

## I

Louise was coming to spend a few days at home with Vincent and their two children. Benoît was waiting for them, leaning shirtless out of his bedroom window, half-asleep and dazzled by the midday sun on the stretch of main road that separated the house from the first apartment blocks of S. It was the 8th of May, very empty and lovely on the crisscross of plowed fields all around. Benoît had been up late the night before, and his tongue was rough with an aftertaste of rusty iron. On the parking lot below, the uprooted pumps of his father's old service station gave off an already forgotten smell of gasoline. Benoît let fall a mouthful of spit, and it splattered on the tarmac in a star shape. There was no sound, just the tremble of the dwarfed meadow shunted against the side of the house and that exhilarating, pure, holiday stillness. When he looked up, the car's red roof was emerging from the edge of the landscape. Louise's bare arm was held out to the breeze and long strands of her hair were blowing

through the open window. A chunky plastic ring on her finger shot orange rays into the spring air. Benoît guessed she was humming; he was infinitely pleased to see her.

Vincent made a wide curve and pulled up in the shade of the housefront. Louise was wearing dark glasses and Benoît saw the sky and house pass across them when she leaned out to blow him a kiss. Her fleshy lips showed only a trace of makeup and lent a sort of violence to the placid perfection of her face; she put her forefinger on them and pointed to the two children who were asleep in the back. Beside her, Vincent had not even raised his eyes to the window. He was tidying the pile of cassettes on the dashboard; Benoît guessed from the expression of his angular profile, a cigarette stuck in his mouth, that he was annoyed with Louise. Arguments were part of the aggravation she took in her stride with incredible good nature. She had knelt on her seat to watch the children sleeping; Vincent emptied the ashtray out of the door and must have finally said something to her, for she sat back on her heels to listen, leaning her head against the seatback and playing with the orange ring in the lap of her miniskirt. Benoît rested his chin on the sun-warmed concrete of his window; the midday warmth was making his armpits damp. He found it pleasant to make the moment of waking last while he admired his sister's infinite patience.

The weather had been fine for only a few days, and a watery blue sky was still trailing long skeins of cloud that suddenly cast a chill over the countryside. Louise in her beach T-shirt

with its low-cut back and shoulders made him cold. She had pushed her door open to brush her hair and was looking indulgently at the dirty white housefront, decorated, as though by chance, with a handful of purple petunias. Benoît realized that she had not been back for nearly a year and that he had gotten used to it.

Vincent got out to take a leak against the heap of scrap metal and tangle of weeds beside the shed; he shouted to Louise that he had things to do in town and she merely waved her brush over the car hood in reply. He went off, doing up his belt over his shirt, which the wind was distending like a sail. His steps rang for a long time on the highway, so strangely deserted in this fine weather. Louise got out of the car—the thick soles of her sandals made her look even lankier—and stretched in the sun, smiling at her brother, Vincent's ill humor already forgotten. Benoît could see the knot of her belly button yawning in the taut skin of her stomach under the waistband of her skirt; he had not remembered that she was so pretty.

Louise opened one of the rear doors partway to give the children some air, then put a great travel bag on the hood and took out a series of neatly folded clothes. She stood very straight, and as she put her hair back, her shoulders rippled in a move that was unconsciously provocative. Louise was gorgeous without being flirtatious. At nearly twenty-five, and despite two already big children, she still had the air of a schoolgirl to which her wide, finely chiseled jaw and short flat nose added an untamed charm. Benoît thought about going down to join her but did not

find the courage to shake off his somnolence. A smell of fatty roasting meat floated up the stairs. He could hear his mother moving the kitchen stools about, striking the broom roughly against the baseboards the way she did when she was tired. The rare visits from this accidental little family revived old irritations she had never thrown off. She did not like Vincent; she could not forgive him for having gotten Louise pregnant at sixteen, partly to get himself talked about in the neighborhood. That her daughter was radiantly happy anyway offended her common sense; she had never made any secret of the fact that she had hoped to the end that the baby would not survive, nor later that she had never managed to love the children completely, without resentment.

A light breeze blew the car door closed with a bang, disturbing the children's sleep. Louise watched them toss restlessly, bewildered by the heat and unfamiliar surroundings, then she went to open the door for Fabien, who slipped into her arms as limp as a little invalid. He would be eight in two days' time, which his narrow face and girlish lips belied. After wiping his cheek with the bottom of her T-shirt, Louise sent him off for a pee against the shed wall, then turned to the second one, Luc, whom she dug out of the car, still half-asleep from the ride. She hugged him to her just as she had petted the older boy, then she smoothed his hair with the flat of her hand and put a white shirt on him that seemed to hurt his eyes. Benoît had always seen her like this with her children: adorably, almost annoy-

ingly, loving. He pitied them for these effusive outbursts, which had been his joy and terror when he was small and she used to come into bed with him to make him promise, without moving or opening his eyes, to love her forever and enough to run away from home with her one day. She must think her role as a mother too serious for such silliness — she performed it like a rite. Far too nice to bring them up, she let them grow up, showering them with gifts, new clothes, and ceremonious kisses. She had turned out two timorous kids who were loved for their good looks and listlessness. They made little noise and few demands for attention. Benoît hardly knew them, Louise having moved to the south with Vincent's family when she was expecting the second one; he had taught them to ride a bike and taken them to eat ice cream, but there was scant satisfaction to be gained from entertaining them.

Benoît pulled yesterday's clothes over his unwashed body; the discomfort was at once pleasant and depressing. Downstairs, his mother was shouting to Louise to make up the beds, and wail followed wail from the children in the garden. As he brought his head through his shirt, Benoît spotted Vincent coming back along the road. He was tall and a bit round-shouldered, and he walked with a shrugging movement that jolted his shock of dark hair. He must have gone to have a beer or buy cigarettes. Benoît knew he was annoyed at having to come here, as though vexed with them for the lack of satisfaction his marriage to the prettiest girl at school had brought him. All that remained of his brief and probably fortuitous love life was the feeling

that he had let himself be had. Despite his taciturn nature and fits of anger, Louise had stayed even-tempered toward him. She would most likely have been surprised if anyone had asked her if she loved him.

Benoît heard Louise dragging her travel bag from stair to stair. The sun was spreading over his unmade bed and the room was full of light; when Louise came in she looked as blond as a Barbie to him. She pressed her cheek to his—Benoît guessed she had her eyes closed—then sat down on the edge of the bed, tugging unconsciously at the sheets and laughing at the chaos. Electricity from the bedcovers made her hair stand out in spikes about her shoulders. She was smiling, her chin in the crook of her hands and her elbows planted on her thighs, as elegantly tangled as a fawn. Benoît caught the fruity waft of her chewing gum; her face, so close to his, was as smooth as a fruit. After making him swear not to tell anyone, she half lay down on the bed and took out of her tiny skirt pocket a note folded in eight. Each time she came she gave him one or two hundred francs stolen from Vincent's mother; it was her way of sharing what she believed to be the happiness of her marriage: a big, new house with televisions in the bedrooms and one whole floor for the use of the young couple. Louise had kept Benoît's hand in hers; the note seemed to wilt between their two palms. She described how she had argued with Vincent before leaving and showed the little scratch he had given her under her ear by pulling her hair. There was no bitterness in what she said; Lou-

ise made no particular demands of love and readily put up with the exasperations of conjugal life. Benoît did not know how to reply, in thrall to the seductive sound of her slow voice. She was silent, her pale eyes devotedly searching the face of this seventeen-year-old brother whom she thought handsome and kind; the sun gave her eyes the complicated depth of glass marbles. Benoît wanted her to stay a bit longer, but the children were already starting to fret that she was out of sight. So Louise stood up, pulling at her miniskirt. Her lips were dark red under the lipstick, now almost completely chewed off; she put them against his, wrinkling her nose, then opened the door to the children whom she gathered about her with the grace of a diva. The blunt cut of their bangs gave them a curious expression of alarm. They were fond of their uncle but seemed to know him less with every visit and now stood sulkily against their mother's long thighs, waiting till they could run to their room.

When he went down, Benoît found his mother busy tidying up the shoes the children had thrown about the hallway. She had put on a tight, rather short dress that was kind to her plumpness, and had mussed up her dyed hair. For all she had made herself look nice, there was no hiding her irritability, which Benoît thought uncalled-for. Seeing him standing at the foot of the stairs, watching Louise soap the children's hands, his mother asked him to go and set the table. They ate in the garden, a simple square of artificial lawn the same width as the house, spreading

right up to the living room door and bordered by a fence of old planks with morning glories clinging to it. The view beyond stopped a quarter of a mile away at the edge of the deciduous wood that hid the river, at the far end of an old beetroot field strewn with couch grass and crumpled litter from the road. Louise explained to the children that that was where she used to bury her hamsters when she was little, and Vincent retorted that it was indeed a good place for corpses. His irony made her blush and smile sweetly, and the conversation went no further. The wash hanging between two posts wafted scented shadows across the table. Louise had brought an over-sweet cake, which the journey had wrecked and which was attracting tiny flies in the fine weather. Luc and Fabien did not want any; they both wore the bizarrely contrite expression of scolded little boys. They squirmed in their chairs, harassed by the raw light that glinted on the little clumps of catnip sprouting between the cracks in the empty lot. This house, with its tawdry outlook, aroused in them the fearful disgust of children accustomed to the beauty of newness. Louise rumbled their hair and glanced up at her mother, hoping to raise a smile at their childishness, which she herself looked on favorably. She thought they had gone even blonder, but as no one answered her remark, she began to clear the table. Her mother followed her inside, where she must have questioned her about what was going wrong with Vincent, for Louise was a bit red when she came back. She had brought out the sunscreen and now smeared it over the grimacing faces of the two children. Her inten-

tion was to go and sunbathe in the field by the gravel pit; Vincent reacted to the idea as though it offended him and left the table, taking his glass. Louise shot Benoît a smile over Fabien's shoulder. Her indulgence toward Vincent was angelic. She was as gentle as she was slow to rile; she never seemed upset when he got cross with her.

They left at around two. Vincent did not go with them—he claimed he had calls to make and people to see in town—and Benoît was not sorry to escape the condescension their amusements caused him. The children had brought their bikes, which ground over the road in the ruts of dried mud. The gravel pit had been out of use for more than a year now. Yellow broom flower bellied out through the mesh of rusty wire fencing, and a whole section of the leveled area where the trucks used to turn had collapsed among thistles and giant hogweed. A kind of cableway for carrying the gravel over the river formed a supple, fluid line over the perfume-drenched relics. Louise noted the changes without surprise. She had sat down on a rusty girder to re-tie Fabien's laces. Behind her the quarry, like a great white bite out of the hillside, returned the echo of her patient chatter; Benoît threw a stick into it, and it ricocheted lengthily amidst a panic of birds and lizards. The sun-warmed stones gave off a chalky powder that caught in their throats and covered the children in dust. Their hands were chafed from the rubber on the handlebars and they did not understand what they were doing here. Louise blew on their reddened palms and told them she had

a hideout way up there near the woods where they could play, and Benoît had to promise to carry the bikes before they would make up their minds to scramble after her along the path by the gravel pit. She walked with astonishing speed in her thick-soled sandals, pulling the children along, one on either side; they made her look like a paper airplane held by its wings.

The area of field at the edge of the void was already half in the shadow of the trees. Louise let go of the children's hands and they stood looking suspiciously at the path they had come along. They always balked at enjoying an outing. Louise stroked the backs of their necks and smiled at Benoît to soothe his impatience with them. The woods gave off a smell of damp moss that made her bare shoulders shake. She seemed to consider a moment before deciding that they would be fine here. The cableway pylon stuck up out of the fields like a stake stabbing into the hill. Fabien whined that it was too high and he was scared, while his brother, seated in the sun on the brow of the gravel pit, took stock of its dizzying height and clamored for cookies. They still could not see what there was to do in this uncomfortable place, but the presence of Benoît, whom they were gradually getting used to again, kept them in suspense.

Louise flattened the grass down with the bath towels and hesitated a moment before getting undressed. Benoît watched her knot her bikini under her T-shirt. She was modest; he remembered having seen her pubic hair only once—at the time, this dark blond tuft had caused him a

vague feeling of unease — and later she had let him glimpse the nipples of her swollen breasts when she was pregnant; they were a purplish brown and spread like a splash of oil. They had been strange times, when their daily existence was disrupted by Louise's obstinate happiness. While the two families sought a solution to her refusal to abort, she would spend hours closeted in her brother's room telling him about the transformations that were going on in her. He was then only nine, and he saw Louise as a fallen woman and a sorceress. His mother was irascible, probably believing she could put an end to her daughter's illusions through severity. She had recently separated from her husband, and this marriage seemed even more of a mess to her. Benoît later learned that she had called Louise a fool on the way out of church when she saw her in her doll's dress, hanging on the kiss of a seventeen-year-old husband who had not wanted any part of what he was doing.

They had been there for over an hour. Louise was dozing with her face under an open magazine, the pages humming in the wind. The shadow from the woods had caught up with her, obliging her to pull a white cotton sweater over her bikini. She had not managed to stand up to the children, who had wanted to eat the cookies intended for four o'clock, and the crumpled wrappers rolled down the field to the river. She had listened to them whining that they were bored, sympathetic but also totally powerless to amuse them, then she had shut her eyes, asking them in an innocent voice that was supposed to be commanding