

1. Tomec, Sarah, Mathieu, Jacques.

In pursuit of clarity, some pray, some drink, some fast, some dance, some mortify the flesh: Tomec stripped naked and made for his evening shower much earlier than he needed to, luxuriating in its steam, adopting beneath the pelting water the meditative pose of the male primate. His broad feet were slightly splayed, his right hand tugged gingerly at his sore, limp penis, while his left hand, instead of supporting his chin, scratched insistently away at its stubble – more neurotic than thoughtful, more rodent than Rodin. After a moment, he resumed soaping himself, wincing childlike.

Tomec wanted to put pictures to an account he had been reading of the death of Virgil. He needed to see the event in order to paint it and to paint it in order to sculpt it. First he would conjure into existence the foggy, muddy quayside in Brundisium to which the Roman poet was supposedly brought by ship, and its throng of people, animals and detritus. That much ought to be easy.

Gripping a bar of soap in his left hand, his arms fell to his sides, and his head tipped back. His mind felt dull and grey, his limbs weary. He blew out his cheeks and opened his eyes so wide that his crows' feet flattened to faint lines. Staring into the water that the aluminium showerhead was shooting like needles into his face, he marshalled a miscellany of features from the faces of childhood friends and later acquaintances, half-remembered family, and the men he saw each night at work. He passed them in review: eyes, noses, chins, foreheads, cheeks, mouths and ears. From such scraps might a multitude be furnished. But the fog failed to lift.

Tomec's belly distended, his penis wagged, and an uneven stream of urine was mixed with the water, turning the shower tray a billowing yellow that darkened then faded, darkened then faded. Within Tomec's mind something distinct was stirring: a shuffling of feet, a promise of people. He longed to stare into the faces of the crowd. He wanted to take possession.

Tomec's skin relaxed, his wrinkles grew back their steep sides, and a smile leapt from eyes to dimpling cheeks. Upon his imagination there now advanced images of the 'surf of people' that lapped around the Roman poet as he was borne shoulder-high from the ship. The 'brooding mass-beast' was emerging from that winter's evening gloom, its innumerable heads looming into focus, submitting to Tomec's gaze. Each shape grew just sharp enough to suggest a temperament, an occupation, the sketch of a past, a character

sufficiently sheathed in living skin to be loathed or liked, admired or scorned.

Where have these forms come from? Tomec wondered as he peered at the fading figments. My own life? Drawn from features I have robbed from my friends, family or clan? There isn't one of these creatures I would call my own.

Rubbing the soap to foam on his hairy belly, the naked man broke into a long guffaw. Clan indeed! Family! All such ties are long since buried in the northern, barbarian reaches of this feud-frozen continent, far enough from ancient Brundisium. And what a pitiful, scurvy mob it was that met the poet's dying gaze on that wintry quayside!

Settling the soap on a ledge, Tomec tried again, beckoning clumsily, half-closing his eyes: show yourselves, come now! I want each one of you so neat and sharp I can smell your breath, read your fetid lives from your faces. I want to know your appetites, thrill to the filthiest of your inclinations. If once I can grip their faces vice-like in the eye of my mind, I know I can draw them, nail them to the board, sculpt the swine. If for one instant, I could pluck Virgil's eyes from his skull and glimpse that crowd I swear I would immortalize it before I die.

Tomec peered straight ahead, then down at the knuckles of his toes clawing at the corrugated white enamel. The current swirled his sparse brown hair into a monk's mop, while the neon light picked out stray white strands. Glancing up again as if alerted by some sound, Tomec caught the faces advancing through the steam toward him, stumbling upon the squint of his mind's eye, clearer now than before, appearing both hostile and, in spite of the man's vaudeville of invitation, still shambling. He chuckled as he soaped as he saw. I have visions, he muttered. It is about time. I am a man possessed!

And possessing? he wondered, snagged like a fish hooked from a river, thrashing airborne on a barbed word, while time swerved and stopped.

For down the contingent corridor, in a space that served as studio, kitchen and bedroom, Sarah sat naked, straight-backed and cross-legged on a mussed bed, sipping from a glass of green tea, taking care not to ingest the leaves and lemon flotsam that bobbed on its surface. Her brow was knit, her breath short and her lips pursed, as if to bestow a kiss: she too was on the brink of some revelation.

In a corner, on the floor, a gramophone grated with modern opera. While the instruments crescendoed and faded and the voices plummeted, soared, and in one case merely droned, emotion set the young woman's chestnut curls swaying. She turned and gazed as the arm rose from the disc's centre

and with a clicking and a clanking travelled to its edge, dithering before it dropped back onto vinyl, adding the crackle of nominal silence to the machine whirr. The music began again and the woman brushed away a tear. Einziger, ewiger, allgegenwärtiger und unvorstellbarer Gott . . . , the voice intoned. God, unique, eternal, ever-present . . . Sarah frowned. A thought was struggling to be born.

What remains of Moses's visionary passion and Aaron's slick oratory once God has quit the scene? Like siblings who lose the engine of their rivalry when their parent dies, how can Moses remain the seer and Aaron the crowdpleaser once God is dead or dethroned by incredulity? Or does God, like the dead parent, linger, a curmudgeonly vestige, breathing fusty life into the conflict and clash of sons? Sarah's head was beginning to pound. A sigh escaped her lips.

Sucking on her teeth, she produced a small sibilant sound: tse. Her tongue discovered, flush to the enamel, a filament of tea that her right hand, with little finger deployed, now rose to dislodge. She scrutinized the morsel, flapping like seaweed against the pink rock of her cuticle, then flicked it away with her thumb. Attending to the music once again, her face was, for a long moment, quite, quite inane. She shifted and fidgeted, then brightened with sudden transport.

How wonderful, she reflected, that arid serialist precepts should beget such melody! But then was the composer not a romantic at heart, steeped in Brahms and Haydn? Ought not all art to be like this? Mosaic in its bluff single-mindedness, eschewing the dulcet ruses of Aaron? At this notion, a plump tear welled in her right eye and rollicked down her cheek, dribbling a path to one side of her mouth. Her tongue flicked out to catch the tear. How pure it tastes! Saltier than the deadest sea!

Frowning prettily, Sarah reached for a notebook that lay face-down on the blanket. She lifted her pencil, cocked her head to one side and blinked twice at the page. Words or images, images or words, which should it be? There is no time to waste. Yet time stood frozen. Tomorrow I may be dead, may I not? For ever and ever and ever. She drew a deep breath and held it. Eine Ewigkeit. Her pencil was poised. Just imagine.

On that particular evening, in a factory close to the centre of Grandgobier, a short stroll from the train station, Mathieu, the foreman on the night shift, was picking his way toward the din and glare of the plastics section. By his

wristwatch, it had just turned nine o'clock. On either side of his path rose grey, greasy machinery, a serried herd of dormant hulks that stood in the shadows and dripped oil unobserved.

Most of the workers on the shift would not show up until minutes or even seconds before they had to clock on at 21.25, and some – Jacques and Alphonse, but possibly Bobrán too – might even arrive late, forfeiting a quarter of an hour's pay. They often did that. Mathieu wondered why, then, with a lift of his eyebrows, pushed the thought away. He quickened his pace. The foreman had to be there early: it was his job to debrief the engineers from the afternoon shift. If some of the workers sometimes came late and lost money, that was their problem. Mathieu was nobody's mother, nobody's nanny. (But Nadine? What of Nadine? I should like to dedicate the next piece to Nadine, who sadly can't be with us this evening. It's by Clifford Brown, who never grew old.)

Mathieu walked with a limp, leaning forward, yet advanced without weaving, dwarfed by the machines, tracing a clean dark line through the metals workshop. On the floor lay old wooden trays glinting with the day's angle pieces, screw-plates, cross-members. Mathieu air-trumpeted the opening bars of a tune he had been practising that afternoon: 'Brownie Speaks' by Clifford Brown. Do-bah, de-de-bah! do-bah-bah! Bah! Mathieu caressed the phrases, in homage to the dead and the dying.

An ancient yawning hold-all with a trailing broken zip, containing a paper, his midnight snack and a bottle of beer, was slung over Mathieu's left shoulder and clamped in place by a mangled left hand, leaving his right hand free to work the valves, blocking and unblocking them with deft jabs and flicks. His lips, blowing through sparse white stubble, spat out the scatted notes of a spiralling solo, as he sought communion with the jazzman's spirit: Bah! De-bah! De-de-de-de, Bah-de! 'Brownie Speaks,' and I speak back. Why did you die so young, Clifford, when you had so much to live for? (An image of Nadine, young and skinny, her hair cropped close.) Not that dying is something to eke out. (Nadine, here and now, and so thoroughly squandered.) But to die when you have a lifetime of blowing still to do. Clifford is silent as the grave, makes no reply. Dead as dead.

Memory-portraits of Mathieu's wife, snaps from a vivid past and a deathlike present, seethed through his mind and were cast aside, heaved into a shallow grave, from which they restlessly arose, returning, undead, hardening

into a scar the stain that over years had formed in his mind, thickening to a canker the knowledge that he had to do something about her, and soon. (Her lovely face, through all those years, when she could laugh, lovelier still when her lines turned to furrows, her hair to silver.) Nadine couldn't be left in this state. It was an affront to her memory, a daily dereliction. It was ruining his life too – as she would have been quick to point out. Seven years already, since that first unlucky stroke, that first-last day. He had done the mourning, he had grieved and he had wept. It was time she died. (When we were young, the nape of her neck, its scent, my hands in her back, her hair rippling like runs of high notes on a piano, falling over my face like a dry spray of leaves.) Who can say what deaths we'll have to die? Mathieu thought. Maybe Clifford was lucky in his car crash. It must have been quick as a riff, as a lick. Wa-wah-wah! A climax with hi-hat, throbbing bass and cymbals. Then silence.

Now the clatter of twenty-plus injection presses came closer, and Mathieu required more volume to cut through the backing. He oiled his lip with spittle, signed off his solo with a flourish, and reprised the head, laying back against the notes, understating the tune, letting it hover like a phantom whose outline you long to see more clearly. He *speaks*, all right. Bu-Wa, Bah! Bah! It was Clifford's but now it's mine and it's free to everyone who wants a piece of it. A quick crescendo and a coda, then a dream of applause, people jumping to their feet and clapping, their hands above their heads, Nadine smiling through the smoke, somewhere in New York, proud. Mathieu pulled a wry smile. He played well, he knew he did, but nobody had ever leapt to their feet. Patted his back, maybe. Bought him a drink. Paid him a compliment.

Reaching the hanging flaps of scratched plastic that curtained the entrance to the plastics section, Mathieu slid his air-trumpet onto an imaginary stand and pushed through into the din, warmth and smells of sizzling polymers. His blue watery eyes blinked in the fumes and glare.

He screwed those faint eyes now into a slowly ratcheting focus and peered down the aisle that separated the rows of machines, spotting several workers who shook their heads at him by way of greeting. He inclined his head in minute acknowledgement. Others were too busy cleaning their machines or packing up boxes of product to note his arrival.

One of the workers, a North African, a woman whom he had sometimes encountered in the street where he lived, hurried past him with a sheet of cardboard and a sticky-tape dispenser, extending a free left arm that Mathieu

grasped briefly in his right hand, squeezing it slightly: B'soir! they mouthed in near-unison. She was always a fraction friendlier than she needed to be. Mathieu appreciated that.

As every evening, the familiarity of this place, a home from home, cheered and infuriated him. A voice within him muttered: here we go again.

The nearest machine, number fourteen, was stopped, the red light on the top of its control cabinet lit up. He had better take a look. He moved toward it and clicked his tongue. (Was Nadine sleeping now or still staring at the wall-mounted TV, saliva seeping from her mouth?) The press was open and an engineer – young and lanky, with a thick moustache – was leaning into it from the other side, scratching his head with one hand, and prodding at the mould with a pair of fine pliers. Alongside him, the afternoon machine operator was taping up boxes, keeping out of the way, as though it were his vocation to go unnoticed.

Luigi, the evening-shift worker in charge of machines thirteen and fourteen, had just arrived and was lowering his old leather satchel onto the floor by the side of control cabinet fourteen. Moving closer to the engineer, he caught a glimpse of the night foreman through the halted press. Mathieu tapped at his watch, shook his head and performed a perfunctory grin: 'earlier than ever!' it seemed to say. Luigi bared his teeth, removed two packs of Nazionali and a pack of Gitanes Maïs from the pocket of his bomber jacket, and turned his attention to the control cabinet: pressures, timings, temperatures, numbers, gauges, dials.

The engineer, now aware of Mathieu's arrival, transferred his cigarette stub to his mouth so he could extend his right hand through the press. Meeting it halfway with his own right hand, Mathieu jerked his head sharply up and back and toward the control panel, in curt interrogation, his red-lidded eyes blinking. (Nadine, just lying there, her eyes closing slowly.)

Ejector pins, the engineer answered. Mathieu aimed a quizzical nod down the aisle. All okay at present, replied the engineer, who then frowned hard, staring darkly at the ground, as if searching out a pattern. Number two's on a new mould, he said at last. Need to watch it, pressure's unstable. (Nadine had been clean and dry when he had left her, but was she even now straining to shit, her vacant face contorting?)

Mathieu nodded his thanks, while the blunt ring finger of his mutilated left hand rose to the centre of his forehead where its corrugated nail probed a patch of psoriasis, dislodging some scales. What about Seventeen? he asked.

Mathieu watched as the engineer sucked hard on his dead cigarette, his cheeks coning into his mouth, then drew a lighter from the pocket of his overalls and flicked it into flame. (Nadine never smoked. Filthy habit, she always said.) Fixed it this afternoon, the engineer said, sure of himself. Mathieu felt that old smoker's pang and reached into his trouser pocket to grip the matchbox he kept there. At the same time, he raised his eyebrows at the engineer's confidence. Well, for now, the engineer conceded, with a dull grin.

Mathieu walked to the clocking-on machine, removed his card from the rack, and clocked on. Nine-oh-two. Could be a regular night. Could be easy. Which could prove difficult. Might have time to do too much thinking. About Nadine. Nadine that was. Ex-Nadine. (Nadine as he had snapped her on the boat they hired one summer in Sète, leaning on the rails, peering down at the water, her mind weakened, but still quite happy with itself.)

There were hands and arms to grab and shake on his way to the aluminium stairs that led up to the glass-fronted office. On the top step, he put down his bag, hauled a key from a trouser pocket and opened the door. From inside the office he could look out over the entire shop floor, straight down the machine aisle. All that Mathieu surveyed was his for the next eight hours. It wasn't much but it was more than he required. The only light that was on was at number fourteen. The engineer had let his cigarette go out again and was standing squinting at the dials on the control panel, his head to one side, the little finger of his left hand probing his right ear.

The workers were finishing up now, humping or trolleying their boxes of product to the pile in the raw-materials annexe, changing into street clothes, combing their hair, loosening or tightening their belts a notch. He espied one of the women adjusting her face in a compact mirror. She probably doesn't realize there is someone up here who can see her. She might not mind if she did. She doesn't need to. She's nice-looking, the way women mostly are when they keep their figures into their fifties. There was something in her lithe movements that made him feel lonely. (Nadine at that age. Never more beautiful. He wasn't going to think of that. He didn't want that image. Not now.)

Mathieu reached beneath the formica-topped desk for a Prisunic plastic bag, from which he extracted his work clothes. He changed slowly, humming 'Brownie Speaks,' but with less commitment now, and then saw Nadine again, as he had left her late that afternoon: supine, expressionless, gone. Gone? Gone where? Just gone. Extinct but still breathing. Ex-Nadine. An

engineer coming down the aisle between the machines smiled up at him and Mathieu lifted his left claw in minimal salute. Who was that guy? The engineer winked at him and grinned like a fool. Mathieu stared back, biting into the matchstick in his mouth. What does he want? The woman I have loved for thirty years doesn't give me that much recognition or get much more from me nowadays: I've given up on her, I suppose. Lost faith? Lost love, more like. If my love for her has gone, it's only because she has gone. That's the truth. I have no affection to spare on engineers whose names I can't remember.

He proceeded with his changing, glancing down at his blue-veined legs, almost hairless now. The work trousers scratched as he pulled them up and he tugged tight but not too tight the length of coarse string that served as a belt, recalling the pork-belly stew and steaming choucroute he had eaten early that evening, some of which he'd attempted to spoon-feed Nadine. He felt a stirring in his gut. No, not too tight, that belt. The choucroute had been over-spiced and over-vinegary. Could cause trouble.

He put on his old work sandals and glanced at his watch. It had been a present from Nadine, how many years ago? From some time before. Before what? Before she began to stop being herself. The memory of before had become routine, shrinking to a handful of mostly still images. Curious the way a memory as it fades retraces the history of cinema in reverse: from complex, colour sequencing with wrap-around audio and visceral impact; to the gaudy hues of early Technicolor; to the jerky montage of black-and-white talkies, people's movements all wrong, either silly or strutting; thence to a handful of separate stills, immaculately posed; finally, a scuffed daguerreotype. Though Nadine was still officially extant, Mathieu had already reached the stills stage: Nadine with an umbrella on the Pont-Neuf; Nadine at Canet-Plage that other long, earlier, stormier summer, after he left the army. (She shielded her eyes from the noonday sun and smiled for the camera – a Zeiss, he recalled, that he had taken from a German.) So that was the way it was back then, and this is the way it is now. What endured was the solitary recollection of things they had enjoyed together, he and Nadine. Ex-Nadine.

Mathieu transferred his matchbox and Opinel penknife to the right-hand pocket of his trousers and rolled his shirtsleeves up to his biceps with the stern application of a man who wasn't ever going to tolerate them working loose. What oddly hairless arms I have now. Why am I losing my body hair as I age? He scanned the shop floor and pulled a face. Strange where you feel

at ease. Doesn't seem right. His two favourite places: the factory at the start of a night and a jazz venue at the end of a gig. Surrounded by people and quite alone. Locked in, but free.

He reached into his pocket and brought out the matchbox. Then he struck a match, blew it out, placed the unburned end between his pursed lips and stood up carefully, pushing off from his good right knee only. His mouth and teeth worked round the match as he opened the door. Dum ching bash-bash. Into the rhythmic din of the injection presses, down the steps, on with the night shift. Dum ching bash. A place beyond Nadine: here we go, then. Me, fronting up the rhythm section; drummer sounding like he's building a six-foot fence. Into my solo, on cue. Bar one, on the downbeat. Mathieu chewed on his match and sucked all the bitterness from the cellulose pulp.

Forty kilometres away, on a hilltop road, Jacques glanced up at the rear-view mirror as he swung his lurching grey 2CV onto the main road, leaving his village behind him, passing its crossed-out name on a road sign in the grass verge.

He was going to be late again, but Philippe would be there to clock him on. Philippe only ever missed Mondays and today was a Tuesday. Jacques wanted to relax, settle into the ride, enjoy the lulling, rollicking, rolling feel of the journey.

Before it was too late to turn back, he ran a mental check: yes, he had left the back door bolted; yes, he had closed the shutters when it had got dark; no, he had not forgotten to bring his packed meal with him. In fact, he had forgotten nothing. It was all right now to submit to the gentle bouncing, rocking motion of the car.

On the seat next to him sat an old leather satchel containing his wine gourd and a plastic box into which he had packed a sharp knife, a large apple brought down by yesterday's storm, a hunk of bread, the end of a fragrant heel of smoked ham, and some of his own sheep's cheese. As well as a cushion, there was a large bag full of windfall apples on the back seat: Philippe, for a start, would want some. Jacques didn't always have ham. He would be eating well tonight. Next to the plastic box was a crisp white paper bag with the green pharmacy symbol on it. For a second, the grin that Jacques' face habitually wore vanished. Then it returned. Fret about that later, he told himself.

Somebody blinded him, switching their lights to full beam as they came

up opposite. Probably the village mayor. Usually was. Nice enough man. Jacques had nothing against incomers, though this one was too keen to please: all things to all villagers. Or was it someone else who had flashed him? Was it perhaps a warning? Might there be a speed trap around the corner? Not that Jacques need worry. You couldn't speed in this crock even if you wanted to. Besides, he was in no hurry to be anywhere. Where he was headed, he had been a thousand times and more already. Five years of it now. He wasn't about to go anywhere new.

Jacques glanced at the fuel gauge, then at his watch, then he let his big body slacken and slump into the tub-like seat, his knees splaying apart. His mind voided, just holding on to the road, the familiar rattles of the car, and the surrounding mountains, already white almost halfway down. Another couple of weeks and he would be driving along gritted roads, between low walls of dirty snow and ice, the collar of his thick jacket turned up. Citroën radiators are crap, his son-in-law had once told him. Know-all prick. Jacques chuckled, then let off a slow, rippling fart, content with the relief it gave him.

Disconcerted by the after-image that the pharmacy symbol had left vagrant in his mind, Jacques glanced again at the paper bag. Still sitting there stiffly, with its hint of starched hospital sheets. Should have thrown the prescription in a drawer and forgotten about it. Bloody quack. He pulled a face. Only went to see her because Jeanne said I should. Hadn't seen the inside of a doctor's surgery in thirty years, and none the worse for it. And now a decision has to be reached, damn it.

What was it the doctor said? I had asked her was she sure it was okay to take the tablets, given I'm not in the pill-popping habit. And she looked me up and down and said that at my age I shouldn't be troubled by any side effects. She talked about disease and illness. While I waited for her to finish, I stared at that mangy stinking dog of hers stretched out on that scrap of colourless carpet with its back against the wall radiator and its hairy old chest in full view. Besides, she was saying, I'm not sure you've got much choice. You've got high blood pressure. Which has been neglected for years. Look, Monsieur, if you want to see your grandson grow up . . . You just follow my advice and take the tablets like it says on the box and come back for a check-up in a couple of months. Okay? With that be-a-good-boy-and-do-what-Mummy-says tone of voice. She wasn't asking me if it was 'okay': she was telling me. So I handed over the money and left.

Clear view tonight over the town. Can see right across it, side to side,

but not down into it: can't pierce that yellow smog-cap just hanging there. Round another bend and the city's gone. And then it's back again. Now you see it, now you don't. I'm a bit old for that. Anyway, you really feel the curves in a *deux-chevaux*, which is exactly what I like about it. Plus it's cheap to run and easy to fix, a tent strapped to a lawnmower, who was it said that? Nothing like the pointy, flashy things they're making nowadays, all gadgetry and aerodynamics and expensive glitches.

The doctor asked a good question, though. Even if she didn't mean to. Do I want to see my grandson grow up? As it happens, not much. Not the way he's turning out. He's getting more and more like his father, the dull prick. Edith wouldn't have liked to hear me say that about little Simon. He was such a sweet child. Reminded everyone of Edith. It was as if Edith's fine features and sweet character had skipped a generation, missed Brigitte completely, and surfaced in Simon. There was nothing of me to see in him, which was fine. Edith always said we should never have let Brigitte leave home so young, but how could we stop her? It was the sixties already, right? She fell in with the wrong sort: trainee bankers and budding office execs. Big-city types with small minds. Miserable swine, grasping hypocrites kidding nobody. Jacques laughed heartily as he reminisced, shaking his head in unquenchable astonishment at the pinched misery of the rich. Why the hell couldn't Brigitte have taken up with some ordinary pot-smoking, down-and-out anarchist-artist type – like everybody else's daughter did those days? That way the grandchild would have turned out okay just as sure as the son-in-law would one day have thrown away his sandals, cut off his hair and got a regular job teaching.

When Jacques had got home from the pharmacy, he had taken his glasses from the dresser, wiped them scrupulously, drawn up a chair and sat down at the oak table in his kitchen. He had taken the packet out of its paper bag, opened it carefully at one end and extracted the notes. There was no need to rush. Stress was bad for blood pressure, right? He read the notice. Dose. Counter-indications. Directions for Use. All very doctorly. Huh, here it comes: side effects. And there it was. Right at the end of a long list: erectile dysfunction, sexual problems in men, risk of impotence. *Merde, merde et merde!* Impotence!

Goddamn cow of a doctor. What had she said? That I wasn't likely to be troubled by any side effects at my age? She probably had that poor miserable dog of hers neutered; chemically no doubt, since she wouldn't have either

the qualification or the steadiness of eye to wield a scalpel. Poor mutt, lying there with its back against the radiator, a dead dick between its legs, glazed eyes half-open, longing for the lethal injection. That must be what made it look that way. Indigestion, halitosis, impotence and depression. It stank out her surgery. Poor wee thing. If I had had the opportunity, I could have been a vet, Jacques said to himself. I have a genuine feel for animals.

Hah! There they are, lying in wait behind that hillock, the speed cops, hiding their radar behind a thicket of bushes. Keeping us guessing. Never seen them there before. They must be under pressure to deliver some fines, earn some commission. Christmas is coming.

Jacques flashed his lights to full beam a couple of times to warn oncoming drivers to ease off the accelerator.

He glanced again at the package. Looks innocent enough, lying there on the seat. What if I take half the dosage the doctor recommended? Would that do the trick and avoid the side effects? Or would it give me a half-life plus a dick stuck at half-mast? All she knows is that Edith died a while ago. Seventeen months, almost to the day. Can't know about me and Jeanne, then. Thought everyone in the village knew. To hell with them, to hell with them all. Or maybe she does know and doesn't give a damn either way. Or disapproves even. Thinks old people shouldn't be getting any. I bet she never gets laid, the sourpuss. The mean, fuckless type. Jacques smiled benevolently.

Jeanne was good to him, they had always been friendly. But he had never expected her to want him in her bed. He liked to remember how it had happened. It made him feel warm, made his eyes feel sparkly and his lips separate slightly and tingle. He raised his forefinger to rub them gently.

They had been playing cards in her kitchen for an hour or two after supper, the way they always did on Saturdays and Sundays after Edith died, because on those evenings Jacques didn't have to go to work. At about eleven thirty, much later than usual – perhaps she had been thinking about it, perhaps that is why he kept winning – she said as she dealt the cards, I think we'll make this the last game tonight, Jacques, but you can stop here with me. Just like that. Matter-of-fact. Then, in case I hadn't got the message: 'in my bed.' She gave me this bashful grin and breathed out as if to say, I'm glad that's done with and there's not going to be any argument. I was choked. She won the next game, no mistake. I hadn't been expecting anything. It's not as if I was lonely. I missed Edith, but I could have slept on my own happily enough for the rest of my days. That would have been a shame, now I think of it.

She gathered up the cards and put them in a stack on her dresser. Then she marched to the door and shot the bolt. As if I might make a run for it. I was on my feet, shifting my weight from foot to foot, feeling stupid, not knowing how to put it. Well? she said, looking at me. So I told her how I needed the antiseptic for my dentures. And a glass. I've thought about that, she said with a bigger grin than before. I went to the pharmacist's this morning and asked what brand you use. You should have seen their faces. They made me repeat the question. For the benefit of the other customers, no doubt. It wasn't as if I had whispered it in the first place. Pathetic. Like buying something for someone's dentures was an intimate act, a scandal. The pharmacist's wife asked if you were well and I said, Never better, and then the new girl behind the counter broke into giggles, bless her.

All we did do that night was sleep and the next few times too. Didn't even cuddle. Just a goodnight peck, much like the ones we would have exchanged at the door if I had been going home. Till one night it just didn't seem right to leave it at that.

And maybe it wouldn't matter if that's what we returned to . . . if the old boy collapsed along with my blood pressure. Maybe I should ask Jeanne. Would she mind much? But what could she possibly say in reply? And what exactly would I ask? How could I put it? How would you like it if I couldn't get it up any more? It isn't something we've ever talked about. Haven't needed to. She likes making love all right, though of course she never says so. But a man can tell. Sometimes, Sunday mornings mainly, when we have made love the night before, she will get up early and potter about the bedroom singing softly, or hum a little as she opens the shutters. Maybe she just likes opening shutters. No, you can tell. Jacques grinned in the dark of his draughty 2CV. Humming: that's the giveaway.

Better concentrate on the road here. Saw one hell of an accident, when was it? While ago. It's four lanes now. In each direction. That many cars. Mustn't miss the turning. Been doing nights for how many years? Four? Five? And I still missed the turning, when was it? A few weeks ago? A few months? Ended up on a street full of burnt-out cars. This job blurs time. Sometimes time races away from you, leaving a kind of smudge; other times it just stands still. No way to remember exactly where it was either. No landmarks down here. Everywhere looks the same. Flat outskirts where the countryside sort of gives up, then a mess of high-rises, a lot of badly made roads stiffly intersecting at right angles, patches of billowing smog, billboards with gaudy

advertises coming unstuck at the edges. How do people live down here in all this filth, and breathe this soupy gunk they still call air?

He thought of some of his workmates. Didn't Dos Santos have a room in a worker's hostel near here? Funny that story he told the other night, or other week, about the girls that work the hostel. Wonder if he made it up. Wouldn't put it past him. Promised I'd bring him a rabbit one evening. He'll take some of these apples, and enjoy them too. Real country boy. And then there's that guy from the Ivory Coast. He lives round here too, somewhere. In fact, maybe he lives in the same hostel. How come I never thought of that? Might explain why he and Dos Santos often come to work together. I must ask Jeanne's neighbour if he can spare me a couple of rabbits: I'm sure Jeanne would like one too. I'll do that tomorrow. Without fail. If I remember. Funny idea that, sparing a rabbit. As if you could ever have too few rabbits on a farm. Well, maybe you could, maybe you could – if it was a rabbit farm.