THE YEARS

ANNIE ERNAUX

Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature

Fitzcarraldo Editions

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'All we have is our history, and it does not belong to us.'
— José Ortega y Gasset

'Yes. They'll forget us. Such is our fate, there is no help for it. What seems to us serious, significant, very important, will one day be forgotten or will seem unimportant. And it's curious that we can't possibly tell what exactly will be considered great and important, and what will seem petty and ridiculous. ... And it may be that our present life, which we accept so readily, will in time seem strange, inconvenient, stupid, not clean enough, perhaps even sinful...'
— Anton Chekhov, tr. Constance Garnett

us the gulf between society's 'sayable' and our unsayable seemed normal and irremediable. It was something we couldn't think but only feel, deep inside, alone watching *Breathless*.

People had had more than enough of Algeria, OAS bombs on Paris windowsills, the Petit-Clamart attack. Enough of waking up to the news of a coup by unknown generals that disrupted the march towards peace and 'self-determination'. They had got used to the ideas of independence and the legitimacy of the FLN, learned the names of its leaders, Ben Bella and Ferhat Abbas. Their desire for happiness and tranquility tallied with the introduction of a principle of justice: decolonization, previously unthinkable. However, they still exhibited as much fear as ever, or at best indifference, in relation to 'the Arabs', whom they avoided and ignored. They could not be reconciled to sharing streets with individuals whose brothers had murdered Frenchmen across the Mediterranean. And the immigrant worker, when he passed a French man or woman on the street, knew more quickly and clearly than they that he wore the face of the enemy. That 'Arabs' lived in slums, laboured on assembly lines or at the bottom of pits, that their October demonstration was outlawed, then suppressed with the most extreme violence, and that a hundred of them had been thrown into the Seine, not that we knew – this seemed to be in the nature of things. (Later, when we learned what had happened on 17 October 1961, we were unable to say what we had *known* at the time, recalling nothing except balmy weather and the imminent return to university. We felt the unease of *not having known*, though the state and the press had done everything to keep us in the dark, as if there were no making up for

past ignorance and silence. And try as we might, we would see no resemblance between October's heinous attack on Algerians by Gaullist police and the attack on anti-OAS militants the following February. The nine dead crushed against the railings of the Charonne Métro station bore no comparison with the uncounted dead of the Seine.)

Nobody asked whether the Évian Accords were a victory or a defeat. They brought relief and the beginning of forgetting. We did not concern ourselves with what would happen next for the Pieds-Noirs and the Harkis in Algeria, or the Algerians in France. We hoped to go to Spain the following summer – a real bargain, according to everyone who'd been there.

People were accustomed to violence and separation in the world. East/West, Khrushchev the muzhik/Kennedy the leading man, Peppone/Don Camillo, JEC/UEC, *L'Humanité/L'Aurore*, Franco/Tito, Cathos/Commies. Under cover from the Cold War, they felt calm. Outside of union speeches with their codified violence, they did not complain, having made up their minds to be kept by the state, listen to Jean Nocher moralize on the radio each night, and not see the strikes amount to anything. When they voted yes in the October referendum, it was less from a desire to elect the president of the Republic through universal suffrage than from a secret wish to keep de Gaulle president for life, if not until the end of time.

Meanwhile, we studied for our BAs while listening to the transistor. We went to see *Cléo from 5 to 7*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, Bergman, Buñuel and Italian films. We loved Léo Ferré, Barbara, Jean Ferrat, Leny Escudero, and

Claude Nougaro. We read *Hara-Kiri*. We felt nothing in common with the yé-yés, who said *Hitler, never heard of him*, and their idols, who were even younger than we: girls with pigtails and songs for the school playground; a boy who bellowed and writhed on the floor of the stage. We had the feeling they'd never catch up to us. Next to them, we were old. Perhaps we too would die under de Gaulle.

But we were not adults. Sexual life remained clandestine and rudimentary, haunted by the spectre of 'an accident'. No one was supposed to have a sex life before marriage. Boys believed their lewd innuendos displayed advanced erotic science, but all they knew how to do was ejaculate on an area of the girl's body to which she directed him, for the sake of caution. No one knew for sure whether or not they were still virgins. Sexuality was a poorly resolved matter on which girls held forth for hours in residence rooms no boy was allowed to enter. They did their reading, pored through Kinsey to convince themselves of the legitimacy of pleasure. They had inherited their mothers' shame about sex. There were still men's words and women's words. Girls did not say 'come' or 'cock', or anything at all. They recoiled from naming the organs except to say 'vagina' or 'penis' in a special toneless voice. The boldest of them stole out to see a counsellor at Family Planning, an underground organization, and were prescribed rubber diaphragms that they struggled to insert.

They had no idea that the boys they attended lectures with were frightened of their bodies, that if they answered their most innocent questions with monosyllables, it was not from contempt but from fear of the inherent complications of their snap-jaw bellies. All things considered, they preferred to quietly beat off at night.

Having failed to panic in time, somewhere in a pine-wood or on the sands of the Costa Brava, one saw time stand still before a pair of underpants whose crotch had remained spotless for days. 'It' had to be got rid of, one way or another. Rich girls went to Switzerland, others to the kitchen of an unspecialized, unknown woman with a probe boiled in a stewpot. The fact of having read Simone de Beauvoir was of no use except to confirm the misfortune of having a womb. So, like sick people, three weeks out of four girls took their temperatures to calculate the risks, and lived in two different times. One was everybody's time, with class presentations and holidays; the other, fickle and treacherous, liable to stop at any moment, was the deadly time ruled by their blood.

In lecture halls, professors in neckties explained writers' works by way of their biographies. They said 'Monsieur' André Malraux and 'Madame' Yourcenar, out of respect for the living persons, and taught us only dead authors. We didn't dare quote Freud, fearing sarcasm and bad marks. We barely even mentioned Bachelard and *Studies in Human Time* by Georges Poulet, believed we showed great independence of mind by declaring at the start of a presentation 'labels must be rejected' or '*Sentimental Education* was the first modern novel'. Friends gave each other books as gifts and wrote dedications on the flyleaves. It was the time of Kafka, Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, and Lawrence Durrell. We discovered the *nouveau roman* of Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Sollers, and Sarraute, which we wanted to like, but it didn't offer us enough help with our lives.

We preferred texts with words and sentences that summarized existence, our own and those of delivery-men and cleaning ladies in housing estates, from whom

we set ourselves apart because, unlike them, we 'asked ourselves questions'. We needed words that contained explanations of the world and self, dictated morality: 'alienation' and its satellites 'bad faith' and 'bad conscience', 'immanence' and 'transcendence'. We measured everything in terms of 'authenticity'. Were it not for fear of quarrelling with our parents, who heaped opprobrium in equal measure on divorcés and Communists, we would have joined the Party. In a café one night, as one sat amidst the noise and smoke, the entire setting abruptly lost its meaning. One felt an outsider, without past or future: 'a useless passion'.

In March the days grew long and our winter clothes too warm. It wasn't only summer that was on its way but life itself, without shape or design. We walked to classes repeating to ourselves: time is out of joint, *life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing*. With friends we discussed our preferred method of suicide: with sleeping pills, in a sleeping bag, in the Sierra de Guadalajara.

On Sundays in the mid-1960s, our parents took advantage of the student's presence – home for the weekend with laundry – to invite friends and family to a meal. The table talk revolved around the arrival of a supermarket, the building of a public pool, the Renault 4L and the Citroën Ami 6. Those who had televisions held forth on the physical attributes of ministers and talk show hostesses, discussing celebrities as if they lived next door. The fact of having watched Raymond Oliver prepare pepper steak flambé, a medical programme with Dr Igor Barrère and *36 chandelles* appeared to grant

them a superior right to speak. Before the stiffness and indifference of those who did not have televisions and knew nothing about Zitrone, Anne-Marie Peysson, or the baby doll put through a meat grinder by Jean-Christophe Averty, the others returned to subjects of common interest: the best way to prime rabbit, the benefits of civil servants, and which local butcher shop served the customer best. They spoke of the year 2000, calculated the age they would be and their chances of being alive. They took pleasure in imagining life at the end of the century, with meals replaced by pills, robots doing all the work, and houses on the moon. They did not talk for long, for no one cared how life would be in forty years, *see if we're alive, for starters!*

With a sense of necessary sacrifice – for the guests, who raved about our studies, and our parents, who gave us pocket money and washed and ironed our clothes – of hours one could have spent reading *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf or Jean Stoetzel's *Sociology and Social Psychology*, we joined the conversation awkwardly and with good grace. We could not help but notice their way of mopping gravy off a plate until it was clean, shaking a cup to dissolve the sugar, uttering the words 'a high-ranking person' with a hush of respect, and suddenly we saw the family milieu from the outside as a closed world that was no longer ours. The ideas that possessed us were alien to illness and factory layoffs, vegetables to be planted with the waxing moon, and all the other subjects discussed at the table. Hence our decision not to talk about ourselves and our studies, careful not to contradict them on any subject. To declare we were unsure of getting a good job or teaching later might demolish their beliefs, insult them and make them doubt our abilities.

The company was no longer enraged by memories of the Occupation and the bombing. No one revived the emotions of yesteryear. When at the end of the meal someone said, 'There's another one the Krauts won't get,' they were simply quoting.

For us too, the great post-war Sundays, *Fleur de Paris* and *Le petit vin blanc* belonged to another time, to childhood, which we had no desire to hear anything about. If an uncle tried to bring it up, 'Remember when I taught you how to ride a bike?' we found him old. Immersed in the voices, the words and expressions we'd heard since birth but which no longer came to us spontaneously, we felt ourselves drift on hazy images of other Sundays, back to the times-before whose tales were told when we returned to the table for dessert, out of breath from too much play, and listened to the yarns no one bothered to tell today.

In this black-and-white photo, in the foreground, lie three girls and a boy, on their stomachs; only their upper bodies are visible. Behind them are two other boys. One stands, leaning over, silhouetted against the sky. The other, kneeling, appears to annoy one of the girls with his arm, which is extended. In the background is a valley, submerged in a kind of mist. On the back of the photo: *University Campus. Mont-Saint-Aignan. June '63. Brigitte, Alain, Annie, Gérald, Annie, Ferrid.*

She is the girl in the middle, the most 'womanly'. Her hair is combed George Sand-style in flat bands on either side of a centre parting. Her broad shoulders are

bare, and her clenched fists emerge oddly from beneath her torso. No glasses. The photo was taken during the interval between the sitting of exams and the announcement of their results. It was a time of sleepless nights, long discussions in bars, rented rooms in town, caresses on naked skin, on the verge of reckless, to the strains of *La Javanaise*. A time of deep sleeps in the afternoons, from which she emerged with the guilty feeling of having removed herself from the world, as on the day when she awakened to learn the Tour de France and Jacques Anquetil had passed hours before. She joined the party and was bored. The girls on either side of her in the photo belong to the bourgeoisie. She doesn't feel like one of them. She is stronger and more independent. By spending too much time with them, accompanying them to *surboums*, she feels she demeans herself. Nor does she think she has anything in common, not any longer, with the working-class world of her childhood and her parents' small business. She has gone over to the other side but she cannot say of what. The life behind her is made up of disjointed images. She feels she is nowhere, 'inside' nothing except knowledge and literature.

At this moment in time, no inventory could be made of the girl's abstract knowledge or of what she has read. The degree in modern literature she is about to receive is only a vague indicator of level. She is a voracious reader of existentialism and surrealism, has read Dostoevsky, Kafka, all of Flaubert, and is also passionate about new writing, Le Clézio and the *nouveau roman*, as if only recent books could provide an accurate view of the here and now.

It seems to her that education is more than just a way to escape poverty. It is a weapon of choice against stagnation in a kind of feminine condition that arouses her

pity, the tendency to lose oneself in a man, which she has experienced (cf. the school photo from five years before) and of which she is ashamed. She feels no desire to marry or have children. Mothering and the life of the mind seem incompatible. In any case, she's sure to be a bad mother. Her ideal is the *union libre* in the poem by André Breton.

At times, she feels weighed down by the quantity of her learning. Her body is young and her thinking is old. In her diary she writes that she feels 'hypersaturated with all-purpose ideas and theories', that she is 'looking for another language' and 'longs to return to an original purity'. She dreams of writing in a language no one knows. Words are 'little embroidery stitches around a tablecloth of night'. Other sentences contradict this lassitude: 'I am a will and a desire'. She does not say for what.

She sees the future as a great red staircase, the one in a Soutine painting reproduced in the journal *Lectures pour Tous.* She cut it out and hung it on the wall of her residence room.

She sometimes lingers over images of her childhood, the first day of school, a funfair in the rubble, holidays at Sotteville-sur-Mer, etc. She also imagines herself in twenty years trying to remember the discussions of today – everyone's – on Communism, suicide, and contraception. The woman of twenty years from now is an idea, a ghost. She will never live to be that age.

To see her in the photo, a handsome solid girl, one would never suspect that more than anything, she fears going mad. Only writing – or perhaps a man – can protect her from that, if only momentarily. She begins a novel in which images past and present, her dreams at night and visions of the future, alternate with an 'I' who

is her double, detached from herself.

She is convinced that she has no 'personality'.

There is no relation between her life and history, though traces of the latter remain fixed in her mind by the grey weather and sensation of cold one March (the miners' strike), by clammy humidity one Whitsun weekend (the death of Pope John XXIII), by a friend's remark, 'World war will begin in two days' (the Cuban Missile Crisis), the night at a national students' union dance that coincided with the coup d'état by Generals Salan, Challe, etc. The time of current events, no more than that of sensationalistic news items, which she disdains, is not *her* time, which is wholly comprised of images of herself. A few months later, Kennedy's assassination in Dallas will leave her even more indifferent than the death of Marilyn Monroe had the summer before, because it will have been eight weeks since her last period.

The increasingly rapid arrival of new things drove the past away. People did not question their usefulness, they just wanted to possess them and suffered when they didn't earn enough to buy them outright. They got used to writing cheques and discovered the 'financial arrangements' available through Sofinco consumer credit. Comfortable with novelty, they took pride in using the vacuum cleaner and electric hair dryer. Curiosity prevailed over distrust. We discovered the raw and the flambé, steak tartare and *au poivre*, spices and ketchup, fish fingers and instant mash, frozen peas, hearts of palm, aftershave, Obao bubble

bath, and Canigou dog food. The traditional Coop and Familistère shops made way for supermarkets, where customers delighted in touching the merchandise before paying for it. We felt free. We didn't ask anyone for anything. Every evening, the Galeries Barbès department store welcomed buyers to a free country-style buffet. Young middle-class couples purchased distinction with a Hellem cafetière, Eau sauvage by Dior, a shortwave radio and hi-fi, venetian blinds, burlap wall-covering, a teak living room set, a Dunlopillo mattress, a secretaire or 'bureau cabinet', furniture whose names, until then, they had only seen in novels. They frequented antique shops, entertained with smoked salmon, avocado stuffed with shrimp, meat fondues. They read *Playboy*, *Lui*, *Barbarella*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Teilhard de Chardin, *Planète*. They daydreamed over listings for apartments of *grand standing* with walk-in closets, in sparkling new apartment buildings. Hiding their anxiety, they took their first plane trip and were moved to see the green and gold squares below. They lost their tempers with the phone company because they were still waiting for the service they'd ordered a whole year earlier. Others saw no point in having a phone and continued going to the post office, where the counter clerk dialed the number they were calling and sent them to a booth.

People were never bored. They wanted the full benefit of everything.

In the popular booklet *Thoughts for 1985*, the future seemed bright. Heavy and dirty work would be performed by robots, and everyone would have access to culture and knowledge. We weren't sure how, but the first heart transplant in faraway South Africa seemed to bring us one step closer to the eradication of death.

The profusion of things concealed the scarcity of ideas and the erosion of beliefs.

Young teachers used the *Lagarde et Michard* from their own school days, gave out stars for good performance, and assigned term papers. They joined unions, which asserted in every newsletter, 'We have the Power!' Rivette's *The Nun* was banned, while erotica could be bought by mail order from the publisher Terrain Vague. Sartre and de Beauvoir refused to appear on television (but nobody cared). Worn-out values and languages lingered on. Later, remembering the nice growly voice of Nounours the bear saying *Night-night, children*, we would feel that de Gaulle himself had tucked us into bed each night.

Waves of migration swept through society from every direction. Country people trundled down from mountains and up from valleys. Students were expelled from the city centre to campuses in the hills. In Nanterre, they shared the same mud as new arrivals from the shantytowns. OS households and repatriated Algerians left one-storey houses with outdoor latrines to be thrown together in housing developments, divided into units marked with an *F* and a number. But communal living was not what people wanted; they were after central heating, pale-coloured walls, and indoor bathrooms.

The thing most forbidden, the one we'd never believed possible, the contraceptive pill became legal. We didn't dare ask the doctor for a prescription and the doctor didn't offer, especially if one wasn't married – that would be indecent. We strongly sensed that with the pill, life

would never be the same again. We'd be so free in our bodies it was frightening. Free as a man.

Young people all over the world were making themselves heard with violence. In the Vietnam War they saw grounds for revolt and in Mao's Hundred Flowers reasons to dream. There was an awakening of pure joy, expressed by the Beatles. Just listening to them, you wanted to be happy. With Antoine, Nino Ferrer, and Dutronc, zaniness was gaining popularity. Full-fledged adults pretended to ignore it, listening instead to the *Tirlipot* game show on RTL, Maurice Biraud on Europe 1, and Saint-Granier's minute of common sense. They compared the beauty of the television newswomen and discussed whether Mireille Mathieu or Georgette Lemaire would be the new Piaf. The troubles in Algeria had just ended. They were sick and tired of war, and watched uneasily as Israeli tanks mowed down Nasser's soldiers, confused by the return of a question they had thought settled, and by the transformation of victims into victors.

Because summers had started to resemble each other, and caring only for oneself was more and more of a drag; because the self-realization imperative was taking us nowhere fast, by dint of solitude and discussions in the same cafés; because youth had come to feel like a vague and cheerless time whose end we could not see; and because we'd noted the social superiority of couples over singles – we fell in love more purposefully and, aided by a moment's lack of attention to the Ogino calendar, found ourselves married and soon to be parents. The meeting

of an egg and a sperm hastened the unfolding of individual histories. People finished school by taking jobs as teaching assistants, part-time pollsters, and private tutors. A term in Algeria or Sub-Saharan Africa to do community work on the state's behalf was tempting as an adventure and a way of fixing a final deadline before one settled down.

Young couples with steady jobs opened bank accounts and took out Cofremca loans to acquire fridges with freezer compartments, dual-fuel ranges, etc. They were surprised to discover that by the grace of marriage, they were poor in the face of all they lacked, the cost of which they'd never guessed, nor the necessity, which now went without saying. Overnight they became adults to whom parents could finally, without fear of rebuke, impart their knowledge of practicalities: saving money, caring for children, washing floors. How proud and peculiar one felt to be called 'Madame' with a name not one's own. Sustenance, the twice-daily feeding circuit, became an abiding concern. Diligently we began to patronize places we'd never really gone before, the Casino supermarket, the grocery section of Prisunic, and the Nouvelles Galeries. The vague desire for the carefree kind of life we'd had before – to go to a film or out with friends at night – dwindled with the arrival of the baby. As we sat in the dark cinema, watching Agnès Varda's *Happiness*, he was always on our mind, so little and so alone in his cradle, and we rushed to him the moment we got in, relieved to see him breathing, peacefully asleep with his small fists closed. So we bought a television, thus completing the process of social integration. On Sunday afternoons, we watched *The Aeronauts* and *Bewitched*. Space shrank, time took on a regular rhythm, carved up

by work schedules, the day nursery, bath time, *The Magic Roundabout*, and Saturday shopping. We discovered the joys of order. Our melancholy at seeing a personal project fade into the distance – painting, writing, or making music – was compensated by the satisfactions of contributing to the family project.

With a swiftness that astounded us, we were forming tiny cells, impermeable and sedentary. Young couples and new parents were invited to each other's homes. Unmarried people, oblivious to monthly bills, tiny Gerber jars, and Dr Spock, were viewed as an immature species whose freedom of movement vaguely offended.

We never thought to assess our experience in the light of world events or politicians' speeches, but did allow ourselves the pleasure of voting against de Gaulle. Instead we chose a dashing candidate whose name somehow plunged us back into the years of French Algeria, François Mitterrand. In the humdrum routine of personal existence, History did not matter. We were simply happy or unhappy, depending on the day.

The more immersed we were in work and family, said to be reality, the greater was our sense of unreality.

On sunny afternoons, from their benches in the park, young women exchanged views on nappies and children's nutrition, while keeping an eye on the sandbox. The gossip and secrets of adolescence, when girls interminably walked each other home, seemed very far in the past. That life from before (three years ago at most) seemed unbelievable. They regretted not having taken greater advantage of it. They had entered the Land of Worry over food, laundry, and childhood diseases. They had never imagined resembling their mothers

but now were picking up where they had left off. They possessed greater levity, offhandedness fostered by *The Second Sex* and the *Moulinex Liberates Woman* advert, but unlike their mothers, they denied the value of things they nonetheless felt obliged to do without knowing why.

With the characteristic anxiety and fervour of young married couples, we invited the in-laws for lunch, to show them how nicely settled we were (and with so much more taste than our siblings). After we'd had them admire the venetian blinds, touch the velvet chesterfield, experience the power of the hi-fi speakers, and brought out the wedding dishes (though a few glasses were missing), when everyone had found a place at the table and commented on the proper way to eat *fondue bourguignonne*, made from a recipe we'd found in *Elle*, the petit-bourgeois conversation began, about work, holidays, cars, the San-Antonio thrillers, the length of Antoine's hair, the ugliness of Alice Sapritch, the songs of Dutronc. There was no escaping the discussion of whether or not it was more cost-effective for married women to work outside the home. We made fun of de Gaulle, *Frenchman, I understand you! Vive le Québec libre!* (as if being forced into a runoff by Mitterrand had unleashed the irreverence and revealed the senility of the man *Le Canard Enchaîné* no longer referred to as anything but 'Charles le Ballotté'[12]). We praised the intelligence and integrity of Mendès France and speculated on the futures of Giscard d'Estaing, Defferre, and Rocard. The table buzzed with peacefully disparate and mocking remarks, about the

12. 'Charles le Run-offed', more or less.

barbouzes[13], Mauriac and his stifled cluck of a laugh, the tics of Malraux (to think we'd once imagined him as the revolutionary Chen, whereas now just seeing him in his trenchcoat at official ceremonies could make anyone stop believing in literature!).

In the mouths of the middle-aged, allusions to the war shrank down to personal anecdotes, full of misplaced vanity, which to those under thirty sounded like drivel. We felt that's what commemorative speeches and wreaths were for. Names from the Fourth Republic, Bidault, Pinay, brought nothing to our minds except amazement at the loathing they still aroused ('that bastard Guy Mollet'), from which we deduced that they'd played a role of some importance. As for Algeria, now transformed into mission territory, to the financial advantage of young teachers, the page had turned.

Contraception was too alarming a subject to broach at family meals, and abortion a word that could not be spoken.

We changed plates for dessert, quite mortified that our *fondue bourguignonne* had not been greeted with the expected congratulations, but with curiosity and comments that were disappointing at best – considering the trouble we'd gone to with the sauces – and even a touch condescending. Coffee was served, the table cleared, and a game of bridge set up. The whisky raised the volume of the father-in-law's voice and thickened his tongue. How was it possible that people still said *Ten thousand English*

13. (Slang, pejorative.) Generally, a secret agent, a spook; here meaning anti-OAS agencies who used methods that could not officially be used by the police or the army.

jumped into the Thames for not having trumped.[14] We sat amidst the new family, saw the faces glowing with contentment, heard the baby crooning, wanting up from his crib, and a sense of impermanence flickered through us. We were amazed to be where we were and to have all that we'd desired, a man, a child, an apartment.

In the photo, taken indoors, a close-up in black and white, a young woman and a little boy sit side-by-side on a single bed, fitted out with cushions to make a sofa. Behind them is a window with sheer curtains. An African artefact hangs on the wall. The woman wears an outfit in pale jersey, a twin set and a skirt just above the knee. Her hair, parted in dark asymmetrical bands, accentuates the full oval of the face. Her cheekbones are lifted in a big smile. Neither her hairstyle nor her outfit corresponds to the images one later saw of 1966 or 1967. Only the short skirt is consistent with the fashion launched by Mary Quant. The woman holds the child by the shoulder. He is bright-eyed, intelligent-looking, and wears a turtleneck with pyjama trousers. He is talking and his mouth is open, revealing small teeth. On the back is written *Rue Loverchy, Winter '67.* So the photographer, invisible here, is the student, the flighty kid who in less than four years became a husband, father, and senior administrator in a city in the mountains. It is definitely a Sunday photo, for that is the only day they can be together, and as lunch simmers

14. Refers to an obscure anecdote related to the game of bridge, and told as a cautionary tale to novice players

fragrantly on the stove, and the babbling child assembles Lego blocks, and the toilet flusher is repaired while Bach's *Musical Offering* plays in the background, they build their common store of memory, consolidate their sense, all in all, of being happy. The photo plays a role in this construction, anchoring their 'little family' in the long term. It acts as a pledge of permanence for the child's grandparents, who will receive a copy.

At this precise moment of the winter of 1967–68, she is probably not thinking of anything, absorbed in her enjoyment of their self-contained unit of three, which a telephone call or the doorbell would disrupt, and her temporary discharge from tasks whose main object is the maintenance of the unit, shopping lists, laundry counts, what are you making for dinner tonight – an incessant looking-ahead to the immediate future, which complicates the exterior dimension of her duties, her teaching job. In family moments she *feels* rather than thinks.

The thoughts she considers real come to her when she is alone or taking the child for a walk in the pushchair. For her, real thoughts do not concern people's ways of speaking and dressing, the height of pavements for the pram, the ban on Jean Genet's *The Screens*, or the war in Vietnam. They are questions about herself, being and having, existence. Real thoughts plumb the depths of transient sensations, impossible to communicate. These are the things her book would be made of, if she had the time to write, but she no longer even has time to read. In her diary, which she rarely opens, as if it posed a threat to the family unit and she were no longer entitled to an inner life, she writes, 'I have no ideas at all. I don't try to explain my life anymore' and 'I'm a petite bourgeoise who has arrived'. She feels she has deviated from her former goals, as if her only progress in life were of the

material kind. 'I'm afraid of settling into this quiet and comfortable life, and afraid to have lived without being aware of it'. Just as she makes this observation, she knows she isn't ready to give up the things this diary never includes, the living-together, the shared intimacy, the apartment to which she eagerly returns after class, the sleeping side-by-side, the sizzle of the electric razor in the morning, the tale of *The Three Little Pigs* at night, the repetition she believes she hates, which ties her down – all the things whose lack she felt when she left for three days to take the CAPES[15], and which, when she imagines their accidental loss, make her heart grow heavy.

She no longer imagines herself lying on the beach or as a writer publishing her first book. The future is laid out in precise material terms: a better job, promotions and acquisitions, the start of *maternelle* for the child. These are not dreams but concrete plans. She often revisits images of herself single, in the streets of cities where she has walked and in the rooms she has occupied – in a young ladies' hostel in Rouen, in Finchley as an au pair, or a *penzione* on via Servio Tullio, on holiday in Rome. These are her *selves*, it seems to her, who continue to exist in these places. In other words, past and future are reversed. The object of desire is not the future but the past; she desires to be back in the room in Rome, in the summer of 1963. In her journal she writes: 'Out of extreme narcissism, I want to see my past set down on paper and in that way, be as I am not' and 'There's a certain image of women that torments me. Maybe

15. *Certificat d'aptitude au professeur de l'enseignement du second degré*, the secondary teachers' training certificate. After obtaining their *licence* (equivalent of a BA), applicants take a one-year course, followed by a probationary year when they work as teachers in training.

orient myself in that direction'. In a Dorothea Tanning painting she saw in a show three years before in Paris, a bare-chested woman stands before a row of doors that stand ajar. The title was *Birthday*. She thinks this painting represents her life and that she is inside it, as she was once inside *Gone with the Wind*, *Jane Eyre*, and later *Nausea*. With every book she reads, *To the Lighthouse*, Rezvani's *Les Années-lumière*, she wonders if she could write her life in that way too.

She is visited by fleeting images of her parents in the small Normandy town, her mother taking off her work coat to go to evening prayer, her father coming up from the garden with a spade over his shoulder, a slow-moving world that continues to exist, more surreal than a film and far removed from the world in which she lives, modern and cultivated, forward-moving – towards what is difficult to say.

Between what happens in the world and what happens to her, there is no point of convergence. They are two parallel series: one abstract, all information no sooner received than forgotten, the other all static shots.

At every moment in time, next to the things it seems natural to do and say, and next to the ones we're told to think – no less by books or ads in the Métro than by funny stories – are other things that society hushes up without knowing it is doing so. Thus it condemns to lonely suffering all the people who feel but cannot name these things. Then the silence breaks, little by little, or suddenly one day, and words burst forth, recognized at last, while underneath other silences start to form.

Later, journalists and historians would love to recall the words of Peter Viansson-Ponté in *Le Monde* a few months before May '68: *France is bored!* It would be easy to find bleak photos of oneself, full of undatable gloom, of Sundays in front of the TV watching Anne-Marie Peysson, and one would be sure things had been that way for everyone – frozen, uniformly grey. And television, with its fixed iconography and minimal cast of actors, would institute a *ne varietur* version of events, the unalterable impression that all of us had been eighteen to twenty-five that year and hurled cobblestones at the riot police, handkerchiefs pressed to our mouths. Bombarded by the recurrent camera images, we suppressed those of our own May '68, neither momentous – the deserted Place de la Gare on a Sunday, no passengers, no newspapers in the kiosks – nor glorious – one day when we were afraid of lacking money, petrol, and especially food, rushing to the bank to withdraw cash and filling a cart to overflowing at Carrefour, from an inherited memory of hunger.

It was a spring like any other, sleet in April, Easter late. We'd followed the Winter Olympics with Jean-Claude Killy, read *Elise, or The Real Life*, proudly changed the R8 for a Fiat sedan, started *Candide* with the *première* students and paid only vague attention to the unrest at Paris universities, reported on the radio. As usual, we thought, the student rebellion would be quelled by the authorities. But the Sorbonne closed, the written exams for the CAPES were cancelled, and students clashed with police. One night, we heard breathless voices on Europe 1. There were barricades in the Latin Quarter,

as in Algiers ten years earlier, Molotov cocktails and wounded. Now we were aware that something was happening and did not feel like returning to life as usual the next day. We met by chance and talked, indecisive, and then came together. We stopped working, for no specific reason and with no demands to make, but simply because we'd caught the bug, and when the unexpected suddenly occurs, there is nothing to do but wait. What would happen the next day we didn't know, or try to find out. It was another time.

We who had never really come to terms with working and did not really want the things we bought, saw ourselves in the students, only a few years younger, who threw cobblestones at the riot police. On our behalf, they hurled years of censure and repression back at the State, the violent suppression of the demonstrations against the war in Algeria, the racist attacks, the banning of *The Nun*, and the unmarked black Citroën DS's of the police. They avenged us for our fettered adolescence, the respectful hush of lecture halls, the shame we felt at sneaking boys into our residence rooms. Our allegiance to the blazing nights of Paris was rooted in our crushed desires, the degradations of submission. We regretted we had not seen all this before, but felt lucky it was happening at the start of our careers.

Suddenly, the 1936 we knew from family stories was real.

We saw and heard things we had never seen or heard in our lives, or even thought possible. Places such as universities, factories, and theatres, whose functions were determined by age-old rules and which admitted only specified populations, were now open to all. There, we talked, ate, slept, loved, did everything except the

thing for which the place had been intended. Institutional, sanctified spaces were a thing of the past. Professors and students, young and old, company executives and manual workers conversed. Miraculously, hierarchies and distances dissolved into words. We were through with carefully phrased remarks, refined and courteous language, measured tones and circumlocutions, the distance with which, we now realized, the people in power and their flunkies – one needed only watch Michel Droit – imposed their domination. Lively voices spoke with brutal frankness and cut each other off with no apology. Faces expressed anger, contempt, and pleasure. The freedom of attitudes and energy of bodies took one's breath away. If this was revolution, it started there, resplendent, in the expansion and release of bodies that settled themselves anywhere they wanted. When de Gaulle resurfaced – where had he been, we'd hoped he was gone for good – and spoke of *chienlit*[16] with a grimace of disgust, without knowing the meaning we saw the aristocratic disdain for revolt, which he reduced to a word conveying both excrement and copulation, a bestial squirming, the instincts broken free.

We were unconcerned by the absence of an emergent labour leader. With their paternalistic air, the Parti Communiste and union leaders continued to determine needs and desires. They rushed to negotiate with the government, which showed virtually no sign of life, as if there were nothing better to be sought than increased

16. A French word dating back to Rabelais, generally meaning 'carnival' or 'chaos'. In de Gaulle's speech of 1968, he pronounced the word as 'chie-en-lit', which resulted in a scatological pun. 'La réforme oui, la chie-en-lit non', literally, 'Reform – yes, shit the bed – no'.

purchasing power and a lower retirement age. At the close of the Grenelle Agreement, as we listened to them pompously outline, in words we'd forgotten three weeks earlier, the 'measures' to which the state had 'consented', we felt a chill come over us. We began to hope again when the working-class 'base' rejected the abdication of Grenelle and Mendès France at Charléty Stadium. The dissolution of the Assembly and the announcement of elections plunged us into doubt again. When we saw the sombre crowd unfurl down the Champs-Élysées with Debré and Malraux, whose inspired and ravaged features no longer saved him from servility, arm-in-arm with the others in a false and cheerless brotherhood, we knew the end had come. There were two worlds and we had to choose between them; it was a fact that could no longer be ignored. Elections were not a choice but simply restored the notables to their former positions. In any case, 50 per cent of the young were not yet twenty-one and couldn't vote. The General Confederation of Labour and the Parti Communiste ordered people back to the lycées and factories. Their spokesmen with their slow, gravelly faux-peasant diction had well and truly shafted us. They were earning the reputation of 'objective allies of the State' and Stalinist traitors, an image borne for years to come by union representatives in the workplace, the target of all attacks.

Exams were resumed, trains ran, gasoline flowed anew. People could again go on holiday. In early July, provincial visitors crossing Paris by bus between train stations felt the bump of cobbles, put back in place as if nothing had happened. On their return a few weeks later, they crossed a smooth tarred surface that no longer bumped beneath the wheels, and they wondered where

all the cobblestones had gone. It seemed that more had happened in two months than in the ten previous years, but not for us. We hadn't had time to do anything. At some point we had missed something, but we didn't know exactly when – or perhaps we'd just let it happen.

Everyone had started to believe in a violent future. It was a matter of months, a year at most. Things would heat up in the autumn, and the spring too, people said (until we eventually stopped thinking about it, and later, coming across an old pair of jeans, we thought, 'These did May '68'). Some hoped and worked towards 'May Redux' and a new society. Others obsessively feared and resisted it, threw Gabrielle Russier in prison, sniffed out 'Leftists' in all young men with long hair, applauded the new anti-demonstration law, and condemned everything. In the workplace, people fell into two categories, the strikers and non-strikers of May, ostracized in equal measure. 'May '68' became a way of ranking individuals. When we met someone new, we wondered which side they'd been on, though no matter what the camp, the violence had been the same, and we forgave ourselves nothing.

We who had remained with the Parti Socialiste Unifié to change society now discovered the Maoists and Trotskyists, a vast quantity of ideas and concepts surfacing all at once. Movements, books, and magazines popped up everywhere, along with philosophers, critics, and sociologists: Bourdieu, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Chomsky, Baudrillard, Wilhelm Reich, Ivan Illich, *Tel Quel*, structural analysis, narratology, ecology. From Bourdieu's *Inheritors* to the little Swedish book on sexual positions, everything moved towards a new

intelligence and the transformation of the world. Awash in languages hitherto unseen, we didn't know where to start and wondered how we'd remained unaware of it all until now. In a month we made up for years of lost time. It moved and reassured us to see de Beauvoir, in her turban, and Sartre again, older but as pugnacious as ever, though they had nothing new to teach us. André Breton, unfortunately, had died two years too soon.

Now, everything once considered normal had become the object of scrutiny. Family, education, prison, work, holidays, madness, advertising, every aspect of reality was questioned, including the one elaborating the critique, who was ordered to probe his own origins, *where are you speaking from, comrade?* Society had ceased to function naïvely. Buying a car, marking a paper, and giving birth all had meaning.

We had to know everything about the planet, the oceans, the crime of Bruay-en-Artois. We had a stake in every struggle, Allende's Chile, Cuba, Vietnam, Czechoslovakia. We evaluated systems and looked for models in an all-encompassing political reading of the world. The key word was 'liberation'.

Individuals, whether or not they were intellectuals, were entitled to speak and be heard. They needed only represent a group, a condition, an injustice. The fact of having experienced something as a woman, homosexual, class defector, prisoner, farmer, or miner gave one permission to speak in the first person. To think of oneself in collective terms brought a certain exaltation. People spontaneously took the floor, prostitutes and striking workers. Charles Piaget, the factory worker from Lip, was better known than the psychologist of

the same name whom our teachers had harped on about in Philosophy class [never suspecting that one day, the name Piaget would mean nothing to us but a luxury jeweller advertised in magazines at the hairdresser's].

Boys and girls were together everywhere now. Prize-giving, compositions, and school pinafores were things of the past, numerical scores replaced with letters from A to E. Students kissed and smoked in the schoolyard, declared essay topics *retarded* or *cool!*

We experimented with structural grammar, semantic fields, isotopes, and Freinet's Modern School Movement. We abandoned Corneille and Boileau for Boris Vian, Ionesco, the songs of Boby Lapointe and Colette Magny, *Pilote* magazine and comic books. We would make pupils write a novel or a diary, emboldened by the hostility of colleagues who in '68 had holed up in the staff room and those parents who decried us for teaching *Catcher in the Rye* and *Les petits-enfants du siècle*.

We emerged in an altered state from two-hour debates on drugs, pollution, or racism, and in our heart of hearts felt we'd taught the students nothing. Were we not *pedalling next to the bicycle*? And for that matter, was school of any use at all? No sooner had we addressed one question than another leapt into our heads.

In order to think, speak, write, work, exist in another way, we felt we had nothing to lose by trying everything.

1968 was the first year of the world.

On learning of the death of General de Gaulle one morning in November, at first we could not believe it – so we had really believed he was immortal! – and then

realized how little we'd thought about him over the past year and a half. His death marked the end of the time before May '68, years that were far behind us now.

Yet as the days went by, marked by the ringing of school bells and the voices of Albert Simon and Madame Soleil on Europe 1, *bavette* steak with fries on Saturdays, Kiri the Clown and Annik Beauchamps' *A Minute for Women* in the evenings, we perceived no evolution. Perhaps in order to feel it, one needed to stop for a moment, for example, to gaze at the tableau formed by the lycée students sitting on the ground, in the schoolyard, in the sun, after the death of the factory worker Pierre Overney, killed by a security guard at Renault. It was a moment whose distinct flavour was that of a March afternoon, or so we'd thought, but which became, when the time behind us had turned into history, an image of the first sit-in.

The shames of yesteryear no longer prevailed. People made fun of guilt, *we are all Judeo-cretins*, denounced *sexual frustration*; *uptight* was the ultimate insult. *Parents* magazine taught frigid women to stimulate themselves with their legs spread in front of a mirror. In a leaflet distributed in lycées, Dr Carpentier encouraged students to masturbate to fight boredom in class. Touching between adults and children was exonerated. All that had been forbidden, unspeakable, was now recommended. We got used to seeing genitals onscreen but held our breath to contain our emotion when Marlon Brando sodomized Maria Schneider. To improve our erotic skills we bought the little red Swedish book with photos of all the possible positions, and went to see *Anatomy of Love*. We considered having a threesome one day. But we could not bring ourselves to do what used to be considered

indecent exposure, walk naked in front of the children.

The discourse of pleasure reigned supreme. You had to feel pleasure while reading, writing, taking a bath, defecating. It was the alpha and the omega of human activities.

We reflected on our lives as women. We realized that we'd missed our share of freedom – sexual, creative, or any other kind enjoyed by men. We were as shattered by the suicide of Gabrielle Russier as by that of a long-lost sister, and were enraged by the guile of Pompidou, who quoted a verse by Éluard that nobody understood to avoid saying what he really thought of the case. The Women's Liberation Movement had arrived in the provinces. *Le Torchon Brûle* was on the newsstands. We read *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millett, *Stifled Creation* by Suzanne Hörer and Jeanne Socquet with the mingled excitement and powerlessness one feels on discovering a truth about oneself in a book. Awakened from conjugal torpor, we sat on the ground beneath a poster that read *A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle* and went back over our lives. We felt capable of cutting ourselves loose from husband and kids, and writing crudely. Once we were home again, our determination faded. Guilt welled up. We could no longer see how to liberate ourselves, how to go about it, or why we should. We convinced ourselves that our man was neither a phallocrat nor a macho. We were torn between discourses, between those that advocated equal rights for the sexes and attacked patriarchy, and those that promoted everything feminine: periods, breast-feeding, and the making of leek soup. But for the first time, we envisaged our lives as a march towards freedom, which changed a great many things. A feeling

common to women was on its way out, that of natural inferiority.

We would not remember the day or the month, only that it was spring and that we had read in *Le Nouvel Observateur* the names of 343 women who stated they'd had illegal abortions – so many, yet we'd been so alone with the probe and the spurting blood. Even if it was frowned upon, we added our voice to the others that called for free access to medical abortion and the abolishment of the law of 1920. We reproduced leaflets on the lycée photocopier and slipped them into mailboxes after dark. We went to see *Histoires d'A*, escorted pregnant women to a private apartment where activist doctors performed free abortions by vacuum aspiration. A pressure cooker to disinfect the equipment and a bicycle pump with reversed valve was all it took. Dr Karman had made it simpler and safer to perform the work of the backstreet abortionists – *les faiseuses d'anges*, 'angel-makers'. We provided addresses in London and Amsterdam, exhilarated to be working undercover, as if renewing our ties with the Resistance and the suitcase-carriers of the Algerian War. The lawyer Gisèle Halimi was radiant in the glare of flashbulbs on leaving the Bobigny trial after defending Djamila Boupacha. She too was the incarnation of this tradition, just as the supporters of *Let Them Live* and Professor Lejeune, who displayed foetuses on television to horrify people, represented Vichy. One Saturday afternoon thousands of us demonstrated impatiently with banners under a blazing sun. We raised our eyes to the cloudless sky of the Dauphiné and told ourselves it was up to us to stop thousands of years of blood-soaked deaths of women. So who could forget us?

Individuals made the revolution to measure, according to their age, occupation, social class, interests, and old feelings of guilt. People reluctantly obeyed the calls to party and enjoy themselves, to enlighten themselves, for one must not die stupid. Some smoked grass, lived in communes, established themselves as factory workers at Renault, went to Kathmandu, while others spent a week in Tabarka, read *Charlie Hebdo*, *Fluide Glacial*, *L'Écho des Savanes*, *Tankonalasanté*, *Métal Hurlant*, *La Gueule Ouverte*, stuck flower decals on their car doors, and in their rooms hung posters of Che and the little girl burned by napalm. They wore Mao suits or ponchos, sat on the floor with cushions, burned incense, went to see the Grand Magic Circus, *Last Tango in Paris*, and *Emmanuelle*, renovated a farmhouse in Ardèche, subscribed to *Fifty Million Consumers* because of the pesticides in butter, went braless, left *Lui* magazine lying on tables in plain view of the kids, and asked them to call them by their first names, like school chums.

They searched for models of existence in space and time, in the exotic or the peasantry, India or the Cévennes. There was an aspiration to purity.

Short of leaving everything, jobs and apartments, to live in the country (a plan constantly postponed but sure to be realized one day), those most hungry for re- generation spent holidays in remote villages in hostile landscapes. They disdained the beaches where you *tan stupid*, and the home provinces, flat and disfigured by industrialization. On the other hand, they credited with *authenticity* poor farmers in arid lands unchanged

for centuries. Those who wanted to make History admired nothing so much as its erasure through the return of seasons and immutability of gestures, and from these same farmers bought an old hut for a song.

Or they spent their holidays in an Eastern bloc country. In the grey streets with shattered pavements, among the state-run shops with their penurious no-name stock, wrapped in coarse grey paper, under naked bulbs dangling from the ceilings of apartments lit only at night, they felt they were back in the slow and graceless post-war world of consummate lack. It was a sweet and inexpressible feeling. Yet they would never have wanted to live there. They brought back embroidered blouses and raki. They wanted the world to always have countries devoid of progress to take them back in time this way.

In the early 1970s, on summer evenings when the air was heady with the aromas of dry earth, thyme, brochettes, and ratatouille (one couldn't forget the vegetarians), strangers gathered around a big farm table bought from a bric-a-brac trader for barely a thousand francs. The Parisians revamping the house next door, backpackers, hiking and silk-painting enthusiasts, couples with and without children, shaggy men, feral teenage girls, mature women in Indian dresses, reticent at first despite the familiar *tu* (used as a matter of course), struck up conversations on colour additives and hormones in food, sexology and body work, anti-gymnastics, the Mezières technique, the Rogers method, yoga, Leboyer's birth without violence, homeopathy and soya, autogestion, Lip, and René Dumont. They

wondered if it was preferable to send children to school or to school them at home, whether Ajax scouring powder was toxic, yoga and group therapy useful, a two-hour workday utopian, and if women should demand equality with men, or equality within difference. They reviewed the best ways to eat, be born, raise children, treat illness, teach, live in harmony with oneself and others, with nature, and how to escape society. How to *express oneself*, with pottery, weaving, guitar, jewellery, theatre, and writing. A vague and immense desire to *create* was in the air. Everyone claimed to be devoted to an artistic activity, or planned to be. All activities were equal, they agreed, and instead of painting or playing the flute, one could always create oneself through psychoanalysis.

All the children were put to bed in the same room and ordered for the sake of form 'not to turn the place into a pigsty'. They wreaked havoc with unbridled joy, while the adults drank the moonshine brought by the farmer next door – he'd been invited for the *apéro* only – and talk moved towards brooding sexual questions, were we straight or gay, the first orgasm, confessions. The feral girl declared 'I love to shit.' Together on that summer evening, these unrelated individuals, cut adrift from family meals and their loathsome rituals, had the exhilarating sense of opening to the world in all its diversity, as if they were teenagers again.

No one thought of bringing up the war, or Auschwitz and the camps, or the troubles in Algeria ('case closed'); only Hiroshima, and the nuclear future. Between centuries of peasant life, whose presence one sensed in the fragrant breeze of the *garrigue*, and that night in August 1973, nothing had changed.

Someone started playing the guitar, singing Maxime

Le Forestier's *Comme un arbre dans la ville*, the Quilapayún's *Duerme negrito*. The others listened, eyes lowered. They would bed down at random on cots in the former silkworm farm, unsure of whether to make love with the neighbour to the right or the one to the left, or with no-one at all. Before deciding, they were overcome with sleep, euphoric and reassured as to the value of the lifestyle they'd paraded for each other all evening, so far removed from that of the 'Neanderthals' crammed into the campsites down at Merlin-Plage.

Now society had a name, 'consumer society'. This was a certainty, an irrefutable fact whether we liked it or not, and there was no going back. An increase in the price of petrol briefly terrified us. Spending was in the air. There was a resolute appropriation of leisure goods: two-door fridges, gleaming R5s bought on impulse, a week at the Club Hôtel in Flaine, a studio in La Grande-Motte. Television sets were turned in for newer models. The world looked more appealing on the colour display, interiors more enviable. Gone was the chilly distance of black-and-white, that severe, almost tragic negative of daily life.

Advertising provided models for how to live, behave, and furnish the home. It was society's cultural educator. Kids requested fruit-flavoured Évian water ('*l'Évian fruité, c'est plus musclé*'[17]), Cadbury cookies, Nutella, a slot-load portable record player for listening to songs from the *Aristocats* and *La Bonne du curé*, remote-controlled cars and Barbie dolls. Parents hoped that all the things they

17. 'Fruit-flavoured Évian water makes you stronger.'

gave their kids would deter them from smoking hash when they were older. And we who were undeceived, who seriously examined the dangers of advertising with our students; we who assigned the topic 'Does the possession of material goods lead to happiness?', bought a stereo at the Fnac, a Grundig radio-cassette player, and a Bell & Howell Super-8 camera, with a sense of using modernity to intelligent ends. For us and by us, consumption was purified.

The ideals of May '68 were being transformed into objects and entertainment.

It was disconcerting to see ourselves for the first time on the pull-down screen in the living room. We walked, our lips moved, we silently laughed while the projector sizzled away in the background. We were amazed by ourselves, by our gestures and movements. It was a new sensation, perhaps similar to what people in the seventeenth century felt on seeing themselves in a mirror, or the great-great-grandparents on viewing their first photoportrait. We did not let on how greatly it disturbed us, and preferred to watch others on screen, relatives and friends, who more closely resembled what they already looked like to us. It was even worse to hear one's voice on the tape recorder. After that, one could never forget the voice that others heard. We became self-conscious, lost spontaneity.

In our clothing (bell-bottoms, tank tops, and clogs), our reading (*Le Nouvel Observateur*), our outrage (at nuclear energy and detergents in the sea), our acceptance (hippies), we felt we were *hip* to our times and therefore sure of being right in every circumstance. Our parents and the middle-aged were from another time, not least in

their very insistence on trying to understand the young. We took in their opinions and advice as pure information. And we would never grow old.

The film's first image is that of a door standing ajar (it is night). It closes and reopens as a little boy comes hurtling out. He stops short, undecided, blinking. He wears an orange jacket and a hat with earflaps. Then a smaller boy appears in a blue hooded anorak with white fur trim. The older child moves restlessly while the other stands frozen, transfixed, as if the film had stopped. A woman enters, wearing a long brown fitted coat, her face hidden by the hood. She carries two cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other. Grocery items protrude at the top. She pushes the door closed with her shoulder. Disappears from the frame, reappears without the boxes and removes her coat, which she hangs on a 'parrot' coatrack. She turns towards the camera with a quick smile, and then looks down, dazzled by the brightness of the magnesium lamp. She is verging on skinny, wears little make-up, brown Karting trousers – close-fitting, no fly – and a brown-and-yellow-striped jumper. Her light brown shoulder-length hair is pulled back with a barrette. There is something ascetic and sad, or disenchanted, in her expression. The smile comes too late to be spontaneous. Her gestures reflect an abruptness of manner and/or nervousness. The children have returned, and stand in front of her. None of the three knows what to do. They move their arms and legs in a group facing the camera, which they gaze at, their eyes

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now accustomed to the violent light. No one talks. One might almost say they're posing for a photo that will not stop being taken. The bigger boy raises his arm in a grotesque military salute, mouth in a grimace, eyes closed. The camera jumps to elements of the décor that display aesthetic and market value, reveal bourgeois taste: a chest, a hanging lamp made of opaline glass.

Her husband filmed these images when she was returning from buying groceries with the children, whom she'd collected after school. The label on the reel reads *Family Life '72–'73*. Only he does the filming.

According to the criteria of women's magazines, on the outside she belongs to a growing category of active women in their thirties who juggle work and motherhood, and wish to remain feminine and stylish. A list of the places she goes over the course of a day (the lycée, Carrefour supermarket, the butcher shop, dry cleaner's, etc.), her trips in the Austin Mini between the paediatrician, the older boy's judo club, the little one's pottery class, the post office, and a calculation of time allotted to each occupation – classes and corrections, making breakfast, choosing the children's clothes, laundry, lunch, grocery shopping except for the bread, which he brings home after work – reveals:

a seemingly unequal division between work inside and work outside the home, paid (two-thirds) and domestic, including child rearing (one-third)
a wide range of tasks
frequent visits to commercial establishments
an almost total absence of free time

She doesn't do these calculations – she derives a sort of pride from the quick accomplishment of things that require no invention or transformation – and in any case, they would fail to explain her new state of mind.

She experiences her job as continuous imperfection, a sham. She writes in her diary 'Being a teacher tears me apart.' Her energy and desire to learn and try new things is boundless. She remembers writing at twenty-two, 'If by twenty-five I haven't fulfilled my promise of writing a novel, I'll commit suicide.' Would she be happier with another kind of life? The question obsesses her. She wonders to what degree it is a product of May '68, which she feels she missed, having been – already – too settled at the time.

She has started to imagine herself outside of conjugal and family life.

Her student years are no longer an object of nostalgic desire. She sees them as a time of intellectual gentrification, of breaking with her origins. Her memory goes from romantic to critical. Scenes from her childhood often return, her mother shouting *later you'll spit in our faces*, boys wheeling around on Vespas after Mass, herself with the curly perm (as in the photo taken in the school garden), or with her homework spread out on the greasy oilcloth-covered table, where her father liked to 'rustle up a snack' (words return too, like a forgotten language), and the things she read (*Confidences*, romances by Delly), the songs of Mariano, memories of academic excellence and social inferiority (the part of the photos that cannot be seen), all the things she has buried as shameful and which are now worthy of retrieval, unfolding, in the light of intelligence. As her memory is gradually freed of humiliation, the future again becomes a field of action. Fighting for women's rights to abortion, against social injustice, and understanding how she has become the woman she is today, are all part of the same endeavour.

Among her memories of the years that have just gone by, she finds none she considers to be an image of happiness:

the winter of 1969–70, black and white because of the livid sky, and the abundant snow that clung to the pavements in grey patches until April; she hunted them down on purpose and smashed them with her boots to help destroy that endless winter, which she associates with the fire at the Saint-Laurent-du-Pont dance hall in the Isère, only partly consumed that year and burned to the ground the following winter

in the main square in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, Yves Montand playing *pétanque* in a pink shirt, with a bit of a potbelly, pacing around after every shot, pleased and smug, and eyeing the tourists herded behind barriers, at a safe distance; it was the summer that Gabrielle Russier was thrown in prison and killed herself on returning to her apartment

the thermal park of Saint-Honoré-les-Bains, the pool where the children sailed toy boats; the Hôtel du Parc, where she lived with them for three weeks, and later confused with the boarding-house in Robert Pinget's book *Someone*.

In the unbearable part of memory, the image of her father dying, of his corpse in the suit he'd worn only once, to her wedding, carried down from the bedroom in a plastic dustcover because the stairs were too narrow for a coffin.

Political events remain as details only: on TV, during the presidential campaign, the pairing of Mendès France and Defferre, an appalling spectacle, and she'd thought 'But why didn't Mendès France run for election alone';

Alain Poher scratching his nose during his last speech before the second round, and her feeling that because of that gesture, for everyone to see, he'd be defeated by Pompidou.

She does not feel any particular age, though certainly feels a young woman's arrogance vis-à-vis older women, a condescension towards the post-menopausal. It is unlikely she will ever be one of them herself. She is unperturbed when someone predicts that she will die at fifty-two. It seems to her an acceptable age at which to die.

There were rumours of agitation; things were going to heat up the following spring and in the autumn too. But they never did.

There were committees of lycée students, autonomists, environmentalists, anti-nuclear activists, conscientious objectors, feminists, gays, all the causes blazed but never merged. Maybe there were too many convulsions in the rest of the world, from Czechoslovakia and the interminable Vietnam to the massacre at the Munich Olympics, and one junta after another in Greece. The authorities and Marcellin quietly repressed 'Leftist activity'. Pompidou, whom we'd thought only had haemorrhoids, suddenly died. Union posters in the staff room again announced that the strike of such-and-such a day to protest the 'deterioration of our working conditions' would 'force the state to retreat'. The way we imagined the future was limited to marking out the holidays in our diaries once the school year started.

Reading *Charlie Hebdo* and *Libération* sustained our

belief in belonging to a community of revolutionary *jouissance* and working, in spite of everything, towards a new May '68.

The 'Gulag' brought to light by Solzhenitsyn, and hailed as a great revelation, spawned confusion and tarnished the revolutionary horizon. All over the city, a fellow with an atrocious smile looked out of a poster into the eyes of passersby and said *Your money interests me*. In the end we left things up to the Union of the Left and its joint programme, which, after all, we'd never seen until now. Between 11 September 1973, when we marched in the anti-Pinochet demonstrations after the assassination of Allende, while the Right rejoiced in the end of 'the unfortunate Chilean business', and the spring of 1974, when we watched the televised debate between Mitterrand and Giscard d'Estaing, presented as a great event, we'd ceased to believe there would ever be another May '68. In the following springs, because of balmy rain in March or April, emerging one evening from a parent-student-teacher meeting, we'd have the sense that something could happen, and just as soon feel that it was just an illusion. Nothing happened in the spring anymore, either in Paris or in Prague.

Under Giscard we would live in an 'advanced liberal society'. Nothing was political or social anymore. It was simply modern or not. Everything had to do with modernity. People confused 'liberal' with 'free', and believed that a society so named would be the one to grant them the greatest possible number of rights and objects.

We were not especially bored. Even we, who had turned off the TV on election night when Giscard uttered his 'I send my cordial congratulations to my unlucky competitor,' like so many farts from a mouth

tightly pursed as a hen's rear end, were shaken by the new voting age of eighteen, divorce by mutual consent, and debate on the abortion law. We nearly wept with rage to see Simone Veil defend herself alone in the Assemblée against frenzied men of her own camp, and placed her in our personal Pantheon, next to the other Simone, de Beauvoir, though were distressed by her first appearance on television, in an interview, sporting a turban and scarlet fingernails, fortune-teller style (it was too late, she shouldn't have done it), and ceased to be annoyed when students confused Veil with a woman philosopher we occasionally quoted in class. But we broke for good with the elegant president when he refused to pardon Ranucci, sentenced to death at the height of a summer without a drop of rain – a scorcher, the first in a long time.

Lightness, nods, and winks were in, moral indignation out. We amused ourselves reading the film billboards for *Suck Divas* and *Little Wet Panties*, and never missed a chance to see Jean-Louis Bory in the role of token 'queen'. It seemed inconceivable that *The Nun* had once been banned. Still, it was hard to admit how shaken we were by the scene in *Going Places* when a woman's breast is suckled by Patrick Dewaere instead of her baby.

We exchanged the words of current morality for others that measured actions, behaviours, and feelings in terms of pleasure, 'frustration' and 'gratification'. The new way of being was 'laid-back', and feeling good about oneself, a mixture of self-assurance and indifference to others.