

around until Dr. Morley's men arrived and I watched them go in and take Jesse. Then I wandered through the other display rooms up to the front office, where most of the real paperwork of the firm was done and where my own desk was. The front office was really a part of the front display room, divided from it only by a little railing with a swinging gate. I knew I would find my aunt up there and I supposed I would find her lying down on the old leather couch just inside the railing. I could even imagine how Dr. Morley and my uncle, and probably one of the office girls, would be hovering about and administering to her. Yet it was a different scene I came on. Dr. Morley was seated at my desk taking down information which he said would be necessary for him to have about Jesse. He was writing it on the back of an envelope. Aunt Margaret was seated in a chair drawn up beside him. She seemed completely herself again. Uncle, standing on the other side of the doctor, was trying to supply the required information. But Aunt Margaret kept correcting most of the facts that Uncle Andrew gave. While the doctor listened with perfect patience, the two of them disputed silly points like Jesse's probable age and the correct spelling of his surname, whether it was "Munroe" or "Monroe," and what his mother's maiden name had been. . . . It was hard to believe that either Aunt Margaret or Uncle Andrew had any idea of what was happening to Jesse at that very moment or any feeling about it.

Dr. Morley had Jesse committed to the state asylum out at Bolivar. They locked him up for a while, then they made a trusty of him. Dr. Morley says he seems very happy and that he has made himself so useful that they will almost certainly never let him go. I have never been out there to see him, of course, and neither has Aunt Margaret or Uncle Andrew. But I have dreams about Jesse sometimes—absurd, wild dreams that are not like anything that ever happened. One night recently when I was at a dinner party at my uncle and aunt's apartment and someone was recalling Jesse's devotion to my uncle, I undertook to tell one of those dreams of mine. But I broke it off in the middle and pretended that that was all, because I saw my aunt, at the far end of the table, was looking as pale as if she had seen a ghost or as if I had been telling a dream that *she* had had. As soon as I stopped, the talk resumed its usual theme, and my aunt seemed all right again. But when our eyes met a few minutes later she sent me the same quick, disapproving glance that my mother used to send me at my grandfather's table when I was relating some childish nightmare I had had. "Don't bore people with what you dream," my mother used to say after we had left the table and were alone. "If you have nothing better than that to contribute, leave the talking to someone else." Aunt Margaret's rude glance said precisely that to me. But I must add that when we were leaving the dining room my aunt rested her hand rather firmly and yet tenderly on my arm as if to console and comfort me. She was by nature such a kind and gentle person that she could not bear to think she had hurt someone she loved.

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Michel Tournier

DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

Hearing muffled laughter coming from the back of the classroom, the teacher suddenly broke off.

"Now what is it?"

The crimson, mirthful face of a little girl appeared.

"It's Melanie, mademoiselle. Right now she's eating lemons."

The whole class roared with laughter. The mistress marched over to the back row. Melanie looked up at her, her face the picture of innocence, its thinness and pallor accentuated by the heavy mass of her black hair. She was holding a carefully decorated lemon, whose peel was curled up on her desk like a snake. The teacher was perplexed.

This Melanie Blanchard had intrigued her right from the start of the school year. Since she was docile, intelligent, and hardworking, it was impossible not to consider and treat her as one of the best pupils in the class. And yet she drew attention to herself—without being provocative, it is true, and with disarming spontaneity—by ridiculous inventions and strange behavior. In the history class, for instance, she displayed a passionate, almost morbid curiosity about all the famous people who had been condemned to death and tortured. Her eyes shined with alarming intensity, she would recite in great detail the last minutes of Joan of Arc, Gilles de Rais, Mary Stuart, Ravalliac, Charles the First, Damiens, omitting no particular of their sufferings, however atrocious.

Was it merely the fascination with horror so frequently to be found in children, reinforced by a touch of sadism? Other characteristics proved that in Melanie's case it was a question of something deeper and more complex. Right from the beginning of the fall term she had distinguished herself by an extraordinary composition she had written for the teacher. As usual, the mistress had asked the children to describe one day in the holidays that were just over. And although Melanie's account had begun quite tritely with the preparations for a picnic lunch in the country, it came to an abrupt halt with the sudden death of the grandmother, which obliged the family to forgo their outing. Then the story resumed, but on a negative, unreal note, and Melanie went on to describe, imperceptibly and in a kind of hallucinatory vision, the various stages of the outing

that had not taken place, the birdsong that no one had heard, the preparation under a tree of the lunch that no one had had, and the comic incidents of their return during a storm, which had no rhyme or reason, since no one had set out. And she concluded:

The family was assembled sadly around the bed on which the grandmother's corpse was lying; nobody ran off laughing to shelter in the barn, none of them did their hair, jostling one another in front of the only mirror in the living room; they didn't light a big fire to dry their soaked clothes, which therefore didn't steam in front of the chimney like the hair of a horse drenched in sweat. The grandmother had gone off on her own, leaving everyone else at home.

And now it was lemons! Did all the little girl's ridiculous inventions have something in common? What was it? The teacher asked herself this question, and suspected that an answer existed—for there was undoubtedly a certain "family likeness" among all these inventions; they bore the stamp of the same personality—but she could find no answer.

"Do you like lemons?"

Melanie shook her head.

"Then why do you eat them? Are you afraid of getting scurvy?"

Melanie had no reply to these two questions. The teacher shrugged her shoulders and took a stand on more familiar ground.

"In any case, it's against the rules to eat in class. You must write out fifty times: *I eat lemons in class.*"

Melanie acquiesced with docility, relieved not to have to give any further explanation. And indeed, how could she have got other people to understand?—seeing that she barely understood it herself—that she was not treating herself with lemons because she was afraid of getting scurvy, but because she was afraid of a much more profound sickness, both physical and mental, a wave of insipidity and grayness that suddenly came sweeping up over the world and threatened to submerge her. Melanie was bored. She suffered boredom in a kind of metaphorical physical vertigo.

Though, after all, was it really she who was bored? Wasn't it rather the things, and the landscape, around her? Suddenly, a blinding light came flashing down from the heavens. The room, the class, the street—all seemed molded out of some kind of murky mud into which their shapes were slowly dissolving. Melanie, the only living being in this nauseating desolation, was fighting desperately to save herself from being the next to be sucked down into this sludge.

From her earliest childhood she had discovered a harmless yet very impressive equivalent of this abrupt change of light which modified the very essence of things; and she had discovered it in the spiral staircase which led to the attic rooms in her parents' house. The window that lit this staircase was merely a narrow loophole containing small multicolored panes of glass. Sitting on the stairs, Melanie had often amused herself by looking at the garden through one particular pane, and then through another of a different color. And each time she experienced the same astonishment, the same little miracle. For though the garden was so familiar to her that she could recognize it without the slightest hesitation,

Death and the Maiden

when she looked at it through the red pane it was bathed in the light of a forest fire. It was no longer the place in which she played and dreamed. Both recognizable and unrecognizable, it became an infernal cavern lit by cruel flames. Then she changed to the green pane, whereupon the garden turned into the unfathomable bottom waters of the ocean depths. Aquatic monsters must certainly be lurking in those glaucous profundities. The yellow pane, on the other hand, irradiated, in a profusion of warm, sunny glints, a golden, reassuring haze. The blue one enveloped the trees and lawns in a romantic moonlight. The indigo pane made the most trivial objects look solemn and grandiose. And yet it was always the same garden, though each time with an appearance of surprising novelty, and Melanie was amazed at the magic power she thus possessed which enabled her at will to plunge her garden into a dramatic hell, a paean of praise, or a spectacular ceremony.

For there was no gray pane in the little window on the staircase, and the ashen downpour of boredom had a different origin: less innocent, but more real.

Quite early in life she had identified those elements of an alimentary order that tended to precipitate her fits of boredom and those which, on the other hand, had the power of warding them off. Cream, butter, and jam—the childish food that people were always trying to press on her—foreshadowed and provoked the advancing tide of grayness, the engulment of life in a dense, viscid slime. On the other hand, pepper, vinegar, and unripe apples—everything acid, sour, or highly spiced—exuded a breath of fresh, sparkling, invigorating air into the stagnating atmosphere. It was the difference between lemonade and milk. For Melanie, these two drinks symbolized good and evil. In spite of the protests of her family, she had adopted, as her morning drink, tea made with mineral water and flavored with a slice of lemon. And with it a very hard biscuit or a piece of nearly burned toast. On the other hand, she had been forced to give up the afternoon slice of bread and mustard she coveted because it gave rise to gales of laughter in the school playground. She had realized that with her bread and mustard she was going beyond the bounds of what was tolerated in a provincial primary school.

There was nothing she detested so much in the climates and seasons as a fine summer afternoon, with its lazy languor, with the obscene, satiated luxuriance of its vegetation which seems to communicate itself both to animals and people. The dreadful act initiated by those muggy, voluptuous hours was that of lounging in a chaise longue with one's legs apart and one's arms raised, while yawning very loudly, as if obliged to expose one's genitals, armpits, and mouth to goodness knew what kind of rape. Against this triple yawn, Melanie cultivated the laugh and the sob, two reactions which implied refusal, distance, and the human being's withdrawal into itself. The weather best suited to this rejection syndrome was a luminous frost, which gave rise to a denuded, frozen, hardened, and brilliant character. At such times Melanie went for rapid, exalted walks in the countryside, her eyes watering on account of the glacial air, but her mouth full of ironic laughs.

Like all children, she had encountered the mystery of death. But in her eyes it had immediately taken on two completely opposite aspects. The animal corpses she had seen were usually swollen and decomposed, and exuded sanious se-

creations. Such beings, reduced to their last extremities, crudely avowed their basically putrid nature. Whereas dead insects became lighter, spiritual, and spontaneously attained the pure, delicate eternity of mummies. And this did not only apply to insects for, fermenting around in the attic, Melanie had found a mouse and a little bird that were equally desiccated, purified, reduced to their own distinctive essence: This was a good death.

Melanie was the only daughter of a lawyer in Manners. She had always seemed strange to her father, who had had her late in life and whom she seemed to intimidate. Her mother had been delicate and had died prematurely, leaving Melanie alone with the lawyer at the age of twelve. She was deeply distressed by her mother's death. The first physical sign was that her chest hurt; she felt a kind of stabbing pain, as if she had an ulcer or an internal lesion. She thought she was seriously ill. Then she realized that she was perfectly well, and that it was grief.

At the same time, every so often she experienced waves of tenderness that were quite pleasant. She had only to think intently about her mother, about her mother's death, about the slim, stiff corpse lying in a box at the bottom of an icy hole. . . . Her eyes filled with tears and she couldn't restrain a kind of hiccuping sob that resembled a bitter little laugh. Then she would feel uplifted, freed from the constriction of material things, liberated from the weight of existence. For one brief moment everyday reality became an object of derision, deprived of its self-importance, and no longer an obsessive burden weighing on the little girl. Nothing mattered anymore, since her beloved mamma was dead. The obvious truth of this irrefutable deduction shone like a spiritual sun. On the wings of funeral intoxication, Melanie discovered the hilarity in the air.

Then her grief wore off. All that was left of it was a scar which contracted when anyone mentioned the dead woman, or when she couldn't get to sleep at night and opened her eyes wide in the darkness.

After that the days passed, all identical, between an old maid-servant who was getting more and more hard of hearing and a father who only surfaced from his papers in order to talk about the past. Melanie grew up without apparently going through any difficult phases. Her family circle found her neither difficult, nor secretive, nor melancholy, and everyone would have been surprised to discover that she was swimming with the energy of despair in a dismal gray void, swimming against the insipid anguish she was caused by that affluent house full of memories, that street where nothing new ever happened, and no one appeared.

When it looked as if a nuclear war might break out between America and the U.S.S.R. over Cuba, Melanie was of an age to read the papers, and to follow the news on radio and television. It seemed to her that a breath of fresh air was sweeping through the world, and her lungs swelled with hope. For, to deliver her from her prostration, it would take nothing less than the immense destruction and appalling hecatomb of a modern war. Then the threat was dispelled, the lid of existence, which for a moment had been half lifted, closed on her again, and Melanie realized that there was nothing to be expected from history.

In the spring, the lawyer was in the habit of turning off the central heating and lighting a fire on those evenings when the temperature was really too low. And this was why, one fine April morning, Etienne Jonchet came to deliver a

truckload of logs. He worked for a nearby sawmill in the forest of Ecouves—his fifth trade in less than a year—and was one of those handsome, downright jovial fellows who considered the need to work to be an unfair, sordid burden. He smelled of resin and tanning, and his turned-up shirt-sleeves displayed soft, golden forearms covered in obscene tattoos. Melanie had gone down to the cellar to pay him. While she was fumbling in her purse, he looked at her with a strange expression which began to frighten her. It was even worse when he slowly raised his hands up to her shoulders, up to her head, and locked them around her neck. Her knees trembling, her mouth dry, all she could see were the tattooed arms, and a little farther away the young man's smiling face.

"He's strangling me," she said to herself. "He wants the purse and he's going to kill me to get it!"

And she felt herself weakening, going down a path toward death in which terror and voluptuousness were confused.

Finally she collapsed, but he picked her up in his arms, toppled her over a pile of anthracite, and possessed her tender, virginal body in this alcove of darkness.

When she passed her father on the stairs later, she was covered in coal dust, and she amazed him by jumping up at his neck and laughing. She had lost her virginity, she was filthy, but she was happy.

They met again. A month later, pretending she was going to spend her vacation with a school friend, she went to live with her handsome woodcutter, taking with her only the clothes she was wearing.

Etienne was not a very subtle psychologist, but even so the unusual behavior of his new girlfriend surprised him. She turned up at the sawmill more often than was necessary. Instead of packing his lunch in his bag every morning, she chose to take it herself, and to share it with him in the midst of his workmates. He was certainly rather proud of the youth, the beauty, and especially the obvious bourgeois origins of the girl. But she ought to have disappeared when they started work again. Instead, she dawdled around the machines, running her finger over the serrated blades, calculating their sharpness, their cutting edge, the width they sawed, the tension of the steel bands, whose sides were rendered infinitely smooth and shiny by the terrible friction they were subjected to. Then she would pick up a handful of sawdust, feel its fluffy, elastic freshness, hold it close to her nose in order to appreciate its forest odor, then let it trickle down through her fingers. That this velvety snow could be made from compact tree trunks was a miracle that enchanted her.

But nothing fascinated her so much as the brief howls of the circular saws as they cut into the heart of a log, and the crazy, heaving movement of the great frame saw as its twelve blades danced up and down in the soft wood.

The equipment was kept in repair by an old man named Sureau. A former cabinetmaker, he had known better days, but after his wife died he had taken to drink and he made a precarious living sharpening the blades in the sawmill. Melanie decided to win him over. She visited him in his hovel, did little favors for him, insinuated herself into his good graces. In actual fact she knew what she wanted, but no one would have understood the grandiose project she was determined to use him for. She finally got him to take up his tools again—he called

them his "clarinets"—to sharpen them, and to return to his trade. True, it might well take him years to produce what would no doubt be his all-time masterpiece.

The summer went by in a nimbus of sun and love, with the underlying mystery of the Sureau project. It seemed as if Melanie and Etienne's embraces would never come to an end. They continued through the autumn mists, through the nocturnal clatter of the rain on the shingle roof of their hut, and under the white mantle of the snow, which that year was heavy.

At the beginning of March Etienne was given the sack after a row with his boss. He went off to look for work. He had heard some talk of vacancies at a nearby stud farm. He promised to come back and fetch Melanie as soon as he was settled. But she was never to see him again. Since it never rains but it pours, old Sureau was hospitalized with pleurisy. It is so true that spring is often fatal to old men.

However, Melanie had no intention of returning to her father, with whom she kept up a parsimonious correspondence. For the moment, the marvelous surprise of her love life, the superb folly of the sawmill, and the Sureau project, which rigorously stemmed from both the one and the other, erected a wall between her present life and the gray waters in which the paternal house seemed to have run aground, like a worm-eaten Ark, in the eyes of her memory.

And yet the void was inexorably closing in on her again, in the piercing, humid breezes of a spring which seemed as if it was never going to end. The shack was invaded by the desolation of the forest as it made its black, haggard way out of the thaw. One day, Melanie surprised herself in the fateful act. She yawned, and recognized with dread the sign that at the same time greeted and summoned up the plashing tide of boredom. The time for childish little gimmicks—lemons, mustard—was well and truly past. Since from now on she was free, she should have run away. But where would she run to? For such is the pernicious force of boredom: It surrounds itself with a kind of universal contagion and sends out its malefic waves over the whole world, over the entire universe. Nothing, no place, and no thing, seems to escape it.

Rooting around in the toolshed where hatchets, axes, wedges, and saws were awaiting the improbable return of Etienne, Melanie found the solution. It was a rope, a beautiful new rope, still as bright and shiny as it had been when it left the rope factory, and it terminated—on purpose, so it seemed—in a loop. If you passed the end of the rope through this loop, you produced a slipknot, which was the very thing to hang yourself with.

Trembling with excitement, she fastened the rope to the main roof beam. The slipknot swung two and a half meters above the ground—the ideal height, for all you had to do was stand on a chair to put your head through it. And indeed, Melanie placed the best chair she possessed underneath the knot. Then she sat on the only other chair in the house, which was wobbly, and admired her handiwork.

It wasn't that those two objects—the rope and the chair—were particularly admirable in themselves. It was more a question of the perfection of the combination of that seat and that sort of hempen wire, and of its fatal significance. She lapsed into a state of blissful, metaphysical contemplation. In preparing her own

death, in raising a visible, palpable barrier against the barren prospect of her life, in building a dam to halt the stagnant waters of time, at one stroke she was putting an end to boredom. The imminence of her death, made concrete by the rope and the chair, conferred an incomparable density and warmth on her present life.

She then experienced several weeks of sinister happiness. The charm had already begun to wear off, however, when the mailman, whom she rarely saw, appeared one day. He brought her a letter from her best friend, Jacqueline Autrain, a schoolteacher who had been appointed to a nearby village for the coming third term of the school year, and who was going to live alone in the apartment over the school. She would be so happy if Melanie would agree to come and spend a few days with her to help her settle in.

Melanie packed her bag, hid the key to the hut in a hole known to Etienne, and went off to stay with her friend.

Jacqueline's welcome, and the springlike radiance of the village, made her forget her obsessions and their funereal remedy. True, she had left her beautiful rope hanging above the chair in the darkness of the locked hut, as if in anticipation, as a kind of pledge against an obligatory return. While her friend was teaching, Melanie took care of their apartment. Then she began to get interested in the children. She started giving private lessons to the ones who found it difficult to keep up. After the love she had experienced all through the summer and winter, in this way, with the coming of spring, she discovered friendship. Between these two celebrations of life was the vast expanse of a bleak desert peopled with exorbitant, nauseating shadows that only a rope ending in the loop of a slipknot rendered habitable.

Jacqueline was engaged to a young man who was at the time serving his apprenticeship with the riot police. Twice during the spring, when she had had a few days off from her job, she had visited him at his barracks in Argentan. One day he turned up with his helmet, his cap, his truncheon, and his big, bulging holster. The two young women were amused by all this paraphernalia.

His leave lasted three days. The first was nothing but a succession of laughter and caresses between the fiancés. When the spectacle became too demonstrative, Melanie tried to slip away unnoticed. On the second day, the young man insisted on going for an outing with the two women, although it was obvious that Jacqueline would have preferred to stay at home and get the full benefit of such rare hours. On the third day she picked a violent quarrel with Melanie and accused her of trying to divert the too naive policeman's attentions to herself. Coming in unexpectedly, the young man darted into the fray, and by tactlessly trying to defend Melanie he completed his fiancée's despair. When he departed for Argentan he left behind him an accumulation of emotional debris.

Melanie couldn't possibly go on living with Jacqueline. She settled in Alençon, and taught in a private school for the last two terms of the school year. Then the holidays emptied the schools, the streets, and the whole town, and Melanie found herself alone once again under a white, merciless, piercing sun. On the dusty branches of the plane trees, between the uneven cobblestones of the squares, on the flaking walls tortured by the light there emerged the livid, bloated face of boredom.

Feeling herself sinking, Melanie clung to her most recent memories. When she thought about Jacqueline's fiancé, strangely enough it was always the image of the bulging holster containing his pistol that first entered her mind. She wrote to him at the Argentinian barracks and asked him to meet her. He replied, suggesting a day, an hour, and a café.

If he had imagined that this was going to lead to an affair, he was disappointed. Melanie explained that, on the contrary, what she wanted was to clear up any misunderstanding and try to restore the good relationship between Jacqueline and him that she might perhaps have unintentionally contributed toward damaging. She begged him to get in touch with his fiancé again as soon as possible, and to let her know that their reunion had been a success. This would be a great relief to her.

Then she had an inspiration. Why shouldn't he telephone Jacqueline right now, from the café? Then she would know that every attempt had been made.

He put up a feeble argument, then shrugged his shoulders, stood up, and made his way to the telephone booth. He left his cap, his helmet, his truncheon, and his bulging holster on the table.

Melanie waited for a moment. He must be having difficulty in getting through, because the young man was taking his time coming back. Actually, she couldn't take her eyes off the bulging holster, which was innocently swelling on the table. Suddenly she yielded to temptation. She slipped the object into her handbag and rapidly reached the door.

Back in her little room in Alençon, the satisfaction of duty accomplished gave her a few days' peace. But she couldn't forget that by reconciling the fiancé's she had permanently excluded herself from their friendship. The pistol, on the other hand, was a source of great comfort. Every day, at a certain hour—she always trembled with impatience and anticipated joy as she awaited it—she brought out the magnificent, dangerous object. She had no idea how to use it, but she was lacking in neither time nor patience. Placed on the table, naked, the pistol seemed to irradiate an energy that enveloped Melanie in voluptuous warmth. The compact, rigorous brevity of its contours, its matt and almost sacerdotal blackness, the facility with which her hand embraced and grasped its form—everything about this weapon contributed to giving her an irresistible force of conviction. How good it would be to die by means of this pistol! Furthermore, it belonged to Jacqueline's fiancé, and Melanie's suicide would unite her friends, just as her life had nearly separated them.

The pistol was not loaded, but the holster contained a magazine and six bullets, and Melanie soon found the orifice in the butt where it should be inserted. A click apprised her that the magazine was in place. Then the day came when she felt she could no longer wait to try it out.

She went off very early in the morning into the forest. When she came to a clearing, a long way from any path, she took the pistol out of her bag and, holding it with both hands, as far away from her as possible, she pulled the trigger with all her might. Nothing happened. There must be a safety catch. For a moment she ran her fingers over the butt, the barrel, and the trigger. Finally a kind of protuberance slid toward the barrel, leaving a red spot exposed. That must be

it. She tried again. The trigger yielded under her fingers and the weapon, as if seized by a sudden fit of madness, kicked in her hands.

The explosion had seemed tremendous to Melanie, but the bullet had left no trace in the trees or thickets into which it must have vanished.

Trembling all over, Melanie put the pistol back in her bag and resumed her walk. Her legs felt weak, but she didn't know whether this was the result of fear or of pleasure. She now had a new instrument of liberation at her disposal, and how much more modern and practical this one was than the rope and the chair! She had never been so free. The key to her cage was there, in her bag, next to her makeup remover, her coin purse, and her sunglasses.

She had gone about a hundred meters when she saw, coming striding toward her, an old man dressed as a cross between a fisherman and a mountaineer, and carrying a cylindrical botanist's box slung across one shoulder. He approached her right away.

"What's going on? Didn't you hear an explosion?"

"No," Melanie lied. "I didn't hear anything."

"Odd, odd. All the more so in that it seemed to come from your direction. And I had been afraid I was becoming hard of hearing! Ah well. Let's say I had an illusion, then, yes, how shall I put it, an auditory hallucination."

He had pronounced these last two words with a kind of ironic emphasis, and he ended his phrase in a grating little laugh. Then, noticing Melanie's bag:

"Were you looking for mushrooms, too?"

"Yes, that's right, for mushrooms," Melanie lied again, eagerly.

Then, carried away by a sudden inspiration, she added:

"I'd especially like to know how to recognize the poisonous ones."

"Bah! Poisonous! For a real mycologist they're so rare they're practically nonexistent! Do you know that my friends in our learned society and myself often invite each other to dinners in which a whole course consists of mushrooms reputed to be lethal? You only have to know how to prepare them, and also perhaps how to eat them without fear. Apprehension makes the organism more vulnerable; everyone knows that. A game for specialists, that's what it comes down to."

"Then poisonous mushrooms are as harmless as that?" asked Melanie, with a touch of disappointment in her voice.

"For us—for us mycologists! But for the profane—hold on! It's rather like the big cats in a menagerie, isn't it! Their trainer can go into their cage and tweak their whiskers. But woe betide the visitor who allowed himself any such liberty!"

"You're absolutely fascinating!"

Aristide Greenhorn, who owned an antique shop on the rue des Filles-de-Notre-Dame, not far from the house where Saint Teresa of Lisieux was born, belonged to the race of those erudite men, curious about everything, who flourish discreetly in the shade in small provincial towns. He reserved the best part of himself for the learned society, which he regaled with eclectic communications, ranging from the miracles of botany to books of magic spells written by obscure mystics.

He was too delighted at having found a virgin ear to let Melanie go so soon,

and for quite a while they walked side by side, chatting. When she got back to her modest lodging, the pistol in her bag was hidden under a perfumed provender of cepes, chanterelles, and parasol mushrooms that they had picked together. But she had also insisted on bringing back—isolated in a plastic bag, it is true—three vivid Entoloma and two death cups, the most fearsome killers of the underground.

That evening, she laid out on her table the pistol, stripped of its holster, and a plate containing the five poisonous mushrooms. A dusky silence enveloped her solitude, but these lethal objects irradiated an invigorating warmth with which she was more than familiar. Once again she experienced the same voluptuous excitement that she had felt in the hut in the presence of the rope and chair. But she was now going much further in her intimate relations with death.

She was worried, at first, by the mysterious affinity that seemed to link these two kinds of objects. They had a concise strength in common, a dormant, languid energy seemingly lurking in forms which could only contain it with difficulty, but which were inspired by it. The massive bulk of the pistol—a hand-held weapon—and the muscular curves of the mushrooms also reminded her of a third object that had been hidden at the back of her mind for a long time but which she finally flushed out, not without blushing: Etienne Jonchet's sex organ, which had given her so much pleasure for so many weeks. And thus she discovered the profound complicity between love and death, and that it was the sordid, threatening emblems tattooed on Etienne's delightful arms that had given their embraces their real meaning. Thus Etienne found his proper place in the forest landscape whose center remained the rope and the chair.

The mushroom, the pistol, and the rope were three keys that each opened a door to the beyond, three monumental doors, whose aspect and style were certainly very different.

The mushrooms were the soft, tortuous keys to a door which displayed the smooth rotundity of a gigantic belly. It was like a vast anatomical altar of repose erected to the glory of digestion, defecation, and sex. This door would only begin to open slowly, lazily. In eating and assimilating these mushrooms, Melanie would have to edge her way through a narrow slit with the obstinate cunning of a baby determined to be born the wrong way around.

The second door was cast in bronze. Black and tabular, unshakable, it stood in front of a blazing secret whose disquieting glow could be glimpsed through the keyhole. Only a terrible explosion, a detonation resonating against Melanie's ear, would open it at one stroke and expose a landscape of flames, the incandescent cleft in a furnace, thick clouds of sulfur and saltpeter.

The third key—that of the rope and chair—concealed beneath its rusticity the abundant richness of a direct affinity with nature. If she put her head through the hempen necklace, Melanie would discover the secret depths of the forest humus, fertilized by rainstorms and hardened by Christmas frosts. This was a beyond which smelled of resin and log fires, which resounded with the rumbling organ sounds the wind made when hurling itself against a cluster of tall trees. In becoming the human weight that would ballast the rope, itself fastened to the main beam of the woodcutter's hut, Melanie would take her place

in that vast architecture of balanced treetops and swaying branches, of vertical trunks and entangled foliage, that was called: the forest.

Greenhorn had invited Melanie to visit him. One evening, she triggered off the silvery music of a cluster of tubes that the opening door set in motion. A whole paradise of polychromatic plaster saints welcomed her, either with open arms or with a right arm upheld in blessing. Little Sister Teresa, in a hundred copies of different sizes, clutched a crucifix to her Carmelite uniform as she raised her eyes up to the moldings on the ceiling.

"She was born just a couple of steps from here, you see," Greenhorn explained with fervor. "At number 42 rue Saint-Blaise. If you like, we'll visit her birthplace together."

Melanie's air of consternation as she thanked him couldn't escape him. He realized that he was on the wrong track, and that in this instance the pious antique dealer had to give place to the philosopher. He needed to keep a wary eye open and show signs of humility if he wanted to pin down the personality of this strange girl, who went for solitary walks in the woods shooting pistols, and who had a predilection for collecting poisonous mushrooms. She was certainly someone out of the ordinary. Unfortunately, it turned out to be difficult to make conversation, because she was more interested in learning simple, precise things from him than in talking about herself.

She left him after a quarter of an hour, but she came back two days later, and they gradually became more at ease with each other. With increasing amazement, Greenhorn pieced together the scraps of information Melanie gave him about her brief fare. For the difference in their ages and the soothing atmosphere of the shop reassured Melanie, and encouraged her to reveal herself. He couldn't help giving an involuntary start the day she told him that she taught small children. For she had hinted at the basic elements of her adventure with the handsome, tattooed Etienne, and at her fascination for the rope and its slipknot. "Poor children!" he thought. "Though, after all, people who are completely normal rarely go in for teaching, and it may well be natural and preferable that children, those semilunatics whom we tolerate in our midst, should be raised by eccentrics."^{*}

Later, she told him about the spiral staircase, the narrow window, and the multicolored panes of glass that made it possible for her to see her garden under profoundly different aspects. "Kant!" he thought. "The a priori forms of sense impressions! At the age of ten, without either wanting to or realizing it, she discovered the basic essentials of transcendental philosophy!" But when he tried to initiate her into Kantianism he soon saw that she wasn't following him, and that she wasn't even listening.

Going back even further in her memories, she alluded to the likes and dislikes she had had as a little girl—liking lemons, disliking cakes—to the boredom that

^{*} This definition of children is to be found in Jean Paulhan's preface to *The Story of O*. Here it is obviously a question of a vague recollection, and, after all, it is not so surprising that Greenhorn should have read Pauline Réage's novel.

had sometimes submerged her like a gray, greasy tide, to the sparking and invigorating relief she had found, at first in a small way in corrosive food and drink, and later, in grandiose fashion, in her mother's death.

At this point he no longer doubted that she had an innate metaphysical vocation, which was accompanied by a spontaneous rejection of anything to do with ontology. He tried to get her to understand that she embodied, in the rough, the ancient antagonism between two forms of thought. Since the most distant dawn of occidental humanity, two currents had crossed and opposed one another, the first dominated by Parmenides of Elea, the other by Heraclitus of Ephesus. For Parmenides, reality and truth combine in the motionless Being, single, solid, and unchanging. This fixed vision horrified the other thinker, Heraclitus, who held that flickering, rumbling fire is the primordial substance of the universe, and that the limpid current of singing water is the symbol of life in perpetual flux. Ontology and metaphysics—Being in repose, and Being surpassed—have always, since the beginning of time, opposed two kinds of wisdom and two kinds of speculation.

While he was speaking thus, carried away by his sublime subject, Melanie was staring at him with her huge, dark, passionate eyes. He might have thought she was listening to him, captivated by the amazing portrait of herself that he was drawing. But he was shrewd and lucid; he knew that he had a long, red, curly hair growing out of a wart on his cheek, and he only had to look at Melanie to realize that she had no eyes for anything other than this minute blemish, and that she hadn't taken in a single word of his discourse.

No, decidedly, he had to face facts: Melanie did not have a philosophical turn of mind, in spite of her prodigious talent for spontaneously involving herself, though crudely and quite unconsciously, in the great problems of eternal speculation. The facts of philosophy, by which she was possessed and which were the supreme guidelines of her destiny, could not be translated into concepts and words that she would understand. A metaphysician of genius, she would remain a primitive and never rise to the level of the Word.

Her visits ceased. Greenhorn was not particularly surprised. Since his arguments had had no effect on the girl's mind, he knew that his relationship with her was at the mercy of fortuitous, obscure, and unforeseeable influences. Nevertheless, he finally went and knocked on the door of the little room where she lived. A neighbor told him that she had moved.

What instinctive warning had decided her to return to the cabin in the forest of Écouves? No doubt, a thought that had imposed itself upon her had a great deal to do with it.

The prospect of death—of a certain kind of death, made concrete by a particular instrument—was the only thing capable of rescuing her from being engulfed in the nausea of existence. But this liberation was only temporary and gradually lost all its potency, like a stale drug, so she had to wait until a different "key" came along and promised her a new death, a younger, fresher, more convincing promise whose credibility was still intact. Now it was obvious that this game couldn't go on much longer. Sooner or later all those unkept promises, all those missed rendezvous, would have to be followed by the day of reckoning. Threatened once again by shipwreck in the quagmires of Being, Melanie had

therefore decided on Sunday, October 1, at noon as the date and hour of her suicide.*

The idea of this commitment had at first frightened her. But the more seriously she envisaged it, and as the decision ripened in her mind, the more she felt warmed and sustained by successive and increasingly intense waves of energy and joy. It was this, above all, that had dictated her behavior. Death, even when it was still distant, by its very certainty, by the precision of its date and occurrence was already beginning its work of transfiguration. And once this date was fixed, every day, every hour increased this salutary influence, as each step that brings us nearer to a great bonfire enables us to participate a little more in its light and warmth.

And this was why she had gone back to the forest of Écouves, where, first in Etienne's tattooed arms and then in the contemplation of the rope and the chair, she had experienced a happiness that presaged the great final ecstasy.

On September 29 a divine surprise was to crown her joy. A small truck stopped outside the hut. An old man sitting beside the driver got out and knocked on the door. It was old Sureau, whose illness had been only a fairly severe warning sign. The two men got out of the vehicle and carried into the living room a tall, heavy, fragile object, completely enveloped in black veils, like a great widow, stiff and solemn . . .

"If I wasn't afraid of being paradoxical," said the young doctor, putting down his stethoscope, "I would say that she died of laughter."

And he explained that in its first stage laughter is characterized by a sudden dilation of the orbicular muscle of the lips, and the contraction of the musculus risorius, of the canine, and the buccinator, and, at the same time, by a discontinuous expiration, but that in its second stage the muscular contractions could spread to the whole of the network subordinate to the facial nerve and even reach the muscles of the neck, in particular the platysma. And that in its third stage it undermines the whole organism, causes tears and urine to flow, and the diaphragm to contract in painful spasms, to the detriment of the intestines and the heart.

For those gathered around Melanie Blanchard's corpse, this lecture in comic physiology had very different meanings. Knowing Melanie, they were even more aware than the doctor himself that this apparently extravagant theory of death by laughter was pretty well in keeping with the eccentric character of the deceased. Her father, the shy, absent-minded old lawyer, remembered her on that spring day, with her clothes in disarray, her face and arms covered in coal dust, throwing herself at his neck and laughing like a madwoman. Etienne Jonchet recalled her strange and profound smile when she was stroking the most terrifying blades in the sawmill. The schoolmistress thought of the voluptuous grimace that the little girl could not suppress as she took a big bite out of a lemon. Meanwhile Aristide Greenhorn was trying to apply to this special case the the-

* October 1 is the feast day of Saint Teresa of Lisieux. Melanie no doubt considered this a touching tribute to her old friend Greenhorn. But we are entitled to wonder whether he appreciated it at its true worth.

ory developed by Henri Bergson in *Laughter*, according to which the comic is a mechanism overlaying a conscious being. Jacqueline Autrain was the only one who didn't understand a thing. Sobbing on her fiancé's shoulder, she was convinced that Melanie, consumed with love for the young man, had sacrificed herself for their happiness. As for old Sureau, he had no thought for anything other than the masterpiece of his career as a craftsman, and under the peak of his cap he was keeping a close eye on its funeral outlines, which encumbered the far end of the room.

Before she died, Melanie had sent them a kind of antithumous invitation informing them of the day and hour of her suicide, taking care to mail the envelopes too late for anyone to intervene. Thus they met, one after the other, in the living room of the forest hut, after Étienne Jonchet—the only one not to have received an invitation—had discovered the corpse when he came to fetch his tools.

The rope still hung from the ceiling, the beautiful new, waxed rope that ended in an impeccable slipknot. On the bedside table were the pistol—with just one bullet missing from its magazine—and a suncer containing five mushrooms that were beginning to dry out. Melanie was lying intact on her big double bed, carried off by a devastating heart attack which had done nothing to obscure the radiant, even hilarious, expression on her face. And, in fact, this dead girl, who had needed no violent expedient in order to cross the threshold, seemed to be floating in the joy of not living.

"And what is that?" the doctor finally asked, pointing to the "widow."
Old Sureau moved, and with the careful, tender gestures of a young bridegroom undressing his bride with his own hands, he began to strip the object of its enveloping black luster veils. They all recognized, with stupefaction, a gullotine, a drawing room gullotine, made with loving care out of the wood of a fruit tree, delicately dovetailed, waxed, polished, weathered—a real masterpiece of cabinetmaking, to which the brightly shining blade with its relentless profile added a cruel, glacial note.

Greenhorn, as an expert antique dealer, noticed that the two uprights along which the blade slid were decorated in the antique fashion with eurythmic foliage, and that the crosspiece above them was in the form of a Hellenic architrave.

"And what's more," he murmured, lost in admiration, "it's in the style of Louis the Sixteenth!"

Translated from the French by Barbara Wright

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William Trevor
 BEYOND THE PALE

We always went to Ireland in June.

Ever since the four of us began to go on holidays together, in 1965 it must have been, we had spent the first fortnight of the month at Glencorn Lodge in Co. Antrim. Perfection, as Dekko put it once, and none of us disagreed. It's a Georgian house by the sea, not far from the village of Ardbeg. It's quite majestic in its rather elegant way, a garden running to the very edge of a cliff, its long rhododendron drive—or avenue, as they say in Ireland. The English couple who bought the house in the early sixties, the Malseeds, have had to build on quite a bit but it's all been discreetly done, the Georgian style preserved throughout. Figs grow in the sheltered gardens, and apricots, and peaches in the greenhouses which old Mr Saxton presides over. He's Mrs Malseed's father actually. They brought him with them from Surrey, and their Dalmatians, Charger and Snooze.

It was Strafe who found Glencorn for us. He'd come across an advertisement in the *Lady* in the days when the Malseeds still felt the need to advertise. 'How about this?' he said one evening at the end of the second rubber, and then read out the details. We had gone away together the summer before, to a hotel that had been recommended on the Costa del Sol, but it hadn't been a success because the food was so appalling. 'We could try this Irish one,' Dekko suggested cautiously, which is what eventually we did.

The four of us have been playing bridge together for ages, Dekko, Strafe, Cynthia and myself. They call me Milly, though strictly speaking my name is Dorothy Milson. Dekko picked up his nickname at school, Dekko Deakin sounding rather good, I dare say. He and Strafe were in fact at school together, which must be why we all call Strafe by his surname: Major R. B. Strafe he is, the initials standing for Robert Buchanan. We're of an age, the four of us, all in the early fifties: the prime of life, so Dekko insists. We live quite close to Leaththead, where the Malseeds were before they decided to make the change from Surrey to Co. Antrim. Quite a coincidence, we always think.

'How very nice,' Mrs Malseed said, smiling her welcome again this year. Some instinct seems to tell her when guests are about to arrive, for she's rarely