



## Inspector of Prisons

Herbert W. Mason

*Boston University*

herbertmason@mac.com

**Abstract:** This novel is set in France during the Algerian War. A distinguished diplomat and author, after having suffered a nervous breakdown following the death of his eldest son, is assigned an ignominious position of Inspector of Prisons in different towns outside Paris. He is compromised morally by what he is expected not to report regarding the torture of Algerian political prisoners. It is a tightly woven story of a principled and patriotic man's depth of fear, depression and anguish culminating in his ultimate declaration of the truth. The novel extends Herbert Mason's prior theme of protest against death in *Gilgamesh*, a verse narrative, a finalist for the National Book Award, and a Muslim mystic's martyrdom in *The Death of al-Hallaj*, a dramatic narrative, from Houghton Mifflin & Harcourt and Notre Dame University Press respectively.

**Keywords:** France; Algerian war; torture; prison; terrorists; honor; loss of one's humanity; truth.

### One

Alain stepped out of the elevator and hurried past the security guard.

"Good morning, Monsieur DeLesparre; it is a fine day, for a change."

He pushed open the outer door acknowledging graciously the *gardien* Monsieur.

DeBlaye as he crossed the cement courtyard rimmed with geraniums and other *fleurs de saison* on his way to the street. DeBlaye and he, though of different backgrounds and states in life, had one thing in common: both came from the southwest region of France just north of Bordeaux and from opposite banks of the Gironde; both had also been raised Protestant, but that was changed for Alain, like other things, after the war. Geography was an accident, religion was divine selection. For just a moment, on the corner of Rue de L'Eglise, before the Neuilly to La Cite bus arrived, he tried belatedly to remember DeBlaye's Christian name:

Edouard? Pierre? Jean? It was a courtesy expected of him, and he didn't like social oversights or being rude. Perhaps he was anxious this day, but it was no excuse.

He was expected by character and profession to be in control of his anxiety, even at bus stops. He was thinking of Yvonne's birthday gift. He hoped the children would remember to buy theirs. They loved their mother very much. Catherine would remember, but Isabelle was still too young to be counted on; it would be his son, Charles, who might forget. That was just family business, tomorrow was her birthday, her 43rd; he knew she was sensitive about birthdays. There would be a little celebration, then he would take her out to dinner; he had to remember to make the reservation. He was expected to concentrate equally on everything? He would be back from Nevers in time to telephone, at 4:00 or 5:00 at the latest. He needed a secretary, but what civil servant had one, especially what inspector of prisons? Perhaps there would be something in the mail today from the great man.

He had sent the poems five weeks and three days before. Literary giants feel no need to hurry to facilitate others' recognition, especially by themselves. It wasn't as if he was a nobody. He had published four books, two after his conversion, and now his work was becoming more naturally religious in subject and, he thought, in tone. There were times, mostly late at night, in his study or in bed awake, when he thought his work was important. But when day came, its value seemed slight, and there was never any time to do more than short pieces.

Then there was money. He was anxious about that. Yvonne was bringing in as much as she could from her English lessons. He was at the limit as a civil servant. Their apartment, small as it was, was beyond their means, but it was safe—that mattered most in these times. Safety, safety. He trusted DeBlay but repeated that word to himself seeing no sign yet of the bus. His parents would leave some inheritance. That was his one hope of a margin of relief. But their health was good, thank God. He praised God for that sincerely. And then there was his sister. She would share what they left. And, of course, if one died before the other, as would surely be the case... He hated this subject most of all, almost. The bus was late. It was 7:40 by his watch. Perhaps only five minutes late, still...

It was conceivable that a writer, even a busy bureaucrat, could compose poems or segments of a novel or an essay on a bus en route to work. The *petits bureaucrates* of the old days found time, some time, to write novels for themselves. Most were unmarried, perhaps. He could not think of their names now.

The man in the seat ahead of him, he noticed when he sat down, looked Algerian. He was dressed well if he was; but if he was, how did he happen to be dressed well and how did he happen to be in Neuilly? The bus originated further to the west, where there were no Algerians residing. Had some moved in? Was this man visiting someone in Neuilly, a leftist collaborator? There were many of those these days, even in Neuilly. Alain felt uncomfortable, stood up, and walked four seats forward to an empty seat next to a woman. He looked back briefly before sitting down. The man could have been Italian. In any case, he felt more at ease. The woman was gray haired, somebody's grandmother, his own mother's age perhaps, sixty-seven. He must telephone his parents from Nevers. He often did that on his tours of inspection. The call from Nevers to Bordeaux was not expensive, a short call. There was always time to kill in Nevers; indeed on most of his inspections. His mother,

when he said where he was and what he was doing, would sigh, "Oh Alain," just that, and then his father would come to the phone. What did that sigh express or, better, what did it omit? His sister was divorced. Surely that caused as great a sigh. Perhaps not. Divorced at thirty-eight after 15 years of marriage. When that happened two years past—and through no fault of his sister, rather through typical French infidelity on the part of his brother-in-law and the final impatience of a long-standing mistress—his mother sighed for several days, literally. Charlotte by her existence of abandonment and woe caused grief only to her mother, not to herself. It was a queer dialectic indeed.

He sat in stillness over that thought. It was his other work that had tied him to his own queer dialectic. What is mine? He came to this question inevitably. Yet, if it were to endure the inspection of the prison at Nevers this day, unlike his other days when he had the more routine inspections at Nantes, Brest, Elbeuf, Rouen, Lille and Lyon, he would have to avoid or at least postpone the answer.

The bus was late arriving at La Cite. The traffic was atrocious. The gas fumes, the grit, the posters on the kiosks of the latest female discovery or, rather, of her bosom, the depressed faces queuing up at the stops, the showing off and up without joy—he mostly ignored it all; but on days of certain inspection trips he noticed everything or, rather, everything challenged him. Two trips a month were especially bad; thank God it wasn't more. Some weren't bad; at least the drives were agreeable; Nantes, Rouen, Reims; he could visit the cathedrals. Nevers was especially bad. He took the train and the local train took long. And then there was the prison itself with its special feature. Of course, he visited the incorrupt body of Sainte Bernadette in her vacuum-sealed glass coffin.

Two trips. Why was a poet, whom a few once called gifted and sensitive, given this task?

On other days there was mediocre daily work, like in any other job: office work at the Commissariat, Hotel de Ville; paper work, reports, meetings with other inspectors, chiefs of service, his director, routine in its overall significance and hardly anxiety producing. None of these duties, in any case, felt like a divine conspiracy.

His chief, Bertrand, interrupted his coffee long enough to acknowledge him in the doorway, wave him into his office while saying "Ah, it's *that* Thursday. Nevers again." They talked but it was like watching two others than himself. They had the same conversation

before each inspection trip to Nevers. Each time Bertrand leaned forward and handed him the latest propaganda booklet with a wink or, increasingly as the war progressed, a smirk. It had become their closing exchange, a pill to take before the ensuing headache set in fully.

Alain had made a point of not knowing many people in the system and few had sought his acquaintance. It was only a job, one that enabled him and his family to live decently and eat. He could not accept it as a definition of himself or as a profession proper to his background and personality. He reaffirmed these denials and then left the office of Bertrand, whom he also knew only there, impersonally, and spoke to no one else on his way out. He recognized a few faces, nodded politely, and feigned preoccupation.

The Gare de Lyon was crowded at 8:45. He had five minutes to buy his ticket and push through the gate to the train. His eyes blurred with desire to be elsewhere. He clapped his suit coat right pocket where he put the booklet and entered the press of people. How easily he became one of the pushing people, impatient at the ticket seller, everyone making facial contortions at neighbors. He tried to think of something, but his wife's present didn't stay in his mind, nor did the novel he still intended to write. He felt an umbrella handle twist into the small of his back. He turned his head to complain: "It isn't raining, it's 15 April, and it's sunny." But maybe it wouldn't be sunny later. The platform was crowded and anyone when pressed could be thoughtless. The little man with the umbrella handle moved by him and disappeared into a car.

Alain found a window seat in a compartment forward. He looked at the tracks crisscrossing southward as they fanned out from the path of his onrushing train. He wanted to call his novel "To the West" or just "West", which had nothing to do with any of this. He would never write about his life as it was now, never about this. This was too ordinary, too beneath anyone's imagination or endurance. No reader would ever want to be where he was going now. His conception of a novel was not naturalistic, though not escapist or fanciful either. Just distant, at least enough to breathe. Distant in memory and in hope. He deliberately denied to both his present experience, which was something not happening at all, especially when it actually was. "West." He remembered the image with which the novel was to begin: a signpost at a large cemetery outside Grenoble.

He or, rather, his protagonist, himself thinly disguised and called Pierre for a number of significant reasons that would become gradually apparent, had taken the morning train from Geneva to Grenoble. He had descended the train onto the platform, waited for several minutes as if looking for someone who might be there to meet him, then, disappointed, he walked into the station to arrange for a taxi to drive him to the cemetery. Once there, he spoke to the custodian and got directions to the particular grave he was visiting. The custodian had said it was located in the section marked "West." As he walked, Pierre came repeatedly upon signs which read "To the West," until he finally reached the section itself, "West." Alain could see that scene recreating itself over and over in his mind: the train, the platform hesitation, the custodian, the signs, and "West," each marked out in momentary episodes against the continuous background of white wooden crosses planted in acres of well tended fields as far as the eye could see. That series of episodes led to two events in Pierre's life, each separated by a decade in time. And that element of time was difficult to realize artistically as well as emotionally, still.

The first event occurred one late morning in 1945 when he walked to the "West" and found at a certain cross a woman standing. They stood side by side for several minutes looking down without speaking. No reader would believe the truth of this first reunion with his wife, that there was only silence between them after four years of separation. He could not include that in the novel. No one would believe nowadays that they had made no contact, no prearrangement for meeting. No one would remember the destruction to relationships and to lives and to ways of normal communication of that time. That problem separated him from today too, because he remembered. He had escaped to serve France in exile in Switzerland, and in August 1945 he had returned to look for his family—his wife and his three children—not knowing if they were alive or dead. His only starting point was there, knowing his last contact two years before was by courier to Grenoble who returned with the news that his brother-in-law had been killed—he did not know how—and was buried in this cemetery. He and Yvonne stood for several minutes in hushed silence before her brother's cross, the only visible symbol then of the West, not knowing the other was real or could be there if real. To each it was another hope, an illusion in a field of crosses. Then he reached out to touch her and found she was real.

They sat on the ground and wept, he remembered

that, holding each other around the neck, kissing, mingling tears. Their legs just seemed to give way. He remembered reading through his tears his brother-in-law's name, "Michel Fouguet, June 14, 1943."

The train was cutting through countryside now, past Melun through the forests of Fontainebleau. Nemours, Montargis, Gien, Briare, Bonny, Cosne, La Charite, Pongues, then Nevers. He recounted the stops ahead.

Superimposed on that reunion, which he had almost become able to consider as belonging to fiction, was a terrible farewell that still was too close and too real to so assign. Some days, when going over his novel, he knew the whole undertaking was impossible. To consider life fictional at all was a desecration if not a moral transgression. He knew of a few writers who had written out their pain caused by the war as a kind of spiritual therapy, but he could not do that. He did not judge them irreverent or wrong, just different from himself. He could not release it to any form other than his own private memory. How could he express what he felt when he touched his wife's hand after four years' separation and felt hers seize his. He could deal with symbols like the crosses for the desecration of the West. But how could he write of the way her arms trembled with his when they embraced. They trembled for an hour together—longer—for days—whenever they stood close to each other. There were almost no words. The Fontainebleau forests were always distracting in themselves.

His eyes returned to the scene of memory. Again he was walking in a cemetery alone. Again there was a woman standing before a cross. But the year was different. It was 1955. This was impossible, almost, to recall let alone assign to another, an invented Pierre. He was forty-two. That had no significance. Ages had become irrelevant when another war had rendered time meaningless. It was near his wife's birthday, then, too. They had not expected to meet there or anywhere during that day. He had recently been assigned the inspection of prisons job and was depressed after days of anger and bewilderment. He drove to Reims that day and came back early so as to visit their son's grave. Their "son"—how easily he said or Pierre said that word to himself. He died at the end of their assignment in the embassy in Geneva. They had a nice home on the lake. The children had two pet dogs. They entertained. He remembered their luxury of space. Geneva, where he had lived in exile, never knowing if his family were alive or how they lived from day to day under the

occupation, knowing what the Germans did especially to the families of Gaullists if they discovered them. Now it was peacetime supposedly, at least in Europe itself. But when was now? There had been a few years of peace for them together, 1945 to early 1954, and then Robert died, killed on his bicycle by a car. After that there was no peace. The years between 1954 and the present were not years, not even moments. In his mind the war in Algeria began when Robert was killed. France was killed. He could not separate their eldest son's death from the war in Algeria. He couldn't. No one had the right to pry into his heart and demand he detach from this or any loss.

They met at Robert DeLesparre's grave: a simple cross, 1939-1954. They both had come that day, too. They said nothing. But at the end of their silence, in which they both prayed for the repose of his soul, he did not reach out to touch her. She took his hand in hers but when he gave no response, she released it. They walked side by side out of the cemetery and drove home in silence. No, that's not exact, he remembered; they talked about her birthday. She wanted to have dinner in with the family.

He could never superimpose these two chance but not so chance meetings on one another. They belonged to Pierre only in their conception of similarity, not in the actual coincidences of God.

Gien was as nondescript a town as there was in France, at least by the view from the railroad station. Hardly a station, just a platform stop. One man got on. Was it one of those towns that Bernanos wrote of where a village *cure* was expiating or substituting for the low and the high born beset with satanic sloughs of inescapable boredom and loss. Gien - it sounded like a disguise of itself, a deceptive obscurity, whatever that meant.

He felt the booklet in his pocket. It wasn't time yet to look at it.

Most of the time he didn't believe in Pierre. Sometimes, like this day, he clung to him, wanting him to replace himself, to allow him through magical substitution to become fictional. Everything could happen to Pierre: the visits to the two cemeteries: his brother-in-law, substitute in death; his son, substitute in life. He didn't understand that last. He didn't understand how he could lose his son. Nothing lived then. He loved the other children and his wife, but something of himself stopped living then—of himself and of his France, simultaneously. He returned to Paris. The government changed. He was given an ignominious job—inspector

of prisons. It will give you time to write, Alain, the great man of Letters had written him with his characteristic sardonic dismissal that substituted for caring and concern. But it was clear to him once that he was chosen precisely because he could not inspect what took place in prisons, especially now with the prisoners of war concealed there—and especially at Nevers. They chose him because they wanted to be sure the prisons were not inspected thoroughly. They knew his nerves were gone. His sensitivity was in need of assuagement. He would overlook and avoid. The system was cruel; no, he had once feared, in his case, it was beyond cruelty; it was satanic.

Nevers was the emblem of his lack of nerve, of his degradation.

He could not write. He could not make Pierre come into being to replace himself. He could not even get the great man of Letters to write him about his desperate otherworldly prose-poems. He was lost, abandoned by everyone and by God, he felt as the train stopped at La Charite. One more stop—Pongues—then Nevers. The train always delayed the longest in La Charite, as if waiting for someone, a latecomer, who finally didn't come. Of course, he pondered its name, repeating it slowly, during the delay. It seemed as if La Charite was only a brief stop in a local train run. One was given a chance to get on or get off there, but inevitably one continued on to Pongues.

He lifted the booklet from his pocket, looked out the window at the disappearing platform, ignored the one remaining passenger in the compartment, an older woman seated next to the door to the corridor, then opened it to the photographs.

They were like little dirty pictures handed out by little dirty men who clustered around Notre Dame de Paris: frontal, artless, badly developed, light gray. They were a new set of "Atrocities Perpetuated by Algerians." The victims were French or French settlers in Algeria. All were mutilated and, when dead, photographed. He looked at one, then looked away. He saw nothing out the window but blur. The old woman, his companion, seemed victimized, stripped by age, quivering in the corner near the door. He tried to smile, but his face muscles had become paralyzed. He began to feel his disgust and hatred for Algerians intensifying. He turned a page and looked at another photo of a victim, this one a woman. He could not make out her face. She was dark complexioned, almost swarthy, but surely she was French. He had seen French women's faces

like that. My God! he shuddered; the bestiality of these Muslims. They are less than human. He turned the page and saw a man whose mouth was open in agony. A distinctly French face, he was sure, a Christ face. The train was moving toward Pongues, jogging his concentration; the old woman was staring at him. Was his face as filled with hate and pain as his heart? He looked at the window but it did not mirror him with any clear likeness. He started to close the booklet, then he believed he should look at one more. He flipped the pages to a photo of a boy no more than eight or nine... Pongues was only eight minutes away and was soon behind him, too quickly. The booklet lay in his lap, its work completed. He saw Bertrand's cynical face looking at him, drooping eyelids, twisted smile and all, as he handed him his medicine for Nevers.

He had one stop or, put more appropriately, one visitation, to make before driving in a taxi to the prison. It was customary, necessary, for him. Sainte Bernadette had become one of his favorite saints during the course of his two years of visiting Nevers. Once he had been a typical French scoffer at the saints, at miracles, at apparitions of the Virgin Mary to misguided children and homely nuns. The Lysee Voltaire had done its job of making a good French rationalist and skeptic of him in his teens. Then the war and the occupation made him believe less and less in reason's claim to a better world, but still without replacing it with faith. He became at least respectful of anyone who suffered physically, emotionally, spiritually though he did not understand the latter category; but, of course, he realized even now, so few did. With his eldest son's death his last vestiges of desire for a rational world left him. He collapsed, literally. He was hospitalized in Geneva for migraines, suspected angina, and nervous exhaustion. Out of the ruins came his conversion. His wife had come from a Catholic family in Grenoble, but religion had never been a problem for them, since she was not practicing at the time of their marriage. The war and occupation had changed all that for her, too, in the direction of belief. His conversion brought them together religiously, but then, later it seemed to erode when he could not reconcile himself to their son's death and to the recurrence of war.

There was no use trying to sort all this out now. Torture, religion, grief converged repeatedly in need of explanation, but he had none. At least Sainte Bernadette calmed him, as much as anyone could calm him, at rest in her transparent coffin.

He visited her at an hour when few pilgrims were

present. He knelt on the carpeted step before the glass, looking at her yellowed folded hands, her tightened facial skin, her discolored eyelids, her closed lips. He prayed for her intercession. He wanted peace— forbearance—a strong stomach—undifferentiated grace. He could not define what he wanted exactly; just her word on his behalf, her pity and compassion, her substitution. She had suffered badly herself from a disease that crippled her legs and caused her early death, yet there she lay in an aura of sanctity, incorrupt, virginal. There was nothing grotesque to him about her presence, though once he could not have knelt there beside a corpse however holy. Make me, one person, undivided, he prayed. Help me to believe, to have the courage of belief. Deep inside, he had always been separated from life; his loved ones, himself, from faith, from reason. There seemed no unity anywhere. Sainte Bernadette, intercede for me. Make this day, at least, endurable! Bring me to tomorrow.

He touched the glass of the casket, as pilgrims did. He bowed his head and, after a silent prayer, he crossed himself and left the chapel, not lifting his eyes from the carpet until he was once again on the street. He raised his hand and called out "taxi!" without seeing. He wondered if he was actually, at some unconscious level, blind.

The prison at Nevers was four kilometers from the town. Like a few other prisons under his inspection, it had not always been a prison but rather a hospital converted by the Germans into an examination (*sic*) center and absorbed permanently into the regular French prison system after the war. As a hospital it had specialized in cases of terminal illness and had once been called a Hotel Dieu with a head of Christ above the entranceway over the words *EGO SUM RESURREXIT*. The prison was another divided self by its mixture of hospital, religious symbolism, barbed wire gates, high-electrified fences, and bars on the windows. It was always referred to on his inspection reports as "Nevers" and, as in the case of the hospital at Vincennes to the east of Paris, no one knew there were interrogations and detentions of political prisoners carried out there. He was only required to inspect sanitary conditions and adherence to prescribed standards in the securing and maintenance of prisoners. That was all. That might have been simple enough or unpleasant enough to endure, but for the warden.

Jacques—"Frère Jacques," the prisoners and guards were made to call him on his insistence—looked upon last names in general with disdain. The minute they

were alone together the inspector was Alain without a last name. It was a policy based on a peculiar fear of anyone's ever knowing anyone beyond the walls of the prison. Alain, as inspector, knew, as perhaps did everyone else, that the warden's name was Silvestre, but Jacques acted as if no one knew it and would never know it. Such pretense was senseless like the inspection itself.

Jacques was a small man, a head shorter than Alain, who was over six feet, but with his oversized chest and broad shoulders he was imposing or at least threatening. It was easy to dismiss him distantly, as some in the Paris prefecture did, as a sociopath, but in one's presence he had the quality that altered one's own normal pattern of behavior. Alain became highly nervous, visibly so, and found himself talking excessively, almost ingratiating himself to this little sallow-faced, thin cheeked ruffian whose voice was loud, whose capacity to listen was nil, and whom one wanted to escape by any means possible. The French system had found him his proper place, rather than discarded him, to everyone's horror. He was Alain's age; he claimed to have served DeGaulle in North Africa and England, but Alain had never been able to trace his war record—having tried vigorously once—and suspected he had been a collaborator, indeed was virtually certain of it. Everyone lied after the Liberation, in any case, except those who did not need to, and they wanted only to forget.

"Alain, my brother," Jacques greeted him in his office. "It's that time, isn't it? You are keeping yourself trim."

"Yes," Alain responded, "you too."

Jacques' pleasantries ended there as he led his inspector out of the office to the prisoners' wings.

"There's nothing specially noteworthy," he said without turning his head.

"I'm sure," Alain said nervously.

Alain wanted him to skip the chatter. They both knew what the report would say. No one had the courage to challenge Frère Jacques. If only he had a patch over one eye, a wooden leg, or a crippled hand, instead of a clean shaven coarse but curiously boyish face, especially when he grinned out "brother," he would have been seen as deformed straight off.

Alain followed behind in the quick tour through the kitchen, the laundry, the four corridors of occupied cells, glancing from side to side without speaking, making mental notes he knew he would routinely record. The last and only question he asked would be forced out of him by Frère Jacques near the end of the tour, as it always was.

"Is there anything I didn't show you that you wish to see?" The boyish grin settled on his face defiantly.

Alain could ordinarily remain silent as he did at some other prisons, but with Jacques he spoke as if involuntarily. "What else should I see?"

"Well, there are a few foreigners here, unofficially. Do you have the guts for it, old friend?"

"What do you mean by foreigners?" It was the same game of euphemism and control.

"You are a sensitive fellow, Alain, a poet I hear, not a fellow like me who deals every day with the harsh, ugly realities of life. You understand?" He stared pugnaciously up at Alain.

"I understand."

"I did not ask for these foreigners. They were sent here for interrogation and detention. Some people don't like to face what service we perform in wartime. You understand?"

"I understand." Alain felt himself shaking and knew Jacques was enjoying his effect.

"It's not pleasant. But you are the inspector," Jacques smiled. "You must have seen worse in your job."

"I will see it," Alain said, his voice cracking. They walked to another section of the hospital-prison. "How many foreigners here?" Alain asked, as if there were to be a report.

"Six — no, five today." Jacques turned his head and smiled again.

Despite the name Jacques, Alain always insisted the warden was German, not French. No Frenchman was so deliberately sadistic, he wanted — he needed — to believe.

Alain touched his pocket where the propaganda booklet was.

"We keep them segregated from the other prisoners, you may remember from your last inspection."

"I remember."

"They are animals, you understand?"

"I understand."

Jacques led the way at a quick pace down the last corridor to where a guard was sitting on a straight chair tilted back beside a closed door.

"You put this in your report as you see it," Jacques smiled.

"Yes." It was the same charade.

Jacques unbolted the door without the guard's moving and took Alain's left arm with his right hand, squeezed it, and led him inside. Six men were lying on the bare floor. There was no toilet, no furniture of any kind, no window, just an overhead light glaring from the high ceiling fixture above. The men did not move.

Jacques turned one over on his back with his foot and kicked him in the groin. The man groaned.

"He's alive, see," Jacques smiled. "That one over there, he knifed a policeman in Dijon last week."

"It was he?"

"That's what they say."

The man's teeth were gone, his mouth was full of dried blood. His eyes were open but motionless. Jacques walked over one who did not move.

"I hate these bastards!" he shouted. "They're not human. Look at them. Do you want to see what I'd do with them?"

"No!"

"Oh Alain, brother, you're a little squeamish with prisoners of war, eh?"

Alain left the room covering his face as he was about to vomit.

Alain ran down the corridor as Jacques shouted at his guard, "Take the dead one out, for Christ's sake. We're not savages!"

Alain leaned against a wall in the men's room after vomiting and washing his face. He repeated to himself, the one who knifed the policeman in Dijon...the one who tortured the woman with the electric rod...the one who cut the man's...the one who slit the boy's... Tomorrow, he tried to reach tomorrow in his mind. He had locked the bathroom door from inside, so Jacques could not get to him there; but he would have to go outside. He could not stay there all day. What else? Were the Algerians human or not? He did not know. He knew. But he was afraid to think. Can he be blamed for being afraid? Alone in the bathroom, he could say the word "alleged," if that meant anything at all, but with Jacques in the room the man was a killer of a policeman; and they were all less than human. What could he do? Why was he asked to see such things, he of all people? He had served his country honorably. He loved France. My God, he had lived through separation and sacrifice for her. What was she doing to him now? What was demanded of him? Who were these people at war with her now, as if there had not been enough war before this? Why against his France? They started the war, these people, these Musulman people, these non-Christian people. God...help me unbolt this door and leave this prison. Help me find tomorrow. God!

"Alain, friend," Jacques called from the corridor outside.

"I'm coming. Give me a minute more."

"You all right? A little too much for you?"

Alain heard the warden's laughter die out, followed by a loud knock. "I have work in my office, don't waste my time!" Jacques screamed.

There was no other warden like this one, Alain remembered his director assuring him as the only compensation. This one was like a monster or his worst terror not a real person, or he was the real person in his imagination of terror, and he was knocking at the door.

In a minute Alain opened the door. Jacques stood before him with a contemptuous stare.

Alain turned away and walked rapidly down the corridor toward the prison exit.

"Hey, you should show those sissies in Paris what the fucking war is all about."

Alain didn't answer.

"I'm talking to you, inspector. You guys put them in here secretly and expect me to get information out of them anyway I can."

Alain pushed through the first of the three last corridor doors.

"How do you get information out of guys who haven't got any to give, huh?"

The second door was spattered, Alain believed, with blood.

"They're laborers, these poor shits, not spies. You want them to be spies, you hypocrites!"

Alain pushed through the final door and hurried toward the exit.

"Poet! Coward! God-damn country. France can eat shit!"

Alain wanted to turn and cry out. His eyes were tormented and spitting tears. "Don't curse my France," he wailed to himself in a whisper. "Don't curse her. I love her. I love her."

He heard Jacques say in a sarcastic murmur, "Don't forget what you've seen on your inspection, brother."

Alain stood for several minutes leaning on the taxi unable to get inside.

"Hey, are you coming or not?" the driver interjected every twenty seconds or so.

"A minute," Alain kept saying, unable to clear his head. The dizziness and nausea were steady. He was afraid if he got in he would vomit over the seat. But he could not walk back to Nevers. His legs would never make it. He got inside and opened the window.

At the station he went immediately to the men's room and vomited, but now there were only raw contractions. He threw the propaganda booklet in the wastebasket

and sat in the waiting room until the train from Lyon to Paris came.

This time there were many unoccupied seats. He had a compartment to himself. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. He had anticipated this visit for days and had not slept for two nights. Still, he could not keep his eyes closed. The report was already written. It had been written two years before. Each time he returned from Nevers he simply nodded when Bertrand asked, "Everything acceptable?" And Bertrand had a secretary type out an update of the last report, to save him that much humiliation anyway. It would be the same again. It was the same at Vincennes and the others, only in those places no one made him look. He could leave with a casual *politesse* and no *cas de conscience*, no physical disgust.

Jacques was a grotesque creature, deformed as surely as if he had a hump on his back, but the only outward sign was a brattish grin. With his constant mockery he had lost his humanity.

Have I lost mine? Alain asked, with his eyes open, staring blankly at the overhead baggage rack. He remembered the Algerian's blank gaze when Jacques turned him over.

He had read about the atrocities committed by the Japanese on Chinese, Russian and American prisoners of war: freezing alive, injections of deadly viruses, like syphilis to pregnant women and then to fetuses, surgery without anesthesia, gratuitous amputations, mutilations.... He knew about the German torture techniques and their medical experimentations, slave labor camps and gas chambers. He knew the century's obscenity; but he had never wanted to believe his own people could do such things or could look the other way when they were done. What was the torturer's and experimenter's syllogism: this person opposes my nation and race; it is not human to oppose my nation and race; therefore this person is not human. What is my rationale? Have I any at all or am I only doing my civil service job with certain omissions acceptable in wartime?

Tomorrow is important. He tried to remember why. He tried to remember anything. It was as though his memory was blind.

## Two

He telephoned home after delivering his report to Bertrand. Catherine answered, to his surprise. He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock. She was home early from her job. Is something wrong? He wanted to ask but instead he said, "Tell me, dear, did you order the



cake for Maman's birthday tomorrow?"

"No, you were going to do that, Papa."

"I mean, could you order it? I'm in town. I'm afraid I'll be too late to order her favorite, you know, with the sprinkle of nuts on the mocha icing. Ask Mrs. Vincent to make it light, not too much brandy this year."

"Papa —"

"Yes, dear." He sensed something.

"Is everything all right with you?"

"Yes," he laughed, "of course, dear, my thoughtful one. Of course."

"I prayed for you today."

"You did? Thank you, dear. I cherish your prayers."

"When will you be home?"

"Soon. In an hour. I am outside the Prefecture now in a booth."

"No one's here yet."

"Is everything all right?" He panicked suddenly. He must not do that. DeBlaye or his evening replacement must be there at the entrance. No one could get by.

"Yes. I just miss you all."

"I'll be home soon, dear. Your maman should be home at five. Isabelle —" He tried to remember what time his youngest daughter got home from school, "— and Charles."

"He'll be late. He's staying at the library with a friend."

"What friend?"

"Thomas, you know him."

"Yes, he's all right. Why late?"

"Bachot, remember?"

"Don't open the door."

"What, Papa?"

"I mean...if you're anxious."

"I just miss you all. I felt something was wrong."

"I'm fine. I'm sure we're all fine. I'll be home soon. Now, hang up, love, and let me hurry home, I'll stop at Mrs. Vincent's. Don't you go outside."

Catherine was twenty-two with a dull, futureless job, no boy friend, nervous. It was nothing. Still, it made him feel anxious. Was Yvonne all right? She had been complaining of headaches. Isabelle was so careless with crossing streets. My God!

He looked in every direction, forgetting momentarily the number of his bus.

After dinner he sat alone in his study. Yvonne wanted to talk with Catherine. Alain thought that was a good idea, without knowing the specific subject. Isabelle had homework.

There had been no mail of any importance—a bill, an advertisement, some information about the university for his son Charles. No word from the great man about his prose poems. He would have liked to be writing something now but he could only sit in his chair and look at his photographs of family and friends, mostly former friends, deceased or moved away, and the miniature reproduction he had framed of St. John of the Cross, about whom he had written and published a book once. He could not think suddenly what his book's point was or why the picture was there, but it echoed his disquieting solitude, he believed—the sunken eye sockets of the prisoner monk in El Greco's painting. He fondled a letter opener whose handle was in the shape of a crouched lion. It had been a gift from his father when he started his degree in Law and Philosophy at the university. He was barely nineteen then. Germany invaded France four years later. He enjoyed the solitude of his study. He pushed up one of the Venetian blind slats and looked out at the courtyard. He could see the light from the guard's room. "The Saint's Journey to the End of Night" had been his title. He remembered comparing and contrasting the Sixteenth Century saint's own with Twentieth Century literary journeys. He let the slat fall. It was ten o'clock. Catherine had arranged the cake with Mrs. Vincent—light on the brandy. The children had their mother's gifts. Charles was not home yet. Was he actually studying at the library or seeing a woman? He seemed so listless and bored all the time, always wanting to go out in the evenings. Alain would pick up his own gift at the jeweler's in the morning. His wife would be surprised. He had wanted to have his grandmother's opal brooch made into a ring for years, as far back as the war, for Yvonne. He had had nothing to give her when he returned from Switzerland and somehow the years multiplied without ever yielding enough money to do something of value. He had a bonus this year, small but enough to make possible a fine setting. Since they had moved to Neuilly and the more expensive but safer apartment complex, there had been a little money. Unpleasant jobs have some compensation. He felt bitter suddenly and set the lion handled letter opener down. There was not enough compensation. There could never be enough. Yvonne worked. Catherine contributed. Whom was he fooling? He was not even a Judas collecting his thirty pieces of money. He was paid extra only for his weakness, for his known fragility. He put his head in his hands and drew his fingers back like a comb's teeth through his prematurely gray hair. A little gift, it cost hardly more

than... The jewel was inherited. His wife meant so much to him. He felt himself becoming maudlin and leaned back in his chair, examining the ceiling like a blank page in a typewriter. God, have I lost my humanity? Tell me. Make me know that much.

The door opened and Isabelle came running in and, without looking to see what he was doing, threw her arms around his neck.

"I love you, Papa," she said.

"I love you, my kitten," he said. He could barely speak.

"Isabelle," Yvonne had come to the doorway, "don't interrupt Papa. He is working."

"Yvonne," he said, holding their youngest in his arms.

She walked into the study and stood close to her husband and daughter. He worked his arm loose and put it around her waist and squeezed.

Today was Nevers, she thought to herself. He knew she knew that much, though he remembered he had not said it was. She held him and the three began to laugh together until the chair tipped backwards and they were suddenly lying on the floor on top of each other laughing.

They began their furniture moving routine together. Each night at ten or ten fifteen their safe and modern but small apartment converted to sleeping quarters for five. Catherine, a young woman of twenty-two, was given the privacy of the one bedroom, though she, Isabelle, and their mother divided the bureau and closet for their clothes; Charles, eighteen, who came home later and later as the bachelorette examinations approached, was given the cot in Alain's small study, which room thus was shared by the two men, one using it to write, the other to sleep in, both keeping their clothes in a single armoire. The living room had two couches, one a 3/4 size pull-out which the parents made up for themselves after pushing the dining room furniture to one wall, chairs upside down on the table, thereby allowing the bed to extend across the combination room, the other, an old sofa on which Isabelle, the youngest and shortest, slept. The conversion was carried out in controlled silence, and it was accomplished usually without Charles' help. While Isabelle got to sleep, with the living room lights off, Alain and Yvonne sat in his study until Charles came home, then moved to the small walk-in Pullman-type kitchen where there were two stools to sit on; or if Catherine did not want to be alone, they would sit with her in the bedroom, though usually she preferred to

confide in one parent at a time, most often her mother, thus leaving Alain to sit in the study anticipating the imminent return of his son, or in the kitchen alone on a stool. It was plainly "absurd," as he often blurted out when he lost his temper, which at night was frequently. He both cherished and hated his home. He both loved and hated his country for what it had done and continued to do to them. First it separated them, then reunited them, then rewarded them with diplomatic status and space in Geneva, then returned him to Paris as inspector of prisons and squeezed them into small boxes, like mice used in an experiment to determine environmental adaptability and potential for survival. He felt always a part of some experiment in the steady process of dehumanization. In his little book on St. John of the Cross, he identified Kafka as his guide through the contemporary "dark night of the soul," but he drew little comfort and no relief from what he understood. Was there any way of life, any place, in which the process ceased? Had there ever been? Was this human life in its only realizable expectation; the expectation of a steady, relentless, inevitable dissolution—of expectation itself, dreams, values, sanity, health, body, soul? Was this conceivably God's will or counter to God's will or man's free (that is, collective) will: the creation of this dehumanizing process—of others; and its managers' own selves? Was there no way to halt it? No way to reach God's desire for helping human beings to emerge creatively, to flower naturally, out of their bleak human separations and spiritual disconnections? These thoughts were suggested nightly by the absurd dismantling of the apartment. He considered them a family of furniture movers incessantly moving dining rooms from living rooms to make bedrooms and, in the morning, back again. The only hope, flickering at best was in Catherine's one day moving out, in which case the bedroom might become his and Yvonne's, the study Charles's, the living-dining room Isabelle's—at least until she needed privacy, when they would move back into the living room, unless of course Charles moved out by then, in which case she could have the study. Since the rooms were each small, the hope was not of a substantial but only an artificial halting of the dehumanizing process. Still, the building was "safe." DeBlaye and his evening counterpart saw to that. But, then, such men could be overpowered easily enough. It was even a sham security, he knew well enough.

"Catherine is upset. I think you should talk to her."

They sat on the kitchen stools and sipped tea. He ate a butter cookie, dipped in his cup and watched as one

side disintegrated and floated around in mushed pieces.

"What is she upset about?"

"You know. The same."

"Oh my." Alain knew there was nothing he could say or do to speed up her life for her or create out of air a white knight. "Yvonne, what can I say to her?"

"Just words of comfort, reassurance, hope, you know. You have a way with words that makes her — and all of us — hope."

He leaned forward and kissed his wife's forehead and then her lips, spilling a few drops of tea from his cup onto her bathrobe. "I'm sorry, love."

"It's nothing."

He wiped the spots with the edge of his own robe, touching her abdomen softly.

She drank from her cup.

"I'll speak to her." He sighed again, less heavily this time.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm fine."

He didn't want to talk about the day, nor did she unless he wanted to. He set his cup down without finishing it, finding it disgusting with its floating cookie suddenly, and squeezed her shoulder affectionately as he left the kitchen.

Catherine was sitting up against the bedstead staring, the covers drawn to her waist. He sat down on the bed and held one of her hands. He looked around the room, then back at her. She was dark complexioned like her mother, but thinner with very small breasts. Her eyes were shaded as if by sorrow, unlike her mother's that always seemed to sparkle. Their eldest now, except for Robert of course, he realized, was joyless. What gift of words did his wife think he had?

"Do you remember Marie Louise, Papa?"

"Marie Louise Draper? Of course. Is there something wrong? Did something happen to her?" He felt alarm suddenly. What had happened to the self-control he once had?

"No, nothing like that. She has always been so gifted and well-liked."

"Yes. I remember."

"She's very pretty."

"So?"

"I learned today she's taking final vows next week."

"Vows? To what?"

"One of my former classmates told me she's been at the Carme on the Butte de Montmartre this year."

"Hm. That's strange. No, not strange. It's..." He

could not think of any description. It seemed absurd. Yet...he remembered Marie Louise as a very beautiful young child of eleven or twelve with thick curly brown hair and dimples. "A Carmelite? Who would have expected that?"

"She has every gift, Papa."

"Yes, dear."

"She plays the piano well. She sings. She was third in our class, and in the first percentile in the bachot. God chose her always."

Catherine began to cry. Alain squeezed his daughter's hand.

"I'm not jealous or envious, Papa, really I'm not. I'm happy for her. Really. But it seems sometimes that God gave me no gift at all or I can't find what it is if He gave me one. I can't do anything at all. I just can't."

She wailed and leaned forward over the bed as if sick. He held firmly to her hand.

The moment felt sadder than any other of the day and he more helpless, more impotent. What if it were true — God gave her no gift? It couldn't be true, of course. God is the creator, the giver of life, the gift giver to every child. He tried to smile at the cliché expression but the smile forced his eyes to sting. Nothing was so terrible as this, he imagined, to be given no gift by the giver of gifts. Nothing. Not even the misusers and wasters of gifts in their worst bad consciences and sloths are so bereft when they fail... What words can there be?

"Dear... You have gifts. We each do. Some days I feel I have none — none at all."

"But you do, Papa. Everybody knows you do. You write books. You have eloquence. That is a gift."

"I have elo...?" He held her in his arms and felt her seize him, as if she were seizing a lover or a closest friend. "God," he whispered, "show her how loving, how gifted, she is. Show her."

He could say nothing of this, nor could he repeat any clichés about time and eventual flowerings and unfoldings. He felt most the pain of her longing, and her sweet words about his eloquence hurt his chest and made his throat dry.

"I know you are gifted," he whispered to her, holding her head against his cheek. "I know. And I'm not being eloquent, as you say, my precious love, but truthful. You will find you have many gifts, not just the one that shows."

"What shows, Papa? I am not pretty."

"Your gift shows. You will see the other gifts one day, as I do now. I promise."

"I want to believe. I love you, Papa. I wish I could believe as you do."

Charles came home at eleven thirty. His father was in his study alone. His mother, he could see as he walked through the living room, had gone to bed. Isabelle was asleep on the sofa. He could hear her breathing with her mouth open. Both he and his sister had adenoid problems. He bumped his elbow on one of the upturned dining room chairs and said "shit!"

"Charles," his mother called out.

"Yes, Maman, I'm home."

"It's late."

"I had a lot of work."

"Would you like some hot chocolate to help you sleep?"

"That would be nice, Maman. Is Papa still up?"

"In the study."

She got out of bed, found her robe, and went to the kitchen.

Alain was dozing when his son entered the study. He had closed his eyes after trying to write some lines in his sheath of poems. Nothing had come of it. He could not bring anything to fruition when he was waiting to hear about his work from the great man or from any man. He had an idea but it was barely a crystal, a sparkle of light in a raindrop on a dark branch, before it dissolved in his mind. It had something to do with a train and the old woman in the corner of the compartment. Out of all the events and imagery of the long day their silent journey together clung to his mind desiring to become a poem. But he could not crystallize what was between them or where they were both going or the simplicity of their chance meeting. Who was she? Who was he? Had the day been unbearable to anticipate for each? He wanted to discover a poem on the paper when he opened his eyes, but he was thankful he still experienced small crystals even if they dissolved. He did not expect the intrusion of his son and was instantly irritable.

"It's too late for you to be out—it's dangerous—a boy your age was knifed just last week only four blocks from the Metro stop and at this very time—where were you anyway? Studying with what's his name or with a woman!"

"I was studying, Papa. I told you. I'm not a good student like you. It takes me longer."

"You don't have the discipline. There are too many distractions. Brigitte Bardot and the rest of the narcissists. You have to concentrate and stop thinking so much about the war."

"Papa."

"It's on everyone's mind all the time—no let up—no relief—either some bitch's bosom or some Musulman's bullets. Our French youth have no capacity to think."

"Papa, I'm getting some hot chocolate."

"You made your mother get up for you at this hour?!"

"No...I didn't make her. She asked."

"You woke her coming in late like this. And what about her birthday present for tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is her birthday?"

"Yes, tomorrow! I knew you'd forget."

"I can't remember, Papa. I can't remember what I just thought I memorized."

"Stupid!"

"Alain!" Yvonne stood in the doorway. "Stop now. Charles, go into the kitchen, your hot chocolate is on the stove. Stir it."

"Papa, I wrote some poems today."

"What?"

"Alain, stop," she repeated.

"I want to show them to you when you have time."

"You're preparing for the bachot. What are you doing writing poems or what you call poems?"

"I'm not a student like you. I just want to write poems."

"Oh God," Alain held his head with both hands. His eyes glanced downward at St. John of the Cross in the El Greco painting. "My God," he repeated. He stood up impulsively and embraced his son. He felt the boy's strong arms around his waist. They were almost the same height. He had perhaps an inch or a little more on him. How he too hated studying, he remembered. How he hated the bachot, until it was all over when he defended it. How stupid. How dehumanizing. "I want to see your poems," he said; "I'm a little tired now but let me have them. Put them there with mine. They will greet me in the morning."

Charles pulled a clump of folded papers from his jacket pocket and tried to press them flat on the writing desk.

"That's good. Like that," Alain said. "Now get your hot chocolate before it boils."

"Thank you, Papa."

Alain looked at his wife as their son walked past her in the doorway, then he looked down at the crumpled pages covering his sheath. He felt suddenly very tired, perhaps even more tired than usual.

He fell asleep, but only for an hour and a half or two.

The electric clock on the sideboard read 2:12 when he woke. His wife was asleep. Her back was towards him. They had to sleep either directly face-to-face or back-to-back because of the bed size. Her breathing was steady as it always was when she slept. She told him once she had not slept a night throughout the war until they were reunited. He had wanted to say "me, too," but he had never regained the luxury of sleep throughout a whole night, especially when he was exhausted.

Isabelle breathed or snored. Poor child, poor anyone who had to listen. They had managed to have her teeth straightened and would have to see to this soon.

The other two were sleeping. At least their doors were shut. Tomorrow he could stay home, except for going to the jewelers and, of course, getting the cake. Oh yes, the restaurant reservation. That is, if it wasn't too late. He would ask Charles to study at home. He would feel easier about leaving the girls. The cake could be tasted with the family together beforehand when the presents were given. It was reverse order, but he wanted to take her out for a respite from their cramped space and, yes, from the children too. A day at home, without the Prefecture in his life. He could breathe more regularly with his anxiety reduced. Days like tomorrow, gaps in the week, were the only compensation. He knew there would be tomorrow.

He closed his eyes, but he knew he couldn't sleep. And he couldn't lie flat and look up into space. If he got up and sat in the kitchen or the bathroom, his wife would sense his absence and wake. They would talk over more tea or hot chocolate. They would talk about the children and their worries. Other things, too. They were not a one-subject couple. But they wouldn't talk about Robert. No one talked about him, though Alain thought about him every day. He was so quick in school, so alert and conscious of others, everything Charles, indeed he himself, was not. Their first child, child of their peace, their peace without anyone invading and controlling their lives, their peace in Grenoble. Isabelle was not born yet when Alain was gone, smuggled to Switzerland. He felt like a deserter of his family then, just as he felt like an evader of humanity today. But he was doing a necessary job for his country then: he was representing a government in exile, a symbol of survival for the future. Today there had to be some explanation and justification for not reporting what he saw: France at war? What if the men were not guilty? What if they were? Weren't they still men? The war would one day be over and be forgotten as a justification. He went over and over in his mind what he had seen and was not

expected to report. He felt a pain between his shoulder blades. It must have been the position he was lying in. He turned slightly but it persisted. He wondered if it was arthritis. It did not seem to be close enough to his heart to be something vital. He didn't smoke. His lungs were strong. But it pressed in irritatingly at his back. He wondered if he was imagining it, if he was actually dozing, actually asleep, and dreaming the pain. That was characteristic of his dreams—to wonder if he was in fact dreaming as he dreamed. He saw nothing, no people, no swirls of images, only himself now sitting on the edge of the bed, then rising and trying to find his way out of the prearranged room. He could hear Isabelle breathing louder than before. He knocked into the edge of the dining room table and became momentarily disoriented in his sense of where the kitchen was. He moved forward in the darkness and struck a table. A lamp tipped over onto the floor.

"Yvonne," he called, "I have forgotten the direction to the bathroom." His knee was sore from the table, but the pain persisted in his back. The children did not know what he did, where he worked, he reminded himself. He was a functionary with the government. That was simple enough to understand. Many writers, even Charles had learned from his studies in literature, were functionaries in order to feed their families, unless they were bohemians, which he could not be. He was bourgeois, it was true, from Bordeaux. But more than that he was a survivor from the war. But more than that, still, he did not like to think of himself as a survivor only; rather he believed there was hope for everyone to not just survive but to grow again and to realize their gifts, like Catherine. He believed and he wanted to believe even more.

"Yvonne!"

He sat up on the bed. He could feel his feet press against the floor. He could feel her arms around his neck, but he could not hear her voice. Then he saw their faces surrounding him in the glare of the living room lights. They stared unnaturally as if exposed to strangers as in photos of atrocities. They rubbed their eyes.

"Robert," he said. "Robert."

"Papa, what's wrong?"

"Alain, Alain, Alain..."

"I saw the one who knifed a policeman in Dijon."

"Papa," Isabelle cried.

"Alain..."

"Robert! They have killed my son." He could see his son's body on the pavement grotesquely mangled. "They killed my son!"

### Three

Alain heard the bell, lightly first, then loudly, as it penetrated his sleep. He opened his eyes and saw himself in the dining room mirror. He raised his head, confused momentarily by the disarrayed furniture. The bell persisted. Was it the doorbell or the phone? He could not greet anyone. He knew he was alone by the fact that no one answered it.

He sat up. Yvonne and the children had left, letting him sleep. It was his free day, to write of Pierre in "To the West" and he had slept through. Whoever was calling was determined. The great man? Hardly, but possible, he thought.

He walked the narrow path through the furniture to his study and lifted the telephone receiver.

"Alain!"

It was his mother and she was hysterical after a night, no doubt, of worrying and sighing to his father's discomfort.

"Maman, I am all right." He was almost relieved to hear her voice, as if from his childhood, and himself still protesting his independence.

"I know something terrible happened yesterday. I felt it."

"Nothing. My job. Routine is terrible," he said truthfully.

"No, something worse than routine. Be honest with me, Alain, please ease my worry."

"Maman, how is Papa?"

"He's fine. He's in the garden. Smoking. He's terrible. Everyone takes health lightly. Why does everyone make me worry?"

"Maman," Alain sighed.

"Now you too. I will die soon."

"Maman." After a deliberate silence he asked for Charlotte.

"She doesn't telephone. Promise you are all right. Did someone try to hurt you? I hate that awful job they gave you – and after all you did for them! Oh Alain..."

"Maman."

"Are the children well?"

"Yes. Charles doesn't study enough. Catherine has no boy friend." He gave the litany as he looked at the clock in his study – he felt hungry.

"How is my precious Isabelle?"

"Fine, as always. Little coquette." He felt his youngest daughter's arms around his neck and almost cried.

"I wanted to wish Yvonne joy on her birthday, poor dear."

His mother always called about his wife when she knew only he was there to extend her wishes. It was an oddly persistent snobbery that survived wars, of Bordeaux Protestant and higher bourgeois toward Grenoble Catholic and middling origins. It would never change, even after all these years, considering his conversion, when admitted, to be a downward step, as she believed.

"I'll tell her you called."

"Tell me the truth," she pursued, "about yesterday."

"It was nothing. Nevers."

"Oh!" His mother sighed heavily. "That evil place. I just can't believe that my son..."

"Maman, is Charlotte well?" He felt genuine concern for his sister even as he used her now for diversion from himself.

"Yes," she said simply. "My children are so sad. Life has been sad. Can't you ask for a transfer back into the government properly speaking?" Her voice was more effectively controlling for being light rather than heavy. Like Charlotte, she seemed almost *feerique*, fairy-like, at least in the quality of her voice, as if reality was always a surprise, which she worried herself accidentally into for lack of something else to do. He loved both women, but they seemed like rare flowers reaching out for special atmospheres, which could exist only if the world around them became less cloudy and moist with its terrible anxieties. How had they survived the war, he wondered; but, then, he smirked ironically, that was another story. He and his parents were of different political persuasions. His mother's father was German. Add to that the euphemistic "division of France into two", the so-called admiration for the family by the villagers of Belin on the Leyre, the presence there of fresh produce and even meat throughout the war, and one has enough of the story to satisfy one. Alain had always given his already anxious mother added cause for worry by his support for France. His father, the lord of the manor house, remained after the war as before, essentially quiet, prudent, tending his garden, keeping the world's anxiety relatively at bay for his wife. He was kind, generous, hospitable, but hated the telephone, through which his mother liked most to communicate in a tone just above a whisper and a sigh combined, as if at an antiseptic distance. Neither wrote letters. He loved them both. He loved his family. He feared their aging. He feared being left alone by his family, that is, by their dying before he died. His family was his country, his life of memory and expectation, his boundary of definition. He wished that his parents were younger than he; that

his and Charlotte's childhood belonged to someone else beginning now, to children Isabelle's age, before death could touch them. He shuddered thinking the word "death" as close to Isabelle's name. His mother's ethereal voice could ensnare him in such fears, so that his facade collapsed before his very eyes in the mirroring glass protecting the face of St. John of the Cross, like *la merule larmoyante*, the strange weeping mushroom that had destroyed the roof of their chateau when they were children.

It had always fascinated him that a mushroom could "weep" into the wood of the roof and eat it away from within until the whole structure could collapse. He had thought once of calling his novel, Pierre's story, *La Merule Larmoyante*, because of what had happened to his beloved family, his France, from within: separations, euphemisms, humiliations, loss, caused, it seemed, by nature herself, not by anything tangible morally speaking. The destruction would be explained metaphorically by the weeping of *la merule*, a vegetal violence that was no less destructive than war. Like those ruins of abbeys or castles one comes upon that one supposes were caused by the Hundred Years War, the Revolution, the Franco-Prussian War, the World Wars, only to learn that no one fought over them, only time. *La Merule Larmoyante* was time. But Pierre was not in search of lost childhood; both his family and his country existed, were loved, were continuing, he believed. *La merule larmoyante* devoured only a roof, which was rebuilt and the house was injected with defensive chemicals at various points in its structure, and the weeping mushroom never, as yet at least, returned. There was a solution. There seemed to be no such solution, on a like plane, to "The West." His title had to carry the sense of no solution, of a carnivorous force that could not be clearly recognized, understood, and destroyed. "The West" defied prediction though it recurred. It renewed itself; it destroyed itself. It was a larger, subtler, more tragic concept than *la merule larmoyante*.

His mother had stopped whispering and sighing. Part of her power, her genius, with the telephone was her silence. She could hear him ignoring her, hear him thinking his own thoughts, imagine him visualizing her in all her slender beauty and perverseness, her strange contempt for food in a country that ravished itself for subtle correspondences of taste, for hitherto undiscovered harmonies hidden in seas of incongruities. For all of that hunger she preserved contempt — to keep

herself thin and, she thought, youthful, flowering in the midst of time and destruction by nature. *La Merule Larmoyante* was her story perhaps, *To the West* Pierre's. One's story was named for what one feared most: she the weeping mushroom, he more death.

"When will you come to Belin?" she asked. It was the last question, as always, depending on his answer.

If he said merely "soon," there would be more, but what could he say now, especially without his calendar before him, and so early on his free day? This was a subtle power to whisper to him on his free day from Belin.

"The end of the month," he said, which meant sixteen days into the future, which allowed uncertainty to remain free.

"It's so far away. But I shall have to be content with that," she said softly "Will you bring dear Isabelle to see her grandmaman?"

He had forgotten that question. "We shall all come."

"Good," she said after a prolonged silence. Have you gotten Yvonne something nice for her birthday?"

"Grandmaman's brooch. I have had it reset as a ring."

"I don't remember...but I'm sure it's nice. Women like nice things, especially jewelry. You were always thoughtful. Put those terrible things of Nevers out of your mind. Think only of your dear family, who missed you so during the war. Embrace them all for their grandmaman, who is here too far away worrying."

"Give my love to Papa."

"Of course. I see him through the window. He should have his hat and scarf. He is smoking."

"I must go, Maman."

"I'll tell Charlotte you asked for her. She is so lonely now. She stays alone too much. You must call her. She admires you so. We all do. Alain —."

"Yes, Maman."

"Is everyone all right?"

"Yes, Maman."

"Embrace my dear Isabelle."

"Yes, Maman."

Her image persisted in his mind after he lay the receiver down. They were a family of tall thin people. Charlotte too. Hunger seemed to feed pride and make them resist eating rather than the reverse.

He visualized his mother setting the telephone down with her long slender fingers and watching his father through her upstairs drawing room window walk slowly through his rose garden toward the rear door of the house. He was knocking his pipe against an

arbor post. Alain could see his father's strong but also thin wrist twisting and tightening as he flicked out his ashes. They had fished and hunted together on the river and marshes that traversed their land, many times in his childhood and youth. His father's physical strength and quiet dexterity had always given him confidence. They seldom spoke, but sat together in pleasure in their rowboat, holding poles out over the water. When his father taught him to shoot wild duck and pheasant, he made shooting seem a natural extension of his arms, a normal if seasonal function of their bodies. Even the sound of his shotgun's firing did not ruffle his calm. A bird's fall from the air and retrieval in the mouth of one of their dogs was natural to the serenity of their being together. He loved his father. He had lost their silence together in the war. Now he was an old man whose death he feared before his own.

He would call Charlotte, as his mother asked. It was 11:00. She had been twenty minutes on the phone. Was he hungry now or not? He wanted to be with his family more than to eat. The children were at school; Catherine at her work. Yvonne was teaching. He felt useless. How could he generate imagination and energy to write on a day off? "A Day Off" had been another possible title for Pierre's novel, but it was too defined, too restrictive, too unambiguous, even for itself! A day off was like the bolt in the cell of a condemned prisoner. It could be opened or closed but the prisoner could never be free of its idea in his consciousness. Its state of being opened was defined by the inevitability of its being closed, and so one remained essentially its prisoner.

He would call Charlotte. He would at least do that within his limits as a prisoner. Would it be intrusive to call? She would know their mother had called him; but about whom was she worrying the most? She probably called Charlotte first. Perhaps he would get a second call shortly. But Charlotte seldom called. He would call.

First, he imagined her large apartment on the sixth floor overlooking the Garonne at Quai Richelieu, just off Avenue Victor Hugo—the large high-ceilinged rooms with the family tapestries their mother insisted she have as wedding gifts along with the Louis XVI chairs, the candelabra, the gold framed French oil paintings influenced by Raphael, to preserve for the family, in a museum atmosphere that Charlotte's husband had finally fled for another less austere and imprisoned woman. Alain both envied her grand apartment in Bordeaux and loathed it, as he both loved his own cramped home and despised it. Most of all he loved Charlotte, and at this moment he needed her as the only

family member he could reach.

He let the number ring a long time. She could be in the back of the long apartment overlooking the public gardens and would walk slowly (suspecting it was their mother with an afterthought) to the front living room, where she kept the telephone on a little marble top table by a window overlooking the river. Its traffic, she told him numerous times, was her main distraction once the children had left for school.

"Hello." Charlotte's voice was even softer than their mother's though without the worry devouring its softness from within. "Alain, it's you. I knew you would call. Our genie of the telephone called early this morning and said I must call you. Are you miserable, as she says?"

"No; maybe a little. Are you, as she says?"

"Lonely, not miserable. I'm happy the children are well. Yours?"

"Well. Yvonne's birthday is today."

"Hug her for me. You know I never remember birthdays. She knows."

"I know." He could see her glancing at the river barges carrying produce from the countryside to the markets, the boats on which some people lived. She was smoking. He could hear her taking extra breaths. "It was terrible at Nevers."

Charlotte said nothing. He knew she was inhaling deeply as she listened.

"The warden is torturing Algerians—one was dead." He had to tell someone. She was the only one possible. She said nothing. "I can't stand it anymore knowing what I know."

"Can you tell the authorities?"

"How?"

"Alain, Alain...." Her sigh was different from their mother's, less metaphysical, not pitying for herself. She loved him as he loved her, not as a lost part of herself causing her pain. He had wept with her over her divorce when she told him. He imagined she was weeping now over his atrocity.

"I want to tell. I want it to stop. I'm tired of all this."

"You're sure of what you saw?"

"Of course. I've seen worse before."

"You're tired, period."

"Yes. But I want to tell the truth. I want this war to stop."

"And you believe you can do it just by telling your truth."

"It's all I have left. I can't sleep. I hate my job. My day is intolerable. I have no time for anything decent."



He didn't want to cry.

"You have the children and Yvonne. No trouble there?"

"Yes — no, not like you mean. I lose patience easily, especially with Charles."

She sighed again, this time more sadly. "Alain... you must let him be himself. Don't think of Robert constantly, for both their sakes."

She was sensitive enough. Only she was allowed to speak of this; and, then, only because to her too, he imagined, Robert was still alive: for both their sake's meant for Robert's too.

"I know. I try. But Charles is such a lump."

"So were you, my love; remember?"

"Charlotte...." He could feel himself struggling. Why had he such a lack of control now? He lived as if every sensitivity was exposed, as if every protective layering had been eaten away from within by something that had penetrated him and would not abate until he or it was destroyed." I need to tell someone who is important. I know only one person now and my contact with him is all bound up with my writing and my need of recognition. I am afraid of losing everything."

"Can you sacrifice your recognition for this?"

"You know too much."

"It is easy for me to say. I'm not an artist. I'm a museum keeper."

"Don't say that."

"I love you, Alain. I want you to be free. You're a poet, you're a diplomat, you're a wonderful father and husband, a provider, and my brother. You have to be free within first. You have to tell the important person you know."

"There are never witnesses. I am the inspector. It is so ironic."

"Witnesses will come forward. People will investigate the truth if only to deny it."

"And I'll be sacrificed. I'm afraid."

"Well?"

She always ended an argument that way, not that they were arguing, but she had reached her only conclusion and always hated to repeat herself. "You are religious," she said as a final comment, not a cold one, but it was detaching since she believed she was not.

"Are there barges on the river?"

"Five, and four house boats."

"You must stop smoking."

"Why? To avoid cancer?" She laughed lightly.

"Perhaps."

"So, we've each given a lesson to the other."

"Mine was easier. I thank you for yours."

"I love you, Alain. I'm thinking of you. Mother didn't need to call."

"I can't sleep," he said.

"Tell someone the truth."

"I can't," he said. How had he been so disgusting as to tell her of the horror he had seen? She was a woman, more sensitive than himself; he did not want her to think he could speak of such ugliness to her as if he believed she was less feminine than his wife, to whom he told no such secrets. Now he regretted calling her. She would feel worse afterwards, more abandoned, by his very confidence. "I love you," he said.

"Call me," she said; "you know I don't like to call."

"I know."

"Be free." It was her familiar way of saying goodbye, though he believed now it was an imperative rather than a mere farewell.

He watched the coffee boil as he imagined her saying to her husband, also, "be free." Always she was too tolerant, too ready to release others to their own responsibility and to remain captive herself. Now she was with the heirlooms of the family; her two children, and the secret he had given her this morning. It was always the same: divest upon Charlotte, the enduring, the patient, the rational, the strong one, who was smoking herself, as their mother and he believed, to death. He felt both relieved and guilty at having called.

Why had he told Charlotte? Was there no one else? She had been through divorce court, an ugly trial involving a third party, a judgment, favoring her finally perhaps, materially speaking, but humiliating her in public, while her husband was released to the other woman, happier, unrelenting, and hardly poor. Charlotte had not wanted to strip him as the father of her children. "Be free," she had said bitterly. Alain knew she would say, "tell the truth" and "be free," whereas their parents would say, "avoid both" or, more characteristically, "transcend both." That was not fair of him; true, but not fair. *La merule larmoyante*, always the devouring trailing white *merule*.

He drank his coffee and milk and ate his toast in his study seated before his desk. He wanted to write. He wanted to write something which for him was fanciful, a diversion, a portrait of Charlotte, a sketch—portrait sounded too formal and pretentious: a pastel, hints of color, something simple and suggestive without allegorical implications, something capturing her, honoring her, in a moment at her window looking

down at the barges. Would he sketch her looking in from outside the window, veiling her with a thin reflecting sheet of glass, sketching only the outline of her face looking down, her long narrow oval face, her highlighted cheekbones, her deep set reflecting blue-green eyes, his own resemblance inevitably in hers, each visualizing the other through glass, each prematurely gray, she forty-two, he 2 1/2 years older, refusing characteristically to color her hair with a dark rinse? Tell the truth, be free, were always connected in her mind, austere. Her lips were large like his, their German grandfather's, their mother's, lips, not the more refined thinner mouth and facial lines of their father. They both shared and feared their mother's fragility not their father's deceptive calm. Charlotte had more of their father's calm than he, though she pretended to the reverse, referring to her brother as "the diplomat" as much as "the poet." He visualized her with a cigarette raised to her lips, clouding the glass momentarily, as she watched a barge drift down river from view. She had started smoking when they were 14 and 16. She was bolder than he and more clever at deception of their parents and the servants, who always told their mother what they saw. She even went swimming naked in the Leyre once in his presence, when she was fifteen, in the full light of day. They had walked out on the dock where their boats were tied. It was in late May, not yet summer and not too warm. She dared him to join her, then she took off her dress and underclothes, and dove off the dock, leaving him ashamed and confused. She was the first woman he had seen naked. He helped her out of the water and she snatched her clothes from his hands and ran back to the house hardly covering herself. She was his idea of boldness, of sensuality, of absence of awkwardness, of femininity, of grace. Nothing seemed beyond her sense of action or her imagination. To their parents' horror she joined the Resistance just before he left Grenoble. She spent virtually three years in hiding, about which she never spoke. She was one of those who never needed to speak. How could her husband have taken a mistress, his office secretary no less, a short pug nosed rather chubby and noisy girl from Toulouse, a grocer's daughter, and left such a sister and their children? He was not a scoundrel type, but, then, no one in Alain's mind could have been worthy of Charlotte or could have read her heart as he read it. She was a unique person, a *dame de beaute* uncontainable by anyone, unafraid of anything, who had disappeared once for France, and who now, at least for the time being, guarded the heirlooms and watched the barges on the Garonne. He wanted to see

her. Her children loved their Uncle Alain as his loved their Aunt Charlotte. Paul and Cecile, two years apart, now 14 and 12 as they had once been. He would take everyone at the end of the month to Bordeaux. He held a pencil in his hand but he could not sketch his sister. As with Pierre, there was much he could not surrender to fiction. He could not bear the thought of her ever having been captured, stripped naked, and violated, as he knew had happened. How striking in contrast was her soft self-assured voice to all that was strident on the world! How she had once hated tapestries as "too busy, too heavy, too warm."

He thought of their favorite novel, *Les Hauts de Hurlevent*, favorite, that is, by a non-Russian. When Cathy says, "I am Heathcliffe," and when he says, at her death, "I want you to haunt me!," he was always reminded of Charlotte and himself. They were each other once, or was he being maudlin now, feeling her solitude at the window. Was she feeling his fear darkening his small study? They felt each other, they lived each other; and when they were lost to each other during the war, they knew instinctively what each was trying to do.

They had not grown up on moors but riverbanks with marshes of tall grass and reeds, rowboats and almost stationary fishermen, swimming in water that seemed effortless and still but nourished life. But it was not in their natures to dwell on each other or their childhoods. Their closeness was subtler. It was as if they shared a common center that was constant though they were apart living separate lives. He was sure they recalled a common scenery together from time to time, especially sunsets disappearing down river toward the Atlantic bearing away the last traces of long slender cranes in flight. She especially felt kinship with birds, he with horses and dogs. They had learned to ride as children under their father's tutelage. They took long rides alone together on their "moors". They did not dream of others coming unexpectedly and mysteriously into their lives as much as of themselves being ever farther away in their private world. Its colors were mauve, dark green, mud brown, violet, the colors of Belin on the Leyre. Now their separations seemed worse even than during the war, more solitary, arid purposeless. Their center seemed on the point of being eaten within by something neither had expected.

He prayed for Charlotte. He believed that he had learned through her the way of living toward the center that is shared by two, perhaps more, the constant substitution of each for each, the *decentrement* of oneself through the other, the mystery of another's love. A poor

Christian, he realized he was, and Charlotte was not even a believer, yet she had taught him.

#### Four

The drive to the Butte de Montmartre was long and strained his ragged nerves further. But he knew the night before, when Catherine spoke of her friend, this visit would occur. No matter from what source it came or how destructive of other plans it could be, news of a spiritual testimony or a vocation to sanctity reached him and compelled his response. Final vows in a week meant that her friends and relatives would visit her for the last time in her life during that week. When he bathed and dressed, put the furniture back in its daytime place, and finished his breakfast, it was the only thing on his mind. He would tell Yvonne — he kept no secrets from Yvonne, except the details of the prisons he inspected — and she would understand, though she would have declined to join him, he was sure.

Rue Cortot was close enough to the convent to park and walk. He bumped and squeezed his black 2-door Peugeot into the one available space, and walked to the Place de Tertre. He knew Yvonne thought his religiosity excessive, the enthusiasm of a convert, but she also refrained from questioning it, unless it intruded on the children's or her consciences. She trusted his fidelity, as he did hers, from all points of view. There was no danger of his going to Montmartre for a prostitute or a look at the nude shows in Pigalle. Still, he was sensitive to what she might feel about his attraction to another woman's spirituality. He believed that everyone's most violent area, once penetrated profoundly by faith, was that of spiritual jealousy. But his wife was trustful, even when faced with the unexpected on her birthday. They would not tell Catherine until later. What would he say to Marie-Louise Draper? He did not yet know.

He sat in the visitors' room with his legs crossed and his hands folded one over the other in his lap. It was as he expected a Carmelite convent's visitors room to be: wooden floor, plain walls, no pictures, a cross on one wall, straight chairs with wicker seats, a small latticed window in one wall with a curtain covering it from inside, no access for the visitors to the interior, only one door — coming from the pebbled courtyard outside where he had been guided by a *gardien* and told to enter and wait. He looked at his watch: 12:30. The drive had taken over an hour.

Traffic had been terrible as usual; gas fumes suffocating, tempers raw. The stillness of the waiting

room made a sanctuary in the midst and on the peak of an anxious and explosive city. He groped for his own stillness within the room's, though he knew his was hardly a Carmelite vocation. Since his conversion, he had taken the sacraments very seriously, especially the sacrament of holy orders. Knowing such could not be his, he venerated it more fully. The celibate life was superior to the marital state, he had come to believe, though marriage too was a sacrament. Marie-Louise, hardly more than a child to him, on one level, was suddenly on a more mature and more sacred plane than he could ever attain. She was an oracle, if such a term was applicable to sacramental life, whose last week of exposure to the world was to be honored, witnessed, by laity such as himself. He was nervous. Stillness was not his normal state. The room even seemed to move with his breathing. He looked at his hands. They were folded in a deceptive calm. He heard heavy footsteps on the wooden floor beyond the curtained window. They stopped and the curtain was pulled to one side brusquely.

At first he thought she was another sister. She did not resemble Marie-Louise Draper. She had put on weight and was a large faced young woman. He felt stupid. He remembered her only as a ten or eleven year old. She was not pretty, but she had energy. She clomped her feet on the wooden floor, she jerked the curtain aside, she sat down, leaned back, and smiled in the tempo of "well, what can I do for you?" like a storekeeper. She was not his idea of a nun. His poor sad gray-eyed sallow faced self-deprecating Catherine was his idea. He stared in through the screen incredulous, which caused her to laugh. Which one, the nun or the visitor, looked more like a monkey in a zoo? he wondered. He at forty-five, his eyes bulging with anxiety, his mouth drooling probably, his hair nearly gray. Or she at twenty-two, her cheeks puffed, her eyes bright, her face framed by a white coif band and a brown head dress — he forgot momentarily the terms for the habit — brown and white, white and black. He felt he was the monkey and he was shaking with embarrassment in her presence.

"I am Catherine DeLesparre's father," he offered in order to break the silence.

She nodded and smiled but did not speak. But she was supposed to be able to speak these last few days, he thought.

"She was a classmate of yours," he added.

"Yes. How is Catherine?"

"Sad," he said, quickly correcting himself. "No, I

mean she's happy for you. But she finds life sad; just for now, you understand."

"She's well?"

"Yes. She's in good health. I'll tell her you asked. Thank you. But she is not finding her way, you understand." Catherine, he suddenly knew, would hate this conversation, but now he could not escape it.

"She has a boy friend?"

"No, not yet, that is. But she will, she will. We're very crowded though, like everybody. And with the war...my job...this job—" he cleared his throat—"I'm not always certain in my conscience about it."

"I will pray."

"Thank you, thank you," he repeated.

"I mean I will pray especially for you. We do that here. We pray for specific people in the world, not just generally for humanity, which is too vague, too literary."

The last word jarred his sensibility suddenly and seemed a strange word for her to use. Was it a chance indictment of himself?

"May I pray specifically for you?" she asked.

He was confused by that word "literary" and did not hear what she asked.

"What is your first name?"

"What? Oh, Alain."

"Alain, I will keep you in my prayers. Will you pray for me?"

"Yes, I will. Each day. Thank you."

"Not as a burden, please, just when you can."

"It's no burden, Marie-Louise."

He was beginning to imagine or perceive a beauty in her that Catherine admired. Her face seemed finer as she spoke, more delicate.

"My job is inspector of prisons." He wanted her to know what his children didn't know.

"Our Lord knew prisons, was a prisoner himself."

"No, you don't understand. I inspect prisons. I write reports about conditions." He tried to think of words that would make it clearer to her. He looked down at his hands, which were no longer calm, expecting them to explain.

"It disturbs you deeply, doesn't it?"

"Yes! My God." His voice was louder than he intended or expected.

"I feel your pain, Alain."

"How can you feel my pain?" he said without meaning to speak at all. He looked at her young, twenty-two year old face. How can you call me Alain? You are my daughter's classmate. He looked down again, not for words, into an angrier silence.

"Can you tell others it is wrong?"

"What is wrong?" He looked up defiantly.

"Something. It is in your face."

"Nothing is wrong. I inspect. I see what I see. It is unpleasant. Most jobs are."

"This one frightens you."

He winced and leaned forward suddenly, feeling the unidentified pain in his upper back that he had felt the night before.

"When you tell what frightens you, you will be free."

"You know that?" The impudence of her! In effect, he was rude now. The interview was irritating him. He needed to stand and straighten his shoulders.

"I know that," she said with calm self-assurance.

"In your world," he said hesitatingly, "you will be protected when you're exposed by telling your confessor what frightens you."

"Everyone's exposed. It's not the telling. It's the admission to oneself. Then there is nothing to conceal."

"What have you admitted to yourself?" Now he felt on the attack, but he wanted to know, since her face was an excellent mask, if it was a mask, of concealment.

"That I could mock others, that I could do evil."

"You?" He laughed. Then he became silent and stared at her face. Without exactly changing expression there seemed hardness to her eyes, or was he projecting what was emanating from himself. He felt protective of Catherine and wished he had not exposed her. "Do you concentrate on evil?" he probed, feeling his role slipping from beseecher and confessor into *avocatis diaboli* inevitably.

"No. I concentrate on each day's schedule."

"Like a job?" he said mockingly.

She laughed. It was one of her facile gifts, he suspected: laughter.

"Pray for me," he whispered. "Pray for my family. Pray for my son Robert, who died."

She looked down in her lap this time, then looked up again at him.

He did not want her to speak of his son to him and held his breath anticipating her touching something too exposed. She said nothing. He knew she knew. But what did she know? Had he told her the right things to direct her prayers to where they were needed? Had he been absurd to come?

She sat in silence. He wanted to speak further, not to leave yet. He wanted to offer some of his own spiritual insight, but suddenly he felt thwarted. Words congested and seemed fatuous. What does one say?

He leaned forward and touched the screen with his fingers. She reached forward and touched his fingertips with hers. He had not expected them to do that. He bowed his head and stood up. She stood up. She was taller than he expected, slenderer. He smiled at her. It was surprising to him to smile.

On the street he felt wary. Nothing he could specify. He wanted to gather his family in again under his own protection. He had no business talking about them that way, even to a nun. If he had not stopped himself, he would have blurted out about Charles' inability to concentrate, his verbal dribblings of "poems" about women's thighs and breasts, wet lips and hair entwined in fingers, and other such nonsense; about Isabelle's snoring; about his wife's recurring nightmares of the war, of being alone again... and on and on. He hated to talk to anyone, especially anyone who knew his family in any capacity, about those he loved. But she was a religious. What did she mean that she could mock others, that she could do evil? She could use others' secrets to betray them. He expected everyone to betray.

Yet she knew that of herself, therefore she could resist. Yet evil was not knowing but doing evil. He knew but...that was her fear, not his. Despite her so-called gifts, she had that fear.

He had forgotten where he left his Peugeot. He was now on Rue Lamarck. How had he gotten there? It was not a narrow street like the other. He looked up at a protective wall surrounding a cemetery. There had been no cemetery where he parked the car.

### Five

Everything conspired to obstruct him this day. Thirty minutes later he stood before the door of the jewelers on Rue Bergere and read a handwritten sign on the door: Closed due to a death in the family. He was furious. It was a weekday. What was this? It had been difficult enough to park in the busy district. What was he to do? He could not contemplate the implications. It was he now, not his son, who would appear to have forgotten his wife's birthday. That was absurd. It was early afternoon. He looked again at the sign. The shop was not closed for lunch, but for grief. Why had he chosen that out of the way jeweler anyway? Because it was cheap; as always. He was furious.

He opened the car door and swung it ajar as hard as he could, then quickly jumped back as it snapped against his knee. Damn!

He would buy flowers. He had enough cash on him to buy a large bunch. He looked up and down the street, but it was not a district for florists. He still had to collect the cake—or was Catherine getting that? And reserve the restaurant—that he must do next. Would Yvonne mind if they did not go out? In a few days he would feel more relaxed. It was hard to celebrate feeling as he did. The pain in his back had left him, but he felt agitated. The whole business with the nun annoyed him in retrospect. Imagine her asking, "What is your first name?" "Alain." "I'll pray for you, Alain. Alain, old pal." He dug his keys out of his pocket again and mistakenly locked the door this time. Damn!

DeBlaye banged on the window of his gardien room as Alain hurried through the courtyard. Alain disdained acknowledging the invasive throbs but DeBlaye swung open his door and shouted, "I let two men go up to your apartment, sir."

"You what?!" Alain's neck vein reddened to bursting. He was torn between killing DeBlaye on the spot with his bare hands and racing upstairs to rescue his children or, if too late, to face the carnage inflicted by the two men. Photos of atrocities confounded his vision and his sense. "Who? What two men?"

"Officials, sir. They showed me some identification, some papers, you know."

"No one goes in—we pay for protection—what are you here for?"

"I had to obey, sir. They had papers—I don't know what—also..."

"Is my family...?"

"Your daughter Catherine—"

"My God!"

Alain did not wait for the elevator but ran up the four flights of stairs to his apartment. He grasped at his keys, dropped them, found the two door keys, inserted one when the door was opened from within.

"My little...my dear...are you all right?" He held her tightly in his arms.

"These gentlemen, Papa..."

"Who? Stay behind me."

"Papa, I'm all right."

"Who are you?"

"Mr. DeLesparre, this is Mr. Rouleau from the Red Cross and I am Mr. Edington from Amnesty International."

"So?" Their presence was impudent and invasive, like everything else this day. What did these people want with him? Was a man's home no longer his own?

He was going to see that DeBlaye was fired.

"May we speak with you – in private?"

Alain began to protest. "It's all right, Papa," Catherine nodded graciously to the visitors and withdrew to her room. She seemed so feminine, so vulnerable, to him as she smiled at the strangers: so much more delicate than Sister Marie-Louise Draper. Without her suddenly he felt naked.

"Here, sir?" the taller, the apparent spokesman, Edington, asked.

Edington? Alain posed "English, no?"

"Yes," Edington said in English.

"I speak English, too," Alain said sarcastically, "if that would be easier for you." His English, unlike his wife's, was faulty and tired him mentally to exercise.

"Doesn't matter," Edington said, then spoke in French again.

Alain looked at his watch automatically but did not read what he saw. His family would be coming home for the birthday. He did not want them to find these men there.

Edington and Rouleau sat on the cot, Alain in his chair before the writing desk. He glanced at the print of the imprisoned Spanish saint before he turned to face them.

"We are concerned, sir," Edington began, "as representatives of our respective organizations –"

"The guard downstairs said you showed him identification."

"Yes, oh, sorry." They handed Alain their official IDs.

French Red Cross and Amnesty International. Fine. They seemed authentic.

"As I was saying, we –"

"And some paper, he said."

"Paper? No, just a letter of introduction."

"May I see it?"

"Yes, of course."

Edington took a folded paper from his breast pocket and leaned forward with it extended.

Alain disliked Rouleau's silence, even his mustached face irritated him. He was young, thirty at most, conspicuously inexperienced and arrogant, he thought. Edington was older, perhaps Alain's age, more sincere looking, open-faced, more his own height and bearing. He remembered the English in DeGaulle's unit. Edington reminded him vaguely of them.

He handed the paper back without registering what it said. Nothing seemed to penetrate either his vision or his memory. He felt tired from the run up the stairs and the traffic and confusion. DeBlaye was a fool.

Perhaps he would not have him fired.

"The prisons in France," Edington's voice broke through Alain's fatigue and preoccupation, "are said to house Algerian political detainees."

"What? Where? What prisons?"

"That's what we wanted to ask you, sir, since your name was given us as one of the inspectors of prisons."

Alain lowered his own voice cautiously, since the walls of the apartment were thin, to lead the tone if not the subject away from any possibility of an outburst in the discussion, "I am an inspector, that's true. Who gave you my name?"

"The paper you just read mentions it."

"Yes, of course." He felt the pain between his shoulders again, just a beginning twinge. Bertrand would protect him; it could not have been Bertrand.

"Are there political detainees to your knowledge in any of the prisons you inspect?"

"Are they tortured?" Rouleau interjected savagely.

"Ah!" Alain sighed. "Detainees? How so political?"

He looked at Edington, ignoring Rouleau.

"Algerian, DeLesparre," Rouleau pressed.

"Mr. DeLesparre," Edington interposed diplomatically, "we have reason to believe, on good authority, that a portion of the prison system in France, unknown surely to many, is being used for purposes of interrogation of Algerians, and that they are being held without charges in violation of their human rights."

"They're being tortured!" Rouleau blurted.

"What Mr. Rouleau is saying," Mr. Edington interposed again, "is an allegation of concern to us all. It has been rumored for two years, as you may know from the press stories, that this has indeed been going on in secrecy in the prisons here in France."

There was a heavy silence in which the three men stared intently at each other. Alain looked over his shoulder, after a prolonged moment of exchanged looks, at St. John of the Cross' small tormented face.

"I..." he hesitated. What he was calling arthritic pain was becoming more intense. "I inspect eight or nine prisons a year on a semi-regular basis, some few only quarterly. Other men inspect others. I am always shown," he cleared his throat, "the same things: maintenance, food, laundry, medical facilities, prisoners' quarters, exercise rooms, reports of the wardens. It is always the same."

"Then you have seen no evidence of Algerians being detained separately and under less than normal conditions?" Edington pressed now more ironically.

"Well, I've seen prisoners who are or happen to be of Algerian origin in cells like any others. Surely Algerians commit crimes, are found guilty, and are sent to prison." He tried to smile.

"We mean political, not criminal," Rouleau insisted; "you know what political means."

"I'm not a child," Alain blurted. This Rouleau, like this day, was irritatingly impudent and invasive.

"No one suggests that you are, sir," Edington said softly.

Alain was wary of both voices now. He was not going to be patronized by anyone.

"Then you've seen no evidence of these allegations in your prisons, sir?" Edington resumed.

"My prisons?"

"Those under your inspection."

"No," Alain said, twisting his shoulders and moving his position in his chair. "No."

"Do you inspect the prisons at Vincennes and Nevers, sir?" Rouleau interrogated. The Frenchman's face was drawn to a chilling point of intense disgust.

"I do."

"Recently?"

"Nevers recently, Vincennes soon, in a day or two."

"Nevers then," Rouleau persisted.

"Yes." Alain folded his hands before his chin and stared at his adversaries, moving his eyes from one to the other.

"We know your reputation, sir," Edington said more quietly. "You were in the government in exile during the war."

"Yes," Alain acknowledged.

"Then after the war a member of Mr. Schuman's government."

"Yes."

"You helped in the planning of a united reconstructed Europe."

Alain nodded without speaking. He was a participant, modesty forced him to admit, hardly a planner. One day he hoped to write a memoir of those days.

"You are also an author of some note."

"Thank you."

"I have read your study of the saint—" Edington nodded toward the picture on the desk. Alain blushed. "It is very fine."

"Thank you again."

"You are a very sensitive and deep man, sir. It must be very hard for you, as it would be for many, to be inspector of prisons."

Alain wanted to shake his head in denial, but he simply stared, following clearly, more patiently now, the line of questioning.

Rouleau started to speak, but was stopped by Edington's sudden gesture of putting a hand on his colleague's arm and restraining him.

"Is it possible," Edington pursued with equal patience, "that the wardens of these prisons—or indeed men higher in authority than they—and I am thinking particularly of Nevers, have arranged your inspection in such a way that you are not shown what we are discussing; but rather, by using your reputation for sensitivity and compassion, are masking activities that they wish to conceal?"

Alain stared a long time at Edington before replying. He wished he were surprised or shocked by this suggestion. He could not remember which was from the Red Cross, which from Amnesty International. He did not want to sigh. He realized he was being given a chance for both shock and surprise, but it was too late. He was not good at pretense or lying. He was always honest with his wife and children and, in the past, with superiors. But who were these two anyhow? What power had they? Who were they to accuse anyone? France was at war. He had always served France. He was serving her now. They were not. They were agents of some institutions or agencies that did not have France's interests at heart, but only the interests of a few Algerians who were probably guilty of crimes, of atrocities against French citizens, and who committed worse than any treatment given them. What right have they to come into my home and challenge me? He was quietly, determinedly furious. The adversaries were waiting, impatiently in contrast to himself, he thought, for an answer.

"No," he said, "it isn't possible." It was even insulting and condescending to suggest.

"Then you saw everything at Nevers to the satisfaction of your values of what constitutes legal and proper behavior by prison authorities toward all prisoners."

"Yes," he insisted. His back was quite painful now. He leaned forward after uncrossing his legs for relief.

"I see," Edington concluded. He remained silent and looked at Rouleau, then stared back at Alain.

"Unfortunately, sir," Rouleau said with unexpected and disarming calm, "we have spoken this morning with an Algerian detainee who escaped yesterday afternoon from the prison outside Nevers. He spoke of torture, forced degradation; of several men being stripped and left to lie in their excrement; of being deprived of food

and the most elementary decencies; and, in his case, of having his genitals tied with wire and electrified until he lost consciousness. He also said he saw that some men in the segregated cell were mutilated and one, he believed, was dead. He is himself in very bad shape. Indeed, he has several stab wounds - in his thighs and legs and one in his back. What do you make of that, sir?"

Alain had crossed and uncrossed his legs twice while Rouleau was speaking but tried to remain fixed on him as attentively and calmly as possible. Alain, after all, realized who he was and who they were and, most especially, he knew what institution he had to uphold. "I question the credibility of this so-called detainee."

"You question the credibility," Rouleau repeated savagely.

"I would like you, sir," Edington said, leaning forward, with his eyes away from Alain momentarily and fixed on the saint's picture, "to think very carefully before you respond further."

"I don't need to think further. I am a loyal Frenchman."

"What does that have to do with it?" Rouleau interjected.

"I am an official of the French government. I am inspector of prisons. I told you what I do and what I see and what, as you put it, satisfied my values as to the proper management and conditions of the prisons."

"You said 'loyal.' I am French, too; but to what are you loyal?"

"Jean." Edington cautioned his colleague.

"To France, to my family, to my vocation as a writer, to God."

"And to humanity?" Rouleau fired forth before Edington interrupted.

"Mr. DeLesparre. I must tell you that this Algerian said he saw you yesterday in the room where he was kept prisoner."

"What?" Alain felt the pain in his back penetrate deeply. His lips were dry. He was holding the arms of his chair firmly. He prayed his family would not return. If only he could be given that much mercy this day. "I don't know any Algerians. I didn't see him or any. How could he know me?"

"It is very hard for me to believe, too, sir, but he says the warden made it possible for him to escape, otherwise he would've died. And the warden, he says, gave him your name and said you were the man responsible for his being there."

Alain felt faint. His mind was confused, yet his anger was welling from inside at some very deep point

as if from a remote past even remoter than his own life. The anger did not become articulate but, surprising to himself, produced a bizarre resignation that was akin to the recognition of indisputable arithmetical or sociological facts. "I don't believe you," he said. "I believe Silvestre could make up such a story to defame me. He is very abusive of me because of our social and intellectual differences. It is always unpleasant for me to go to Nevers for that reason. But even he would do this only as a wicked joke. He would not implicate himself anymore than he would discredit the system. He knows how he lives and who feeds him. But his humor is sick. He makes everyone call him Frère Jacques. I suspect him of being the collaborator type, who has no morals, no decency, no loyalty. But that does not make him a torturer or violator of the 'rights,' as you call them, of Algerians. And if he helped this man escape, as you say, he kept excellently concealed from me the place from which he helped this man escape. I am amazed he could be so clever." He stopped himself to catch and steady his breath. He was angry and fearful in every fiber of his being.

"You are being very logical, sir," Edington concluded. He looked at Rouleau. They both shrugged. Rouleau pulled a photograph from his pocket.

"Have you seen this man at Nevers prison or anywhere before?"

Alain looked quickly, then looked more closely. "No, never." The man was an Algerian type without question, but he did not remember seeing him in the room at Nevers prison. All those men had been in much worse condition. Jacques had created this man out of another hidden room or out of thin air to play his evil trick. Alain felt sick. "No," he repeated with absolute assurance, in this instance. "Has this man identified my photo?" he asked ironically.

"He has given us only your name."

"There, you have it. Now I must ask you both not to continue with this discussion here. I am expecting my family soon. It is my wife's birthday. I think you will agree this is not a subject for one's children and one's wife, especially on her birthday."

"I am sorry we had to come to you with this. The evidence we were given seemed very strong."

"We are all concerned about this war in our different ways," Alain said grandly, feeling prematurely released, "but I assure you my inspection does not conceal the truth. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"We'll leave sir," Edington said adroitly. "If we need to speak with you again, we'll call for an appointment."



Alain began to walk toward the study door tentatively, feeling himself falling away into a desolation that was increasing as rapidly as his breathing. As he reached for the knob, the door swung inward and Isabelle ran to him and hugged him around the waist. He saw his wife, Catherine and Charles standing side by side like witnesses at a trial bar staring in at him, their faces ashen under the overhead living room light or was he seeing his own face in theirs without seeing theirs at all? The photograph of the man was still interposed in his vision.

"Did you read my poems yet, Papa?" Charles said in a silly inane sounding incongruity.

Alain said quietly, "Yes."

"Well, did you like them?"

"Papa liked them very much," Yvonne said.

"No," Alain said strangely, "tell the truth, for God's sake. The truth!"

Charles' face changed swiftly from anxious anticipation to pain. He ran past the two men who were moving toward the door away from this bewildering domestic aesthetic conflict.

"Alain," Yvonne said with a mixture of anger and pleading. Her face looked as drained as his.

"I'll go after him," he assured her, "I'll tell him I didn't mean him or his poems. God!"

Edington and Rouleau talked to each other as they stood outside the apartment. Alain hurried past them down the stairs as the elevator rose.

Yvonne sat on Isabelle's couch with her jacket still on and her teaching books in her briefcase beside her. Something is happening, she repeated to herself several times; and I don't know what it is, Catherine was in her room. Isabelle was in the bathroom. This was usual. This other, intruding upon their lives, is not usual.

When Alain returned with Charles, she had not moved. Her husband looked not just exhausted but grilled and tormented. She knew he was going to say, as he did the last two years, would you mind if we stayed in, I am very tired. But she wanted to be away from the children with her husband alone, not for her sake but for theirs. Alain's tensions were destroying the atmosphere.

He and Charles looked at her, at least seemed to recognize her, then walked together into their room. She was confined to the living room-dining room and was not going to make her room the kitchen today.

It was her forty-third birthday, which did not matter much to her, unless it could give them something else

to direct their attention to, and then it mattered. She was decimated, she was wasted by her days teaching English to French adolescents who hated any foreign language and who had been taught by almost all of their other teachers and their parents that they were right to so hate. She had believed the same once herself, until a "dashing" Englishman carried off an aunt of hers from Grenoble to London, and she was invited for three weeks for "fortnight" vacations with them at their retreat in Cornwall for four successive summers. She was ten at her first visit. She believed Merlin came out of his cave at the bottom of a cliff near Newquay to teach her by magic a second equally splendid language. That was her English uncle's idea—he was a poet who had been a soldier in The Great War—and she thought at first he was being patronizing and "silly;" but the magic worked and she learned English well. Thank God, she often reminded herself, nowadays when we need money so badly. Alain is a good husband, a loving father, she reviewed as she stared at the closed door to the study, but he has a frightful temper, is not handling pressures well, is overly anxious about his writing and his recognition, he fears the loss of his powers, he is compensating too much with religion, he is increasingly irritable, easily slighted and injured, impatient with the children, and made crazy with the war. It is this awful work of his for the Prefecture. If he could only talk about it. He mistakenly tries to spare everyone and spares no one a single thing. What did those men want? Catherine said they were from the Red Cross and something else. Something to do with Algerians. She was not clear what. He is so tight about everything these days. He is so impossibly French. Oh! She was furious at the closed door. I do not care about any presents. I want attention. Ha! she laughed. Why have they put this terrible thing upon him? It is paralyzing all of us. I am really quite furious. "Alain," she called. This isolation was inexcusable.

## Six

They sat in silence during the drive to Rue Bonaparte. The silence she refused to internalize. They were going out. If her insistence angered him, she was not going to feel guilty. If anything she was angry because of the visit of those two men or because he had forgotten to make a reservation at L'Aiglon on Quai Voltaire. Now it was too late, so they would go to their old favorite from their student days, the Casque d'Or. That was all right. Perhaps he would become sentimental. That

was better than this incessant touchiness. The English have such nice physical words for certain emotions – "touchiness, touchy." Peculiar language. She thought of it a great deal, especially when she wanted space and distance apart from their cramped and tension-ridden world. She always tried to convey to her students the beauty of escape that another language provides, the travel, the wonder, but that it also has problems, and most thought of her as "very queer indeed," a suitable English expression she had taught them inadvertently; so she resorted, as language teachers are wont to do, to discipline – drill and recitation – as the only thing they would respect or, more importantly, fear. Alain was so bad as regards languages. Really she was irritated with him.

He parked the car clumsily, banging into the car behind. "Damn!" At least, he broke the silence. She smiled at him as a kind of diplomatic concession but also as a gesture of flinging aside the whole business of cars. He looked at her, with both hands firmly on the wheel, but could not manufacture a response. Something terrible had happened with those two men.

They walked down Rue Jacob toward Rue Bonaparte. He walked a few paces ahead. She was tempted to disappear through an open doorway and wait to see if he noticed her absence. He could be "such a boor" – another good evocatively earthy English expression. That was what these French intellectuals needed to escape their silly abstractness – earthiness; they had an excess of intellectual sensitivity. "My God!" she muttered in English as she continued faithfully behind him. Does he think I am a woman of the Ming Dynasty? He is being "very naughty."

The Casque d'Or was mercifully crowded, but with one free table, so that they did not have to face each other alone. It was a tiny restaurant with room for 20-25 diners lingering through an evening. They were lucky it was Thursday. The curtains were still dank gold velvet and almost kept out the noise of traffic streaming down Rue Bonaparte en route to the Right Bank. The overhead brass lamps, painted gold, were more chipped and flaking than she remembered. The waiters still had barely enough space between tables to move. It seemed the same as it had been before the war.

They perused the small menus. Alain barely glanced at his. Yvonne took especially long to decide. She looked at the desserts, remembering the cake Catherine had "fetched" that they decided to taste later if the children left any. How silly to be here, she thought.

"Alain, what will you have?"

"Fish."

"It's not Friday," she laughed. Now she was being naughty.

"Oh really, Yvonne, do you have to make jokes?"

"On my birthday – remember? – I can make jokes."

He said nothing, but looked judgmentally, she thought, from side to side at their neighbors pressed against them. He was miserable, poor man. What is he thinking? This is the worst he has been.

The waiter leaned over her head, jostling her slightly, which made Alain snap, "Really! Be careful, eh?"

"It's nothing, Alain," she said yieldingly, encouraged by his responsiveness even if it was hysterical.

"We are here to have a nice dinner in calm and quiet."

"Here, sir?" the waiter quipped too wittily.

"We were students once and were here often," Alain said.

"Like everybody."

"It's my wife's birthday."

"I will do my very best, sir."

"Thank you." Alain managed a smile at both the waiter and Yvonne.

"Thank you," she echoed to the middle-aged waiter, who was perhaps never a student.

When the orders were taken and they were brought a carafe of wine, Alain toasted and kissed her, then they drank together. It was something terrible, she realized, because he was choosing to conceal it by pretense of affection.

"Who were those two men?"

He looked surprised, uncertain about the reference.

"The two in your study when we came home."

"Must we spoil a birthday evening in our old Casque d'or?"

"Would it spoil it to tell me who they were?"

"Must you know everything I do?"

"Alain!" she said with more depth than alarm.

"I meant only that there are things in connection with my work that I would rather spare you and the children –"

"The children, yes, but I am not one of the children. We have always told each other everything, except when we couldn't get word at all."

"I know." He laid his hand on the table over hers and squeezed it gently.

"Were they from the Red Cross or some such? Catherine thought so, but she is so often wrong in her

information."

"One was from the Red Cross. The other was from Amnesty International, a group —"

"I know of them, at least by reputation."

"Well?"

"What did they want with you? Something about treatment of Algerians?"

"What?"

"The papers are full of it. Is that what they came to you about? I would think that reasonable enough. You could corroborate it for them if it's true."

"Yvonne, dear, it's not as simple as that."

"What is not as simple?"

"Corroboration."

"But one sees or doesn't see."

He laughed painfully, then said, as if giving a lecture, "We have the honor of France to think of, always."

"Honor? In what sense?"

She raised her glass for her husband to refill. The wine was disappearing faster than usual, she noted herself, but it was her birthday and she felt she needed wine for this conversation. She took some bread from the wicker basket, bit into it, and waited for him to answer.

"France is at war. She has been at war since our student days in this restaurant."

"I know."

"Then you know what I mean by honor."

"No, not in this instance."

"France is trying to conduct a war and does not need bad publicity." Alain did not want to share his thoughts with strangers at other tables. They were young, many of them, he could see, and would not understand.

"France...," Yvonne said slowly and with conviction, "must let Algeria go and accept whatever publicity comes with that."

"Yvonne!"

"You want her to keep Algeria. What did these men want of you that had to do with honor?"

"Yvonne, this is not talk for here."

"Not for the children either, but for your study. When and where can I hear it? I know what the honor of France means."

"You're tired." Where is the waiter with our appetizers, he wondered. He forgot what they had ordered. Cucumber salad, eggs with mayonnaise, or what?

"I am, that's true," she conceded, challenging him.

"They wanted to know something about one of the

prisons."

"Nevers?"

"Yes, Nevers. I hate that place with the deepest of hate."

"What did they ask?"

"A prisoner — Algerian — escaped and made certain allegations."

"About?"

"About treatment there."

"Of Algerians?"

"Yes."

"And they asked you to corroborate or refute."

"There was nothing to it — it was all lies — a trick by the warden himself."

"I'm confused. Nothing — lies — the warden... What does this have to do with you?"

"It's not so simple."

"You told what you saw?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then what is complex?"

"I have a job, Yvonne. We have a home, bills, debts... Three children depend on us for everything."

"Yes. What did you tell the men you saw?"

Alain believed those at the other tables were listening only to them now. The men especially looked at him from time to time, he thought, with growing hostility. The women were furtive and silent. He noticed that much. He had trouble observing in close confines.

"Cucumber salad," the waiter said offering a small dish over the table.

"Here, for me," Yvonne said.

The waiter set down a dish of fruits of the season before Alain.

"Wasn't it egg with mayonnaise?" He had forgotten. Yvonne took another bite of bread. The fruit was fresh with a touch of kirsch. It was all ordinary, Alain thought despairingly.

"What did you tell them?" she repeated more quietly. Now she felt nervous anticipating his response.

"I did not tell them anything. I saw nothing the Algerian claimed I saw."

"He claimed you saw?"

"He claims he saw me yesterday. He didn't. I did not see him there with the others." He was silent, as alarmed as if the two visitors had heard him say this. Yvonne said nothing for a minute or two. She did not drink from her glass or eat anything.

"You saw Algerians detained there," she said sadly.

"Of course, just criminals." He was with the interrogators again not with his wife.

"Everyone knows what happens to Algerians in prison these days."

"Everyone."

"Alain, are you not telling what you see because of your job – because of us?"

He extended his hand again. She momentarily drew hers back, then put hers over his. She felt more than tired suddenly, more like she had felt during the war from sleeplessness and constant awareness of abnormality and danger. Her migraines had never ceased, only relaxed slightly from time to time. A part of her could not believe the war would end even when the Germans were defeated and gone.

There had to be some solution to this new torment, she believed. Loss and not knowing were steady and acute, but this destroyed them both, right there in Casque d'Or or before, months before, two birthdays before, as if from within, and without their knowing or admitting it was true.

"I can't eat," she said and burst into tears. "Silly," she said, "silly woman." She pushed her chair back.

"Yvonne, please, stay."

"I can't. I'm sorry."

He rose to follow her as she left the restaurant, then he hesitated but only to set some money on the table for their dinner.

He looked both ways on Rue Bonaparte but she was not in sight. He walked toward the Seine, remembering how they differed in senses of direction: his was supposedly instinctive and remarkably accurate, hers logical and always getting her lost; he was also diplomatic, she was blunt; he intuitive, she analytical; he poetic, she "prosaic" – that was her joke on herself; he serious, she always capable of levity. He looked down the short narrow side street Rue Visconti off to the right and saw her standing leaning against a wall. It had been one of their favorite streets in the old days, because of its narrowness. The old buildings on either side looked deceptively high and seemed to tilt across toward each other overhead, especially at night. From either end it was hard to see doorways, only shadows protruded. It was easy to disappear into one of those.

He stood behind her and held her around the shoulders as he had often done when they were younger.

"We have always done everything together," she said; "even when we were forced apart, we knew what to do."

"What would you have done?"

"You don't understand. We do things together, always." She turned around under his arms to look at him. It was as if a film covered his eyes or his mind. "We should live differently. It's terrible the way we live. Like perpetual furniture movers. And why, because of fear of living somewhere more vulnerable to crime. It's too ironic!"

"But Yvonne, dear, recognize the way the city is... think of the children."

"We're in the city here, now. Is this street scary? Look at us. I was here alone before you found me. No one raped me or stole my purse. I trusted it was you who came up behind me."

"Yvonne," he laughed, he enjoyed her bluntness, he loved her defiance.

"And as for the children, we're short with them; they have no outlets; there is an atmosphere of fear which is preventing them from growing. We both know the atmosphere. They have to grow."

"It is not so simple."

"I know. It never was or is. But why did we stop making decisions together? Why did we become conventional like this? I am capable of the truth. What scares me is that you, whom I have loved more than anyone else, think I can't help make a decision of importance that affects us all."

"I hate my life, Yvonne."

"No, you hate being Inspector of Prisons. So do I. So do the children. You must somehow stop, resign."

"And how do we pay our rent?"

"I hate the apartment. I don't want to be its slave."

"We have to live somewhere, we five."

"Not in Neuilly."

"Everywhere is expensive. This is not the Paris of our student days, or even five years ago. If you can find an apartment, you can't afford it."

"And it will only get worse. We have to begin looking now. I'm working. I don't mind that. I mind working for something I hate and that you hate. We have to change. I won't live there knowing you are doing something against your conscience to keep us living there. If you continue, you have to find some other reason." "How can I resign? How, tell me."

"Go into your chief, salute, and say I resign."

She looked ridiculous to him making her mock salute. He wished it were only possible. Their lives that had been lived together seemed too far apart and drifting further. He was even visiting nuns, spiritual liaisons, without her. He looked up at the rooftops

overhead. There had to be some place for them to be together or was life, their life as they knew it, really ending—aborting, as it were, barely beyond midpoint, after having survived what seemed much greater separations?

"It began before this, Alain, we both know that." She was reading his thoughts, as her own, sharing them again.

He looked back down at the street and out the narrow gorge like opening onto Rue Bonaparte. He stood apart but she took his hand and they looked out through Rue Visconti at the blurs of passing cars.

"Is there nothing anyone can do or say?" she asked.

He was unable to speak about this to her or anyone. He had not even shared it with his usual confessor except in what seemed a passing way. No one had ever probed it out of him nor would he let anyone attempt to do so. He knew how he felt about that. He knew how he felt that day. Ask any father how he feels when he argues with his son about something as trivial as a bicycle—of whether he can get a new one or not—and is badgered repeatedly until he the father says "No!" and says no with other things in his voice, things between men, things he not the boy had power to control. Suddenly a father is an obstacle to life and the boy is made powerless as if forever. That is what he remembers doing to his son, to Robert, whom he loved more than anyone almost.

It began in Geneva, she remembered in their silence, in that big spacious elegantly furnished diplomat's house on the lake. Two part-time servants and a driver on call. He could not think clearly for awhile after Robert's death, was sent back to France, was reduced to a faceless position in the bureaucracy and, with almost unbelievable irony, was given—for reasons they never yet discovered and no one admitted—the very position a frightened man would find most appalling to perform and endure: Inspector of Prisons. She cursed the title to herself.

He only wanted a bicycle—a bicycle! He remembered ever so painfully. Life stopped then. Why couldn't they have talked? Instead, Robert was headstrong like his father. He took the bike he had and rode off, angry and desperate, not seeing clearly. A bicycle! Alain remembered traveling to Italy to take confession with Padre Pio. He had said to the celebrated priest, who bore the stigmata in his hands, side, and feet, I am afraid for my son who was killed on the highway on his bicycle. I am afraid for his soul. Even then to Padre Pio he could not confess his fear that Robert had died deliberately, intentionally after an argument.

"Your son is in Heaven," the Padre whispered through the confessional screen, "be at peace." Alain had clung to those words though he knew the Padre could not know for sure. And Yvonne knew of his visit to see him. He did not keep that from her; she was grieving herself but could not see what it meant to go there. Any man would understand his inability to speak about Robert's death. It seemed everything died, was aborted then. Even Alain's conversion seemed linked to death, to grief. The grieving Christ. Where do we see Christ grieve? He was confused by the pressures of the day, carried to the extremes of fatigue.

Can his religion be of no help, she wondered. There must be a way. There must. He has made Christ so joyless, so eternally sad. Where is Christ eternally sad? She wondered what Alain thought of the Christ they and everyone shared. Or did he not share Him? She thought of times He was sad, according to the Gospel accounts. There were those times, but they were less dwelled on than His joy. Anyway, He had little time to dwell. There were always convergences, too much for anyone to bear. And He moved on in the strange flow of His life between compassion and duty. He was sad; He grieved for John the Baptist, for Lazarus, for the blind, the crippled, those with much less...but He raised Lazarus, He fed the hungry, He raised Himself. He did not die of grief. Even if Robert died as Alain feared, which I do not for a minute believe because I knew he was impulsive and easily angered and not a very good thinker, but even then, Christ rose...and so in His sorrow for Robert's being reckless and loving his father so much to be so hurt by his harshness, He would still have mercy. He would. Can Alain not believe in Christ's mercy?

He stood numb at her side unaware she was holding his hand, unaware of the details of the day anymore. He saw photos but they were submerged in liquid solution as if reversing the developing process. What had happened that made them stand there? He was too tired for profound speculation; but why had they left the apartment? What had happened to their dinner? It had been her birthday. They were apart for a long time. Then they met again and he took her hand; that was it. It was at a grave in those terrible long rows of white markers leading "To the West." How could he forget the novel he was going to write?

## Seven

Bertrand had someone with him in his office. He was also talking on the phone. The glassed-in office was

filled with standing files, a metal desk, straight chairs, two plastic plants to approximate for himself a natural environment inside. Bertrand hung up the phone and looked over his interviewee's shoulder at Alain through the glass. He seemed to need to overlook the immediate in anticipation of the next to come in view, which was one reason why he was chief of the prison regulatory authority. Alain had always felt neutral about him, except during their brief review meetings, at which time he felt peculiarly compromised and afterwards obligated. There may have been no need for obligation, but Bertrand seemed to maneuver even when he did not. Perhaps it was his composure or his mustache.

The chief waved him in when his visitor rose to leave and Alain soon replaced the other in the straight chair. Bertrand's attention, he noticed, immediately began to drift.

"I wanted to talk to you about this Nevers business." Alain said straight out.

"Nevers?" Bertrand said, glancing toward the door. Alain looked but the person distracting him walked by on his way elsewhere.

"The business with the warden," Alain omitted his name deliberately.

Bertrand was silent, fixing his gaze on Alain alone now.

"I had a visit yesterday from two men: one from the Red Cross, the other from Amnesty International."

Bertrand nodded with his fingertips now joined to form a little arch just below his nose.

"One of the Algerians, it seems, escaped two nights ago."

"What Algerians?" Bertrand interrupted.

"The ones the warden has at Nevers."

Bertrand stood up and looked in one of his standing file cabinets. He thumbed through folders, pulled one, pushed the drawer in with his knee, and sat down with the file spread open on his desk. "What Algerians?" He flipped the sheets of paper over one at a time, looking steadily at Alain.

"You know," Alain said.

"I don't know. I know only what you put in your reports. Do you omit anything from your reports?"

"You know. It's understood."

"What's understood?"

"That you ask me if everything's the same. I nod. You make out the same report."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Each quarter you hand me the booklet."

"What booklet, man?"

"The atrocities, the photographs!" Alain was exasperated; feeling himself slipping through a protective grill in a street he had thought was safe to walk across.

"It's nonsense. Are you telling me now you see something you can't report?"

"I'm reminding you that 'we' know something 'we' don't report."

"Not 'we,' mister. You report what you see or don't see, as the inspector. I take what you report on good faith."

"You liar!" Alain immediately regretted that.

Bertrand stood up. He was amazingly still composed. "These are your reports. No one else is inspector at Nevers. Remember that. No one else's name is on your reports. No one else has seen Algerians. It was your duty, no one else's, to report what you saw. Do you understand? Isn't it you who could be called a liar?"

"What about Brest, Toulouse...?"

"Segnier's inspection. He was dismissed yesterday for failure to report an infraction."

"Yesterday? The two men came to see you, didn't they?"

"I have seen such men from time to time. They have a right to their views. They do their job."

Alain became frightened as his superior stared in rigid silence. This was his only source of income, he kept thinking. His parents might help for a little while, but how could he ask them? What did he have to do now? What should he do? Yvonne's pay was inconsequential. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't know what? What you saw? What you want to do? Resign? Or what?"

"I don't know."

"I am shocked that you wouldn't report an infraction, just like Segnier."

"I could tell what I saw, what we all saw, and what you knew we saw repeatedly for months, for two years."

"As I said, here are your reports, signed each time. Think it over."

Alain stood up. He started to reach for his file but withdrew his hand. "The Algerian saw me there. You won't back me at all?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about. You didn't come to me very well qualified for this work, you know. In fact, your personal file said you had been high up in the Foreign Service but had some shock or something and might not be too stable. We don't like to take people from high up places we feel are dumped on us. Our work is skilled, too, you know."

"Bertrand, you helped me endure with your "pill." Why are you treating me this way now?"

Bertrand's eyes began to move restlessly again. Alain looked quickly behind him. Someone was waiting at the door.

"You're scheduled for Vincennes today, aren't you?"

Bertrand was giving him another chance, he realized. He wanted to resign, but he felt now it was both premature and too late. Now he knew he would inspect Vincennes as scheduled. He felt nauseous and his back bothered him again. High up places...unstable...."What about my report?" he asked.

"You write your report. I assume you will write everything you see, won't you?"

Alain was silent. Bertrand waited for a little smile, which didn't come.

## Eight

He walked across the Archeveque Bridge behind Notre Dame and stood for a few moments in the middle, looking at the long strands of ivy hanging down the island wall above the water. He wondered if the great man would write him. He was ashamed to cling to that hope. What would it yield anyway? He needed his recognition. He needed someone important to say who he was: You are a poet, not inspector of prisons. His failures were all as inspector of prisons, for which he had no gifts, no calling, no belief. He might still succeed as a poet. His own books had been well reviewed if modestly rewarded financially. He had published a few prose poems in journals. Why did the great man not answer? Was it politics? The great man was on record as being against the war, against a continued French Algeria. But he does not know my politics, Alain thought, unless to him anyone in the government is suspect intellectually as well as morally these days. How can that be? What is happening to France anyway? His mind skipped to large insoluble problems, then slid back down to himself. I need to know that I am someone of value to someone now. I need to express my gifts. He thought he was brother to Catherine just now not father. Next he would see no gifts, no meaning to his history, none to history itself. Everything seemed to be approaching self-destruction. He was unsuited for the world of Bertrand and Frère Jacques. Yet was he to withdraw like a quietist, disdaining on moral grounds participation in any public life, or like a coward let others do the dirty work? Was he really unstable? "A shock or something" had indeed happened to him.

He looked at his watch. He had a few hours before he was to drive to Vincennes. But he was not the kind of person who told. He had always been a loyal government service man, by training, circumstance, and disposition.

He started to cross the bridge but forgot momentarily in what direction he had been walking. He stopped and looked down at the water, not wanting passersby to think him lost or behaving unstable.

A hand reached out and held a paper for him to see. He tried to focus his eyes to read what was written on it. He was not sure how to respond. The language was foreign to him. He looked closely at the man. Was he a beggar? He was standing precariously with the aid of two canes. He spoke but Alain did not understand what he was saying. The words sounded Italian or Spanish. The man held the paper up closer to Alain's eyes. A street name was written on it – Rue St. Didier – with some other words he did not understand.

"You want to go to Rue St. Didier?" he asked the man.

"Si," the man nodded several times.

"I don't know where it is." Alain had an arrondissement book in his car, but his car was far away. The man could hardly walk that far.

"Hospitale Santa Didiyaa."

"You are going to a hospital on Rue St. Didier?"

"Si, si, hospitale."

How was he going to help this man who had suddenly appeared? "You want to go to the hospital?"

"Si, si, hospitale."

There was no use saying anything more. Alain thought of getting a taxi, but there was none in sight. The man was dressed plainly but not poorly: brown suit coat, non-matching gray pants, a white shirt, no tie. He stood leaning forward on the canes with the note clutched in one hand.

It was blocks to his car. The man would be in agony walking that far. Why am I involved?

"Can you walk?" he asked the man, then walked a few feet to illustrate.

"Si, si," the man said with determination. He pushed one leg out before the other, then pulled them painfully together. He repeated a few steps, then paused, his brow moist from the strain.

"No, no," Alain said. "I'll go get my car. My car." He made a gesture of steering a wheel and pointed to himself.

"Si, si." The man stood still and smiled appreciatively at Alain, who walked back toward the Prefecture where

he had parked his car. He thought intently of the street directory. A man who could have been Algerian walked toward him on the sidewalk. They continued toward each other and then passed without incident.

Alain's car was parked beside the Prefecture on Rue de Lutece. His special sticker gave him for once a useful privilege. He looked at his street directory. Rue St. Didier was far away, off Avenue Victor Hugo in Passy to the west of the Center of the City. According to the list of hospitals, hospices, and clinics there was no hospital on Rue St. Didier. He closed the book and drove to the bridge behind Notre Dame.

The man was still standing there, but his back was to the street and he was doing something Alain considered unthinkable at that place: pissing through the bridge lattice into the Seine, in full view of Notre Dame and passersby, including a group of children being led by two female teachers away from him to the other side of the bridge. Alain in his shock felt for a moment like driving on and forgetting the Spaniard, crippled or not. It was a desecration, a sacrilege, no matter how desperate the man may have become or how paralyzed his legs were. This was simply "insupportable", he said above a whisper. The Spaniard, furthermore, seemed to be taking in the view of the cathedral and its flying buttresses with great delight like any other tourist, while relieving himself in face of the whole world. Alain wished he could leave, but he swung the door open and called to the man. There was a strange moment when the man, taller than himself and straight backed, almost locked in his full height, turned and smiled not exactly in Alain's direction but at the world before him, with his eyes filled with tears.

Alain ran around the car and stood beside the man. "Bella!" the man said loudly; "mucho bella!"

Alain looked back at the cathedral that he passed almost everyday to the Prefecture, and then at the man, and back again. His eyes watered strangely, involuntarily. "Si," he said.

He reached out to take the Spaniard's arm, but he pulled back from him, saying "Solo, solo." He pushed his legs ahead slowly leaning on his canes toward the car, as Alain hurried ahead and swung open the door on the passenger side.

When the Spaniard reached him his face was beaded with perspiration, some of which had formed channels in his cheeks, around his nose and across his upper lip. Alain wanted to give him a handkerchief but was stopped by the echoing "solo, solo."

"I am Alain," Alain said pointing to himself.

The man said, "Miguel", taking both canes in one hand and pointing the other at himself.

"I from Paris," Alain said.

"Bella," Miguel said. "Bilbao," he responded, pointing again at himself.

Alain gestured for him to get in the car, which Miguel did by sitting down backwards, then hauling one leg after the other in and placing his canes between his legs. Alain closed the door, then hurried around to the driver's side.

"Rue St. Didier," Alain said, making a forward motion with his right hand. The way seemed mapped out clearly in the Arrondissement book. He looked at his watch. He had slightly less than two hours before he was scheduled to inspect Vincennes, a good 30-40 minutes drive from where they were heading, on the southeastern rim of Paris. This left him approximately an hour to assist Miguel to reach his hospital, barely fifteen minutes away according to the map.

When the Eiffel Tower came into view Miguel said, "Magnifico!" He reached into his right coat pocket and pulled out a photograph, which he held up to Alain's face. It was a photograph of himself standing before a newspaper, magazine and souvenir stand on a street near a bus stop.

"Yours?" Alain pointed at Miguel.

"Si, si!" Miguel was exasperated from loss of words. He pointed at himself and at the shelves of trinkets in the stand behind him. At a stop light Alain looked more closely and could make out a triad of miniature Eiffel Towers, St. Peter Chairs, and Don Quixotes holding long lances seated on thin and sagging horses.

"Bono, bono," Alain said feeling stupid. They crossed the Seine on Pont d'Iena, and Miguel pressed his face to the window looking out at the barges. He turned to say something but merely smiled.

Miguel became silent as they drove through the side streets behind Trocadero. Alain felt his companion's physical dip, sensing his own mood change in the other's. When they stopped at another light, he pointed at the other's canes, feeling grossly intrusive but wanting to know.

"Sclerosa," Miguel said and held up three fingers, assuming the number would be understood.

Alain drove faster after turning off Avenue Kleber and strained his eyes to make out the numbers on the buildings. Rue St. Didier was a narrow street, residential, with a bakery, a meat shop, a small florist stand at a corner, indistinct from many others. He looked at Miguel's paper again to verify the number:



56, and pulled over to the curb alongside a walled courtyard with an open gate through which he could see a large group of young women standing staring at a small group of nuns. Across the street some poorly dressed men of different ages were sitting on the curb. Alain thought they were clochards by their loitering, but they looked foreign. He took his hands off the wheel and said, "Voila, 56 Rue St. Didier."

The two men walked slowly to the open gate and Alain rang the bell. What do I say? he wondered, looking back across the street. His companion was dressed not unlike the loiterers.

An older nun answered the bell and stood facing them, in effect, blocking the entranceway.

"This man," he began in French, "I met near Notre Dame. He had your address on a paper. He said or I thought he said he was going here to a hospital or a clinic."

"Oh these people," she responded in broken French before he had finished. "They come here looking for work, looking for miracles. We have neither to give them."

"He is sick."

"He has sclerosa," she said shortly. "Look across the street. All those men are out of work. In a half hour we feed them."

"What am I to do for Miguel?"

"He's here to find a hospital - a miracle. They come all the time. We have no space. I'll give you an address. Wait."

She closed the gate. Alain looked at Miguel's large person leaning forward next to him in anticipation on his canes, and back again at the ten or twelve men slouched on the curb. What had he happened onto?

The gate opened again and she held a paper up to Alain's face. "St. Denis!" The northern tip of Paris was far off course from his inspection site.

"God!" he exclaimed. Miguel, he noticed, dipped forward further.

"I can't help you," she said. "I have these girls all waiting for maid's jobs. Our Spanish are filling the streets." She seemed even more desperate than he. What was happening?

He looked at the paper as he and Miguel walked back to the car. What did he want of Miguel? Not to be one of those men? No, it was different: a miracle. The nun was standing at the gate watching as Alain closed Miguel's door and hurried around to the driver's side. She nodded and kept her eyes fixed on the street. A convent of Spanish, was it? There wasn't even a sign

explaining it.

What were he and Miguel doing there? Now St. Denis. He looked at the Paris street guide again, which did not include St. Denis among its maps, except to point out its direction north via Porte de la Chapelle. If they could only talk...

He sensed Miguel's wish to apologize but also his desperation. But he had his own, too. What had brought them together? Neither Bertrand nor Yvonne would understand when he reported late in Vincennes for his inspection or explained he was driving a Spaniard with sclerosa around Paris looking for an address where a miracle would occur. Are you all right, DeLesparre? Bertrand expected next his breakdown. Are you dotty? Yvonne would say in her English mode. "No, yes," he would say to both respectively. "I'm breaking down, I'm dotty. Miguel is dying of sclerosa in three years and he's my best friend and we need a miracle!" Among useless information that cluttered his mind was the fact that Lesparre was a village north of Bordeaux where his family had originated. The village was theirs, they once owned the chateau, had tenants, and now were "from Lesparre." Alain from Lesparre was driving Miguel from Bilbao, heading toward the martyr St. Denis' hill. He felt his life, as only the dying are supposed to feel, flashing before his eyes. He saw birds and woods animals fly and scurry for shelter. He had not expected a storm, but now he drove faster as if for protection to St. Denis without looking sideways or trying to explain in any language. He glanced only at his watch, realizing they were all running out of time.

In St. Denis he knew they were approaching the address on the paper by the numbers of people crowding the street outside a building that looked like a meeting hall. People were eating out of copper cups. Things looked more desperate than at Rue St. Didier. Why had she sent them here? By his watch he was supposed to be passing through the gate at the "hospital" of Vincennes just then. The irony of the name "hospital," which he knew by his regulation inspections to be a prison for political, meaning Algerian, prisoners, struck him painfully now as never before.

He gestured for Miguel to wait while he got out and made some inquiries. His companion's silence worried him. They needed good news.

Alain asked people on the street. None knew French. They were mostly laborers, he guessed, but there were women with small children, too. He had had no inkling that so many poor Spanish were pouring into Paris for menial or any jobs. He thought of his saint's

picture on his desk, the great mystic from Toledo, and felt the weight of an all too fathomable fundamental martyrdom on the faces of those standing around him. Finally one spoke a little French.

When he returned to the car it was with a guide this time. He was a short man in a leather jacket, jeans and boots, Spanish but almost French speaking, who had a moped and would lead them to another address "not far away" where they could be helped.

Helped how? Alain wondered but accepted the progression of events as a current of sadness releasing itself from within that he couldn't deter. No one seemed harmed by their journey, though Miguel was not helped either. As they followed the begoggled man on the moped, neither now aware of the direction in which they were going, Miguel pressed Alain's arm with his left hand and said "Gracias."

"No, it's all right. We'll get there—" Where?—he wondered. "It's not far off. They'll be there to help us."

It was now thirty minutes past his inspection time. Bertrand would know he was no longer useful to the service. More than his job, which he despised, he felt he was losing Robert, whom he loved. What was happening? He felt himself trying to reach out to hold him back even as he drove. He grasped Miguel's arm now as he followed the speeding moped. Their guide turned his head at every intersection to make sure they were following, and Alain made thumbs up signals to reassure him. Alain from Lesparre, who used to ride a chestnut stallion across the marshes, followed on his heels by Charlotte on her gray: Prince was his horse's name, hers he could not remember. Their guide's cap blew off and he pulled to the side near a bakery to retrieve it. Suddenly Miguel laughed and pointed at their guide as he leaned over to grab the cap. The seam in the man's pants was split showing white underpants. Alain laughed with Miguel until his eyes watered. He got out of the car and hurried into the bakery. He remembered stops he and Charlotte had made on their rides. They took bread and cheese and apples in sacks tied to their waists. They would sit on stream banks and watch the ducks. Would she approve of his run through St. Denis with his Spanish friends? He hated thinking of her alone at her window watching barges.

He hurried back to the car with a bag full of *raison buns*, *croissants*, and fruit tarts. Miguel had gotten out and was towering beside the car talking with their guide in Spanish. Alain spread the food on the hood and the three ate.

"Your friend is looking for a special clinic," their guide explained. "He read in a magazine that came to his stand in Bilbao about some special treatment for sclerosis that was being tried in Paris. His sister and brother-in-law gave him money to come to Paris and get the treatment. Then he will go to Lourdes and after that," he shrugged his shoulders, "back to Bilbao and his news stand."

"Where's the clinic?" Alain asked hopefully.

Their guide asked Miguel, then replied "Paris."

"Paris?"

"Paris."

"Where are we going now?" Alain asked.

"It's just a few streets away," the guide said.

"Yes, but what is it?"

"Just ahead." The guide walked forward to his moped eating an apple tart.

Alain and Miguel gathered up the rest of the pastry and got slowly back into the car, not wanting to lose the man, since they were lost.

The sight of the man's split pants was more evident now but Miguel had surrendered to depression again. Alain felt his friend's fatigue.

They pulled up at a church whose facade was blackened as if by an avalanche of soot fallen directly over it and oozed down the walls to the sidewalk. What could have happened here? Old dormant factory stacks projected upwards behind it and in every direction as far as the eye could see.

Their guide led them both to the church entrance, which was open and dark inside. A priest with silver-rimmed glasses and three missing upper front teeth smiled at them from just inside the doorway. He said, "Welcome," in French without a Spanish or any other accent, to Alain's relief. "There's some room inside, I think," he said. "As you can see, I think, people are sleeping on the floor here temporarily." Alain thought the man either daft or sublime. Of all the places on their route this one seemed the furthest over the edge. The guide, Alain and Miguel looked in at all the people and belongings crowded into the shadows on the floor and then walked back to the car leaving the priest waving from the doorway. He is simply mad, Alain thought. The guide said to both in French and Spanish that he had nothing more to offer and bade them farewell, got on his moped and returned, they presumed, from wherever he had come.

"I have no ideas," Alain conceded to Miguel, who understood now without knowing the words.

"There is a hospital I know," Alain said.

"Hospitale, si," Miguel said.

Alain made the forward gesture with his hands again. It was only mildly ironic that they would seek their miracle now at a place adjacent to both the Prefecture and Notre Dame, where they had started.

The Hotel Dieu allowed Alain to drive into the emergency courtyard as a convenience "to the man on canes." They sat in the outpatient receiving room on a wooden bench waiting for a doctor to examine Miguel and, as Miguel hoped, to admit him. The room was like many other waiting rooms, perhaps identical, Alain thought, to those in government, law, transportation, education, police and ecclesiastical buildings. It seemed as if there had sometime been a consensus reached by all established persons on one thing: the nature of waiting rooms. They shall be gray with faded blue trim, kept evenly dirty, and furnished with hard wooden benches; they shall be desolate and diminishing of expectation; they shall discourage prolonged or repeated visitation; they shall be instructively *douleureuses* or as Yvonne would say in her English mode "awfully sad." The two voyagers had reached a hospital at last, now they had to have their expectations reduced.

Alain looked at his watch. He was two hours late. It did not matter. He tried to recall the sequence of events, but recall seemed threatening to their being together. Being together seemed important, necessary, and supposed to be. He wished he knew more about Miguel. His last name, for instance; where he had been his last few years; what he had wanted to be, if such would be possible still. He was young, 24 at most, Alain guessed, not much older than his son Robert would be, maybe a little younger even. It had been strange, that moment in St. Denis, his feeling of losing Robert without knowing why or to whom; trying to hold him back, then releasing him unexpectedly. The national consensus had failed to agree on a wall clock, but it did not matter; maybe that was its only compassion. Two windows, once perhaps clean, looked out into an alleyway, another diminution of hope.

One of the two opposing doors opened suddenly and an orderly led a man and a young boy into the waiting room and then left, closing the same door behind him. The man's right arm was wrapped in a blood soaked towel. The boy attended the man, whose face showed his considerable pain. Alain recognized the signs of shock from his war days—the glazed eyes, the shivering, the barely contained panic, the submission. The boy held the man's other arm to comfort him. Alain

and Miguel recognized the others' waiting was worse. The boy's eyes stared in steady alarm, blind to the room itself and others in it. Ten maybe twelve years old. The man, his father it seemed, was in his late thirties. Alain looked at the boy, Miguel looked steadily at the floor.

The boy said, "My father's a butcher."

Alain felt himself becoming light headed and looked away at the other door where the examination rooms were. Footsteps approached, he was not sure from where as they all glanced from one side of the room to the other.

An intern entered from the examination door and unwrapped the towel from the man's arm. Blood spurted out onto the floor. Alain saw the man's arm dangling above the wrist. The intern wrapped the towel quickly back around the arm and led the man and the boy through the examination door, which shut automatically behind them. Alain and Miguel both looked at the blood drying on the floor before them.

Alain struggled to remain clear. The examination room door opened again. A different intern, this one foreign, stood before them. Alain feared he was losing consciousness. He knew the doctor and Miguel were speaking Spanish but it seemed more remote than that, as if they were talking in another world.

"Are you a relative?" the physician asked Alain.

"A friend."

"Do you want to wait here?" The physician's French accent was crude but his meaning was clear.

"Of course, if he needs me," Alain said, remembering another hospital waiting room in Geneva.

"It isn't necessary, really," the physician said, sensing Alain's fatigue and possible faintness. "We'll examine and admit him for tests and recommendation."

"He is looking for a special treatment he read about," Alain said.

"I know. There are many who come here to Paris looking for miracles. They are seen, they exhaust possibilities. Then they go to Lourdes. Then home to die."

Alain was jarred by this last, though the doctor did not seem callous.

"He's only twenty-four, my son's age," Alain protested.

"We know nothing to help this, unfortunately," the doctor said simply.

"You'll try to find the treatment he read about?"

"Yes, we'll do everything we can. You should go home. You've done all you can. Miguel says you've been a good friend."

Alain looked at Miguel, who stood before the

bench leaning forward on his canes, smiling, not unlike the expression at Notre Dame though, if possible, more joyful. "A friend," Alain repeated silently.

They shook hands vigorously, firmly, and Alain realized the other's strength. Miguel turned slowly to follow the doctor to the examination room. Alain watched the other cross the room, remembering his word "solo." In the open doorway Miguel turned and waved both canes in the air as if to throw them away. They both smiled and then left through opposite doorways.

Alain returned to his car and drove along the quais west as far as the Eiffel Tower, then crossed the river north, once again on Pont d'Iena, but this time he drove toward the great man's street. Why was he going there? Once in Auteuil he no longer knew.

He swung his car over to the curb and shut off the motor. The great man lived in this building before him. This was uncharacteristic of Alain, to call on him or anyone without an appointment. But he was desperate. He could not wait another day for a letter that had not been written. He walked through the lobby and was stopped at the end by the concierge. "Sir?"

"Alain DeLesparre. I'm here to see Mr. Bouffard." Alain remained determined and forceful.

"Is Mr. Bouffard expecting you?"

"He knows me. We have been in touch. He will see me. It's important."

"Wait here."

## Nine

Alain stood in the mirrored lobby while the concierge rang upstairs. Hours before it would have been unthinkable to be there. Did he know what he was doing? Did it matter? What could he lose?

"The housekeeper says to come up. Third floor. He can spare a few minutes."

The elevator was quieter than the one in his own building. It seemed barely to move. The door opened. He stepped out into a small corridor where a middle-aged woman, anticipating his assent, stood beside an open door.

She escorted him into a large but sparsely furnished reception room. Alain did not believe he was there. Yet he could not have dreamed or imagined it as it was. The floor was covered wall to wall with a soft off-white wool carpet. There were two upholstered armchairs, one a bold red, the other a muted blue. Beside the red on a chest high pedestal stood a marble bust of the

great man himself. There were three doors leading out of the otherwise empty high-ceilinged room and in one end a stairway, also carpeted as the floor, led to a small balcony and another doorway. From the ceiling hung a glass double-tiered chandelier, not lit. The room was suggestive, but Alain was not sure of what. Excess, he thought. He envied the marble bust its space, also its fame.

The balcony door opened and the great man appeared and began his descent to the reception room. Alain rose from the blue chair and stood nervously, as if at attention, as the much older Laureate approached.

Etienne Bouffard shook Alain's hand perfunctorily and sat down in the red chair, leaning his head to one side in the pose of the bust, Alain could not help noticing.

"Why have you come?" Bouffard asked grumbly. His reputation was for acerbity and swiftness with fools.

"I wanted your reaction to the material I sent you."

"You sent me material?"

Alain checked the instant pain he felt, realizing the great man was not only old but also frail and thus to be pardoned for forgetfulness.

"Prose-poems."

"Aren't you Inspector of Prisons?" he snapped, concentrating more intently.

"Yes," Alain said in a lower voice.

"Then you are in a position to limit this talk about 'torture of political prisoners.' You have an important role to play. Our President must not be fettered with this issue. He is a great man, a very great man, sent by God. We must do everything to support his patient efforts."

"Did you have a chance to read my poems, my Christian poems?" Alain, increasingly desperate, was resorting to religious flattery.

"God has no need of writers anymore, only of saints," Bouffard responded. "My confessor is a saint, Dom Mallarti, do you know him?"

"No," Alain said.

"Did you wish to ask me something?"

"No," Alain concluded.

"Then you are in a good state of grace."

"I hope so," Alain said.

"Why did you come?"

"I wished to tell you personally...." He hesitated, uncertain now as to his actual position on Algeria and the war, then interjected "...how much I admire your work."

"Thank you," the great man said. He stood up rising to the height of his bust and extended his hand. "We must help our country through this difficult time. These

people planning to demonstrate today in Vincennes are making it more difficult for our President's diplomatic moves to be successful."

"What demonstration?" Alain was alarmed.

"At Vincennes," the Laureate repeated. "Did you come for something?"

"No. Thank you for your time."

Bouffard extended his hand again. The interview ended. Alain looked back at the bust on its pillar as Bouffard ascended the stairs slowly and the housekeeper opened the outer door.

What hope? Alain asked himself in the car before starting the motor. He felt any possible release from his prison had dissolved. Yet more important still, what was the demonstration at Vincennes?

He opened his Plan de Paris. Place de la Nation was the direction he would go. What was happening? Demonstrating what? Bertrand had not warned him about any demonstration. He started the motor, made a U-turn on Rue de Passy, then stopped the car in the lane. Horns assaulted his ears. That is why Bertrand kept him from resigning today: to be the one to face the demonstration.

He drove to the quai and down along the Seine eastward past the Louvre. Now he knew in advance what he was being used for and he still couldn't escape. Does it make any difference? He was a decent human being, he wanted to believe. He was not a deceiver for gain, a backstabber, a stealer of other men's wives, a threat to anyone's children. He recounted the Deadly Sins, He was not covetous, at least. The recounting was a tiresome prospect and he stopped. At an overlong light he resumed: lust, anger, gluttony, envy, sloth. Which were deadly, which were venial? This was senseless. So, the great man was a dotard. He laughed but the laughter hurt his throat or somewhere deeper inside.

Traffic was stalled near Place de la Nation. Why had he wanted recognition for so long? For what? Did he want a plaque on the buildings where he had lived or a bust on a pillar? Perhaps God does not need more writers or more postponements of the truth. Yet he had to live somehow and get through the day with some confirmation of himself, some sense of pride.

His back began to hurt again. It was a niggling hurt. His father suffered from arthritis pains. No doubt he was subject to those too, by inheritance. Something more out of all this pain and confusion he had to release; nothing was flowing, unfolding; everything had stopped: Inspector of Prisons. If only it were possible!

## Ten

What had happened to him earlier? He tried to remember amidst the changes of lights, the horns, the bursts and surges of traffic. The pain in his back intensified as he hunched his shoulders and sat further forward at the wheel. The faces of his sister Charlotte, of Marie-Louise Draper, of Chief of Inspections Bertrand, of Miguel, of the doctor, of the great Laureate Monsieur Dotard—one of them had said something, had made something happen. What was it? He could not remember their words, but one of them—or all of them—or was it himself somewhere in his writing—said something. What? He needed to know before he reached Vincennes. In his frantic state it seemed a matter of absolute necessity to know precisely what he didn't remember. Everything else was unnecessary.

What was going to happen at Vincennes? His mind was rushing. He remembered what it felt like to flee Grenoble for the Swiss border—what the seizure of fear was. He knew that. He remembered speaking once to a priest, a well-known priest in Paris with a reputation of honesty and truthfulness. He went to him because he wanted to know from another with a reputation for vision of the truth if what Padre Pio had said—that Robert was in heaven—was true. The priest had said, "Padre Pio should not have told you that. He does not know. No one knows. We have faith. We have hope. Nothing more." Alain remembered that moment afterwards in the street when his heart gave in to fear, when faith seemed to abandon him as suddenly as some believe it finds one. He knew despair then, he knew its very shore, as he looked out on a sea of death. He had never been without fear since—fear for Robert, fear for himself, fear for Yvonne and the children, fear for his country, fear that there was no other but this familiar shore. It was impossible to believe, to hold any sense of coherence together for more than a stoplight or a sign "to the West." He wanted to believe. He wanted to be just once without fear. Place de la Nation—the filling of emptiness with a memorial obelisk. St. Joan—the virgin violated in prison, the liberator of hearts, the warrior child. The Algeria-French and the Algeria-Algerians both invoked her name. Whom was she for? Whose emptiness did she fill? Give me courage, St. Joan. Something is going to happen at Vincennes, he knew it. Everything of the last three days pointed him there, and it would not be over like the day at Nevers was. He sensed that. It would be like no other.

He remembered picnics in the woods at Vincennes,

the rowboat rides with all five of them in the boat weighing it down to the water line. He drove through the Porte de Vincennes toward St. Maude Tourelle and the Chateau de Vincennes. The "hospital" was on the grounds of the chateau. No one even knew it was a detention center. Maybe even the President did not know. He gave him and his Laureate Dotard that much leeway for their hesitation to act. Maybe everyone spoke and wrote and preached and confessed and guarded and commanded and planned and avoided and invaded and brutalized and tortured out of ignorance. Everyone except himself. He knew, as he had sat staring at the marble bust and at the aging fragile skeletal flesh and blood and human head of the Dotard himself, what was happening inside Vincennes. The Great President was no substitute for God. What nonsense. Yet Alain wondered why he at this moment was given only fear. What right have some to lead others where others lack the courage to go?

As he approached the boulevard facing the chateau he saw the sidewalk was filled with people, not standing but sitting. What were they sitting for? Some held banners on sticks. He slowed his car to a crawl behind other cars as numerous policemen waved their nightsticks in the air. How had he, of all people, not known about this demonstration? It was like a carnival, a circus, but without animals and clowns. He made an ironic grimace as he thought about the comparison. Police wagons were drawn up in a long black line like train cars across the street from the seated demonstrators. Like barricades. No, it was no circus at all. The demonstrators were deliberately provocative in their entertainment; even their silence, their deceptive calm, was a provocation. The police stood facing them. No demonstrator waved a club or other weapon in the air. The police were standing waiting for an eruption to occur. Alain saw mostly young people, girls too, in American type sloppy sweaters and blue jeans. A few older people, some men in three-piece suits. He remembered the phrase "our dear professors" from somewhere. One man had white hair and wore a shawl over his shoulders. Who was he? The leader? Alain stopped his car at the entrance gate, opened his window, and beckoned to a policeman.

"I am Inspector DeLesparre," he said, holding up his identity card. "I have to drive through the gates. Can you clear the people away to let me in?"

"It's clear, sir. They're back from the gates." The young man seemed impudent to Alain, who could see

well enough that a large group was sitting in front of the gates on the street itself.

"I said, officer, I have to go in. I'm late for my inspection."

"Sir—"

"Did you see my card?" Alain held it up for the officer to see it again. "I am Inspector of Prisons. I have to get through these gates."

"This is a hospital, sir," the officer said, raising his voice.

"Why are these people here then?" Alain said equally loudly.

"I don't know, sir."

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"No, sir."

"I know this is a prison. I inspect it many times to make sure the prisoners are well treated."

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Of course, I'm all right. I tell you I'm Inspector of Prisons! Inspector of Prisons!"

Alain looked through his car windows, front and side. Faces surrounded the car, policemen and civilians, young people in American clothes. Senator Kennedy had called for Independence of Algeria. How impudent of an American to interfere in the affairs of France! The young policeman he was talking to, explaining himself to, was talking to another policeman, with his back turned. "Impudent!"

"Let me through," Alain pressed. "I am Inspector DeLesparre of Prisons. I left my family in Grenoble to serve in exile."

"This is a prison then, sir?" he heard a voice at his side.

"Of course, why else would I be here?"

"There are Algerians kept inside?" the voice repeated.

"Yes, everyone knows that."

"You have seen them?"

"Yes, each visit."

"You report what you see?"

"No, I'm not allowed."

"Why are you here now?"

"All right, move on. Let this car through. Get away from the car." The police were waving their batons now, as he imagined they would.

"Did you see torture inside?" another voice called out.

"Yes, much torture, yes!"

"Let the man speak," the voice said. "Speak to us!"

"I am a poet," Alain said plaintively, "do you know my poems?"

"Tell us about the torture!"

"Get away from the car, you!" another voice shouted.

A night stick struck the front window on the driver's side. Alain saw the grimacing face of a policeman through the splintered glass. Tiny trickles of blood ran down his cheek. The car door opened and someone seized Alain's arm and pulled.

"What do you want?" Alain said in a frightened childlike voice. He couldn't see who held him. It felt like many hands as he was pulled from his car.

"Let him go, you filthy bastard!", the young policeman shouted as he swung his club at someone behind him.

"I am an authorized inspector. I came to tell them officially to stop the torture they are committing inside!"

He had regained his balance on the street and stood suddenly alone as policemen formed a wide circle around him pushing the demonstrators back to the sidewalk. Someone had been hurt and was being attended to on the curb by a young woman and a man. The white-haired man in the shawl was standing protectively in front of them. The police seemed to honor him. The people were quiet.

"What do you want me to say?" Alain asked the old man.

"Don't speak to them," a policeman cautioned.

"I will, I will," Alain insisted.

"Just speak the truth," the white-haired man said.

"The truth," Alain laughed. "Everyone here knows the truth."

"You need to tell it for yourself!" the man said with shocking command.

A strange murmur began to rise from the sidewalk. Alain pushed through the police circle and stood among the young people at the curb. "What are they doing?" he asked the old man.

"Praying."

"Praying? Here? For whom?"

"Victims of violence."

"Victims?"

"For you," the man said.

"Why?"

"You are Inspector of Prisons and you said you haven't been allowed to report the truth."

"I can speak it now."

"I am one of your professors, Alain, do you remember me?"

Alain could not hear what the man said above the murmurings. He did not recognize the man, in any case, yet the man knew his name.

"Fear was always one of your problems, Alain. Do you remember? Fear and pride."

"Pride?"

"You wanted recognition and none you were given satisfied."

"Who are you?" Alain listened but again he could not hear. "Who are you?"

The murmurings grew louder. The police moved forward raising their clubs in a threatening gesture of solidarity against the numbers of murmuring people huddled on the sidewalk.

"Join us in prayer," the old man whispered to Alain.

"I can't. I don't believe in prayer." He felt a mixture of pride and anger and revulsion standing before the crowd.

"Are you going in, sir?" he heard a voice behind him ask. He turned to look.

"In?"

"To the hospital?" the policeman said.

"What hospital?"

"The hospital here at Vincennes, sir?"

"I've been there. I've seen operations performed without anesthesia. I've seen men's hands crushed in a grill. I've seen women prodded with a cattle rod."

"At Vincennes, sir. You must be mistaken."

"Who said that?" Alain turned but could not see.

"Are you mistaken?" someone asked from the sidewalk.

"I've seen everything," he said turning around in a circle; "everything horrible that one can see!"

"Alain," the old man's voice reached his ears again. He was in the crowd on the sidewalk. "Sit with us."

Alain turned and looked around for his car, which was left near the gates with the door open. "I have to be somewhere," he said. He walked toward the car. He heard footsteps behind him. Several people seemed to be running somewhere. His back hurt, His legs felt weak. He wondered where the Spanish man had gone. Where everyone he knew had gone. Robert... Even the great man to whom he had sent his poems. He grasped the door and leaned to one side awkwardly, which made the door fall away from his hand and turn him spinning to the pavement. He lay on his back and looked up at staring faces in policemen's hats.

## Eleven

"I should have also talked to them about their country. About its past, its virtues, its reason for demanding sacrifice. I should have spoken out and assumed the leadership. A man in my position has an obligation. I

do not remember if I said enough. I was very tired. I am all right. I can drive myself home."

"You're quite sure, sir?"

"Yes, very sure now."

"I would continue that way, sir, around the chateau, not reverse yourself past the crowd."

"I understand."

Alain closed the door and started the engine of his Peugeot. The windshield was shattered but he could see clearly through his side window. It was a minor incident. There was a little blood on his cheek. There was a demonstration, but everyone was orderly. He had not seen the warden in the crowd. Chambord was his name. He should have been there when I spoke; he should have told the truth himself.

Where was he driving now? He was revived and determined. He was going to Ivry, on the route to Choisy. The cemetery was there.

He cut south from the Vincennes woods to the Seine, crossed the bridge to the route to Choisy, and drove deliberately and steadily until he reached the gates to the cemetery at Ivry.

He left his car and walked through the gates. A guard stopped him and said, "Sir? Are you visiting a particular grave?"

"DeLesparre. Robert DeLesparre."

"The name is not familiar to me. No matter. I'll look in the directory. Wait here."

The man was a typical French bureaucratic record keeper; Alain felt pity for him or anyone in such positions. It did not matter, he knew the direction himself. Waiting was unnecessary. When the guard went into his gate house to look at his records, Alain hurried down one of the side avenues and hid behind a tomb for a few minutes until it was safe.

Safe from what? He was a DeLesparre. There was no need to hide, especially not there.

He knew the avenue but the signs were not as he remembered them. Still, he would find his way. It had been so painful for them to move Robert's remains from Geneva to Paris when they were reassigned. But he was not going to leave his son alone. He had done that once in his life—he had left his entire family alone, wondering always if they were alive or dead—and he had never forgiven himself. This time they would all be together. "Robert...Robert." It was not far off now. He

remembered the avenues. Why had his son died? He had been angry with the boy. He was still angry. There was such a thing as anger at the dead. It is not Christian, but it is not certain that one can be a Christian in every respect. Certainly he knew he was not. He knew well enough his omissions, which he himself could not forgive. But why had Robert disobeyed him and caused him to be so angry? It could have all been avoided if both of them had become a little patient. Robert was too much like himself.

Alain looked down a long avenue of tombs and thought he recognized the site of Robert's grave by the little tree just across from it. He hurried down to it and at the corner, concealed from prior view, was a person standing, looking down at Robert's grave stone. Alain looked at the marble slab with the name, which he could not make out clearly. His vision was unaccountably imprecise.

"Robert," he said aloud. "I wanted us to be together. You separated us again. You went off leaving us." Alain could not look up at the other mourner. He had never been able to share his son's death with another. It was his alone to hold. He looked at the slab in silence. "What?" he said, as if half-hearing another speak, or was there still something in the day he wanted to remember? The other mourner was looking at him. He could feel the other's presence, but he couldn't look up and acknowledge anyone. He remembered they had met there once or somewhere else in a cemetery. They had reached out and touched and grasped hands. They had been unable to stop shaking for a long time. They had sat on the ground. They had held each other and cried. He wanted to grasp the other's hand now, to feel another's hand grasp his. He looked up and his eyes cleared as he saw the name engraved in marble before him. Robert's name. He looked at the person mourning at his side. For a moment she looked almost like a stranger. Her eyes were red from crying, like the eyes of someone who had grieved a long time in solitude. He nodded to her and smiled shyly, then he reached out and grasped her hand.

As they walked out of the *cimetiere*, he said in a sudden burst of freedom surprising to himself:

"I am so sorry my love, thank you for believing in us. May I invite you to finally celebrate your birthday at the L'Aiglon on Quai Voltaire."