

I got a letter one day, a long letter that wasn't signed. This was quite an event, because I've never received much mail in my life. My letter box had never contained anything but useless brochures and postcards informing me that the-sea-was-warm or that the-snow-was-good, so I didn't open it very often. Once a week, maybe twice in a gloomy week, when I hoped that a letter would change my life completely and utterly, like a telephone call can, or a trip on the métro, or closing my eyes and counting to ten before opening them again.

And then my mother died. And that was plenty, as far as changing my life went: your mother's death, you can't get much better than that.

I had never read any letters of condolence before. When my father died, my mother had spared me such funereal reading. All she did was show me the invitation to the awards ceremony for his medal. I can still remember that bloody ceremony, I had just turned thirteen three days earlier. There was a tall bloke shaking my hand, a smile on his face, but it was actually a grimace. His face was lopsided and when he spoke it was even worse.

'It is infinitely deplorable that death was the outcome of such an act of bravery. Mademoiselle, your father was a courageous man.'

'Is that what you say to all your war orphans? You think a feeling of pride will distract them from their sorrow? That's very charitable of you, but forget it, I don't feel sorrowful. And besides, my father was not a courageous man. Even the huge quantity of alcohol he consumed every day couldn't help him. So let's just say you've got the wrong man and leave it at that.'

'This may surprise you, Mademoiselle Werner, but I insist it is

Sergeant Werner—your father—that I am talking about. He volunteered to lead the way, the field was mined and he knew it. Whether you like it or not, your father distinguished himself and you must accept this medal.'

'My father did not "distinguish himself", you stupid man with your lopsided face. He committed suicide and you have to tell my mother he did. I don't want to be the only one who knows, I want to be able to talk about it with her and with Pierre, too. You can't keep a father's suicide a secret.'

I often dream up conversations for myself, where I say what I am thinking; it's too late but it makes me feel better. In actual fact, I didn't go to the ceremony in honour of the veterans of the war in Indochina, and in actual fact I only ever said it once, other than in my own head—that my father had committed suicide—and that was to my mother, one Saturday, in the kitchen.

Saturday was the day we had chips and I was helping my mother peel the potatoes. It used to be Papa who helped her. He liked peeling and I liked to watch him. He was no more talkative when he was peeling than when he wasn't peeling, but at least there was a sound coming from him and that felt good. You know I love you, Camille. I always had the same words accompany every scrape of the knife as it sliced: you know I love you, Camille.

But that Saturday other words accompanied the scrape of my knife: 'Papa committed suicide, you knew that, didn't you, Maman? That Papa committed suicide?' The frying pan fell, shattering the floor tiles, and the oil splattered onto my mother's rigid legs. Even though I cleaned frenetically for several days, our feet continued to stick, causing my words to grate in our ears: 'Papa committed suicide, you knew that, didn't you, Maman? That Papa committed suicide?' To keep from hearing them,

Pierre and I spoke more loudly—perhaps to mask Maman’s silence as well, for she had hardly spoken at all since that Saturday.

The kitchen tiles are still broken. I was reminded last week while I was showing Maman’s house to a couple who were interested. And if they turn into a buying couple, every time that interested couple looks at the big crack in the floor they will lament the prior owner’s carelessness. The tiles will be the first thing they’ll have to renovate, and they’ll be pleased to get down to work. At least my horrible outburst will have been good for something. They absolutely must buy the house—whether it’s this couple or another one makes no difference to me, but someone must buy it. I don’t want it and neither does Pierre: a place where the slightest memory reminds you of the dead is not a place where you can live.

When she came back from the ceremony for Papa, Maman showed me the medal. She told me that the guy who had given it to her had a lopsided face and she tried to imitate him, tried to laugh. Ever since Papa died, that was all she could do: try. Then she gave me the medal, squeezing my hands very tight and telling me that it was mine by right, and she began to cry; that was something she could do without trying. Her tears fell on my hands, but I pulled away from her abruptly; I could not stand to feel my mother’s pain in my body.

When I opened the first letters of condolence, my tears falling on my hands reminded me of Maman’s, and I let them fall, to see where they might have gone, the tears of this woman I had loved so much. I knew what the letters would have to say: that Maman had been an extraordinary woman, that the loss of a loved one is a terrible thing, that nothing is more wrenching than bereavement, etcetera, etcetera, so I didn’t need to read them. Every evening I divided the envelopes into

two piles: on the right those with the sender's name on the envelope, and on the left those without. And all I did was open the pile on the left and jump immediately to the signature to see who had written to me and who I would have to thank. In the end I didn't thank a lot of people and nobody held it against me. Death forgives such lapses of courtesy.

The first letter from Louis was in the pile on the left. The envelope caught my attention even before I opened it: it was much thicker and heavier than the others. It was not the usual format for a letter of condolence.

It was handwritten, several pages long, unsigned.

**A**nnie has always been a part of my life. I was two years old, just a few days short of my second birthday, when she was born. We lived in the same village—N.—and I often happened upon her when I wasn't looking for her—at school, out on walks, at church.

Mass was a terrible ordeal, for I invariably had to put up with the same routine, stuck between my father and mother. The pews one occupied at church reflected one's temperament: fraternal company for the gentler children among us, parental for the more recalcitrant. In this seating plan, which the entire village adopted by tacit consent, Annie was an exception, poor girl, for she was an only child, and I say 'poor girl' for she complained of it all the time. Her parents were already old when she came along, and her birth was hailed as such a miracle that not a day went by without them saying 'all three of us', in that way, whenever the opportunity arose, while Annie was sorry not to hear 'all four or five or six of us'... With every mass this unavoidable situation seemed to become all the more trying for her as she sat alone in her pew.

As for myself, while nowadays I hold boredom to be the best breeding ground for the imagination, in those days I had ordained that the best breeding ground for boredom was mass. I would never have thought that anything could happen to me at mass. Until that Sunday.

From the moment of the opening hymns a deep malaise came over me. Everything seemed off-balance—the altar, the organ, Christ on his cross.

‘Stop breathing like that, Louis, everyone can hear you!’

My mother’s scolding, added to the malaise that would not leave me, called to mind a phrase I had tucked away, words my father had murmured to her one evening: ‘Old Fantin has breathed his last.’

My father was a doctor and he knew every expression there was for announcing a person’s death. He used them one after the other, whispering into my mother’s ear. But like all children I had a gift for picking up on what adults murmured to each other, and I had heard them all: ‘close one’s umbrella’, ‘die in his boots’, ‘give up the ghost’, ‘die a beautiful death’—I liked that last one, I imagined it did not hurt as much.

And what if I were dying?

After all, one never knows what dying is about until one dies for good.

And what if my next breath proved to be my last? Terrified, I held my breath and turned to the statue of Saint Roch, imploring him; he had cured the lepers, so surely he could save me.

It was out of the question for me to return to mass on the following Sunday, this time death would not pass me by, I was convinced of that. But when I found myself in the pew we occupied every week with my family, the malaise I was dreading did not descend upon me. On the contrary, I was overcome by a particularly sweet feeling, and I rediscovered with pleasure the smell of wood that was so peculiar to that church: everything was as it should be. My gaze was back where it belonged, focussed on Annie, although all I could see of her was her hair.

Suddenly I understood that it was her absence the previous week that had thrown me into such horrible turmoil. She must have been lying down at home, with a facecloth on her forehead

to calm her spasms, or she had been painting, protected from any abrupt movement. Annie was subject to violent fits of asthma, and we all envied her because this meant she was exempt from the activities we found unpleasant.

Her figure, still shaken by a slight cough, restored fullness and coherence to everything around me. She began to sing. She was not naturally joyful and I was always surprised to see her become animated and engage her entire torso the moment the organ sounded. I did not yet know that song was like laughter, and one could invest it with anything, even melancholy.

Most people fall in love with a person upon seeing them; in my case, love caught me off guard. Annie was not with me when she moved into my life. It was the year I turned twelve—she was two years younger, two years minus a few days. I began to love her the way a child does, that is, in the presence of other people. The thought of being alone with her did not occur to me, and I was not yet old enough for conversation. I loved her for love's sake, not in order to be loved. The mere fact of walking past Annie was enough to fill me with joy. I stole her ribbons so that she would run after me and snatch them brusquely from my hands before turning on her heels brusquely. There is nothing more brusque than a little girl in a fit of pique. It was those scraps of cloth that she rearranged clumsily in her hair that made me think, for the first time, of the dolls in the shop.

My mother owned the village haberdashery. After school we both went there: I to join my mother and Annie to join hers, for Annie's mother spent half her life there, the half she did not spend sewing. One day, as Annie was walking past the shelf with the dolls, I was suddenly struck by the resemblance. It was not only the ribbons; she had the same fierce white and fragile complexion as the dolls.

At that point my youthful powers of reasoning got the better of me, and I realised that I had never seen any of her skin other than what her neck, face, feet and hands could offer. Exactly like the porcelain dolls! Sometimes when I went through the waiting room at my father's surgery I would see Annie there. She always came alone to her consultations with my father, and she would sit there, so small in the black chair. When her asthma overwhelmed her she resembled the dolls more than ever, her coughing fit spreading like rouge over her cheeks.

But of course my father would never tell me that she had the body of a rag doll, even if I asked him about her. 'Professional secret,' he would reply, tapping me on the head before tapping Maman on the backside. And she would smile back at him with that smile I found so embarrassing.

As any resemblance is reciprocal, the porcelain dolls made me think of Annie. So I stole them. But once I was in the refuge of my room, I was inevitably struck by the fact that their hair was either too curly or too straight, their eyes too round or too green, and they never had Annie's long lashes that she curled with her index finger when she was thinking. These dolls were not made to resemble anyone in particular, but I held it against them. So I went to the lake and tied a stone to their feet, then watched without sorrow as they sank effortlessly, my thoughts already on the new doll I would take and who would bear a greater resemblance to Annie, or so I hoped.

The lake was deep, and the spots where one could bathe without danger were rare indeed.

That year at the centre of the world there was me, and there was Annie. All around us lots of things were happening that I couldn't

care less about. In Germany, Hitler had become chancellor of the Reich, and the Nazi party exercised single party rule. Brecht and Einstein had fled while Dachau was being built. It is the naïve pretension of childhood to think one can be sheltered from history.