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Along The Way

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Along The Way

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of Bard College

by
Jeremy Albet

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Introduction

Along The Way is my effort to create an original collection that results from my newly discovered taste in experimental fiction. Upon coming to Bard I was introduced to a range of diverse and original writers with writing styles I had never encountered before. Some of them have raised my interest in literature as much as to lead me to switch my major from Economics to Creative Writing. My senior project is my final expression of this major shift.

Among those writers I encountered at Bard, John Hawkes was the most influential one. His novel *Travesty* has left a vivid mark in my mind. I read this book at a turning point in my studies as I was taking my first creative writing workshop. In his short but concise novel I was struck by the narrator's control over the reader. The protagonist's voice, a first person singular, is the only one we, the reader, can hold on to. We are drawn in listening to a testimony where we are the muted judges:

The beauty of motion, musical or otherwise, is precisely this: that the so-called guarantee of timelessness is in fact the living tongue in the dark mouth of cessation. And cessation is what we seek, if only because it alone is utterly unbelievable

There is nothing else for us to do but listen and follow his discourse. We become immersed deep within the protagonist thoughts and we become so much

drawn to the writing that we are lead unknowingly to approve or at least understand a man who is about to commit a horrific and immoral act.

While my stories do not share a common interest for the bitter and tragic as *Travesty*, I was fascinated by the rhythms and musicality of Hawkes's text and I came to understand that a powerful and vivid story could owe it more to the narrator than the plot itself. That is, the reader's attention can be drawn in not so much because of an abundance of action taking place, but because of the artistry of writing.

Throughout my senior project I have tried to imitate a similar approach to lyrical writing. My project is composed of the first part of a novella I wrote in French and then translated into English, and four short stories (written in English) led by an unnamed protagonist, only described as a "young man." We follow this young man at times when he is drawn to alienate himself from the people surrounding him, in order to experience a memory to its fullest. This young man romanticizes memories he holds and does not share them with anyone but the reader. Whether he's at a bar surrounded by people or in bed with his wife, he seems to always be drawn to events that have occurred in the past. He almost seems to hold a greater value to memories than anything that is yet to be experienced:

He pauses and, looking past her, wonders if after all, aura was not the engraving stone for recollecting memory.

"You were unusually silent at dinner," she tells him.

He remains silent. Aurore. She is in front of him now. He has never run so fast; he has never had reason to. And look at her; he could follow her to the end of the world.

Memories are distorted, and this senior project is my attempt to formulate a point of view in the different states one might get into from the simple act of remembering. It is also my exploration of how memory brings forth a feeling of nostalgia that becomes intimate, gratifying, and sometimes even sickening.

The act of remembering also holds an important part in my novella where the caretaker of an estate is nostalgic of the past as he tries to adapt to his ever-varying role in the house where the children he took care of in the past, have now all grown up.

Most challenging of all was the translation process. The two versions of Jets in this project are the first part of a longer piece. I first wrote it in French and then translated it into English. In the French version of my novella, I tried to establish a certain rhythm with sentences and paragraphs. As I translated my work into English, the tonality and rhythm of my sentences were completely altered since a lot of the words once translated sounded different. Therefore I had to find expressions and words that worked well together in keeping a certain rhythm and at the same time keep in mind the plot I had in the French version.

All my stories in this project carry little dialogue as the characters have a tendency to keep their deeper feelings to themselves. However by revealing the private thoughts of the characters only to the reader, there is an idea that the narrator trusts the reader more than anyone else. I tried to create a sense of

intimacy between each character and the reader. Yet, at the same time, there is also a certain degree of secrecy, as a few questions remain unanswered. I tried to emphasize on this notion because I am not of the opinion that everything should be explained and explicit. Not all questions should be answered, as they rarely are in our own lives.

Jets

I

Dehors, couverte par la brousse nocturne, la pluie battante restait invisible aux yeux nus des trois garçons immobiles et ternes, plongés au coeur du bureau sonnait creux de leur père.

Daniel, le majordome, seul, debout à coté de la porte, laissait son regard de gardien impénétrable tomber dans le ventre mou de la pièce ; jetant quelque fois un regard soutenu sur James, l'enfant aîné qui lui, adossé contre la fenêtre, se contentait de fixer la lettre qu'il tenait en main. En face, assis sur le fauteuil généralement offert aux conviés de leur père, Henri, le plus jeune des trois, maintenait sa tête avec ses deux mains, ses coudes s'appuyant fermement sur ses genoux. Il parcourait du regard les cavaliers dessinés sur le tapis imposant au milieu de la pièce.

Un peu excentré sur le coté, Tom restait par terre, adossé contre le canapé en velours dupé, ses yeux fixé de l'autre coté de la pièce, d'abord sur le siège vide derrière le bureau, puis au dessus, soutenant le regard assuré de son ancêtre peint avec une allure noble dans cette pièce même, une épée à la main.

« Quand-est ce qu'il te la donné? » demanda James sans détourner son regard de la lettre et qui rompu le silence qui régnait dans la pièce.

« En partant. » répondit le majordome.

« Tu l'as vu partir ? » demanda Henri en relevant la tête.

« Oui. »

« Qu'est-ce qu'il a dit? » demanda Henri

« Rien. Seulement qu'il était désolé. » répondit Daniel

James soutint son regard sur Daniel et hocha la tête mesurément, comme s'il acquiesçait. Puis, il tourna son attention une nouvelle fois sur la lettre.

Daniel se tourna vers Henri qui regardait cette fois vers le sol d'un air abattu pendant que Tom, lui, maintenait toujours son regard de l'autre côté de la pièce.

II

Le majordome était levé de bonne heure. A vrai dire, il n'avait pas réussi à fermer l'œil de la nuit. Le temps dévoilait l'approche du levé de soleil. Il était encore trop tôt pour ressentir la fatigue lorsqu'il se mit en marche vers le village.

Ce matin-là, il était l'un des premiers à circuler dans le village. Les commerçants n'avaient pas encore ouverts. Il faisait un froid sec et les pas de l'homme sur le sol humide se laissaient entendre au long des ruelles sonores. L'ombre de quelques personnes faisait surface au loin puis s'éclipsait. Cette vue était devenu presque coutume chez le majordome qui, ces derniers mois, avait pris pour habitude de marcher à des heures non ensoleillées en compagnie de Jack, le père des trois garçons.

Il était revenu sans sa femme, Eva. Daniel lui avait alors demandé tout naturellement où elle était et Jack lui avait répondu: « Nous ne sommes plus ensemble Daniel. » avant de monter sa valise à l'étage.

Il se souvient de son ton, direct, sec et insensible, comme si leur séparation était un fait trivial et passé, comme s'il n'était plus d'actualité. Mais le majordome avait reçu cette nouvelle comme un choc, comme une sécheresse imprévue qui frappe les lieux fleuris, comme un rappel qu'au manoir les nouvelles se font rares et que l'on oublie qu'à l'extérieur une vie différente est menée et qu'elle est secouée plus fréquemment que les saisons ne passent.

Il n'avait pas anticipé cette nouvelle, il n'avait pas non plus anticipé le retour inattendu de Jack qui resta plus de trois mois. Durant ces longues semaines, Jack et Daniel vécurent côte à côte. Ils travaillèrent ensemble sur le manoir, à repeindre des pièces, à réparer des meubles, à s'occuper du jardin. Ils passèrent beaucoup de temps ensemble durant les premières semaines où Jack semblait très excité à l'idée de redonner un nouveau souffle à cette maison familiale. Ils ne parlaient que de ça avec Daniel. Ensemble ils planifiaient les travaux à faire et chaque jour était dédié à une nouvelle tâche. Le majordome prenait beaucoup de plaisir, lui qui, avant le retour de Jack, passait ses journées seul à s'occuper d'un manoir vide. Les enfants qui grandissaient ne venaient plus s'y cloisonner, même le temps d'un week-end.

Puis d'un jour à l'autre, il vivait désormais aux côtés de Jack. Lui, le valet loyal pour qui l'expérience dans la vie de tous les jours se résumait au domaine et au village ; et Jack, le récent divorcé qui quittait les joies et peines de la ville pour s'isoler dans un endroit qui n'y connaissait rien aux mœurs citadins.

Les semaines passèrent et Daniel observait Jack perdre sa bonne humeur et son humour. Le père des garçons s'isolait de plus en plus et travaillait de moins en moins sur le manoir. Daniel le retrouva plus d'une fois le matin endormi sur le canapé dans son

bureau ou dans le salon, souvent avec une ou deux bouteilles d'alcools qui traînaient à coté. Cela lui faisait du mal, lui qui n'avait jamais vu Jack dans cet état là. Et petit à petit, il sentit une gêne monter entre eux. Daniel commençait à ressentir un manque d'attention venant de Jack et il ne savait alors plus comment l'approcher. Surtout, il ne voulait pas le contrarier.

Puis un matin, il entendit des pas dans l'entrée à l'aube et trouva Jack tout habillé avec une valise à la main. Il revoyait très clairement le visage navré du père des enfants qui s'avança alors vers lui.

« Je suis navré Daniel. » avait-il dit tout simplement en mettant sa main sur son épaule et en le regardant droit dans les yeux.

« Prends soins de toi. » avait-il ajouté avant de se retourner et d'avancer vers la porte.

Daniel ne prononça aucuns mots. Il n'était pas sur s'il rêvait ou non. Le soleil s'était à peine levé et dehors il pouvait voir le ciel gris et argenté qui se préparait pour un jour couvert. Il eu le temps ensuite de regarder Jack ramasser sa valise et sortir de la maison sans se retourner. Il resta immobile alors qu'il entendit le moteur de la voiture s'allumer puis se dissiper au loin.

III

Tom regardait au loin la forêt lorsqu'il vit du coin de l'œil Daniel en train de marcher en direction du manoir, portant les provisions du jours dans chaque main. Le

jeune homme appuya sa tête contre la fenêtre et le suivit du regard, avant que le majordome ne disparaisse sous la verrière. Il entendit la porte s'ouvrir puis se refermer en bas, senti le courant d'air s'immiscer. Il tenait en main la lettre de son père que le majordome leur avait transmise à leur arrivée.

Mes fils,

Je suis navré de ne pas être présent à vos côtés. J'aurais tant voulu vous voir et passer ces quelques jours avec vous. A l'heure où je vous écris, il m'est tout simplement impossible de rester ici. Il m'est très difficile de vous expliquer mes raisons. Je pensais que cela me ferait le plus grand bien de prendre mes distances de la vie en ville. Comme vous pouvez vous en douter en lisant cette lettre, cela n'a pas été le cas. Pour être tout à fait honnête avec vous les enfants, en regardant ces pièces, j'ai l'impression de vivre dans le passé. Je suis entouré de souvenirs entre ces murs et y vivre seul, sans ma famille, n'a pour moi aucun sens.

J'ai cette envie très forte en moi qui me pousse à partir loin d'ici, loin de tout ce qui pourrait me faire rappeler.

J'espère que vous comprendrez ou du moins que vous me pardonneriez.

Je vous aime fort les garçons. Prenez soin de vous.

Votre Père.

Tom parcourait sa chambre du regard; son lit déjà fait, son bureau en vieux bois vide et dépossédé de sa chaise. En dessous, quelques jeux de société restés esseulés, comme la trace d'une enfance réjouissante. Il se rappelait alors lorsque plus jeune, cette chambre l'effrayait. La nuit il y entendait des bruits qu'il ne pouvait assimiler à rien d'ordinaire, et lorsqu'il n'était pas assez profondément endormi pour mettre de côté sa peur, il rejoignait la chambre voisine de son grand frère et allait s'engouffrer dans ses draps.

Il se retourna vers la fenêtre. Il n'arrivait pas à se détacher de cette vue, comme s'il la voyait pour la première fois.

IV

Les trois garçons se mirent à table en bas dans la salle à manger située entre le salon et la cuisine. Cette pièce sans porte avait été la pièce familiale de la maison ; celle où les déjeuners et diners étaient servis et où enfants et parents se réunissaient. Le soir on l'éclairait de la grande lampe cendrée et ovale au plafond qui coïncidait avec la longue table en vieux bois faisant presque la taille de la pièce. On prenait le temps d'allumer les chandeliers sur la table lorsqu'il y avait des invités. Les tableaux impressionnistes fixés de chaque côté de la pièce se fondaient dans le décor et attiraient les regards des invités mais aussi des enfants, pour qui ces tableaux étaient devenus une partie intégrante de l'atmosphère festive de la salle à manger. Mais ce jour là, pour le premier déjeuner des enfants depuis leur retour, la pièce était à peine illuminée par la maigre lumière que le

jour projetait et les enfants qui n'avaient pas pensés à allumer la lampe du plafond, laissait les tableaux négligés dans l'ombre et la pièce plonger dans une semi-obscurité.

« Assieds-toi avec nous Daniel. » dit James d'un ton amical.

« Il y a amplement de quoi manger pour quatre. »

« C'est gentil, mais je n'ai pas faim. » rétorqua Daniel.

« Eh bien assieds toi quand même. Ça fait longtemps qu'on ne t'a pas vu. »

Le majordome prit place à table à coté de James, en face de Henri et resta jusqu'à la fin du repas.

A table James et Henri étaient les plus bavards. James raconta les exploits de l'équipe de foot de son université dans laquelle Tom occupait une place de titulaire. Il expliqua sa thèse de fin d'année et parla de sa relation amicale très proche avec l'un de ses professeurs. Il était toujours en relation avec Olivia et ils fêteraient leurs deux ans de couple dans quelques semaines. Henri, lui, informa le majordome de son entrée à la prestigieuse université dans laquelle ses deux grands frères étaient déjà des élèves réputés et où la fameuse équipe d'escrime l'avait recruté.

Le majordome, pas le moins surpris de la réussite des enfants, proposa qu'on porte un toast au diner. Ils iraient choisir une prestigieuse bouteille dans la cave qu'il tenait absolument à leur montrer car leur père s'était beaucoup consacré à lui donner une nouvelle jeunesse.

Un peu plus tard, il les regardait de la fenêtre jouer au foot dans l'herbe. Il ressentait en lui un goût amer, une sensation étrange le parcourait. Il avait caché tant bien que mal son malaise a table. En observant les enfants, il ne ressentait pas une tristesse profonde chez eux. Il s'attendait à être questionné au sujet de leur père. Il avait passé ces

derniers mois seul avec Jack et les enfants eux, ne l'avaient pas vu depuis la rentrée des classes. Pourtant, ils n'avaient pas mentionnés son nom une seule fois.

Pendant le déjeuner il remarqua que Tom fuyait son regard et l'observait parfois du coin de l'œil.

Depuis son retour au manoir, Tom était inhabituellement silencieux. Il souriait et plaisantait avec ses frères mais ne disait pas grand chose.

Daniel se demandait au final ce qu'ils pensaient tous, Tom et ses frères, de cette situation ; de ce brusque départ de leur père. Il espérait que bientôt, ils oseraient le lui en parler, comme lorsque dans le passé, ils ne voyaient pas en lui qu'un simple valet, mais aussi et surtout, un confident.

V

Le soir ils se regroupèrent dans la cuisine et chacun proposa son aide en vue de la préparation du diner. Comme lorsqu'ils étaient plus jeunes, ils s'efforcèrent de montrer leurs talents dans la discipline ; allant de la sauce pour la salade, à la cuisson de la viande, chacun y mettait du sien pour prouver qu'il savait y faire. Le tout était supervisé par le majordome qui regardait fièrement les garçons plaisanter ensemble, se taquiner comme autrefois mais toujours en gardant un certain sérieux sur leurs taches.

Puis ils s'en allèrent tout les quatre à la cave où Daniel leur montra les travaux de leur père. Les vins étaient rangés dans des étagères collées au mur et qui contournaient la pièce, formant une sorte de carré. Ils étaient classés par domaine, par type et par année.

Cette gestion d'espace laissait un vide au milieu qui se comblait par de longues étagères qui allaient du sol au plafond et qui stockaient les alcools plus forts ; les vieux armagnacs du sud de la France, des rhums de Caraïbes et d'Amérique du Sud et des bouteilles de vodkas de l'Est. Daniel donna une visite de la pièce rénovée aux garçons en les laissant contempler par eux même. Un à un, étagère par étagère, ils s'attardaient devant les bouteilles et reconnaissaient parfois des noms qui leurs étaient familiers.

Ils étaient stupéfaits du changement radical du cellier qui était autrefois l'endroit au manoir à ne pas mettre les pieds. Il était à l'époque rempli de cartons et on avait du mal à mettre un pas après l'autre. Leurs parents avaient jugés bon d'y mettre tous les biens qu'ils ne voulaient plus voir dans le manoir. A l'époque, la lumière délaissée au milieu de la salle n'illuminait qu'une partie de la pièce et on ne voyait pas l'étendue de la cave. Lorsque leur père allait chercher du vin, il prenait toujours avec lui une lampe torche et revenait dix minutes plus tard, épuisé par son périple. Les garçons n'y allaient presque jamais sauf quand leurs parents leurs demandaient de rendre un service.

Leur père qui s'intéressait un peu à la boisson mais toujours avec modération, s'était rendu compte que le manoir était pourvu d'une collection plus impressionnante qu'il ne pensait. Les grands-parents des garçons ne buvaient pas et n'avaient donc pas portés tant d'attention que cela à cette pièce esseulée et à son contenu. Ils l'avaient laissée comme telle. Jeunes, ils avaient entendu quelques histoires au sujet de leur arrière grand père. Il était mort à trente ans dans un accident de moto. L'homme était alcoolique, leur avait-on dit vaguement. Jack leur apprit qu'à l'époque, lorsque les parents de son grand-père partaient en voyage ou allaient en ville, le jeune homme en profitait pour organiser des grandes fêtes mondaines au manoir. Les gens venaient souvent de loin et faisaient

notamment le trajet inverse en venant de la ville. Jack n'en avait jamais vraiment appris plus, ni sur les fêtes ni sur son grand-père et laissait donc une vague mais imposante impression auprès de ses enfants au sujet de leur ancêtre.

VI

A table le majordome avait ressorti les assiettes en porcelaine, les bougies en chandeliers. Il était heureux au diner. Il n'avait jamais été aussi proche des enfants, ou peut-être qu'il l'avait été mais le temps s'en était emparé. Il était rassuré de voir Tom souriant et causeur. Il se revoyait, une dizaine d'années plus tôt, manger à table avec les enfants. Ils étaient toujours en train de rigoler, de se moquer l'un de l'autre. Il ne pouvait jamais placer une phrase alors il n'intervenait que quelques fois et le reste du temps il se taisait et les contemplait d'un air amusé.

Ce souvenir l'apaisa, ou peut être était-ce le vin. La soirée progressait et il alla s'asseoir avec les garçons qui préparaient un feu de cheminée au salon. Il commençait à sentir sa tête lourde sur ses épaules fatiguées. Il avait du mal à ordonner ses pensées alors il laissait les jeunes exposer les leurs. Il resta quelques minutes à leur côté avant de leur souhaiter une bonne nuit. Il pensait les rassurer en leur annonçant qu'il irait au réveil chercher le petit-déjeuner au village.

Le matin il s'en irait tôt. Sa tête lui ferait toujours défaut mais la marche lui redonnerait de l'air frais et le contact avec les gens du village lui ferait oublier son mal de

tête. De retour à la maison, il se sentirait réconforté, galvanisé à l'approche d'une nouvelle journée.

Les enfants eux étaient bien installés au salon. Henri restait debout et ravivait le feu de temps en temps. Tom était allongé sur le canapé et James se tenait assis sur le fauteuil en face. Ils étaient plus silencieux depuis qu'ils avaient quittés la table, depuis que le majordome était parti.

Tom fixait les moulures au plafond. Henri allumait une cigarette et en offrait une à Tom avant de se tourner vers James

« Dis moi, qu'est ce que ça fait d'arrêter ? » lui demanda t-il

« Ça fait mal. » répondit James.

« Moi tu vois, je laisserai jamais une fille m'obliger à arrêter la cigarette. » Il réfléchit une seconde. « La cigarette et l'alcool. »

« Bonne chance mon vieux. » répondit James.

Henri souri et répondit « En parlant d'alcool, on est à court. »

Tom détourna sa tête du plafond pour regarder la bouteille vide. Il se redressa et prit la bouteille à la main.

Il regarda ses deux frères.

« On y va? » demanda t-il.

James pris un souffle prolongé et accentué en maintenant son regard sur son verre vide.

« Ouais. » dit-il tout simplement.

D'un sourire partagé ils se mirent en route vers cette pièce restaurée et qui dorénavant symboliserait le renouveau de cette enceinte familiale.

« Attendez ! » leur commanda James qui repartit vers la cuisine.

On l'entendit ouvrir les tiroirs d'un coup sec sans les refermer ; le grincement des couverts sous l'effet de force. Il revint avec trois lampes torches à la main sous le regard divertie de ses deux frères.

Ils descendirent un par un en bas et n'éclairèrent l'escalier, puis la pièce, que de leur lampe torche. James et Tom se mirent sur deux étagères différentes et commencèrent leurs recherches. De leur lampe ils éclairèrent les étagères une par une et s'agenouillèrent lorsqu'ils arrivèrent en bas de la colonne, puis ils passèrent à la prochaine. Henri lui, s'était directement penché sur les étagères à alcools forts au milieu de la pièce.

« Faites bien attention aux bouteilles. » s'exclama James

« C'est sûr que tu y avais bien réfléchi avec ta brillante idée de lampe torche. » rétorqua Henri sans se retourner et qui amusa tout le monde.

Quelques minutes plus tard les trois garçons étaient toujours à la recherche d'une bouteille.

« Château Margaux 1949 ! » s'exclama James.

« Bordeaux de Saint Lozet 1953 ! » rétorqua Tom.

Ils se retournèrent dans la direction de Henri qui s'était engouffré dans les rangées plus sombres. On voyait sa lumière éclairer l'autre côté de la salle et lorsque les deux frères pointèrent la leur sur Henri, il n'apercevait que son dos courbé.

« Henri? » appela James.

« Aultmore vingt cinq ans » s'écria Henri dans l'obscurité.

James et Tom se jetèrent un coup d'œil satisfait.

VII

Plus tard James se réveilla assis, seul devant la cheminée qui avait beaucoup perdu de ses flammes. Il pensait s'être reposé quelques instants et fut surpris de ne pas voir ses deux frères à ses côtés. Il fit le tour de la pièce du regard puis se tourna vers la fenêtre, mais la nuit paraissait plus sombre et il n'y voyait rien. Sur la table son verre resté vide et esseulé. Il se poussa hors du fauteuil et commença à marcher vers sa chambre. Ses pas lourds rompirent le silence complet du manoir. Lorsqu'il emprunta l'escalier et se traina jusqu'au premier étage, il vit au bout du couloir Henri assis par terre contre le mur.

Il s'avança dans sa direction et remarqua que son frère gardait près de lui son verre et il remarqua aussi que ses yeux étaient ouverts mais qu'ils ne bougeaient pas. Ils étaient fixés en face de lui et ne semblaient pas se préoccuper des pas qui progressaient vers lui.

Henri restait de marbre en face de cette porte qui l'avait tant intrigué lorsqu'il était plus jeune. Durant son enfance, on lui avait interdit de rentrer dans cette pièce qui renfermait des objets de valeurs. Cette pièce c'était l'héritage de leur famille lui répétait son père. Lui et ses frères, depuis qu'ils avaient joué au ballon dans le couloir et avaient cassé une horloge de plus de cent ans, étaient interdits de rentrer dans cette salle de musée non accompagnés. Ils étaient tous très déçus car ils aimaient beaucoup cette pièce qui les amusait énormément et lorsqu'ils firent leur procès auprès de leurs parents, c'est leur mère qu'ils n'arrivèrent pas à convaincre. C'était une des seules pièces au manoir

qu'ils trouvaient gaie et vivante. On y trouvait des costumes loufoques, de vieilles tuniques, des anciennes tenues de pompiers et uniformes militaires, des bijoux de valeurs, des tableaux de familles.

Mais ce qui attirait Henri le plus dans cette salle c'était une épée ; une lame en fer longue et fine comme un éclair et le manche en bois. Jack, le père d'Henri ne savait pas d'où elle provenait. Lui et les enfants l'avaient retrouvées dans un étui en dessous de tapis collés contre le mur au bout de la pièce. C'était James qui avait essayé de la tenir lorsque son père était à côté d'eux mais l'épée était trop lourde pour lui et il ne réussit pas à la garder en l'air plus de quelques secondes. Henri voulait absolument la tenir en main et il avait beau supplier son père, mais il ne lui autorisa pas. Connaissant la façon de jouer de ses enfants, il préféra la ranger dans son étui, la cacher et fermer la porte.

Jeune, Henri se faisait des tas d'histoires au sujet de cette épée. Il se disait qu'elle appartenait à un vaillant chevalier, qu'elle avait tué des centaines et milliers d'hommes. Il en rêvait. Il se voyait protéger le manoir face aux ennemis. Ils seraient de plus en plus nombreux à attaquer, de plus en plus agile et adroit à l'épée, mais il tiendrait bon, il les repousserait tous un par un.

James s'assit à côté de son frère, lui aussi se présentant face à la porte. Il ne se rappela pas d'avoir tenu un jour cette épée. Il se remémora la fois où, avant que cette pièce ne soit fermée à clé, il venait se réfugier ici lorsque ses frères étaient encore trop petits et dormaient paisiblement. Lorsqu'il entendait des bruits dans sa chambre le soir, il courrait se réfugier dans cette pièce où l'ampleur d'objets de valeur le soulageait. C'était comme si il était entouré de l'histoire de ces derniers siècles ; d'objets représentant une époque, une génération ; des objets qui n'attendaient plus qu'à être sollicités pour

raconter ce que c'était de vivre à l'époque. Alors il s'asseyait au milieu de la pièce sur un des tapis persans et écoutait, ou du moins se faisait une idée des histoires auxquelles tous ces objets pouvaient témoigner.

« Tu crois qu'il est ou? » demanda James.

« Je ne sais pas. » répondit Henri.

« Tu crois que ça l'a rendu fou, d'être ici? »

Henri se tut quelques instants et laissa la question en suspens.

« Tu deviendrais pas fou toi, si tu vivais seul ici ? » répondit Henri d'un ton calme, presque agacé.

« Si, sûrement. Mais je retournerais en ville tout simplement. Je laisserai pas tout tomber pour disparaître. »

Henri ne répondit rien. Il continua à fixer la porte et James fit de même. Il revoyait son père lui sourire, puis le revoyait seul à son bureau, à travailler en s'isolant.

VIII

C'était un soir en ce début de mois de Septembre. Henri avait accepté d'accompagner sa mère à un diner en ville. Il y avait des couples à table qui connaissait Henri depuis qu'il était petit, il y avait certains de leurs enfants aussi qui avaient l'âge d'Henri ou qui étaient plus vieux ; des amis de famille qui se connaissaient depuis des années, des couples recomposés et d'autres pas. Les parents parlaient voyage, école et enfants qui grandissaient et ceux qui étaient à table racontaient leurs expériences à

l'école. Henri était le seul qui n'était pas encore à l'université et lorsqu'on aborda le sujet il mentionna ses plans de rejoindre la fameuse équipe d'escrime à l'université où ses frères étudient.

Il ne se sentait pas très bavard ce soir là. Il répondait poliment aux questions qu'on lui posait mais ne disait que le strict minimum. Lui qui d'ordinaire était quelqu'un de social, n'avait cette fois pas l'envie, ni de répondre, ni de savoir ce que les autres avaient à dire.

Ils étaient tous ravis de se voir, presque extatique aux vues de leurs visages jouissifs, de leurs épaules penchées en avant exprimant leurs désirs à tous de parler, de raconter. Et lui se sentait spectateur. Ils étaient tous si heureux et pourtant lui, à entendre ce qui se disait ne comprenait pas pourquoi ils l'étaient. Sa mère aborda des sujets ayant pour but de le faire parler mais vu que ça n'avait que très peu d'effets, elle racontait à sa place des anecdotes et faits qui le concernait. On le regardait et lui souriait, disait quelques mots mais il voulait surtout que l'attention se porte sur quelqu'un d'autre.

IX

Il n'osait rien dire. Devant les enfants le majordome se taisait, ne laissait rien paraître, où presque, de ses sentiments.

Il avait toujours regardé Jack comme un être immortel, comme un vaillant guerrier à qui la force physique et mentale le rendait invulnérable, indomptable ; un caractère tenace capable de faire face à toutes épreuves.

Puis une nuit, seul et retranché, des images d'horreur lui traversèrent l'esprit ; des visions de Jack agonisant, la bouche ouverte, les yeux grands ouverts remplis de terreurs. Daniel se réveilla d'un coup. Il parcouru la chambre sombre de ses yeux meurtris. Il se leva de son lit et marcha vers sa salle d'eau. Il mouilla d'eau froide son visage transpirant puis jeta un regard vers la glace reflétant son visage défraîchi, amaigri avant de retourner en chambre où il changea son tablier à col blanc et s'assilla sur le coin de son lit. Il restait pensif contre son gré. Il se répétait que Jack allait bien ; qu'il y avait dans son départ un but précis, une raison valable. Et peut être, se disait-il, qu'il reviendrait d'ici peu, avant que ses enfants ne repartent à l'école.

Alors même qu'il touchait à une certaine raison, ce sentiment se remplaçait peu à peu par une culpabilité dont il n'arrivait pas à se débarrasser.

Il se sentait coupable, se sentait responsable de la fuite de leur père. Il l'a voyait, cette peine en Jack, grandir au fil des semaines. Il ne savait pas comment s'y prendre, ce n'était pas sa place que d'aller lui poser des questions qui ne le regardait pas. Alors il restait de côté et attendait ou du moins espérait que Jack le sollicite.

X

Les jours passèrent et le majordome remarqua que les garçons se levaient de plus en plus tard. Il avait accepté l'idée qu'ils n'étaient peut être pas prêts à parler de leur père. Peut être qu'eux aussi pensaient qu'il reviendrait d'ici peu. Ce qui l'inquiétait depuis quelques jours c'est qu'au réveil il trouvait de plus en plus de bouteilles d'alcools

qui traînaient dans la maison. Le matin il ramassait toujours une ou deux bouteilles de vins dans le salon puis d'autres suivaient au premier puis deuxième étage, et comme on monte les étages, les degrés d'alcools eux grimpaient aussi. En faisant un peu le ménage dans les chambres, il avait notamment trouvé une bouteille de scotch par terre dans la chambre de James. Il l'avait laissé tel quel. Il ne voulait pas que les enfants pensent qu'il fouillait dans leurs affaires.

Puis un matin il se réveilla à une heure matinale et fut surpris de ne voir aucune bouteille traîner dans le salon. Il monta à l'étage et s'aperçut que les portes des chambres de Tom et James étaient ouvertes et que leurs lits étaient faits. Pris de panique il monta au 2eme étage et fit le même constat lorsqu'il rentra dans la chambre de Henri et dans la chambre parental.

Il fouilla la maison toute entière. Pièce par pièce il cherchait des signes qui le mettraient sur la bonne route. Puis en regardant par la fenêtre du bureau du père au premier étage, il vit au loin les garçons marcher en direction du manoir.

Il avait enfilé son long manteau noir et les attendaient en bas de la porte.

« Bien dormi ? » demanda James d'un ton réjoui en arrivant au bas de la porte

« Vous êtes aller faire les courses ? » répondit le majordome en voyant les sacs qu'ils tenaient en main.

« Oui et on a acheté un poulet pour ce soir. Tu vas voir je vais nous faire une recette que j'ai apprise. » dit James, réjoui, en rentrant dans le maison.

Le majordome suivit les garçons à la cuisine et les regarda ranger les courses. Il avait du mal à y croire. Il les avait laissé au salon hier soir alors qu'ils venaient de ramener un digestif de la cave. Il n'avait réussi à fermer l'œil que quelques heures et ne

comprenait pas comment ils avaient pu partir aussi tôt. N'avaient-ils pas dormis ? Ou s'étaient-ils tous levés très tôt ? Et même si ces questions jazzièrent dans sa tête, il décida de ne rien dire. Il se contenta seulement de les regarder.

XI

L'après-midi, James laissait Tom et Henri jouer au ballon sur la pelouse pendant que lui faisait mine de lire sur la terrasse. Il lisait une phrase puis s'arrêtait. Il observait ses frères jouer et regarder au loin la forêt qui démarquait la frontière du domaine. Il avait la lettre de son père en tête. Il revoyait ses mots impromptus écrits hâtivement sur cette feuille claire qui avait aspiré l'encre noire du stylo. James revoyait l'écriture et pouvait témoigner de la vitesse de la main battante sur le papier. Il n'arrivait toujours pas à croire que ces mots étaient ceux de son père. Il n'aurait jamais pu associer ces pensées à un homme n'ayant jamais montré la moindre trace d'une quelconque fragilité.

Ce sentiment d'incompréhension l'envahissait et il eut cette envie pressante de relire la lettre, de la disséquer car cette lettre il l'a connaissait par cœur, il l'a connaissait mot pour mot et pourtant il voulait la revoir, la relire encore et encore à en devenir l'inventeur.

« James! » cria Tom depuis le jardin.

« On va faire un tour en vélo. Tu viens? »

« Non ça va. Je veux terminer ma lecture. » répondit James.

Tom ne demanda pas deux fois et avec Henri ils s'en allèrent chercher leurs vélos.

Daniel sortit de la maison derrière et approcha James.

« Tu ne viens pas? » lui demanda t-il.

« Non. Je finis ma lecture. » Répondit James

« D'accord. » répondit tout simplement le majordome avant de descendre les quelques marches de la terrasse et de s'en aller vers la remise.

James attendit quelques minutes après leur départ, puis se mena jusqu'au bureau de son père à l'étage. Lorsqu'il ouvrit le premier tiroir à droite du bureau, là où ses frères et lui avaient placés la lettre après l'avoir lu le premier soir, il n'y trouva que de la paperasse. Il se mit alors à chercher dans les tiroirs du dessous, puis dans les tiroirs de l'autre coté du bureau mais la lettre n'y était plus.

Il fit alors le tour de la pièce, souleva les coussins du canapé, se mit à quatre pattes au sol pour voir si elle n'avait pas glissée en dessous. Il comprit qu'il perdait son temps et, déconcerté, il se retrouva au milieu de la pièce à parcourir l'espace à qui il manquait désormais cruellement une âme. Il le ressentit à cet instant précis, bien plus qu'il ne l'avait jamais ressenti auparavant.

Les rayons de soleil illuminèrent des parties de la pièce et ses yeux suivirent tout naturellement cette exposition de luminosité qui le guidait dans sa quête. Mais ni l'aide du temps radieux, ni ses yeux qui brulaient l'envie de retrouver ce bien précieux, ne put empêcher cette soudaine réalisation qui montait en lui et qui l'informait qu'on l'avait bel et bien devancé.

XII

Tom et Henri accéléraient sur leurs vélos tout terrain et d'un rythme frénétique, ils se suivaient à la trace. Le chemin tracé était étroit. A l'arrivée de chaque saut la fenêtre pour retomber était mince. Il fallait que les garçons s'immiscent entre deux arbres et parfois se baissent si une branche épaisse venait contredire le passage.

Tom était devant et à la moindre erreur ou chute, son frère reprendrait les commandes. On entendait seulement le métal des chaines de vélos qui tournaient fiévreusement et qui rendaient l'effort physique des deux frères presque inaudible. Les rayons du soleil ne passaient pas sur ce terrain où les arbres rapprochés, de leurs longues branches à maturité, empêchaient la lumière de pénétrer.

Ils avaient laissés le majordome à l'arrière, qui lui allait à son rythme. Il avait pris un autre chemin plus tranquille où l'espace était plus ouvert et ensoleillé. Il avait pour habitude de prendre ce chemin avec Jack.

Seul désormais, il prenait son temps et pédalait lentement. Il observait les branches qui avaient perdu leurs feuilles et qui étaient désormais délaissées de toute tonalité. La forêt lui paraissait sans essence. Elle perdait à son œil, tout trait intrigant. En Automne elle avait maintenu toute sa forme d'été et lorsqu'il se promenait avec Jack, la forêt était intacte et jouissait même des temps pluvieux. Venu le début de l'hiver qui coïncida avec le départ de Jack, elle commença à perdre ses feuilles, à laissé des traces de fatigue et en se découvrant petit à petit, elle laissait tout voyageur l'aisance de la voir nue et découverte.

XIII

Seul et libre, il se sentait fin et tranchant comme le vent. Henri se déplaçait entre les pièces avec la nette conviction que cette nuit laissait à présager quelque chose d'exceptionnel. Les détectives les plus doués ne le devenaient-ils pas à l'envie ? Si, certainement et ce soir, de tous les soirs, il arpenterait tous les recoins du manoir, il fouillerait les vestiges d'un domaine laissé pour compte, d'un territoire qui l'a éduqué et pour qui il n'y a jamais eu de secret.

Il parlait à ces murs, les laissaient leurs raconter leurs places au sein de l'histoire. Il voulait voir comme eux avaient vu. Il voulait être témoin comme eux l'ont été, témoin des scènes marquantes qui les ont forgées.

De la paume de ses mains il parcouru ces briques en cherchant les traces de scènes passées.

De ses pas lents et appuyés au sol il longea le couloir et non pas par hasard, comme attiré par une force envahissante et reconnaissable seulement en ces heures noctambules, il se trouva face à cette porte dont ses pensées s'étaient imprégnés innocemment durant ces années où l'esprit se forme et la mémoire naît.

Il s'attarda un instant devant cette porte qui paraissait à cet instant plus glorieuse que jamais. Il avait été attiré comme un aimant, comme pour des retrouvailles passionnelles et lorsqu'il ouvra la porte et mis un pas dans la pièce, il eut cette nette impression de rentrer dans l'esprit du manoir.

La pièce était sombre et il resta un instant immobile. Il jeta un regard soutenu sur son contenu. Lentement ses yeux s'ajustèrent au noir complet et il put observer les différentes formes qui remplissaient la salle. Il resta ainsi un moment. Puis il alluma enfin la lumière du plafond qui éclaira la salle toute entière.

La pièce rectangulaire et haute de plafond laissait place à des rideaux impressionnants d'un rouge foncé qui cloisonnaient la pièce et la rendait à la fois majestueuse et étouffante et qui rappelait les maisons closes durant les années d'interdiction. Henri s'avança et pris note de l'habit de picador doré mis en exhibition en plein milieu de la pièce dans une vitrine assez large pour l'encadrer.

Il prit un ensemble de tissu de rideaux dans ses bras. Il avait oublié le poids presque accablant du tissu plus épais qu'à première vue. Il rassembla ses forces et déplaça une partie du rideau sur le côté. Il fit de même avec le reste du tissu qu'il déplaça de l'autre côté de la pièce.

En ouvrant les rideaux il laissait place à une gigantesque fenêtre qui faisait toute la longueur de la pièce et qui, de largeur, partait du busque de Henri et allait jusqu'au plafond. La baie donnait vu sur l'arrière du manoir et sur la forêt. Excentré sur la gauche on pouvait voir l'extrémité du village. Il n'y avait aucun vis-à-vis, aucunes maisons n'étaient placées dans le périmètre et de là où Henri était placé, il pouvait témoigner de l'étendu de l'isolement du manoir.

Car pour voir Henri à cet instant, il aurait fallu que quelqu'un, en se promenant à cette heure tardive se soit égaré sur son chemin. Il aurait alors atterri au pied de la forêt et une fois réalisé qu'il s'était égaré, il ne s'arrête devant le domaine et ne perçoit au loin une silhouette placée devant une grande baie vitrée illuminée. Et si tout de fois la

curiosité de ce voyageur le prenait subitement et qu'il décidait de s'approcher pour observer de plus près cette scène si surprenante mais irrévocablement poignante visuellement ; alors cet étranger, s'il s'avancait assez près, pouvait identifier cette silhouette comme appartenant au plus jeune des frères qui, à cet instant, découvrit dans cette pièce même ce bien qui avait laissé sa trace dans son enfance.

Il vit l'étui d'un coup, comme une évidence ses yeux se posèrent dessus. Elle l'avait appelé ou alors il l'avait incité à comparaitre. Dans les deux cas leurs esprits s'étaient trouvés une fois de plus. Il l'a prit en dessous de l'armoire Napoléon et en tenant l'étui de sa main gauche, il libéra l'épée hors de son socle de la main droite.

Resplendissante. Elle dépassait toutes les attentes qu'il s'était fixé. Il l'a serra des deux mains, la pesa. Main gauche, main droite. Il l'a mit devant lui, droite et tendu. Il se retourna et fis face à la salle. Il prit l'épée des deux mains, tourna ses poignets et se mit en garde. Il resta comme ça un instant puis d'un coup éclatant, plongea la lame droite devant lui. Il ramena l'épée contre son corps, puis se mit de coté et de la main droite, commença à magner le manche de droite a gauche. Il commença à bouger ses pieds en avant. Il fit des petits pas qui accéléraient comme des claquettes et sa main elle, suivit le rythme de ses pas avec son poignet articulant le manche et faisant tourner la lame acérée de l'épée en cercle. Il continua à avancer en gesticulant l'épée, en lui faisant faire des tourbillons dans l'air. Il contourna des objets de valeurs, une table ronde en verre, une table en vieux bois en plein milieu de la pièce. Il les contourna habilement. Il fit une fois, deux fois le tour des tables comme s'il pourchassait un ennemi, une âme rivale.

Il fit quatre, cinq aller-retour de la pièce comme ça, en prenant à chaque fois différentes routes ; en passant a gauche de la table ronde, puis à droite, puis en se mettant

dessus et en y restant un instant, a combattre dans le vent. Il allongea sa jambe qui trouva la table en bois. Il laissa une jambe sur une table et une jambe sur l'autre. Il continua à combattre, à aller plus vite encore, ses yeux fixés sur ses adversaires. Ils vinrent en nombre et en vagues. Il les repoussa un par un puis se déplaça.

Il se déplaça dans le couloir. Il avait plus d'espace et il fit des tours sur lui-même, toujours en mouvement, toujours avec son arme qu'il tenait solidement dans sa main et qu'il magnait avec une dextérité sans appel. Il feintait, puis réattaquait. Il se sentait si libre, si fort qu'il les combattrait toute la nuit s'il le faut, toute sa vie.

XIV

On entendait seulement le bruit de la pluie battante qui venait ricocher contre les fenêtres et sur le toit. Elle berçait le jeune homme qui restait plongé dans son sommeil alors que, avachi sur le fauteuil, il pressait une bouteille de scotch contre lui et l'entourait amoureusement dans ses bras.

Le majordome restait de marbre devant James.

Il le connaissait depuis sa naissance, cet enfant qu'il a vu grandir d'année en année, qu'il a aimé de tout son être et auprès de qui il s'est toujours senti très protecteur. Daniel était très fier de James lorsqu'il était plus jeune. Lorsque les parents s'absentaient, lorsqu'ils laissaient les enfants seuls avec le majordome, Daniel voyait bien que James prenait son rôle de grand frère à cœur, qu'il s'occupait d'Henri et Tom avec amour et grande maturité.

Il revoyait l'enfant sage et communicatif lui raconter innocemment ses semaines à l'école, ses amoureuses et ses exploits sportifs.

« James, » appela le majordome.

« James. » dit-il une seconde fois mettant sa main sur l'épaule du garçon.

Son visage était tourné de profil et ses yeux en s'ouvrant, tombèrent sur le bureau de son père. Il y resta figé un instant.

« James qu'est ce qu'il se passe ? » demanda Daniel d'un ton doux et désarmant.

Les yeux grands ouverts de James se tournèrent vers le majordome sans que son visage ne bouge d'un trait. Il le regarda de côté un instant, sans répondre, avant de tourner son regard une nouvelle fois sur le bureau.

James regardait droit devant. Il observait l'espace creux en dessous du bureau et notait la chaise vide tournée de côté.

Il continua à regarder le bureau quelques instants, puis referma tout simplement ses yeux. Le majordome contemplait l'état de ce garçon sans avoir la moindre idée quoi faire. Il continuait à le fixer, à espérer qu'il ouvre les yeux une nouvelle fois et prenne conscience de sa présence.

Un silence pesant régnait. Il resta immobile. Le temps semblait s'éterniser, et malgré son malaise grandissant, il ne trouvait pas la force en lui de se retirer de la pièce. Il se demanda alors si James s'était endormi, ou s'il attendait seulement qu'il s'en aille et le laisse en paix ?

Petit à petit, Daniel sentit monter en lui une inquiétude qui trottait dans sa tête depuis maintenant quelque temps ; la peur que finalement il n'avait peut-être plus rien à faire ici, aux côtés de ceux pour qui il n'était plus utile. Car au fond à quoi servait-il

vraiment ? Cette question l'angoissait. Elle pesait en lui comme un fardeau qu'on ne peut enterrer. Et à ce moment là plus que tout d'autres, il sentait bien qu'il était de trop. Il ne se sentait pas le bienvenu, comme si la pièce elle-même était imprégnée de la présence de James et rejetait la sienne. Comme si elle faisait mine d'oublier tous les moments qu'il avait passé ici, seul où avec Jack, et qu'elle l'ignorait complètement et volontairement afin de lui faire passer un message ; qu'il était peut-être temps de se retirer.

XV

La journée fut longue. Le majordome, qui s'était retiré dans ses quartiers, avait fait peu avant, un tour dans la cave. Il prit la même bouteille de vin qu'il avait trouvé vide dans le bureau de Jack à côté de la lettre qu'il avait écrite à ses enfants. Il l'ouvrit en pensant à Jack, en pensant aux moments qu'ils avaient partagés ensemble ces derniers mois. Il souri même à l'idée que Jack trinquait avec lui et qu'il était à ce moment là dans sa chambre et qu'ensemble ils se remémoraient les soirées marquantes qui ont eu lieu dans ce manoir.

Venu l'heure du coucher de soleil, Daniel eu l'envie pressante de marcher jusqu'au village. L'air était bon d'un vent présent mais silencieux et la route était déserte.

Il observa le ciel qui d'une teinture ensanglantée, se confondait avec le village tout en vieux brique. Et la forêt elle semblait en rougir davantage que lorsque le soleil l'écorche de ses rayons imposant l'été.

Daniel voulait arrêter le temps, le suspendre ; rallonger les aiguilles au point que les minutes deviennent secondes. Il voulait s'attarder sur cette vue mais au fil des minutes, il pouvait voir le soleil se dissiper et le ciel s'assombrir.

XVI

Le majordome rentra à la maison. Il avait réussi à prendre une portion de viande avant que le boucher du village ne ferme.

Il marchait la tête baissée et il ne remarqua pas de loin que le manoir était plongé dans l'obscurité. En entrant dans la maison il éclaira l'entrée, puis la salle à manger et fut surpris lorsqu'il rentra dans le salon, de voir les trois garçons assis dans le noir.

« Eh bien vous n'allumez pas la lumière les enfants ? » demanda le majordome avec assurance.

Il fit le tour de la pièce pour allumer les lumières. Les garçons en grimacèrent.

« Ça va, on ne te dérange pas ? » grinça James allongé sur le canapé.

Daniel le regarda, puis se tourna vers les autres enfants. Au milieu d'eux, sur la table, il aperçu deux bouteilles de vins rouges, l'une d'elle vide et l'autre presque.

« Vous avez bu deux bouteilles avant le diner ? » s'écria le majordome.

« Qu'est ce qui ne tourne pas rond chez vous ? »

Cela amusa Henri qui lui dit d'un ton narquois :

« On t'attendait. On s'est dit qu'on prendrait un verre avant que tu reviennes. T'en as mis du temps ».

« Vous ne m'avez même pas vu partir » rétorqua Daniel

« Non mais je l'ai senti. J'ai le flair pour ce genre de choses » répondit Henri et qui amusa ses frères.

« Bon, je nous ai pris de la viande pour ce soir. » Il continua.

« C'était la dernière pièce du boucher. Il fermait, j'ai eu de la chance. »

« Ah mais on a déjà mangé. On avait faim, alors on s'est fait des pâtes » répondit James en le regardant

« Pardon ? » rétorqua Daniel

« On avait faim » répéta-t-il « alors on s'est fait des pâtes. On mangera ta viande demain » répondit-il d'un ton sec.

Le majordome resta muet. Il regarda les garçons puis sorti de la pièce, sans dire un mot.

Plus tard, Henri s'endormi en bas dans le salon pendant que James et Tom jouaient aux cartes dans le bureau de leur père. Le majordome vint à leurs rencontres. Il s'avança d'un pas assuré et se présenta face à eux.

« Les garçons, » Il attendit qu'ils les regardent. « J'ai bien réfléchi et je pense que les choses devraient changer. On ne peut pas continuer comme ça. »

« Comment ça ? » répondit James

Tom et James regardèrent tout deux Daniel d'un air incrédule. Tom se leva pour aller resservir son verre d'une bouteille de whisky posée sur le bureau de son père, puis s'assisa sur la chaise derrière le bureau. James lui, se contenta de suivre les cartes qu'il traitait sous le regard du majordome.

Plus tôt dans la journée, lorsque Daniel rentrait du village au coucher du soleil, il se remémora ces fois où les enfants et lui jouaient au foot dans le jardin ; au temps où il possédait encore un peu d'énergie pour leur faire plaisir. C'étaient les seuls instants où il faisait de l'exercice – ces sessions avec les garçons qui le entraînaient jusqu'au jardin pour jouer avec eux. Ils ne se fatiguaient jamais, et lui était trop heureux d'être entouré de cette énergie, cet amour innocent que les enfants portent à un être qu'ils ont toujours connu.

Il avait aussi pensé à Eva, et à quel point sa présence manquait au manoir. Il aimait Eva, Daniel, comme un garçon aime son Saint. Elle avait cette force tranquille qui attirait l'attention de ceux qui la voyaient, qui l'écoutaient. Dans le passé c'était bien elle qui animait la vie dans la maison, qui égayait les visages par sa présence.

Il aimait les voir complices elle et Jack. Il aimait les voir danser et plaisanter, offrant des souvenirs irremplaçables aux yeux des trois garçons.

À présent Tom restait assis sur le fauteuil à contempler Daniel.

« Si les choses ne te plaisent pas ici Daniel, personne ne te retient » ajouta James qui le regardait cette fois.

Daniel resta figé. Il contemplait James. Lui regardait le majordome puis son jeu de carte qu'il triait, faisant mine de ne pas s'intéresser au majordome.

Lorsque Daniel se tourna vers le bureau du père et plongea son regard dans celui de Tom, il n'y trouva rien. Il n'y avait dans ses yeux aucune foi, aucune raison qui puisse l'inciter à rester auprès d'eux, auprès de garçons qu'il avait toujours considéré comme les siens. Il le vit dans les yeux de Tom qui restés fixés sur lui, ternes et passifs. Alors sans se retourner vers James, le majordome fit demi-tour et quitta la pièce.

Au réveil, le temps serait bon et l'air serait frais. Les garçons se lèveraient mais n'iraient pas à la recherche du majordome. Ils le sauraient déjà parti.

Jets

I

Outside, the pouring rain remained invisible to the naked eyes of the three boys motionless and immersed deep in the heart of their father's office.

Daniel the caretaker, standing beside the door, let his gaze fall to the soft underbelly of the room. He sometimes gave a glance at James, the oldest son, who stood against the window looking at the letter he hold in his hands. Across from him, sitting on the sofa that was usually reserved to their father's guests, Henri, the youngest of the three brothers, held his head in his two hands with his elbows leaning firmly on his knees. His eyes travelled across the imposing carpet where cavalrymen stood gloriously. To the side, Tom, the third brother, remained seated on the floor, his back resting against the velvet couch, his eyes fixed on the other side of the room, holding the confident look of his ancestor painted in a noble manner in this same room with a sword in his hand.

"When did he give it to you?" asked James without averting his gaze from the letter and breaking the silence that reigned in the room.

"The morning he left." answered the caretaker.

"You saw him leave?" asked Henri as he turned his look to Daniel.

"Yes."

"What did he say?" asked Henri.

"Nothing. Simply that he was sorry."

This answer left a weighing silence in the room as the brothers were still coping with the news.

“Do you know why he left?” asked James looking straight at Daniel.

“No. He did not tell me anything. I knew nothing about it. I caught him as he was leaving”.

James looked at Daniel, then back at the letter. Henri left his haggard look fall back on the ground while Tom held his look on the other side of the room

II

He was up early in the morning. In fact, he had not slept at all. The sun had yet to rise when he set off to the village. He was one of the first men in town. The shops had not yet opened. The day carried a dry cold and the man's steps on the wet ground echoed through the sonorous alleys. The shadows of a few men emerged, and then faded away in the distance. This view of the village brought back familiar feelings to the caretaker who, in the past, used to walk around at times when the sun did not intrude with Jack, the father of the three boys.

Ever since Jack had come back, Daniel became the sole witness of the man's slow decline. He had come back without his wife Eva, and when Daniel had asked him instinctually where she was, Jack had simply answered, “We are not together anymore, Daniel” before taking his suitcase up to his room.

He remembered his tone as straight, sharp and emotionless, as if their separation was trivial news, a note that now only belonged to the past. Yet it had struck Daniel like an unforeseen drought that hits the blooming fields - a reminder that in the outside world, different lives than in the estate are led and shaken up more often than seasons pass.

He had not anticipated this news, nor had he anticipated Jack's return. He stayed for three months. The weeks that followed saw Jack and Daniel living side by side, working on fixing up the manor. They repainted some of the rooms, fixed up some furniture and took care of the garden. They spent a lot of time together as Jack was very excited to revive the family home. That's all they talked about with Daniel. Together they planned the weekly tasks with every day a new one.

It became a joyous routine for Daniel who was glad to see Jack by his side, glad to spend time with him. Before his return, the days in the estate felt endless and Daniel began to feel almost useless, taking care of an empty house. The boys were growing up and were not visiting anymore, even for a weekend. And then Jack had appeared and it was just the two of them. Daniel, the loyal attendant whose knowledge of life did not go beyond the estate, and Jack, the newly divorced man who had left the city to seclude himself in a place that new nothing about the social mores of the city.

Weeks passed and Daniel witnessed Jack lose his good mood and his humor. Jack started to isolate himself more and more everyday and stopped working on the house. Daniel found him several mornings, sleeping on his office's couch or in the living room and most of the time, with one or two bottles lying around. Little by little Daniel felt a discomfort growing between them. The caretaker could see Jack's attention towards him

decreasing and because he did not want to upset him, Daniel stayed back and waited for Jack to come and talk to him.

And then one morning he heard footsteps in the hallway early in the morning and found Jack all dressed up with a suitcase in his hand. He could still see very clearly, Daniel's apologetic and affectionate look as he walked towards him.

“I'm sorry Daniel.” he simply said, putting his hand on his shoulder. “Take care of yourself,” he added earnestly before turning back and making his way to the door.

Daniel did not say anything. He wasn't sure if he was still dreaming or not. The sun had barely risen, and outside he could see the white and iron sky turn towards a new day. He looked back just in time to see Jack pick up his suitcase on the floor and then leave the house without turning back. Daniel stayed still and heard the car's engine turn on and disappear in the distance.

III

Tom was staring off into the distance when he saw Daniel walking towards the manor, out of the corner of his eye. The caretaker held groceries bags in each hand. Tom rested his head against the window and followed him with his eyes narrowed before the caretaker disappeared beneath the terrace. He heard the door open then close downstairs, felt the fresh air penetrate. Tom held his father's letter in his hands. He thought of Daniel's sorrowful look as he gave it to him and his brothers the day of their arrival.

My sons,

Please believe me when I say that it hurts me just to imagine how you must feel about this situation. I wish in so many ways that we could spend this time together and it kills me to think now that we won't be able to. As I write this to you, I have tried in every way possible to extend my stay here. But living here, within these walls where I have seen you grow and become the men that you are today, has simply become too much for me. I have this urgent and unsatisfying need in me that pushes me far away from here, far away from everything that makes me remember.

I truly hope you will understand or at least come to forgive me.

I love you very much. Please take good care of yourselves.

Your Father

Tom's eyes wandered around his room. He stared at his bed already made, his old desk in wood, empty and dispossessed from its chair. Below it laid a few board games, now the remnants of a heartening childhood. He remembered then when, in the past this room frightened him. He would hear noises at night that dragged him out of bed. He would run into his brother's room and hide under his sheets.

Now he turned back towards the window. He could not detach himself from this view, as if he saw it for the first time.

IV

The three boys sat in the dining room downstairs that rested between the living room and the kitchen. This open space with no door had been the familial room in the house, where lunch and dinner were served and where parents and children gathered together. At night they would light up the ash-colored oval lamp fixed on the ceiling and the long fine candles on the table. The lights shined on the long wood table that almost filled the entire room. The impressionistic paintings hooked on both sides of the room blended in the background and most times drew not only the guests' attention but also the children's, for whom those landscapes had become an integral part of the festive atmosphere at night.

But on that day, during their first lunch since their return, the room was barely lit by the light projected by the sun and the boys, who had not cared to switch on the ceiling light, left the neglected paintings in the shadow and let the room sink into semi-darkness.

"Sit with us, Daniel," said James amicably. "There's plenty to eat for all of us."

"Thank you James, but I'm not hungry," answered Daniel.

"Still, sit with us. We haven't seen you in so long."

Daniel took a seat at the table next to James, in front of Henri and stayed with them for lunch.

At table James and Henri were the most talkative. James told Daniel about his junior year at university, he mentioned his two-year anniversary coming up in a few weeks with his girlfriend Olivia. Henri informed Daniel about his admission to the prestigious university in which his older brothers were already renowned students. The fencing team, the best in the country, had scouted him. Daniel, not the least surprised by the news and proposed to make a toast at dinner. They would choose a bottle from the wine cellar that he wished to show them since their father had spent a lot of time working on it.

Later in the afternoon, he watched them play football in the garden from the window. An odd feeling passed through him and he could not get rid of it. He had not noticed a profound sadness in the boys since their return. He expected them to ask questions about their father but they hadn't mentioned him once. During lunch, he noticed Tom avoiding his gaze and then looking at him from out of the corner of his eye. Tom had also been unusually silent. He smiled and laughed at his brothers' anecdotes but did not talk much about himself. Daniel wondered what they all thought about the situation, about their father's sudden departure. He hoped they would soon talk to him like they used to, when in the past, they saw him as more than a caretaker, a confident.

V

Before dinner, Daniel led the boys to the cellar. The bottles were now stocked on shelves along the wall that went around the room. They were stacked by domain, by type

and year. The long and thin shelves that went from floor to ceiling filled up the empty space in the middle of the room. Those shelves stocked hard liquors: old Armagnacs from the south of France; rums from the Caribbean and South America; vodkas from Eastern Europe. Daniel left the boys to contemplate the renovated room in which sat proudly the retrieved collection. One by one, shelf by shelf, the boys dwelled on the bottles, sometimes catching the names of domains or alcohol that they were familiar with.

They were stunned by the radical change of the cellar that used to be the place to avoid in the manor. In the past, the room was filled with objects their parents did not want to see in the house. There were so many of them that it was hard to even take a step. In the past, the abandoned light bulb in the middle of the room only cast a dim light that did not illuminate the entire room. Jack always took a flashlight with him when he went to the cellar. He would come back ten minutes later, exhausted from his journey. The boys only went down when their parents asked them to.

Jack knew a bit about alcohol – enough to realize that the manor held a collection far more impressive than he had imagined. His parents did not drink and therefore did not pay much attention to this isolated room and its content. They had left it as it was. When he was younger, Jack had learned stories about his grandfather who he had never met. He had died in his thirties in a motorbike accident. His parents had told him vaguely that he was an alcoholic. Jack had learned that when his grandfather's parents were out in town or gone for holidays, his grandfather organized extravagant parties at the manor that brought in people from the city. Jack had never really learned more about those parties, only that some of them had turned into unspoken debacles. He did not learn much more about his grandfather either since his parents never wanted to talk about him.

VI

At night the boys gathered in the kitchen where everyone offered to participate in the making of dinner. Just like when they were kids, they each tried hard to show off their talents, from the dressing for the salad to the cooking of the meat. Daniel, who witnessed the scene proudly, supervised the whole ordeal. He looked at the boys joking around, teasing each other but always keeping a certain seriousness to their respective task. At the table, the caretaker had set out the porcelain plates and the candles that he carefully lit up as they sat down.

Daniel could not be more delighted at dinner. He had never been so close to the boys, or maybe he had, but time had taken it from him. He felt like part of the family once again. He was reassured to see Tom smiling and talkative. He was reminded of years ago when he would eat at table with the children. They were always laughing at each other, talking constantly and most of the time he just stayed silent and looked at them with amusement. This memory appeased him or maybe the wine did, and as the night progressed he felt a soft and delicate fuzziness that made his head heavy and burdensome. He sat with the boys who were starting a fire in the living room. He struggled to order his thoughts and let the young men expose theirs. He stayed for another few minutes before wishing them a good night. (He thought of comforting them by announcing he would go get the breakfast in town in the morning).

He would leave early. The walk to the village would give him some fresh air and the contact with the people would make him forget his morning headache. Back at the manor, he would feel comforted, galvanized at the dawn of a new day.

The boys were settled in the living room. Henri was standing up and reviving the fire. On his left, next to the window, Tom was lying down on the couch and on his right, James was sitting on the armchair. The room was quieter and in the silence they could only hear the wood scorching in the flames. Tom was fixing the mouldings on the ceiling. Henri lit up a cigarette and offered one to Tom. He then turned to James.

“How does it feel, to quit?” he asked.

“It hurts,” answered James.

“I bet.” He thought for a second.

“I don’t think I’d ever let a girl stop me from smoking.” He paused. “Smoking and drinking.”

“Well, good luck with that,” answered James.

Tom laughed and Henri smiled. “Speaking of alcohol, I’m afraid we’re running out, boys,” he added.

Tom turned his look to the empty bottle left on the table. He straightened his back and still sitting down, grabbed the bottle in his hand then looked at his two brothers.

“Shall we?” he asked assuredly

James took a deep and accentuated breath while maintaining his look on his empty glass. “Yeah.”

They shared a content smile and headed over to the restored room that now symbolized the rebirth of this home.

“Wait,” commanded James to his brothers as he walked back towards the kitchen.

They heard him open the drawers sharply and heard the screeching of silverware. They heard him retrace his steps as he came back with three flashlights to the amusement of his two brothers. One by one, they walked downstairs, then the room, lit up only by their flashlights. James and Tom began on different shelves and started their search. They lit up each shelf one by one and kneeled down when they reached the bottom then went to the next one. Henri had immediately gone to the center of the room where the hard liquor was stocked.

“Be careful with the bottles, guys,” called out James.

“You sure as hell thought about it beforehand with your brilliant idea of bringing those flashlights,” replied Henri without turning back, making everyone laugh.

After a few minutes the boys were still busy finding the right bottle to continue the night.

“Bordeaux de Saint Lozet 1953,” exclaimed James

“Chateaux Margaux 1949,” called back Tom

They both turned back towards Henri who had rushed into the somber part of the room. His brothers could see his light illuminate the other side of the cellar. When they pointed their lights towards Henri, they could only get a glimpse of his arched back.

“Henri?” Tom called out

“Aultmore aged 25 years!” shouted Henri from his obscured position.

James and Tom glanced at each other contentedly.

Later in the night, James woke up in front of the chimney as it gave out its last sparks. He thought he had only rested for an instant and was surprised to see that his

brothers were no longer present. He looked around the room, only lit by the tall lamp in the corner of the room. He looked through the window, but the night seemed dark and he couldn't see anything through it but the blurry features of his face. His glass laid lone and empty on the table. He slowly lifted himself up from the armchair and started his walk towards the upper floor. His heavy steps stole the silence away from the walls. He made his way up the stairs to reach the second floor. Farther down the hall, he saw his brother Henri sitting down against the wall. James walked towards him and noticed the glass his brother kept beside him and he noticed too that Henri's eyes were open but not moving. They were fixed straight ahead and did not seem concerned with the steps that progressed towards him.

Henri remained stone-faced in front of the door that held his family heritage and to which his parents had forbidden him and his brothers to enter. They had been forbidden to enter this museum room unaccompanied since they had played football in the hallway and broke a hundred year old bronzed clock. They were all very saddened by this news since it was one of the only places in the manor that they found high-spirited and animated. Henri still remembered the odd looking costumes, the fashionable tunics, the former firemen's outfit and military grab, the valuable jewelries and family paintings, but most importantly, what had struck him in his childhood was an iron blade sword, long and fine like a flash of light. His father did not know where it came from or to whom it belonged. Jack and the children had found it in a case hidden beneath a set of carpets stack on top of each other and pushed against the wall across the room. It was James, the oldest of them who got to hold it or at least try to since the sword was too heavy and he couldn't raise it in the air more than a few seconds. Henri begged to hold it too but his

father didn't let him and knowing his sons' way of playing games, he decided to put it back in its case, hide it and lock the door. When he was young, Henri had dreams of this sword. He made up stories in which he was a valiant knight whose sword had killed hundreds and thousands of men. He saw himself protecting the manor from enemies. Waves of men came in the estate but he pushed them away. He handled his sword more and more skillfully with a natural touch and perfect discipline. As time passed he stood strong and firm and sent them back as the nation he protected cheered him on with a glorious roar.

James sat down next to his brother. They were both facing the door. He did not remember that time when he held the sword. He looked back at that time when, before the room was locked, he would and take refuge here when his brothers were still too young and were sleeping peacefully. He had just learned to walk without falling and when he heard noises at night, he would run straight to this room where the ample amount of objects soothed him. He felt like he was surrounded by the history of object from past centuries, surrounded by objects that represented an age, an era, objects who expected nothing more than to reveal what it was like to live back then. And so he sat in the middle of the room, on one of those Persian carpets and listened to the stories each object had to tell.

“Where do you think he is?” asked James

“I don't know,” Henri answered simply.

“You think it drove him crazy to be here?”

“Wouldn't you go crazy if you lived here by yourself?” answered Henri calmly.

“Yeah probably. But I wouldn’t leave everything behind, I wouldn’t leave my family and just disappear.”

Henri did not say anything back. He eyes stayed fixed on the door and James did the same. One boy did not think of anything and simply left his look rest on the door in front of them. The other one saw his father smile at him, saw him working at his desk, isolated from everyone else.

VII

He did not say anything. In front of the kids, he stayed silent. He did not show any feelings or any regrets that he felt. He had always seen Jack as an immortal being, as a valiant warrior whose physical and mental force made him self-willed and invulnerable, a man who showed firm character in face of challenge.

At night, alone and entrenched, horrific images went through Daniel’s mind: visions of Jack in agony, his mouth and eyes wide open and filled with terror. Daniel woke up at once. He looked through his dark room as if expecting someone to suddenly appear or something to happen. He waited an instant and then lifted himself up and walked to his washroom. He wetted his sweating face with cold water and gave a quick look at himself in the mirror that reflected his soiled and slender face, before walking back to his room. He sat on the side of his bed and remained pensive against his will. He persuaded himself that wherever Jack had gone, he was all right; that he had good reasons to leave and would probably come back soon, maybe even before his sons

went back to school. Yet as hard as he tried to believe in those soothing thoughts, they never lasted long. He could not stop but think that he was responsible for Jack's departure.

He had seen this pain in Jack grow as the weeks passed. He simply did not know how to react to it. He did not dare to ask any questions that did not concern him. He did not want to say the wrong things and harm their relationship so he stayed on the side and waited, hoping that Jack would come to him. And at times, he did. Those spontaneous walks were initiated by Jack's sudden will to share an intimate moment with the caretaker, and while he did not say much along the way, the caretaker could see that this was Jack's own way of communicating deeper thoughts.

VIII

Days passed and Daniel noticed the boys waking up later and later. He had accepted the idea that they might not be ready to talk about their father. Maybe they too thought he would come back soon. What disturbed him was that he would find more and more bottles of alcohol lying around the manor. In the morning he often found one or two bottles of wine in the living room. Then more followed on the second and third floors, and it seemed that the more they climbed floors, the higher the alcoholic content grew. By cleaning up the house, Daniel had found a bottle of scotch in James's room. He had left it there. He didn't want the boys to think that he had gone through their private belongings. Then one morning as he woke up early, he was surprised to see that there

were no bottles left lying around. The house looked cleaner than usual. He went up to the second floor and saw the doors of Tom and James' rooms both open with their beds already made. He felt a sudden anxiety run through him as he accelerated his pace. He went up to the third floor only to make the same observation with the master bedroom and Henri's, which remained empty. He went through the entire manor, room by room, searching for the boys and for signs that would point him in the right direction. Then, as he looked in Jack's office, he saw the three brothers walking towards the manor from the impressive bay window.

He put on his long black coat and waited for them right outside the main door.

"Did you sleep well?" asked James smiling.

"You went for groceries?" answered the caretaker noticing the bags they were each carrying.

"Yeah, we got some chicken for tonight. I know a great recipe. You'll see, it's going to be great," said James as he went into the house.

Daniel followed the boys to the kitchen and stood by the door as he watched them put the groceries away. He thought of last night when he left them in the living room as they were drinking a nightcap from a bottle they had picked up from the cellar. He had only slept a few hours and did not understand where they had got the strength to leave so early. Didn't they sleep? And while those questions tormented him, he decided not to say anything. He simply looked at them with worry.

IX

One evening in early September, Henri had accepted to accompany his mother to a dinner in town. Some couples at table had brought their children too and they were all about the same age as Henri. They all knew each other for a long time. The parents talked about holiday trips; school and children who were growing older every day; time that was passing too quickly. Henri was the only one at table who had yet to go to university and when the subject was touched upon, he mentioned his plans to join his two older brothers at the prestigious university.

That night, he did not feel too talkative. He had been used to those kinds of dinners and for some reason this time, he felt somewhat different. He politely answered the questions he was asked but only said the bare minimum. He did not have any desire that night to answer any of their questions or to hear what they had to say.

They were all so glad to see each other, almost ecstatic given their shining faces, their shoulders brought forward expressing the desires of all to talk. And by that time, he had come to feel like an onlooker, someone who had no reason being there, surrounded by people he did not want to see. He looked at them, at their faces as they were all so joyful, so delighted to see each other and yet hearing what was being said, he could not understand what made them so festive.

His mother engaged in topics of discussions aimed at making him talk but since it had little effect on him, she decided to tell a few anecdotes concerning him. They all looked at him, looked at his mother overjoyed as she counted his exploits in this or that,

and they all smiled back, listening and nodding while he sat back on his chair, yearning for the attention to turn to someone else.

X

In the afternoon, James let Tom and Henri play football in the garden while he tried to read on the terrace. He read a sentence then stopped. He observed his brothers play and looked beyond them to the forest that bordered the property. He thought of his father's letter. He could see his words written hastily on the thick and clear piece of paper that had sucked up the pen's ink. He could imagine the speed of the beating hand drumming against the desk as his father unleashed his thoughts on the paper. Still, something bothered him. He had imagined the scene in his head over and over again, and as hard as he tried to envision his father writing this letter, he could not come to believe that those words written on the paper were his. He could not attribute those thoughts to a man who had never shown any sign of fragility, a man he had never seen back down in face of challenge. This feeling of incomprehension welled in him. He had this urgent need to read the letter, to dissect it once again. He wanted to see it one more time, to dwell on it, read it over and over as become its inventor.

"James!" screamed Tom from the garden. "We're going for a bike ride. You coming?"

"I'm fine. I want to finish reading this." answered James.

Tom and Henri didn't ask twice and turned towards the side of the house and went to get the bikes. Daniel came out from the house behind him.

"Are you not coming?" asked the caretaker.

"No, I'm not. I'm just finishing this." replied James, without breaking his gaze from his book.

"Okay," said the caretaker very simply as he went down the steps of the terrace and started his way towards the shed.

James waited a few minutes after they left and then led himself to his father's office on the second floor. When he opened the first drawer of his desk, where he and his brothers had put the letter the day Daniel handed it to them, it wasn't there anymore. He opened the drawers below it, the drawers on the other side of the desk, but the letter was nowhere to be found.

He went around the room and searched in every corner. He looked through the couch and, he kneeled down and checked under the carpets.

He found himself in the middle of the office, his eyes desperately looking around the room that felt emptier than ever, a room that was now missing its soul.

His eyes followed the sun's rays that were lighting up parts of the room as if they were guiding him in his search.

But neither the help of the glorious day, nor his eyes that burned with the desire to find this precious note, prevented this sudden realization that grew in him and informed him that someone had made a step ahead of him.

XI

Tom and Henri accelerated on their bikes. They followed each other closely on the narrow road that passed by large trunk of trees. Tom was in front but Henri was closing the gap. He could feel the waves of blow coming from the front wheel of his brother's bike right behind him. The screeching of the metal of chains that wheeled around frantically turned the physical effort of the two brothers soundless. The rays of light did not pass on the track where the trees were gathered close and with their thick and dense branches, prevented the light from passing through.

Daniel was going at his own pace. He took a quieter and wider road that was open to the sun. He remembered when he and Jack went for walks on this path. He pedaled slowly and observed the trees and noticed they had lost their leaves, and were now deprived from any tonality. The forest appeared to him without essence, it lost any form of intrigue. In autumn, she had maintained all of her summer form and when he and Jack had walked around, the forest was blooming and flourished. When winter came, along with Jack's departure, the forest lost its appeal. Its verdant and glorious colors began to fade and the leaves, to fall. Now Daniel was left to contemplate it bare and monotonous.

XII

Alone and free, he felt thin and sharp like the wind. Henri moved around the rooms with the conviction that tonight was moving towards something exceptional.

Didn't the most talented detectives achieve greatness because of their excessive desire to succeed? Certainly. And tonight of all nights, he would roam every corner of the manor. He would search through the remnants of a house left for account, a house who educated him and never kept any secrets from him.

He talked to those walls and let them count their stories, their place within history. He wanted to witness what they had seen, the striking scenes that forged them and that will forever be engraved in its roots.

He travelled along those bricks with the palm of his hands, searching for the marks of past scenes.

He walked with slow and careful steps along the hallway and as if drawn by a controlling force recognizable only during those nocturnal hours, he found himself in front of the door that had left its mark in his childhood. He lingered for a moment in front of this door. It had never seemed so glorious to him. He had been drawn to it like a magnet and now he stood in front of it as if he were on the verge of experiencing a passionate and heartfelt reunion. When he opened the door and stepped into the room, he had this clear and immaculate impression of entering into the manor's mind.

The room was completely dark. He closed the door behind him and remained still. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the complete darkness, and he was able to observe the different forms that filled up the room. He remained like this for an instant, before turning the ceiling light on.

The rectangular high-ceiling space made way for the impressive dark red curtains that confined the room and made it both majestic and stifling. It reminded Henri of the high-class bawdy houses of the Roman Empire he saw in movies.

He moved forward and noticed the picador's golden dress exhibited in the middle of the room in a window glass large enough to frame it.

He went to the window and took half of the onerous curtains in his arms and moved it to one side and did the same with the other half. The large bay window went through the entire length of the room and its width went from Henri's bust to the ceiling. The bay provided a view on the neighboring forest. On the far left side one could see the edge of the village. No other property could be seen and from where Henri stood, he could witness the extent of their isolation.

In fact to see Henri at this instant, one would have had to lose itself while walking around meditatively in this nightly hour. One would had to find himself at the foot of the forest and upon realizing of his mistake, stop in front of the manor and notice in the distance a figure standing in front of the large bay window. And if by chance, this stranger took upon his curiosity to get a closer look at this surprising scene, yet undoubtedly poignant visually, then this stranger, if he got close enough, could identify the shape as the youngest of the three sons. And at the same time, instead of looking out and noticing an unusual presence, Henri would have been suddenly drawn to the object that had left an irremediable mark in his childhood.

XIII

He saw the case in a sudden look. She had called for him—or maybe he had made it appear. In any case they had found each other once again. He grabbed the case from behind the Napoleon wardrobe. He held it in his left hand and freed the sword from it. She stood there in front of him, more radiant than he had ever imagined. He tightened the sword in his two hands; he weighted it. Left hand, right hand. He held it out in front of him, long and straight. He turned back on himself and faced the room. He took the sword in his two hands and started in position. He stayed still for an instant then suddenly burst forth diving his blade in front of him. He brought the sword back close to him, then moved his body sideways. He held the grip firmly in his right hand and handled the sword as to make the point of his blade turn in circles. He started to move his feet forward. He made small steps that accelerated and his hand followed the rhythm of his steps with his wrist still making the sharp blade turn in circles. He continued to move forward hurrying the sword, making it swirl in the thin air. He moved around a table in glass then moved around a wider wooden table. He turned once and twice around them as if he chased an enemy, a rival soul.

He went back and forth like this, taking different paths, going left from the oval table then a right. He stood on the glass table and fought as he found his balance. He extended his leg that found the wooden table. He left a leg on each table and continued to fight, going faster and faster with his eyes fixed on his enemies. They came in numbers but he pushed them away, one by one he defeated them.

He made his way to the hallway. He had more space and he moved freely turning around himself, still with his sword held solidly in his hand, which he handled with indisputable artistry. He feigned once, twice and then struck again. He felt liberated, powerful and light; he could fight them all night; he could fight them all his life.

XIV

Inside the house, we could only hear the sound of the beating rain that beat on the windows and roof. It lulled the young man who remained immersed deep in his sleep with a bottle of scotch pressed against his side, his arm encircling it amorously. The caretaker remained still in front of James.

“James,” called out Daniel calmly.

“James,” he repeated this time putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

His face was turned sideways and when he opened his eyes they landed on his father’s desk. James remained fixed like this for an instant.

“James, what is going on?” asked Daniel in a disarming and soft voice.

James’s wide eyes turned to the caretaker without moving his face. He stared at him from the side and remained still. Then his eyes came back to their initial position, fixed on the desk in front of him. He observed the sunken space below the desk and noticed the empty chair turned sideways. He remained looking at the desk for an instant and then closed his eyes all so naturally.

The caretaker remained still, contemplating the boy. He stayed almost paralyzed in front of James hoping that he would soon open his eyes again and acknowledge his presence. Time seemed to hold still and despite his growing and palpable discomfort, he couldn't find the strength in him to leave the room.

A heavy silence reigned. Did he fall back asleep? Or was he simply waiting for the caretaker to leave the room and him alone.

Daniel felt raising in him a growing fear that had grown in his mind for a while - the fear that perhaps he wasn't welcome in this house, among these boys who did not need him anymore. And in the end what good was he actually doing? What cause was he serving? This feeling weighed on him like a burden he could not bury. And on that particular moment he could feel both James and the room escaping from him, distancing themselves. As he remained standing up, almost paralyzed by this notion, he gathered his strength to exit the room and close the door behind him.

XV

The day was long. The caretaker went back to his quarters. He had paid a visit earlier to the wine cellar and had gotten the same bottle of wine he had found empty in Jack's office next to the letter he had written for his children. When he felt the sunset approaching, he went for a walk by himself to the village.

The air was fresh and the wind remained silent.

The road was deserted and like a sudden awareness, he became the witness of an extraordinary sight.

The sky of a crimson charcoal blended with the village in all brick that seemed to catch fire of a single flame. And the forest blushed a greater shade than in summer when the sun's ray of beams scorches its skin.

He wanted to stop time, suspend it – lengthen the needles to the point where minutes became seconds; to the point where his expectations gave way to emotions he would have never envisioned. And in the end, he thought, is that not the real quest of men? Not to satisfy and indulge in personal needs but to surprise themselves at discovering new ones?

As he walked at a slower pace, it started to become clear to him that this view of the town in the distance, with the manor in the background that observed it all, was where he truly belonged.

XVI

The caretaker came back to the manor. He had managed to get a portion of meat for the boys and himself, as the town's butcher was closing.

He walked with his head down and did not notice in the distance that the manor sat in complete darkness. He lit up the hallway as he entered the house and when he made his way to the kitchen, he spotted the shadows of the boys who sat in the dark, in the living room.

“What are you guys doing in the dark?” asked the caretaker as he entered the room.

“Boys?” he added as he went around the room turning the lights on.

“What are you doing?” asked James lying on the couch

Daniel looked at him, and then turned to Tom and Henri who sat on opposite sofas. Two bottles of red wine rested on a table between the boys, one of them empty and the other almost done.

“You drank two bottles already?” called out the caretaker.

“What is wrong with you guys?” he added.

Henri laughed and answered ironically: “We waited for you. We thought we’d get a drink before you came back.. and.. well, you sure as hell took some time!”

“But you didn’t hear me leave?” answered Daniel

“No but I felt it. I have a good intuition for this kind of thing,” answered Henri, which made Tom and James laugh.

“Alright, well I got us some meat for tonight,” Daniel said

“Last piece they had. They were closing, I got lucky,” he added.

“Well... we kind of already ate man. We were so hungry so we made pasta; a whole lot actually, I’m sure there’s some left,” said Tom.

“Really?” commented Daniel with a beaten voice.

“Yeah really. It’s find we’ll eat your meat tomorrow.” answered James as he turned his look back to the ceiling.

The caretaker remained silent. He looked at the three boys who were regaining composure from the brusque dismissal of light, and left the room without saying a word.

Later in that night James and Tom were playing cards upstairs in their father's office. Henri had fallen asleep down in the living room. Daniel came to see them. He walked in a serious and assured manner.

"Boys" he said now facing James and Tom.

"I have long thought about this, about the situation" he paused. "I think, for the good of everyone, things should change around the house. We can't continue like this".

"Like what?" answered James looking straight at him.

Tom looked at him too, then stood up and went to fill up his glass from the bottle that rested on his father's desk. While he poured himself another drink, James' dropped his gaze down to the cards as he mixed them up.

Daniel remained silent. He looked at James with empty eyes.

Earlier in the day, when Daniel came back from the village after sunset, he had come to remember those times when the boys were still kids and played football in the garden. He still had a bit of energy left to play with them back then. They never grew tired and him; he was simply glad to be surrounded by all this energy, this will and above all this innocent love that boys gave to a man they had known all their lives. He had thought of Eva too and how deeply she was missed in the manor. He loved Eva, the way a boy loves his saint. She had this powerful force that stole your attention and kept it until she was done. She gave the manor a new reason to exist; to a domain that was close to become a nostalgic memory for the family.

Daniel took those times for granted, when Jack and Eva were accomplices. His joyful mood depended on theirs; he laughed when they did, smiled when he saw them together. He cherished those moments of love that undoubtedly gave the children

irreplaceable memories. Without her in the house, something key was missing, like a plant that tries to grow with no water.

“If things don’t suit you here Daniel, no one is forcing you to stay.”

Daniel remained still. He looked at James, who stared back at him and then at his cards he was shuffling.

When the caretaker turned to Tom, who sat behind his father’s desk, and dived his look into his, he did not find anything in it. He couldn’t find any faith in Tom’s eyes, any reasons to make him stay here, among boys he had always considered as his. He saw this now in Tom’s eyes as they remained fixed on his, bland and soulless. Without turning back to James, he turned around and left the room.

In the morning, the weather would be nice and the air fresh. The boys would wake up but would not go looking for the caretaker. They would know he would be gone already.

At Dawn

He sits on his side of the bed, his hands on his knees, his face down, struggling to regain composure. He turns his head, posing his eyes on the shape behind him. Lying on the bed with her face turned towards him, her eyes are closed and only her lower body is covered in white sheets, exposing her pristine breasts.

Standing up he staggers to the corner of the room reaching for his jeans, his shirt lying on the floor. He picks up his pair of socks, his pair of shoes and slowly walks to the door, gently opening and closing it behind him.

He stands in the large living room, his eyes scanning the place lit by a white modern lamp stranded in the corner. He picks up his coat lying on the velvet couch and moves forward to the window. Slightly brushing the nude, cream curtains he lets his head skim the side of the bay as he glances at the dark, empty street.

He gets out of the building and crosses the street. While taking a last look at the Haussmann edifice, he starts the engine and disappears down the silent narrow path.

Inside the two-seater car, the low glow of the radio barely lights up the face of the pale, young driver whose gaze is fixed on the edge of the road.

He drives through streets lit by noble streetlights. Along the road, the car takes a left then a right before coming to a stop at a red light. Across the street a few remain gathered outside the club. One of the bouncers is resting against the wall; the other one is pushing two drunken boys out while a few people watch the scene play out.

*

Inside, a drunken girl stands against the wall looking intensely at him as he enters. On the left people are gathered around the coat check, howling communally as the music finally kicks in the man's ears. Farther to the right, a man sits on a small counter talking to a young brunette wearing black tights. On seeing the thirty-year old, the young man embraces him cordially before making his way to the staircase.

Downstairs, the clouded room feels endless with the blurred view of girls dancing with a few men left wandering around.

*

The young man walks along the nearly empty bar as he passes the tall bartender drinking from the bottle of Mansinthe with two men.

Taking a look at the two drunken men, the young man comes to rest on the last stool offered at the edge of the bar. He crosses his arms on the counter and briefly makes eye contact with the bartender.

His shirt halfway buttoned down reveals his manly chest; his combed back dark hair highlights his well-shaved beard; his eyes daring the young man while his hand gently removes the cap of the bottle.

The barman's voice is muted by the young man's thoughts. His gaze wanders past the tall man who pours him another glass before joining back the two drunken men.

He contemplates the silvery liquid, floating, drifting as he lightly waves the earnest glass along the wooden stand, keeping his eyes fixed on the rich and amphibious ambrosia.

He turns over to get a good look at his surroundings. The bartender with the two drunk men, their laugh blending into the beating music; the young city heroes still out dancing; headless shapes forming and vanishing, yet remaining concealed within the glistening room.

The silence once more. The quiet presence of gods and goddesses who enter and disappear from his field of vision.

They stand in front of him now; the two shades moving in concert, moving gracefully, skillfully as he remains still, his fizzing eyes frozen on the private concerto.

He feels the pleasure they receive from the attention he offers.

Their movements redouble with more strength, more assurance and as they move closer to him, their pace gently easing, looking first into his eyes then into each others', they synchronize their seductive smile, before gently retreating from the bar, slowly moving back to the grounded floor.

He tries to grab one of them with his hand that sweeps the thin air. He stands up, attempts to follow the two souls but they are gone now, among the shadows forming and vanishing; the music finally resuming.

*

He reaches his car.

Through the rearview mirror, he observes the pale young face, the inquiring eyes left unfulfilled.

He starts moving farther along the road with the simple feeling that night is sovereign of time.

*

The car comes to a stop before the boulevard. He opens his window, stretches his arm to the side with only the feel of the breeze caressing his fingers and covering the low volume of the music.

A first, then a second dimmed car runs past the young man whose eyes follow their rears but quickly fall back to the light turning green. The car roves along the flowered boulevard making another stop at the end of the street.

He notices the comforting wind sweeping the leaves softly falling on the street, quietly being carried away, with each leaf motioned in a lone stream.

He gazes at a car crossing the bridge solely, passing two silhouettes interlacing, becoming one soul sailing on the bridge before disappearing on the other side of the shore, leaving him once more as a lone deponent of the deserted city.

*

He finds his therapy in the night's amusements. He ignores the pain with the alcohol flooding in his system as to lose reason; life becomes simple and life becomes

quiet. He does not listen, he observes; he does not acknowledge, he performs. The camera is hidden and he is the only one informed.

The thought of her hand gently nuzzling his neck, her fingers tenderly brushing his skin, her eyes fondly looking at him as he struggles to remain composed, twitching when her finger reaches a sensitive point, craving for the car to come to a stop so he can turn and look warmly into her eyes as she remains still, looking irresistibly into his.

The car takes a right, and as it crosses the bridge, the young man turns swiftly towards the passenger seat, getting a glimpse of the cleared city lit by tall poles and a few cars' headlights scattered around the city.

He barely notices the exposed shapes coming out of the subway, walking along the streets, swallowed into the city's narrow walks.

He feels the distance with the outside world: the men crossing the empty street, the couple waiting on the silent road. His gaze travels along the lane, leaving the untouched memory feed his mind.

He sees her laugh, sees her grabbing his shoulder as he smiles warmly. Her eyes wander along the streets; he wishes he could get into her mind, know each of her thoughts, any emotion she is keeping from him.

He admires her secrecy, her recurring detachment from the surrounding world, the way she becomes the center of attention when she is attentive to others.

His gaze is on the road but he manages to get glimpses of her fingers tenderly dandling her jeans. He wishes the drive was longer, the city wider.

He sees her getting out of the car. Her amorous kiss nourishing his lips; her innocent, innate smile as she closes the door, before bringing her head back through the

open window. She offers her last embrace, leaving him wishing for more. He looks at her walking to her building door as she stares back at him, smiling before retreating, leaving him with the bitter view of a wooden door.

He has passed her house now and there is no coming back. He is driven by the city's laws and has long lost control over his case.

*

He waits for the elevator, allowing his head to rest against the wall, struggling to prevent his thoughts from recalling his night.

He looks back at the dinner but now it seems far and vague, as if he had only been a witness of the meal.

*

Upon entering his house, he is welcomed by the intruding wind. He walks towards the long dining room, stepping over empty glasses lying on the floor. He grabs the inviting wine bottle from the table as he moves back to the living room. He sees the pair of black high heels spread on the floor, the black fur coat stretched on the couch. He notices the lights dimmed as he weighs the coat in his hand and notices pronounced smell of perfume.

Leaving the fur coat on the couch, he escorts himself down the long, somber corridor.

He moves along the dark hallway, carefully supporting each of his steps.

In the bathroom, the lights are on, just barely enough to see his face. The wine bottle is resting on the marble edge, leaving him naked before the impressive, impassive mirror fixed over the sink.

Taking a step back, he gently conducts his body inside the silvery bathtub, placing one foot after the other.

Standing over him, the painting of a naked woman is hooked on the wall. She has short black hair and tempting red lips. She sits on nothing but an empty blank space and her eyes stare past him.

Leaving his legs and arms at rest, he closes his eyes as the sun's first morning beams come carefully light up his face.

Travel

Inside the common dark SUV, the young men and women are huddled in the backseat, howling collectively as Henri sits in the front, talking drunkenly to the driver about the song playing on the radio. He doesn't know anything about the artist or anything about techno music for that matter, but past a certain time Henri naturally tends to agree with everything the person he is talking to has esteem for, just for the sake of excitement. Behind the driver Jack and Tom sit talking to each other, smirking and laughing out loud while the sound of the radio drowns out their voices. They look back and forth at the three girls sitting on each other's laps in the far backseat. Among the pile of young men clumped together the young man lies with his eyes close despite the resonant voices bursting within the confined space, losing touch within the circle of sound surrounding him.

The noise inside the car gradually seeps into his mind as he regains consciousness. Slowly, his eyes open to Henri laughing and looking back at him. He hears the girls giggle behind him, one of them tapping his head jokingly. To his left, he picks up on Jack or Tom telling him to "wake up" as they both laugh, eagerly grabbing his left shoulder. As he tries to bring his hands to his face, he finds his right arm trapped by a puzzling weight. He finds his cramped head stuck, almost paralyzed by the mound of flesh squelching him back into his seat, preventing him from moving either way.

He notices his lower body hidden by another; he suddenly becomes aware of her face resting against his, her warm breath lasting on his forehead. With his head weakly

confined to the narrow space, he only manages to get a glimpse of the girl's lower body with her curled brownish hair resting on his shoulder and falling down on her legs. He is struck by its unfamiliarity, the layers of reddish stains, the tip of her hair curled back forming little round shapes, the heavy smell of cigarettes.

He remains forced back in his seat, confined by the shapes leaning on him, restrained by the distress of an arm wrapped around his neck, her fingers nuzzling his skin. There is something intensely foreign about her presence - the way she sits on him, her awkward contact with his body, her unskilled, almost uneducated way of touching him. Troubled by the situation, the man remains silent as he tries to recall the past events of the night, the proof that would justify her presence.

The night is calm; the wind is resting, allowing other groups of young men and women to venture out onto the lighted streets. The tinted car is one of many traveling along the roads, swinging from one lane to another, moving among the endless flow of rides, entering and disappearing from the boundless skyway. If you were to stand at a window at the top of one of those towers, on the balcony of a three story house, or walk along the shiny street your failed attempt to follow the passing voluminous car would be shared by many who more than once have found themselves looking at the bright and flashing streets only to see the turning rears of identical empirical cars.

*

The bar is filled with men and women resting on and around the comfortable looking sofas – bronze, dyed couches with bottles resting on the oval tables while other people are gathered around the overcrowded, polished bar.

He lets himself be effortlessly driven by the girl whose face he has now seen but not grasped. She guides him through the masses, allowing his eyes to contemplate not the looks of those he passes but the drinks they carry with each hand bearing it's own mean.

They make their way behind the bar. As they go down the stairs the young man stares in the eyes of elegantly dressed men and women leaning against the wall and as he goes deeper into the ground he notices the same faces over and over—faces he's seen before, faces he will never be able to attribute any names to. As he lumbers down, motioned by a guide more confused about which path to take than he is, he leers daringly at the faces that cross his line of sight.

They pass between two colossal bodies as one of them pull out the red rope signaling their clearance. They make their way through the somber corridor bordered by two long black curtains on either side, mounted from the invisible high ceiling to the floor...

The young man's eyes are fixed on his fingers brushing the curtain that waves along his fingertips. The music from above is now completely silenced. A different, unclear tone resonates, making their feet tremble. In front of him, Henri and Tom walk assuredly, looking and pointing straight at Jack who's cheerfully gripping one of the girls, amused by the idea of a guilty flirt. In the back, the two remaining girls support each other in their arms, yowling wildly, stumbling on one unstable curtain to the other.

The music escalates in the young men's ears, becoming more distinct with every step forward. They reach the end of the hallway where another extravagant long and dark curtain hides the next step of the evening's excursion.

*

He stands alone on the dance floor surrounded by people that look nothing like the ones upstairs. The ones he saw wore vintage jackets and dashing jeans. Here, within the vast underground vault, the crowd looks younger, wilder as they dance ferociously to the intensely loud hip-hop that resonates throughout the sunken shelter. There is no sign of the others, of Henri, Jack and Tom; of the amusing girls, of the brown haired young woman whose grip was lost in the tumult and now, left alone among this nocturnal pack, he smiles dully. He dances next to groups he doesn't know, who don't know him but it's fine, he thinks, since down here he has no identity. He does not belong here; he is the visitor visiting, the passenger observing, scathingly scanning the faces of those for whom he has no regard, for the sweaty, the staggering drunk, the demented, the deranged... And so he dances, still smiling, at the boiling faces, the unbalanced bodies swinging, spinning, whirling wildly to the beating tune.

As he moves around girls and boys dancing in groups, dancing solely, he recognizes a face: a strangely familiar face and it takes him a moment to realize that Michael is standing right there, in front of him - since the last he heard, Michael had moved back to London.

When their eyes meet, Michael doesn't seem surprised to see him. He simply smiles back with the same snobbish look on his face as he moves along the dance floor, his whisky in his hand, making fun of people in his way. The young man is all the more surprised to see Michael looking so well, his face tanned, his glowing blond hair floating in the air.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, stunned.

“What?” Michael answers, smiling.

“What are you doing here?!”

“What are you talking about man?” Michael answers.

“C'mon,” he goes on, grabbing his shoulder.

The young man follows Michael as they move away from the dancing crowd and make their way to the bathroom. In front of the door stands a tall, intimidating bodyguard whom Michael shakes hand with before entering the men's room. Inside, Michael finds his way to the bathroom stall followed by the young man. He pulls out his credit card as he sits on the stool, dragging his sugarcoated bag and draws out four lines. The young man fixes Michael's head ,covering up the card before handing it to him.

*

I saw him there, with his face resting against the dark wall, looking straight at the sealed door, straight into my eyes, searching for something that had long deserted.

I get out of the bathroom, the pulsing music roaring in my ears. I walk straight to the table where Henri and Jack are sitting, laughing blithely. I sit down on the red sofa, looking at the pulsating dance floor...

“You alright, man?” asks Jack.

“Where are the girls?” I ask.

“What girls?”

“The girls, man.” I respond.

Henri and Jack both look at me, surprised.

“They’re all over the place,” comments Henri, which makes both him and Jack fall back into laughter.

I turn to face their open mouths and remain fixed to the sight of hysteric faces.

The beating music becomes too sharp, too fierce for my aching head. Next, I’m walking straight into the galvanized crowd, passing boys and girls kissing fiercely, two girls dancing in front of each other, singing to the song that is playing and looking straight at each other willingly as two boys awkwardly try to grind on them from behind. I pass by boys surrounding each other by the neck with their arms, inspecting the crowd. I move on, overlooking yet another set of youths kissing on the sofas where no flashing lights dare to venture, and as I walk farther into the clouded room, I forcefully push the exit door that releases me into the air of the dim city.

*

In these moments, one remembers the true value of fresh air, the intense pleasure of rediscovering the gentle feel of paced breath. The people passing by, the cars running alongside – they are only mere shadows in my line of sight and as I walk further with no destination in mind, my eyes fall on a glowing facade hanging over a door of brilliant red. I recognize the place but cannot tell if I've ever been inside. The foggy windows prevent me from looking in and I decide to take it upon me, to motion my body inside.

The spacious pool bar looks oddly familiar even if I can't seem to remember exactly if I've even been in here. There is a long line formed by people waiting for a table. I'm about to turn around when I perceive far off someone at the bar waving in my direction. Looking more closely, I realize that Clara is motioning me to join her.

I move past people standing in front of me, making my way hesitantly over to the bar.

“There you are,” she says, handing me a beer. “You're making a face,” she adds.

Meanwhile Henri appears in front of us, holding a pool cue in his hand.

“Come on we just got the table,” he says

I look at Clara whose eyes remains fixed on mine.

“Are you okay?” she asks me earnestly.

“Yeah,” I answer, my feet fixed on the ground, looking at Henri walking back and then at Clara confused.

“Are you coming?” she asks.

“I'll join you in a sec...” I answer.

I pretend to walk back before following Henri and Clara walking back to the pool table where Jack and Tom are placing the balls while two strangely familiar girls are left chatting on the side as Clara joins them. I look at the table, amazed by the picture in front of me.

Inside the bathroom, my head feels too heavy, too inert to make something out of this scene. After pouring water on my face, it feels like they all already seem so far from reach and the image I keep of them is by now bleary and dubious. I try to envision Clara's face, with all its peculiar and natural traits but can only draw a vague and uncertain portrait of her with all the conformity that reins on young faces.

The thought of being unable to picture her distinctly somewhat infuriates me and as I take a last look at myself in the mirror, noticing the water already dried from my face, I make my way to the door with the strong resolution of correcting the inaccurate precision that time sets on you.

I walk out of the bathroom and before I look up from the floor I almost bump into a waitress. I stop instantly and look around the room only to stare in awe at the smartly and casually dressed people seated inside the restaurant. On my right the noisy echo of a butcher shop surrounded by clients and on my left, waitresses wearing elegant black and white garments dresses who make their way in-between the circumscribed set of tables. I look at the faces of the ones seated and catch sight of my parents and little sister in the center of the room. I walk towards the marked table, taking a seat in the empty chair.

My parents, absorbed in the menu, do not seem to find my presence surprising. Only my little sister looks at me with inquisitive eyes. As the waitress appears on my right, I hear, "What do you want, honey?" coming from my mother and I look back at

her, at the open menu in front of me. I look straight into the waitress bright brown eyes, searching helplessly for an answer. She doesn't seem to understand my alarming request and her eyes remain fixed on mine, smiling before pointing her pen at my menu. As she appears to explain something to me, I look back at my little sister pointing her finger towards me. Upon her genuine motion, I realize that my nose is now bleeding. I look around me but no one seems to notice that my hands are covering my nose and chin, which still doesn't prevent the blood from pouring out and escaping between my fingers.

The next moment I'm standing up and I'm hurrying towards the front door, almost crashing into a man rising from his seat. I rush out the front door with my head bowed down, with my hands still covering my mouth. I stare down blankly, looking at the floor, looking at the grey, soft carpet with my feet coming to a stop.

I look back up, staring straight at the window in front of me. I remove my hands from my recovered nose while my eyes go around the room with no thoughts for support.

The deserted room is voiceless and my breathing is muted.

I look where once rested a pile of reassuring treasured toys, sets of colorful games mounted on each other, imperial plastic towers keeping the territory safe, hiding the soothing stone radiator which now lies poorly naked under the window—the sole remnant of a territory dispossessed from its sacred belongings.

Now all I see is a desolate room deprived from its musical core, a room empty of its soul, a room missing its beating heart. The full extent of inactivity turns into an oppressive weight in my head and the sudden echo of a knock forces me to turn around to where shining beams swiftly erupt from the crystal door, brusquely lighting up my face.

The sudden display of brightness forces me to walk away as my stiff body stumbles against the wall with my right arm pushing me away from the ground, preventing my fall.

My eyes are left to wander within complete darkness as the deafening noise of cars' horns suddenly resurface making my knees drop to the floor and my hands cover my head.

The agonizing shriek becomes too unbearable, too painful and after a first attempt of inhaling the fresh air, my stomach propels the evening feast out of my weary mouth onto the street. I expel all the crap my body has consumed and as I bend forward, folded in two on the street, I let my mind empty itself from the oppressing view of common scenes.

Aurore

He runs after her with his marble mouth wide open. His eyes are fixed on her imperious body, on the thin legs cycling vigorously as the wind brushes her long blonde hair that sways behind her shoulders, down her back.

“Aurore !” he calls from behind her. She turns her head back, her legs maintaining their rhythmic pattern, her eyes looking straight at him.

“Come on” she commands him, laughing slightly, smiling loosely.

He follows her head as she turns back to him, her body moving rhythmically as he remains in wonder, taking in the measured pace.

He watches the lucent moon gleaming on her naked shoulders, over her tan skin.

Looking back at the light sky and the scattered stars, his pacing intensifies with the resolute intention of capturing the seductive soul.

*

His eyes open to the view of his desk that stands in front of the window and hides the bottom half of the brown curtains. No thoughts come to him yet, only the feeling that his brain has yet to awake and the invariable notion that each of the five senses arises solely. Slowly, he tries to raise his body up but the weigh of his hammered head forces his head to fall back to his bed.

The room is silent and his thoughts have yet to form. He listens to his own breathing, calm and easy. He turns sideways and lies on his back, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. Still breathing steadily, he remains nailed to the frame hoping to linger in this steady and restful state.

He tries to close his eyes but they feel like they are burning inside.

He comes to deplore this state of passivity and in a sudden motion; he lifts his legs to the side and gets out of bed. His unsteady legs carry him to the desk, which he pushes his arm against to maintain balance. He opens the curtains with his free hand, letting the bright light infiltrate the room. The brusque dispersal of sunlight makes him dizzy and forces him to sit on the wooden chair behind the desk. He tries to look through the sun's rays of beams and catches glimpses of white vines nestled on branches outside his window. He looks at them intently but slowly his look drifts away.

Later on that day, he walks on the pathway bordered by rows of grass. He passes by shapes hidden by the sun's shining beams, and with his eyes downcast he follows his feet mounting the alley.

He gets in the glass building and makes his way up the stairs where the classroom is already filled with young girls and young boys seated around the table. The class discussion starts as he removes his books from his bag, before resting back on the chair. As the discussion progresses, his eyes glaze over, yet remain open to the view of his teacher animated by the discussion. As he remains in a state of mental paralysis, he sees his classmates turning to each other, gathering into groups. To his right a girl opens her book and asks him something, and before he can process the information, the boy seated to his left answers it. At this point, the discussion progresses and the more the two voices

converse, the more each answer seems like a heavy blow striking his head. Remaining trapped in-between the two echoes, he occasionally feels the need to intervene – only when he senses the eyes of the teacher fall on him as if the sun’s powerful ray of lights were scorching his skin.

He is aware that in this instant, his intellect is still in a coma, that the words formed in his mind differ from the ones he expresses out loud. He tries to hide his lack of awareness by keeping his mouth shut, bottling up his words in his mind and letting the other students run the discussion. A sudden feeling of disdain arises in him as the girl’s voice fails to fall silent. The sound coming out of her mouth seems to heighten at each answer she receives from her comrade. He wonders where she gets the strength to speak up that many words with such fervency, so early in the day.

He excuses himself from the group and exits the classroom. He passes by study tables filled with more young men and young women already at work. He hurries down the steps and rushes out of the building. He walks through the grass and finds shelter below a tree, hidden from the sun. He leaves his legs and arms at rest and lets his eyes fall in recess.

*

He sits on the bed looking at Emma, looking at her body once more unveiled as the dark navy dress falls to her feet. With her face turned to the silver dresser, she takes out a white nightgown from the row of colorful dresses lining in front of her. He stares at her long brown hair, at her pair of legs, stretching, bending as she picks up her dress from

the night lying on the floor. He glares at her bare pair of buttocks with the tan blemish on her left cheek.

He thinks to himself, that he has scanned and scrutinized the most secret parts of her body discovering the sensitive, receptive points that more than once, he believes, have raised the pleasure of physical contact to a peak. As he lies fully dressed on the bed, just a few feet away from her, he senses the inviting scent that has filled his mind for the past three years. He pauses and, looking past her, wonders if after all, aura was not the engraving stone for recollecting memory.

“You were unusually silent at dinner,” she tells him.

He remains silent. Aurore. She is in front of him now. He has never run so fast; he has never had reason to. And look at her; he could follow her to the end of the world.

“Babe,” she calls him

“What?”

“I said you were unusually silent at dinner.”

“Was I?”

“Yes. Why was that?”

“I don’t know, babe. I guess I just had something on my mind.”

Emma slowly walks back to bed in her nightgown and lies down by his side.

Her hand gently caresses the side of his face and his hair. She looks at him intently. She has his attention.

“What were you thinking about?” she asks, her voice close to a whisper.

“I don’t know,” he answers following the tone of her voice.

“You don’t know?”

“Just, nothing in particular, babe,” he strokes her hair.

She pauses.

“Do you like them? Henry and Olivia?” she asks.

“Yeah, they’re great.”

“Maybe call Henry tomorrow. Just tell him it was nice to see them ... you know, that we should do this again”

“Sure, babe... sure.”

He looks at her, takes her hand in his and gazes at the proudly displayed engagement ring on her finger. They remain in silence as he kisses her hand. He closes his eyes and surrenders to his mind once again recollecting the memory.

*

“Come on,” she tells him, grabbing his hand as she leads the way. Now as he runs by her side, he feels the breeze brushing his face. He comes to hear the muffled of waves and notices the entrancing perfume of pine trees. He loses her hand, but quickly recaptures it as she reaches for his. As they move farther ahead, following the drawn path sharply delineated by clouded stones, he can feel his energy intensifying, his breathing arousing.

Soon, his feet will touch the sand and he will follow her to the edge of the water. She will remove what’s left of her spring dress. She will turn to him and smile; smile warmly before running into the water, swimming farther ahead, diving in and coming out, breathing in, and breathing out.

Emma

The day was a bright crystal blue, and from the library, the aged man could tell that spring was beating a full and warmed swing. The leaves were shining and the trees were on to a glorious companionship to the aging man who felt rested and peaceful. He sat on the couch reading the paper Chloe picked up for him this morning, like every other one. The high-ceiling doors that lead to the courtyard were left slightly open, allowing the breeze to pass through the room and lightly brush the side of his newspaper.

He didn't pay attention to her when she came back into the room. She came up and stood in front of him. She held a photograph in her right hand.

"Who is that?" she asked raising a picture of him in his mid-twenties alongside a young woman with dark hair.

"Where did you find that?" he responded.

"In a box in the hall cabinet." She paused.

She waited for an answer that did not come.

"Who is it?" she added.

"That's Emma. My first wife."

"Your first wife? She repeated, surprised.

"I didn't know you married twice," she added.

"I did," he answered going back to his paper while she stared back at him and then back at the picture.

"She's gorgeous" she said. "What happened?"

“It didn’t work out,” he said simply “We married too young,” he added, looking at her then at his paper.

“How old were you?”

“Look Chloe I— ” he stopped for a second.

“I don’t really want to talk about it now and the truth is that there isn’t a lot to say. I do not remember much of that time.”

He said that looking straight at her, and now she remained silent, uncertain.

“Okay, I’ll put that back where I found it,” she said as he watched her leave the room, before returning to his paper.

He read the same line from his newspaper over and over again. He could not grasp the meaning of it, yet it was not any more difficult than any other line in the article. He placed his paper next to him and took a look outside where the vines were smoothly mothered by the wind. Somewhere in the space where the vines swung back and forth he saw Emma again, and as he left his eyes in the same spot where the vines appeared and disappeared, he came to see her very clearly.

*

“Dance with me,” he whispered to her.

She smiled, yet her look stayed on the man sitting next to her.

“Come on, dance with me,” he continued. She turned over and looked at him. He had never seen that look from her. Her piercing green eyes dared him. He noticed her long dark hair running over her shoulders. She smiled at him and stayed silent for an

instant. There was nothing else to say. The ball was on her side now, and his role was to remain still, and keep his look fixed upon her.

And then he knew. She wanted to. She weighted his look that became more intense. They were the only people out there now and he felt like she knew that too. It was his move now and so he went for it. He showed his left hand as an invitation and she left it hang there for an instant.

She took pleasure in this; she wanted to linger on this moment as long as she could. Her eyes brightened and her smile conciliated.

He did not take a look at the man sitting next to her as she stood up. He didn't see the look Emma gave to her neighbor as she turned to him and simply said, "I'm sorry."

*

The old man let this memory drift in the air all day. He had come to remember and now he could not stop thinking about her. He ate his dinner in the spacious living room upstairs where he watched the news on TV by himself. Yet he did not pay any attention to the voices that filled up the room. He felt his legs burning and felt within him a sole emptiness. He waited for the cook and nurse to leave and when they both said goodnight, he simply answered, "Goodnight" without shifting his eyes from the TV.

He waited a moment and then carried his plate to the kitchen. He walked back and went straight towards his office.

The nurses and doctors had taken all the alcohol from the house as part of the process. It was written in the contract he had signed. There were no given reasons written

on it, only statements: *no alcohol in the house* was one of them. At the time he had felt like this was the best thing to do. “Alcohol will slowly kill you. This is serious,” his doctors had told him. And so he listened. He gave the bottles he had collected over the years to the nurses. He had cooperated and yet they still went through the house making sure nothing was left, even in the office, which was the only room in the house where the man had asked for privacy. Still, he had succeeded to hide three bottles, two whiskies and one gin, that he hid in the library before they searched the house. When they were done, he put them away in the drawer of his desk in his office. He did not plan on drinking those bottles, but he liked having them by his side. They were keeping him company. They meant a lot to him. They had a story. They represented a moment in time which he took pleasure in returning. And yet he knew, that precisely because they reminded him of the past, they were better off left hidden.

He opened the drawer where in the gloom his three bottles remained alone and bare. He grabbed the bottle of whisky that his first wife Emma bought him for their three year anniversary. It was the first drink he got her at a bar when they were still in graduate school. They split up three months after she gave him that bottle and from then on he never had the courage to open it for just himself.

And that night, alone on his couch, when he opened the bottle and poured himself a drink, courage had nothing to do with it. No, it was for the simple sake of heightening the memory, of filling up his thoughts with her presence by remembering the night their relationship took a turn.

He saw her then as she walked in front of him. He wondered what was running through her mind. He wondered if she was smiling. His hand rested carefully on her back,

leading her to where the band was playing. The careful breeze made her hair drift from side to side like a boat ashore that lets itself sway in by the quiet wind at night. She turned over to him as they found their space on the dance floor. A wave of her hair came to rest on her face, and as if she knew the effect this had on him she left it as it is as he grabbed her hand and made her turn.

*

He poured himself another drink and sat back against the firm pillows of his couch. He stared at the library. She used to always tell him that one day he'd have one just like that, although he knew she loved to see books lying around the house, books that had no place to rest on. The two of them would step on lost novels that rested on the floor as they made love. She would pick up a book and start reading the first page, pretending to forget about him, teasing him and he would take the book from her hands and throw it on the other side of the room as she smiled. That's how she made him feel sometimes, jealous even of a book. And now looking at the library he saw himself once again very clearly on that loving night, when in the midst of spring, his beating heart had been muted by her presence that filled him up with excitement as he made her spin.

He made her spin, once and twice then brought her close to him. He made her spin over and over again and each time he brought her back closer to him until finally he could feel her warm body tasting his.

He never took his eyes off her. After all those weeks spent chasing her, she was finally his. She had yielded and he wasn't close from leaving sight of her. When they set

foot on the dance floor, her eyes couldn't stay still at first. They drifted anxiously away. But the more they danced, the closer he brought her to him and the less her eyes wandered around. He hadn't gotten a clear look at the sky but he imagined it to be cloudless and transparent. He was oblivious to the people around them and as time passed he thought she felt it too. When her body came as close to him as bodies can merge, he gestured his hand to move her hair away from her eyes and left his hand to linger lightly around her neck. He gave her a kiss on her forehead and felt her nose shiver. He looked at her and saw her smile and her eyes were motioning him to join her.

*

He let a tear roll down his cheek as he lay down on the couch staring at the ceiling. His glass rested next to him on the table. Drinking was the only thing left that could still make him feel something. Now he could connect with the young man he had been and he had left; they had something in common. At that moment he looked back at his younger self, when at times a few drinks made him forget the people surrounding him. He saw himself in his twenties, sitting around people of his own age. They were all laughing and talking loudly in a room filled of young men and women. But he could see his younger self disconnected from his surroundings, looking past the people around him. The aged man looked at his younger self and in turn, he could see it now, the young man looked back at him. The two men had created a bridge in time and they were now within a world only available to them. The young man smiled at his elder, smiled at the idea that someone out there understood him. And so the aged man saluted the young man of a

thoughtful and tender smile that meant, *I understand you. You are not alone* and the young man looked back at him and raised his glass respectfully to his senior who, at this moment, tasted the great pleasure of life once again.