was simply a black pebble. She closed the bag again, slung it over her shoulder and went back upstairs. She had recovered her calm. She was off again.
Two years had passed. She went back to Ischia to see old Amalia because she had written to her and asked her discreetly to come.

She died with her hands in Ann’s, so to speak.

Ann saw Filosseno again at that time.

She took a room in a hotel at San Angelo, 4 miles from the farm at Cava Scura.

She didn’t go to the other side of the island to see the long house with the near-blue roof that had been built once upon a time for her friend’s great-aunt.

In October, the sea was violet.

With that change in colour, all the fashionable people left.

*
In November, the sea turned brown. The waves grew wilder. The sea-front villas emptied. The rocky spur and the island became shrouded in mist. Smoke appeared above the roofs of the houses in the valley and mingled with mists. Armando left in his turn. Then Jolly Dodderer. The Kropotkin woman left.

Left behind were peasant women, sailors and fruit.

She went to Naples, to the opera, to see a performance of Gluck’s *Paride ed Elena*.

*’Ah, che leggo!’ she heard endlessly echoing in her head. It was night and she was standing on the staircase of the Teatro di San Carlo. She had lit a cigarette. She wanted to throw away the match but didn’t dare. She put it between her little finger and her ring finger.

She was holding the cigarette between her index and middle fingers.

The musician, who had a boyish head (even though he had gone bald), came down the staircase of the opera house in his turn.

He looked at Ann Hidden, standing still on the stairs, toying with her match and cigarette full in the light, playing with her cigarette as though she were playing the piano.

He went up to her.

‘I really must say good evening to my good fairy.’
‘My rescuer!’
They embraced.
‘Have you come back to the island?’
‘Here I am,’ said Ann.
‘Have you seen Leonhardt again?’
‘He doesn’t know I’m here.’

Then Ann Hidden grasped the hand of Charles Chenogne and asked him, almost feverishly: ‘Where is she living? Have you seen her again?’

‘Juliette’s settled in Montreal,’ he said. ‘I don’t know any more than that.’

She squeezed his arm without a word and walked away.

It didn’t even occur to him to ask if she’d like him to drive her home. He watched her disappear. She hadn’t grown particularly talkative in her old age.

He went looking for his car in the little lanes.

*

‘The shower’s stopped working!’

Georges stood naked before her, protecting his modesty with his towel. He seemed lost. He was looking hopefully at Ann. Looking at her as though she were the world’s greatest plumber.

‘The shower’s stopped working,’ he repeated very quietly.

‘There are jugs in the kitchen,’ she said.

‘Or there’s the hosepipe,’ she added.
‘Yes, that’ll be quicker.’
She held the pipe and he screamed while she hosed him down as gently as possible.

* 
They ended up loving each other. They didn’t love each other sexually. But they did truly love each other. They loved each other the way two six-year-old children would have loved each other.

In the eyes of children, to love is to watch over. To watch over sleep, allay fears, give consolation where there are tears, care where there is illness, caress the skin, wash it, wipe it, clothe it.

To love the way one loves children is to save from death.

Not dying means feeding.

On this last point, he loved her even more than she ever loved him.

* 
He began his pleading once more.

‘We’re the same age, we have the same past, we had the same schooling . . . ’

‘Not quite.’

‘. . . the same primary schooling, to put it more precisely. We learnt to read together. We learnt to count together. We learnt our notes together. We had the same schoolmistresses.’
‘If you think I don’t know where you’re going with this!’

‘I’ll go on, all the same. Our tastes are related, if not similar, our understanding’s . . .’

‘. . . perfect. Really perfect, quite impeccable, as soon as you stop talking.’

‘Our mothers abandoned us in this remnant of a world, in this fine mess of a world, almost the same year.’

‘It’s true that we no longer really have families.’

‘We have no heirs.’

‘I can already see you’re steering the conversation in a tendentious direction.’

‘Someone would have reason to think of me after my death, and that would be you.’

*

He had gone travelling in March. That at least was what he told her, as she was in Sydney for the last recording she wanted to make. He had come home even more exhausted. He had placed his finger on her lips. He grasped her hands. She was so surprised by the state she found him in that she didn’t know what to say. She hadn’t seen anything so rapid coming. She probably hadn’t wanted to see anything coming that was like this. He had taken her by the hand and said: ‘Don’t say anything.’

He lay down on one of the divans in the living room.
‘Please don’t say anything. I beg you, feign indifference. I’m going to have to bring all my things down by the bed. We’re going to have to get organized.’

‘Of course.’

‘Will you help me a bit?’

She nodded, being incapable of speaking.

He went on: ‘We’re going to get married. Just as you dedicate everything you compose and write to the little one, I feel I need everything to be dedicated to you if I’m to live a little longer. For me to have a happy end. I need you, Éliane. I need you for everything to go painlessly. We won’t speak of any of this again.’

‘Marriage doesn’t . . . ’

‘I beg you. Let’s not quibble over words—love, marriage, fusion, symbiosis. The other person’s need for oneself takes over an old realm where none of these names had currency. Do you accept?’

In the end, she accepted. In the end, she discovered he was partly right. The other’s desire for oneself created a realm which, when it disappeared, brought overwhelming sorrow.
She liked to be ahead of time at airports—to hang around, shop, read, meditate, daydream in a carefree way, with no fear of lateness, no hurry. She couldn’t mess up ‘leaving’. She liked to leave. It was so thrilling to have the certainty of departure. She closed the door of the Gumpendorf hut. It was six in the morning. The sky was cloudless. Day was just barely breaking. The mist was beginning to rise weakly above the water. She wouldn’t make any noise. She certainly wouldn’t wake Georges as he had asked her to.

She’d telephone for the Teilly taxi and it would take her to Sens station.

She’d catch the first train.

She preferred to be ahead of time at the airport.
She’d read a score in the big cold chairs at the boarding gates rather than force herself to leaf through it here distractedly, fearing she might not be on time.

She left the little ivy-clad house, walked through the rose garden, strode out onto the least dew-soaked edge of the lawn.

In the distance she saw the light of the living room already on. She saw Georges reading near the standard lamp and the window. He must have forced himself to wake up earlier so as not to miss her departure for New York.

Through the window she could see his face bent over the book he was reading, lit by the lamp.

She went over.

She tapped lightly on the window, but clearly he was engrossed in his reading and didn’t respond to her knocking. She went in, putting her bag and keys down in the corridor. She pushed open the living-room door.

Georges, sitting by the window at the far end of the room, didn’t look up.

She tiptoed over, so as to kiss him without waking him. But he was strangely still. She placed a hand on his forehead. It was freezing cold. The book fell from his hands. She picked it up, then she herself suddenly dropped down to sit on the floor, taking her friend’s stiff hands in hers.

She stayed like that for a moment, her head completely empty.

*
She walked the gendarme back to his police car out in the street. She came back. The door of the next-door house was wide open. A thin, white-haired old man was standing there, wearing a white, loose-knit cotton pullover, sweeping brush in hand.

He came out on to the roadway.

‘Is something wrong?’

At that point she broke down in tears and stammered that Georges Roehlinger was dead.

*

Her nose was running. Her face was puffed up. She was sitting on a white stool in Monsieur Delaure’s magnificent steel kitchen.

There was a smell of coffee. And, behind the coffee, Dutch tobacco, a mix of bleach and mothballs.

They were both of them watching the coffee as it bubbled up miraculously in the glass coffee-maker.

She saw the reflection of her face everywhere—on the aluminium panels, the white porcelain tiles, the glass door of the oven. Never in her life had she seen such a clean kitchen.

‘You’re his wife?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you alone?’

She didn’t understand. The old man repeated: ‘Are you alone?’

‘What do you mean?’
‘You don’t have any children?’
‘That’s right.’
‘So, you’re alone.’
‘I’ve left the house open!’ she suddenly screamed.
She dashed out. She didn’t go and catch the plane. She stayed.

It was Monsieur Delaure who helped her with all the paperwork. She wasn’t grieving, but she was lost.
Old age and solitude made her bonier. Her body had become stiff. Her hair had turned completely white.

Once again she—radically—changed the way she dressed. With a wave of a magic wand, she was now in enormous skirts. She had to give up the faded grey jeans, the men’s white cotton shirts, Georges’s old leather jackets.

Lavish old second-hand clothes came rushing in—
silk jackets,
large pale overshirts,
big soft grey fleeces.

* 

There is a pleasure not in being alone but in being capable of being alone.
O Oh How I.
Katharine Philips sings, then she haunts you.
Then it all eventually grows fainter, quietens down.
Then everything falls silent.
Ann Hidden looks up towards the window.
It’s daylight now.
Everything’s so white.
‘I can no longer see the floor of my bedroom. I can no longer see either the ground or the bank. The mist is so slow to lift. Everything seems empty. Only the earth still smells a little—beneath the mist—when you tread it, when you trample the grass and tread the mud of the riverbank that crunches beneath the snow.’

It is past noon when the fog clears and the roofs appear, the electricity poles, the church towers, the little heads of the mallards.

Suddenly the sun streams in.
She has a frugal lunch (a little chicken pie) with a glass of wine (Épineuil). The Mauritian cleaner arrives.

Ann clears the table. She bumps into the circular tap, knocking off her brooch. The locket breaks open on the edge of the sink.

A little tooth falls out, bounces noiselessly and disappears into the waste-disposal unit.

‘What’s that? Was it a tooth?’ asks the cleaner.
‘No, no,’ mumbles Ann Hidden.
She closes the empty locket and escapes out into the garden.

290
She washes out the wheelbarrow with the garden hose.

*

Suddenly the sun lit up the lawn.

It touched the riverbank.

The bones became visible beneath the skin of her face.

She had her mother’s face in some ways. But her face was thinner than her mother’s at the same age. To those who didn’t know her, she was beautiful, but something severe and violent had appeared in her forehead and jaw. A woman behind stood ready to pounce—leaner, more emaciated than her mother and her grandmothers and her maternal great-grandmothers. When she smiled, her smile was exquisite but it was seen so rarely. Her large—enormous—teeth, very beautiful and very white, lit up everything but lit it with a cold light.

Pain, swimming, love, music and hunger had made her an intense woman.

She went out often. She had bought a studio flat near the Gare de Lyon. She was seen—noticed—at concerts, dressed always Japanese style—Yohji Yamamoto or Issey Miyake. People came over to say hello. She was preparing to sell Teilly.

It was summer. It was evening. She was leaning over beside the Yonne in the shadow of the Gumpendorf, its whitewash now yellowed and cracked. She was throwing the leftover bread to the ducks and swans which hurried
toward her in the silence that lay on the surface of the
dark water. A dog barked. Suddenly she thought of
Magdalena Radnitzky. She would have been sixteen
years old. She would have rushed out in a flannelette
nightgown with her wet hair, she would have run up
behind her, shouting, saying . . .

Suddenly a bell rang out to her left.

It was an old barge, a craft from another age that
came sailing up. Dutch people touring the Burgundy
canals. They went by shouting and waving to everyone.

She sat down slowly on the steps to watch them
pass.

The muddy water of the Yonne lapped against the
quayside and the rings. She was sitting there in the sun,
as Giulia had once done with her legs dangling in the
blue water of the Mediterranean a few feet below the
cheap tavern. The water wasn’t so attractive here. The
summer not so hot. She no longer had the force to get
up, walk, run, leave, die. Here, she was beginning to be
afraid of the sun. Over there, when they were together,
when they were all three of them living together, they
were never afraid of the sun, all three of them curled up
in their recliners, all three of them drinking iced water
in big, steamed-up glass bottles on the terrace at the top
of the hill—in paradise.