

I

Emerald green against the blue night. INTERIOR BELTWAY CLEAR EXTERIOR BELTWAY CLEAR. Emerald, you love that name, who knows why. Because of Esmeralda, the first girl who turned you on, under the features, or rather the curves, of Gina Lollobrigida? Or maybe because as a child you spent summers on the Emerald Coast? No windsurfing, no outboards, nothing on the water, the sea empty like it is in paintings. You had to watch out for drifting mines; the tide still brought them in, big balls of death, patient, rusty. Just waiting. The end of the war was so recent. You were born exactly halfway between the Mother of Defeats and Dien Bien Phu. Just your luck. The sadness of history, you sucked it in with your mother's milk. She used to take you and your brother to see the sunset from a cliff close to the house. Seated on the bench, you'd wait. It's not the sun that's going down, she explained, but the earth turning, toppling, pushing itself into the night. On the other side of the world, in Asia, in Indochina, as we used to say, day was breaking. Hard to believe. You hoped to see the green flash, but you never did. You would go home silently, confused and disappointed. You like the name of the night, also *navire* night,

noche triste, notte continua. In German, you won't say it. Glistening highway, black with golden flecks—BOBIGNY LILLE BRUXELLES PORTE DE BAGNOLET—black towers whose tops are lost in the fog—PORTE DE MONTREUIL HYPERMARCHÉ AUCHAN green and red, NOVOTEL blue 550 METERS TO NATIONAL 302 CAMPANILE green SANT-MACLOU PEUGEOT PARIS NORD. First days of the twenty-first century. You lived up on the right over there in the dark night, at the top of the street . . . what street was it? How many years ago? The night of time . . . with Judith. Maybe it's too much to say, "living there." You slept there. How long ago? Let's see . . . maybe thirty years. Could that be? The Internet didn't exist, not even computers. No beltways, no high-speed trains, no laptops, no cable, no Walkmans, not even answering machines, can you imagine? The Baltard Pavilions in Les Halles were still spreading their umbrellas over Paris's stomach, the TV was in black and white, just one channel or maybe two, you can't remember, so long ago, so deeply buried in the night of time . . . Supermarkets were a novelty, the Socialist Party a tiny group, the Communist Party—we used to say, "the Party"—got 20 percent of the vote . . . Judith, did she still have the long hair you loved? Soft fur rolled up on one side of a thin neck, which side? Sliding forward over her breasts. Like a small silky animal perched on her shoulder. A joyful, small, silky animal. Didn't she used to take a lock and put it in her mouth? Now she has short hair, hedgehog style. You were living in the house of an anemic blond guy, or rather his mother's. She sold needles and thread, a notions seller, a trade that's pretty much disappeared. Blondie lived with his mother and you with them; they were friends of The Cause, she made you dinner, later you or Judith did the dishes, well, not always but often, then you unfolded the cot in the "living room," as we said at the time. There must have been a sideboard with some porcelain, a TV on a little table, President Pomp on the screen, dark red-velvet double curtains, floral carpets, a silk doily on the table, you get the picture, it was before Habitat-Ikea. Boy, you must have pissed those people off . . . Being a friend of The Cause was no picnic. It must be said that being

part of The Cause wasn't that easy either. A water pipe ran through the cellar: that stream from Ménilmontant most likely, which turns into the sewer through which Jean Valjean fled. Judith's now selling apartments. She used to dream of being Rosa Luxemburg or Tamara Bunke, known as Tania, that young woman killed in Bolivia alongside Che, or even Tina Modotti, photographer, secret agent, lover — that beauty that a taxi carried off dead into the night of Mexico City. In short, she used to dream of an adventurous life. LA GRANDE PORTE red CARREFOUR blue 700 METERS TO NATIONAL 34 PORTE DE VINCENNES PORTE DORÉE DÉCATHLON blue ÉTAP' HOTEL green 245 FRANCS LA NUIT HOTEL FORMULE I STATION SERVICE 700 METERS. Shit! All of a sudden, a big truck swerves without warning, your heart in your mouth, you jerk the car to the left; luckily the breaks aren't locked, just slipping a bit. Asshole! Thirteen's daughter didn't blink, she's got nerve. From her father. And you still got your reflexes. Reflexes, they come from the time you were driving on icy roads in a stolen Mercedes, with a small sheet-metal rectangle cut out behind the rear armrest so you could talk to the prisoner in the trunk, a politician who had been a collaborator, what was his name, that bastard? You think it was a cardinal's name. You had ripped off the car at the Vesoul station; it was the only time you went to Vesoul, except in the Jacques Brel song. The water was frozen in the Vesoul gutters. The departmental roads were like ice rinks, to plan the job you had one car connected to the other by makeshift radios. You wore vests and incredible velvet hats to look like notaries or country doctors, at least you thought you looked like that. Twenty-year-old notaries! You could probably get away with that now, only the desire's gone. That's it, "now": gray hair, a middle-class look, and the desire no longer there? But then, all around you, snowy expanses, ruffled by the wind, clumps of black woods, with buzzards perched on the boundary markers; they took off painfully when we passed. The freezing cows seemed to really take you for notaries; they looked at you with no emotion. Old-fashioned cows, the kind they had thirty years ago, you tell Thirteen's daughter. They were dinner a

long time ago. Never heard about mad cow disease. That's all people care about today: you've noticed that? Safe eating. Precaution Principle. Death prowls at the edge of the plate. Assholes. Do you think that's what the "present" means: the fear of dying from eating? This ambience of the "Splendid Spud," which is what the draftees used to call the Haute-Saône, reminded you of a bizarre Western, *The Great Silence*: Trintignant, the good guy, the upholder of the law, silent because bad guys cut his throat when he was a kid, gets himself shot to pieces at the end, in the snow. A little like Brando at the end of *Viva Zapata!*. The Revolution always gets killed at the end. Rosa Luxemburg gunned down in the snow, on the edge of the canal where they threw her body. Che executed at la Higuera, laid out naked, hairy, glassy eyed, like he was being readied for dissection, his hands cut off, the death mask that tears the skin from his face. Tamara-Tania, riddled with bullets at the Vado del Yeso ford, her body drifting in the Rio Grande. Your head was stuffed with these tragic images. Making the Revolution was not so much preparing to take power as learning to die. It seems worth it when you're very young. At the time you were no longer going to the movies; the Revolution couldn't waste its time with those tricks and jokes, but you were living like you were in a film, a low-budget cops-and-robbers. You would have liked to see Trintignant in the role of you playing your role. In the end, you never did manage to holler anything through the prompter's hole at that collaborator-pol with the bishop's name, because that gallows bird had disappeared by the time you were ready to nab him; it often happened like that.

VINCENNES DORÉE SERVICE STATION JOHNNY WALKER KEEP WALKING BELTWAY CLEAR bridges yellow lights Paris on the right under a somber lilac sky emerald signs in front METZ NANCY PORTE DE BERCY DISNEYLAND 32 KM the tires tear up the night's silky golden black dress A4-A86 CLEAR, A4-A104 CLEAR. Everything is clear, even you, red MR BRICOLAGE. Two in the morning. BERCY 2 green CARREFOUR blue BERCY EXPO red. On the right the great phosphorescent rod that is the

Ministry of Finances 300 METERS TO NATIONAL 19 the sky lightens as we near the Seine. The rivers spread this sort of phosphorescence in the darkness of the sky. When you had gone to My Tho you had made out the Mekong from this glow in the clouds. You didn't go down there, to the Cochinchina Delta, for Marguerite Duras, not for a moment; you wanted to see the place from where the lieutenant left one morning, the year after your birth, to get killed in an inlet, what the Viets call a "*rach*," of the Mekong. The lieutenant was your father. You see Marie, you say to Thirteen's daughter as you pass by the Gare de Lyon's shiny iron beams, the orange and blue-gray train cars soaked with dew, you see, I don't know any more about my father than you do about yours. If I went there, it was because only these distant places could tell me something, maybe— not teach me anything, no, it wasn't that; it was to talk to me, the way rivers and woods, intense heat, the lazy flights of butterflies, cockroaches and the damn snakes, the dog days at noon, speak, those unchanging witnesses. All the other voices had been silenced: dead. That's often the way: you really only want to hear about stuff when the voices that could tell you something are stilled. For example, in this decrepit photo there's a woman's face, next to your father on the edge of a river; you can't tell whether the river is from around here or over there. Nobody can tell you anymore, and this face, even if it's nothing special, will have the dignity of the forever silent. Me, I'm still alive, so you're lucky, you tell Thirteen's daughter. So use it. In the south suburb of Saigon that's now called Ho Chi Minh City, you had gotten on a sampan that went up and down the delta. The boat's deck was cluttered with bikes and big wicker baskets; the passengers in the steerage were peasants returning from selling their vegetables in the markets at Ben Thanh and Cho Lon, they looked at you with frank curiosity and without much sympathy. In a birdcage was a monkey that the hicks were having fun annoying. The wind was making the tarps sheltering the deck snap, the sky foamed in gray and white above a narrow strip of land gnawed by the water. At a turn in the river, beyond the mangroves, beyond the roofs of sheet metal or

palm, you had glimpsed the buildings of Ho Chi Minh City topped with red flags and advertisements for Jap, Korean, and American brands, DAEWOO HONDA HITACHI SUZUKI CANON IBM HEWLETT-PACKARD TOSHIBA, the same as here along the beltway, or anywhere else in the world. Ho Chi Minh City, of all the cities you had seen, was perhaps the one where the obsession with money was most nakedly apparent. Later, you passed through the plain of Joncs: aquatic villages, looking like baskets of bamboo, thatch, reed, teeming with life, geese, ducks, and black pigs splashing about under the pilings, green fluorescent rice fields, green like beetle wings, or a peacock's tail, in the middle of which there would sometimes be a white tomb. Iron bridges guarded by blockhouses dating from the Americans, or even from the Phap, the French. Swarming along the waterways were potbellied sampans whose prows sported an appeasing eye, whose sides were riddled with portholes sprouting toothless, louse-ridden heads, slow barges whose name you don't know, propeller shafts fiddling with the water, barges groaning under piles of plants whose damn name you, pathetic intellectual, didn't know, and then some sort of gondolas loaded with the same plants, radiant green and mauve in the descending night, and on the poop deck, the jerky motion of women in Tokinese hats glided the boats smoothly along, thrusting forward, in a movement rather like a lunging fencer, pushing forth the oar, then hauling it back to the point where it floats in the wake, their arms bending in rhythm with it, then starting again (the eternal story of Asia! What a stereotype!), and so on.

300 METERS CRÉTEIL MARNE-LA-VALLÉE METZ NANCY QUAI D'IVRY PORTE D'IVRY we should have got off here, but you missed the exit, already too carried away by the inertia of the story, should we continue? you asked Thirteen's daughter. Unless you're in a rush to get home? No. Me, I'm fine. A little drunk, but not much. So we continue. We are going to turn this story over and over, like a stone in a slingshot so that it would travel far. On the right, the spangled plains of light from

the Bibliothèque Nationale de France look like launching pads. To the left, the great incinerator's chimneys spit out exhaust from the space shuttle. Feel like a little orbital tour? OK? No sooner said than done. Five, four, three, two, one, blast off! Zoooom! A Molotov cocktail. You step on it, you're flying above the tracks of the Gare d'Austerlitz, the turbine pumps purr like cats, ignition of the second stage; you let loose the booster rockets, fantastic crackle, normal trajectory, beltway clear; you climb into the black velvet sky, you overcome the attraction from the big globe on the right: below the world of sleepyheads. Now you're an angel, an old angel at the commands of the vessel, Remember, you have things to do, Thirteen's daughter and you, experiments on memory in a state of weightlessness. The earth spreads out below and behind you NANTES BORDEAUX ORLY RUNGIS ÉVRY LYON CASINO red CASTORAMA blue HARDWARE DECORATION VOLVO blue JACK DANIELS (Hi there, Jack!) PORTE DE GENTILLY HOTEL IBIS ÉTAP' HOTEL NOVOTEL blue, we deploy the solar panels, golden petals in the night, already the Porte d'Orléans is coming into view, and the Montrouge bell tower planted in the rind of the red sky. You remember a scene that took you a long time to laugh about. Years in fact.

Here's the story: you're seated in the entrance of an apartment a friend loaned you in one of those cheapo brick buildings at the Porte d'Orléans . . . maybe 1967? You're seated at a table writing a tract. It may well become the longest tract in the history of agitprop because: to your left the door leading to the bedroom is open. What time can it be? One, two in the morning? Back then, night didn't exist; the night for sleeping was a bourgeois invention (you still think that). Night was for meetings (the day too: incredible how much time you spent in discussions. You had to "dissect the sparrows," according to the expression of the Great Helmsman — an elegant way of saying "fuck yourself with your own folderol"). Morning would find you dozing on crummy mats, foam mattresses, in sleeping bags, surrounded by coffee cups crammed with cigarette butts. Old, cold Nescafé and cigarette juice — one of

the most disgusting memories of that era. No doubt there was a “meet” that night at the Porte d’Orléans; anyway, there you are, writing a tract. A tract, Internet users (“a tract,” you explain to Thirteen’s daughter), here’s how it was done: somebody types on a sort of onion skin called a stencil. If you use the machine without a ribbon, it makes holes in the stencil, OK? Then you put it on the ink cylinder of a Roneo (*tech.*: a copying instrument, first half of the twentieth century), and turn the handle—on some luxury models, you just pushed the switch; the tracts would glide along and pile up, sticky with ink, black with vitriolic words, ready for the “distrib” at that awful moment when workers slouch off to work under a dawning sky. A tract can’t be more than double sided, and even a single side is much too long because at that lousy hour when workers slouch off to work in the windy early morning, eyes still black with sleep, nauseous, acid stomach, the hour for a black coffee at the bar, a stinking little coffee with some bubbles on top that you could easily mistake for detergent, as dead leaves swirl around in the street (even in the spring leaves are dead when you head off to work), the hour when the street lamps, as well as the illuminated ads on buildings flicker; at that particular moment, my friend, nobody reads. You blink again, the lighting is crummy, you turn off the lights, no desire to rouse yourself, maybe just lights out once and for all, a wretched coffee chased with a shot of calvados in those tiny trumpet-shaped glasses at dawn. “Protecting the mercenaries of American imperialism,” you wrote, “the fascist cops raised a big stone, only to let it fall on their feet.” Although, all in all, you are partisan of a purely national style, a Chinese expression, here and there, can do the trick. Pick up a big stone to let it fall on your feet; it’s a good joke from the Great Helmsman. In the “propaganda organs” of The Cause, there are admirers of the vulgar “Père Duchesne” style, but you’re not crazy about this supposedly common-man language. Of course, you could write “son-of-a-bitch cops, we’ll hang you by your balls.” That might please the powers that be, but, no, that gets on your nerves. You prefer a certain decorum. You are a sort of Malherbe of revolutionary

poetry, a potential social traitor, so to speak. You are not against the heavy irony of Marx the pamphleteer. Even the bourgeois can read that, especially the bourgeois, the university types; in a word, it makes a serious impression, reassuring. Aragon the patriot, *French Diana* and all that, now there's somebody who, according to you, creates popular literature. "I will never forget the lilacs and the roses," "Death does not dazzle the eyes of the partisans": Wow! That makes you cry, flatters your pathetic side . . . a real sentimental fool . . . While "son-of-a-bitch cops," . . . no, forget it. "Our task," stated the resolution (adopted unanimously!) at the last conference of the Vietnam Committee, "is to speak of the Vietnam people's just struggle in the language of the broad French masses." Fine, but what language do they speak, these "broad masses?" And why does one say "broad"? First of all, it's an adjective that the masses, as for them, use to qualify highways and pant legs. Troubling questions, subject to various opinions. "While protecting the so-called embassy of the South Vietnamese puppets, the coppers . . ." Stop, nobody says "coppers" anymore. "Flat-foot," then? No, too slangy, almost friendly. Pimp's parlance. The "fuzz." Nope. Maybe in a Bourvil film. The real French comic. (Why not "the law," while you're at it?). "The cops?" Boring, but good enough. The cops. "The cops have clearly demonstrated they're merely an auxiliary militia . . ." "Clearly," there's an adverb you like. Everything has to be clear. All the time. Otherwise, how can you avoid dying from stress? Gideon is the master of clarity; he gets his clarifying power from the Great Helmsman. Who's Gideon, Thirteen's daughter wants to know. Wait a minute, I'm getting there. Our Great Leader. "The cops have clearly demonstrated they are merely an auxiliary militia of the American B-52s." Or even U.S. Maybe "Amerikkkans?" No. They won't get the reference. The B-52, you bring to Thirteen's daughter's attention, is one of the rare things that has not changed, not much anyway. It comes right from the era I've been telling you about today. The B-52 and Johnny Hallday, so to speak. Impressively long-lasting, from the Golf Drouot theater, where Johnny started out, to his triumphs at the Zenith and

the Stade de France, from *Doctor Strangelove* to Desert Storm. They've both been done over, been tightened up a bit, but all in all they're the same, rustproof: the same rock star, the same planes carpeting the Vietnamese jungles with their bombs and layering the greenery with their defoliants. The right stuff. The stencils, the Roneos, the broad masses, the Red East, the Great Helmsman — all gone, the world turns and everything disappears: not the B-52, you tell Thirteen's daughter. "The cops have clearly demonstrated that they are merely the auxiliary militia of the American B-52s. But they are only paper tigers, and the partisans will give back as good as they get." No, cross that out. "Will give back as good as they get" sounds farcical. "Will pay them back a hundred times over the interest from their exactions." Nope. "Exactions," too complicated. Intellectual petit-bourgeois language. And then, "interest," not a great image. "The partisans . . ." well . . . While you're writing that . . . it's already tough . . . while you're trying to write that, you get distracted, really terribly distracted, by what you see on the left, in the bedroom doorframe.

FLAT TV PHILIPS ROUEN PORTE DE CHATILLON PORTE DE MONTROUGE
ITINERIS 2 A.M., TEMPERATURE 12, all's well on board, the instruments glow softly, the earth slides by, from one moment to another, you are waiting to see sidereal dawn's electric arc burst forth from behind the mighty sphere in the night. Quietly, on the radio, lalala lalala lalala la . . . do-mi-la do-la-sol si-sol-la mi . . . : *The Appassionata*. At the time, music was also counterrevolutionary. Several years after the notions saleslady and her son's apartment, you rented — naturally under an assumed name — a little dump near the Buttes-Chaumont. There was a sort of cot that folded up against the wall, and a sideboard with, incredibly enough, what we used to call a "record player" on it. Judith had gotten from her father, a Russian Jew whom the ups and downs of the century had turned into an import-exporter in France, two or three records, including that sonata played by Richter. What a wonderful moment! When you would be listening to it, in the evening, after a day

of tough, subversive work, you felt like you were yielding to a guilty pleasure. If the Great Leader had only gotten wind of that! He would not have liked it, for sure. Do-mi-la do-la-sol si-sol-la mi . . . Lalala lalala lalala la. HOTEL MERCURE FORD ARISTON ÉLECTROMÉNAGER PARIS EXPO BIOMER THÉRAPIE SOFITEL SHARP PORTE DE SÈVRES SECURITAS the black star on your right streaked with lightning bolts of neon, with bursts of red, green, white, sometimes a lighted window watches over the night. This enormous swirling darkness consists of piles of History, History that collapses under its own weight, you tell Thirteen's daughter; the city is a ball of string that knots and tightens the threads that are lives past and present, lived and dreamed; somewhere in this inescapable muck is my story, as well as Thirteen's, and all the others whose lives were entangled with ours: Gideon, Judith, Chloé, Angelo, Fichouai-called-Julot, Jean d'Audincourt, I sense them deep in the darkness, Juju, Amédée, Roger the Belgian, Momo whom we called the Lock-Eater, Hairy Reureu, a guy known as The Shits, another called Pompabière, Klammer, the saints and the stool pigeons, the brawlers and the gutless. Also greater, more tragic stories we were part of in our dreams, Saint-Just at the guillotine, the wall of the Communards in Père Lachaise, the February barricades and the June ones, Colonel Fabien shooting the German officer in the Barbès subway stop, Aragon's *Affiche rouge*, all these stories jumbled together in a gigantic tangled line, some glorious and rough, others fragile, but the weaker ones drawing from the former a naive strength. All this muddled, mixed-up past, piled up in the shape of a city; you just have to take the right string and pull it gently to unwind the past, that's what you say while signs flow by in this garrulous night AQUABOULEVARD NANTES BORDEAUX BELTWAY CLEAR BELTWAY CLEAR QUAI D'ISSY PONT DU GARIGILANO 200 METERS, the Garigliano Bridge, who remembers what Garigliano refers to? The lieutenant was in that bloody Italian stream in 1944. A young man driven by a nameless, wordless revolt to run away from his middle-class, provincial family to equatorial Africa, it was called the "colonies" then. Listen, you new generation of the self-