

ImPure
Translation sample of
UnPur

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Editions Belfond

You're no longer a child, Benjamin. You haven't been one for a little over half a century. A lot of dust has accumulated in that time, not that we knowingly created it. And now there's no longer a sheep in sight. Were you a sheep? I don't believe so. But I do know one thing: we were both slow in living life. That was how things were, or rather how things failed to be.

My telephone vibrates in the pocket of my mac.

Unknown number. I can't even say for sure that I recognised your voice, but who else would leave a message saying 'I'm waiting for you' and then hang up?

And I come running in my oversized mac. I don't have a broad back, as I'm sure you've noticed. At your trial, you were the one standing tall, not me. I was as limp as a rag, crushed by all the years of havoc and everything that has been lost. I'm not bold by nature, and people can hardly say 'How does he have the nerve?'. The fact is that I've been completely unnerved by your absence. You're waiting for me? Okay, I'll rush to your side, smelling of all the stale alcohol I've consumed waiting for this moment of confession. Not a confidence or an admission, but a confession. I've longed for nothing more and yet I feel dread. That irreparable act is a black stain on our lives and you can rub as hard as you like - you'll never get it out. What do you want to confess to me today that you have buried within you for so long? You can do whatever you like, whatever you can, with the truth. You accommodate it. It's a marshmallow that you can stretch as much as you like. You can twist it into any shape and it will assume the form that you impose on it.

In court I talked about my collection of sand, the hundreds of phials containing thousands of grains. They're the totems of the house. The house... you know the word for where we live. Our home. You haven't set foot there since... for 43 years my heart has felt like a clenched fist. All of those years have left their mark. They've crushed me into as many fragments as my phials contain. It's as if I'm in a container. Sand is not what people think - before it slips through our fingers, it is a block of tiny flakes. If it's disturbed, the block disintegrates and the flakes are carried away by a draft or at the whim of the wind. I don't know if you noticed when you were in the dock, but I was constantly rubbing together my thumb and fingertips hoping for... a sensation, the sense of a shape that would remind me of when you and I were still a block.

Italy, Venice

Summer of '76, 25 August. The short silhouette is clothed. He is so young that his chest looks sunken. Adorable little thin arms, and oh to be a dog to nibble at and play with those little wrists. This little boy is the dream of every dawn. He will need to be undressed oh so very slowly, taking an age to arrive at the white skin untanned by the sun halfway down.

The hunter is there, but invisible. In the sights of his sick desire he has his two-legged fawn, and he has no intention of letting him escape. The child's knees are dirty, almost as green as his irises. And in fact there are two pairs of eyes, because he and his brother are identical.

Mum always refused to treat us as a single entity. Unlike many parents who call their sons 'the boys' as soon as they have two of them, she never saw us as the just 'the boys', even though we were identical twins. Everyone else got us mixed up, but she never did. She would drum into us that we were both a very special little person in our own right. She'd decided to take us off to Venice, because nothing was too good for her BenjaminhowIloveyou and her JulienhowIloveyou. Though she had forced us to wear shorts that were now too small for us. We kicked up a fuss, not least because there were new shorts of the right size in the suitcase, but Mum had decreed that we could only wear them on the way home. We'd leave the old ones in the hotel room. For some reason, she liked leaving a trace behind, and you didn't argue with her, you went along with it. And that's how it came to pass that shorts which ride up your backside devastated a life. Three lives, in fact.

I should have sat down in Le Florian and enjoyed my *cioccolata con panna* - the worst I would have ended up with was a milky moustache. Instead of which I tried to spoil Mum's pleasure in revisiting an episode that had become a family legend. We looked ridiculous in our undersized shorts and I'd found a way of getting back at her. She had been banging on about her *cioccolata* since the start of the summer. By not drinking her very best chocolate of the worldplanetuniverseentireearth, I was preventing her from enjoying hers. Stop playing up, Julien, and enjoy your whipped cream. I was already regretting my attitude, but I forced myself to stick it out, and so as not to give in to temptation, I got up and walked off, pulling at my shorts. I was completely unaware of the danger. We had just turned eight years old. The last time the three of us had had a chocolate was on a terrace in Paris on the Place Saint-Sulpice, and we never had the time to finish it. Suddenly Mum got up and said 'Come with me!' And she started running in the direction of the church. You followed her, but I didn't. That time I didn't move, frozen to my chair and petrified. We hadn't finished our drinks or paid for them, and so we had no right to leave. I couldn't understand what was going on. The waiter was just as disconcerted as I was. The pretty woman with the two twins had caught his eye, but now he was clearly thinking that we were no better than the rest of them and he was giving me the evil eye. It seemed to

last a long time. I could see you laughing your head off on the far side of the square by Mum's side, and she kept gesturing to me to get my arse over there. No way. She was the one at fault here. Finally she came back, affecting an air of indifference. I felt like ratting on her to the whole café, so annoyed was I. And yet that fool of a waiter was already smiling at her again. She tripled the tip. She'd been seen but not seized.

Perhaps, Julien, you've forgotten how you galloped after her across Place Saint-Sulpice, but I haven't. She was up for not paying just to see what it felt like, like a naughty kid. And she was certain that her sons would follow her without a moment's hesitation, but only one of them was up to the challenge.

At Le Florian, she'd chosen to sit inside, so she wouldn't be running off without paying. Which didn't stop her from slipping one of café's little silver spoons into her handbag - she just couldn't help herself. You expect - you need - your parents to set an example, or at least to give the impression that they are.

In St. Mark's Square, I was seized by the desire to kick a pigeon right in front of the four bronze horses adorning the façade of the basilica. We had just had a game of hide-and-seek among the arcades. Mum always encouraged us to go out and play, and we always knew we'd lose no time in leaving home when we turned eighteen. We also knew that she'd put on a brave face but in fact wait obsessively for us to return, our Absolutelove Mum. But we weren't yet at that stage and it was the first time I'd strayed out of her sight without you at my side. She'd just told us that St. Mark's was the only *piazza* in Venice, the others being *campi*. She liked reading to us what she had found out, as if she had written it herself. She'd read it out loud with a great deal of emotion. I was dimly aware of her extremely vigilant side - she had to watch over us lest we escape. I was too small to formulate the idea properly, but I sensed that when we grew up, there was a danger our mother's affection for us would become suffocating. But that summer in Venice I was still at the stage of enamoured admiration. I eagerly took in the spectacle of St. Mark's Square with its hotchpotch of humanity and the uninterrupted flow of people surging into the basilica. I could already spot the more coquettish women, as Mum used to like pointing them out to us and drawing our attention to their attire, high heels, lipstick and painted nails. In 1976, selfies didn't yet exist and nor did the muppets filming themselves on the Grand Canal with their backs to the palace. No social media either, but already the dark-skinned locals were hawking seeds and anything else they had. It was after all the kingdom of the pigeons... The kids would throw handfuls of seeds around, the parents would buy them. The birds were part of the place's legend, much to Mum's disgust. She called them flying rats and would happily have shot them all and anything else that cooed.

As usual, she had planned everything out. We'd go into the basilica

about twenty minutes before it closed, just when everyone else was coming out, and so we'd have the place to ourselves, if only briefly. Before getting to where I don't want to go, Julien, I just want to dwell on a person I loved so much. She was our mother, but we never forgot that she was also a woman to the very tips of her fingertips and beyond. The only time she allowed herself some rest was when she was by the sea or the ocean. Only the stillness of the former and the commotion of the latter could release her repressed inner calm. And when she managed to connect with them, she became bewitching and our laughter was transformed, as if it too had the right to be released.

She grew up in La Palmyre by the ocean and she could spend hours walking along the shore, ankle-deep in the lapping water which would splash up her legs. She'd let us come with her, providing we walked behind her and didn't obstruct the view ahead. We found that perfectly natural. She was born in Les Landes in the south-west but preferred the Mediterranean. She never taught us how to swim because as soon as the sea was lapping at her feet she never paid us any heed. She'd leave us on the shore without a word, and without looking back. We were used to it and would watch her swimming off into the liquid horizon. She was at peace, and we were too. If she felt better once she was in the water, detaching herself from us and from everything else, then it was better to leave her to it. We were too young to reflect on it, and in any case we only wanted one thing: for her happiness to rub off on us. We were sure of her, we knew what kind of mother we had, what a miraculous but difficult character she was. Changing, unpredictable, an agitated mother in calm weather.

We never left her shore. Clarice. She liked her first name and had decided to put a *c* between the *i* and *e* just to be different. When she pronounced her name, it was with a whistling sound. The *c* was inspired by a writer called Clarice Lispector, and she even made us learn a page of her work by heart, as if we didn't already have enough homework. *She pretends that she is a blue princess in the coming twilight, she pretends that childhood was right now and strewn with gleaming toys, she pretends that no vein has been opened, and she pretends that scarlet blood is not flowing in white silence. She pretends that she is just closing her eyes and that her loved ones will reappear full of transparent gratitude when she opens them again, she pretends that everything she has is not pretend, she pretends that a weight is being lifted from her chest and that a golden light is guiding her through a forest of locks and tranquillity, she pretends that she is not caught up in flights of fancy, she pretends that she is not crying.* Mum never tired of telling us that Clarice Lispector had written that passage while she was expecting us. She liked repeating things. Anything that came out of her mouth came out at least twice, and normally three times. Repeating things must have reassured her that things really were that way. That through repetition, everything would happen just as she said it would. To help me to retain her Lispector passage by heart, I persuaded myself that our father had given her the book as a gift

because he understood Mum inside out. That way, him not being around didn't feel so bad. Did you ever think about that, Julien? At an age when we should have been saying it all the time, the word 'Dad' never passed our lips. Was he even aware of our birth? I convinced myself that he wasn't, as it made it less painful. Without needing to spell it out, Mum had created a taboo: no Dad at home in any shape or form. Even in a drawing, or between just me and my brother. I started tearing pages out of my exercise books and filling every single line with daddaddaddad to prove he existed, and then at the end of the day I'd tear them up before going home. I know you saw me do it. But we weren't about to talk about it, because the only thing that counted was not upsetting Mum. And for as long as I could believe it, I remained a child. For eight years, which deserved to be doubled. Because being a twin doesn't count as double.

How do we go on when there was such a strong 'before'? I wish Mum could have loved me more than love itself and that it had gone on forever. You had a long stretch with her, Julien. I know I'm being unfair. It's just that everything I missed is itching at me and I'm scratching. I'm tending to our joint wound and you're not saying anything. Obviously, you're not saying anything.

We were playing dead. We'd persuaded Mum to leave us to our own devices. Our room in Venice was so tiny, so what other game could we have played? At least this one didn't take up any space. It was hot, the air was like a vice and we didn't have the energy to move around. At lunchtime we had pasta in black ink just ten metres from the hotel and then we didn't move again until 5pm. The sons propped up against the head of the double bed and her on the single bed. Two children, one parent - Mum had assured us that the small bed would suit her very well. The winner was the one who could remain inert the longest staring into the void. We were even holding our breath. The hardest thing was not to smile. I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead, I kept repeating over and over in my head - I really wanted to be the one who remained dead the longest. But I lost, I couldn't help myself. 'I don't really want to die, Mum. But the thing is, I'm curious to know what it's like. Aren't you?' Without a word, she drew me towards her for one of her hugs. She used to squeeze us so tight that they were almost brutal. As she had a flat chest and poking-out hips, you could almost get bruised in her arms.

'Where are the pulses, Mum? She gave a start.

'The *pulse*, Benjamin. In the singular. Give me your wrist. Can you feel it? Just here?'

But it was her pulse that I wanted to hear beating, even though after that I never stopped feeling for my own pulse, just to be sure that something was still living inside me after Venice. If I could hear my pulse, I was obliged not to die. And that's what I've gone on doing.

I feel a stupid sense of peace today for having reached fifty, because it was by no means guaranteed. When the past is never far enough away, the present seems to be out of reach.

On that first evening in Venice on her single bed, Mum was the child and her two sons were either side of her, each facing one of her cheeks. Without telling her, we'd decided to watch her sleep for a whole night - it was the big adventure! We were going to force ourselves to stay awake, and even if one of us flagged, the other would be there. Watching your mother or father sleep is not actually that pleasant at whatever age. You inverse the roles, and you see yourself watching over them when life is no longer there. That won't happen to us, Julien. Mum is dead, although it took me thirty years to find that out. That's a long time to live with somebody who is no longer living.

But that night in Venice remains with me, a life that is sleeping and might not end, Mum deep asleep and all for us. I've constantly returned to those hours in the hope that I'll never leave them, but it just doesn't work. We weren't actually so comfortable seeing her not moving, and to lighten the atmosphere we made faces at each other over the strange asset we were guarding. I needed to feel her breath to make sure that we still had a mum. Very slowly I brought my lips into contact with

hers, just very slightly.

She had shown us the huge, canal-hogging boats between the two banks which seemed to swallow up the Giudecca Canal. Their beams of light ran across the walls of the room until they hit her face, and each time we hoped that they would wake our lagoon mother up.

By falling asleep first in this little room by the Fondamenta delle Zatterre, she had deprived me of her. Normally she was the one who watched over us, and there could never be enough of that. We were under the impression that if we fell asleep, she would never wake up, and so neither you nor I gave in. Time dragged its feet, but we fought off sleep, and those next few hours were the last that we spent hoping for the dawn.

The summer of '76 was not hot just in Venice. It was the end of the summer holidays and we'd arrived from La Palmyre, where for two days a fire had been raging in the forest of Coubre, not far from Mum's parents' house. She grew up there and became the daughter who liked to always be in the right and brooked no argument. So she had got angry and stuck to her guns about Venice. This eagerly awaited trip had been planned long in advance and there was no question of cancelling it, even if La Palmyre was in flames. Nearly seven hundred hectares were going up in smoke, emptying the busy campsites, and not everybody had a room booked on the Zattere. Once again, Mum's parents encouraged her to do what she felt best. Obviously she wasn't comfortable about the furnace on their doorstep, but she insisted that she had to think about the little ones too. We'd already realised that for them we'd be the little ones for the rest of our lives. But what lives?

The morning we left for Italy, the fire was threatening La Palmyre zoo, which housed a thousand animals all told. At that time, people didn't speak about a heatwave every time a field went up in smoke, or about global warming. Even the tomatoes were crying for mercy. Those tomatoes that Nan would prepare in every conceivable way - we had the impression that she never cooked anything else. On the station platform, we promised to send her the recipe for Arrabiata sauce and did a lot of gesticulating. We didn't care about the other travellers. Our Nan and Grandpa were the station, the locomotive, the train. Even when we were on board, we carried on talking to them and making exaggerated gestures through the window. All those gestures and expressions of love eased the sadness that we felt in leaving them behind. And this time we were abandoning them to a forest fire. Kneeling on our seats, all three of us were still blowing them kisses long after the train had pulled out. They wouldn't be getting any more of those kisses from me. That was something that I never imagined.

I had no interest in the pigeons of St. Mark's Square, I wanted to be among the animals of La Palmyre zoo. After the *cioccolata*, the plan was to ring Nan and Grandpa and get news of them and of the gorilla that we had watched growing up. It was another five years until I found out how he was, and much longer to find out that they weren't doing well at all.

In Venice we sought out the shade and made a beeline for the churches. We'd never seen Mum on her knees before. It wasn't to pray but to get a better look at the ceilings, with her neck craned backwards. She'd warned us that she'd be prostrating herself on the floor of the basilica, and as usual we were intending to keep our distance. By anticipating her extravagances, we could avoid being implicated in them.

Everyone loved Mum - the little girls, the grandmothers were all enchanted by her. And where men were concerned, we were well

aware that she was something of a flashing headlight about her. If she was attracted to one of them, she'd flash her lights and they couldn't help but being dazzled. And a second later, it would be back to just her sidelights. That was very much her style. She was still a minor when she fell pregnant, but it was the father that she didn't want to keep. She told her parents that she'd handle it, and handle it she did. She smiled when she recalled the first ultrasound, taken aback just fleetingly by the fact that there were two of us. There was something of the Visigoth barbarians about the identical twins. All the better - we had a Viking for a mother!

There was no elder twin. In the fifth month, Julien and I wrapped ourselves around each other in the placenta and we remained mouth-to-mouth until birth, desperate to make sure that the other one was breathing. I started out as an anaemic twin with an umbilical cord that was useless to me, whereas just a few millimetres away from me you were gorging on blood. This was a source of concern to the gynaecologist. In Mum's womb, you were the villain of the piece. She'd tell me to hold on and reassure me that she was there for me. She'd reassure us and her navel - just a few weeks more and we'd be together for the rest of our lives. She recounted the adventure of her pregnancy so many times, always making sure to wink at you to let you know that she didn't hold it against you. Did she hold it against me after Venice?

She'd really tried to sell us on her Venezia! She'd read us endless stories about it. The curse of the Palazzo Dario, the black tongue of the Grand Canal belonging to the ogre who devours palaces of crystal, brocade and silk which remain cold ever thereafter. Then she'd talk about the unfathomable beauty of the floors of St. Mark's, born of all the wear and tear. 'They're like me', she'd add and laugh in her exaggerated fashion.

Before walking out of Le Florian and leaving you there, my eye was caught by something out of the ordinary next to the entrance.

'Stop staring at that man, Benjamin.'

'That's not a man, Mum. He's got no arms or legs.'

'Yes, he is, but he's handicapped.'

She gave me five-franc coin and told me to look him in the eyes. I found his misfortune beyond my comprehension. Mum followed me with a ten-franc note in her hand. He looked up and that changed everything. I could see that he was a man.

The legless, armless cripple was an abomination, but in that same instant another creature descended on me. She did have arms and legs, and her eyes were riveted on this boy in the undersized shorts. Mum went back to her seat, and the woman continued to stare at the

unfortunate little boy - he was the one they had chosen.

I've banished from my mind the hours that followed, which were years. Even if it's what you want to do more than anything else, you can't alter misfortune.

Truth is not necessarily beautiful. It puts me in mind of a cockroach. You decapitate it and it just carries on. You crush cockroaches and they proliferate. You've got to take a different approach with them or else they get into your throat. Truth is like that too.

France, Paris

We were comparing our penises. We'd pulled down our pyjama bottoms and were taking it in turns to lean against the bedroom door to make sure no one could come in. We didn't want to take any risks. The previous evening, after Mum had showered us with her JulienhowIloveyous and BenjaminhowIloveyous and wished us goodnight, we set the alarm for half an hour earlier than usual and put the alarm clock under your pillow so that she wouldn't hear it. We'd planned it all out. Under my pillow we'd slipped a 20cm ruler, which we thought should be long enough.

We never used the word willy. Mum thought that it didn't do justice to this male attribute. So our pyjamas were round our ankles and we were making a point of not cheating. We each measured our own without pulling on it. We argued in low voices trying to eke out an extra millimetre, but we had to concede that we were identical twins in that respect too. We had two results, one for when they were flaccid and one after we'd fondled ourselves, which prompted a spectacular increase in size! To think that we could change the size ourselves, just like that! Thereafter we'd often have cause to check that they still worked. We used to do it with great concentration, side by side without any embarrassment, waiting for something that didn't come and which we didn't understand. It wasn't looking like coming out, and then in the end it did. But only a little bit - we were too young. We tasted it out of curiosity, but as if it was poison.

At the start of Year 3, we experienced our one and only bout of sleepwalking, and Mum used to love to re-enact it. She'd mime how she came in and stood in the middle of our bedroom. We would sit cross-legged on our respective beds enjoying the show. We'd never tire of seeing ourselves through her eyes, her gestures and her vocal mimicking. She'd start with exaggerated yawns that were supposed to sound like ours, but in fact they were as loud as Grandpa's so it immediately turned the show into a farce. A lugubrious cry would follow and she'd open her eyes wide with an exaggerated 'ooooh'. This was to convey that she was worried and puzzled, and she'd pretend to hurry to the spot where she was already standing. Her feet were anchored to the floor but she would swing her torso backwards and forwards so that you really had the impression that she was careering through the bedroom. For her captive audience, she'd transform herself into two drowsy little boys who couldn't see their flabbergasted mother suddenly coming to a halt. One is huddled on his bed with bulging eyes, hypnotised by the threat, and the other throws himself on him. Mum would keep switching roles, and then mimic her relief at realising that we were alright. And then her expression would change again and she would look worried at what she was witnessing. As a child she was even better - she imitated really well her two sons face to face. You the terrified one, pointing and shouting: 'The train, the train, the traaiiinn's arriving'. Just by looking at her we could tell

that you were on the point of being run over. Then she became me, got down on all fours and assumed a menacing and yet very calm gaze, imitating my chilling smile. Then the terrible sound came out of her mouth as she imitated my ‘Choo, choo, choo, choo, ch...’. I was the baddie, ready to squash you to a pulp, or rather into sausage for Nan’s stuffed tomatoes! To put an end to those horrible ‘choo, choos’, one of us absolutely had to wake up. Mum became herself again and instinctively turned on the lamp. And so we came to the moment when she took you in her arms and calmed you. How lucky you were to be the goodie! She hugged you very tightly and put you back into bed. But I got treated very differently - she made it very clear that she was unhappy with my ‘Choo choos’. You had already closed your eyes and Mum could focus on her other son. But we sensed that she especially liked acting out the next bit and showing that I wasn’t after all the devil. It was my turn to get a hug. A silence invaded the room and it was time to go to sleep. She turned out the light and stood there for a moment in the darkness until her eyes could make out the shadows of her two sons.

At the trial you were careful not to talk about the sleepwalking episode. Who knows, it might have influenced the jury. It really resonated after Venice... I really didn’t want to be the one to squash his brother. And I saw in this foreshadowing of events a kind of protective function.

Having an actress for a mother meant we knew our Narcissus by heart. She always used to say to us: 'In playing someone else while giving everything of yourself, you're pitched into the cauldron of emotions.' And we were pitched in there with her! At home we had a star for a mother, but in the real world she was a jobbing actress. She didn't let us see that, playing to perfection the role of the fulfilled actress. She forbade bitterness from crossing our threshold and resentment from invading her heart. It had started out promisingly for her with a first prize from the conservatory of dramatic art, but the problem was that she lived in the provinces and did not therefore come to notice. A handful of leading roles in classic repertory plays performed in village halls were never going to cut it. She had us so young, and carrying twins meant she had to rest up, and then it took her a while to recover. The roles didn't wait for her. I can still see her standing in front of the large mirror in the living room in a long wine-coloured velvet dress, laced up at back with billowing sleeves and a scalloped neckline. She looked like a film actress in it, but the problem was there were never any films. Before coming on stage – the two square metres between our sofa and the mirror – she'd bunch her hair up in a loose bun and the very same lock would always hang free. And just before speaking, without realising it she'd swallow a few times out of stage fright. At some point she'd be overcome with sobs - we were as used to that as we were to her slightly over-loud laugh. At the end there would be a silence and then we'd clap until our hands hurt. After all, we were having to play the part of a full house on its feet applauding her. We'd devour her with our eyes. I'd always hesitate between watching her or her reflection, and I'd end up positioning myself so that I could catch both. Later on, I found words for her desperate urge to keep alive the little girl inside her who wanted everything, because nothing could be too much. I won't ask you anything, Julien, about the life the two of you spent without me. You're conning yourself if you wallow in what might have been - you're just inviting guilt in. Guilt took a bite, a good chunk, out of my soul and you can't stitch that back together.

After her performance in front of the living room mirror, we'd watch her silently put her beautiful dress back on its hanger and then close the wardrobe. You got the impression she was closing herself in there too.

On just one occasion we saw her perform somewhere other than in our living room. At the request of our headmistress at the end of our last year in nursery school, Mum played Goldilocks. And the three bears and the little girl. The canteen served as the stage with us children sitting cross-legged on the floor a few inches from her. To play the bears, she put on an ushanka, and as the little girl she made a great play of swishing around her false golden locks. Before going to bed, she had put rollers in her hair, and we were suitably disconcerted in the morning to find her looking like Nan in her curlers! Suddenly we found her old and were afraid she was going to die one day.

Anguish welled up in us - I read it in your eyes and you read it in mine. Later when she'd taken off the rollers, we discreetly grabbed them, stuffed them in the bottom of our satchels and quietly got rid of them in the school bin. I imagine they wondered where on earth they had come from. As if we could just have thrown away the future that would have taken away from us... Obviously we weren't aware what we were doing, we were just acting spontaneously. But we learnt soon enough that the future alone decides how it will turn out.

Back in the canteen, a crowd of little hands were applauding Mum. Our classmates were impressed. The three bears bowed and the ushanka ended up on the teacher's head. The headmistress came forward with two yellow roses, two golden roses. You and I were given the honour of presenting them to the actress, thereby getting our share of the applause too. I'd never liked the canteen so much! And then disaster struck. Goldilocks burst into tears and the ovation stopped dead. Mum tried to put on a brave smile which turned out more like a grimace. The teacher's hands remained outstretched as if she was Jesus! Goldilocksthreebears then did something that really wasn't polite: she left without saying goodbye to anyone, leaving the roses behind to wilt. We felt strangely mixed emotions inside, as if our hearts had been placed on a very soft rug, and *bang* somebody had pulled the rug and our hearts were left behind. When I think back to that episode, that's the image that comes to me. Coming on top of her looking prematurely like a granny with her curlers the day before, it was a lot to take in. The hairline fracture within your mother is your wound for life.

Performing in a canteen after years without a proper role or a stage to perform on, the accumulation of false hopes and disappointed expectations, of all that nothing, had finally pushed her over the edge. All these children, with us in the front row, represented her failure. How could she go on facing that failure? We couldn't express it, but what a commotion there was inside us! And we stood there helplessly as we watched her flee. Two little chaps wondering what on earth they had done wrong. The teacher finally lowered her arms and tried to pretend that nothing had happened, but as it turned out she *wasn't* a good actress. She watched Mum as she made for the school gates and you and I, Julien, set off simultaneously. We weren't allowed to leave the school grounds but at that moment we couldn't have cared less - we had to catch Mum up and be with her. We heard the teacher calling after us to wait for her, but we weren't going to risk losing sight of Mum. We were already in Rue du Dragon chasing after her, and people were turning round as they passed her - but not on this occasion because they found her beautiful. The crossroads a few yards further on was a bit scary and she must have sensed that we were following her. She stopped dead and we both slipped a hand in hers without a word. We didn't want to force her to take care of us, we wanted to take care of her. The lights changed from red to green and then back to red

again. Eventually she squatted down to our level. There was no more of the little girl about her, and her dishevelled false golden locks gave her a weird appearance. I think I can still feel her frozen fingers gripping mine. Memory is surprising in how it stocks, orders, sorts and arranges itself into a hierarchy. It can deceive us, but has good reasons for doing so.

We turned back towards the school and people had to make room for us on the pavement - we weren't going to let anyone separate us. The teacher was there on the other side of the road, trying to smile. If Mum had had a sister, I really wished in that moment that it was our teacher.

In the canteen they'd kept back for us a plate full of cake and three glasses of lemonade. One for all, and all for one! We raised our glasses.

Among the Dogon, twins possess a single soul and if one of them dies, the other has to conserve the absent one in the form of an effigy in order to be able to go on living. I've been blowing on extinguished candles for a long time. Talking can fan their flames, however cold they are. But to the point of burning ourselves? Everything is frozen inside me.

The Maya have a legend about a dynasty of twins. Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu are found decapitated. A princess comes across their remains and strokes the head of Hun Hunahpu, who spits on her and makes her pregnant. The coagulated blood on the tree from which the head of the twin was hanging becomes the artificial heart that saves Princess Ixquic from the wrath of her father, who is incensed at this unnatural union. The story can continue with two newborns, who are of course twins too. In the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya, we see them sitting cross-legged in profile with their arms crossed, one behind the other. They have weird haircuts that seem to be taking it out on their heads. The end of a belt pokes out from their bellies - it protrudes from the frame and looks like a pincer. What scar might it have left?

We couldn't understand, and still less could Mum, why people couldn't tell us apart. To us, it seemed so obvious which was which. We were the same and yet completely different. We refused to sport different haircuts or wear a colour that would identify us - we were twins, not criminals! At school our first efforts at writing were so similar - the same mistakes with the same words - that it troubled our teacher. She moved us to opposite ends of the classroom as if we'd been cheating. At first sight, we were impeccable copies of each other, and yet we didn't copy.

Mum never mixed us up and could even identify us from the back. I suppose she had her little tell-tale signs, but we never asked her what they were. The important thing was that she always recognised us. Imagine what it would be like for a kid if your mother or father always hesitated in front of you. Nan and Grandpa would shamelessly mix us up but we didn't hold it against them, because being with them at La Palmyre was pure joy. Mum would drop us off there every school holiday, and she enjoyed the arrangement too. We'd wait until the evening to telephone her and recount our day's adventures, sharing every little detail so that she wasn't missing out. On the phone she did have trouble telling us apart and we turned it into a guessing game that went on and on until she got a little fed up.

I haven't returned to our neighbourhood or to our place in Rue Madame, which Mum renamed Rue Milady. She'd even write Milady on the back of her envelopes or on our subscription forms and the postman played along, though only for us. That was typical Mum, turning a complete fiction into reality. We grew up in that place and in the Jardin du Luxembourg, which was an obligatory stopping-off point on our way home from school. The swings were all ours as well as the

Médicis fountain where the glowering cyclops prepares to snatch Acis away from Galatea. Mum liked the sculpture, but there's nothing to like about being snatched...

On Sundays she'd take us on long walks through Paris. She would turn a cul-de-sac into a fresh point of view, a bench into an island. If there were a couple of trees, we'd be in the countryside. She was always scrutinising the lives being played out behind the windows, on the lookout for stories. I can remember a ground-floor bay window in Rue Monsieur-le-Prince behind which there was a little girl on the tips of her toes in a tutu, concentrating hard. She was a little plump but had firm thighs and I would have liked to dance with her. Noticing that I was watching her, she executed a series of leaps and essayed a daring pirouette before disappearing from the room. What a queenly bearing she had! I didn't say a word about my sudden infatuation, but the following Sunday Mum, who invariably chose a different route every time, took us the same way. As we approached the bay window and the tutu it contained, I felt an overwhelming affection - not for the dancer but for the woman who was leading me to her. As always, Mum had completely grasped the situation.

The following day we were off to La Palmyre and then Venice. Four decades have passed since then and I still sometimes think of the little ballerina behind her window. I've made so many dates with her in my mind over the years. Who has been dancing with her in my place? When we were living in Rue Milady, I got so much pleasure out of life. I didn't realise it at the time. Now I'm constantly aware of it.

I tried to build up my muscles by lifting up Grandpa's boules each in turn. Morning, noon and evening I'd work my biceps, hoping after each session that they'd have doubled in volume. Our puny physiques bothered me. You, Julien, were more interested in preparing the aperitif with Mum and Nan, which needless to say involved home-made tomato juice. We'd drink while playing boules, or 'teasing the jack' as Grandpa called it.

He wasn't Mum's biological father - he'd adopted her before she could even walk. She had always known that she was adopted. There are no big secrets you can keep from a kid, and grown-ups would do well to remember it. Mum preferred not to share with us the circumstances of the death of the man who never got the chance to be our grandfather. But just before we turned eight, she told us a tale that was more than just a tale.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who was hardly out of her cradle, and she was teething and dribbling – Mum would blow bubbles of spit to illustrate her story! She ound herself on the floor with a whole virgin territory to explore. Silence was reigning in the house, which made her feel uncomfortable, so she tried to get out. Her bedroom door was ajar and she found herself in the corridor, drawn to the light streaming in through the front door. Summer was a welcome visitor to the house. She passed through a cloud of strange glittering particles, but she couldn't catch them. Never mind. The outside world was beckoning, where she was sure to find someone. She didn't mind getting into trouble for going somewhere she wasn't allowed to go, because she didn't want to be on her own anymore. Everything was gigantic, especially the sky – and Mum imitated a spinning top. The little girl made for the grass, which was softer on her knees. She spotted the big pine tree under which Dad liked to sit. She crawled around it, and she didn't mind the pine needles digging into her. This was where she sat upright for the first time. It was the day after a storm. She'd heard her parents rowing so loudly that it had blotted out the threatening thunder, but that hadn't reassured her. Then they had stopped speaking to each other altogether, and something had changed. It was as if the house had grown cold. The little girl didn't want to dwell on it, preferring to take in the scent of pine which permeated everything. Her mother would burn a little of it in every room 'like a magician' as her father used to say. Except that he didn't say it anymore. They should have been there with her, in this place where she wasn't supposed to be. There was something wrong, even with the shade of the tree. With her back against the trunk, the little girl looked up into the air. But... what on earth was...? 'Dad! Dad!' Why was she afraid of him? She'd never experienced fear before but she knew that it was not for her and she rebelled against it. Against the trunk, the shade and the fear. She'd never stood up by herself – And Mum leapt up so suddenly that we recoiled! So that's what was going on! Her dad had deliberately climbed up in the tree to force her to stand up on her own! She was relieved and it didn't matter that he

wasn't answering her - by stretching out her arm, she'd be able to touch him. – We knew her story and we wanted to stop the little girl from stretching out her arm, to stop Mum doing it, but we didn't dare.

The little girl tried to keep her balance. She was no longer trying to call out to her father, just to touch him.

The sun had moved and the shade had moved too, but not the shadow in the pine tree, although he was swaying very slightly, Hangeddad. This was no longer a tale, even though Mum and the little girl were telling their story. They both knew - they who were one person and yet not quite whole - that certain memories make living painful. Children like to be scared but only when it's make-believe, without any danger or pain or loss.

The little girl wouldn't let her father leave her altogether, despite him abandoning her. You can die and still live for a long time. Or you can live and die a little every day.

Every time she left Nan and Grandpa's place after dropping us off, Mum would walk past the pine tree and raise her fist. She knew we were watching her, but she didn't turn around and just continued on to the car with her fist held aloft. After all, she was still alive and that fist was her strength. She was trying to convey her resilience to us.

Nan, who was not yet then Nan, got remarried pretty quickly afterwards - she adopted a no-nonsense approach and decided not to allow the suicide to haunt her. Mum's father, who didn't have nine lives, died because he sought too much from life. There were too many loves that faded, too many suns that didn't always rise, too much adagios that he'd listen to over and over again. Nan found the little girl a brand-new handsome dad who would be there rain or shine and was more into bossa novas than adagios! She was not going to take any more chances with melancholic natures, but there was nothing she could have done to stop her daughter drowning in melancholy in a canteen where two kids saw Goldilocks in tears. The pine tree went on growing, but all the space around it shrank as new residences sprang up in La Palmyre and Royan was no longer as distant as another planet. The surfing boom took off just before we were born. Mum used to contemplate the ocean from afar, walking along the wild coast and its fifteen kilometres of straight beach, which were windy all year round. The gangs of boys surfing in the day gave her food for thought in the evening.

In the apartment in Rue Milady where you still live, Julien, there is a framed black-and-white photo - a yellowed class photo which is unusual in that none of us three appear in it. The kid in the photo is Hangeddad - the little girl never called him by any other name.

When she was a child, Mum would constantly hear how much she

took after Grandpa. That disgusted her, but out of consideration for her foster father (who didn't correct people), she never said a word. Fortunately, there was still this photo to show her who she was. She first paid attention to it when she was five - the very age of her father in the photo. She pointed at a little blond head in the third row - it looked like her, but she didn't recognise any of her classmates.

What the photo revealed was blood that continues to flow but doesn't wound. An image of an inaccessible past which transcended definitive absence. Looking like a boy didn't bother her in the least. The little girl felt beautiful for resembling someone who was no longer there.

But finally there came an episode which forever deprived Mum of the strength to hold her fist aloft, though her fist remained clenched forever thereafter.

I was just a speck among the sea of faces in Venice, my thighs exposed by my shorts, but someone had trained their gaze on me.

There was a man flitting backwards and forwards across St. Mark's Square. He never approached us, but he was there that day. He had been there yesterday and the day before. He didn't talk to anyone and kept his distance, but already he possessed me. He had manoeuvred himself into position without me realising. He seemed to show no interest in me or even to look in my direction. But for three days he had been scoping out the lay of the land and he had found me. When the time came, he would have no hesitation in striking. He was there, all around us, and he was about to massacre us. You two, Mum and Julien, had eyes only for the panna.

When childhood ends with clenched fists, it takes a long time for it to end when you can't hold those clenched fists aloft. Tomorrow had ceased to exist.