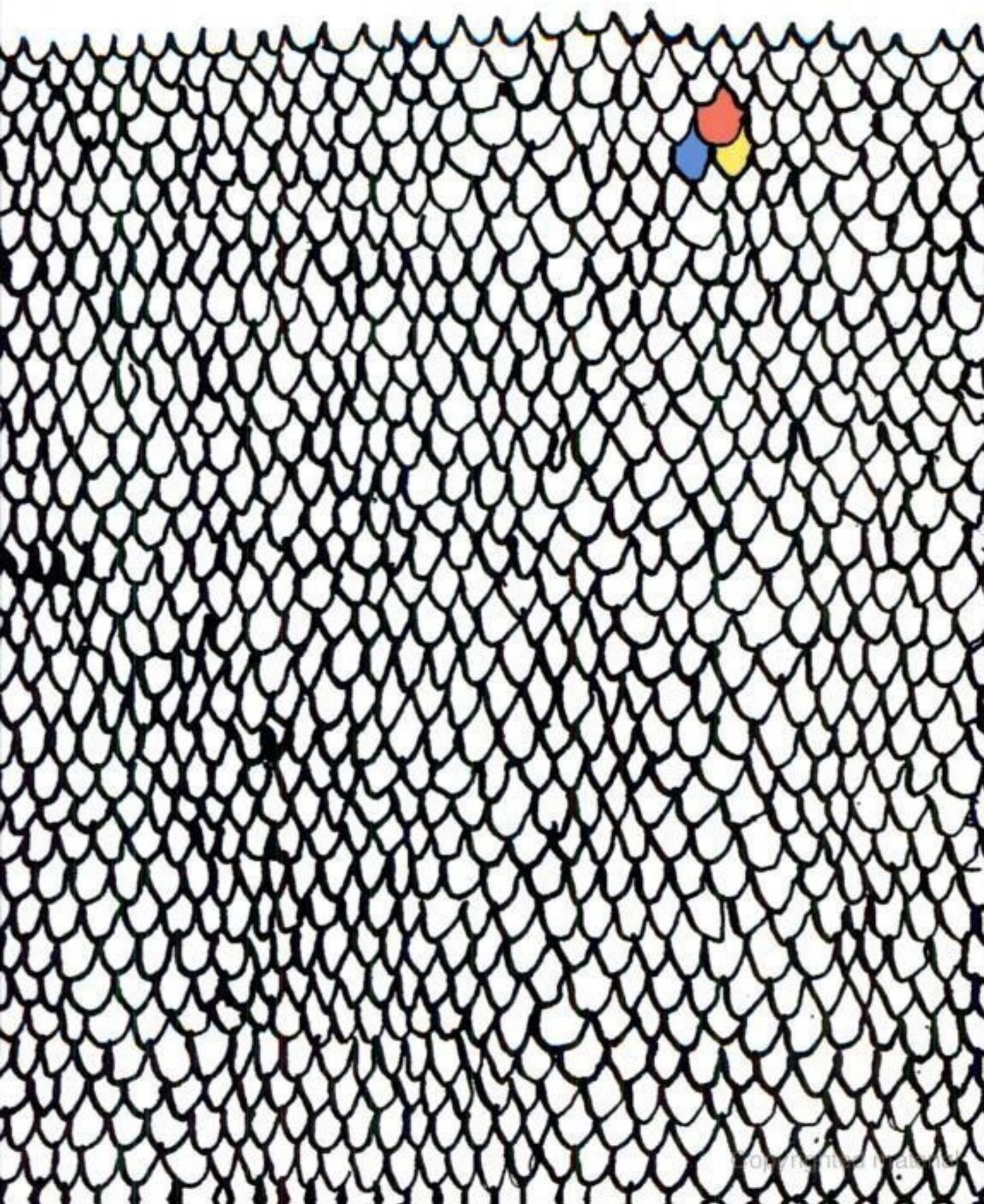


The Bathroom

Jean-Philippe TOUSSAINT



THE BATHROOM

JEAN-PHILIPPE TOUSSAINT

Translated by Nancy Amphoux and Paul De Angelis

A Dutton Obelisk Paperback

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*The square of the hypotenuse is equal to
the sum of the squares of the other two sides.*

—PYTHAGORAS

I

PARIS

1. When I began to spend my afternoons in the bathroom I had no intention of moving into it; no, I would pass some pleasant hours there, meditating in the bathtub, sometimes dressed, other times naked. Edmondsson, who liked to be there with me, said it made me calmer: occasionally I would even say something funny, we would laugh. I would wave my arms as I spoke, explaining that the most practical bathtubs were those with parallel sides, a sloping back, and a straight front, which relieves the user of the need for a footrest.

2. Edmondsson thought there was something desiccating in my refusal to leave the bathroom, but this didn't stop her from making life easier for me, providing for the needs of the household by working part-time in an art gallery.

3. Around me were cupboards, towel racks, a bidet. The washbasin was white; a narrow shelf projected above it, and on the shelf lay toothbrushes and razors. The wall facing me, studded with lumps, showed cracks, and in places cavities pitted the lifeless paint. One crack seemed to be gaining ground. I spent hours staring at its extremities, vainly trying to surprise it in action. Sometimes I made other experiments. I would scrutinize the surface of my face in a pocket mirror and, at the same time, the movements of the hands on my watch. But my face let nothing show. Ever.

4. One morning I tore down the clothesline. I emptied all the cupboards and took everything off the shelves. After piling all the toilet articles into one large refuse bag, I began moving part of my library. When Edmondsson came home I greeted her book in hand, lying with my feet crossed up on the faucet.

5. Edmondsson finally alerted my parents.

6. Mom brought me pastries. Sitting on the bidet with the open box wedged between her legs, she arranged the pastries in a soup plate. I thought she seemed ill at ease, she'd been avoiding my eyes ever since she came in. She raised her head with a weary sadness, made as if to say something but didn't, picked out the éclair, and bit into it.

You need some distraction, she told me, sports, I don't know. She wiped the corners of her mouth with her glove. There's something suspicious about the need to be diverted, I replied. When I added, almost smiling, that there was nothing I feared less than diversions, she saw there was no use arguing with me and, mechanically, held out a napoleon.

7. Twice a week I would listen to the radio broadcast of the day's play for the French soccer championship. The program lasted two hours. From a studio in Paris the announcer would orchestrate the voices of the reporters covering the matches in the different stadiums. Believing that soccer gains in the imagining, I never missed these dates. Lulled by warm human voices, I would listen to their reports with the lights off, sometimes with my eyes closed.

8. A friend of my parents was passing through Paris and came to see me. From him I learned it was raining. Stretching out an arm toward the washbasin, I suggested he take a towel. Best the yellow, the other one was dirty. He dried his hair carefully and at length. I didn't know what he wanted from me. When the silence had begun to seem permanent, he told me the latest about his professional activities, explaining that the difficulties he had to contend with were insurmountable since they were linked to incompatibilities of temperament among persons at the same hierarchical level. Fiddling nervously with my towel, he strode up and down alongside the bathtub and, fired by his words, became more and more intransigent. He began to threaten and vociferate. In the end he accused Lacour of irresponsibility. I am trying to do the impossible, he said, the impossible! And nobody gives a damn.

9. I dressed very simply: tan cotton trousers, a blue shirt, and a solid tie. The fabric fit my body so becomingly that, fully dressed, I looked powerfully, elegantly muscular. I lay down, relaxed, eyes shut. I thought about a White Lady—the dessert—a scoop of vanilla ice cream with a coat of scalding chocolate poured over. I'd been thinking about it for some weeks. From a scientific point of view (I'm not a food enthusiast), I saw this combination as a glimpse of perfection. A Mondrian. Unctuous chocolate on iced vanilla, hot and cold, substance and fluidity. Imbalance and rigor, exactitude. Chicken, despite my deep affection for it, cannot compare. No. And I was just about to fall asleep when Edmondsson came into the bathroom, spun around, and held out two letters. One of them was from the Austrian embassy. I opened it with a comb. Edmondsson, who was reading over my shoulder, pointed to my name on the invitation. Knowing neither Austrians nor diplomats, I said it was probably a mistake.

10. Seated on the edge of the bathtub, I was explaining to Edmondsson that perhaps it was not very healthy, at age twenty-seven going on twenty-nine, to live more or less shut up in a bathtub. I ought to take some risk, I said, looking down and stroking the

enamel of the bathtub, the risk of compromising the quietude of my abstract life for... I did not finish my sentence.

11. The next day I left the bathroom.

12. Kabrowinski. First name? I asked. Vitold. He was a white-haired man in a gray suit, sitting in my kitchen with a cigarette holder in his hand. A younger man stood behind him. Kabrowinski leaped up and offered me his chair. He had supposed he was alone in the house; he was so sorry, he hoped I would forgive him. To justify his being in my apartment he hurriedly explained that Edmondsson had asked him to repaint the kitchen. I knew about it. The art gallery where Edmondsson worked was showing a group of Polish artists. Edmondsson had explained that, since they were broke, we could use the situation and get them to repaint the kitchen for low pay.

13. I had spent a quiet day, troubled in my movements by the two Poles, who, patiently awaiting the paint that Edmondsson had forgotten to buy for them, never left the kitchen. From time to time Kabrowinski would knock on my door and, sticking his head through the crack, ask me questions about which, I cordially replied, I hadn't the slightest idea. For the last few minutes I had heard nothing more. Sitting on my bed with a pillow at my back, I was reading. The front door slammed, I raised my head. A moment later Edmondsson appeared, her features radiant. She wanted to make love.

14. Now.

15. Make love now? I shut my book composedly, leaving a finger inside to keep my place. Edmondsson was jumping up and down, laughing. She started to unbutton her blouse. From behind the door, Kabrowinski, in a serious voice, said he'd been waiting since morning for the paint; it was a wasted, senseless day, he said. Still laughing, Edmondsson opened the door and, as a matter of course, invited them to share our evening meal.

16. Edmondsson burned her lips testing the pasta. Sitting on a kitchen chair, Kabrowinski sucked thoughtfully on the end of his cigarette holder, his head falling loosely forward to express deep reflection. Ever since he'd learned why Edmondsson hadn't bought the paint (the hardware stores were closed), he'd been lamenting the fact that it was Monday. At the same time, he tried to find out if he was going to be paid for the day anyway. Edmondsson was evasive. She admitted she wouldn't have bought the paint today in any event, because she hadn't finished making up her mind about the color. She was hesitating between beige, which she was afraid would make

the room look dark, and white, which always showed the dirt. Kabrowinski asked in a low voice whether she intended to reach a decision before tomorrow. She served him a helping of pasta, he thanked her. Except for the tiny scallops replacing the clams, what we were eating was spaghetti *alle vongole*. The beer was warm, I tilted the glasses, pouring it. Kabrowinski ate slowly. Carefully wrapping his spaghetti around his fork, he suggested they should start painting as soon as possible and, turning to me, asked, with a worldly air, what I thought of the glycerophthalic enamel used by builders. In support of his question, he added that he'd noticed two cans of it in our utility cupboard. Not wanting to cut myself out of the conversation, I answered that personally I had no opinion one way or the other. Edmondsson was absolutely against it. Not only were the cans of enamel empty, she informed us, they also belonged to the former tenants, which seemed to her a second good reason for not using them.

17. Edmondsson hadn't completely shut the door on our guests before she started taking off her skirt and tights, wriggling to make them slide down her legs. Through the narrow crack Kabrowinski drew out his leave-taking, thanked us for dinner, and said, as though it were a matter of indifference, that he thought beige would be the best color for the kitchen. When Edmondsson tried to finish shutting the door, Kabrowinski swiftly inserted the handle of his umbrella in the crack and, smiling ingratiatingly, thanked us again, in different words, for the excellent meal. After a silence he withdrew his umbrella, and as Edmondsson, hidden by the door, was taking off her underpants, Kabrowinski became more explicit. What he wanted was an advance on the total promised, he needed some cash for a taxi and to pay his hotel. Edmondsson held out. The moment she managed to bolt the door she smiled at me and, bare-bottomed, looked through the peephole on tiptoe. Without turning, she unbuttoned her blouse. To please her, I took off my trousers.

18. After undoing our embrace, we sat a moment facing each other, naked, on the hall rug.

19. The light in the bathroom was turned off, a candle lit up Edmondsson in places. Drops of water glittered on her body. She stretched out in the bathtub and, hands horizontal, lightly slapped the surface of the water. I watched in silence, we smiled at each other.

20. I was lying in bed, trying to finish my chapter. Edmondsson moved about the bedroom completely naked, a towel on her head, stepping languidly, breasts thrust out, making slow motions with her arms, curving them in the air and describing endless spirals before my eyes. One finger on the right line, I waited to resume my reading. Turning around on herself, Edmondsson read letters and filed papers. She moved away from the desk and came toward me. She sat in the armchair, moving her lips,

scanning some publication; then she uncrossed her legs, stood up, and made comments. Shhh, I would say now and then. She would drop the subject, scratch her thigh. Pensive, she would run a finger over the desktop, gaze around her, pick up some bit of paper and tear it to pieces. She froze. With a questioning gesture she picked up an invitation card and came to lie next to me on the bed. I didn't look up, so she put the card on the page I was reading. I asked what she wanted. Nothing, she only wanted to know who sent the invitation. I nodded slowly and thoughtfully and, edging the card aside with a finger, went on reading. After a while she asked again, in a voice deformed by a yawn, who had sent the invitation. Who? I hesitated. I'd had time to consider the matter for some days. Maybe the Austrian embassy had purely and simply made a mistake in sending it to me. But if that was the case, why were there no mistakes in the address? Maybe the embassy secretary, wanting my particulars, had consulted a certain acquaintance. Maybe. Not long ago, acting in a sense in the capacity of researcher, I had had dealings with historians and sociologists. I was T's assistant, who presided over a seminar, I had students, I played tennis. All this seemed to me to offer excellent reasons why my presence might be deemed desirable, but none of it, to my mind, could fully justify an invitation to an embassy. What did she think? Nothing, Edmondsson had fallen asleep.

21. One arm under the pillow, Edmondsson asked what time it was and groaned because the doorbell had rung. It was early. It was still dark out. The curtains were half drawn, but no pallor interfered with the tranquil darkness of the bedroom. The gloom softened angles, wrapped walls, desk, armchairs. The bell rang again. Fascist, said Edmondsson in a drowsy voice. Lying on her stomach, she remained immobile, as though utterly exhausted, her hands clutching the sheets. When the bell rang a third time she finally admitted that she didn't have the energy to get up and open the door. To be accommodating, I offered to accompany her; it seemed to me it would be a fair compromise if we both went. Edmondsson got dressed, taking her time. I waited on the edge of the bed, exasperated by the bell that was now ringing uninterruptedly. When she was ready I followed her down the hall, buttoning my pajamas. Kabrowinski was full of remorse for having rung so long. He stood in the doorway, his jacket buttoned up to the collar and a scarf around his neck. Between his feet was a small transparent bag full of viscous flesh. He picked it up with his fingertips, kissed Edmondsson's hand, and came in. Kovalskazinski John-Maria not here yet? he asked as he looked around. He won't be long, he assured us, he's very punctual. And noticing that water was dripping out of the bag, making spots on the rug and his shoes, he gave an apologetic look and gingerly held out the trickling bag to Edmondsson. Octopus, he said, gift. Yes, yes, he insisted, gift. Sitting in the kitchen on the same chair as the night before, he told how he'd spent the night playing chess in the back room of a café and made friends with his tablemate, a young fellow who, when the bar closed, had dragged him to Les Hailes, where they bought a crate of octopus which they'd divided at dawn in the Invalides metro station. I looked at him, thinking of something else. Edmondsson wasn't listening either; she had turned on the water and was filling the kettle. Kabrowinski, comfortably installed in the kitchen, sat with legs spread, still energetically rubbing his hands. He had caught cold during the night in

the long icy meat depots, he said, among the hanging sides of beef, which he proceeded to describe. With a knowing smile, alluding to Soutine, he talked about raw meat, blood, flies, brains, guts, intestines, organs piled in crates, accompanying the gruesome details with evocative gestures ending in a sneeze. Gesundheit, Edmondsson said politely as she made coffee with her back turned. Raising her elbow very high, she poured water into the filter. I offered to take her place so she could go out and buy croissants (and paint, added Kabrowinski).

22. After Edmondsson's departure, Kabrowinski asked permission to brush his teeth, wash his face, smarten up a little. I was very friendly, explaining that I needed the bathroom but that the kitchen sink, where his squid were lying, was entirely at his disposal. Just put them somewhere else; you do it, I said, and went to fetch him a towel and soap. After which, I shut myself in the bathroom.

23. Standing in front of the mirror, I looked at my face attentively. I had taken off my watch, which lay in front of me on the shelf above the basin. The second hand was touring the dial. Immobile. With every circle a minute passed. It was slow and pleasant. Without averting my eyes from my face, I put lather on my brush; I distributed the lather on my cheeks, my neck. Slowly moving the razor, I removed rectangles of foam, the skin reappearing in the mirror, taut and slightly reddened. This over, I fastened my watch around my wrist again.

24. On the kitchen table, next to the familiar bag of croissants, stood three cans of paint. Kabrowinski had opened one with a jackknife and said it was ultra-in to have picked orange enamel for the kitchen. Edmondsson wasn't sure, she explained that it was bright beige, not orange. She stacked the cans in a corner and brought coffee to the table. I sat. While I was filling my cup, Kabrowinski, across from me, was trying to open the jam jar with his jackknife. We ate in silence. Edmondsson turned the pages of a magazine and was astonished that the Raphael exhibition hadn't been extended. Kabrowinski had seen the retrospective in London. Not bad, Raphael. He told us his likes and dislikes, admitted that he respected Van Gogh and admired Hartung and Pollock. Holding a hand under her chin to catch crumbs, Edmondsson hurriedly finished her croissant. She had to go, the gallery opened at ten. Kabrowinski, helping himself to more coffee, told her to convey his warm regards to that exceptional man, the director of the gallery who'd chosen to exhibit his works, and added thoughtfully, drinking a long mouthful, that she should remind him that he was ready and willing to meet any potential buyers. Edmondsson rearranged her hair, tied the belt of her coat. Passing the sink, she said that if we wanted octopus for lunch we would have to clean and skin them. Kabrowinski agreed wholeheartedly. His face was radiant, beatific. Leaning back, he wiped his mouth with satisfaction and, speaking to Edmondsson, who was already in the hall, shouted at her not to forget to phone the studio and find out if the lithographs were ready.

25. Leaning over sideways, white shirt under gray suspenders, Kabrowinski attempted to slip the tip of a knife into the sticky flesh of an octopus tentacle stretched out on the wooden chopping board. Facing him, Kovalskazinski John-Maria (who arrived, very elegantly dressed, shortly after Edmondsson's departure) held the mollusk between his delicate hands to keep it from slipping. He had taken off his watch and was lending himself to the procedure with some reticence. A dish towel wrapped around his waist, he stood very straight, head held stiffly, lips pinched together. From time to time, in a remote voice, he would recommend some interstice as being more accessible to the knife blade. Bending over the handle, his hair in his eyes, Kabrowinski did not listen; he made faces, his hands contracted, forcing the knife into the visceral mass with all his strength. Sitting at the far end of the kitchen with my legs crossed, I smoked a cigarette. I looked at the unsteady column of smoke escaping from my filter and wondered whether I should attend the reception at the Austrian embassy. What could I expect from it? The events of the evening, scheduled for the following Tuesday, seemed to me utterly inexorable. I would wear a dark suit and black tie. I would hold out my invitation at the entrance. Under crystal chandeliers, the gleam of naked shoulders, pearls, satin lapels. Slowly, I would move from room to room, my gaze slightly averted. I would not speak, would not smile. I would walk very straight, go to a window. With one finger I would push aside the curtain and look out into the street. It would be pitch dark. Would it be raining? I would let the curtain drop and return to the buffet tables. Behind a group of guests I would come to a stop. An ambassador would be speaking. Our country is sound, he would say. This observation is borne out by a totally forthright examination of the situation made at the outset of the periodic meeting of our government. This is all the more significant, given an international context in which there is so little room for maneuver. I would listen. He would be impressive and would speak with self-satisfaction. It was against this gratifying background, he would explain, that the items on the agenda were examined; the course of the sitting was marked by numerous clarifications, making possible, thanks to our fruitful consultation, a summing up of the position in each of the relevant sectors. Henceforth, our imperatives are qualitatively new; their names are realism of objectives, conjugation of all potentials, rigor in management. Rigor. The word would make me smile; I would try not to smile, I would turn away, walk through the rooms with one hand in my pocket. And I would leave, not forgetting to retrieve my scarf from the cloakroom. Back home, I would explain to Edmondsson that the diplomats had crowded around to hear me speak on disarmament, that the women had jostled one another in their efforts to attach themselves to the little group in which I was lecturing, glass in hand, and that Eigenschaft himself, the Austrian ambassador, an austere, measured, learned man, had admitted how highly impressed he was by the acuity of my reasoning, how struck by the implacability of my logic, and, lastly, how frankly dazzled by my beauty. At that point Edmondsson would raise her eyes and her cheekbones would stand out; she would smile. And then? I got up from my chair and went to put out my cigarette under the faucet. On the way, I glanced at the octopus, only the perfectly smooth upper half of which had now been skinned. Kabrowinski had succeeded in isolating one long

fragment of grayish skin but, with all his efforts, was still unable to detach it from the largest tentacle. Using his knife, he was hacking at the suckers and gouging beneath them to free the skin. His cold did not make things easier: a little while before, a violent sneeze had forced him to stop and wipe his fingers.

26. One foot in front of the other, almost running, I trotted down the hall to answer the telephone. It was a mistake, a call for the former tenants. In the bedroom, gray daylight showed through the net curtains. I replaced the receiver on the hook of my old-fashioned telephone, moved musingly around the desk, and came to a stop in front of the window. It was raining. The street was wet, the sidewalks dark. Cars were parking. Other cars, already parked, were covered with rain. People were crossing the street quickly, going in and out of the post office in the modern building across from me. A little vapor began to cover my windowpane. Behind the thin coat of mist, I observed the passersby sending their letters. The rain gave them a conspiratorial air: stopping in front of the mailbox, they would draw an envelope from their coat and thrust it through the slot very quickly so as not to get it wet, meanwhile pulling up their collars against the rain. I put my face close to the window and, eyes against the glass, suddenly had the impression that all these people were inside an aquarium. Perhaps they were afraid? The aquarium was slowly filling.

27. Sitting on my bed with my head in my hands (always these extreme postures), I told myself that the people were not afraid of the rain; some, coming out of the hairdresser's, might want to avoid it, but no one was actually afraid it would never stop, would become a continuous downpour obliterating everything—annihilating everything. It was I who, standing in front of my window and misled by the dread inspired in me by the movements taking place before my eyes—rain, moving humans and automobiles—had suddenly felt afraid of the bad weather, when what had really terrified me, once again, was the passing of time itself.

28. The table covered with a white oilcloth, the kitchen cupboard, its drawers and shelves, the window and its sill. I knew nothing of this sink facing me, this stack of dishes, this stove. The floor seemed dark, the linoleum was coming unstuck in places. There were two brooms standing against the wall. I saw the details, seeing but not making the decision to go in. Standing in the doorway, I had the feeling that I was looking at a place I had never seen before. Who were these men? What were they doing in my house?

29. Not taking the slightest notice of my presence, the Poles were carrying on a conversation, busy and contented. His eyes on the shapeless mass of cephalopod covering the wooden board, Kabrowinski bore down here and there with the tip of his knife, squaring off some protuberance. The octopus had been completely stripped.

Only the tips of its prehensile limbs were still covered with fragments of grayish skin, their ends turned back like socks. Overflowing the wooden board on all sides, the tentacles writhed in every direction; they lay on the surface of the sink, draped themselves over obstacles, touched and sometimes climbed over one another. Several of the longest ones dangled in the void. Kabrowinski put his knife down and, turning to me, informed me that he was beginning to get the hang of it. To his mind, and even though five more octopuses were still lying tangled in the sink, he would not need more than another quarter of an hour to cut them all up. Fine, fine, I thought as I felt in my pockets for cigarettes. I had left them in my bedroom.

30. Discussions have been put in hand, the ambassador would say, suggestions put forward, conclusions reached, and programs adopted. These projects, which have been conceived and drawn up with an eye to the harmonization of texts, are intended, with the aid of precise definitipn at the level of preliminary studies, to reinforce the implementation of provisions adopted at the previous meeting. Those same provisions, moreover, are helping to inspire the people involved to carry out a more rigorous programming of their exploratory activities with a view to greater control over the projects, in such a way as to bring into play methods that will heighten the practical effectiveness of the potential. Fired by the high hopes of the people involved, they agreed to concentrate their efforts in the areas of responsibility, fidelity, and cohesiveness. More: they anticipate—and the expression is from the very lips of the chairman of the sitting—a multiplication of efforts, combining to realize the principal objectives adopted. Do you have a salad bowl? Kabrowinski asked. What? A salad bowl, he repeated, roughly miming the shape of a salad bowl.

31. Stooping slightly, Kabrowinski lovingly slid thin slices of octopus off the tilted board into a receptacle. He had had to open every cupboard, displace pots and pans, pull out jugs, basins, strainers, and stewpans, before finding, at the back of some cabinet, this greenish sauce bowl made of nasty transparent plastic. Kovalskazinski John-Maria had also looked, but halfheartedly, contenting himself with an attentive scrutiny of the entire kitchen. The octopus had been completely cut up, its body into strips, its tentacles into rounds, and, now dismembered, it formed the moving heap which Kabrowinski was causing, with the help of his knife, to slither down to the bottom of the receptacle. This operation completed, he speared a second octopus in the sink, lifted it high above our heads, and, knees flexed, smoothly spread it out on the board in a single enveloping movement. For a few moments before that, I had been aware that I was about to leave the kitchen (I was feeling a little chilly).

32. I had stood up and was leaving the kitchen, to get a sweater in my bedroom. Before stepping through the door I bowed slightly, smiling apologetically, to indicate to my guests that I was sorry to leave them. The apartment was silent. I walked noiselessly. How many times had I crossed the entrance hall in just this way, turned

left and then right in the corridor, to reenter my bedroom with measured tread? And how many times had I performed the reverse? I wondered. Doors along the corridor were ajar. Issuing from the gaps, streaks of gray light mingled together on the rug; my moving shoes encountered crossed segments of pale brightness. I turned right and entered my bedroom. Standing in front of the window, I rubbed my arms, chest. With my finger I made drawings on the pane, tracing lines in the mist, endless curves (outdoors, it was as Parisian as before).

33. When one is at home, there are two ways to watch rain fall from behind a pane of glass. The first is to keep one's gaze fixed on a particular point in space and observe the succession of raindrops passing the chosen spot; this is restful to the mind but gives no conception of the ultimate goal of the movement. The second, which requires greater agility of vision, consists in following, with the eyes, the fall of a single raindrop at a time, from its intrusion into the field of vision to the dispersal of its water on the ground. In this way it is possible to imagine that the essential tendency of motion, however lightning-swift it may appear, is toward immobility and that, however slow it may sometimes seem, it is continuously drawing bodies toward death, which is immobility. Ole.

34. The rain had become a downpour, as though all the rain were going to fall: all. Cars slowed on the drenched roadway; sheaves of dead water rose on each side of the tires. Except for one or two umbrellas fleeing horizontally, the street looked immobile. People had taken refuge outside the post office door and, huddled together on the narrow stoop, were awaiting a lull. I turned around and went to open the clothes cupboard; I pawed through the drawers. Underwear, shirts, pajamas. I was looking for a sweater. Was there no sweater anywhere? I came out of the bedroom and, using my foot to push aside the cans of paint that cluttered the passageway, opened the closet door. Leaning forward into it, I began shoving at crates, opening suitcases, in search of a warm garment.

35. Seashells, collections of stones, agate flakes, souffle dishes, egg cups, tablecloths, handkerchiefs, lace, shawls, cruets, pendants, lacquer boxes, corkscrews, old tools, shepherd's knives, silver knives, ivory snuffboxes, plates, forks, Christmas creche figures, netsukes. I had managed to unlock a big iron trunk covered in padlocks and frayed string, and I was amazed to find all this junk inside it; it must have belonged to the former tenants: sybarites, judging from the elegance of the prints.

36. We met the former tenants the night before we moved. They had wanted to meet us before abandoning the apartment to us. They had telephoned, inviting us over for cocktails. We made our appearance that evening, bringing a bottle of claret. The former male tenant, a man of distinction, looked at the bottle and opined that it was a

very good wine, but confessed, with a prudent laugh, that he was not partial to Bordeaux and preferred Burgundy I replied that I myself was not overly enthralled by his style of dress. His smile*grew strained; he blushed. There was a certain coolness; in fact, conversation languished for a moment. All four of us were standing in the entrance hall, arms crossed, eyes averted; Edmondsson was looking at the paintings. With a broad smile, the former tenant put an end to the discomfort by asking us into the living room. There, among the movers' crates, we seated ourselves on camp stools. The former tenant brought out some olives in a terra-cotta dish and a bottle of Burgundy, which he ceremoniously uncorked. We had to stand up and fold our stools to get to the crate in which the crystal glasses were packed; they had been wrapped in tissue paper and then placed painstakingly between two layers of old newspapers. After I was served and had said how excellent his wine tasted, the former tenant, now visibly more comfortable and confident, retied his ascot and told us about himself, his past, his work. He was an appraiser and auctioneer. His wife came from Nimes. They had met on the Esmeralda coast in Sardinia. The reason why they had decided to move was that they had had enough of living in Paris. They needed a change, fresh air, the countryside (he was already charmed by the thought of being awakened by the twittering of birds). Since he was going to retire at the end of the year, they would live permanently in Normandy, in a converted farmhouse. The prospect filled him with gladness. He would be able to fish, hunt, tinker. He would write a novel. And will you have a garden? I asked, to stop him from telling us about the subject of his novel, the twists of the plot and side incidents. A very big garden, he answered, almost a park, we'll take long walks through the woods, won't we, Brigitte? Brigitte nodded, smiled at us, and asked if we wouldn't have another olive. Replacing the bowl on the crate, she turned to me and asked what I did for a living. Me? I said. As I said nothing further, Edmondsson answered for me. The former tenants were thrilled to learn that I was in research, they took turns asking about my projects, made observations, expressed opinions. They talked enthusiastically, tried to be persuasive, ended by giving me advice. In my place, they said, they would have done things differently. I spit my olive pit into the palm of my hand and nodded, not really listening. When they finished explaining what the main lines of conclusion of my dissertation ought to be they rose, certain of having convinced me, and suggested that we go through the apartment together so they could explain one or two practical matters to us. We set out. They entered the rooms ahead of us and described what we were seeing. We toured the rooms as though we were touring a museum, our hands behind our backs, with expressions of detached interest on our faces. In the bathroom they pointed out that the plumbing had been completely redone at th[^]ir expense, the wall mirror was new (they had the bill), and the floor tiles were not two months old. The bedroom carpet had cost them fifty-six francs a meter. The hooks of the coat racks in the hall were made of wild cherry and the racks were worth over six hundred francs apiece. The ceiling light in the entrance hall dated from the same period as the building, its value could be estimated at nearly three thousand francs. We listened to these figures attentively. Edmondsson was smiling secretly at me, I felt like asking how much the living-room door had cost. Back in the first room again, they asked us to sit, filled our glasses, and, wearing extraordinary, embarrassed smiles, said they had thought we might like to buy all the fixtures in the apartment. Otherwise, they said—they were

sure we would understand—they would be forced to dismantle the shelves and take up the carpet. Edmondsson, who is excellent at money matters, instantly replied that we didn't need shelving and that as far as the carpet was concerned, yes, she would really be obliged to them for clearing the bedroom floor to make way for our rug.

37. We went all around the empty apartment. We drank Bordeaux sitting on the parquet floor. We emptied crates, untied boxes, unpacked suitcases. We opened the windows to get rid of the smell of the former tenants. We were home; it was cold, we argued about a sweater that both of us wanted to wear.

38. There was a housewarming party. The couple we invited arrived very early. They were childhood friends of Edmondsson's. They sat on the sofa, cleaned their glasses by breathing on the lenses. During the cocktail period I found myself alone with these young people, as Edmondsson had to leave and get the dinner ready. They did not speak. They crossed their legs, looked at the walls around them. After smiling politely at me a few times, they lost interest in me and began conversing together in low tones. Taking no further notice of me, they began to talk about recent parties, vacation memories, their last ski holiday. Then, as Edmondsson still wasn't back, they picked up some magazines lying within reach. They leafed through them, showing each other the photographs. I got up, put on a record, and went to sit down again. *Ah quel bonheur a la porte du garage, quand tu parus dans ta superbe auto, papa, il faisait nuit mais avec l'eclairage, on pouvait voir jusqu'aux flancs du co-teau. Charles Trenet, I said. No us partirons sur la route de Narbonne, toute la nuit le moteur vrom-brira, et nous verrons les tours de Carcassonne se profiler a l'horizon de Barbaira.* Don't you have any Frank Zappa? Pierre-Etienne asked, patronizingly amused. No, none, I said. I finished my glass of whiskey in small sips and set it on the table. Edmondsson called out from the kitchen that she was going to need another ten minutes. In the meantime, she went on at the top of her lungs, would I be a dear and show our friends around the apartment? Our friends shut their magazines and followed me down the hall arm in arm, hugging each other closely. We started with the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the bathtub, leaving them free to admire in comfort. Then I showed them the bedroom. They paused in front of the bookcases, took books down from the shelves, and put them back again. I waited in the hall. When we passed the toilet I opened the door and, moving toward them and waving my arm to guide them in the desired direction, I managed to get them both inside. They came out again at once and, walking slowly and looking on both sides, went back to the living room. Edmondsson finally joined us. She excused herself for the delay and asked what they thought of the apartment. Holding hands, our friends thought it was small but well proportioned. We sat down to eat. We ate asparagus; they talked about international politics, university degrees. Pierre-Etienne informed us, as though he were speaking to his grandparents, that he was succeeding brilliantly at the university. He had a bachelor's degree in law and a second degree in political science, and he was thinking of getting an advanced diploma in the history of the twentieth century. But he was a

little worried about the selective admission procedure for this last degree; some of the applicants, he explained, eating with excellent table manners, were Enarchs and Polytechnicians. Discoboli, I said, taking another asparagus. I added, not joking anymore, that it would be quite a coincidence if I happened to be on the examining board. They thought I was trying to be funny. I let it pass, but if by any chance T. were to ask me to assist him with the admissions interviews, I should not care to be in the shoes of candidate Pierre-Etienne. After dinner we played Monopoly. I served whiskey. We passed each other the dice, built houses, constructed hotels. The game dragged. Our friends caressed each other's forearms and stroked each other's fingers when they threw the dice; we chatted on, Pierre-Etienne wondered whether there would be a third world war. I could not have cared less. After administering a crushing defeat (in Monopoly there can be no pretending), I went to bed.

39. Huddled in a heap, it looked like an abandoned sack of potatoes; it was a sweater made of thick white wool, knitted in wide ribbing. There were white and beige diamonds across the chest; leather elbow patches broke up the lines of the sleeves. The garment lay rolled on the closet floor; I picked it up and unfolded it in the entrance hall, in order to take a closer look at it. It was small: Edmondsson must have worn it when she was a girl. I took off my jacket and put it on. Apart from one or two things (?), it would do.

40. Sitting, head down, at the back of the kitchen, I pulled at the sleeves of my sweater, trying to make it cover part of my wrists. The Poles, for a wonder, were not talking. Kovalskazinski John-Maria was still holding down a mollusk's head on the wooden board. His hands were very red, wet, gripping hard. He was losing patience, it seemed to me; his back was beginning to hurt. Every time the knife passed over the beige pocket lurking in the bag he dryly warned Kabrowinski not to make a hole in it because that was where the ink was. Kabrowinski disagreed completely; he said it was the liver, and to prove it he stabbed the organ with his jackknife. The ink was not all released at once; at first a few extremely black drops oozed to the surface, then more drops, and finally a trickle, which slid slowly along the board. Kovalskazinski John-Maria untied the towel around his waist and, taking no further interest in the situation, came to sit beside me. His features tense, he lit a cigarette and told Kabrowinski, half in French and half in Polish, that he ought to have asked the fishmonger to skin the octopuses himself. Especially, he said, as there were four more of them, still lying intact in the sink. Kabrowinski wasn't listening. He had dipped his finger in the ink and was explaining that squid ink was what they used to make sepia. In his youth he had painted some very beautiful ink washes. Yes. Dreamily, he held the octopus under the faucet and rinsed it at length. He wiped the board with a sponge and, after returning the rinsed octopus to its place, asked John-Maria Kovalskazinski if he would mind coming to help him . . .

II

THE HYPOTENUSE