

**Translation and Analysis of Suzanne Myre's Short Story Collection *Mises à mort*: A
Case Study in Translating the Short Story Cycle**

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Abstract

In translation studies, the short story cycle has been largely overlooked as an object of study in prose translation. This thesis serves as a case study on the practice of translating the short story cycle, using my translation of Suzanne Myre's 2007 short story collection *Mises à mort* as a paradigm.

The thesis comprises four sections: the first is devoted to a discussion of the short story cycle, a modernist form of the short story collection. It is a hybrid subgenre, balancing elements of both the traditional short story collection, characterized by heterogeneity, and the novel, characterized by homogeneity. In this first section, I examine a few definitions of the cycle, then I discuss the subgenre according to a four-part criteria established by Gerald Lynch: 'character,' 'place,' 'theme' and 'style or tone.' In the second section, I provide an analysis of *Mises à mort* within the framework of short story cycle criteria; an examination of the characters, setting, overarching themes and stylistic parallels serves to demonstrate how and why I ultimately interpreted the collection as a short story cycle.

The third section is my complete translation of the work. In the fourth and final section, I discuss what implications my interpretation of *Mises à mort* as a cycle had for my translation thereof, and what unique challenges it presented. I compare my first draft, produced in the mindset that I was translating a traditional collection, to my final draft, revised to accommodate the cohesiveness of the work. This thesis serves to demonstrate how a translator can accommodate for the dual nature of the short story cycle, *simultaneously* maintaining the discreteness and interconnectedness of the stories.

Résumé

En traductologie, le sous-genre littéraire appelé « recueil-ensemble de nouvelles »¹ (*short story cycle* en anglais) a été grandement négligé. La présente thèse constitue une étude de cas sur le sujet, avec comme paradigme ma traduction de *Mises à mort*, le recueil de nouvelles de Suzanne Myre paru en 2007.

La thèse se divise en quatre parties : la première porte sur le recueil-ensemble de nouvelles, une forme ou sous-genre moderniste du recueil de nouvelles. Il s'agit d'un sous-genre hybride caractérisé à la fois par l'hétérogénéité du recueil de nouvelles traditionnel et par l'homogénéité du roman. Dans cette première partie, j'examine quelques définitions, puis je traite du sous-genre selon les quatre critères établis par Gerald Lynch : personnage, action, thème et style. Dans la deuxième partie, j'analyse *Mises à mort* en fonction de ces critères; l'étude des personnages, de l'action, des thèmes dominants et des parallèles stylistiques permet d'expliquer les raisons qui m'amènent à conclure qu'il s'agit d'un recueil-ensemble. La troisième partie présente ma traduction complète de l'œuvre. Dans la quatrième et dernière partie, je traite de l'incidence de mes conclusions sur la traduction, ainsi que des défis uniques auxquels j'ai été confrontée. Je compare mon premier jet, traduit comme un recueil traditionnel, à ma version finale, révisée avec un souci particulier pour une cohésion unifiante. La présente thèse montre comment un traducteur peut s'adapter à la double nature du recueil-ensemble, c'est-à-dire en conservant *à la fois* le caractère distinct des nouvelles et leur interdépendance.

¹ The term used by Jean-Pierre Boucher to designate 'short story cycle.' In French, there is no standardized term for the subgenre.

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0 Introduction

When I set out to translate *Mises à mort*, the 2007 short story collection from Montreal writer Suzanne Myre, it was my first attempt at translating a complete short story collection. Although I was somewhat familiar with working in the genre, having translated individual short stories in the past (whether they were selected from collections or periodicals), I had not read a great deal of short story collections in full, nor had I ever translated one. This was going to be a new experience for me and, as I would ultimately discover, an unexpectedly enlightening and enriching one.

The short story collections I had read in the past (both in English and in French) were collections of discrete texts written by a single author. The stories did not function together as a cohesive group; they did not contain recurring characters, locales, themes or motifs and were not necessarily alike in terms of style or tone, either. Even if stories did possess certain commonalities, these did little to link the stories in any significant way. So the collection consisting of unconnected fictions is what I considered to be the formal standard for the genre and, consequently, this was the assumption I was operating under when I embarked upon the reading and (simultaneous) translation of *Mises à mort*.

Though I was cognisant that death served as the primary theme throughout the collection—the book title and cover are quite clear about that—because of my expectations of the genre, I was not necessarily expecting *every* story to involve death, nor was I anticipating the stories to be otherwise interrelated. As a result, I initially approached my translation of *Mises à mort* as though I were translating a series of distinct stories, which meant I was not automatically or necessarily employing the same

translation method for each story, nor was I making certain assumptions or presuppositions about one text based on another.

However, as I read story after story, delving more deeply into the collection and progressing in my translation thereof, I found myself discovering more and more similarities between the individual texts—some obvious and overt, others subtle and covert, but undeniable nevertheless. And although I was noticing variations in terms of character, tone and style, I was also recognizing patterns occurring throughout: there were recurring themes, allusions and stylistic elements, and whenever geographic indicators were provided, the setting was consistently the city of Montreal (or the surrounding areas). In certain cases, there were even parallel plot events. I was intrigued: never had I encountered a short story collection in which the stories possessed so many common elements. It was completely subverting my expectations of the genre, as well as my expectations of the translation process; because of these common elements, I found myself reassessing my interpretation of certain aspects of the collection, which ultimately forced me to revise my approach to the translation as a whole.

By the time I reached the end of the book and completed my first draft of the translation, my assessment of the work had changed and I realized that I was going to have to revise my translation, adjusting from my initial approach to the work.

As I began my research on the short story genre—a genre I had never studied and, frankly, knew little about—I found that this type of collection, in which the stories are distinct yet interrelated, is a modernist form of short story collection that appeared around the turn of the twentieth century. Though no standardized term has been developed for the subgenre, it is most commonly referred to as a ‘short story cycle.’

While there has been a great deal of attention focused on the study of the short story genre and the short story cycle, there has been very little written on the translation of a short story cycle itself.

Objective

My objective in this thesis is to discuss a subgenre of the short story collection, referred to as the 'short story cycle,' in which stories are discrete yet interrelated, functioning as parts of a greater whole. I will subsequently provide an analysis of Suzanne Myre's 2007 *Mises à mort*, which will demonstrate that due to possessing recurring themes, stylistic elements and a common setting, I interpreted the collection as a cycle. In the final section, I will discuss my translation of the collection and how, as a consequence of my interpreting this work as a cycle, I adjusted my translation accordingly, maintaining a consistent approach throughout in order to match the cohesiveness of the original text.

Section 1. The Short Story Cycle

1.1 Introduction

Julio Cortázar wrote that a novel is analogous to a film, capturing a progression of events, while a short story is akin to a photograph, capturing but a moment (1999: 28). So what does that make the short story collection? What does that make the short story collection in which the stories are interconnected? For the focus of this thesis is not the short story as an individual unit of prose, nor the traditional (miscellaneous) short story collection, but the short story *cycle*, a hybrid subgenre that possesses characteristics of both the traditional short story collection and the novel. (The short story anthology will not feature in my discussion, as I am only concerned with drawing comparisons and distinctions between works that are created by a single author, whereas a short story anthology is distinguishable from a short story collection or cycle in that it consists of stories written by various authors.)

In this section, I will discuss the emergence of the short story cycle as a subgenre, cite examples of definitions and examine various characteristics. As we will see, scholars have yet to agree on a definition for the subgenre and there is some discrepancy as to what conclusively establishes a cycle. However, this thesis is not meant to provide an exhaustive, comprehensive study of the short story cycle, but to provide a brief overview of the subgenre in the goal of subsequently demonstrating that I reasonably interpreted *Mises à mort* as an example of the form. I will primarily focus on the elements I believe to be the most crucial in identifying a short story cycle.

1.2 The Emergence of a New Subgenre

Writers have long been in the practice of assembling their stories in collective works. Rather than rely exclusively on publishing short stories individually in periodicals, for example, it is far more beneficial to compile and publish works together in a more substantial collection format, effectively increasing market exposure and financial gain. Short story collections that are single-author groupings of unrelated stories are referred to as ‘miscellaneous’ or ‘traditional’ short story collections.

The traditional short story collection can be defined as a compilation of discrete stories written by a single author. Although the stories may be similar in terms of style (works created by a common author often are) and possess a few other common elements such as overlapping themes, they are ultimately unconnected. The reading of one story does not impact the reading of another—once you finish one and move onto the next, you are transported into a new world, complete with new characters, settings, themes, motifs, etc. Each story offers its own unique reading experience and there is little or no unity binding the collection together. The traditional short story collection served as the standard format for the short story collection throughout the nineteenth century, but the twentieth would spawn a new subgenre.

The dawn of the twentieth century coincided with the emergence of the modernist movement, a period marked by what Peter Childs describes as the “desire to overturn traditional modes of representation and express the new sensibilities of their time” (2002: 4). Artists revolted against the grain of traditionalism and began experimenting with new forms, creating avant-garde works that expanded, blurred or strayed beyond the confines of genre lines or created new genres and styles altogether. Modernist thought held that

life was fragmented and unordered, and works created within this period were reflective of this notion. (For a helpful visual, think of Picasso's abstract cubism portraits, which are composed of visible, fragmented parts that together make up a whole.) The movement was not exclusive to painters, however—literary works were being created in the same vein.

Though certain scholars may argue it had predecessors in the form of epistolary novels, for example, it is generally agreed that a distinct new form of short story collection came into its own in the twentieth century, born out of the modernist literary movement (Ferguson 2). One of the first specimens of its kind was *In The Village of Viger*, a short story collection written by Canadian author Duncan Campbell Scott, published in 1896 (Lynch 16). Set exclusively in the fictional town of Viger, it features recurring characters and portrays the clash between rural and urban life, thus unifying the collection in terms of setting, character and theme. Subsequent collections that were created in the same structure were Stephen Leacock's 1912 collection *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, published in 1914, and the 1919 work *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson (who claimed he invented the form).

The new form of collection was similar to the traditional short story collection in that it also consisted of autonomous stories; where they diverged, however, is in how the new collections were arranged by the author and in the nature of the relationship between the stories within the collection, i.e., how they functioned in conjunction with one another. For despite the stories being autonomous, they were simultaneously interrelated, creating a fragmented yet cohesive whole.

In this respect, the new subgenre also possessed the novelistic quality of unity. However, it was distinguishable from the novel in that it did not contain a unified plot, nor was its structure entirely congruent (it was composed of independent texts, as opposed to dependent chapters). Therefore, this modern hybrid collection represented a departure from both genres—a veritable new subgenre unto itself, which would require its own designation.

1.3 The New Subgenre: Definition(s) and Characteristics

Initially, scholars were reluctant to assign a name to the subgenre, unwilling to even concede any sort of middle ground between the novel and the short story collection, instead preferring to (misleadingly) classify such works under one of the two pre-established categories, depending on their structure and level of cohesiveness. For a while, they occupied a sort of no man's land between the two poles: the traditional (miscellaneous) short story collection, characterized by heterogeneity, and the novel, characterized by homogeneity. Eventually, however, they would be recognized as distinct from these traditional forms of prose. Below, I discuss a few of the terms, definitions and characteristics proposed for the subgenre by some of the foremost contributors in this particular area of study.

In 1971, when Forrest Ingram published one of the first major and comprehensive works on the subject, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*, he developed the term 'short story cycle,' along with the following definition: "A book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole

significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (19). Both the term and definition gained footing in the field and have been in popular use ever since. In 1989, Susan Mann employed the term in her practical book *Short Story Cycle: A Reference Guide and Companion*, and Gerald Lynch adopted both the term and definition in his 2001 *The One and the Many: The Canadian Short Story Cycle*. For his part, James Nagel also prefers the term ‘cycle,’ but offers his own definition. In his work *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, he stated that in a short story cycle, “each contributing unit of the work is an independent narrative episode, and that there be some organizing principle of unification that gives structure, movement, and thematic development to the whole” (2001: 2).

Not everybody was satisfied with the term ‘cycle,’ however. Arguing against it in his 1989 article “The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book,” Robert Luscher proposed the term ‘short story sequence’ as an alternative, for which he offered the following definition: “a volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme” (148).

Finally, in their 1995 book *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris adopted the term ‘composite novel’ and defined it as “a literary work composed of shorter texts that—though individually complete and autonomous—are interrelated in a cohesive whole according to one or more organizing principles” (qtd. in Ferguson 2003: 3).

Despite differences in opinion regarding the appropriate terminology for the subgenre, as well as some discrepancy as to what precisely constitutes a cycle, scholars

overwhelmingly use the same sample works as objects of study, often including the aforementioned examples. Moreover, they largely analyze these works according to the same criteria.

The goal of my thesis is not to further the debate on the validity of one term over another—for the sake of simplicity, I have opted to use ‘cycle’—but to provide a helpful overview of the genre so one may understand the context in which I interpreted and translated *Mises à mort*. While these definitions are useful (and necessary) starting points, in order to fully comprehend a genre (or subgenre in this case), one must venture beyond its definition and explore its characteristics. Below, I discuss the various traits of the short story cycle (alluded to in the aforementioned definitions), beginning with the ‘arrangement’ of the collection.²

1.4 Arrangement

An interesting similarity between the definitions proposed by Ingram and Luscher is the explicit reference to the author’s role in arranging the cycle, whereas the definitions put forward by Nagel and Dunn-Morris both simply state that texts are arranged according to some “organizing principle” (though ostensibly by the author).

Nearly every scholar is in general agreement that a necessary condition of the short story cycle is a clear intention on the part of the author to arrange a cohesive collection. (In this thesis, the term ‘arrangement’ will simultaneously refer to a) the texts the author has decided to include in the collection, and b) how they are arranged within the collection.) While I agree there should be a clear, conscious effort on the author’s part to include interrelated works within a collection, whether they are linked by character,

² While not all short story collections are cycles, all cycles are short story collections.

setting, subject, etc., I do not particularly care for emphasis on the author's intent to create semantically unifying themes within a collection (as Ingram does).

Patterns and unifying elements that create cohesiveness in a cycle may exist, discovered by the reader, regardless of what an author may or may not have intended. (I think it an agonizing and futile undertaking to try to determine precisely what an author intended or meant by something he or she wrote—often, they are not even sure themselves.) Authors frequently write and create something subconsciously, but whether consciously or not, the text, once written, becomes something independent of the writer and now belongs to the reader, who will bring their own interpretation to the text.

For example, *Mises à mort* is a short story collection in which religion features prominently (and which I have interpreted as a meaningful aspect of the book) and yet, interestingly, Myre did not even realize the extent to which religion permeated her text. The following is an excerpt from her interview with Martina Djogo, from the cultural weekly publication *Voir Montréal*: Il y a une présence assez forte de l'Église et de la religion dans ce recueil...

Oui, c'est ce qu'on me dit. Moi, je n'avais pas remarqué. Mais j'ai relu dernièrement pour vérifier et c'est vrai. Il faut dire que j'ai été sous l'influence du catholicisme assez longtemps dans ma jeunesse, avant de m'en défaire et de me pencher sur le bouddhisme, pour finalement revenir à ma propre philosophie de vie. J'aime beaucoup la religion et la vie monastique [...] (2007: n.pag.).

I find it fascinating that Myre did not even recognize the heavy religious content in her own work—that it had to be pointed out to her and she had to return to the book not as the author, but as a reader, in order to realize that yes, it was true, religion figured

prominently throughout the collection. This serves to demonstrate that the author's intent is not necessarily relevant to the interpretation or analysis of a text, but that it is the reader who essentially fleshes out meaning.

Among others, Robert Luscher, André Carpentier and Denis Sauv  give the reader the task of discovering connections between stories and determining how the 'part' relates to the 'whole,' ultimately interpreting whether or not a short story collection is a cycle. The "tighter" the collection, the less effort is required by the reader; the "looser" the connections between the stories, the more agility is required by the reader in order to decipher them. This is not to imply that "looseness" negates unity; it simply means that the cohesiveness of the cycle is not as immediately evident to the reader as it is in a tightly structured cycle, in which unifying elements are for more obvious and persistent.

When arranging a collection, authors not only decide to include texts that are related, but also determine how these texts are positioned within a collection; for example, an author may decide to place the stories in chronological order. Several scholars argue that cycles should be classified according to their structure or the way in which they are conceived by the author.

Ingram distinguishes between three types of cycle, categorized by the manner in which they are arranged: the first is the 'composed cycle,' "in which the author had conceived as a whole from the time he wrote its first story" (1971: 17); the second is "an arranged cycle consist[ing] of stories which an author or editor-author has brought together to illuminate or comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association" (which he deems the "loosest" form of cycle); and finally, "completed cycles" are "sets of linked stories which are neither strictly composed nor merely arranged" (1971: 18).

Luscher rejected the term ‘cycle’ on the basis that labelling these collections as cycles “draws attention to the recurrence of theme, symbol, and character, but does so at the expense of deemphasizing the volume’s successiveness” (1989: 149). He also argued that the overall message in a short story cycle should be achieved through sequential progression as opposed to being achieved through amalgamation; therefore, the form of the cycle is integral to understanding its meaning.

Klaus Lubbers is another who advocates for structural classification: he differentiates between ‘short story sequences’ (“often chronological and devoted to the development of a character”); ‘short story cycles’ (“works exhibiting more of a plan and a compositional whole”); and ‘short story novels’ (“characterized by such a high degree of unity and closure that it is difficult to draw a line between this subgenre and the novel”) (qtd. in Lundén 1999: 36).

To my mind, it is fruitless to know how a cycle was composed, as such knowledge provides the reader little information about the work itself, i.e., how it functions as a cycle. And while I find that structural classification is a more constructive typology than that proposed by Ingram, I do not feel it should serve as the exclusive classification method, nor do I find it to be the most beneficial. As Jean-Pierre Boucher (1992: 13) and Gilles Pellerin (1997: 150) point out, one of the unique characteristics—and one of its joys, according to Pellerin—of a short story collection is that the reader has the freedom to read it any number of ways. Many of the aforementioned definitions and criteria for the short story cycle place an emphasis on how the work is arranged, stating that unifying themes and patterns are revealed to the reader progressively as the stories are read in succession. But because the stories within a cycle are independent, there are

no limitations as to how a reader can approach reading the work; while a novel demands to be read in linear fashion from beginning to end, in a collection or cycle, the reader can choose to start with one story, skip a few, read the last one, bounce back to the beginning and so on, which effectively negates the purpose of any intentional order. In fact, this is how I worked on *Mises à mort*: for the most part, I tackled the stories in sequence, but I also passed over a few, translated the last story, then returned to the others at a later point, depending on what I felt like translating at the time. And, by the time I finished reading the collection, I understood that I was dealing with a work unlike the miscellaneous short story collections I had read in the past.

As Mann wrote (and as I experienced), readers may not realize they are dealing with a cycle until after they have read a few stories (or the complete collection). But even if an author provides instructions as to how the collection should be read and these instructions are followed, in my opinion, this is ultimately irrelevant to recognizing and interpreting the cohesiveness of the collection: the interrelatedness of the stories should (and will) still be clear to readers; when read out of sequence, the cohesiveness of the collection, its *unity*, which is the key distinguishing element of the cycle, is still evident.

Before readers even begin reading the collection, however, in whichever order they choose, there is an initial indicator that they may be about to read a cycle, which is the title of the work itself.

1.5 Title

Several studies on the short story cycle reference the title of a work as being one of the indicators that a collection may be a cycle. For example, scholars such as Mann,

Lynch, Luscher and Boucher state that the title of a short story cycle will point to the cohesiveness of the collection, insofar as it will not be the title of one of the stories, but a name signposting, say, a common theme or setting (for example, the title *Dubliners* indicates a people—and subsequently stories—united through setting during a particular period in history). Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, as there are short story cycles that contain eponymous stories and miscellaneous short story collections that do not; however, such collection titles will often indicate disparity between the stories, the addendum “and other stories” being a frequently used qualifier (J.D. Salinger’s “Nine Stories” is a classic example). Overall, though it may represent a preliminary signal to readers that they are reading a cycle, I feel it is a comparatively weak indicator—I am more concerned with how the stories within the book are related and function together.

1.6 Self-sufficiency and Interrelatedness

Mann claims there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated (1989: 15). Therefore, every story within a cycle is a text that can function as an independent work. This is not necessarily an important distinction from the traditional short story collection, but from the novel, for in every short story collection, miscellaneous or otherwise, the stories are self-sufficient—it is the degree of interrelatedness between the stories that truly distinguishes a traditional short story collection from a cycle. Therefore, this characteristic primarily serves to differentiate the cycle from the novel, in which chapters are not fully achieved works that could exist independently of the book in which they are contained; conversely, stories in a cycle do not function like chapters in a novel, seamlessly advancing the narrative of a

unified plot. In my opinion, in identifying a short story cycle, the greater emphasis should be placed on the degree of interrelatedness between the stories, as this is undeniably the most significant factor.

Stories contained within cycles are interrelated through various means. The ways in which they are connected, as well as the degree to which they are connected, will differ from one cycle to another; in the case of “tight” cycles that, as Luscher puts it, “offer the tantalizing possibility of a novel” (1989: 153), stories will be very cohesive in terms of character(s), setting, theme and style, whereas “loose” cycles will exhibit far more variety from one story to the next.

With regard to the *content* of a short story cycle, analyses of works are largely conducted according to the same decisive factors; for this thesis, I borrow from Gerald Lynch and analyze the short story cycle in the framework of his quadripartite criteria, which consists of two ‘major’ and two ‘minor’ characteristics.

1.7 Character

Gerald Lynch lists ‘character’ as one of two major characteristics of the short story cycle and certainly, one of the most common features of the subgenre is the presence of recurring character or sets of characters. Many cycles with recurring character(s) may contain one main character throughout, as well as subordinate characters who may not necessarily appear in every story; often, such collections are based on the *bildungsroman* format, following the emotional and psychological growth of a character. An example of one such cycle is Junot Díaz’s critically acclaimed *This is How You Lose Her*, the coming-of-age story in which the reader sees the central character, ‘Yunior,’

grow from a young boy, to a troubled teenager, then finally into an author and college professor in his adult life. Though Yunion serves as narrator throughout most of the cycle, not every text is told from his point of view, nor is he the primary focus of every story. The cycle is structured as a modern, fragmented version of a *bildungsroman*, but unlike a traditional *bildungsroman*, despite the text tracing the evolution of a single character throughout, the stories function as autonomous works, told from various perspectives.

Other cycles may lack a central figure while featuring groups of characters who, again, may or may not appear in every story. In Suzanne Myre's 2004 short story cycle *Humains aigre-doux*, there is no main character; rather, multiple characters appear and reappear throughout the book, often congregating in the same locale. In cycles, it is also common for characters to possess similar personality traits (vain, superficial, idealistic and so forth).

Another less common (though interesting) character 'type' in a cycle is what Suzanne Ferguson, in her 2003 article "Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story Genre Criticism," refers to as the "composite personality," a character who appears to be several different people, but is actually one and the same. In John Barth's 1969 collection *Lost in the Funhouse*, Ferguson writes that in spite of initially appearing as though the stories are completely unrelated and contain separate characters, "eventually it does become clear that all the stories are "about" the same character, at different life stages...and seen through different technical perspectives" (4). In contrast to a recurring character who is clearly the same person, the "composite personality" of course requires a much greater capacity on the part of the reader to recognize and interpret the character(s) as such.

Regardless of how characters manifest themselves in a work, the inclusion of one recurring character (or multiple) is perhaps the most widespread feature of a short story cycle, though there are cycles in which recurring characters do not appear at all (as is the case in *Mises à mort*, which I discuss in the following section). It is possible for collections to lack common characters and still be considered cycles, but in lieu of a common character, the stories will often possess a common setting.

1.8 Place

Another chief unifying feature of short story cycle, which serves as the second major characteristic in Lynch's criteria, is 'place' (otherwise herein referred to as 'setting' or 'locale'). (Lynch states that while unity of 'character' in a cycle will always imply unity of 'place,' the reverse is not true, meaning stories in a cycle can be connected by setting without necessarily being connected by character.) A few famous examples of cycles linked by geographic locale are, as mentioned earlier in this section, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. (The setting need not be real—Leacock's collection takes place in the fictional town of Mariposa, representative of the archetypical small town in Ontario.) Furthermore, while 'place' ostensibly constitutes a more "straightforward" characteristic than 'character,' it is not limited to geographical setting exclusively; less frequently, it may also include the abstract concept of a mental or emotional place—a particular state of mind, for example.

Though 'character' and 'setting' are the two dominant characteristics of the short story cycle, they are certainly not the sole characteristics and they seldom occur in

isolation: in fact, cycles generally contain at least one of the major characteristics as well as several supporting elements, which Lynch refers to as ‘minor’ characteristics.

1.9 Theme and Style

In addition to his two major characteristics, Lynch adds two minor characteristics to his criteria: ‘thematic unity’ and ‘consistent style or tone.’ In my opinion, consistency in style or tone is a less significant factor than ‘thematic unity’ in terms of distinguishing a miscellaneous collection from a cycle, for again, tone and style may be (and are likely to be) consistent among miscellaneous short stories written by a single author, whereas theme is less likely to be unified in a traditional collection. In “La nouvelle romanesque: un sous-genre hybride,” Michel Biron cites Gilles Pellerin’s short story collection *Ī (i tréma)* as an example of a cycle whose great stylistic variance does not negate the unity of the work. Biron argues that the diversity of the collection does not weaken its character as an ensemble:

Le recueil saute allègrement d’un registre à l’autre, d’un style à l’autre, d’un lieu à l’autre. Il y en a pour tous les goûts. Cela ressemble tantôt à un petit poème en prose, tantôt à une satire politique ou à une critique mordante de quelque fait de société. Ces changements apparents de style n’affaiblissent aucunement l’unité d’ensemble. Le style reste tributaire de la forme même de la nouvelle, ramenée ici à sa contrainte première, la brièveté (2004: 129).

While Biron may be more flexible as to which works he includes under the subgenre, in his short story cycle criteria, Lynch does not qualify a collection of stories united exclusively through theme and style; in order for a short story collection to be

considered a cycle, it must possess at least one of the two major characteristics.

Otherwise, he claims, almost any miscellany of short stories would potentially qualify (2001: 21). He does acknowledge however (and I agree) that minor characteristics, when consistent throughout a work, help create and intensify cohesiveness in cycles unified primarily via character or setting.

As we have seen, the short story cycle is an inherently dynamic subgenre, simultaneously balancing unity and fragmentation, to varying extents. Like Luscher, I like to think of the short story cycle existing along a line of continuum drawn between the traditional short story collection and the novel, positioned according to the degree of interrelatedness between the stories. The looser the cycle is, like Pellerin's *Ī (i tréma)*, the closer it is to the traditional short story collection, while the more cohesive the cycle is, like Díaz's *This is How You Lose Her*, the closer it is to the novel.

To return to Cortàzar's analogy of a short story (photograph) and a novel (film), perhaps a suitable analogy for the short story cycle is the flip book, consisting of individual photographs that, when viewed together (even out of sequence), create a cohesive image.

In the following section, I provide an analysis of *Mises à mort* within the context of the short story cycle criteria and demonstrate how, by reason of a common setting, an overarching theme, recurring sub-themes and stylistic unity, I interpreted the work as an example of this specific subgenre.

Section 2. Analysis of *Mises à mort*

2.1 Introduction

Mises à mort is a short story collection consisting of thirteen short stories about death, whether it be in the literal (biological) sense of the word or in the metaphorical sense (a notion I elaborate on below).

In this section, I provide an analysis of *Mises à mort* within the framework of the short story cycle characteristics heretofore examined. Despite the presence of an overarching theme, it may not be immediately evident that the collection would qualify as an example of the subgenre, as it is devoid of certain elements common to many short story cycles, such as ‘recurring character’ (and as we saw, ‘thematic unity’ alone is not necessarily sufficient to classify a work as a cycle). Nevertheless, the collection is otherwise cohesive in terms of setting, theme (there are several recurring throughout the collection) and, to a certain extent, style, which provides sufficient grounds for the work to be reasonably interpreted as a cycle as opposed to a traditional miscellaneous short story collection.

2.2 Title

The first indication that *Mises à mort* is not a miscellaneous short story collection is the title of the book itself: it is not shared with any story titles in the collection and it points to a common thematic thread (death). Furthermore, the back cover reads as follows: “[...] Certains personnages de *Mises à mort* verront leur destinée soudainement modifiée. Rempli de petites fins du monde, *Mises à mort* dépeint des tragédies quotidiennes, des combats comiques et existentiels [...]” While this does not indicate that

the collection will inevitably function as a cycle, it does indicate that the stories are linked, demonstrating that there has been a deliberate arrangement on the part of the author and/or publisher to include corresponding stories in the collection.

Again, though it does serve as an indicator, ‘title’ is a relatively weak one in my opinion and in order to truly establish a work as a cycle, the reader has to look at the substance of the collection itself.

2.3 Arrangement

As we saw in the previous section, it is largely agreed that an important (necessary) condition of the short story cycle is that there is some intent on the part of the author to create a unified collection. In the case of *Mises à mort*, Suzanne Myre deliberately assembled a group of stories that revolve around death—it would be difficult to argue against that. However, as I also indicated in the previous section, Myre claimed that she was unaware of the strong presence of religion, a thematic element I found to be recurrent and significant within the collection. In spite of the occurrence of death, whether or not the stories were conceived to function together as parts of a *cycle* is unknowable and ultimately irrelevant; therefore, the analysis below is based on my own interpretation of the text.

2.4 Self-sufficiency and Interrelatedness

Each story in *Mises à mort* is a completely autonomous unit of prose; in fact, “Vile ville” and “Cadeau d’anniversaire” were published independently in the Quebec short story periodical *XYZ* in 2005, prior to being included in the *Mises à mort* collection

in 2007. As for ‘interrelatedness,’ the stories are interconnected in several important ways; below, I demonstrate how the parts function within the whole, i.e., how they work in conjunction with one another in the cycle to a) create and strengthen cohesiveness, and b) attain meaning that is not necessarily achieved outside the collection.

2.5 Character

As we have seen, ‘character’ is one of the most prominent characteristics of a short story cycle and yet, there are cycles in which characters of any aforementioned type, i.e. ‘recurring’ or ‘composite,’ do not appear at all. *Mises à mort* is one such cycle.³

However, despite the absence of recurring characters in the collection and discernible differences between the *non*-recurring characters in terms of age, sex and walk of life, the individuals of *Mises à mort* nevertheless have a good deal in common with one another as well, namely, they are almost exclusively outsiders who struggle—or have no desire—to fit in with a group or conform to society at large. The following are just a few examples. In “Vile ville,” the single Sylvie finds herself alone, again, on Saturday night:

Le samedi soir est la soirée la plus ingrate à vivre lorsqu’on est célibataire. La ville vibre de tous ses pores; elle est possédée par les couples, ils sont partout, enlacés, dans les restaurants, au cinéma, sur les terrasses, pas possible de sortir seul dans un lieu public sans se sentir *nobody*, pitoyable, *reject* (13).

The young Joanie of “Câlin manqué” does not have any friends at school:

³ There are two characters named ‘Sylvie’ in the collection, one appearing in “Vile ville” and the other in “Félix et le chat.” Despite sharing a name, there is no definitive indication that these characters are indeed the same person. However, it is possible that they are.

Mon grand frère me dit que c'est justement parce que je ne singe pas les autres que je suis singulière; c'est possible, mais pour ce qui est de faire partie d'un clan, la recette, c'est d'être pluriel (27).

The unnamed protagonist of “Cellules en l’air” declares herself an individualist by choice: “Je déteste les transports en commun, comme tout ce qui est en commun, d’ailleurs. Je suis une individualiste. Enfin, je l’étais” (48).

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that these characters are bitter, sad, indignant, cynical, depressed, pessimistic or just plain miserable—it is safe to say that not a single character of *Mises à mort* is happy or fulfilled in life (apart from Poppy, the dog). In addition to sharing personality traits, many characters featuring in the collection also share a contempt for religion (something I elaborate on in my discussion of themes).

While I would not go so far as to interpret these characters as a form of ‘composite personality,’ the parallels between them are striking and, within the context of the cycle, meaningful, for they create cohesion. A second unifying factor which creates cohesiveness in *Mises à mort* is ‘place.’

2.6 Place

Though not every story in *Mises à mort* is set in a specific locale, when geographic indicators *are* provided, it is the city of Montreal that serves as the killing grounds in this short story collection.⁴ Characters do tai-chi in Baldwin Park, fall in love in Outremont, stroll along rue Saint-Denis, grocery shop on Mount Royal Avenue, get

⁴ The name of the city is never explicitly stated: it is revealed via references to parks, neighbourhoods, street names and stores. Therefore, previous knowledge of the city is required in order for the reader to recognize this.

trapped on the Metro, have their car crushed against a median on the Metropolitan Autoroute and drive Autoroute 10 to (potential) freedom.

Even when no geographic indicators are provided, descriptions in the text are reminiscent of an urban setting (which could easily be construed as Montreal): in “Félix et le chat,” Pichou the cat roams his favourite alleyways, above which clothing lines hang between buildings; Félix walks to school, to the dépanneur, to church; his friend and Pichou’s owner live two street corners away in an apartment building, all of which are reasonably improbable if he lived in the country or a suburb. In “Marie, à mort,” the protagonist’s mother walks to church and goes to a club every Saturday night, which is when her daughter sneaks over to her friend’s house and notices that the lights emanating from the televisions in people’s living rooms while they watch hockey are “rouges et blanches, parfois avec un peu de bleu. Ça dépend des équipes” (134). (Red and white happen to be the team colours of the Montreal Canadians, so when I read this story, this is what comes to mind.)

These abovementioned indicators could potentially be descriptions of other cities; however, when placed in proximity to related stories that are explicitly set in Montreal, the inclination as a reader is to interpret these stories as taking place in Montreal as well.

Therefore, despite the fact that a specific geographic setting is not always provided, it is reasonable to interpret Montreal as the unified ‘place’ for the collection.

2.7 Theme

Though considered a ‘minor’ characteristic by Lynch, ‘theme’ is one of the strongest unifying characteristics of *Mises à mort*. Certain themes are more overtly and

consistently employed than others, but overall, the collection contains numerous important recurring themes and sub-themes which help thread the stories together, the most prevalent being death (and as we see below, the theme of death manifests itself in many ways).

2.7.1 Death

The overarching leitmotif on which the entire collection is based, immediately evident from the title of the book—and its suggestive cover art—is death. Even the number of stories included in the collection (thirteen) is ominous in nature, reminiscent of bad luck and bad horror films (which play a foreshadowing role in a scene from “Vile ville”). (Whether the number of stories included in the collection was intentional or not is pure speculation, but if it was not intentional, it is a happy coincidence indeed.) Not to be dismayed or dissuaded, however; in *Mises à mort*, death is not always serious, final or beyond humour (even a croissant is potentially murderous).

When we think of death, we tend to automatically (and exclusively) think of it in the biological sense of the word, i.e., “the irreversible cessation of organismic functioning” (“Death”) and indeed, there are numerous occasions in *Mises à mort* in which the characters experience a cessation of organismic functioning. The collection runs the gamut, from homicide (“Vile ville,” “Il l’aime tant”); to suicide (“Cadeau d’anniversaire,” “Marie, à mort”); to felicide (“Félix et le chat”); to accidental death (“Mona se terre”); to unknown cause of death (“Dans la boîte,” “Cendres amères”). In the case of “Ne vous endormez pas!” the main character Sophie is induced into a permanent sleep (coma) by her colleagues—a ‘pseudo-death,’ but an act they no less

deem equivalent to murder (further underscored by the fact that they keep her dormant body on display in an open coffin).

There are also stories in which the central character reaches the brink of death, even temporarily crossing over to the “other side,” but ultimately survives the ordeal. In “Cellules en l’air,” the main character finds herself looking down on her own body from above after colliding head-on with a motorcycle while she was riding her bicycle. She stands in line with other corpses, awaiting her verdict as to whether she will go straight to paradise or have to spend some time in purgatory first. She is finally informed that she is not dead, and she returns to her body on Earth (the supporting characters she encounters ‘up above,’ on the other hand, are not as fortunate). In “La mort d’un dogue,” the canine protagonist Poppy is wrongfully condemned to be euthanized, but is saved at the final hour by two passionate veterinarians who do not believe in the practice of killing innocent animals. Poppy fulfills his dreams, happily living out his days as a greeter in a veterinary clinic.

In these aforementioned stories, which account for eleven of the thirteen in the collection, ‘death’ is palpable and manifest in its biological sense—little effort was required on my part (as a reader) to ascertain that. There are two stories, however, which are distinctive from the rest of the collection in this respect and as such, require a deeper reading. In the first case, it appears as though no death has occurred at all. However, as a result of the story’s inclusion in the collection, the reader interprets that it did occur, or at least entertains the possibility that it did; in the second case, death *does* occur, albeit not in the biological sense (again, my conclusion is based on my interpreting the collection as a cycle).

“Câlin manqué” is narrated by Joanie, a young bookworm and loner who has a crush on her wise, spiritually inclined older brother Arnaud. Jealous of his new relationship with a beautiful girl who represents everything superficial he claims to be against, Joanie makes her repugnance known, causing the pair to break up. Arnaud, depressed, shuts himself up in his room “comme si c’était pour toujours” (45). The final lines of the story read:

Des fois, je rêve d’Arnaud, mais ce ne sont jamais des rêves très agréables, alors je les efface de ma mémoire. Il faut apprendre cela, si on veut être heureux dans la vie. Et, bien entendu, trouver la vérité qu’on porte en soi. Elle ne se rencontre pas dans les livres, il faudra que je le dise à Arnaud, s’il finit par sortir de sa chambre (46).

There is no concrete indication that a death has occurred—it could simply mean that Arnaud now spends all of his time in his bedroom. However, when read alongside the rest of the stories in the collection, the ending seems far more ominous (Joanie’s bad dreams about Arnaud serve as a further indicator), and the possibility that Arnaud has committed suicide is opened up. Similarly, “Point de salut,” requires greater effort on the part of the reader—arguably more so than for any other story, as its presence within the collection may initially seem strange.

“Point de salut” is the story of Léa and her search for the elusive G-spot, goaded on by her libidinous co-workers who brag about their incredible G-spot orgasms and disparage orgasms achieved exclusively through clitoral stimulation (as Léa is only able to do). Léa, single and frustrated with her “superficial” orgasms, masturbates frequently in the hopes of finding the mythical spot “avant de mourir” (97); eventually, she hires a

specialist to find it for her. On the surface, the story of a woman tirelessly searching for her G-spot may seem an odd fit among a collection of stories about death—it *is* noticeably different from the rest of the stories in the collection in terms of tone, plot and subject matter—and apart from the protagonist Léa wondering whether a G-spot specialist may or may not be a sadistic serial killer who keeps his victims' G-spots in pots of formaldehyde as trophies, there are no references to death, nor occurrences thereof. However, the death involved in this story is not in the literal sense of the word, but in the metaphorical sense.

'La petite mort' (or 'the little death' in English) is a euphemism for 'orgasm.' So, ultimately, the story is about a woman seeking 'the little death'—hence, its inclusion in *Mises à mort*, for I can only conclude that the *raison d'être* of a story about achieving the ultimate orgasm in a collection of stories about death is derived from this metaphor.

As was the case for "Câlin manqué," had I read "Point de salut" in isolation, outside the context of *Mises à mort*, I would have interpreted the story differently, insofar as its morbid connotation would not have crossed my mind (likewise, I would have interpreted other aspects of the text differently as well, which I discuss under 'religion').

Not only is *a* death (in one form or another) central to the plot of every story, but the characters of *Mises à mort* frequently think morbid thoughts: in "Vile ville," Sylvie feeds an almond croissant to a wiener dog, hoping it has a nut allergy. Later on, she wonders whether the dog might be lying dead in its own vomit somewhere. In "Câlin manqué," when Joanie catches her brother having sex with his girlfriend, she looks at the girl and observes: "Ses yeux étaient fermés, elle aurait pu être morte et pourquoi pas, ça ne m'aurait pas dérangée d'aider Arnaud à l'enterrer dans le jardin sous le tas de

compost” (35). In “La mort d’un dogue,” Madame Weller believes that Poppy’s “propension à mordre la télécommande cachait des instincts meurtriers” (128). This trend is particularly prevalent in “Marie, à mort;” this is an example in which the melodramatic young protagonist thinks about the recent school shootings in the United States:

La semaine dernière, aux États-Unis, un garçon a mitraillé une dizaine de ses copains d’école. Enfin, « copains » est un grand mot dans ce cas-ci, je suppose qu’ils s’étaient pas mal disputés pour en arriver là. Depuis ce temps, ça se mitraille à qui mieux mieux dans les collèges, les écoles, les universités, c’est une épidémie. Heureusement que je suis une fille, sinon je pourrais bien faire pareil (138).

Not only is the theme of death intensified by characters’ morbid thoughts, but also by the consistent use of ‘death-centric’ language throughout the collection, often in the form of idiomatic expressions linked to death. (The underlining is my doing in the following quotes.) In “Câlin manqué,” Joanie exclaims “J’étais morte d’inquiétude, moi!” In “Ne vous endormez pas!,” the omniscient narrator proclaims that Sophie “à ce don inusité de péter à volonté en se contorsionnant telle une anguille qu’on aurait chatouillée à mort” (68). Again, this tendency is exceptionally evident in “Marie, à mort,” and the following is just one of several examples: “[...] puis on s’écoule mortes de rire sur son petit lit [...]” (135).

Though these examples may seem inconsequential when considered in isolation, as linguistic consistencies within the context of *Mises à mort*, they not only help to intensify the major theme of death, but also to draw further connections between the characters in the collection.

As I stated in my introduction to this section, in addition to the primary theme, *Mises à mort* contains multiple sub-themes; let us now delve into these below.

2.7.1.1 Sex

As we saw in the discussion of “Point de salut,” sex and death are intimately linked; hence, it is not surprising to find that sex serves as a recurring sub-theme in a death-centric short story collection.

In addition to the metaphorical sex-death relationship, throughout *Mises à mort*, literal (biological) death is frequently accompanied by, or associated with, the physical act of sex. Interestingly, the two murders in the collection, which occur in “Vile ville” and “Il l’aime tant,” are both committed during interludes of sexual intercourse—and in similar fashion.

In “Vile ville,” Sylvie meets a strange man at the video store and agrees to join him for a drink at his apartment. Unfortunately, the man, handsome like Anthony Perkins (foreshadowing effect of impending doom), drugs and smothers a now incapacitated Sylvie as he rapes her. A parallel death scene occurs in “Il l’aime tant:” the protagonist, an insecure man who is madly and blindly in love with his vain, selfish, superficial and demanding girlfriend, reaches his breaking point when he realizes no matter what he does, he will never be good enough for her. As they make love one night, he strangles her to death with her scarf.

Further links between sex and death occur in “Câlin manqué”—the example I provided in the previous subsection of Joanie catching her brother having sex with his girlfriend and observing that the girl looks dead—and in “Marie, à mort,” the main

character claims she wants to die after kissing her friend (whom she considers to be like a lover):

C'est pendant un film à pleurer d'ennui que j'ai embrassé Marie sur les lèvres. Elles m'ont rappelé la peau des nectarines, sucrées et lisses, tellement que j'ai eu envie des les éplucher avec mes dents et de me tuer pour mourir d'extase sur-le-champ (137).

As we can see, the theme of sex is widespread throughout the collection. Just as the presence of sex is a logical occurrence in a short story cycle thematically unified by death, it is natural that religion will, at some point or another, in some way or another, be mentioned.

2.7.1.2 Religion

Religious rites and practices are an integral part of death. When people die, what we do with the body and what we do to preserve the soul, or what we believe happens to the spirit once it is freed from its human form, are all determined or shaped by our religious beliefs (except, of course, in the case of atheism).

When reading *Mises à mort*, I was struck by how prominently religion featured in the collection. In numerous stories, characters go to church, try to skip going to church or reference religion in some way or another. Most of the action in “Mona se terre” takes place in a monastery. Religious references occur in the most unexpected places as well: in “Point de salut,” a character describes a series of pornographic films in which each movie is dedicated to a specific profession and ‘priest’ is one of the professions (which seems an odd choice for a pornographic film). Even the title of the story, “Point de salut,”

has religious connotation: the phrase “hors de l’Église, point de salut” is an expression that is closely linked with the Roman Catholic Church, prevalent in Quebec society (an association I would not have made in reading this story outside the context of this collection).

Although religious denomination is rarely explicitly stated in the text, there are instances when it is. For example, in “Dans la boîte,” the female funeral attendees think about things that are inappropriate to think about at a funeral (like what beauty products the widow uses to make her skin so soft): “Elles adorent avoir la tête ailleurs, comme certaines adoraient être à ta place, pour des raisons qu’il ne serait pas catholique de s’avouer” (my underlining) (114).

In the majority of cases, however, religious denomination is *not* specified, but the religious figures and customs, i.e. priests, confession, burial rituals, etc., are all indicative of the Roman Catholic faith (Divine Office, concepts of God, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory). In “Mona se terre,” when the eponymous Mona can no longer cope with her grief, she flees to the refuge of a monastery, where, to her horror, a nun urges her to read the bible and attend the exorbitant number of services given every day: hymns, prime, mass and terce, sext, none, vespers, compline and vigils.

The ensuing observation to be made about religious references in *Mises à mort* is that throughout the entire collection, religion (or the Church) is overwhelmingly perceived in a negative light. Characters frequently complain of having to attend services and go to confession, claiming that Church is boring and unimportant. Mona, for example, does her utmost to avoid attending services at the monastery, stating that the last time she went to Church, the priest died (more death!) of a heart attack mid-sermon,

to which her remark is: “Son coeur avait péri d’ennui, sans aucun doute” (157). In “Félix et le chat,” young Félix despises going to church, dreads going to confession and makes disparaging remarks about the priest: “Il remercie le prêtre, parce qu’il le faut bien, et quitte le confessionnal en regrettant de s’être confié...Après tout, est-il obligé d’écouter le conseil du farceur derrière la grille?” (84) In the opening paragraph of “Marie, à mort,” the narrator states:

Ça fait quatre dimanches en ligne que je manigance pour éviter la séance de torture de neuf heures. [...] Depuis que j’ai découvert la gueule anti-messe parfaite, elle n’a même plus envie de me traîner de force comme elle s’y essayait encore quand j’étais plus petite, il y a quatre messes (131).

Interestingly, the book also addresses the issue of hypocrisy in the Church. For example, the narrator of “Cadeau d’anniversaire” is a woman who goes to mass and prays on a regular basis, because she is worried that God is going to judge her children (even though he’s not supposed to) on Judgment Day and they will be punished for their sins. She goes to confession every Sunday and is suspicious of the priest who seems more interested in her daughter’s sins—her daughter is a stripper and quite possibly an adulterer—than her own comparatively innocuous sins. There is even hypocrisy in the fact that this same narrator, a woman who is so devout, is making preparations for her suicide—an unforgivable sin in the eyes of the Catholic Church—placing her statue of the Virgin Mary at the foot of the bed. In “*Marie, à mort*,” the young protagonist criticizes people (namely her mother and the other so-called “femmes d’église”) who attend church every Sunday, but who, in actual fact, show little interest in the teachings

of Christ, but are more preoccupied with spying on and gossiping about the other people in the parish:

Je sais ce qu'elles font, par contre, avant et après les prières, alignées entre les bancs avec des airs de saintes qu'on aurait canonisées pour leur beau linge: elles s'épient. Je le sais parce que j'épiais tout autant pour ne pas m'endormir. Je le sais aussi parce ce que quand maman revient, elle raconte des tas de trucs qui n'ont rien à voir avec Jésus (132).

From these abovementioned examples is another observation to be made regarding the religious-based content in the collection: it is almost exclusively the young characters of *Mises à mort* who show contempt for the Church. This leads me to another sub-theme of the collection (or perhaps we should consider it more of a motif): the clash between the old generation and the new.

2.7.1.2.1 The Generation Clash

There is an interesting contrast between the younger and older characters of *Mises à mort* (when ages are not explicitly stated, as they rarely are, the reader is able to reasonably approximate characters' ages based on indicators such as language, age of related characters, etc.). In general, the 'older' characters of *Mises à mort* are pious, whereas the 'younger' characters show disdain for religion and the Church.

As we saw above, in "Cadeau d'anniversaire," the protagonist (whose age we can roughly determine based on the fact that she has two adult children and refers to herself as a "personne âgée"), prays every day and goes to confession every Sunday; in "Félix et le chat," the young Félix is dragged to Church every Sunday by his parents, who (falsely)

admire their son for electing to go to confession unprovoked; the main character of “Marie, à mort” is forced to go to Church by her mother, who says it would do her daughter good to confess (her daughter disagrees).

Overall, as portrayed in this short story cycle, the younger generation reveals a general disenchantment with the Church, whereas the previous generation still believes it is a relevant and important part of life.⁵

2.7.1.2.2 The Afterlife

The final point of discussion under ‘religion’ is about the afterlife, which is another commonality among a few of the stories in *Mises à mort*. There is one story in which life after death is alluded to (“Cadeau d’anniversaire”) and two in which some of the action actually takes place in the afterlife (“Cellules en l’air” and “Dans la boîte”). Again, the concept of the afterlife is reminiscent of the Catholic faith (there are references to Judgment Day, Heaven, Hell and purgatory, for example).

As I previously discussed, in “Cellules en l’air,” the protagonist “dies” in a bicycle crash, then finds herself looking down on her own body from above as she waits to receive the verdict as to whether she will go straight to paradise or spend some time in purgatory first. A woman with a celestial, crystalline voice, an angel hair clip and a long white robe that floats around her even though there’s no breeze, eventually informs her that she is not in fact dead, she is alive and it is her destiny to return to Earth.

⁵ This is an interesting juxtaposition in a short story collection set in a province that experienced a dramatic shift towards secularism in the 1960s, during the Quiet Revolution. It is possible that Myre is projecting her own childhood experiences from that era against a modern backdrop, thus conflating the two generations. This is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the current reality in Quebec; I am simply stating that this is how the situation is depicted in the text.

In the third segment of “Dans la boîte,” the omniscient narrator is directly addressing the dead man in the coffin. It is not entirely clear whether the man in the coffin can “hear” the narrator or not, but it appears as though he can, indicating that he has entered into another state:

Tu entends la terre qui tombe, n'est-ce pas effrayant? Tu t'es réjoui bien trop tôt de ton nouveau confort, ton supplice ne fait que commencer. Tu as du mal à respirer, subitement? Tu te souviens de ces histoires de purgatoire dont tu riaais à la petite école? Comme c'est ironique. Allez, dis tes prières, si tu te souviens d'une seule. Il est à craindre que tes chansons d'ivrogne ne te soient ici d'aucun secours (120).

As we can see, ‘religion’ features heavily throughout the collection and is almost unflinching viewed in a disparaging way.⁶ Apart from the disparity between generations, this general systematic disenchantment with religion and the Church serves as a common ground between characters (something I touched upon briefly in the ‘character’ section). As I also discussed under ‘character,’ another way in which the individuals of *Mises à mort* show solidarity (paradoxically) is through solitude.

2.7.1.3 Solitude

As many scholars who have written extensively on the formal characteristics of the subgenre will point out, the short story cycle is particularly adept at handling certain subjects—isolation and fragmentation being among them—due to its discrete yet connected form (Mann 11). The disjointed yet unified nature of the stories in the cycle is

⁶ This is not meant to suggest that Suzanne Myre is against religion or the Church.

reflective of the fragmentary nature of modern society, in which people are paradoxically united through disunity. Indeed, the cycle is an appropriate and efficient form in the case of *Mises à mort*, as isolation (solitude) is one of the continuous sub-themes throughout the collection. This simultaneously creates a common bond between the characters, for as I previously discussed, the characters in *Mises à mort* are solitary creatures, whether by choice or not (mostly not), whose solitude is further exacerbated by the loss of someone (a person or a pet) or of something (love, friendship). In general, there tends to be something lacking in their lives.

2.7.1.3.1 Into the Void

Stemming from loss and isolation is the notion of the ‘void,’ a recurring idea throughout much of the collection; characters lament the ‘void’ in their lives created by lonesomeness, the loss of a loved one, or a general lack of emotional fulfillment in their lives. In “Cellules en l’air,” the main character relays the following about a dead woman she encounters in the afterlife (my underlining):

Elle se rendait à un cocktail donné en l’honneur de son mari, un riche promoteur immobilier qui la trompait depuis dix ans mais dont elle n’arrivait pas à se séparer, à cause de ces jolies robes dont il la comblait pour combler l’autre vide (50).

Not only does the ‘void’ serve as a thematic thread between the stories, but in some cases, the remedy does as well: for example, both “Vile ville” and “Mona se terre” feature single women who attempt to fill the void in their lives via food. From “Vile ville:”

Elle sait que ces croissants, qu'elle ne peut s'empêcher de manger à raison de un par jour, contribuent à la brioche qui se développe lentement autour de son nombril, mais bon, c'est une question de choix: se nourrir (agréablement) ou mourir (misérablement). C'est bien, les fruits et les légumes, mais aucun n'arrive à la cheville de la pâtisserie quand il s'agit de combler le vide affectif (11).

In "Mona se terre," there is a section entitled "Remplir le vide par l'estomac," in which Mona narrates: "Je n'étais au monastère que depuis la matinée et le seul vide que j'avais réussi à remplir était mon ventre" (172).

The numerous recurring themes in *Mises à mort* bind the stories together, fulfilling Lynch's characteristic of 'thematic unity.' As for his second minor characteristic, throughout the collection, interrelation is further established through consistencies in style and tone, which I discuss in the following subsection.

2.8 Style and Tone

Although there *are* stylistic and tonal variances between the stories in *Mises à mort*, on the whole, the texts are more similar than dissimilar in this respect. The overall mood or atmosphere of the collection is rather dark, and stories are most often written in a tone that is sad, solemn, ironic, bitter, derisive, indignant, cynical or pessimistic (as one is able to ascertain from many of the various passages cited above). In terms of style, certain stories are rather abstract, making use of complex (and sometimes bizarre) syntax and imagery, whereas others are written in a more plain, straightforward fashion; regardless of these differences, however, the writing is always vivid, sharp, and there are

many stylistic elements that are consistent throughout the collection, which reinforce cohesiveness. One of the most consistently utilized devices is irony.

2.8.1 Irony

Irony plays a large part in *Mises à mort*, frequently in the form of verbal irony (characters often employ sarcasm, a form of irony, intentionally making comments or statements they know to be untrue) and situational irony (many deaths serve as ultimate consequences of occurrences that contradict expectations).

For example, in “Vile ville,” Maryse, who typically walks her dog in the leash free zone in the hopes of meeting a man (and never does), begins walking her dog in the park (and finally does meet a man). This situation is in direct contrast to that of Sylvie: Sylvie, who is single and (tells herself she is) pleased to be so, finally decides to tear herself away from her lonely apartment and go out and meet someone. While the change in routine yields a favourable outcome for Maryse, the change in Sylvie’s proves to be her downfall, as the man she meets becomes her murderer. In “Cellules en l’air,” the protagonist, who loathes cell phones—particularly people who use them while driving—is in a near-fatal bicycle accident, which is ironic in and of itself, as it occurs on a bike lane (supposedly the safest option). The motorcyclist she collides with is shouting into his cell phone at the moment of impact. After barely surviving the crash, she has limited use of her hands and fingers and is told she will not be able to hold a cell phone up to her ear; ironically, she is very upset by this news.

Ironic circumstances are the source of much of the humour in *Mises à mort*, which serves as another stylistic consistency throughout the collection.

2.8.2 Humour

Despite the collection's heavy subject matter and often sober tone, with the exception of a few stories such as "Félix et le chat," "Il l'aime tant," "Dans la boîte" and, to a certain extent, "Cadeau d'anniversaire," the collection is also humorous (albeit darkly), exhibiting mordant irony and acerbic wit. For example, in "Vile ville," Sylvie encounters a man in a grocery store and makes a startling observation. I particularly like the use of imagery in this passage:

Son examen lui confirme une chose : le gars est en érection. Le large pantalon aux multiples plis est étiré par le devant d'au moins...beaucoup de pouces, évalue Sylvie, et le type ne porte pas de caleçon, c'est clair. Elle s'empare d'un kilo de bananes et se dirige vers la caisse, dégoûtée. Pas de danger que cela lui arrive. En sortant, elle bouscule à nouveau le chien saucisse, convaincue qu'il est parent avec le type à l'intérieur. Pas d'erreur possible, ils ont presque les mêmes proportions (10).

Humour is also evident in the clever and playful story titles in *Mises à mort*. To give a few examples: "Félix et le chat" is an (ironic) allusion to "Félix le chat;" "Point de salut" is about a woman searching for her un-findable 'point-G;' "Mona se terre" is a play on the word 'monastère,' where the eponymous Mona spends most of her time in this story; "Cendres amères" is a double entendre indicating not only the bitter tone of the story, but also playing on the expression 'à mère;' and finally, the title "Vile ville" displays a clever use of rhyme, alliteration and homophone.

While "Vile ville" plays on the repetition of sounds, the repetition of words and expressions is another stylistic similarity between the stories.

2.8.3 Repetition

Throughout the collection, words, phrases and images are frequently repeated as a means of emphasizing a particular element of a text or creating parallels between people or situations. In “Cadeau d’anniversaire,” the narrator compares events or people in her life to things she sees on television, starting many of her sentences with the phrase “J’ai vu ça à la télé.” From “Vile ville” (my underlining): “Sylvie cale son café, s’essuie ses lèvres et se lève en empoignant ses sacs d’une seule main.” [...] “D’une seule main, il enserre ses deux poignets et de l’autre... (c’est possible, elle a fait ça ce matin, elle a empoigné deux sacs d’une seule main et de l’autre...” (16). This technique is employed multiple times in “Félix et le chat.” Both Sylvie and her cat Pichou have a “bon regard;” when Félix learns the name of the cat whose death he played a part in, the narrative reads “Le chat a maintenant un nom” (82), and when Sylvie learns Félix’s name, the narrative reads “il a maintenant un nom” (89).

Although these recurring words or phrases do not necessarily cross story boundaries, consistent use of this technique throughout the entire collection creates stylistic unity, just as two other technical elements in *Mises à mort* do: the use of the English language and references to (popular) culture.

2.8.4 Bilingualism: Use of the English Language

When reading *Mises à mort*, I was struck by the conspicuous and frequent use of the English language (so much so that at one point, I considered making this facet of the text the focal point of my thesis studies). Throughout the collection, characters often

pepper their French dialogue with English words (a few examples being ‘fun,’ ‘cool,’ ‘look,’ ‘smash,’ ‘cheap,’ ‘nobody,’ ‘reject,’ ‘full,’ ‘no-man’s land’), as well as English phrases: in “Mona se terre,” Mona stands at the door of the monastery listening to the lyrics of a song by House of Love (“somebody’s got to love you, somebody’s got to care”) (149); later on in the story, her boyfriend appears to her in a dream, wearing his t-shirt that reads “I’m allergic to negative people” (159), and a nun at the monastery tells her that “Un petit peu de Bible *every day keeps the toubib away* hihi” (151).

(Apart from being a stylistic marker, the use of English mixed in with the French further emphasizes the ‘Montreal’ aspect of the collection. Montreal is a bicultural city, with large populations of both Francophone and Anglophone people, many of whom are bilingual or at least have some basic knowledge of the other language by reason of living in proximity to that language community.)

In addition to the use of the English language, English popular culture—American or British—features heavily in the work as well.

2.8.5 Popular Culture References

There is a staggering number of cultural references in *Mises à mort*, predominantly relating to popular culture, and despite a few references to Québécois (or French) popular culture (Madame Bec Sec, les Simards, Romain Gary), the vast majority are American or English (British) references (Harry Potter, Kate Moss, Coldplay, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, *Six Feet Under*, *The Sound of Music*, Woody Allen, Nirvana, David Usher, The Simpsons—and that is not an exhaustive list).

What I find even more remarkable, however, is how these references are employed within the text. The characters of *Mises à mort* have a penchant for drawing comparisons between themselves (or others) and cultural figures (real or fictional): Mona compares her relationship with her boyfriend Steve to that of Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin, wants to pick up her skirt and run like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music* and thinks the nun at the monastery looks like Babe, the shepherding pig (as a recurring allusion, Poppy the dog from “La mort d’un dogue” is infatuated with Babe). The central character of “Marie, à mort” compares herself and her friend Marie to the girls in *Heavenly Creatures* (a morbid comparison), then when Marie rejects her as a lover, she claims to be both Romeo and Juliet (yet another morbid comparison). In “Câlin manqué,” Joanie compares herself to the lonely, desperate-for-affection protagonist of the book she’s reading, *Gros-Câlin*. After playing his part in the killing of a cat, the guilty Félix (who shares a name with a famous feline) is no longer able to laugh at Tweety Bird thwarting Sylvester. A woman in “Mona se terre” claims that her fiancé Nathaniel was dismembered by a machine he was working on (a story that makes Mona angry and suspicious, because it precisely mimics the plot of an episode of the television show *Six Feet Under*). Therefore, these pop culture references are not only prevalent, but are also employed in a parallel manner.

The total effect of the abovementioned commonalities is overall cohesion throughout the collection. The number of consistencies among the stories in *Mises à*

mort, whether considered major or minor according to Lynch's criteria, contribute to the strength of its unity. The stories are interconnected in a variety of ways and the meaning and experience of each story is modified by the reading of neighbouring texts; together, they portray the many facets of death, intensify recurring themes and paint a picture of a fragmented modern society experiencing a general disenchantment with the Church (things the stories could not necessarily achieve singlehandedly). Therefore, *Mises à mort* functions as a short story cycle and not a traditional collection.

Below, is my complete English translation of *Mises à mort*, entitled *Death Sentences*.⁷

⁷ I chose this translation for the title because like *Mises à mort*, *Death Sentences* is a death-centric idiomatic expression (which also points to the darkly humorous, often sardonic, tone of the work).

Section 3. English Translation of *Mises à mort*

DEATH SENTENCES

VILE CITY

Baldwin Park. Ten tai-chi amateurs form a pretty, moving mosaic under the hundred-year-old trees. They move in unison, without a sound, scarcely disturbing the grass as they shift their feet, which are clad in Chinese slippers. Contemplating them provides pure, though slightly soporific, rapture. We understand nothing of it, but the relaxation taking over the spectator seems to be as powerful as that of the participant. Might as well stay on the bench, it requires less effort.

For a week now, instead of going to the leash-free zone, Maryse has been walking her wiener dog, Hygrade, along the paths in the park. To her belt, she attached a canvas bag filled with other bags, intended for doing what nobody likes to do, but what we must do, *n'est-ce pas*, if we don't want to find ourselves neck-high in crap. She hates dog owners who think they can turn a blind eye, looking in the other direction while Tootoo goes *poopoo*. So she approaches them subtly, takes a bag from her supply and offers it with an innocent smile. It works every time.

Hygrade pulls on his leash, wanting to frolic at his own will. "Woof! Woof!" he says in his lovely wiener-dog voice to thank Maryse for removing his collar. A little face like his never bothers anybody; rather, he evokes cooing to the tune of "Oh!" and "Ah!" and "Oh, what a cute little puppy!" But this time, it's the dog that's bothered. While Maryse is busy flirting with Jacques' Spaniel (or is it with the Spaniel's Jacques?), Hygrade, usually so docile, lunges at a "tai-chier" and bites his ankle, the ankle anchoring the "crane takes flight" movement. The little dog is tenacious; he bites into the black cotton pant leg, recognizing the taste of the fresh material washed in blanchéd almond-scented Tide, the same laundry detergent his owner uses to wash her underwear. He loves

sniffing Maryse's underwear and sprawling himself over the lace and fine cotton.

Nibbling on cotton is his guilty little pleasure.

Hygrade finds himself being lifted off the ground; the crane is strong and has taken flight, despite the incident. Destabilized, the man falls backwards and crushes Hygrade under his powerful Karateka thighs. The dog disappears under the parachute pants, lets out a small yelp, then goes silent. He's either playing dead or he *is* dead. Maryse rushes over to the group whose uniformity has broken into ten pieces, irritated by the distraction; ten individuals who, nevertheless, lean curiously over Marc—that's the name of the killer in the kimono. Maryse weaves towards the scene of the accident in such a panic that the others move out of her way as a single unit. It's charming to see. What Maryse sees is even more so: holding the sausage in the shape of a dog out to her, Marc falters: "He's not dead, he's alive. At least, I think he is." There's a look of love in his eyes. Ever since Hygrade was born, Maryse had him defecating in dog parks that reek of shit in the hopes of meeting her soulmate. Hygrade is a bit dazed, slightly dishevelled, might have a broken rib or two, a dislocated foot, might be traumatized for life to the point that he'll do his business all over the house he'll never want to leave again, but Maryse couldn't care less: she's finally met a man who has some animal magnetism.

...

Mount Royal Avenue. Sylvie is grocery shopping, very early, before the inhabitants emerge from their condos, still half asleep, their bed-head messy but strategically so, eyes puffy from the ravages of city life, in search of coffee to wash the zombie-like expressions off their faces. She locates the items with the sale stickers on them—a necessity of unemployment—and visits the interesting fruit shops. There's no

shortage of them, they grow like mushrooms. It's as if every suddenly vacant location has a fruit seed hiding under the floorboards, just waiting for the previous owner to go bankrupt before sprouting. Great is the fruit and vegetable mystery on the Plateau.

A small, insignificant wiener dog blocks the entrance to Yoga-Fruits. Sylvie pushes him out of the way with her foot and he tries to bite it. Who does this pretentious little sausage think he is? In front of the organic products display, a guy wearing some sort of black pants big enough to make a tent is fondling the neck of a swooning blond. Their heads touch as they decipher the list of ingredients on a yoghurt container. He laughs as he reads a difficult word, she kisses him congratulations, he kisses her back, it's never-ending. Sylvie hates people who express their libido in public. Nevertheless, she can't stop watching them as she chooses some apples. Her observation confirms one thing: the guy has an erection. The large, multi-pleated pants are extended in the front by at least... a lot of inches, Sylvie assesses. And he's not wearing any boxers, that's obvious. She grabs a kilo of bananas and heads to the checkout, disgusted. No danger of that happening to her. Leaving the store, she gives the wiener dog another shove, convinced he's related to the guy inside. No mistaking it, they have almost the same proportions.

...

Second Cup. Sylvie decides to have a coffee to restore her nerves. It's not every day you encounter an erect penis in a store that's not meant for such things. She puts her bags down and massages her wrists. She feels as though her arms have stretched by an inch and that one day, by dint of transporting such heavy parcels, her hands will hang down to her knees like a chimpanzee's. She orders café au lait in a bowl and a massive

almond croissant, then chooses a seat near the window. She knows these croissants, which she can't stop herself from eating once a day, are contributing to the dough that's slowly accumulating around her belly button, but really, it's a question of choice: nourish oneself (agreeably) or die (miserably). Fruits and vegetables are all well and good, but none of them can hold a candle to pastry when it comes to filling the emotional void. As luck would have it, the libidinous lovers also need a coffee, to tame their fire or to inflame it even more. They sit right next to her. Even though they whisper, she catches every word.

- You always have an erection when it's not the time.

- It's always the time.

- Except when we're in bed, apparently.

- I hate making love in bed. Hygrade's always there, watching us with his sad, stupid little eyes, it's humiliating. It makes me lose my hard-on.

- Don't talk about Hygrade like that. We met thanks to him. Besides, he still limps.

- You care too much about that ridiculously named mutt.

- Hey, mister "tai-shit," a little respect.

- How's your coffee?

- It needs a bit of sugar, could you go get me some?

So his name is Hygrade. Sylvie is at the pinnacle of happiness. She's happy not to be in a relationship, and to have given the little runt a smack. She bites into her croissant and some crumbs fall to the floor. On the sidewalk, the dog stares at her with his almond-shaped eyes, imploring. He pulls with all of his might at the leash that's attached to a

parking metre and approaches Sylvie, craning his neck through the French door until he's touching her ankle. She rips off the end of her croissant and holds it out to him, hoping he has a nut allergy.

- Hey! Don't do that! He can't stomach any foods with flour or sugar. It makes him sick, he vomits everywhere.

- Sorry. He's *so cute*. I didn't give him anything, don't worry.

- I know, he's cute. Everybody tells me how adorable he is, or at least, almost everybody.

She looks dumbly at her boyfriend, who returns with a packet of brown sugar. He rips it open and pours its entire contents into the bowl.

- What are you doing? That's too much! I won't be able to drink it now! Ah! You're impossible.

Sylvie finishes her café au lait, wipes her mouth and stands up, grabbing her bags with one hand. Passing by the dog, she opens her other hand and drops a big piece of croissant. Walking through the city at this early hour is still enjoyable. There aren't too many people out, but enough to experience totally random happenings, like the poisoning of a wiener dog. She goes down De Lorimier Street, turns onto Rachel Street and, passing Hotdogeria, stifles a little laugh.

...

La Boîte Noire. Saturday night is the most intolerable night when you're single. The city pulses from every pore, possessed by couples, they're everywhere: intertwined, in restaurants, in theatres, on patios. It's not possible to go out alone in a public place

without feeling pathetic, like a *nobody*, a *reject*. Her hands in dishwater, Sylvie tries to console herself by thinking about the owners of the Merguez dog that might be lying dead in his own vomit at this very moment. She recalls their insipid exchanges, inspired by a familiarity that, inevitably, breeds contempt. A glass slips out of her hands and falls onto a plate, which collides with a wine glass. Sylvie throws her dish rag into the garbage bag full of glass shards, grabs her purse and heads out before the walls and the solitude crush her. She has to break free from her sterile world so full of the pretensions of self-sufficiency. What she needs is a movie, the quintessential escape, the exit door from a world without relief and the entrance to another that's lively and exciting. She strides through the animated streets pretending to be light-hearted and care-free, feigning interest as she looks into the windows full of useless objects. She did the test, with the objects—it doesn't work.

At the video store, she's greeted by an employee whose protruding chin reminds her of something, but what? Everything reminds her of something, but she never knows what, it's tiring. Her life resembles a glass full of holes; she has the unpleasant feeling of being unable to draw anything from what happened to her, as if the remnants of events, experiences and encounters drained out of her without ever sealing a positive space or filling her for even an instant. She's like the fleeting moment that comes after watching a movie, just before the feeling it brings evaporates completely.

She doesn't know what would make her happy, tonight. The protruding chin could give her advice, he has the face of a total cinephile. He's having an agitated discussion with a rather attractive gentleman. The latter looks at her out of the corner of his eye with curiosity, as if he finds her pretty, or intriguing. She returns his look, adds a

smile and mimes to him that she wants to speak to the employee. Success. He comes over without losing a second, his chin in front acting as a rudder. Taking advantage of the fact that she doesn't know what she wants, he brings her to the back where you can find the B-horror movies. Not her thing at all. *Attack of the Killer Hot Dogs, Attack of the Tai-chi Killer, Attack of the Saturday Night Singles Killer*. She rereads the titles twice, it must be a joke. Excited, he suggests other DVDs with images of ridiculous, tentacled, blood-stained creatures on the covers. He gestures animatedly, he jumps up and down, he loves these movies, he's seen them all, he'd see them again, he's definitely going to watch one of them again, no later than tonight. She thanks the employee, whose maniacal enthusiasm makes her uncomfortable, and abandons the idea of a movie. She leafs through a photo book of stars from the sixties, lingering on Anthony Perkins' face. What a fated face! The gentleman approaches her with hushed steps, like a cat, a tiger. What poise! He looks like he's straight out of a celebrity magazine. She suppresses a shiver; she hates air-conditioning, especially when she's wearing a soft, tight-fitting bra. She clutches the book against her chest.

- Do you have any suggestions for a movie? I'm short on ideas and my friend there is wacko, he lives in another world.

- I noticed.

- So this is what I do, I ask people. It's interesting and I'm often pleasantly surprised.

- I'm short on ideas myself. I'm not even sure if I want to watch a movie anymore.

- Why don't we go get a drink?

- Sure. Why not?

This was missing in her life. Spontaneity, letting go. What was she complaining about, after all? Her neighbourhood is full of possibilities for single people. All you need to do is go out. They walk a little along Saint-Denis, without managing to find a place to their taste. It's packed and noisy everywhere, both inside and on the patios. He suggests they go to his apartment, it's not very far, it's near Jeanne-Mance Park. It's hot outside, they could sit on the balcony, watch people go by, then go back to the video store if they felt like it.

She quickly feels drunk. What was in that tangy drink he gave her? Her head's spinning, it's not unpleasant; she's always so uptight, constantly on her guard. Her clothes join his on the floor of his bedroom, which has only a bed. He gently pushes her down onto the mattress and turns her over, her face against the soft down. With one hand, he grabs her two wrists and with the other... (it's possible, she did that this morning, held two bags with one hand and with the other, served the end of a croissant to a dog. What's become of that dog? Such a small piece...)... with the other hand, he presses a pillow against her head. She doesn't see the use in fighting; anyway, her limbs have taken on the consistency of the cotton. They're soft, soft, soft, almost non-existent. She feels as though she's enclosed in some kind of dark box, where the events of her day suddenly begin playing on a projection screen in Technicolour: the wiener dog, the couple aroused by studying the yoghurt, the black pants distorted by the erection (fittingly, the man penetrates her, but maybe it's just her imagination, because she barely feels a thing— everything is so fuzzy, apart from the images accelerating over a black background), the coffee, the innocent murderous croissant, the shards of glass in the sink, the windows full

of objects, the man with the protruding chin talking (about her?) to the gentleman, the B-movies with the unusual titles, Anthony Perkins...

A stifled roar reaches her from the street—the everyday, faraway murmur of the city. It feels like she’s quietly evaporating.

THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

I want to leave everything clean and tidy behind me. The final impression is important. When they arrive, I don't want them to think I didn't know how to keep house. I just hope I don't have time to start to smell. I'm going to take a bath and slip into my pink and red dress, the one I would like to be displayed and buried in. You have to liven up these events. Otherwise, everybody broods. I'm going to write a note about that. On each side of my bed, I'm going to place candles, but I won't light them. I've always been afraid of fire. The statue of the Virgin Mary will look very pretty, at the foot of the bed, with my beautiful plastic roses all around. I hope the dust doesn't have time to spoil them.

The kids were doing well, the last I heard. Carmen has an interesting job. She managed to reach her goal of being able to buy herself everything she wants, brand new. Sure, her husband drinks, but at least he doesn't hit her. It's not fun for a man to earn a smaller salary than his wife and be shorter than her, too. I told Carmen not to make it worse and to wear flat shoes, but she insists on perching herself on top of Eiffel towers. Even when she was a child, she would play dress-up with my clothes. She'd teeter around in my high heels and say: "When I grow up, I'm going to be a stewardess. Are you comfortable, ladies and gentlemen? I hope so, because we're going to take off in a moment and you won't be able to adjust your seats for the next forty hours!" She'd roar with laughter and roll around on the floor, hamming it up, a real comedian. Today, on stage, people pay her to put on such a show—to roll around on the floor and twist around a pole, contorting herself into all sorts of poses, more or less clothed. Mainly less. I saw

that on TV, a report about women who do this for a living. I changed the channel, I felt improper. She's in the area right now. I wonder what her husband does while she's away. Maybe he drinks to keep himself from imagining scenarios of Carmen cheating on him with a man from the audience or with her manager. Even so, I always told her: "Carmen, if you have to sleep with everybody to find your place, it's because your place isn't where you think it is." I wasn't sure of what I was saying. Philosophy, ideas, they've never been my strength. She certainly earns a much better living than she would as a cashier, but I'm afraid that the Good Lord will ask her for an explanation on her judgment day, even though he's not supposed to judge. I pray for her every day, on Sundays especially, and I confess about her to the priest. He asks me for details. He seems interested, which I find suspicious. He's never as interested in my own sins.

I'm a little more worried about René. The last time he came to see me, two months ago, he asked me for grocery money, like he always does. I don't have much, but I don't want him to beg in the streets, so I give him some. He didn't look to be in very good health. His skin looked strange, like a sheet of rice paper. I asked him if he was eating well and he laughed. "You worry too much, Ma. I'm full o' beans!" I think he's doing drugs. I saw that on TV, young people with veins like snakes in their arms. They beg or become prostitutes. René always wears long-sleeved sweaters. He's so thin. As a baby, he was all chubby. But he cried all the time. He never had enough, he always wanted something. I never understood what exactly. I'm going to leave a cheque in his name on the table. I waited for him last week, but he never came, he didn't call. I hope nothing has happened to him.

I phoned the cable company to have the cable disconnected. The lady was so nice. I told her I was moving and she asked me where, thinking that maybe I would like to reconnect once I settled into my new home. I told her I was going to a place where everything would be taken care of. She said that's true, in old-age homes, they have cable and everything. I didn't think I gave the impression of being an "old person" over the telephone. My voice is hoarse, it's true—I so rarely speak out loud.

I settled all of my accounts, I didn't want to leave it to anyone else. They'll already have enough to do. My will is in order, all they'll need to do is sell the house and share the money. I included a special note, so they don't argue over that. I saw that on TV, families torn apart because of a will that wasn't clear or because one family member got more than another. It causes never-ending battles. At least it gives them a reason to see each other again. Family is important.

Doudou found a nice home. Cats are happy no matter where they are, as soon as they eat and sleep. I thought about bringing him with me, but I didn't feel capable of making that decision for him. He's still young, he has a life expectancy, and everybody loves cats, they never stay alone for long. A cat is an easy thing to love, not like an old person.

I thought about writing a letter, but I don't know how to write, apart from my grocery lists. And besides, the kids don't like reading anyway. I've never seen any of them with a book in their hand, now that I think of it.

Now that I think of it...it's my birthday today. I can't believe it, how could I have forgotten that? If I hadn't disconnected the phone, maybe there would have been

somebody to remind me about it. This is the first time I'm giving myself a trip as a birthday gift. I never thought I'd be travelling alone one day.

MISSING HUG

We had gym class yesterday. I hate gym class, I'm always afraid of getting a ball in the stomach or falling off the balance beam and cracking my head open on it on the way down. It happened to Morgane last year. After the accident, which was the talk of the school for months, she wore her hair in front of her face to hide the scar, but ever since Harry Potter became popular, she's uncovered her face, because her scar's in the shape of a broomstick and so she feels a sort of affinity with him. She already looked like a witch, that just sealed it for me.

They keep drilling into our heads that it's important for us to take care of our physical fitness. Me, I prefer to strengthen my brain. My brother assures me that the brain is what counts most in a girl these days. When I try to find out more by asking him, "So why do girls only think about being pretty and sexy?" he replies in a very wise sort of way, open quotation marks: "People spend their time getting dolled up and dressing like fashion icons because it's become the only way to get noticed, but what can you do—they don't understand the importance of the soul anymore." I don't really understand it, either. He adds, open quotation marks: "We have to see people for what's on the inside. I read that in a book and I completely agree with it. But now, because of marketing and everything, the soul has disappeared under superficial layers and been replaced by the God that is Silhouette!" I'm not sure that I grasp all of this, but I trust him, he's very smart. Or so it would seem, because I don't understand everything he says. He uses a lot of difficult words and makes long sentences full of sophisticated punctuation.

On page 10 of *Gros-Câlin*, written by my new favourite author Romain Gary, who sometimes signs his books Émile Ajar (I'm still not sure why, but I'm going to look

into it), Michel Cousin says, open quotation marks: “Je n’ai pas compris et j’en fus impressionné. Je suis toujours impressionné par l’incompréhensible, car cela cache peut-être quelque chose qui nous est favorable.”⁸ I think like him. Arnaud perfects my education and teaches me things that will be useful to me later on, important things they don’t teach us in school.

And while we’re on the subject of school, I can’t say I’m very popular. I’m classified in the same category as Marité, a girl who doesn’t speak to anybody and who smiles with pinched lips, like she wants to keep her teeth to herself or hide something serious. She lugs around one leg that’s shorter than the other, so I’m nice to her. Anyway, the others don’t want me to be in their *cool* group. I don’t wear brand name clothing, my ears, eyebrows and belly button aren’t pierced and I don’t dye my hair. My older brother tells me I’m singular precisely *because* I don’t copy the others; that’s possible, but to be part of a group, the recipe calls for you to be plural. He once told me, open quotation marks: “If I ever see you dressing like those bimbos in the music videos or magazines, I’m throwing you out into the street!” He says this to be funny, of course. He takes it upon himself to be my dad, because we don’t have one. Arnaud is sixteen, five years older than me. He’s the one in charge of the house: cooking, pretending to clean and everything until mom comes home from the hospital where she had an operation to have “everything taken off,” as she says. I wonder what she’ll look like when she comes back, if there’s nothing left of her.

Arnaud often tells me that I’m *cute* and un-tucks my t-shirt from my jeans so that it hangs down over my bum. “It’s *cooler* like that, with your shirt hanging out. You’re

⁸ *Gros-Câlin* has not been translated into English. The following is my own translation of the passage: “I did not understand and I was impressed by it. I am always impressed by the incomprehensible, for it may be hiding something that is favourable to us.”

really *cute* that way. If you weren't my sister, I'd ask you to have some fries with me." He laughs when he says this and asks me to have some fries with him. And he talks non-stop, I can finish his hamburger while he tells me about the latest book he's reading. Right now, he's reading *Siddhartha*, a "very spiritual" book, by a Mr. Hermann Hesse. It's about the journey of a man who's lost touch with his inner truth and travels to godforsaken places to find it again. Arnaud says he wants that, too, to find the truth within himself. He's handsome when he talks about deep things. His eyes light up and his big mouth moves in all directions. If he weren't my brother, I'd want to kiss him, even if I've never kissed anybody. You have to start with someone. Sometimes, when he's not around and I have to rely on myself for affection, I do what Michel Cousin does: I hold myself in my own arms. It's not the same, that's for sure; especially because I don't have very long arms, so I can't wrap them all the way around myself, but it's better than nothing. I shudder when I think about what it must be like to be enveloped by a python, because Cousin gets hugs from his snake, the snake he calls 'Big Hug.' Everybody in the book thinks it's a bit ridiculous, but I think it's a really pretty name, all the more so because it must be the only snake in the world that was christened that way. It's original.

Thanks to Arnaud, I've developed a taste for reading and I read between classes especially, so I don't look too lonely. While the other girls compare their nail polish and talk about boys, the latest Britney CD or the piercings they want to get, I sit in my corner and read. They don't bother with me and they don't laugh at me, so I don't mind. Marité reads a lot, too, but she's still on *The Famous Five*. I read all of Enid Blyton's books before I was eight. Yesterday, Marité asked me what I was reading and I showed her *Big Hug*. She frowned while she studied the drawing on the cover (a pretty, colourful reptile

with big, surprised eyes) and she said with one of her super-closed-mouth-frowns: “Huh? You read kids books? *Big Hug*, isn’t that a little young for your age?” I didn’t sigh, because I pitied her a little. I told her I would lend it to her when I finished it, so she could judge for herself. “No thank you” she said, showing me her copy of *Five Go To Smuggler’s Top*, then she limped away. My brother told me not to make her go faster than she can, because I could “traumatize her and cause her to regress.” He has a very strange way of speaking, Arnaud. I think he’s just saying that she wouldn’t understand the book, that’s all. I don’t really see what the danger is. He gives me his adult books to read all the time.

Like Michel Cousin, I’d like to have a pet that wraps itself around me for physical affection. When Cousin bought a mouse to feed his snake, he became attached to the mouse. So he went looking for a guinea pig, but the guinea pig became attached to him and vice versa and the situation has become complicated because the python hasn’t eaten for a month. I still don’t know how he’s going to solve this (I’m only on page 45). In any case, it seems really easy to find a friend in a personable animal, more so than in a personable person. I often want to ask Arnaud to stay and sleep with me for some nighttime affection, but I don’t think that’s a good idea, even if he doesn’t have a girlfriend.

Tonight, since it’s Thursday, we’re supposed to spend the night reading, playing Skip-Bo and listening to music. I like it. We’ll order Chinese or something else that’s quick and easy. I never say no to Arnaud’s suggestions, he knows how to organize things. I waited for him until five-thirty. I was reading my Romain Gary, with one eye on the page and the other on the door, and I started worrying that something had happened or

that I was going to go cross-eyed. All of a sudden, I heard footsteps and Arnaud came in smiling strangely. He was followed by a girl, who was also smiling strangely and fiddling with a handbag the size of a thumbtack. I instantly fell into a bad mood. I didn't smile at all, especially since I was starving and about to condemn myself to opening a box of Kraft Dinner, the last resort, according to Arnaud.

- Do you have any idea what time it is! I was worried to death!

I could've chosen something more original to say, something clever, but my tongue hadn't consulted me beforehand; my tongue and my brain don't always cooperate when I'm irritated. I've watched too many bad American soap operas: women in curlers often scream this exact phrase at their husbands when they come home late, because they think they were with other women who have nicely combed hair. It turns out they aren't wrong. Mine was definitely with another woman. I didn't stand up. The girl was way too pretty; a cover girl with plenty of superficial layers, multi-coloured hair, a miniskirt made out of kangaroo skin and shoes that weren't made for walking. I didn't like the look of her. Me, with my old South Park t-shirt that was stretched out because Arnaud made me wear it outside my jeans and my heavy Apollo XII boots with the big soles that were designed for walking on the moon. I felt how Marité must feel: lame.

Arnaud was nice. He acted as if I hadn't said anything and came over to give me a kiss, even though I was stiff as a pole and he had to bend almost all the way down to the floor to reach my cheek. I stayed there lying on the couch, pretending to act casual, because my two-bit soap opera comment had been a little humiliating. The beautiful girl was staring at me with some kind of admiration in her full mascara look, as if I'd stepped out of *A Galaxy Far, Far Away*, boots and all. I wondered what Arnaud had told her

about me, who she was and whether she was going to leave or stay. I forgot her name as soon as he introduced her to me, but she seemed to remember mine, because she said it at the end of every sentence she spoke to me. Nothing annoys me more than that. I know my name is Joanie, there's no need to repeat it at the end of every line. In three minutes—probably the amount of time she gave herself to buy me and/or sell herself—she complimented me on everything possible: my books, my clothes, my hair (I never brush it), my taste in music (I was listening to a King Crimson CD when they came in), my boots that were “so cute.” I guess she really wanted me to like her. I told her she looked like Kate Moss and she smiled and asked if that was a compliment. She smiled very well, she must have gone to charm school. I told her maybe yes, maybe no, it was up to her to decide. Arnaud shot me a furious look, so I said yes, of course it was, Kate Moss was perfect, even if she was a bit anorexic and on drugs and I got the look again.

We ate Kraft Dinner, sitting cross-legged on the Persian rug that my mom is terrified of us muddying with our boots that track in all the dirt from outside. You always have to walk around it or risk getting yelled at afterwards. Arnaud's mind must have been somewhere else for him to forget that. The girl lit a candle that she put in the middle of the carpet, then played a CD she'd brought over, Sigur Rós, an Icelandic band that makes you soar when you're in love. I wasn't soaring, I was just forcing myself not to bite my cheeks while I ate. Arnaud told the girl she was brilliant, all because Miss “*À la Di Stasio*” had added a box of tomatoes to the noodles and grated a carrot ontop for more vitamins. It made a pot of liquid mush that risked getting spilled all over the carpet at any moment. I didn't tell them I thought it was better, even if it was. I asked Arnaud if our Skip-Bo game was still on. He looked a little embarrassed and said he had a group project

to finish for tomorrow with the girl, but if they finished early, they could plan a little party. *They*. Fine, I said. Anyway, I wanted to keep reading *Big Hug* and they could always call for me if they needed to, blah blah blah. I was really upset and Sigur Rós was seriously starting to get on my nerves with their high-pitched voices. Under any other circumstances, I would have liked it: all alone with Arnaud and our books, sitting feet to feet on the soft sofa, but not now. Even my boots were nauseating me. I was tempted to offer them to the girl, since she thought they were “so cute.”

I went upstairs to my room while the two of them washed the dishes. I could hear them giggling. Mostly the girl. Arnaud’s a real clown, he could make a frying pan laugh. Her laugh rang like cowbells on the necks of an entire herd. It took the place of mine. I took myself in my arms and hugged myself tightly, but it didn’t console me. I heard them creep quietly upstairs and I squeezed myself even harder, my fingers could almost meet. He opened his door very quietly, like he didn’t want me to know he was going into his bedroom with the girl. He never usually shuts his door completely. What did I care, really? I was living here, but she’d have to leave at some point or another—as soon as possible, so we could play our nice game of Skip-Bo, as a family.

At nine o’clock, sick of waiting and hoping, I went to bed without having been able to concentrate on a single line of Romain Gary. Not a sound came from Arnaud’s bedroom. I thought: I must have dozed off, the girl left and Arnaud is sleeping. I got up and on my tiptoes, I slipped like a spy all the way to my brother’s room. I opened the door quietly. Arnaud’s white bum glowed in the light from a camel-shaped candle I’d bought him for Christmas. It was rocking back and forth on top of the girl’s body. It killed me. I let out a small, muffled cry (not on purpose, I swear). Arnaud turned his head

toward me, he wasn't irritated at all. He looked at me and there was something in his eyes I'd never seen before. It was a kindness that was different from his usual kindness. He put a finger to his mouth, miming "Shh!" He didn't seem mad at all, he even looked as though he loved me, like he didn't mind me being there. The girl didn't notice that while he was moving on top of her, he was communicating with me. Her eyes were closed, she could have been dead, and why not? It wouldn't have bothered me to help Arnaud bury her in the garden under the compost heap. I eventually unfroze myself and went back to my room, the awful image of Arnaud's loving eyes imprinted on my brain. It hurt me, but not so badly, because it was like I had frozen inside. The only thing bothering me for the moment was tomorrow and what it would hold: which words, which looks, which smells. Would we be alone, just the two of us as usual, or would I have to deal with the girl? Would I have to learn how to say her name without straining my tongue? I held myself gruffly and fell asleep in the crooks of my arms. I never have trouble sleeping.

All the same, I woke up with a nervous pimple on my nose. Arnaud was whistling while he banged some pots around, way too cheerfully. I washed up and went downstairs feeling like a ghost who was afraid of encountering another. Arnaud was alone, making *three* eggs sunny side up. He greeted me by waving the spatula, without noticing that I had tucked my t-shirt deep into in my jeans. No trace of the girl, it was all a dream. No. She emerged from the bathroom off of the living room, rubbing her short hair with *my* towel, and shouted "hello" to me like her life depended on it. I'm not deaf and I don't like people yelling in my ears in the morning. I certainly don't like having a stranger there, especially if she's using my things. So I grabbed a bagel, stuffed it into my school bag along with some fruit and told Arnaud I was leaving earlier this morning, too bad for my

egg, they could each have one and a half. He didn't even raise his eyebrows—Arnaud, who always nags me when I don't eat enough before school. I left without giving him a kiss, hoping he would notice. But he was too busy artistically plating the healthy breakfast for mademoiselle, full of vitamins and protein.

We had volleyball for gym class. I'm not any crazier about team sports than I am about the others, not counting the fact that I'm always the worst player in the group. I prefer racquet sports; you're only responsible for yourself and the defeat is less humiliating than when you cause an entire team to lose. Still, I was feeling the ball well this morning—so much so that I even made a thundering *smash* that normally would have earned me loads of bonus points of respect from my teammates, except that I sent the ball straight into Morgane's eye. She'd been provoking me from the other side of the net with that brand name printed on her forehead. My masterful strike went totally unnoticed, buried under the concert of wailing à la Sigur Rós. She wouldn't stop howling that she'd gone blind, help, ah! That cow! She really poured it on: a little black eye never killed anyone, as far as I know. She should've considered herself lucky it wasn't a squash ball. I stood in the middle of the court, my arms crossed, while her groupies swarmed around her, whining just as loudly. It made a hell of a ruckus.

At lunch time, Marité came to sit with me, her copy of *The Famous Five* in hand. I was holding my Romain Gary without reading it. I didn't want to anymore. The story of a poor guy who lives all alone with his python and tries to win the too-beautiful girl in a miniskirt was starting to kill my morale. He was too much like me. I didn't have any friends either, all I had was Arnaud and now he was going out with a girl, in a miniskirt to boot. I really felt clueless.

- Marité, do you want to come over tonight? We could play Skip-Bo.

- Yeah, ok.

Marité must have been desperate, too, because she said “yeahok” like she was afraid the two words were going to run away from each other. She smiled at me, showing me her teeth for the first time. They were tiny little baby rabbit teeth with two front ones that were curved slightly inwards. She seemed really happy, I’d never seen her look so alert. She looked like Big Hug on the cover of my book, her eyes all round. I had to show Arnaud that I could get along just fine without him, that I didn’t have an “emotional dependence.” He had already talked to me about it: it was an illness suffered by women who love too much or the wrong way, I didn’t really understand. It seems that hundreds of books have been written on the subject and they all say the same thing, but apparently they don’t help anybody, because seven more need to be published every year.

After class, I went to visit my mom at the hospital. Arnaud was there, still with the girl. She was holding him so tightly by the hand that her knuckles were white. I imagined her fingers falling off one after the other and Arnaud vomiting when he realized he was holding nothing more than a stump. Honest to God, they were literally glued together. The girl must not have been able stand up on her own anymore. She’d been seized by emotional dependence. I said “Hi mom, hi Arnaud,” and the girl said “Hi Joanie,” in the voice of a saleswoman who absolutely has to sell her product. I’ve shopped in *cheap* stores before, I know how salespeople sound. Mom saw from my stupid look that something was wrong, but because she’s not as stupid as I am, she understood right away what was going on. She took my hand and told me that she’d come home soon, that there had been some complications, but nothing serious. The girl

smiled at me; didn't she see that her smiles didn't interest me? I would've liked to shove my mother's IV up her nostrils.

- So, *Jo*, do you want to have dinner together tonight and play a game of Skip-Bo? Arnaud told me you're really good at it.

One: I don't like people speaking to me like I'm a baby. Two: I don't like it when people are nice to me when I'm not inclined to be nice. Three: I was feeling really, really not nice. Three and a half: I hate it when people call me 'Jo.' Four: it was obvious that she wanted to make sure my mom thought she was nice.

- I can't, I already have plans with a *friend*.

I emphasized the word *friend*, like I wanted to rub it in. Evidently, I hadn't mentioned who it was. Arnaud raised his eyebrows sceptically.

- Oh yeah, which friend?

- A girl from school. She reads a lot, too. *We're going to talk literature*, so you see, we won't have time to play.

- We could play on teams—that is, if you have a minute, between rounds of your literary debate.

He was insisting a little too much. He could see very well that I was getting pretty mad, and now he'd noticed that I was wearing my t-shirt in a way that was contrary to his fashion tastes. He let go of the girl's hand and she staggered, already seized by the illness, poor thing, and he took me by the arm and led me into the hallway. We sat down in the wheelchairs that were there. "They're comfortable, these chairs," I said to Arnaud, pivoting from left to right on the wheels. The neon light flickered above our heads, giving us a yellow tint, you'd think we were in a horror movie. The final touch was my greasy

hair and the nervous pimple on my nose. Pale, tired nurses bustled around us, eyeing us curiously. They were hoping for a family squabble to distract them.

- What's the matter with you? You're jealous, is that it?

I've said it before: he's very intelligent, my brother. He's not afraid to tell it like it is, even if there are people around.

- You think I like seeing your bum in the candlelight when we're supposed to be playing together?

He pinched his lips. I couldn't swear to it, but I think he blushed. He took his time answering. First, he un-tucked my shirt from my pants. I let him do it, while I fiddled with the wheels of the chair to make the task more difficult for him. I was trying not to cry.

- You think my heart isn't big enough for you and another person? Is that it? You think that because Béa's around, I don't love you anymore? You know what? We've been going out for a month already and you didn't know it, did you? Was I different with you for that month, before I decided to bring her home? You think I didn't think about it sooner?

I didn't know what to say. I felt stupid, again. I was torn between throwing myself into his arms and continuing to say nothing. I didn't want to lose him and I didn't want to leave him entirely to another girl. *Béa*. If I said that everything was fine with the girl, I might be able to keep my secure little corner. If I said no, I risked having nothing to do with him anymore. Arnaud would choose the girl and our love would be broken forever. He wouldn't tell me what books to read anymore, he wouldn't play with me anymore, he

would just shut himself in his room all the time, with and without her. And worse, he'd treat me like an emotional dependent and quietly slip me books on the subject.

- Take some time to think about it. And tell yourself that I love you just as much as I did before, and that the love I have for you has nothing to do with the love I have for Bea.

- That's for sure. You don't wave your bum around in the air with me.

He arched his eyebrows, which was a bad sign—he wanted me to go away. I pulled myself out of the chair, which bumped his, and headed towards the exit like a loser, holding back my tears. I walked all the way home knowing very well that I was wrong, but I couldn't change my mind. I didn't want to share Arnaud. I wanted to wrap him around me, tight enough so that nobody could come between us.

Marité arrived right on time. She must have waited on the doorstep staring at her watch, ringing the bell only when the small hand reached twelve. She was dressed differently. She was wearing a *cool* outfit, she didn't look anything like the Marité from school. She was wearing ripped jeans, worn-out sneakers and a t-shirt that stretched over her belt. Her hair fell down to her shoulders, tousled just so. We could have been sisters. I was completely shocked.

- Hi! I'm not too early, am I? Your house is beautiful, everything's antique!
Wow!

She wandered around the living room, touching the armoire, the coffee table, the old sofa that belonged to my dad and was now covered in a chenille blanket, the bookcase, the lamp with the base that was shaped like a swan. She gently caressed

everything with the tips of her fingers, as if everything were breakable. She turned towards me and smiled timidly, showing her rabbit teeth. Her eyes sparkled.

- I don't have any friends.

I didn't know what to say. Neither do I? Do you want to be my friend? I'm available? She didn't wait for my answer. She sat down on the Persian rug and started rifling through her big army bag. She pulled out *Big Hug* and waved it in front of my eyes. It gave me a strange thrill.

- I borrowed it from the library this afternoon. I'm finished with Enid Blyton. It's a little young for my age. I started it. I like it, but it's sad in a way, don't you think? I mean the guy, with his python. How can you be so lonely to the point that you become obsessed with a python?

- I don't know. I...you...do you want to play Skip-Bo?

- You don't have Scrabble? Skip-Bo is fun, but it's a little easy. It seems like a lot of people play it in retirement homes, that's what my dad told me. We prefer Scrabble. You've played it before, right?

I was dumbfounded. She stood up and took off her wool sweater. She was wearing a Nirvana t-shirt. That sealed it for me. It all happened so fast after that. I showed her my CD collection, Arnaud's library and the shelf of books I'd read, I let her touch my copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* (I had reinforced the binding myself to make sure it never wore out). She read, with interest, the titles of all of our video tapes of old horror movies, asking me if she could borrow *Return of the Mummy*. One by one, I introduced her to the plants I take care of, calling them by their nicknames—Élise, Carmel, Éliane—and we finished off in my bedroom. She admired my David Usher

poster and my Simpsons bedcover, hurried to try on my cute ankle boots and when I saw how much she loved my caramel corduroy vest, I told her she could keep it. Her eyes started watering.

- This is the first time a friend has given me a present. You're my first real friend.

It was that easy to make a friend? The lame-o with the rabbit teeth was *cooler* than me. She played Scrabble, now read Romain Gary, wore Nirvana across her chest under my caramel jacket and decided that we were friends. I couldn't believe it. I heard Arnaud slam the door. He never slams doors, he hates people who don't control their arms when they're closing doors.

- Is that your brother? I heard he's good looking, is that true? Are we going to see him? Maybe he'll play Scrabble with us?

- Don't even think about it. He's super-glued to a girl. But I couldn't care less, *anymore*.

It was true, I didn't care.

- Why?

- Because. Shh, he's coming upstairs.

- Joanie, you there? Oh, hey. I take it you're Marité?

- Yes.

Marité goggled. Arnaud's not bad, but he's nothing special. Especially because he looked beaten down. I was almost happy. I felt really good all of a sudden. He noticed that Marité was wearing the jacket he'd given me a month earlier, the jacket I'd begged him to let me have. He didn't say anything. It was better that way.

- Your girlfriend's not with you tonight? Did you finish your group project? It didn't seem like you did much work last night.

- Alright, that's enough of the sarcasm. You can rejoice, we're not together anymore. After you left the hospital, she came and told me it wasn't going to work out.

- Really? Why?

- Ask yourself. Have fun, I have things to do. And you know what, *Jo*? I was really attached to that girl.

Marité chewed her thumbnail and stared at the carpet. A massive silence fell upon us and I felt a snake wrap itself tightly around my stomach. I played innocent though and invited him to join us for a game of Scrabble, because we were playing Scrabble now, not Skip-Bo. He sighed. He seemed to be sad. It killed me a little, but it was his own fault. If he had made the right choice, everything would have stayed as it was before. Oh well. He went and shut himself in his room like it was for forever. A few minutes later, we smelled something herbal and I told Marité it was incense. I knew exactly what it meant: he had "lost touch with his inner truth." Close quotation marks, period.

I've started seeing Marité almost every night, at my house or at hers. We talk about what we're reading, we exchange CDs and clothes, sometimes I sleep over at her house, the two of us in her double bed. We chat for hours, sinking into big feather pillows. Once the light is turned off, it's up to one of us to say: "Give me a big hug," and the other one gives the hug. We wrap ourselves around each other and act all mushy. Sometimes, I dream about Arnaud, but they're never good dreams, so I erase them from my memory. You have to learn how to do that if you want to be happy in life. And, of

course, find your inner truth. You won't find it in books. I'll have to tell Arnaud that, if he ever comes out of his room.

CELL PHONES IN THE AIR

I'm dead after a head-on collision. Bike to bike, face to face, handlebar against handlebar. This sort of accident is rare, I'll probably earn a small column under the "news in brief" section of the newspaper: "Cyclist Impaled By Handlebar."

Just yesterday, a friend told me I was careless to ride my bike between cars, but there you have it: when it happened, I was on a two-lane bike path, much to her astonishment. She's an advocate of public transportation. I've always refused to wait like a paralytic sucker for a crowded bus where you have to deal with bad smells, bad moods, bad vibrations emanating from people pressed up against one another, at the mercy of the driver who's swerving to avoid potholes in the road. The last time I took the Metro, our train was stopped for an hour because of a breakdown that was caused by a man who had thrown himself onto the tracks during rush hour. In one swift movement, all of the passengers on the train started rifling through their bags or pockets to retrieve their cell phones. If airwaves could pass through Metro tunnels, I would've had no choice but to suffer a cacophony of cackling expressing anger, impatience, the full gamut of negative emotions. Everyone maintained the hope of possessing *the* cell phone, the one that would connect them to the world above ground, against all probability. I studied the dismayed looks they kept to themselves, their lips twisted in anxiety; not one of these faces was smiling, not with their eyes, nor with their mouths, occupied as they were, dialling numbers in vain, tortured by the thought of being late. As I fiddled with my gloves, I wondered if I was one of the last human beings not to possess a cell phone, as I'd adopted

a Zen way of life. I hate public transportation, like everything public for that matter. I am an individualist. At least, I was.

My helmet split into two tidy pieces when it hit the asphalt. The other protagonist, a twenty-something guy wearing a Harley Davidson helmet with a visor, was launched into a hedge on the other side the sidewalk, which absorbed the impact and didn't displace his helmet by so much as a hair. He came through well: a plum the size of a quarter on his forehead, a few scratches to liven up the tattoos on his arms, a dazed look on his face when he saw my blood spilling onto the sidewalk and a slight psychological trauma consisting of a tiny amount of guilt that I hope will be rampant, exponential and incurable. He wasn't looking where he was going, nor did he signal, as he held his handlebar with one hand, completely stoned, yelling into his mobile, making a marijuana transaction. When we crashed, his cell phone fell to the ground and was crushed by the wheel of the third bike, which hit me from behind. I heard the sound of the phone breaking on the asphalt just before I lost consciousness. Several long minutes passed before the paramedics came to collect my dislocated corpse, splayed across the ground at a grotesque angle, broken. A small, compact crowd gathered around me; thirty-odd sorry eyes scrutinizing me with curiosity. I hope I wasn't too disfigured. I saw them from above, these people who seemed so moved by my death but who, in fact, were mainly just afraid of their own. I felt the fear oozing out of their thoughts, the sight of my inert body reminding them of the probability of their own demise and yet they stayed there, fascinated, maybe hoping for a resurrection. They formed a moving, *moving* mosaic. I've never been the object of so much attention in all my life.

In the hallway, where I await my verdict as to whether I'm going straight to paradise or if I'll have to spend some time in purgatory first, there's a line made up of very different people—a sample of the human race as we rarely see it, given that each one is really banged up. This woman, for example, wearing an expensive and incredibly low-cut dress and whose face resembles a Picasso drawing, was smashed against a concrete wall on the Metropolitan Autoroute by a truck that was longer than a freight train. She'd been on her way to a cocktail party being given in honour of her husband, a rich property developer who'd been cheating on her for ten years, but whom she couldn't bring herself to leave, because he filled her closet with pretty dresses in order to fill the other void. She was driving behind the truck, trying to figure out why the vehicle was swerving so much. As she passed it, she saw that the driver was talking into his cell phone. It's an epidemic, this mania—a growing public threat the authorities clearly aren't dealing with. She tried to exit the fast lane and move into the right while he, too, without signalling, planned the same manoeuvre. The woman's car was squashed against the guardrail and, consequently, so was the woman. She's not a very pretty sight, despite the nearly unspoiled dress, but neither am I. Apparently, we'll recover our original appearance once the verdict is pronounced. Soon, I hope; I'm starting to scab and I'm not going to be able to breathe soon, there's blood obstructing my nasal passages. My back really hurts, too; all of the vertebrae in my spine seem to want to detach from one another and fall away like snowflakes. Upon our arrival, a clerk at reception told us not to worry about it, these sensations are merely illusions, everything is suspended in the hallway, time and wounds alike; but it's strange, I can still smell things. Like that repulsive synthetic cologne, the one belonging to the man in the vest and tie who's shaking while

trying in vain to dial a telephone number on his cell phone. What an idiot. He doesn't realize he's dead and I'm not going to be the one to tell him—he's too entertaining to watch. The woman tells me he was hit by a car while crossing the street during rush hour; both he and the driver were using their cell phones. I snigger, trying to suppress the urge to grab it from his hands and make him swallow it once and for all. I hope they'll prove that in the long term, these devices kill brain cells, failing they kill you in the short term.

I hear my name: a divine, crystalline voice asks me to board a small bus resembling a children's toy. I step inside the vehicle whose proportions are impossible to determine. It's long like a tunnel and seems interminable. I sit in the only free seat—all of the others are occupied by kids whose faces and bodies are covered in wounds. My little neighbour takes my hand and asks if I'm going back to Earth. His eyelids are heavy with dried blood. I dampen a Kleenex and try to clean them. He lets me do it as he whimpers, murmuring "I want my mommy." I sigh, hold him against me and reply that I don't know yet, but I doubt it, given my condition. "And you?" He stops crying and tells me how his entire class died in a school bus accident; the bus was found in a ditch, having betrayed the trust they had in it. "Look at our broken limbs and our faces all covered in bruises, I don't think we're going back to Earth. Our moms are really going to miss us, they miss us already. Our driver is the only one who made it. He's really sad, he wishes he was dead. He's going to miss us, too. We liked him a lot, he always brought us home before. But it's not his fault. He was cut off by a truck driver, he was talking on the phone while he was driving and he wasn't paying attention. My dad does that sometimes too and my mom tells him to stop, but he doesn't listen." I say nothing. I curse truck drivers, I curse cell phones, I hope they all blow up at the same time.

The bus makes a stop, the driver calls my last name and my first name, then finishes with a “Last stop!” singing and joyful, giving me the impression that I’m off to have fun at a carnival, that I’ve just won a prize, or a competition. I kiss the boy’s swollen forehead before leaving the bus, holding onto the railing. A woman is waiting for me and guides me to a podium, asks me to remain standing, even though my back really is in a lot of pain. She’s wearing her hair in a French roll, held in place on top of her head by a clip decorated with an angel. That seems appropriate. In a careful voice, like she’s reciting a speech that was learned and repeated several times over, she says “good news:” I’m not ready yet, not for purgatory or for any of the other options, I have to return to Earth, I’m not dead, that’s why I’m still feeling pain. I have to go back, but I have to be strong. It’s my destiny. Her long white robe floats around her, even though there’s no breeze.

And voilà, I emerge. I’m immobilized in a bed, unable to move, surrounded by apparatuses with blinking lights, held in a brace from neck to thigh, tubes attaching me to quiet machines. I will need several long weeks before I can leave this bed, this room, this cocoon of safety. So, I’ll have to confront reality and accustom myself to the vehicle that will be mine for the rest of my days.

They told me I’ll be able to go everywhere, thanks to the ultra-specialized mechanisms of my wheel chair; roll along one-way bike paths, take special public transit buses that have a movable floor, have a “normal life.” The muscles in my arms are strong enough and my fingers are dexterous enough that I can easily work the levers that control my chair, but not enough to hold a cell phone up to my ear. It’s crazy, but that really makes me sad.

BITTER ASHES

In memory of Lise Florence Villeneuve 1941–2005

I barely have time to sit one cheek in my chair and assess the taste of my coffee before the phone rings. My work colleague graces me with an exasperated look; the ringing prevented her from hearing the winning lottery number. She turns up the volume on the radio. I press the receiver tightly against my good ear, as my older sister's voice is feeble, uncertain. She's calling me from the planet of the orphans, our new planet, the one where you lack the ability to attend to daily things. In one quick breath, like she's afraid I'm going to protest or interrupt her, she asks me to go pick up our mother's ashes at the funeral home, that's all, that's not too complicated, is it? I don't feel anything in particular—slightly irritated, at most. Ever since our mother died, we've shared the tasks, mechanically checking them off an endless list as we complete them. It's amazing what's required of life after death. I've been handed this tedious assignment, since neither she nor my brother want to do it, which is understandable: we're used to our mother's absence and seeing her in little pieces, it doesn't interest anyone. I'm indifferent. Collecting my mother in a box doesn't seem any sadder than the other times I had to collect her from her balcony, motionless between her petunia boxes, to take her to her doctor's appointments. She would be on the lookout, terrified, her little white vinyl handbag handcuffed to her wrist as if she were afraid it was going to be stolen. As soon as she saw the nose of my car at the end of the street, she'd come downstairs, holding onto the railing as if she were afraid of missing a step. She was always afraid of something. Then she'd blabber incessantly, stopping only to catch her breath between

sentences. I'd keep my eyes fixed on the road, punctuating her chatter here and there with an encouraging "uhuh." She needed to talk. She was so alone, with only her illness to keep her company and *it* certainly didn't tell her anything worthwhile.

With the receiver wedged between my shoulder and my cheek, I pick at a floury blueberry muffin constellated with microscopic blue dots, sipping the vile coffee made in a percolator by a criminal hand. I make the decision to take care of it myself from now on and arrive at the office first in order to prevent the secretary from ruining my breakfast. She only drinks green tea, because it's fashionable, and she looks down her nose at coffee drinkers, despite the fact that only three weeks ago, she was still a part of this loathsome group. I listen to my sister hesitate on every word, explaining to me why my brother can't do it, why she can't do it, but the only thing I'm concerned about right now is the heavy pastry that's crumbled and fallen between the keys on my keyboard. The funeral parlour is on my way home, right by my office, it's much easier for me to go. It seems absolutely vital for my sister to justify her request, like she's afraid I'm going to begrudge her. Fear is part of her maternal heritage. I assure her, I stress that *of course*, we can't leave mom in that cold place any longer, it's impersonal. She'll feel much better in my living room, in front of the TV, *n'est-ce pas?* Like when she was alive, in front of the TV I can take care of it during my lunch hour, why not? Or even tonight, what do I do with my evenings anyway? I listen to her give me instructions as I play a Chopin sonata on my desk...or is it the nursery rhyme *Au clair de la lune*? I have visions of useless sandboxes, deserted beaches, lunar soils. A jumping Tele-Tubby appears, but I erase it immediately.

My colleague didn't win the lottery. Too bad for her. And for me. She goes to get herself a coffee, emitting a series of devastated sighs, grumbling that she'll be here again

tomorrow, this isn't a life. She walks away, waddling a derriere that appears to have adopted the shape and size of her chair. I sigh too.

. . .

The funeral home is located on the other side of the park. I stop along the way, even if it's too cold to eat outside, and choose a bench that has seen others: M. loves S., R. and C. inside a heart. I sit on B., who was there on June 2 with F., and unwrap my sandwich. From where I am, I can see the funeral home: a block of grey and beige marble prettily surrounded by young snow-covered poplars. I imagine the interior décor: rows and columns of small boxes labelled and arranged in alphabetical order, lined up against the walls, rising as high as the eye can see, like skyscrapers. A series of orderly lives, silent, waiting for something to happen next, hoping that a hand will offer them a true final rest. I have visions of Lego blocks, Domino games and Rubik's cubes.

I'm going to make this task a joyous event and go to my mother light-hearted and smiling, so she knows that it's possible, now. With a bounce in my step, I put a jubilant look on my face and open the door to the funeral parlour. A woman absurdly Transylvanian in appearance, her hair pinned up with a sharp claw I wouldn't want to get my nose caught in, receives me with an exaggeratedly condoling face—the complete opposite of mine. She must have perfected her expression over the years, because she's perfectly convincing: I feel like I've lost my mother a second time, that she died in the minutes preceding my arrival and it's this woman's job to tell me. I maintain my carnivalesque expression, declining to reveal my identity and the reason for my visit. Her little ferret eyes become almost liquid, the blue of her irises seem to drown in a motionless river. It's really quite touching. This mortuary masquerade makes me want to

burst out laughing. There's definitely a hidden camera somewhere. It's as if she's the person I came for and she's distraught because she hasn't had time to put herself into the fire before my arrival: "Just wait, I won't be too long, the oven is already at 500 degrees!" She offers me a dry hand to shake and invites me into an enormous office where the furniture blends into the walls and carpets. Everything is brown, earth-coloured, you'd think we were six feet under, only better, with a bit more comfort and the enticing aroma of coffee. She serves me some without asking if I'd like any, and I don't say no. I want to test it and ask her for the recipe, if it's better than the coffee at the office. She holds out a packet of sweetener and a container of powdered milk. I refuse it, telling her I take it brown, like everything else, but she doesn't get the allusion. As she rummages around in search of papers, I take the opportunity to study her. I have visions of Marge Simpson, Vampirella and Madame Bec Sec. Mom appears, she disapproves of my visions and I erase them immediately.

I affix my signature on the lines she points out to me with a scarlet fingernail that looks out of place in this muddy den. She asks me not to move, she's going to fetch my mother from *down below*. I move a little, because I can't tolerate being told not to. A moment passes, then another, and I hear her coming back up the stairs, panting. I almost expect to see them appear suddenly, arm in arm, and the reality isn't far off: the woman is holding my mother under a bent arm, her spine a little curved from the weight. Mom is in a black box, a completely ordinary box. I'm upset. What was I expecting? For the woman to reappear shouting "Tada!" and brandishing a Chinese urn, Greek amphora or multi-coloured storage kit from IKEA above her head? Mom lived in a small, plain apartment without much personality; she lives in death as plainly as she did in life, that's all. I hurry

to relieve the woman of my mother, since her arm seems to want to stretch under the weight of the box, even though it's just a tiny little box. When she puts it into my hands, my body lurches forward involuntarily. "Are you sure this is her? She wasn't this heavy when she was alive!" I think I'm pretty funny, I even dare to giggle a little. I earn an expressionless look: "Yes, that's her," she says as if she's identifying a corpse at the morgue. I have visions of an autopsy room, medical examiners, rigid stretchers. Dr. Welby appears, but I erase him immediately, even if, frankly, he's friendlier than the mummy's face I have in front of me. In fact, the woman seems irritated by my behaviour—her microscopic blue eyes in her floury face attest to this eloquently. She withdraws behind her desk, clicking her tongue in disapproval. She doesn't like people making jokes in her funeral home, it lacks dignity. In a calculated gesture, she shows me the exit and thanks me for taking my mother off her hands. Not in those words, but if you peeled away the layer of affected politeness, that's basically what you'd get.

. . .

On my way back, nobody notices that I'm transporting my mother under my arm. I have the urge to tell the passers-by I come across. I feel proud, but I wouldn't know how to explain why. She went out so rarely that walking her through the frozen park almost makes me happy. I hold her against my down-filled coat to warm her up. The mercury must have dropped ten degrees in the last hour. I get back to my office before all of my colleagues, who always steal an extra fifteen minutes for lunch. I set mom down on my desk between two aggressive cacti, right next to my computer. The effect is depressing: it looks like a Jeep trapped in the desert, taken prisoner by two soldiers. This won't do. I move the cacti, without having decided whether I should put both of them on

top of the box, or one on top of the box and the other beside it, or if I should create a background display. After numerous attempts, I decide to put the box behind the cacti. The result is quite pretty. I'm eager for the others to come back, so I can make introductions and they can see firsthand the reason why they each chipped in five dollars to buy the bouquet of flowers. The reactions are instantaneous and not very subtle; looks of discomfort, fearful grimaces, gaping mouths and wide eyes, various muscular contractions more or less pronounced according to each person's expressive capacity. I'm disappointed, nobody has raved about my lovely funeral arrangement. I phone my sister to tell her: mission accomplished!

- So, where is she now?

- Here, with me.

- Where is *here*?

- At work, on my desk.

- What? In front of everybody?

- Yes, so? She's not naked!

- You're terrible! Don't you have any decency?

- And tonight, I'm going to my therapy session and she's going to have to come with me or spend the night here. She's well protected, I've assigned two prickly bodyguards to her.

- What are you talking about? She's not going to sleep there! And don't even think about bringing mom to therapy either! This isn't a Woody Allen movie! You know how much she disapproved of your behaviour! I knew I should've gone to get her myself!

Sometimes, I think my sister is as frantic as our mother could be. She can't express herself without punctuating half her sentences with an exclamation point. I go on horrifying her by guaranteeing that tonight's session is sure to be one of the best sessions of my life, the one that will settle all of my mother-daughter conflicts once and for all. She hangs up, sighing in exasperation, letting me know how "tactless" I am. She'd get along well with the woman from the funeral home—neither of them has a sense of humour.

My shrink doesn't hide his sympathy when he sees I've transported my mother the entire distance separating my workplace from his. He understands the weight of the dead and appreciates my intention, which he must interpret as a ritual and not an insolent farce. My arm is sore, I massage it as my therapist gently places the box on the table separating his couch from mine. The understanding smile that forms under the hairs of his beard reassures me: we're welcome here, mom and I. He sits down and looks at me with such kindness that I only want to do one thing: close my eyes and look. I don't like what I see: mom, buried in her old sofa, her hand clenching the remote control, looking for a program that will satisfy her, her cat in her lap. While he gently kneads with his front paws, pulling out threads from the ratty bathrobe she wears, she tells him what's happening. She involves him in the life she has. I burst into tears and open my eyes to come back to my own. It's not the best session of my life. I cut it short, I want to go home. Come on, mom.

. . .

More than ever tonight, my apartment breathes abandonment, you'd think I didn't even live here. My plants are thirsty and the cacti gloat, all thorny outside. My mother

has never been to my home before. I give her a tour of the rooms, explaining what each one is used for, then I set her down between two small flowering cacti on the living room table. It's the only room that looks lived in, thanks to the TV set that I never turn off. Her cat climbs onto the table and sniffs her. Then, he comes and curls himself into a ball on my knees. I choose a program she would have liked and I tell them what's happening. I involve them in the life I have.

I have visions of a mother and daughter separated in life, reunited by death, but I don't know which of the two is more dead. My shrink appears, his arms open wide, but I erase him immediately.

DON'T FALL ASLEEP!

On the day of her birth, Sophie could already make people laugh. The second following her expulsion from the maternal cocoon, she broke a small wind that had the force of an outboard motor. The staff in the delivery room laughed until they couldn't breathe. Never had they witnessed such an outburst from a newborn; a hiccup, sure, but a fart, never. So funny! Once she was cleaned up, they noticed the roundness of her nose and the enormity of her mouth, meant for swallowing melons whole.

- She has the face of a clown, said her father.
- Or a mime, retorted her mother.
- I don't know, I'd say she has the face of a clown.
- If you insist. Let's call her Sophie, it's a pretty name for a little clown.

...

At four years old, Sophie imitates Krusty the Clown to perfection. She terrorizes all of the children at nursery school with her delirious, borderline sadistic laugh, and the teachers make her take off the red plastic nose she wears overtop of her own (it scares the other children). At ten, she gives her first solo performance in front of teachers and parents. She has the uncommon gift of being able to fart at will by contorting herself like an eel being tickled to death. It's difficult to decide whether it's worrisome or comical to watch this little girl twist in such a way without tearing a muscle or a tendon, open an already immense mouth so wide without dislocating her jaw, produce such embarrassing sounds. At sixteen, she goes to an audition in the hopes of enrolling in a circus school for clowns. Except, during her performance, the laughs that initially erupt from gaping

mouths became more and more scarce. One after the other, the members of the jury fall into a deep sleep. Sophie does her best to wake them up by using her most boisterous gags, but nothing works. She finally surrenders and sits on the floor, legs crossed Indian-style, waiting for the jurors to wake up on their own. At this moment, the oldest person present suddenly sits up, looks at Sophie and opens her arms to her.

- My child, you're extraordinary! Never in my whole life have I slept so deeply, so quickly. I feel completely rejuvenated. You have a therapeutic gift and I know just what we're going to do with you.

Convinced she'd be rejected on the spot, Sophie's confused. She can't understand how she was able to put five people to sleep at eleven o'clock in the morning. One by one, the others yawn, stretch and take up their pens again. The foremother gives them an authoritative sign of her hand. They study her with unfeigned curiosity; isn't it their duty to fail this wannabe clown?

- My dear, there's a circus with a unique specialty that has its headquarters in the confines of Insomnia. It's made up of people who are blessed with the same gift as you, concerned with anxiety, stress and health problems related to modern civilization. There are twelve at Insomnia, but a second group travels from city to city, putting on shows that are designed to relax the audience or even put them to sleep. Believe me, their shows are very popular. First, the spectators are distracted and then, unknowingly, they're gently guided towards profound relaxation and eventually, sleep.

Sophie raises her eyebrows, sceptical.

- People who have problems sleeping are always trying unsuitable cures that rarely work: subliminal music, aromatic baths, boring reading. The circus proposes the

exact opposite: subliminal, yes, but through entertainment. The troupe hasn't recruited new members in a long time, they need some new blood. Pack your bags for Insomnia, there's a plane leaving in ten days.

Sophie has a hard time believing her ears. How was her gift transformed so radically? The lady prepares a reference letter for her, approved by the other jurors, who suddenly admire her initiative and clairvoyance. The little clown goes home like a sleepwalker, feeling as though she dreamt the whole thing.

- Mom, I want to check something. Sit down comfortably for a minute. Dad, you too. Look at me!

She executes four turns, three pirouettes, makes one or two jokes and notices that her parents are starting to yawn and blink their eyes. After ten minutes, they're sleeping peacefully against one another. Sophie takes twenty dollars out of her father's wallet and goes out into the fading light, heading in the direction of the youth centre.

- There's Sophie. Make us laugh, clown face!

Sophie knows the boys in her neighbourhood have been making fun of her since elementary school, either out of jealousy or a lack of understanding: it's rare for a girl to be so funny, it's distressing. She feels the twenty-dollar bill crinkle in her pant pocket and she makes a decision: she'll get rich. She'll finally be able to buy herself everything she's ever desired but which her parents, who are too poor, have had to refuse her. In less than two jokes, she puts the five ruffians to sleep and empties their pockets. The harvest isn't very fruitful, she's only able to gather fifteen dollars and a few cents. She'll have to aim higher. She'll go to Insomnia.

Her departure is complicated by her parents' apprehensions: she's still young, she's never travelled, it's all so sudden. The old lady from the circus school handles everything, reassures the parents and accompanies Sophie to the airport. The airplane, which seems to be made out of paper maché, looks as though it's out of a child's dream: it has a small round nose, a propeller on the front and a mouth that smiles. The hostess who greets Sophie is wearing a tutu. She invites her to take a seat that's covered in a pink and white blanket, soft like a cloud. As Sophie watches the hostess perform a few humorous gags, she soon feels overcome by a beneficial torpor from which she emerges only when the plane lands, feeling as rested as if she had slept for nine hours.

Insomnia is a deafening place. No wonder the people here sleep so poorly. From the time Sophie steps off the airplane, her ears are assaulted by the ambient noise. A small heterogeneous group comes to meet her; they're the members of the *Cirque du Sommeil* troupe. Sophie immediately feels at ease. There's even a dog whose head is adorned with a pink powder-puff. She leaps up at Sophie, trying to lick her cheeks. Sophie decides she'll be the dog's master and the dog concurs. Nobody takes offence at this sudden appropriation; in the *Cirque du Sommeil*, everything belongs to everybody.

The number she performs at the soirée held in her honour is unanimously approved: Sophie is the new recruit they were hoping would revitalize their show. Half the people watching put on tinted glasses to avoid falling asleep; this way, they're able to observe the effectiveness of Sophie's sleep-inducing tomfoolery on the others—the youngest, the most excited, thus the most difficult to put to sleep. Sophie is delighted by how the other members of the circus fall under her spell. The eldest tell her how the inhabitants of Insomnia are all so tense, so anxious, that few among them can remember

what it means to have a restorative night's sleep. For these exhausted people, a good night's sleep is worth all the gold in the world. All of the shows are sold out and they're held every night of the week in front of a thousand fraught faces with tired eyes, which emerge from the theatre completely changed, as if they had undergone a rejuvenation cure. Some renounced their habitual sleep routines, sleeping pills, acupuncture or therapy sessions and now come to the show once a week.

When Sophie asks how much a ticket sells for, she's shocked by the price—it's way too low, in her opinion. The senior member of the group looks her up and down and clicks her tongue before answering in a dry tone. Sophie squirms, embarrassed.

- Our goal isn't to make money from people by exploiting their weakness. When I was young, I myself suffered greatly from anxiety and I spent a fortune in therapies that did nothing for me. If anything, they ruined me. In founding the circus, I decided that our sessions—or rather, our “shows”—would be accessible to everyone. Sleep troubles aren't just the prerogative of the rich, you know.

- But at least you could live in something other than these gipsy caravans!

- What do you have against these trailers? We don't need anything more. Useless material possessions weigh you down in life, they prevent you from rising up and achieving peace of mind. Burdening ourselves with everything you're thinking about is incompatible with our goal, which is to help people.

Sophie remains pensive after hearing this and retires to her trailer with the dog in the pink powder-puff. This is how she's supposed to live? In poverty, in this little space that's barely big enough to fit the big-screen TV of her dreams? She slips into her leather

vest, goes downtown and starts pick-pocketing all of the passers-by and groups of onlookers she encounters, quickly putting them to sleep.

Word of Sophie's escapades reaches the troupe. The new recruit is wild, incapable of resisting temptation. Her trailer is overflowing with her new acquisitions, fashionable clothing and jewellery. The chief of police doesn't want to cause problems for the Circus; he himself benefits from laughter therapy twice a month. But over the last five months, he's received so many complaints from citizens that he has to alert the leader that the troupe's reputation risks being sullied if she doesn't stop Sophie soon. So the leader seeks the troupe's council, while Sophie, shut up in her new luxury trailer, eats pizza with Davar, a recently arrived circus member, in front of the gigantic TV she's just bought herself. Clearly, she's in the process of corrupting the young man. They have to act swiftly. Her gift is turning against her, against them. The council must make a difficult decision: should they put Sophie to sleep for good, since her obsession with luxury seems incurable? That would be equivalent to murder and Sophie doesn't deserve that. She's simply been overcome by the powers her gift has provided.

One night, when the show finishes as usual to the muffled sound of the audience's redeeming yawns, the leader orders Sophie to remain on stage after the last spectator has left the room.

- We want to try out a new act, Sophie. Stand in front of that big mirror and just let yourself go, make us laugh.

- That doesn't make any sense! If I do my act in front of the mirror, I'll make myself fall asleep. What is this? You want to get rid of me, is that it? I knew I was right

to lock the door to my trailer at night. You're nothing but poor circus performers who are going to stay poor for the rest of your lives! I'm smarter than you!

She turns her back to the mirror and starts acting, trying to make her colleagues fall asleep, but they're quick to protect their eyes with their tinted glasses. In turn, they go to work, executing hilarious but grotesque choreography. It's the Dance of the Sleeping Beauty. Sophie drops like a moth. She isn't dead, just numb—so numb that she appears to be dead. Two men lift her limp body and place it in a sort of tomb pierced with holes. It remains to be seen what they will do with the young girl.

...

Years go by, during which spectators line up to contemplate the immaculately preserved body of the little prodigy who pillaged bystanders. Legend has it that her gift had become so powerful that she put herself to sleep accidentally, playing clown in front of her mirror one morning while she brushed her teeth. She lies in a satin-lined coffin. Sometimes, a little dog in a pink powder-puff sleeps on her feet. It's absolutely adorable. A simple gaze in Sophie's open eyes creates a relaxation that is so profound, so close to hypnosis, that the onlooker doesn't feel a thing when the hand of Davar, the supervising performer, slips a few extra bills into his pocket.

FELIX AND THE CAT

At the corner of the sloping alleyway, so lush with flowers you'd think you were in the countryside, two large garbage bins used for recyclables shelter a cat. A distracted passer-by might think it was a cat sleeping against the fence, but no cat sleeps twisted into such grotesque angles unless it has four dislocated legs or a broken neck; alas, he's not asleep, but dead. A few hours ago, this cat was alive and happy, unknowingly practicing zotherapy; a polite young cat who uncomplainingly accepted the self-interested touch of passers-by seeking to comfort themselves. He was as dignified as could be, with something in his gaze that demanded respect and made you say "There's a good cat;" who made you want to call him Kitty, "KittyKittyKitty!," as this was the most appropriate name for the cat who sat quietly on his little bum as he looked at you, asking for nothing, and happily accepting whatever you had to offer him.

That was a few hours ago.

Kitty roves through this alley, his favourite, the one that from a cat's point of view, boasts the most intoxicating aromas and the most inviting back doors. He pees on the usual fences, rubs against the same pots and chews the plants on the familiar windowsills as if he were on a new adventure. He smells Roudoudou's bum, then has a chat with him. Roudoudou turns tail when he sees the trio of school kids advancing in their direction, shouting at each other. Kitty doesn't try to hold him back. He sits on his hind legs to watch the children approach; he's seen kids like this before and these ones are nothing special. He remains still in anticipation of potential caresses preceded by "Oh! The pretty little cat, come here little cat, come here!," always accompanied by the

sound of wet and eager kisses to which he cedes, for the pleasure of both parties. As he lets a thousand hands pet him, he doesn't feel he's cheating on his owner, for he always goes back to her. She possesses the hand that he prefers above all others, for it's the hand that feeds him.

Kitty is a little startled when Felix stops and plants his torso in front of him, abruptly ordering his friends: "Let's kill the cat." Kitty has heard the consonance of the words 'the cat' before, but never 'let's kill.' Nevertheless, he doesn't move, for he trusts in the kindness of human beings. The friends think it's a great way to unwind after a day that was ruined by a mound of homework assigned by the teacher, who so clearly hates them all, giving them as much work as possible just before the weekend. Felix takes advantage of Kitty's naivety to brusquely pick him up, by the skin of his neck. In a fraction of a second, Kitty remembers the last time he was lifted up like this. He was just a tiny little thing then, being separated from his mother to be brought to another one who didn't have the same smell, a female mounted on top of two tall legs that he came to love rubbing against. There's nothing reassuring about *this* hand.

Felix and his two comrades steal into a dark corner protected by tall trees with gnarled trunks that form a cover over their heads. They each take hold of one of Kitty's paws and stretch it to the maximum, leaving the fourth one free. Kitty quickly feels distraught and starts twisting furiously. He tries to escape the children's grasp by clawing at Felix with his free paw and when this isn't enough, he bites him. Stifling a cry of pain, Felix grabs Kitty's head and squeezes his neck until his kind eyes take on a terrifying look. One of the boys yells "Stop it!" and lets go of the paw he's holding. He turns his eyes away, grimacing, while the other boy takes hold of the abandoned foot, calls him a

sissy and urges Felix to squeeze harder. But Kitty has no intention of letting him do so, and starts fighting vigorously to escape the juvenile hands. Suddenly and soundlessly, oh, with scarcely a tiny squeak from his throat, his body decontracts, then contracts again. In an effort that surpasses that of the boys, he leaps beyond their reach, scratching the tender skin of an arm on his way, then bounds towards the alley. He doesn't have time to avoid the car that's turning the corner a little too quickly and when his body rolls under a back wheel, he gives a final meow and breathes his last breath. The car continues along its route towards the street; neither it nor its driver know they've just *dekittied* a life. Felix and his friends witnessed the accident without experiencing any of the appropriate feelings. With the tips of their shoes, they nudge a disarticulated Kitty who looks at them with steady, cloudy eyes, he who had such a nice gaze (did they even notice it?). They fear a final jolt, a miraculous resurrection that would force them to finish him off, but all that remains of Kitty's will to live are the scratches on Felix's wrist. The three boys stare at each other as if they didn't see what just happened. Felix takes Kitty by the tail and carries his small, limp, dead kitty corpse over to the garbage bins. They walk home, their hands in their pockets, without saying anything.

A mother can sense when her child is coming down with something—a virus, a bad mood—she has a nose for these things. So she asks what's wrong, and sometimes the child answers. Sometimes, the child prefers to cloak himself in a mysterious silence and this is what Felix does when his mother asks him about his sullen air. She's not insistent; she strokes his hair, calling him "poor little pet," because he works so hard at school, and she serves him a chocolate milk and Piroulines. He turns on the television and sinks into the soft couch to watch the four o'clock cartoons. Sylvester runs like a maniac after

Tweety Bird to squash him, with the intention of making a sandwich out of him. It's very funny, Sylvester's such a klutz, but Felix doesn't laugh this time. He even goes upstairs to his bedroom to start his homework. His mother is very proud of him.

The next morning, like every Saturday morning, he goes to the *dépanneur* to buy the newspaper for his parents. A young woman mounted on top of two long legs is talking to the storekeeper. There's agitation in her voice. Felix gets in line behind her and admires her brown, shiny hair that he'd like to touch. He catches a few words.

"... didn't come home last night... never does that... I'm worried... not shy enough, he'd follow anybody... his name is Pichou... if you see him or hear anybody talking about him... everyone in the neighbourhood knows him... please." Noticing the silent presence of Felix behind her, she turns around and leans towards him to bring her eyes to the same level as his. Her hair falls over her cheeks, creating a silk drape. Felix stares at the girl's mouth, her teeth as straight as fence poles, her tongue flashing between her lips when she says: "Do you know Pichou? A pretty black and white cat with short hair, he's not shy at all, have you seen him before? I'm going to put up flyers tomorrow morning if he doesn't come back today. If you see him, will you call me? And tell your friends about him, please?" She has a kind and innocent gaze that reminds him of something, someone. Her imploring way of saying "please" claws at Felix's heart, almost to the core. He answers no, then yes, pays for the newspaper and runs home without saying goodbye. The cat has a name now.

On Sunday, Felix and his parents go to the eleven o'clock mass. This is one of the family activities he can't yet avoid. His only consolation is that afterwards, he gets to have an ice cream, which he licks as a reward for having sat quietly and upright on the

hard pew that supports his back like a corset. Mom takes Felix by the hand as they walk. He feels a bit old for this, but on this morning, he needs this reassuring hand. On the first pole they come across, there's a flyer about Pichou. It's asking someone to "please" bring him home. On a second flyer, Pichou is clumsily drawn with big black spots. The black and white pattern on his round body and the daisies climbing up his legs make him look more like a cow than a cat. He's begging for his mother and gives his telephone number on ten pre-torn strips. On the third: "I lost my way home, please help me find it." Felix bites his lips while his parents read every flyer out loud, commenting on how original they are, saying poor little cat, poor owner, it's almost like losing a child when you lose a cat, don't you think? Would you like to have a cat someday, Felix? Felix doesn't know.

During the sermon, which he can't manage to pay attention to, as usual, only worse, Felix says he'd like to go to confession. His mother feels proud of her son, what a good little boy she has! His father pats him on the shoulder and moves aside to let him pass. He follows Felix with his eyes as he walks solemnly to the confessional. What a good little boy he has! For once, Felix knows he won't have to invent any sins.

The priest's voice, smooth and indistinct, reaches him through the diamond-patterned screen that separates them. Felix is asked to explain why he sinned. He doesn't answer, his mind is racing. Can you go to prison for murdering an animal? But he didn't really kill the cat, he just shook him a little, right? That wasn't what killed him. Besides, he'd been hurt, too, his lacerated wrist is proof of that. Will the priest rat him out to his parents if he tells him what he did, and if so, will he have to go to a foster home? He makes up a trivial lie and when the priest asks him if that's all, Felix says no. And he tells him about the cat.

- Why did you do that?

- Because.

- Because why?

- I don't know.

- Did you want to kill it?

- I don't know.

- You know that killing a living thing, even if it's an animal and not a human being, is a sin in the eyes of God?

- Yes.

- Can you imagine that woman's pain now?

- Yes.

- As your punishment, I'm going to give you prayers to recite and some advice that I encourage you to follow. If not, who knows, you risk having a cat stuck in your throat until the end of your days!

Felix sees the priest's mouth smiling at him, a smile coldly cut up into uniform diamonds. He thanks the priest, because he has to, leaves the confessional and regrets having confessed. He would have given anything to say even more "hail Marys" and ignore the extra advice. After all, did he really have to take advice from that joker behind the screen? Dozens of cats die in different ways every day, why was this one so special? He wasn't even cute.

Felix gets to have his soft ice cream, vanilla-*chococat*. He quickly mixes the reminiscent colours on the tip of his tongue, which freezes so quickly that he can't taste the flavours anymore. They pass the same poles, see the same flyers, his parents make the

same comments and he feels the same discomfort again, aggravated by the memory of the priest's recommendations.

His mother suggests that he stay outside while she makes lunch. He has no desire to be outside, with all of those poles talking to him. But he obeys and sits on the balcony, nibbling on his sugar cone. Loads of questions jumble around in his mind. He's not used to feeling so agitated, his mind is like a highway jammed with cars he can't control. He decides to go call on his friend, the one who's not a coward, the one who's like him. His house is only a few blocks away from his own. So is that of the sad cat owner, which he didn't know. She comes down the stairs with flyers in her hand, more flyers, so many flyers that she drops a few at Felix's feet. He bends down to pick them up and as he stands, his eyes look deeply into hers. Clear mirrors reflecting everything he has no wish to see.

- Pichou didn't come home. I didn't sleep last night. I started putting flyers up really early this morning. If you don't have anything to do, would you come help me post them?

Felix doesn't know what to say, the woman's unexpected request makes him feel incredibly uneasy. His tongue seems to be stuck to the roof of his mouth, so he agrees with a nod of his head. He gets to hear the complete story of the wonderful cat who brought daily happiness to the girl (Sylvie is her name). It's only been two days since he disappeared, but she can't resign herself to the thought that she may never see him again, that he might be dead, it's impossible! For five years, he slept with her every night under the covers and fetched his toy mouse like a little dog. He was the best of cats, she could never have another, because he's irreplaceable. Felix is uncomfortable; he listens to her

confidences politely, but he can barely bring himself to look at the girl who's so pretty, so animated by the passionate love she has for her cat. His cheeks are on fire, he's on the verge of confessing for a second time, but fear holds him back. If Sylvie scolds him with the same fervour she uses to describe Pichou, he's going to meet his end, drop dead on the spot in the flurry of intensity and be flayed alive. She might even force him to eat Pichou, who knows, he's seen that kind of punishment in a movie before. One thing is certain, he's never seen anybody love anyone else so much—an animal that is no more. In a hoarse, hesitant voice, he says in a serious tone that's not his own:

- Maybe we could put them up on the poles in our street? A lot of people and cars go by there.

- That's a brilliant idea! You're a very smart little boy. And you know what? I feel better that you're coming with me, it gives me faith again. Pichou's going to come home.

Felix bites his lips and points the way. He's become chief of operations, a chief who has trouble speaking up, true, because something is caught in his throat, but at least the blood is flowing to his heart again. He feels like he might be doing a good thing, if there's something good to be done under the circumstances. With determination, he indicates the suitable poles, height and angle; he applies the glue and Sylvie sticks the flyers in the right place. They make a great team. At the sight of the garbage bins concealing Pichou's body, Felix becomes anxious again and tells Sylvie that the only poles left are the ones in the alleyways that are used for clotheslines. He stammers and feels very hot all of a sudden. His throat closes up. Felix hears the priest's voice

resonating in his head, but it doesn't mask the fear he experiences again at the thought of witnessing Sylvie's grief from a front row seat.

- You've been a big help, thank you so much. Hey! I'm going to put the last flyer here, what do you think? These garbage bins are always here.

Before Felix has the time or courage to protest, she makes her way resolutely towards the big rolling garbage bins, the flyer already glued in her hand. Felix is frozen to the spot. He knows what will happen next as though he's already lived it. Sylvie bends over to put the paper on the side of one of the garbage bins and sees a white foot, or is it the tip of a tail? She bends over further and her body crumples as she falls to the ground, crying "Pichou? Pichou!" She picks up the cat's body and clutches it to herself, despite the fact that it's dirty and might already be contaminated, and Felix has no other choice but to stay there and wait. She's not crying anymore, she's examining her cat who's playing dead, what a ham. Her eyes inspect him, searching for a remaining fragment of life; they're as round as the wheels of a car, all you can see is the brown that shines and slowly turns to liquid. She walks towards Felix and falls to her knees, presenting him with a shapeless Pichou who looks boneless. She caresses the cat, whispering words of love to him, "my poor little kitty." Felix has never felt so bad in his whole life.

- He's dead, can you believe it? He's dead!

Felix would like to run far, far away, but he's afraid his knees will fail him if he moves. The girl thinks Felix supports her and she finally lets herself cry real tears, like the cartoons on TV, tears that gush out of her eyes like sprinklers, well beyond her eyelashes. Her long brown hair intertwines with Pichou's black and white fur as she hugs him and whispers a lot of words to him that Felix thought were reserved for lovers. He

suppresses his disgust, because frankly, the cat is pretty repulsive. He tries to find something to say and thinks he's found it, but he's incapable of uttering a single word; all that comes out is a sort of rumbling that sounds like a husky meow. In the distance, his mother calls him for lunch in that bright, loving voice he recognizes. Felix clears his throat heavily, because he has to; he has to free his voice and for that, the cat has to be buried somewhere other than in his throat. He helps Sylvie stand up, relieves her of Pichou's weight and, with his free hand, clasps the sweaty hand of his companion. "What's your name?" she asks him. "Felix," he replies. He has a name now. She gently gives herself over to him and, without resisting, lets herself be guided by this good little boy.

HE LOVES HER SO MUCH

I'm crazy about her. Ever since I met her, every second that goes by without my being able to inhale her scent is a second lost, a time-space in which I survive by waiting to regain my substance, my human form. Next to her I become whole again, I lose all of my handicaps.

(Are you blind? She's a rock. She's the rock that makes you stumble. Several times a day, you fall flat on your face, damage your soul a little more, rip apart your mind, further diminish your already deficient stock of self-esteem. But)

. . .

- I love you so much.

- Me too, darling. But I'm begging you, take that shirt off, it's depressing. It's funny, every time you wear it, I don't have the slightest urge to kiss you anymore. Even worse, I barely recognize you. The material emasculates you, the colour washes you out and the cut doesn't suit you at all. It looks like it was designed by a blind tailor. Really, it's not you. Like half of what's in your wardrobe. I'll have to take you shopping. You have such a strange build though, I still haven't been able to figure out what would flatter you.

. . .

I got rid of the monster that was eating and corrupting my body, making it an insect that was destroying her desire. I wanted nothing to alter her love, nothing to prevent her gaze from dressing me in the perfect skin. While she painted her toe nails, sitting on the toilet seat, as pretty as a princess on her throne, I got rid of half the contents

of my wardrobe, hoping it was the right half. (*You've gotten rid of other things, don't you see? They're hiding between the you that you don't like and the one you're trying to love through her. And are you even sure you're getting rid of the right things?*) I added my Moores suit to the pile and my big African explorer hat. She was ecstatic. We made love exhaling loud, savage moans in the middle of the sacrificed clothing. Her toe nails glowed red like the fire that devoured me, perfectly filed, innocent (*she's innocent herself, you're the only guilty one. But*)

. . .

- That was incredible. I love you so much.

- Me, too. But you came a little faster than usual, no? Unless I was the one who took more time. Actually, it looked like I was coming, but I didn't come. If I screamed, it's because a hanger was about to pierce through my lower back. You're so heavy! You have an exercise bike and I've never seen you use it. You'd have such a nice body if you lost that extra weight and built some muscle. Don't take this badly, but I'm convinced your posture is what's causing your clothing problem. You slouch too much, it's as if your nose is trying to reach your destination before the rest of your body. Except sometimes, like when you have an erection. Do you like it when I touch you like this, while I talk to you? Hmm, it looks that way.

. . .

As soon as she left, I dusted off the stationery bike and started my race towards her (*the battle against your true portly nature*). I looked at myself in the mirror as I rode, imagining the kilos of melting fat I would offer her as I crawled at her feet, kissing the

incandescent nails that lighted my way. I looked at myself and saw clearly what she saw: a man who was too ordinary for her, who needed to strive to break away from his ordinary self to be worthy of her (*pitifully, but each push of the pedal takes you further away from yourself; in fact, you see nothing at all*).

. . .

I slimmed down generously. I acquired a build that earned me some serious compliments: “You look better and better, in a few months you’ll be a new man. All the women will want you and you’ll leave me, without remembering that it was thanks to me you feel so much better in your skin.” I started to have a very *cool* look, dressing myself in very *cool* clothes (*now you look more like the image she wants you to be*).

. . .

- I love you so much.

- Me too, love. You know, I barely recognize the man who seduced me. I wouldn’t be surprised if you got a promotion. I heard the boss talking about you, he has you in his sights. If he names you assistant sales director, your benefits and salary will double. What would you say to celebrating right now? Surprise! I already reserved a table at Adamo.

. . .

A table right next to the bar, a panoramic view of us. She knew everyone in the restaurant. She introduced me to old acquaintances (*do you think...old lovers?*), cooing my name as she caressed the new goatee she loved to see me sporting. The wine and the noise were making my head spin, I suddenly felt sick, so much so that I mistakenly (*so*

you think) went into the ladies room. I sat down on a toilet in one of the stalls and massaged my temples as I tried to sort out my thoughts. Two women came in and started chitchatting while they fixed their makeup. I could see them through a gap between the door and the panel.

. . .

- She's ridiculous, she's like a peacock. And that poor guy, you can't even recognize him anymore. He was so cute before. Obviously, they're never good enough.

- That's one more on her list. You remember Marco? And John? Henri? To think, he left his wife for her. What *is* it that she does to them?

. . .

But I loved her so much. Were they really talking about her, and about me? Before going back to her, I looked at the reflection I projected in the mirror (*to make sure it was that of another*).

That night, when she wanted to blindfold her eyes to make love, I thought about the conversation I heard in the bathroom and thought: "That's it—I'm still not good enough for her." Then I didn't think anymore. I unwrapped the scarf from around her head and covered her eyes while I penetrated her in my own way (*you don't recognize yourself anymore, in this fervour*).

- Darling, no, I want it.

- It? What is 'it?' You don't want to see me? You don't like my beard anymore, you think my hair is too long?

- Darling, you're hurting me. You're heavy, you're suffocating me.

- Ah! Still too big? I'm not coming fast enough, this time? What? WHAT?

. . .

I went in and out of her, I dispossessed myself, I possessed her, I went in and out. I tightened the scarf around her neck, her tender neck. The moment I accomplished this act, I loved myself, so much.

SPOT OF SALVATION

“Ladies, I know where your G-spot is hiding. Gilbert.” This line, which stands out from the others in the ‘Personal Outgrowth’ column, catches Léa’s eye. The bold characters, all in capitals and underlined, are hard to miss. This guy didn’t skimp on anything to attract attention; he’s either a prankster or a true specialist in body illiteracy. Each of Léa’s lovers believed themselves to be more skilful than the last. She had been swept from top to bottom and none of them had been able to get beyond the C. For Clitoris, of course; the last resort, that of the poor wretches for whom the vagina mimes death at the slightest attempt to excite it. She rereads the ad, makes sure it doesn’t contain any spelling errors, cuts it out meticulously and places it under her pillow. She turns off the light and places the palm of her hand on her pubis. She wants to find this famous intense orgasm spot before she dies. Léa’s fed up with having to listen passively to detailed descriptions from her office colleagues who boast about their incredible orgasms while they snack on doughnuts during coffee breaks.

. . .

Ginette: He started stroking me during the hockey game. I was in the middle of sewing a button on my pink blouse, I was afraid I was going to stick the needle into my finger while he was sticking his into my coochie.

Geneviève: What! You were sewing in the nude?

Ginette: No! I was already in my pyjamas.

Geneviève: You wear pyjamas? That doesn’t seem like you, it’s not very erotic.

Ginette: Well, no, it's this sort of semi-sheer baby-doll. Greg loves it. It barely covers my bum, but it's just decent enough, in case somebody knocks at the door and I need to open it.

Geneviève: What! You would answer the door dressed like that?

Ginette: Greg loves it when I expose myself to strangers. The other night, he ordered pizza and asked me to answer the door for the delivery guy. I barely had any clothes on, just this vampy little one-piece he'd bought me at a sex shop. I was wearing high heels. It was hard to keep my balance, but that gets Greg going, too.

Geneviève: Hmmm, yes, I see.

Ginette: He jerked off while I paid the delivery guy, who looked like he was about to faint. Greg, the naughty boy, had positioned a mirror so he could see the guy's face. Apparently his eyes were bulging when I bent over to pick up my wallet, which I'd left on the floor on purpose. It's pretty exciting to be ogled like that by two guys at the same time, especially when they're dressed and I'm practically naked.

Léa: It really doesn't bother you to flaunt yourself like that?

Ginette: Ever since Greg found my G-spot, he can ask anything of me. I'm his slave. My little love cave is always open.

Geneviève: Yes, the G-spot is heaven. Once you've found it, you want nothing more to do with clitoral orgasms. Roger found mine by accident. He just happened to be fumbling around with his middle finger and I felt like I had to go pee. It didn't take long after that—to come, I mean. What about you, did you find it yourself or *did somebody help you?*

Léa: No, of course not. What do you think, I spend my time fiddling with myself because I'm single?

Ginette: Why not? Before Greg, I used my vibrator e-ve-ry day, I wasn't going to let myself dry out! I can lend it to you if you want, I don't need it anymore. You'd just have to disinfect it. It's ultra efficient, very *high-tech*. It has a little thing for stimulating the clitoris, if you're still at that stage.

Lea: Thanks, I have everything I need.

Geneviève: Okay good, because you don't talk to us about your sexual activities very often.

. . .

Léa turns the light back on, grabs the little piece of torn paper and rereads the ad several times, word for word. She can't believe she's going to do this. This guy might be a sex maniac who cuts his victims into pieces, keeping only the G-spot for his personal collection. She imagines a sea of G-shaped spots, floating freely in a jar of formaldehyde. She closes her eyes, lifts up the bottom of her nightgown and starts caressing the usual places. With her finger wedged between the dry folds of her tender anatomy, she falls asleep before reaching whatever it may be.

Waking up, she reviews all of her ex-lovers: Michel, André, Denis, Bernard, Marie. None of these names contains the letter 'G.' Moreover, none of these people ever succeeded in taking her beyond her usual superficial orgasms. Actually, she didn't think they were superficial. She was quite satisfied with them before she started hearing talk of that damn phantom spot. Greg, Roger, Gilbert... is the letter 'G' in the name a precondition? Ginette, Geneviève... good God, for women, too! She's wide of the mark

with Léa, she always will be! She applies a bit of lubricant to the tip of her middle finger and, frowning spitefully, buries it deep inside her. She searches to the right, to the left, up high, down low, as far as the length of her finger allows her, nothing special. No noticeable bump, no unevenness to signal anything capable of rousing the slightest gasp from her. Truth be told, she feels a bit silly, and the feeling totally overwhelms her as she thinks about the matador's ad again. She pulls her finger out, wipes it on her pillowcase and gets up, quite resolved not to think about that stupid spot anymore and not to be influenced by her libidinous colleagues.

. . .

Ginette: Girls, be jealous of the bags under my eyes, I spent the whole night having sex.

Geneviève: Do tell!

Ginette: Greg rented a movie. OH. MY. GOD. You absolutely have to see it.

Geneviève: What's it called? Wait, I'm going to write it down.

Ginette: *The Plumber II*.

Geneviève: II?

Ginette: Yes, it's the second one, it's kind of a series of jobs. They have policemen, plumbers, priests and doctors who specialize in pussy.

Geneviève: Veterinarians, too?

Ginette: Nooooo, don't be stupid! Gynaecologists! So, the main actress, a total unknown—or at least, I've never seen her in any other roles—is completely desperate when she realizes the water's barely running out of the faucet in her shower. So she calls the plumber. Enter this guy and let me tell you, wow! He's a stud. First, he checks out the

girl without her realizing it, so you guess he's got more on his mind than just fixing her pipes. All she's wearing is a towel wrapped around her, this really small, thin towel that's clinging to her huge chest, her torpedoes. I'll leave the rest up to you to imagine, but any bigger than that and she'd fall over. So he fiddles with a few thingamajigs around the pipes under the bath, it must not have been a very serious problem, because it only takes him a minute to fix. Then he tells her: "There you go, little lady, I think that'll do it. But maybe you should try it while I'm here." The girl looks surprised, which is natural, I would be too, but she goes ahead and washes herself from head to toe very sensually in front of the plumber, who gets this massive erection. I'm telling you, he's a stud. Eventually he joins her and they do everything you could possibly do standing up. But, and this is where the action really starts, the girl's roommate comes home; she's sweating, she's just gone for a jog and she needs to freshen up, which is natural. When she sees the shower's occupied, she heads towards the door except that, get this, the plumber's still super hard and it turns out that the first girl's also a lesbian, so they all start lathering each other up and eventually end up in bed together, but then, the first girl's boyfriend shows up and you think he's going to be annoyed, but he's not at all. He takes off all his clothes and joins them and the final scene is incredible: they're all in a single file, the plumber has his thing in the roommate's mouth, she's on her knees in front of him while the other guy is driving his cock into her from behind.

Geneviève: Stop, I'm getting wet! What about the first girl, the also-a-lesbian?

Ginette: Uh, wait, yeah, she's missing...oh right, she's masturbating while she watches them. So were we, on our couch, of course. It was irresistible, you have no idea how hard and wet we were. We went at it almost all night listening to Donna Summer.

Greg loves doing it to disco. We even dance sometimes, it gets us going before the big finale. And you, what did you do last night?

Léa finishes her coffee, swallowing loudly. She gives an inane reply, a lie that makes her blush (“Nothing special, but I woke up in the middle of the night after I had an incredibly erotic dream, it must have been because of all your stories, and I had to masturbate to fall back to sleep,” which earns her some applause from her colleagues) and goes and shuts herself in the bathroom. She lifts up the front of her skirt and makes herself come faster than ever thanks to her good ol’ clitoris.

. . .

Gilbert is nothing like the lewd, muscular, arrogant forty-year-old Léa was expecting. The only purpose of the succinct conversation preceding their rendezvous was to decide on a meeting place. This pleased Léa, who had feared an interminable description of the methodology Gilbert uses for his clients, which surely would have intimidated her. She’s not in the habit of talking about sex with strangers, though she’s acquired a certain expertise in listening to it, thanks to her fellow employees. On the tips of his toes, he enters room 33 of the Meeting Spot Motel that Léa reserved, like he’s afraid of waking her, even though she’s sitting upright in the only armchair, her hands on her knees. The picture of a falsely modest pseudo-spinster who’s waiting for her punishment—that’s what Léa evokes in Gilbert’s mind as he tries to assess her erotic potential: a good spanking with the flat of his hand, on a bum he guesses to be flat but receptive—that’s what it would take to surprise her and get her warmed up. Gilbert is touching, with his round gold-rimmed glasses, well-trimmed goatee and newly acquired baldness forming a soft crown around his oval head. An Egyptian history professor—

that's what he evokes in Léa's mind. This pleases her and helps her relax; the slightly old-fashioned style is comforting. She uncrosses her hands and from the right, caresses her cheek all the way to her neck, sliding her finger down her cleavage in a manner she believes to be provocative. Gilbert puts his briefcase down near the door and closes it, taking care not to make a sound, takes off his overcoat and hangs it on the hook over Léa's gabardine coat. He discreetly sniffs the beige and brown material, appreciating its delicate lavender scent. The smell reminds him of the fragrant sheets from his childhood, which his mother rinsed with eau de Provence. His penis throbs slightly at the evocation of this memory: oh, how he enjoyed rubbing himself, as a young adolescent, between those crisp, clean sheets. The atmosphere is profoundly quiet, apart from the continuous buzz of cars on the freeway. During their brief phone conversation, he and Léa had agreed that he would be economic with words regarding the "experience"—that's what he called it—so as not to encumber Léa's mind with too much useless information that would prevent her from losing herself in her sensations. The background noise creates a soft hypnotic hum that's favourable to the "experience," not unpleasant at all. He'll have to remember the name of this motel for some of his other clients. However, he has a feeling it's not silence that Léa needs, *au contraire*.

He asks Léa to undress and sets the example by ridding himself of all his clothing, save for some kind of white undergarment bodysuit that covers him from his neck to his ankles. Léa hides her surprise; this attire isn't very erotic and yet, she feels a slight tingling around the circumference of her head. She chooses not to remove the little two-piece matching set she bought for the occasion, her first slightly exotic frillies. Gilbert drily orders her to take it off. The truth is he's disgusted by red panties, especially ones

embellished with little white teddy bears. Léa does so, shivering. She doesn't dare ask the same in return. After all, if she's paying Gilbert, it's for him to take command; he must know what's appropriate for the circumstances. If he prefers to remain dressed and for her to be naked, then it must be part of the process.

As Léa slips under the fresh, rough sheets and pulls the blanket up to her breasts, Gilbert opens his briefcase and takes out a radio. He pushes a button and disco music invades the room, filling it with off-beat colours. He starts writhing to the sound of the music—it's like an avant-garde Fruit of the Loom ad—and undoes the buttons of his bodysuit all the way down to the bottom of his torso. This little man might seem grotesque in such a moment, especially when he takes his swelling penis out from the slit in the undergarment and wiggles the tense member in time with his other sicklier appendages. Nevertheless, Léa watches this spectacle without laughing; she simply waits for what's to come, understanding that this must be a ritual intended to precede a more important act. There is, however, something comical in all of this: the man who's determined to help her discover the most sensitive spot inside her is there displaying his cock, which is bigger than the rest of his body, to the sound of Donna Summer, and he's performing his dance in all seriousness. Yet he had mentioned that his penis wouldn't be useful for the "experience." What is she supposed to think, do? She stands up, joins him on the grey carpet and faces him, arching her torso. He orders her to turn around, bend over and put her hands on the foot of the bed. He spans her bum with the flat of his hand and then with his cock, which produces the sound of applause. Léa imagines a small crowd of fully clothed people watching their frolicking and it excites her tremendously. While she's in the same position, which at any other time would make her blush with

shame, he penetrates her with the help of a thin vibrator, or is it some other kind of instrument? The music is still playing and they move to the rhythm of “I Will Survive.” Gilbert is skilful with the dildo, rubbing the end of it against a surface that Léa thought to be insensitive, but in two minutes, when she feels on the verge of urinating, she explodes and collapses, her limbs turned to jelly. Through half-closed eyes, she sees Gilbert tuck his penis back into his long johns, quietly get dressed, take the cheque Léa had left on the bedside table and leave with his things without saying a word, abandoning Léa dazed on the carpet. She quickly falls asleep, as relaxed as a mollusc.

. . .

Geneviève: Damn Monday. You know what? Roger couldn't come last night. I almost dislocated my right elbow and nothing happened to him, apart from his penis being all irritated.

Ginette: It must be in the air, because Greg was in a lousy mood, he didn't even want me to touch him. And I was wearing the latest negligee he bought me, you know, the pink one with the white bear cubs on the breasts.

Geneviève: Phhh. It's amazing that teddy bears could give anybody a hard-on. Your guy always surprises me. What about you, Léa, you didn't do anything this weekend? You have a funny look on your face.

Léa: It's possible, I drank a little. I have a drink or two sometimes, to relax. Actually, I rented a XXX movie, *The Professor*.

Ginette: Not one from the *Plumber* series?

Léa: I don't know, maybe.

Geneviève: Tell us about it. Maybe it'll console us.

Léa: It's about a single woman—or at least, you assume she's single, despite the fact that she's very sexy. That's what the text implies—I mean, the image. She responds to an ad, a guy who offers his escort services specializing in un-findable G-spots. In short, they meet in a hotel room, they go at it like you'd expect and the climax is when he finds the famous spot. The girl's exhausted, she's insatiable, and she chases the matador into the streets near the motel, half-naked under her coat. She's picked up by two guys who rape her, but she seems to like it, because she asks them to do it again.

Ginette: That's it?

Léa: Yes.

Ginette: Either you tell it badly or your movie's really crap.

Léa: I don't have the descriptive gifts you two have.

Geneviève: Get to bed early tonight, you look terrible.

. . .

Léa can't fall asleep. Visions spatter her brain as she searches her vagina with the help of a small, basic vibrator she bought. It doesn't work. It never works, her body is illiterate. She turns the device off and instead of fingering her insides, she imagines herself sprawled across her gabardine coat, being raped by two men who look like university professors. First they rip off her red underwear with the teddy bears, then they take turns penetrating her, taking care to stimulate her clitoris to give her incredible orgasms. They're true gentlemen who must have read the Hite report to know women so well. She falls asleep, without noticing that a little piece of newspaper is stuck to her moist temple.

IN THE BOX

You...

So tiny, as we are when we're six years old; you know, more bone than flesh. You go unnoticed in your blue dress, a Sunday schoolgirl dress, well-ironed, not a single visible wrinkle. The scent of flowers is overwhelming; it clogs every pore of your skin, you can taste them on your tongue, the sweet flavour of a rainy day. Your daddy is lying on his back, rigid; he's not sleeping, nobody could sleep that much. While people move incessantly around you, stopping to sweep the bangs from your forehead (the tuft that falls over your eyes like a curtain but doesn't prevent you from seeing the show going on around you), you feel as though you're on a faraway planet, and the people stumbling around this foreign land have grown out of the soil, plants and twisted roots. They smooth your falling lock of hair, murmuring words that are fitting, sad, that make you even sadder, though you're not sure if you're supposed to be sad or otherwise. It seems to be the proper feeling.

Your mommy is unrecognizable in this jungle: wearing a black dress with thin straps that reveal tired shoulders, you'd think she was dressed for a gala. The red on her lips makes her teeth look even whiter when she accidentally lets them show. She smiles a lot, with a certain smile. *You* don't smile; you just try not to wonder if what's happening is important. But it must be, so many people have come. Come to see your daddy lying in that box. Take your mommy by the elbow. Smooth your hair again and again, give it some shine. Never have you been touched so much.

Nobody told you they were going to put this box in a hole. In fact, nobody told you anything about anything. When your mommy threw a handful of earth on the lid, then a white chrysanthemum, when you heard the sound of the earth hit the box and saw the flower disappear in the darkness of the crater, something shut off inside you. It didn't make a sound, it didn't hurt, it just happened, like that. Did you even notice it?

Your mommy, in her glamorous dress, shakes hands, still smiling. You remember now having seen that smile before. On your last birthday, when you blew out the six candles, just after daddy called to say he wouldn't be there in time for dinner, as was so often the case. Dinner was eaten, only the cake was left. But the cake was eaten without him, too. As was so often the case, you wanted to stay up until he came home, but she didn't want you to, it would be too late. You yourself never smiled a lot, other than by pinching your lips.

Now, your mommy takes you by the hand. She seems both relaxed and tense, like she hasn't yet decided which manner to adopt. She shows you to other people you've never met before, who nonetheless pat your head as if they have a right to it. Your hair is a world map of fingerprints. It's funny, you don't understand anything these strangers are saying. Their lips are moving, no doubt saying kind things, because they're smiling. Are your ears blocked? It's not very likely, you still hear the "plop" of the earth against the box. Like a prayer, a repetition, something you're ordered not to forget.

Your hands are causing you trouble, you don't know what to do with them, they become fidgety. They start exploring the bottoms of your pockets, searching for an object to touch, a little ball of lint to roll between your fingers. You hear your heart all of a sudden, it goes "plop-plop-plop." You're sure people can hear it miles away, above the

singing of the birds, the wind in the trees, the murmur of voices. Planted like a stake, you're going to take root; your feet will never again be able to move your body, carry you elsewhere, to another land. But no, your mommy takes your arm and moves you towards the place where your father is, far, far beneath the surface, for the hole is now filled. Tonnes of earth through which your eyes strain to see, between your bangs, between the clumps of soil, the earthworms, the stones, behind the wood of the coffin, under the satin glued to the wood. You hold your breath. But your mommy pulls you again, limp little parcel, just when you were going to see your daddy again. It was always like that.

. . .

Mommy...

Everybody is looking at you. Your dress isn't appropriate, neither is your deportment. Those bare shoulders and that much-too-radiant smile applied to your face, which is made up with a substance other than grief, don't evoke the proper compassion. The women stare at you out of the corners of their eyes and feel guilty for not being able to like you right now; the men leer at you, trying to suppress their thoughts. You're a widow, they're not widowers—too bad. Your skin looks so soft under the satin. What products do you use? all the rough, dry-skinned women wonder. They ponder a lot of questions that aren't suitable for the day of a funeral. They love having their minds elsewhere, like some would love being in your place, for reasons which wouldn't be Catholic to confess.

The man in the box is—was—a monster. You alone know it. You decided to bury the monster with pomp in order to celebrate your deliverance. Your satin dress hides the wounds, the indelible remains of your foolishness. The other remains, the little girl, hides

in your skirt. At the moment, you don't know what to do with this extension of him. You would have liked to bury that as well; oh not the little girl, just what she signifies. She reminds you that you once loved, or thought you loved, the monster. You see plainly that the girl is lost, now and always, but you yourself have been so busy trying to find the path for such a long time that you would have trouble showing her the way.

People pretend to feel pain for you; on the contrary, they should rejoice. If you lifted up the bottom of your dress, they could touch the bruise on your thigh that refused to heal. A little higher, a gash in the shape of a wilted flower, made shiny by time. Below your navel, the trace of his teeth, a rough cross-stitch, a defined border that says what your smile is trying to keep silent. You remember all of the scars that embroidered your existence at the monster's side, when he was almost there. These people, what do they know and what will they ever know?

The little shadow follows you as you weave between the other shadows, the ones that hold out their hands and whisper words meant to encourage you as you bear your suffering, while they were ghosts when the need cried out. How absurd! You'd have reason to laugh, to let yourself fall to the ground and roll around in the dirt holding your sides, staining your pretty dress with mud; reason to laugh even more at seeing their disgusted faces, creating a scandal, being taken for crazy. This hypocritical bigotry raises your spirits. When one of the husbands eyes your cleavage, the husband's wife recites a passage to you from the Bible, smiling with condolence. She pats the head of the little shadow, who searches for your hand. Her pain seems strange to you. "Mommy, I'm hungry," she says. Her voice is clear and crisp, like crystal grating on your ears. You never wanted to harm her, but even if you didn't want to, the harm is done. The food she

asks you for is easy to find. The other food, you never knew how to provide her with. Protecting her from the monster seemed to be your only priority. He never touched her; and yet, you could say he did. You don't understand.

You're hungry, too. This farce goes on and on like an elastic band whose stretch capacity can't be determined without breaking it. When the box is six feet under ground, when you're certain the monster can no longer climb out of it and all the clowns have gone back to their habitats (TV room, kitchen, tavern, neighbour's bed) and put their true faces back on (indifferent, forgetful, I-don't-give-a-damn, denial), you'll take the little girl out for a hamburger, some French fries, whatever. She deserves whatever. And then you'll go see a funny movie, which will take her mind off things. She should also have a new dress, or some pants with those wide legs that are in style. With some effort, you can imagine that losing your father at six is much worse than losing your husband at forty. But this produces nothing in you, no recognizable emotion, at least. You float in an almost comfortable no man's land that borders on pleasure, because feeling nothing, for as short a time as it may be, is almost that—pleasure. This planet, where it suddenly seems possible to set your two feet down without stumbling, without being hit, without hearing shouts of rage, seems imaginary to you; but it's perfectly real and you're walking in it right now, prisoner of the little hand.

. . .

Him.

It's dark, of course. Not the opaque darkness in which you were submerged your entire life, but rather a fluid darkness, where it seems you can breathe better. Your life was so heavy. That kid who waited for you, that woman you tried to love, this sick mind

and body you had to drag around, day after day. Do you have any regrets? Should you have any? Are you responsible for everything that happened to you in this life? Who cares, now? The satin of the coffin is much more comfortable than the bedsheets in which you had to battle your animosity. You hated life, you gnawed on it, mauled it, sought to escape it by taking exit doors that turned out to be sealed, dead ends. These indirect means only served to fuel your anger even more—you know, that anger that came into the world the same time you did.

Look at how your wife is strangely beautiful on this day. You remember that fall morning, the day after a night of drinking? You had thrown your bottle at the mirror in which she was admiring herself, shattering her reflection into miserable pieces. You couldn't bear this beauty that accentuated your secret, ugly face. Okay. You can stop moping. Relax. Take advantage of this, they're putting on a show in your honour. Make sure you don't miss it. Are you comfortable? Not too chilly in there? First, your little girl. Fragile and cute, completely lost. Nobody has spoken to her about anything, that seems obvious. What can she be fiddling with so much in her pocket? Your mother waddles on one leg, then on the other, her varicose veins making her suffer. She avoids meeting your wife's gaze, she blames her for your death. Admit it, there's something to laugh about. So much hatred emanates from her, you have to wonder how such a virulent charge isn't enough to kill. Your dad, the guy with the red nose, the notorious moron who drinks like a fish. He likes your wife. If you knew what he was thinking right now. It's true she looks very sexy today, more so than when you were alive. Your death gives her a sort of violent beauty, isn't that amusing? Her parents look like a couple of stiff, two zombies who think they're alive. Nobody knows who you really were; otherwise, who would have

sacrificed such a lovely afternoon for you? Oh, you can't see it from the grave where you're stuck, but the sunshine is dazzling. The blossoming greenery lends a very poetic touch above the cedar finish of your coffin. Too bad you're missing all of it.

Your little girl is looking for you, it's so sad and yet, you don't cry a single tear for her. You're a real bastard. Your wife still bandages her bruises and hides them behind her difficult smiles. Let's wager that in the corner, there's a guy who will help her recover from this erroneous path that bears your name. Look, that distant cousin of yours who looks at her intelligently—you know, the way some men have of considering women as human beings. Of course you don't know. What, you're sceptical? You couldn't touch her without leaving marks and the thought of somebody other than you giving her body a true caress is painful? You have feelings then? Ah, it's about time! Too bad, old boy, it's your turn to eat dust. It's funny, there's something delightful in seeing you this way, powerless before these events. You had all the time in the world to act and look what you did with it. You're definitely your father's son, and your mother's. A by-product of a by-product. Look again. Your wife throws a white chrysanthemum on your coffin. You hear the earth falling, isn't it scary? You rejoiced in your newfound comfort way too early, your torture is only beginning. You have trouble breathing all of a sudden? Remember the stories of purgatory you laughed at when you were in school? How ironic. Go on, say your prayers, if you can remember a single one. It's safe to say your drinking songs won't help you now.

DEATH OF A GUARD DOG

Tristan and Bérénice. Two children of modern times, adorned with scintillating names that reveal a parental concern to have them crowned at birth. Pretty names for nice six-year-old children, like the others, with the exception that these two will go to private school and be deprived of nothing. Two future scientific or literary award winners, already intrigued by the placid water that sparkles and shines under the glacial winter sun, captivated by the poetry emanating from this reptilian and translucent mass stretched across otherwise banal surfaces. The smooth, tempting ice on Bérénice's wrought-iron balcony.

It must have been absolutely adorable to see them bend forward in unison, their little bums pointing towards the empty white sky, then stick out their tongues towards the frozen surface to sample its taste. How funny it must have been to see the terrified and synchronized expressions form on their little faces when they realized they were stuck. Children are capable of such spontaneous acts, it's so charming.

Tristan was the first to attempt to free himself from his ominous position by pulling his head back, thus tearing a microscopic piece of skin from his pink tongue without, however, freeing it. It stung and emitted a slight taste of blood. Bérénice, for her part, whimpered as she tried to translate through incomprehensible gurgling, indeed a sort of vocal hieroglyphics, her numerous emotional symptoms: "Krithtan! Thave me!" Tristan was using all available means to unstick his tongue from the ice, fumbling with his frozen fingers. The result was a little more pain, a little more blood and a terrible confusion in his mind. He cried out a piteous "Bérénithe!" while trying to maintain his

composure, for he was the man of the two and, consequently, the number one go-to person in the case of a crisis. He took his friend's hand, clasped the little mitten concealing fingers that were as frozen as his own and wondered if one day, somebody would notice them and come to their rescue. He imagined the blade of a long serrated knife being inserted into the nonexistent space between the ice and his tongue, condemning him to forever pronounce her name 'Bérénithe,' creating a farce of their wedding day. Kritchtan and Bérénithe, the couple whose tongues had been stricken by a day of frost.

Bérénice began experiencing a terrible fear, that of freezing to death on her back porch after having peed her pants, for she was beginning to feel the need to evacuate the half-litre of milk she'd drunk a quarter of an hour earlier. She also thought she'd never have time to tell Tristan how much she loved him, from the first day they had met, when they were one-and-a-half years old. She remembered it like it was yesterday. Their respective mothers, probably tired of pushing their strollers, stopped to sit on the same bench, thus sparking the moment that would seal the fate of the two cherubs. With emotion, Bérénice remembered a detail (while her tongue began to congeal in the open space between her bluish lips): Tristan was wearing a blue and white sailor shirt, identical to her own. She had understood then that chance didn't exist and she was proud of being so intelligent, for such an elusive notion is not accessible to all (her intelligence would not, however, prevent her from one day sticking her tongue to an icy surface). From the depths of his stroller, Tristan casually eyed the future curves beneath the stripes of his betrothed's shirt, but of course, he couldn't see anything, because there wasn't anything there yet. But deep down, he told himself that these flat stripes hid the most sensitive of

hearts and that was important in life—a life that acquired its full meaning from that point on. For if he were capable of such noble thoughts, he was already a great thinker, which was comforting for the years to come. The mothers chatted without suspecting that under their noses, the most beautiful of Outremont love stories was being born. The little birds in Pratt Park chirped at the top of their lungs, as if to announce the beginning of the romance, the squirrels vaulted gracefully from branch to branch and the ants dug opulent tunnels under the wheels of the new lovebirds' strollers.

Tristan had difficulty accepting that he had been had in such a way. He should have protested when Bérénice turned her attention from the idea of building a super lighthouse in which they could *do everything*, with the goal of showing him how the frost covering all of the surfaces was beautiful. He gave Bérénice too much credit as soon as she opened her mouth, her oh-so-pretty mouth dotted with crumbs from the gigantic apple turnover they'd devoured before going to play outside to burn off the calories they had ingested (according to Bérénice, who envisioned a career for herself as a nutritionist). But Bérénice was always right and even if her theories were dreadfully harebrained, Tristan found pleasure in encouraging his better half to formulate more and more of them.

A faint sound of claws scratching the ground tore Bérénice from her rosy thoughts and drew a small cry from her throat. Tristan tightened his grip on the beloved mitten and strained his eyes to see the cause of Bérénice's agitation. Poppy, the colossal Rottweiler that belonged to the neighbour, Mrs. Weller, a paranoid Jewish woman who had her dog permanently guarding the balcony just above Bérénice's, was coming to investigate the situation. Beneath the appearance of a bloodthirsty brute, Poppy had the heart of a toy

poodle. He hated playing bodyguard to his mistress, but went along with it, growling as soon as a sparrow landed on the clothes line, even though he would have preferred to serve as a landing point for said sparrow just to have a little bit of company. He adored little kids, but couldn't risk showing it, for fear of being sent to the kennel, with no chance of ever returning. He knew the kennel well. He had spent the first four months of his life in a cage next to a vicious Doberman that barked obscenities in his face all day long. Poppy would have so liked it if they'd kept him in the adjacent room, with the cats. Incidentally, he had learned to meow well before he learned how to bark, but he kept this talent to himself. Sometimes, he softly meowed nursery rhymes to himself to fall asleep on nights when the storm growled, for above all, he feared thunder and any sound that overpowered his mistress' snoring.

To thank him for his house-guarding services, even though he felt he didn't provide any, Mrs. Weller always served him the leftovers of her slice of cake or pie. Poppy was absolutely mad about desserts of all kinds. Sugar enticed him more than anything else in the world and he would have chewed the pant legs of every mailman if it had been his mistress' will, so long as he received his grain of sugar in return. Poppy also adored watching TV. He was infatuated with Babe, the little pig that wanted to be a shepherding dog. Just like him, Poppy had greater aspirations, such as becoming a seeing-eye dog, the owner of a pet shop, a security guard for the firm Secur or the vice-president of the SPCA. When his mistress had her back turned, he fiddled with the remote control using his ferocious paws, trying to find the "University" channel on the television set, but alas, in vain.

While Tristan, Bérénice and Poppy shared a sort of common intelligence, with the two children thinking themselves superior at any other time, they now felt tiny before the mastodon that was coming towards them, its mouth open like a bottomless tunnel that was spouting hot steam. Poppy was beside himself with joy to have some company and above all to smell, on Bérénice's face, the aroma of the recently eaten pastry. He made straight for her and set about licking her cheek. Bérénice was frozen, paralyzed with fear and disgusted by the dog's breath (clearly, his teeth hadn't been brushed since he was born). She saw her future spoiled forever by a disfigured face, half-eaten by the wild animal—she, a future Nobel Prize winner, scarred. She adopted the pose of a mummy (she was already the colour of one). Little by little, thanks to the warmth of the saliva, Poppy, busy delighting in the delicious turnover crumbs flavoured with the essence of the little girl's cheeks, melted the ice that was holding Bérénice prisoner of the balcony. She freed herself from the icy vice and fled, leaving Tristan to the giant's teeth. Poppy, thinking it was a game, stayed right on Bérénice's heels while Tristan whispered the name of his beloved in despair at having been abandoned by the one he would have given his life for.

It is known that love stories often end badly. Poppy, the most pacifist of all, was unjustly condemned to euthanasia for having attacked a little girl. For his part, Tristan couldn't forgive Bérénice and refused to see her again, despite her pleas. He fell into a depression from which he would never fully recover. His medication, a cocktail of antidepressants and hallucinogenic drugs, nevertheless had a beneficial effect on his mind and he published an abundant body of work comprising harrowing and evocative poems that won him numerous prizes, including the Bertrand-Laverdure poetry prize. "Ode to

Poppy” was made into a song and the instrumental version, purchased by a German label, earned him international success. It’s not uncommon to hear it being played in elevators and on telephone waiting lines. For her part, Bérénice married a rich Greek shipowner she met in a souvlaki restaurant on Park Avenue where she worked as a waitress, and gave up her studies in animal testing for cosmetic companies. Mrs. Weller got another dog, the miniature hairy mosquito kind, effectively only good for a few bites to the ankle, nothing dramatic. She should have trusted Poppy, but she suspected that his propensity to chew the remote control hid murderous instincts. Poppy, in his own opinion, met the most glorious of destinies. The veterinary assistant in charge of assisting the doctor with the fatal injection was moved when Poppy began licking her hands and meowing—yes, meowing—a sort of serenade to her. The assistant asked for special and unprecedented permission to put Poppy with the small animals. The veterinarian, an ardent defender of animal rights and secretly in love with his assistant, had recently read in *The Veterinary Journal* that suicide was a common trend among his colleagues who were forced to assassinate perfectly healthy animals. Having no intention of killing anyone that morning, since he was feeling lively, he acquiesced to Pamela’s request, such was her oh-so-charming name. Conrad, the sensitive veterinarian, collected two kittens awaiting castration and rested them against Poppy’s stomach. They immediately began looking for potential nipples, having been victims of a grave mistake at their births: they had been weaned too early. Of course, they found only empty teats, but to their surprise, Poppy began licking their noses and meowing little love songs in the range between *re* and *fa*. Before this spectacle of pure animal poetry, Pamela and Conrad fell into each other’s arms in a fit of ecstasy. They kissed their first kiss to the sound of what resembled the

overture from Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* (they weren't wrong—Mrs. Weller was a groupie of all those Russian Romantics) and sealed two destinies: theirs and Poppy's.

From then on, Poppy lived the happiest days of his life, as guard of the Furry Friends Veterinary Clinic. He welcomed visitors, served biscuits to animals and their masters while they waited (he sometimes made a mistake in his choice of biscuit, but nobody ever said anything), took out the garbage and comforted the little ones waiting to be fixed or operated on. Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky were part of the daily program in the waiting room, to the great pleasure of the clients who never tired of listening to this Rottweiler meow, with all its heart, the most beautiful movements from the concertos of these great masters.

MARIE, TO DEATH

It's been four Sundays in a row now that I've plotted to avoid the nine o'clock torture session. Mom is starting to get the hint. Ever since I discovered the perfect anti-mass look, she doesn't even want to drag me there by force anymore, the way she used to when I was younger, four masses ago. I would humiliate her in front of everybody with my gloomy little girl look.

She leaves for church with her hair done up, "lipsticked," wearing perfume and dressed like when she goes to Café du Nord with the goal of replacing dad. She wants to compete with Mrs. Charlebois, who struts around with a freshly killed racoon-skin coat on her back, and with Mrs. Chrétien, who drives to church in a car even though she only lives two blocks away, except she wears high heels, so two blocks is too much. It's the season of big coats, but also high heels. I don't understand anything about them, these church women.

But I *do* know what they do, before and after prayer, lined up between the pews looking like saints you could canonize for their pretty clothes: they spy. I know this because I was spying on them to keep myself from falling asleep. I also know this because when mom comes home, she talks about a lot of things that have nothing to do with Jesus: "Mrs. Chrétien is going to meet her end in her chic little shoes, it's already November. They don't call it the month of the dead for nothing. Doesn't she think when she gets dressed in the morning? You should have seen that Charlebois woman, she didn't even take off her rat-hair coat. She must have been sweating underneath it. She's probably afraid somebody's going to steal it. We never see her husband. He works all the time, while she spends his money. But certainly not on the collection plate, she barely

puts in twenty-five cents. Oh, you should have heard the priest's sermon, I kept nodding off!" Like that for half an hour. By the end, my ears are ringing and I'm up-to-date on all of the parish's bad habits, plus the ones she invents to make herself seem more interesting.

There used to be two of us listening to this. Dad and I. I'd come running home from church, because I couldn't wait to eat—sacramental bread isn't a meal—and dad would already be smoking his pipe, rocking back and forth so as to better reflect on the things of life. Mom would take her time on the way back, so that everybody had time to notice her pretty clothes. I'd already be finished my third piece of toast with Shirriff pineapple marmalade when she'd start with her Sunday gossip. Dad would listen in deep, religious silence, but I swear to God, he wasn't really listening at all; he'd discreetly roll his eyes or look at mom to see if there weren't horns growing out of her chignon. He was ashamed like me, that's for sure. Because even if mom had just spent an hour with Jesus, she never talked about him. One fine day—or one horrible day, if you ask me—dad went out to smoke his pipe somewhere else, the devil knows where. And I was left alone to put up with mom's gossiping, rocking back and forth with my piece of bread.

"Mr. Laramée didn't take communion, as usual. He must have some sort of sin on his conscience. His wife went to confession. Their drapes are always closed, I wonder what goes on in that house." I know: nothing. Marie told me. Her dad has a mistress, like we do at school, but not the same kind. He sees her every Saturday night at Café du Nord, so I'm not sure why mom pretends to wonder, since she's there on Saturday nights, too. Marie and I laugh, and say she gives him private tutoring.

Marie is my special friend and a growing religious delinquent like me. As soon as her parents leave the house, she calls me and whispers: “The coast is clear.” Her voice flows through my ear like warm honey, melting away the filth and everything else that hinders my emotional behaviour. I wait for my mother to leave the house, smelling of perfume that lingers behind her. It leaves a trail I have to follow if I want to get to the door and make my exit. The smell is so strong that I hold my breath until I get outside. I wonder how Mr. Whatshisname stands it. Then I rush over to Marie’s, hoping the fresh air will rid me of my mother’s odour and I cross the street without looking both ways, it’s so dead. On Saturday nights, everybody eats chips and drinks beer while they watch the hockey game on TV; I can tell because the lights coming from the windows are red and white, sometimes with a bit of blue. It depends on what teams are playing.

Marie and I have found a new ritual, one that’s much more exciting and real than mass: we play my mommy and her daddy. I paint my lips with lipstick that I stole from mom and I go on and on saying lots of nasty things about people on our street, while Marie touches me. Her hands are always cold, so sometimes she wears her dad’s big suede gloves. They tickle me and send shivers all the way up my spine. Sometimes, she pretends to strangle me with the gloves. She squeezes just hard enough, so that I have a brief delicious blackout, and I tell myself if death is like that, great, but only if Marie comes with me. Otherwise, I let her run her small, bony fingers under my shirt. They feel my ribs and tickle my belly button. I murmur in a sophisticated voice: “Mr. Laramée, Mr. Laramée, just think what will happen if we get caught!” I try to say this without laughing, but Marie bursts out giggling every time. “Mr. Laramée, control yourself!” We play like that for an hour or two, then we kill ourselves laughing and fall down onto her little bed,

and we lie there, our eyes open wide, without saying anything else because really, we've said it all. Marie turns to me and asks if what we do is wrong. It's always the same. She even manages to transfer her guilt onto me. I wipe my lipstick off with my thumb, take her hand and say: "If they can do it without being afraid of going to Hell, then why can't we?" Then all over again, we can't wait for the next time.

Mom has figured out that I've been stealing her lipstick, because the angle of the tip was worn down on the other side and had become flat. I'm left-handed, I should've painted my lips using my wrong hand. It's been forever since I went to the interrogation room and now I'm good for ten rosaries because I told lies. I don't want her to know that Marie is like my lover. I'd rather die. It's my secret. She might think we play dirty games, like her and Mr. Laramée, but that's not the case; we give each other pure affection, like the girls in "Heavenly Creatures." Of course, it's not like I plan to kill my mother or anything like that—this is reality, in three dimensions. We just want to be together for the rest of our life. I want to marry her and adopt a little Chinese girl. I'll go to work while she teaches our daughter how to speak French and lets her feet grow to their full length and we'll be a real family of real girls. Marie says it's impossible to have a family without a man, but I have good news for her: an article in the newspaper says the opposite. Now people of the same sex can get married and not get shot for it; they even get their picture on page 14. Real love can happen without lipstick. Mom can hide hers if she's so worried I might want to make myself as pretty as she is, even if it's not to please a man. Marie loves me without makeup, with my real face. At the very least, when I have a salary, I'll buy myself one (a lipstick). I love it when my mouth leaves kisses on

Marie's stomach. I love the taste of her skin when I lick them afterwards. I'd die for that taste.

Our affection has become huge like a planet and bright like a star. I sleep at her house all the time or she sleeps at mine, we share clothes, I practically eat off her plate. It doesn't bother our parents, because we actually do our homework and now we go to mass on Sunday. We like to tickle each other's palms during the Gospel reading. Afterwards, we're free to do whatever we want, like go to the movies with the money we get from Mr. Laramée or buy ice cream with the money we get from mom, or both, when we've been good beggars. It was during a movie so boring I could die that I kissed Marie on the lips. They were sweet and smooth. They reminded me so much of the skin of a nectarine that I wanted to nibble on them with my teeth and kill myself to die of ecstasy on the spot. Everything about her is soft and clean, she smells like a newborn baby. Ever since that first kiss, I've wanted to touch her everywhere, like they do in the movies (boys and girls, I mean). She protests a little when I try to play with her nipples, but she coos and lets me do it. She likes it, she's just a little shy. I guide her hand so that she does the same thing to me and I get electric shocks all the way to the tips of my toes. I'm having trouble understanding what's happening to me and Marie isn't helping. It's like she's not there anymore. It didn't happen overnight. Otherwise, I would have noticed and killed myself on the spot, in front of her. I would've hanged myself with my skipping rope. It's that boy's fault, the one who started at our school last week and follows her around as if she were the only girl in our class. Little by little, she's been finding excuses not to sleep over at my house and she doesn't want to play doctor anymore, she says she's too old for that

now. I feel rejected. I don't like the lump it makes in my chest, it's like I ate indigestible foods that have rotted in there.

Mom is worried because I'm losing my appetite and since I'm not fat, I get skinny really quickly. You can see it in my knees, they look like bones. She's started forcing me to go to mass with her again. She says it will do me good to confess, but I have nothing to confess. It's Marie who should repent; she spends all her time with Gregory and I've become the chaperone, a role that doesn't suit me at all. Sit beside those two like a school supervisor while they canoodle on the bench, my heart wanting to burst and leap out of my chest, spraying them with my blood, drowning them in it, no thank you. It still wouldn't be enough.

Last week, in the U.S., a boy machine-gunned a dozen of his school friends. Well, "friends" is a generous word in this case. I suppose there must have been some animosity between them for things to get to that point. Since then, each shooting has been worse than the last, in colleges, schools, universities, it's an epidemic. Luckily I'm a girl, otherwise I might do the same thing. I become more and more enraged, and my rage made me vomit my mother's shepherd's pie. True, it wasn't very good, as usual.

So, it's official: Marie is going out with Gregory now. The class president announced it while we were eating our macaroni and cheese in the cafeteria. "They're so beautiful together, like Romeo and Juliet!" I wanted to throw my plate at her head. Romeo and Juliet—she doesn't know what she's talking about, she should reread her classics. I'm Romeo, I'm Juliet, I'm two sufferers in one.

Tonight, I cried out what was left of the liquid inside me. Now that my heart and everything surrounding it are dry, I have the cold blood that's needed to compose my

missives, by hand though, not on the computer. I'm writing by hand because somebody could read my emails before I'm dead and the heavy artillery would show up to save me. Then I'd be back at square one. I write to mom, among others, to tell her that I wish her happiness with Mr. Laramée, but that she has to think of Mrs. Laramée, too, because we can't just come stomping in with big boots and break up a relationship, the way Gregory did. It causes too much pain and then you just want to end it. I explain how I'm going to do it, so she knows I didn't suffer much. A man on the Internet describes the method and it seems really good. I'll need some sleeping pills; mom has tons of them, they're these little blue pills she took when dad left and they're about to expire. All I'll have to do is take more of them, to make sure they have an effect. And when I start to feel sleepy, I put a plastic bag over my head and seal it tightly around my neck with adhesive tape, the thick kind you use to seal boxes. I'm going to go to sleep peacefully, I won't feel the lack of air. It will be much less painful than letting myself die slowly, helping with the fake preparations for Marie and Gregory's wedding, with me as the maid of honour, or escorting them while they hold hands and walk home from school. I don't begrudge Marie, I love her too much. And one day, Gregory will realize that she's not for him and all he'll have to do is to put a bag over his head, too. I'm going to leave him a note with the instructions. I'm sure he's going to need them, poor boy.

MONA'S RETREAT

Doctor Phil, Reader's Digest, Anything

I'd become a fan of Doctor Phil, I confess (but only under torture). In the evening, I loved curling up into a ball with Snuggles in front of the TV from five until six o'clock for my favourite show. Snuggles didn't judge me, whether I was watching a science show or some piece of crap. We purred and watched the good doctor reprimand, with his legendary elegance, people who seemed to be even more emotionally lame than me.

I often wondered what enticed these people to exhibit their relationship problems in front of an audience. Sure, some people found it exciting to watch them speak candidly about their sufferings on live TV. Sordid voyeurism, the desire to identify with these people or to reassure themselves? How could I blame them? I was the same. I admired Dr. Phil, for his tact, for his ability to make his patients face their unfortunate realities without ever humiliating them and help them come up with solutions other than murder or suicide.

My sudden interest in Dr. Phil's show didn't occur by chance; ever since the event that happened three months earlier, I'd felt incapable of regaining control of my life. The daily company of these strangers consoled me. I came to envy these people who shamelessly poured their hearts out, who weren't afraid to burst into tears or express their pain. My own eyes remained dry. A storm was welling up inside of me, pernicious, poisoning my life as though contaminated water had replaced my blood. My heart was wounded and I didn't have faith that time would heal it.

Yes, I wound up developing a sort of crush on Doctor Phil. His well-groomed moustache reassured me. It seemed to sweep away worries as soon as words passed beneath it. But truth be told, it was the humiliating reading of a popular book, written by a guy who's seemingly more enlightened than me, that pulled me out of my lethargy. Ok, reading psycho-pop is no more degrading than watching an episode of Doctor Phil, all the more so because reading a book at least requires an effort, just to turn the pages. He says, this opportunist who profits from the misery of his fellow man, that human beings live in continual dissatisfaction. We have everything we need to be happy, materially speaking, and yet we're not. Forced to do battle *ad nauseam* in a great spiritual void that we attempt to fill through the consumption of goods, we constantly find ourselves facing existential solitude, blah blah blah. The type of thing you read and smack your forehead after each paragraph, saying: "Yes! That's exactly it, I already knew that! How is it that he's making money with these über-simple ideas and not me, who probably thought of them long before he did?" And you close the book, persevering in the same destructive manner, with the newly acquired unpleasant feeling of knowing as much as the author who nicked your ideas and who certainly lives in an aura of daily positivism, with nothing to do but wait blissfully to be paid his royalties, seated on a white leather sofa next to an inspiring, drooling and inevitably obese Labrador. I'm infuriated by the thought of these businessmen disguised as writers who turn out "how-to" books for better living. If there's one person who would know how to do that without hitting a false note, it's me, simply by doing the reverse: i.e., by drawing inspiration from the opposite of what I do every day.

I've long believed, or liked to believe, that the lives of others were easier and more exciting than mine; that my neighbours required fewer acrobatic moves to get their bodies out of bed in the morning. Never happy with myself, with others, with anything, my cat was the only one who had my total consent. I envied his existence devoid of remorse. He had nobody to answer to, nothing to do other than to be cute. Easy, when you're born cute. I wanted to be him (minus the fur), to feel nothing of the weight of my existence.

Since the event, I'd been alternating between episodes of Doctor Phil and my "deep" readings in an attempt to avoid the unshakeable evidence. Such evidence conceals too much simplicity for a complicated mind. I finally surrendered: it was the contents of my thoughts that weighed a hundred times too much, not my whole destiny. I wasn't the only person in the world bad things had happened to. We all experience deaths, great or small, day after day. It's just that for every one of them, I tortured myself twice as much as necessary. I clung to them as though the sting of suffering were more appealing than the strength needed to pull myself out of it. If a Canadian version of Doctor Phil existed, I might have put my name at the bottom of the waiting list.

I was catapulted into this abyss I'd been avoiding when a domestic dispute exploded the idyllic bubble I'd been constructing around my neighbours' uneventful lives. The man, a stunning specimen of the BMW race who drove his noble self to church every Sunday morning, blew the head off his wife, a forty-year old aesthetician, refurbished from head to toe, whose specialty was plumping old skin. A miniscule hole in her "botoxed" forehead spattered all over the beautiful carpet, walls and the guy's clean shirt, which his now-perforated wife had just ironed, for nothing. He appeared on the

balcony, stunned, the smoking gun still in his hand. He howled at the top of his lungs: “I can’t take it! Does anyone hear me? I can’t take it!” Then he put the muzzle to his own forehead and bang! I didn’t see any of this, of course. I was busy writhing in every possible way, trying to drag myself out of bed, just as I had done every morning for three months. Under my pillow was my book full of noble ideas on how to get better, as I was hoping to absorb the benefits of these writings during my sleep. I suddenly heard the guy yelling and I remember thinking: “Me neither! I can’t take it, I have to end it.” Then the detonation followed.

No, it wasn’t by chance. Something inside me switched off in that moment. A gunshot, on your mark, get set, go! What could be better? No more flames, nor inspiration for a while now, in this bubble of mine. Proof that things weren’t working at all *at all?*

- From one day to the next, all of my shoes became uncomfortable;

- Regardless of the position and whether or not I use my textured, ultra-vibrating vibrator, I couldn’t orgasm anymore. The scenarios I invented to stimulate myself made me feel so guilty that I finally just gave up;

- Snuggles persisted in trying to stretch out on my stomach and I shooed him to the foot of my bed. The poor thing kept wanting to touch at least my belly button with his paw. Cats know when you’re in a bad way. In fact, he knew it long before I did.

No chance of resurrection when I was rotting away, cloistered in my room, trapped under my poor Snuggles. Every morning, stuck in my bed, I’d prick up my ears and listen for Nathalie to leave. Nathalie’s my friend and roommate, a fresh HEC graduate who works at a company teeming with other HEC grads and who reads

Reader's Digest to de-stress. Then I'd get up and move from one room to another, inspecting the walls, the plinths, the door frames, as though redemption were nestled away underneath and all I needed to do was drive it out. I had to move, I couldn't go on like this indefinitely, waiting for a call from Steve, especially because the break from my salary was starting to cost me a lot of money and wasn't bearing any fruit. Into a travel bag that had never travelled, I tossed some clothes and reading material that would require neither concentration nor intelligence to read. I wrote a short note to Nathalie telling her where I was going, asking her not to divulge my destination to anybody and to take care of Snuggles for a few days. I'd call her to get my messages. I told her not to worry, I was fine, I just needed some rest. I erased these last words. She knew perfectly well that all I'd been doing since the event was resting, without success, my mental state shattered for the reason she knew left me no chance to actually do so. I added that I would come back as good as new and that I'd definitely go back to work and if he called...

Without slowing down to weigh the soundness of my decision, believing I was ready to come out of my inertia, I threw myself into the seat of my car and headed for autoroute 10, the road that would liberate my soul (or so I hoped). The Merciful Sisters House of Prayer, located in the heart of nature, far from the urban shambles and possibly far from my internal chaos, called to me, and even though I hadn't taken the time to check if there were any rooms available, I had a feeling there would be a place for me there, since I'd found none in myself.

The week before, while waiting my turn to have an impacted wisdom tooth removed—a tooth that posed a tragic threat to the straightness of other properly aligned

teeth, according to my expert-dentist-three-floor-chalet-in-the-Laurentians-three-cars-three-mistresses—I mindlessly opened a *woman's magazine* that was lying on the table, the kind that's supposed to meet all of your *lady* needs. I had to calm this feeling of anxiety gripping my heart at the thought that in a few moments, a gaping hole in my mouth was going to add to the great void of my existence. I tenderly caressed my soon-to-be defunct tooth with my tongue, which must have given me a hell of a face. Nobody goes *la-dee-da* at dental butchery. I wondered how much such a big tooth could be worth, under my pillow and on my Visa statement. In the magazine, between an article about those horrible wrinkles that add ten years to your appearance and a 15-page article about that horrible hair that prevents you from wearing tiny bikinis displayed on horrible mannequins without wrinkles and without hair, was an article about the benefits of seclusion for people who no longer knew what to do about their wrinkles or their hair. It described several locations, including this one: a house of silence located at the foot of Mount St. H, on the edge of a forest.

This came to mind as I mechanically slid the tip of my tongue over the clean, smooth space created by the ablation. I'd have to go to ground for a time, take time to rekindle my spirit and regain the ability to get myself up every morning without thinking that it's easier for my neighbour. I'd had enough of living my life without taking any interest in it. I put the pedal to the floor and numbed my ear drums listening to the guy from Coldplay sing "*We live in a beautiful world*" in a nasal voice. I'd sing that, too, if I were a rich, talented, good-looking, charismatic person who didn't need a cloister to put my mind right again; but come to think of it, if I had to look at Gwyneth Paltrow and her

pale fish face every day, I'd eventually contemplate reclusion. Ok, ok, some couples just make me crazy. With jealousy, mind you.

When Thinking About the Movie 'Babe' is Completely Inappropriate

It was a pretty house of prayer. A huge, red-brick building with white-washed walls, standing two stories high and flanking the sides of Mount St. H. A sign read: "Please respect the silence of this house." I finished listening to a song by House of Love: "*Somebody's got to love you, somebody's got to care.*" *Somebody*, anybody. Who? Me? I waited for the last note before turning it off, preparing myself to cross the threshold separating sound from silence.

Since I hadn't made a reservation, I left my luggage in the trunk, even though there weren't any cars parked in the space reserved for visitors. A deafening calm prevailed in this place, interrupted every two minutes by the sound of a faraway chainsaw, the kind that's always operating wherever there's a patch of forest to be decimated. I rang the bell and folded my hands on my stomach. It was supposed to be the appropriate pose, the one that would earn me preferential treatment. Long, indeterminable minutes passed before I could see movement inside, which, upon examining my reflection in the window, gave me time to realize that my "burgeoning saint" look was completely absurd. I unclasped my hands and buried them in my pockets. I was worried I'd interrupted mass, a meal or a siesta. After what seemed to be an eternity, a sister finally appeared. If time had already skidded to a halt on the doorstep, what would it be like within the walls? I felt like I was on the verge of entering a time-space from which I

wouldn't emerge unscathed. I thought about fleeing, of lifting up my skirt so that I could run faster, like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music* when she prances about in the flowery meadows singing her *joie de vivre*. But it was a stupid idea, like the ones I often have. I was wearing pants and I had no desire to sing. The small round and pink nose of a nun appeared in the door window and I thought of Babe, the little pig who longed to be a sheep herder. I often think of incongruous things when I'm nervous.

. . .

-Hello, sister. I know you weren't expecting me, I left home in a hurry without taking the time to make a reservation, but you wouldn't happen to have a small room available, for a few days, I don't know how many, just enough time to repair my soul, maybe a decade or two.

I said this, instantly regretting my long-winded speech, which seemed way too colourful and in stark contrast to the sister's plain black robe. Steve often told me that I talk too much, that I should say things in my head before speaking. He dreamily talked to me about gags, muzzles, pinchers.

- In this sanctified place, my child, the soul benefits from special treatment. A decade generally suffices, heehee. Come in, come in! You're in luck, there aren't as many people here during the middle of the week. For now, you'll be the only resident. I hope you don't get frightened? Don't worry, there's only one ghost in our monastery, the ghost of St. Cecilia. She likes banging doors, heehee. Otherwise, we don't even notice her. Do you prefer shade or light?

I looked at her without knowing how to answer. In terms of rambling, she'd outdone me. With her earnest eyes under her veil, she now reminded me of an owl with a

veil, not a little piglet. What did she mean by shade or light? Was it some sort of poetic metaphor, a philosophical question? I opted for light, it seemed to be the better choice.

-Very good, I'll give you Saint Suzanne's room, East wing, very sunny, you'll leave us with a Cuban tan, heehee. If you don't know Saint Suzanne's very special story, you'll find it on the page that's bookmarked in the Bible in your desk drawer and I encourage you to consult it. A little Bible a day keeps the doctor away, heehee.

I suddenly had the urge to turn heel. Sister Owl punctuating the ends of her sentences with "heehee" was fine, but urging me to read the Bible...I didn't need that kind of pressure right now. I'd filled my bag with the latest issues of Nathalie's soporific *Reader's Digest*, so as to rest my neurons during my stay. I didn't want to think anything about anything. "Laugh a little." "Enrich your vocabulary." "I am George's knee." Nothing more. Was she going to test me every day on my progress with the Epistles? I didn't even know a Saint Suzanne existed. None of the Suzannes I knew possessed anything resembling beatitude; on the contrary, they were hypochondriacs, for the most part. Under her robe, Sister Owl shuffled her feet quickly and I couldn't see them for a while. You'd think she was on roller skates, the way she moved.

- As I said, the sun shines for a good part of the afternoon in this room, but you have a small fan if it gets too hot.

- That's fine, Sister, it's not a problem. I'm used to the throes of Hell.

- You need rest, from what I can see. Irony masks great mental fatigue. You will be well served here with us. There is ab-so-lute-ly nothing to do here, apart from attending services, worshipping Mary, sleeping, eating and above all, praying. If you'd like to stretch your legs, there's a little path, the Path of Silence, that circles the house. As

I'm sure you've noticed, we abstain from speaking as much as possible. If you must open your mouth to ask something, please whisper. Meals are also taken in silence, but as there's nobody besides yourself in the refectory, apart from the sisters, the problem is somewhat non-existent, though people may show up at any time. In general, they wait to be at the end of their ropes for that, heehee. They come to find silence, because they can't handle the noise, inside or outside, but they have trouble keeping quiet and dealing with the ambient silence. So they chew loudly to make a little noise, which we can tolerate, heehee.

The sister's hushed voice buzzed in my head, like a faint swarm of seemingly harmless bees. I had the feeling it was never going to stop; that once I was in my room, it was going to be transmitted to me again through a small overhead speaker hidden in an undetectable nook. I kept my eyes glued to hers while maintaining a kind, interested look, even though I only caught every other word. I hoped they were the right words, the ones instructing me how to avoid committing some sort of faux-pas during my stay. My concentration was weakening, I had to keep myself from yawning. I'd slept terribly the night before and all I wanted to do was lie down for a minute.

- We recommend that you attend the services, they're good for healing the soul. If you need to speak, all you have to do is ask. A qualified nun—me—is here to listen to you and guide you. You'll find the schedule for meals, snack-times and services on a sheet on the back of your bedroom door. There's a communal bathroom with a shower right next to your room and there's a reading room on the mezzanine.

She graced me with a few more "heehees," covering her mouth like a shy little girl who had just done something brazen. She never seemed to want to stop talking, it

was as if I were the first person she'd spoken to since she was born and she was making up for lost time.

- Thank you, that will be fine. I just need to clear my head. I'm having a bit of trouble waking up in the morning.

- Yes, I see, that's quite common. When you're settled in, come down to my office and we'll fill out your arrival form. Here are your keys. Try not to bang the doors, Cecilia does that enough as it is, heehee.

- Thank you, Sister. I'll respect the quiet of the house, don't worry.

With a dubious look, she gave me a curious smile, nodded her head and left in a rustle of heavy cloth. Her religious robes looked like a potential hiding place for all sorts of things, like secret provisions of dry little cookies, for example.

. . .

The room, which was the size of a closet in a suburban house (which is to say as big as my bedroom in the city), offered a reasonable amount of comfort. There was an immaculate sink with a vanity, giving you the chance to assess your face and fix it up before confronting the world for lunch. To my great pleasure, there was a rocking chair near the window, the essential item for long hours spent in idle solitude. Rocking makes you feel like you're doing something—covering miles and miles on a waxed linoleum floor without using your legs, for example—even if you're doing nothing. I've wasted many indolent hours rocking myself. When I think of all the things I could have done at the same time: embroider something, have phone sex, read an encyclopaedia, create a knitted masterpiece, write a mini-series for TV, anything. To me, rocking chairs are irresistible. As soon as I enter a new place, I look for one, find one, then forget it; I stay

glued to it as long as they don't throw me out. I always dreamed of having a rocking bed. The twin bed in Saint Suzanne's room was covered in a pink, white and green woven blanket, like candy, a call to sleep and sweet dreams. I tested the mattress. It was as rigid as a plank. When I lay down on it, I felt like I was lounging on a tombstone. Apparently, they didn't want you sleeping in. I looked at the schedule for the first mass. I read that correctly: seven-fifteen. I was going to be woken up by singing, but no need to get worked up over it, ear plugs would do the trick. It wasn't as if Sister Owl was going to come knock on my door and force me to attend. Now Steve, he loved being woken up by hysterical radio hosts (the reason being, he had to wake up at five o'clock in the morning and act as if there was nothing to it...). He would turn the volume up to maximum to make sure he didn't sleep through it. I never understood this habit. It's unhealthy, I'm sure of it. How can you start your day off on the right foot when somebody's shouting bad news in your ear from the second you open your eyes? It's definitely harmful, it gives the day a negative vibe right from the start. My alarm clock is this thing that rings like in the old days, I always think it's the telephone.

Breakfast at eight o'clock. I hoped there wouldn't be any gruel on the menu. Forty-four whole grains of grey gruel, blech! I despise this mixture they serve to inmates in prison movies. In one of them, a guy found a worm in his bowl of soup. It's the sort of thing that scars a viewer's psyche forever. Lunch at twelve-thirty, supper at six, snack at four, perfect. I wouldn't die of hunger, as long as the *modus vivendi* of the retreats didn't consist of not weighing down the stomach, as a way of keeping the mind light and open to prayer, the *ultimate* nourishment. On the schedule, I crossed out the hymns, prime, mass and terce, sext, none, vespers, compline and vigils, so that only the meals remained.

Even though spiritual nourishment would have been better suited to filling the void in my soul, I wanted to know nothing of it. Sleep, eat, rock, fold myself into hems of oblivion...that's what I wanted. I doubted that the Divine Office was just an orthographic disguise that hid something else and I didn't see how I'd be able to participate in whatever celebration it might be without falling asleep. I hadn't gone to mass in ages and I'll never forget the last time I went—the priest fell victim to a heart attack during his sermon. His heart had died of boredom, no doubt.

Eat in Silence, There's Nothing To It!

I went to fill out my registration form with Sister Owl. She conducted her business like a medical investigator, going so far as to question me about any possible psychological troubles. I refrained from telling her that I was afraid of developing some during my stay. Everything was so calm, so quiet, I could hear the walls breathing, emanations from past residents who died of dullness and weariness during their retreats and were buried between the cement walls. I noticed, through a half-open door, that the sisters had a TV room. I was jealous. I wondered what sort of shows really interested them, apart from those on Sunday mornings. I shuddered at the thought of these nuns, clad from head to toe, stumbling upon a clip of Christina Aguilera or Britney Spears, or worse, some rap video where women are represented as sexual playthings whose clothes can't seem to stay on, whose sole mission is to make themselves available should an erection occur, and not to pose for the Pope. Sister Hee-Hee asked if I thought I would attend the services. This seemed to be her greatest concern. She must have smelled the

scent of scandal on me, the scent of atheism, the morbid odour of somebody who would use this holy place for wallowing in inertia at a minimal expense and not for thanking God for his good deeds. I reassured her: I didn't say no to a good mass every now and then. She breathed a happy sigh and in so doing, her little red nose twitched. She reiterated that she would be there if ever I felt the need to confide in her. She emphasized the word 'confide,' as though she sensed that I needed to rid myself of some secret burden, the kind all the residents arrived with, their chins dragging on the floor. No, no, I was doing very well, thank you. I was here just to...just to...to get even better, that's all.

Between the interview and lunch, I went to stretch out on my little sarcophagus and quickly fell into a deep coma. I slept like a rock, not a very long sleep, but an effective one, interspersed with outlandish dreams that had religious and psychoanalytical connotations, dreams that would have confounded Dr. Phil's audience.

1. I'm in the chapel and Sister Hee-Hee is watching me while I stuff my face with Vachon's Ah-Caramel! cakes, wearing nothing but frilly underwear from La Senza. A dozen residents in briefs, exclusively male, are singing the melody for Lancia noodles (a catchy old jingle that played on the radio in the sixties and left its mark on the collective musical subconscious) and sexual psalms I couldn't catch a word of because they sounded like Gregorian chants.

2. Steve comes to join me at the monastery. He knocks on my bedroom door and tells me he's come to spend a few days with me before he dies. He's wearing his *I'm Allergic to Negative People* t-shirt that I bought him during a period of acute positivism. I invite him in and he lies down on my bed, his hands in prayer and his eyes closed. He's as white as the pillowcase.

3. I'm consulting with Sister Owl and I tell her I want to enter the Order. She says first, I have to agree to change my way of dressing and she has me watch a rap video for educational purposes, pointing out a girl who's barely clothed. This was to be the inspiration for my religious life.

The bell sounding the lunch hour rang out. I heard footsteps in the hallway and rushed out to see that a new visitor had arrived while I was sleeping. I didn't like her much, mainly because she had the perfect monastic look: a long dark skirt and a matching top. Did I want to monopolize the place or something? Become the sisters' pet and offer everyone little sugar cookies between meals? Steve sometimes told me I was nothing but a dirty little egoist, but he always made sure to hug me after his insult so as to help me swallow the pill. Throughout my entire adolescence, my mother told me again and again that we, women, had to learn egoism from men, just as they would benefit from emulating our ability to care for others and be attentive to the needs of others in order to re-balance the male and female poles in each. It seemed to me that I had 100% succeeded in my mission, if I believed Steve, and that he too had restored his yin and yang. I was an egoist and he knew how to take care of me, keeping me in check at all times so that I didn't sway too far towards one pole. He was my little guardian angel for morality and earthly qualities.

The bell sounded again, jolting me from my thoughts. I hurried to get out of my wrinkled clothes and put on a sundress, a long, pretty, floral dress that was soft and airy. I hurtled down the stairs, but on the tips of my toes, which were clad in my red Birkenstocks, then entered the dining room in a more solemn manner. Four nuns, including Sister Hee-Hee, who waved at me, and a nun who was rather young and

pretty—that's what intrigued me—were sitting in the four corners of the room, eating conscientiously. As I examined the dishes on the counter, the young nun studied me with big fawn eyes and scrutinized my dress as if she were trying to count the number of flowers on the fabric. The woman I'd seen in the hallway was serving herself soup with a trembling hand, while crumpling a used Kleenex with the other. I was so worried she was going to drop her bowl that I didn't let her out of my sight as I waited my turn to serve myself. Her gloomy face caught my eye, maybe because I'd worn a similar expression for weeks, but I was so tired that I decided to focus on my own affairs. Steve always told me I was too distracted, too diverted by the outside world and my incessant spying exposed my lack of internalization. I disagree with that. It's a completely exaggerated observation coming from somebody with an incurious mind. I like watching people and imagining their lives, I don't see how it could bother anybody.

Regardless, I studied the girl while she served herself to see how she proceeded and see what was appropriate to take without passing for a pig. She looked the part and must have been in the habit of taking this type of retreat. When it was my turn, I served myself some soup, a clear broth in which swam a few noodles (Lancia?) and little cubes of coloured vegetables. A sort of solid beef ragout completed the meal. Everything smelled divine, or maybe I was just starving, having eaten nothing before I left. I decided to flout potential conventions. I filled my plate to the brim and helped myself to a slice of lemon meringue pie, to which I added a spoonful of vanilla yoghurt and a chocolate cookie. I wasn't going to die of hunger during my stay, which was comforting. I like eating, I'm not one of those people who's going to torture themselves with a self-imposed diet to lose a few kilos. I prefer to exercise, it's more dignified.

I took a seat near the big window where you could contemplate the trees and I attacked my meal with Albinoni's oppressive *Adagio* echoing in the background. I would have preferred total silence, to see if anybody was making any noise while they ate. It was the first time in my life I'd eaten a meal without having the possibility of speaking, in the company of people I didn't know, no less. The obligation created a mixed emotion of unease and questioning. I felt strangely gauche, as if, accentuated by the silence, each of my movements, now exposed, counted in the balance. This simple rule compelling you to focus on one thing only—eating, and nothing else—subtly imposed humility and forced you to pay attention. Nobody stared at anybody, apart from the young sister whose gaze crossed mine when I dared to lift my plate. She smiled at me and I returned her polite gesture. A smile never made a sound.

The soup tasted like little more than water and I doused it liberally with salt and pepper. I sympathized with Steve, who couldn't touch anything I cooked him without bombarding my tasteless dishes with various spices, calling me a cafeteria cook. As for the ragout, it was unsurpassed. It tasted exactly like the Cordon Bleu ragout we would've paired with various vegetables, which isn't an insult coming from me, since I've always loved that mixture. It's horrible, if you ask epicureans, but delicious in my opinion, as I'm an expert in plain yet stodgy food. The lemon pie melted on my tongue, but I'd enhanced it by adding some yoghurt and a cookie. I noticed that the model resident was fastidiously mopping the bottom of her plate with a piece of bread, you'd think this was how they cleaned the dishes here. So I forced myself to leave nothing, then felt ashamed for having been so gluttonous. The cookie was a little stale and I swallowed it, cursing my fondness for food. I took my dishes to the counter, separating the utensils from the

plates and the other dishes without clanging them together so as to avoid noise and, after waving to a sister who I didn't know and who was looking at my dress with a smile that was polite and slightly pinched, I climbed the staircase with difficulty. The number of steps had surely doubled in the last half-hour. I entered my room panting, my stomach so full I was having trouble breathing freely. I slumped into the rocking chair I'd turned towards the window to see what was going on outside—nothing—and skated on the waxed floor for a good hour, reading “How a Saint-Bernard Saved Me From the Storm” and all of the jokes at the bottom of the pages in an issue of *Reader's Digest* before deciding to go out and get some air, as a way of aiding my temperamental digestion. I belched and tasted my food again, which led me to believe everything had mixed badly in my stomach.

Six Feet Under Lies

Keeping quiet is not a problem for me. I work in technical services at a library where I catalogue official documents all day long. It's the most boring job in the world and as if that weren't enough, all of the employees wear ghoulish expressions and don't say a word from morning 'til night. I was comfortable with the idea of not losing myself in conversations for a few days. Steve liked conceiving erroneous ideas about me: I wasn't going to die of linguistic inactivity if I went more than ten minutes without speaking! This wasn't the case for everybody. I came across the other resident on a turn in the path while I was trying to clear my mind, a clearly exaggerated undertaking in my case. Not to speak too loudly is one thing, but not to speak even quietly, phh! She was

sitting on a stump, snivelling and wiping her nose with a crumpled Kleenex. I'd seen her from afar and thought about veering off to respect her meditation, but where could I go? There was no visible fork in the path. It snaked around a little wooded area, circling the house of prayer in a circular manner, allowing you only to go in a single direction. After all, I told myself, we were on a free path and we were free to pace it as we pleased, crying or otherwise. She lifted her head when she noticed me and let out a big sniffle as she dabbed her puffy eyes. "Would you mind if I walked with you a little?" I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to disrupt my silence, but I told myself I'd have to prove to her that I was affable and agree to let her join me. We very well could have walked side by side without uttering a word, the same way we ate together, contenting ourselves to simply chew and swallow. I had no doubt I was going to be the recipient of an outpouring of personal revelations and from the first word, I opted to listen without intervening. I walked, looking down at my feet with their unkempt toe nails, getting excited about possibly giving them a pedicure to occupy my evening and I let her empty out her poor heart.

- He's dead! He's dead! Waaaaaahhhh!

- ?

-My fiancé! He was crushed to death by the machine he was repairing. We couldn't even have an open casket, he was too dismembered. My handsome future husband, dis-mem-ber-ed, waaaah! We were supposed to get married the next month. The dress was bought, you should've seen it, it was marvellous, white, all white. I told myself: it's way too white, I always spill on myself when I wear white and I'm going to be so nervous...the arrangements had been made, everybody had bought their presents. I

got up the courage to open a few before coming here, because some people sent them to me anyway, can you imagine? I had them for two months. They were looking at me from the top of the dresser, with their colourful papers and bows. They said: “Open us, open us, face reality. He’s dead, he’s d-e-a-d- dead! You’re never going to see him again!” What am I going to do with a new set of dishes for six now that I’m alone? Wah-ah-ah-ah. He was so nice, the cream of the crop—the most punctual, diligent, pleasant, distinguished, cultured man, even if he was just a simple labourer. He bought the first three seasons of *Six Feet Under* and we watched two episodes every Saturday night. I could never finish it now, there are too many memories! And then last week, Ruth, a friend of mine, said: “Claire, you’ve got to stop going in circles. Go have a rest with the sisters, you know how it does you good and the silence will help heal your wounds.” But I could never, the silence is going to drive me crazy, I can’t stop thinking about him, I think about him all the time!

. . .

Her story about the crushed fiancé perplexed me. I’d seen all of the episodes of *Six Feet Under*. We’d literally inhaled them, Steve and I, eating Fritos and drinking cream soda—a tradition contrary to our nutritional principles, but one we adopted for the circumstances, since we usually made a point of never eating such junk. I remembered the episode well: a man dies at the beginning, chopped into pieces by the machine his young employee accidentally starts. He’s so dismembered that it’s impossible to display the body, despite all of the thanatologist’s know-how. I let myself ramble on internally, remembering all of those delicious moments when Steve and I were super-glued to the sofa, covered in Fritos crumbs, mesmerized by the action and fixated on the characters’

lips so as not to miss a word. During the time when we watched the first season of the series, we felt like we were part of the Fisher family. We became engrossed in the private lives of Claire, Ruth, Nathaniel and David. We talked about them when we woke up, when we went to bed, after an episode, calling the characters by their first names as if they were friends of ours. I was completely obsessed. I dreamed about it, I couldn't tear myself away from it and in the end, when we finished the first season, we felt a flood of relief. Then we sank our teeth into *24*, but that's another story.

The woman started crying again and I looked around to make sure we were alone, because she spoke louder than a drill sergeant. This proved to be unnecessary, since there wasn't a soul in sight, to my great dismay; I could've passed her off to somebody else. I instantly wished I hadn't had this thought, devoid of Christian charity—very inappropriate given the location—but I felt incredibly uncomfortable, I didn't know if I should say something. I'm not very good in matters of bereavement. Steve often told me I avoided the inevitability of death by never broaching the subject with him. He always wanted to talk about death, it fascinated him. Not me. That's why he bought *Six Feet Under*. He was hoping to have transcendental conversations on the subject, but instead, I went on and on about Nathaniel's sex appeal and bitchy Brenda, his hysterical girlfriend whose face I couldn't make my mind up about: did I like it or not? He thought I was so superficial!

- And you, did you come here for any particular reason?

I found that she jumped quickly from her case to mine. Confiding in this stranger was out of the question. She had enough problems of her own, but being a follower of Dr. Phil, I knew full well that people who are suffering also like to hear about other people's

sufferings in order to forget their own. I didn't know how to react. The woman had swiftly dried her eyes, it was all very suspect.

- I'm here because...because I needed...to get some air, that's all. To think, and be quiet.

I emphasized the word 'quiet' as I said it, trying to make it seem as though I hadn't done so on purpose. What she said next almost knocked my legs out from under me.

- I've been here before, two or three other times, it's the perfect place to put things into perspective. I often need to put my life into perspective, but I have to admit that Nathaniel's death has been the most painful of all.

Nathaniel? No, that wouldn't fly. I felt a wave of anger rush over me. What did she take me for, some kind of idiot? I suddenly had the urge to be back in my room, in my pyjamas, with my nail clippers, waiting for supper, away from this mythomaniac in need of attention. Maybe I was mistaken—there *are* Nathaniels other than the one in *Six Feet Under*. I could put Sister Detective Owl on the case. I picked up my pace so that we reached the doorway as quickly as possible and I left her on the doorstep, wishing her a good recovery from *Nathaniel's* absence (I couldn't stop myself repeating his name) as best as she could. I added that I would "pray for her." I can't believe I said that. I don't even remember how to pray. Someone here would have to refresh my memory.

. . .

- You've come back from your walk just in time for the None service. You won't be alone, somebody arrived while you were out.

Sister Owl caught me in flight, while I was trying to sneak to the staircase without making a sound for fear (and rightly so) of being spotted. I wouldn't escape the services. I was already cornered, I didn't have any pretext for refusal and what I used on my mother when I was little wouldn't be of any help to me here. My mind raced, trying to invent a plausible story: I was experiencing an overwhelming, unbearable fatigue coupled with an urgent desire to suddenly cry out the weight of my worries (then would she suggest that I meet with her after mass?) A back injury that would prevent me from tolerating the notoriously uncomfortable church pews? An urgent need to read about Saint Suzanne? I quietly followed her into the chapel and the crier joined us. A man whose face wore an ominous expression turned towards me as I entered the luminous chapel like someone preparing to be crucified, looking for the best seat, the one that would shelter me from the view of the nuns who lined the back row like well-behaved children. I offered them my neck to see, so they wouldn't notice I was blinking my eyes, trying not to fall asleep. I pretended to be interested in what was happening around the altar, hoping that a rock star would show up and sing us a funk-style mass. The new arrival was sitting two benches from mine. What was this type of man, who looked as though he could pay for the best spas, doing in a place like this? I heard him blow his nose, then dab his eyes. No doubt, he was in the right place. I was the only person who wasn't crying. Everybody was crying around me—here, on TV, in front of Dr. Phil, at the movies—there were plenty of good reasons to cry and I, who had the best reason of all, couldn't do it. I wasn't normal. I'd need psychoanalysis for ten years, a brain cleansing, electro-shocks, teargas or cayenne pepper, a deep clearing to unearth the dead weeds around my heart, something, anything. But what?

The ceremony went by so quickly that I was still on my bum, eyes fixed on the altar, when I noticed that everybody was standing up. I flashed an embarrassed smile in Sister Owl's direction. She seemed very pleased with the None service, especially because I'd attended. I hurried back to my room without looking at the new resident or the woman who fiddled with her old Kleenex, thinking they'd make a good couple, those two, like Gwyneth and Chris Martin, like Steve and me.

Filling the Void Through the Stomach

Unable to focus my attention on anything, I tiptoed downstairs and crammed myself into the phone booth. I'd only been at the monastery since that morning and the only void I'd managed to fill was the one in my belly. I'd stuffed myself as though I had four stomachs. The only thing that would result from my stay here would be ten kilos to lose. The cook had outdone herself and I couldn't help but get carried away at the sight of carrot soup, spinach and ham pastries, buttery potato puree, delicate asparagus and a blueberry tart that was still warm. I was sitting in such a way that people could only see my back. It seemed impossible to commit myself to this food orgy in front of people. I would've bitten my lips or the insides of my cheeks out of nervousness, or spilled soup on my sweater and left pastry crumbs all around my mouth without even realizing it. I chewed my pastry, pretending to take in the tiniest detail of the plain drapes. I forced myself to eat without making a sound, I was on the look-out. From time to time, the new arrival turned his head towards me. Was he trying to get my attention? It was out of the question for me to deviate from the goal I'd set for myself in coming to the monastery. In

reality, I ignored nearly every aspect of this goal, but I hoped it would appear to me in all its lucid luminosity at any moment. While I waited, I'd have to see if I had any messages on my voicemail. I got Nathalie, who was coming home from work.

- I can't believe you left me to take care of that big cat of yours. You know I have trouble just feeding myself. I can't serve him my frozen meals!

- Listen, it's only for a few days. It's not complicated, he only eats little dry bits. And that's all he leaves in his litter, nothing to get worked up about. Nobody called for me?

- MonaMonaMona, don't tell me you're still waiting for Steve to reappear?

- Yes. No.

- Yes, I know. It's been three months now since he and Luc disappeared, and their bodies were never found. You know they did everything to find them. Sweetie, I don't mean to be so blunt, but you have to turn the page. Do you understand? *Tourne la page.*

- Stop it, you're going to put that song by the Simards in my head.

- Stop trying to escape reality. Move on. Go back to work.

- I can't. Not yet. I had to get out of the house, I was going crazy, especially since that ordeal with the neighbours. You weren't there when he shot his wife.

- You shouldn't have been there either, you should've been at work.

- Work, work, work, that's the only word on your lips. I can't right now.

Everyone looks at me like I'm a giant nuisance.

- You *are* a giant nuisance, and you're not doing anything to help yourself.

- Well, that's why I came here, to help myself.

- By doing what?

- Nothing.

- What's the difference between being there and being here?

- We'll see. At the very least, I'm out of the house.

- Out? You're always with yourself, in your heart, no matter where you are, dummy. You haven't even cried a single tear! Are you dehydrated or what?

- Stop it! Just let me be in denial, let me hope, let me wander. Crying would equal defeat, surrender. I don't know how you did it, getting over Luc so easily.

- Who told you it was easy? I cried right away, I didn't keep everything inside and deny the facts! Hey! You're not the only one who suffered a loss, but you have to keep on living your life. Otherwise you just waste away and that doesn't solve anything. Doesn't your Dr. Phil say that? In the end, the burden is twice as heavy to carry. It doesn't bring back the dead.

- Don't say that word.

I started crying like a Magdalene. I sobbed so hard that I alerted Owl, who was passing by the phone booth. She slipped her arm through the door and handed me a handkerchief. I hadn't seen anything like it since my dad's. I saw my mom's disgusted face as she sorted through the dirty laundry. I burst out laughing and sniffled.

- You can't even cry for real, you're laughing!

- Nathalie, Nathalie, I don't know, I don't know what I'm doing here, I don't know where my place is right now. It's like I don't have a place anywhere anymore.

- So come home. We'll watch *The Sopranos*, I rented the entire first season.

- Thanks, you're so sweet.

I wiped my nose. Friends are all you have when nothing else seems to make any sense.

- Just give me a couple of days, I need it. Don't watch the first episode, wait for me, ok?

- Of course. I'll call you if anything important comes up. Have a rest, clear your mind, recharge and come back a whole new woman.

- I'll be as good as new, I'll have put on twenty pounds. We eat like pigs here, it helps to fill the great void.

- Don't worry about Snuggles, I'll take care of him. I'm going to roast him.

- Save me the fur, I'll make a winter hat out of it. Ok, I'll see you soon, about a week from now, probably less. It's just as easy to go crazy here as it is to do the opposite.

I brought some of your issues of *Reader's Digest* to keep my sanity.

- Don't laugh at me. You know I need light reading after work.

- Ha! Reading stories about guys who were attacked by grizzlies, you think that's light? Ok, you take care of yourself, too.

- Bye, Mona.

- Bye, Nathalie.

- Bye.

- Bye.

I liked this girl. In my eyes, she was like the reed that bends but doesn't break. She faced reality and gave me an example to follow, like a little lantern that lighted my path.

. . .

When Steve and Luc had told me they were leaving on a canoe-camping trip on the Moisie River in Sept-Îles for a few days, I had refused to join them and Nathalie was too busy with her new job. I'm petrified of making those descents in rapids that manhandle your body at the risk of cracking your upper spine, worse than a treatment from a bad chiropractor. I don't like water, or camping, or insects, and the pitch black of the forest terrifies me. In short, in my eyes, it was a guy thing and I was happy at the thought of them spending some time together. I needed to repaint my room and the opportunity presented itself. I never finished. There's still one green wall and all of the others are pink, it's horrible—all the more so because the uncompleted task reminds me of our equally uncompleted relationship.

After finding their camp and their canoe, the rescue teams spent weeks searching for them. I, myself, combed the thick dark woods, woods that were capable of swallowing walkers by the dozen. I scoured the riverbank, hostile with rocks whose sharp points stuck out of the water, furious with myself for not having overcome my fears. If I'd been there, nothing would have happened. That's what I've told myself every day since. Every day since, I've waited for a call and let myself waste away between the pink and green walls. Nathalie was an unexpected help, considering she'd suffered a loss, too. She would come home from work earlier than usual and prepare casseroles and stews—Nathalie, who hates cooking. She righted me physically, but my morale remained between the branches of the tree under which stood the tent full of Steve and Luc's things, those lifeless things I keep under my bed.

I went out with the goal of pacing the path of Silence, despite the darkness that scared me. I thought of Steve who navigated the blackness of the forest like a rest area, whereas it reminded me of death. Nevertheless, I headed for the woods. What was I risking? The air was pure and fresh, it expanded my lungs and pumped new blood to my heart, as if to cleanse it. The clouds moved in the sky and revealed a full moon that cast a soft light between the trees, showing me the path to take. For the first time in a long time, I felt a little like I was controlled by myself and not by the void. I twirled in space, my arms open like a helicopter, exhaling a grumble followed by a cascade of wails and tears. From where I was, between the branches of the maple trees, I caught a glimpse of Sister Owl, who was standing in the window like a benevolent vigil. She seemed to be watching me, illuminated only by a lantern she held in her hand. I waved both of my arms to signal that I saw her and by way of replying, she twitched her little nose from left to right, like Samantha the witch. For a moment, I imagined her flying towards the moon and the stars, like the Flying Nun.

Section 4. Translation Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In the field of translation studies, the focus on the short story genre has largely been on translating the individual short story and not on translating the short story cycle. (Translating a traditional short story collection would hardly warrant much discussion, as it does not constitute a whole that is the sum of its parts; rather, it represents a space in which the parts co-exist independently of one another.)

For example, Peter Newmark, in *Paragraphs on Translation*, and Josefina de Rodrigues, in *Short Story Translation: From Theory to Practice*, provide general observations and guidelines as to how to handle some of the challenges of translating a short story in itself, and while they offer potentially useful information, my primary concern is how my overall translation approach differed when I was treating the text as part of a traditional collection, as opposed to when I was treating it as a part of a cycle.

In this section, I discuss how my interpretation of *Mises à mort* as a short story cycle influenced my translation thereof. I contrast the first draft of my translation, which was written in the mindset that I was translating a traditional short story collection composed of miscellaneous stories, to the final draft, which was revised in the mindset that I was translating a short story cycle composed of interrelated stories. Though the two drafts are not vastly different, there are important distinctions between them which reflect my accounting for the cohesiveness of the collection. Although I do address the challenges of translating certain elements such as wordplay, cultural references, etc., my specific focus is on demonstrating the general constraints and unique challenges associated with translating within the context of a short story cycle.

4.2 Translating the Short Story Cycle

When we read (and translate) a text, we have expectations as to the reading experience of that text based on our knowledge of the genre. When reading a novel, for example, we expect the work to consist of a unified plot and structure, so we approach our translation with the goal of maintaining and achieving consistency throughout, using a cohesive method.

When people begin reading a short story cycle, unless they possess previous knowledge of the nature of the work, initially, they are not necessarily aware they are dealing with a cycle (and not a traditional collection). This was the experience I had with *Mises à mort*: when I began reading and simultaneously translating the collection, my expectation was that it consisted of mainly discrete short stories—possessing thematic unity, yes, but otherwise unconnected. As such, my approach to the translation was inconsistent from one story to the next. Only when I finished reading the book in full and produced a first draft of my translation did I recognize and understand that the collection functioned as a unified whole. When I fully grasped the cohesiveness of the work, I reinterpreted certain aspects of the collection based on this realization; consequently, I knew I would need to reassess and revise my approach to the translation.

For her thesis, University of Alberta graduate student Cynthia Amber Marks analyzed and translated (into English) a French short story by Hans-Jürgen Greif, entitled “N’appelle pas le chat pour mettre d’accord deux oiseaux,” taken from his collection of short stories entitled *Le chat proverbial*, published in 2009. Marks addresses the issue of translating the title, an Indian proverb about a cat. What is interesting is that despite the

fact that Marks was only translating one story for her project, she nevertheless considered the rest of the collection in her translation; this was particularly evident with regard to the titles. In this collection by Hans-Jürgen Greif, the title of each story is a proverb about a cat. Now, translating proverbs is a difficult task, as they are often poetic in nature—poetry being widely and notoriously regarded as “untranslatable”—and very closely linked to their original culture and language system. Often, a solution is to try to find a proverb in the target language that is semantically “equivalent” (I have no intention of launching into a discussion on complex notions of “equivalency” here) to that of the source language. This, however, is not what Marks opted to do. Recognizing and understanding the stories’ interconnectedness within the collection, evidenced by titles that undeviatingly consist of feline-related proverbs, she opted for a literal word-for-word translation of the French rather than use an equivalent target-language proverb for the title:

To translate these proverbs with an equivalent proverb that did not feature cats would be to completely change the overall theme of this short story collection, and to skew the author’s intention of placing the feline animal in a central and titular role in every tale. While the literal translation would take a little more time for the reader to process and interpret, in the context of the short story collection it is the only possible option (41).

This is an excellent example of how a translator accounted for the cohesiveness of a cycle in her translation of a short story, perhaps foregoing a solution she would have normally and/or initially preferred (which was something I experienced when translating *Mises à mort*).

Below, I discuss the implications of translating within the context of a short story cycle, taking into consideration the disjointed yet unified nature of the work.

4.3 Self-sufficiency and Interrelatedness in Translation

To reiterate, Susan Mann claims: there is one essential element of the short story cycle: self-sufficiency and interrelatedness (1989: 15). Translators need to be aware of a story's dual identity as an autonomous yet distinct text; therefore, translators should be careful to maintain the style and characteristics unique to each individual story (if that be the case), but must also be mindful of the elements binding the stories together, ensuring to maintain them in the target text. Naturally, this will vary depending on how "tight" or "loose" the cycle is, and *that* is left to the translator's (good) judgment.

As I had initially translated *Mises à mort* in the mindset that it was a traditional short story collection, when finally I interpreted the collection as a cycle and started revising my translation under a more unified approach, accommodating for the cohesiveness of the work, I was careful of two things: one) to maintain thematic consistency and stylistic similarities in the text, and two) to maintain the stylistic differences between the stories (when translating a cycle and considering the stories as a unified group, there can be a tendency to neutralize and create uniformity of style where there is none in the original; *differences* in terms of tone, etc., are important to keep as well).

4.4 Themes in Translation

As I discussed in my analysis of *Mises à mort*, the themes of ‘death’ and ‘religion’ are emphasized by the use of ‘death-centric’ or ‘religious-centric’ words or expressions (“J’étais morte d’inquiétude, moi!,” “Point de salut,” etc.). As a translator working in the context of a cycle, I felt unable to translate as “freely” as I might have in another context; rather, like Cynthia Marks, I was obligated to adhere more closely to the text.

In my first draft of “Câlin manqué,” I translated Joanie’s soap opera-inspired line “J’étais morte d’inquiétude, moi!” as “I was worried sick!”—a common and idiomatic expression that I decided matched the original French in terms of style and register. Although the theme of death was not as “dominant” in this story as it was in others, I still felt it was important that any mention of or allusion to ‘death’ should be maintained in the context of the cycle. Therefore, in my final draft, I revised my translation of the quote to read: “I was worried to death!”

In “Marie, à mort,” Marie and the narrator are playing ‘mommy and daddy:’ “On joue comme ça pendant une heure ou deux, puis on s’écroule mortes de rire sur son petit lit [...]” (135). My first translation of the passage read: “We play like that for an hour or two, then we fall down laughing onto her little bed [...]” When I revised the text to accommodate the death-centric language, it became: “We play like that for an hour or two, then we kill ourselves laughing and fall down onto her little bed [...]”.

Likewise, in striving to maintain the religious connotation of certain words and phrases in the collection as a means of accentuating the ‘religion’ sub-theme, I made a

few noticeable modifications to my English text. Perhaps the most challenging task was revising my translation of the title “Point de salut.”

As there is no explicit reference to religion or the Church in this story (apart from ‘priest’ being included in a list of professions featured in a series of pornographic films), the religious connotation of the phrase “point de salut,” i.e., “Hors de l’Église, point de salut” did not come to mind in my initial reading of the text. I simply considered the phrase as meaning ‘without a certain condition, something cannot be achieved’ (in this case a metaphor meaning ‘without the G-spot, the ultimate orgasm cannot be achieved’). And, of course, “point de salut” tied in nicely with the ‘point’ from ‘point G.’

Therefore, when initially testing out various options for the translation of the title, I was primarily focussed on maintaining the word ‘spot’ (as in ‘G-spot’), just as “point de salut” incorporates the ‘point’ from ‘point-G,’ and, insofar as it was possible, the meaning of the idiomatic phrase (which proved exceedingly difficult). Early translation options included “Spotless” and “Spot Check.”

However, when I ultimately viewed the collection as a cycle in which religion was a prominent unifying element, I interpreted “point de salut” as having a religious connotation. Therefore, I was determined to somehow maintain the allusion in my English translation. No simple feat, but an imperative one, in my opinion. Ultimately, I decided on “Spot of Salvation,” which still incorporated the ‘spot’ from ‘G-spot,’ maintained the religious allusion of the expression “Without the Church, no salvation.” (“Death Spot” was another final contender, tying in with the death theme of the collection, but ultimately, I decided to maintain the religious connotation I interpreted in the French title.)

Similarly, I reconsidered my treatment of the title “Mona se terre.” Originally, I was chiefly focussed on retaining the denotative sense of ‘se terre’ (unfortunately, it seemed impossible to simultaneously maintain the play on words in English as well). And so, first drafts included “Mona in Hiding,” “Mona in Mourning,” “Mona Goes to Ground” and “Mona’s Reclusion,” all of which conveyed the meaning of withdrawing from (social) life, but none of which bore a religious connotation. In revising my translation, however, I shifted my focus: recognizing the importance of religion as a dominant theme throughout the collection, I finally settled on “Mona’s Retreat,” to evoke the connotation of a religious retreat. (Although Mona is not participating in a religious retreat in the traditional sense—she has no interest whatsoever in the Church—she is retreating from her problems and doing so in a holy setting.)⁹

4.5 Style and Tone

Though my translation of certain stylistic elements did vary from the first draft of the collection to the final (as we will see below), in terms of overarching style and tone of the stories (simple, abstract, ironic, sombre, humorous, etc.), no revisions were required. Operating in the context of a cycle had no impact on translating these aspects of the work. As I was producing the initial version of my translation, if a story was ironic in tone, I strived for the translated text to be ironic in tone as well; if a protagonist narrated using plain language, I preserved the use of plain language; if repetition was used as a stylistic device in the original, I maintained repetition in the translation and so on and so forth. Therefore, there was no discrepancy between the two drafts in this respect. Below,

⁹ Though dominant in “Mona se terre,” the theme of religion becomes even more significant in the context of the cycle, as it is intensified by its proximity to other stories in which religion is often portrayed in a similar light.

I will discuss which specific characteristics of the collection were affected in translation by my interpreting the collection as a cycle.

4.5.1 Bilingualism / Biculturalism in Translation

As ‘bilingualism’ serves as one of the unifying stylistic elements in *Mises à mort*, I wanted to maintain this aspect in the translation as well, as much as possible, which meant maintaining certain French words and phrases. The following are a few examples: in my translation of “Cellules en l’air,” I revised “I emerge” to read “And voilà, I emerge;” in “Vile ville,” I added part of the original French phrase to the text: “To her belt, she attached a canvas bag filled with other bags, intended for doing what nobody likes to do, but what we must do, *n’est-ce pas*, if we don’t want to find ourselves neck-high in crap.” In “Félix et le chat,” I revised “store” and ultimately opted to maintain “dépanneur,” a French word adopted by Anglophone inhabitants of Montreal (and often simply referred to as “the dep”).

As I discussed in my analysis of *Mises à mort*, the cycle possesses a common setting (Montreal). As such, in the final version of my translation, I decided to maintain all original Montreal-centric references.

The moniker for the aptly named wiener dog in “Vile ville,” Hygrade, caused pause in the first draft of my translation. The name ‘Hygrade’ was unfamiliar to me at first, but recognizing it was an allusion, I performed a search online and determined that it was the name of a hot dog brand. (A subsequent conversation with my French Canadian thesis director also revealed that Hygrade was in fact the official hot dog brand served at the now-defunct-Montreal Expos games.) Wanting to maintain the humour,

allusion and imagery in the text—the shape of the dog is important in the story—but also wanting to make the text accessible (or at least the humour more obvious) to a non-Montreal readership who, like me, may not immediately grasp the reference, I initially opted to call the dog ‘Shopsy’ in the English translation (a famous and easily recognizable brand which is often served at sporting events).

However, when the cohesiveness of the collection became fully evident to me and I opted to maintain a consistent translation method throughout, I changed the dog’s name to the original Hygrade, thus highlighting the Montreal aspect of the collection. (While I thought ‘Shopsy’ might be the funnier solution, I decided it was more important to be culturally accurate and more cohesive in this case.)

4.5.2 Pop Culture References in Translation

An interesting point regarding the pop culture references in *Mises à mort* is that although they are predominantly Anglo-centric, they also include references to Quebec pop culture. Therefore, as the original cycle incorporates references to both cultures, I decided that the translation should as well. (The Quebec-centric references are the ones that would ultimately prove to be the most challenging and, in the context of translating within a cycle (or *this* particular cycle), the most interesting.)

In “Mona se terre,” Mona has a conversation with her roommate in which her roommate inadvertently quotes a lyric from the song “Tourne la page,” released in 1987 by Natalie and René Simard (“Les Simards”), a French-Canadian brother-sister pop duo from Quebec (though familiar to people in Quebec, “Tourne la page” was largely

unknown outside the province and I had never before heard it). Below is an excerpt from the text:

- [...] Cocotte, je m’excuse de te parler aussi franchement, mais tu dois tourner la page.

Tourner la page, tu m’entends?

- Arrête, tu me mets la chanson des Simard dans la tête.

Now, I had the difficult task of finding a song with lyrics that not only served a diegetic function within the narrative, but were also written by a band that was comparable to the Simards.

Translated into English, “tourner la page” becomes “turn the page,” which happens to be the name of a Bob Seger song and, being a fan of Bob Seger, this was my immediate cultural referent. Not an ideal solution, unfortunately, as Bob Seger is not similar to the Simards, but as I struggled to find a more suitable replacement, I ultimately decided that since the lyric fit perfectly in the text and a reference to Bob Seger would not have looked inordinately out of place given the other allusions to American culture in the collection, this served as my initial solution for the translation.

However, in my revision of the text, in considering the importance of revealing the ‘Québécois’ characteristic of the cycle both culturally and linguistically (i.e. bilingual), I decided to maintain the Simards reference. Still, because the lyric served a diegetic function in the narrative, I needed it to be understandable to an English readership, which would require some intervention in the text on my part. The following is my final solution:

- [...] Sweetie, I don’t mean to be so blunt, but you have to turn the page. Do you understand? *Tourne la page*.

- Stop it, you’re going to put that song by the Simards in my head.

This translation simultaneously preserves the original Simard reference and the diegetic function of the lyric, while being comprehensible to an English readership and in keeping with the unifying bicultural aspect of the cycle (by having the lyric repeated, once in English and once in French).

In “Cendres amères,” (as we saw in the previous section), a recurring element in the text is the protagonist having visions that are allusions to pop culture figures. When she goes to pick up her mother’s ashes at a funeral home, she describes the employee who greets her as being Transylvanian in appearance, having hair piled high and held in place by a sinister-looking hair clip: “Il me vient des visions de Marge Simpson, de Vampirella et de Madame Bec Sec” (60).

Madame Bec Sec was a character on a children’s television show in Quebec in the 1960s (I had to perform an Internet search in order to learn that). As the reference would be completely unfamiliar to an English readership, I originally translated ‘Madame Bec Sec’ as ‘Bride of Frankenstein’ in order to maintain the imagery of tall hair. In the final translation, however, I changed the reference to the original ‘Madame Bec Sec.’

Another cultural reference I ultimately retained from this story is the song “Au clair de la lune.” The narrator mimes playing a Chopin piano sonata on her desk, though she may be mistaking it for the aforementioned children’s nursery rhyme. My initial solution was to find an English nursery rhyme about the moon (preserving the moon reference is important, because it ties in with the narrator’s subsequent visions). Although there is an English translation of the French song, it is not nearly as well known or as popular as its French counterpart, so I sought to find a children’s song about the moon that was as well known as “Au clair de la lune” in its own culture. In my first draft, “The

Man in the Moon” and “I See the Moon” served as two potential solutions. However, in revising my translation, just as I did with other French cultural references from the book, I preserved the original title in the English text. In order to make the reference more easily understood for the English reader, I created an addition in the translation and indicated that the song was a nursery rhyme (though the original French song may be familiar to certain English readers, I determined it is not well known enough for the reference to be immediately or necessarily comprehended).

As result of interpreting *Mises à mort* as a cycle, I reassessed my approach to the translation and revised certain aspects of my text in order to better reflect the unified nature of the original collection. Although the first and final drafts of my translation are not radically dissimilar (as I mentioned, revising my translation did not involve making changes to stories in terms of overall tone or style), there are important distinctions between them. One of the major (and most noticeable) differences between the two versions is that my final translation contained more traces of the French text (the “other”) than my first draft did, as a means of conveying the unifying bicultural and bilingual aspect of the original work. Interestingly, I found that revealing “otherness” in the context of short story cycle translation simultaneously (and paradoxically) had the additional benefit of highlighting “sameness” between the stories. Incorporating foreign elements into a translation, however minimally, alerts the reader to the fact that there is something unique or atypical about the text; the presence of a foreign cultural referent (or

language) is more remarkable than a domestic cultural referent (and the absence of a foreign language). Therefore, adopting such an approach to the entire collection makes parallels between stories more discernible—the cohesion of the work is further emphasized and reinforced.

Again, modifying my approach to the translation did not produce a final translation that was wholly unlike my original, but we can see how making relatively small adjustments can go a long way in intensifying themes, thus achieving unity in a cycle.

Section 5. Conclusion

As we have seen in this thesis, the short story cycle is a modernist form of prose that is paradoxical in its disjointed yet unified composition: it simultaneously possesses the fragmented structure of the traditional (miscellaneous) short story collection and the cohesive nature of the novel. Stories in cycles are autonomous yet interconnected, representing parts of a greater whole that function together to achieve meaning and unity. While not every part will necessarily function and contribute in the same way, each serves its own purpose within the cycle.

Stories in cycles can be arranged in many ways; however, it is the way in which stories are connected (and not the way in which they are ordered) that proves more relevant in identifying and characterizing a cycle, for recognizing and understanding connections between stories will ultimately reveal unity (the most important feature of a cycle, in my mind). A fruitful way to establish connections between stories in a cycle is to evaluate them according to four characteristics: ‘character,’ ‘place,’ ‘theme,’ ‘style and tone.’

As we have also seen, the level of cohesiveness will vary from one cycle to the next; some cycles are very tightly unified and require little effort on the part of the reader to decipher patterns throughout the work, whereas others are more loosely connected and require much more alertness to discern similarities between individual texts. I found this to be the case in *Mises à mort*.

Mises à mort is a loose short story cycle, for while it possesses a common setting, recurring themes and certain repeated stylistic elements, it also contains variations in terms of tone and there are no recurring characters.

Translating a loose cycle arguably requires greater dexterity on the part of translators as well, for not only do translators have to work harder as readers to discern important patterns throughout the text, but they also have to strike a balancing act between the differences and similarities therein in order to accurately equal the level of cohesiveness of the original (whereas in a tighter cycle possessing all four characteristics, translators would require less agility).

As for selecting a translation method, in the context of translating a short story cycle, I believe this is irrelevant: whether the translator chooses to domesticate or foreignize, for example, one is no more well suited than another to this form of prose. (The final version of my own translation ultimately incorporated more elements of the French text than my first draft did, at times in their original form.) As with any literary translation, the translator must make choices based on the purpose of the project and the text itself. In the framework of the short story cycle, what matters is that the translator acknowledges the simultaneous autonomy and dependency of stories, approximating where the cycle belongs on the line of continuum between the miscellaneous short story collection and the novel. The translator must recognize *how* the stories are connected and consequently, adopt a cohesive approach for the whole work (similar to how one would when translating a novel), while maintaining the discreteness of the stories.

While my own translation serves as a case study in translating a loose cycle, it would be interesting to see how others have translated “looser” or “tighter” cycles than *Mises à mort*. (It would also be interesting to see if any translators decided to rearrange the order of the stories in a cycle; however, as we have seen, readers will still have the freedom to choose which order to read the cycle in.)

In the field of translation studies, there seems to be somewhat of a blank space under the short story cycle subgenre. I hope this thesis has served to fill a small part of that space.

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