

At the edge of the evergreen forest, the vines tumbled towards the sea between the brush and the pine groves. In a glorious pageant of gold, russet, and brown, the brilliant vine shoots clung to the hillside where the chalky terrain appeared in irregular bald, white patches. Curious lightning flashed across a low-lying November sky that encircled a deserted park further down the hill and a vast, unshaded mansion that jutted out defiantly in the sea wind of the Languedoc coast. Two hundred meters beyond, a winding road furrowed by tractors and trucks led to the small village, which was often drenched in a morning fog as All Saints' Day drew near. Barely distinguishable was the outline of the ramshackle houses with their red-tiled roofs surrounding the old dilapidated tower. In the dim light, only the solid wooden shutters, in bright colors of mauve, blue and green, lent a slightly surrealistic tone to this tiny village where life had remained unchanged for centuries.

The post office and town hall buildings, of a more modern construction, stood side by side with their neutral-toned shutters, also fading into this timeless universe. Two teenage girls dawdled in front of the bakery, which was no more than a large diagonal hallway illuminated by the neon from the refrigerated display case and receded slightly into an alcove. They looked longingly at the forbidden goodies, but tried to resist, perhaps forcing themselves to remember the perfect figures of the models in the magazines they thumbed through every day. One of the girls was on the verge of surrendering to her sweet tooth when the sound of a car pulling up snapped them out of their sugary reverie.

Amandine, in her miniskirt and red-ribboned braids, pouted mockingly. "It's Madame Fraysse — she'd park her car in the store if she could. She's too proud to walk down the street with her basket under her arm."

The other girl, taking the cigarette out of her mouth, agreed. "Now that she's a widow, she thinks she can do anything — she's in charge of the house *and* the vineyard!"

Amandine, feeling virtuous for only buying a baguette, replied: "That may be true, but my Aunt Justine told me that she's turned the whole estate over to tenant farmers. And now she has a lot less money coming in than before."

"Oh, she's got no reason to complain. Your aunt also tells you, doesn't she, that she often goes to town and to concerts? So there!" She shot a smug look at her friend.

Outside the car started up again, swerved, and several yards further, grazed a doorway whose mauve paint was flaking off in large salt-fringed sheets, revealing the grayish material underneath. The two teens smiled in the gentle mist, elbowing each other, and made their way towards the only boutique in the village.

"I'll bet she's heading towards the pier. She often walks there alone."

As the girls entered the boutique, their voices soon became muffled by the lacy merchandise.

In fact, Odile Fraysse was indeed driving her red Beetle towards the marina. The fog had lifted, and the small village square where the polyanthus still bloomed suddenly took on a holiday atmosphere. Across from the marshland, the sea appeared in all its magnificence, spreading out to the horizon, becoming a deeper blue out beyond the pier. To the east, the resort city rose up, its modern semi-circular buildings of faded pink and pale beige concrete leaning insolently, nonchalantly against the mountains.

The Volkswagen moved slowly along the docks. In the marina, sailboats and patrol boats bobbed up and down, rocking their mainsails and sleek hulls. Heavy tarps of a uniform blue covered the beach beyond. The pleasure crafts were hibernating, lulled by winter dreams: no noise,

no purring or exploding engines, no sudden movement, not even the whipping of the ships' ropes disturbed them. Sometimes on Sundays, the shopkeepers would sit on the railing or the beach beyond and, either by force of habit or interest, would identify the parts of the boats and their motors.

Odile parked her car at the far end of the pier and got out. The wind lifted up the sides of her raincoat, and she buried her hands in her pockets to keep them down. Then she started forward, and with her eyes wide open looked out over the open sea.

At the same moment, the young girls were just walking out of the boutique.

"You see? I was right—it's her car, right at the end of the pier," Amandine declared.

She raised her head, pensive for a moment, then, turning on her ballet slippers, pointed with a quick gesture to the house above, amid the vines.

"I wonder what she does all day long in her chateau."

The word chateau was not meant sarcastically; the villagers had always called it that. It was an enormous manor house actually built as a replica of other chateaus, in the last century, a time when the railroad introduced a new era of wine growing in the Languedoc region.

"My Aunt Justine likes her; she won't tolerate unkind words about her. Of course, she's worked for Madame Fraysse's family for nearly thirty years and knew her before her marriage."

This time the car went by right next to the young girls. Odile recognized Justine's niece and gave her a slight nod. They noticed her dark green eyes and her slightly distracted expression. They saw her tawny skin, her brown hair cut short at the nape, and her slender, graceful neck. Her gloved hands clenched the wheel. Then the image vanished, swept away in the car which soon became no more than a red dot amid the russet branches.

Odile wondered if the city was going to repair the road leading to her house. At night, travel was dangerous. Although she knew all too well every turn, every bump, and every rut her car's shocks had suffered, a driver unfamiliar with the area could lose control of his car at any moment and cause an accident.

She put her car in the garage behind the big Citroën that she had rarely taken out since Charles' fatal accident. He had been crushed beneath the wheels of his tractor, and now the sight of the silver vehicle plunged her into memories of their life together. She remembered how, whenever they would go out, she would be alongside him, his hand lightly brushing hers, his conspiratorial smile filling her heart with love. She tossed her head with a brusque movement, something she always used to do when he was around, an instinctive gesture of confidence and completeness.

Odile closed the iron gate and entered the house by the service entrance. Everything had stayed the same as it had been during Charles' time and even during her own parents' time. An only child, she had inherited the estate and this large two-story house which had been luxuriously, tastefully furnished for decades. There used to be a huge fortune, but it had dwindled over the years with the deterioration of the vineyards and declining wine sales. However, her parents, the Sires, were still considered the richest wine growers in the region.

Distractedly, Odile walked through the adjoining rooms of the ground floor: the large living room, the dining room, the office. There, all at once, she felt like she could see Charles, first sitting down, then getting up, adjusting the standing lamp, stretching his arms to select a book. He hadn't much liked this retro-Egyptian style.

"I prefer the clean lines of modern furniture," he used to say. But, because they couldn't afford to replace it and for fear of hurting Odile's feelings, he put up with it. "The furniture is very

valuable," he would add, "and it also brings back memories for you, my dear." Then he would take her by the shoulders, kissing her high on her forehead, near her hairline.

It was in this room that he did the books and would occasionally read his newspaper. On rainy days, when he left the fields and shut himself up in this room, Odile would kindly reproach him; why didn't he come in beside her, in the living room in front of the huge fireplace? He gave a start, not because he felt guilty, but, rather, annoyed at having missed a few moments of happiness. He would then sit on the Voltaire armchair, across from her, and look up to admire her hands busily working on embroidery or knitting. He slipped into a wonderful sense of well-being with her; a sense that can only come from the knowledge that you are loved by the one you love. He would often move his arms down the embroidered armrests, letting his fingers slide along their fluted, scrolled curves, "so as to feel the warmth and smoothness of the wood, just like the smoothness of your skin," he would add with a smile.

The armchair had been there for generations, reupholstered several times to fit the tastes of the various mistresses of the house; there were also writing desks, folding game tables, work benches that had been restored from time to time, and delicate knick-knacks.

Charles had sold his part of his family's estate to his two brothers; their property was adjacent to the Sires'. Then he had invested this money in his in-laws' land, which was partially his from then on.

But sometimes, in the midst of all this luxury (which was a bit outmoded, it seemed to him, and incongruous with their income), he would murmur: "We are penniless squires." Odile always laughed at this expression, which in turn made him laugh. She could still hear the teasing in his voice when she looked at a piece of furniture, or a knick-knack, that they had gently poked fun at together. This laughter had warmed her, had given meaning to her life.

Often she used to lay her work to one side and sit at his feet, resting her head on his knees. She remembered these gentle moments. She would close her eyes, feeling him lightly caressing the back of her neck. A very sweet happiness pervaded their existence; nothing delighted them more than this silent communion, this tenderness beyond all sensuality.

As she walked through the dining room, she noticed the parquet floor and remarked that it hadn't been waxed in a long time, and that she had better get to it. Charles had liked this Hungarian-patterned floor, with its interlocking grooved strips, very much.

"It's annoying that it's so hard to maintain," he would sometimes exclaim. "Why don't we have it varnished?"

However, Odile would always dissuade him from that idea.

Today the fire crackled strongly, violently, in a kind of rage. Before she left for town on her bike, Justine used to feed it, "not forgetting the cuttings from the grenache vine," she often used to say. Charles had liked the grenaches best. Odile absently wiped a tear away at this memory.

The embers continued to crackle, as they had in the past, insensitive to the deceptive emptiness and to this thing which haunted her mind and heart: despair, powerlessness in the face of this devastated happiness, an urge to scream in the face of this uncontrollable denial, at death which cut like a knife. How could someone who loved her beyond all reason have left her like this? How could he allow death to carry him off, numb, rigid, when a short time earlier his actions were only based in love? How could she ever get used to it? How could she overcome her hatred of this cruel fate?

All at once, she grabbed the copper tongs and, with a brisk movement, pushed a log all the way to the back of the fireplace. Then, sighing deeply, she stared at the andirons.

The embers were hitting the metal screen, but also, despite the chimney's depth, sometimes flew over it. She remembered (without bitterness this time) that Charles, looking for ways to save money and be organized, had had this Savonnerie rug moved away from the fireplace. She glanced at the floral motifs that her feet had trod on since her childhood, and where, many times, they had made love, not far from the raging flames whose shadows danced on their skin.

There was no longer anyone to love in this house. She began to climb the steps of the big staircase with its iron banister, which stretched out in one long flight up to the second floor, where the bedrooms were.

"The staircase is what I love the most in your chateau," Charles had often said ironically, but with a playful smile at the corners of his mouth that suggested the reason for this preference.

When she reached the second floor, she opened the door of the room she had always planned on using as a nursery someday. There was a dresser that she had painted and decorated with intertwining garlands and simple scenery. In a habitual gesture, she opened the armoire and gently fingered the tiny white cotton booties she had knitted one day, in a fit of pique. She closed the door, and when she got to her own room, threw herself on the bed. A moment later, she went into the bathroom and splashed her face with water. The mirror revealed a still-young woman, with large eyes of autumnal green, a few small wrinkles scarcely visible around her eyelids.

"You are still very beautiful," her cousin Raymonde insisted. "Think about your future -- you can't possibly be thinking about staying alone at your age."

Thirty-nine years old! Almost the dreaded 40. She couldn't stand it, however, when people mentioned remarriage to her. Charles was too much of a presence in this house; his pipes and tobacco still rested on the living room table and on his desk; his clothes still hung in the armoire. The local priest had recommended that she get rid of them, give them to Catholic Relief Services, but she couldn't seem to do it. It would have been as if she wanted to purge all her memories and settle into acceptance. And she did not want this acceptance, not at any price.

The same night they told her about the accident, she had had a strange dream. Charles was drowning in a pond, and she reached out her hand to save him, but he couldn't grab it. And then she had awakened with a start.

It seemed that whenever the memories overcame her, she responded by sleepwalking. So she decided to take a shower to relax her, then to visit Pascaline, who lived nearby, and whose presence always calmed her. Pascaline was the wife of the tenant farmer, Joseph Rastouil, who had been a groundskeeper when Charles was alive. They didn't live very far away, just at the bottom of the hill, in a small villa built where the outbuildings used to be. Pascaline's father, himself a stableman for the Sires, had lived for years with his small family in one of the now-abandoned buildings. As a child, Odile used to love to hang around the stables, and many times Pascaline's father had warned her to watch out for the kicking hooves of these huge animals who had a mind of their own, he used to say. Like a slap, the memory of Charles' accident struck her again. Why had he so stubbornly tried to make the tractor go through those vines which clung so dangerously to the steep hillside? Joseph had already suggested doing this work using animals hitched to yokes.

And Pascaline was pregnant again. Odile thought about this as she ran down the steep path which led to the villa. She saw herself as a young girl again, tearing down this same path in springtime, gathering brambles and *cistes*—wild pink and white roses—along the way, putting them in her hair or behind her ear.

She couldn't resist casting a quick glance towards the wine cellar nearby, with its ramshackle roof and dirty tiles. The building had been unusable for a long time; in fact, even then, her father had already started bringing his harvest to the co-op. Charles had done the same.

Now she heard the shouts of Pascaline's children in the tiny enclosed garden.

"Maman, Maman! It's Madame Fraysse."

Pascaline appeared in the doorway, her youngest child in her arms. Three children and a fourth on the way. Odile said to herself, she's getting older by the day! And why does she hide her hair in a bun, when it is the envy of everyone in the village? But the sight of her heavy belly, in a dress from a previous pregnancy, filled Odile with tenderness nonetheless.

The two women hugged. Having lived on the same property during childhood, they had grown up together, played the same games, laughed at the same silly jokes, and had often done their schoolwork side by side. Since Pascaline's parents were illiterate, Odile's mother often helped the little girl. But adolescence had separated them. Pascaline had had to stop her education after middle school; her mother needed her at home. Odile, on the other hand, was sent to the most elite boarding school around, in the neighboring town.

For several years, their joy on seeing each other again still equaled that of their childhood. But, gradually, their respective friends took up all their time, and they moved in different circles, circles that had distanced them from each other without altering their affection.

"When is the baby due, Pascaline?"

"You know very well! They're usually conceived in spring. It will almost certainly come in January," she added.

For a moment Odile felt resentment towards Joseph, who was nevertheless so devoted, for ruining his wife with these pregnancies that occurred too quickly, one after the other. Then she thought about their marriage, remembered the love they had for one another, and held her tongue: conflicting thoughts were overwhelming her. She turned to Pascaline.

"Give me Pascal for a minute; you shouldn't hold him for so long; he's big already."

She held the infant against her chest, and, as she always did, rested her cheek against the baby's. He knew her and allowed her to do it. But today this contact upset her so much that she quickly handed him back to his mother.

She absently made some small talk, and finally she kissed her friend again and waved goodbye to the children. She practically fled, with her hands shoved deep inside her pockets.

After several minutes, the steep hill forced her to slow her pace. Looking to both sides, she noticed the tractor hangar and the workers' quarters where the seasonal grape pickers used to live. The roof of this part of the building had been retiled in a bright red that gleamed in the noontime sun. Today, Joseph rented a machine to harvest the grapes.

Without thinking about the weather, upset by the human warmth she felt from this family, Odile tried to look for *cistes*, or "wild roses," as she used to say as a child. But there were no calm, pale colors among the brushes and loose stones; only the aggressive russet of the vine leaves. She left the path and went into the middle of the vines, touching them distractedly. One of the leaves crumbled in her fingers.

A husband and a child: she had wanted that with all her heart during her adolescence and her years at the university. She had met Charles there — he was studying law at the time. The children of the winegrowers in the area were often loaded up with diplomas, especially the younger sons, paid for by their brothers so that they could buy a law practice or an office. Charles had wanted to be a lawyer, but he met Odile, and the vineyard became his chambers.

She suddenly remembered that right after his death she had been advised to sell a part of the vineyards and to transform the chateau into a hotel-restaurant. The location was superb, with a breathtaking view of the ocean and the mountains—guaranteed to attract tourists all year round. She had even thought about taking courses in hotel management. But this was only a dream she toyed with; there were too many risks involved in this business. Better to be content with the income she derived from farming. Time would tell.

Meanwhile, Pascaline's face haunted her; it made her think about the impending birth of the next child. This afternoon, without fail, she would have to go into town. The piano bench she had taken to be restored was ready, and the woodworker was getting impatient. She would take advantage of the trip by stopping by Prénatal, the maternity boutique. Maybe she would find a small bed she liked, since the one Pascaline had now was worn from overuse. She would also go visit her cousins, who ran a bookstore. Raymonde was sweet and well-balanced and knew how to comfort her. Raymonde's husband, Camille—her blood cousin, her childhood boyfriend—still had the same good-natured, teasing affection for her that had never managed to offend either Raymonde or Charles.

2

The bookstore was located on a busy street near a canal edged with plane trees. On windy days, the shadows of the leaves moved like giant seaweed on the calm water. At this time of year, they began to shed their leaves, which whirled in the current, or stayed immobile like great brown water lilies. Odile leaned over this long reddish trail flecked with light green, over these enormous shadows that seemed to come from the depths.

The town gave her a more vibrant taste of life, of movement. People were in a hurry; they had their specific, immediate goals. In the country, everything relied on the rhythm of the seasons. Only the seaside resort, in the summer, was caught up in the madness: backfire from motorcycles, revving engines, deafening music starting at dawn, shouts, and youthful laughter, hysterical or joyous. The city seemed a balance between the apparent heaviness of the countryside and these summer beaches where getting away from it all and the frenzied desire to have fun turned the place upside down, making the city itself a little tipsy.

She headed towards a bakery. Every time she went into town, she bought alleluias and glorias for Pascaline's children, who kept pieces of the cakes in a round tin. Since they were dry, without cream, they could last a full week. Odile was served, and said that she would come back later to pick up the package. It seemed to her, if not indelicate, at least awkward to show up at her cousins' house with treats that weren't meant for them.

She loved this store with its smell of books. The fine dust of the paper, faintly bitter, reminded her of her student days at the university library. Here, however, everything was devoted to leisure, to relaxation, to research as well, but without the obsessive need to prepare for exams. She liked the tidiness and muffled ambiance of the place; the faces of the readers, simultaneously attentive and peaceful, relaxed her. Today, a single customer thumbed through a magazine; he gave her a slightly annoyed look that surprised her. She felt as though she'd bothered him. How strange!

There was nobody at the register. Camille must be in his office, in back of the bookstore. His wife, Raymonde, only came in later in the afternoon.

A young saleswoman came up to her: "How are you, Madame Fraysse?" She had worked there for several years and knew her employers' cousin. She sometimes even allowed herself friendly small talk.

"Monsieur Camille has gone out. He's at the bank—he goes every Tuesday. He won't be long."

"I'll wait," Odile said. "My cousin Raymonde is certainly home."

"No, Madame is at the hairdresser's; she will be a while."

The girl, seeing Odile's expressionless face, headed towards the back of the store where the children's books were stacked. Odile saw her open the long list in a hardbacked book suspended from the shelf and note the items that had been sold into a notebook. Odile was familiar with this work; Raymonde and Camille had invited her to their place several times after her ordeal. During the holidays, she had helped them out during the busy times. This business had proved beneficial for her, and for that she was very grateful to them. They came more often now on Sundays or holidays to the Saint-Anne place or rather to the Sire home.

Distractedly, she took a selection from the display right at the store's entrance, where they put all the bestsellers of previous months of this year, 1985. The new winners of several literary awards were due out in November—this month—and Camille had to wait impatiently for the red bands denoting the winners, which would make the books sell more easily.

Odile felt a presence behind her. The blond man who had been leafing through a magazine when she arrived approached her. With a manicured hand he reached out and grabbed a book. She turned her head; the blue-eyed customer seemed to have lost his arrogant look, and the shadow of a smile softened his features. She quickly turned her book over and began reading the first sentences on the back cover. But this man's nearness disturbed her; he stayed on her side, far back enough, however, so he couldn't be seen. She could see his hand slowly turning pages. A sense of uneasiness, almost panic, seized her. She was about to move away from him when the shop's glass door opened and in walked Camille, looking impeccable in his cashmere sweater, his closely cropped hair, and his well-tailored jeans.

"Odile! What a surprise! Why didn't you tell us you were coming? Raymonde would have rescheduled her appointment at the hairdresser's. You know she'll be there for two hours - beauty treatments, manicure, and all that. Thank God she only goes there once a month. And how are you getting along? We haven't come to see you lately. Christmas is coming, and, as you know, starting mid-November we have to organize everything: completely redo the window displays and decorate them."

He headed towards his office, urging her to follow him, when he recognized the customer.

"Monsieur Forest! We haven't seen you in a long time."

"I've moved," he said, putting his book under his arm and holding his hand out to Camille. "I'm living across from you now. It makes life easier since I'm near my job at the library."

"Odile, let me introduce Monsieur Fabien Forest, who runs the public library. My cousin, Madame Fraysse. In fact, you might have seen him before."

Odile thought about it, but couldn't remember.

"The Forests bought a parcel of vineyard, of red *carignan* grapes, from your grandfather. It was solid as a rugby goalpost, he used to say. But you were still only a little girl. They also

bought a house on the property, with a very pretty view.”

Odile tried to go further back in her memories of adolescence and suddenly recalled a skinny boy dressed in a white undershirt and bathing suit. He used to spy on her while she sunbathed on the steps, displaying her slender fifteen-year old body. He would stand several yards from her, clutching the handlebars of his bike, stammering that he was lost, had taken the wrong road. He lived in the area, he used to say. She had thought him stupid: how could he get lost? The park was enclosed, surrounded by a wire fence or hedges cut from the brush. Besides, there was only one entrance, and it had no gate. Two massive pink brick columns, where you could still see the location of the hinges, were all that marked the way. She remembered she had shrugged her shoulders and ignored him as he was leaving.

At this memory something in her relaxed. She felt like laughing when she recalled those years when promises and illusions gave her a glorified image of her small self, and also an immense desire for conquest, a secret, voluptuous impression that she could have everything, even while knowing intuitively that she must protect herself and not trust others.

Fabien smiled; his tiny pupils were dilated and swallowed up the blue of his irises. He seemed to be laughing at himself, and this far-from-flattering encounter. Odile, however, was aware that he had never been a part of their group.

“Were you studying law?”

“No, humanities, but not in the same town as you.”

An unaccustomed curiosity drove her to ask him these questions. Although they were neighbors and about the same age, the only memory she had of him was of this audacious, and—who knows—lovestruck child.

Reading her mind, Fabien replied, “It’s true; I was in love with you at the time. But who wasn’t in love with the beautiful Odile Sire?” he added quite simply, without sarcasm or ostentation.

Camille, who was excluded from the conversation, remarked, “I’ll leave you two. Excuse me.” Indeed, there were customers waiting at the register. Upset by this encounter, she took this opportunity to leave.

“So why don’t you come with my cousins one Sunday afternoon to the house? You know the way,” she added with a smile that betrayed no ambiguity.

“I’d be delighted—why not?” His tone was cheerful, but he turned away from her slightly. “I knew your husband Charles Fraysse a little. He liked to come to the library when he passed through our town.”

Odile started. The mention of Charles’ name by this man seemed displaced, incongruous to her. Without knowing why, she held it against him.

She knew Charles had consulted works on viticulture and wines, but he had never talked to her about this man...how odd...he who was always so happy to tell her about the most insignificant meeting.

They exchanged goodbyes and Fabien kept her hand in his, much longer than was proper. His hand was sweaty - Odile got an unpleasant, unhealthy impression. But his broad shoulders in his well-tailored jacket and his gentle, dreamy smile reassured her.

It was Sunday. Odile, feverishly pacing the living room, looked out into the distance from the French door, which was open (she had decided to air out the room—it was stuffy. Once again, Raymonde and Camille are going to say that I am holing myself up, she thought).

Ever since she was young, she had loved this far-off view of the sea, this countryside of

vineyards, thickets and conifers which stood out against a horizon which could be either placid or choppy with waves. The wind, whether it came from the southeast or from the sea, had nurtured and inspired her adolescent dreams, especially at night when the old mansion would tremble from the gales and the echo of the crashing waves.

Her cousins had promised her they would come and bring their grandchildren, two toddlers three and four years old (already!), who liked to run in front of the house, bursting with laughter, for hours at a time.

The children's laughter and shouts were already running through her head. Once again, she could see the little boys bounding along the path, but, unlike the other times, she didn't think of preparing the tea service, or bringing the tray near the fireplace.

She felt preoccupied, worried. This Fabien Forest had also promised to visit her, and she caught herself thinking that the petits-fours she'd bought in town would perhaps not be to his liking. She also knew that when her cousins came, she ordinarily didn't buy flowers. Today she had put flowers in the two celadon porcelain vases on the living room console table between the French doors.

Ever since she returned from town, Fabien Forest's face haunted her. There was something attractive about this man, but something she distrusted too. Would she forget Charles? Already?

The phone rang. Her cousins, the booksellers, couldn't get away; they had been left with the grandchildren, one of whom had a high fever. The doctor was due to arrive any minute. They apologized for this unexpected turn of events.

Odile panicked: she was going to entertain this stranger alone! What was he going to think—that she had maneuvered it so that they would be alone together? She had better phone him, pretend it was a misunderstanding, say she'd suddenly remembered a forgotten invitation.

But just when she was heading for the telephone stand, a kidney-shaped table edged with copper friezes, she heard the crunching of tires in the driveway. She slipped towards the French door that she had closed again, then drew the large-patterned embroidery curtains back slightly.

Fabien was already getting out of his black sports car.

She waited for him to ring the bell, glanced quickly in the mirror near the large Audes armoires of the vestibule, and opened the door. She immediately explained what had happened but felt at the same time that it was an invitation for him to leave. Fabien, however, didn't seem bothered in the least by the cousins' defection and inquired about the child's health. Odile then had no choice but to let him in and invite him to sit down by the hearth.

However, when he headed for Charles' Voltaire armchair, she was on the verge of stopping him. As she led him in, Fabien's presence behind her had already made her uneasy. She had had a disturbing feeling that she could not define. She would have preferred that he walk beside her, but, apparently, he let himself fall back a step behind. Although she tried not to, at one point she turned her head to look at him. Fabien's cold stare frightened her; but he suddenly became courteous, even admiring, talking and settling himself in the family armchair in the same offhanded way.

"So, one of Monsieur Bonnet's grandchildren is sick," he repeated.

Odile, sitting across from him, was rather tense. Her hands rested flat on her crossed legs—she wasn't listening to him. She should have made an effort to be more presentable! Even so, a pair of jeans and an angora sweater were suitable for a Sunday in the country. Fabien, on the other hand, had arrived dressed almost ceremoniously, in a suit and tie. She should have also

offered him a cup of tea or coffee, but an involuntary animosity immobilized her. To see him so relaxed, so... (the word escaped her), so jovial in this house where unhappiness still lingered, and especially in a place he had never been before.

She let her gaze fall on the strange paleness of his eyes and on his slightly weak chin. His clothing, however—if not appropriate, it was at least impeccable — and his grooming also captured her attention.

He gladly accepted a cup of tea and the petits-fours, which he complimented her on. From time to time, Odile noticed that he cast politely detached but inquisitive glances around the room.

“Do you play the piano?” he asked, cup and saucer in hand. He turned towards the mahogany baby grand which had been placed in the corner of the living room, under a wall hanging embroidered with peacocks. Two matching cushions adorned the caned seat of a bench made of the same reddish wood.

He seemed to expect a negative answer. Women Odile Fraysse’s age had frequented the nightclubs and tennis courts more often than the conservatory, especially in this society. A faint sarcasm drifted in and out of his banter. Odile—aggressive this time—saw herself dressed in her white socks and Peter Pan collar, a long braid down her back, agonizing over the Carpentier and Hanon methods.

“Obviously, I took lessons when I was a child, but I wasn’t as talented as my mother.” And, forgetting about the possible sarcasm that was only perhaps a first impression, she started explaining, since she forgave quickly despite her mistrust.

“It’s been years since I uncovered this keyboard. It’s a Pleyel - my great-grandfather gave it to his wife in 1885. It’s one of the first ones, with felt hammers and crossed strings. I thought, why not take it up again?”

A strange sensation made her panic. Suddenly she wanted to hear the sound of this instrument once more, to recapture the joy of her childhood, or simply to feel joy again. And she recalled that, many times, underneath the piano’s sounding board, on the oriental rug, she used to fall asleep while listening to her mother play *The Virgin’s Prayer*, *The Sparrows’ Polka*, or *The Indian March*.

She continued, “I used to rest my head on an embossed leather cushion, no doubt made by my mother, since, as you well know, the young girls of her day, especially the ones who lived in the country, used to like this sort of handiwork.” She added: “When I awoke, the outlines stayed on my cheek, the patterns of the artwork had left their mark.”

She touched her face and felt it burning; Fabien still had this noticeably mocking air about him, yet he was also attentive. He seemed to be listening to her and at the same time admiring her surroundings with a feigned offhandedness. She stopped herself for a moment, then in order to appear composed, she headed towards the piano, uncovered the keyboard, took off the runner (embroidered by Mother, Fabien said to himself), and started playing the first notes of *Für Elise*. Then she started chatting again; she was a little nervous, however.

“You see this Eros made of Sèvres porcelain?” She pointed to a statue of an adorable nude adolescent on the piano, on a pedestal of white marble and reading an enormous book. “Many times since childhood I’ve tried to imagine his expression underneath the lids of those closed porcelain eyes.”

Fabien stood up and, as if he were in his own house, grabbed the copper tongs and started stoking the coals. Some sparks flew, and then the flames stretched out in long dancing streaks.

He added another log. Odile noticed that he placed it well in the back to keep it from smoking.

All at once, he seemed different to her: skillful, master of his movements, like people who lived in the country. As if he had guessed her thoughts, he said, with his back to her, "I too am a man of the earth. Oh, I don't pretend to be well off, with my three hectares of *carignan* and my librarian's salary, but I love life away from the city."

More unsettled than she cared to admit, she suggested, "Would you like to walk outside for a bit before it gets dark?"

The truth was, she didn't know what to do with him, but he remained motionless, as if he hadn't heard. Now he was watching the fireplace with interest.

"The floral motifs sculpted in the lintel are identical to the ones on the wainscoting in the living room," he noticed. Then, very relaxed, he raised his eyes towards the center of the mantel where a portrait of an ancestor of the Sires hung.

"This must surely be your great-grandfather."

"How did you know that?"

"By counting the generations and by his clothing. He was a handsome man," he added with a barely ambiguous tone, "with his handlebar moustache, heavy sideburns, ascot."

Then after a moment of silence he said with either gentleness or contained feeling: "He has the same eyes as you, the same color...exactly. It's rather rare, that dark green."

Odile was now standing beside him. This unexpected compliment, this curious emotion perplexed her; she affected a relaxed air.

"Come on, there's a marvelous view from up there," she said finally.

Outside, a damp wind made her shiver. She tightened the sweater that she had thrown over her shoulders around her neck, tying the sleeves together over her chest.

Fabien, his hands in his pockets, stared at the house in the middle of the large enclosed space, which had all the characteristics of a poorly maintained parking lot and nothing of a former park. What was brewing inside his head? An evaluation? An estimate? Or a penchant for a rather peculiar style of architecture? Odile wondered. For it, too, was handsome, this large old home with its wings barely jutting out from each side of the main building, with its two stories, its twenty-six windows and French doors, its bull's-eye window topped by a triangular façade decorated with sculptures, its balustrade which ran all along the second floor with its vase-shaped balusters. On the roof were windows without balconies, also topped with circular pediments, lightly sculpted. The ocher tiles, on a pinewood base, were covered now by the golden hues of the setting sun.

"I've always remembered this house and the pretty girl who used to sunbathe on the steps."

With his chin, Fabien pointed to the double steps and their two symmetrical ramps. Odile smiled, happy this time. But suddenly, she felt the painful memory of Charles. Was she beginning to forget him now? Ever since this man had walked through the door of their home, she had felt a renewal without knowing it. She sighed, turned her head, and remembered the sunsets, dazzling and dark, that they had gazed upon together from the top of the stairs or from the edge of the vineyards. November sunsets—lifeless despite the red masses which bloodied the sky and the streaks of light which were, from time to time, softened by a passing cloud.

Fabien approached her without her noticing. This startled her again, and she wondered if this was an unconscious fear or maybe a foreshadowing of joy.

"Madame Fraysse, would you like to have dinner together? I know a restaurant along the shore that's open on Sunday nights, all year round. It's about thirty kilometers from here. I think

that will take your mind off things. This countryside is very beautiful, but it brings back painful memories for you.”

She turned around abruptly, and he was up against her. His eyes had lost their sarcastic expression. It seemed that a calm strength, a great tenderness, emanated from him. However, it was difficult for her to believe it.

She had put on a gray suit, with a white silk scarf knotted around her neck. He was proud to be with her.

There weren't very many people in the restaurant. Some couples their age or older, no doubt resting from the weekly Sunday visit of grandchildren or from an unpleasant family meal.

Fabien rested his hand on hers. She withdrew it, but regretfully.