

Anna, who was the last guardian of the house,

missed it most of all. She invited me to lunch, to her three-room apartment in her low-cost-housing building in the Salines neighbourhood where she had been living since she left the family home. Salines with its absence of graffiti, of writings on its buildings, the grey-blue calmness of its alley-ways, seemed purposely not to resemble any popular neighbourhood of the Continent. I knew that, turning her back on the sea – which the window of the kitchen faced – the bay, the port and its departures, she preferred to remain seated on the other side, for days on end, there in the kitchen, in her enormous black robe which increasingly failed to envelope her inert and tired body, grown huge from all the accumulated devotions, the consented to surrenders, the silent resistance of the flesh to adapt to the city and the plains, all this in order to breathe in the delicate smells of the underbrush, to attempt to spy from afar a glance of a spring of water, a hung sheet roughly touched by the sun amidst a decreasingly dark greenness, dense and thick, hilly, as if already slightly whitened by the dust of the dirt roads that encompass it. She remained indifferent to Ajaccio. Early every morning, her three daughters – searching for a work placement or a part-time job – would go there, equipped with their school certificates and pretending boldness, modern with that all too red and too thick lipstick, the only sign of an emancipation which they didn't really deep down desire: eventually they would find, thanks to their stubborn kindness, temporary employment as receptionists at the office of Social Security. She didn't go out more than once or twice a week in

order to sit on a bench in Salines Square or to do her shopping at Corsaire. She could recognize them from a distance. The deprived women who like herself had come down recently from a village: taking advantage of empty afternoon hours, they would move forward through the huge aisles of the store with a concentrated, serious and slightly lost look, stuffing their purchases into shopping bags out of fear that they would drown in the depths of a trolley which they would never use, holding on tightly in the palm of their hands to their purses as if they were tattered prayer books which they would open with a kind of anxious and sad caution as if afraid, at that moment that they drew closer to the till lest they not have enough, fearing that their calculations had been erroneous, that they would suddenly be obliged to admit, to demonstrate their poverty, give up their pride (on an island where there are no beggars, where whatever vagabonds seen, in winter stretched out on benches along the Cours Napoleon or around the Admiralty, were for the most part simply informers in disguise.

And, of course, they never counted the change and would never later dare make a claim for it, if the discount marked on some product had not been subtracted from the total. They looked so frail, so disoriented and gloomy on the immense, sun-drenched esplanade in front of Corsaire, unable to find immediately the way to the housing development, tensely staring, terrified, stubbornly, at the letters painted on the sides of the buildings, as if they were discovering, were being forced to learn the beginnings of an alphabet unknown to them. And today, one could say that Anna, making use of all that darkness within us and around us, of our sadness protected by the closed shutters, of her own moroseness, of the halo of the bouquet of heather brought from Ucciani, of the smell of cooked figatelli, of wine still to be tasted, warming in the decanters, using it to recreate the anxious silence of an autumn noonday when she continued to wait in the dining room of the Vaccareccia, mute, her eyes filled with tears, for the return of the hunters, of Antoine – perhaps already sensing that he had been brought to his knees suddenly in the forest of Vizzavona, surrounded by empty cartridges and trampled ferns, and that his heart had just ceased to beat.

"You should gather up your father's things from the apartment on Wagram Avenue", she advised me. That former apartment of Juliette which had been abandoned at a time when my dad, who had been closeted up there since he had been hospitalised six years earlier and where there still remained on the kitchen table

the little tied-up packages (of sugar, clothes-pins, samples of products that he had been offered when coming out of the Monoprix), like those of someone living in a house who was being hunted down, before fleeing, lacking the time to gather up his last little valuables. I carried them off, very quickly – as if I too had been given a reprieve, a delay – but there was nothing to lose except my fear of failing; everything in 'his' wardrobe (as they say when it is a place, a private space set aside for an infant when it begins to grow): his shoes, his 'boyish' polo shirts which remained spotless despite their worn collars, his two hats with their faded, grey satin ribbons, his worn-out, skin-tight jerseys. I piled them into plastic bags that I had brought along – like the one in which he himself had carried one day, stumbling as he tried to look like a distracted traveller in a hurry, the dresses of Xavière and then those of Juliette ("They're very good there... they themselves do the sorting...", he had said to me then), carrying them to Catholic Relief, on Daniele-Casanova Street, opposite the San Carlu Hotel where he had come to look for me, all happiness – even though I never came to Ajaccio except in a cloud of dust, even though I only spent an hour or two with them, at the doorstep, under the tree of Chez Yvonne where, dressed as if it was for a celebration, the morning of a holiday, he said over and over that everything was fine, that he did not feel lonely, that he was often invited out: and he would turn his head away out of fear that I would ask him by whom he was invited.

He had a safe-deposit box at the Caisse d'Épargne savings bank – he had confided to me then with a mysterious pride, as if he had accumulated a fortune which he had put aside and which he never touched. The director, on opening the box in my presence, had a small sad smile. There were – it is all that he possessed, all that he left – two brown leather bags full of papers, clippings from newspapers, old advertisements; bundles of photos – those of an oriental costume ball at the club for senior citizens in which he beamed as if he was back in the courtyard of a house in Batna on the eve of the celebration of the Mouloud, the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, among women in blue, mauve and golden Turkish serouals; others of their voyage to Egypt where he had begun to wander, to no longer know where he was, asking a member of the group – at the moment that he came down the ladder of the boat to Assouan – to accompany him as far as the corner of Beverini Avenue. And then, enclosed by an elastic band, his diary in the shape of a schoolkid's notebook in which he had written, day after day, all of the chores he had done, before he gave that up, satisfied with indicating the few gestures that filled his life:

Washed two small towels Sunday 3 May 91
Changed the string binding the shutters 3 April 91
Wore yellow woollen polo shirt Saturday 3 April 91
Changed blade of Gillette Contour razor 24 January 91
Washed my hair Sunday 22 July 90
Washed woolly hat with red and blue stripes Thursday 19 April 90
Opened a bar of soap called Soleil from the Monoprix 6 January 90
Inventory of shoes: 2 brown boots, 2 black Mephistos
2 black tennis shoes, 14 May 89 at 7 p.m.
Wore green Guy de Beredac polo shirt Sunday 16 April 89
Opened 1 litre Beaumont strawberry syrup 3 February 87
at 12 a.m.
Invited Filfille and his daughters to have chocolate
apartment Juliette Saturday 23 November 86 at 11 a.m.
Opened ball of string Wednesday 8 October 86
Changed black boot heels Thursday 20 October 86.

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