

HARDY

ZOUC

BERTIER

SMKT

STORIES

WEEK 8

JEAN

BECKER

This book is dedicated to five friends who have taught us:

Théophile Jorat
Angeline Coudurier
André Coudurier
Théophile Gay
Marie Raymond

to the friends who have helped us learn:

Raymond Berthier, Luc and Marie-Thérèse Bertrand, Gervais and Méline Besson, Jean-Paul Besson, Denis Besson, Michel Besson, Gérard Besson, Christian Besson, Marius Chavanne, Roger and Noelle Coudurier, Michel Coudurier, La Doxie, Régis Duret, Gaston Forrestier, Marguerite Gay, Noel and Hélène Gay, Marcelle Gay, Jeanne Jorat, Armand Jorat, Daniel and Yvette Jorat, Norbert Jorat, Maurice and Claire Jorat, François and Germaine Malgrand, Francis and Joelle Malgrand, Marcel Nicoud, André Perret, Yves and Babette Peter, Jean-Marie and Josephine Pittet, Roger and Rolande Pittet, Bernadette Pittet, François Ramel, François and Léonie Raymond, Basil Raymond, Guy and Anne-Marie Roux, Le Violon, Walter

and to Beverly with whom I learn.

Introduction

"The earth shows up those of value and those who are good for nothing." A peasant judgement quoted by Jean Pierre Vernant in *Mythe et Pensée Chez les Grecs*. (Vol. 2. Paris 1971)

"The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power." Theodor Shanin. *Peasants and Peasant Societies*. (London 1976)

PEASANT LIFE is a life committed completely to survival. Perhaps this is the only characteristic fully shared by peasants everywhere. Their implements, their crops, their earth, their masters may be different, but whether they labour within a capitalist society, a feudal one or others which cannot be so easily defined, whether they grow rice in Java, wheat in Scandinavia or maize in South America, whatever the differences of climate, religion and social history, the peasantry everywhere can be defined as a class of survivors. For a century and a half now the tenacious ability of peasants to survive has confounded administrators and theorists. Today it can still be said that the majority in the world are peasants. Yet this fact masks a more significant one. For the first time ever it is possible that the class of survivors may not survive. Within a century there may be no more peasants. In Western Europe, if the plans work out as the economic planners have foreseen, there will be no more peasants within twenty-five years.

Until recently, the peasant economy was always an economy within an economy. This is what has enabled it to survive global

transformations of the larger economy—feudal, capitalist, even socialist. With these transformations the peasant's mode of struggle for survival often altered but the decisive changes were wrought in the methods used for extracting a surplus from him: compulsory labour services, tithes, rents, taxes, sharecropping, interests on loans, production norms, etc.

Unlike any other working and exploited class, the peasantry has always supported itself and this made it, to some degree, a class apart. In so far as it produced the necessary surplus, it was integrated into the historical economic-cultural system. In so far as it supported itself, it was on the frontier of that system. And I think one can say this, even where and when peasants make up the majority of the population.

If one thinks of the hierarchical structure of feudal or Asian societies as being roughly pyramidal, the peasantry were on the base frontier of the triangle. This meant, as with all frontier populations, that the political and social system offered them the minimum of protection. For this they had to look to themselves—within the village community and the extended family. They maintained or developed their own unwritten laws and codes of behaviour, their own rituals and beliefs, their own orally transmitted body of wisdom and knowledge, their own medicine, their own techniques and sometimes their own language. It would be wrong to suppose that all this constituted an independent culture, unaffected by the dominant one and by its economic, social or technical developments. Peasant life did not stay exactly the same throughout the centuries, but the priorities and values of peasants (their strategy for survival) were embedded in a tradition which outlasted any tradition in the rest of society. The undeclared relation of this peasant tradition, at any given moment, to the dominant class culture was often heretical and subversive. "Don't run away from anything," says the Russian peasant proverb, "but don't do anything." The peasant's universal reputation for cunning is a recognition of this secretive and subversive tendency.

No class has been or is more economically conscious than the peasantry. Economics consciously determines or influences every ordinary decision which a peasant takes. But his economics are

not those of the merchant, nor those of bourgeois or Marxist political economy. The man who wrote with most understanding about lived peasant economics was the Russian agronomist Chayanov. Anyone who wishes to understand the peasant should, among other things, go back to Chayanov.

The peasant did not conceive of what was extracted from him as a surplus. One might argue that the politically unconscious proletarian is equally unaware of the surplus value he creates for his employer, yet the comparison is misleading—for the worker, working for wages in a money economy, can be easily deceived about the value of what he produces, whereas the peasant's economic relation to the rest of society was always transparent. His family produced or tried to produce what they needed to live on, and he saw part of this produce, the result of his family's labour, being appropriated by those who had not laboured. The peasant was perfectly aware of what was being extracted from him, yet he did not think of this as a surplus for two reasons, the first material and the second epistemological. 1) It was not a surplus because his family needs had not already been assured. 2) A surplus is an end product, the result of a long-completed process of working and of meeting requirements. To the peasant, however, his enforced social obligations assumed the form of a *preliminary obstacle*. The obstacle was often insurmountable. But it was on the other side of it that the other half of the peasant economy operated, whereby his family worked the land to assure its own needs.

A peasant might think of his imposed obligations as a natural duty, or as some inevitable injustice, but in either case they were something which had to be endured *before* the struggle for survival opened. He had first to work for his masters, later for himself. Even if he were sharecropping, the master's share came *before* the basic needs of his family. If the work were not too light in the face of the almost unimaginable burden of labour placed on the peasant, one might say that his enforced obligations assumed the form of a permanent handicap. It was *despite this* that the family had to open the already uneven struggle with nature to gain by their own work their own subsistence.

Thus the peasant had to survive the permanent handicap of

having a "surplus" taken from him; he had to survive, in the subsistence half of his economy, all the hazards of agriculture—bad seasons, storms, droughts, floods, pests, accidents, impoverished soil, animal and plant diseases, crop failures; and furthermore, at the base frontier, with the minimum of protection, he had to survive social, political and natural catastrophes—wars, plagues, brigands, fire, pillaging, etc.

The word *survivor* has two meanings. It denotes somebody who has survived an ordeal. And it also denotes a person who has continued to live when others disappeared or perished. It is in this second sense that I am using the word in relation to the peasantry. Peasants were those who remained working, as distinct from the many who died young, emigrated or became paupers. At certain periods those who survived were certainly a *minority*. Demographic statistics give some idea of the dimensions of the disasters. The population of France in 1320 was seventeen million. A little over a century later it was eight million. By 1550 it had climbed to twenty million. Forty years later it fell to eighteen million.

In 1789 the population was twenty-seven million, of whom twenty-two million were rural. The revolution and the scientific progress of the nineteenth century offered the peasant land and physical protection such as he had not known before; at the same time they exposed him to capital and the market economy; by 1848 the great peasant exodus to the cities had begun and by 1900 there were only eight million French peasants. The deserted village has probably almost always been—and certainly is again today—a feature of the countryside: it represents a site of no survivors.

A comparison with the proletariat in the early stages of the industrial revolution may clarify what I mean by a class of survivors. The working and living conditions of the early proletariat condemned millions to early death or disabling illness. Yet the class as a whole, its numbers, its capacity, its power, was growing. It was a class engaged in, and submitting to, a process of continual transformation and increase. It was not the victims of its ordeals who determined its essential class character, as in a class of survivors, but rather its demands and those who fought for them.

From the eighteenth century onwards populations all over the world mounted, at first slowly and later dramatically. Yet for the peasantry this general experience of a new security of life could not overlay its class memory of earlier centuries, because the new conditions, including those brought about by improved agricultural techniques, entailed new threats: the large-scale commercialisation and colonialisation of agriculture, the inadequacy of ever smaller plots of land to support entire families, hence large-scale emigration to the cities where the sons and daughters of peasants were absorbed into another class.

The nineteenth-century peasantry was still a class of survivors, with the difference that those who disappeared were no longer those who ran away or who died as a result of famine and disease, but those who were forced to abandon the village and become wage earners. One should add that under these new conditions a few peasants became rich, but in doing so they also ceased, within a generation or two, to be peasants.

To say that peasants are a class of survivors may seem to confirm what the cities with their habitual arrogance have always said about peasants—that they are backward, a relic of the past. Peasants themselves, however, do not share the view of time implicit in such a judgement.

Inexhaustibly committed to wresting a life from the earth, bound to the present of endless work, the peasant nevertheless sees life as an interlude. This is confirmed by his daily familiarity with the cycle of birth, life and death. Such a view may predispose him to religion, yet religion is not at the origin of his attitude and, anyway, the religion of peasants has never fully corresponded with the religion of rulers and priests.

The peasant sees life as an interlude because of the dual contrary movement through time of his thoughts and feelings which in turn derives from the dual nature of the peasant economy. His dream is to return to a life that is not handicapped. His determination is to hand on the means of survival (if possible made more secure, compared to what he inherited) to his children. His ideals are located in the past; his obligations are to the future, which he

himself will not live to see. After his death he will not be transported into the future—his notion of immortality is different: he will return to the past.

These two movements, towards the past and the future, are not as contrary as they might first appear because basically the peasant has a cyclic view of time. The two movements are different ways of going round a circle. He accepts the sequence of centuries without making that sequence absolute. Those who have a unilinear view of time cannot come to terms with the idea of cyclic time: it creates a moral vertigo since all their morality is based on cause and effect. Those who have a cyclic view of time are easily able to accept the convention of historic time, which is simply the trace of the turning wheel.

The peasant imagines an unhandicapped life, a life in which he is not first forced to produce a surplus before feeding himself and his family, as a primal state of being which existed before the advent of injustice. Food is man's first need. Peasants work on the land to produce food to feed themselves. Yet they are forced to feed others first, often at the price of going hungry themselves. They see the grain in the fields which they have worked and harvested—on their own land or on the landowner's—being taken away to feed others, or to be sold for the profit of others. However much a bad harvest is considered an act of God, however much the master/landowner is considered a natural master, whatever ideological explanations are given, the basic fact is clear: they who can feed themselves are instead being forced to feed others. Such an injustice, the peasant reasons, cannot always have existed, so he assumes a just world at the beginning. At the beginning a primary state of justice towards the primary work of satisfying man's primary need. All spontaneous peasant revolts have had the aim of resurrecting a just and egalitarian peasant society.

This dream is not the usual version of the dream of paradise. Paradise, as we now understand it, was surely the invention of a relatively leisured class. In the peasant's dream, work is still necessary. Work is the condition for equality. Both the bourgeois and Marxist ideals of equality presume a world of plenty; they demand equal rights for all before a cornucopia, a cornucopia to be con-

structed by science and the advancement of knowledge. What the two understand by equal rights is of course very different. The peasant ideal of equality recognises a world of scarcity, and its promise is for mutual fraternal aid in struggling against this scarcity and a just sharing of what the work produces. Closely connected with the peasant's recognition, as a survivor, of scarcity is his recognition of man's relative ignorance. He may admire knowledge and the fruits of knowledge but he never supposes that the advance of knowledge reduces the extent of the unknown. This non-antagonistic relation between the unknown and knowing explains why some of his knowledge is accommodated in what, from the outside, is defined as superstition and magic. Nothing in his experience encourages him to believe in final causes, precisely because his experience is so wide. The unknown can only be eliminated within the limits of a laboratory experiment. Those limits seem to him to be naïve.

Opposing the movement of the peasant's thoughts and feelings about a justice in the past are other thoughts and feelings directed towards the survival of his children in the future. Most of the time the latter are stronger and more conscious. The two movements balance each other only in so far as together they convince him that the interlude of the present cannot be judged in its own terms; morally it is judged in relation to the past, materially it is judged in relation to the future. Strictly speaking, nobody is less opportunist (taking the immediate opportunity regardless) than the peasant.

How do peasants think or feel about the future? Because their work involves intervening in or aiding an organic process most of their actions are future-oriented. The planting of a tree is an obvious example, but so, equally, is the milking of a cow: the milk is for cheese or butter. Everything they do is anticipatory—and therefore never finished. They envisage this future, to which they are forced to pledge their actions, as a series of ambushes. Ambushes of risks and dangers. The most likely future risk, until recently, was hunger. The fundamental contradiction of the peasant's situation, the result of the dual nature of the peasant economy, was that they who produced the food were the most likely to

starve. A class of survivors cannot afford to believe in an arrival point of assured security or well-being. The only, but great, future hope is survival. This is why the dead do better to return to the past where they are no longer subject to risk.

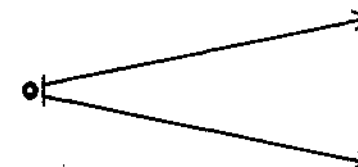
The future path through future ambushes is a continuation of the old path by which the survivors from the past have come. The image of a path is apt because it is by following a path, created and maintained by generations of walking feet, that some of the dangers of the surrounding forests or mountains or marshes may be avoided. The path is tradition handed down by instructions, example and commentary. To a peasant the future is this future narrow path across an indeterminate expanse of known and unknown risks. When peasants cooperate to fight an outside force, and the impulse to do this is always defensive, they adopt a guerilla strategy—which is precisely a network of narrow paths across an indeterminate hostile environment.

The peasant view of human destiny, such as I am outlining, was not, until the advent of modern history, essentially different from the view of other classes. One has only to think of the poems of Chaucer, Villon, Dante; in all of them Death, whom nobody can escape, is the surrogate for a generalized sense of uncertainty and menace in face of the future.

Modern history begins—at different moments in different places—with the principle of progress as both the aim and motor of history. This principle was born with the bourgeoisie as an ascendant class, and has been taken over by all modern theories of revolution. The twentieth-century struggle between capitalism and socialism is, at an ideological level, a fight about the content of progress. Today within the developed world the initiative of this struggle lies, at least temporarily, in the hands of capitalism which argues that socialism produces backwardness. In the underdeveloped world the “progress” of capitalism is discredited.

Cultures of progress envisage future expansion. They are forward-looking because the future offers ever larger hopes. At their most heroic these hopes dwarf Death (*La Rivoluzione o la Morte!*). At their most trivial they ignore it (consumerism). The

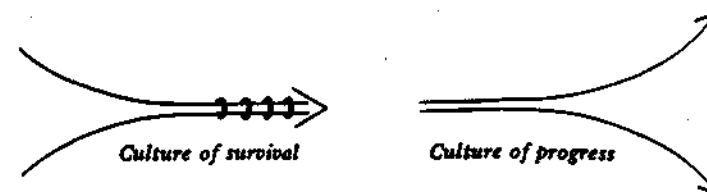
future is envisaged as the opposite of what classical perspective does to a road. Instead of appearing to become ever narrower as it recedes into the distance, it becomes ever wider.



A culture of survival envisages the future as a sequence of repeated acts for survival. Each act pushes a thread through the eye of a needle and the thread is tradition. No overall increase is envisaged.



If now, comparing the two types of culture, we consider their view of the past as well as the future, we see that they are mirror opposites of one another.



This may help to explain why an experience within a culture of survival can have the opposite *significance* to the comparable experience within a culture of progress. Let us take, as a key example, the much proclaimed conservatism of the peasantry, their resistance to change; the whole complex of attitudes and reactions which often (not invariably) allows a peasantry to be counted as a force for the right wing.

First, we must note that the counting is done by the cities, according to an historical scenario opposing left to right, which belongs to a culture of progress. The peasant refuses that scenario, and he is not stupid to do so, for the scenario, whether the left or

right win, envisages his disappearance. His conditions of living, the degree of his exploitation and his suffering may be desperate, but he cannot contemplate the disappearance of what gives meaning to everything he knows, which is, precisely, his will to survive. No worker is ever in that position, for what gives meaning to his life is either the revolutionary hope of transforming it, or money, which is received in exchange against his life as a wage earner, to be spent in his "true life" as a consumer.

Any transformation of which the peasant dreams involves his re-becoming "the peasant" he once was. The worker's political dream is to transform everything which up to now has condemned him to be a worker. This is one reason why an alliance between workers and peasants can only be maintained if it is for a specific aim (the defeat of a foreign enemy, the expropriation of large landowners) to which both parties are agreed. No general alliance is normally possible.

To understand the significance of peasant conservatism related to the sum of peasant experience, we need to examine the idea of change with a different optic. It is an historical commonplace that change, questioning, experiment, flourished in the cities and emanated outwards from them. What is often overlooked is the character of everyday urban life which allowed for such an interest in research. The city offered to its citizens comparative security, continuity, permanence. The degree offered depended upon the class of the citizen, but compared to life in a village, all citizens benefited from a certain protection.

There was heating to counteract changes of temperature, lighting to lessen the difference between night and day, transport to reduce distances, relative comfort to compensate for fatigue; there were walls and other defences against attack, there was effective law, there were almshouses and charities for the sick and aged, there were libraries of permanent written knowledge, there was a wide range of services—from bakers and butchers through mechanics and builders to doctors and surgeons—to be called upon whenever a need threatened to disrupt the customary flow of life, there were conventions of social behaviour which strangers were

obliged to accept (when in Rome . . .), there were buildings designed as promises of, and monuments to, continuity.

During the last two centuries, as urban theories and doctrines of change have become more and more vehement, the degree and efficacy of such everyday protection has correspondingly increased. Recently the insulation of the citizen has become so total that it has become suffocating. He lives alone in a serviced limbo—hence his newly-awakened, but necessarily naïve, interest in the countryside.

By contrast the peasant is unprotected. Each day a peasant experiences more change more closely than any other class. Some of these changes, like those of the seasons or like the process of ageing and failing energy, are foreseeable; many—like the weather from one day to the next, like a cow choking to death on a potato, like lightning, like rains which come too early or too late, like fog that kills the blossom, like the continually evolving demands of those who extract the surplus, like an epidemic, like locusts—are unpredictable.

In fact the peasant's experience of change is more intense than any list, however long and comprehensive, could ever suggest. For two reasons. First, his capacity for observation. Scarcely anything changes in a peasant's entourage, from the clouds to the tail feathers of a cock, without his noticing and interpreting it in terms of the future. His active observation never ceases and so he is continually recording and reflecting upon changes. Secondly, his economic situation. This is usually such that even a slight change for the worse—a harvest which yields twenty-five per cent less than the previous year, a fall in the market price of the harvest produce, an unexpected expense—can have disastrous or near-disastrous consequences. His observation does not allow the slightest sign of change to pass unnoticed, and his debt magnifies the real or imagined threat of a great part of what he observes.

Peasants live with change hourly, daily, yearly, from generation to generation. There is scarcely a constant given to their lives except the constant necessity of work. Around this work and its seasons they themselves create rituals, routines and habits in order

to wrest some meaning and continuity from a cycle of remorseless change: a cycle which is in part natural and in part the result of the ceaseless turning of the millstone of the economy within which they live.

The very great variety of these routines and rituals which attach themselves to work and to the different phases of a working life (birth, marriage, death) are the peasant's own protection against a state of continual flux. Work routines are traditional and cyclic—they repeat themselves each year, and sometimes each day. Their tradition is retained because it appears to assure the best chance of the work's success, but also because, in repeating the same routine, in doing the same thing in the same way as his father or his neighbour's father, the peasant assumes a continuity for himself and thus consciously experiences his own survival.

The repetition, however, is essentially and only formal. A work routine for a peasant is very different from most urban work routines. Each time a peasant does the same job there are elements in it which have changed. The peasant is continually improvising. His faithfulness to tradition is never more than approximate. The traditional routine determines the ritual of the job: its content, like everything else he knows, is subject to change.

When a peasant resists the introduction of a new technique or method of working, it is not because he cannot see its possible advantages—his conservatism is neither blind nor lazy—but because he believes that these advantages cannot, by the nature of things, be guaranteed, and that, should they fail, he will then be cut off alone and isolated from the routine of survival. (Those working with peasants for improved production should take this into account. A peasant's ingenuity makes him open to change, his imagination demands continuity. Urban appeals for change are usually made on the opposite basis: ignoring ingenuity, which tends to disappear with the extreme division of labour, they promise the imagination a new life.)

Peasant conservatism, within the context of peasant experience, has nothing in common with the conservatism of a privileged ruling class or the conservatism of a sycophantic petty-bourgeoisie. The first is an attempt, however vain, to make their privileges

absolute; the second is a way of siding with the powerful in exchange for a little delegated power over other classes. Peasant conservatism scarcely defends any privilege. Which is one reason why, much to the surprise of urban political and social theorists, small peasants have so often rallied to the defence of richer peasants. It is a conservatism not of power but of meaning. It represents a depository (a granary) of meaning preserved from lives and generations threatened by continual and inexorable change.

Many other peasant attitudes are frequently misunderstood or understood in an exactly opposite sense—as the diagram of the mirror-image has already suggested. For example, peasants are thought to be money-minded whereas, in fact, the behaviour which gives rise to this idea derives from a profound suspicion of money. For example, peasants are said to be unforgiving, yet this trait, in so far as it is true, is the result of the belief that life without justice becomes meaningless. It is rare for any peasant to die unforgiven.

We must now ask this question: What is the contemporary relation between peasants and the world economic system of which they form part? Or, to put this question in terms of our consideration of peasant experience: What significance can this experience have today in a global context?

Agriculture does not necessarily require peasants. The British peasantry was destroyed (except in certain areas of Ireland and Scotland) well over a century ago. In the USA there have been no peasants in modern history because the rate of economic development based on monetary exchange was too rapid and too total. In France 150,000 peasants now leave the land every year. The economic planners of the EEC envisage the systematic elimination of the peasant by the end of the century. For short-term political reasons, they do not use the word *elimination* but the word *modernisation*. Modernisation entails the disappearance of the small peasants (the majority) and the transformation of the remaining minority into totally different social and economic beings. The capital outlay for intensive mechanisation and chemicalisation, the necessary size of the farm exclusively producing for the market,

the specialisation of produce by area, all mean that the peasant family ceases to be a productive and consuming unit, and that, instead, the peasant becomes the dependent of the interests which both finance him and buy from him. The economic pressure on which such a plan depends is supplied by the falling market value of agricultural produce. In France today the buying power of the price of one sack of wheat is three times less than it was fifty years ago. The ideological persuasion is supplied by all the promises of consumerism. An intact peasantry was the only class with an in-built resistance to consumerism. When a peasantry is dispersed, markets are enlarged.

In much of the Third World the systems of land tenure (in large parts of Latin America one per cent of landowners own sixty per cent of the farm land, and one hundred per cent of the best land), the imposition of monocultures for the benefit of corporate capitalism, the marginalisation of subsistence farming, and, only because of these other factors, the mounting population, cause more and more peasants to be reduced to such a degree of absolute poverty that, without land or seed or hope, they lose all previous social identity. Many of these ex-peasants make for the cities where they form a millionfold mass such as has never existed before, a mass of static vagrants, a mass of unemployed attendants: attendants in the sense that they wait in the shanty towns, cut off from the past, excluded from the benefits of progress, abandoned by tradition, serving nothing.

Engels and most early-twentieth-century Marxists foresaw the disappearance of the peasant in face of the greater profitability of capitalist agriculture. The capitalist mode of production would do away with small peasant production "as a steam engine smashes a wheelbarrow." Such prophecies underestimated the resilience of the peasant economy and overestimated the attraction of agriculture for capital. On the one hand, the peasant family could survive without profitability (cost accounting was inapplicable to the peasant economy); and on the other hand, for capital, land, unlike other commodities, is not infinitely reproduceable, and investment in agricultural production finally meets a constraint and yields decreasing returns.

The peasant has survived far longer than was predicted. But within the last forty years monopoly capital, through its multinational corporations, has created the new highly profitable structure of agribusiness whereby it controls, not necessarily the production, but the market for agricultural inputs and outputs and the processing, packaging and selling of every kind of foodstuff. The penetration of this market into all corners of the globe is eliminating the peasant. In the developed countries by more or less planned conversion; in the underdeveloped countries catastrophically. Previously cities were dependent on the countryside for their food, peasants being forced, in one way or another, to part with their so-called surplus. Soon the world countryside may be dependent on the cities even for the food its own rural population requires. When and if this happens, peasants will have ceased to exist.

During the same period of the last forty years, in other parts of the Third World—China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Algeria—revolutions have been made by peasants, and in their name. It is too soon to know what kind of transformation of the peasant experience these revolutions will achieve, and how far their governments can or cannot maintain a different set of priorities to those imposed by the world market of capitalism.

It must follow from what I have already said that nobody can reasonably argue for the preservation and maintenance of the traditional peasant way of life. To do so is to argue that peasants should continue to be exploited, and that they should lead lives in which the burden of physical work is often devastating and always oppressive. As soon as one accepts that peasants are a class of survivors—in the sense in which I have defined the term—any idealisation of their way of life becomes impossible. In a just world such a class would no longer exist.

Yet to dismiss peasant experience as belonging only to the past, as having no relevance to modern life, to imagine that the thousands of years of peasant culture leave no heritage for the future—simply because it was seldom embodied in lasting objects—to continue to maintain, as has been maintained for centuries, that peasant experience is marginal to civilisation, is to deny the value

of too much history and too many lives. No line of exclusion can be drawn across history in that manner, as if it were a line across a closed account.

The point can be made more precisely. The remarkable continuity of peasant experience and the peasant view of the world acquires, as it is threatened with extinction, an unprecedented and unexpected urgency. It is not only the future of peasants which is now involved in this continuity. The forces which in most parts of the world are today eliminating or destroying the peasantry represent the contradiction of most of the hopes once contained in the principle of historical progress. Productivity is not reducing scarcity. The dissemination of knowledge is not leading unequivocally to greater democracy. The advent of leisure—in the industrialised societies—has not brought personal fulfilment but greater mass manipulation. The economic and military unification of the world has not brought peace but genocide. The peasant suspicion of “progress,” as it has finally been imposed by the global history of corporate capitalism and by the power of this history even over those seeking an alternative to it, is not altogether misplaced or groundless.

If one looks at the likely future course of world history, envisaging either the further extension and consolidation of corporate capitalism in all its brutality, or a prolonged, uneven struggle waged against it, a struggle whose victory is not certain, the peasant experience of survival may well be better adapted to this long and harsh perspective than the continually reformed, disappointed, impatient progressive hope of an ultimate victory.

Finally there is the historic role of capitalism itself, a role unforeseen by Adam Smith or Marx: its historic role is to destroy history, to sever every link with the past and to orientate all effort and imagination to that which is about to occur. Capital can only exist as such if it continually reproduces itself; its present reality is dependent upon its future fulfilment. This is the metaphysic of capital: the word *credit*, instead of referring to a past achievement, refers only to a future expectation. Such a metaphysic has come to inform a world system and has been translated into the practice of consumerism. The same metaphysic has lent its logic to the

categorization of all those who are being impoverished by the system as *backward* (i.e., as bearing the stigma and shame of the past). This trilogy has been written in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called “backward,” whether they live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis. Solidarity, because it is such women and men who have taught me the little I know.

A Question of Place

OVER THE COW'S brow the son places a black leather mask and ties it to the horns. The leather has become black through usage. The cow can see nothing. For the first time a sudden night has been fitted to her eyes. It will be removed in less than a minute when the cow is dead. During one year the leather mask provides, for the walk of ten paces between fasting-stable and slaughter-house, twenty hours of night.

The slaughter-house is run by an old man, his wife, who is fifteen years younger, and their son, who is twenty-eight.

Seeing nothing, the cow is hesitant to move, but the son pulls the rope round her horns and the mother follows holding the cow's tail.

"If I had kept her," the peasant says to himself, "another two months until she calved. We could not have milked her any more. And after the birth she would have lost weight. Now is the best moment."

At the door to the slaughter-house the cow hesitates again. Then allows herself to be pulled in.

Inside, high up near the roof, is a rail network. Wheels run on the rails and from each wheel a bar hangs down with a hook on the end of it. Attached to this hook a horse's carcass of four hundred kilos can be pushed or pulled by a fourteen-year-old.

The son places the sprung bolt against the cow's head. A mask at an execution renders the victim more passive, and protects the executioner from the last look of the victim's eyes. Here the mask ensures that the cow does not turn her head away from the bolt which stuns her.

Her legs fold and her body collapses instantaneously. When a

viaduct breaks, its masonry—seen from a distance—appears to fall slowly into the valley below. The same with the wall of a building, following an explosion. But the cow came down as fast as lightning. It was not cement which held her body together, but energy.

“Why didn’t they slaughter her yesterday?” says the peasant to himself.

The son pushes a spring through the hole in the skull into the cow’s brain. It goes in nearly twenty centimetres. He agitates it to be sure that all the animal’s muscles will relax, and pulls it out. The mother holds the uppermost foreleg by the fetlock in her two hands. The son cuts by the throat and the blood floods out on to the floor. For a moment it takes the form of an enormous velvet skirt, whose tiny waist band is the lip of the wound. Then it flows on and resembles nothing.

Life is liquid. The Chinese were wrong to believe that the essential was breath. Perhaps the soul is breath. The cow’s pink nostrils are still quivering. Her eye is staring unseeing, and her tongue is falling out of the side of her mouth.

When the tongue is cut out, it will be hung beside the head and the liver. All the heads, tongues and livers are hanging in a row together. The jaws gape open, tongueless, and each circular set of teeth is smeared with a little blood, as though the drama had begun with an animal, which was not carnivorous, eating flesh. Underneath the livers on the concrete floor are spots of bright vermilion blood, the colour of poppies when they first blossom, before they deepen and become crimson.

In protest against the double abandonment by blood and brain, the cow’s body twists violently and its hind legs lunge into the air. It is surprising that a large animal dies as quickly as a small one.

The mother lets go of the foreleg—as if the pulse was now too weak to count—and it falls limply against the body. The son begins to cut the hide away around the horns. The son learnt his speed from his father, but now the old man’s actions are slow. Ponderously at the back of the slaughter-house the father is splitting a horse in two.

Between mother and son there is a complicity. They time their work together without a word. Occasionally they glance at each other, without smiling but with comprehension. She fetches a four-wheeled trolley, like an elongated, very large open-work pram. He slits each hind leg with a single stroke of his tiny knife and inserts the hooks. She presses the button to start the electric hoist. The cow’s carcass is lifted above them both and then lowered on its back into the pram. Together they push the pram forward.

They work like tailors. Beneath the hide, the skin is white. They open the hide from neck to tail so that it becomes an unbuttoned coat.

The peasant to whom the cow belongs comes over to the pram to point out why she had to be slaughtered; two of her teats were decomposing and she was almost impossible to milk. He picks up a teat in his hand. It is as warm as in the stable when he milked her. The mother and son listen to him, nod, but do not reply and do not stop working.

The son severs and twists off the four hooves and throws them into a wheelbarrow. The mother removes the udder. Then, through the cut hide, the son axes the breast bone. This is similar to the last axing of a tree before it falls, for from that moment onwards, the cow, no longer an animal, is transformed into meat, just as the tree is transformed into timber.

The father leaves his horse and shuffles across the abattoir to go outside and pee. This he does three or four times each morning. When he walks for some other purpose, he walks more briskly. Yet it is hard to say whether he shuffles now because of the pressure on his bladder, or to remind his much younger wife that, whilst his old age may be pathetic, his authority is remorseless.

Expressionless the wife watches him until he reaches the door. Then she turns solemnly back to the meat and starts to wash it down and then to dab it dry with a cloth. The carcass surrounds her but almost all tension has gone. She might be arranging a larder. Except that the fibres of meat are still quivering from the shock of the slaughter, exactly as the skin of a cow’s neck does in summer to dislodge the flies.

The son splits the two sides of beef with perfect symmetry.

John Berger

They are now sides of meat such as the hungry have dreamt of for hundreds of thousands of years. The mother pushes them along the rail system to the scales. They weigh together two hundred and fifty-seven kilograms.

The peasant checks the reading on the meter. He has agreed to nine francs a kilo. He gets nothing for the tongue, the liver, the hooves, the head, the offal. The parts which are sold to the urban poor, the rural poor receive no payment for. Nor does he get paid for the hide.

At home, in the stable, the place which the slaughtered cow occupied is empty. He puts one of the young heifers there. By next summer she will have come to remember it, so that each evening and morning, when she is fetched in from the fields for milking, she will know which place in the stable is hers.

Death of La Nan M.

When she could no longer
prepare mash for the chickens
or peel potatoes
for the soup
she lost her appetite
even for bread
and scarcely ate

He was painting himself
black on the branches
to watch the crows
who no longer flew high
but kept to the earth

Smaller than the stove
she sat by the window
where outside the leeks grow

By the wood stack
— the hillsides of brushwood
she had carried on her back—
he crouched and became
the chopping block

Her daughter-in-law
fed the chickens
put wood in the stove

John Berger

Front wheels locked
with a pole through their spokes
I'll take her down

And when I pack her
second wife under my roof
my sweat will blind me.

The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol

THE COCADRILLE WAS BORN in 1900 in the month of September. White cloud, like smoke, was blowing through the open door of the stable. Marius Cabrol was milking. His wife, Mélanie, was in bed, on the other side of the stable wall, attended by her sister and a neighbour. Their first child had been a boy, christened Emile. Marius, the father, hoped that the second would also be a son. He would be named Henri after his grandfather.

The Cabrol farm is on a slope above the village which is called Brine. On the south side of the house the ground flattens out and there are plum trees and a quince. Beside the house is a stream which Henri, the grandfather, channelled to drive a saw. If a log started to roll from up there, it wouldn't stop till it reached the church. I like to think of the logs I have rolled from high up! If the log is not straight, it leaps like an animal. You watch it from above and it is like an animal galloping. Gradually as the slope levels out, it slows down. When you expect it to lie still, it leaps again. It takes a long time for the flat ground to kill a rolling log.

On the bed Mélanie gripped the headboard. The water was already boiling on the stove in the kitchen. The baby was born very quickly. When I think of her being born, my mind wanders and I see her fishing. She was fourteen and I was three years older. She walked upstream, watching both banks. When she prodded with a stick under a stone, two dark shadows slipped across the river to the other bank. From that moment onwards she never shifted her gaze. She tucked her skirt into its own waist-band and without looking down for an instant she waded across. There she stood absolutely still. The water flowing round her thighs made the same noise as it does flowing round two small stationary rocks.

One of the trout left the overhanging bank and darted under a boulder. Was it because she was so small that she was so quick? Or was it because, being blind to warnings, she could read signs which are lost on others? Frisking under the boulder, she trapped the fish and pressed upwards with all the force of her small hand against the stone. The fish was fixed there like a long tongue. And, like a tongue, it tried to retract itself, reaching back down the throat of the water. It tried to thrust forward out of the throat. It tried to turn on its side. Slowly, never letting up the pressure of her palm, she inserted a tiny finger between tongue and stone and two more fingers between tongue and palm. All this with one hand. The instant he went still, she had him out of the water wedged between her three fingers, two with their backs to him.

It's a girl! cried the neighbour.

La Mélanie looked tenderly, and with surprise, at the tiny body, the colour of a radish, held upside down.

Give her to me.

On the forehead of the baby's puckered face was a dark, red mark.

Jésus! Forgive me! La Mélanie screamed. She is marked with the mark of the craving.

When a woman is pregnant, she sometimes craves for something special to eat or drink or touch. It is the right of the mother, by a kind of decree of nature, to have what she wants. Yet often it is not possible, and it is then that she must be careful. For if one of her cravings is denied, the next time she touches her body, the touch may be printed in the same place on the embryo in her womb. And so it is better when one of her cravings has been unsatisfied, for her to touch deliberately her foot or her bottom: otherwise, without thinking, she may touch her cheek or her ear and this will be printed as a disfiguring mark on the child.

Jésus! cried La Mélanie again. I have marked her face with the mark of the craving.

Mélanie, be calm. It is not the mark of the craving. I've seen it often. It is where her face rubbed as she came out, said her sister.

The neighbour took the baby to press the top of her head so that it should be as round as possible.

It was when I wanted to eat freshwater fish! La Mélanie insisted.

Her sister was proved right, for in a few days the red mark disappeared, and only much later did La Mélanie ask herself whether her daughter had not, after all, been marked by the mark of another kind of craving. As a young child, two things were unusual about her. She remained very small. And as soon as she could crawl, and later walk, she had a habit of disappearing.

You lose her as easily as you lose a button, La Mélanie said.

I think of Lucie—for that is how she was christened—as a baby in her cradle. What is the difference between a baby and a small animal? An animal goes straight along its own path. A baby vacillates, rolling first to one side and then to the other. Either she's all smiles and gurgles, or a face all puckered up and bawling.

When she was six, Lucie was missing for a whole day. If I go out of the door now and take a few steps up the hillside to where the cows are grazing, I can see the track she took.

It leads to the skyline where the moon rises. In August when the cows are grazing up there, they are silhouetted as if against a great circular lantern. From there the path leads along the crest to a pass where there are some marmots, through a moraine of boulders the size of houses, along the edge of an escarpment, and finally down to the forest below.

In the evening Lucie came back with her hat full of mushrooms. Yet by that time, Marius à Brine had organised a search-party. I remember the men filling their lamps with paraffin.

When there wasn't any work to be done at home, Lucie went to school. The village teacher was called Masson. He used to read from the *Life of Voltaire* and the curé preached against this book in church. One thing impressed me about the *Life of Voltaire*. When there was famine, he distributed sacks of grain among the peasants at Ferney. Otherwise, the *Life of Voltaire* belonged to that collection of books which we knew existed and which entailed a way of life we could not imagine. At what time of day did people read? we asked ourselves.

Masson was killed at Verdun. His name is on the war memorial. Each morning, before the first lesson began, he wrote on the blackboard the day of the week, the date of the month and the

year of the century. On the war memorial there is only the month and the year of his death: March 1916. After the date each morning, he wrote a saying on the blackboard which we children copied into our books:

*Insults should be written on sand
Compliments should be inscribed on marble.*

It was in her last year at school that Lucie was given the nickname of the Cocadrille. A *cocadrille* comes from a cock's egg hatched in a dung heap. As soon as it comes out of its egg, it makes its way to the most unlikely place. If it is seen by somebody it has not seen, it dies. Otherwise, it can defend itself and can kill anything it chooses, except the weasel. The poison, with which it kills, comes from its eyes and travels along its gaze.

Soon after Lucie was born, La Mélanie had another son who was christened Henri. By the time he was two, he was larger than his sister who could by then sit on the horse, fetch wood for the stove and feed the chickens. It could be that her tiny size was a kind of provocation to jealousy. Small children normally accord rights according to size. Whatever the reason, Henri hated his sister. It was he who, forty years later, said to the Mayor: This sister has never brought anything but shame to our family.

One day Mélanie found three of her chickens dead. The killer was not a fox or a weasel, for the chickens were untouched.

Lucie killed them! shouted Henri, she looked at them and they died.

I never touched them!

She's a Cocadrille!

I'm not! I'm not!

The Cocadrille! The Cocadrille! shouted Henri.

Stop your bickering, the mother grumbled.

That time the nickname did not stick. The next time it did.

It was between Easter and Whitsun. Later, when I was in the Argentine, I used to tell myself that I could not die until I had seen another month of May, here in the mountains. The grass grows knee-high in the meadows and down the centre of the roads

between the wheel ruts. If you are with a friend, you walk down the road with the grass between you. In the forest the late beech leaves come out, the greenest leaves in the world. The cows are let out of the stable for the first time. They leap, kick with their hind legs, turn in circles, jump like goats. The month itself is like a home-coming.

Her brother Emile had left in the autumn to work in Paris as a stoker for the central heating of the new department store of Samaritaine. La Mélanie could not read the postcard which had come, so she gave it to Lucie.

Emile's coming home!

When?

Sunday.

On the Friday Marius chose the largest of his black rabbits, and, holding it up by its ears, he felt its flesh through the fur.

Yes, you big crook, Emile is coming home!

He stroked it again and then knocked it unconscious with one blow. Delicately, he cut out its two eyes. Their lashes remained unhurt round the two holes through which the blood flowed when he hung it up by its hind legs to bleed. On Sunday morning Mélanie skinned it and cooked it in cider.

Emile's present for Lucie was a silver-painted model of the Eiffel Tower.

Did you see it? she asked in excitement.

You see it everywhere. It's three hundred metres high.

At the end of the meal La Mélanie collected up in her hands the neat piles of bones laid on the table beside each plate. The rabbit bones were so clean they looked as if they were made from horn or ivory on which there had never been meat. She was happy. Her son who had come home was already asleep in his room.

Each evening Henri and Lucie took the milk down to the dairy. Lucie's size never affected her strength. She was as tough as a mountain goat. The same as Henri, she carried twenty litres on her back, the can strapped on like a school satchel. That evening, after he had slept, Emile said he would go with them.

Give me the milk, Lucie.

She refused. Her head was scarcely higher than Emile's waist.

Could you find me a job in Paris? she asked.
You could work in a baker's.
Do you live in the same place as you work?
I catch the Métro. The Métro is a train, an electric train that goes underground . . .

What time do the trains start in the morning? asked Henri.
Early, but the Parisians can't get out of bed. So they're always in a hurry. You should see them running along the tunnels to catch the trains.

The trains don't stop? asked the Cocadrille.
The path down to the village followed a stream and near the bottom was a lilac tree. When the lilac was in flower, you could smell the tree thirty metres away.

Tell me more about Paris.
People sleep in the streets, said Emile.
Why?
If they asked for shelter, the Parisians would never let them come in.

Why don't they build sheds?
There is no wood to build with.
No trees?
It's forbidden.

Do you know what Grandfather Revuz did? Lucie asked. The Mayor told him he couldn't cut down an acacia. And he cut it down. After he cut it down, he said the leaves on that bush were too small for him to wipe his arse on! And if they were that small, he said, it couldn't have been an acacia.

Grandfather Revuz may think he's clever but he'd be lost in Paris, said Emile. Do you know how many horses there are there?
Fifty thousand! guessed Henri.

Two million, said Emile with pride.
Will you take me with you next time? Lucie asked.
They would lock you up! said Henri.
When they went into the dairy, the cheesemaker straightened his back, extended a hand and shouted:

So 'Mile is back from Paris!
For the summer.

How old are you now?
Sixteen, Emile replied.
Never too young!
The cheesemaker, whose wife cuckolded him regularly, winked.
Henri and Lucie unstrapped their cans. In the middle of the dairy a cauldron hung from its wooden gallows. The dairy was well-placed because it was cool even in summer. The cheesemaker's wife complained that her husband's feet were perpetually like ice.

Did you climb to the top? Lucie asked Emile.
What top?

The top of the Eiffel Tower!
You go up by a lift, Emile said.

Lift?
Yes, lift.
What's a lift? she asked.

The Cocadrille knows nothing, roared Henri, laughing. The proper place for her is her dung heap.

None of them was looking at her. She removed the lid of her milk can. She picked it up and, as you throw water out of a bucket, she hurled litres of milk into Henri's face. Whilst the milk was dripping from his hair, she screamed:

If you weren't a weasel I'd kill you!
The cheesemaker, swearing, tried to hit her, but she escaped, ran round the cauldron and vanished out of the door.

The story soon reached the ears of Marius à Brine. He found his daughter by the washing trough and he started to beat her, shouting:

Milk is not water! Milk is not water!
After a few blows he stopped. She was staring at him with her bright blue eyes. She had eyes the colour of forget-me-nots. Her look forced him to gather her into his arms and to press her face against his stomach.

Ah! My Cocadrille. You came out like that, didn't you? You can't help it. You just came out like that.

She stepped with her small feet onto his boots and then he carried her on his feet across the yard, repeating and laughing: The Cocadrille! The Cocadrille!

And so the name Cocadrille, born of both hatred and love, replaced the name Lucie. When she was thirteen, a circus came to the village and put up its tent in the square. The circus consisted of one family, a goat which could stand on the smallest milking-stool we ever saw, and two ponies. The father was ringmaster, the mother was acrobat and their son was the clown. During the afternoon the son went round the cafés of the village and blew a trumpet to announce the evening performance. The men smiled at the trumpet but they did not invite him to drink, lest he make fun of them.

The circus also had an elephant. The elephant was a piece of grey cloth with a trunk sewn onto it. When the ringmaster turned to the benches where the kids were sitting and asked for volunteers, I rushed forward. I was the front of the elephant, and Joset, who was killed in an avalanche, was the back. Together we danced to an accordion which the clown was playing.

And now for a cow elephant! shouted the ringmaster, holding up a second piece of grey cloth. Two pretty girls please! The second piece of cloth had a pearl necklace painted on it, and from the huge folds of its ears hung a pair of earrings painted gold. The rings had been taken from a horse's bit.

The girls were all too shy. Not one put up her hand. I lifted up the cloth of the elephant's head and, facing the girls, cried out:

The Cocadrille! The Cocadrille! The Cocadrille!

And she came! Everyone in the tent clapped and laughed at the tiny figure who was going to be part of an elephant.

I heard the ringmaster whisper to his son:

She's a dwarf. Find out her age.

For a moment the Cocadrille stood there alone, eyes alight. Finally another girl climbed over the benches and joined her. Beside the Cocadrille, the other girl looked like a giant. The clown began to play music—a violin this time. The only way the Cocadrille could manage was to be the back of the elephant, and instead of bending forward at the waist, she stayed upright and pulled hard at the grey cloth so that it didn't sag in the middle of the animal's back. There we were, two elephants, a bull and a cow, with the violin playing.

There were pictures of elephants in our schoolbooks, because, from Hannibal to Napoleon, foreign generals had the idea of using elephants to cross the mountains. The four of us danced in the middle of the arena, and every time we stopped, the ringmaster cracked his whip over us, and the crowd shouted: Again! Again! Sometimes I caught sight of the Cocadrille's bare feet—she had kicked off her sabots—dancing jerkily at the back of the grey cow elephant.

Eventually they let us go. The clown son whispered something to the Cocadrille and then shook his head at his father, who shrugged his shoulders.

When I saw her next at school I asked her what she had thought of the circus. She didn't mention the dance of the elephants. What she liked, she said, was the clown on stilts. Could I make her a pair? I said I would.

I never made them. More than fifty years later she said to me—her eyes were stone-coloured by then—If I had a pair of stilts, I could cross the valley in ten strides. This was at the time when she was walking a hundred kilometres a week. Ten strides! she repeated.

The Cabrol farm at Brine is on the *advet*, the slope facing south. Opposite on the *ubac*, facing north, is a hamlet called Lapraz. There is a song about the cocks in each hamlet. The one at Lapraz, where there is less sun, calls out:

I sing when I can.

The cock at Brine crows:

I sing when I want!

To this the *ubac* cock replies:

Then be content!

It was on the slope facing Lapraz in August 1914 that the Cabrol family were scything their patch of oats when they heard the church bell ringing in the valley below.

The war has started, said Marius.

The massacre of the world has begun, said La Mélanie.

Women usually know better than men the extent of catastrophe. The Mayor delivered the mobilisation papers. Most of those called up were in high spirits. Never again, not once, were the cafés in

the village to be so full as on the evening before the mobilised men left. Marius, older than most of the others—he was thirty-eight—was apprehensive. He avoided the cafés and spent the evening at home, giving instructions to Emile about what had to be done before the snow came, by which time he would be back, and the war would be over.

The band played as the men marched out of the village along the road which followed the river to the plain. The band was smaller than usual, for half its players were among the soldiers who were leaving. I had joined the band the previous autumn and I was the youngest drummer.

Marius did not come back before the snow came, nor before the New Year, nor before the spring. The endless time of war began. The seasons changed, the years passed and all our lives, except those of the youngest children, who remembered nothing else, were in abeyance. Early in 1916 Emile and I were called up. Between young boys and old men there was nobody left. There were no full male voices to be heard. The horses became accustomed to the commands of women.

La Mélanie, the Cocadrille and Henri ran the farm. There was so much to be done that the younger brother could not afford to quarrel openly with his sister. If Henri made the Cocadrille angry, she would disappear for the rest of the day, and he realised that they could not do without her labour even for a few hours.

Despite her size, she was tireless. She was like the small humming-bird who, when the time comes to migrate, can fly a thousand miles across the Bay of Mexico. She was not the second woman of the house, she was more like a hired hand—a man. A midget man with a difficult and unpredictable character. She drove the mare, she fetched wood, she led the horse when Henri ploughed, she fed the cows, she dug the garden, she made the cider, she preserved the fruit, she mended the harnesses. She never washed clothes nor sewed. In a *pailler* on top of her head she could carry eighty kilos of hay. If you saw her from behind, it looked like magic: the linen tent, full of hay, completely hid her and so it appeared to be moving down the slope, alone, on its lowermost corner. Both La Mélanie and Henri were somewhat frightened of

her when she sat with them in the kitchen. They never knew how she could take what was said.

At the beginning of 1918 the family at Brine received a telegram informing them that Emile had been gravely wounded near Compiègne. Each evening the Cocadrille asked the milk, frothing in the wooden bucket, to keep her brother Emile alive.

He stayed alive and after months in hospital came home. When at last Marius too returned, Mélanie saw that her son now looked older than his father. Nobody in the village spoke of victory, they only spoke of the war being ended.

A year after his demobilisation Marius announced to Emile that La Mélanie was expecting another baby.

At her age! said Emile.

Marius nodded: It will be our last.

It will have to be!

The more scandalised the son's expression, the more the father smiled.

All the war I promised myself that.

And Mother?

I survived.

So we'll be four, concluded Emile.

He meant that the family inheritance would be divided into four.

Yes, if you count the Cocadrille.

Have you told the Cocadrille?

Not yet.

I wonder how she will take it.

It's for Mother to tell her.

It'll change the Cocadrille.

How is that?

It will change her. Me and the Cocadrille, we might be married now with our own children. Yet who is going to marry the Cocadrille? And I'm too sick to marry. It ought to be our turn and, instead, you've made another baby.

Call it an old man's last sin! Marius, however penitent, could not stop smiling.

In December 1919 La Mélanie's last baby was born and was

christened Edmond. I stayed in the army an extra year to learn mechanics. I came back to the village at the beginning of 1920.

The following June, four men took the steep path, up to the alpage. They were young and they climbed quickly. With them they carried an accordion, eight loaves of bread and a sack of coarse salt for the cattle. They had worked all day and it was beginning to become dusk.

At one point where the cumin grows profusely either side of the path, the one who was leading stopped and all four looked down at the village, seven hundred metres below.

You can see André's sheep, Robert said.

They could also see the road out of the village which followed the river and led to the plain.

He's slow, is André.

He slowed down ever since the death of Honorine.

He should marry again.

Who?

Philomène!

They laughed and looked down on the village, with the assurance of youth: an assurance which comes from the conviction that, because the young see clearly, they will avoid the mistakes of the old.

Philomène has driven stronger men than André out of the house!

Out of their minds!

When they arrived at the top, the pastures were full of small birds flying just above the grass. The flight of these birds is like a line of stitches, they beat their wings as fast as butterflies and with this they gain height; then they glide and lose height till they beat their wings again and begin another stitch. As they fly they chirp making a noise like castanets.

These birds, flying at the level of their hands, made the men think of the eyes and names of the girls they had come to visit. Very soon the birds would stop flying and night fall.

From time to time a visiting archprêtre would preach a sermon against the immorality of leaving young women alone in the alpage. Our own curé knew that there was no alternative. It was the unmarried daughter, capable of looking after the cows and

making the cheese, who had the pair of hands most easily spared from the work below. Old women still talk of their summers in the alpage.

Before making their visits that night, the four young men planned to sing. There is a place surrounded on three sides by a rock which resounds like the choir of a church. There they were going to sing to announce their arrival to the young women whom they had already, in imagination, chosen. Yet for their singing to be a surprise, they had to skirt the main group of chalets and reach the horseshoe of rocks unseen. This detour involved passing only one chalet, which was unimportant, because it was the Cocadrille's.

As the four approached, the Cocadrille came to her doorway. What emphasised her smallness was the fact that, although she wore the clothes of a woman, she had neither hips nor bust. She had the figure of the ideal servant, tiny but active, without age or sex. That summer she was twenty.

You have an accordion, she said.

Yes, we have.

I can dance, she replied.

Not in those sabots, you can't!

She kicked them off, just as she had kicked them off when she was dancing at the back of the elephant. Her feet were black with dirt. Without waiting for the music, she began to lift up her knees and to step ferociously on the earth around the entrance to the stable where the coming and going of the cows had already worn away the grass. Just by dancing she forced Robert to play a few chords.

Stop! I shouted. The music will tell the others we're here.

The music of the accordion died down. The Cocadrille looked straight at me, unblinking, and slipped her feet back into her clogs. What was disconcerting about her look was its fixity. It was as if her head and neck became suddenly paralysed.

We must be on our way.

Can one of you help me move a barrel? she asked. Robert stepped forward.

Not you, she said, better the one who has just come back from the army.

I shrugged my shoulders and asked my three companions to wait.

Let them go, she said.

Guffawing and making signs with their hands, they left.

Tell La Nan I'm coming to visit her! I shouted after them.

The barrel had oil for the lamp in it. After I had shifted it, the Cocadrille offered me coffee. At first I could hardly see inside the chalet. I stood there, holding the cup in my hands, and she poured gnôle into it without asking. To pour gnôle into my cup she had to raise her arm higher than her shoulder.

You'd be small enough for a chimney-sweep, I said, not knowing what else to say.

I'm a woman, she replied, and I'd shit down their chimneys.

In the very dim light which made her almost invisible, her voice sounded like a woman's.

Are you going away to work in Paris this autumn? she asked.

Yes.

I'll catch a marmot for you to take with you.

How?

That's my secret.

You dig them up when they're asleep?

Will you go up the Eiffel Tower? she asked, ignoring my remark.

The others will be waiting, I said. Thank you for the coffee.

They're singing, she told me. Can't you hear?

No.

She opened the door. They were singing "Mou père a cinq cent moutons."

I'll fetch you some butter, she said.

We don't need any.

You have so much at home that you can refuse butter?

She left me and went through the door into the stable. By now the moon was up, and a little of its light came through the dusty window, no larger than an open book, and down the wooden chimney. There was a pool of moonlight around the dead ashes.

When the Cocadrille came back, I gasped. She had taken off her

blouse and chemise. I could see her breasts, each scarcely larger than the bowl of a wooden spoon. She came and stood right in front of me, and I saw that the dark nipples of her breasts were dripping with milk.

It was not until next morning that I reasoned that she must have poured cow's milk over her breasts when she went into the stable. At the time I thought of nothing beyond the thin warm arms she put round me.

We went to lie on the bed, a wooden shelf at the far end of the room. As I caressed her, lying on the bed, I had the impression that she grew larger. She grew as large as the earth upon which I had to throw myself.

How you stir me! she cried, you stir my milk!

The only other time I had been to bed with a woman was in a brothel in the garrison town of L . . . , and there the lights were pink and the prostitute was as white and plump as a pig. Was that, I asked myself later, why the Cocadrille had asked for the one who had been in the army?

At two in the morning she dressed and reminded me not to forget the butter. As I left, she reached up and pulled the hair at the back of my head, digging her nails into my scalp. I knew the path down by heart.

Suddenly a cloud obscured the moon so that I could see nothing. A noise in the undergrowth made me stop. On every side the low bushes were being trampled. For the third or fourth time that night my heart raced wildly, yet this time, unlike the others, my whole body felt icy. I took to my heels. I ran for ten minutes without stopping, as if I were running from damnation itself.

Later when I reasoned that the Cocadrille must have poured cow's milk over her breasts, I also reasoned that on my way home I had disturbed some sleeping goats.

What was it that made me go back the following evening? Why did I deliberately go up alone, avoiding my companions? She gave no sign of surprise at my arrival.

So you've finished the butter! she said.

Can you give me some more?

Yes, Jean. She pronounced my name solemnly in her deep voice. It was as if she had invented the name herself. Nobody else had ever said my name like that. It disturbed me because it separated me from all other men called Jean or Théophile or François.

She made some coffee. I asked her what she had done and she recounted her day to me. She asked me nothing about myself, but sometimes she looked at me, as if to make sure that I corresponded with the name she had pronounced. We sat across the table, facing each other in the darkness. It was now as dark outside as in. There would be lights in the windows of the other chalets. I knew why she had not lit the lamp: any visitor would conclude that she was already asleep. When a cow moved her head in the stable the note of the bell filled the room, and it was like a reminder of what we were about to do. By now neither of us spoke. I could even hear the breath of the cows. It crossed my mind to leave then and there. Yet it was already too late. Everything outside was already distant, like a coastline seen from the stern of a ship.

She had placed a candle by the bed. Without a word, she lit it. The blanket was white and smelt of sunlight. In the morning, after the cows had grazed, she must have washed the blood from the blanket. I lay there and watched her undress. She threw her clothes onto the table and strode onto the bed.

Stir me! She said this standing over me.

I began to shout at her. I called her obscene names. I referred to parts of her with the words we used for animal parts. All she did was to smile and then, squatting, she sat on me as if I were a horse. I tried to make her fall off and she held onto my shoulders and laughed. Her laughing made me laugh. My shouting stopped. I made a noise like a horse neighing. I neighed and she gripped the hair above my ears as if it were a mane. Later I asked myself how she made me do such things.

We played and made love on the wooden stage of the bed as though we possessed the strength of the whole village. Perhaps that is an old man's boast. I could literally pick her up with one arm, yet every time I tried to put my feet on the floor, she succeeded in pulling me back. It was difficult to believe she was the

same woman whom I had passed so often, during the first years of the war, working alone in a field, cursing and already bent with a kind of weariness. I made her laugh by measuring her limb by limb, part by part, against myself. Today I have made a mark on the doorpost of the kitchen to help me recall her real height, before, like all of us, she shrank in old age. One metre, twenty-five centimetres is what I've marked. None of the rest is measurable.

At last we were exhausted and I got up to breathe a little in the fresh air. On the slope behind the Cabrol chalet there is a fold in the earth like a furrow, down which a trickle of water runs. The water makes the flowers grow profusely there, and on both sides of the fold, there are millions of ranunculi, the small, white five-petalled flowers which cows will not eat. I sat down amongst these flowers and the Cocadrille, wearing a man's hat, came out to join me. The other chalets were silent. The crickets had long since stopped. Below were the roofs of the village, no larger than dice.

She lay back among the grasses and ranunculi and looked up at the sky where the stars were the same shape as the flowers, and lying on her back she began to talk. She spoke about herself, about her brother Emile, about the land she would one day inherit, about the cows, about what she thought of the curé, about how she would never marry. At first I listened to what she was saying without much attention. Then gradually it occurred to me that she was saying all this because it might turn out to be otherwise. I became convinced that she was plotting one thing whilst talking about its opposite. It wasn't true that she would never marry. She was plotting to make me her husband. She believed she was now pregnant and so I would be forced to marry her.

Lucie! I interrupted her as we sat there in the firmament of flowers. I do not know why I used her real name.

Yes?

I'm not going to come up again.

I didn't expect you to, Jean.

Her reply confirmed my worst suspicions. It meant that I was already trapped.

Here's the butter, she said, and the way she looked so fixedly

at me scared me, making me feel alone and separate, as I had felt when I first arrived and she had used my name in such a strange way.

The next night, asleep in the bed with my brother, I dreamt of her. The Cocadrille came to the house, fearless, eyes blazing. Only one man can be the father of my child, she said in my dream, and Jean is that man! Is it true? asked my own father, turning to me. I couldn't answer. With the Cocadrille! he shouted. No, I don't believe it, he roared. I can prove it, she said. Then prove it! ordered my father. I counted the moles on the small of his back, said the Cocadrille. How many are there? my mother asked. The Cocadrille said a number, and I was forced to take down my trousers in front of the three of them whilst my father counted the moles. You've ruined your life, said my father. Ruined it for nothing! The number was correct. I woke up frightened and sweating.

Many times that summer I was tempted in the evenings to climb up to the alpage to discover whether or not she was pregnant. Each time I told myself it was better not. And so I stayed below in suspense. Finally, late in August, I saw her outside the church at a wedding and, to my great relief, she did not single me out in any way.

After I had been in Paris for two winters, Marius à Brine fell sick. It was the month of July and I was back in the village. La Mélanie sat by her husband's bed, lending him what courage she could, and the Cocadrille climbed up to the alpage to fetch ice to lay on his burning stomach. There is a cave there, near the horse-shoe of rocks where the four of us were going to sing, into which the sun never penetrates. She filled a can with this broken ice, covered it with a shawl, and ran back all the way down to Brine. It was the same path I ran down that first night when I fled from the goats. By the time she arrived, more than half the ice had melted and there were only rounded slivers left to put on his pain-clenched stomach. She made three such journeys up to the cave, and when she came back the third time, in the mid-afternoon, Marius was dead.

I went to pay my last respects to him. He was laid out in his black suit and boots. At the foot of the bed the Cabrol family kept

vigil. The Cocadrille was wearing a widow's dress like her mother and her face was inclined and invisible. I made the sign of the cross with the sprig of boxwood over his still heart and his head with its closed eyes. Edmond, his youngest son, was only three years old.

Food and drink were laid out for the visitors. The Cocadrille left the room of the dead and came out to offer me some apple rissoles. As I ate, she looked up at me. In her drawn, tearstained face, framed in black, her blue eyes were even more intense than I recollected. In April the first forget-me-nots appear in the grass, like flakes fallen from the sky. Dug up with their roots and brought inside the house they bring fine weather with them. Her eyes were the same blue.

So you are leaving us again? she said.

Yes. Not just for Paris, I'm going to South America.

Come back before you die, she said in her deep voice.

Her saying this angered me. I offered my condolences once more and left. After her father's death the Cocadrille continued to work on the farm.

In 1936 Emile died as the final consequence of his war wounds. Two years later La Mélanie followed her husband and her eldest son into the grave. Henri married Marie, a woman from the next village. The Cocadrille milked the cows, looked after the stable, grew the vegetables, collected wood, grazed the cattle. Marie, her sister-in-law, complained about her:

She's as dirty as a chicken house. And she never lifts a finger in the kitchen. What sort of woman is that?

The years passed. The Second War broke out.

One morning the Cocadrille was scything between the apple trees with her own scythe which she would never allow anyone else to touch. Over the years its blade had been worn down by whetting and beating until it was scarcely wider than a thumb-nail. If you gave me the money, I could never buy another like this, she said. Only the work of twenty summers can make a scythe as light as this. For twenty summers I've cherished this scythe like a son. She was by now known for her original way of talking.

The air was still cooler than the earth under the grass. Far above the orchard, the forest was not yet in the full light of day. Looking up, the Cocadrille saw two men beckoning her from the edge of the trees. Her brothers noticed that she had stopped working and followed her gaze. The two strangers at the edge of the forest must have seen what they took to be a child and two peasants in a hayfield pointing towards them. This was in 1944.

Shit! said Henri.

They're maquisards, said Edmond, who was now as large as a man and already had a knowing expression.

What else could they be? grumbled Henri.

Jésus! don't let anyone else see them.

The Cocadrille pretended to have noticed nothing. It was always Edmond who spoke and Henri who waited, and then it was Henri who prided himself on his cunning.

Marie can give them food and they can go, said Henri after a long pause.

One of the two unknown men started down the slope. Half-way, he emerged from the shadow of the mountain and entered the early morning sunshine. He was short and burly and walked like a peasant.

The two brothers stood absolutely still lest any movement be interpreted by the stranger as a welcome. When he was a few metres away, the stranger said, Good morning.

In the fields deliberate silence is a powerful weapon. Henri said nothing, and withdrew his head back into his shoulders like a dog guarding a doorway. Edmond stood with his hands on his hips, staring insolently.

Two of us need shelter for twenty-four hours, announced the stranger, after allowing the silence to continue long enough to show that he had recognised it.

Who told you to come to our farm?

Nobody. We know who not to go to.

In God's name! muttered Henri. He took out his scythe stone and began sharpening the blade. The noise of the stone on the metal, like the previous silence, was intended to indicate a further refusal to answer.

The stranger strolled over towards the small figure who was still scything between the apple trees.

Good morning, little girl, he said to the Cocadrille.

She turned towards him and he saw that she was a middle-aged woman with a lined face, old enough to be his mother.

I didn't see . . . he excused himself.

This is also my farm, she said.

The stranger made a sign to his companion up by the forest. The second man was limping and carried a gun in each hand.

The two brothers, anxious to prevent the Cocadrille talking to the maquisard, came over to the apple trees.

Where are you from? Edmond asked.

I'm from the Dranse. The SS burnt down my father's farm there.

So you have nothing to lose? remarked Edmond.

Nothing.

The single word contained a threat. This time the silence was filled only with the gasp of the Cocadrille's scythe as it cut the grass.

We'll give you food and after that you must go, announced Henri.

No, we need to stay till tomorrow.

The man who limped and carried the guns joined them. He was young and his unshaven face looked worn and pain-filled.

The best way to hide, said Henri slyly, is to work with us. We need to get the hay in.

The comrade here has a wound that needs dressing, said the peasant from the Dranse.

We are not a hospital!

The Cocadrille leant on her scythe and looked across at the young man. Where is your wound? she asked.

The right thigh, he said.

I will dress it for you.

And if the Germans come? Henri yelled. He can't be in the house.

You are right, interrupted the peasant from the Dranse. It's better if we stay up here.

You mean the Germans *are* looking for you? said Edmond quickly.

Probably.

You came here with a wounded man and with the Germans on your heels and you expect us to risk our lives saving you!

They could hide in the chicken house.

No, we are safer, like you said, working with you. We are your cousins come to help with the hay. Is there anyone down there in the house?

My wife.

So you are four.

With the Cocadrille here, yes.

Can you, Madame, fetch hot water and bandages? Meanwhile we'll hide the weapons.

When she returned from the farm with some strips of linen sheet, she led the wounded man to a flat step of ground by the side of the stream which her grandfather had used to drive the saw. The wound near the top of his thigh was like a wound of any generation.

She knelt in her black dress by his hips and bent over the wound whilst she bathed it with hot water. It took her a long time to get the old dressing completely off. The wound was as red as beef. She diluted some *gnôle* and dabbed it on the wound. When it hurt him, his hand, lying on the grass, found her calf and gripped it through her dress.

Thank you, he said when at last she had bound the wound up again. You have very gentle hands.

Laid out on the grass, his body looked long and his bare legs as thin as those of the body on the cross.

Gentle! she said. They've worked too hard to be gentle. They've been in too much shit.

He shut his eyes.

How old are you? she asked.

Nineteen.

Is your mother alive?

I believe so.

And your father?

He is a judge.

You have such regular teeth. You don't come from here.

No, from Paris.

Have you ever turned hay?

I will do as you do.

She helped him to his feet. After a while, he stopped to wipe his face with the corner of his shirt.

She held out a bottle to him. However much you drink when haymaking, she said, you never piss!

At midday a car drew up at the farmhouse.

Take no notice, ordered the peasant from the Dranse, go on working.

Two men in uniform got out of the car.

They're not the Milice, said Edmond, they're Germans.

The Cocadrille, who was standing beside the young man from Paris, suddenly reached up and slapped the side of his neck with her open hand.

What! he shouted.

A horsefly had been about to bite him.

Soon they could hear the heavy breathing of the Germans whom the slope still hid from view. The first to appear was an officer with a tight belt and straight high cap, pulled down over his eyes. Following him came a sergeant holding a submachine-gun.

Everyone here! shouted the officer. He surveyed the five hay-makers: four peasants and one dwarf woman.

We are looking for six assassins. We know who they are. Who has come by here this morning?

I'll tell you, said the Cocadrille. The brain needs renewing. It wanders. If I had the money to buy a new one and if they sold them, I'd change it tomorrow. She buttoned her dress where it was undone. I did see a car go by this morning—or was it yesterday morning? An army could go by and I wouldn't be sure. When I saw this car I said to myself, that's strange. There was an officer driving it, with a cap like yours, sir—she pointed the prongs of her wooden fork at the officer's face: the sergeant pushed her back. I said to myself, he looks like a man wearing a disguise. Perhaps he was one of the men you are looking for, sir, one of the assassins.

His cap came right down over his face like yours, sir, as if he was trying to hide his face. Was it this morning or yesterday morning I saw this car? He could have stolen the car, you see, sir. Was it yesterday? I wish I knew. She put a finger in her ear. You'll do better, believe me, sir, asking my two cousins here. She pointed her fork at the maquisards.

Nobody's passed this way, said the peasant from the Dranse. Not since before it was light. We were up at five. Nobody has come by, unless they stuck to the forest and we didn't see them.

The peasant from the Dranse stared vacantly at the distant snow-covered mountain, white like a pillow propped against the blue sky, and farted.

The officer approached Edmond and gently touched his face so that he could look into the boy's eyes.

They couldn't come here, said Edmond ingratiatingly, they know too well where our sympathies lie.

No, the officer said, you all hate us!

And you? demanded the sergeant, pointing his gun at the young Parisian.

The hay is dry now. He spoke slowly and stupidly as if he were the dwarf woman's son.

What have you seen this morning?

Flies and horseflies.

Has anyone come down from the forest?

Flies and horseflies.

His idiocy provoked the sergeant to jab the muzzle of his gun hard into his stomach. The dwarf woman raised her fork in protest. The officer scowled at the prospect of a brawl on the steep slope which the hay made slippery.

We are wasting our time, he said curtly to the sergeant. To the peasants he said: If you are lying, I can promise you we'll be back, just as we came back to T . . .

The previous winter the Germans had come one night to the village of T . . . with two armoured lorries, an officer's car and a searchlight mounted on a sidecar. With their searchlight trained on the doors, they went from house to house. The women they chased into the forest. The men they lined up and shot. Whilst

the stables and animals were burning, the German troops sang.

The sergeant left first. The officer, as he went down, dug his heels in so as not to slip, and the dust from the hay coated the backs of his polished boots.

After the car had driven away, there was nowhere any sign of what had happened or of what might happen.

The Aunt here made a fine speech! said the peasant from the Dranse. She scowled in case he was taking her for a fool. During her first life the Cocadrille was never indifferent to what people thought of her.

It's safe now. They won't come back until they've questioned everybody, she said to the one she had bandaged. You can go and rest in the hayloft.

He must work, Henri contradicted, that was the understanding from the beginning. If they come back and find him . . .

His leg needs rest.

Jésus! It's not your farm they'll burn down.

You can lie in the hayloft, and if they come back you can be working on top of the hay, the Cocadrille said.

And if he's asleep?

I'll stay with him.

Stay with him! In God's name! We have this hay to get in.

The Aunt is right, said the peasant from the Dranse, you should listen to her.

Half the hayloft was empty; in the other half the new hay was stacked almost as high as the roof beams. When she shut the door it was like twilight. She told the wounded man, who was young enough to be her son, on no account to hide in the hay, for the previous year a maquisard hiding in another farm had buried himself in the hay and the Italian soldiers had searched the loft, sticking in pitchforks. One of the prongs had wounded him in the neck. He dared not cry out. The Italian soldiers dawdled in the barn, joking with the peasant's wife. And the wounded man bled to death in the blood-red hay.

They know they are defeated now. Couldn't you see it in the officer's eyes? said the young man.

The Cocadrille shrugged her shoulders.

What will you do when the war stops?

I will continue my studies, he said.

And one day become a judge like your father?

No, it is another kind of justice that I believe in, a popular justice, a justice for peasants like you and for workers, a justice which gives factories to those who work in them, and the land to those who cultivate it. As he said this, he smiled shyly, as if confessing something intimate.

Is your father rich? she asked.

Fairly.

Won't you inherit some of his money?

All of it when he dies.

There's the difference between us.

She had a habit of kicking off one sabot and rubbing the bare foot against her other leg.

I shall use that money to start a paper. By then we shall have a free press. A free press is a prerequisite for the full mobilisation of the masses.

Are your feet hot too? she asked.

The hay is dusty, he said. He gravely gave everything he said equal thought.

Meanwhile you are in danger, she commented.

Not more than you.

That is true, today we are equal.

Do your brothers think like you?

I don't think.

I didn't trust them, he said.

They are as straight as a goat's hind leg. You must rest now. Later I will dress your wound again. What is your first name?

They call me Saint-Just.

I have never heard that name. Rest now, Saint-Just.

He slept without stirring. In the evening whilst the others were eating, she took him bread and a plate of soup.

I feel stronger, he announced.

I can dress your wound again.

No, just sit beside me.

When she sat beside him, he laid his head in her lap and she combed his hair with her fingers.

You have very gentle hands, he said for the second time.

It's like raking hay, she said laughing.

She broke off the story there. I do not know whether they made love. Perhaps it is only my own memories which make me ask the question. Yet there was something in the way the Cocadrille recounted her meetings with men which always left you speculating.

The two maquisards departed next day. Within forty-eight hours the village heard that a group of maquisards had been surprised in their camp by the Milice, taken prisoner, transported to A . . . and shot in a field there. There were six in the group and they included the peasant from the Dranse and Saint-Just. It was said that the Milice could never have found the camp, unless they had been tipped off by an informer.

The Cocadrille shrieked when she heard the news. At supper that night she was still crying with bloodshot eyes.

In God's name stop it, woman! Henri's wife exclaimed. In any case a woman of your age should be ashamed!

Those who sleep with dogs, wake up with fleas, said Edmond.

That's good! shouted Henri. That's good! Those who sleep with dogs, wake up with fleas!

She never forgave the insult. She began, as she had done when she was a child, to disappear. Without telling her brothers, she would be absent for a whole day, sometimes two days and a night. It became impossible to confide any regular job to her. She gradually withdrew her labour, as job after job appeared to her shameful. Not shameful in itself, but shameful for her to perform for two men whom she could not forgive.

Soon she was no longer on speaking terms with anybody in the house. She slept in the stable. She ate by herself. To save the bother of eating more than once a day, she rolled herself cigarettes. Her brothers were in constant dread that deliberately or accidentally she would set fire to the farm. They threatened to beat her if they found her smoking in the stable. In revenge she put an

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unlit cigarette in her mouth whenever she saw one of them approaching.

It was Henri who first spoke in the village of the Cocadrille's stealing. She stole, he said, eggs from his wife's chicken house. Since she doesn't work, he added, she has no right to them, and she sells them for money.

Some believed him and sympathised; others argued that she was, after all, his sister and he owed her her share of the inheritance. Gradually it became apparent that she was stealing from other gardens. A few lettuces, some plums, a marrow or two. Nobody, except Henri and Edmond, took these small thefts very seriously. They were humiliated by them.

The end came with the fire. The Cabrol grenier burnt down one autumn morning. The two brothers accused the Cocadrille of having deliberately set light to it.

They went to see the Mayor and they told him that they could no longer take responsibility for the actions of their sister, whose unleashed madness was Stealing and Arson. The Mayor was reluctant to refer the matter to any outside authority. It was his wife who thought of the solution which he finally proposed to Henri and Edmond. They accepted it enthusiastically. And with this proposal the first life of the Cocadrille came to an end.

The Second Life of Lucie Cabrol

HOW LONG DISTANCES seem to a peasant may depend on how he cultivates his land. If he grows melons between cherry trees, five hundred metres is a considerable distance. If he grazes cows on a mountain pasture, five kilometres is not far. To the Cocadrille, who could cultivate nothing, because she now had no land, twenty kilometres became a short distance. She walked fast. When she was an old woman, people still commented on how quickly she disappeared. One moment they saw her on a path: the next moment hillside and skyline were empty. She usually carried a sack and, sometimes, tied across her back, a large blue umbrella.

One September morning in 1967 she set out early. The place she was making for was a high forested plateau, about eight kilometres away from where she now lived. When a pine tree falls in that forest, struck by lightning, or its roots are torn out of the earth by a gale, it lies where it fell until its wood turns grey, stifled by snow in winter and burnt by the sun in summer. There are no paths there. You can see on the fallen tree trunks hundreds of systematically dismantled pine-cones, which the squirrels have eaten, undisturbed since the thaw in the spring. Everywhere, climbing over roots and boulders, wild raspberries grow.

The canes were taller than she. As she picked them she crooned. This was to frighten the snakes. With her left hand she bent the canes back so that their under-sides, clustered with fruit, were uppermost: then, between the finger and thumb of her right hand she picked, going from cluster to cluster, until she was so far stretched over the cane that she risked falling forward on to her face. Any fruit that failed to come away easily from their white cores she left. Those she picked she put in the palm of her left

hand. The berries were warm and granular like nipples. She held them in her calloused dirt-lined palm without squashing them. When she could hold no more she turned round and emptied the handful into a frail made of thin wood. As she moved forward through the forest, she left behind her thousands of white cores from which she had taken the fruit.

I was watching her. I had climbed up to the forest the same morning to look for bolets which grow along its upper edge, where the pines stop. To my surprise I saw a very small old woman in black among the trees. Since my return I had only heard about the Cocadrille from others.

After I arrived in Buenos Aires I seldom gave her a thought. If she came to mind at all, I congratulated myself on my luck in escaping her guile. I remained convinced that she had tried to trap me into marriage. Fortunately she had failed—probably because she was sterile. Contrary to what one might expect, as time passed, I thought of her more often. I took for granted my luck in not having become entangled with her. And in the hot airless nights of the city, not far from one of the vilest shanty towns, I used to picture to myself an alpine summer. One of the things I recalled was the long grass beneath the stars beside the Cabrol chalet. And then even her plotting seemed to me to belong to a life that was carefree and innocent.

Among the trees in the forest, she straightened her back from time to time and ate some of the fruit. I hid so she would not see me. I wanted to watch her unawares.

After twenty-five years in the Argentine, I went north to Montreal where, for a while, I was rich. I had my own bar there. Sometimes I would tell my story about the goats in the moonlight and the Cocadrille. Once a client asked me: Was this woman a dwarf? And I had to explain. No, she was not a dwarf, she was tiny, she was underdeveloped, she was ignorant, she was like a dwarf, but she wasn't. If she was physically like a dwarf, the client reasoned, she surely was a dwarf. No, I said.

When I next looked towards the forest, she had disappeared. Not a branch moved. The red cones hung motionless, they were especially, obscenely red that year. I have never seen them so red—

as red as the arseholes of baboons. There was no sign of her. I told myself I had imagined seeing her. Yet, when I walked over to where I thought she had been, the raspberry canes were stripped and you could see everywhere the white cores of the fruit she had taken.

A few days previously I had overheard some children coming out of school talking about her.

It makes you frightened just to meet her on the road.

Why does she live up there, so far away, next to the precipice?

Mother says she catches marmots and skins them.

My father says she has a fortune hidden up there.

Why doesn't she have a dog at least to keep her company?

Witches don't have dogs, they have cats.

If she looks at you, you have to open your mouth—have you noticed that—you can't keep it shut!

I was walking with my head down looking for mushrooms. With age I have become somewhat deaf. Something made me look to the side. The woman in the black dress, not more than ten metres away, was squatting at the foot of a tree, holding her dress up over her scratched knees.

The passer-by, she cawed, should always raise his hat to the one who is shitting!

I took off my beret and she cawed with laughter.

I think she didn't recognise me for when she got to her feet and took a few steps towards me, pulling down her skirt, she stopped and exclaimed.

It's Jean!

I nodded.

Do you recognise me?

You're the Cocadrille.

No! she said and her laughter stopped dead.

Why are you following me? she asked.

I came up here to look for bolets.

You found some?

What?

Did you find some? she insisted.

I opened my haversack. Her hair was white, the lines to the

corners of her mouth were very deep, and down the sides of her face I could see tracks of sweat. Around her lips were spots and traces of dark red from the fruit she had eaten. This, with her lined face and white hair, gave her the macabre air of a prematurely aged child. Or of an old person become childish.

Give them to me. Her eyes were fixed on the bolets I had found. What for?

They are mine! she claimed.

She believed that whatever grew and had not been planted by man, within a radius of ten kilometres of where she lived, was incontestably hers.

I closed my haversack. She shook her head and turned away, cursing quietly to herself.

So you've come back, she said after a minute.

Yes, I've come back.

You were away too long. She stared at me with the intense gaze of her blue eyes, which were no more like flowers but like a stone called kyanite.

I remembered the way up here, I said.

You came up here to spy on me.

Spy?

Spy on me!

Why should I want to spy on you?

Give me the bolets then.

No.

Why did I refuse? I had found the mushrooms, therefore they were mine. It was an elementary point of justice. Yet I knew that justice had little to do with my life or hers. I refused out of habit.

She took an empty frail from her sack and began picking. I wondered how she arranged the frails in her sack when they were full so that the fruit would not be damaged.

Whilst you were away, everything changed, she said to me over her shoulder.

A lot must have changed when you left the farm.

I didn't leave it. They disinherited me.

She moved on, following the fruit, away from me. Soon she

appeared to forget that I was there. She bent back a stem on which the berries must have been especially closely clustered.

Thank you, little sow, she cawed. Thank you!

Did you marry out there? she shouted.

Yes.

I forced my way through the brambles so as to hear her better. She wore boots with no stockings and her scratched legs were as lean as the forelegs of a cow.

Why did you come back alone then?

My wife died.

You're a widower.

I am a widower.

Do you have children?

Two sons. They are both working in the United States.

Money can change everything, she said. She held up her left hand, full of raspberries, pretending that it was full of coins. He who hasn't got money is like a wolf without teeth. She looked around at the whole forest as if it were the world. And for he who has money, money can do anything. Money can eat and dance. Money can make the dirty clean, the despised respected. Money can even make the dwarf big.

Her using the word *dwarf* shocked me.

I have two million! she cawed.

I hope you keep them in a bank.

Fuck off! she swore. Fuck off and get away!

She pointed as if pointing at a door and ordering me out of a room rather than a forest. Everyone in the village said that she was fearless. I don't think this was true. What she counted on was inspiring fear in others. She knew that people were frightened of her. Now she was angry because she had told me about her savings; she had probably intended to keep this a secret. If I went obediently she might assume that I was not interested. If I insisted upon staying it would be tantamount to admitting my curiosity. So I left.

It is said that large mushrooms are large from the moment they first appear. One morning there is nothing, and the next morning

the mushroom is there as large as it will ever be. A small mushroom is not a young large one. It will stay small, as the Cocadrille stayed small.

Occasionally, as I went on looking for my mushrooms, I saw her faded blue sunshade in the distance. Its blue was like the colour of her eyes. They had lost none of their colour with age. They had simply become dry, like stone.

Towards midday I found the largest bolet I have ever seen. I looked at it for several minutes before I saw it. Then suddenly it stood out from its surroundings of fern, moss, dead wood, grey pine needles and earth—exactly as if it had grown from nothing before my eyes. It was thirty centimetres in diameter and thick like a round loaf of bread. Sometimes I dream of finding mushrooms and even in my dream I say to myself: Don't pick them straight away, admire them first. This one weighed two kilos and was still fresh.

I walked to another part of the forest where the pines are not spruce but larches, and where the earth is covered with a carpet of turf as soft as an animal's stomach. There I planned to eat my lunch and afterwards, as has become my habit, to sleep a little. I put my beret over my face to keep the sun out of my eyes. And as I lay there, before I fell asleep, I thought, I must look like an old man who never left his country. This thought along with the mushrooms I had found, the little wine I had drunk, the softness of the turf, was a consolation. I sat up to look once more at the giant bolet in my haversack. It too was a confirmation that I had come home.

God in heaven!

If she hadn't sworn, she wouldn't have woken me. A platoon could march on the turf there without making a sound. She was holding the bolet which was as large as a loaf and staring at it. The strap of my haversack was already over her shoulder. She saw me sit up. This in no way deterred her. With her exaggeratedly long strides she was making off towards the other part of the forest. Why didn't I protest? To lose all the mushrooms I had gathered during the morning, to lose the largest bolet I had ever

seen, and to lose a haversack into the bargain was a shouting matter. I could have run after her, picked her up and shaken her. I stayed there on the ground. All the stories I had heard about her were true. She was shameless. She was a thief. I had no doubt she would sell my mushrooms. Why had she not asked me for them once more? I might have given her some. The idea came to me that this time, and this time only, I would let her have what she had taken.

I need my haversack, I shouted.

You know where I live!

She bawled this as if it were a complete justification of what she had done.

A few days later I went to retrieve my haversack. Half an hour's walk along the road which climbs east out of the village brings you to a stone column on top of which is a small statue of the Madonna. She stands there arms relaxed, palms of her hands facing the road as if waiting to welcome the traveller. Either side of the Madonna are railings because, behind her, there is a sheer drop to the gravel of the river Jalent, sixty, seventy metres below.

Around the next bend of the road is the house in which the Cocadrille lived her second life. Beside the house there is a rock, as tall as the roof, with an ash tree growing on top of it. You have the impression that the house is jutting out into the road, edging away from the precipice behind its back. It was originally built before the First World War for a roadmender. He lodged there with his horse during the few weeks of the year when he was working on that isolated stretch of the pass. With the advent of lorries, the house no longer served any purpose and so was locked up and the key kept in the Mayor's office. The Mayor's wife's proposal had been that the Cocadrille should live in the roadmender's house rent-free. There, she would be far enough away from the village to cause trouble to nobody, and the law would not have to be invoked against her.

If you approach the roadmender's house from the opposite direction, you don't see it until you are beside it, for it is completely hidden by the rock with the tree on top of it. The rock is like a

second house that has been filled with stone. From the direction I was approaching I could see a window, which had no curtains, in the house which was lived in.

I knocked on the door.

Who is it?

Jean.

You're too late.

It's not half past eight.

The door opened a fraction.

What do you want?

I have come to fetch my haversack.

At this hour!

I won't come in.

Now she opened the door fully.

I'll pay you a coffee.

The room was full of sacks and cardboard boxes, there were two piles of wood and so far as I could see, only one chair at a table, on which there was a pile of old newspapers, a heap of hazelnuts and some knitting. The blue umbrella stood in a corner. The ceiling was smoked dark brown like the hide of a ham. The room was the size of a small lorry.

She continued doing what she must have been doing before I knocked. She gathered the hazelnuts into a basket and hung them on a pair of scales, the traditional kind made of iron, which, on the banknotes of some countries, the figure of Justice holds up in front of her bosom.

Shit and shit! she grumbled. I can't see in this light.

I put on my glasses and looked over her shoulder to read the markings on the iron bar.

Six kilos, three hundred, I said.

She smelt of the floor of a forest into which the sun never penetrates, she smelt of boar.

After they were weighed she put the nuts into a cardboard box.

I haven't had a visit for three years. I had to strain my ears to hear her. She was speaking as if to herself. The last visitor I had was Monsieur le Curé in July 1964. They put me here to get me

out of the way. Why don't you take your glasses off? They make you look like a curé.

If you can't read, you should wear glasses yourself.

Read! she cawed. Read!

From the pocket of her apron she took out a packet of tobacco and slowly rolled herself a cigarette. On the stove she moved a saucepan of milk to get a light from the burning wood.

If I turn my back you spill over, she said to the milk.

A cock came through the door from the adjoining stable. It stood there, one claw poised in the air.

Sit on the chair! she said. It was the last curé, not this one. He was always in bad health. He'd climbed up here on foot on his way somewhere. I offered to pay him a glass of water. Ah, he said, as soon as he came in: You are a child of the earth, Lucie. Without land, I said. You must not harbour resentment, he told me, you have things to be grateful for. I knew what he meant. Like this house you mean—everybody whispers that I don't pay rent for it and what a shack it is! It was built for one man and a horse—she lifted the milk off the fire—and when the horse died it wasn't lived in any more. I'm the only woman who ever slept in this house. I asked the curé to name one other woman in the village who would live here alone. None of them is a child of the earth, he repeated. I will show you one day what I am, I said, I'm going to surprise you all! It is dangerous—I remember how solemn his voice was—to hope too much; you cannot please the world and there is no reason to envy it. She shooed the cock away into the stable. Father, I said, I believe in happiness! And do you know what happened then? His face went white and he grasped my arm. Lucie, is there a little more water? he whispered. I gave him some *gnôle* and he drank it like water. He started to speak as if he were reading the Bible in church. It is written, sadness has killed many, and there is no profit in it. You are right, my daughter, to believe in happiness. Lie down, Father, I told him, and rest a moment. Where? he asked, I see no bed. I got him to the table. He lay down, closed his eyes and smiled. The angels, he murmured, who descended and ascended on Jacob's ladder, they had wings, yet

they did not fly and they trod the gradual rungs of the ladder. I held the glass for him and undid the buttons where his clothes were too tight. He never opened his eyes. He will be ashamed when he wakes up, I said. He heard me say this because he spoke: I'm ashamed now but I feel better. Slowly, Father, I said, let your strength come back slowly. That was the last visitor I had. She poured out some coffee.

Haven't Henri or Edmond ever visited you?

It was then that she told me the story of her brothers and the maquisards. She told it squatting on a sack beside the stove. The kitchen grew darker and darker. I could see nothing except the orange of the fire in the stove and her white hair which gave off a glimmer of light. Outside there was a hard moon. They are traitors, she added, when she had finished the story.

Traitors?

It was they who informed the Milice.

Have you any proof?

I don't need proof. I know them too well.

Why should they have done that? The war was nearly over. Everyone saw the Germans were losing.

What kind of patriot were you? she hissed. A thousand kilometres away.

Ten thousand, I said.

She spat and rubbed the spittle with her foot on the floorboards.

The only time my brothers came here was when they brought my furniture. They made excuses all day saying they had to finish planting the potatoes. It was in April 1949. Only after they had eaten their soup did they load the cart. Then we set out under cover of darkness. Do you know why? In the daylight they were ashamed to be seen moving their sister out. When we arrived here, it was as dark as it is now. My own brothers, fed on the same mother's milk, sperm of the same father's sperm, left me here in the dark one night. I didn't even have a lamp. Each month they were meant to pay me. Pay my arse! I saw the last of them that same night through the window there.

I watched the cart go, she continued, and when I knew it was far away, I followed it. I went as far as the Madonna. She walked

to the dark window in the room and stood looking out through the glass.

There was a long white cloud in the shape of a fish, she went on, I have never seen it again. Where the fish's eye should have been was the moon. I waited there at the foot of the Madonna's column and I spoke to Maman and Papa. You should have known your sons better, I told them. You always thought of them as they were when they were in the cradle. Shit! You didn't know where their evil came from, did you? You died, Papa, didn't you, not knowing that to make a child you need a woman, a man and the Devil. That's why it's so tempting! I saw what Papa was doing at that very moment when I was standing at the Madonna's feet. He was rutting into Maman. And Maman was pulling him down! When you were alive, you didn't do it enough, did you, you were always too tired and your back felt too broken. Go on. I give you my blessing. Go on, I told them. You have nothing left here. Your sons will give nothing back to you. If you speak out loud, they won't listen. If you stopped and saw me, you'd suffer. I'm not going to let you suffer, Papa, I'm not going to let you suffer, Maman, because I'm going to survive. You carcasses with your backs to everything! I'm not going to let you suffer. I swear it. I'm going to survive.

In the darkness the room smelt of sacks and earth. A car came up the road and its headlights shone straight through the window at which she stood, lighting up the entire room. In this light, the room looked more than ever like a store shed. In the corner, on the far side of the stove, was a ladder and above it an open trapdoor. When the car had passed, the darkness by contrast was total. The noise of the engine died away. In the silence and darkness, the two of us could as well have been in our coffins.

Do you want to eat some soup with me?

I have a bottle of wine.

So you thought you'd stay!

No, I bought it for myself at home.

After forty years' absence, what have you got to show? One litre of wine!

A little more.

What?

Enough to live on till I move to the Boulevard of the Laid Out.
So you've come back to die.

We're not young any more.

I'm not ready to die yet, she proclaimed.

Death doesn't ask if you are ready.

Are you going to live well? she asked.

I'm not rich. I didn't make the fortune I dreamt of. I was unlucky. Do you always sit in the dark?

What did you find in South America—electricity? I go to bed when I can't see. You're going to keep your mother's house in the village?

I bought it from my brothers.

When did you do that?

This interrogation, during which we were both invisible to the other, reminded me of kneeling before the confession box. I sent them money when I had it.

She must have read my thoughts, for the next question she asked was: Were you faithful to your wife?

What a man does with his own skin, I said, is his own business.

For twenty years I haven't spoken to anyone after nightfall except my chickens and the goat, when I still had one.

Give me my haversack and I'll be going.

No, wait! I'll light the lamp.

She struck a match and made her way over to the cupboard, in which she found a candle.

Are you hot now? she asked the soup, lifting the lid of the saucepan with as much caution as she had first opened the door to me. I can't grow a single potato for you, they've taken every one. Can you lift the lamp down? Otherwise I have to stand on a chair.

The lamp was on the mantelpiece. I lit it. She climbed up the ladder to the loft and came down with a second chair. From the nail in the wall behind the stove she took a pewter ladle and rubbed it against the side of her black dress.

At last we sat down on either side of the table. The soup was steaming in the plates. It must have been past midnight.

So you have brought nothing back with you! She looked into my face.

Not a great fortune.

That's obvious.

She held out her glass for me to fill with wine.

I swore to survive and become rich, and rich I've become, she said. There's no man on earth who has the right to a single glass of vin blanc paid for out of my money! From now on I'm going to drink wine in the evenings.

What time do you get up in the mornings? I asked. I must be going.

In time to milk.

You have no cows.

I get up in time to milk. Every morning for the twenty years since I've been here.

At five?

She nodded.

You have an alarm clock?

In here. She pointed at her white hair.

And tomorrow? I asked.

Tonight is an exception, she said, holding out her glass for me to refill. Tonight I'm going to tell you about the twenty years.

What have they to do with me?

You have come back a pauper yet at least you have seen the world.

When she swore at the feet of the Madonna to survive, she had no clear idea of how to become rich. She knew less than I did when I took the boat to Buenos Aires. All she knew was that she could not become rich in the village.

I have renamed the village, she said. I have renamed it *Chez Cocadrille!* She shook with laughter and licked her colourless lips with her pink tongue.

Fifty kilometres away, just over the frontier, was the city of B Marius à Brine had spoken of its wealth, just as his father had done. Marius also said that those who lived in B . . . gave nothing away; they were so mean that they melted the snow to give what was left as alms to the poor! The Cocadrille concluded

as she watched her two lost parents embracing that the place where money truly existed was B. . . . Such money as reached the village was vagrant money. She had to go to its home, where money bred.

What could she take to sell in B. . . ? It was the moment for killing kids and she had no goats. It was the time when last summer's cheeses were ready to eat, and she had no cows. It was the laying season for chickens and she had not yet built her chicken-run. The solution, obvious as it was, did not come to her immediately. She walked back along the moonlit road from the Madonna's column.

I slept down here the first night, she said. It took me a year to move up to the loft. I missed the animals in the stable, and the idea of sleeping half-way up the sky, in the cold, didn't appeal to me. I prefer to sleep on the ground, don't you?

For a while I lived on the eighteenth storey.

What did it bring you?

She rubbed index finger against thumb in the banknote gesture which signifies money. Then she touched the back of my hand with her fingers.

During the first night in the roadmender's house, she dreamt of the Madonna. The Madonna spoke to her in her dream and told her that everything which people go out to pick, she must pick first and take to the city. This is why the Madonna's hands were open and pointing to the grass on the verge of the road.

Next day she took the path up to the highest fields of the village. The altitude there is nine hundred metres, and the grass was only just beginning to grow. She picked dandelions for salad, their leaves still very small, their stalks white. She didn't come down until she had picked two kilos. Then she set out for the fields and orchards five hundred metres below, and there, where the dandelions were already flowering and the grass as high as her shins, she hunted for morels. Her fingers led her to them, under the pear trees, among nettles, between the stones of walls.

I still know where a mushroom is waiting, like a bitch on heat for a dog.

By the end of the day she had filled a basket.

At dusk she went out once again to collect violets and primroses at the edge of the forest. The violets she arranged in tiny bouquets with a damp cloth around them, and the primroses she cut out of the earth with their roots and soil attached. When it was fully night, she walked along the road to the Madonna's column and, in the grass at its base, she planted some of the primroses.

A train went to the frontier town which adjoins B. . . . There was even a song about this train which La Mélanie used to sing. The train in the song left the town at noon, and travelled so slowly and stopped so often by the river, the smoke from the engine going straight up into the sky, that it never reached the village till it was dark, a fact which delighted lovers because they could caress each other undisturbed in the warm upholstered carriages. La Mélanie used to mime their embraces whilst she sang. The Cocadrille took this train. It was going in the opposite direction to the train in the song and went much faster. The journey lasted less than two hours. What frightened her was its smoothness. She was used to lurches and bumps against which, without thinking, she tensed herself so as not to be bruised against the wood of the cart drawn by the horse. The smoothness of the train made her feel sick: it was as if the earth no longer existed.

When the train arrived at the end of the line, she followed everyone out of the station. She saw no one she knew to ask where the frontier was. She resolved to walk in the same direction as most of the men. It was still early in the morning and she knew that many men went to work for the day in B. . . .

At the frontier the douanier asked her whether she had anything to declare. She looked blank. What have you got with you? he asked. Some morels, she said. I'll sell them to you, if you offer me a good price!

After two hours' searching, she found the market. She walked through it to see whether others were selling the same goods as she had brought. There were no other violets, and she thought she had misread the price of the dandelion leaves. They cost two hundred for a hundred grams. Two thousand a kilo! She understood better the wealth of the city of B. . . . The morels were selling at five thousand a kilo! She chose a corner in the shade,

put her baskets down either side of her feet and waited for customers to come and buy. She stood waiting all morning. At mid-day she saw all the other traders packing up their stalls. She had sold nothing. She had not opened her mouth.

On her way back to the frontier she went into a café to ask for a glass of water. Nowhere in the streets had she seen a pump or a fountain. The proprietor peered into her basket of morels. He picked one up without a word, turned it in his fingers.

I'll give you a thousand for the basketful.

There are two kilo there. You can weigh them.

I don't need to.

They're selling for five thousand a kilo in the market, she said, scandalised.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away. She stared at him, her chin level with the top of his zinc bar. Looking over his shoulder, he opened his silent mouth and guffawed with laughter.

How much do you weigh yourself! he asked. You could throw yourself in for good measure! I'll give you twelve hundred.

She saw that she had to accept the price, it was her last chance.

It took her a year to find her way about B. . . . In Buenos Aires I saw peasants newly arrived in the city, and all of them had the same air of confusion and extreme timidity. Many of them never got over it. I and the Cocadrille did. Of the two of us, she was the quicker. At home, in the village, it is you who do everything, and the way you do it gives you a certain authority. There are accidents and many things are beyond your control, but it is you who have to deal with the consequences even of these. When you arrive in the city, where so much is happening and so much is being done and shifted, you realise with astonishment that nothing is in your control. It is like being a bee against a window pane. You see the events, the colours, the lights, yet something, which you can't see, separates you. With the peasant it is the forced suspension of his habit of handling and doing. That's why his hands dangle out of his cuffs so stupidly.

Month by month the Cocadrille learnt where she could sell each item in the city, each item which, according to the season, she scavenged from the mountains: wild cherries, lilies of the valley,

snails, mushrooms, blueberries, raspberries, wild strawberries, blackberries, *trolles*, juniper berries, cumin, wild rhododendra, mistletoe.

You have to understand that everything you watch in the city is as unimportant as a game. Everything which impresses you about the city is an illusion. It is not easy. To be impressed and unimpressed at the same time! What really happens in a city is hidden. If you want to achieve anything it must be arranged in secret.

She went to cafés, never missing a wink or a nod, never failing to remember a quickly suggested address. She bought a map of the city and on it she marked, with the flowing capital letters which André Masson taught us all, the addresses of her customers.

You'd have to pay to see that map! she cawed.

I poured out the last of the wine.

Do you remember where the cumin grows on the path to the alpage? I bring down a pailler full on my back and I let it dry there in the stable. I put newspapers underneath for the seeds to fall on to. I can sell a hundred grams of cumin seed for one thousand, five hundred!

As she named the price, she tapped with all the fingers of one hand on the edge of the table, and the spoon rattled in her plate. She discovered that there was no need to pay for a ticket to travel to B. . . . She could stop lorries and cars on the road and they would take her. She went to the city twice a week. All the other days of the year, when there wasn't snow, she scavenged from dawn to dusk.

Drivers came to know me. She touched the back of my hand again. Sometimes they tried to take liberties but they never tried twice.

Réné, the electrician, picked her up one day.

As far as the frontier? she asked.

Réné nodded and she got in the back. He saw her in the driving mirror. It was a new car he had just bought and she sat in the very centre of the shining back seat, bolt upright with her sack on the floor. René nudged the apprentice sitting beside him.

Have you heard the story of the he-goat who went mad?

No.

He belonged to a farm where, years before, a cock laid an egg. How's that?

The peasant's wife was certain because one morning she went into the chicken house and there was the cock on one of the hens' boxes, making laying noises. She shooed him off and there was an egg! Saying nothing to her husband, she took the egg and buried it in the dung heap. Four weeks later . . .

He was interrupted by the noise of something crackling. He turned around. The Cocadrille was lying back with her legs and boots in the air. On the seat beside her, several egg yolks were running down the upholstery. The scraps of newspaper from which she had unwrapped the eggs were still on her lap.

Finish your story, she said. What did the Cocadrille do to the billy-goat?

Réné drove on in silence. When the douanier at the frontier asked whether they had anything to declare, the Cocadrille leant forward and said:

The two men here have a dozen broken eggs to declare.

Réné shook his head and winked at the douanier.

You can count them there on the floor, she insisted, twelve, and they haven't paid me for them yet. A car like this, and they pretend they can't pay an old woman for a dozen eggs!

How did they break? asked the douanier, laughing.

A billy-goat rolled on them . . . she explained, and, without a thank-you or a good-bye, the Cocadrille got down from the car and followed the tram-lines.

She learnt that money did not have the same value on both sides of the frontier. For everything bought, there was a cheap side and an expensive side. She learnt that it was foolish to bring money back; less foolish to bring back what she could sell expensively on her side.

We are surrounded by natural frontiers: snow, mountains, rock walls, rivers, ravines. For centuries we have also lived near an invisible political frontier. Where exactly it runs, changes according to the force of foreign governments and armies. This frontier divides the rich from the poor, and it is the easiest of all to cross.

The threat of being flogged, of exile, of execution, of being sent to the galleys, has never deterred men or women from crossing it and smuggling. Many smuggled alone; some formed bands like small armies. The names of the leaders of these bands she knew by heart: Le Grand Joseph, Le Dragon, La Danse à l'Ombre, the great Louis Mandrin who was executed at V. . . .

What have you got to declare today, Grandma?

Down to there, nothing, she pointed to the pit of her stomach, underneath there is a present for any young man who wants it!

Besides the map which she would not show me, she kept an almanac. In it, each year, she wrote down the date of the month when a crop in a given place was ready for picking. Five days a week, for she was also out scavenging on Sundays, she combed the countryside. Like a crow, she noticed everything.

She knew not only paths but countless clearings, assemblies of rocks, streams, fallen trees, protected hollows, fissures, crests, slopes. It was only for the city of B . . . that she needed a map. She knew exactly where to crawl along the border of the forest to find wild strawberries. She knew under which pine trees the cyclamen grow, the tiny cyclamen which are called *pain de porceau* because wild boar eat their roots. She knew on which distant precipitous slope the first rhododendra flower. She knew by which walls whole settlements of snails come out of hiding. She knew where the yellow gentians with the largest roots grow on the mountainside where the soil is least rocky so that digging them is a little easier. She worked and scavenged alone.

I talk to my shadow when the sun is out, and together we calculate the price our loot is likely to fetch. We have become experts, the two of us. And we commiserate together—about the weight of the sack, about the thorns in our hands, about how long we work. Sometimes, like you, we sleep at midday.

Abruptly she pushed back her chair, and went over to the cupboard.

Do you still drink gnôle?

It's very late, I complained.

The contempt of her laughter filled the room. She poured from the bottle into the glasses.

I sell a bottle of this for nine thousand!

It was the first gentian which I had tasted since my return. It has a very strong taste. The gentian roots taste of the earth and the earth tastes of the mountain.

She knew where every accessible wild cherry tree was. She carried a small ladder with her, no taller than herself, and this enabled her to get up into the tree. When she was well placed, her back against a branch, her boots on another, surrounded by cherries, and the basket hung from its hook at the right level, she could pick without looking. She could stand in the tree with her eyes shut like an owl, and her fingers would find the stalks, instantly move down them and break them off at the hode four or five at a time. With her eyes half shut she scarcely touched the fruit.

She sold her goods to restaurants, herbalist shops, florists, hotel manageresses.

I'll give you three thousand for the silver thistles, said the manageress, are you deaf, can you hear me? She held out a five-thousand note.

I have no change, said the Cocadrille.

If you never have change, how do you get here every week? demanded the manageress angrily.

By private car!

The manageress was forced to go and change the note. May she rot! added the Cocadrille.

One afternoon there was a cloudburst and she found herself propelled into a crowd of women, who surged through the glass doors of a department store and came to a stop before a glass counter where young women were selling stockings and lace underwear. No sooner had she begun to marvel at the black lace, than she was again pushed from behind, and this time found herself surrounded by other women in a lift. When it went up, she crossed herself and whispered:

Emile, if only you could see me now!

The lift operator, a man of her own age, dressed in a bandsman's uniform, said to her: Coffee, tea, chocolate, pâtisseries, Madame.

The lift doors slid back and the two carpeted ground levels once more coincided.

For the next ten years, every week, after she had sold her goods, she visited this upper floor tea-room. On her way to the tea-room she went to a tobacconist.

What can I do for you today, Madame?

Give me eight hundred Marlboro.

The tobacconist slipped the four large packets into a gold-coloured plastic bag. Carrying the gold-coloured bag, she entered the department store, crossed to the lift and waited for the liftman to address her: Coffee, tea, chocolate, pâtisseries, Madame?

On the fourth floor she went to the ladies' room. There she locked herself in the lavatory and pulled up her long black serge skirt. Underneath, at the level of her hips, she wore a cloth band. This bandoleer she had made out of one of La Mélanie's linen chemises. Its pockets were larger than the usual ones for cartridges. Before sewing them she had measured very carefully. Into the double line of pockets she fitted thirty-nine packets of Marlboro.

With these red-and-white packets of what she considered to be tasteless tobacco, she was able to double her income. American cigarettes sold for twice as much on her side of the frontier. After she had arranged her skirt and pulled down her loose cardigan she flushed the toilet and emerged, hat in hand. She arranged her hair in the mirror above the wash-basin.

She had the appearance of a pauper and at the same time she looked wilful. Such a combination in a city suggests madness.

The drinking of the chocolate she ordered in the tea-room was a ritual, and was accompanied by her smoking one or two cigarettes from the single packet she had kept out. She preferred the cigarettes she rolled herself. It was her sense of occasion which made her realise it would have been inappropriate to smoke them in such a setting.

This was the only moment of the week when she sat in company, although she spoke to no one except the waitress. Sitting there on one of the gilded wicker chairs, such as she had never seen until her second life began, sipping her chocolate with graded

nutmeg sprinkled on its frothy cream, smoking a perfectly cylindrical cigarette with a long filter-tip, checking from time to time with her stiffened fingers that her bandoleer was in place, she allowed herself to dream of the fulfillment of her plans. She studied the other customers, nearly all of whom were women out shopping. She noticed their hands, their made-up faces, their jewelry, their shoes with high heels. She had no wish to speak to them and she did not envy them, yet the sight of them gave her pleasure. They were a weekly proof of the extent of what money can do. Each month she saved at least half the money which she received for the cigarettes smuggled across the frontier. Never for an instant did she forget what the total of her savings amounted to. Every week this figure encouraged her. It was like a father. It got her out of bed when it was dark. When she set out, before the sun was up, on her walk of twenty kilometres, and her skirt was drenched by the dew which dripped down her legs into her socks, it reminded her that her dress might dry within an hour, if it didn't rain. When she was hungry, it told her not to complain, for she would eat later. When her back ached and her shoulders were sore and, coming down from the mountain, her knees were knotted and cracked with so much pain that it made her cry out, it reminded her how one day she would buy a new bed. When she talked with her shadow, it promised her that eventually they would move back into the village.

Whilst drinking her chocolate, the total of her savings—she always added on what she was about to receive that day—was as consoling as the music which came out of the loudspeakers high up near the decorated ceiling. Every week, every year, every decade, the amount increased.

When you have enough money, you can stand on your head stark naked!

She said this to a man, accompanied by a woman in a fur coat, who was waiting in the tobacconist's shop. The woman gave a little scream and the man, thinking that she was begging, dug into his trouser pocket for a small coin. The Cocadrille refused it. I have enough! she hissed at him. I have enough, she repeated to me across the table.

She sipped the gnôle and rolled herself another cigarette.

Soon it will be winter, she went on. Then I'm alone. And the snow forces me indoors. At Christmas I take mistletoe into B. . . . I get a thousand for a good bunch. The rest of the time, I knit. I can do nothing else. I never learnt to spin like Maman. Anyway I have no sheep. I knit pullovers and ski caps for a shop in B. . . .

She gulped back the rest of the gnôle.

Next door to the wool shop there is an antique shop. There's a wooden cradle in the window at the moment. If I had mine, I would sell it. Once I went in there and asked the price of a milking stool. Can you guess how much it cost? If it costs that much, I told them, what would I cost? You could sell me piece by piece. You could ask one hundred thousand for a milking hand. You could ask fifty thousand for a milking arm. How much would you get, I asked them, for a real peasant woman's arsehole?

She drew on her cigarette.

All winter I knit. There's nothing here, day after day, except the two needles and me. When a car passes and doesn't stop—and they never stop—I think of shooting the driver. Why not?

Why do you tell me all this?

So that you should know what I'm saying.

Only the corners of the room were still dark. The flame in the lamp looked yellow and daylight was coming through the smeared, dusty windows. She took the lamp and I thought she was going to blow it out. Instead, she walked over to the chimney in the corner and held the lamp above her head.

Look! she ordered.

On the mantelpiece were several porcelain plates decorated with cherries and flowers, a statuette of a chamois standing on a rock with his head high in the air, and a white bust in porcelain of St François de Sales. Unlike everything else in the room, these objects were dusted, carefully arranged and shining.

Have you really saved two million? I asked.

She cocked her head on one side, like a blackbird when it is about to smash a snail against a stone.

I have been listening all night, I said. It's not as if you're hiding things from me!

She blew out the lamp, turned her back, and refused to utter another word.

Three days later, on returning home in the evening, I found a note rolled and put into the keyhole of my door. The Cocadrille must have passed through the village and found the door locked. The note, written in her large flowery hand, simply said: *If you want to hear more, I have more to tell you.* It was useless to visit her in the daytime for she might be anywhere in her vast territory, and so the following evening I took the road past the Madonna's column. When I turned the corner I saw to my surprise that there was already a light in the window of the roadmender's house. I knocked at the door.

Who is it?

Jean! I replied. Are you alone?

She undid the lock.

I wasn't expecting you.

I found your note.

What note?

The note you left in my door yesterday.

I wasn't in the village yesterday.

Who else could it have been?

Was it signed?

She demanded this mischievously as though she already knew or had guessed the answer.

No, it wasn't.

The store-room was unchanged, except that there were several bulging sacks in the corner under the ladder, and from their smell I knew they were full of gentian roots. Like roots, her own hands were caked with earth.

What have you done? she asked.

I was at the fair at La Roche.

I was by Le Forêt du Cercle.

In my head I tried to work out who, if not the Cocadrille, might have written the note. Whoever it was intended that I should believe it was written by the Cocadrille; it must have been written by somebody who knew that I had already visited her.

Why have you lit the lamp so early? I asked.

I was going to write.

Another note to me?

To somebody else.

It then occurred to me that, contrary to what she said, the Cocadrille was in the habit of receiving other visitors. And they were men, I felt sure of that. She used her jokes and stories as a bait to attract some company for a little while, to drink across the table—this is why she had commented on my bringing only one bottle of wine—and perhaps also out of a kind of malice, to make a little mischief with the men's wives. It was a previous visitor who must have written me the note.

Sit down, she said, I'll heat the soup.

I can't stay long.

You have so much to do!

She knelt down to blow into the fire and whisper into it: there is something I want to ask you. It was not clear whether she said this to the fire or to me.

She went out to the stable and I heard her washing her hands in a bucket of water.

What can I pay you? she asked when she came back.

A little red.

I carry everything up here on my back!

Is the white wine lighter?

She laughed at that, and glanced at me conspiratorially.

Wait! she ordered and climbed up the ladder.

The wood cracked as it caught fire in the stove. I went over to smell the soup—with age I have become greedy: not that I eat so much and not that, living alone, I cook special dishes for myself, it is simply that I think more about food, thoughts about food pester me like cats that have not been fed. I glanced up at the mantelpiece and the shining porcelain plates decorated with cherry-tree branches. I rubbed my finger on the shelf to check whether it had collected dust and I thought: How unpredictable the Cocadrille is!

Outside, the sun had set behind the Roc d'Enfer, I could tell because the distant rockface, where the cumin grows, had turned pink, the colour of pale coral. Usually it is as grey as wood ash.

I went out of the door onto the ledge. I could hear the Jalent below. They said in the village that the Cocadrille seldom washed her clothes; when a garment was rotten with dirt she simply threw it over the edge.

On the other side of the river were orchards and meadows with cows in them. They looked like a picture engraved on a wooden mould for butter. La Mélanie had had just such a mould showing a river at the bottom, two cows in the middle, and some apple trees in the distance. This was the mould the Cocadrille used in the alpage fifty years before.

I looked behind the chicken hutch, I walked right round the rock house with the tree on top of it, I went down the road as far as the corner, I surveyed the mountain above. Nobody was there. Whoever had written the note was going to play no practical joke tonight. I was slightly disappointed for had he come, we could have talked there on the road about the Cocadrille's stratagems. The air was turning cold, and I returned indoors.

The saucepan was steaming on the stove.

So you've seen the ledge I live on!

I looked up. She was standing half-way down the ladder. She had changed her clothes. She was wearing shoes, not sabots, some kind of silk stockings instead of woollen ones, a black heavy silk skirt, a white blouse, a jacket to match the skirt, and around her head and shoulders, a white tulle veil. She was dressed in the clothes in which women go to church to be married.

In God's name, what do you think you are doing! I shouted.

Her eyes were so intense that they forced you to share in their madness. I remember thinking: For the first time I understand why you are called the Cocadrille. Her eyes made both our long lives seem no more than a moment.

My poor Jean! You're shitting in your pants!

She came down the ladder, went over to the stove and dipped the ladle into the saucepan. Years before, her entry from the stable had so surprised me that I did not fully understand what she had done until the next day; it was only then that I realised how she must have sprinkled cow's milk on her breasts. This time I was

more percipient. Clearly she had spent several evenings sewing the black silk costume. Even if, as was likely, she had inherited it from Mélanie, it would have been too large for the Cocadrille and would have required drastic alteration. She must have prepared this scene. It was part of a plan.

You certainly have a taste for theatre! I muttered.

There is no theatre in what I do.

Why do you dress up then?

The last time I undressed! She put her hands on her ribs as though to quieten the cackling of her own laughter.

We broke the bread and put it in the soup. Neither of us spoke and the silence was filled with the sound of her sucking from her spoon. She had fewer than half her teeth left. When she had finished, she pushed her plate away, got up, and came back with a bottle of gnôle. Of all the stories I had heard about her, none hinted that she was normally in the habit of drinking. Her shoes were brand new—as indeed they must have been, for nobody else's would have fitted her.

Do you dress up like this every time you invite a man up from the village?

Abruptly she drank back the gnôle in her glass. She drank it back like a chicken drinks, with a quick stupid toss of its head.

If I didn't have enough, she cried, I could go on for another ten years. I do have enough. I have scavenged for twenty years. I want to enjoy the rest of my life. I want to move back into the village. You have a house in the village and you haven't much else. I'm prepared to buy now a share of your house until I'm dead, and I will pay you straight away. The rest of my savings I'm keeping for myself. Does that interest you?

The house is too small.

I know.

The way you live—I looked deliberately round the kitchen—is not the way I could live. At my age I'm not going to change.

I can change. That's why I showed you the plates and the chamois.

I shook my head. Why don't you rent a whole house to yourself?

There are none. And it would be a waste of too much money. Have you asked anyone else to take you in?

Only *you* know me! She whispered this as though we were not alone in the lonely house on the deserted road which led over the empty pass.

Was it you who wrote the note?

She nodded. I was writing to you again tonight.

What you really want, I shouted, is for me to marry you! That's what you have always wanted!

Yes, she said. In church, with this veil.

You are out of your mind.

There's no one to stop you this time. You are alone, she said. God protect me.

I will pay you separately for the marriage, I'll give you a dowry. You can't be that rich!

We can talk about money as soon as we agree in principle. She laid her hand on the back of mine.

I can't marry you.

Jean!

Again she said my name as she had said it forty years before and again it separated me, marked me out from all other men. In the mountains the past is never behind, it's always to the side. You come down from the forest at dusk and a dog is barking in a hamlet. A century ago in the same spot at the same time of day, a dog, when it heard a man coming down through the forest, was barking, and the interval between the two occasions is no more than a pause in the barking.

In the pause between her twice saying my name in the same way, I saw myself as the young boy I had once been, encouraged by Masson to believe that I was more than usually intelligent, I saw myself as a young man without prospects, because I was the youngest, but with great ambitions, my first departure for Paris which so impressed me as the centre, the capital of the globe, that I was determined to take one of the roads from l'Etoile across the world, the last good-byes to my family, my mother imploring me not to go all the time that I harnessed the horse and my father put my bag in the cart. It is the Land of the Dead, she said. The

voyage by the boat on which each day I dreamt of how I would return to the village, honoured and rich with presents for my mother, I saw myself on the quayside where I did not understand a single word of what was being said, and the great boulevards and the obelisk, the grandeur of the packing plants which I tried to describe in a letter to my father, for whom the selling of one cow for meat was the subject of a month's discussion, the news of my father's death, the noise of the trains through the window of the room where I lodged for five years, Carmen's tantrums and her plans to open a bar of her own, her black hair the colour of the coal I shovelled, the epidemic in the shanty town, the land of straight railways so flat and going on forever; I saw myself in the train going south to Río Gallegos in Patagonia, sheep-shearing and a wind that, like my home-sickness, never stopped, I saw my wedding in Mar del Plata with all seventy-three members of Ursula's family, the birth of Gabriel six months later, the birth of Basil eighteen months afterwards and my fight with her family to christen him Basil, Ursula's dressmaking, her mother's debts, my friendship with Gilles and the pleasure of speaking my own language again, I saw Gilles' death, Ursula refusing to go to his funeral or to let the boys go, the flight to Montreal, the boys learning English which I could never speak, the news of my mother's death, the news of Ursula's death, the fire in the bar, the police investigations, I saw myself working as a night-watchman, my Sundays in the forest, the buying of my ticket home, I saw forty whole years compressed within the pause.

What separated me this time from all other men called Jean or Théophile or François was not desire, which is stronger than words, it was a sense of loss, an anguish deeper than any understanding. When she said my name the first time in the chalet in the alpage, she offered another life to the one I was about to live. Looking back I saw, now, the hope in the other life she offered and the hopelessness of the one I chose. Saying my name the second time, it was as if she had only paused a moment and then repeated the offer; yet the hope had gone. Our lives had dissolved it. I hated her. I would gladly have killed her. She made me see my life as wasted. She stood there and everything I saw—her wrinkled

cider-apple of a face, her stiff swollen hands which grabbed and rooted the region like a boar's tusks, placed now with their palms to her breast as if in supplication, the frail veil, the morsel of cigarette-paper stuck to her lip, were all proof of the dissolution of the offer. Yet I was forced—for the first and last time in this life—to speak to her tenderly.

Give me time to think, Lucie!

My using her proper name caused her to smile and brought tears to her eyes. For a moment their extraordinary sharpness was clouded and the thousands of lines around them were doubled as she screwed them up.

Come and tell me when you want to, Jean.

Before I gave her my considered answer, she was dead.

Her body was discovered by the postman who noticed that the window onto the road was broken and swinging on its hinges. The second morning he knocked and went in. She had been felled with an axe. The blade had split her skull. The signs were that she had put up a fight and had thrown a bottle through the window. Despite extensive searches, her fortune was never found. The most likely explanation was that the murderer came to steal her savings, had been surprised by her when he was leaving, and had killed her. The axe was her own which he had taken from the stable. The police cross-questioned almost everybody in the village, including myself, yet they made no arrest and the murderer was not identified.

She was buried a month before La Toussaint. There were fewer than a hundred people at her funeral; her death was a kind of disgrace for the village. She had been killed for her fortune and only somebody from the village was likely to have known about it. There were many flowers placed on her coffin, and the large unsigned wreath I ordered was not immediately remarkable.

The Third Life of Lucie Cabrol

ONE MORNING WHEN I was six my father said to me: When you let out the cows, keep Fougère behind, she's going to the abattoir today. I undid the chains of the other cows—I could just reach the locking links with my arms above my head—and the dog chased them out. Later I would take the cows to the slopes by the place which we called Nîmes. Left alone in the stable, Fougère looked anxiously around her, her ears full out like wings. By this afternoon, I said, you will be dead. She started to eat the hay in the manger. After pulling out several mouthfuls, each with a toss of her head, she looked around again and lowed. The other cows were already grazing outside. I could hear their bells. The sunlight coming through the holes in the planks of the stable walls made beams in the dust which I raised as I swept. My father unbuckled the wide leather collar Fougère was wearing. Attached to this collar was her bell which weighed five kilos. Before he turned away to hang the collar and the bell on the wall, he looked at the beast and said: My poor cuckoo, you'll never again go to Nîmes.

Whilst the funeral service was being performed inside the church, most of us men stood outside. This group of standing figures, solemn and still, always looks dwarfed by the mountains. We spoke in low voices, about the murder. Everyone was agreed that the police would never discover who the assassin was. Each said this as if he himself had a clear idea of the truth. She was fearless, they said, this had been the Cocadrille's trouble.

When the coffin came out of the church, the crowd followed it in procession through the cemetery. Nobody spoke now. The coffin was so small that it made you think of a child's funeral. It

was in the cemetery that I first heard her voice. I had no difficulty in hearing what she said, although she was whispering.

Do you want me to say who it is? He's among you, he's here in the cemetery, the thief.

The murderer, I muttered.

It's the thief whom I cannot forgive!

Her voice made me frightened. I realised that the others could not hear it. My fear was that she would shout, and it would become obvious by my reactions that I could hear something.

What would you do if I shouted his name? she said, realising my thoughts.

They won't hear.

You will hear me, Jean, you can hear me if I say Jean, can't you.

Yes, I said, and made the sign of the cross over her coffin.

When once the coffin was passed, the procession shuffled forward more quickly.

It wasn't me.

You thought of killing me.

Outside the cemetery gate her brothers Edmond and Henri stood by the wall traditionally reserved after funerals for the closest of kin. If stones could feel, the stones there would be blood-red from the pain felt by many of those who have leant against them.

My brothers look solemn and hopeful, don't they? Solemn and hopeful!

The crowd dispersed and the men went to drink in the cafés. I declined several invitations and hurried away in order to lead her voice back home, where we would be unobserved.

In the house, the same house in which she had planned that we should live after we had married, I spoke to her. She did not reply. Indeed I had the impression she had not accompanied me. Perhaps she had gone to the cafés.

I awoke early next morning and went to look out of the window. The valley below was filled with opaque white mist; where it ended, little trails of transparent cloud blew off like steam into the sky. The valley was like a laundry, the endless laundry of the damned, steaming, soaping, billowing, working against the bath

of the rockfaces in total silence. The lichen on the rocks were the voices of the damned.

Did you decide not to marry me?

I hadn't decided.

Then I'll leave you till you've made up your mind.

At La Toussaint the cemetery was full of flowers, and many people stood at the feet of the graves of their loved ones trying to listen to the dead. That night I heard her voice again. It was as close as if it were on the pillow beside mine.

I've learnt something, Jean. All over the world the dead drink at La Toussaint. Everyone drinks, no one refuses. Every year it is the same, they drink until they're drunk. They know that they have to visit the living. And so they get drunk!

On what?

On eau-de-vie! She spluttered with laughter and I felt her spit in my ear.

When she had got her breath back, she continued: And so they never know whether the living are as bone-headed as they seem, or whether the dead only have that impression because the dead are so drunk!

You sound drunk now.

Why did you think of killing me?

You know it wasn't I who stole your savings?

What did you want to kill me for?

You are drunk.

I tell you, nobody comes today if they are sober.

Has La Mélanie come?

She's making some coffee.

That will sober you up!

Not the black coffee of the dead won't. She cackled with laughter once more.

So you're drunk, every time you talk to me.

No, the dead forget the living, I haven't forgotten yet.

How long does it take to forget?

I know why you thought of killing me.

Why do you ask then?

I want to hear you say it.

Are you alone, Lucie?

You can see.

I can see nothing in the dark.

Admit the truth to me and you'll see.

Yes, I thought of killing you the night you dressed up.

I heard her get out of the bed and the floorboards creaked under her feet.

Have you been to see the man who did kill you?

It doesn't interest me.

You said you could never forgive the thief.

I've changed my mind. I don't need my savings now. Why did you think of killing me?

You were going to force me to marry you.

Force you! Force you! What with?

Then she went.

The room smelt of boar. Otherwise there was no sign that she had been there.

The thirteenth of December was her name day, *Sainte Lucie*. According to the old calendar—I read this in an almanac—Saint Lucie's day used to be the twenty-third, just after the winter solstice.

*From the day of Saint Lucie
the days lengthen by a flea's width.*

On neither the thirteenth nor on the twenty-third of December did she come back. The days grew longer.

At last the weather turned warm. My circulation improved. The old man's blood responding a little to the sun. The apple trees blossomed, the potatoes were planted, the cows were put out in the pastures. The hay was cut. One evening when the valley, full of clouds and torn mists, had its look of being the laundry of the damned, I told myself: on the next fine day I will climb up to Nîmes and pick some blueberries.

The sky was clear, and its peacefulness extended further than the furthest range of snow-capped mountains. The blueberries

grow above the tree line, usually on slopes facing east or west. The southern slopes have too much sun. My mother used to dry whole sprigs of blueberries with their leaves to give to the cows when they had diarrhoea.

From the slope where I began picking, I could see the Cabrol chalet, a little to the right and below. The chalet will scarcely outlast me, I said to myself. It must be years since Henri or Edmond have done anything to it. Instead of bringing their cows up, they rent extra pasture below. There are holes in the roof and many of the shingles need replacing. The snow will be driven in, the beams will rot and one day one end of the timberwork will fall. The following winter it will look like a shipwreck; the wind, the snow, the slope, the summer sun, which burns the wood black, wear away the timber just as the sea and waves do.

The Cocadrille used a comb to pick her blueberries. When we were young, the comb didn't exist. It is like a bear's paw, made of wood and nails. It scoops up berries between each claw, and working with it is ten times as fast as picking each berry separately between finger and thumb. It collects indiscriminately: anything that passes between its nails, it keeps in its wooden paw. As well as ripe berries, you find green ones, leaves, the ends of twigs, tiny white snails and the pods of flowers. Later, to separate them, you set up a plank at an angle to the ground, wet the plank with water, take a handful of fruit from the bucket and pour them so that they roll down the wet plank; the ripe fruit roll to the bottom into the pan, and most of the leaves and the twigs and the grass and the snails stick to the wood.

The Cocadrille set up her plank on the ledge of ground behind the roadmender's house. It is a tedious operation if you are alone. You need one person to roll the fruit, and another to check in the pan below and take out the green ones which didn't stick to the wood. She must have rolled a few handfuls and then gone to squat by the pan on the ground, then rolled a few more, then gone to squat by the pan and so on.

Bent forward towards the slope, my face close to the ground, I could see the grasshoppers. There were a couple mating. Their

bodies are bright green with streaks of white yellow. They are about three centimetres long, and the noise they make consists of three soft chuffs and then a long drawn-out hiss like a snake.

Tchee tchee hissssss.

When she rolled the blueberries down the wet plank, she must have heard the roar of the Jalent at the bottom of the ravine and the tinkle of the blueberries as they fell into the pan.

When blueberries are wet they darken to the colour of ink. Warm and dry in the sun they almost have a bloom like grapes. As you comb, you notice others a little higher up or a little to the side, and so you move towards them to comb them too with the bear's paw, and they in turn lead you to others and the others to others. Picking blueberries is like grazing.

As she sorted the fruit she must sometimes have gazed at the orchards and fields on the other side of the ravine, a reminder of all she had lost in her second life.

My bucket was half full. I had climbed out of sight of the place where I had begun.

Jean!

I wasn't convinced that I had heard her.

How many have you picked?

Half a bucket.

As slow as ever! she mocked.

I have calluses under my chin, I shouted, because all my life I have rested it on the handle of a shovel.

I thought this made her laugh. I could not be sure because there was a jackdaw flying overhead. And the laugh I heard might have been his cry: Drru krrie krie! Drru krrie krie!

Shall I help you pick?

If you wish.

I went on picking, and I heard no more, only the grasshoppers, the jackdaw, and occasionally very distantly, when the wind blew, the sound of cowbells.

I learnt what the cowbells said as a boy:

It's mine! It's mine! Can it go on? Can it go on? It can't! It can't!

I combed with the bear's paw, following the trail of the berries, grazing higher and higher. The next time I emptied the paw into

the bucket, I had the impression that the level of the fruit had mounted twice as fast as before.

I straightened my back and, for the first time since her death, I saw her. She was combing, leaning against the green slope, with her head above the skyline, silhouetted against the blue sky. A scarf was tied round her head. As I watched, she climbed and went over the skyline.

She's as easy to lose as a button, La Mélanie said.

I left my bucket and climbed up to the crest. She lay there on the other side as if dead. She lay there on the soft turf between the rhododendron bushes whose flowers were finished, and she wore a scarf round her head, a crumpled black dress, socks and boots. Her shins were bare and scratched. Her eyes were shut and her arms were crossed exactly as if she were dead. It is strange I thought that, for I knew she was dead. I had seen her coffin lowered into the earth. Now there was no coffin lid, no earth, nothing but the blue sky above her.

Without thinking I took off my beret and stood there holding it in my clasped hands as I gazed down at her. Her face was grey like the outcrops of limestone. She was as motionless as a boulder. I know that it is easy in the mountains to see things that others cannot see. And then I noticed the fingers of her hands. They were stained an inky blue-black. They were like any of our fingers in André Masson's class. This was proof that she had indeed been picking blueberries this morning. In September when she was murdered there were no blueberries.

Can you see me now? I heard her say this, although her lips didn't move.

Without answering, I lay down beside her and gazed up into the sky. The sky was benign and the jackdaws were still circling in wide circles above us.

How old am I? she asked.

You were in the class of 1920. That makes you sixty-eight. No, sixty-seven.

I was born in the morning. My father was milking in the stable. White cloud like smoke was blowing through the door. My mother had her sister and a neighbour with her. I was born very

quickly. The neighbour held me up feet first and cried, It's a girl. Give her to me, my mother said and then she screamed, Jesus forgive me, she screamed, she is marked with the mark of the craving, Jesus! I have marked her with the mark of the craving. Mélanie, said the neighbour, be calm. It is not the mark of the craving.

You know everything about your life now, I said.

If I told you all that I know it would take sixty-seven years.

I turned my head towards her, she was smiling at me, her blue eyes open, dirt smudged on her cheek, a few black hairs escaping from her scarf; she had the face of the Cocadrille at twenty. I moved my arm away from my body to find her hand. When I touched it, I remembered.

She led me by the hand towards the side of the mountain. Crossing an outcrop of rock she stopped, and pointed with the toe of her boot.

Cherry stones in the bird shit! She laughed. They fly with them all the way up here.

I did not recognise the path we took. At first I blamed my memory. Forty-six years is a long time. Soon I doubted whether it was a path at all. The going became steeper and steeper, and we had to push our way through pine trees which grew so close together that no sunlight ever reached the ground. There were centuries of pine needles and my boots sunk into them up to the ankles. I could feel them working their way through the wool of my socks. The needles were either ashen grey or black, they had no more colour than the lower branches of the trees. To prevent ourselves slipping we held on to the branches like ropes.

She led the way and I followed. At one point the slope was so steep that it was like climbing down the trunk of the tree itself. I suddenly remembered the porcelain chamois on her mantelpiece. I wondered whether it was still there. At least three men had fallen to their deaths whilst hunting chamois on this mountain. I hoped that she knew exactly where we were going. I doubted whether I would be capable of climbing up again. My legs were already shaking out of weakness. When I was twelve, Sylvestre, an old

man, was trapped on the mountainside. He could neither climb up nor continue down. The alarm was given just before nightfall. Twenty of us with lamps set out to try to find him. If the Cocadrille disappeared, I would be like Sylvestre.

When the Devil grows old, she shouted back at me, he becomes a hermit!

Sylvestre was dead when we found him.

Fortunately she knew the path as she knew all paths. There was not a slope or crag or stream on this mountainside that she did not know. We emerged from the trees into the sunlight. We were at the top of a long bank of grass on which the paths the cows had traced over generations were like steps for us to walk down. A man in Montreal who worked for the radio once sent me a postcard of an ancient Roman theatre. The steps down the grass were like the seats of that theatre. At the bottom was a large pasture bordered by a forest. In front of the forest I could see men working.

Descending the grass steps I suddenly felt as carefree as I did before I was fully grown. Opposite Saint Lucie beside the shortest day, there is Saint Audrey beside the longest. You put on a clean shirt, newly ironed by your mother—it touches your shoulders like the face of a flat iron gone cold—you comb your hair and look at yourself in the mirror, what you see is a sixteen-year-old to whom anything may happen this Sunday. You join friends walking down to the village. You wait in the square. Everything which occurs is part of a preparation. You drink in the café. You read the signs of the future—so many of them are jokes—and yet you remain ignorant. This ignorance makes the time easy and long. You walk to the next village. There is a fight. You notice the consequences of your smallest actions and these consequences never reinforce each other. You walk back by moonlight. The girls flounce their skirts. Almost everything talked about has not yet happened. Father is asleep, beneath the smoked sausages hanging from the ceiling. You fold your trousers with care, scratch your balls and fall asleep. Sunday follows Sunday, season follows season and you go from tree to tree: there is as yet no forest. Then a day comes when there is only a forest and you have to live in

it for ever: then all the days, both summer or winter, are short. I never expected to emerge from that forest, yet there I was, walking down the grass steps as if my life lay before me.

I first singled you out at school, said the Cocadrille, you made less noise than the other boys and you were methodical. You always carried a knife in your hands, always carving a stick. Once you cut yourself, and I saw you peeing over your cut to disinfect it.

Amongst the flowers in the grass there were red champions. Their pink is like the pink of paper flags all over the world when there is a fiesta.

Where are we?

This is where I am going to build.

Who does it belong to?

Me.

You!

The dead own everything, she said.

So you have land now.

Land but no seasons.

How do you plant?

We don't, we have no reason to, we have access to all the granaries in the world, they are all full.

And when they are empty?

They are full for ever.

Why don't you give potatoes to the hungry then?

We can't.

You could smuggle some across.

I chose a smoked ham for you last winter, it weighed seven kilos and was beautifully dry, I stood by when it was being smoked for two days, I was there when Emile cut the juniper bushes and when he threw water on the burning branches to make more smoke, six weeks earlier I led the pig to have her throat cut, I put my hands over her eyes so she became calm when the life flowed out of her, I gave her to the sow to suckle the day she was born, and I carried the ham to your house and I hung it in the cellar, wrapped in muslin, and when you found it two days later it was a bone, even the string had rotted and you found it in the earth

in which you bury your white beet so they stay white on the cellar floor.

That bone! I muttered.

And you said: It could be the ham of a pig we killed when I was a child. I heard you say that and I knew then I could give you nothing.

You are lying.

You didn't say that and you didn't throw it over the wall?

Yes I did.

She shrugged her shoulders.

The figures I had seen from afar were working on timber, hammering nails into the joints of three vast frames which lay flat on the ground and which, when raised, would hold the walls and roof of a chalet. Each frame had five vertical columns, each column as thick as a sixty-year-old tree and twelve metres high.

They felled the trees last September, the Cocadrille said, on the day I was killed with the axe. The sap was rising.

The frames laid out on the ground were the colour of stripped radiant pine. One of the men who was hammering straightened his back. It was Marius Cabrol. I had seen him last on his deathbed. I had made the sign of the cross with a sprig of boxwood dipped in holy water over his heart. It was his daughter who had laid him out and dressed him. The way he now greeted us disconcerted me for he gave no sign that he remembered or recognised any of this. He grinned as if we had just drunk a glass together.

Fifteen spruces for the columns, he said, a dozen for the purlins, forty twenty-year-old trees for the rafters, I forget how many for the planks. We cut them all down when the axe entered her head. She told us afterwards she heard us sawing in the forest.

The first thing I did, wasn't it, was to bring you all cider and cheese and bread. I knew exactly where you were.

We were getting hungry, said Marius, smiling.

She took my hand and we stepped over the columns of the nearest frame. She was a young woman leading an old man. The men sat astride the frame as they hammered, the nails were big and they launched them into the wood with blows from the shoulder.

All right, Lucie? The hammerer who shouted this with virile impertinence was Armand who had been carried away by the Jalent and drowned. Next to him hammered Gustave who had fallen from the mountain. Georges, who hanged himself because he knew that he would become a pauper, was sewing paper flowers to the branches of a tiny spruce; the flowers were white like silver and yellow like gold. Adelin, who was killed by a tree in the forest, was tying a rope. Mathieu who was struck dead by lightning was measuring with a yellow ruler. Then I recognised Michel who died of internal bleeding after being kicked by a horse, and I saw Joset who was lost in an avalanche.

Why are they all here? I demanded.

They have come to help us, each of them brought food and drink for the meal tonight, they are good neighbours.

Why only—

Only what, Jean?

The ones who died violently.

They are the first you see.

And those who died peacefully?

There are not so many who die in their beds. It's a poor country.

Why first—? My fears that I had been led into a trap were increased.

Bend down.

She kissed me on the cheek and my fears became ridiculous. Her mouth was full of white teeth and she smelt of grass. Was it really she who fifty years ago nobody in their right mind would have thought of marrying?

They all say your trouble was that you were fearless.

I knew what I wanted.

She laughed. Between the buttons of her shirt I could make out the slight, barely noticeable rise of her breasts. Like two leaves on the earth.

Do you know, it took me no longer to learn my way around here among the dead than it took me to learn my way around the city of B. . . .

As she said this, her voice aged and became hoarser. I glanced

at her. She was an old woman with a sack on her back and she looked mad.

Who is going to live in the chalet?

Somebody from behind pushed my beret over my eyes. It was Marius, her father. Once again he was grinning.

You are warmer in bed with a wife. The whole war I thought of nothing else, I thought only of caressing Mélanie in bed. The way Marius spoke had the unctuousness of a caress. There were some who had intercourse with donkeys, it never interested me, a beast isn't soft enough, when at last I came home I took her to bed and we had our fourth child. Even when I was old and lost my warmth, I thought of going to bed when I was working alone in the fields, sometimes thinking about it made me warm. There are those who call me lazy. It was my idea of happiness, you'll see for yourself, if you don't see now—it's better than sleeping alone.

The Cocadrille walked away, across her back was tied the blue umbrella and over her shoulder she carried a sack.

Aren't you forgetting that your daughter has been a spinster all her life? I asked.

Ah! my poor Jean, my poor future son-in-law, it's now that she's at the marrying age. Why else would I be building a chalet for her?

You were never a carpenter, I pointed out, and sixty-eight is no marrying age!

We can become anything. That is why injustice is impossible here. There may be the accident of birth, there is no accident of death. Nothing forces us to remain what we were. The Cocadrille could be seventeen, tall, with wide hips and with breasts you couldn't take your eyes off—only then you wouldn't know her, would you?

Once more I had the feeling of not yet having entered the forest, of all my life being in front of me.

All the men you see working here, whispered Marius—I remembered the milk running off her breasts—have married her!

Not Georges! I exclaimed.

Georges was the first. He married her the day after her funeral. The bridesmaids took the flowers from the grave. Those who die violently fall into each other's arms.

Am I to die violently? I asked.

Do you want to marry her? His smile had now become a leer. Everything's ready! a man shouted.

The frame lay on the ground, constructed, finished, waiting to be lifted up into the air. To lift such a frame, thirty-five or forty men are needed. They came from every direction. All those whom I recognised were among the dead. Some carried ladders. Some were speaking and joking to one another and I could not hear their words. All of them greeted Marius à Brine who stood beside the sablière, which is the horizontal timber on the ground into which the frame, when vertical, has to be fitted. He who was no carpenter had become the master builder.

The wood of the frame smelt strongly of pine resin. Mixed with wax, this resin makes a good poultice for the cure of sciatica, a complaint from which many of us suffer as a result of carrying heavy loads on the slopes. We bent down together to lift the frame with our hands.

Marius was shouting so that everyone lifted at the same moment.

Tchee! Tchee! Lift!

And again. Tchee! Tchee! Hissssss!

The dead got their forearms under the frame. Bent double over the ground, they cradled the wood as you cradle a baby.

Tchee! Tchee! Hissssss!

Wood is to us what iron has been to others for two thousand years. We even made gearwheels out of wood.

With each heave we raised the frame a little higher. We could just rest our forearms on our thighs. The dead who were lifting the king-post, the vertical beam which holds the point of the roof, were now able to slip their shoulders under it, bundling together like bearers carrying a coffin.

When the frame was too high for us to lift with our hands, we thrust with poles. There was a pole tied to each column. Half a dozen or so men gathered around each pole, thrusting it up, their

grasping hands overlapping. Ten hands, fifty fingers, they were indistinguishable one from the other except where there was a scarred severed finger. How many of our fingers have been cut off by saws! Yet better a finger than a life, the living had a habit of saying.

With each thrust we grunted. The grunts came from the pit of the stomach. Sometimes a dead man farted with the effort. The Cocadrille had come back and was standing by my side, the same scarf round her head, white hairs straggling out of it.

Why do you want a hayloft, you have no land? I gasped.

Tchee! Tchee! Hissssss!

The gigantic frame which was going to span three rooms, a stable and a hayloft—a hayloft such as a hundred haycarts, pulled across the wooden floor by the mares, would scarcely fill—shook with each heave. Or, rather, it was we who shook.

To store our hay, she said.

You have no cows.

To have thirty-five litres of milk a day for butter and cheese.

Tchee! Tchee! Hissssss!

You don't need to eat, I said.

To support ourselves and to have something to hand on to our children! She smiled, as she had when she handed me the butter fifty years before.

The faces of the dead were red with the effort of grasping, heaving and holding, their mouths were strained, their eyes bulged, the muscles and veins on their necks stood out like ropes and cords beneath the skin.

I was always told the dead rest after a lifetime's work, I muttered.

When they remember their past, they work, she said. What else should they remember?

The shoulders of those who had taken off their shirts glistened with sweat, yet the frame was still below the angle of forty-five degrees.

Again! Tchee! Tchee! Lift!

The gigantic naked frame scarcely stirred. It was as if another forty men were pushing it down against us.

We need more help, go and fetch some others, round up the neighbours!

Jésus, Marie and Joseph!

A ménage à trois!

Be quick about it!

The Cocadrille ran towards the forest. It was not possible to lay the frame down on the ground. It is easier to raise such a weight than to lower it, and in lowering it there is the risk of somebody being trapped beneath it. Pierre, who was on the next pole, had been trapped under a frame, with both his legs broken, and had died two years later.

No man should suffer the same thing twice.

We were able to prop several poles against the ground. We wedged in several ladders. Most of the weight was taken off us, yet nobody took their hands off the poles. The great frame pointed into the sky, not into the dark blue sky above us, it pointed towards the pale sky beyond the distant mountains. A jackdaw—I cannot say whether he was the same one—was circling above the frame. At one moment I thought he was going to alight on it. Everything was still, none of the dead was moving.

When the Cocadrille came back from the forest, she was young; several men followed her. As so many years before, I was astounded by how fast she ran.

Yes, I should have married her! I said it out loud. The dead were lost in their own thoughts. Nobody responded.

The newcomers joined the groups round each pole.

Tchee! Tchee! Hissssss!

The frame shifted up five or six degrees. Together we were going to master it. As soon as it passed the half-way mark of forty-five degrees it would become easier.

As a precautionary measure some men were already holding the ropes in case the almost vertical frame should incline too far and fall inwards. When the frame was vertical its tusk tenons had to be slotted into the mortices of the *sablière*. Human geometry had to replace the original strength of the trees. The tusks entered the mouths of the *sablière*, all five at almost the same moment.

I will marry you, I said, turning towards her.

To my horror 'Mile à Lapraz was standing beside her. He was flushed and looked as if he had been drinking. I had seen him only a week before in the village. It occurred to me then that all the men she had brought back running with her were among the living.

You will be a witness, she said to 'Mile.

Where are we? I mumbled. Aren't we far from the village?

We are outside the church, Jean, where the men stand at funerals and the newly married are photographed.

My face must have shown my consternation.

He's so careful, slurred 'Mile à Lapraz, nodding in my direction, he wipes his arse before he has shat!

You should talk, the Cocadrille snapped back at him. You've lived alone all your life, you get drunk alone, your bed smells like a distillery. Jean has been to the other side of the world, he married, he had children, he came back, he picks blueberries very slowly, all right he pretends to be deaf, he wanted to kill me, he has taken his time, but now at the last moment, the very last moment, he has agreed to marry me, you would never have the spunk to do that, 'Mile.

Now that the first frame was in place, she went from man to man with a bottle and a glass offering them to drink.

After we had rested, Marius à Brine called us to start raising the second frame. Encouraged by the sight of the first, upright, its columns as thick as trees, its white wood framing triangles of deep blue sky, we lifted the second frame, call by call:

Tchcc! Tchcc! Hissssss!

We lifted it without stopping, and the tusks of its columns entered the mouths of the *sablière*. We raised the third frame even quicker than the second. Some said this was because the wood was less green and so lighter.

Fifty men stood looking up at the three frames which indicated the full dimensions of the chalet; it was an outline drawing in white on the green pasture, the dark forest, and the blue sky.

No one will kill themselves in this chalet, she said.

The men whom the Cocadrille had brought from the village announced that, if they were no longer needed, they would return.

Marius à Brine did his best to persuade them to stay for the feast they would have as soon as the work was over. They said they must go.

Come back later, insisted Marius, come back with your women for the feast!

The villagers were noncommittal.

Several of the dead came over to thank them. At least let us pay you another glass, they said.

No need to thank us, answered the living, you'd do the same for us.

That goes without saying, whenever a house is built some of us are there.

I watched the villagers walk away into the forest. Gradually they formed a single file, each one walking by himself. Their going disturbed me: I was alone again with the dead. At the same time I was relieved by their going; I would have no questions to answer. What language do they speak in Buenos Aires? How long have you been a widower? Are you really thinking of remarrying? How did she persuade you?

The work which remained to be done was now more divided and less anxious. We had to lift the purlins, the beams which run the length of the roof, into their positions, fit their joints and nail them. Every purlin was numbered with a numeral, written as André Masson had taught us all at school, and every joint was indicated twice on each piece of wood, with a capital letter. Some of the dead were on ladders and some worked on the ground. They made more comments than before and more jokes. Those on the ground fixed temporary bars at an angle to the future walls, like buttresses. Along these they pushed and pulled the purlins up with ropes.

The first to be fixed in place was the lowest, the timber bordering the overhanging roof. Against the wall beneath this overhanging roof, the wood for the stove would be stacked, sheltered from the snow and the rain. Against the southern wall protected by the roof she'd plant lettuces and parsley, and, along the edge of the same bed, multi-coloured pansies, which have the colours of most of the precious stones in the world. Under the roof behind

the first purlin, sparrows would nest and on the posts of the fence, for which the stakes have not yet been cut or pointed, a pair of crows would sit, waiting for her to come out to feed the chickens. I heard her calling them.

She took my hand in her stiff, calloused, grabbing, picking, old woman's hand. It was no longer possible for me to think of her as young.

There is no need for you to work, she said, they have enough help, we can sit in the sun.

And the food? I asked. Is everything prepared?

Everything.

I don't see any tables or benches.

They are in the church, it'll only take a minute to bring them out.

At her funeral when people were still filing out of the cemetery, the Mayor told the local veterinary surgeon: And so we gave her the roadmender's house, it was the best we could think of. You have to reckon with the fact that if she'd lived in a city, she would certainly have been put in an institution many years ago . . .

Look! she said, tapping my shoulder, they will soon be finished.

We were sitting there side by side, watching the mountains, and the men working. We were the eldest, all the working dead were younger than us. The Cocadrille's features and the backs of my own hands were a reminder of our age. The Cocadrille was sixty-seven when she was murdered, and I was three years older.

So, my contraband, I've smuggled you here, she said. An unlit cigarette was stuck to her lower lip which protruded and was blueish from the blueberries she had eaten.

The feeling of endless promise such as I hadn't experienced since I was young bore me up, cradled me. I saw my father making rabbit hutches, and myself handing him the nails. I must have been eleven the year when, under my mother's careful supervision, I bled and skinned my first rabbit. At the catechism class the Cocadrille knew by heart the answers I could not remember.

What is avarice?

Avarice is an excessive longing for the good things of life and particularly money.

Is love of the good things of life ever justified?

Yes, there is a justified love of the good things of life and this love inspires foresight and thrift.

On feast days in the Argentine the peones killed and ate turkeys: emigration offered me no new promises. The promise of the Place d'Etoile and the promise of the Arenne Corrientes in Buenos Aires were simply revivals of what I had already hoped in the village. I couldn't have imagined those places from the village, yet I did imagine my pleasure, the same pleasure they promised and didn't give me.

Pleasure is always your own, and it varies as much and no more than pain does. I had become accustomed to pain, and now to my surprise the hope of pleasure, the hope I had known when I was eleven, was coming from the old woman with the unlit cigarette who called me her contraband. Where had my life gone? I asked myself.

The dead were nailing the rafters. By the time all forty were in place, the sun was low and the bars of the roof cast a shadow on the grass beside the chalet which looked like a dark cage. The bars were the shadows.

Do you want to nail the bouquet? shouted Marius à Brine.

She waited for me to answer. I could feel her gaze through her half-shut eyes. The force of my reply surprised me.

From the corner of each of her puckered, squeezed eyes a tear came like juice. She crossed her arms to grasp her flat chest with her stiff hands. Her mouth stretched in a smile. Her tears ran down the deep lines to the corners of her mouth and she licked her upper lip.

Go, she said to me.

Marius handed me the hammer and the nails and I walked over to the foot of the first ladder. There was Georges, who hanged himself because he knew he was to become a pauper and would be sent in the winter to the old people's hostel where half the inmates were incoherent. The money to build this hostel had been donated by a rich engineer from the region who had built many bridges for roads and railways far away. Georges planned his suicide as carefully as the engineer planned his bridges, he fixed a

hooked wire to a t, ran the wire down it and with the help of this pch-tension wire, near the centre of the village, in a would disturb no one. At the instant he died, all village went out. Now Georges handed me the spe had attached the yellow and white paper flowoses. With this bouquet across my shoulder, likeh, I climbed the ladder, which Georges held for :

At the top a man was sitting on a cross beam. He put out his hae as I stepped off the ladder. I shook my head. Ie since I'd been on a roof and I needed no help. Is born to it. Why were so many of us obliged to gimney sweeps? We lived on a roof; almost the ke are on slopes as steep as our roofs. As long as a ladder and lift one foot above the next, I need n

Who are you? lot from here.

Lucie knew mee replied.

You were in th

We were orderaves and we were shot.

I will tell you sc There were Nazis who escaped after the Liberation Argentine, they changed their names and they lif the pampas.

They only escant.

You can't be sc

Justice will be c

When?

When the living dead suffered.

He said this wi bitterness in his voice, as if he had more than allthe world.

I climbed a secche tree across my shoulder, and sat astride the roa slight breeze; I felt it on my forearms. I could the forest. In the east the snow on the mountainsery diluted rose, no redder than the water of a stnimal has been killed. I looked down through th the upturned faces of the dead who had assemblt I was going to do.

It was then that I noticed the band. They were standing at the end of the chalet, by the first frame. They were like the band I had joined as a drummer when I was fourteen. The band that played the soldiers out of the village. The sun was by now too low in the sky for the brass and silver instruments to dazzle. Their metals shone only dully like water in a mountain lake.

I began to make my way—not without some difficulty—along the ridge of the roof. When I reached the end, I looked down on the upturned faces; they were grinning like skulls. I lifted the tree off my shoulder and held it upright. What I had to do now was to nail it to the king-post. Suddenly from behind two thin arms clasped me round the ribs.

Hold the tree, I said.

She couldn't reach it.

I'll sit on your shoulders, she said.

The onlookers below started to cheer. All the remembered dead of the village were there, women and children as well as men. She held the tree and I drove in four nails.

The little tree pointed up into the sky. She sat behind me, her arms relaxed. We were like a couple riding on their horse going to work in the fields. Her hands lay in my lap.

The bandsmen raised the instruments to their mouths, the drummers lifted their sticks. For a moment they remained transfixed and still, then they started to play.

The sign of the tree nailed to the roof was in honour of a work completed. All that remained to be done was to cover the roof with *bûchilles* cut from the beams, to lay the floors, nail boards on the walls, make and fit the doors and windows, construct the chimney, build the cupboards, make the shelf for the bed. It was the work of months. Yet the whole weight-bearing frame which promised shelter was there.

How can I tell you what the band played. I could hum the melody and you would not hear it. The bandsmen were dead and they played the music of silence. On Ascension Day the village band goes out into the country across the slopes, between the orchards, and, wherever there are two or three farms, it stops to play. Three summers I went out with them as drummer before I

had to leave to find work. The music drowns the noise of the water in the *bassin*, it drowns the streams, it drowns the cuckoo. At each farm they gave us cider or *gnôle* to drink. The saxophonist, who played like a bird, always got drunk. Sweating under our peaked caps and in our brass-buttoned jackets we played as well and as loudly as we knew how, and the louder we played, the more still became the mountains and the trees of the forest. Only the deaf butterflies continued to flutter and climb, close and open their wings. On Ascension Day we played to the dead, and the dead, behind the motionless mountains and the still trees, listened to us. Now everything was the other way round, it was the dead who played at the foot of the chalet, and I, astride the roof, who was listening.

The village began to dance to the music, on the grass under the roof timbers. The Cocadrille beat her hands on my thighs to the rhythm of the music. I saw that my blood had not turned as cold with age as I thought it had. When the music stopped she kept her hands there.

The band started up again.

Wait for me, she whispered.

Climbing to her feet, she walked along the ridge of the roof like a chamois. As she went down I prided myself on having learnt from experience. Her return would be startling and unexpected. Still aroused, I tried to foresee how she would come back: perhaps she would come back aged twenty and naked as though she had been bathing in a river.

It was impossible to make out the uniforms of the bandsmen. Occasionally an instrument glinted like an ember when you blow on it. They knew the dances they were playing by heart, for it was too dark to read the notes on the music cards clipped to their instruments. The dancers, as the light disappeared, packed closer and closer together into the chalet.

I peered down, looking for the Cocadrille. The darkness was not so total that the whiteness of her body would not give off a certain light, like the white flowers sewn on to the tree did.

I felt my way down the first ladder. The dancers were now packed together in the area which would be the stable, where we

would milk the cows. The cows were there. One was licking the head of her neighbour. Her tongue was so strong that when she licked round the eye, it pulled it open, revealing the eyeball, as you must do if you are looking for something which has entered the eye and is hurting it.

Seeing that eye, I saw the truth. The Cocadrille was not going to come back. Or if she came back, she would come back as nothing.

Lucie! Lucie!

Beyond the timbers of the roof the stars were shining. They shine over some oceans like they shine over the alpage. They are very bright and the similarity isn't in their brightness; it is simply that their distance isn't confusing. The Milky Way was folded into the sky like the ranunculi bordering the stream are folded into the hill beside the abandoned Cabrol chalet.

I missed my footing, rolled, like a log, down a precipitous slope. What saved me were some rhododendron bushes at which I instinctively, unthinkingly, grasped. I never lost consciousness. Ten metres further down was a sheer drop of a hundred metres. I had a broken arm and shoulder. When it was light, I somehow made my way down the path where the cumin grows, my arm hanging loose like the tongue of a bell.

Ten days later I met 'Mile à Lapraz in the village.

Where were you, 'Mile, ten days ago?

At home.

Where exactly, doing what?

The Friday, you mean?

Yes, the Friday.

Wait, Friday. I remember, I was ill in bed. I had terrible pains in the stomach. A white weasel was eating it. I swear to you I thought it was the end. As it turned out, he didn't want me, and so here I am. I'll pay you a drink.

Standing by the counter of the café, he clinked glasses and said conspiratorially: To the two of us they didn't take!

Later when my arm was still in plaster, I walked up to the roadmender's house. The weight of the plaster round my arm was as heavy as iron. I climbed slowly, letting one leg follow the other:

the body becomes accustomed unlike that of a cradle being slowly rocked. After an hour or two of such climbing you procure: the pleasure at night of lying absolutely still.

The hospital had discovered rays, yet I was convinced that at least one cured. With each breath it stabbed me on the left heart. I stopped once and looked down at the bed that led away. I remembered the Cocadrille climbing up to the house and being taken ill; muttered when she loosened his clothes on the

I had not been to the Cocadrille the night when she came down from the bedding veil. The chicken hutches had been taken, and the door was ajar. I knocked. I could hear below. I pushed the door open. The table adhered. There was nothing on the mantelpiece. Plates? I opened the stove. It was stuffed with the remains of a picnic. On the wall by the cupboard some scratched, neither hers nor mine, and beside that, the shape of an owl's face, with an arrow.

In the stable I found some paw. There was no sign of the blue umbrella ladder to the loft. She dreamt about that ladder in the loft and a young man climbed up and to get into bed with her. She could see that he slipped between the blankets beside her and jumbled, she woke up. The bed too had gone.

Before I was six, before I was, perhaps I was only two or three, I used to be in the kitchen on winter mornings, when it was light. He knelt by an iron beast, feeding it. If he butted at me. He knelt down at one side of that iron legs and, breathing deeply, he whispered father praying in church. In the kitchen he pushed, blowing and sighing. I never saw the iron beast was inside its stomach. After a while I could find the kitchen,

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and my father would sit beside the animal, warming his feet between its legs, before putting his boots on and going to feed the other animals. Now when I light the stove in the morning, I say to myself: I and the fire are the only living things in this house; my father, mother, brothers, the horse, cows, rabbits, chickens, all have gone. And the Cocadrille is dead.

I say that, and I do not altogether believe it. Sometimes it seems to me that I am nearing the edge of the forest. I will never again be sixteen; if I am to leave the forest, it will be on the far side. Do I feel this because I am old and tired? I doubt it. The old animal when he feels his strength disappearing hides himself in the very centre of the forest, he does not dream of leaving it. Is it a longing for death such as an animal never feels? Is it only death that will at last deliver me from the forest? There are moments when I see something different, moments when a blue sky reminds me of Lucie Cabrol. At these moments I see again the roof which we raised, built with the trees, and then I am convinced that it is with the love of the Cocadrille that I shall leave the forest.

Potatoes

The cock crows
the soil its black feather spread
claws its stone
and lays its eggs

Don't lift them too soon
they give light off
through their moon skin
to the dead

During the snow
heaped in cellars
they gravely offer
body to the soup

When they fail
the plough has no meat
and men starve like the great bear
in the winter night