

Anna

Anna lands on her feet with perfect agility. The wall has scraped her belly and grazed her knees. They're stinging a bit. 'Careful of the dog,' says Pierre. She has dropped two metres; nothing scares her any more. She passes along the facade, skirts the gravel that would wake everyone, and balances her way along the string of large pebbles that edge the fuchsias, Mrs Letourneur's favourite flowers – 'in a tie', she tends to clarify, with blue hortensias. Morning is coming. Triumphantly, Anna hops onto the road and looks at Pierre at the window. She thinks she can see a smile on his face – she's not sure – and gives him a quick wave. Her moving shadow sets the dog barking and leaping after her. Anna breaks into a run, giddy on this night she will never forget.

In the blue darkness, her body is outlined sharply, crisp and buoyant and full of new assurance. She can't get over what has just happened and she laughs as she reflects that she's no longer the same, that maybe it'll show, that tomorrow her mates, her mother, her father, her sister, people who know her will ask her if she's all right, they'll be on the lookout for a change, her hairstyle perhaps and she'll answer 'no', obviously – though yes, it'll all have changed. The more she thinks about it, the clearer it is. Even those stone-built houses she's been seeing since forever, this road she's been treading since she was very little and which she knows by heart, all of it seems different to her. Life isn't the same anymore.

Now night enfolds her. It's a night like the fulfilment of a wish made on blowing out a candle. Anna reflects on all those times when grief has governed her, on the strength it took to keep going, on the things she would like to do from now on. Everything seems possible to her. She needs to be quick about it, respond to every aspiration that shows itself. And even if, one day, it should all come undone, if it all has to stop, she will know that there was this moment. She traces its outlines in her mind in order to remember it, for afterwards. Eyes closed, fists clenched, she senses her heart about to crash against her ribs. So this is what it's like, to live. She runs and her body feels no tiredness. In the distance, she notices the cut-glass curves of the moon as it pierces through the branches. Some of the trees seem to be floating, trunkless, in the dark sky.

When she gets to the river, she pauses to catch her breath. The air is carrying along a faint melody: the hoot of an owl, the rustling of leaves, the cracking of branches, and the darting current with its old familiar noise. Anna plunges her hand into the water. Ripples are formed at the touch of her fingers, then large graceful arcs and on this canvas that laps at her skin she tries, and fails, to distinguish what is reflected: the neighbouring stones, her face, the shadow of the big weeping willow that sways alongside. She drinks, dabs her neck with cool fingers, and sets off again.

The road rises in a false flat. She carries straight on, past the corner of 'Death Road'; she passes in front of Christ on the cross, defying the stitch that is setting in: she can hear her father saying it'll ease. For ten years at least, he's been training for the marathon, but he cries off as soon as there's any talk of going. She runs with him, normally. On Sunday mornings they go as far as the tidal bore. In identical stride, they speed straight towards the wave and, when the soil is not too soggy, they arrive at the old ruined presbytery on the other side without ever uttering a word, except when Anna feels the small needle behind her ribs. When that happens, her father tells her to empty her lungs, completely, to breathe out in puffs. 'There you go, once more and... breathe in!' Anna knows what to do. She empties

her lungs and holds her breath, the way her father taught her. The needle goes away. The air tickles her throat. She hurtles onto the ground.

The wind gathers up the decorative pampas at the half-open gates to the estate. Anna swerves the abandoned chairs on the lawn, the tangle of sprinkler hose, and kneels as if praying by the granite lion that watches the door. He has prominent muscles and a heavy mane. On the staircase, there is a photo of her sitting next to him, she must be three, her arm is draped around his neck. Her mother always enjoyed seeing her pose and taught her to smile, even if she didn't feel like it. That's the way memories form in her mind, under the semblance of being happy ones.

Anna slips her hand between the two big paws and takes hold of a key. She catches her breath and stares into the vacant eyes of the animal that has seen everything, has been seeing everything for such a long time; she considers the secrets he is keeping. Things come back to her mind. The impulse is strong. Anna feels it coming and slipping away, suddenly nostalgic for a moment she'd have liked to hold onto.

In the house, the smell of the evening meal is lingering, an odour of boiled vegetables and wine. The silent rooms await invasion. Anna reflects on how few hours she has before the alarm goes off, on the maths test at 10:30, on the ten euros she owes Lucie. Yesterday, having three hours to fill, they walked along the main road to town and their favourite store. Anna tried on a very red lipstick. She didn't recognise herself in the mirror and she liked being somebody else. Lucie said to her, 'Get it! It really suits you.' And Anna replied, 'I haven't got enough on me and anyway my mother will never let me wear that.' So Lucie opened her purse, a tatty cloth heart she was fonder of than anything. 'You can pay me back.' They left arm-in-arm, the lipstick in a gold-embossed box. Anna probably would never wear it, but it was a pledge, sealing a friendship the two young girls swore was indissoluble – especially Lucie, who put Anna before all else: school, family and, of course, boyfriends. That was her, the keeper of their catchphrases, their exploits, their tastes and shared memories, of all that accumulated like an unconquerable treasure and which each of them cherished without letting on.

Anna climbs the stairs, walks along the carpeted corridor that leads to her bedroom, tiptoeing by her parents' room and then past the glazed door that leads to the loft. At that moment, she closes her eyes, a reflex from childhood, as though that could protect her from the ridiculous fear that is there, hidden inside her, with its shapeless images, its enormous hands; all those chimeras that have ended up making her, among other unforgettable things: imaginary friends, notebooks tucked away under mattresses, laughter on the swing, cuddles and tears too, and then things pointed at on the horizon, clouds like stories, the void of Sunday afternoons, those moments you all know that somebody is missing.

She falls onto her bed in a star-shape. The house's vague noises grow muted and soon all she can hear is a branch caressing her bedroom window, and her heart drumming.

Tomorrow – now already –, her new life.

She falls asleep fully dressed, the scent of Pierre on her skin. His body still inside her.

Ethel

Her eyes are smarting from the cold. She shouldn't have put on mascara. It's her indulgence, though, 'her coquetry' says her husband, and he often emphasises this word with a squeeze before absconding; leaving her by the wayside, as it were, without a lot of clue where to go.

Ethel wipes the corners of her eyelids. She thinks about that word Josselin said and all those words, all those sentences they no longer exchange, the speech that, between them, has oddly vanished and the risk that each takes, occasionally, to bring it to existence once more. She reflects, tries to remember the moment they stopped talking, wonders how they can be, for such a long time, going about their life in silence. She is afraid to find answers. The still impenetrable darkness enfolds her. She fancies that all will be well.

She went by in a flash. Flying hair and nimble feet, almost noiseless. Little Anna. Little – well, not really, not any more. She's at the age when big things happen and she's bound to know it. The best to come, thinks Ethel, the best, just ahead.

It's pretty rare to see someone going past at this hour, an hour that is normally Ethel's alone. That's the one advantage of her job, a privilege, even: to be acquainted with this time before the day that most people, still sleeping, will never know.

She casts an eye on the first floor of the house. The swarm is no longer there. Josselin has done the necessary, is what he told her yesterday. He'd said the same thing last week but they were still buzzing between the stones, they had got into the beams and, out of exhaustion perhaps, had dropped down to die on the floor. Ethel hadn't dared to touch them; she had always been scared of bees. In the silence, she had witnessed their death and watched their trembling abdomens on the parquet, hypnotised by the delicateness of their opalescent wings.

Her feet on the gravel break a silence she'd rather were total. With every step, she regrets her haste: she stops for a few seconds now and then, slowing her momentum as far as she can to weigh up the next thing she's ruining. That's her all over, precaution in intent, the never-ending fear of upsetting people. Josselin is asleep up there. They went to bed late last night; she hardly slept.

She recalls dinner, the curves of the meat, the fire that could have done with poking. She'd spoken so little, so she could have taken care of it. And the voice of Suzanne who puts down her just-filled glass, that glass of wine she hasn't drunk and that pronouncement, 'We've got something to tell you all.' Ethel knew exactly what she was about to say, and she'd rather not have been there to hear it. She had set the table, raised her eyes to look at Suzanne, at Adalric who was holding her hand and she had felt the oncoming wave, 'No way!' she had smiled, had feigned surprise and delight, saying what any female friend would have said at that moment, 'That's wonderful! How far along are you? How are you feeling?' and amid this play-acting that was provisionally saving her from running aground, she had knocked over her glass, the wine had spread like blood over the cloth that was fucked now, and she had felt an immense pain that had crushed her, an unfamiliar, ludicrous pain, and she had looked at Josselin who wasn't saying a word, wasn't dabbing up the wine. Josselin, who had no idea what she was going on inside her.

Ethel had seen them to the door and she had noticed how delicate Suzanne's knees were, her ankles, the fragile hinges of her joints. She had beautiful legs. Suzanne had squeezed her hand hard, 'We'll have a get-together sometime soon?' Ethel had nodded and felt obliged to add, 'I'm so happy for you both' – which went without saying, but further self-persuasion was required. 'Call you tomorrow?' Suzanne had kissed her burning cheek and Ethel had held onto her hand a bit longer; she wanted to keep her close, have a word with her perhaps, just take a bit of her happiness and the strength that was now inhabiting her and was going to grow, and she had told herself: with a bit of luck, this strength will seep through my skin, get into my veins, my heart, will irrigate it once and for all and that will be my salvation. She had squeezed Suzanne's hand as if she were drinking from a source. Life is, perhaps, transmissible.

Ethel ducks into the car. She reflects on the road, the wet fields, the discomfort of this flat journey, the emptiness of this stony country which, deep down, she had never liked. She had wanted this life in the country, though. She was looking for a place to soothe what was consuming her, she had had enough of dreams, their tatters; she had given her all to make something happen, but nothing had happened, and she had asked herself how much more she would take, at what point would she put an end to it all and one morning, she had let everything go, left everything behind her. The kitchen where she liked to think, her office covered in books, the bedroom, the clothes, the photos and Louis who, as he did every day before leaving, had kissed her on the neck and had slammed the door. He wouldn't be home late, he would buy bread on the way, they would tell each other about their day before dropping with tiredness. 'See you this evening!' She had heard the lift open downstairs, the porch door creak and close again.

She hadn't really stopped to think. She was lost, she wanted to find herself. Better than that: to become. At the station, she had looked at the departures screen and she had remembered the figure heard on the radio a few weeks before. Ten thousand. That was the number of people who disappeared without a trace every year in this country. Ten thousand – that was a lot, and she wondered where all these bodies were, if they were still alive, if they were hiding; how to live without being seen. Ethel had often considered disappearing. Not dying, just doing a vanishing trick. She had wondered how to erase the traces we leave without even being aware of it; she envied the power of the sea which swallows, in seconds, the sandcastles it took us hours to build. She had given some thought to other people as well, to the grief her disappearance would cause. It was a twisted notion, the shamefaced hope that she might be missed. A train was leaving, platform 9. To become: perhaps. She had boarded the train without telling anyone, without forewarning her mother, her colleagues, her pupils, with no note for Louis. Just before, she had thrown her phone in a litter bin. She had enjoyed starting from zero again, deciding on the story to write. She was, after all, a woman who's free. Free to choose, to take chances, to fail and to suffer: a slip of the knife, and there goes a finger.

At times, her boldness made her quiver. What some people dream of doing in silence, leaving it all behind, forgetting it all, that minor spiritual revolution we do all we can to suppress – she had given it its chance. To inaugurate her new life, she had dyed her hair and she had worked as a barmaid at the kiosk and bar on the corner. She works there still. The boss had agreed not to declare her, not to ask any questions. She kept an eye on the newspapers, maybe somebody was looking for her but the news rolled in and nothing happened. Her vanishing trick was working.

It was over there, one morning, that she met Josselin. He came to buy his cigarettes almost every day. He lived further away, in the fields. He always said, 'my land, my livestock.' His house was his memory and his life.

Josselin had been born and had always lived in the region. Like the others, he never locked his front door before going to bed; he knew how the old people killed themselves, on cider or the beams in the barns; the days of rain and loneliness. He had grown up surrounded by men and women whose hearts had shrivelled, who didn't read, didn't get out much and had never learned to love. Ethel was aware of all that when she moved in with Josselin, that he was filled with a rage capable of smashing against anything at all so long as it found release and was no longer tormenting him. She had seen him release it, too: kill a lamb, chop wood, without once stopping his arm or doubting his duty. His actions split void and matter. She retained brief and clear-cut images of those moments: the watery sun through the branches, the damp grass on the boots, that scent of earth that lingers. She had loved Josselin straight away; she could never have explained to herself why.

Ethel adjusts her rear-view mirror and rubs the lower rim of her eye, licking her finger slightly to lighten the black smear. She turns the ignition key. The car judders a bit and the engine, as if exhausted, wails continuously. She tries again, doggedly determined and suddenly swears. She rips open her bag, rummages among the tissues, receipts and an old cardigan, and her only just charged phone that she finds out of battery. In the boot, her hurrying hand comes across the parasol from last summer. The sand sticks to her clammy hands and gets under her nails newly done nails. In one corner, an old torch that's never any use. Knackered, that as well. A light wind makes a tree bend slowly against the open door. A big leafy arm caresses the bodywork and brushes against Ethel, who thinks she's in danger for an instant. But she likes being afraid. She has always thought that that way, she could practise being brave.

Ethel raises her face to the sky and looks at the moon as though for the first time. She is astonished to see it so big, so beautiful; she wonders why she never looks at it and if it has always been like that, big and beautiful. She closes her eyes to give them a rest and feels sleep overcoming her. Little black, blue and red blobs float beneath her eyelids like wills-o'-the-wisp and then combine to form one single, incandescent dot. She laughs, knowing she's ridiculous. It's been such a long time, she'd thought she was rid of it, but she must face up to what's plain. She is there, fully dressed in the garden, in the middle of the night, while everyone's sleeping. She's having a seizure, she's sure of it.

Josselin

As always, it's the door that wakes him. Josselin knows the score by heart. The crossed rooms, the caution on the windowless stairs, the brushed-against furniture, the unhooked coat and the picked-up keys. All the nooks of this house, the door handles and the windows, are etched within him. Sometimes, silences take longer than usual and he wonders what Ethel can be up to, why she has stopped moving. The wonky mouth, the conquering gaze in the mirror, making herself beautiful for what – serving coffee behind a counter?

At his feet, the dog, normally so quiet, whines incessantly. He keeps getting up, going to the bedroom door, coming back, turning in circles and lying down again. Josselin perches on the edge of the bed and scratches the dog's neck. With one hand, he parts the curtain, and the moon's raw blade eats into his eyes. He glimpses Ethel's outline. She is dusting down her coat and walking towards the house. He grabs his watch. 2:36.

'Right, off we go.'

The dog shakes himself. Josselin slips on t-shirt and trousers. He opens the door but the wall arrests his gaze. The crack. It has grown without warning, like the stalk of a flower, between a painting and the wardrobe. It has been there a long time and seems to be progressing a bit each day, behind his back. 'No, can't be.' He steps up to it noiselessly, as though afraid it might flee; he caresses it to signal his presence, holds his breath to hear it sinking into the wall; pictures the tiny flakes of plaster, the stone beneath that, the faint creaking; how can this house still be standing, is it possible to live in something that is crumbling. He does not know when it appeared, the moment of its arrival in this bedroom and his life. He also can't tell how far it will get, if one morning it will be, who knows, under his feet. He contemplates the crack and says to himself it needs filling. Tomorrow, in a bit, he will go and buy some putty. He will make it disappear.

He remembers seeing it for the first time, as a child: he loved coming into this bedroom, his parents'. There was a strong odour of waxed wood there, which excited him and made him retch at once. He would enter with a sense of doing something forbidden and he would contemplate the bed, the thick eiderdown turned down at the pillows, the wooden crucifix hung on the wall, which he'd had removed since. He never got over that stasis, the silence of the objects, and the tarnished mirror that reflected him, Josselin, with his brown curls and green eyes which everyone said were beautiful. 'He's not a violent one,' his mother would say, 'there's not a bad bone in him, he'll do things one day, he's got the right stuff between the ears you know.' Those words, like a refrain, the unsettling self-assurance of that voice, those hands ruffling his hair; she'd always done that in front of other people, as if to say, 'He's mine, it's me who made him, look!' She could see him at university, 'in America'. She'd go on at her husband about the savings, her son would be proof it was possible to leave this dump. 'Your son'd do well to learn to use his fists, is he fucking boy or what.'

The house had thin walls, you heard it all, especially that.

Josselin, in the next bedroom, would wonder why his mother wasn't answering, what was keeping her here, what her life might have looked like somewhere else, far from the cluttered kitchen and

mimosa wallpaper. She had learned to keep quiet. Her rare interventions would dull noiselessly, the way smoke vanishes. Josselin had spent his childhood watching his mother, observing her mute ballet and wondering if his parents once loved each other, how could they have liked each other, liked having their bodies touch; what the one had seen in the other. He was completely ignorant of their emotional life, it was grown-ups' business, 'the past'. But all the same, that day, long ago, when they got it on, they could have been doing something else, like contemplating their feet or gazing at the stars. Adults, while making love, never spare a thought for other people – those who'll get off on their appetite for risk.

The dog has already hurtled down the stairs. The hands of the clock are stuck to each other and say 6:30. He tries to put them right; each time, they drop again, like overly heavy arms.

The front door opens. Ethel puffs into her cold hands. Josselin asks, 'is that starting again', since he knows very well what is happening. He recalls the first nights spent with her, he'd never heard of sleepwalking and Ethel, of course, hadn't warned him, surely for fear he'd reject her, and he remembers her outline in the night, the silhouette of Ethel who was in the process of counting the sheets, walking up and down the stairs, peeling carrots in the kitchen while nothing, yet, was familiar to her here; but she had found the utensils, she had opened the right doors, made the most ordinary moves with erring, without hesitating or hurting herself and then her body had come back to lie down next to his, as though it were all perfectly natural. It'd have been a fright for anybody. Him, though, he'd said to himself he wasn't the only one, that other people were odd as well. And then, he'd felt proof that Ethel loved him and that had been enough for him. He could live with her. This house in which she wandered with her eyes closed, without even being acquainted with it, could become hers and he, too, would learn to love this woman – it was bound to come. 'It's nothing, go back to bed.' She goes up to him to kiss him; her skin is cool, she smells musky. 'My car's broken down, can you come out with me later?'

In the dining room, Josselin picks up a glass from the night before and drinks the dregs in one go, a thick residue of red that tastes sweet. Outside, he hears the cattle. They are on the road.

Josselin's house is adjacent to Adalric's. When you go out of the kitchen through the back door, you step onto a rose-lined lane. On this side, the roof is low. Josselin leans and adjusts his line of sight to the four-paned windows with old-fashioned net curtains, hand-me-downs from Suzanne's family she doesn't want to part with. Those net curtains have seen the war, survived the shells falling from the sky, and they're still intact. Once he is at the front door, he makes a visor of his hands against the glass and peers in. Two yellow rounds hover in one corner, blinking occasionally. The cat. Josselin whistles through his fingers, keeping an eye on the lifeless upper storey. A bird takes flight above him and beats the air violently, unable to gain height. Josselin watches it fight against gravity, struggle not to touch the ground.

Upstairs, a light goes on and Adalric's outline appears. He lifts the curtain and gives a sign with his eyes, a sign that can't be made out by other people but which is an indicator of their friendship to him alone. Josselin and Adalric know, without ever having said it out loud, that they would do anything for each other.

'Everything ok?' The cat makes use of the open door to slink outside. Josselin's dog follows it and they vanish into the bushes. 'The cattle are on the road, the gate's not holding.' Adalric buttons his trousers and lights a cigarette. Josselin knows what he's thinking: he spent the day yesterday repairing it, that gate, it was right as rain. 'Got the time?' Josselin looks at his watch. Two thirty-six – still. He shrugs.

About thirty metres away on the road, a cow is swinging its tail against its flank and raising a fine dust that hovers, sparkling, in the empty air. Adalric takes a hard drag on his cigarette. 'Let's go.'

He pulls on his boots, throws on his shirt and takes out a gun from behind a mass of coats, and hangs it across his shoulders. He got himself licensed several years ago: he handles it well, and it's also a reassurance for Suzanne who gets rattled by the various sordid deeds in the newspapers, torn between fear of their happening and the pleasure of reading the reports. Josselin has brought nothing with him. He picks up a spade that's lying about, balances it on his shoulder and leads the way.

The moon draws their shadows, which extend to the opposite gutter and flicker along the centuries-old oaks. The dog is up ahead of them. He turns round from time to time to make sure they are there and trots up joyously to the motionless herd. The cows, packed tightly, are holding their heads straight. The white rays are falling onto their dancing ears, illuminating their foreheads and setting onto their eyes a soft shadow that swells their sockets. Never saw a human, it looks like. Josselin and Adalric go up to them: they know what they have to do. The cows belong to Josselin, but the land is Adalric's. They'd reached an agreement, which went back ages.

The first thing that astonishes them is the quietness.

'You take this side?' Adalric walks around the herd, puts his hands on one animal's warm flank. 'Go on, girl, go on, there, there,' and his voice trails, it takes on a deeper tone, he whispers words that only the animals can hear. He pushes one of them to make it step back, leans his whole bodyweight against the cow, which snorts. Josselin takes the flat of the spade and whips the road to get a reaction out of them.

They stay stock-still.

'What the hell is this?' He sniffs the air. The bocages are covered in mist and this white, translucent carpet is unusually beautiful. Hilly expanses rise up in the distance. Ahead of Josselin, the road, the village's only one, grows gradually dimmer, you can make out its bend beneath the heather. It sinks in valiantly and, thus submitting, consents to disappear, snatched by who knows what depth. The stream runs on his right, in a muddy hollow, without ever dwindling. Its lively current has been cutting through the earth always, confronting obstacles, carving out detours and, in this way, flowing between the pebbles and branches, without stopping. For the first time, Josselin considers the eternity of this water, its momentum, these days that are passing and this stream that remains.

'Hey! You with me there?'

Adalric wipes his brow, inspecting the inert herd. He takes one of the cows by the halter and pulls it forward to encourage it to make a half-turn. 'Move, move won't you!' The cow digs in, opens terrified eyes and lows so loudly that it agitates the others. The dog starts yapping. 'Sit! Stay there!' There is a ripple of movement and then the bells attached to the animals' necks all jangle at once and form a low rumbling. Josselin, as though preparing to defend himself, raises his hands and voice but the surge grows: the cattle are trembling, a charge seems to be growing out of their multitude and then this raucous breath coming out of their nostrils makes Josselin take a step back. They advance, foreheads to the front, all bent on freedom. 'Come and help me!' Adalric runs towards him to form a barrage against the rising



tide. He grabs hold of horns haphazardly, locking his gaze with that of one animal which, with one movement of its head, repels his body. The herd flees. Josselin is propelled into the gutter.

He watches the animals gallop into the distance, the barking dog on their tail. He gets up, walks towards the gate that gave way. Several wooden bars are shattered, some of them crushed. He surveys the field, the soil trampled by hooves, the abandoned watering-holes, the tottering pile of hay bales; he moves forward and his shoes sink into an oily sludge as he listens to the silence of this familiar world. Water from the trough sparkles on bits of cattle-shed roofing. Lines oscillate. Josselin sees more or less geometric shapes emerging and even – a face.

‘Josselin?’

He’s still looking, the wavy lines and the shattered wooden bars. How can the gate have broken, what made the herd do that?

‘Josselin!’

‘– What?’

Adalric is pointing at him. Josselin touches his back. There’s blood all over his hand.

Gautier

‘And what about your motor – is it starting?’

Gautier thought he was dreaming, at first. A familiar voice in his sleep. He couldn’t tell who it belonged to. Then he realised that Josselin was just below. In his house.

At the top of the stairs, Gautier ducks his head and sees, through the banisters, the front door wide open; his father from behind, and Josselin and Adalric who are moving about in front. They point at the road, pass their hands through their hair, wipe their foreheads. A small crater of fire hovers in the void. Josselin crushes it against the brick wall and provokes a cloud of sparks.

‘I don’t get it – aren’t you the expert?’

Gautier hears his father reply that he’s a plumber, not an electrician. He has to lean over more to see Josselin, who’s not looking happy. He loses his balance. ‘Gautier! Go back up to your room!’ But Gautier is already downstairs when his father says, ‘Ok, I’m coming with you.’

‘Where you going?’

‘I’m coming back.’

‘I’ll go with you.’

And before his father can answer, he slips his hand into his.

It’s the end of autumn, maybe winter. It’s cold, the days have got shorter, and there’s nothing left in the trees. At their feet, hidden in the tufty grass, apples are rotting and nuts are waiting to be picked up. Gautier walks quickly. He’s having to take two steps when the grown-ups are only taking one. Josselin has relit a cigarette. He’s shiftily looking left and right, and spitting out the smoke that swirls behind him like a ghost’s coming out of his back. Gautier doesn’t know where they’re going. His laces are coming undone beneath his eyes. He doesn’t dare stop to do them up again, he doesn’t want to hold up the team he’s just become part of. The big stone wall comes up on the left, it’s a rampart if you ask him. The Letourneurs’ house, with a garden like the magazines, flowers everywhere and grass nobody walks on and that doesn’t have time to grow. Well it wouldn’t, would it. Paulin comes and mows it every day.

It’s Josselin who knocks on the door. Three clear blows that make a mouse scuttle out from under a stone. ‘Dad, why we here?’

‘No questions, now.’

Josselin knocks again. He bites his lip, takes a few steps and mobilises once more. A high-pitched voice comes through the walls, providing assurance that yes, yes, she’s coming.

‘Hello gentlemen, what’s up?’ Gautier hears his father start saying something, but Josselin interrupts him. ‘Sorry to disturb you, we’ve got a problem, is Jean-Noël there?’

‘Perhaps I can help you?’

Mrs Letourneur crosses her arms and Gautier notices Josselin staring at her bosoms which can be seen through her dressing-gown before giving him, Gautier, a furious look, and he immediately lowers his eyes to his undone laces. He knows you mustn’t stare at people. He recalls what his father told him, what happened to Josselin a long time ago and he wonders if it still hurts. Never will he ask him that question, it might rekindle the pain. Rekindle’s a word he learned at school last week. You can say it about a flame or a memory.

‘The power’s off, we need the keys for the transformer and...’ Josselin changes his tone. If this was his father, Gautier wouldn’t dare argue. ‘We need to talk to the mayor.’

Behind, the parquet creaks. Mr Letourneur approaches, eyes glued together with sleep, followed by Pierre, a black t-shirt with a yellow lightning bolt in the middle, like thunder’s tearing up the material. He’s chewing gum.

‘What’s the problem?’

‘I can deal with it, darling, it’s about the electricity.’

‘What time is it?’

Pierre lifts his chin a bit at Gautier, a thing the big kids do at college to say hi how are you, and this familiarity makes him happy, he has always considered Pierre to be the big brother he’s never had. He’d love to be like him one day. The same haircut, the same kind of clothes, and the same marks in science. Pierre is brainy, but he never seems to do any work. That’s Gautier’s aspiration, too: he’s still searching for the method. His father takes off his cap, looks like he’s saluting a general. ‘We’re not sure exactly...’

‘You’re not sure what?’

Leaning against the wall, Josselin smokes on umpteenth cigarette and begins to tell all. The herd that took off, the clocks that have stopped working, the dead telephones, the cars that won’t start. Occasionally he pauses, while the smoke goes into his throat, and Gautier notices that everyone’s hanging on his words, that Josselin has them all captivated even though he’s only speaking and smoking, nothing else, and he thinks of his father, with him it’s completely the opposite. When he speaks, nobody listens to him; he has never understood why.

Gautier is still holding his father’s hand, it’s gone clammy; he tries to move his slightly numb fingers. They can hear Pierre chewing his gum; the teenager’s father tells him to stop, he can’t hear himself think, he repeats, ‘I need to think!’ several times while clutching his temples; and he mentions a general breakdown, frost that can destroy cables and engines, he says they need to consider those eventualities. Mrs Letourneur talks about the weather, she says they didn’t see winter coming this year and without warning, she runs across the garden, barefoot; the darkness swallows her for a few seconds and then gently spits her out again, she’s panic-stricken. ‘Pegasus!’ Her dappled mare. She’s not there anymore, either.

As for Gautier, he has another theory. He knows he's seven, he has to keep quiet, but at times like these any idea's a good one, right? It's odd nobody's suggested them – the pikeys. His father explained to him who they were. That they came out at night to ransack kitchen gardens and sometimes even came into houses to empty fridges. Gautier has never seen any but he imagines them to be little, clever, a bit hairy; they haven't got any eyes, their mouths take up their whole face and their bodies are dressed in huge leaves because nature is their only home and has ended up covering them all over. Maybe, while tumbling about, they've broken the electric cables? Maybe they wanted to take the cars for a spin, but without the keys, they've upset the workings? He reflects. It's eating at him.

'Maybe it's the pikeys?'

All heads turn to look at him. His father loosens the hand he has been holding tight and says it is time to go home. Gautier sees the embarrassment on his face, like he's said something stupid. Mr Letourneur tells everyone to gather at the town hall and slips away. Josselin stubs out his cigarette, Adalric gives a brief nod of assent in Mrs Letourneur's direction and concludes with a 'Madam' on everyone's behalf, and this word seems to please her greatly because despite the emotional distress of having lost her horse, she drops a little curtsy, like at royal courts.

Gautier follows the tread of his father who's already reached the road in long strides. He hasn't waited for him, hasn't taken his hand. He runs to catch up with him. Behind, he sees Pierre who is watching him on the doorstep. He wants to do what he did just now so he lifts his chin a bit to say, 'Be seeing you sometime.' Pierre, who's now nothing but a faraway shadow, doesn't move. Gautier speeds up. He's not sure if he's done the right thing.

Anna

'Wake up, pet.'

Her father has placed a hand on her cheek. That thing he's been doing since forever. His fingertips behind the hollow of her ear, his palm enclosing the top of her neck and his thumb slowly caressing her nose. Anna loves the feeling of her father's hand settling on her face this way. This hand might be worried, might move up to her forehead, might keep a watch on her temperature. It's a doctor's hand, after all. It could, after all this time, have indicated anger, index pointed at the sky; it could have told off the little girl, reproached the adolescent for something, or admonished the budding young woman. But her father's hand has never done that. Anna long took it to be a shell that opens: she had deposited tiny scraps of paper there: for years, she had refolded the fingers, had unfolded, refolded them, endlessly, she had put words inside. Even back then, they wouldn't speak to each other much, just the main things but that was their way of telling each other stuff. It was a game she loved and had stopped playing all of a sudden, but her father's hands are always there enwrapping something, her cheek, her hand from time to time; they are a socle, which allows her, when she thinks she has lost it, to find her balance again.

'Sweetheart.'

Anna places her hand on his and opens her eyes. Her father is sitting on the edge of the bed; his glasses encircle his beady eyes.

'I have to go out for an hour, maybe two.'

'Didn't think you were on call?'

'It's not the hospital. I'll explain later.'

'What about mum?'

'She's asleep. She needs to rest. You know.'

'Ok.'

'You look after Mado?'

'Yes.'

'There's no electricity. If anything comes up, I'm at the town hall.'

He kisses her and stands up.

'What's going on?'

'I'll explain later.'

'Why are you going to the town hall?'

Her father crosses the bedroom. Anna throws off her bedsheets and makes to stand up.

'Wait, I'm coming with you.'

'Sleeping in your jeans, now?'

'I worked late.'

She considers she can do better and clarifies, 'For the maths test.'

'Ok.'

What she likes most about her father is his discreetness, when he understands, without taking umbrage, that the truth might not be getting told. On those occasions, he taps his glasses gently to slide them to the top of his nose, in a sign of resignation.

'Stay here. I won't be long.'

Anna watches her father exit the bedroom. She feels the same thing every time, on seeing him go through the door. Calmness; security. She remembers all those evenings her parents had friends round, the endless dinners, the music that went on after dessert, and little her insisting she doesn't want to sleep, she wants to stay up late with the grown-ups; yet she'd drop off on the snuggly sofa, assured that she can sink into sleep because there's laughing and that will protect her. And her father carrying her up to her bedroom in the middle of the night, setting her down on her bed; her opening one eye and watching him go out. 'Goodnight my pet.'

She looks for her phone. It might be at Pierre's. Mrs Letourneur will come across it, have her suspicions; she'll try and unlock it, will she decide to come over with it? If she does, she'll have to make conversation, say something to that right chatterbox of a woman.

A small silhouette slips under the sheets. There's a smell of coconut shampoo.

'Move over.'

Anna dislodges a pillow and hands it to her sister, who burrows into it.

'You're dressed!'

'And you've got freezing feet.'

'Where's dad gone?'

'He'll be back. Go to sleep.'

'And where were *you* just now?'

'Go to sleep, I said.'

Anna imagines herself in Mado's place, being her age and having a big sister, all the mysteries that must be popping up in her mind; the different way time works, feelings, the novelties of a body that's changing or is just about to; everything that will fall quiet soon, or awaken. For now, her bedroom walls are papered with pictures of horses and world maps with contoured reliefs; she makes up dances moves in front of the mirror, draws fortresses on squared paper and has started embroidering on a tambour. She's pretty gifted. She has already written 'Madeleine' in pink capitals. Nobody calls her that, though. It's always been 'Mado.' Mado come and brush your teeth, Mado don't pull out the remote buttons, Mado's a character and what's more, she's got theories, has Mado. On the human species that is a speck of a dust speck among all the other dust specks in the hugeness of the universe and if only people knew it, they'd realise their everyday problems were small. And theories on Fridays and Saturday evenings, which are the best ones of all because she doesn't sleep in boarding school and she comes back to her castle, as she puts it, her horses, her fortresses and, most of all, she can go to bed when she wants.

'I won't tell, promise.'

'I never budged from my room.'

'That's not true. I saw you in the garden.'

'Not possible.'

'Just before Adalric.'

'Stop a sec.'

'He came by to talk to dad.'

'I'm telling you I didn't go out.'

'You're lying.'

'Why did Adalric come by?'

'Don't change the subject.'

'Leave me in peace then. I've got an exam. Some people work on Saturday morning.'

'Go on! I'll leave you alone after, promise.'

'We'll see tomorrow, that all right with you?'

'It's already tomorrow.'

Anna sits upright and pushes the switch on her bedside lamp. The power cut: she's forgotten. She asks Mado if she's hungry. Mado is always hungry.

On the stairs, Anna winds her sister's blond strands around her fingers. Mado wriggles out of the way. 'Wait! I'm giving you curls.' They race each other to the kitchen.

On the table, there is a crate of apples from the garden. They've been waiting to get peeled for two days. You have to bake them to get rid of their sourness. The procedure can take hours. They crackle, go brown and only after, you get that caramel smell. 'What do you want?' Anna's hand lands on a packet of butter biscuits. Mado climbs onto the sink to get to the cupboard, from which she extracts a different bag. 'You shouldn't, that's been open for ages.' Mado, sitting on the counter, dangles her legs and tips the contents into her mouth.

'So, going to tell me where you were tonight?'

'Will you stop that?'

'I know, anyway.'

'Can we talk about something else?'

Anna drops the crumbs from the packet into her hand and trickles them down her throat. Mado's eyes are on her the whole time.

'Want me to tell you a secret? But you won't repeat it to anybody.'

'Ok.'

'That way, we'll know each other's secret.'

'If that's your idea of fun.'

'Mum. She's ill because of me.'

'You're talking rubbish.'

'It's true though.'

'Who told you that?'

'Nobody. I did some research.'

'How?'

'On some forums.'

'You go on forums?'

'I used dad's computer.'

'Does he know?'



'If you could keep it quiet.'

'You know his password?'

'Obviously.'

'I won't say anything if you stop saying stupid things.'

'It's my family makes me believe in stupid things. Father Christmas, mean anything to you?'

'You're not putting that back.'

'I looked like a right idiot at school.'

'Come here.'

Anna kisses the top of her head and, getting high on coconut and winding strands around her fingers, remembers something her father would say when measuring her at the wall: he'd be holding the pencil and saying, 'We're growing, we're growing!' and those words, the same ones, come back to her mind suddenly, except she's no longer the one hearing them: she gets to say them, now.

Ethel

She advances without thinking towards the bottom of the garden. Behind the shed, she walks up some stone steps that lead to the entrance to the field. She sees nothing, but knows where she's putting her feet. Body memory, something akin to habit. Giant nettles criss-cross her clothes. She raises her arms to spare her bare hands, curses 'it's unbelievable' and promises herself she'll tear them up soon, when it's rained, or do the inspection next time. Too bad if it takes her a while to get around to it.

The night has devoured some of the terrain; the other part's lit by the moon. She notes the immaculate grass, the nearly white trees in the distance. She's not afraid of the dark, but she is of its denseness. She closes her mouth around her fingers and whistles. The echo dies in seconds. 'Max.' That's the first thing she wanted to do after Josselin left just now. Find Max.

Since she's been living here, he's become her dog too. She likes opening the door for him at dawn, before leaving for work. Putting him on the lead for their big evening outing. They walk along the road, go as far as the wash house, and return. When she moved into this house, he was on a chain. Josselin had explained to her that dogs, here, always slept outside, regardless of season. On a chain. She remembers having objected to that rule, having set up a corner in the kitchen and one afternoon, when Josselin was in the fields with Adalric, she had gone up to Max. He had bounded out of his kennel, his chain had unrolled and he had gone crazy with rage because nobody, apart from Josselin, encroached on his territory. Ethel had ideas about German Shepherds, like everybody – stories people had told her – but she had held out her palm and moved towards the open muzzle. Max had reared up, he had barked with all his might and Ethel had crouched down; she had held out bits of bread to him, had stroked him between the ears and her hand had slipped slowly towards his collar and the chain that was holding him back. 'Come on then!' And Max had followed her into the garden, into the field, into the house. At her heels, the whole day. Josselin, that evening, hadn't protested.

Max isn't a runaway. He knows the village; he knows where the house is. For a brief moment, Ethel imagines him injured, she can't see any other reasons for his absence. She whistles more loudly, for longer; she stares at the edge of the woods and thinks she can make out movements. She calls him again, encourages him to show himself with a click of her tongue and expects to see him leap out of the bushes, to scamper off like he usually does, tongue in the wind and tail in the air. She does a half-turn, towards the track reserved for the tractor, and sinks into the soft soil. She almost slips several times.

Over there on the road, the neighbours are arguing. She recognises Suzanne, who comes up and falls into her arms.

'I've been looking everywhere for you!'

'I'm here.'

'What are you doing all alone in the dark?'

'Max has disappeared.'

'He'll come back.'

'He doesn't normally do this.'

'Ethel, he's a dog, he'll come back, yeah?'

Ethel looks at the empty night all around her, then Suzanne's eyes which seem to be expecting a reply.

'We've got other problems, wouldn't you say? Has Josselin told you anything?'

'No.'

'I don't get it, the electricity, was working yesterday at your place, and it was when we got home, right?'

'Right.'

'Ethel, you ok?'

'I just want to find Max.'

Suzanne turns round. She waves at some neighbours as they come out of their house and walk away.

'We were saying we'd be better off joining the others, at the town hall. It's getting me down staying at home – isn't it you?'

'You go, I'm staying for a bit.'

'No way am I leaving you all alone here.'

'Nothing to be afraid of.'

'Come on – please?' Suzanne hooks onto Ethel's arm and nestles against her shoulder.

'Your man will be worried. And maybe Max is down there.'

Ethel nods.

On their way, doors and windows open and people approach, holding candles or lighters and looking helpless and distraught: they conjecture a sabotage, a war; they feed on meteorological or supernatural theories; they like writing the story, most of all. Suzanne reassures them; she has the right words and gentle, simple gestures, though she is, perhaps, trembling inside. Occasionally, she places a hand on her still-flat belly and leaves it there for a few seconds, and Ethel imagines what she must be feeling to have such a powerful secret inside, a secret kept from the world. Suzanne listens to the

questions, promising she'll go and find out. She smiles and consoles. People squeeze her hand, taking courage. Ethel looks on as Suzanne spreads her light, since this is what's going on here – Suzanne spreading her light effortlessly, without even being conscious of this power, nor of all her other parts. Suzanne, who's never wondered what she's made of or doubted her place. Suzanne, who's where she's meant to be, at age thirty-two, who's lucky and doesn't even know it.

The cold stiffens their fingers which they rub energetically. They move at one pace towards the town hall, huddled together, keeping each other warm. Ethel watches the road fill bit by bit with silhouettes in a hurry. Hands in pockets, hoods on heads. Children are being told to stay quiet and they aren't listening. They're playing chase, they're saying 'there are no cars anyway, so.'

Ethel isn't worried; perhaps she ought to be. Anyone peering into her mind would find a handful of humdrum thoughts: remember to buy flour, the curtain rod at the front door that needs fixing, and things that Ethel has never formulated to herself. A ladder propped against an endless wall, a colour she thinks she knows but doesn't exist, the faint outline of a boat on the sea, a phrase by an Argentine poet she thinks she forgot long ago. But nothing that concerns tonight.

Adalric, standing on the town hall steps, kisses Suzanne and wants her to sit down but she refuses; she's not ill, after all, she'd like to help – 'what can we do?' He and Josselin have been to check the transformer; they found nothing abnormal, no wear, nothing's happened to the insulation, lightning conductors, the switch. 'Nothing.' And then Josselin lost his rag and left him standing. 'Do you know where he is?' Ethel shakes her head. It's a question she asked herself a lot in the early days, on coming here. She remembers it well, the small pain that had gripped her stomach, the impression that, maybe, she was making a mistake; and Josselin whom she almost never saw, who was in bed when she left to open the kiosk at dawn, and who got home late: she waited for him to have dinner even if she was hungry, to see him a little bit at least, and she had no idea where he had been all day, in the fields or somewhere else, or what he had been doing. Often, she thought it was him approaching, but no, it was Paulin, stopping by for a drink; he always called in unannounced, he would come in without knocking and sit down to the meal Edith had made. By and by, she had ended up putting out a plate for him, just in case. And then Josselin would arrive: they would eat and then they would go to bed, and only then, tucked up in the warmth of his body, did she grasp the futility of those questions; she relished the silence that enveloped the two of them, she told herself she'd made the right choice, after all.

Ethel wanders off a bit.

People are streaming in but she can't make out a single face. Yes, she can: she recognises Gautier and his father in the distance, with their hands full of wood; they come up from the other end of the road and deposit logs on the cobbles, in the middle of the square they call main. And as they are leaving again, Josselin arrives; he is pushing a wheelbarrow full of kindling and twigs and tips it over near to the pile. Everyone watches him do it: methodically place the twigs underneath the logs which he piles on top of one another, and shut up the whole thing with big branches, which he snaps into equal length across his knees. A woman goes up to Suzanne, asking where the mayor is; she wants to be told what's happening, 'why isn't anyone telling us anything?' and Jean-Noël comes out of the town hall: he has that look of people called to manage crises, it is his moment, he who has grand things to say about the meaning of taking action, ethics and the importance of keeping promises. 'I've got no news for the moment, go back home and trust me, we are going to find a solution.' But nobody does what he says.

The kindling has caught fire, the flames are unfurling; Josselin walks around to make them grow and all arrive from the road, all converge on this glimmer which, bit by bit, becomes a fire; sticking to one another, they'll be glued together soon. Ethel watches the silhouettes emerge from between the flames, faces reddened, hands extended to get warm; the kisses exchanged, the ashes aloft, and Josselin amid the specks: Josselin, who stares at the blaze, lulled, like the others, by this incredible stillness.

Josselin

The rule's a simple one, though. Everyone gets a chance to speak and you have to listen to what each has to say. But that's beyond them all. Everyone ignores the rule. Voices clamour, there's hand-raising, there's swearing, all those voices merging into one enormous one, it's spectacular.

The fire is growing, in its way it's celebrating what some are already calling a disaster. The wooden scaffold is collapsing, the canopy of sparks raising exclamations of delight from the children crouched a few metres away. They're waiting for the grown-ups around them to find a solution. They're tapping sticks on the ground, passing around whispered messages, or drawing faces using small stones. Josselin envies their carefreeness, the way they're bowing to the uncertainty and not giving it any power. He looks closely at the crimson silhouettes, the people taking measure or settling their accounts. The faces look a bit mad. It's hard to believe, to conceive of, this extended night, this bigger than usual moon and life going on, regardless. Josselin would have given anything for a morning like any other. He would have got up, made the coffee, sliced yesterday's bread; he would have slipped on his coat and cast an eye on the quiet road. In that moment still out of time, he would have seen the sky appear and he would have done all that without thinking, without reflecting on the new day that is rising and starting. On the life that he must live.

He watches the fire eat the wood. He imagines the time value of each section, he makes swift and rough calculations; he wonders how long they have all been there, debating on the square; what time it is, what they are going to do. He watches the wood in the process of tearing, the glowing coals that are piling up, and the ever-bigger fire that is prolonging –normalising – the wait. Over there, Paulin is getting restless. He's looking for the bottom of the crowd, he's trying to stir up anger; he's going up to people and, one by one, forehead to forehead, one hand gripping their neck – sometimes the face, he's trying to subdue them –, he's saying to them, 'listen to me'; he's searching eyes for fear and if he doesn't find it, he makes it come. 'Gettin' freaked out, yeah?'

Paulin is the loneliest guy Josselin knows. Always wandering outside at unthinkable hours, always wanting to talk, scrutinising gardens like a janitor doing the rounds. One day, he found him glued to a window, hands framing his eyes, hoping for a movement indoors, a reason to go into a house that he nevertheless knew to be empty, for he knows all the houses in the village, who lives where and since when; he's 'at home' everywhere, he keeps on saying. He's not all bad though, Paulin. He's the only one, Josselin remembers it well, the only one to have come to find out how he was after the accident. He had sat down opposite his bed, he had acted like Josselin didn't have any bandages, like he wasn't injured; he had lit a cigarette although it wasn't allowed, and had held it out to him so he could take a drag.

They were both the same age but, even back then, Paulin had some funny ways: he would stare at people, the girls were scared of him. He lived alone with his mother since his father had gone off with another woman. And then his mother had died and he had wanted to stay in the house: he was turning eighteen, he could be self-sufficient, look after the farm, take on the small poultry-selling business. Josselin's parents had kept an eye on him, encouraging him like a son but Paulin had no mind to work: he would disappear sometimes, nobody would know where he was and one day, you'd come across him and he'd let on nothing about his escapades. He did, once: a few weeks ago, he'd landed in the police station

for scrapping and boozing, and they'd phoned Josselin to come and pick him up. It was a constant mystery to everyone what he lived on.

Paulin had a passion: he accumulated spare vehicle parts in his garage: ice-scrapers blades, brake pads, headlights, shock absorbers, bulbs; he had some in the basement of his house as well, people sometimes went round and came away with a door, a car radio, but this fencing wasn't enough to keep him fed. Chickens, rabbits, sheep: he never looked after them, and they'd all upped sticks or died, one by one. He could be seen, sometimes, stealing a lettuce or tomatoes from neighbours, and nobody said a word.

One day, he had got hold of a job, a few hours per week transporting hay from one field to the other. Hervieu had trusted him, he meant well by him and had given him the keys to his tractor. Paulin had two hundred metres to do, not even that. And at the intersection, he hadn't stopped, too pleased to be driving this motor. He said, 'these roads are mine.' The idiot. This road, Death Road, was his forever, since he had hit a car. Little Gautier's mother was at the wheel.

From that time on, the Letourneurs employed him to look after their garden. Paulin took this task very seriously. He went there every day, even if there was nothing to mow. He'd swagger about, scenting a life of prosperity that will never be his; and in the middle of these large spaces with man-made paths and well-tended flora, he had the feeling of being some use.

'All right, mate?'

Gautier turns up the collar of his coat. His father has always told him not to talk to Paulin.

'Hey, anyone at home?'

He taps the boy's head.

'Leave him, will you?' says his father.

'I'm not allowed to say hello?'

'Get lost.'

'What are you talking to me like that for? Fancy him talking to me like that!'

Paulin whacks a stone. The dust covers the tips of Gautier's shoes. 'D'you hear Arnaud?' says Josselin, tickling the fire. 'Move.'

But Paulin comes closer, with his lumbering body and unblinking eyes. He's still looking for the apocalypse.

'I'm harmless, me, OK?'

Arnaud purses his lips to stop any words from slipping out. Maybe he's mindful that Gautier is watching him, waiting to find out what he's going to do and say – is it necessary, by the way, to do or say anything at moments like this one? Josselin, if he was a father, would have had no idea and it suits him

not to be in his position, to be having a fire to look after and not a child. Paulin pats Arnaud's back before moving away; he waddles along, yanking up his rip-off jogging bottoms, an item that's now faded, it's been worn so much, but he doesn't care; what he wants to do is to strut, to show that he's there, that he has the right to be respected like everyone else; he often says to Josselin, 'why do people look at me funny', he doesn't understand people depriving him of what's given to men as a matter of course: consideration, a bit of thought, nothing out of the ordinary, really, but in his case, it's what he's never had. Paulin, he doesn't want much, as he says, but he does want to be valued as much as anyone else; he just wants to exist.

There he is, haranguing the crowd, persuading them that people are hiding things from them, mocking Jean-Noël's title, yelling – in this night where everything echoes – his incompetence and apathy. 'This is no time for pointing fingers, Paulin. We've got to stick together!' Jean-Noël, flanked by his wife and son, strongly believes in unity: it's his thing, he bores the entire world with it. He suggests they go and seek assistance in the next village. 'Me! I'll go.' No surprises, there – it's Dr Bisson. He's got a racing bike, a machine with very thin wheels that goes very fast. 'All right. Arnaud, you go with him. We'll look after Gautier.' Arnaud must realise that it's better for him to be away from Paulin, better for everyone at this juncture – one less problem. The decision is taken to bring along all the wood they can carry to feed the fire; there are concerns about food reserves; no-one can understand the quietness, why the residents of neighbouring villages aren't making themselves seen. There's not much around, it's true: kilometres of fields before a single house, and with no cars. But maybe, not far away, somebody knows something and the authorities have things in hand. That's what everyone is hoping.

Josselin looks up. There's nothing to be learnt from the dark sky and yet the moon – sharply outlined; one side of patinated stone, the other more irregular with chasms and reliefs – the moon is resplendent and calm, and him, he's the opposite of all that, he's as loathsome as the moon is pure. Josselin restrains himself; otherwise, he might break something, kicking the fire would do him good. He can't take any more of Paulin's false bravado, his raised fists when he's won nothing, when all of them are losing: Josselin doesn't really know what, but it's under way, it's started and the sky, this nothing, the inertia of the others who are going along with it and seeking an explanation that's staring them in the face... – he cannot bear it any longer.

'Just bloody wake up! The hell, you all blind? Don't you see what's happening? We're wasting our time debating, waiting here like idiots – we should've taken care of it a long time ago, I know it, you know it, we all do!' Josselin hears his blood pulsing in his palm, then near his jugular, and then his chest is where it's all at. 'Look around you, look closely! Who isn't here?' He puts emphasis on the 'who', and they all get it. They all think of her, because this is her all over – why haven't they thought of it before? Her absence marks her out; it's her undoing.

And Josselin casts his mind back and remembers that day it hailed, he had never seen such violence unleashed by the sky; everything had been destroyed, crops, cars, windowpanes, and this hail had fallen continuously for hours and it had all happened a few days after that woman arrived. And then there had been Gautier's mother's accident on that road where no accidents ever happened, and more had followed at the same spot, and what can one say about the epidemic that had affected the livestock a year ago: nobody had a clue what to call that virus and half of the herd had died. Maybe those incidents aren't isolated: they're the start of a macabre series and their common point is – her. It's obvious to him, now.



'I'm telling you, now, it's over. We should never have let her live here, we decided to turn a blind eye, we convinced ourselves all would be well, that she was harmless and it's too late.' Josselin's eyes, yellow and gleaming, seem to be the verge of tears. Around his lips runs a viscous sap, which he wipes with a clumsy hand, a hand that has long forgotten the essential things: pick up a cup with no risk of breaking it; caress a child's cheek while holding back from slapping it; a hand that cannot stop itself from strangling the arm of a chair and which, sometimes, allows flames to touch it, impervious to the pain, insensible of the skin that weeps.

Josselin contemplates them, and they contemplate the ground. Even Jean-Noël says nothing. Each is waiting for someone else to break the silence, but nobody dares do it, and this silence that muffles their cowardliness, this silence, in Josselin's view, is a response. His eyes meet Adalric's and don't let go.

Whatever happens, he knows, he'll be on his side.