

In Other Words, A Woman: A Translation of Annie
Ernaux's *Une Femme*

by

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Introduction

There are differences in perceived tones of languages, colored by an individual's native tongue. A person's first language will serve as a template against which languages learned later in life will be compared. Thus, a language's tone changes based on the way it is perceived by its listeners, readers, writers. This raises questions for the literary translator. How much of a text can be systematically translated from one language to another? What is subtly implied in the original text that may not come through in the simple systematic translation?

In applying these questions to my own literary translation of Annie Ernaux's *Une Femme*¹, I had to begin with another question: What is it that I want to move across the linguistic border from French into English? My purpose was similar to Ernaux's stated purpose in writing this book; she wanted to convey the "truth" of her mother in words. The truth of her mother, of course, does not exist in the words themselves but perhaps they point to that truth. It was my undertaking to assume the truth that she believed to be expressible only in the words she chose and express it differently, or, in fact, prove that such a truth could be invoked by using different words. In doing so, I had to choose from among the many linguistic means at my disposal to express what I believed to be Ernaux's intentions. In other words, I was faced with the many options of how to say what Ernaux meant, but in another language. This is a struggle that is universal to literary translators; there may be many ways of saying essentially the same thing. The subtle differences among them, however, will dictate the tone and fluidity of a translated piece of writing.

¹ Ernaux, Annie. Une Femme. New York: Schoenhof Foreign Books, 1994.

Une Femme serves as one piece of the mosaic of Ernaux's personal life represented by her larger body of work. *La Place*, *La Honte*, *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, are among her numerous (auto)biographical works. Each offers a unique focus on a particular theme or time period in her life and the lives of those close to her. She does not approach the autobiography as a singular work, but rather, as her body of work intrinsically suggests, as the accumulation of stories, observations, memories from different chronological and emotional perspectives. She uses this technique on a smaller scale, within *Une Femme*, to uncover the "truth" of her deceased mother. Through layering anecdotes, concrete images (sometimes photographs, sometimes entire scenes) and her present feelings about her mother (as she writes), Ernaux strives to evoke the whole of her mother's being.

Ernaux writes in the first person, she employs meta-narrative and seeks to render the writing process, at least partially, transparent. Through the intimacy and writer-to-reader trust fostered by this openness, a particular style emerges. She opens the door to a unique kind of empathy in literature. In any kind of biography, the mere fact of a true story may give a leg up in the quest for reader empathy, an advantage that is not inherent in fiction writing. What makes Ernaux's work remarkable, however, are not just the truths she tells about the past, but the reasons why she reveals these truths as she does. Writing is a therapeutic and investigative process for Ernaux, and we are not left to guess why and in what ways. Just as the mother she describes is brash, indiscrete, Ernaux does not hesitate to "tell it straight." Her language is direct and does not seek to soften reality with extensive use of metaphor. While she does not explicitly state this, her writing style in *Une Femme* echoes the frankness embodied in her mother as portrayed in the text.

Ernaux defines her project as an undertaking that she hoped would remain “below literature.” If this was truly her hope, she may have been dismayed to find it so well received in the literary world, and addressed in numerous critical essays as a serious piece of literature. I would not define her work as “below literature,” and in my translation have treated her work with the same attention to detail that one would give a more traditional novel or serious piece of literature. *Une Femme* is certainly different from traditional fiction or even autobiography; within the text she refers to herself as an “archivist.” This hints at a rift between the fabric of Ernaux’s life and the text she has created, and yet one assumes all of her material originates in her life and her family’s history. The final product is deeply personal, and yet Ernaux does not seem to let emotionality skew the facts of her mother’s life.

Wherever *Une Femme* fits into the realm of “literature,” Ernaux’s approach provides an important example of blurred genre boundaries within a single work. Her frank and clear tone mimics the unapologetic manner in which she simply lets human stories speak for themselves, acting as their own form of artistry. She proves that emotion injects life into history, leaving little need for linguistic embellishments. While she may be an “archivist,” in this work, she is also a daughter grieving the death of the central figure of her archive. This connection between writer and subject means that she is not only able to provide an intimate account of the history, but it becomes an explicitly personal work that gives the sense of holding nothing back. One nearly has the impression of reading her personal journal. It seems as if she is only secondarily conscious of having an audience, but this consciousness ought not be taken for granted. It comes across in one particular moment, among others, in which she employs meta-

narrative: “I’m now writing those same words, but they’re no longer words just for me, as they were then, to make all of it bearable, now they are words to make it understandable, to others.” This consciousness on an author’s part is essential in differentiating between merely publishing one’s personal journal and publishing a piece of literature that is meant to be interpreted and to be relevant in a larger, more impersonal context.

Literary translation, as a practice, has a scope that extends beyond the text in question in both its original and translated forms. It may initially seem like a straightforward process to transcribe a text from one language into another; no new ideas need be inserted (and most, indeed, would argue ought not be inserted, in order to preserve the integrity of the text in question). This perspective, however, is based on the simplistic assumption that any two given languages will have essentially the same mechanics, and the same breadth and depth of vocabulary. Even languages that have similar roots and thus may have overlapping grammatical structures and a significant number of cognates, have diverged and developed over time and may appear to be quite different from one another, like different species of animals with mutual ancestry. Environment and culture play important roles in the development of a language. Of course linguistic roots remain intact to a certain extent, but languages are living and constantly evolving entities.

Ernaux is both rigid and fluid in her approach to language. She is fluid in the sense that in *Une Femme* she employs sentence fragments and verb tenses that seem to be in conflict with chronology. She uses these in her attempts to reproduce on paper the way she is remembering her mother, “outside of time.” *Une Femme* is also colored by dialectal and personal idiosyncrasies woven throughout to give a sense of the way

language was used by a particular person, in a specific era and environment. On the other hand, she is rigid, in the sense that, for her, there is a right way to say something (meaning there is also a wrong way). From *Une Femme*: “In 1967, over the course of four days, my father died of a heart attack. I cannot describe those moments because I’ve done it already in another book, meaning there will never be another possible way to say it, with different words, the sentences in another order.”

Based on the above quotation, it would almost seem as if Ernaux’s work is not intended to be translated; one is hesitant to alter in any way the words she has deemed to be the only “possible way to say it,” even if it means simply translating them into another language. I believe, however, that despite the specificity and singularity of her account of her mother, this text evokes and addresses many universal themes, thus legitimizing a translation that will not, by definition use all of the “right” words. While the translated words are not exactly her words and thus may not resonate with her in the same way, they may certainly be just as relevant to a larger audience. In the relatively short, 106 page novel, Ernaux delves into deeply personal, and universally understood issues of coming of age, generational history, death of a parent, social mobility, protean mother-daughter relationships, and methods of grieving, among others. These issues are, of course, evoked primarily through a specific woman, her mother, “une femme.” The words “une femme,” however, are words that could also be taken in the general, universal sense; they could refer to half of the world’s population.

My translation of *Une Femme* moves from French into English. This means I do not have to address the issues that may arise from languages with disparate alphabets (or lack of alphabet, as with Chinese characters, for example). English is a Germanic

language, and has borrowed extensively from Latin, Greek, and numerous others. Over the course of its history, it has acquired words from other languages, including especially French, which has its origins in Latin. An estimated 30% of the modern English vocabulary has French origins. Words of Latin origin are often considered to be more formal, purer or generally of a higher caliber than words with Germanic roots. English is regarded as a mixed language of Latin and Germanic roots, with other diverse linguistic influences.

There is a sort of interchange between English and French. In the case of the French language, however, it wasn't until more recent times that it began to adopt modern English words into its vocabulary, much to the dismay and criticism of certain French linguistic purists. The emergence of "Franglais," and the insertion of English words into quotidian French vocabulary (i.e. le weekend, un parking) are indicative of a movement toward a more fluid definition of the French language. Thanks to initiatives of the Académie Française, however, the French language will ostensibly maintain a certain degree of purity and rigidity regarding what is considered to be linguistically correct. This means that the English language and the French language provide different environments from which literary works are produced. When Latin words (via French) are adapted into the English lexicon, they serve to elevate the tone wherever they are employed. This means, in effect, that to a native English speaker, French will sound more formal. This becomes especially clear if a French sentence that is supposed to be informal is translated nearly word for word (maintaining cognates, that is) into English. It will sound much more formal than it would in French, to a native French speaker.

This leads to one of the principle challenges for a literary translator: that of conveying a tone. Before a tone can be translated effectively, it must be defined or characterized. This is not always easy, considering the fact that a text may be perceived as inherently more formal in French, due to its Latin linguistic origins, than it would be had it been written originally in English. Should the text be conveyed in English in such a way as to provide as similar a reading experience as possible to English speakers who would be able to read the piece in French? In other words, should characteristics of the French language which are, for the most part, taken for granted by native French speakers, play any role in coloring the tone of the translation? To take an example from *Une Femme* from among the many that present themselves, Ernaux repeatedly uses the word “client,” which has an exact cognate in English. In *Une Femme*, however, this word is employed to refer to the working class *customers* who frequent the mother’s small grocery store. If, over the course of a translation from French into English the word “client” were to remain unchanged, the English version would have a much different (and most likely irrelevant) tone than the original text. It may even lead to confusion regarding the plot, as “clients” are generally associated with different types of businesses than the small mom-and-pop store of the novel.

Many examples, however, are less evident, making the tone of a work in a foreign language elusive, even if all of the vocabulary and syntax are within the reader’s comprehension. I believe that the question of tone can be simplified by addressing it in terms of the intentions of the original author. Unless the intended emphasis were on the specific sound or construction of a word (which is more likely to be found in the case in poetry), then *meaning* of the words in context of the original language should serve to

dictate tone. One must assume that the author is writing to convey a tone in his or her mother tongue, and not thinking about how it will sound in translation. Similarly, the reader of a *translated* text will be looking for the message that the original author intended to convey, and will likely be less interested in the mechanics of moving from one language to another. A successful translation is one that renders this process invisible in the final text. Thus I have attempted to be as faithful as possible to Ernaux's tone as intended for French readers. This means, for example, that I would not use the word "installed" for the French "installé" when referring to a person moving in somewhere. In order to create overall tonal consistency, tone must be developed on a situational basis within the text.

The question of formality of tone has been especially pertinent in the case of my translation of *Une Femme*, as many important social and generational distinctions come across through dialectal and linguistic differences. It was also important to maintain consistency and differentiation between the narrator's voice and her mother's voice. One presumes the narrator's voice is Ernaux's. This is debatable in the sense that the narrator's voice is of course a construct of the author, but in this case it is not relevant to belabor the point; it is sufficient to equate Ernaux's voice to the narrator's. Within the voice of the narrator are tonal shifts, as she moves from recitation of history that she was not alive to witness, to her own memories of events and emotions, to her use of meta-narrative in directly addressing the reader and elaborating on her writing process and intentions. Thankfully, the artistry of this text, in moving among such differing tones, comes through clearly in translation if one merely maintains a certain level of fidelity to Ernaux's words. Challenges arose with certain unfamiliar old-world Norman phrases,

but these are likely just as obscure to the modern French reader, unless he or she hails from Normandy or otherwise has a connection to its old-fashioned dialect.

I decided that the book's Frenchness would have to come across in ways unrelated to syntax and word choice, such as through the names of towns and other geographical locations. If I were to maintain too much of the French syntax, for example, it would sound awkward in English and would be unclear to non-French speakers why I had made such choices. French speakers who want the full benefit of the Frenchness of the novel should read the original. A literary translation's aim ought to be to convey the ideas, events and sentiments in a text that rely on words merely as a medium. A translation conveys those ideas using the original text as a template, but need not search to evoke the materiality of the original language.

Ernaux's *Une Femme* presents an interesting challenge in the form of its frequent use of quotation marks. These quotation marks often appear outside the context of dialogue and carry with them a more serious burden of accurate representation in translation because the text is (auto)biographical. Ernaux's quotation marks connote a sort of reverence on her part for the way certain things were said in everyday life; she implies that these are the best ways to say them. In other words, the truest way to characterize her mother's speech is to give examples of it, intact. They also act as small snapshots, interspersed in the text. If descriptive literature as a means of representation were to be compared to a visual art, it could be compared to painting (realistic painting at best), in that while representing objects, people, events, the artist's *style* of representation tends to take center stage. Quotations, however, are closer to photography in that they offer objective and ostensibly unaltered reality. In both cases, however, context can serve

to manipulate or skew the original thing or words being represented. The use of quotation marks in this text posed a challenge because they demarcate a boundary around something that is unalterable; they are like barricades protecting words or phrases, as if saying they should remain unchanged or be removed all together. For Ernaux, this type of verbal photography (as well as her descriptions of real photographs) helps her evoke the realm “outside of time” where she encounters her mother’s “history.” Keeping all of this in mind, I tried to tread lightly in this arena, to make my hand as discrete as possible.

When translating *Une Femme*, it was, at certain times, tempting to make changes that I would believe would “clarify” a sentence. This would mean either changing a verb tense, adding a verb where none was present, or breaking up run-on-sentences with commas, dashes or periods. I tried to stay as true as possible to the verb tenses she employed, because they serve a specific function in her narrative. While, of course, verb tenses play an important role in the chronology of any narrative, she uses them to evoke a sort of experimental chronology, one based on the mechanisms of her memory rather than historical order of events. As for the “sentences” that have no verb, these serve as another type of snapshot within the text. She is not only describing the way things were at a certain time, but perhaps how they manifest themselves in her memory, as images beyond the restraints of time. With that said, her frequent use of the imperfect began to sound a bit incessant when translated too faithfully into English. In French, the imperfect is expressed merely by changing the conjugation of the verb in question. In English, however, one may often use the word “would” to connote a repeated or regular action in the past. It seemed to me, therefore, that remaining too faithful to the French in this case would add an inadvertent and unnecessary ennui to the text and would cause it to lose

some of its subtlety and readability. Thus in cases where, for example, the imperfect could be implied through the use of “would” just once or twice as opposed to incessantly throughout the paragraph, I chose to apply it more sparingly.

Other details I made sure to leave unchanged include repetition of certain words, and the book’s typographical layout. Words such as “violent,” “pride,” and “solid” are examples of words associated with the mother that are repeated in various contexts. The repetition of specific word choices creates a visible motif in describing her mother, and I was careful not to alter it or make it subtler where Ernaux chose not to. In terms of typographic structure of the text, I maintained the same spacing in my translation as Ernaux used in the original. In a book with no chapters or demarcated sections, these function as subtler means of inserting pauses in the flow of the narrative. In her varied spacing between certain paragraphs, Ernaux uses a somewhat ambiguous device in an otherwise candid novel.

Aside from the technicalities of translation, a convincing translation is one which will read as smoothly and be as accessible to its audience as the original was to its own. It was my intention, therefore, to present a readable text that includes certainly all of Ernaux’s themes, and as much of her personal voice as possible.

In Other Words, A Woman

It is an error to claim that contradiction is
inconceivable, because it finds its real
existence in the sorrow of the living.

-Hegel

My mother died Monday, April 7th in the nursing home of the Pontoise hospital, where I placed her two years ago. The male nurse said over the telephone: “Your mother passed away this morning, after breakfast.” It was around 10am.

For the first time her bedroom door was closed. Someone had already washed her, a swath of white fabric encircled her head, passing under her chin, drawing in all of the skin around her mouth and eyes. She was covered with a blanket up to her shoulders, her hands hidden. She looked like a little mummy, all bandaged up. The bars that had been put in place to prevent her from getting up were still installed on the bed. I wanted to put her in the white night gown with the braided edge that she’d bought for her burial. The male nurse told me that an employee would take care of it, and that she would also put the crucifix on her, which was in the nightstand drawer. It was missing the two nails to fix the copper arms to the cross. The nurse wasn’t sure he’d be able to find them. That didn’t matter, I wanted someone to put the crucifix on her just the same. On the rolling table was the bouquet of forsythia that I had brought the day before. The nurse recommended I go right away to the hospital’s records office. During this time, someone would take inventory of my mother’s affairs. She hardly had anything that belonged to her anymore, a suit, blue summer shoes, an electric razor. A woman began to cry, the same woman who had been crying for months. I couldn’t comprehend that she could still be alive and my mother dead.

At the records office, a young woman asked me what I needed. “My mother died this morning.” “At the hospital or in the nursing home? What’s the name?” She looked

at a form and she smiled a little: she already knew. She went to get my mother's file and asked me a few questions about her, her place of birth, her last address before entering the nursing home. These details would have to go into the file.

On the bedside table in my mother's room was a plastic bag full of her things. The nurse gave me the inventory slip to sign. I no longer wanted to take the clothes and the things she'd had here, save one statuette bought during a pilgrimage to Lisieux with my father, years ago, and a little Savoyard chimney sweep, souvenir from Annecy. Now that I'd come, my mother could be driven to the hospital morgue without waiting the usual two hours after death. As I was leaving, I saw the woman who shared my mother's room sitting in the glass personnel office. She was seated with her purse, she had to wait until my mother was taken to the morgue.

My ex-husband went with me to the funeral home. Behind the display of artificial flowers were sofas and a low table with magazines. An employee brought us into an office, asked questions about the date of death, the burial location, a mass or no. He noted everything on a large schedule and tapped from time to time on a calculator. He brought us into a dark room, without windows, and turned on the light. A dozen coffins stood upright against a wall. The employee specified, "All prices include tax." Three coffins were left open to display the lining color options. I chose oak because it was her favorite tree. Whenever she stood in front of a new building, she would ask if it was made of oak. My ex-husband suggested red-violet for the lining. He was proud, almost happy to remember that she often wore blouses of that color. I made out a check for the employee. He would take care of everything, except for the fresh flowers. I returned

home around noon and had some port with my ex-husband. My head and stomach began to spin.

Around 5, I called the hospital to ask if it was possible for my two sons and me to see my mother at the morgue. The switchboard operator told me it was too late, the morgue closed at 4:30. I drove alone to find a florist who was open on Mondays, in the new neighborhoods around the hospital. I wanted white lilies, but the florist discouraged them, they are only used for small children, young ladies at most.

The burial took place on Wednesday. I went to the hospital with my sons and my ex-husband. The morgue was unmarked, we got lost before finding it, a concrete one story building at the edge of a field. An employee in a white blouse who had phoned motioned for us to have a seat in the corridor. We sat on chairs lining the wall, facing a bathroom with open doors. I wanted to see my mother again and take the two flowering quince branches that I had brought from my purse, and place them on her. We didn't know if we should expect to see my mother one last time before closing her coffin. The funeral home employee that we'd had at the store came out of an adjoining room and courteously invited us to follow him. My mother was in the coffin, her head tilted back, hands joined on the crucifix. Someone had removed her headband and put on the nightgown with the braided edge. The satin blanket came up to her chest. All this was in a large bare concrete room. I don't know where the low light came from.

The employee indicated that the visit was over, and accompanied us into the corridor. It seemed as if he'd shown us my mother so we could attest to the high quality of service. We walked through the new neighborhoods to the church, built next to the

cultural center. The hearse hadn't arrived, we waited out front. Opposite the church, scrawled in tar on the front of the supermarket were the words "money, merchandise and the state are the three pillars of apartheid." A very affable priest approached. He asked, me "is it your mother?" and asked my sons if they were still students, at which university.

A kind of little empty bed, bordered in red velour, was sitting on the cement floor in front of the altar. Later, the men from the funeral home placed my mother's coffin on it. The priest put on a cassette of organ music. We were the only ones to attend mass, no one knew my mother here. The priest spoke of "eternal life," of the "resurrection of our sister," he sang canticles. I would have wanted this service to last forever, I would have wanted still more to be done for my mother: gestures, songs. The organ music began again and the priest extinguished the candles on either side of the coffin.

The car from the funeral home left immediately for Yvetot in Normandy, where my mother was to be buried by my father's side. I made the trip in my own car with my sons. It rained during the entire drive, the wind came in gusts. The boys asked me about the mass, because they had never been to one and they didn't know what to do during the ceremony.

At Yvetot, the whole family was gathered close to the cemetery's entrance gate. I saw one of my cousins, she called out from far away. "Crazy weather, it feels like November!" to avoid standing silently, watching us approach. We walked together toward my father's grave. It had been opened, the dug-up earth piled to the side in a yellow mound. They brought out my mother's coffin. Once it was positioned above the

grave between the ropes, the men invited me to approach so that I could watch it descend the length of the trench walls. The gravedigger waited a few meters away with his shovel. He was in jeans, a beret and purplish boots. I wanted to talk to him, to give him a hundred francs, thinking he could maybe use it for a drink. He was not insignificant, he was the last man to take care of my mother. Covering her in earth all afternoon, he must have taken pleasure in his work.

The family didn't want me to leave without eating. My mother's sister had arranged for the burial meal at a restaurant. I stayed, it seemed like one more thing I could still do for her. The service was slow, we talked about work, kids, occasionally about my mother. They said to me, "what good was it for her to live in that condition for so many years?" It was better for everyone that she was dead. A statement like that, such certainty, I don't understand. I returned to my home near Paris that evening. Everything was really over.

During the week that followed, I would find myself in tears anywhere I happened to be. Waking up, I knew my mother was dead. I would wake from deep dreams remembering nothing, except that she had been there, and dead. I didn't do anything beyond the necessary day-to-day tasks, shopping, cooking, throwing laundry in the machine. I would often forget the order to do things in. After peeling vegetables, I

would stop. Only after a great mental effort could I move on to washing them. Reading was impossible. Once I went into the basement and my mother's suitcase was there with her purse, a summer bag with scarves inside. I lay on the floor gaping at the suitcase. Outside the house, going into town, I was at my worst. I would be driving, and suddenly: "She'll never be anywhere in this world again." I could no longer understand the mundane way people would go about their business, their meticulous attention at the butcher's to choose this or that piece of meat was appalling to me.

This condition disappeared little by little. More satisfaction from the cold rainy weather, like at the beginning of the month when my mother was alive. And those moments of emptiness each time I conclude "it's not worth it anymore to" or "Now I don't need to" (do this or that for her). The problem with thinking this way: the first spring she won't see. (Now feeling the force of ordinary sentences, even of clichés.)

Tomorrow it will be three weeks since the burial. Only yesterday, I overcame the terror of writing at the top of a blank page, like at the beginning of a book, or a letter to someone, "my mother is dead." I could look at photos of her, too. In one of them, she's sitting by the Seine with her legs crossed. A black and white photo, but it's as if I can see her red hair, the reflection of her black alpaca suit.

I'll keep writing about my mother. She's the only woman who has truly meant something to me and she had dementia for the past two years. Maybe I'd be better off waiting until her illness and her death blur together over the course of my life, as other events have, my father's death and my separation from my husband, so I'll have the distance that makes memories easier to understand. But I am unable, at this moment, to do anything else.

It's a difficult undertaking. My mother is not history to me. She's always been there. When talking about her, my first instinct is to place her in scenes with no timeframe: "she was violent," "she was a woman who burned everything," and to evoke these scenes where she appeared, out of order. In doing that, I only find the imaginary ageless woman, the one I've seen come back to life in my dreams of the past few nights, with the tense atmosphere of a horror film. I want to capture the woman who existed outside of me, the real woman, born in a rural area outside a little city in Normandy and who died in the nursing home of a hospital near Paris. I want to focus most on what lies at the intersection of the familial and the social, of myth and history. My project is literary in nature in that it seeks the truth of my mother that can only be found through words. (What I mean is that neither photos nor my memories nor family stories can give me this truth.) But in a certain sense, I hope to stay below literature.

Yvetot is a cold city, built on a wind-swept plateau between Rouen and Le Havre. At the beginning of the century, it was the trade and administrative center of an entirely

agricultural region owned by powerful proprietors. My grandfather, carter on a farm, and my grandmother, weaver working at home, settled there a few years after their marriage. They both came from a neighboring village three kilometers away. They rented a little low-roofed house with a courtyard, on the other side of the railroad tracks, on the outskirts, in a boundless rural zone, between the last cafés close to the train station and the first rapeseed fields. My mother was born there, in 1906, fourth of six children. (So proud when she would say: “I wasn’t born in the country.”)

Four of these children didn’t leave Yvetot their entire lives, my mother spent three quarters of hers there. They moved closer to the center of town but they never lived there. They “went into town” for mass, meat, to mail money orders. Now my cousin has a place in the center of town, crossed by Nationale 15 where trucks drive day and night. She gives sleeping pills to her cat to keep it from going out and getting run over. The district where my mother grew up is coveted by wealthy people for its tranquility and old homes.

My grandmother laid down the law and saw to the “training” of her children with shouts and spansks. She was tough with her work, not very refined, her only leisure was reading the weekly serials in the newspaper. She knew how to write and, top student in her area, she could have become a schoolteacher. Her parents wouldn’t let her leave the village. No question that distance from the family was a source of unhappiness. (In Norman, “ambition” means sadness resulting from separation, a dog could die of ambition.) To understand this desire to succeed, pushed aside at age 11, remember all the sentences that start, “in those days” : in those days, we didn’t go to school the way you do today, we listened to our parents, etc.

She ran the house well, which is to say that on a tight budget she was able to feed and clothe her family, line her children up at mass without holes or spots, as well as achieve a sense of dignity that allowed them to live their lives without feeling like peasants. She turned the collars and cuffs of shirts inside out so they could be used twice. She kept everything, the skin on the milk, stale bread to make cake, wood cinders for the laundry, the heat of the extinguished stove to dry plums or rags, the water from morning face-washing to wash hands during the day. Knowing all of these tactics that make the best of poverty. This knowledge, passed from mother to daughter for centuries, stops at me, I am nothing more than its archivist.

My grandfather, a man who was strong and gentle, died at age fifty from a heart attack. My mother was thirteen and she adored him. Widowed, my grandmother became even more rigid, always on the alert. (Two terror-inducing images, prison for the boys, pregnancy for the girls.) Since weaving at home had stopped, she did laundry, cleaning at the office.

At the end of her life, she lived with her youngest daughter and her son-in-law, in a shack without electricity, former dining hall of the nearby plant, just at the end of the railroad tracks. My mother brought me to see her every Sunday. She was a little round woman who moved quickly despite one leg's being shorter than the other since birth. She read novels, spoke brusquely and very little, liked drinking brandy, which she mixed with a bit of coffee in her cup. She died in 1952.

My mother's childhood was more or less like this:

an appetite that was never sated. She would devour the chunk of bread on the way back from the baker's. "Till I was twenty five, I would have eaten the fish and the sea!"

the room all of the children lived in, the bed shared with a sister, the episodes of sleepwalking, when she'd be found standing up, asleep, eyes open, in the yard,

the hand-me-down dresses and the shoes from one sister to another, a rag doll at Christmas, teeth full of holes from cider,

but also the rides on the plow horse, skating on the frozen pond during the winter of 1916, games of hide-and-seek and jump rope, the insults and the routine gesture of contempt –turning and hitting your backside with an open palm – meant for the "young ladies" of the private school,

a whole existence completely outside of her role as a little country girl, with the same know-how as the boys, sawing wood, shaking a tree for apples and killing chickens with a single stab in the throat, with scissors. The only difference, not allowing herself to touch "that place."

She went to the commune school, more or less depending on the seasonal work and the sicknesses of brothers and sisters. Very few memories outside of the teachers' demands for politeness and cleanliness, show your nails, the top of the blouse must not be too low, take off one shoe (one never knew which foot to wash). The teaching went over her head without inspiring anything in her. No one "pushed" their children, it had to be

“in them” and school was merely a way to pass the time before the children were no longer the parents’ responsibility. One could miss class without really missing anything. But not mass. Even when held in the church basement it gave you the feeling, by participating in its richness, beauty and spirit, (embroidered tunics, gold chalices and canticles) of not “living like dogs.” My mother showed a keen interest for religion at a young age. The catechism is the only subject that she had studied passionately, learning all of the responses by heart. (Later, in this joyous breathless manner, responding to the prayers at church, as if to show that she knew.)

Neither happy nor unhappy to leave school at twelve and a half, the common practice.² In the margarine factory where she went to work, she suffered from the cold and the humidity, and her damp hands were covered with chilblains that would last all winter. Afterwards she could never “even look ” at margarine. And so, very little of your “dreamy adolescence,” but the waiting for Saturday night, the salary to be brought back to her mother - keeping just enough to treat herself to *Le Petit Echo de la Mode* and rice powder –fits of laughter, resentments. One day, the foreman got his scarf caught in the belt of a machine. No one helped him, so he had to untangle the scarf himself. My

² A trap, though, to only speak in the past tense. On June 17, 1986, there was a section in *Le Monde* about the region in which my mother grew up, Haute-Normandie: “A school system that fell behind and never caught up, despite improvements, continues to make its effects known(...). Each year, 7,000 students leave the school system unprepared. Coming out of ‘remedial classes,’ they are not qualified for internships that would prepare them for paying jobs. According to a pedagogue, half of them “can’t read two pages written expressly for them.”

mother was beside him. How does one allow such a thing to happen, without having also endured the weight of isolation?

The industrial movement of the 1920s brought a large rope factory to the region that drained all of its youth. My mother went to work there along with her sisters and her two brothers. For the sake of convenience, my grandmother moved about a hundred meters from the factory, renting a little house which she and her daughters tidied in the evenings. My mother was pleased with her clean and dry workshops, where no one was forbidden to talk or laugh while working. Proud to be an employee in a large factory: something akin to being civilized compared to “savages,” the country girls who were valued even less than the cows, and free only compared to slaves, the maids of bourgeois households forced “to serve the master’s ass.” But sensing everything that separated her, in an indefinable way, from her dream: to be the woman behind the shop counter.

Like many large families, my mother’s was a tribe, meaning that my grandmother and her children had the same way of behaving and living out their condition as half-rural factory workers, which set them apart as “the D’s...”. They all shouted, men and women, in every situation. They were exuberant, but moody, they were quick to anger and they “told it straight.” Above all, pride in their ability to work. It was difficult for them to admit that anyone was more courageous than they were. They continually countered their real life limitations with their certainty of being “someone.” The source, perhaps, of this wild enthusiasm that made them plunge full-force into everything, work,

food, laughing to tears and announcing one hour later, “I’m going to throw myself in the cistern.”

Of all of them, my mother carried the most violence and pride, a disgusted awareness of her inferior position in society and her refusal to be judged on this position alone. One of her frequent responses regarding rich people, “we’re just as good as they are.” She was a beautiful blond, rather strong, (“people would have paid to be as healthy as me!”) with gray eyes. She liked to read everything that fell into her hands, sing new songs, put on make-up, go out with a hoard of friends to the movies, to the theater, see *Roger la honte* and *Le Maitre de forges*. Always ready to “treat herself.”

But during an age and in a little town where the social life consisted of learning as much as possible about others, to practice a constant surveillance on the movement of women, one couldn’t help but be caught between a desire to “enjoy one’s youth” and the obsession with “being pointed out.” My mother tried to conform to fit the most favorable judgment that could be passed on factory girls: “working girl *but* serious,” taking part in mass and the sacraments, the communion wafer, embroidering her trousseau at the nuns’ orphanage, never going into the woods alone with a boy. Unaware that her skirts that were getting shorter, her boyish haircut, her “impetuous” eyes, and above all the fact that she worked with men were enough to keep anyone from seeing her the way she aspired to be seen, “a proper young lady.”

My mother’s youth, in part: an effort to escape her most plausible destiny, poverty certainly, alcohol probably. From everything that happens to a factory girl when she “lets herself go” (smoking, for example, hanging around the streets at night, going out in stained clothes) and no “serious young men” pursuing her anymore.

As for her brothers and sisters, everything that could have happened to them, did. Four have died in the past twenty-five years. For a long time it's been alcohol that's filled their emptiness with violence, the men at cafés, the women at home (only the youngest sister, who didn't drink, is still alive). There was no joy or conversation in them without a certain degree of inebriation. The rest of the time, they got through their work without speaking, "a good worker," a cleaning woman that you "couldn't complain about." Over the course of the years, getting used to being evaluated by people only in terms of drinking, "to be sober," "to be sloshed." Once, the day before Pentecost, I met my aunt M... as I was coming back from class. Like every day off, she went downtown with her sack full of empty bottles. She kissed me without being able to utter a word, wobbling in place. I believe that I will never be able to write as if I had not encountered my aunt that day.

For a woman, marriage was a matter of life and death, the hope of coming out better as part of a couple, or taking the final plunge. So it was essential to meet the man able to "make a woman happy." Naturally, not a farm boy, even a rich one, who would have you milk the cows in a village without electricity. My father worked at the rope

factory, he was tall, comfortable in his own skin, a “good guy.” He didn’t drink, he saved his salary to improve his household. His disposition was calm, cheerful, and he was seven years older than her (not a good idea to chose a “rascal”!). Smiling and blushing, she told the story: “I was very desirable, I’d gotten many proposals, your father’s was the one I accepted.” Often adding: “He wasn’t common.”

My father’s history resembles my mother’s, large family, father a carter, mother a weaver, left school at age twelve, in his case, to work the fields as a servant on a farm. But his older brother managed to get a good job on the railroad, two sisters were married to salesclerks. Former servants, they knew how to speak without shouting, walk calmly, be inconspicuous. They were more “dignified,” but also had a tendency to denigrate factory girls, like my mother, whose appearance, gestures, evoked too strongly the world that they were in the process of leaving behind. According to them, my father “could have done better.”

They were married in 1928.

In the photo from their wedding day, she has the unremarkable face of a Madonna, pale, with two locks of hair in spit curls, under a veil that surrounds her head and comes down to her eyes. With prominent breasts and hips, pretty legs (her dress doesn’t cover her knees). No smile, amusement in her tranquil expression, an inquisitive gaze. He, with a little mustache and bowtie, looks much older. He’s frowning, seeming anxious, perhaps that the photo won’t be taken well. He has his arm around her waist and

she has her hand on his shoulder. They are standing on a path, beside a courtyard with overgrown grass. Behind them, the foliage of two apple trees joining together creates a dome over them. In the background, the front of a low house. It's a scene that I can actually feel, smell, the dry earth of the path, the pebbles poking through, the smell of the country at the beginning of summer. But it's not my mother. I've stared at the picture till I hallucinate that the faces move, still I only see a sleek young woman, a little awkward in a costume from a 1920's movie. Only her broad hand squeezing her gloves, her way of holding her head high, tell me it's her.

Of the happiness and pride of this young bride, I am almost certain. Of her desires, I am clueless. The first evenings – as she intimated to a sister – she went to bed with her drawers on under her nightgown. But that's not the whole story, love could only be made without shame, but love had to be made, and made well, when one was “normal.”

At first, the excitement of playing the lady and being situated in a new home, using the dinner service for the first time, embroidered tablecloth from the trousseau, going out on “her husband's” arm, and the laughter, the arguments (she didn't know how to cook); the reconciliations (she wasn't sulky), the impression of having a new life. But the salaries weren't getting any higher. They had the rent, the furniture bills to pay off. Forced to consider every expense, to ask their parents for vegetables (they didn't have a garden), and the bottom line, it was same life as before. They just lived it differently. Both of them, the same desire to succeed, but for him, hesitant to undertake the struggle,

the temptation to resign to his condition, for her, more of a conviction that they had nothing to lose, and had to do all they could to get out, “at all costs.” Proud to be a factory worker, but not to the point of wanting to be one forever, dreaming of the only adventure that she was fit for: to start a grocery store. He went along with her, she was the couple’s driving force.

In 1931, on credit, they bought a food and drink place in Lillebonne, a working class town with 7,000 inhabitants, twenty-five kilometers from Yvetot. The café-grocery was situated in la Vallée, in the district of nineteenth-century textile mills, that dictated people’s daily lives and existences from birth till death. Even today, saying “pre-war la Vallée” says it all: the highest concentration of alcoholics and teenage mothers, the humidity dripping off the walls and infants dying of green diarrhea in two hours. My mother was twenty-five. It’s here that she must have become herself, with that face, those tastes and the mannerisms I believed for a long time to have always been hers.

The funds not being enough to support them, my father hired himself out to construction sites, and later to a refinery of the Basse-Seine, where he became the foreman. She ran the store on her own.

Straightaway she threw herself wholeheartedly into the business, “always a smile,” “a little word for everyone,” an inexhaustible reserve of patience: “I could have sold pebbles!” From the beginning - being made one with an industrial poverty that was

just like the one she had known, but harsher, and aware of the situation- earning her living thanks to people who didn't earn their own.

Doubtless, not a moment to herself between the grocery, the café, the cooking, a growing little girl, born shortly after their move to La Vallée. Opening at six in the morning (the women from the textile mills came for milk) till eleven at night (the card and billiard players), to be “bothered” at any moment by a clientele accustomed to returning multiple times during the day to shop. The bitterness of earning scarcely more than a laborer and the haunting fear of not “making it.” But also, a certain power – didn't she help families survive by giving them credit? –the pleasure of speaking and listening - so many lives were recounted at the little store -, all in all the happiness of an expanded world.

And she too was “evolving.” Obligated to go all over (for taxes, to the town hall), to see the wholesalers and their agents, she was learning to choose her words carefully while speaking, she wouldn't go out “bareheaded” anymore. She began asking herself before buying a dress if it was “stylish.” The hope, then the certainty, of no longer “being country.” At the same time as Delly and the catholic works of Pierre l'Ermite, she would read Bernanos, Mauriac and the “racy stories” of Colette. My father was not evolving as quickly as she, maintaining the uncertain stiffness of one who, laborer by day, doesn't feel at home at night as the boss of the café.

There were the dark years of the economic crisis, the strikes, Blum, the man “who was finally on the worker's side,” the social laws, the late rowdy nights in the café, her

side of the family who would come to stay, mattresses laid out in all of the rooms, who would leave, with sacks bulging with provisions (she gave easily, and wasn't she the only one to have made it?), the quarrels with "the other side" of the family. The pain. Their daughter was high-strung and cheerful. In a photo, she looks tall for her age, the scrawny legs with knobby knees. She's laughing, one hand above her forehead, to keep the sun out of her eyes. In another, close to a girl cousin, at her first communion, she is serious, but her fingers fidgeting, spread in front of her. In 1938, she died of diphtheria, three days before Easter. They only wanted to have one child so that he or she could have a better life.

The buried sorrow, nothing but the silence of depression, prayers and the belief in a "sweet little saint in heaven." Life renewed, at the beginning of 1940, she was expecting another child. I will be born in September.

Now it seems to me that I'm writing about my mother to, in turn, bring her into the world.

It's been two months since I started, when I wrote on a sheet of paper, "my mother died Monday, April 7th." It's a sentence I can now bear, and even read without feeling any different emotion than I would have felt if the sentence were about someone else. But I cannot bear to go into the neighborhood of the hospital or the retirement home, or to brutally recall the details that I had forgotten, of the last day she was alive. At first, I thought I would write quickly. The truth is I spend a lot of time reflecting on the order in which to say things, word choice and placement, as if there were an ideal

order, only one capable of revealing the truth of my mother – but I don't know what it is – and nothing else matters to me, as I'm writing, but discovering this order.

The exodus: she left, following the roads till she reached Niort, with neighbors, she slept in barns, drank “little local wines,” then she came back alone, by bicycle, crossing German barricades, to give birth at home a month later. Fearless, and so dirty when she returned that my father didn't recognize her.

During the Occupation, la Vallée huddled around the grocery store, in the hopes of getting supplies. She tried her best to feed everyone, especially the large families, her desire, her pride in being kind and helpful. During the air raids, she didn't want to take refuge in the communal hillside shelters, preferring “to die at home.” In the afternoon, between two raids, she would take me for walks in a stroller to help me grow strong. It was a time of easy friendship, on the benches in the public garden she would make friends with young thoughtful women who would knit in front of the sandbox, while my father would watch the empty store. The English, the Americans, entered Lillebonne. Tanks were crossing through la Vallée, throwing chocolate and sachets of orange powder that one would pick up out of the dust, and every night the café full of soldiers, brawls from time to time, but celebration, and knowing how to say *shit for you*. Then she would speak of the war years like a novel, the great adventure of her life. (She really loved *Gone with the Wind*.) Maybe in this universal unhappiness, a sort of pause in the struggle for success, pointless now.

The woman of those years was beautiful, her hair dyed red. She had a hearty, expansive voice, often shouted in a terrifying tone. She also laughed a lot, a throaty laugh that exposed her teeth and gums. She would sing while ironing, *Le temps des cerise's*, *Riquita jolie fleur de Java*, she wore turbans, a summer dress with fat blue stripes, or a beige one, a soft waffle knit. She would powder herself with a powder puff in front of the mirror above the sink, would put on lipstick starting with the little heart in the middle, she would dab perfume behind her ear. To fasten her corset, she would turn toward the wall, her skin poking out between the criss-crossed laces, attached at the bottom by a knot and a rosette. Not a single detail of her body escapes me. I believed that when I grew up I would become her.

One Sunday, they go picnicking at the edge of an embankment near a wood. Memory of being between them, in a nest of voices and flesh, continual laughter. On the way back, we are caught in an air raid, I'm on the bar of my father's bike and she is going down the slope in front of us, sitting upright on the bike seat pressing into her rear. I'm scared of the shells and that she'll die. It seems to me that we were both in love with my mother.

In 1945, they left la Vallée, where I coughed without reprieve and my growth was stunted by the haze, and they came back to Yvetôt. Post-war life was more difficult than life during the war. The restrictions continued and the "black market nouveaux riches" were beginning to emerge. In hopes of finding another store location, she would take me for walks in the devastated center of town, lined with rubble, take me to pray at the

makeshift chapel situated in a movie theater to replace the burned out church. My father worked to refill the holes left by bombs, they lived in two rooms without electricity, with dismantled furniture against the walls.

Three months later, she was beginning to live again, owner of a kind of country grocery-café in a neighborhood spared by the war, a short distance from the center of town. Just a miniscule kitchen and, on the second floor, a bedroom and two attic rooms, for eating and sleeping out of customers' sight. But also a large courtyard, sheds to store wood, haystacks and straw, a wine press, and most importantly, a clientele who paid in cash more. Along with serving at the café, my father would tend his garden, raise hens and rabbits, make cider to sell to customers. After being a factory worker for twenty years, he returned to a sort of peasant life. She would look after the grocery store, orders and accounts, master of the money. Little by little they began to live more comfortably than the factory workers around them, succeeding, for example, in becoming owners of a store and an adjoining little low-ceilinged house.

The first summers, during vacations, former clients from Lillebonne would come to see them, whole families, by bus. They would kiss and cry. They would push tables together to eat, they would sing and reminisce about the Occupation. Then they stopped coming in the early 1950's. She used to say, "it's the past, you have to move forward."

Images of her, between 40 and 46: one winter morning, she barges into the classroom to tell the teacher my wool scarf must be found. I had left it in the washroom and it had cost a lot of money (I knew the price for a long time.)

one summer, by the sea, she gathers mussels at Veules-les-Roses, with a younger sister-in-law. Her dress, mauve with black stripes, is hitched up and knotted in the front. They often go to have aperitifs and cakes in a café set up in a military camp near the beach, they laugh and laugh.

at church, she would sing the hymn to the Virgin, at the top of her voice, *One day I will go to see her, in heaven, in heaven.* That always made me want to cry and I hated it.

she had bright dresses and a “fine-knit” black suit, she would read *Confidences*, and *La Mode du jour*. She would put her bloody sanitary napkins in a corner of the loft, till Tuesday laundry.

when I would look at her too much, she would get annoyed, “are you planning to buy me?”

Sunday afternoons, she would go to bed wearing a slip and stockings. She would let me come in beside her. She always fell asleep quickly, I would read, snuggled against her back.

at a communion meal, she was drunk and she vomited next to me. At every party after that, I would fix my gaze on her arm resting on the table, holding the glass, willing her with all of my strength not to raise it.

She had become quite stout, 89 kilos. She ate a lot, kept lumps of sugar stashed in her blouse pocket. To lose weight, she got pills from a pharmacy in Rouen, hiding them from my father. She went without bread, butter, but lost only 10 kilos.

She would slam doors, bang chairs as she stacked them on tables to sweep. Everything she did, she did noisily. She didn't put objects down, but seemed to throw them.

If she was upset, it would show instantly on her face. Around the family, she spoke her mind harshly, without reserve. She would call me things like, slut, bitch or simply say that I was "disagreeable." She was quick to strike me, usually slaps, sometimes punching me on the shoulder ("I would have killed her if I hadn't stopped myself!"). Five minutes later, she was holding me close and I'd be her "doll."

She would give me toys and books for the smallest occasion, a party, an illness, a trip to town. She would drive me to the dentist, the chest specialist, she would make sure to buy me good shoes, warm clothes, all of the school supplies requested by the teacher (she had put me in boarding school, not public school.) If I noticed, for example that a friend had an unbreakable slate, she would immediately ask me if I wanted one: "I don't want people saying you're not as good as the others." Her strongest desire was to give me all the things that she'd never had. But for her that would mean such an effort, so many money problems, and such a preoccupation with children's happiness - so new in comparison to the old style of education - that she couldn't stop herself from announcing "You cost us a lot" or "With everything you have, you're still not happy!"

I'm trying not to consider my mother's violence, the moments of excessive tenderness, my mother's reproaches, as merely personal character traits, but also to place them in the context of her history and social condition. This kind of writing, which seems to me to move toward truth, helps me escape from the solitude and obscurity of individual memory, by discovering a more general meaning. But something in me resists, wanted to preserve purely emotional images of my mother, her tenderness or tears, without giving them meaning.

She was a business mother, meaning she belonged first and foremost to our customers, who were "our livelihood." We weren't allowed to bother her when she was helping someone (waiting behind the door separating the shop from the kitchen, to ask for the embroidery thread, permission to go play, etc.) If she heard too much noise, she would spring up, smack us without a word and go back to serving the customer. Very early on, she taught me the rules to follow when clients were around – say hello clearly, don't eat, don't argue in front of them, don't criticize anyone – no matter how suspicious they seemed, never believe that they were lying, watch them discretely when they're alone in the store. She had two faces, one for her clientele, the other for us. At the sound of the doorbell, she would appear, smiling, her voice calm for the usual questions about health, the children, the garden. Back in the kitchen, the smile would fade, she would stand for a moment without speaking, exhausted by a role that mixed jubilation with

bitterness to go to such lengths for people who she guessed were ready to ditch her if they “found cheaper somewhere else.”

She was a mother whom everyone knew, a public figure as it were. At school, when I would do a problem on the blackboard: “If your mom sells ten packets of coffee at this price” and so on (obviously, never this other scenario, though just as likely, “if your mother serves three drinks at this price”).

She never had the time, to cook, to clean the house “properly,” a button sewn on me just as I was going out the door to school, a blouse that she would iron on the corner of a table as she was about to put it on. At five in the morning she would scrub the tile floors and arrange the merchandise for display, in the summer she would hoe the rose beds, before the garden was opened. She was a powerful and fast worker, gleaming the most pride from completing tough jobs, even though she would curse them, washing dirty laundry, stripping the parquet floors in the bedroom with steel wool. It was impossible for her to relax and read without a justification like, “I’ve certainly earned the right to sit down,” (and again, interrupted by a customer, she would hide her serial under a pile of clothes that needed mending.) My mother and father only argued about one thing: the amount of work each one did in comparison to the other. She would protest, “I’m the one who does everything around here.”

My father only read the local newspaper. He wouldn't go anywhere he felt "out of place" and he said a lot of things just weren't for him. He liked the garden, dominoes, cards, odd jobs. He couldn't care less if he was "well spoken" and he didn't stop using patois expressions. My mother, on the other hand, tried to avoid grammatical errors, she didn't say "my husband," but rather "my spouse." Sometimes in conversation she would test out unusual expressions that she had read or heard used by the "right people." Her hesitation, her face flushing in fear that she would slip up, my father's laughter as he would tease her "big words." Once she grew sure of herself, she enjoyed repeating them, smiling if she used a metaphor that she would take literally ("he wears his heart on his sleeve!" or "we're only birds passing by...") to lessen the pretension in her mouth. She liked "nice" things, to be "well-dressed," Le Printemps, more "chic" than Les Nouvelles Galeries. Certainly, just as impressed as he by the rugs and paintings in the eye doctor's office, but always wanting to overcome her shame. One of her frequent expressions: "I indulged in being brash," (for doing this or that.) To my father's remark about her new look, carefully made-up before going out, she would respond in a lively tone, "Well you've got to look your part!"

She wanted to learn: the rules of etiquette (so much fear of not having any, always uncertain of whether she was doing the right thing) things to stay on top of, news, names of famous writers, movies coming out in theaters (but she didn't go to the movies, she didn't have the time), the names of flowers in gardens. She would listen attentively to

everyone who spoke about something she didn't know about, out of curiosity, out of a desire to demonstrate her willingness to learn. For her, learning was most important for growth (she would say, "your mind has to be furnished") and nothing was more beautiful than knowledge. Books were the only objects that she handled carefully. She would wash her hands before touching them.

Through me, she pursued her quest for knowledge. Every evening at dinner, she would have me talk about school, what I was learning from the teachers. She enjoyed using my expressions, "la récré" "les compos" or "la gym." She expected me to "correct" her when she had used "a wrong word." She would no longer ask me if I wanted a "light repast" but a "snack." She would take me to Rouen to see historical monuments and the museum, to Villequier to see the Hugo family tombs.

Always ready to admire something. She would read the books that I read, the bookseller's recommendations. But would also occasionally skim *Le Hérisson*, forgotten by a customer, and laughing, "It's dumb and people read it anyway!" (When she would go to the museum with me, maybe she drew less satisfaction from looking at Egyptian vases than from her pride in steering me toward the knowledge and tastes of "cultured" people. The cathedral's recumbent statues, Dickens and Daudet instead of *Confidences*, abandoned one day, certainly more for my benefit than for hers.)

I believed she was superior to my father because she seemed closer with my teachers than he was. Everything about her, her hopes and her ambition, was aimed toward school. We shared a complicity around literature, the poetry I would recite for her, cakes at the Rouen salon de thé, everything from which he was excluded. He would

drive me to the fair, to the circus, to Fernandel movies, he taught me to ride a bike, to recognize the vegetables in the garden. I had “fun” with him, I had “discussions” with her. Of the two of them, she was the dominant figure, the law.

Sharper images of her as she approaches her 50s. Still lively and strong, generous, red-blond hair, but often a disgruntled look on her face, once she was no longer compelled to smile at customers. A tendency to use an incident or a benign comment as an outlet for her frustration about their living conditions (the little neighborhood store was threatened by new stores in the rebuilt downtown), to get angry with her brothers and sisters. After my grandmother’s death, she was in mourning for a long time and began to go regularly to early mass during the week. Some “romantic” quality in her faded.

1952. The summer when she’s forty-six. We went by bus to Étretat on a daytrip. She climbs through weeds along the cliff, in her blue crepe dress with big flowers that she slipped into behind the rocks in place of her mourning suit, worn for the departure for the benefit of the people in the neighborhood. She reaches the top after me, out of breath, her face shining with sweat underneath her powder. She hasn’t had her period in two months.

When I reached adolescence, I distanced myself from her and conflict was the only thing between us.

In the world of her childhood, even the question of girls' liberties was not raised, except in terms of damnation. Sexuality was only spoken of in off color jokes that were barred from "young ears" or in social judgments, having proper or improper conduct. She never told me anything, and I didn't dare ask, curiosity was considered already the seed of vice. My anxiety, when the moment came, to admit to her that I'd started my period, say the word in front of her for the first time, and her flushed face as she handed me a sanitary napkin, without explaining how to use it.

She didn't like seeing me grow up. As soon as she would see me undressed, my body would seem to disgust her. Probably my having a chest and hips presented a threat, meant that I would run after boys and lose interest in my schoolwork. She tried to keep me from growing up, saying that I was thirteen within a week of being fourteen, making me wear pleated skirts, ankle socks and flat shoes. Until I was eighteen, almost all of our arguments were about not being allowed to go out, the clothes I would wear (her repeated desire, for example, that I wear a corset, "you'll be much better dressed"). She would become disproportionately angry, considering the cause "You will ABSOLUTELY NOT go out like that" (with that dress, that hairstyle, etc.) but it seemed normal to me. We both knew what we were really fighting against: she, against my eagerness to be attractive to boys, I against her dread that "something bad" would happen to me, meaning I would sleep with some guy and wind up pregnant.

Sometimes, I imagined that her death would have no impact on me.

As I'm writing, sometimes I see the "good" mother, sometimes the "bad." To escape from this oscillation that goes back farther than my childhood, I try to describe and explain as if I were writing about a different mother, and a daughter not myself. This way I write as neutrally as possible, but certain phrases, ("if something bad happens to you!") don't manage to be neutral, for me, the way other, abstract phrases do ("refusal of body and sexuality" for example). As soon as I recall them, I feel the same sense of discouragement that I felt at age seventeen, and, for an instant, I confuse the most influential woman in my life with the African mothers holding their daughter's arm behind her back while the "circumcising matron" cuts her clitoris.

She was no longer my role model. I became attuned to the female image I was encountering in *L'Écho de la Mode* and which the mothers of my petit-bourgeois friends from boarding school seemed to embody: slim, discrete, knowing how to cook and calling their daughters "darling." I thought my mother was gaudy. I always looked away when she would uncork a bottle, holding it between her legs. I was ashamed of the gruff way she spoke and carried herself, even more so as I realized how much I resembled her. As I moved into a new social milieu, I resented her for being exactly what I was trying not to appear to be anymore. And I discovered that there was a chasm between the desire to become cultured and actually being so. My mother needed a dictionary to be able to say who Van Gogh was, as for important authors, she knew nothing beyond their names.

She didn't understand the way my studies worked. I had given her too much credit for not being upset, more than I gave my father, at not being able to come with me, to leave me unescorted in the world of school and friends who had libraries at home, having had no resources to offer except her anxiety and suspicion, "who were you with, are you at least working?"

We would speak to each other in argumentative tones, no matter what we were talking about. To her attempts at maintaining our former complicity, I would respond with silence ("you can tell your mother anything") from then on impossible: if I would talk to her about desires that weren't related to education (trips, sports, wild parties) or argue about politics (it was during the Algerian War), she would listen to me, at first, with pleasure, happy that I'd chosen her as a confidant, then all of a sudden, violently, "Stop filling your head with all that, school comes first."

I began to disdain social conventions, religious practices, money. I would write out Rimbaud and Prévert poems, I would glue pictures of James Dean onto my notebook covers, I would listen to *La mauvaise réputation* by Brassens, I was bored. I lived out my adolescent rebellion in a romantic style, as if my parents had been middle-class. I identified with misunderstood artists. For my mother, rebellion had only one meaning, namely to refuse poverty, and a single form, to work, to earn money and become as well off as others. Where did this bitter reproach come from, that I could no longer understand how she couldn't understand my attitude: "If someone had stuck you in the factory at age twelve, you wouldn't be like this. You don't know how lucky you are." And often, that angry reaction toward me: "That's ok at boarding school and it's no more impressive than any other."

At certain moments, she had, standing before her, a daughter who was an enemy of a different social class.

I wanted nothing more than to leave home. She allowed me to go to the lycée de Rouen, and later to London. Willing to make every sacrifice to make my life better than hers, even the biggest one, letting me leave her. Far from her watchful gaze, I plunged to the depths of everything she had forbidden me to do, then I stuffed myself with food, then I stopped eating for weeks, until I was dizzy, before being sure of my freedom. I forgot our disagreements. Literature student at the university, I had a purified conception of her, without shouting or violence. I was certain of her love and of this injustice: she served potatoes and milk from morning to night so that I could sit in a lecture hall and listen to someone talk about Plato.

I was happy to see her again, I hadn't missed her. I would retreat back to her, especially when I was upset over some sentimental happening I couldn't tell her about, even though now she would tell me in whispered tones about who was seeing whom, or so-and-so's miscarriage: it was as if it had been decided upon that I was old enough to hear these things but that they would never really concern me.

When I would arrive, she would be behind the counter. The customers would turn around. She would blush a little and smile. Only in the kitchen, once the last customer was gone, would we embrace. Questions about the trip, my studies and "make sure to give me your things to wash," "I saved all of the newspapers for you since you left."

Between us, the kindness, almost shyness of those who don't live together anymore. For years, I had nothing but homecomings with her.

My father had an operation on his stomach. He would tire quickly and no longer had the strength to lift the storage lockers. Without complaint, with satisfaction, almost, she took on the responsibility and workload of two people. Since the time I had left, they argued less, she would move close to him, often affectionately calling him "Papa," more easy going about his habits, like smoking, "he's got to at least have some little pleasures in his life." On summer Sundays they would drive around the countryside, or visit cousins. In the winter, she would go to vespers and then greet the old folks. She would go through the center of town on her way home, pausing to watch the television in a shopping center, where kids would gather after going to the movies.

The customers would still say that she was beautiful. Hair always colored, high heels, but fuzz on her chin that she burned in secret, bifocal glasses. (Amusement, my father's secret pleasure in seeing these signs that made her seem just as old as he was). She stopped wearing light dresses with flashy colors, only grey or black suits, even in the summer. To be more comfortable, she wouldn't tuck her blouse into her skirt.

Till I was twenty, I thought I was aging her.

People don't know that I'm writing about her. But I'm not writing about her, it feels more as if I'm living with her in a time, in places, where she's alive. Sometimes, at home, I stumble across objects that belonged to her, the day before yesterday her thimble that she would wear while at the rope factory, on the finger that had been mangled by a machine. Just as quickly, the feeling of her death overwhelms me and I'm in real time, where she'll never be again. Under these conditions, to "release" a book doesn't mean anything, except the definitive death of my mother. Desire to snub those who ask me with a smile, "when's your next book coming out?"

Even living far away, as long as I wasn't married, I still belonged to her. To family, customers who asked her about me, she would respond, "She has plenty of time to get married. At her age, she's not a lost cause," just as likely to exclaim, "I don't want to take care of her. It's part of life to have a husband and children." She trembled and blushed when I told her, one summer, about my plans to marry a political science student from Bordeaux, searching for reasons against it, embodying her peasant's suspicion once again - which she considered, nevertheless, outdated -: "he's not from our world." Then calmer, content, even, in a little town where marriage is the essential status marker, no one could say that I had "married a laborer." A new kind of complicity brought us closer again, one centered on spoons, on pots and pans to buy, on preparations for "the big day," and later, on children. There will no longer be anything else between us.

My husband and I had the same level of education, we would talk about Sartre and freedom, we would go see *L'Avventura* by Antonioni, we had the same left wing political views, we didn't come from the same worlds. The inhabitants in his world weren't really rich, but had gone to college, were well spoken on all subjects, played bridge. My husband's mother, the same age as mine, still had a slim figure, a smooth face, hands well cared for. She could sight read any piece of piano music and "entertain" (type of women you'd see on TV in spacious rooms on the boulevard, in their fifties, string of pearls on a silk blouse, "delightfully naïve").

My mother's feelings toward this world were split between the admiration that good education, elegance and culture inspired in her, the pride in seeing her daughter take part in it, and the fear of being looked down upon, under the guise of exquisite civility. The entirety of her feelings of inferiority, an inferiority from which she didn't separate me (maybe another generation was still needed to erase it), in that sentence she spoke, the day before my wedding: "Try to keep the house neat, you don't want him to *get rid of you*." And a few years ago, speaking of my mother in law: "She's obviously a woman who wasn't raised like *us*."

Fearing she wouldn't be loved for herself, she hoped to be loved for what she would give. She wanted to help us financially during our last year of school, later constantly trying to figure out what we'd like to have. The other family had a sense of humor, originality, and didn't feel they had any obligations.

We moved to Bordeaux, then to Annecy, where my husband was appointed to the post of administrative civil servant. Between classes at a lycée in the mountains forty kilometers away, a child and cooking, I too have become a woman who simply doesn't have the time. I hardly thought of my mother at all, she was as distant as my life before I was married. I gave short responses to the letters she would send us every two weeks that always began "my dearest children," in which she would constantly bemoan living far away, not being able to help us. I would see her once a year, for a few days in the summer. I'd describe Annecy, the apartment, the ski lodges. With my father, she would insist, "you two are well, and that's what matters." When the two of us would converse, she seemed to want me to confide in her about my husband and our relationship, disappointed, because of my silence, at being unable to answer the question that must have haunted her more than anything else, "does he at least make her happy?"

In 1967, over the course of four days, my father died of a heart attack. I cannot describe those moments because I've already done it in another book, meaning there will never be another possible way to say it, with different words, the sentences in another order. Only to say that I see my mother again washing my father's face after he's died, pulling his arms through the sleeves of a clean shirt, his Sunday best. While doing this she rocked him with gentle words, as if washing and putting a small child to bed. Watching her simple and precise movements, I thought that she had always known he would die before she would. The first night, she still slept in bed beside him. Until the

undertakers took him away, she would go up to see him between customers, in the same way she did during the four days of his illness.

After the burial, she seemed exhausted and sad, confessing to me: “It’s hard to lose one’s companion.” She kept the business going as before. (I just read in the paper, “hopelessness is a luxury.” This book, that I have the time and means to write since I lost my mother is probably also a luxury.)

She saw the family more, chatted for hours with young women in the store, kept the café open later, which was frequented more by young people. She ate a lot, quite stout again, and talkative, with a tendency to behave like a girl, quite pleased to inform me of the two widowers who were interested in her. In May ’68, over the phone: “Things are moving around here, too, they’re moving!” Then, the next summer, alongside the reconstruction (shocked, later, that in Paris the leftists could be destroying l’épicerie Fauchon, that she likened to her store, only bigger).

In her letters, she would insist that she didn’t have time to be bored. But she essentially wanted one thing, to live with me. One day, timidly, “If I moved in with you, I could take care of the house.”

In Annecy, I would think of her guiltily. We lived in a “big bourgeois house,” we had a second child: she didn’t get the chance to “enjoy” any of this. I would imagine her

with her grandsons, living a comfortable life that, I believed, she would appreciate since this was what she had wanted for me. In 1970, she sold her business, which found no buyer, as a private house, and she moved in with us.

It was a mild day in January. She arrived in the afternoon, with the moving van, while I was at school. When I got home, I saw her in the garden, hugging her one-year-old grandson in her arms and supervising as her remaining furniture and boxes of preserves were carried inside. Her hair was completely white, she was laughing, overflowing with vitality. From afar she shouted to me: “You’re not late!” Suddenly I realized with desperation, “now I’ll never be out of her sight.”

At first, she wasn’t as happy as she had expected to be. In a single day, her life as a shopkeeper had ended, the fear of bills to pay, exhaustion, but also the comings and goings and the conversations with customers, the pride of earning “her” money. She was nothing more than “grandma,” no one knew her in town and she only had us to talk to. Suddenly, the universe was dreary and shrunken, she didn’t feel anything anymore.

And this: living with her children meant taking part in a lifestyle she was proud of (to her family: “They’re very comfortable!”). It also meant not leaving dishtowels to dry on the radiator in the entrance, “being careful with things” (records, crystal vases), being “hygienic” (not wiping the children’s noses with her own handkerchief). Discovering that things that were important to her were not necessarily as important to us, trivial bits of news, crimes, accidents, good relations with the neighbors, the constant fear of “bothering” people (even laughter would shock her, among all these preoccupations). It

was life inside a world that welcomed her on the one hand and excluded her on the other. One day, angrily, “I don’t fit into this picture!”

And so when the phone would ring next to her, she wouldn’t answer it, she knocked conspicuously before entering the living room where her son-in-law would be watching a match on TV, she was always clamoring for work, “if I’m not given anything to do, I’ll just have to leave” and, half laughing, “well I’ve got to earn my keep!” The two of us would have arguments about her stance, I would scold her for humiliating herself on purpose. It took me a long time to realize that my mother resented the discomfort in my house that I had felt as an adolescent in “better company than ours” (as if it were only for “the lowly” to suffer the differences that others esteemed to be of no importance.) And in pretending to think of herself as an employee, she was instinctively transforming the real cultural dominance of her children reading *Le Monde* or listening to Bach, to imaginary economic dominance of boss to worker: one way of revolting.

She adapted, finding an outlet for her energy and enthusiasm in caring for her grandchildren and helping to keep house. She was trying to free me from all material burdens, was sorry to let me cook or clean, start the washing machine, which she was scared to use: not wanting to share the only domain in which she was acknowledged, where she knew she was useful. As before, she was the mother who refuses any help, with the same disapproval when seeing me work with my hands, “don’t bother with that, you have more important things to do” (meaning, do my homework when I was 10, now, make lesson plans, act like an intellectual).

Once again we would speak to each other in that tone composed of annoyance and endless complaints, the tone that always made it (inaccurately) seem like we were arguing, a tone I would recognize between a mother and daughter in any language.

She adored her grandchildren and was tirelessly devoted to them. Every afternoon she would go exploring in town with the youngest in his stroller. She would go into churches, spend hours at the fairground, stroll around old neighborhoods and stay out until nightfall. In the summer she would climb la colline d'Annecy-le-Vieux with her two grandchildren, take them to the lake, indulge their desires for candy, ice cream and rides on the merry-go-round. On park benches, she made acquaintances whom she began to see regularly, she chatted with the neighborhood baker, she rebuilt her world.

She read *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, she went to a friend's house "to have tea" (laughing, "I don't like all that but I keep my mouth shut!"), she was interested in antiques ("that must be valuable"). Coarse words no longer escaped her lips, she strove to handle things "gently," in short, to "watch herself," trimming away her violence. Proud, even, that later in life she was mastering the knowledge that is instilled from childhood in bourgeois women of her generation, the perfect upkeep of a "household."

Now she only wore light colors, never black.

In a photo from September 1971, she is radiant under her white hair, slimmer than before, in a Rodier blouse with an arabesque print. Her grandchildren placed in front of her, she covers their shoulders with her hands. These are the same broad, folded hands of her bridal photo.

In the mid 1970s, she moved near Paris with us, to a new city right in the midst of construction, where my husband had been offered a higher post. We lived in a house in a brand new subdivision in the middle of a field. The shops and schools were two kilometers from us. We only saw the other residents in the evenings. On weekends they would wash the car and hang shelves in the garage. It was a vague place without character where it felt as if you were merely drifting, deprived of feelings and thought.

She didn't get used to living there. In the afternoons, she would walk on the rue des Roses, the rue des Jonquilles, and des Bluets, all empty. She would write lots of letters to her friends in Annecy, and to the family. Sometimes she would go all the way to centre Leclerc, on the other side of the highway, via dilapidated roads where cars would spray her as they passed. She would come home, a stolid expression on her face. It weighed on her to be dependant on me and my car for even her most miniscule needs, a pair of stockings, mass or the hairdresser. She was becoming irritable, would protest, "A person can't just read all the time!" The installation of a dishwasher, in taking away her job, had nearly humiliated her, "what am I going to do now?" In the subdivision, she spoke to only one person, a woman from the Antilles, an office worker.

At the end of six months, she decided to return, once again, to Yvetot. She moved into a studio apartment in a single-storey building for the elderly, near the center of town. Glad to be independent again, to reconnect with her last remaining sister – the others were dead -, with former customers, married nieces who invited her to parties and

communions. She borrowed books from the town library, went to Lourdes, in October, with the diocesan pilgrimage. But also, little by little, the repetitiveness of everything, inherent in a life without employment, the annoyance of having only old people for neighbors (her violent refusal to participate in activities of the “golden age club”), and of course, the secret dissatisfaction: the people of the city where she had lived for fifty years, the only ones, after all, who she would have wanted to witness the success of her daughter and her son-in-law, would never see this success with their own eyes.

The studio apartment will be the last place she can call her own. One rather dreary room, with a kitchenette opening onto a little garden, an alcove for the bed and the nightstand, a bathroom, an intercom for communicating with the caretaker of the residence. It was a space that cut every gesture short, or rather where there would be nothing to do but to sit, watch television, wait to start dinner. Each time I went to visit her, she would repeat as she looked around: “I would really be a bother if I complained.” To me she still seemed too young to be there.

We would eat facing one another. At first, we had plenty of things to talk about, health, the boys’ grades, new stores, vacations, we would interrupt each other, and very quickly, silence. As always, she would try to restart the conversation “how should I put it ...”. Once, I thought, “this studio is the only place my mother has lived without me since I was born.” Just as I would get ready to leave, she would find some administrative form that she needed to be explained to her, she would look everywhere for a beauty or cleaning tip that she had set aside for me.

Instead of going to see her, I preferred that she come visit us: it always seemed easier to insert her for two weeks into our life than to share three hours of hers, where nothing happened anymore. As soon as she was invited, she would come running. We had left the subdivision and were situated in the old town just outside the new city. The place pleased her. She would appear on the platform at the train station, often in a red suit, with the luggage that she wouldn't let me carry. As soon as she would arrive, she would rake the flowerbeds. In the summer in La Nievre, where she would stay with us for a month, she would go out alone on the footpaths, and would return with kilos of blackberries, her legs covered in scratches. She would never say "I'm too old to" go fishing with the boys, or to go to the Trone fair, go to bed late, etc.

One evening in December '79, around half past 6, she was hit on Nationale 15 by a Citroën CX that ran a red light through a crosswalk she was using. (According to the article in the local paper, the driver had had bad luck, "the visibility was poor due to recent rainfall" and "vertigo caused by cars going in the opposite direction could contribute to other causes that prevented the driver from seeing the seventy year old woman.") She had a broken leg and head trauma. She was unconscious for a week. The surgeon at the clinic guessed that her robust constitution would come out on top. She would argue, trying to pull out her IV and lift her plastered leg. She would yell for her blonde sister, dead for twenty years, to watch out, a car was coming right at her. I would look at her bare shoulders, her body that I was, for the first time, seeing neglected, in pain. I felt like I was standing before the young woman who had struggled to give birth

to me, one night during the war. In a state of stupefaction, it was becoming clear to me that she could die.

She recovered, was able to walk as well as before. She wanted to win her case against the driver of the CX, submitting to all medical estimates with a sort of resolute immodesty. People told her she was lucky to have recovered so well. She was proud of it, as if the car smashing against her had been yet another obstacle she had completely overcome, as usual.

She changed. She began to set the table earlier and earlier, eleven every morning, half past six in the evening. She would only read *France-Dimanche* and picture books given to her by a young woman, a former customer (hiding them in her sideboard as soon as I would come to see her). She would turn on the TV in the morning – there weren't any programs, just music and the test pattern on the screen - , would leave it on all day, hardly watching it in the evening and would fall asleep in front of it. She was easily irritated, always saying “that's disgusting,” regarding trivial inconveniences, a blouse that was difficult to iron, the bread that had gone up ten cents in price. Also, a propensity for panic, about a flyer from her retirement fund, some junk mail announcing that she had won this or that, “but I didn't ask for anything!” When she would reminisce about Annecy, walks with the children in old neighborhoods, swans on the lake, she would be

on the verge of tears. Words were missing in her letters, which were shorter and more infrequent. There was a smell in her apartment.

Some strange things happened to her. She waited on the platform at the station for a train that had already left. As soon as she was ready to do her shopping, she found all of the stores closed. Her keys were always disappearing. *La Redoute* sent her things she hadn't ordered. She became aggressive toward the family in Yvetot, accusing them all of speculating about her money, no longer wanting to visit them. One day when I called her: "I'm sick of pissing away my time in this hellhole!" She seemed to be bracing herself against unseen threats.

July '83 was scorching, even in Normandy. She wouldn't drink and she had no appetite, insisting that her medication provided enough nourishment. She fainted in the sun and was driven to the medical center at the hospice. A few days later, fed and hydrated, she was doing well and was asking to go home, "or else I'll jump out of the window" she would say. According to the doctor, it was no longer possible for her to live alone. He suggested we put her in a retirement home. I refused the idea.

At the beginning of September, I drove to pick her up from the hospice, to take her home to live with me. I was separated from my husband and was living with my two sons. During the entire drive, I was thinking, "now I'm going to take care of her" (like in the past, "when I grow up, I'll travel with her, we'll go to the Louvre," etc.) The weather was beautiful. She was calm in the front of the car, her purse on her knees. We were talking, as usual, about the kids, their studies, my work. She was happily telling stories about her roommates, just one strange remark about one of these women: "A dirty bitch, I

would have giving her a couple of smacks.” That is the last happy image I have of my mother.

Her story stops, the one in which she held her place in the world. She lost her head. It’s called Alzheimer’s disease, the name doctors gave to a form of senile dementia. For several days now, I’ve been writing with greater and greater difficulty, maybe because I wanted never to reach this moment. And yet, I know I can’t live without joining - through writing - the demented woman she became with the strong and luminous woman she had been.

She would get lost going from room to room in the house and she would often ask me angrily how to get to her room. She would mislay her things (this sentence she would then say: “I can’t seem to get my hands on it,”) flustered to find them in the places she had refused to believe she herself had put them. She would start sewing again, doing the laundry, peeling vegetables, but each job would immediately exhaust her. She entered a life of endless impatience, to watch TV, to eat lunch, to go out to the garden, and one desire following the other without offering any satisfaction.

In the afternoons, just like before, she would situate herself at the sitting room table with her address book and her letter writing paper. After an hour, she would rip up the letters she had started and had been unable to finish. In one of them, in November, “Dear Paulette I haven’t escaped my darkness.”

Then she forgot the order of things and the way they work. No longer knowing how to set a table with glasses and plates, or turn off the light in a room (she would stand on a chair and try to unscrew the light bulb.)

She would wear worn-out skirts and mended stockings that she refused to part with: "I suppose you're so rich you throw everything out." Her only feelings were anger and anxiety. In every sentence, she sensed a threat. Pressing needs constantly tortured her, to buy hairspray, to know what day the doctor was coming back, how much money she had in her savings account. But sometimes, a glimpse of forced cheerfulness, inappropriate laughter, to show that she wasn't sick.

She stopped understanding what she read. She would wander from one room to another, always searching. She would empty her wardrobe, throw her dresses, her little souvenirs on the bed, put them back on other shelves, begin again the next day, as if she hadn't yet found the perfect arrangement. One Saturday afternoon in January, she stuffed half of her clothes into plastic bags which she had stitched closed with thread. When she wasn't arranging things, she would sit in a chair in the sitting room, arms crossed, looking straight ahead. Nothing could make her happy anymore.

She forgot names. She called me "madame" in a polite, refined way. Her grandsons' faces no longer meant anything to her. At dinner she would ask them if they were well paid here, she imagined she was on a farm where they were, like her, employees. Yet she was "self-aware," her shame at soiling her under-things with urine, hiding them under her pillow, her little voice one morning, in her bed, "I couldn't hold it." She would try to seize the world, she wanted to throw herself into her sewing, putting together scarves, handkerchiefs, one on top of the other, with dropped stitches. She

would cling to certain objects, her toiletry bag that she would carry with her, panicked, on the verge of tears, when she couldn't find it.

During this period, I had two car accidents, both of them my fault. I had trouble swallowing, I had stomachaches. I would shout for practically no reason at all and I often wanted to cry. Sometimes, on the other hand, I would laugh violently with my sons, we would pretend we believed my mother's mistakes were made intentionally, to make us laugh. I talked about her to people she didn't know. They would look at me without a word, I felt like I was crazy too. One day, I drove aimlessly for hours on country roads, I didn't come back till nightfall. I began an affair with a man who repulsed me.

I didn't want her to become a little girl again, she didn't have the "right."

She began to speak to people only she could see. The first time that happened, I was correcting papers. I covered my ears. I thought, "it's over." Afterwards, I wrote on a scrap of paper, "Maman speaks to herself." (I'm now writing those same words, but they're no longer words just for me, as they were then, to make all of it bearable, now they are words to make it understandable, to others.)

She no longer wanted to get up in the morning. She would only eat milk products and sweets, vomiting when she ate anything else. At the end of February, the doctor decided to move her to the Pontoise hospital, where she was admitted to the gastroenterology ward. Her condition improved in a few days. She would try to escape from the ward, the nurses would secure her to her recliner. For the first time, I cleaned her dentures, her nails, put cream on her face.

Two weeks later, she was transferred to the geriatric ward. It's a small modern building, three stories tall above a ground floor, located behind the hospital, surrounded by trees. The elderly people, mostly women, are distributed thus: on the second floor, the temporary occupants, on the third and fourth floors those who can stay until they die. The fourth floor is reserved mostly for invalids and those with diminished mental capacities.³ The rooms, doubles or singles, are bright, clean, with flowered wallpaper, prints, a wall clock, faux-leather recliners, a bathroom with a toilet. The wait for a permanent spot can be very long, when, for example, there haven't been many deaths during the winter. My mother went to the second floor.

She was talkative, telling stories about things she would believe to have seen the day before, a hold-up, a child drowning. She would tell me that she had just come back from doing her shopping, the stores overflowing with people. The fears and the resentments reappeared, she was incensed to be working like a nigger for bosses who wouldn't pay, men were chasing after her. She would greet me angrily, "I waited here for days, without enough to even buy myself a piece of cheese." She would keep scraps of bread from lunch in her pockets.

Even in this state, she wasn't resigned to anything. Religion disappeared from her life, no desire to go to mass, to have her rosary. She wanted to recover ("finally they'll figure out what I have"), she wanted to leave ("I would be better off with you"). She

³ In the original, the three floors on which residents are placed are referred to as "premier," "deuxième" and "troisième." They are not translated here as "first," "second" and "third" floors but rather as "second," "third" and "fourth" because the French words imply the existence of a ground floor; "premier étage" refers to the first level above the ground floor, or, in English, to the second floor.

would walk from one corridor to the other till she was exhausted. She would demand wine.

One evening in April, she was already sleeping, at half past six, lying on top of the sheets, in a slip; her legs raised, showing her genitals. It was quite warm in her room. I began to cry because it was my mother, the same woman from my childhood. Her chest was covered with little blue veins.

Her allotted stay of eight weeks in the ward came to an end. She was admitted to a private retirement home, temporarily, because they didn't take "disoriented" persons. At the end of May, she went back to the geriatric ward of the hospital, in Pontoise. On the fourth floor, a room had opened up.

For the last time, despite the mental illness, it's still her, when she gets out of the car, goes through the front door, erect, with her glasses, her cloudy gray suit, her elegant shoes, stockings. In her suitcase, there are her blouses, her own linens, her souvenirs, photos.

She moved permanently into that place without seasons, the same soft, odorous warmth all year long, or time, just the well-regulated repetition of tasks, eating, going to bed, etc. In intervals, walking in the corridors, waiting for the meal, seated at the table an hour in advance, ceaselessly folding and unfolding her napkin, watching American television series and glittering commercials parade across the screen. Parties, most

likely: the cakes distributed every Thursday by lady volunteers, a glass of champagne on new year's, lilies of the valley on the first of May. Some love, still, women hold one another's hands, touch each other's hair, argue. And this accepted philosophy of the aides: "Come on, madame D..., have a candy, it will pass the time."

After a few weeks, she lost the desire to hold on. She drooped, walking half-hunched over, head bowed. She lost her glasses, her gaze was opaque, her face naked, slightly bloated, from the tranquilizers. There began to be something wild about her appearance.

Little by little she lost all of her personal belongings, a cardigan she had loved, her second pair of glasses, her toiletry case.

She didn't care, she stopped trying to find the things she lost. She didn't remember what belonged to her, she no longer had any belongings. One day, while looking at the little Savoyard chimney sweep that she had brought with her everywhere since living in Annecy, "I used to have one just like this." Like the majority of other women, for greater convenience, she was dressed in a smock that was open in the back from top to bottom, with a flowered blouse over top. She no longer had any shame, wearing a diaper, eating, with her fingers, voraciously.

The people around her became more and more indistinguishable from one another. Words she heard were emptied of meaning, but she would respond at random. She always wanted to communicate. The function of language remained intact in her, coherent sentences, correctly pronounced words, merely separate from things, subject only to her imagination. She would invent the life that she no longer lived: she had gone to Paris, she had bought herself a red fish, someone had driven her to her husband's

tomb. But sometimes, she would KNOW: “I’m worried my condition is irreversible.” Or she would REMEMBER: “I did everything so that my daughter would be happy, and thanks to this she wasn’t, especially.”

She whiled away the summer, (her hair was done like the others, with a straw hat to go down to the park, to sit on the benches), the winter. On the first of the year, someone put a blouse and skirt on her, gave her a drink of champagne. She was walking more slowly, supporting herself with one hand on the railing that lines the walls of the corridors. She would fall. She lost her bottom dentures, then the top. Her lips shrunk, her chin took up all of the space. When the moment would come to see her, my panic each time of finding her less “human.” Away from her, I would picture her with her expressions, her former gait, never as she had become.

The following summer, she cracked her hip. She was not operated on. Giving her a prosthetic hip, like everything else - getting new glasses, new teeth -, was no longer worth it. She didn’t get up from her hospital bed anymore, she was attached to it by a cloth band tied around her waist. Someone would bring her into the dining room with the other women, in front of the television.

The people who had known her would write to me, “she didn’t deserve that,” they believed it would have been better for her to be quickly “rid of it all.” Maybe someday all of society will be of this opinion. They didn’t come to see her, to them she was

already dead. But she wanted to live. She would ceaselessly attempt, straining, to stand up on her good leg and to remove the fabric that restrained her. She would stretch out her hand toward everything that was within reach. She was always hungry, her energy had become focused in her mouth. She liked to be kissed and she would stick out her lips to be kissed more. She was a little girl who would never grow up.

I would bring her chocolate, pastries, that I would give to her in little bits. At first, I would never buy the good cakes, too creamy or too firm, she wasn't able to eat them (inexpressible sadness to see her struggle, her fingers, her tongue, to finish it). I would wash her hands, shave her face, sprinkle her with perfume. One day, I started to brush her hair, then I stopped. She said, "I like it when you do my hair." After that, I always did it. I would sit facing her, in her room. Often, she would grab the fabric of my skirt, feel it, as if examining its quality. She would forcefully tear up the cake wrappers, her jaws clenched. She would talk about money, customers, would laugh with her head thrown back. These were the mannerisms she had always had, words that came from all of her life. I didn't want her to die.

I needed to feed her, touch her, hear her.

Many times, the fierce desire to bring her home with me, to do nothing but take care of her, and knowing right away that I was not capable. (Guilt to have placed her there, even if, as people would say, "I couldn't have done anything else.")

She survived another winter. The Sunday before Easter, I went to see her,

bringing forsythia. It was gray and cold. She was in the dining room with the other women. The TV was on. She smiled at me when I approached her. I rolled her into her room. I arranged the branches of forsythia in a vase. I sat down next to her and gave her some chocolate to eat. Someone had dressed her in brown wool socks that went up just above the knee, a smock that was too short and left her withered thighs bare. I cleaned her hands, her mouth, her skin was lukewarm. Suddenly, she tried to grab the forsythia branches. Later, I brought her into the dining room, Jacques Martin's show was on, "L'école des fans." I kissed her and I took the elevator. She died the next day.

During the week that followed, I would relive that Sunday, when she was alive, the brown socks, the forsythia, her movements, her smile when I said goodbye, then the Monday, when she was dead, lying in her bed. I wasn't able to connect the two days.

Now, everything is connected.

It's the end of February, it rains often and the weather is very mild. This evening, after doing my shopping, I returned to the retirement home. From the parking lot, the building seemed lighter, almost welcoming. There was a light in the window of my mother's old room. For the first time, with surprise: "There's someone else in her room."

I also thought that one day, sometime in the 2000s, I would become one of those women who waits for dinner, folding and unfolding her napkin, here or somewhere like it.

During the ten months I've written, I've dreamed of her almost every night. Once, I was lying in the middle of a river, between two currents. From my belly, from my genitals, newly smooth like a little girl's, were growing stringy plants, that were floating, soft. They weren't only my genitals, they were also my mother's.

At certain moments, it feels like I'm back in the time when she was still living at home, before her hospital stay. For an instant, while maintaining clear awareness of her death, I wait to see her come down the stairs, sit down with her sewing box in the sitting room. This feeling, in which the illusory presence of my mother is stronger than her real absence, is probably the first sign of forgetfulness.

I have reread the first pages of this book. A shock to discover that I've already forgotten certain details, the employee at the morgue speaking on the telephone while we were waiting, the tar words on the supermarket wall.

A few weeks ago, one of my aunts told me that my mother and father, when they were first seeing each other, would meet in bathrooms, at the factory. Now that my

mother is dead, I would like not to learn anything more about her than what I knew when she was alive.

Her image is becoming the one I imagine to have had of her when I was a little girl, an ample white shadow over me.

She died a week before Simone de Beauvoir.

She liked giving to everyone, more than receiving. Is writing not a form of giving.

This is not a biography, nor a novel of course, maybe a mix of literature, sociology and history. My mother, born in a dominated milieu from which she wanted to escape, had to become the stuff of narrative so that I could feel less alone and artificial in this dominating world of words and ideas, into which, as she had wanted, I have passed.

I will no longer hear her voice. It is she, and her words, her hands, her gestures, the way she laughs and the way she walks, that united the woman I am to the child I was. I've lost the last link with the world that bore me.

Sunday, April 20 1986 – February 26, 1987