
HERVÉ LE TELLIER

... The ...
Intervention
... of a ...
Good Man ...

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
ADRIANA HUNTER

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Everything invented is real.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

I get attached very easily.

ROMAIN GARY

THE INTERVENTION OF
A GOOD MAN

overly long prologue

Inverness comes from the Gaelic *Ibhir Ness*, meaning “mouth of the Ness.” A monster lurks in its loch, but our hero, who will arrive there tomorrow (Flight BA823), has no interest in that at all. He is coming to the heart of the Highlands to be with a woman, a very blond woman as they sometimes are in Scotland, who is twenty years younger than he is, none of which constitutes even the bare bones of a portrait.

He is coming to be with her in a place where, for the last two weeks, she has been staying with her mother and in a few days will be joined by the man with whom she spends her nights, therefore almost a husband. Of course people would call this madness, a mistake. He has made many mistakes and will make more. He is convinced—perfectly aware that he is quoting Oscar Wilde—that the only things we never regret are our mistakes.

It seems appropriate at this stage to say a little more about our hero. He will soon turn fifty. There

are not fifty different ways to tackle fifty. There are two: in the first instance, you persuade yourself you are still young; in the second, you complain you are already old. Our hero ought to reject both, one out of realism, the other out of a concerted effort of will, but he settles for an obstinate pendulum swing, depending on the time of day. He is not altogether wrong in this: after all, in ten years his testosterone level will most likely start to drop and, in the absence of actual crutches for medicinal purposes, this defining question may be definitively settled. Suffice it to say that, if these are not his first old years, they are at least the last of his young ones.

Our hero has made quite an effort. He arrives tanned (there are those who would say red-faced, but some of these creams work miracles), with a bit of new muscle tone (the starting point was very low), and slightly slimmer (he was not all that fat). He hopes that these slight differences will be apparent to the young woman, but would still like to be not too different from the man he was when he managed to seduce her. He remembers the story of the woman who—because her older partner constantly strove to stay young—eventually left him for an even older man.

Our heroine, you see, seems to appreciate mature men. Her regular partner—I think we can call him

that—is the same age as the irregular one, to within a month. Better two lovers of fifty than one of a hundred, the more facetious among us would quip. The reason our heroine appreciates mature men (we much prefer this expression to “old”) is not something our hero knows. He imagines it is for their wisdom, their experience, perhaps their social status—all things that do not affect him—and does not for a moment feel that wrinkles, spare tires, and creeping baldness could come under the jurisdiction of sex appeal. He thinks that whatever there is between himself and her is a misunderstanding, but feels happier saying nothing about it. Our hero is forgetting that the young, who can seduce without even thinking about it, are not always thinking of seducing. The more mature exhaust themselves with it from the moment they wake. Perhaps, with all the anxious application these two men put into appealing to her, our heroine gets what she wants.

When our hero met this heroine for the first time at a party, she was escorted by her official partner. He gave this Other (we will adopt this pleasingly nebulous term) not a moment’s thought. He found he lacked charm, but the gauging process was very swift. Our hero has not met him since but, out of curiosity, made discreet inquiries, deftly questioning mutual acquaintances. Nothing he should worry about, that

was his deduction. Let us say that—if social elements matter to her—they are playing in the same league.

Mind you, the Other has stolen a march on him. Three years in a lifetime is huge, at least that is what she seems to think, because he constantly hears her saying so. The Other has become her family, while he is just a stranger. True, our hero has known her only two months, and they have seen each other, what, ten, fifteen times. How, in such a short time, he has managed to weave the web that grows tighter with every passing hour is quite another question.

No one would disagree with us on this: our heroine is pretty, very pretty. She knows it, of course. We cannot keep asking pretty women, whom men are always reminding of the fact, to behave as if they were ugly. Ours is tall, slender, with delightful little breasts, and her regular bicycling keeps her small buttocks firm; her face is dusted with freckles, her eyes are blue with flecks of gold and deep purple, and her blond hair is cut short. From a particular angle our heroine is fractionally less pretty, but the impression is terribly fleeting. As for our hero, similarly, from one specific angle he is very good-looking, but this vision is even more transient.

She is also intelligent and cultivated, although perhaps a little too ponderously so—her fondness for German authors sometimes worries him. He

himself tends more toward advocates of derision: he has trouble taking seriously anyone who actually takes themselves too seriously on the third planet in a second-rate solar system. If he does not know whether she has a sense of humor, then on his own head be it: for fear of boring her, he tries to have enough for two when he is with her. He knows she can be sweet and gentle. He is afraid she could sometimes prove hard, but does not suspect her of cruelty.

Does he love her? His current state presents all the symptoms of love: painful impatience, shortness of breath, constricted chest, complete loss of appetite. For days on end he has thought of nothing but her, with a feeling of genuine dependence. An addiction which, with hindsight, justifies the term "heroine." What does he think of when he thinks of her? Her eyes, her mouth, the back of her neck, other parts of her body that no listing could ever exhaust. This is a physical desire, one he could never fight. But what drives him toward her first and foremost is a sense of suffering, which at some points he lucidly analyzes as a fear of losing her, a fear made all the more agonizing and incomprehensible by the fact that we cannot lose what we do not possess. Does he dream about her, about what might, one day, be possible? With salutary prudence, he tries to forbid himself any plans. He does love her—we

should not be afraid to use the words—and is aware that he should not.

Does she love him? No, any sensible person would reply. She is not especially considerate with him, never allows him to believe she depends on him for anything. She is quite capable of going for days on end without giving any sign of life. If we are not talking of love, but only of proof of love, the latter is sorely lacking. Unless we consider that offering her body and opening her lips for his kisses amount to indications of any such feeling for him, which is what our hero has decided to believe. He finds comfort in remembering their embraces, which are always intense. He knows from the taut feel of her young body beneath his hands that he has been synonymous with pleasure for her, every time they have met.

Let us say then that declarations, tender pronouncements, are rare. But that does not prove anything either, our hero has decided, remembering that he has received them in the past, some of them quite lovely. He prefers to believe that if our heroine occasionally seems very inflexible, it is because she feels any superfluous admission would represent a promise, and that her own honest nature means she can never leave him room for hope, because hopes dashed are a source of suffering. If our hero could

read the awkward cumbersome sentence the narrator has just hatched, he would sigh, because, poor chap, he is so perfectly incapable of such strategies himself.

With the passing years and the traces they leave on his body and his features, our hero has taken to doubting whether anyone could desire him. But, oddly, as soon as a woman shows that she does, he is convinced she can but love him. He is aware of his good qualities: a degree of intelligence, a sense of humor that he manages to maintain in any situation, and indisputable gentleness. He is not a bad lover, he is also sincere, attentive, and tender. He is vulnerable and sensitive, which, in some women's eyes, can be an asset. Lastly, if he wants to seduce or even just convince someone, he can draw on energies even he finds astonishing. Which is why he is amazed that this young woman who certainly desires him finds it so easy to resist the love he inspires and, equally, the love she inspires in him. Every indication is that she finds our hero's feelings for her distressing. We will not take this any further at this juncture.

The rendezvous has been arranged on a main road, where the A32 crosses the S70 to be precise, beside a sign that shows the way to the improbably named "Inchnadamph." Our hero stayed up late into the night the day before, poring over maps of the Highlands on which the A32 was marked in bright

red and the s70, deemed a tourist route, was edged in green. On the Internet he consulted ten different online route finders, zooming in on satellite views until he had transformed Inchnadamph into a fog of pixels. If the map were the landscape, he would know how to find his way with his eyes closed. By matching up a local directory with the telephone number that appeared on his cell phone when she called from Scotland, he managed to find the address and first name of this mother she had come to stay with. A very Scottish first name, one our hero could never even have guessed existed. In desperation and if he hired a taxi, he could always play the trick of the guy who broke down just outside their house, which, metaphorically, would not be far from the truth.

What will be the first thing this young woman says by the roadside? Of course, not everything hangs on that. But this question provides as good an opportunity as any to close the prologue.

Chapter ... 1

In which our hero becomes the victim of logistics.

A number of depressing possibilities.

We should always beware an overprepared journey, says no proverb at all. Our hero has thought of everything, except for the three-hour delay before take-off. He has to change flights and his arrival is now scheduled for early evening. Unhappy at the airport, happy in love?

He warns the heroine he will be late, by text, then with a call (he too frequently adopts this “belt and suspenders” approach with her). He has learned that indifference and distance, even feigned, are weapons. But our hero is not a man of weapons, not calculating. On the telephone, she shows little evidence of disappointment at this hitch, and immediately proposes meeting the following day rather than that evening, however late. A subtle pause on the other end of the line does commit her to suggesting he call as

soon as he lands, and to see where they stand then. He agrees. It is a short call. She does not want the conversation to go on, he has no wish to insist, or rather to appear insistent.

He hangs up. The rather false smile he forced on himself falls from his lips. He had constructed a perfectly lighthearted expression, and here he is now plunged straight back into gloom. It is nearly a week since he called her—and it is almost always he who calls her. She had asked for some time to herself, he granted it. There was her voice again, lilting and distant, its very distinctive articulation suggesting constant impatience. For a long time he could not bring himself to erase a banal message from his answering machine simply because in it, and this was too rare an event for his liking, she let slip a note of tenderness. He wishes he could listen to it again right now.

I shouldn't go, our hero keeps thinking. Seeing me again isn't at all important to her, it even seems a nuisance. And that is yet more proof she doesn't care.

But, although all his logic dictates this conclusion, he would still rather cling to less regrettable interpretations: she might not have told her mother, she doesn't want to be bicycling late into the evening, in the pitch dark, plenty of explanations that do little to satisfy him. He finds himself ridiculous and now views himself with a degree of contempt, which, in

his eyes, might eventually justify the disdain felt for him. He must pull himself together. Have strength, for goodness' sake! If he's seeing her tomorrow, what does it matter! What will he gain by insisting on seeing her this evening, if it's to be for a few minutes in the rain, in a rental car? The mounting absurdity of the situation is not lost on him.

Our hero goes back to his cell phone. He calls his children. No need perhaps to point out he has two: a girl of twelve, a boy of ten, utterly adorable. He has just spent three weeks of July with them, beside the sea. The day before—as is the rule—they left to vacation with their mother for the whole of August. He is not ashamed of needing the sparkle in their laughter, needing the color in their voices. Hearing them, he knows, will for a few sweet moments bring him back to the happiness of uncomplicated love, to his second life, the radiant, fatherly one. At the other end someone picks up, and the magic works. All enthusiasm, the boy talks about soccer (PSG beat Lens 2–1, epic); all exuberance, the girl describes the small swimming pool their grandparents have just had made (there's a porthole to light it up at night, awesome). They talk about everything and nothing, his eyes are full of laughter, everything is better, everything is fine.

He hangs up and goes to find out about the refreshments generously offered by the airline. An

autumnal chill is gradually pervading this airport with its military and presidential name, where no one, except for him, seems to be growing impatient. The passengers at Gate 26 are leaving for Tel Aviv, those at Gate 23 for Algiers, and those at Gate 22 for Reykjavík.

The staff of the British airline has opted for invisibility, when the scheduled takeoff time is already long gone. Will he leave before nightfall? He slips on the cotton cardigan he brought to tackle the cool Celtic evenings. The cream of his knitwear clashes with the faded burgundy of the seats in the waiting area.

Chapter ... 2

In which Charles de Gaulle is a bastard.

In which our hero gets the heroine to speak.

The intervention of a good man.

Takeoff is scheduled with a five-hour delay. A relief airplane is coming in from London. Our hero can no longer soothe himself with the hope of arriving any sooner than late into the night. He has called back the young woman to let her know, and suggests one last time coming to pick her up so he can spend the night with her. She dismisses the offer, insists he call back in the morning. She argues that she would really rather not invent some lie for her mother. Our hero takes this pretext at face value and will have to make do with it. All the same, he tries—we really do never learn—to extract a few kind words from our heroine, or at least some sort of encouragement. She will not be moved but does concede that she is very sorry he is stuck at Charles de Gaulle. Then she

agrees he can call once he is on the way to Braemore. She said Very sorry. It's not much. Not much at all. To be honest, it's enough to make you cry. But our hero is too grown up to cry.

Let's laugh instead: from the Paris airport, our hero has also contacted his hotel to let them know about the delay. A kindly Scotsman—a warmly dressed redhead with alopecia, waiting to catch the same flight—overheard his administrative conversation. He starts talking to our hero, who looks him up and down in amazement. My God, I bet this guy's the same age as me, he shudders. He wonders how, in all honesty, he could be sure of looking any younger.

As friendly as you please, the man tells him the best way to get to the town he referred to. He goes so far as to say the hotel in question is magnificent. And finishes with a You're lucky to be spending a night there. Our hero thinks that, in actual fact, this night will be spent alone, and he will leave the hotel when the time comes to check out without having been joined by the young woman. Still, he thanks the kindly Scotsman as best he can.

But four stars for one man on his own is a lot less fun than two stars for two people.

Chapter ..3

*The kindness of fate. In which our hero, in
the face of adversity, rallies himself.*

In the end, it is almost eight o'clock in the evening when the DC-10 deigns to alight on Scottish soil, not before the airline (whom we will not name and shame) has stuffed its occupants with filthy paninis, unblushingly billed at five euros apiece. Our hero, the first to emerge from the baggage hall—precisely because he has no baggage—rushes over to the Avis Car Rental desk, picks up his keys, runs to find the car, lobs his bag into the trunk, opens the door, and sits inanely in the passenger seat, this, of course, being a British car. No witnesses to the procedure, by good fortune. Facing this absence of a steering wheel, in the passenger seat of a foreign sedan, stationary and driverless, it occurs to him that this is a remarkable allegory for his own amorous situation.

A long hour's drive spent changing gear with his

left hand, a phone call that was as pointless as it was depressing—Tomorrow would be better, she reiterated—and now here he is at his hotel in a state of unusual physical and emotional exhaustion. But fate has a way of playing an elegant hand: the place is as ugly as could be, and this fact is not without its jubilant compensation, so utterly inappropriate would it be to spend a night of passion here. The Braemore Great Southern Hotel is a building with about a dozen rooms, marshmallow-style lighting, long corridors, and ugly carpeting with a leafy, gilded, cross-hatched design on a black background. It would be no surprise to meet the blond twins from *The Shining* at the end of a corridor, and streams of blood could easily spring from the elevator shaft. In the lobby, Maria Callas is singing from *La forza del destino*, but who is taken in by that? His room is vast, the bed equally so, and our hero promises himself to sleep across it, in order to reap the best return on his investment.

He also congratulates himself for deciding to keep a diary of his misadventures—he dare not think in terms of “adventure.” This sort of work in progress means he can sustain an illusion that his being here is not entirely without purpose, but surely illusions are the driving force behind his situation? His love of the aesthetic and the absurd are both amply gratified.

This is going to need footnotes, he thinks. He will write those later, perhaps.

It has been agreed that he will call the heroine in the morning, at ten o'clock. He has already prepared what he will say, asking her to forgive him for being so pushy this evening, which was probably because he was tired of waiting. He will be a new man, he promises himself he will.

But is a restorative night even possible in the peculiar state in which our hero finds himself? And will everything seem better in the morning?

No.

The night does not improve anything. Besides, our hero dreams.

He follows her a long way, a long, long way, to a hotel beside the sea which probably does not exist anywhere in the world. The place, for readers who might know Chris Marker's film, is like the hotel in *The Jetty*. Others will have to imagine an empty modern building, lots of concrete and not much glass, almost a blockhouse, standing in the middle of a felled pinewood, beneath gray clouds stretching to a gloomy horizon. Our heroine is with the Other on a wide beach full of dirty, lumpy pebbles, and dozens of people who have come to the seaside only to cart their boredom somewhere new. It is October weather, windless. Our hero walks down a path and

goes over to them. She sees him. He cannot remember what the Other looks like in real life but here, in the dream, he does not visualize him, and it does not matter. They are busy writing postcards to mutual friends. They say names and surnames. He does not recognize any of them. This very ignorance is painful to him. There are two sky blue air mattresses beside them, they can only be theirs. The hero lies down on one. She is only three feet away. Despite the fact that the Other is there, she seems completely unself-conscious, as does our hero. He looks over toward the sea, people swimming, watches her too, but his nonchalant gaze is intended to make the Other think she is merely part of the scenery.

She and the Other have discussions about whom they really must send postcards to. There is a strong sense that a lot is at stake in these decisions, a disproportionate amount. She does the writing, he is happy just to sign. All at once, our heroine turns to our hero and says something innocuous, to do with stamps. She should be speaking to him as a stranger but she lays her hand on his shoulder. She has just made a blunder, he can see by the look in her eye, but the Other does not react, he looks at him and suddenly he takes shape, it is ridiculous, in real life this Other has a fairly ordinary physique and no depth, but in the dream he is peerlessly magisterial. Our hero sees

something of Beckett in him, and of Terence Stamp too, the lie of his hair, or the suit he is wearing, black, double-breasted, beautifully cut, utterly inappropriate for the beach. The Other seems convinced he knows him. Our hero simply replies, "No, I don't think so." He stands up and leaves. Without looking back.

He is at the hotel again, and it is now like a hotel in Moscow, on a gigantic scale with strong geometric lines and a central staircase around which the rooms are arranged. There is nothing comfortable about his room, and this too has a Soviet air, it is vast, with an odd layout, the sink halfway along one wall, the carpet bald. A room no one could ever feel right in. He wishes she would join him there, but also wishes he were somewhere else, anywhere, but not here. It is very hot. He lies down on the bed. The sheets are untidy, the covers crumpled, he has never slept in it, this mess is from the previous occupants. Damn, he feels depressed.

Our heroine opens the door to the room, says his name, unenthusiastically. And our hero then feels so sad and his sadness is so piercing that he wakes up.

Chapter . . . 4

In which our hero rereads and corrects his notes.

In which he prepares for the worst and also the best.

Daylight peeps through the skimpy curtains. His cell phone blinkingly indicates it is three minutes past six in the morning. Our hero wakes, exhausted, after too short a night. Quite unable to get back to sleep, he sits on the bed, switches on his laptop, and reworks the few notes he made. A reader (a woman reader comes to mind more readily but it could just as well be a man) would be wrong to think that this new text was less sincere than the first draft, from which it differs only in small details. In fact the opposite is true: there, on his keyboard, our hero hones his thoughts, adjusting words to try to capture his feelings as accurately as possible. His sentences also expel the tragic element, and he is not displeased by the redeeming role he makes them play. If our hero had any recollection of things he read long ago, he would

know that, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle ascribed the word "catharsis" to this purging of passions through practicing an art form.

True.

In more prosaic terms, writing also eats away the minutes, which is no mean feat.

It is now two and a half hours until he can call her. They are going to see each other, definitely. Yes but, yes but, our hero suddenly worries, could it be she has already made her decision, that nothing can make her change her mind? Has she let him come to the farthest reaches of the Highlands to tell him that she will no longer give herself to him? And if this is the case, could he hold it against her? She owes him nothing, of course, and he did so insist on coming.

Come on, he thinks, if I seem lighthearted, care-free, smiley, I'll persuade her to accept my kisses, my affection, and, softly softly, when the feeling is right, to make love. I will put far more energy into that than any introspection and soul-searching.

This lightheartedness is essential. For, if our hero would only admit it to himself, it was the very moment the heroine sensed the beginnings of true feelings in him that she kept her distance, as if afraid. Our heroine does not want any complications. It suddenly occurs to him that he needs to affect indifference, that she will surrender herself

more readily to a man who does not love her than to one who does.

Granted, this detachment is not a character trait he appreciates in her, but if it is thanks to this that they end up making love, should he complain? Yes, cries some part of him, yes, I should complain. If all she's looking for is my lust, if she doesn't want to be loved, then she doesn't love me.

This is his implacable deduction. And, anyway, if he no longer feels any love, what will happen? Our hero knows the workings of his own body by heart, and realizes that, with age, the path adopted by his desire has become more cerebral, more vulnerable. All his life, desire alone has never been completely sufficient for him to desire completely. But now, everything about the other person needs to convince him, the attentiveness of every gesture, the tension in her entire body. He wants her skin to long for his, and to prove it to him every moment. This demanding requirement, he fears, will become increasingly difficult to satisfy with the passing years.

Our hero closes his eyes. He tries to reconstruct her face, to rekindle, beneath his eyelids, cheerful images of times they spent together. Only anecdotal images emerge, that bottle of muscat drunk from coffee cups, a stolen kiss in the harsh light of the Métro, a

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ray of sunlight skimming the golden hairs on an arm, loving words sidelined in favor of pleasure. Too few definite images to strengthen his resolve.

He tosses and turns between the sheets.

Our hero yawns. Sighs.

We'll see.

And this closes Chapter 4.

Chapter ... 5

In which the suspense is at its height.

An ineffective strategy.

Disaster foretold.

At a quarter past nine our hero gets up, takes a shower, and goes down for breakfast. He is just drinking his Lipton tea with its international yellow teabag tag when his eye settles on the digital clock. It flashes three figures: 8:55.

Because did you know, dear reader, that Scotland is one hour behind mainland Europe? Our hero suddenly remembers this and realizes to his despair that it is not yet nine o'clock while his wretched cell phone is still saying it is 9:58. He spends the additional hour trying to sleep. It will prove in vain.

Ten o'clock, well, five minutes to (he did not hold out). He catches our heroine asleep. In a weary, irritable voice she agrees to meet him at eleven. Seeing me again, he thinks, is definitely far from urgent. She

names a new meeting place, outside a pub on the A32, because she is worried he will not be able to find the previously agreed place, by the sign to Inchnadamph, if you remember.

Our hero takes his precautions, and arrives, of course, with half an hour to spare. The pub is a miserable affair, the creepily unnatural love child of a franchised truck stop and a traditional inn. It looks out over the main road, is utterly deserted. Later, our hero will gather that people have wedding receptions here. He turns back over the white gravel, and decides to go to the previous meeting place, about a mile farther on. There, he opens the trunk, carefully reads the manual for the Nissan Almera, and manages to collapse the rear seat, planning to put a bicycle in the back shortly.

For some time now, our hero has dreamed of this crossroads between the A32 and S70, the place where they would be reunited. He pictured somewhere more rural, dry stone walls, something more—how could he put this—Scottish. A recently built church devoid of any charm stands facing a featureless roadside café, the road is wide, busy, noisy. He leaves the car, walks a little way along the S70, sets off over the narrow bridge that spans a peaceful river, and looks at the undulating moor and copses from which she could emerge. Suddenly frightened by his own nerve, he goes back to the car.

It is a beautiful day. He is not sure whether this is a good thing. The cold shower he can feel looming will dry quickly in the sun.

Our hero is sitting in the Nissan, parked, with the engine off, in the church parking lot, when our heroine goes past. She is on foot, pushing her bicycle, and has not seen him. What is it they say in bad novels? That his heart feels squeezed like a sponge, that his blood freezes? Alas, all the clichés are true. He is amazed to feel so much emotion, so feverish, hates himself for his sentimentality.

She gets back on her bicycle, and he does not call out to her. He looks at her, her hair, her back, her buttocks, let's admit it. He dare not call out her name. He can tell that this hesitation is a bad sign: Does he know he is already in the wrong for parking here, where she was not expecting him? Or perhaps, fearing he is condemned, he does not want to hasten the hour of his execution? So he lets her pedal on awhile, starts the car, overtakes her, and goes to wait for her at the appointed place, on the crunching white gravel.

It takes only a few minutes to bicycle just over a mile. Enough for him to regret subjecting her to such an arduous hill, in the crushing heat, and he decides to turn back. He immediately meets her on the road and comes to a stop, facing her. She was finishing the

hill on foot, bicycle in hand. A lock of blond hair clings to her slick forehead. She sees him, manages admirably well to hide her pleasure.

Our hero steps out of the car, our heroine keeps on pushing her bike. She sketches an appropriate sort of smile, with no result. He has not practiced any opening lines, and tries a conspiratorial grin. Perhaps we should forget the ensuing exchange of words which is pitifully mundane. She kisses him, their lips brush past each other for a fraction of a second. She does not want this kiss to last, and he immediately gathers he is not welcome, he should not be here at all. How strange, he thinks, that the worst is always foreseeable. Let's go somewhere else, not this pub, he suggests. And adds, Even to split up, I'm sure we can find something better. She makes no comment.

He puts her bike in the trunk, which refuses to accommodate it: the gap between the rear seats is too narrow, the saddle will not go through. He pulls down the trunk door, which will have to remain partly open. She shrugs her shoulders. Either way, her gesture implies: we won't be going far. It is an excellent summary.

She sits down beside him, not looking at him. Where are you taking me? she asks. He gives the name of the hotel where he has booked a room for the second night. The Glen Carron Park Hotel. She

knows it. It is nearby. She adds: It's the next turn on the right. They are off.

They drive along. Her perfume instantly pervades the car despite the open windows. It is such a distinctive fragrance, lily of the valley mingled with vanilla. The smell of their rare moments of Parisian intimacy, of her pretty naked body beneath his, of the nape of her neck docile to his kisses. It is a gentle perfume but a heady one that he took everywhere with him, that stayed with him for hours, long after he had made love to her. It is an almost painful scent as the two of them drive along to the Glen Carron Park Hotel.

Occasionally, as a riposte, our hero would spray himself with Chanel Pour Monsieur. Eau de toilette versus perfume, cistus and oak versus lily of the valley, it was an unequal battle. Be that as it may, in his haste, he has forgotten to bring the bottle.

Chapter .. 6

In which our hero finds renewed hope.

In which our heroine shows signs of hesitation.

The car trundles along the small Scottish roads toward the hotel, the Glen Carron Park Hotel. He has not tired of saying its name, which has such a charming ring to it. Your hotel's very nice, she concedes. I'd rather you called it our hotel, our hero manages ironically. Silence on the passenger seat. I'd also rather you went ahead and attached yourself with that, he adds, pointing at her seat belt which she is holding halfheartedly across her chest. Then he thinks about his choice of words and goes on, But I do know you have trouble getting attached. He smiles, she meekly fastens her seat belt.

We can see here that, yes, our hero is capable of smiling. In fact, from this point on and until notification is given to the contrary, the reader should only be picturing our hero with a smile on his lips. This

smile may be ironic, genuine, seductive, amused, or sad, but he will not abandon it and give in to moody pouting. It is a question of dignity but also of survival.

They park in the hotel's lot, the Nissan slips between two luxurious German sedans. They take the bike from the trunk, and she immediately crosses the road to secure it to a lamppost. The building is indeed very impressive. A two-story, brick-built coaching inn, looking delightful in the sunshine. A Virginia creeper sprawls over its walls, framing the bedroom windows. The spacious lobby with its marble flooring has an air of Mediterranean luxury.

Our heroine does not go with him, preferring instead to stay outside to have a cigarette. She smokes too much but our hero couldn't give a damn if this affects the health of those around her. In order to get back to her as quickly as possible, he abandons his bags to the bellboy and simply makes a mental note of the room number. Because he feels his time is limited.

He looks around for her. Fails to see her right away. For a brief moment he thinks she has left, that he will never see her again. It would be absurd. But he now has his doubts about everything.

There is a lounge bar alongside the hotel and he suggests they have a drink on the terrace. She orders a glass of cider and he has sparkling mineral water. These details are of only minor importance, but

every now and then it is appropriate for insignificant details to be given their full weight. It is a hot day, too. With a determined flourish, our hero opens an umbrella (*Always Coca-Cola!* shrieks the red canvas) and takes cover in its shade. He would loathe it if his scalp, whose capillary betrayals are already familiar to him, now started shining like a mirror.

Our heroine is reserved but has a lot to say. She talks and explains and hopes she is being persuasive. Her mother, whom she never sees enough, a few weeks, once or twice a year, her boyfriend, who is due to arrive soon and will be staying with her, and him, so incongruous in this place. She does not want her mother to guess, from her serial absences, that she is having an affair. More important, she does not want the Other, who knows nothing of her infidelity, to find out about it and possibly suffer as a result. He doesn't deserve that, she adds.

Then she talks about her mother, at length. She tells such a sad and intimate story that he feels quite disarmed. He maintains his idiotically frozen smile even though there really is nothing to smile about. She points this out to him. He says he is very sorry, erases any trace of jollity from his face. He wishes he knew how to console her, how to leave her alone with her mother, alone with her family. He understands. Honestly.

They fall silent. She brings her cider up to her lips. The bitter taste surprises her, she makes a face.

But anyway, our hero says. I'm here now. What to do? She smiles. It is a pretty smile, it really is. Although he has never been an authority on women's smiles and what they mean, our hero thinks to himself that no one can smile like that without feeling something. He responds with a different smile, of the happy variety. It all calls for a bit of sense and sensibility. If even Jane Austen says so, then it must be true.

He takes her hand.

She surrenders it to him.

For a moment.

Chapter . . . 7

*The beautiful Glen Carron Park.
Sheep, droppings, and swans.
A brief discussion.*

Opposite the Glen Carron Park Hotel, for all to admire, lies Glen Carron Park, which leads to Eilan Castle and to the smaller of the two lochs, Loch Fannich. The more inquisitive reader can refer to the lush green images languishing on the Internet. A northern sun shines down, it is very hot. Our hero is carrying his jacket, a so-called middle-season garment and completely pointless. They have to cross the road to reach a trail that is asphalted but meant only as a footpath. He looks the wrong way, she holds him back by his sleeve before he launches himself under the wheels of a truck. A sign reads: Eilan Castle, 2.1 miles.

Two point one miles is a half-hour walk, at a good pace, the very pace adopted by our heroine. Our hero

conforms to her speed, even though it is hardly fitting for a lovers' stroll. In any event, she will not let him hold her by the waist or, from now on, by the hand. He does not insist. Our hero's shoes squeak and our heroine makes fun of him, not unkindly. They are walking shoes, sturdy old ones, but with every step they give a little sound like a timorous mouse. He has never noticed it in all the bustle of the capital. This discreet squeaking escorts them on their way.

She talks, haphazardly, about Scottish sheep, Scottish moors, Scottish thistles, Scottish seagulls. Whether he likes it or not, he agrees to discuss these rustic and nationalist topics with her. He thinks that "Thistle Song to a Seagull" would be a good song title for Joni Mitchell, but does not mention this.

He listens to her and watches her, distressed. He finds everything about her spellbinding, and our hero hates himself for this spell she casts on him so effortlessly, just by being dazzling, without even trying, and—worse—without even wanting to. So many have fallen, and will still fall for her charms. He does not hold this injustice against her, but it pains him. He can also tell that, whatever lengths he goes to, he will not cast a spell on her. Be careful what you wish for. Can our hero settle for being one of those plain people that others get used to rather than one of the beautiful ones they tire of?

He scrutinizes her, tries in vain to grasp what it is about this young woman he likes so much. She's not all that pretty, he tells himself several times, before fuming, because, in spite of everything, she is so very pretty. He also suspects that she could easily be even more so: she would simply have to want to be, for his sake.

He finds himself wondering whether it is this denial of love that he is drawn to, captivated by, luring him to the abyss. Isn't the word "attraction" a synonym for gravitation, he muses, and isn't a black hole which gives out no light at all far more attractive than all the stars? Rather taken with his cosmological musings, he tries every now and then—though always in vain—to kiss her, injecting as much humor as possible into his advances.

The castle has come into view, with its drawbridge, its moat, and its crenellations. They have come across plenty of carts trundling tourists—some of them in kilts—toward the site, and drawn by horses that expel droppings with impressive regularity. They exchange a considerable number of comments about these droppings, their smell, and the magpies and crows that come and peck at them, and eventually reach the edge of the loch. A dead tree, smothered in moss and ivy, enjoys a second, parasitic life. Our heroine is talking about a swallow that has nested near her window,

and asks him whether he thinks there are any eggs in the nest, and how long they will take to hatch. She asks him if swallows build nests as late as July. Hell, he doesn't have a clue. Out of courtesy, he gives some vague reply about global warming, the greenhouse effect, and the shifts that have been noticed in bird migrations. She gives the impression of being satisfied with that. She points to the swans, so white, on the far bank of Loch Fannich, and wants to sit on a rock by the water's edge. There is plenty of green grass, neatly mown, but she opts for the hard contours of this rock, and he takes this to mean they will not be here forever. He sits down beside her.

At their feet the water makes a listless lapping sound. In the distance swans move the way swans do, tiny dots of white on the loch's emerald surface. Nature does nothing for him. What he likes best about swans, if he really had to choose something, is the mimetic elegance of the word itself.

Our hero now wants to leave. His desire for her remains intact, as does his affection, he wants to go home before feeling dirty. He does not want a struggle. He has neither the will to be tyrannical nor the energy to be angry. If he has learned one thing, just one, it is that feelings, affection, and desire have to make or break themselves. And also that love—let's call it that for convention's sake—that love, then, is not a stone by

the side of the road that never moves, that came from nowhere and appeared out of nothing. Love disappears and comes back, it changes, it shifts, it falls, and picks itself back up even when we think it has died.

But for now, he needs to go.

He wants to help her get rid of him. And he wants to do it fast.

He presses her. A few questions and he gets her to say she no longer cares for him. And, more important, that she no longer wants him. He doubts this is altogether true, but it is still what he wants to hear at the moment, to give him the strength to leave. He pushes the point so much that she pronounces the fateful words. He can tell she is relieved, and immediately knows he is at least freeing her from feelings of guilt toward the Other, who will be joining her in three days' time. He smiles. Says, It doesn't matter. Adds, I'm going to go home to Paris, this afternoon if I can. If not, tomorrow.

She says, Scotland's beautiful, stay, you could explore. He replies, No, it's you I came to see, not Scotland. He adds, I'd have gone to Jackson if you'd been in Jackson. Not that he actually has anything against Jackson.

And he stands up.

I'll take you back if you like, our hero concludes. Hero is the very word at this point.

Chapter .. 8

The beauty of Glen Carron Park, still.

A surprise.

A longer conversation.

On the way back our hero and heroine walk side by side. They take it more slowly. The sheep are still there, peaceful and woolly. The tension has gone.

He is sure he will go now, completely. Because he is not going in order to leave her. Quite the opposite, he is going because this is where the risk of losing her is at its greatest. The sheep, the broom, the moor, the blue of the sky, everything feels like a personal enemy to him. Scotland in its entirety wants him to fail. Our heroine may be keeping him at a distance, but it is not because she no longer wants him, it is because she cannot do anything with him here. There is too much weight, too much guilt, too much lying. That is what he would like to think, but it is also what he senses. He is going, he knows he must, so that

somewhere else, perhaps, later, it may be possible to be with her again.

So, in order to be sure, he subjects our heroine to the question again. She dithers, dangles, he does not insist on any tender gestures, only words. And she lets those anticipated words slip, they reiterate her rejection, but the color of them is smoother, she no longer denies her desire. He asks, Do you want me? You don't ask the right questions, she replies. That is enough for him.

Our hero suddenly stops walking. He smiles as he points out a caterpillar crossing the path. It is brown with glints of gold, gleaming, covered in hairs, and crawling over the asphalt. It looks like a processionary caterpillar, minus the procession. They both stop to look at it. It is a quiet moment together, a necessary moment. He advises her not to touch it because its fine hairs could well be urticant. Now that's a word he rather likes, urticant, it seems a while since he has used it. Then they set off again, abandoning it to its perilous fate as an urticant caterpillar.

Our hero now wants to reassure her, soothe her. He knows how to: he finds the right words, makes her laugh, thinks she seems more cheerful. They are walking through a strenuously landscaped wood, she is making fun of upwardly mobile Scots in the brand-new twenty-first century. She talks about her

neighbors, of all the nouveaux riches created by the housing boom. He listens, is amused, makes occasional comments. The fact that the conversation is artificial does not bother him.

This newfound calm in her, this peacefulness, rekindles the desire and affection in him that he had almost driven out. She is walking within reach, so serene, and he wants to take her in his arms more than ever. Images of her fragile nudity come back to him, and echoes of the extreme words uttered in the half-light. A great wave of memories. He does not know how to fight this off. He never has.

So, when they finally reach the pub, when she suggests they have lunch (or was he the one who planted the idea?), he is surprised to find his hopes renewed. When she asks if he would like to sit next to her, he puts his hand on hers and she plays briefly with his fingers. He kisses her, tenderly, on the lips. She accepts the kiss, then pushes him away, gently. They order some mineral water, Sparkling, please (him), and a beer, A glass of stout (her), and One panini (just one for both of them). It comes served with thick greasy chips and a salad of raw onion rings that she devours eagerly. Her breath is like Claudette Colbert's in *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* when she rejects Gregory Peck's advances by gobbling white onions. Our hero cannot be sure of either the film or the

male lead, but he would have no trouble triumphing over the smell of onions if our heroine decided to kiss him.

He may never have learned anything about women but he now knows that the panini is the Scottish national dish, way ahead of the haggis.

She finishes her beer, down in one.

Please take me back, she says.

He nods.

Chapter ... 9

Ridiculous business with an insect.

First separation.

Tinkerbell.

Our hero takes our heroine back. He is upset. The route from his handsome redbrick hotel to the monstrous A32 is far more painful in this direction. He keeps his eyes on the road but drives too far over to the left, and drives badly. He cannot get himself to concentrate. All of a sudden a large buzzing insect flits into the car through his open window and settles on his arm. Is it a horsefly, a hornet? It's just a bumblebee, but our hero writhes, making the car swoop into the gutter. They stop and the bumblebee flies out almost immediately. Everything is fine, the heroine is unharmed, he does not get out to assess any possible damage. Just apologizes. And thinks to himself, Shame this trip's not as much fun as "The Flight of the Bumblebee."

Our hero sets off again. This incident has opened up fault lines in his cheerful facade. He is now having trouble finding his words, being amusing, even maintaining his smile. He cannot help saying he will call her when he is in Paris, that everything will be easier, then immediately regrets his words, which seem as pointless as they are irrelevant. He's still seventeen. Hell, how long's he going to go on being seventeen? Why can't his heart age like his skin and his eyes? In ten years' time, or twenty, will he still be tormented by passionate longings he can't even hope to fulfill? Is it a sign of strength, weakness, or madness, not being able to grow old?

To date, there are no answers.

He drops her at the corner of the s70, near the sign for Inchnadamph. Some day soon he will go and destroy Inchnadamph. They extricate the bicycle from the trunk. She mounts it. Our heroine says, Call me to let me know when you're leaving. She kisses him, he watches her pedal away.

From this line on, our hero notably forgets to smile.

He heads back to his hotel. A glance at his watch. It is not even four o'clock.

He has not yet seen his room. It is enormous with a very wide bed. You could get three people in there. Ha ha ha, our hero sneers. The bathroom too is enormous, has a bathtub and a shower and two washbasins.

Getting back to Paris the same day proves impossible. The first plane leaves from Inverness toward noon the following day. He reserves a seat. It is expensive, but when you are not loved money is no object. Only then does he call our heroine. He would like to see her one last time, he cannot imagine spending this last evening alone, in this hotel. She does not pick up. He hangs up, takes his cell phone into the bathroom—in fact he is never without it—and checks for the umpteenth time that day how much battery he has left, more concerned about its levels than a deep-sea diver about those in his oxygen tank. He runs himself a bath. Then forgets the water filling the tub and takes a shower. The degree of distress and confusion in our hero is such that the reader can but sympathize with him.

The shower soothes him, he stays under the flow of warm water for a long time. He really has lost weight, at least there's that. He dries off, looks at himself at length in the mirror. His body has still not aged much. But the hair is receding from his forehead, wrinkles are forming and bags developing under his eyes. Skin, like tree bark, shows the years clearly. He tries to see in himself the old man already threatening to appear. When he leans his face forward, his features slump, and he shudders to think that this is the image he presented when they were

making love. He steps away from the mirror, looking his reflection in the eye, as if backing away from a tiger.

He tries to think back, to understand where and when the affection he thought she felt for him died. Died? He is not prepared to accept that yet. Not out of pride or self-esteem. He has little of either. He suspects she is stifling her affection, suppressing it. He knows women can do this, and it is probably also true of some men. He still wants the right to see her again in Paris, to blow on the last embers. He is not afraid of this unimaginative metaphor.

It is still early, too early to call her again anyway. So our hero leaves his room, goes down to the pub and, not begrudging the Glen Carron Park a single penny, chooses a table facing it. He fearlessly confronts the green sign: Eilan Castle, 2.1 miles.

May I sit here? The voice is a woman's, the language French, and our hero is startled. But it is not our heroine and, besides, it was not her voice. He nods, she sits down. She is very young with short brown hair, fine features, and clear eyes. She smiles at him, he feels happy, or let's say reassured, to find her pretty. She adds, I'm back on duty in a while, I work at the hotel. Our hero recognizes her, she checked him in at reception. She eats a salad quickly, wiping the corners of her mouth with every bite.

It is a graceful gesture, delicate. She speaks French with an almost imperceptible Slavic accent. She is Polish, this is a summer job, next year she will be in Paris for a year, acting onstage. She says, What I really want is to perform Feydeau and Beckett. She brought the two authors together spontaneously, and it makes her laugh, he finds it funny too. Then she says, Are you French? I know, I looked at your passport. She narrows her eyes, impishly. Our hero thinks she could just as easily be an ingenue as a soubrette. I noticed you live in Paris, will you come and see me in a play? Of course, he replies. Are you here for vacation? she asks next. He hesitates, stammers, admits he is going home tomorrow. Something unexpected. That is the word he uses. What a shame, she says. He agrees.

She suddenly glances at the clock. She grumbles: I'm on duty, *merde!* She does say *merde* very prettily, thinks our hero.

As she is getting up, he asks her where in Poland she is from. With a last smile she says, From Lublin, takes her plate, and disappears.

Tinkerbelle, for real.

Lublin? Our hero knows it. He went there thirty years ago. He visited neither the cathedral of Saint John the Baptist nor the Royal Castle. Some miles away are the camps. Majdanek, Sobibor, and Belzec.

Whose granddaughter could this young woman be? he wonders. He counts the years and corrects himself: great-granddaughter. When, full of anger and tears, he walked through that tall grass, beneath what was left of the watchtowers and barbed wire fences at Majdanek, this young woman had not yet been born. His musing about her parentage didn't mean much in the first place. It means nothing at all.

Now here he is alone again. His watch says only five o'clock but it has not stopped. It is with a guilty feeling of capitulation that our hero surrenders once more to love's annihilating embrace. He does not fight the downward pull, and slips into prostration, without resistance.

He is going to do something stupid. He does it.

He gets back in his car. He drives, carefully this time, to the 570, then turns left and takes the road he has seen her come down. He goes all the way to the place where her mother lives. He has no trouble remembering the name, because it is rather like "leprechaun." He looks at the stony paths leading down to the river, and tries to spot the mansion overlooking the loch, as she described it to him. It hurts him to think she could be so close by. But didn't he come here precisely to feel this pain? He doesn't like the darkness deep in his soul, constantly striving to suffer.

He is afraid he might come across her, on her bicycle. With fate pursuing him so doggedly, he could also run into her mother's car, with her in the passenger seat. It would make a wonderful scene from a film, some sentimental comedy with achingly British humor (he can just see Hugh Grant playing his part). The title could be something like *Over the Moor*, or maybe *Inchnadamph Crossing*. But we are not in a movie theater.

He stops by the side of the road, a little way before a narrow stone bridge. He opens his cell phone and dials her number. Just then, not far away, the angelus rings.

Chapter 10

A deluxe dinner.

Poet, poet.

A little gift that has to wend its way.

You're calling me right when the angelus is ringing, our heroine shouts to smother the bell's high-pitched sound. This is how he discovers just how close he is to her house. He scans the surrounding countryside but sees no bell tower. He tells her when he is leaving, suggests they have dinner together. There has been no war or battle, and yet he wants to make peace. But—even though it is half past six—her mother is already preparing a meal. She says they could meet in two hours' time, in the usual place, for a drink.

Our hero goes back to the hotel. He has his dinner on the pub's sunny terrace, choosing a deluxe Thai chicken curry. A dish that turns out to be a sort of chicken supreme, only more bland.

He heads back up to his room. From her desk at reception, the young Pole gives him a friendly, almost conspiratorial wave, but the elevator door closes. How strange, our hero thinks, there's a woman I could easily fall in love with, in the space of a few hours. He can see in her a spontaneous sincerity, a sense of mischief devoid of calculation or artifice. That young woman knows who she is, he speculates, so much so that she's bound to have the nerve to step fearlessly into someone else's shoes. Perhaps that is the characteristic that makes great actors. If he dared (but he will not), he would lay at this girl's feet the extravagant love he bears within him for another. The emotional equivalent of making a transfer from a bank account. But would she accept the deposit?

Our hero lies down on the bed, runs his eye along the stucco moldings and the shadows on the ceiling. He knows what he is suffering from, recognizes obsessive love. He contracts it only—and the logic is implacable—when he is with the sort of woman who refuses to let herself love him. From experience, his prognosis is for a rapid convalescence, total recovery, and no relapses. But, right now, this reassuring diagnosis does nothing to help him.

His head is spinning, he sits on the edge of the bed, gets to his feet, and picks up the car keys. He

does not want to linger here, in this empty room where he had anticipated being with her.

Once again he arrives at the rendezvous well ahead of schedule. What difference does it make, given that Scotland has now been reduced to a colossal hourglass knocked on its side, and through which time refuses to sift.

While he sits in his car, he very quickly, too quickly, writes a little poem in his black notebook. Because, at times like this, our hero poetizes. He has a degree of talent for it, and compensates for his stylistic weaknesses and approximate technique with an acute sense of self-mockery and a touching simplicity. His poem begins:

*There where the A32
Meets the scenic S70*

which gives the number 2 the unusual role of offering up an inevitable rhyme with his beloved “you,” or something more despairing about “what to do,” or the two.

Let us summarize it briefly here: in this piece of doggerel our hero explains that (1) although hurt, he will not resign himself to the facts, and (2) he still hopes to see our heroine again in Paris. A meteorological parable concludes the poem with an “ond” rhyme that is neither “blond” nor “fond.”

Our hero writes the poem down in fine cramped letters, then tears the page out carefully and stows it in his shirt pocket without folding it.

He waits. All he gets to do in these two days is wait and invent devices to cheat the waiting process. He is an expert.

As soon as our heroine arrives, as soon as her bicycle is wedged into the Nissan Almera's trunk, where—let's say this again just in case this book should reach the car designer's desk—you cannot fit a bike, our hero offers to take her wherever she would like to go. She chooses the closest tavern, that improbable pub overlooking the A32 that has already been mentioned.

Our hero could not have chosen a better place for a last meeting. As it takes a good minute to get there by car, he hands her his poem, its fifteen easy lines. She reads it, smiling, amused. This takes five seconds, and she folds it in two.

Chapter .. II

About a few sartorial details.

A general remark and a cultural reminiscence.

Ze last moment.

She leaves the bike in the trunk. At the pub they order two glasses of beer and go to sit outside, the area is completely deserted.

It is getting dark and growing chilly. All our heroine is wearing over her shoulders are a T-shirt and a black cardigan that she zips up. The shadowing curve of her breasts disappears beneath the wool. She pulls the woolen sleeves down over her hands, shivering, and the stretched stitches afford glimpses of the lightly tanned skin along her arms. Our hero just cannot take his eyes off her. Only three months ago, this young woman did not exist. How, then, has she become such a major part of him, when she herself asked for nothing?

With no trace of irony, she clinks her glass against his. He would rather not know what they

are drinking to. To his leaving? To the peacefulness of their breakup? To Scotland's mild summer? Silently, he drinks to *l'Amour*, and everything he knows about it. Its 2,700 miles, from its source in the Argun region to its mouth on the Tatar Strait, opposite Sakhalin. He keeps his bad joke about the River *Amour* to himself. A pity he doesn't realize that the river's English name, Armur, is closer to the word "armor" than to "love," and—worse—that armur means "muddy" in Buriat.

Our hero takes a sip from this dark, bitter beer that he does not like, which is precisely why he chose it. He had to give the whole debacle a degree of harmony.

Once again, what they say to each other is meaningless, every word has been said before. He still occasionally tries to paraphrase, she does so less and less. The smiles they exchange reveal her weariness and his sadness, and no words can measure up to these. They have both stopped pretending. She hasn't built any sort of wall around herself, our hero acknowledges. No part of her cleaves toward me, and there's nothing about me she is having to resist. You can suppress desire only when desire is weak enough to be suppressed. Ovid, Blake, and plenty more said it long before he did, but right here, now, our hero really couldn't give a damn. He thought he was

leaving in order to save whatever could be saved from the sinking ship. He now realizes there may never have been a ship.

There are also silences between them. He makes less effort to fill them than she does. He imagines she feels guilty. Because she often feels guilty. Once, after making love, she astonished him by whispering that pleasure like that was a sin. A sin. He could not remember ever having heard the word.

To spare her from feeling awkward, he too starts furnishing the pauses. He decides to make her laugh. And succeeds, it is easy. But it was not a good idea, so painful is the sound of her laughter.

The level of beer is going down too slowly in their glasses. Our hero wishes he could find the courage to get it all over with, to cut the episode short. But he has only the courage to bear its being prolonged.

He briefly contemplates telling her about the young Polish girl. But what could he say about her, and what would he actually want? To study our heroine's reaction, provoke some feeling in her, elicit her hypothetical jealousy? Just in time, he grasps that he runs the risk, once and for all, of appearing pathetic and ridiculous. He can just imagine her response—searing and well deserved. So he says nothing.

The Other arrives in three days, and, oddly, our hero is not jealous. Yet he knows everything there is

to know about jealousy, that blast of cruel images dominated by sex, bodies, and possession. He looks at our heroine's blue eyes, her mouth, the curve of her shoulder, he tries to understand why he never succeeded in seeing this Other as a rival, nor in picturing them making love, why, in fact, when he doggedly attempts to re-create the scene—the act, to use a shrink's word for it—he cannot manage to take it altogether seriously. The memory of their past pleasures protects him from that, at least.

He gives an involuntary little laugh, almost a sigh. What's funny? she asks.

He shakes his head. Nothing.

She asks him if he is angry with her. And even adds, You have every right.

No, really not, our hero replies. And he is not even cheating. Simply overcome.

He does still have one redeeming phrase on his mind, but abstains from using it. Why do we always push harder on the remote control when the batteries are dying?

Acta est fabula, the ancients used to say.

Our heroine smiles at him, she shivers.

Our hero feels a bit cold too.

They do not finish their beers.

She wants to go home on her own. He offers to take her back. She lets him. They drive to the

crossroads of the A32 and the S70, near the sign for Inchna—yes, that's the one.

He is intent on taking her farther in order to spare her at least the long hill. She refuses to let him go beyond this point. She says it categorically, he does not insist. He has maintained an elegant tenacity, what would he gain from stooping to obstinacy?

He stops the car. She consents to stay a little longer. He begs for a kiss on the lips. She gives him his alms. He feels only shame.

They take the bike from the trunk, and it stains his shirt. Just a few more words, and she hops onto the contraption, puts her weight down on the pedal, and rides off. He watches her cycle away without looking back. His heart and his reason manage to agree not to prolong the episode. He sits down in the Nissan and sets off again. The folded-down seats will no longer serve any purpose.

It is not even half past nine in the evening. Our hero goes back to his hotel. He will have to wait, once again. The plane is tomorrow, in precisely fourteen hours. He makes some notes, sketches out the final chapters, tells himself he will get back to this later.

It is dark in the hotel room. From time to time car headlights are projected on the walls. He switches on the TV. Images and sounds fill the room, which is

now plunged in complete darkness. He tries to concentrate on the news. Bomb attacks in the Middle East, Hurricane Myriam in Florida, a new prototype for a car. With a quick flick he switches it off.

Suddenly tired, he brings a hand up to his eyes and, in a gesture that has become a habit, he runs it over his face. He inhales its smell. It held our heroine's hand, so briefly but for too long, it has captured her smell. He has never missed her so much. In an attempt to escape, he rubs his hands together in a stream of water and lathers them for a long time. The lily of the valley resists the almond's assault. He takes another shower. The lily of the valley yields at last.

Chapter .. 12

Back to the future.

About the rental car.

An appropriate capitulation.

The fact that he had woken so early did have one advantage: he was really tired. A hypnotic-type sleeping pill plunged him into a dreamless sleep. He gets up at seven o'clock and, on autopilot, takes a shower and goes down for breakfast. It is a luxury hotel with a lavish buffet, and he is the only person there at this time in the morning: he has a salad of fresh grapefruit and strawberries, a yogurt, and some green tea.

Then he pays his bill. The Polish girl is not at reception. Right now he would have liked being entitled to her smile. From the receptionist on duty, he gathers what her name is. Then he quickly writes her a friendly, affectionate note, wishing her success and happiness. Leaves neither his address nor his telephone number, out of propriety. He has tact.

Trusting in Google, he does however sign with his first name (and adds his family name in brackets). He tears the page from his notebook, folds it, and hands it to the receptionist, who—and she is betrayed in this by her overly detached attitude—will certainly read his message the moment he has turned on his heel.

Beneath cold, fine rain, he slings his bag in the trunk. Sets off. Drives away. He is not leaving Scotland, but fleeing it. He goes back past the crossroads between the A32 and the S70, and glances one last time at the Inchnadamph sign. He should insist they erect a statue. A concertinaed bicycle, for example. If he'd known . . . If he'd known, what? He would still have come, he was incapable of not coming. You never can tell. The previous day's bitterness is fading. I need to leave, he keeps telling himself. Paris is another town, where she won't be held hostage by anything. That is all he asks.

Our hero drives on. The windshield wipers sweep a leaf toward the hood, mercilessly. He turns on the radio, switches it off right away. He does not want company. In the rain, the journey seems longer. But he reaches the airport two hours early, and hands the car back to Avis. He puts the rear seats up, checks over the bodywork. The Nissan is untouched, not even a scratch.

The girl in a red jacket behind the counter asks him whether everything went well. He says, Yes, thank you, and this standard exchange brings a smile to his lips. It's not all doom and gloom, he could have had a blowout and missed his flight. He adds, just out of principle, Actually the seats don't go down flat enough to get a bike in.

So here he is at the airport. Outside it is overcast and pouring rain. From the departure lounge, he calls our heroine to confirm that he is taking off and also, he admits, to hear her voice again. She makes him promise not to contact her again in Scotland. He would not have. She agrees to his doing so as soon as she is back. He is pacified. He feels neither resentful nor bitter, he knows that he still wants to believe in this. He thinks back to what he told her: being in love is when it feels hot inside your head. It was the best he could come up with. He still feels hot enough for two. All in good time.

The lounge slowly fills with people. He drifts. Does he really need a duty-free shop? A fluffy sheep key ring attracts his attention. He smirks.

Is it because the carpets are dirty or something about the way the seating is lined up? Our hero gradually succumbs to all-encompassing melancholy and invasive anxiety. He is suddenly worried that, with her, he will never be able to take anything for

granted. Afraid that, with every passing moment, she is leaving his life, abandoning him to his fate as a soon-to-be-old man, that, rather than him, she wants a life with something to look forward to. How can he hold this against her? She is the one with the world at her feet, while our hero feels he is on borrowed time. She is thirty, which is almost twenty. He fifty, which might as well be sixty. If he inverted this morbid logic they would both be the same age, but this is no time for optimism. His spine stoops beneath the absurd superstition of seeing figures in decades. When he plunges into a state of dejection and mental liquefaction like this, our hero feels so old he could make flowers wilt just by touching them.

He slumps into an uncomfortable chair. Then immediately berates himself for his resignation, which is far removed from the strong cheerful him. He keeps telling himself that he *is* young, that he will continue to be young as long as he refuses to give up hope of a future. He is alive enough today to move mountains, still attractive enough to register as a man. The same will still be true tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. But a terrible sentence pops into his head. He read it in *The Life Before Us*, and it marked him for life. He was eighteen, Ajar's book had just come out, and no one knew he was in fact Romain Gary. Little Momo is talking about Madame Rosa, saying, "She

used to be a woman and she's still got a bit of it." Our hero stands, paces up and down the waiting area by the departure gate, and draws some renewed strength from his energetic striding. Then sits back down and lowers his eyes.

He stares at the gray carpeting, and—as the saying goes—the scales seem to fall from his eyes. His age and that of our heroine have no part in their affair's failure. She knows nothing of his concerns, she cannot begin to imagine what it is to be fifty. He could be twenty years younger and it would change nothing. Our heroine may not allow herself to indulge her desire for him or grant him her tenderness, and this is because what she most wants to avoid is pain, what she refuses is heartache, and what she dreads is drama. It is so easy breaking away from him now. This is what our hero finally grasps. High time too. He now needs to become a promise of happiness for her, the very image of happiness. That, he thinks, is right up his street.

And now he is afraid that if she ever did give in to him, he would owe that to his perseverance, his doggedness. If she started loving him for the energy he put into conquering her, could she then learn to love him of her own free will? How can he now rekindle the carefree atmosphere of the early days? These are the new questions gnawing at our hero,

quite pointlessly, when the flight attendant calls out his row.

The plane takes off on time. Through the port-hole, our hero watches the runway scud past, then shrink in the distance. The sheep, then again, grow smaller. Seeing them finally disappearing, drowned out by the altitude and his myopia, is both a relief and a torment. There is, should he want one, panini on the menu. A group of young French kids on a language trip bawl throughout the flight. He tries to remember whether, at their age, he was such an asshole. He could well have been. He is in seat 16A. The young woman in 16B tries to start a conversation. Blond, pug-nosed, an eyebrow piercing that does not succeed in making her ugly. She is from Paris, a researcher, she works for a company that specializes in transgenic products. She offers him her name. He gives her his in return.

She reminds him that they both traveled on the same outbound flight, and so were held up for hours. She thought he looked very stressed, really. She asks him whether he had a pleasant stay in Scotland.

Our hero does not lie to her. He replies:

“The weather was nice.”

acknowledgments

Apple France

Avis Rental Inverness Airport

British Airways

British Telecom

Currabottle Inn

Great Southern Hotel Braemore

Glen Carron Park Hotel

Glen Carron Park Pub & Restaurant

Orange International

G7 Taxis