

"We won't talk about our parents," they said. Simultaneously. Unless Camille said it to Leo or Leo to Camille. Then, addressing me they added: "There're only the three of us, you know."

Simultaneously, or one after the other. Those two cultivated the art of leading you astray; it took me a while to understand. Don't they resemble each other like two drops of water? They were sixteen, and I was nineteen. It was ancient history, five or six years ago. They wanted me to write their biography, since I couldn't be their twin. Having the three of us together inside a beautiful parchment notebook, the three of us bound by our childish words. I suppose that's what I wanted, too.

"Our parents don't exist, that's it." All right. Yet we'll see, my sweethearts who, between you and I, will be the winner. Because there's a battle between us now, a posthumous fight, I'll explain it later; I'm in too much of a hurry right now. Time is linked to words, how many seconds for a written word, how many seconds between words, how many hours between sentences, and weeks between pages? I don't know. I'm stupid, and quite young, much younger than they are, though I am actually three years older. They confused me terribly; that's what they did, but I'll do them in.

"We won't talk about our parents," I said they had said. I replaced "forget about our parents" by "we won't talk about our parents," I don't care if they don't like it. "Forget about our parents," that's what they must have said, as well as "don't fuck with us, there're only the

three of us, everything else is bullshit.” Is that important? They also happened to be polite in the most refined way, and they didn't seem that much alike towards the end. Now they're messing around with me in retrospect. Are the exact words important? I wonder. I might make some changes later. And I'm very happy to be starting my project (my report, my story, my thing?) with precisely their parents. Anyway.

I was in Bamako that winter, hanging out with my mother, who had been sent there by our town's France-Mali Association. That winter, that is to say several years ago already. I had seen a flyer announcing a meeting between several Francophone writers at the Palace of Culture. I left my mother with drums, skins and all kinds of things at the market and took a cab there. Better getting informed before throwing myself completely into that project. Getting informed retrospectively, because at the time I had written nothing, except for my high school homework as well as what the twins were forcing me to write in their fucking fancy notebook. But I'm getting ahead of myself again, the notebook came later. Never mind, Mali for now.

What I wanted most of all was to get into a car, go away alone somewhere. My mother could understand that, maybe she wanted to hang out on her own as well, without having to drag along a big surly guy. The cab's door held by a single iron strip. The wheels were about to fall off, everything jumping and jolting along, the windows stuck, nothing to grab hold of, jolts, bumps and potholes, and yet it was moving, I was mesmerized. Something jerry-rigged, repaired and that was even speeding, speeding crazily. Like me, I suppose. That cab was jostling my head, a real fever in the brain. I could have crossed the whole African continent, but the cabdriver dropped me on the yellow road.

Now, the writers' congress.

I arrived after the colloquium had started. There were five or six speakers plus the moderator, facing an audience under a tent. It was a small crowd, but everyone was talking at the same time. Words were buzzing in the heat. A sort of fight broke out between two of the writers, I couldn't tell what it was about -- I was falling into one of my fits of despondency when a young woman signaled she wanted to talk. She was sitting with the writers, but nobody seemed to be paying attention to her. A pretty girl, very dark hair, Indian maybe, I'm not sure. She raised her hand. The speakers became aware of her presence and stopped talking: they were polite, I noticed, and suddenly I felt a twist in my stomach.

What was she saying exactly? My mind wandered away. I was feeling ashamed, one doesn't say things like that. The things she said are for kids like me, writers don't think, don't talk like that. She had said "That's all very fine, but the only thing I really have in mind when I start writing is: am I going to manage to write a hundred pages? You never talk about that! It's tough to write a hundred pages!" I did not need to worry about her, she was so funny, so perfectly funny that people started laughing. Then a gust of wind blew and the tent started shaking above our heads. A rope became loose on the side, and the whole top fell down, stopping just above our heads like a reversed parachute, billowing smoothly in the still blowing wind. It was a lovely moment.

I wish something like this would happen when I address my audience. Not the lawyer, tutor, judge, psychologist, the whole congregation of them all, whom I hope never to see again, but the real audience, the audience of the soul to which everyone aspires. The girl was called Natacha something, Natacha followed by a complicated name that I couldn't remember.

But I could find it again if I wanted to, if I weren't in such a hurry. It was in Bamako, in Mali, yes I've already said that, my first experience as a writer.

A writer by proxy, because, immediately thereafter, I was by that girl's side, so to speak. As soon as she raised her hand, as soon as the others, flabbergasted, turned towards her, I became Natacha: I was that young writer in the midst of all those tough males (I wasn't feeling part of their tribe, obviously). Whatever she would say, those would be my words, I had already made them mine. "A hundred pages, it's exhausting, you never say that!!" She had succeeded in writing them, those hundred pages (followed by dozens of others, but, she would say, after that you feel better, your book really becomes yours) had even managed to find a publisher, and not any random one; and so I, who was still a nothing yet, but Leo and Camille's friend (and of this word "friend" one cannot even be so sure, I might have been their purveyor rather, their witness, their punching-bag, the safeguard for their fears), so I who had not written a page yet, nor even imagined that I would write a page some day, I suddenly had the intuition (oh! a very fleeting one, set to be revealed in the future) that I would surely write a hundred pages, perhaps they were written already.

It was exhausting, yes, that's why I had not started yet. Leo and Camille had made me feel tired, that's what I was becoming aware of, there, under the tent that had fallen and that was brushing my hair lightly, stroking my hair, and the skin of my scalp was rising to receive that light touch, as if it were a sign from above. Leo and Camille had worn me out, and it was not only because of who they were, but also because they were characters of these hundred pages that I had not written yet. That was the very revelation I was having. And on top of the weariness of knowing them flesh and bones and the way they were by themselves, there was

some anticipated fatigue, obscurely anticipated, of knowing them as characters, of finally fleshing them out, of turning them inside out, yes, of doing them in.

So, one day they told me, they were under their parents' bed, inside the big room of that huge apartment in New York on top of a building from which you could see the park as well as the two rivers, an apartment I'll never be able to see. I can imagine what it was like as much as I want, from the drawings Leo made me and from what I could surmise about their mother's tastes, Mrs. Van Broeker, who was Dutch, very beautiful and rich and authoritative, and in the end very endearing. The master bedroom, Mrs. Broeker's and her husband's Bernard Desfontaines, whose name she took as well, had a view of the East River, but from the kitchen in the back one could see the towers of the World Trade Center. There were two vast bays, the bed was more than king size, Leo and Camille explained to me, it was probably two queen sizes side by side, which would make a 9 foot, 2 inch wide bed, so necessarily wider than long; because the length measured only 6 feet and 6 inches, they were sure about that, since that bed helped them measure themselves on a regular basis. They would lie down one above the other and only their head or feet would jut out, and, at the time, each of them was less than 5 feet tall. Finally they remembered it was a Californian King Size. What could I say, I could only relate to the single and double beds from home.

I had never been to that country where one slept in a queen's or king's bed. I was assuming that the kingly Californian bed was still one of those wonderful things that could only be found in Leo and Camille's surroundings. Oh, their wonderful things made me furious and all the more furious that they, little spoiled prince and princess, were not paying any

attention to them.

Let me explain something about Leo and Camille's method of calculation: if they weighed themselves, they would do it together, climbing on that glass plate of their bathroom scale holding each other by the arms. And if they were asked for the result afterwards, they would give the total; if one insisted, only unwillingly would they consent to divide the number by two. Useless to suggest to them that such a division did not necessarily correspond to reality. Likewise, they would measure each other in the bathroom climbing on the other's shoulders -- who had his feet on the ground -- from the seat, and then making a light mark with a pencil and a ruler placed between the upper head and the wall. Then, they had to measure the lower head, add it to the first number, erase the first mark and write down the other one on top of it, the total of their two superimposed bodies (plus the head, of course). Then they would go and check the results along their parents' bed.

Mrs. Van Broecker found these idiosyncrasies annoying at worst, at best amusing and she didn't worry about them. Little worrying at the Van Broecker-Desfontaines' residence: the operative word was "amusing." Leo and Camille were, no doubt, amusing. *I wasn't.*

So they were in Mr. and Mrs. Van Broecker-Desfontaines' bedroom, measuring each other again under their parents' bed, sniffing the carpet, trying all possible twists and contortions in that narrow space, then climbing on each other. Back upon back to begin with, so as to see whether the upper back would touch the bottom of the mattress and then stomach upon stomach so as to determine what could be seen from the mattress and then from the floor with one's eyes on it, and so on and so forth (they had some specific taste for systematization) when their mother entered. I sincerely believe that they hadn't planned on that. Mrs. Van

Broeker's general principle was not to let her children inside the conjugal room. Her older kids, yes, when one wanted to have a private and important discussion about marriage or career. But not Leo and Camille, who were too young, too unpredictable, and with whom one couldn't possibly have any important private conversation.

They had huddled in the center of the space under the bed, so that their mother wouldn't see them if she bent over, which she did indeed, first taking off her shoes, and then picking them up and throwing them into the dressing room. She took off her stockings, left them on the side of the bed, lay down, moved lightly, and then silence. One of the stocking's legs hung a few inches away from their heads, the extremity of it still perfectly marked by their mother's foot. Impossible to resist, they told me, they felt it was begging to be tickled, that nylon or silk foot. They raised their hands towards its curved part, touched it lightly, the nylon or the silk moved very slightly and, they swore, at that precise moment a chuckle was heard above them, as if their mother's foot had actually been tickled.

That was enough for them to think they had magical powers. "We have powers," they would tell me with that mix of arrogance and naivety that stunned me. At first, I would shrug my shoulders. "You don't believe us, because you don't know where those powers come from." No, I didn't know it then and didn't care to know, I insisted. That their mother whispered or even chuckled (she laughed easily) when small hands tickled the extremity of the stocking that had been deserted by its foot was not even striking. It was not a coincidence for Leo and Camille. For them, everything had a very personal meaning, a logic that belonged to them, had I only understood it.

Under the bed, a few centimeters away from their head, their mother's stocking was

hanging. They started stretching it slightly. Millimeter by millimeter the stocking was going down, until it fell completely, all of a sudden, the first leg drawing the second one, on the ivory colored carpet, forming a small silky pile a few centimeters away from their face. They could have left it there, so that everything would have looked natural. There would have been nothing extraordinary for that stocking, neglectfully put on the bed's side, to fall down to the floor. But that small pinky pile was taunting them, they had to grab it, to make it disappear under the bed, and that appropriation against the natural order (the inertia of fallen things) provoked what happened after and that never ceased to pursue them. The repercussions splashed over to me, millions of kilometers away, within a parable that landed much later here in Mali and picked me up, while I was listening to that young unknown female writer; and suddenly I saw Leo and Camille as the friends they were (at that moment not ex-friends yet) and at the same time, in a more obscure way, as characters in pages that were meant to be a hundred at first, Natacha would say, a hundred first, and then one sees.

In the panty hose, in that double stocking that was coiled like a snake on the carpet, the hundred pages were contained.

They pulled the stocking under the bed, they told me, they smelled it, stretched it, made it spin on their wrists, slide on their legs, they wrapped themselves in it. Meanwhile their mother had fallen asleep. They were quiet, flexible, and devious and so well matched that each of their movements would flow smoothly into the next. They could hear their mother breathe and occasionally growl slightly in her sleep. The animal within her was

relaxing on the bed, while small cats were playing under it, lion cubs rather, but the stocking was bothering them. They knew they would have to bring it back to where it came from: they didn't want to be discovered.

The scolding wouldn't have been that dramatic, they were still of too little importance to risk any major punishment, and for that specific reason they didn't want to be discovered, I guessed eventually. I thought fear had kept them hidden that way under their mother's bed, but I was completely wrong: Leo and Camille were not afraid of any living person. Their fear was of a totally different nature, and I was discovering it by fragments, rarely where I would have located it.

Had their mother heard them and thrown them out of the room with a few reproaches and had she ordered them not to come back or, even worse, had she taken them with her on the bed for a hug and a kiss, which would probably happen occasionally though, their little adventure would have lost all its luster. It would have thrown them back to their everyday life, to their status of ordinary children, but that precisely was intolerable. Something important was happening to them, and they had to protect it.

The stocking was the danger, but it was also the salvation, or rather it was the way to salvation. They would mess around with it, bite into it, tie themselves up with it. They were absolutely passionate about it. They were "remote controlled," they told me. They screwed their heads into the widest part, the thigh end, making a double mask for themselves. They even strangled each other: one would put the stocking around his/her neck while the other would pull as he/she could from both sides, just to see, to laugh, to count as high as they could, since they loved to count so much. But it was not funny finally, that simulated

strangling; neither Camille strangling Leo, nor Leo strangling Camille, to which they had to surrender despite their being slightly frustrated by the first attempt, because they would always do everything equally.

That stocking around the neck made a terrifying impression on them; and then it happened for the one and only time, what shouldn't have happened, and which was bound to mark their behavior forever.

"Oh well, we slept together," Leo said.

"But you were too young," I protested.

"I don't know," Camille said. "But he took his thing out, it was very hard, and I pushed it between my legs, like they do on TV," she added.

Whatever you want my sweethearts, I thought, I wasn't there, and you can make up as many things as you want. But it was quite possible after all, and now I believe it. Camille had her periods not too long after, she must have been twelve. And the following year they came back to France for their second long stay at their grandparents' Desfontaines' house, in Bourgneuf, that small town I had never left.

Then their mother woke up. They watched her walking back and forth in the room; or they observed her feet rather, being very careful, they said, as if they had some debt towards their mother, towards that part that was visible to them, that is to say, her feet. They were rather pretty, large, firm, with thick toes, and square nails with bright red polish on them. Their only defect was a bump on the big toe, as well as some thick skin with an almost circular shape on both sides of the little toes. Calluses, they thought, very surprised: they had always heard their mother complain about them but they didn't really know what they looked like. And now they were very interested in them, a few inches away from their faces. They had forgotten about their bizarre act or at least were not thinking about it just then. They were concentrating on their mother's feet. Later Leo did some nice drawings of them, but didn't

show them to his mother: he dreaded she would recognize them and that she would discover where and when they had been so well observed.

They hadn't forgotten about their bizarre act, they would never forget it. It would wind itself into a private corner of their lives, intangible, where they hid their habits. It would wind itself the same way as the stocking, with its unique smell, its brown color Leo would say, and its light texture, silklike, but snakelike nevertheless, and too supple. "You've been bitten by a snake in fact," the French child psychiatrist told them, the one they would occasionally go to, when their mother would think of it. Another strange aspect of their lives, I told myself, that way of going to the psychiatrist as one goes and gets a shot done. I had no idea I would be sent to one myself, much later, in Paris that time, after the sinister affair with Anne. They immediately rejected the suggestion. I imagine them shrugging their shoulders, and the psychiatrist waiting, on the lookout for something, but nothing. They were shrugging their shoulders, telling me what the subtle doctor had told them: "you've been bitten by a snake" and, ultimately, I was the one hurt, and I am still struggling with that immaterial snake bite.

What pushed that bizarre act into the secret storeroom of their life was what Mrs. Van Broecker-Desfontaine was saying while walking back and forth on the ivory carpet, telephone in her hand and in great oratorical shape after her little nap in the vast kingly Californian bed. Their mother was in charge of charities that had elected her to their board, where she was alternately chairman or vice-chairman; and of course I had interrupted them, because I was taught in middle school that you should say "man" for "woman" when a woman is concerned.

"Woman if you want, they said, no one gives a shit."

Maybe I was always trying to detect some lie on their part, even if very small, but a lie that would prove that all the rest was false -- their story, mine, Anne's, and all the rest; and then I would finally be able to sleep well, start studying again, and go swimming into the

troubled waters of the world, but with my own fins. Mrs. Van Broeker-Desfontaine's phone conversation was about the Bal des Berceaux,

"The Bal des Berceaux," she would hammer, outraged, "it's an international event! A little respect, please!" And it was also about a celebrity that the voice on the other end of the phone had solicited so as to provide the event with some kind of splendor,

"But you don't solicit just *anybody* for the Bal des Berceaux!" Mrs. Van Broeker screamed, and rightly so it seemed, for that celebrity, a French actress, was asking for a bigger amount of money than they hoped to obtain from the proceeds, "incredible for the Bal des Berceaux, it is a charity, she should understand that, shouldn't she?!"

And their mother's voice was holding forth that way while her feet were moving around the three accessible sides of the Californian bed with the regularity of a metronome. Her voice was indignant on the surface but cheerful deep down, it was like a gentle smile provoking wavelets on the surface of a lake. And on the lake were those small cradles, in which they were now cuddling up, Leo and Camille, rocked and appeased, sailing on their mother's voice in those cradles as insubstantial as clouds but hypnotic in the same way. And as long as they were in that ball, they were feeling good, that ghostly cradles' ball, they were satisfied with that, they were all ears yet half asleep, those little spotters of weightless worlds.

Bad kids, yes, cheaters and spies: would *I* myself have stayed, under my mother's bed, without running away? Would I have hidden that way while she was having conversations with her friends, would I have kept that way like a cockroach on the carpet? But of course, in my place, the carpet is lineoleum

( "that's not even true, they said, it's not lineoleum at your place," and I replied "Alright, it's a carpet, but it's not 4 inches thick like at your place,"

"but," they said, "you didn't see our place since it was in New York,"

"didn't see," I said, "but that's what you told me,"

"that's not true, we never said that," they shouted. That time they were indignant, because it was about numbers and numbers are their private property: nobody can suggest a figure without their approval.

"Alright, I said, how thick then?") and it could go on that way until we would abandon the game the game, out of sheer weariness.

We would keep weaving words, a sentence on top of another one, positive statement, negative statement, denial and the whole round again, each one always more outrageous so that the opponent could keep going: it was a weaving of words and sentences so as to string Raphael more tightly to his wonderful friends.

"Adversary," I said, and I'm sure you'll quickly write it down into your little notebook, Mr. *my* psychiatrist, for adversaries who keep entangling each other with words, isn't that love? Otherwise why string each other? Because underneath is a void, that's what I would tell you. Happy, sir? And my mother doesn't talk about the Bal des Berceaux and her words don't have any lightness, her words are big stones that neither float nor sail. If you want, if you want, Mr. *my* psychiatrist says. Are you not going too far, Raphael?

Mrs. Van Broecker had hung up and now they wanted to leave. The hiding, the stocking, the feet, the bizarre act, that was enough for a day. They were starting to yawn - they were only kids after all. And finally their mother walked away, towards the bathroom or the kitchen, it didn't matter: both were at the turn of a corridor inside the vast apartment. Running away was still possible, they slid like elves down the entrance hall to their room. End of the story for the day and for several years for that matter.

"You'll recount everything," they said. It was later, when they decided to have me write down notes about their life, because they were sure they would die soon. And I would tell them "How am I going to do that? I've never been to New York, I don't have any details, you have to tell me things," I was riled up, and they were laughing. "We're not asking you to

make miniatures on a book of hours, just write down what we've told you," and then Leo proposed to make drawings for me. The following day I had a drawing of the bedroom with a stocking wound on the side of the bed, the stocking looked like a snake. But that wasn't really helpful. "Why do you think you're going to die soon?" I asked them. Answer: "Because." "And why should I be the one taking notes?" Answer: "You know." And I recall their look, then.

They were fugitives, Leo and Camille, they were like roe deer in the woods, unapproachable finally, ready to jump with that grace so characteristic of them, leaving me alone with my simple-minded questions, strange friends finally. But that's how they were, take it or leave it, and of course I took it.

I "took" it that very first day when we met, they were 6 years old, I was 9. My teacher was away for a few days, either sick or taking a refresher course, and the schoolmaster had decided to disperse his students into the other classes.

That word "disperse" had a disastrous effect on me. In general, new words pleased me immensely. They were easily absorbed along with all that a child learns at 9 years of age, but that word frightened me. I didn't want to be torn away from my regular class, from the teacher I knew and loved. I connected the word to some strong wind, clouds flying away, destruction and suffocation, and in a way that was what was at stake.

I found myself with kids from the lower grades, I acted sullen and uncommunicative, but the principal took me aside and explained that he had picked me for that class because he had a mission for me and he needed a "trustworthy" older guy. There were seven of us "dispersed" in that class. Were the six others also part of the mission? I spent the first morning wondering. Was I supposed to ask them? Three o'clock, I was so nervous I could hardly stand it. It was then we heard steps in the hallway: the principal. Our new teacher

quivered. We all looked up as she headed towards the door. There was a short discussion and utter silence in the classroom. We had perceived a new presence.

Someone we couldn't see was the cause of the commotion at our classroom door. We knew the rhythms and protocols that governed school life pretty well, and something new was happening: there was a stranger.

The principal finally walked away, the door closed and the teacher returned to her desk. It was then I realized I had been holding my breath for a while. I felt I was about to smother, for I suddenly had to gulp a deep breath, so deep the entire class heard it and everyone turned to stare at me: the teacher, the students, and those she was still holding by their hands, one on each side, the strangers.

"Is it possible to drown in air?" they asked me later on, the same evening maybe. "It was just apnea," I told them. I didn't want to lose face, had to shut them up so to speak. But they were just surprised. They wanted to know what "apnea" meant, what it was used for, if I could show them. In other words, my mission was found. I had been chosen to be their guide, their friend and their interpreter as well, for their French was full of holes. It was useless to ask the principal for more details about my intended mission. Instead, I had found on my own and was rather proud of it. It was obvious too that my six other fellow fourth graders were not part of it. The mission was mine and mine alone.

"Let me introduce you to Leo and Camille Van Broecker-Desfontaines," our teacher said. She sounded queerly solemn. "Like a cow in high heels, you see," as I tried to explain to my friend Paul later on. She started again, blushing, and stammered very quickly: "Here are Leo and Camille. They're going to stay with us until the end of the year. I'd like you to help them adjust to their new life here."

"Who's the boy?" shouted Claude Blanquart, one of the younger students. I would never forget his name. And the class burst out laughing.

The teacher looked perplexed; she didn't know how to answer him. I noticed a slight commiseration on the faces of Leo and Camille, which stunned me. Consider: the entire class was making fun of them, yet they were just observing the teacher's face, and feeling empathy for her, for the delicate situation they had put her in. They were very unusual, those two. From that moment on, I was under their control, linked to them. I was their prisoner.

"Who's the boy?" Claude Blanquart trumpeted. And the newcomers were standing straight in front of the classroom, laughters thundering, swelling, threatening to swallow them in. And they still remained completely motionless. Like people whose servants had never failed them, I thought or maybe am just figuring only now, as I remember the scene.

I felt they were very tall for six year old kids. I was holding my breath again, fascinated by the drama that was taking place. I don't know what the boy read on my face, but he suddenly stepped forward. With a very clear, perfectly pitched voice, he said, "I am Leo. This is Camille." That self-assurance, in itself, was already remarkable. But what struck us the most, I believe, was what came next: the other stranger, the girl, stepped forward too and said, "I'm Camille. This is Leo. We are twins." Then they came straight towards me (and they had to walk down the entire aisle, since we, the "dispersed ones," had been exiled to the back of the classroom), offered their hands. "Bonjour, what's your name?" they asked with a very slight accent that sounded like candy sprayed on their words. In the midst of my silent and stupefied classmates, I heard myself stutter "Raphael."

"We didn't understand anything," they told me later, "it sounded something like Rafou."

And when they wanted to make fun of me, they would call me Rafou, or any other variation of that name - I could fill an entire page of this, a quick step towards the hundredth one, right, Natacha? After that, I don't recall anymore. The teacher must have taken care of things. The cleaning woman and the gardener arrived with desks; and when it was time to get

out, the new ones were not so new any longer.

"We don't remember any of this," they said. When was it again? Three or five years ago? In Paris, in any case, at either their studio apartment or at a café.

"We don't remember any of this!" Good for them. They want to be outside history, outside genealogies. They want to be meteorites fallen from the sky, without any planetary origin, arriving at the age of sixteen already. They don't want to be murderers. I don't know what they want; they messed up my life.

For four days they followed me all around the school, to the cafeteria, under the covered playground, in the gym. They had a very special way of raising their faces towards me, questioningly. They were waiting with an air of tranquil confidence that amazed me. I felt like getting rid of them to meet with my buddies again, but I couldn't. I couldn't resist them. I thought maybe they were retarded.

"They're clingy, those two morons," Paul, my best friend, told me the following day. They raised their heads towards me, and they still had that air. I figured it was the word "morons" that they couldn't understand. "You leave them alone," I told Paul. And we ended up wrestling on the ground, Paul and I, I don't know for how long, as if there had been a simmering hatred between us. But it couldn't be hatred because we never suffered from such violent an emotion and had no real cause to suffer from it. We were slow and peaceful boys, not particularly awake, and in natural agreement with our world. It was rather a premonition of all the pains and complications of life, of the impending end of our childhood. It was the intimation of some huge mysterious cloud, that was hovering beyond our nine years, and that had suddenly found a favorable channel through which to come closer.

Leo and Camille backed off. They were watching us in silence, looking more angelic than ever. They were not at all scared; just observing the scene. I felt they were

stealing my victory. They should have looked terrified, should have clung to me after the fight. I had been their spokesman after all, had I not? At least that was how I had imagined myself, the big boy defending weaker than himself, back at a time that seemed so far-removed and was only the day before. I felt ridiculous and simple-minded.

In class they were extraordinarily well-behaved. They seemed to be listening, but I knew, I felt, they were listening only to themselves. And I would have liked to hear what was going on between them: a subtle stream of sensations, of airy words, of secret glimmers reflecting one another. I was helping them, leaning on the right and then on the left, since they had been placed on either side of my desk. I was helping them find the workbook or the text they needed, or draw their lines, or underline passages.

That lasted four days. Paul stopped looking at me during those four days. Then our teacher came back and I returned to my usual class. It was a relief because I wasn't "a dispersed boy" any longer; I was a normal boy. I had had my fill of Leo and Camille. Paul didn't talk about them anymore and we became friends again.

And then there was Claude Blanquart. I had noticed he was following them around the courtyard. He was a vindictive, obsessive boy; I'm saying that to explain how I was feeling then: at the time I called him a little bastard.

He lurked around them for several days in the courtyard. I didn't want to look at Camille and Leo anymore because they were not my business any longer. My mission had only been to facilitate their first steps into school. That is, if there had been a mission. I wasn't so sure about it anymore. As soon as I wanted to think about it, I could feel my skin turning feverish, a shame burning me. Nobody, maybe, had entrusted me with any mission and the director had maybe not even uttered that word. That meant I had let myself be subjugated by two little kids, and manipulated in such a strong way that I had ended up imagining a scene with the principal, that had maybe never existed. It was intolerable, and it still is, I believe.

Compared to what was bound to come next, it seems insignificant. But it appears that it isn't -- the small childhood embarrassment is still smoldering next to the flaring blaze of future humiliations.

And in this instance, if there had been no mission, then that meant Leo or Camille or both had located me, chosen me among the seven "bigger" kids. And it was not out of kindness they had befriended me, but rather to avoid the nuisance of Claude Blanquart's question "Which one is the boy?" and to gain my protection. It meant they had detected a sign on my face, a flaw or weakness, obvious to their foreign eyes... But maybe they were more wily. And there was no way for little Blanquart to imagine where the echoes of his nasty question were going to reverberate.

I wasn't interested in Leo and Camille any longer, but it was difficult not to see them. First it was because they were always two, that is to say together. And secondly because everywhere they would walk in the courtyard, activity would slow down, a sort of soothing wave seemed to pass over everyone. They approached others easily, would join groups without any apparent difficulty, groups evolving or already gathered together, but their presence would invariably bring reprieve. Leo and Camille "conversed" and if there was one thing we didn't know how to do, that we would never have had the idea to do, it was converse. We were rough kids, resistant to any form of civility that seemed copied from adults. The others, intimidated or surprised by their polished elocution, their elaborated expression and their slight accent, would respond politely to begin with, and this is what caused that punctual slowing down in the courtyard. I could sense them through my peripheral vision or even behind me. And, a few steps further, following them like a hunting dog, was Claude Blanquart.

One day they came towards me, walking deliberately in the part of the courtyard the "older ones" reserved for themselves. I was shocked into disbelief by how audacious they were, my heart beating fast. Maybe I had waited for them to look for me. I had waited for that indeed. And here they were, looking for me.

"We'd like you to come," they said. Leo, or she, or both of them.

"Where?"

"To the maze."

"When?"

"When the bell rings."

"Which one?"

"The end-of-school bell."

Claude Blanquart had stopped on the centerline of the courtyard. He was pretending to be looking somewhere else, but his entire attention was focused on us. I could feel it as surely as if there had been a bow in his hands, its arrow pointed in our direction.

"Are you going?" Paul asked. I shrugged. Leo and Camille were no talking matter for us.

When the late afternoon bell rang, I headed towards the hedge. It was composed of small trees that had originally grown on their own, next to the wall. But the gardener had pruned them in such a way that a small maze formed in the interior. If you bent down slightly, you couldn't be seen from either side. There we held secret meetings, there flourished our black market and its busy trade. Frequenting the maze meant dipping your toes around the cesspool of our society. Leo and Camille were already there, and so was Claude Blanquart, a little pale.

"What's the matter?" I said to the twins.

"Nothing, we just want you to look," they said.

“And what about him? What is he doing here?” I went on.

“I didn’t ask them to do anything,” Claude Blanquart responded immediately.

Leo and Camille were sniping off their sweatshirts, they bent down and pulled off their shoes, and then they lowered their pants and underwear. They remained naked for a while, perfectly motionless. A minute later they were already dressed again, I still had their two bodies burned on my retina, they were so white against the dark foliage. When I said “you’re nuts!” they were already gone and I was left talking to Claude Blanquart.

“I didn’t do it!” the snotty brat stuttered.

“Shut up, or else I’m stripping you as well.”

I wanted to beat him - I was so mad.

“You shouldn’t’ve come!” he muttered.

I could tell that he wanted me on his side. We could hear a ball bouncing in the courtyard, not the soccer ball getting kicked against the chestnut tree, with the characteristic intervals of silence and explosions, but a regular bang bang against the ground. Paul was waiting for me.

“Listen to me, Blanquart, I am going to go out first. You wait until I meet up with Paul and you can leave. Understood? I don’t want to be seen with you.” He took my tirade as a way to make peace, which it was in a way. He sat down on the ground and I left the grove. Leo and Camille were not at the gate anymore, but a few parents were still lingering.

“So?” Paul said.

“Crap,” I mumbled. He nodded, which was his way of saying “I don’t give a shit.” And we left in silence, bags on our shoulders, Paul bouncing his ball and me dragging my hands on the low walls of gardens along the way.

When Leo and Camille arrive in Bourgneuf, a small French town, Raphael, a teenager, becomes their babysitter. He doesn't know what kind of psychological stranglehold Leo and Camille are going to throw around him. It's only later that he is able to recount his story, and to become the actual narrator of The Imperfect Lovers.

Pierrette Fleutiaux dares to explore class and cultural clashes, and her story verges on darkness when the three young adults have to go on a trial...after a "disaster."

A psychological drama about youth and the loss of innocence, The Imperfect Lovers is Pierrette Fleutiaux's latest novel, published in August 2005.