

WHEN JONATHAN DIED



Tony Duvert

GMP

...Two lads, that thought there was no more behind,
But such a day tomorrow as today,
And to be boy eternal.

W. Shakespeare, *A Winter's Tale*

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JONATHAN
DIED

TONY DUVERT

translated by D. R. Roberts



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PART I

The little boy came into the kitchen, and he saw strange things on the floor.

But he said nothing. His mother was chatting to Jonathan. He, Serge, was going to explore this unknown house; he was unhappy at being neglected by the conversation.

A little later, his mother left without him. His eyes followed her. She went down a little track that led to the road; her car was down there. Jonathan shut the garden gate, pushed the child forward by the shoulders, and they went back into the kitchen. It was tea-time. Serge took a piece of bread and jam and a glass of milk. As he took a bite, the child pointed to Jonathan the strange things that were on the floor.

‘Why do you put those there?’

‘They’re for the mice,’ said Jonathan.

A saucer of milk, a saucer of jam and a big crust of bread. ‘Do they drink milk?’

‘They do.’

Serge listened with pleasure to Jonathan’s slight accent. An English, Dutch or German accent, you couldn’t tell. Jonathan had travelled too much, he no longer came from anywhere. Serge would have liked to imitate his voice; the words were calm and clear, a bit diffident, without shadows, like objects in a naive painting.

‘Do they have a tongue?’ Serge asked.

‘A tongue, yes. A little pink tongue that flicks about. They like doing that. They like jam too, this is raspberry, they leave the little raspberry seeds behind.’

‘I prefer it like that, like that, but apricot,’ said Serge, who seemed disappointed by this difference between his tea and the meal the mice would have. ‘But why do you give them food to eat?’

‘Because... well, I don’t know why.’

Serge ate his bread and butter from the middle. He took the buttered bread and ignored the crust, leaving a horseshoe behind.

‘I really like them,’ Jonathan went on. ‘They’re nice. Have you seen them?’ Serge shook his head. ‘They’ve got a long tail like that and it moves about, like your dog’s ears when he’s talking to you.’ (Serge said very quickly we haven’t a dog mother gave it away.) ‘No...? And paws like a cat or a squirrel, have you ever seen a squirrel?’ (Ah we’ve got a cat it’s a boy and it’s called Julie, said Serge), ‘and they’re soft to touch, really soft.’

‘You’ve touched one? It was my mother, calling it Julie, the cat, have you really touched a mouse?’

‘No, they’re too frightened. It was your mother who called the boy cat Julie?’

‘It was her, really; so you haven’t touched one?’

‘I have, but it was dead. I touched it, though. It was by the side of the bed.’

‘Do they come into the bedroom?’

‘They do, they come in the evening. That’s when they go for a walk and that’s when I really see them. Because I’ve got cake and biscuits and I put them on the bedside table.’

‘D’you give them cake?’

‘No, that’s for me, when I can’t sleep and I wake up, I get hungry.’

‘Are they boys or girls, the mice, tell me.’

‘Don’t be silly, they’re both.’

‘Ah... there are mice, and sometimes they’re boys.’

‘Yes.’

‘But can you tell they’re boys when you see them eating?’

‘No, you can’t tell. You have to catch them by the tali and you have to look just there.’

Jonathan pointed modestly with his finger towards the little boy’s shorts. Serge started to laugh:

‘Then it’s just like Julie, you can see her balls! You’ll have to give me a wash, I’m dirty now.’

It was a little over half a mile between the village and the house Jonathan had rented. The nicest thing about this landscape of coppice and meadow, dotted with farms, was the rough earth track which crossed it. At the far end there were hillsides bathed in light which fell down towards a shady river. You had to make your way through the hazel trees leaning out across the path; their catkins scattered pollen on the head and neck of anyone who passed.

Jonathan’s house was small, just as the village was small. It was surrounded by a ridiculous little garden: gardens are tiny in the country. And beyond the wire-netting fence where the bindweed curled Jonathan could see the calm and undulating expanse of the fields of bare earth, the trees, each made up of a thousand flashing lights all flickering in place, and the meadows of damp grass, their animation more gentle than that of the leaves above.

It was the beginning of June.

The house was doubtless one of an old group of farms. Close by, the only neighbouring house was like Jonathan’s, and though badly proportioned, it was more appealing in the simplicity of its decrepitude, and more dirty. It was occupied by an old peasant woman. There were, too, in the meadow, the ruins of a vast building, clear of grass or ivy; had it not been for the clumps of nettles which grew at their feet, thicker and higher than bracken, these walls, upright, yellow, worn and crumbling, might have risen in the midst of a blue desert sweltering under the sun.

A letter had told Jonathan that Barbara would visit with her son. He’d got to know them through a friend, eighteen months earlier. He’d kept company with them because of the boy. That was in Paris; Serge was six and a half then, Jonathan twenty-seven.

In their own way, the child and the man had loved each other very much. But Jonathan, discouraged by a thousand difficulties, had soon left Paris to take refuge in this

corner of the country, though he hadn't broken off relations with anyone.

Since then, he hadn't talked, had rarely replied to letters, had no friends to visit, and his sexual life was reduced to solitary caresses accompanied by memories which were less so. He worked little, doing no more than a few drawings in ink or pencil. His gallery gave him a fair amount of money for them, but he had no use for it.

The idea of seeing Serge again overwhelmed him. Barbara would leave the child with him for a week to go on a trip to the south, and she would pick him up again when she returned. Free of a husband, she used to leave Serge here and there, as she enjoyed the life of a single girl. So when Jonathan had lived in Paris he looked after the boy, and they used to sleep together; in the morning, he would wash him, dress him and take him to school. Their friendship was so strange that Barbara was relieved when Jonathan went away. Serge, very quick-tempered before he knew Jonathan, was sweet-tempered with him, but only with him. After he'd left, he became passive and closed in on himself. That suited Barbara.

Jonathan wondered why she dared give the child into his care again. It seemed to be some kind of deal. Barbara was often short of money, and Jonathan, when he was able, would willingly help her out. Two months earlier, he'd made her a loan which wasn't really a loan, because lending was something he wasn't good at. Barbara had thanked him with two pages of gossip, in which the only special thing had been a passage about Serge; her other letters had never mentioned the child.

Jonathan had been intrigued by this unexpected gift. *I hope you think of my lovely boy every now and again!!... He seems to have forgotten you completely!!!!... I talk to him about you — we were even going to see that exhibition of yours in December!... But no, the young man wasn't interested... You know at their age they forget very quickly which is best don't you think... But you can't imagine how lovely he is now!!!!*, Barbara had written, with her individual punctuation. She went on to say that Serge was at last behaving himself at school, that he loved her more and more, hid himself in her bed in the evening, a real little lover; he was getting to be a bit of a cry-baby, but so sweet. *And really I do prefer that to when he went round breaking everything!!...Children!...*

This wonderful news had driven Jonathan to despair.

As for the letter promising her son's visit, it also mentioned the financial difficulties in which the mother found herself. The ploy was so outrageous that Jonathan was afraid Barbara would in the end arrive alone.

Serge had his hands wiped clean.

'You weren't dirty,' said Jonathan.

'No, I wasn't dirty, it was a bit so you could wash me.'

In Paris, the child used to follow Jonathan into the shower, and would even have gone into the lavatory after him. 'There isn't a shower here, you know.'

'Ah... why?' said Serge. Then he turned his head away and his face took on that angry expression he used to have in his wild days.

'Why did you go?' he demanded.

'...Last year?... I wanted to stay with you, you know,' said Jonathan. 'I should have

stayed. I wasn't brave enough. Your mother gets me down.'

'Why did you go?'

Jonathan lived austerely. He didn't have a lot of the things he needed for the child. He had few sheets, just one pillow and one pillow-case, one dishcloth. He washed them all himself. His few comforts were wine for his depressions, and a bedroom, every chink and crack blocked off, in which to suffer them. These days it needed bolts and blankets, a whole heap of obstacles to retain and to contain this life which ran away from him. After the child's short visit, Jonathan would know an anguish from which he would never perhaps escape; he had less and less strength to fight against death.

He looked to see how much money he had and went to the village nearby to get the food, furnishings and other things he needed; he even made a journey to the nearest town. He hired a refrigerator. At the farms round about, he bought more food than he usually ate in two months. He got a mirror, too, and promised himself to break it afterwards. He looked at himself in it, examined his clothes, his hair, his hands, his face, and spent a long day getting them all in order.

He spring-cleaned the house, painted the garden fence, unscrewed the bolts from his bedroom door and tore down the rags which had been stuffed around the shutters. He put a clock in the kitchen, scoured the blackened saucepans, cleaned the tiles, the lavatory, the windows, found clean linen for the table and got some net curtains made up, found lamps, and put shades on the bare bulbs. There were games, toys, picture-books and medical supplies, and he meekly sought advice so as not to get them for the wrong age.

At the toy shop, he said he had a son. When he left the shop, his lie caused him such shame and unhappiness that he almost left the package behind on a bench.

Finally, he thought to himself: 'If only he doesn't come.'

They went upstairs to put Serge's clothes away in the cupboard. The bed was large and high off the ground. It was the only bedroom in the house, which had just three rooms, including the kitchen. Close to the bed, on trestles, Jonathan had put the table where he worked. It was covered in large sketches, meticulously clean, and on the wood itself there were formless doodles.

'It's you that does those drawings?' asked Serge.

'Yes, me.'

'Are they good?'

Jonathan smiled. 'Do you think they're good?'

'My mother does drawings too. And paintings.'

'Yes, I remember.'

'But have you sold any? She hasn't.'

'It's not easy.'

'No. We go outside the cafés, you know, with Dominique, to the restaurants, we show them to people when they're eating, but they haven't got any money. Do you sell them like that, in restaurants?'

‘Uh... no,’ said Jonathan, a little embarrassed, ‘I don’t go out much in the evening, in Paris. But there are magazines and books, and then there’s a gallery, they send me money.’

‘A gallery?’

‘Well, a shop.’

‘So you don’t go out to work, you’re at home all the time?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Mummy works now.’

‘Yes, so she told me.’

‘At the office, in the afternoon. But not every day. Because she writes music and songs, she doesn’t write the notes, she sings the tune. It’s Jacques who writes the notes. But it’s her that makes it all up. Even the words. He’s got a guitar, he has. Do you know any of my mother’s songs?’

‘I don’t. She’s never sung anything for me.’

‘I know. She sings all wrong.’

‘Ah. But someone sings them?’

‘Well, no, nobody. She teaches me some, with Jacques, sometimes.’

‘I see. You’re lucky.’

‘Well, yes... not really.’

‘Oh well.’

‘But why don’t you do drawings like Mickey Mouse?’ Serge went on.

‘He seems to be... too... stupid. I prefer to draw cows. Would you like me to do a cow?’

They sat side by side in front of the drawing board, and Jonathan brought out a big sheet of paper.

‘Oh yes. No, a pig. And a big fat cow. And Donald Duck, you know Donald Duck, don’t you?’

Jonathan obeyed. Doing as Serge wanted didn’t embarrass him at all. His hand could do anything; and these clear and ironic images, the only ones the child’s eyes found legible, gave him the same pleasure as if he were a serial composer humming a schoolchildren’s song together with a child.

‘I can draw a cat, I can,’ said Serge. ‘I’m going to draw it here, first of all he’s laughing, only he doesn’t have any paws. What are you doing now?’

‘It’s an apple with lots of hair.’

‘There aren’t any. Are there really?’

‘There is one here. No, I’m doing you, Serge. Come on, look down again.’

And beneath the top of the head with its hair so delicately tangled, Jonathan sketched out Serge’s profile as he saw him sitting close, in a pencil line so fluent and so tender that he felt abashed by the beauty his hand produced despite himself. A skill which served no public purpose, but one he’d worked on stubbornly for years, because of his secret love for children’s faces. He would never have shown these portraits to anyone. His public work, which had gained him a reputation, was severe and very little concerned with figuration. The boy complained of not having an ear, then, when it was in place, Serge said:

‘Now, I’m going to draw you.’

He grabbed half a dozen coloured felt-tips and in red, blue, yellow and pink, he drew a boy holding a green flower in his hand, eyelashes radiant like stars and smiling from ear to ear, and with very long legs because he was a grown-up.

‘Is that me?’ said Jonathan softly. ‘I’m pretty.’

‘Yes, it’s you. ‘Cos you’ve got big legs. And there’s your pullover.’

Jonathan was surprised by the colour: a bright blue, with a red band across the chest. It was a year since last he’d worn it.

‘But that’s my old one, the one I had in Paris. I’ve still got it, you know. I’ll put it on again.’

‘Don’t bother,’ said Serge in a quiet, cold voice. And he spread brown all over his cat without paws.

For dinner, Jonathan had two little pigeons. First of all, they had to be plucked. Serge enjoyed doing it. The birds thrilled him. He returned to the abrupt gestures of other times as he stuffed the four wings into his pockets.

‘With all those wings, your trousers will fly away,’ said Jonathan.

‘I don’t care,’ he said, pushing his hands in deeper.

‘It’s getting cold. I’ll draw them and we’ll cook them in the fireplace, we’ll make a fire, eh?’

The fireplace was in the other room, Serge agreed to the fire. He wanted chips as well. In the fire, he burnt a handful of feathers, whose horrid smell made him contort his features. He got up all red and excited.

‘You’re waking up,’ said Jonathan, ‘you were dead this afternoon, with your mother.’

‘Is not true,’ replied Serge, ferociously. His face was fixed. He started to sulk, looking bad-tempered as he stared at the flames.

‘And I’m not hungry,’ he added, a moment later, looking closely at Jonathan.

‘Doesn’t matter, they can be eaten cold... You frighten me when you’re angry,’ Jonathan murmured, now bent over the fire himself. His voice trembled and he was ready to cry.

‘You mustn’t frighten me, Serge,’ he went on, ‘I can’t cope, I haven’t the strength, I really can’t, I’m going to go to bed. Why did you say that?’ The child looked at him, surprised.

‘We’ll eat,’ said Serge, intimidated, ‘Eh? We’ll eat then? Don’t go.’

‘The spit is too close, they’re going to burn. You see the juices dropping there, we’ll use that and baste them with the big spoon.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘I’ll go and cut the chips.’

Jonathan went out to look for potatoes and a tea-towel, still new and stiff. He sat down on the ground near the fireplace, a shoulder against the boy’s arm. Serge, on his knees, was watching the juice which fell from the birds, his face bright with the heat.

‘Tomorrow I’ll go into the garden,’ he said.

‘Yes, it will be fine. I’ve seen toads and grasshoppers, and there are two cats that come.’

‘What are they called?’

‘They haven’t got names, they’re wild.’

‘But where do they sleep then?’

‘Where they like, when people don’t chase them away.’ ‘Do you chase them?’

‘Oh no, they’re no bother. They bring the things they steal from the old woman here to eat, there’s an old woman who lives next door with a dog, she’s got chickens and rabbits. Vegetables too. She doesn’t talk to me.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. She’s all alone, she doesn’t like to talk, she told me to put poison down for the rats.’

‘Rats? Are they big, rats?’

‘Perhaps as big as that,’ said Jonathan, pointing to the pigeons.

‘We’re going to eat rats,’ Serge shouted out. And he started to laugh again at last, the vulgar, hellish and raucous laugh that was his secret voice.

Jonathan had put the kitchen table close to the fire. The nights were still very cold. He laid the table carefully on a bright red tablecloth. The boy became intoxicated by the smell of the meat and the frying fat.

At the table, impressed by this artless decorum, Serge said: ‘You know at home? I used to break everything all the time. Now I don’t break anything.’

‘Ah, that’s good,’ said Jonathan, ‘You drink wine, do you?’ ‘No, I don’t. Come on, give me some! Give me! Give me, come on!’

‘Enough? You really don’t break things any longer? Can you show me?’ asked Jonathan.

‘You can’t show,’ said Serge, roaring loudly with laughter, ‘I’m going to drink the wine! the wine!’

‘You can show me.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can.’

‘No you can’t!... Go on, show me.’

‘It’s easy. Here’s two plates. The first one, I drop. The other one I leave alone.’

The plate smashed on the tiles. Serge shouted out in astonishment. Jonathan went to look for a dustpan and brush: ‘The second plate I didn’t break, did I? You see you can show you aren’t breaking something.’

‘Y...es,’ said Serge, ‘but you broke the other one.’

‘That’s not the same, there are plenty of them.’

‘Oh! Oh! Then I can as well? Hey, I can as well then?’ Serge called out provocatively.

‘Of course, we can eat out of our hands, it’s better.’

‘Well, that one then!’ and Serge threw his own plate to the other end of the room. Jonathan jumped. Bits of plate struck against the furniture, but what one really heard was the joyful hunter’s whoop the child uttered at the same time as the movement.

‘A pity it was empty,’ Jonathan said, holding out the broom to the young boy, who was already on his feet.

‘Mmm...,’ said Serge, ‘if there were... chips on it!’

‘Soup.’

‘Spaghetti!’

‘Peas.’

‘Oh yes! Peas.’

Serge was down on his haunches, ferreting under a chest of drawers with the dustpan:

‘Soup! You got it. But... wait...,’ and his voice exploded, ‘something that stinks.’

‘That stinks? And you can eat it?’

‘I don’t really know what.’

Serge said no more. He went like a good boy and put the pieces in the bin. Then, spattered all over with fat and red wine, they had a wonderful dinner by the wild flames of the fire.

In the morning, Jonathan could hear his neighbour scratching away at the earth, behind the fencing that separated their two gardens. She must have put herself there to find out what was going on and where this infant voice was coming from.

It was a bright morning. Serge had woken up at seven, and Jonathan had felt a slight constraint. They’d put on their clothes without washing. Serge got his shoelaces tied for him, saying he didn’t know how. Jonathan didn’t know, either. He noticed that the boy’s feet had grown; the toes were less short and less plump. Against the light, a golden down could be seen at the ankle; dense, regular, each hair slightly curved, it thinned out towards the calf without entirely disappearing.

Serge insisted on going out into the garden straight away. Jonathan served breakfast on the ground, on the thick grass. Not quite wakeful, the child listened to the scraping of the hoe. He pulled limply at the grass around him and tossed it into his coffee-bowl, which he’d left half-full; then he tipped it upside down, stood up with a spring and approached the wire-netting fence. He pushed the little leaves aside:

‘Hello!’ he said, catching sight of the old woman.

‘Hnn.’

She remained bent over. A wet black nose, surrounded by short greying hair, pressed itself through the netting and touched the child on the knees.

‘Is that your dog?’ asked Serge, pushing a finger through to be licked.

‘Get out of there, you tike,’ said the old woman. She gave the dog a prod with the hoe. Disappointed, Serge went back to sit with Jonathan.

The old woman straightened up, and shouted through the fence:

‘I’ve still got rats! Put down more poison! Monsieur! They had two of my chicks last night! And you’ll have to pull up that bindweed, it’s getting to my turnips!’

Without waiting for a reply, she bent over the bed and started hacking at the soil, but slowly and gently, so as to be able to hear. Serge murmured happily, ‘Your turnips! my rats! my chicks.’

‘I’ve put flowers in over there for the summer,’ said Jonathan.

A very small oblong patch of earth, dug over and sieved, where thin shoots were growing, tall as a hand.

‘Turnips?’ said Serge, rather louder.

‘No, they’re... I’ve forgotten the French name. They grow in the wheat. If you take off your shoes,’ he went on seriously, ‘I’d really like to draw your feet.’

Serge accepted, unsurprised:

‘But I can’t undo the knot.’

Jonathan helped him; then, on his back in the grass, his legs in the air, pulling at his socks, Serge gurgled: ‘Oh! my chicks! my chicks! my little rats! my turnips.’ Jonathan put his drawing board on a crate; he gave the boy a magazine, and got him into the right position for the light. ‘Are you doing both feet?’

‘Yes, all your feet.’

‘All my feet?’

Serge, who read very badly but tirelessly, often moved about as he read. His feet moved too, and Jonathan followed. At the end of an hour there were ten or so feet on the paper. All his feet, thought Jonathan. He drew with a pencil, without retouching or rubbing anything out. It was something he could have done with his eyes shut — an old skill. But it moved him, this rearticulation of the academic outline in Serge’s proportions. He produced depth simply by varying the thickness of the line. The whiteness of the skin made him want to put a wash on the paper, and this surprised him; since he had lived here, he hadn’t touched colour.

After the watercolour, the childish feet seemed lumpish and restless. Over there, Serge’s own were waving gently very near a clump of nettles. Sometimes, while reading, the boy would speak a syllable out loud, his voice toneless or resolute, as it might be.

Jonathan looked at the paper, happy. These drawings weren’t his. This morning, simply, the chance play of sun and cloud had caught the young boy’s exorbitant likeness and held it, floating, on the paper. He showed the sketch to Serge, who paid it no attention.

‘That’s how you catch a cold,’ came a sharp voice, full of cold itself. The old woman had come out onto the lane, and taking advantage of the clear view from the front, was giving them a curious glance.

‘She’s interested in you,’ said Jonathan.

Suddenly he pulled Serge towards him by his legs, and spent some time kissing his feet. He licked between his toes as well. The little nails were black. The child laughed and shouted with pleasure. He thrashed about. The sketch had fallen to the ground, and got trampled and torn. Then they had a rest, and in silence Jonathan and the boy looked at each other in a very particular way. They got up and went back into the house.

As Serge disappeared barefoot in front of Jonathan, he seemed in a hurry, a little insubstantial, almost dancing.

Serge never talked about his father, who was called Simon and whom he saw once or twice a month. Jonathan had met him the odd evening in Paris, and they’d got on well enough. Simon would have liked to be a painter or sculptor; he was some kind of technician in an architect’s office. He was a nice chap, but nothing special. He seemed to have loved Barbara very much, and not to have got over it; but Barbara thought him boring company, both in town and in bed.

She saw him now and then, all the same. They made conversation, or made love in a desultory fashion, or perhaps Simon would take Serge to the cinema or the zoo. His son inspired in him no more than a lukewarm kindness. He paid Barbara a small monthly sum as maintenance for the child.

In Serge's room in Paris, though, there was a big photograph of Simon, one of his pipes, a pair of shoes, very much worn, and a pair of jeans splashed with paint. Simon must have brought them to Barbara's to do some work around the house. These things were mixed up with the toys and other things that Serge was in the habit of leaving lying about everywhere. At the age of six, he'd had a mania for changing his clothes right through the day. He'd invent or discover discomforts in this pair of shorts, that vest, or in one sock of a pair. He would pull them off furiously and try on other clothes, turning drawers upside down, shouting, crying, and then eventually quietening down. Barbara, insensitive to noise and disorder, would merely shrug her shoulders. But when she had friends round to think quietly and meditate, with incense sticks, green tea, and a Zen book within hand's reach, she would shake Serge and hit him, reasoning with him in a measured voice:

'Listen now, young man, it's time to stop the play-acting, don't you think?'

Beside himself, the child would go and cry in a cupboard. Now Barbara and her friends could continue their exercises in serenity.

Jonathan's arrival changed all this. He didn't know how to meditate. He followed Serge into his cupboard, and was astonished at what he saw. On a shelf fixed very high on the wall, curled up behind a heap of rumpled linen, there was a little animal gasping, rigid, savage, inaccessible, of which no more was to be seen than some ear and a bit of knee. Deeply moved, Jonathan desperately wanted to comfort him; to take him in his arms. Tears in his eyes, he waited and allowed himself to be watched. Then, suddenly, Serge overturned the rampart of linen and fastened himself about his neck. Later, he showed Jonathan how he managed to climb up into this den; it was very much more difficult to come down.

They finished the evening in the boy's room, so quiet that Barbara broke off the tranquility trials to see why everything was so calm. The two boys were on the floor; sitting on top of Jonathan, Serge was putting together, from the top of Jonathan's head down to his waist, the little blocks of plastic usually used to build bungalows and petrol stations. Shy, and hung about with these angular garlands, Jonathan didn't know what to say or what to think. After that first evening, he felt a great distress. Then, after some weeks, he had to admit that Serge loved him, and he too rediscovered his peace of mind.

Serge behaved as if younger than he was. He did dozens of imaginary little things for Jonathan; in return, he insisted that Jonathan dress him, button him up, do up his shoes, undress him, wash him, take him to school and back, hold his hand in the street, kiss him before and after, help him read the letters and draw even the most simple of them. He'd been so unmanageable and fickle at table that Barbara had given up trying to make him eat; he helped himself from the fridge when he wanted. But Jonathan liked to cook, so Serge now liked to eat.

Jonathan undertook each role so patiently and contentedly that Barbara, irritated,

soon saw in these rituals so many detestable habits being instilled into her son, and put a stop to them when she was present. That put Serge back in a bad mood: more disorder, with things getting broken, shouting, and retreats to the top of the cupboard. Barbara concluded from this, in accordance with her own private way of linking cause and effect, that Jonathan upset the boy and had a bad influence on him. Having fallen under the spell of certain writings, she didn't put this down to any perversion on Jonathan's part, but to the negative vibrations he put out without being able to control them. Experts in vibration, her friends confirmed the diagnosis:

'You're right; what this guy gives out, it's just impossible. You shouldn't leave the kid with him.'

'Yeah, you know, I can feel it just here. Really.'

'I'd say he hasn't any orgone energy.'

'You crazy or what? Everybody has.'

'I know, but, you see, I don't know, you know, he doesn't *accept* it, he *refuses* it, like, he... well, I don't know... but hey, it's obvious, like, isn't it?'

It was thanks to Simon that Serge had escaped an affected Christian name. When he was born, Barbara had wanted to call her baby Sebastien-Casimir, or Gervais-Arthur, or Guillaume-Romuald, anything like that would have done. Simon protested, and with such unaccustomed vigour that Barbara gave way. They *were* intending to get married, and she was worried about other disagreements. Serge was the name of Simon's father, whom he admired.

As for Barbara's real name, it was Georgette. Her mother called her nothing else when she visited her in Paris. Inclined towards irony, Serge could have wet himself laughing each time his grandmother said 'Georgette', but he held himself back. On those days Barbara was in a stormy mood, and rows broke out between mother and daughter.

In this old woman Jonathan had an enemy. She often found Serge with him and she didn't like it. She came to Paris to enjoy possession of her grandchild: this rival spoilt her plans. Serge was impossible with his grandmother; he kept his good manners for this quiet young man who wasn't even French. The old woman thought Jonathan made such an effort with Serge so as to sleep with his mother. She found it disgusting: it was just too easy to please a child like that. Of course, Barbara would fall for it! The grandmother thought it revolting that such calculation should rob her of the privileges and pleasures which by rights were hers alone.

She lived in Peronne. She dreamed of taking Serge away from the dissipated life that Barbara led, to make him a part of her settled widow's existence. She had brought up a daughter, a husband and six poodles. This large number of dogs was the result of her having them put down as soon as their age meant they needed care or attention.

When Serge was very small, he'd often been given to her to be looked after — for Barbara it was more important to get her son off her hands than to find him the right company. The old woman had made him wear straw hats, supervised his play in the squares, sat him down in front of the television adverts, offered him a Zorro suit with a black mask and guns for tiny tots; she'd taught him baby-talk, with its lisping speech and shrill shouts, for Serge's own voice was rough and spoke only ordinary sentences, nothing

to do with what comes out of a doll's belly. However, Serge had loved his grandmother: at three or four years old, overflowing with liveliness, sweetness and confidence, he loved everybody.

After one stay a little longer than the others, Barbara thought her son was being made into an idiot. For the time being, she decided he wouldn't any longer go to Peronne.

But Serge only needed a week to recover his coarse voice, his laughter and his audacity. Barbara liked to show off about this, as long as he remained happy with her.

She had read, though, in a feminist book, that after three years children, both girls and boys, have had enough of their mothers. She watched him, checked it out, rejected it. The upbringing continued.

The grandmother had never read anything like that. Nonetheless, she did what she could to combat Serge's tendency to love whom he liked. This was the main reason for the wars between her and Barbara; the origin of such general ideas as Barbara had about Jonathan and the world as a whole; and the reason why, in those days, Serge reacted with a furious face and clenched fists to the seductive endeavours of the two women, and asked for no other pleasure than to be taken for a walk through the streets on Jonathan's shoulders. If she was feeling up to going on the offensive, the grandmother would go with them. Serge would take this opportunity, held firmly by the thighs, to stand up straight on top of Jonathan and pretend to jump. Then he really would jump: Jonathan would catch him beneath the arms before he reached the ground; he admired the boy's courage, and he hugged him a lot. The grandmother would turn away her face, talk about broken legs, about ice-cream shops round the corner, and her rigid fingers trembled.

'Where's your junk-drawer?' asked Serge, bounding from the garden into the kitchen. Jonathan, sitting at the table, was making a drawing in brown and red inks.

'My junk-drawer?'

'Yes, where you put things, you know, all your things.' 'Oh, right.'

Jonathan got up. He quickly put his drawing out of sight. He opened several drawers in the dresser, which was painted in a veined chestnut colour, to imitate the wood of which it was made.

'Will that do you?'

'I'll have a look.'

Serge shook out the jumble of string, rubber bands, broken pens, odd cutlery, corks, screws and a hundred other little bits he knew people stored away.

'What is it you want?' asked Jonathan.

'I'm looking! You sit down, you!'

Jonathan obeyed. The child put together a bulky collection which he took out into the garden, making several journeys. Then he disappeared. The door slammed.

There was no rubbish collection in the village; everyone threw their rubbish into a hole dug at the bottom of the garden, or over the fence. Thus there developed a sort of compost mixed with plastic and old iron. At Jonathan's house, this hole, at the edge of a field, was hidden by clumps of redcurrant bush, mixed up with borage, wild carrots, chervil run to seed, and the high wavy feathers of abandoned asparagus plants. It was

here, ensconced among the dishevelled greenery and the smells, that Serge had begun to dig a pond, patiently, with the help of an old spade with its handle broken off almost at the socket. First of all he knelt down and uprooted the weeds one by one, pulling them up with a flourish. Soon he was panting. When he'd cleared a patch of ground, he outlined a rectangle there and started to dig. He hacked at the soil with the edge of the blade, and lifted it away with his hands. It was soft and close-textured.

He came across a first earthworm, small, wriggly and very red, like the ones for fishing. He amused himself, putting it on the back of his hand. The invisible hairs scratched at the skin and the worm expelled a whorl of digested earth. Serge threw it away.

He continued to dig, and found another: a big fat pointed end which waved slowly at the entrance to a tunnel as round and neat as a pipe. Serge seized it and pulled at it valiantly. It was stretchy; but better than chewing-gum: it resisted, it was muscled. And interminably long. Curious, and vaguely alarmed, Serge gave it a last pull and let it drop. Completely exposed, the worm twisted and turned on the damp earth.

'Disgusting!' Serge shouted at it.

That was the moment he went back in to the kitchen to look for things.

In the meantime, the worm had disappeared; but Serge prodded at the earth with an old spoon and found it again. 'Aha! You'll see!'

He examined the objects he'd brought with him. He tried a few unidentifiable things, hesitated, then chose a tin box that had held medicinal pastilles.

'You wait there, and don't you move!'

Back in the kitchen: 'Jonathan, uh, have you got any wire? Have you got matches?'

'There, on the stove. Thin wire or thick?'

'Thick! ...no, thin. What's it like, the thin one? Oh, I can take that old candle there, it's really old.'

This time, the worm was still visible.

'Right then, fatso, wait a moment, you just wait!'

Serge opened the tin, and, picking the worm up with a little stick, he put it inside. The tin was a bit small, but Serge folded the worm up neatly and quickly closed the lid.

What came after needed some work. Serge cut two lengths of wire, twisting them for a long time so as to produce a break; he tightened them round the box, then twisted the end and suspended the box from a stick.

'Now I need two like that.'

He made a 'V' with his fingers and studied the form. He looked at the redcurrant bushes, an espaliered pear tree, the twigs on the ground, didn't find what he was looking for. He got up, and walked round the garden. It took a good while. He pulled a small forked branch from a young wild cherry tree: on its trunk were scattered tears of amber gum. Serge picked one off: it was soft, it was sticky, he pressed it here and there before flattening it onto the middle of his forehead like a wart. He fingered it so as to be able to feel his new face. The other fork was a piece of dead wood.

Having planted the forks in the hole, Serge rested the other stick with the box hanging from it across them, like a spit. He put the stump of candle just underneath. He had to try

very hard to light it. The wick was embedded in the wax, it was delicate work, and the matches kept going out.

Eventually, a wavering flame began to lick at the tin, and the worm it contained. Bending over it, his teeth suddenly flooded by an acidic saliva, Serge watched, listened, protected the flame, listened again. But no sound escaped from the tin. Except, later, a sizzle; and a little water came through between the tin and its lid. Not onto the candle, luckily. Serge was surprised by the soot which accumulated. Now and again this deposit lifted off in flakes, under the effect of the paint underneath, which was coming off with the heat; the metal appeared and was immediately blackened. Serge swallowed down his spit, and his heart thumped.

‘Ah aah! You’re well cooked now, you disgusting thing!’

Serge blew out the candle. He would have liked to open the tin, but it was burning hot. He blew at that too, gave up, rushed once more into the kitchen.

‘I’m taking some water,’ he said.

‘Is there a fire?’ asked Jonathan.

‘Oh no.’

He lied: ‘It’s for the pond. ‘Cos I’m making a pond. Need lots of water.’

‘The bucket’s under the sink. But look for the tap outside, it’ll be easier, by one of the windows, very low down.’

Jonathan, who’d been getting on with his drawing in red chalk, was touching it up now with white chalk and charcoal.

Serge took the bucket. He didn’t use it. He cooled the tin directly under the tap. At last he could touch it and undo it from the stick. His fingers were covered in black. He untwisted the wires and opened the lid. In the tin, charred remains, five or six sausages which seemed to be made up of hollow, crumbly rings. Other ashes had dissolved in the water. The examination of the remains fascinated the child even longer and more intensely than the incineration.

He inflicted the same death on two giant slugs, one brown, the other grey, tiger-striped, or rather, marked with black stripes at head and tail. The grilling of the brown slug was a disaster: this flesh resisted better than that of the worm. When Serge opened the tin, the slug wasn’t burned to a cinder, it remained whole, and still damp even, but it had exploded and the guts were spilling out in an enormous bundle. Serge, nauseated, threw the corpse and its box far away. As a precaution, the tiger-striped slug was given a proper bonfire of twigs, which Serge kept properly fed. This one’s coffin, or oven, was a fat tube for effervescent tablets. The plastic cap caught fire, giving off a nasty smell and a thready smoke. Then it popped. Liquids and foams flowed out. Much later, the cinders Serge emptied out were light, tinkling and granular.

‘Why haven’t they come, the cats?’ he asked. Jonathan had asked to see the pond, but Serge refused:

‘It’s not finished. You can see it tomorrow. Is tomorrow alright?’

‘Yes, that’s alright.’

And Jonathan, for his part, hadn’t dared show his drawing to Serge, for the drawing was obscene. It showed one of their secrets. Often, Serge busied himself alone, and

Jonathan preferred this. Time passed quickly; the child's stay was drawing to a close, and Jonathan made an emptiness in himself, so as to become accustomed to his departure. He continued to respond to the boy's desires, to his affectionate gestures, but as if his presence were merely imaginary.

Serge was not someone who could be loved, a free and rational man who had chosen this place and this tenderness in accordance with his own requirements. He was no more than a child, whose possessor had loaned him, deposited him indeed. Barbara didn't belong to anyone, nor did Jonathan, but Serge did. So he didn't exist; the feelings he inspired or experienced didn't exist either. To think he was alive, to listen to him, to follow him with your eyes, these were ridiculous mistakes. He hadn't left his child's playpen, down there at the feet of those who oversee these things and the creatures shut up in them. You got it wrong, because these captives were allowed to travel, were there to be seen, aroused passions, raised smiles; but against all this they had their labels, police documents, legal and commercial papers, which proved they were possessions — that they were not themselves.

Jonathan was tormented by these facts. He had no notion of childhood. What was thus named and loved made him nauseous. To him, Serge seemed a completed being, different from any other, like to any other, as good as any other. A man, who would grow old like all the rest, but more slowly at first. He would grow up; this was little change compared to the thinning hair and wrinkling lips, the flabby breast, the legislative voice, the fat arse, the comatose slumber, or the ponderous weariness of false existence which, once manhood comes, weighs down the limbs and makes their action weak. For many years yet, Serge (but not Jonathan) would remain himself, solar, perfect, whole, and death would have no hold on him.

This was why Jonathan felt in childhood a robustness of savour, a sureness of touch and a fulfilment which were lacking later. But the word 'child' ordained the very opposite, and made Serge's bountiful childhood a nightmare — just as a teenager's face, infinite in its possibilities, becomes nightmarish when we see it in the criminal's cell, in the family circle, in a gang of hooligans, a row of schoolchildren or workers. This same sentence of annulment had been pronounced on Serge, on his feelings, his thoughts and on the limitless energies of his body.

In the presence of this boy, suppressed by a single word, Jonathan stood aside. He chose to be a servant, not daring even to be a witness. He did the dishes and the laundry, he cooked, he cleaned the bog, he tidied up, he did the shopping, he allowed himself to be hugged, offered up his nakedness, his sex, his sleep, and observed in the house a diffident splendour in which there basked, as if tomorrow had no existence, the aerial kingdom of the little boy. But there was no other future than the return of Barbara, protectress, mistress and determined lover of a dog called Serge.

The old woman went out with the watering-can when the sun no longer shone on the beds. It was five or six in the evening. The smells of the dinner Jonathan was cooking were beginning to waft through the air. Serge wanted to water as well, the little square of flowers in the grass, or the grass itself. But the sun here disappeared more gradually than

on the other side of the fence, more slowly fading into gilt. Serge waited patiently. Held in a wet hand, the watering can was pulling down on his whole arm. On the young shoots, he watched the tongue of sunlight being swallowed up by shadow, and he could already imagine the damp smells, the dripping earth, brown and shining, shit-coloured, grainy with the tiny pebbles washed down by the water.

Now, behind the screen of bindweed, the neighbour was speaking to him:

‘So, you’re watering?’

She must have been smiling and watching him at work, Serge could imagine it. He answered: ‘Yes, I’m watering.’

Well-behaved, quietly spoken, as if to a mother. He sniffed, among the exhalations of the earth and the plants, to see what the old woman was eating that evening. He couldn’t smell anything, and he didn’t dare ask. With all the vegetables and all those hens, the dahlias in front and the sunflowers, it was surprising all the same. Her watering can was older, but on the other hand it was much bigger.

‘You got rabbits? No... oh you have,’ said Serge, belatedly remembering to use the polite *vous*.

‘Rabbits?’ said the woman, ‘I’ve got one big rabbit, she’s got four little ones. D’you want to see them?... You do the watering, then, and we’ll go and see them.’

Standing there, Jonathan too was invited into this garden he had never entered before. The-rabbit-hutch was on the other side, towards the rubbish, where the washing was hanging on the line and the lucerne sprang upward.

‘Look at that fruit!’ murmured Jonathan, pointing at a bunch of stiff stems, where swollen like oak galls hung big pale green balls veined with a darker colour. (They were gooseberries.)

‘They’re very hard, ah, that’s my garden for you,’ said the woman. ‘Me, I haven’t my teeth, if you’d like some for the little one... they’re not very ripe. So you’re called Serge, are you?’

‘...You heard!’ exclaimed Serge, laughing despite himself. Jonathan saw something coquettish in him, with a charming flash of canine he hadn’t seen before.

‘We hear a out things here, can’t help it.’

‘But why is she all alone in her cage, the rabbit?’

‘My dear, they eat their little ones, the horrid things, you can never leave them together, the bitches.’

‘She eats them? Really? It ought to be the rats,’ offered Serge. ‘She doesn’t!’

‘Well, well, there you are! Knee high to a grasshopper and he knows everything already. I’m telling you, she’ll eat them all: every last one!’

‘And the others there, they eat the little ones as well?’ ‘Ah, those others, well they do sometimes, yes. Look, I’ll get a little one out for you.’

Dextrously, Serge took hold of the young rabbit, which was russet-brown and white, and he fussed over it with girlish gestures. He really would have liked to put it down on the ground, he felt that one could have a good run with an animal like that.

‘It smells of straw,’ he said. ‘It smells nice. It’s straw!’ ‘Yes, it smells of rabbit droppings, yoube careful of your little shirt,’ said the woman.

Jonathan had the bad idea of buying the rabbit. It wasn't easy. As it was, it wasn't worth anything. And the old woman was too proud to sell it for the price of a grown animal, ready to kill and ready to cook.

'But you can give me the lucerne,' Jonathan insisted. The bargain was concluded, with the promise of greenstuff and bolted cabbages, they wouldn't heart.

'Well, look who's been a lucky one!' said the old woman, stroking the rabbit and looking at Serge's face. 'You won't go and eat him up all raw, will you my pretty boy, will you?'

Busy pressing their noses together, the child and the animal failed to reply to this question, which wasn't clearly addressed to either of them.

Jonathan had raised animals already, and he knew more or less what to do with this one. Tonight, the rabbit would sleep in the bedroom, on a bit of straw from the hutch and some cabbage leaves. Tomorrow they would knock up a home for it. Jonathan was afraid it had been taken away from its mother too young. His neighbour had insisted that it hadn't, and in any case, the mother rabbit was old. Jonathan still thought the little rabbit would soon die. But that would be after Serge had left, and he would surely leave the animal behind.

Jonathan was glad he hadn't already cooked rabbit for the boy. Serge did like to eat identifiable animals, though, rather than faceless pieces of meat. They'd got through the poultry repertoire; fine fish; frogs; undersized crayfish, caught illegally and sold under the counter.

'Would you eat it?' asked Jonathan.

'You know? You know what we're going to do? We'll put it outside! We'll send it out!'

Jonathan sighed: 'Into the countryside... It would be nice, but he'd never survive. He couldn't cope, he's not wild.'

Serge didn't believe him. Jonathan described what it was like in the wild. He said he would repair the garden fence; the animal would be able to go around without a cage and without risk. This half-measure left Serge disgruntled, his hunger for freedom in the shape of a rabbit still unsatisfied.

'You can let him go if you like,' said Jonathan, resigned. 'Perhaps he would die here with us, you know.'

'Well,' said Serge, 'We'll put him in the garden, but you won't block up the holes. You leave them alone! We'll put plenty of food down to eat, and there we are! Like that, if he dies, it'll be his own fault. Shall we do that?'

Jonathan smiled and nodded his head.

'Yes then... But come on, say so! Say yes!'

Jonathan said yes.

As the sun shone brightly every day, Jonathan put the washing to dry outside. In any case, there was too much now to hang it up in the kitchen as he used to.

He did the washing in the old way, with ancient equipment he found in the cellar: a concrete sink, a copper with its chimney, a gas ring, a beetle and a scrubbing-brush which had lost half its bristles. He liked this solid labour — which pleased him all the more

when there was Serge's dirty clothing mixed in with his own. He took very great care with it. Serge, curious, watched him all the way through. He only knew the laundries in town, and this domestic laundering pleased him. It was the second-to-last day. Everything would be clean, mended and ironed ready for his departure.

Jonathan had felt the secret urge to steal some of the boy's clothes, to hide them. He didn't dare. Barbara and Serge were carefree enough for the theft to go unnoticed, but in Jonathan's solitude, these clothes would take up too much space, would be too much present, in the bottom of their cupboard, where Jonathan would never look at them, except perhaps the one time before rolling them up into a ball and throwing them into a river very far from here, well, weighed down with stones.

His neighbour's face clouded when she saw him hanging the pretty washing on the line. These small sizes of clothes were women's property, no gentleman should touch them. She shrugged her shoulders, murmured to herself, remained hidden. It was well washed, the whites white, the colours bright, the woollens light and fluffy, fresh as a daisy. Bad work, of course, would have pleased her more. She could have intervened, said what she knew, been a little bit in charge.

Serge helped to hang the washing. He pulled out his own clothes from the basket, as he didn't dare touch Jonathan's. Then he decided to hold one item out, and another, with a lewd laugh, almost dancing. Jonathan, clothespins in his mouth, did not react. Their fabric silhouettes waved about in the wind, shone in the sunshine, very naked and very naive among the sheets and the napkins.

When they washed together, Serge was not so ironical: true nakedness wiped out the differences that clothing indicated or created. They would heat a big saucepan of water and get the tin bath ready in the middle of the kitchen, pushing the table and chairs aside. It was done late in the afternoon, so Serge wouldn't get cold, and lasted almost till dinner. First of all Jonathan washed the boy; he did this in workmanlike fashion and he remained clothed. Serge behaved himself, standing straight as a soldier. But then Jonathan would undress, pour more water into the bath and stand up in it; the boy, his face scarlet with heat and his body pearly over with drops of water, would begin his provocations, his tricks and his dirty talk. A carnival of nakedness, damp, cool air on bare bottom, sex upright, in the kitchen, at tea time, time for leaving school.

'Big balls!' he chuckled, squinting sideways at Jonathan's penis, then grabbing it, slapping and twisting it before declaring: 'I'm going to wash you!'

He would soap Jonathan vigorously all over, thoroughly, leaving nothing out, as carefree and energetic as a housewife flanneling her kids. Jonathan washed only his face and his hair, too high for the boy to deal with them without difficulty.

This scrubbing got Serge excited. He seemed hungry. At first he'd avoided getting wet again, but had then stopped caring, getting soap over himself where he pressed against Jonathan. On his skin there were round or oval patches fringed about with soap-suds, showing where their bodies had touched.

The pushing and shoving ended with water splashed all over the floor. They had to abandon the kitchen. Serge and Jonathan went up the stairs, and they wrapped themselves up in the one bath towel, the little one lying on top of the big one. The boy

started his games again on the young painter's stomach, or on his back. As Serge twisted about, their skin, moist and slippery with soap, would make contact then break apart again, making farting and sucking noises.

Calm returned after what quenches boyish passion. Now Serge would decide he was dry enough, and get down to essentials — sitting on Jonathan, head toward his feet, as if he were an armchair made for the purpose. Jonathan's legs, pulled up a little, made up the back of the chair, his belly, sex now quiescent, made the seat. Depending on the day, Serge would lie there on his back, or curled up, or even on his stomach; the angle of the chair-back would be arranged to suit. In every case, the object was to offer Jonathan a part to be caressed as long as Serge thought fit. Invariably, the caress was a stroke of the index finger, or rather of its tip, which followed a fixed course, without pressure, and without any modification of its rhythm. The finger touched the divide of the buttocks, an inch or two above the hole, slipped along, brushed along one side of the ring, or passed teasingly over the middle, continued onward, faster, circled about the sac and then faded away. Three seconds later it began again at the top, and started on its way again. By the hundredth stroke the fine grain of the childish skin seemed to Jonathan to be raised, almost rasping, while the flesh of his finger felt flayed to the quick.

Other caresses interested Serge less, or led him on towards other things. But this stroke was sufficient to itself. Soon the boy's erection would decline: he'd put his thumb in his mouth and shut his eyes, more still and more relaxed than if he'd been asleep. Busied with this monotonous duty, Jonathan too felt dozy, but if his finger left off for a moment, Serge's voice would call out straight away:

'Go on, go on.'

They had inaugurated this ritual the year before, one morning they were alone and had been sleeping naked. Serge, allowed access to the resources of a grown-up boy, had discovered the position where Jonathan could be used as a chaise-longue, and pleased that an anatomy should be so habitable, had appropriated it, graciously, but without right of appeal. Jonathan embraced the nakedness open before his face. The little caress was born among others, and Serge had picked it out, explaining, with the lewdest laugh of which he was capable:

'It makes electricity in my bottom!'

'We could put a bulb there,' Jonathan suggested.

'A bulb, eh! Go on, do it again!'

The same time had seen the beginning of the thumb-sucking and the doziness. Otherwise, in going to sleep at six years old, Serge chewed an old napkin he held gripped in his fist.

His first morning in the country, before they'd really woken up, they'd again taken up this position, with the strange perfection one sees in the movement of birds, the sleep of foxes. Jonathan experienced it as a rite of rebirth, vegetal, slow and secret in its monotony, in its forgetting of time, of acts, of images. Their other sensual intimacies were commonplace; this one owed its singularity to the repetition and hypnosis it engendered.

It wasn't a pleasure for the evening, nor for the garden. Serge looked for it only in bed, on waking up, or after his bath.

His all-over wash, two or three times a week, was an occasion which concentrated all the ideas and extravagances inspired in him by Jonathan's nakedness and his own. He amused himself in urinating from afar into the tin bath, and he knew how to pull back and pinch so as to obtain a jet as long and straight as from a fire hose. He wanted Jonathan to do the same; naturally modest, Jonathan pretended he hadn't the necessary liquid.

'You've only got to drink,' the boy insisted.

'It won't come through straight away,' said Jonathan. Serge aimed at the tub from the door of the kitchen, or pretended to be looking for a mouse to pee on. But they were frightened by the tumult, and there wasn't one to be found.

They usually appeared after dinner, and their favourite stage was the top of the stove. There they nibbled whatever had been spilt from the saucepans; these half-burnt residues, which Jonathan would clean up in the morning, they found more pleasing than the little meals put on the ground, which they often left untouched. The milk curdled, the jam skinned over, the bacon sweated. Then the saucers would be found empty, as clean as if an army of rats had invaded this kitchen in Cockaigne.

Serge was not as fond of animals as one might have thought from the attention he paid to them. He was curious above all about Jonathan, about Jonathan's space and everything in it, alive or dead.

The bedroom, for example, was a place where, if they stayed reading and watching, naked under the warm bedclothes, neither moving nor talking, they would see the mice, no, one mouse, her or her brother, making an audacious appearance, risking even the bedspread at their feet, as if it followed a necessary path, unavoidable whatever dangers it brought.

They eyed the two boys with such intelligence, with such a mixture of hesitations, twists and turns and bold advances, that instead of vermin they seemed dwarves, faery creatures, related to gnomes, elves and sprites, the whole miniature ruffraff which once peopled the world, laughing behind people's backs before playing their tricks on them. But Serge would have preferred the mouse to have appeared while he was playing with Jonathan, and he would have put the mouse just there.

It was what he'd tried to do with the rabbit, as they slept together that night. After having fun running with it on the ground, Serge took it onto the bed and put it down in the nest of his thighs; the animal didn't even take a sniff at his sex. To tell the truth, it didn't really want to be there, and Serge had difficulty in keeping it. But this quivering ball of fur inspired the boy to further impudence; he spread his legs and showed the little rabbit his hole, huddled the little ball against it, talking dirty as he did so. Between two shrill laughs, he felt the tickling of the furry little animal, whose skin and ears were shivering as it tried to get away.

Jonathan was troubled by Serge's cynicism; he held back an urge to do the same thing (in a scene where Serge would be the rabbit). He would have preferred to be mistreated himself, when the child changed his toy.

For Serge, gentle and delicate in love, became pugnacious as soon as his pretty little sex was involved. He wrangled with Jonathan's own as if it were an unbreakable rod.

Serge also liked to bite. In his first year at school, several children were scared of him because of it. Sometimes he dared test Jonathan's endurance to the blood, taking a bite at a cheek, a forearm, a nipple or a hip, where he chewed away at a fold of flesh grasped near the liver. His eyes watering with pain, Jonathan submitted to this mystery and saw in it no cruelty but that of primitive initiations, of tribal bonds and childish pacts — the more tender, should it resemble the emotion it left behind it.

Jonathan's other source of happiness, on bathing days, was to smell in the boy's hair the extraordinary scent of cheap shampoo, after their pleasure had been taken, and they had pulled the bedclothes round their necks, put the lamp out and drawn their heads close together for sleep.

Jonathan was watching the calendar, but the boy didn't seem to be thinking of Barbara's return. On the last evening, though, Jonathan said to him:

'It's tomorrow.'

'What's tomorrow?'

'It's tomorrow she's coming back.'

'Who? My mother?'

Despite himself, Jonathan was watching Serge's face closely. But there was no sign of disappointment, of sadness, or of rebellion. The small head was shaking, doubtful and a little amused.

'She won't come,' Serge said simply, 'she's always late!... I bet she won't come.'

'Well then, the day after tomorrow.'

'No, she won't come. I know. She's always changing her mind. You know that!'

'Yes, it's true.'

'Well then!'

Jonathan worried about this unrealistic attitude, Serge's naive refusal of his mother's return. Did the child so much fear their being separated, or did he think his mother neglected him? He lived in her shadow, he was naturally attached to her. But Serge and Barbara, Serge and Jonathan were two incompatible couples — two worlds of unequal force. The child knew it: he had already lived this conflict, he knew how it would end, the only possible end. At best, he would just be abandoned a little by the one, then snatched away from the other: beaten, then comforted, to be burnt alive. Jonathan didn't think he wanted to choose.

'...What would be nice,' the child went on, 'is some frogs, because my pond is finished, we could put them in, do you know where there are any?'

'I think I do,' said Jonathan, 'otherwise I know a shop that sells them, nice green ones.'

'Oh, where's that?'

'No, no, in town. Listen Serge... would you like to stay here?'

Jonathan hated himself for putting this useless question. Serge would stay if his mother decided he could stay, he would go if his mother decided he would go, he would see Jonathan again if his mother said he should, he wouldn't see Jonathan and wouldn't love him any more if his mother decided that he wouldn't see him and shouldn't love him

any more. It was her affair, and hers alone, and certainly a kid had nothing to do with it. But Jonathan was tormented by the child's serenity.

'First of all, I'm not going,' the little one explained, 'so I'm staying then.'

He caught Jonathan by the shirt, smiled at him and looked him in the eyes, as if to reproach him:

'Don't worry! I'm telling you she won't come! Everything's alright! If you ask me it's nothing at all, you'll see.'

And Serge was right. The day came, and Barbara didn't appear. That evening, Jonathan, who'd packed the child's suitcase quietly and ashamedly, now had to unpack it as he watched. Serge thought nothing of it.

The next day, neither mother nor any news of her. No frogs either: Jonathan was waiting, he didn't dare leave the house.

One more day without anything, Sunday. Jonathan had asked the grocer if his son couldn't perhaps catch two or three frogs, but the lad had no success. In any case, there weren't any more in the lake; it had been exhausted.

Monday, at last, there was a letter from Barbara. Air-mail envelope, United States stamp. Serge's mother was in San Francisco.

'Perhaps for the whole summer,' said Jonathan, summaris-ing the contents of the letter for the boy. He also read him a few motherly lines written especially for him. Serge listened care-fully, then:

'Forget it, I don't know how to write,' he remarked, shrug-ging his shoulders.

...a great adventure, perhaps unforgettable... love — it's true... — what can you say, how do you explain it?... Barbara wrote to Jonathan. There were details about the man she'd met. (That's what she did, on the train or in the hotel.) Her trip had gone very well; after Aix, where she'd discovered this admirer, she'd found herself in Sicily and then in Greece. And then a wonderful woman had joined the wonderful couple: she ad-mired Barbara's talent as a painter and had decided to launch her all over the world, and especially far from Europe, and she thought, on top of all this, that Barbara had an incredible gift for healing by the laying on of hands, an authentic whatever.

...the fluid... you can see how crazy it is.. I can't explain it myself... — but it's true... I can do anything with her... her awful migraines... a profound psychic dimension... And the invitation to California. Jonathan was struck by the absence of exclamation marks, and didn't know what to make of it.

Vagueness about Serge. Apologies about the cost. And then some advice, unexpected and not very diplomatic. Jonathan had known her to be more clever, and this carelessness made him hope that Barbara really had fallen in love with the USA, and would stay there for a long time. Anyway, she didn't suggest that Serge should join her, nor even that Jonathan should put the child on a plane.

...I wasn't sure — whether you and Serge would get on — not just at the level of appearances... — I mean real communication... total understanding... it's absolutely fundamental for a child... they have an instinct, they know when they're really loved — I'm like that myself I can feel it about them... I get into the soul, it's an osmosis... I was very doubtful...Perhaps I was wrong last year, I didn't really understand, but I felt that

there was too much egotism — that you were too egotistic, essentially,...when you were with him... I wondered — that's what shocked me I think... I was wrong, I suppose, I'm sorry about that — but I'm taking a risk now — I'm putting my complete trust in you, really... But I must ask you — Respect his personality, he's only a child... — you could stifle him, destroy him without even noticing — it's so important — a boy... if you love him, do think about that... — let him develop as he wants to himself not the way you want... it's him I want to rediscover in the autumn — that wonderful boy... my son... I really know who Serge is, I could tell straight away.. — but no I'm not threatening anything!... — put yourself in my place — a wonderful — terrible — situation — it's not easy!... think... you'll realise... you listen to him — get out of yourself indeed — but whether a man really can... difficult... — but you ought to make him... for his sake... otherwise it's too easy... well there you are, I'm his mother, it's ridiculous, but never mind... you can understand it but... I know your

‘Yes, until the beginning of term,’ Jonathan confirmed. ‘And she says I’ve got to make you do what you want.’

‘Her?... But what’s she doing in America?’ Serge cried out, pensive. ‘Ah! I know! She’s found a man again!’

‘That’s what she says here.’

‘Has he got lots of money? Her men are always poor.’ ‘She doesn’t mention money.’

‘Then he’s rich,’ concluded Serge.

And he laughed. But he was visibly upset, though used to being abandoned as he was to being periodically abused. (Essentially, Barbara got involved with her son when, in a mood of childish, languid, maternal and cosy femininity, she took to chastity. It would sometimes last for months; then she would start making love again, and leave Serge to his own devices.)

Besides, such freedom was beyond the boy’s imagination, like a figure in billions. He was abstracted and inactive the whole afternoon, and never for one moment did he leave Jonathan’s side.

Though old and small, the house wasn’t dirty. Jonathan respected its atmosphere. He wouldn’t have dreamt of repainting, or putting down carpets, or moving the furniture about. He simply took his place unobtrusively, here where generations had succeeded each other. The silence of these extinguished lives was more or less the only human tenderness he felt certain of. And if it pleased him, in the dim light of evening, to go slowly round one room or the other, brushing past the modest and old-fashioned furniture, listening to the sound of his feet on the floor, on the tiles, looking attentively at the shadows, the stains and the dark corners, he wasn’t moved by dreams of ancient presences, even childish ones (for half a century hunched up in the stiff bodies and ragged mourning of old age), but by the pleasure he took in this infinite absence of human beings. The house was like one of those fine shells, in whose cavity, when held to the ear, you can hear the sound of the sea. As you admire the smooth and nacreous surfaces flowing towards the interior, you don’t think of the probably shapeless mollusc, utterly repulsive when out of its shell, which secreted this mother-of-pearl and polished

the plunging corridor.

To secrete, to construct, to attach, to smoothe and to arrange: this is what Jonathan could no longer do. He had discovered a house empty and dead; he made himself comfortable, though not too much; he had adopted it. But with no desire for those distant lives that had created it; and without living his own, because it wasn't possible.

He'd had no concrete reason for settling here, of all the places, regions, countries he had known. When time had weighed too heavy and he had looked for somewhere to go, an affectionate and mournful memory of this village had gradually come to dominate the others. With its dispersed habitations (a more concentrated group near the church and the bus-stop), it was only a hamlet, a very loose gathering of poor houses, each one closed in on itself and at a distance from the others. Like a cemetery that hadn't been fenced in, where the graves, apart from a little nucleus of immemorial tombs, had been constructed one by one according to a law of gradual dispersal, had spilled over the prescribed limits and had gained the surrounding countryside, invading the meadows, the fields, the forests, the islands, butts and lovers' copses, the paths along which the harvesters made their way.

There hadn't been another house to rent. The old neighbour didn't bother him; doubtless her secrets were no more than those of children dead and a past in ruins — Jonathan's own secrets. He and she avoided each other.

Jonathan's was not a gloomy character. He had little imagination. He thought little about himself. He hardly analysed himself at all; he knew himself so well he wasn't interested any longer. The desperate mood, then, that had locked him up in here had nothing to do with him, with an illness of spirit, but with the vast illness of things outside. That's why, too, this mood was permanent, as the world didn't change.

As for the hours of more lively pain that Jonathan sometimes suffered, they must have been an effort by the youth in him, a last revolt, a last rejection of the evidence. Nothing worse.

It would be possible to hide away here, to get older by a year or two, without changing, without suffocating, without dying. Jonathan wouldn't move on again. Every part of the world was as good as any other, there wasn't anywhere a life to be lived. There remained to him only this body, this solid, affectionate, cheerful thing, pierced through and animated by every beauty of the universe; but a body uninhabited, which had to be sheltered, protected from what could make it suffer — cold, hunger, other people's gaze. Jonathan cared for himself calmly, with a sort of domestic tenderness, as he would scrupulously have attended to a prisoner of whom he knew nothing, or an idiot, an innocent given by chance into his keeping, whom he could neither possess, nor despise, nor destroy.

They had sat down in a café whose front was open to the street, and their table stood almost astride the slot in the ground where the plate-glass windows ran back and forth. Jonathan, who was bored, found his boredom disturbed by sobs. High-pitched, not very loud, they must have had their origin in a very tiny breast.

Serge showed him who it was. Outside, sitting at a café table, there was a woman with

her son. It was this four- or five-year-old child who was crying, and his mother was murmuring inaudible reprimands in his ear. Only the woman's profile, distorted by the effort of speaking harshly in a low voice, made it possible to grasp the tenor of her words. The boy's cheek, particularly plump and white, was marked by a long trickle of blood. It flowed slowly downward, vermilion, like melting lipstick. A snail's track, you might have said, but bloody.

'She slapped him like that, across the face, and it bled,' explained Serge.

The stone in a ring, or a broken nail. Contrary to plan, the slap to induce good behaviour had produced a striking and indecent spectacle which the woman was trying in vain to bring back under control. Words were not enough; at the edge of the table, her hand, with rigid fingers and cupped palm, was tapping rhythmically to draw the infant's attention to the threat of another slap to correct the results of the first.

But she no longer dared strike. With darting glances of her expressionless eyes, she looked about her. No, none of the customers in the café had reacted: they knew how difficult was the art of teaching manners to the little ones. But a few passers-by, who were obliged, on account of the narrowness of the pavement, to walk close by the table, caught sight of the bloodied child, heard his sobs, and took a quick look at the mother. She was wearing an old-fashioned black suit with a nipped-in waist and rounded skirts, her hair was long, reddish brown, waved, black at the roots. Middle-aged women, walking alone, stopped for a second, or even turned round, as if to size up the wound and to find in the face of the little one the good reason for this brutality; then they went on, impassive and discreet, without having said a word, or risked an alteration of expression.

Embarrassed nonetheless, the woman in the black suit decided to wipe her son's cheek with a handkerchief, for the blood had reached the young boy's collar. Perhaps he took this for a further act of violence, beginning to cry more loudly and trying to free his head, which the woman held from behind as she was wiping. Exasperated, she put away the handkerchief and threw some coins onto the table, where there still stood two glasses of lemonade and cordial, one red, the other green. She stood up with the air of a person offended; she pulled up the child from his seat, as far and as roughly as possible, plonked him firmly onto the ground, took his hand and marched him away.

'You know why?' asked Serge in an expressionless voice. 'It's because he wouldn't drink, he wasn't thirsty, so she hit him.'

Sure enough, the glass of grenadine was untouched.

'If my mother did that, I'd hit her back,' cried Serge.

'He was too small.'

'You could have stopped her,' said Serge. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'Nobody says anything, it was his mother. It doesn't help. She has a row with you, and she pays him back twice over when they get home.'

After witnessing hundreds of family scenes, Jonathan had nothing else to say; oppressed by anger and by shame, he could do no more than forget as quickly as possible these tiny dramas which it would be ridiculous or dangerous to take to heart.

'So if Barbara hit me you'd really let her?' Serge asked, with an incredulous smile.

'No, but I know her. With the others you can't. You just put your fingers in your ears

and wait for it to finish.'

It was Wednesday, the schools' day off, which amused Serge because he was already on holiday. That morning, about ten o'clock, they had come into town on the bus. They hadn't found any frogs at the shop. There were some fine toads, some with red eyes, some with gold, but Serge found them disgusting. He was more interested in the white mice, and in a smelly cage of hamsters, huddled in their excrement. Fascinated, he breathed in the over-ripe odour of urine, rotten eggs and rabbit hutch which rose from a glass tank covered with a wire grille, where there slept a knotted clump of snakes. They didn't buy anything, and while Serge looked at the birds in their cages, dull-witted and fidgety, with the gaudy colours of feminine knick-knacks, Jonathan waited on the pavement.

The weather was really fine, and the boy very much enjoyed the walk through town. When they crossed the bridge, Serge saw the fishermen and wanted to fish himself. In the window of a nearby shop, Jonathan showed him the hooks and explained how one impaled a maggot or an earthworm, and then how the hook caught in the lip or stomach of the fish. This didn't bother the child, who nonetheless understood that Jonathan didn't want to buy one, and left it at that.

To tell the truth, Jonathan didn't really care about the fishes' fate, but since arriving in the town, contact with his contemporaries, whom he no longer usually saw at such close quarters, had brought out in him a bottled-up mixture of hate, suffering and bad temper.

Serge, for his part, seemed rather to ignore his peers than to suffer from them. When they met a little girl or boy, he did not deign to follow them with his glance, nor indeed to look them in the face. But these were unreal children, all attached to the women by whose sides they made their frigid way.

At the bridge, though, there were a handful of boys who were fishing in a desultory way. They were two or three years older than Serge. He took his hand away from Jonathan and leaned back against the parapet, silent and enchanted, looking at them as if they were some incredible fairground attraction. It must have been this image of liberty and noisy camaraderie which had made him want to fish. The youngsters allowed themselves to be wondered at, without even sparing a glance for the astonished little thing, as contemptible in their eyes as they were themselves in those of the fourteen- or fifteen-year-old youths who were fishing not very far away, and whose broken voices, loud and raucous, seemed to mark off a territory where none of the little brats would have had the nerve to venture, while the adults too, warned by this sort of baying, kept away and amongst themselves.

Down on the bank was the old men's corner, in a shady spot provided with a few public benches. These old men weren't grouped together, but strung out one by one along the bank, each with his canvas stool, his empty keep-net and faded tackle.

No one was catching fish. The river was glaucous, greenish and muddy, as if it had washed a hundred miles of dirty sheets and slimy handkerchiefs. Jonathan wondered what might be the taste of any fish that survived in there; and he rather imagined that towards midnight, with all the town asleep, the greedy mouths and shining eyes of a thousand rats would emerge from the water, and the two banks come alive with the quick patter of rodents' feet.

It was a pretty little town, with gardens well looked after and fine old buildings. It had no industries, no office buildings, no housing estates. People bought and sold; they slept; they believed in the radio, television and pop songs; they died in a good hospital. They didn't mate, but they got married and there were children.

Serge, off his own bat, had taken Jonathan by the hand as soon as they'd got off the bus. He held it gently and in a lively way; after the first moment, he twisted his own hand so that Jonathan's fingers, pulled here and there, slowly changed their position and finally completely enclosed his own. Then his hand became very relaxed, and Jonathan felt as if he were keeping warm a sleeping bird. The arm which belonged to it just hung there, light and insubstantial; then, with the slightest impulse from outside, the bird stiffened, the arm communicated a force, a traction, the bird flew away and Serge went with it. Once he'd finished his journey, he would slowly come back; and meanwhile, Jonathan's hand remained immobile, empty as a deserted nest.

The boy took pleasure in being seen with Jonathan, even more here than in Paris. Independent and headstrong, Serge would cheerfully walk ten yards apart if he was with Barbara, but from his very first outings with Jonathan, he'd taken his hand, to be held and to abandon himself to it. And when in the morning they arrived in front of the school, Serge would cling even closer. There were all the other little ones, brought by their mothers, or more often their grandmothers, bareheaded and in their slippers. They took Jonathan for a young father and gave him knowing smiles. A young papa too intimate with this sleepy and cheerful urchin, who hauled himself up to his father's face, where, hanging on tight and well supported, he talked in his ear, almost kissing him, as we do when we really love each other.

There was a shop where Jonathan wanted to buy colours, artist's equipment and tools, which he'd been missing since Serge had made him want to paint again. It was a bookseller's arid stationer's, with bibles, local crafts, barometers, religious art and the material to produce it. Serge, while exploring a pile of children's books (he'd already put aside a bundle of transfers for tattoos), had discovered a book, whose pictures, when their surfaces were scratched, could be licked and smelt. They were printed with sugary multicoloured inks, saturated with the artificial flavours of bad sweets, the exaggerated and bewildering odour of a streetful of brothels. Despite these charms, and the place it was found, the book was not a gospel as told to little children. They were pictures of fruit, each flavoured with a chemical which bore the same relation to the true flavour as the false artlessness of the representation bore to the real flesh of the fruit.

Here Jonathan recognised the talents of those liberated young women who worked at seducing children on behalf of the advertisers and baby industries, the mothers and primary-school teachers. A fashionable occupation, without which the vast beaches of the Third World, the exposed beams and the visit to the psychoanalyst, riding a folding bike and wearing a peasant dress (full-length in flowered silk) would have remained inaccessible. To Jonathan, the naive little drawings sang their artful song:

Kids — it's incredible what I'm just beginning to understand. You know, we don't do anything without them, we invite a dozen, you can imagine the teachers go crazy, with sandwiches, hot chocolate, the tape recorder — I love it! They're unbelievable!... They

have incredible ideas! We get them to draw, we put our ideas to the test, because it's them who choose, in the end, they have the final say! Well, you think you're creative, you know, just a bit, after all, but you're outclassed. Because then you discover what creativity really is! Oh, they're wonderful!... Do you know, eventually, I shall have one myself really! But I can do without the man, I'll have my child and I'll keep it, he's had his bit of fun, he's happy, okay, goodnight and goodbye. But think about it! Who gets pregnant, him or me? When you get pregnant, then perhaps we'll talk about it... And then a husband... Boys, they're alright when they're small, but afterwards, it's just shit, there might be one in a thousand... Anyone would think you were shocked! Oh Jonathan, you disappoint me! Well, darling, you're just going to have to get used to it. Women have changed, or didn't you know? No Jonathan, it's a job just the same, you should try it yourself I'll give you the tapes, you can't imagine it, it's impossible to imagine what it's like!... There is the dumb side, the commission, the report or whatever, I admit, only there are times, really, when you just flip. You know, you're feeling awful, you're just staring at these kids' things, you're sick of it — and then, bang, it takes off.' Everything just goes crazy, every which way! Suddenly, you just don't know, and you discover, well, what shall I say, you're just a little girl again!... It's not work any longer, you go mad, you're hooked, really crazy, you could even end up crying and you just can't help it! It's

The pretty bright fruit brought back a thousand other confidences of the kind, picked up from girls who were students with him, when his patience, his silence, his gentle manner, his broad shoulders and his pleasing face had made him very attractive to young women.

Chance memories often brought him up against such things or worse. So he didn't cultivate reminiscences. He felt himself to be ferreting in the rubbish, a dog with shit on its muzzle; he would have had to be terribly clever to follow through a memory without coming up against something that *they* had left there.

He bought the book (its cover showed it to be the work of two of them this time), and it brought back the crimes that used to be committed in the old days, when, having soaked the pages in poison, you gave presents of books which had to be read often, with much licking of the index finger. He was pleased by this gift in the Venetian manner. In the street, Serge bumped into lots of passers-by, he was so absorbed in the task of scratching and licking, and getting Jonathan to scratch and lick as well.

Then, in the main shopping street, there were three little boys of Serge's age. They were very like each other, and you would have thought they were triplets if there hadn't been a slight difference in size between them. They were walking in Indian file, not very quickly, unaccompanied by any adult. They wore shorts in the pattern of the American flag, and they were bare above the waist, tanned, with strong arms and muscular bellies. They were making their perilous way along two tightropes: beneath their feet, the stones of the kerb, a narrow path between two precipices; and above their heads the very low-hanging valance of a cafes awning, a valance which they all held with the same hand, the arm up like a pantograph, while three other hands were each carrying identical shirts.

Serge, laughing, followed this little train along its rail, and the three engines, very merry themselves, were good-natured in return; in deserts so dangerous, fellowship

required it.

Jonathan took the opportunity to sit down at the cafe that lay alongside the railway. He wondered what Serge, whose gift for clarity of speech he admired (something very important, once the stage of babbling is past), was saying to the American railway, which, taken by surprise, had to let go of the overhead wire and unhitch itself, the better to lend an ear.

Very simply, Serge had invited the three little engines to join them; they made a circle around Jonathan's table. He shook three hands. Everyone accepted a drink, apart from the middle-sized engine, which preferred an ice-cream, and ate it standing up and hopping about, as ice-creams ought to be eaten.

Jonathan didn't want to get in the children's way. He went to the far end of the café to make a telephone call; he had to order a few items from Paris they'd never heard of at the religious art and designer poison shop.

By the time he got back, the little train had disappeared, and Serge as well. A little later, the boy came running back:

'I'm at their place, we're playing trains,' he explained. 'Are you going to come too?'

'No, not me,' said Jonathan, who felt self-conscious with these cheerful children. 'I'll go and have a look at the little church, and we'll meet again here. I'll wait for you, and if I'm not here, I'll be back in a little while. Alright?'

'Alright. Their house isn't far,' said Serge. 'It's not difficult.'

Jonathan gave him some money and the boy left. There probably wouldn't be a bus, they would have stopped running. Better plan to eat and sleep in the town.

Jonathan crossed the street and reached a hotel-restaurant with a red awning and a terrace surrounded by box trees. It wasn't where they'd eaten their lunch. He booked a room with a double-bed. They gave him registration forms to fill in, but didn't ask him to prove his relationship with the child he'd included on the form. He'd given Serge his own surname, and hadn't mentioned that the need for police registration had been abolished some time before. He knew how much better it was for him not to make himself noticeable, and he was the most obedient of citizens, even towards laws now repealed.

He bought a few things for washing the next day. With no luggage and no car, he was worried he'd cause suspicion at the hotel, accompanied as he was by a kid with no luggage either. Obviously a kidnapper. Before the evening, he'd have to get a good-quality suitcase, to prove he didn't strangle children, even if he did borrow them for a little while.

These precautions, and his visit to the hotel reception, had put him in a miserable mood. He made his way to the church he loved, a black and dumpy romanesque construction.

In front of the church he was stopped by a young girl in blue jeans, navy-blue sweater and navy-blue nylon jacket, small, with big thighs, very low in the knees, her hair in a pony-tail. She clutched some pamphlets or magazines to her breast.

'Don't be afraid, monsieur!' she cried out, 'I'm not going to steal your parcel! If you could just give me a moment of your time! I won't eat you!...'

And, having confessed her religion, she explained that the children of a certain poor part of town were left entirely to themselves; the association she represented was

therefore planning to send twenty young Catholics to help them, to open a centre, to protect and guide, to be another family to them. All young people, but for children, it was important. That was her spiel.

At the same time (not smiling any longer, because Jonathan's face had become extraordinarily dark, as if he was either going to cry, or to hit her), she held out a plastic identity card from the prefecture, with her photo, a tax-stamp and other proofs of her honesty, her rights and duties. But this exorcism wasn't enough to dispel Jonathan's sadness; and she again described, this time her voice yet more broken and full of pathos, the dangerous condition of these children left all to themselves, and the help the twenty young Christian girls, and a few boys as well, would bring. But they were short of money, she concluded, and every little bit...

'If you really want,' Jonathan eventually murmured, quiet as a dying man, 'if you really want, mademoiselle, to... to do good... really do good... then listen to me: just leave them alone! Do it for their sakes, at least. Now you'll please excuse me.

And he went into the church, where the young girl didn't dare to follow him. As she'd listened to Jonathan, her ample cheeks had taken on a bluish tint, her lips had disappeared, pressed the one against the other; it made her eyes squint, narrowed behind two short pink eyelids, reddened, like pig's ears scalded and stripped of hair, but not yet of down.

What Jonathan liked in churches, and wasn't offered in the same way by other architecture, was very simple. After the ruts under his feet, the constraints on every side, the pressures above his head, there were now smooth paving-stones, vast spaces, empty depths. Like true music, good buildings moved from slow to fast, from wide-open to closed-in, from the crushing to the diaphanous, from light to dark, from caress to brutality, a thousand motions of pleasure and a thousand impulses of the body — which seem each second and at every step to change size, shape, age, species, becoming one and many, and there awake in one all the hours one has ever lived, or dreamed.

For Jonathan, a desirable building would then offer a particular place where, having heard that long polyphony, he might go to earth, let himself go, his thoughts uncommitted, colourless, inexpressible. In the little romanesque church, this spot was a chilly refuge at the foot of an arch in a corner of the north transept, near a pulpit with a back and canopy in ugly woodwork, which smelt of priests' feet and whose stairs looked just like a pair of housewife's steps. Up there before him, in the airy space created by a silence in the masonry, was a long stream of light that cut through the shadows but remained contained within itself. Jonathan compared this narrow and rectilinear ray to a beam of light under grey skies, full of unmoving dragonflies, their wings dulled like dead insects or dirty windows. A memory of streams, of sad springs, of childhood's poverty.

This happiness, without joy and without activity, made him feel better. He was alone. He wanted to leave, but he was afraid of meeting the young woman collecting, and he started again to walk around the church.

'And where did you fish this one up, then?' said the young mother of the three railway engines, cheerfully, when she saw Serge on all fours along the electric track.

She was coming back from shopping; she was pretty; she had a peasant dress of flowered cretonne which fell down to her feet, on which she wore heavy-heeled Parisian clogs.

‘Nowhere,’ muttered one of her sons.

‘Oh, very funny, you lot! Just the same, I do have the right to know where you live, don’t I?’

‘I don’t live here!’ said Serge, shrugging his shoulders, ‘I live somewhere else!’

‘Oh well, that’s that sorted out then!’ said the woman. She busied herself unpacking the things she’d just bought, food and cleaning things.

‘Just the same,’ she said, offended by the mute hostility of the boys, ‘I’ve had just about enough. It’ll be more bother, all over again. You’ve got to remember how old you are. You don’t care, but any moment now we’re going to have another woman descending on us and blowing her top because her kid isn’t at home. So your little friend is going to be very good, he’s going to pick up all his bits and bobs and he’s going to go home nicely, if that’s not too much trouble.’

‘My mother’s in America,’ Serge remarked as he got up. ‘Well, isn’t she lucky!’ said the young woman. ‘But you are staying with somebody, I suppose? Your grandmother?’ ‘My grandmother’s in Peronne,’ said Serge.

‘Well, your father then.’

‘My father’s in Paris, well, I think so,’ said Serge.

‘All right then, you’re all on your own, you’re just travelling round the country,’ she said with a sigh. ‘You don’t miss a trick, you lot, not one...!’

‘I’m with Jonathan, we took the bus, he’s a friend.’

‘Oh well! So it’s his mother you’re staying with then?’

‘No, just the two of us,’ said Serge. ‘He’s waiting for me at the cafe, he’s getting drunk!’ he added mischievously. But one of the boys intervened and said that Jonathan wasn’t a boy but a grown-up.

‘Oh, you really are smart, you lot,’ the woman said again.

‘Yes, and he’s American,’ Serge suddenly decided, ‘and he’s given me lots of dollars, a hundred thousand dollars! To go and play!’

He burst out laughing and showed the banknote he had from Jonathan.

Lost in this confusion, the young woman decided to take Serge back to the café herself.

‘And you don’t move from here, you hear me?’ she ordered her sons (who were a bit footloose, and had sometimes been brought back by two policemen, or a neighbour or shopkeeper).

She locked the door with the key, just in case.

Jonathan wasn’t at the cafe.

‘He’s not there,’ said Serge. ‘He was sitting at that table but it’s not him any longer. We’ll just have to wait.’

This prospect didn’t make the young woman very happy, but eventually she discovered from Serge that perhaps his friend was ‘at the little church’. Being told that was where he

was reassured her. And it was very close.

And so Jonathan was surprised, having Serge returned to him by a young and charming mother, whose clogs cracked on the church floor like whips laid in unison across the backs of a thousand heretics. She was smiling, and she told the story without complaining or offering advice, apologising in fact for having brought the boy back, for fear of the problems that always cropped up. Jonathan's manner often made people well-disposed. And he was less surprised by Serge being returned than by the three children having invited him; he knew that in France you're never asked into people's houses — and hardly ever go out. He thought the young woman was kind and attractive. Serge thought otherwise, and said so in front of her, in one word, his voice muffled. Jonathan heard the word with one ear, and it was this that he responded to straight away after the young mother had left them:

'Yes, but there's nothing we can do.'

The only thing left was to cancel the hotel and catch the last bus.

As they passed the toy shop, Serge pointed at the window: 'Look, that's the train they've got, just like that! That's it exactly!'

Jonathan offered to buy it (he'd got plenty of money out of the bank). Serge said no:

'You can't play with it all by yourself.'

He accepted a pop-gun firing arrows tipped with rubber suckers, whose enormous target had attracted his eye.

The return journey went cheerfully, for Serge, who had opened the packet, had discovered that the suckers would stick to your skin if you licked them a bit. He put an arrow on his forehead, then two and then three, tried them on his cheeks, made faces to unstick them, tried again, and eventually transformed Jonathan into a horned devil. He looked at the young man's new face with an inexpressible pleasure, and he challenged him with his own horns, like a young kid at play.

The ladies in the bus, many of whom must have gone into town to have their hair permed, decided, despite the din the young boy was making, that today an indulgent smile would suit them better than an air of reproof, granted the distinction of their coiffure and the voluntary-social-worker tint of their puce and ash-grey locks. A little later the driver turned the radio on, and Jonathan, discovering the loudspeakers along the length of the bus, understood that it was intended for the passengers. This racket extinguished Serge's, and he began again to scratch at his book of fruit and poison, without removing the arrows, which fell of their own accord when the saliva dried.

'What you could do with is a bike,' said Jonathan, surprised not to have thought of it earlier.

'Me, a bike?' asked Serge. 'Are you going to get me a bike? Why?'

For Serge had never thought about it before. Not very greedy for presents, he hardly ever asked for anything, and in shops he had to be left alone and unconstrained, like a robber, if he was ever to decide he wanted anything.

'And you?' he asked.

'I'll buy two. We could come here without taking the bus, if you're up to it. It would be better.'

This plan of Jonathan's inspired in the young boy no pleasant imagination. He liked the bus a lot, himself; nor did he hate the radio, and he loved the grannies with their freshly-permed hair.

'I don't really want one, a bike,' he said, after he'd had a think.

Jonathan felt an awkward pride, the boy looked so happy to have come back here, to their home, to Serge's home, with night falling, his limbs tired, his belly hungry, his mind excited, drunken, full of the emotions of the long day.

'Stephane's cock's as big as this,' said Serge, showing with his hands.

'Oh,' Jonathan said absently, busy taking the breast off a duck, 'who's that then?'

'Stephane, the big one.'

The breast of duck, which he was going to slice and marinate in brandy, was to go in the middle of a *pâté* which he'd make tomorrow with the rest of the bird, with fat pork, bacon, veal, liver, eggs, pistachios, lemon, coriander-seed and herbs. More from a taste for the Flemish masters than from love of food, Jonathan liked to make a pie or a *pâté* in a pastry case, and he had many handsome moulds for the purpose. The pattern of the moulds seemed not to have changed through the centuries.

'Oh yes. Why did the others...'

'Dunno, I didn't see.'

Serge seemed thoughtful, he'd got something he wanted to say. Jonathan didn't try and help him. He carried on boning the fat Nantais duck, its gaping bottom bloated with yellow fat.

'Does he take his trousers down to play trains?'

'Course he doesn't!' protested Serge. 'You are stupid.'

In speaking to him like that, Serge had used the word *con*, which in French can also mean cunt. Serge had never before said *con*, nor *bite*, cock; it was the young mother who said *con*; the other word must have come from her sons.

'Is it women who say *con*?' asked Jonathan. 'Boys don't say it, do they? Or is it *conne*? I don't really know the French.' 'Yes they do. My mother doesn't though.'

In fact, Barbara said it very often. Until now the boy mustn't have noticed hearing it.

Jonathan gave him the pistachios to peel. He'd only been able to find them salted and roasted, but they'd do, perhaps, if they were soaked.

'No, 'cos I saw it,' Serge began again, 'the end's all red.' 'Red?'

The bird was really old, it would be better to marinate it for longer than he'd thought.

'Yes, and do you know why? Because it's got no skin on it. Because the doctor cut it off. Didn't you know? Stephane... the doctor cut it off all three of them, d'you know why? Because their mother said it's dirty it ought to be cut off, because she said they'd be ill.'

Jonathan sighed.

'It's not true. But mothers do what they like,' he said.

'It's none of Barbara's business!' Serge cried out, suddenly furious. 'I'll smash her face in! Anyway, she's got no right.'

'They have all the rights in the world. If she wants to, they'll do it to you.'

'I'd kill her!' yelled Serge. With a sweep of his arm he knocked over the bowl of

pistachios and they flew all over the kitchen; his two cheeks suddenly flooded with tears.

Jonathan, his face burning, shared in his anger but dared not show it. He remembered the little railway-train, undressed it, imagined the three mutilations. He said:

‘They do it because the doctor says they should. Mothers believe anything the doctors say. They’re the real bastards,’ he insisted gently.

‘Yes, they’re bastards,’ echoed Serge, whose lowered voice was shaken by sobs.

‘Is it because it was cut he showed it to you?’ asked Jonathan.

‘No, he didn’t show me. He looked, when I went to the toilet, ‘cos I didn’t know where it was. It was afterwards he showed me.’

‘Ah... and which does he prefer?’

‘Like me. But not when I pee, because I have to do like this.’

He showed on his thumb the gesture of pulling back the foreskin. The difficulty of the description seemed to have calmed him down.

‘Then I put it back, otherwise it doesn’t look nice. But we’ll see them again anyway, won’t we?’

‘Of course. But if their mother throws you out every time... You know, people in your country...’

‘She’s a bitch!’ Serge shouted. ‘They’re bastards!’ (He was thinking of the doctors again.) ‘Look,’ he said, in a suddenly cheerful voice, ‘Thomas gave me this... look at this then, thingummy!’

Thingummy too was a new word, only this time affectionately intended. Serge took a little packet from his pocket, and unfolded the wrapping, which was a new ten-mark note. Inside there was a fine horse’s head in ivory, perhaps broken off from a large chess-piece, and a gold chain, short and very fine, no doubt what was left of a baby’s identity bracelet that had lost its nameplate.

Jonathan showed Serge how the head could be fastened to the chain and how the whole thing could hang round his neck on a cord. Serge wanted the job done straight away. Jonathan, hands greasy and bloodied from the duck, promised him he’d do it after dinner. He gave up picking up the pistachios and pushed them towards the mouse corner. The bowl, a plastic food container, hadn’t broken.

Serge hadn’t given the other boy anything in exchange for the present. He felt bad about it. He explained to Jonathan that if he’d taken the picture-book with the smells with him... But he hadn’t got anything with him, except the hundred-franc note, which wasn’t a real present — or was it perhaps?

Jonathan said it was, and he smiled to think of the young mother’s face had she discovered the note amongst her son’s \ belongings.

All the same, Serge had better things in Paris, and it was a pity. He described a little box; Jonathan couldn’t tell whether it was made of tortoise-shell, mother-of-pearl or plastic (it seemed to be a powder-box). Then the boy went through the objects he kept in it, which he thought a great deal of. A button, golden, or rather brass, with a naval anchor on it. Two little oblong magnets of the kind you find in the magnetic fasteners on cupboard doors: they worked very well. A miniature compass which came from a key-ring, whose needle went round and round. A puzzle in a case just like that of the compass, but

with a little ball inside and a concave bottom with a circle of little numbered holes. A ring with a diamond as big as a hazelnut. A spring-operated rifle, as long as a finger, which could shoot flaming matches as high as the ceiling. The present he'd received seemed to have something in common with this collection and its box.

'They're no good for anything though, they're silly!' he nonetheless declared, a bit embarrassed at having described this secret treasury, rare because of the scale of its contents, and much superior to ordinary toys — which are big and there's nothing to look at very closely. But Jonathan can't have shown enough enthusiasm. He was putting snails onto their baking dish, poaching brains, taking the bones from a pickled herring, draining black olives, and covering with garlic the sweetcorn salad with tomato, chicory and beetroot. This was the strange menu composed from some of the foods Serge had chosen in town. Thanks to Barbara's bohemian dinners, the boy didn't have boring tastes. Jonathan was especially surprised at the snails, which Serge chewed thoroughly, as if they were gum; himself, he practically swallowed them before they touched his teeth, and only when grown up had he learned to like garlic.

Nonetheless, Serge was a great eater of noodles; his taste for them was very pure, and he'd have no more than a speck of butter. He ate them without sauce, cheese or seasoning, one by one with his fingers, overcooked and rather cold. Small and slippery ones which had to be eaten with a fork or spoon only revolted him, and if, in the grocer's, he saw Jonathan pick up a packet of this kind, he'd stop him:

'No! Not those! They're no good!'

As for puddings, the boy would eat anything sweet, without discrimination. But a more touchy pastry-cook than Jonathan would have been annoyed at Serge's passion for a certain brand of industrially produced biscuits, which he nibbled all day; the house was full of them. On the wrappers, there were little playing-cards to cut out. Serge collected them, and after much consideration of alternatives, it was these he chose as a present for Thomas. He kept just the duplicates for himself. He didn't even think of the toys Jonathan had bought for him before he arrived; he hardly used them, they had no personal interest. He hesitated over the picture-books, but he didn't know if the other boy could read, and he was a little bit possessive about the few publications on which he could exercise his own talent.

'No... he can't read...,' he'd murmured to himself as he leafed through his reading matter, scattered about him as he lay on the floor after the meal.

Thomas was the youngest of the brothers, the one who spoke least and laughed most. He saw everything, and everything amused him. Jonathan, who'd preferred him to the others, was delighted that Serge should show such a lively and spontaneous tenderness toward a child so young (Thomas still had teeth missing, while Serge's had grown since ages, at least at the front); and that this little one himself had been the only one of the three to give anything to Serge — this funny present, with neither meaning nor importance but those he had himself attached to it. In the end, Serge kept for himself the books he knew well; for Thomas, he chose a wonderful one which he'd found very difficult to read. He put it with the cards.

'Because he doesn't read, it doesn't matter it's difficult,' he said, with impeccable logic.

Jonathan agreed; he could remember giving his friends books that were too good, following the same reasoning.

While Serge was searching, he made a tiny hole in the horse's head, and with an equally tiny screw he succeeded in fastening the little chain to it by its ends, forming a circle. The pendant so fashioned took its place on a piece of black garter elastic which Jonathan had preferred to all the other cords, for fear the boy should strangle himself.

He was right; Serge kept the trinket round his neck when he went to sleep. The next day, Jonathan replaced the elastic with a bookmark pulled from a big bound book; the ribbon of emerald green watered silk was frail enough not to be dangerous, and it looked good on the boy's skin.

The little rabbit hadn't run away. Serge touched it, stroked it, played with it every day. The little creature was almost as playful as a cat, but there was no smile on its face. It had a formal look, occasionally pretty, usually rather elderly looking. What was unusual about the breed were the long ears, very large and rounded, which stood up straight. Jonathan, used to tame rabbits, greyish brown, flabby and shy, was surprised by this rabbit, wilder and stronger than the others. It might have been descended from a wild ancestor, killed in a trap, whose little ones had been gathered up.

The young rabbit hadn't discovered the holes in the netting. It hopped about the garden, nibbled at the cabbage leaves, looked at plants and flowers, often slept or just rested, recognised people, put up with being handled by Serge, who treated it like a tame squirrel, putting it round his neck, kissing it on the mouth, fusing his liveliness with that of the animal. He did not disdain to hold conversations with it, and generally the rabbit won the argument, though not without a struggle.

The animal had its moments of madness; it spun in circles on the grass, rolled on its back, shaking its trembling paws like a dying man, rushed around, sniffed, seemingly intelligent in its activity, but its empty eye gave it a distracted look. It lived outside; the kitchen door was opened for it when it rained, but it preferred to shelter under some big leaves.

The two cats no longer came. The time of year offered them resources which no longer depended on one place alone. But Jonathan still put food out for them in the garden before going to bed, and he usually found the dishes empty in the morning. The cats, intoxicated with the smell of life, the scent of live creatures, ran about the country like bachelors in search of love; still out of luck in the evening, they came home shamefaced to devour their food.

The pond Serge had dug had grown large enough for him to sit in it completely, in muddy water the colour of milky coffee. First of all, he'd only dipped his feet into the cream, which frothed up at the edges as he poured in the water. In less than an hour, all the water had been absorbed and he had to put more in. The walls of the hole were coated with a soft smooth shiny ooze.

Then, at Jonathan's suggestion, the child bathed his naked bottom. It was cold, tickly, and the bottom of the pond was sticky. When he got up again, a milky and earthy border ran along his thighs, his belly and the small of his back, just as drinking from a big coffee-

bowl left breakfast moustaches on the upper lip.

These baths were so agreeable that Serge, excited, hated to be left there alone. So Jonathan would slip his foot between the child's thighs; or he would crouch down, plunge his hand into the depths of the water, gathering up the creamy mud and pushing it against the boy's intimate places.

They would often draw together. Jonathan would get out his biggest sheets of white paper, as big as the drawing board itself. Each armed with a pencil, thick or thin, black or coloured according to the mood of the moment, they would draw away. Pictures, writing, stories followed one after another, each taking his turn like a game of cards, indecent and bantering conversations where the drawing was no more than an accompaniment, riddling burlesques, composed in silence, waiting for solutions; Jonathan and Serge made innocent love.

After watering, Serge had moved on to gardening. He'd cleared a corner of ground next to the fence, had broken it up and raked it, and looked for something to put there. He dug up plants, wild flowers and tiny saplings, replanted them in his rectangular plot, then flooded his dying garden. It wasn't the season for planting.

But he wasn't discouraged. In the morning, he would visit the scene of his labours. He saw the drooping plants, their tops flopping down, their petals tattered; he didn't dare lift them to replace them with others. He talked to them quietly, lifted up the drooping stems in his hands:

'You're not dead. You can stay!' and then added to himself, in front of another which was drying out, 'That one's done for, tomorrow then.'

Everything was blooming. Only Serge's plot was in its death throes, making one think not so much of winter as of bunches of withered flowers thrown away in dustbins. The pond too was developing. Serge had made some boats, and put them to float there. He added to it a sort of canal, which, like a motorway interchange, made a great curve as it left the basin and then rejoined it. The island this produced, Serge populated with inhabitants and little copses. These copses were made with pieces of broken-off branch, which he would renew. The inhabitants were made from hazel-nuts, matches, and acorns — brown from the previous year, or very little green ones, pulled from the oak trees of the neighbourhood. And there were cows, lots of cows with stiff tails: the third of a matchstick which he stuck in their bums.

The island was pretty, and it prospered, again thanks to the matches. Jonathan bought a number of big boxes, and they made houses, benches and sheds, they coloured them, or made people to go in, on, or at the door. Serge dug a swimming-pool in the middle of his island, a rectangular hole where he lodged the bottom half of a hard plastic box which had contained correspondence cards. They put a little bit of blue in the water, and bathers floated in it, tanned as rotten acorns.

One of the island's shores later had a well-organised beach, with its umbrellas and sloping sand.

A hillock garnished with mosses received a windmill, whose cardboard sails were pinned to a nut which swivelled at the top of a tower of matchsticks. Gusts of wind at ground level acted on the sails, which thrummed, if you listened to them closely.

Roads, steps and squares were laid out, and carefully swept. Finally, Jonathan installed street-lamps connected to a battery, which were lit in the evenings. Then the trees, the paths and houses seemed to come alive, the little vegetable people seemed purposeful, and it was a place where one would have liked to live.

Jonathan didn't particularly want to go back to the town. Serge seemed to have forgotten the three children; he could in any case have gone to see them on his own, but he didn't suggest that either. Such an expedition would not have presented any risk, Serge knew how to look after himself; his open and cheerful manner, his laugh, his attention to people, his impertinence and his vitality charmed even the brutish and the crabbed, even some of the women; there was nowhere he could go without pleasing people and receiving help.

The young painter loved this character of Serge's. He could imagine the child six foot high, covered in hair, or even ruined by wrinkles and convictions, without this new Serge making him sad, as long as he imagined him with the child's humour and his soul (except this doesn't exist).

After a few days, the barbarous pendant no longer hung around the child's neck. Jonathan didn't ask what had happened to it. It was natural that the incident should end like that.

One morning, though, Serge said, 'Can we go on the bus? Can we go?' and here they were in town. They soon found the building, the floor, the door. They rang; there was no reply. It was very nearly lunchtime, though.

'Perhaps they're at school,' said Jonathan, who didn't know the dates of the school holidays. Serge asked:

'But where do they eat then?'

'At the school canteen, I should think, and their mother's at work,' said Jonathan. 'We'll come back after we've eaten.'

He reproached himself for being so distant from the normal world; this freedom and this disgust closed off any access to the labyrinths and prisons which swallow up the childish population, and he no longer knew how to keep in touch. The immense daily deportation which they suffered left him upset and unresisting.

And as Serge no longer had any part in this husbandry, the children became as inaccessible to him as they were to Jonathan.

They ate lunch.

In Paris, Serge was an absolute devil in restaurants. he talked very loudly, he stared at and saw everybody; he turned his plate upside down and made puddles of food on the tablecloth; he shook the table, banged the glasses, filled them with bread, dropped his fork and followed it to the ground, where stuffed on all fours between the legs of the grown-ups he thrashed around noisily; he would order three dishes and then abandon them in favour of a crust, he fished about in the dishes with his fingers, or flecked them

with his own food; above all, he used to laugh, get excited, playing up with Jonathan and provoking the waiters.

Jonathan worshipped this turbulence. He saw beyond it. Despite the disagreeable side to the situation, he could sense a truth the child was pointing out; and he recognised beneath the manners he disapproved of, a model he would have liked to follow. For with Serge he was like a wandering disciple, who through valley and mountain, river and forest, plain and coast, has searched for a master — that is to say a witness — and has found him at last. But this master does not know he knows; only those who have searched for him, after rejecting the great men and the charlatans, can understand his lesson; the others will mock, will be humiliated, will persecute, will go away.

Later, Serge had realised the displeasure he caused. Now his meals in public were well-behaved. Invariably he would eat an almost raw steak with greasy chips, after a plate of charcuterie from which he ate no more than the gherkins and the butter, and followed by a chocolate ice-cream, covered in whipped cream, which he chopped and mixed to make a pap he abandoned as soon as it got too cold, which is to say, as soon as he reached the lower part. It was useless to take him to a good restaurant; Jonathan nonetheless chose respectable ones, so the food would look good and he could enjoy a little calm.

After lunch they went up once again to the three children's house, rang the bell and knocked at the door in vain. They gave up, and looked for something to occupy them until the bus left.

There was no matinee at the only cinema in town. There was a programme of heterosexual pornographic films, shown on another screen, on Saturdays after midnight.,

The town was deserted. Not even a child in the streets. So the holidays hadn't started and it wasn't Wednesday.

'It's a labour camp,' said Jonathan. 'We shouldn't come on the wrong days.'

'I didn't know,' apologised Serge.

Jonathan's remark wasn't aimed at the child; but he saw the streets empty, the cafés empty, the river deserted, the shopkeepers with nothing to do, and he sensed the silence within which their steps were echoing.

They walked along sluggishly. When the shops opened, they started listlessly to make some useless purchases.

Then they had some luck; in a fine square, planted with poplars and provided with an urinal, they discovered the huts and canvas of a travelling fair. It wasn't closed; there were a dozen people strolling about, middle-aged men and women overdressed for the time of year, sorry-looking adolescents.

They approached a young fairground worker, almost naked, repairing a wheel. Jonathan looked at his muscles, his posture, then looked at Serge. The man seemed to him to be made of rubber or plaster: an appearance without being, conforming to the universal ideal of the time. This smooth body's rounded forms made Jonathan think of a series of bald scalps, or a hawker's bunch of balloons.

The three of them spoke together. The boy said the conjuror was just giving a performance. It was just there, close by: a caravan with an extension in green canvas, whose door, or curtain rather, opened in Arab fashion. Jonathan was worried that the

performance was being given to empty benches; but Serge insisted on seeing. At the same time he climbed onto Jonathan, had himself held and carried, as if the young fairground worker's athletic appearance had given him ideas of the jungle.

On the other side of the green canvas they were in half-darkness; the conjuror, prudently, stood in an indifferent slanting light in lurid colours, apple green and dirty red, with a single white lamp which destroyed all depth. Underfoot, the beige and dusty soil of the square.

The show had already begun. He was doing commonplace tricks. They could stay at the back, there were a few customers at the front. The conjuror was a slender youth, quiet and cheerful, with a plain and pleasant face. He must have set to work, despite its being so quiet, because he had been told to; he took it in good part, and managed his equipment with skill. But the impression of bareness and sadness was so great that Jonathan sometimes turned his eyes away from him. He felt embarrassed, as if he were committing an indiscretion by being there, or had injured a sensitive person in his self-respect.

Serge followed the magic tricks with the imperturbable cool of those who have television. But here it was in the flesh, just the same, and the boy's almost new blue costume, his hair cut so short one might have imagined him working there between two stints in the barracks, his little Dracula cape, it was very like the real thing, that was it. The trick that impressed Serge was the one with the razor-blades. The young man took one, and cut some paper with it to show how sharp it was, then he ate a great many, quickly, using both his hands. His thin cheeks bulged greedily, his eyes almost popped out, he chewed away, almost rubbing his stomach with pleasure. Then, by a miracle incomprehensible to the profane, he pulled the blades out of his mouth — and now they made a long garland, a bright and jingling necklace. These supplies must have been very expensive; unless he made them himself, for he seemed to be good with his hands.

'What's good is with fire,' said Serge, unsatisfied.

They had to applaud. Without the little one with him, Jonathan would have hidden beneath the bench. He wanted to go and see the magician after the performance. That was surely to feel better himself. Jonathan, who worried very little about beauty or ugliness, simply felt he would like to approach him, embrace him, touch him. He recognised childhood in those who no longer had it, like its absence in those who seemed to show it. He loved the magician, and was not ashamed to have seen him. In the innocence and fragility of others, he found a means of suffering less from his. The villagers clapped hard.

'He's a kid, still a kid,' said one old girl to her husband, as the audience made their way out. The husband said nothing.

Outside, Jonathan glanced at the caravan, which provided the backstage area. He saw nothing. He went closer with the child. He tried to look through the windows, in which were reflected the nearby trees. No movement inside: the caravan was empty. The boy had disappeared.

But this was no magic trick, the boy must simply have been having a pee, he would reappear. There was no time to wait, Serge was getting impatient. He wanted to climb again on top of Jonathan, who took him, kissed him, and with the hand that held Serge under the thighs, felt his balls and bounced them. Serge paid no attention, and pointed to

the air-guns on one of the fairground stalls.

Small children were not allowed to use these, and in any case they weren't tall enough. But Jonathan had a discussion with the stall-keeper, fired two or three times just for show, and as he had paid with a perfectly good banknote and hadn't wanted the change, they both gave the boy a hand. Jonathan was on his knees, and lifted Serge a foot or so, holding him by the waist; the stall keeper took hold of the gun-barrel and pointed it. He wasn't a bad chap; Serge got two bull's eyes. He carried away a little bar of nougat and a doll made of artificial feathers. And his two cards, shot clean through.

He gave Jonathan his prizes, and kept hold of his marksman's certificates. He talked a lot about the air-gun. It was better than the pop-gun; and it made holes. He asked Jonathan if you could kill someone with it. Jonathan said yes, he supposed so, because he didn't know; in that situation, he rarely dared answer no.

'Then I'll kill you with it!' Serge concluded, laughing.

Jonathan hugged him again; he had never been loved so well that such a thing could be said.

They had to visit the three children's house one last time. Serge still wanted to give his present (which Jonathan had been carrying since the morning, augmented now by the shooting prizes), and he wasn't going to be put off by anything so negligible as two failed attempts.

Even before they rang, they knew the door would be opened; they could hear voices on the other side. Serge quivered with impatience, and pressed the button of the door bell with the same energy with which he put out his arm to shake hands. He laughed at the door and at the mat. Jonathan, on the other hand, was ill at ease. If the mother was there, what were they going to say? What right did Serge have to come back? And if the young woman let her children loose for a moment, she and Jonathan would have to find some way of passing the time while the four children were together. When old ladies with dogs meet, the dogs look at each other, enjoy each other, fight each other, tickle each other in the arse, but the old women hold them back — mustn't get too familiar with that woman's nasty little creature. They exchange a bitter politeness, a menopausal rictus: what can be done about these shameless animals, which oblige them to be almost human?

Here, it will be worse; Jonathan isn't a woman, he can't say one word against what the other, mounted on her maternal stilts, may claim to decide for the best.

The door opened. Jonathan and Serge saw, with the same delight, Thomas's round cheeks and cheerful little nose; with his smile the boy showed off his milk-teeth, a missing front one giving his mouth the black patch that covers up a pirate's eye. They shook hands almost enough to dislocate their shoulders. Mummy wasn't there, they were lucky. The two visitors escaped a little while before she came back.

'So those are air-guns?' Serge asked in the bus, talking about the weapon he'd used. 'Well, then, cock-gun! Hey, cock-gun, just think, cock-guns, cock-guns!'

This was the first word-play Jonathan had heard from the boy. But perhaps Serge had heard it from Stephane (who was almost ten years old, and whose language was developing rapidly) when he'd told the three brothers of his adventure at the fair. Serge's

insistence in repeating this play on words showed he hadn't before imagined that one could so manipulate this thing as light and as insubstantial as soap-bubbles, language.

'In the garden,' Jonathan suggested, 'we could, uh... If the sun is shining, eh?'

'Ooh, you filthy pig!' Serge exclaimed, 'Well, I'm not doing it.'

'I never asked you to.'

'Liar. 'Cos it makes me go like this,' said Serge with a harsh laugh; and his mouth gaped as if he were trying to swallow a tennis-ball.

'You kiss it sometimes, just the same,' murmured Jonathan, amused by these pretend refusals.

'Yes, yes, but that was before. Or well then, just like this.'

As he talked, Serge's lips tickled against Jonathan's ear, which suddenly felt a pointed little lick; Jonathan's heart raced. The boy started laughing, and settled back into his seat.

'I really love you!' said Jonathan, in a low voice, and needlessly.

'Oh I know,' said Serge, with the indifference of an idle king, 's no need to say so.'

And just afterwards:

'How does he do it, that boy when he eats the razor-blades, mm...? What d'you think then?'

Jonathan thought Serge sounded a bit pompous. But he replied, improvising an explanation with great effort:

'It's... they're not real blades. There's one real one he cuts the paper with, and the other ones are fake. Then when he takes the blades out of his mouth, it's different again, it must be a special blade, very thick, but you don't see it, it's too quick; it's like an accordion, there's lots of thin blades that aren't sharp, tied tight together in a bundle, and they're all tied together in advance, with, with fishing-line, and when he pulls they come unstuck, and he shows all that, and the other ones stay in his mouth. I think that's it, well, I think so. I don't know!'

'So they're fake?' said Serge, in a challenging tone of voice. 'They must be. He hides the real one, and then he eats the fakes.'

'They're not fake!' said Serge, sitting up straight again. 'They're real! I'll explain to you. You don't know what he does? It's not difficult. His face is fake!'

'What?' said Jonathan, 'like a mask, you think?'

'Yes, okay, but a fake face, definitely.'

'Perhaps... But in any case, it's very well done then.'

'You're telling me they're real!' said Serge, as if it was plain to see. 'They're really clever, see. So they put the fake face on first, and there's a hole in it, in the mouth, and they put the blades in there. That's what they do.'

'I wouldn't dare, myself,' said Jonathan. 'Imagine you got the wrong hole. Behind your fake face, there's the other one, your own. If it's the wrong hole you get cut about everywhere, no tongue, nothing. It's dangerous.'

'Mm... it is dangerous,' Serge admitted, 'but it's pretty good.'

All the waters are polluted, all the fields fenced off; the meadows are poisoned, the lanes narrow and filthy, and the only patches of grass or wooded corners still accessible are

covered with mountains of plastic rubbish, abandoned domestic appliances, rusting motor cars.

Walks in the countryside, then, were no pleasure. One progressed between two fences, or followed endless straight-line cuttings through the rye, wheat and maize. Away in the distance a river could be seen; but its banks, cut up and fenced off as private fishing-grounds, were forbidden to walkers. Perhaps, in a mile or so of flowerless grazing, one might see a puny grasshopper jump. No other insects but flies; no other birds than the enormous flights of crows and noisy rooks; no other animals than the rats. Such was the countryside in the region.

Serge and Jonathan had soon explored this barbed-wired, electric-fenced, hostile and monotonous desert. They had given up country amusements. The area around their house was still the liveliest, the most cheerful and the freest they could find. And so they busied themselves quietly at home, or perhaps Serge would pay a visit to the village. There he would meet a few children his own age, particularly at the grocer's, where they had their headquarters. In the back of the shop and in the cellar, they fooled about noisily or in silence; Serge never mentioned what they did.

Sometimes he went there early in the morning. He would come back towards lunch-time; he would willingly have brought back his friends, but their parents wouldn't allow it. He would rejoin them in the village after the meal. Jonathan, who preferred to do his shopping in the afternoon, would often run into him and his gang. One rainy day, the grocer's was invaded by potato-sacks, in which five or six small children were jumping up and down, laughing. Shelves were bumped into, tins rolled about. The grocer, their friendly sponsor, who'd given them the sacks, shouted a little, but let it go. In any case, it was his son who led the unruly procession.

Later on in the summer, a coach stole away the children of the village. In fact, the local council offered low-priced holidays at a children's holiday camp, which gave the women a rest. Only the teenagers, who could help with the machine-work, stayed behind. There wasn't a cheerful voice in the streets, not a fresh face in the windows. Serge, deserted, fell back on Jonathan.

Then the children came back. But Serge wasn't interested in them any longer.

The old woman next door was behaving strangely. Some days, she would chat at the garden fence, let Serge visit her, make him tea, with pancakes or brawn. Other days, she didn't show herself, and her walking stick would stay hanging on the doorknob.

In fact, she had two sticks: a garden stick, thick, blackened and worn, which she leaned on when she didn't have a garden tool; and an inside stick, which she left at the door as she went out and picked up again as she returned. You could tell, depending on the stick at the door, whether she was in or out.

Her idea of giving Serge tea cost her a lot, compared to what she had to spend: butter, eggs, sugar, chocolate, candied fruit, raisins, vanilla. Especially as she made big cakes, wanting Serge to have plenty left over to take home with him.

The days she hid herself away, she wasn't ill, but simply in a bad mood. You could see her going into the garden two or three times, her face sullen, her eye mistrustful.

When Serge visited, she would lock up the dog and bring out the hens.

The hens were a sorry sight, stupid, dirty, and cowardly. The old dog was very gentle and almost lame. But that was all. Serge liked him a lot, and gave him all his time. So she claimed the creature now had pains which made it bad tempered, it bit, and the boy shouldn't play with it any longer.

They still met, however, at the fence between the two gardens, for the old woman put the dog out again, ill or not, as soon as Serge had left. And if she caught them at their furtive dalliance, she would wave her stick, threaten the animal, shouting at Serge:

'I've told you once, will you leave him alone! He'll bite, I tell you!'

'But no, he doesn't bite,' Serge would reply, giving the dog a scratch and feeding him pieces of cake, 'he's nice.'

'That's just what he looks like!' the woman shouted, coming closer. 'All of a sudden he'll bite you! Don't you trust him! He'll bite you! Once a little idiot gets an idea into his head! You leave him alone now!'

Once she had eliminated the rival, she was curious to know about the relationship between Jonathan and Serge. She nagged at the little boy, got her answer and was pleased with it, but couldn't really do anything about it. She tried to poison her gifts a little, when the boy thanked her, testing the ground and exclaiming:

'But oh dear someone must, my poor little thing, with no one to look after you and your mother leaving you all alone.'

But Serge's plain speaking had soon robbed her of this little pleasure. For he calmly replied:

'I don't care about my mother. And anyway, I'm not alone.'

She made up for it with her fits of domesticity, which she worked off on the boy when she had him in the kitchen. After having had a good long look at him, she would take some item of his clothing from him and wash or repair it on the spot, chattering and excited, her nose watering.

It wasn't for the young gentleman to look after that, and anyway, would he be able to?

Serge, more or less undressed, uttered no protest. He sat there nicely, very upright on his chair, eating, quite proud, very pleased, full of questions, chattering away like a real gossip.

She didn't dare have the trousers off him, although one might sense in her hands an urge to wipe and poke about, to bring under control, with scrubblings and inspections, this half of the body which escaped her. Had the urchin been her grandchild, it would have been hers by rights.

Just the same, she had the shorts. When she saw them hanging in the garden on Jonathan's wash-day, she complained about the state they were in; Serge, phlegmatic, unpegged them and took them to her.

In a strange voice, a little honeyed, a little peevish, squeaky and unguarded, she would ask him, after tea, whether he wanted a wee-wee or a poo-poo. She seemed to expect it as her due. The child would shake his head. Without discouragement, she would insist:

'You're sure?... Are you really sure?... not a wee-wee nor a poo-poo?... Not even a wee-wee?'

Disdaining both the inquisition and the vocabulary, Serge shrugged his shoulders: 'I've already had a shit.'

Or he would go out and pee against a tree. It was only a half success for the old woman, who however exclaimed:

'Ahh! There you are! You did want to, didn't you! You must say when you want to! It's not difficult, after all!'

With the same air of teasing modesty and ingratiating covetousness, she enquired about his socks and his underpants, offered to change the elastic if they didn't hold up properly. Unfortunately, Serge refused to give up his underclothes.

Nor would he allow himself to be touched or kissed, and he would move away roughly if the old woman tried to rest a hand on his shoulder. She told Jonathan that the boy was difficult, pig-headed, as intractable as a cow, as stubborn as a mule.

'But of course, the poor thing,' she insinuated, with piteous voice and a false look in her eyes, 'he can't help being like that... You can't bring them up properly without a mother. You just can't ask the impossible...'

Despite her vices of domesticity, she was dirty and didn't look after herself. She patched herself up with safety-pins, tape and string. Her long yellow nails were dirty. But her house was clean, at least the tiles, the pans and the sink.

Jonathan was unhappy at not paying her for the washing and mending. Her goings-on distracted him, without his being able to see anything wrong with them.

Unable to think of anything else, he offered her cakes in his turn, when he made any. City stuff such as choux buns, mocha cake, puff-pastries: they weren't the right thing at all. This skill made his neighbour cross, and she returned this rubbish to the little boy without even tasting it.

'You can take that back with you. I've made you something else.'

Jonathan looked for a better way. He bought sweets, candied fruit. The woman received these with less disdain, but they all still ended up in the child's pockets. Jonathan gave up.

She'd had a married son, who used to live in the town. He had killed his wife and two kids in his cheap little car.

'He used to come on Sunday. He brought his dirty washing, took away his clean clothes, his chicken, eggs, his wine, now he's dead. Filthy brute!'

She said no more about him.

When the three brothers from town were also sent away on holiday, the area really became too uninhabited. Jonathan was worried that Serge would be bored; he suggested that they go away together somewhere, to the seaside, wherever. But the child wasn't interested. He was very happy where he was and didn't want to move.

Despite his adventures in the village, he was a sedentary soul. He enjoyed his own place and his own little habits, as neither had been imposed on him, and he had arranged things as he wished. His whole ambition seemed to be no more than to start again on the same things every day, with the variations, suppressions and restorations his fancy dictated. In this place and this way of life which Jonathan thought of no interest to

anyone, Serge found a thousand resources. Apparently monotonous, his days were crowded with discoveries, crafty constructions, sensations, violence, flirtation, gossip, caresses, searches and investigations, by all of which he found himself endlessly fascinated. This excess, the fruit of his intelligence, offered him at all times an inexhaustible world — where Jonathan was one source among others. He kept to his place, perhaps a lowly one, in Serge's mysterious collection; he had his use in operations, advances, trials and moods, in which he counted for nothing. Always available, he left the industrious child to grow, and to draw on him as well as on everything else.

For quite a time during the summer, Jonathan was preoccupied by the thought of Barbara's return. He still forced himself to see Serge as no more than a bird of passage, like a morning full of light, one of those things dreamt about in solitude, a lucky discovery in drawing. Later, he would not succeed in loving the child with so much precaution. He was afraid of autumn. He had secret ideas of kidnapping, of fleeing abroad with the child. Or he imagined himself moving back to Paris, engaging in a face-to-face struggle with Barbara.

Then he understood that it wasn't just a question of Barbara. It was the order of things, which would take hold of Serge and turn him into one of those numberless men from whom Jonathan had fled. Everything, all the world's fascination, all its powers, would force Serge to betray himself, and without regret. In the end, the enemy would be embodied not in the monsters, the caricatures, the idiots, not in the parents or assize-courts; it would be implanted in the child's own heart. Neither Serge nor Jonathan had any means to prevent it.

Jonathan took this idea to heart. He stopped struggling, stopped hoping. He thought of this coming dissolution, the death of the child; he thought upon his own. The simplest, the easiest would be to cut his wrists. A suicide of protest, rather than from mere suffering: but one doesn't splash oneself with petrol in front of a hundred journalists in witness of a lost cause. Jonathan would keep his death to himself.

Despite these torments and these plans, Jonathan lived cheerfully. He made sure to do nothing that would displease Serge; he became less neutral, entered more profoundly into the odd things the child wanted to do, dared to follow him without reserve.

Jonathan was in perfect health. His difficulty in being did not affect his body, as its origin was not anything internal, or unknown to him. He ate well, drank well, digested well, shitted copiously, pissed forcefully, slept wonderfully, looked well, with good muscles, a good skin and a fine cock. Even his friendship with Serge inspired in him neither guilt, nor self-exploration, nor theory. He would have been incapable of explaining himself, trying to legitimate himself before those who, incapable of living as they are of dying, are thus appointed to judge and to reorder what exists. Nothing was more right, for Jonathan, than to know so much, and to be able to say so little.

Neither of the two boys worried about the calendar any more. No threat was presented by the signs of wear and maturity to be seen in the countryside now that the summer was ending. An order without boredom or suffering, a disorder without suffering or injury: such was the impossible universe they had built. An anti-world, which would die in autumn. But it didn't matter.

They ate, hugged, breathed, they got bored the way people do when they get on together, they played at sex, then abandoned it, they made their house clean and bright as a miniature landscape, then they dirtied it, soiled it, disordered it. And as houses, unlike living things, do not reconstitute themselves as one lives off them, they reconstructed it energetically, brushing, sponging, polishing, getting the scene ready for the next bout of filthiness.

Serge and Jonathan were not in love, being insufficiently narcissistic. They had better things to do together. Their association was more biological. Certain plants absorb the substances they require and purify the soil, making it usable by other plants which would otherwise die. Each absorbs and gives out different nutriments; each one eliminates the poisons that would prevent the other from living. Such was the friendship between Jonathan and Serge, and it was impossible to tell which one, in fact, was purifying the world for the other.

If the old woman had made pancakes, Serge farted eggs. There was a special smell, an egg fart smell. The sound, swift, easy, sustained and singing, had a melody of its own. When Jonathan was present for a fart of this kind, he thought of hard-boiled eggs, then of mayonnaise; and he would make some in the evening. Serge, too, liked mayonnaise very much. He farted like a young dog, surprised.

One day when they were bringing in the clean washing, Serge wanted to put on Jonathan's clothes, and offered him his own.

Naked, they set about it. The underclothes were a problem. Jonathan was thin, but the boy was small; the disproportion was striking.

Disguising themselves as each other was easier with shirt and shorts. Serge looked like a clown. Jonathan put his arms into one of the boy's pairs of jeans, so that he had two sleeves. Tearing a little at a very large pullover the child liked to wear, he managed to get his legs in and made it into a pair of underpants. What popped through the collar wasn't a little boy's head.

Despite the discomfort of these accoutrements, they decided they felt good in them, and abandoned them only with regret. Serge was entirely accustomed to Jonathan's docility and to everything that made him different from an adult. Now, he rather thought of the young man as some kind of very small boy, smaller than Serge was himself — and he was very kind and gentle with little children. The boy's habitual violence and provocations were often put aside; he was even sometimes shy when he cornered Jonathan to make love. Perhaps he felt that he was really the assailant.

Or being a little monkey with a big monkey, keeping warm together, tickling each other a little, protecting each other. It wasn't that, but Jonathan had this idea of it, and he had drawn monkeys, happy. They looked better than the real ones, or people.

Jonathan worked a great deal, without thinking about it. In this way he occupied the hours which Serge preferred to spend elsewhere. As soon as the child left him, Jonathan would pick up his brush; as soon as he returned, Jonathan would put it down and forget

the canvas he was working on. These moments of solitude were no longer part of his life; what he did then didn't matter to him.

Simply, like a housewife who knits woollies while the kids are at school, Jonathan covered with paint the canvasses he was contracted to produce. He had fallen behind, but the summer months were enough to put him ahead. Never had he painted while thinking less and looking less at his work, having fewer plans, less ambition, less critical concern. Yes, the stuff pleased him; it wasn't difficult to do; he didn't find it boring; it wasn't that wonderful; his dealer would be happy.

So Serge's presence didn't produce in Jonathan any desire to create, to express himself: just the ease and productivity of the reliable worker. Sometimes he thought his new canvasses were beautiful, better than the others. He didn't give a damn. He had no need to judge himself. The common opinion, that one fulfilled oneself in one's work, made him shrug his shoulders. Everything collective is limited, everything solitary is null: between these two convictions, Jonathan was hardly able to think much of being an artist.

He was in a hurry to finish and put all this idiotic stuff away. Perhaps they would like what he had to offer, but he didn't think much at all of the art-public. Just to spend five minutes with a connoisseur was enough to have him shaking with anger. He liked good people, that is to say, no one; he suffered from being appreciated by little cliques whom he would not even deign to spit at.

The September days were spoiled by visits. The carriers came to take away the paintings. The dealer himself came down, and a few friends turned up: Parisians doing well up there, intellectuals, middle-aged women, schoolmasters, daddies' boys, talkative failures. The atmosphere was laboured. It only needed these people, who all believed themselves more original and more precious than the rest, to come down here, and normality and all its filth came alive again. Talent, like shit, attracts the worst sort of flies.

And Serge? A tiny little kid, hardly visible, as grey as the walls. The mood was unclear, faces featureless, gestures impossible. Kingdom of parasites, stinkers, liars and idiots. At the feet of a gallery-owner, the island with the match-houses became so much grotesque rubbish, the sort of junk you trip over in a garden when you don't look where you're going. Suffocated, crushed by the false personality imposed on him by these false relationships, Jonathan was overwhelmed. Of course, they left; but a few hours were enough for them to complete their work of deception, violence and death. Afterwards, between Jonathan and Serge, it was never the same again.

This violation was the forerunner of another, and perhaps helped them cope with it better.

One afternoon they were in the garden, busy on the ground, when they heard the sound of voices in the lane coming up from the road.

Then several men and women came through the garden gate, looking for Jonathan. It was Barbara's new crowd — the American woman, her admirers, her hangers-on, and Barbara herself. The two boys' hearts stopped. They had to get up off the grass where they were sitting. Respond to what was said. Put out a hand. The visitors themselves were relaxed, elegant, free, and so proud of themselves that, seeing Jonathan's embarrassment,

they thought themselves intimidating, which pleased them. They spoke in loud voices, pedantic, condescending, while smiling as if, egalitarian snobs, they were talking to a friend's gardener. They were the town-dwellers, the adults, and the actors.

After an hour, they went, Serge all alone in the middle of them. They carried his cases, one on the left, another on the right.

When the rain came, Jonathan heard it on his ceiling. For the bedroom where he hid himself away was tucked under the roof; part of the roof sloped down over his bed and prevented him from lifting his head up completely.

This regular sound, almost cheerful despite the greyness of the day, despite the clammy chill and the trees stripped bare, filled him with a mournful calm. He wouldn't do anything while the rain fell. You kill yourself only on a more violent day, which reminds you of the world, the seasons, or of somebody.

Jonathan thought again of leaving everything, going back to Paris, seeing Serge again quickly, suffering anything — even his contemporaries — as long as he could save the little boy.

But save him from what? The world in which one could believe oneself happy wasn't Jonathan's world. Serge had spent three or four months here, months which might be counted happiness; but he wasn't yet of an age to recognise or go looking for any happiness at all. His stay with Jonathan was rather the stuff of sixty-year-old memories and of 'if I had known. For when we get old we finally remember an age when we were happy, which we lived without knowing it would never come back; and these are the first years of our life, and the only life ever.

And only by chance. What Jonathan knew of Serge's life as a small child struck him as shocking. What he remembered of his own was no better. And what they had told him later, before he abandoned his family, his friends, his country — and humanity too, so-called humanity — had simply made him want to commit murder. What's more, *they* (the old) were proud to tell what they had done to you, when you had grown old enough to understand.

The rain was falling. Soft and even, it reconciled him, like a discreet caress, to life, life all alone and without point.

Not to die. These drops of water, making their tranquil noise, would surely be enough to allow one to love life, while they were there.

Jonathan watched the leaves fall, time passing, he wrote letters to Paris in the morning, and then, a few evenings later, he realised they were being intercepted. A child of eight doesn't reply on his own; Serge wouldn't be given even three lines in the emphatic letters Barbara wrote him if she needed money, or to tell him about some new eternal love.

Jonathan wasn't unhappy that his own life was now finished. It had only begun when Serge had borrowed it and taken it over in order to live himself. But Jonathan suffered from the thought that this might not be enough for the child to survive.

The violent rains of September gave way to the enormous gilded lustre of autumn, an autumn shot through with a tender and luminous light, which, from sunrise to sunset,

was like the image of another summer.

So Jonathan didn't die, and all alone he loved a departed child.

At the first rains, the neighbour's old black dog became crippled. Jonathan heard the old woman shouting as she pushed it outside so it wouldn't shit in the house. It was loth to walk. It couldn't see very well, and bumped into things as it went along; its stiff legs couldn't carry it any longer, and folded beneath it with the first kick the old woman, out of patience, gave it in the backside. It would lie down out of the way as long as its mistress would allow. But this wasn't enough; it couldn't be allowed to die without the old woman making it realise — she, still a little bit active, who was waiting her own turn and bent on revenge.

In the autumn damp, the dog was on its last legs. The old woman put it on a doormat, and then pulled the mat to the door. She tipped the animal over, and it defecated there. Jonathan saw this, and he trembled in distress.

Late one afternoon, because she'd had enough, or because, for her too, Serge had gone for good, or because winter and its threat of death was on the houses, she got rid of the dog.

Jonathan was in the garden. He maintained Serge's pond with manic attention, and had taken its furnishings inside. Through the wire-netting and the dried-up tendrils of withered bindweed, he saw the old woman pulling her dog along by a thick rope, unusually long.

The dog couldn't walk any longer, and fell over on its side. The old woman dragged it by the neck and took it round the corner. They went to the other side of the house.

Jonathan knew what was going to happen next. He'd already heard from the shopkeepers in the village (as he had seen many hunting dogs and guard-dogs, and had asked about them), that it was usual to hang the old animals. It was free, and it didn't hurt.

At first, Jonathan remained on his haunches, cleaning away like an idiot at the little semicircular canal that belonged to the pond. Skinny weeds grew in the bottom, almost springing up in a day, despite the cold; he pulled them up. The only scenery left on the island, the little people planted on their matchstick legs, were falling over on account of the rain, which unstuck them; Jonathan stuck them back in. He was reluctant to take them inside; he would rather the little men rotted away than see the island altogether bare. While he worked, he wasn't sad. His imagination recreated for him each gesture, each attitude, each look on Serge's face and each intonation of his voice as he had played in the garden: and he was astonished at how much he had remembered, for he thought he had forbidden himself to watch the child.

'Dear God!' the old woman cried out as she came back to the side where Jonathan could see her. 'The bastard! Stupid little git! Oh Jesus Christ!'

The woman, who was limping a little with her stick, snatched up the spade from the ground and went away again with heavy tread.

Terrified, Jonathan took a few moments to understand what this meant. She obviously wasn't going to dig a grave. No: lacking strength in her arms, she must have failed to hang

the animal, and she was altering her method.

Jonathan got up suddenly and rushed out into the lane. He went into his neighbour's garden and ran towards the back of the house.

It was too late. Or too early. The woman was breaking the dog's neck and skull, as it lay upon the ground, with the edge of the spade. She shouted insults at the same time; she was leaning over to one side, with the stick jammed under her elbow. The dog didn't bark, but at each blow it let out a little groan, fallen from its feeble lungs. Its head and neck, cut open with many shining wounds, were covered with dark red blood. It was alive, it was groaning, it shook with every blow of the spade. The old woman was shouting:

'Will you die, you stupid thing!'

But she couldn't strike cleanly.

Jonathan threw himself on the old woman, snatched the spade from her hands, and with all his strength, he smashed in the old dog's skull. The legs went rigid, to the tips of the toes. The tail moved more gently, and then fell to the ground with a horrible slowness. The bloodied ears pulled back, as if for sex.

Jonathan put down the spade, and as he turned round, he shouted insults at her, pushed her with his arm. She fell on her bottom, and cried out against strangers, young people, and foreigners.

'I'll come back and bury it,' said Jonathan, wet with tears, his hands filthy.

PART II

Jonathan was affected for a long time by Serge's abduction. Paralysed and brutish, he aroused himself from his torpor only in order to get drunk. He started to eat a lot, but without doing any cooking: he bought any old thing all ready to eat, which he devoured in bed during his wakeful nights. His depression made him sleep up to twelve or fifteen hours a day (in gentle souls, unhappiness often produces this excessive sleep). The alcohol helped, of course.

Within this fog, he received some news of his paintings, news of sales. Everything was going very well. The contract would be extended, the monthly payments increased, the number of works to be supplied each year would be less. He didn't give a damn.

But he had to fight, not to go to Paris, not to meet clients or prattle with the critics, to be absent from the show they would do that winter. The gallery-owner came in person to look for him, but had the misguided vanity to announce his arrival by telegram — like whistling himself for a dog that paid no attention to the servants. That day, Jonathan wandered in the frozen fields, like boys who disappear when they expect to be punished. He returned, cautiously, in the middle of the night; he was worried that this weighty leader of men, instead of leaving, might have gone to bed to wait for him; he was an unassuming millionaire, a simple man.

He didn't write to Serge's mother, but received spontaneous letters from her. It was Jonathan's growing fame that did it. A snob, Barbara boasted of knowing a fashionable painter:

But he used to wash my little boy! He'd make food for us! I swear it! And he cooks — divinely!

It wouldn't have taken much for her to suggest that Serge was his.

Just the same, she was very careful not to invite Jonathan to visit, and her letters, more sharp than friendly, always very brief when it came to the child, told of some very strange things. Serge, it seemed, had complained of his holiday: Jonathan was a real nuisance, bossy and boring, he had no radio, no television, he stopped you doing anything, you had to eat too much, you were cooped up, he lectured you about anything, he only thought about work, he lived in a dirty and stinking old place, you weren't even left alone to sleep, there was only one bed, and Serge was very glad to get back to Paris.

'You were a right cow to leave me with that guy!' he had told Barbara (according to her).

Jonathan's cheeks were aflame and his stomach felt empty when he read the news.

He believed, at first, that Barbara had written these cruelties from jealousy, and that Serge was guiltless. Indeed, after the first unhappiness, he would have shown Barbara the difference he saw between her and Jonathan. And she wasn't a woman to put up with that. Overseer of relations between the two boys, there was plenty she could do to disturb them.

But if she was telling Jonathan that Serge detested him, what was she telling Serge? That could be guessed without difficulty:

Jonathan has written to me that you were impossible at his place, and he doesn't want to see you again. There's no point you telling me your little stories, he just doesn't seem to agree with them...

The obvious solution, to see Serge again, would do no good at all.

If they met, and assured each other of their friendship, what would they do then? Barbara was making it clear she had no intention of sharing the child. Their war against her was lost in advance. Barbara would become overtly hostile, forbid them to see each other again, send Jonathan away. There would be nothing but more suffering again for Serge and for himself.

Simple prudence advised him rather that he should remain on good terms with her and seem not to care very much for the child. Jonathan didn't know what less unhappy future might be safeguarded by such a course of action. But if he were to go to Paris, if the child should come out forcefully in his favour, in his frank and unflinching fashion, then everything would definitely be endangered.

It would be impossible to inflict on Serge the dramas flowing from a face-to-face struggle with Barbara. Impossible to see him without her knowing. Impossible even to write to him directly. There was nothing for Jonathan to do but to sit back and wait.

Then he began to ask himself whether, at bottom, Barbara hadn't written him the truth. Perhaps Serge had complained.

Jonathan thought again about the events of the summer. It was true that his impression of happiness and absolute agreement between the two of them rested on nothing that could be expressed. Insignificant gestures, fragments of sentences, tiny pleasures. He knew nothing about Serge. He had rejected the usual ways of listening, judging, loving and accompanying a child; he had relied on a hundred nameless things, denied by adults and forgotten by children. So it could all be imaginary; would someone else have seen and understood what he thought he had believed and understood? There had been nothing, nothing. A few ideas too sweet in the brain of a man half-mad.

Serge had seemed to be happy, but kids seem happy anywhere, even between two tyrants and two blows. He was pleased with everything, but children get used to anything. He liked to make love, but he hadn't the right, it was only the false pleasure of an uneducated little animal, a desire which should have been restrained and disciplined, not welcomed and shared. And anyway, children preferred to sleep.

That was their friendship, described by anyone else; so that was the truth.

As he continued to torment himself, Jonathan thought too that the child could have had a deeper reason to disown him, once he had got back to Paris. For his life with Jonathan had made him very different from what normal people expected a little boy to

be. No child could bear to find himself a stranger amongst the people he is obliged to live with. It was an inferiority, a misfortune. In a world of dog eat dog, to respect a child is to pervert him; to encourage in him his fugitive humanity is to change him into a monster his parents, his friends and his school will no longer recognise. Serge must have felt the first painful consequences of this; he wouldn't have had a friendly reception, and the feeling would be mutual. He was no longer of the same kind. He was suffering. And it was because of Jonathan. Now, if he wanted to save himself, he would have to go back on his tracks, take his place again amongst the dogs and bark in the same way. Otherwise, he was too weak, and too alone.

A capitulation or dishonour? Certainly not. To tell the truth, for three or four months Serge had suffered the dangerous and promiscuous attentions of a neurotic; and then his own good health had come out on top, under the benign influence of the mother, and the child was returning to equilibrium, readapting to the norm. This language wasn't Jonathan's?

Precisely.

On other days again, Jonathan refused to believe the boy would have given him up — even if he'd felt suddenly different and hated. Serge was strong. Barbara had lied. The child had complained not about Jonathan, but about being snatched away from the young artist. Just now he was struggling with these people and he was suffering. He was still one of those stubborn boys against whom the nursery-school she-monkeys and school-master gorillas wear out in vain their science, their love, their inquisitions, their violence, their ruses, their extortions and their bad temper. There's only one child in a thousand that will resist them, one in a thousand who fights not to become like them: but Serge was certainly that one.

Then once again Jonathan accused himself of giving way to illusion. What could it mean, this division between a bestial humanity and some few rebels all too human? Where was this miraculous Serge he had invented? And why anyway should he be interested in Jonathan? What was the evidence? The proof? And even if it were true, what difference did it make?

Jonathan couldn't think. Even if he'd been able to, he couldn't have proved anything. A lost cause: the end of the matter.

Jonathan stayed locked away at home, made no reply to Barbara's letters. He drank, he wept, he died alive.

The old woman next door died the same winter. Jonathan was there. He'd buried the dog, and he'd felt the woman would follow soon. There is a moment when loneliness beyond all sadness gives such an impression of rocky hardness, of anaesthesia, of nakedness unashamed, that one knows death isn't far away.

When the old woman fell ill, he knew; the two houses were too close together for the two hermits not to notice each other. After two days of not seeing her go out, he decided to knock on the door, already thinking he would find her dead.

There was no reply. The door wasn't locked. He went in. There was no fire in the house. He found the woman in bed. There was a terrible smell in the room. The old

woman had shitted and pissed herself; she seemed to be in a coma; she was snoring.

Her face was green and yellow, vividly coloured. Her mouth gaped open, she still had a few teeth.

Jonathan wanted to let her die. He rejected the idea, out of cowardice, and quickly made his way to the village. You could make a telephone call at the grocer's (the nearest doctor was in the nearby town).

In the shop, Jonathan changed his mind. He bought ham, wine, butter and cheese and walked home quietly without saying anything to anyone.

'I haven't the right to do it to her,' he said to himself, simply.

He went to watch at her bedside, with his wine and his sandwiches. He felt better. He thought of Serge without pain. Wearing plenty of clothes, wrapped up in a scarf, a good glass of wine at his side, he sat at the head of the bed in a tall armchair of plum-coloured velvet, listening to the old woman snoring. It is comforting to see them die, people who mean nothing to you; you see yourself, you get used to it.

'Ah, a lovely evening,' murmured Jonathan, surprised to feel so peaceful. Clearly, things are never what people say they are: neither death nor children.

'They really are idiots, real bastards!' Jonathan said, smiling as he repeated Serge's words to himself. Surely the boy would have liked to be here. Perhaps he could have spoken to the dying woman, he'd talked with rabbits.

Because of the smell, Jonathan had opened the window a little. And this smell, now dissipated, had left no more than a scent of vomit, of bile, of empty guts.

Jonathan left the room to eat, but not to drink.

He made a fire in a little coal stove. He'd needed some paper, and had discovered some large sheets of writing-paper with blue lines, already folded in four to fit into an envelope. With a ball-point pen, he started to draw what he saw. It was curiosity, rather than weakness of memory — curiosity for a kind of image he had never drawn.

Towards the middle of the night, he went home to sleep. He was drunk and he slept badly.

He woke at mid-day with a heavy head. His first thoughts were of the old woman. This got him going again, after a brief bout of nausea. He went to the house next door.

The smell in the room had changed. It had become very fetid, but fainter, sharp, a bit acidic, like the smell of babies' nappies. The woman breathed without snoring. Her cheeks were cold and slack, her eyes still closed; a bluish scalp could be seen through the brushed back hair.

'Oh, my pretty one,' sighed Jonathan, 'you're so tired. Really tired! But I like you. People are almost lovable when there's almost no one left inside. I really love you, it's no lie! Look, I'll comb your hair.'

He watched over her until the evening, then went away again, without having had anything to drink.

It was only the next morning he found her dead. He wasn't sure, first of all. He tried the pulse, listened at the head and at the breast.

Her death had been agitated; the sheets were thrown back, a naked foot stuck out, a hand grasped at the mattress, one eyelid was a little open, showing the white of the eye,

the mouth seemed frozen in the middle of a shout, or a word, and the hair made damp rats' tails with the sweat.

This time, Jonathan went to make the telephone call.

When they had taken the body away, and Jonathan knew it had been buried in the cemetery, right on the other side of the village, he became frightened of death, naively, when night fell, the long winter night.

He was alarmed by the slightest movement of the curtains; and if when he put the light on at home he caught sight of the shadow of his jacket or raincoat, hanging on the back of a chair, he was overcome by terror, as if he'd actually seen her, coming for him. She walked through the gardens, pushed at his gate, prowled among the weeds, stood upright and unmoving in the middle of the woods, among the black branches. Her hair was wild, her eyes bulged, her malicious mouth half opened to show the decaying teeth, a strong blue bony hand rested on her stick. She was a creature of wind and shadow — but she came into Jonathan's house, broad and heavy, and walked slowly about the ground-floor rooms when the boy had gone to bed.

But Jonathan was without superstition or belief and he had neither god nor soul. What haunted him was entirely human; he could always joke about it to himself, and it would always come back. In some inexplicable way, this unreasoning fear did him good.

He put a bolt again on the bedroom door and a lock on the shutters. When he tried to sleep, with the lamp out, he became distressed, sensing a patient presence which waited only for him to sleep before approaching; he would put the light on, look round the room, put the light out, and then do the same again, several times. During the night he woke up suddenly, alarmed, covered in sweat, searching desperately for the switch of the lamp, not finding it, stretching his hand further out, desperately afraid of finding someone there, finding the switch, but it wouldn't work, trying again, pressing it ten times, then feeling along the wall, finding the switch for the ceiling light, that didn't work either, he was in the dark, unable to breathe, and the old woman was coming towards him, he could feel her there, cold and stinking. She reached the bed. He shouted out.

He woke up from the dream straight away, put on the lamp, turned over his soaking pillow.

Slowly his pulse and breathing returned to normal. The horror of the dream had worked off his anxiety, and he made fun of himself, looked confidently about the room. But he wouldn't have gone downstairs to get a drink of water.

He thought of Serge lying at his side in the calmest and brightest of houses. It couldn't have been this one. It couldn't have become this trap, this nightmare, in so few months. Serge's place was there on the left: a very small space, you couldn't imagine that someone had slept there, a complete body, with nothing missing at all — and a child who was all over the place. Jonathan had never seen Serge as *small*, and he could have sworn in good faith that they were the same size. Serge was big, really big, his face was at the same level as his own, he had to lift his arm to put it round his neck, he didn't have to bend down to see him just as easily as anyone else. But this space on the left hardly offered room for two cats to lie down in. Where was he?

The images of the child faded away. Anxious again, Jonathan listened out and heard the noises of the house. Wherever it was empty and without light, it had been invaded by creatures of the night. They were looking for something. You don't make these grating sounds, these bumps and sudden creaks when you're just going quietly about your business. They were looking for him, patiently, step by step; they were looking everywhere, as if Jonathan could as easily have hidden himself in a drawer or a sideboard, or under the furniture, as inside his bolted bedroom. They lengthily examined every trace of his life, every evidence that he was there. Darkness doesn't trouble the dead.

Since he longer had a neighbour, Jonathan hadn't been coping very well with the isolation of the house. The nearest other house was a good half-mile away, possibly more. Without a human world around, his walls became spongy, permeable; the whole countryside, the whole night came through them and took hold of Jonathan, last living creature on a devastated planet.

He wasn't frightened of anything during the day. The house next door was locked, but you could get into the garden. He went there often. After the funeral, old women had taken the rabbits and chickens away; Jonathan had even given them Serge's rabbit, big and fat by now, ready to eat. The fierceness of this sacrifice, indeed this separation, for he had become very fond of the beast, had brought him a bitter pleasure, as if he had returned to the women the last living part of Serge which yet remained, to be destroyed in the same way.

The old women had also pulled up the vegetables that remained in the ground, the hardy ones that could put up with frost: carrots, turnips, celery, a few leeks.

Jonathan was interested by the empty rabbit-hutch: it retained the sweet, downy warmth of the little animals it had sheltered. Their throats weren't cut; the old women hung them up by their ears and took their eyes out with two fingernails into the orbit, or with the help of a small kitchen knife. The animal would squeak for a long time; the old women would chat.

Further on, near a dead cherry-tree, its trunk split open and powdery, there was the grave where Jonathan had buried the dog. When he was a little boy he'd buried the dead birds he found, and then he dug them up a few days later to have a look. He'd imagined vaguely that the soil protected from decay. He'd discovered a damp round mass, sticky feathers falling away all by themselves, opened and gaping full of worms. He remembered two kinds: the first, ivory-coloured, thick as cooked vermicelli, not very numerous, independent, calm enough; the others, threadlike, pure white, all wriggling at an incredible speed, flickering like watered silk; which seemed to represent a greater volume of flesh than the bird itself had contained. Worms fed on dogs and humans, ought to be less thin and less repugnant than those. Jonathan had a pressing desire to use the spade to uncover a little the corpse of the black dog. He could imagine it, but without the unpleasant details which so tormented him. The head must have been towards this side of the tree. No; he gave up.

No one came along this way now. In the middle of the autumn, though, a young boy had made the metal gate ring, striking it with an old piece of iron, and he'd asked Jonathan whether Serge was there. Jonathan explained that Serge had gone back to Paris.

‘Ah, I knew him, you see,’ said the child (whom Jonathan himself had never seen before). ‘So he’s not here any longer?’ he asked, unable to make up his mind to go.

‘No, he’s not here.’

‘Is he coming back?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jonathan, ‘I don’t think so, no.’ ‘Not at all?’

Then the child had shut the gate and gone down the lane. Since this distant visit, there had been a brutal silence over this part of the countryside, the silence of abandoned places, of the empty islands of the Arctic, with their greenish skies, dizzying lichen-covered cliffs, where unreal birds, wailing, swoop and dive.

Instead of the pictures of monkeys that people inspired in him, Jonathan made pictures of corpses. He was so taken by this work that he went up to Paris to do a series of etchings. He didn’t use anyone else to engrave from his drawings, and even abandoned them himself, placidly improvising his rage in the varnish of the plate.

These were the first figurative works he dared show. Their fury was thought pleasing; he was forgiven what might have been considered an artistic regression; he was congratulated. The etchings were a success and rapidly disappeared into the portfolios of small investors.

During this visit to Paris, Jonathan made up his mind, one evening when he was drunk, to go and knock at Barbara’s door. The arguments he’d rehearsed to himself against such a visit no longer worked when he was so close to the place where Serge was living.

‘I really must try. Afterwards, we’ll just have to see.’

Luckily or unluckily, there was no reply. He scribbled a note to say he’d been round, folded it, wrote Serge’s name on it and slipped it under the door.

But that very night, sobered-up and in despair, he left on the train. He couldn’t find one for his own town, so took one that would take him fairly near, stepped down into an unknown town, frosty and fast asleep, and in the morning he reached his own on a local train. He was over-excited, and he looked at children with a dangerous expression. He had to wait until the afternoon to get the bus back to the village. He blamed himself for having gone to Barbara’s and left the note. He’d been wrong to drink.

His mood became even blacker. Two days out of three, now, he’d tear up his letters without opening them, murmuring to himself: ‘So *they* think they’ll write to me, do they. Bastards.’

All that spring, his behaviour became worse. He drank more and more, sat about the whole day without working; he talked to himself and was subject to sudden fits of fury, which he worked off on whatever lay to hand.

Because of the success of the etchings, in March he was asked to illustrate an edition of de Sade’s *La Nouvelle Justine*. It was an important commission and very well paid. This edition, bound and finished in luxurious fashion, was for private sale only; he would have a completely free hand. For a long time the book had been a schoolboy purchase, and grist

to the rhetorical mill of every kind of pedant; this secret edition would give it back its proper place.

Jonathan threw himself into the work. He masturbated as much in drawing as Sade must have done in writing it, and each illustration, imagined and executed without the slightest sign of effort, cost him volleys of spunk. He ate better, almost drank less and slept without nightmares. He laughed derisively when he thought how he owed the great ease and force with which he produced these images to long years of secret practice devoted to the sweetest of childish faces and the most delicate of bodies. He hadn't imagined then that it would end up like this.

When summer came, he'd finished his hundred and fourteen engravings.

They were admired by the publisher, but rejected. Jonathan (he explained) had put too much emphasis on scenes of torture and pederasty. There weren't enough women to be seen; and again, what the artist had really gone to town on was caricaturing the procuresses and naked old women. Finally, the whole thing was far too violent. The publisher, if he'd any sense of humour, or had just been stupid, could simply have told Jonathan: 'Ugh! You'd think it was de Sade.'

Instead he said that these volumes were to be sold to important people, to doctors, members of parliament, and other moneyed and honourable fathers of families, who wouldn't be best pleased by this excess of fairies, fuckers, tortures and shit. There should have been nice clean pretty girls, plenty of female bottoms, straightforward fucking, spanking without injuries, pretty little tears, little girls, boudoirs, lechery, and a few horror-scenes, not too detailed, just for atmosphere: but not *this*, which brought out the nastiest aspects of the work. Sade's novels were neither handbooks to dissection, nor reports from Auschwitz; and their humour...

Jonathan took back his drawings without argument. His dealer accepted them just as they were. There was an unpublicised and limited printing, just thirty sets which went so quickly and at so high a price that Jonathan wouldn't have to produce another canvas all year. This was just as well, as he didn't want to paint a single one.

He was also asked to produce other drawings of the same kind, for various elegant and smutty books, all spanking and black leather. Jonathan refused. He had, moreover, exhausted that side of himself. Drawing adults occupied in cutting children up had made up for his inability to explain that the morality of family and school, quite apart from any physical violence, was nothing but the same thing. He felt freed from his pain. As for the erotic potential of the images, or of making them rather, he no longer experienced it. He was back in a soft and lazy humour.

These sets of prints, however, did nothing for his reputation. They were talked about rather more than they were seen — in the same way as he was spoken about without anyone actually seeing him. His withdrawal, far from those who wished him well, was shocking and offensive. The little groups of the bored, the failed, the parasites, whose profession it is to recognise or deny the talent of others, according to the changing fashions, would not tolerate such neglect. You have to flatter, to pay court, do little kindnesses. Jonathan's indifference was seen as a sign of arrogance and contempt.

And so, without doing or saying anything, Jonathan did himself more harm than if

he'd lived amid the manoeuvres and the tittle-tattle. He was suspect. His drawings, admired for a short time, became the topic of gossip and slander.

The more grotesque the calumny, the more excessive its insinuations, the more effective it is. They said you'd have to be very strange to draw such scenes (which were considered to have skewed the text and gone beyond it). Basically, Jonathan had disappeared because he had some unfortunate secret to hide.

What had he been running away from, travelling from country to country? What was it, after all, that had so often made him abandon a capital city when he had already made such a striking beginning to a promising career? No, not the police, perhaps not, but...

Certain women, expert witnesses who were heard uncritically as soon as the talk turned to children, were able to give the impression that they knew quite a bit about it. Oh, a great deal. And if Jonathan hadn't got friends in high places... Anyway, all you needed to know was who had bought the famous sadistic prints. Some of his clients were well known... No, not just touching up some little boy in a corner: up to a point, that wasn't... No. Really quite unspeakable things.

It was a fine opportunity to be revenged upon the deserter. If he had only known how to do it, Jonathan could have cut a fine figure of a man, taking refuge in the countryside, far from the temptations of the world, like some superb genius of eighty-five. But he was too young, too much the subject of discussion. He hadn't the skill to organise from a distance that mixture of advertisement for his virtue and flattery of those who have none, without which such a retreat just gets you libelled and hated.

Apart from the ridiculous allusions to his disgusting habits, more odiously yet, they worked to ruin his relationships with his most important buyers. It was enough to tell them that Jonathan, during his rare visits to Paris, had told hurtful and compromising stories about them. An indiscreet and dangerous friend with whom it would be best to break off relations.

As the market in paintings is particularly artificial, young artists are interchangeable, and no one gets a foothold or makes further progress there without the carefully guided but ignorant rich having their part to play in it, this easy malice did Jonathan far more harm than any 'revelation' about his violent sexual tastes.

There was no plot. Chance, or very little more, had simply placed Jonathan among the steady flow of victims consumed by the gossip of tiny cliques. For some weeks, it was towards him that they directed the thousand darts of spite and bitterness thrown by those who dine and meet together for this purpose. No need for a cue: they're all alike, they act in the same way, from afar they can smell the quarry that's ripe for them, they pursue it together, abandon it together, forget their prey as quickly as they have chosen it, and their faces remain clear of the leprosy they spread.

But these cruelties in a tea-cup sometimes innocently strike their target. Jonathan's dealer wrote to him to say that the situation was getting worrying. He had many of the previous year's canvasses unsold; there was a slump, prices were falling, existing clients were cool, an overall feeling of animosity. Jonathan, said the dealer, should remember that his success depended in fact on a very few people; it was urgent that he should come to Paris to put a stop to this nonsense, which was beginning to turn out very badly.

Jonathan didn't bother to reply. Without the letter, he would have known nothing; with it, he thought nothing. He'd never thought that his unwilling and relative success could last for long; and he'd no illusions about the narrow milieu within which art prospers, and dies. In the end, his future didn't bother him.

Jonathan was tormented by something altogether different. For it was the height of summer, the first summer after Serge. When these days arrived, with the same colours, the same smells, the same limpid evenings, when the night sky was as pale as dawn, the young painter fell into a deep depression, interspersed only by flashes of pain.

He still hadn't managed to kill himself (a living person's idea, too optimistic a solution). Nor had he succeeded in rediscovering that state of innocence, of resigned insensibility, in which he'd been before meeting Serge.

He realised that these memories of the visit, which he thought about ceaselessly, helped him not to think about the new Serge: the boy would be nine years old now. Where was he spending the summer? With whom? Did he remember Jonathan?

Serge as he existed in Jonathan's memory clearly didn't correspond any longer to anyone in the world. And the other Serge, the one who existed, so far from here: Barbara's child, the one who went to school, watched the telly, who heard only mothers, schoolmistresses and the children of idiots, was being monitored, measured, weighed and adjusted by the medical profession; the one who'd asked for three francs to buy a comic, had turned up his nose at his evening meal and praised school dinners, he was gauged, noted and profiled in state files. The one dully bellyaching because his wrists and ankles stuck out too naked from clothes become too small: this Serge, so likely, brought bitter tears when he dared imagine him. His memories of the boy could tolerate no future: none, at least, that happened far away from him, quite the opposite of what he had known, and hoped, and worshipped.

That same summer, Jonathan committed several indecent assaults.

Walks in the country calmed him down, but they were impossible around his own home. On the other hand, he'd discovered some pretty places on the other side of the town you went to by bus from the village. He would take a walk, now and then, starting off from there.

On the road, though, or on the river-banks, or at the edge of the fields, he would meet boys. They weren't very rough, sometimes as old as eight or ten. Meeting them, Jonathan forgot his manners. He would greet them, smile and talk, enjoying their voices and gestures, the happy looks that brightened up their fine faces. He wanted to hug them, to touch those joyful legs, the backs of their necks, their forearms and their cheeks. Nothing simpler: but nothing so unimaginable. So Jonathan, limiting himself to a recognised invitation, sometimes put his hand low down on their bellies, when he wasn't able to get himself away before.

The first victim was peeing in the hedge round a field of rabbit-hutches. The little boy was eight years old. When Jonathan passed, the boy, standing with his feet apart, preferred to turn and say hello rather than hide his cock and its long foreskin, the yellow jet zig-zagging through the air. Jonathan waited while the boy did up his shorts, then stopped, sat down, and chatted about nothing in particular, the way people do when

they're out for a walk.

Then the child crouched down right next to Jonathan, lying down on the ground; he took hold of the boy's crutch, with a naive movement like cupping a hand about the feathery head of a dandelion. The child responded simply by dropping himself onto the ground and spreading his legs wide apart. He had a shy smile, a little distrustful, a little kind. He soon felt reassured. He carefully opened his shorts, where his cock was stiff. He didn't seem surprised that Jonathan should kiss and lick the organs that appeared. After a well-mannered 'Oh!' he seized the young painter's cock, so as politely to provide him with the movement that he himself experienced in the same place. And when Jonathan asked him, with a touch of hypocrisy, whether that bothered him, the child said simply:

'No, I like that.'

At the end, Jonathan took his sex, hid it, pushed it into the grass, for fear the child should be surprised by his sperm. The lad ended up rubbing himself, then examined his willy as if waiting for something to happen. He pulled back at his foreskin, squinted at the urethra with its scarlet and salty depths, and then, as he was going soft, got dressed again.

He talked a bit about his life. He was as innocent and silly as a young kitten, and Jonathan was so disappointed he was ashamed to have touched him.

The boy's body was different from Serge's. He had a Nordic fairness, his flesh more yielding, his skin less soft, the cock shorter, more curved, more cushiony. And Jonathan felt the world rock as he travelled through space and time — towards his home, his country and his childhood twenty years before. The time of his first loves, when he was the same age.

The boy wasn't at all curious about Jonathan. He talked stupidly about the rabbit-farm and the pleasure of killing. He often mentioned daddy, and said 'It's the holidays,' and 'The farm-dog, he's a good ratter.' These commonplaces filled Jonathan with disgust: he had no experience of ordinary children, the hollow children in families.

'It's necrophilia,' he thought to himself as he left.

This miserable bit of good luck left him unhappy; and he restrained himself a little before starting again.

He was astonished, too, that his unfashionable sexual tastes should lead in the end to the adventures of a potential daddy: shrewish mothers-in-law looking for a better son-in-law, stupid young women in bars, full-bosomed and empty-headed. The difference in age and sex between his loves and those that were allowed hardly counted for anything in the face of such damning similarities. You don't change the world in changing the object of your desire: this society, however you look at it, has only got the one thing to offer.

Another walk. Two children, very well-built, dressed in swimming-trunks, catching frogs at the edge of a pond. Jonathan looked at the frogs, stored alive in a transparent plastic bag full of water. Jonathan and the boys were on their knees. Jonathan touched the velvety bulge of flesh at the waist of the one who was carrying the bag. The boy frowned and pulled away. Jonathan carried on talking about frogs, and the boy relaxed. The other one hadn't seen the gesture. Jonathan started again, the boy got up suddenly, went to join his friend. They left together. Jonathan went on his way, calling to them as he went, shouting out:

‘You little shits!’

For these aggressions, without violence, even without distrust, produced no sense of guilt in him. He had visited many countries where such gestures are innocuous, and where lovemaking follows from such invitations as chance may bring one’s way; where a refusal is as pleasantly made as the request, for such things are commonplace, and flattering, after all. Such customs seemed to him to be more developed than those of Northern Europe, whose chaste children, far from being fragile innocents, were rather, in his opinion, doltish and retarded barbarians.

Another walk. On a weed-grown railway siding, two boys were having a look at an abandoned goods wagon.

One of them got up into it; the other stayed to keep a lookout; it was near a tiny railway station, perhaps itself abandoned. Jonathan approached, reassured the boys, got up into the wagon, saw the slender and big-bottomed one, aged ten or eleven, moving about in the shadow, and found him attractive. This shade gave him the Mediterranean idea of showing his sex. An invitation in the rustic manner, but too childish for the cold and well-trained children of this part of the world.

Apparently the boy, for his part, had never travelled, despite his curiosity for stationary railway wagons: Jonathan’s action terrified him.

Annoyed, dejected, suddenly brought back to where he was, the country he was in, Jonathan insisted; he threatened the child and ordered him to touch it.

The boy did this, trembling, and stuttering a whole string of ‘Yes, yes’ — as you do to show your fright in some dramatic scene from a play at the church youth-club, once the primary-school mistress and the priest have explained how you should look to express fear. But all he did, standing back, was to put out his index-finger to touch the young painter’s beautiful golden cock for a fraction of a second, as if it would bite him. This was so ridiculous that Jonathan, moved to pity, shrugged his shoulders, did himself up again, and let the child get down.

He followed him and said, mockingly:

‘Now that you’ve seen a Martian, you can go and tell your... your mates. You’ve been lucky! But careful: I’ve got my flying-saucer over there, behind the trees, and it’s jam-packed with green rays!’

The other boy, who stood at the side of the petrified victim, looked at Jonathan with the terrible brilliant eyes of an indignant judge, and didn’t say a word.

Braced by the terror, the young artist went unhurriedly on his way, waving two or three times to the immobile pair.

But this incident dissuaded him from ever again touching a child of France. The boy at the rabbit-farm had been an exception, an unlikely and insignificant chance. No use exposing himself again to the danger presented by *parents’ children*.

Any one of these assaults might have turned out badly: Jonathan would have been turned into a monster for the newspapers. Rejection of his solitude could only lead him there. He would fall into the trap, become one of those unfortunates turned upon by families, their newspapers and their cops. Become exactly what they want you to become, so that you humbly allow yourself to be destroyed by them. Child molester! Jonathan

would not offer them the pleasure.

That autumn there came news from Paris which brought him back to life.

It was a letter from Simon, Serge's father. Longwinded and unmalicious, the letter recounted that Simon had gdt together again with Barbara — abandoned by her American gang, and made no richer, it seemed, by her healing fluid than by her dreamy daubs in acrylic. She had started working half-time again as a secretary, and was thinking seriously about making a living of it. Simon realised that she would turn to him to support her, if it came to it; but he loved her, and that's all that mattered. The architects' office where he worked was doing a great trade in corrupt deals, with MPs, town councillors, the minister and the bank; it stank, he realised, but it would bring a rise, very handy now he was marrying Barbara. That's what counts, after all, we only have one life. Yes, they were getting married properly, families there and all; they'd just have to wait for the rise, because there were problems finding some-where to live, for three of them. Because he absolutely had to have an office, and Barbara preferred separate rooms. Like that, you don't get too used to each other, she was right, really.

So it would be the spring or summer, depending on the money.

There, just at the corner of the page, in the most ordinary way, Simon sent Serge's regards to Jonathan, adding that the boy thought about him a lot and that he would very much like to visit him in the country again. Perhaps in the spring or the summer, said Simon, because, of course, after the wedding, a little honeymoon, just him and Barbara, without the kid... Yes, it would be nice. Obviously they wouldn't spend their whole lives using Jonathan as a nanny; Simon was suggesting it because his son, my word, had a real soft spot for Jonathan. So if it wasn't too much trouble — but we'll see, of course, it was for him to decide, they did realise, and if the worst came to the worst there was always one of the grandmothers, but as for Simon, he really thought, etcetera.

He also valiantly reasserted his artistic ambitions (sculp-ture, more than anything); and he talked about what was going on, about up-and-coming artists.

Hardly had he deciphered the letter than Jonathan felt like dashing up to Paris. He went round and round in the house, read and re-read the sentence where Serge was thinking of him, laughed, called himself an idiot, opened a bottle, poured it away in the sink, cried though still laughing, stopped, stroked his hand as if it were the boy's, ran into the garden, looked full of wonder at even the slightest dead leaf, came in again boiling hot, collapsed on a chair where, his eyes blurred with tears, he dropped the letter and experienced his joy in all its pain and all its purity.

In his mind's eye he saw the house as it had been before. He saw each object anew, as if it was to be rediscovered and loved by another eye. There came to his ears a rough and penetrating voice, quick and delightful, with the song of a river rushing over stones, the sweet simplicity of lake-water. He made food, and set the table elaborately, as if a minute later there should appear the guest he would now be waiting for, each day and the next.

Given up to this childish happiness, he pushed away his plate, took some paper, and drew, as if for the front cover of a scandal magazine, this tremendous event, the arrival of Serge. Then he saw he could no longer produce the child's face. He searched out his old

drawings, looked at them, and as he did this, his joy died away.

If Serge came at Easter, it would be almost two years since those drawings. If he came in the summer, he would be a big boy of ten, a child he couldn't imagine. A stranger, who carried in his memory, and in his heart, another stranger. Jonathan was afraid.

It was too late to catch the bus. If Jonathan had wanted to go to Paris, he would have had to wait till the next day. But he was no longer thinking of going. He was held back by his fear of seeing Serge now grown older. It would be better to stay here, and wait until they brought the child.

Anyway, what would he have done up there? There would have been the same obstacles as before, even if Barbara, now preoccupied with a husband rather than a pre-pubescent pup, would cut back on her motherly demands.

Jonathan hadn't heard from her for several months. He was afraid that the Parisian libels his dealer had told him about might have reached the young woman's ears. She scarcely had an entrée to the private circles where that sort of thing prospered, but with her super-rich friends...

It must have been that they had become bored or disappointed with her. And as Simon, for his part, didn't seem to have any suspicions, the de Sade affair couldn't have got out. Or again, the dealer might have been exaggerating, and put a very black cast on the situation, just so as to be able to reduce the monthly payments he made.

After the anguish which came with the idea of a Serge unknown, Jonathan managed to reason with himself. It would be enough not to imagine anything, not to try to do anything, not to expect anything. To be there, to be ready. The future would be more easy, because there was Simon between Barbara and the child. With her narcissistic mania for throwing her viscous and grandiloquent love about everywhere, she actually loved no one; he really did love people, the poor failure. They would cancel each other out, and this would make Serge free.

With every day that passed, Serge would become stronger and more independent. With every day, if Jonathan was worthy of it, their friendship would grow in strength. Real life would no longer face problems. There would be no obstacle, in any case, which could not be assessed and overcome. The difficulties would no longer come from outside. Misfortunes, if such they were, would be no one's business but their own, and would have a human scale. Rows, illnesses, accidents, whims, uglinesses, differences, impotence, bad-tempered discussions, irritation, wounds, and the passage of time: in short, happiness just as it comes.

If Serge came back. But the year was getting on, and there was no news; and there were already signs of spring, despite the cold.

Simon wrote to Jonathan fairly often. He talked about himself, about Barbara, about marriage, delayed but certain. He had discovered, in the limestone cliffs above the Seine at Rouen, some strange blocks of stone, with flint embedded in them, which he enjoyed sculpting on the spot on Sundays. Oh, just to exercise the arms a bit and get some air:

sculpture is an athletic art.

He envied Jonathan his single state, escaping from all the problems couples have, and making a living without leaving home — at a distance, in fact. Paradise! He said very little about the child.

But he had quite a lot to do with him: Serge made a fine son, it really was nice. From here until the boy was fifteen or sixteen, they would be real mates, they would get on together. Rather strangely, Barbara had left the little one entirely to him. And she'd become a vegetarian: she fed herself on brown rice, verjuice, wheatgerm and pollen. She went to primal scream seminars and took courses in movement and expression. For Simon it was steak and salad and the motorbike.

As for Serge, he was given money, he looked after himself, he wasn't stupid. He bought himself food to eat, clothes, shoes, exercise books. He'd smoked, once. He got on with things, he was funny, he wasn't ten yet, it wasn't bad at all. But stubborn as a mule. Simon certainly would have liked to have as much freedom when he was a kid. Today, things were better, you couldn't deny it. Even sex education: Simon was all for it. At fourteen, he'd thought that girls had three holes, one after the other, like buttons on a jacket. There was progress of a kind. They had a bundle of Danish porn magazines at the house: Serge had seen them, they didn't hide anything. It hadn't done anything for him, of course, he was after all still on the young side. And as for me, if my father... But one is never born at the right time, he concluded philosophically.

When Jonathan noticed Easter approaching, he decided, just on the off-chance, to get the house ready. He tried to do it better than he did the last time. He felt, or was worried, that he would have to entertain an adult; things had to be more comfortable, arrangements less rough and ready.

Once again he visited the town. He nearly got through all his money. Among his purchases there was even a washing-machine. He thought for a moment of getting a new stove: his was old and inconvenient, but you cooked wonderfully well on it, and the mice knew it as well as themselves. He decided to keep it.

He would have installed a shower, a proper bathroom, but he was worried about all the work, and the cost; his contract for the year was hardly more than charity. Nor did he have any work planned. He did however have a geyser put in above the sink.

Finally, he put another bed, a single bed, downstairs, in the room that wasn't used next to the kitchen. He was sure that Serge would want to sleep by himself.

There was nothing to do now but wait: the boy wouldn't arrive until July.

There was the sound of a motorbike in front of the house. Jonathan heard it from his bedroom. The rider gave a blast on the horn, and the sound of the engine died. Someone called out for Jonathan.

When the young painter appeared in the garden, the rider had taken off his gloves and his helmet, opened his jacket, and he was coming through the gate. It was Simon. Serge wasn't with him.

Yes, Serge was there. In the lane, a boy, his face turned towards the bike, was unstrapping a fairly small but expensive suitcase which had been fastened at the back. A big blue sports bag, with a very worn strap, was already leaning against a wheel.

A boy long in the legs, long-necked, slim and supple as a girl, a boy from the town and the built-up streets.

Jonathan looked at this stranger, without daring to show himself. This wasn't Serge. His neck, his shining forearms, had a different tone, white and delicate. His hair fell down to the collar, in loose curls. His back was long, his shoulders a bit narrow. He seemed very well turned-out.

Jonathan hardly touched Simon's hand, went back into the kitchen with him, didn't manage a smile. Jonathan was filled with terror by the idea that in a few seconds from now Serge would be there, would come through the door, with his new hair, his new size and his new way of moving, in which the shoulders, hips and hands had a new place.

He hadn't seen Simon for two years at least; strangely, the letters they'd exchanged had established between them a sympathy and familiarity which hadn't existed before. And Simon, now he was a married man, seemed less colourless and dumb. He sipped at the white wine. He was excited at having come up the little lane on the bike. And two and a half hours from Paris.

'And you're allowed to ride, with...' said Jonathan, imagining Serge sitting behind his father on the bike.

'Oh, I don't know. You know... In any case, he came by train, I picked him up at the station, we've only come the last five miles together. Five miles from town! You know, you don't live very far away... No, he really loves the bike, we do a bit on Sunday, he'd have liked to have done the whole trip like that. Couldn't really do it with all the luggage. Now whether you're allowed to, I can tell you... I don't know.'

And Serge came in. He didn't lower his eyes, but he seemed to avoid looking at Jonathan. He shook his hand, absently. Then he put down on the table a bright green motorcycle helmet, with red and white stripes, with a sun visor and a copper's chinstrap.

He sat down nonchalantly, near his father. He was relaxed, with the merest ghost of a smile, a smile of pride, the merest ghost, nothing at all. Jonathan was stunned by his beauty, or by what he considered to be such. But why Serge? This beauty was too much... — and this air of youth, this airy face, too clear, which little children don't have.

Bigger, taller, but less solid. Disembodied. Diaphanous. Jonathan felt defeated, bloated, marked by illness and solitude. He turned away his eyes, he was sure there was no look in them, just two dirty things, tired and worn out, which expressed nothing, just looked out shamefully.

He produced whisky, Coca-Cola. Simon took the spirit and thanked him noisily. His forearms had grown a lot. He was putting on weight around the waist.

'You go and put your stuff away,' he said to Serge. The boy obeyed him instantly and disappeared with the old sports bag and the expensive suitcase.

Jonathan was surprised to see Serge obey; or rather to see Simon issue orders with such ease, so naturally, like a good-natured boss, to a being who should have made him nervous, frightened him, rendered him dumb with fear, humility and admiration.

He hasn't grown that much, thought Jonathan. It's a first impression, because he's changed shape, changed proportion.

But the footsteps on the stairs went quickly. Serge took the steps two at a time, despite his burden. Upstairs, the silence was complete: they should have heard the creaking of the cupboard door.

'He hasn't seen the bed downstairs,' Jonathan said to himself, 'or else he's seen it but doesn't know it's for him. He's hesitating, he's not unpacking his things. That young executive suitcase. When his father's gone he'll bring it all down again.'

'I'd never dare live with this kid,' he thought. 'I couldn't. I can't.'

Simon seemed very pleased with life.

Jonathan gave him another whisky, remarking, as he did so, that drinking and driving...

'I'm not worried. If a cop tries to stop me, I'll give him a run for his money,' said Simon carelessly.

The boy didn't come down. They talked about him. Simon mentioned that since Serge had discovered all about men and women, he'd become very modest: he locked the bathroom door, even to wash his hands. He'd changed.

'He really has,' Simon went on, 'because before, he let you see everything. All kids are like that, though. At a certain age... And Barbara used to wander about naked, no point being embarrassed.'

'Ah. Well, that's okay,' said Jonathan.

'It is. There were just a few problems,' said Simon, laughing. 'I'm telling you, when he was six, about that, when I was round at Barbara's all the time. Well, almost. Now just think, I was in the shower once and the little bugger comes along, mmm, daddy, can I come in? I said yes, I thought he wanted a piss, that's fine by me: and wham! he gives me a funny look and then, without a word, he grabs hold of my cock and pulls! And can he pull! You wouldn't do that to a bell.'

'And what did you do?'

'Well, d' you know what, I walloped him. Didn't even mean to. Didn't think. But, my God, he really hurt me, the little bastard. He couldn't imagine. I tell you he never did that again. And it was a shock, wasn't it, they can be really strong if they set their minds to it. It was a real shock.'

'What, being hit?'

'Oh, that... Then he got a cuddle for quarter of an hour. It does help.'

'What, in the shower?'

'No, Barbara took him of course. Anyway, at that age, a man...'

'Of course.'

'But no! It's a question of habits, I mean, at six it's all right, but afterwards? Freedom's all very well, but if you just think what might happen if it goes too far, then you see you've got to be a bit careful. It's no joke. Now I'm not talking about that, but generally. Because a kid won't understand if you don't explain. We live in a shitty society and you can't in the end do just what you want.'

'Indeed, but your way of explaining, in the bathroom...'

‘But hang on! That’s what was really extraordinary! Barbara was furious! Absolutely furious! She petted him for half an hour. That’s no good either. A kid crying, if you pay no attention, he shuts up. You pay attention and you’re buggered, you’ve had it for the evening. But it was me she was really getting at.’

‘It does happen sometimes.’

‘I know. So she says to me: You’re a bloody idiot you are, what d’you have to go and hit him like that for, if you really want to make him neurotic, etcetera! I mean, really! But that’s how she used to think, then. Once she got going she could say just as easily, a slap can make you queer or give you cancer... I’m like you, I just laugh at it. And anyway, you’ve only got to look at Serge, he’s hardly neurotic! What it was, he was such a little actor, you took him seriously; in fact, you’d be getting it completely wrong.’

‘Sure. And with Barbara cuddling him to get at you, and you thumping him for a laugh, it must have done wonders for his sense of humour.’

‘Oh, just for a laugh... You’re a bit like Barbara, exaggerating like that. I didn’t use to hit Serge. What would I do that for? For me, the problem at the time was I was crazy about Barbara and she just wasn’t that interested. Right. Okay. But that’s something else, it’s nothing to do with the kid. It’s not as if...’

‘I know what you mean,’ Jonathan cut in. ‘Another whisky?’

‘You’ve got this unbelievable Scotch right in the middle of the countryside, single malt too, you must be doing all right! D’you have to go far to get it?’

‘I don’t get it. I used to drink, too much, but that’s over. Now I have white wine, with plenty of water.’

‘With water? My God you’re French!... Anyway, it’s all settled down now. Now that Serge isn’t such a little kid, things are a lot better with Barbara, let’s say; it’s going a lot better, after we’ve had a holiday it’ll be just right, I think: in the end, there was no point in all that fuss. We’re going to settle down properly — don’t laugh! That’s what we’re doing, really, I know! Anyway, that’s just the externals, it’s not what’s important.’

‘No, I agree with you, Simon. So... you’re going for two months then?’

‘Oh no, no! One month, I’m not an artist, am I! No, we’re going for a month, in a month’s time.’

‘So what about Serge?’

‘Well... You’d said two months was okay with you, didn’t you? Well, it’s okay with him too, it’s what he wanted to do for his holidays, if it was alright with everyone else, it would be silly for him to stay at home. But, look, don’t you worry: you just tell us what it costs, and I’ll pay you back, anyway! Talking about that, what if I gave you a cheque now. It’s not that we’re really rich, but there’s no reason why you should pay for it. No, really, I was already a bit anxious: I tell you, if you hadn’t sworn...’

‘But it’s true!’ said Jonathan, ‘I really like Serge, and it’s good for me. I’m just worried that he might get bored.’

‘Fine. Ever since he’s started going on and on about it, he’s asked for it! No, I’m all in favour, but... look, I’ll write you a cheque then.’

‘No, there’s no need, Simon. I’ve got everything we need. We’ll see later. The main thing is that your holiday with Barbara goes well. Uh... she can sometimes be a bit

difficult.'

'That's true,' Simon admitted, 'I know where Serge gets it from! You know, in fact, she wasn't that keen on him coming here: there was a real row. There certainly was... D'you know what she wanted to do with him? Send him to her funny farm there, yoga, grated carrots and all.'

'What?'

'I'm telling you. They do summer schools or something in some château or other. You can see Serge! No, and then, I don't know, she seemed to have something against you, I don't know what was going on. You know, though, you've ignored her a bit, these last two years — me too, in fact!'

'You're right. But you know, I work so much. And going to Paris, it's a real expedition. Anyway, she doesn't write to me.'

'In the end, we sorted it out. But I tell you, she really wasn't that keen. I don't feel the same way. As far as I'm concerned, it's for the kid to make his own mind up. If this is what he wants, then fine. Unless it's a problem for you, of course. Look, if it gets to be too much for you, you just say so: he can always come back and he can go to my mother's, or to Barbara's.'

'I shouldn't think it will,' said Jonathan.

'...And what's he getting up to, up there?'

'D'you think I really look tired?' Jonathan asked suddenly.

'Tired? You're crazy!' said Simon. 'You look wonderful. Really wonderful! Damn sight better than in Paris. It must be the countryside. Jesus, if I was in your place... In fact, how is the work getting on?'

'It's all right. But I've done too many drawings, I'll have to start painting a bit again. It's not as hard, and they're easier to sell. It's abstract, it's subversive, they pay, you get rich.'

'I don't care about that, I prefer your paintings, I do. Your drawings, if you don't mind my saying so, they're a bit conformist, to my mind. Perhaps you're too clever, that can make it seem academic!'

'You could be right,' said Jonathan, 'all that work and in the end it's just déjà vu. But I promise you I'll stop drawing. Shall we go into the garden?... And your sculpture, how's that getting on?'

'Hmm...' sighed Simon. 'I have fun, I have fun, that's all. In fact, there's no chance of doing anything serious while I have to do another job. And that could well go on until I retire... Sixty, sixty-five... It's no laughing matter.'

'That's a fine age,' said Jonathan, 'you gain at least ten years, starting that old.'

Simon burst out laughing.

'No, I'm not joking,' said Jonathan softly. 'Really I'm not. But your son is hiding away somewhere.'

Simon went back into the kitchen, called the boy and poured himself another whisky. Time was getting on, it would soon be time to go.

On the threshold, just in front of the little garden, sitting astride his motorbike and revving the engine with little touches to the throttle, Simon made his loquacious and interminable goodbyes. Eventually he put on his helmet and started off headlong down the hill.

Serge hadn't waited for this exhibition before going back into the house. Jonathan, embarrassed, unhappy, full of anxiety, must have decided to wait for the noise to disappear completely before rejoining him there.

'...Are you going to come and look upstairs?' Serge asked shyly, as soon as he had come in.

Jonathan followed him, a little surprised.

'I'm not telling you anything,' murmured Serge again as he climbed the stair with great strides which brought his knees above the waist.

They were in the bedroom. Serge's luggage had not been unpacked, just as Jonathan had imagined. But he'd taken out from his old bag an enormous roll of drawings in watercolour, glued end to end like a papyrus, and he'd hung it up across the room. A paintbox and a damp brush on Jonathan's table showed that Serge had added a few final touches while his father had been talking downstairs. This was the surprise which he had mysteriously been preparing for Jonathan.

The marvellous banner started at the top of the cupboard; then the fat people, the enormous flowers, the crazy houses, the oceans, rivers, forests and brilliant skies ran over the bed, draped themselves over the chest of drawers, lay across the drawing-table, spanned the gap between two chairs and ended in large folds at their feet. There were twenty-five or thirty feet, perhaps more.

Serge looked at the drawings, then at Jonathan, his face all smiling, his arms dangling at his sides.

'I don't know how to draw, I don't,' he explained. 'But these are for you! If you want them. The beginning isn't very good, don't look at it. It was a real bother. I haven't shown it to anyone.'

Jonathan didn't say a word.

'We'll pin it up with drawing pins, all round the walls,' he said eventually, in a colourless voice.

'No, I'll put it away. It's a real mess,' replied Serge, who had misunderstood Jonathan's trouble.

Jonathan, who felt crushed by this misunderstanding, let him roll up the papyrus. Then he pulled himself together again. He ought to choke back his feelings, reject the old doubts, abandon himself to the child. To trust him, to forget so much truth, so much darkness, to believe.

'Serge?'

A beaming Serge unrolled his work and began to explain the drawings.

'Here, there's a mountain. It's Mont Blanc. It's all round and there's someone sitting on top of it. He's got a leg on each side. He's looking to see if the weather is fine. At the bottom, there are cows. They're making cheese! That's that heap at the side, that's the

cheese. They're big fat Camemberts. They're all runny. Now here's somebody dressed up as a sheep, he's looking at the cheese, he's got a stick, he's watching it to make sure nobody steals it. That's water on the mountain, it's running down, like going downstairs, it's a waterfall. And here's an elephant having a drink! He's smaller than the cows. That doesn't matter, because there aren't elephants on Mont Blanc, I know that. Here, there are some flowers. I've put the sun in because the sun is shining. The sun's too small too, but there was no more room, so I did it again at the side, because of the head of the little man on the mountain. That's why there are two of them. There's no room!

'You see, he wants to come down now. But he's frightened so I put the clouds over him because I can't draw him being frightened. It'll be better to see him later. It looks as if it's going to rain.

'Now there's a submarine coming out, there. It's not the same story, but it's the same, now the mountain is green and the man is very small. He's hanging on to the end but it's too pointed so it's broken off. It hits him in the face. I don't know why the submarine is there. That's just the tail of one cow, so as not to draw everything. You can't see the cheeses either, they were silly.

'There, the submarine has got sails like a boat, and there's water all round the mountain. These are the fishes' heads sticking out of the water. This is the captain and he's fishing and looking through binoculars, all at the same time. Because I showed him fishing, because of the water, I made a mistake, it's impossible: I put in the other arm he's using to look through the binoculars, but I didn't take away the arm he's fishing with. If you saw him like that, you'd really think he was working hard!

'After that it's just to see under the water. That's just the water. Here's the sand at the bottom. Here there are different fish. These are the flowers under the sea.'

Holding Serge's neck gave Jonathan a strange feeling. He had the impression that it wasn't Serge he touched, but an indefinite being, more general, almost abstract: *a boy*. Any boy. Something in Serge's physical presence did not belong to him himself.

This feeling was new, troubling, almost repugnant. At six, at eight, the child had been wholly his body, and his body had been wholly him. Now, on the other hand, he had, curiously, a body to be looked at, attractive and expressive, which must be him, and another body to be touched, this anonymous boy's body. A body in excess.

Jonathan wondered whether Serge too now experienced his touching him in a different way. The child seemed to be at ease.

Then perhaps it was only a false impression produced in Jonathan by his fear of becoming a stranger to Serge. He hoped this was so, but his gestures remained shy — even when the child kissed him. Even later that evening, in bed (for the little bed downstairs had been forgotten), when Serge teased the young man with such a particular look of mischief in his eyes that Jonathan was certain that Serge now knew what all this was about.

'No, the little man on the mountain is nothing now. It doesn't matter. There's no more

mountain you see: it's an island now. It's high. It looks like an ice-cream. There's smoke, like Robinson Crusoe. The captain is going to look.

'He's in a forest. The monkey there doesn't look right, no. There are things to eat in the trees. Not real fruit, I made them up. There's a chop. That's an alarm clock — mmm, that ought to be good but it'll be full of pips. These are striped bananas, and all these others I really don't know. But there's a bottle of wine.

'Cos the captain's climbing the tree and he's drinking the whole bottle. He looks drunk! There's his dog wagging his tail, because there was a dog I think. Perhaps he wanted to eat, the dog. Only it was wrong with the dog, so afterwards he isn't there any longer, there's an elephant again. I really like that, elephants. He's little. The captain has made a house in the tree. He's collecting chops, bananas, gruyere. He looks happy. There are butterflies.

If Jonathan had this feeling of strangeness, Serge himself seemed to be just the same.

He had come back to the house to do again what he had been doing two years earlier; and the first day of this summer could have been joined to the last day of the other without any break, without the slightest change to the old rites, the old games, the old pleasures.

Jonathan was wrong: time hadn't passed. Nothing had happened but a long summer, started long ago, which would go on forever. Serge's own life.

'The whole tree's broken. The captain's got fat, eating all that! He's too heavy. He falls down. Look at that, d'you like it? I wanted to show he was too fat, in his shed, and he's burst through it. The planks are exploding!

'Now it's the same thing but from very far away. Very, very far away, I'm telling you. Really, the island, you don't know, do you... It was as small as the moon, with the palm trees there; it was in the sky. And him, he's falling through space, of course. He's thin, I didn't remember to do him fat. Look at the stars: they're not just there to fill it all up, well, not just for that. It's the constellations. It's the real ones from the encyclopaedia.

'That's his submarine arriving. It's atomic. Now it's a rocket. It's never the same little man, I can't draw him the same, just the clothes, only if I've got the right colours.

'Now, between these two pictures, you've got to listen. He's back in his submarine, he's thinking what was the smoke he saw on the island, you remember when he was eating everything, he came because of the smoke. So they came, only the island, they made a mistake, they were on a whale breathing out water like a palm tree, they thought it was an island. A red whale, because I didn't know what colour. But I know it's not red. Or are there any?

'The rocket is very small. There, the whale's mouth, that's how they are, with bars. That's why the captain has a beard. 'Don't laugh, it's true. Because I'd made him a prisoner in the whale's mouth, but I put the bars too close together and you couldn't really see his face. So I put a beard on him so you could see him better. You see, he hasn't shaved for a long time. The whale is brown now, but not on purpose. It is brown, but I

didn't notice. You can see, all the beginning, it's not very good.'

'I know how to make coffee now. But not with that machine. You show me, and then I'll make the coffee. Perhaps it won't be right.'

Serge wanted to help with everything, show off his talents. Less clumsy than before, he applied his new dexterity, his quickness and lightness of touch to tasks useless or bizarre. The kitchen cupboard was completely emptied onto the ground, sorted out and inventoried object by object; an enormous heap of things to be thrown away was collected together, but in reality Serge kept them for himself. Cooking implements, crockery and groceries were put back in place with a window dresser's attention to detail. This too well-organised cupboard wasn't very practical, but if you opened all the doors at the same time, what a sight it was! Serge shut them again with regret. He wanted nothing more than to be asked to fetch things, so as to be able to admire his stacks, rows, alignments and nests, his rankings by size and his staggered displays. Jonathan was unhappy to disturb this order, and waited for the boy to stop paying it attention. Two nights were enough.

Serge's zeal had its moments of excess and its moments of relaxation. He certainly hadn't given up being as lazy and as disorganised as the next fellow; but he was showing that he was no longer a little boy who had to be helped all the time. Apart from that, he really liked the work: because he only did it now and again, and that only when he wanted. The word 'housework' meant nothing to him. Against the background of dirt, slackness and disorder that followed from such a state of mind, the child would display his flashes of activity, repairing with sudden industry the effects of his neglect, suddenly doing a hundred tiny things, emerging from a long phase of negligent disinclination, luminous, transparent and laughing. Jonathan observed the same rhythm, and adjusted to it very well. He was only enchanted by the little boy's lively and extremely intelligent assistance.

'There it's inside a whale. There's a pot of flowers, and some crabs. They really are crabs, aren't they? After that one, they're a lot better.

'And him, there, now there's two of them. There was already one inside, in the whale's stomach. He hasn't got a beard any more, there's no need! They're saying hello.

'Here they've found a door in the whale. I don't know why the other one hadn't discovered it before, you mustn't ask. He must have been stupid. The other one is taking the flowers. They belonged to him. I laugh when I see someone carrying a pot of flowers in the street. That's why. Look, they're going outside!

'It really is a very special whale. Now you can see the other side, there's a door open, like an aeroplane, they've put a ladder because it's too high. It isn't standing on anything, the ladder, they're going to fall into the sea.

'Here, they're swimming. There was nothing to draw, I put the sun in the middle. It's too big. I can swim now, too. Not fast! Well, fast, but not very. Near the sun there is the rocket. It's looking for the captain. It's lost, I think it's later, in the pictures afterwards.

'There it's not the same. There's nothing there, that must be when they arrive. That's

the countryside! Yes, the countryside. Perhaps, if you look.

'There you can see, they've got a chair. They're smoking a pipe. There's a black man on a bike, it's in Africa. There are pineapples in the palm trees. They're difficult to draw. But it's not a real black man, I did him like that.

'Here, I copied a drawing. It's not as good as the other but I didn't have any tracing-paper. The colours are quite like. It's all the animals in Africa. D'you recognise them?... That one, what's that?... That's right. And that one.

'I copied a photo there as well. You tell me which one it is.

'No, it's not that one. That's a mountain, it's called Ruwenzori. Yes! It's three miles. Three miles high! Didn't you know? It's invisible. There's fog all the time. It was a really good photo. At the bottom, that's the jungle.

'Have you been there, to Africa? In a plane you're there straight away. It must cost a lot of money. They've got Boeings. Afterwards, they'll be atomic. You won't even have time to see. That'll be good. All the same, I'd like to go there.

'Yes, we could walk, if you like. I would. But you'd have to walk slowly though. Look at my shoes. See, I wear them down just on that side. I walk all on one side. I don't care, I've got basket-ball boots, it's not worth repairing them.

'In that one, there's still two of them, but it's at the North Pole. That's the photo I had afterwards: they went a long way, they were too hot! It's blue because with white you can't see it. Look! look look look! It must be another elephant. I always draw them pointing the same way. They aren't cold, I forgot to show it.'

'Didn't you have the bed before?'

About a week had passed without Serge showing any interest in the bed. Then he suggested to Jonathan that they should take it up to the bedroom. He wanted to try and sleep all by himself, but he wanted to be with Jonathan.

The young man's bed, it's true, was very narrow for two. And if Serge went to bed and went to sleep cuddled up to Jonathan, in deep sleep he was independent; he drifted towards the edge of the bed and slipped between the tucked-in sheet and the side of the mattress, spending the night in this sort of hammock.

If the furniture was moved, there would be enough room in the bedroom for the second bed. The problem was rather getting it up there. They succeeded, with much patient effort. As for the room downstairs, it became the studio and dining-room.

Simon hadn't lied when he spoke of Serge's present modesty. He undressed by taking his clothes off in bed; and he insisted on washing by himself.

'You mustn't be seen when you're dirty,' he said. With Jonathan, though, he did much more than allow himself to be seen; and at times like that, he didn't care much whether he was dirty or not. But that was different.

This search for bodily independence didn't make Jonathan unhappy. However, it seemed to him that their coupling was less natural as a result; there were minutes of contact, compared to hours and hours of not touching. Gone was the confusion of bodies that had so pleased Serge when he was younger. Their embraces, definable and distinct from the other events of the day, thus became more intense but less pure. This took

Jonathan a long time to get used to. It worried him to have a cock, and then not one, a body, and then not one, according to the child's desire. Then he resigned himself to the banalisation of their love-making, and he wasn't unhappy. Serge could be very lascivious and bold. As soon as it came into his head, he lost all modesty; his interest in the young man's sex was greedy and unflagging; to be caressed anywhere but on his own sex bored him; if he hugged, kissed, or had moments of tenderness, it was rather when he was clothed and shod (for bare feet gave him ideas).

'There, that's it, they're all standing on top of the elephant. He's feeling the wind with his trunk and he's saying goodbye! The other one is little, perhaps it's a child. The captain isn't a captain, I'm saying that because of the submarine. They're just people. It could be you!

'No, it's not you. They've found a ship, but it's just like an ordinary boat, there aren't any sails. No oars either. But they're moving just the same. It's the elephant that's making it go, I think, 'cos he's blowing!

'Ah, it's because he's farting all the time. Hey, that's really pushing the boat along.

'There's another boat. It isn't a proper one. It's more like a flying saucer. Yes, with yellow and green peas. It's got two cannons. It shoots green soup out of the cannons. There's the soup, d'you see it? It's completely crazy! It might be a soup-bowl fallen off a ship, from a liner. Could be. But it's too big! That, it just made me laugh, that's all. It's something that happened when they were travelling.

'Here, it's another adventure. Do you understand the drawing? There's a hole in the water. Here, it stops, and there on the other side, it starts again. They don't know how to get by. They're waving their arms in the air. Oh dear, what's going on!

'It seems there are holes in the sea. There are, but you can go round them. Here, though, it stops, you've got to jump.

'And do you know what I found out?... I said to myself, if there's a hole in the sea, all the water will go into it. So that's what's happening. There you can see the sea falling into the hole, and then the boat has got no water round it. It's on the sand. They've been lucky. The little one is collecting starfish. They put them round their necks. I haven't put the elephant in, but it's still there.'

'At home, d'you know what I do? It's not difficult! I cut the onions up, I put them in the frying pan with the butter, and then when they're golden, I put in the mince, uh, six ounces at least, then I put in two eggs, then I do this (he mixed with his two hands), and then I make a ball, then I flatten it (a thump with the fist), then I put it in the frying pan with plenty of butter, then I eat it. It gets crusty on the outside! But if you don't put salt and pepper it's no good. It's true. I eat it all the time. And spaghetti.'

Serge's appetite, which had always been hearty, was now enormous. It worried Jonathan, who had much less money than when the child first stayed with him. He didn't dare tell him. The meals were wonderful; and every two or three days there were visits to the nearby town, where the council had built a swimming pool, and next to it a water-

sports centre in some old gravel-pits, and Serge had really developed a taste for it; he needed clothes and lots of other things; he read in bed much more than he used to, and would get through two or three small books in an evening. In scarcely a fortnight, Jonathan's monthly payment would be spent.

Clearly, he couldn't write to the boy's parents — he was worried that if he did that they would take him back.

He didn't have any rich or generous friends, certainly not both. He told himself he would have to make real the improvised lie he'd told Simon: he'd start to paint again. Not necessarily nice canvasses properly done for his dealer and his clientele of Huns de luxe: anything that could be sold quickly anywhere. His perfection of draughtsmanship (to which he attached no importance, but he knew he had the fault) allowed him to produce with pen or brush, without even looking, the prettiest forest glades and the most cheering country scenes to be seen in any supermarket — not to mention female nudes, which he was really good at, having copied so often from permitted works, and masterpieces at that.

It was selling them that embarrassed him. And apart from that, in summer businesses were hardly ticking over. He should have gone down to the Mediterranean, and sketched profiles outside cafés in the evening. People would be pleased; he knew how to make a likeness, very like, too much, or not so much. He'd lived from that for a year, before, during his first stay in France. He'd been eighteen. He'd made enough money to fulfil the only desire inspired in him by Paris: to go elsewhere. Which is what he'd done.

But he'd come back, all the same, much later. For him, there was something hollow, frozen and senile about France, which suited his unsociable nature, and which he'd never seen anywhere else. And the shifting light on this edge of a continent, neither grey nor bright, neither fleshy nor diaphanous, neither veiled nor radiant — like the impression made by some dim person who tries very hard to seem not brilliant, but pleasant and interesting — this light, which never dominated the sight and which never flattered things, this light left his eyes in peace. Eyes too fragile, so captivated by the *already created* as to render the artist in him impotent. Only the weakness of art had given him the strength to be a painter in spite of the perfection of what exists.

He had understood neither this orientation of his life, nor the violent enthusiasm which his work had aroused ever since his teenage years. At least he'd had reasons to paint and draw, even if he couldn't imagine the reasons for the spectator's enthusiasm. At present he no longer had any reason to do anything. His only present, his only future, was Serge, his brother.

So, do anything at all to get the money.

He wrote to the publisher who'd commissioned, and then rejected, the Sade illustrations. It wasn't yet August; he received a favourable reply. Jonathan didn't know the book he was meant to illustrate; it belonged to the realm of French literature, which he didn't know at all well. He would have accepted in any event, if there hadn't been a problem: he had demanded, if he were commissioned, a substantial down-payment — almost the whole cost of the work. The publisher, perhaps alarmed by his previous experience, had offered only a tiny advance. Jonathan, by a sort of reflex action hitherto

nourished by his indifference to money, but now out of the question, refused the commission.

He'd also written to his dealer, to find out the lie of the land. His reply was late, and described the terrible state of the market; recalled the large number of his paintings still unsold; suggested to Jonathan that he should produce a dozen small paintings, decorative, very clear and very simple, such as he had already produced two or three times before, which had been so well received. They could be sold pretty quickly, and in this case, the dealer would advance him thirty per cent of the total value. On top of the monthly payments, of course.

The sum offered, though modest, was enough for Jonathan and made him happy. It would be enough to cover Serge's stay. He did the six small canvasses in a week. Coldly, he repeated himself. The dealer was enchanted and sent the money. It was a little less than expected; the paintings, it seemed, should have been a little less small, so... Jonathan smiled as he saw this discount, which came to a few hundred francs: the rich have got their secrets.

'They've found a little pool in the sand. There's just one fish, and he's sticking his head out. I wanted to give him arms, look, so he's got arms. The fingers aren't any good. It looks like a comb, to me. With teeth missing.

'Afterwards I thought, those arms are stupid. So I put that on his head — I don't know what it's called but you use it to put candles in, with three lighted candles, that looks pretty! — to show it's not real.

'D'you really think it's good? I do it just for fun, that! Sometimes I do proper drawings, but it takes too long. D'you remember the animals in Africa? Well, I did those in pencil, then went over them again after. Every day. A week at least! You know, you know when I do them, the drawings, I do them in my bedroom. 'Cos Barbara, now, I've got a desk, she bought it forme. That was... it was the Easter holidays. But it's my father who's got money. My mother's lazy. She doesn't even paint any longer... You haven't seen her, have you? She's got thinner! She's pretty now, I think.

'You know, Jonathan,' and here Serge's voice became very low and hesitant, '...if you were married to her instead of my father.'

'We'll make a big garden again! Like all the flowers you had before. I've got the stones from avocados, because Barbara eats them. D'you know what you do? You stick matches in, three of them, just like that, it makes it stand, in a glass, because you put some water in a glass, and then after, the top end, it opens up, it cracks, and then the shoot comes out. And then there are leaves. Then it dies, p'raps that's not very good, that. Do you know what to do?'

'No, I don't eat them.'

'I don't either. They're bitter. It's like artichokes. I don't like artichokes. Have you seen your flies?'

'Why, what's the matter?'

‘That’s what. That, that, that!’

‘You see, the little one waves when he sees the fish. I show them saying hello to the captain, well, the other one. There they are. They’re shaking hands. You have to know, because doing hands is hard. Can you show me how to do them...?’

‘Here, there’s everything. It’s funny. I’m not going to tell you, you can see for yourself.’

Serge knew perfectly well that Jonathan and his mother didn’t get on together. His remark about their being married was not a reproach. He hadn’t delayed in talking to Jonathan about the subject that preoccupied him above all: why Jonathan hadn’t been to see him, hadn’t even written to him for the past two years. This was the real reproach.

But there had been no misunderstanding. Jonathan had Barbara’s letters and showed them to the boy. Now Serge could read and understand; and despite the gentleness and delicacy of his ten years, he hadn’t changed his character. When he saw what opinions his mother had ascribed to him, and with what lies she had deceived Jonathan, he blushed all over, tore up the letter in his hand as if twisting someone’s neck, burst out in tears, knocked over the chairs and showered the cupboard with kicks. But he said nothing, not even an insult; then shyly, Jonathan spoke, because the content of the letters didn’t explain everything. It was the first time that Jonathan had confided in the child.

But Serge knew all that.

‘That doesn’t carry on either. They got on my nerves, both of them. I wanted to draw a house. So I drew yours. Of course! D’you think you can recognise it? You know, I remembered all the mice, so I’ve put them all over the place. There’s a few too many, more than you need. And I did the little island. You remember. Hey, I’ll make another one, tomorrow! But a big one!’

‘What would be good is a whole river, eh, we could start at the rubbish-tip and go all the way to the door. It’d need lots of water. If you put cement, the water stays. Could we do that, put some cement?’

‘And look! D’you see there? I’m at the door! I’ve got my bottom behind! I’m going into the kitchen! It’s Madame Morand took my underpants!... No, really, nobody goes there at all?’

In fact, after she died, people did come, now and again, to look at the old woman’s house. As these visitors were never the same, Jonathan had concluded that the house was for sale. On whose behalf?

Nothing had changed; or rather, things were looking better. Up above, on the attic floor, a window had opened; and the wind, blowing it about, had shattered the panes. In the garden there grew isolated vegetables, disorganised and haggard, with neither the comfortable air of vegetables well looked after, nor the free and simple attitude of wild

plants. The paths were overgrown with scarlet pimpernel and dandelion. Jonathan's bindweed, crossing the fence, had covered one of the beds. The gooseberry bush had produced its big opaque fruits which burst in the mouth; the fruit on the trees was maggoty.

If he were rich, Jonathan would willingly have bought the house — and the one he rented. He would have left the fence, and kept the old woman's things intact, so as to have a strange place to discover. Unfortunately, they had already taken away the linen, the crockery, her knick-knacks, the best was gone.

'There was one thing I shouldn't have done, but I'll tell you just the same. I went to the supermarket near us, near my mother's, where they go, I'm always running messages. I bought a litre of wine.

'I drank the whole litre. I vomited it all up after. Later, I took it down to the bin, we haven't got a rubbish-chute.

'It was just to try. To start with it was nice. But afterwards it was no good. It was too much, eh, a litre. I never drink any.

I never tried again. It makes you feel too sick. Just the same, the beginning!... Just one glass! A little little glass! 'Cos I was sad, I was more sad afterwards. It must be true what they say. You don't think about anything after. Have you ever done that?

'Now I won't go back home. Never. Never!

'No, I know we can't.

'You know something I read! It was in the paper. It was a boy, he killed someone. It was his father's gun. They didn't do anything to him. I'm telling you that, see...

'Only, *afterwards*, they don't let you go where you want. It's not worth it. Otherwise, I could.' Jonathan was bored by the swimming in town. They had to try the canoe, too. It was nice to see Serge naked, or almost, among all these people. It was nice to see him messing around. It was nice to swim with him. What was unbearable, all this time, was to be normal.

'It's a big fat bottom. How do I know it's fat? Just the same, it's really funny, a big bottom!' (Noise of repeated farts.)

'Now it's not your house any longer. It's to show lots of aeroplanes. They make red white and blue smoke. They're going really fast. You can see the head inside.

'But look, the story is starting again. That one first of all, perhaps you've already seen it? You see, it's in the zoo, they're cutting their tusks. You know, you take bread, him, he's very small but he can see everything. He really can see you! So he comes along with his big thing, he takes it off you, it's like a dog when it licks you — but it's really quick. Elephants are really good!

'Haven't they got any here? Not in a town over there? That's a pity.

'At home, you could have little ones. Oh little ones, eh! As big as that though! A big cow! I've seen little ones, I have. They haven't got eyelashes.'

Serge really is very big. Children of ten are thought of as larvae with dead brains; and many of them, in fact, are even worse. But Serge, Serge indeed had resisted.

Which made him already familiar with unhappiness. This surprised Jonathan, and hurt him. While two years before he had loved a little boy who had seemed a stranger, almost, to the suffering of the world, now he had to deal with someone like himself: a man of ten years old, who lived and knew the same things as Jonathan; but who believed that to be with Jonathan was to save himself from this knowledge, to recover from it, to make of it an ordinary nightmare, from which you free yourself in the morning with a laugh. For Serge, it was still possible for the world to be like the people one likes, and not like the people who rule.

Jonathan knew this wasn't true. He didn't say so. And this was the one silence that still stood between them.

'There are five of them, in fact. If you count the bottoms. Each one is a different colour. They're eating really big flowers. There must be flowers like that, somewhere. You can use them for an umbrella.

'It's in pictures you see them.

'And look! there's the water coming back again. They get out of it, look at them climbing up. It's a ladder made of elephants. The one on the bottom has got his trunk up in the air so he can breathe, and a periscope. He mustn't drown! I haven't put the water too high.

'But it's a real problem for them, just the same. Now look! The one on top is doing like they do in the cartoons, he's using his ears to fly! It's not terribly good, you have to explain. The others see that, they say, oh, that's a good idea! And they go. It all works out alright. And I put the water all the way up to the top. Aah!'

After a month of this new life, Serge had asked if it wasn't costing too much. That was the time, too, when they began, with a hundred hesitations, to talk about the autumn. They really must... must what? What could they do? How could they keep *them* away. How could they stay together?

'We mustn't say anything to them,' Serge concluded, but this was a precaution, not a solution.

As for Jonathan, he already thought the game was up; he dreamed the impossible; he said nothing.

'Yes! It's the rocket from before. It's big, to hold five elephants.

Or perhaps they've shrunk. Like that, it's ordinary.

'They're in the sky again. The stars are different, it's the night. You know my father's got binoculars, really big ones! I borrowed them, if you stand at the window, and you look at the moon, if you use the binoculars you can see everything up there! The big blue patches. It's beautiful. If it's a quarter moon you can't see a lot. But it's really beautiful!

'I saw the photos of when they went up there. It doesn't look very good, from close up.

But there were photos of rocks, coloured ones. They're a secret, you can't buy them. The rocks.

'I would have liked to have some as well. It doesn't matter, I put in all the sky. The real one, I told you.

'That one, well. He's going for a walk. It's a sea-snake. But he's going for a walk in the sky. He must have thought of it suddenly. He's laughing. He's not nasty. But they're frightened, sitting there on the rocket. He's big!

'I wanted to make them say "How d'you do?" but I didn't want to give the snake arms like the fish. What would have been good would have been for him to wag his tail, like a dog, but I don't know how to draw that!

'So he's dead too, the dog. It didn't hurt?

'When you die in the ordinary way, d'you think it hurts? I wouldn't like that, not really. So, you go to sleep? Is it like going to sleep?

'But if you kill someone, then it hurts them just the same? Can they feel it? With a gun, say?... And with the guillotine? In America they kill people with gas. They say it takes ten minutes. Or what about the electric chair then! That must be strange. It's funny, electricity, it tickles. Have you ever tried, with a battery?

'It has to be a new one. Not the round ones for torches. There are two things sticking out like that. You've got to touch them both at the same time. With your tongue!

'If we had a torch we could go for a walk during the night.' Serge didn't like humorous cartoons so much. He preferred little black and white adventure comics, with their often hideous covers. He read *Satana*, *Buffalo Bill*, *Harry Sprint*, *Colt*, *Mystery Woman*, *Atomic*, *Strike Force*, *Tom Berry*, *Brik*, *Jingo*, *Fantastic*, *Crime Stories*, *Hallucination*, *Zara the Vampire*, *Thrills*, *Posse*, *It was midnight...*, *Anticipation*, *Eclipse*, *Demon*, *X 12*, *Genius*, *Avenger*, *Wolfpack*, *Zorro*, *Don Z* and countless others, which he chose according to the picture on the cover, and then a quick flick through. It was difficult, this, he explained. First of all you had to look inside to make sure you hadn't read it already, but not look too much, so as not to read ahead and lose any of the surprise. The solution was to squint a bit. This made the pictures fuzzy, and if, through this fog, he recognised some detail, he would take a proper look, worry about reading too much, and then cry out, relieved:

'No, I've already got it!'

For he took an incomparable pleasure, in bed in the evening, in deflowering a really promising comic book, completely untouched. It would make him forget even Jonathan, and he would go to bed at sunset.

Not having anything to read, though, did not leave him idle. He had dozens of ways of occupying himself after the evening meal. Comics were rather the ritual close of a day spent in town, when he would come home, worn out with swimming, rowing, capering about, gossiping and the sun, and he would treat himself, as soon as the meal was over, by going to bed, where, with a good light, and cosily tucked in with a packet of biscuits and a glass of iced lemonade within hand's reach, he could make a start on the new comics they had brought back with them. This ritual required, finally, that everything downstairs should be carefully tidied away, and that the little bed should have been made (the least

wrinkle in the sheet under his bottom, the tiniest crumb of biscuit, and everything would be spoilt), and that Jonathan, in the other bed, should be lying down too, reading quietly, with himself and his bedding properly in order.

So Jonathan pretended to read. In fact, he couldn't take his eyes away from the child; he was much happier to look at him here than at the swimming pool; he admired him; he was overcome by a warm and tender passion; it was his greatest happiness.

Their beds were at right angles to each other and formed a T, its two strokes separated by a gap a yard wide. Jonathan had the vertical; his head touched the far wall, his feet were towards Serge, ensconced on the other bar of the T, which lay along the opposite wall with the head in the left hand corner.

In this corner, white pillows at his back, there sat the papy-rivorous inhabitant Jonathan liked to watch, as he sat high upon his own island.

He made many quick sketches, without saying anything about it. He didn't show these portraits to the boy, and he hid the sheets in a large book he used to draw in. Over there on the island of the comic books, things were happening. Serge was munching biscuits; the silence was such that one could hear the sound of biscuits being crushed between the teeth, a sound like that of a geological event, slow, massive, regular and subterranean. For Jonathan, this discreet accompaniment to the comics was a magic song which charmed his ear and made the pencil drop from his fingers. Without the calm, the particular resonance of evening, the granular, sandy murmur of biscuit being ground up without benefit of saliva would have been inaudible; it belonged to twilight; its mysterious occurrence at this furtive hour was amongst the rarest of zoological phenomena, only ever observed by naturalists of the greatest patience and power of attention, at the end of long tropic journeys, at the hour when the monkeys have ceased to cry and the predators of the night have not yet begun to prowl.

Serge spent more time removing the sticky paste from his teeth with his little finger than in actually eating the biscuits themselves. It was difficult to decide which of these two activities he preferred. The sounds of mouth, tongue and throat which accompanied this cleaning of the teeth and gums were themselves not in the least exotic; they were pleasantly organic, charming and human, and they produced an irresistible desire to share in that mouth's tea-time treat.

When the provisions were exhausted, the lemonade swallowed and the reading well under way, the inhabitant of the T relaxed his behaviour. First of all he gave up the canonical posture of the child tucked up in bed. He pushed back the sheets, turned onto his side, or on his stomach, his feet towards the pillow. The pyjamas he always wore were annoying him — the weather was warm — he murmured:

'It's hot isn't it? I'm hot, I am!... I'll put it on later,' and having unbuttoned himself and taken down his trousers (more or less preserving his modesty by putting in the right place a sleeve or the corner of some clothing left lying on the bed), he started to read again. As soon as this was done, Jonathan, who himself continued to sleep naked, felt entitled to throw back his own sheets — his big book serving to cover his loins.

‘Those six pieces of paper, they’re all the same picture. What a view! It’s the moon, of course. There’s nothing to explain. It’s not really a story, but it’s more beautiful. Don’t you think? I like to look at them! Those I look at a lot! But not now.

‘You have to see them all at the same time, otherwise it’s not as good.

‘There were enough elephants! If only I could draw them differently, at least. But always pointing left!...

‘The boy is here, on the moon. He’s looking at the ground. There’s nothing there for him to eat. He’ll have to go down again. Can you imagine if you had to go all that way to buy things to eat. But all the same...

‘He’s going hunting. He hasn’t got a gun, so he can’t catch birds. He’s looking in the grass, it’s very long. It’s as tall as he is.

‘Those are the animals he finds. They’re vegetables with shoes on. A big potato. A leek. More potatoes. They’re running fast. They’re frightened.

‘He’s caught a potato, and he eats it on a skewer. And he can use the shoes for himself, that’s handy.

‘Then he has a nap. There’s a rocket leaving the earth. They’re going to look for them. It’s like before. He never gets a rest.

‘The noise wakes him up, he’s going to hide. But he falls into a hole. It’s full of cracks, the moon. He’s falling. Don’t look any further! First of all, tell me what you think there is at the bottom.’

And there were the night-time walks, each of them carrying an electric torch. Then the ungrateful countryside became beautiful; and you felt you could do anything.

Jonathan knew the neighbourhood well, the lanes, the fields, the streams and woods, so they needn’t worry about getting lost. But Serge had no intention of being taken on a guided tour. Soon over-excited, especially when they reached a patch of forest, he escaped from Jonathan and went exploring. He wasn’t nervous; he soon communicated his enthusiasm to Jonathan, for whom the magic of the forest and the night had long ago died out — but who got so involved again that he ended up being frightened of the dark himself, as soon as he no longer saw the boy’s light dancing in the dark.

Serge enjoyed a kind of hide-and-seek. He said:

‘You go that way and I’ll go this way. Then we walk up to a thousand. You don’t have to count all the numbers really. You just go on until the time. Then we turn back. But you mustn’t hide the lamp. And the first one to see, wins.’

The boy had the cunning to climb a tree. He let Jonathan disappear, then ascended through the branches to the height where you sway about and you can see the stars, then the whole sky. The air was cool, up there! Then, in a very loud voice, he called for Jonathan, but he had put out his lamp, which was attached to a loop on his trousers by a piece of string.

After a while, Jonathan approached, a little disoriented, not very sure about the shouts. Serge didn’t see his lamp, didn’t even hear his footsteps; but the young man’s voice was clear.

‘Well, where am I then?’ Serge cried, enchanted, as he discovered his victim within a few yards of the tree.

Some rocky outcrops with little caves, a clean-enough stream reached by climbing two fences and slipping underneath some barbed wire, served as locations for similar games. Serge didn’t give up until he was really tired, and it was only then that he suggested they should return home. It might be eleven o’clock, or midnight. There would often be a long way to walk back, getting lost and finding the way again. The boy would drag his feet a bit, but he was never less than cheerful. He was making up ideas for tomorrow evening.

‘It was an ordinary town, with cars. Just that! It was very strange for it to be there, wasn’t it!’

‘You know, they’re not real stories, because I don’t write anything. It’s to do the drawing. And there’s some that aren’t very good, I haven’t put them in. But they’re getting better. At the beginning they were all like that.’

‘Did you do stupid pictures? When you were small?’

If Serge’s manner was now very affectionate, and sometimes very demonstratively so, he had however become less sociable. Children his own age hardly attracted his attention now; as for adults, he never looked at them. He said nothing about his parents; from time to time there would be word of them, a postcard; for a few moments his expression would cloud over, or become absent, then he seemed to forget all about it.

His curiosity about Jonathan grew. He demanded stories, wanted to know all about his life. Jonathan did what he was told, said what he could. He found this horrible. He liked neither to lie nor to simplify; he had to.

The young boy’s beauty also troubled Jonathan, and he couldn’t get used to it. He hoped it would be fleeting; he sometimes thought, with a certain sadness, of the Serge he knew before, who did not strike the eye, or who wasn’t beautiful, like this one, apart from, or in addition to himself.

This impression kept Jonathan shy. He never dared to take the initiative in their couplings. He almost regretted that they had taken place. He had an infinite need of them. Without Serge’s kindness, his ease and his vulgar greed, those moments would have been hard to bear.

They had always fucked a bit. This is what had astonished Jonathan when in Paris he’d slept alongside the child — then hardly seven years old — who would turn his back on him and go to sleep with his bottom pressed into the hollow of the young man’s thighs, both of them curled up together. In the morning he would regain the position, and once, without saying a word, he slipped his hand behind him, took the sex that lay along the divide of his buttocks, and moved his hips so as to put it just at the hole. Jonathan didn’t dare move, and pretended to be still asleep. But that very evening, when they were in bed and had indulged in various caresses, they were again in the same position; and Jonathan, as the boy’s hole was still wet with saliva, pushed in his sex. He had not imagined it so elastic. When he had gone in about the length of a finger, he heard Serge, his voice calm,

murmur simply:

‘That hurts a bit.’

He withdrew straight away, and would not start again. The disproportion terrified him, although Serge, for his part, seemed quite unaware of it.

Later, the child repeated the gesture. Jonathan understood better than the pleasures of this little body. He didn’t penetrate, or hardly, but in this way masturbated the anus at length, until he flooded it, then wiped it dry, unless Serge demanded, as he did on some later occasions, with placid tyranny:

‘No, you must carry on when it’s wet.’

The thing was part of their routine, without occupying a privileged place. As for Serge, after various low and hesitant provocations, he had found means to amuse himself with the young man’s bottom, although for orgasms he relied on his hands.

So, for a long time this sodomy had been mixed up with other pleasures; among them, it was nothing special, it went unnoticed. Only the child’s growing up, or the length of their intimacy, had gradually modified the nature of the penetrations — much deeper, but still almost static, on Jonathan’s part; more skilful, less facetious, longer and more solidly implanted, on Serge’s.

A development which continued through that summer. But an outside event had also intervened. In fact, Serge told Jonathan that a little while before the holidays, he’d sucked a boy of fifteen — who had also fucked him, without reserve. It was one of the crowd of men and girls of all ages, more or less, who used to visit Barbara’s. The suggestion, abrupt, had come from the teenager; Serge had agreed without fuss. Nothing came of it; the elder boy, having done his bit, must have got the jitters, and had never set foot in the house again.

This story left Jonathan perplexed. He hadn’t imagined that Serge could have done such a thing; the child spoke of it disdainfully, with a laugh in his voice — all the people who hung around with Barbara were idiots. He was, however, just a tiny bit proud of what had happened, Jonathan could see it clearly. But the false notions the young painter still entertained about children, despite himself, prevented him from being able to interpret and understand the event.

Nor did he conclude that now Serge would be willing to go further than before, that his desires might be more focussed, nor that he might take bolder initiatives. In this he was wrong.

It wasn’t a question of pleasures that Serge loved for love of Jonathan; he sought them out for themselves. When he thought of Jonathan, he hugged him; when he thought of cock or arse, he used it. It was this carefreeness which enabled Jonathan to bear these encounters, which otherwise would have so intimidated him as to force him to give them up. As Serge passed without transition, without any signal, according to whim, from what was ‘sexual’ to what was not, and vice versa, and liked to deal with the young man as if he, on his side, had no actual personal desires of his own, Jonathan was cast down and comforted in turn, unhappy at being alone in his desire, glad no longer to be so, sexed or unsexed according to the unpredictable motions of the child, of whom he was himself no more than the place, flesh and mirror.

‘It’s the people in the town who are special. They’ve only got heads and feet. I did lots and lots of heads like that. They haven’t any shoes. They’re as big as him. You realise, the heads are as big as that, at least! You’d be in the street, and hey, look! Wouldn’t you be frightened?’

‘But they’re not dangerous, look. They seem to be fed up. They’re not paying any attention to him. There are arms instead of ears. Like the dogs there that have got long ones, really long. You can’t see if there are any women, I should have put them, eh, it would have been good!’

‘That one you can see from the back, like me before. You see, he hasn’t got a neck, that’s his bottom down there. They don’t wear clothes.’

‘They’re just ideas, I don’t know where I get them.’

‘How d’you do, how d’you do! They all take each other’s ears, uh, their hands. What if I said hello to you like that. Hello there mate! Aah!’

‘The cars haven’t got any wheels either. There are shoes again, big boots, clogs. You’d only have to give them ears and tails and you’d have animals.’

Serge has Jonathan’s head on his thighs, lying there like a curled-up cat. First of all he touches it, scratches at it, strokes it. Then he starts to scratch a bit too much, to wobble it up and down, to tickle the ear with a hair. Jonathan gives up and gets onto his feet. Perhaps it’s better.

Serge empties the shopping basket, and reads the label on the toilet-paper.

‘Four hundred centimes to wipe your bum,’ he shouts out, ‘That’s expensive by the hour!’

Jonathan is disconcerted by this complex arithmetic, but Serge is probably right. A long exercise in mental arithmetic while making the meal.

‘He’s found a machine to escape, it’s a machine with pedals and steam-pipes, but really, to make it work you have to talk into that loudspeaker there. Then that wheel goes round, that makes the chain go round, and so on. He’s not sitting down properly. What he’s discovered is that if he says dirty words, the machine goes very very fast. If he says ordinary words, it doesn’t go fast. He drives it with the pedals. He’s shouting.’

‘He must have said something really dirty, it’s flying now. I didn’t do it the same again. Just think of copying it all. That’s the smoke it makes with the dirty words. He knows a lot!’

‘He’s out of the hole, he’s flying out again. But the rocket has seen him, it’s following. He’s thinking, it was silly of me to come out. He hasn’t even got a helmet to get back to earth. You see, on the moon he can breathe without anything, but it doesn’t help, he can’t leave.’

‘There are pointed mountains like those down there. He’s flying over the top. The rocket hasn’t noticed and it crashes into them. Bang! He’s really happy.’

‘He’s not saying any more dirty words, and the machine is coming down. Down there, there are trees you can eat, like for the captain, in fact, who...

‘I’m always doing things the same, that’s why I stopped. I prefer to do things that don’t exist. All the trees where you eat. The things to eat I cut them out and then I glued them in the trees, they’re adverts, there was all that in a fridge!’

Serge was astonishingly active. His productions multiplied everywhere; Jonathan understood how they had been able, a century earlier, to get kids to work a twelve- or thirteen-hour day in the factory. It was impossible to imagine a more generous source of energy. Except that just as he expended his energy with such reckless prodigality, he refilled himself with food, the way coal is fed to a railway engine. If he had two hands to work at something, he seemed to have a third to eat at the same time.

The little garden had become a landscape worthy of the drawings on the papyrus. The colours even looked like watercolour. To go from the kitchen door to the garden gate, you now crossed a whole countryside with all its numerous features of landscape. But it was a pity to see it from the plane, at the height of an adult’s head; it had been created on all fours, and it was on all fours that it needed to be travelled through. And the roads, although excellent — very smooth to the touch — were very narrow for big knees like Jonathan’s.

‘Afterwards, I said to myself, well, that’s good! To glue things, see.

‘To cut things out and mix them up with the drawings. I did all that there. The black and white ones I coloured.’

But how short these two months were. Serge hardly liked any longer to get on with things by himself. Jonathan was taken on as a labourer. He was asked for his advice on a technical problem; otherwise, he was given the boring tasks that a bigger body did better. Serge kept the design and the fiddly bits for himself.

And finally, every three or four hours, Jonathan would be taken to a corner, to serve the needs of the ‘warrior’s rest’. These pauses were short and simple: Serge would want to be sucked and masturbated; he masturbated the young man at the same time, for the pleasure of seeing the skin slide up and down on the big cock. And Serge, as soon as he had his own orgasm, would say, without batting an eyelid:

‘That’s it. Stop now!’

Jonathan would stop. Flies were done up again. Jonathan, for his part, wasn’t concerned to have an orgasm or not. They turned back to other physical activities which had the advantage of not coming to an abrupt end because of an orgasm. It might be said that in the economy of his days, Serge was successively solicited by one part of his body or another, and satisfied each according to its requirements. Certain parts, such as the legs or eyes, were almost insatiable; others like the cock or the stomach were easy to satisfy with a simple gesture, hour after hour; as for the traffic of the anus, turds or cock, its short duration was compensated for by its intensity.

This distribution of the child's activities reminded one of a farmer, who was obliged, from morning to night, to provide food for innumerable animals. Cows, pigs, ducks, pigeons and hens, the geese to be crammed, the lambs to be fussed over, the pullets to be fattened on rice pudding, greenery for the rabbits, saucers for the cats, salad things for the tortoises, flies for the chameleon, mice for the boa constrictor — then the horse to be rubbed down, the giraffe to be combed, the elephant to be showered, dogs to be patted, bikes to be greased, flowers to be watered, the dead to be buried, crocodiles to be tickled and whales to be soothed to sleep. This made up an immeasurable body, around which the young boy bustled about indefatigably. His body, the world itself.

'I like that, geography. It's what I like best. I've got all the maps. I saw some in a shop, in 3-D, for the mountains. They're plastic, you can see everything. You could put water, where all the rivers are. I didn't try, I haven't got any. But I think you could!

'That's what it's for, you see, the drawing. To do the same thing. It's just France, with the Loire, the Seine, the Garonne, the Rhone, the Rhine. And the little ones that go into them, d'you know the names? You don't do you! ...I know them. Because I learn them.

'It's not 3-D like they do, I don't know how. They have pictures on top, that's the thing. You know, I've done heaps. But I've only put that one out, because it's the best.

'It goes with the other drawing, it's the same colour. It's when he's eaten, he sleeps, he wakes up, it's Earth! Yes, it was a dream. It was to get him back there, I didn't know how. You can say, it's people dreaming, they think things are happening to them, and then afterwards it's not true! Like that it works. It does, doesn't it, more or less. But that doesn't matter. It's only because you're going to tell me you can't understand anything.'

'But you'll come to Paris, won't you? You'll come?

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders in embarrassment: 'Your parents, if they see me... Especially your mother.' 'I know.'

Since he'd discovered Barbara's misdeeds, Serge had been wondering. Most of all, he found it difficult to understand his mother's tactics. As soon as Serge and Jonathan met, the woman's lies were worth nothing; so why had she uttered them? Jonathan had his own ideas about it, but they weren't easy to explain to the child. In the first place, Barbara was frivolous: she acted, reacted, with the structures of the world, with things and people, each day as it came. She was then a good liar, and easy to deceive herself.

Secondly, she wasn't bad. She couldn't see the importance of anything; her kindnesses and her cruelties both came from this same incapacity to see anything but herself, just herself at that precise moment. She was one of these people who murder without wanting to kill, who save a life without knowing. Short-sighted, with an enormous navel.

And finally, she felt that she had over her child an absolute right, which she might enjoy according to her whims, and which authorised all the contradictions. Serge served her as a reserve human being when there was no one else left. He was a doll on whom she could experiment with those activities she would try again later on less lowly victims. A partner for rehearsal, for stage design and research. Whence the incoherence in her

behaviour towards him: it depended on the play.

But it was clear that in all these theatres, Jonathan himself was the enemy and the danger. Barbara probably didn't think particularly unfavourably of him; his problem, his clear qualification as unconditional enemy, was simply that Serge preferred him to her.

This was the problem now. If the man and the child were to meet, Barbara would feel injured; and as Simon definitely seemed too spineless to line up with the two boys, their whole future seemed to be in the hands, or in the claws, of this woman. So they would need to deceive her. The question was how?

'You can come when she's not there!' Serge suggested. 'How would I know?'

'I'll tell you!'

'And if she comes back when I'm at your house?'

'Well, we'll invent something.'

'Okay. But it wouldn't work twice. She's got it in for me, and she knows why I'd come. She knows well enough.'

'So what can we do?'

This wasn't a conclusion. It only meant that they couldn't plan ahead. It would be a guerilla war, relying on expedients and improvisations.

This situation reminded Jonathan miserably of an adultery and its shabby conspiracies. How to meet and to love without the knowledge of a jealous husband. Except that here the husband was a mother, because the wife was a little boy.

'We'll have to decide, just the same,' Serge insisted.

But a wife over whom the husband had unlimited rights, such as no longer exist in real cuckoldry. The enjoyment of such powers by this nameless marriage, maternity, explained Jonathan's reply to another question of Serge's:

'But what could she do to you?'

'She could call the cops,' said Jonathan. 'She's not bad, you know. No, I really mean it. But we're not entitled to anything, that's all. And it's not her that's going to give it to us.'

'I could kill her. Only that...'

Jonathan lowered his eyes. He was thinking rather of killing himself. But the child was right. Jonathan's death, that too would have been a murder: for suicide doesn't exist. One is always killed by somebody.

But they needed to get away from this talk of death. Serge's thought, too energetic, too straightforward, didn't suit a situation as delicate as their own. Jonathan forced himself to become accustomed to uncertainty. He hardly succeeded. Serge imagined things according to his own experience. How to tell him that their amorous encounters, for example, were not what he believed, not what he lived himself, not what he innocently and frivolously insisted upon, in the perfection of his personality as yet intact. How to tell him it was a crime, to be corroborated by commissioning doctors to spread apart his buttocks; and that their pleasures would bring Jonathan ten years in prison, and bring upon Serge a flood of psychotherapy, torture without instruments.

Jonathan's silence on this subject meant their discussions about the future could have no meaning. But never, never could he explain to the freest of men, the purest of boys, that he was a criminal.

‘When I grow up, I’m going to do underwater fishing. No, eh, I won’t kill them! I know you don’t like it. We eat them just the same. But no I won’t. Don’t you worry!

‘Anyway, you know, we don’t have to eat them any more. I prefer beefburgers, see.

‘No, it’s to go under water, You have a gas mask, you know, for oxygen. It’s heavy with the bottles! And d’you know what, they have them when they go to the Himalayas as well. Have you seen pictures? ...It would be good if they worked for two people. I wouldn’t mind doing both!

‘But you know it’s hard, you have to learn for a really long time. There’s Cyril, he’s ten like me, his father took him. He’s got everything, with flippers and a mask like that. Where you breathe, it’s a thing you put in your mouth, you suck it! I’ve tried it! It makes the air go in you! It was quite strong! His father’s nice. He calls them all dumbos and his brother is Celestin, he’s little, and then there’s a baby, their little sister, actually, that’s Julie! Like our cat, remember. We’ve still got him. But he goes roaming.

‘So, it’s in the sea again, with a big octopus.

‘You know, you can eat them, octopuses. There are tins, there are really small ones, as big as that. It stings, because of the sauce. They kill them in the eye. Whop!

‘That, you don’t know. It’s in the microscope, but it’s bigger. They’re in the water as well, it’s what all the animals eat. Except sharks! I’m going to ask my father for a microscope. You see all the tiny things in the sea. They’re pretty.’

If Serge’s vigour contrasted with his new lightness of appearance, he had his periods, or minutes rather, of disembodiedness, during which Jonathan, on the other hand, had to rediscover all his weight.

It wasn’t that Jonathan tried so hard at all other times to fade into the background. But he was certain that to show himself, to be who he was, would harm the child. Adults who are proud of it, even the best of them, he thought, did nothing but spread a miasma. Authorised — by love, or the interest that another has in them — to show themselves, to be free, to express themselves, they did no better than display a hideous mish-mash of infirmities, grotesque sincerities, diseased affectivity, manic possessiveness and greedy narcissism. The times allowed nothing else in the guise of humanity. It was better to recognise it, and incapable of doing anything about it, simply forbid yourself from entangling people you loved — especially children.

‘That’s in the water as well. It’s a little house where someone lives. There’s all the garden with the vegetables. When you go and pick the vegetables, it’s not snails, it’s octopuses inside! You have to wash them really well! The fishes eat spinach. It’s always full of holes, isn’t it. It’s a pity, ‘cos it’s nice. With plenty of onions and then butter. I don’t know if he’s got any butter down there.

‘It carries on here. He never gets bored. Wouldn’t you like to live in his house?’

Serge’s parents didn’t come back. Simon simply sent a telegram asking Jonathan to put

the child on the Paris train straight away.

It was the beginning of September, as was proved by the calendar. But Serge and Jonathan had hardly begun their holidays; the two months flown by so quickly were only an outline, an introduction to a new life — which wouldn't happen. They had acted towards each other as if nothing would ever separate them, neither men, nor time, nor age.

It was just one additional mistake. Certain of having warded off the misfortunes of ordinary life, they had forgotten their very own, which the telegram, polite and cheerful, now summed up, like a sentence.

'I hope you had a good time, we did, but now that's it. Break your hearts if you like, we are resuming our rights;' this was the only meaning of the friendly message.

Impossible to disobey. Serge and Jonathan took the train together.

Jonathan told a lie, perhaps the first tactical lie of his life. He told Simon he had spoken of him to the boss of the gallery: the dealer was very interested, he trusted the judgment of Jonathan — who certainly had no illusions about his influence — so, if Simon had anything he could show...

It was well calculated, for Simon, thrilled, insisted modestly that he had nothing, but that soon... But it was a disaster as well, for Jonathan had never said such a thing to Barbara, who didn't think of herself as a Sunday painter. The woman wasn't just annoyed; she realised that Jonathan was flattering Simon, and she guessed why. She mocked, carelessly. Simon didn't realise what was going on, but Jonathan saw what a mistake he'd made. His first attempt at diplomacy had ended in a fine mess.

He consoled himself with the thought that in any case there was no pleasing Barbara. He might have been a flatterer of genius and he wouldn't have got a millimetre further. On the other hand, he could gain Simon for their cause, as long as he didn't rely on his intelligence. But when you lose a war, alliance with another defeated party doesn't change the balance of forces.

The outcome of the holiday Simon and Barbara had taken together without their sprog was the establishment of Barbara's reign — and the flat stank of it. A domination which seemed to suit Simon, the happy husband, but which rendered any alliance with him futile.

During the evening Jonathan suffered nausea, and occasionally almost fainted, listening, looking, seeing Serge there. He felt, in his turn, the desire to murder. The ideal couple under whom the child was to live was beyond reproach. An employer would have loved them, leftists given them their blessing, psychiatrists (apart from a few acid ironies to suggest that they really knew what was going on) would have warmed the cockles of their bastards' hearts at the sight of them. Jonathan drank glass after glass, then left. Serge was watching him, often on his feet, always far from the three of them, and his look was almost like that of the children Jonathan had scandalised in the countryside the year before.

Jonathan forgot this mess completely, until the moment when he discovered himself seated in the train which would take him home. But what was he doing there? He didn't

want to go home. But he would go. Obviously. Inevitably.

He remembered that on the journey up, Serge and he had made rough plans to stay in touch. The child would write to Jonathan, who couldn't reply, because unquestionably, Barbara would intercept the mail, and what was worse, would read it and discover things which would confirm her feelings. Serge was going to play the spy, note the times of his parents' absence and presence, and all the other practical details; make a note of his hours at school (he was going to enter the sixth year, at a lycee a good distance from his home); let Jonathan know of every opportunity to meet. For his part, Jonathan would move to Paris, and make sure he had a telephone. And try and live somewhere between Serge's school and his home.

The best, perhaps, would be to cut off all relations with the boy's parents (so much the worse for Jonathan's gallery...). Serge would explain his absences by saying he was going to friends; he was free, very free, that wouldn't bother anyone, especially if Jonathan's disappearance put an end to all suspicion. Serge, too, knew how to show he'd forgotten the young painter, that boring jerk.

These plans had a major problem. If Jonathan broke with Serge's parents, there would no longer be any question of holidays together, of life together, no question of living in that other world, the vast world they had discovered. In fact, a break with Simon and Barbara would be premature; the intensity of the woman's suspicions, jealousies and hatreds would have to be closely assessed, as well as the possible value of the husband as a future accomplice. Their profound indifference towards Serge — who didn't begin to interest them until he was far away — was another precious asset.

No, they had to be stroked and sung to sleep, better to be there than otherwise. In any case, until the moment one knew what could be expected from them, things would have to be taken from them — without their knowing.

As for Jonathan's moving house, it was impossible in the immediate future, for lack of money. He'd had to talk about that on the train with Serge, whose ideas relied too much on the supposed riches and freedom of the young painter. At the absolute minimum, and then with no more than a livable room in Paris, Jonathan would have to wait until the beginning of the following year before he abandoned his little house. And he forgot, in his calculations, the taxes which he'd have to pay on last year's tremendous income, now that he'd practically nothing left.

Serge didn't seem to find these three months of patience long. He made a list of the school holidays that fell within the period; he said he would ask his father if he could go to Jonathan's on each occasion. He was sure to manage it — because, after all, he'd already succeeded in doing so that summer.

Jonathan himself didn't really think he could. The child underestimated the situation, and overestimated at the same time his father's power and his own. Jonathan was sure Serge would soon have to change his tune; but he was careful not to say so.

In any case, they had their plans. Now, they were separated. The real war had begun — the war Jonathan knew deep inside was already lost, but which the child felt sure of winning. Jonathan remembered that he too, twenty years before, had had such blind and burning energy; and that too had been in vain. You could fight against people, ordinary

people, but not against personalities, against roles, for they have a whole society behind them. And you don't learn this quickly or willingly. Jonathan knew, Serge didn't; because of this child, still whole, Jonathan was willing to forget his knowledge; but he felt too strongly, at the same time, that this didn't change things at all.

First letters from Serge were negative. Barbara wasn't working any longer, she was there all the time, and her alternative friends with her. Serge, cheerful, drew them with flies flying about them, and all with beards, even his mother.

But his line, the crosshatching in crayon, had almost torn through the paper.

Jonathan had never seen the boy's writing, nor imagined his written expression. Serge seemed to be five or six years younger than when he was drawing or talking. Jonathan understood that the fruits of this means of communication, now out of fashion, taught by nobody, learnt by nobody, used by nobody, would be extremely meagre. Almost like smoke signals.

To recognise Serge, it was better to take the great papyrus. Slowly, he unrolled it; and he looked at each image until the moment he remembered the words the boy had used in speaking of it. He had every right to be moved, to cry; that life, whatever happened, would never return.

'After that it's just to see under the water. That's just the water. Here's the sand at the bottom. Here there are different fish. These are the flowers under the sea.'

At the beginning of October a letter from Serge said that his parents — taking advantage, Jonathan concluded, of a quiet period in Jonathan's work — were going to spend a week in England. Without the boy, as usual. Serge was going to try and get himself sent down to Jonathan. He had spoken to his father, who had been agreeable. It left only Barbara to deal with.

This too was the first letter to contain expressions of love. Jonathan was thrown into confusion, for the child never said such things, and their extraordinary foolishness wasn't Serge's but that of a model he must have copied. When you don't know how to write, then everything is good. It was just as if the little boy, intending to honour his correspondent, had offered him a Latin quotation. Phrases not understood, nor ever spoken, but which enjoy a good reputation. A present of flowers or chocolates. An effort made, for affection's sake, with the result that the mawkish words achieved their aim. Serge had wanted — had dared — to tell Jonathan something; where he was, he had only this culture at his disposal. He had conscientiously taken advantage of it. It wasn't his fault if his means of expression were as meagre as they were; nor that he was as yet unaware of it.

His parents' trip was arranged for the following week. Jonathan would hear. He mustn't move!

Simon finished undressing, modestly. Despite Barbara's habits of nudity, he no longer dared behave more freely. Barbara had told him (and had repeated in conversations with friends) that nothing seemed to her more ugly than a man's cock when it was soft (it was true that Simon's was a bit small and wrinkled). Whence her regret that she and her

husband hadn't yet found — they were in such a hurry to get one — a flat where they could have separate rooms.

Simon wore striped cotton pyjamas, and left in the cupboard any more elegant nightclothes he might be given. When he got into bed, he took off the pyjama trousers.

The flat was badly designed, the work of a half-wit, he used to say. Between their room and Serge's there was a thin wall, and because of the poor lay-out, they had to put the beds one on each side of this divide. It embarrassed Simon, when he went to bed, to think of Serge six inches away on the other side; then he forgot him.

Barbara, naked, took her time about coming to bed, talking in a low voice, smoothly and emphatically, like an actress in a scene from married life, whispering to two thousand spectators. She took off her make-up sitting down, got up, looked at herself, relaxed, offered herself congratulations.

During the holidays, she'd put on again the weight she'd lost. The back of her thighs and the lower part of her buttocks seemed pitted by smallpox; the primal scream, the incense, the Zen and her bold opinions on important matters made her forget this cellulite, and she thought of herself as an Amazon.

Simon had a difficult matter to raise; it concerned Serge. A coward, Simon was nonetheless loyal to the boy; he loved him without cheating too much; secretly he felt himself to be beneath him, and vaguely impressed by this, he didn't dare betray him. Serge was just the son he would have wanted; having had him, he discovered he had aimed too high.

It was the same feeling with Jonathan, this friend to whom he dared say nothing.

The two of them, that was it. They were so like each other that Simon didn't wonder that they enjoyed each other's company. They were what he was not; he knew that, and accepted it. He enjoyed his own life, after all.

And Barbara helped him, she was his security. She could make the world alright, bring it down to a manageable scale; grandiloquent, she miniaturised the people who troubled you; and then showed off and magnified the cretins she honoured with her absurdities. She saved his life, although he wasn't fooled. But who ever said a cur, a mongrel (Simon depressed would think of himself like this), deserved the mistress he adored?

On the other hand, Simon's income would soon be more than ten thousand francs a month. It was an achievement. He could see himself opening his own office soon. He had become a careerist only for Barbara's sake, and he had succeeded. That was something in favour of couples, wasn't it?

Sitting up in bed, a cigarette in his hand, his last gin on the bedside table, Simon first spoke prudently, flattering Barbara's body, as if in spontaneous praise. He could see its faults, but they didn't worry him; he liked squashiness. He felt at home there; his character and her flabby masses were the terrain where they met. However, he expressed this complementarity in terms less cynical, and spoke of Man and Woman.

Barbara was pleased by the compliments, and she put on a certain air.

'I'm going to have to give her one, just for the little bastard's sake,' he thought.

This vulgar expression was inexact; Barbara rarely allowed penetration. Usually, she masturbated herself while sitting astride her husband, who masturbated himself behind

her, between the jelly-like buttocks which married so closely with his own slight paunch.

‘Serge was talking to me earlier on.’

‘What is it this time? Now listen...’

‘No, it’s just about that holiday of ours. Well, just for six days, he can miss school, fine, but we can’t leave him here all on his own, can we? And if he went with us he’d be really bored in London. So.’

‘London... Yes, but what’s the matter then? Explain a little bit, darling. I don’t understand. What is it?’

Her voice grew softer as she spoke her favourite words; she was brushing her hair. With each stroke of the brush, the Outline of her buttock was squashed into waves, like a stirred mayonnaise, and then it returned to its pleasant and photogenic original form.

‘It’s just him,’ said Simon, ‘he wants to go to Jonathan’s while we’re away.’

‘Oh no!’

She had seemed to cry out in exasperation; but she moved her brush from one hand to the other with the gesture of a film star, and she was calm and in high good humour.

‘Well, now,’ said Simon, ‘I love Serge very much, but it would be nice not to have him with us for a while.’

‘I know, but no!... That’s enough of Jonathan!... It’s not healthy, you’ve got to admit it! ... Since he’s come back from there, he’s never been the same, he’s quite impossible. No, darling.’

‘All the same...’

‘No! Listen to me: no. It just doesn’t make sense! I’d much rather send him to mother’s. Anyway, she’s asked for him herself, in fact. Oh yes, she was saying, you can imagine, oh so it’s like that again! Oh I understand!’

‘What was that about?’

‘Well the summer holidays of course. I had to tell her we’d sent Serge to Jonathan’s. What, two months and a bit. And so it started: oh yes, you prefer to send your son to a stranger, of course I never see him, no that’s quite alright, I’m only his grandmother indeed, etcetera.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Well, Simon, you can say what you like. My mother, I don’t care, I really don’t give a damn, but just the same it’s not very nice. Not for me at least! I can’t spit in her face, you just realise that, even if I was dying to do it! There are limits, after all. I can’t do it.’

‘But he’ll be bored to death over there in Peronne.’

‘Now look here, just listen to me! That’s all changed. Now me, when I was a kid, I tell you, it wasn’t every day we had fun. What a lovely childhood that was! But I’ve met a really wonderful girl down there, she’s opened a children’s workshop — yes, things are changing! — she’s tremendous. I met her through friends, and I’m telling you, it would be really great.’

‘But will it be open?’

‘Of course. I said to mother, fine, but he’s used to playing outside, take him there, it’s a friend of mine, etcetera. Because otherwise she wouldn’t even give her the time of day, I know that. I do know her, after all. If you want to know, at seventeen, me, I wasn’t

allowed to wear lipstick; you know what it was like.'

Barbara was combing her hair all over again, with a long comb in clear plastic, and she'd put on a bed jacket.

'No, she's really good this girl! You can put your kids there almost from morning till night! And she gets them to prepare the food, it's decent, not like in a canteen, and she teaches them to make cakes and everything, she's got looms, potting things, I tell you, if you'd seen the little girls, and the boys. Absolutely radiant! Really out of this world! The kids! But I'm sorry, I did see them! No, really! You can see them there, really enjoying themselves. I can tell, I was actually there, you realise. I've been saddled with Serge, you didn't really have that, no, I'm not blaming you, just think a little bit. No, it'll be good for him. Because I don't know whether you've noticed, but he's getting neurotic, that kid of yours. And then there's their drawings! My dear! If you saw them, you'd start painting again. All over the walls! And not like Jonathan's either, oh no, a bit of air please, a bit of fresh air! And love! And openness, they're really open! Everything he isn't, in fact.'

'He's not very sociable, just now, though, is he?' said Simon wealdy, 'Don't you think that with the other kids...'

'But we haven't been paying attention to him, you see. It's a real problem, you wouldn't know, they need parenting, otherwise they just go wrong, straight away. Well, I'm not so good at it, you're not really that much better. That's the worst of it. What they want — when you come down to it, darling — they want you to be normal. Hell!... And that's the whole problem! We were wrong to leave him with J the whole summer. That was really the last thing we should have done. And I did say so. Well, I let it go, but only...'

'No!' Simon interjected, 'no, that isn't true! It's what he wanted, wasn't it. And J, well, I know we don't agree, but as for me, he really is somebody. And Serge didn't complain, did he?'

Simon, in his frankness, or in mere sexist solidarity, or because, before the summer, he'd had such a long struggle about this with Barbara, or because he could see perfectly well how strange it was — what colleague from the office would have done such a thing? — to confide his son to a male friend (though for Simon it was freedom, it was Art, it was May '68, it was change), reacted badly to this belated criticism from Barbara. She noticed this and replied:

'Alright Simon. Perhaps. There were reasons. Perhaps reasons a little bit too much just yours and mine. Weren't they?' Because you aren't going to tell me we were thinking of the kid. No! If we'd ever thought about it, we would never have sent him to J's. It's true, listen! In any case, whatever the reasons, our little reasons, we're paying for them now. And the boy is paying too. You've seen him? Fine, enough said. No! he makes me ill. I tell you, what he needs is a bit of normal life. Normal — that's all. He's respectable. All children are respectable. Paranoid and respectable. Psychotic, if you like. Well, there's a solution for that. It's quite easy. My mother will make him nice little soups, nice little meals with nice little puddings, she'll buy him books, she'll iron the little MCP's nice little shirts, she'll say, poor thing, he hasn't got anything to wear — and then fine, he'll spend the whole day with the other kids. It will be good for him. And then he can express himself — realise himself! — instead of just spending his time ignoring us.'

‘Uh...’

‘But yes, my dear. Drawing, you can’t imagine what it does for a child like that. It liberates them, through and through! They let everything out! It makes them a bit more manageable. It’s true! But it does, Simon. You just don’t understand, you play the big guy, kids, they just don’t interest you, none of your business, thank you and goodbye. Fine. Only if it’s the chicks who get saddled with them, then you just listen to the chicks. At least. You could do that... Now I’m telling you, these things, the pictures and everything, the children — fair enough, you don’t know anything about it — it’s simple enough: what it is about them, it’s Freudian. All their funny little ideas, they sort them out like that. I swear to you, you won’t recognise him when he comes back!’

‘I’m not arguing about that,’ said Simon. ‘I’m just saying what he said to me. I really don’t want to tell him he can’t go down there. You know, he talked to me about it, really seriously. He doesn’t talk just for the sake of it. You know that, whatever you say.’

‘Oh no! As far as that’s concerned, no, no, and no! There’s no reason — Serge has no reason, no reason at all! — I don’t want him to carry on seeing Jonathan. I don’t want any more of it. No. But are you listening, Simon. I’m telling you I don’t want to hear about it again. There’s something not right about it. It probably not their fault. I’m not saying that, well... But there’s something wrong. I can feel it. I can feel it. And I’m not wrong about that sort of thing. No! Something, I’d rather not tell you what I think. But I can feel it. No, there’s something wrong. No. It’s over, as far as Jonathan is concerned, and that’s it. I tell you we’ll have trouble for years to come if we let it go any further. Fine! Nothing! I’m not saying anything! But it’s over. It’s all over, and that’s all there is to say about it. Serge has become too attached, don’t you see. And I don’t know who to. I don’t know who it is! Yes, that’s what worries me... It’s my right... I produced this child, I don’t know whether you’ve noticed. I can feel it. It’s serious. I’m telling you Simon, drop it! There’s no need for you to send your kid off to your mates. He’s a little bit mine as well, isn’t he? You just don’t notice anything, but I can feel it. It just can’t go on, this business. No. That’s enough. The end. Full stop.’

‘Alright then. So what do I tell him?’

‘Darling, you just say to him, well, your grandmother wants to see you, it’s almost a year now, etcetera. There — but I’ll talk to him myself if you insist! Anyone would think you were frightened! But listen... it should have been me he talked to about this business with J, don’t you think that would have been normal? He’s quite crazy, that child.’

‘Perhaps, after all, it would be better... well, if he came with us?’

‘Oh, you really are wonderful! It’s a bit late to be playing the mother-hen, if you don’t mind me saying so! He can’t make a fuss, just about a week, not even a week, without seeing his mother and father, come on! And you can say what you like about my mother, but she isn’t a monster. I had to put up with my mother for twenty years, he can surely cope with her for a week, don’t you think. You really are extraordinary! I tell you, there are times, things you say, I just don’t know, I really don’t!... And by the way, London... You know me, I’m Mediterranean.’

‘From Peronne,’ Simon couldn’t help but adding, defeated.

But Barbara-Georgette wasn’t cross; she gave a laugh. She had just taken a sip from

the glass of gin, and the ice-cubes tinkled too.

Serge, behind his wall, heard the whole discussion. He carried on thinking about it, long after the parental bed had ceased to creak.

The next day, he made his escape. On his return from the lycee with its competent young women, where he was beginning his secondary education, he discovered, to his great happiness, that the flat was empty. He hurried.

In the kitchen he dug out a plastic carrier bag; in it he put various clothes, books, writing-books and photos, and he added a little portrait of himself done by Jonathan.

He didn't want to steal anything, not even a suitcase or an ordinary bag.

He went back into his room, knelt by the bed, emptied his pockets and counted his money. It wasn't the best day, he hadn't much left.

He looked out of the window. He became flushed, and his eyes shone. It wasn't right he should be forced to do it. Why? Nobody knew. Everyone just talked to themselves. He left his room and went back into the kitchen. There was no bread. He took some rusks, an orange, some sugar-cubes, the remains of a bar of chocolate. A tin of something, perhaps? No, it was no good. In the fridge, there were bottles of tonic, but he didn't like it; he found a last small bottle of Coca-Cola at the bottom, among the vegetables.

The cat had gone out. Serge hesitated before taking the bottle-opener. He remembered there was a fine-looking one on the living-room table, the one in the kitchen was ugly but it worked better. He could take the top off a bottle with his teeth, providing he was enjoying himself. All alone, no.

He left his bunch of keys in the door on the landing, and went out the building without meeting anybody.

He went down into the underground, bought a ticket and got a box of chocolate drops out of the machine. He only had a few small coins left. He was feverish, and didn't look at anyone.

He knew where the hitch-hikers went, the exit from Paris which led to the road for Jonathan's. His own road now. It couldn't take very long, surely. Not with all the cars. It had to work. There were plenty of people.

Serge left the underground at the end of the line. Once outside, he got lost; on foot, he couldn't recognise anything.

Everything was too big. Everything was difficult. The weather, warm for the time of year, was turning to rain; Serge was wearing his blue jacket with the red white and blue cuffs. He'd chosen it and bought it himself. The collar was red white and blue as well. It had lots of pockets with zip fasteners. You could put all sorts of things in there, when you had things. On a clock, he saw it would soon be six o'clock. He didn't wonder whether his plan would succeed. He didn't think about it. Seeing he'd already gone. He'd remembered this road out of Paris, the hitch-hikers; afterwards, who could tell? He wanted to find the place where the hitch-hikers were.

He got there, along long tunnels, footbridges, paving-slabs marked with yellow stripes, where he was the only pedestrian. He recognised the pavement, where people usually stood hitching. But there was nobody. The damp cars went past, practically brushing

against your arm.

Damp, because for the last few minutes it had been raining. A rain you couldn't feel. There was a lot of water, but it didn't seem to touch you. Commuters were going home; headlights were lit according to the highway code. On foot, you could hear a great deal of noise. It hurt your ears, it rang out brutal and empty, as if a crowd was shouting.

Serge felt awful, and thought about going home.

He thought about home. His parents. Her, him. He shivered. His chest tightened in refusal. No. Someone would come and take him away. He would have to walk a bit further, after the fork, to the road on the right, with the red earth and the weeds at its edge. He'd have to cross as well, down there, or he'd be on the wrong side.

He reached the spot he'd chosen, and walked on a little further. He imagined he was on a journey, as if he were waiting on a station platform. He was going to Jonathan's. Here, it was a little bit like there, because of the earth and the weeds. Around him, very far away, there were the suburbs, covered in cotton-wool puffs of smoke, drowned in the grey and black rain, jagged like an enormous heap of rubbish and scrap iron. The rain was still gentle, not too wet.

Faced with all those cars, all those houses, all those miles, Serge suddenly felt so worried it frightened him, and he stepped back among the weeds. He felt an icy wind. He felt the night. He saw he was alone, completely alone, and he cried, despite himself, fiercely, slowly, and loud, without any gasps for breath.

From a van, there came a long squeal of brakes, and it stopped close by the child. Now everyone had their headlamps on, and you couldn't see anything else. The sky, though, was light enough still. Silhouetted in black against it there were office blocks, factories, vast roofs, steel structures, and enormous pipes hanging in the air.

'No,' Serge replied, 'I'm waiting for my father, he's over there. He's just coming.'

And he pointed, behind him, towards an open-sided shed, near which there was a yard surrounded by broken fence, where there stood three or four broken-down lorries.

'Oh, your father's over there. Fine. But you shouldn't stand at the edge of the road, my boy, it's dangerous.'

The man slammed the near-side door, and the van went off again. Serge thought he wasn't really at the edge of the road when it stopped.

He went a bit further into the weeds, but it was slippery, because of the dark.

He'd never be able to think of a lie that would take him far. Everyone would be suspicious. He hadn't even looked at the driver's face; just hearing the voice, he'd realised he mustn't say anything to him. Not to him, nor anyone else.

He wanted to sit down, because he was tired, because he wanted to think. It was too muddy. He stayed in the middle of the weeds, near a trench dug for a drain. Standing straight, his face turned towards the cars. It would be easy to get through the fence and go into the shed, into the light, but perhaps there would be somebody there. Serge hoped there was someone. He didn't move.

He opened the yellow carrier-bag, because the rain was falling more strongly. He wanted to see if it was getting wet inside. It didn't close very well at the top. He couldn't really tell, he pushed his hand further in. There were one or two broken rusks, and the

chocolate had come out of its torn wrapping.

It was then, touching the things in his bag, that Serge told himself he wouldn't leave. Nor would he go home.

This idea didn't surprise him: since yesterday evening, he'd been thinking. He'd even imagined doing it. He'd already realised there was nothing else he could do. Because nobody could. Because he knew absolutely that there was absolutely nothing to be done.

It was, though, the right road for Jonathan's. Serge was cold right through. Too great a cold, too great art emptiness.

The cars going by were now less numerous, and they were travelling fast. In the night and the rain, they seemed enormous.

No. Not yet. Serge threw his bag onto the floor and sat himself down on it. In the dark, his face was at the same level as some of the weeds: they had yellow flowers like dandelions, but a bit different. These weeds and the child were occasionally caught in the light of passing cars.

His peaceful situation brought him a sudden and unexpected happiness. Things returned to normal. Everything would work out. There would have to be a car, obviously. Obviously. Down there, in two or three hours, after you came off the main road, there was another big road to follow; he knew it well. If a car had picked Serge up, he would have done this last part on foot, and perhaps at eleven o'clock, or at midnight, he would have pushed at Jonathan's garden gate. It was never shut. Jonathan would be asleep, Serge would go in through the kitchen, he'd put the light on, perhaps he'd see the mice running away behind the stove, he would quietly go up to the bedroom, gently wake Jonathan up, or if it was cold, he'd get into bed next to him first, or perhaps he'd eat something first if he was hungry, Jonathan wouldn't be surprised, they'd hug each other lots and lots, and Serge would tell him about his journey, this courageous journey, and they'd go to sleep together in the big bed, this same night, tonight, and then forever.

Serge got up suddenly, gave the bag a kick, and it rolled into the ditch. The opener tinkled against the Coke bottle. The boy stood at the edge of the road. The rain fell, cold. Now, watch the cars, until there was one going very fast and all by itself. And watch the headlights and throw himself against them, very fast too, there where the light shone brightest. Rigid and motionless, his sight a little blurred, Serge allowed several cars go by, before he saw the one he was waiting for.

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Like so many novels, this book is the story of a love affair. What is less usual is that Jonathan, an artist, is almost thirty when the story starts, while Serge is a boy of eight. Jonathan had got to know Serge and his mother Barbara in Paris the previous year . Tired of the city and confused by the stress of this relationship, Jonathan shut himself away in a remote village. But his retreat is disturbed when Barbara needs someone to look after Serge for the summer while she travels abroad. Like all lovers, Jonathan and Serge create their own microcosm of domestic and erotic ritual, but theirs is a world that shatters on contact with the surrounding society.

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