

manner more marvellously supernatural than making the acquaintance of Golo or chatting with Genevieve de Brabant.

My grandfather's cousin – my great-aunt – in whose house we lived, was the mother of that Aunt Léonie who, after the death of her husband, my Uncle Octave, no longer wished to leave, first Combray, then within Combray her house, then her bedroom, then her bed and no longer 'came down', always lying in an uncertain state of grief, physical debility, illness, obsession and piety. Her own rooms looked out on the rue Saint-Jacques, which ended much farther away in the Grand-Pré (as opposed to the Petit-Pré, a green in the middle of the town where three streets met), and which, smooth and grey, with the three high steps of sandstone before almost every door, seemed like a defile hewn by a cutter of Gothic images right out of the same stone from which he would have sculpted a creche or a calvary. My aunt effectively confined her life to two adjoining rooms, staying in one of them in the afternoon while the other was aired. These were the sorts of provincial rooms which – just as in certain countries entire tracts of air or ocean are illuminated or perfumed by myriad protozoa that we cannot see – enchant us with the thousand smells emanating from the virtues, wisdom, habits, a whole secret, invisible, superabundant and moral life which the atmosphere holds in suspense; smells still natural, certainly, and the colour of the weather like those of the neighbouring countryside, but already homey, human and enclosed, an exquisite, ingenious and limpid jelly of all the fruits of the year that have left the orchard for the cupboard; seasonal, but moveable and domestic, correcting the piquancy of the hoarfrost with the sweetness of warm bread, as lazy and punctual as a village clock, idle and orderly, heedless and foresightful, linen smells, morning smells, pious smells, happy with a peace that brings only an increase of anxiety and with a quality of the prosaic that serves as a great reservoir of poetry to one who passes through it without having lived in it. The air was saturated with the finest flour of a silence so nourishing, so succulent, that I could move through it only with a sort of greed, especially on those first mornings of Easter week, still cold, when I tasted it more keenly because I had only just arrived in Combray: before I went in to say good morning to my aunt, they made me wait for a moment, in the

first room where the sun, still wintry, had come to warm itself before the fire, already lit between the two bricks and coating the whole room with an odour of soot, having the same effect as one of those great country 'front-of-the-ovens', or one of those château mantelpieces, beneath which one sits hoping that outdoors there will be an onset of rain, snow, even some catastrophic deluge so as to add, to the comfort of reclusion, the poetry of hibernation; I would take a few steps from the prayer stool to the armchairs of stamped velvet always covered with a crocheted antimacassar; and as the fire baked like a dough the appetizing smells with which the air of the room was all curdled and which had already been kneaded and made to 'rise' by the damp and sunny coolness of the morning, it flaked them, gilded them, puckered them, puffed them, making them into an invisible, palpable country pastry, an immense 'turnover' in which, having barely tasted the crisper, more delicate, more highly regarded but also drier aromas of the cupboard, the chest of drawers, the floral wallpaper, I would always come back with an unavowed covetousness to snare myself in the central, sticky, stale, indigestible and fruity smell of the flowered coverlet.

In the next room, I would hear my aunt talking all alone in an undertone. She always talked rather softly because she thought there was something broken and floating in her head that she would have displaced by speaking too loudly, but she never remained for long, even alone, without saying something, because she believed it was beneficial to her throat and that if she prevented the blood from stopping there, she would reduce the frequency of the fits of breathlessness and the spasms from which she suffered; besides, in the absolute inertia in which she lived, she attributed to the least of her sensations an extraordinary importance; she endowed them with a motility that made it difficult for her to keep them to herself, and lacking a confidant to whom she could communicate them, she announced them to herself, in a perpetual monologue that was her only form of activity. Unfortunately, having acquired the habit of thinking out loud, she did not always take care to see that there was no one in the next room, and I often heard her saying to herself: 'I must be sure to remember that I did not sleep' (for never sleeping was her great claim, and the

language we all used deferred to it and was marked by it: in the morning Françoise did not come to 'wake' her, but 'entered' her room; when my aunt wanted to take a nap during the day, we said she wanted to 'reflect' or 'rest'; and when she happened to forget herself, while chatting, so far as to say: 'what woke me up' or 'I dreamed that', she would blush and correct herself instantly).

After a moment I would go in and kiss her; Françoise would be steeping her tea; or, if my aunt was feeling agitated, she would ask instead for her infusion and I would be the one entrusted with pouring from the pharmacy bag on to a plate the quantity of lime-blossom which then had to be put into the boiling water. The drying of the stems had curved them into a whimsical trellis-work in whose interlacings the pale flowers opened, as if a painter had arranged them, had made them pose in the most ornamental way. The leaves, having lost or changed their aspect, looked like the most disparate things, a fly's transparent wing, the white back of a label, a rose petal, but these things had been heaped up, crushed or woven as in the construction of a nest. A thousand small useless details – the charming prodigality of the pharmacist – that would have been eliminated in an artificial preparation gave me, like a book in which one is amazed to encounter the name of a person one knows, the pleasure of realizing that these were actually stems of real lime-blossoms, like those I saw in the avenue de la Gare, altered precisely because they were not duplicates but themselves, and because they had aged. And since here, each new characteristic was only the metamorphosis of an old characteristic, in some little grey balls I recognized the green buds that had not come to term; but especially the pink lustre, lunar and soft, that made the flowers stand out amid the fragile forest of stems where they were suspended like little gold roses – a sign, like the glow on a wall that still reveals the location of a fresco that has worn away, of the difference between the parts of the tree that had been 'in colour' and those that had not – showed me that these petals were in fact the same ones that, before filling the pharmacy bag with flowers, had embalmed the spring evenings. That candle-pink flame was their colour still, but half doused and drowsing in the diminished life that was theirs now, and that is a sort of twilight of flowers. Soon my aunt would be able to dip into the

boiling infusion, of which she savoured the taste of dead leaf or faded flower, a small madeleine, a piece of which she would hold out to me when it had sufficiently softened.

On one side of her bed was a large yellow chest of drawers of lemon-wood and a table that was akin to both a dispensary and a high altar, on which, below a small statue of the Virgin and a bottle of Vichy-Célestins, could be found her missals and her medical prescriptions, everything needed for following from her bed both the services and her regimen, for not missing the hour either of her pepsin or of Vespers. On the other side, her bed lay by the window, she had the street there before her eyes and on it from morning to night, to divert her melancholy, like the Persian princes, would read the daily but immemorial chronicle of Combray, which she would afterwards commentate with Françoise.

I had not been with my aunt five minutes before she would send me away for fear that I would tire her. She would hold out to my lips her sad, pale, dull forehead, on which, at this morning hour, she had not yet arranged her false hair, and where the bones showed through like the points of a crown of thorns or the beads of a rosary, and she would say to me: 'Now, my poor child, off you go, get ready for Mass; and if you see Françoise downstairs, tell her not to stay too long amusing herself with all of you, she should come up soon to see if I need anything.'

Françoise, who had been in her service for years and did not suspect at that time that one day she would enter exclusively into ours, did in fact neglect my aunt a little during the months when we were there. There had been a time, in my childhood, before we went to Combray, when my Aunt Léonie still spent the winters in Paris with her mother, when Françoise was such a stranger to me that on January 1, before entering my great-aunt's, my mother would put a five-franc coin in my hand and say to me: 'Take great care not to give it to the wrong person. Wait to give it until you hear me say, "Good morning, Françoise"; at the same time, I'll touch you lightly on the arm.' Hardly had we arrived in my aunt's dim hall than we would see in the shadows, under the flutes of a dazzling bonnet as stiff and fragile as if it were made of spun sugar, the concentric ripples of an anticipatory smile of

gratitude. It was Françoise, standing motionless in the frame of the little door of the corridor like the statue of a saint in its niche. When we were a little used to this chapel darkness, we could distinguish on her face the disinterested love of humanity, the fond respect for the upper classes excited in the best regions of her heart by the hope of a New Year's gift. Mama pinched my arm violently and said in a loud voice: 'Good morning, Françoise.' At this signal, my fingers opened and I released the coin, which found a hand to receive it that was embarrassed but outstretched. But ever since we had begun going to Combray I knew no one better than Françoise, we were her favourites, she had for us, at least during the first years, not only as much regard as for my aunt, but also a keener liking, because we added, to the prestige of being part of the family (she had, for the invisible bonds formed between the members of a family by the circulation of the same blood, as much respect as a Greek tragedian), the charm of not being her usual masters. And so with what joy would she welcome us, feeling sorry for us that we did not yet have finer weather, the day of our arrival, just before Easter, when there was often an icy wind, while Mama asked her for news of her daughter and her nephews, whether her grandson was a pretty child, what they were planning to make of him, whether he was going to be like his grandmother.

And when there was no one else there, Mama, who knew that Françoise still mourned her parents, who had died years ago, would talk to her about them gently, ask her for a thousand details about what sort of life they had led.

She had guessed that Françoise did not like her son-in-law and that he spoiled the pleasure she took in being with her daughter, with whom she could not chat as freely when he was there. And so, when Françoise went to see them, a few leagues from Combray, Mama would say to her, smiling: 'Isn't it so, Françoise, if Julien is obliged to be away and you have Marguerite all to yourself all day long, you'll be sorry, but you'll make the best of it?' And Françoise would say, laughing: 'Madame knows everything; Madame is worse than those x-rays' (she said *x* with an affected difficulty and a smile to poke fun at herself, an ignorant woman, for using that erudite term) 'that they brought in for Mme Octave and that see what you have in your heart,'

and disappeared, embarrassed that someone was paying attention to her, perhaps so that we would not see her cry; Mama was the first person who gave her that sweet sensation, the feeling that her life as a country woman, her joys, her sorrows could be of some interest, could be a reason for pleasure or sadness in someone other than herself. My aunt was resigned to managing without her to some extent during our stay, knowing how much my mother appreciated the service of this maid who was so intelligent and active, who was as beautiful at five o'clock in the morning in her kitchen, under a bonnet whose dazzling rigid flutes appeared to be made of porcelain, as she was when going to High Mass; who did everything well, working like a horse, whether she was in good health or not, but without a fuss, as though it were nothing, the only one of my aunt's maids who, when Mama asked for hot water or black coffee, brought them really boiling; she was one of those servants who, in a household, are at the same time those most immediately displeasing to a stranger, perhaps because they do not bother to win him over and are not attentive to him, knowing very well they have no need of him, that one would stop seeing him rather than dismiss them; and who are, on the other hand, those most valued by masters who have tested their real capacities, and do not care about the superficial charm, the servile chatter that makes a favourable impression on a visitor, but that often cloaks an ineducable incompetence.

When Françoise, having seen that my parents had everything they needed, went back for the first time to give my aunt her pepsin and ask what she would like to have for lunch, it was quite rare that she was not already required to offer an opinion or provide explanations about some event of importance:

– Françoise, imagine, Mme Goupil went past more than a quarter of an hour late going to fetch her sister; if she lingers along the way it wouldn't surprise me at all if she were to arrive after the elevation.

– Well, there wouldn't be anything astonishing in that, answered Françoise.

– Françoise, if you had come five minutes earlier you would have seen Mme Imbert go past carrying some asparagus twice as fat as Mère Callot's; now try to find out from her maid where she got them. You

have been serving us asparagus in every sauce this year; you of all people might have found some like those for our travellers.

– It wouldn't be surprising if they came from M. le Curé's, said Françoise.

– Ah! Do you expect me to believe that, my poor Françoise? answered my aunt, shrugging her shoulders. From M. le Curé's! You know very well he grows only wretched, spindly little asparagus. I tell you these were as fat as a woman's arm. Not your arm, of course, but one like mine, poor thing, which has got so much thinner again this year . . . Françoise, didn't you hear those chimes that nearly split my head open?

– No, Madame Octave.

– Ah, my poor girl, you must have a solid head, you can thank the Good Lord for that. It was Maguelone coming to get Doctor Piperaud. He came back out with her right away and they turned into the rue de l'Oiseau. Some child must be ill.

– Oh my, dear God, sighed Françoise, who could not hear of a misfortune occurring to a stranger, even in a distant part of the world, without beginning to lament.

– Françoise, now who were they ringing the passing bell for? Oh, dear God, it must have been for Mme Rousseau. I'm blessed if I hadn't forgotten that she passed away the other night. Oh, it's time for the Good Lord to call me home, I don't know what I've done with my head since my poor Octave died. But I'm wasting your time, my girl.

– Not at all, Madame Octave, my time is not so precious; He who made it did not sell it to us. I'm only just going to see that my fire isn't out.

In this way Françoise and my aunt together appraised, during that morning session, the first events of the day. But sometimes those events assumed a character so mysterious and so grave that my aunt felt she could not wait for the moment when Françoise would come up, and four astounding peals of the bell would echo through the house.

– But Madame Octave, it isn't time for your pepsin yet, Françoise would say. Were you feeling faint?

– Not at all, Françoise, my aunt would say, or rather yes, you know

quite well that there are very few occasions now when I don't feel faint; one day I'll pass away like Mme Rousseau without even time to collect myself; but that's not why I rang. Would you believe that I just saw Mme Goupil as clearly as I see you now with a little girl whom I don't know at all? Now go fetch two sous' worth of salt at Camus's. It's not often that Théodore can't tell you who someone is.

– But that'll be M. Pupin's daughter,' Françoise would say, preferring to be satisfied with an immediate explanation since she had already been to Camus's twice that morning.

– M. Pupin's daughter! Oh, do you expect me to believe that, my poor Françoise? And you think I wouldn't have recognized her?

– But I don't mean the big one, Madame Octave, I mean the little one that's away at school in Jouy. I think I saw her once already this morning.

– Ah! That must be it, said my aunt. It must be she's come for the holidays. That's it! There's no need to ask, she will have come for the holidays. But then any time now we might very likely see Mme Sazerat come and ring at her sister's for lunch. That's what it is! I saw Galopin's boy going past with a tart! You'll see, the tart was on its way to Mme Goupil's.

– Once Mme Goupil has a visitor, Madame Octave, it won't be long before you'll see all her folk coming back for lunch, because it's not so early as it was, said Françoise, who, in a hurry to go back down in order to see to lunch, was not sorry to leave my aunt the prospect of this distraction.

– Oh, not before noon! answered my aunt in a tone of resignation, casting an uneasy glance at the clock, yet furtively so as not to let it be seen that she, who had renounced everything, nevertheless took such a lively pleasure in learning whom Mme Goupil was having to lunch, a pleasure that would unfortunately have to wait a little more than an hour longer. 'And on top of that, it will happen during my lunch!' she added half-aloud to herself. Her lunch was enough of a distraction for her so that she did not wish for another one at the same time. 'At least you won't forget to give me my eggs with cream in a flat plate?' These were the only plates with pictures on them, and my aunt amused herself at each meal by reading the inscription on the one



she was served that day. She would put on her glasses and spell out: Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Aladdin or the Magic Lamp, and smile, saying: 'Very good, very good.'

— I would certainly have gone to Camus's . . . Françoise would say, seeing that now my aunt would not send her there.

— No, no, it's not worth the trouble any more, it's certainly Mlle Pupin. My poor Françoise, I'm sorry to have made you come up for nothing.

But my aunt knew perfectly well it was not for nothing that she had rung for Françoise, since, in Combray, a person 'whom one did not know at all' was a creature as scarcely believable as a mythological god, and in fact one could not remember when, any time one of these stupefying apparitions had occurred, in the rue du Saint-Esprit or on the square, well-conducted research had not ended by reducing the fabulous character to the proportions of a 'person one knew', either personally or abstractly, in his or her civil status, as having such-and-such a degree of kinship with some people of Combray. It was Mme Sauton's son returning from military service, Abbé Perdreau's niece leaving the convent, the curé's brother, a tax-collector at Châteaudun, who had just retired or who had come to spend the holidays. One had had, upon seeing them, the shock of believing that there were in Combray people whom one did not know at all, simply because one had not recognized them right away. And yet, long in advance, Mme Sauton and the curé had let everyone know that they were awaiting their 'travellers'. When in the evening I went upstairs, after returning home, to describe our walk to my aunt, if I was so imprudent as to tell her that we had met, near Pont-Vieux, a man my grandfather did not know, 'A man Grandfather did not know at all! she would cry. Ah! I don't believe it!' Nonetheless somewhat disturbed by this news, she would want to clear the matter up, my grandfather would be summoned. 'Now who did you meet near Pont-Vieux, Uncle? A man you didn't know? — But I did know him, my grandfather would answer, it was Prosper, the brother of Mme Bouilleboeuf's gardener. — Ah! All right,' my aunt would say, calmed and a little flushed; shrugging her shoulders with an ironic smile, she would add: 'Now, he told me you had met a man you didn't know!' And they would advise me to be

more circumspect the next time and not to go on agitating my aunt with thoughtless remarks. One knew everybody so well, in Combray, animals and people, that if my aunt had chanced to see a dog pass by 'whom she did not know at all', she would not stop thinking about it and devoting to this incomprehensible fact all her talents for induction and her hours of freedom.

– That must be Mme Sazerat's dog, Françoise would say, without great conviction but in order to pacify my aunt, and so that she would not 'split her head in two'.

– As if I didn't know Mme Sazerat's dog! my aunt would answer, her critical mind not accepting a fact so easily.

– Ah! Then it will be the new dog M. Galopin brought back from Lisieux.

– Ah! That must be it.

– It seems it's quite an affable creature, added Françoise, who had got the information from Théodore, as clever as a Christian, always in a good humour, always friendly, always as agreeable as you might wish. It's uncommon for an animal of that age to be so well-behaved already. Madame Octave, I will have to leave you, I haven't time to enjoy myself, here it's almost ten o'clock, and my stove not lit yet, even, and I still have my asparagus to scrape.

– What, Françoise, more asparagus! Why, you've got a regular mania for asparagus this year. You'll make our Parisians grow tired of it!

– Why, no, Madame Octave, they like it very much. They'll come home from church with an appetite and you'll see, they won't eat it with the backs of their spoons.

– Church; why, they must be there already; you'd do well not to waste any time. Go and look after your lunch.

While my aunt was gossiping with Françoise, I was going to Mass with my parents. How I loved it, how clearly I can see it again; our Church! The old porch by which we entered, black, pocked like a skimming ladle, was uneven and deeply hollowed at the edges (like the font to which it led), as if the gentle brushing of the countrywomen's cloaks as they entered the church and of their timid fingers taking holy water could, repeated over centuries, acquire a destructive force, bend