

moment when all these people, among whom I was disconsolate not to find a certain mulatto banker by whom I felt I was despised, would see the young stranger to whom they had paid no attention bow (without knowing her, in fact, but I felt I was authorized to do so because my parents knew her husband and I was her daughter's playmate) to that woman whose reputation for beauty, improper behaviour and elegance was universal. But I was already very close to Mme Swann, so I raised my hat to her with a motion so large, so extended, so prolonged, that she could not help smiling. People laughed. As for her, she had never seen me with Gilberte, she did not know my name, but for her I was — like one of the keepers of the Bois, or the boatman or the ducks on the lake to which she threw bread — one of those secondary, familiar, anonymous figures, as lacking in individual character as an 'extra' on stage, of her outings in the Bois. On certain days when I had not seen her in the allée des Acacias, I would sometimes find her in the allée de la Reine-Marguerite, where women go who want to be alone, or to appear to want to be alone; she would not remain alone for long, soon joined by some friend, often wearing a grey 'topper', whom I did not know and who would talk to her for a long time, while their two carriages followed.

The complexity of the Bois de Boulogne which makes it an artificial place and, in the zoological or mythological sense of the word, a Garden, I rediscovered this year as I was crossing it to go to Trianon,³⁶ on one of the first mornings of this month of November when, in Paris, inside the houses, we are so close to the autumn spectacle, and yet denied it, as it rapidly comes to an end without our witnessing it, that we are filled with a yearning, a veritable fever for the dead leaves that may go so far as to stop us from sleeping. In my closed room, they had been coming for a month now, summoned by my desire to see them, between my thoughts and any object to which I applied myself, and they eddied like those yellow spots that sometimes, whatever we may be looking at, dance in front of our eyes. And that morning, no longer hearing the rain fall as on the days before, seeing the fine weather smile at the corners of the drawn curtains as at the corners of a closed mouth that betrays the secret of its happiness, I

had felt that I might be able to look at those yellow leaves as the light passed through them, in their supreme beauty; and being no more able to keep myself from going to see the trees than in earlier days, when the wind blew too hard in my chimney, from departing for the seaside, I had left to go to Trianon, by way of the Bois de Boulogne. It was the hour and it was the season when the Bois seems perhaps the most manifold, not only because it is more subdivided, but also because it is subdivided differently. Even in the open parts where one embraces a great space, here and there, in front of the dark distant masses of the trees that had no leaves or still had their summer leaves, a double row of orange chestnut trees seemed, as in a picture just begun, to be the only thing painted so far by the scene-painter, who had not put any colour on the rest, and it offered its alley in full light for the episodic walk of figures that would be added later.

Farther off, at a place where the trees were still covered in all their green leaves, one alone, small, squat, lopped, obstinate, shook in the wind a homely head of red hair. Elsewhere, again, there was a first awakening of this May of the leaves, and those of an ampelopsis as marvellous and smiling as a pink winter hawthorn had since that same morning been all in flower. And the Bois had the temporary and artificial look of a tree nursery or a park, where for botanical purposes or in preparation for a festival, they have just placed, among the trees of a common sort that have not yet been transplanted, two or three precious species with fantastic foliage which seem to be reserving an empty space around themselves, giving air, creating light. Thus it was the season when the Bois de Boulogne reveals the most numerous different varieties and juxtaposes the most numerous distinct parts in a composite aggregation. And it was the hour, as well. In the places where the trees still kept their leaves, they seemed to be undergoing a change in substance starting from the point where they were touched by the light of the sun, almost horizontal in the morning as it would be again a few hours later at the moment when in the early twilight it flames up like a lamp, projects over a distance on to the foliage a warm and artificial glow, and sets ablaze the topmost leaves of a tree that remains the dull and incombustible candelabrum of its burning tip. Here, it thickened the leaves of the chestnut trees like bricks and, like

a piece of yellow Persian masonry patterned in blue, crudely cemented them against the sky, there on the contrary detached them from it as they clutched at it with their fingers of gold. Halfway up a tree clothed in Japanese ivy, it had grafted and brought into bloom, too dazzling to discern clearly, an immense bouquet as though of red flowers, perhaps a variety of carnation. The different parts of the Bois, merging more completely in summer in the thickness and monotony of their green, were now separated. Open spaces made visible the entrance to almost every one of them, or a sumptuous bit of foliage marked it like a banner. One could distinguish, as on a coloured map, Armenonville, the Pré Catelan, Madrid, the Race Course, the shores of the lake. From time to time there would appear some useless construction, a fake grotto, a mill for which the trees parted to make room or which a lawn carried forwards on its soft platform. One sensed that the Bois was not merely a wood, that it fulfilled a purpose foreign to the life of its trees, the exhilaration I was experiencing was not caused merely by an admiration for autumn, but by some desire. The great source of a joy which the soul feels at first without recognizing its cause, without understanding that it is motivated by nothing outside. And so I looked at the trees with an unsatisfied tenderness that passed beyond them and went on without my knowing it towards that masterpiece of lovely strolling women which they enclose each day for several hours. I went towards the allée des Acacias. I passed through old groves where the morning light imposed new divisions, pruning the trees, joining together the different stems and composing bouquets. Deftly it drew towards itself a pair of trees; using the powerful scissors of a ray of light and a shadow, it cut off from each of them half its trunk and branches and, weaving together the two halves that remained, made of them either a single pillar of shadow, delimited by the sunshine around it, or a single phantom of brightness whose tremulous artificial contour was ringed by a net of black shadow. When a ray of sun gilded the highest branches, they seemed, steeped in a sparkling dampness, to emerge alone from the liquid emerald-coloured atmosphere in which the entire forest was plunged as though under the sea. For the trees continued to live their own life and, when they had no more leaves, that life shone more brightly on the sheath of green velvet

that wrapped their trunks or in the white enamel of the spheres of mistletoe that spangled the tops of the poplars, as round as the sun and the moon in Michelangelo's *Creation*. But forced as they have been for so many years by a sort of grafting to live a life shared with women, they conjured up for me the wood nymph, the lovely quick and colourful lady of the world whom they cover with their branches as she passes beneath them, obliging her to feel as they do the power of the season; they recalled to me the happy time of my believing youth, when I would avidly come to the places where masterpieces of feminine elegance were created for a few moments among the unconscious and complicitous leaves. But the beauty which the pines and acacias of the Bois de Boulogne made me desire, trees more disturbing because of this than the chestnuts and lilacs of Trianon that I was going to see, was not fixed outside me in the mementoes of some historic period, in works of art, in a little temple to the god of Love whose base is piled with golden palmate leaves. I reached the shores of the lake, I went on as far as the Tir aux Pigeons. The idea of perfection which at that time I had carried inside me I had conferred upon the height of a victoria, upon the slenderness of those horses, as furious and light as wasps, their eyes bloodshot like the cruel steeds of Diomedes,³⁷ which now, filled as I was with a desire to see again what I had once loved, as ardent as the desire that had driven me down these same paths many years before, I wanted to see before my eyes again at the moment when Mme Swann's enormous coachman, watched over by a little groom as fat as a fist and as childlike as Saint George, tried to control those wings of steel as they thrashed about quivering with fear. Alas, now there were only automobiles driven by moustached mechanics with tall footmen by their sides. I wanted to hold in front of the eyes of my body, so as to know if they were as charming as they appeared in the eyes of my memory, women's little hats so low they seemed to be simple crowns. All the hats were now immense, covered with fruits and flowers and varieties of birds. In place of the lovely dresses in which Mme Swann looked like a queen, I now saw Greco-Saxon tunics with Tanagra³⁸ folds, and sometimes in the style of the Directoire, made of liberty-silk chiffons sprinkled with flowers like wallpaper. On the heads of the gentlemen who could have walked with Mme Swann

in the allée de la Reine-Marguerite, I did not find the grey hats of earlier times, nor any others. They went out bare-headed. And I no longer had any belief to infuse into all these new elements of the spectacle, to give them substance, unity, life; they went past scattered before me, randomly, without reality, containing in themselves no beauty that my eyes might have tried as they had in earlier times to form into a composition. These were ordinary women, in whose elegance I had no faith and whose dress seemed to me unimportant. But when a belief disappears, there survives it – more and more vigorously so as to mask the absence of the power we have lost to give reality to new things – a fetishistic attachment to the old things which our belief once animated, as if it were in them and not in us that the divine resided and as if our present lack of belief had a contingent cause, the death of the Gods.

How awful! I said to myself: can anyone think these automobiles are as elegant as the old carriages and pairs? I'm probably too old already – but I'm not meant for a world in which women hobble themselves in dresses that aren't even made of cloth. What's the use of walking among these trees, if nothing is left of what used to gather under the delicate reddening leaves, if vulgarity and idiocy have taken the place of the exquisite thing they once framed? How awful! My consolation is to think about the women I have known, now that there is no more elegance. But how could anyone contemplating these horrible creatures under their hats topped with a birdcage or a vegetable patch even sense what was so charming about the sight of Mme Swann in a simple mauve hood or a little hat with a single stiff, straight iris poking up from it? Could I even have made them understand the emotion I felt on winter mornings when I met Mme Swann on foot, in a sealskin coat, wearing a simple beret with two blades of partridge feathers sticking up from it, but enveloped also by the artificial warmth of her apartment, which was conjured by nothing more than the bouquet of violets crushed at her breast whose live blue flowering against the grey sky, the icy air, the bare-branched trees, had the same charming manner of accepting the season and the weather merely as a setting, and of living in a human atmosphere, in the atmosphere of this woman, as had, in the vases and flower-stands of her drawing-room,

close to the lit fire, before the silk sofa, the flowers that looked out through the closed window at the falling snow? But it would not have been enough for me anyway for the clothes to be the same as in those earlier times. Because of the dependence which the different parts of a recollection have on one another, parts which our memory keeps balanced in an aggregate from which we are not permitted to abstract anything, or reject anything, I would have wanted to be able to go and spend the last part of the day in the home of one of these women, over a cup of tea, in an apartment with walls painted in dark colours, as Mme Swann's still was (in the year after the one in which the first part of this story ends) and in which the orange flares, the red combustion, the pink and white flame of the chrysanthemums would gleam in the November twilight, during moments like those in which (as we will see later) I was not able to discover the pleasures I desired. But now, even though they had led to nothing, those moments seemed to me to have had enough charm in themselves. I wanted to find them again as I remembered them. Alas, there was no longer anything but Louis XVI apartments all white and dotted with blue hydrangeas. Moreover, people no longer returned to Paris until very late. Mme Swann would have answered me from a country house that she would not be back until February, well after the time of the chrysanthemums, had I asked her to reconstruct for me the elements of that memory which I felt belonged to a distant year, to a vintage to which I was not allowed to go back, the elements of that desire which had itself become as inaccessible as the pleasure it had once vainly pursued. And I would also have needed them to be the same women, those whose clothing interested me because, at the time when I still believed, my imagination had individualized them and given them each a legend. Alas, in the avenue des Acacias – the allée de Myrtes – I did see a few of them again, old, now no more than terrible shadows of what they had been, wandering, desperately searching for who knows what in the Virgilian groves. They had fled long since as I still vainly questioned the deserted paths. The sun had hidden itself. Nature was resuming its rule over the Bois, from which the idea that it was the Elysian Garden of Woman had vanished; above the artificial mill the real sky was grey; the wind wrinkled the Grand Lac with little wavelets, like a real lake; large

birds swiftly crossed the Bois, like a real wood, and uttering sharp cries alighted one after another in the tall oaks which under their druidical crowns and with a Dodonean³⁹ majesty seemed to proclaim the inhuman emptiness of the disused forest, and helped me better understand what a contradiction it is to search in reality for memory's pictures, which would never have the charm that comes to them from memory itself and from not being perceived by the senses. The reality I had known no longer existed. That Mme Swann did not arrive exactly the same at the same moment was enough to make the avenue different. The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions that formed our life at that time; the memory of a certain image is only regret for a certain moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, as the years.