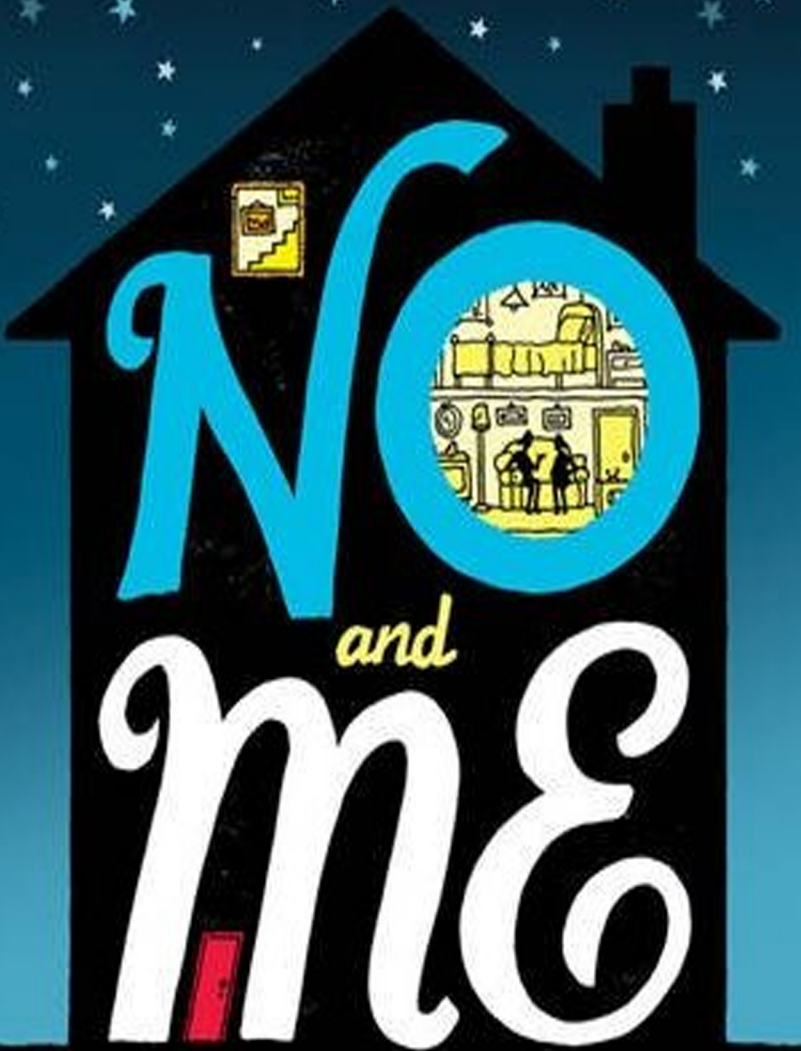
Delphine de Vigan



NO and ME

Two girls, three friends.
One family falling apart

No and Me

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Delphine de Vigan

Translated from the French
by George Miller

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For Iona and Arthur

– I told you, I was looking at the sea,
I was hidden in the rocks
and I was looking at the sea.

J.M.G. Le Clézio, *Lullaby*

'Miss Bertignac, I don't see your name on the list of presentations.'

Mr Marin is looking at me from a distance with one eyebrow raised, his hands on his desk. I'd reckoned without his long-range radar. I'd been hoping to get away with it, but I'm caught red-handed. Twenty-five pairs of eyes turn round, waiting for my answer. 'Brains' has been caught out. Axelle Vernoux and Léa Germain stifle laughter behind their hands, and a dozen bracelets jingle in delight on their wrists. If only I could disappear a hundred miles under the earth, right down to the lithosphere, that would be convenient. I loathe presentations. I loathe talking in front of the class. I feel like a huge crack has opened beneath my feet, but nothing's moved, everything is stuck in slow motion, nothing's falling in. I wish I could faint right here and now. Just be struck down. Drop dead. There I'd lie, spreadeagled in my Converse Allstars,

and Mr Marin would take his chalk and write on the blackboard: 'Here lies Lou Bertignac, top of the class, but silent and a loner'.

'. . . I was going to put my name down.'

'Good. What's your topic?'

'The homeless.'

'That's rather general. Can you be a bit more specific?'

Lucas is smiling at me. His eyes are huge. I could drown in them, or disappear, or let the silence swallow up Mr Marin and the whole class. I could take my Eastpak and leave without a word, the way Lucas does. I could apologise and say that I haven't a clue, I just said the first thing that came into my head. I'll go and see Mr Marin at the end of the lesson and explain that I can't do it, a presentation in front of the whole class is simply beyond me. I'm sorry, but I'll get a doctor's note if I have to: 'constitutionally unfit for any sort of presentation', all stamped and everything, and I'll be let off. But Lucas is looking at me, and I can tell that he's waiting for me to get myself out of this, that he's rooting for me, he's thinking that a girl like me can't make a fool of herself in front of twenty-five students. He's got his fist clenched. Any higher and he'd be brandishing it in the air, like football supporters encouraging their team. But suddenly the silence feels heavy, like we're in church.

'I'm going to follow the journey of a homeless girl, her

life, erm . . . her story. I mean . . . how she ended up on the streets.'

A buzz goes through the rows. There's whispering.

'Very good. That's an excellent subject. Figures show that every year more and more women run away, and at a younger and younger age. What documentary sources are you planning to use, Miss Bertignac?'

I've nothing to lose. Or else so much that you couldn't count it on the fingers of one hand, or even ten, there is so much.

'Erm . . . interviews. I'm going to interview a young homeless woman. I met her yesterday and she's agreed.'

Thoughtful silence.

On a pink sheet of paper, Mr Marin notes my name and the subject of my presentation. 'I'll put you down for 10th December. That will give you time to do some background research.' He goes over the basic rules: don't take more than an hour, provide a socio-economic analysis, give examples . . . His voice tails off. Lucas's hand unclenches. I've got transparent wings, I'm flying above the tables. I close my eyes, I am a tiny speck of dust, an invisible particle, weightless as a sigh. The bell rings. Mr Marin dismisses us, and as I'm putting away my things and getting my jacket on, he calls me over.

'Miss Bertignac, a word, if I may.'

There goes my break. He's done this to me before – a word by his reckoning equals a thousand for the rest of

us. The others are hanging back, keen to hear. I wait and look down at my feet. My lace is undone as usual. How the hell can I have an IQ of 160 and not be able to tie my shoelaces?

'You should be careful. With your interviews, I mean. Don't meet unsuitable people. Perhaps your mother or father should go along with you.'

'Don't worry. It's all sorted.'

My mother hasn't been out of the flat in years and my father cries secretly in the bathroom. That's what I should have told him.

Then, with a single stroke of his pen, Mr Marin would have crossed me off his list.

I often go to Austerlitz railway station on Tuesdays or Fridays, when I get out of school early. I go to watch the trains leaving. There is so much emotion. I really like that, watching people's emotions. That's why I never miss football matches on TV. I love it when they kiss after they score, and run around with their arms in the air and hug each other. I also like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* You should see the girls when they get the answer right. They throw their heads back and scream and everything, their eyes brimming with tears. In railway stations, though, it's different – you've got to work out what people are feeling from their expressions, from their gestures and movements. There are lovers who're about to part, grannies going home, ladies with big coats who are leaving men with upturned collars, or vice versa. I watch these people who are leaving, without knowing where they're going, or why or for how long,

saying goodbye through the window, with a little wave, or trying to shout even when they can't be heard any more. If you're lucky you get to see a proper separation, I mean one that's going to last a long time, or seems like it will (which comes to the same thing). Then the emotion is really heavy, like the air's thicker, as if they're alone, with no one else around. It's the same with arrivals. I pick a spot at the end of the platform and watch people waiting, their faces all tense and impatient, their eyes scanning the platform, and then suddenly they're smiling, their arms go up, hands waving, and along the platform they go and into each other's arms. That's what I like best – when they really show their feelings.

So that's why I was in Austerlitz station. I was waiting for the 16.44 from Clermont-Ferrand. That's my favourite, because you get all sorts of people on it – young, old, well-dressed, fat, thin, scruffy. The lot. I was concentrating so hard that it took me a while to realise that someone was tapping me on the shoulder. A mammoth could trample over my feet at times like these and I wouldn't even notice. I turned round.

'You got a smoke?'

She was wearing dirty khaki trousers, an old jacket with holes in the elbows and a Benetton scarf like the one my mother's got at the bottom of the wardrobe as a souvenir of her youth.

'No, sorry. I don't smoke. I've got some gum, though.'

She made a face, then held out her hand, and I gave her the packet, which she stuck in her bag.

'Hi, I'm No. What's your name?'

'No?'

'Yes.'

'I'm Lou . . . Lou Bertignac.' (Usually that gets a bit of a reaction, because people think I'm related to Louis Bertignac, the famous singer, maybe his daughter. Once, when I was at junior school, I pretended that I was, but things got complicated, because people asked for details and autographs. I ended up admitting I'd made it up.)

She didn't seem impressed. I reckoned that maybe she wasn't into that kind of music. She went up to a man who was standing reading his paper nearby. He rolled his eyes and sighed, but he took a cigarette from his packet, which she took without looking at him and then came back over.

'I've seen you here a few times before. What are you doing?'

'Watching people.'

'Isn't there anyone to watch at home?'

'Yes, but that's different.'

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen.'

'You got a couple of euros? I've not had anything to eat since last night.'

I fished in the pocket of my jeans. I had a few coins left and I gave them to her without looking at them. She counted them before she closed her hand.

'What class you in?'

'Year Eleven.'

'That's unusual for someone your age.'

'Erm, yes. I moved up two years.'

'How come?'

'I skipped two classes.'

'Yeah, I worked that out. But how come you skipped two classes, Lou?'

I thought she was talking to me in a strange way. I wondered if she was making fun of me, but she looked very serious and also very worried.

'I dunno. I learned to read in nursery school, so I didn't go into reception. And then I skipped year four. I was getting so bored I'd twist my hair round my finger and tug on it all day. So after a few weeks I had a bald patch. By the time I had three of them, they moved me up a class.'

I wanted to ask her some questions, but I was too shy. She smoked her cigarette and looked me up and down, as if she was trying to find something else I could give her. There was a silence (or at least we were silent – there was still the deafening recorded voice of the tannoy), so I felt obliged to add that it was better now.

'What, your hair or the boredom?'

'Well . . . both.'

She laughed. And I saw that she had a tooth missing. It only took a split second to find the right word: a premolar.

All my life I've felt on the outside wherever I am – out of the picture, the conversation, at one remove, as though I were the only one able to hear the sounds or words that others can't, and deaf to the words that they hear. As if I'm outside the frame, on the other side of a huge, invisible window.

But yesterday, when I was there with No, you could have drawn a circle round us, a circle that didn't exclude me, which enclosed us and for a few minutes protected us from the world.

I couldn't stay; my father was expecting me. I didn't know how to say goodbye, whether I should call her 'madame' or 'mademoiselle' or if I should just call her No since I knew her first name. I solved the problem by simply saying 'bye', and told myself that she wasn't the sort of person to get hung up about good manners or all the stuff that you're supposed to pay attention to. I turned to wave and she was still there, watching me go, and I felt bad because you could tell from her eyes, the blank way they looked, that there was no one expecting her, no home, no computer, maybe nowhere for her to go at all.

* * *

That evening at dinner I asked my mother how come young girls ended up on the streets, and she sighed and said that's how life was: unfair. This once I let it go, though I've known for ages that first answers usually just fob you off.

I thought about No's pale skin, her eyes that looked bigger because she was hungry, the colour of her hair, her pink scarf. I imagined a secret hidden beneath the three jackets she'd been wearing, a secret stuck in her heart like a thorn, something she's never told anyone. I wanted to be near her. With her. Later, in bed, I wished I'd asked her how old she was. That bothered me. She looked so young.

At the same time it seemed to me that she already knew all about life. Or maybe that she knew something frightening about life.

Lucas is sitting in the back row, his usual place. From my seat I can see his profile. He looks ready for a fight. I can see his open shirt, his baggy jeans, his bare feet in his trainers. He's leaning back in his chair, his arms folded, as if he's observing, like someone who's landed there by mistake because of a signalling error or some administrative mix-up. His bag beneath the table looks empty. I'm looking at him furtively, remembering how he was on the first day of term.

I didn't know anyone and I felt scared. I'd gone to sit at the back. Mr Marin was handing out forms and Lucas turned to me and smiled. The forms were green. The colour changed each year, but the boxes were always the same: surname, first name, parents' professions and then a ton of things to fill in that were nobody's business. Lucas didn't have a pen so I lent him one. I reached over as far as I could from the other side of the central aisle

between the desks.

'Mr Muller, I see that you've started the year with the right attitude. Did you leave your writing equipment on the beach?'

Lucas didn't reply. He glanced over at me. I was afraid for him. But Mr Marin began giving out our timetables. When I got to the 'brothers and sisters' box on my form I wrote out 'zero' in full.

Using a number to express the absence of something isn't self-evident. I read that in my science encyclopedia. The absence of an object or a subject is better expressed by the phrase 'there are none' (or 'none any more'). Numerals are abstract and zero can't express absence or sorrow.

I looked up and saw that Lucas was looking at me. Because I'm left-handed and write with my wrist curled round, people are always surprised to see the complicated way I hold my pen. He was looking at me as though he was wondering how such a little scrap of a thing had landed up here. Mr Marin took the register and then started the first lesson. In the attentive silence I reckoned that Lucas Muller was the kind of person who isn't scared of life. He was still leaning back in his seat, not taking any notes.

Today I know the names of everybody in the class, all their habits, friendships and rivalries, Léa Germain's

laugh, Axelle's whisper, Lucas's never-ending legs sticking out in the aisle, Lucille's flashing pencil case, Corinne's long plait, Gauthier's glasses. In the class photo taken a few days after the start of term, I'm at the front, where they put the smallest ones. Above me, up at the top, is Lucas, looking sullen. If you allow that a single straight line can be drawn between any two points, one day I'm going to draw a line from him to me or me to him.

No is sitting on the ground, leaning against a post. She's put an empty tuna can in front of her feet with a few coins in it. I haven't checked the train times on the departure board. I've gone straight towards the platforms, to the place where she first spoke to me. I'm walking towards her decisively. As I get nearer, I'm suddenly afraid she won't remember me.

'Hi.'

'Why, it's Lou Bertignac.'

She says this in a snooty voice, the kind they use in comedy sketches or adverts to imitate people who're a bit snobby. I almost turn round, but I've repeated to myself what I'm planning to say enough times and I don't want to give up.

'I thought we could go for a hot chocolate . . . or something else . . . if you like. My treat.'

She jumps up, grabbing her canvas bag, and mutters

that she can't leave all her stuff there, pointing with her chin at a small suitcase on wheels and two plastic bags stuffed full of things. I pick up the two plastic bags, leaving the case to her, and hear her say thank you behind me. Her voice sounds less confident than the first time. I feel proud of having done this, to be leading the way, but I'm dead scared at the thought of sitting across a table from her. Near the ticket desks we come to a man in a big dark coat who signals to her. I turn round and see her respond in the same way, almost imperceptibly, with a little nod of her head. By way of explanation she tells me that stations are crawling with cops. I don't dare ask questions. I look around to see if I can spot any of them, but I can't, so I reckon that you need a lot of training to recognise them. As I'm about to go into the café by the departure board, she puts her hand on my shoulder to hold me back. She can't go there, she's been noticed. She wants to get out of the station. As we pass the newsagent's, she makes a detour to say hello to the woman on the till. I look at her from a distance – she's got a big chest, she's wearing lipstick and has flaming red hair. She gives No a Bounty and a packet of Petit Lu biscuits and No comes back. We cross the boulevard and go into one of those brasseries with big windows that all look the same. I just glimpse the name on the awning: the Relais d'Auvergne. Inside, it smells of sausage and cabbage. I search my internal database for what culinary speciality the smell could

be: stewed cabbage, stuffed cabbage, white cabbage, cabbages and kings, Cabbage Patch dolls. . . I'm always getting sidetracked like that and drifting off. It's a pain, but I can't help it.

We sit down. No keeps her hands under the table. I order a Coke, she asks for vodka. The waiter hesitates for a few seconds. Any second now he's going to ask her how old she is, but she meets his eye with an incredible insolence that I'm sure means 'don't give me any shit, dickhead'. It's as clear as on a big sign. Then he sees the holes in her jacket, the one she's wearing on top. He sees how dirty it is, and says OK and off he goes.

I often see what's going on in people's heads – it's like a treasure hunt, a black thread that you just have to slip between your fingers, a fragile one that leads to the Truth of the world, the one that'll never be revealed. My father once told me that it alarmed him, that I shouldn't play at that, that I ought to lower my eyes to keep the look of a child. But I can't close my eyes. They're wide open and sometimes I cover them with my hands so as not to see.

The waiter comes back and puts the glasses down in front of us. No grabs hers impatiently. And I see her black hands and the nails bitten till they've bled, the traces of scratches on her wrists. That makes me feel sick to the stomach.

We drink in silence. I try to find something to say, but nothing comes. I look at her. She seems so tired, not only

because of the dark circles round her eyes or her tangled hair gathered in an old scrunchie or her worn clothes. The word which comes into my head is 'crushed'. That makes me feel bad. I'm not sure if she was like this the first time we met and I just didn't notice. It's like she's changed in the space of a few days. She's paler or dirtier; it's harder to get her to look you in the eye.

She speaks first.

'You live round here?'

'No, Filles du Calvaire. Near the Cirque d'Hiver. What about you?'

She smiles. She opens her hands in front of her, her grimy empty hands, in a gesture of powerlessness which means: nothing, nowhere, here, I don't know.

I take a big mouthful of my Coke and ask, 'So where do you sleep?'

'Here and there. At people's houses. People I know. Hardly ever more than three or four nights in the same place.'

'What about your parents?'

'I haven't got any.'

'Are they dead?'

'No.'

She asks me if she can have another drink. Her feet are fidgety under the table. She can't lean back on the seat or let her hands settle anywhere. She's watching me,

noticing my clothes. She shifts position and then shifts back again. She's turning an orange lighter over in her fingers. Her whole body's sort of tense and agitated. We stay like that, waiting for the waiter to come back. I try to smile, to act natural, but there's nothing harder than acting natural when that's exactly what you're thinking about, even though I've had lots of practice at it. I hold myself back from asking all the questions that are jostling around in my head: how old are you? When did you stop going to school? What do you do about food? Who are these people you stay with? But I'm afraid she'll realise that being with me is a waste of time and leave.

She starts drinking her second vodka, gets up to grab a cigarette from the next table (a man's left his packet behind and gone to the toilet), takes a long drag and asks me to talk to her.

She doesn't say 'how about you?' or 'what's your life like?' Her exact words are: 'Can you talk to me?'

I'm not too keen on talking. I always have the feeling that the words are getting away from me, escaping and scattering. It's not to do with vocabulary or meanings, because I know quite a lot of words, but when I come out with them they get confused and scattered. That's why I avoid stories and speeches and just stick to answering the questions I'm asked. All the extra words, the overflow, I keep to myself, the words that I silently multiply to get close to the truth.

But No's sitting in front of me and her expression is begging me to speak.

So I plunge in any old how. Too bad if I feel like I'm stark naked, too bad if it's stupid. 'When I was young I used to hide a treasure chest beneath my bed with all sorts of souvenirs in it: a peacock's feather from the Parc Floral, pine cones, multicoloured cotton-wool balls for taking make-up off, a flashing key-ring, that kind of thing. One day I put my last souvenir in it – I can't tell you what it was – a very sad souvenir that marked the end of my childhood, and I closed the box, slid it under my bed and haven't touched it since. All the same, I've got other boxes – one for each dream. In my new class the pupils call me 'Brains'. They ignore me or avoid me, as if I had some contagious disease, but deep down I know that it's because I can't talk to them or laugh with them. I keep myself to myself. There's this boy called Lucas, he sometimes comes to see me at the end of class. He smiles at me. He's sort of the class leader, the person everybody looks up to. He's very tall and handsome, you know? But I don't dare talk to him. In the evening I do my homework and stuff. I look for new words. It makes my head spin, because there are thousands of them. I cut them out of the paper to capture them and stick them into big white notebooks that my mother gave me when she came out of the hospital. I've got tons of encyclopedias too, but I don't use them much any more because I know them by

heart. At the back of the cupboard I've got a secret hiding place with heaps of things that I've picked up in the street, things that have been lost or broken or abandoned, you know . . .'

She's looking at me like she's amused. She doesn't seem to think I'm weird. Nothing seems to surprise her. I can tell her my thoughts, even if they get mixed up and bump into one another. I can express the jumble in my head, I can say 'you know' without her picking me up for it, because she knows what that means, I'm sure, because she knows that 'you know' stands for all those things you could say, but which you skip over because you can't be bothered or there's no time or because there are some things that you can't say.

She puts her forehead on the table between her arms and I go on. I don't know if this has ever happened to me before, I mean speaking for so long, like in a soliloquy in the theatre, without any response. And then she's gone to sleep and I've finished my Coke and I'm sitting there watching her sleeping. At least she's getting a bit of sleep, in the warmth of the café on the well-padded banquette that I made sure I let her have. I can't complain – I fell asleep too when we went to the theatre to see *L'École des femmes* with school, even though it was really good. But I had too much in my head, and sometimes it's like with computers, the system goes to sleep to save the memory.

Around seven o'clock I begin to get really worried I'll

get told off and I shake her gently.

She opens one eye and I whisper, 'I'm sorry, but I have to go.'

The imprint from the stitches of her pullover is tattooed on her cheek.

'Have you paid?'

'Yes.'

'I'm going to stay here for a bit.'

'Can I see you again?'

'If you want.'

I put on my coat and leave. In the street I turn round to wave to her through the window, but No isn't looking.

'Miss Bertignac, come and see me at the end of the lesson. I've done some research into your subject and I can give you the gist of it.'

'Yes, sir.'

You have to say 'yes, sir'. You have to come into the classroom in silence, take out your things, say 'present' when the register is taken, make sure Mr Marin can hear you, wait till he gives the sign to get up when the bell rings, not swing your feet beneath your chair, or look at your mobile in class, or glance at the clock in the hall, or twist your hair round your finger, or whisper to your neighbour. You mustn't have your belly button showing, or the top of your bum. You must raise your hand if you want to speak, have your shoulders covered even if it's 40°C, not chew your pen, never mind gum. I could go on. Mr Marin is the terror of the school. He's against thongs, low waists, trousers that trail on the ground, hair gel and

dyed hair. 'Miss Dubosc, you will return to class when you are wearing a garment worthy of the name.' 'Mr Muller, here's a comb. You have two minutes to comb your hair.'

My A starred average doesn't guarantee me immunity. From the first day he's been on to me as soon as I look out of the window, the instant I drift off. It only takes two seconds. 'Miss Bertignac, would you be so kind as to rejoin us. You'll have plenty of time to return to your inner life. Tell me, what's the weather like in your universe?' Mr Marin must have a dozen pairs of invisible eyes all over his body, plus a not-paying-attention detector grafted into his nose and the antennae of a snail. He sees and hears everything – nothing gets past him. And yet, my stomach isn't showing, my hair is smooth and tied back, I wear normal jeans and long-sleeved pullovers. I do what I can to blend into the background. I don't make a sound, don't speak unless he asks me a question, and am a foot shorter than most of the students in the class. No one tries it on with Mr Marin. Lucas is the only one who dares leave his class, his head held high, after answering, 'Combs are like toothbrushes, Mr Marin. They're not for lending.'

'According to estimates, there are 200,000–300,000 homeless people in France, 40% of whom are women, and the figure is going up all the time. In the 16–18 age group, the proportion of women is as high as 70%. You've

chosen a good subject, Miss Bertignac, even though it's not an easy one. I've borrowed a very interesting book for you on social exclusion from the library. Here you are. And here's a photocopy of a recent newspaper article from *Libération*. If you need help, don't hesitate to ask. I'm counting on you to do a less unappealing presentation than your peers. You have the ability. I'll let you go now. Enjoy your break.'

My throat is tight and my eyes are smarting. In the playground I go to my little corner near the bench. I lean against the only tree around. It feels like it's mine. After two months no one tries to come here any more. It's my place. I watch the others from a distance, the girls laughing and nudging each other. Léa in her long skirt and lace-up boots. She wears make-up. Her eyes are blue and almond-shaped. She's really quick-witted, and always has something funny or interesting to say. All the boys look at her. And at Axelle, even if she's less pretty. You can tell she's not afraid, not of anything. They drink alcohol in the café after school and phone and text each other. They go to parties. Chat on MSN in the evenings and go to H&M on Wednesday afternoons. One day, just after term started, they invited me to their birthday party. I was looking at my shoes as I said thank you. I said I'd go. I thought for a week about what I'd wear. I left nothing to chance. I practised dancing to music on the radio. I'd

bought them both a present. And then the evening arrived. I put on my best jeans, a T-shirt I'd bought at Pimkie, my big boots and a black jacket. I'd washed my hair that morning to make it silkier. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I was so small: I had little legs, little hands, little eyes, little arms. I was a little thing that didn't look like anything. I imagined dancing in the living room at Léa Germain's house in the middle of the others, and I put down the bag with the presents, took off my jacket and switched on the telly. My mother was sitting on the sofa. She'd been watching what I was doing. You could tell she was searching for something to say. It wouldn't have taken much – for example, if she'd only said 'you're very pretty' or even 'you look nice', I think I'd have found the strength to go out, to press the button for the lift and everything. But my mother said nothing and I watched that advert with the girl who puts on a magic deodorant and dances about. Cameras flash and she spins around in a flouncy skirt. I wanted to cry.

On Monday I went to apologise for not coming. I made up some family excuse. Axelle said I'd missed the party of the year, and I looked down. Léa Germain and Axelle Vernoux haven't spoken a single word to me since.

One day Mrs Cortanze, a psychologist I saw for a few months, explained what 'intellectually precocious'

meant. 'Imagine that you're an extremely modern car, equipped with a greater number of options and functions than most cars. You're faster and higher performance. You're very lucky. But it's not easy. Because no one knows exactly the number of options you have or what they enable you to do. Only you can know. And speed can be dangerous. Like when you're eight, you don't necessarily know the highway code or how to drive. There are many things you have to learn: how to drive when it's wet, when it's snowy, to look out for other cars and respect them, to rest when you've been driving for too long. That's what it means to be a grown-up.'

I'm thirteen and I can see that I'm not managing to grow up in the right way: I can't understand the road signs, I'm not in control of my vehicle, I keep taking wrong turnings and most of the time I feel like I'm stuck on the dodgems rather than on a race track.

Leaning against my tree I'm trying to come up with an illness that I can contract for real around 10th December, something so serious that no one could possibly suspect that it's got anything to do with my presentation. Tetanus or TB strike me as impractical because of the vaccines and whatnot. Broken bones hurt too much (I know because I broke my arm last year at my cousins'), and you can't even be sure you'll get to stay at home. Meningitis has the advantage that it would close the school, but it

can kill you. Glandular fever means kissing boys and that's not going to happen. So even if I drink the water from the gutter or jump head-first into the wheelie bins at home, I can't be sure I'll catch anything. And it's not worth counting on an old classic like a cold or a throat infection. I get ill once every five years and it's always during the school holidays. That only leaves a bomb scare at school to hope for, or better still a terrorist attack that means the whole place has to be rebuilt.

The bell's rung. The students are making their way up the stairs, chatting and high-fiving. Lucas is approaching. It looks like he's coming towards me. I try to think of what I can do to look calm. I put my hands in my pockets. Why does it suddenly feel like it's 50°C in my coat? If only I was equipped with an emergency cooling system, that would be convenient.

'Hey, you've hit the bull's eye with the homeless! Marin's not going to give you any peace. It's the kind of subject he's right into.'

I'm struck dumb. Like a carp. My neurons must have left by the back door. My heart's thumping like I've just run half a mile. I'm incapable of making any response, not even a yes or a no. I'm pathetic.

'Don't worry, Chip, I'm sure it'll turn out OK. You know, I had Marin last year too. He's cool about presentations. He likes them when they're unusual. And your

interview idea is really good. You coming?'

I don't go after him. He's a funny sort of boy. I've known that from the start. Not just because he seems angry and contemptuous or the way he walks like a tough guy. Because of his smile – it's a child's smile.

The art teacher is giving back the work we did last week. I look out of the window. The clouds seem to be in free-fall. There are white trails all over the sky, a smell of sulphur. What if the earth were to start shaking? I've got to do a presentation.

The sound of voices suddenly brings me back into the classroom. There's nothing. No storm or hurricane, no natural disaster brewing. Axelle and Léa are swapping notes under the desk. And come to think of it, the smell is mainly chips from the canteen.

I've still got to study the documents Mr Marin gave me. And to convince No to help me.

It's a grey, wet day. I come out of the metro and I'm instantly swallowed up in the station. I spot her in the distance in front of the newspaper kiosk. She's standing up. Not begging. I go towards her and she answers with a grunt when I say hello. No looks like she's in a very bad mood. She agrees to come for a drink with me. I made sure I waved my purse to make it clear that I was paying. In the café I try hard not to look at her hands. My feet are swinging at top speed beneath the banquette. I look around, trying to find something to fix my attention on. I go for the hard-boiled eggs on the counter. I think of the square egg I made with my cousins last year. They learned the trick in *Pif Gadget*. We had to cook it, peel it while it was still hot, slide it into a cardboard mould we made from the pattern in the magazine and leave it in the fridge for twenty-four hours. A square egg looks really funny, the way that anything unfamiliar does. I imagine

other things – telescopic forks, see-through fruits, false breasts. But No is opposite me, frowning. This isn't the time to drift off. I've got to get back to what I have to do. If only I had an immediate-return-to-reality button, that would be convenient.

'I wanted to see you because I've got something to ask you.' (That was my introduction. I'd thought ahead.)

'Yeah?'

'I've got a presentation to do for my SES class . . .'

'What's that?'

'Social and economic sciences. You study lots of different things, like the economic situation in France, the stock market, growth, social classes, the underclass and so on . . . Know what I mean?'

'Mmm.'

'So, well, I really dread presentations. I mean, I get really scared and the teacher's no pushover. The problem is that I said I'd do something on the homeless . . . something that explained, er . . . (I'd got to the heart of the matter, the tricky bit. I couldn't remember what I'd rehearsed at all. It's always like that when it comes to emotions) . . . how women, especially young women, end up on the street. Like you.'

'I told you I slept at mates' places.'

'Yes, I know. I meant, women with no permanent home, you know . . .'

'Did you mention me?'

'No . . . well, yes . . . not by name of course, but I said that I was going to do an interview.'

'An interview?'

Her eyes have got bigger. She automatically brushes away the hair that's fallen over her eyes.

'I'd love another beer.'

'Sure, no problem.' (I've started. I mustn't stop and break the thread, I've got to keep going.) 'So if you liked, I could ask you questions, which would help me illustrate things, like a first-hand account. Know what I mean?'

'Sure.'

I haven't clinched it yet. She signals to the waiter, who nods without coming over.

'Are you up for it?'

She doesn't reply.

'You could just tell me how it works, you know, eating, sleeping. Or if you'd rather, you could talk to me about other people you know in the same situation.'

Still nothing.

'And that way I'll come back to see you. We can have a drink.'

The waiter puts the beer on the table. He wants to cash up right now. I've noticed before that waiters have their own language. They're finishing their shift and so they're cashing up right now. Even if they're still there two hours later. It's the same all over Paris. I hand him my five-euro

note. No lowers her head, which gives me a chance to look at her closely. If you ignore the grubby marks on her face and neck, her dirty hair, she's very pretty. If she was clean, dressed in nice clothes and had her hair done, if she looked less tired, she might even be prettier than Léa Germain.

She raises her head.

'What's in it for me?'

It's late and my father will be worried. I take the quickest way home and replay the conversation, which is easy because I record everything, down to the smallest sigh. I don't know why, but I've been able to do it since I was little – words are printed in my head like on a scroll, stored for several days. I erase them when I need to in order to avoid a traffic jam. The dinner's ready, the table set. My mother's gone to bed. My father puts the serving dish in front of me and picks up my plate to serve me. He pours water into our glasses. I can tell he's sad. He's making an effort to seem jolly, but his voice gives him away. That's one of the things I can spot, voices that conceal a lie within them, and words that say the opposite of feelings. I can spot it in my father's sadness, and my mother's, it's there like an undertow. I swallow the breaded fish and the mashed potato and try to give him a reassuring smile. My father's very good at keeping a conversation going and giving the impression that

something's happening when it's not. He knows how to ask questions and give replies, get a discussion going again, digress and make links on his own while my mother stays silent. Usually I try to help him, put a brave face on it and join in. I ask him to clarify, to give examples, I push his arguments, look for contradictions. But this evening I can't. I'm thinking about my presentation, and Lucas and No. Everything's mixed up in the same feeling of fear. He's telling me about his work and a trip he's got to make soon. I'm looking at the wallpaper in the kitchen, the drawings I did when I was little stuck to the wall and the big frame with the photos of the three of us. Photos from before.

'You know, Lou, it'll take time to get your old mum back. A lot of time. But you mustn't worry. We'll get there.'

In bed I think about No and her jacket. I counted the holes in it. There were five – two cigarette burns and three rips.

In bed I think of Lucas and this phrase comes back to me: 'Don't worry, Chip, I'm sure it'll turn out OK.'

When I was little I used to spend hours in front of the mirror trying to get my ears to stay back. I thought I looked ugly and wondered if they could be fixed, maybe by squeezing my head into a bathing cap or a cycling helmet every day, summer and winter. My mother had told me that when I was a baby I used to sleep on my side with my ear folded over. When I was little I wanted to be a traffic light at the biggest junction. I thought there was nothing more worthwhile or more respectable than directing the traffic, going from red to green and green to red in order to protect people. When I was little I would watch my mother putting on her make-up in front of the mirror, following every movement – eyeliner, mascara, lipstick. I breathed in her perfume, I didn't know it was so fragile. I didn't know that things could come to an end just like that and never return.

* * *

When I was eight my mother got pregnant. They'd been trying to have another baby for ages. She'd been to the gynaecologist, taken medicine and had injections – and then finally it happened. I'd studied reproduction in my encyclopedia of mammals: the uterus, ovaries, spermatozoa and all that stuff, so I was able to ask precise questions about what was going on. The doctor had talked about an in vitro fertilisation (it would have been cool to have a brother or sister made in a test tube), but in the end they didn't need it, my mother got pregnant just when they'd given up hope. The day she had the test results we drank champagne and raised our glasses in a toast. We couldn't tell anyone during the first three months, when mothers can lose their babies. I was sure it was going to be OK. In my encyclopaedias I followed the growth of the embryo, the different stages of its development and all that. I studied the diagrams and did extra research on the Internet.

After a few weeks we could tell everybody, and we began the preparations. My father moved his desk into the living room to clear the bedroom and we bought a cot for the baby, who was going to be a girl. My mother got out my old baby clothes and we sorted through them together and put them all neatly folded in the big lacquered chest of drawers. That summer we went to the mountains. I remember Mummy's tummy in her red swimming costume by the side of the pool, and her long

hair blowing freely in the wind and her taking siestas under the parasol. When we got back to Paris, there were only two or three weeks to go before the birth. I thought it was incredible imagining a baby coming out of Mummy's tummy, that it could start just like that with no warning, even if I'd read lots of things about it in her pregnancy books, even if it could all be explained scientifically. One evening they went to the hospital. They left me with a neighbour across the hall for the night. My father was carrying the case that we'd packed together, with the little pyjamas and bootees and everything. You could tell they were happy. He rang very early in the morning: I had a sister. The next day I was able to go and see her sleeping beside my mother in a see-through plastic cot on wheels.

I know they can send supersonic planes and rockets into space, and identify a criminal from a hair or a tiny flake of skin, and grow a tomato that will keep in the fridge for three weeks without getting a wrinkle, and store millions of pieces of information on a tiny chip. But of everything that exists and is still evolving, there's nothing more incredible to me or more amazing than this: Chloe came out of my mother's stomach.

Chloe had a mouth, a nose, hands, feet, fingers and nails. Chloe opened and closed her eyes, yawned, suckled and moved her little arms, and this high-precision mechanism was all my parents' work.

* * *

Sometimes when I'm alone in the house I look at those first photos: Chloe in my arms, Chloe sleeping on my mother's breast, the four of us sitting on the bed in the hospital – my grandmother took that one and it's a bit wobbly, not very well framed, you can see the room in the background, the blue walls, the gifts, the boxes of chocolates. Most of all you notice Mum's face – it's so incredibly smooth – and her smile. When I rummage in the little wooden box the photos are kept in, my heart beats like it's going to burst. Mum would go crazy if she caught me.

After a few days they came home. I loved changing Chloe, bathing her, trying to comfort her when she was crying. I rushed back from school to see them. When she started drinking from a bottle, I'd sit on the sofa with my arm propped up on a cushion and give her her evening feed. I remember you had to be careful about air bubbles and not let her drink too fast.

Those moments aren't ours any more. They're shut up in a box, buried at the back of a cupboard, out of reach. They're frozen like on a postcard or a calendar. The colours will end up disappearing, fading. They're forbidden to our memories and our words.

One Sunday morning I heard Mum scream. It was a scream I'll never forget.

Even today, when I let my mind wander, when I'm not paying attention to where my thoughts are going, when that day floats into my head because I'm bored, that scream comes back to me and tears at my stomach.

I ran into the bedroom and saw Mum shaking Chloe, shouting. I didn't understand. She held her against her, shook her again, kissed her. Chloe's eyes were closed. My father was already calling an ambulance. And then Mum slid down on to the floor. She was hunched over the baby, on her knees, crying and saying 'no, no, no'. I remember that she was only wearing a bra and pants and thinking that that wasn't suitable if people were coming. And at the same time I could tell that something was happening, something that couldn't be fixed. The doctors came quickly. They examined Chloe and I know that Mum saw in their eyes that there was nothing they could do. It was at that moment that Dad realised that I was there and took me out of the room. His face was pale and his lips were trembling. He held me very tight in his arms without a word.

Then there were the announcements, hushed conversations, endless telephone calls, letters and the burial. And then a huge void like a black hole. We didn't cry that much – all together, I mean. Maybe we should have. Maybe that would have made it easier. Life picked up again as before with the same rhythm, the same

timetable, the same habits. My mother was there with us, preparing the meals, doing the washing, hanging out the clothes, but it was as if a part of her had gone away to be with Chloe in a place which only she knew. She extended her first period of sick leave with another, and then another, and then she couldn't work any more. I was in the last year of primary school. The teacher asked to see my father because she thought my behaviour was abnormal for a child of my age. I was at the meeting. She said that I was withdrawn and solitary. That I displayed 'a disturbing maturity', I remember those words. She alluded to Chloe's death. The whole school knew about it. She said that it was a great trauma for a family, that each of us risked losing our way, that we needed to seek help. She was the one who recommended that my father took me to a psychologist. That's why I went to see Mrs Cortanze every Wednesday till the end of that year. She made me take IQ tests and other tests with funny names and initials that I can't remember. I went without complaining, to make my father happy. I refused to do the drawings and all the stuff psychologists get children to do to work out what they think without really thinking it or without knowing they're thinking it, but I was willing to talk. Mrs Cortanze nodded with great conviction and rarely interrupted me. I shared my theories about the world with her (that's when they started) – my theory about subsets, my theory about infinite stupidity, about polo necks,

equations without unknowns, visible and invisible segments and so on. She really listened and always remembered what I'd said the time before. She would come up with connections or deductions and I would nod back so as not to contradict her or hurt her feelings, because Mrs Cortanze had an incredible bun on top of her head that was so high it was probably a sign of pure magic.

My mother got ill. We saw her drift away little by little without being able to stop her. We held out our hands, but we couldn't touch her. We called out to her, but she didn't seem to hear. She stopped speaking, stopped getting up. She stayed in bed all day or sat in the big armchair in the living room dozing in front of the TV. Sometimes, as she stared into space, she'd stroke my hair or face. Sometimes she'd squeeze my hand, out of the blue for no reason. And sometimes she'd kiss my eyelids. She didn't eat with us any more, didn't do the housework. My father talked to her for hours. Sometimes he'd get angry with her. I'd hear raised voices coming from the bedroom. I tried to make out the words and the pleading. I'd glue my ear to the wall and fall asleep sitting up in bed and wake with a start when my body slumped sideways.

The following summer we went to stay with friends at the seaside. Mum stayed in the house nearly all the time. She didn't put on her swimming costume or her sandals

with the big flowers in the middle. I think she dressed the same way every day, when it occurred to her to get dressed. It was hot that year, a strange, damp, sticky sort of heat. My father and I tried to stay happy, to recapture the holiday atmosphere, but we didn't have the heart.

Now I know without a shadow of doubt that you can't chase away those images, let alone the invisible holes that burrow deep down inside. You can't chase away the reverberations or the memories that stir as night falls or in the early hours. You can't chase away echoing screams, still less echoing silence.

Then, just like every other year, I went to spend a month with my grandparents in the Dordogne. At the end of the summer my father came down: he had important things to tell me. My mother had been admitted to a special hospital for people with serious depression and my name was down for a special school in Nantes for gifted children.

I asked my father what *he* was planning to do that was special. He smiled and hugged me.

I spent four years in Nantes. When I think about it now it seems like a lot. I mean, when you count one, two, three, four school years, each with about ten months, each month with thirty or thirty-one days, it seems ages, and that's not counting the hours and the minutes. Yet it's as if that time is folded in on itself, empty as a page

left blank in an exercise book. That doesn't mean I can't remember anything about it, but the colours aren't true, they're blown, like in an overexposed photo. I went back to Paris every other weekend. In the beginning I'd go to see my mother in hospital with my heart in my mouth and a feeling of dread in my stomach. Her eyes were glassy like a dead fish, her face frozen. She'd be watching the TV in the day room. I recognised her hunched body from a distance, her trembling hands. My father tried to reassure me: she was taking a lot of medicine and they had side effects, but the doctors were hopeful, she was doing better. Later, after she got out, she'd come with him to meet me at Montparnasse station. They would wait at the end of the platform. I'd try to get used to her motionless, broken silhouette from a distance. We kissed unemotionally. My father took my bag and we'd go to the escalator. I filled my lungs with the smell of Paris and the three of us got into the car. The next day they'd take me back to the station. Time went so quickly. Then it was time to go.

For weeks I dreamed that one Sunday my father would say, 'This can't go on. Stay with us. You can't be so far away.' He'd turn the car round before we got to the station. For weeks I dreamed that at the last traffic light or as he turned off the engine, he'd say, 'This is crazy' or 'It's ridiculous' or 'This hurts too much'.

* * *

For weeks I dreamed that one day he'd put his foot down on the accelerator, flat to the floor, and drive all three of us into the wall of a car park, and we'd be together for ever.

I ended up coming back for good. I rediscovered Paris and the bedroom that belonged to a child who was no longer me. I asked my parents to send me to a normal school for normal children. I wanted life to go back to how it was before, when everything seemed simple and connected and we didn't have to think about it. I didn't want anything to make us different from other families any more, where parents spoke more than four words a day and children didn't spend their time asking themselves bad questions. Sometimes I reckon that Chloe must have been gifted too and that's why she gave up on it all, when she understood what a struggle it was going to be, and that there was nothing that could be done – no cure, no antidote. I just want to be like other people. I envy their ease, their laughter, their stories. I'm sure they've got something I haven't. I've spent ages looking in the dictionary for a word that means ease, casualness, confidence. A word that I can put in my notebook in capital letters, like a magic spell.

It's autumn and we're trying to pick up the threads of our life. My father's got a new job. He's had the kitchen and

the living room repainted. My mother's doing better. That's what he tells people on the phone. 'Yes, yes, Anouk's doing better. Much better. She's recovering. Little by little.' Sometimes I want to grab the phone from his hand and shout at the top of my voice, 'No, Anouk's not better. She's so far away from us that we can't talk to her. Anouk hardly recognises us. For four years she's been living in a parallel world that we can't reach, a sort of fourth dimension, and she couldn't care less about whether or not we're alive.'

When I get home she'll be sitting in her armchair in the middle of the living room. She doesn't put the light on. I know she sits there from morning till night without moving. She spreads a blanket over her knees and waits for time to pass. When I get back she gets up, makes a series of gestures and movements out of habit like she's on autopilot, gets a packet of biscuits out of the cupboard, puts the glasses on the table, and sits down beside me without saying anything, collects the washing-up, puts away what's left and wipes the table with a sponge. The questions are always the same: did you have a good day? Did you have a lot of work today? Weren't you cold in that jacket? Distractedly she half listens to my replies. We're in a role play – she's the mother and I'm the daughter. Each of us sticks to the script and follows the stage directions.

* * *

She never touches me any more. She doesn't caress my hair or my cheek, or put her arm around my neck or my waist. She never hugs me.

I count one, two, three, four drops. I watch the ochre cloud dissolve in the water as the paint escapes the brush at the bottom of the glass, the colour spreads little by little, stains the liquid and disappears. I've been an insomniac for a long time, a word which ends like 'maniac' and 'hypochondriac'. It's one of those words that mean something's gone off course. I take plant-extract capsules in the evening after dinner and when that doesn't work my father gives me Rivotril, a medicine that takes you into a black hole where you don't think about anything any more. I have to take them as infrequently as possible so that I don't get used to them, but tonight I can't get to sleep. I've been trying for hours. I'm counting everything that can be counted – sheep's teeth, the sandman's hair, and then his freckles and beauty spots. I'm like a heap beneath the quilt, my heart's in my mouth. There are too many words in my head getting

mixed up, all colliding in a giant pile-up. Scrambled phrases are fighting to get to the front and the sheep are baaing in unison in the background: 'Miss Bertignac, you should factor in a section on social security', 'Chip, you do realise you look like Tinkerbell in that hat?', 'What time do you call this to come home?', 'No, I don't want you to record . . .', 'A beer, please', 'Ladies, I'm going to cash up', 'No, I can't tomorrow, how about the next day?', 'Umbrellas are pointless because I always lose them', 'Hey, let people get off before you get on'.

I don't know what made her agree in the end. I came back a few days later and she was outside the station. In front of the police station there was a whole camp of homeless people with tents, cardboard boxes, mattresses and stuff. She was standing talking to them. I went over to her and she introduced me to them straight away, her face dead straight and serious: 'Roger, Momo and Michel', then, with her hand outstretched to me: 'Lou Bertignac, who's come to interview me.' Momo laughed. He didn't have many teeth. Roger shook hands and Michel frowned. Roger and Momo wanted me to interview them too. They were laughing. Roger made his fist into a microphone and held it under Momo's chin. 'So, Momo, how long's it been since you had a bath?' I felt uncomfortable but tried not to let it show. I explained that it was for school (so that they didn't get the idea that it was going to be on the

eight o'clock news) and that the project was only about women. Roger said that it was all the fault of the idiots in the government and politicians were all crap. I nodded, because it seemed best to agree with him. He took a bit of dried sausage out of a plastic bag and cut some slices which he offered round, except to Momo (probably because he didn't have enough teeth to eat it). I didn't dare say no, even if I have to admit it really didn't appeal at all, but I was too scared to risk annoying him. I swallowed it almost whole, without chewing. It tasted rancid. I don't think I've ever eaten anything as bad as that, even in the school canteen.

No and I went off to the café. I told her that her friends were nice, and she stopped and said, 'On the streets you don't have friends.' That night when I got home I wrote that down in my notebook.

At each meeting we arrange the next one. Sometimes she shows up and sometimes she doesn't. I think about it all day. I can hardly wait for school to be over, and as soon as the bell rings I rush to the metro, always with this fear that I won't see her again, the fear that something will have happened to her.

She's just turned eighteen. At the end of August she left an emergency hostel where she'd stayed for several months because she was still a minor. She lives on the

streets, but she doesn't like you saying that. There are some words she refuses to hear. I'm careful, because if she gets angry she stops talking – she bites her lip and looks at the ground. She doesn't like adults, doesn't trust them. She drinks beer, bites her nails and drags behind her a suitcase on wheels that contains her whole life. She smokes the cigarettes that people give her, roll-ups when she can buy tobacco. She closes her eyes when she wants to escape the world. She sleeps here and there, at Geneviève's place, a friend she met at boarding school, who works on the deli counter in the Auchan superstore at Porte de Bagnolet. There's a railway ticket inspector who takes her in from time to time, and she squats anywhere she can, depending on who, she meets. She knows a boy who managed to get a tent from a charity and sleeps outside. Once or twice he's taken her in and asks for nothing in return. She's told me that if you go along the rue de Charenton, you can see his tent opposite number 29. That's his spot. When she doesn't know where she's going to sleep she calls the social services helpline to find an emergency shelter, but it's difficult as lots of them are closed until the winter.

We have our usual table in the Relais d'Auvergne, a bit out of the way, and our habits and our way of being silent. She has a couple of beers, I have a hot chocolate. I know the yellowing walls like the back of my hand, the flaking

paint, the polished glass wall-lamps, the frames and their outdated pictures, the grumpy waiter. I know No, her off-balance way of sitting, the way she hesitates and feels ashamed, the effort she makes to seem normal.

We sit opposite each other. I can tell how tired she is from her face. It's like a grey veil covering and enveloping her, and maybe protecting her too. In the end she let me take notes. At the beginning I didn't dare ask questions, but now I launch in again and again, asking when, why, how. She doesn't always play along, but sometimes it works, she really gets talking, her eyes lowered and her hands beneath the table. Sometimes she smiles. She tells me about the fear, the cold, the wandering around. The violence. The trips back and forth on the same metro line to kill time, the hours spent in cafés in front of an empty cup and the waiter who comes back four times to ask if Mademoiselle wants anything else, or in the launderettes because they're warm and you can be quiet there, the or in libraries, especially Montparnasse, or in day centres, stations and parks.

She tells me about this life, her life, the hours spent waiting, and the fear of the night.

I leave her in the evening without knowing where she's going to sleep. Most of the time she won't answer. Sometimes she jumps up quickly because the hostel's about to shut its doors and she has to rush to the other

side of Paris to stand in a queue to get a number for her position in the list or a room, have a shower in a washroom that other people have made filthy and look for her bed in a dorm where the blankets are infested with fleas and lice. Sometimes she doesn't know where she's sleeping because she hasn't managed to get through to the social services, whose emergency number is nearly always engaged, or because they've run out of places. I let her go off into the damp autumn night, her case bumping along behind her.

Sometimes I leave her there, in front of an empty beer glass. I get up, sit down again, hang around, try to find something to comfort her. I can't find the words. I don't manage to go. She looks down and says nothing.

And our silence is filled with all the world's impotence. Our silence is like the return to the origin of things, their true state.

I had thought that she was hoping for something in return. The first time I handed her the package I'd prepared, she suddenly went all pale and said, 'What are you thinking?' I tried to give her my cap, my umbrella, my MP3 player and even some money. She refused them. All she'll accept is the drinks I buy her. For a week or two I've been giving her the exact money when we meet so that she can wait for me in the café next time. It's starting to get cold. Twice she spent the money before she came, but now the waiter knows us and he lets her sit down and order. I've told my parents that I'm preparing a presentation with Léa Germain and that I go round to her place to work on it. They're pleased I've made a friend. They think it's positive. Since I've got through all the birthday money my grandmother gave me (originally earmarked for the *Encyclopedia Universalis* on CD-Rom), I invent trips to the cinema with people from my class at eight

euros a go. When I get home, I tell them about scenes from the film, with lots of made-up details, since my parents never go to the cinema anyway. And then I give my opinion, borrowed from *20 Minutes* or *À nous Paris*, those free papers you get in the metro. I embroider and add my own little personal touches.

We meet in the café. The station's getting dangerous for No; she can't stay in the same place for several days. That's the way her life is. Settle. Move on. Avoid risks. On the streets there are rules and there are dangers. Best not to stand out. Keep your head down. Blend into the background. Don't stray on to someone else's turf. Don't look people in the eye.

Out there she's nothing but prey.

Today she's telling me about how time seems suspended, stopped, the hours spent walking to keep your body from getting cold, the stops in Monoprix or department stores, wandering from one department to another, the strategies to avoid being noticed, getting chucked out by the security men. She describes the invisible places she's learned to spot – cellars, car parks, warehouses, storage units, abandoned building sites, hangars. She doesn't like talking about herself. The way she does it is by talking about other people's lives – the people she meets, the ones she hangs around with. She tells me about how they drift and sometimes their violence. She

talks about the women. She's clear that they're not tramps, not nuts. She says, 'Make a careful note of that, Lou, you with your words.' They're normal women who've lost their jobs or run away from home. Women who've been beaten or thrown out, who stay in emergency shelters or live in their cars. Women you pass without noticing, without realising, who live in fleapit hotels, who queue up every day to feed their families and in winter wait for the soup kitchens to open.

Another time she tells me about this guy who followed her for a whole day. She didn't know how to get rid of him. He sat down beside her on a bench near the canal Saint-Martin. When she got up he stayed close behind her. She jumped the turnstile on the metro, slipped through the door and he did the same. She said, 'You could tell that he had fuck-all else to do, he was a real thug. I see thousands like him, I can tell you.' She ended up insulting him in the middle of the street; she screamed so loud that he took off. She's always on the move, on the lookout. She can't bear people looking at her. It's the same in the café. If someone turns round she instantly gives them an earful: 'Do you want a photo or something?' or 'What do you think you're looking at?' There's something about her that makes an impression, forces respect. In general people get up and go off grumbling. Once a man muttered 'poor girl' or something. No got up

and spat on the floor at his feet. There was such a look of violence in her eye that the guy went off without waiting for his change.

Another time she tells me about a women who sleeps every night down the end of rue Oberkampf. She doesn't want to be taken away. She settles herself down there every night in front of the florist's with six or seven plastic bags. She gets out her quilt, positions her bags carefully around her and sleeps in the open every night. I ask how old she is. No doesn't know. Well into her fifties, she reckons. She saw her the other day at the Little Brothers of the Poor centre. The woman was coming out with her feet all swollen. She was having trouble walking. She was bent double, completely hunched over, taking tiny little steps. No helped her to carry her bags to her spot. The woman said 'how very kind of you' and No adds, 'You should hear the way she talks. Like a TV presenter or something.'

Yesterday she was at the Saint-Eustache soup kitchen. There was a fight between two women over a fag end that was lying on the ground. The cigarette had only been half-smoked. It was as if they were fighting to the death. After they'd been separated, the younger one had a fistful of hair in her hand and the other one had blood in her mouth. For the first time No's voice cracks. She stops

talking. She has those images in her head and I can see they're disturbing her. She says, 'So that's what you turn into. Animals. Fucking animals.'

She describes her days to me, the things she sees and hears. I'm all ears – I hardly dare breathe. I'm sure she's giving me a gift, *her* sort of gift, along with her frequent pouts, her look of disgust, and the harsh things she sometimes says – 'leave me alone' or 'give me a fucking break' or 'so what do you believe?' (It's not really a question, but it comes up often as if she was saying to me: 'what do you believe? What do you believe *in*? Do you believe in God?') It's a priceless gift, but one of such weight that I'm afraid I'm unworthy of it. It's a gift that changes the world's colours and calls all theories into question.

It's a December day. The sky's low and heavy, like in poetry. The café windows are steamed up and outside the rain's bucketing down. My presentation's in two days. I've filled a whole exercise book. I'm writing at top speed, afraid that this will be the last time. I'm afraid of the moment when I leave her. I've a feeling that something is missing, something important. I don't know anything about her family or her parents. Every time I've tried she's pretended not to hear or to be too tired, or she's got up and had to go. The only thing I've managed to find out is that her mother lives in Ivry. She's never taken care of her. No was put in a foster family when she was twelve. She's seen her three or four times since, but that was ages ago. Her mother seems to have a son. She made a fresh start.

This evening it's too late, it's too late for everything, that's what I think. That's what keeps coming into my head – it's too late for her – and I'm going to go home.

* * *

At what point is it too late? From what moment? The first time I met her? Six months ago, two years, five years? Can you get out of a fix like that? How do you find yourself at the age of eighteen out on the streets with nothing and no one? Are we so small, so very small, that the world continues to turn, immensely large, and couldn't care less where we sleep? These are the questions I was claiming to answer. My notebook is full, I've done additional research on the Internet, I've collected articles, discovered reports, synthesised figures, statistics, trends, but none of it makes any sense, none of it is comprehensible, even if I had the highest IQ in the world. Here I am, my heart in bits, with nothing to say to her face. I have no answer. Here I am, paralysed, when all it would take would be to grasp her hand and tell her to come home with me.

I note two or three things on the last page, just to try to appear composed.

She's silent. It's six o'clock. Maybe this is the last time. She has nothing ahead of her, nothing more, no plan, no path, no way out. She doesn't even know where she's going to sleep tonight. I can see she's thinking about it too, but she doesn't say anything. Eventually I get up.

'OK, well, I've got to go.'

'OK.'

'Are you staying here?'

'Yes, I'll stay for a bit.'

'Do you want to order something else?'

'No, I'm fine.'

'Will you . . . will you still be at the station . . . sometimes?'

'Maybe. I dunno.'

'We could meet on Tuesday. At the usual time? That way I could tell you about how my presentation went.'

'Yeah, if you like.'

I go down into the metro and I feel dizzy. It's a much bigger fear than a presentation in front of the class, a fear that goes beyond what I'd feel if I was condemned to give a presentation every week till the end of my life, a fear that has no name.

'. . . There's this invisible city within the city. The woman who sleeps in the same place every night with her quilt and her bags on the pavement. The men under the bridges, in the stations, the people lying on cardboard or huddled on a bench. One day you begin to notice them. In the street or on the metro. Not just the ones who're begging. The ones who're hiding. You notice the way they walk, their baggy jackets, the pullovers with holes. One day you latch on to one of these silhouettes, to a person. You ask questions, try to find reasons and explanations. And then you begin to count. The others, the thousands. Like the symptom of our sick world. *Things are what they are.* But I believe we've got to keep our eyes wide open. That's just the start.'

That's the conclusion. A glance at my watch. I haven't gone over time. I must be about as red as my pullover. I

keep my head down and don't look at Mr Marin. I tidy my papers that are spread out on the desk. I have to get back to my own desk. I'm not sure I've got the strength – when I feel overwhelmed my legs turn to jelly. Why aren't they saying anything? Why's there silence all of a sudden? Have they all died? Are they laughing and I can't hear it? Have I gone stone deaf? I don't dare look up. If only I was fitted with an instant ten-minutes-into-the-future teleporter, that would be convenient.

They're clapping. It's not a dream. I can really hear it. So I look. I'm facing the whole class and they're applauding, even Léa Germain and Axelle Vernoux. Mr Marin's smiling.

Back at my desk I'm so tired I could fall asleep right here and now, as if I'd used a whole year's energy in a single hour, as if I had given it everything and have nothing left, not a single spark, not even the strength to get me home. Mr Marin's given me 18 out of 20. He ends the lesson by giving us some definitions and we take notes: social security benefit, free health care, income support (only for over-25s), the underclass, eviction . . .

Someone puts a hand on my shoulder.

'Chip, the bell's gone.'

Lucas helps me put my things in my bag. We're last to leave the class. In the corridor he bursts out laughing. He

can't get over it. 'Chip, you fell asleep right in the middle of Marin's class. That'll go down in school history. Lou Bertignac snoozes in class and escapes detention!' I think I laugh too. Suddenly I'm happy there in the fuzziness of sleep, and maybe this is what happiness is – not a dream or a promise – just living for the moment.

I went back on the right day at the time we'd agreed. No wasn't there. I waited for her outside the brasserie, searched the whole station, the newspaper kiosk, the ticket windows, the toilets. I waited near the sign where she sometimes sat when the cops weren't around. I looked for the colour of her jacket and her hair in the crowd. I sat in the waiting room and looked for her skinny silhouette through the window. I went back the next day and the one after that. And on other days. One evening when I was passing the newsagent's for the tenth time, the red-haired woman waved to me to come over. I went.

'Is it Nolwenn you're looking for?'

'Yes.'

'I haven't seen her for a while. She hasn't been coming here much recently. What do you want her for?'

'Well, nothing, really . . . we were supposed to be having a drink.'

'She must have taken her custom elsewhere. But tell me, do your parents know you're here?'

'No.'

'You know, you shouldn't hang around with a girl like that, dear. I'm fond of Nolwenn, but she's a street girl. She lives in a different world from you. You've probably got homework and lots of other things to do. You'd be better off getting yourself home.'

I went into the metro and waited for the train. I looked at the posters and wanted to cry because No wasn't there any more and I'd let her go without thanking her.

My mother was sitting in her armchair. My father wasn't home yet. She hadn't put the light on. Her eyes were closed. I tried to slip into my room without making a noise but she called me. I went over to her and she smiled. When she looks at me like that, when she's so close to me, another image superimposes itself on her face, sharp and transparent at the same time, like a hologram. It's another softer, calmer face from before, without that line on her forehead. She smiles at me with a real smile that comes from within, not a smile that's a front to hide the cracks, not a silent smile. It's her and at the same time it's not her any more. I can't tell the real one from the fake any more. Soon I'll forget that face, my memory will let go. Soon there'll only be photos to

remember it by. My mother doesn't ask why I've got back so late. She's got no sense of time any more. She says, 'Your father called. He won't be long.' I put my things down and start setting the table. She gets up and follows me into the kitchen. She asks me how things are. She's there with me and I know how much this is costing her, what an effort it is. I tell her that everything's fine. 'Yes, school's fine. I was at a friend's, the one I told you about. I got 18 for my presentation. I don't know if I told you about it. Yes, it's fine. The teachers are nice. So are the students. In two days we'll be on holiday.'

'Already?'

She's surprised. Time goes so quickly – Christmas already, winter already, tomorrow already and nothing changes. That's the problem – our lives have stopped and the world keeps going round.

When the door opens, cold air rushes into the hall from outside. My father quickly shuts the door behind him. He's in the warm, we're all in the warm. I think of No – I don't know where she is, on some pavement in the cold night air.

'Here, sweetie, I've found something that'll interest you.'

My father hands me a book, *From the Infinitely Small to the Infinitely Large*. I spotted it on the Internet and have been dreaming about it for weeks. It weighs a ton,

it's full of wonderful pictures on shiny paper and everything, and I'm going to have to hold back till after dinner to devour it.

While I wait, I pick up the moussaka packaging that's lying on the kitchen table. I announce my intention to keep it: from now on all packaging from Picard products are to be handed directly to me. I'm planning to do a comparative test soon. It's not that they're bad, but all frozen meals taste more or less the same – moussaka, shepherd's pie, Mediterranean stew, salt cod puree and so on. They must have a common ingredient, something that gives them that taste. My mother's laughing – that's rare enough to warrant some detailed research.

In bed I think of the woman at the newsagent's. The words that keep coming back to me are: 'she lives in a different world from you'.

I really couldn't care less that there are several worlds within this one and that you're supposed to stay in your own. I don't want my world to be subset A such that it doesn't intersect with any others (B, C or D), a watertight shape drawn on a slate, whole but empty. I'd rather be elsewhere, following a line that leads to places where worlds communicate with each other, overlap, where the edges are permeable, where life follows a path without breaks, where things don't come to an end brutally for no

reason, where important events come with instructions (level of risk, mains or batteries, expected duration) and the necessary equipment (airbags, GPS, ABS).

Sometimes it seems as though something's lacking inside me, like there's a crossed wire, a part that's not working, a manufacturing error. Not, as you might think, something extra, but something missing.

'Mr Muller, come to the blackboard.'

Lucas unfolds his long body, gets up casually, steps on to the platform and stands in front of the blackboard's smooth surface.

'Draw a circle.'

Lucas picks up the chalk and does it.

'That's your mark.'

A ripple round the whole class.

'You can put your things away and spend the rest of this lesson in the study room. I cannot accept such mediocre homework in a test you were told about two weeks ago.'

Mr Marin gives out our work. Lucas puts his things away without showing any emotion, but throws me a glance of complicity.

It takes more than that to shake him. He drags his heels, goes towards the door, taking his time.

* * *

At the school gate I see him leaning against a no entry sign, smoking. He waves and calls to me. Every time he does this I get the same feeling in my body, like an air pocket, as if my stomach was suddenly dropping to my feet and back up again, like in the lifts in the Montparnasse tower when you go up for the panoramic view. He was waiting for me.

'You want to come to my place, Chip?'

Panic in Disneyland! Red alert, general mobilisation, biological chaos, short circuit, internal pile-up, emergency evacuation, cosmic revolution.

'Erm . . . thanks . . . no . . . I can't.' (Such verbal skill, as my father would say.)

I'm dying to, but if he ever . . .

Maybe that's got nothing to do with it.

If he ever kissed me.

Maybe he just wants to talk a bit.

But if ever . . .

When you kiss, what direction is your tongue supposed to go in? (Logic would suggest both clockwise at the same time, but I suppose kissing isn't something rational, so it's not inconceivable that you do it the other way round.)

'I've got to go home. Thanks. Another time, maybe.'

He goes off with his hands in his pockets. The hem of his jeans is worn from trailing on the ground. He's handsome even from a distance. Maybe there won't be another time.

Maybe in life you only get one chance, and too bad if you don't grab it, it doesn't come back. Perhaps I've just missed my chance. On the bus I look at people and wonder if they grabbed their chance. There's nothing to prove it either way. They've all got the same tired expression, occasionally a hint of a smile. I get off a couple of stops early to walk. I often do that when I don't want to go home right away. I don't go to the station any more. I hang around for a bit on the boulevard Richard-Lenoir. There are lots of homeless people on the central reservation there, around the gardens and in the squares. They're in groups, laden with bags, dogs, quilts. They're gathered around benches, talking, drinking cans. Sometimes they laugh, they're happy. Sometimes they argue. There are often young girls with them, with dirty hair, old clothes and so on. I watch them from a distance, with their ruined faces, raw hands, clothes black with filth, their gap-toothed laughter. I look at them with that feeling of shame, a clinging sensation of being on the right side. I look at them with that fear that No has become like them. Because of me.

Mouloud died a few days ago. He'd been living on the streets in our area for the past ten years. He had his metro vent in a recess at the junction of two streets, just beside the baker's. That was his territory. For a few years I saw him every morning and every afternoon on my way to

and from primary school. All the pupils knew him well. At first we were scared of him. And then we got used to him. We'd say hello and stop to talk. He refused to go to the shelters because they wouldn't take his dog in. Even when it was really cold. People used to give him blankets and clothes and food. He was a regular at the café opposite. He drank wine from a plastic bottle. At Christmas people gave him presents. Mouloud was an Algerian from Kabylia. He had blue eyes. He was handsome. It was said that he'd worked for Renault for ten years and then one day his wife left him.

Mouloud felt ill and they took him to hospital, and the next day we heard that he'd died of pulmonary embolism. The owners of the café told my father. In the place where Mouloud used to sit, people began putting up posters, letters, tributes and even a photo of him. They lit candles and left flowers. The following Friday about a hundred people gathered round his tent, which had been left there because no one wanted to touch it. The next day *Le Parisien* published an article on Mouloud with a photo of his spot turned into a shrine.

The lady in the bar opposite took in Mouloud's dog. Dogs can get taken in, but the homeless can't. I thought to myself that if everyone took in a homeless person, if everyone decided to look after just one person, to help them and be with them, perhaps there'd be fewer of them

in the streets. My father told me that wouldn't work. Things are always more complicated than they seem. *Things are what they are*, and there are lots of things you can't do anything about. You probably have to accept that if you want to become an adult. We can send supersonic planes and rockets into space, and identify a criminal from a hair or a tiny flake of skin, and grow a tomato you can keep in the fridge for three weeks without it getting a wrinkle, and store millions of pieces of information on a tiny chip. Yet we're capable of letting people die in the street.

We're staying in Paris for the school holidays. My mother doesn't like travelling any more. The mountains and the sea are more than she can manage, she needs to stay here on familiar ground. In the evening I feel like I can see us from the outside through the windows, the Christmas tree blinking at the back of the living room. These are the same baubles and garlands that we've taken out for centuries. No one's interested or pays any attention, not even my father, who's practised at playing happy familes. We could probably all agree that it's pointless, but no one says so, and so every year the box is opened, the tree decorated and the menu known in advance. Usually my grandparents come up from the Dordogne and stay with us on Christmas Eve. The only thing I like is that we eat very late because they go to midnight mass (my grandmother refuses to eat before it because otherwise she falls asleep on account of her digestion). On Christmas Day

my aunt, uncle and cousins come for lunch. The Christmas truce means that we have to pretend to be happy and content, to get on well with everyone. For example, my aunt (who's my father's sister) always passes comments on my mother right in front of her as though she wasn't there, like she was part of the background. 'Anouk should give herself a bit of a shake. There comes a time when you've got to take yourself in hand, don't you think, Bernard? It's not good for the little one, who's disturbed enough as it is. And you look worn out. You can't do two things at once. She's going to have to snap out of it.' My father doesn't reply and my mother acts as if she doesn't hear. We pass round the serving dish, take some more lamb or turkey or whatever. They go on about their latest holiday in Mauritius. 'The buffet was *gigantic*. The shows were *marvellous*. We met a very nice couple. The boys went diving.' I don't like it when people attack others who can't defend themselves. I get really angry, especially when it's about my mother, so one day I said, 'And how would you be, Sylvie, if you'd held your dead child in your arms?' An Arctic chill came down instantly. I thought she was going to choke on her oyster. There was a long silence. It was a wonderful moment because of the little smile that flickered across my mother's face. My grandmother brushed her hand against my cheek and the conversation picked up again.

Christmas is a lie that unites families around a dead

tree covered in lights, a lie woven of bland conversations, buried beneath tons of buttercream, a lie that nobody believes in.

They've all gone. Around my neck I'm wearing a little gold chain with a heart-shaped pendant which my parents gave me. One evening at the table I think of No, Mouloud and Lucas. I look at the plate in front of me. I try to count the noodles and at the same time the number of beats of my feet below the table. I like dividing myself in two, tackling two things at the same time, like singing a song while I'm reading some instructions or a poster without interruption. I set myself challenges – too bad if they're pointless. Forty-six noodles and fifty-four beats of my feet later, I stop counting. It's all pointless. The only point is it makes me forget one thing: No is alone. No's out there somewhere and I don't know where. No gave me her time and I gave her nothing.

The next day I took the metro to Porte de Bagnolet and went straight into the shopping centre. I thought about taking a trolley to help me blend into the background. It was ten o'clock and the Auchan superstore was already really busy. There were about ten people waiting at the deli counter. Two girls were serving. I took my place in the queue and began watching them. They were both wearing white aprons and a kind of paper hat. One of them was blonde with straight hair and the other had curly brown hair. I put myself in the hands of fate: when my turn came, it would be No's friend Geneviève who served me.

Sometimes chance obeys necessity. That's one of my theories (the theory of the absolutely indispensable). You just have to close your eyes, visualise the desired outcome, and concentrate on the image without letting anything interfere or distract you. And something happens, exactly

the way you wanted it to. (Of course it doesn't always work. Like every theory worthy of the name, the theory of the absolutely indispensable has exceptions.)

The brunette was asking me what I wanted. I gave a start.

'I'm looking for someone you might know. She's called No.'

'Nolwenn?'

'Yes.'

'What do you want her for?'

I'd been concentrating so hard I had forgotten what I was supposed to say.

'I want to find her.'

'Listen, I'm working. I can't talk to you.'

'Does she still come to your place?'

'No. I asked her to leave and never come back. I couldn't keep her. She'd empty my fridge, she did nothing all day and she wouldn't look for a job.'

'Do you know where she is?'

'Last I heard she was in a shelter. But those things never last long. I can't remember which one.'

Behind me a woman in a tight green coat leaning on a trolley that was filled to the brim was starting to get impatient.

I said thank you and turned to go.

I took the metro back to Bastille and walked to the rue de Charenton. Opposite number 29, alongside the Opéra,

just as No had described it, an Igloo tent was set up on the pavement. Behind it, jammed against the wall, was a pile of boxes, bags and blankets. The tent was zipped up. I called out. I waited a few minutes, hesitating, and then began to pull down the zip. I poked my head inside. There was a terrible smell. I went forward on all fours looking for a clue (when I was little I played at detectives with my cousins – I was the best). I scanned the tent – plastic bags were piled up at the back, a few empty cans were scattered on the ground.

'Hey! You there!'

At once I tried to get up, stepped on my lace and fell flat on my face. The man was grumbling behind me. He'd caught me by the collar and in a single movement dragged me from the tent and stood me upright. If I'd been equipped with the ability to disappear into thin air, that would have been convenient. He was all red and smelled of wine. I was dead scared.

'What are you up to? Didn't anyone ever tell you not to go into people's houses?'

My heart was beating so fast I needed a couple of minutes to be able to utter a sound.

'I'm sorry . . . I was looking for No. She told me she knew you.'

'I don't remember her.'

'Erm . . . She's got brown hair, blue eyes, not very tall. Hair like mine. A bit shorter. She's slept with you once or

twice. In your tent, I mean.'

'Hmmph . . . that vaguely rings a bell.'

'Do you know where I could find her?'

'Listen, I don't want any of this shit. Anyway, I've got things to do. I've got to tidy up.'

'How long is it since you saw her?'

'I told you, I don't have time for this.'

'Don't you have any idea at all? Please.'

'Heavens, you know what you want, you do . . . I help people out for a night or two and then I forget.'

He looked at me for a long time – my coat, my boots, my hair. He scratched his head, like someone who's hesitating.

'How old are you?'

'Thirteen. Almost fourteen.'

'Are you family?'

'No.'

'Sometimes she's at the soup kitchen on the rue Clément. It was me who told her about it. I see her there from time to time. Right – now hop it.'

Back home I did some research on the town hall website. I found the exact address, the opening hours and the phone number. Meals were served between 11.45 and 12.30. They gave out tickets from ten o'clock. For several days I stood on the pavement opposite for more than an hour, watching people come and go, but I never saw her.

It's the last day of the holidays. There's a queue that stretches about fifty metres. They haven't opened the doors yet. I recognise her jacket in the distance. The closer I get, the weaker my legs feel. I have to slow down, take my time, do very complicated multiplication and division in my head as I walk towards her. I often do that to make sure I keep going forward when I'm afraid I'll start to cry or turn round. I give myself ten seconds to find three words that start with 'h' and end in 'e', or conjugate the verb 'to befit' in the imperfect subjunctive, or do incredible multiplication with lots of carrying over. She sees me. She's looking me straight in the eye. Without a gesture or a smile, she turns away as if she didn't know me. I reach her and see her face, how much she's changed, the bitterness in her mouth, the way she looks defeated and abandoned. I stop. She's ignoring me, waiting, stuck between two men. She makes no

move to extricate herself, just stays there, behind the fatter one, her face hidden in her scarf. People stop talking. For a few seconds everyone looks me up and down.

I'm well dressed. I'm wearing a clean coat with a zip that works, polished shoes, a designer rucksack, my hair's shiny and nicely combed. In a game of spot-the-odd-one-out, it wouldn't be hard to pick me.

Conversations start up again, low and attentive. I go over to her.

I don't have time to open my mouth. She turns to me, her face hard and closed.

'What the hell are you doing here?'

'I was looking for you . . .'

'What do you want?'

'I was worried about you.'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'But you –'

'I'm fine, OK? Everything's fine. I don't need you.'

She's raised her voice. A murmur has begun to run through the queue. I only catch snatches of it – 'What's going on?' 'It's the girl.' 'What does she want?' I can't make another move. Suddenly No gives me a shove and I slip on the pavement. I can't stop looking at her face. She's still got her hand out to keep me away.

I'd like to tell her that *I* need *her*, that I can't read or sleep any more, that she has no right to leave me like

this, even if I know that that would make the world topsy-turvy. Anyway, the world *is* topsy-turvy, you just have to look around. I want to tell her I miss her, even if it's crazy, even if she's the one who's missing everything, everything you need to live. But I'm all alone too and I've come to look for her.

The people at the head of the queue are beginning to go in. The queue's moving quickly, and I follow her.

'Get lost, Lou, do you hear? You're really pissing me off. This is nothing to do with you. This isn't your life, do you understand? It's NOT YOUR LIFE!'

She shouted these last words with incredible fury. I step back without taking my eyes off her. Eventually I turn around and go off. A little bit further on I turn round one last time. I see her going into the building. She turns round too and stops. It looks like she's crying. She's stopped moving. Other people are bumping into her, going round her. I hear someone shout at her. She swears back at them and spits on the ground. A man pushes her and she disappears into the darkness of the corridor.

I head back towards the metro station. All I need to do is follow the grey line of the pavement. I count the number of City of Paris bins, green on one side and yellow on the other. I think at that moment I hate her – her and all the homeless people on Earth. All they need to

do is be nicer, less dirty, and they'd be fine. All they have to do is make an effort to be pleasant, instead of boozing on park benches and spitting on the ground.

When I look up at the sky, I always wonder how far it goes and whether it ever ends. How many billions of kilometres would you have to travel to see the end? I looked in my new book. They give this question a whole chapter. According to Big Bang theory, various observations suggest that the universe is 13.7 billion years old. It was about 300,000 years after its birth that light was able to circulate freely (when the universe became transparent). The most distant theoretically observable object emitted its light at the first moments of the transparent universe. It defines what's called the visible horizon. The light of 13.7 billion light years is therefore that of the visible universe. Beyond that distance, nothing is visible, we don't know if the universe goes further or not. That's why people stay inside, in their little apartments, with their little furniture and their little bowls and their little curtains and all that – because of dizziness. Because if you

raise your head the question inevitably comes up, and also the question of what we, who are so small, amount to in all of this.

When my father gets home in the evening I plague him with questions that he doesn't always know how to answer, so he looks in books or on the Internet. He never gives up, even when he's really tired. The other day I asked him what 'telluric' means. I could tell that he'd rather have switched on the TV and watched a good cop show with modern cops who spend their time solving mysteries and hunting criminals, but have their problems like everybody else, and love interest too. All the same he looked in his books and came up with the exact definition for me. My father would have made a good cop in a TV series if he'd wanted to. He never loses his temper, he has a leather jacket, a sick wife he looks after really well, and an adolescent daughter who can be a bit of a pain. Everything necessary to make you like him and not want anything bad to happen to him.

When I watch a film with him, I make a vow of silence. But sometimes it gets the better of me and I can't help making some comment or pointing something out, like when the heroine is sitting on the sofa with her hair behind her shoulders, and in the next shot, although *she* hasn't moved, her hair's in front. To tease me, he says, 'Turn off the computer, Lou. Press pause.' And then he

ruffles my hair: 'I'm going to fix your hair. Just you wait!'

When I was little my mother would put a couple of squares of chocolate on a slice of bread and slide it into the oven. I'd wait by the oven door and watch the chocolate melt, going from solid to soft. Watching it being transformed was what I liked best, much more than looking forward to spreading the chocolate on the bread and tasting the result. When I was little I'd watch the blood go solid on my scratches. I'd ignore the pain and wait for the last drop to dry, the one that would become a little crust that I'd pick off later. When I was little I'd stay as long as I could with my head upside down and go bright red, then suddenly turn myself upright again and watch in the mirror as my face went back to its normal colour little by little. I did experiments. Today I'm waiting for my body to change, but I'm not like other girls. I don't mean the ones in my class who're fifteen, I mean the ones who're the same age as me. I see them when I pass them in the street, walking as if they had somewhere to go. They're not looking down at their feet, and their laughter rings out with all their shared promises. But I can't manage to grow up and change shape. I'm still tiny, and staying that way, perhaps because I know the secret that everyone pretends to be unaware of, perhaps because I know that deep down we're all tiny.

* * *

When you stay in the bath too long your fingers go wrinkly. I read an explanation of that in a book: the outer layer of our skin, the epidermis, absorbs water, expands and goes into creases. Here's the real problem: we are sponges. And with me it doesn't just affect my hands and feet. I absorb everything all the time. I'm permeable. My grandmother thinks it's dangerous and very bad for my health. She says, 'That poor girl, her head will end up exploding with all that she takes in. How can she make sense of it, Bernard? You should sign her up for gymnastics or tennis. Get her to expend some energy, work up a bit of a sweat, otherwise her head's going to end up falling at her feet.'

He got on through the back door of the bus the stop after me. He was standing right in front of me. I could tell he was expecting a kiss on the cheek. I was holding on to the rail and let go to get nearer to him. In spite of all the people around us, I noticed the smell of fabric softener that came from his clothes.

'You have a good holiday, Chip?'

I made a face.

Lucas is standing in front of me with that laid-back look he has nearly all the time. And yet I know that he knows. He knows all the girls in school are crazy about him, he knows that Mr Marin respects him even if he spends time making comments about him, he knows how time runs away from us and that there's something not right about the world. He knows how to see through windows and mist in pale morning light, he knows about strength and fragility, he knows we are everything and its

opposite, he knows how hard it is to grow up. One day he told me that I was a like a fairy.

He's impressive. I watch him as the bus moves off again. People are pushing towards the back. He wants to hear more about my Christmas. I search for something to tell him and instead turn the question back on him. He went to his grandparents in the country. He shrugs and smiles.

I'd like to tell him that I lost No, that I'm worried about her. I'm sure that he'd understand. I'd like to tell him that some evenings I don't want to go home because of all the sadness that clings to the walls, because of how empty my mother's eyes are, because of the photos shut away in boxes and because of the fish in breadcrumbs.

'We could go to the ice rink one night if you like, Chip.'

'Mmm.'

(I've seen ice skates at Go Sport. They've got heaps of laces to feed through the eyelets. Impossible.)

We get off the bus outside school. The doors aren't open yet. Students are gathering in groups, talking, laughing, lighting cigarettes. Lucas knows everyone, but he stays with me.

I try to look cool, not to let ideas invade my head, ideas which often come into my mind when I see everything that might happen, the best and the worst. They can surge up at any time as soon as my attention wanders,

like a lens that lets me see the world in another colour. Sometimes a better world, and sometimes a disaster.

I try not to think that one day Lucas could put his arms around me and hold me close.

I go out of the main door, lost in the tide. I see her on the pavement opposite. I spot her at once: a dark shape in the evening light. No's waiting for me. She remembered the name of my school and she came. She's not dragging her usual clobber behind her, just a bag that she's wearing across her body. From this distance I can see that she's dirty, her jeans stained with dark streaks, her hair matted in little clumps. I stay like that for several minutes without moving, getting jostled by the other students. There's the noise of scooters, laughter, voices, like a whirlwind around me. Then only me, facing her. Something's holding me back. Then I notice her puffy eyes, the dark marks on her face, her uncertainty, and all at once my bitterness and resentment are gone, and I just want to take her in my arms. I cross the street and say 'come on'. She follows me to the Bar Botté. People are looking at us. People are looking because No

lives on the streets and that's as plain as the nose on my face.

She tells me about it with her head down, her hands round her cup. She's looking for warmth even if it burns her palms. She's sleeping in an emergency shelter in Val-de-Marne, they've admitted her for two weeks. At eight thirty every morning she's on the streets, outside for the whole day. She's got to kill time. Walk so that she doesn't get cold. Find somewhere sheltered to sit down. She has to cross Paris for a hot meal. Take a ticket. Wait. Go off again. Ask for money outside a shop or in the metro. When she's got the strength. Enough to say 'please'. Soon she's going to need to find another shelter. That's her life. Going from hostel to hostel. Hold on as long as possible. Push back the time limits. Find something to eat. Avoid sleeping in the street. She's tried looking for work – fast-food joints, bars, restaurants, supermarkets. But with no address, or only the shelter's, the answer's always the same. There's nothing she can do about it. No address, no job. She's given up. She never thought that her life would get so crappy. When she was little she wanted to be a hairdresser, do shampoos and colours, and later to have a salon of her own. But she never learned – not hairdressing or anything else. She didn't learn anything. She says, 'I don't know what I'm going to do, you know. I've no idea.'

* * *

She doesn't speak for a few minutes, staring into space. I'd give anything – my books, my encyclopedias, my clothes, my computer if she could have a real life with a bed and a house and parents waiting for her. I think about Equality and Fraternity and all the stuff that they teach you in school that doesn't exist. They shouldn't make people believe that they can be equal, not here and not anywhere. My mother's right. Life's unfair and that's all there is to it. My mother knows something that you're not supposed to know. That's why she's not fit for work – that's what it says on her social security papers. She knows something that prevents her from living, something you're not supposed to know until you're very old. You learn to find unknowns in equations, draw equidistant lines and demonstrate theorems, but in real life there's nothing to position, calculate or guess. It's like when babies die. There's sorrow and that's it. A great sorrow that doesn't dissolve in water or in air, a sort of solid that can resist everything.

No's looking at me. Her skin's gone grey and dry like the rest of them. Seeing her like that, it looks as though she's reached the end, the end of what she can bear, the end of what is humanly acceptable. It looks to me as though she'll never be able to get back up again, never be

clean and pretty again. But she's smiling and says that she's pleased to see me.

I see her lip tremble. It only lasts a second. She looks down. I pray in my head with all my strength that she won't cry, even if I don't believe in God every day, because if she starts crying it'll set me off too, and when I start it can go on for hours, like a dam that bursts from the pressure of water, a flood, a natural disaster, and crying is pointless after all. She scrapes the bottom of her cup with a spoon to get all the sugar and sits back in her chair. She's back in control. I can tell from the set of her chin.

'What about your presentation?'

I tell her how scared I was in front of the whole class, my voice trembling at the start and then not at all because it was as if she was with me, as if she'd given me strength, and then the relief when it was over, and the applause and everything.

'And then Lucas, you know, the boy I told you about, has asked me at least twice to come to his place after school and he wants me to go ice-skating with him, but every time I wimp out. I don't really know what to do.'

She likes me to tell her stories. She's like a little girl, I can see that she's really listening – maybe because it reminds her of when she was at school. Her eyes are shining. So I talk. I tell her about Lucas, that he's been kept back

two years, the Opinel knives he collects, his dark hair, the white scar above his mouth which runs down diagonally above his lip, his canvas bag with the writing in marker pen that I don't understand, his cheek in class, his violent outbursts, and the day he threw everything on the floor, books, the table, pens, the lot, before leaving the class, like a king, without even turning round. I talk to her about Lucas, that he's seventeen, that his body seems so dense, so solid, and the way he has of looking at me, as if I were an ant that had lost its way, his blank exercise books, my excellent marks and his three-day exclusion and my homework held up as an example, how kind he is to me, though he's the complete opposite of me.

'What about you, have you ever been in love with a boy?'

'Yeah, when I was about your age. I was a boarder at a place at Frenouville. We weren't in the same class but we used to meet in the evenings instead of going to study hall. We'd hang around outside, sit under a tree, even in winter.'

'What was his name?'

'Laurent.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'Well, what happened?'

'I'll tell you another time.'

She doesn't like talking. There's always a point where she stops. Often in the same way: another time, another day.

'Did it make you sad?'

'I told you – another time.'

'I wanted to ask you something. Do you know which way your tongue goes round when you kiss a boy?'

First she opens her eyes very, very wide. Then she laughs. I've never seen her laugh like that. Then I laugh too. If I had more money, I'd call the waiter and shout 'champagne'. I'd clap my hands and order petits fours like at my big cousin's wedding, lots of them. They'd turn up the music in the café and we'd dance on the tables. We'd invite everyone to our party. No would go and change in the toilets. She'd slip on a beautiful dress and pretty shoes. We'd close the doors to be undisturbed and make it dark and turn up the volume like in the songs.

'The things you ask! There's not a "right way round" for kissing. We're not washing machines!'

She laughs a bit more and then asks if I've got a Kleenex. I hand her the packet.

She looks at the café clock and suddenly gets up. They have to be back at the centre by seven otherwise they're not allowed in. I give her the money I've got left for her metro ticket. She doesn't refuse.

We go down to the metro together. At the bottom of the

escalator we have to separate. I say, 'I'd really like you to come back and see me if you can.' It's not so hard to say any more. She smiles.

'OK.'

'Promise?'

She gives my hair a quick ruffle, like you do with kids.

What if No came to stay with us? What if we decided not to do 'the done thing'? If we decided that things can be different, even if that was really complicated and even more so than it seemed? That's the solution. The only solution. At our house she'd have a bed, a place at the table, a cupboard to keep her things in, a shower so she could wash. She'd have an address. She could start looking for work again. Chloe's room's been empty all this time. My father eventually gave away the cot and the clothes and the chest of drawers. Later he put in a sofa and a table. He shuts himself away in there from time to time when he has work to finish. Or when he needs to be alone. My mother never goes in any more, or at least not when we're around. She didn't touch anything – my father took care of it all. When we talk about the room we don't call it a bedroom any more, we call it the office. And the door stays shut.

* * *

I wait a few days before I mention it. I wait for the right moment. There aren't that many ways of presenting it. On the one hand there's the truth. Unvarnished. On the other, there's a presentation to make No seem something she's not. I imagine different hypotheses: No's the cousin of a classmate, up from the provinces. She's looking for a job as an au pair so that she can continue her studies. No is a teaching assistant at school and is looking for a room. No's just back from a long spell abroad. Her parents are friends of Mrs Rivery, my French teacher. No's the assistant head's daughter and he threw her out because she failed her exams. I look at it from every angle, and every time I bump up against the same problem: No's incapable of playing a role. A hot bath and new clothes won't be enough.

One evening I take my courage in both hands. We're at the table. For once my mother hasn't gone to bed as soon as it gets dark and is eating with us. It's now or never. I broach the subject: I have something important to ask them. They mustn't interrupt. Not in any circumstances. They've got to let me get to the end. I've prepared an argument in three parts the way Mrs Rivery taught us, preceded by an introduction to announce the subject and followed by a two-level conclusion (you have to pose a question that opens on to a new debate, a new perspective).

In broad terms, the outline goes like this:

Introduction: I've met an eighteen-year-old girl who lives on the street and in hostels. She needs help (I get straight to the essential without additions or embellishments).

Section I (thesis): she could come to live with us to give her time to get her strength back and find work (I've prepared concrete arguments and practical proposals). She could sleep in the office and help with the housework.

Section II (antithesis: you put the counter-argument yourself so that you can dismantle it more easily): it's true that there are specialist organisations and social security and that it's not necessarily up to us to take responsibility for a person in a situation like this; it's more complicated that it seems; we don't know her, we don't know what we're dealing with.

Section III (synthesis): there are over 200,000 homeless people in France and the social services can't cope. Every night thousands of people sleep rough. It's cold. Every winter people die in the street.

Conclusion: What's to stop us trying? What are we afraid of, why have we stopped struggling? (Mrs Rivery often says my conclusions are a bit strident, and she may be right, but sometimes the end justifies the means.)

I wrote my plan in a notebook and underlined the main points in red. I rehearsed it in front of the bathroom mirror, my hands calm and my voice level.

We're at the table with a Picard pizza in front of us (I've kept the packaging), the curtains are drawn, the orange glow of the little lamp in the living room outlines our faces. We're on the fifth floor of a Parisian apartment block, the windows are closed, we're sheltered. I start talking and very quickly lose the thread, forget the plan, let myself get carried away by the desire to convince them, the desire to see No here with us, sitting on our chairs, on our sofa, drinking from our bowls and eating from our plates. I don't know why I think of Goldilocks and the three bears when No has straight dark hair. I'm thinking of the picture in the book my mother used to read when I was little. Goldilocks broke everything, the bowl, the chair and the bed, and the picture keeps coming back to me. I'm afraid of losing my words, so I talk at top speed without following anything. I speak for a long time, telling them how I met No, what little I know about her. I talk about her face, her hands, her case rattling along, her rare smiles. They hear me out. Then there's a silence. A long, long silence.

And then my mother's voice, which is even rarer than No's smile, sudden and clear: 'We should meet her.'

My father looks up, stunned. The pizza's cold in my mouth. I form it into a ball, moistened with saliva, and count to ten before I swallow.

My father repeats after her, 'OK, let's meet her.'

* * *

Which just goes to show that things can be different. The very small can become large.

I waited for No. I looked for her at the school gate every evening, delaying the moment when I'd catch the metro home. I looked for her off-balance silhouette, her dragging walk. I didn't give up hope.

This evening she's there. She'd promised. January cold cuts right through you. She's left the emergency hostel where she had been staying. They gave her other addresses to try, and a reference, but you have to wait till a place becomes available. She went back to her friend on the rue de Charenton, who took her in for a few nights, but other people pitched up alongside them with their tents, because it's a well-sheltered spot, and then they started to cause trouble, listening to the radio at all hours and wanting to screw her. She explains all this to me at once on the pavement. She says 'screw' as if she was talking to an adult, and I'm proud that she's not treating me like a kid because I know what that means and the

difference there is between different words for the same thing, and that words have their own importance and shades of meaning too.

I can't take her home in this state. She needs a wash and a change of clothes. My mother will be at home and No must at least be presentable. Even if my parents have said yes, a bad first impression could spoil everything. Then everything happens very quickly, in spite of everything that usually keeps me at a distance when I have to act, because often images and words invade my head and paralyse me. But this time everything has to go in the same direction, without colliding or scattering. One foot must go in front of the other without taking time to wonder whether to start with the left or the right. (Mrs Cortanze the psychologist once told my father that intellectually precocious children have a great ability to conceptualise, to grasp the world, but that they can be helpless when they're faced with relatively simple situations. That struck me as a serious ailment, a major handicap that I could never overcome.)

I ask No to wait for me, not to move. I think it's the first time I've spoken to her like that, no argument. She's got no strength left. No strength to protest or say no. I cross the street again and grab Lucas's arm. Normally I'd never be capable of doing something like that, but sometimes needs must. A few days ago he told me that he more or less lived alone in a five-room apartment. His

father's gone off to live in Brazil and sends money. His mother rarely sleeps there. She leaves him notes on yellow Post-its on the front door and ignores teachers' requests for meetings. Once or twice a month she signs a cheque when the fridge is empty. The cleaning lady comes in once a week and worries about whether he's eating properly.

I explain the situation to him briefly. I need to be quick so it's too bad if I splurt it out, too bad if red spots appear on my neck. There's no time to lose. Then I understand why I chose him and him alone. He glances at No and says, 'Follow me, girls.'

She falls in step without having to be begged. When we get to Lucas's, she throws up in the bathroom. She says she took some medicine. I don't dare ask what. He takes a big towel from a cupboard. It's perfectly ironed and folded, like the ones in that advert for fabric softener with the stupid soft toy that tells its life story. She can't have seen one that thick in ages. She doesn't protest when I push her into the corridor. I run the bath. Everything's still going at top speed in my head, everything's joined up perfectly, decisions are followed by actions. I call my mother to let her know I'll be arriving with No in an hour and hang up without waiting for her reply in case she's changed her mind. I ask Lucas if he can find something that will suit No among his mother's things. He lights a cigarette, adopts a gangster pose and makes a gesture that

means, I'm on to it. The bath's ready. I help No undress, breathing through my mouth so as not to smell her smell. I watch her get into the hot water. She has the body of a boy, narrow hips, thin arms, tiny breasts. Her hair floats like brown seaweed. You can see her ribs, in her back and on her chest. With the heat of the bath her cheeks have got some colour. Her skin's so fine you can see the veins. I stay with her because I'm afraid she'll sink. I take a glove and wash her shoulders, neck, legs and feet with lots of soap. I ask her to get up, sit down again, to give me her one foot and then the other. She does as she's told without saying anything. I give her the glove for what remains to be done and turn round. I hear her get up again and then plunge back into the water. I hand her the big towel and she leans on me to get out. On the surface, mixed in with the soap residue, float a thousand particles of dirt.

Lucas has laid out the clothes on his bed and gone off to watch TV. I help No get dressed, then go back to the bathroom to clean the bath with Mr Clean pine fresh, the same one we've got at home. It sparkles almost as much as on the label. The jeans and pullover suit her perfectly. I wonder how such a small woman could have brought such a big thing as Lucas into the world. He suggests we have a drink. He doesn't dare look at No. I say thank you for helping us. I don't know what she's taken – she's here but not here. She still doesn't protest when I tell her we're

going to my place, that my parents have agreed and are waiting for us. She looks at me for a few seconds, as though it takes that long for the information to reach her brain, and then she follows me. While we're waiting for the lift she turns to thank Lucas and he says, 'Come back whenever you like.' In the street I pull along No's case. The wheels don't work any more. It makes an incredible noise, but I don't care.

We walk to my building. In the lobby I look at her one last time. The pink has disappeared from her cheeks, and her hair's still wet.

I ring the bell before going in. I know that I could lose her.

My father and mother came out of the kitchen to greet us. I did the introductions. Inside my socks my toes were tightly clenched. My father hesitated and almost shook her hand, but then he moved towards her to kiss her cheek. No backed away. She was trying to smile, but you could tell that it wasn't easy.

All four of us sat down to dinner. My mother had prepared a courgette gratin. For the first time in ages she wasn't in her dressing gown, she'd put on her multi-coloured stripy pullover and black trousers. They didn't ask questions. They behaved as if all this was the most natural thing in the world. My mother stayed till the end of the meal. For the first time in ages it felt as though she was really there, that she didn't just have a walk-on part, she was *entirely* there. We talked about everything and nothing. My father talked about the business trip to China he had coming up and told us he'd watched a TV

programme about how Shanghai was developing. It probably didn't mean much to No – not Shanghai, or the caretaker's dog which spends its time digging up imaginary bones in the middle of our building's courtyard, or the electricity meter reading, but that didn't matter. The important thing was to make her feel at ease, and that she wasn't being observed. And for once it seemed to be working, like in the family meals you see in ready-meal adverts where the conversation keeps going without jarring notes or gaps. There's always someone ready to chip in at the right moment, no one looks tired or weighed down with worries, there are no silences.

No must weigh forty kilos. She's eighteen but looks barely fifteen. Her hands shake when she raises her glass to her lips, her nails are bitten and bloody, her hair is falling in her eyes, her movements are clumsy. It's an effort for her to stay upright. To stay sitting. Just to stay together. How long has it been since she ate in a home without having to rush or make way for the next people? How long since she spread a cloth napkin on her knees and ate fresh vegetables? That's all that matters. The rest can wait.

After dinner my father opened out the sofa bed in the office. He went to look for sheets and a thick blanket in the cupboard in the hall. He came back finally and told No that her bed was ready.

She said thanks without looking up.

* * *

I know full well that sometimes it's best to stay like that, shut away within yourself. Sometimes a glance is all it takes to make you waver, someone holding out their hand can make you realise all of a sudden how fragile and vulnerable you are, that everything is collapsing like a matchstick pyramid.

There was no interrogation, no suspicion, no doubt, no back-pedalling. I'm proud of my parents. They weren't afraid. They did what they had to do.

No's in bed. I close the door of the office, turn out her light. A new life is starting for her, I'm sure of it, a real life where she's safe. And I'll always be there beside her. I don't want her ever to feel alone again. I want her to feel that she's with me.

She stays in her room with the door closed. My mother's lent her some clothes and my father's cleared the office so that she can arrange her things. She only comes out when I'm there and sleeps practically all day. She leaves the curtains open, lies down on top of the sheets with all her clothes on, her arms by her sides and her palms open. I knock softly on her door, go in on tiptoe, and find her in this strange position. Every time she makes me think of Sleeping Beauty in her glass coffin, sleeping for a hundred years, her blue dress spread out on her bed without a crease and her smooth hair surrounding her face. But No does wake up, her eyes bright from sleep, with this incredulous smile on her face. She stretches, asks me what's new at school and in my class. I tell her and then go off to do my homework, closing the door behind me.

Later I come to fetch her for dinner. She bolts her food down, helps clear up, ventures into the apartment for a

few minutes and then goes back to lie down.

She's recuperating.

To look at her you'd think that she's returned from a long journey, that she's crossed oceans and deserts, walked barefoot along mountain tracks and along miles of main roads, that her feet have taken her to unknown places. She's come back from far away.

She's returned from a land that's invisible, and yet so close to us.

For weeks she stood in queues waiting for her turn to eat, to wash her clothes, to get a bed somewhere. For weeks she slept with her shoes stuffed under her pillow, her bags jammed between her and the wall, her money and ID card in her pants so they didn't get stolen. She slept on the alert on paper sheets under makeshift blankets or with her jacket as her only protection. For weeks she found herself on the street in the early morning, with no plan and no prospects. She spent whole days wandering in this parallel world, which is ours all the same. All she was looking for was a place that wouldn't turn her away, somewhere she could sit down or sleep.

She tries to take up as little space and make as little noise as possible. She has her shower quickly in the morning, finishes off the coffee left on the stove by my father, doesn't put the light on in the kitchen, walks as softly as possible, keeping close to the walls. She answers with a

yes or a no, accepts just about everything she's offered and lowers her eyes except when she looks at me. Once when I was sitting beside her on her bed, she turned to me and said, 'We're together now, the two of us, aren't we?' I said yes without really knowing what she meant by being together. It's something she often asks: 'We're together, eh, Lou?' Now I know. It means that nothing can ever separate us, it's like a pact between us, a pact that doesn't need words. She gets up in the night and roams around the apartment, turns on the water. Sometimes I think she stays awake for hours. I hear the door to the corridor and her light footsteps on the carpet. One night I surprised her with her face against the window in the living room contemplating the whole of the city from the fifth floor, the impossible darkness, the course of the cars' red and white lights, the halos round the street lights and other smaller bright points, turning in the distance.

Lucas is waiting for me at the school gate. He's wearing his leather jacket and a black bandana to keep his hair out of his eyes. His shirt's hanging below his pullover. He's so big.

'So, Chip, how's it going?'

'She doesn't come out of her room much, but I think she's going to stay.'

'What about your parents?'

'They're cool with it. She's going to get herself sorted a bit and then she can look for a job when she's doing better.'

'They often say that people end up broken, living on the street. After a while they can't go back to living normally.'

'I couldn't care less what people say.'

'I know, but –'

'Those "buts" are the real problem. They mean that nothing ever gets done.'

'You're little, but you've got a big heart, Chip. You're absolutely right.'

We go into the maths class. The others are looking at us, especially Axelle and Léa. Lucas sits down beside me in the second row.

Since the Christmas holidays he's given up on the back of the class and sits with me. To begin with, the teachers couldn't hide their amazement. Lucas came in for all sorts of remarks and warnings. 'Well, Mr Muller, you're keeping useful company.' 'Miss Bertignac may manage to transmit some of her seriousness to you. Make the most of it and you may get out of a detention.' 'Don't seek inspiration from your neighbour's work.' 'You'll find that the air is just as agreeable here as at the back of the class.'

All the same, Lucas hasn't changed his behaviour. He still doesn't take many notes in class, forgets to turn off

his mobile, slumps in his chair, leaves his legs sticking all the way out in the aisle and blows his nose really noisily. But he's stopped knocking over the tables.

I get a kind of respect from the others now. Even Axelle and Léa say hello and smile at me. I don't hear the stifled laughter and whispering any more when I answer a question that no one has been able to work out. I no longer catch meaningful glances being exchanged when I finish my test before the others and the teacher collects my paper.

He's the king, he's cheeky and a rebel. I'm top of the class, timid and silent. He's the oldest and I'm the youngest. He's the biggest and I'm tiny.

In the evening we take the metro or the bus together. He walks me home. I don't want to hang around because of No. He brings me things for her – comics, bars of chocolate, a few cigarettes in a pack that she smokes at the window. He asks me for news of her, worries about how she's doing, says we should come over to his place when she's better.

We have our secret.

In the past few days she's started coming out of her room and showing an interest in what's going on in the house. She suggested to my mother that she could do the shopping, take out the bins and help make the meals. She leaves her door open, makes her bed, tidies the kitchen, does the vacuuming and watches the football on TV with us. She goes out a bit during the day but never gets home later than seven o'clock.

When I get back from school she comes to see me and lies on the carpet while I do my homework, flicking through a magazine or a comic book, or else she stays there, her eyes wide open, stretched out below my room's false ceiling, with its constellation of glow-in-the-dark stars. I watch her chest rise and fall to the rhythm of her breathing. I try to read her thoughts from her face, but nothing's visible, nothing at all.

At the table she watches how I eat. I can see her making

an effort not to make a mistake. She doesn't put her elbows on the table, she sits up straight and looks at me for approval. I'm sure no one has ever taught her how to hold her knife and fork, that you shouldn't slurp your soup or mop up your sauce with the bread. Not that I'm such a great model, even though my grandmother's determined to teach me good manners when I go to stay with her in the holidays. The other day I told No the famous story of what happened last summer at my great-aunt Yvonne's, who's my grandmother's sister and married the son of a real duke. My grandmother took me there for tea. For three days she'd been giving me tons of instructions and had bought me a hideous dress specially. In the car she gave me her final bits of advice and then we drew up in front of their nice house. Yvonne had made some little madeleines and almond biscuits herself. I drank my tea with my little finger in the air. That didn't seem to please my grandmother that much but I was sitting the way she had shown me, the edge of my bottom on the velvet sofa and my legs close together but not crossed. All the same, it was pretty hard to eat cake with a cup and saucer in your hand and not drop crumbs on the carpet. At one point I wanted to 'contribute to the conversation' (as my grandmother says). It wasn't easy to say something in such a solemn atmosphere, but I jumped in. I wanted to say, 'Aunt Yvonne, this is delicious.' I don't know what happened – a sort of short-circuit in my brain – but I took

a deep breath and said calmly and clearly, 'Aunt Yvonne, this is disgusting.'

No laughed so much when I told her. She wanted to know if I got yelled at. But Aunt Yvonne understood that something had got misconnected or that it was nerves, so she just gave a little laugh, a bit like a cough.

It feels as though No has always been here. Day by day we can see her getting her strength back. We see her face change, and the way she walks. We see her raise her head and hold herself upright, look at things for longer.

We hear her laugh at the television and hum the songs that are on the kitchen radio.

No lives with us. Outside winter has arrived. In the street people are walking more quickly, letting the heavy doors of their apartment blocks swing shut behind them, tapping in their entry codes, pressing intercom buttons and turning their keys in locks.

Outside, men and women are sleeping buried in sleeping bags or under cardboard boxes, on top of metro vents or on the ground. Outside, men and women are sleeping in the recesses of a city they're excluded from. I know she sometimes thinks about it, but we never talk about it. I surprise her in the evening, her head against the window, looking at the darkness, and I have no idea what's going through her head. None at all.

Axelle Vernoux's had her hair cut really short, with a longer, highlighted strand at the front. It's the attraction of the day. She's laughing with Léa in the playground. They're surrounded by boys. The sky's blue, it's bitterly cold. It would be simpler if I were like them, if I had tight jeans, lucky charm bracelets, bras and that stuff. Oh well.

The students have come into class without making a noise. Mr Marin calls each name aloud, glances up, then makes a cross. He's getting to the end: 'Pedrazas . . . present. Réviller . . . present. Vandenbergue . . . present. Vernoux . . . absent.'

Axelle raises her hand.

'But I'm here, Mr Marin!'

He looks at her with a vaguely disgusted expression.

'I don't know you.'

She hesitates for a second. Her voice trembles. 'It's me. Axelle Vernoux.'

'What happened to you?'

A buzz goes through the class. She's starting to get teary, she looks down. I hate people to be humiliated like that for no reason. I lean towards Lucas and say 'That's really disgusting.' And this time that's exactly what I mean.

'Miss Bertignac, would you like to share your comment with us?'

A tenth of a second's reflection. No more. A tenth of a second to decide. I don't have the courage, or the nerve. If I had the ability to rewind time, that would be convenient.

'I said: that was really disgusting. You don't have the right to do that.'

'You can go and be a defender of justice in study hall, Miss Bertignac. Collect your things.'

You mustn't mess up your exit. It's not the time to trip over your feet. I tidy my things and count the steps – twenty-six, twenty-seven to the door. Then I'm out. I can breathe again. I'm a lot bigger than I seem.

After class Axelle grabs my arm and says thanks. It only lasts a second, but it's enough. It's all in her eyes.

No's waiting for me at the school gate. We're planning to go to Lucas's. She's wearing a green pullover my mother lent her. Her hair's pinned up and her skin's

smooth again. She looks pretty. Lucas comes over and congratulates me on my exit. He kisses No like a friend. That gives my heart a little tweak. The three of us walk off to the metro.

There are pictures everywhere, Persian rugs, old furniture. The living room's huge. It's all been carefully planned. Everything is magnificent. But every room feels abandoned, like a cinema set, like it had all been made for make-believe. One evening last year Lucas came home from school and found a letter from his father. His father had been preparing to leave for weeks without saying anything, and then one morning he shut his suitcase and closed the door behind him, leaving his keys inside. His father caught the plane and never came back. In the letter he asked his forgiveness and said that Lucas would understand later. A few months ago Lucas's mother met another man. Lucas hates him. Apparently he's the type of man who never apologises on principle, and thinks everyone else is an arsehole. They almost came to blows several times so his mother moved out to stay with him in Neuilly. She phones Lucas and comes back for the weekend from time to time. His father sends money and postcards from Brazil. Lucas gives us the tour. No follows him, asking questions – how does he manage for food, how can he live by himself in such a big apartment, has he never wanted to go to Rio.

* * *

Lucas shows us pictures of his father at all ages, a model ship in a bottle they made together when he was little, the Japanese prints he left behind, and his collection of knives. He's got dozens of them – big, small, medium, penknives, daggers, flick knives, from all over the world. Laguioles, Krisses, Thiers. The handles feel heavy in your hand, the blades fine. No takes them out one by one, makes them dance between her fingers, strokes the wood, ivory, horn and steel. I can tell that Lucas is worried that she'll hurt herself, but doesn't dare say anything. He watches her and so do I. She's good at taking out the blades, folding them back, as if she's been doing this all her life. In the end Lucas suggests we have tea. No puts the knives back in their boxes. I haven't touched them.

We're sitting around the kitchen table. Lucas has got out packets of cakes, chocolate, glasses. I look at No, her wrists, the colour of her eyes, her pale lips, her dark hair. She's so pretty when she smiles, in spite of the gap left by her missing tooth.

Later we listen to music, slumped on the sofa. Cigarette smoke envelopes us in an opaque cloud. Time stands still. I feel as though the guitars are protecting us, that the world belongs to us.

On my father's advice, No's been back to see her social worker. She's gone though various official processes and visits a day centre twice a week that deals with reintegrating young women who've had severe difficulties. There's a phone and a computer she can use and she can make photocopies. There's a cafeteria and they give her luncheon vouchers for meals. She's started looking for work.

My father got some keys cut for her. She comes and goes when she wants, often has her lunch at Burger King because they give change from the vouchers, which means she can buy her own tobacco. She's replying to job ads and trying for work in shops on spec. She never gets back very late. She's spending a fair bit of time with my mother. She tells her about her job search and other things too because my mother's best at getting her to talk. Sometimes when you ask her a question her face

will shut down, and she'll act like she hasn't heard you. Sometimes she'll begin to talk when we least expect it – while my mother is preparing the meal, putting away the washing up, or when I'm doing my homework beside her, times when we're only partly paying attention to her, when she can be heard without being looked at.

This evening my father's getting back late. The three of us are in the kitchen. My mother's peeling vegetables (which is an event in itself), I'm flicking through a magazine beside her. My mother's asking questions, not automatic questions prerecorded on tape, real questions that she seems interested in the answers to. That annoys me a bit. No begins to talk.

Her mother was raped in a barn when she was fifteen. There were four of them. They were coming out of a bar as she was cycling along the road. They made her get into their car. By the time she discovered she was pregnant, it was too late for an abortion. Her parents didn't have the money to send her to England, where she would still have been within the legal limit. No was born in Normandy. Suzanne left school when her stomach started to get round. She never went back. She didn't go to the police because the shame would have been even worse. After the birth, she got a job as a cleaner in a local supermarket. She never held No in her arms. She couldn't bear to touch

her. Until the age of seven, No was raised by her grandparents. At the start people pointed and whispered behind their backs and looked away when they went by. The sighing increased, people predicted the worst. It was like a vacuum all around them, that's what her grandmother told her. She used to take her to the market, to Mass, and came to collect her from the village school. She'd hold her hand to cross the road, with her chin up and her expression proud. And then people forgot. No can't remember if she always knew who her real mother was, but she never called her Mummy. At the table, by the time No was a little girl, her mother refused to sit beside her. She wouldn't have her opposite her either. No had to be kept away from her, out of eyeshot. Suzanne never called her by her name, never spoke to her directly, just referred to her as 'her', from a distance. In the evening Suzanne went out with the local boys on their motorbikes.

No's grandparents looked after her like she was their own daughter. They got clothes and toys out of the attic, bought her picture books and educational games. When she talks about them her voice is stronger, there's a hint of a smile, as if she was listening to a song that brought back lots of memories, a song that would make her emotional. They lived on a farm. Her grandfather worked the land and raised chickens. When Suzanne was eighteen she met a man in a nightclub. He was older than her. His

wife had died in a car accident, along with the unborn baby she'd been carrying. He worked for a security company in Choisy-le-Roi. He was making money. Suzanne was pretty. She wore miniskirts and had long dark hair. He wanted to take her to Paris. They left the next summer. No stayed on the farm. Her mother never came back to see her.

When No was still at primary school, her grandmother died. One morning she climbed a ladder to gather apples, but there would be no apple compote that year because she fell on to her back like a big bag of sweets and lay there in her floral blouse. A trickle of blood came out of her mouth. Her eyes were closed. It was hot. No went to tell the neighbour.

Her grandfather couldn't keep No. He had his chickens and his work in the fields. And a single man with a little girl isn't right. So No went to Choisy-le-Roi to be with her mother and the man from the security company. She was seven.

Suddenly she stops. Her hands are lying flat on the table. She's silent. I really want to know what happened next, but you mustn't rush things. My mother understood that a long time ago, so she doesn't ask.

In the space of a few weeks, No has found her place among us. She's got her colour back and probably put on

a few kilos. She goes with me all over the place, hangs out the washing, fetches the post, smokes on the balcony, helps choose the DVDs. We've almost forgotten the time before, the time without No. We can spend hours side by side without talking. I can tell she's waiting for me to suggest she comes with me, that she likes it when we get into the lift at the same time, on a mission, when we go shopping together, when we come home as it's getting dark. She keeps the list in her pocket and crosses things off as we go, does a final check to make sure we haven't forgotten anything before we go to the checkout as if the world depended on it. On the way back she sometimes stops on the pavement and asks me point-blank, 'We're together, eh, Lou, aren't we?'

There's another question that often comes up, and I answer yes to it too. She wants to know if I trust her, if I have faith in her.

I can't stop myself thinking of the phrase I read somewhere, I can't remember where: 'He who's always assuring himself of your trust will be the first to betray it'. And I try to chase those words out of my head.

My mother has started flicking through magazines again. She's borrowed books from the library and been to a couple of exhibitions. She gets dressed, does her hair, puts on make-up, eats with us every evening, asks questions, tells stories about things that happened to her during the

day or things she's seen. She's regaining the power of speech. She hesitates like a convalescent, loses her thread, picks it up again. She's called her friends, seen some of her old colleagues and bought new clothes.

In the evening when we're round the table, I catch my father looking at her with a look that's tender and incredulous and at the same time full of anxiety as if all of this, which is so mysterious, is just hanging by a thread.

There's something annoying in life that you can't do anything about: you can't stop thinking. When I was little I practised every evening lying on my bed. I tried to create a perfect vacuum, I chased away ideas one after the other, even before they became words. I exterminated them at the root, wiped them out at source, but I always came up against the same problem: thinking about not thinking is still thinking.

One day I tried the question out on No. I reckoned that after all she's been through she might have discovered a solution, a way around the problem. She looked at me in a mocking way. 'Don't you ever stop?'

'Stop what?'

'Wearing out your brain.'

'Well, no, that's exactly what I'm trying to explain to you. In fact, when you think about it, it's not possible.'

'Yes, it is – when you're asleep.'

'But when you're asleep you dream . . .'

'Just do what I do. I never dream. It's bad for your health.'

She doesn't think it's stupid that I cut out the packaging from frozen food, that I collect labels from clothes and textiles, that I do comparative tests to see which brands of toilet roll are longest. She watches me measuring, sorting, classifying, with a smile at the corner of her lips, but it's not an ironic smile. Sitting beside her I cut out words from the papers to stick in my notebook. She asks me if I don't have enough already, what the point of it is, but she helps me look in the dictionary and I can tell that she likes it. You should hear her read out the definition in her broken voice. She separates out each syllable like a schoolteacher in such a serious tone. One day she helped me cut out some geometric shapes for school. She really concentrated. She pursed her lips and didn't want me to speak to her. She was scared of getting it wrong. It seemed so important to her that it should all be perfect to the tiniest fraction of a millimetre. I told her she'd done really well when she'd finished. The thing she likes best is helping me with my English lessons. Once I had to revise a dialogue between Jane and Peter about ecology. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I could memorise it if I read it once or twice – she insisted on being Peter and me being Jane. With a hilarious French accent she tried

ten times to say 'worldwide'. She stumbled, made a face and tried again. We laughed so much we never did get to the end.

When I'm busy she spends a lot of time doing nothing. It's perhaps the only thing that reminds me where she comes from, this ability she has to put herself anywhere at all like an object and wait for the minutes to pass, staring into space, as if something were going to come along and carry her off somewhere, as if everything ultimately didn't count or was unimportant, as if it could all come to an end suddenly.

I go on to the balcony with her when she's smoking. We talk as we're looking at the lighted windows, the shapes of the buildings which stand out in the darkness, the people in their kitchens. I try to find out more about Laurent, her boyfriend. She told me that he went to live in Ireland, but that one day, when she had the money and a new tooth, she was going to go and find him.

In the evenings we arrange to meet at Lucas's. After school I take the bus with him, or when it's too cold to wait for it we go down to the metro. No meets us there. We're alone and free. She spends her days visiting shops, associations, agencies. She gives out her CV left, right and centre, calls numbers that have been recommended to her, but always gets the same response. She left school at

fourteen, she doesn't speak any foreign languages, doesn't know how to work a computer, and has never worked.

With Lucas we invent a better future for her, lucky breaks, fairy tales. She listens, smiling, and lets us invent another life for her, imagine scenes, details, chains of events, invent coincidences and make the impossible come true. I lay little plates on the kitchen table. He puts bananas at the bottom of a frying pan, sprinkles them with sugar and lets them caramelise. The three of us sit there safe from the world. He imitates the teachers and makes me laugh (except Mrs Rivery, because he knows I adore her and French is my favourite subject). He shows us his comics, posters, his drawing and animation software. We listen to music or watch films, slumped on the sofa. I slide between No and him. I can feel the heat of their bodies against mine and it seems as though nothing bad can happen to us ever again.

The two of us go off on foot with our scarves wound around our necks, marching into the wind. We could go for miles side by side. We could go on like that, straight ahead, go away somewhere to see if the grass really is greener, if life is easier, sweeter.

Whatever happens, when I think of her later, I know that these are the images that will come first – full of light and intensity, her face open, her laughing with Lucas, the

woolly cap my father gave her pulled down over her dishevelled hair. These moments when she is truly herself, without fear or resentment, her eyes shining in the blue glow of the television.

The evening that No announced she'd found work, my father went out and bought a bottle of champagne. The crystal glasses had to be rinsed because they hadn't been used for so long. We raised our glasses and drank to No's health. My father said that a new life was beginning. I tried to work out their emotions from their faces – No had pink cheeks so you didn't have to be an expert. I think she was even making a big effort not to cry. When she told us more details, my father looked as though he thought it was less than ideal, but she was so happy that no one would have had the heart to spoil her joy by expressing even a tiny reservation.

Every morning from seven, No works as a chambermaid in a hotel near the Bastille. She finishes at four, but some days she has to stay on to stand in for the barman, who has shopping and deliveries to do. The boss puts her down as part-time and the rest is off the record. She's told

my parents that she'll invite them to a restaurant when she gets her first pay and that she'll leave when she's found somewhere to stay. They both answered simultaneously that there was no rush. She should take her time. Make sure that the job suited her. My mother offered to buy her one or two sets of work clothes, and we all laughed like crazy when we looked in the mail order catalogues and imagined No in polyester floral smocks. They came in all shapes and colours, buttoned at the front or the back, with big pockets, lace aprons, like in Louis de Funès films.

Now No gets up before us. Her alarm goes off at about six. She makes coffee, has some bread and butter and sets off in the dark on foot. At lunchtime she has a sandwich with the boy in the bar, perched on a big stool, but she only takes a quarter of an hour because otherwise the boss blows a gasket (I looked 'gasket' up in the dictionary as soon as she wasn't looking). In the afternoon she changes before she leaves the hotel, unpins her hair, puts away her overall and makes the same journey in the opposite direction back to our house, exhausted. She lies down for a while with her feet up. Sometimes she falls asleep.

Every day she has to do about twenty rooms and all the communal areas – lounge, entrance, corridors. She has no time to daydream, the boss is always on her back. She's never really managed to describe what kind of people go to the hotel. It seems to be a mixture. Sometimes she

talks about tourists, sometimes men on business trips. It's always full. Her boss showed her how to sort the dirty linen from the clean (according to his own personal idea of 'clean'), how to fold the towels without washing them when they've been used once, and how to top up the little bottles of shampoo. She's not entitled to a break or to sit down, and she's not allowed to talk to the guests. One day he caught her smoking on the ground floor, and he shouted that this was her first and final warning.

Her social worker has sorted out her medical cover records. She's waiting for them to be approved. As she's got backache, my father sent her to our doctor and gave her enough to pay for the consultation. She came back with an anti-inflamatory and a muscle relaxant. I read the leaflet that came with them. I know a fair bit about medicines because of all the things my mother used to take and the stuff she still takes. I lock myself in the bathroom to read the dosage instructions, side effects and so on. I continue my research in the medical encyclopedia, I go through each different molecule and their main characteristics. When anyone asks me what I want to do when I grow up, I say A&E doctor or rock singer. That makes people smile. They can't see the connection, but I can.

No's taking her medicine. She seems to be feeling better. She's getting used to it. When she stays on to work behind the bar, she has to be well dressed and serve the guests until the boy gets back. My mother's lent her a

couple of skirts, which are quite fashionable and really suit her.

On Tuesdays when she manages to get away she comes to join us at Lucas's. He downloads tracks from the Internet and plays us new bands. He draws the curtains and we talk about everything and nothing. No tells us about the state of bedrooms first thing in the morning, the things people leave behind, and her boss's schemes to save pennies. She makes us laugh when she imitates him with his fat stomach and his fingers covered in rings. She puts on a deep voice and pretends to be mopping her forehead with a handkerchief, which is apparently what he does all the time. She tells us anecdotes from her day, like the time the door to the toilets was stuck for two hours, with a man inside who eventually broke it down, or the huge fuss that a guest made when he discovered that the gin had been watered down. Lucas recounts stories about our class, describes people. He spends the lessons observing the other students, their clothes, the way they walk, their tics. He describes them in amazing detail, explains the friendships, the snubs and rivalries. He doesn't leave out what he gets up to – his gangster manner, all his zeros, the noisy exits from class and the torn-up work. He doesn't forget to mention how I read my work aloud or to imitate my uptight manner. He can reel off whole paragraphs.

The rest of the week I go to Lucas's on my own for an

hour or two before I go home. He's started a blog and writes posts about comic books, music and films. He asks what I think and reads out the comments he receives. He wants to create a page just for me and has thought of a title: The Infinite Chip. I like being beside him, breathing in his smell, brushing against his arm. I could spend hours like that, looking at him, his straight nose, his hands, the lock of hair that falls over his eyes.

And when he catches me looking at him, he gives me this incredibly sweet calm smile, and I think that we've got our lives ahead of us, our whole lives.

No lived with her mother and the security man in a three-room house in the centre of Choisy-le-Roi. He left early in the morning and came back late. He went round businesses trying to sell them locks, reinforced doors and alarm systems. He had a company car, smart suits and a gold chain on his wrist. No says she remembers him clearly, she'd recognise him if she saw him in the street. He was nice to her. He gave her presents, took an interest in her schoolwork and taught her to ride a bike. He often argued with her mother about her. Suzanne made her eat her dinner in the kitchen. She'd put her plate in front of her as if she was a dog and close the door. She'd come back a quarter of an hour later and shout at No if she hadn't finished. No would look at the clock on the wall and watch the second hand go round to pass the time. No tried not to get noticed. She did the washing-up, the housework, the shopping. She hid in her room as soon as

she could, spending hours in there in silence. When the man played with her, her mother would sulk. They argued more and more often. No could hear the shouting and raised voices through the wall. Her mother would complain that the man got back late and accuse him of seeing another woman. Sometimes No realised that they were talking about her. He criticised her for not looking after her daughter. He'd say 'you're screwing her up' and her mother would cry on the other side of the wall. The man would get back later and later and her mother would pace up and down like a caged animal. No would watch her through a crack in the door. She wanted to hug her, console her, ask her forgiveness. Once when No went over to her mother she pushed her away so roughly that No split her eyebrow on the corner of the table. She's still got the scar.

One night the next year the man left. When he came in from work he played with No, read her a story and tucked her up in bed. Later that night No heard noises and got up. She surprised the man in the hall. He was holding a big bin bag full of his things and wearing a long grey coat. He put the bag down to stroke her hair.

He closed the door behind him.

A few days later a social worker called. She asked No some questions, met her teacher, talked to the neighbours and said that she'd come back. No can't remember if her mother started drinking before or after the man left.

She bought beer in packs of eight and filled her supermarket trolley with bottles of cheap wine. No helped her lug them up the stairs. Suzanne had found a job at the checkout of a local supermarket. She walked to work and began drinking the moment she got back. In the evening she'd fall asleep in front of the TV with all her clothes on and No would turn the television off, cover her up and take off her shoes.

Later they moved to a council house in Ivry, where her mother still lives. She lost her job. Instead of going to school No often stayed with her to help her get up, open the curtains and make the meals. Her mother wouldn't speak to her; she'd point with her hands or her head to say bring me this or that, yes, no, but never thank you. In school No was kept back, hid behind the posts in the playground, didn't play with the other children or do her homework. In class she never put her hand up, only spoke when she was spoken to. One day she arrived with a split lip and bruises all over her body. She'd fallen down the stairs and broken two of her fingers, but hadn't received any treatment. The social worker notified the local authorities.

At the age of twelve, No was put in a foster family. Mr and Mrs Langlois ran a petrol station on a B road on the outskirts of Colombelles in Normandy. They lived in a new house and had two cars, a colour TV with a massive screen, a video recorder and the latest model of food

processor. No always adds that sort of detail when she's telling you something before she goes on. Their three children had left home and they'd applied to be foster parents. They were nice. No lived with them for several years and her grandfather would come to visit her one afternoon a month. Mr and Mrs Langlois bought her clothes she didn't need, gave her pocket money and worried about her bad school results. When she went to secondary school she started smoking and hanging around with boys in the café. She got back late, spent hours in front of the TV and refused to go to bed. She was scared of the dark.

After she ran away several times, she was sent to reform school in the area. Her grandfather still came to see her and sometimes she went back to the farm during the holidays.

It was at the boarding school that she met Laurent. He was a bit older than her and very popular with the girls. They played cards after lessons, talked about their lives and jumped over the wall at night to go and watch the shooting stars. It was there too that she met Geneviève, the girl who works at the superstore, and they became friends straight away. Geneviève's parents had died a few months before in a fire and she had attacks of nerves in class and broke windows. No one could go near her. They called her 'the savage'. She was capable of tearing down the curtains and ripping them to shreds. Every other

weekend Geneviève went to her grandparents near Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives. Once or twice she invited No along and they took the train together. Geneviève's gran met them at the station. No loved their house with its white walls and high ceilings. It made her feel safe.

Geneviève was desperate to get out, No said. When she stopped breaking everything and banging her head against the wall, she managed to pass her exams and went to live in Paris. No began running away again.

We heard a key in the lock and my father came into the kitchen. No broke off. When she's talking to my mother she's careful to swear less. I see clearly how my mother treats her. At eighteen you're an adult. You can tell from the way people talk to you, with a sort of respect and distance – not how you talk to a child. It's not just a question of what you say, but also how you say it. It's a way of treating you as an equal. That's the way that my mother talks to No, in a particular tone, and I admit that it hurts, like little needles being stuck in my heart.

When I was three or four I used to think that ages reversed. That as I got bigger my parents would get smaller. I could imagine myself standing in the living room, frowning, my index finger raised, saying in a loud voice, 'No, no, no, you've had enough Nutella.'

Sunday's the day for home experiments: the reaction of different types of bread at setting 8 on the toaster (sandwich loaf, baguette, Viennese, multi-grain), how long it takes for footprints to vanish on the damp floor, how long a mouth-print takes to disappear from a misted-up mirror, comparative resistance test of a scrunchie and an elastic band from the kitchen, evaporation test of Nesquik compared to instant coffee. After detailed analysis, I make a fair copy of the synthesis of my results in a notebook kept specially for this purpose. Since No's been in the house I've had to take care of her, when she's not at work, I mean. That's a sort of experiment too, at a very high level, a large-scale experiment against fate.

No always comes to see me when she gets back in the evening. She lies on the floor with her feet on a chair and her arms crossed behind her neck. We tell each other

heaps of little things. I like it when time slips between your fingers without you getting bored or anything in particular happening, when there's just the pleasure of the moment. She always demands lots of details about my class – what Axelle was wearing, what mark Léa got, how Lucas got on. She knows virtually everyone's names and asks for news as if it was a soap opera. Sometimes I think she must be missing school and everything, that she'd like to run around a gym in shorts, eat ox tongue in the canteen and kick the drinks machine. Sometimes she asks me to go out with her as though she needed air, as if she had to be outside, so we go for a walk. We have fun playing games with the lines on the pavement, pretending to be tightrope walkers, jumping from square to square. I'd never have thought she'd like that at her age, but No follows me in all my adventures, takes the challenges I set her and almost always ends up winning. The other night we were sitting on a bench. It was incredibly mild for January. We stayed there side by side counting the number of women wearing boots (an epidemic) and the number of bulldogs on leads (also in fashion).

With her, nothing is absurd, nothing is pointless. She never says 'you and your daft ideas', she falls into step. She came with me to Monsieur Bricolage to buy washing lines, which I want to put up in my room (to hang up things I'm experimenting on), she came with me to

collect old metro tickets (because I wanted to understand what code they use and how the inspectors know which tickets are valid and which aren't), and she helped me when I did a test in the bath to see how watertight different Tupperware tubs are. At the beginning she was happy to be my assistant, passing me the tweezers, the scissors, the containers with great speed. Now she takes an active part in my little schemes, suggesting new formulas and even solutions.

I can tell that her job isn't easy, but she doesn't want to talk about it. Perhaps one day when she's got a bit more experience she'll be able to find something else that's better, in another hotel or somewhere else. In the meantime she goes off every morning in the dark and spends all her free time with me.

She found some new clothes in a charity shop – a very short red skirt and two pairs of tight trousers. My mother's given her some pullovers that she wears a lot. She's keen to hang on to her jacket – the one she was wearing when I met her. My mother's had it cleaned but the marks haven't completely disappeared. She's been back to see the social worker about housing entitlement, but with half her income undeclared, she's got no chance. The only thing she can hope for is a place in a social reintegration centre where you can stay for longer.

I don't want her to go though. I remind her that we're

together, she's the one who said it, it's a promise we made to each other. 'We're together, aren't we, No?' Then she nods and stops saying over and over that it can't last.

Lucas writes me little notes in class. He folds them over and slides them in front of me. 'Awful!' when the English teacher wears a strange skirt with fringes and pearls around the hem. 'He can sod off' when Mr Marin has given him his umpteenth zero. 'Where's the gnome?' because Gauthier de Richemont is absent (he's not particularly good-looking and Lucas has hated him since he grassed Lucas up to the principal one day when he was smoking in the toilets). In French class he stays quiet, even when we're doing grammar. It's the class where I'm most attentive. I hate being disturbed, I concentrate so as not to miss the tiniest thing. Mrs Rivery gives me special homework. French class is like a logic puzzle or a deduction, an exercise in dissection without a scalpel or a body.

People who think that grammar is just a collection of rules and restrictions are wrong. If you get to like it, grammar reveals the hidden meaning of history, hides

disorder and abandonment, links things and brings opposites together. Grammar is a wonderful way of organising the world how you'd like it to be.

After giving me a thousand pieces of advice, my father has gone off to Shanghai on business for a few days. I'm not to get back too late, I've got to help my mother to prepare the meals and tell him about the tiniest problem. He telephones every morning and asks to speak to me, he worries about whether my mother is OK, if she's coping without him. I go into another room and give him lots of details to reassure him. Yes, she's doing the shopping and the cooking, she's talking, she bought some material at the Saint-Pierre market to re-cover the old cushions.

In the evening the three of us eat together. As my father isn't here we take the chance to eat things he wouldn't approve of – hamburgers, chips, dauphinoise potatoes. I'm careful not to mention them on the phone to him. My mother couldn't care less about nutrition and good health. She's got other things to worry about.

Yesterday she told No how I learned to read in a few weeks when I was four, first from cereal, washing powder and drinking chocolate packets and then books. Then she told her about the time I fell off the fridge because I'd climbed on to it to find out how the boiler worked. And the time I completely dismantled my Fisher Price

cassette player to see how it worked. Encouraged by No's interest, she told more stories from my childhood: about the loss of my yellow rabbit, accidentally left behind in a motorway service station, the rubber ring in the shape of a duck that I slept with for a whole summer and refused to be parted from, my pink sandals with a yellow star that I wore with socks right until the middle of the winter and my passion for ants.

As I listened to her I thought, this is incredible. My mother has memories. They haven't all been rubbed out. My mother's kept colour pictures in her memory, pictures from before.

We stayed up late. She opened a bottle of wine for No and her, and I had a sip just to taste it. No started asking her questions about her life when she was younger, how old she was when she met my father, what age she was when they got married, had we always lived here in this apartment, how long had it been since she stopped working and so on. When my mother talked about Chloe, I almost fell off my chair, because No gave me a reproachful look as if to say 'why have you never told me?' I kept looking down at my plate, because there were no good reasons. Some secrets are like fossils and the stone has become too heavy to turn over. That's all there is to it.

They finished the wine and then my mother said that it was late and I had school tomorrow.

When I'm really angry I talk to myself and that's what

I did in bed for at least an hour, going through my woes and grievances. It really helps. It's even better when you do it in front of a mirror and exaggerate a bit as though you're shouting at someone. But last night I was feeling tired.

I heard No get up this morning and then the sound of the shower followed by the coffee-maker, but I kept my eyes shut. Since she started working, we've not been able to spend so much time together, so often I get up early to see her for a few minutes, but not today – I didn't want to.

At school I met Lucas, who was waiting for me at the gate. We had a class geography exercise coming up and he hadn't revised for it. I let him see my work, but he didn't so much as glance at it. He doesn't cheat or make things up. He draws people in the margins of a sheet of paper which otherwise remains blank. I love their wild hair and huge eyes and marvellous clothes.

In the queue for the canteen I thought about my mother, how her face and hands are mobile again and her voice is no longer just a murmur. It doesn't matter if there's an explanation, a link between cause and effect. She's feeling better, she's beginning to recover her appetite for speech and company, and nothing else matters.

After school Lucas said he'd buy me a Coke at the Bar Botté. He thought I was looking sad. He told me all the school gossip (he's always up to speed because he knows

everybody). He tried to worm out of me what was up, but I couldn't tell him because everything was mixed up in my head and I didn't know where to begin.

'You know, Chip, everyone has their secrets. And some of them have to stay hidden. My secret is that when you're grown up I'm going to take you somewhere where the music is beautiful and people dance in the streets.'

I can't tell you the effect that had on me, or exactly where it happened – somewhere right in the middle of my solar plexus – but it stopped me breathing. For several seconds I couldn't look at him. I was aware of the point of impact and the heat spreading up my neck.

We stayed like that without speaking and then I asked, 'Do you believe that some parents don't love their children?'

With his father on the other side of the world and a mother who'd drifted off, that wasn't a very smart thing to ask. I often regret the fact that you can't rub out words in mid-air like you can on paper, that there isn't a special pen that you can wave in front of you to remove the clumsy words before anyone can hear them.

He lights a cigarette and stares out of the window. Then he smiles. 'I don't know, Chip. I don't think so. I think it's always more complicated than that.'

The other day No and I took some pictures. Lucas had found a camera in his father's cupboard, an old thing with a film in that you have to get developed. In the same box there were two or three out-of-date rolls of film so we decided to give it a go. We went out while he was at his guitar lesson and took some pictures of both of us using the timer. We invented witches' hairdos (Lucas had lent me some gel to keep our hair up). A few days later we went to pick up the photos together. We sat on a bench near the shop and looked at them. The colours were a bit faded, as if the photos had been pinned up on a wall for a while. She wanted to tear them up. She thought she looked horrible in them all. She said, 'Look how pretty I was before, when I was little.' She took a photo of her as a child out of her bag. It's the only one she has. She'd never shown me it before. I looked at it for ages.

She must have been about five or six. Her fringe is

neatly combed. Two brown tresses frame her face. She's smiling, but there's something about the picture that's painful. She's looking right at the camera. You can't really make out where she is – a library or a classroom maybe – but that doesn't matter. She's all alone. That's clear from the picture, it's there in the way she's standing with her hands on her dress and empty space all around her – a little girl alone in the world. She took the photo back. She was really proud of it. She said again, 'You see how pretty I was when I was little?' I don't know why at that moment I thought of a report I'd seen on the TV a few months ago about children in orphanages. I cried so much that my father sent me to bed before the end.

'Anyway, you don't give a damn . . .'

She's been in a bad mood for a few days. She shuts herself away in her room and gets annoyed about the slightest thing when the two of us are together. That hurts my feelings, but I remember that my father once told me that it's with the people you love the most, the ones you trust the most, that you can allow yourself to be unpleasant (because you know that it won't stop them loving you). I've discovered that No is pinching medicine from my mother, tranquillisers and stuff. I caught her in the bathroom as she was closing the box. She made me promise not to say anything, like I was the kind of person who'd snitch. She needs them to calm her down, but I know that

you can't take just things without a prescription. It says so in my medical encyclopedia. She's promised me that she'll go back and see the doctor when she gets her health card. Things must be getting more difficult for her at work. She gets back later and later and is more and more tired. Some evenings she refuses to come and eat, claiming that she's not hungry. At night she roams around, leaves the water running, opens and closes the window. I've heard her being sick in the toilet several times, even though she's closed the door. My parents don't know because my mother takes sleeping pills and my father's always been a very heavy sleeper (apparently when he was little you could be doing the vacuuming right beside him and he wouldn't wake up). When he got back from China, he gave each of us a good luck charm that you can hang up on a red string. I hung mine above my bed because I know that night-time is when things get lost. No tied hers to the buttonhole of her jacket.

She's had her first pay – half in a cheque and half in cash. Her boss didn't count her overtime. He said that if she wasn't happy she could get lost. The same day she spat in his coffee and mixed it in carefully to dissolve the saliva before she took it to him. She did the same the days after that too. Her boss is fat and dirty. He'd kill his own mother and father to save a euro. He rips off the guests and spends his time doing dodgy deals on the phone. That's what she says. He's always complaining that she

doesn't work fast enough, spends too long in each room when she's got the laundry to do and the corridors and lobby to clean. To make up for being so slow, he reckons she should do some extra hours. The boy in the bar's been sacked and, because he hasn't been replaced, No has to serve the guests every evening till seven when the other barman turns up. She doesn't want to tell my parents about it. She says it doesn't matter, but I'm sure that her boss isn't that hot on workers' rights and all that stuff.

Lucas has given me a hardback notebook, like a blank book, and a felt-tip pen with a special point for downstrokes and upstrokes. He took me with him to buy old CDs and choose a new jacket. He's said he's going to take me to a restaurant near his house where he knows the owner and that one day the two of us will go on holiday with a camping stove and tins of ravioli, an Igloo tent and all that stuff. And the other day I thought he was going to punch Gauthier de Richemont because he bumped into me in the playground and didn't say sorry.

His mother calls sometimes to check he's OK. He wants me to meet her. Once I heard him ask her if she was planning to come back for the weekend, and afterwards I realised he was sulking, but I didn't ask him about it. My parents are happy that I've made a friend in my class. I've not been too specific about his age and his educational achievements. When I go to his I give him news of No, I tell him stories about her boss. We think up plots,

vengeance, reprisals. Each time the situation is different, but the outcome's always the same. We'll let down his tyres, wait for him at the corner of the street with black hoods like in the films, give him such a fright that he'll hand over all his money and abandon his hotel and never come back. Then, after a year and a day No will become the owner. She'll have the walls repainted and the outside spruced up. She'll attract a sophisticated international clientele. People will need to book months in advance to get a room. She'll earn lots of money and organise dances. One day she'll meet an English rock star and they'll fall madly in love. Then she'll open a branch in the heart of London and travel between the two capitals. Or else Laurent will come back. He'll decide to leave Ireland and come and live with her.

What I like about Lucas is that he's able to think up the most improbable stories and talk about them for hours in lots of detail, as if that was all it took for them to come true, or just for the pleasure of the words as if they were true. Even if he doesn't like French class, Lucas is like me: he knows the power of words.

The other day when he was handing back our work, Mr Marin declared in front of the whole class that I was a utopian. I tried to look like I was taking it as a compliment. I checked in the dictionary. Then I was less sure. When he's striding round the class frowning, with his hands behind his back, Mr Marin's carrying in his head

the true reality of life in concentrated form – the true reality of the economy, the financial markets, social problems, exclusion and so on. That's why he stoops a little bit.

Maybe I am utopian, but it doesn't stop me wearing matching socks, which isn't always the case with him. And if he can wear one green sock and one red sock in front of thirty pupils, you can't tell me that he doesn't have his head in the clouds just a little bit.

Unlike most people, I love Sundays when there's nothing to do. No and I are sitting in the kitchen. Her hair's falling over her face. Outside the sky's pale and the trees are bare. She says, 'I need to go and see my mother.'

'What for?'

'I just do.'

I knock on my parents' door. They're still asleep. I go over to their bed and whisper in my father's ear that we want to go to the flea market at Montreuil. No doesn't want me to tell them the truth. My father gets up and suggests coming with us. I quickly discourage him: he should have a rest, it's direct on the metro if we go from Oberkampf. In the corridor he hesitates, looking at both of us one after the other. I try to look reasonable and smile.

We take the metro to Austerlitz station and then an RER train to Ivry. No looks on edge. She's biting her lip.

I keep asking her if she is sure she wants to go, sure that this is the right time. She's got her stubborn look. Her jacket's buttoned up to the neck, her hands thrust in her pockets, her hair in her eyes. When we leave the station, I go over to the map. I love looking for the 'You are here' arrow, finding the red circle in the middle of the streets and crossroads, working out where I am using the grid references. It's just like battleships – H4, D3, hit! Sunk! You might almost think you had the whole world there in front on you on the board.

I see that she's shaking and ask her one last time, 'You sure you want to go?'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure she still lives there?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know?'

'I rang the other day and she answered. I said I want to speak to Suzanne Pivet and she said "Speaking" and I hung up.'

It's not twelve o'clock yet. We go into the estate. From the bottom of the building she shows me the room with closed curtains that used to be hers. We go up the stairs quietly. I feel my legs turn wobbly and I get out of breath. No rings once. And then again. Shuffling footsteps come towards the door. The peephole goes dark and for a few seconds we hold our breath. In the end No says, 'It's me.

Nolwenn.' We hear a child's voice from further away, then whispering, then silence again. We can sense a silent presence on the other side, waiting. Minutes go by. Then No starts kicking the door and punching it too. My heart's beating loudly. I'm worried that the neighbours will call the police. She's hitting it with all her strength and shouting, 'It's me. Open the door!' but nothing happens. So after a while I tug her sleeve. I try to talk to her and take her hands, her face. Eventually she comes with me. I lead her to the stairs and we go down two flights and then all of a sudden she slumps to the floor. She's so pale I'm afraid that she's going to faint. She's breathing heavily and her whole body's shaking. Even through two jackets you can see that it's been much too much for her – too much sadness. She keeps hitting the wall, and her hand's started to bleed. I sit down beside her and take her in my arms.

'No, listen to me. Your mother's not strong enough to see you. Maybe she'd really like to, but she can't.'

'She doesn't give a fuck, Lou. She doesn't give a fuck.'

'No, I'm sure that's not true.'

She's not moving any more. We've got to get out of here.

'You know, with parents and children it's always more complicated than that. But, hey, we're together, you and me, aren't we? You're the one who said it. Come on. Get up and let's get out of here.'

* * *

We go down the last flights. I'm holding her by the wrist. In the street the sun casts our shadows on the ground. She turns back to the building. We glimpse the face of a child at the window just before it disappears. We walk back to the station through deserted streets. I think I can hear the sound of a market in the distance.

Aunt Sylvie's husband has met someone else and wants a divorce. My father has decided we're going to stay with her for three or four days during half-term in February. She needs support. For once my mother agrees. Even if it's been ages since we've left Paris, I feel a bit annoyed. Especially as No can't come with us because of her job. I tried to suggest that I could stay with her because of all my schoolwork, I even claimed that I was in the middle of a few personal experiments which I couldn't leave, but they wouldn't hear of it. That evening I heard my father and mother discussing whether they could leave No alone in the house. They were speaking softly, so I couldn't hear everything, just a few scraps from which I worked out that my mother was inclined in favour and my father wasn't too sure.

We're in her room. There are clothes all over the floor and

the bed's unmade. No's leaning on the window ledge smoking.

'We're going away for a few days next week to stay with my aunt in the Dordogne. My father's sister. She's dead sad because her husband's dumped her. It's not easy, with my cousins and everything . . .'

'How long for?'

'Not long. Just a few days. You can stay here, don't worry.'

'On my own?'

'Well, yes . . . but it won't be for long.'

She's quiet for a few seconds, biting her lip. I've noticed before that she can bite her lip till it bleeds when she's annoyed.

'But can't you stay? Do you have to go?'

Things like this break my heart in two. She throws her cigarette butt out of the window and lies down on the bed with her hands behind her head. She's not looking at me. I stay with her and try to distract her. But floating there above us and growing stronger is the feeling I have that I'm abandoning her.

My father gave her a big speech about trust, responsibility, the future and all that stuff. If he'd had a microphone, you'd have mistaken him for the leader of a political party. You can tell that my father manages a team of twenty-five people at work. Sometimes that rubs off on the way he behaves at home. He loves schedules, plans, graphs. We're lucky he doesn't give us a performance review at the end of the year. When my mother was really ill it was more complicated, but now that she's recovering, he's cooking up a four-stage programme for the return to life.

In my opinion he overdid it a bit with No, but she looked very serious, very concerned. She nodded, yes, she would take care not to lose the keys, yes, she would pick up the post, yes, she would call every day, yes, she had understood that she wasn't to invite anyone round. I've noticed that when you tell people fifty times that you

have faith in them, it's often the case that you're not too sure. But No didn't look annoyed, just a bit worried.

We're leaving tomorrow. This evening No's meeting me at Lucas's for a little party. I've packed all my things, and everything's sorted, apart from the fact that I've got a knot in my stomach. I don't know what it's made of, but it's a knot that makes me scared or worried or both. No rings the doorbell. She's managed to get away from work. When Lucas opens the door he goes, 'Wow!' She's got her miniskirt on and is wearing make-up. It's the first time I've seen her like this, perched on her high heels. She's as beautiful as a Manga character, with her dark hair, pale skin and huge eyes. It's been ages since the three of us were together. Lucas goes out to get her favourite cakes and some cider, which she loves. I have some too. At least three or four glasses. The warmth spreads through my stomach and the knot dissolves. We shut the curtains and settle down on the sofa like we used to, all snuggled up, and we put on a DVD that Lucas has chosen. It's about a young deaf woman who works in a company where no one knows she wears a hearing aid. She takes on a trainee, he's just got out of prison, and falls in love with him. He uses her to plan a crime because she can lip-read. She does everything he asks her to, becomes his accomplice, takes huge risks. She trusts him and loves him and everything, but the day of the break-in she discovers that

he's planning to leave without her. He's got just one plane ticket. But she doesn't leave him, she goes through with it and she's the one who saves him. At the end he kisses her and it's probably the first time a guy has kissed her. It's a great scene because you know that he's not going to leave her. He's understood what she is – her strength and reliability.

In the dark we didn't notice the time go by. It's very late when we leave Lucas's. I phone home to tell them that we're coming. On the way No doesn't say anything. I take her hand.

'Is something up?'

'No, I'm fine.'

'You don't want to tell me? . . . Are you afraid of staying by yourself?'

'No.'

'You know, if we're together you need to tell me so that I can help you.'

'You've already helped me a lot. That's not the problem. But you've got your parents and your school and your family. You've got your life, you know what I mean?'

I can sense my voice beginning to tremble.

'No, I don't know what you mean.'

'Yes, you know exactly.'

'But you're part of my life too. You know, you know I need you . . . and you . . . you're part of our family . . .'

'No, I'm not, Lou. That's what you've got to understand. I'll never be part of your family.'

She's crying. In the icy wind she can hardly control her sobs.

We walk on in silence and I know that something's happened to her, something that can't be said, something that could push you over the edge.

My aunt Sylvie's hair was all a mess. For once she didn't make any remarks about my mother. She must have suddenly realised that you can't always appear as though everything's fine, take care of the cooking and the housework and the ironing, make conversation and everything. What's more she'd lost her all-purpose smile and forgotten to put on her perfect lipstick that stays in place all day. To tell the truth, it made me sad to see her like that. She couldn't even manage to shout at my cousins any more and they were making the most of it. Their room was messier than I'd ever seen it before and they hardly answered when she called them.

No phoned as agreed the first two days. But on the last two days we didn't hear from her. My father tried calling the house, but there was never any reply, not in the morning or the evening or even during the night. He contacted the neighbour downstairs. She listened at the door

and couldn't hear anything. He decided not to panic. We'd planned to go home on Thursday so that's what we'd do. The time seemed endless to me. I didn't even have the heart to play with my cousins, though they had heaps of ideas for making building sites in the garden, tunnels, irrigation systems, country trails, unbelievable things that you can't do in Paris. I stayed inside reading love stories. My aunt has a whole collection of them – *The Courage to Love*, *Honeymoon in Hawaii*, *Beauty and the Pirate*, *Celia's Shadow* and heaps more. I agreed to go on a couple of walks, helped with peeling the vegetables and played Trivial Pursuit, just to put in an appearance. My father and mother's time was completely taken up with my aunt. They spent hours talking; it was like a council of war.

When I got in the car I gave a big sigh of relief, but then the little knot in my stomach came back, and throughout the whole journey it got tighter and tighter. I was looking out for the signs to see how far we were from Paris. We were getting nowhere, we were dawdling, and all the while I was sure we were in a race against the clock. Most people tell you after the event that they had a bad feeling. After it turns out that they're right. But I had a bad feeling, a premonition *in advance*.

My father played a classical music CD in the car. That annoyed me because he always plays sad things with clear voices that make you realise what a mess the world

is in. My mother had fallen asleep with her hand resting on his thigh. Since she's been getting better I can tell they've got closer. They kiss in the kitchen and laugh together with a kind of complicity.

I was afraid. Afraid that No would be gone, afraid I'd be alone like I was before. Eventually I fell asleep because of the trees whizzing past like a garland without lights. When I woke up we were on the Paris ring road. It was very hot in the car. I looked at my watch – it was almost eight. No should be home. My father had tried to call her that morning, but there was no answer.

The ring road was jammed, so we were crawling along at a snail's pace. From the window I could see the camps of the homeless on the verges, under bridges. I saw their tents, tarpaulins, huts. I'd never seen that before. I didn't know that it existed here on the edge of the city. My father and mother were looking ahead. I thought, people live there in all the noise of the engines and the filth and the pollution, in the middle of nowhere. People live there day and night, here in France at the Porte d'Orléans or the Porte d'Italie. Since when? My father didn't really know. In the past two or three years the number of camps had grown. Now they're everywhere, all around Paris, especially to the east. I thought, that's the way things are. The things you can't do anything about. We can put up 600-metre-high skyscrapers, build hotels underwater and artificial islands in the shape of palm leaves, we can invent

'intelligent' building materials that absorb organic and inorganic pollutants from the atmosphere, we can create robot vacuum cleaners and lamps that come on when you get home. And we can leave people to live on the side of the ring road.

My mother opened the door and we went in. At first sight everything looked normal: the curtains were drawn, things were in place, nothing had disappeared. No's door was open, her bed unmade and her things scattered about. I opened the cupboard to check that her suitcase was still there. It was. Then I saw the empty bottles that had been knocked over on the floor, four or five of them. My father was behind me and I didn't have time to hide them. There was vodka and whisky and empty blister packs of pills.

So I thought about adverbs and coordinating conjunctions that mark a rupture in time (suddenly, all at once), an opposition (nevertheless, on the other hand, however) or a concession (while, even if, all the same). I just focused on that and tried to count them off in my head, to make a list. I was incapable of saying anything at all because everything around me, the walls and the light, was getting foggy.

Then I thought that grammar has already foreseen everything – disenchantment, defeat and how crap things are in general.

When you can't sleep at night, worries multiply – they swell and get bigger, and as time ticks by, the future grows darker, the evidence backs up your worst fears, nothing seems possible any more, nothing is calm or surmountable. Insomnia is the dark side of the imagination. I'm familiar with these black, secret hours. The following morning you wake up numb, the disaster scenarios have become fantastical. The day will wipe away the memory of them. You get up, wash and tell yourself that you'll make it. But sometimes the night does announce the colour of the day, sometimes the night reveals the only truth: time passes and things will never be the same again.

No got back in the early hours. I was sleeping lightly. I had left my door open so that I didn't miss her. I heard the key in the lock, the noise light and very soft. At first it

slipped into my dream. I saw my mother in my room. She was wearing the nightgown she had on in the hospital when Chloe was born, open at the front. Her feet were bare and white in the darkness. I woke with a start and jumped out of bed and went along the corridor, my hand sliding along the wall to guide me. Through the door I saw No taking off her shoes. She lay down with all her clothes on, without even bothering to take off her jeans. I went closer and could hear she was crying. It was like a sob of anger and powerlessness, a note that was both high and hoarse, unbearable, a note that could only be created in silence because she thought she was alone. I turned round on tiptoes. I stayed standing behind my door. I felt cold but I couldn't move. I saw my father go into No's room. I heard his voice for an hour, low and firm, but he was too far away for me to be able to understand, and No's voice, lower still.

I got up early. No was still asleep. Late, that morning she had an appointment with her social worker. She'd written it weeks ago on the whiteboard beside the fridge. It was her day off. I found my father having his coffee in the kitchen. I poured some milk into a bowl, grabbed the cereal and sat down opposite him. I looked around. It wasn't the right moment to continue my experiment on the absorbency of various brands of sponge or to start a new test of the power of cupboard door magnets. It was

the moment to save what could still be saved. My father leaned towards me.

'Do you know what's going on, Lou?'

'No.'

'Did you hear her come in?'

'Yes.'

'Is that the first time with the bottles?'

'Yes.'

'Does she have problems at work?'

'Yes.'

'Has she talked to you about it?'

'A bit. Not really.'

Some days you feel like words could take you down a slippery slope and make you say things that it would be better not to.

'Is she still going to work?'

'I think so.'

'You know, Lou, if this doesn't work out, if No doesn't respect our life, if Mum and I decide that it's not good for you, that it's putting you at risk, she can't stay. That's what I told her.'

'. . .'

'Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

I could see time ticking by, and No still hadn't got up, though she had an appointment with her social worker. I

could see the moment coming when my father would look up at the clock and think to himself, there's the proof that it's not working, that it's getting out of hand, that we can't count on her any more. I got up and said, 'I'll go and wake her. She asked me to.'

I went over to her bed. There was a smell I couldn't quite place, a smell of alcohol and medicine. Without meaning to, I trod on things lying about on the floor. When my eyes began to get used to the dark I saw that she had rolled herself up in the bedspread. I shook her gently and then more firmly. It took her a long time to open her eyes. I helped her change her T-shirt and put on a pullover. I heard the front door slam as my father went out. I went back to the kitchen to make coffee. I had the entire day ahead of me. I would have liked to call Lucas but he was spending the whole holiday at his grandmother's.

No eventually got up, but she'd missed her appointment. I took a cloth and wiped the magic slate clean. I put on the radio to cover the silence. Later she locked herself in the bathroom for two hours to take a bath. We couldn't hear anything apart from the sound of the hot water from time to time. In the end my mother knocked on the door and asked if she was OK.

Around lunchtime I found her in her room and tried to talk to her, but she seemed not to hear me. I wished I could shake her with all my might, but instead I just sat

opposite her and didn't say anything. Her eyes were vacant.

It made me think of the way Mum looked after Chloe died, how her eyes fell on objects and people. It was a dead look. I thought of all the dead looks on Earth, the millions, without a spark or light, lost looks that only reflect the complexity of the world, a world saturated with sounds and images and yet so empty.

No has changed job at the hotel. Now she works nights. She works behind the bar till 2 a.m. and stays on until morning to let guests in. It pays better. She gets tips. For the past week my father's been bumping into her in the hall downstairs as he goes off to work. Often he helps her upstairs. She collapses on the bed, never takes off her clothes. One time he picked her up in the hall, her tights torn and her knees all scratched. He carried her upstairs, put her head under the shower and then helped her into bed.

She spends the whole day asleep. My father says she's drinking and taking pills. He's been in touch with her social worker, but there's not much she can do if No doesn't go to see her any more. One night I caught him and my mother in the kitchen in the middle of a confab. As soon as I appeared they stopped talking and waited till

I closed the door before they began again. I wish I could have hidden a microphone or two under a dishcloth.

I can't go out and enjoy the holiday. I stay in and mope around all day. I watch television, flick through magazines. I listen out for noises from No's room, the moment when she wakes up. She doesn't come into my room any more and when I knock on her door at the end of the day she's lying curled up on the bed. My mother's tried to get her to talk, to ask her questions. No lowers her head in that way she has of avoiding looking at you. She's stopped coming into the kitchen and the living room and she slips into the bathroom only when she's sure she won't bump into anyone. She eats with us in the evening before she goes off to the hotel. It's the same scene as a month ago, same lighting, same positions, same actions. Seen from above you would get the images mixed up, you could superimpose them. But from where I'm sitting you can tell how the atmosphere's changed, got heavy.

I don't know why I thought about *The Little Prince* last night as I was falling asleep. About the fox, to be precise. The fox asks the little prince to tame him. But the little prince doesn't know what that means. So the fox explains it to him. I know the passage off by heart:

'To me, you are still just a little boy like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. To you, I am just a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes.

'But if you tame me, we shall need one another. To me, you will be unique. And I shall be unique to you.'

Maybe that's the only thing that matters. Maybe you just have to find someone to tame.

School starts again this morning. It's dark outside. There's a smell of coffee in the air in the kitchen. No's sitting across from my father. Her face is pale and tired. She's probably just got in. My father's fists are resting on the table like two grenades with the pins pulled out. He gets up. He looks like someone who's back in control. In the present situation, that's none too reassuring.

My alarm clock's only just gone off and I'm still in my nightdress and bare feet. He says that No's leaving. I think he repeats it several times because I don't react. No's going to a centre where they'll take care of her. She needs help. No is silent. She's looking down at the table. I pull up a stool and sit down. I'm finding it hard to breathe so I concentrate, slowing the rhythm, opening my mouth like a goldfish to take in air in little gulps. I spread my fingers like palm leaves against the current and keep my feet flat on the kitchen floor.

'You understand, Lou, don't you?'

I don't want to reply. I don't want to hear this or the rest of it – the stories of social security, aid, detox, all these meaningless, microscopic, revolting words on the surface of the sea. We told No that we'd help her all the way, we said we'd be there for her, we said we wouldn't give up on her. I want her to stay, I want to fight, I want us to put up some opposition. Under the table I dig my nails into my palms as deep as possible to fend off the pain, so that it concentrates and flows to where it will leave a visible mark, one that will heal.

I have a shower, get dressed, grab my schoolbag and leave the two of them there. My father still talking, No not answering. If I could, I'd tell her that she just has to do what I did when I was small, clamp her hands over her ears to make a vacuum, stop the noise and the din, make the deafening world silent.

I run to the bus stop. I'm scared of being late for Marin's class. I haven't eaten anything and my head's spinning. I get on through the back door and squeeze my way between people. There are all these words that are getting mixed up above me, and the noise of the engine, and the street. The blood is throbbing in my temples. I look at the electronic display with the names of the stops going by and the estimated time till the terminus. That's all I look

at, the red letters sliding from left to right, and I count the vowels to stop me crying.

I get to school just after the bell goes. Lucas is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. My eyes are burning as I go towards him. When I get to him he wraps his arms around me. I feel the weight of my tiny body all at once against his, his breath in my hair.

In books there are chapters to separate out the moments, to show that time is going by and things are changing, and sometimes the parts even have titles that are full of promise – 'The Meeting', 'Hope', 'Downfall' – like paintings do. But in life there's nothing like that, no titles or signs or warnings, nothing to say 'Beware, danger!' or 'Frequent landslides' or 'Disillusion ahead'. In life you stand all alone in your costume, and too bad if it's in tatters.

I would have done anything so that No could stay with us. I wanted her to be part of our family, to have her bowl and her chair and her bed, of just the right size. I wanted Sundays in wintry colours, the smell of soup drifting from the kitchen. I wanted our lives to be like other people's. I wanted everyone to have their place at the table, their time for the bathroom, their part in the

domestic routine, for there to be nothing to do but let time drift by.

I thought you could halt the course of things, break the programme. I thought that life could be different. I thought that helping someone meant sharing everything, even the things you can't understand, even the darkest stuff. The truth is that I'm just a Little Miss Know-it-All (that's what my father says when he gets angry), a cheap plastic computer for children that plays games and riddles with a stupid voice that gives the right answer. The truth is that I can't even do up my shoelaces properly and that I'm fitted with crap functions that are useless. The truth is that things are what they are. Reality always gets the upper hand and the illusion disappears without you realising it. Mr Marin is right. Dreaming is pointless. And there's no point hoping to change the world, because the world is so much stronger than us.

My father's gone to work and my mother is out shopping. I don't imagine No hung around for long. What did they expect? That she'd patiently wait for a place to come up in some help or reintegration centre? That all they had to do was explain the problem to her nice and slowly? 'No, you can't stay with us, we're no longer able to look after you. We're going to resume the course of our lives. Thank you for coming and see you soon . . .'

* * *

When I got back she had gone. I looked at her empty room – she'd made the bed, hoovered. Everything was in place, as if she'd noted and recorded everything, as if she knew that one day everything would have to be put back. I looked at the Moroccan rug that she liked lying on, the lamp that she left on all night. I thought of her suitcase on wheels, full to bursting, bumping along the pavement. I thought about it getting dark and the deserted streets and I closed my eyes.

She'd left the clothes my mother had lent her neatly folded on the table. She'd emptied the medicine cabinet. That's what my father told me. She took everything in it – all the sleeping pills and tranquilisers.

On my desk she left the photo of her when she was little, slipped into a grubby envelope. I looked around to see if she'd left a note, but there was nothing. Nothing but her eyes looking at the lens, looking at me.

No rang the doorbell. Lucas was alone, watching TV. She was holding her case in one hand and two bags in the other. Her jacket was open and she wasn't wearing anything under her pullover. You could see how white her skin was, the veins in her neck. He grabbed her things and asked her in. She lent on the hall table to move forward, she could hardly stand up. He took her to his mother's room and took off her jeans and her socks. He turned down the quilt and put her to bed. He phoned me in his gangster's voice and I understood at once.

His mother had been round a few days before. She'd filled the fridge, picked up some clothes, left another cheque and gone off. That gave us some time.

I went round the next day. No got up when she heard my voice. She came over and hugged me. We didn't say anything. Not a word. We stayed like that and I don't

know which of us was holding the other, which of us was the more fragile. No had emptied her case in the bedroom, spreading out her things on the floor – old clothes she'd got from charity shops or from Geneviève, a make-up bag, a children's book her grandmother gave her, her red miniskirt. On the bedside table she'd put the big ashtray from the living room. She'd turned over the photographs, closed the bedroom curtains and didn't open them again.

Several times my parents asked me if I'd heard from her and I put on a sad face and said no.

We're going to take care of her. We won't say anything to anyone. We'll keep it a secret just for ourselves, because we're strong enough.

My mother's wearing mascara and lipstick, she's bought new clothes, cut back on her medication and asked for an appointment with the HR director at her old company. She may go back to work part-time. My father has started working in Chloe's bedroom, he's washed down the walls, pulled up the carpet and is thinking of putting down a wooden floor. He's going to choose high-tech furniture to make a nice office. In the evenings they flick through Ikea and DIY catalogues, doing sums, making plans, talking about holidays and making changes. They agree about everything. The two of them sit on the sofa with their legs crossed as if everything were perfectly normal, as if it had always been like this.

They think I'm spending a bit too much time at Lucas's, so I have to invent ruses and pretexts for getting back late. I'm working with François Gaillard on a new presentation, I'm doing research in the library, I'm taking

part in a workshop to prepare for the open day, I'm helping Axelle Vernoux, who's having trouble with her maths. I've never mentioned the fact that Lucas lives alone and I talk about his mother as if she lived there so that they don't get suspicious. My father has rung No's social worker several times. He's worried. She's still got no news. She said it's often like that – 'You know, you can't trust street people. They come and they go.'

At home I keep myself occupied as best I can. I've finished my study of frozen food. There are certain ingredients you find in most dishes: wheat gluten, rice starch, corn starch or modified wheat starch, sodium phosphate or baking soda. I made the most of the chance to do additional research on food additives, which themselves are an inexhaustible field of further study. Emulsifiers, thickeners, stabilisers, conservation agents, antioxidants and flavour enhancers fill my free time, my time without No.

If you toss a coin ten times, chances are heads or tails will come out on top. But apparently if you toss it a million times heads and tails will come out equal. It's the law of large numbers. And as I like experimenting myself with laws and theorems, I'm tossing a coin and keeping a tally on a piece of paper.

I've made a huge garland for No, a garland made specially for her with all sorts of stuff: an empty yoghurt

pot, a single sock, a plastic wallet for a metro card, the remnants of a corkscrew, an ad for a karate club, an Ariel net intended for washing powder tablets, a Betty Boop hair clip I found in the street, a 10 yuan note that my father brought back from China, a Schweppes can (empty), crumpled tinfoil, a money-off coupon from Marché U worth fifty cents. I'll give it to her when she has somewhere she can hang it up. Meanwhile I've put it up in my room and told my mother that it's conceptual art. She didn't look too convinced.

Lucas gives me the news when I get to school each morning – when she got back, whether she could stand, whether she spoke to him. We take ourselves off and talk in hushed voices, we come up with theories and construct strategies. Lucas emptied two bottles of vodka down the sink. No went crazy. He told her that she couldn't drink at his place, his mother might drop by unexpectedly one day, or the cleaning lady. It was risky enough as it is. He hasn't given her a key and he's insisted that she comes home before he leaves.

Since she started working nights No hasn't been the same. There's something within her like a huge feeling of exhaustion or disgust, something we can't grasp. Every day after school we hurry to the metro and go up the stairs to Lucas's in silence. Lucas opens the door and I hurry into the room. I'm scared of finding her dead or the

room empty, with no trace of her things. No will be lying on the bed, sleeping or dozing. I look at her bare arms and the rings round her eyes. I would like to take her face in my hands and stroke her hair and for everything to be erased.

When we get back she gets up and has two or three slices of bread washed down with a litre of coffee. Then she has a shower and puts her clothes on and joins us in the living room. She asks for news, worries about whether it's cold outside, compliments me on my skirt or my hair, tries to put on a brave face, rolls a cigarette, sits down beside us. Her gestures are abrupt and clumsy. I'm sure she's thinking about the evenings the three of us spent together watching films or listening to music not so long ago, that she thinks of them like a time that's gone and can't be recovered because there's a veil over everything now and it can't be reached.

Before she goes out she puts on her make-up and pins up her hair, slips her high heels into a plastic bag and closes the door. If it's not too late I go part of the way with her before heading home. We talk about this and that in the way we used to. We kiss goodbye, she attempts a smile. In the cold I watch her frail shape go off go round the corner. I don't know what lies in wait for her, where she's going without turning back.

At school we talk in hushed voices, we've got codes to describe what's going on, complicit smiles and knowing looks. If we took it any further it'd be like in the war, when the Righteous Among the Nations hid Jewish children. We're the Resistance. I love how Lucas looks in the morning when he arrives and gives me a little nod from a distance to let me know that it's OK. He takes care of everything in his tough guy way, he goes to the supermarket, cleans the kitchen, tidies up after her, and turns out the light when she's fallen asleep. The cleaning lady comes once a week. He has to shove No's things in a cupboard, make the bed, air the room and get rid of all traces of her presence. We're perfectly organised. We've prepared what we need to say if his mother rings, we've imagined emergencies and adapted explanations, in case she turns up unannounced, in case my parents take it into their heads to come and get me, in case Mrs Garrige,

the cleaner, twigs what's going on. We've got explanations and arguments at the ready.

Some days No gets up before we get back and watches TV while she's waiting for us. She smiles when she sees us. Some days she'll dance on the sofa, and everything seems so simple because she's there. Other days you can hardly say a word to her, days when she only opens her mouth to say shit and crap and fuck, when she kicks the chairs and armchairs, when you'd like to tell her that if she's not happy then she can go home. The problem is that she has no home. The problem is that she's unique because I've tamed her. I'm sure that Lucas loves her too. Even if some days he says he's had enough or says 'What's the point?' Even if sometimes he says, 'We're not strong enough, Lou, we're not going to make it.'

One evening I walk with No as far as the hotel. It's dark. She decides she wants to buy me a drink in return for all the ones I've bought her. We go into a café. I watch as she downs three vodkas one after the other. It makes me feel sick, but I don't dare say anything. I don't really know what I'd say.

Another day I'm walking with her not far from the Bastille. A man calls to us, 'You couldn't spare me some change, could you?' He's sitting on the ground with his back against the front of a vacant shop. No glances at him

and walks on without stopping. I nudge her. 'That's Momo, your friend from Austerlitz.' She stops, hesitates for a few seconds, then turns back and goes over to him. She says, 'Hi, Momo,' and holds out a twenty-euro note. Momo gets up, stands in front of her, straight as a die, and looks her up and down. He doesn't take the money. He spits and sits down again. I don't know what she's thinking as we walk off. She's not part of his world any more, but she's not part of ours either. She's neither inside or outside, she's between the two in no-man's-land.

Another time, when she's just got up and Lucas has gone out to do the shopping, we're both in his big living room. Her neck is covered in red marks. She claims that her scarf got stuck in an escalator. I can't say to her 'yeah, right', never mind get angry with her. I can't fire off a barrage of questions any more like I used to and keep on at her until she replies. I can tell that she's happy to see me. She gets up when I arrive as soon as she hears me. I know she needs me. The rare times I didn't see her because it was too risky, she's panicked. That's what Lucas says.

She's saving money, adding notes one at a time to a brown envelope. One day when she's got enough she's going to be with Laurent in Ireland, that's what she's told me. She doesn't want me to tell Lucas about it. Not the envelope,

not Laurent, not Ireland – nothing. I promised with my hand held up like when I was little and swore on the life of my mother. I've never dared look in the envelope. She only ever talks to me about Laurent when Lucas isn't there. She tells me what they got up to when she was in the boarding school, the tricks to get seconds in the canteen, the card games, the night-time adventures.

They were in love. That's what she says.

They told each other their stories and their dreams. They wanted to run off together far, far away. They smoked and drank coffee together in the common room, the grey walls covered with American film posters. They talked quietly for hours, the plastic cups staying there after they'd gone, with dried-up sugar at the bottom. Before being sent to the school, Laurent had held up a bakery and stolen an old lady's handbag. He'd been placed in a young offenders' institution. He knew how to play poker. He'd get crumpled notes out of his pocket and place big bets just like that. He taught No, Geneviève and the others to play. They'd play late into the night after lights-out in the silent dorms. She could tell when he had a winning hand. And when he was bluffing, when he was cheating. Sometimes she caught him red-handed. She'd throw her cards on the table, leave the game and he'd come running after her, catch up with her, hold her face in his hands and kiss her. Geneviève used to say, 'You two are made for each other.'

Often there are questions I'd like to ask No about love and stuff, but I can see that the time's not right any more.

When he turned eighteen, Laurent left the school. On his last day he told No that he was going off to live in Ireland to look for work and to have a change of scene. He told her he'd write to her as soon as he was settled and he'd wait for her. He promised. Geneviève went off the same year to do her exams. No was seventeen. The next year she started running away again. One night she met a man in a bar in Paris. He bought her a drink and she knocked them back one after the other, looking him straight in the eye. She wanted to feel them burn her insides, she laughed and laughed and cried until she fell off her chair in the middle of the café. The fire brigade came and then the police and that's how she found herself in an emergency centre for minors in the fourteenth district a few weeks or months before I met her. She hid Laurent's letters somewhere in a place only she knows. Dozens of letters.

When she stands up and has no strength any more, when she doesn't want to eat because she feels so bad, I go close to her and whisper, 'Think of Laurent waiting for you over there.'

I watched for Lucas's outline in the playground till the very last moment. I went upstairs after everyone else. I slipped into class just a second before Mr Marin closed the door. Lucas isn't here.

Mr Marin's taking the register. Léa's wearing a tight black pullover and silver rings. Axelle is back to her natural hair colour. She's wearing lip gloss. Léa turns round to me to ask if Lucas is ill. They smile at me with an air of complicity. Mr Marin starts the lesson as usual. He walks between the rows, his hands behind his back. He never looks at his notes, it's all in his head – dates, figures, trends. You could hear a pin drop.

It's crazy the way that things can seem so normal. If you take the trouble. If you don't look under the carpet. You could almost imagine you're in a perfect world where everything turns out fine.

We're more than half an hour into the lesson when Lucas knocks on the door. He comes in. Mr Marin lets him sit down, continues developing his idea. Lucas takes out his folder, takes off his jacket. We're taking notes. Is Marin actually going to let him get away with it?

No.

The attack's about to happen.

'Mr Muller, is your alarm clock broken?'

'Eh, no sir, our lift. I was stuck in the lift.'

A sound of hilarity runs through the rows.

'You expect me to swallow that?'

'Well, yes . . . I mean, it's the truth.'

'Mr Muller, I will soon have been teaching for thirty-five years. You are probably the fiftieth student to try the lift trick on me.'

'But –'

'At least show a little imagination. You've led us to expect better from you. If a herd of goats had blocked your way, I would have sympathised.'

'But –'

'You can put your jacket back on. Go and see the deputy head.'

Lucas gets up, takes his jacket and leaves without looking at me. He seemed worried. He just slunk out. That's not like him. Not a mutter or a mumble. He didn't even drag his feet or slam the door. Something must have happened. Something has happened.

* * *

After class, Mr Marin follows me down the stairs and calls to me. 'Miss Bertignac, your lace is undone.'

I shrug. My lace has been undone for the best part of thirteen years. I just stretch, step over it, or take a bigger step. It's a question of practice. Mr Marin passes in front of me, a smile on his lips.

'Take care of yourself.'

I didn't say a word. He knows something's up.

Outside the English class I catch up with Lucas. I don't get the chance to ask the question: No hasn't come home. He left the key under the mat. He says she's in a bad way – she's drinking in secret, she really stinks of booze, she's doing crazy things, anything at all. He's talking quickly and loudly, no longer being careful. You can probably hear him at the other end of the corridor. He says, 'We're not going to make it, Lou. You've got to understand, we can't leave her in that state. She's taking things. You can't talk to her any more. You can't fight against that . . .'

'She talks to *me*.'

Lucas looks at me as though I'm crazy. He goes into the class and I sit beside him.

'You just don't get it, Chip. You don't want to get it.'

I'm leaning against my tree, which is his too, and all around us there are bursts of laughter and shouts. I don't

know what to say. If the world's an equation, I don't understand it, the division between dream and reality, I don't understand why things collapse, tip up, disappear, why life doesn't keep its promises. Axelle and Léa are coming towards us arm in arm, looking purposeful.

'Hi!'

'Hi.'

'We wanted to invite you to a party at Léa's next Saturday.'

Lucas smiles.

'OK, that'd be cool.'

'Are you on MSN?'

'Yeah.'

'OK, give us your address and we'll send you an invite.'

I don't like this. We've got other fish to fry. We're battling against the current. We've taken an oath. A silent oath, but that makes it all the more important. Nothing else counts. Nothing else must count.

I don't say anything. I listen to them talking about music. Lucas will bring his iPod along, he's got loads of stuff on it, enough to last all night, the best tracks in the world and so on. They laugh, go into ecstasies, then turn to me. 'And Lou, you will come this time, won't you?' I watch them laughing with him; they're fifteen and have busts that fill their bras and bums that fill their jeans. They're pretty, there's no denying it. There's not even some little flaw that would make them ugly – nothing.

Lucas brushes the hair from his eyes and all of a sudden I don't like that gesture any more, or the way he has of standing in front of them, all confident and relaxed.

I sulk a bit for the rest of the day. Sulking helps. It's like shouting at someone in front of the mirror, it's a relief. But you mustn't keep it up too long, just enough to make your point. You have to know when to stop before things begin to fester. That's why I dragged him off after maths: 'Come on, let's go to your place. I'll buy you a Swiss brioche.' They're his favourite because of the cream and those little chocolate chips. He *loves those chips*, that's what I was thinking in the queue at the baker's, he loves *me* but he doesn't realise. Or perhaps he thinks I'm too small to kiss. Or maybe he resents me dumping No on him. Or he's in love with Léa Germain. Or . . .

The problem with theories is that they multiply at the speed of sound if you let them.

We go into the apartment with an enormous bag of pastries. The curtains are drawn. In the gloom we make her out stretched out on the sofa. She must have crashed there when she got back this morning. Her T-shirt is pulled up on her stomach, a thread of saliva has trickled from her mouth, her hair's hanging down, she's lying on her back, exposed. We tiptoe towards her. I hardly dare breathe. Lucas looks at me and in his eyes I can read in

capital letters: what did I tell you?

It's true that there's an empty bottle by her side. And it's true that the whole room stinks of booze. And it's true that she's not doing well. Not much better than she was before. But before she was all alone. Before, no one worried about where she was sleeping or if she had anything to eat. Before, no one worried about whether she came home. Now we're here. We carry her to bed when she can't do it by herself, we're afraid when she doesn't come home. That's the difference. Maybe that doesn't change the course of things, but it makes a difference.

Lucas listens to me. He doesn't say anything. He could say, 'You're really little, Chip, but you're really big too.' But he stays silent. He knows I'm right, that makes the difference. He ruffles my hair with his hand.

I used to think things were the way they are for a reason, that there was some hidden meaning. I used to think that this meaning governed the way the world was. But it's an illusion to think that there are good and bad reasons. Grammar is a lie to make us think that what we say is connected by a logic which you'll find if you study it, a lie that's gone on for centuries. Because I now know that life just lurches between stability and instability and doesn't obey any law.

They've got the boxes out of the cupboard and have put them on the floor to sort through them. They're both sitting there, with objects and papers and newspapers spread out all over the carpet in front of them. My father's taken two days off work to do the big tidy-up before the painting gets done. I go into the living room with my bag on my shoulder and they say hello. My mother doesn't deviate from her usual questions – did you have a good day? You didn't have too long to wait for the bus? She's wearing her hair down and has got on the earrings my father bought her for Christmas. They've got two piles – things to keep and things to chuck. They look happy. They're creating order. They're getting organised for a new life. Different. Of course, they haven't forgotten No, not quite. Sometimes they talk about her in the evening at dinner. My father tries to reassure me, we'll hear from her one day, he's sure. He keeps calling the social worker, almost every week.

* * *

I put my bag in my room, open a couple of cupboards in the kitchen, grab an apple and then go back into the living room. They're working silently. My mother looks questioningly at my father with an object in her hand. He gives a nod and she puts it in the good pile. Then he consults her about a pile of old newspapers. She makes a face and puts them to the side. They understand each other.

'I've been invited to a party next Saturday at a friend's place.'

'Oh, that's nice.'

My father's the one who'll make the decision. My mother hasn't even looked up.

'It's in the evening. From eight.'

'I see. Until what time?'

'I don't know. Midnight maybe. Whenever you like.'

'That's fine.'

There. 'That's fine.' Everything's perfect. Everything is for the best. It's all settled.

I go back to my room and lie down with my arms crossed, like No.

I don't like this new life. I don't like it when things get erased, lost. I don't like pretending to have forgotten. I don't forget.

I don't like it when it gets dark. These days which disappear into the shadows for ever.

I look for memories, precise images, exact light. Those hours spent playing with Playmobil with my mother, stories we made up on the carpet and would begin again a thousand times. We shared out the plastic characters, men, women and children, we gave them voices and names, they went for picnics in the yellow truck, slept in tents, celebrated their birthdays. They had bikes, glasses, hats that came off and smiles that didn't. That was before Chloe.

I remember an autumn evening later, I must have been nine or ten. I'm with my mother in a park. The sun's going down, there's almost no one left. The other children have gone, it's time for their baths, pyjamas, damp feet slipped into slippers. I'm wearing a flowery skirt and little boots, my legs are bare. I'm playing on my bike and my mother's sitting on a bench keeping an eye on me from a distance. On the main path I get up some speed, my jacket's done up, the wind's in my hair, I'm pedalling as hard as I can to win the race. I'm not afraid. At the turn I skid, the bike slides off to the side, and I go into the air and come down and land on my knees. I stretch out my legs. It hurts. I've got a big cut, encrusted with earth and gravel. I scream. My mother's on her bench a few metres away, looking at the ground. She didn't see it. She can't hear. The blood's started to come and I'm screaming louder. My mother doesn't move, cut off from everything around her. I'm screaming as loud as I can, emptying my

lungs. I've got blood on my hands. I've bent the injured knee in front of me. My tears are burning my cheeks. From where I am, I can see a lady get up and go over to my mother. She puts her hand on her shoulder. My mother looks up and the lady points towards me. I turn up the volume. My mother waves me over. I don't move. I keep crying. She stays where she is, paralysed. So the lady comes over and crouches down beside me. She takes a hanky out of her bag and cleans around the wound. She says it'll need disinfectant when I get home. She says, 'Come on, I'll take you to your mother.' She helps me get up, picks up my bike and leads me to the bench. My mother gives me a weak smile of welcome. She doesn't look at the lady, doesn't say thank you. I sit down beside her, no longer crying. The lady goes back to where she was, on her bench. She's looking over at us. She can't help it. I'm gripping the lady's Kleenex tight in my hand. My mother gets up and says we're going. And we go. We pass the lady, who hasn't stopped looking at us. I turn back to her one last time. The lady gives me a wave. And I understand what it means, a wave like that, as the night falls in the empty park. It means you're going to have to be strong, you'll need lots of courage and you'll have to grow up with that. Or rather without.

I walk along with my bike. With a clank the park gate closes behind me.

'Mr Muller, stand up and count to twenty.'

Lucas is looking rough this morning – you can tell from his eyes, which are all screwed up, his messy hair and the way he looks as though he's not really here. He sighs ostentatiously, gets up in slow motion and starts counting.

'One, two, three –'

'Stop! That is your mark, Mr Muller: three out of twenty. You've known about this homework for two weeks; your average for the second term is five and a half. I'm going to ask the deputy head to suspend you for three days. If your plan is to repeat this year for a second time, you're going about it the right way. You may leave.'

Lucas collects his things. For the first time he looks humiliated. He doesn't protest or knock anything over. Before he goes he turns to me. It's as though his eyes are asking me to help him, not to leave him, but I sit there

looking haughty with my back straight and my head high, concentrating as though I'm on *Questions for a Champion*. If I was equipped with an automatic central-locking function, that would be convenient.

He's going to go to Léa's party. He's going to go without me. I've tried hard to imagine the scene, with me in the middle. I've tried to imagine myself in the middle of the party, with spotlights and music and sixth formers and everything. I've tried to find images that seem authentic – me dancing in the middle of the others, me talking to Axelle with a glass in my hand, me sitting on a sofa laughing. But it doesn't work. It's quite simply impossible. It's inconceivable. It's like trying to imagine a slug at an international dragonfly convention.

I look for him in the playground. He's talking to François Gaillard, waving his arms about. From a distance I can see that he's smiling at me and I can't help smiling back, even if I'm angry, because I don't have a carapace like a tortoise or a shell like a snail. I'm a tiny slug in Converse. Stark naked.

At the school gate Léa and Axelle are talking loudly. They're with Jade Lebrun and Anna Delattre, really pretty girls in their last year. I realise at once that they're talking about Lucas. They haven't seen me. And I manage to stay hidden behind a post and listen.

'This morning he was at the brasserie on the boulevard

with a really strange girl. They were having coffee.'

'Who was the girl?'

'I dunno. She wasn't a girl from school. She didn't look too good, I can tell you. You should have seen her – she was like a corpse or something. She was crying and he was shouting at her like anything.'

Lucas comes over to me. They stop immediately. The two of us head to the metro. I say nothing. I look at my shoes, the lines on the pavement, and count the cigarette butts.

'Chip, you should come with me on Saturday to Léa's. It would do you good.'

'I can't.'

'Why?'

'My parents don't want me to.'

'Did you ask them?'

'Course I did. They don't want me to go. They think I'm too young.'

'That's too bad.'

Oh yeah. He doesn't even care. He's got his life. Everyone has. In the end, No's right. You mustn't mix things up. He's seventeen. He's not afraid of people looking at him, of looking ridiculous; he's not scared of speaking to people, or of girls. He's not afraid of dancing or of fading into the background. He knows how handsome and tall and strong he is. And that gets on my nerves.

* * *

We walk on in silence. I don't want to speak to him any more. But we still have to go to his place because of No. When we get there, she's ready to go to work. I suggest going with her, and wave goodbye to Lucas. We go down the stairs because the lift makes her feel sick. In any case you can tell that she feels sick in general. Her heart's been damaged.

When we're in the street she takes a cardboard box out of her bag. She hands it to me.

'Here, these are for you.'

I open it and discover a pair of red Converse, the ones I've been dreaming about. Sometimes not bursting into tears is really complicated. If I could find something to count right away that would be convenient. But nothing comes, apart from the tears in my eyes. She's bought me a pair of Converse that cost at least fifty-six euros. The red ones I wanted.

'Oh, thank you. You shouldn't have. You should keep your money for yourself, for your trip . . .'

'Don't worry about that.'

I'm walking beside her. I'm digging in my pocket for a Kleenex, even an old one, but I can't find one.

'Does Lucas want you to leave?'

'No, no, don't worry. Everything's fine.'

'He hasn't said anything?'

'No, no, it's all fine. Don't fret. It'll be fine. OK, I've got to go now. You go home. I'll go on alone.'

I look up and see the billboard we've stopped under. It's a perfume ad – a woman is walking along the street, looking decisive and dynamic. She's got a big leather bag over her shoulder, her hair's flying, she's got a fur coat on and behind her you can make out a city at dusk – the front of a big hotel, sparkling lights. And there's a man too, turning to her, captivated, enthralled.

How did this difference between posters and reality start? Did life stop being like posters, or did posters part company from life? When did it start? What went wrong?

I let No go, carrying her plastic bag. She turns the corner. Nothing's shining around her. Everything's grey and dark.

When I get home, I chuck my things down on the floor. I like making it clear that I'm annoyed. That way my mother has to make an effort to talk to me. It never fails. She's dressed and wearing make-up. If you don't look too closely she looks like a regular mother who's come home from work. She follows me into the kitchen. I haven't even said 'hi' or 'good evening'. I open the cupboard and close it again. I'm not hungry. She follows me to my room and I slam the door in her face. I hear her shouting on the other side. That really surprises me. It's been about three billion years since she last shouted at me. She's complaining that I never tidy anything up, that I leave stuff lying around, scissors, glue, string, she's sick of my conceptual experiments and my resistance tests, sick, sick, sick. The apartment is such a mess. No one can say a word to me. What's the matter?

That's indeed the question: what is the matter? A

general question, one that everyone asks without being able to give an answer. What's up with the world? I don't open my door. I stay on the other side and don't answer.

There's the fact that I'm also sick, sick, sick of being alone, sick of her talking to me like I'm the caretaker's daughter, sick of words and experiments, sick of everything. And the fact that I'd like her to look at me the way other mothers look at their children, that I'd like her to sit by my bed at night and talk to me before she turns off the light, without giving the impression that she's following the marks on the floor and that she's learned the dialogue by heart.

'Lou, open this door!'

I don't say anything. I blow my nose as loud as I can, just to make her feel a bit guilty.

'Lou, why won't you talk to me?'

I don't want to talk to her because she doesn't listen, because she always seems to be thinking of something else, always looks lost in her own world or as though she's swallowed a pill the wrong way. I don't want to talk to her because she doesn't know who I am any more, because she always seems to be puzzling over what the link between the two of us is, how we're related.

I hear a key in the lock. My father's back from work. He calls to us. I hear his footsteps and him talking to my mother in a low voice. I can't make out what they're saying. She goes off.

'Hey, Rebel Smurf, you going to let me in?'

I open the door. My father hugs me.

'What's this all about?'

I look at my crumpled Kleenex in my hand. I feel really sad.

'Well?'

'Mum doesn't love me.'

'Why are you saying that? You know it's not true.'

'Yes, it is, and you know it. She hasn't loved me since Chloe died.'

Then my father goes really pale, as if something has drained him, and I regret saying it, even if I think it, because my father's spent vast amounts of energy for years hiding the truth.

Several minutes go by before he replies, and I sense how hard it is for him to find the right words, the words to create the illusion, the reassurance.

'Lou, you're wrong. Mum does love you. She loves you with all her heart. She doesn't know the best way to show it, it's a bit like she's got out of the habit, like she's waking up after a long sleep, but in her dreams she was thinking about you, lots, and it's because of you that she's woken up. You know, Lou, Mum was really ill . . . She's doing better, much better, but you need to give her time.'

I said 'OK' to show that I understood. I even smiled. But at the same time I thought about the salesmen outside

the Galeries Lafayette, perched on their little stands, the ones who do demonstrations with those incredible machines that cut vegetables into cubes and slices and circles and strips and roses, that grate and press and crush and mix. In fact, do absolutely everything and last a lifetime.

Even though I wasn't born yesterday.

No's turned on the TV and is sitting beside me, having fetched the bottle of vodka she had hidden under her bed. We're watching the final of *Pop Idol*, nestled in the sofa. She's pretending to be interested in the jury's comments, but I can see deep down that she doesn't care at all. She doesn't care about anything.

My parents are at the theatre. They've allowed me to stay at Lucas's and are coming to get me after the play. I've brought a quiche lorraine that my mother made and stopped off on the way to buy some lychees and mangoes, which No loves. She's not working tonight. It's her day off.

We're waiting for Lucas. He has his guitar lesson on a Thursday. The teacher told his mother that he misses half his lessons, and since then he's been going to avoid trouble. He isn't back yet. As it gets later I think to myself that it can't be his lesson that's making him so

late. As it gets later I think of Léa's party which I didn't go to. Maybe they've arranged to meet up for a drink, maybe she's wearing her black V-neck pullover, the lowcut one, and her really tight jeans. Maybe he's sick of it all too.

For Océane, you press 1, and for Thomas, 2. No prefers Océane and I'd vote for Thomas because he looks like Lucas, but thinner and with smaller eyes, because Lucas's eyes are big and black.

On TV, everyone has white teeth. I asked No why she reckoned that was. Was it down to a lighting effect or special toothpaste that only stars used or even a product they put on before the broadcast, like a varnish that makes their teeth shine.

'I don't know what it's down to, Lou. You ask too many questions. You'll end up blowing a fuse up there.'

She's in a bad mood. She's curled up on the sofa. I'm watching her secretly. She's as thin as the day I first met her. She looks like she hasn't slept in weeks. Her eyes are shining as if she's got a fever. As soon as you look at the world around you, you ask questions. I look around, that's all. At this rate she'll never be strong enough to go to Ireland. I can see her hands are trembling and she can't stay standing. I see there isn't much vodka left. Alcohol protects her, she told me, but in spite of that she doesn't want me to drink – not a drop. I'd like to be protected by something too, I'd like someone to tell me everything

will work out, that none of it's too serious.

During the ads, I try to distract her.

'You know, in Ireland they've got manors, castles, hills, amazing cliffs, even lakes.'

'Have they? So are you coming with me?'

That's not a casual question. Not just a question for the sake of it. She's waiting for an answer. Maybe life in Ireland is like the posters on the metro. Maybe the grass *is* really green and the sky so huge you can see infinity. Maybe life in Ireland is easier. Maybe if I went with her, she'd be saved. It's late and Lucas isn't back.

'I dunno. Maybe . . .'

Laurent works in a pub in Wexford and lives in a big house in the country with dogs and cats. It's got loads of rooms and a huge kitchen. He often has friends round and they make chicken kebabs and have bonfires in his garden, sing old songs, play music and spend the night outside, rolled up in blankets. He makes a lot of money and doesn't notice what he spends. He wanted a house for her. He sent her photos. She saw how big the trees were, the amazing light and the bed where they would sleep. Laurent has fine long hands, curly hair, he wears rings with skulls on them, a long black coat, according to No. She wrote to him to tell him that she's coming soon, when she's got the money.

* * *

Ocean's won. There are tears rolling down her cheeks. She's got a big smile. She's beautiful. No's fallen asleep. She's finished the vodka. I look at the time again. I'd love to know how much money there is in the envelope. I'd like to lie down beside her, close my eyes and wait for something that sounded like music, something that would enfold us.

I didn't hear Lucas. He's standing in front of me. I'd like to yell what time do you call this to come back at in a stern voice, ask where he's been, stand in his way until I get an explanation. I'd like to be twenty centimetres taller and know how to get angry.

My father calls. They're leaving the theatre and will be there in twenty minutes. The phone must have woken No. She opens her eyes and asks me who won. She's pale. She mutters, 'I'm going to be sick.' Lucas reacts and grabs her under the arms to take her to the toilet. She steadies herself on the basin and leans forward. He supports her for as long as it lasts. Money is sticking out of her jeans pocket – fifty-euro notes. There are quite a few of them. Behind her back I grab Lucas's arm and silently point to them. Then Lucas goes crazy. He pins her against the wall and starts yelling. He's beside himself. I've never seen him like this. He shouts, 'What are you doing, No? What are you doing?' He gives her a powerful shake. 'Answer

me, No. What is it that you're doing?' No grits her teeth. Her dry eyes look at him without replying. She gives him that challenging look and I know what it means. He's got her by the shoulders and I'm shouting, 'Stop, stop!' and trying to restrain him. She looks at him as if to say: 'What do you think? How do you think you can get out of this? Get out of this shit?' It couldn't be clearer if she'd shouted it. That's all I can hear. When he eventually lets go, she falls to the floor and splits her lip on the edge of the basin. He slams the door and leaves her there, reeling.

I sit down beside her and stroke her hair. I get blood on my hands and I say, 'It's OK,' and I repeat it several times, but deep down I know it's not OK, deep down I know that I am too small, and that he's right: we're not strong enough.

Before I met No I thought that violence meant shouting and hitting and war and blood. Now I know that there can also be violence in silence and that it's sometimes invisible to the naked eye. There's violence in the time that conceals wounds, the relentless succession of days, the impossibility of turning back the clock. Violence is what escapes us. It's silent and hidden. Violence is what remains inexplicable, what stays forever opaque.

They'd been waiting for me for twenty minutes just outside of the building. I opened the car door and got into the back seat. My mother's perfume floated in the car, her smooth hair covering her shoulders. They called me three times from downstairs before I came down. They were getting impatient. I didn't want to talk. I didn't feel like asking them if they'd enjoyed the play or had a nice evening. The image of No was seared on my retina. No

sitting on the floor with blood in her mouth. And Lucas superimposed, hitting the wall with his fist. My father put the car in the garage and we went up in the lift. It was after midnight. He wanted to talk to me. I followed him into the living room. My mother went to the bathroom.

'What's going on, Lou?'

'Nothing.'

'Yes, there is. Something's going on. If you could see your face, you wouldn't say nothing.'

'. . .'

'Why are you always hidden away at Lucas's? Why don't you ever invite your friends home? Why don't you want me to come up and get you? Why did you make us wait twenty minutes although I rang you to tell you we were on our way? What's going on, Lou? We used to get on pretty well, the two of us. We told each other things. We talked. What's gone wrong?'

'. . .'

'Is No at Lucas's?'

I couldn't stop myself looking up at that. Shit. My father's too good at this. Even though we were forearmed.

'Tell me, Lou. Is No staying at Lucas's?'

'Yes.'

'Did his parents take her in?'

'Yes . . . well . . . no. His parents aren't there.'

'His parents aren't there?'

* * *

There's silence for a few seconds while my father takes this information in. All the times I've been round to Lucas's, all the times we've been left on our own, in that big apartment, without the merest hint of a parent, all those times I've been economical with the truth. All that time they've been busy elsewhere. He hesitates between reproach and hurricane. He takes a deep breath.

'Where are his parents?'

'His father's gone off to live in Brazil and his mother lives in Neuilly. She sometimes comes back at the weekend.'

'And No's been living there since she left here?'

'Yes.'

'Why didn't you tell us anything?'

'Because I was afraid you'd have her sent to a centre.'

My father is furious. Furious and tired.

He listens to me and I try to explain. She doesn't want to go to a centre because they're dirty, because they throw you out at eight in the morning, because you have to sleep with one eye open if you don't want your stuff to disappear, because she needs to leave her things somewhere, to have a place to put herself. She doesn't want to look after herself because there'll be no one to wait for her when she gets out, no one to take care of her, because she doesn't believe in anything any more, because she's all alone. I'm crying and I go on speaking. I'm saying whatever comes into my head – 'Anyway, you don't care

– about No or about me. You threw in the towel, you gave up, tried just to maintain appearances, to paper over the cracks. But I didn't – I didn't give up. I'm still fighting.' My father looks at me with all those tears on my face and the snot coming out of my nose. He's looking at me as if I've gone mad, but I keep on going, I can't stop now. 'You don't care because you're inside in the warm, because it disturbs you to have someone who steals in the house, someone who's not doing well, because it messes up the cosy picture, because you'd rather look at the Ikea catalogue.'

'You're talking nonsense, Lou. That's not true and you know it. Go to bed.'

My mother comes out of the bathroom. She must have heard me shouting. She comes into the living room in her silk dressing gown. She's brushed her hair. My father gives her the gist in a few words. I must say he demonstrates a great ability to summarise, which Mrs Rivery wouldn't fail to emphasise. My mother says nothing.

I'd like her to hug me, to stroke my forehead, my hair. To hold me till I stop sobbing like she used to. I'd like her to say, 'Don't get upset' or 'I'm here now.' I'd like her to kiss my wet eyes.

My mother stands there at the living-room door with her arms by her sides.

* * *

And I think that there's violence in that too – in her inability to reach out to me, to make the gesture which is impossible and so forever suspended.

I recognised her voice on the phone at once. It was ten o'clock in the morning and she was begging me to come. She repeated 'please' several times. She had to leave. Lucas's mother knew something, she was coming round to check. I had to come – now. She couldn't manage by herself. She repeated that several times: 'I can't manage by myself.'

The moment we'd dreaded so much had come. The moment when No would have to pack up her things yet again. It was ten o'clock and something had snapped, the breaking point had come. It was ten o'clock and I was leaving, leaving with No. I looked in the cupboard for the sports bag I use on holiday. I opened it on the bed. I put in a few clothes, grabbed my toothbrush and toothpaste and slipped them into my sponge bag with a few pink cotton wool balls and a body lotion that my mother bought me. I was finding it hard to breathe.

My parents had gone out early to the market. I'd leave without seeing them, I'd leave like a thief. My throat was tight. I was going to leave because there was no other solution, because I couldn't leave No, couldn't abandon her. I made my bed, pulling the undersheet tight and smoothing the quilt. I plumped up the pillow. I folded my nightdress and put it in the top of my bag. In the kitchen I found some packets of cakes, which I put in too, as well as some kitchen roll. I sat down with a sheet of paper, picked up my pen and tried to find the right words, words that were adequate. 'Don't worry. Don't tell the police. I've chosen another life. I must follow it through. Follow it through to the end. Please forgive me. Don't be angry with me. The time has come. Farewell. Your daughter who loves you.' But everything seemed laughable, ridiculous. Words weren't up to the seriousness of the moment, they couldn't communicate the necessity or the fear. I closed the pad without writing anything. I put on my parka and closed the door behind me. I hesitated for a second on the doormat, my heart thumping so fast that that second seemed like an eternity. But it was too late. My bag was at my feet and I'd left my key inside.

I walked quickly in the street, crossing without looking. The cold tore at my throat. I climbed the stairs four at a time. At the top I needed several minutes to get my

breath back. Lucas opened the door. He looked almost as freaked out as she did. He was running around, grabbing things at random, coming back to the bedroom and going out again. No was sitting motionless on the bed.

She looked at me imploringly. It was the same look she'd given me at the station the day she asked me to talk to her, only more serious, more tense, the kind of look you can't refuse. I looked for her clothes, got them on her, and then her shoes, and combed her hair with my fingers. I picked up the things that were lying on the floor and stuffed everything I came across into her case. I made the bed and opened the window wide to air the room.

Eventually No got up to get the brown envelope hidden in a cupboard. I helped her on with her jacket. I warned Lucas that my father had probably called his mother. He needed to get his story straight. We were all standing in the hall. Lucas saw my bag lying by the door. I pulled No's sleeve. We had no time to lose. The question was hanging in the air between us. What are you doing, Chip? Where are you going? I met his eye. He looked at a loss. I pressed the lift button without turning round.

I caught up with No in the street. It was icy cold. I was holding her case in one hand and my bag in the other. There was no one about. I thought, I'll never go home again, I'm outside with No for the rest of my life. I thought, that's exactly how things collapse, without

warning, no sign, that's how things stop and never return. I'm outside with No.

We stopped off at a café nearby. No had money. She wanted me to have a croissant, some bread and butter and a big hot chocolate. She insisted. She wanted us to have a super-mega breakfast. She rummaged in her envelope to find a twenty-euro note. We devoured every last crumb. It was warm and we were doing fine. I reckoned that her body was gradually calming down. She was shaking less. She ordered another hot chocolate and smiled. We stayed there at least two hours because of the warmth. It reminded me of the first times we'd spent together when I was preparing my class presentation. When anything seemed possible. I didn't really want to be sad so I told her about a cartoon about the fear of flying, which I'd seen a few days before on TV. She laughed. After that we didn't really talk that much, we just looked around, at people coming and going. We listened to conversations at the counter. I'm convinced she would have fallen asleep if she'd shut her eyes.

It was her idea to go to the cinema. She begged me again. I was annoyed she was spending all this money. She told me not to worry about that and said 'please' again: 'It's been so long since I went.' We took the metro to the Forum des Halles. She was carrying my bag and her case. From a distance, we must have looked like two tourists trying to find their hotel.

We chose the film at random and settled down in our seats. No had bought popcorn. She'd insisted. We shared the tub as we watched the ads. I felt sick to my stomach, but I wanted to make her happy. I think she dozed off towards the end, but I pretended not to have noticed. In any case, she didn't miss much. We spent the rest of the afternoon in the same area. She wanted to buy everything, a scarf for Lucas, hair slides for me, packets of cigarettes. She'd stop in front of every window, go into the shop, insist that I choose a candle or gloves or postcards. She kept saying 'don't worry' and patting her jacket where the inside pocket was. I had to pretend I didn't like anything to stop her buying any and everything. I wasn't able to stop her buying a hat for each of us, the same style. At about six we sat down on the edge of the Fontaine des Innocents. It was still just as cold. We shared a huge waffle with Nutella and stayed there, passing remarks about the people going by. She asked me to invent lives for them, like before, so I invented a heap of things, each more incredible than the last, to make her laugh. I talked so that I'd forget I'd left home without leaving a note. I talked so that I wouldn't think about my parents' faces, their worry, about the possibilities they must have considered without really believing them. By now they must have been starting to get scared, maybe they'd have gone to the police. Or maybe they'd waited, thinking I'd be back. They trusted me, they were still

waiting. I saw my mother on the sofa, my father pacing up and down, his eyes fixed on the clock in the living room. It had got dark. I was afraid of not being up to it, of not having the strength. I chased the image away but it came back, getting clearer. I pushed it far away. I wanted to be here, with No.

It suddenly seemed so simple to me, to leave your own subset, follow a tangent with your eyes closed and walk on a wire like a tightrope walker, to leave your life. It seemed so simple to me. It made me dizzy.

'We're going to Ireland. I'm coming with you.'

No turned to me. Her nose was red, her hat pulled down to her eyes. She didn't reply.

'Tomorrow we'll take the train from Saint-Lazare to Cherbourg. It's either direct or you change at Caen. When we get to Cherbourg we'll find the port and get tickets. There's a boat every other day. If I'd known I'd have looked at the dates. Anyway, it doesn't matter, we can wait. And from Rosslare there are trains to Wexford.'

She blew on her fingers to warm them up. She looked at me for ages. I could tell that she was on the point of crying.

'Do you want me to come with you or not?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to go tomorrow?'

'Yes.'

'Have you got enough money?'

'I told you. Don't worry about that.'

'The ferry takes eighteen hours. Do you promise that you won't spend the whole time being sick?'

We high-fived to show that we agreed and laughed really loud. People turned to look at us, but we couldn't care less – we were going to Ireland, where the grass is greener and the sky is bigger, where No would be happy and where Laurent was waiting for her. I followed the trail of our breath in the cold air and stamped my feet to get warm. We got up and wandered aimlessly. It must have been at least ten o'clock at night. There was less traffic. We continued along the boulevard Sebastopol towards the Gare du Nord. We were in the street. On the street. We had nowhere to sleep. No told me to put on my hat and to tuck my hair up in it so that no one would recognise me. Every step I took beside her took me further from home. Every step in the dark seemed irreversible. My stomach hurt.

No knew a hotel at the top of the boulevard de Strasbourg where we could spend the night.

The owner recognised her. He asked for the money up front. She got some notes out of the envelope. I really wanted to see how much was left, but she put it away immediately. He handed us a key and we went up to the

room. The walls were yellow and dirty, it smelled of urine, the sheets didn't look clean, and the black marks in the shower showed that it hadn't been cleaned in ages. This is where she used to sleep before I met her, when she had the money. This was the kind of dump where she crashed when begging had gone well. This was what you had to pay for a filthy, cockroach-infested room.

No went out again to get a McDonald's, but she didn't want me to go with her. I stayed by myself. I couldn't get warm. I looked for the radiator and then I thought about my room at home, my rainbow quilt cover, my old yellow rabbit sitting on a shelf, the sliding doors on my cupboard. I thought about my mother, the way she called me from the kitchen, how she wiped her hands on a tea towel that hung by the sink, the way she read, sitting across the armchair, the way she looked over the top of her glasses. I thought about my mother and I missed her. All of a sudden it was like a lift had gone into free fall. Luckily No came back. She'd got two cheeseburgers, fries, milk shakes and a little bottle of whisky. We sat on the bed and she started drinking. She insisted that I should eat while it was still hot. I thought about the envelope. There couldn't be that much left, what with all we'd spent. And then I told myself that if we had to we could hitch to Cherbourg and then we'd manage somehow or other. No got off the bed. She was in her pants and T-shirt. She held the bottle as if it was a microphone and pretended to be

Johnny Hallyday. It was dead funny. We sang at the tops of our voices, 'I love you, I love you and light the fire.' We couldn't have cared less about people banging on the wall, or about the smell of old fish, or the creepy-crawlies on the walls. We were together, we were going away, making tracks, going far away.

By the time we went to bed she'd finished the bottle. The fries had fallen on the floor. I hadn't put on my night-dress with the moon on it and I hadn't brushed my teeth. I felt lighter than I'd ever felt before. Everything was calm in my head. It had never been so calm and clear. There were no more words, only gestures. I pushed everything off the bed, we slipped between the sheets and I turned off the light.

The next day I woke up at eight. It was Monday. I thought about Lucas. I thought about Mr Marin, who must have been in the middle of doing the register. I recited it in my head along with him – Amard, present. Antoine, present. Berthelot, present. Bertignac? . . . I saw it as if I was there. I heard the silence in class. Miss Bertignac isn't here. Miss Bertignac has left the building. Miss Bertignac has disappeared.

No woke up much later. I'd had time to tidy the things in her case, to throw away what was left of the McDonald's and to count the flowers on the wallpaper. We took the metro to Saint-Lazare. Opposite us was this man who kept getting up and sitting down. He'd check his collar and adjust his tie, pull at his shirt, look at himself in the window, then a few seconds later go through the same motions in the same order. It was proof, if proof were needed, that something was up. You just had

to take a look around. All you had to do was see how people looked, to count the ones who were talking to themselves or had gone off the rails – you just had to take the metro. I thought about life's side effects, the ones you never see on any sign or instructions. I thought that violence was there too. I thought that violence was everywhere.

Wind rushed into the station. We stood beneath the departure board to read the timetables. The next train for Cherbourg left in two hours. We looked for the waiting room to put down our things. We sat on the plastic chairs furthest from the door. No rolled a cigarette and said, 'I'll get the tickets, you wait here.'

I don't know how I didn't notice that she took her case with her. I don't know how that was possible. I asked her again if she had enough money. And she told me again not to worry. I had my nose stuck in my bag looking for a Kleenex as she went off. I didn't see. I didn't see that she was pulling her case behind her.

I waited for her to come back. I didn't get worried. I waited half an hour. And then another. And then I noticed that her case had gone. I waited a bit longer, as there was nothing else to do. Because she couldn't have gone off without me. I waited because I was afraid that we might miss each other. I waited without moving so that she knew where to find me. I waited and it got dark. I

think I may have dropped off for a bit. At one point I thought that someone was standing behind me tapping on my shoulder. I opened my eyes, but she wasn't there. I waited and she didn't come back.

It was cold and I hadn't eaten a thing since the morning. In the end I left the station. The last train for Cherbourg had gone. I crossed in front of the station to the rue Saint-Lazare. There was noise all around, cars, buses, horns, and my head was spinning. I stopped. I stroked the little Opinel knife that I always take with me, the one Lucas dropped in the playground one day without realising.

No had left me. No had gone off without me.

It didn't go quiet around me. Street life just went on, noisy and chaotic.

We're together, aren't we, Lou? We're together. Do you trust me? You trust me. Call me when you leave. I'll wait for you at the bottom of the steps. I'll wait for you outside the café. It's better paid. I work nights. Let me sleep. I'm knackered. I can't move. We don't need to talk about it. We're together, Lou. If you tame me you'll be unique in the world for me. I said I wanted to speak to Suzanne Pivet. If you could come with me. You ask too many questions. You'll end up blowing a fuse. We're together, eh? So are you coming with me? I'll never be part of your family, Lou. What do you

think? So you're coming with me? I'll go and get the tickets. This isn't your life, do you understand? It's not your life.

I walked home. I didn't have a metro ticket. I didn't have anything. I walked for ages. I didn't hurry and I didn't ask for help. I didn't go to the police. My trainers hurt. Something had happened to me. Something which I should understand, which I should take stock of for my whole life. I didn't count the traffic lights or the Clios. I didn't do multiplication in my head. I didn't try to find synonyms for 'disinheritance' or definitions of 'complexion'. I walked looking straight ahead. I knew the way. Something had happened that had made me grow up. I wasn't afraid.

I rang the bell and my mother opened the door. She looked haggard and her eyes were red. She stood there in front of me, no sound seemed to be able to come from her mouth, and then she pulled me towards her without a word. She was crying like I've never seen her cry before. I

don't know how long this silence lasted, her body jolted by sobs. I hurt all over but I didn't have tears. I hurt as I've never hurt before. Eventually she said, 'You gave us a fright.' And she went into the living room to call my father at the police station.

Lucas and I waited a few weeks before going to see Geneviève. We took the metro to Porte de Bagnolet and got a trolley to take into the superstore. We drifted with the music. There were bells ringing and Easter eggs the whole length of one aisle. We queued at the deli counter. Geneviève recognised me and said that she had her break in a quarter of an hour and would meet us in the cafeteria.

We waited for her with a Coke under the orange plastic lights. She came without her lace cap. She only had twenty minutes. Lucas offered her a drink but she said no. I thought that No might have sent her a card, as a reminder of the times they'd spent together with Laurent, that she might have wanted to tell her that she was over there, that she was doing better. But Geneviève hadn't had any news. She told us exactly the same story about Laurent that No had told us – how he'd gone to Ireland,

had promised to write. But No never heard anything. Neither then nor later. It was one of the teachers who told them that Laurent was living in Wexford and working in a bar. He never wrote.

Mr Marin has just finished the lesson. We've taken notes and didn't miss a word, even though it's the last day of term. He's finished quarter of an hour early so that we have time to tidy the classroom. We take the posters down from the walls, roll up the maps and the graphs carefully. The classroom is going to be painted during the holidays. Next year Lucas is going to live with his mother in Neuilly. They're selling the flat. Next year I'm going to go to Léa Germain's birthday party. She made me promise in front of witnesses. Next year Mr Marin won't be here. He's retiring. He looks a bit sad, even though he complains that standards go down every year, getting worse and worse. He'd rather give up before he's teaching sheep.

I'm looking at the bright sky through the window. Are we such tiny things, so infinitely tiny, that we can't do anything?

* * *

We're leaving the class. The students' goodbyes are heartfelt. 'Goodbye, Mr Marin. All the best. Have a good holiday. Have a good rest.' Just as I pass the door he calls me back.

'Miss Bertignac?'

'Yes?'

'I'd like to give you something.'

I go over to his desk. He hands me an old book, covered in brown paper. I take it and open it at the first page. I don't have time to read the title, just his name written in blue ink: Pierre Marin, 1954.

'It's a book that was very important to me when I was a young man.'

The paper is yellow. The book seems to have survived four or five hundred years. I say thank you. I'm alone in the class with him, overwhelmed. I've no idea what to say in situations like this. I'm sure it's a really nice present. I say thank you again. I go towards the door and he calls me back again.

'Miss Bertignac?'

'Yes?'

'Don't give up.'

Geneviève has gone back to her counter. She gave us a little wave before she went.

I must have looked miles away, because Lucas moved his hand gently in front of my face.

He brought his mouth to mine and I felt his lips first, then his tongue, and our saliva mixed.

And then I understood that, of all the questions I ask myself, the one about which direction your tongue goes in isn't the most important.